

**COME  
AGAIN**

**ROBERT  
WEBB**



CANONGATE

# Chapter 1

She woke with her mouth forming a single word. ‘You.’ This was how they always ended, her dreams of Luke. The details varied but they would always be alone together in his room back in college. Two people still in their teens, asking their first questions, sharing their first jokes. Kate noticed the freckle on a knee showing through his ripped jeans; his ready smile; the way he tilted his head when he listened. The twenty-eight-year conversation was a few hours old – the first night of their first week. This was the beginning.

She sat in the little armchair in the corner of his student room, Kurt Cobain watching her with an intelligent smirk from the Nirvana poster on the wall opposite. Below Kurt, sitting on his bed and leaning against the wall, was Luke – similarly slim but darker, unbleached, and with a face that had seen less trouble. He was jiggling his foot off the edge of the bed. Kate had just given him something to jiggle about.

‘I mean, I wouldn’t have to take *all* my clothes off, right?’

Kate adjusted the A4 pad on her lap and carried on sharpening her pencil. ‘No, of course not. Just slip your shirt off if you like. The trouble is, I’m not good enough to draw clothes. That pyjama top would present quite a challenge.’ She looked up from the pencil and met his mock-insulted gaze.

‘It’s not a pyjama top,’ he said, slightly pouting, ‘it’s a granddad shirt.’

‘Ah yes, of course,’ Kate smiled, ‘the blue and grey stripey cotton thing with four open buttons at the top that definitely doesn’t look like you’re wearing pyjamas.’

Luke pinched the top of the shirt to one side and frowned at it. ‘Yes, it’s possible,’ he nodded like a barrister. ‘It’s possible that there’s a resemblance with—’ Abruptly, he glanced up at her. ‘Hang on, where did you get that pencil sharpener from? This is my room, isn’t it?’

Kate stopped turning the pencil and took a breath.

*No, not yet. Let’s not wake up yet.*

The intrusion of logic threatened to end the dream too soon – she felt the beginning of a rise towards consciousness but resisted it by talking. She wanted to stay right here, in this room, in this moment. She wanted to stay here forever.

‘Oh, it’s my pencil sharpener. I carry it around everywhere in case I run into a boy I want to seduce.’

Luke stopped jiggling his foot. ‘I’m being seduced, am I?’

‘Certainly. Why do you think I told you to strip? You don’t think I can actually draw, do you?’

Luke looked around his room with a mixture of surprise and excitement. ‘To be honest, yes I did think you would at least make a token effort.’

Kate put the drawing materials to one side and moved over to sit beside him on the bed. ‘And what was going to happen after I’d made a token effort?’ She ran a hand slowly over the shoulder of his shirt, her fingers tracing the v-shape of the top buttons down to where they met the sprinkling of chest hair. She knew this body like no other: nineteen-year-old Luke, Luke in his twenties, Luke in his thirties . . . and then, halfway through his forties . . .

He gave her the quizzical smile that always signalled the end of the dream. He said, ‘What’s the matter?’

She searched his face helplessly. ‘You died.’

He took her hand and gently said, ‘I know, my love. I know. But you have to wake up.’

‘Can’t. Don’t want to. Can’t.’

‘You can, sweetheart. Rise.’

‘Go to the doctor! You’re still young! The tumour’s tiny now, they can take it out, you can—’

‘Kate, my love,’ he said, ‘it’s too late.’

Luke looked down at their hands. She followed his gaze: down to their wedding rings and then back up into the eyes of her middle-aged husband. He said, ‘You’re going to be all right, Kate. Come on – you know things. You’re the Girl from the Future.’

She gently took her hand away and whispered, ‘I’m not going to be anything like all right.’

‘Get some help.’

‘No,’ she said with certainty. ‘No one can help me. And I’ve had enough of the future.’

His shirt was clutched in her fists.

‘You,’ she breathed.

Kate brought it up to her face but of course it had lost his smell long ago. Now it was tie-dyed with mascara and crinkled with dried snot.

*Needs a wash. Can’t be bothered. Maybe tomorrow. No, not tomorrow. Today’s the day.*

*Memory stick. Where is it? Keys downstairs.*

*Wonder who’ll find me? Maybe the mice I hear at night. Don’t go for the liver, guys. You’ll get smashed out of your tiny minds on the liver. I wouldn’t want you to start making bad choices.*

Kate slowly bundled the shirt under her pillow and began to think about the effort it would take to get out of bed. Too numb for tears now and long past words – the only

person she wanted to discuss Luke's death with was Luke. She gazed at the window opposite, through the curtains she hadn't drawn – a single cloud in the blue March sky. A puffy cumulus, like a freeze-framed explosion.

Sometimes, over these last nine months, she would manage to get back to sleep. She would sleep until she gave herself a headache. This morning, for better or worse, she already had a headache from last night's Pinot binge. In these first few seconds of consciousness the fingertips of a monster hangover were beginning to find a grip around her brain. She would have to get up. A more organised widow bent on self-destruction would surely keep some ibuprofen nearby.

*'Rise', he says. Easy for you to say, Lukey.*

Kate sat up and stared at her battered and reddened hands against the white duvet as they closed into fists.

She dared herself not to look over to the empty side of the bed. Maybe if she just avoided the standing insult of his absence and just got on with her day then by the time she got back from the bathroom he would be there, sleeping safely. She looked over anyway. Just the normal tally of beer and wine bottles.

The bed clinked as her feet found the floor.

*Socks.*

At least she'd taken her shoes off.

*'Best foot forward, Katie.'*

It was something her dad used to say. Onwards then, downstairs in search of Nurofen. The headache was the one pain that she could do something about.

*Memory stick. Must make sure the memory stick is safe. No, need a piss first. God, this day is relentless.*

She grimaced at the bathroom mirror. At least she didn't have to see herself undressed this morning because she was

still wearing the clothes she had passed out in. Baggy jeans, black long-sleeved top covered by a black loose-knit jumper, faded with time. She entertained the vague memory of what this five-foot-three body used to be capable of – this winner of medals and trophies. She saw her dark eyebrows raised at the thought, neither proud nor bitter. Sport belonged to a different lifetime.

What they don't tell you at Widow School, she had come to understand, was the way you age. You meet and fall in love with someone when you're eighteen, and the two of you are still together when you're one day older, and then another day older . . . until all the days of twenty-eight years have gone by. So there's a part of you that sees yourself through their eyes – a part of you that is still eighteen. And when they die, when that connection is lost, you start to see what other people see instead. Kate gazed at this middle-aged woman, almost a stranger. A cruel sort of time-travel but in her mind it seemed just. Luke was gone and he had taken her innocence with him. Fair enough. What did Kate Marsden need of innocence?

She inspected the diaspora of the make-up that she applied five days ago. Why the hell was she wearing make-up, anyway? She remembered with a shudder. Her mother had made one of her regal visits and Kate thought she ought to make some kind of effort. The eyeliner had spread south, as if to find a new life away from the war zone. Her hair was a tangle of neglect. With attention, it could be coaxed into a wavy stream of dark brown, falling just short of her shoulders. Now it sat defiantly on the top of her head like a mad hat. She thought of looking for a hairbrush but the idea nearly sent her back to bed.

*No, check the memory stick. In the kitchen. Oh yeah, that piss.*

It was a three-bedroom terraced house in Clapham. Too

big for a couple with no children but reasonable given Kate's age and salary. Or her former salary. She had been fired yesterday afternoon.

'Charles,' she said as she sat on the loo. Tentatively she encouraged her colon.

*Come on then, Charles.*

She waited for the usual all-or-nothing verdict: the shitquake or the turdfast. Nothing, then. What was this – day four? It was hardly surprising. It wasn't like she had eaten anything. She was about to haul up her knickers and jeans but decided they were such a disgrace that she just took them off and left them on the floor. There was no point putting them in a laundry basket since the distinction between 'special places for dirty clothes' and 'the rest of the house' had evaporated. The effort of reaching down to get the fabric past her heels almost made her throw up so she stood and leaned on the sink to get her breath back.

She washed her hands with what was left of the coal-tar soap she had found in the bathroom cabinet a few days after the funeral. Not a favourite of hers but Luke had used it occasionally when the nights drew in and he got a flare-up of eczema. The thin bar reluctantly foamed. She spent a long time rinsing under the cold tap, mesmerised by the splashing water. 'Who asked you to dance, then?' she asked with a tenderness that surprised her. She looked up to find the scary-looking woman again. Her cobalt eyes still flickered with life, having somehow missed the memo that everything else was closing down. She kept her own eye-contact as she found the tap and strangled the flow. From this angle she looked fully dressed but she didn't care anyway: she snorted a mirthless laugh at the idea that personal modesty could ever be an issue in a house as implacably empty as this. The jumper came down past her hips and she expected no company.

Kate took back Luke's soap gently in one hand and gripped the edge of the sink with the other. She closed her eyes and recalled yesterday's confrontation with Charles. Well, what had she expected? The guy was a criminal. In his office, she had managed to conjure a version of her old self: the bold and self-possessed person she was before the sky fell in. A tribute act which had taken a heavy toll on what was left of her energy. Today she felt like Yoda, agedly picking up his walking stick after ten minutes of leaping around and twizzling his lightsaber like a demented frog.

She had expected a fight. She hadn't expected threats of terrible vengeance.

Kate met her own eyes again, refusing to blink.

Charles – the attendant lord to the Russian gangster. And how did he begin?

'Thanks for coming to see me, Kate, and may I say for the record that I'm sorry about Luke et cetera.'

## Chapter 2

Kate pushed her hands into the pockets of her baggy jeans. Her eyes flicked to the window behind Charles and focused on the rooftops of West London. She said, ‘That’s very good of you, Charles et cetera.’

Her job was to rewrite history. That’s not how she described it to Luke when she first took the job and it wasn’t how Charles Hunt described it now as he swivelled in his chair and considered exactly how to fire her.

He nodded gravely for slightly too long. It was as if Charles had studied doctors in TV medical dramas and had decided this is the thing you do with your head when you want to signal compassion. He had an angular, pale face with permanently flushed cheeks and a side-parting of thinning blond hair which needed no maintenance, although he swept a hand across it frequently. His private office was a large room with homely touches – an antique sofa his mother had given him, a toast rack he affected to use for incoming mail. He liked to give his clients the impression that his work was a hobby. Kate faced him across an impressive mahogany desk, the one he used to say was a gift from Harvey Weinstein but which he now claimed he had personally whittled from the bark of the *Mary Rose*.

She watched him working out what to say next. Was it

her imagination or was her chair two inches lower than usual? Or was his higher? She'd never noticed before. Nine months ago, Charles had given her a fortnight off and then had called to say . . . what had he said? She had been drowsy with lack of sleep and a permanent hangover.

A voicemail: 'Kate, I'm really sorry as usual about Luke et cetera, but we could really do with you back here ASAP. Obviously you're a woman and therefore natch need a bit longer than normal. I get that. Take as long as you need . . . I mean, the sooner the better if you ask me because with my mother – I mean, Christ, widows just collapse, don't they? Like windows. Click on the top-left cross of an Excel sheet and the whole thing goes [croaking sound]. No offence. Anyway, take as long as you need. You're a woman. I get that.'

In the office Kate smiled pleasantly and waited. She knew what was coming: the idiot had put 'Sack Kate' in the e-calendar he thought she couldn't access. It was a pity she hadn't got in there first and resigned. Where was her moment with her co-workers gazing on as she strode out of the office with an Aretha Franklin soundtrack and a big smirk on her face?

She wasn't going to get that and she had reason to believe that she didn't deserve it. But at least she had something else to take away with her. She crossed her legs and her right hand fingered the memory stick attached to her bunch of keys.

Charles had founded Belgravia Technologia with nothing more than his own merit, flair, hard work and £394,000 from his father, a former defence minister in a Conservative cabinet. Kate had met Charles in the same first term she had met Luke – as students at the University of York. But over the years she had heard him start to describe that

place to clients as 'New York'. In his mind, the simple addition of 'New' was a harmless embellishment and Kate was sure that the man himself had come to believe it. His company was an early and leading exponent of ORM – Online Reputation Management. Kate was the IT manager but Charles owed her work much more than the title suggested and considerably more than the salary he paid her. She designed and edited the website; she had built and optimised the impregnable firewall; she created and continually upgraded the software architecture that kept the whole thing running smoothly. And, of course, she told the rest of the staff how to turn their computers off and on again.

In 1992, Kate had laced her boots and set out to arrive early for her first Computer Science lecture. If someone had told her she was about to devote most of her working life to revising the online histories of powerful men, she would have laughed. Well, life is long and full of surprises. And what is this 'internet' anyway? But if you'd told her she'd be doing it in the employ of Charles Hunt, the amusement would have turned to incredulity.

Charles was a walking punchline. Bart Simpson had a Charles Hunt duvet. Charles DeMontford Alphonso Hunt, the remarkably wealthy, fully oblivious, invincibly complacent prat. Charles who had attended Matthew Chatsworth College, a boarding school devoted to the advancement of the less gifted boys of the English upper-middle class. Kate could almost feel sorry for Charles if he were not such a committed and promiscuous liar. He could scarcely part his lips without spilling forth an unstoppable stream of instantly disprovable bullshit. His Jaguar was a Bentley. His surname meant 'royal' in Latin. In the Cadet Corps at school he had driven a tank. In fact, he had done so with such proficiency that he had been 'seconded by the Territorial Army to Northern Ireland' (where he had killed a man). He had an

IQ of 176. The Richard Attenborough character in *The Great Escape* was based on his great-uncle. His father was a Tory cabinet minister (that was actually true) but had previously been, at various times, a renowned fencing instructor, Martin Luther King's speechwriter and the Ambassador from the Court of St James to North Korea. His mother, by contrast, had merely invented the card-game bridge. Hers was an achievement affectionately admitted by Charles to be 'actually pretty impressive when you think about it'.

BelTech had all started innocently enough. *Because Everyone Deserves a Second Chance* was a principle Kate could sign up to, despite the wanky italics above the reception desk. A nurse unfairly accused of negligence here; a Rotarian who lost his head and punched a traffic warden there – imperfect humans who needed the historical mud to stop sticking to their search results. Unfairly accused or guilty as charged, they needed to move on. In either case, Kate had managed to convince herself that she was just a techie who went around fixing photocopiers. But in her more honest moments she knew that her entanglement was far knottier than that. As the digital security expert and key-holder of every password in the building, Kate had access to any file received by Charles. She had, from time to time, taken an unsanctioned peek at what the company was up to. Restless and greedy, Charles had recently begun to exploit his father's contacts in the delightful world of arms procurement. Kate told herself that she was there to keep him honest. The fact that she knew perfectly well that Charles was the least honest person she'd ever met was a nuance to be set against the other thing she knew about Charles: he was a chump and a nitwit. Guys like Charles, she thought, were never the problem.

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‘Kate, as you know, I didn’t always see eye to eye with Luke and his amusing ideals or whatnot. But you liked him, which must count for something, and he was obviously a perfectly all right guy.’

Kate nodded sympathetically. ‘Wow, Charles. If I’d thought you felt that strongly about him, I’d have asked you to deliver the eulogy.’

‘Well, as you know I missed the funeral because I was advising Prince Andrew on a certain matter. You wrote a card to say that you understood.’

‘I certainly understood.’

‘In fact I scanned it and I have the copy right here . . . ?’ Charles opened a drawer and started to look for the piece of paper Kate knew he had just invented.

‘Charles, don’t worry. I remember the card.’

Charles slammed the drawer shut. ‘Good.’

She watched as he tried to remember the speech that he’d rehearsed. There had been times, in the early years, when she could walk into his office without knocking and interrupt Charles Hunt in his only creative moment: acting out his part of the telephone call he was about to make. The unnaturally deep voice for clients, the cajoling bonhomie, the CBeebies-level empathy, the name-drops audible from orbit.

She picked casually at an imaginary piece of spinach between her lower teeth. He was going to have to be nice. Very nice. He needed her to find the Nestor Petrov file but still hadn’t worked out how to ask for it.

Charles said, ‘Your colleagues insist that the quality of your work has remained unaffected by the Luke situation, so I’ve tried to turn a blind eye to your timekeeping. Sometimes you don’t come in till after four o’clock.’

Kate said, ‘Right, yes. Just to check – the “Luke situation” being that my partner of twenty-eight years recently dropped dead while unloading the dishwasher? That situation?’

‘Bingo. And then obviously there’s the matter of your dishevelled appearance.’

For the first time in nine months, Kate nearly laughed. She’d caught a glimpse of herself in the bathroom mirror that lunchtime. She looked like Suzi Quatro after two months on a desert island being chased by dogs. She said neutrally, ‘I really don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘But that’s not the issue.’ Charles produced a plain Manila folder from his drawer and left it on the desk, significantly unopened. He looked at her as if he had just landed a royal flush.

*Christ, he’s going to do this like he’s in a Bond movie. Not yet. Keep it together.*

Kate took her nail out of her teeth and peered at the folder. ‘What have you got there, Charles? Not your latest rejection letter from the MCC, I hope.’ Charles didn’t even like cricket but she knew it bugged him that there was at least one club in England that considered him beyond the pale.

‘A-ha, no, something even more depressing, I’m afraid. It’s the message you sent to Mr Petrov.’

She kept her voice steady. ‘So many Petrovs. The tax evader?’

‘You know which one.’

‘Oh! The paedophile. I thought I did quite a good job there.’

‘You’re a techie. It’s not your job to talk to clients. And where did you get his contact details?’

‘Hmm. Lucky guess?’

Charles kept a lid on his rising temper. Kate could see that he’d worked out that she’d been spying on him for years but could scarcely admit it to himself, never mind say it out loud. He opened the folder and took out a single page of A4, handling it as if wearing surgical gloves, then placed it before him and launched into his speech.

‘As you know, the allegations have been made by women interested only in money and publicity. Mr Petrov came to us in good faith and, as always, I set out a comprehensive ORM strategy. His charitable works would be emphasised. Personal testimonies of his good character would become prominent through all platforms. His website would be remodelled and links to it would increase by five hundred per cent via the usual methods. Original copy would be produced in both Russian and English, focusing on Mr Petrov’s impeccable business record and exemplary family life. All allegations of sexual conduct with minors would be cleared from at least the first three pages of any search engine enquiry, except where the integrity of his accusers was called into question. The moral character of these women would be brought into legitimate disrepute. Unfortunate information about the personal lives and questionable mental health of those journalists pursuing the story would be disseminated through the usual channels. Mr Petrov would be given a clean sheet, or as close as is possible. That’s what he paid us to do.’

Kate re-crossed her legs and cocked her head to one side. ‘Did we not do that, then?’

Charles picked up the sheet of paper and read. “‘Dear Mr Petrov, I only work here but I’ve had a few thoughts. You clearly belong in prison. I can’t guarantee that’s where you’ll end up but if you do, I hope you get bum-fucked by burly Cossacks on a daily basis. My considered reputational advice is as follows: try not to be such an appalling shit in future. Love, Kate. Kiss. Kiss. Kiss.’”

Kate looked out of the window and frowned. ‘I agree it lacks a certain lightness of touch.’

‘Mr Petrov is extremely unhappy.’

‘Not enough kisses?’

‘Kate, don’t be so—’

‘I know the bum-fucking thing is a bit homophobic but I thought he wouldn’t mind, what with his thrillingly right-wing views on the subject. If you like, I could—’

‘Kate!’ Charles slammed his hand down on the desk. She waited for him to regain his composure, which wouldn’t take long because he was already rubbing his reddening palm on his trousers. In a second flurry of violence he tried to toss the page at her but it flapped across his sleeve and landed in front of him again, face down. He looked beyond her, calming down and visibly recalling a line that he had practised. ‘You know, it surprises me that a woman of your intelligence would do something so very stupid.’

Kate nodded. ‘That’s funny, because it surprises me that a man of your intelligence doesn’t live in a skip.’

‘Uh-huh,’ said Charles, smiling thinly and swivelling his chair again. Somehow he regarded Kate as his intellectual equal and put this kind of thing down to ‘banter’. She could say literally anything to him and he would contrive to take it as a compliment. For years, this had suited them both very well.

Kate took a breath and waited for his next move. At the same time, she remembered how her hand had trembled as she stole the Petrov file.

Last week, as was her habit, Kate had idly hacked Charles’s inbox and scrolled through his correspondence. But then something in her attitude had changed. She’d felt a numb, out-of-body understanding that her life was about to end. What was she doing here? What had she ever been doing here?

There was something new. There was one particular man in the emails – a London-based billionaire. She recognised his celebrity: Nestor Petrov was a Premier League football club owner and a regular fixture on comedy panel shows

where his fiftysomething good looks and hokey eccentricities had endeared him to millions. Or at least to a couple of TV producers and the board of a struggling football club.

The more she read, the more curious she became. By its nature, BelTech relied on discretion but the two men were having a veritable secrecy jizz-off.

Petrov: ‘the deeply sensitive matter we discussed in person’, ‘the heinously missing file’, ‘the urgent need to rectify this delicate aberration’.

As for Charles, Kate had to concentrate to get past his usual feat of making his own English sound like it had gone through Google Translate: ‘our deepest regret vis-à-vis that the matter remains hitherto unresolved’, ‘our most talented people operating 24/7 to alleviate the discomfiture’, ‘the file will be located with premium haste’.

*What file?*

Kate opened Petrov’s first contact – his original submission to BelTech.

His lawyers complained that he had been recently accused of historical sexual harassment and assault in the early 1990s when he first moved to London. He wanted a skin-job and a make-over. He wanted to be on the right side of fake news by employing Charles to create it.

There wasn’t much in her stomach but Kate very nearly threw up. Hiding in the dungeon of her grief, she hadn’t turned on the news for months. But now she read the reports and testimonies of the women accusing Petrov. She believed them. She was no judge or jury but she was entitled to a private opinion: this man was a menace. He needed to be arrested, not protected. That Charles could countenance working for such a person was a new low. But there was more.

From what she could make out, Petrov or someone

working for him, had accidentally shared a highly compromising file with BelTech which Charles had promptly lost. She understood his panic. She had built the company's bespoke file-sharing system and no one else knew where to start looking if something went wrong. A deeply unwise way to operate a security system but Charles had taken little interest and Kate simply didn't trust anyone else with her turf. It took her roughly ninety seconds to figure out what had happened and locate the encrypted file while glancing nervously over her shoulder.

It looked like a standard AVI file, lasting four minutes and forty-two seconds. That day, Kate waited until everyone else in the office had gone home before playing the video.

Four minutes and forty-two seconds later, Kate Marsden was staring at her monitor in a state of shock. Her discovery had implications that could topple some of the few civilised governments left on the planet. And Charles was up to his neck in it. She was furious with herself that she had slept through her years at BelTech, all the while kidding herself that she was innocent.

She dreamed of Luke every night and the moment of waking had become unbearable. She had made her plans. But first, she would atone for her part in this rolling shit-wagon. An apology for the dozy waste of her extraordinary gifts. She owed the world a parting shot or, more accurately, a parting kiss.

Petrov was coming down, she'd decided. And Charles with him.

Kate waited for Charles to address the more urgent source of his agitation. He eyed her warily and picked up her Petrov email again. "PS, I loved the video you sent Charles. Highly creative. Although I have different feelings about semolina." He looked at her for an explanation and

attempted to inject a casual jokiness into his tone. ‘What the hell’s that about?’

The attempt at levity was embarrassing but Kate joined in, chuckling lightly. ‘Oh, that! Yes, that was an absolute scream. I was just tidying up the server and came across a funny video Mr Petrov had sent.’

Charles had gone very still. He said through scarcely parted lips, ‘Funny . . . video?’

‘Very.’

‘Of what?’

‘Nothing important. I was just having a bit of a clear-out and I *think* I deleted it. Can’t remember.’

‘You deleted it.’

‘*Think* so.’ Kate suddenly feigned alarm. ‘Oh Charles, don’t tell me you hadn’t seen it! Oh, I feel awful. You really missed a treat.’

Kate sat back and watched with fascination as Charles tried to process the new information. He literally didn’t know what to do next. At length, he just carried on with what he was going to do in the first place. He gestured to the Petrov email: ‘Well, I’m afraid I’m going to have to take this as a resignation letter.’

Kate’s fist tightened over the memory stick. ‘I understand.’

Charles looked at her carefully. ‘I’m not minded to give you much in the way of severance pay, but I suppose . . . ?’ Kate saw this was the opening gambit in a protracted haggle. She had no intention of being bribed into returning the file.

‘No,’ she said sharply, ‘I don’t want anything beyond what you owe me up to this moment.’

‘Really? I mean . . . yes, I see. Well, that’s . . . ?’

‘And what you owe me is this.’ She produced her own piece of paper. A handwritten list, folded neatly into quarters. She reached across and left it in front of him.

Charles unfolded the page. He mumbled out loud as he

read in confusion. ‘Camden Women’s Refuge, 50K; Index on Censorship, 50K; CALM, 50K; Save the Children, 50K . . . ?’ He looked at Kate with genuine fear. ‘What the fuck is this?’

‘You’re going to give two million pounds to charity. Specifically, 50K to the forty charities listed.’

Charles gaped at her and blinked rapidly. ‘Have you completely lost your mind?’

‘I think that’s quite likely, yes.’

‘And why the hell would I do that?’

‘Oh, I know that one. You’ll go along with it because if you don’t I’ll spill the beans about some of the things we’ve been doing around here. And then you and Mr Petrov will go to prison.’

Charles gave a strangulated laugh. Kate smiled back at him sweetly. He rose from his desk and started pacing back and forth. ‘No one will believe you.’

‘I’ve seen evidence.’

‘Evidence isn’t what it used to be.’

‘Agreed. And that’s down to people like us. Time for a change, Charles.’

‘You wouldn’t dare.’

‘Really? Let’s find out.’ Kate got her phone out and pressed a contact.

‘Who are you calling?’

Kate held the phone to her ear. ‘*The Guardian*.’

‘Stop . . . doing that.’

‘Oh, hello. Features desk, please. Sorry? Oh yes, well, she’d be great but it doesn’t have to be her.’

‘Stop! Okay, just fucking stop!’

Kate cancelled the call. Charles realised he was fiddling with his shirt sleeves in agitation and put his hands in his pockets. Then he took them out again and picked up Kate’s list, shaking his head in disbelief. He tossed it aside, turned to the window and then back again to face her. Kate popped

a piece of chewing gum in her mouth, enjoying the show.

‘This is outrageous. I mean, for a start, why me?’ he whined. ‘If you love these people so much, why don’t *you* give them two fucking million?’

‘I haven’t got two million. But I have left my house to Shelter. I’ve made my will and everything’s in order.’

Charles stared at her, the gravity of the threat finally beginning to dawn on him. If there was one thing more dangerous than Kate Marsden it was Kate Marsden with nothing to lose.

‘Okay, you can have your job back.’

‘Don’t want it,’ Kate said, chewing. ‘It’s a shit job.’

‘Well, what do you want then!?’

‘I’ve told you. You’ll use the secret account – I’ll be watching the transfers. You’ve got till this time tomorrow.’

Charles rapidly swept his parting. ‘Look. Come on. Hey, there. Look.’

Kate just chewed at him.

‘Remember the old saying? Everyone deserves a second chance? That’s what ORM is, right? We all make mistakes and it ends up on the internet and people need help to de-emphasise that. Hmm? That’s all a reputable Online Reputation Management company is.’

‘Cool. Except we haven’t been reputable for years, have we, Charles? Kind of ironic when you think about it.’

‘Oh, come on. You were there at the start, Kate. Remember that nurse we helped? Accused of misconduct? She was a woman! And black! Yeah? The good old days? Everyone deserves a second chance, Kate.’ He now closed his eyes for special emphasis. ‘Everyone.’

She looked at her old colleague with something approaching fondness. ‘Some people do,’ she said evenly. ‘But not you and not me.’

Something in Charles’s brain finally lit up. He greeted

the insight with abrupt rage. ‘You can’t prove anything. Your access to the system is revoked. Effective immediately.’

‘Charles, you don’t know how to do that.’

‘Effective immediately!’

He picked up his desk phone and stabbed a button. ‘Colin, I’m revoking Kate’s credentials immediately. I want you to . . . no, not Kate from accounts, Kate Marsden. I want you to lock her out of the system and deny her access to everything. And I mean everything . . . Colin, are you listeni—? Yes, Kate Marsden! . . . Don’t give me that IT bullshit, Colin, I’m not talking Chinese here. Just make it so her computer doesn’t work. Throw it out of the fucking window if you have to.’ Charles slammed the phone down. He sat and leaned across his desk, snarling. ‘You needn’t think you can blackmail me.’

‘Charles, it was only last month you asked me to hack MI6. It’s not fair to tell Colin to lock me out of the system. Colin has talent but we both know that guy couldn’t lock me out of a Ford Focus.’

‘You don’t know what you’re dealing with. You don’t fuck with a man like Nestor Petrov.’

‘Good advice for any teenager.’

‘Whatever’s in that video, he won’t allow it to go public. He’ll hurt you.’

‘You just haven’t been listening. I’m already dead.’

She took out her chewing gum and pressed it into the ‘H’ of Charles Hunt’s silver nameplate, which he claimed had been a gift from Lucian Freud. She started to fashion the gum into a ‘C’. She wasn’t much of an artist but concentrated on doing the neatest job she could manage. She talked quietly and deliberately as she worked.

‘You were quite a sweet boy when I met you, you know? At York, we all thought you were redeemable. We pretty much made you our project, remember?’

She'd never seen Charles so angry. She was pressing a thumb into every bruise and the results were spectacular. His jaw jutted out, baring his lower set of small teeth. 'You smug fucking witch. I don't remember a "project". I remember you and Luke and Amy and Kes and Toby taking the piss out of me in the bar as I got the rounds in. I remember a bunch of freeloading lefties.'

'Yes, that's exactly what we were. But then, all your posher mates used to pick on you for not being related to the Third Duke of Arsefordshire. At least we made you laugh, Chuck. That's why you hung around. And you thought we might be useful to you in the future. In my case, you were dead right. But now you're dead wrong.'

Charles searched for the most hurtful idea he could think of. 'Luke was the worst. Luke was a scumbag.'

Kate breathed through her mounting fury and put the finishing touches to 'Charles Cunt'. She placed it back on the desk and turned it to face him. Charles looked at it and snorted with derision.

His remark about Luke boomeranged in Kate's head and it was lucky that her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. Mainly it was lucky for Charles because Kate had detailed training in how to break his nose and was already picturing herself leaping over the desk.

Colin popped his head round the door. 'Sorry to bother. Problem.'

'Get in here,' Charles snapped. 'What is it?'

Colin Laidlaw, Kate's IT deputy, was a large and large-breasted man in his early thirties with a long beard and a much-worn black t-shirt reading `BECAUSE JAVASCRIPT HAS FEELINGS TOO . . .`

He closed the door behind him, carrying Kate's computer under his massive arm: the 'power' part of her PowerPC.

'Hi, Colin.'

‘All right, Kate! How are you getting on?’

‘Not too bad, Col. How’s lovely Carly?’

‘Aah, she’s seven on Friday, mate. She still talks about Go to Work with Daddy Day. You were bloody lovely with her, Kate. She goes, “When’s Kate coming round for a playdate?”’

‘Well . . . can’t make any promises but give her my love and tell her to keep practising the home keys.’

Charles shifted in his chair as if a baby scorpion had just climbed up his arsehole. ‘What is it, Colin?’

‘Yeah! Thing is, skipper, I can’t actually get the windows open. As you probably know, they’re not manually activated. Some of them are in the rest of the building . . . I mean, Doug from Aztec on the second floor tells me . . .’ Colin noticed the white-lipped impatience of his boss. ‘Well, I’m saying that when you guys took the office, Kate made a decision about the regs and put the windows on a circuit. Probably to do with not twatting with the air-con and keeping it all harmonious and ecologically sound, so to speak . . .’

Kate said, ‘I regret that, to be honest. People should be able to open their own office window, just in case they want to throw themselves out of it.’

‘Exactly,’ Colin agreed. He turned back to Charles. ‘Trouble is, Kate put the override on a PIN so I’m not actually able to throw her computer out of the window as suggested.’

Charles started to say, ‘For Christ’s sake—’

Kate interrupted: ‘Colin, it’s 1832.’

Colin gave her a shrewd look. ‘Great Reform Act?’

‘Cholera pandemic.’

‘Nice.’

Charles shot to his feet, the paler parts of his face suddenly matching his rosy cheeks. ‘COLIN, you idiot! I

don't literally want you to throw her computer out of the window! I just want it disabled! Hit it with a fucking spanner if you have to!

Colin raised his eyebrows and looked down at the machine under his arm. 'Yeah. The thing is, what we're dealing with here is what's known as a fusion drive. So a spanner, even a heavy spanner . . .'

'Just put it down . . .'

' . . . even a monkey wrench . . .'

'Put the fucking thing on the floor and get out!'

'Right you are, skipper.' Colin set the machine down respectfully on Charles's carpet and turned to leave. Over his shoulder: 'IT drinks tonight, Kate. Don't suppose we can tempt you? It's been ages.'

'Sorry, Colin.'

'All right, mate.' He left.

Charles stared miserably at Kate's computer as she got to her feet and headed towards the door. 'Okay,' she said, 'I'll leave you to it. You might have more luck with a screwdriver than a spanner. Watch out for residual currents, though – I wouldn't want you to get a nasty shock.'

He looked up at her with genuine loathing as she stood at the door. 'You've already taken what you need, haven't you?'

She ignored the remark and said, 'Make the transfers, Charles. Do something good for once. You might even like it.'

'You've stolen confidential material.'

'Report me to the police then.'

'We both know it won't be the police who come looking for what you've taken.'

Kate walked out calmly, leaving the door wide open. Her heart raced with fear as she summoned the lift but no one came after her. Low as Charles had sunk, he hadn't yet

installed a private army of thugs in the building. But she had certainly underestimated his fear of Petrov and began to wonder if all this might have been rather a bad idea.

‘I suppose this is what people do when they’re quietly going round the bend,’ she’d thought as she entered the lift.

*They plan a very long sleep and then, just as they’re ready to doze off . . . they start a war.*

## Chapter 3

Kate replaced the coal-tar soap in its dish and dried her hands on her jumper. Downstairs, she squinted at the clock on the oven: 10.23 a.m. Much earlier than usual – no wonder she felt like shit. Sunshine from the patio window illuminated the kitchen in all its squalid glory.

*Up yours, Charles. Come and get me and see if I care.*

She skidded over the discarded laundry and ready-meal sleeves, nearly retching as she felt the cold contact of an ancient linguine between her toes. She bent and wiped her foot with a stiff tea towel and felt her head ready to explode. The hangover was growing in confidence now, summoning reinforcements of nausea and heartburn to bolster the headache. She opened an eye-level cupboard and reached for the blessed silver box of painkillers. As her fingers made contact with it, she saw a paper bag from the local pharmacy on the shelf above. These were the antidepressants that her GP had prescribed four months ago, after her friends had mounted their only successful intervention. She had gone along with it just to shut them up. The obviously overworked doctor was given the minimum information as neutrally as possible. He asked a few questions over those ten minutes and his expression had turned from a stock performance of concern during which he kept interrupting

her to say ‘Mmm’ to an expression of badly concealed alarm. The pills he gave her were of a type and dosage that Kate’s friend Amy – a lifelong handler of anxiety and depression – described in her broad Sheffield as ‘fucking hardcore’.

‘Kate, that bloke is an idiot,’ Amy had said. ‘You need to bin those buggers and see someone else. What’s stopping you?’

Kate had nodded in full agreement and did nothing of the kind. The second doctor’s opinion remained unsought, the pills untouched. Tonight she would do more than touch them. Her eyes lingered on the paper bag.

*Not yet. At least not this morning.*

She brought down the Nurofen and closed the cupboard.

A few moments later she had cleared a space just big enough to nestle her mug of coffee within the mountain of junk that used to be a kitchen table. She flipped a discarded bra from the chair and sat down heavily. The spring sunlight glinted off her house keys, half-stuffed into a dead jade plant.

*The memory stick.*

She reached for the little plant pot. Why had she stuck her keys in it? Some colossally drunken notion of a security measure in case Petrov had sent a bunch of heavies to burgle the place. She surveyed the encircling crap-heap. Maybe they had burgled the place already. It was difficult to tell. She took her keys and inspected the memory stick dangling on the Tiffany keyring Luke had bought her years ago. The drive itself was just a cheap little 16GB she’d picked up somewhere in the office. She extended it the centimetre out of its Union Jack plastic casing and instinctively looked behind her. Just the window onto the tiny urban garden. She was tempted to watch the stolen video again.

*No, not now. Hide it. I'm hiding.*

She tossed the keys into a bowl half-lined with fossilised rice and turned it over as if trapping a wasp. She tapped the space bar of her open laptop.

Something of a post-sacking session here last night, she surmised. Another evening spent in the tranquillising embrace of Spotify's *Easy 90s* playlist. And the photos, of course, some of them old enough to be scans – the latest binge with Luke in 2D. Since literally everything reminded her of Luke, she could at least choose certain times to remind herself deliberately. Better to jump willingly into the vortex than to be sucked in by a TV weather report, or the conkers on the ground outside, or the smell of cinnamon, or any overheard mention of the words 'cancer', 'tumour', 'dishwasher', 'collapse', 'pulse', 'panic', 'ambulance', 'hospital', 'DOA', 'sorry' . . . The deliberate seeking of memories didn't lessen the frequency of those that came unbidden, but it gave Kate an inkling of control.

Here he was, then. Luke posing over a huge sauceman of student Bolognese; Luke gesturing with pride to a single string of green tinsel pinned to the ceiling of his room at the end of their first term at York; Kate and Luke in the same room giving a solemn military salute while dressed in each other's clothes. Who had taken that? Probably Toby.

Luke in a bandana, the prat, playing his guitar – topless in his parents' Wiltshire garden, his shoulders absurdly golden in the late afternoon sun. Kate and Luke on their graduation day in 1995; Kate and Luke in Brighton; Kate and Luke in Ibiza. Luke frowning with concentration at an old school textbook of *The Tempest*, his six-foot-two frame folded awkwardly into the tiny bath of their first flat. A sneaky shot of Luke asleep on the morning of his thirtieth birthday, his wavy dark hair cropped to an Action Man fuzz, his eyelashes ('Wasted on a boy,' Kate's mother had

said) quite black against the pillow. Kate and Luke on their wedding day outside St Nicholas Church, Deptford; their friend Toby standing to one side, resplendent in his kilt and velvet jacket.

Kate closed the laptop gently and sipped her coffee.

*Toby. The shiny sixpence we lost down the back of the sofa.*

A movement interrupted her reverie and she held her breath as a mouse made its way casually through the garbage tip of the table: a house mouse, light brown with a white belly, about two inches long not including its hairless tail. Kate fought down a mild wave of revulsion and formed an ‘ooh’ shape with her lips, breathing out calmly. ‘Who breathing,’ her first karate instructor had called it.

‘Hello then, you,’ she said in a soft monotone. ‘Sorry, you won’t find me very good company. I mean, you’ll be nice for a while but you can only spend so much time with depressed people. Eventually we just annoy you and you go away. Or we go batshit and you give us the sack.’ She brought the coffee to her lips but put it down again. ‘I wonder where you came from?’ she asked.

The mouse had found an upended box of Ritz Crackers and immediately got to work on the spilled crumbs. It emitted a squeak in between mouthfuls.

‘Sorry, I can’t place your accent,’ Kate replied. ‘I assume you’re local. Not one of those North London mice. They can be a bit snooty. You’re not from my neck of the woods, are you? Deptford way?’ The mouse ignored her. She dropped an elbow on the table to rest her face in one hand and the movement sent her unbalanced phone clattering to the floor. The mouse vanished in an instant. ‘Bugger, sorry.’ She slowly leant down to reach the phone, groaning and seeing multi-coloured emojis with the effort of putting her head under the table. To her delight she found an unopened

bottle of Merlot lying on its side. She heaved herself up and plonked the bottle down on the table, inspecting the time on her phone. The echo of her personal standards had left her with a vague ‘wait until lunchtime’ rule, even though lunchtime would seldom involve any actual lunch. *Fuck it*, she thought as she unscrewed the cap and took a swig from the bottle.

The order of business as usual was to get drunk enough to go back to sleep.

The mouse reappeared, now scrambling onto a dirty plate and sniffing the dusty remains of a microwave risotto.

‘Aren’t you a bold one?’ she said and then, glancing at the wine, added, ‘You’ll have to excuse my boozing at this hour. Hair of the dog, you understand.’ She took another swig, tired and inaccurate, the wine spilling down the left side of her chin.

‘Of course I’d never say that to a dog. That may well be doggist and we can’t have that.’

The action of swigging from a red wine bottle and having a one-sided conversation with an animal reminded her of a movie she and Luke both loved. She followed the thought.

*What happened to Withnail after those credits rolled?*

She replaced her elbow on the table more gently this time and palm-settled her face, sighing with the greatest fraction of sadness that she allowed herself these days.

“‘I have of late,’” she recited slowly, “‘but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition; that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory . . .’”

She gazed around the room. ‘Actually I know exactly wherefore. It doesn’t mean “where”, by the way, it means “why” as I’m sure you know. Not “Where are you, Romeo?” but “Why are you Romeo?” Like, why do you have to be

Romeo? Why couldn't I fall in love with someone . . . safer?' She nodded at the dishwasher. 'Anyway, it was right there.'

That's where the hidden tumour had finally announced itself. A slow-growing meningioma, the pathologist had said. A remarkably slow-growing cancer.

'About this size by the end.' She made a circle with her thumb and finger about the size of a grape. 'He'd been dying since before we met. And I didn't notice. I did nothing.' She found an empty mug amongst the rubbish on the table, wiped it almost clean with the sleeve of her jumper and then filled it with wine.

'Do you know how many days it is since I met him?' she asked the mouse, whom she now loved for being incapable of giving the first toss about whether she lived or died. 'Since the most gorgeous man alive walked into the college bar and we talked for three hours and then I got him to strip his clothes off in a student room that night?' The mouse was sniffing a hard hillock of chewing gum. 'Well, I'll tell you. I've been counting, obviously, but I could work it out in my head from scratch. I'm quite good at sums, you see. And computers and languages and all sorts. Always have been and I'm afraid it doesn't make me popular. Certainly didn't at Deptford Comp. Hate me for being a coward if you like, but don't hate me for being a freak.' She took a large sip of wine and closed her eyes as she swallowed, welcoming the acid against the back of her throat. Taking a breath, she resumed. 'Anyway, it's exactly ten thousand days. I met him ten thousand days ago today.'

The mouse scurried to another part of the table but Kate kept talking.

'The dream always goes wrong. But it didn't go wrong that night. We were in my room, not his. And he took his top off and then I said, "Sorry, I can't draw trousers or

socks either – you’re really going to have to help me out. Look, there’s a loo just through there.” I think he knew what I was up to by then but went along with it. He came back from the loo wearing just his flags-of-the-world boxer shorts. Bit of tension going diagonally down to the left. Norway, Finland and Denmark taking most of the strain, as I recall.’

She sipped her wine and found a pack of cigarettes under a lost cardigan. Since the funeral she had gone to considerable trouble to take up smoking again. It had been tough work but she had managed it. She lit a Marlboro Gold and saw with disgust that last night she’d been using one of her old karate trophies as an ashtray. Oh well. What did any of it matter now? There was no ash yet but she rehearsed a flick onto the floor.

‘Hope you don’t mind the old lady telling you sexy stories, my young friend. Bit grim, I suppose. I was young too then. I’m only forty-five now. It’s just that I feel a million.’

She had pretended to ignore the beginnings of Luke’s Scandinavian erection as he shyly padded back into her room and retook his position on the bed. ‘Oh yes, that’ll be much easier,’ she said.

All men are created equal. It sounds plausible until you’re sharing a small room with Luke Fairbright in just his pants. It wasn’t so much his beauty that staggered her as the fact that he seemed completely unaware of it. Maybe slimmer, a touch less muscular than Michelangelo’s *David* but Kate didn’t think the comparison ridiculous. And unlike David, Luke breathed. He had a scent and a spirit and an attitude: nervous, golden, diffident. He was alive.

Kate had made a few swift marks on the A4 pad for form’s sake. ‘So I bet you’ve had loads of girlfriends, right?’

‘Yeah, one or two.’

Kate smiled into her drawing. ‘Is that one . . . or two?’

‘Two,’ he said solemnly. Their eyes met again and they both laughed. ‘Well,’ he added, ‘if you mean “sexual partners”, it’s more than two. But proper girlfriends – yeah, exactly two.’

‘Same here, more or less.’

‘Sexual partners?’

‘Stop saying “sexual partners”. I’m trying to concentrate on my art.’ They sat in an enjoyable silence for a moment, the atmosphere charged with irony as well as the wooziness of their three hours in the college bar.

‘It’s about trust really, isn’t it?’ Luke said.

Kate stopped drawing and looked at him. ‘Trust?’

‘Well,’ Luke shifted position slightly, ‘when someone you like turns into someone you love. Or when . . .’ His wide hazel eyes searched the orange curtains of her window as he found the words. ‘. . . you share anything intimate, like your secrets. Or your body.’

‘Or the secrets of your body.’

‘Yeah,’ he said simply.

‘You’re quite mature, Luke, if I may say so. For a boy.’

He slightly bristled at that but his smile was never far away. ‘Boy? Excuse me, I am nearly twenty, you know.’

‘Oh, your advanced years are not in question. I meant for someone of your sex.’

‘Stop saying sex. You’re concentrating on your art.’

She raised a hand in solemn apology.

‘Well,’ Luke shrugged. ‘Yeah, fair enough. Girls do seem to understand mysterious stuff in a baffling kind of way. Why do you think that is?’

Kate wasn’t sure if she was being humoured or if this guy was the real thing. She replied, ‘My mother would call it women’s intuition. I call it paying attention. Women are

interested in how men's funny minds work because we might need that knowledge to survive. So we end up anticipating things and it looks like a magic trick.'

His expression didn't falter – another encouraging sign. He could take a bit of feminism on the chin without moaning. Just about. 'I see – all is revealed! You're the Girl from the Future.'

Kate smiled ruefully to herself and murmured, 'All girls are.'

She had encountered the boundaries of her artistic talent. Which is to say she had drawn a stick man with an acid-house smiley face and a massive knob and balls. She was considering the exact moment to reveal her masterpiece.

She said: 'Actually, you're almost elderly – I only turned eighteen last week.'

'Happy birthday. Hang on, so . . . in your year, you must have been . . .?'

This was a mistake. Kate didn't mind telling guys about the karate championships – they were usually more fascinated than intimidated and most of them didn't believe her anyway. But York was a clean slate – these new students didn't need to know about her early A-levels. She was determined that no one here was going to call her a freak.

'Dunno,' she said, 'some kind of admin thing when I started school.' He had been charmingly open and she regretted the evasion. She thought he deserved a secret of her own. 'Anyway, you're right about trust. The fight stuff we were talking about in the bar . . .'

'The Deptford Karate Kid!' Luke exclaimed.

Kate wrinkled her nose but went on. 'Indeed. Well, that all started as a self-defence thing after an unpleasant experience with a man that I trusted.'

Luke's face fell a million fathoms. 'Oh Christ, I'm sorry.'

Kate wondered what the hell she was doing. Rule number

one of getting laid was: Don't Tell Boys You've Been Assaulted. 'Thanks. It's all right.' She sensed him trying to control his alarm and came to his rescue. 'It was just a groping; nothing serious. I mean, it *was* serious – you're really not supposed to feel up a thirteen-year-old on a Geography field trip . . .'

'Bloody hell . . . a *teacher*?'

Kate nodded. 'But nothing horrifying. At least I didn't think so but maybe I was playing it down.'

'Maybe you still are.'

Kate inspected the blunt point of her pencil. There it was again – his emotional boldness. There was considerably more to this boy than a pretty face. And chest. And legs.

'Sorry, that was . . .'

 he started.

'No, you might be right.' Kate liked to think of herself as being difficult to offend: one of the few qualities she admired in her mother. 'Anyway, Dad was all for killing the bastard.'

'Naturally.'

'I couldn't tell Mother. She'd have just said, "Darling, this is what comes of wearing scarlet leg-warmers." But I could talk to Dad. He was going to run the fucker over in his taxi.'

Luke compressed his lips to stifle a laugh.

'I know,' she grinned. 'Anyway, I said that would be a bad idea and asked him to get me some sort of self-defence lessons instead so that he didn't have to worry. All for his sake and very silly. You can be Rambo but still freeze in the moment if you get blindsided by . . . well, by a betrayal like that.'

That didn't seem to compute in Luke's head: why wouldn't she fight? But she watched him reach out for it with his imagination. 'Yes . . . yeah, I think I see.'

'And I know it's corny but I did love *The Karate Kid*

and David Carradine on TV so I spent weeks with Dad and the Yellow Pages, driving around in his cab after he finished a shift. We must have covered half of London before we found a sensei who would teach a girl.'

She was quietly pleased to see that Luke was now gazing at her like he was sharing a room with Debbie Harry. 'Anyway, blah blah, me me me. But you're right: it's all about trust.'

'I trust you,' said Luke.

Kate stared at him. 'Why on earth would you trust me? You've only known me for three hours.'

He shrugged good-naturedly but his innocence was invincible. 'I just do.'

They looked at each other then – both allowing a pause to open up. A long one. Kate dragged her eyes away from his and they wandered again over his body. She said softly, 'I'm afraid I can't do boxer shorts either. You're going to have to take those off too.'

Luke hesitated. He looked down at his knees and a vulnerable smile played around the corners of his lips.

Kate asked, 'Do you really trust me?'

Luke met her eyes and answered by slowly hooking both thumbs into the waistband of his underwear. He took a breath and leaned back, suppressing a shiver as his shoulders made contact with the cold wall behind him. His heels found the edge of her bed and he levered himself up for a moment, the flags of the world sliding forwards towards Kate as they passed up his thighs, over his knees, down his shins and off the ends of his feet. In a moment of bravado he chucked them to one side like a shy stripper but they landed on her pillow, which he immediately thought inappropriate so scrambled to toss them onto the floor. Kate laughed, chewing the end of her pencil. He sat up against the wall, his right leg still arched, his wavering semi-erection

emerging from dark pubic hair, finding a temporary resting place against his left thigh.

He said, 'Sorry, I think I've changed position, haven't I?'  
'What?'

'I was supposed to stay still.'

'Oh yes! Well, that's okay,' said Kate, rediscovering some composure. 'Not . . . *all of you* has to stay completely still.'

Luke's lips parted and his breathing became faintly audible as the astonishing girl he'd just met leaned forward and stared frankly at his nakedness. She saw that he was still fighting his own modesty but stayed where he was for her enjoyment, his hard-on growing and climbing towards his navel with languid throbs. She crossed her legs in response to her own arousal but then uncrossed them and stood, moving towards him and slowly hitching up the skirt of her denim dress. Careful not to tread on his bare feet with her oversize boots, she straddled him on the bed, her knees either side of him and her fingers wrapping around the hard warmth of his cock. She leaned in to his ear as she felt his hands on her breasts and uttered the first serious thing she ever said to him.

'I trust you too.'

# COME AGAIN

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