

Chapter 5

Kate rushed through the house throwing shirts, underwear, makeup and toothpaste into her little red travel bag. She had planned this little trip for months, but anxiety dictated that she make the final preparations in a rush so she would not second-guess herself. That was the best way to proceed when journeying not out of harm's way, but headlong into it.

She had hoped that the thousands of miles she placed between her and those strange men and their stranger questions would provide some protection, but that sliver of hope had been shaken from her whenever *he* had appeared at the Gala three months ago. Even the memory of his hand on her arm brought on a cold sweat. If *he* was there, then it meant the man known simply as the "Boss" was serious. Dead serious.

Luckily Alex had been there to save her. In little ways and without even knowing it, Alex had been saving her for years. That day at the pool, when they met seemingly by accident, Kate had slipped into the office complex to elude some man from "back home." When she came back out, her love for water kept her there longer than she had intended. It felt good to get some healthy exercise on her own terms, instead of the forced run she usually took whenever a suspicious-looking man followed her a little too closely. Afterward, she had grabbed a quick shower from the community locker room, filched an apple from one of the break rooms and was just biting in to the tangy red fruit when Alex came through the door. She quickly put on an act and humored Alex so he would think

her just some ditsy health nut lying around the pool. When he asked her out to the coffee shop, she had agreed, her sole motive being that if she were accompanied by another person, the strange men might stay away a little longer.

She never could have predicted she would actually fall in love with Alex. He had been sweet, caring, and, best of all for Kate, a little unperceptive. When he asked her to marry him, Kate had even chanced a meeting with her parents. It was a dangerous move to get her family together like this, but she knew: Alex was worth it.

After the wedding, the strange men had stopped bothering her in the open, but she would occasionally receive phone calls with a New York area code on the caller ID. She knew they had to be from one of Boss's men and would shove Alex out of the way so he wouldn't answer it. She even picked up art again—it had been her major back in college before her parents' mistake. Art allowed her to stay at home and sift through the mail and keep those envelopes without a return address from catching Alex's attention. She would occasionally receive a major scare in the letters, and had even thought about returning to New York at the less than polite request of one or two of them, but she found Alex was simply too much to let go.

In time Kate merged wholeheartedly with her role as stay-at-home artist, and her initial façade of a free spirit soon came to be her actual personality. She realized the person she had become was the person she would have been naturally if it weren't for her parents and their "contacts." She had even entertained thoughts of growing old with Alex and simply continuing to ignore the minor threats of people so far away.

After her encounter with the dark man, Kate had become increasingly disturbed. What frightened her most was how little of the Boss's "assistant" she had seen in the

months after the gala. Why would he suddenly show up, talking about debt and asking for “the papers,” only to get frightened off by Alex, and not show his face again for three months?

She decided to keep her fears to herself. She could not know how Alex would react to knowing that she had originally used him as a cover to escape those people, or that the people she was running from were more frightening than death itself.

With her bags packed and the “papers” stuffed in under huge wads of money in her briefcase, one last thing remained: her letter to Alex. However, her little explanation was not the only thing in the letter. What she needed most from Alex was for him to understand why she had written the letter the way she did...

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Detective Herrington watched as Alex pored over the photos. Predictably, sweat beaded on Alex’s brow, as the bereaved husband riffled through the stack of glossies. Alex finally looked up with a grimace of fear pasted on his face. “What do these mean? I don’t...”

“Settle down now, sir. We’re not quite sure of what to make of them ourselves, what with all the photo manipulation technology out there. However, you must understand that in any case where someone’s wife mysteriously blows up after starting her car, the husband is immediately someone we need to talk to.”

Alex looked back at the stack of photos, which were reportedly from an anonymous P.I. who had been tipped off to some possible foul play. They showed a man—he looked like Alex—in some of the shadier parts of town, conversing with some even shadier people. According to the notes clipped to each photo, Alex had apparently

been in contact with people ranging from an explosives advisor for a local mining company to a gun-shop owner to a mortician in a respectable funeral home near the cemetery.

Detective Herrington continued. “There a few things that are fishy about this case. For instance, the photos came to us after Kate had already been killed. If it were a P.I. working on a suspicion case, he would have given official notice long before the date of a suspected murder. Also, Kate had with her a bag that contained a large sum of money and some...*interesting* documents. They don’t mention anybody specifically, but if they were tied to a name, then *somebody* would have a late-night visit from the Bureau in a heartbeat. What we need now is your cooperation...”

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“Sloppy,” he muttered to himself, face flush with personal rage. The dark man, seething over his recent failure, paced in front of a flickering black-and white image of the evening news crackling out from an ancient portable television in the back of an old coffee house. He had picked up a day job working as a coffee jockey in one of the more Bohemian establishments downtown as cover while he worked on his latest assignment. The job gave him a respectable face, a little extra funding for his plans, and he actually enjoyed the amateur poetry played with bongo accompaniment.

His informant from inside the local P.D. had mentioned some papers that hinted at massive criminal activity in a briefcase from the girl’s burned out vehicle. After all his preparation for the girl’s death and her stupid husband’s framing, it could all be ruined by a simple case of oversight. He whipped out a cigarette from the packet in his jacket

pocket and lit it, drawing in as much of the nicotine-laden smoke as his lungs could handle.

But why would she have the papers on her? It didn't make sense. She had been hiding those documents for well over five years. Why would she risk them falling back into the Boss's hands now?

Unless...unless she was planning to use them as leverage. She *had* been heading north along the East Coast. She may have actually been returning to New York. That would also explain the large sum of cash found in the briefcase as well. One detail still bothered him. If she intended on using the papers as leverage against the Boss, she wouldn't simply waltz in with the originals in hand. The Boss could just shoot her and take them if she did that. There had to be copies. Somewhere.