

COLE'S PASSAGE

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None of Tom Cole's parolees had ever come to his door. So why this urge to go for his pistol when the doorbell rang? He didn't need his gun. Not now.

He turned off the television, went to the door and looked through the peephole.

In the distorted view of the fisheye lens, he made out Renee Lawson, his neighbor from down the street. She stood on his porch alone, and even in the distortion she looked good.

He opened the door.

Without the lens between them, in the stark morning light Tom now saw a haunted expression on her face.

He tried to remember how long it had been since her daughter disappeared.

"Hi, Renee," he said.

"Can I talk to you, Tom?" she said.

"Sure." There were chairs on the front porch, and he gestured in their direction.

"Inside would be better," she said.

He hesitated. "Okay," he said, stepping back.

She moved past him, a woman about Tom's height. Her light red hair hung limply to her shoulders. She wore a knit pullover sweater, purple, and jeans, running shoes. She carried a bag, a slender strap over her shoulder.

In the living room, she looked the place over. She'd never been here before. Tom watched as her eyes landed on the picture of him and his son on the flying bridge of the *Manifest*, the sport fishing boat he and his friend Brad had owned twenty years ago. Visitors, when he had them, would sometimes comment on boating or ask about his son.

Not Renee. She turned and faced him, her lips set in a hard line.

He became aware of the closeness of the room.

"Have a seat," he said. He offered the sofa to her, and she lowered onto it and crossed her legs, back rigid.

He said, "Can I get you anything?"

"No, thanks."

Tom sat in a chair opposite the sofa. "Any word on April?"

She shook her head and started talking. Tom had heard stories like hers before. April had been a good kid, she came from a good home, a good family, but then everything changed and the kid wasn't so good anymore. The girl began to withdraw. She became distant, then sullen, then angry. Her appearance changed next—hair, makeup, clothes—and then came indications of drug abuse as she began to rapidly lose weight. They'd tried intervention and counseling, but nothing brought her back to them.

And when they sent her to rehab, she ran off. And disappeared.

It was difficult for Tom to put this story together with the girl he'd seen growing up in the neighborhood over the years since her family had moved in. But who knew what happened behind the doors of these houses?

"Has she ever run away before?" Tom said.

"Never. And I'm not sure she did. But that's what the police seem to think. The detective's named Ackermann. Two Ns. Jewish."

Tom wondered what Ackermann being Jewish had to do with anything, but he skipped it. "You think she's been abducted?" he said. "From rehab?"

"I don't know! And even if she wasn't, who knows what's happened to her since she's been out there?" Her eyes held his, pleading, her brows rising. "It's been three days, Tom. We haven't found a trace of her..."

As she spoke, it began to dawn on Tom where Renee was going with all this. And he didn't like it.

He'd been retired for nearly two years. And the truth was, even during the last three years he'd been on the job, his heart hadn't been in it. So if you looked at it honestly, he'd been retired for five years. Most of his buddies were retired now too, or a lot of them, anyway. All but Brad. But beyond Brad, Tom had no real connections anymore, and more important than not having many connections, he had no motivation. He was almost sixty, and sometimes he thought he had the mentality of an eighty-year-old. Sure, he was so bored most days that it was all he could do to stay away from a bottle until the afternoon. And the desertion of his family, or his desertion of them, depending on his mood, left him with just the television and the bottle and his few friends to distract him from his regrets. He'd tried hobbies but none stuck except the hours he could spend with the weight set in his garage and the heavy bag he pounded on until his arms wanted to drop off. But he didn't want a job. He didn't want an assignment. He'd botched things up enough—in his job and in his marriage and with his son. He hated to think what might happen if he made himself responsible for finding this girl too.

Renee stared at him. Waiting.

He said, "The LAPD and the Feds have a lot of resources, Renee."

"But they won't use their resources to find her. They say if she's run away, she's likely to just come back. And even if they tried to find her, they've got a thousand other things to do."

Tom almost said he did too, but she was too desperate to lie to.

"I'm not an investigator," he said. "I never was. I was a parole officer most of my career. There are private investigators—"

"I don't know them. I know you."

Not really, Tom thought. Our houses are near one another. We see each other in passing, drive past each other and wave, make small talk at the annual block party. That's it. We don't know one another well at all.

"I can pay you," she said. "I have some money I've been able to save—"

"I don't need your money. I just don't see what I can offer you."

She looked to the window, her lips parted. It looked out onto the street, onto the sidewalk Tom had seen April walk down dozens of times on the way home.

"Someone must have seen her," he said. "Why not go on television? Make an appeal to the public?"

"Steve doesn't want to do that."

Her husband, the shy accountant who didn't look like any accountant he'd ever seen. The man on his morning runs chugged down the street like a heavyweight in training.

She went on. "He thinks that kind of thing is sensationalism."

"That doesn't make any sense. If somebody sees you on the news and they've seen her—"

"He won't do it. And he won't let me do it either."

"Won't let—?" Tom stopped himself. "Does he know you're here?" he said.

"No. And I don't want him to know."

Tom wouldn't allow himself to judge Steve and Renee Lawson's marriage. He was in no position to. If her husband tried to control her, it wasn't Tom's affair.

"Well, what does Steve want to do about it?" he said.

She reached into her purse for something. If she was going for a tissue because she wanted to manipulate him with tears, he'd have to show her the door.

But what she came out with and unfolded was an outsized sheet of paper, a size you might see taped to a telephone pole. She held it out to him. "This," she said.

He pushed up from the chair and took it from her.

The picture must have been taken before April started with the drugs. Her eyes, dark and wide, were mesmerizing, and her smile now reminded Tom of a pop star whose name he couldn't bring to mind. Across the top of the paper was the word, *MISSING*, and along the bottom a phone number people could call if they saw her.

Steve knew what he was doing.

Tom looked at Renee. Giving him this picture was not a fair tactic. And Renee knew it. She nodded down at the picture.

He returned to it. The girl would attract attention wherever she went. On the streets, every man and boy would home in on her in an instant whether they were good or bad.

She didn't stand a chance.

"How old is she now?" he said.

"Sixteen," Renee said.

She looked older than sixteen, Tom thought. That wouldn't do her any good either.

Tom had no business doing this. He had no private investigator's license. He was just a used-up ex-cop who wanted to be left alone. The police still on the job had far more resources and skills than he had, and he'd never worked in Missing Persons, had no training in this kind of investigation.

He held out the paper to her. "Renee, I'd like to help. But this just isn't—" "You have to," she said. "There's no one else I trust."

She wouldn't take the paper back.

"Then find someone you can trust. You said you have some money saved."

She was blinking back tears now. Too proud to let him see her cry. "Not enough," she said.

"Steve thinks hiring someone would be a waste of money? Is that it?"

She nodded. "He's so tight he squeaks."

"Where is he now?"

"He went up to Hollywood." She motioned to the poster in Tom's hand. "Putting those up. Yesterday he put them up at Venice Beach."

He was hitting some of the places teen runaways might go. Not a bad idea.

"What have her friends told you?"

"Nobody's heard from her. That's what makes me think someone's taken her. Unless her friend's aren't being honest."

"You think someone's holding out on you?"

She looked at the floor. "I don't know, Tom."

The way she said his name, the plea in it, froze him for a moment. He blinked. "You've tried the shelters?"

She nodded. "They won't tell us anything."

"What about her social media accounts? Can you get access to them?"

"Not yet. It takes a subpoena and Ackermann's supposedly working on it. He says we should get it any day. But I'm tagging her in my own posts constantly. Anyone following her on any of her accounts knows she's missing and they know to contact me if they've seen her. But I've gotten nothing. They put her up on the LAPD's Missing Persons site and we've put that flyer up on a bunch of sites for missing kids. Just crackpots so far. According to Ackermann."

Tom looked down at the picture of April. He realized he was running his palm back and forth along his bare scalp. It was an old habit, one he hadn't caught himself doing for nearly two years. Since his retirement.

He heaved a sigh.

Renee watched him.

Three days. Even though he'd never worked Missing Persons, Tom knew that if someone had taken her, with every passing hour their odds of finding her safe diminished.

He looked into the eyes in the picture.

How could he not try to find her? Wouldn't failing to try be worse than trying and failing?

He'd failed so many times, he wasn't sure he knew the difference anymore.

He dropped his hand. Looking into the photo of those eyes, resignation descended upon him.

"She must not have her phone," Tom said. "Is that right?" Missing Persons would be able to track her location if she had it.

Renee nodded.

"I'll need the names and numbers of all her friends," he said. "And family. Teachers. Anybody close to the family. Anyone who had any contact with her at all. Or contact with you or Steve."

He'd done it. He'd committed to it.

Renee reached into her bag again. She came out with a list and handed it over. She must have prepared it for Ackermann. Written in a neat and angled script were names, addresses, phone numbers, all categorized and with notes next to each one telling him the person's relationship to April or the family. Renee had written her cell number at the top.

"Are any of these new friends? People she started hanging out with when you started to notice April changing?"

"The ones at the bottom of the list."

Tom looked them over. Near the bottom of the list was the name Marcus Williams, and below it, Jon McKenna. That one drew Tom's attention. "This guy, Jon McKenna, why's his address at a church?"

"I don't have his home address. That's where he works."

"Talk about that."

"She started going there—I don't know, six months ago. Maybe she thought it would help her get clean."

Tom had heard of McKenna's church. It was a big one. He scanned the sheet and found the name and address of the rehab facility in Calabasas. "So the last time you saw her was when you took her to rehab?" he said.

She nodded.

He looked over the names on the list. “I don’t see any other addresses on this list anywhere near Calabasas. Does she know anyone out there she could have gone to?”

Renee shook her head. “She’d come back to L.A. if she could. I know it. This is where all her friends are.”

“Did she have any money? Access to any?”

“I—I don’t think so. The rehab place is inpatient. They don’t let the residents—”

“So how could she get back? It’s twenty-five miles.”

“I don’t know. Maybe she tried to hitch—” She couldn’t seem to say the rest of the word. She swiped at her cheeks, although they were dry, as if she were so used to crying she just assumed tears were falling.

“All right,” Tom said. “I’ll have to go through her room. Are you okay with that?”

“Of course. We can do that now. Steve should be gone a couple hours.”

He looked back at the list. There had to be thirty names here. “I’ll be over in a few minutes,” he said. “I have to make a call.”

“Okay.”

They stood.

“Renee, doing this without talking to Steve is sort of tying my hands.”

“It’s the way it’s got to be. He wouldn’t understand. And I can’t deal with his issues right now. Not with everything...” She lowered her head to compose herself. After a moment, she lifted her face to him again.

Tom didn’t know what he saw in those eyes. It might have been desperation. It might have been fear. But there was a hint of something else. Something just out of his reach.

He chalked it up to her stress. “Never mind,” he said. “I’ll do all I can, Renee, but I’ve never done this kind of—”

“I trust you, Tom.” She stepped closer and her fragrance rose to him. Those brown eyes softened, and when she lifted her hand and put it on his arm, its warmth penetrated his shirtsleeve. “I can’t tell you how much this means to me,” she said. She gave him a hint of a smile, lifted her hand from his arm, turned and walked out.

Alone again, Tom looked down at the flyer, the picture of the girl, a girl with auburn hair and with dark eyes that had a look in them that radiated brightness from inside and would draw people to her. She could be a pop star, a prom queen, a teen model.

But on the streets, beauty could be a curse.