

THE MONITOR



A seemingly casual conversation, accidentally overheard, reveals a young woman's days are numbered. With only a handful of puzzle pieces, can Sara unravel the riddle before the young woman becomes a blip on a police blotter?

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The Monitor

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ISBN: 978-1-63263-405-4

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg,
Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2017

First Edition

The small group reached the point where the trail head separated forming two distinct paths leading in opposite directions. Waving to her friends, a singular young woman set off on her own. From a vantage point above, his cold, indifferent eyes watched her follow the needle covered trail leading further into a grove of loblolly pines and moss covered boulders. The trail narrowed, forcing the young woman to reduce her pace. *Oh man, this is going to be a piece of cake!*

Soundlessly, he shoved aside an impeding branch with his large, calloused palm maintaining a watchful eye as his mark gingerly navigated the footpath. As predicted, a light blue outfit covered her frame.

Ever so slowly, he let the branch fall silently back into place and began inching stealthily down a slight incline along a pathway perpendicular to hers. Timing it perfectly, he nearly bumped into her as they arrived at the junction together. She let out a startled shriek.

“So sorry, Miss,” he smiled smugly, furtively sizing her up. “Didn’t mean to frighten you. Didn’t see you.”

She took a small step backward, her hand on her chest. “No, no it’s okay. I wasn’t looking.” the girl replied nervously.

“Guess I wasn’t either. Sure you’re okay?”

“Yes...yes, I’m fine.”

“Okay. Well, again I’m sorry.” Reassured, the man passed behind her, continuing his walk up the rise towards the trail head as she continued on her way.

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Reaching the top of the knoll, he glanced over his shoulder at the blue dressed figure fading from view. A sinister sneer played around his lips. The wheels were in motion.

Chapter Seven

After a leisurely walk home from the park, Sara kissed Adam goodbye as he left for the office, cleaned up the dishes from the morning and fixed herself another cup of coffee after making lunch for her daughter. Within the hour, Elizabeth became fussy, a clear indication she was ready for a nap. Scooping up her daughter, Sara carried Elizabeth up the stairs, placing her in bed. Walking over to the chest of drawers, Sara turned on the baby monitor then opened the window to allow a soft, tranquil breeze to flow through the half open plantation shutters. By the time she turned around, Elizabeth was sound asleep. Sara quietly crept out of the room, gently closing the door behind her.

Sara placed the parent monitor on the coffee table and walked to the laundry room returning shortly carrying a wicker basket of clothes needing to be folded. Making short work of the job, Sara reached for the latest issue of *Southern Living* and settled back to relax. *Ah, blessed peace.* A few birds chattering nearby, the laughter of children and the occasional sigh from her daughter were the only sounds emanating from the monitor in Elizabeth's room.

An impatient masculine voice punctured the peaceful atmosphere.

“You're late! I've been waiting for fifteen minutes.”

Another male voice, placating and defensive replied, “Chill dude. I took the wrong turn at the gate. Besides, I’m only ten minutes late.”

“Whatever! Did you check out the area like I told you?”

“Course I did. It’s jes like you said...real nice and quiet. Further in you go, the thicker the tree growth and bushes. Hides that trail real good. Nobody around to see nothing.”

The first voice responded dryly, “How true. One couldn't ask for a better setting.”

Sara’s head snapped up. *Nobody around to see nothing*. She inexplicably shuddered. *These guys aren’t discussing jogging trails*. She slowed her breathing as the conversation continued.

“You’re sure no one saw you?”

“Nah, only her. I made sure we had a little accidental meeting, so to speak. Trust me, there wasn’t no one around to see it.”

His companion, obviously furious, hissed with agitation. “Trust you? You made sure you had an *accidental meeting*? What the hell did you do that for?”

The recipient of this vitriol sought to pacify his partner, downplaying the encounter. “It’s okay, man! Listen, she split from a small group before heading down the path. No one else was around. I swear! I came jogging down the hill kinda casual like. We bumped into each

other. I said sorry, she said it was okay and then I kept on going.”

“And why, pray tell, would you do something as stupid as that? You were supposed to remain hidden. You were *supposed* to simply verify her identity.”

With the hairs of her neck standing on end, Sara had sensed the ominous nature of the conversation long before the tongue lashing had begun. With trembling fingers, Sara had opened the camera app on her phone, pressing the record button in time to capture the entire tirade beginning with “Trust you?”

Assuming a lighthearted tone, the second individual became cajoling. “Listen, don't worry. It's not like she's going to be able to identify me or anything. I just wanted to make sure I had pegged the right one. Besides, now she thinks I'm harmless. When the time comes, she won't be expecting a thing, ya know? It's gonna be okay.”

In a tone suggesting anything but confidence, the first man snapped. “So, genius, you sure it was her?”

“Oh yea, I'm sure. Same color hair, same build as the girl in the photo you gave me. And she was wearing blue, just like you thought she would.”

As if distracted, the voice softened ever so slightly. “It appears to be the preferred color of choice these days.” There was a long gap in the conversation.

That particular voice sounds vaguely familiar. Where have I heard it? Hard as Sara tried, no face materialized, no name bubbled to the surface.

“So boss, when do you want to do this?”

“*I'm* not doing this. *You* are doing this and your job is to do it quietly and exactly as I instructed. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yea...of course. That's what I meant. When do you want *me* to do this?”

“Friday afternoon. It's Memorial Day weekend. People will be preoccupied, getting out of town. They'll be planning barbeques and dinners and picnics. She'll probably be there around the usual time...between one and two.”

“So how do we handle this?”

Sara shivered. *Murder? Are they discussing murder?*

“As per our agreement, here's half the money now. The other half will be left in a hidden location at the Atlanta Airport.”

“Wait a minute, boss. Whaddya mean half? That wasn't the original deal!”

“No, but it's only a slight change in plans. It doesn't alter anything. I'm setting set up my own alibi. Like you, I don't want any loose ends leading back to me.”

Sara heard the unmistakable reproach in the partner's tone as his voice, dripping with sarcasm, replied, “You're going out of town! You son of a bitch! What if something goes wrong? If things so south...” He was interrupted by a low growl.

“And what will you do?”

“I can identify you too, ya know!” His voice didn’t sound nearly as confident as his words implied.

“Are you sure you want to go there? Hmm? One call to your parole officer and...” There was a lengthy pause before the voice continued with a threatening manner. “Do your job quickly and efficiently, nothing will go wrong.” Then like the flip of a switch, his tone suddenly changed. “Listen, you’re worrying for nothing. This is no different than the other times I’ve hired you. I’ve not let you down before, have I?”

“I guess not.”

“Look, here’s a prepaid cell phone. Keep it close. I’ll confirm on Friday. In the meantime, you have a week to prepare. Once you’ve completed your part of the deal, call me on your way to the airport. I’ll attach a small white envelope underneath a toilet in one of the stalls. Inside will be a safety deposit key, confirmation of your prepaid ticket and all the information you’ll need to access the remainder of the money I owe you. By the time anyone notices anything amiss, you’ll be sipping margaritas on a sandy beach by dusk. It’s that simple. Trust me, pal. Everything is going to work out perfectly.”

Sara’s blood ran cold. *They are talking about murder! But who?*

“I don’t like margaritas...” was the sullen retort.

“So have a beer. Just make sure that phone takes a nose dive into the ocean once you get there, got it?”

His co-conspirator sounded dubious. “You seem to have everything worked out.”

“Yes, I believe I do,” was the chilling response. “As long as you follow the plan, all will run smoothly.”

“What if she decides to go a different way? I mean she could, ya know.”

“I highly doubt it. She's a creature of habit. This day will be no different.” said the voice reassuringly. “Besides, it's like you said. If you act like everyone else, no one will notice. Once more thing, dump your car okay? Sell it, trash it, do whatever you have to do, but no loose ends. Understood? Now, you have your passport?”

“Yea.”

The conversation indicated the men were wrapping up their meeting. *I've got to try to see their faces.*

While her phone continued to record, Sara raced up upstairs, taking two at a time and silently entered the room adjoining her daughter's nursery. She tried every angle but the foliage proved too thick. *Damn!*

Left with no alternative, Sara quietly snuck into her daughter's nursery but met the same results. Dejected, she returned to the family room in time to overhear another snippet of the conversation.

“It's none of my business, but why are you doing this?” The question had apparently caught his cohort off guard for a significant moment of silence hung in the air. “I mean, it don't make no difference to me.” She heard a tense chuckle. “People disappear all the time, right?”

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After a deliberate, audible sigh, the query was met with a toneless response. "You're right. It's none of your business. The less you know the better." Another prolonged pause followed. "Let's just say, in my own way, I'm righting a wrong and leave it at that, shall we?"

"Okay, 'nuff said."

With her heart pounding, Sara bravely decided to slip out the garage door in a daring attempt to catch a glimpse of their faces. Over the monitor Sara heard Elizabeth make signs of waking. *Not yet, Elizabeth! Please, not yet. Just a few more minutes.* Sara's silent pleas went unheeded as her daughter's soft demands escalated in volume and drifted out the window, alerting the men. Within seconds, they terminated the meeting.

"Any other questions before we break?"

"Nope. I'm good. You won't hear from me til I head to the airport."

It's now or never! This is my only chance to see their faces.

In a last ditch effort, Sara sped out the garage and through the back door. Too late! The bench sat empty. Looking in both directions revealed nothing. *How could they vanish so quickly!* With no time left to spare, Sara bolted to the front of the house. Way down the road, nearly two blocks away, a lone figure frantically peddled away on a bicycle. From this distance, Sara couldn't detect any identifying features. She watched forlornly as the figure came to the stop sign, turned left and disappeared from sight.

Discouraged, Sara trudged back inside. Elizabeth, rubbing her eyes had carefully descended the stairs. Upon seeing her mother, she raised her arms to be picked up. With her daughter straddling one hip, Sara picked up her phone, stopped recording and went into the kitchen to get her daughter something to drink.

Ten minutes later, as Elizabeth lay watching a video, Sara pulled up the recording on her phone and pushed play. The exchange sounded worse than she first thought. The audible documentation explicitly registered every innuendo, ever objective and implication in a concise manner measuring almost ten minutes in length. For Sara, it felt like an eternity.

Hoping to glean every important detail that might shed light on the culprits, Sara replayed the conversation again, trying to pinpoint any pertinent clues. To her dismay, Sara realized not one name had been mentioned, no location indicated, no hint of the reason why. Beyond knowing the gender of the intended victim, the tape provided little else other than she often wore blue and visited the same park on a regular basis. Worse, Memorial Day weekend began in less than a week. *There's no way to unravel this mystery!* And yet...that familiar voice; emotionless, pragmatic and modulated. *I've heard that voice before.* Pinching the bridge of her nose in exasperation, Sara replayed the tape again. A headache began lurking behind her eyes.

Her watch read 4:30. She dialed Adam's cell and he picked up on the second ring.

"Hi, honey. You must be clairvoyant. I was just wrapping up. What's going on?"

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“Adam, if I order from *Romano’s*, can you pick it up on your way home, please?”

“Sure. Is something wrong? You sound funny.”

“Everything is fine, Adam. It's just that...” she deliberated, thinking of a plausible excuse. “I just have a splitting headache. Nothing serious.”

“There’s Advil in my cabinet.”

“Thanks, I’ll take some now. See you soon.” She hung up the phone, her hand slowly sliding away. She could do nothing until Adam arrived.