

A
TRACE
OF
CRIME

A KERI LOCKE MYSTERY--BOOK #4



BLAKE PIERCE

Блейк Пирс

A Trace of Crime

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Аннотация

In A TRACE OF CRIME (Book #4 in the Keri Locke mystery series), Keri Locke, Missing Persons Detective in the Homicide division of the LAPD, follows a fresh lead for her abducted daughter. She winds her way through a twisted underworld, and step by step, she gets closer to finding her daughter.

Yet she has no time. Keri is assigned a new case: a dad calls from an affluent community and reports that his teen daughter vanished on the way home from school.

Shortly after, ransom letters arrive. Twisted, filled with riddles, they make it clear that there is little time to save the girl. They also make it clear that this is the work of a diabolical killer who is toying with them.

Keri and the police must scramble to find the kidnapper, to understand his demands, to decode the letters, and most of all, to outwit him. But in this master game of chess, Keri may find herself

up against a foe even she cannot understand, and for the missing girl—and her own daughter—she may just be too late.

A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, *A TRACE OF CRIME* is book #4 in a riveting new series—and a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

“A masterpiece of thriller and mystery! The author did a magnificent job developing characters with a psychological side that is so well described that we feel inside their minds, follow their fears and cheer for their success. The plot is very intelligent and will keep you entertained throughout the book. Full of twists, this book will keep you awake until the turn of the last page.”

–Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re *Once Gone*)

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BLAKE PIERCE

A TRACE OF CRIME

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Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes eleven books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising five books; and of the new KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.

BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)

ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)

ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)

ONCE LURED (Book #4)

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ONCE PINED (Book #6)

PROLOGUE

Carolyn Rainey could sense something was wrong. It was hard to explain the feeling. But as she walked along the winding residential street to meet her twelve-year-old daughter, the skin on the back of her neck tingled.

On the surface, nothing was out of the ordinary. Carolyn always left the house around 2:30 to meet up with Jessica. She enjoyed the solitary, if brief, walk. It allowed her to clear her head for the second half of the day.

Playa del Rey Middle School let out at 2:35 and Jessica biked home every day. By the time she got everything from her locker into her backpack, made it to the bike rack, said goodbye to her friends, and got on the road, it was usually around 2:45.

Mother and daughter invariably met up at about the halfway point between the school and house around 2:50. Then they would return home together, Carolyn walking, Jessica biking slowly beside her, occasionally circling her mom playfully.

They would talk about the events of the day: who had a crush on whom, which teacher accidentally used a curse word, what song they were working on in choir. When they got home, there was always a snack waiting, after which Jessica would dive into her homework and Carolyn would get back to her own work. They had their routine and it was always the same, give or take a few minutes.

But Carolyn had been walking for close to a half hour now. It was almost 3 p.m. and she was nearly two-thirds of the way to the school. She should have run into Jessica by now.

Maybe her daughter had needed to go to the bathroom. Or maybe she had gotten caught up in a conversation with Kyle, the cute boy from her English class. But the tingling sensation on her neck told Carolyn that something else had happened.

When she rounded the next corner, she saw that she was right. Jessica's purple bike, covered in stickers from the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* movie and photos of her favorite singers, Selena Gomez and Zara Larsson, was lying on its side, half on the sidewalk, half on the road.

She ran over to it and stared, frozen with fear. Looking around desperately, she caught a glimpse of something in the bushes of the nearest house. She hurried over and pulled at it. A branch snapped and the thing came loose.

She looked at it, almost unable to process what she was seeing. It was Jessica's backpack. Carolyn dropped to her knees, her legs suddenly unsteady. Her heart pounded nearly out of her chest as the realization hit her: her daughter had vanished.

CHAPTER ONE

Detective Keri Locke was frustrated. She sat at her desk in LAPD's West Los Angeles Pacific Division, studying the computer screen in front of her.

All around her, the station was bustling. Two teenagers who had snatched a purse and tried to escape on skateboards were being booked. An elderly man was seated at a nearby desk, explaining to a patient officer how someone took his morning paper every day before he could get outside to collect it. Two chubby guys were handcuffed on benches at opposite ends of the holding area because they'd gotten into a mid-afternoon bar fight and still wanted to go at it. Keri ignored them all.

For the last twenty minutes, she'd been poring over every post in the "strictly platonic" section of the Los Angeles Craigslist. It was the same thing she'd done every day for the last six weeks when her friend, newspaper columnist Margaret "Mags" Merrywether, had given her a tip she hoped would help her find her missing daughter, Evie.

Evie had been abducted over five years ago. But after relentless, mostly fruitless searching, Keri had finally found her, only to have her ripped away again. The memory of seeing Evie being driven away in a black van, turning a corner and disappearing from sight, perhaps forever, was too much. She shook the thought from her head and refocused on what was in

front of her. After all, it was a lead. And she desperately needed a lead.

It was in late November when Mags had reached out to a shadowy figure known only as the Black Widower. He was a fixer, legendary for doing the dirty work of the rich and powerful, whether that was assassinating political enemies, making troublesome reporters disappear, or stealing sensitive material.

In this case, Keri suspected that he either had her daughter or at least knew her location. That was because just six weeks ago, Keri had tracked down the man who had abducted Evie all those years ago. He was a professional kidnapper known as the Collector. Keri had learned that his real name was Brian Wickwire after she killed him in a life-or-death struggle.

Using information she later found in Wickwire's apartment, Keri had been able to piece together Evie's location. She'd gone there just in time to see an older man forcing the girl into a black van. She had called out and even locked eyes with her daughter, now thirteen. She had actually heard Evie say the word "Mommy."

But the man rammed Keri's car with the van and escaped. Dazed and unable to follow, she'd been forced to watch helplessly as her daughter disappeared from her sight a second time. Later that night, she'd been told that the van had been found in an empty parking lot. The older man had been shot in the head execution style. Evie was gone.

For several weeks after, the department had run down every lead, shaken every tree in search of her daughter. But they were all dead ends. And without any evidence to go on, the team eventually had to pursue other cases.

Ultimately it was Mags, who looked like a cover model for *Southern Socialite* magazine but was actually a tough-as-nails investigative reporter, who had provided a new lead. She told Keri that the situation with Evie reminded her of someone she had investigated years ago called the Black Widower. He was notorious for double taps in parking lots late at night. He was known to drive a Lincoln Continental without plates, which had been visible in the parking lot surveillance footage where the black van was found.

And it was Mags who, using a tip from a confidential source and writing anonymously, had reached out to him using the seemingly outdated Craigslist message board. It was apparently how he liked to communicate with potential new clients.

And to her amazement, he'd responded almost immediately. He said that he'd be in touch and would soon ask her to create a new email address so they could communicate confidentially.

Unfortunately, after that initial communication, he'd gone dark. Mags had reached out a second time about three weeks ago but hadn't heard anything back. Keri wanted her to try again but Mags insisted it was a bad idea. Pressuring this guy would only make him go to ground. As frustrating as it was, they had to wait for him to reach out again.

But Keri was worried it would never happen. And as she scoured the “strictly platonic” board for the third time today, she couldn’t help think that what had once seemed like such a promising lead might just be another devastating dead end.

She closed the window on her screen and shut her eyes as she took several deep breaths. Trying not to let hopelessness overwhelm her, she allowed her mind to drift wherever it wanted. Sometimes it took her to unexpected, revealing places that helped unlock puzzles she thought were beyond her.

What am I missing? There’s always a clue. I just have to recognize it when I see it.

But it didn’t work this time. Her brain kept circling around the idea of the Black Widower, untraceable and unknowable.

Of course, at one time she had thought that same thing about the Collector too. And despite that, she had been able to track him down, kill him, and use information in his apartment to discover her daughter’s location. If she did it once, she could do it again.

Maybe I need to review the Collector’s emails again or go back through his apartment. Maybe I missed something the first time because I didn’t know what to look for.

It occurred to her that both men – the Collector and the Black Widower – operated in the same world. They were both professional criminals for hire – one a child abductor, the other a killer. It didn’t seem impossible that their paths might have crossed at some point. Maybe the Collector had a record of that

somewhere.

And then she realized there was one other piece of connective tissue. They both had links to the same man, a well-heeled downtown lawyer named Jackson Cave.

To most people, Cave was a prominent corporate attorney. But Keri knew him as a shady dealmaker who represented the dregs of society, was secretly involved in everything from sex slave rings to drug trafficking operations to outright murder for hire. Unfortunately, she couldn't prove any of that without revealing some secrets of her own.

But even without proof, she was certain that Cave was involved with both men. And if that was the case, maybe they had interacted. It wasn't much. But it was something to follow up on. And she needed something, anything, to keep her from going crazy.

She was about to go to the evidence room to look through Wickwire's stuff again when her partner, Detective Ray Sands, walked over.

"I ran into Lieutenant Hillman in the break room," he said. "He just got a call and he's assigned us a case. I can give you the details on the drive over. Are you okay to head out? You look like you're in the middle of something."

"Just some research," she answered, locking the screen, "nothing that can't wait. Let's go."

Ray looked at her curiously. She knew he was fully aware that she wasn't being completely straight with him. But he said

nothing as she stood up and led the way out of the station.

*

Keri and Ray were members of West Los Angeles Division's Missing Persons Unit. It was generally regarded as the best in all of the LAPD and they were the two major reasons why. They had solved more cases in the last eighteen months than most entire divisions had in double that time.

It was also true that Keri was viewed as a loose cannon who could create as many problems as she solved. In fact, she was currently technically under investigation by Internal Affairs for how the Collector confrontation had gone down. Everyone kept telling her it was only a formality. And yet it hovered over her, like a rain cloud always threatening to open up.

Still, despite the corners they sometime cut, no one could question their results. Ray and Keri were the best of the best, even if they were going through a few personal hiccups these days.

Keri chose not to think about that as Ray walked her through the case details on the drive over to the scene. She couldn't handle focusing on both a missing persons case and her complicated relationship with Ray at the same time. In fact, she had to look out the window to avoid focusing on his strong, dark forearms gripping the steering wheel.

"The potential victim is Jessica Rainey," Ray said. "She's twelve and lives in Playa del Rey. The mom typically meets her

on her bike ride home from school. Today she found the bike lying at the edge of the street and her backpack shoved in a bush nearby.”

“Do we know anything about the parents?” Keri asked as they barreled down Culver Boulevard in the direction of the seaside community, where she also happened to live. Often parental estrangement was a determining factor. A good half of their missing child cases involved one parent kidnapping the kid.

“Not much yet,” Ray said as he weaved through traffic. It was early January and cold out but Keri noticed beads of sweat trickling down Ray’s bald head as he drove. He seemed nervous about something. Before she could pursue it, he went on.

“They’re married. Mom works at home. She designs ‘artisanal’ wedding invitations. Dad works in Silicon Beach, for a tech company. They have a younger child, a six-year-old boy. He’s in his school’s aftercare today. The mom checked and he’s there, safe and sound. Hillman told her to leave him there for now, so his day can stay normal for as long as possible.”

“Not much to go on,” Keri noted. “Is CSU on the way?”

“Yeah, Hillman sent them at the same time as us. They may already be there, hopefully processing the bike and backpack for prints.”

Ray zipped past the intersection with Jefferson Boulevard. Keri could almost see her apartment in the distance now. The ocean was only half a mile beyond that. The Rainey home was in a separate, fancier section of the community, on a big hill

with multimillion-dollar homes. They were less than five minutes away.

Keri noticed that Ray had become unusually quiet. She could tell he was working up the courage to say something. She couldn't explain why but she dreaded it.

She and Ray Sands had known each other for over seven years, back before Evie had been abducted, when she was a criminology professor at Loyola Marymount University and he was the local detective who'd been volunteered by his boss to talk to her class.

After Evie was taken and Keri's life had fallen apart, he'd been there both as a detective working the case and as a supportive friend. He was there for her during her divorce and her career meltdown. It was Ray who had convinced her to join the force. And when she came to West LA division after two years as a street officer, she became his partner in the Missing Persons Unit.

Somewhere along the line, their relationship had gotten closer. Maybe it was partly all the playful flirting. Maybe it was the fact that they'd each saved the other's life multiple times. Maybe it was partly simple attraction. She'd even noticed that Ray, a notorious ladies' man, had stopped mentioning other women, even in jest.

Whatever it was, in the last few months, they'd spent a lot of time hanging out at each other's place after work, going to restaurants together, calling each other for non-work conversations. It was like they were a couple in all ways but

one. They'd never made that final leap to consummate their connection. Hell, they'd never even kissed.

So why am I dreading what I think he's about to say?

Keri loved spending time with Ray and a part of her wanted to take things to the next level. She felt so close to the man that it was almost weird that nothing had happened. And yet, for reasons she couldn't find words for, she feared taking that next step. And she could feel Ray about to cross the threshold.

"Can I ask you something?" he said as he turned left off Culver onto Pershing Drive, the snaking road that led up to the wealthiest part of Playa del Rey.

"I guess."

No. Please no. You're going to ruin everything.

"I feel closer to you than anyone else in the world," he said softly. "And I get the sense that you feel the same way toward me. Am I right?"

"Yes."

We're almost to the house. Just drive a little faster so I can get out of this car.

"But we haven't done anything about that," he said.

"I guess not," she agreed, unsure what else to say.

"I want to change that."

"Uh-huh."

"So I'm officially asking you out on a date, Keri. I'd like to take you out this weekend. Would you like to go to dinner with me?"

There was a long pause before she responded. When she opened her mouth, she wasn't entirely sure what would come out.

“I don't think so, Ray. Thanks though.”

Ray sat in the driver's seat, his eyes straight ahead, his mouth agape, saying nothing.

Keri, also stunned at her own response, stayed silent as well and fought the urge to jump out of the moving car.

CHAPTER TWO

Without another word between them, they turned right off Pershing Drive onto the steep incline of Rees Street and then left onto Ridge Avenue. Keri saw the Crime Scene Unit truck in front of a big house at the top of the hill.

“I see the CSU truck,” she said dumbly, just to break the silence.

Ray nodded and pulled up behind it. They got out and headed for the house. Keri fiddled with her gun belt to allow Ray to get ahead of her a bit. She could sense he wasn't in the mood to walk side by side.

As she followed him down the walk to the front door, she once again marveled at the sheer physical specimen he was. Ray was a six-foot-four, 230-pound, bald, forty-one-year-old African-American former professional boxer.

Despite the challenges he'd faced since retiring from the sport, including a divorce, getting a glass eye, and being shot, he still looked like he could step into the ring. He was muscular but not heavy, with a lithe agility unexpected for a man his size. There was a reason he was so popular with women.

A few months ago, she might have wondered why he'd be into her. But lately, despite nearing her thirty-sixth birthday, she'd recaptured some of the youthful zest that had made her pretty popular herself.

She would never be a supermodel. But since she'd resumed Krav Maga and cut down on the drinking, she had lost almost ten pounds. She was back to her pre-divorce fighting weight of 125, which looked pretty darned good on her five-foot-six frame. The bags under her eyes had disappeared and she occasionally wore her dirty blonde hair down instead of in her usual ponytail. She was feeling good about herself these days. So why had she said no to the date?

Deal with your personal issues later, Keri. Focus on your job. Focus on the case.

She forced all extraneous thoughts out of her head and glanced around as they approached the house, trying to get a sense of the Rainey's world.

Playa del Rey wasn't a large neighborhood but the social divisions were quite stark. Down near where Keri lived, in an apartment above a cheap Chinese restaurant, most folks were working class.

The same was true of the small residential streets heading inland off Manchester Avenue. They were almost all populated by the residents of huge condominium and apartment complexes. But closer to the beach, and on the large hill where the Rainey's lived, the homes varied from big to massive, and almost all of them had ocean views.

This house was somewhere in between big and massive, not truly a mansion, but as close as one could get without the protective outer wall and the huge pillars. Despite that, it felt like

a genuine home.

The grass on the front lawn was a little long and it was littered with toys, including a plastic slide and a tricycle that was currently lying upside down. The path they took to reach the house was covered in colored chalk designs, some clearly the work of a six-year-old. Other sections were more sophisticated, done by a preteen.

Ray rang the bell and stared straight at the peephole, refusing to glance over at Keri. She could feel the frustration and confusion emanating from him and chose to stay quiet. She didn't know what to say anyway.

Keri heard the rapid footsteps of someone running to the door and seconds later it opened to reveal a woman in her late thirties. She was dressed in slacks and a casual but professional top. She had short dark hair and was attractive in a pleasant, open-faced way that even her tear-stained eyes couldn't hide.

"Mrs. Rainey?" Keri asked in her most reassuring voice.

"Yes. Are you the detectives?" she asked pleadingly.

"We are," Keri answered. "I'm Keri Locke and this is my partner, Ray Sands. May we come in?"

"Of course. Please. My husband, Tim, is upstairs gathering pictures of Jess. He'll be down in a minute. Do you know anything yet?"

"Not yet," Ray said. "But I see our crime scene unit has arrived. Where are they?"

"In the garage – they're checking Jess's things for fingerprints.

One of them told me I shouldn't have moved them from where I found them. But I was afraid to just leave them on the street. What if they were stolen and we lost any evidence?"

As she spoke, her voice got higher and the words started tumbling out at a frenzied pace. Keri could tell she was barely holding it together.

"It's okay, Mrs. Rainey," she assured her. "CSU will still be able to get any potential prints and you can show us where you found her things later."

Just then they heard footsteps and turned to see a man walking down the stairs holding a stack of photos. Skinny, with a bird's nest of unruly brown hair and thin wire-rimmed glasses, Tim Rainey wore khakis and a button-down shirt. He looked exactly as Keri imagined a tech industry executive would.

"Tim," his wife said, "these are the detectives here to help find Jess."

"Thank you for coming," he said, his voice almost a whisper.

Keri and Ray shook his hand and she noticed that the other hand holding the pictures was shaking slightly. His eyes weren't red like his wife's but his brow was furrowed and his whole face looked pinched. He seemed like a man overwhelmed by the stress of the moment. Keri couldn't blame him. After all, she'd been there.

"Why don't we all sit down and you can tell us what you know," she said, noting that his knees seemed close to buckling.

Carolyn Rainey led them all to the front sitting room where

her husband dropped the pictures on a coffee table and slumped heavily onto a couch. She sat beside him and put her hand on his knee, which was bouncing up and down wildly. He got the message and sat still.

“I was walking to meet Jess after school,” Carolyn began. “We have the same routine every day. I walk. She rides her bike. We meet up somewhere in between and come back together. We almost always connect around the same spot, give or take a block.”

Tim Rainey’s knee started bouncing again and she gave him a gentle pat to remind him to collect himself. Once again, he stilled. She continued.

“I started to worry when I got two-thirds of the way to school and hadn’t seen her. That’s only happened twice before. Once was because she forgot a textbook in her locker and had to go back. The other time she had a bad stomachache. Both times she called me to let me know what was going on.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Ray said. “But can you give me her cell number? We might be able to trace it.”

“I thought of that first thing. In fact, I called her as soon as I saw her stuff. It started ringing right away. I found it under the same bush her backpack was in.”

“Do you have it now?” Keri asked. “There might still be valuable data to gather from it.”

“The crime scene people are dusting it too.”

“That’s great,” Keri said. “We’ll look at it when they’re done.”

Let's go through a few basic questions if you don't mind."

"Of course," Carolyn Rainey said.

"Had Jessica mentioned anything recently about having a falling out with a friend?"

"No. She did change who she had a crush on recently. School just started up again this week after winter break and she said the time off had made her see things differently. But since the first boy never even knew she liked him, I don't think that matters."

"Still, if you could write down both their names, it would be helpful," Ray said. "Did she ever mention seeing any unusual people either at school or on her way there or home?"

The Raineys both shook their heads.

"May I?" Keri asked, pointing to the photos on the table.

Carolyn nodded. Keri picked up the stack and began to go through them. Jessica Rainey was a perfectly normal-looking twelve-year-old girl with a broad smile, her mother's twinkly eyes, and her father's wild brown hair.

"We're going to follow every possible lead," Ray assured them. "But I don't want you to jump to any conclusions just yet. There's still a chance that this is just a misunderstanding of some sort. We haven't had a report of an abducted child in this community in well over two years, so we don't want to make any assumptions at this point."

"I appreciate that," Carolyn Rainey said. "But Jess isn't the sort of girl to just run off to a friend's and leave all her stuff lying by the side of the street. And she would never willingly part with

her phone. It's just not her.”

Ray didn't reply. Keri knew he had felt obligated to suggest other possibilities. And he was usually far less likely to leap to the abduction theory than Keri. But even he was having trouble coming up with legitimate reasons why Jessica would abandon all her things.

“Is it okay if we take a few of these photos?” she asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “We want to circulate them among law enforcement.”

“Of course. Take them all if you want,” Carolyn said.

“Not all,” Tim said, pulling one out of the pile. It was the first time he'd spoken since they all sat down. “I'd like to hold on to this one if you can do without it.”

It was a photo of Jessica in the woods wearing hiking gear, with a way-too-big-for-her backpack strapped to her back. Her face was smeared with what looked like war paint and she had a rainbow bandanna tied around her head. She was grinning happily. It wouldn't help much for identification purposes. And even if it had, Keri could tell it was very special to him.

“Keep it. We've got more than enough,” she said softly before getting down to business. “Now there are a few things we are going to need from you and all of it in short order. You may want to write this down. In situations like this, time is crucial so we may have to sacrifice your feelings for information. Are you two okay with that?”

They both nodded.

“Good,” she said before diving in. “So here’s what’s going to happen. Mrs. Rainey, we’re going to need you to show us the route you took to meet your daughter and her usual route from that point to the school. We’re going to want to look through her room, including any computers or tablets she might have. As I mentioned, we’ll also look through her phone when CSU is done with it.”

“Okay,” Mrs. Rainey said, writing it all down as Keri continued.

“We’ll need the contact information for every friend you can think of and any kids she might have had issues with during the last year. We’ll need the principal’s number. We can get teacher and guidance counselor contact information from the school. But if you already have it, that would be great.”

“We can get you all that,” Carolyn promised them.

“We’ll also need the names and numbers of any coaches or tutors she has,” Ray added, “as well as those names of both the boys she was crushing on. Detective Locke and I will split up to maximize time.”

Keri looked at him. His voice sounded completely normal but she could tell that there was more than simple professional expediency at work.

Don’t take it personally. It’s a good idea.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Why don’t Mrs. Rainey and I walk the route to school before it gets too dark out? At this time of year, the sun will be setting in less than an hour. You can give me those

contact numbers on the way.”

“And Mr. Rainey,” Ray said, “you can show me Jessica’s room. After that, I recommend you go get your son. What’s his name?”

“Nathaniel. Nate.”

“Okay, well, CSU will be gone by the time you get back so there won’t be so many people around. You’re going to want to try to keep things as normal as possible for him. That way, if we need to ask him questions, he won’t shut down.”

Tim Rainey nodded absently, as if he’d only just remembered he had a son as well. Ray continued.

“When you go, I’ll head over to the school to talk to the folks there. We’ll also check to see if there’s any video that can be helpful. Mrs. Rainey, I’ll meet you and Detective Locke at the school and drive you back home.”

“Are you going to put out an Amber Alert?” Carolyn Rainey asked, referring to the abduction messages sent out to the general public.

“Not yet,” Ray said. “It’s very possible that we’ll do that soon, but not until we have more information to share. We just don’t know enough yet.”

“Let’s get moving,” Keri said. “The more quickly we check off all these boxes, the better picture we’ll have of what might have happened.”

They all stood up. Carolyn Rainey grabbed her purse and led them to the front door.

“I’ll let you know if we learn anything,” she said to her husband as she gave him a kiss on the cheek. He nodded, then pulled her in for a long, tight hug.

Keri glanced over at Ray, who was watching the couple. Despite himself, he glanced over at her. She could still see the hurt in his eyes.

“I’ll call you when we get to the school,” Keri said quietly to Ray. He nodded without replying.

She felt stung by his coldness but she got it. He had opened up and taken a big risk. And she had shut him down without explanation. It was probably good that they had some space for the next little while.

As the two women stepped outside and began to walk away from the house, one thought reverberated in her head.

I have screwed up massively.

CHAPTER THREE

Ninety minutes later, back at her desk, Keri let out a sigh of deep frustration. Most of the last hour and a half had been fruitless.

They hadn't found anything unusual on the walk to the school and didn't come across any obvious signs of struggle. There were no odd tire marks near the spot where Mrs. Rainey had found Jessica's stuff. Keri had stopped at every house nearby to determine if any residents had street-facing video cameras that might be of use. None did.

When they got to the school, Ray was already there talking to the principal, who promised to send out an email blast to all school parents asking for any information they might have. The security officer had all the surveillance footage from the day queued up so Keri suggested Ray stick around and view it while she got Mrs. Rainey back home and returned to the office to call all the potential leads.

To Carolyn Rainey, it must have simply looked like two partners effectively multi-tasking. And to a degree, it was. But the thought of sitting awkwardly in the passenger seat as Ray drove her back to West LA division was something she wasn't up for right now.

So instead, they got a Lyft back to the Rainey house and Keri continued to the station from there. That's where she'd spent the

last half hour calling all Jessica's friends and classmates. No one had anything unusual to share. Three friends all remembered her leaving school on her bike and waving to them as she left the parking lot. Everything seemed fine.

She called both the boys Jessica had crushes on in recent weeks and while both knew who she was, neither seemed to know her well or even be aware of how she felt. Keri wasn't shocked at that. She remembered that at that age, she'd filled up whole notebooks with the names of boys she liked, without ever actually speaking to them.

She spoke to, or left messages with, all of Jessica's teachers, her softball coach, her math tutor, and even the head of the neighborhood watch group. No one she reached knew anything.

She called Ray, who picked up on the first ring.

"Sands."

"I've got nothing here," she said, deciding to focus solely on the matter at hand. "No one saw anything out of the ordinary. Her friends say everything seemed fine when she left school. I'm still waiting for some calls back but I'm not optimistic. You having better luck?"

"Not so far. The video camera range only extends to the end of the school's block in each direction. I can see her saying goodbye to her friends, just as you describe, then biking off. Nothing happens while she's visible. I'm having the guard queue up footage from earlier in the week to see if there was anyone loitering around on prior days. It might be a while."

Unspoken in that last line was the assumption he wouldn't be returning to the station anytime soon. She pretended not to notice.

"I think we should post the Amber Alert," she said. "It's six p.m. now. So it's been three hours since her mom called nine-one-one. We don't have any evidence suggesting this is anything other than an abduction. If she was taken right after school, between two forty-five and three p.m., she could be as far as Palm Springs or San Diego by now. We need to get as many eyes on this as possible."

"Agreed," Ray said. "Can you honcho that so I can keep reviewing this footage?"

"Of course. Are you coming back to the station afterward?"

"I don't know," he answered noncommittally. "Depends on what I find."

"Okay, well, keep me posted," she said.

"Will do," he replied and hung up without saying goodbye.

Keri ordered herself not to focus on the perceived slight and put her attention into preparing the Amber Alert and getting it out. As she was finishing up, she saw her boss, Lieutenant Cole Hillman, walking toward his office.

He was wearing his usual uniform of slacks, sport coat, loose tie, and short-sleeved dress shirt that he couldn't keep tucked in because of his ample girth. He was a little over fifty but the job had aged him so that there were deep lines in his forehead and at the corners of his eyes. His salt-and-pepper hair was more salt

than pepper these days.

She thought he was going to come over to her desk and demand a status update but he never even looked in her direction. That was fine with her, as she wanted to check with the CSU folks to see if they'd found any prints.

After she submitted the Amber Alert, Keri walked through station bullpen, which was unusually quiet for this time of night, and down the hall. She knocked on the CSU door and poked her head in without waiting for permission.

“Any luck on the Jessica Rainey case?”

The clerk, a twenty-something girl with dark hair and glasses, looked up from the magazine she'd been reading. Keri didn't recognize her. The CSU clerk job was a grind and had a lot of turnover. She typed the name in the database.

“Nothing from the backpack or bike,” the girl said. “They're still checking a few prints from the phone but the way they were talking, it didn't sound promising.”

“Can you please have them let Detective Keri Locke know as soon as they're done, regardless of the result? Even if there are no usable prints, I need to check that phone.”

“You got it, Detective,” she said, burying her nose back in the magazine before Keri had even closed the door.

Standing alone in the quiet hallway, Keri took a deep breath and realized there was nothing else for her to do. Ray was checking the school surveillance footage. She had put out the Amber Alert. The CSU report was pending and she couldn't

look at Jessica's phone until they were done with it. She'd either spoken to or was waiting to hear back from everyone she had called.

She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, allowing her brain to relax for the first time in hours. But as soon as she did, unwelcome thoughts flooded in.

She saw the image of Ray's face, hurt and confused. She saw a black van with her daughter inside rounding a corner into darkness. She saw the eyes of the Collector as she squeezed his neck, draining the life out of the man who'd abducted her daughter over five years ago, even as he was already dying from a head wound. She saw grainy footage of a man known only as the Black Widower as he shot another man in the head, took Evie from the man's van, and shoved her into the trunk of his own car before disappearing forever.

Her eyes snapped open and she saw that she was facing the evidence room. She'd been in there many times in recent weeks, poring over photos from Brian "The Collector" Wickwire's apartment.

The actual evidence was held at Downtown Division because his apartment was in their jurisdiction. They had consented to let the West LA police photographer take pictures of everything as long as it stayed in the evidence room. As she had killed the man, Keri wasn't in a position to argue with them.

But she hadn't gone through the photos in several days and now something about them was eating at her. There was an itch

at the edge of her brain that she just couldn't scratch, some kind of connection she knew was hiding just out of the corner of her consciousness. She walked into the room.

The evidence clerk wasn't surprised to see her and slid the sign-in sheet toward her without a word. She checked in, then went straight to the row with the box of photos. She didn't need the reference data as she knew exactly what row and shelf it was. She grabbed the box from the shelf and lugged it to one of the tables in the back.

She sat down, turned on the desk lamp, and spread all the photos out in her front of her. She'd looked at them dozens of times before. Every book Wickwire owned was catalogued and photographed, as was every piece of clothing and each item from his kitchen shelves. This man was believed to be involved in the abduction and sale of as many as fifty children over the years and the detectives from Downtown Division were leaving no stone unturned.

But Keri sensed that what was teasing her wasn't in any of those photos she'd studied previously. It was something she'd only registered in passing before. Something had been jogged in her mind when she stood in the hall minutes before, letting all her painful memories wash over her.

What is it? What's the connection you're trying to make?

And then she saw it. In the background of a picture of the Collector's desk was a series of nature photos. They were all 5 x 7 images lined up in a row. There was a frog on a rock. Beside it

was picture of a jackrabbit with its ears pricked up. And next to that was a beaver working on a dam. A woodpecker was in mid-peck. A salmon caught on film as it leapt from a stream. And next to it was the image of a spider on a patch of dirt – a black widow.

Black widow. Black Widower. Is there something to that?

It might have just been a coincidence. Obviously the Downtown detectives didn't think much of the photos as they hadn't even been catalogued as evidence. But Keri knew that the Collector liked to keep coded records.

In fact, that's how she'd found the addresses where Evie and multiple other abductees were being kept. The Collector had hidden them in plain sight, in an alpha-numeric code on a bunch of seemingly innocuous postcards in his desk drawer.

Keri knew that the Collector and the Black Widower shared a connection: they had both been hired at various points by the attorney Jackson Cave.

Did their paths cross at some point, maybe on a job? Was this Wickwire's way of keeping the contact information of a fellow sinner for hire, in case they ever needed to team up?

Keri felt a certainty wash over her, one that usually only came when she'd uncovered a crucial clue in a case. She was certain that if she could access that photo, she would find something useful about it.

The only problem was that it was in Brian Wickwire's apartment, which was still cordoned off by the Downtown police. The last time she'd tried to get in, two weeks ago, there was crime

scene tape all around it and two cops stationed in front of the building to deter any looky-loos.

Keri was just beginning to consider how she might navigate that challenge when her phone rang. It was Ray.

“Hey,” she said hesitantly.

“Can you come back to the Rainey place right now?” he asked, skipping the pleasantries.

“Of course. What’s up?”

“They just got a ransom note.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Twenty anxious minutes later, Keri pulled up to the Rainey house. Once again a CSU truck was already out front. She knocked on the front door. Ray opened it almost immediately and she could tell from the look on his face that the situation was grim. She glanced over his shoulder and saw the Raineys sitting together on a couch. She was weeping. He looked shell-shocked.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Ray said sincerely. “I’ve only been here five minutes but I’m having a hard time keeping them from going off the rails.”

“Is there a clock on the note?” Keri asked quietly as she stepped inside.

“Yeah. The guy wants the transfer to happen tonight at midnight. He’s demanding a hundred grand.”

“Jeez.”

“That’s not the worst of it,” Ray said. “You need to read the letter. It’s...weird.”

Keri walked into the room. One CSU investigator was dusting what looked like a FedEx envelope. She looked back at Ray, who nodded.

“Crazy, huh?” he said. “I’ve never heard of a ransom note come via FedEx before. It was same-day. I already gave the tracking number to Edgerton. He says it was posted from a location in El Segundo. The time stamp was one fifty-eight p.m.”

“But that’s before Jessica was taken,” Keri said.

“Exactly. The abductor must have sent it before he grabbed her – pretty brazen. Suarez is headed over there now to look for any potential footage from the place.”

“Sounds good,” Keri said as she headed to the living room where the Rainey’s sat. She was reassured that some of their best people were in the mix. Detective Kevin Edgerton was a tech wizard and Detective Manny Suarez was a dogged, experienced cop. Nothing would slip by them.

“Hi,” she said softly and the Rainey’s both looked up at her. Carolyn’s eyes were puffy and red but there were no tears left. Tim was ghostly pale, his face dour and tight.

“Hello, Detective,” Carolyn managed to whisper.

“May I take a look at the letter?” she asked, glancing at the sheet of paper on the coffee table. It was already in a clear evidence envelope.

They nodded wordlessly. She moved closer to get a better look. Even before reading the contents, she could tell that the letter hadn’t been printed using a computer. It had been typed on a standard 8 x 11 sheet of paper. That immediately concerned her.

Every computer printer had its own identifiable signature, represented through a pattern of dots not recognizable to the undiscerning eye. The dots printed out in a code along with the text of the document and provided the make, model, and even the serial number of the printer used. If the person who typed

this letter knew enough to avoid a computer printer, it suggested he probably wasn't an amateur.

The letter itself was equally troubling. It read:

Your child has a dark spirit. The spirit must be pruned so that a healthy child can grow in its place. That will destroy the body of the child but save its soul. So sad but it must be done. The hothouse desire of the creator demands it. I can free this child of the spirit with my holy shears, the mechanism of the Lord. The demons must be uprooted from within her.

However, if you promise to redeem her yourself through bloodletting purification as he has commanded, I will return her to you for the procedure. But you must compensate me for my sacrifice. I demand \$100,000 to be made whole. It must be cash, untraceable. Do not involve the authorities, the filthy purveyors of sordid wretchedness upon this world. If you do, I will return the child to the soil from which she came. I will employ the machinery of the Lord to spread her dripping remains among the spoiled weeds of the city. I have provided proof that I am sincere in my claims.

Midnight. Father only. For fathers alone will save this world from impurity.

Chace Park. The bridge by the water.

\$100,000. Midnight. Alone.

The flesh of your flesh depends on your supplication.

Keri looked up at Ray. There was so much to process that she chose to set most of it aside for the time being and focus on the

clearest elements of the letter.

“What does he mean about providing proof?” she asked him.

“There were several strands of hair in a baggie in the package as well,” he answered. “We’re having them tested to see if they’re a match.”

“Okay, there’s a lot to pore over in that thing,” Keri said, turning to the Rainey’s. “But for now let’s focus on the non-psycho stuff. First off, you made the right choice by reaching out to us. Parents who follow instructions not to contact authorities usually have worse outcomes.”

“I didn’t want to call you,” Tim Rainey admitted. “But Carrie insisted.”

“Well, we’re glad you did,” Keri reiterated, then turned to Ray. “Have you talked to them about the money?”

“We were just about to when you got here,” Ray said, then focused his attention on the Rainey’s. “It’s not a bad idea to secure the money, even if we hope not to hand it over. It gives us more options. Have you thought about how you might get it?”

“We have the money,” Tim Rainey said, “but not in cash. I called our bank to talk about transferring some securities over. They said that it’s hard to do that kind of transaction after hours and impossible on such short notice.”

“I’ve reached out to our fund managers and they say the same thing,” Carolyn Rainey added. “They might be able to get it for us by early tomorrow morning, but not by midnight and not in cash.”

Keri turned to Ray.

“It is odd that he had the letter arrive so late,” she said. “He had to know it would be almost impossible to get the money in time. Why make it so difficult?”

“This guy doesn’t sound like he’s operating from a full deck,” Ray noted. “Maybe he’s not up to speed on the timing challenges of financial institutions.”

“There is another option,” Tim Rainey interrupted.

“What’s that?” Ray asked.

“I work for Venergy, the new mobile gaming platform based in Playa Vista. I work directly for Gary Rosterman, the guy who runs the company. He’s filthy rich and he likes me. Plus Jessica and his daughter went to the same Montessori school until last year. They’re friends. I know he has cash on hand. Maybe he’d front me.”

“Call him,” Ray said. “But if he agrees, ask him to be discreet.”

Rainey nodded aggressively. His dark visage lifted slightly. He seemed heartened by having renewed hope. Or maybe it was just having something on which to focus his attention.

As he dialed the number, Ray turned back to Keri and nodded for them to step away from the Raineys. When they were out of earshot, he whispered, “I think we should take the letter back to the station. We need to have the whole unit on this, get their ideas on what it means; maybe bring in the psychologist. We should check for recent similar cases in the area.”

“Agreed,” Keri said. “I also want to filter the letter through the federal database to see if it matches anything else. Who knows what we’ll find? I’ve got a really bad feeling about this one.”

“More than usual? Why?”

Keri explained her concerns about typing the letter versus using a computer. It resonated with Ray.

“Whether this guy is crazy or crazy like a fox, he seems like a pro,” he said.

Tim Rainey ended his call and turned to them.

“Gary said he’ll do it,” he said. “He said he can have the cash in hand in about three hours.”

“That’s great,” Ray said. “We’ll send someone to collect it when it’s ready. We don’t want a civilian transporting that kind of money if we can avoid it.”

“We’re going to head back to the station now,” Keri told them. Seeing the sudden anxiety in their faces, she quickly added, “We’re going to leave two uniformed officers here with you, as a precaution. They can reach us any time.”

“But why are you leaving?” Carolyn Rainey asked.

“We want to run the ransom note through our databases and talk to some experts. We’re getting our entire Missing Persons Unit involved in your case. But I promise we’ll be back in a few hours. We’ll lay out the whole plan for the park with you and explain exactly what we’re doing. As soon as we leave you, I’m going to call to have surveillance set up there right away. Everything will be in place well in advance of the meet. We’ve

got this.”

Carolyn Rainey stood up and gave her a surprisingly powerful hug. She did the same to Ray. Tim Rainey nodded politely at both of them. Keri could tell that his brief respite from his angst had faded and he was back in permanent crisis mode.

She understood his position better than most and knew that trying to talk him down or tell him to try to be calm was a waste of time. His daughter was missing. He was freaking out. He just did it more quietly than most.

As they left, Ray muttered under his breath, “We better find her quick. If we don’t, I’m worried her dad is going to have a stroke.”

Keri wanted to disagree but couldn’t. If she’d gotten a letter like this when Evie was taken, she might have literally lost her mind. But the Raineys had something going for them, even if they didn’t know it. They had Keri.

“Then let’s find her quick,” she said.

CHAPTER FIVE

“I’m telling you, it’s just a cover,” Detective Frank Brody shouted indignantly. “All that blather about mechanisms and the Lord is just to throw us off. This guy is a con man, pure and simple!”

The station conference room was a mass of noisy, angry voices and it was starting to piss Keri off. She was tempted to yell at everyone to shut up, but painful experience had taught her that some of these people needed to wear themselves out before anything useful could be accomplished.

Brody, an old-school veteran of the unit less than a month from retirement, was convinced the letter was a sham. As usual, he had some kind of sauce on his shirt, which was tucked in but missing a button so that part of his large stomach was exposed. And as usual, Keri thought, he was more interested in being loud than in being right.

“You don’t know that!” shouted back Officer Jamie Castillo. “You just want it to be true because that makes the case easier to understand.”

Castillo wasn’t a detective yet, but because of her competence and enthusiasm, she’d become essentially a junior member of the unit, almost always assigned to their cases. And despite her junior status, she was no shrinking violet.

Right now, her dark eyes were blazing and her black hair,

tied back in a ponytail, was bobbing up and down along with her animated responses. Her muscular arms and athletic frame were both tightly coiled in frustration.

“None of us are experts in this sort of thing,” Detective Kevin Edgerton insisted. “We need to bring in the police psychologist.”

Keri wasn't surprised that Edgerton wanted to go that route. Tall and skinny with perpetually unkempt brown hair, he was a computer genius who knew the ins and outs of everything from a smartphone to the utility grid. But not yet thirty years old, he didn't always trust his instincts when it came to things with less clear-cut solutions. It was his nature to defer to expertise, if it was available.

The problem was that Keri wasn't confident the police psychologist would have any more insight into the letter than the rest of them. Any conclusions he was likely to draw would just be speculation. If that was the case, she trusted her own speculation more than most others'.

Lieutenant Hillman held up his hands in an appeal for calm and quiet. To Keri's surprise, everyone complied.

“I sent a copy of the letter to Dr. Feeney at home. He's looking at it now. We'll probably get feedback soon. In the meantime, any other thoughts? Sands?”

Ray had been sitting quietly, rubbing the top of his bald head, taking it all in. From this angle, Keri could clearly see the reflection of the station lights off the glass left eye that replaced the eye he'd lost boxing. He looked up and she could tell where

he stood before he even spoke.

“I’m inclined to agree with Frank. That letter is just so over the top that it’s hard to buy. Everything is so overheated. That is, except for the part about wanting the money and where to bring it. That section is completely straightforward; pretty convenient, if you ask me. Still...”

“What?” Hillman asked.

“Well, I’m just not sure whether it makes any difference. We know so little and don’t have much time. Regardless of whether he’s a psycho or a con artist, there’s still a drop with him in a few hours.”

“I’m not sure I agree,” Keri finally said. She didn’t love contradicting her partner publicly under any circumstances and especially not with the way things were between them at the moment. But it wasn’t about that right now. It was about the job and finding this girl. Keri had never held her tongue about a case before and she wasn’t about to start now, regardless of the personal consequences.

“Look, I don’t know for sure if this guy is faking or for real. But I think it does matter which is true. If he’s just pretending to be some kind of religious fanatic and this is all just about money, I’d prefer it. Then this is transactional for him, not personal. And that scenario is way more predictable. It means he’s more likely to show up. And it’s more of a priority for him to keep Jessica alive.”

“But you don’t buy it,” Ray said, proving he knew her as well

as she knew him.

“I’m skeptical. I think it’s possible that money stuff was so straightforward because he didn’t really believe in it and was just saying what he was supposed to in a ransom note. What if that’s the fake part and the real part is the crazy stuff? I mean the contrast between those sections is so dramatic as to be ridiculous. The ‘overheated’ language seems to be where his passion is.”

“Seems to be,” Brody interrupted. Keri reminded herself to keep a level head. The short-timer was baiting her, hoping he could rile her up to make her argument seem less credible. She nodded politely and continued.

“Yes, Frank, seems to be. I don’t pretend to know anything for sure. But all that talk of freeing her from her own evil spirit, of the machinery of the Lord, it’s pretty detailed, like he’s developed some kind of personal liturgy to reflect his own warped religion – one where he’s in control, like he’s the Pope of his own demented faith. And if that’s true, we’ve got a much bigger problem.”

“How so?” Edgerton asked.

“Because if this is all truly about cleansing spirits and pleasing his deity, then he doesn’t really care about the money. It might just be a way to justify the abduction to himself in societal terms. He tells himself it’s about the money so he can function in some kind of normal way. But deep down, he knows that’s just an excuse, that the real reason he took her is much deeper and darker.”

“So Locke,” Hillman said, “you’re suggesting this guy is

having some internal struggle and that the money is just a way for him to hide what he really wants to do to the girl from himself?"

"Maybe."

"That seems like a stretch," he said. "Other than the language he used, what do you have to support the theory?"

"It's not just the language, Lieutenant. The very fact that he offered to return her, to let her own father purify her, suggests that he might be trying to fight this thing, that he's trying to find an 'out,' some way to *not* free her from the demon by killing her."

She stopped talking and looked around at the faces of her co-workers, which were a mix of skepticism and genuine intrigue. Even Hillman seemed to be reconsidering.

"Or he could just be after the money and your mumbo-jumbo is as full of BS as he is," Brody said derisively. His comment seemed to drain the room of goodwill and Keri felt everyone retreating to their safe corners.

"You're a Neanderthal!" Castillo said, disgusted.

"Yeah?" he spat back. "I think you could use a good hair dragging."

"You want to go right now, old man?" Castillo said, taking a step toward him. "I'll knock your beached whale ass back in the ocean."

"Enough!" Hillman shouted. "We've got a twelve-year-old girl to save and we don't have time for this crap. And Brody, another sexist comment like that and I'll dock your pay for the rest of your frickin' career, even if that's only a month, you got me?"

Brody reluctantly shut his mouth. Castillo looked like she wasn't done yet so Keri put her hand on her shoulder and led her away.

"Let it go, Jamie," she muttered under her breath. "The guy's one more burrito away from a heart attack. You don't want to get blamed when he keels over."

Castillo chuckled despite her anger. She was about to reply when Detective Manny Suarez walked into the room. Manny wasn't much to look at, with his longish stubble, his love handles, and his heavy-lidded eyes that reminded Keri of Sleepy the dwarf. But he was a tough, able detective. And most importantly right now, he was returning from the FedEx office where the ransom note had been dropped off. Keri hoped he had good news.

"Give me something good," Hillman said.

Suarez shook his head as he sat down at the conference room table and pulled out one lonely receipt from the manila envelope he was holding. He slammed it on the table.

This is it," he said. "This is the one piece of meaningful evidence I was able to retrieve from the FedEx store. It has the time and date of the purchase, which was made with cash. That's it."

"Wasn't there any security footage you could match to the time of purchase?" Hillman asked.

"There is, but it's mostly useless. The exterior footage from the place shows someone walking in. But that person is wearing

a bulky sweatshirt with a hoodie and sunglasses. I'm having it circulated but it won't be much help. It's hard to even tell whether it's a male or female."

"What about inside the FedEx store?" Castillo asked.

Suarez pulled out a second sheet of paper from the envelope and put it on the desk too. It looked like a photo but it was basically white with black around the edges.

"This is a still image from the interior camera," he said. "It looks like he was using a pair of laser refraction sunglasses that blow out anything onscreen. This is what the footage looks like the whole time the person is in there."

"That's hardcore tech," Edgerton noted, impressed. "Usually that sort of thing is only used in high-end robberies."

"What about other cameras?" Ray asked. "Ones he didn't look at directly."

"They were unaffected. But the suspect stood conveniently out of frame of each of them. It's like he knew exactly where every camera would be and steered clear of all but the one he couldn't avoid, right behind the register. And that's the one that's blown out."

"I'm assuming he avoided any other exterior cameras on the way out too?" Keri guessed. "No chance he walked to his car and we can get a make or license plate?"

"No chance," Suarez confirmed. "We have him walking around the corner. But the direction he went leads to an industrial block where none of the businesses have cameras. He could have

gone anywhere from there.”

“I hate to pile on,” Edgerton added, studying the laptop in front of him. “But I’ve got more bad news. Jessica’s backpack and phone were busts. CSU just emailed me that they didn’t find any unexpected prints.”

Lieutenant Hillman’s cell phone rang but he indicated for Edgerton to continue as he stepped out of the room to take the call. Kevin picked up where he’d left off.

“And I’ve been running a program using her SIM card to look for suspicious activity. It just finished. But there’s nothing out of the ordinary. Every single call she made or received in the last three months is from either her family or friends.”

Keri and Ray exchanged a silent glance. Even the tension between them couldn’t undermine their shared concern that this case was going downhill fast.

Before anyone could respond to Edgerton, Hillman walked back in. Keri could tell from his expression that there was more bad news coming.

“That was Dr. Feeney,” he said. “He buys the con man theory too. He thinks this guy’s faking the crazy stuff and just wants the money.”

Great. Every lead we have has gone nowhere and now the unit consensus is that this guy is just a run of the mill kidnapper.

Keri couldn’t explain it, even to herself. But her instincts were telling her that the consensus was dangerously wrong; that this kidnapper was something else entirely. And she feared that if

they didn't get on the right track soon, Jessica Rainey would pay the price.

CHAPTER SIX

As the minutes leading up to the drop passed, Keri tried to ignore the pit of anxiety growing in her stomach. Time was running short and Keri felt like they were losing options fast. She actively told herself not to lose hope, to remember that Jessica was out there somewhere, desperately waiting for someone to find her.

Since the FedEx office and Jessica's backpack and phone were dead ends, the team began pursuing less case-specific, and therefore less promising, options.

Edgerton put the case parameters into a federal database to see if there was any record of similar kidnappings. The results would come in soon but culling through them would be time-consuming.

He also input the ransom note in the system on the off chance that the language checked the boxes of any previous letters. That was a long shot. If a letter this strange had been sent to someone before, they felt confident they would have heard about it.

Suarez was looking at a list of registered sex offenders who lived in the area to see if any of them had a record of this kind of crime. Castillo had gone to the park to prep for surveillance. Brody had left the station, claiming he was going to talk to some of his street informants. Keri suspected he'd just gone out to get something else to eat.

She and Ray pored through old case files, looking for any old or unsolved cases that matched Jessica's. It was possible that this was the work of someone back out on the streets after a long prison stretch. If that was the situation, it would predate either of their time on the force and they wouldn't remember the particulars. Neither of them thought the exercise would bear fruit but they weren't sure what else to do.

After over an hour without success they headed out. It was almost 10 p.m. and she and Ray were returning to the Rainey house. It was the same route they'd taken that morning, when everything had been normal, right up until the moment he'd asked her out. Both of them were aware of that fact, but they were too busy to allow that to get in their way at the moment.

As they drove, Ray was on the phone with Detective Garrett Patterson, who was still at the station coordinating the surveillance for the drop location, Chace Park.

Patterson, a quiet, bookish guy in his thirties, was a tech geek like Edgerton. But unlike his younger colleague, Patterson seemed content to focus on the minutiae of cases. He loved activities like poring over phone records and comparing IP addresses, so much so that it had gotten him the nickname Grunt Work, which he didn't mind at all.

Patterson wasn't the kind of detective who was going to make instinctive leaps of deduction. But he could be counted on to set up a thorough perimeter of video and electronic surveillance that would be both effective and undetectable.

“They’re prepped,” Ray told her as he hung up. “The surveillance team is in place. Manny is headed over to Rainey’s boss’s place now to accompany him and the money to the remote headquarters in the van at the Waterside shopping center.”

“Great,” Keri said. “While you were talking, I had an idea. I have a friend I know from when I used to live on the houseboat in the marina. He has a sailboat and I bet he’d take us out so we could observe the drop area from the water. What do you think?”

“I say reach out,” Ray said. “The more eyes we can get on the drop area without being noticed, the better.”

Keri texted her friend, a crusty old sailor named Butch. He was actually less of a friend than a sometime drinking companion who liked scotch as much as she did. After she lost Evie, her marriage, and her job in quick succession, she’d bought a decrepit old houseboat in the marina and lived there for several years.

Butch was a friendly, retired Navy man who liked to call her “Copper,” didn’t ask about her past, and was happy to swap professional war stories with her. At the time, that was exactly the kind of companionship she was looking for. But since she’d moved from the marina to her apartment and significantly reduced her alcohol consumption, they hadn’t hung out much recently.

Apparently he wasn’t holding a grudge as she heard back almost immediately with a text that read: “no problem – see you soon, Copper.”

“We’re good,” she told Ray, then let her mind drift to

something that had been eating at her. She didn't realize how long she'd been quiet until Ray broke into her thoughts.

"What is it, Keri?" Ray asked expectantly. "I can tell you're turning some clue over in your head."

Once again Keri marveled at how he seemed capable of reading her mind.

"It's just the drop. Something about it bugs me. Why would this guy, assuming it's a guy, give us the location so early? He must know that if the Rainey's contacted us, we'd have hours to do exactly what we're doing – establish a perimeter, install surveillance, gather manpower. Why give us a head start? I understand demanding the money early to give them time to gather it. But if it was me, I'd call at eleven forty-five p.m. to reveal the drop location and say the meet was at midnight."

"Fair question," he agreed. "And it fits with your suspicion that he doesn't really care about the money."

"I don't want to belabor it, but I really don't think he does," she said.

"So what do you think he cares about?" Ray asked.

Keri had been mulling this over in her head and was happy for the opportunity to share it out loud.

"Whoever this guy is, I think he's fixated on Jessica. I feel like he knows her or has at least met her. He's been watching her."

"That fits. Everything suggests he's been planning this for a while."

"Exactly. Those special sunglasses he used at FedEx, knowing

where the cameras were there, abducting her at the perfect time when she was out of sight of the school but not yet to her mother, in a part of the neighborhood where no neighbors had exterior security cameras. These are all signs of someone who has been working on this for a long time.”

“That makes sense. But the security officer at the school came up empty with staff. I checked again at the station. No teachers had records of anything more than parking tickets.”

“What about school janitors or bus drivers?”

“They’re employed through outside companies. But everyone who comes in contact with the school has to pass a background check. We can go through the list again. But the guy was pretty thorough.”

“Okay then, what about employees at businesses along her bike route or construction workers on a house being built nearby – people who would see her every day and be familiar with her routine and who have a record?”

“Those are good leads we can pursue in the morning. But I’m hoping we nab this guy tonight and none of that is necessary.”

They pulled up to the Rainey house and noticed a police car parked far down the block. It had been instructed not to park too close to the house in case the abductor drove by. They walked to the door and knocked. An officer opened it immediately and they stepped inside.

“How are they doing?” Ray asked him quietly.

“The mom has spent most of her time upstairs with the little

boy, trying to keep him busy,” the officer replied.

“And keep herself busy,” Keri added.

“I think so,” the officer agreed. “The dad has been mostly quiet. He’s spent a lot of time studying the park layout on his laptop. He’s been asking us all kinds of questions about our surveillance, most of which we don’t have answers to.”

“Okay, thanks,” Ray said. “Hopefully we can provide a few.”

Just as the officer said, Tim Rainey was seated at the kitchen table, with a Google map of Burton Chace Park on his laptop screen.

“Hi, Mr. Rainey,” Keri said. “We understand you have a few questions.”

Rainey looked up and for a moment, barely seemed to recognize them. Then his eyes focused and he nodded.

“I have a lot actually.”

“Go ahead,” Ray said.

“Okay. The note said not to contact the authorities. How are you going to keep from being seen?”

“First, we’ve set up hidden cameras throughout the park,” Ray answered. “We’ll be able to monitor them remotely from a van in a nearby parking lot. Also, the park is populated by some homeless people and we’ve dressed up an officer accordingly to fit in. She’s been there for hours so as not to draw suspicion from the others. We’ll have people at the Windjammers Yacht Club next door, watching from a second-floor room with tinted glass. One of them is a sniper.”

Keri saw Tim Rainey's eyes widen but he said nothing as Ray continued.

"We'll have an overhead drone available but won't use it unless absolutely necessary. It's almost silent and can operate up to five hundred feet. But we don't want to take any chances with that. In total, we'll have almost a dozen officers offsite but within sixty seconds of the location to assist you if things go south. That includes Detective Locke and myself. We'll be on a civilian boat in the marina, far enough away to avoid suspicion but close enough to watch events through binoculars. We've thought this through, Mr. Rainey."

"Okay, that's obvious. So what exactly do I need to do?"

"I'm glad you asked," Ray said. "That's what we're here to go over now. Why don't we prep right here, since you already have the map up?"

He and Keri sat down on either side of Rainey and she took over.

"So you're supposed to meet him on the bridge between the pergolas at the back of the park near the water. And that's exactly what you're going to do," Keri said. "The park itself will be officially closed so you can't park in the metered lot. That's probably partly why he's doing this at midnight. Any car in the lot would look suspicious. You'll park in the public lot a block away. We'll give you change. All you have to do is park, pay, and walk toward the drop area. Does all this make sense so far?"

"Yes," Rainey said. "When will I get the ransom money?"

“You’re going to pick it up at Waterside shopping center near the park.”

“What if the kidnapper is watching?”

“That’s okay,” Keri assured him. “Your boss will be making the handoff to you, right in front of the Bank of America ATMs. He’s being prepped by one of our detectives right now. There will be officers in the area, also out of sight, in case the abductor tries to grab the money then.”

“Are you tagging the money with some kind of GPS locator?”

“We are,” Ray admitted, jumping in, “and the bag too. But the locators are all very small. The one in the bag will be sewn into the stitching. The tags placed on the money are tiny, clear stickers placed on individual bills. Even if he found the exact bills, the tags are very hard to see.”

Keri knew why Ray had answered that question. It was clear from Rainey’s sour expression that he wasn’t happy about the locators. He didn’t say it but they could tell that he was worried they might put Jessica at risk.

Ray had spoken up so he would be the bearer of that unwelcome information. That way, the rapport and trust Keri was developing with the anxious father wouldn’t be undermined. Keri nodded her imperceptible thanks to her partner. Rainey didn’t seem to notice. She could tell he was agitated by what Ray had said but didn’t object. He moved on.

“So what do I do next?” he asked Keri, pointedly looking away from Ray.

“Like I said before, after you get the ransom money, drive to the parking lot a block from Chace Park. Then just get out and walk to the bridge between the pergolas. There will be officers in the area but you won’t see them. And it’s not your job to worry about any of that. All you have to do is go to the bridge with the money.”

“What happens when he arrives?” Rainey wanted to know.

“You’re going to ask for your daughter. In theory, he’s going to be under the impression that you’re alone. So it won’t feel right if you just give him the money without a fight. He’d get suspicious. I seriously doubt he’ll have brought her with him. He may give you a location. He might tell you he’ll text you the location once he’s safely away. He might say he’ll FedEx the location – ”

“You don’t think she’ll be there?” Rainey interrupted.

“I’d be very surprised. He’d be giving up all his leverage if he had her with him. His best bet to keep you in line is to keep you in fear for Jessica’s safety. You need to prepare yourself for the likelihood that she won’t be there.”

“I understand. What next?”

“After you express your misgivings about giving up the money, give up the money. Don’t try to negotiate some other plan with him. Don’t try to overpower him. He might be jumpy. He’ll probably be armed. We don’t want to do anything that will cause a confrontation.”

Tim Rainey nodded reluctantly. Keri didn’t like his vibe and decided she needed to be more forceful.

“Mr. Rainey. I need your promise that you won’t do anything foolish. Our best bet is for him to either tell you where to find your daughter or return to her after the drop. Even if he tells you nothing, don’t panic. We will track him. When the time is right, we will apprehend him. If you take matters into your own hands, it could end badly for both you and Jessica. Are we clear on that, sir?”

“Yes. Don’t worry. I’m not going to do anything to put Jessica at risk.”

“Of course not,” Keri said reassuringly despite her doubts. “What you will do is complete the drop, return to your car, and drive back here. We’ll deal with everything else as it comes, okay?”

“Will you be putting a microphone on me?” he asked, notably not answering her directly.

“Yes,” Ray said, jumping in again, “and a tiny camera as well. Neither will be noticeable, especially at night. But the camera may help us identify him. And the audio will let us know if you’re in any danger.”

“Will we be able to communicate?”

“No,” Ray told him. “I mean, we’ll obviously be able to hear you. But giving you an earpiece would be risky. He might see it. And we want you to stay focused on what *you* need to do.”

“One more thing,” Keri added. “There’s a chance he may not show up at all. He could get spooked and back out. He might never have intended to come. Be prepared for that as well.”

“Do you think that’s what going to happen?” Rainey asked. He clearly had never even considered the possibility.

Keri gave him the most truthful answer she could muster.

“I have absolutely no idea what’s going to happen. But we’re about to find out.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Keri thought she might be sick. It was almost funny. After all, she'd lived on a floating houseboat for several years. But floating on a sailboat in open channel waters while holding binoculars to her eyes for long stretches was a different proposition.

Butch had offered to drop anchor on the *Pipsqueak* but both Keri and Ray worried that a stationary boat in the water might look suspicious. Of course, a boat aimlessly traipsing back and forth wasn't much better.

After about fifteen minutes of that, Butch suggested they loiter near a dock across the channel from the park, where at least the other boats would make them stand out less. Keri, uncertain that she could hold off the nausea much longer, jumped at the suggestion.

They found an unoccupied spot and lingered there as midnight drew near. The biting winter wind howled outside. Sitting on the small bench near the window, Keri could hear the water lapping loudly against the hull. She embraced it, trying to match her breathing to its rhythm. She felt the knot in her stomach start to loosen and the sweat on her brow subside a bit.

It was 11:57 p.m. Keri put the binoculars to her eyes again and looked across the water at the park. Ray, several feet over, was doing the same.

“See anything?” Butch asked from up above. He was excited

to be a part of a police operation and was having a hard time hiding it. This was probably the most eventful thing to happen to him in years.

He was the same crusty guy she remembered, defined by his weather-beaten skin, his shock of unbrushed white hair, and the perpetual smell of liquor on his breath. Under normal circumstances, operating a boat in his condition was a violation. But she was willing to let it slide considering the situation.

“There are some trees partially blocking the view,” she whispered back loudly. “And it’s hard to see with the glare from the window, even with the lights out down here.”

“I can’t do anything about the trees,” Butch said. “But you know, the windows open part way.”

“I didn’t know that,” she admitted.

“How long did you live on that boat?” Ray asked.

Keri, happily surprised that he was willing to engage in teasing, stuck her tongue out at him before adding, “Apparently not long enough.”

A voice came over their comms, interrupting the most natural moment they’d had all day. It was Lieutenant Hillman.

“All units be advised. This is Unit One. The messenger has the cargo, has parked, and is en route to the destination on foot.”

Hillman was one of the people stationed on the second floor of the Windjammers Club, which had a good vantage point of much of the park, including the bridge. He was using pre-assigned non-specific terms for everyone involved to avoid sharing too much

information over communication lines, which always seemed to be hacked by curious citizens who liked to listen in on police traffic. Rainey was the messenger. The bag of money was the cargo. The bridge was the destination. The kidnapper would be referred to as the subject and Jessica would be the asset.

“This is Unit Four. I can see the destination,” Keri said, finally finding an angle with a clear view of the bridge. “There’s no one visible in the vicinity.”

“This is Unit Two,” came the voice of Officer Jamie Castillo, who was playing the role of the homeless woman in the park. “The messenger has just passed my location west of the community building near the cafe. The only other people I see are two homeless individuals. Both of them have been here all afternoon. Both appear to be sleeping.”

“Keep an eye on those individuals, Unit Two,” Hillman said. “We don’t know what the subject looks like. Anything is possible.”

“Copy that, Unit One.”

“I hope you guys can hear me,” a nervous-sounding Tim Rainey whispered loudly into his lavalier microphone. “I’m in the park and headed toward the bridge.”

“Ugh,” Ray muttered under his breath. “Are we going to get a running commentary from this guy?”

Keri scowled at him.

“He’s nervous, Ray. Cut him some slack.”

“All units be advised. This is HQ,” Manny Suarez said from

the van in the shopping center parking lot that served as mobile headquarters. “We have eyes on the entire area and there is no movement at this point besides the messenger, who is fifty yards from the destination.”

Keri looked at her watch. 11:59 p.m. In the distance she heard the motor of a boat at the far end of the marina’s main channel. Seals, who liked to sunbathe on the docks in the day, were calling out to one another. Other than that, the wind, and the waves, it was silent.

“Movement along Mindanao Way approaching the park,” came an unfamiliar, agitated voice.

“Identify your unit,” Hillman barked, “and don’t use proper names.”

“Sorry, sir. This is Unit Three. There is a vehicle approaching the park along...the street leading up to it. It appears to be a motorcycle.”

Keri realized who Unit Three was – Officer Roger Gentry. West LA wasn’t the largest division of LAPD and they were short on available manpower at this hour, so Hillman had pulled in every unassigned officer and that included Gentry. He was a rookie, on the job less than a year, about as long as Castillo but far less confident or, apparently, capable.

“Does anyone else have eyes?” Hillman asked.

“Can anybody else hear that?” Tim Rainey asked way too loudly, apparently forgetting no one could reply to him. “It sounds like someone’s coming.”

“This is Unit Two,” Castillo said from her makeshift nook near the community center. “I have eyes. It *is* a motorcycle. Can’t identify from my location but it’s small, a Honda, I think. Only a driver. It has entered the park and is traveling along the south edge of the service road in the general direction of the destination and the messenger.”

Keri saw the bike now too, speeding along the service road that skirted the edge of the park near the water. She turned her attention to Tim Rainey, who was standing stiffly in the middle of the bridge, his right hand tightly clutching the bag.

“This is Unit One,” Hillman announced. “We have rifle on standby, prepared to assist. Does anyone have an updated visual on the vehicle?”

“This is Unit Four,” Ray said. “We have a visual. Solo rider is traveling about fifty miles per hour along the edge of the service road. Vehicle is turning right, that’s north, in the general direction of the destination.”

“I think it’s someone on a motorcycle,” Tim Rainey said. “Can anyone tell who it is? Is it the guy? Does he have Jess?”

“Unit Four, this is Unit One,” Hillman said, ignoring the chatter from Rainey. “Do you see any weapons? Rifle, stand ready.”

“Rifle ready,” came the voice of the sniper next to Hillman in the second-floor room of the yacht club.

“This is Unit Four,” Ray replied. “I don’t see any weapons. But my visual is compromised by darkness and the speed of the

vehicle.”

“Rifle on my mark,” Hillman said.

“On your mark,” the sniper replied calmly.

Keri watched as the driver of the bike hit the brakes and did a sudden, dramatic wheelie. When the front wheel hit the road again, the driver forced the bike in a tight donut, circling three times before coming out of it and speeding back in the direction from which it came.

“This is Unit Four,” she said quickly. “Stand down. Repeat, recommend Rifle stand down. I think we’ve got a late-night joyrider on our hands.”

“Rifle, stand down,” Hillman ordered.

Sure enough, the bike continued back the way it had come, down the service road and through the metered parking lot. She lost sight of it when it got back on Mindanao.

“Who has eyes on the messenger?” Hillman asked urgently.

“This is Unit Four,” Keri continued. “The messenger is shaken but unharmed. He’s standing there, unsure how to proceed.”

“Frankly, I’m unsure too,” Hillman admitted. “Let’s just keep alert, people. That may have been a decoy.”

“Is anyone coming to get me?” Rainey asked, as if in response to Hillman. “Should I just stay here? I’m going to assume I should stay here unless I hear different.”

“God, I wish he’d shut up,” Ray muttered, putting his hand over his mic so only Keri and Butch could hear him. Keri didn’t respond.

After about ten minutes, Keri saw Rainey, still standing in the middle of the bridge, check his phone.

“I hope you can hear me,” he said. “I just got a text. It says ‘By involving the authorities, you have betrayed my trust. You have sacrificed the opportunity to redeem the child sinner. I must now determine whether to remove the demon myself or forgive your insubordination and allow you one more chance to purify her soul. Her fate was in your hands. Now it is in mine.’ He knew you were here. All your elaborate planning was for nothing. And now I have no idea whether he’ll even reach out to me again. You might have killed my daughter!”

He screamed the last line, his voice cracking in fury. Keri could hear his voice across the marina even as it came over the comm. She saw him drop to his knees, let go of the bag, put his hands to his face, and begin weeping. His pain felt intimately familiar.

It was the anguished cry of a parent who believed his child was lost to him forever. She recognized it because she had wept the same way when her own daughter had been taken and she could do nothing to stop it.

Keri rushed out of the boat cabin and just made it up on deck in time to vomit over the side into the ocean.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jessica Rainey wriggled her fingers to keep them from falling asleep again. They were tied behind her back, attached to the pipe she sat leaning against. The ground was asphalt, hard and cold. The one fluorescent light that dangled from the ceiling flickered intermittently, making it impossible to fall asleep.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been in this place but knew it had been long enough for day to turn into night. She could tell because of tiny cracks in the wall that let in the light from the sun. There was no light now.

She hadn't even noticed the cracks initially. When she woke up, all she did was scream and try to yank herself free. She screamed for help. She screamed for her parents. She even screamed for her little brother, Nate, not that he could have helped her.

And she pulled so hard at the restraints on her wrists that when she looked behind her, she could see the drops of blood where they had dug into her skin and dripped onto the ground.

It was around that time that she noticed she wasn't wearing her own clothes. Someone had removed them and replaced them with a sleeveless dress that went to her knees. It was clearly homemade, stitched together unevenly.

Beyond that, it was rough and scratchy, as if it had been made from several burlap sacks. If she wasn't so sore, she'd be totally

focused on how itchy she was. She refused to think about how she had actually gotten from one outfit into the other.

After she had worn herself out from screaming and yanking and the adrenaline had faded from her system, she tried to remember what had happened to her. The last thing she could recall was riding her bike up the big hill on Rees Street, when she'd felt a sudden sharp pain in her back. It felt like the electrical shock she sometimes got from touching a metal door handle after walking on a carpet, only a hundred times worse.

And that was it. The next thing she knew she was in this room that was only lit for about six feet around her before it collapsed into darkness. She no idea of its dimensions but she was pretty sure the walls were made of the same asphalt as the floor. When she yelled, it sounded muffled, as if no sound could escape the room.

And her back hurt, not in the way all of the rest of her hurt, which was mostly an ache due to being stuck in the same position for so long. There was one particular spot on her back that felt burned.

In fact, it was the same spot where she'd felt the pain earlier. The more she thought about it, the more Jessica suspected someone had poked her in that spot with something like a cattle prod. She remembered reading about them in her history class's section on Western States.

Ranchers sometimes used them on their cows to get them to go in the direction they wanted. She remembered Mr. Hensarling

saying that it gave a cow a jolt but that a cattle prod would do much worse to a human being.

Now that the initial terror and exhaustion had worn off, Jessica realized something else: she was hungry. She hadn't had anything to eat or drink since lunch. And whatever time it was now, she was sure it was late.

But no one had come by to offer food or even check to see if she was still alive. She hadn't heard anything other than her own voice and the occasional rattle of the pipes since she'd arrived.

Have I just been left here to die? Will I ever see my family again? Will I ever even learn who did this to me?

Just then, the light above her burned out completely. Too tired and hoarse to scream, she pressed her back against the pipe as if it could offer her some kind of protection.

After a few seconds, a hum kicked in and a dull blue emergency light came on in the far corner of the room. Her eyes slowly started to adjust to the half-darkness and she noticed something in the same corner where the light emanated from. She squinted, in the vain hope that could somehow help. Eventually the form came into focus and she realized that it had the shape of a human.

"Hello," she called out excitedly. "You in the corner – can you hear me?"

There was no response. She looked a little closer and realized there was something odd about the figure, lying limply on its side. It looked human but somehow different. She was perplexed. And

then, in a flash of recognition, she realized what she was looking at. It was a human skeleton.

Jessica Rainey discovered that she could still scream after all.

CHAPTER NINE

Even though she didn't really feel it, Keri pretended to stay calm and collected for the sake of her passenger.

Tim Rainey was so shell-shocked that she had to drive him home in his own car. Ray said he wanted to check on some leads at the station so Manny Suarez followed her and picked her up to drive her back.

On the way, she tried to tell Rainey that there was still hope, that they still had lots of leads to follow. But she could tell he wasn't really listening and stopped trying after a few minutes. When they got to his house, he got out of the car and closed the door behind him without saying a word.

Back at the station, Keri was surprised to find there was very little in the way of investigative activity. That was until she remembered that it was after 1 a.m. and there wasn't much more that could be done until morning.

"How's Rainey doing?" Hillman asked when he saw Keri and Manny walk in.

"Not great," Keri admitted. "He was equal parts pissed and stunned. I'd expect it to tip more toward pissed by morning. Do we know what gave us away? How the hell did this guy know we were there?"

"I'm reviewing the footage from the scene," Edgerton said. "So far, I can't find any errors on our part."

Hillman sighed heavily. He'd seen a lot of these situations and Keri noticed that he wasn't as quick to place blame as usual.

"Folks, we may not have done anything wrong at all. This guy has clearly been planning this for a long time. It's reasonable to think he prepared for this contingency as well."

"It's like Keri mentioned to me earlier," Ray added. "He gave us a lot of lead time on the drop area. It's possible he had already set up cameras in the area or at the Rainey house. If he was testing them to see if they'd call us, it wouldn't have been hard to discover they had."

Keri appreciated that even though he was upset with her, Ray was willing to acknowledge that her misgivings hadn't been misplaced.

"I'm just worried we might not get another chance," Manny said. "He may not want to risk another attempt."

Keri was tempted to remind them about her doubts that the kidnapper ever intended to show up but decided now wasn't the time.

"What happened with the motorcyclist?" she asked instead.

"Nothing," came a voice from the couch in the corner. Keri looked over and saw that it was Frank Brody, sprawled out lazily.

"Can you be a bit more specific?" she asked, trying to keep her tone non-confrontational. She hadn't even realized he had been part of the operation.

"He was just some joyriding teenager. We pulled him over a few blocks away. We checked and he has no record other than

two speeding tickets for the same sort of thing. He goes to high school in Venice – no obvious connection to the girl or anything else in the area.”

Garrett Patterson, who had remained back at the station to help with coordination, cleared his throat.

“If you got something to say, Patterson, just spit it out,” growled Brody. “This isn’t a finishing school.”

For once Keri agreed with him. Patterson was great at sifting through data but his reticence to go in the field or even speak up in meetings was getting tiresome. Patterson swallowed hard and spoke.

“I was just going to say that we traced the phone that texted Mr. Rainey. It was a burner. Its last GPS location was in the marina, not too far from the park. We think it was dumped in the ocean after it was used.”

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