



**EXCERPT**



At four in the morning, I make an executive decision to give up on sleep altogether. I was still taking notes on the briefing papers at two, and now the whole project is making me nervous. It's an ambitious fundraising campaign to attract donors for scholarships in the university's climate change research programs. My idea. A cinematic film showcasing the achievements of our alumni scientists, interwoven with words by the university's preeminent writers and poets, set to a piece of music composed by a grad student in the music school after the summer bushfires a few years ago. I want to send donors the message that we're in this together. Arts. Science. All of us. And the university is bigger than the sum of its parts.

Hugh thought the idea was beautiful. He backed me a hundred percent. Sank a large chunk of our fundraising budget into this one campaign. And now his belief in me is giving me the heebie-jeebies.



“It’s a feel-good story,” I’d argued late one Friday afternoon after the rest of our team had bolted to happy hour at a local bar. “But if we can’t demonstrate a direct boost to donations, I’m worried it will be your head that rolls.”

“You’re shaping a bangforbuck appeal that aligns with the university’s strategic objectives. You’ve brought several faculties into the spotlight on a global water-cooler topic. Give them cold hard science and pull at their humanity. What’s not to love, Kate?”

But now, in the hours before dawn, it all seems too complicated. After I toss and turn about work for a while, I can’t move on from the idea that I’ve had one of Cam’s treasured possessions seized from the house for destruction. I imagine it being blown to smithereens, over and over. Symbolic of our tragedy.



I roll over in bed again and, as if to cheer itself up a bit, my mind ambles across the road. I tell myself it's not disrespecting Cam's memory to invent an imaginary little bedtime story involving my new neighbor and the fascination he develops in me, not in spite of my bumbling single-mother-widowhood but because of it. Yes. I make him that sort of man.

Attracted to the flaws. The history. The stretch marks and scars plastered on my body and soul. I almost drift off in a kaleidoscope of muscles and king-size beds and explosives and mind-boggling actuarial math. In my fantasy, Justin doesn't leave when I need him most. Not like Cam.

*Don't think that!*

I sit up, slammed by guilt. Cam died against his will. What sort of person lies here, grief-stricken over her beautiful husband, fantasizing about another man falling helplessly for her stretch marks and history and flaws?



Worse, a man who isn't some distant Hollywood heartthrob like usual, but the very accessible hero next door.

Now I'm wide awake again, and another disturbing thought rushes in: Hugh will sack me if I fall asleep in this meeting. Well, he won't actually sack me. I've done worse than fall asleep at work. The man is a saint! But the thought of letting him down again undoes all of Fantasy Justin's work in soothing my troubled mind.

Eventually I get up, shower, and throw last-minute toiletries into the oversize tote I take on flying interstate visits. This should be a relatively straightforward, if hectic, trip. The first of several mad dashes to meet with the cast of thousands now involved in the project. Today it's Far North Queensland to see a bunch of interested company directors, then various university-affiliated environmental scientists who can strut our stuff and attract millions in financial support.



I sit on the window seat in my front room, blanket around my knees, sipping tea, killing time, and wondering how I got stuck here, in the wrong life.

I'm meant to be a writer. *Am one*, at heart. But cannot possibly live the life of one—not even part-time. The way the cards have fallen, I can only grasp for words in stolen moments. Pull them onto pages in fits and starts around the very real challenges of keeping a roof over Charlie's head until he's old enough to do that himself.

With Cam, I always had the space to write. He ensured that. Even then, though, I clung to my day job, scared of really putting my work out there. Terrified of rejection. I even struggled to show Cam my work. An English professor, of course, so professionally equipped to judge it.



“Why do you write?” he’d asked me once. I’d been pushing words around the pages of a short story for weeks and was staring down the last few hours until the deadline to enter it in a literary award. I’d shown him my work mid crisis of confidence, needing to hear it was good enough.

We’d had a blazing row.

“I’m not one of your students!” I’d shouted.

But he’d defended his question.

“Seriously. I’m asking you why you write. What drives you?”

“Cam! I want to know what you *think*,” I’d cut back. “About *this* piece.”

His face was racked with emotion. Love, mainly. Fear of hurting me. And professional integrity. “I think it’s good,” he’d said quietly. “But Kate, I don’t think you’ve found your place yet.”



His feedback struck a nerve. I'd been wanting to write serious literary fiction since Cam and I first met as undergrads. But trying to force beautiful words into serious stories and onto pages just so was sucking all the joy out of the process.

I drain my cup of tea and hug the blanket. This is why I don't do "silence." Other mums crave these rare moments alone in the quiet when nobody's demanding anything. But with Charlie at Mum's twenty minutes away, the quiet just scares me. What if my grief is worse than I think? Maybe I'm distracted on purpose, and I've subconsciously engineered a frantic, overcommitted, hectic whirl so I can always put "busy" center stage, and grief can only ever hover in the wings.

*It's a work day. Keep it together.*

I check the time and get up and rinse the mug. I've determined that it's cheaper to pay for two days of long-stay parking at the airport than to get a cab or an Uber





from here, and I find it less stressful than waiting around for people who might never come. I've got enough to worry about with my flying phobia.

Locking up, I toss my bag in the passenger seat of my trusty red Mini. My previous car had given up the ghost one day in that problem-plagued six months after Cam had died. I'd overwhelmed myself on the car sales websites that evening, wishing he was around to help me decide. "Just give me a sign, Cam," I'd pleaded. The next morning, I'd driven to the local shops and swung into a park beside an impeccable latemodel, red Mini Cooper with a for sale sign on the dash, low mileage, and a price tag under ten grand.

The windshield is iced over now, but I'll get the heater going and scrape it with a credit card. I push the start button and ... nothing. I turn the key manually.



The engine chokes, like it's in the last wheezes of the death rattle—a sound I wish I didn't have the experience to recognize.

My heart pounds as I check the time. It's too late to call a spontaneous ride and make it to the airport in time. That's the problem living in a place where sprawling suburbs weave through the bush and farmland. You can't just stand on a street corner and hail a cab.

I have the phone in my hand, ready to break the career-limiting news to Hugh that I'm not going to make the flight, followed by unpalatable groveling and another empty promise to be more on my game in future, when a light flicks on out the front of Justin's place.

*Hmm.* Have I become the kind of woman who'd pass a virtual stranger her grenade and then beg for a second, totally unrealistic favor in the space of eleven hours?



*Rhetorical question.*

A message pops up on my phone. “Nearly here?” It’s accompanied by a photo of a long black on a glass table in the airport lounge. My blood sugar plummets.

I grab my bag from the seat, close the door, lock the car, and march across my front lawn, across the road, over Justin’s frost-covered nature strip and up to his doorstep. I can’t overthink this. I just knock and silently resolve to become a far less clingy neighbor upon my return from this trip. A more reliable employee, too. Just better, in several key aspects.

Justin’s house is shaped like a bunker. A rendered, gray box of a place that I’ve always wanted to snoop through. After a minute or so, I hear the bolt unlock and the door creaks open. Soft light spills out from the entry way and Justin stands there and yawns, messy blond hair, smooth skin illuminated like one of



Michelangelo's sculpted angels—in a pair of black boxers and nothing else, blinking his warm, caramel eyes.

Not already awake, then. My bad.

It's also my bad that there's a significant delay in explaining the purpose of our predawn catch-up, while my eyes adjust to his gloriousness. It's been an incredibly long time since I've been this close to a man wearing so few clothes. Particularly one with a physique like an Olympian. I was flustered enough to begin with, what with the broken-down car and the screaming travel deadline, and now I barely know where to look.

He has no such trouble himself, eyeing me, standing expectantly on his doorstep, overnight bag in hand, as if I'm about to move in. "Morning, Kate," he drawls in the low and gravelly voice of the rudely awoken. "Something else you want defused?"



I blush red. Again. “Actually, there is a small logistical problem—”

“It’s the battery,” he diagnoses, before I can continue. “Heard the engine failing to turn over from bed.”

I imagine him, starfished on the mattress in those boxers, listening to my ailing vehicle. *Stop it!* There’s no time to call for roadside assistance. No time for any conceivable option beyond begging this man for help. “Hugh is in the airport lounge,” I tell him. “He’s probably ordering me a latte as we speak.” I’m so churned up now, the thought of dairy makes me nauseous. “Of course, he sensibly lives in a high-rise apartment just minutes away from literally everything—”

“Does he?” Justin pulls me across the threshold into his bunker out of the cold. “And miss the charms of suburban life?”



I almost lunge at him. “I’m so sorry to be banging on your door. The front light came on—”

“It’s a sensor.”

“You must be exhausted from moving in yesterday.” I gesture at the moving boxes piled high on polished floorboards all around us. It’s like he’s hauled it all in and run out of steam to unpack anything. Or maybe he ran out of time, given last night’s furor. “Justin, I am an incredibly desperate woman!”

He draws his mouth into a slow smile.

“Are you?”

There isn’t a minute to spare. We cannot stand here, the only two people awake in the southern hemisphere—apart from Hugh and hopefully our pilot—exchanging flirty innuendo about my apparent level of desperation. This is an emergency. The second emergency, in fact, of our brief and dramatic acquaintance.



“Why don’t I give you a lift?” he suggests.

I could kiss him. Of course, now I’m picturing exactly that, and exhibiting the social graces of my inner bookish teenager.

“Give me two minutes,” Justin says. “Pull up a box. Make yourself at home.”