

CHAPTER ONE

the disappearance

Santa Barbara, California

Five weeks is too long to be apart from the one you love. Two more hours and I'll be home. I can't wait to touch my wife's silky skin and kiss her soft lips. I'm sure she's looking forward to salacious sex tonight as much as I am.

Maybe this unplanned separation is good for us. Chenille doesn't argue on the phone like she does in person. I guess I should have agreed for her to visit me in New Mexico. She was too busy with cases anyway.

Jake, my coworker, pulls into my driveway at 8:35 p.m., only thirty minutes late. I jump out, grabbing my duffel and laptop bags from the back seat.

"Thanks for driving, Jake."

"No problem, Daniel. We rocked that job. Bonus coming our way."

"Yeah, we deserve it. See you later."

I'm an environmental engineer for a solar installation company that specializes in medium-scale panel fields throughout the Southwest. Promoting clean energy is a cause I believe in.

We just wrapped up a project in Las Cruces, New Mexico. It was brutal, with twelve-hour days in the scorching heat. Completion was delayed for a myriad of technical reasons. I'm so glad to be back home in Santa Barbara.

I like my job, even though I have to work out of town often. By the time Chenille and I have kids, I'll have seniority. Then I can focus on planning and engineering, which will keep me close to home.

Through the vertical window by the front door of our Spanish bungalow, I see dim light streaming from the master bedroom. As I fish into my pocket for the key, my left hand instinctively twists the knob. It's unlocked. How many times have I told her to lock the door when she's home alone?

"Chenille! I'm home." I toss my bags onto the chair. "Oh, butterfly? Chenille?"

Silence. Her Gucci purse is hanging on the hall tree in the foyer, where she always leaves it when she comes home from the office. The living room is tidy, with the accent pillows arranged on our leather couch just the way she likes them.

I enter the kitchen, with the only sound being the echoing of my work boots as they plod on the tile floors. The countertops and stainless steel sink are spotless. I peek into the garage, finding her BMW parked next to my Ford Edge, like children tucked in for the night. This is weird. Where is she?

The lamps are on in our bedroom, our king-sized bed is made, and the dresser and end tables are dustless. Her black pumps are strewn on the floor in front of her side of the closet, as though she kicked them off in a hurry.

Raffling through her clothes, I don't notice anything missing. Her red canvas suitcase is tucked in the corner, and her jeans are stacked on the upper shelf. She has too many clothes. Wait, I don't see her pink sweatshirt hanging with her cardigan sweaters. That's it, she must be jogging.

I touch her number on my phone. Amy Winehouse's 'Back to Black' emanates from the foyer. Her cell is in her purse? Bizarre, she always has it with her when she's running. She's fanatical about it. This isn't making sense.

Examining her phone, I see the last call was from me at 12:09 p.m.. Preceding calls show no names. Probably clients.

I scroll through the text messages. Nothing unusual, most are from me. One to her coworker, Ryan King, is random. About a month ago at 5:42 p.m. she wrote: are you ready? No response. Ready for what? They must have had to work late.

Maybe our next-door neighbor, Lisa, saw Chenille leave the house. After two rings of the bell, she opens the door.

"Hello, Daniel." She greets me with a broad smile and a toddler on her hip. "You're back from your business trip!" Dressed in black capris, and a leopard print

*tunic, with her hair in a high ponytail, she epitomizes my vision of a soccer mom.
“Come on in.”*

“That’s okay. I’m just looking for Chenille. Is she here?”

“Umm...no.” Her brows furrow.

“Have you seen her today?”

“No, I haven’t.” She taps her index finger on her lower lip, as if the motion has the power to jog her memory. “I saw her yesterday, about six in the evening. She was watering the flowers by the front porch. We waved, no time to talk. I had just picked up the kids from their music lessons and had to get dinner ready.”

“I don’t get it. I’m only half an hour late. I thought she’d be waiting for me. The door was unlocked, and she left her purse and phone at home.”

“Maybe she’s out jogging?”

“That’s what I think too. Thanks, Lisa. Sorry to bother you.”

I take a long hot shower, hoping my wife will sneak in and seduce me while I’m soaping up. No such luck.

Grabbing a beer, I plant myself on the loveseat, and turn on mindless TV, trying to relax. Two episodes of the ‘Walking Dead’ elapse. This show does not evoke relaxation. Damn it, where is Chenille?

My father-in-law might know. It’s getting late, I hope he’s still up.

“She’s not here,” John states. “She dropped by about a week ago. It was a pleasant surprise. We watched football and ate pizza. She told me you were in New Mexico. She was disappointed the job kept getting extended.”

“Yeah, I was too. Two weeks became five. I’m finally home. I’ve been waiting for her for over two hours. Did she say anything about having to go out of town for work?”

“No, not to me. Have you talked to her today?”

“Yeah, about noon, when I was on my way to the airport. She’s usually home from the office by seven. I got home at eight thirty and there’s no sign of her.”

“Could she be on a jog?”

“She usually doesn’t run this late. I didn’t call to upset you, John, I just wanted to check with you.”

“She’ll show up, Daniel. She’d do this when she was a teenager. Stay out all night, and worry me sick. Then she’d come up with some lame story about where she had been. Did you call her friends and coworkers?”

“Not yet. It’s strange, she left her phone here, and her car’s in the garage. Even if she doesn’t take her purse with her running, she always has her phone.”

“That doesn’t sound like her. If she doesn’t show up, call me back. We’ll form a posse.”

I get along with John, as long as I don’t see him too often. Chenille is a lot like him. Positive qualities like hardworking and tenacious, and negative ones like closed minded and obsessive. Or maybe she’s more similar to her mother. I wouldn’t know. I’ve never met the woman. She left when Chenille was fourteen. She doesn’t talk about her. Ever. Too painful I guess.

Analyzing Chenille’s contact list, I find her dentist, nail salon, hairdresser, and coworkers. I’ll call Ryan King, her associate at the law firm. They often work together on cases. He’ll know if she went on an unexpected business trip.

“Hi Ryan, this is Daniel.”

“Who?”

“Chenille’s husband.”

“Oh, hey Daniel. Do you know what time it is?”

“Sorry, I know it’s late.”

“What’s up?”

“I got home a couple of hours ago and Chenille isn’t here. Did she go out of town to see a client on short notice, an emergency trip for a case?”

“Not that I’m aware of.” He’s mumbling, and I strain to hear him. “I didn’t talk to her today.”

“You mean she wasn’t at work?”

“I’m not sure. I was buried in my office all day preparing court filings.”

“Did you see her yesterday?”

“Yeah, briefly. We said hello in the morning. I was at the courthouse most of the day.”

“Thanks, Ryan.” He’s no help.

A second beer, accompanied by more mindless television. It’s almost midnight. I’m pacing the floor like a chain smoker needing a nicotine fix. I pull the drapes back, staring out the window to the street. I envision Chenille running up the walk, bursting through the door, and throwing her arms around me. My wishful thinking is distracted by the intermittent fluttering of the street light, before it extinguishes completely.

Something is wrong. Terribly wrong. What am I waiting for? I’ve got to find her.