

# HIDDEN PIECES by Mary Keliikoa

## EXCERPT

### ZERO MINUS FOUR HOURS

Less than a breath consumes the moment between decision and commitment. But he'd run through the scenario countless times. *He* wasn't the factor he worried about with so many variables out of his control. His throat tightened at this unfamiliar place. He coughed to release the tension.

The school bus would soon crest the hill. More farm workers would arrive. Some had already started their daily tasks. Kids would be racing to their stops.

Only one interested him.

The distance closed to where she stood; her flowing brown hair mesmerized him, along with the freckles across her nose. Her small frame swam in her oversized sweatshirt. Wide lips protruded over her braces. A backpack hung off her thin shoulder. Oblivious. He slowed, noting her red-rimmed eyes. She'd been crying. Fragile. Innocent. Weren't they all?

For a beat, he thought about driving by. But another chance to find her this isolated might be long in coming. If he stopped, there'd be no turning back.

Every muscle clenched as he eased to the edge of the road, punching the down button on the passenger window.

"Allison," he called. She wiped her eyes quick with her sleeve. But he'd seen her pain. He'd use it. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," she said with a quiet defiance.

He nodded, kept the conversation light and on point so she wouldn't fear him. Familiarity created trust. His heart thumped against his ribs and chest; the rush of blood crashed in his ears. He couldn't remember the words he'd said to get her into his vehicle, but he didn't need to. Her hand gripped the handle.

She slid in, her backpack between them, her shoulders rounded. Head down. He waited as she pulled the seatbelt across her chest, clicking it into place.

"Ready?" He checked the rearview mirror.

She nodded. Silent.

He passed the driveway to turn around.

"Where are we going?"

He recognized the lilt of the last word. That instance between realization and worry. The moment had come fast—the window slamming shut. He gripped the rag he'd readied earlier and smashed it onto her face.

Her eyes went wide. She gasped and slumped into the seat with a final bounce of her chin on her collarbone.

His hands steadied on the wheel, and he depressed the gas pedal.

No turning back.

## CHAPTER 1

Sheriff Jax Turner swerved his patrol car off Highway 101 and took a sharp right onto an unmarked dirt road leading to the beach. Tourists didn't come to Misty Pines for the summer to swim in the ocean or the lakes. Too much mist; too much murkiness. The few outdoorsmen drawn to the area for fishing off the ragged ocean jetties had long gone for the season.

His Glock 22 rested on the seat next to him, along with a miniature wooden chair. He'd finished carving it during another sleepless night for a dollhouse he'd never complete, for a tea party that would never happen.

Jax followed the smooth road as it transitioned into rock, his upper body swaying and bouncing with the uneven terrain. When it leveled, he floored it, the tires spinning before they found their footing on the sandy flat.

Aimed toward the sea, he parked on a stretch of solid pack a few yards from the surf. The foamy fingers of the ocean reached for his cruiser, coming up short. The weather report called for ninety degrees in the city located eighty miles east, which meant an inversion for everyone on the coastline. His future, or lack of one, floated in the horizon, where gray ocean met gray clouds, both soon to be indiscernible in the impending fog. Damn, he was tired of being tired.

The window down, he sucked in the brackish scent of the seaweed-littered shores. Seagulls swarmed overhead. Their plaintive cries sent a wave of grief through him.

Misty Pines should have been a fresh start, a place to heal the wounds of the past. Instead, the salty air had entrenched itself in the ten years since he'd arrived. The torture would never end on its own. An hour spent unloading his ammunition at the shooting range into a silhouette target hadn't helped this time.

Except he hadn't unloaded all of it.

He leaned over the passenger seat to retrieve two sealed envelopes from the glovebox. A dragonfly drawing done with blue-green Crayola and glitter slid out. He fumbled and then caught it before it floated to the floor. His finger trembled as he traced the wings, remembering Lulu's soft pink cheeks. He laid his daughter's gift on his lap and propped the envelopes on the dash right before picturing them splattered in his blood. They'd accuse him of many things when they

discovered his body. He wouldn't let heartless be one of them. He placed the items back, securing the latch.

At least when they were found, the people who'd cared about him once would know why. One letter was for his former partner, Detective Jameson. He would understand if no one else did. The other to Abby. Ten years married, and their only child lost to cancer.

Lulu's brave smile flashed in his mind, making the lump in his throat swell. Abby said she didn't blame him, but he blamed himself enough for them both. And despite what she said, the light had dimmed in Abby's eyes the night their little girl passed. Their marriage died that day too. They just hadn't properly buried it until last year.

He balanced the gun on his lap and held the miniature chair in his hand, letting the gulls' cries and the roaring surf fill his mind one last time. The rearview mirror reflected his weary eyes and the bags that had taken up residence under them. He ran his broad hand over his graying sandy hair and back around to the stubble on his chin.

Time to get to it.

He lifted the gun, holding the barrel in his mouth. The cold, metallic weight pushed against his bottom teeth. His throat closed, and he forced a swallow. *Quit stalling.* Eyes squeezed shut, sadness flooded his chest. Regret shoved him. Don't think. He drew in the cool air through his nostrils one more time. Held it. Waited. Was this what he really wanted?

"Jax," his radio crackled to life. "Sheriff...please..."

His eyes flew open, and he withdrew the gun from his mouth. Trudy. Had he heard something in her tone? Hard to tell with her voice coming in and out. He wouldn't miss the shoddy technology in this godforsaken place. No. He was imagining it. He shook his head. Raised the gun.

"Sheriff Turner, we have a Code Ten-Fifty-Four. Urgent. Response needed."

Lost child or runaway. Could be either. He'd been equally useless in both instances in the past.

"Sherriff Turner. Answer your damn radio." Trudy's voice blared that time.

He bristled and lifted the receiver off the hook. "What're you talking about, Trudy?"

"There you are. It's Emily Krueger's kid. She didn't get on the school bus."

Allison. The little girl with the gap-toothed smile who used to wave when he walked past the bookstore. Not so little now, right? A teenager?

"Emily check with her friends?"

"No one's seen her, hon."

"Have Chapman handle it. I'm a little—"

"Gone this week," Trudy said. "Alaska fishing trip. Remember?"

Right.

He scrubbed the exhaustion from his eyes. "On my way."

He dropped the mic into its holder and secured his gun. Hopefully, this wouldn't take long, and he'd be back in an hour to contemplate finishing the job.