

A wooden chair is positioned in the lower-left foreground, angled towards the right. The chair is made of dark-stained wood with a high back and vertical slats. The floor is a light-colored, textured concrete. The background is dark, with a bright, circular light source in the upper-left corner creating a strong spotlight effect on the chair and the text. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

A KERI LOCKE MYSTERY--BOOK #3

A
TRACE
OF
VICE

BLAKE PIERCE

Блейк Пирс
A Trace of Vice

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Аннотация

Yet at the same time, Keri is assigned a new case, one with a frantic ticking clock. A teenage girl has gone missing in Los Angeles, a girl from a good family who was duped into drugs and abducted into a sex trafficking ring. Keri is hot on her trail—but the trail is moving fast, with the girl being constantly moved and with her abductors' single, nefarious goal: to cross her over the border with Mexico.

In an epic, breathtaking, cat and mouse chase that takes them through the seedy underworld of trafficking, Keri and Ray will be pushed to their limits to save the girl—and her own daughter—before it is all too late.

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| PROLOGUE | 6 |
| CHAPTER ONE | 16 |
| CHAPTER TWO | 24 |
| CHAPTER THREE | 34 |
| CHAPTER FOUR | 45 |
| CHAPTER FIVE | 53 |
| CHAPTER SIX | 64 |
| CHAPTER SEVEN | 73 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 76 |

Blake Pierce
A TRACE OF VICE

BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)

ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)

ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)

ONCE LURED (Book #4)

ONCE HUNTED (Book #5)

ONCE PINED (Book #6)

PROLOGUE

Even though Sarah Caldwell was just sixteen, she had a good head on her shoulders and a keen sense of when things felt off. And this felt off.

She almost didn't go. But when Lanie Joseph, her best friend since elementary school, called and asked her to hang out at the mall this afternoon, she couldn't think of a convincing reason not to go.

But ever since they met up, Lanie seemed jumpy. Sarah couldn't understand what about wandering around the Fox Hills Mall could be so anxiety inducing. She noticed that when they were trying on cheap necklaces at Claire's, Lanie's hands shook as she tried to fasten the clasp.

The truth was that Sarah didn't really know what made Lanie nervous anymore. They'd been incredibly close all through elementary school. However, once Sarah's family had moved from south Culver City to the still working-class but less-dangerous neighborhood of Westchester, they'd slowly drifted apart. The communities were only a few miles apart. But without cars, which neither girl had, or a serious commitment to stay connected, they'd lost touch.

As they tried on makeup at Nordstrom, Sarah stole glances at Lanie in the mirror. Her friend's light blonde hair was streaked with blue and pink. She already had on so much dark eye

makeup that there was really no reason to test anything out at the counter. Her fair skin seemed even paler when contrasted with her multiple tattoos and the black tank top and Daisy Dukes she wore. Amid the intentional body art, Sarah couldn't help but notice some bruises mixed in.

She looked back at her own reflection and was stunned by the contrast. She knew she was pretty too, but in a more subdued, almost sensible way. Her shoulder-length brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Her own makeup was subtle, highlighting her hazel eyes and long lashes. Her olive skin was tattoo free and she wore faded jeans and a cute but far from risqué teal top.

She wondered if she'd stayed in the old neighborhood, would she look like Lanie did now? Almost certainly not. Her parents would never have allowed her to start down that path.

If Lanie had moved to Westchester, would she still look like she was a teen prostitute working a truck stop?

Sarah felt her face turn crimson as she shook the thought from her head. What kind of person was she, to think such awful thoughts about someone she'd played Barbies with as a girl? She turned away, hoping Lanie wouldn't see the guilt she felt sure was plastered all over her face.

"Let's get a snack at the food court," Sarah said, trying to change the dynamic. Lanie nodded and they headed out, leaving the disappointed saleslady behind.

As they sat at a table munching on pretzels, Sarah finally decided to find out what was going on.

“So you know I always love to see you, Lanie. But you sounded so upset when you called and you seem so uneasy...is there something wrong?”

“No. Everything’s cool. I just...my boyfriend is stopping by to say hi and I guess I’m nervous about you meeting him. He’s a little older and we’ve only been together for a few weeks. I kind of feel like I might be losing him and I thought that you could talk me up a little, that if he saw me with my oldest friend, it would make him see me differently?”

“How does he see you now?” Sarah asked, concerned.

Before Lanie could answer, a guy approached their table. Even before the introductions, Sarah knew this must be the boyfriend.

He was tall and super-skinny, with tight jeans and a black T-shirt that set off his own pale skin and multiple tattoos. Sarah noticed that he and Lanie had the same small skull and crossbones image on top of their left wrists.

With his long, black, spiky hair and penetrating dark eyes, he wasn’t so much handsome as beautiful. He reminded Sarah of the lead singers of those hair metal bands from the 1980s her mom always swooned over with names like Skid Row or Motley Row or something Row. He was easily twenty-one.

“Hey, babe,” he said casually and leaned in to give Lanie a surprisingly passionate kiss, at least for a mall food court. “Did you tell her?”

“I didn’t get a chance yet,” Lanie said sheepishly, before turning to Sarah. “Sarah Caldwell, this is my boyfriend, Dean

Chisolm. Dean, this is my oldest friend in the world, Sarah.”

“Nice to meet you,” Sarah said, nodding politely.

“The pleasure is all mine,” Dean said, taking her hand in his and doing a deep, playfully exaggerated bow. “Lanie talks about you all the time, how she wishes you guys could hang out more. So I’m really glad you could get together today.”

“Me too,” Sarah said, impressed by the unexpected charm of the guy, but wary nonetheless. “What didn’t she get a chance to tell me?”

Dean’s whole face broke into an easy smile that seemed to melt away her suspicions.

“Oh that,” he said. “I’m having some friends over to my place this afternoon and we thought it might be fun for you to join us. Some of them are in bands. One of them needs a new lead singer. Lanie thought you might like to meet them. She says you’re a really good singer.”

Sarah looked at Lanie, who smiled back but said nothing.

“Is that what you want to do?” Sarah asked her.

“It could be fun to try something new,” Lanie said. Her tone was casual but Sarah recognized the look in her eyes, which pleaded for her friend not to say anything to embarrass her in front of her hot new boyfriend.

“Where is it?” Sarah asked.

“Hollywood adjacent,” he said, his eyes glimmering with anticipation. “Let’s head out. It’s gonna be fun.”



Sarah sat in the back seat of Dean's old Trans Am. The relic was well maintained on the outside but the interior was littered with cigarette butts and rolled up McDonald's wrappers. Dean and Lanie sat up front. With the loud music, it was impossible to have a conversation. They passed through Hollywood in the direction of Little Armenia.

Sarah looked at her friend in the front passenger seat and wondered whether she was even helping her by coming. Her thoughts drifted back to the mall ladies' room before they'd left, where Lanie had finally come somewhat clean with her.

"Dean is super passionate," she'd said as they checked their makeup one last time in the bathroom mirror. "And I'm worried that if I don't keep up, I'm going to lose him. I mean, he's so sexy. He could have his pick of girls. And he doesn't treat me like some teenager. He treats me like a woman."

"Is that why you have those bruises, because he treats you like a woman?"

She tried to catch Lanie's eye in the mirror but her friend refused to look at her directly.

"He was just upset," she said. "He said I was ashamed of him and that's why I didn't introduce him to any of my respectable girlfriends. But the truth is, I don't really have any friends like that anymore. That's when I thought of you. I figured if you two

met, it would be a double whammy. He'd know I wasn't hiding him and you'd make me look good because I have at least one friend who's, you know, got a future."

They hit a pothole and Sarah's thoughts were ripped back into the present. Dean was pulling into a parallel parking spot on a seedy street with a row of small houses, all with bars on the windows.

Sarah pulled out her phone and tried for the third time to send a quick text to her mom. But she still couldn't get any reception. It was weird because they weren't in the boonies or anything; they were in the heart of Los Angeles.

Dean parked the car and Sarah put her phone back in her purse. If reception was still bad in his house, she'd use his landline. After all, her mom was pretty understanding, but going hours without giving a courtesy call was definitely against family rules.

As they walked up the path to the house, Sarah could already hear the thumping beat of music. A tingle of uncertainty coursed through her body but she ignored it.

Dean banged loudly on the front door and waited while someone inside undid what sounded like multiple separate locks.

Finally, the door opened a crack to reveal a guy whose face was hidden under a mass of long, unkempt hair. The strong smell of pot wafted out and hit Sarah so unexpectedly that she started coughing. The guy saw Dean and gave him a fist bump, then opened the door wide to let them all in.

Lanie stepped in and Sarah stayed close behind her. Blocking the foyer from the rest of the house was a large red velvet curtain, like something out of a cheesy magician's act. As the long-haired guy relocked the doors behind them, Dean pulled back the curtain and directed them into the living room.

Sarah was shocked by what she saw. The room was packed full with couches, love seats, and beanbag chairs. On each of them were couples making out and in some cases, doing much more. All of the girls looked to be Sarah's age and most looked drugged up. A few even appeared to be passed out, which didn't stop the guys, all of whom looked older, from doing their thing. The vaguely unsettled feeling she'd had walking up to the house returned, but much stronger now.

This is not a place I want to be.

The air was thick with pot and something sweeter and stronger that Sarah didn't recognize. Almost on cue, Dean handed Lanie a joint. She took a long drag before offering it to Sarah, who declined. She decided she'd had enough of this place, which looked like the set of an old porno.

She took out her phone to order an Uber but found she still had no reception.

"Dean," she shouted over the music, "I need to call my mom to let her know I'll be late but I can't get a connection. Do you have a landline?"

"Of course. There's one in my bedroom. I'll show you," he offered, once again flashing that broad, warm smile before

turning to Lanie. “Babe, would you get me a beer from the kitchen? It’s that way.”

Lanie nodded and headed in the direction he’d pointed and Dean motioned for Sarah to follow him down a hall. She wasn’t sure why she’d lied about needing to call her mom. But something about this situation made her feel like it wouldn’t be well received if she said she wanted to bail.

Dean opened a door at the end of the hall and stepped aside to let her enter. She looked around but didn’t see a phone.

“Where’s your landline?” she asked, turning back to Dean as she heard a door lock. She saw that he’d already turned the deadbolt and was attaching the chain lock near the top of the bedroom door.

“Sorry,” he said, shrugging but not sounding apologetic at all. “I must have moved it to the kitchen. I guess I forgot.”

Sarah weighed how aggressive she needed to be. Something was very wrong here. She was in a locked bedroom in what appeared to be something close to a brothel in a seedy part of Little Armenia. She wasn’t sure how effective calling him out would be under the circumstances.

Be sweet. Act ignorant. Just get out.

“That’s okay,” she said perkily, “let’s just go to the kitchen then.”

As she spoke she heard a toilet flush. She turned to see the bathroom door open, revealing a huge Hispanic guy wearing a white T-shirt that rode up on his enormous, hairy belly. His head

was shaved and he had a long beard. Behind him on the linoleum floor of the bathroom lay a girl who couldn't have been more than fourteen. She had on only panties and appeared to be passed out.

Sarah felt her chest tighten and her breathing get shallow. She tried to hide the growing panic she felt.

"Sarah, this is Chiqy," Dean said.

"Hi, Chiqy," she said, forcing her voice to remain calm. "Sorry to cut this short but I'm just headed to the kitchen to make a call. Dean, if you could just unlock the door for me."

She decided that instead of trying to find the kitchen, where she doubted she'd see a phone anyway, she was heading straight for the front door. Once outside, she'd flag someone down for a ride. Then she'd call 911 to get help for Lanie.

"Let me get a better look at you," Chiqy ordered in a gravelly voice, ignoring what she'd said. Sarah turned to see the massive man eyeing her up and down. After a moment, he licked his lips. Sarah felt the urge to vomit.

"What do you think?" Dean asked him eagerly.

"I think we put her in a sundress with pigtails and we got a solid earner here."

"I'm going to go now," Sarah said and hurried over to the door. To her surprise, Dean stepped aside, looking amused.

"You used the dampener so she couldn't call or text?" she heard Chiqy ask from somewhere behind her.

"Yep," Dean answered. "I watched her real close. She tried a lot but never seemed to get a connection. Did you, Sarah?"

She fumbled with the chain lock and almost had it off when a huge shadow suddenly blocked out the light. She started to turn but before she could, she felt a sharp thud on the back of head and then everything went black.

CHAPTER ONE

Detective Keri Locke's heart was pounding. Even though she was in the middle of a huge police station, she tuned out everything around her. She could barely think straight as she stared at the email message on her phone, refusing to believe it was real.

**willing to meet if you follow
the rules. will be in touch soon**

The words were simple but their meaning was colossal.

For six long weeks, she'd been waiting for this, hoping against hope that the man she suspected had abducted her daughter five years ago would reach out. And now he had.

Keri slid her phone away on the desk and closed her eyes, trying to stay composed as she attempted to wrap her head around the situation. When she'd first uncovered the contact information for the man known only as the Collector, she'd set up a meeting. But he never showed up.

She reached out to him to find out what happened. He indicated that she hadn't followed the rules but hinted that he might get in touch in the future. It had taken all of her discipline and patience not to try to contact him again. She wanted to

desperately but worried that if she came on too strong, he would get skittish and dump the email address completely, leaving her no way of ever finding him, or Evie.

And now, after all those torturous weeks of silence, he'd finally gotten in touch again. Of course, he didn't know he was communicating with Evie's mother or even that it was a woman. All he knew was that this was a potential client interested in discussing an abduction for hire.

This time she would come up with a better plan than before. The last time, she had less than an hour to get to his assigned meeting place. She tried to set up a decoy to go in her place and survey the situation from afar. But somehow he knew the decoy wasn't legitimate and he didn't come. She couldn't let that happen again.

Stay cool. You've held out this long and it's paid off. Don't ruin it by doing something impulsive. There's nothing you can do right now anyway. The ball's in his court. Just give a basic response and wait to hear back.

Keri typed one word:

understood

Then she put the phone in her purse and stood up from her desk, too nervous and excited to sit still. Knowing there was nothing more she could do, she tried to force the Collector from her mind.

She headed for the break room to get a bite to eat. It was after 4 p.m. and her stomach was growling, although she wasn't sure if it was because she'd skipped lunch or due to general anxiety.

When she arrived, she saw her partner, Ray Sands, rifling through the refrigerator. He was notorious for snagging any food not properly marked. Luckily her chicken salad, with her name clearly taped to the container, was hidden in the lower back corner. Ray, a 6-foot-4-inch, 230-pound black man with a bald head and a heavily muscled frame, would have to really be desperate to navigate himself down there just for a salad.

Keri stood in the doorway, silently enjoying watching Ray's butt wriggle as he maneuvered. In addition to being her partner, he was also her best friend and lately, maybe something more. They both felt a strong attraction to each other and had admitted as much to one another less than two months ago, when Ray was recovering from a gunshot wound he'd sustained when they took down a child kidnapper.

But since then, they'd only taken baby steps. They flirted more openly when they were alone and there had been several semi-dates, where one of them would come to the other's apartment to watch a movie.

But they both seemed afraid to make the next move. Keri knew why she felt this way and suspected Ray felt the same. She was worried that if they decided to really go for it and it didn't work out, both their partnership and their friendship could be put at risk. It was a legitimate concern.

Neither of them had a great romantic track record. Both were divorced. Both had cheated on their spouses. Ray, a former professional boxer, was a notorious ladies' man. And Keri had to admit that since Evie was taken, she'd been one big pulsing nerve, constantly on the verge of spinning out of control. Match.com wouldn't be putting either of them on posters anytime soon.

Ray sensed that he was being watched and turned around, half of an unclaimed sandwich in his hand. Seeing that there was no one in the room but Keri, he asked, "Like what you see?" and winked.

"Don't get cocky, Incredible Hulk," she warned. They loved to tease each other with pet names that highlighted their substantial size difference.

"Who's using the double entendres now, Miss Bianca?" he asked, smiling.

Keri saw his face darken and realized she hadn't done a good enough job of hiding her nervousness about the Collector. He knew her too well.

"What's wrong?" he asked immediately.

"Nothing," she said as she brushed past him and bent down to grab her salad. Unlike him, she had no problem navigating tight spaces. While she wasn't as small as a fictional mouse nickname might suggest, compared to Ray, her 5-foot-6-inch, 130-pound body was Lilliputian.

She could feel his eyes on her but pretended not to notice. She didn't want to discuss what was on her mind for a couple

of reasons. First of all, if she told him about the email from the Collector, he'd want to break it down in detail with her. And that would undermine her efforts to keep sane by not thinking about it.

But there was another reason. Keri was under surveillance by a shady lawyer named Jackson Cave, who was notorious for representing pedophiles and child abductors. To get the information that led her to find the Collector, she'd broken into his office and copied a hidden file.

The last time they'd seen each other, Cave had hinted that he knew what she'd done and said outright that he had his eye on her. It was clear to her what he'd meant. Ever since, she'd done regular sweeps for listening devices and been careful to only discuss the Collector in secure environments.

If Cave knew she was on to the Collector, he might warn him. Then he'd disappear and she'd never find Evie. So there was no way she was going to mention anything about it to Ray here.

But he didn't know any of that, so he pressed her.

"I can tell something's up," he said.

But before Keri could diplomatically shut him down, their boss burst through the door. Lieutenant Cole Hillman, their immediate supervisor, was fifty but looked significantly older, with a deeply wrinkled face, uncombed salt-and-pepper hair, and a growing potbelly he couldn't hide with his oversized dress shirts. As usual, he wore a jacket and tie but the former was ill-fitting and the latter was ridiculously loose.

“Good. I’m glad you’re both here,” he said, skipping any kind of greeting. “Come with me. You’ve got a case.”

They followed him back to his office and both took seats on the weathered loveseat against the wall. Knowing she likely wouldn’t have a chance to eat later, Keri scarfed down her salad while Hillman read them in. She noticed that Ray had already finished the sandwich he’d stolen before they sat down. Hillman dove right in.

“Your possible victim is a sixteen-year-old girl from Westchester, Sarah Caldwell. She hasn’t been seen since lunchtime. Parents called her multiple times, saying they couldn’t reach her.”

“They’re freaking out because their teenage daughter didn’t call them back?” Ray asked skeptically. “Sounds like pretty much every family in America.”

Keri didn’t reply despite her natural inclination to disagree. She and Ray had argued this point many times. She thought he was too slow to sign onto cases like this. He felt that her personal experience made her far too likely to jump in prematurely. It was a constant source of friction and she didn’t feel like getting into it at this moment. But Hillman apparently was willing.

“I thought so too at first,” Hillman said, “but they were very convincing that their daughter would never go this long without checking in. They also tried to check her location using the GPS on her smartphone. It was turned off.”

“That’s a little weird, but still,” Ray reiterated.

“Listen, it may be nothing. But they were insistent, panicked even. And they noted that the policy of being missing for twenty-four hours before starting a search doesn’t apply to minors. You two don’t have any pressing cases right now so I told them you’d stop by to take their statement. Hell, the girl may be home by the time you get there. But it won’t do any harm. And this keeps our asses covered on the off chance something is up.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Keri said, standing up to go with her mouth full of her last bite of salad.

“Of course it sounds good to you,” Ray muttered as he took the address from Hillman. “Another wild goose chase for you to drag me on.”

“You know you love it,” Keri said, walking out the door ahead of him.

“Could you two please be a little more professional when you get to the Caldwells’?” Hillman shouted through the open door after them. “I’d like them to think we’re at least pretending to take them seriously.”

Keri tossed her salad container in the trash and headed for the parking lot. Ray had to jog to keep up with her. As they reached the exit, he leaned in and whispered to her.

“Don’t think you’re off the hook on whatever it is you’re keeping secret from me. You can tell me now or you can tell me later. But I know something’s going on with you.”

Keri tried not to visibly react. There *was* something going on. And she did plan to fill him in when it was safe to do so. But

she needed to find a more secure location to tell her partner, best friend, and potential boyfriend that she might be on the verge of finally catching her daughter's abductor.

CHAPTER TWO

As they pulled up in front of the Caldwell house, Keri's stomach suddenly clenched up.

No matter how often she met with the family of a potentially abducted child, she was always taken back to that moment when she first saw her own little girl, just eight years old, being carried across the bright green grass of a park by a malevolent stranger in a baseball cap pulled low to hide his face.

She felt the same familiar panic rising in her throat now that she'd experienced as she chased the man through the gravel parking lot and saw him toss Evie into his white van like a rag doll. She relived the horror of seeing the teenager who'd tried to stop the man get stabbed to death.

She winced at the memory of the pain she'd felt as she ran barefoot on the gravel lot, ignoring the sharp bits of rock that embedded in her feet as she tried to catch up to the van that was peeling out and driving off. She recalled the sense of helplessness that had overcome her as she realized the van had no license plates and she had almost no description to offer the police.

Ray was familiar with how much she was always affected by this moment and sat quietly in the driver's seat while she worked through the cycle of emotions and gathered herself for what was to come.

"You good?" he asked, when he saw her body finally relax

slightly.

“Almost,” she said, pulling down the visor mirror and giving herself one last check to make sure she wasn’t a total mess.

The person staring back at her looked much healthier than she had just a few months ago. The black circles she used to have under her brown eyes were no longer there and they weren’t bloodshot. Her skin was less blotchy. Her dirty blonde hair, while still pulled back in a utilitarian ponytail, wasn’t greasy and unwashed.

Keri was closing in on her thirty-six birthday but she looked better than she had at any point since Evie was taken five years earlier. She wasn’t sure if it was because of the sense of hope she’d had since the Collector had hinted all those weeks ago that he’d be in touch.

Or maybe it was the real possibility of romance with Ray on the horizon. It could also have been recently moving out of the ratty houseboat she’d called home for several years into a real apartment. Or it might have had to do with her reduced consumption of large quantities of single malt scotch.

Whatever it was, she noticed more men than usual turning their heads when she walked by these days. She didn’t mind it, if only because for the first time in forever, she felt like she had some power over her often out-of-control life.

She flipped the visor back up and turned to Ray.

“Ready,” she said.

As they walked up to the front door, Keri took in the

neighborhood. This was the northernmost part of Westchester, adjacent to the 405 freeway and just south of the Howard Hughes Center, a large retail and office complex that dominated the skyline in this part of town.

Westchester had a reputation as a working-class neighborhood, and most of the homes were of the modest, one-story variety. But even those had exploded in cost in the last half dozen years. As a result, the community was a mix of old-timers who'd lived here forever and young, professional families who didn't want to live in cookie-cutter developments but somewhere with personality. Keri guessed these folks were the latter.

The door opened before they even got to the porch and out stepped a clearly worried couple. Keri was surprised at their age. The woman – petite, Hispanic, with a no-nonsense pixie cut – looked to be in her mid-fifties. She wore a nice but well-worn women's suit and old but immaculately maintained black shoes.

The man was easily half a foot taller than her. He was white, balding with tufts of grayish-blond hair, and spectacles hanging around his neck. He was at least as old as her and probably closer to sixty. He was more casually dressed than she was, in comfortable slacks and a crisp, buttoned-down plaid dress shirt. His brown loafers were scuffed and one of his laces was undone.

“Are you the detectives?” the woman asked, reaching out her hand to shake theirs even before getting confirmation.

“Yes, ma'am,” Keri answered, taking the lead. “I'm Detective Keri Locke of LAPD's West Los Angeles Pacific Division

Missing Persons Unit. This is my partner, Detective Raymond Sands.”

“Good to meet you folks,” Ray said.

The woman beckoned them in as she spoke.

“Thank you for coming. My name is Mariela Caldwell. This is my husband, Edward.”

Edward nodded but didn’t speak. Keri sensed that they didn’t know how to begin so she took the initiative.

“Why don’t we have a seat in the kitchen and you can tell us what has you so concerned?”

“Of course,” Mariela said, and led them through a narrow hallway adorned with photos of a dark-haired girl with a warm smile. There had to be at least twenty photos covering her entire life from birth until now. They came to a small but well-appointed breakfast nook. “Can I offer you anything – coffee, a snack?”

“No thank you, ma’am,” Ray said as he tried to squeeze against the wall to maneuver around and into a chair. “Let’s all just sit down and get as much information as possible as quickly as we can. Why don’t you start by telling us what has you worried? My understanding is that Sarah has only been out of touch for a few hours.”

“Almost five hours now,” Edward said, speaking for the first time as he sat down across from Ray. “She called her mother at noon to say she was meeting up with a friend she hadn’t seen in a while. It’s almost five p.m. now. She knows she’s supposed to

check in every couple of hours when she goes out, even if it's only a text to say where she is."

"She doesn't ever forget?" Ray asked, keeping his tone neutral so that only Keri caught his underlying skepticism. Neither of the Caldwells spoke for a moment and Keri worried that Ray had offended them. Finally Mariela answered.

"Detective Sands, I know it may be hard to believe. But no, she doesn't ever forget. Ed and I had Sarah later in life. After many failed attempts, we were blessed by her arrival. She is our only child and I admit that we are both a little, what's the word, hovering?"

"Helicopter parents," Ed added with a wry smile.

Keri smiled too. She could hardly blame them.

"Anyway," Mariela continued, "Sarah knows that she is our dearest love in the world and amazingly, she doesn't resent it or feel stifled. We bake together on weekends. She still loves to go to 'take your daughter to work' days with her father. She even came with me to a Motley Crue concert a few months ago. She dotes on us. And because she knows how precious she is to us, she is very diligent about keeping us in the loop. We established the 'text where you are' policy. But she's the one who chose the two-hour rule."

Keri watched both of them closely as they spoke. Mariela's hand was in Ed's and he was gently stroking the back of hers with his thumb. He waited until she was done, then spoke up.

"And even if she did forget, for the first time ever, she

wouldn't have gone this long without getting in touch or replying to any of our texts or calls. Between us, we've texted her a dozen times and called half a dozen. In my last message I told her I was calling the police. If she had received any of those, she would have reached out. And as I said to your lieutenant, the GPS on her phone is turned off. That's never happened before."

That unsettling detail hung in the room, threatening to overwhelm everything else. Keri tried to squelch any movement in the direction of panic by quickly asking the next question.

"Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell, may I ask why Sarah wasn't in school today? It is a Friday."

Both of them looked at her with surprised expressions. Even Ray appeared taken aback.

"It's the day after Thanksgiving," Mariela said. "There's no school today."

Keri felt her heart drop into her gut. Only a parent would know that kind of detail and for all practical purposes, she no longer was one.

Evie would be thirteen now. Under normal circumstances, Keri would have been negotiating how to ensure child care for her daughter so she could work today. But she hadn't had normal circumstances in a long time.

The rituals associated with school breaks and family holidays had faded away in recent years to the point where something that used to be obvious to her no longer registered.

She tried to respond but it came out as an unintelligible cough.

Her eyes got watery and she lowered her head so no one could see. Ray came to her rescue.

“So Sarah had the day off but you didn’t?” he asked.

“No,” Ed answered. “I own a small paint store in the Westchester Triangle. It’s not like I’m rolling around in money. I can’t take many days off – Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year’s – that’s about it.”

“And I’m a paralegal for a big law firm in El Segundo. Normally I’d be off today but we’re prepping a huge case for trial and they needed all hands on deck.”

Keri cleared her throat and, confident that she had control of herself, rejoined the conversation.

“Who is this friend Sarah was meeting?” she asked.

“Her name is Lanie Joseph,” Mariela said. “Sarah used to be friends with her in elementary school. But when we moved here from our old neighborhood, they lost touch. Frankly, I wish it had stayed that way.”

“What do you mean?” Keri asked.

Mariela hesitated, so Ed jumped in.

“We used to live in South Culver City. It’s not very far away from here but that area is much more hardscrabble. The streets are rougher and so are the kids. Lanie had an edge that always made us a bit uncomfortable, even when she was young. It’s gotten worse. I don’t mean to be judgmental, but we think she’s headed down a dangerous road.”

“We scrimped and saved,” Mariela jumped in, clearly

uncomfortable at casting aspersions among strangers. “The year Sarah started middle school we moved here. We bought this place just before the market exploded. It’s small but we’d never be able to buy it now. It was tight even then. But she needed a fresh start with different kids.”

“So they lost touch,” Ray prodded gently. “What made them reconnect recently?”

“They’d see each other a couple of times a year but that was about it,” Ed answered. “But Sarah told us that Lanie texted her yesterday and said she really wanted to meet – that she needed her advice. She didn’t say why.”

“Of course,” Mariela added, “because she’s such a sweet, caring girl, she agreed without hesitation. I remember her telling me last night, ‘What kind of friend would I be, Mama, if I didn’t help someone when they needed it most?’”

Mariela broke off, overcome with emotion. Keri saw Ed give her hand a little squeeze of support. She envied these two. Even in a moment of near-panic, they were a united front, finishing one another’s sentences, backstopping each other emotionally. Somehow their shared devotion and love was keeping them from falling apart. Keri remembered a time when she thought she’d had the same thing.

“Did Sarah say where they were meeting?” she asked.

“No, they hadn’t decided as of noon. But I’m sure it was somewhere close – maybe the Howard Hughes Center or Fox Hills Mall. Sarah doesn’t drive yet so it would have to be

somewhere with easy bus access.”

Can you give us a few recent photos of her?” Keri asked Mariela, who immediately got up to get some.

“Is Sarah on social media?” Ray asked.

“She’s on Facebook. Instagram, Twitter. I don’t know what else. Why?” asked Ed.

“Sometimes kids will share details on their accounts that are helpful to investigations. Do you know any of her passwords?”

“No,” Mariela said as she pulled a few pictures from their frames. “We’ve never had cause to ask for them. She shows us posts on her accounts all the time. She never seems to be hiding anything. We’re even Facebook friends. I just never felt the need to ask for that kind of thing. Is there no way you can get access to those?”

“We can,” Keri told her. “But without the passwords, it takes time. We have to get a court order. And right now we don’t have probable cause.”

“What about the GPS being off?” Ed asked.

“That helps make the case,” Keri answered. “But at this point everything’s circumstantial at best. You’ve both made a compelling argument for why this situation is so unusual. But on paper, it might not look that way to a judge. But don’t let that upset you too much. We’re just starting out here. This is what we do – investigate. And I’d like to start by going to Lanie’s house and speaking to her folks. Do you have her address?”

“I do,” Mariela said, handing Keri several photos of Sarah

before pulling out her phone and scrolling through her contacts. “But I don’t know how much help it will be. Lanie’s father is out of the picture and her mother is...uninvolved. But if you think it will help, here it is.”

Keri wrote down the information and everyone made their way to the front door. They shook hands formally, which struck Keri as odd for people who’d just been discussing something so intimate.

She and Ray were halfway down the path to his car when Edward Caldwell called out after them with one last question.

“I’m sorry to ask this but you said you were just getting started. That makes it sound like this might be a long process. But my understanding is that in the case of a missing person, the first twenty-four hours are crucial. Is that wrong?”

Keri and Ray looked at each other and then back at Caldwell. Neither was sure who should answer. Finally Ray spoke.

“That’s not wrong, sir. But we don’t yet have any indication that anything suspicious has happened. And in any case, you reached out to us quickly. That helps a lot. I know this is hard to hear but try not to worry. I promise we’ll be in touch.”

They turned and walked back to the car. When Keri was sure they were out of earshot, she quietly muttered, “Good lying.”

“I wasn’t lying. Everything I said was true. She could turn up back home any minute and this will be over.”

“I guess,” Keri conceded. “But all my instincts are telling me this one isn’t going to be that easy.”

CHAPTER THREE

Keri sat in the passenger seat on the way to Culver City, quietly flagellating herself. She tried to remind herself that she hadn't done anything wrong. But she was wracked by the guilt of forgetting something as simple as today not being a school day. Even Ray hadn't been able to hide his surprise at it.

She was losing touch with the parent part of her and it scared her. How long would it be before she forgot other, more personal details? A few weeks ago, she'd been given anonymous clues which led to a photo of a teenage girl. But Keri, much to her shame, hadn't been able to tell if it was Evie.

True, it had been five years and the picture was grainy and taken from far away. But the fact that she just didn't immediately know if the photo was of her daughter or not had shaken her. Even after the unit's resident tech guru, Detective Kevin Edgerton, had told her that his digital comparison of the picture to photos of Evie at eight years old was inconclusive for a match, her sense of shame lingered.

I should have just known. A good mother would have known if it was real right away.

"We're here," Ray said quietly, snapping her out of her reverie.

Keri looked up and realized they were parked just up the street from Lanie Joseph's house. The Caldwells had been right. This area, while less than five miles from their home, was much

rougher-looking.

It was still only 5:30, but the sun had already mostly set and the temperature was dropping. Small groups of young men in gang attire were gathering in driveways and on stoops, drinking beers and smoking what didn't look like cigarettes. Most of the lawns were more brown than green and the sidewalks were cracked everywhere, with weeds fighting their way through the spaces. Most of the residences on the block looked to be townhouses or duplexes and all of them had bars on the windows and heavy metal screen doors.

"What do you think – should we call Culver City PD for backup?" Ray asked. "Technically, we're out of our jurisdiction."

"Nah. It'll take too long and I want to stay low profile, get in and out. The more formal we make this, the longer it's going to take. If something did happen to Sarah, we don't have time to waste."

"Okay, then let's get to it," he said.

They got out of the car and walked briskly to the address Mariela Caldwell had given them. Lanie lived in the front of a two-unit townhouse on Corinth, just south of Culver Boulevard. The 405 freeway was so close that Keri could identify the hair color of passing drivers.

As Ray knocked on the outer metal door, Keri glanced two houses over at five men huddled around the engine of a Corvette sitting on blocks in the driveway. Several of them cast suspicious looks at the interlopers but no one said anything.

The sound of multiple kids screeching came from inside. After a minute, the inner door was opened by a small blond boy who couldn't have been more than five. He wore holes-pocked jeans and a white T-shirt with a homemade Superman-style "S" scrawled on it.

He stared up at Ray, his neck craning all the way back. Then he looked over at Keri, and apparently viewing her as less threatening, he spoke.

"What you want, lady?"

Keri sensed that the kid didn't get a lot of sweetness and light in his life, so she knelt down to his level and spoke in as gentle a voice as she could muster.

"We're police officers. We need to speak to your mommy for a minute."

The kid, unfazed, turned and shouted back into the house.

"Mom. Cops are here. Want to talk to you." Apparently this wasn't the first time he'd had a visit from law enforcement.

Keri saw Ray glance over at the guys around the Corvette and without looking herself, asked him quietly, "We got a problem over there?"

"Not yet," Ray answered under his breath. "But we could soon. We should make this quick."

"What kind of cops are you?" the little boy demanded. "No uniforms. You undercover? You detectives?"

"Detectives," Ray told him and apparently deciding the boy didn't need to be coddled, asked his own question. "When's the

last time you saw Lanie?”

“Oh, Lanie’s in trouble again,” he said, a gleeful grin consuming his face. “No surprise there. She left at lunchtime to see her smart friend. I guess she was hoping some of it would rub off on her. Don’t bet on it.”

Just then a woman wearing sweatpants and a heavy, gray sweatshirt that said “Keep Walking” appeared at the end of the hall. As she lumbered toward them Keri took her in. She was about Keri’s height but weighed well over 200 pounds.

Her pale skin seemed to merge with the gray sweatshirt, making it impossible to clearly tell where one ended and the other began. Her grayish-blond hair was pulled back in a loose bun that was in danger of falling apart completely.

Keri guessed that she was younger than forty but her exhausted, worn face could have passed for fifty. She had bags under her eyes and her puffy face was dotted with gin blossoms, possibly alcohol-induced. It was clear that she had once been quite attractive but the weight of life seemed to have drained her and you could only see flashes of pretty around the edges now.

“What’s she done now?” the woman asked, even less surprised than her son to see police at her door.

“You’re Mrs. Joseph?” Keri asked.

“I haven’t been Mrs. Joseph for seven years. That’s when Mr. Joseph left me for a massage therapist named Kayley. Now I’m Mrs. Hart, although Mr. Hart cleared out without a proper goodbye about eighteen months ago. But it’s too much trouble to

change the name again so I'm stuck with it for now."

"So you're Lanie Joseph's mother," Ray said, trying to get her on track. "But your name is...?"

"Joanie Hart. I'm the mother of five hellions, including the one you're here about. So what exactly did she do this time?"

"We're not sure she's done anything, Ms. Hart," Keri assured her, not wanting to create unnecessary conflict with a woman who was clearly comfortable with it. "But the parents of her friend Sarah Caldwell haven't been able to reach her and they're worried. Have you heard from Lanie since about noon today?"

Joanie Hart looked at her like she was from another planet.

"I don't keep tabs like that," she said. "I was working all day; 7-Eleven doesn't close just cuz yesterday was Thanksgiving, you know? I only got back about a half hour ago. So I don't know where she is. But that's not special. She's gone half the time and she never tells me where she's going. That one loves to keep secrets. I think she's got some guy she doesn't want me to know about."

"Did she ever mention this guy's name?"

"Like I said, I don't even know if he exists. I'm just saying I wouldn't put it past her. She likes to do things to piss me off. But I'm too tired or busy to get angry so that pisses *her* off. You know how it is," she said, looking at Keri, who had no idea how it was.

Keri felt her anger rising at this woman who didn't seem to know or care where her daughter was. Joanie hadn't asked about her well-being or expressed any concern at all. Ray seemed to

sense how she was feeling and spoke before she could.

“Can we get Lanie’s phone number and a recent photo of her, please?” he asked.

Joanie looked put out but didn’t say so.

“Give me a second,” she said and wandered back down the hall.

Keri looked at Ray, who shook his head in shared disgust.

“You mind if I wait in the car?” Keri said. “I’m worried I’m going to say something...unproductive to Joanie.”

“Go ahead. I got this. Maybe you can call Edgerton and see if he can bend the rules to access their social media accounts.”

“Raymond Sands, my stars,” she said, rediscovering a bit of her sense of humor. “You seem to be adopting some of my more questionable law enforcement methods. I think I like it.”

She turned on her heel and walked off before he could respond. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that the men two doors down were all watching her. She zipped up her jacket, suddenly aware of the cold. Late November in Los Angeles was pretty tame, but with the sun gone, the temperature was in the low fifties. And all those eyes on her added an extra shiver.

When she got to the car, she turned and leaned with her back against it so she could maintain a good view of both Lanie’s house and her neighbors as she dialed Edgerton’s number.

“Edgerton here,” came the enthusiastic voice of Kevin Edgerton, the unit’s youngest detective. He may have been only twenty-eight, but the tall, lanky kid was a tech genius who was

responsible for cracking many cases.

In fact, he'd been instrumental in helping Keri get in touch with the Collector while shielding her own identity. Keri imagined that right now, he was brushing the longish brown bangs out of his eyes. Why he didn't just get his sloppy, millennial hair cut was beyond her, as were most of his technical abilities.

"Hey, Kevin, it's Keri. I need a favor. I want you to see if you can access a couple of social media accounts for me. One is for Sarah Caldwell from Westchester, age sixteen. The other is Lanie Joseph, Culver City, also sixteen. And please don't give me a hassle over warrants and probable cause. We're dealing with exigent circumstances here and –"

"Got it," Edgerton interrupted.

"What? Already?" Keri asked, stunned.

"Well, not Caldwell. All her accounts are password-protected and require her approval to view. I can crack them if you need. But I'm hoping we can avoid any sticky legal situations just using Joseph's stuff. She's an open book. Anyone can look at her pages. I'm doing it now."

"Do they say anything about where she was today after about noon?" Keri asked, as she noticed three of the men from the Corvette driveway walking toward her.

The two other men remained behind, their focus on Ray, who was still standing at the Hart front door, waiting for Joanie to find a recent photo of her daughter. Keri readjusted herself slightly so that even though she was still leaning against the car, her weight

was more evenly distributed in case she had to move suddenly.

“She hasn’t posted on Facebook since last night but there are a bunch of posts on Instagram of her with another girl, I’m assuming Caldwell. They’re from the Fox Hills Mall. One’s in a clothing store. Another’s at a makeup counter. The last one is of her at what looks like a food court table, eating a pretzel. The caption says ‘yummy.’ It’s from two oh six p.m.”

The three men were crossing into the Harts’ yard now and were less than twenty feet from Keri.

“Thanks, Kevin. One last thing – I’m going to send you cell phone numbers for both girls. I’m betting the GPS was shut off in both of them but I need you to track their last known location before that happened,” she said as the men came to a stop in front of her. “I’ve got to go. I’ll get back to you if I need more.”

Keri hung up before he could respond and slid the phone into her pocket. Along the way, she inconspicuously unsnapped the holster of her weapon.

Glancing at the men but not saying a word, she still leaned against the car but lifted her right leg so that her foot rested against the vehicle. That way she would have extra power if she needed to propel herself forward.

“Evening, gentlemen,” she finally said in a firm, friendly tone, “a little nippy out tonight, don’t you think?”

One of them, clearly the alpha, sniggered and turned to his friends. “Did this bitch just say it was nippy?” He was Hispanic, short, and a little paunchy in the face, but his bulky flannel shirt

hid his frame, making it hard for Keri to tell what she might be up against. The other guys were both tall and skinny with the shirts hanging off skeletal frames. One was white and the other was Hispanic. Keri took a moment to appreciate the racial diversity of this particular street gang before deciding to exploit it.

“You guys letting white boys in these days?” she asked, nodding at the odd man out. “What? Hard to find enough brown-skinned members willing to take orders from you?”

Keri didn’t love playing this card but she needed something to create division among them and she knew a lot of these gangs were very particular about membership requirements.

“That mouth is gonna get you in trouble, lady,” the Alpha hissed.

“Yeah, trouble,” repeated the tall white guy. The tall Hispanic guy remained silent.

“You always go around repeating what your boss says?” Keri asked the white guy. “You pick up any trash he drops on the ground too?”

The two men glanced at each other. Keri could tell she’d hit a sore spot. Behind them, she saw that Ray had gotten the photo of Lanie and was walking back toward them. The two remaining guys by the Corvette started to step in his direction but he gave them a sharp glare and they stopped in their tracks.

“This bitch is rude,” the white guy said, apparently unable to come up with anything more clever.

“We may have to teach you some manners,” Alpha said.

Keri noticed the tall, quiet Hispanic guy with them tense up at that. And suddenly she understood the dynamic among these three. Alpha was the hothead. White was the follower. Quiet was the peacemaker. He hadn't come over to join in any trouble. He was trying to prevent it. But he hadn't found a way in yet and that was partly Keri's fault. She decided to throw him a lifeline and see if he'd use it.

"You two twins?" she asked him as she nodded at White.

He looked at her for a second, clearly unsure what to make of the comment. She gave him a wink and the tension seemed to seep from his body. He almost smiled.

"Identical," he answered, taking the opening.

"Yo, Carlos, we ain't twins, man," White said, not sure whether to be confused or angry.

"No, man," Alpha jumped in, temporarily forgetting his anger. "Bitch is right. It's hard to tell you two apart. We need to pin some tags on you, right?"

He and Carlos laughed and White joined in, although he still looked perplexed.

"How we doing over here?" Ray asked, startling all three of them. Before they could get riled again, Keri jumped in.

"I think we're good," she said. "Detective Ray Sands, I'd like to introduce you to Carlos and his twin brother. And this is their dear friend...what's your name?"

"Cecil," he said willingly.

"This is Cecil. They like Corvettes and chatting older ladies

up. But unfortunately, we're going to have to leave you to the car repair, gentlemen. We'd like to stay, but you know how it is with LAPD – always working. Unless, that is, you'd like us to stick around and discuss manners a little more. Would you like that, Cecil?"

Cecil took a look at all 230 pounds of Ray, then back at Keri, seemingly unruffled by his insults, and apparently decided he'd had enough.

"Nah, it's aight. Y'all go on and do your LAPD thing. We busy with car repair, like you said."

"Well, you guys have great night, okay?" Keri said with a level of enthusiasm that only Carlos noticed bleeding into mockery. They nodded and headed back to the Corvette as Keri and Ray got in their car.

"That could have gone worse," Ray said.

"Yeah, I know you're still not a hundred percent from that gunshot wound. I figured I shouldn't get you involved in an altercation with five gang members if I could help it."

"Thanks for looking out for your invalid partner," Ray said as he pulled out into the street

"Don't mention it," Keri said, ignoring the sarcasm.

"So did Edgerton have any luck with the social media stuff?"

"He did. We need to go to Fox Hills Mall."

"What's there?"

"I'm hoping those girls," Keri said, "but I've got a feeling we aren't going to be that lucky."

CHAPTER FOUR

The second Sarah woke up, she felt like she needed to vomit. Her vision was blurry and so was her head. There was a bright light shining down on her and it took a second to realize she was lying on a threadbare mattress in a small, otherwise nearly empty room.

She blinked a couple of times and her eyesight cleared up enough for her to see a small plastic garbage can lying on the floor beside the mattress. She leaned over and pulled it to her, retching into it for a full thirty seconds, ignoring her watery eyes and even more watery nose.

She heard a noise, looked in that direction, and saw that someone had pulled back a black curtain to reveal that she wasn't actually in a small room at all. She was in a cavernous warehouse. As far as the eye could see, there were other mattresses. And on almost all of them were girls her age, all scantily clad or naked.

Some were alone, either sleeping, or more likely passed out. Others were with men, who were having their way with them. Some of the girls struggled, others lay there helplessly, and a few didn't seem to even be conscious while they were being violated. Sarah's mind was foggy but she guessed there were at least twenty girls in the warehouse.

Someone stepped into view. It was Chiqy, the huge guy with the long beard from Dean's room. Suddenly, Sarah's head cleared

and the observational distance she'd felt while taking in her surroundings disappeared. Her heart began to pound and she felt a creeping terror take hold of her.

Where am I? What is this place? Why do I feel so weak?

She tried to sit upright as Chiqy moved closer but her arms collapsed under her and she slumped back onto the mattress. That made Chiqy chuckle.

"Don't try to get up," he said, "the drugs we gave you make you clumsy. You might fall and break something. And we can't have that. It would be bad for business. Clients prefer that if any bones get broken, they're the ones doing it."

"What did you do to me?" she demanded hoarsely, trying to sit up again.

Before she knew what was happening, Chiqy backhanded her across the face, knocking her back onto the mattress and sending an explosion of pain from her cheekbone to her ear. As she gasped for air and tried to regain her equilibrium, he leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"You gonna learn, little miss. You don't raise your voice. You don't talk back unless a client wants it. You don't ask questions. Chiqy in charge. You follow my rules, you'll be okay. You don't, then not so okay. We clear?"

Sarah nodded.

"Good. Then listen up cuz here come the rules. First, you're my property. I own you. I may loan you out but never forget who you belong to. You understand?"

Sarah, her cheek still throbbing from his slap, nodded meekly. Even as she tried to wrap her head around the situation, she knew that openly challenging Chiqy in her current condition was unwise.

“Second, you gonna satisfy my clients’ needs. You don’t gotta love it, although who knows, maybe you’ll take to it. That don’t matter. You do what the client says, no matter what. If you don’t, I’ll beat you ’til your insides bleed. I have ways of doing that so you still look pretty for the clients. On the outside, you’ll look like angel. But on the inside, you’ll be all pulp. We clear?”

Again Sarah nodded. She tried to prop herself up again and squinted in the bright light, hoping to get her bearings. She didn’t recognize any of the other girls. Suddenly a cold chill ran up her spine.

Where’s Lanie?

“Can you tell me what happened to my friend?” she asked in what she hoped wasn’t a challenging voice.

Before she knew what was happening, Chiqy had slapped her again, this time on the other cheek. The force of it slammed her down against the mattress hard.

“I wasn’t done,” she heard him say despite her ringing ears. “The last rule is you don’t speak unless I ask you a question. Like I said, you’re gonna learn fast that being uppity doesn’t pay around here. You got it?”

Sarah nodded, noticing her head throb as she did.

“But that question I’ll answer,” Chiqy said with a cruel smile

on his face. He pointed at a mattress about fifteen feet away.

Sarah looked over and saw a man who looked to be in his sixties on top of a girl whose head was slumped to the side. Just then, the man grabbed her chin and lifted her face so he could kiss her.

Sarah nearly gagged again as she realized it was Lanie. She was naked from the waist down and her black tank top was up around her neck, revealing her bra. When the man lost interest in her lips, he let go and her head lolled in Sarah's direction.

She could tell that her friend was conscious, if only barely. Her heavy-lidded eyes were barely slits and she didn't seem to be aware of her surroundings. Her body was limp and she didn't physically react to the things being done to her.

Sarah took it all in but somehow the horror of the moment seemed like it was happening far away, on a distant planet. Maybe it was the drugs. Maybe it was getting hit in the face twice. But she felt numb.

Maybe I should be grateful for that.

"She was hard to handle so we had to calm her down a lot," Chiqy said. "That could be you. Or if you don't fight so much, we won't have to give you the sleepy shot. It's up to you."

Sarah looked at him and started to answer but then remembered the rules and bit her tongue. Chiqy saw it and smiled.

"Good. You're a quick learner," he said. "You can talk."

"No sleepy shot," she pleaded.

“Okay, we’ll try it clean. But if you...struggle, it’s the needle for you. Understand?”

Sarah nodded. Chiqy, a satisfied smile on his face, nodded back and stepped out, pulling the curtain closed behind him.

Not knowing how long she had, Sarah looked around desperately, trying to take stock of her situation. She was still wearing her jeans and teal top, which suggested nothing had been done to her yet. She checked her pockets for her phone, change purse, and ID but they were all gone. No shock there.

A loud female groan from somewhere nearby snapped her out of her numbness and she felt something approaching panic seep in. She welcomed it as it came with a jolt of adrenaline that sharpened her mind and gave her greater control over her limbs.

Think, Sarah, while you still can. You’ve been gone awhile. People are looking for you. There is no way Mom and Dad would wait this long for you to get in touch without calling the cops. If they’re looking for you, you have to give them some kind of clue, something to let them know you were here, in case something happens.

She glanced down at her shirt. Had she told her mom what she was wearing today? No, but she had FaceTimed with her this morning so she’d seen her outfit. She’d remember it for sure. After all, they’d bought it together at the Cabazon outlet mall.

She reached down and tore off a strip about two inches long at the seam near the waist, where it was weakest. She was debating where to leave it when she heard two male voices approaching.

Just as the curtain was yanked open again, she shoved the fabric under the mattress so that only a small piece was visible.

Trying to act as casual as possible, she looked over at the men. One was Chiqy. The other was a short white guy in his forties, wearing a suit and tie. He had on glasses, which he took off and placed on top of his shoes after he slid them off and placed them near the curtain.

“How old is she?” he asked.

“Sixteen,” Chiqy answered.

“A little mature for my taste but she will most definitely do,” he said as he approached the mattress.

“Remember what I told you,” Chiqy warned her.

She nodded. He seemed satisfied and started to head off when the man said, “A little privacy please.”

Chiqy reluctantly pulled the curtain closed. The man stood over her and stared down, his eyes wandering everywhere. She felt ill.

He began to undress and Sarah used the time to decide her next move. She wasn't going to let this happen. Of that she was sure. If they killed her so be it. But she was not going to end up some sex slave. She just had to wait for an opening.

It didn't take long.

The man had taken off his pants and boxers and was crawling toward her. He was squinting slightly and she could tell that without his glasses, he was slightly uncertain. Soon he was right above her on his hands and knees.

No time like the present.

In one swift motion, Sarah brought her right leg up to her chest and thrust her foot forward, slamming the ball of her shoe into the man's crotch. He immediately grunted and collapsed on top of her.

She had been expecting that and rolled his crumpled torso off her. Then she scurried to her feet and hurried to the curtain. The man was behind her moaning and trying to speak. She poked her head out and looked around.

At the far end of the warehouse, she saw the main door. But between her location and freedom were countless occupied mattresses and at least half a dozen men walking around, keeping tabs on things. There was no way she could make it that far.

But maybe she could find a back door if she kept in the shadows close to the wall. She was about to step out when she heard the man's voice, strangled and pained, but clear.

"Help!"

She was out of time. Stepping out from behind the curtain, she dashed to the left, looking for anything that resembled a door. She made it about twenty feet before a guy appeared, blocking her path.

She spun around and started in the other direction but ran directly into Chiqy, who wrapped a huge arm around her. She could barely move.

Several feet away, she saw the man who'd been wearing the suit. He was doubled over, but standing up. He was still pantsless.

Reaching up his hand, he pointed at her.

“I want her for half-price after this.”

Sarah saw Chiqy pull something from his pocket and realized what it was – a syringe. She tried to break free but it was no use. She felt a sharp prick in her arm.

“I warned you we’d have to use the sleepy shot if you were bad,” he said, sounding almost apologetic.

She sensed his grip loosening but realized that it was only because she was losing all muscle control. Chiqy felt it too and let her go. By the time she slumped to the floor, she was completely unconscious.

CHAPTER FIVE

Keri was jumpy and nervous as she sat in the waiting room of the Fox Hills Mall security office. For the fourth time in the last fifteen minutes the same thought went through her head: this is taking too long.

One of the security guards was searching for footage of the food court from around 2 p.m., when Lanie had posted her last Instagram photo. It was taking forever, either because the system was old or the guard was inept.

Ray sat in the chair beside her, chowing down on a chicken wrap he'd picked up when they had visited the food court. Keri's wrap sat in her lap, mostly untouched.

Despite the fact that it was 6:30 and the girls had only been out of touch for about four and a half hours, Keri had the creeping sensation that something was very off with this case, even if she didn't yet have the evidence to prove it.

"Do you have to swallow that thing all in one go?" she asked Ray sourly.

He stopped in mid-chew and gave her a quizzical look before asking, with his mouth full, "What's eating you?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't yell at you. I'm just frustrated that this is taking so long. If these girls really were abducted, all this fiddling about is wasting valuable time."

"Let's give the guy two more minutes. If he doesn't have it by

then, we'll bring down the hammer. Fair?"

"Fair," Keri replied and took a small bite of her wrap.

"I know you're annoyed about this," Ray said, "but there is clearly something else going on with you. I think it has to do with whatever you were holding back at the station. We've got a little time now. So fill me in."

Keri looked at him and could tell that even with the piece of lettuce in his teeth making him look ridiculous, he wasn't joking around.

You're closer to this man than anyone else in the world. He deserves to know. Just tell him.

"Okay," she said. "Hold on though."

She pulled out the small bug and camera detector she'd been keeping in her purse and motioned for Ray to follow her into the hall.

The contraption was recommended to her by a security and surveillance expert she'd once helped out on a case. He said that it was a good combination of portability, reliability, and decent price, and so far, he seemed to be right.

In the weeks since the lawyer Jackson Cave hinted that he'd be keeping close tabs on her, she'd found several eavesdropping devices. One bug had been put in the lamp on her office desk. She suspected a member of the cleaning staff had been bribed to place it there.

She had also found both a camera and an audio bug in her new apartment. The bug was in the living room and the camera had

been set up in the bedroom. She had also found a bug inside her car's steering wheel and another in the sun visor of Ray's car.

Edgerton had added extra protections on her office desktop to specifically hunt for tracking software. So far, nothing had been discovered. But she played it safe and avoided using it for anything other than official business.

Her cell phone was clean so far, probably because it never left her side. It was the only device through which she'd communicated with the Collector and was therefore the one she was most protective of.

When they reached the hall, Keri swiped herself, then Ray. She pointed to his phone. He held it out and she swiped it as well.

Ray had been through this routine many times before in the last few weeks. He was initially resistant but after Keri discovered the bug in his car, he no longer balked. In fact, he'd wanted to rip it and all the others out of their locations.

She had pleaded with him to leave them in place and act like everything was normal. If Cave knew they were on to him, he'd suspect that they knew about the Collector and he might warn him to run.

Cave was already suspicious that Keri was the one who had stolen his files with dossiers on different abductors for hire. But he couldn't be sure of that. Even if he was, he didn't know how much Keri had discovered about his secret connections to this dark underworld or whether she had *him* under surveillance too. So he obviously didn't want to risk incriminating himself by

contacting the Collector if he could possibly avoid it.

He believed they were in a surveillance stalemate. And considering that Jackson Cave had a lot more information than Keri did right now, she was pretty happy with that arrangement.

She had promised Ray that when allowing the bugs to stay in place became counterproductive, she'd get rid of them, even if it tipped Cave off. They even had a code phrase that meant it was time to dump them. It was "Bondi Beach," a reference to a beach in Australia that Keri one day hoped to visit. If she said those words, Ray would know he could finally rip the device out of his visor.

"Satisfied?" he asked when she'd finished sweeping them both thoroughly.

"Yes, sorry. Listen, I got an email from our friend this morning," she said, choosing to be cryptic about the Collector even when she was sure they weren't being listened to. "He hinted that he'd be reaching out. I guess I'm just a little on edge. Every time my phone buzzes, I think it's him."

"Did he give you any kind of timetable?" Ray asked.

"No. He just said he'd be in touch soon; nothing beyond that."

"No wonder you're so agitated. I thought you were just overreacting to this case."

Keri felt the heat rise in her cheeks and stared silently at her partner, stunned at his comment. Ray seemed to know immediately that he'd gone too far and was about to try to clean it up when the security guard called out from the computer room.

“I’ve got something,” he yelled.

“You are so lucky right now,” Keri hissed angrily, storming ahead of Ray, who gave her a wide berth.

When they entered the computer room, the guard had the video footage cued up to 2:05 p.m. Sarah and Lanie were clearly visible sitting at a small table in the center of the dining area. They saw Lanie take a picture of her food with her phone, almost certainly part of the post Edgerton had found on Instagram.

After about two minutes, a tall, dark-haired guy covered in tattoos approached them. He gave Lanie a long kiss and after a few more minutes of chatting, they all got up and left.

The guard froze the image and turned to face Keri and Ray. Keri looked at the guard closely for the first time. He wore a nametag that read “Keith” and couldn’t have been more than twenty-three, with greasy, pimply skin and a hunched-over back that made him look like a scrawny Quasimodo. She pretended not to notice it as he spoke.

“I got a few solid screen grabs of the guy’s face. I put them on digital files and I can send them to your phones too if you like.”

Ray gave Keri a look that said “maybe this guy isn’t so incompetent after all” but shut it down when she glared back at him, still pissed about his “overreaction” remark.

“That would be great,” he said, turning his attention back to the guard. “Were you able to track where they went?”

“I was,” Keith said proudly and spun around to face the screen again. He switched to a different screen that showed the guy’s

movements throughout the mall, as well as those of Sarah and Lanie. They culminated with them all getting into a Trans Am and leaving the parking lot, headed in a general northbound direction.

“I tried to get the license plates on the car but all our cameras are mounted too high to see anything like that.”

“That’s okay,” Keri said. “You did really well, Keith. I’m going to give you our cell numbers for those screen grabs. I’d also like you to send them to one of our colleagues at the station so he can run facial recognition.”

“Of course,” Keith said. “I’ll do that right away. Also, I was wondering if I could ask a favor?”

Keri and Ray exchanged skeptical glances but she nodded anyway. Keith continued hesitantly.

“I’ve been planning to apply to the police academy. But I’ve held off because I don’t think I’m ready for the physical requirements yet. I was wondering if, when all this settles down, I could pick your brains for some suggestions on how to improve my chances of getting in and actually graduating?”

“Is that all?” Keri asked, pulling out a business card out and handing it to him. “Call this pituitary case over here for the physical advice. You can call me when you need some help with the mental part of the job. And one more thing. If you have to wear a nametag for work, get one with your last name on it. It’s more intimidating.”

Then she walked out, leaving Ray to mop up. He deserved it.

Back out in the hall, she texted the screen grabs of the guy to both Joanie Hart and the Caldwells, asking if either recognized him. A moment later, Ray stepped out to join her. He looked sheepish.

“Listen, Keri. I shouldn’t have said you were overreacting. Clearly there’s something going on here.”

“Is that an apology? Because I didn’t hear the words ‘I’m sorry’ anywhere in there. And while we’re at it, haven’t there been enough cases that looked like nothing to everyone but me which turned out to be something for you to give me the benefit of the doubt?”

“Yeah, but what about all the cases...?” he started to say, then thought better of it and stopped himself mid-sentence. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” Keri replied, choosing to ignore the first part of his comment and focus on the second.

Her phone buzzed and she looked down with anticipation. But instead of an email from the Collector, it was a text from Joanie Hart. It was brief and to the point: “never seen this guy.”

She showed it to Ray, shaking her head at the depths of the woman’s apparent ambivalence toward her daughter’s well-being. Just then the phone rang. It was Mariela Caldwell.

“Hi, Mrs. Caldwell. This is Detective Locke.”

“Yes, Detective. Ed and I have been looking at the photos you sent. We’ve never seen that young man. But Sarah mentioned to me that Lanie said her boyfriend looked like he should be in a

rock band. I wonder if this might be him?"

"It's quite possible," Keri said. "Did Sarah ever mention a name of this boyfriend?"

"She did. I'm pretty sure it was Dean. I don't recall a last name. I don't think she knew it either."

"Okay, thanks very much, Mrs. Caldwell."

"Is that helpful?" the woman asked in a hopeful, almost pleading voice.

"It may very well be. I don't have any new information for you yet. But I promise you, we're focused hard on finding Sarah. I'll try to update you as much as I can."

"Thank you, Detective. You know, I only realized after you left that you're the same detective who found that missing surfer girl a few months ago. And I know that, well...with your daughter..." Her voice cracked and she stopped, clearly overcome with emotion.

"It's okay, Mrs. Caldwell," Keri said, steeling herself so that she wouldn't lose it.

"I'm just so sorry about your little girl..."

"Don't worry about that right now. My focus is on finding *your* daughter. And I promise I'm going to put every ounce of energy I have into that. You just try to stay calm. Watch a crappy TV show, take a nap, do anything you can to stay sane. Meanwhile, we're on this."

"Thank you, Detective," Mariela Caldwell whispered, her voice barely audible.

Keri hung up and looked at Ray, who wore a worried expression.

“Don’t worry, partner,” she assured him. “I’m not going to lose it just yet. Now let’s find this girl.”

“How do you propose we do that?”

“I think it’s time we check in with Edgerton. He’s had long enough to review the data from the girls’ phones. And now we have a name for the guy in the food court – Dean. Maybe Lanie mentions him in one of her posts. Her mom may not know anything about him but I think that may be more due to lack of interest than Lanie hiding him.”

As they walked through the mall toward the parking lot and Ray’s car, Keri called Edgerton and put him on speaker so Ray could hear too. Edgerton picked up after one ring.

“Dean Chisolm,” he said, dispensing with any greeting.

“What?”

“The guy in the screen grabs you had sent to me is named Dean Chisolm. I didn’t even have to use facial recognition. He’s tagged in a bunch of the Joseph girl’s Facebook photos. He’s always wearing a cap pulled down or sunglasses like he’s trying to hide his identity. But he’s not very good at it. He always wears the same kind of black shirt and the tattoos are pretty distinctive.”

“Good job, Kevin,” Keri said, once again impressed by their unit’s resident tech savant. “So what do you have on him?”

“A decent amount. He’s got several drug arrests. Some are for possession, a couple for distribution, and one for being a courier.

He did four months for that one.”

“Sounds like a real solid citizen,” Ray muttered.

“That’s not all. He’s also suspected of being involved in operating a sex ring using underage girls. But no one’s ever been able to pull him in on that.”

Keri looked at Ray and saw something change in his expression. Until now, he’d clearly thought there was a more than solid chance that these girls were just out joyriding. But with the news about Dean, it was obvious that he had gone from mildly uneasy to full-on concerned.

“What do we know about this sex ring?” Keri asked.

“It’s run by a charming-looking guy named Ernesto ‘Chiqy’ Ramirez.”

“Chiqy?” Ray asked.

“I think it might be a nickname – short for *chiquito*. It means tiny. And since this guy looks to be well over three hundred pounds, I’m guessing it’s a joke.”

“Do you know where we can find Chiqy?” Keri asked, not amused.

“Unfortunately, no. He has no known address. He mostly seems to bounce around abandoned warehouses, where he sets up pop-up brothels until they get raided. But I do have some good news.”

“We’ll take anything we can get,” Ray said as they got into his car.

“I have an address on Dean Chisolm. And it just so happens

that it's the exact location where the GPS on both girls' phones shut off. I'm sending it to you now, along with a photo of Chiqy."

"Thanks, Kevin," Keri said. "By the way, we may have found a mini-Kevin working as a security guard at the mall; very tech-savvy. He wants to be a cop. I might put him in touch with you if that's cool."

"Sure. Like I always say, nerds of the world unite!"

"Is that what you always say?" Keri teased.

"I mostly think it," he admitted, then hung up before they could give him any more crap.

"You seem awfully centered for someone who just learned that the girls we're looking for may be caught up in a sex trafficking ring," Ray noted with surprise in his voice.

"I'm trying to keep it light as long as I can," Keri said. "I don't think I'm going to have the chance for much longer. But don't worry. When we find Chisolm, there's a decent chance I may do some amateur tattoo removal using my Swiss Army knife. It's nice and dull."

"Good to know you haven't lost your edge," Ray said.

"Never."

CHAPTER SIX

Keri tried to keep her heart from beating out of her chest as she crouched behind a bush on the side of Dean Chisolm's house. She forced herself to breathe slow and quiet, gripping her weapon in her hands as she waited for the uniformed officers to knock on the front door. Ray was in about the same spot as her on the other side of the house. There were two more officers in the back alley.

Despite the cool weather, Keri felt a trickle of sweat running down her spine, just under her bulletproof vest, and tried to ignore it. It was after 7 p.m. and the temperature was in the high forties now, but she'd left her jacket in the car so she'd have greater range of motion. She could only imagine how sticky she'd be if she'd left it on.

One of the officers rapped on the door, sending a jolt through her entire body. She bent a little lower to make sure no one peeking out a window could see her behind the bush. The movement caused a light twinge in her rib. She had broken several in an altercation with a child abductor two months ago. And while she was technically completely healed, certain positions still caused the rib to get grumpy.

Someone opened the door and she forced herself to shut out the street noise and listen closely.

"Are you Dean Chisolm?" she heard one of the officers ask. She could sense the nervousness in his voice and hoped whoever

he was talking to couldn't as well.

"No. He's not here right now," a youngish but surprisingly confident-sounding voice answered.

"Who are you?"

"I'm his brother, Sammy."

"How old are you Sammy?" the officer asked.

"Sixteen."

"Are you armed, Sammy?"

"No."

"Is there anyone else in the house, Sammy? Your parents maybe?"

Sammy laughed at the question before getting control of himself.

"I haven't seen my parents in a long time," he said derisively. "This is Dean's house. He bought it with his own money."

Keri had put up with just about enough of this and stepped out from behind the bush. Sammy glanced in her direction just in time to see her holster her gun. She saw his eyes widen briefly despite his best efforts to act blasé.

Sammy looked like a carbon copy of his big brother, complete with pale skin and multiple tattoos. His hair was black also but too curly to make spiky. Still, he wore the required punk uniform – black T-shirt, skinny jeans with an unnecessary chain hanging from them, and black work boots.

"How did Dean manage to buy his own house at just twenty-four years old?" she asked without introducing herself.

Sammy stared at her, trying to decide whether he could blow her off or not.

“He’s a good businessman,” he answered with a tone that hinted at defiance without completely going there.

“Business been good lately, Sammy?” she asked, moving a step forward, staying aggressive, hoping to keep the kid off balance.

The two uniformed officers stepped down so there was no one between Keri and Sammy. She didn’t know if it was a conscious decision on their parts or them just wanting to get the hell out of the middle of the confrontation. Either way, she was happy to have the floor all to herself.

“I wouldn’t know. I’m just a lowly high school student, ma’am,” he said, sounding more brazen.

“That’s not true, Samuel,” she charged, glad that she’d read the file on Chisolm that Edgerton had sent her while they drove to the house. She saw that using his given name startled him. “You dropped out last spring. You just told a lie to an LAPD detective. That’s not a great start to our relationship. Do you want to repair it?”

“What do you want?” Sammy demanded, full of guarded petulance. He was off his game now, stepping out onto the stoop against his better judgment.

He was oblivious as Ray quietly came out from around the other side of the house and set up position a few steps behind the boy. Keri stepped toward him to keep his attention on her. They

were now less than four feet away from each other.

“I want to know where Dean is,” she said, dropping the playful pretense. “And I want to know where the girls he brought over this afternoon are.”

“I don’t know where he is. He left a few hours ago. And I don’t know anything about any girls.”

Despite being a juvenile delinquent in training, Keri she knew that Sammy had never been arrested, much less served time. She could use his fear of the prospect to her advantage. She decided to go in for the kill.

“You’re not being straight with me, Samuel. And I’m losing patience with you. We both know what business your brother is in. We both know how he can afford this house. And we both know that you’re not spending your free time working on getting your GED.”

Sammy opened his mouth to protest but Keri held up her hand and barreled on without pausing.

“I’m looking for two missing teenage girls out there. They were brought here by your brother. It’s my job to find them. If you help me do that, you can lead something close to a normal life. If you don’t, it’s going to go very badly for you. This is your one chance tonight to avoid getting put in the system. Cooperate or it’s down the rabbit hole.”

Sammy stared at her, trying to keep his face untroubled. But his eyes were unnaturally fixed and his breath was shallow and quick. He kept clenching and unclenching his fists. He was

terrified.

What Sammy didn't know was that Keri didn't have a warrant. If he'd just stayed inside the house and refused to speak to them, they wouldn't have had much recourse other than to call for a warrant and wait outside until it was approved.

But by stepping outside to engage with her and leaving the door open, he'd made himself vulnerable. He didn't realize it yet but whether he agreed to help or not, they were getting in that house. His next decision really would determine his immediate future. Keri hoped he could tell she wasn't bluffing. She hoped he'd choose wisely. He did not.

"I don't know anything," he said, unaware that he was only sealing his own fate.

Keri sighed. She almost felt sorry for him.

"Did you hear that?" Ray asked.

Sammy, unaware that anyone was behind him, nearly jumped out of his boots.

"What the...?" he started to say. Ray interrupted him.

"Detective Locke, I think I heard some cries for help from inside. Can you hear them too?"

"I think I can, Detective Sands. Officers, can you hear that too?"

The two uniformed officers clearly couldn't but didn't want to be the weak links. They both nodded, and for good measure, the one who'd first knocked on the door added, "For sure."

Ray rolled his eyes at the clumsy effort but continued anyway.

“Officers, can you handcuff Mr. Chisolm and put him in the back of your car for now while Detective Locke and I check out that crying?”

“This is BS,” Sammy shouted as one of the officers grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him around to cuff him. “You can’t hear anything. This is an illegal search.”

“I’m afraid not, Sammy,” Ray said, unholstering his gun and preparing to enter the house. “Those cries we all hear create exigent circumstances. Maybe go to law school once you get that GED, buddy.”

“You should have listened to me,” Keri whispered in Sammy’s ear before she walked up the steps and pulled out her gun. Ray nodded and they both entered with weapons raised.

The place was a sty. There were empty beer cans everywhere. Fast food wrappers littered the stain-dotted carpet. Music was coming from somewhere in the back.

Keri and Ray made their way through the house quickly. Neither of them expected to find much. The fact that it was devoid of people suggested that it had only been a staging area. Girls were likely brought here thinking they were attending a party only to be drugged and then moved en masse.

Keri found the back bedroom where the relentless techno music was coming from and turned it off. She stepped into the adjoining bathroom and saw a pair of panties balled up beside the toilet.

With a creeping anxiety, Keri returned to the bedroom and

noticed something she'd missed before. There were three locks on the door. In addition to the standard one on the knob, there was both a deadbolt and a chain lock.

"Hey, Ray, come back here," she called out as she moved to get a closer look. The chain lock had lots of scuffs. It could have been her imagination, but Keri couldn't help thinking all the markings were a result of it repeatedly being locked in a rush, by someone trying to prevent people from getting out easily.

Ray stepped in the room and Keri pointed at the door.

"Lot of locks for a bedroom door," he noted, pointing out the obvious.

"I also found some panties in the bathroom," Keri said.

"There are a few other pairs strewn throughout the rest of the bedrooms too, as well as a few bras," Ray said. "I also found some coke and pot. I think we've got enough here to arrest Sammy if we want."

"Let's call in CSU to collect the drugs and see if they can find any prints. I want to take another run at Sammy. Now that he's facing real time, maybe he'll be a little more chatty, especially after sitting in the back of that squad car for a while."

"Sounds good," Ray said. "I'm going to turn on the TV to find a channel that sounds like girls screaming. You know, for the exigent circumstances and all. Got to make it look good, right?"

Keri nodded. While Ray fiddled with the remote control, she walked out to the squad car. One of the officers had turned on the flashing lights and a small crowd was developing down the street.

Keri was pleased at the effect. Everything was adding to the pressure on Sammy. She didn't want to put a sixteen-year-old kid in the system but she would if she had to, especially if the threat of doing so might rescue two abducted girls.

He was staring at her nervously through the car window as she approached him. She opened the door and knelt down to his eye level. She could go lots of ways with this kid but decided that at this point her strongest move was to just play it straight.

"We found the drugs, Sammy," she told him. "Pot, coke, who knows what else. The quantity suggests more than just possession. We're talking intent to distribute. And since you were the only one in the house, you're the only one we can pin this on. We also found female undergarments. We're bringing in our crime scene unit to check for DNA and dust for fingerprints. And I'm pretty confident we're going to find some for the girls I'm looking for, maybe others too."

Keri watched as Sammy gulped hard. She thought he might say something but he stayed silent, so she went on.

"I'm laying this all out for you so you know what you're facing. I'm not trying to trick you or play games. You're hosed, Sammy. I don't know what the sentence is for this off the top of my head. But if we can't get those girls back, I'm going to put all my energy into making sure you get the stiffest possible sentence. I'll testify against you. My partner will testify against you. I'll find a way to get the parents of these girls to testify against you, to tar you with these missing girls. Do you believe me Sammy?"

Sammy nodded.

“Good. So we’re on the same page. With that, I’m going to give you one more chance to get yourself out of this. I’m not even going to ask you to implicate your brother. I just want to know the location of the warehouse where Chiqy took those girls. You give me that and it pans out, I’ll go to bat for you with the DA. But this is a one-time-only offer. You’re only good to me as long as I still have a shot at finding these girls. What do you say, Sammy? You want a second chance at saving your own life?”

Sammy lowered his head as if lost in thought. Keri waited patiently, knowing she had pushed as hard as she could and it was now out of her hands. After a moment he raised his head again and she knew she had him.

“The warehouse is in the Valley, in North Hollywood, on Vanowen,” he nearly whispered. “I don’t know the exact address. But I have it on my phone. If you give it to me, I’ll find it for you. That guy has it.”

Keri stood up and faced the uniformed officer he’d pointed at. It was the one who’d first knocked on the door. He was leaning on the hood of the car.

“Give me his phone,” she ordered forcefully, then turned to face the house and yelled as loudly as she could. “Ray, get out here now!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Keri wasn't in control and she hated it. She forced herself not to let her frustration show but it was hard. If she bit her tongue any harder, she feared it would bleed.

Because they were about to raid a warehouse that might be housing a prostitution ring run by a notoriously brutal pimp who maintained a small army, an LAPD SWAT team had been called in. They were running the show.

Keri and Ray stood with the team, who had set up a block away from the warehouse. They were listening to the team leader give final instructions. On his mark, half the team was to enter through the front and half through a door in the back. Keri and Ray would be allowed to join them once the place was secure.

Keri watched them approach the warehouse and, despite her resentment at being left out, couldn't help but admire their teamwork and efficiency as they quietly moved into place.

The team leader gave the go-ahead over the radio and she heard a series of bangs as the team members dispersed stun grenades before disappearing inside. She listened to the chatter as they secured the facility. There were no shouts, no gunfire, and little anxiety in their voices. Keri could tell within thirty seconds that there were no hostiles inside. After another two minutes, they were given permission to enter.

Once inside, Keri allowed herself a moment to take in her

surroundings. The entire cavernous warehouse was comprised almost exclusively of mattresses scattered throughout. There had to be over two dozen. They were completely bare, without sheets or blankets. A few of the ones in the corners had curtains, which offered the barest semblance of privacy. A bitter thought entered Keri's head.

Maybe those are for the VIP clients.

It was immediately apparent why the SWAT team had sounded so casual. Other than the areas behind the curtains, which had clearly been checked, there was no place to hide. Despite the overhead lights being dimmed, the entire warehouse was visible and it was almost completely empty.

In fact, she only saw two people in the whole place who weren't law enforcement. One was a john who appeared to be passed out on the ground next to a mattress. The other was a young girl sitting on a mattress near the back of the facility. A SWAT officer stood over her, while a medic took her blood pressure.

Keri headed straight for her, followed closely by Ray. The girl looked to be about fourteen, with long stringy blonde hair. Her eyes were red and cloudy, as if she wasn't all there. She wore a tank top but didn't have any bottoms on. Instead, she was partially covered by a thermal blanket the medic had given her.

"Have you asked her anything yet?" Keri asked the officer.

"No ma'am. Not my area of expertise. Besides, I wouldn't want to step on any toes."

"Smart man," she said before kneeling next to the medic. He

glanced at her briefly before returning his eyes to the girl.

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