

A KERI LOCKE MYSTERY--BOOK #2

A
TRACE
OF
MURDER

BLAKE PIERCE

A Keri Locke Mystery

Blake Pierce

A Trace of Murder

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Pierce B.

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“A dynamic story line that grips from the first chapter and doesn't let go.” -- Midwest Book Review, Diane Donovan (regarding *Once Gone*) From #1 bestselling mystery author Blake Pierce comes a new masterpiece of psychological suspense. In *A TRACE OF MURDER* (Book #2 in the Keri Locke mystery series), Keri Locke, Missing Persons Detective in the Homicide division of the LAPD, remains haunted by the abduction of her own daughter. Encouraged by the new lead that has landed, the first in years, she pursues it with all that she has, determined to find her daughter and bring her back alive. Yet Keri, at the same time, receives a phone call from a frantic husband, a famed Beverly Hills plastic surgeon, who reports that his wife has been missing for two days. A wealthy socialite with no enemies and little reason to leave her life, he fears the worst has become of his wife. Keri takes on the case, assigned a new partner whom she hates, as Ray still recovers in the hospital. Her investigation leads her deep into the elite Beverly Hills world of the idle rich, to encounters with lonely housewives, and those with shopping-addicted, empty lives. Keri, in over her head in this world, becomes increasingly puzzled by the conflicting signals: did this woman, with a stalker and a lurid, secret past, run away, or was she abducted? Or did something far more sinister happen? A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, *A TRACE OF MURDER* is book #2 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*) Book #3 in the Keri Locke series will be available soon.

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Содержание

CHAPTER ONE	8
CHAPTER TWO	12
CHAPTER THREE	15
CHAPTER FOUR	17
CHAPTER FIVE	23
CHAPTER SIX	25
CHAPTER SEVEN	28
CHAPTER EIGHT	32
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

Blake Pierce

A Trace of Muder (A Keri Locke Mystery—Book 2)

Blake Pierce

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

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.

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CHAPTER ONE

The long hallway was dark. Even with her flashlight on, Keri had trouble seeing more than about ten feet in front of her. She ignored the pit of fear in her stomach and pressed on. With one hand holding the light and the other grasping her gun, she inched forward. Finally she made it to the basement door. Every part of her told her she'd finally found the place. This was where her little Evie was being held.

Keri pushed open the door and stepped onto the first creaky wooden step. The darkness here was even more overwhelming than in the hall. As she slowly made her way down the stairs, it occurred to her how odd it was to find a home with a basement in Southern California. This was the first one she'd ever encountered. Then she heard something.

It sounded like a child crying—a little girl, maybe eight. Keri called out to her and a voice called back.

“Mommy!”

“Don't worry, Evie, Mommy's here!” Keri shouted back as she hurried down the stairs. Even as she did, something was eating at her, telling her this wasn't quite right.

It wasn't until her toe snagged on a step and she lost her balance, falling forward into nothingness, that she realized what had been bothering her. Evie had been missing for five years. How could she still sound the same?

But it was too late to do anything about that now as she hurtled through the air toward the floor. She girded herself for the impact. But it didn't come. To her horror, she realized she was falling down a seemingly endless pit, the air getting colder, nonstop wailing all around her. She had failed her daughter once again.

Keri woke with a start, sitting bolt upright in her car. It took a moment for her to realize what was happening. She wasn't in an endless pit. She wasn't in a creepy basement. She was in her battered Toyota Prius in the police station parking lot, where she had fallen asleep while eating her lunch.

The cold she'd felt was from the open window. The wailing was actually the siren of a police car leaving the lot on a call. She was drenched in sweat and her heart was beating fast. But none of it was real. It was just another horrible, hope-crushing nightmare. Her daughter, Evelyn, was still missing.

Keri shook the cobwebs from her head, took a swig from her water bottle, got out, and headed back inside the station, reminding herself she was no longer just a mom: she was also a Missing Persons detective for the LAPD.

Her multiple injuries forced her to move gingerly. She was still only two weeks removed from her brutal encounter with a violent child abductor. Pachanga, at least, had gotten what he'd deserved after Keri rescued the senator's daughter. Thinking of it made the sharp pains she still felt all over her body more tolerable.

The doctors had only let her take off the soft-sided face protector a few days ago, after determining her fractured eye socket was healing well enough. Her arm was still in a sling from Pachanga breaking her collarbone. She'd been told she could remove it in another week but was considering dumping it early because it was so annoying. There was nothing to be done about her cracked ribs other than wear protective padding. That bothered her, too, as it made her look about ten pounds heavier than her usual 130 fighting weight. Keri wasn't a vain woman. But at thirty-five, she liked that she could still turn heads. With the pads bulging against her blouse at the waist and riding above her work slacks, she doubted she was doing much of that.

Because of the time off she'd been given to recover, her brown eyes weren't as bloodshot with exhaustion as usual and her dirty blonde hair, tied back in a simple ponytail, had actually been shampooed. But the fractured orbital bone had left the side of her face with a big yellow bruise which

was only now starting to fade, and the sling didn't add to her appeal. This probably wasn't the ideal time to go on any first dates.

The thought of dating reminded her of Ray. Her partner for the last year and friend for six before that was still recovering in the hospital from having been shot in the stomach by Pachanga. Luckily, he was doing well enough that he'd recently been moved from the local hospital near the shooting to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Beverly Hills. That was only a twenty-minute drive from the station, so Keri could visit him often.

Yet at no point during those visits had either of them addressed the growing romantic tension she knew they were both feeling.

Keri took a deep breath before making the familiar but nerve-wracking walk through the station bullpen. It felt like her first day back. She could still feel eyes on her. Every time she walked past her co-workers, she sensed their furtive, darting looks and wondered what they were thinking.

Did they all still just consider her a rule-breaking loose cannon? Had she gotten any grudging respect for taking down a child-abducting killer? How long would being the only female detective in the squad make her feel like a permanent outsider?

As she walked past them all in the hustle and bustle of the station and eased herself into her desk chair, Keri tried to control the pit of resentment rising in her chest and just focus on the work. At least the place was packed and as chaotic as ever, and in that reassuring way, nothing had changed. The station was crowded with civilians filing complaints, perps being booked, and detectives on the phones, following up on leads.

Keri had been limited to desk duty since her return. And her desk was full. Ever since she got back, she'd been awash in a sea of paperwork. There were dozens of arrest reports to review, search warrants to procure, witness statements to evaluate, and evidence reports to examine.

She suspected that because she wasn't allowed to go out on cases yet, all her colleagues were pushing their busy work on her. Luckily, she was supposed to be allowed to return to the field tomorrow. And the secret truth was that she didn't mind being office-bound for one reason: Pachanga's files.

When the cops searched his house after the incident, they'd found a laptop. Keri and Detective Kevin Edgerton, the precinct's resident tech guru, had cracked Pachanga's password, managing to open his files. Her hope was that the files would lead to discovery of multiple missing children, maybe even her own daughter.

Unfortunately, what had seemed at first like the mother lode of information on multiple abductions had proven difficult to access. Edgerton had explained that the encrypted files could only be opened with the proper code-breaking cipher, which they didn't have. Keri had spent the last week learning everything she could about Pachanga in the hopes of cracking the code. But so far, she'd come up empty.

As she sat there reviewing files, Keri's thoughts returned to something that had been eating at her since she'd resumed work. When Pachanga kidnapped Senator Stafford Penn's daughter, Ashley, he'd done it at the behest of the senator's brother, Payton. The two men had been in communication on the dark web for months.

Keri couldn't help but wonder how a senator's brother had managed to get in touch with a professional abductor. It wasn't like they traveled in the same circles. But they did have one thing in common. Both men were represented by a lawyer named Jackson Cave.

Cave's office was high atop a downtown skyscraper, but many of his clients were far more earthbound. In addition to his corporate work, Cave had a long history of representing rapists, kidnappers, and pedophiles. If Keri was being generous, she suspected it was simply because he knew he could gouge such unpleasant clients. But part of her thought he actually got off on it. Either way, she despised him.

If Jackson Cave had put Payton Penn and Alan Pachanga in touch, it stood to reason that he also knew how to access all their encrypted files. Keri was sure that somewhere in that fancy high-rise office of his was the cipher she needed to break the code and discover details on all those missing children, maybe even her own. She resolved that one way or another, legally or not, she was getting into that office.

As she started to think how that might be accomplished, Keri noticed a twenty-something female uniformed officer walking slowly in her direction. She waved her over.

“What’s your name again?” Keri asked, uncertain if she should already know.

“Officer Jamie Castillo,” the young, dark-haired officer answered. “I only just got out of the academy. I was reassigned here the week you were in the hospital. I was originally at West LA Division.”

“So I shouldn’t feel too bad for not knowing who you are?”

“No, Detective Locke,” Castillo said firmly.

Keri was impressed. The gal had confidence and a sharpness in her dark eyes that suggested keen intelligence. She also looked like she could take care of herself. Easily five foot eight, she had a sinewy, athletic frame that suggested tussling would be unwise.

“Good. What can I do for you?” Keri asked, trying not to sound intimidating. There weren’t a lot of female cops in Pacific Division and Keri didn’t want to scare any of them off.

“I’ve been covering the station’s tip line for the last few weeks. As you might suspect, a ton of them were related to your run-in with Alan Pachanga and the statement you made afterward about trying to find your daughter.”

Keri nodded, remembering. After she’d rescued Ashley, the department held a big press conference to celebrate the happy outcome.

Still in her wheelchair, Keri had praised Ashley and her family before co-opting the conference to mention Evie. She’d held up her picture and begged the public to offer any information that might help in her search. Her immediate supervisor, Lieutenant Cole Hillman, had been so pissed at her for using a department victory as a tool in her personal crusade that Keri thought he would have fired her on the spot if he could have. But since she was a wheelchair-bound, teenage-rescuing hero, he couldn’t.

Even when she was stuck in the hospital, Keri had heard through the grapevine that he was annoyed when the department started getting inundated with hundreds of calls daily.

“I’m sorry you got stuck with that assignment,” Keri said. “I guess I just wanted to make the most of the opportunity and didn’t think about who would have to deal with the fallout. I assume all the calls were dead ends?”

Jamie Castillo hesitated, as if wondering whether she was making the right decision. Keri could see the wheels turning in the younger woman’s head. She watched her calculating the right move and couldn’t help but like her. It felt like she was watching a younger version of herself.

“Well,” Castillo finally said, “most were easily dismissed as being from unstable people or simply pranks. But we got one call this morning that was somehow different. It had a straightforwardness that made me take it more seriously.”

Almost immediately, Keri’s mouth went dry and she felt her heart start to race.

Keep cool. It’s probably nothing. Don’t overreact.

“Can I hear it?” she asked more calmly than she’d thought possible.

“I’ve already forwarded it to you,” Castillo said.

Keri looked at her phone and saw the blinking light indicating she had a voicemail. Trying not to look desperate, she slowly picked up the receiver and checked it.

The voice on the message was raspy, almost metallic sounding and hard to understand, made even more difficult by a banging noise in the background.

“I saw you on TV talking about your girl,” it said. “I want to help. There’s an abandoned warehouse in Palms, across from the Piedmont Generating Station. Check it out.”

That was all there was to it—just a gravelly male voice offering a vague tip. So why were her fingertips tingling with adrenaline? Why was she having trouble swallowing? Why did her thoughts suddenly flash on potential images of what Evie might look like now?

Perhaps it was because the call had none of the earmarks of the standard hoax calls. It didn’t try to draw attention to itself, which was what clearly got Castillo’s attention. And that same element—its straightforward blandness—was the quality currently making beads of sweat trickle down Keri’s back.

Castillo was watching her expectantly.

“You think it’s legit?” she asked.

“Hard to tell,” Keri answered evenly, despite her elevated heart rate, as she punched the generating station into Google Maps. “We’ll check where the call originated from later and have tech try to scrub the message to see what else can be gleaned from the voice and background noise. But I doubt they’d be able to determine much. Whoever made this call was careful.”

“That’s what I thought too,” Castillo agreed. “No name given, clear attempt to mask the voice, distracting noise in the background. It just felt...different from the others.”

Keri was only half-listening as she looked at the map on her screen. The generating station was located on National Boulevard, just south of the 10 Freeway. Checking satellite imagery, she verified that there was a warehouse across the street. Whether it was abandoned, she didn’t know.

But I’m about to find out.

She looked at Castillo and felt a rush of gratitude toward her—and also something she hadn’t felt in a very long time for a fellow officer: admiration. She had a good feeling about her, and was glad she was here.

“Good work, Castillo,” she said belatedly to the young officer, who was also staring at the screen. “So good that I think I better go check it out.”

“You need company?” Castillo asked hopefully as Keri stood and gathered her things to head out for the warehouse.

But before she could answer, Hillman poked his head out of his office and yelled across the bullpen to her.

“Locke, I need you in my office now.” He glared at her. “We’ve got a new case.”

CHAPTER TWO

Keri stood frozen in place. She was consumed by a flood of conflicting emotions. Technically, this was good news. It looked like she was being put back on field duty a day early, a sign that Hillman, despite his issues with her, felt she was ready to resume her normal responsibilities. But part of her just wanted to ignore him and go straight to the warehouse this second.

“Today, please,” Hillman called out, snapping her out of her momentary indecision.

“Coming, sir,” she said. Then turning to Castillo with a little half-smile, she added, “To be continued.”

When she stepped into Hillman’s office, she noticed that his typically wrinkled brow was even more scrunched up than usual. Every one of his fifty years was visible on his face. His salt and pepper hair was mussed as usual. Keri could never tell if he didn’t notice or just didn’t care. He wore a jacket but his tie was loose and his ill-fitting shirt couldn’t hide his slight paunch.

Sitting on the old, beat-up loveseat against the far wall was Detective Frank Brody. Brody was fifty-nine years old and less than six months from retirement. Everything about his demeanor reflected that, from his barely competent attempts at politeness to his disheveled, ketchup-stained dress shirt, nearly bursting at the buttons against his formidable girth, to his loafers, which were splitting at the seams and looked like they might fall apart at any moment.

Brody had never struck Keri as the most dedicated and hard-working of detectives, and recently he seemed more interested in his precious Cadillac than in solving cases. He usually worked Robbery-Homicide but had been reassigned to Missing Persons with the unit short-handed because of Keri’s and Ray’s injuries.

The move had put him in a permanently foul mood, which was only reinforced by disdain at potentially having to work with a woman. He was truly a man of a different generation. She’d actually once overheard him say, “I’d rather work with bricks and turds than chicks and birds.” The feeling, though maybe stated in a slightly different way, was mutual.

Hillman motioned for Keri to sit in the metal folding chair across from his desk, then took the caller off mute and spoke.

“Dr. Burlingame, I’m here with the two detectives I’m going to be sending to meet with you. On the line are Detectives Frank Brody and Keri Locke. Detectives, I’m speaking to Dr. Jeremy Burlingame. He’s concerned about his wife, whom he hasn’t been able to reach for more than twenty-four hours. Doctor, can you please repeat what you told me?”

Keri pulled out her notebook and pen to take notes. She was immediately suspicious. In any case of a missing wife, the first suspect was always the husband and she wanted to hear the timbre of his voice the first time he spoke.

“Of course,” the doctor said. “I drove to San Diego yesterday morning to help perform a surgery. The last time I spoke to Kendra was before I left. I got home very late last night and ended up sleeping in a guest room so as not to wake her up. This morning I slept in since I didn’t have any patients to see.”

Keri wasn’t sure if Hillman was recording the conversation so she scribbled furiously, trying to keep up as Dr. Burlingame continued.

“When I went into the bedroom, she was gone. The bed was made. I assumed she’d just left the house before I got up so I texted her. I didn’t hear back—again, not that unusual. We live in Beverly Hills and my wife attends a lot of local charity functions and events and she typically silences her phone for them. Sometimes she forgets to turn the volume back on.”

Keri wrote everything down, evaluating the veracity of each comment. So far nothing she’d heard sounded warning bells but that didn’t mean much. Anyone could hold it together on the phone. She wanted to see his demeanor when confronted in person by LAPD detectives.

“I went to work and called her again on the way in—still no answer,” he continued. “Around lunchtime I started to get worried. None of her friends had heard from her. I called our maid, Lupe, who said that she hadn’t seen Kendra today or yesterday. That’s when I really started to worry. So I called nine-one-one.”

Frank Brody leaned in and Keri could tell he was going to interrupt. She wished he wouldn’t but there was nothing she could do to stop him. She typically preferred to let an interviewee go on as much as they liked. Sometimes they got comfortable and made mistakes. But apparently Brody didn’t share her philosophy.

“Dr. Burlingame, why didn’t your call get routed to the Beverly Hills Police Department?” he asked. His gruff tone carried no sense of sympathy. It sounded to Keri like he was wondering how he’d gotten stuck with the case.

“I guess because I’m calling you from my office, which is in Marina del Rey. Does it really matter?” he asked. He sounded lost.

“No, of course not,” Hillman assured him. “We’re happy to help. And our missing persons unit would likely have been called in by BHPD anyway. Why don’t you return to your house and my detectives will meet you there around one thirty. I have your home address.”

“Okay,” Burlingame said. “I’m leaving now.”

After he hung up, Hillman looked at his two detectives.

“Initial thoughts?” he asked.

“She probably just ran off to Cabo with some of her girlfriends and forgot to tell him,” Brody said without hesitation. “That or he killed her. After all, it’s almost always the husband.”

Hillman looked at Keri. She thought for a second before speaking. Something about applying the usual rules to this guy didn’t feel right, but she couldn’t put her finger on why.

“I’m tempted to agree,” she finally said. “But I want to look this guy in the face before I draw any conclusions.”

“Well, you’re about to get your chance,” Hillman said. “Frank, you can head out. I need to talk to Locke for a minute.”

Brody gave her a malicious smile as he left, like she’d gotten detention and he’d somehow escaped it. Hillman closed the door behind him.

Keri braced herself, certain that whatever was coming couldn’t be good.

“You can head out in a second,” he said, his tone softer than she’d anticipated. “But I wanted to remind you of a few things before you go. First, I think you know I wasn’t very happy about your stunt at the press conference. You put your own needs ahead of the department. You get that, right?”

Keri nodded.

“That said,” he continued, “I’d like for us to get a fresh start. I know you were in a bad way at that moment and saw this as a chance to shine a light on your daughter’s disappearance. I can respect that.”

“Thank you, sir,” Keri said, slightly relieved but suspicious that a hammer was yet to drop.

“Still,” he added, “just because the press loves you doesn’t mean I won’t kick you out on your ass if you pull any of your typical lone wolf shit. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Lastly, please take it easy. You’re less than a week out of the hospital. Don’t do anything to put yourself back in there, okay? Dismissed.”

Keri left his office, mildly surprised. She’d been expecting a dressing down. But she hadn’t been prepared for the slight hint of concern for her well-being.

She looked around for Brody before realizing he must have already left. Apparently he didn’t even want to share a car with a female detective. Normally she’d be annoyed but today it was a blessing in disguise.

As she headed for her car, she stifled a smile.

I’m back on field duty!

It wasn't until she'd been assigned a new case that she realized just how much she'd missed it. The familiar excitement and anticipation started to take hold and even the pain in her ribs seemed to dissipate slightly. The truth was that unless she was solving cases, Keri felt like a piece of her was missing.

She also couldn't help but grin about something else—she was already planning to violate two of Hillman's orders. She was about go lone wolf *and* not take it easy at the same time.

Because she was making a pit stop on her way to the doctor's house.

She was going to check out that abandoned warehouse.

CHAPTER THREE

With her siren on top of her battered Prius, Keri weaved in and out of traffic, her fingers gripped tight on the wheel, her adrenaline rising. The Palms warehouse was on the way to Beverly Hills, more or less. That was how Keri justified prioritizing the search for her daughter, missing five years ago last week, over the hunt for a woman who'd been gone less than a day.

But she had to get there quick. Brody had a head start in getting to Burlingame's house so she could get there after him. But if she showed up too much later, Brody was sure to rat her out to Hillman.

He'd use any excuse he could to avoid working with her. And telling the boss she'd delayed an investigation by arriving late to a witness interview was right up his alley. That left her only a few minutes to check out the warehouse.

She parked on the street and headed for the main gate. The warehouse was in between a self-storage place and a U-Haul rental outlet. The hum of the generating station across the street was disturbingly loud. Keri wondered if she was risking cancer just standing there.

The warehouse was surrounded by cheap fencing designed to keep vagrants and druggies out, but it wasn't hard for Keri to slide through the gap between the poorly locked gates. As she approached the front door of the complex, she noticed the sign for the place lying on the ground, covered in dust. It read *Priceless Item Preservation*.

There was nothing priceless inside the empty, cavernous warehouse. In fact, there was nothing inside at all other than a few turned over metal folding chairs and some mounds of crumbled drywall. The whole place had been cleared out. Keri walked the entire complex, looking for any clue that might relate to Evie, but couldn't find anything.

She knelt down, hoping that a different perspective might offer something fresh. Nothing jumped out at her, although there was something slightly odd at the far end of the warehouse. One metal folding chair was sitting upright with a pile of drywall debris resting on the seat, delicately balanced over a foot high. It seemed unlikely that it would have gotten that way without help.

Keri walked over and looked more closely. She felt like she was searching for connections where there were none. Still, she moved the chair aside, ignoring the drywall that teetered briefly before tumbling to the floor.

She was surprised by the sound when it hit the concrete. Instead of the expected thud, there was a hollow echo. Feeling her heart suddenly begin to beat faster, Keri kicked the debris away and stomped on the spot where it had fallen—another hollow echoing sound. She ran her hand along the floor and discovered that the spot that had been under the metal folding chair was not actually concrete but wood painted gray to blend in with the rest of the flooring.

Trying to control her breathing, she searched the wooden piece with her fingers until she felt a small raised bump. She pushed in on it, heard the sound of a latch opening, and felt one end of the wood piece pop up. She reached under and pulled the square chunk of wood, about the size of a manhole cover, from its grooved slot.

Below it was a space about ten inches deep. There was nothing inside. No papers, no equipment. It was too small to hold a person. At most, it could maybe have housed a small safe.

Keri felt around the edges for another hidden button but found nothing else. She wasn't sure what could have been here before but it was gone now. She sat down on the hard concrete next to the hole, not sure what to do next.

She looked at her watch. It was 1:15. She was supposed to be in Beverly Hills in fifteen minutes. Even if she left now, it would still be close. Frustrated and annoyed, she quickly put the wooden cover back in place, slid the chair back where it had been, and left the building, glancing at the sign on the ground once more.

Priceless Item Preservation. Is the name of the business some kind of clue or am I just being punked by some cruel asshole? Is someone telling me what I have to do to preserve Evie, my most precious item?

The last thought sent a wave of anxiety through Keri. She felt her knees buckle and dropped to the ground awkwardly, trying to prevent any further damage to her left arm, which was nestled uselessly in the sling across her chest. She used her right hand to stop herself from completely collapsing.

Bent over, with a cloud of dust rising around her, Keri closed her eyes tight and tried to force away the dark thoughts closing in on her. A brief vision of her little Evie forced itself into her brain.

She was still eight in the vision, her blonde pigtails bouncing on her head, her face white with terror. She was being tossed inside a white van by a blond man with a tattoo on the right side of his neck. Keri heard the thud as her tiny body slammed against the wall of the van. She saw the blond man stab a teenage boy who tried to stop him. She saw the van pull out and tear off down the road, leaving her far behind as she chased after it with bloodied, bare feet.

It was all still so vivid. Keri choked back tears as she pushed the memory away, trying to force herself back into the present. After a few moments she got control again. She took a few long, slow breaths. Her vision cleared and she felt strong enough to push herself upright.

This was the first flashback she'd had in weeks, since before the confrontation with Pachanga. Part of her had hoped they were gone for good—no such luck.

She felt the ache in her collarbone from the jarring when she'd reached out to brace herself as she fell. In frustration, she pulled off the sling. It was more of a hindrance than a help at this point. Besides, she didn't want to look weak in any way when she met with Dr. Burlingame.

The interview with Burlingame—I've got to go!

She managed to stumble back to her car and pull out into traffic, this time without the siren. She needed quiet for the call she was about to make.

CHAPTER FOUR

Keri felt a nervous pit in her stomach as she punched in the number of Ray's hospital room and waited while it rang. Officially, there was no reason for her to feel nervous. After all, Ray Sands was her friend and her partner in the Missing Persons Unit of LAPD's Pacific Division.

As the phone continued to ring, her mind drifted back to the time before they were partners, when she was a professor of criminology at Loyola Marymount University and served as a consultant for the department, helping him out on a few cases. They had hit it off immediately and he'd returned the professional favor by occasionally speaking to her classes.

After Evelyn was taken, Keri tumbled down a black hole of despair. Her marriage fell apart, and she took to drinking heavily and sleeping with multiple students at the university. Eventually she was fired.

It was soon thereafter, when she was nearly broke, drunk, and living on a decrepit old houseboat in the marina that he came by again. He convinced her to enroll in the police academy as he had done when his life had fallen apart. Ray had offered her a lifeline, a way to reconnect with the world and find meaning in her life. She took it.

After graduating and serving as a uniformed officer, she was promoted to detective, and she asked to be assigned to Pacific Division, which covered much of West Los Angeles. It was where she lived and the area she knew best. It was also Ray's division. He requested her as a partner and they'd been working together for a year when the Pachanga case put them both in the hospital.

But it wasn't the status of Ray's recovery that had Keri feeling nervous. It was the status of their relationship. Something more than friendship had developed in the last year, as they worked so closely together. They both felt it but neither was willing to acknowledge it out loud. Keri felt pangs of jealousy when she called Ray's apartment and a woman answered. He was a notorious and unrepentant ladies' man so it shouldn't have come as a surprise to her, but the feeling of envy was still there, despite her best efforts.

And she knew he felt the same way. She'd seen his eyes flash when they were on a case and a witness came on to her. She could almost feel him tense up beside her.

Even with him so close to death after getting shot, neither of them had been willing to address the issue. Part of Keri thought it was inappropriate to focus on such trivialities when he was recovering from life-threatening injuries. But another part of her was simply terrified of what would happen if things were out in the open.

So they both ignored it. And because neither was used to hiding things from the other, it had gotten awkward. As Keri listened to the ringing phone in Ray's hospital room, she half hoped he'd pick up and half hoped he wouldn't. She needed to talk to him about the anonymous call and what she'd discovered at the warehouse. But she didn't know how to start the conversation.

It ended up not mattering. After ten rings, she hung up. There was no voicemail on the hospital phone, which meant Ray likely wasn't in bed. She decided not to try his cell. He was probably in the bathroom or at a physical therapy session. She knew he'd been itching to get moving again and had finally gotten the go-ahead to start two days ago. Ray was a former professional boxer and Keri was certain he'd spend every available moment working to get back in fighting, or at least working, shape.

Unable to bounce her thoughts off her partner, Keri tried to force the warehouse trip out of her head and focus on the case at hand—missing person Kendra Burlingame.

With one eye on the road and the other on her phone's GPS, Keri quickly wound her way through the twisty Beverly Hills streets up into the secluded part of the community above the city. The higher into the hills she got, the more winding the roads were and the further back the homes got from the street. Along the way, she reviewed what she knew about the case so far. It wasn't much.

Jeremy Burlingame, despite his profession and where he lived, liked to keep a low profile. It took some quick digging by co-workers back at the station to learn the forty-one-year-old was a renowned plastic surgeon known both for doing cosmetic work on celebrities and for offering pro-bono surgery to children with facial deformities.

Kendra Burlingame, thirty-eight, had once been a Hollywood publicist. But after marrying Jeremy, she'd created and put all her energy into a non-profit called All Smiles, which raised money for the children's surgeries and coordinated all of their pre- and post-op care.

They'd been married for seven years. Neither had an arrest record. There was no known history of marital discord, nor of drug or alcohol abuse. On paper at least, they were the perfect couple. Keri was immediately suspicious.

After several wrong turns, she finally pulled up to the house at the end of Tower Road at 1:41, eleven minutes late.

To call it a house was an understatement. It was more of a compound on a property that seemed to cover several acres. From her vantage point, she could see the entire city of Los Angeles splayed out below her.

Keri took a moment to do something rare for her—put on extra makeup. Removing the sling had helped her appearance, but the yellowish bruise near her eye was still noticeable. So she dabbed it with some concealer until it was almost invisible.

Satisfied, she pushed the buzzer next to the security gate. As she waited for a response, she noticed Detective Frank Brody's maroon and white Cadillac parked in the roundabout.

A female voice came over the gate intercom.

"Detective Locke?"

"Yes."

"I'm Lupe Veracruz, the Burlingames' housekeeper. Please enter and park next to your partner. I'll meet you and take you to him and Dr. Burlingame."

The gate opened and Keri eased in, parking next to Frank's immaculately maintained vehicle. The Caddy was his baby. He was proud of its outdated color scheme, its poor gas mileage, and its whale-like size. He called it a classic. To Keri, the car, like its owner, was a dinosaur.

As she opened her car door, a petite, pleasant-looking Hispanic woman in her late forties came out to meet her. Keri got out of the car quickly, not wanting to let the woman see her struggle to navigate around her injured right shoulder. From this point on, Keri considered herself on enemy territory and at a potential crime scene. She didn't want to betray any sense of weakness to Burlingame or anyone in his orbit.

"This way, Detective," Lupe said, getting straight to business as she turned on her heel and led Keri along a cobblestone path, surrounded by immaculately manicured flowers. Keri tried to keep up while stepping carefully. With the injuries to her eye, shoulder, and ribs, she still felt uncertain on uneven ground.

They passed a huge pool with two diving boards and a lap lane. Next to it was a large pit, with a massive pile of dirt beside it. A Bobcat excavator sat idle nearby. Lupe saw her curiosity.

"The Burlingames are having a hot tub put in. But the Moroccan tile they ordered is on hold so the whole project is delayed."

"I'm having the same problem," Keri said. Lupe didn't laugh.

After several minutes, they reached a side entrance to the main house, which led into a large, airy kitchen. Keri could hear male voices nearby. Lupe directed her around the corner to what looked to be the breakfast room. Detective Brody was standing, facing in her direction, speaking to a man with his back to her.

The man seemed to sense her arrival and turned around before Lupe had the chance to announce her. Keri, in full investigative mode, focused on his eyes as he took her in. They were brown and warm, with just a hint of redness around the rims. He either had bad allergies or he'd been crying recently.

He forced an awkward smile to his face, seemingly trapped between the expected responsibility to be a good host and the anxiety of the situation.

He was a nice-looking man, not quite attractive but with an open, friendly face that gave him an eager, boyish quality. Despite his sport coat, Keri could tell he was in good shape. He wasn't overtly muscular but had the lean wiry frame of an endurance athlete, maybe a marathoner or a triathlete. He was of average height, maybe five foot ten, and about 170 pounds. His short-cropped brown hair had the first, tiniest hints of gray.

"Detective Locke, thank you for coming," he said, walking forward and extending his hand. "I've just been speaking to your colleague."

"Keri," Frank Brody said, nodding curtly. "We haven't gotten into any details yet. I wanted to wait until you arrived."

It was subtle dig about her lateness masked by what seemed like professional courtesy. Keri, pretending not to notice, kept her focus on the doctor.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Burlingame. I'm sorry it's under such difficult circumstances. If you don't mind, why don't we get started right away? In a missing persons case, every minute is crucial."

Out of the corner of her eye, Keri saw Brody scowl, clearly annoyed that she had taken over. She didn't really give a shit.

"Of course," Burlingame said. "Where should we begin?"

"You gave us a rough outline of the timeline over the phone. But I'd like you to walk us through it in more detail if you could. Why don't you start with the last time you saw your wife?"

Okay, it was yesterday morning and we were in the bedroom—"

Keri jumped in.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but can you take us there? I'd like to be in the room as you describe the events that occurred there."

"Yes, of course. Should Lupe come as well?"

"We'll speak to her separately," Keri said. Jeremy Burlingame nodded and led the way up the stairs to the bedroom. Keri continued to watch him closely. Her interruption a moment earlier was only in part for the reason she gave.

She also wanted to gauge how a well-regarded, powerful doctor reacted to being repeatedly ordered around by a female. At least so far, it didn't seem to faze him. He appeared willing to do or say whatever she asked of him if it would help.

As they walked she peppered him with additional questions.

"Under normal circumstances, where would your wife be right now?"

"Here in the house, I imagine, preparing for tonight's fundraiser."

"What fundraiser is that?" Keri asked, feigning ignorance.

"We have a foundation that funds reconstructive surgery, mostly for children with facial irregularities, but sometimes for adults recovering from burns or accidents. Kendra runs the foundation and holds two major galas a year. One was scheduled for tonight at the Peninsula Hotel."

"Is her car here at the house?" Brody asked as they started up a long flight of stairs.

"I honestly don't know. I can't believe it didn't occur to me to check. Let me ask Lupe."

He took out his cell phone and used what appeared to be a walkie-talkie function.

"Lupe, do you know if Kendra's car is in the garage?" The response was almost immediate.

"No, Dr. Burlingame. I checked when you called earlier. It's not there. Also, I noticed one of her small travel bags was missing from her closet when I was hanging some clothes."

Burlingame looked perplexed.

"That's odd," he said.

"What is?" Keri asked.

“I just don’t see why she would have had reason to take a travel bag anywhere. She has a duffel that she uses when she goes to the gym and she uses a garment bag if she plans to change into a gown at a gala location. She only uses the travel bags as carry-ons when we’re actually traveling.”

After climbing the flight of stairs and going down a long hallway, they reached the master bedroom. Brody, winded from the long trip, put his hands on his hips, stuck his chest out, and breathed in heavily.

Keri took the room in. It was enormous, bigger than her entire houseboat all by itself. The four-poster king bed was made. A willowy, sheer canopy surrounded it, making it look like a square cloud. The large balcony, with its door wide open, faced west, offering a view of the Pacific Ocean.

A massive flat-screen TV, easily seventy-five inches, hung on one wall. The other walls were tastefully decorated with paintings and photos of the happy couple. Keri walked over to look at one.

They seemed to be on vacation, somewhere warm with an ocean in the background. Jeremy wore an untucked, wrinkle-free button-down pink shirt with fitted plaid shorts. He had on sunglasses and his smile was slightly goofy and forced, that of a man uncomfortable having his picture taken.

Kendra Burlingame wore a turquoise sundress with stacked, block-heeled cage sandals that looped around her ankles. Her tanned skin popped against the dress. Her black hair was tied in a loose ponytail and her sunglasses rested on her head. She wore a broad smile, as if she’d just been laughing and had only barely managed to contain it. She was as tall as her husband, with long legs and aquamarine eyes that matched the water behind her. She was leaning into him and his arm was casually wrapped around her trim waist. She was stunningly beautiful.

“So the last time you saw your wife was when?” she asked. Her back was to Burlingame but she could see his reflection in the glass frame.

“In here,” he said, his worried face hiding nothing from what she could tell. “It was yesterday morning. I had to leave early to go to San Diego to supervise a complicated procedure. She was still in bed when I kissed her goodbye. It was probably around six forty-five.”

“Was she awake when you left?” Brody asked.

“Yes. She had the TV on. She was watching the local news to see what the weather would be like for tonight’s gala.”

“And that’s the last time you saw her, yesterday morning?” Keri asked again.

“Yes, Detective,” he said, sounding slightly annoyed for the first time. “I’ve answered that question several times now. May I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“I know we have to go through everything methodically here. But in the meantime, can you please have your people check the GPS in Kendra’s phone and car? Maybe that will help locate her.”

Keri had been waiting for him to ask this question. Of course, Hillman had ordered the techs back at the station to begin that process the moment they got the case. But she’d been holding that detail back for this very moment. She wanted to gauge his response to her answer.

“It’s a good idea, Dr. Burlingame,” she said, “which is why we’ve already done it.”

“And what did you find?” Burlingame asked hopefully.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? How could there be nothing?”

“It would appear that in both the phone and the car, the GPS has been turned off.”

Keri, on full alert, watched closely for Burlingame’s reaction.

He stared at her, stunned.

“Turned off? How is that possible?”

“It’s only possible if it was done intentionally, by someone who didn’t want either the phone or the car to be found.”

“Does that mean it was a kidnapper who didn’t want her found?”

“That’s possible,” Brody answered. “Or it could be that *she* didn’t want to be found.”

Burlingame's expression went from stunned to disbelieving.

"Are you suggesting that my wife left on her own and tried to hide where she was going?"

"It wouldn't be the first time," Brody said.

"No. That doesn't make any sense. Kendra isn't the kind of person to do that. Besides, she had no reason to. Our marriage is good. We love each other. She loves her work for the foundation. She loves those kids. She wouldn't just up and abandon all of that. I would know if there was something wrong. I would know."

To Keri's ear, he sounded almost pleading, like a man trying to convince himself. He looked utterly lost.

"Are you sure about that, Doctor?" she asked him. "Sometimes we keep secrets, even from the ones we love. Is there someone else she might have confided in, other than you?"

Burlingame seemed not to hear her. He sat down on the end of the bed, shaking his head slowly, as if that might somehow drive the doubt from his mind.

"Dr. Burlingame?" Keri asked again softly.

"Um, yeah," he said, rousing himself. "Her best friend is Becky Sampson. They've known each other since college. They went to a high school reunion together a couple of weeks ago and Kendra seemed a little rattled after she came back but wouldn't say why. She lives off Robertson. Maybe Kendra mentioned something to her."

"All right, we'll get in touch with her," Keri assured him. "In the meantime, we're going to have a crime scene unit come in and do a thorough rundown of your house. We'll follow up on the last known location of your wife's car and phone before the GPS was disabled. Are you hearing me, Dr. Burlingame?"

The man appeared to have gone into a numbed stupor, staring straight ahead. At the sound of his name, he blinked and seemed to return to the moment.

"Yes, crime scene unit, GPS check. I understand."

"We'll also need to verify everything about your whereabouts yesterday, including your time in San Diego," Keri said. "We'll need to contact everyone you dealt with down there."

"We just have to do our due diligence," Brody added, in a clunky attempt to be diplomatic.

"I understand. I'm sure the husband is usually the main suspect when a woman disappears. It makes sense. I'll make a list of everyone I interacted with and give you their numbers. Do you need that now?"

"The sooner the better," Keri said. "I don't mean to be harsh but you're right, Doctor—the husband is typically a prime suspect. And the sooner we can eliminate you as one, the quicker we can move on to other theories. We're going to have some officers come out and secure the entire area. In the interim, I'd appreciate it if you and Lupe could join us in the courtyard where Detective Brody and I parked. We'll wait there until backup can arrive and CSU can begin processing the scene."

Burlingame nodded and shuffled out of the room. Then, suddenly, his head popped up and he asked a question.

"How long does she have, Detective Locke, assuming she was taken? I know there's a ticking clock on these things. How much time do you realistically think she has?"

Keri looked at him hard. There was no guile in his expression. He seemed to genuinely be clinging to something rational and factual to hold on to. It was a good question and one she needed to answer for herself.

She did some quick mental math. The numbers she came up with weren't good. But she couldn't be that blunt with a potential victim's husband. So she softened it a bit without lying.

"Look, Doctor. I'm not going to lie to you. Every second counts. But we still have a couple of days before the evidence trail starts to grow cold. And we're going to pour major resources into finding your wife. There's still hope."

But internally, the calculation was much less encouraging. Usually, seventy-two hours was the outer limit. So assuming she was taken sometime yesterday morning, they had a little less than forty-eight hours to find her. And that was being optimistic.

CHAPTER FIVE

Keri walked down the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center hallway as quickly as her aching body would allow. Becky Sampson's house was only blocks away from the hospital so Keri didn't feel too guilty about making a quick pit stop to check on Ray.

But as she approached his room, she could feel the recent, familiar nervousness start to churn in her gut. How were they going to make things normal between them again, when there was this silent secret they shared but couldn't acknowledge? As she reached his room, Keri resolved on what she hoped would be a temporary solution. She'd fake it.

The door was open and she could see that Ray was asleep. There was no one else in the room. The latest labor contract with the city stipulated that hospitalized officers got private rooms whenever available, so he had it pretty sweet. The room had a view of the Hollywood Hills and a big-screen TV, which was on but muted. Some old movie with Sylvester Stallone competing in an arm-wrestling competition filled the screen.

No wonder he fell asleep.

Keri walked over and studied her sleeping partner. Lying in bed, with a floral hospital gown loose about his body, Ray Sands looked much more frail than usual. Normally his six-foot-four, 230-pound African-American frame was intimidating, as was his completely bald head. He'd more than earned his sometime nickname of "Big."

With his eyes closed, his right glass eye, the one he'd lost in a boxing match years ago, wasn't noticeable. No one would guess that the forty-year-old man now lying in a hospital bed with an untouched bowl of red Jell-O next to him had once been Ray "The Sandman" Sands, an Olympic bronze medalist and professional heavyweight contender once considered a frontrunner to win the title. Of course, that was before an underrated southpaw with a brutal left hook had destroyed his eye and ended his career at age twenty-eight with one punch.

After flailing about for a while, Ray found policing and worked his way up to become one of the most highly regarded Missing Persons investigators in the department. And with Brody's imminent retirement, he was in line to take over his position in Robbery-Homicide.

Keri glanced out at the distant hills, wondering what their status would be in six months, when they were no longer partners or even in the same unit. She pushed the thought away, unwilling to imagine life without the one steadying influence in her life since Evie was taken.

Suddenly she sensed she was being watched. She glanced down and saw that Ray was awake, quietly staring at her.

"How's it going, Smurfette?" he asked playfully. They loved teasing each other about their dramatic size difference.

"Okay, how are you feeling today, Shrek?"

"A little tired, to be honest. I had a big workout a while ago. I walked all the way down the hallway and back. Look out, LeBron James, I'm on your heels."

"Did they give you a timetable for when they're letting you out?" she asked.

"They said maybe end of the week, if things keep progressing. Then it will be two weeks of bed rest at home. If that goes well, I'll be allowed to assume desk duty on a limited basis. Assuming I haven't shot *myself* from boredom before then."

Keri sat quietly for a moment, mulling over how to continue. Part of her wanted to tell Ray to take it slow, not to push too hard to get back to work. Of course, saying that would be hypocritical, as that was exactly what she'd done. And she knew he'd call her on it.

But he had been shot while helping save her life. She felt responsible. She felt protective of him. And she felt other things she wasn't quite prepared to think about at the moment.

Ultimately, she decided that giving him a distraction to focus on might be a better way to go than lecturing him.

“Along those lines, I could use your help with a case I just landed. You willing to mix in a little analysis with your Jell-O?” she asked.

“First of all, congrats on getting back on field duty. Second, how about we skip the Jell-O and go straight to the case?”

“Okay. Here are the basics. Kendra Burlingame, Beverly Hills socialite wife of a successful plastic surgeon, hasn’t been heard from since yesterday morning—”

“What was yesterday again?” Ray interrupted. “The pain meds have me a little loopy when it comes to, you know, days of the week.”

“Yesterday was Monday, Sherlock,” Keri said snarkily. “Her husband says he last saw her at six forty-five a.m. before he went to San Diego to supervise a surgery. It’s currently two forty on Tuesday afternoon, so that’s about thirty-two hours missing.”

“Assuming the husband’s telling the truth. You know the first rule when it comes to missing wives—the husband did it.”

Keri was annoyed that everyone, including her seemingly enlightened partner, seemed to constantly remind her of that. When she responded, she couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

“Really, Ray, is that the first rule? Let me write that one down because this is the first time I’ve heard it. Any other pearls of wisdom you care to offer, oh wise one? Maybe that the sun is hot? Or that kale tastes like aluminum foil?”

“I’m just saying—”

“Believe me, Ray, I know. And the guy is currently suspect number one. But she could have just run off too. I think that as a law enforcement professional, it might be worthwhile pursuing other leads, don’t you?”

“I do. That way, you have a leg to stand on when you arrest him.”

“Nice to see you using your keen investigative skills rather than just jumping to unfounded conclusions,” Keri said mockingly, trying not to smile.

“That’s how I roll. So what’s next on the agenda?”

“I’m going to see Kendra’s best friend when I leave here. Her place is just around the corner. The husband said Kendra was acting funny after the two of them returned from a high school reunion.”

“Is anyone checking on the doctor’s trip to San Diego?”

“Brody’s headed down there now.”

“You got partnered with Frank Brody on this?” Ray said, trying not to laugh. “No wonder you’d rather spend time with an invalid. How’s that going?”

“Why do you think I didn’t object when he offered to go to San Diego? The local guys down there could have just as easily followed up but he insisted and I figured it would keep him and his maroon atrocity of a car out of my way for a while. Besides, I’d rather spend time in the company of a worn-out, weak-muscled, bed-ridden sad sack like yourself than Brody any day.”

All the banter had lulled Keri into a sense of comfort and she realized, too late, that her last comment had sent them right back to the awkward place. Ray was silent for a moment, then opened his mouth to speak but Keri got there first.

“Anyway, I should be heading out. I was supposed to be meeting Kendra’s friend right about now. I’ll check in with you later. Take it slow, okay?”

She left without waiting for a response. As she rushed down the hall to catch the elevator, she kept repeating one word over and over again.

Idiot. Idiot. Idiot.

CHAPTER SIX

Still feeling flushed with embarrassment, Keri drove the short distance to Becky Sampson's house. She caught sight of her blushing face in the rearview mirror and looked away quickly, trying to think of anything other than how she'd left things with Ray. It occurred to her that she'd rushed out so quickly, she forgot to tell him about the anonymous call regarding Evie and her trip to the abandoned warehouse.

This case, Keri. Keep your mind on this case.

She considered calling Detective Kevin Edgerton, the tech expert who was tracing Kendra's last known GPS location, to see if he'd had any luck.

Part of her was annoyed that having Edgerton work on this was taking him away from trying to break the code on Alan Pachanga's laptop. Again, frustration coursed through her as she remembered how they had initially thought they'd accessed an entire network of abductors, only to hit wall after wall.

Keri was certain that the cipher she needed was somewhere in the files of Pachanga's lawyer, Jackson Cave. She resolved that she was going to pay Cave a visit today, case or not.

As she made that pledge, she pulled up to Becky Sampson's place.

Time to set Cave aside for now. Kendra Burlingame needs my help. Stay focused.

She got out of her car and took in the neighborhood as she walked up to the main door of the apartment complex. Becky Sampson lived in a three-story Tudor-style building. The entire street, North Stanley Drive, was lined with similarly faux-ornate complexes.

This part of Beverly Hills, just south of Cedars-Sinai and Burton Way and west of Robertson Boulevard, was technically within the city limits. But as it was surrounded by commercial districts and abutting the city of Los Angeles, rent was significantly lower than in other sections of town. Still, the mailing address said Beverly Hills and that had its perks.

Keri buzzed Becky's unit and was let in right away. Once she was inside, it became apparent that the zip code was the major selling point of the place. It certainly wasn't the actual building. As she walked down the hall to the elevator, Keri took in the peeling light pink paint on the walls and the thick, mottled carpeting. Everything smelled moldy.

The elevator smelled even worse, like it had suffered through multiple vomit-related incidents over the years and could no longer hide the scent. It jerked unsteadily up until it reached the third floor and the doors rattled open. Keri stepped out, deciding to take the stairs on the way down, even if her ribs and shoulder would hate her for it.

She knocked on the door to unit 323, undid the clasp on her weapon, rested her hand over it unobtrusively, and waited. The sound of dishes being dumped unceremoniously in a sink was easy to identify, as was the thud as whatever had been lying on the floor was tossed in a closet.

Now she's checking herself in a mirror near the front door. There's the shadow across the peephole as she checks me out and the door should open in three, two...

Keri heard a lock turn and the door opened to reveal a thin, harried-looking woman. She must have been about the same age as Kendra if they'd gone to a reunion together but she looked much older, closer to fifty than forty. Her hair was a mousy brown, clearly dyed, and her brown eyes were as bloodshot as Keri's usually were. The word that immediately came to mind to describe her was jumpy.

"Becky Sampson?" she asked by way of protocol, although the driver's license photo she'd been sent en route clearly matched. Her right hand continued to rest on the butt of her gun.

"Yes. Detective Locke? Come on in."

Keri stepped inside, keeping some distance between her and Becky. Even rail-thin Beverly Hills wannabes could do damage if you let your guard down. She tried not to scrunch her nose up at the musty scent that dominated the place.

“Can I offer you anything?” Becky asked.

“I’d love a glass of water,” Keri answered, less because she wanted one than because it allowed her to more fully take in the apartment while her hostess was in the kitchen.

With windows closed and the blinds drawn, the unit felt suffocating. Everything seemed to have a layer of dust on it, from the end tables to the bookshelves to the couch. Keri stepped into the living room and noticed that she was mistaken.

One part of the coffee table was shiny, as if it was in constant use. On the floor in front of that spot, Keri noticed several specks of what looked like white powder. She knelt down, ignoring the screaming pain in her ribs, and glanced under the table. She could see a partially rolled up one-dollar bill, covered in whitish residue. She heard the water faucet turn off and stood up before Becky reentered the room with two glasses of water.

Clearly surprised to see her guest so far away from the front door, Becky gave her a suspicious look before involuntarily glancing down at the clear spot on the table.

“You mind if I sit down?” Keri asked casually. “I’ve got a broken rib and it hurts to stand for too long.”

“Sure,” Becky said, seemingly placated. “How did that happen?”

“A child kidnapper beat me up.”

Becky’s eyes widened in shock.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Keri reassured her. “I shot him to death after that.”

Sufficiently confident that she had Becky off guard, she dove in.

“So I told you over the phone that I needed to talk to you about Kendra Burlingame. She’s gone missing. Any idea where she might be?”

If possible, Becky’s eyes widened even more than before.

“What?”

“She hasn’t been heard from since yesterday morning. When is the last time you spoke to her?”

Becky tried to answer but suddenly began coughing and wheezing. After a few moments, she recovered enough to speak.

“We went shopping on Saturday afternoon. She was looking for a new dress for the fundraising gala tonight. Are you really sure she’s missing?”

“We’re sure. What was her demeanor like on Saturday? Did she seem anxious about anything?”

“Not really,” Becky answered as she sniffed and reached for a tissue. “I mean, there were some minor hiccups with the fundraiser that she was dealing with, calls with caterers and so on. But it wasn’t anything she hadn’t dealt with a million times. She didn’t seem that bothered.”

“How was it for you, Becky, listening to her make those calls about a fancy gala while she bought an expensive dress?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re her best friend, right?”

Becky nodded. “For almost twenty-five years,” she said.

“And she lives in a mansion up in the hills and you’re in this one-bedroom apartment. You don’t ever get jealous?”

She watched Becky closely as she answered. The other woman took a sip of her water, but coughed as if some of it had gone down the wrong pipe. After a few seconds, she answered.

“I do get jealous sometimes. I’ll admit that. But it’s not Kendra’s fault that things haven’t gone as well for me. Truthfully, it’s hard to ever get upset with her. She’s the nicest person I know. I’ve dealt with some...issues and she’s always been there for me when things got rough.”

Keri suspected what those “issues” might be but said nothing. Becky continued.

“Besides, she’s very generous without lording it over me. That’s a tough line to walk. She actually bought me the dress I’m wearing for the gala tonight, assuming it’s even still happening. Do you know if it is?”

“I don’t,” Keri replied brusquely. “Tell me about her relationship with Jeremy. What was their marriage like?”

“It was good. They’re great partners, a really effective team.”

“That doesn’t sound very romantic. Is it a marriage or a corporation?”

“I don’t think they were ever a super-passionate couple. Jeremy’s a very buttoned-down, matter-of-fact kind of guy. And Kendra went through her sexy, wild-guy phase in her twenties. I think she was happy to have a stable, sweet guy she could count on. I know she loves him. But it’s not Romeo and Juliet or anything, if that’s what you mean.”

“Okay, so did she ever long for that passion? Could she have maybe gone looking for it, say on a high school reunion trip?” Keri asked.

“Why do you ask that?”

“Jeremy said that she seemed a little rattled after she returned from yours.”

“Oh, that,” Becky said, sniffing again before breaking out in another brief coughing fit.

As she tried to regain control, Keri noticed a cockroach scurry across the floor and tried to ignore it. When Becky recovered, she continued.

“Trust me, she wasn’t messing around on the trip. In fact, it was the opposite. An ex-boyfriend of hers, a guy named Coy Brenner, kept coming on to her. She was polite but he was pretty relentless.”

“How relentless?”

“Like, to the point of being uncomfortable. He was one of those wild guys I told you about. Anyway, he just wouldn’t take no for an answer. At the end of the reunion, he said something about looking her up in town. I think it really got to her.”

“Does he live here?”

“He lived in Phoenix for a long time. That’s where the reunion was. We all grew up there. But he mentioned something about moving to San Pedro recently—said he was working down at the port.”

“How long ago was this reunion?”

“Two weeks,” Becky said. “Do you really think he had something to do with this?”

“I don’t know. But we’ll run it down. Where can I find you if I need to get in touch again?”

“I work at a casting agency over on Robertson, across from The Ivy. It’s about a ten-minute walk from here. But I always have my cell. Please don’t hesitate to call. Anything I can do to help, just ask. She’s like a sister to me.”

Keri looked hard at Becky Sampson, trying to decide whether to call her on the elephant in the room. The constant sniffing and coughing, the total disregard for maintaining a livable home, the white residue and rolled up bill on the floor all suggested that the woman was deep into cocaine addiction.

“Thanks for your time,” she finally said, deciding to hold off for now.

Becky’s situation might prove useful later. But there was no need to use it yet, when it served no tactical advantage. Keri left the apartment and took the stairs down, despite the jarring twinges in her shoulder and ribs.

She felt slightly guilty for keeping Becky’s coke problem as a potential card to play down the road. But the guilt faded quickly as she left the building and breathed in the fresh air. She was a police detective, not a drug counselor. Anything that could help her solve the case was fair game.

As she pulled out into traffic and headed for the freeway, she called into the office. She needed everything they had on Kendra’s aggressively interested ex-boyfriend, Coy Brenner. She was about to pay him an unannounced visit.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Keri tried to keep her cool even as she felt her blood pressure rising. Rush hour traffic was starting to back up as she made her way south on the 110 to the Port of Los Angeles in San Pedro. It was after four in the afternoon and even using the carpool lane and her siren, progress was slow.

She finally got off the freeway and wended her way through the complicated basin roads to the administration building on Palos Verdes Street. There she was supposed to meet her port police liaison, who would assign her two officers as backup when she interviewed Brenner. Port police participation was required since she was in their jurisdiction.

Normally Keri chafed at that kind of bureaucratic requirement but for once she didn't mind having backup. She usually felt pretty confident going up against any possible suspect, as she was trained in Krav Maga and had even taken some boxing lessons from Ray. But with her gimpy shoulder and battered ribs, she wasn't as sure of herself as usual. And Brenner didn't sound like a pushover.

According to Detective Manny Suarez back at the precinct, who ran a background check for Keri while she was on the road, Coy Brenner was a piece of work. He'd been arrested a half dozen times over the years, twice for drunk driving, once for theft, twice for assault, and most impressively for fraud, which had earned him his longest stint behind bars, six months. That was four years ago and since he wasn't allowed to leave the state for five, he was technically in violation of his parole.

Now he was a dockworker at pier 400. Even though he'd hinted to Becky and Kendra that he'd just moved to San Pedro in the last few weeks, records showed that he'd been living in a Long Beach apartment for over three months.

The port police liaison, Sergeant Mike Covey, and his two officers were waiting for her when she arrived. Covey was a tall, thin balding man in his late forties with a no-guff demeanor to him. She'd briefed him over the phone and he'd obviously done the same with his men.

"Brenner's shift ends at four thirty," Covey told her after they'd exchanged introductions. "Since it's already four fifteen, I called the pier manager and told him not to let the crew out early. He's been known to do that."

"I appreciate it. I guess we should head right over. I want to get a look at the guy before I interview him."

"Understood. If you want, we can take your car over first to arouse less suspicion. Officers Kuntsler and Rodriguez can follow separately in the squad car. We patrol the piers constantly so having them in the area won't seem odd to your suspect. But if he sees an unfamiliar face get out of one of our vehicles, it might raise eyebrows."

"That sounds good," Keri agreed, appreciative that she wasn't facing a turf war. She knew it was likely because the port police hated bad publicity. They would happily dispose of this thing quietly, even if meant ceding authority to another agency.

Keri followed Sergeant Covey's directions across the Vincent Thomas Bridge and to the visitor parking area for pier 400. It took longer than Keri expected and they arrived at 4:28. Covey spoke into the radio, telling the pier manager he could release the crew.

"Brenner should walk right across our line of sight to the employee parking area any minute," he said. As he spoke, the squad car passed by them and started a long, slow casual loop along the road circling the pier. It seemed completely unremarkable.

Keri watched the dockworkers file out of the pier warehouse. One guy realized he'd left his hardhat on and jogged back to return it. Two others ran across the broad expanse, clearly racing each other to their cars. The rest walked in a large group, apparently in no hurry.

"There's your guy," Covey said, nodding in the direction of the one guy walking alone. Coy Brenner bore only a passing resemblance to the man in the mug shot from his arrest in Arizona four

years earlier. That man had a lean and hungry look, with longish, shaggy brown hair and a hint of stubble.

The guy lumbering across the parking lot now had put on about twenty pounds in the intervening years. His hair was cropped short and his stubble was now a full-on beard. He wore blue jeans and a lumberjack-style shirt and walked with his head down and a grimace on his face. Coy Brenner didn't strike her as a man happy with his lot in life.

"Can you hang back, Sergeant Covey? I want to see how he reacts when confronted solo by a female cop."

"Sure. I'll head over to the warehouse for now. I'll tell the boys to stay back as well. Give a wave when you want us to join you."

"Will do."

Keri got out of her car, threw on a blazer to hide her gun, and followed Brenner from a distance, not wanting to make her presence known just yet. He seemed oblivious to her, lost in his own thoughts. By the time he reached his old pickup truck, she was almost on him. She felt her phone buzz with a text and tensed up. But he obviously didn't hear it.

"How ya doin', Coy?" she asked coquettishly.

He spun around, clearly taken by surprise. Keri removed her sunglasses, gave him a broad smile, and placed her hand on her hip playfully.

"Hi?" he asked more than said.

"Don't tell me you don't remember me? It's only been about fifteen years. You are Coy Brenner from Phoenix, right?"

"Yeah. Did we go to school together or something?"

"No. Our time together was educational, but not in a school kind of way, if you know what I mean. I'm starting to get offended a little bit here."

I'm really laying it on thick here. Maybe I've lost my touch.

But Coy's face softened and Keri could tell she'd hit pay dirt.

"Sorry—long day and lots of years," he said. "I'd be happy to get reacquainted. What was your name again?" He seemed genuinely perplexed.

"Keri. Keri Locke."

"I'm really surprised that I can't place you, Keri. You seem like the kind of girl I'd remember. What are you doing all the way out here?"

"I can't stand the heat back in Arizona. I work for the city now. Case work—kind of boring. What about you?"

"You're looking at what I do."

"A boy from the desert ends up working by the water. What made that happen? Looking to break into the movies? Wanted to learn to surf? Following a girl?"

She kept the tone light but watched closely for his reaction to that last question. His bemused but intrigued expression immediately disappeared, replaced by one of wariness.

"I'm really having trouble placing you, Keri. Remind me again when we hung out?" There was a sharpness to his tone that hadn't been there a moment before.

Keri could sense her ruse was wearing thin and decided to poke a little more aggressively.

"Maybe you don't remember me because I don't look like Kendra. Is that it, Coy? You only have eyes for her?"

Those eyes turned quickly from wary to angry and he took a step forward. Keri watched his fists clench involuntarily. She didn't flinch.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded. "What is this?"

"I'm just making conversation, Coy. Why so rude all of a sudden?"

"I don't know you," he said, now outright hostile. "Who sent you, her husband? Are you some kind private investigator?"

“What if I was? Would I have something to investigate? Is there something you want to get off your chest, Coy?”

He took another step toward her. Their faces were less than a foot apart now. Rather than shrink, Keri squared her shoulders and lifted her chin defiantly.

“I think you’ve made a terrible mistake coming here, lady,” Coy growled. His back was to the squad car, which had slowly rolled up behind him and was now idling twenty feet away.

Out of the corner of her eye, Keri could see Sergeant Covey cautiously making his way over from the warehouse, careful to stay behind Coy as well. She felt a sudden urge to wave in their direction but forced the feeling down.

It’s now or never.

“What did you do to Kendra, Coy?” she demanded, any trace of playfulness gone from her voice. She stared hard at him, hand once again brushing the butt of her gun, ready for anything.

At her question, his eyes went from angry to surprised and she could tell he had no idea what she was talking about. He took a step back.

“What?”

She immediately sensed that he wasn’t the guy, but pressed on just in case.

“Kendra Burlingame has gone missing and I hear you’re her personal stalker. So if you’ve done something to her, now would be the time to come clean. If you cooperate, I can help you. If you don’t, it could get very bad for you.”

Coy was staring at her but he didn’t seem to be fully processing what she said. He was oblivious to Sergeant Covey moving to within a few steps behind him. The veteran officer’s hand rested on his gun hip. He didn’t look trigger-happy, just prepared.

“Kendra’s missing?” Coy asked, sounding like a kid who’d just learned his dog had been put down.

“When’s the last time you saw her, Coy?”

“The reunion—I told her I would look her up here in LA. But I could tell she didn’t want any part of me. She looked embarrassed for me. I didn’t want to see that look on her face again so I just dropped it.”

“You didn’t want to punish the woman who made you feel that way?”

“She didn’t make me feel that way. I’m ashamed of what I’ve become without any help from her. It was just seeing how far I’d fallen in her view—it was a real eye-opener, you know? I’ve been lying to myself about being this cool, tough guy for a long time. It took Kendra for me to see myself as the loser I really am.”

He looked at her desperately, hoping to make some kind of connection. But Keri didn’t feel like exploring this guy’s inner demons. She had enough shame of her own that she didn’t want to deal with someone else’s.

“Can you account for your whereabouts yesterday, Coy?” she asked, changing the subject. Realizing he wasn’t going to get any sympathy from her, he nodded.

“I was here all day. I’m sure my boss can verify it.”

“We can check on that,” Sergeant Covey said. Coy jumped slightly at the unexpected voice behind him. He turned around, surprised to see Covey within feet of him and the squad car with Kuntsler and Rodriguez not much farther away.

“So I guess you’re a cop, then?” Coy said, looking downtrodden.

“I am—LAPD Missing Persons.”

“I hope you find her. Kendra’s a great gal. The world’s a better place because of her and she deserves to be happy. I always held a torch for her. But I knew she was out of my league so I never got my hopes up. If there’s anything else I can do to help, let me know.”

“Detective Locke,” Sergeant Covey interjected, “unless you have additional questions, I’m happy to follow up on his alibi. I know you have other avenues of investigation you want to explore.”

Besides, we need to do some paperwork to process Mr. Brenner for separation. He lied on his application about his parole status and that's cause for termination."

Keri saw Brenner's face sag even more. He was truly pathetic. And now he was unemployed on top of it. She tried to shake away the feeling that she was partly responsible for that.

"I'd appreciate that, Sergeant. I do need to get back and this looks like a dead end. Thanks for all your help."

As Covey and the officers led Coy Brenner back to the warehouse for interrogation, Keri got in her car and checked the text she received earlier.

It was from Brody. It read:

GALA STILL ON. GREAT CHANCE FOR INTERVIEWS. MEET YOU THERE. DRESS SEXY.

Brody continued to amaze her with his lack of insight and professionalism. In addition to being an unrepentant sexist, he didn't seem to get that a fundraiser whose hostess was missing wasn't the ideal venue to get her friends and colleagues to bare their souls.

Besides that, I don't even have anything to wear.

Of course, that wasn't the only reason. If she was being honest with herself, Keri had to admit that part of her dread was because this was exactly the sort of event she went to all the time back when she was a respected professor, the wife of a successful talent agent, and the mother of an adorable little girl. Going to this thing would be a bright, shiny, painful reminder of her life before she lost Evie.

Sometimes she hated this job.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Keri's stomach was a churning pit of anxiety as she sat in the waiting room of Jackson Cave's law firm. He'd made her wait twenty minutes already, long enough for her to repeatedly rethink whether this was a good decision.

She'd been on the way back from San Pedro, calculating how long it would take her to get to the houseboat to change into an evening gown and then to Beverly Hills for the All Smiles fundraiser. But as she headed north, she saw the skyscrapers of downtown Los Angeles in the distance and a powerful urge took over. She found herself driving to Cave's office, without any kind of plan to fall back on.

On the way there, she'd called Brody so they could debrief each other. After she filled him in on the Coy Brenner dead end, he told her about San Diego.

"Jeremy Burlingame's alibi checks out. He was in surgery all day yesterday. Apparently he was supervising some doctors down there, teaching them a new facial reconstruction procedure."

"All right, listen, traffic's a real bitch here," Keri said. It was partly true but also an excuse for her to stop at Cave's. "So if you get to the gala before me, please just scope the place out. Don't start interrogating people."

"Are you telling me how to do my job, Locke?"

"No, Brody. But I am suggesting that going into this place like a bull in a china shop might be counterproductive. Some of these socialite women would probably open up more to another chick in a dress than to a guy whose longest relationship has been with his car."

"Screw you, Locke. I'll talk to whoever I want," Brody said indignantly. But she could hear in his voice that he had doubts about how good an idea that was.

"Suit yourself," Keri replied. "See you there."

Now, a full half hour later, she still hadn't gotten in to see Cave. It was almost 5:30. She decided to take advantage of the lull to look around. She walked up to the reception desk.

"Do you know how much longer Mr. Cave is going to be?" she asked the secretary, who shook her head apologetically. "Then can you tell me where the restroom is, please?"

"Down the hall to the left."

Keri headed that way, her eyes alert for any detail that could work to her advantage. Directly across from the women's restroom was a door marked Exit. She opened it and saw that it opened into the same hallway she'd come down to get to the main entrance of the firm.

Glancing around and seeing no one in the hall, she pulled a tissue out of her purse and shoved it into the tube latch hole so that it couldn't lock automatically. Then she stepped into the restroom briefly for the sake of appearance.

When she returned to the lobby, an attractive woman in a crisp business suit was waiting to lead her to Jackson Cave's office. As she followed the woman, she tried to keep her heart from beating out of her chest. She was about to meet with the man who might hold the key to getting crucial information about Evie's whereabouts and she had no game plan.

The only other time she'd met with Jackson Cave had been at a police station in a small mountain town. He'd come to try to bail out his client, Payton Penn, the brother of California Senator Stafford Penn. Ultimately, she discovered that Penn had hired Alan Pachanga to abduct his niece, Ashley. Things had gone her way back in that mountain town, but now she was in enemy territory and she could sense it.

Jackson Cave was known throughout most of the city for his reputation representing major corporate clients. But to law enforcement, his pro-bono work defending rapists, pedophiles, and child abductors was his claim to infamy.

Keri was immediately suspicious of a man like that. It was one thing to defend a murder suspect in a death row case or some desperate guy who robbed a bank to support his family. But to exclusively

and enthusiastically represent the worst perpetrators of sexual violence that the city had to offer, free of charge, struck her as an odd choice.

Nonetheless, Keri hoped to put his work to her advantage. She knew that somewhere in Cave's possession must be a cipher that could crack the code to Alan Pachanga's computer. If she could find it, that could lead her to information on a whole network of abductors for hire. It might even include something about the man who'd taken Evie, a man she believed went by the name "The Collector."

Everything about the place was designed to intimidate. The firm itself consumed the entire seventieth floor of the seventy-three-story US Bank Tower. There were floor-to-ceiling windows everywhere, looking out on the vastness of Los Angeles. Expensive art covered the walls. All the furniture was leather and mahogany.

They finally reached an unmarked office at the end of the hall and the woman led her in. It was empty. Keri was directed to a plush chair across from Cave's desk, which was immaculate.

Left alone, she glanced around, trying to glean something about the man from his surroundings. There were no personal photos on his desk or credenza. On the wall were some photos of Cave with movers and shakers such as the mayor, several city councilmen, and a few celebrities. His college (USC) and law school (Harvard) diplomas were displayed as well. But nothing gave a sense of the man or his passions.

Before Keri could study the room further, Jackson Cave walked in. She stood up quickly. He was just as she remembered him from their last meeting. His coal black hair was slicked back like Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*. His blindingly white teeth filled out a mouth twisted into a fake, plastic smile. His tan skin gleamed underneath his navy Michael Kors suit. And his penetrating blue eyes glinted with a fierceness that reminded her of an eagle hunting prey.

And then, in a flash, she knew her course of action. Jackson Cave, with his personal photos with power players and his immaculate grooming and attire, was a man who cared about how he was perceived. He made his living off winning people over—politicians, juries, the media. And Keri knew he wanted to win her over too. It was his nature.

I have to undermine that goal. I have to come at him hard and fast, upend his expectations, keep him off balance. The only way I'm going to poke through his armor and get him to slip up is if I jab him in enough places. Maybe then he'll say something inadvertently that could lead me to crack the cipher.

If she could get him upset, or even just annoyed, maybe he'd make a mistake and inadvertently reveal something important. Considering she already despised the man, it wasn't a big lift. She just had to amp it up and look for cracks in his perfect façade. She didn't know exactly what those cracks might be, but if she stayed alert, she was sure she'd find something.

"Detective Keri Locke," he said as he swept past her to his side of the desk, "what an unexpected surprise. It was only a few weeks ago that we chatting in the fresh mountain air. And now you've consented to visit me here in the concrete jungle. To what do I owe the honor?"

Before speaking, Keri took a step toward one of the photos of Cave with a local dignitary so that her back was to him. She did it partly to show that she was in charge of the meeting, partly to get under his skin by refusing to look at him directly, and partly because her ribs were starting to ache again and she didn't want him to see her gritting her teeth in discomfort.

"Sorry to bother you, counselor. I know you must be busy, preparing to defend an accomplice to child abduction."

"Alleged, Detective. Alleged accomplice."

She ignored his comment and continued.

"I came down here to ask you a question. Why is it, with so many powerful corporate clients at your disposal, you insist on representing the dregs of society?"

She glanced casually over her shoulder as if she didn't have a care in the world but focused intently on Cave's eyes, looking for any sign of distress. He offered none. Clearly, he was used to these kinds of put-downs.

“Everybody deserves quality representation, Detective. It’s in the constitution—sixth amendment. Look it up.”

“I’m aware of that, Mr. Cave,” she said, returning her attention to the wall of photos. “But you could represent any kind of defendant and yet you seem drawn to those who engage in violent behavior toward women and children. Why is that?”

“Something for me to work out with my therapist, I suppose.” He sounded relaxed, completely unruffled.

This isn’t working. He’s too practiced at batting away attacks about his clients. I have to poke somewhere else.

“That’s a cute quip, Mr. Cave. I’ll bet it’s one you use when defending your work to folks like him,” she said, pointing at the city councilman in the photo she’d been looking at. She turned quickly to see his reaction and saw that he still seemed unfazed.

“Is this what you came here for, Detective—to try to guilt-trip me? How boring...and disappointing. I expected more of you.”

“Sorry to disappoint. But I can’t help wonder why these people aren’t more reluctant to be seen with you. After all, isn’t that the CEO of a major rape crisis center in that picture with you?” she asked, pointing to an older woman almost melting into Cave as he wrapped his arm around her.

“Lovely lady,” he said, unperturbed. “Nice gams too.”

“And this gentleman, the Monsignor,” Keri continued. “I’m wondering if he had to go to confession after meeting with you. Or at least take a Silkwood shower.”

She was surprised that Cave didn’t come back at her with another blasé reply. In fact, she noticed that he’d visibly tensed. The plastic smile still covered his face. But for the briefest of seconds she saw something in those blue eyes she couldn’t quite identify.

He regrouped quickly, regaining his normal expression, and stepped around to her side of the desk.

“This has been wonderfully fun,” he said, “but unfortunately, I still have a lot of work to do tonight. And unless you’re here for some reason other than to attack my personal character, I’m going to have to end our little get-together.”

He pushed a buzzer and the woman who had brought Keri in immediately appeared to take her away.

“This way please, ma’am,” she said politely but firmly. “They can validate you at the front desk.”

As she walked out the door, Cave called after her with an almost musical lilt in his voice.

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