

AFTER THE FALL

by Kylie Ladd

EXCERPT

Kate

I had been married three years when I fell in love. Fell, tripped and landed right in the middle of it. Oh, I already loved my husband, of course, but this was different. That had been a decision; this was out of my control, an impulse as difficult to resist as gravity. Mad love, crazy love, drop, sink, stumble. The kind of love where every little thing is a sign, a portent: the song on the radio, his Christian name staring up at you from a magazine you're flicking through, your horoscope in the paper. Normally I don't even believe in horoscopes, for God's sake. Love without holes or patches or compromises, soft as an easy chair, a many-splendored thing.

At first I enjoyed it. A fall is a surrender; you can't help it, you didn't plan it. Maybe you could have been more careful, but it's too late for that now--you might as well enjoy the swoop and the speed, the unnerving sensation of having your feet higher than your head.

I fell in love with a man who had hair like silk. A man who said my name as if he were taking communion, who looked me in the eye while we made love, and even again afterward. He fell too, and there we were, clutching each other as the hard earth hurtled up to meet us.

That's the thing about falling. It doesn't go on indefinitely, and it rarely ends well . . . plunge, plummet, pain. Even if you get straight back up, even when you regain your footing, after the fall nothing is ever quite the same.

Luke

Okay, it was the sex. Or, okay, it was love. When Cress insisted we see a counselor I knew the question was bound to arise: Why did I do it? Why had I betrayed her? I couldn't work out which answer might be better received, so I turned to my best friend, Tim, for advice. Given that Cress was also going to be at the session I had to be careful. Did I say it was love, and appeal to her romantic side? Cress is the most sentimental soul I have ever met, and I had a hunch, ridiculous as it may sound, that pleading love or one of its lesser forms--a crush, infatuation--would be a better defense than straight lust. Then again, given that she was such a romantic, maybe even mentioning the word risked alienating her completely--love, I suppose, being the sort of thing reserved for one's wife. The alternative was to plump for sex, but would that leave Cress forever paranoid about the hoops she herself wasn't jumping through in the boudoir?

Either way I was doomed, though I was hoping Tim could come up with something plausible. Predictably, though, he just looked shocked. If Cress is the most sentimental person I have ever met, Tim is the most naive. Or the most moral--I'm not quite sure what the difference is.

"Just tell the truth," he sputtered, looking moist and uncomfortable, checking his watch when he thought I wasn't looking. "How much longer do you want the lies to go on?"

Well, indefinitely would have been nice. For seven months I was the happiest man in the world. Who wouldn't have been? Two beautiful women whose faces lit up when they saw me, one always available if the other was elsewhere. I'll admit it was good for the ego, but that was just the fringe benefit, never the aim. And for that reason I can't feel guilty about it: nothing was planned or premeditated. I feel guilty enough about the conventional things, of course--guilty as hell for hurting Cress, even some residual Catholic remorse for breaking my vows. Up till then I'd believed in them. But I never felt guilty for loving them both. Parents claim that they love all their children equally, and no one doubts this. Why can't it be the same for adults? Maybe I'm rationalizing what I did, but in a lot of ways I think everything that happened would have been far more objectionable if I had stopped loving Cress, transferred my affection rather than shared it.

In any event, Tim was no help, and I ended up telling the counselor that the whole thing had just happened. That sounds pretty lame for someone in advertising. I'm meant to be good at making words do as I please, but I could tell no one was fooled. Not Cress, sitting sniffing on one side of the office, eyes skittering away every time I glanced in her direction; not the counselor, mouth narrowing skeptically as she heard me out. Goaded by their disbelief, I abandoned any thought of appeasement and went on the attack. Forget love or sex . . . I blamed loneliness, frustration, all those long nights that Cress worked, then was too tired to talk, never mind touch, when she finally did get home. Bad move. My wife spent the session in tears and I wondered if I shouldn't have just gone with lust and been damned.

I don't know. It was love, and it was sex, and it was fate and karma and reincarnation too. It was an epiphany and an epitaph. There, I'm making the words work now.

Cary

I don't think about it much. No, really. What's there to think about? It happened; it's over; I'll survive. What's the point in talking about it? It's not going to change what took place. I mean, I made my decision too, and now I'm going to live with it--all this blathering around in circles isn't my style.

I grew up in the country. Sometimes I think about moving back there, though I know there's little work. What appeals, though, is that out there you just do. You don't debate, or discuss, or try to weigh up every angle. . . . There isn't time for it, and it's never helpful. You come off your horse or your bike; you get up, brush yourself down and get on with it. No point wondering if you'll ever ride again--it's not an option; you have to. It might hurt, but bruises heal. Bones too. Even hearts.

Cressida

For ages after I found out I tormented myself, wondering when it had started. Not the sex, which was too much even to contemplate. Not even the kissing, but the thought, the desire, the possibility. They'd always clicked; that much was evident to anyone with half an eye, but it's still a fair stretch from flirting to fucking, particularly when you're both married to other

people. That's crude, and I apologize. Luke would be shocked to hear such language from his virgin bride.

No, what I want to know is if such a thing can truly just happen, as Luke so ingenuously told the counselor. Surely people don't go around just falling into bed with others on a whim? Not, as I seem to be reiterating, if they are otherwise legally wed. Did they discuss it? Or did they just know, the way I sometimes know when I see a patient for the first time that he or she is going to die? It's something about their faces: something blurred or unfinished. There's no sense of the adult version lurking underneath, maybe because they will never grow old. I'm invariably right, though I wish I weren't. I'd rather not know at all, in case I then don't try hard enough with the ones I'm sure won't make it. Self-fulfilling prophecies frighten me.

When I first found out about that kiss, though, I wasn't frightened. Angry, yes, but I never felt threatened. It didn't even occur to me that this might spell danger. That probably sounds silly, but I knew my husband and the games he played. Luke is a flirt: a man who loves women and attention in equal measure, and preferably together. We had some stormy scenes over it when we were courting. It never did sit easily with me, but after a while it's amazing how one can adjust. Then too, I guess once I knew he loved me I could see it for the sport it was. It even validated me in some crazy way: he would spend all night at parties charming these beautiful women, succeed, and yet still leave with me. And after we did leave he would be so aroused by the thrill of the chase that we would rarely make it home without pulling over into some darkened street to heave and tussle on the backseat of the car . . . my hair caught in static cling on the seat belt, my toes pressed hard against the misted windows. Those nights were the grace notes of my marriage. I truly didn't care where the desire had come from as long as it was spent on me. And it was, wholeheartedly.

Luke is a golden boy, one of those the gods have smiled upon. Everything comes easily to him, or at least it appears to. Head prefect at school, valedictorian at university, a cushy job full of long liquid lunches and long-legged girls. Even his birth was blessed: after three daughters his parents were longing for a boy, and hey, presto, that was exactly what they got. Golden too in his coloring. A classical gold: hair the color of a halo in a Renaissance painting, eyes the blue of the Madonna's robe. Rich, vibrant colors. He isn't particularly tall or well built, but he stands out in a crowd.

Actually, I'm blond myself. I'm also good-looking enough, I suppose--I had to be to have attracted his attention in the first place. But my eyes are brown, my skin is fairer and my hair much lighter, a pale imitation of his, as if it has been washed once too often or left out on the line too long. When we stood next to each other it was his hair, his features the eye was always drawn to, as if he'd sucked all the color out of mine. My parents thought we looked like brother and sister, and my friends used to tease me about the beautiful blond babies we would make. I wanted children, and God knows I thought about them too. But try as I might I could never quite see them, their faces as hazy as the faces of the patients I knew would die.