

PAINTED

by Kirsten McKenzie

Chapter One

“He can go whistle himself into his own grave, because I’m not driving there again. I wasted hours last time driving there and back, so he can damn well courier the paperwork. You get hold of him and tell him,” Alan Gates dismissed his secretary with the flick of a wrist, muttering to himself about the self-entitled elderly who refused to embrace technology. As if he had time to drive out to the coast to amend the last will and testament of a rambling idiot. The letter had been splattered with paint and addressed to his father, who’d been dead and buried three months now, hardly a professional approach at all.

Now he was running the family law firm, things would change. No more pandering to the poor and indulging the elderly, this business needed a firm hand and profitable clients. The mess his father had left behind never ceased to amaze him. Fortunately he’d died when he did, while there was something still salvageable in the firm.

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Alma Montgomery sniffed her dissatisfaction as she closed Alan’s office door. His father would be turning in his grave if he knew how his clients were being treated by his son.

Clutched in her gnarled hand was the letter Alan found so offensive. A handwritten letter from one of the firm’s oldest clients, Leo Kubin. She’d never met him in the thirty years she’d been answering phones and typing legal documents for Alan’s father, and now for Alan himself, but she’d recognised the letter as soon as it had arrived. The faint scent of mineral turpentine clung to the paper and a kaleidoscope of paint droplets smeared the corners and along the edges of the thick paper.

Despite the assumption that he was an untidy man as she knew bachelors usually were, his thoughts were clearly expressed in the letter — terminally unwell, he wanted to finalise his affairs. He’d included a sheaf of annotated notes, less paint marked than the letter, but unmistakably from the same hand. His writing slender, the product from a school system long since consigned to the scrap heap. Page after page detailed how to dispose of Kubin’s extensive art collection after his death.

It wasn’t unusual for passionate collectors to leave instructions on how their belongings were to be managed, but, as Alma leafed through the papers, Kubin’s instructions seemed bizarre even to

her. Each portrait must be crated as soon as it was removed from the wall and not be left leaning against a wall, laying on a table, or boxed with other items. Every portrait *must* be packaged individually and shipped to the National Portrait Gallery. Of the other pieces in his collection, they were to be sold and the funds distributed to the needy. Given the dubious accounting practices of Alan Gates Junior, she wouldn't be at all surprised if Alan counted himself among the 'needy' referenced in Kubin's instructions.

Alma removed that final page, the reference to the 'needy'. Nothing good ever came of shredding legal paperwork, but Alan had been insistent they buy a shredder to better dispose of old paperwork. With a wry smile, she fed that one page through the shredder. All of Mr Kubin's art could be donated to the gallery. They were best equipped to decide what to do with it. In these times of fiscal cutbacks, every public art institute could be considered a charitable cause. And, after all, how many pieces of art could one man have in his house?

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A tiny obituary appeared in the local newspaper recording the death of Leonard Kubin, Artist, aged eighty. *No known family.*

Alan Gates Junior closed the paper. He only bothered reading the local paper in case it mentioned any of their clients. Divesting the firm of the dead and unworthy was an enjoyable hobby and the menial task of shredding their files a highlight. Thus Mr Kubin's file could also be disposed of shortly, once the sale of his house and estate was finalised.

Calling Alma to bring him Kubin's file, he pondered how much of a fee the firm could expect from the sale of the estate. He had some vague recollection of a vast art collection. He'd not paid that much attention at the time, but those reclusive types were more than likely to have squirrelled away a Matisse, or half a dozen long lost Monet oil paintings. His eyes were shining more than the handmade Italian brogues he wore on his feet. It could be a good payday for the firm, yes indeed. Not everything needed to be donated. The man had been old, his mind failing him. Better to sell everything of value and donate the dregs. Potentially slip one or two of the nicer pieces into his own collection.

After instructing the old biddy about what he wanted arranged for Mr Kubin's estate, he rubbed his hands together. As a golf lover, he'd calculated that soon he'd be able to upgrade to the better club on the other side of town. Membership was at least five figures more than he currently paid, but that wouldn't be an issue soon. He deserved to be mixing with a higher class of person than his father had, that's where the monied clients came from, fresh from the manicured lawns at the Bolton Hills Golf Club, and he could not wait.

Against her better judgment, Alma Montgomery typed the letter to the Nickleby's Trusts, Estates and Valuation Service, requesting their services to catalogue and sell Mr Kubin's estate and left it on Alan's otherwise empty desk for his signature. Clipped to the back were Kubin's comprehensive instructions detailing how his portraits were to be treated. She rubbed her chest, unsure which hurt more, her arthritic hands or her chest. It'd been bothering her for days. Time to retire. There was no joy working for Alan Junior. She'd known him since he was a boy, a boy fond of cruel jokes, snide asides and everything money could buy. No, life was too short, he wouldn't miss her if she left. He'd prefer a malleable young thing in short skirts and heels, flouncing around the office. Not her in her orthotic soles and sensible slacks. She'd tell him tomorrow she'd decided to retire.

Locking the office, Alma paused to catch her breath. Pressing her hand to her chest, she came over all clammy. The feeling passed and she pushed off, shuffling to the bus stop, not realising she'd never step foot into the office again.