

Chapter One

Alex knew something was wrong when his wife stopped making breakfast.

There were very few occasions during their two years together when Kate was not in the kitchen as he awoke, whisking eggs or whipping batter. It was their morning routine. She would urge him to eat a grapefruit, a banana, anything healthy. It never worked. He took his eggs fried and his pancakes bathing in butter and syrup.

During these mornings they teased each other, pretended to argue over whose turn it was to feed the puppy, and snatched their favorite newspaper sections. Hers was Arts and Leisure; he bored straight into the financial reports.

And then the breakfasts stopped.

It was a gradual process. A few mornings in a row Kate encouraged him to finish off some dry cereal cluttering the pantry. Then she was in the kitchen again, confidently mixing and chopping, slapping his hand away from her messy domain when he got too close. Now upon rising he found himself peering into a hushed, darkened kitchen. The bathroom had become her new morning hideout, and when he tapped on the door he was greeted with a thin, "I'll be out in a while."

Every morning for three weeks he ate alone at the breakfast bar, hunched over a bowl of soggy bran flakes with a side of scorched toast. When Kate emerged from the bathroom she was either bleary-eyed, as if she'd been crying, or she bounded into the kitchen with rehearsed enthusiasm, offering to wash his cereal bowl and urging him to hurry or he'd be late for work.

One evening after an aching melancholy dinner, Alex mentioned her strange behavior.

"This isn't like you," he said, trying to sound concerned instead of hurt. "What's going on? Am I not making you happy?"

The wind whipped around the house and whistled through the windowpanes as he waited for her answer. Kate was curled tightly on the sofa, the supple red fabric creating a dramatic backdrop for her pale skin and honey-colored hair. She loved that sofa and the dramatic, floor-length curtains that hung behind it. The velvety ensemble was too much for his taste; it reminded him of an opera house. The curtains in particular were unabashed overkill. They hung in massive velvet sheets against the largest window in the

house. When the curtains were closed they thwarted every ray of light which attempted to slice across the room; they were rarely opened, swinging weightily on the outer window edges.

Alex stared at his wife, who sat up on the crimson sofa and sighed. She did not reply right away, and he was nearly breathless as he wondered if he wanted her to answer at all.

* * * * *

Alex could vividly recall the first day he met Kate, by the community pool. The roar of the aquatic gym had surprised him; every word and splash echoed and swirled inside his head. He was only taking a shortcut to the community center offices, of course. His fear of water and intense dislike for the acrid odor of chlorine nearly overwhelmed him as he marched past a pool full of women in synchronized concentration, dutifully performing their aerobic routines.

Keep walking.

As he continued towards the dingy office complex, he saw her sitting cross-legged, snapping into an apple with ferocious bites. When he approached, she ducked her head and covered her mouth with one hand.

“Oh!” she murmured sheepishly. “You must think I’m a pig. Here I am, just stuffing my face in front of strangers!”

She sat wrapped in a thick towel like a smothering layer of marshmallow. Her hair was wet and formed generous curls around her flushed face, red from embarrassment or exertion he could not tell.

“Nice day for a swim,” he said.

She smiled. “I’m Kate. I swim laps here nearly every day. I’m a water baby.” Her eyes flitted over him. “You’re not really dressed for water aerobics.”

“I’m here to turn in some paperwork. Some work I did here a while back. After-school program.”

She paused and seemed to evaluate his staccato replies. With a nod that indicated, “Yes, you’ll do,” she stood up and patted his arm.

“You’re going the wrong way, then. That building is for memberships and general information. Administrative services are across the way. Come, I’ll show you.”

After slipping clothes over her bathing suit, she picked up an enormous daffodil-colored bag and started walking.

Alex didn't know what to say to her, someone so lively, outgoing, and beautiful. He was at once enchanted and terrified. He stared at the women as he passed them for a second time and observed more closely their fluid motions under the water, rippled and skewed from his aerial view. They stirred like a Riverdance troupe comprised of grandmothers and soccer moms, smeared mascara shadowing their focused eyes.

"It's like they're in a trance, isn't it?" Kate piped up suddenly. "I'm sorry, I can't do group exercise. It's the whole herd mentality thing." She stopped abruptly in front of another brick building, identical to every other cluster.

"And this is it."

Her sentence hung in the air. This was his chance. He took it and asked her to get some coffee down the street. She nodded but explained apologetically, "I'm really a mess right now. And...I don't know your name."

"I'm Alex," he said. "And I actually think you're very pretty."

She believed him.

* * * * *

They broke up once. They had been an official couple for four months when Alex arrived at Kate's apartment to pick her up and saw two suitcases by the front door.

"I just can't stay here," she pleaded when he demanded an explanation. "I feel smothered. I'm restless."

Alex couldn't say he was surprised. He suspected Kate was the free spirit he could never be; that her heart didn't lie with him, but in faraway places and solitary adventures. It didn't take away the pain he felt, but he tried to understand. He offered to drive her to the airport, not knowing what else to say.

She shook her head and said, "Please tell me we're still friends. I don't know what I would do without you," as she stood on tiptoe to kiss him. She had already called a taxi, and through the gauzy curtains Alex saw the yellow car pull up curbside and wait. Kate snatched her suitcases, one in each hand, and flew down the stairs. Alex watched her through the window, from the apartment with so much left behind for who-knows-who, and wondered if she would start to cry when the taxi sped away.

He was determined not to. His resolve lasted two blocks.

The air was cold that night, and he decided to drive around a while before going home, knowing once he got there the silence would be too much. For half an hour he drove aimlessly, wishing that their song would come on the radio. He returned to his house too soon. There was nothing for him there.

And then he saw her on his front porch. She sprang up when he exited his car and ran to him, leaving her suitcases behind on the freezing cement.

“I couldn’t do it,” she explained, smiling and crying while gripping Alex so tightly he could hardly breathe. “I just couldn’t.”

He believed her.

* * * * *

As Alex stared at Kate the wind outside railed more forcefully against the sides of the house. Looking at her against the brightness of the sofa made his eyes hurt and he closed them. When he did, Kate suddenly said, “It’s nothing to worry about. I’m fine. I’m just so tired these days. I’ll be better, I promise.” She uncurled her legs and stood up.

Alex knew she wasn’t telling him anything at all. She really didn’t need to.

That night Kate went to bed while Alex was still awake, reading in his overstuffed chair with only a lamp glaring behind his head. He still had on his black suit from work. His white shirt collar was ruffled and sweaty against his neck. He waited an hour after she retired to their bedroom before mustering the strength to look inside her pocketbook. He was fairly certain of what he would find, but if it wasn’t there he wasn’t prepared to speculate other reasons his wife could be acting so strange. It was too many questions for his liking.

He found her pocketbook on an end table and whipped it open; he thumbed through various receipts and business cards before he saw it. Folded in half, deeply creased, was an airplane ticket to New York City. It had expired two days before.