

# Finding Matthew

---

**John Boston**

The first time I ever met Jennifer Tersey, I was sitting in my office having lunch. Nothing special, just a sub and a soda. Business had been slow the last couple of weeks. Just the nature of the beast. Some weeks I put in over ninety hours, other weeks, I barely work nine. People think being a private investigator is glamorous. It isn't. Far from it. It barely pays the bills. It's just me and my secretary, Shelby. I don't even know why I have a secretary, it just seemed like I needed one at the time, so I hired her. I'm glad I did. She's young but smart. As soon as Jennifer came into our office, Shelby walked her right in.

I like to think I can make most people in about five minutes. I've met enough bull-shitters and hustlers to spot one a mile away. She looked like the kind of woman you would bump into at a health food store. I'd give her fifty or so. Kept in shape. Had a large diamond ring on her finger. I figured she suspected her husband was screwing around on her. That's kind of my bread and butter business. That and reuniting lost family members. I put down my sub and shook her hand.

"Jackie.....this is Mrs. Tersey." said Shelby

"Nice to meet you, please excuse the mess. What can I do for you Mrs. Tersey?"

"Well.....I've done my research on you, Mr. Johnson. You came highly recommended for what I need." she said politely.

"Please, have a seat. What is it you need?"

"I'm not quite sure how exactly to phrase this, so bear with me. Mr. Johnson, fourteen years ago, my son Matthew was killed on board Euro Air Flight 313. At least that's what I've believed all these years. I'll never forget the day I received a phone call from the airline, asking me to please make my way down to their corporate office in the city. They had even arranged a cab that was already paid for. My husband and I endured the most horrible day of our lives as a representative from the airline told us that Matthew, along with 98 other passengers died somewhere near the Azores in Portugal. He boarded the aircraft and it plummeted into the sea. I'm not sure if you recall the crash or not." she said calmly.

"No, not off the top of my head," I said.

"The reason I am here is because yesterday morning I passed by my son at the local mall here in the city. I know it sounds absurd, but I am one hundred percent certain it was my son. It was him. I'm certain of it."

"Janet.....how can you be one hundred percent certain it was your son?" I asked.

"Because I called out his name and he immediately turned around."

"I see. ....this goddamn computer. Hold that thought." I always do this when I need Shelby in here. I've learned that you always need another woman's opinion on women. It's invaluable. Shelby wasn't much of a girl's girl, but this was uncharted territory for me and I was worried about where it could go.

"Shelby, the damn computer locked up again," I said into the small intercom on my desk.

She came in a second later and pulled it off perfectly. Some women feel more comfortable telling men their dirty secrets. I had no idea what Janet's reaction to having Shelby in the room would do. She didn't seem to mind at all.

"Please, go on," I said.

"A mother knows. I am not some middle-aged whacko grasping at straws here, Mr. Johnson. I've shed enough tears to fill a swimming pool over the death of my son. I know it's time to move on and up until yesterday afternoon, I thought I had. At least I can talk about him without tearing up. It took me years to be able to do that."

"So, your son was on a plane that crashed fourteen years ago and you're sure you just saw him yesterday? Am I correct?"

"That's about it."

"So, what exactly is it you want from me?"

"I want you to find him. I want you to find him and bring him home to me. I don't care what it costs. I don't care how long it takes. I've been waiting fourteen years to see my son. I know you're very good at finding people who don't want to be found."

"Okay, Janet. ....let me play devil's advocate here for a second. I am a professional after all. Is it possible that the person you thought was your son was just a person who bore a striking resemblance to your son and had the same name? I have to use Occum's Razor here. It's almost always right."

"As I said...a mother knows. That man I passed by yesterday in the mall was my son, Matthew. It was not a doppelganger, it was him. I know from his eyes. I looked right into his eyes and I saw my son's eyes."

"Well, let's just assume for a moment that this person was your son. If he survived a plane crash, why on Earth hasn't he tried to contact you over the last fourteen years?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe he doesn't want to remember me. I got pregnant with Matthew at a very young age. I was a single mother and certainly not a very good one. I'm ashamed of some of the things I did. My son and I were not very close by the time of the crash. I was working as a stripper when I met his stepfather. He gave us a very good life. He was good to Matthew and treated him like his own son. They got along very well. Truth is, I hadn't spoken to my own son

in over three months since the day he died. We had a rather nasty fight about what happened to him when he was younger and I said some very horrible things to him. Things no mother should ever say to her son. I just want him to know I am so sorry for what I did. It haunts me, knowing what a bad mother I was to my only child. It's something I will take to my grave. I want my son to know that I am not the same person I was when I was younger. I just want my son back, Jackie. I hope you can understand."

"Of course. Janet, in my job you have to be able to tell the difference between what is statistically possible and what is probable. It is statistically possible that your son is alive, but it is far more probable that he is not. I can look for your son, but he's probably at the bottom of the ocean. You must realize that."

"Maybe I am chasing a ghost, Jackie. But, it's my money and if I want to waste it chasing ghosts, that's exactly what I'm going to do. Are you going to help me find my son?" she asked.

"Janet, would you mind stepping outside my office for just a minute? I'd like to discuss this with Shelby." I said.

"Certainly," she said and excused herself. As soon as she was out of the room, Shelby sat down on my desk.

"You're not going anywhere near this thing, right?" she asked.

"If I don't, she'll only be bled dry by some con artist who calls himself a PI. At least I won't bleed her dry. Besides, have you looked at the bank account lately? We're broke. We're broke and she's willing to give us a lot of money." I said quickly.

"You can't take money to find her son when we already know her son is dead. That's like, fraud."

"He is presumed dead."

"He's deader than a doornail, Jackie. I know we need the money, but this woman is a giant boatload of crazy. It's probably not worth the money. What happens when you tell her that her son is dead? That's not what she is going to want to hear."

"What if she's right?"

"She's not. She lost her son. She lost her son before he died and she wants to make amends. I'm not getting warm fuzzy about this one." said Shelby.

"Yeah, me neither. We need the money." I said.

"There will be other cases. You could get slammed tomorrow with rich wives looking to dig up dirt on their husbands before they divorce them."

"Then, I will drop this Janet woman like a hot potato. Sometimes in this line of work, you have to be a little dirty if you want to survive and right now, we are at the survival stage."

"Your call boss. Just don't come crying to me when this all goes to shit," she said and hopped off the desk.

I called Janet back into the office. I tried to be as upfront and reasonable with her as I could.

"Janet, before I agree to take this case, I just want to make it clear that in all likelihood, your son is dead. This could all be for nothing. I can't even imagine what you must have been through. I don't want to take all of your money just to pour salt on an old wound. Now, I must ask, 'cause I will eventually find out: is there anything about his disappearance that you are not telling me? If I find out you have lied to me, I drop you as a client....and I don't do refunds."

"I'm not lying to you. I have been one hundred percent honest. I think you will be surprised by what you find, just not in the way you think you will be." she said smiling.

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Because if I am right and that person in the mall really was my son, then there are bound to be some massive surprises for everybody," she said.

I walked her out. Before she left she signed a standard contract and gave me a retainer of ten thousand dollars. Clearly, the woman meant business. Shelby gave me a death glare. If only I had told her no thanks. If only I had just listened to Shelby who had been right about everything else, maybe my life wouldn't be the giant pile of shit it is now. If only I had a time machine.

"Kind of odd who it was just her and not her husband. Did you see the size of the ring on her finger?" asked Shelby.

"I figured she didn't want him to know."

"She's dropping this kind of cash and doesn't want him to know?"

"You haven't been around too many rich people, have you?" I added.

I really didn't do much on the case for the next few days. The ten grand was spent before I even had a chance to enjoy it. I bought Shelby dinner. I bought myself a new gun. That was about it. We were behind on all our bills. I felt guilty about taking her money, but ten grand just seemed to make everything all better, at least for the moment. I figured Janet was smart enough not to expect results in just a few days, but she might expect me to actually be working on the case. Much to my dismay, a few days later, a cashier's check showed up in our mailbox for another five thousand dollars with Janet's name on it. I didn't even tell Shelby. I knew I had to get the ball rolling. I did plenty of accident investigations when I was a cop, but nothing like this. I drove down to Euro Air's headquarters in the city. I figured this was a safe bet to start. I've learned that you don't want to flash the badge unless you have to. Most of these businesses are staffed by flunkies who will work for next to nothing. Real answers are going to cost you. I got a hold of the name of the PR Rep for the airline and asked for her by name at the main information desk as soon as you walk inside the building. The girl working the desk was gorgeous, but clearly in over her head. I showed her my private detective information, she called somebody, who called

somebody else, and about fifteen minutes later, somebody came to meet me who was clearly not the PR spokesperson.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"I'm Jack Johnson. I'm a private investigator working for the Tersey Family. Their son was on board flight 313."

"Sir, any information about that flight must be done through our legal team, I can give you their number. Feel free to contact them," he said as he gave me a phone number written on a business card.

"What's your name?" I asked

"My name is David."

"David. ....I've got kind of a sticky situation here with my client. Now, I'm sure a smart kid, like you, could help me. It's not what you think. Nobody's after money here. Can you help me?" I asked.

"What's the problem?" he asked.

"My client says she saw her dead son the other day at the mall. The same son who was supposed to have died on Flight 313, fourteen years ago."

"Well, this woman is obviously mistaken. No one survived the crash."

"You and I know that. Is there some way I could prove to this woman her son is really dead? Besides a death certificate? Anything David, anything at all?"

David was not used to dealing with real people outside of the corporate world where most of us existed. He knew he should just walk away, but no one had been this polite to him in ages. He liked being talked to like a real person.

"There's a website put up by the victim's family and friends. I think it's in German but you can translate it. I did. I learned a lot about the crash. It might help you." he said.

"Really? Like what?"

"Well, fourteen years after the crash, the cause of it has still been undetermined. Not a single body was ever recovered. Turns out the plane is now in a huge cavern on the ocean floor. They sent down an underwater drone to take pictures. They are all on the website." said David.

"Well, thank you, David. I'll be sure and check this site out. You seem to know quite a bit about a plane crash that happened 14 years ago. That's like a whole century to most millennials."

"It's the only crash in the history of the company going back sixty years. It's kind of a big deal around here."

David left me and I didn't really have squat. I didn't expect the company to offer up much. No one likes talking to PI's. I spent the next four hours going over everything I could. Euro Air did an investigation. They believed the plane was brought down by an explosive. Since Matthew and four other Americans died, the NTSB did their own investigation. They refuted the earlier Euro Air report about explosives and instead, said the plane simply descended rapidly and simply crashed directly into the Pacific Ocean. They didn't come right out and say it, but they indirectly insinuated that the pilot committed suicide and took 98 others along with him. There was another report done by an Aerospace group from the European Union that said the plane crashed and the cause of the failure is unknown.

No black box was ever recovered. No pilot ever mentioned any sign of distress. They were talking to a radar station in Portugal only ten minutes before the plane disappeared. I struck gold when I found the name and cell phone number of the lead NTSB Investigator of the crash. Much to my dismay, his fourteen-year-old cell phone number was still in use. His name was Shawn Gallavin. He was the head honcho investigating crashes at the time for the US Government. The internet had quite a bit of information about him. Clearly, this guy was no lightweight. I nearly shit myself when I dialed the phone number on the archived crash report and he answered.

I told him I was a private investigator right from the start. This was a straight-to-the-point, no-bullshit type of guy. I told him I had been hired by the mother of one of the victims of the crash. He must have thought I was kidding.

"You got hired by a woman who thinks she saw her dead son in a mall? Look, Mr. Johnson, if her son was on that plane he died that day. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. That plane hit the water at like three hundred miles per hour. It disintegrated almost instantly on impact. It probably took only a matter of seconds before the ocean pulled it down to its final resting place. If he did somehow survive the impact, he would have drowned seconds later. No, I would say it is almost physically impossible for a human being to have survived that crash."

"Could he have somehow survived the initial crash, swam to the surface, and just held on to some wreckage? Perhaps been picked up by a passing boat or something?"

"No, I doubt that's even possible. The Royal Navy were actually the first ones at the crash site. The Portuguese Navy had a helicopter over the crash site within fifteen minutes of it having gone down. Hundreds of boats and planes were in the air within the hour. No one reported seeing any survivors. I mean it isn't rocket science. The fact that the plane is mostly intact and has heavy damage on its front side indicates it was not destroyed in mid-air. I don't know what those people at Euro air were smoking, probably just wanted to save their asses and deflect any blame away from the company. The only way they could do that was by an explosive."

"So, what did bring the plane down?"

"Mr. Johnson, I really believe that something horrible happened in the cockpit that day. All evidence indicates that the pilots simply flew the damn plane right into the ocean. One of them never should have been flying. He was being treated for depression."

"Jesus, if you want to end it all, there have to be much easier ways to do it. Suicidal certainly isn't the same thing as homicidal." I said.

"The fact that we can't examine the plane didn't make things easier at all. The submersible could only take pictures and video. The creepiest goddamn thing I have ever seen in my life."

"I can imagine. Thank you very much for your time Mr. Gallavin. I might be pissing in the wind here, but I want to be able to justify taking this woman's money somehow." I added.

"I wish someone did survive. I'd give one of my testicles to know what went on in the cockpit that day. Most crashes are pretty straightforward. You look at the wreckage and sort of go in reverse until you pinpoint the cause of the failure. This one was weird. Real weird. No mayday call. Nothing out of the ordinary. One minute they're at 32,000 feet and the next minute they're not. I hope I helped."

"You sure did, thanks a bunch," I said.

At this point, I was reasonably sure I could just tell Janet I spoke to the lead NTSB Investigator and he assured me there is no way her son could have survived. I found the web page that David had referred to. There were forty-six German nationals who died in that crash. It was front-page news for weeks in Germany. A group of family members of the crash had decided to hire their own private investigator, a retired Lt. Col in the German Air Force. It wasn't really a web page about the crash, no, not at all. Once it was translated from German to English, it became readily apparent that *this group believed the plane never actually crashed at all and that the pictures and video taken by the submersible were in fact of a completely different plane.*

Intrigued, I spent the next two hours going over their evidence. I must admit, some of it was certainly eye-opening. It turns out that yes, one of the pilots was depressed, but it was over the death of his father. He was examined by two different psychiatrists hired by the airline. They both agreed that his mental state was perfectly normal for someone who had just experienced a loss of a close family member. Both pilots were very experienced, with over forty years of flight time between them. If they had engine trouble, why on earth did they not report it? Good question. In fact, the group discovered that the only evidence for the crash at all was taken by the submersible. The SENTRY Class submersible was not manned. It was used by a research team from WOOD'S HOLE, the NOAA headquarters. One of the members, Jonas Honecker, showed quite clearly that the images taken from the submersible do not in fact match up with any of the characteristics of the plane that crashed into the ocean. The plane that Matthew was supposed to be on was basically an old MD-90. Pretty common plane. The plane that was shown in the video was clearly not an MD-90. Honecker clearly showed that the aircraft shown in the videos was a Boeing 757-23A. He went a step further and showed that the plane in the video is the same one that crashed off the coast of Peru in 1996. Even an aircraft layman like myself could clearly see they were not the same plane. He believed it was the exact same plane. I had to get in touch with his guy. His son was on board the plane. Unfortunately, he died last year and many of the original group members had simply lost interest. No one had updated the site in almost ten years. I figured it was a waste of time. I did have to wonder if Janet saw the same page. Maybe this put the idea in her head.

So, after two weeks of research, I really didn't have anything she couldn't have discovered just by researching the crash online. That just wasn't going to cut it. I had to have something more. I phoned Shelby and asked how we were doing.

"Well, I took a nap in the office for two hours, if that tells you anything," she said.

"I'm going to waste some more of Janet's money. I'm going to talk to the team that ran the submersible for the crash back in 2004. I got one of their names off of the official NTSB investigation."

"Where did you get that?"

"Online. It's public information."

"I think this woman is going to expect just a little more than that. You're going out on a limb here for this woman."

"Yeah, I just can't shake the feeling she knows more than she's telling me." I said.

"Or, she could just be good old-fashioned nuts." added Shelby

"Yeah, there is also that possibility."

That's the problem in this line of work. Sometimes it's hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys, or the crazy people *from the really crazy people*. Most people in my line of work are for an asshole who wants to get dirt on another asshole. Not very appealing when you step away from it, but it's money. I've tried doing other things in life. None were very appealing. I guess I'm just not built to be a slave. I'd rather hustle 24/7 than slave away for eight hours a day.....any day.

But, even I have my limits. There are certain things I won't go near. Lines that I will not cross, no matter how much money is involved. I've found that people generally are honest, unless there is a lot of money involved, then honesty and ethics go right out the window. Most of the people I deal with would sell out their own mothers if the price was right.

The Wood's Hole Oceanographic Institute is located in Wood's Hole, Massachusetts. It was a six-hour drive from my motel. Traffic in that part of the state is a nightmare. I waited in bumper-to-bumper traffic for at least two of those six hours. It's a pretty massive operation with the main campus being located two miles away. I had no idea where to go, or who to ask to find what I was looking for. It should have been fairly simple, that's what I thought.

There is an information desk, staffed by volunteers. I told them I had come a very, very long way in the hopes of finding the individual who had taken the video and photos of the Euro Air crash back in 2004. She made a few calls and found a researcher who was working here at the time and said he might be able to help me. A few minutes later, he came down the elevator and met me in the hallway.

His name was Kevin Rhee. He was from South Korea. He was polite, but very standoffish, which I found unusual.

"Kevin, my name is Jack Johnson, I'm a private investigator hired by one of the family members to track down her son who may or may not have been on that plane. I'm wondering if it is at all possible to see the video taken by that submarine back in 2004. I'm told the video was pretty



extensive. I know it's probably a waste of time, but I'd like to see it anyway if it's possible." I said.

"Gosh, I wouldn't even know where to start. This is a massive organization. Each department is pretty much separate from the others. People have worked here for years and I have no idea who they are. I was working as a graduate student at the time in the sonar department. We didn't do much with submersibles. We usually contracted that work out. It would help if you knew the name of anyone involved in the project." he said.

"The names I saw on the documents were Marjorie Kenner and Greg Emory."

Rhee's expression immediately changed.

"Now, that is one name I do remember. Greg Emory. Never met him, but I remember hearing about him."

"Yeah, I read his obituary online. He wasn't very old when he died."

"No, I remember that name very well. He was killed in a robbery shortly after he got back from the crash site."

"Really? His obituary neglected to mention that."

"Yes, he stopped by an ATM one night. Someone just shot him and took all his money. The institute has a big mural named after him. Everyone said he was such a nice guy. That's a rare thing nowadays. I miss nice people. I wouldn't even know where to look. I can call the institute director and see if she could help you. If she's available."

"No, I don't want to tie anyone up. Would it be possible to get a hold of the other researcher, Marjorie?"

"If I knew where to find her, I'd say yes. She hasn't worked here in ages."

"Right, well, thank you, Kevin. You've been very helpful."

"So, your client isn't sure whether or not her son was on the plane that crashed?"

"Yeah, it's kind of a mess. She's certain she saw him a few weeks ago at the mall. I know she didn't, but she hired me to make certain he is not alive, so that's what I have to do."

"Wow, well, here's my card. If I can be of any help, please let me know," he said and handed Jack his business card.

Wood's Hole was a waste of time. My only shot at getting any real information was going to happen at Euro Air. I had to talk to somebody at the airline who was involved in the recovery operation. I knew in this day and age, talking to anybody with half a brain was next to impossible, let alone someone who could give me some real answers. Somebody at that airline knows what caused the crash. I just wasn't sure what route to take. I have found honesty is

almost always the best policy, even when dealing with these corporate turds. There's so little of it nowadays, people are almost drawn to it. I stayed overnight at a motel near Boston and drove down to New York City the next day. It took me over an hour to park and walk to the headquarters of the airline. I walked up to the same gal that had helped me a week earlier. She didn't even recognize me.

"Hi, I spoke with a very nice young man last week named David, could I possibly speak to him again? It's in regards to the Euro Air crash back in 2004."

"Does David have a last name?"

"I'm sure he does, but I can't recall it at the moment. You called him last week when I was here."

"Give me just a minute."

She pretty much ignored me for the next ten minutes. Finally, she waved and I walked back to her desk.

"Someone from our public relations office will be down to speak with you shortly," she said

"Thank you."

A few minutes later, 2 men, who were obviously some type of security came down and started grilling me.

"Where's David?" I said jokingly.

"He no longer works for this company. Can I ask the nature of your business?" said one of the suits.

I'm Jack Johnson, a private investigator. I'm employed by the family of one of the victims of the crash. I just need to know that he was in fact on board the plane when it went down into the ocean."

"We don't release information like that to investigators." said the other security member.

"If I have to get a court order, I'll do it. That means a bunch of cops will be here with me. I'll confiscate every hard drive in this damn building if I have to. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Either way, I'll get this information." I said, surprised at their very defensive attitude.

"Wait here." said one of the security guards. He made a call on his cell phone and was gone for about five minutes.

"Okay, please follow me," he said.

I felt uneasy about being unarmed. I didn't think I had to be. I have a concealed carry permit from the state of Pennsylvania, but New York has their own set of rules. I won't make that mistake again.

"No one said a word as we boarded the elevator and were taken to the seventh floor. I was led into an office. Judging by the elaborate furnishings and décor, I figured this person was a big wig in the airline.

The two suits followed me into the office. The man met us at the door.

"Hi, I'm Peter Murdock. What can I do for you?" he asked.

I told him why I was here and what he wanted. His demeanor suddenly changed. He was no longer smiling. He suddenly became very nervous.

"Well, let's see what we can do. So, Jack.....can I call you Jack?"

"Sure."

"Jack, if the airline told you he died, then I'm going to assume that they were 100 percent certain he boarded the plane. It only stands to reason."

"I understand. I'm sure it was a very difficult time for everyone at the airline. I also know mistakes can happen. Is it somehow possible for Matthew Tersey to have not boarded the plane, yet the airline believed he did?"

"Well, no, not really. I suppose it is possible for him to simply have given his boarding pass to someone else and they crashed on the plane, that's the only possible scenario that makes sense."

"So, then that is a possibility."

"Yes, it is possible. I was not working for the airline at the time, but they are all pretty much the same in this regard. I can't say for certain that he was on the plane, I just can't figure out why he wouldn't have said something after all these years. I mean, he literally cheated death. I would think for a kid, that would be major bragging rights."

"That's just the problem, Pete....he's a teenage kid. Who the hell knows what he was thinking?"

"Well, the airport did have a video of the gate where the plane departed. I've seen the video, it was released online. It shows everyone boarding the airplane that day in Athens. As painful as it may be, perhaps your client would want to watch it to see if she recognizes her son. If she does, then I think we can safely assume he was on board the plane when it went down."

"You wouldn't happen to have a copy of that video, would you?"

Pete began searching online for the video. After about ten minutes he was just about to give up when he found a link for a server that still had it. I followed him on my smartphone. Problem was that the video quality was pretty bad. You could barely make out anything. Matthew also mentioned to his dad that he had changed his appearance while he was in Rome. I downloaded it onto my phone. Maybe my tech contact could do something with it, but as far as I was concerned, this was another dead end.

"Pete, I thank you for your time. I hope you can understand my position. I'm not after money. I just want to give this woman some kind of peace. The last fourteen years have been a slow-motion train wreck for her."

"Of course. My associates will follow you downstairs. Nothing personal, it's just our company policy."

I shook his hand and followed the suits back into the elevator. We went back down to the lobby.

"So, what exactly does Mr. Pete do for the airline?" I asked one of the suits.

"He answers questions." said one of them.

They escorted me out of the building. I thought their demeanor was somewhat odd. Both men were wearing ankle holsters. Did they have that many unhappy customers who felt it necessary to be armed? Just as I was walking out of the building, it hit me. I stopped dead in my tracks.

*I never told Pete how old Matthew was.....how the hell did he know he was a teenager?*

Maybe he just assumed it from the scenario I described. Maybe.....or maybe he knew more than he was telling me. Either way, he was right about one thing: I had to know one way or the other if Matthew really did board the plane that day. That would solve all of this. If he did board the plane, he was dead. If not.....well, that was kind of a problem. Is this what the airline was trying to hide? Did they really know that Matthew didn't board the airline? No, it just doesn't make any sense. He would have said something to somebody.....I would have to think he would have at least contacted his father or his friends.

I just didn't like this at all. In my business I've found where there's smoke there's fire and that room was sending out smoke signals. That guy clearly knew more than he was telling me.

*He wasn't going to tell me shit. He just wanted to know what I knew.*

Why all the secrecy? Was he afraid of getting sued and losing his job? What the hell were these guys hiding?

Shelby had also raised the possibility that if we were to find him alive, then the airline would probably want their settlement money back. She did some searching and found that the airline had to pay out fifty thousand dollars a victim to the family members.

My best bet would be to give the video to my tech guru and see if he could do anything with it. If not, I was back to square one.

I drove back home that night. I called my nerd friend, Santos on the way and had him meet me at my house. He found the link on his phone and downloaded it onto his laptop.

"It's standard VGA quality," he said.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means 640x480 resolution. It means trying to do anything with this video is going to be next to impossible. Even if I scanned it into a digitized format, as soon as I tried to clean it up, it would just get blurry. If we knew at one point he scanned his boarding pass, we might be able to zoom in on him and have a better look." said Santos

"I don't know. Do your best with it. I'll have to show it to Janet and see if she recognizes any of them. That's about the best I can do. I was lucky to get this."

"This really isn't my cup of tea. I know somebody who works with video. I'll give him a call in the morning and see what he can do with this."

"I'd appreciate it. I'm going to meet with the client in a few days. I'd like to have something for her."

Santos called me the next day at the office.

"Hi, my buddy was able to restore the picture somewhat. He basically blue-rayed the old video and slowed it down. It's much better than what we saw last night, but still not great. Hope it helps. I mailed the DVD today. It should arrive tomorrow afternoon."

"Thanks, Santos, I owe you one. Stop by the office to pick up your money."

"Okay, Jack. If you need anything else, just give me a shout."

Santos was worth every cent I gave him. I talked to Shelby and went over everything I had done in the last week. I was curious to see what she had to say.

"Jack. I can't believe you did all of this for her. Her son is dead. If he didn't get on the plane, I can assure you he'd have told somebody. Nobody just escapes a nightmare like that and is going to remain quiet. No way."

"Maybe this kid isn't your average nineteen-year-old. Maybe he realizes that everyone thinks he's dead, so why not take advantage of it?"

"I doubt any nineteen-year-old would think that way. Besides, how the hell would he get out of the country and back home? If he made any ATM withdrawals or used his credit card, that would give it away, right there."

"Yeah.....I don't know Shelby. I started off thinking this whole thing was a waste of time, but after that meeting at Euro air a few days ago, I don't know. It's like everybody is hiding something. Maybe she is crazy, but that doesn't mean she's wrong."

"Why do you say that? What about this is setting off red flags?"

"Just a feeling I get. Innocent people don't mind talking. Guilty people do. That German website that showed the plane at the bottom of the ocean is not the same plane Matthew was on, the fact the guy who recorded the plane in the ocean was murdered. The fact that the kid at the airline who helped me got canned. Maybe it's all coincidence.....maybe it's not."

"I looked at the video by that German guy. You can barely make anything out. It's not the complete plane, just a big chunk of it. The fact that it says EURO AIR on it, should have been a dead giveaway."

"Yeah.....I'll call Janet and give her an update. I'm going to have to show her the video, as painful as it may be."

"I know. Just be careful with her. I don't trust her."

"Her? Come on. She just wants her son back."

"Jack, I like you, I really do, but you trust people too much, that's going to be your downfall."

"Shelby, I don't trust anyone, including myself," I added.

I knew the meeting with Janet was going to be rough. She had a very cold, business-like demeanor. She'd be perfectly happy running a billion-dollar corporation. Still, she didn't even hesitate to offer more money when she arrived. I sat her down and went over everything with her. Thank goodness the boarding video had arrived only an hour before in the mail. I watched it several times. I could not say for certain the two kids that fit his description were definitely him. That's what Janet was here to do. I just had to hope she hadn't gone completely nuts. I figured if I saw tears, that was enough for me. I didn't want to punish the poor woman any more than she already had been.

"Janet, nice to see you," I said shaking her hand.

"What do you have for me, Mr. Johnson?" she said, getting right to the point.

I spent the next fifteen minutes going over all of my receipts with her. I told her about the Wood's Hole trip, and the Euro Air trips. Finally, I asked her if she was ready to see the boarding video.

"Yes, please," she said.

We spent the next forty-five minutes watching the entire video. She never changed her expression. She barely even blinked. I turned it off and sat down next to her.

"Was he there?"

"No. No, he was not. A mother knows. I'm not just being difficult, either. If I really did see him there in that video, I would say so. No one there was my son."

"I rewound the video and stopped at the three people I thought might be him."

"Not him. He hated baseball caps. Never wore one in his life."

I went on to the next one.

"He was traveling solo. That boy is clearly with the girl beside him," she said,

When I stopped at the last one, she leaned forward, then sat back in her chair.

"Hair is too long. Matthew always kept it short. I've been to that airport in Athens. It's like an oven in there. He hated being hot. No way he would be wearing a jacket. I'm sorry. My son is not there."

"So then he gave his ticket to someone else?"

"It would appear so?"

"Janet, the Athens airport has very tight security. He must have switched tickets with someone else."

"It would appear so."

"So, then you are one hundred percent sure, no one on this video is your son?"

"Correct. The video quality may not be great, but it's clear enough. None of them is Matthew. I am not crazy. That boy in the mall really was my son."

"Okay, let's walk through this one. He changes tickets with someone else on a different flight. Let's say he lands in Boston. He would still need someplace to go. He would still need money. Where does he go?"

"I don't know. I made a list of his friends, even a girl he was dating at the time," she said and handed me a handwritten piece of paper.

"You have excellent handwriting Janet."

"I hope the next time we speak, you will have something a little more convincing than this video. Here's another ten thousand dollars. Use it wisely." she said and dropped a huge stack of bills right on my desk.

"Yes ma'am," I said and followed her out the door.

Shelby pretended to be on the phone. She put it down as soon as Janet had left the office.

"So, how'd it go?"

"None of those people in that video were her son. She didn't care about how much of her money I had spent. She just wanted me to tell her where her son was."

"Of course, her son was in that video. She just doesn't want to admit it to herself."

"Isn't it possible that he met somebody in that terminal and switched tickets with them?"

"Why would he do that?"

"Why doesn't it really matter? I'm just asking is it possible? He takes their ticket and lands safely someplace else and the poor bastard he switched with ends up at the bottom of the ocean?"

"Yes, it's possible, but come on. If he did pull it off, I doubt very much he would just disappear. I can't stand my mother either, but that doesn't mean I would let her think I'm dead. Only a sick son of a bitch would do something like that."

"I don't know. She gave us another ten grand. I'm going to track down the names on this list. Wish me luck."

"Don't forget to pay me," she said.

I peeled off five hundred dollar bills and put them on her desk.

"There's more to life than money." I reminded her.

"No there isn't." she reminded me back.

The first name on my list was Kevin Donnelly. He and Matthew were lifelong friends up until the day Matthew died. He still lived in the same town where they grew up. He owned a furniture business.

You never really know what to expect from people. Some co-operate and are easy to talk to, some are not. Donnelly would fall into the latter of the two.

I walked in and asked if Kevin was available. The salesman asked me what I needed him for and I flashed him my badge. I don't like to flash my badge. It creates a lot of buzz feed. People assume the person I am talking to has done something wrong. 99.9 percent of Americans have done something wrong. I'm not a cop. I only want information. That's my catch of the day. As soon as I saw him, I knew there were going to be fireworks.

"Hi, I'm Jack Johnson, a private investigator. I was hoping just to ask you a few questions about the death of Matt Tersey."

"Jesus, he died fourteen years ago, what help could I be?"

"Could we step into your office?"

He rolled his eyes and motioned for me to follow him. We were led into one of the most ghetto-looking offices I had ever seen. There was a huge water stain on the floor, where the roof had partially collapsed.

"So, how can I help you?"

"Kevin, you haven't had any contact with Matthew since his death, correct?"

"Well, unless he's a ghost, then no."

"So, he hasn't tried to contact you, or anyone else that you know of?"



"No, he's dead, how could he?"

"I was hired by his mother to investigate his death, that's why I'm here."

"Jesus, you really are a fucking low life aren't you?" he said sitting in his chair.

"I'm sorry?"

"She calls me out of the blue a few weeks ago and asks if I've seen Matthew. I figure the woman is losing it. I tried to be polite, I know how hard she took his death. Then she tells me she hires this famous private detective to track down her dead son, who is like half a mile underwater. How the hell do you take this poor woman's money? How do you look at yourself in the mirror every morning?" he asked

"Kevin, I'm not stealing her money. I was hired to do a job and I'm doing it. You see, we have a little problem with all this. We have the video of Flight 313 boarding in Athens. Matthew is not in the video. I'm not sure he ever boarded that plane. So, if he didn't, you can see the problem we have here."

"Of course, he boarded the plane. The airline wouldn't have made a mistake like that."

"They could have made an honest mistake. I'm thinking it may have been possible for him to have switched boarding passes with someone else. They just scanned the passes at the airport, they didn't even look to see if they matched up to a passport. It is possible for him to have switched boarding passes with someone else and then flown somewhere else."

"So, where is he? I doubt he would just drop off the face of the Earth."

"Look, I get it. You're his best friend, his amigo, his compadre. You're thinking that if he survived, he would surely have made some kind of contact with you over the years. You'd be hurt if you knew he survived and let you think he was dead."

"How much is she paying you?"

"Not much."

"How much is not much?"

"I'm not sure I want to have that discussion with you."

"Yeah, I'll bet. See, Matt's mom is trying to get the airline to pay out her son's money."

"What money?"

"Euro Air has to pay out fifty thousand dollars for each victim of pilot error. That's why they ruled it was an explosive. They don't have to pay anything if it's a bomb. Multiply that figure by 99 passengers and you have one hell of a bill. The insurance company did their own investigation and said the cause of the crash was pilot error. She's just a bottom feeder like you. That's all this country is anymore, bottom feeders. I mean, at least a whore knows what she is."

You fuck strangers for pocket change but think you're mother Teresa. You're no better than she is."

"Kevin, if that were true, then why would she hire me to prove her son is still alive? Wouldn't that defeat the purpose?"

"With Janet, it's always about money. Always has been, always will be."

"Well, if he does try to contact you, I'm going to leave you my business card," I said.

"It will go in the trash as soon as you leave, so don't bother."

I put the card back in my wallet. I knew I should just leave well enough alone, but this asshole had gotten under my skin. I turned around and said.

"Kevin, this isn't what you think it is. No one cares about money. We just want to find Matthew. If you were really his friend, maybe you'd want to find him too." I said as I left his office.

I was out of my car when he came running out. I didn't know what he wanted, I had to assume the worst.

"I'll take one of the cards, please. On the very slim chance I ever do see him, I will be sure and call you."

"You aren't doing him any favors, by keeping this a secret, you know that, right?" I said.

"Yeah, look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken to you that way. I apologize. I was really angry after his death. I suppose in many ways, I've never gotten over it. He was my best friend."

I didn't say anything, I just put my hand on his shoulder and gave him one of my business cards. If nothing else, maybe in some small way I helped him get over the death of his best friend, if that's even possible.

I called Shelby back and told her about the settlement problem. It still didn't add up, but in the end, even crazy people have their reasons for doing things.....even if they are crazy reasons.

"Yeah, she got paid alright, but they had to sue the airline to get them to do it. I can't figure out why she would want to hire you to find her son when she was part of the victim settlement fund. Doesn't add up."

"No, none of this does. I just wish I could read minds." I said.

"You and me both," she added.

Next up on the list was Antonia Gilcrest. I figured with a name like that, I was bound to meet someone with some money. Turns out, she ran a daycare in a nearby town, not too far from the interstate.

I should add here at this point, that I still did not really believe Matthew was alive. I mean it may have been statistically possibly, but for all real intents and purposes, it was not. I didn't like having to re-open old wounds, you just never know what is going to come out. Since Janet had already beaten me to the punch and tipped everyone off that I'd be coming, I pretty much had to assume the worst. You don't have to talk to a private investigator. Not at all. I have no more legal authority than anyone else. I'm not a cop. I can't arrest you. I'm really just nosy. That's all private investigators do is be nosy. Put it in places it shouldn't be and see what you find. I do carry a gun, but I am not a cop. I shoot somebody, I'm in serious trouble. I might not be charged, but I can be sued and I almost certainly would be. You are between a rock and a hard place. Makes me wonder why I ever started this line of work in the first place.

Antonia was a soccer mom, right down to the SUV and the soccer ball in the back seat. She ran a licensed daycare facility by the state of New York. I hoped this would go a little more smoothly than the last visit to one of his former friends.

I surmised that Matthew did not have friends that were girls. He had friends that were girls whom he slept with. Antonia was very easy on the eyes. If he wasn't sleeping with her, I'd have been worried. I had to wait at least fifteen minutes for her to finish up with a group of kids before she could talk. The daycare had a pretty sophisticated security setup, where everyone had to be buzzed in and out of the main building. I showed the receptionist my badge and explained why I was there. She didn't know how to react. I told her that I was only hoping for any information about a former friend of hers who died in a plane crash in 2004. I sat and I waited, then I waited some more. Finally, she came out into the lobby area. I tried not to stare at her, but it was next to impossible. The woman could easily have been a Miss Universe.

"Antonia, my name is Jack Johnson. I'm investigating the death of Matthew Jersey. He died in 2004."

"Yeah, Matt's been dead for a while. What exactly are you investigating?"

"I'm trying to determine if he did in fact die in the plane crash in 2004," I said.

"Jesus, did Janet put you up to this? That woman is crazy. Matt couldn't stand her. I can't imagine what that's like, not being able to love your own mother. He never talked much about her, but when he did, he didn't have anything nice to say about her."

"I had already figured that out for myself. No, I'm just making sure you have had no contact with Matt since he allegedly died."

"He didn't *allegedly* die, he really did. It was terrible. God, I never cried so much in my life."

"Could you tell me about him?"

For the next half hour, she went into vivid detail about Matt and their time together. They had met in high school and continued their friendship afterward.

"He was such a nice kid. We hooked up a few times, but neither of us was ready for that kind of commitment, we decided just to remain friends as hard as it was. We were so crazy about each other."

"So then, you have no reason to believe he is still alive?" I asked

"No, how could he be?"

"His mother believes she saw him several weeks ago in a mall."

"His mother is nuts. You can't believe a word she says."

"As long as she is paying me, I kind of have to."

"I wouldn't trust that woman as far as I could throw her. She's kryptonite. She never cared about Matt. He just existed to help her. She would call him and order him to do all these ridiculous things for her. Pick this up, drop this off. He was like her slave. He just wanted to make her happy, that's all he ever wanted."

"You said he didn't have anything nice to say about her."

"Yeah, maybe that was a little too harsh. He never bashed her or anything like that, he just never said anything nice about her either, if that makes any sense. Most teenagers don't talk about their parents unless they have really done something unusual."

"So, you said you two weren't dating, did he have a girlfriend?"

"Oh, he had a girlfriend alright, my arch enemy.....Colby Price."

"You two didn't get along?"

"No, we've hated each other since we were in Junior High. She was the captain of the lacrosse team, I was the captain of my soccer team. I know she started dating him just to piss me off and it worked. It definitely worked."

"Colby Price.....that name was not on the list his mother gave me."

"Doesn't surprise me. Matt didn't want his mother to know he had a girlfriend. I don't know why, but he always kept her a secret."

"You don't happen to know where I could find Colby Price, do you?"

"No, she's probably making trophy wife training videos on the internet. I mean I understand she's a trainer at this big gym in Albany. I'm sure she won't be too hard to track down."

"Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer, I guess," I said.

I handed her my business card.

"If you can think of anything else, please give me a call."

"Will do. Jack, I'd be careful of Janet Tersey if I were you. Whatever she told you, I'm sure it's not the truth."

"I will. Thank you for your time."

I realized after speaking to Antonia that I needed to find out as much about Matthew himself as I could. I didn't think Janet was going to be much help, maybe this Price girl would be. I didn't have to look for her too hard. A quick internet search revealed a ton of information about her. She had all kinds of social media accounts. She was a personal trainer at a massive health club in Albany. She did personal training as well as spin classes and cardio. She just recently completed the New York City Marathon. Matthew clearly liked his girls to be overachievers.

I had to stop for the night and got a room outside Albany. I gassed up my Jeep and took it easy for the night. Judging by her gym's class schedule, she'd be at the gym tomorrow morning. She would be pretty easy to find. At that moment, I just needed some food and a good night's sleep. Sometimes, those two simple things can do wonders for one's health and outlook.

I actually pretended to be a new client, wanting to take Colby's classes. She has quite a following, judging by the outrageous prices the gym was charging to take them. I was given a tour of the gym, which was state-of-the-art. They had a yoga room, a boxing room, and even an Olympic size swimming pool. This was not a gym, no, no, no. This was a *health club*. Kind of like a country club for fitness buffs. They even served food in the kitchen. A quick check of Colby's bio was pretty much standard for this part of the country. After graduating from high school, she got a full ride on a lacrosse scholarship at BU, where she majored in exercise science. She moved back home after school and has been working locally ever since. The first time I met her, she had a gigantic engagement ring on her finger that probably cost more than my jeep. She was stunning. The kind of woman who would be doing beer commercials thirty years ago. I lost the kid who was taking me around the gym and walked right up to Colby. I wasn't sure quite how to handle this one. I made sure she had enough time in between her classes to talk to me.

"Hi, Colby. My name is Jack. I was hoping we could talk."

"Jack, I'm very busy. If you want to take any classes, the staff will be more than happy to help you," she said turning away.

"I'm not here to take any classes. I was hoping we could talk about Matthew Tersey." I said.

She stopped dead in her tracks and immediately spun around.

"What exactly do you want to know?"

"I was hired by his mother to find him. She thinks he is still alive. Do you know why she would think her son is still alive?"

"Jack....Matt died fourteen years ago. He's dead. If you'll be so kind as to see yourself out, I'd appreciate it."

I took my business card and put it in her hand.

"He's not dead, is he?" I whispered before she pulled away and stormed off.

I really don't know what on Earth possessed me to say that. I don't know if he is alive or dead, her reaction was just so strange. I learned a long time ago that people react to horrific events completely differently. I was a rookie cop and had to tell a woman in our town that her daughter had been killed by a drunk driver. I told her that her daughter is dead and the woman just continued to do her pointless yard work. She never even stopped! We all handle stress in different ways. There is no right or wrong way to handle it. This was different. She was angry.....*almost like she had been caught doing something she shouldn't have.*

I got the hell out of that gym as fast as I could. I figured Colby probably hit the panic button when she heard Matthew's name. I went back out to the jeep and drove a few miles away. I was lucky the gym was the size it was. I might not have been so lucky had it been a smaller building. Not that I was doing anything wrong, I just didn't want to scare her away. I could be wrong, but I felt the Price woman could make or break the case. If she tells me she hasn't heard anything from him since his death, then that's it. I've done everything I possibly could. I just have to tell Janet I do not believe he is alive. If that plane really is at the bottom of the sea and if Matthew boarded it, he is most certainly dead. I just can't continue with this case. I just couldn't continue to take her money at that point. Even a dirtbag like me has a line they won't cross and taking a delusional woman's money is it. I called Shelby and filled her in.

"The hell with her. I got a call today from the owner of Willies, you know that big store in the city. They're only in this state. I have no idea how they're still in business, but they are. Just opened another store near my house. I thought big box stores were a thing of the past. Anyway, they are being hit hard by an organized ring of shoplifters. The store security might be in on it. They want us to catch them in the act."

"What did you tell them?"

"Five thousand up front, another five thousand when we bust them."

"Ten thousand? That's it?"

"It's not like you're going after Al Capone here. Most of the time you'd be sitting in your car, listening in on conversations and watching people go in and out."

"Okay, I'll take it. I'm going to bail on this Tersey woman. This is a waste of time.."

"Glad to hear. I might have another job running security at the county fair. After last year's fiasco with the local police, they've decided to contract it out. I also gave your cell number to a delightful woman who suspects her husband isn't just working late hours at the office to get ahead."

"When it rains it pours. Okay, I'm going to drive home tonight, I'll see you tomorrow."

"What did fake tits Barbie have to say?"

"Not much. She pretty much just flushed my toilet. I was like a fish out of water in there. I gave her my card. I doubt she'll ever call."

"Let's just drop this case. We have bigger fish to fry with bigger paychecks."

"Shelby, it's about time," I said and hung up.

The next seven months flew by. I had so much work on my plate, I was turning down jobs. I finally caught the organized crime ring looting Willies and several other stores in the area. Turns out security wasn't in on it, after all, they just sucked that bad. I followed several husbands around and discovered that monogamy doesn't seem to be very popular these days. I even had to investigate an officer-involved shooting in my hometown. I knew the cop. We went to the academy together. As much as I didn't want to, I had to turn over what I had to my client, whose son was shot in a drug deal gone bad. I got a copy of the internal affairs report and immediately smelled a cover-up. Turns out my buddy had been shaking down local drug dealers for years and pocketing the money. When one of them threatened to talk, he was killed. Made the whole department look bad. So be it. I work for my client, not the local cops. Made some real enemies on that case. I don't really care. Nothing makes my blood boil more than a dirty cop. I'd still be on the force if it hadn't been for police corruption. Honest cops don't last very long in that profession.

I was tailing this husband who had just met with his mistress and was headed back to her place when my phone rang. I didn't recognize the number. Normally I don't pick up the phone if I don't recognize the number or have it in my contact list. I don't know why I did pick it up. Maybe my whole life would have been drastically different if I hadn't.

"Hello, Jack Johnson here," I said.

"Mr. Johnson.....I'm not sure if you remember me or not. My name is Colby Price. We met in my gym several months ago."

"Colby....of course, I remember you. What can I do for you?"

"I need to talk to you."

"I'm listening."

"No, it must be in person. It's about Matthew."

"Colby, I'm not working on this case anymore. Janet Tersey and I parted ways many months ago. She didn't call you or threaten you, did she?"

"Jack.....Matt didn't die in that plane crash. Somehow he survived. He stayed with me for ten days, then he left. He made me promise not to say a word to anyone, especially his mother. I'm sorry, I should have told you that day, but I made him a promise. I keep my promises."

I nearly shit myself. I hadn't even thought about that case or that name in months.

"Wait, so you're telling me that Matthew Tersey, your boyfriend is still alive? Colby, how the hell is that possible?"

"I don't know. He never said anything about the crash, or what happened, or how he managed to survive. I do know this: this was not the same Matthew I knew before he left. The Matthew that came back to me had changed. He was not the same person."

"Colby.....you aren't lying to me, right? You are being completely truthful?"

"I am. I wouldn't lie about something like this."

"Do you have any idea where he might have gone?"

"The day before he left, he mentioned something about joining a carnival that was passing through town. I thought he was joking. He never even said goodbye. He just left me a note. I'll never forget what it said."

"What did it say?"

"It said if he stayed any longer, I would be in danger and that they would find me. I still don't know what that means."

"Me neither. Have you had any contact with him since then, anything?"

"No, not a word. For years, I was never with anyone, hoping he would just show up one day. He was the love of my life. But, everyone has to move on, so I did too. I would just love to know what happened to him and why he changed so much over just one month."

"Shelby, I have to go. I can reach you at this number?"

"Yes."

"Okay.....well, thank you for calling. I've got some serious work to do. I really did not see this coming."

I hung up and immediately dialed Shelby.

"Shelby dear, you'll never guess who just called."

Needless to say, she was not impressed, not at all.

"You are not going down this rabbit hole again. We were lucky to escape this woman the first time, now you want to tempt fate again," she said.

"Look, I'm not going to tell her a damn thing. Kiddo, in this line of work, where there's smoke, there's fire. Somewhere in all this is a huge story. If this kid really is alive, it could blow the doors off of everything."

"If he's alive. We still don't have a shred of evidence, other than this Colby woman."



"Why would she lie?"

"Why do all liars lie? They can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality. I just think if he was alive, she would have said something by now."

"She said he made her swear not to tell anyone. Not even his own family knew he was still alive. That's what makes me think there's more going on here than meets the eye. If you survive a plane crash and are the sole survivor, wouldn't you want to tell somebody? It just doesn't make any sense. She didn't indicate that he was injured or anything. He just shows up at her dorm room one day like a resurrected ghost. I just think somebody should investigate this."

"What's in it for us?"

"Nothing.....except to get the bottom of a very bizarre story."

"Jack, if there's nothing in it for us, why are we wasting our time? I hate to be the bitch here, but we're running a business, not a charity. That Tersey woman knows a hell of a lot more than she told us. Unfortunately, right now, we can't go wasting our time chasing ghosts. We have bills to pay and bonuses to pay out."

"What bonus?"

"The one you are going to give me for being such a great employee."

"How did you go from being my secretary to being the boss?" I asked.

"You need a boss. You're smart, but you have no direction."

"I did fine up until now."

"That's the problem, we're in the big leagues now. Fine just isn't going to cut it," she replied.

"Well, I'll see what I can manage. Are you still dating that boyfriend of yours?"

"Nope, I gave him a pink slip."

"Good. Any man who wears a beret is definitely not someone you want to date."

"He was nice, just not for me."

"Well, don't go getting any ideas about you and me. I have strict rules when it comes to office romances. You don't shit where you eat."

"It's so hard to believe you're still single. Hey, I gotta go. I have to meet my mom for lunch."

"Alright, keep that phone of yours nearby."

"I always do. It's even waterproof. I take it in the shower with me." she said and hung up.

*Who takes their phone in the shower with them.....oh yeah, Shelby would.*

Shelby was right, just like always. There wasn't anything in this for us. I should have just left it alone. I should have, but I didn't. I drove for over three hours from my office in Scranton to the gym in Albany where Colby worked. I had to know. I couldn't just let this one go, even though I knew it wasn't really going to go anywhere. I didn't even know what to say to her. I called her at around 8:30 that morning. I checked into a motel and got about four hours of sleep before our meeting. I looked like shit. I didn't even know why I was here.

We met in the cafeteria at her gym. She had no makeup on. She hadn't done her hair. She looked like any other woman, not the knockout I had met seven months earlier.

I bought her a coffee and one for myself. She didn't say anything at first. I didn't want to make her any more uncomfortable than she already was. She had tears in her eyes.

"I feel like I'm betraying him," she said quietly.

"No, Shelby.....you're helping him. I'm probably the only person in this whole mess that can help him."

"I feel like I failed him."

"Start at the beginning, take as long as you want," I said.

She did start at the beginning. She said she saw on the news about a plane crash in Portugal. When she saw Euro Air 313, she lost it. She was in the school gym and she had a breakdown. An hour later, it was confirmed. Euro Air Flight 313 had crashed with no survivors.

"It was the worst week of my life. We had only been dating for like six months, but I knew he was the one. It's true what they say when you meet the right one, you know it. I knew after our second date that he was the man I was going to spend the rest of my life with."

"So, he just shows up at your dorm room one day, and what?"

"I was getting ready to go down to dinner. I hear a knock at my door and I open it. There he is. I almost fainted. I think I may actually have fainted. I threw my arms around him and hugged him for like hours.....maybe not hours, but a very long time. I had so many questions, you know? He didn't answer any of them. He was different. I'm really not sure how long he stayed with me. I was kind of a mess at the time. I was hooked on Vicodin and wine. Some days I would be so high, that I don't even remember going to class. He was with me for like a week or so, then he just left. Didn't say a word. Just that note I told you about."

"He must have said something."

"Not really. I knew there was something wrong with him. He didn't smile or laugh, or anything. He was kind of like a shell of his former self. I knew something horrible had happened to him. He just never told me what. He just kept saying that everything was a lie.....it was all a lie."

"He didn't elaborate?"

"No, my thinking at the time was that I don't want to force anything out of him. We never even had sex. He was traumatized. I mean he had seen something that just changed who he was, forever. Like those combat vets from Vietnam."

"Is there anyone else who can confirm your story? Anyone?"

"Yes. My roommate, Jessica Alvarez. We were on the Lacrosse team together. I told him he was my cousin, though I don't think she bought it. I mean we were sleeping in the same bed together."

"Would it be possible to speak to her?" I asked.

"Yeah. She lives in Albany too."

"I hope you wouldn't mind. I just need corroboration about this. It's pretty incredible."

"You want to meet her face to face?"

"Please."

"I never told her who he was. We've kind of drifted apart over the years. I haven't spoken to her in almost a year. We used to call or text every day. What are you going to tell her?"

"What are you going to tell her?"

"Nothing. Maybe I should just tell you where she works. I can give you her address."

"That would be great."

"Who hired you?"

"Well, it was his mother, Janet Tersey. She was convinced she saw her son pass by her in a mall."

"I see. I think maybe she had another reason."

"What reason would that be?"

"She was the reason he was on that flight in the first place. He wasn't supposed to come home for another three days. She then changes his ticket at the last minute and tells him she needs him home for some reason. Matt was never supposed to be on that flight. It was her fault. She just feels guilty about it."

"Why wait fourteen years?"

"Who knows? She's nuts. She was into some really weird stuff. Like UFOS and mysterious places. She spent more time on that than she did with her own son. She was not a very good mother."

"So I hear. I can't thank you enough for this."

"Do you want me to call Jessica and give her a heads up? I don't have to tell her everything."

"That's up to you. I have to pretty much tell her everything. Honesty is the best policy."

"Not in this case. I was honest. Didn't help me any."

"Not yet, but that could change. Matt needs help. I just hope I can find him. You don't have any idea where I should start looking?"

"All he mentioned was that stupid carnival. Makes sense. Get a job and move from place to place, where it's hard to track you. They probably don't ask a lot of questions or anything. Good place to hide."

"Did he mention the name of the carnival?"

"No, just that some guy named Jeb was the one running it. I could never in a million years have ever imagined Matt working in a carnival. He wanted to work on Wall Street and make money. He was really smart."

"Well, it's a start. Thank you, Colby." I said and put my hand on hers.

I got Jessica Alvarez's address. I figured if I showed up at work, it might be a little less intimidating. Colby neglected to mention where Jessica worked.

She was a Sergeant at Albany County Correctional Facility.

I didn't bother trying to contact her at work. I waited outside her house for someone to come home. It took almost four hours, but an SUV pulled into the driveway. I called Colby and asked her what kind of vehicle she drove, and if she knew it off the top of her head.

"If it doesn't say BMW on it, Jess is not driving it," she said.

As soon as I heard that, I knew I had the right girl. I stepped out of my jeep and walked up to her. I flashed my badge and tried to show her I was not armed.

"Jessica? I was hoping to talk to you?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Jack Johnson, private investigator."

"What do you want?"

"I was hoping to ask you some questions about Colby Price?"

Colby? What kind of questions?"

"I'm investigating the disappearance of someone fourteen years ago. Please, I've come a very long way, it will only take a few minutes."

"I am armed. Do anything stupid, I blow your head off," she said.

"Fair enough. Let me help you with those bags." I said.

Jessica was on guard, but I had my hands filled with grocery bags. I knew she had her hand on her weapon, but she was just as curious as I was to find out what the hell was going on."

"You want a coffee or something?"

"No thank you. I'm investigating the disappearance of Matthew Tersey. He was dating Colby Price in 2004. I understand he stayed in your dorm room at the beginning of the semester for a short time and then left, is that correct? I said and showed her a picture of Matthew.

"Yeah, that's him alright....wait, wasn't that the name of her dude that died in that plane crash?"

"Yes."

"Well, if he died in the crash, how did he end up in our dorm room?"

"That's precisely what I'm trying to find out."

Jessica seemed caught off guard. I guess you could say we both were.

"So.....he didn't die in that plane crash?"

"Apparently not. Are you certain this is the same person who stayed with you in your dorm room?"

She took the picture and looked at it closely.

"It's been fourteen years, but yeah, that sure looks like him. I remember him, he was cute but weird. Very quiet. Not the type of guy she usually goes for. She said he was her cousin. I knew that was a lie, but I wasn't going to pry. She was in bad shape after she found out he died. I thought she was going to leave school. I didn't want to rock the boat."

"On a scale of one to ten. How certain are you that this is the same person who stayed with you?"

"I'd have to say an eight. Is there something I'm missing here? Why are you looking for this guy now, after all this time?"

"His mother hired me to track him down. She thinks she saw him pass by her in a mall."

"This is very weird. If he survived, why didn't he say something?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. Why did he stay with you guys, instead of his own family? None of this makes any sense. The kid must have had his reasons. Did he say anything you can recall? Anything that I could use to track him down?"

"No.....there was one thing. He said he was going to join the carnival. We thought he was joking. Maybe he wasn't."

"Did he say anything else you can recall?"

"No, I wasn't there much. I left for a semester in Spain about a week later, so I never got a chance to find out what was going on. I remember him being very weird. He would just sit and stare out our window. I asked him what he was looking for and he goes: you wouldn't believe me if I told you. Whatever that means. Something really screwed him up."

"Thank you, Jessica. All I'm trying to do is find this kid and get to the bottom of this. I started seven months ago thinking this was a total waste of time and his mother had to be mistaken. Evidently, I was wrong. If you think of anything else, please give me a call." I said and handed her my card.

I left her house and drove back to my motel. I booked another night. I was so tired I passed out after I had my dinner and woke up six hours later. Still tired, but rested enough to make it back home before sunrise. I like sleeping in my own bed. I just don't sleep right anywhere else. I had to call Shelby and fill her in. I couldn't wait for her reaction.

"Seriously? You drove out to Albany. What did she say?"

"She said the same thing she did on the phone. I also spoke to her college roommate. She confirmed the story. She's eighty percent sure it's him."

"Damn boss, we got a real mystery on our hands here. What's your next move?"

"The only lead I have is that he may have joined a carnival that was passing by. That's it. Other than that, I'm at a dead end. I'm not sure Colby was 100 percent honest with me. I've got to figure he tried to contact her again. I doubt he would have gone through all of this just to leave her hanging. Left a goodbye note, then vanished."

"Well, if it is him, we aren't any closer to where we were the day she came into our office."

"Tell me about it. At least now we know he's alive. That's what burns me in all this: he's alive and I have no idea where to look for him. Call Santos. Tell him there's ten grand in it for him if he can find him. I'll put the word out to the rest of the PI's we go fifty-fifty if they can locate him."

"They will really only want to take half?"

"The ones I trust, yeah. There aren't many of them, but the few I do trust figure it's more money than they had before I called. I've got their numbers on file. Elliot and Mathers. They're good at finding people. Make sure Santos knows what's in it for him if I find him."

"I'll put the word out. What are we going to do about the rest of our work?"

"You're going to have to stall them until I get back?"

"When will that be?" she asked

"I honestly don't know?"

"We won't be able to stall these people for very long."

"I know. It shouldn't be more than a few days. Don't tell anyone about the carnival, let me work that angle and see what I turn up."

"Boss, I didn't know you did pro-bono work. There's no payday in this for us."

"Kiddo, we might be talking to the lone survivor of a plane crash that managed to escape without a single scratch on him. I'd say that kind of makes him special."

"What if he doesn't want to be found?"

"I might have to lure him out. Don't say a word to his mother. I don't want to give her half-baked pie here. I won't talk to her until I know I have found him. He's still got to be in the country or in Canada or Mexico. No point in going anywhere else unless you have a nest egg, which it doesn't sound like he had."

"Be careful boss. I'm still not convinced his mother is telling us the whole story."

"I will. Don't go falling in love with anyone while I'm gone."

"I'll do my best," she said and hung up.

I drove back home that night after catching some sleep. I pulled into my driveway and parked the jeep. I ran on my treadmill for half an hour. I try to keep in shape. You only have one body, may as well take care of it. A quick shower and I was back to work. I live alone. Yes, it does get lonely sometimes, but I have found being lonely is far better than being with the wrong person. Took me one failed marriage to figure that out.

I found a copy of a flier from an Albany newspaper dated about the same time he would have stayed with her back in 2004. It read HORIZON CARNIVAL. They were coming to Albany for five days around Labor Day. I figured Albany wasn't being inundated by Carnivals, so this had to be the right one. I searched and searched for anything about the carnival online, but there wasn't much. This was my only lead, I couldn't just let it evaporate. I called Santos and asked him to run the name and see if he could find anything. He called me back an hour later.

"The circus has a business license out of Clearwater, Florida. Still active. Net assets for the last calendar year were about two and a half million dollars. The business was sold in 2009, not sure what happened after that. The only name I can find even associated with this transaction is Jeb Fargo. He's listed as the owner of the business in 2009."

"What do you have on Mr. Jeb?"

"I have three telephone numbers associated with him and a mailing address."

"Is anything you do even remotely legal?" I asked him.

"Do you want the numbers or not?"

"Of course." I didn't want to know how Santos got this information. I couldn't do this job without him. It's not easy to track someone who vanished fourteen years ago. I tried all three numbers, none belonged to a Jeb Fargo. I looked at the address and using online maps, I quickly determined it to be a residential neighborhood. It had to be his home address. Didn't make much sense for a carnival to have an office since they were always on the road. He must have used his home address. I hated to have to fly down there, but this was my only lead. I booked a flight down to Clearwater and left that night.

I figured I was going to hit a dead end. I doubted this guy would have anything to offer and even if he did, why offer it to me? I knew I was going to have to bribe him, so I took plenty of cash. Cash and headache medicine. I was going to need both.

I landed at the airport at about six the next morning. It was a nonstop flight. I rented a car and drove to my motel room. Six hundred and thirty-six dollars later, I was ready to hit this guy with everything I had, which wasn't much.

I was so tired that I could barely keep my eyes open. I wanted to drive out to his house, but I knew I needed a nap first. I closed my eyes and woke up almost four hours later. I felt much better. I got a bite to eat and drove over to his residence. This was it. If I struck out here, this was all for nothing. I'd be right back to square one. I tried not to get my hopes up. Knowing Matthew was alive, somewhere just made this all the more difficult.

He lived in a nice area of Dunedin, just off Rt. 19. Had a great ocean view. I made certain I had the right address. I hate knocking on front doors. It's like I'm invading their personal space. Fortunately for me, a man came out of the residence to check his mailbox. I got out and walked over, just as he opened his mailbox.

"Jeb Fargo?"

"Who's asking?" he said angrily.

"I'm Jack Johnson, a private investigator."

The old man just waved me off.

"I'm done talking to you people. I told you a hundred times what happened there was not our fault."

"No, I'm here to find out anything I can about Matthew Tersey?"



"Who?"

I showed him a picture of Matthew. He put his glasses on and stared at it.

"Yup. I remember him. Nice kid. Smart too. Stuck out like a virgin in a cathouse. Most of the people we hire.....well, they're not too bright. it's either the carnival or the street. Most are just transients or hobos. He stayed with us for about a year. Yeah, I remember one day, we were in Ohio and he comes into my trailer and says he has to leave immediately. I ask him why and he says he got accepted into some seminary school. I think he's joking, but then he shows me his acceptance letter. I don't want to be accused of holding anyone back, so I told him to go for it. That's the last I ever heard of him."

"Do you happen to remember which seminary school it was?"

"Oh yeah. That's why I remember him. Only person I have ever hired in my twenty-six years as the carnival manager that ever got accepted to Notre Dame. I was proud of him. That's quite an accomplishment."

"Thank you, sir. You have been very helpful. I've been looking for this man for months. I flew down here from Pennsylvania."

"Pennsylvania? Why didn't you just call?"

"I didn't have your number."

"Really? When I need somebody's number I just look them up online. You can find all kinds of fascinating things about people online." he said.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"One thing though. My body might be shot, but my mind isn't. If I remember correctly, the name he gave me wasn't Matt Tersey. It was similar to that, but not that. Let me think for a minute.....ah, yes, Kersey. Matt Kersey. That's what he called himself."

"I see. Thanks again Jeb, you've been a lifesaver."

"You want to come in? I got some fresh crab, cold beer."

"Jeb, I've only slept a few hours in the past few days. Here's my card. If you can think of anything else, please, give me a call."

"Sure. If I think of anything, I'll give you a call," he said and headed back into the house.

I raced back to the motel and filled Shelby in. I was getting closer. Notre Dame Seminary College. Seems like an odd career choice for him, but whatever. He said he saw the acceptance letter. I called Santos and updated him. He called me back half an hour later and said he thinks he found him.

"Father Matthew Kersey. He graduated in 2011, ordained shortly thereafter. His last known address was at a church in Grand Island, Nebraska."

"It's got to be him. Santos, you're amazing. Stop by the office to collect your money. I promised you five grand, right?"

"Good one, Jack. I'll be there by tomorrow morning. Who's that girl in your office, she's cute."

"That is my secretary, Miss Shelby."

"Secretary, huh? Didn't think you would need one of those. You that busy?"

"No, I really can't even afford her. She's kind of the brains of this whole operation."

"So then, what are you?"

"When I figure that out, I'll let you know. Thanks again, bud."

I knew I had to make one last phone call. This one was for all the marbles. I knew it was not going to be easy, but it had to be made. I was going to need some money. I knew just who to call.

"Janet....it's Jack. Don't hang up. I think I've found your son." I said.

"Jack. So nice to hear from you. I knew you wouldn't let me down, your previous disappointment notwithstanding. Where are you?"

"I'm in a motel in Clearwater, Florida. Look, I have to fly to Nebraska. I could use some money."

"Jack, do you take me for a fool?"

"No, I take you for a royal pain in my ass, which you are. Do you want to see your son or not?"

There was an awkward silence for a moment and then she said yes.

"Look, he did survive the crash. I have no idea how, but he did. He stayed with his girlfriend sometime after. He joined a carnival and vanished for a few years, then resurfaced as a priest. That's what he's doing now."

"Jack, there is no way on Earth my son would become a priest. Celibacy is definitely not his cup of tea."

"I wouldn't know about that, but I am sure he is a priest. He changed his name. When I call you from Nebraska, I will give you his name and address. Do we have a deal?"

"How much do you need?"

"Let's say two grand. Another ten when you're reunited."

"I'll wire you the two grand. You better not be lying to me."

"I don't lie. I don't even exaggerate."

"You surprise me, Jack. I had all but written you off as just another middle-aged loser and then you drop this in my lap. It's nice to be surprised in a good way."

"When you're all re-united we can go out to dinner to celebrate."

"Sounds wonderful. I'll be waiting for your call."

I needed some real, REM-type sleep, but I just had to get out there as soon as possible. Shelby booked me a flight from Clearwater. I had two stops, and finally, got out to Omaha. I rented a car and had to drive for nearly three hours out to Grand Island. I found the address for his church. I waited for two hours, but no one came in or out. I was so tired that I could barely keep my eyes open. I found a room in the city and passed out for nearly six hours. I woke up at nearly three in the morning. The room had a small coffee maker, thank goodness and I made myself two cups. I knew trying to do anything at this hour would be pointless. I checked the church's web page and saw that the church had a six-thirty AM mass scheduled. I got a quick breakfast and drove back to the church. I waited over an hour and a half for the doors to open. I was the first one in the church as soon as the doors were opened. I sat through a Catholic mass for nearly an hour. There were five people in attendance, most looked to be about twice my age. I sat up front. As soon as I saw him, I knew it was him, at least I was reasonably sure it was him. He was much older than the photograph. He had changed his appearance and dyed his hair. He was also wearing glasses. I made it a point to ask Janet if Matthew wore glasses and she said he didn't. I guess I would say eighty percent certain it was him. I was so nervous that I could barely make it through the mass. I wasn't sure if he made me or not. It was during communion that I was able to get a very good, albeit quick look at him. I still wasn't sure. He strongly resembled Matthew, but it was not a definite match. I looked for surgical scars or sharp lines on his face to indicate he had plastic surgery done and I couldn't see any. I didn't want to be too obvious.

I left with the other parishioners when mass was over. I waited until the altar boy had left. I watched him leave the rectory about twenty minutes later and go into a small, but well-kept house across the street. I knew it was now or never. I called Shelby and gave her an update, just in case things went south. I didn't have any weapon, just my bulletproof vest. I really had no idea how this was going to go. Shelby was livid.

"Jack.....why the hell are you in Nebraska? We have clients that will pay triple what that Tersey woman will. You're burning some big bridges here. By the way, did you promise Santos ten grand for tracking down that carnival?"

"I'm going to have to plead the fifth on that one."

"He wouldn't leave until I paid him. It cleaned us out. I know he's important, but ten grand? Come on, Jackie."

"I found him, Shelby.....I really think I found him."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Shelby, I have to know. I don't care about Janet at this point. I just have to get to the bottom of this thing. There's something really weird going on here. Maybe it will all turn out to be for nothing, but I can't come this close, then just back away."

"What if it isn't him? What will you do then?"

"Pack up and head home I guess. Hope I haven't pissed anyone off too bad."

"I can't keep stalling much longer. They are going to want an answer today or tomorrow. You need to get back here." she said.

"I will. Just give me an hour, then I'm all yours. If you don't hear back from me in an hour, call the cavalry."

"Be careful. I still don't trust that woman. She's been lying to you from the start."

"I guess we'll find out soon."

I walked across the street and up onto his porch. I rang the doorbell. I was just about to ring it for a second time when he opened the door.

"Matt Kersey....I'm a private detective. Can we talk?"

"Do you have any identification?"

I held up my badge and ID for him to see. He unlocked the screen door and I stepped inside.

"How can I help you?" he asked

"Is your name Matthew Tersey? Your mother is Janet Tersey?"

"No....my name is Matt Kersey."

"Is it?"

"I think I know my own name," he said. He reached into his pocket, pulling out his wallet, then his driver's license. Sure enough, it said Matt Tersey.

"I know you might go by this name now, but fourteen years ago, you died in a plane crash off the coast of Portugal. At least that's what everyone thought. Come on Matt, games' over. I found you."

"Jack....your name is Jack, right? Well, I'm afraid you have me confused with someone else. I'm pretty sure I did not die in a plane crash in 2004, because, how else could I be standing here, talking to you."

"Matt, I was hired by your mother to track you down. She thinks she passed by you in a mall about eight months ago near Philadelphia. Even though up to that point, she believed you had died, she really believes she passed by you in that mall."

"Jack.....I've never been anywhere near Philadelphia. Eight months ago, I worked for the Red Cross in Tanzania."

"I see. Look, I realize this is a very unusual request, but your mother did have your fingerprints as a kid. She saved them. If you wouldn't mind being fingerprinted, we can end this whole thing very quickly."

"Jack.....look. I'm a man of the cloth. We're not supposed to lie, at least to other people. We lie to ourselves quite a bit, but I am not the person you are looking for. I was born and grew up in Bloomington, Indiana. Went to high school there. I joined the Navy and was a chaplain's assistant for three years, then used my GI Bill to go to school. I got a full ride to Notre Dame.....now here I am. You have me confused with someone else."

"Like I said. Fingerprints or a DNA sample could clear this up very quickly." I said.

"Do you always meet people and ask for their DNA or fingerprints?"

"Matt, what you fail to realize here is that at some point in the not-too-distant future, someone way higher than me on the food chain is going to ask you for your fingerprints. See, your mother got paid out almost fifty thousand dollars by the airline because they believed you died in that crash. You can see the problem we have here. They will get a court order for all this and you won't be able to say no."

Matt just shook his head and sat down.

"This is ridiculous. What makes you think I am the person you are looking for?"

"Well, for starters, the similarities in your names. The fact that you bear a striking resemblance to the person I'm looking for. The fact that my last positive lead told me you had been accepted into the seminary school at Notre Dame. Just too many coincidences here for me to go away."

"Fine.....you can have my fingerprints, but not my DNA. I'd like to think we still have some type of privacy left these days. I have to draw the line there."

"I'd certainly appreciate it. I've done this enough times. I have the kit, right here." I said and took the fingerprint kit out of my bag. He kind of half-heartedly co-operated. I took several finger and palm prints, making sure they were done right." It only took a few minutes.

"I hope you won't consider me rude, by asking you to please leave," he said.

"Not at all. I thank you for your cooperation, Matt. You did the right thing whether you realize it or not. All this poor woman wants is to know if her son is still alive."

"I've never been to Philadelphia. Certainly not a mall there. I hope you find the person you're looking for, but it isn't me." he said.

"If I'm wrong, I owe you a steak dinner. Here's my card." call anytime." I said and handed him the card.

He didn't say goodbye or anything. I just stepped out and he closed the door behind me. I raced down to the nearest Post Office and overnighted the fingerprints to Shelby. I have a fingerprint expert on the payroll who I have used before. He worked for the Pennsylvania State Police for many years. He has testified in hundreds of trials. The man knows his stuff. She would drop them off at his house tomorrow. I knew I couldn't leave until I had an answer one way or another, but I also knew that if this person really was Matthew Tersey, there's no way in hell he would have let me fingerprint him right then and there. He would have stalled as long as possible. Maybe he was planning on escaping. I had to keep an eye on him, without raising alarm bells. I made sure he still stuck to his routine and followed him that afternoon as he made his rounds. He spent two hours at a hospital, then went to a grocery store, then went to some office building. Nothing out of the ordinary. I was waiting to see if he went to a bank or ATM. That would be a good tip off he was planning to skip town. He didn't use either one. I'm pretty certain he didn't know I was following him.

The prints wouldn't be to Scranton until tomorrow morning. It was an hour's drive to his house. He would know in five minutes if it was the same person. As bad a mother as Janet allegedly was, she went out of her way to make certain her son was well fingerprinted, which I found rather odd. An absentee mother who goes overboard on the safety of her kid? Didn't quite add up. It was just a waiting game. Shelby said she would make sure he was at the office as soon as they arrived with his equipment so I wouldn't have to wait. That was all I could do, was sit and wait. I went back to the motel room at about six that night. It was raining out so hard, that I had to pull over and crawl back to the main road. I got back to the room about seven o'clock. I stopped by a restaurant and had a bite to eat on the way. I turned on the TV and was flipping through the channels when my phone rang. I didn't recognize the number.

"Jack Johnson here."

"Jack.....it's Matthew. We need to talk. Come to the local high school, the one on Lafayette Ave. Come alone. Be there in an hour. I'll be on the football field." he said and hung up.

I called Shelby right away and told her where I was meeting him and why. She sounded like she was in the middle of something and blew me off.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I'm in the middle of dinner. Let me know how it goes," she said.

I didn't pay much attention to it. I got dressed and drove out to the high school. It was a ten-minute drive. I parked the car and walked over to the football field. Matt was in the bleachers. I didn't have my gun with me, just my vest. I figured if it really was him, he was probably armed.

"You're not armed, are you?" I asked from the fifty-yard line.

"I'm a man of God. I've never carried a weapon in my life," he replied.

Sure, Matt. I'm dumb, but not that dumb.

I sat next to him. The bleachers were freezing. It was still raining outside and I was not dressed for this weather.

"You are the third private detective my mother has hired. I killed the other two," he said.

I was floored. I hit pay dirt....I mean I really hit pay dirt here. I figured if he was going to kill me, he would have done it in the house.

"Why didn't you kill me?" I asked.

"Because I'm a priest. I'm supposed to be one of the good guys. I'm not supposed to go around killing people and disposing of their bodies. That's not what good Christian people do, now is it?"

"Matt, what the hell is going on here?"

"Before we go any farther, I need to ask you something and I need you to think about it. I mean, I really, really need you to think about it."

"Okay."

"See, if you know the story, then you are a part of the story. You can never escape it. For the rest of your life, you are a part of it. Cause once you know....you know. Your wife, your kids.....they are a part of it too. Are you certain you want to accept something of this magnitude?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't have come all this way if I wasn't."

"You have no idea what you're about to step into here, Jacky boy. This is some serious, mind-warping shit. Whatever you thought before.....well, forget it, it's all bullshit."

"Matt.....what happened?"

"I was in Athens, waiting to go home. I had to call home and check in with mom, so I did. She tells me she got me an earlier flight. Athens to New York. I just wanted to be back with Colby. I knew something was wrong about halfway there. We were headed in the wrong direction. We should have been going north and we were going southwest. I figured the pilots knew what they were doing. It wasn't until we saw the palm trees that we really got worried, cause palm trees don't grow anywhere near LaGuardia. The flight was longer as well, by almost two hours. The captain came on and said we had to be rerouted because of an emergency. No one was panicking yet. Maybe we should have. We landed and about a dozen men with guns came on board the plane. They didn't say a word and just shot two people right in front of me. Everyone started panicking. The captain came on the radio and said the next person who screams gets shot. So, I'm worried, I tried to call or send a text, but my phone wouldn't work. Nobody's cell phone worked. They got all of us off the plane and made us wait in this hangar for like two hours. Then we got loaded up into trucks like cattle and shipped to these big cargo boats. We were on the boats for several days. They fed us and gave us water, but they told us there were too many of us and some of us had to be culled before we arrived. They were just looking for an excuse to kill

us. We land in Mexico, then get loaded onto these big trucks. I remember seeing all these Mexican soldiers. We pleaded for them to help us, but it didn't do any good."

"The men that bordered the plane....were they Mexican as well?" I asked

"No....definitely American. One was British. Not Mexican though. They all had their faces covered, so it was hard to tell, but you still knew. So, at this point, we're all crying and tired. Some of us did try to escape. I'd like to think he made it. While we were on the ship, one of the men brought us a newspaper. The front page was about our plane crashing into the ocean. He told us that as far as the rest of the world was concerned, we were dead. No one was going to come looking for us. We weren't allowed to talk to each other, but some of us were able to communicate. We'd slip one another our passports. For some reason, they never searched us when we got off the plane. They killed a few more in front of us on the boat. Just to let us know who was in charge. We were taken to what looked like some kind of Army base out in the Mexican desert. We were taken into some giant building and these doctors or scientists came in and talked to us. They were all American. They were much nicer than everyone else. They apologized for what had happened to us and told us as horrible as it was, it was necessary. They said we were chosen for an experiment. They said we were going to meet aliens. None of us could believe it. It was like a nightmare, only it was real. There was no waking up from this one. They assigned us rooms. We were given these hospital-like gowns and then locked in. I finally got a chance to talk. My roommate was a fifty-year-old woman named Rebecca Paulson. She was from Dover Delaware. She had a husband and two children. She was hysterical. We both knew something horrible was going to happen to us and tried to find a way out of that room, but it was useless. It was a prison cell, not a room. The doctors and nurses would come in throughout the day to check up on us. They always had two guards with them at all times. One wrong move and we were both dead. I had a plan to just rush them as soon as they came in and get one of their guns, but Rebecca talked me out of it. We were in that room for about a week, when everything changed. There were no more visits from anyone. One night five guards came in and stripped us down. Took all our clothes off and marched us down this big elevator. It seemed like we went down a mile. They led us to this big hallway where dozens of people were standing. I knew this was it. I hugged Rebecca and told her if I ever got out of this alive, I would tell her family what happened. She promised to do the same for me. There were maybe twenty of us in line. I was the very last one. I see four guards come by with this giant woman in the middle. She passed in front of me. I knew I was looking at an alien. I mean a real-life, honest-to-goodness being not from this planet. She was like seven feet tall, very thin, and very beautiful. She stopped in front of Rebecca and kissed her on the lips. It was the most surreal thing I had ever seen. They kissed for a few minutes, then this alien just smiles at her, grabs her by her neck, and snaps it.....right in front of me. She killed her. She just kind of floated away. I mean she wasn't really walking or floating, kind of both. It was so weird. Most of the people in the line were in shock. I talked to someone in front of me for a few minutes. He was in shock too. I asked him what was going to happen to us and he just smiled and said: those aliens are going to have a little fun with us. First time in their lives they get to have a little fun. Some of them go too far. They get a taste of what it's like and they get lost in the moment. He then lifts his hand and it's missing some fingers." said Matt.

I could tell by the expression on Matt's face that he was not lying. He believed he was telling the truth. I didn't want to interrupt him.



"I was the last one in line. That stupid guard must have been brand new. He didn't know how to put on a pair of handcuffs. He left too much slack in mine. They never even took Rebecca's body away. It was just laying there on the cement floor. I knew if I hung around, I was as good as dead. There was some kind of fight or drama at the front of the line, so the guards left me. It was now or never. I slipped the cuffs and slid them down to Rebecca's body. It was kind of dark in there. I was hoping they would not see the empty pair of handcuffs. I knew I only had a few minutes to get out of there. I bolted and found a stairwell. Keep in mind that I was completely naked. I must have gone up twenty flights of stairs before I found a door that wasn't unlocked. It was to some kind of giant mechanical room with these pumps and generators. That must have been what powered this place. Up top, I can see sunlight. I climbed on the generator and tried to open the metal grate. They were all locked, except for one. The metal was rusted so bad, that I was able to push it open and climb out. I climbed my way up this giant tube that must have been for ventilation. I almost slid down a dozen times. Finally, I got to the top. I climbed out and hit the sand. I was out. I didn't even hesitate. I ran and ran until I couldn't run anymore. It was dark outside. Completely dark, no light, except for this little ranch. I don't know if anyone was at home or not. I found some clothes and shoes. There was a truck parked out front, so somebody lived there. I didn't stop, I just kept running. I finally came to civilization about two days later. I was dehydrated and exhausted. The town of Agua Prieta was only five miles away. I actually walked across the border in the desert. Just walked across. No one even tried to stop me. Right at the Arizona, New Mexico line. Hitch-hiked to Lordsburg. I stopped in at a local church and I spent the next few days there. Father David Wilhelm. He saved my life. The reason I'm a priest is because of him."

"Matt. This has got to be the most bizarre story I have ever heard. It's too crazy to be a lie, but....."

"Too real to be fake. Yeah, I know what you mean. I know exactly what you mean."

"So, you were taken to an alien base underground so that aliens can just kill you?" I asked

"No, not exactly. They don't want to kill us.....they want to torture us to death," he said distantly.

"Why would they want to do that?"

"Because Earth is the only fallen planet in the galaxy. We are the only place where evil reigns supreme. There are entire civilizations, millions of years old, that have never experienced, real evil. They want to feel what it is like to kill someone, or burn them, and hear them scream. This is the only place where that is possible. We are their guinea pigs. We exist to serve them. It's kind of like a school for them. They come here to learn and experience and to grow."

"Matt, that's crazy. That's absolutely crazy." I said.

"Is it.....or is it about the only thing that makes any sense? In fact, if you look back on our planet's history.....it's the only damn thing that makes any sense."

"Why haven't you said something, or come forward?"

"Jack. They made 99 people vanish from the face of the Earth. They run the show. They call the shots. I'm amazed I'm still alive. I think it's because they know no one will ever believe me. I can hardly believe it happened."

"Yeah, but they know you were on the flight, how the hell can they explain that away?"

"They'll just say I never boarded the plane. I saw the boarding video of the flight. I've seen it a hundred times. I know I boarded the plane, but you really can't see me. I was wearing a backpack and a baseball cap."

"Your mom said you never wore baseball caps."

"My mom didn't know the first thing about me."

"How does she fit into all of this?"

"She put me on that flight, you figure it out."

"You think she knew what was going to happen?"

"About six months before the crash, my stepfather's business went down the tubes. We were broke and facing foreclosure on our house. My mom was pawning furniture and jewelry to pay our bills. Then, like a miracle, my mom buys a winning lottery ticket. Three million dollars just magically drops in our laps. Kind of odd timing, isn't it?"

"What does being kidnapped by aliens have to do with your mom winning the lottery?"

"There was this big drama from the lottery commission. They claim they have no record of the ticket being sold, yet my mom had it in her hand with the winning numbers. The store couldn't say for certain that they sold it to her one way or another. It took them a while to pay her out, but they had to. Gave her a lump sum of 2.1 million dollars. I still to this day don't believe she won the lottery. She sold me out. She knew exactly what was going to happen to me."

"Well, Matt.....if that's true, then why would she be looking for you?" I asked.

"Because.....she still owes them a toy.....me," he said coldly.

"Matt. Would you be willing to go on record and say exactly what you just told me?"

"You mean you weren't recording me all this time? Jack, you disappoint me," he said smiling.

"So, you became a priest because of that priest in Lordsburg, who saved you?"

"I was sick when I came to that church. I told him if he went to the cops, I was as good as dead. I don't know what they did to me in that place, but I was in rough shape. Vomiting, fever, cramps. I could barely walk. He put me in a bed in the basement of the church. Gave me an intravenous antibiotic. Nursed me back to health. Never once did he ask for anything in return. The man really is a saint. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for him, or worse, I'd be back in that horrible place in the desert. I realize now that's the real challenge each of us faces."

"What do you mean?"

"To be a saint among sinners.....or a saint among monsters as it is more fitting," he said.

"Matthew.....stay right here. I'm going to get my microcassette." I said standing up.

"Micro cassette? Why don't you just use your pho....."

I only hear it as it zipped by my ear. I heard it hit Matthew. It knocked him backward and he collapsed onto the concrete below. I ran down the steps after him. He had taken a bullet right to the chest.

Shit just got real here. I thought to myself.

I rolled him over. He was losing a lot of blood. We both knew he was as good as dead.

"My mother set you up," he said, spitting blood out of his mouth.

"I'm going to call 911. It's the only chance you've got. Maybe they can still...."

"Don't bother. I'm a dead man anyway. Save yourself. Make your way down to Baja, to Loreto. Go to the city park and ask for a man named Miguel Ferrera. He will take you to a man named Joshua. He's the only one who can help you." he said, struggling for air.

I hated to leave a dying man, but I didn't think whoever killed him was just going to leave me as a witness. I ran back to my car and got the hell out of there. I knew if I called 911, using my phone, I was finished. The cops would just think I killed him. I knew what it meant. I should have called the cops, but I figured he was a dead man anyway. I pulled into a gas station and told the kid behind the counter that I think someone had just been shot at the high school, out in the bleachers. He didn't know whether to shit or go sailing.

"DIAL 911!" I shouted.

He did as I ordered him to do. I couldn't wait for the cops. I took off. I raced back to my motel and grabbed my things. I tried calling Shelby but got no response.

That's weird.....Shelby always responds.

I tried again five minutes later and it went right to voicemail. I sent her a few texts. I wasn't sure if the cameras from the gas station captured an image of my rental car or not. I did park across the street just to avoid the cameras. It was risky, but I took off back to Omaha. I had no idea how far this went. Was I being set up for Matthew's murder? I decided to call Janet.

I called her twice and got no response. I left a very brief, very intense voicemail and asked her to call me back as soon as possible. I tried calling and then texting Shelby a few more times. I got no response. I was now very worried. Something was wrong, very wrong. Finally, as a last resort, I called Santos.

"Hey, buddy, what's up?"

"Santos, I am right in the eye of a category five shit storm here," I said and told him the rest of the story.

He made some phone calls and called me back about half an hour later.

"Jack.....I don't know how to tell you this.....Shelby is dead."

"WHAT?"

"Yeah. The cause of death was a single gunshot to the head. They found her in your office. Jack, it gets worse. The cops put out a BOLO for you. I don't know what evidence they manufactured, but it must have been good."

"How the hell could I have killed her when I am in Nebraska?"

"You got me, I'm just telling you what my source told me and he's never wrong," said Santos.

"The hell do I do now?" I said almost hysterical.

"Jack, my hacking group has safe houses and stashes all over the country and in Mexico. You just have to get there and not get picked up. First of all, get off the interstate. Highway Patrol and State Police have license plate readers. Your plate could already be flagged. The back roads are filled with small-town cops that don't have that kind of technology. Just don't speed and you'll be fine. The nearest safe house is in St. Louis. The Maryland Heights neighborhood. Go to Twin Cities Storage. Unit number 138.....you getting all this?"

"Hold on, let me pull over and write it down," I said and pulled over.

"Go ahead."

"Unit number 138. The combination is 38, twenty-six right, and 32 left. You got that?"

"I got it. Thanks, Santos....remember, whatever crap you hear about me, you know it's not true. I've been set up and set up good. I should have been more careful. I should have been a lot of things, but that doesn't matter right now, too little, too late."

"Take care, Jack. Inside the locker, there are dozens of stolen passports, stolen driver's licenses, even cash, and guns. Just find one that fits your description."

"Thanks, Santos. You saved my ass yet again."

"Call me when you can. Good luck," he said and hung up.

It was going to be over eight hours from where I was in Nebraska to St. Louis. I filled up twice along the way. I ignored Santos's advice and took the most direct path. I figured, even if I was picked up, my alibi should be good enough. I figured at some point, my picture would be all over the news about the death of Father Kersey. He was a priest after all. I checked several news sources and there was nothing. Not a word. Did the cops go to some other high school? Surely, they would want to at least question me. There was nothing on any of the news channels in

Nebraska about his death. It had been over four hours. Maybe there would be something else in the morning.

I gassed up and pulled over outside of Kansas City in a shopping center. It was dark and I needed some sleep. It was raining outside, chilly for this time of year. Who the hell was I kidding? I couldn't sleep. As exhausted as I was, I just couldn't fall asleep. Too much adrenaline.

It was over four hours from Kansas City to St. Louis. I watched my speed. I found the address of the place on my phone and pulled in. I had to wonder though, at this point, just who the hell did I trust? What if Santos was in on this as well? What if this was just another trap?

I didn't really have much choice. I wasn't going to get very far in my present condition. I had twenty-six dollars in my wallet and I dared not use my credit cards. I found unit 138 and pulled in. I had to try the combination a few times until it finally worked. I lifted the door open. The unit was mostly empty except for some large boxes in the corner. I pulled my jeep in and pulled the door down.

Santos wasn't kidding. Inside the boxes were passports, all current. He had stolen driver's licenses as well. I found a driver's license that was a very close match for me. Height, weight, and age. It didn't really look like me, so I knew I had to get to work altering my appearance to match the one in the driver's license photo. My new name was Shawn Kirby. I was from Houston, Texas. The passport was not quite as easy. None of them really fit my description. I took the one that was the closest, though it was about an inch and a half too short and fifty pounds heavier.

I opened the other box and was amazed to find over five thousand dollars in hundred and twenty dollar bills, all seemingly brand new. I stuffed all of them into my pockets. At the bottom were two guns and two clips. I took them as well. I opened the door to the storage unit and stepped outside. I put the lock back on it and walked away.

I got a motel room, then walked across the street to buy some hair clippers and hair dye. I had never dyed my hair before and really had no idea what to expect. I checked the news in Nebraska for anything about Matthew and still, there was nothing. It had now been almost eight hours. There should be something. That struck me as very unusual.

What the hell happened to him?

I knew they could trace me if I were to call Janet, so I decided against it. I was still angry about Shelby's death. I had to have answers. I wasn't going to do anyone any good if I was sitting in a jail cell. I knew I shouldn't, but Shelby wasn't just my secretary, she was my work wife, my better half in a way. I called the Scranton PD and asked to speak to a detective handling the case. A young kid, but very professional answered. A Corporal Josh Evers of the Scranton PD was handling the investigation.

"Well, it looks pretty cut and dry. We found the gun and the suicide note next to her body."

"Suicide note?"

"Yes, she was pregnant, the guy bolted and she was depressed. I guess she figured it was better for her and the baby."

"Are you going to run an autopsy?"

"Yes, it's standard in all homicides. If she comes back pregnant, we drop the case."

"Look Corporal, Shelby would not have killed herself, no way, no how. She went through men like shit through a tin horn. She would not have killed herself over a guy, even prince charming himself. Someone killed her."

"Well, Jack. We disagree. It's being treated as a suicide. If you can present any information to the contrary, we'd be happy to look at it."

"We'll be in touch," I told him.

Suicide? Are you freaking kidding me? Shelby was a lot of things, but the one thing she was not was suicidal. Somebody killed her. Probably the same people that killed Matthew. He was right: once you know, then you become a part of it. There's no going back, not ever. You just became another player in the game and I hadn't even read the rule book yet. I needed to get to Loreto as soon as possible. If Mathew was serious and I believe he was, then this was my only hope.

I spent four hours cutting and trimming, then dying my hair to look like the person in the picture. I bought some reading glasses as well. When you looked at the picture on the license and then me, we were pretty close. I decided to give it a try.

"I walked down to a used car lot and bought the first car I could afford. I drove back to the motel and took a nap. I had been awake for almost twenty hours. I was exhausted.

I slept for almost eight hours without waking up. I got dressed, brushed my teeth and was on the road twenty minutes later. It took me over a week to get to the border near Douglas, Arizona. I hoped and prayed that my passport would work. The CBP agent looked at mine, then waved me through. Five minutes later, the Mexican agent looked at my passport, scanned it, then waved me through. If it was stolen, it never registered. I was allowed to enter Mexico.

There was one thing I should mention here. That fingerprint expert called me a few days later when I was driving through New Mexico. I don't know what the local cops told him, but he didn't seem to think I had anything to do with Shelby's death.

"Jack, the prints you sent me. I'm going to have to say the results are inconclusive. I can test his toes if you can get another sample." he said.

"Inconclusive? How's that possible?"

"One in a thousand people have very weak fingerprint lines. Some of his matches up, and some don't. You can have defined lines as a child, then by the time you're in your late thirties, they've all but disappeared. No court would accept them as absolute proof."

"Damn.....that did not want I wanted to hear."

"It could be Andermatoglyphia, the genetic condition that causes someone not to have fingerprints, but it's very rare. My guess is he just used acid to burn them off. Whatever the reason, I can't be sure." he said.

"Fifty percent sure? Damn, I thought this was a slam dunk." I said.

"I know. Look, I'm sorry to hear about your secretary. Seemed like a real nice kid."

"She was. It hasn't been easy. I would be back there if I could."

"No, I understand. I was on a stakeout the night my first son was born. My wife was so pissed, that she didn't talk to me for a week. Nature of the beast." he said.

I was only about five miles across the border on the American side. I parked outside of Douglas. I had no idea what I was doing. I should be back in Scranton for Shelby's funeral, but here I was, thousands of miles away. I sent the family flowers and a card, but who cares? She was like a daughter to me. I'm going to miss that kid, I really am.

In some way, I knew every person I met, every person I drew in was going to become a part of this. They could be killed at a moment's notice. I also made it a point to get my revenge on Janet Tersey, if it was the last thing I ever did in my life. It's one thing to just hurt me, but Matt, then Shelby.....how many others have been silenced? How many others know but are afraid to speak out? How long has this nightmare been going on?

If it's this bad in the US, just how bad is it in other countries? Have all these Mexicans really been killed in Cartel violence? Or were they killed by something else? Something that may not want to be exposed. Something that was so horrible, most people would choose to ignore it, rather than confront it. That's how evil flourishes when good people refuse to confront it.

I had never been to Mexico before, let alone driven in the country. The roads were actually in better shape than our roads were. It took me eight hours to get to Loreto. I booked a room in the center of town. Mexico is a beautiful country, but a very dangerous one. You had better watch what you say and what you do down here. One screw-up and you could vanish forever. I went to the park the next day. There were a dozen men, some writing, some playing chess. My Spanish was a bit rusty. After four years of Spanish in high school, I still couldn't order off the menu at Taco Bell.

"Hola, Senior. I'm looking for Manuel Ferrera?"

No one in the group even gave me the right time of day. I asked again and got pretty much the same response."

"I can take you to him, but it will cost you." said one of the men.

"Tell him I'm looking for Joshua. Tell him Matthew sent me."

"Si, senior." said the man and walked off.

I sat down on the bench. About half an hour later, three men came walking rather quickly towards me. I sincerely hoped one of these men was Joshua.

A tall blonde, who looked like a surfer, stepped forward.

"I'm Joshua. Can I ask who you are?"

"I'm an associate of Matthew Kersey. Father Matthew Kersey? Ring a bell?"

Joshua looked like he had just been smacked.

"How exactly do you know Matthew?"

"Take a walk with me, Joshua, my back is starting to cramp up," I said.

I spent the next fifteen minutes going over everything I could, up until now. I told him about Janet, the twists and turns. Everything, up until this moment.

"I'm a part of it now, Joshua. I won't last five minutes without your help."

Joshua looked very serious. I could see that both of his Mexican associates were armed and not too thrilled about me being here.

"Okay, Jack. Follow me," he said.

We loaded up into two SUVs and drove for almost half an hour back to his compound. It had armed guards at the gate. We were led inside the compound. When I stepped out of the van, I was searched from head to toe, by a British man and his wife. They took all my clothes from me, including my shoes. I guess they figured I could be wearing some kind of tracking device. I was led down a hallway to an office. When I opened it, I saw about two dozen people manning computers and phones. There were maps all over the walls.

"Guys, this is Jack. He's on our side," said Joshua.

A few of them waved their hands. One man shook mine.

"Welcome to the family, Jack. This is where the resistance begins," he said.

"Resistance?"

"We are all here to stop them from hurting anyone else. That building where Matt was taken, we stormed it last year. It was empty. Hadn't been used in years. Remember Malaysian Air Flight 370 that just vanished....it didn't vanish. Those people are going through what Matthew did, right now. He and countless others every year are just kidnapped and tortured for their amusement. We almost captured one last year. So close. Could have changed everything."

We walked around and met some of the people working in the office.



"This is Jose. His son disappeared in 2014. You may have heard about it. The Iguala Mass Kidnapping. Still unsolved. Still missing. Jose was prevented from getting any information by the Mexican Government and the police. Not only did they not help him, they threatened to kill him if he exposed what he knew." said Joshua as he put his hand on Jose's shoulder.

"This is a war for our survival. You are either with us or against us." Joshua said.

"This is insane. People have to know. Somebody in our government should be helping us." I said.

"Good luck. I spent ten years trying to get the FBI to look at the cases. They wouldn't even listen to me. Thousands and thousands of people disappear every year in the US and no one even looks for them. Every time we get close, the government or the police throw up a brick wall. I don't know if it would change anything, maybe not. At least our planet would know what is really going on behind the scenes."

Seconds later, one of Joshua's aides came running into the office, waving a piece of paper. He was screaming in Spanish.

"Enrique....calm down, what is it?" he said, taking the piece of paper. Joshua's eyes got wider and wider. His face went completely white as if all of the blood had been drained.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.....this has got to be a mistake."

"No, no mistake. We listen to the military traffic. I make calls. We stop them this time." said Enrique.

Joshua sat down in a chair and put his head in his hands.

"They've never done anything like this before. It's got to be a mistake," he said softly.

"It's not Joshua. It's going down in a few days. There's still time to stop them." said one of the men from behind his desk.

"This is it, guys. This is the big one. We stop them here or we're done." he said.

"What's going on?"

"Stick around. Fun's just starting," he said and left the room.

I had no idea what he meant. If only I knew what was coming. I might just have turned and run. Joshua wasn't kidding. Except, there wasn't much fun to be had, none at all.