

Chapter Two

She was gone, emotionally at least. It was true that Kate's physical presence still accompanied Alex to bed every night, but he couldn't ignore the signs that her mind occupied some distant realm. He knew this through her posture, her gaze . . . her habit. Kate doing something habitually was Alex's clue to pay closer attention. Red had become her newest habit.

As her free-spirited nature dictated Kate had trained herself as a painter. She was a cook, guitar player, and swimmer, but making art was her joy. Most of her paintings were collages made with numerous materials. Kate took these shimmery-matte, ruffled and smoothed concoctions and hung them all over the house. Alex didn't understand them, but he could appreciate that she loved them. Recently, Kate had been spending all her time exploring the color red. Of all her artistic ventures this one disturbed Alex the most.

In every spare moment Kate was in front of that horrid voluminous curtain, holding up scraps of red, looking for a match. Paint sample cards, material swatches, photographs, magazine cutouts were stonily scrutinized one by one. Each bit was forced against the velvet curtains which had been a gift from her parents. The curtains used to hang in her parents' house, but she'd asked for them as a wedding present along with the couch. Though her fierce concentration made him uneasy, Alex let her be. He feared disturbing Kate would cause the piercing gaze to fall upon him.

One morning, after a string of solitary burnt toast breakfasts, Alex woke to sounds of gasping and sniffing coming from the living room. Alex looked at the bed stand clock as if it could explain the unusual sounds. Mentally noting that Kate's side of the bed was cold, he slid out of the covers and followed the faux wood paneling down to the living room. When he reached the white carpet he stopped to peer into the dim room. Blood. Covering the flooring were pools of blood.

"Kate!" The scream tore itself from the back of his throat. A woman screamed in response; it was Kate. He threw on the lights. Kate was standing on the couch. The splotches of blood revealed themselves to be nothing more than Kate's collection of red oddities. The soft light cast an eerie haze on the scene.

"I needed to see how they looked," she offered, "in the dark."

They didn't go back to sleep after that. Alex went to his spread sheets and Kate to her studio room to make it look like a giant scatter plot. Later they breakfasted together.

"Where are you Kate?" Alex began quietly.

"I'm right here," she answered quickly, as if expecting the question. "I'm here with you in our house. You know I could never leave you,"

"Then why," he paused daring his voice to fail now, "then why are you acting like this?"

They were sitting in the kitchen. Before them were two untouched croissants and a bowl of fresh fruit. Coffee burbled in the background, and for that Alex was thankful. Anything to hide the silence. Kate gazed mildly at the glimmering fruit, but he could see her toes curling around the bottom rung of her counter stool.

At last she spoke. "We're kind of like this bowl of fruit, Alex. Everything in it once had the potential to become a tree of some sort. New things form, formed things die . . . and next week you and I won't even remember what was in this bowl." Kate slowly picked out a cherry and held it as a scientist holds an old petri dish found germinating in a corner. Alex saw the look. The artist look that painted itself mysteriously across her face. He surveyed his wife of four and a half years desperately. Argue with the fruit metaphor or knock the damn cherry out of her hands? No, neither. Alex got up and left the room.

* * * *

Their relationship had not always inhabited such shaky ground. It was worth remembering how initially both sets of parents had such high hopes for them as a couple. Alex's mother and father loved Kate and her own parents grew to love him. Kate had the natural advantage of her winning personality. Since Alex worked for his dad's company, he and his parents saw each other quite frequently. Their meeting Kate was inevitable from the moment he'd mentioned her name. They'd wanted to take him and Kate somewhere spendy, but contrary Kate insisted on cooking for them. So his uncomfortable, over-dressed parents came to his place for dinner one night. Conversation was civil and anything but boring. Kate tended to initiate the conversational gauntlet when she was nervous.

Alex could still recall Kate clearing away the remains of her homemade chocolate timbales. Judging their need for privacy, the cook took herself to the kitchen. Alex used this opportunity to ask his dazed and confused parents what they thought of her.

“Force ‘a nature. Quite a girl you’ve got there, Son,” his dad replied immediately. His mother took a deep breath.

Mischief crept into the corners of her eyes as she answered, “She’s darling. I’ve never known a girl so engaging. Where did you say she was from?”

“New York,” he replied. Alex knew he would be further prodded. Without hesitation he added, “Her parents own a place in Rockland County. It’s about thirty minutes from New York City.” His mother’s disconcerted look was washed down with a sly smile.

“Well,” she said. “Isn’t that nice?” That was all that needed to be said about the matter. Money here, money there. Money, money everywhere.

Alex’s first meeting with her parents was similar, if more delayed. The Stricklands had to fly down for the occasion. He’d found Kate’s mother cautious and her father indiscernible. Mr. Strickland had perfected his emotional mask to the point of impenetrability.

“So? What do you think?” he’d asked Kate after her parents had left for the evening. She was cleaning up the kitchen. “Do they like me? Will they let me marry you?” He grinned and grabbed her around the waist, swaying her from side to side.

Kate gave him a half smile. “Oh, they like you so much. I want you to spend some time with my dad, though. He can be a little hard to get to know. Take him out for a drink or something.”

Since Kate’s parents were staying in town a whole week he had ample opportunity to take out her father. But his fear of the big “one-on-one” kept him from arranging it until the last day of their stay.

“She needs someone like you,” Kate’s father rambled after he’d consumed a notable amount of alcoholic beverages, “to take her away from it all. To, to take her away from me. Make sure,” he’d added upon sudden conviction. “Make sure that she doesn’t come back, to us I mean.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Alex said. He scooted his stool closer.

But Mr. Strickland was lost to the kitschy atmosphere of the bar. “She needs to let it go, I would take it all back if I could . . .” he said and buried his face in his arms.

Later that evening Alex had asked Kate what her father had meant by this. Kate's brows creased slightly and then became smooth. "It has to do with that lawsuit brought against my dad when I was young. I don't remember very much of it," she'd answered. He knew this was territory she didn't wish him to cross and that was fine.

* * * *

Up in his office, Alex mused upon his disintegrating marriage. Moments in which he was free to wander in his own mind were slowly becoming extinct. The company needed him. Even though his voice answered the phone, his words graced the memos, and his body took up a seat at meetings, his heart was with Kate. Day and night painting red in her studio room. He'd kissed her on the cheek before he'd left, and the moment still lingered in his thoughts. The tears, her constant obsessing when did they begin?

He remembered three months ago, driving home from the gala. Kate had mentioned visiting her parents, a desire he thought reasonable and fair, as they were always around his parents. The gala had been in honor of the big merge with Fulwell A&R. Alex Sr.'s company was merging with their rivals. Somehow that evening amidst the immaculate linen and black tie sycophants, he and Kate had been separated.

"Excuse me, I seem to have lost my wife . . ." Alex's breaking point had come around when the sobers leave and the unsobers continue to make merry. Looking for Kate, he entered a smoky, dimly lit area of the pavilion. He heard his wife's voice.

"I don't know what you're talking about," came the crisp sound of Kate expressing anger.

He strode toward her and found her wrist caught in the grasp of a shady looking man. The dark man let go immediately and strode off. Kate grabbed Alex in a tight hug. He'd assumed she had been brushing off another drunk co-worker. He'd never asked her about it. He thought it was the kind thing to do. Just take her home and get her away from these people.

He thought then that the episode was over, but now wondered. Since the night of the gala his sweet Kate had become increasingly melancholy.