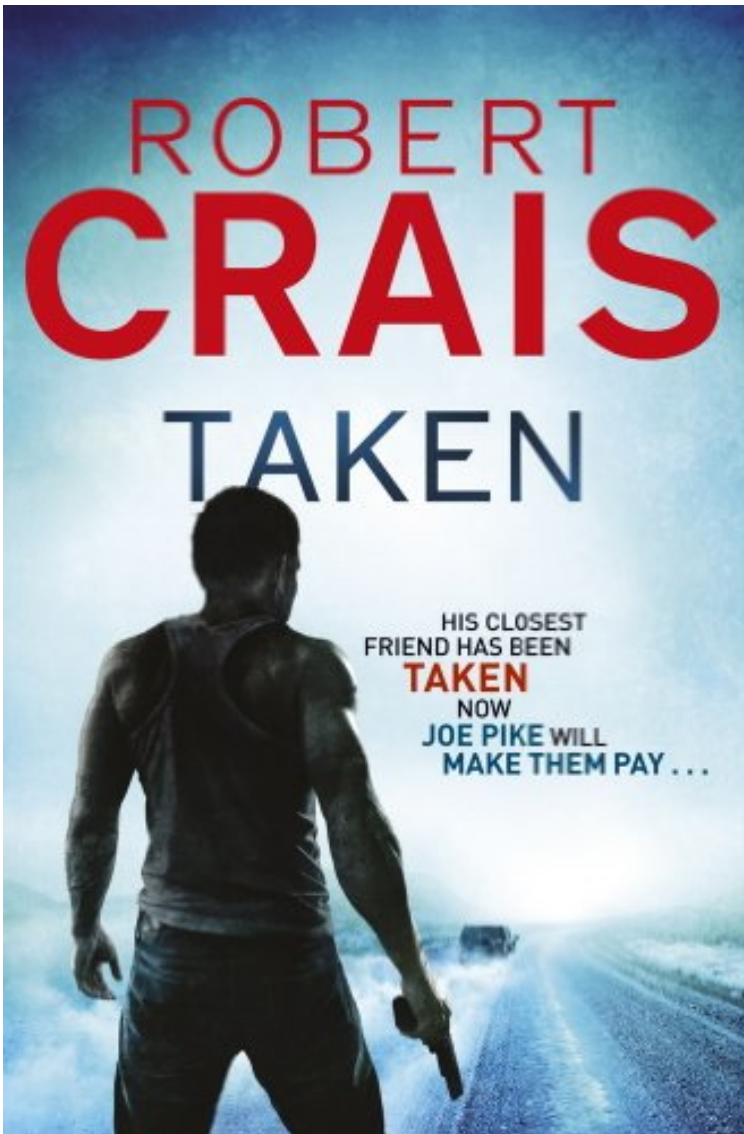


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Taken



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurJoe Pike must take on his toughest challenge yet. He must hunt down and rescue . . . Elvis Cole.A nail-biting Cole and Pike novel from the No. 1 NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author.Elvis Cole. All round nice guy. Always the first man to help a stranger in distress. This time, however, he's paid the ultimate price for trying to be the good Samaritan.Joe Pike. A fierce protector and a dangerous enemy.

This time his tough guy exterior will be tested to the limit as he risks everything to save his closest friend.The clock is ticking now that Elvis has been TAKEN.ExtraitPart 1Elvis Cole12Joe Pike345Jack and Krista6Elvis Cole78910Joe Pike11Elvis Cole1213Jack and Krista1415Elvis Cole1617Jack and Krista1819Jon Stone20Part 2Elvis Cole21222324Jack and Krista252627Part 328Elvis Cole29Joe Pike30313233Jack and Krista34Elvis Cole3536Part 4Riverside County Jail37Joe Pike38394041the date

farm424344454647Suspect chapter excerptAcknowledgmentsPrologue:JACK AND KRISTAJack Berman wrapped his arms around his girlfriend, Krista Morales, and watched his breath fog in the cold desert air.

Twenty minutes after midnight, fourteen miles south of Rancho Mirage in the otherwise impenetrable darkness of the Anza-Borrego Desert, Jack and Krista were lit in the harsh purple glare of the lights that blossomed from Danny Trehorns truck, Jack so much in love with this girl his heart beat with hers. Trehorn gunned his engine. You guys comin or what? Krista snuggled deeper into Jacks arms. Lets stay a little longer. Just us. Not them. I want to tell you something. Jack called to his friend. Maana, dude. Were gonna hang. We roll early, bro. See you at nine. See us at noon. Pussy! Well wake your ass up! Trehorn dropped back into his truck, and spun a one-eighty back toward town, Ride of the Valkyries blaring on his sound system. Chuck Lautner and Deli Blake tucked Chucks ancient Land Cruiser in tight behind Trehorn, their headlamps flashing over Jacks Mustang, which was parked up the old county road where the ground was more even. They had come out to show Krista a drug smugglers airplane that had crashed in 1972 because Krista wanted to see it. Jack grew colder as their tail lights receded, and the desert grew darker. A thin crescent moon and cloudy star field gave them enough light to see, but little more. Jack said, Dark. She didnt answer. Jack said, Cold. He snuggled closer, spooning into her back, both of them staring at nothing. Jack wondered what she was seeing. Krista had been pensive all night even though she had pushed them to come, and now her wanting to tell him something felt ominous. Jack had the sick feeling she was pregnant or dumping him. Krista was two months from graduating summa cum laude at Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles, and had taken a job in D.C. Jack had dropped out of USC. Jack nuzzled into her hair. Are we okay? She pushed away far enough to study him, then smiled. There have never been two people better than us. I am totally in love with you. You had me worried. Thanks for getting Danny to bring us out here. I dont think he wanted to come. Its a long drive if youve seen it a million times. He stopped coming out here in high school. According to Trehorn, the twin-engine Cessna 310 had crashed while bringing in a load of coke at night during a sandstorm. A local drug dealer named Greek Cisneros cleared enough cactus and rocks to fashion a landing strip in the middle of the desert twenty miles outside Palm Springs, and used the airplane to bring cocaine and marijuana up from Mexico, almost always at night when the outline of the runway was marked by burning tubs of gasoline. On the night of the crash, the right wingtip hooked into the ground, the landing gear collapsed, and the left wing snapped off outside the left engine. Fuel pouring from the ruptured fuel tanks ignited, enveloping the airplane in flames. The engines and instruments had long ago been salvaged for parts, but the broken airframe remained where it died, rusting, corroded, and covered with generations of overlapping graffiti and spray-painted initials: LJ+DF, eat me, PSHS#1. Krista took his hand, and tugged him toward the plane. Come with me. I want to show you something. Cant you tell me about it in the car? Im cold. No, not in the car. This is important. Jack followed her along the fuselage to the tail, wondering what she wanted to show him about this stupid airplane, but instead she led him onto the overgrown remains of the runway. She stared into the darkness that masked the desert. Her smart, black eyes shined like jewels filled with starlight. Jack touched her hair. Kris? They had known each other for one year, two months, and sixteen days. They had been head-over-heels, crazy, there-and-back, inside-out, bottom-to-top in love for five months, three weeks, and eleven days. He hadnt told her the truth about himself until after she declared her love. If he had secrets then, she had secrets now. Krista took his hand in both of hers, giving him the serious, all-business eyes. This place is special to my family. Jack had no idea what she was talking about. A drug runners airstrip? This place, right here between the mountains, its a place easily found by people coming from the south, for all the same reasons the drug dealers put their landing strip here. When my mother was seven, coyotes brought her up through the desert from the south. Mom and her sister and two cousins. A man with a hearse was waiting here at this airplane to drive them into town. Jack said, No shit? Krista laughed, but her laugh was unsure. I never knew. She only told me a couple of weeks ago. I dont care. Hey. Im giving you momentous family history, and you dont care? I mean that shes illegal undocumented. Who gives a shit? Krista tipped back to look up at him, then suddenly grabbed his ears and kissed him. Undocumented, but you dont have to go all PC. Kristas mother had described a twelve-day trip on foot, in cars, and in a delivery truck where it got so hot that an old man died. The last leg of their journey had been in a covered pickup truck at night past the Salton Sea and across a sixteen-mile stretch of desert to the old crash site. The man with the hearse had driven them to a supermarket parking lot at the eastern edge of Coachella, where her uncle was waiting. She looked south into the darkness as if she could see her mothers footsteps. I wouldnt be here if she hadnt come through this place. She wouldnt have met my dad. I wouldnt have met you. I wouldnt exist. Krista looked up, and her face was all summa-cum-laude focused. Can you imagine what her journey

must have been like? Im her kid, and I cant even begin. She was starting to say more when Jack heard a far-off squeal. He stood taller, listening, but didnt say anything until he heard it again. You hear it? Krista turned as the faint sound of a muffled engine reached them, and two lurching shapes appeared in the dim starlight.

Jack studied them for a moment, and realized they were lightless trucks crawling toward them across the desert. Jack felt a stab of fear, and whispered frantically into her ear. This sucks, man. Lets get out of here. No, no, no! I want to see. Shh. They could be drug runners. We dont want to be here. Just wait! She pulled him to the far side of the airplane, where they settled into a low depression between the cactus. A large box truck emerged from the dark like a ship appearing out of a fog. It rumbled onto the overgrown landing strip, and stopped less than thirty yards away. No brake lights flared when it stopped. Jack tried to make himself even smaller, and wished he had pulled Kris away. A moment later, the cab creaked open, and two men climbed out. The driver walked a few yards in front of the truck, then studied a glowing handheld device. This deep in the desert, Jack thought it was probably a GPS. While the driver studied his GPS, the passenger went to the back of the truck, and pushed the box door open with a loud clatter. The man said something in Spanish, then Jack heard soft voices as silhouette people climbed from the truck. Jack whispered, What are they doing? Shh. This is amazing. They gotta be illegals. Shh. Krista shifted position, and Jack cringed with a fresh burst of fear. She was taking pictures with her cell phone. Stop. Theyll see us. No one can see. The people emerging stayed near the truck as if they were confused. So many people appeared Jack did not see how they had all fit inside. As many as thirty people stood uneasily in the brush, speaking in low murmurs with alien accents that Jack strained to identify. That isnt Spanish. What are they speaking, Chinese? Krista lowered her phone and strained to listen, too. A few Spanish speakers, but most of them sound Asian. Something else, too. Is that Arabic? The man who opened the truck returned to the driver, and spoke clearly in Spanish. Jack figured these two were the coyotes guides who were hired to sneak people illegally into the U.S. He leaned closer to Krista, who was fluent in Spanish. What did he say? Where in hell are they? Those bastards are supposed to be here. The driver mumbled something neither Jack nor Krista understood, then visibly jumped when three sets of headlights topped by roll-bar lamps snapped on a hundred yards behind the box truck, lighting the desert between in stark relief. Three off-road trucks roared forward, bouncing high on their oversized tires. The two coyotes shouted, and a scrambled chatter rose from the milling people. The driver ran into the desert, and his partner ran back to their truck. He emerged with a shotgun, and ran after his friend even as two of the incoming pickups skidded in a loose circle around the box truck, kicking up murky clouds of dust. The third chased after the fleeing men, and gunfire flashed in the dark. The crowd broke in every direction, some crying, some screaming, some scrambling back into the box truck as if they could hide. Jack pulled Krista backward, then jumped up and ran. Run! Cmon, run! He ran hard toward his Mustang, then realized Krista wasnt with him. Men with clubs and shotguns jumped from the pickups to chase down fleeing people. Krista was still between the cactus, taking pictures. Jack started to shout for her, but stopped himself, not wanting to draw attention. He and Krista were outside the light, and hidden by darkness. He risked a sharp hiss instead. Kris She shook her head, telling him she was fine, and resumed taking pictures. Jack ran back to her, and grabbed her arm. Hard. Lets go! All right. Okay They started to rise as four Asian women came around the planes tail and ran past less than ten yards away. A man with a shotgun came around the tail after them, shouting in Spanish, and Jack wondered if these poor women could even understand what he said. Then the man stopped, and stood absolutely still as if he were a cardboard cutout against the night sky. Jack held his breath, and prayed. He wondered why the man was standing so still, then saw the man was wearing night-vision goggles. The man was looking at them. There in the starlit desert landscape where no one could hear the shots, the man lifted his shotgun, and aimed at Jack Berman. six days after they were taken When people call a private investigator because someone they love is missing, especially a child, the fear bubbles in their voice like boiling lard. When Nita Morales called that morning about her missing adult daughter, she didnt sound afraid. She was irritated. Ms. Morales phoned because the Sunday Los Angeles Times Magazine published a story about me eight weeks ago, rehashing a case where I cleared an innocent man who had been convicted of multiple homicides. The magazine people came to my office, took a couple of pretty good pictures, and made me sound like a cross between Philip Marlowe and Batman. If I were Nita Morales, I would have called me, too. Her business, Hector Sports Promotions, was on the east side of the Los Angeles River near the Sixth Street Bridge, not far from where giant radioactive ants boiled up from the sewer to be roasted by James Arness in the 1954 classic, Them! It was a warehouse area now, but no less dangerous. Buildings were layered with gang tags and graffiti, and signs warned employees to lock their cars. Steel bars covered windows and concertina wire lined roofs, but

not to keep out the ants. That spring morning, 8:55 A.M., a low haze filled the sky with a glare so bright I squinted behind the Wayfarers as I found the address. Hector Sports Promotions was in a newer building with a gated, ten-foot chain-link fence enclosing their parking lot. A young Latin guy with thick shoulders and dull eyes came out when I stopped, as if he had been waiting. You the magazine guy? The magazine guy. That's right. Elvis Cole. I have a ten o'clock with Ms. Morales. I gotta unlock the gate. See the empty spot where it says Delivery? Park there. You might want to put up the top and lock it. Think it'll be safe? That would be me, flashing the ironic smile at their overkill battlestar security. For sure. They only steal clean cars. That would be him, putting me in my place. He shook his head sadly as I drove past. I had an old Vette like this, I'd show some love. I'd pop those dents, for sure. That would be him, rubbing it in. My Jamaica yellow 1966 Corvette Stingray convertible is a classic. It's also dirty. He locked the parking gate behind us, told me he was Nita Morales's assistant, and led me inside. We passed through an outer office with a counter for customers, and a man and woman at separate desks. The man and woman both looked over, and the man held up the Sunday magazine issue with my story. Embarrassing. We passed through a door onto the shop floor where fifteen or twenty people were operating machines that sewed logos on baseball caps and photo-inked mugs. Nita Morales had a glass office on the far side of the shop where she could see the floor and everything happening there. She saw us coming, and stepped from behind her desk to greet the magazine guy when we entered. Tight smile. Dry hand. All business. Hi, Mr. Cole, I'm Nita. You look like your picture. The one where I look stupid or the one where I look confused? The one where you look like a smart, determined detective who gets the job done. I liked her immediately. Would you like something? Coffee or a soft drink? No, thanks. I'm good. Jerry, where's the swag bag? You left it in here, right? She explained as Jerry the Assistant handed me a white plastic bag. We made a little gift for you this morning. Here, take a look. A large white T-shirt and a matching baseball cap were in the bag. I smiled at the cap, then held up the T-shirt.

Elvis Cole Detective Agency had been silk-screened onto the front in black and red letters, with the world's greatest detective in smaller letters below it. An emblem saying the same had been sewn on the front of the cap. You like them? I like them a lot. I put them back in the bag. This is very cool, but I haven't agreed to help you. You understand that, don't you? You will. You're going to find her. It won't be hard for the World's Greatest Detective. She got that from the magazine. The world's greatest thing was a joke, Ms. Morales. The guy who wrote the article put it in the story like I meant it. I didn't. It was a joke. I have some things to show you. Give me a second. I have to get them together. She dismissed the assistant, and returned to her desk while I looked around. Shelves along the wall opposite her desk were lined with mugs, cups, bobbleheads, T-shirts, caps, giveaway toys, and dozens of other promotional items. Want team shirts for your kids soccer club? They could do it. Want the name of your insurance agency on cheap plastic cups for the Knights of Columbus barbecue? That's what they did. Photos of youth teams dotted the walls, the kids all wearing shirts made by Hector Sports. I said, Whos Hector? My husband. He started the company twenty-two years ago, silk-screening T-shirts. I run it now. Cancer. Sorry. Me, too. Seven years, this June. You must run it well.

Business looks good. No one's getting rich, but we're doing okay. Here, let's sit. She came around her desk so we could sit together on matching metal chairs. Nita Morales was in her mid-forties, built sturdy, and wore a conservative blue business skirt and ruffled white shirt. Her sleek black hair showed no gray, and framed her broad face well. Her nails were carefully done, and her wedding ring was still in place, seven years later, this

June. She held out a snapshot. This is who you're going to find. This is Krista. I haven't agreed yet, Ms. Morales. You will. Look. We haven't talked price. Look at her. Krista Morales had a heart-shaped face, golden skin, and a smile that dimpled her right cheek. Her eyes were deep chocolate, and her hair glistened with the deep black sheen of a crow's wing in the sun. I smiled at the picture, then handed it back. Pretty. Smart. She's going to graduate summa cum laude in two months from Loyola Marymount. Then she's going to work in Washington as a congressional aide. After that, maybe the first Latina president, you think? Wow. You must be proud. Beyond proud. Her father and I, we didn't graduate high school. I had no English until I was nine.

This business, we built with sweat and the grace of God. Krista. She ticked off the points on her fingers. highest GPA in her class, editor of the student newspaper, National Honor Society, Phi Beta Kappa. This girl is making our dreams come true. She suddenly stopped, and stared through the glass wall into the shop. Even with the angle, I saw her eyes glisten. They're good people, but you have to watch them. I understand. Take your time. She cleared her throat as she pulled herself together, then Nita Morales's face darkened from a sunrise of pride to the iron sky of a thunderstorm. She put Krista's picture aside, and handed me a page showing a name and Palm Springs address. The name was Jack Berman. She went to Palm Springs seven days ago. With a boy. Her boyfriend. She said boyfriend as if it were another word for mistake. She

described the boyfriend, and didnt have anything good to say. A USC dropout without a job and little future.

Just the type of boy who could derail her daughters ambitions.I glanced at the address.He lives in Palm Springs?Somewhere in L.A., I think. His family has the house in Palm Springs, or it might belong to a friend, but I dont really know. Krista hasnt told me much about him.Old story. The less Krista told her, the less she could criticize. I put the address aside.Okay. So how is she missing?She went for the weekend. Thats what she told me, and she always tells me where shes going and exactly how long shell be gone. But shes been gone now for a week, and she wont return my calls or texts, and I know its that boy.That boy.How long have Krista and that boy been together?Thinking about it seemed to sicken her.Six or seven months. Ive only met him two or three times, but I dont like him. He has this attitude.She said attitude as if it was another word for disease.Do they live together?Her face darkened even more.She shares an apartment near campus with a girl. She doesnt have time for that boy.She had time to go to Palm Springs. I had seen this story five hundred times, and knew where it was going. The good-girl daughter rebelling against the dominant mother.Ms. Morales, twenty-one-year-old women go away with their boyfriends. Sometimes, they have such a good time, they turn off their phones and stay a few extra days. Unless you have reason to believe otherwise, thats all this is. Shell come back.Nita Morales studied me for a moment as if she was disappointed, then picked up her smart phone and touched the screen.Do you speak Spanish?A few words, but, no, not really.Ill translate. This is the second call. I recorded itNita Moraless voice came from the tiny speaker as she answered the incoming call.Krista, is this you? What is going on out there?A young woman fired off rapid-fire Spanish. Then Nitas voice interrupted.Speak English. Why are you carrying on like this?The young woman shifted to English with a heavy accent.Mama, I know you want me to practice the English, but I cannotShe resumed a torrent of Spanish, whereupon Nita paused the playback.Shes pretending. This exaggerated accent, the poor English. My daughter has no accent. This isnt the way she speaks.What is she saying?She began by saying theyre concerned because they didnt get the money.Whos they?She held up a finger.ListenShe resumed the playback. A young male voice took Kristas place, and also spoke Spanish. He sounded calm and reasonable, and spoke several seconds before Nita paused the recording.You get any of it?I shook my head, feeling slightly embarrassed.Hes saying he has expenses to cover. He wants me to wire five hundred dollars, and as soon as he gets the money hell see that Krista gets home.I sat forward.What just happened here? Was Krista abducted?Nita rolled her eyes, and waved me off.Of course not. The rest is just more Spanish. Ill tell you what they said.No. Play it back. I want to hear the emotional content.The playback resumed. Nita repeatedly interrupted. The man remained calm. He waited her out each time she interrupted, then resumed as if he was reading from a script.The recording finally ended, and Nita arched her eyebrows.He apologized for asking for the money. He told me where to wire it, and promised to take good care of Krista while they waited. Then he thanked me for being so helpful.She dropped the phone to her desk. Plunk.I said, This was a ransom demand. It sounds like shes been abducted.Nita Morales waved me off again.He put her up to this so they could get married.You know this for a fact?You dont kidnap someone for five hundred dollars. Five hundred dollars is what your stupid boyfriend tells you to ask for when he wants money. And this business with the Spanish and the bad English? This is absurd.Did you pay them?Not the first time. I thought she was making a joke. I thought she would call back laughing.But she didnt call back laughing.You heard. I wanted to see if she would come home, so I paid. She hasnt called again, and that was four days ago. I think they used the money to get married.All in all, Krista Morales did not sound like a person who would shake down her mother for a few hundred bucks, but you never know.Why would she pretend she has poor English?No idea.But you believe shes pretending shes been abducted to swindle five hundred dollars from you?Her mouth dimpled as she frowned, and the dimples were hard knots. But after a moment they softened.Even smart girls do stupid things when they think a boy loves them. I was so upset I drove out there, but they werent home. I waited almost four hours, but no one came, so I left a note. For all I know they went to Las Vegas.Did you call the police?She stiffened, and her face grew hard.Absolutely not. Krista has everything ahead of herpossibilities no one in my family would have even dreamed. Im not going to ruin her future with nonsense like this. Im not going to let her throw her life away by doing something stupid.If what you believe is true, Berman might have her involved in something more serious.This is why youre going to find her. The man they wrote the article about, he would save this girls future.If shes married, theres nothing I can do. I cant force her back if she doesnt want to come.You dont have to bring her back. Just find her, and tell me whats going on. Will you help me, Mr. Cole?Its what I do.I thought so. You arent the Worlds Greatest Detective for nothing.She burst into a wide smile, went behind her desk, and held up a green checkbook.Ill pay you five thousand

dollars if you find her. Is that fair? Ill charge you a thousand a day, and well start with a two-thousand-dollar retainer. Expenses are mine. Youll save money. She smiled even wider, and opened a pen. Ill pay you ten thousand if you kill him. I smiled at her, and she smiled back. Neither of us moved, and neither spoke.

Outside on the floor, the big stitching machines whined like howling coyotes as they sewed patches to baseball caps. She bent to write a check. I was kidding. That was a joke. Like me being the Worlds Greatest Detective. Exactly. When can you leave for Palm Springs? Ill start at her apartment. Its closer. Youre the detective. You know best. She wrote the check, tore it from the checkbook, then gave me a large manila envelope. I put some things together you might want. Kristas address, her phone number, a picture, the receipt when I wired the money. Things like that. Okay. Thanks. Anything else? This will be fine. Ill start with her roommate. Maybe you could call her, let her know Im coming? Oh, I can do better than that. She picked up a red leather purse, and went to the door. I have a key. Ill let you into her apartment and introduce you. Sorry, Ms. Morales. Id rather go alone. Her eyes grew dark and hard. You might be the Worlds Greatest Detective, but Im the Worlds Greatest Mother. Dont forget your swag. She walked out without waiting.

Loyola Marymount University was a Jesuit university with a tough academic reputation. Krista had a full-ride scholarship for all four years that covered her share of a two-bedroom apartment only seven blocks from the campus, which was as far from downtown L.A. as possible and still on land a mile and a half from the beach at the edge of Marina del Rey. The Worlds Greatest Mother and I took separate cars, picked up the I-10, and caravanned west across the city. Nita had phoned Kristas roommate from her car, so Mary Sue Osborne returned home early from class and was waiting when we arrived. Mary Sue was pale and round, with a spray of freckles, blue eyes, and small, wire-framed glasses. She wore a blue top, tan cargo shorts, and flip-flops, and her light brown hair was braided. She peered at me over the spectacles when she let us in. Hey. Hey back. Are you really the Worlds Greatest Detective? That was a joke. Nita had filled her in on the drive. Krista and Mary Sue had been roommates for two years, and had worked together on the student paper for four. This was obvious as soon as we entered. Long neat rows of front pages from the weekly student newspaper were push-pinned to the walls, along with a movie poster from All the Presidents Men. I made a big deal out of their wall. Man, this is amazing. Is this your paper? Im the managing editor. Kris is editor in chief. The capo-di-tutti-capi. This was called building rapport, but Nita steamrolled over the moment. He doesnt have time for this, Mary. Have you heard from her? No, maam. Not yet. Tell him about that boy. Mary Sue made a kind of fish-eyed shrug at me. What do you want to know? Nita said, Did that boy convince Krista to marry him? Is he mixed up in some kind of crime? I cleared my throat. Remember when I said Id rather come alone? Yes. This is why. Maybe Mary Sue and I should talk in Kristas room. Alone. Nita Morales fixed me with a glare as if she had second thoughts about me being the Worlds Greatest Detective, but she abruptly went to the kitchen. Ill be out here if you need me. Texting Kris, and praying she answers. I lowered my voice as I followed Mary Sue through a short hall to Kristas room. She doesnt like him. No shit, Sherlock. Kristas bedroom was small, but well furnished with a single bed, a chest of drawers, and a well-worn George R.R. Martin paperback faceup on her pillow. An L-shaped desk arranged with a computer, printer, jars of pens and pencils, and neat stacks of printouts filled the opposite corner. Large foam-boards on the walls above her desk were push-pinned with pictures of her friends. Mary Sue saw me clocking the pictures. The Wall of Infamy. Thats what we call it. This is me. She pointed at a picture of herself wearing an enormous floppy hat. Is Berman here? Sure. Right here. She pointed out a close shot of a young man with short dark hair, thin face, and gray T-shirt. He stood with his hands in his back pockets, staring at the camera as if he didnt like having his picture taken. All in all, Berman was in six pictures. In one of the shots, he was leaning against the rear of a silver, late-model Mustang. The license plate was blurry, but readable 6KNX421.

When Mary Sue confirmed this was Bermans car, I copied the plate, then took the close shot of Berman from the board. Im going to borrow this. Ill blame Nita. Take what you want. You think Nita is right? About what? Marriage. No way. Theyre definitely into each other, but shes jazzed about moving to D.C. Ive heard her talking with him about it on the phone. Lots of people do the long-distance thing. So why isnt she back? Mary Sue climbed onto Kristas bed, and crossed her legs. Dude. The years essentially over. Yeah, Kris was due back Sunday, but she finished her classwork weeks ago. She was going to write a piece for the paper, but if theyre having a blast in Margaritaville, why not enjoy? Thats where Id be if I had a hoochie boy to go with. So you arent worried? She frowned as she thought about it. Not like Nita, but kinda. Its weird she isnt returning my texts, but theyre way out in Palm Springs. Maybe she cant get a signal. I thought about it and decided the signal business was unlikely. You didnt stay overdue and out of reach for a week because of bad cell service. I also considered telling her about the five-hundred-dollar ransom demand, but Nita had

asked me to save Krista the embarrassment. Is Berman the kind of guy who would be involved in something sketchy? I never met him. I don't know, but I doubt it. I looked at her, surprised. Are you kidding? If you knew Kris, you would doubt it, too. She's the straightest person on earth. I didn't mean that. I meant, how is it you've never met him? They've been together for over a year. She shrugged. He's never been here when I've been here, and he never comes in. Not even when he picks her up? Parking here sucks. She goes out to his car. He never hangs out? She goes to his place. No roommates. Nita appeared in the doorway, looking tense and irritated. I can't just sit out there doing nothing. I'm going to check her bathroom and closet. If she planned a longer stay, maybe I can tell by what she took. Good idea. I didn't really think it was a good idea, but it would keep her busy. She disappeared into the bathroom, and I turned back to Krista's Wall of Infamy and considered the picture of Berman and his Mustang. Maybe they had returned on Sunday like she promised, only she had kept the party going by staying with him. You know where he lives? Uh-uh. I think it's in Brentwood or one of those canyon places, but I'm not sure. Does Krista keep an address book? Her phone, for sure. Nobody uses paper. She might have a contact list on her computer, but her computer's locked. You need a password. Okay.

How about you help me search her stuff? An envelope saved with a birthday card might give us a home address. A handwritten note on a letterhead. Something like that. Okay. Sure. Mary Sue started on the computer leg of Krista's desk, and I started on the leg scattered with papers. I fingered through the printouts and clippings, looking for anything useful about Berman or their trip to Palm Springs. Most of the printouts were articles about illegal immigration, mass graves in Mexico, and the increasing power of the Mexican cartels. Several were interviews with immigration activists and political figures. Sections of text in almost every article were highlighted in yellow, but none of the notes I found were about Jack Berman, wedding chapels, or Vegas acts. Most appeared to be about the material at hand: who makes the money? where do they come from? who is involved? Mary Sue edged closer to see what I was doing. This is research for her editorial. You won't find anything there. You never know. People make notes on whatever's handy. Uh-huh. I guess. Is this the piece she was going to finish Sunday night? Yeah. It's about illegal immigration and immigration policy. She got super into it a couple of weeks ago. Nita appeared in the doorway. What was she doing? Mary Sue repeated herself. Writing her editorial. It's her last editorial. She's been working on it for a couple of weeks. Nita came over and picked up the articles. Her face was lined so deeply as she read, she looked like a stack of folded towels. I said, Did she pack for a long trip or a weekend? Nita didn't answer. Ms. Morales? She looked at me, but her eyes were vacant, as if she couldn't quite see me. It took her another full second to answer. Everything's fine. She backed away, blinked three times, then left. We only knew she had gone when we heard the front door. Mary Sue said, What's wrong? I considered the articles Krista had highlighted, then looked at Mary Sue. Would you do me a favor? Sure. I live to serve. Keep looking. Look for something that tells us where Krista went, or why, and where and how to find her boyfriend, okay? Okay. Sure. I gave her my card, left her in Krista's room, and found Nita Morales seated behind the wheel of her car.

Her sunglasses were on, but she hadn't started the engine. She was holding the wheel in the ten and two o'clock positions, and staring straight ahead. I got into the passenger's side, and made my voice gentle. You okay? She shook her head. Talk to me. Nita studied me from the far side of her car on that spring day, a distance too close to some clients and miles too far from others. She looked as if we were going a hundred miles an hour even though we weren't moving. I am not a legal resident of the United States. My sister and I were sent here when I was seven years old and she was nine. We came to live with an uncle who was legally here on a work visa. I have been here illegally ever since. I am here illegally now. May I ask why you told me? What Mary Sue said. That Krista started all this two weeks ago. You told her two weeks ago. This isn't something you tell a child, but she is almost twenty-one, and now she has this job in Washington. I thought she should know. So she can protect herself. Did she react badly? I didn't think so, but she grew worried when we discussed what would happen if this became known. I wasn't an expert on immigration, but anyone living in Southern California becomes conversant with the issue. Do you have a criminal record? Of course not. Are you involved in a criminal enterprise? Please don't make fun of this. Nita, I'm not. I'm trying to tell you ICE isn't going to knock down your door. Are you scared Krista is doing whatever she's doing because you told her? I've lied to her. You said it yourself. This isn't something you could have told her when she was a child. She closed her eyes as hard as she clenched the steering wheel. She must be ashamed. This girl earned a job with the Congress, and now her mother is a wetback. She tried to hold it together, but convulsed with a sob, and covered her face with her hands. I leaned across the console and held her. It was awkward to hold her like that, but I held her until she straightened herself. I'm sorry. This isn't how I thought it would be. I don't know what to do. You don't have to do anything. The World's Greatest Detective takes it from here. A tiny

smile flickered her lips. I thought you hated being called that. I made an exception so you'll feel better. She studied me for a moment, then picked up her purse and placed it in her lap. I didn't hire you because of an article. I did my homework, but the picture caught my attention. I read the article because of the picture. The one with your clock. Pinocchio. The puppet who wanted to be a boy. Two pictures illustrated the article. One was a close shot of me on the phone at my desk. The second photograph was a full-page shot of me leaning against the wall. I was wearing a shoulder holster, sunglasses, and a lovely Jams World print shirt. The shoulder holster and sunglasses were the photographers' idea. They made me look like a turd. But my Pinocchio clock was on the wall behind me, smiling at everyone who enters my office. Its eyes roll from side to side as it tocks. The photographer thought it was colorful. Nita took something from the purse, but I could not see what she held. My uncle had a clock like yours. He told us about Pinocchio, the puppet who dreamed an impossible dream. To be a flesh-and-blood boy. To dream of a better life. It was why we were here. Your uncle sounds like a good man. The tocking rocked me to sleep. You know how people talk about the surf? The tocking was my surf in Boyle Heights when I was seven years old. I loved that clock. Every day and all night, Pinocchio reminded us to work for our dreams. Do you see? She opened her hand. He gave this to me when I was seven years old. A faded plastic figure of Jiminy Cricket was in her palm, the blue paint of his top hat chipped and worn. Pinocchio's conscience. When I saw his clock in the picture, I thought we were not so different. She put the figure in my hand. I can't take this. Give it back when you find my baby. I put the cricket in my pocket, and got out of her car. eleven days after they were taken Dennis Orlato Their job was to get rid of the bodies. Twenty-two miles west of the Salton Sea, one hundred sixty-two miles east of Los Angeles, yellow dust rooster-tailed behind them as the Escalade raced across the twilight desert. The sound system boomed so they could hear bad music over the eighty-mile-per-hour wind, what with the windows down to blow out the stink. Dennis Orlato, who was driving, punched off the music as he checked the GPS. Pedro Ruiz, the man in the passenger seat, shifted the 12-gauge shotgun, fingering the barrel like a second dick. What you doin? Give it back. Ruiz, who was a Colombian with a badly fixed cleft lip, liked narcocorrido songs that romanticized the lives of drug dealers and Latin-American guerrillas. Orlato was a sixth-generation Mexican-American from Bakersfield, and thought the songs were stupid. Orlato said, I'm looking for the turn. We miss it, we'll be here all night. In the back seat, Khalil Haddad leaned forward. Haddad was a thin, dark Yemeni drug runner who had been hauling khat into Mexico before the cartels shut him down. Now, he worked for the Syrian like Orlato and Ruiz. Orlato was certain Haddad talked shit about him to the Syrian, Arab to Arab, so Orlato hated the little bastard. Haddad said, A kilometer, less than two. You can't miss it. When they reached the turn, Orlato zeroed the odometer, and drove another two-point-six miles to the head of a narrow sandy road, then stopped again to search the land ahead. Three crumbling rock walls sprouted from the brush less than a mile in the distance, and were all that remained of an abandoned supply shed built for bauxite miners before the turn of the century. Orlato and Ruiz opened their doors, and climbed onto their seats to scan the coppery gloom with binoculars. The surrounding desert was flat for miles, broken only by rocks and scrub too low to conceal a vehicle. The sandy road before them showed only their tire tracks, made three days earlier, and no footprints. Seeing this, Orlato dropped back behind the wheel. No other cars, trucks, motorcycles, people, or ATVs had passed on this road. Its good. We go. Revue de presse Praise for Taken I have no criticisms of Robert Crais's work, other than I wish he could write as fast as I devour his work, which would require him to crank out at the very least a new book every week. Huffington Post Wonderfully told, a punch-in-the-gut thriller that is not to be missed. The Providence Journal [Craiss] best-selling Elvis Cole/Joe Pike series gets better with every new book, and... Taken, is no exception. OregonLive.com [Taken] would make a fine action-packed film. Publishers Weekly