

Sarah Herrington-Shaner

Chapter 6

Light ran between the parted red curtains onto Alex's closed eyelids, banishing the fog of the week, and with it the mist of the past four years. He had slept across the couch because of the now unbearable width of their bed. The living room window faced east and Alex was glad for the stunning warmth of the sun, which reached its fingers inside to press serenity through his pores into his muscles.

After a painfully fresh fight between his eyes and the brilliance bearing down the aisle of red curtain, Alex stood shakily, heavily, and fingered the thick fabric. It seemed to contain within it the secrets of the unhappy house and its unhappy mistress. So Alex untied the knots one by one. The blanket of bloodred first limped and then fell to the floor. He folded the lengths evenly and buried them in the oak hutch in the now luminous gold room.

In the kitchen, Alex ground beans, brewed coffee, and chugged orange juice straight from the carton. He opened the back door in response to Wesley's low long whines and reached for the hamper of dog food only to find it empty. He substituted puppy chow for stale cornflakes but the dog sniffed, dropped to his haunches, and let out a growlish whine from his severely tilted head. The impatient wag of his tail accentuated his complaint. Alex poured a bit of juice onto the dusty tile.

“Orange juice it is then.”

He poured the rest into the dog cereal bowl. Wesley apparently found the cold cereal soup acceptable.

It was day two of Alex's indefinite personal leave from work.

The night after his interrogation, he had returned to his glass-walled office and closed the door against the outside world. He needed a well-lighted place with straight edges, defined space, and numerical answers to counter the jagged, undefined, chaotic whirlwind all about him.

He cleared his desktop of files, his laptop, and very slowly, the framed pictures of Kate. A couple-smiling wedding photo. Next to that a black and white Kate moment Alex had captured without her knowing. Her hair tied to the nape of her neck, large strands fallen out and turning in around the curve of her cheekbone. She had been painting barefoot on the front porch. She had been wearing his shirt. She had seemed to have forgotten that she asked him to sit by her while she worked. Alex remembered all these things because of the clear absence of her eyes. There was a Kate-shaped shadow in his life. There was a Kate shaped shadow in his marriage. There was a Kate shaped shadow in her presence, in her eyes.

He lined the pictures face down on the floor and spread the contents of his briefcase across the desk.

The evidence the police had shown him didn't make sense. He hadn't the least idea why fake pictures of him had been taken. He was fortunate to have been out of town on a verifiable business trip on the precise date that the owner and clerk of the gun shop remembered talking to the man in the picture who looked remarkably similar to Alex. He was puzzled by the sloppy set-up, relieved that the detective seemed puzzled as well, and overwhelmed by the "documents" that had been found in the burnt out remains of Kate's vehicle.

He had never known of any documents until the detective mentioned them. Now the evidence of his wife's secret life was surfacing like trudded-through muck on the bottom of a lake shallow. Alex searched the house as soon the questioning ended. He found a packet of envelopes addressed to Kate, bank receipts, and printed hotel confirmations tucked into the Velcro pocket of Kate's canvas art tote. To these he added the letter she had left him. In the office he papered his desktop with Kate's fearful secret.

Alex opened the letters first. There were six of them, dating as far back as three years. They were unsigned with Kate's address written in for the return address. The letters were vague and threatening but made no mention of the documents Alex was looking for. He could only gather that his wife had a long outstanding debt to a vile, illegal lender and that she must have protected herself for at least the past three years with insider knowledge or documentation.

The hotel confirmations were for three nights in New York beginning the date after her death. She was distinctly not staying with her parents. Underneath the hotel confirmation he found three printed emails. Two were responses to an ad Kate had posted. She was selling the vehicle in New York. She was gathering resources. The third was an online ticket home. She had paid a \$16.95 fee for flight insurance so that her flight would be refundable.

Alex finally studied the bank receipts. One detailed a \$1500 withdrawal from their mutual savings account. Alex winced at the number. It was exactly half of their joint savings. He had started the account on their three-year wedding anniversary with \$500 and the promise of a second honeymoon tour of Italy. He nursed their travel plans as his own special gift to Kate: his contribution to her artistic passion. He set aside a portion of

each of his paychecks, depositing a sum each month with the pleasure of a gardener's daily watering round. The numbers on the receipt, half of their honeymoon fund, half of his intended gift to his wife, reached inside his chest, grabbed hold of him and twisted hard.

He had suspected but never been told of Kate's private bank account. The \$5,000 withdrawal meant that she must have been more successful in her recent art shows than she had let on.

He closed the receipts in an envelope, distanced them from himself on the corner of the desk and held his forehead in his hands trying to collect himself. Alex was amazed that his grief over Kate's violent death could turn into anger so quickly. But he couldn't fight the feeling that he was suffocating underneath the ironclad paper evidence of his wife's second, or maybe first, life. The clawing, twisting, nail-digging in his stomach dissolved into emptiness. Kate had never felt compelled, or loved enough to make him a character in whatever fearful story she had lived, and now it seemed to have ended violently without a single line prepared for the Cover Husband.

So the Cover Husband looked at his own Cover World, the world of numerical answers and straight edges, and found no use for it any longer. There was no Kate to whisk off to Italy. There was no Kate to build a home for. There was no Kate to fill his whole life with just half of hers.