

# A TRACE OF HOPE

A KERI LOCKE MYSTERY--BOOK #5

BLAKE PIERCE



A Keri Locke Mystery

Блейк Пирс

**A Trace of Hope**

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2018 — (A Keri Locke Mystery)

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“A dynamic story line that grips from the first chapter and doesn't let go.” --  
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A TRACE OF HOPE is the final book in the Keri Locke series, bringing the series  
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mystery series), Keri Locke, Missing Persons Detective in the Homicide division of  
the LAPD, is closer than she's ever been to finding her daughter. Finally, she gets  
a fresh lead—and this time, she will do whatever it takes to bring her home alive.  
At the same time, a new, urgent case is assigned to Keri: an 18 year old girl has  
gone missing after being hazed by her sorority. As the race is on to find her, Keri  
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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  
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# **Blake Pierce**

## **A trace of hope**

**Blake Pierce**

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

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

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## CHAPTER ONE

When Detective Keri Locke opened her eyes, she immediately knew something was off. First of all, she didn't feel as if she had been asleep for long. Her heart was racing and she felt clammy all over. It was more like she'd passed out than been sleeping for a long time.

Second, she wasn't in bed. Instead, she was flat on her back on the couch in her apartment living room and Detective Ray Sands, her partner and, as of late, her boyfriend, was leaning over her with a concerned expression on his face.

She tried to speak, to ask him what was wrong, but her mouth was dry and nothing came out but a hoarse crack. She couldn't remember how she got here or what had happened before she lost consciousness. But it must have been something huge for her to react that way.

She saw in Ray's eyes that he wasn't sure what to say. That wasn't like him. He wasn't one to beat around the bush. A six-foot-four African-American LAPD cop and former professional boxer who'd lost his left eye in a fight, he was direct in almost everything he did.

Keri tried to push up on her arms to get to a more elevated position but Ray stopped her, gently resting a hand on her shoulder and shaking his head.

"Give yourself a moment," he said. "You still look a little unsteady."

"How long was I out?" Keri croaked.

"Not quite a minute," he answered.

"Why was I out?" she asked.

Ray's eyes widened. He opened his mouth to reply but stopped, clearly at a loss.

"What is it?"

"You don't remember?" he asked incredulously.

Keri shook her head. She thought she heard a buzzing in her ears but then realized that it was another voice. She glanced over to the coffee table and saw her phone resting there. It was on and someone was speaking.

"Who's on the phone?" she asked.

"Oh, you dropped it when you collapsed and I put it there until I could revive you."

"Who is it?" Keri asked again, noting that he had avoided her question.

"It's Susan," he said reluctantly. "Susan Granger."

Susan Granger was a fifteen-year-old prostitute whom Keri had rescued from her pimp last year and gotten placed in a girls' home. Since then, the two had become close, with Keri acting as a kind of mentor for the damaged but spirited young girl.

"Why is Susan calli – ?"

And then the memory hit her like a wave crashing down on her entire body. Susan had called to tell Keri that her own daughter, Evie, who had been abducted six years ago, was to be the central participant in a grotesque ceremony.

Susan had learned that tomorrow night at a house somewhere in the Hollywood Hills, Evie was going to be auctioned off to the highest bidder, who would be allowed to have his way with her sexually before killing her in some sort of ritualistic sacrifice.

*That's why I passed out.*

"Hand me the phone," she ordered Ray.

"I'm not sure you're up for this yet," he said, obviously sensing that she could now remember everything.

"Give me the goddamn phone, Ray."

He handed it over without another word.

"Susan, are you still there?" she said.



“What happened?” Susan demanded, her voice borderline panicky. “One minute you were there and then nothing. I could hear something happening but you didn’t answer.”

“I passed out,” Keri admitted. “It took me a moment to regroup.”

“Oh,” Susan said quietly. “I’m sorry I did that to you.”

“It’s not your fault, Susan. I was just taken by surprise. It’s a lot to process at once, especially when I’m not feeling a hundred percent.”

“How are you doing?” Susan asked, the concern in her voice almost palpable.

She was referring to Keri’s injuries, sustained in a life-and-death fight with a child abductor only two days ago. She had only been released from the hospital yesterday morning.

The doctors had determined that the bruises on her face, where the abductor had punched her twice, along with a badly bruised chest and swollen knee, weren’t enough to keep her another day.

The abductor, a deranged zealot named Jason Petrossian, had gotten the worst of it. He was still hospitalized under armed guard. The girl he’d kidnapped, twelve-year-old Jessica Rainey, was recovering at home with her family.

“I’ll be okay,” Keri said reassuringly. “Just some bumps and bruises. I’m glad you called, Susan. No matter how bad the news, knowing this is better than not knowing. Now I can try to do something about it.”

“What can you do, Detective Locke?” Susan said, her voice rising as the words tumbled out of her. “Like I said, I know Evie is the Blood Prize at the Vista. But I don’t where it’s happening.”

“Slow down, Susan,” Keri said firmly as she pulled herself to a sitting position. Her head felt a little dizzy and she didn’t protest as Ray put a steadying hand on her back as he sat down beside her on the couch. “We’ll figure out how to find her. But first I need you to tell me everything you know about this whole Vista thing. Don’t worry about repeating yourself. I want every detail you can recall.”

“Are you sure?” Susan asked hesitantly.

“Don’t worry. I’m okay now. I just needed a moment to take all this in. But I’m a Missing Persons detective. This is what I do. Just because I’m looking for my own daughter doesn’t change the job. So tell me everything.”

She pushed the speakerphone button so Ray could listen too.

“Okay,” Susan said. “As I told you before, there’s a club of rich johns who have pop-up sex parties in the Hollywood Hills. They call them Hill House Parties. The house is filled with girls, almost all underage prostitutes like I was. They usually have them every few months and most of the time, they only give a few hours’ notice, usually via text. Am I making sense?”

“Absolutely,” Keri said. “I remember you telling me about this. So remind me about the Vista event.”

“The Vista is like their biggest party of all. It only happens once a year and no one knows when. They like to give a little more notice for that one because no one wants to miss it. That’s probably why my friend heard about it already even though it’s not until tomorrow night.”

“And the Vista is different from the other Hill House Parties, right?” Keri prodded, knowing Susan was reluctant to revisit the particulars and giving her permission to do it.

“Yeah. At all the other parties, the john pays for whatever girl he likes and just does whatever he wants with her. Guys can be with anyone they want and a girl can be used all night by anyone. But the Vista is different. On that night the organizers pick one girl – she’s usually special in some way – and make her the Blood Prize.”

She stopped talking and Keri could sense she didn’t want to continue, didn’t want to hurt the woman who’d rescued her and helped her see a future for herself.

“It’s okay, Susan,” Keri insisted. “Go on. I need to know everything.”

She heard the girl give a deep sigh on the other end of the line before continuing.

“So the event starts around nine at night. For a while it’s just like a regular Hill House party. But then they bring in the girl who has been chosen as the Blood Prize. Like I said, there’s usually



something different about her. Maybe she's a virgin. Maybe she was just abducted that day so she's been on the news. Once it was former child star who got hooked on drugs and ended up on the streets."

"And this year it's Evie," Keri prodded.

"Yeah, there's a girl named Lupita from my hooking days in Venice who I keep in touch with. She still works the streets and she overheard some guys talking about how they were using the lady cop's daughter this year. They're using the nickname 'mini-pig' to describe her."

"Very creative," Keri muttered bitterly. "And you said they picked her because I'm getting too close?"

"Right," Susan confirmed. "The powers that be were tired of moving her around. They said she's become a liability with you constantly on the hunt for her. They just want to finish her off and dump her body somewhere, so you know she's dead and will stop looking. I'm so sorry, Detective."

"Go on," Keri said. Her body was numb and her voice sounded like it was coming from somewhere far away, outside of herself.

"So it's basically an auction. All the big spenders will bid on her. Sometimes it gets into the hundreds of thousands. These guys are competitive. Plus there's the fact that by punishing her, it's like they're reaching out and hurting you. I'm sure that'll up the cost. And I think they're all turned on by how it ends."

"Remind me of that part," Keri asked, closing her eyes in preparation. She sensed Susan's hesitation but didn't press, letting the girl gather herself to say what had to be said. Ray edged a little closer to her on the couch and moved his arm from her back, wrapping it around her shoulder.

"Whoever wins the auction is taken to a separate room while the Blood Prize is prepared. She's bathed and put in a fancy dress. Someone does her makeup, movie-star style. Then she's taken to a room where the guy gets to have his way with her. The only rule is he can't hurt her face."

Keri noticed that Susan's voice had grown hard, as if she was turning off the part of herself that felt emotion so she could get through this. Keri didn't blame her. The girl went on.

"I mean, he can do things to her, you know. He just can't hit her or slap her above the neck. She's got to look right for the big event later. They don't mind if her mascara is streaky because she's been crying. That adds to the drama. Just no bruises."

"What happens next?"

"The guy has to be finished a little bit before midnight because that's when the final sacrifice happens. They put her in a fresh dress and strap her down so she can't move too much. She can wriggle a little. They like that. But not too much."

Despite her eyes being closed, Keri sensed Ray stiffening beside her. He seemed to be holding his breath. She realized she was doing the same thing and forced herself to exhale when she heard Susan pause to swallow.

"The guy puts on a black robe and a hood to hide his identity," she continued. "That's because the thing is shown on TV in the main room where everyone else is. I think it's recorded too. Obviously none of these guys want video evidence of them murdering a teenage girl."

"When they're both prepped, the guy comes in and stands behind her. He delivers some prepared line, I don't know what. Then he's handed a knife and, right at the stroke of midnight, he slits her throat. She dies, right there on camera. Everybody recites something. Then they turn the TV off and the party resumes. That's pretty much it."

Keri finally opened her eyes. She felt a tear trickle down her cheek but refused to wipe it away. She liked the way it almost burned her skin, like a wet flame.

As long as she could keep that flame of righteous fury alive in her heart, she was sure she could keep Evie alive too.



## CHAPTER TWO

For a long time, no one spoke. Keri didn't think she could. Instead, she let the rising tide of rage fill her up, making her blood boil and her fingers tingle.

Finally Ray cleared his throat.

"Susan, this is Detective Locke's partner, Ray Sands. Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course, Detective."

"How do you know all this? I mean, were you at one of these parties?"

"Like I told Detective Locke, I was taken to a Hill House Party once when I was about eleven. I was never brought back but I know girls who have been. One of my friends was taken twice. And you can imagine how word spreads. Any girl who's been in the life in LA knows all the details about the Vista. It's become almost an urban legend. Pimps sometimes use it to keep their girls in line. 'Talk back and you might be the Blood Prize this year.' Only this legend is actually true."

Something in Susan's tone – the mix of fear and sadness – snapped Keri out of her silence. This young girl had made so much progress in recent months. But Keri feared that asking her to return, even just in memory, to the dark place she'd inhabited for years was unfair and cruel. Susan had shared everything she could, at the cost of her own emotional well-being. It was time to let her try to be a kid again.

The adults had to take over now.

"Susan," she said, "thank you so much for telling me all this. I know it wasn't easy for you. With the information you've given us, I think we've got a great start at finding Evie. I don't want you to worry about this anymore, okay?"

"I could check around some more," the girl insisted.

"No. You've done enough. It's time to get back to your new life. I promise to check in with you. But for now I need you to focus on schoolwork. Maybe read a new Nancy Drew book we can talk about next week. We've got it from here, kiddo."

They said goodbye and Keri hung up. She looked over at Ray.

"You think we've got a great start at finding Evie?" he asked skeptically.

"No, but I couldn't tell her that. Besides, it may not be great. But it's a start."

\*

Keri and Ray sat in Ronnie's Diner, both lost in thought. The morning rush at the nondescript joint in Marina del Rey had ended and most of the customers in the place were enjoying a leisurely breakfast.

Ray had insisted they leave the apartment and Keri had agreed. She had dressed more casually than usual, in a long-sleeved shirt and faded jeans, with a light jacket to protect against the crisp January morning.

She wore a baseball cap, pulled down low over the top half of her face. She let her dirty-blonde hair, normally pulled back in a professional ponytail, intentionally hang loose to swallow her face and hide the bruises she knew would make others stare.

She hunched down in their booth as she sipped coffee, further hiding her already modest frame. Keri, almost thirty-six years old, was an unimposing five foot six. Recently, she'd taken to wearing more form-fitting attire, as she'd cut down on the drinking and gotten back into solid shape. But not today. This morning, she was hoping to go unnoticed.



It was nice just to get out after two days of doctor-ordered bed rest. But Keri was also hoping that a change of scenery would give her a fresh perspective on how to find Evie. And it had worked to some degree.

By the time their food arrived they'd agreed not to formally involve their team, the Missing Persons Unit of LAPD's West Los Angeles Pacific Division, in the search. The unit had been helping Keri look for her daughter on and off for years, to no avail. There was no reason to assume the outcome would be any different without new evidence to go on.

But there was another reason to keep a low profile. This was truly Keri's last chance to find her daughter. She knew the exact time that Evie would be in a certain part of LA – the Hollywood Hills at midnight tomorrow – even if she didn't have the specific location yet.

But if the team started poking around and word got out that they knew about the Vista event, the people who had Evie might cancel the event or just kill her early to avoid complications. Keri needed to keep things quiet.

Unspoken but understood between the partners and new couple was another wrinkle. They couldn't be sure they weren't being monitored by the person they most needed to keep in the dark – Jackson Cave.

Last year Keri had taken down a serial child abductor named Alan Jack Pachanga, ultimately killing him while rescuing a teenage girl. And while Pachanga was no longer a problem, his lawyer was.

Jackson Cave, the man's attorney, was a big-time corporate lawyer with a fancy downtown high-rise office. But he had also made something of a career of representing the dregs of society. He seemed to have a particular affinity for child predators. He claimed much of it was pro bono work and that even the worst among us deserved quality representation.

But Keri had uncovered information that seemed to link him to a vast network of child abductors, a network she suspected he was profiting from and helping to direct. One of the abductors in the network was a man who went by the title of the Collector.

Last fall, when Keri learned that the Collector was Evie's abductor, she lured him into a meeting. But the Collector, whose real name was Brian Wickwire, discovered her ruse and attacked her. She ended up killing him in their fight, but not before he swore she would never find Evie.

Unfortunately, she had no evidence that could prove Jackson Cave's connection to the man who'd taken her daughter or the larger network he seemed to run. At least none that she'd obtained legally.

In desperation, she'd once broken into his office and found a coded file that had proven helpful. But the fact that she'd stolen it made it inadmissible in court. Besides that, the connections between Cave and the network were so well-hidden and tenuous that proving his involvement would be nearly impossible. He hadn't reached his position of power atop the Los Angeles legal world by being sloppy or careless.

She even tried to convince her ex-husband, Stephen, a wealthy Hollywood talent agent, to help pay for a private investigator to follow Cave. A good investigator was well beyond her means alone. But Stephen refused, essentially saying he thought Evie was dead and Keri was delusional.

Of course Jackson Cave had no such financial limitations. And once he realized that Keri was on to him, he started having *her* surveilled. Both she and Ray had found bugs in their homes and cars. Each of them now did regular bug sweeps of everything from their clothes to their phones to their shoes before discussing anything sensitive. They also suspected even their LAPD office was monitored and acted accordingly.

That's why they sat in a loud diner, wearing clothes they'd swept for recording devices, making sure no one at nearby tables seemed to be listening in, as they formulated their plan. If there was one person they didn't want to know they were aware of Vista, it was Jackson Cave.



In her multiple verbal confrontations with him, it had become clear to Keri that something had changed in Cave. He may have originally viewed her as merely a threat to his business, another obstacle to overcome. But no longer.

After all, she'd killed two of his biggest earners, stolen files from his office, cracked codes, and put his business, and perhaps his freedom, at risk. Of course, she was doing it all to find her daughter.

But she sensed that Cave had come to see her as more than merely an opponent, some chick cop desperate to find her kid. He seemed to consider her almost as his nemesis, as some sort of mortal enemy. He didn't just want to defeat her anymore. He wanted to destroy her.

Keri was sure that was why Evie was to be the Blood Prize at the Vista. She doubted that Cave knew where Evie was being held or who was holding her. But he surely knew the people who knew the people who knew those things. And he had almost certainly instructed, at least indirectly, that Evie be the sacrifice at tomorrow's party as a way to break Keri beyond repair.

There was no point in tailing him or formally interrogating him. He was far too clever and careful to make any mistakes, especially since he knew she was on to him. But he was behind all of it – of that Keri was certain. She'd just have to find another way to solve this.

With a renewed sense of resolve she looked up to find that Ray was watching her closely.

"How long have you been staring at me?" she asked.

"A couple of minutes, at least. I didn't want to interrupt. You looked like you were doing some seriously deep thinking. Have any epiphanies?"

"Not really," she admitted. "We both know who's behind this but I don't think that helps us much. I need to start fresh and hope to track down some new leads."

"You mean 'we,' right?" Ray said.

"Don't you have to go in to work today? You've been off for a while taking care of me."

"You've got to be kidding, Tinker Bell," he said with a smile, alluding to their massive size disparity. "You think I'm just going to go into the office with everything going on? I'll use every sick, personal, and vacation day I have if it comes to that."

Keri felt her entire chest warm over with delight but tried to hide it.

"I appreciate that, Godzilla," she said. "But with me still being on suspension because of the IA investigation, we might need you to take advantage of some of those official police resources you have access to."

Keri was technically on suspension while Internal Affairs investigated the circumstances surrounding her killing of Brian "The Collector" Wickwire. Their supervisor, Lieutenant Cole Hillman, had indicated that it would likely be wrapped up soon in her favor. But until then, Keri had no badge, no department-issued weapon, no formal authority, and no access to police resources.

"Was there something particular you thought I should be looking into?" Ray asked.

"Actually, yes. Susan mentioned that one of the past Blood Prize girls was a former child actress who became an addict and ended up on the streets. If she was raped and murdered, especially by having her throat slit, there should be a record of it, right? I don't remember it being on the news but maybe I missed it. If you could track that down, maybe the forensic workup included DNA from the semen of the man who assaulted her."

"It's possible no one ever thought to even check for DNA," Ray added. "If they found this girl dead with her throat cut, they might not have felt the need to do anything further. If we can figure out who she was, maybe we can have more testing done, put a rush on it and ID who she was with."

"Exactly," Keri agreed. "Just remember to be discreet. Involve as few people as possible. We don't know how many ears our lawyer friend has in the building."

"Understood. So what do you plan to do while I pore over old records of murdered teenage girls?"

"I'm going to interview a possible witness."

"Who's that?" Ray asked.



“Susan’s prostitute friend, Lupita – the one who said she overheard those guys talking about the Vista. Maybe she’ll remember more with a little help.”

“Okay, Keri, but remember to go a little easy. That area of Venice is rough and you’re still not at full strength. Besides, at least for now, you’re not even a cop.”

“Thanks for the concern, Ray. But I think you know by now. Going easy just isn’t my style.”



## CHAPTER THREE

As Keri pulled up in front of the Venice address Susan had texted her, she forced herself to forget about the lingering pain in her chest and knee. She was entering potentially dangerous territory. And since she was not officially on the job right now, she had to be on extra high alert. No one here would give her the benefit of the doubt.

It was only mid-morning and as she crossed Pacific Avenue in this seedy stretch of Venice, her only company was tattooed surfers, oblivious to the cold and headed to the ocean just a block away, and homeless men huddled in the doorways of not-yet-open businesses.

She arrived at the rundown apartment complex, walked through the open front door, and walked up three flights of stairs to the room where Lupita was supposedly expecting her. Business didn't usually pick up until after lunch so this was a good time to stop by.

Keri approached the door and was about to knock when she heard noise from inside. She checked and found the door unlocked and quietly opened it, peeking her head in.

On the bed in the unadorned room was a brunette girl who looked to be about fifteen. On top of her was a naked, wiry man in his thirties. Covers hid the particulars, but he was thrusting down aggressively. Every few seconds he would slap the girl in the face.

Keri fought the strong urge to march in and rip the guy off her. Even without the badge, it was her natural inclination. But she had no idea if this was a john and the activity taking place was standard operating procedure.

Sad experience had taught her that sometimes coming to the rescue was counterproductive in the long run. If this was a client and Keri interrupted, the guy might get upset and complain to Lupita's pimp, who would take it out on her. Unless a girl was willing to leave the life for good, as Susan Granger had, stepping in, while following the law, might only make things worse for her in the big picture.

Keri stepped into the room a bit more and caught Lupita's eye. The frail-looking girl with curly dark hair gave her a familiar look, a mix of pleading, fear, and wariness. Keri knew almost immediately what it meant. She needed help but not too much help.

This clearly was a john, maybe a new, unexpected last-minute one, because he was here when Lupita had agreed to meet Keri. But she'd been told to service him anyway. It was likely that the slapping was unexpected. But she wasn't in a position to object in case her pimp had given permission.

Keri knew how to handle it. She stepped forward quickly and quietly, pulling a rubber baton from the inside pocket of her jacket. Lupita's eyes got big and Keri could tell the john had noticed. He was just starting to turn his head to look behind him when the baton connected with the rear of his skull. He fell forward, collapsing on top of the girl, unconscious.

Keri held her finger to her lips, indicating for Lupita to stay quiet. She stepped around to the side of the bed to make sure the john really was out cold. He was.

"Lupita?" she asked.

The girl nodded.

"I'm Detective Locke," she said, neglecting to say that for now, she wasn't technically a detective. "Don't worry. If we're quick, this doesn't have to be a problem. When your pimp asks, here's what happened: a short guy in a masked hood came in, knocked out your john, and stole his wallet. You never saw his face. He threatened to kill you if you made a sound. When I leave this room, you count to twenty, then start screaming for help. There's no way you can be blamed. Got it?"

Lupita nodded again.

"Okay," Keri said as she rifled through the man's jeans and pulled out his wallet. "I don't think he'll be out more than a minute or two so let's cut to the chase. Susan said you overheard some guys



talking about the Vista happening tomorrow night. Do you know who was talking? Was one of them your pimp?”

“Uh-uh,” Lupita whispered. “I didn’t recognize the voices. And when I looked out in the hall they were gone.”

“That’s okay. Susan told me what they said about my daughter. What I want you to focus on is the location. I know they always hold this Vista thing in the Hollywood Hills. But were they any more specific than that? Did they mention a street? Any landmarks?”

“They didn’t mention a street. But one of them was complaining that it was going to be more of a hassle than last year because it was gated. In fact, he said ‘the estate is gated.’ So I’m assuming it’s more than just a house.”

“That’s really helpful, Lupita. Anything else?”

“One of them said he was bummed because they wouldn’t be close enough to see the Hollywood sign. I guess last year, the house was right near it. But this time they’ll be too far away, in a different area. Does that help?”

“Actually it does. That means it’s probably closer to West Hollywood. It narrows it down. That’s really helpful. Anything more?”

The man on top of her groaned softly and started to stir.

“I can’t think of anything,” Lupita muttered, barely audible.

“That’s all right. This is more than I had before. You’ve been a big help. And if you ever decide you want to get out of the life, you can reach out to me through Susan.”

Lupita, despite her situation, smiled. Keri took off her cap, pulled a black hood out from her pocket, and put it on. It had small slits for her eyes and mouth.

“Now remember,” she said in a deep voice intended to hide her own, “wait twenty seconds or I’ll kill you.”

The man on top of Lupita was coming to, so Keri turned and hurried out of the room. She rushed down the hall and was halfway down the stairs when she heard the screams for help. She ignored them and made her way to the front door, where she pulled off the hood, stuffed it back in her pocket, and put on her cap.

She rifled through the guy’s wallet, and, after taking out the cash – all of twenty-three dollars – she tossed it in the corner by the door. As casually as possible, she walked back across the street to her car. As she got in, she could hear the shouts of angry men, headed toward Lupita’s room.

When she was clear of the area, she called Ray to see if he’d had any luck with his lead. He picked up after one ring and she could tell from his voice that it hadn’t gone well.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“It’s a dead end, Keri. I’ve gone back ten years and can’t find any record of a former child star who was found with her throat slit. I did find a record of a former child actress named Carly Rose who fell on hard times and went missing as a teen. She’d be about twenty now. It could easily be her. Or she could have just overdosed in a subway tunnel and never been found. Hard to know. I also found records of other girls between eleven and fourteen who meet a similar description – throats slit. Bodies just left in dumps or even on street corners. But usually they’re girls who were on the streets for a while. And they’re really spread out over time.”

“That actually makes sense to me,” Keri said. “These people probably had no compunction about dumping the bodies of girls who worked the streets or had no family. But they wouldn’t want to draw attention by leaving the bodies of girls from good homes who were recently abducted or a girl who was well known. Those might initiate real investigations. I bet those girls were burned, buried, or dumped in the ocean. It’s the ones no one would follow up on that they just dumped anywhere.”

Keri chose to ignore the fact that she’d said all of that so matter-of-factly. If she lingered on it, she’d be bothered by how inured she’d become to these kinds of atrocities.



“That fits,” Ray agreed, sounding equally unfazed. “It might also explain the gap in years. If they used a street prostitute one year, then used a few kidnapped suburban kids before returning to another teen hooker, it would be harder to establish a pattern. I mean, if a teen hooker showed up once a year with her throat slit, that might generate interest too.”

“Good point,” Keri said. “So there wasn’t anything to go on then.”

“Nah. Sorry. You have better luck?”

“A little,” she said. “Based on what Lupita said, it sounds like the location may be in West Hollywood, on a gated estate.”

“That’s promising,” Ray noted.

“I guess. There are a thousand of those up in those hills.”

“We can have Edgerton cross-reference them to see if the property titles match up to anyone we know. With dummy companies, it’s probably a long shot. But you never know what that guy will come up with.”

It was true. Detective Kevin Edgerton was a genius when it came to anything tech. If anyone could suss out a meaningful connection, it was him.

“Okay, let him have at it,” Keri said. “But have him do it under the radar. And don’t give him too many details. The fewer people who know what’s going on, the less chance someone inadvertently leaks something that tips off the wrong people.”

“Understood. What are you going to do?”

Keri thought for a moment and realized she didn’t have any new leads to follow up. That meant she had to do what she always did when she hit a brick wall – start fresh. And there was one person she realized she definitely needed a fresh start with.

“Actually,” she said, “can you ask Castillo to call me, but have her do it outside, using her cell?”

“Okay. What are you thinking?” Ray asked.

“I’m thinking it’s about time I reacquainted myself with an old friend.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

Keri waited anxiously in her car, eyeing the clock as she sat outside the offices of *Weekly L.A.*, the alternative newspaper where she had asked Officer Jamie Castillo to meet her. It was also where her friend, Margaret “Mags” Merrywether, worked as a columnist.

Time was starting to run short. It was already 12:30 on Friday, roughly thirty-six hours from when her daughter was going to be raped and ritualistically murdered for the pleasure of a group of wealthy soul-sick men.

Keri saw Jamie walking down the street and shook the dark thoughts from her head. She needed to stay focused on how to prevent her daughter’s death, not obsess on the awfulness of how it might unfold.

As she had requested, Jamie was wearing a civilian coat over her uniform to draw less notice. Keri waved at her from the driver’s seat, getting her attention. Jamie smiled and headed for the car, her dark hair blowing in the bitter wind despite being pulled back in a ponytail. She was taller than Keri by a few inches and more athletic too. She was a Parkour enthusiast and Keri had seen what she could do under duress.

Officer Jamila Cassandra Castillo wasn’t yet a detective. But Keri was sure that once she made it, she’d be a great. In addition to her physical skills, she was tough, smart, relentless, and loyal. She’d already put her own safety and even her job on the line for Keri. If she wasn’t already partners with Ray, Keri knew who her next choice would have been.

Jamie got in the car gingerly, wincing involuntarily, and Keri remembered why. While on the hunt for the suspect who gave Keri her current injuries, Jamie had been in the proximity of a bomb that went off at the guy’s apartment. It had killed one FBI agent, badly burned another, and left Ray with a chunk of glass in his right leg, something he hadn’t mentioned since. Jamie had ended up with a concussion and some serious bruises.

“Weren’t you just released from the hospital today?” Keri asked, incredulous.

“Yep,” she said with pride in her voice. “They let me go this morning. I went home, changed into my uniform, and made it in to work ten minutes late. Lieutenant Hillman cut me some slack though.”

“How are your ears?” Keri asked, referring to the hearing loss Jamie had suffered in the moments after the bomb blast.

“I can hear you fine right now. I get some intermittent ringing. The doctor says that should go away in a week or two. No permanent damage.”

“I can’t believe you’re working today,” Keri muttered, shaking her head. “And I can’t believe I’m asking you to go above and beyond on your first day back.”

“It’s no problem,” Jamie assured her. “I needed to get out for a bit. Everyone was treating me like a porcelain doll. But I do have to get right back or I’d hang out. I brought what you asked for, though.”

She pulled a file out of her bag and handed it to Keri.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. And before you ask, I used the ‘general’ username ID when I searched the database, so it won’t be tracked to me. I assume there’s a reason you didn’t want me using my own ID. And I further assume there’s a reason you didn’t volunteer anything about why you asked for this stuff?”

“You assume correctly,” Keri said, hoping Jamie would leave it at that.

“And I assume you’re not going to tell me what’s going on or let me help in any way?”

“It’s for your own good, Jamie. The less you know the better. And the less anyone knows you helped me, the better for what I’m doing.”



“Okay. I trust you. But if you find that at some point down the road you do need help, you have my number.”

“I do,” Keri said, giving Castillo’s hand a squeeze.

She waited until the officer had returned to her car and pulled out into the street before getting out of her own. Gripping the file Castillo had given her tightly to her body, Keri hurried up the steps and into the *Weekly L.A.* building, where Mags, and hopefully some answers, were waiting for her.

\*

Two hours later, there was a knock on the door of the conference room where Keri had set up shop and had been poring over documents. The large table in the center of the room was covered in papers.

“Who is it?” she asked. The door opened slightly. It was Mags.

“Just checking in,” she said. “I wanted to see if you could use any help, darling.”

“Actually, I could use a little break. Come on in.”

Mags stepped inside, shut and locked the door behind her, made sure the blinds were still fully closed so no one could see in, and walked over. Once again, Keri marveled at how she had become friends with what was essentially the live-action version of Jessica Rabbit.

Margaret Merrywether was over six feet tall, even without the high heels she usually wore. Statuesque, with milky-white skin, ample curves, flaming red hair matched by her ruby red lips, and bright green eyes, she seemed like she’d stepped out of the pages of a high-fashion magazine for Amazon women.

And that was all *before* she opened her mouth to reveal an accent that suggested Scarlett O’Hara, only slightly undercut by a tart tongue that was more Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday*. Only that mildly biting tone hinted at Margaret’s (Mags to her friends) alter ego. It turned out she also went by the pseudonym “Mary Brady,” the alternative paper’s muckraking columnist who had brought down local politicians, uncovered corporate malfeasance, and called out dirty cops.

Mags was also a happily divorced mother of two, made even wealthier after she parted ways from her banker ex-husband. Keri had met her while working a case and after some initial suspicion that her whole persona was some elaborate form of performance art, a friendship had blossomed. Keri, who didn’t have many friends outside of work, was happy to be the boring one for once.

Mags sat down in the seat beside Keri and looked at the collage of police documents and newspaper clippings spread out on the table.

“So, my dear, you asked me to collect copies of every article the paper had ever written on Jackson Cave. And I see that you asked someone in the department to do the same with everything they have on him. Then you locked yourself in here for two hours. Are you ready to tell me what’s going on?”

“I am,” Keri said. “Just give me a moment first.”

She got up, pulled a bug detector out of her bag, and proceeded to sweep the entire conference room. Mags raised her eyebrows but didn’t seem stunned.

“You know, darling,” she began, “I’m hardly one to tell you you’re being overcautious. But I have this sort of thing done professionally twice a week.”

“I have no doubt,” Keri said. “But thanks for humoring me. This was given to me by a techie friend I trust.”

“Someone in the department?” Mags asked.

“No, he’s actually a mall security guard. It’s a long story but let’s just say the guy knows his stuff and he owed me a favor, so when I asked for a recommendation for a good bug detector, he gave me this as a gift.”

“That sounds like a long story I might like to hear when we have a bit more time,” Mags said.



Keri nodded absentmindedly as she continued to sweep the room. Mags smiled and waited patiently. When Keri was done and found nothing, she sat back down.

“Okay, here it is,” she said and launched into her history with Cave, much of which Mags was already familiar with.

In fact, her friend had even recently helped her lure out information from an assassin-for-hire with a connection to Cave. He was a man known only as the Black Widower, a mystery figure who drove a black Lincoln Continental without plates.

Months earlier, Keri had watched on security camera footage as he casually killed the man who’d been holding Evie, shoved Evie into his trunk, and disappeared with her into the night, all, Keri suspected, on the orders of Cave.

Somehow, Mags had managed find a way to anonymously reach out to the Black Widower. It turned out that he was happy to pass on a lead about Evie’s whereabouts for a hefty price. He seemed to have no loyalties, which worked out well for Keri in that instance because his information ultimately led to her learning of the existence of the Vista event.

But while some of the particulars, like the Black Widower connection, were old news to her, Mags said nothing. She didn’t interrupt once, although she pulled out a notepad and took occasional notes. She listened intently, from the beginning all the way up to the call from Susan Granger this morning about Evie being the Blood Prize at the Vista.

When she was sure Keri was done, she asked a question.

“I understand your predicament, Keri. And I’m horrified for you. But I still don’t understand. Why are you staring at hundreds of papers about Mr. Cave?”

“Because I’m at my wits’ end, Mags. I have no more leads. I have no more clues. The only thing I know for certain is that Jackson Cave is somehow involved in my daughter’s case.”

“You’re certain?” Mags asked.

“Yes,” Keri said. “I don’t think he was initially. He probably had no idea that one of his abductors’ victims was my daughter. After all, I wasn’t even a detective at the time. I was a college professor. Her disappearance is the *reason* I became a cop. I don’t even know at what point I really attracted his interest. But at some point he must have pieced together that the kid the lady detective was searching for was abducted by someone he had commissioned.”

“And you think he sought out her location?” Mags asked. “You think he knows where she is now?”

“Those are two very different questions. I’m sure that at some point he did investigate her location. It would have been in his interest to know her circumstance. But that would have been well before I started to sniff him out. Once he suspected I was looking into him, I have no doubt he made sure that he couldn’t be connected to her. He knows that if I thought he could lead me to Evie, I’d follow him day and night. He probably worries that I’d kidnap him and torture him to get her location.”

“Would you?” Mags asked, more curiously than accusingly.

“I would. A million times over I would.”

“Me too,” Mags whispered.

“So I don’t think that Jackson Cave knows where my daughter is or who has her. But I do think he knows individuals who know individuals who know where she is. I think he could find out her current location if he was so inclined. And I think that he could direct her to be at a specific location at a particular time if he wanted. That’s what I think is going on. I think Evie is the Blood Prize because he wants her to be. And somehow, his wishes have been conveyed to the people who can make it happen.”

“So you want to follow that trail?”

“No,” Keri said. “The maze from him to her is too complicated for me to figure out, even if I had unlimited time, which I obviously don’t. That’s a rabbit hole I won’t go down. But I started to



realize, all this time I've only been looking at Jackson Cave as an opponent, the mastermind who is keeping me from my daughter, this malevolent force out to destroy my family."

"He's not?" Mags asked, sounding surprised and almost offended.

"He is. But that's not how he sees himself. And that's not what he always was. I realized that I have to forget my preconceptions to learn who this guy is and what makes him tick."

"Why do you care what makes him tick?"

"Because I can't beat him if I don't understand how he thinks, what his motives are. And if I don't understand what's really important to him deep down, I'll never get leverage over him. And that's what I really need, Mags – leverage. This guy isn't going to volunteer any information to me. But if I can determine what matters most to him, maybe I can use that to get my daughter back."

"How?"

"I have no idea...yet."



## CHAPTER FIVE

When Ray walked into the conference room three hours later, Keri still didn't have leverage. But she did think she had a better sense of who Jackson Cave was.

"Lovely to see you, Detective Sands," Mags said when he entered bearing submarine sandwiches and iced coffees.

"Good to see you too, Red," he said as he tossed the sandwiches on the table.

"Well, I do declare," she replied huffily.

Keri wasn't sure when Ray had started calling Margaret Merrywether "Red" but she got a kick out of it. And despite her reaction now, Keri was pretty sure Mags didn't mind either.

"I brought the guy's financials and property records," Ray said. "But I don't think they're going to be the answer. I reviewed them with Edgerton and he couldn't find anything hinky. But for a guy with that kind of money and power, that alone is actually kind of hinky."

"I agree," Keri said. "But hinky isn't enough to act on."

"He wanted to bring in Patterson but I told him to hold off for now."

Detective Garrett Patterson went by the nickname "Grunt Work," and for good reason. He was the second best tech guy in the unit behind Edgerton, and while he lacked Edgerton's intuitive gifts for finding unseen connections within complex information, he had another skill. He loved to pore over the minutiae of records to find that small but crucial detail that others missed.

"That was the right call," Keri said after a moment. "He might uncover something with the property records. But I worry that he couldn't help but tell Hillman or accidentally cast too wide a net and set off warning lights. I don't want to involve him unless we have no other choice."

"It may come to that," Ray said. "That is, unless you've cracked the Cave code in the last few hours."

"I wouldn't say that," Keri admitted. "But we have uncovered some surprising stuff."

"Like what?"

"Well, for starters," Mags piped in, "Jackson Cave wasn't always a complete asshole."

"That is a surprise," Ray said, unwrapping a sandwich and taking a big bite. "How so?"

"He used to work in the D.A.'s office," Mags replied.

"He was a prosecutor?" Ray asked, nearly choking on his food. "The defender of rapists and child molesters?"

"It was a long time ago," Keri said. "He joined the D.A. right out of law school at USC – worked there for two years."

"Couldn't hack it?" Ray wondered.

"Actually, his conviction rate was pretty amazing. He apparently didn't like to plead down often so he took most cases to trial. He got nineteen convictions and two hung juries. Not one acquittal."

"That is good," Ray acknowledged. "So why did he switch teams?"

"That took some digging," Keri said. "It was actually Mags who figured it out. You want to explain?"

"It would be my great pleasure," she said, looking up from the sea of pages in front of her. "I suppose a lifetime of doing tedious research pays off from time to time. Jackson Cave had a half-brother named Coy Trembley. They had different fathers but grew up together. Coy was three years older than Jackson."

"Was Coy a lawyer too?" Ray asked.

"Hardly," Mags said. "Coy was in trouble with the law throughout his teens and twenties – mostly petty stuff. But when he was thirty-one, he was arrested for sexual assault. Basically he was accused of forcing himself on a nine-year-old girl who lived down the street."

"And Cave defended him?"



“Not officially. But he took a nine-month leave of absence from the prosecutor’s office right after the arrest. He wasn’t Trembley’s attorney of record and his name isn’t on any of the legal documents filed with the court in the case.”

“I hear a ‘but’ coming,” Ray said.

“You hear correctly, dear,” Mags declared. “*But* for tax purposes, his declared job during that time was ‘legal consultant.’ And I’ve compared the language in the briefs in Trembley’s case. Some of the phrasing and logic are very similar to more recent Cave cases. I think it’s fair to assume he was secretly assisting his brother.”

“How’d he do?” Ray asked.

“Quite well. Coy Trembley’s case ended in a hung jury. Prosecutors were debating whether to retry him when the little girl’s father showed up at Trembley’s apartment and shot him five times, including once in the face. He didn’t make it.”

“Jeez,” Ray muttered.

“Yeah,” Keri agreed. “It was around that time that Cave gave his notice to the D.A.’s office. He was off the grid for three months after that. Then he suddenly reemerged with a new firm that dealt mostly with corporate clients. But he also did a little white collar defense stuff and increasingly as the years went by, pro-bono work for folks like his half brother.”

“Wait,” Ray demanded incredulously. “Am I supposed to believe this guy became a defense lawyer to honor the memory of his dead brother or something, to defend the rights of the morally grotesque?”

Keri shook her head.

“I don’t know, Ray,” she said. “Cave almost never spoke about his brother over the years. But when he did, he always maintained that Coy was falsely accused. He was pretty adamant about it. I think it’s possible that he started his practice with noble intentions.”

“Okay. Let’s say I give him the benefit of the doubt on that. What the hell happened to him then?”

Mags picked up from there.

“Well, it’s pretty clear that the guilt of most of his early pro-bono clients was highly dubious. Some of them seem to have just been picked out of lineups or pulled off the street. Occasionally he got them off; usually he didn’t. Meanwhile, he was going around making speeches at civil liberties conferences – good speeches actually, very passionate. There was even talk that he might run for office someday.”

“Sounds like an American success story so far,” Ray said.

“It was,” Keri agreed. “That is, until about ten years ago. That’s when he took on the case of a guy who didn’t fit the profile. He was a serial child abductor who apparently did it professionally. And he paid Cave handsomely to represent him.”

“Why did he all of a sudden take on that case?” Ray asked.

“Not a hundred percent clear,” Keri said. “His corporate work hadn’t really taken off yet. So it could have been a financial decision. Maybe he didn’t view this guy as being as objectionable as others. The charges against him were for abduction for hire, not assault or molestation. The guy basically kidnapped kids and sold them to the highest bidder. He was, to use a generous description, a ‘professional.’ Whatever the reason, Cave took this guy on, got him acquitted, and then the floodgates opened. He started taking all manner of similar clients, many of whom were less...professional.”

“Around the same time,” Mags added, “the corporate work picked up. He moved from a storefront in Echo Park to the downtown high-rise office he has now. And he’s never looked back.”

“I don’t know,” Ray said skeptically. “It’s hard to see the through line from civil libertarian fighting for the least among us to remorseless legal shark representing pedophiles and possibly coordinating a child sex slave ring. I feel like we’re missing a piece.”

“Well, you’re a detective, Raymond,” said Mags snarkily. “By all means, detect.”



Ray opened his mouth, about to fire back, before realizing that he was being teased. All three of them laughed, glad for the chance to break the tension they hadn't realized had been building up. Keri jumped back in.

"It has to be related to that serial abductor he represented. That's when everything changed. We should look into that more."

"What do you have on him?" Ray asked.

"His case just kind of dead ends," Mags said, frustrated. "Cave represented the man, got him off, and then that guy dropped off the radar. We haven't been able to find anything on him since."

"What was the man's name?" Ray asked.

"John Johnson," Mags answered.

"That sounds familiar," Ray muttered.

"Really?" Keri said, surprised. "Because there's almost nothing on him. It looks like it was a false identity. There's no record of him existing after he was acquitted. It's like he left that courtroom and then completely disappeared."

"Still, the name rings a bell," Ray said. "I think it was before you joined the force. Did you try pulling up a mug shot?"

"I started to," Keri said. "There are seventy-four John Johnsons in the database who had mug shots taken the month of his arrest. I didn't have a chance to go through them all."

"Mind if I take a look?"

"Go ahead," Keri said, punching up the screen and sliding her laptop over to him. She could tell he was on to something but didn't want to say it out loud yet in case he was wrong. As he scrolled through the images, he spoke almost absent-mindedly.

"You both said it was like he dropped off the radar, like he'd disappeared, right?"

"Uh-huh," Keri said, watching him closely, feeling her breathing quicken.

"Almost like...a ghost?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," she repeated.

He stopped scrolling and stared at an image on the screen before looking up at Keri.

"I think that's because he is a ghost; or more accurately, 'The Ghost.'"

Ray turned the screen so that Keri could see the mug shot. As she stared at the image of the man who first sent Jackson Cave down his dark path, a cold shiver went down her spine.

She knew him.



## CHAPTER SIX

Keri tried to control her emotions as a shot of adrenaline coursed through her system, making her entire body tingle.

She recognized the man staring back at her. But she didn't know him as John Johnson. When they'd met, he'd gone by the name Thomas Anderson, but everybody referred to him as The Ghost.

They'd spoken only twice, each time at the Twin Towers Correctional Facility in downtown Los Angeles, where he was currently being incarcerated for crimes not unlike those John Johnson had been acquitted of.

"Who is it, Keri?" Mags asked, half concerned, half annoyed by the long silence.

Keri realized she had been mutely staring at the mug shot for the last few seconds.

"Sorry," she replied, shaking herself back into the moment. "His name is Thomas Anderson. He's being held at county lockup for the abduction and sale of children, mostly to out-of-state families who didn't meet adoption qualifications. I can't believe it didn't occur to me that Johnson and Anderson could be the same guy."

"Cave deals with a lot of abductors, Keri," Ray said. "There's no reason you should have made that connection."

"How do you know him?" Mags asked.

"I stumbled across him last year when I was looking through case files about abductors. At one point, I thought he might have taken Evie. I went to Twin Towers to interview him and it became clear pretty quickly that he wasn't the guy. He even gave me a few leads that helped me ultimately hunt down the Collector. And now that I think about it, he's the first person who mentioned Jackson Cave to me – he said Cave was his lawyer."

"You'd never heard of Cave before that?" Mags asked.

"No, I'd heard of him. He's notorious to Missing Person cops. But I'd never met one of his clients or had reason to think about him as anything other than a generalized scumbag until Anderson made me more aware of him. Until I met Thomas Anderson, Jackson Cave was never on my radar."

"And you don't think that's a coincidence?" Mags asked.

"With Anderson, I'm not sure anything is a coincidence. Isn't it strange that he gets off scot-free as 'John Johnson' but then gets arrested doing the same abduction thing using his real identity, Thomas Anderson? Why didn't he use a fake identity again? I mean, the guy was a librarian for over thirty years. He basically ruined his life by using his real name."

"Maybe he thought Cave could get him off a second time?" Ray suggested.

"But here's the thing," Keri said. "Even though Cave was technically his defense attorney, at his last trial, the one at which he was convicted, Anderson defended himself. And supposedly, he was great. Word was he was so convincing that if the case wasn't iron-clad, he would have gotten off."

"If this guy was such a genius," Mags countered, "how was the case against him so strong in the first place?"

"I asked him the same thing," Keri replied. "And he agreed with me that it was odd that someone as clever and meticulous as him would get caught like that. He didn't come right out and say it but he essentially hinted that he meant to get convicted."

"But why on God's green earth!" Mags asked.

"That is an excellent question, Margaret," Keri said, closing the laptop. "And it's one I intend to address with Mr. Anderson right now."



\*

Keri parked her car in the massive structure across from the Twin Towers and made her way to the elevator. Sometimes if she had to visit in the day, the massive county lockup facility was so busy that she had to go all the way to the uncovered tenth floor of the structure to find a parking spot. But it was almost 8 p.m. and she found a spot on the second floor.

As she crossed the street, she went over her plan. Technically, because of her suspension and the IA investigation, she didn't have authorization to meet with a prisoner in an interrogation room. But that wasn't common knowledge yet. She was hoping her familiarity with the prison staff would allow her to bluff her way through.

Ray had offered to come along to smooth her path. But she worried that would lead to questions, potentially getting him in trouble. Even if it didn't, he might be required to sit in on the interview with Anderson. Keri knew the guy wouldn't open up under those circumstances.

As it turned out, she needn't have worried.

"How's it going, Detective Locke?" Security Officer Beamon asked as she approached the lobby metal detector. "I'm surprised to see you up and moving after the run-in with that psycho earlier this week."

"Oh, yeah," Keri agreed, deciding to use her earlier confrontation to her advantage, "me too, Freddie. Looks like I was in a prize fight, right? I'm actually still officially on leave until I'm in better shape. But I was getting a little stir-crazy around the apartment so I thought I'd check on an old case. It's informal so I didn't even bring the gun and shield. Still cool if I interview someone even if I'm off the clock?"

"Of course, Detective. I just wish you'd take it a little easy. But I know you won't. Sign in. Get your visitor badge and head to the interrogation level. You know the drill."

Keri did know the drill and fifteen minutes later she was seated in an interrogation room, waiting for the arrival of inmate #2427609, or Thomas "The Ghost" Anderson. The guard had warned her that they were getting ready for lights out and it might take a little extra time to collect him. She tried to stay cool as she waited but knew it was a losing battle.

Anderson always seemed to get under her skin, as if he was secretly peeling back her scalp to reveal her brain and read her thoughts. Oftentimes, she felt like she was a kitten and he was holding one of those laser pen lights, sending her scampering in random directions at his whim.

And yet, it was his information that sent her down a road that had gotten her closer to finding Evie than anything else had. Was that by design or just luck? He'd never given her any indication that their meetings were anything other than happenstance. But if he was that far ahead of the game, why would he?

The door opened and he stepped through it, looking much as she remembered. Anderson, in his mid-fifties, was on the shorter side, about five foot eight, with a square, well-built frame that suggested he used the prison gym regularly. The manacles on his muscled forearms looked tight. Still, he appeared leaner than she remembered, as if he'd missed a few meals.

His thick hair was parted neatly but much to her surprise, it was no longer the jet black she remembered. Now it was mostly a salt-and-pepper combination. At the edges of his prison jumpsuit, she could still see portions of the multiple tattoos that lined the right side of his body all the way up his neck. His left side was still unblemished.

As he was directed to the metal chair across the table from her, his gray eyes never left her. She knew he was taking her in, studying her, sizing her up, trying to learn as much as he could about her situation before she said a word.

After he was seated, the guard took a position by the door.

"We're fine, Officer...Kiley," Keri said, squinting at his nametag.



“Procedure, ma’am,” the guard said brusquely.

She glanced over at him. He was new...and young. She doubted he was on the take yet but she couldn’t afford for anyone, corrupt or clean, to hear this conversation. Anderson smiled slightly at her, knowing what was coming. This would probably be entertaining for him.

She stood up and stared at the guard until he sensed her eyes on him and looked over.

“First of all, it’s not ma’am. It’s Detective Locke. Second, I don’t give a rat’s ass about your procedure, newbie. I want to talk to this inmate in private. If you can’t accommodate that, then I need to talk to *you* in private and it’s not going to be a comfortable chat.”

“But...” Kiley started to stammer as he shifted from foot to foot.

“But nothing, Officer. You have two choices here. You can let me speak to this inmate privately. Or we can have that chat! Which is it gonna be?”

“Maybe I should get my superviso – ”

“That’s not on the list of choices, Officer. You know what? I’m deciding for you. Let’s step outside so I can chat you up a little. You’d think taking down a religious zealot pedophile would give me a pass for the rest of the week but I guess now I have to instruct a corrections officer as well.”

She reached for the door handle and started to pull when Officer Kiley finally lost what was left of his nerve. She was impressed at how long he’d lasted.

“Never mind, Detective,” he said hastily. “I’ll wait outside. Just please use caution. This prisoner has a history of violent incidents.”

“Of course I will,” Keri said, her voice now all buttered honey. “Thank you for being so accommodating. I’ll try to keep it brief.”

He stepped out and shut the door and Keri returned to her seat, filled with a confidence and energy that had been lacking only thirty seconds earlier.

“That was fun,” Anderson said mildly.

“I’m sure,” Keri replied. “You can bet I expect some valuable information in return for providing you with such quality entertainment.”

“Detective Locke,” Anderson said in a tone of mocked indignation, “you offend my delicate sensibilities. It’s been months since we’ve seen each other and yet your first instinct upon seeing me is to demand information? No hello? No how are you?”

“Hello,” Keri said. “I’d ask how you are, but it’s clear you’re not great. You’ve lost weight. The hair has gone gray. The skin near your eyes has gotten saggy. Are you ill? Or is something weighing on your conscience?”

“Both actually,” he admitted. “You see, the boys in here have been treating me a little rough lately. I’m no longer in the popular crowd. So I have my dinner ‘borrowed’ occasionally. I get an unrequested rib massage now and then. Also, I have a touch of the cancer.”

“I didn’t know,” Keri said quietly, genuinely taken aback. All the physical signs of wasting away made more sense now.

“How could you?” he asked. “I didn’t advertise it. I might have told you at my parole hearing in November but you weren’t there. I didn’t get it, by the way. Not your fault though. Your letter was lovely, thank you very much.”

Keri had written a letter on Anderson’s behalf after he’d helped her before. She didn’t advocate for his release but she had been generous in her description of his assistance to the force.

“You weren’t surprised you didn’t get it, I gather?”

“No,” he said. “But it’s hard not to hope. It was my last real chance to get out of here before the sickness takes me. I had dreams of wandering on a beach in Zihuatanejo. Alas, it’s not to be. But enough small talk, Detective. Let’s get down to why you’re really here. And remember, the walls have ears.”

“Okay,” she started, then leaned in and whispered, “do you know about tomorrow night?”

Anderson nodded. Keri felt a surge of hope rise in her chest.



“Do you know where it’s happening?”

He shook his head.

“I can’t help you with the where,” he whispered back. “But I might be able to help you with the why.”

“What good will that do me?” she demanded bitterly.

“Knowing why might help you find out where.”

“Let me ask you a different why,” she said, realizing her anger was getting the best of her but unable to contain it.

“All right.”

“Why are you helping me at all?” she asked. “Have you been guiding me all along, since I first met you?”

“Here’s what I can tell you, Detective. You know what I did for a living, how I coordinated the theft of children from their families to be given to other families, often for massive fees. It was a very lucrative business. I was able to conduct it from a distance using a false name and live a happy, uncomplicated life.”

“As John Johnson?”

“No, my happy life was as Thomas Anderson, librarian. My alter ego was John Johnson, abduction facilitator. When I was caught, I turned to someone we both know to ensure that John Johnson was exonerated and that Thomas Anderson was never connected to him. This was almost a decade ago. Our friend didn’t want to do it. He said he only represented those mistreated by the system and that I was, and this is funny to think about now, a cancer on that system.”

“That is funny,” Keri agreed, not laughing.

“But as you know, I can be convincing. I persuaded him that I was taking children from wealthy, undeserving families and giving them to loving families without the same resources. Then I offered him an enormous amount of money to get me acquitted. I think he knew I was lying. After all, how could these low-income families afford to pay me? And were the parents who lost their children all really terrible? Our friend is very smart. He had to have known. But it gave him something to hold on to, something to tell himself when he took six figures in cash from me.”

“Six figures?” Keri repeated, disbelieving.

“As I said, it’s a very lucrative business. And that payment was just the first. Over the course of the trial, I paid him about half a million dollars. And with that, he was on his way. After I was acquitted and resumed work under my own name, he even started helping me facilitate the abductions to these ‘more deserving’ families. As long as he could find a way to justify the transactions, he was comfortable with them, even enthusiastic.”

“So you gave him that first bite of forbidden fruit?”

“I did. And he found that he liked the taste. In fact, he discovered that he had a taste for a great many things he hadn’t been aware that he might like.”

“What exactly are you saying?” Keri asked.

“Let’s just say that somewhere along the way, he lost the need to justify the transactions. You know that event tomorrow night?”

“Yes?”

“It was his brainchild,” Anderson said. “Mind you, he doesn’t partake. But he realized there was a market for that sort of thing and for all the smaller, similar festivities throughout the year. He filled that niche. He essentially controls the upscale version of that...market in the Los Angeles area. And to think that before me, he was working out of a one-room office next to a doughnut shop representing illegal immigrants being randomly charged with sex crimes by cops looking to make quotas.”

“So you developed a conscience?” Keri asked through gritted teeth. She was disgusted but she wanted answers and worried that being too overt with that disgust might shut Anderson down. He seemed to sense how she felt but proceeded anyway.



“Not yet. That’s not what did it for me. It happened much later. I saw this story on the local news about a year and a half ago about a female detective and her partner who rescued this little girl who was kidnapped by her babysitter’s boyfriend, a real creep.”

“Carlo Junta,” Keri said automatically.

“Right. Anyway, in the story, they mentioned that this detective was the same woman who had joined the police academy a few years earlier. And they showed a clip from an interview after her academy graduation. She said she’d joined the force because her daughter was abducted. She said that even though she couldn’t save her own daughter, maybe by being a cop, she could help save some other family’s daughter. Does that sound familiar?”

“Yes,” Keri said softly.

“So,” Anderson continued, “because I worked in a library and had access to all kinds of old news footage, I went back and found the story from when this lady’s daughter was abducted and her news conference right afterward when she pleaded for her daughter’s safe return.”

Keri flashed back to the news conference, which was mostly a blur. She remembered speaking into a dozen microphones jammed in her face, begging the man who had snatched her daughter in the middle of a park, who had tossed her in a van like a rag doll, to return her.

She remembered the scream of “Please Mommy, help me” and the bobbing blonde pigtailed getting farther away as Evie, only eight at the time, disappeared across the green field. She remembered the bits of gravel that were still embedded in her feet during the news conference, trapped there when she ran barefoot through the parking lot, chasing after the van until it left her in the dust. She remembered it all.

Anderson had stopped talking. She looked at him and saw that his eyes were rimmed with tears, just as hers were. He pressed on.

“After that, I saw another story a few months later where this detective rescued another kid, this time a boy grabbed while he was walking to baseball practice.”

“Jimmy Tensall.”

“And a month later, she found a baby girl that had been snatched right out of a carrier at the supermarket. The woman who stole her had a fake birth certificate made and was planning to fly with the baby to Peru. You caught her at the gate as she was about to board the plane.”

“I remember.”

“That’s when I decided I couldn’t do it anymore. Every transaction reminded me of that news conference where you were begging for your daughter’s return. I couldn’t keep it at arm’s length anymore. I got soft, I guess. And right around then, our friend made a mistake.”

“What was that?” Keri asked, feeling a tingly sensation that only came when she sensed something big about to be revealed.

Thomas Anderson looked at her and she could tell he was wrestling with some kind of big internal decision. Then his brow unfurrowed and his eyes cleared. He seemed to have made up his mind.

“Do you trust me?” he asked quietly.

“What the hell kind of question is that? No friggin’ w – ”

But before she had finished the sentence, he had pushed away the table that separated them, swung the manacles on his wrists around her neck, and pulled her to the ground, sliding back into a corner of the interrogation room.

As Officer Kiley burst into the room, Anderson used her body as a shield, keeping her in front of him. She felt a sharp prick at her neck and glanced down to see what it was. It looked like a shaved-down toothbrush handle. And it was pressed against her jugular.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Keri was totally bewildered. A moment earlier, Anderson had been tearing up at the thought of her missing daughter. Now he was holding a razor-sharp piece of plastic to her throat.

Her first instinct was to make a move to break his grip. But she knew it wouldn't work. There was no way she could do anything before he'd be able to jam the plastic spike into her vein.

Besides, something about this wasn't right. Anderson had never given her any sense that he had malice toward her. He seemed to actually like her. He seemed to want to help her. And if he really had cancer, this was a fruitless exercise. He said himself that he'd be dead soon.

*Is this way of avoiding the agony, his version of suicide by cop?*

"Drop it, Anderson!" Officer Kiley screamed, his weapon pointed in their general direction.

"Put your gun down, Kiley," Anderson said surprisingly calmly. "You're going to accidentally shoot the hostage and then your career will be over before it's even started. Follow procedure. Alert your superior. Get a negotiator over here. It shouldn't take long. The department always has one on call. Someone can probably be in this room in ten minutes."

Kiley stood there, uncertain how to proceed. His eyes darted back and forth between Anderson and Keri. His hands were shaking.

"He's right, Officer," Keri said, trying to match Anderson's soothing tone. "Just follow standard procedure and this will all work out. The prisoner isn't going anywhere. Step outside and make sure the door is locked. Make your calls. I'm okay. Mr. Anderson isn't going to hurt me. He clearly wants to negotiate. So you need to bring in someone who has authorization to do that, okay?"

Kiley nodded but his feet remained rooted in place.

"Officer Kiley," Keri said, this time more firmly, "step outside and call your supervisor. Right now!"

That seemed to snap Kiley out of it. He backed out of the room, closed and locked the door, and grabbed the phone on the wall, never letting them out of his sight.

"We don't have much time," Anderson whispered in Keri's ear as he relaxed the plastic pressing against her flesh slightly. "I'm sorry about this but it's the only way I could be sure we could speak in complete confidence."

"Really?" Keri whispered back, half furious, half relieved.

"Cave has people everywhere, in here and out there. After this, I'm done for sure. I won't last through the night. I might not last the hour. But I'm more worried about you. If he thinks that you know everything I know, he might just have you eliminated, regardless of the consequences."

"So what do you know?" Keri asked.

"I told you Cave made a mistake. He came to me and said he was worried about you. He had done some checking and found out that one of his guys had kidnapped your daughter. As you found out, it was Brian Wickwire – the Collector. Cave didn't order it or know about it. Wickwire operated on his own a lot and Cave would often help facilitate moving the girls after the fact. That's what he did with Evie and he never gave it a second thought."

"So he wasn't targeting her?" Keri asked. She had suspected as much but wanted to be sure.

"No. She was just some cute blonde girl that Wickwire thought he could fetch a nice price for. But after you started rescuing girls and generating headlines, Cave went back through his records and saw that he was connected to her abduction through Wickwire. He was worried you'd eventually find your way to him and he asked me to help stash Evie somewhere well-hidden and to keep him out of it. He didn't want to know."

"He was covering his tracks even before I suspected he was involved?" Keri asked, marveling at Cave's foresight.



“He’s a clever guy,” Anderson agreed. “But what he didn’t realize was that he was asking the exact wrong person for help. He couldn’t have known. After all, I’m the one who corrupted him in the first place. Why would he suspect me? But I made up my mind to help you. Of course, I did it in a way that I thought would keep me protected.”

Just then Kiley opened the door a crack.

“Negotiator’s on his way,” he said, his voice quavering. “He’ll be here in five minutes. Just stay calm. Don’t do anything crazy, Anderson.”

“Don’t you make me do anything crazy!” Anderson screamed back at him, pulling the toothbrush back up to Keri’s neck and inadvertently poking her skin. Kiley quickly shut the door again.

“Ow,” she said. “I think you drew blood.”

“Sorry about that,” he said, sounding surprisingly sheepish. “It’s hard to maneuver splayed out on the floor like this.”

“Just rein it in a little, okay?”

“I’ll try. There’s just a lot going on, you know? Anyway, I talked to Wickwire and told him to place Evie at a location somewhere in LA where she’d be well taken care of, in case we needed her later on. I wanted to make sure she didn’t leave the city. And I didn’t want her to go through... more than she had to.”

Keri didn’t respond but they both knew there was nothing he could do about the years prior to that, and the horrors her daughter must have suffered in that time. Anderson continued quickly, clearly not wanting to linger on the thought any more than she did.

“I didn’t know what he did with her but it turned out he put her with the older guy you eventually found out she was staying with.”

“If you had decided to help me, why didn’t you just find out her location and get her yourself?”

“Two reasons,” Anderson said. “First, Wickwire wasn’t going to give up her location to me. It was prized info and he kept it closely guarded. Second, and I’m not proud of this, I knew that I’d get arrested if I came to you with your daughter.”

“But you got arrested intentionally anyway a few months later for child abductions,” Keri protested.

“I did that afterward, when I realized I had to take drastic action. I knew that eventually you’d research child abductors and traffickers and find your way to me. And I knew that I could set you on the right path without making Cave suspicious of me. As to getting arrested intentionally, that’s true. But you may recall that I defended myself in court. And if you check the court record closely, you’ll discover that both the prosecutor and the judge made several errors, errors I baited them into, that would almost certainly lead to my conviction being overturned. I was just waiting until the right time to appeal the case. Of course that’s all moot now.”

Keri looked up and saw a commotion outside the window of the room. She could see multiple officers passing by, at least one of whom was carrying a long gun. He was a sniper.

“I don’t mean to be cold but we need to wrap this up,” she said. “There’s no telling if someone out there has an itchy trigger finger or if Cave has ordered one of his minions to put you down as a precaution.”

“Quite right, Detective,” Anderson agreed. “Here I am blathering on about my moral conversion when what you want to know is how to get your daughter back. Am I right?”

“You are. So tell me. How do I get her back?”

“I genuinely don’t know. I don’t know where she is. I don’t believe Cave knows where she is. He might know the location of the Vista event tomorrow night but there’s no chance he’ll attend. So it’s pointless to have him followed.”

“So you’re saying I have no hope of getting her back?” Keri demanded, disbelieving.

*Have I been through all this for that answer?*

“Likely not, Detective,” he admitted. “But maybe you can get him to *give* her back.”



“What do you mean?”

“Jackson Cave used to consider you an annoyance, an obstacle to running his business. But that has changed in the last year. He’s become obsessed with you. He not only thinks you are out to destroy his business. He thinks you want to destroy him personally. And because he has twisted reality to make himself the good guy, he thinks you are the bad guy.”

“He thinks *I’m* the bad guy?” Keri repeated, incredulous.

“Yes. Remember, he manipulates his moral code as he sees fit so that he can function. If he thought he was doing evil things, he couldn’t live with himself. But he’s found ways to justify even the most heinous of acts. He told me once that the girls in these sex slave rings would be starving on the streets if not for him.”

“He’s gone mad,” Keri said.

“He’s doing what he can to look himself in the mirror each morning, Detective. And these days, part of that means believing that you are on a witch hunt. He views you as the enemy. He sees you as his nemesis. And that makes him very dangerous. Because I’m not sure what lengths he’ll go to in order to stop you.”

“So then how can I get a guy like that to *give* Evie back to me?”

“If you went to him and convinced him that you’re not after him, that all you want is your daughter, maybe he’d relent. If you could persuade him that once you had your daughter safe in your arms you would forget about him forever, maybe even leave the police force, he might be convinced to lay down his arms. Right now he thinks you want his destruction. But if he could be made to believe that you don’t want him, that you only want *her*, perhaps there’s a chance.”

“You think that would really work?” Keri asked, unable to hide the skepticism in her voice. “I just say ‘give me my daughter back and I’ll leave you alone forever’ and he goes for it?”

“I don’t know if it will work. But I know that you’re out of options. And you have nothing to lose by trying.”

Keri was turning the idea over in her head when there was a knock on the door.

“The negotiator’s here,” Kiley yelled. “He’s coming down the hall now.”

“Wait a minute!” Anderson yelled. “Tell him to stay back. I’ll tell him when he can come in.”

“I’ll tell him,” Kiley said, though his voice indicated he was desperate to hand over communication as soon as possible.

“One last thing,” Anderson whispered in her ear, even more quietly than before if that was possible. “You have a mole in your unit.”

“What? West LA Division?” Keri asked, stunned.

“In your Missing Persons Unit. I don’t know who it is. But someone is feeding information to the other side. So watch your back. More than usual, I mean.”

A new voice called out from the other side of the door.

“Mr. Anderson, this is Cal Brubaker. I’m the negotiator. May I come in?”

“Just one second, Cal,” Anderson called out. Then he leaned in even closer to Keri. “I have a feeling this is the last time we’ll talk, Keri. I want you to know that I think you’re a very impressive person. I hope you find Evie. I really do. Come in, Cal.”

As the door opened, he brought the toothbrush back up to her neck but didn’t actually touch the skin. A pot-bellied man in his mid to late forties with a mop of bushy gray hair and thin, circular-framed glasses that Keri suspected were just for show eased into the room.

He was wearing blue jeans and a rumpled lumberjack-style shirt, complete with the red and black checkerboard pattern. It was borderline laughable, like the “costumed” version of what a nonthreatening hostage negotiator might look like.

Anderson glanced at her and she could see that he felt the same way. He seemed to be fighting the urge to roll his eyes.



“Hi, Mr. Anderson. Can you tell me what’s bothering you this evening?” he said in a practiced, unaggressive tone.

“Actually, Cal,” Anderson replied mildly, “while we were waiting for you, Detective Locke talked some real sense into me. I realized I was just letting myself get a little overwhelmed by my situation and I reacted...poorly. I think I’m ready to surrender and accept the consequences of my choices.”

“Okay,” Cal said, surprised. “Well, this is the most painless negotiation of my life. Since you’re making things so easy on me, I have to ask: are you sure there’s nothing you want?”

“Maybe a few small things,” Anderson said. “But I don’t think you’ll take issue with any of them. I’d like to make sure Detective Locke gets taken straight to the infirmary. I accidentally poked her with the point of the toothbrush and I’m not sure how hygienic it is. She should get it cleaned up right away. And I’d appreciate it if you had Officer Kiley, the gentleman who brought me in here, cuff me and take me wherever I’m headed. I have a feeling some of those other guys might be a little rougher than needed. And maybe, once I drop the pointy object, you could ask that sniper to clear out. He’s making me a bit nervous. Reasonable requests?”

“All reasonable, Mr. Anderson,” Cal agreed. “I’ll do my best to accommodate them. Why don’t you start the ball rolling by dropping the toothbrush and letting the detective go?”

Anderson leaned in close so only Keri could hear him.

“Good luck,” he whispered almost inaudibly before dropping the toothbrush and lifting his arms high so that she could slip under the manacles. She slid away from him and slowly got to her feet with the aid of the overturned table. Cal reached out his hand to offer assistance but she didn’t take it.

Once she was standing upright and felt steady she turned to face Thomas “The Ghost” Anderson for what she was certain would be the last time.

“Thanks for not killing me,” she muttered, trying to sound sarcastic.

“You bet,” he said, smiling sweetly.

As she stepped toward the interrogation room door, it opened wide and five men in full SWAT gear burst in, tearing past her. She didn’t look back to see what they did as she stumbled out the door and into the hallway.

It looked like Cal Brubaker had been true to at least part of his word. The sniper, leaning against the far wall, with his gun at his side, had stood down. But Officer Kiley was nowhere in sight.

As she walked down the hall, escorted by a female officer who said she was taking her to the infirmary, Keri was pretty sure she could hear the sound of gun butts slamming into human bone. And while she didn’t hear any subsequent screaming, she did hear grunting, followed by deep, ceaseless moaning.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Keri hurried back to her car, hoping to leave the parking structure before anyone noticed she was gone. Her heart was beating in time with her shoes, pounding hard and fast on the concrete.

Her trip to the infirmary had been a gift from Anderson. He knew that after a hostage situation, she was sure to face hours of interrogation, hours she didn't have to spare. By demanding she be allowed to go to the infirmary, he was ensuring her a window in which she would have little supervision and possibly be able to leave before being cornered by a bunch of Downtown Division detectives.

That's exactly what she had done. After a nurse had cleaned up the small puncture wound on her neck and bandaged it, Keri had feigned a brief post-hostage-crisis panic attack and asked to use the bathroom. Since she wasn't an inmate, it was easy to slip out after that.

She made her way down in the elevator with the janitorial staff who got off at 9 p.m. Security Officer Beamon must have been on break because there was some new guy manning the lobby and he didn't give her a second look.

Once out of the building, she started across the street to the parking structure, still expecting some detective to come racing outside after her demanding to know why she'd been interrogating a prisoner when she was on suspension. But she heard nothing.

In fact, she was completely alone with her footsteps and heartbeat as all the off-duty janitors headed down the street to the bus stop and metro station. Apparently none of them drove to work.

It was only when she had reached the second floor of the stairwell that she heard the sound of other shoes below. They were loud and heavy and they seemed to come out of nowhere. She would have noticed them earlier if they'd been walking before. They couldn't have come from across the street. It was almost as if someone had been waiting for her arrival to start moving.

She headed toward her car, about halfway down the row on the left. The footsteps followed and it became clear now that it wasn't one set of shoes but two, both clearly belonging to men. Their gaits were thick and lumbering and she could hear one of them wheezing slightly.

It was possible that these men were detectives but she doubted it. They likely would have identified themselves already if they wanted to question her. And if they were cops with ill intent, they wouldn't be approaching her in the Twin Towers parking structure. There were cameras everywhere. If they were on Cave's payroll and meant her harm, they would have waited until she was off city property.

Keri slid her hand down involuntarily to her gun holster before remembering that she'd left her personal weapon in the trunk. She had wanted to avoid questions from security and decided that carrying her personal piece into a city jail might not accomplish that goal. For the same reason, her ankle pistol was in the same place. She was unarmed.

Feeling her pulse quicken, Keri ordered herself to remain calm, not to speed up her pace to alert these guys that she was on to them. They had to know. But maintaining the illusion might give her time. Same for looking over her shoulder – she refused to do it. That was certain to set them running after her.

Instead, she casually glanced in the windows of some of the shinier SUVs, hoping to get a sense of who she was dealing with. After a few cars, she was able to size them up. Two guys, both wearing suits: one big, the other huge with a belly that tumbled over his belt. It was hard to gauge age but the bigger one looked older as well. He was the wheezer. Neither were holding guns but the fat one had what looked to be a Taser and the younger one was clutching some kind of nightstick. Apparently someone wanted her taken alive.

Trying to appear nonchalant, she pulled her keys from her purse, sliding the pointy ends between her knuckles facing outward as she hit the button to unlock her car, now only twenty feet away. The two men were still about ten feet from her but there was no way she could get to her car, open the



door, get in, close the door, and lock it before they caught her, even at their size. She silently cursed herself for parking head-in.

The beep her car made seemed to startle the fat one and he stumbled a bit. After that, Keri knew that pretending she didn't notice them at this point would seem more suspicious than turning around, so she stopped abruptly and spun quickly, taking them by surprise.

"How's it going, guys?" she asked sweetly, as if discovering two hulking dudes right behind her was the most natural thing in the world. They both took another couple of steps before awkwardly pulling up five feet from her.

The younger guy appeared to be at a loss. The older guy started to open his mouth to speak. Keri's senses were tingling. For some reason, she noticed he had missed a patch of hair on the left side of his neck the last time he'd shaved. Almost without thinking, she pushed the alarm button on her car remote. Both men glanced involuntarily in that direction. That's when she moved.

She lunged forward quickly, swinging her right fist, the one with the exposed keys, at the left side of his face. Everything began to move in slow motion. He saw her too late and by the time he started to raise his left arm to try to block the punch, she had made contact.

Keri knew it was a direct hit because at least one of the keys went pretty deep before hitting resistance. The screaming started almost immediately as blood gushed from his eye. She didn't pause to admire her handiwork. Instead, she used her forward momentum to dive forward, slamming her right shoulder into his left knee even as he was already crumpling to the ground.

She heard a sickening pop and knew that his knee ligaments were being torn violently apart as he fell to the ground. She forced the sound from her brain as she tried to roll smoothly back up to a standing position.

Unfortunately, throwing herself against such a massive person had rattled her body from head to toe, re-aggravating the pain of the injuries she suffered only days earlier. Her chest felt like it had been whacked with a frying pan. She was pretty sure she'd slammed her injured knee on the concrete parking structure floor as she dived and the collision had left her right shoulder throbbing.

More immediately troubling than any of that was that smashing into the guy had slowed her movement enough for the younger, fitter guy to regain his senses. As Keri came out of her roll and tried to recover her balance, he was already moving toward her, his eyes blazing with an intense mix of fury and fear, the nightstick in his right hand starting its downward swing.

She realized that she wasn't going to be able to avoid it completely and turned her body so that the blow landed on her left side rather than her head. She felt the brutal smash against the ribs on her left torso just below the shoulder, followed by a stinging pain that radiated outward from the point of impact.

The air left her body as she collapsed to her knees in front of him. Her eyes had gone watery immediately upon being hit but she still managed to make out an ominous sight directly in front of her. The younger guy's feet had started to rise onto his toes, his heels leaving the ground.

It took less than a fraction of a second for Keri to process what that meant. He was rising up, lifting the nightstick over his head so that he would be able to bring its full force down on hers for a knockout blow. She saw his left foot start to come forward and knew that meant he was starting the downward motion.

Ignoring everything – her inability to breathe, the pain ricocheting from her chest to her shoulder to her ribs to her knee, her blurry vision – she dove forward, directly at him. She knew she didn't have much momentum pushing off from her knees but she hoped it was enough to prevent a direct hit on the top of her skull. As she did, she thrust her right hand, the one still clutching the keys, in the general direction of the guy's crotch, hoping to make any kind of contact.

It all happened at once. She felt the stick hit her upper back at the same time she heard the grunt. The whack stung her but only for a second as she realized the man had lost his grip on the stick



almost immediately after making contact. She heard it hit the concrete and roll off into the distance as she collapsed to the floor.

Glancing up, she saw the man doubled over, both hands clutching at his groin area. He was cursing loudly and without end. At least for the moment, he seemed oblivious to her. Keri looked over at the fat man, who was several feet away, still rolling on the ground, screaming in agony, both hands covering his left eye, seemingly unaware of his knee, which was bent in an inhuman direction.

Keri gulped in a deep breath of air, the first in what felt like forever, and forced herself into action.

*Get up and move. This is your chance. It may be your only one.*

Ignoring the pain she felt everywhere, she pushed herself up off the hard ground and half-ran, half-limped to her car. The younger guy glanced up from his crotch and made a token attempt to reach out and grab her. But she steered well clear of him and stumbled toward her car, got in, locked, it, started it, and pulled out without even looking in the rearview mirror. Part of her hoped the young guy was back there and that she'd hear a thud as she slammed into him.

She hit the gas and tore around the corner of the second floor and down to the first. As she approached the exit booth, she was amazed to see the younger guy stumbling down the stairs and shuffling in the direction of her car.

She could see the horror on the face of the booth attendant, who was looking back and forth between the hunched over man shambling in his direction and the tire-screaming car careening to the same spot. She almost felt bad for him. But it wasn't enough to prevent her from speeding through the exit, slamming into the wooden gate, and sending chunks of it flying off into the night.

\*

She spent the night at Ray's place. For one thing, it didn't seem safe to go back to hers. She didn't know who had come after her. But if they were willing to attack her in a camera-filled parking lot across from the jail, her apartment didn't seem like such a heavy lift. Besides, the way she felt, Keri wasn't in any condition to fend off additional attackers tonight.

Ray had drawn a bath for her. She'd called him on the way over so he knew the basics of the situation and mercifully wasn't peppering her with questions while she tried to regroup. As she lay in the water, letting its warmth ease her aching bones, he sat in a chair beside the tub, intermittently coaxing her to sip spoonfuls of broth.

Eventually, after drying off and putting on a pair of his pajamas, she felt well enough to do a postmortem. They sat on his couch in the living room, lit only by a half dozen candles. Neither of them commented on the fact that both their weapons rested on the coffee table in front of them.

"It just seems so brazen," Ray said, referring to the boldness of the parking structure attack, "and kind of desperate."

"I agree," Keri said. "Assuming these were Cave's flunkies, it makes me think he was really concerned that Anderson spilled all the beans in that interrogation room. But what I don't get is, if he was willing to go that far, why didn't he just have those guys shoot me in the back and get it over with? What was with the Taser and the nightstick?"

"Maybe he wanted to find out what you know, see who else knows it, before getting rid of you. Or maybe it's not Cave at all. You said Anderson told you there's a mole in the unit, right? Maybe someone else didn't want that information getting out."

"I guess that's possible," Kari admitted, "although he was so quiet when he said that part that I almost couldn't hear him. It's hard to imagine that even in a bugged room, anyone caught it. To be honest, I'm still having trouble even processing that bit of information."



“Yeah, me too,” Ray agreed. “So where do we go from here, Keri? I stayed in that conference room with Mags for another couple of hours but we didn’t learn anything really new. I’m not sure how to proceed.”

“I think I’m going to take Anderson’s advice,” she replied.

“What, you mean go see Cave?” he asked, incredulous. “Tomorrow’s Saturday. Are you just going to show up at the front door of his home?”

“I’m not sure what other choice I have.”

“What makes you think it’s going to do any good?” he asked.

“It may not. But Anderson’s right. Unless something breaks soon, I’m out of options, Ray. Evie is going to be murdered on closed circuit television in twenty-five hours! If talking to Jackson Cave – appealing to him for my daughter’s life – has even a chance of working, then I’m going to try it.”

Ray nodded, clasping her hand in his and wrapping his huge arms around her shoulder. He was gentle but she winced in pain nonetheless.

“Sorry,” he whispered quietly. “Of course – we’ll do whatever it takes. But I’m going with you.”

“Ray, I’m not holding out much hope that this will work. But he’s definitely not going to say anything if you’re standing there next to me. I have to do this alone.”

“But he might have tried to have you killed tonight.”

“Probably just maimed,” she said with a weak smile, trying to lower the temperature. “Besides, he won’t do that if I show up at his house. He won’t be expecting me. And it’d be too risky. What kind of alibi would he have if something happened to me while I was at his home? He might be delusional but he’s not stupid.”

“Fine,” Ray relented. “I won’t go with you to the house. But you better believe I’ll be close by.”

“Such a good boyfriend,” Keri said, snuggling up closer to him, despite the discomfort that moving caused. “I’ll bet you’ve got a black-and-white outside patrolling the neighborhood to make sure your little lady sleeps safe through the night.”

“How about two?” he said. “I’m not letting anything happen to you.”

“My knight in shining armor,” Keri said, yawning despite her best efforts. “I can still recall the days when I was a criminology professor at LMU and you would come and speak to my students.”

“Simpler times,” Ray said quietly.

“And I also remember the dark days after Evie was taken, when I started drinking scotch instead of water, when Stephen divorced me for sleeping with everything that moved, and the university dumped me for corrupting one my students.”

“We don’t have to hit every pothole on memory lane, Keri.”

“I’m just saying, who was it that pulled me out of that pit of self-loathing, dusted me off, and got me to apply to the police academy?”

“That would be me,” Ray whispered softly.

“That’s right,” Keri murmured in agreement. “See? Knight in shining armor.”

She rested her head on his chest, allowing herself to relax, to ease into the rhythm of his breathing as he slowly inhaled and exhaled. As her lids became heavy and she drifted off into sleep, one last coherent thought passed through her head: Ray hadn’t actually ordered two police cars to patrol the neighborhood. She’d checked out the window as she’d changed earlier and counted at least four units. And that was just what she could see.

She hoped it was enough.



## CHAPTER NINE

Keri gripped the steering wheel tightly, trying not to let the sharp curves of the mountain road make her more nervous than she already was. It was 7:45 a.m., just over sixteen hours until her daughter was supposed to be ritually sacrificed in front of dozens of wealthy pedophiles.

She was driving through the winding Malibu hills on a chilly but clear and sunny January Saturday morning to the home of Jackson Cave. She hoped to convince him to return her daughter safely to her. If she couldn't, this would be the last day of Evie Locke's life.

Keri and Ray had woken up early, just after 6 a.m. She hadn't been very hungry but Ray had insisted she force down some scrambled eggs and toast to go with her two cups of coffee. They were out of the apartment by seven.

Ray spoke briefly to one of the patrol officers outside, who said that none of the units had reported any suspicious activity during the night. He thanked them and sent them on their way. Then he and Keri got in their cars and drove separately to Malibu.

At that hour on a Saturday morning, the normally clogged Los Angeles roads were virtually empty. Within twenty minutes, they were on the Pacific Coast Highway, catching the last remnants of the sunrise over the Santa Monica Mountains.

By the time Keri was white-knuckling it up Tuna Canyon Road high in the Malibu hills, the splendor of the morning had given way to the grim reality of what she had to do. Her GPS indicated she was close to Cave's place so she pulled over. Ray, who was right behind her, eased up next to her.

"I think it's right up past the next bend," she said through the open car window. "Why don't you go ahead and set up a little further down the road. He's the type of guy who will have surveillance cameras all around so we don't want to be driving up there together."

"Okay," Ray agreed. "The cell service is really spotty up here so once you're done I'll just follow you back down the hill and we can debrief at that diner we passed at the PCH turnoff. Sound good?"

"Sounds like a plan. Wish me luck, partner."

"Good luck, Keri," he said sincerely. "I really hope this works."

She nodded, not really able to think of a meaningful reply at that moment. Ray gave her a little smile and drove on ahead. Keri waited another minute, then eased her foot onto the gas pedal and made the last curve before Cave's house.

When it came into view, she was surprised to find it looked modest compared to other homes in the area, at least from the street. The place had a bungalow appearance to it, almost like an elaborate version of something one might find at a South Seas resort.

Then again, she knew this wasn't even Cave's main Los Angeles residence. He had a mansion in the Hollywood Hills, which was much more conveniently located to his downtown high-rise office. But it was common knowledge that he liked to spend his weekends at his Malibu "retreat," and she'd checked around to make sure that was where he'd be this morning.

Keri pulled into the short gravel driveway just off the road and hopped out. She walked slowly up to the security gate, taking in the impressive privacy measures Cave had employed. The house might not be massive but the safety precautions were. The gate itself was wrought-iron and easily fifteen feet high, with curled spikes that pointed outward toward the street.

A twenty-foot, ivy-covered stone wall surrounded the property as far as the eye could see, with what appeared to be three additional feet of electrified fencing above that. She counted at least five cameras mounted on the walls and attached to high branches of several trees just inside the property.

Keri pushed the "call" button on the keypad next to the gate and waited.

"May I help you?" a middle-aged female voice asked.

"Yes, Keri Locke here to see Jackson Cave."

"Does Mr. Cave know you're coming, Ms. Locke?" the voice asked.



"I doubt it," Keri said. "But I suspect he'll still be willing to see me."

"Just a moment, please."

Keri stood by the gate for another thirty seconds, staring at the ocean in the distance, listening to the wind whistle through the leaves of the trees. She hadn't seen a single car pass by in the time she'd been there.

"Please come in," the voice finally said as the heavy gate slowly creaked open.

Keri drove her car just inside the gate, parked, and walked toward the front door of the bungalow. As she got closer, she saw that her initial impression of the place had been wrong.

What had appeared to be an unassuming one-story cottage on a cliff overlooking the Pacific was actually a multi-tiered home built into the cliff itself. From where she stood, she could see at least three floors and an indoor/outdoor pool, but it was possible there were even more below.

The front door opened and Jackson Cave stepped out to greet her. Apparently he was just finishing up a call as he was putting his phone in his pants pocket. It was not quite 8 a.m. on a Saturday morning and yet he looked immaculate. His thick black hair, with sunglasses nestled softly in it, was already slickly combed back like he was channeling Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*.

He wore tight, light blue jeans, a black sweater rolled up to his elbows to reveal his wiry, tanned forearms, and laceless black loafers. He smiled at her with his disturbingly white teeth, which made his over-bronzed face seem even more unnatural. His smile always came across as a sneer but that might just have been for her. Maybe he had a more genuine smile for other people. Somehow she doubted it.

"Detective Locke," he said, spreading his arms wide in welcome, "had I known you'd be stopping by, I would have prepared breakfast."

His voice dripped with all its usual smarm, but she noticed something she rarely saw in his piercing blue eyes – uncertainty. He didn't have any idea why she was here. She had him off-balance.

She was tempted to come back at him with a snarky reply. It was her default position. She was as good at getting under his skin as he was at infuriating her. But that wasn't the goal today. She needed to appeal to, if not his sympathy, at least his self-interest.

She needed to persuade him that if he was able to return Evie to her, she would leave him be. She needed to convince him that she was not his enemy; that she was not, as Anderson had put it, the "bad guy."

"Thank you, Mr. Cave," she said, trying to sound pleasant but not unctuous. "That's very kind. But I actually already ate – pounded back two coffees too."

"Ah, well come in then," he said, visibly surprised by her innocuous reply. He'd clearly been expecting something more biting. "You can tell me what brought you so far west so early on a weekend morning."

He held the door open for her and she stepped inside a vast living room that was as warm and welcoming as Cave was not. The Polynesian-themed design with bamboo-style paneling was charming, as was the wicker-inspired furniture and the open indoor fire pit. The entire room was windowed with views of the ocean and mountains in every direction.

"This place is gorgeous," she marveled despite herself.

"Thank you," he said. "I designed it in conjunction with a hotel magnate client from Fiji. He builds private estates in this style over there. This is a hut to him."

"If I were you, I'd live here all the time," Keri said, meaning it.

"Bit of a commute though," he said, unable to keep the sarcasm from dripping into his voice.

Keri bit back the urge to suggest he just have a helipad built. It would be counterproductive and it was possible he already had. Instead, she looked around the parts of the house that were visible. The kitchen was massive, with a center island larger than her entire apartment kitchen. Part of a dining room could be seen off in a corner with a table that looked to be made of marble.



She saw a hallway that must have led back to the bedroom wing and thought she heard voices coming from that direction. A Hispanic woman in her forties with her hair tied back in a bun opened a sliding door and stepped inside from the small deck.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” she asked, and Keri recognized the voice from the gate intercom.

“No thank you. I’m good.”

She smiled and then turned to Cave.



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