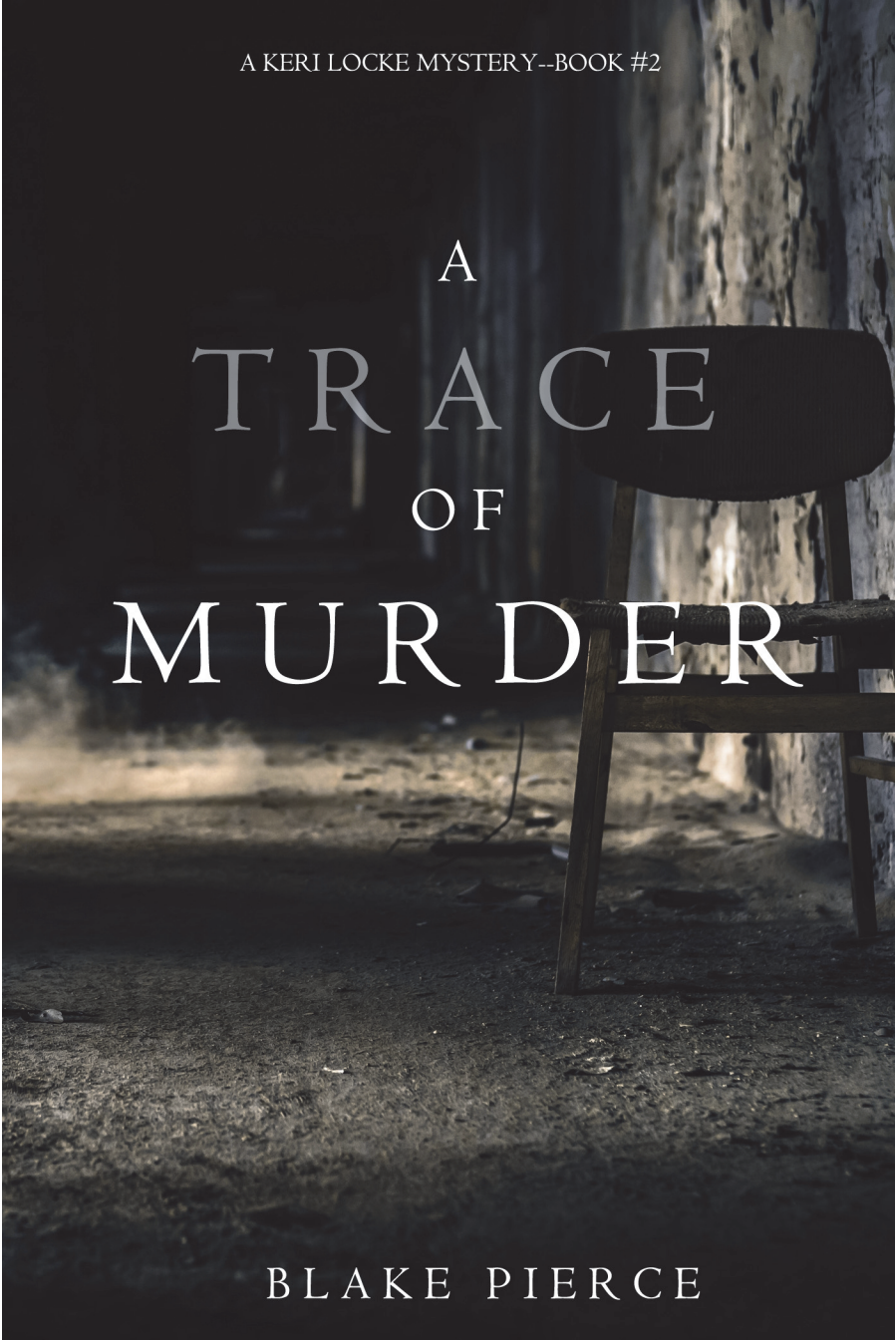




A KERI LOCKE MYSTERY--BOOK #2

A
TRACE
OF
MURDER

BLAKE PIERCE

A TRACE OF MURDER

(A KERI LOCKE MYSTERY—BOOK 2)

BLAKE PIERCE

CHAPTER ONE

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

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

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

“Mommy!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

against her blouse at the waist and riding above her work slacks, she doubted she was doing much of that.

Because of the time off she'd been given to recover, her brown eyes weren't as bloodshot with exhaustion as usual and her dirty blonde hair, tied back in a simple ponytail, had actually been shampooed. But the fractured orbital bone had left the side of her face with a big yellow bruise which was only now starting to fade, and the sling didn't add to her appeal. This probably wasn't the ideal time to go on any first dates.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As she sat there reviewing files, Keri's thoughts returned to something that had been eating at her since she'd resumed work. When Pachanga kidnapped Senator Stafford Penn's

daughter, Ashley, he'd done it at the behest of the senator's brother, Payton. The two men had been in communication on the dark web for months.

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

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

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

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

"What's your name again?" Keri asked, uncertain if she should already know.

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

"So I shouldn't feel too bad for not knowing who you are?"

"No, Detective Locke," Castillo said firmly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jamie Castillo hesitated, as if wondering whether she was making the right decision. Keri could see the wheels turning in the younger woman's head. She watched her calculating the

right move and couldn't help but like her. It felt like she was watching a younger version of herself.

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

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

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

"Can I hear it?" she asked more calmly than she'd thought possible.

"I've already forwarded it to you," Castillo said.

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

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

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

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

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

Castillo was watching her expectantly.

"You think it's legit?" she asked.

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

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

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

But I'm about to find out.

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

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

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

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

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