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taken

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Prologue:
JACK AND KRISTA

JACK BERMAN WRAPPED HIS ARMS around his girlfriend, Krista Morales, and watched his breath fog in the cold desert air. Twenty minutes after midnight, fourteen miles south of Rancho Mirage in the otherwise impenetrable darkness of the Anza-Borrego Desert, Jack and Krista were lit in the harsh purple glare of the lights that blossomed from Danny Trehorn's truck, Jack so much in love with this girl his heart beat with hers.

Trehorn gunned his engine.

"You guys comin' or what?"

Krista snuggled deeper into Jack's arms.

"Let's stay a little longer. Just us. Not them. I want to tell you something."

Jack called to his friend.

"Mañana, dude. We're gonna hang."

"We roll early, bro. See you at nine."

"See us at noon."

"Pussy! We'll wake your ass up!"

Trehorn dropped back into his truck, and spun a one-eighty back toward town, *Ride of the Valkyries* blaring on his sound system. Chuck Lautner and Deli Blake tucked Chuck's ancient Land Cruiser in tight

behind Trehorn, their headlamps flashing over Jack's Mustang, which was parked up the old county road where the ground was more even. They had come out to show Krista a drug smuggler's airplane that had crashed in 1972 because Krista wanted to see it.

Jack grew colder as their tail lights receded, and the desert grew darker. A thin crescent moon and cloudy star field gave them enough light to see, but little more.

Jack said, "Dark."

She didn't answer.

Jack said, "Cold."

He snuggled closer, spooning into her back, both of them staring at nothing. Jack wondered what she was seeing.

Krista had been pensive all night even though she had pushed them to come, and now her wanting to tell him something felt ominous. Jack had the sick feeling she was pregnant or dumping him. Krista was two months from graduating *summa cum laude* at Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles, and had taken a job in D.C. Jack had dropped out of USC.

Jack nuzzled into her hair.

"Are we okay?"

She pushed away far enough to study him, then smiled.

"There have never been two people better than us. I am totally in love with you."

"You had me worried."

"Thanks for getting Danny to bring us out here. I don't think he wanted to come."

"It's a long drive if you've seen it a million times. He stopped coming out here in high school."

According to Trehorn, the twin-engine Cessna 310 had crashed while bringing in a load of coke at night during a sandstorm. A local drug dealer named Greek Cisneros cleared enough cactus and rocks to fashion a landing strip in the middle of the desert twenty miles outside Palm Springs, and used the airplane to bring cocaine and marijuana up from Mexico, almost always at night when the outline of the runway was marked by burning tubs of gasoline. On the night of the crash, the right wingtip hooked into the ground, the landing gear collapsed, and the left wing snapped off outside the left engine. Fuel pouring from the ruptured fuel tanks ignited, enveloping the airplane in flames. The engines and instruments had long ago been salvaged for parts, but the broken airframe remained where it died, rusting, corroded, and covered with generations of overlapping graffiti and spray-painted initials: LJ+DF, eat me, PSHS#1.

Krista took his hand, and tugged him toward the plane.

"Come with me. I want to show you something."

"Can't you tell me about it in the car? I'm cold."

"No, not in the car. This is important."

Jack followed her along the fuselage to the tail, wondering what she wanted to show him about this stupid airplane, but instead she led him onto the overgrown remains of the runway. She stared into the darkness that masked the desert. Her smart, black eyes shined like jewels filled with starlight. Jack touched her hair.

"Kris?"

They had known each other for one year, two months, and sixteen days. They had been head-over-heels, crazy, there-and-back, inside-out, bottom-to-top in love for five months, three weeks, and eleven days. He hadn't told her the truth about himself until after she declared her love. If he had secrets then, she had secrets now.

Krista took his hand in both of hers, giving him the serious, all-business eyes.

"This place is special to my family."

Jack had no idea what she was talking about.

"A drug runner's airstrip?"

"This place, right here between the mountains, it's a place easily found by people coming from the south, for all the same reasons the drug dealers put their landing strip here. When my mother was seven, coyotes brought her up through the desert from the south. Mom and her sister and two cousins. A man with a hearse was waiting here at this airplane to drive them into town."

Jack said, "No shit?"

Krista laughed, but her laugh was unsure.

"I never knew. She only told me a couple of weeks ago."

"I don't care."

"Hey. I'm giving you momentous family history, and you don't care?"

"I mean that she's illegal—undocumented. Who gives a shit?"

Krista tipped back to look up at him, then sud-

denly grabbed his ears and kissed him.

"Undocumented, but you don't have to go all PC."

Krista's mother had described a twelve-day trip on foot, in cars, and in a delivery truck where it got so hot that an old man died. The last leg of their journey had been in a covered pickup truck at night past the Salton Sea and across a sixteen-mile stretch of desert to the old crash site. The man with the hearse had driven them to a supermarket parking lot at the eastern edge of Coachella, where her uncle was waiting.

She looked south into the darkness as if she could see her mother's footsteps.

"I wouldn't be here if she hadn't come through this place. She wouldn't have met my dad. I wouldn't have met you. I wouldn't exist."

Krista looked up, and her face was all *summa-cum-laude* focused.

"Can you imagine what her journey must have been like? I'm her kid, and I can't even begin."

She was starting to say more when Jack heard a far-off squeal. He stood taller, listening, but didn't say anything until he heard it again.

"You hear it?"

Krista turned as the faint sound of a muffled engine reached them, and two lurching shapes appeared in the dim starlight. Jack studied them for a moment, and realized they were lightless trucks crawling toward them across the desert. Jack felt a stab of fear, and whispered frantically into her ear.

"This sucks, man. Let's get out of here."

"No, no, no—I want to see. Shh."

"They could be drug runners. We don't want to be here."

"Just wait!"

She pulled him to the far side of the airplane, where they settled into a low depression between the cactus.

A large box truck emerged from the dark like a ship appearing out of a fog. It rumbled onto the overgrown landing strip, and stopped less than thirty yards away. No brake lights flared when it stopped. Jack tried to make himself even smaller, and wished he had pulled Kris away.

A moment later, the cab creaked open, and two men climbed out. The driver walked a few yards in front of the truck, then studied a glowing handheld device. This deep in the desert, Jack thought it was probably a GPS.

While the driver studied his GPS, the passenger went to the back of the truck, and pushed the box door open with a loud clatter. The man said something in Spanish, then Jack heard soft voices as silhouette people climbed from the truck.

Jack whispered, "What are they doing?"

"Shh. This is amazing."

"They gotta be illegals."

"Shh."

Krista shifted position, and Jack cringed with a fresh burst of fear. She was taking pictures with her cell phone.

"Stop. They'll see us."

"No one can see."

The people emerging stayed near the truck as if

they were confused. So many people appeared Jack did not see how they had all fit inside. As many as thirty people stood uneasily in the brush, speaking in low murmurs with alien accents that Jack strained to identify.

"That isn't Spanish. What are they speaking, Chinese?"

Krista lowered her phone and strained to listen, too.

"A few Spanish speakers, but most of them sound Asian. Something else, too. Is that Arabic?"

The man who opened the truck returned to the driver, and spoke clearly in Spanish. Jack figured these two were the coyotes—guides who were hired to sneak people illegally into the U.S. He leaned closer to Krista, who was fluent in Spanish.

"What did he say?"

"'Where in hell are they? Those bastards are supposed to be here.'"

The driver mumbled something neither Jack nor Krista understood, then visibly jumped when three sets of headlights topped by roll-bar lamps snapped on a hundred yards behind the box truck, lighting the desert between in stark relief. Three off-road trucks roared forward, bouncing high on their oversized tires. The two coyotes shouted, and a scrambled chatter rose from the milling people. The driver ran into the desert, and his partner ran back to their truck. He emerged with a shotgun, and ran after his friend even as two of the incoming pickups skidded in a loose circle around the box truck, kicking up murky clouds

of dust. The third chased after the fleeing men, and gunfire flashed in the dark. The crowd broke in every direction, some crying, some screaming, some scrambling back into the box truck as if they could hide.

Jack pulled Krista backward, then jumped up and ran.

"Run! C'mon, run!"

He ran hard toward his Mustang, then realized Krista wasn't with him. Men with clubs and shotguns jumped from the pickups to chase down fleeing people. Krista was still between the cactus, taking pictures.

Jack started to shout for her, but stopped himself, not wanting to draw attention. He and Krista were outside the light, and hidden by darkness. He risked a sharp hiss instead.

"Kris—"

She shook her head, telling him she was fine, and resumed taking pictures. Jack ran back to her, and grabbed her arm. Hard.

"Let's *go*!"

"All right. Okay—"

They started to rise as four Asian women came around the plane's tail and ran past less than ten yards away.

A man with a shotgun came around the tail after them, shouting in Spanish, and Jack wondered if these poor women could even understand what he said. Then the man stopped, and stood absolutely still as if he were a cardboard cutout against the night sky.

Jack held his breath, and prayed. He wondered why the man was standing so still, then saw the man was wearing night-vision goggles.

The man was looking at them.

There in the starlit desert landscape where no one could hear the shots, the man lifted his shotgun, and aimed at Jack Berman.

Part 1

Elvis Cole:
six days after
they were taken

1.

WHEN PEOPLE CALL A private investigator because someone they love is missing, especially a child, the fear bubbles in their voice like boiling lard. When Nita Morales called that morning about her missing adult daughter, she didn't sound afraid. She was irritated. Ms. Morales phoned because the Sunday *Los Angeles Times Magazine* published a story about me eight weeks ago, rehashing a case where I cleared an innocent man who had been convicted of multiple homicides. The magazine people came to my office, took a couple of pretty good pictures, and made me sound like a cross between Philip Marlowe and Batman. If I were Nita Morales, I would have called me, too.

Her business, Hector Sports & Promotions, was on the east side of the Los Angeles River near the Sixth Street Bridge, not far from where giant radioactive ants boiled up from the sewer to be roasted by James Arness in the 1954 classic, *Them!* It was a warehouse area now, but no less dangerous. Buildings were layered

with gang tags and graffiti, and signs warned employees to lock their cars. Steel bars covered windows and concertina wire lined roofs, but not to keep out the ants.

That spring morning, 8:55 A.M., a low haze filled the sky with a glare so bright I squinted behind the Wayfarers as I found the address. Hector Sports & Promotions was in a newer building with a gated, ten-foot chain-link fence enclosing their parking lot.

A young Latin guy with thick shoulders and dull eyes came out when I stopped, as if he had been waiting.

"You the magazine guy?"

The magazine guy.

"That's right. Elvis Cole. I have a ten o'clock with Ms. Morales."

"I gotta unlock the gate. See the empty spot where it says *Delivery*? Park there. You might want to put up the top and lock it."

"Think it'll be safe?"

That would be me, flashing the ironic smile at their overkill battlestar security.

"For sure. They only steal clean cars."

That would be him, putting me in my place.

He shook his head sadly as I drove past.

"I had an old Vette like this, I'd show some love. I'd pop those dents, for sure."

That would be him, rubbing it in. My Jamaica yellow 1966 Corvette Stingray convertible is a classic. It's also dirty.

He locked the parking gate behind us, told me he was Nita Morales's assistant, and led me inside. We

passed through an outer office with a counter for customers, and a man and woman at separate desks. The man and woman both looked over, and the man held up the Sunday magazine issue with my story. Embarrassing.

We passed through a door onto the shop floor where fifteen or twenty people were operating machines that sewed logos on baseball caps and photo-inked mugs. Nita Morales had a glass office on the far side of the shop where she could see the floor and everything happening there. She saw us coming, and stepped from behind her desk to greet the magazine guy when we entered. Tight smile. Dry hand. All business.

"Hi, Mr. Cole, I'm Nita. You look like your picture."

"The one where I look stupid or the one where I look confused?"

"The one where you look like a smart, determined detective who gets the job done."

I liked her immediately.

"Would you like something? Coffee or a soft drink?"

"No, thanks. I'm good."

"Jerry, where's the swag bag? You left it in here, right?"

She explained as Jerry the Assistant handed me a white plastic bag.

"We made a little gift for you this morning. Here, take a look."

A large white T-shirt and a matching baseball cap

were in the bag. I smiled at the cap, then held up the T-shirt. "Elvis Cole Detective Agency" had been silk-screened onto the front in black and red letters, with "World's Greatest Detective" in smaller letters below it. An emblem saying the same had been sewn on the front of the cap.

"You like them?"

"I like them a lot."

I put them back in the bag.

"This is very cool, but I haven't agreed to help you. You understand that, don't you?"

"You will. You're going to find her. It won't be hard for the World's Greatest Detective."

She got that from the magazine.

"The 'world's greatest' thing was a joke, Ms. Morales. The guy who wrote the article put it in the story like I meant it. I didn't. It was a joke."

"I have some things to show you. Give me a second. I have to get them together."

She dismissed the assistant, and returned to her desk while I looked around. Shelves along the wall opposite her desk were lined with mugs, cups, bobbleheads, T-shirts, caps, giveaway toys, and dozens of other promotional items. Want team shirts for your kid's soccer club? They could do it. Want the name of your insurance agency on cheap plastic cups for the Knights of Columbus barbeque? That's what they did. Photos of youth teams dotted the walls, the kids all wearing shirts made by Hector Sports.

I said, "Who's Hector?"

"My husband. He started the company twenty-

two years ago, silk-screening T-shirts. I run it now. Cancer."

"Sorry."

"Me, too. Seven years, this June."

"You must run it well. Business looks good."

"No one's getting rich, but we're doing okay. Here, let's sit."

She came around her desk so we could sit together on matching metal chairs. Nita Morales was in her mid-forties, built sturdy, and wore a conservative blue business skirt and ruffled white shirt. Her sleek black hair showed no gray, and framed her broad face well. Her nails were carefully done, and her wedding ring was still in place, seven years later, this June.

She held out a snapshot.

"This is who you're going to find. This is Krista."

"I haven't agreed yet, Ms. Morales."

"You will. Look."

"We haven't talked price."

"Look at her."

Krista Morales had a heart-shaped face, golden skin, and a smile that dimpled her right cheek. Her eyes were deep chocolate, and her hair glistened with the deep black sheen of a crow's wing in the sun. I smiled at the picture, then handed it back.

"Pretty."

"Smart. She's going to graduate *summa cum laude* in two months from Loyola Marymount. Then she's going to work in Washington as a congressional aide. After that, maybe the first Latina president, you think?"

"Wow. You must be proud."

"Beyond proud. Her father and I, we didn't graduate high school. I had no English until I was nine. This business, we built with sweat and the grace of God. Krista—"

She ticked off the points on her fingers.

"—highest GPA in her class, editor of the student newspaper, National Honor Society, Phi Beta Kappa. This girl is making our dreams come true."

She suddenly stopped, and stared through the glass wall into the shop. Even with the angle, I saw her eyes glisten.

"They're good people, but you have to watch them."

"I understand. Take your time."

She cleared her throat as she pulled herself together, then Nita Morales's face darkened from a sunrise of pride to the iron sky of a thunderstorm. She put Krista's picture aside, and handed me a page showing a name and Palm Springs address. The name was Jack Berman.

"She went to Palm Springs seven days ago. With a boy. Her boyfriend."

She said "boyfriend" as if it were another word for "mistake."

She described the boyfriend, and didn't have anything good to say. A USC dropout without a job and little future. Just the type of boy who could derail her daughter's ambitions.

I glanced at the address.

"He lives in Palm Springs?"

"Somewhere in L.A., I think. His family has the house in Palm Springs, or it might belong to a friend, but I don't really know. Krista hasn't told me much about him."

Old story. The less Krista told her, the less she could criticize. I put the address aside.

"Okay. So how is she missing?"

"She went for the weekend. That's what she told me, and she always tells me where she's going and exactly how long she'll be gone. But she's been gone now for a week, and she won't return my calls or texts, and I know it's that boy."

That boy.

"How long have Krista and that boy been together?"

Thinking about it seemed to sicken her.

"Six or seven months. I've only met him two or three times, but I don't like him. He has this attitude."

She said "attitude" as if it was another word for "disease."

"Do they live together?"

Her face darkened even more.

"She shares an apartment near campus with a girl. She doesn't have time for that boy."

She had time to go to Palm Springs. I had seen this story five hundred times, and knew where it was going. The good-girl daughter rebelling against the dominant mother.

"Ms. Morales, twenty-one-year-old women go away with their boyfriends. Sometimes, they have

such a good time, they turn off their phones and stay a few extra days. Unless you have reason to believe otherwise, that's all this is. She'll come back."

Nita Morales studied me for a moment as if she was disappointed, then picked up her smart phone and touched the screen.

"Do you speak Spanish?"

"A few words, but, no, not really."

"I'll translate. This is the second call. I recorded it—"

Nita Morales's voice came from the tiny speaker as she answered the incoming call.

"Krista, is this you? What is going on out there?"

A young woman fired off rapid-fire Spanish. Then Nita's voice interrupted.

"Speak English. Why are you carrying on like this?"

The young woman shifted to English with a heavy accent.

"Mama, I know you want me to practice the English, but I cannot—"

She resumed a torrent of Spanish, whereupon Nita paused the playback.

"She's pretending. This exaggerated accent, the poor English. My daughter has no accent. This isn't the way she speaks."

"What is she saying?"

"She began by saying they're concerned because they didn't get the money."

"Who's they?"

She held up a finger.

"Listen—"

She resumed the playback. A young male voice took Krista's place, and also spoke Spanish. He sounded calm and reasonable, and spoke several seconds before Nita paused the recording.

"You get any of it?"

I shook my head, feeling slightly embarrassed.

"He's saying he has expenses to cover. He wants me to wire five hundred dollars, and as soon as he gets the money he'll see that Krista gets home."

I sat forward.

"What just happened here? Was Krista abducted?"

Nita rolled her eyes, and waved me off.

"Of course not. The rest is just more Spanish. I'll tell you what they said."

"No. Play it back. I want to hear the emotional content."

The playback resumed. Nita repeatedly interrupted. The man remained calm. He waited her out each time she interrupted, then resumed as if he was reading from a script.

The recording finally ended, and Nita arched her eyebrows.

"He apologized for asking for the money. He told me where to wire it, and promised to take good care of Krista while they waited. Then he thanked me for being so helpful."

She dropped the phone to her desk. Plunk.

I said, "This was a ransom demand. It sounds like she's been abducted."

Nita Morales waved me off again.

"He put her up to this so they could get married."

"You know this for a fact?"

"You don't kidnap someone for five hundred dollars. Five hundred dollars is what your stupid boyfriend tells you to ask for when he wants money. And this business with the Spanish and the bad English? This is absurd."

"Did you pay them?"

"Not the first time. I thought she was making a joke. I thought she would call back laughing."

"But she didn't call back laughing."

"You heard. I wanted to see if she would come home, so I paid. She hasn't called again, and that was four days ago. I think they used the money to get married."

All in all, Krista Morales did not sound like a person who would shake down her mother for a few hundred bucks, but you never know.

"Why would she pretend she has poor English?"

"No idea."

"But you believe she's pretending she's been abducted to swindle five hundred dollars from you?"

Her mouth dimpled as she frowned, and the dimples were hard knots. But after a moment they softened.

"Even smart girls do stupid things when they think a boy loves them. I was so upset I drove out there, but they weren't home. I waited almost four hours, but no one came, so I left a note. For all I know they went to Las Vegas."

"Did you call the police?"

She stiffened, and her face grew hard.

"Absolutely not. Krista has everything ahead of her—possibilities no one in my family would have even dreamed. I'm not going to ruin her future with nonsense like this. I'm not going to let her throw her life away by doing something stupid."

"If what you believe is true, Berman might have her involved in something more serious."

"This is why you're going to find her. The man they wrote the article about, he would save this girl's future."

"If she's married, there's nothing I can do. I can't force her back if she doesn't want to come."

"You don't have to bring her back. Just find her, and tell me what's going on. Will you help me, Mr. Cole?"

"It's what I do."

"I thought so. You aren't the World's Greatest Detective for nothing."

She burst into a wide smile, went behind her desk, and held up a green checkbook.

"I'll pay you five thousand dollars if you find her. Is that fair?"

"I'll charge you a thousand a day, and we'll start with a two-thousand-dollar retainer. Expenses are mine. You'll save money."

She smiled even wider, and opened a pen.

"I'll pay you ten thousand if you kill him."

I smiled at her, and she smiled back. Neither of us moved, and neither spoke. Outside on the floor, the big stitching machines whined like howling coyotes as they sewed patches to baseball caps.

She bent to write a check.

"I was kidding. That was a joke."

"Like me being the World's Greatest Detective."

"Exactly. When can you leave for Palm Springs?"

"I'll start at her apartment. It's closer."

"You're the detective. You know best."

She wrote the check, tore it from the checkbook, then gave me a large manila envelope.

"I put some things together you might want. Krista's address, her phone number, a picture, the receipt when I wired the money. Things like that."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Anything else?"

"This will be fine. I'll start with her roommate. Maybe you could call her, let her know I'm coming?"

"Oh, I can do better than that."

She picked up a red leather purse, and went to the door.

"I have a key. I'll let you into her apartment and introduce you."

"Sorry, Ms. Morales. I'd rather go alone."

Her eyes grew dark and hard.

"You might be the World's Greatest Detective, but I'm the World's Greatest Mother. Don't forget your swag."

She walked out without waiting.