Dangerous Love

Kate Lock

Chapter 1

I'd known Tim for less than two hours when he told me he was out of prison on licence. Then he offered to walk me home.

'Look,' he said. 'It's late and it's dark. You can't go back by yourself. It's not safe.' He took my coat off the chair and held it open, waiting. I remained in my seat, weighing up the odds. The footpath ran along a bank above the road, and it was narrow and badly lit. Which was riskier: going it alone and chancing being attacked by some unknown rapist, or letting a lifer I'd met in the pub walk me through the shadows? Dawdling over the dregs of my glass, I avoided his eyes, focusing instead on his wrists in front of me, labourer's wrists, brown and muscular and broad at the knuckle. Earlier, I'd found myself wanting to touch them, without knowing why. He extended his arms, offering the coat. A droplet of sweat inched a snail trail down my side. I wanted to bolt, but he was standing in the way. I heard him exhale steadily through his nostrils and sensed he was controlling impatience. Torn between politeness and panic, I told myself he couldn't be dangerous or they wouldn't have let him out. Tim gave my coat an insistent shake. 'Well?' he said. 'Are you coming?'

I met Tim through Mike, a post-graduate I had become friendly with. Mike helped out with our biology practicals and flirted with all the authority that a white lab coat can lend. He had tight fair curls, crinkly blue eyes and a teasing manner, but, most importantly, he was older. At twenty, I was finding it hard to fit in with the other freshers: too young to be a mature student and too old to put up with puking school-leavers. With Mike, at least, there was some common ground - I'd worked with male scientists and could match the banter - so when he invited me to a Biology Society's cheese-and-wine party, I leapt at the chance. 'The others'll be there,' he announced casually, as we tidied up the desks.

'Who? Your harem?'

He flicked agar-agar at me. 'My housemates.'

'Are they nice?'

He grinned. 'They're completely insane.'

I often wonder what Tim saw in me. Youth, mainly, I suspect. Rawness, naiveté. I was so obviously malleable. Like a shark scenting a drop of blood in a vast expanse of ocean, he sniffed out my vulnerability the first time he laid eyes on me. Furthermore, I was wearing a red jumpsuit unzipped to reveal a great deal of

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cleavage, which demonstrated a willingness to be exploited. (I overheard him joking about this years later - 'There she was, damn thing undone to her bellybutton and pissed as a newt - well, I ask you' - and was dismayed by his coarseness.) It was true that I was drunk, so drunk I could scarcely see, but if all he'd wanted was an easy lay, he could probably have had me that night. It was Freshers' Week, an induction into university life for new students that consisted mainly of trial by alcohol, and Mike and his friends had dragged me to the Philosophy Society's party after we'd drunk the Biology Society's cheese-and-wine dry. He had then abandoned me for a brunette and I had consoled myself with several more glasses of vinegary red, which the cubes of dry cheddar had no hope of absorbing. I remember pouncing on an owlish young man in a sports jacket, who seemed to want to talk about A. J. Ayer rather than dance to Adam and the Ants, and there being some confusion over our interpretations of New Romanticism, but the rest is a blur. I was whisked back to my hall of residence by a couple of sober academics, staggered into my room and was sick in the basin, unaware that Tim had already exerted his influence over me.

Despite my two extra years in the 'real' world (one gap year had segued into another) university life was proving harder to adjust to than I'd imagined. Having survived comprehensive-school bullying - where I'd been picked on for being 'square', a swot and talking 'posh' (the threat of elocution lessons with Auntie Gertie, a retired mezzo-soprano, had done its job) - I had expected students to be more egalitarian. Not so. Exeter University in 1981 turned out to be much more class-driven than my mother, or at least its undergraduates were, and being a police sergeant's daughter, I was now Not Posh Enough. A large proportion of the students were privately educated; Oxbridge rejects from wealthy families with ruddy cheeks and loud voices. They had a nickname, 'Wellies', and a uniform that both sexes adhered to rigidly. The girls wore velvet Alice bands, pearl necklaces, navy pumps and Laura Ashley blouses with the collars turned up; the boys, rugby shirts and brown cords. They were also extremely rude, pushing into the coffee-bar queues and acting as if us comprehensive-school kids were invisible. This created a sense of alienation that drove me further to the political left: I palled up with Matt, a softly spoken Irish Marxist; Lizzie, a lesbian who campaigned tirelessly for the removal of VAT from tampons; and flirted with the Socialist Worker Student Organization (or 'Swizzo' as it was known), mainly, I confess, because I fancied Roger, who was running it. We spent a night drinking Polish vodka and discussing Lech Walesa's Solidarity union, twisting cold tongues and fumbling beneath each other's T-shirts, but we'd climaxed with our mutual hatred for Margaret Thatcher too early, and by the time we climbed under his thin sheets, our passion was spent.

Being at university was like going back to school, but with one crucial difference: sex was practically on the curriculum. Freshers Week gave a pretty good indication: on the very first evening I saw a theatrical sideshow in which a girl in her underwear simulated fellatio on a groaning, hamming-it-up boy. She turned round to face us, fake spunk dribbling from her shiny lips. 'So good for you, and full of protein,' she mewed, rolling her eyes. The audience roared with delight. I'm not sure which shocked me more: the realistic-looking semen or the flagrant display of her pubic hair, which covered the insides of her thighs like overgrown moss.

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I thought I was cool about sex - I had a boyfriend back home who was eager to please - but I was no more experienced than my younger peers, and probably less than a lot of them. I'd been a virgin until nineteen and was busy making up the time: in the space of a summer I had metamorphosed from shy sixth-former into a heat-seeking sexual missile, courtesy of a twice-divorced gardener from Jersey. Boys my own age didn't arouse me; they tended to be immature and grabby. I preferred men with experience and poetry in their souls. I had long legs, a winning smile and youth, which, in that marketplace, seemed to be all that was necessary, and I was naive enough to think that it gave me the power. I knew what they were thinking when they inclined their heads; I saw the glints in their polite smiles. It made me laugh that older men, for all their sophistication, were that transparent, which makes it all the more surprising that I didn't pick up Tim on my radar at that first meeting. But that was his technique, flying under your defences. Tim had a strategy for everything, especially love.

'Max. Nigel. Lindsay. Keith.' Mike waved a hand at the group of post-graduates around the table in the Cowley Bridge, Exeter's 'in' student pub. 'I need a slash,' he added, deserting me.

'Hi,' I said brightly, to no one in particular, trying to appear confident.

'First year?' asked a girl with pale eyelashes. I nodded. One of the lads winked. A student with a thin, serious face raised his glass in sombre salute. The fourth, who was hunched over his pint, belched loudly without looking up. I hesitated, unsure of whether to sit down.

'I'm afraid Keith has a very limited vocabulary,' a voice said behind me, 'especially after a few drinks. His ability to articulate decreases incrementally with every pint of Flowers. Although even when he's sober he talks utter rubbish.'

'Bollocks,' said Keith. I turned round to see an older man bearing a tray of drinks. He set them down and held out his hand. 'Tim Franklin,' he said crisply. 'And you're Kate. Good to see you again.' His handshake was firm, dry, assertive. He was my father's age at least, but fit-looking, as if he worked out, with a taut, tapered torso and bulky shoulders that seemed constrained by his short-sleeved shirt. I had a vague memory of meeting him before, but the image was piecemeal, a Cubist-type collage of sensory snapshots, the features exaggerated and distorted. The thin, white pencil moustache looked familiar and the clipped English accent sounded familiar, but my brain couldn't fit the bits together.

'Freshers' Week. The Philosophy Society's party.' He grinned at my obvious confusion. 'You livened it up no end. The whole thing was a crashing bore until you came along. Lindsay is still recovering. He's never been made to dance before.' Lindsay, with the camel face, shook his head mournfully. A few frazzled synapses sparked for a second, prompting a painful flashback. 'Sorry,' I mumbled, recalling that I'd dragged him, protesting, onto the floor. Lindsay sighed. 'My tutorial group has lost all respect.'

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'Nonsense,' Tim retorted. 'Your credibility went up considerably.' Turning to me, he asked confidentially, 'I trust the Masons got you home without incident?' Another connection flared and I had a surprising impression of Tim steering me towards a car, one hand on my arm, the other on the small of my back. The press of his palm had been authoritative and quaintly old-fashioned, as if I were a fine lady being escorted to a waiting carriage, not a silly student who required propping up because she was cross-eyed with drink. Recalling his solicitousness - he had seen me into the car, making sure my seatbelt was done up - I realized that he must have arranged the lift. The funny thing was, I had no memory of talking to him before then. 'Yes. Thank you for . . . well, you know.'

'Think nothing of it.' He indicated a chair. 'Sit down. I'll protect you from Keith.' Mike returned, carrying two brimming pints of bitter - girls didn't bother with halves, I noticed, watching Max drain her froth-scummed glass - and plonked one down in front of me. 'This'll put hairs on your chest.' I sipped it, even though I didn't like the stuff, because it was what the rest of them were drinking, although Tim, I noticed, drank Coke. He was clearly a regular at the Cowley Bridge because he had his own tankard behind the bar engraved with 'Tim's Coke glass' in frosted letters. Everyone seemed to know him and I supposed he was a member of the academic staff slumming it, partly because of his age and partly because he spoke with such authority. Guessing that he was a senior lecturer or, more likely, a philosophy professor, merely compounded the embarrassment I already felt about him witnessing my drunken behaviour at the party. I sat in silence, feeling like the gatecrasher I was, hoping Mike would come to my rescue, but he had already forgotten about me and was larking with Nigel. I downed some more beer, which went the wrong way and made me splutter. Red-faced and wretched, I was preparing to make a dash for the safety of the ladies' loo when Tim passed me a handkerchief. 'Here. It is clean. Would you like me to fetch you a glass of water?'

'I'm all right,' I coughed.

'You're sure?'

'Yes.' I coughed some more, and he patted me on the back, rubbing between the shoulder blades. 'Better?'

'I think so.'

'Good. Mike tells me you're a biologist.'

'Yes.'

'Darwin, natural selection, survival of the fittest?' He looked at me quizzically. I wasn't sure how to respond. Tim gestured around the table. 'Makes you wonder how this lot ever made it. They're definitely mutations, I can vouch for that.' He eyed Keith, who was dozing over his pint, giving a remarkable impression of the dormouse in the teapot. 'I suppose one could argue that he has adapted to environmental constraints.' I started to giggle and he smiled broadly. From that moment, I forgot my awkwardness. Tim talked a lot, but he was witty, and flattered

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me by asking endless questions. He seemed genuinely interested in what I had to say, wanting to know what my ambitions were and what I thought about things, listening to my answers carefully and treating me like an equal, which, patently, I was not. He picked me up on my answers frequently, but not in a harsh way, and I found myself rising to his challenges as my confidence increased. I had never met anyone like him before: his intelligence was extraordinary. Our conversation made me feel nervous and reckless at the same time. I was having to run to keep up, but the effort was worth it. There were moments when it felt like flying. It was clear from the broadsides he dealt Lindsay and Nigel that he could be intellectually ruthless, but with me Tim was gently teasing, parrying with a presumptiveness that bordered on flirtation. He was attractive, for an older man, and obviously made an effort with his appearance, so I was happy to play along with him. He was too old - late fifties, I judged - even for my taste in men, and I assumed with my youthful arrogance that he was beyond 'all that'. It was harmless, I thought, and anyway, I was having fun.

By this time I was well into my second pint and feeling nicely fuzzy round the edges, so it didn't occur to me that Tim had revealed little about himself. I was astonished when he turned out to be a mature student doing a PhD and not a professor at all. None of the others seemed to find this unusual and he was obviously accepted, despite the age difference and his right-wing politics. Tim seemed equally at home in their company, ribbing them and arguing while puffing furiously on a roll-up. He clearly enjoyed playing the upper-class reactionary to a bunch of credulous socialists (provoking a near-meltdown during a discussion about the student boycott of Barclays Bank), but there was something about the extravagance of his gestures - thumping the table for emphasis, or smacking his forehead in pained disbelief - that seemed almost too flamboyant, foreign, even.

As for me, I sat there soaking it all up, longing to have a share in this laid-back lifestyle. They all lived together in a rambling country house called Barton Place, Tim told me, which the university had taken over for post-graduate accommodation. It sounded blissfully bohemian. By all accounts, life there was one permanent party, with post-pub drinking continuing long into the night, usually in Tim's room. He was obviously the head of their unusual household, an indulgent father-figure who cooked famous Sunday lunches (Tim's roast potatoes were second to none, according to Nigel) and was generous with his booze, if the accounts of his parties were accurate. However, he was rigorous with them, too, challenging any intellectual slacking and criticizing them for their ignorance of history, although his lectures on their lack of morals were accepted as tongue-in-cheek. Looking round at this bawdy, unruly, makeshift family, I envied them their freedom. Life in my hall of residence was depressing and I was spending more evenings than I cared to admit holed up in my room eating Pot Noodles and trying to drown out the noise of competing stereos with my transistor radio.

Of the group, three of them were philosophers: Tim; Lindsay, the gangling young fogey; and Nigel, a Lancastrian who resembled a scruffy puppy. Following a furious argument about Kant's categorical imperative, which might as well have been conducted in a foreign language to me, Tim went off to buy some tobacco and Mike, who I'd almost forgotten about, moved over to sit next to me. He wrapped an arm

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around my shoulders. 'Well,' he said, blowing beer at me, 'what do you think of our celebrity?'

I glanced around the table. Lindsay and Nigel had deserted us to continue their debate over a game of pool; Maxine, the strapping geologist, was deep in conversation with another girl and Keith, who didn't seem to do anything much except drink, was still slumped in his seat with his eyes shut. 'Who?' I asked.

'Tim.'

'Tim's famous?'

'Tim's notorious.' Mike beamed. 'You don't know, do you?'

'Know what?'

He rocked back in his chair, observing me. 'It's no big secret. Everyone knows. Sociology love him. He's their star turn.'

'Sociology? But he's doing philosophy.'

'He's got a degree in philosophy. He knows his stuff all right. But his doctorate's in sociology. Had to be. Given the subject matter.' He tapped the side of his nose.

'Which is?'

'It's all about prisons. Why the criminal justice system's crap. Like, an insider's view.' He paused for effect. 'Tim's a lifer.'

'A lifer?' I didn't understand. Weren't lifers murderers? The Yorkshire Ripper was a lifer. Myra Hindley, Ian Brady. I assumed Mike was winding me up. 'Very funny.'

'He is, really. You can ask him yourself. Tim's cool.' He swivelled round in his chair. 'Look, here he comes.'

'I'm not a complete idiot,' I said crossly. Mike and Keith had already caught me out by requesting pints of 'Fleurs' (the bitter was Flowers, but I hadn't spotted the pump handles until it was too late) and I was determined not to get stitched up again. Mike frowned. 'I'm not joking. Ask him.'

'Yeah, and my other leg's got bells on.'

'Have it your way.' He got up. 'I'll accept your apology later. I'm going to play pool.' He sauntered off to join the others, leaving me feeling confused. Surely Mike wasn't telling the truth? On the other hand, why make up something like that? It just didn't fit: Tim was a gentleman, besides which he was - well, too old. Too old, and too respectable. And even if this didn't preclude him from being a lifer, the fact that he was so obviously well liked by his fellow students argued against it. Someone that popular could hardly be a cold-blooded killer or an armed robber or whatever else it

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took to get a life sentence. If Tim had committed a terrible crime, people wouldn't even sit with him. All the same, there had been a secretiveness in Mike's smile that had hinted otherwise, and when Tim rejoined me I found myself unable to meet his eyes. 'I can't believe Mike's abandoned you again. The man's a fool.' He threw a packet of Old Holborn down on the table. 'Still, at least I've got you to myself, now.' He gave me an arch grin. Probably I didn't respond, or perhaps he saw the doubt in my face, because he suddenly became serious. 'Kate? Are you OK?'

'I'm fine, thanks.'

'No you're not. You look peaky.'

'I'm always pale. It's my colouring.'

'Hmph.' Tim looked disbelieving. He studied me carefully. 'Do you feel sick? That beer's strong stuff if you're not used to it.'

'Honestly, I'm OK.' Tears were threatening - where had they come from? - and I stared at the table, concentrating on a ring of moisture left by a glass.

Tim moved closer and laid his hand on my arm. It felt relaxed, heavy, intimate. I froze. 'Kate,' he said softly, 'did Mike say something to you?' I shook my head, biting my lip. 'Come on, I can see you're upset.' He rubbed the baby hairs on my forearm gently with his thumb.

'You're right, I'm a bit pissed.' I decided to play it light. 'Mike was just trying to catch me out again. He thinks I'll believe any story he spins me.' I took a deep breath. 'You should have heard what he just said about you.'

Tim removed his hand and started to tear the cellophane off the tobacco. 'What was it?'

'That you were some sort of criminal. That you'd been in prison.' The words plopped into the space between us like stones in a pool. Across the table, Keith opened one eye and stared at me with lizard-like detachment. The two girls paused to listen.

'I'm a lifer, Kate. Is that what Mike said?' Tim's voice was cool. I felt the back of my neck prickle. I nodded. 'I'm out on licence,' Tim continued. His eyes met mine and there was a challenge in them.

I swallowed. 'What does that mean?'

'It means that I can be recalled to prison at any time, without question. If I was to harm one hair on your head - or even threaten to - I'd be straight back inside, for good.' He slapped his hands down on his thighs. 'That you should know.' The bell rang for last orders and he got to his feet. 'Let me buy you one for the road. A brandy, perhaps?'

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I nodded again, dumbstruck. Keith began to cackle, laughing so much that he had a coughing fit. Max and her friend went back to chatting. Across the room, Mike gave me a cheery wave. I watched Tim go to the bar and order the drinks, joking with Gil, the landlord. My brain felt overloaded with contradictions. The logical side advised caution; the intuitive side told me there was nothing to fear. It was impossible to decide: the information and the image just did not add up. There was nothing in Tim's dress or demeanour to suggest violence; no tattoos, no heavy rings or steel toecaps. He looked less like an ex-con than a favourite uncle.

'I thought you might like some peanuts.' Tim returned with my brandy - a large one, I noticed - and started to roll himself a skinny cigarette. The act, which had earlier struck me as slightly incongruous (the others all smoked Marlboro), suddenly made sense: the eked-out tobacco, worth a week's prison wages. Tim caught me looking. 'Old habits.' He shrugged and licked the edge of his Rizla. It was clear he wasn't going to volunteer any more information.

I took a gulp of my brandy, feeling it burn a ball of heat in my belly. 'If you're a lifer . . .' I didn't know how to ask it. It seemed too crude to just come out with What did you do?

Tim's face seemed to close in on itself. 'It was an accident,' he replied tersely, anticipating the question. I felt my mouth open and shut like a goldfish. 'Someone I was with. We had a row and I was trying to restrain her. She fell and hit her head against a wall. I got the blame.' He exhaled smoke through his nostrils. 'Complete miscarriage of justice. Judge led the jury. The appeal went to the House of Lords.' He didn't elaborate further and, from the rigidity of his neck chords, I thought it wise not to ask.

'Time, gentlemen, please,' Gil roared, tolling a heavy handbell.

And so, extraordinarily, we left it at that.

The definition of murder is unambiguous. It means the unlawful, premeditated killing of one human being by another. Not by accident. Not because they lost control, or were mentally ill or somehow provoked. But because they meant to. A verdict of murder carries a sentence of life imprisonment automatically, unlike manslaughter, which is judged to have been committed without malice aforethought and receives shorter sentences. I wasn't well informed about this distinction at the time, and certainly not the difference in sentencing. Since Tim had given me the impression that his crime was essentially a flukish domestic tragedy, I assumed he'd been charged with the lesser offence. The fact that he was a lifer should have made me think harder about this, but he hadn't used the word 'murder' and I didn't appreciate the anomaly.

It was reassuring to discover that Tim wasn't a serial killer but, despite his explanation, I felt a frisson of unease as I let him slip on my jacket. He steered me outside, a proprietary hand again on my back, and we stopped in the car park. Neither of us spoke. I tipped my face up to the night sky, watching the moon bowl

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across it like a pale frisbee. A few stars winked tremulously through the racing clouds.

'You know,' Tim said quietly, 'what stars are, don't you, Kate?' I turned to him, surprised at the question. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. His eyes were soft and brown, like a dog's, and he looked suddenly vulnerable. 'I'm not talking about those up there. It's prison slang, what they call someone who's serving their first sentence.'

'I didn't know that.' 'Few people do, except those of us who've had the experience.'

'I suppose not.' I tried to sound casual.

'Prison's a different world from the one you're used to, Kate. But not for me. I had to fight to survive boarding school, which my parents dumped me in when I was six. I had to fight my way through an army barrack room as a seventeen-year-old officer to get the respect of the men. Prison was just another all-male institution; same rules.' He sighed heavily. 'I served eight years, Kate. Eight long, bloody years. I made a mistake and I've been punished for it, even though I didn't deserve what they gave me. And now here I am starting my life again from scratch at the age of fifty-six.' A carload of students drove past us, honking a raucous goodbye. Tim smiled faintly and raised his hand in salute. 'They're a good lot here. Most of them accept me for who I am - although I realize I'm an object of curiosity among the more prurient.' He replaced his glasses, assuming his previous formality. I shivered and he looked at me, concerned. 'You're cold.' He unwound his scarf. 'Have this.' He looped it around my neck, lifting my hair gently out of the way, then took the two ends and crossed them over. I held my breath for a moment. 'We'll soon have you warm.' His voice was tender. I lifted my chin obediently, like a child, letting him pull the knot tight to my throat, feeling the wool against my windpipe. It was snug, comforting. Our faces were close, close enough to taste the smokiness of his breath, and I kept my focus on the door behind him (there was a hand-painted sign next to it: 'No dogs or muddy Wellies'), too perturbed by our proximity to look at him directly.

'There.' Tim gave the ends a tweak. 'Better?'

'Yes. Thanks,' I stammered.

'Thank you, Kate.'

I lowered my eyes to his face. 'What for?'

He gazed at me levelly. 'For trusting me.'

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