



french
KISSING
EPISODE ONE

Harper Bliss

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Preview

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Warning: This title contains sensual language, ladies making love and cliffhangers.

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JULIETTE

“We haven’t had sex in months.” Juliette gazed out of Claire’s corner office window, hesitant to look her oldest friend and business partner in the eye. She could see Claire shuffle around nervously in her seat in the reflection of the window. “Nadia, she’s just... hardly there anymore. And I’m not saying it’s her fault, but since she got promoted—”

“It’s her time, Jules,” Claire interrupted. “You had yours. Now it’s her turn.”

This remark made Juliette spin around instantly. “I *had* mine?” She opened her palms to the sky and made a sweeping gesture. “Past tense? Then what’s all this?”

“This is what we built. Through years of hard work and spousal neglect. I’m the best example of that.”

“You’re just single because you’re so bloody difficult and no one’s ever good enough.” Juliette scanned Claire’s flawless face. A few laughter lines bracketed her eyes and she dyed her hair now, but she still looked a decade below her physical age.

Claire pushed herself out of her chair and walked towards Juliette. “No need to take it out on me, dear. I may be single but I’m getting plenty.”

Frustration flared beneath Juliette’s skin. “As long as you stay away from the interns—”

A loud knock on the door stopped Juliette mid-insult. Steph, dressed in tight jeans and equally tight blazer, appeared in the doorway and Juliette and Claire both burst out laughing.

“What?” The puzzled look on Steph’s face made it difficult to stop the giggles, but this was their place of business and, in the end, everything always stopped for business.

“We were just talking about you. That’s all,” Claire said.

“Glad to be the source of such gaiety.” Steph always kept her cool, no matter the circumstances. It was one of the main reasons they had decided to hire her straight out of school ten years ago, despite her indiscretion with one of the bosses. “Dominique Laroche wants to meet first thing on Monday.”

“She’s keen,” Juliette said. “We want you in that meeting, Steph. Try to wear something... politically correct.”

“Sure. I just bought a really cool red tank top—”

“Don’t you fucking dare. She’s MRL’s rising star and we want to make an impression.” Juliette stared into Steph’s grinning face, realising too late her friend and employee was winding her up. “Just be on time tonight.”

“Is there a dress code?” Steph asked.

“Just your usual über-lesbian attire will do.”

“If everybody looked the same...” Steph hummed before turning on her heels and exiting Claire’s office.

Juliette checked her watch. “I’d better get going.” She couldn’t stifle a sigh. “Oh, and just a heads-up, even though I wasn’t supposed to tell you to avoid awkwardness... Nadia has invited some doctor from the hospital she wants you to meet.”

Juliette watched Claire roll her eyes. “I thought we had agreed on no more set-ups?”

“We had, but Nadia only seems to follow her own rules these days.”

“Hey, cut her some slack, okay? She’s put up with your workaholic habits for years. You’ll find a way to make it work again.”

“We have talked about, um, means to spice things up...” A blush bloomed on Juliette’s cheeks. She headed towards the visitor chair opposite Claire’s desk, against which Claire was still leaning, and sat down. “But this does not leave this room, yeah?”

“Of course not.” Claire’s eyebrows were already arched up expectantly.

“We were a bit tipsy at the time, mind you, otherwise, I mean, we would never...” Juliette knew she was rambling. She took a deep breath and continued. “We were thinking about going to Les Pêches one of these weekends with the sole purpose of picking someone up for a threesome.”

Claire’s face broke out in a grin. “You? Miss Control Freak? Inviting a stranger into your bed?”

“Better a stranger than someone I know.”

“I’m not so sure, Jules.”

Juliette ignored the smirk tugging at Claire’s lips. “What? Are you volunteering?”

“Been there, done that.” Claire’s face was now completely split by a smile baring her impeccable white teeth.

“I’m serious.” Juliette wanted nothing more than to have a giggle at it all. “My relationship is falling apart and I don’t know what to do about it.”

Claire scooted closer and put a hand on her knee. “It’s not falling apart. You’re just going through a rough patch, adjusting to changes in your life. You’ll be fine. You’re Juliette and Nadia for heaven’s sake.”

“What if we’re not, though? What if we’re not fine?”

Claire gave her knee a squeeze. “Don’t even think about it.” She looked at her watch. “Don’t you have a dinner party to prepare for?”

“Yes, heaven forbid I screw that up as well.”

“Do you need help?”

Juliette shot Claire a disdainful glare. “You’d only end up setting my kitchen on fire.”

“Fair enough.” Claire pulled Juliette out of her chair and pecked her on the cheek before spinning her around and gently coaxing her towards the door. “I’ll see you at eight.”

Juliette made a brief stop in her office next door, powered off her computer and headed home. The Barbier & Cyr office was located on a side street of the Champs-Élysées and it was a fifteen-minute downhill walk to her and Nadia’s flat. Juliette pushed any negative thoughts about her relationship to the back of her mind and focused on the dish she would prepare tonight. Coq au vin with gratin dauphinois. Not that she was overcompensating.

NADIA

“What were you thinking?” Nadia tried to ignore Juliette’s question. She’d been expecting it all evening, but they hadn’t had a moment alone. “You couldn’t have picked a less compatible person for Claire. You know what she’s like.”

“Honey.” Nadia turned around, back against the sink. “When will you get it out of your head that the only type of woman Claire will fall for is someone exactly like you?” She painted a tight smile on her face. “People change. Tastes evolve. You may have an excellent business relationship these days, but, from what you’ve told me, back in the day when you were dating, it wasn’t all sunshine and roses, was it?”

Nadia witnessed how Juliette’s jaw dropped.

“There are so many things wrong with all of what you just said.” Juliette shook her head, no sign of kindness or amusement in her eyes. “I’m going back in there, but this conversation is far from over.” She spun on her heels and left the kitchen, but, just before rounding the corner, faced Nadia once more. “Claire has been my best friend for more than twenty years. I believe I know a thing or two about her.” And she was gone.

Nadia, once again, wondered when they’d stopped seeing eye to eye on most matters. It used to be so easy. Now they were seriously discussing threesomes—something that would never happen, if Nadia had any say in the matter, and she had—to save what was left of their relationship.

She opened the fridge and took out the chocolate cake she’d bought rather than made herself. Another strike against her.

“Everything under control?” Steph’s voice startled her.

Nadia nodded, drew her lips into a wide smile and pushed her troubles to the back of her mind. “I’ll be right out with dessert.”

“The doctor’s nice.” Steph said it with that inflection in her voice Nadia had heard so many times. *Great*. “Are you trying to set her up with Claire? Because I’m not sure that’s going to work out. But you know me, always willing to pick up the slack.”

“What is it with you people? You spend two hours in someone’s company and your mind’s made up? Has anyone even asked Claire what she thinks?” Nadia only realised after she’d uttered the words that the volume of her voice was not adjusted to the fact that the kitchen was right next to the dining room.

“Did you call for me?” Claire, all groomed to perfection, appeared in the doorway.

Still with the chocolate cake in her hands, Nadia sighed. “No.”

“Oh. Sorry.” She shot Nadia a quick wink and disappeared with Steph hot on her heels.

Nadia straightened her back, lifted her chin, and carried the cake into the living room. “No need for applause, I didn’t bake it myself.”

“But you took the time to pick it up for us,” Claire said.

“Looks great, honey.” Juliette’s voice had that now almost familiar undercurrent of disdain and Nadia spotted the quick exchange of glances between her and Claire.

“I’ll do the cutting,” Margot, the—frankly—hot surgeon Nadia had invited to dinner with her friends, offered. “It’s my job after all.” It was true that, unlike most French people—and Juliette especially—Margot was not in love with the sound of her own voice and didn’t produce an endless stream of meaningless words just to hear it non-stop. These days, Nadia much preferred a quick, quiet lunch with Margot to one of Juliette’s laboured-over suppers. Not because of romantic motivations, but mainly because Juliette, although very careful not to criticise too directly, didn’t

seem to have that many good things to say about Nadia anymore.

Nadia sat down and regarded her friends and partner of ten years. She usually didn't feel so deflated in their company. This was time off work, time to relax, but, in all honesty, Nadia didn't mind working overtime if this was all she had to come home to.

Steph had adopted her usual pose, incapable of sitting in a chair like an adult, with one leg drawn up under her. Claire's blonde fringe was cut so it nearly did but just didn't fall into her eyes—eyes that Nadia had seen wander to Margot in unguarded moments, no matter what the others thought. Margot was her calm self, trained to remain level-headed in every situation. Maybe it worked against her a little bit in social situations, but if it hadn't been for her co-worker's lunch time advice over the past few weeks, Nadia wasn't sure she'd still be sitting at this table.

Then there was Juliette. She'd slipped out of her business suit for the evening and looked relaxed in jeans and t-shirt. How looks could be deceiving. Juliette Barbier, the love of her life, who couldn't feel more removed from her now than if she'd been on a mission to the North Pole.

And maybe she shouldn't, but Nadia did what she had to do to numb that feeling of dread spreading in her chest. The premonition that this could not last, that the setting was false, the people present mere actors playing well-rehearsed parts. She poured herself another glass of wine.

STEPH

Nadia was drunk, Juliette sported her angry scowl in response, Claire shuffled in her chair uncomfortably, and the hot doctor was about to leave. Steph had enough decency not to flirt with Margot in front of the others, despite their levels of indifference or intoxication. Claire and Juliette had become good friends, but they were still her bosses.

"I'm heading home as well." Steph got up out of her seat and hugged the hosts and Claire, who lived just down the street from Nadia and Juliette. Steph knew full well that, in a previous life, Claire and Juliette had been lovers, but to her, her two bosses seemed more like twins, like sisters who couldn't be away from each other for more than twenty-four hours.

She followed Margot to the elevator and hopped in with her.

"To be a fly on the wall now," she joked, trying to break the ice while admiring the doctor's all-leather outfit.

Margot just gave a small smile in response, obviously not very interested in gossiping about Nadia and the people she just met.

"Heading straight home?" Steph asked, trying to coax even a few words out of her elevator companion, not being very good at silences in confined spaces.

With pursed lips, Margot just nodded. Was she giving Steph the cold shoulder? *Heavens*. She hadn't even tried anything yet, was just making polite conversation. They exited the building in silence. Steph had a good few inches on the doctor in height, but she had to quicken her pace to keep up with Margot's swift strides. They stopped at a sporty but quite heavy motorbike. Steph's eyes grew wide.

"Very nice to meet you, Steph. I'm sure I'll see you around." Margot produced a key from her leather jacket pocket and unfastened the helmet chained to the bike's handlebar. *Could she get any*

hotter?

“Would you like to go for a night cap?” It was as if Steph’s brain had stopped working. Was she really using that crappy line on this gorgeous woman? Steph wasn’t that used to going after someone like this. She just had to set foot in Les Pêches and at least one person would be all over her.

“I’m driving.” Margot pointed at the bike and Steph was grateful for the darkness of the night hiding the sudden blush on her cheeks. “And I’m not much of a drinker. I’m not on call but I simply never know when someone’s life will be in my hands. I like to be prepared.”

The simple way in which she said it and the gravitas of her words made Steph accept them immediately. Clearly, Margot was out of her league—too serious, too smart and too level-headed. *Too much of a challenge as well?*

“Besides,” Margot said, her helmet already at the top of her head. “No offence, but you’re a bit young for me.” With that, she slipped the helmet over her head, straddled the bike, pushed it off its stand and kicked it into gear. It was the most arousing thing Steph had seen in months, maybe years. Maybe ever.

Ouch. She watched Margot speed off with a roar in the night before heading for the Métro. She briefly contemplated getting off at Saint-Paul and drop by Les Pêches to nurse her wounded ego, but that would only result in mediocre sex and a hangover.

Instead, she took the underground to her flat near Père Lachaise, fed her cat and divided her thoughts between the memory of Margot driving off and Claire’s words earlier that day, just before she left work. They wanted her in the Dominique Laroche meeting on Monday. If she made the right impression, they would let her take the lead on a very important account. It had been a long time coming and Steph was ready.

She had research to do this weekend. Les Pêches would be there the next weekend, and the next. Steph had turned thirty-three last month and it was time to take her career to the next level.

“What do you think, Pierrot?” she asked her grey-striped cat.

“Meow,” he said.

CLAIRE

Claire high-fived Steph, not a gesture she often partook in, but Steph had just landed Barbier & Cyr its first politician as a client in its fourteen-year existence. Claire had always known politics and PR were a match made in heaven, but for the first time, she would reap the rewards.

Steph had been outstanding in the meeting with Dominique Laroche, sweeping her off her feet with her boyish charm as well as with deep knowledge of the smallest events in the rising députée’s career. A winning combination.

“Impressive,” she said as she ushered Steph and Juliette into her office for a debriefing. “She’s all yours now.” Claire liked to believe that she’d taught Steph all she knew, but their once intern and now co-worker was plenty savvy herself. She simply had the instinct. And she could seduce like no other.

A sly grin on Steph’s face said it all. It was the same crooked smile Claire had briefly fallen for

ten years ago, in a moment of weakness. Despite scolding herself for that misstep many times, she could still see how it had come about. Glancing at Juliette, her other, more serious ex, she wondered how the three of them had made it work so well.

"I hope you're ready to work around the clock," Juliette said. "When you're on a politician's payroll, you're always on standby."

"She'll be fine." Claire didn't want Juliette to ruin Steph's moment of glory just because she'd been suffering from a skewed work-life balance the past fourteen years or, to be more precise, because Nadia was starting to show signs of being fed up with it. "Steph? Are you up for it?"

She sat up in the chair she'd been slouching in in typical Steph fashion. "Can't wait."

"This woman is ambitious." Adrenalin surged in Claire's blood. "We want to be around when it really happens for her. You have to build a relationship with her based on trust. That's the most important thing. But before you do, you'll have to dig up all her dirty laundry."

"Consider it done." Steph cleared her throat. "Speaking of which and in the spirit of full disclosure... last Friday I made a bit of a pass on Margot when we were saying our goodbyes. She blew me off. We went our separate ways."

Claire shook her head. "Quelle surprise."

"I know she was meant for you—"

"She wasn't *meant* for Claire," Juliette interjected. "For heaven's sake."

"It's all good, ladies. Please." Claire raised her hands in a conciliatory gesture. There were many perks to working with your best friends, but this was one of the downsides. "Steph, I wasn't expecting anything else from you." She turned to Juliette, who'd been in a foul mood since arriving at the office, despite their big meeting. "Please thank Nadia for introducing me to Margot. She's certainly intriguing, but it was hardly love at first sight. On either side."

"If you want to thank Nadia, you can do it yourself." Juliette brought a hand to her mouth as soon as she said it. "Sorry. I shouldn't bring my personal life to work. I will fix things at home. Let's move on."

Claire gave her a slight nod of the head before turning her attention back to Steph. "She blew you off? That must have stung?"

"Maybe I've peaked and the time has come to settle down."

"And pigs will fly," Claire said absent-mindedly, thinking back to last Friday when she'd found a tight-lipped, square-jawed trauma surgeon in leather pants in Juliette and Nadia's sofa. Margot had looked as ready to slice through someone's skin as to kick someone's ass. A vibe that had, admittedly, put Claire off from the start. She had to agree with Juliette on this, as on most things, that Nadia might have made an error of judgement. And she'd had no doubt in her mind that Steph would have tried something with the *inconnue* at the dinner party.

"I'm interviewing a potential new assistant in five minutes." Juliette tapped her watch. "Can we get on with it, please?"

"I hope she's good and intuitive and brings you a better mood to be in," Claire said. "I have lunch with Renson at Le Georges. I'll give him your love."

"I'll start digging into Laroche." Steph raised her eyebrows twice in quick succession and

pushed herself out of her chair.

When they'd both left her office, before shifting her focus to work, Claire closed her eyes for a minute and wondered when was the last time she'd spent some time cultivating her own love life instead of discussing that of her friends.

JULIETTE

Sybille, the girl Juliette was interviewing for the position of her new PA, was the spitting image of Nadia ten years ago. Big brown eyes, that North-African complexion that made Juliette's knees go weak, a feistiness brimming under the polite tone of her voice. Maybe it was wrong to base her decision on the turmoil her personal life was going through, but she couldn't possibly hire her. Or maybe a constant reminder of how it used to be was exactly what she needed.

Suddenly she didn't feel like asking Sybille about her strengths and weaknesses anymore—a question the girl would no doubt answer capably and even with a bit of wit thrown in. She was definitely over-qualified and surely ambitious, exactly the overachiever Juliette was looking for.

"You know what, Sybille?" She locked eyes with her and saw Nadia again. Nadia on their first date wearing that white blouse that contrasted so gloriously with her skin, it made Juliette's mouth water. "You're hired. Please see Fabio in the office next door for details. We use the standard two-month trial period. Please start as soon as possible." She stood up to shake hands. Sybille seemed undeterred, as if she'd had this in the bag from the moment she walked in. As if she'd seen it in Juliette's eyes. The guilt, the eagerness, the desperation to, for once, say yes.

"Merci beaucoup, Madame Barbier." She stood tall, no trace of nervous sweat on her fingers when their hands met. "You won't regret it."

We'll see about that. Juliette's success in business was due to a good combination of gut instinct, profound analysis and a complete lack of emotion. If she didn't deal with her crumbling relationship soon, she'd be doing more than hiring assistants who looked like her wife on a whim. She'd be harming her and Claire's life's work.

After showing Sybille out, she reached for her phone and called Nadia.

"Have lunch with me," she said as soon as she heard Nadia's matter-of-fact greeting on the other end of the line.

"What? Today?" The lack of eagerness and spontaneity in Nadia's voice gripped her around the heart like a cold fist. "I can't, babe. I'm up to my ears." The same excuse Juliette had used for years, meaning she had no defence against it.

"Please. We need to talk." If neither one of them ever insisted, how could they ever work it out? If all they did about their current impasse was instigate half-hearted conversations after too much wine—usually resulting in a flaming fight because they both couldn't control their temper very well when under the influence—how could they possibly find a way out?

"I know, but can't it wait? The most I could possibly spare you for lunch is half an hour." Nadia sighed. "We deserve more than that."

Juliette could hardly argue with that. "Tonight?"

"I'll be home at eight. I promise." A sweetness had crept into Nadia's voice. Juliette didn't

want to hang up now.

“I’ll cook.” She realised she’d been overcompensating in the kitchen of late.

“Why don’t you relax. Open a nice bottle of wine. I’ll take care of dinner.”

“Sounds perfect, babe. I love you.” It was so easy to say, and certainly no lie, but what if it wasn’t enough? What if their love had developed into something different over the years. Something more pragmatic and less romantic.

“Love you too. Got to run.”

Juliette sagged against the leather back rest of her chair. They’d had all weekend to talk, but Nadia had had a nasty hangover to nurse on Saturday and Juliette had been so angry, so frustrated and utterly unwilling to talk anything through. On Saturday evening Juliette had attended a ghastly play with Claire courtesy of a good client—attendance not optional.

On Sunday, just like every Sunday for the past six months it seemed, Nadia had had to deal with an emergency at the hospital, keeping her away from home for the better part of the day. Juliette had been so tired, so emotionally exhausted, she’d barely made it out of bed at all. Resentment was a heavy burden to bear, not just resentment for Nadia’s job which had transformed her into someone Juliette wasn’t sure she particularly liked—possibly because that new person emerging reminded her a bit too much of herself for comfort—but, mostly, resentment for how the whole situation made her feel so helpless, so dependent on someone else’s availability and time for her.

Juliette wasn’t used to playing second fiddle, but Claire was right. Maybe it was Nadia’s time to shine professionally. But where did that leave her, if not in the shadows?

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