

Chapter 1

Kevin was dead and the people in my house wouldn't go home. It seemed they were certain I was incapable of grieving properly outside of their presence. They mingled through my house after the funeral, eating sandwiches, drinking tea, and spoke in muffled tones. I didn't feel grateful for their being there. I felt exactly nothing.

Funerals exist so we can close doors we'd rather leave open. But where did we get the idea that the best approach to facing death is to eat Bundt cake? I refused to pick at dainties and sip hot drinks. Instead of closing the door on my pain, I wanted it to swing from its hinges so the searing winds of grief could scorch my face and body. Maybe I hoped to die from exposure.

I knew, if I turned my head, I'd see my mother's back as she guarded the patio doors. She took up this position the moment I wandered into the back yard. I sat on the porch swing and closed my eyes, knowing she would let no one pass. As a recent widow herself, she knew my need to stare into my loss alone.

Kevin had been dead three hours before I had arrived at the hospital. A long time for my husband to be dead without me knowing. He was so altered, so permanently changed without me being aware.

I had stood in the emergency room, surrounded by faded, blue cotton curtains, looking at the naked remains of my husband while nurses talked in hushed tones around me. A sheet covered Kevin from his hips to his knees. Tubes, that had either carried something into or away from his body, hung disconnected and useless from his arms. The twisted remains of what I assumed to be some sort of breathing mask lay on the floor. "What happened?" I said in a whisper so faint I knew no one could hear. Maybe I never said it at all. A short doctor with a

pronounced lisp and quiet manner told me Kevin's heart killed him. He used difficult phrases; aortic dissection, medical terms I didn't know, couldn't understand. He called it an 'episode' and said it was massive. When he said the word "massive", spit flew from his mouth, landing on my jacket's lapel. We had both stared at it.

When my mother and sister, Heather, arrived at the hospital, they gazed speechlessly at Kevin for a time, and then took me home. Heather had whispered with the doctor, their heads close together, before taking a firm hold on my arm and walking me out to her car. We drove in silence to my house. The three of us sat around my kitchen table looking at each other. Several times my mother opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Our words had turned to cotton, thick and dry. We couldn't work them out of our throats. I had no words for my abandonment. Like everything I knew to be true had slipped out the back door when I wasn't looking. "What happened?" I said again. This time I knew I had said it out loud. My voice echoed back to me off the kitchen table. "Remember how John Ritter died? His heart, remember?" This from Heather, my younger, smarter sister. Kevin had died a celebrity's death.

From the moment I had received the call from the hospital until now, I had allowed other people to make all of my bereavement decisions. My mother and mother-in-law chose the casket and placed the obituary in the paper. Kevin's boss at the bank, Donna Walsh, arranged for the funeral parlor and even called the pastor from the church that Kevin had attended until he was 16 to come and speak. Heather silently held my hand through it all. I didn't feel grateful for their help.

I sat on the porch swing, and my right foot rocked on the grass, pushing and pulling the swing. My head hurt. I tipped it back and rested it on the cold, inflexible metal that made up the frame for the swing. It dug into my skull. I invited the pain. I sat with it; supped with it.

I opened my eyes and looked up into the early June sky. The clouds were an unmade bed. Layers of white moved ruffled and languid past the azure heavens. Their shapes morphed and faded before my eyes. A Pegasus with the face of a dog; a veiled woman fleeing; a villain; an elf. The shapes were strange and unreliable, like dreams. A monster, a baby—I wanted to reach up to touch its soft, wrinkled face. I was too tired. Everything was gone, lost, emptied out.

I had arrived home from the hospital empty handed. No Kevin. No car—we left it in the hospital parking lot for my sister to pick up later. "No state to drive," my mother had said. She meant me.

Empty handed. The thought, incomplete and vague, crept closer to consciousness. *There should have been something.* I should have brought his things home with me. Where were his clothes? His wallet? Somehow, they'd fled the scene.

"How far could they have gotten?" I said to myself. Without realizing it, I had stood and walked to the patio doors. "Mom?" I said as I walked into the house.

She turned quickly, but said nothing. My mother didn't just understand what was happening to me. She knew. She knew it like the ticking of a clock, the wind through the windows, like everything a person gets used to in life. It had only been eight months since Dad died. She knew there was little to be said. Little that should be said. Once, after Dad's funeral, she looked at Heather and me and said, "Don't talk. Everyone has said enough words to last for eternity."

I looked into her dull brown eyes. "What happened to Kevin's stuff?" Mom glanced around as if checking to see if a guest had made off with the silverware.

I swallowed hard and clarified. "At the hospital. He was naked." A picture of him lying motionless, breathless on the white sheets filled my mind. "They never gave me his things. His, whatever, belongings. Effects."

"I don't know, Kate," she said. Like it didn't matter. Like I should stop thinking about it. I noticed how tall and straight she stood in her black dress and sensible shoes. How long must the dead be buried before you can stand straight again? I moved past her, careful not to touch her, and went in search of my sister.

Heather sat on my secondhand couch in my living room, a two seater with the pattern of autumn leaves. She held an empty cup and a napkin; dark crumbs tumbling off onto the carpet. Her long brown hair, usually left down, was pulled up into a bun. She looked pretty and sad. She saw me coming, her brown eyes widening in recognition. Recognition that she should do something. Meet my needs, help me, make time stand still. She quickly ended the conversation she was having with Kevin's boss, and met me in the middle of the living room. "Hey," she said, touching my arm. I took a small step back, avoiding her warm fingers.

"Where would his stuff go?" I blurted out. Heather's eyebrows snapped together in confusion. "Kevin's things," I said. "They never gave me his things. I want to go and get them. Will you come?"

Heather stood very still for a moment, straight backed like she was made of wood, then relaxed. "You mean at the hospital. Right Kate? Kevin's things at the hospital?"

Tears sprang to my eyes. "There was nothing. You were there. When we left, they never gave me anything of his." I realized I was trembling.

Heather bit her lower lip, and looked into my eyes. "Let me do that for you. I'll call the hospital—" I stood on my tiptoes and opened my mouth. "I'll go," she corrected before I could say anything. "I'll go and ask around. I'll get his stuff and bring it here."

"I need his things."

Heather cupped my elbow with her hand. "You need to lie down. Let me get you upstairs, and as soon as you're settled, I'll go to the hospital and find out what happened to Kevin's clothes, okay?"

Fatigue filled the small spaces between my bones. "Okay." She led me upstairs. I crawled under the covers, as Heather closed the door, blocking the sounds of the people below.

It was dark when I half woke. I wasn't alone in the bedroom. I could see nothing in the darkness, but I could feel Kevin standing by the door. My heart beat out a staccato rhythm, but my body remained loose and limp. I opened my mouth, but found I had no voice. The words I formed fell back into my throat. His presence seemed to move from the doorway to the end of the bed. Whatever his intent, I was powerless to either resist or comply. I blinked in the darkness, tears forming at the corners of my eyes.

"Go back to sleep. Everything is fine." Kevin said his voice low and commanding.

Everything wasn't fine. He was dead and I was alone and none of this was supposed to happen. I rolled onto my side and sobbed as the darkness over took me.

I awoke, with a start. A noise, rumbling and deep, like a man's voice—I strained my ears, but heard nothing more. The sun peered in around the blinds. Kevin's clothes were at the bottom of my bed, neatly folded. I grabbed them and buried my face in their folds. They smelled of citrus, as if recently laundered. I slipped on Kevin's blue-striped dress shirt. His belt lay coiled on top of his black slacks. I found his wallet in the back pocket and placed on top of his dresser beside his wedding ring the funeral director had returned to me only two days before. Another noise, this time like the scraping of a chair. I headed down stairs. I went into the kitchen and was neither surprised nor alarmed to see Blair Winters sitting at the table. It must have been him I'd heard when I awoke. He looked up from the magazine he was reading and gave me a small “Hey.”

Blair Winters was Kevin's best man at our wedding, and best friend in life. He was a pallbearer at Kevin's funeral and cried without restraint at the grave site.

They were an unlikely pair, Kevin and Blair. They had met at basketball tryouts their junior year of high school. Kevin was a serious guy who believed in hard work and dating one girl at a time. He attended Sunday school until he was sixteen. Blair was already on his way to becoming one of the most popular guys in high school. He had a ruffled, lazy look that drove girls crazy, which was fine with him.

When Blair left Greenfield for university, everyone in town said he'd never come back. They were wrong. The ink wasn't dry on his degree before he was back in town, much to the delight of his mother and the dismay of several co-eds. He opened a small skateboard shop, which dealt in exclusive, expensive parts. His mother had called his shop, “A fine waste of an expensive degree”.

He'd been back in town less than a month when his mother came home to find every window in her house broken. A short police investigation tracked the culprit to the university Blair had attended. A sweet-faced blond co-ed who wasn't good at goodbyes was to blame. She claimed to be terribly, terribly sorry. Mrs. Winters, at the urging of her son, didn't press charges. Blair said he couldn't stand to see the poor girl suffer. As soon as the co-ed was released, she drove back to Greenfield and set Mrs. Winter's canning shed on fire. Blair moved to his own apartment the next day.

I could still see the remnants of the playboy I knew in high school as I looked at Blair's face that morning. I noticed lines forming around his mouth, and a sadness that stretched over his face like a mask, but they did nothing to diminish his sex appeal. Even in my numb state I recognized his appeal. He looked like a man any woman would kiss. A co-ed, a mother, a nun.

I grabbed a box of cereal. "What are you up to?" I opened the fridge for the milk. I had to move two casserole dishes and a bowl of grapes in order to reach it. The entire town had cooked for me. I would be eating lasagna for years.

"Nothing," he said, tossing the magazine into the recycle bin by the back door. "I let myself in." Blair held up the set of keys that Kevin had given him the day we moved in.

Blair pocketed the keys. "I checked on you, but you were sleeping so I came down here."

"How long have you been here?"

He looked at his bare wrist. "Uh, it was pretty early when I got up. I couldn't sleep so I decided to go for a walk. I wandered around for awhile and found myself in front of your guys' house. Your house." He pawed at his face with both hands. "I guess it was around three," he spoke into his palms.

"A.M.?" I said stupidly.

"Yeah."

I shrugged and grabbed two bowls. Blair and I ate our cereal in silence. Until:

"Do you want to know what his last words to me were?" Blair said. He didn't look at me, just traced the maze on the back of the cereal box with his index finger.

"Yes."

"We were on the phone, the day before he . . . We'd been talking for about ten minutes; I was trying to help him with a problem he was having." He threw me a look I couldn't read, and then went back to the maze. "It was no big deal; just some stuff at work he was trying to get straight. Anyway, at the end of our conversation he said: 'You're a great friend, Blair. Like a brother'." Blair's face trembled and crumbled. I thought he was crying, but when he spoke next his voice was calm. "Do you remember his last words to you? I mean, do you want to tell me?"

"No."

Kevin's last words to me? Did he kiss me goodbye before he drove off into his eternity? Did he call me from work to tell me he'd be home early—or late? Had he called on his cell phone, pounding his fist at red lights and tell me how he loved me? I didn't know. Couldn't remember. When I turned to look into the days and weeks I just lived, all I could see was a yawning, dark hole. My memories, taken by some blunt force I couldn't recall. I wasn't sure when it happened, when my memories slipped away. But looking at Blair's grief-doused face, I was certain they were gone. The dark hole, the abyss where my recent past now resided wasn't a complete void. Swirling in the midst of obscurity were pockets of light, like snapshots of my life. Each one swam alone, unconnected to any other, unfettered. One of them, more a soundtrack

than an image, played over again in my mind. Kevin saying, "Don't wait for me." The statement taunted me like a bully. It lurked in dark rooms and around corners. What did it mean? Who was he speaking to? When had he said it? And when would I remember again?

Blair watched my face for a few moments, and, when it was clear I would say no more, he got up from the table in a series of jerky movements that caused milk to spill from his bowl onto the table. "Sorry. I should go." He walked to the back door. I followed wordlessly. Blair kissed the top of my head. "If you need me, I'm only a phone call away. Day or night, Kate. Okay?"

"Okay," I said.

He reached for the knob and hesitated. He turned and looked into my eyes. "Seriously, Kate. Anything."

"I know."

When he was gone I locked the back door and felt the emptiness of the house enfold me.

I left the dishes on the table and walked into the living room. Everything had been cleaned mercilessly. I could see no evidence of the funeral reception. It was as if it had never happened. I sat on the floor, my back to the two seater sofa, and drew my knees up to my chest. Maybe it hadn't happened. Maybe it was a mistake. A divine clerical error.

Once, I'd gone grocery shopping and, when I was at home unpacking my food, I discovered a bag that didn't belong to me. I had stood in my kitchen wondering what I should do with four avocados, a package of condoms, and denture cleaner. Maybe that's what had happened. I'd picked up someone else's tragedy by mistake.

"The cereal is going to dry right onto those bowls," Kevin said from the kitchen.

"Who cares?"

"You hate it when the cereal is stuck to the sides of the bowl."

"Kevin?" I said. My head felt light, a nebulous balloon floating above my body. I ran into the kitchen, catching my toe on a chair. "Kevin?" There was no one there. I stared down at the cereal bowls. Hope and helplessness blended like oil and water in my stomach. Of course he's not here. I thought. He's dead. No one talks to the dead.

"I'm cold," he said.

"Where are you?"

The phone rang. I stood immobile, staring at it. My lips parted "Kevin?" My heart ricocheted off my breastbone as I reached for the receiver. I picked it up and pushed it to my ear, waiting in silence.

"Kate?" My mother said. "Are you there? I wanted to tell you that I left a turkey salad in the fridge for your lunch."