

# The Case of the Missing Serial Number

Cora is an avid cyclist. For the past year, she has been saving money to upgrade her bike. One day, she discovers an amazing deal on Craig's List. The bike she finds is just what she has been looking for but much cheaper than she was expecting to have to pay.

Cora and the seller agree to meet at a park near Cora's workplace, so that Cora can try out the bike. The seller, Megan, helps Cora adjust the bike to fit well. Megan points out some scratches on the frame, but Cora agrees that these are minor cosmetic issues.

Cora loves her new bike, but she receives troubling news 6 months later. A mechanic notices that the clear-coat serial number glued to the bottom of the frame has been stripped off. Cora's stomach sinks: the missing serial number almost certainly indicates that the bike was stolen.

If Cora had known that the bike was probably stolen, she would never have bought it. But she realizes that there is little chance of getting her money back. She never learned the seller's actual identity beyond her first name and no longer has record of the email conversation planning their initial meeting, and she also knows that stolen bikes are almost impossible to trace.

Cora needs to decide whether to turn the bike over to the police. If she does, there is at least a chance—however unlikely—that the police could find the bike's original owner. In addition, she feels guilty that her purchase might have made it worthwhile for a thief to steal the bike. Indeed, the very idea that her prized possession is potentially stolen property is depressing to her.

On the other hand, Cora does not think that she was irresponsible in making the purchase (although it is true that she never checked for the serial number). And Cora worked hard for a whole year to save money for this bike. And again: it is at least *possible* that the serial number was stripped off accidentally. Cora doesn't want to risk losing her bike, especially since she did nothing wrong. Why should she suffer negative consequences if her bike turns out to be stolen property? She wishes the missing serial number had never been brought to her attention.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

- (1) Should Cora turn over the bike to the police for their review?
- (2) What should Cora do if she *did* have the contact info for the seller after all?
- (3) How, if at all, does the monetary value of the (allegedly) stolen property affect the case?