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Husbands and Lies

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Extract

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Chapter 1

My mother taught me to lie.

Don't get me wrong. She never sat me down and said, 'Okay, Francesca, today's lesson is all about the art of the tangled web' or any such thing. She was far subtler than that, although as a rule the use of the word *subtle* in conjunction with my mother would demand the immediate addition of the 'as a brick' qualification. My mother rode roughshod through life on a tougher-than-rhino saddle leaving a trail of debris the size of Africa in her wake.

She taught me other things, too, of course, like where to hide when she was in one of her rages and how to hold the tops of my hand-me-down socks in place with a rubber band – early lessons that were dismissed with ne'er a nostalgic glance backwards once I left home and had shaken off the shackles of my childhood. The lying, though: that was another matter altogether. That one I practised. By the time I hit twelve I had it off to a fine art.

Which was just as well, really. Lord knows what kind of adult I'd have made if I hadn't learned to differentiate between compulsive honesty and an occasional well-placed falsehood. Sometimes, during the long, interminable days and nights of Alison's illness, lying was the only thing that kept me going.

Not least, of course, the lying I did to myself.

Alison. My best friend since primary school, when she'd punched Billy Waterman after he made me cry during times tables practice by showing me his willy under the table. She'd waited until playtime and then collared him by the girls' toilets, where she'd split his lip with a right hook that Frank Bruno would have been proud of. When an unexpected promotion brought me south from Staffordshire seven years ago, one of the deal clinchers had been that my new office was fifteen minutes from where Alison was living.

And now she was shackled to a hospital bed by a tangle of tubes and could barely lift a hand from the covers, let alone throw a punch. I caught a glimpse of her through the corridor window as I approached the side room that had been her home for the past month and a half, and a thousand horrible truths rampaged through my head. *So this is what it does to you. What's happened to your hair? Is your skin supposed to be that colour?*

I ignored them and set my mouth in a determined line lest they try to break forth anyway. 'You look well.'

'Liar.' Alison gave me a weak smile. 'I look like shit.'

'No, really – I think you look – well, you don't look so tired today. Your eyes look brighter.'

Alison regarded me closely. 'More than I can say for you, then. You look like you haven't slept in a fortnight.'

'I'm fine.' I dropped my coat over the back of the chair and drew it up alongside the bed.

'Sure? Max and Lottie okay?'

'Mmn? Oh – yeah. They're fine.'

Alison eased herself forward in the bed. 'Hon? You sure you're okay? Only you don't look okay to me. You look – grey.'

I regarded her for a moment, and felt tears begin to threaten. Oh, God. I always vowed before I came in that I wouldn't go getting upset in front of her. But watching your best friend being taken from you by degrees, deteriorating with each visit as the cancer that had been diagnosed five months earlier ate her up from the inside, was never going to be easy. Her concern for my wellbeing was humbling.

I pulled myself together. 'Grey, you think?' I gave a mock sigh and folded my arms across my chest. 'Yeah, well, Max was saying much the same thing the other day.'

She raised her eyebrows at the suggestion of my paragon of a husband saying anything so maladroit. '*Max* was?'

'Mm-hmn.' I looked at her innocently. 'We've just bought this new full-length mirror for the bedroom. One of those – chevalier things, you know. In an antique pine frame, to go with the dressing-table. It's got this little design kind of carved into the top of the frame.' I gestured with my hand, and she nodded encouragingly. Then I sighed heavily again. 'Anyway, I was just out of the bath, and doing the whole *scrutinising* thing in front of it – *big* mistake, by the way – and I said to Max, "Look at me. I'm fat, I'm wrinkled, I'm old, and I'm grey." I was waiting for him to disagree, you see.' Alison nodded again. 'And he didn't, so eventually I said, "For goodness' sake, Max, say something nice to me."'

Alison waited expectantly. 'And did he?'

I lowered my eyes. 'He said – well, he said –' I hesitated. '"At least there's nothing wrong with your eyesight."'

Alison gave a shout of laughter, and a nurse who was busy at a desk across the corridor looked over at us and smiled. Then Alison sobered again.

'No, but seriously, Fran. I think you're overdoing things.'

'I'm not.'

'You *are*. How could you not be? Full-time job. Husband and kid to look after – admittedly both cute, adorable, blah blah, but still a handful. Useless best friend who's about as much help to you as a chocolate teapot.'

'Less,' I said.

'What?'

'Less use. At least I could comfort-eat my way through a chocolate teapot.'

She stuck out her tongue. 'Sod off. Though I suppose it might fatten you up, at least.' She reached out and plucked at the sleeve of my jumper. 'Look at you. You're all skin and bone. Fat, my ass. *I've* got more meat on me than you.'

'Yeah, well.' I gave her a sidelong look, and one of the earlier truths I'd been trying to suppress slipped out before I could help it. 'At least I still have my own hair.'

She bit her lip to stop herself from smiling, and I felt the tears welling up once again.

'Come here,' she ordered, and patted the side of the bed. I slid reluctantly onto the edge of the mattress beside her, and she wrapped her wasted arms around my shoulders and leant her head in against mine for a moment, so that I could smell the fresh perfume that was so quintessentially Alison,

the fragrance she had never lost despite the prolonged stay in hospital and the punishing weeks of treatment she'd undergone, which made me want to cry all the harder and cling on to her and scream at the gods to leave her be and stop their relentless quest to take her from me. Then she pushed me away and studied me at arm's length, narrowing her dark-shadowed eyes at me intriguingly.

'I want you to help me with something.'

I sniffed unattractively, feeling around unsuccessfully for a handkerchief, and she passed me a tissue from a box that stood alongside a vase of white freesias on her bedside cabinet.

'Go on.' I blew vigorously into the tissue.

She gave me one of her wicked looks, her eyes gleaming.

'You're not allowed to say no.'

'Oh, God.'

'I'm dying. Would you refuse the wishes of a dying woman?'

'Yes!' I blew again. 'No,' I admitted.

She grinned at me conspiratorially, then gestured towards the cabinet. 'Open it. Top shelf.'

I did as I was bidden.

'There's a notepad on top of my clean PJs. Got it?'

'Uh-huh.' I lifted it out, and she took it from me and rifled through the pages. Then she handed it back to me, and I began to read aloud what she had written in her clear rounded hand.

'"Thirty-something, closer to my fourth decade than my third, alas; never done any online dating before."' I raised my eyes to Alison. 'You're joining a dating agency?'

She gave a tired laugh. 'Not me, you cheeky bugger. I'm nowhere near my fourth decade.' She nodded at the page. 'Keep reading.'

I cleared my throat. '"One careful previous owner (lady driver). Friends tell me I have a good sense of humour, that I'm trustworthy and fun, but then I pay them well to say all that stuff!"' I broke off and raised my eyebrows at her before continuing. '"I'm into good food, great wine and long lazy weekends in the country. Strengths: I can cook. And wash up afterwards. And iron my own shirts. Weaknesses: hopeless fashion sense. Besotted by my six-year-old daughter. Would love to meet lady with similar interests who isn't afraid of tackling someone with a wardrobe dating back to 1979, isn't repulsed by children, and enjoys at least the occasional glass of Cloudy Bay."'

'Well? What d'you think?'

I looked at her, confused. 'Um … he sounds divine. But – don't you think it's a bit optimistic to be looking at going out on dates, given the circumstances?' I gestured at the paraphernalia of equipment surrounding her bed. 'I mean, where will you hide the drip? Can you even remember how to put on anything that isn't a pair of pyjamas? Not to mention, won't Adam mind?' And do I care if he does, I asked myself, though I didn't voice this last, uncharitable thought. Adam, Alison's husband, worked as a producer for the BBC. The first time I'd met him, when Alison had brought him round for dinner and a checking-over after she'd been on a couple of dates with him, I'd been struck by his likeness to Max, and a bit dazzled on discovering that he routinely wined and dined some of Hollywood's

finest. He was full of funny anecdotes about the lesser-known habits of the movers and shakers in the world of television, and I'd found myself seduced by his easy charm. Between the cashmere sweater and the fancy cufflinks he was wearing, he was like a glamorous version of Max, who wasn't wearing a sweater but who had rolled the sleeves of his shirt up above his elbows, and whose fingernails bore traces of the engine oil he'd been unable to scrub clean after he'd come in from work that evening. He had teased me after Alison and Adam had left at the end of the night, telling me I'd never be able to cope with a man who spent longer in front of the mirror than me. My admiration had been short-lived, however: the next time we were out together at a party, Adam had made a pass at me and had laughed in the face of my self-righteous indignation when I turned him down, calling me a prude. Since that time I'd harboured feelings of protectiveness towards both Alison and Max, neither of whom I'd ever told, and a desire to run a hot kebab skewer through one of Adam's eyes every time I saw him.

Alison looked hard at me now, her eyes glittering.

'What?'

'That *is* Adam.'

'What?' I felt stupid and slow all of a sudden.

'Adam and Erin.'

'What?' I said again.

'Fran!' She gave an exasperated sigh. 'I need you to say something other than just "What?" all the time.'

'But – I don't—'

'Yes, you do, Fran.'

I looked hard at her. My mouth felt suddenly dry. She continued to grill me with her eyes.

'You've written a dating CV for your husband,' I said eventually.

'Mm-hmn.'

'Because …?'

She sighed. 'Please don't make me spell it out for you.'

'Spell it out for me.' I could feel a great surge of anger welling up inside me.

'Oh, Fran.' She reached out to take one of my hands, but I pulled away from her. She shrugged.

'Okay, then. I don't want Adam left moping on his own for the rest of his life. You should hear him when he's in visiting. Believe me, it's not like when you come in.' She broke off, and ran a hand distractedly across what was left of her ravaged hair. Then she rubbed her face with both hands for a moment, as though looking inside herself for the right words.

'I live for your visits,' she finally admitted, emerging from behind her hands. 'I love it when you come in: you make me laugh. You let me say things like "I'm dying", without giving me those great reproachful looks Adam's so good at. You poke fun at my hair, at the state I've become, without making me feel you're trying to protect me from some awful truth that everybody else already knows about but that I'm supposed to pretend I'm oblivious to. You tell me I'm less use than a chocolate teapot and make up stupid stories about looking at yourself in front of a mirror—'

'I do stuff like that to make you laugh!' I said, still angry. 'That doesn't mean I've become reconciled to losing you. It

doesn't mean I haven't given up hope that they'll find some miracle cure. There are new advances in medicine every day now, and you've got to stay positive. You're not allowed to give up hope! You never know: the next treatment—'

'Stop it, Fran,' she admonished. 'Don't lie to me. Not you, too. There won't *be* any more treatments. You know that.' She reached out for my hand again, and again I refused her advances. She sighed patiently. 'Of all the people who surround me every minute of every day – the nurses, the oncologists, Adam, Erin, my mum – you're the only one who treats me any way that even approaches normal. When Adam comes in, I'm not allowed to mention the cancer. He doesn't know how to cope with it. He used to ask about the tests, the treatments, you know? But he stopped doing even that eventually. The answers were never what he wanted to hear. I feel as though I'm letting him and Erin down because I can't defeat this thing and I'm just going to up and – *disappear* one day, and the thought of them being left on their own terrifies me. You *know* how hard this is. You're a wife and a mother as well. Lottie's the same age as Erin. Adam and Max are so alike they could be twins – aren't we always saying that? And yet you treat me just the same as you always did, as though you're sucking the juice out of every visit and you're not going to let this foul thing that's eating me up steal what's left of our time together. I couldn't do this without you. I need you to stay honest for me.'

She was so calm. I envied her that, even if I didn't agree with whatever mad scheme she was cooking up. Frankly, I

suspected that Adam would be more than capable of taking care of himself in the future.

I picked up the notepad once again.

'"One careful previous owner?"' I raised my eyebrows at her.

'Too much of a cliché?' She wrinkled her nose at me. 'I didn't want to put "widower". It makes him sound about a hundred. Plus, it seems a bit tasteless to mention it in a dating ad.'

'Whereas asking your best friend to collude with you in producing the ad whilst you lie dying in a hospital bed is the very height of good taste, I suppose.'

She smiled at me heartbreakingly. 'I love you, Fran.'

I sighed in exasperation, refusing to acknowledge the treacherous tears that were once again threatening. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Well.' She clasped her hands together in front of her excitedly. I had to admit, she hadn't looked this fired up in weeks. 'Nothing with the ad yet, obviously. Except – well, I'm not sure if I've hit the right tone. I thought perhaps you could go on to a couple of online dating sites and get a kind of feel for them – suss out what people normally say, that sort of thing. And then print a few out so that we can go over them together. I mean, mentioning Erin might be a huge no-no. I don't want to put people off before they've given him a chance.'

'Erin wouldn't put anybody off!' I said indignantly. 'The child is a doll.'

She laughed at my outraged tone. 'Of course she is,' she agreed. 'But there might be some *amazing* woman out

there who is perfect for Adam and Erin, but doesn't even know how great she'll turn out to be with kids and would run a mile at the prospect, but once she meets Adam and realises how fantastic *he* is, she won't *want* to run. D'you see?'

'Not even remotely. But what the hell.' I looked at her eager face. 'Okay, okay: so – *if* I agree, you want me to suss out the lingo and report back. Is that it?'

'Well, no. Sorry. *Afterwards*—' She looked at me meaningfully. 'I want you to join him up without telling him.' I started to protest, but she held up a hand to stop me. 'This is important to me, Fran, so please hear me out. I mean, give it a decent period of time – six months, say. No longer than that. I don't want him brooding.'

I bit back a snort. The thought of Adam brooding was hard to swallow.

'And then go through any responses, and see if you can't find him a nice girl to look after him and Erin,' Alison continued. 'I mean, *I'm* not going to be around to filter out the fortune hunters from the singing nuns.'

'But – how on earth am I going to do that? I can hardly pretend to be him, can I, when all these would-be perfect women start phoning up to arrange dates with him?'

'Oh – you'll think of something,' Alison said dismissively. 'You can say you're his PA, or something. Didn't you tell me you worked with someone who met his partner through a dating agency? A really pretty girl who works in advertising?'

'Modelling,' I admitted reluctantly. 'Greg Patterson. He heads up the system architecture team. They're getting

married at the end of the month. Second time round.' Greg's first wife had left him in the middle of a rainy November day, hiring a van and clearing their carefully constructed loft apartment of every stick of furniture while he was at work. She hadn't left a note.

'Well, then,' Alison said, as if that solved everything. 'You can ask him for some hints and tips.'

'Alison,' I said, trying to sound patient, 'I am not going to a colleague to ask for hints and tips on how to set up my best friend's husband on a dating site. I mean, apart from the fact that he would think me stark staring mad, it would be completely unprofessional. Guys just don't talk about that stuff in the office, plus I'm his *associate*—'

'So how come you know all about how he met his fiancée?'

'He – I don't remember.' She raised her eyebrows at me. 'Okay, *okay*. He told me.'

'Well, there you are, then.' Alison looked smug. 'I'm sure he'll be full of good advice.'

I shook my head at her. 'I'll start with stage one,' I said. 'I'm not agreeing to anything beyond that at this point.'

'Tonight?'

'What d'you mean, tonight?'

'I mean, will you go online and suss some agencies out tonight?' She tore the page out of the notepad and folded it in half before holding it out to me. 'Then you can report back when you come in tomorrow.'

'I might not make it in tomorrow,' I said loftily, gathering up my coat from the back of the chair. 'I do have a life, you know.' I looked at the piece of paper, which she

was waggling at me, and eventually snatched it out of her hand and stuffed it into the pocket of my coat.

Alison grinned, unfazed, and with good reason. I hadn't missed a day since she was admitted six weeks earlier for intensive and apparently futile radiation treatment.

'Don't go anywhere,' I said, like I always did, dropping a light kiss on her cheek.

She winked at me, happy in spite of the tiredness that had begun to show in her features.

'I might,' she replied mischievously. 'I do have a life, you know.'