

passing the  
*Torch*

# l.l. sanders

*She carried the flame, but preferred the ashes.*

LLS BOOKS

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Queen Creek, Arizona  
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Cover art by Karri Klawiter  
Editing by Red Road Editing / Kristina Circelli ([www.circelli.info](http://www.circelli.info))  
Formatting by [Inkstain Interior Book Designing](#)

Passing the Torch/ L.L. Sanders. -- 1st edition.

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# chapter *One*

## PRESENT DAY...

Good girls do anything for their fathers, including rob, cheat, and kill, and I always considered myself a good girl. The time I first came to that conclusion will stay with me forever. Years later, here I am, still fulfilling my daughterly duty.

After wiping the sweat from my palm onto my jeans, I press the bulbous tip of the match against the strike strip on the side of the small carton. My hands shake worse than Grandma's had when trying to slice her ninety-first birthday cake just a few hours ago, but I manage to run the match across it anyway. The flame comes alive at my fingertips, dancing merrily at the prospect of latching on to something and disintegrating it into smoldering embers. Although the light breeze causes the flame to flicker at the end of the matchstick, I'm aware of the control I have over it. I watch the glow change shape through a veil of tears and with that the decision was absolute.

The flame will get to perform its destructive duty.

I flick the match toward the pile of wooden planks that used to be the porch. Instantly the fire catches the fumes of the pooled liquid and expands so quickly a wall of gasoline-scented hot air rushes me before the blaze travels deeper into the house. I back away to a safe distance as the straw-like grass crunches beneath my feet. Nearing the homemade fence, which is nothing more than a double row of chicken wire, I hear the screams from the distance, cries of agony that meld with my memory like two spreading pools of melted wax. I can't stop the waterworks. I don't even make an attempt.

Like my tears, I am unable to prevent the shudder that trickles down my spine as paralysis seizes me.

By the time the roof caves in, windows shatter, and a plume of black smoke merges with the dark gray clouds in the evening sky, the distant wailing of police sirens and the victims' screams mingle with my own howling cries. I bring my palms to my ears to silence them all.

Even so, the noise is all I hear.

# chapter Two

## AGE EIGHT...

Staring at the empty spaces in the fifty-piece jigsaw puzzle set, I wondered why Daddy hadn't finished putting it together. I couldn't tear my eyes away from where it was displayed on the coffee table, the exact same way it'd been a couple months ago when we had visited the cottage. The dull colors and specific shapes of Mona Lisa showed clearly in the half-finished image. I studied it, fitting the pieces together in my mind. I knew not to touch it—one warning from Daddy was all it took—even though the urge nearly overcame me a few times.

At moments like those, I would preoccupy myself by enjoying the outdoors. After all, the main reason for my and Daddy's visits to the cottage had always been to escape city life, to develop our bond, and enjoy each other's company.

I stood from the caramel-colored love seat with torn and tattered edges, and strolled outside to the front porch. The wooden planks creaked beneath my weight, which was normal during summer days since the wood shrank, causing the boards to wobble on their fastens. What wasn't normal was Daddy kneeling in the straw-colored grass near the chicken wire fence, staring at the ground.

"Daddy?"

"Come here, Mesa." He swiped his hand through his hair, removing some of it from his chiseled jawline. "You gotta see this. It's a Gila monster."

Such a thing would have frightened any other eight-year-old girl. Not me. I hurried down the three little steps and toward him.

He looked at me with deep gray eyes, a look that often bore into my soul. That stare told me I might not like what I was about to see but it was necessary I see it.

The bloated lizard squirmed from side to side, but didn't scamper away like I imagined it would as I neared it. Its short and plump tale slithered back and forth over the fine dirt, creating ripples in the tiny granules.

"See, Daddy?" I pointed to its pudgy tail, the only part of the lizard that moved. "That's where they store most of their fat."

"That's right." His smile was special as it told a thousand stories, and one—my favorite—was how proud of me he was. "You remember that from your science project?"

"Yep." I rocked on my toes, excited by the memory.

"What else do you remember about them?" His dark, wavy chestnut-colored hair blew in the breeze, catching my attention. His rich and warm voice carried effortlessly through the draft, comforting me with a blanket of familiarity as my ears filtered his words.

"That their pink and black color helps them to hide in the desert."

"Helps them to camouflage, right?" His thumb brushed my cheek so gently it tickled the super-fine hairs on my skin like a spider's web would.

"Mm-hm." I nodded, feeling the weight of my ponytail as it swung.

"What else?"

"That, uh—that its skin is thick and bumpy." I stretched out my hand to feel the tiny bumps of its reptilian hide on my fingertips, but before my fingers got near Dad stopped me by pushing my hand away.

"No, honey. It might try to defend itself and bite anything that gets close to it. Remember what you learned about Gila monster bites?"

"That they're poisonous?"

His expression clouded my mind with images of Mom. Did she ever hold concern in her eyes for me the way Dad did?

"Poisonous." He nodded. "That's right."

I mimicked his expression. "Why are *you* so close to it, then?"

"Because since they rarely come out in the open it's hard to see them in their original habitat. This one only showed itself because it's sick," he said, answering my question before I even had a chance to finish the thought. "It's dying."

I wasn't one hundred percent sure how being sick had anything to do with dying, and what dying actually meant. I knew Grandpa died a while ago. Daddy would often say the big C took him. I used to wonder if the big C took my mom away too. He had assured me that it hadn't, but that she just wasn't ready to be a mom.

It would have been less painful and damaging if the big C had taken her.

One thing I knew for sure, being sick wasn't pleasant. Often, being sick meant being in pain, and pain was one thing I understood.

"When it dies will it feel pain?"

"No. Once it dies, it will never feel pain again." Dad tugged the hairs at the tip of my ponytail, his affectionate way of admiring my innocence while comforting me. "Once it dies we'll bury it."

"In the ground? Like lost treasure?"



"Exactly." He nodded toward the back of the cottage where the backyard met the tree line of old canyon hackberry trees and shrubbery. "We'll bury it back there, where it will help grow green grass instead of the yellow weeds."

"Why?"

"Because that's what you do when something dies. It's a form of respect."

"Respect?"

"That's right. The body returns to the ground and nourishes the earth. It's like we're feeding Mother Nature and in return Mother Nature feeds us. A cycle. By doing that we're showing Mother Nature respect."

# chapter *Three*

## PRESENT DAY...

The wailing sirens grow louder as they approach, making the singed hairs on my arms stand up as anticipation prickles beneath my skin. Strands of my hair blow against my face, tickling my nose and briefly reminding me of the life I was willingly leaving behind. No more fussing over which shampoos and leave-in conditioners were best suited for my hair, no more being embarrassed when the manicurist added the dull-pink nail polish to my nails that unintentionally blends with my natural skin tone, no more ordinary life for an ordinary girl.

But have I ever been an ordinary girl with an ordinary life, or was my urge to be normal greater than my reality? That question was too obvious to answer, and I would've chuckled at the ridiculousness of it at any other time.

Now as I walk farther from the cottage along the narrow trail—worn and barren from the years of traffic—I'm hit with a devastating realization . . . I can still hear the agonizing screams.

No matter how much or how long I try to shut out the noise, I fail. Nothing helps, not a thought, a memory, not even the smell of burnt wood in the air can distract me from the noise. Each tactic eventually leads me right back to the screams.

I grab the wire of the makeshift fence with one hand, the fence my dad had built to separate our property from the rest of the desert. It didn't matter much. Our cottage was the only structure for many miles, built by Grandpa decades ago near a remote lake. Even so, erecting a fence and creating a yard may have been Dad's attempt at being normal too.

I look down at my hand and I know my fate is sealed when I spot the dirt caked under my once pink fingernails and the random spots of dark-brown blood on my knuckles that begin to coagulate and form scabs. Even the soil that is trapped within the tiny cotton fibers at the knees of my jeans confirms my doom.

By the time I thoroughly examine each fingernail in an absentminded attempt to mentally escape the flames, the smokes, and the occasional crackle and pop of wood, the fire truck arrives, escorted by a single police car. Each vehicle kicks up a thick trail of dust that seems to stretch out for miles.

It takes a few seconds to realize that I haven't been successful at shutting out the noise, but that the sirens have stopped even though the red and blue lights continue to flash. The handsome man steps out the police car; his slender frame and muscular build remind me of Dad.

I can't stop the tears. They flood my eyes and spill over the lids like an overflowing dam.

"Ma'am?" The officer steps forward, his voice deep and stern. "You alright, ma'am? Are you alone? Are you okay?"

I nod, hunched at the spine and unable to hold in my sobs.

*What have I done?*

There is no taking it back now. Not even fire can abolish the horror and pain I inflicted.

The officer examines me with his eyes as the firefighters prepare their hoses. "Need me to dispatch an ambulance?"

"No." I peer through the blurry stream of tears. "I—I'm okay." More words attempt to come out but get trapped in my aching throat, and for a split second I wonder if I'm really ready to come clean. That second passes all too quickly and the words spew out. "I've done something horrible."

"You set this fire, ma'am?" the officer asks, throwing his thumb back toward the crackles and pops behind him, the sounds my body reacts to with shudders and sudden jolts.

He needs to know. Someone needs to know. It is time. "I'm—" I sigh, a mixture of defeat and relief. "I'm a murderer."

\*\*\*END OF EXCERPT\*\*\*

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