

PROLOGUE

Is my mommy dead?”

San Diego police detective Paula Chase looked at the two little girls in her rearview mirror. The question had come from eleven-year-old Chloe Morgan, who was in the backseat with her nine-year-old sister, Sloane.

Paula exchanged glances with her partner, Detective Todd Williams, who was in the passenger seat. They were in her car riding to a popular walking trail in Tecolote National Park.

“No, honey,” she said gently. “We haven’t seen anything to make us think that happened to your mother. What makes you ask that?”

Chloe shrugged. “That’s what Aria Watkins said in school today. She said our mommy was dead and no one wanted to tell us the truth. I got in a fight with her after she said that. That’s why I was in detention when you picked us up.”

Paula sighed. As if these poor girls hadn’t been through enough. Their mother had disappeared four days before, while exercising in her wheelchair on this park nature trail. Her Toyota Sienna van was found on an adjacent gravel

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parking lot, but so far there had been no trace of Alyssa Morgan.

Until an hour ago.

Maybe.

Williams turned to face the girls. “Don’t listen to Aria Watkins or anyone else about your mother. They don’t know sh—” He stopped himself before completing the expletive. Paula smiled. Williams was obviously as angry as she was.

He took another moment to compose himself. “Just know we have a lot of people working on this. We’re doing everything we can to bring your mom home, okay?”

Sloane looked around at the wooded park. “Why are we here? This is where Mommy likes to ride.”

“We know. We need you to look at something for us.”

This appeared to unsettle both girls. Paula had been afraid it might. “What is it?” Chloe asked.

Paula hesitated a long moment before answering. “It’s a wheelchair.”

Both girls gasped. Sloane began to cry.

“We don’t know if it’s your mom’s,” Paula added quickly. “It looks like it might be from the photos we have, but we can’t tell for sure. That’s what we need you for.”

While this information only caused Sloane to crumble further, Chloe’s face tightened into a determined expression. It was a strength Paula had observed in her first interviews with the girls. “Where is it?” Chloe asked.

“Up ahead. Some hikers found it in the middle of the trail.”

Chloe shook her head. “But we looked there. We looked everywhere around here.”

“We know. We looked, too. Our department has

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combed this trail from one end to the other. I guarantee you, that wheelchair was not there before today.”

“But why would it be here now?” Chloe said.

Williams shrugged. “I don’t know. Somebody might be playing a sick prank. Pictures of your mom in her wheelchair have been all over the news these past few days. That’s why we need you to look at it for us. Okay?”

Chloe grasped her sister’s hand tightly and nodded. “Yes.”

They parked in the same gravel lot where the woman’s van had been found, then trudged up the path that had consumed so much of their attention in the past few days. Soon they were greeted by the sight of several uniformed officers, a pair of forensics specialists, and several yards of yellow police tape.

One of the officers stepped aside to reveal an ultralight manual wheelchair.

The girls froze for a long moment, transfixed by the sight.

Paula turned toward them. “What do you think? Have you seen it before?”

Chloe and Sloane didn’t answer. They stepped forward as a hush fell over the group. The investigators backed away, clearing a path to the chair. Chloe and Sloane approached and knelt beside it, still mesmerized. Sloane reached out, but Paula gently pulled back her arm. “Please don’t touch it, honey. It’s evidence.”

Sloane looked up. “It’s my mom’s chair.”

“Are you sure?”

Chloe pointed to tiny lightning bolt decals on the left and right footrests. “Mom loves Harry Potter. She put these

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here herself. And these blue scratches on the handles came from our front railing at home. This chair is hers.”

Paula flinched and then nodded. “Okay.” She spoke to her partner. “Let’s make sure our teams go over this whole trail again, Williams. Maybe somebody saw this chair being moved out here today. If so, there’s a chance—”

Everyone was suddenly looking behind her. She turned to see a grim-faced uniformed officer climbing through a clump of brush and back onto the trail. “Detectives...You should take the girls away now.”

“No! Why?” Chloe screamed as she jumped to her feet. “Why do we have to leave her? I have to find my mom!”

Detective Williams put his hand gently on Chloe’s shoulder. “Let’s get back to the car and let these people do their work.”

Chloe broke free and bolted toward the brush. “Mom!”

The uniformed officers rushed toward the girl and tried to block her path, but Chloe bent over and dove into the brush. Williams grabbed her ankles at the last second and pulled her back. She was still screaming and crying as he carried her back toward her sister.

Paula looked at the faces of the officers coming back from the other side of the hill. Grimmer than grim. Shit.

She pushed through the brush and looked down the ridge.

There, hanging from an oak tree, was the body of Alyssa Morgan. Her hands and feet were bound by the same green-and-white nautical rope used to wrap around her neck and the highest tree branch.

Paula turned away. In her years on the force, she’d seen more than her fair share of monsters. But with this poor

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woman's little girls now sobbing less than a hundred yards away, she was sickened in a way most of the others couldn't touch.

She sat on a large rock at the ridge's edge. And rocked herself back and forth. "Jesus," she whispered. "Dear Lord Jesus."

CHAPTER

1

FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

Kendra Michaels looked at the sea of faces in front of her. She was in the general-purpose room at the Pacific Villas Senior Living Community, where she'd set up her synth keyboard in front of a dozen residents afflicted with profound dementia. She'd greeted each of them as they were brought in, but the audience members were not even remotely responsive to her or, as far as she could tell, any outside stimuli.

“You want to hear some music?” She smiled at the group.
No reaction.

She smiled again. “I’ll take that as a yes.” She began playing Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons’ “December, 1963” on her keyboard. Aside from rhythmic swaying from a few staff members, there was still zero reaction from the crowd.

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Kendra wasn't surprised. She was a music therapist with a successful practice in San Diego, and she'd seen the same response—or lack thereof—literally thousands of times. Much of her academic research focused on the ability of music to reach and help certain patients form connections with the outside world. She'd had greater success with younger subjects, particularly autistic children, but she had recently begun a promising study involving elderly patients in advanced stages of dementia. Unfortunately, none of the seniors in front of her were exhibiting any positive signs of—

Wait.

In the second row, a woman in a floral sweater began to bob her head in time with the music.

Don't get too excited, Kendra told herself. The woman might just be drifting off to sleep.

No. She was listening.

And feeling it.

The woman's eyes opened wider.

And was that...a smile?

Kendra smiled back and raised the keyboard's volume. Staff members smiled and gestured toward the woman, obviously surprised and pleased at her engagement.

But her attention faded after a couple of minutes, and despite Kendra's best efforts to re-engage with her, the woman never responded to the twenty minutes of music that followed.

Kendra concluded her mini-concert, and the staff began the process of moving the residents away from the area.

Bill Dillingham stepped toward her. He was in his late eighties, and he looked elegant with his stylish slacks,

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well-coiffed hair, and neatly trimmed silver mustache. “Tough crowd.”

She hugged him. “Good to see you, Bill. Just so you know, I wasn’t here to entertain them.”

He chuckled. “That was painfully obvious.”

“You know why I’m here. And I appreciate your helping arrange it.”

“It was my pleasure, Kendra. You seemed to be reaching Sophie for a minute there.”

“The woman in the floral-print sweater? You know her?”

“No, I can’t say I do. As you can imagine, our dementia residents keep pretty much to themselves. They live in a different building from the rest of us. But an orderly told me that he hasn’t seen her so responsive to anything since she’s been here.”

Kendra unplugged her keyboard and wrapped the power cord around a spindle. “That’s nice to hear. I’d like to do some follow-ups with her. I’ll speak with her family about it.”

“I’m sure they’ll be glad to hear from you.”

“Hard to say. If a patient is here in that wing, the family has probably already given up hope that they can improve. With good reason, most likely. But even if I can’t help them, they can help add to the body of research that my colleagues and I can use to help others. That may not be good enough reason for them. I spend a lot of my time with this, believe me.”

“I believe you.”

Kendra smiled as Bill greeted several others as they walked past. He was obviously one of the institution’s most

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popular residents, which didn't surprise her a bit. He was a gregarious, charming man who liked to tell stories from his colorful career as a sketch artist with the San Diego Police Department. But he was also a wonderful listener, a major reason he'd been so good at his job.

She slid her keyboard into its long vinyl sleeve. "How about I take you to lunch, Bill? I know a good restaurant near here."

"Sounds fun. But there's something I need to talk to you about first."

"Sure."

"You're not gonna like it."

She put down her keyboard and turned toward him. "Well, that sounds ominous."

"It isn't. Not really. I just know how you feel about investigative work."

"Oh, no."

"Sorry, kid. You have a gift, so you shouldn't be surprised when people ask you to use it."

"A gift? Sometimes it feels more like a curse."

"You don't mean that."

"Don't I?"

He nodded. "I know you better than that, my dear. Think of all the people you've helped. And I'm not talking about the police departments and the FBI. I'm talking about the lives you've saved."

A voice came from behind Kendra. "He's right, isn't he?"

She turned to see a woman in her mid-sixties stepping toward her. She extended her hand to Kendra. "Detective Paula Chase, San Diego PD, retired. It's a pleasure to meet you, Kendra."

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Kendra shook hands with her and turned back to Bill. “You didn’t tell me I was walking into an ambush here.”

“Detective Chase is an old friend of mine,” Bill said. “There’s something I thought maybe you could help her with.”

Paula smiled at Kendra. “And even if you can’t, I knew I’d enjoy meeting someone I’ve heard so much about.”

“From Bill?”

“From Bill, from my other former colleagues, from everyone. How could I not? It’s an impressive story. You were blind for the first twenty years of your life, and after you gained your sight thanks to a surgical procedure, you still had all those other senses you’d improved during your years as a sightless person.”

“You do know my story,” Kendra said. “But I honestly don’t think my senses are better than anyone else’s. Like all blind people, I just learned to pay attention to what my senses of hearing, smell, touch, and taste told me about the world. It’s not something I’d ever forget how to do just because I’m fortunate enough to see now.”

Paula nodded. “But from what I understand, you’re now also extremely observant about things you see.”

“I guess that’s because sight is such a wonderful gift to me. I don’t take anything I see for granted, so I’m constantly absorbing and processing whatever passes in front of me.” Kendra shrugged. “Again, I think it’s a natural response.”

“Interesting,” Paula said. “I suppose all this is what makes you such an amazing investigator. I know the FBI has tried to get you to join their ranks, and I’m sure the SDPD would love to have you on their payroll.”

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Kendra laughed. “Depends on who you talk to. A few people there would be happy never to see me again.”

“Only the insecure ones,” Bill said. “There’s a reason why Kendra is brought in to consult on the tough cases. Which is why I wanted you two to speak.”

Kendra turned back toward Paula. “But you said you were retired. Are you a private investigator now?”

Paula rolled her eyes. “Lord, no. When I say I’m retired, I’m most definitely retired.”

“So what’s this about?”

Paula took a deep breath before launching into it. “You probably would have been a teenager at the time...But have you heard of the Bayside Strangler?”

Kendra thought for a moment. “Sounds familiar, but I honestly don’t have any real memory of that.”

“You’re not alone. It was fifteen years ago, and most people have forgotten about it. The Bayside Strangler was a serial killer who murdered five women in a four-month period, all just south of downtown San Diego. Not all of them were near the bay, but the name stuck.”

“The case was unsolved?”

“Yes, unfortunately. It was my case, and I eventually led the task force.”

“Ah. Needless to say, you’ve never forgotten.”

The years of pain were suddenly etched on Paula’s face. “No, never. Not for a single day.”

“I can imagine.”

“Anyway, the FBI had just started to get involved when the murders stopped. The profilers thought the killer might have moved, gone to prison for something else, or died himself. It’s rare that a serial killer can just stop and lead a normal

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life for the rest of his days. We continued to investigate, of course, but the case just went cold. The task force was disbanded, and we moved on to other things.”

Kendra could see that it still pained Paula to talk about the case. “Most investigators I’ve known have at least one unsolved case that haunts them years later.”

“It’s true. This was definitely one of mine. But the thing that has really stayed with me all these years is the daughters of the second victim, Alyssa Morgan. I was with them when their mother’s body was found. Alyssa was a single parent, and she’d done a wonderful job with those girls. They were nine and eleven when their mother was taken from them. They were smart and beautiful. Their aunt raised them as her own, but sometime during their high school years, they started asking more and more questions about what happened to their mother. I got calls from them almost weekly, and I tried explaining to them there was no place for us to go in the case. Eventually I realized they were investigating the case themselves. It consumed them, especially the older girl, Chloe. They each graduated from college, but over the years, a lot of their free time has been spent working on the case. It got worse in the past month or two. They were obsessed. According to their aunt, they were convinced they were onto something, but they wouldn’t say what. Then, a week ago yesterday, both girls disappeared.”

Kendra raised her eyebrows. “By disappeared, you mean...”

“It’s as if someone snapped their fingers and made them vanish. Their cars, purses, wallets, and phones were at their homes. There’s absolutely no sign of anything wrong at either of their places. They’re just gone.”

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Kendra stepped closer to her. “The police have talked to family members and friends?”

“Of course. They didn’t talk about going on a trip or doing anything out of the usual. They both had jobs and co-workers who were expecting to see them. Their financials were untouched, no credit card or banking activity whatsoever.”

“That’s not encouraging.”

“No, it isn’t. And I guess I’m feeling some responsibility. All those years I told those women there was nothing that can be done, that all the leads had been exhausted...They felt they had no choice but to take matters into their own hands, and now they’ve gone missing.”

Bill put his hand on Paula’s arm. “You did what you could. You can’t blame yourself.” He turned back to Kendra. “I told Paula I’d make an introduction and let her tell you her story. No obligation, of course. But it’s a story I thought you should hear.”

Kendra nodded. “I’m flattered that you think I can help, but the police have far more resources for a case like this. I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

Paula turned around and pointed to three stacked shipping cartons, all secured to a dolly with bungee cords. “Well, you could start with those. It’s over ten years’ worth of photographs, newspaper clippings, interview transcripts, and everything else Chloe and Sloane Morgan have gathered as they investigated their mother’s murder.”

Kendra walked around the stacked cartons. “Shouldn’t the police have this?”

“Their aunt tried to give it to the detectives investigating her nieces’ disappearance, but they weren’t interested. The

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police aren't convinced that Chloe and Sloane were closer to finding the killer than any of the official investigations have been."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. But those women have been relentless in uncovering everything they could about the Bayside Strangler cases. There are things here I never knew."

Kendra unfastened one of the bungee cords and lifted the lid on the top box. The items were neatly labeled and organized, with dates and supporting information handwritten on the file folders.

"Their aunt gave you these?"

"Yes. Chloe kept them in her home office. I spent last weekend going through every single page and photo, believe it or not."

"I can't even imagine. What did you find out?"

"A lot of possibilities and several dead ends. But nothing that obviously points the way to what may have happened to them, I'm afraid."

"What do you think?" Bill said to Kendra.

Kendra lowered the lid and refastened the bungee cord. As much as Bill was trying not to pressure her, he clearly wanted her to look into the case. He'd cheerfully helped on several of her investigations; what kind of friend would she be if she didn't return the favor the one time he asked something in return?

Paula smiled. "I know it's a lot to ask. And frankly, I have no idea if Chloe and Sloane's disappearance has anything to do with those fifteen-year-old murders that they were investigating. They've already been through a lot in their lives, and I'm concerned for them. I wouldn't be here otherwise."

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“I know. Chloe and Sloane are lucky to have you in their corner.”

“I’d love to have you there, too. But whether you think you can help or not, I was wondering if you could do something for me.”

“What?”

“Tell me about myself.”

“I’m sure Bill told you everything about me you would ever want to know.”

“No. I want you to tell me about myself.”

“I’m not sure I understand. We just met.”

“That’s never stopped you before, from what I gather. If what I’ve heard about you is true, you can tell a lot about a person or place from just one glance. I’d love to see it for myself.”

Kendra looked over to Bill. He was raising his eyebrows in excitement. As much as she tired of performing her parlor tricks, she didn’t want to disappoint him.

She turned back to Paula. “It’s really not that big of a deal.”

“That’s not what I hear.”

Kendra shrugged. “You’re a dog lover. It wasn’t that long ago that you had one large dog, one small. Sad to say, you’ve recently lost your big dog. I’m sorry. I know you give your pets a lot of love and attention, and I’m sure it still must be hard for you.”

Paula looked as if she’d had the wind knocked out of her. “How in the hell...?”

“You have allergies, but you’re more susceptible to mold than pollen. And there’s a good chance you’re a diabetic. If

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you haven't been diagnosed or gone under a doctor's care for it, it might be a good idea to get checked out."

"Pre-diabetic," she said, sounding dazed. "I'm trying hard not to go all the way there." Paula looked at Bill, who was thoroughly enjoying the show. She turned back toward Kendra.

"Good. You're taking care of yourself. I guess your visit to Massage Envy this morning is part of that."

Paula smiled. "Deep tissue. I go every other week. Sometimes more if I'm feeling extravagant."

"Nice. I've gone there for facials a couple times."

Paula shook her head. "Wow. Anything else?"

"Well, speaking of extravagant, you've stayed in a Waldorf Astoria Hotel recently. Maybe in New York?"

"Park City. I went on a ski trip with some college friends."

"Fantastic. I've never been there. I hear it's nice."

Paula held her head in her hands. "This is unbelievable."

"Not at all. I just learned to pay attention at a time of my life when I had to."

Paula crossed her arms in front of her. "How could you possibly know I recently stayed at a Waldorf Astoria?"

"Your hair. You brought home some hotel shampoos and you happened to use one today. I'm smelling their house brand, Salvatore Ferragamo. The Waldorf Astoria version is the only one that smells this way."

"I never would have guessed."

"Then you wouldn't have guessed that Massage Envy uses Obagi Professional-C Serum. It's available other places, but almost every time I've smelled it, the wearer has just been there for a massage."

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“Huh. Allergies? I don’t have itchy eyes or anything that shows.”

“No, you usually see that in the springtime with grass and ragweed pollen. This time of year, when we get almost all our rain, it’s more about mold and getting a post-nasal drip. I thought I could hear a slight rattle in your breathing a couple of times.”

“A slight rattle? I could’ve had a cold.”

“You could have if I hadn’t seen a distinctive outline in your front right pant pocket. It looks like a wide squashed tube with a straight bottom. That happens to be the exact shape and size of the most popular allergy medication in the country. It’s Flonase, right?”

Paula reached into her pocket and pulled out the green-and-white bottle. “Yes, it is. I didn’t want to meet you with snot running down my face.”

“I think we both can be grateful for that.”

Paula pocketed the container. “But I’m not carrying diabetes medicine.”

“No. That brings us back to smell.”

Paula’s eyes widened. “You can smell a diabetic?”

“You have a slight fruity smell on your breath.”

Paula covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh, God.”

“It’s not a bad odor. Seriously. It’s sweet smelling, a product of diabetic ketoacidosis. That odor is an early sign of diabetes. It’s good you caught it so early, before it’s taken hold.”

She put her hand down. “Good to know. But I think I’ll start carrying travel-size mouthwash, just in case.” She looked down at her clothes and shoes. “Still, there’s no way in hell you could know about my dogs. Bill didn’t even know about them. There’s nothing on me that could tell you that.”

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“Sure there is.”

“What?”

“Look at the backs of your hands.”

Paula raised her hands.

“Like a lot of dog owners, most of the sun you get each day comes when you walk them. You obviously use retractable leashes with handles you slip your fingers through. I say ‘obviously’ because those handles have left untanned stripes across the backs of your fingers. You see those on a lot of dog walkers, especially if they don’t wear sunscreen on their hands. The stripe on your right hand is larger than the one on your left, clearly because that leash handle was a bigger size for a bigger dog.”

“You’re right.” Paula suddenly sounded sad. “I always held Bruno with my right hand. But how did you know he—?”

“That right-hand stripe isn’t as distinct as the other. It’s now red. There’s a sunburn there now because you’ve recently been walking your other dog, but no longer carrying a leash in your right hand.”

“Yes.” She managed a smile. “You’re absolutely right. Bruno died just last month. He was a good boy.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, this just shows that the stories about you are true. Will you consider helping me find Chloe and Sloane?”

Kendra thought for a moment. Bill was now trying his damndest to look like he didn’t care either way, but she knew better. “I’m not sure what help I can be, but of course I’ll look into it.”

Paula smiled. “Thank you, Dr. Michaels. That’s all I can ask. Where would you like to begin?”

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“You said it yourself.” Kendra motioned toward the stacked boxes. “With those. I’ll see where they take me and get back to you.”



“Sir, can I help you?”

Rod Wallace was standing on the far side of the parking lot, watching Kendra Michaels load the three file boxes into her Toyota 4Runner. He’d considered snapping her neck and seizing them when a muscular man in a red Pacific Villas polo shirt approached from seemingly nowhere. He was obviously an employee.

“Can I help you?” the employee repeated.

“Uh, yeah.” Wallace glanced around. “I’m thinking of bringing my dad here. He’s not crazy about the idea of moving to a retirement community, but this place looks...nice.”

“It is. But you’ll need to go to the welcome desk and get a visitor’s badge. Did you make an appointment, sir?”

“No. Is that really necessary?”

“I’m afraid so. But if you’d like to follow me, I can take you to someone who can set up a time for a tour. Maybe your dad can come with you.”

Wallace looked out of the corner of his eye and saw that Kendra Michaels had climbed into her car and started it. Dammit. Now he wanted to snap this employee’s thick neck.

Patience.

He couldn’t risk tipping his hand now. He had come too far.

“Thanks,” he told the man. “But I’d better check my schedule. I’ll call this afternoon. Thanks.”

Wallace turned and walked away.

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Patience.

He'd been following that retired detective, but when she handed off that stack of files, he now had *two* people to be concerned about. Dammit. Either of those women could now be a danger to him.

He would have his turn with the Michaels woman yet.

All things came to people who were willing to wait...