

**THE  
MISTAKE**

**KATIE McMAHON**

*echo*



## Bec

I never thought of myself as smug. That's the really humiliating bit.

I didn't plaster a BRIARWOOD: INDEPENDENT AND OUTSTANDING sticker on our car's back window. ('Not everyone needs to know where you go to school, darlings.')

I wore my engagement ring – of course I was going to wear it – but my wedding band was as discreet and unassuming as a light switch.

I was careful never to mention how easily I fell pregnant (yes, all three times) or that, after twelve years of marriage, Stuart and I still had sex at least once a week. I didn't say things like, 'The kids are doing long-haul so much better these days' or, 'My dermatologist is excellent, but I'm too much of a scaredy-cat for filler before forty'. (Those are actual quotes from the school gate, by the way. You can see where my baseline was.)

I thought I was way too humble and sensitive and *grounded* for any of that sort of talk. And anyway, I felt the opposite of smug. I felt like someone who had to try really hard just to manage the minimum.

But I was smug. Insufferably.

Lots of people probably think I got exactly what was coming to me.

And I agree with them.



## Kate

Mum once said Bec was the easy one. Even when we were little, she was one of those people who never put a foot out of line. At least not deliberately.

But when she makes a mistake, it's a really, really big one.

## Chapter One

### Kate

Eventually, I decided to try online dating.

‘So,’ I said, casual as anything, ‘I’m going on Tinder.’

It goes to show how strong the urge to procreate is, because just about everything I’d heard about internet hook-ups was bad. Stories about ghosting and photos and genuinely frightening weirdos. It was almost enough to make you look back with fondness on the days of smoke-filled nightclubs where your bottom was pinched by simple, honest menfolk with beery breath and heads like red capsicums.

‘Oh right,’ Bec said. ‘Aren’t you on it already?’

We were talking on the phone, and I could tell she was cooking dinner. She sounded a bit distracted: probably worried she’d accidentally put non-organic kale in the kids’ frittata.

‘Well, if you meet someone nice, you can bring him to Stu’s fortieth. As your plus-one.’

Hearing Bec use the term ‘plus-one’ without irony was almost enough to make me cry. I loved my sister, but honestly, there were moments when I felt I didn’t know her anymore.

In any case, I didn’t want a ‘plus-one’ for social events. I also didn’t want: walks along the beach, red wine in front of fires, or even sperm for my (no doubt rapidly dwindling) 39-year-old supply of eggs. I was just yearning, absolutely yearning, to have sex. (Intercourse, to be more specific.)

Of course I know – believe me, I know – that intercourse is Just One Of The Many Ways Human Beings Can Enjoy Their Sexuality. But I felt I'd fully explored my personal sexual identity – if you catch my drift – and it was well past time to involve someone else. A man, in my case.

Anyway, the yearning. For skin and touch and eye contact and that quiet, concentrated breathing. For the way some men know how to look at you and say – all level and effective – ‘God, I want you’ or ‘Been dying to get you alone’ or something like that. It hardly matters what they say. It's all in the tone. And I wanted to wake up with urgent hands on me. I wanted to be undressed. I wanted to be dragged across a bed. But you just can't say stuff like that to someone who uses the term ‘plus-one’ in general conversation.

‘Ha! Maybe,’ I said instead. ‘Listen, I'd better go.’

I hung up, feeling a bit sad, as if I'd given someone a really thoughtful present that they hadn't bothered to open. But it was hardly Bec's fault she didn't know what was going on with me.

Far below my apartment windows, Melbourne gleamed. Lights were starting to come on: they snaked along the coast, all the way around Port Phillip Bay. So many headlights. So many houses and banks and football grounds and beaches and delis and trams and apartments and offices and building sites.

I will go on as many dates as it takes, I thought, until I find one man to have sex with. The only criteria are that I must want to have sex with him, and he must want to have sex with me.

I would give it three months, then reassess.

I wasn't optimistic.

‘Kate!’ said Juliet. ‘There will be right-swiping a go-go! You'll have so much fun!’

Juliet – my main Melbourne confidante, given Bec lives in Hobart – is enthusiastic about most things, especially if they have to do with me. She is extremely kind.

‘I’m putting just my face in my photo,’ I said, looking at my cauliflower salad.

Juliet chewed a cherry tomato. (We were having lunch at a café with second-hand chairs, butterscotch walls and a we’ll-accept-you-even-if-you-eat-gluten vibe.)

‘Whatever you’re comfortable with.’ She used a strident tone, as if someone had suggested I should do something I was *un*comfortable with, and pushed her hair out of her face. She has curly red hair, like Nicole Kidman’s was before Hollywood.

Just then her phone rang. Juliet is a travel agent. You would think that travel agents would have all perished of the internet, but a few of them hang on, battered and defiant. They are like survivors in a ye olde English village after the Black Death has galloped through. (The reason Juliet survived is the high-end retiree market. Her clients are elderly, but not sweet, easily-fobbed-off, grateful-for-any-old-rubbish-because-at-least-it’s-not-The-War elderly. More like: ‘I’m paying top dollar for this Northern Lights helicopter jaunt, so why is the Moët non-vintage?’ elderly.)

‘So when’s your first date?’ said Juliet, when she’d finished explaining to the man on the phone why he didn’t want a balcony the size of a postage stamp.

‘You sure? About just my face in the photo?’

‘You don’t owe anyone anything.’ She gave me a sweet smile, then started eating fast. She would have an appointment to talk about Copenhagen, Iceland or Budapest at two.

‘All right,’ I said.



‘Just don’t show your bazookas,’ she added, with her mouth full. ‘Tinder would actually burst into flames.’

That’s Juliet. Exceptionally kind.

Two weeks later, both Bec and Juliet had texted to ask me if I had met any ‘cuties’ (Bec) or ‘contenders’ (Juliet).

*No luck yet*, I texted back, to both of them. I sent the emoji with the crossed eyes, as if the whole thing was a hilarious adventure.

I didn’t know how to tell them there’s a certain look men get. It’s the look that probably crosses your face when you think you’ve spotted an amazingly good deal and then realise you missed a zero on the price tag, or when you grasp that the \$14 is per oyster, not per six oysters. And that’s the look from the *polite* men – the ones with nice mums and dads, the ones who weren’t the coolest boys in school.

The others – the ones used to getting their own way – look annoyed, as if they’ve been duped by a shoddy naturopath into buying herbs that do nothing. Date Number Seven fake-yawned as I said, ‘Hello.’ So I’d know it was a fake yawn, he raised four straight fingers to his wide-open mouth and gave his lips several slow taps. Date Twelve – cuffs flipped back revealing tanned wrists – looked at his watch as I sat down and said, ‘I need to be elsewhere.’ He gave his head a little shake, the way you might when your team loses because the referee made a stupid decision.

On the way home that night I remembered the time David Hillman – the film producer – invited me out for Italian and I said no. I told him it was because I was off to New York in the morning, but really it was because he pulls his shirt collars out over the necklines of his jumpers. (That’s a really bad look; I stand by my judgement there. Even he couldn’t pull it off. And he still wears them like that, too; I saw him interviewed recently. Handsome as ever. He’s aging well.)



I listened to a podcast the other day, about aging. Some women thought it was easier to age if you hadn't been good-looking to start with. You would have based your self-esteem and your sense of identity on your intelligence or your sense of humour or your kind heart or whatever. But other women thought that it was easier to age if you'd been hot in your youth. They said that hotties, having been hot for their allotted two decades (late-teens to late-thirties, or thereabouts) inevitably realised the limitations of hotness. They saw through it. Understood hotness never buys happiness.

I wondered if I would, eventually, have come to believe that.

Adam Cincotta was the seventeenth date. No one can say I don't persevere.

We met at a newish restaurant with good black-and-white drawings on the walls and sensible – by which I mean dim – lighting. It was crowded, but not too noisy. Well-designed acoustics. I was wearing a pale-green mohair sweater, black skinny jeans and my favourite black ankle boots. Also the earrings Bec and Stuart gave me for Christmas. They were dangly and sparkly and, having been chosen by Bec, much more tasteful than they sound.

I was first to arrive, partly because I wanted to get it over with. I waited, facing the door, watching plates of gnocchi go past and thinking I'd definitely stay and have dinner even if he left straight away. When he arrived I was reading the menu.

'Kate?' he said.

He was standing behind the chair opposite me, one capable-looking hand resting across each of its polished wooden knobs. His black polar fleece was the sort of thing I'd wear for a bushwalk, if I were to suddenly become the bushwalking type. He was skinny, but not in a bad way, and at least as tall as me.

'Adam?' I said.

He sat down and asked me what looked good. I immediately noticed he hadn't done The Look and that he had very definitely grey eyes. He had a sort of alert, quick-reflex way about him that could have made him look like a meerkat but didn't, because his gaze was grave and his shoulders were relaxed. Meerkats are cute, with their babysitting among the tribe and their big roundy eyes, but you just wouldn't want that frantic, bouncy sort of vibe when it comes to sex.

We talked about my family (a mere seventy-minute flight away in Hobart) and budget airlines (generally not too shabby) and Melbourne's inner-city traffic (we both tried to walk everywhere). Then we somehow got onto his hobby: rock-climbing. He had done something called free-climb Arapiles, and seemed to think I would know what that meant.

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' I said. 'Scrambling illegally up an ancient ruin?'

'No, Arapiles the mountain,' he said. 'In the Grampians?'

He didn't immediately reach for his phone to show me a photo, which was nice. Instead, he tilted one of his forearms to indicate a steep cliff-face.

'You climbed it without a rope?'

'No. With a rope.'

'But you said, "free climb".'

'Yeah. You have ropes. Gear. It means you don't—'

'Not that impressive, really, then,' I said. I was smiling though.

'Bugger.' He had a smile that came and went fast. 'That's all I've got.'

There was a little silence until I started talking about a holiday I'd been on near the Grampians. I made it sound as if I'd been camping with friends, although it had actually been a health retreat where I'd eaten a great deal of chef-prepared fermented stuff and resisted pressure to discuss my 'bowel actions' with the On-site

Qualified Ayurvedic Therapist. Since she was about twenty, I did not believe she could be that well-qualified.

When the waiter told us there was only one panna cotta left, Adam asked me if I wanted it. I said, God no, I was having the chocolate thing, and he said, well, thank Christ, and did you notice how chivalrous that was? I laughed and so did the waiter.

While I was eating my chocolate tortino, I found myself thinking about my underwear. I was wearing a matching maroon ensemble from Victoria's Secret. The bra only partially concealed my nipples; the knickers were called the Very Sexy Strappy Cheeky Panty, which made me think of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Curled up in my drawer, the entire Very Sexy Strappy set had looked like a top-quality version of the shoebox of hair ribbons that Bec and I shared during primary school. On me, it looked pretty much the way it does on the VS models.

Pretty much.

Adam said he could walk me back to my apartment. I said that would be beyond chivalrous, we were now heading into gallant territory. He smiled his quick smile again. We ambled along a wide, busy-ish street. Necklaces of headlights shimmered past, and a tram with an ad featuring a beautiful, curvy twenty-something whose hips presumably represented the brand's Very Genuine Commitment to diversity. It was raining, but we were on a wide footpath, under the awnings of lovely old shops. They mostly sold expensive kitchenware, expensive shoes or expensive haircuts. I was thinking, if he turns out to be a nutter, at least we will have been captured on CCTV and in tasteful environs.

As we waited to cross a road, a shiny black four-wheel drive with a numberplate saying geluz? went past.

'Do you have a personalised number plate?' I asked. He looked at me and shook his head. 'Would you ever get one?' I went on.

‘Maybe. If I first had a lobotomy.’ Then he squinted his eyes and said, ‘You?’

‘Mine says “For Kate Not You”, with K 8 for Kate,’ I said. I drew a squiggle in the air to show the ‘8’. ‘And the number four, and the letter U,’ I clarified. He looked at me for a moment.

‘Kay Eight, I know U R joking,’ he replied, and did his quick smile again.

The lights changed. He put his hand on my back, just for a second, as I stepped off the kerb. It felt nice. After a minute I stopped to look in a window (boring knitted things, but I needed to collect myself for a bit) and when we started walking again, he took my hand. His hand felt Very Subtly Lively. I felt very something. Not nervous. Not excited. A bit scared. A bit hopeful. Turned on. I felt very turned on.

It was that delicious time when you sort of want to talk but there’s nothing to say, when it feels as if your bodies are swooshing your minds along. A familiar feeling, lovely and painful at the same time, an echo of a long time ago. From early on at dinner I’d been able to tell the sort of lover he’d be. Agile and strong; quiet, purposeful, competent.

‘Here we are,’ I said. I dropped his hand to fiddle with the coded gate into my apartment complex.

It was when we turned down the path that I saw us in the double glass doors that lead to the lobby. My hair, which as usual was down, had got a bit wet and gone very frizzy. It felt suddenly, unbearably itchy against my face, and I became aware that a few strands were stuck to my lip. The doors glinted at us with malevolent accuracy.

We didn’t hold hands again. As soon as we reached the bright fluorescent glow of the vestibule, I turned to him.

‘Thanks for a fun evening,’ I said. I was aiming for dignified.

‘Thank *you*, Kate.’ He put one of his hands on my waist. ‘Shall we go in?’

He obviously hadn't noticed that my forehead was all tight, the way it goes when I need to cry. I felt the pressure he was putting through the base of his palm, onto my jeans, through to the uppermost strap of my ludicrous knickers.

I shook my head. Not flirtily. Not maybe-next-time promisingly. Just the way Mum used to when I asked her for a treat before dinner. Firm, routine, with the chance of some mild irritation just around the corner.

'Possibly an unchivalrous suggestion,' he said, not letting go of my waist.

'No problem at all. Thank you for walking me home.' He let go. 'In such a gentlemanly manner,' I managed to add.

Then, as I turned away, I somehow pulled out my best smile. The dazzling one. The iconic, stunning, light-up-the-room, insert-any-other-superlative-here one, just as if I were still a true professional. And I did it over my shoulder, in a manoeuvre that was a perfect imitation of a normal – of a *sexy* – woman flirting. As if there was nothing marring my anticipation of all the fun we were planning to have *When We Were Both Ready*.

When I got into the lift, I pressed the button and leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes. But I'd missed the moment and now the tears wouldn't come.

In the morning I made myself do all the usual things. No phone in the bedroom. Yoga in the yoga room. Ancient-grain porridge with stewed apricots for breakfast in the sun. The whole time bracing for disappointment. Telling myself he probably wouldn't have texted, and if he hadn't it could just be because I'd acted weird, and in any case that it didn't really matter either way, and also that, if he hadn't, it was his loss.

Finally, I checked my messages. Bec had sent a photo of Essie wearing the bright-green wig I'd given her for her birthday, one of Lachlan with his bike and one of Mathilda dressed up as Harry Potter. There was a reminder about a hair appointment.

And him.

Well. Seeing his name on my screen unleashed a lot of happy feelings. It was like opening the door on an overstuffed cupboard and standing there while the huge stack of towels – the ones you shoved in and hoped for the best about – falls out all over you.

I took a deep breath and replied 'Y' to the hair. Then I sent a lot of my specially downloaded unicorn emojis for Essie. (Mathilda, being eight, is too grown-up for unicorns, so I sent her some blue and green hearts, and a double thumbs up to Lachy.)

Then I read it. He had sent it at 11.37 p.m. the night before.

*Thanks for dinner. Sorry for any lack of gallantry. I got carried away.*

I picked my phone up off its special mat. I put it to my chest and squeezed it hard.

*My pleasure*, I typed back. My finger hovered over the Send button for three minutes. I said, 'For God's sake, Kate,' out loud. I deleted the words, stood up and made tea and when I sat back down I texted, *Come over?* as fast as I could and sent it. I was telling myself it was just a game, just a bit of fun, even though I could still feel the exact spot where he'd touched my back.

He replied straight away: *Can't. At work. Tonight?*

Of course he would be working; it was 10.14 a.m. on a Wednesday.

*Yes*, I texted back. I hesitated. *CU at 7? K8 x*

*OK K8. GR8. x*

*Don't B L8 x*, I wrote, and then I stepped away from the phone before I could do anything to spoil it all.

\*



‘Your front door’s the same as mine,’ he said.

He arrived at ten past seven, carrying a bottle of Spanish red wine.

‘But your apartment’s a lot nicer,’ he added, as I led him into the living area.

He sounded a bit impressed. Thank God. The only thing more annoying than people asking, ‘So, where are you based?’ is when you tell them and then they try to hide the fact that they’re impressed.

‘Thanks. I love it here.’

My apartment is nicer than most people’s, I forbore to say. My apartment is worth several million dollars, and I have spent a lot of time decorating it. (I’ve tried to go for New-York-loft style: lots of light and white and space, and then beautiful bits of furniture, the sorts of things that an interiors magazine would describe as eclectic, quirky or bohemian.)

We were in the living room by this time. I had planned that the icebreaker would be pointing out interesting bits of the view, because everyone gravitates to the windows. But he didn’t come over to the windows; he went towards the kitchen.

‘I’ll open the wine,’ he offered. I decided not to make a big deal of that in my head. Men like doing things for women, apparently, and anyway I really wanted a drink. So I just told him where the glasses were and sat down on the couch.

‘So you were a model back in the day?’

He set down the wine glasses on the kitchen counter. He was wearing a dark-green shirt that fit him properly and was not (praise the Lord) tucked into his jeans. Call me a traditionalist, but if the occasion requires that your shirt be tucked in, then you should not be wearing jeans. A little triangle of grey T-shirt peeked out from near his collar.





‘Yeah.’ I guess he’d googled me. I felt flattered – and also glad, because the pictures that still come up on Google are far from unbecoming. ‘Didn’t you know that last night?’

He shook his head and I believed him.

‘What did you get up to today?’ I said. For some reason I had decided it’d be good to change the subject. Modest. Also, I didn’t have a clear idea exactly what work he did. He’d talked about a science degree.

He shrugged. ‘Just work. Taking photos, actually. Not fashion though. Lots of boring waiting around stuff today.’

I liked that he didn’t say, Of-course-I’m-not-in-Demarchelier’s-league or any of that crap. He left the wine bottle open on the counter. You could tell by the way he handed over my glass that my Persian rug and taupe leather couch inspired no apprehension in him. Some people just don’t spill drinks.

As he sat down, he put his hand on my thigh. Knew he’d be competent, I thought, as triumphant as if I’d guessed his star sign. It was just as well, because I really needed to get the sex done and I’d accidentally sat down on the left side of the couch, and anyway, I was holding my wine. I took a big gulp. I had not eaten since the ancient grains.

‘Was that when you looked at my pictures?’ I said. When I try to act modest, I can never keep it up for long. ‘In the waiting-around bit?’

‘Yep.’

I couldn’t tell if he was embarrassed or what. His hand on my leg was like an entire planet. I wished – yearned, craved, ached – to slide my own hand along it, slip a delicate, teasing, pseudo-casual finger along the margin of his heavy silver watch. Instead I turned a bit so I was sort of facing him.





‘They’re pretty amazing, Kate,’ he said. I wondered if he’d seen the undone silk shirt ones. Prada let me keep that shirt, but I don’t have it anymore.

‘I know.’ I sounded so wistful that I quickly added, ‘Good old airbrushing.’

He made a little face that could have meant either *airbrushing alone can’t make people look like that* or, alternatively, *no amount of airbrushing will ever make you look like that again*. Both those sentiments are true, of course. I slurped my drink.

He was still holding his glass in one hand, and he lifted his other one off my leg and used it to brush my hair behind my ear. He stroked my cheekbone with three attentive fingers, then ran his thumb over my lip. I opened my mouth and he turned his wrist. He moved his thumb a little way into my mouth, deliberately, gradually. He was watching my face. I skimmed my tongue along his thumb.

I felt as if I was impersonating a woman who knew what to do, but I must have been getting something right, because after a moment he made a tiny little sighing sound. He took my wine glass out of my hand, and put both our drinks on the coffee table, in the middle, where we wouldn’t knock them.

He put his hands on the back of my neck. I could feel his palms on my skin. Then he slid them down to my shoulders. Our faces were close together. Even with the wine on board, I remembered to raise only my left arm to go around his neck. When I saw that his eyes were closed, I closed mine, and we started kissing.

‘So, what do you do with yourself now you’ve stopped bringing playful Aussie naturalness to the catwalks of Paris?’ said Adam.

It was later that night, and we were in my bed.



I laughed. My most famous campaign showed me with slightly unkempt-looking hair and minimal make-up. At least it had looked minimal in the pictures. Around that time everyone else was doing glossy crimson lips and glossy enormous hair, so just about all the stories written about me used the words ‘playful’, ‘natural’, or (in the more high-end publications) ‘insouciant’. ‘Sultry’ got a red hot go as well. He must have read quite a lot about me on Google.

‘I study medieval history,’ I said. My Masters degree is about the types of textiles ordinary women wore – and made – in the 1500s, and how that influenced the economy. Even I knew that was not great post-sex conversation, so I said, ‘King Henry VIII sort of era?’ Then I added something about treason and Anne Boleyn. (I’ve noticed that Anne is the one most people remember, perhaps because she was the first of Henry’s wives to be executed. Catherine Howard – fifth wife; probably still a teenager when Henry had her head lopped off for extra-marital shagging – seems to have been largely forgotten.)

‘Brutal times,’ said Adam. Then he looked around my room and said, ‘Student flats have certainly moved on.’

I shrugged. I didn’t want to tell him that I hadn’t made all the money through modelling. I made lots, obviously, and because I had my dad advising-slash-nagging me, I managed to keep most of it. The pound was very strong then. I had income protection insurance and excellent, excellent lawyers. I made sensible investments. All adds up.

‘Yep. But you better get dressed, my flatmates’ll be back around now.’

It took him much less than half a second to realise I was teasing. He laughed, probably more than he would have if we hadn’t just had really very good sex. At least, it had seemed good to me. But

maybe community standards had changed, the way they have regarding home cooking and smacking children.

‘Want some tea or something?’ I said, sitting up and shaking out my hair.

He looked a bit surprised, but said, yeah thanks, that tea would be nice. I could see him making an effort to keep his eyes on my face as he spoke. I smiled and looped my knickers around my foot and then pulled them up my legs and on. Retrieved from under my pillow the T-shirt that I’d placed there earlier – in anticipation of exactly this moment – and found my way into that. Awkward but whatever.

Before, I had never minded being undressed in front of lovers. It just seemed to me to be part of the intimacy, part of the whole thing. For years I couldn’t understand what all the fuss was about. Now, of course, I understand. But my bottom in a G-string is still more an asset than a liability, in my honest opinion, so once my T-shirt was on I stood up and walked into the kitchen. He whistled, in a parody of a bogan guy driving past in a car. It was nice. A couple of times when people – men – have whistled, they’ve stopped halfway through, as if they’ve made a mistake. It’s sort of heart-breaking and funny at the same time.

When I came back with his tea, he had his grey T-shirt back on and was sitting up, leaning back against the pillows. He has the kind of very short hair that is impossible to mess up, so he looked pretty much the way he had when he arrived. I handed him his drink and went back to the kitchen for mine.

He was staring so much that when I got back into bed, I leaned against the bed-head, sipped my Milo and said, ‘What?’

‘Sorry,’ he said. He gave his head a quick shake. ‘I was thinking about work stuff.’

‘Oh right!’

‘Kay Eight? That was a joke. I was thinking how nice you look.’  
‘Thank you.’ He’d made *nice* sound the opposite of boring. I let the silence stretch out.

‘What’s that you’re drinking?’ he said, comfortably.

‘Milo. Want to taste?’ I held out my cup. He used one of his hands to steady it as he had a sip.

‘Yum. I’m having Milo next time.’

‘Well, that’s rather presumptuous,’ I said. I would have thought it was obvious that he was on safe ground, but he looked a bit embarrassed.

‘Sorry.’ He smiled a quick smile. ‘You – want to catch up again later in the week?’

‘OK,’ I said, and sipped my drink. ‘That might be nice.’

I was as cool and sexy as anything, like Anne Boleyn was, at the beginning.

