

ANATOMY
OF
A
SCANDAL

KATE

2 December 2016

One

My wig slumps on my desk where I have tossed it. A beached jellyfish. Out of court, I am careless with this crucial part of my wardrobe, showing it the opposite of what it should command: respect. Handmade from horsehair and worth nearly six hundred pounds, I want it to age; to accrue the gravitas I sometimes fear I lack. For the hairline to yellow with years of perspiration, the tight, cream curls to relax or to grey with dust. Nineteen years since I was called to the Bar, my wig is still that of a conscientious new girl – not a barrister who has inherited it from her, or more usually his, father. That’s the sort of wig I want: one dulled with the patina of tradition, entitlement and age.

I kick off my shoes: black patent courts with gold braid on the front, shoes for a Regency fop; for Parliament’s Black Rod; or a female barrister who delights in the history, the rigmarole, the sheer ridiculousness of it all. Expensive shoes

are important. Chatting with fellow counsel or clients, with ushers and police, we all look down from time to time so as not to appear confrontational. Anyone who glances at my shoes sees someone who understands this quirk of human psychology and who takes herself seriously. They see a woman who dresses as if she believes she will win.

I like to look the part, you see. To do things properly. Female barristers can wear a collarette: a scrap of cotton and lace that acts like a bib – a false front that goes just around the neck – and that costs around thirty pounds. Or they can dress as I do: a white collarless tunic with a collar attached by collar studs to the front and back. Cuff links. A black wool jacket and skirt or trousers; and – depending on their success and seniority – a black wool or wool and silk gown.

I'm not wearing all of that now. I have shed part of my disguise in the robing room of the Bailey. Robes off. Collar and cuffs undone; my medium-length blonde hair – tied back in a ponytail in court – released from its bobble; just a little mussed up.

I am more feminine, shed of my garb. With my wig on and my heavy-rimmed glasses, I know I look asexual. Certainly not attractive – though you may note my cheekbones: two sharp blades that emerged in my twenties and have hardened and sharpened, as I have hardened and sharpened, over the years.

I am more myself without the wig. More me. The me I am at heart, not the me I present to the court or any previous incarnations of my personality. This is me: Kate Woodcroft,

QC; criminal barrister; member of the Inner Temple; a highly experienced specialist in prosecuting sexual crimes. Forty-two years old; divorced, single, childless. I rest my head in my hands for a moment and let a breath ease out of me in one long flow, willing myself just to give up for a minute. It's no good. I can't relax. I've a small patch of eczema on my wrist and I smear E45 cream there, resisting the desire to scratch it. To scratch at my dissatisfaction with life.

Instead, I look up at the high ceilings of my chambers. A set of rooms in an oasis of calm in the very heart of London. Eighteenth-century, with ornate cornicing, gold leaf around the ceiling rose and a view – through the towering sash windows – of Inner Temple's courtyard and the round twelfth-century Temple Church.

This is my world. Archaic, anachronistic, privileged, exclusive. Everything I should – and normally would – profess to hate. And yet I love it. I love it because all this – this nest of buildings at the edge of the City, tucked off the Strand and flowing down towards the river; the pomp and the hierarchy; the status, history and tradition – is something I once never knew existed; and to which I never thought I could aspire. All of this shows how far I have come.

It's the reason that, if I'm not with my colleagues, I slip a hot chocolate – with extra sachets of sugar – to the girl hunched in her sleeping bag in a doorway on the Strand whenever I grab a cappuccino. Most people won't have noticed her. The homeless are good at being invisible or we are good at making them so: averting our eyes from their

khaki sleeping bags; their grey faces and matted hair; their bodies bundled in oversized jumpers and their equally skinny wolfhounds as we scurry past on our way to the seductive glitz of Covent Garden or the cultural thrills of the South Bank.

But hang around any court for a while and you will see just how precarious life can be. How your world can come tumbling down all too rapidly if you make the wrong call: if, just for one fatal split second, you behave unlawfully. Or rather, if you are poor and you break the law. For courts, like hospitals, are magnets for those dealt a rough hand from the start of life; who choose the wrong men or the wrong mates and become so mired in bad fortune that they lose their moral compass. The rich aren't quite as affected. Look at tax avoidance – or fraud, as it might be called if perpetrated by someone without the benefit of a skilled accountant. Bad luck – or lack of acumen – doesn't seem to dog the rich quite as assiduously as the poor.

Oh, I'm in a bad mood. You can tell I'm in a bad mood when I start thinking like a student politician. Most of the time I keep my *Guardian*-reading tendencies to myself. They can sit oddly with the more traditional members of my chambers; make for heated discussions at formal dinners, as we eat the sort of mass-catered food you might get at weddings – chicken, or salmon en crouete – and drink our equally mediocre wine. Far more diplomatic to limit oneself to legal gossip: which QC is receiving so little work they're applying to be a Crown Court judge; who will next be made

silk; who lost their cool with an usher in court. I can rattle through such conversations while thinking of my workload, fretting about my personal life, or even planning what to buy the next day for dinner. After nineteen years, I am adept at fitting in. I am skilled at that.

But in the sanctity of my room I can occasionally let myself go, just a little, and so, for a minute, I put my head in my hands on my mahogany partner's desk; squeeze my eyes tight shut; and press my knuckles in hard. I see stars: white pinpricks that break the darkness and shine as bright as the diamonds in the ring I bought for myself – for no one else was going to buy it for me. Better to see these than to succumb to tears.

I've just lost a case. And though I know I will have got over the sense of failure by Monday; will move on for there are other cases to pursue, other clients to represent, still it rankles. It's not something that often happens or which I like to admit to, because I like to win. Well, we all do. It's only natural. We need it to ensure our careers continue to sparkle. And it's the way our adversarial judicial system works.

I remember it came as a huge shock when I had this spelled out to me, early in my Bar training. I had gone into the law with high ideals – and I have retained some; I haven't become overly jaded – but I hadn't expected it to be so brutally expressed.

'The truth is a tricky issue. Rightly or wrongly, adversarial advocacy is not really an inquiry into the truth,' Justin

Carew, QC, told us callow twenty-somethings, fresh from Oxford, Cambridge, Durham and Bristol. Advocacy is about being more persuasive than your opponent, he continued. You can win even if the evidence is stacked against you provided that you argue better. And it's all about winning, of course.

But sometimes, despite all your skills of persuasion, you lose; and, with me, that invariably happens if a witness turns out to be flaky; if they didn't come up to proof with their evidence; if, under cross-examination, their story unravels like a skein of wool tapped by a kitten – a mass of contradictions that becomes ever more knotted when pulled.

That happened today in the case of Butler. It was a rape case clouded by domestic violence: Ted Butler and Stacey Gibbons, who had lived together for four years, for most of which he had knocked her about.

I knew the odds were stacked against us from the start. Juries are keen to convict the predatory rapist, the archetypal bogeyman down a dark alley, yet when it comes to relationship rape, they'd really rather not know, thank you very much.

Though, in general, I think jurors get it right, in this case they didn't. I sometimes think they are stuck in the Victorian era; she is your wife, or common-law wife, and it's completely private, what goes on behind closed doors. And, to be fair, there is something rather mucky about delving so intimately into a couple's lives: about hearing what she wears in bed – an oversized T-shirt from a leading supermarket chain – or

how he always likes a cigarette after sex, even though she is an asthmatic and he knows it makes her chest tight. I wonder at those who sit in the public gallery: why do they come to watch this sad, sorry drama? More gripping than a soap opera in that these are real people acting it out and real sobs coming from the witness – who thankfully those in the public gallery cannot see; her identity shielded by a screen so that she doesn't have to watch her alleged assailant: fat-necked and piggy-eyed; in a cheap suit and black shirt and tie; his menacing take on respectability, glowering behind the reinforced glass in the dock.

So it feels smutty and prurient. Invasive. But still I ask the questions – questions that pry into the most exposing, frightening moments Stacey has ever experienced – because deep down, despite what that eminent QC told me all those years ago, I still want to get at the truth.

And then the defence lawyer brings up the issue of porn. An issue that can only be raised because my opponent has made a successful application in which he argued that there is a parallel between a scene in a DVD on their bedside table and what happened here. 'Is it not possible,' my learned friend, Rupert Fletcher, asks in his deep, coercive baritone, 'that this was a sex game that she now finds a little embarrassing? A fantasy indulged in that she felt went a little too far? The DVD shows a woman being tied up, just as Miss Gibbons was. You may feel that at the point of penetration, Ted Butler believed that Stacey Gibbons was going along with a fantasy they had discussed at some point beforehand.

That she was just acting a part she had, in all willingness, already agreed on.'

He relays further details of the DVD; then refers to a text message in which she admits: 'It made me hot.' And I can see the shudder of distaste on a couple of juror's faces – the women in late middle age, dressed smartly for court, who perhaps anticipated sitting in on a trial for a burglary, or a murder; and whose eyes have been well and truly opened by this case – and I know that their sympathy for Stacey is disappearing faster than a tide slithering from the beach.

'You fantasised about being tied up, didn't you?' Rupert says. 'You texted your lover to let him know you'd like to try such things.'

He waits a beat, allowing Stacey's sobs to ring around the windowless courtroom. And then: 'Yes,' comes her muffled admission – and from then on it does not matter that Ted half-choked her as he carried out the rape; or that there were welts on her wrists from where she struggled to free herself; rope burns she had the foresight to record on her iPhone. From then on, it is all downhill.

I pour myself a shot of whisky from the decanter on the sideboard. It's not something I often do, drink at work, but it's been a long day and it's past five now. Dusk has settled – soft peach and gold illuminating the clouds, making the courtyard excessively pretty – and I always think alcohol is permissible once it's dark. The single malt hits the back of my throat; warms my gullet. I wonder if Rupert will be celebrating in the wine bar opposite the High Court. He must

have known, from the welts, from the choke, from the smirk on his client's face as he heard the verdict, that his client was as guilty as hell. But a win's a win. Still, if I were defending a case like that, I would have the decency not to gloat, far less to buy a bottle of Veuve to share with my junior. But then again, I try not to defend in such cases. Though you're deemed a better barrister if you do both, I don't want to sully my conscience by representing those I suspect to be guilty. That's why I prefer to prosecute.

For I am on the side of the truth, you see, not just the side of the winners – and my thinking is that, if I believe a witness, then there is sufficient evidence to bring a case. And that's why I want to win. Not just for winning's sake but because I am on the side of the Stacey Gibbonses of this world; and of those whose cases are less muddied and even more brutal: the six-year-old raped by her grandfather; the eleven-year-old repeatedly buggered by his scoutmaster; the student forced to perform oral sex when she makes the mistake, late at night, of walking home alone. Yes, particularly for her. The standard of proof is high in the criminal court: beyond a reasonable doubt, not on the balance of probabilities, the burden of proof applied in the civil court. And that's why Ted Butler walked free today. There was that seed of doubt: that hypothetical possibility conjured up by Rupert, in his caramel voice, that Stacey, a woman whom the jurors might assume was a bit rough, had consented to violent sex and it was only two weeks later, when she discovered that Ted had a bit on the side, that she thought to go to the

police. The possibility that she might be traumatised and shamed; that she might fear she would be mauled by the court and disbelieved, as she has been, does not appear to have occurred to them.

I refill my heavy crystal glass; add a splash of water. Two shots is my limit and I keep to it. I am disciplined. I have to be, for I know my intellect is blunted if I drink any more. Perhaps it is time to go home – but the thought of returning to my ordered two-bedroom flat doesn't appeal. Normally I enjoy living alone. I am too contrary to be in a relationship, I know that; too possessive of my space; too selfish; too argumentative. I luxuriate in my solitude, or rather the fact that I don't need to accommodate anyone else's needs when my brain is churning as I prepare a case, or when I am dog-weary at the end of one. But when I lose, I resent the close, understanding silence. I don't want to be alone – to dwell on my professional and personal inadequacies – any more. And so I tend to stay late at work, my lamp burning when my colleagues with families have long gone home; searching for the truth in my bundles of papers and working out a way in which to win.

Tonight, I listen as the heels of my colleagues clatter down the eighteenth-century wooden stairs and the burble of laughter drifts up towards me. Early December, the start of the run-up to Christmas, a Friday night and it is palpable: the general relief of reaching the end of a long week. I won't be joining my colleagues in the pub. I have a face on me, as my mother would say, and I've done enough acting for one day. I

don't want my workmates to feel they have to console me; to tell me there are other cases to fight; that if you are dealing with a domestic, you're on to a losing streak from the start. I don't want to have to smile thinly while inside I rail; I don't want my anger to curdle the atmosphere. Richard will be there: my one-time pupil master; my occasional lover – very occasional these days for his wife, Felicity, has learned of us and I don't want to rock, still less to wrench apart, his marriage. I don't want him to feel pity for me.

A crisp knock on the door: the brisk rat-a-tat-tat that belongs to the one person I could bear to see at the moment. Brian Taylor, my clerk for the entire nineteen years I have been in 1 Swift Court. Forty years in the profession, and with more nous and a better insight into human psychology than many of the counsel for whom he works. Behind the slick salt-and-pepper hair, the neatly buttoned suit, the perky 'Miss' – for he insists on sticking to hierarchy, in the office at least – there is a sharp understanding of human nature and a deep sense of morality. He's also intensely private. It took me four years to realise that his wife had left him; four more before I realised it was for another woman.

'Thought you'd still be at it.' He pops his head round the door. 'Heard about the Butler case.' His eyes flit from my empty whisky glass to the bottle and back again. Saying nothing. Just noting.

I make a noncommittal murmur that comes out as a growl in the back of my throat.

He stands in front of my desk, hands behind his back,

relaxed in his own skin; just waiting to offer some pearl of wisdom. I find myself playing along with it and lean back in my chair; unfurling just a little from my bleak mood, despite myself.

‘What you need now is something meaty. Something high-profile.’

‘Tell me about it.’ I feel the breath rush from my body: the relief of someone else knowing me so clearly and stating my ambition as a fact.

‘What you need,’ he continues, and he looks at me slyly, his dark eyes alight with the thrill of a juicy case, ‘is something that will take you to the next level. That will completely make your career.’

He is holding something in his hand, as I knew he would. Since October 2015, all cases have been delivered electronically: no longer wrapped in dark pink ribbon like a fat *billet doux*. But Brian knows that I prefer to read physical documents: to pore over a sheaf of papers that I can scrawl on, underline; cover with fluorescent Post-its until I create a map with which to navigate a trial.

He always prints my papers out and they are the sweetest of letters, presented now with a magician’s flourish.

‘I’ve got just the sort of case you need.’

SOPHIE

21 October 2016

Two

Sophie has never thought of her husband as a liar.

She knows he dissembles, yes. That's part of his job: a willingness to be economical with the truth. A prerequisite, even, for a government minister.

But she has never imagined he would lie to her. Or rather, that he might have a life she knows nothing about: a secret that could detonate beneath her lovingly maintained world and blow it apart forever.

Watching him that Friday, as he leaves to take the children to school, she feels a stab of love so fierce she pauses on the stairs just to drink in the tableau of the three of them together. They are framed in the doorway, James turning to call goodbye; left arm raised in that politician's wave she used to mock but which now seems second nature; right hand cradling Toby's head. Their son, fringe falling in his eyes, socks bagging round his ankles, scuffs at the tiles,

reluctant, as ever, to go. His elder sister, Emily, ducks through the doorway: determined, aged nine, not to be late.

'Well, bye then,' her husband calls, and the autumn sun catches the top of his still-boyish crop, illuminating him with a halo, the light highlighting his six-foot-three frame.

'Bye, Mum,' her daughter shouts, as she runs down the steps.

'Bye, Mummy.' Toby, thrown by the change to his routine – his father taking them to school for once – juts out his bottom lip and flushes red.

'Come on, little man.' James steers him through the door: competent, authoritative; even, and she almost resents the fact she still finds this attractive, commanding. Then he smiles down at his boy and his entire face softens, for Toby is his weak spot: 'You know you'll enjoy it when you get there.'

He slips his arm over his son's shoulders and guides him down their neat, west London garden with its topiaried bay trees standing like sentinels and its path fringed with lavender, and away from her and out down the street.

My family, she thinks, watching the perfect-looking trio go: her girl, racing ahead to embrace the day, all skinny legs and swishing ponytail; her boy, slipping his hand into his father's and looking up at him with that unashamed adoration that came with being six. The similarity between man and boy – for Toby is a miniaturised version of his father – only magnifies her love. I have a beautiful boy and a beautiful man, she thinks, as she watches James's broad

shoulders – a one-time rower’s shoulders – and waits, more in hope than expectation, for him to look back and smile at her; for she has never managed to grow immune to his charisma.

Of course, he doesn’t and she watches as they slip out of sight. The most precious people in her world.

That world crumbles at 8.43 p.m. James is late. She should have known he would be. It is an alternate Friday: one in which he is holding a surgery, deep in his Surrey constituency, in a bright-lit village hall.

When he had first been elected, they had stayed there every weekend: decamping to a cold, damp cottage that never quite felt like home, despite their extensive renovations. One election on, and it was a relief to give up the pretence that Thursdon was where they wanted to spend half their week. Lovely in the summer months, yes: but bleak in winter, when she would stare out at the bare trees fringing their hamlet garden, while James went about his constituency business, and try to placate their urban children, who wanted the bustle and distraction of their real, North Kensington home.

They venture there once a month now, and James schleps down for the Friday surgery in the intervening fortnight. Two hours on a Friday afternoon: he promised to leave by six.

He has a driver now he is junior minister, and should have been back by seven-thirty – traffic permitting. They are supposed to be going to friends for a kitchen supper. Well,

she says *friends*. Matt Frisk is another junior minister: aggressively ambitious in a way that doesn't sit well with their set where success is understood as inevitable but naked ambition considered vulgar. But he and Ellie are near neighbours and she can't easily put them off again.

They said they would be there by eight-fifteen. It is ten past now – so where is he? The October evening creeps against the sash windows: black softened by the glow of the street lamps, autumn stealing in. She loves this time of year. It reminds her of fresh starts: running through the leaves in Christ Church Meadows as a fresher, giddy at the thought of new worlds opening up to her. Since having children, it has been a time to nest; to cosset with log fires, roast chestnuts; brisk, crisp walks and game casseroles. But now, the autumn night is taut with potential. Footsteps totter down the pavement and a woman's laugh rings out, flirtatious. A deeper voice murmurs. Not James's. The footsteps rise and fall; die away.

She presses redial. His mobile rings out then clicks to voicemail. She jabs the sleek face of her phone – rattled at her loss of customary self-control. Dread tightens her stomach and for a moment she is back in the chill lodge of her Oxford college, the wind whistling through the quad, as she waits for the payphone to ring. The look of sympathy from a college porter. The chill fear – so intense in that last week of her first summer term – that something still more terrible was going to happen. Aged nineteen and willing him to call, even then.

Eight-fourteen. She tries again, hating herself for doing this. His phone clicks straight through to answerphone. She plucks at a piece of imaginary lint, rearranges her friendship bracelets and glances critically at her nails: neatly filed, unvarnished, unlike Ellie's gleaming gelled slicks.

Footsteps on the stairs. A child's voice. 'Is Daddy back?'

'No – go back to bed.' Her tone comes out harsher than she intends.

Emily stares at her, one eyebrow raised.

'Just climb back into bed, sweetheart,' she adds, her voice softening as she chases her daughter up the stairs, heart quickening as she turns the corner and bundles her under the covers. 'You should be settling down, now. He won't be long.'

'Can he come and say goodnight when he gets in?' Emily pouts, impossibly pretty.

'Well, we're going out – but if you're still awake ...'

'I will be.' Her daughter's determination – the set of her jaw; the implacable self-belief – marks her out as her father's daughter.

'Then I'm sure he'll come up.'

She gives her a quick peck on the forehead, to curb further arguments, and tucks the duvet around her. 'I don't want you out of bed again, though. Understand? Cristina's babysitting just like normal. I'll send him up when he arrives.'

Eight-seventeen. She won't ring to check. She has never been the sort of wife who behaves like a stalker but there is

something about this complete silence that chills her. Usually so good at communication, this just isn't like him. She imagines him stuck on the M25, working his way through his papers in the back of his car. He would call, text, send an email: not leave her waiting – the au pair hanging around the kitchen, keen for them to disappear so that she can curl up on the sofa and have the house to herself; Sophie's carefully touched-up face becoming a little less perfect; the flowers bought for the Frisks wilting in their wrapping, on the table in the hall.

Eight twenty-one. She will call the Frisks at half past. But that deadline comes and still she doesn't ring. Eight thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven. Aware that it's bad form to do so, at eight-forty she sends Ellie Frisk a brief, apologetic text explaining that something has cropped up in the constituency and they are terribly sorry but they won't be able to make it, after all.

The Times has a piece on Islamic State by Will Stanhope but the words of her old college contemporary wash over her. It might as well be a story about dinosaur astronauts, read to Tobes, to the extent to which it engages her. For every part of her is attuned to one thing.

And there it is. The sound of his key in the door. A scrape and then a hiss as the heavy oak eases open. The sound of his footsteps: slower than normal, not his usual brisk, assertive tread. Then the thud of his red box being put down: the weight of responsibility abandoned for a while – as glorious a sound, on a Friday night, as the slosh of dry white wine

being poured from a bottle. The jangle of keys on the hall table. And then silence, again.

‘James?’ She comes into the hall.

His beautiful face is grey: his smile taut and not meeting his eyes where his light crow’s feet seemed deeper than usual.

‘You’d better cancel the Frisks.’

‘I have done.’

He shrugs off his coat and hangs it up carefully, averting his face.

She pauses then slips her arms around his waist – his honed waist that deepens to form a V; like the trunk of a sapling that burgeons outwards – but he reaches back and gently eases them away.

‘James?’ The cold in the pit of her stomach flares.

‘Is Cristina here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, send her to her room, will you? We need to talk in private.’

‘Right.’ Her heart flutters as she hears her voice come out clipped.

He gives her another tight smile, and a note of impatience creeps into his voice, as if she is a disobliging child or, perhaps, a tardy civil servant. ‘Can you do it now, please, Sophie?’

She stares back at him, not recognising his mood – so different to what she had expected.

He massages his forehead with firm, long fingers and his

green eyes close briefly, the lashes – disarmingly long – kissing his cheeks. Then, his eyes flash open, and the look he gives her is the one Toby gives when trying to pre-empt a telling off and plead forgiveness. It's the look James gave her twenty-three years ago before confessing to the crisis that threatened to overwhelm him; that caused them to split up; that still, sometimes, causes her to shiver, and that she fears is about to rear its head again.

'I'm sorry, Soph. So sorry.' And it is as if he is carrying not just the weight of his job – under secretary of state for countering extremism – but responsibility for the entire government.

'I've fucked up big time.'

Her name was Olivia Lytton – though Sophie had always just thought of her as James's parliamentary researcher. Five-foot-ten; twenty-eight; blonde; well connected; confident; ambitious. 'I expect she'll be dubbed the blonde bombshell.' She tries for acerbic but her voice just comes out as shrill.

The affair had been going on for five months and he had broken it off a week ago, just after the party conference.

'It meant nothing,' James says, head in hands, no pretence that he is anything other than penitent. He leans back, wrinkling his nose as he trots out another cliché. 'It was just sex – and I was flattered.'

She swallows: rage pushing against her chest, barely containable. 'Well, that's OK then.'

His eyes soften as he takes in her pain.

‘There was nothing wrong with that part of us. You know that.’ He can usually read her so clearly: a skill honed over two decades, one of the things that bind them so closely. ‘I just made a foolish mistake.’

She waits, poised on the sofa opposite, for her anger to subside sufficiently for her to speak civilly or for him to bridge the distance between them. To reach out a tentative hand, or at least offer a smile.

But he is rooted there: head bowed, elbows on knees, fingers touching as if in prayer. At first, she despises this show of sanctimony – a Blairite trope; the penitent politician – and then she softens as his shoulders shake, just the once: not with a sob but with a sigh. For a moment, she sees her mother as her charming, rakish father confessed to yet another ‘indiscretion’. Ginny’s dry resignation – and then the quickly suppressed flash of pain in her marine-blue eyes.

Perhaps this is what all husbands do? Sorrow surges, then anger. It shouldn’t be like this. Their marriage is different. Founded on love and trust and a sex life that she does her very best to maintain.

She has made compromises in her life and, God knows, she took a huge leap of faith when they got back together; but the one certainty is meant to be that their relationship is solid. Her vision begins to blur, her gaze filming with tears. He looks up and catches her eye – and she wishes he hadn’t.

‘There’s something else,’ he says.

*

Of *course*, he wouldn't confess to an affair without a reason.

'Is she pregnant?' The words – ugly but necessary – discolour the space between them.

'No, of course not.'

She feels herself relax a little: no half-sibling for Emily and Tobes. No proof of a liaison. No need to share him in any other way.

And then he looks up with a grimace. Her nails bite into her palm in sharp crescents and she sees that her knuckles are ivory pearls thrusting through the red of her skin.

What could be worse than some other woman having his child – or perhaps choosing to abort his child? Other people knowing: the affair a particularly juicy piece of gossip, dropped into the ear of a favoured few in the Commons tea rooms until it becomes general knowledge. Who knows? His colleagues? The PM? Other MPs' wives? What about Ellie? She imagines her silly plump face alight with barely suppressed pity. Perhaps she recognises her lie of a text and already knows.

She forces herself to breathe deeply. They can deal with this; move beyond it. They have experienced far worse, haven't they? There is no crime in having a quick fling: it can be brushed over, quickly forgotten, absorbed. And then James says something that takes this to a more damaging, corrosive level; that strikes her in the solar plexus hard as she contemplates a scenario so terrible that she hadn't quite seen it coming.

'The story's about to break.'

SOPHIE

22 October 2016

Three

It is the *Mail* that has the story. They have to wait until the first editions to learn quite how bad it is.

The PM's director of communications, Chris Clarke, is there: pacing the floor, phone jabbed to his ear or glued to his hand, his ratty face tense with anticipation; small eyes narrowed either side of a sharp nose that is dulled with the grease of too many takeaways and the grey exhaustion of countless early mornings and late nights.

She cannot bear him. His estuarine twang; his self-importance; that strut – the strut of a short man for, at five-foot-nine, he is dwarfed by her husband. The knowledge that he is indispensable to the prime minister. 'He has the common touch: keeps us in check, knows what we lack – and how to counteract that,' James once said when she'd tried to articulate her instinctive distrust. She has no barometer by which to measure this former *News of the World* journalist,

from Barking. Single, without children but apparently not gay, politics genuinely appears to consume him. In his late thirties, he is that unfathomable cliché: married to his job.

‘Fuck’s sake.’ He is skimming the story now on his iPad, while waiting for the fat wad of a Saturday paper to be delivered; mouth twisting in a sneer as if there is an acrid taste in his mouth. Sophie feels a surge of bile rise up as she catches the headline, ‘MINISTER HAS AFFAIR WITH AIDE’, then the standfirst: ‘PM’s friend in trysts in the corridors of power.’

She skims the first paragraph, the words coalescing into something solid and impossible. ‘Britain’s most fanciable MP had sex with his female aide in a lift in the Commons, the *Daily Mail* can exclusively reveal.

‘James Whitehouse, a junior Home Office minister and confidant of the prime minister’s, conducted his affair with his parliamentary researcher in the Palace of Westminster. The married father-of-two also shared a room with blonde Olivia Lytton, 28, during the party conference.’

‘Well, that was fucking stupid.’ Chris’s voice cuts through the silence as she struggles to master her feelings and consider how to sound controlled and cogent. She cannot manage it and stands abruptly, revulsion swelling like a tide of sickness as she walks quickly from the room. Hidden in the kitchen, she leans against the sink – hoping the desire to throw up will ease. The chrome is cool to her touch and she concentrates on the shine and then on a picture by Toby: one of the few she has deemed good enough to be pinned to the

fridge. It shows four stick figures with huge smiles, the father figure towering over the rest of them: 50 per cent taller than his wife; 100 per cent bigger than his son. A six-year-old's view of the world. 'My famly' scrawled in magenta felt tip.

Tobe's family. Her family. Tears brim but she blinks them back and touches her wet lashes to prevent her mascara smudging. No time for self-pity. She thinks of what her mother would do: pour herself a double whisky; take the dogs for a bracing, blustery walk along the cliffs. No dogs here. No remote coast path on which to lose one's self, either: or hide away from the press who, if the past indiscretions of other ministers are anything to go by, will soon be circling outside their front door.

How to explain this to the children, expecting to go out early to ballet and swimming? The cameras. Perhaps a reporter? Tobes can be fobbed off – but Emily? The questions will be endless. *But why are they there? Is Daddy in trouble? Who's that lady? Mummy, why do they want a photo? Mum, are you crying? Why are you crying, Mummy?* Just thinking of it – the fact they will be exposed to this very public embarrassment and scrutiny; and that she will need to reassure them while the questions continue, incessant – makes her retch.

Then there will be the snippets of information heard and only half-understood in the playground and the looks of pity or ill-disguised delight from other mothers. For a moment, she considers bundling the children into the car and driving them to her mother's, in deepest Devon, hidden down endless, high-banked lanes. But running away implies

guilt – and a lack of unity. Her place is here, with her husband. She fills a glass from the tap; takes a couple of sharp, hard swigs – and then walks back into the front room to discover how she can shore up their marriage and help to rescue his political career.

‘So – she’s a classic woman scorned?’ Chris Clarke is hunched forwards, scrutinising James, as if trying to find an understandable explanation. It strikes Sophie that perhaps he is asexual. There is something so cold about him: as if he finds human frailty inconceivable – let alone the messy foolhardiness of desire.

‘I had told her our fling was a mistake. That it was over. She’s not quoted directly, is she, so she can’t have gone to the papers?’

‘She works in Westminster. She knows how to get the story out.’

“‘Friends of ...’?” James looks pained as he glances down at the reams of type about himself.

‘Exactly. “‘He used her. She thought it was a proper relationship but he treated her abysmally ...’, a ‘friend’ of Miss Lytton said.”’

‘I’ve read it,’ James says. ‘No need to go on.’

Sophie sits then, on the sofa opposite her husband and to the right of the director of communications. Perhaps she seems masochistic, wanting to know each detail, but ignorance isn’t an option. She needs to understand exactly what she is up against here. She tries to reread the story – taking

in the 'friend's' description of what Olivia endured; reading about a lift taken in the House of Commons. 'He pressed the button between floors and the ride took some time.' She can imagine the smirk as the reporter chose the double entendre; the sniggers, hastily suppressed, or raised eyebrows of some readers – but though the words smite her with their crudeness, the facts, in their entirety, make little sense.

She looks up, aware that Chris is still talking.

'So the line to take is: You deeply regret this brief affair and the pain you have caused to your family. Your priority now is to rebuild those relationships.' He glances at her as he says this. 'You're not going to be springing any surprises on us, are you, Sophie?'

'Like what?' She is startled.

'Announcing that you're leaving. Putting your side of the story. Moonlight flits?'

'Do you need to ask?'

'Of course I do.' His gaze is appraising.

'No, of course not.' She manages to keep her tone neutral: not to reveal that yes, of course she had thought of fleeing, of disappearing down a rabbit hole of lanes far away from London and her new, painful reality; or betray her anger that he has guessed at this.

He nods, apparently satisfied, then turns to her husband.

'The problem, of course, is a) that you were in a position of power; and b) this allegation that you shagged on government time. At the taxpayers' expense.'

'The party conference isn't funded by the taxpayer.'

‘But your business as a minister in Her Majesty’s Government is. And the idea that you were getting down and dirty in a lift when you should have been helping to run the country looks problematic, to say the least.’

‘I can see that.’

She looks at James then: a sharp glance of shock that he isn’t denying this; that he is acknowledging this description. The director of communications smiles and she wonders if he takes pleasure in belittling them like this. It is self-aggrandising: by putting them in their place, he validates himself; reiterates his importance to the prime minister, she can see that. But there seems to be more to it than this: more, even, than his journalistic revelling in a good story. For all his political dirty tricks – for he has a reputation for being ruthless, someone who will hold on to a kernel of gossip and threaten to wield it at the most effective moment, much like a government whip – he seems to be personally judgemental about this.

‘So, the key is to refuse to comment on details. This is tittle-tattle, the details of which you refuse to be drawn on. In your statement you will stress that in no way did this brief error of judgement affect your ministerial business. You will not be drawn into denials: they have a way of coming back to haunt you. And you will not elaborate. Stick to the line: deep regret, brief affair, priority your family. Deflect and dismiss but don’t deny. Understood?’

‘Of course.’ James glances at her and offers a smile, which she ignores. ‘And there’s no need to offer my resignation?’

'Why would you do that? The PM will make it clear if he wants that – but he doesn't abandon old friends, you know that, and you're one of his closest.' Chris points to the iPad and the *Mail's* copy: 'It says so, here.'

'Yes.' James seems to visibly straighten. Tom Southern and he go back to Eton, and Oxford, their adolescent and adult lives inextricably entwined since the age of thirteen. This is the one positive to hold on to: the prime minister, known for being almost fatally loyal, will do everything he humanly can before letting his oldest friend down. Sophie clings to this thought: Tom won't hang James out to dry. He can't: it's not in his nature; and, besides, he owes him too much.

'He reiterated that earlier.' James clears his throat. 'Conveyed his support.'

Sophie feels her breath ease out. 'So you've spoken?'

He nods but refuses to be drawn. Theirs is an exclusive relationship. The drinking rituals, the schoolboy debagging, the shared holidays in their twenties in which they plotted Tom's political career and one for James later, after he'd gained some experience in the real world, melding the two men together in a way that twelve years of marriage and two children apparently still haven't done as indestructibly for her and James. And the curious thing is that Tom – whom she still can't think of as the most powerful man in the country; whom she can still remember getting hog-whimperingly drunk at one of their late-twenties holidays in Tuscany – is the more dependent one. It is less apparent since he's become PM but still, she knows there is an inequality there – perhaps

only discernible to her. He is the one who looks to her husband for advice, yes, but also relies on him, she knows, to keep his secrets.

‘With the PM’s support, you should be fine.’ Chris is brisk. ‘Sex doesn’t have to kill a career these days. Not if the issue is closed down quickly. Lying does. Or rather, being caught lying.’ He gives a sniff, suddenly fastidious. ‘Also, you’re hardly some poor fool caught with your hands down your pants, filming yourself on a smartphone. There will be an element among the older, male voters who will see a quick knee-trembler with a young filly as perfectly understandable.’ He sneers. ‘No one’s business but yours as long as it’s brushed aside swiftly and doesn’t reoccur.’

‘What about an inquiry – into my having a relationship with a party employee?’

Sophie’s insides clutch tight. The thought of an ongoing internal investigation, pored over by the press, who could chivvy and harry and complain about lack of accountability or a whitewash, was chilling. It could destroy his career but it would also wound them: stoking the subject when it needed to be buried deep.

‘Did the PM mention that?’ Chris is sharp, his ratty eyes – a pale opalescent blue – widening.

James shakes his head.

‘Then there’s no need. This is a foolish affair, quickly forgotten – as long as you’ve told me everything?’

James nods.

‘Well. You’re part of the inner sanctum. If this moves off

the front page quickly, there'll be no need for anything further at all.'

She feels like laughing. James will be fine because he is the right type; he has done nothing illegal; and he has the prime minister's patronage. She glances past him to the bookshelves on which Hilary Mantel's pair of Cromwell novels sit: stories of an era in which a mercurial king's favour was all. More than four centuries have passed and yet, in Tom's party, there is still a flavour of life at court.

She lets her eyelids lower, trying to block out thoughts of a 24-7 news agenda and of the pack mentality that takes hold when a story gains traction on social media. News, these days, spins so fast. But all will be well, Chris said, and he is a realist, a cynic even: there is no reason for him to offer false reassurance. None at all.

She opens her eyes and finally looks at her husband.

But his classically beautiful face, with its high cheekbones and strong jaw, and those crinkled lines at the outer edge of his eyes that tell of a love of the outdoors and a propensity to laugh, is drawn; his expression closed to her.

He looks at the other man, and she spots something uncharacteristic: just the tiniest flicker of doubt.

'I just hope you're right.'

JAMES

31 October 2016

Four

The sun is filtering through the bedroom curtains and Sophie is still asleep when James comes back up to their bedroom. Six-thirty, Monday morning. Nine days since the story broke.

It is the first time she has slept past five-thirty in all that time. He watches her, now, taking in her face, stripped of make-up, softened against the plump pillows. Her forehead is etched with lines and her tousled hair has a fine silver thread running from her temple. She still looks younger than forty-two but this past week has taken its toll.

He sheds his dressing gown and slips back into bed, not quite touching in case he wakes her. He has been up since five, poring through the newspapers that, thank God, have nothing on him – as if the press has finally accepted that the story has run its course. What was Alastair Campbell's rule? That if a story was on the front page for eight days then the

minister had to go? Or was it ten? Whatever the figure, he'd avoided both, and there was nothing in the Sundays. No sniff of anything further to come on social media, not even on Guido Fawkes, and Chris had heard nothing: all the indications were that the tabs had dug up nothing new.

Besides, they had a real story to latch on to this weekend. There has been a foiled terror plot, yet again. Two Islamic extremists from Mile End had been planning another 7/7-style attack and had been raided once they'd received supplies. The Met were paranoid about leaking details for fear of prejudicing the trial but the papers were full of speculation as to the amount of damage the ammunition could have caused. He hadn't needed to lean on the chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee to help flame the coverage: Malcolm Thwaites, pompous ex-Home Office minister that he was, would be working his way through his contacts, raising the risk of allowing Muslim asylum seekers to stay in this climate; pandering to the dog-whistle fears of his constituents and, beyond them, of white, insular Middle Britain. The affair of a junior minister few had heard of outside Westminster would fade into insignificance compared to the perceived risk of hordes of potential terrorists infiltrating the country.

He yawns, letting some of the tension of the past week ease from him, and Sophie stirs. He won't wake her. Won't even risk slipping his arm around her waist, let alone down between her legs. She is still behaving in a way that is decidedly frosty. Perfectly civil in front of the children and

Cristina but chilly – and, yes, frigid – when they are alone. It is understandable, of course, but she can't keep it up. Sex is the energy that fuses them together. She needs it just as he does; or at least she needs the affection and the affirmation that he still wants her.

That is what has hurt her so much about his thing with Olivia: he can see that, he isn't stupid. He has been a shit, no question of it, and he has admitted it freely in those still, small moments in the night when she has finally let herself cry, and the rage she manages to control most of the time spills out in tight, sharp sobs. The trouble is, he wants sex more frequently than her; would have it every day if at all possible. It is a release – just like going for a run, or even having a piss. Something purely physical, an itch that needs to be scratched, a need that has to be answered. And for quite some time, since the children were tiny, she no longer seems to feel that same urgent need.

He decides to risk it: to wrap himself along the length of his slight wife. She is still tiny: her shape even sleeker than when she was a rower in her college women's first eight. Her bottom pert, her legs toned from her regular running: her stomach just a little slacker – silvered with fine stretch marks from bearing Emily and Tobes. It isn't that he doesn't desire her. Of course he does. But Olivia was there – virtually offering herself up on a plate. Plus she was undeniably gorgeous. Even now that he thinks of her as a bitch – for she had sanctioned the story in the papers even if she hadn't gone to them herself – he can acknowledge her beauty. A body untouched

by motherhood: tight, high breasts and skinny legs; blonde hair that shone and smelled of citrus; and a mouth as capable of cruelty – for she is clever; that was part of the attraction – as it is of temptation.

It was the first time he had been unfaithful. Well, the first since their marriage. Their engagement didn't count – nor their student days. He had raced through girls at college as if he was compelled. Things had changed for a while after he'd met Sophie and she, rowing and finals had briefly combined to exhaust him; and yet, even then, he was still open to opportunities. That was what Oxford was about, wasn't it? Exploration – intellectual, emotional, physical – of all kinds.

He had got away with it – in the same way that, as the only son with two older, doting sisters, he had always got away with things as a boy. Soph had never guessed that there were other women. He'd picked wisely: girls in different colleges, different years, reading different subjects, making it all possible. These were one-night stands that lasted two nights at most, for it was variety that he craved: the endless, surprising difference between one pair of breasts and the next; one woman's cry and another's; one soft, damp cunt or crook of an elbow or curve of a neck. For a young man who had spent five years of his adolescence in an all-male boarding school, and before that boarding at a prep, his first year at Oxford – and even more that glorious, exam-free second year, before he met Sophie – had brought immense, anarchic freedom.

On he'd romped through his mid-twenties, after they'd split up for six years, and through his late twenties: years when he'd worked as a management consultant and his City salary, and late nights working and then drinking, meant there was almost a surfeit of girls. And then, at twenty-nine he had bumped into Sophie again in a pub in Notting Hill and she was twenty-seven then, not a needy twenty: more self-assured and experienced; something of a challenge; a bit of a catch. She'd played hard to get for a while: wary, she'd said, of him behaving as recklessly as he had before; fearful that the crisis that had led him to dump her – for she had seen him at his most vulnerable and he couldn't bear that – would come back to haunt them. But, despite her ambivalence, it was inevitable they would get back together. As he'd said in his wedding speech, trotting out a cliché he hadn't taken the time to articulate more freshly, it felt as if he was coming home.

And he really thought he had satisfied his itch. That desire to sniff around. During their engagement, there had been a couple of friends with benefits: an ex-girlfriend who'd tried to dissuade him from marrying Soph in the months leading up to their wedding; a colleague who had become a bit of a stalker when she failed to recognise that he really *did* just want sex with no strings attached. That had shaken him a little. Amelia's clinginess; those tremulous eyes – limpid pools of tears that had filled whenever he had sprung out of bed, leaving straight after sex; that final, irate phone call – her voice rising in a hysterical crescendo

of pain until he'd silenced her with the off button. That had forced him to draw a line under his behaviour. Marriage, he decided, was when his fidelity would start.

And it had worked. For nearly twelve years, he had been completely faithful. The kids had made it easier. He had assumed he would be a traditional, semi-detached dad, rather like Charles, his own father; and yet they had changed him entirely – at least for a good, long while. He hadn't felt it when they were babies. Had been fairly ambivalent when they had puked and gurgled and slept. But once they had begun to talk and ask questions then the all-encompassing love affair began. It had started with Emily but had become more intense with Tobes: this burden of responsibility; the need to be someone his child – his son – respected. Not just an admirable but a *good* man.

Sometimes he found them unnerving. Those big, questioning eyes, that extreme innocence, the total trust. In his professional life, he wasn't always entirely frank: he could get away with answers that didn't fit the question and yet still manage to mollify or beguile. But not with them. With them, he feared they saw right through him. For his children, he had to be better than that.

And for a while, for quite a while, he had succeeded in being this good man. He had behaved as he knew he should do. Kept to those pledges made in that sixteenth-century church, in front of Sophie's father, Max, who had made no pretence of keeping them, in the least. He would be a good

man for her and their children and a better man than her father. And until a month before their twelfth wedding anniversary, he had managed it.

And then, in May, he had been in the House, late at night. The new Counter-Terrorism Bill. A late sitting. He had been racing through the cloisters after a vote towards Portcullis House, his stomach caving in with hunger, hoping to find something healthy to eat. And there she was: returning to collect a bag from his office after a night out with friends. She was tipsy: slightly, delightfully tipsy. Not something he'd seen her like before. And she had tripped on her heel as she'd passed him, and fallen against him; one hand reaching out for his forearm as her left foot had landed on the chill slate of the cloisters; a sheer stockinged foot, landing by his polished Church's; mulberry-painted toenails just visible through the toe.

'Oops – sorry, James,' she had said, and bit her bottom lip as her laugh faded for it was all 'Yes, Minister' in the office, even though he knew they referred to him as James in his absence and he tried to get them to use their first names. She had kept her hand on his forearm as she steadied herself, and slipped that foot back into the shoe; and he had found himself holding the crook of her other elbow in his hand, as she righted herself again.

'Are you all right? Can I get you a cab?' He began to walk her towards the bell in New Palace Yard, concerned, solicitous: for she was a young woman who needed to get home safely, an employee slightly the worse for wear.

She had stopped and looked up at him in the moonlight, suddenly sober and just a little knowing.

‘I’d far rather have another drink.’

And so it had begun. The seeds of their affair sown that balmy, late-spring night as the sky turned navy and he had limited himself to a single beer and she a gin and tonic, out on the Terrace Bar. The Thames had slipped past and he had stared into its charcoal depths, watching the lights of St Thomas’s opposite – the hospital where his daughter was born – dapple the water. And he had known that he was letting go of his principles; that he was jeopardising everything that made him the man he was; the better man he wanted to be for his children – and he had barely cared.

They hadn’t consummated their relationship then. Didn’t even kiss: it was all too public and he was still telling himself he was resisting the inevitable. That happened a week later: seven days of the most painful, delicious foreplay of his life. Afterwards, he had apologised for it being so rushed; for him needing to consume her – for it felt like that – so quickly and entirely. She had smiled. A lazy smile. ‘There’ll be other opportunities.’ ‘Like now?’ ‘Like now.’

It had carried on, their fling, until three weeks ago. Intense, when there was the opportunity, but with physical breaks during the recess: a week in the South Hams near Sophie’s mother; a fortnight in Corsica, where he had taught the children to sail and made love to Sophie nightly; had seen his

fling with Olivia as a madness; something he could and *would* finish as soon as parliament resumed.

He had tried to distance himself once he got back; told her it was over after the party conference. He had called her into his office, hoping that, this way, she wouldn't make a scene; that they could be businesslike. Professional. It had been fun while it lasted but they both knew it couldn't go on.

Her eyes had watered and her tone became clipped, a reaction he was familiar with and so was unperturbed by: the response of previous girlfriends; and, on the very rare occasions when he had disappointed her, of his mother, Tuppence.

'So, we're all fine then?' he had made himself ask, only wanting to hear her say yes.

'Yes, of course we are.' She gave him a bright smile: chin up, her voice all perky and plucky, though she rather ruined it when it wobbled. 'Of course we are.'

And that should have been it. Perhaps would have been if he hadn't been a fool. If he hadn't succumbed just the one last time.

He rolls towards Sophie, pulls her tight. He won't dwell on what happened in the lift. Barely the most romantic setting but then there was little that was romantic about their relationship: he doesn't need the *Mail* to remind him of that fact.

It must have been that that tipped Olivia over the edge: or rather his reaction to her afterwards. A flash of arrogance,

perhaps, yes. But he'd thought it was a one-off; that a bout of fast and furious sex didn't mean, as she predictably thought it did, that they were getting back together.

'Thanks for that. Just what I needed.' Feeling light-headed, he was uncharacteristically crass. He could see that now.

'Does that mean?'

'What?' The lift had reached their floor and, as the doors opened, he stepped out into the narrow corridor and opened the committee corridor door; his mind already on the day's events; uninterested in what she had to say.

Her eyes had swelled into pools of hurt but he couldn't be doing with it. They were supposed to be giving evidence at a committee: were now running late. He just didn't have the time.

Perhaps if he'd offered her a kiss, smoothed her hair, let her down gently. Perhaps if he'd been a bit less brutal then she wouldn't have gone to the papers.

But he had just left her: her hair less sleek; her tights, he remembered this now, snagged where he had pulled at them; had left her just staring after him.

Sophie stirs, and rolls towards him; rouses him from the discomfort of the memory. He holds his breath, wary of causing her to shift away, feeling the familiar warmth of her body lying against his chest. Gingerly, he puts a hand between her shoulder blades then moves it lower towards the small of her back and pulls her into him.

She opens her eyes – a deep, startling blue – and for a moment seems surprised to be in such proximity. Little

wonder: she has spent a week being as physically distant as possible.

'Hello, my darling.' He risks a gentle kiss on her forehead. She draws her face away, her brow furrowing in a crease between her eyes as if deciding whether to view this as an intrusion. He takes his hand away then places it behind her shoulder, lightly enclosing her within his arms.

'OK?' He leans forward; drops a kiss on her lips.

'Don't.' She shrugs her shoulders, discontented, but doesn't move away.

'Soph – we can't carry on like this.'

'Can't we?' She looks up at him and he can see the hurt in her eyes and then something more promising: a mixture of defeat and hope that suggests she doesn't want to continue in this state of chilly restraint.

He removes his arm, releasing her from the circle of his clasp and shifts back to look at her properly. There is a foot between them and he reaches across it to stroke the soft down of her cheek. For a moment she hesitates and then she turns her lips towards it and, as if she cannot help but do so, as if it is a force of habit, lightly kisses the palm of his hand. Her lids close, as if she knows she is being weak to concede.

He draws her back to him. Holds her close; trying to convey through the force of his hug how much she means to him. Her shoulders, tense for the past nine days, are tight but her breath comes out in a rush as if she is trying to relax, as if she wants that desperately.

'There's nothing in the papers today. It seems to be all

over,' he says, drawing back and kissing her on the top of her head.

'Don't say that. It's tempting fate ...'

'Chris hasn't heard a murmur all weekend. And there's nothing today.' He brushes over her superstition. 'I really think we're safe.'

'We need to listen to *Today*.' She rolls away from him as the clock radio switches on automatically for the six-thirty headlines: A predicted drop in interest rates; a British nurse with Ebola; another bomb in Syria.

They listen in silence. 'Nothing,' he says.

Her eyes well with tears: huge globes that topple. She swipes at her eyes and gives a surprisingly noisy sniff.

'I've been so frightened.'

'What about?' He is bemused.

'You *know*. In case the papers dig up any stuff about the Libertines.'

'Pffsh. Not going to happen.' He has boxed those days away; doesn't let himself think about them; wishes she wouldn't. 'My conscience is clear about what happened then. You know that.'

She doesn't answer.

'Soph?' He tips her chin; looks deep into her eyes; gives her his most persuasive, heartfelt smile. 'Truly. It is.'

For a while they just lie there: her in his arms; his chin on the top of her head.

'You've been my rock, you know?'

'What else could I be?'

'No, really. You've been my everything. You've had every right to be angry but you and the kids have got me through this.' He peppers her face with kisses: a light dusting just as she likes it. She remains unresponsive. 'I owe you so much, Sophie.'

She looks at him, then, and he can see a hint of the young woman he fell in love with beneath the layers of distrust that have built up over the past week.

'If I'm going to carry on sticking by you – if we're going to try and make us work – then I need to know that it's *completely* over,' she says.

'We've been through this before,' he sighs. 'Christ, I'm hardly going to want to see the woman.' He gives a bark of laughter. 'Besides, our paths aren't even going to meet. She's on sick leave, and she'll be moved to another office when she returns – *if* she returns. There's no need for me to see her again.'

'And I need to know that you won't do this again . . . I can't bear the *humiliation*.' She gives a shudder and recoils from him, shifting up in bed and wrapping her arms around her knees. 'I can't be like my mother.' She looks at him, accusatory. 'We said we wouldn't be like them – like my parents. When we married, you *promised* me.'

'I know, I know.' He looks down, conscious of the need to still play the penitent. 'I don't know what to say to convince you. I've – we've – all paid for my behaviour. It's not something I'm *ever* going to repeat.'

'You are my world,' he adds, sitting up and putting his

arm around her shoulders. She doesn't move away from him; and so he slides the second, exploratory, around her waist.

'Don't,' she says, resisting now and shifting to the edge of the bed. 'I've got to get the children up.'

'But you do believe me?' He gives her the look. The one she would normally find irresistible: a wide-eyed glance injected with a streak of disbelief.

'I do.' She leans against him, briefly, and gives a small, sad smile that acknowledges her weakness. 'Fool that I am, I do.'

He kisses her, then: a proper kiss, mouth open with a hint of his tongue. A kiss that manages to be respectful while being far from chaste.

'It's over,' he tells her, looking into her eyes and trying to convey a conviction he doesn't feel entirely. 'Everything is going to be OK.'

KATE

31 October 2016

Five

I lay my copy of *The Times* down on the clear surface of my galley kitchen and work through it methodically then do the same with the *Sun*, the *Mirror* and the *Daily Mail*.

Plenty on the foiled Mile End terror plot, more too on the all-consuming story of the week: a Egyptian beachside bombing. But nothing on James Whitehouse, 'the PM's mate caught bonking' as the *Sun* described him, last week; or 'Liv's lover in the lift'. I double-check the tabloids, pilfered from the clerks' office. Not one single word.

It's bizarre how swiftly that story has sunk: buried by proper, earth-shattering news and yet its complete absence is unsettling. Something doesn't smell right, as my mother would say. The prime minister has said that he stands by his colleague. That he has the utmost confidence in him; that this is a private matter, now resolved. But other junior ministers, caught having sex with a junior member of staff,

would be hung out to dry. So what has inspired this loyalty?

It bothers me, this old boys' favouritism, but I don't have time to obsess. Nine o'clock on a Monday night and, just like every other night, I have a wheelie-case of documents nudging, like a loyal dog, at my heels. I scan through the notes for *Blackwell*, tomorrow's hearing, at Southwark Crown Court. I'm prosecuting a recidivist sex offender who, at 2 a.m. one morning in March, abducted an eleven-year-old. His defence? He was being kind-hearted and the boy – paralytic on the four cans of the cider with which he'd plied him – is 'a lying shit'. Sounds absolutely charming.

I work efficiently and, despite the grubbiness of the evidence, the unrelenting sadness for the child, begin to feel lighter: Graham Blackwell, a 25-stone 55-year-old, will not endear himself to the jury. Unless something goes terribly wrong, I'm unlikely not to win. And then I turn to *Butler*, a case of relationship rape that will prove more difficult to prove. The details swim up from the pages of notes and I realise that my eyes are blurring: fat tears that pool and swell, I can feel them teetering on my lower lashes. I swipe them with my knuckles. God, I must be exhausted. I glance at my watch. Ten-forty: relatively early for me.

I stretch, trying to energise my weary body. But I know this is less the bone-aching tiredness that comes from traipsing around the south-eastern circuit or the intellectual weariness of teasing out each legal loophole and more an emotional exhaustion that blankets me like the velvet darkness of a starless night. Here, in my quiet, rather lonely

flat, I am tired of man's inhumanity to man. Or, rather, his inhumanity to women and children. I am tired of such casual sexual violence or, as Graham Blackwell might put it, the refusal to give a shit.

Time to buck up. I can't allow myself to wallow. It's my job to catch out these bastards: to use my considerable powers of persuasion to do all I can to put them away. I pack up my files; slosh whisky into a tumbler; dig around in the freezer box for some fat ice cubes – I remember to make ice even though I forget to buy milk; and set my alarm for 5.30 a.m. The flat's cold – the central heating's on the blink and I haven't had time to get it fixed – and I run a bath, hoping it will warm my bones and unknot my tense shoulders; will envelop me in its watery caress.

The steam rises and I submerge my limbs. It almost scalds but the relief is immediate: no one has touched me since last month's brief, unsatisfying evening with Richard, and I feel exposed and somehow vulnerable as I take in my nakedness and note quite how thin my thighs are these days. My hips protrude like tiny islands; my stomach is concave, my breasts tight. I am dropping a cup size each decade. My face might have improved – high cheekbones; arched brows; my once-hated nose no longer kinked but straight and petite; a thirtieth birthday present to myself; the most dramatic evidence of my reinvention and success – but my body is more scrawny than lean. A bubble of self-pity wells as I remember the younger Kate and envisage an older one: a grey-haired husk of a woman as brittle and shrivelled as the beech leaves I scrunch through on my walk from the tube to my mansion flat. Desiccated.

Oh, for God's sake. Think of something else. My mind Rolodexes through the news – Egypt; the cloying fog; the planned arrival of Syrian refugees before Christmas – then flits back to James Whitehouse and the intensity of his friendship with Tom Southern. They go back thirty years: plenty of time for secrets to be made, shared and kept. I wonder if the tabloid hacks are sniffing around for them again, truffling for a tale of class and corruption, determined to unearth some choice nuggets this time?

There's that infamous photograph that emerged just after the prime minister was first elected, in 2010, of them both at Oxford. They're posing on the steps of the grandest college, dressed in the uniform of their elite dining club, the Libertines: midnight-blue tails, velvet burgundy waistcoats, cream silk cravats blooming like peonies against each blemish-free face. The photo was hastily suppressed – news organisations can't use it now – but the image persists of those preening, entitled young men. I see their smooth, smiling faces now: the faces of men who will sail through life: Eton, Oxford, parliament, government.

And then I think of the child in *Blackwell*, the case of tomorrow's repeat sex offender – and how his life chances have differed; how his life has already been derailed. The paper dips in the water, and I let the soggy mass slip from my hand to the floor as I find myself ambushed by a wave of sorrow: an ache that engulfs me so entirely that I can either succumb – or suppress it. I sink deep into the bath, welcoming the oblivion of the hot, greying water as it closes over my face.