

Be careful! You may be next!

BLOOD AND JUSTICE



RAYVEN T. HILL

A Jake & Annie Lincoln Thriller

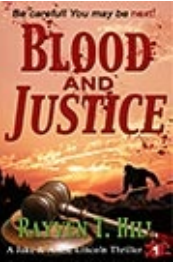
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ABOUT THIS BOOK

When sixteen-year-old Jenny James goes missing, and the local police are unable to find her, the girl's frantic mother hires private investigators Jake and Annie Lincoln to search for her daughter.

When the body of Jenny's boyfriend is discovered, the mystery of her disappearance deepens. Shaken out of their comfort zone of Internet searches and poring over public records, the couple soon find themselves facing the frightening possibility they are looking for the latest victim of a serial killer.

As more bodies pile up, the town is gripped with fear. It seems no one is safe, and the Lincolns race to solve the impossible puzzle before they become the killer's next victims.



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RAYVEN T. HILL

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Dedication & Acknowledgements

Thanks to Merry Jones for her hours of editing and proofreading. Many thanks to my beta readers whose comments, suggestions, and insight, have helped streamline this story and smooth out a few bumps. And not least, thanks to my wife for her patience. (1034)

Connect with the Author

You can go to my [Web Site](#) to contact me, or [sign up for my newsletter](#) to get updates on future releases.

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Even though this book has been thoroughly edited, typos or factual errors may have been missed. Please eMail me if you find any errors.

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[Justice Overdue](#)

[Justice Returns](#)

[Personal Justice](#)

Silent Justice (Coming Next)

Table of Contents

[About this Book](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Connect with the Author](#)

[Books by Rayven T. Hill](#)

CHAPTERS

[Prologue](#) | [1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#) | [5](#) | [6](#) | [7](#) | [8](#) | [9](#) | [10](#) | [11](#) | [12](#) | [13](#) | [14](#) | [15](#) | [16](#) | [17](#) | [18](#) | [19](#) | [20](#) | [21](#) | [22](#) | [23](#) | [24](#) | [25](#) | [26](#) | [27](#) | [28](#) | [29](#) | [30](#) | [31](#) | [32](#) | [33](#) | [34](#) | [35](#) | [36](#) | [37](#) | [38](#) | [39](#) | [40](#) | [41](#) | [42](#) | [43](#) | [44](#) | [45](#) | [46](#) | [47](#) | [48](#) | [49](#) | [50](#) | [Epilogue 1](#) | [Epilogue 2](#) | [Epilogue 3](#)

[Also by Rayven T. Hill](#)

[Coming Next](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Tell Your Friends About Blood and Justice](#)

PROLOGUE

Eight Years Ago

THE REASON his plan was so good was because it was so simple. He was counting on one fact. Joey was stupid. Not really stupid, like, *stupid* stupid—just dumb.

When Jeremy told Joey he'd found a hidden cache of money and jewels in the woods, probably hidden there by a robber, Joey had been dumb enough to believe him.

Jeremy laughed out loud at the thought.

He looked down, aimed his father's old H&R .22-caliber revolver, and took another shot, this time hitting Joey in the head. The boy on the ground stopped his pathetic whining, crying, and pleading and remained silent and still.

The deed was done; someone had to take care of this. He knew no one would understand. Certainly not his mother, or the police, but Jeremy knew all too well it had been necessary. The bully would torture him no longer.

Shoving the weapon behind his belt, Jeremy Spencer looked around. Except for a couple of birds breaking the stillness, the forest was dim and quiet.

He crouched down and examined the body. The first bullet had entered the victim's stomach. Blood flowed from the wound and darkened the hue of the already red and brown autumn leaves beneath the fresh corpse.

The second bullet had entered just below Joey's left eye. Blood trickled down, followed the path of his cheekbone, down his neck, finally dripping like dew onto the forest floor.

Drip, drip, drip.

He reached out and touched the wound beneath Joey's eye. It felt warm. He looked at the crimson on his finger and gently touched it to his tongue. It tasted sweet and thick. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, the taste of blood on his tongue somehow making him feel pure, whole, and righteous.

He was filled with a feeling of euphoria, breathing rapidly, his heart racing, excited. He knew that moment that what he'd done was fully justified.

He remained still for several minutes, pondering the deed, and thought about his father. Father

would approve.

Finally, he stood, straightened his back, and took a deep breath. He bent over, grabbed the bloody corpse by the leg, and dragged it to the hole he had previously prepared. A fierce shove with his foot sent the body tumbling over and then down, finally landing with a thud at the bottom of the waiting grave. He picked up the shovel and set about filling in the hole.

Jeremy labored for some time, humming to himself as he worked. Finally, he tossed the last shovelful of dirt, covered the area with twigs, branches, and dead leaves, and stood back.

“That should do it,” he said aloud.

He contemplated a moment longer, and then resting the shovel on his shoulder, he turned and hurried for home.

He was expected there by five o’clock, and he didn’t want to keep his mother waiting.

CHAPTER 1

Sunday, August 7th, 6:00 p.m.

JAKE DRAGGED another piece of piping-hot apple pie onto his plate and looked across the table. His wife was eyeing him closely, something on her mind, no doubt.

“Next time, honey, I’d appreciate if you’d let me do the talking,” she said. “Especially with something so sensitive.”

Jake gave her a crooked grin and nodded. “You can handle things like that next time,” he said before digging in to the pie.

Annie was right, of course. He’d almost bungled their last task, as simple as it was. They’d been hired to find a man’s runaway son. No problem there—a few minutes online and Annie had tracked him down. But going off half-cocked, Jake had made a call to the boy, demanding he return home. He’d almost gotten hung up on, but when the more sympathetic Annie had gotten involved, she convinced the boy to contact his father. There was ultimately a satisfactory outcome for all.

“No harm done,” she said with a smile that made Jake wilt. She knew how to tell him off gently.

After he finished eating, Jake helped Annie clean up the table and put the dishes in the sink. He turned to her and sighed. “It’s been awhile since we had a real case,” he said. “I’m tired of barely making ends meet.”

Annie turned to face her husband. She touched his arm and looked up into his eyes. “We’re doing okay. Just let me handle the finances.”

She was better at that too. She was better at a whole lot of things, and he wondered what he would ever do without her. He took a sideways look at his wife. At just over five feet four inches, she was still about the prettiest thing he’d ever seen. Her midlength golden hair, and the trim figure she’d kept all the years since he’d known her, always made his heart melt. She was his motivating force and he thought the world of her.

The phone jangled on the counter and interrupted Jake’s thoughts. He scooped it up. “Lincoln Investigations. This is Jake.” It was Annie’s best friend from next door. “Hold on, Chrissy. She’s right here,” he said, holding out the phone. Annie and Chrissy had been friends for a long time, and seemed to Jake they were always yakking about something.

Annie took the receiver and settled into a chair. "Hi Chrissy. How's everything?"

Jake wandered into the living room, grabbed the remote, and switched on the TV. Just some stupid sitcom. He flicked through the channels but eventually gave up and turned it off again. Tossing the remote back where he'd found it, he stretched out on the couch.

A rocket the size of an eight-year-old boy suddenly landed on his chest. The rocket was named Matty, and he was a bundle of energy, and ready to wrestle his father into submission. The battle soon took to the floor, but before long, Jake surrendered, pinned down and seemingly helpless.

From the other room came a warning. "Don't you guys break anything in there."

~~*~~

Back in the kitchen, Annie finished cleaning up and went to the makeshift office, dropping into her swivel chair behind the desk. The office, formerly an unused bedroom, was sparse. A couple of bookcases lined one wall, filled with read and unread novels, several books on law, and a row of rare, used and obsolete encyclopedias. A few prints hanging on the wall and a well-worn carpet completed the look.

She opened the top drawer of the desk and pulled out the accounting ledger. Jake was right: money was tight. The new camera equipment had set them back, purchased when they had been hired to evaluate the honesty of a department store employee by posing as a customer. The camera had caught the thief red-handed in the act of loading some expensive computer equipment into a waiting van.

Lincoln Investigations was only a few months old, and Annie realized it would take some time to land steady business. The ad in the Richmond Hill Daily Times was pulling in the occasional client, and she was confident in the future of their agency.

Prior to starting their current undertaking, Annie had been doing part-time work as a research assistant for a Fortune 500 firm. The crunch had come when, due to downsizing, Jake had been let go from his job as a construction engineer at one of Canada's largest land developers. But now, things were looking up. Annie had started their new detective agency by taking on freelance research, and they hoped it would eventually allow them both to work full-time.

Most of their clients engaged them to obtain evidence for divorce, child custody, and missing persons cases, or to turn up information about individuals' character or financial status, and Annie's experience had served as a natural progression into their enterprise.

Jake did most of the outside work, chasing leads, or doing stakeouts, but this evening she knew he felt a little restless. There hadn't been much for him to do lately, and he was aching to be useful.

Five Days Ago

JEREMY PUFFED and panted as he maneuvered the bundle from the trunk of his 2005 Hyundai.

dropped to the ground with a dull thump, and he stopped for a much-needed rest.

He'd never grown much. Now at twenty-four years old, he was only five foot three, or maybe four inches tall, and as thin as a teenager. In fact, he was still often mistaken for one, and he'd had to use his brains rather than his brawn to get anywhere in life.

He took a deep breath and turned his attention back to the task. Dragging almost two hundred pounds of dead weight wasn't easy for someone so small, but he finally managed, with great effort, to heave and roll it to the hole he'd dug earlier. The blanket came loose from its contents, exposing a bloody corpse.

The trees around him snapped and ruffled in the warm afternoon breeze as he stopped again to wipe the sweat from his face with a dirty shirtsleeve. The pungent smell of the nearby swamp permeated the air.

Jeremy preferred to bury the bodies here, in the forest. It was a secluded place, away from prying eyes, making it easier to cover them up and hide them. Here they would never be found.

Good riddance.

He knelt down and stared intently at the body. The blood around the wound looked dry and dark, but as he touched it, it felt slightly moist and still warm. He stood and gazed quietly at the body for a few moments.

Then, bending over, he gave another heave, and the corpse slid to the bottom of the shallow hole. He kicked the bloodstained blanket in after it, then patted the ground flat and covered the area with leaves. The job was done.

But he still had one more thing to do and he was perplexed. The guy had gotten what he deserved, but what about the girl? He couldn't let her go, but hurting her would be wrong, and he had to come up with an idea. But for now, she was safe.

Monday, August 8th, 3:30 p.m.

DETECTIVE HANK CORNING reached across the aging desk and gently touched the woman's hand. "I'm sorry, Mrs. James. We've done all we can do. Your daughter has been missing for almost a week and there's no information to go on. With no evidence of foul play, Captain Diego won't allow us to dedicate any more time and resources."

The woman sitting across the desk from Hank was in her late thirties. She still had signs of true beauty, but right now the grief and anxiety clouding her face were masking her allure.

The woman bowed her head and gave another sob, dabbing at her tears with a soft white handkerchief. "I just know she wouldn't go anywhere without telling me. She's only sixteen, and she's never been away from home for more than a couple of days at a time. And I always knew where she

was.”

Hank nodded sympathetically and sighed deeply. At forty years old, he'd been doing this job for almost twenty years and had seen more than his share of grief—missing kids, murdered kids, and victims of all kinds. He was tired. Tired of all the pain, and tired of feeling helpless.

He ran his fingers through his short-cropped, slightly graying hair and sat back. “I’m very sorry.”

Mrs. James looked intently at the detective, the hope once in her eyes now faded. “Will you keep trying?”

“I’ll do what I can, Mrs. James,” he promised gently.

The woman clutched her purse, pulling her jacket around her as she stood. “Thank you, Detective,” she said, giving him a fragile smile.

Hank’s heart broke as he stood and watched her turn and head slowly toward the door. “Mrs. James,” he called.

She turned back.

“Perhaps a private detective ...”

Monday, August 8th, 9:59 p.m.

SHEETS OF RAIN pounded against the office window. A wind had come up suddenly and threatened to remove the shutters as they rattled and clapped. The big oak in the backyard sighed under the strain.

Jake was in the office, on the phone with a woman who sounded desperate. “We can come to visit you, Mrs. James, or you’re welcome to come to our office.”

“I prefer you to come here,” she said.

Jake arranged an appointment for the next morning and hung up the phone.

Annie poked her head into the room. “Who was that?”

“That was Amelia James. Apparently, Hank recommended she talk to us. Her daughter’s missing and the police have nothing more to go on. I told her we would help.”

“Another missing kid,” Annie said. “Thank God for the Internet. Hopefully, we can track this one down as fast as the last one.”

“I’m not so sure this time,” Jake said. “The girl’s been gone a week. She just disappeared and didn’t take any of her things with her. Her mother says it’s not like her to do anything like that.”

He stood and came from behind the desk toward Annie. She put her arms around his neck and drew her close, burying his face in her hair. She always smelled good.

“We’ll find out more tomorrow morning,” he said. “We have an appointment to see her at ten.”

Annie looked up at him, nodded, and then said, “By the way, I’ve invited Mom and Dad over for barbecue Thursday evening. Is that okay?”

Jake frowned at her and sighed. “You know I don’t get along with your mother.”

“I know. Just try to be patient.”

He pulled away from her, annoyed. “It’s hard to be patient when she always gives us instructions on how to raise our own son.”

“I don’t want the two of you fighting. Besides, she has some good suggestions.”

“Like sending Matty to a private school? Who’s going to pay for that? I don’t know how your father puts up with her either.”

Annie shot him a sharp look. “My father’s an amazing guy,” she said. “He’s been through a lot, and he’s happy, so leave him out of this.”

“I’ve got nothing against your father. It’s your mother. She treats me like a kid and thinks I’m not good enough for you. Maybe I’m not, but it’s none of her business.”

“I don’t want to argue about this,” Annie said softly. “It’s been a long time since they’ve been here and Mom has been hinting at coming over for some time, so I had to invite them.” She paused. “And Matty needs to see them once in a while as well. They adore him. Especially Dad. Matty’s his only grandson.”

Jake plunked into a chair and looked up at her. “All right,” he said. “I’ll try to keep it under control.” He paused. “For your sake.”

Annie bent over and kissed him quickly. “Thank you.”

Jake stood and drew her close again.

“It looks like we’re going to have a busy day tomorrow,” she said. “But right now, it’s time for bed.”

Jake smiled. He was all for that suggestion.

CHAPTER 2

Tuesday, August 9th, 9:58 a.m.

JAKE BROUGHT his 1986 Pontiac Firebird to an abrupt stop under the shade of an ancient maple tree. Annie crawled from the passenger door, stepped onto the sidewalk, and surveyed the house in front of her.

They were in a fairly exclusive part of town in a quiet and safe upper-class family neighborhood. Sitting on about two acres of land, the house was by no means new, but it had been restored to an elegant finish with vintage character.

They made their way up a winding path that led through a well-maintained rock garden and climbed the steps onto a large verandah guarding the front doors.

The solid forged brass doorknocker clanked as Jake knocked three times. In a few moments, there was a rattle of chains and the door swung open. A tall and remarkably beautiful woman appeared in the doorway.

Jake introduced them and handed her a business card. She looked at it briefly and gave a forced smile. "I'm Amelia James. Please, come in."

She ushered them into a fashionable sitting room. Feminine flourishes and modern lines with the absence of a rug created a sparse look and showcased the beautiful, dark hardwood floors. Matching bookcases, with what appeared to be antique books, framed either side of a huge fieldstone fireplace.

"Would you like tea or coffee?" Mrs. James asked.

Jake spoke for both of them. "Coffee, please."

Mrs. James motioned toward a comfortable-looking divan, and Jake and Annie sat. She left the room and returned a moment later, sitting across from them in an overstuffed armchair. She leaned forward and looked intently at them as if sizing them up.

Annie placed a small digital voice recorder on the coffee table in front of her. "Do you mind if I record this interview, Mrs. James?"

"That's fine. And please, call me Amelia."

Jake spoke. "Tell us about your daughter, Amelia."

The woman thought for a few moments. "She's a good daughter. Rarely gets into trouble o

anything like that. The occasional party or hanging out with her friends, but nothing worse than we do as kids.”

“Does she have a boyfriend?” Annie asked.

“She’s very pretty and most of the boys like her, but there’s no one steady boy as far as I know. There are a few of them in the group, but there’s nobody serious or she would’ve told me. Jenny and I are close, and we talk about everything.”

Annie knew that no matter how close you are to your mother, there are always some things you don’t tell her, but she said nothing. “Has Jenny ever gone anywhere without telling you? Even overnight?”

“Never. Like all girls her age, she might occasionally stay overnight at a friend’s house for a day or two, but I always know where she is.”

“Is there any one friend in particular?” Annie asked.

“Her best friend is Paige Canter, and they’re together a lot. She’s sixteen, the same age as Jenny.”

“Do you have a copy of the police report, Amelia?” Jake asked. “That may save asking a lot of questions. I’m sure the police have contacted Paige and her other friends?”

“Oh, yes. That was one of the first things they did.” She frowned. “And maybe about the other thing.” She paused. “However, Detective Corning has been kind, but there’s a limit to what he can do.”

Amelia got up and opened a small drawer beside the bookcase. She pulled out two or three sheets of paper stapled together. “Here’s the police report. It has all the names and addresses of her friends.”

Jake reached for the papers. “Thank you. That should help.”

Annie glanced over and scanned the pages as Jake leafed through them. She looked back at Mr. James. “Would you have a picture of Jenny we could borrow?”

Amelia sat back down, reached toward a nearby end table, and picked up a photo. “Here’s a recent picture of her,” she said, handing it to Annie.

Annie looked at the picture. Jenny’s mother certainly was not biased. The girl in the picture had long blond hair like her mother, a great figure, and a beautiful smile. She was a very pretty girl indeed.

The entrance of a tiny Filipino woman, who appeared to be the maid, briefly interrupted them. She carried a tray that held three cups of steaming coffee, with cream and sugar, and set it on the table in front of them. Jake helped himself, and the others followed.

“Do you have another picture? Perhaps a close-up of her face?” Annie asked.

Amelia looked around the room, her eyes stopping at the fireplace. She stood and retrieved a framed picture from the mantel. “You may borrow this.” She removed the photo from its frame and handed it to Annie. She smiled. “I’d like it back, though.”

Jake asked, “When was the last time you saw Jenny?”

“It was last Tuesday morning, August second. She left for school as usual. Richmond Hill Public School. And that was the last I saw or heard from her.” Amelia bowed her head. When she looked up

a tear or two was on her cheek. “Oh, please, I hope you can find her. I’m so afraid she may be in some danger.”

“We’ll do what we can, Amelia,” Annie said gently. “I can’t promise we’ll find her, but we won’t give up.”

Annie sipped her coffee and glanced at the police report again. All of the vital information seemed to be there. Full name, date of birth, nicknames, height, weight, hair color, etcetera. The report contained a lot of other questions regarding the missing girl’s habits and personality, but Annie wanted a little more information. “Does Jenny have a cell phone?”

“Yes, she had it with her as far as I know, but the police were unable to track it. She must have turned it off, or maybe it was lost.”

“And what about social media? Facebook and so on?”

“Like just about everyone she knows, she has a Facebook page. She doesn’t spend a lot of time on the computer, it’s mainly for homework, but I know she chats with friends on occasion.”

“We can’t rule out online predators,” Annie said.

Amelia looked fearful. “She’s careful about things like that.”

“I’m sure she is,” Annie said. “We just don’t want to miss any possibilities.”

“And your husband?” Jake asked. “Jenny’s father? Is he ...”

Amelia forced a smile. “My husband, Mr. James, is ... was ... Jenny’s father. He passed away a little over three years ago.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Jake said.

“He was a good man. A good father.” Amelia looked around the room. “He provided for us very well.” She sighed. “He just worked too hard I think. Winston had a weak heart and it couldn’t take the stress of his job.”

“What was his work?” Annie asked.

“He worked for a private investment firm. Private banking, asset management, hedge funds, things like that. He had some very wealthy clients and had to work long hours to keep up. But he always had time for us.”

“And Jenny ... how did she cope with his death?”

“She loved her father very much. She was his pride and joy. She took it very hard, but we’ve worked through it together. At first, I was unable to provide emotional support for both of us, so we saw a counselor, but we’re okay now. We made it through the rough part together. She’s a very strong girl and very sensible. I know she didn’t just leave. She’s out there somewhere.”

Jake nodded. “Don’t worry. We’ll find her.”

After a moment of silence, Annie spoke. “I believe that’s all for now, Amelia. We’ll keep you updated as we proceed. If there’s anything else we need to know, we’ll contact you.”

Jake gulped the last of his coffee and stood. Amelia followed them to the door, handing them a piece of paper. “Here’s my cell phone number where you can reach me if I’m not at home.”

Jake stuffed it into his shirt pocket as they left.

CHAPTER 3

Tuesday, August 2nd, Eight Days Ago

JEREMY SPENCER didn't know what to do with the girl. He couldn't go on keeping her locked up, feeding her, and attending to her needs. He had things to do. But he couldn't let her go, either. She could identify him in a second.

He hadn't counted on her being there. She wasn't supposed to be around when he got the guy, but she had been, and now he was stuck with her.

Her boyfriend had been easy to catch. Like before, Jeremy had planned everything quite skillfully. A simple plan for sure, but sometimes the simplest plans were the best.

He knew the guy would drive out of town and then along County Road 12, a seldom-used road, on his way to King City. It was there Jeremy had put his plan into effect.

He had seen the car coming about a quarter mile away, around a curve. He climbed from his vehicle, parked on the shoulder, and lay down in the center of the road, his leg curled underneath him. He looked twisted and broken, like perhaps he'd been hit by a truck.

Jeremy heard the car screech to a stop just a few feet from him. He heard the door slamming, the footsteps coming toward him. A figure bent over, and then he heard an explosion as the bullet left his gun and shattered the skull of the scumbag.

He heard a scream and he jumped to his feet. The scream came from the guy's vehicle. There was a girl in the car, but she wasn't supposed to be there. What had happened to his oh-so-wonderful plan?

He ran to the car and pointed his gun at the girl. "Stop your noise," he said. "Get out of the car."

The girl did as she was told. She opened the door and stepped out slowly, keeping a distance between herself and him. She looked terrified. "What ... what do you want?" she managed to ask.

"I already got what I want," he said, frowning. "And more than I want." He pointed toward the rear of the guy's car. "Get over there."

She obeyed, her body trembling. He kept an eye on her as he moved toward his car and popped open the trunk. Digging in a cardboard box, he found a plastic cable tie, then came back and fastened her wrists securely together in front of her.

He stuffed his hand into her side pocket and brought out a cell phone, which he switched off and

shoved into his own pocket.

“Get in the trunk.”

Jenny climbed clumsily inside and he slammed the lid. His first priority was to get the guy’s car off of the road, leave her inside, and hide the vehicle somewhere. She would be okay in the trunk for a few minutes while he returned to move his own car. Then he would take her someplace safe until he figured out what to do with her.

Tuesday, August 9th, 4:06 p.m.

ANNIE HAD ARRANGED a meeting to interview Jenny’s best friend, Paige Canter. Jake was at home, in the garage with Matty, fixing the leg of an end table that had come loose during one of the wrestling bouts.

She arrived at the Canter house just after four o’clock. She parked her Ford Escort on the narrow street in front of the modest house and walked up a short pathway bordered by flower beds stuffed with carnations, lilies, and bright red geraniums. She rang the doorbell. Mrs. Canter answered the door and, after introductions, led her to the kitchen.

The smell of something newly baked hung in the air. A vase of freshly cut flowers sat in the middle of the kitchen table, giving off a subtle fragrance.

A young girl sat at the far side of the table. She stood and introduced herself as Paige. She was an attractive girl. Maybe not as pretty as Jenny, but certainly appealing enough to turn the heads of most boys. She was dressed modestly in a colorful printed t-shirt and faded jeans.

Mrs. Canter took a seat at the end of the table, while Annie and Paige sat across from each other.

Annie dug a notepad and pen from her small valise and placed them on the table in front of her.

“We’re worried about Jenny,” Mrs. Canter said. “She’s such a nice girl. Whatever we can do to help, we certainly will.”

Annie smiled. “Thank you, Mrs. Canter.” She turned to Paige. “When did you see Jenny last?”

“She came to school as usual last Tuesday,” Paige said. “It was just an ordinary day. She has been seeing this guy. I wouldn’t call him a boyfriend. Nothing romantic or anything like that, but they had started hanging out. She left with him right after school that day. She wanted me to come too, but I had lots of homework to do, and I told her I needed to get right home.”

“What can you tell me about him? What’s his name?” Annie asked.

Paige stopped to think. “His name is Chad Brownson ... or Bronson ... something like that.” She leaned forward. “I think he’s from King City.”

“Have you seen him since last Tuesday?”

“No, he didn’t come around as far as I know. They didn’t see each other every day, just two or three days a week, but I haven’t seen him since last week.” Paige paused. “You don’t think he had anything

to do with her disappearance, do you? He seemed like a nice guy. Very polite and all that.”

“It’s too soon to say anything, but we have to check him out. He may have been the last person to see her.” Annie paused. “Do you know what kind of car he drives?”

“I’m not too good with cars, but I know it’s a Toyota. White.” Paige frowned. “I don’t know what year, though. But not that old.”

Annie scribbled something in her notepad and then looked up. “Would anyone else know Chad? Someone you hang out with, perhaps?”

“I don’t think so. He seems to be kind of a loner. He always came by himself.”

“Where did Chad and Jenny meet?” Annie asked. “Do you know?”

Paige thought a moment and then replied slowly, “I really don’t know. I’m surprised she didn’t tell me more about him, but I think it may’ve been at a party somewhere. I told all this to the police,” she added. “But nothing seemed to come of it.”

“The police are limited, Paige. They did what they could, but they’re so busy they can’t do much beyond a few interviews and phone calls,” Annie explained. “But right now, we’re dedicated to finding Jenny and nothing else.”

Paige leaned forward. “Please find her,” she pleaded, looking worried.

“We will. By the way, do you know if she had her cell phone with her? If she did, it seems to be turned off.”

“I’m sure she did. She always carries it,” Paige replied.

Annie skimmed quickly through her notes before looking up. “That seems to be all for now,” she said. She dug a card from her valise and handed it to Paige. “If you think of anything else, give me a call. Anything at all.”

“I will,” Paige promised.

Annie turned to Mrs. Canter. “Thank you, Mrs. Canter. This has been a big help.” She packed up her notepad and pen. “I’ll be in touch,” she said as she stood.

CHAPTER 4

Tuesday, August 9th, 4:46 p.m.

ANNIE SAT AT THE desk in the small office of Lincoln Investigations. She stared intently at the computer screen, a frown on her face.

“There are only a couple of Brownsons and several Bronsons in King City,” she said. “We’ll have to try them all.”

“I think this guy is the key to it all,” Jake replied. He was slouched back, his bulk burying a small leather chair, one foot resting on the desk. “If we find him ... we’ll find her.”

“Mrs. James seemed certain Jenny would never go anywhere without telling her.” Annie looked at Jake and sat back. “But it seems certain that wherever she is, she was with Chad.”

“And it doesn’t seem to be a kidnapping,” Jake added. “At least, not for ransom. The kidnappers would’ve contacted someone by now if it was.”

“So ... if she wouldn’t leave without telling anyone, and she wasn’t kidnapped for ransom, then ...” Annie hated to say it. “She’s either dead or in grave danger.”

Jake leaned forward and grabbed the phone. He hit a speed dial button and covered the mouthpiece with his hand. “Let me see what Hank can do.”

After several rings, the voice mail on Detective Hank Corning’s cell phone greeted Jake. “This is Hank. Leave a message.”

Jake and Hank had been friends since high school. They’d played together on the school football team, where they’d met and hit it off right away. After that, Jake had gone on to university while Hank wanted to be a cop. Hank had wanted Jake to go to Police Academy with him, but Jake knew all too well the social life of a cop wasn’t much. Besides, Jake and Annie were already a couple, and she would be attending the University of Toronto as well. That had done it for Jake. He chose Annie over Hank. “No hard feelings, Hank,” he had said. “But she’s better looking than you.”

Jake had great faith in Annie’s expertise online. He knew when it came to research, if Annie couldn’t do it, nobody could ... except maybe Hank. But only because the cop had access to more resources than Annie.

Jake spoke into the phone. “Hank, it’s Jake. I need some info. What can you find out for me about

guy from King City? Chad Brownson, or maybe Bronson. Probably the last one to see Jenny. Get back to me ASAP.”

He slowly hung up the phone. “In the meantime,” he said. “There’s not much we can do.”

Annie was staring at the computer again. “There’s nothing on Chad Brownson or Bronson on Facebook. At least not from around here. The names do pop up in a few other places elsewhere online but mostly hundreds of miles away. Certainly not our guy.”

Tuesday, August 9th, 4:52 p.m.

BENNY FLANDERS had been a bum and a petty thief for most of his long life. He could never seem to settle down. Didn’t want to. He liked the freedom of doing his own thing, stealing what he needed, bumming for cash, and doing the occasional break and enter. Most houses were easy to get into. There was always an unsecured window or some other means to help him find his way into an unguarded residence.

He’d been in and out of jail a few times. Nothing serious. He didn’t care. Actually, jail was a pretty good place to spend a night or two. The cells were warm and there was enough to eat. They never seemed to be able to pin much of anything on him and life was pretty good.

And right now, he was as free as the air. There was nobody to tell him what to do, and that’s what was all about.

A half-full bottle of cheap wine obtained from this morning’s begging jutted from the right pocket of his filthy overcoat. An unlit stub of a cigar was stuck in his face.

And today was a day just like any other.

Benny was patrolling the parking lot of the huge Walmart store centrally located in Midtown Plaza. He peeked in car windows, looking for unlocked doors, searching for anything to claim as his own. Maybe he could find something to sell, or wear, or eat, or whatever the occasion provided.

He wasn’t having much luck so far.

Benny leaned down and scanned the front seat of a white 2000 Toyota Tercel.

“I can’t believe it,” he said, his mouth hanging open, the cigar stuck to his lip. “They left the keys in it.”

Benny hadn’t driven for many years and he didn’t know whether he should even attempt it. But the keys dangling there in front of his astonished eyes, and a chance to break up the boredom of the day were just too much for him.

He took a quick look around. Nobody was in sight. He grinned as he lifted the door handle, opened the door, and slipped into the driver seat.

He sat there for a minute with a stupid smile on his face, then turned the key and the motor purred to life.

He backed carefully from the narrow parking spot his newfound toy was occupying. He cut the wheel slightly too sharp and dinged the front fender of a sleek black Mercedes beside him.

“Oh, nuts,” he said to himself. “Be more careful, boy.”

There were no more mishaps, and in a couple of minutes Benny steered the Tercel from the lot and headed toward a side street away from Walmart. He bounced up and down in the seat with gleeful chuckling to himself as he sped down the street. Not too fast. There might be cops around.

He spun through a stop sign, not noticing it until it was too late. A quick look in his mirrors assured him he was still safe. Nobody else was in sight.

He didn't want to keep the car. Of course not; it was stolen. And he couldn't sell it. He wouldn't know where to sell a car. It probably wasn't worth much anyway. He just wanted to go for a little ride. Or a long ride. Whatever. He wasn't thinking that far ahead. He didn't care and didn't want to care.

The officer in the cruiser who tossed his donut into the box beside him, pulled from the side street and hit his siren didn't care either. All he knew was he'd seen a car run a stop sign and that was against the law.

Officer Spiegle was new on the job. He felt important. He wasn't too bright and had only gotten the job because his daddy was a cop. The other cops called him Yappy. He didn't know why. He didn't talk much, but it was a name, and he didn't care, so it stuck.

But he was a cop, a symbol of authority, and he was going to get this guy.

When Benny heard the siren, he glanced in the rearview mirror and swore. He cursed the cop and then swore again, pushing the gas pedal to the floor. He didn't care about stop signs now.

He should never have taken the car. But he had, and now he had to get away from the cop.

The vehicle weaved back and forth across the narrow street as Benny did his best to control it. His best wasn't good enough. The engine whined. The car seemed to skid out from under him, spun around, and planted itself into a row of well-manicured hedges.

Benny rolled from the car and sprang to his feet. He wasn't a big guy, or brawny by any means, but he spent most of the day on his feet, so he had strong legs. Those legs helped him jump over the hedges and carried him past the house, then through the backyard and away. He was gone.

Officer Spiegle couldn't do much of anything. By the time he was able to remove himself from the cruiser, Benny was out of sight.

He swore, jumped back into the car, and called dispatch.

He would let them handle it.

CHAPTER 5

Tuesday, August 9th, 5:25 p.m.

DETECTIVE HANK CORNING slouched at his tired desk in the precinct, surrounded by a steady buzz of activity. Footsteps clattered on the well-worn hardwood floor as officers moved to and fro. A photocopier quietly whined. Complaints were being handled, phones were ringing, and constant chatter of all kinds filled the room.

He hit the message button on his cell phone.

“Two new messages,” the machine informed him.

Hank listened to the first message. It was from Amelia James. He smiled at the soft, pleasant voice. He couldn't help but picture her face. Her long blond hair framing her beautiful features, her gentle manner, and her graceful walk. Then he felt guilty for thinking about her that way when she was going through so much pain.

She had called to keep in touch. “I know you're not actively pursuing this anymore,” she had said. “But I'm anxious to see if anything turned up.”

Hank returned her call. When she answered, he apologized, explaining there was nothing new.

“I've contacted Lincoln Investigations as you suggested,” she said hopefully. “They sound confident they can help.”

“I've known Jake and Annie for many years,” he assured her. “They're good at what they do.”

“Thank you, Detective. They promised to let me know if anything develops. I just feel so helpless and wish there were something I could do.”

“Mrs. James,” Hank said suddenly. “I want to help you and I'm going to contact Jake Lincoln and offer to assist them in any way I can. Officially, I can't do anything unless there's a solid lead, but unofficially ... well, that's a different matter. And please, Mrs. James, call me Hank,” he added.

“Thank you again, Hank. You may call me Amelia.” She sighed deeply and Hank felt her sadness.

After hanging up, Hank's chair groaned and squeaked as he leaned back. At a little more than five years away from retirement, he was ready for it. He would do a little fishing, maybe some hunting and just generally take it easy for a while. Then he could do something less stressful, like working as a security guard, or consulting of some kind.

But right now, something had drawn him to this case. Maybe it was because Amelia felt so helpless. Maybe it was the thought of a missing girl, or maybe it was because his own daughter would've been about the same age as Jenny.

He knew the captain would cut him some slack on this. It wasn't just a spur of the moment decision. He'd been thinking about this for some time. Maybe he would take some time off—he needed it anyway—and see what he could come up with.

He hit the “Next Message” icon on his cell and listened intently to Jake's message.

Leaning forward quickly, he tossed his phone on the desk and thumped a few keys on his computer terminal. The name Chad Bronson appeared on his screen. From King City. Eighteen years old and no record to speak of. Just a pair of speeding tickets. Hank tapped a couple more keys and a picture appeared. He touched the print button, and in a moment, a page came whirring from the printer.

Hank stared at the screen. A further search showed a car registered to Bronson had just been involved in an accident. The driver had fled the scene and the car was now on its way to the pound.

He snapped up his cell again and hit the “Return Call” button. After a couple of rings, Jake answered.

“Jake, it's Hank,” he said, dispensing with small talk. “I may have something here. A car registered to a Chad Bronson has just been in an accident. No sign of the driver.” Hank scanned the online police report. “The attending officer described the fleeing driver as a white male. Approximately fifty to sixty years old. That doesn't sound like Bronson. The vehicle is on its way to the pound right now. I can meet you there if you come right away.”

“On my way,” Jake replied. “I'll just let Annie know, then I'll see you soon.”

Hank printed a couple more pages, scooped them from the printer, and hurried from the building.

Tuesday, August 9th, 5:55 p.m.

THE SUN GLEAMED sharply off the hood of the bright red Firebird as Jake brought it to a quick stop beside where Hank stood waiting for him.

“Park that thing and let's go,” Hank said.

Gravel flew as Jake spun into a nearby parking space and joined the cop.

The auto pound on Cherry Street was the only one in Vaughan, used to store vehicles that had been used in the commission of a crime and required additional investigation or were on hold for evidentiary purposes. It also held unclaimed vehicles that had been towed away for one reason or another. The enclosure was surrounded by a huge chain link fence and guarded by a massive gate.

Hank flashed his badge to the attendant and was given the location of the white Tercel. A tow truck crawled past them, exiting the lot, as Jake and Hank slipped through the gate and made their way toward the back of the area.

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