

## Chapter 9

Kate Strickland-Buell stood at the end of the dark hallway, illuminated by the early morning light from the living room. She was wearing the empire-style nightgown she had found at a rummage sale and immediately fallen in love with. It was soft and supple and full of delicate wrinkles, the way thick old cotton gets after being worn and washed for years. Sometimes, after she had gotten dressed for bed in this gown, she would go running through the house and land on the sofa beside Alex in a graceful swoon.

“No! I will not marry you, Lord Thorntree! I am in love with another!”

Alex would always play along and grasp her hands, dramatically pressing them to his chest. “But, I must HAVE you! Tell me, who is this man? I shall have him flogged, killed, burned, HUNG from the ceiling by his TOENAILS!” Alex couldn’t be this way with anyone else. Only Kate ever saw his lighthearted side.

But this morning, the figure in the gown wasn’t in a playful mood. She stood there, swaying back and forth before beginning to tiptoe down the hall. The nightgown floated around her darkened body like an aura, glowing and white.

“Alex,” she called. “Alex, where are you?” She bent to pick up the hem of the nightgown, although it wasn’t long enough to trip over. “Alex, what did you do with my curtains?”

Alex woke breathless, his heart banging around in his chest, like a prisoner trying to escape an institution. He blinked a few moments until his eyes cleared and then jumped out of bed. The hallway was empty. As in his dream, sunlight poured through the naked window in the living room and illuminated the other end of the hall. He closed his eyes and the negative of her form stood there again. *I am going crazy.*

In the gold room, he reached into the oak hutch. He pulled out the red curtains and carried them into the living room. Instead of grabbing the step ladder, he stood on the back of the sofa, anxious to get the job finished quickly. When he was done, he stepped back to examine his work; the house was once again dark. *Maybe that’s why she always liked these curtains,* he thought. *To keep things—to keep me in the dark. That way, she never had to explain what I might have seen.*

He looked at the clock, it was nine-thirty. The memorial was scheduled for one pm. He had to get a haircut. He couldn’t face anyone looking like the emotional wreck that he was.

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When he got back from the barber shop, he jumped in the shower to wash off the last pieces of cut hair and shave his darkening jaw. When he was done, he stood dripping in front of the closet, paralyzed by the burden of choosing the suit he would wear to his wife’s funeral. He knew he had to choose carefully, because he would never be able to wear it again. Finally, he decided on his black suit. He found a pale gray shirt at the back of his closet and tied on a black tie that had silver and red metallic threads in a criss-cross pattern. He looked in the mirror at the finished product and ran his hand over his

shorn head. Despite the fresh grooming and immaculate suit, he still looked like a mess. There was no hiding the hollows of his face or the glazed look in his eyes.

Standing over the kitchen sink, he wolfed down a sandwich and sucked down two beers. When he was done, he left the plate and bottles on the counter and wiped his face on a kitchen towel. He wandered through the house, watching the clock, trying to decide exactly when he should show up at the church. He wondered what the protocol for memorials was, and at the same time, he didn't care. He sat down on the sofa, aware of the curtains hanging like a palpable presence behind him. He laid his head down on one of the soft arms, intending to shut his eyes for just a few seconds. But, before he could even take off his suit jacket to prevent it from wrinkling, he had fallen asleep.

He dreamt of Kate again. This time, she was ripping strips of homespun muslin that she had dyed red and knotting them into her latest art piece. The background was half corduroy and half lace, with mountainous piles of linen starched into undulating waves. She had also dyed hemp rope and glued it into twisted forms in the upper left corner. Rosettes of taffeta stood out along the bottom and a red length of barbed wire spelled out the name *Daddy*.

"I call it 'Textures of Love'," she said grinning up at him from the floor, "because I just love my Daddy."

Alex woke, this time, instantly aware that it had been a dream. The back of his neck was sweaty and he urgently needed to pee. He stood up, the room whirled and dipped, the universe spun, planets sped by and nebulas bulged. He stood on the precipice of a black hole. He saw stars whirling. Some stars danced too close to the edge and guttered out like snuffed candles. Blood roared in his ears, timeless waves on the ocean; his pulse beat against his temples. Finally succumbing to the weight of the planets, he teetered and nearly fell into the chasm. Falling, he grabbed handfuls of the red velvet curtains, desperately trying to stay in the universe where she had been.

"Kate!" he cried, willing the curtains to hold him steady. "Kate."

Suddenly, the doorbell rang and Alex lifted his head from the damp spot his tears had made in the velvet. His heart pounded to think that it might be the police or detectives, coming to throw his world into more chaos. Or it might be this faceless enemy, his framer and Kate's murderer. But when he opened the door, he found not the police, or an unknown enemy, but Kate. He stood there for a moment until he realized that he had stopped breathing.

"Alex. It's Anna," Kate's sister said, touching her chest in introduction. He only stared, his face white and ghostly. "Remember? The wedding?"

"I—I'd forgotten," he whispered, "how much you look like her."

Anna nodded, pressing her lips tightly together. "Can I come in?"

"Sure." Alex stood aside.

Anna slowly walked through the entryway, careful not to brush against Alex. She sat down on the sofa and smoothed the skirt of her black dress. She lowered her black patent-leather bag to the floor. The corner of the manila envelope poked out.

"I'll be back in a moment," Alex said, excusing himself to go to the bathroom.

Anna glanced around the house, grimacing at the bloody gallery the house had become with Kate's red-themed artwork everywhere. After a moment, she noticed Alex was back, standing at the edge of the living room, just staring at her.

“I know the memorial is starting in an hour, but I really wanted to talk to you,” she said.

“I don’t know if I want to talk to any more of Kate’s family,” Alex said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You know your father called here just yesterday, trying to give me money? I felt like he was trying to pay me off or something.” Alex sat down beside her. “My wife’s dead. What do I need money for?”

Anna gave Alex a pained smile. “‘Money makes the world go round’, Daddy used to say. He always was a sort of twisted Willy Wonka, except instead of candy, his factory churned out cold, hard cash.”

“Come with me and we’ll be,” she began singing the song from the 1971 musical version of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, “in a world of pure financial freedom...”

Alex stared at her as if she had lost her mind.

“I’m sorry. I’m freaking you out.”

“It’s a little late for apologies from your family,” Alex said, shaking his head. “I feel like I’m in a bad soap opera or something. Next month the viewers will find out Kate isn’t dead at all; she just faked her death to escape the mob. Oh, and she’s pregnant with a baby from her third ex-husband.”

Anna placed her hand on his. “Kate *is* dead, Alex. That’s the reality of it.”

“I know!” he moaned, jerking his hand away from her and covering his eyes. “God, if I don’t know it!”

Anna sat back on the sofa and turned her head towards the curtains. “These curtains are horrible. I don’t like them at all.”

Alex rubbed his hand up and down his face, making a dry rasping sound. “I hate them too, but she won’t let me take them down.”

Anna tore her eyes away from the sea of red. “I want you to know something. No matter what you hear, no matter what anyone says, Kate loved you. She loved you dearly.” She stopped, closing her eyes. “I’m sorry she was taken from you.”

“‘The Lord gives and the Lord takes away’”, Alex quoted. He shrugged his shoulders and scratched at the dried tears on his cheek. “I’m not sure it was a bad thing that she was taken. I mean, did I even know her, ever?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” Anna said grasping both of his hands, forcing him to look at her.

Alex’s charade of nonchalance crumbled and he raised his head to look into Anna’s eyes. “You have Kate’s eyes...”

The doorbell woke them both out of their trance and Alex took a deep breath. He plodded over to the door and slowly opened it, while Anna tucked the corner of the manila envelope out of sight. A youngish man in jeans and a thin navy-blue sweater stood on the porch.

“Hi. My name is Brian. You don’t know me, but Kate did.”