

Man Catch

by Christopher Rice, 1978–

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From her table by the window inside the bustling Starbucks, Kate could see clear across the crowded parking lot and the traffic-snarled interstate to where the setting sun turned the San Bernardino Mountains into looming ghosts on the near horizon.

After giving her his laptop computer, Rick had disappeared into the shopping mall next door; she assumed he was ensconced in the racks at Border's, perusing books on fishing or hunting, or one of the other strangely adult hobbies he had picked up from his father following high-school graduation.

This was going to be their first trip alone together, three days at a cabin near Lake Arrowhead, three days without parents checking to make sure they were sleeping in separate beds. In less than a month they would be at different colleges; every hour they spent together was too precious to be wasted in traffic.

Even though her boyfriend had insisted otherwise, Kate was confident they could find an alternate route to the cabin. As soon as she typed in the first two

letters of Mapquest, the browser on Rick's computer automatically completed the address with the closest match from its list of recently visited sites.

www.ManCatch.com.

Convinced it was a Web site that taught lazy jocks like Rick how to manage their finances, Kate clicked on the entry. The screen filled with an image of a muscular half-naked Latino man reclining on a white bedspread, one hand draped over the bulge in his white briefs. According to the flashing pink banner above the man's head, ManCatch was the #1 site for man-on-man action in the country. She almost laughed out loud. Surely, Rick had visited the site by mistake.

Then she saw that the computer had been set to remember user names and passwords, not a surprise considering Rick had made it through four years of high school without memorizing a single locker combination. The user name in the entry blank was *SoaksGuy*. S Oaks had to mean Sherman Oaks, the San Fernando Valley suburb where they had both grown up. The browser's history list told her that Rick had visited ManCatch the night before, at 1:30 a.m., when she had believed him to be asleep beside her.

At her house. In her bed.

Her breaths short and ragged, Kate clicked the LogIn button before she could convince herself not to. Suddenly, she was scrolling through profiles for ManCatch members in which each man spelled out his sexual tastes in a coded language that combined hip-hop affectations with the shorthand her girlfriends used to pass notes in class. (*Lookin for hung dudes! U Can Play? Step 2 da front! HIV—here, U B2.*) Most profiles were accompanied by a photo. The first few were harmless enough, mostly shots of bare muscular chests, the heads cropped out, making the subject look like a Greek statue in lousy lighting. Then came several preposterously large erections.

A chair scraped the floor behind her. A silently furious mother was dragging her toddler-age son toward the exit. When the woman looked back and saw that it was a seemingly normal teenage girl who had just exposed her child to such filth, she looked both wounded and baffled, as if her tiny son had just flipped her the bird.

Humiliated, Kate scrolled up until the most offensive photographs were out of frame. She tried to make some kind of sense of what she was seeing. According to the history list, Rick had only made one visit to this site in the past three weeks. But the username and password suggested he planned on becoming a regular. Why then had he let her borrow his computer without a second's pause? Maybe he was a regular and had deleted all evidence of his other visits—except for one.

Nothing fires the imagination like betrayal, she realized. In digital clarity, she saw Rick, in only his paisley boxers, backing silently out of the half-open door to her room, holding his laptop in both hands as if it were the Holy Grail.

Her eyes locked on something she had missed. On the left-hand side of the screen, there was a long menu bar. It was clear Rick might be a regular; now she could find out if he had made any friends. When she clicked on the Buddy List button, only one name came up: *FunForRtNow*. Next to the name was a photograph of a short muscular brown-haired guy lying facedown on his bed. She thought he was naked at first, then she saw the red waistband of a jockstrap tucked beneath the exposed cheeks of his ass.

HOT JOCK LOOKIN 2 PLAY! YOU GAME?

5'11", 156, 27, 9" cut, in Studio City here. Into young and old, u just gotta be fit, got it? (Fit = work out 4 X a week or more!) A u gotta be hot! No fats, flems or flakes. No time-wasters. No hard partiers. Into porn, role play, lots a oral. Be Clean! Be Cool.

The photo didn't shock her. But the nakedness of the man's requests turned her stomach. Then it occurred to her that she was reading the wrong profile.

She was about to type SoaksGuy into the search blank when something slammed into the window just above her head. Rick was plastered to the glass as if he had just been hurled against it by a nightclub bouncer. When he stumbled back a few steps, he was too busy laughing at himself to notice the expression on Kate's face.

"So I was talking to my aunt on the phone," he boomed as he approached her table. "She says there's this awesome pond, like, a half mile from the cabin. Totally easy hike, too." He slammed down into the chair opposite hers and flattened his mess of black curls with his palm. "She says it's so cool at sunrise 'cause the sun comes up, like, right over—Jesus. Are you all right?"

Kate turned the laptop so Rick could see it. He jerked back from the screen as if he had been stung. Then his sleepy eyes turned to slits and his upper lip tensed. He sucked in a deep, pained breath.

"Last night," she said. "One-thirty. I was asleep. I thought you were, too."

"I *was*!"

"Your computer says you were *right here*," she said, tapping the top of the monitor for emphasis. "Is it lying, Rick?"

He kept shaking his head and studying the screen in front of him as if his best defense could be found in FunForRtNow's profile. For the two years they had been together, she had consistently studied the way he acted around other girls, searched for smiles that might look like invitations, friendly pats on intimate body parts. She had been doing the wrong homework all along.

His wide eyes met hers. "It wasn't me, Kate," he whispered.

"Then who was it?"

His mouth opened slightly but nothing came out. He chewed his lower lip and brought one hand to the bridge of his nose. If he wasn't about to choke on his guilt, she certainly was. She pulled the laptop's power cord from the socket and scooped both items up off the table.

She was several paces from her 4Runner when he caught up with her. The second his hand met her shoulder, she whirled, lifting the computer like a baseball bat, swinging it around her in a wide arc. For a split second, she wasn't sure how hard she had hit him. Then he hit the pavement ass-first, blood from his nostrils painted all over his lips. Before she pulled out of the parking lot, she checked to see if she had run over him. When she saw him struggling to his feet, she felt a dull sense of relief.

The interior rearview mirror offered a view of Rick's bulging duffel bag lying across the back seat. After the fourth call from him, she killed the ringer on her cell phone. She called her father. Her father would fix it. Her father would beat

Rick within an inch of his life and find a way to blame his injuries on a strong wind. That morning, as she was packing, he had told her he would be entertaining clients late. It had seemed like an irrelevant detail at the time. Her dad liked to have his female assistant leave his greeting message, so Kate couldn't even take comfort in her father's soothing baritone voice. At the sound of the tone, her eyes misted and her throat clogged.

She hung up.

Her mother had flown to a convention in San Francisco two days before, where she was no doubt lecturing her fellow real estate agents on how to get ahead in life by sucking the air out of every room you entered. Her mother couldn't find out about this.

She would just find a way to make it Kate's fault. Surely, Kate had missed something, some vital sign that her boyfriend was screwing other guys he met online. Surely, Kate could have planned for this contingency. Her mother loved plans. Right now, Kate's plan was to get home and crawl under the covers until her father arrived.

In downtown L.A., she hit a procession of brake lights and spent the next two hours in the slow crawl of chromium heading into the Valley on the 101 Freeway. It was a little past midnight when she reached her house, a Cape Cod-style cottage that sat on a meandering street at the base of the foothills. There was a good chance Rick might get a ride back from one of his friends and come looking for her, so Kate parked a block away and around the corner.

When Kate opened the front door, the alarm system let out a short burst of beeps. She was at the panel, ready to punch in the code, when the beeps stopped—not a warning that the siren was about to go off, just the perimeter alert that sounded every time a door or window in the house was opened. The house was dark.

Her father had left without remembering to set the thing. That wasn't normal.

Her heart was racing. Even though she had been sitting in traffic for most of it, the drive home had left her feeling as if she had run a marathon. The door to her father's office was half-open.

The mess of papers on his desk didn't look right; his computer was missing. That morning her father had said something about her mother taking the PC into the shop before she left town so that she could get the hard drive whipped; she wanted to buy him a new one and give the thing to her own mother as a Christmas gift.

Now that her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, she could make out a weak flickering light on the walls around her. It came from the second floor. At the end of the second-floor hallway, the door to her parents' bedroom was half-open. She could see a spread of tea candles on top of the credenza. There were many more that she couldn't see; they filled the entire bedroom with a ghostly luminescence. Whoever was in the bedroom had heard her come in and not blown out a single candle. This thought loosened the knot of fear in her chest. Maybe her father was in the tub.

Gently, she pushed open the door to her parents' bedroom. She was about to call out to her father when she saw a different man lying facedown across the bed,

a dark stain curling out from under his head across the tan comforter. He was stocky and muscular and she could just make out his short cap of brown hair.

Again, she thought he was naked until she noticed the red band of his jockstrap tucked under the cheeks of his ass. Hours earlier, she had seen a picture of the man on her boyfriend's computer screen and she almost whispered the words Fun For Right Now.

Before Kate could scream, a patch of darkness stepped forward from the bathroom door and lifted one arm in her direction. The silhouette seemed vaguely familiar at first, then Kate saw that her mother had tucked her long hair inside the back of her black sweater; it made a misshapen lump on the back of her head.

The guilt hit first. Kate saw the wide-eyed shock on Rick's face when she had confronted him. She had misread his pained breaths and wide-eyed fear as signs of guilt, when all the while Rick had known the truth and been afraid to tell her. Then she saw the two of them asleep in her bed just down the hall as her father padded silently out of her room with Rick's laptop in his hands. Because his own computer was in the shop. Kate tried to see through the halo of candlelight around the man's body, tried to detect some small motion that indicated life.

"Is he dead?" she asked.

"Would you like to hear what they did together? One time, I was away. You were asleep. In the yard, Kate. They did it in the yard while you were sleeping."

A car slowed outside, then turned up the driveway, tires crunching gravel. Her father was home, and Kate had walked right into a trap her mother had set for him. "Once I explain, you'll understand, Kate. I spent days talking to this young man, days finding out what he and your father did together. Once you hear, Kate, once you *know*, it will be very hard for you to be Daddy's little girl anymore."

Kate bolted from the room. Halfway down the steps she lost her balance. The hardwood floor at the foot of the stairs rose up to meet her face. The impact knocked the wind out of her. She lifted herself up onto all fours. A shadow dimmed the strips of leaded glass on either side of the front door. Keys rattled against the lock outside. "Kate," her mother said quietly and firmly.

Kate could hear the challenge in her mother's voice. Maybe if she just let her explain. Maybe she could understand. Maybe then she wouldn't have to risk her own life for a father who was guilty of the indiscretions she had just accused her boyfriend of.

As soon as a crack of light appeared around the edge of the front door, Kate rose to her knees and hurled the front door shut, heard her father let out a surprised grunt. Steeling herself for the gunshot she was sure would come next, Kate dropped to the hardwood floor.

"Well," her mother said quietly. "It looks like you've made your choice."

Kate heard the door to the master bedroom close. Then there was a quick sharp sound that Kate couldn't place. A movie sound.

Her mind groped to give it a word. *Silencer*.

By then, Kate's father was standing over her, his jacket slung over one arm and his tie loose, his head cocked to one side like a puppy as he tried to make sense of the scene before him and the strange sound that had just come from his bedroom.

Kate didn't explain any of it for him. She let him go upstairs and discover the scene for himself, just as her mother had intended.

