

[Transcript] Crime Junkie / MISSING: Phoenix Coldon

Hi, crime junkies. I'm your host, Ashley Flowers.
And I'm Brett.
And the story I have for you today is about a young woman
who literally seems to vanish off the face of the earth.
And despite all the efforts by her family to bring her home,
there seems to be a lack of an official investigation.
But the further they look into her disappearance,
the more questions they have.
This is the story of Phoenix Colden.
Goldie Colden knows something bad has happened to her daughter.
It is 1.30 in the morning, and her daughter, Phoenix,
is always home by now.
But she's not pulling into the driveway.
She's not walking through the front door,
and the house is silent.
Now, one thing you need to know about Goldie
is that she is not one to just stand around
and wait for something to happen.
So as soon as she gets that feeling in her gut
that something's wrong, she trusts it.
She walks into the bedroom that she shares with her daughter
and wakes him up.
But Lawrence doesn't share her panic,
at least not on the outside.
He tries to calm Goldie down,
saying Phoenix is going to be home soon,
she's fine, everything's going to be okay.
But even though Goldie trusts her husband more than anyone,
she can't believe a word he's saying.
She knows in her heart that something is wrong.
Now, Phoenix is a responsible 23-year-old who knows
that while she's living under her parents' roof
and attending college,
she is not supposed to stay out past 1.30 am,
and she never has, until now.
So Goldie stays up,
watching the clock slowly turn from 1.30 to 2.30 to 3.30,
and Phoenix still isn't home.
And by the next day, both Goldie and Lawrence
are beside themselves with worry,
and Goldie decides to call the police.
But before she can, Lawrence tells her to just wait.
Wait for what?
Kid didn't come home last night.

Well, it's not that he doesn't want her to call
or that he's not worried,
because by this point, he for sure is.
Basically, Goldie explains in an episode of Real Talk with Tamara
that he was just under the impression
that they had to wait between 24 and 48 hours
before you could report someone missing.
S***, information strikes again.
I know.
But actually, that doesn't happen here,
because Goldie is like,
I don't care if you have to wait,
I'm calling and I'm reporting our daughter missing.
An officer from St. Louis County
shows up at their house in the northern part of St. Louis
later that day and asks them all the standard questions,
name, physical description, age, all of it.
But before the coldens can even get around
to telling the officer what had happened,
you know, the important information,
he stops them as soon as they tell him her birthday.
He doesn't think she's missing because she's an adult.
That's exactly what he says,
just like so many other cases we've covered.
But Goldie does not budge.
She says, you don't know my daughter,
you don't know our family, and this isn't right.
So the officer is like, okay, you know what?
Let me go run her license plate,
make sure that her vehicle, which is this 1998 Chevy Blazer,
hasn't shown up anywhere.
So he steps out, leaving Goldie and Lawrence
waiting with bated breath, thinking back on the day before
and the last time that they had seen their daughter,
wondering if there were any red flags.
But the day before had been entirely normal.
It was December 18th, 2011, a Sunday,
so Goldie and Phoenix had gone to church in the morning.
Jill Cedarsstrom reported for oxygen
that they had stopped by the store after that
and headed home at around 2 p.m.
The last time either of them had seen her
had been around 3 p.m.
Lawrence was in the living room

and Phoenix had walked past him out the front door
and sat in her SUV,
which actually isn't entirely unusual.
Usually she would go sit out there to like talk on the phone
to get like a bit of privacy.
I don't really get that.
But after a few minutes, Lawrence saw her pull out
of the driveway.
Again, not really any cause for concern.
He just assumed that she was going to go to the store or something.
But then she just never came back.
When the officer comes back in,
he informs the coldens that he ran her license plate
but didn't get a hit.
Now, I'm not sure if they're able to file
an official missing persons report,
but even if they are, it becomes pretty clear
that the police aren't going to offer any help.
The officer is convinced that she just left on her own
and she's eventually just going to show back up.
And she hadn't left with like a bag of stuff or anything.
At least nothing that Lawrence saw, right?
Right.
The only thing missing is her purse,
which makes sense because again, she drove away.
Like she was going somewhere.
Right.
But all of her clothes are still there.
All of her personal belongings, everything is at the house.
And as far as her parents know,
like she has a great life.
She's in college.
She has a good group of friends.
So not only does leaving on her own
not make sense for her personality,
but there's also no physical evidence to back that up.
But even though the police aren't much help,
the coldens aren't just going to sit around
and wait for Phoenix to come home.
They make and distribute their own flyers.
They call local hospitals just in case she was in an accident.
Goldia even calls every local news station.
She can think of begging them to cover Phoenix's case
just to get her face out there because she knows

how important it is for the public to be looking out for her.
But she is essentially ignored.
Call after call gets the same response
and no one wants to cover Phoenix's story.
That is except for one woman.
A local reporter named Shondrea Thomas
who works for Fox too.
She hears about the coldens struggle
to get any coverage for Phoenix
and she pushes to report on the story herself
at her news station.
Now she's appalled,
not only by the police's dismissal of the case,
but also just the lack of coverage.
I mean, here is a young, successful, hard-working young woman
who literally disappears into thin air
and no one is talking about her.
But both Shondrea and the coldens
think that they know why.
It is because Phoenix is black.
In an article for St. Louis Post Dispatch
by Marlene Walker,
Goldia says they're able to get some coverage,
but nothing close to cases like Natalie Holloway, for instance.
But it's not just the media or the police
or the institutions they're used to seeing this from.
What's wild about Phoenix's case
is that it is a grind
to even get Phoenix's own friends to help.
I mean, Goldia is shocked by how many of Phoenix's friends
just kind of drop off and don't seem to care.
Yeah, I'm always shocked when I hear stuff like that too.
I mean, I've literally already had you search my house
when I thought Justin was missing.
For like five minutes,
like the second you thought he was gone.
Yeah.
If something happened to you,
like, oh, well, would not be it.
Honestly, this crime-ducky feed would just be episodes titled
Missing Ashley Flowers.
I literally thought about that
if anyone I ever knew went missing.
I was like, every audio Chuck show

would just become about that case.
Now, fortunately, there are a few friends
who set up and offer some helpful information,
and the coldens learned
that they might not have known their daughter
as well as they thought they did.
For example, a few days after she went missing,
Goldia is kind of doing her thing, making some calls,
and she's actually speaking to one of Phoenix's friends.
And the friend mentions Phoenix's boyfriend,
a boyfriend that Goldia and Lawrence didn't know about.
So Goldia is obviously shocked by this,
and she asked if the boyfriend would know where Phoenix is.
And the friend is like, I mean, yeah,
if anybody would, he would.
These friends, how are they not shouting this
from the rooftops on day one?
Yeah.
Not like, oh yeah, maybe ask this person,
she had this significant relationship with.
Again, if you go missing,
the first episode of missing Ashley Flowers
would just be me being like, Eric did it, right?
You're like fully feeding
into like the husband always did a thing.
It's probably not Eric.
But I think that this is like the tip of the iceberg
of them discovering that they maybe don't know
everything about their daughter, right?
And I think that maybe goes into her friendships.
Maybe the people they thought
were her close group of friends aren't.
I don't know the full dynamic.
Right, right.
And I also don't know how exactly this call went down.
So maybe there was more urgency, but I don't know.
To me, it just seems like someone
should have let them know sooner.
But this is what I was meaning about these friends,
even the ones who are helping.
It's just kind of like this, oh, by the way, kind of thing.
So anyways, this friend does agree to call the boyfriend
and see if he knows anything.
And a few days go by before Goldia hears back.

Days?

Yeah.

Where is the urgency?

I know, this is painful.

But when they finally call back,

they say that they talked to the boyfriend

and he said he doesn't know anything.

I'm sorry, this is all too weird.

This is after days have gone by.

I'm not buying it.

Yeah, neither is Goldia.

So she asked the friend, well, do you believe him?

And the friend's like, no, not one bit.

I mean, that's all I'd need to hear.

Let's go talk to him, see what he knows, everything.

Yeah, well, hold on, because there's more.

In these last few days, they have learned
even more new information about Phoenix
that they have to take into consideration
when planning their next move.

Like?

Like, not only did Phoenix have a boyfriend,
the two of them had actually lived together for a while.

What?

How did her parents not know about him then?

Well, let me give you,

I think you need some context around this.

So when Phoenix was 18, she had moved into an apartment
with who her parents thought was a female friend.

Like, Goldia had even signed the lease and each time

Goldia had been over to the apartment,
she had never seen anything that would indicate
that there was a guy living there.

Do they know how long he was living with her?

I don't think so, at least not at this point,

but it had been for a while

because Phoenix had just moved back in with her parents
like earlier that year.

Which I can't imagine that transition was painless,
going from having all that freedom
to living with your parents again.

I had to go back to living with my parents
when I was exactly Phoenix's age, 23.

And I mean, it was painful for me

and I have lovely parents as she might too.
And it wasn't the easiest for her.
But again, as far as Goldia and Lawrence knew,
things were okay.
But the more they're uncovering about Phoenix,
the more they start to question
literally everything in her life.
Because in addition to the boyfriend
and the living arrangements before,
they also find out that she actually
hadn't enrolled in classes for the fall semester.
So everything is a lie?
Well, that's what they want to find out.
It's around this time that they decide
to go through her room.
I mean, they had been in it since she went missing,
but never with the intention of like searching for clues
as to not just where she is, but like who she is.
But when they do this, they find some items
that make them start questioning
what really happened to their daughter.
First, they find one of her boyfriend's business cards,
with his phone number on it.
And this is a big deal.
Wait, why?
I mean, didn't the friend have his number?
They called him and talked to him.
Here's the thing, so from what I can tell,
the friend did have the number.
The friend did call him,
but the coldens didn't have his number.
So I don't know if the friend
just didn't think to pass along,
then they couldn't get a hold of them,
or wouldn't pass it along, or what.
But from what I can tell,
this is the first time that they're seeing his number anywhere.
So anyways, this is huge because back in 2011,
when you got your phone bill,
you could see every number who called you
and every number that you called.
So they take a look at their phone bill
specifically for the last few days
before Phoenix went missing,

and his number shows up multiple times.
The day before she went missing,
that was December 17th,
they had had a phone call that lasted 116 minutes
from 11 p.m. to almost 1 o'clock in the morning.
And then the day she went missing,
they had talked twice,
once for six minutes, and once for just a single minute.
And actually, that one-minute conversation
is the last number that she called on that phone.
Could that be the call she took from the driveway,
or is this later, like, after she left?
Actually, neither.
This last call happened an hour before she left the driveway.
How is this the last call
if it's before the call she made in the driveway?
So that's the thing.
We actually don't know if she made a call in the driveway.
So the thing that her dad said
is when she went to her SUV, like,
he said it was normal because she would often take calls.
Not that he saw her taking a call.
So as far as we know, no call necessarily was made.
Okay.
Are the police aware of any of this?
Because if he's the last person she talked to,
it seems like he's the person they should be looking at, right?
Well, no.
I mean, as far as I can tell,
the police aren't looking at anyone.
So they're definitely not starting with him.
Now, the phone records are not the only thing
that they find suspicious,
because tucked into the pages of a notebook in her room,
they also find a piece of paper
with this hastily scribbled note.
Now, they can tell it's written by Phoenix.
But from what Gouldia can tell,
it's seemingly something that someone said to her.
Now, I don't know exactly what the note says,
like verbatim, or even what it's written on.
But all I have are like, that it's a piece of paper
dated for the day she went missing.
And I just have this summary that Gouldia gave on that episode

of Real Talk with Tamara that I mentioned earlier.
And what Gouldia said on that show was, quote,
we think you need to make up your mind
about what you're going to do before 2012,
or else I'm going to have to show you
what I can do about your parents, end quote.
That's a threat.
Mm-hmm, that's what Gouldia ends up thinking too.
Well, and also, who is we?
I have no idea.
Again, Gouldia is paraphrasing there,
not verbatim what the note says.
So I don't know if it actually was a we or an I or whatever,
but whoever said that clearly wanted Phoenix
to make a decision about something,
and it does seem like they're threatening her,
but her parents don't know
what the decision would need to be about.
Now, after they find the note,
the coldens keep searching for Phoenix
in whatever way they can,
but they just keep hitting dead ends.
That is until two weeks later,
when they learn that her car has been found.
Where did they finally find it?
Well, that's the thing.
It has been sitting at an impound lot in East St. Louis
since the day she went missing.
I'm confused.
Same.
The police ran her plates the day she went missing.
Why didn't it show up in their system till now?
Well, for a second, you got to slow down
because, yes, police ran the plates
the day she went missing and they found nothing,
but right now, it's actually not the police
who find her car.
So get this.
On January 1st,
Gouldia gets a call from this family friend.
This is somebody who had heard Phoenix is missing
and they basically just are calling to see
if what they heard is true.
Now, whoever this person is,

once Gouldia confirms that, yes, my daughter's missing,
this family friend says, okay, I'm going to do some digging.
And they ask for Phoenix's license plate number,
her vehicle description, stuff like that.
They hang up and not 15 minutes later,
Gouldia gets this call back and this friend says,
listen, I've tracked down her car to this tow yard
in East St. Louis,
which is across the Mississippi River
from Missouri in Illinois.
15 minutes?
It took them 15 minutes to find the car
while police have been doing what exactly all this time?
And that's the question, isn't it?
But regardless of how they learned where it was,
what matters now is that they know where it is.
So the coldens pass this information
on to the St. Louis County police
who head to the in-pound lot and start processing the car.
And they do end up learning some pretty disturbing details
about how it was found.
So it turns out the car was found less than three hours
after Phoenix left home at an intersection
at around 5.30 p.m.
And they're told that it was found in the traffic lane
with the engine running, keys still in the ignition,
with the driver's door just open.
Now, the officer who first came upon it
said that he didn't see anyone inside
and after confirming that it hadn't been reported,
it was just towed away.
And as if that wasn't suspicious enough,
the area where it was found makes her parents even more worried
because, again, it's found in East St. Louis,
which is known for violent crime, known for drugs, gang activity.
I mean, this is known to not be a great place to be in.
So it's not a place that Phoenix would normally go to on her own.
Okay, but that's what they know of.
I feel like she was doing a bunch of things
they didn't know about though.
True, true.
And I mean, even if she did take the car there,
what I can't get over is they find this car in a bad part town
under clearly suspicious circumstances

and no one was like, maybe we should see whose car this is and find out why it's here in the middle of the road.

What?

Still on.

And this is what is, to me, the strangest part.

The car is actually, though it's Phoenix's car,

like she's the only one that used it,

it's actually registered and insured under Goldie's name,

which you think they would have known.

So literally all East St. Louis police would have had to do

is like pick up the phone and call her.

So you got this abandoned car.

It seems like there was no effort put into even track down the owner.

Right.

And I still don't understand how the car didn't show up

when the St. Louis County police ran the plates,

when Goldie and Lawrence went to them in the first place.

I know, I was super hung up on that too.

But Goldie says in an article for HuffPost by David Lord

that she thinks the East St. Louis police just didn't enter it

into their system right when it came into their possession.

So by the time St. Louis police ran the plate,

it didn't show up.

Like just a small window, they basically missed each other.

And how much was lost in that though?

Like even though they're processing the car now,

it hasn't been treated like a crime scene for two weeks.

Who knows what evidence was in there

that might be contaminated or degraded by now.

I mean, I think it depends on who you ask

because police would say that nothing was lost in those two weeks

because when the car is finished being processed,

the police tell the coldens that there wasn't anything in it.

Like it was empty, no items, no fingerprints, nothing.

I mean, it's so worthless as evidence to them

that they just release it to the family on January 5th.

So when they release it,

Goldie and Lawrence head over to the lot to get it.

And I kid you not, as soon as they open the door,

the first thing they see are Phoenix's reading glasses,

like sitting right there.

Bullsh**t, there's nothing in the car.

And the glasses aren't even all like there's a tote bag.

Her purse is there.

There's a scarf, two short sleeve t-shirts,
an extra pair of shoes that she kept in the car.
There's a bracelet, some earrings.
I mean, her insurance card, the list goes on and on.
If all of that is nothing,
what is actually nothing to them?
Right, I don't know.
Okay, so all of this is still in the car
and the police just collect none of it.
None of it.
Nothing.
Which is why I'm saying like to them, they're like,
oh, the two weeks, you know, and again, there might have been more.
Who knows what happened in those two weeks,
but they think everything in there is useless.
Especially again, to me, you didn't even look at her purse.
Were you even looking at the right car?
I'm so confused.
Right.
But even after all of that frustration and negligence,
it seems like the investigation is finally starting to take off.
Goldie says in another episode of Real Talk with Tamara
after the car is found, police bring in cadaver dogs
to search the area around where it was found.
They also check her bank and her phone records, you know,
actually starting to investigate Phoenix's disappearance.
Yeah.
And the police confirm that her bank account hasn't been accessed
and her phone hasn't been used since she went missing.
And there was nothing suspicious from when
or where the phone stopped being used?
Again, so based on the phone bill,
we know that last call that she made was that one minute call.
I mentioned earlier, but police have never said
if she was texting on it or anything afterwards.
And I couldn't find like, again, where it stopped transmitting
or died or anything like that.
Now, they at this point also finally interviewed the boyfriend
who they end up clearing.
So he's a dead end.
This is when the black in missing foundation steps in
and helps the coldens get some national coverage for the case.
And once Phoenix's name is out there, tips do start coming in.
For instance, there is one where someone contacts investigators

and says that they think they saw Phoenix at a bus stop.
They're in St. Louis.
And wouldn't you know it when they go to check it out?
There is surveillance footage.
So they take a look and there is a woman who bears
a striking resemblance to Phoenix to the point where investigators
think that they found her.
So they take some of the images to her parents just to be sure.
And they say it wasn't her.
But despite that disappointment, the coldens keep pushing forward.
They go on the local news.
They keep handing out photos and flyers.
They even start a fund to raise money to hire a private investigator.
And Lawrence even leads searches of their own around where her car was found.
But time after time, they come up with nothing.
By the time spring rolls around,
they have raised enough money to finally hire that private investigator
who gets to work trying to fill in some of the blanks.
And he starts with the police report from the officer who found Phoenix's car.
He's able to get a copy of it, which he passes on to the coldens.
And they are shocked by what they see.
First, the report they get is supposed to be six pages.
At least that's what they think because it's numbered.
One, two, three, four, six.
Page five is missing, which strikes them as odd.
There's also just not a lot of information in the report,
like nothing about who the car was registered to and insured by.
And finally, on one of the first pages, like there is this line that says victim,
where the officer can write if there is someone in the car or around the car, hurt, whatever.
And in that line, in that victim line is written adult female.
How would he know that if Phoenix wasn't with the car?
Exactly. It is bizarre.
And they don't get an explanation for it either.
So the report just ends up furthering the rift between the East St. Louis PD and the coldens.
Yeah, I'm on the cold inside here.
It's not adding up.
And if you don't have answers for why, then you're part of the problem.
Same.
Now, tips are still coming in to both police and the coldens themselves.
And one of them does grab their attention.
This man from Texas calls them and says that he knows where Phoenix is.
He says she's alive.
She's in Texas and he can point them to exactly where she's staying.
Now, based on their conversation, the coldens are convinced that this guy is legit.

I mean, he gives them details that seem really convincing.
And so they spare no expense traveling to Texas to get their daughter and bring her home.
And mind you, already they have spent a lot of money in their search for Phoenix.
I mean, their life savings are all but gone.
But to them, this is all worth it to get their daughter back.
Yeah.
But when they travel to Texas, they are devastated to learn that the man they talked to was lying.
Phoenix isn't there.
And even though that's the most heartbreaking part of this, it doesn't even end there.
Because a HuffPost article by David Lorre reports that the trip puts them dangerously close to losing their home.
Now, they contact police to try and report this guy and have him arrested.
But the authorities tell them that they actually can't do anything.
Because he contacted the coldens and not police, he hasn't hindered their investigation.
So apparently there's nothing they can do.
Now, the coldens are able to end up selling their house, which helps them avoid foreclosure.
Their financial situation stays dire.
All because this random man wanted attention or, I don't know, whatever his motive was.
What is wrong with people?
I know.
I will never understand the reasoning behind shit like that.
Yeah.
So it is back to square one.
So did they ever have any theories about where she is?
Like, I know they had the boyfriend theory for a while, but after that was ruled out, what else were they working on?
I mean, there's still the theory, I think, in police's mind that she left on her own,
which her parents both adamantly deny, especially since she didn't take any of her personal belongings.
But there is also a second theory that she was met with foul play, specifically that she was abducted and trafficked.
I mean, at this point in 2011-2012, St. Louis had a massive human trafficking problem.
According to a two-part documentary titled The Disappearance of Phoenix-Colden, St. Louis is one of the top 10 cities for human trafficking in the United States.
And Interstate 70, which runs right through it, is known as the sex trafficking superhighway.
Oh my God.
And as we all know, there are lots of ways someone can become a victim of human trafficking.
But, Britt, I actually had you look up some of the more common ways that people fall victim to this.
Can you talk us through what you found?
Yeah, so like you said, there are a lot of tactics to force someone into this.
And I know we've talked about before that maybe it's someone you know who pressures you into sex work, like a boyfriend, for instance.
They say, oh, it's just this one time, we need the cash, you'll never have to do it again.
But then it becomes one more time, one more time, and it's never just one more time.

Another common tactic is that someone will offer you a job that takes you away from home. It might seem like a little too good to be true.

And once they get you away from like the safety and the comfort of home, you're forced into it. And then there are abduction scenarios where there's no tricking or manipulation involved. Right.

Someone just grabs you.

And those are two examples that they give in the documentary about Phoenix's case.

And I'll talk more about it later, but they even interview a survivor and that's exactly what she says. So many ways someone can be lured or forced into trafficking.

And the abduction theory is actually what the coldens start to think happened to Phoenix.

Between the location of her SUV and the way it was found, they think it's totally possible that someone just grabbed her straight out of her vehicle.

But what about the note?

Who says it can't be both?

Like maybe someone got her into this and maybe she was trying to get out?

It would explain a lot of the behaviors her parents couldn't like dropping out of school.

Right.

I mean, it's totally possible.

But again, if we're looking at all scenarios, it's also totally possible that the letter was just a red herring and they aren't connected.

I mean, like something definitely was going on that took her to that area and then she was abducted. And I only suggest that because of this story about another young woman that the coldens learn about.

According to that same huff post article by David Lord, this woman was at a stoplight a few years ago and a man literally just walked up to her car, opened the door, reached over, ripped her from the car and shoved her into another vehicle. Now she said there were a few people in the car and they took her somewhere that she didn't recognize.

It was there that she was drugged repeatedly sexually assaulted and was basically made aware that they planned to traffic her.

Now, thankfully, she was able to get away.

Most of the people that she had been with had, I guess, gone out one day and there was just one guy left to guard her and he got drunk.

So she took that opportunity and just ran to this nearby house where the woman who answered the door called 911 for her.

After she was taken to the hospital, she learned that the place she had been taken was about three hours outside of East St. Louis.

But she says that pretty much right away, the police didn't seem to care about what she'd gone through.

They never found the people that abducted her and aside from being interviewed at the hospital, the police only contacted her once, like a year later, and she hadn't heard any updates since.

So the coldens have got to be thinking that this woman's ordeal and Phoenix's disappearance are connected, right?

Oh, I mean, her family thinks it's a definite possibility, but I'm not sure what the police do with that

information.

In fact, they stay pretty tight-lipped about everything that they're doing.

So I'm not entirely sure what they know or what they do with what they know.

Anyways, after this tip from the woman, things seem to go quiet.

The coldens keep their search going with their PI and if the police ever make any headway, it's never been reported on.

But that police report that the PI got has just been nagging at Goldie at this whole time.

I mean, there are so many things about it that just don't sit right with her like the missing page, that spot where it said there was a victim.

So in the summer of 2013, she goes to the East St. Louis Police Department and requests a copy of the report herself.

They give it to her and she is appalled to see that what they gave her is a completely different report than what she saw a year ago.

What?

Yeah, this one is three pages, not six.

The date that it was filed isn't December 18th when the car was found.

It's January 1st, 2012 and Goldie says that it has a lot more information than the first report did.

Like the first report didn't have anything about her registration information, which remember was in Goldie's name.

And this report has all of it.

So there are two reports or just this one and now they're saying the other one doesn't exist?

I have no idea. I can't find any explanation from the East St. Louis Police on why the documents are different.

And if the Coldens have ever been told why, they've never made a public statement about it.

But what they're really hung up on is the date that this second report says it was filed because January 1st is the day that that family friend was able to track down the car.

Right.

And if it wasn't entered into any databases until the 1st, that backs up Goldie's assumption that they just hadn't filed anything in a timely manner.

So when the officer ran her plate back when she was first reported missing, there's no reason it would have shown up.

Right.

And which is just another example of how the police's incompetence at the start of this investigation may have severely hindered the entire thing.

So over the next few years, the investigation seems to stall.

I mean, there are a few sightings which make the Coldens believe that Phoenix is still out there.

The most convincing which comes in March of 2014, basically one of Phoenix's former church friends is on a plane coming back from Vegas when she looks up and sees this group of women who are like still boarding.

And among them is a woman that she is convinced is Phoenix.

She says she's well-dressed.

She's with this group of other well-dressed women, as well as these two large muscular men who look to be about 35 to 40.

So when this church friend sees her, she says her name out loud, almost like out of shock.

And the woman that she thinks is Phoenix turns to her, looks her dead in the eye, and she says something like, oh, do I look like someone?

And so the church friend kind of goes on to explain, you know, you look like my friend Phoenix, and the woman just doesn't even respond.

She just keeps walking past her to her seat.

Now, as soon as the plane lands, the church friend goes to the airport officials to report what she saw, and police end up being called.

And they search the entire airport, but they're never able to track this woman down or even confirm if it really was Phoenix.

You know, I feel like this fits with the trafficking theory. I mean, if she's traveling with a group, including these two men.

I mean, it's suspicious, right? And like the fact that it's this church friend, to me, like it feels a little less random.

Like I don't think they would have mistaken her identity.

Like they'd known each other for years.

So I don't know.

It just seems so legit.

It seems to carry more weight for some reason.

Now, after the sighting, Goldie and Lawrence keep trying to push to get Phoenix's case solved. But as the years pass, it seems like everyone has forgotten about Phoenix.

Everyone but Chandra Thomas, that reporter I mentioned earlier.

She's actually never forgotten about the coldens and the search for their daughter, even though reporting on her case is all but stopped.

So she actually starts working with Oxygen True Crime to produce that documentary on Phoenix's case that I've talked about.

She teams up with this man named Joe Delia, who's worked for the FBI, the DEA.

And he was actually part of a task force that busted one of the largest child sex trafficking rings in the U.S.

The two of them together start digging into Phoenix's past for this documentary.

And slowly but surely, they start to unearth even more information that had never been made public before.

For example, one of the things found in the SUV was a phone bill, but it wasn't for the family plan.

It turns out that Phoenix had a phone other than the one on the coldens family plan.

Did her parents know about it?

Not until after she vanished.

And they knew it for a long time, but it was something that they just kept under wraps, probably to try and protect the investigation.

But I mean, with so many years at this point having passed, I think they felt like they had nothing to lose by including it in the doc.

Now, Chandra and former officer Delia confirm with the St. Louis County police that they have been able to track her phones, both of them, on the day she disappeared, but they won't share what those records told them.

Okay, but do they know why she had two phones?

If anyone, police, coldens, anyone know, no one says.

But Chandra and Officer Delia talked to some of Phoenix's friends and they say that it was because she didn't want her mom or her boyfriend to know that she was talking to this other guy. Apparently it was a guy that she was dating while she was with her boyfriend that she lived with for a time, though I'm not sure like how much of an overlap there was. But either way, Chandra and Officer Delia dive into this guy's background and they dig up some pretty interesting stuff. So boyfriend number two has a restraining order against him from a girlfriend that he had up until the end of 2011. Chandra and Officer Delia track her down and they talk to this other woman and in the documentary, she says that boyfriend number two, he was possessive and angry and over time became both emotionally and physically abusive. That's not all. She also says that he was obsessed with missing persons cases. Specifically, Phoenix's and a few others in Chicago. Now he told her it was because he was a psych major and just really into true crime. And fair, listen, I'm also obsessed with missing persons cases. Right, we're all here, right? But she pressed him further and he asked her why she was so worried about someone who was already dead. I'm sorry, what? Yes, super sus. Well, when Chandra and Officer Delia go talk to him, they learn that he has a lawyer and isn't up for talking like he's not saying anything. But they know that the police are at least aware of him. So there's not much more they can do on that front. Now, one of the other major discoveries comes when they talk to the officer who first saw Phoenix's SUV the evening she went missing. Now, remember, the cold ends were told really everyone was told that the SUV was parked door open keys in the ignition engine still running. But when they speak to this guy again, who is listed as the responding officer, he's like, no door was closed, SUV was off keys were not anywhere in the vehicle. So the complete opposite of what they've been saying for years. I have no idea how this story got so twisted. Again, this is years later. I don't know if he's misremembering because even on the police report that the cold ends have it's literally written that the car is still running and the door was open. All of it. Okay, here's my question. Do the investigators have the keys then? We know the cold ends don't have them. If the police didn't collect them and the car was found. That would confirm that would mean the story everyone's been believing for years is wrong. Right. There's so many pieces that are missing. I don't know who has the keys because you're right. If the investigators have them, I mean, they're keeping it under wrap. Right.

And to your point, like if they have them, then the keys were with the vehicle.
It just doesn't make any sense.
None of this case makes any sense.
So I have to keep going.
The next thing that the doc reveals is another big twist.
So they reveal this video from one of Phoenix's cell phones.
Apparently the video was taken about a month before she disappeared.
And in it, she is talking to herself about wanting to start over.
She basically says that she's gotten herself into a situation.
And while she doesn't go into any detail, she's looking around like there's something or someone watching her.
I feel like that would have been important to know day one.
This plus the note in her room really makes it seem like she was trying to get away on her own.
Yeah.
But something about this, I don't know, it still feels like there's got to be a foul play element.
You said she's like looking around in the video.
It feels like she's clearly running from someone, right?
Again, her parents are still adamant that she didn't leave on her own.
But there are actually a few reasons that kind of back up that theory.
Her friends tell Shondreya and Officer Delia that Goldia and Lawrence are pretty strict.
And that ever since she moved home, she had been having a really rough time getting used to not having that freedom that she had in the past.
But it goes beyond that.
One of her friends mentions getting in an argument with Phoenix a few days before she disappeared, in which Phoenix threatened to pack and leave.
Okay.
What if it's all of it?
Like, she could have run away, but also have been trafficked if whoever she ran away to was shady.
I really think trafficking could be involved in some way.
And, I mean, again, to go back to what I was saying, maybe that was happening before.
Maybe that's the thing that made her want to leave.
I mean, one of the ideas that Shondreya and Officer Delia explore in the doc is that traffickers can hold someone basically,
quote unquote, shameful over someone to force that person into it.
So maybe she had done something that she felt her parents wouldn't approve of,
or, again, she just felt a lot of shame over whether she should have or not,
and whoever she was with knew that and used that against her.
Though, I will say that the Coldens PI doesn't really buy into that theory.
As far as I can tell, he doesn't work for them anymore.
And he tells Shondreya and Officer Delia that after everything he's learned,
he thinks Phoenix ran away on her own.
He says the human trafficking theory is unlikely because she had a support system around her.
Even if her parents were strict, she had friends.
Now, could she have gotten lured away by something?

Maybe, but he says that he's pretty convinced she left on her own to start a new life. Listen, if he has proof she did this on her own, by her own choosing, awesome. Great, let's see it. Actually, people with support systems get trafficked all the time. I totally agree with you. This felt like a very old-school mindset about trafficking. And, again, I don't want what he's saying to get misinterpreted. I think this is some toxic misinformation that makes it so hard for people to spot trafficking. Because, again, we've said it before, it happens to people with great support systems. Sometimes those people go home to their families. Well, and on top of that, this is not, like, way back in the day. She's missing in 2011. It is not that easy just to disappear in the thin air. Well, actually, it's funny you should say that because for Phoenix, it actually might have been easier than for most people. Because in researching this case, I found out that she had two birth certificates. Okay, what are the odds of that, though? Why? So, the first one is from when she was born and it has her mother's maiden name on it, which was Reeves. And then when Goldia married Lawrence and Phoenix was still a child, she changed it. But the Reeves birth certificate still exists. And, theoretically, she could maybe use it to assume a new identity. So, Chandra and Officer Delia, they found this out as well. They decided to look into that idea just in case. And it might actually have some legs to it. They started looking into that name and they find four people going by the name Phoenix Reeves. Three can be discounted right away because they're able to determine that they're not Phoenix, or at least they're not the Phoenix they're looking for, right? But the fourth is interesting. They can't find a social security number for that name. No relatives, nothing. But there's records of someone going by the name Phoenix Reeves because it was associated with a place in Anchorage, Alaska, from January of 2012 to June of 2012. Which is right after Phoenix Colden went missing. Now, the documentary follows Officer Delia as he actually goes to Alaska to see if he can track down this Phoenix. But as good of a lead as it seemed, he can't find her. I mean, he goes to the address, but the woman who lives there says that she's lived at the house since 2002. She's never rented to anyone. No one in the neighborhood recognizes Phoenix's photo either. So, I mean, this was promising, but it's like every other sighting.

It seems like a dead end.
Is there any other theory about where she could be?
Any similar cases? Anything?
The only other possible connection is the murder of a woman named Stacey English, which happened in Atlanta back in December of 2011.
And Stacey's story goes that she'd gone missing after a family gathering and her car was found the exact same way as Phoenix's was.
Or at least how we thought it was in the beginning, right?
Like door unlocked, engine running.
Anyway, Stacey's body was found on January 23rd of 2012 under a tree about a mile from her car.
And while her death was eventually ruled as quote-unquote accidental, her family disagreed with the ruling.
But that's really it.
Over the last few years, there haven't been any possible sightings, at least none that have been reported on, but Goldia and Lawrence are still desperate for their daughter to come home.
So, Phoenix, if you are out there somewhere and you happen to hear this, maybe you did leave on your own.
You don't have to come back to your old life.
I mean, you'd be 34 years old now.
You can make your own decisions, but your parents are desperate to know what happened to you.
You don't have to talk to them.
You don't have to tell anyone where you are.
There are ways to keep your location and identity secure, but they do miss you and they do love you.
But if you didn't mean for this to happen, if you maybe trusted the wrong person or did something you aren't proud of, something that you think people will judge you for, there are resources out there that can help you get out of whatever situation you're in.
You can call the Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888 for anonymous immediate assistance, and that applies to anyone who feels like they might be in that situation.
And if Phoenix isn't out there, or if this never makes it to her, then Crime Junkies finding Phoenix is up to you.
If any of you know anything about the disappearance of Phoenix Colden, you can call the St. Louis County Police at 636-529-8210.
Or you can submit a tip online to the St. Louis Regional Crime Stoppers at stlrcs.org.
You can find all of the source material for this episode on our website crimejunkiepodcast.com.
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We'll be back next week with a brand new episode.
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