

## CHAPTER THREE

Jeremy Stuart was working up a sweat, trying to get fit.

Though very overweight, Jeremy was not the jovial, slip-on-a-banana-peel type of fat man; his corpulence was muscular and could appear menacing, like that of a bouncer or a mob enforcer.

His facial features projected gravitas: a creased forehead, dramatic brows that tended to be raised, deep eyes with bags beneath, a powerful, thick neck below, copious dark hair peppered with grey on top. His default expression was a frown. Smiling could hurt—those particular facial muscles didn't get enough use. The stationary bicycle was the latest high-tech model—standard issue at the Seapoint Health Club on Cape Town's harbor. Monitors, displays, light emitting diodes: what were they trying to signal or warn about? He didn't much care. Watching the light show helped break the tedium of exercise.

As did the TVs overhead. In several days of hanging around the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he had counted fewer black people than in the Spice Girls video that was now playing; he suspected that the Truth hearings were stagemanaged by well-meaning whites, who hoped chatter would fend off retribution. They were awarding amnesties hand over fist to all the worst thugs of the apartheid regime, in return for confessions—mere words.

Did a grudge lurk somewhere behind these thoughts? The Commission was keeping his girlfriend away from him. Nora Appleton was a legal intern there, a sparkling twenty-seven-year-old spirit, over-endowed with smarts and drive.

Their reunion in the Cape had been a sexual disaster. He should have expected that. He could hardly blame her. Only a psychopath would come home aroused from dealing with torture and dismemberment.

Tomorrow he would be gone, on his way to Prague.

He was consulting to the Global Bank on the telecom and broadcasting sell-off in the Czech Republic, the latest in a string of missions since graduating from Yale Law and then the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

He was a freelance agent of global capitalism and democracy, a citizen of the world, and much in demand as a speechwriter, an adviser, a behind-the-scenes man, transnational troubleshooter. For all this, he hadn't advanced through the normal ranks in any of the organizations that had used his talent. He was too rebellious, too idiosyncratic, too taken with his own opinions on how the world should be. So he was living the peripatetic existence of a consultant.

Things were coming to a head in Prague, where his mission was to foil the bid by a consortium of family-owned German companies. These noble houses had been enthusiastic contributors to Hitler's war machine. They already had much of the electronic media under their thumb in Hungary and Slovakia, and Croatia was about to fall to them, as well. He didn't like the Germans and their renewed (if peaceable—for now) designs on central Europe. Jeremy was pitching an alternative plan—wider shareholding, with the foreign investment stake led by American interests, but the Czech public and its government retaining significant control.

The German group aimed for mastery of multimedia, including broadband, throughout central Europe. But the Czechs desperately wanted into the European Union; if the German offer won, serious questions about monopoly could arise with the European merger authorities. The Czech Republic, and even Hungary, could have entry into the common market held up even longer. If this he could play this anti-trust card, the outside minority shareholders assembled by DeutscheRad would get very cold feet.

Juliette Casanova, his study group partner from Yale Law—at a tender age, she had been the mistress of Pierre Lamarre, founding father of the European common market. The mergers commissioner, Claus-Dieter von Fincklestein, owed his entire career path in Brussels to Lamarre. A word from Lamarre, and von Fincklestein would be warning the Czechs about competition headaches.

The European Infrastructure and Transitional Facility had endorsed the DeutscheRad proposal. But the effete Italian count heading the EITF was locked in mortal combat with the Texas cowboy billionaire who ran the Global Bank. So the Bank had hired Jeremy to prepare a breakout on the deal; they knew he would use every milligram of his thinking matter to tear the German submission to shreds. A mere expert opinion wouldn't shake the markets very much, even with the Global Bank imprint. But, if there were ominous noises from the Brussels Eurocrats around the same time, the double whammy could sink DeutscheRad's stock and send the outside investors scrambling: While the German families behind DeutscheRad held a controlling bloc, there were enough footloose shares to make the price move big-time.

The neurasthenic redhead on the neighboring treadmill was throwing Jeremy a worried glance. Maybe the big guy was overdoing it; he could drop any minute, in total cardiac arrest. She made him self-conscious. He dismounted, not bothering with the cooldown recommended by the fitness gurus, and headed for the steam bath. There, black, white and "colored" (mixedrace and Asian) men sweated themselves side-by-side, naked, each absorbed in solitary enjoyment of this innocent relaxation—the

bodily proximity generated no racial tension, no manifest unease. To Jeremy *that* was real, even if the Truth Commission was largely for show.

His thoughts switched back to Nora. How was it going to end between them?

She was the latest in a series of brilliant and ambitious young things. Like the others, she was a combination of brains, beauty and pathologically low self-esteem. The low-self esteem bit puzzled him, in such overachievers. At least, it made seduction easy. All he had to do was really *listen*, and take their ideas and intuitions seriously (about which he was sincere; you never knew where you could pick up something useful).

As far as self-esteem went, Nora's case was unusually bad. Thus, the giant professional misstep of sleeping with the judge she had been clerking for.

Nora had spilled those beans when they'd first hooked up at a conference in London. (Land mine treaties or the Kyoto Protocol? It was half a year ago, almost.) Knowing the justice in question, he couldn't resist answering her confession with some gossip. "The last time Dick Kent fell for a clerk, his wife went off the handle. She was so furious, she screamed threats at his secretary and assistant and she went out and bought up a department store on his credit card."

"She's very sick, isn't she? A hospital basket case."

"Not in the least. Of course, after the wild shopping spree, her wicked elder sister, who had always envied her marriage to an important judge, had her thrown in the bin. Got some shrink to sign that she was psychotic."

"She's not loony?"

"*Loony?* She's a big name in the art world, represented by a leading gallery in New York, and the top agents in Berlin and Palm Beach. Besides, looks-wise, she's a bombshell. I saw that photo of her in *Art News*, at the opening of the retrospective here in London: a short red dress, tight ass, spiked heels—something to die for."

Hearing this, Nora became visibly upset—Jeremy had feared that he'd gone too far with the crass language.

"Nora, I'm sorry. I've been offensive, insensitive. I really like you; this is awful."

But it turned out that he, Jeremy, wasn't the problem. She was in rage, in hatred against Kent. She had fantasized that he was trapped in a marriage with a chronic mental patient, starved for company but too noble and caring to have yet demanded a divorce. Now a very different picture had emerged: a libertine with a beautiful, bohemian wife, to whose bed he could always make his way back after straying with his young helpers. Blaming the volcanic curry for a stream of tears she couldn't stem, she asked him to excuse her; but he insisted on following her back to the hotel.

It ended up with Nora drinking too much, and a few hours of wicked sex in her room. He had expected to be out of there by the crack of dawn, leaving her to sleep off the booze.

Instead, she went and almost died on him.

How long had it taken to figure out that she'd lost consciousness?

At least, the ambulance had come quickly; and he was with her for the twisting, turning journey at high speed from one side of Kensington to the other. He used the last juice in his mobile to reach Lucy Napier, his ex-girlfriend and the head surgeon at Chelsea Hospital. He hadn't set eyes on Lucy since their breakup years ago. Now he was waking her up to get some help with the medical complications of a one-night stand. Was that arrogance or just quick thinking?

Whatever, Lucy promised she'd be there.

She ordered her taxi to stop for take-out at an espresso joint on the Old Brompton Road; it now ran 24/7, catering to the American brokers and bankers in the 'hood. Minutes later, she burst through the hospital doors with a paper demitasse in each hand. Braless, a Benneton T-shirt covering her torso, Harvard Medical School sweatpants threatening to fall off at the waist, curly dirty-blond hair restrained in a ponytail, thick-lensed, wirerimmed spectacles perched on her nose, she charged into Emergency.

Her entry did not go unnoticed. Lucy Napier was the wonder doctor of Chelsea (a type that was supposed to exist only in the silly world of prime time Yankee TV drama was here a reality). Childless, without life-partner, self-described part engineer, part shaman, part alchemist—this slight, wiry woman was at her best in the OR when hope, and time, were running out.

"Nora revived very quickly," Lucy filled Jeremy in. "Now she's sleeping, but we've got her on the monitors, and there's frequent checking by the nurses. The cardiologist thinks it could be something rare, a chronic fainting condition like Vesal Vegal. You wouldn't happen to know any history on her?"

"We hadn't been that close 'til recently."

"Jeremy, she's not a hooker, now?"

"God, no, Lucy—don't be flippant."

"The admitting resident reported there was semen in her mouth, throat."

"Lucy, it might surprise you, but there are good girls who like to swallow, too. A professional would probably have insisted on a condom."

"*Touché*" Lucy conceded, gallantly.

Then he remembered. The cold metal he had slid along the inside of her thigh, teasing the soft skin. "The Bracelet! MedicAlert, when I think about, most likely."

"Brilliant!" But where is it?"

"Well, she wasn't wearing it."

“You took *that* off?” she asked, accusatorily.

“Yes,” he had to admit.

Only an ex-lover could pull out that “hooker” business in the midst of a medical emergency. Was there a hint of jealousy in Lucy’s sharp tone? A pang or two in one’s ex never hurt.

Nora’s parents had hopped on the first available discount flight from Toronto.

She was out of danger by then. The senior Appletons made Jeremy’s acquaintance in the ward. He sized up Mrs. Appleton: she was the sort who made lasting judgements from first impressions. And what she had to see in Jeremy was a stout middle-aged man who hadn’t slept or showered or shaved for forty-eight hours.

Mrs. Appleton addressed Lucy Napier, who had come by to check on Nora (and on Jeremy), as “Nurse.”

“It’s *Dr.* Napier,” Lucy instantly set her straight, throwing a rather sly glance at Jeremy. “Doesn’t our hero look adorable,” Lucy now suggested to Professor and Mrs. Appleton, “not even leaving Nora’s side to brush his teeth. He’s as sleep-deprived and unkempt as any junior resident on call for the OR. The dear would be utterly believable as a surgeon, don’t you think?” Jeremy remembered that, listening to the eulogy, he hadn’t been able to stop his face turning red; he had actually blushed.

Only Lucy could ever make him do that.

Jeremy emerged from the Seapoint Club into the sunshine.

Should he call a taxi, or stroll along the boardwalk? The crisp sea air of the Cape winter was invigorating. And if he walked back he could loiter at a café or two, killing some time before Nora’s return from the Truth Commission.

But there was more. Maya Svobodnik, his obsession.

It was attacking him, singing a siren song to his soul. The obsession had haunted him for twenty years; he stored it in some durable compartment of his psyche, separated by firewalls from the Jeremy known to the rest of the world.

The obsession was played out in the anonymity of public cyberspaces, Internet cafes, Kinko’s copy shops, and so on; he used Hotmail addresses registered with false or incomplete personal data.

He perambulated towards the downtown. The E Space was near the truth headquarters where Nora now toiled; he had spotted it the other day, when visiting her there. He walked past, then back again, and retraced his tracks once more. Get a grip, he said to himself, but without success.

With the Internet, he could follow Maya’s movements; it wasn’t hard to learn where Arthur Rizler happened to be on tour, defending American civilization and the West. Maya had been reduced to an appendage of Rizler, his glorified bag carrier.

Jeremy was hoping somehow to insinuate himself into her

life. He had sent to her Yahoo account the texts of speeches he'd drafted for politicians, translations of poetry from French and German, and essays on global warming, nuclear terrorism and the digital revolution (most were too original and countercurrent to have a hope of seeing publication).

She was drawn to him back then, when they were students; he *knew* that—he could read it in her eyes. She had told him, “You’re the freest spirit I’ve met; you’re the greatest!” But she had refused his kiss, turning away with fabulous coldness and decisiveness. And soon she had disowned him even as a friend. To be still burned up by that, two decades later—what did he want from her now? A relationship? Or revenge? Perhaps it was an accounting or reckoning, like what they *said* they were doing up the street at the Truth hearings.

Jeremy double-checked the site of the Horton Bland Foundation. Next, he surfed to a web page with a calendar of cultural events for the Czech capital. Now he had the exact time and venue.

After logging off, he noticed the man who had been standing behind him, waiting to use the PC—a lanky Afrikaner with a withered face, partly concealed by large aviator sunglasses.

“Bland Foundation?” the fellow queried in a soft voice. “Good people. Are you involved with him?”

“Just surfing,” he answered, resolving to disclose as little as possible.

“I’d like to help out,” offered the Boer. “Bland stuck with us right to the end, on the ANC being terrorists, our right to defend ourselves. I was upstairs, over *there*, last week”—he pointed towards the Truth Commission offices—“humiliating myself, forced to grovel for amnesty.”

So this was a member of the Security Services, an apartheid-era goon. Images of all that the Afrikaner could have eyeballed were flashing through Stuart’s mind at high speed. Could the interloper uncover the connecting thread, Maya Svobodnik? He could easily track down the keywords that Jeremy had put into the search engines. Jeremy realized he had been sloppy in thinking that he could count on the anonymity of a public Internet point. There was someone who already shared the secret of his obsession. It was Maya herself. He had been counting on her to cure him, to force closure. She could send a cease-and-desist notice; she could cancel the email account he had discovered. She could have her husband tell him off; or she could hire an attorney. If he was still at it, that must be *her* fault, for not laying down the law.