

BLAKE PIERCE

A green upholstered chair is positioned in the center of a dark, dimly lit room. Above the chair, a skylight in the ceiling allows bright light to stream in, creating a strong contrast with the surrounding shadows. The floor is dark and appears to be covered in small stones or debris. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and somber.

A
TRACE
OF
DEATH

A KERI LOCKE MYSTERY--BOOK #1

A Keri Locke Mystery

Блейк Пирс

A Trace of Death

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Пирс Б.

A Trace of Death / Б. Пирс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», — (A Keri Locke Mystery)

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Keri Locke, Missing Persons Detective in the Homicide division of the LAPD, remains haunted by the abduction of her own daughter, years before, never found. Still obsessed with finding her, Keri buries her grief the only way she knows how: by throwing herself into the cases of missing persons in Los Angeles. A routine phone call from a worried mother of a high-schooler, only two hours missing, should be ignored. Yet something about the mother's voice strikes a chord, and Keri decides to investigate. What she finds shocks her. The missing daughter—of a prominent senator—was hiding secrets no one knew. When all evidence points to a runaway, Keri is ordered off the case. And yet, despite pressure from her superiors, from the media, despite all trails going cold, the brilliant and obsessed Keri refuses to let it go. She knows she has but 48 hours if she has any chance of bringing this girl back alive. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, A TRACE OF DEATH marks the debut of a riveting new series—and a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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Blake Pierce

A TRACE OF DEATH (A Keri Locke Mystery – Book 1)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which include the mystery suspense thrillers ONCE GONE (book #1), ONCE TAKEN (book #2), ONCE CRAVED (#3), ONCE LURED (#4), ONCE HUNTED (#5), and ONCE PINED (#6). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, the AVERY BLACK mystery series, and the 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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CAUSE TO HIDE (Book #3)

PROLOGUE

He glanced at his watch.

2:59 PM.

The school bell would ring in less than a minute.

Ashley only lived about twelve blocks from the high school, less than a mile, and almost always made the trek alone. That was his only concern – that today would be one of the rare occasions where she had company.

Within five minutes of school letting out, she was in sight, and his heart sank as he saw her walking with two other girls along Main Street. They stopped at an intersection and chatted. This wouldn't do. They had to leave her. They *had* to.

He felt the anxiety rise in his belly. This was supposed to be the day.

Sitting in the front seat of his van, he tried to control what he liked to call his *original self*. It was his original self which emerged when he was doing his special experiments on his specimens back at home. It was his original self which allowed him to ignore the screams and begging of those specimens so he could focus on his important work.

He had to keep his original self well hidden. He reminded himself to call them girls and not specimens. He reminded himself to use proper names like “Ashley.” He reminded himself that to other people, he looked completely normal and that if he acted that way, no one could tell what lurked in his heart.

He'd been doing it for years, acting normal. Some people even called him *smooth*. He liked that. It meant he was a great actor. And by acting normal almost all the time, he'd somehow carved out a life, one that some might even envy. He could hide in plain sight.

Yet now he could feel it bursting in his chest, begging to be let free. The desire was getting the better of him – he had to rein it in.

He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, trying to remember the instructions. On the last breath, he inhaled for five seconds and then exhaled slowly, allowing the noise he'd learned to escape his mouth slowly.

“Ohhhmmm...”

He opened his eyes – and felt a rush of relief. Her two friends had turned west on Clubhouse Avenue toward the water. Ashley continued south on Main Street alone, next to the dog park.

Some afternoons she lingered there, watching dogs tear across the wood chip-covered ground after tennis balls. But not today. Today, she walked with purpose, as if she had somewhere to be.

If she'd known what was coming, she wouldn't have bothered.

That thought made him smile to himself.

He'd always thought she was attractive. And as he inched his way along the street behind her, making sure to give way to the cavalcade of high school jaywalkers, he once again admired her lean, athletic surfer's body. She was wearing a pink skirt that stopped just above the knees and a bright blue top that hugged her close.

He made his move.

A warm calmness washed over him. He activated the unconventional-looking e-cigarette that had been resting on the van's center console and pressed his foot gently on the gas pedal.

He pulled up next to her in the van and called out through the open passenger window.

“Hey.”

At first she looked taken aback. She squinted into the vehicle, clearly unable to tell who it was.

“It's me,” he said casually. He put the van in park, leaned over, and opened the passenger door so she could see who it was.

She leaned in a little to get a better look. After a moment, he saw something like recognition cross her face.

“Oh, hi. Sorry,” she apologized.

“No problem,” he assured her, before taking a long drag.

She looked more closely at the device in his hand.

“I’ve never seen one like that before.”

“You want to check it out?” he offered as casually as he could.

She nodded and stepped closer, leaning in. He leaned toward her as well, as if he were about to take it out of his mouth and hand it to her. But when she was about three feet away, he clicked a little button on the device, which made a small clasp open, and which sprayed a chemical right for her face, in a small fog. At the same moment, he raised a mask to his own nose, so as not to breathe it himself.

It was so subtle and quiet that Ashley didn’t even notice. Before she could react, her eyes began to close, her body to slump.

She was already leaning forward, losing consciousness, and all he had to do was reach over and ease her into the passenger seat. To the casual observer, it might even look like she got in of her own accord.

His heart was thumping but he reminded himself to stay calm. He had come this far.

He reached across the specimen, pulled the passenger door closed, and properly secured her seatbelt and then his own. Finally, he allowed himself one last slow deep breath in and out.

When he was sure the coast was clear, he edged out into the street.

Soon he merged with the mid-afternoon Southern California traffic, just another commuter blending in, trying to navigate his way in a sea of humanity.

CHAPTER ONE

Monday

Late Afternoon

Detective Keri Locke pleaded with herself not to do it this time. As the most junior detective in the West Los Angeles Pacific Division Missing Persons Unit, she was expected to work harder than anyone else in the division. And as a thirty-five-year-old woman who'd only joined the force four years ago, she often felt like she was supposed to be the hardest-working cop in the entire LAPD. She couldn't afford to look like she was taking a break.

All around her, the department buzzed with activity. An elderly Hispanic woman was sitting at a nearby desk, giving a statement about a purse snatching. Down the hall, a carjacker was being booked. It was a typical afternoon in what had become her new normal of a life. And yet that recurring urge was eating at her, refusing to be ignored.

She gave in to it. She stood up and wandered over to the window that looked out on Culver Boulevard. She stood there and could nearly see her reflection. With the dancing glare from the afternoon sun, she looked part human, part ghost.

That was how she felt. She knew that objectively, she was an attractive woman. Five foot six and about 130 pounds – 133 if she was being honest – with dirty blonde hair and a figure that had escaped childbirth relatively unscathed, she still turned heads.

But if anyone looked closely, they'd see that her brown eyes were red and bleary, her forehead was a knotted mass of premature lines, and her skin often had the pallor of, well, a ghost.

Like most days, she was wearing a simple blouse tucked into black slacks and black flats that looked professional but were easy to run in. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. It was her unofficial uniform. Pretty much the only thing that changed daily was the color of the top she wore. It all reinforced her feeling that she was marking time more than really living.

Keri sensed movement out of the corner of her eye and snapped out of her reverie. They were coming.

Outside the window, Culver Boulevard was mostly devoid of people. There was a running and biking path across the street. On most days in the late afternoon, it was choked with foot traffic. But it was relentlessly hot today, with temperatures in the high nineties and no breeze at all, even here, less than five miles from the beach. Parents who normally walked their kids home from school took their air-conditioned cars today. Except for one.

At exactly 4:12, just like clockwork, a young girl on a bike, about seven or eight years old, pedaled slowly down the path. She wore a fancy white dress. Her youngish mom trailed behind her in jeans and a T-shirt, with a backpack slung casually over her shoulder.

Keri fought the anxiety bubbling in her stomach and looked around to see if anyone in the office was watching her. No one was. She allowed herself to give in to the itch she'd tried not to scratch all day and stared.

Keri watched them with jealous, adoring eyes. She still couldn't believe it, even after so many times at this window. The girl was the spitting image of Evie, right down to the wavy blond hair, the green eyes, even the slightly crooked smile.

She stood there in a trance, staring out the window long after the mother and child had disappeared from sight.

When she finally snapped out of it and turned back to the bullpen, the elderly Hispanic woman was leaving. The carjacker had been processed. Some new miscreant, cuffed and surly, had slid into his spot at the booking window, an alert uniformed officer standing at his left elbow.

She glanced up at the digital clock on the wall above the coffee machine. It read 4:22.

Have I really been standing at that window for ten solid minutes? This is getting worse, not better.

She walked back to her desk with her head down, trying not to make eye contact with any curious co-workers. She sat and looked at the files on her desk. The Martine case was largely wrapped up, just waiting for a sign-off from the prosecutor before she could dump it in the “complete until trial” cabinet. The Sanders case was on hold until CSU came back with its preliminary report. Rampart division had asked Pacific to look into a prostitute named Roxie who had dropped off the radar; a co-worker had told them she’d started working the Westside and they were hoping someone in her unit could confirm that so they didn’t have to open a file.

The tricky thing with missing persons cases, at least for adults, was that it wasn’t a crime to disappear. Police had more leeway with minors, depending on the age. But in general, there was nothing to prevent people from simply dropping out of their lives. It happened more often than most people would expect. Without some evidence of foul play, law enforcement was limited in what they could legally do to investigate. Because of that, cases like Roxie’s often fell through the cracks in the system.

Sighing in resignation, Keri realized that barring something extraordinary, there was really no reason to stick around beyond five.

She closed her eyes and pictured herself, less than an hour from now, kicking back on her houseboat, *Sea Cups*, pouring herself three fingers – okay, four – of Glenlivet and settling in to an evening of leftover Chinese takeout and a few reruns of *Scandal*. If that personalized therapy didn’t pan out, she might end up back on Dr. Blanc’s couch, an unappealing alternative.

She had started to pack up her files for the day when Ray walked in and plopped himself in the chair across the large desk they shared. Ray was officially Detective Raymond “Big” Sands, her partner of nearly a year now and her friend for closer to seven.

He matched his nickname in every way. Ray (Keri never called him “Big” – he didn’t need the ego stroking) was a six-foot-four, 230-pound black guy with a shiny bald head, a chipped lower tooth, a meticulously trimmed goatee, and a penchant for wearing dress shirts a size too small for him, just to emphasize his build.

Forty years old now, Ray still resembled the bronze-medal-winning Olympic boxer he’d been at age twenty and the professional heavyweight contender, with a record of 28-2-1, he’d been until the age of twenty-eight. That was when a scrappy little southpaw five inches shorter than him took out his right eye with a vicious hook and brought everything to a screeching halt. He wore a patch for two years afterward, didn’t like the discomfort, and finally got a glass eye, which somehow worked for him.

Like Keri, Ray joined the Force later than most, when he was searching for a new purpose in his early thirties. He rose through the ranks quickly and was now the senior detective in Pacific Division’s Missing Persons Unit, or MPU.

“You look like a woman dreaming of waves and whiskey,” he said.

“Is it that obvious?” Keri asked.

“I’m a good detective. My powers of observation are unmatched. Also, you mentioned your exciting evening plans twice today already.”

“What can I say? I’m dogged in pursuit of my goals, Raymond.”

He smiled, his one good eye betraying a warmth his physical demeanor hid. Keri was the only one allowed to call him by his proper name. She liked to mix it up with other, less flattering, titles. He often did the same to her.

“Listen, Little Miss Sunshine, maybe you’d be better off spending the last few minutes of your shift checking in with CSU on the Sanders case instead of daydreaming about day drinking.”

“Day drinking?” she said, mock offended. “It’s not day drinking if I start after five, Gigantor.”

He was about to come back at her when the line rang. Keri picked up before Ray could say anything and stuck her tongue out at him playfully.

“Pacific Division Missing Persons. Detective Locke speaking.”

Ray got on the line as well but didn't talk.

The woman on the phone sounded young, late twenties or early thirties. Before she even said why she was calling, Keri noted the worry in her voice.

"My name is Mia Penn. I live off Dell Avenue in the Venice Canals. I'm worried about my daughter, Ashley. She should have been home from school by three thirty. She knew I was taking her to a four forty-five dentist appointment. She texted me just before she left school at three but she's not here and she's not responding to any of my calls or texts. This isn't like her at all. She's very responsible."

"Ms. Penn, does Ashley usually drive or walk home?" Keri asked.

"She walks. She's only in tenth grade – she's fifteen. She hasn't even started Driver's Ed yet."

Keri looked at Ray. She knew what he was going to say and she couldn't really argue the point. But something in Mia Penn's tone got to her. She could tell the woman was barely holding it together. There was panic just below the surface. She wanted to ask him to dispense with protocol but couldn't come up with a credible reason why.

"Ms. Penn, this is Detective Ray Sands. I'm conferencing in. I want you to take a deep breath and then tell me if your daughter's ever been home late before."

Mia Penn launched in, forgetting the deep breath part.

"Of course," she admitted, trying to hide the exasperation in her voice. "Like I said, she's fifteen. But she's always texted or called if she wasn't back within an hour or so. And never if we had plans."

Ray responded without glancing at what he knew would be Keri's disapproving glare.

"Ms. Penn, officially, your daughter is a minor and so typical missing person laws don't apply as they would for an adult. We have broader authority to investigate. But speaking to you honestly, a teenage girl who isn't responding to her mother's texts and isn't home less than two hours after school lets out – that's not going to command the kind of immediate response you're hoping for. At this point there's not much we can do. In a situation like this, your best bet is to come down to the station and file a report. You should absolutely do that. There's no harm in it and it could expedite things if we need to ramp up resources."

There was a long pause before Mia Penn responded. Her voice had a sharp edge that wasn't there before.

"How long do I have to wait before you 'ramp up,' Detective?" she demanded. "Is two more hours enough? Do I have to wait until it gets dark? Until she's not home in the morning? I'll bet that if I was –"

Whatever Mia Penn was about to say, she stopped herself, as if she knew that anything else she added would be counterproductive. Ray was about to respond but Keri held up her hand and gave him her patented "let me handle this" look.

"Listen, Ms. Penn, this is Detective Locke again. You said you live in the Canals, right? That's on my way home. Give me your e-mail address. I'll send you the missing persons form. You can get started on it and I'll stop by to help you finish it up and expedite getting it in the system. How does that sound?"

"It sounds good, Detective Locke. Thank you."

"No problem. And hey, maybe Ashley will be home by the time I get there and I can give her a stern lecture on keeping her mom better informed – free of charge."

Keri gathered her purse and keys, preparing to head to the Penn house.

Ray hadn't said a word since they'd hung up. She knew he was silently seething but she refused to look up. If he caught her eye, then *she'd* be the one getting the lecture and she wasn't in the mood.

But Ray apparently didn't need to make eye contact to say his piece.

"The Canals are *not* on your way home."

“They’re only a little out of my way,” she insisted, still not looking up. “So I’ll have to wait until six thirty to get back to the marina and Olivia Pope and associates. No big deal.”

Ray exhaled and leaned back in his chair.

“It *is* a big deal. Keri, you’ve been a detective here almost a year now. I like having you as my partner. And you’ve done some great work, even before you got your shield. The Gonzales case, for example. I don’t think I could have solved that one and I’ve been investigating these cases for a decade longer than you. You have a kind of sixth sense about these things. That’s why we used you as a resource in the old days. And it’s why you have the potential to be a truly great detective.”

“Thanks,” she said, though she knew he wasn’t finished.

“But you have one major weakness and it’s going to ruin you if you don’t get a handle on it. You have got to let the system work. It’s here for a reason. Seventy-five percent of our job will work itself out in the first twenty-four hours without our help. We need to let that happen and concentrate on the other twenty-five percent. If we don’t, we end up running ourselves ragged. We become unproductive, or worse – counterproductive. And then we’re betraying the people who really end up needing us. It’s part of our job to choose our battles.”

“Ray, I’m not ordering an Amber Alert or anything. I’m just helping a worried mother fill out some paperwork. And truly, it’s only fifteen minutes out of my way.”

“And...” he said expectantly.

“*And* there was something in her voice. She’s holding something back. I just want to talk to her face to face. It might be nothing. And if it is, I’ll leave.”

Ray shook his head and tried one more time.

“How many hours did you waste on that homeless kid in Palms you were certain had gone missing but hadn’t? Fifteen?”

Keri shrugged.

“Better safe than sorry,” she muttered under her breath.

“Better employed than discharged for inappropriate use of department resources,” he countered.

“It’s after five,” Keri said.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I’m off the clock. And that mother is waiting for me.”

“It would appear that you’re never off the clock. Call her back, Keri. Tell her to e-mail the forms back when she’s done. Tell her to call here if she has any questions. But go home.”

She’d been as patient as she could but as far as she was concerned, the conversation was over.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Mr. Clean,” she said, giving him a squeeze on the arm.

As she headed for the parking lot and her ten-year-old silver Toyota Prius, she tried to remember the quickest shortcut to the Venice Canals. She already felt an urgency she didn’t understand.

One she didn’t like.

CHAPTER TWO

Monday

Late Afternoon

Keri threaded the Prius through rush hour traffic to the western edge of Venice, driving faster than she meant to. Something was driving her, a gut feeling rising up, one she didn't like.

The Canals were only a few blocks from tourist hot spots like the Boardwalk and Muscle Beach and it took ten minutes of driving up and down Pacific Avenue before she finally found a spot to park. She hopped out and let her phone direct her the rest of the way on foot.

The Venice Canals weren't just a name for a neighborhood. They were a real series of man-made canals built in the early twentieth century, and modeled after the originals in Italy. They covered about ten square blocks just south of Venice Boulevard. A few of the homes that lined the waterways were modest, but most were extravagant in a beachy way. The lots were generally small but some of the homes were easily worth eight figures.

The one Keri arrived at was among the most impressive. It was three stories high, and only the top floor was visible due to the high stucco wall that surrounded it. She walked around from the back, which faced the canal, to the front door. As she did, she noticed multiple security cameras on the mansion walls and the house itself. Several of them seemed to be tracking her movements.

Why does a twenty-something mom with a teenage daughter live here? And why such heavy security?

She reached the wrought-iron gate in front and was surprised to find it open. She stepped through and was about to knock on the front door when it opened from the inside.

A woman stepped out to meet her, wearing frayed jeans and a white tank top, with long, thick brown hair and bare feet. As Keri suspected from hearing her on the phone, she couldn't have been more than thirty. About Keri's height and easily twenty pounds lighter, she was tanned and fit. And she was gorgeous, despite the anxious expression on her face.

Keri's first thought was *trophy wife*.

"Mia Penn?" Keri asked.

"Yes. Please come in, Detective Locke. I've already filled out the forms you sent."

Inside, the mansion opened into a commanding foyer, with two matching marble staircases leading to an upper level. There was almost enough room to play a Lakers game. The interior was immaculate, with art covering every wall and sculptures adorning carved wooden tables that looked like they might be art as well.

The whole place looked like it could be featured on a moment's notice in *Homes That Make You Question Your Self-Worth* magazine. Keri recognized one prominently placed painting as a Delano, meaning that all by itself, it was worth more than the pathetic twenty-year-old houseboat she called home.

Mia Penn guided her to one of the more casual living rooms and offered her a seat and a bottled water. In the corner of the room, a thickly built man in slacks and a sport jacket leaned casually against the wall. He didn't say anything but his eyes never left Keri. She noticed a small bulge on his right hip under the jacket.

Gun. Must be security.

Once Keri sat, her hostess didn't waste any time.

"Ashley's still not answering my calls or texts. She hasn't tweeted since school let out. No new Facebook posts. Nothing on Instagram." She exhaled and added, "Thanks for coming. I can't even begin to tell you how much this means to me."

Keri nodded slowly, studying Mia Penn, trying to get a sense of her. Just as on the phone, the barely concealed panic felt real.

She seems to genuinely fear for her daughter. But she's holding something back.

"You're younger than I expected," Keri finally said.

"I'm thirty. I had Ashley when I was fifteen."

"Wow."

"Yeah, that's pretty much what everyone says. I feel like because we're so close in age, we have this connection. I swear sometimes I know what she's feeling even before I see her. I know it sounds ridiculous but we have this bond. And I know it's not evidence but I can *feel* that something's wrong."

"Let's not panic quite yet," Keri said.

They went over the facts.

The last time Mia saw Ashley was that morning. Everything was fine. She had yogurt with granola and sliced strawberries for breakfast. She'd left for school in a good mood.

Ashley's best friend was Thelma Gray. Mia called her when Ashley didn't show up after school. According to Thelma, Ashley was in third-period geometry like she was supposed to be and everything seemed normal. The last time she saw Ashley was in the hall around 2 PM. She had no idea why Ashley didn't make it home.

Mia had also spoken to Ashley's boyfriend, a jock-type named Denton Rivers. He said he saw Ashley in school in the morning but that was it. He texted her a few times after school but she never answered.

Ashley didn't take any medications; she had no physical ailments to speak of. Mia said she'd gone through Ashley's room earlier in the afternoon and everything was normal.

Keri scribbled it all down on a little pad, making specific note of names she'd follow up with later.

"My husband should be home from the office any minute. I know he wants to speak with you as well."

Keri looked up from her pad. Something in Mia's voice had changed. It sounded more guarded, cautious.

Whatever she's hiding, I bet it's related to this.

"And what's your husband's name?" she asked, trying to keep it light.

"His name's Stafford."

"Wait a minute," Keri said. "Your husband is *Stafford Penn*, as in *United States Senator Stafford Penn*?"

"Yes."

"That's kind of important information, Mrs. Penn. Why didn't you mention it before?"

"Stafford asked me not to," she said apologetically.

"Why?"

"He said he'd like to address that with you when he arrived."

"When did you say he'd be here again?"

"Less than ten minutes, for sure."

Keri looked at her hard, trying to decide whether to push. Ultimately, she chose to hold off for now.

"Do you have a picture of Ashley?"

Mia Penn handed over her phone. The background photo was of a teenage girl in a sundress. She looked like Mia's younger sister. Other than Ashley having blonde hair, they were hard to tell apart. Ashley was slightly taller, with a more athletic frame and a deeper tan. The dress couldn't hide her muscular legs and powerful shoulders. Keri suspected she was a regular surfer.

"Could she just have forgotten about the appointment and be out catching waves?" Keri asked.

Mia smiled for the first time since Keri met her.

“I’m impressed, Detective. You made that guess based on one picture? No, Ashley likes to surf in the mornings – better swells and fewer troublemakers. I checked the garage just in case. Her board’s in there.”

“Can you send me that photo as well as a few close-ups with and without makeup?”

While Mia did that, Keri asked another question.

“Where does she go to school?”

“West Venice High.”

Keri couldn’t hide her surprise. She knew the place well. It was a large public high school, a melting pot of thousands of kids, with everything that entailed. She had arrested many a student who attended West Venice.

Why the hell is the wealthy daughter of a US senator going there instead of a fancy private school?

Mia must have read the surprise on Keri’s face.

“Stafford’s never liked it. He’s always wanted her in private schools, on track to Harvard, where he went. But it wasn’t just for better academics. He also wanted better security,” she said. “I’ve always wanted her in public schools, to be in the mix of real kids where she could learn about real life. It’s one of the few battles I’ve actually won with him. If Ashley ends up hurt because of something at school, it will be my fault.”

Keri wanted to nip that kind of thinking in the bud fast.

“One – Ashley is going to be fine. Two – if anything were to happen to her it would be the fault of the person who hurt her, not the mother who loves her.”

Keri watched to see if Mia Penn bought it but she couldn’t tell. The truth was, her reassurance was intended to keep a valuable resource from falling apart more than to buck her up. She decided to press on.

“Let’s talk about that for a second. Is there anyone who would want to hurt her, or you or Stafford, for that matter?”

“Ashley, no; me, no; Stafford, nothing specific that I’m aware of, other than what comes with the territory of doing what he does. I mean he gets death threats from constituents who claim to be aliens. So it’s hard to know what to take seriously. “

“And no one’s called demanding ransom, right?”

The sudden stress on the woman’s face was palpable.

“Is that what you think this is?”

“No, no, no, I’m just covering the bases. I don’t think it’s anything yet. These are all just routine questions.”

“No. There have been no ransom demands.”

“You obviously have some money – ”

Mia nodded.

“I come from a very wealthy family. But no one really knows that. Everyone assumes our money comes from Stafford.”

“Out of curiosity, how much are we talking about, exactly?” Keri asked. Sometimes this job made discretion impossible.

“Exactly? I don’t know – we have a beachfront house in Miami and a condo in San Francisco, both owned under company names. We’re active in the market and have lots of other assets. You’ve seen all the art in the house. Altogether we’re probably talking about fifty-five to sixty million.”

“Does Ashley know?”

The woman shrugged.

“To a point – she doesn’t know the exact figures but she knows there’s a lot of it and that the public isn’t supposed to know about all of it. Stafford likes to project a ‘man of the people’ persona.”

“Would she talk about it? Just to her friends, maybe?”

“No. She’s under strict instructions not to.” The woman exhaled and said, “God, I’m really shooting my mouth off. Stafford would be livid.”

“Do you two get along?”

“Yes, of course.”

“How about Ashley? Do you get along with her?”

“There’s no one in the world I’m closer to.”

“Okay. Does Stafford get along with her?”

“They get along fine.”

“Is there any reason she’d run away from home?”

“No. Not even close. That’s not what’s going on here.”

“How’s her mood been lately?”

“It’s been good. She’s happy, stable, all of it.”

“No boy trouble – ”

“No.”

“Drugs or alcohol?”

“I can’t say never. But in general, she’s a responsible young lady. This summer she trained as a junior lifeguard. She had to be up at five in the morning every day for that. She’s not a flake. Besides, she hasn’t even had time to get bored yet. This is her second week back to school.”

“Any drama there?”

“No. She likes her teachers. She gets along with all the kids. She’ll be going out for the girls’ basketball team.”

Keri locked eyes with the woman and asked, “So what do *you* think is going on?”

Confusion washed over the woman’s face. Her lips trembled.

“I don’t know.” She turned her eyes to the front door, then back, and said, “I just want her to come home. Where the hell is Stafford?”

As if on cue, a man appeared from around a corner. It was Senator Stafford Penn. Keri had seen him dozens of times on TV. But in person, he gave off a vibe that didn’t come through onscreen. About forty-five, he was muscular and tall, easily six foot two, with blond hair like Ashley’s, a chiseled jaw, and piercing green eyes. He had a magnetism that seemed to almost vibrate. Keri gulped hard as he extended his hand to shake hers.

“Stafford Penn,” he said, although he could tell she already knew that.

Keri smiled.

“Keri Locke,” she said. “LAPD Missing Persons Unit, Pacific Division.”

Stafford gave his wife a quick peck on the cheek and sat down beside her. He didn’t waste any time with pleasantries.

“We appreciate your coming down. But personally, I think we can let it rest until the morning.”

Mia looked at him in disbelief.

“Stafford – ”

“Kids break away from their parents,” he continued. “They wean themselves. It’s part of growing up. Hell, if she was a boy, we would have been dealing with days like this two or three years ago. That’s why I asked Mia to be discreet when she called you. I doubt this is the last time we’ll be dealing with this kind of thing and I don’t want to be accused of crying wolf.”

Keri asked, “So you don’t think anything’s wrong?”

He shook his head.

“No. I think she’s a teenager doing what teenagers do. To be honest, I’m sort of glad this day has come. It shows she’s getting more independent. Mark my words, she’ll show up tonight. Worst case, tomorrow morning, probably with a hangover.”

Mia stared at him incredulously.

“First of all,” she said, “it’s a Monday afternoon during the school year, not Spring Break in Daytona. And second, she wouldn’t do that.”

Stafford shook his head.

“We all get a little crazy sometimes, Mia,” he said. “Hell, when I turned fifteen, I drank ten beers in a couple of hours. I was literally heaving my guts out for three days. I remember my dad got a good chuckle out of that. I think he was pretty proud of me, actually.”

Keri nodded, pretending that was completely normal. No point in alienating a US senator if she could avoid it.

“Thanks, Senator. You’re probably right. But as long as I’m here, would you mind if I took a quick peek in Ashley’s room?”

He shrugged and pointed to the staircase.

“Go for it.”

Upstairs, at the end of the hall, Keri entered Ashley’s room and closed the door. The decor was about what she expected – a fancy bed, matching dressers, posters of Adele and one-armed surfing legend Bethany Hamilton. She had a retro lava lamp on the bedside table. Resting on one of her pillows was a stuffed animal. It was so old and tattered that Keri couldn’t tell if it was a dog or a sheep.

She fired up the Mac laptop on Ashley’s desk and was surprised to find it wasn’t password protected.

What teenager leaves her unprotected laptop sitting out on her desk for any nosy adult to check?

The Internet history showed searches for only the last two days; the priors had been cleared. What was left mostly appeared to relate to a biology paper she was researching. There were also a few visits to websites for local modeling agencies, as well as a few in New York and Las Vegas. Another was to the site for an upcoming surfing tournament in Malibu. She had also gone to the site of a local band called Rave.

Either this girl is the most boring goody two-shoes of all time or she’s leaving this stuff out on purpose to present an image she wants her folks to buy.

Keri’s instinct told her it was the latter.

She sat down at the foot of Ashley’s bed and closed her eyes, trying to channel the mindset of a fifteen-year-old girl. She’d been one once. She still hoped to have one of her own. After two minutes, she opened her eyes and tried to look at the room fresh. She scanned the shelves, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

She was about to give up when her gaze fell on a math book at the end of Ashley’s bookshelf. It read *Algebra for 9th Grade*.

Didn’t Mia say Ashley was in tenth grade? Her friend Thelma saw her in geometry class. *So why is she holding on to an old textbook? Just in case she needs a refresher?*

Keri grabbed the book, opened it, and began paging through it. Two-thirds of the way through, easy to miss, she found two pages carefully taped together. There was something hard in between them.

Keri sliced open part of the tape and something fell out onto the floor. She picked it up. It was an extremely authentic-looking fake driver’s license with Ashley’s face on it. The name on it was Ashlynn Penner. The date of birth indicated she was twenty-two.

More confident that she was now on the right track, Keri moved quickly through the room. She didn’t know how long she had before the Penns got suspicious. After five minutes, she found something else. Tucked in a tennis shoe in the back of the closet was a spent 9mm casing.

She got out an evidence bag, pocketed it along with the fake ID, and left the room. Mia Penn was walking down the hall toward her as she closed the door. Keri could tell something had happened.

“I just got a call from Ashley’s friend Thelma. She’s been talking to people about Ashley not making it home. She says another friend named Miranda Sanchez saw Ashley get into a black van on

Main Street next to a dog park near the school. She said she couldn't be sure if Ashley got in on her own or if she was pulled in. It didn't seem that weird to her until she heard Ashley was missing."

Kerry kept her expression neutral despite the sudden increase in her blood pressure.

"Do you know anyone who has a black van?"

"No one."

Keri started briskly down the hall toward the stairs. Mia Penn tried desperately to keep up.

"Mia, I need you to call the detectives' line at the station – the one you reached me on. Tell whoever picks up – it'll probably be a guy named Suarez – that I said to call. Give him Ashley's physical description and what she was wearing. Also give him the names and contact information for everyone you mentioned to me: Thelma, Miranda, the boyfriend Denton Rivers, all of them. Then tell him to call me."

"Why do you need all that info?"

"We're going to have them all interviewed."

"You're starting to freak me out. This is bad, isn't it?" Mia demanded.

"Probably not. But better safe than sorry."

"What can I do?"

"I need you to stay here in case Ashley calls or shows up."

They got downstairs. Keri looked around.

"Where's your husband?"

"He got called back into work."

Keri bit her tongue and headed for the front door.

"Where are you going?" Mia shouted after her.

Over her shoulder Keri called back:

"I'm going to find your daughter."

CHAPTER THREE

Monday

Early Evening

Outside, as she hurried back to the car, Keri tried to ignore the heat reflecting off the sidewalk. Beads of sweat formed on her brow after only a minute. As she dialed Ray's number, she cursed quietly to herself.

I'm frickin' six blocks from the Pacific Ocean in mid-September. When is this going to let up?

After seven rings, Ray finally picked up.

"What?" he demanded, sounding winded and annoyed.

"I need you to meet me on Main, across from West Venice High."

"When?"

"Now, Raymond."

"Hold on a second." She could hear him moving around and muttering under his breath. It didn't sound like he was alone. When he got back on the line, she could tell he'd changed rooms.

"I was kind of otherwise engaged, Keri."

"Well, disengage yourself, Detective. We've got a case."

"Is this that Venice thing?" he asked, clearly exasperated.

"It is. And could you please cut it with the tone. That is, unless you think the daughter of a US senator disappearing into a black van isn't worth checking out."

"Jesus. Why didn't the mother mention the senator thing on the phone?"

"Because he asked her not to. He was as dismissive as you, maybe even more so. Hold on a second."

Keri had reached her car. She put the phone on speaker, tossed it in the passenger seat, and got in. As she pulled out onto the street, she filled him in on the rest – the fake ID, the shell casing, the girl who saw Ashley getting in the van – possibly against her will – the plan to coordinate interviews. As she was finishing up, her phone beeped and she looked at the screen.

"That's Suarez calling in. I want to fill him in on the details. We good? You disengaged yet?"

"I'm getting in the car now," he answered, not taking the bait. "I can be there in fifteen minutes."

"I hope you offered her my apologies, whoever she was," Keri said, unable to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

"She wasn't the kind of girl who needs apologies," Ray replied.

"Why am I not surprised?"

She switched calls without saying goodbye.

*

Fifteen minutes later, Keri and Ray walked the stretch of Main Street where Ashley Penn may or may not have been abducted. There was nothing obviously out of the ordinary. The dog park next to the street was alive with happy yips and owners shouting out to pets with names like Hoover, Speck, Conrad, and Delilah.

Rich bohemian dog owners. Ah, Venice.

Keri tried to force the extraneous thoughts out of her head and focus. There didn't seem to be much to go on. Ray clearly felt the same way.

"Is it possible she just took off or ran away?" he mused.

"I'm not ruling it out," Keri replied. "She's definitely not the innocent little princess her mom thinks she is."

“They never are.”

“Whatever happened to her, it’s possible she played a role in it. The more we can get into her life, the more we’ll know. We need to talk to some people who won’t give us the official line. Like that senator – I don’t know what’s going on with him. But he definitely wasn’t comfortable with me probing into their life.”

“Got any idea why?”

“Not yet, other than a gut feeling that there’s something he’s hiding. I’ve never met a parent so blasé about their missing child. He was telling stories about pounding beers at fifteen. He was trying too hard.”

Ray winced visibly.

“I’m glad you didn’t call him on it,” he said. “The last thing you need is an enemy who has the word *Senator* in front of his name.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well, you should,” he said. “A few words from him to Beecher or Hillman, and you’re history.”

“I was history five years ago.”

“Come on – ”

“You know it’s true.”

“Don’t go there,” Ray said.

Keri hesitated, glanced at him, then turned her gaze back to the dog park. A few feet from them, a little brown-furred puppy was happily rolling on its back in the dirt.

“Want to know something I never told you?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“After, what happened, you know – ”

“Evie?”

Keri felt her heart clench at her daughter’s name.

“Right. There was a time right after it happened, when I was trying to get pregnant like crazy. It went on for two or three months. Stephen couldn’t keep up.”

Ray said nothing. She continued.

“Then I woke up one morning and hated myself. I felt like someone who’d lost a dog and went straight to the pound to get a replacement. I felt like a coward, like I was being all about me, instead of keeping the focus where it belonged. I was letting Evie go instead of fighting for her.”

“Keri, you got to stop doing this to yourself. You’re your own worst enemy, you really are.”

“Ray, I can still feel her. She’s alive. I don’t know where or how, but she is.”

He squeezed her hand.

“I know.”

“She’s thirteen now.”

“I know.”

They walked the rest of the block in silence. When they got to the intersection at Westminster Avenue, Ray finally spoke.

“Listen,” he said in a tone that indicated he was focusing on the case again, “we can follow every lead that turns up. But this is a senator’s daughter. And if she didn’t just go for some joyride, the claws are going to come out on this one. Sometime soon, the Feds are going to get involved. The brass downtown are going to want in too. By nine tomorrow morning, you and I will be kicked to the curb.”

It was probably true but Keri didn’t care. She’d deal with the morning in the morning. Right now they had a case to work.

She sighed deeply and closed her eyes. After partnering with her for a year, Ray had finally learned not to interrupt her when she was trying to get in the zone.

After about thirty seconds she opened her eyes and looked around. After a moment, she pointed to a business across the intersection.

“Over there,” she said and started walking.

This stretch of Venice north of Washington Boulevard up to about Rose Avenue was a weird crossroads of humanity. There were the mansions of the Venice Canals to the south, the fancy shops of Abbot Kinney Boulevard directly east, the commercial sector to the north, and the grungy surf and skate section along the beach.

But throughout the entire area were gangs. They were more prominent at night, especially closer to the coast. But LAPD Pacific Division was tracking fourteen active gangs in greater Venice, at least five of which considered the spot Keri was standing on as part of their territory. There was one black gang, two Hispanic ones, a white power motorcycle gang, and a gang comprised primarily of drug- and gun-dealing surfers. All of them existed uneasily on the same streets as millennial bar-goers, hookers, wide-eyed tourists, homeless vets, and long-time granola-chomping, tie-dyed T-shirt-wearing residents.

As a result, business in the area comprised everything from hipster speakeasies to henna tattoo parlors to medicinal marijuana dispensaries to the place Keri stood in front of now, a bail bondsman’s office.

It was on the second story of a recently restored building, just above a pressed juice bar.

“Check it out,” she said. Above the front door, the sign read Briggs Bail Bonds.

“What about it?” Ray said.

“Look right above the sign, above ‘Bail.’”

Ray did, confused at first, then squinted his one good eye to see a very small security camera. He looked in the direction the camera was pointing. It was trained on the intersection. Beyond that was the stretch of Main Street near the dog park, where Ashley had allegedly entered the van.

“Good catch,” he said.

Keri stepped back and studied the area. It was probably busier now than it had been a few hours ago. But this wasn’t exactly a quiet area.

“If you were going to abduct someone, is this where you’d do it?”

Ray shook his head.

“Me? No, I’m more of an alley guy.”

“So what kind of person is so brazen as to snatch someone in broad daylight near a busy intersection?”

“Let’s find out,” Ray said, heading for the door.

They walked up the narrow stairwell to the second floor. The Briggs Bail Bonds door was propped open. Immediately inside that door to the right, a large man with an even larger gut was settled into a recliner, perusing *Guns & Ammo* magazine.

He looked up when Keri and Ray walked in, made the snap decision that they weren’t a threat, and nodded to the back of the room. A long-haired man with a scruffy beard sitting at a desk waved them over. Keri and Ray sat in the chairs in front of the man’s desk and waited patiently as he worked the phone with a client. The issue wasn’t the ten percent cash down, it was the collateral for the full amount. He needed a deed of trust on a house, or possession of a car with a clean title, something like that.

Keri could hear the person on the other end of the line pleading but the long-haired guy wasn’t moved.

Thirty seconds later he hung up and focused on the two people in front of him.

“Stu Briggs,” he said, “what can I do for you, Detectives?”

Nobody had flashed a badge. Keri was impressed.

Before they could answer he looked more closely at Ray, then nearly shouted.

“Ray Sands – The Sandman! I actually saw your last fight, the one with the southpaw; what was his name?”

“Lenny Jack.”

“Right, right, yeah, that’s it, Lenny Jack – the Jack Attack. He was missing a finger or something, wasn’t he? A pinky?”

“That was after.”

“Yeah, well, pinky or not, I thought you had him, I really did. I mean, his legs were rubber, his face was a bloody pulp. He was tripping all over himself. One more good punch, that’s all you needed; just one more. Hell, a half-punch would have been enough. You probably could have just blown on him and he would have fallen over.”

“That’s what I thought too,” Ray admitted. “In hindsight, that’s probably why I let my guard down. Apparently he had one punch left he wasn’t telling anyone about.”

The man shrugged.

“Apparently. I lost money on that fight.” He seemed to realize that his loss wasn’t as great as Ray’s and added, “I mean, not that much. Not compared to you. It’s not that bad, though, the eye. I can tell it’s fake because I know the story. I don’t think most people could though.”

There was a long silence as he caught his breath and Ray let him twist awkwardly. Stu tried again.

“So you’re a cop now? Why exactly is the Sandman sitting in front of my desk with this pretty little lady, excuse me, pretty little peace officer?”

Keri didn’t appreciate the condescension but let it slide. They had bigger priorities.

“We need to look at your security camera footage from today,” Ray said. “Specifically from two forty-five to four PM.”

“Not a problem,” Stu answered as if he got this kind of request every day.

The security camera was operational, necessary, actually, given the establishment’s clientele; it wasn’t just live-time to a monitor but streamed to a hard drive where it was recorded. The lens was wide angled and picked up the entire intersection of Main and Westminster. The video quality was exceptional.

In a back room, Keri and Ray watched the footage on a desktop monitor. The section of Main Street in front of the dog park was visible to about halfway up the block. They could only hope that whatever happened took place on that stretch of road.

Nothing eventful happened until about 3:05. School had obviously just let out as kids began streaming across the street, headed in all directions.

At 3:08, Ashley came into view. Ray didn’t recognize her immediately so Keri pointed her out – a confident-looking girl in a skirt and tight top.

Then, just like that, there it was, the black van. It pulled up next to her. The windows were heavily tinted, illegally so. The driver’s face wasn’t visible as he wore a cap with the brim pulled low. Both sun visors were down and the glare from the bright afternoon sunlight made getting a clear view of the interior of the vehicle impossible.

Ashley stopped walking and looked in the van. The driver seemed to be speaking. She said something and moved closer. As she did, the vehicle’s passenger door swung open. Ashley continued to speak, appearing to lean in toward the van. She was engaged in a conversation with whoever was driving. Then, suddenly, she was inside. It wasn’t clear if she got in voluntarily or was pulled in. After a few more seconds, the van casually pulled out into the street. No peeling out. No speeding. Nothing out of the ordinary.

They watched the scene again at regular speed, and then a third time, in slow motion.

At the end Ray shrugged and said, “I don’t know. I still can’t tell. She ended up inside, that’s all I can say for certain. Whether it was against her will or not, I’m not sure.”

Keri couldn’t disagree. The clip was maddeningly indeterminate. But something about it wasn’t right. She just couldn’t put her finger on it. She rewound the footage and let it replay to the point when the van was nearest the security camera. Then she hit pause. It was the only moment when the van was completely in shadow. It was still impossible to see inside the vehicle. But something else *was* visible.

“You seeing what I’m seeing?” she asked.

Ray nodded.

“The license plate is covered,” he noted. “I’d put that in the ‘suspicious’ category.”

“Same here.”

Suddenly Keri’s phone rang. It was Mia Penn. She dove right in without even saying hello.

“I just got a call from Ashley’s friend Thelma. She says she thinks she just got pocket-dialed from Ashley’s phone. She heard a bunch of shouting like someone was yelling at someone else. There was loud music playing so she couldn’t tell exactly who was doing the shouting but she thinks it was Denton Rivers.”

“Ashley’s boyfriend?”

“Yes. I called Denton on his phone to see if he’d heard from Ashley yet, not letting on that I’d just talked to Thelma. He said he hadn’t seen or heard from Ashley since school but he sounded squirrely. And this Drake song, “Summer Sixteen,” was playing in the background when I called. I called Thelma back to see if that was the song she heard when she got butt-dialed. She said it was. So I called you right away, Detective. Denton Rivers has my baby girl’s phone and I think he might have her as well.”

“Okay, Mia. This is really helpful. You did a great job. But I need you to stay calm. When we hang up, text me Denton’s address. And remember, this could all be completely innocent.”

She hung up and looked at Ray. His one good eye suggested he was thinking the same thing she was. Within seconds, her phone buzzed. She forwarded the address to Ray as they hurried down the stairs.

“We need to hurry,” she said as they ran to their cars. “This is *not* innocent at all.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Monday

Early Evening

Keri braced herself as, ten minutes later, she drove past Denton Rivers' home. She slowed her car, examining it, and then parked a block away, Ray behind her. She felt that tingling in her stomach she got when something bad was about to happen.

What if Ashley is in that house? What if he's done something to her?

Denton's street was littered with a series of cookie-cutter one-story houses, all way too close together. There were no trees on the street and the grass on most of the tiny front lawns had long since turned brown. Denton and Ashley clearly did not share similar lifestyles. This part of town, south of Venice Boulevard and a few miles inland, did not have any million-dollar homes.

She and Ray walked quickly together down the block, and she checked her watch: just after six. The sun was beginning its long, slow descent over the ocean to the west, but it wouldn't be truly dark for another couple of hours.

When they reached Denton's house, they heard loud music coming from inside. Keri didn't recognize it.

She and Ray approached in silence, now hearing shouting – angry and serious, a male's voice. Ray unholstered his weapon and motioned for her to go around back, then signaled the number "1," as in they would enter the house in exactly one minute. She looked down at her watch to confirm the time, nodded, took out her own gun, and scurried along the edge of the house toward the back, making sure to duck when she passed open windows.

Ray was the senior detective and he was usually the more cautious between them when it came to entering private property. But he clearly thought these were exigent circumstances that didn't require a warrant. They had a missing girl, a potential suspect inside, and angry shouting. It was defensible.

Keri checked the side gate. It was unlocked. She opened it as little as possible to avoid squeaking and squeezed through. It was unlikely anyone inside could hear her but she didn't want to take any chances.

Once in the backyard, she hugged the rear wall of the house, keeping her eyes open for movement. A ratty, decrepit shed near the property's back fence made her uneasy. The rusty corrugated door looked like it was about to fall off.

She crawled up on the back patio and held there for a moment, listening for Ashley's voice. She didn't hear it.

The rear of the house had an unlocked wooden screen door, which led to a 1970s-style kitchen with a yellow fridge. Keri could see someone down the hall in the living room, shouting along with the music and flailing his body as if he were head-banging in some kind of invisible mosh pit.

There was still no sign of Ashley.

Keri looked down at her watch – any second now.

Right on time, she heard a loud knock on the front door. She opened the rear screen door in tandem with the sound, masking the slight click of the door latch. She waited – a second loud knock let her close the rear door concurrently. She moved swiftly through the kitchen and down the hall, glancing in every open doorway as she went.

Back at the front door, which was open except for the screen, Ray knocked hard, then even harder. Suddenly Denton Rivers stopped dancing and moved to the door. Keri, hiding at the edge of the living room, could see his face in the mirror beside the door.

He looked visibly confused. He was a good-looking kid – short-cropped brown hair, deep blue eyes, a wiry, sinewy frame that suggested he was more likely a wrestler than a football player. Under

normal circumstances he was probably a catch, but right now those good looks were masked by an ugly grimace, bloodshot eyes, and a gash on his temple.

When he opened the door, Ray flashed his badge.

“Ray Sands, Los Angeles Police Department Missing Persons Unit,” he said in a low, firm voice. “I’d like to come in and ask you a few questions about Ashley Penn.”

Panic spread across the kid’s face. Keri had seen that look before – he was about to run.

“You’re not in trouble,” Ray said, sensing the same thing. “I just want to talk.”

Keri noticed something black in the kid’s right hand, but because his body partially blocked her view, she couldn’t tell what it was. She raised her weapon, training it on Denton’s back. Slowly, she unlocked the safety.

Ray saw her do it out of the corner of his eye and glanced down at Denton’s hand. He had a better view of the item the kid was holding and hadn’t raised his own gun yet.

“Is that the remote for the music, Denton?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Can you please drop it on the ground in front of you?”

The kid hesitated and then said, “Okay.” He dropped the device. It was indeed a remote.

Ray holstered his weapon and Keri did the same. As Ray opened the door, Denton Rivers turned around and was startled to find Keri standing in front of him.

“Who’re you?” he demanded.

“Detective Keri Locke. I work with him,” she said, nodding at Ray. “Nice place you got here, Denton.”

Inside, the house was trashed. Lamps were smashed against walls. Furniture was pushed over. A bottle of whiskey sat on an end table, half empty, next to the source of the music – a Bluetooth speaker. Keri turned the music off. With the room suddenly quiet, she took in the scene more meticulously.

There was blood on the carpet. Keri made a mental note but said nothing.

Denton had deep scratches on his right forearm that could have come from fingernails. The gash on the side of his temple was no longer bleeding but had been at some point recently. The torn shreds of a picture of him and Ashley lay scattered on the floor.

“Where are your parents?”

“My mom’s at work.”

“What about your dad?”

“He’s busy being dead.”

Keri, unimpressed, said, “Welcome to the club. We’re looking for Ashley Penn.”

“Screw her.”

“Do you know where she is?”

“No, and I don’t give a rat’s ass. Me and her are done.”

“Is she here?”

“Do you see her?”

“Is her phone here?” Keri pressed.

“No.”

“Is that her phone in your back pocket?”

The kid hesitated and then said, “No. I think you should leave now.”

Ray got uncomfortably close to the kid, held out his hand, and said, “Let me see that phone.”

The kid swallowed hard, then fished it out of his pocket and handed it over. The cover was pink and looked expensive.

Ray asked, “This is Ashley’s?”

The kid stood silent, defiant.

“I can dial her number and we can see if it rings,” he said. “Or you can give me a straight answer.”

“Yeah, it’s hers. So what?”

“Sit your ass on that couch and don’t move,” Ray said. Then to Keri, “Do your thing.”

Keri searched the house. There were three small bedrooms, a tiny bathroom, and a linen closet, all innocuous looking. There were no signs of struggle or captivity. She found the pull line for the attic in the hallway and tugged. Down came a set of creaky, wooden suspension steps leading upstairs. She carefully climbed up. When she got to the top, she took out her flashlight and pointed it around. It was more of a bonus crawl space than a real attic. The ceiling was only about four feet high and cross beams made it difficult to move around, even while crouching.

There wasn’t much up there. Just a decade’s worth of spider webs, a bunch of dust-covered boxes, and a bulky-looking wooden trunk at the far end.

Why did someone put the heaviest, creepiest item at the far end of the attic? It had to be hard to get it all the way to that corner.

Keri sighed. Of course someone would put it there just to make her life difficult.

“Everything okay up there?” Ray called out from the living room.

“Yup. Just checking out the attic.”

She climbed up the last stair and squatted her way across the attic, making sure to step on the narrow wooden beams. She worried that a wrong step would send her crashing through the drywall ceiling. Sweaty and covered in dusty spider webs, she finally reached the trunk. When she opened it and shined the flashlight inside, she was relieved to discover there was no body. Empty.

Keri closed the trunk and made her way back to the stairs.

Back in the living room, Denton hadn’t moved from the couch. Ray was sitting directly front of him, straddling a kitchen chair. When she walked in, he looked up and asked, “Anything?”

She shook her head. “Do we know where Ashley is yet, Detective Sands?”

“Not yet, but we’re working on it. Right, Mr. Rivers?”

Denton pretended not to hear the question.

“Can I see Ashley’s phone?” Keri asked.

Ray handed it to her unenthusiastically. “It’s locked. We’ll have to get tech to work their magic.”

Keri looked at Rivers and said, “What’s her password, Denton?”

The kid scoffed at her. “I don’t know.”

Keri’s dour expression let him know she wasn’t buying it. “I’m going to repeat the question again, very politely. What’s her password?”

The kid hesitated, deciding, and then said, “Honey.”

To Ray, Keri said, “There’s a shed out back. I’m going to go check it out.”

Rivers’ eyes darted quickly in that direction but he said nothing.

Out back, Keri used a rusty shovel to pry a padlock off the shed. A strip of sunlight pierced the interior through a hole in the roof. Ashley wasn’t in there, just paint cans, old tools, and other random junk. She was just about to step back outside when she noticed a stack of California license plates on a wooden shelf. On closer examination, there were six pairs, all with stickers for the current year.

What are these doing here? We’ll have to have them bagged.

She turned around and started to leave when a sudden breeze slammed the rusty door closed, blocking out most of the light in the shed. Thrust into semi-darkness, Keri felt claustrophobic.

She took a huge gulp of air, then another. She tried to regulate her breathing when the door creaked open, letting some sunlight back in.

This must have been what it was like for Evie. Alone, thrust into darkness, confused. Is this what my little girl had to face? Was this her living nightmare?

Keri choked back a sob. She’d pictured Evie locked away in a place like this a hundred times. Next week it would be five years exactly since she disappeared. That was going to be a tough day to get through.

A lot had happened since then – the struggle to keep her marriage together as their hopes faded, the inevitable divorce from Stephen, going on “sabbatical” from her professorship in criminology and psychology at Loyola Marymount University, officially to do independent research but really because the drinking and sleeping around with students had forced the administration’s hand. Everywhere she turned, she saw the broken pieces of her life. She’d been forced to face her ultimate failure: the inability to find the daughter who’d been stolen from her.

Keri roughly wiped the tears from her eyes and chastised herself silently.

Okay, you’ve failed your daughter. Don’t fail Ashley too. Get it together, Keri!

Right there in the shed, she powered up Ashley’s phone and typed in “Honey.” The password worked. At least Denton was honest about one thing.

She tapped *Photos*. There were hundreds of pictures, most of them standard fare – adorable little selfies of Ashley with friends at school, she and Denton Rivers together, a few photos of Mia. But scattered throughout, she was surprised to see, were other, edgier pictures.

Several were taken in an empty bar or club of some sort, clearly before or after hours, with both Ashley and her friends visibly drunk and in hardcore party mode, shotgunning beers, lifting their skirts and flashing their thongs. In some they were working bongos or rolling joints. Bottles of liquor were rampant.

Who did Ashley know that had access to a place like that? When was it happening? When Stafford was in DC? How did her mother have no clue about any of it?

It was the photos with the gun that really caught Keri’s attention. It would suddenly be there in the background, a 9mm SIG, sitting inconspicuously on a table next to a pack of cigarettes, or on a couch next to a bag of chips. In one instance, Ashley was out in the woods somewhere, down by a river, shooting at Coke cans.

Why? Was it just for fun? Was she learning how to protect herself? If that was it, then from what?

Interestingly, the photos with Denton Rivers tapered off considerably over the last three months, corresponding with new ones of a strikingly good-looking guy with a long, wild mane of thick blond hair. In many of the pictures, he was shirtless, showing off his six-pack abs. He seemed very proud of them. One thing was certain – he was definitely no high school kid. He looked closer to his early twenties.

Was he the one who had access to the bar?

Ashley had also taken a number of erotic photos of herself. In some, she was flashing her panties. In others she was naked except for a thong, often touching herself suggestively. The photos never showed her face but they were definitely Ashley. Keri recognized her room. In one she could see the bookcase in the background with the old math book hiding her fake ID. In another she could see Ashley’s stuffed animal in the background, resting on her pillow with its head turned away, almost as if it couldn’t bear to watch. Keri felt the urge to throw up but forced it down.

She went back to the phone’s main menu and tapped on *Messages* to see the girl’s texts. The erotic pictures from *Photos* had been sent one by one from Ashley to someone named Walker, apparently the guy with the six-pack. The accompanying messages left little to the imagination. Despite Mia Penn’s special connection with her daughter, it was starting to look like Stafford Penn understood Ashley much better than her mom did.

There was also a text to Walker four days ago that said, *Formally kicked Denton to the curb today. Expecting drama. I’ll let you know.*

Keri powered the phone off and sat there in the dark of the shed, thinking. She closed her eyes and let her mind wander. A scene formed in her head, one so real that she might as well have been right there.

It was a nice, sunny September Sunday morning, filled with endless blue California skies. They were at the playground, she and Evie. Stephen was returning that afternoon from a hiking trip in Joshua Tree. Evie wore a purple tank top, white shorts, lacy white socks, and tennis shoes.

Her smile was wide. Her eyes were green. Her hair was blond and wavy, pulled into pigtails. Her upper front tooth was chipped; it was a grown-up tooth, not a baby one, and would need to be fixed at some point. But every time Keri brought it up, Evie went into full panic mode, so it hadn't happened yet.

Keri sat on the grass, barefoot, with papers scattered all around her. She was getting ready for her keynote speech tomorrow morning at the California Criminology Conference. She'd even lined up a guest speaker, an LAPD detective named Raymond Sands whom she'd consulted with on a few cases.

"Mommy, let's get frozen yogurt!"

Keri checked her watch.

She was almost done and there was a Menchie's on the way home. "Give me five minutes."

"That means yes?"

She smiled.

"It means big, big yes."

"Can I get sprinkles or just fruit toppings?"

"Let me put it like this – how do you spread fairy dust?"

"How?"

"You *sprinkle* it! Get it?"

"Of course I get it, Mommy. I'm not *little*!"

"Of course you're not. My apologies. Just give me five minutes."

She returned her attention to the speech. After a minute, someone walked past her, briefly casting the page in shadow. Annoyed by the distraction, she tried to regain her concentration.

Suddenly, the quiet was shattered by a bloodcurdling scream. Keri looked up, startled. A man in a windbreaker and baseball cap was running away quickly. She could only see the back of him but could tell he was holding something in his arms.

Keri got to her feet, looking desperately around for Evie. She was nowhere to be found. Keri started running after the man even before she knew for sure. A second later, Evie's head poked out from in front of the man. She looked terrified.

"Mommy!" she screamed. "Mommy!"

Keri chased after them, breaking into a full sprint. The man had a big head start. By the time Keri was halfway across the grassy field, he was already in the parking lot.

"Evie! Let her go! Stop! Someone stop that man! He has my daughter!"

People looked around but they mostly seemed confused. No one got up to help. And she didn't see anyone in the parking lot to stop him. She saw where he was headed. There was a white van at the far end of the lot, parallel parked near the curb for an easy exit. He was less than fifty feet from it when she heard Evie's voice again.

"Please, Mommy, help me!" she pleaded.

"I'm coming, baby!"

Keri ran even harder, her vision blurry with burning tears, pushing past the fatigue and fear. She had reached the edge of the parking lot. The asphalt was crumbly and dug into her bare feet as she ran but she didn't care.

"That man has my daughter!" she screamed again, pointing in their direction.

A teenage kid in a T-shirt and his girlfriend got out of their car, only a few spots from the van. The man ran right by them. They looked bewildered until Keri yelled again.

"Stop him!"

The teenager started to walk toward the man, then broke into a run. By then the man had reached the van. He slid the side door open and tossed Evie in like a sack of potatoes. Keri heard the thump as her body slammed against the wall.

He slammed the door shut and started to run around to the driver's side when the teenage boy reached him and grabbed his shoulder. The man spun around and Keri got her best look at him. He was wearing sunglasses and a cap pulled low and it was hard to see through the tears. But she caught a glimpse of blond hair and what looked like part of a tattoo on the right side of his neck.

But before she could discern anything else, the man reared his arm back and punched the teenager in the face, sending him crashing into a nearby car. Keri heard a sickening crack. She saw the man pull a knife from a sheath attached to his belt and plunge it into the teenager's chest. He pulled it out and waited a second to watch the kid tumble to the ground before hurrying around to the driver's seat.

Keri forced what she'd just seen out of her head and focused on nothing but reaching that van. She heard the engine start and saw the van start to pull out. She was less than twenty feet away.

But the vehicle was picking up speed now. Keri kept running but she could feel her body start to give out. She looked at the license plate, ready to commit it to memory. There was none.

She reached for her keys, then realized they were in her purse, back on the field. She ran back to where the teenager was, hoping to grab his and take that car. But when she got to him, she saw his girlfriend kneeling over him, sobbing uncontrollably.

She looked up again. The van was far off in the distance now, leaving a trail of dust. She had no license plate, no description to speak of, nothing to offer the police. Her daughter was gone and she didn't know how to get her back.

Keri dropped to the ground beside the teenage girl and began to weep anew, their wails of despair indistinguishable from each other.

When she opened her eyes she was back in Denton's house. She didn't remember coming out of the shed or walking across the dead grass. But she had somehow gotten to the Rivers' kitchen. This was twice in one day.

It was getting worse.

She walked back into the living room, looked Denton in the eyes, and said, "Where's Ashley?"

"I don't know."

"Why is her phone in your possession?"

"She left it here yesterday."

"Bullshit! She broke up with you four days ago. She wasn't here yesterday."

Denton's face sagged visibly at the verbal gut punch.

"Okay, I took it from her."

"When?"

"This afternoon at school."

"You just snatched it out of her hand?"

"No, I bumped into her after the final bell and snuck it from her purse."

"Who owns a black van?"

"I don't know."

"A friend of yours?"

"No."

"Someone you hired?"

"No."

"How'd you get those scratches on your arm?"

"I don't know."

"How did you get that bump on your head?"

"I don't know."

"Whose blood is that on the carpet?"

"I don't know."

Keri shifted her feet and tried to hold back the fury rising in her blood. She could feel herself losing the battle.

She stared through him and said, without emotion, “I’m going to ask you one more time: where is Ashley Penn?”

“Screw you.”

“That’s the wrong answer. You think about that on the way down to the station.”

She turned away, hesitated briefly, and then suddenly swung back around and punched him with a closed fist, hard, with every ounce of frustration in her body. She got him square in the temple, in the same spot as his previous wound. It split open and blood shot everywhere, some landing on Keri’s blouse.

Ray stared at her in disbelief, frozen. Then he jerked Denton Rivers to his feet with one powerful yank and said, “You heard the lady! Move! And don’t trip and hit your head on any more coffee tables.”

Keri gave him a wry smile for that one but Ray didn’t smile back at her. He looked horrified. Something like this could cost her her job.

She didn’t care, though. All she cared about right now was getting this punk to talk.

CHAPTER FIVE

Monday

Evening

Keri drove the Prius with Ray in the passenger seat as they followed the black-and-white she'd called to transport Rivers down to the station. Keri listened quietly as Ray worked the phone.

The captain in charge of the West LA Division was Reena Beecher, but she would be notified of the situation by the head of Pacific Division's Major Crimes Unit, Keri and Ray's boss, Lieutenant Cole Hillman. That's who Ray was filling in now. Hillman, or "Hammer," as some of his underlings called him, had jurisdiction over missing persons, homicide, robbery, and sex crimes.

Keri wasn't a huge fan. To her, Hillman seemed more interested in covering his own ass than putting it on the line to solve cases. Maybe seniority had made him soft. He had no qualms about tearing into detectives who didn't clear their boards – their running tally of open cases. Thus the nickname "Hammer," which he seemed to love. But to Keri's mind he was a hypocrite who got pissed when they didn't close cases *and* got pissed when they took risks to solve those very cases. Keri thought a more appropriate nickname was "asshole." But since she couldn't call him that, her little rebellion was to never call him by his preferred nickname either.

Keri sped through the city streets, trying keep up with the squad car in front of her. Next to her, Ray recapped for Hillman how a late afternoon call about a teen who had been missing for a couple of hours had suddenly morphed into a potentially real abduction situation involving the fifteen-year-old daughter of a US senator. He described the bail bond security video, the visit to Denton Rivers' place (minus some details) and everything in between.

"Detective Locke and I are bringing Rivers down to the station for more questioning."

"Hold on, hold on," Hillman said. "What's Keri Locke doing on this case? This is way above her pay grade, Sands."

"She caught the call, Lieutenant. And she's uncovered almost every lead we have so far. We're almost to the station. We'll fill you more then, sir."

"Fine. I'll be in soon myself. I have to call Captain Beecher anyway. She's going to want a heads-up on this. I've ordered an all-hands in fifteen. "

He hung up without another word.

Ray turned to Keri and said, "We'll get kicked to the curb as soon as they get a full debriefing out of us, but at least we made some progress."

Keri frowned.

"They're going to screw it up," she said.

"You're not the only good investigator in this town, Keri."

"I know. There's you too."

"Thanks for the mildly condescending compliment, partner."

"You bet," she replied, then added, "Hillman doesn't like me."

"I don't know about that. I think he just finds you a little...brash for someone with so little experience."

"That could be it. Or he could just be an asshole. That's okay. I don't like him either."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he's a toady and a paper pusher and can't think outside the box. Also, when he passes me in the hall, his eyes don't go above my chest."

"Oh. Well, if you're going to hold that against every cop who does that, you'll be left with nothing but assholes."

Keri looked over at him knowingly.

"Exactly," she said.

“I’ll try not to take that personally,” he said.

“Don’t be so sensitive, Iron Giant.”

He sat quietly for a moment in the passenger seat. Keri could tell he wanted to say something but wasn’t sure how to bring it up. Finally he spoke.

“Are we going to talk about what happened back there?”

“What?”

“You know, you assaulting an underage boy.”

“Oh, that. I’d rather not. Besides, I thought you said he hit his head on the coffee table.”

“If it turns out he’s not involved in this and he files a complaint, there could be consequences.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Well, I am. Maybe it’s because we’re getting close to the anniversary. Have you called Dr. Blanc lately?”

Keri’s silence gave him his answer.

“Maybe you should,” he said softly.

Keri pulled into the Division parking lot, effectively ending the conversation.

Denton Rivers was put in an interrogation room while Keri filled out the charging complaint against him for theft of property, specifically Ashley’s cell phone. It would be enough to hold him for a few hours. By then, with any luck, they’d know more.

After that, they headed to Conference A, the big room where watch commanders doled out assignments at the start of shift. Hillman’s all-hands meeting was about to start.

When they arrived, Hillman and six of the Division’s most seasoned detectives were already waiting, including two from homicide. Ray fit right in. Keri wasn’t as confident. Right now, with all their eyes trained on her, she felt like a bug under a magnifying glass.

Don’t sabotage yourself. You belong here, too.

Lt. Cole Hillman stood up to speak. He had recently turned fifty but the deep creases in his face hinted at a man who’d been prematurely aged by the things he’d seen on the job. His salt and pepper hair had begun to recede only slightly. He had a barrel chest and a slight paunch that he tried to hide with loose-fitting shirts. It was after seven in the evening but he still wore a jacket and tie. Keri couldn’t remember ever seeing him without them.

“First of all, thank you all for coming in on such short notice. As many of you already know, this case involves Ashley Penn, the daughter of US Senator Stafford Penn. Even if he wasn’t close friends with the mayor and the governor, this would be a high priority. But he is, so the pressure is really on. We can expect assistance from our friends at the Bureau shortly. But for now, we need to proceed as if this will remain our case. My understanding is that the senator isn’t confident that this was an abduction. He thinks his daughter may be off partying somewhere. That’s possible. The video footage of her getting in that van is inconclusive. But until his suspicions are borne out, we will run every lead to ground, understand?”

Heads nodded and there was a general murmur of understanding from the assembled. Hillman continued.

“Apparently, word has spread among the students at the girl’s school, West Venice High, and this thing is already starting to blow up on social media. We’ve already received the first call from a local reporter poking around. By morning, it’ll likely be the lead story on every news outlet in the state. So let me be clear – when the media approaches you, and they will, you have no comment. No matter who’s asking the question, you refer them to the public information officer. Is that understood?”

Everyone nodded.

“Okay, good,” Hillman said. “Right now, we probably have just a few hours to work this before the Feds formally claim jurisdiction. Let’s make them count.”

With that, he tuned to Ray and said, “Detective Sands, would you please bring us all up to speed.”

Ray, leaning against a wall in the back of the room, shifted uncomfortably and said, “If it’s all the same, sir, Detective Locke broke this case and knows a lot more about it than I do. I think she’s better prepared.”

Everyone looked at Keri, who was standing next to her partner.

Hillman scowled but said, “Detective Locke, it looks like the floor is yours.”

Her chest tightened. A vision of a white van tearing down a road as her bloody feet burned flashed before her eyes for the briefest of moments.

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