

## Chapter Five

"Knock, knock," Alan said entering the villa.

"Hola," Ulima greeted him as she pattered away in the kitchen.

Coffee was already brewing. The smell lled the spacious interior. Alan smiled at the kindly lady who returned to work as soon as he tracked her down. No one had been more surprised than Alan when he learned Sarah had let the housekeeper go.

Two weeks ago he started what promised to be a long, fruitless search with no idea where to start. So he began with what he did know, the past. For three years Sarah lived at the villa so it was the best place to start. Despite the fact she lived there she left very little evidence. Almost every room of the three-story home had been locked up and unused gathering an impressive layer of dust. As far as he could tell she used only the kitchen, master bedroom and bathroom. Even the living room was pristine and virtually untouched.

In the bedroom he discovered her wedding ring left on the bedside table. The closet was full of women's clothing but on closer inspection he found less than half her side was in actual use. Everything was beige, gray or black. All were rather shapeless and unattractive despite the brand names on the tags. It was like she was deliberately trying to fade into the background and not draw attention. Even the small selection of evening gowns in the back of the closet was simple, black and uninspired. She had no jewelry, not even a simple gold chain. For accessories he only found hair ties, bobby pins and a few clips.

In the bathroom Alan had expected to nd a plethora of amenities but here too were only the bare minimum. No perfumes, no oils, not even bubble bath. Her shampoo and conditioner were nondescript bargain brands and aside from a little concealer she had no makeup.

Nowhere in the house were there any photographs, keepsakes or collectibles aside from a few decorative wedding gifts. Nothing even suggested a favorite color as the walls had been left untouched and unchanged from when the home was purchased three years ago. In the end, Alan only had a handful of clues.

The first clue he found deep in the closet in a small dresser. There he found jeans, shirts, shorts, sweaters. None of it was designer but all of it well worn. It seemed she prized comfort over fashion in her daily life but that wasn't to say she had no sense of style. Scarves, knitted hats and even a beret all harkened to someone who enjoyed accessorizing and juxtaposing different elements. She liked warm colors: plum, orange, marigold, and red. All were colors often associated with autumn. He was fairly certain she was fond of horses as he had found a pair of riding breeches in one drawer along with well-scuffed cowboy boots.

The second clue he found in the kitchen. The coffee pot, he was certain, had been a wedding gift and unused for three years. Rather it was a kettle that caught his attention as well as an extensive selection of teas in the cupboard. Though tea was sometimes considered fashionable it was unlikely anyone with only a casual interest would have collected such a variety.

Even more perplexing was how she afforded it all. After the wedding Sarah had been given a generous annual allowance but as far as he could tell she never touched a penny after she let her housekeeper go. Alan went through Lucas and Sarah's joint taxes several times but she made no claims or deductions. It didn't make any sense. If she didn't even have a part-time job where did she have money to spend on fashion labels? And why leave it all behind? Even selling the clothes would have given her some funds. Did she not take them because she didn't need it?

His first thought had been an inheritance but he ruled it out after looking into her family. Sarah's mother, Cindy Tomlinson, had come from an upper-middle class family but her scant family inheritance went to funding her husband's obsession. Nathan Tomlinson was also from a middle-class family with a love for electronics. He was largely self-taught and earned a scholarship to MIT. After college he oated from one job to another before deciding to start his own tech company. Somehow he found investors and his company was up and running.

In the beginning he had some success but in his quest to develop ever more interesting technology he forgot the most important aspect of business...to make a profit. In the end selling the company was his only option.

No one knew what his proposal to Alice Stanton had been. Alan doubted anyone would ever have the guts to ask. Yet somehow she had been convinced to take his conditions with one of her own: Sarah Tomlinson would marry her grandson.

As far as Alan could tell Sarah had no previous contact with the Stanton matriarch. He wasn't certain how Alice even knew of Sarah who had made no entrance into society. In fact Sarah had no part in her father's company unlike her brother who shared their father's passion for technology.

From what Alan understood Sarah initially rejected the proposal even though it would have given her a rich husband and thrust her into the glamour of high society. Wasn't that every woman's dream? When word of Sarah's reluctance got back to the Stanton matriarch Alice asked for a private meeting. Just like her meeting with Nathan no one knew what had been said but afterward Sarah acquiesced to the wedding and the merger was on track. There were too many unknowns for him to make sense of how or why it came together.

What was more, according to what he knew her family paid for the wedding but aside from the venue he found no receipts or evidence that any money had been spent. There was no wedding planner. No wedding dress. No owers. No fancy lights or décor yet he remembered thinking it had all been quite sophisticated and refined.

Digging through archival photos from various magazines and newspapers he noticed the décor and table settings were all cleverly made using mason jars, lengths of cut burlap, twine, faux owers and strings of lights. Even her gown was nothing new but her mother's wedding dress altered a bit. Had she done it all herself? Why?

What did her father do with the money meant for the wedding? What was more he didn't see any photos of her family at the wedding. She even walked herself down the aisle. Where was her father or brother during the whole event? Why had she said yes? Why did she stay for three years? Why did she suddenly leave? What happened the night before she left?

The last question gave Alan a sinking feeling. Lucas claimed she had taken advantage of him but what if it was the other way around? Considering how drunk Lucas had been it certainly wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

"Is Luke up?" Alan asked.

"No. Mister Stanton has not come out of his room yet."

"Can you make him a sandwich or something?"

"Mister Stanton doesn't like to eat in the morning," Ulima shook her head.

"I know, but he needs something more than coffee and scotch."

"Sí, señor."

Alan gave her a nod of thanks. The housekeeper was kind hearted with an easy-going personality. Frankly he was surprised Sarah let her go. After hearing Ulima's story it was even stranger.

According to Ulima, she and Sarah got along famously. Sarah often spent a portion of her day in the kitchen on her laptop chatting away with her while she worked. Sometimes she would be on a conference call or even video chat using the laptop though the housekeeper couldn't remember with whom.

Some days Sarah would go out saying she had a lunch date with a friend dressed in a simple pair of jeans and shirt, nothing formal. Other days she put on her breeches and would be gone for a good portion of the day only to come back smelling like a horse. But after a year Sarah let her go giving her a generous severance pay, bonus and a glowing reference. Alan didn't understand it.

Ulima did have a few answers though. When Alan commented on the lack of mail she informed him Sarah hadn't received any invitations. As the wife of a prominent businessman Sarah should have been inundated with invitations to various events but she received only a few. According to Ulima she never went out except to meet her friend for lunch every other Friday. Unfortunately she didn't know who the friend was or where they met.

Once again he had more questions than answers. Alan sighed and made his way upstairs to the bedroom. Knocking on the door he let himself in to see Lucas splayed out across the bed like a starfish.

"Luke, time to get up."

"Mmm..."

"Luke. Up."

"...Did you nd her yet?"

"Luke, it's been two weeks. I don't know what to tell you. The woman is a ghost. You've ocially been ghosted."

"She has to be somewhere," Luke slowly sat up seizing her wedding bands he kept beside the bed and stared at them. The set was simple, understated, lacking any embellishments. There wasn't even a single diamond chip on either. "She didn't just fall off the face of the earth."

"Why are you obsessing over her?"

"I'm not obsessing."

"Luke, you moved into the villa you avoided for three years. You are sleeping in the bed you refused to share with her. Every morning you ask me if I found her. You are obsessing. Why? You never paid any attention to her for three years, so why now?"

"Why did she leave?"

"She was completely ignored by her husband for three years and snubbed by society."

"Snubbed? What are you talking about?"

"I mean you weren't the only one ignoring her," Alan explained. "She hardly received any invitations to any events from anybody."

Lucas's brow furrowed.

"What about the Mixer and the New Year's Gala and..."

"Those were invitations you received, not her."

"It doesn't make any sense."

"It's the truth. Even Ulima says so. Now, get up. Shower, shave and get dressed. We have work to do," Alan said. "You have a luncheon today."

After more prodding Lucas nally complied. The shower was simple lacking an integrated sound system or digital interface. It was a far cry from the one at his condo but he had no complaints. Stepping under the steaming water he paused picking up a container of honey-colored bodywash marked honey and argan oil. Opening the top he breathed deep inhaling the slightly sweet smell.

Closing his eyes he could almost picture her. Her slim gure close to his. A subtle fruity smell seemed to accompany her and he had sometimes wondered about her perfume. He now knew it was just her soap.

Lucas had gone through every drawer, looked at every shelf. There was nothing: no perfume, no jewelry, no accessories, nothing. Where were all the small personal touches that should be scattered everywhere? He couldn't go home without tripping over his sister and mother's things but Sarah didn't even have makeup. Why?

Why hadn't she spent any of the money he gave her? Why did looking at her closet make him feel like he was seeing a stranger? If she didn't love him why did she stay for three years? If she loved him why did she leave? He just didn't understand.

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Lucas sighed as he slowly made his way through the mingling crowd. The Easter Luncheon was considered the ocial start of the social calendar allowing companies to begin vying for partners and advertise their upcoming projects for investors. Several gave him curious looks as he had shown up alone but he paid them little mind as he continued his train of thought from the morning.

"Oh, hello Lucas."

Blinking he turned to see Avalynn Prescott a few feet away. As always her hair style and makeup were simple though she was practically glowing in her light and airy spring dress that hugged her ever growing belly. After spending so many years apart Silas was clearly making up for lost time and despite Ava declaring their fourth would be their last she was expecting again, and soon.

"You're looking well," Lucas greeted with a half-hearted smile.

"Thank you," Ava blushed placing a hand on her stomach. "I hope it's a girl this time. Lexi and I are sorely outnumbered at home."

Lucas managed a chuckle. That was right. Her last child had been another boy, Isaac Prescott.

"Anyway, I'm very sorry Sarah couldn't be here. She always brightens up a room."

"Just what is that supposed to mean?" Lucas asked his expression souring.

Ava blinked, wary of his sudden change in tone. Shaking her head she stepped back, "Nothing."

"No," Lucas reached out snagging her wrist. "You meant something by that. What do you know?"

Ava winced as his grip tightened.

"Stanton!" a commanding voice bellowed. "Remove your hand...now!"

Lucas jerked to attention but released her as Silas reached them. Gently pulling Ava into a protective embrace he kissed her temple before turning his attention back to their visitor.

"Mistreating your own wife isn't enough for you, you think you can manhandle another?" Silas demanded.

"What? I never touched..."

"I am well aware," Silas snorted. "You think physical abuse is the most damaging? Verbal and emotional cut far deeper."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't dare act like you don't know. You treated your wife like an unwelcome shadow and wouldn't even look at her in public then show up with that so-called secretary of yours fawning all over her and with enough jewels around her neck to make a queen blush. You think the rest of us don't know what was going on behind closed doors? And you wearing that wedding ring as if means something to you. How shameless can you be?"

Lucas frowned, "What are you talking about?"

"After everything Ava endured you honestly think I wouldn't notice? And everyone here, treating poor Sarah like she was a leper when the truly diseased one is you!" Silas cast a disgusted scowl around the room causing the others to squirm and bow their heads. "Well they might be willing to do business with you...but not me. So I suggest you stay as far away from me as you can and I think you'll nd Julius agrees with me. Come on, Ava. Don't pay him any mind."

Refusing to give Lucas another look Silas gently escorted her away. Ava spared one nal pitying glance before departing. Lucas watched them go with a mixture of outrage and confusion. Just what the hell were they talking about? His gaze swept the room as others tried to avoid meeting his glance. Did everyone here think he was cheating on his wife?

"Luke."

He turned to see Alan staring at him with a pale, helpless look.

"Not here. Outside." Alan shook his head before leading him to an empty terrace. The unseasonably cold weather kept everyone inside and gave them some privacy.

"What is going on?" Lucas demanded. "What was Silas talking about?"

"Do you really not know?" Alan scoffed.

"Know what?"

"Everyone knows how much you hated your wife. I mean, you show up to galas with her in the same plain, black gown and won't even look at her."

Lucas frowned.

"Then you take Madeline shopping for designer dresses and jewelry before showing up to places with her hanging off your arm like some giggly school girl going to her prom. How could they not think you're having an affair?"

"I never touched her. Lidia is the one I take shopping. Madeline just tags along."

"And the difference being?" Alan rolled his eyes.

Taking out his phone he called up several pictures before handing it over. Lucas looked at the screen and paled. The images showed him with Madeline trying on dresses, modeling dresses for him, picking out a new necklace, even attending various events hanging off his arm as Alan said. Alongside were headlines reading: A Night Out But Where's the Missus Stanton? Say Hello to the Soon-to-Be Missus Stanton Two!

"What is this?"

"These are the articles the Eagle and others have been publishing for the past two years," Alan said. "And these are the tamer headlines."

"So...the reason Sarah was never invited to parties was because..."

"Because everyone knew she meant nothing to you and no good would come of being friendly with her. She was a laughing stock."

"They would do that to a Stanton?" Lucas glared.

"Luke, you treated her like she was nothing. They just followed your lead. I'm surprised she stayed as long as she did," Alan sighed. "I don't know any woman who would have stayed half that long unless...unless she really did love you."

Lucas paled. Could it be true? Did Sarah have genuine feelings for him? How? When? Why didn't she say anything? Where did she go?