

“My dearest Alex,” the letter said, “when you receive this, I will have been gone for three days...”

Alex scanned across the subsequent lines, neither seeing nor understanding. He had found the note taped to the mirror of his medicine cabinet in the bathroom he and Kate shared. The back side of the paper was occupied by a drawing of a seated woman facing a partially closed door. It was a photocopied facsimile of one of Kate’s own paintings, paintings which she had been churning out at a steady rate for the past several months. The note had been written in red ink.

Alex finally finished reading. There weren’t many words, but each one seemed to add its own extraordinary weight to the emotions which were building up behind his now closed eyelids. It was like dragging his brain through a field of deep, cold mud while a freak show of an electrical storm blasted away all sense of direction and coherence. He was screaming inside a room of pure black, all the sound absorbed before it disturbed the first molecule of air.

After a time, Alex found himself seated in his armchair in the living room, staring vacantly at the televised image of a late afternoon talk show. He didn’t remember turning on the television. The front of his white button-up shirt was damp, as was the silk tie which had been a surprise gift from Kate during their first year together. He couldn’t remember crying.

Looking away from the blathering idiot box, he turned towards the windows lining the far wall. Orange-red light slanted in at an extreme angle. The velvety couch crouched before him in half light. He perceived it all with a numb mind, including his own haggard reflection staring back at him from the window directly opposite. He was sure his eyes were bloodshot, but he couldn’t be bothered to look. The note was still clenched in his left hand.

A current rustled through the living room, sending a month-old newspaper ad for some ritzy art gallery skittering across the hardwood floor. Alex blinked in confusion at the sudden movement, then remembered that he had left the back door open. He still needed to unload his bags from the car. He had been out of town for his father’s company for the last week and a half.

“I should shut the door,” he thought, but remained sitting. Another gust blew through, sending the ad flying again and shattering the cloying silence. In the renewed wind, Alex saw another movement from the corner of his eye.

Like ponderous vertical waves, the oppressive red curtains flowed in the air, their heavy weight producing no sound as they undulated gently. Terrified but mesmerized at the sight, Alex couldn’t look away, not even as his eyes began to blur again.

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Kate’s honey-colored hair danced about vibrantly in the wind roaring through the open car window. Her black and silver sedan coasted gracefully along the highway under a hot Atlantic sun. The humid air was starting to turn downright unpleasant as the afternoon wore on endlessly. She knew she would have to roll up the windows soon and crank the A/C. But she wanted to enjoy the feeling of the rushing air for just a little while longer. A cigarette sparked to life on her lips as the CD in the dash skipped to the next track.

As the music played, Kate's thoughts wandered back to the note that she had left as she walked out the door earlier that morning. She had saved its writing until it was the very last thing she did before leaving the house. The words had been spontaneous, even if the plan to write them had not been. She had tried to reassure Alex without writing the novel that would be necessary to explain all of what had been going on in both of their lives in recent months. She wanted him to know that she still loved him, and always would, but that life was sometimes not under anybody's control, least of all theirs. And she wanted to let him know that she wouldn't be gone forever.

Reaching down to pick up her drink, Kate's eyes fell on the briefcase lying in the passenger seat like a bomb. Inside were thick stacks of large-denomination bills, all the cash she had managed to scrape together from her personal resources, including her last successful art show. Like a fire blanket, the green piles lay on top of three legal-size envelopes that were the real contents of the briefcase. In her mind's eye, Kate could see the outline of the envelopes through the closed lid of the case. They burned red and hot, like scheming demons lurking with malicious intent. Like the past catching up with her.

Alone on the road, separated from her husband, running from one problem into an even bigger one, Kate suddenly felt herself drowning in an overwhelming sense of loss. Her eyes watered, and she began to weep.

Through her teary eyes and mangled lashes, she never noticed the boxy blue SUV that followed at a discreet but constant distance.

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Outside the motel, the dark man sat in the cab of the SUV and drank a bottle of water. He took one last drag, then crushed his cigarette out into the overflowing ash tray. He exhaled and turned his eyes back towards the door of room 12. Kate's black and silver sedan sat directly in front of it.

It had been appallingly easy to follow her as she left her home two days before. The Strickland's only daughter had been completely oblivious to the fact that he had tailed her from the very instant she got into her car. Like some bratty teenager on an independence bender, she had torn off across the countryside, away from her home and husband. Headed north. It was almost insulting in its predictability.

He thought back to the one time that he had met the troubled young lady at some fancy company party she attended with her husband. He recalled his revulsion at the sight of the drunken businessmen, celebrating success with dusty bottles of champagne and thousand-dollar bottles of Scotch. The whole atmosphere had disgusted him.

He had found Kate standing alone, aloof from the loud partygoers. He had tried to impress upon her the weight of the debt which her family owed his employers, and the determination which they possessed to insure that debt was collected. Her indignant protestations had angered him; he was a man not used to having his intelligence insulted. That was why he found this assignment to be particularly fulfilling.

The motel door opened, and Kate stepped out into the morning glare. The briefcase was in her hands. She put on her sunglasses, opened the car door and placed the case inside, then headed towards the front desk. Smiling, the dark man started his truck and began to follow her down the row of parked cars. She didn't even notice him.

Kate ducked inside the open door and walked up to the counter. The dark man watched as she returned her key, exchanged a farewell with the desk clerk, and headed back out the door to her car. Grinning more broadly as she walked past his SUV towards her own vehicle, the man watched her as long as he could to make sure she got back in her car. Satisfied that that was what she intended, he turned out of the parking lot and began driving up the road.

Kate placed her keys in the ignition of her car and turned the engine over.

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It was dark outside before Alex's thoughts returned to him. The living room was like a cave, lit only by the pale white of the TV screen. The wind still gusted in from the open door, but nothing was moving in the house now. Even the curtains were curiously stilled.

The news was on the screen in front of him. On it, there was an image of a cheap highway motel. The reporter, a short redhead wearing a green blouse, was standing in front of a line of yellow police tape, describing the reactions of the motel staff to the incident which had occurred at their business. Alex wasn't listening. He was watching with horror as the image panned away from the reporter's freckled face to focus on the scene behind her.

Tendrils of dirty smoke drifted up from the remains of a black and silver sedan. The motel room directly in front of it had been gutted by fire. A rescue worker was shifting through some debris off to the side, uncovering a burnt briefcase. A pack of cigarettes, incongruously clean, lay where the car's trunk had been. The license plate, one that Alex knew before the numbers even registered in his brain, was being handed to a team of police forensic experts.

Alex looked up at the red curtains with eyes so crazed they appeared calm. This time when he screamed, there was no darkness that could ever hope to contain it.