

THE DISAPPEARING NEIGHBOR

It very rarely happened, that a major crime interfered with a girls' night out, but this was one of those nights. Carol and Emma Riley were on their way to the movies, looking forward to the teen comedy that everyone raved about, when Carol got a call and pulled over to talk. She hung up and sighed. "I'm sorry, honey, we're going to have to postpone."

"That's all right," said Emma. She had overheard her mom on the phone earlier in the day, so she had a feeling what this was about. Last night, a man had disappeared from his home. The Beaverton PD had a strict policy of not paying ransoms, and Carol Riley, the chief detective on the case, had argued with the victim's family about letting the police handle things.

Carol parked in front of a modest house on the edge of town. There was no moon, and the house backed onto the woods, so it was relatively isolated. "I just texted your dad. He's coming to pick you up. Meanwhile, you stay in the car. Is that understood?"

Emma was disappointed, but she understood. She watched her mother get out and head up the walkway,

guided only by the lights in the house. Two people were visible in the living room, a man in a suit and a woman, both pacing nervously. When the doorbell rang, the woman answered and invited Detective Riley in. It was at times like this that Emma wished she had binoculars and could lip-read.

She was alone for only a minute when she noticed some movement by the edge of the woods. It was a man, looking exhausted. He stumbled halfway to the front door. Without thinking, Emma jumped out of the car and went to his aid.

When the woman answered the door again, she found Emma there, helping the dirt-covered man in pajamas into the house. Everyone inside, including Carol Riley, was thrilled to see him.

Emma stayed in the background as the others walked him into the brightly lit living room and asked him a million questions, checked him for injuries, and sat him down with a cup of hot tea. As they spoke, Emma pieced together the situation.

The man, Jeremy Brand, was a bachelor and had been at home alone last night. "I was here in the living room, reading," he told them between sips. "It was around ten. I looked out through the window, and saw this woman standing in the middle of the lawn. Without really thinking, I opened the door. I was barely outside when someone came up from the side and grabbed me and stuffed a bag over my head."

"So, there were at least two of them," Detective Riley

said. "Did you get a good look?"

"No. It was dark out, and they kept the bag on my head. They barely talked the entire time, but I got the feeling it was just two, a man and a woman." He turned to Detective Riley. "What happened? Did someone pay a ransom?"

The detective nodded. "They contacted your company. Apparently, you're a very valued employee."

Jeremy Brand confirmed this. He was a top biotech scientist and was in the final stage of developing a new rice variety. "There is another company working on a similar process," he told Carol. "We're perhaps a week away from filing a patent application, so every day is critical."

The woman who'd answered the door was Claire, Jeremy's sister. Both she and the company had received ransom notes this morning. "I know you were against paying the money," she said to Carol. "But Bio-Research insisted. They paid the whole thing."

The other man in the room was Jeremy's boss, Todd Billings. He'd been the one to deliver the money, all in twenties. "I did exactly what they said. I put the cash in two paper bags and taped them under the Jasper Park Bridge. Then I hurried off. We were worried they wouldn't let you go, but it was a risk we had to take." His face was full of relief. "And here you are."

Jeremy thanked his boss profusely. "They left me alone for hours in some shack somewhere. Then they drove me into the woods, and took the bag off my head. I must have wandered around for an hour before recognizing where I

was. Just over the ridge.”

Emma was fascinated. It was like something out of a movie. And then she heard a car honking right outside and realized it was her father coming to pick her up.

“Looks like you two had an exciting evening,” he said as she got into the car and settled in beside him. “Do you think Mom is going to come home late tonight?”

“Probably,” said Emma. “But I think we both know who the bad guy is.”

Do you know, too?

Who does Emma think is responsible?

What detail gave it away?

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Chet Riley let his daughter stay up until his wife came home two hours later. "Sorry about our girls' night," Carol said as she walked in the door. "You should be in bed."

"How can I possibly sleep?" Emma was so eager to hear the outcome of tonight's adventure. "Did you arrest him?"

Carol wasn't surprised by her daughter's question. "Yes, Jeremy Brand is in custody and has a lawyer. Apparently, he felt underpaid and used this fake kidnapping as a way of getting himself a bonus."

"Did he have an accomplice?" Emma asked.

"We don't know. But we do know he's lying about what happened."

"Of course. He said he opened the door because he looked out the window and saw a woman on the lawn." Emma looked out her own living room window. The darkness outside made the window almost like a mirror, reflecting back their images. "That was a lie. He couldn't have seen anyone out there."

Solution to

"The Case of the Nothing Crime"