

The Drowning Desert

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Abstract

This is a piece that I have written as my Creative Component for my Honors Degree. As a Creative Writing Major. The piece is a mystery story that covers the appearance of an unidentifiable body in a town in the middle of nowhere, better known as Western Texas. The story follows the investigations of a Texas State Trooper, Roman Brown, as he attempts to figure out who the body is as quickly as possible. To conflict matters though, this town in the middle of nowhere was the one that he grew up in as a child, and the one that he has avoided returning to as much as possible. He will have to work with Jonah, the town's sheriff who has known Roman since he was a kid and isn't necessarily the greatest at laying down the law in his own town. After all, why arrest someone when you can give them a stern talking to? Besides Jonah, there is the town's detective Gregory, who has worked with Roman in the past. Since the incident that sent him to this town in the middle of nowhere was related to the Roman, their relationship soured. Despite Roman possessing better relationships with other characters, he still wants to get out of there and solve the crime as quickly as possible. This often means making a mockery out of being a detective: ignoring anything that will keep him from his goal of leaving.

Further complicating this already mysterious case is a mysterious man dressed in yellow, some missing teeth, some letters, flat tires, fireworks, a landline phone, and rain. I hope you like rain, because if you want to hear all the ways that I can describe it raining outside, or stepping in a puddle, or just water in general, then this is the story for you. This piece is a 74-page novella, clocking at 21,168 words. With all that being said, I hope you enjoy.

Chapter 1

I turned my dark blue truck into the parking lot, sliding into a stop in one of the many open spots. I silenced the engine, leaving only the slow dripping of rain for company. The headlights peered out at the flat desert before me, with the only splash of color across the pale landscape being small patches of green brush. Usually there would be something more—gold pebbles underneath the sand, the pale blue sky, maybe a swooping hawk. However, there wasn't any of that today. Dark stormy clouds cloaked all of the sky.

Well, the weather seemed rather fitting, seeing why I was called out there. It had been 2 hours since I got a call from my boss to come out here, something about a body. Apparently, it was something that the sheriff Jonah and his skeleton crew were too ill-equipped to handle, as the most they ever really did was hand out speeding tickets. Even then they were rather lenient, as I remember seeing a guy going over 100 just getting a slap on the wrist.

Of course the responsibility of coming all the way out here kept on getting passed around until they decided on me. Oh, he's a state trooper who grew up in the area, what a perfect fit. This isn't even my county, it's Doug's! He just had to be on a trip with his family. I guessed the boss thought that nothing would happen here and he could leave the area alone for a week. Then nobody else wanted to come out here, so here I am.

I gave an exasperated sigh as I reached over and grabbed my cowboy hat, placed it on my head, and stepped out into the rain. It was just a little more than a drizzle now, hanging in the air, tiny drops sticking to the brim of my hat. My boots splashed in the puddles that sat above the clay soil, making a popping sound with every step.

I started to walk northwest, my eyes down watching my feet, trying to sidestep as many puddles as possible. It wasn't very successful—I still got wet—but I continued nonetheless. I was walking like this for about a minute when something glanced off of my shoulder, so I looked up and around at my surroundings. What hit me? A low flying bird? Maybe a stick thrown at me by the wind? A small fox or critter going airborne? I looked around the desert before me, but there was nothing on the horizon. I thought nothing of it and started to walk again when I heard a groan from near my feet.

The groaning figure in question was a young man dressed in all yellow: the coat, the pants, the goofy hat, even the boots. Granted, they weren't very yellow now, rather various shades of gray mud. I reached down and pulled him up, quite easily too, as he tried to refocus himself. He had mousy hair, pale green eyes, a split lip—that last part most likely from our crash—and was about a head shorter than me and rather thin.

“Sir, you hit like a truck,” he said after awhile. “I just wanna know how'd you not see me? I think I am—well was pretty obvious to spot.”

As he spoke he gestured out his outfit, and upon seeing that he was cloaked in mud tried to scrap some of it off.

“Sorry kid, I was watching the ground in front of me to avoid stepping in puddles. Now, what about you?” As I explained my reasons for walking into him, I saw his cheeks turn bright red. Poor kid must've been doing the same and we just happened to crash. I decided to axe that question and instead asked, “So what are you doing out here kid? A desert is a dangerous place for someone as fragile as you to be walking around.”

“Oh, I found the dead body.” he said, and upon seeing my shocked face quickly continued. “Well, I went for a hike and I found it. Nothing much more than that. It looks like you’re going the same way I’m coming from, and I kind of figured that that you were someone of importance. Are you a cop or border patrol or ... what else is there?”

“State Trooper, son. Just a quick word of advice for the future, don’t just trust anyone right away, especially when talking about police matters.” I said. I paused, taking in his words and asked. “So you were on a hike?”

“Yes sir.”

“In the rain?”

“Well, it’s really more of a drizzle, maybe a trickle.”

“But, you would’ve gotten here at least two hours ago?”

“That’s correct.”

“That was about 4 AM. Why would you come out here that early just to hike?”

“Well, they say that the early bird gets the worm. Plus, I wanted to see the beautiful Texas sunrise. It’s my first time in this state and how does the saying go, everything is bigger in Texas, y’know? I’m from Oklahoma originally, which is kind of like Texas, but with more tornados. It’s kind of like looks the same too, but the ground is red there instead of gray.”

“Please shut up,” I said. The kid opens his mouth as if to fire an insult back, but ultimately closes it. Looked like he realized he was making a fool of himself. Looked like he was going to start taking things seriously now, so I started again. “Okay. So, you said you wanted to see the sunrise?”

“Yep. That’s right. I came out here to enjoy the beautiful sunrise.” he said, and then pointed to the horizon.

We both looked to the east, the heavy storm clouds still stretched across the horizon, and not even a single ray of sunlight peeked through. I looked at the young man, then back at the dull horizon. Young man. Dull horizon. Young man. Dull horizon. The smile he had on his face from before faded, and he began to stutter excuses. I went to grab his wrist, but he snatched it back just in time. Dammit, this kid definitely knew more than he’s letting on, I couldn’t afford to let him leave. I reached out to grab him again when a cheerful voice echoed across the plains.

“Roman my boy, long time no see. Looks like you’ve gotten a little lost.” bellowed a portly older gentleman. He had thinning gray hair peeking out of his own cowboy hat, but rather thick eyebrows and stache. “What was keeping you?”

“I was just having a chat with this young man here. He claimed to have found the body. Can you back him up on that?” I asked.

“Young man?” Jonah asked, then after approaching and squinting his eyes he exclaimed, “Oh, Thomas, didn’t see you there. Looks like you took a nasty spill, can barely see you there.”

“Jonah, can you or can you not confirm that he found the body?” I repeated.

Jonah liked to talk. He often talked so long he would forget what he was originally talking about. In fact, I once had a “conversation” with him that lasted 45 minutes. It started with him approaching me with some vague comments on the weather and it somehow escalated to talking about his old war stories. I think I only spoke about 10 words the entire time.

“Yeah, Thomas was the one to find the body. That’s right, you need to come see the body. Follow me, Roman,” said Jonah, who already started to trudge his way back.

“Wait Jonah!” I said “This kid clearly knows more than he’s letting on, let’s take him in.”

As if he didn’t hear me, Jonah continued his march away from me. Dammit.

“Jonah! Jonah!” I quickly looked back and forth between him and Thomas, who was just standing there watching with a smug smile. I took a step towards Thomas, when Jonah called for me to follow once again. Ugh. As I started back towards Jonah, I took one look back at Thomas.

“Good luck, *Roman*. Hopefully the body’s still in good shape.” Thomas said, whilst he slowly waved. After that he turned towards the parking lot and walked away, head bent down watching the puddles.

“C’mon Roman, we ain’t got all day!” Jonah shouted.

I ran after Jonah, my feet splashing in the puddles, water soaking my jeans. After running for about a minute I caught up to Jonah, catching him by his shoulders and spinning him towards me. After taking a few seconds to catch my laboring breath I spoke.

“God Dammit, Jonah! Why the hell did you walk away? I get called all the way out here—the middle of freaking nowhere—and you pull me away from someone who clearly knows more than they’re letting on? I was called in here to look at this damn body that’s turned up and figure out why! Lo and behold I run into the guy who finds the body, and he A. doesn’t have a believable story, and B. clearly knows something. But before I can do something, here comes old Jonah to come take him off the hook. Lucky for me, huh?”

“But Roman, you haven’t even seen the body...” Jonah began.

“Don’t tell me about the body, I know about the body! Why do you think I came all the way out here? I’m not a kid anymore Jonah! In fact I’m the one in control here, after all you’re just some small town sheriff. I am in charge of you! I don’t care if you’re older, or you know the area better, or that the kid’s really nice; I am running an investigation! Don’t you get in my way again or I’ll send your old ass to retirement. Hear me?”

After my loud explosion, I unclenched my fists from Jonah’s shoulders, my knuckles white. I sighed and grabbed a stick of gum from my pocket, spearmint, and popped it into my mouth, pocketing the wrapper. All the while Jonah remained silent, the sounds of dripping rain and soon chewing gum filled the air.

Shit, I messed up. I know Jonah’s not a bad guy, but to pull me away from a suspect like that? He’s an old soul and is more content on letting people go with a slap on the wrist than anything else. Hell, even when I was a teenager and he’d just been on the force he let me get away with speeding. However, there’s a big difference in catching someone going over the speed limit—especially in Texas—and someone appearing with a dead body. Still, to explode at him like that. I guess I have been under quite a bit of pressure this past week.

As I was thinking, Jonah finally looked up to me, and in a quiet voice, asked, “Mind if I have a smoke?”

I shook my head, and he pulled out a cigarette, and struck his lighter multiple times before a weak flame appeared. He lit it and took a deep draw, exhaling the sweet smoke with a sigh.

“Thanks Roman. I needed this.” said Jonah, “I’m sorry for pulling you away from the kid and making you upset, but we have more important things to do.”

He took another deep draw from his cigarette and then continued, “The kid’s not going anywhere either, he’s JoAnn’s grandkid. Apparently he decided to come on down and visit her for Spring Break. He came to town bout three days ago, has about three more left. If we need to keep him for longer, we’ll get it all figured later on down the line. If he knows something he’ll tell us, don’t worry.”

He went back to his cigarette, the smoke just hanging in the air, tiny embers extinguished before even hitting the ground.

“I don’t plan on claiming my time working makes me better than you, or that I can’t let someone else come in and order me around. I’ll try not to get in your way anymore, you don’t need to go around pulling rank. The department and I’ll follow you on this one,” he said.

“So how bad is it?” I asked, “Is it some cartel thug that got dumped, or was it someone the Coyotes brought across?”

Instead of answering, Jonah continued to smoke, so I repeated the question. Still no answer. I know I had just gotten upset at him earlier for ignoring me, but he was getting me going again. As he went to smoke again, I lashed out my hand, knocking his cigarette and incidentally his cowboy hat loose, and both landing on the wet ground.

Honestly, I felt bad at this point, but I needed Jonah’s answer, so I sternly asked again “How bad is it Jonah? How bad is the body?”

Jonah instinctually moved to take another draw from his cigarette, but when he realized it wasn’t there, finally turned to me. The water in the air had plastered his stringy hair to his head, covering his balding head much less than his hat. His lips trembled just a little as he began to speak.

“You know Roman, that I was in the military, probably heard me talk about it a few more times than you wanted. Every once and a while you’d see something that would make you question humanity.” he said. “The state of this body makes me do the same. Be careful with this one, I’m not sure you’d want to get close to whoever did this.”

“Fraid I don’t have a choice in the manner Jonah,” I said, “You have to do your job, and I have to do mine. If you aren’t up to par right now, do you want me go on ahead?”

Jonah took a deep breath and then exhaled a couple of times before he looked at me and said, “No, wouldn’t be right to leave someone as young as you are to take the whole burden of this. I’ll come along.”

“I’m not young. I’m fifty,” I said.

“That’s twenty-two years too young for me son.” Jonah said, “Hell, you’re so young that I was done with service and returning home before you were even born.”

“But that’s all relative to you. That’s like me calling you small even though you’re only about 5 inches shorter than me. You’re still 6 foot, which is above average,” I said.

We continued talking about nonsensical things as we made our way to the body. It’s good to see Jonah like this, especially all things considered. Usually when he talked about war it was all the highlights, never anything that dark. I wasn’t sure how he’d hold up on this case, especially considering how he reacted to the body. I was thinking I’d have to bench him on this one and assume full control, but it seems like he’s already done that for me.

We cleared a small ridge and I saw a pale blue canopy tent, flaps pulled down on all sides. As we got closer I got a better look, seeing mud piled up at the corners of the tent, as well

as a weak attempt at a moat. The shovel that was used to dig it lay haphazardly on the ground between the moat and tent, encrusted in mud.

“We weren’t really prepared, so we used the tent we usually use for the Fourth of July cookout as a kind of rain cover.” Jonah said, “We put stakes in, but they weren’t really sticking with the weather being as is, so we piled up some mud to hopefully weigh it down a bit. Last thing we need is a gust of wind to come knock it all down.”

“Who did all of this digging? If my memory serves me, Gregory isn’t really the physical type,” I asked.

“That’d be Charles, our rookie officer. You’ll either meet him when he comes back to help move the body or at the station afterwards.” Jonah said. “He left a little while ago to get some supplies that we needed to move the body. He’s a good kid, strong too.”

I moved to open the tent flap as we approached but Jonah held me back. “You know that Gregory doesn’t like to be disturbed. Plus it would be rather rude to just barge in,” he said. “Just let me call out to him and get everything sorted out.”

Usually I’d say something, but before I could, Jonah spoke out.

“Gregory! I’ve returned with Roman. He’s here to look at the body. Would you please come out!”

After Jonah had finished, we waited, and nothing happened. Gregory was always like this, an ass. I worked with him a couple of times in San Antonio before he was reassigned here, and even then he was a stuck-up, arrogant rat. Jonah tried to call out to him again, and again

there was no response. As Jonah tried for a third time, I spoke instead. Clearly, he wasn't going to listen to Jonah's pleading.

"Hi Gregory, it's been a while. This is Roman from the Texas State Rangers. I was called in to inspect this body after you called it in. So needless to say, get your scrawny ass out here!" I said.

Still, nothing happened. I knew Gregory didn't like me, but to hold up an investigation. I knew Jonah warned me against pulling rank, but Gregory isn't exactly making things easy for me. I turned to Jonah, who had stopped his pleading and had looked to me for insight.

"Gregory, this is Roman. I know you're in there, so please stop throwing a temper tantrum and come out here," I said. "If you want to continue to make a fuss, I can just barge in on you. It's your choice."

And nothing. Jonah and I exchanged glances, and with a sigh I went to open the tent. Right as I got up to the opening of the tent, the flap peeled open and Gregory stuck his head out. He still looked the same as every other time I'd met him, his long, black hair tied back into a ponytail, his thin glasses perched on his nose, and dark circles under his eyes. He looked me up and down and uttered a sigh.

"Roman, you should know that it's impossible for you to send me anywhere worse than this hell hole," he said.

"Nice seeing you too Gregory," I said. "So, do you mind skootching to the side so I can see the body, or are we going to play more games?"

I was hoping to appeal to Gregory's sense of decency, but unfortunately, he hated me.

“You can have my official report, alongside with everyone else at the station. You can see the body when we move it to the station,” he said flatly. “Now if you don’t mind, I have to get back to work.”

He began to close the flap when I darted out and grasped his hand, an act he recoiled at.

“Gregory, I am not asking you, I am telling you. Let me look at the body,” I said, my grip on his hand tightening.

Before he could answer, most likely with another bitter refusal, Jonah interjected,

“Gregory, I know you like to stick to the report, but Roman came all the way out here. Wouldn’t it just be better to just let him see it once. You don’t even have to talk, just let him look.”

Gregory looked at Jonah as he spoke and then back at me. His eyes rose to meet my gaze, holding it steady. After a few seconds, he looked away and sighed.

“Whatever, just don’t pester me with questions. Don’t touch the body, no matter how tempted you might be.” he said. He then turned to Jonah and asked, “I presume you’ll stay outside this time?”

Jonah nodded his head, and turned away from us as he lit up another cigarette. I released the hold I had Gregory, who rubbed his hand gingerly as color returned to them. He looked at me one last time, his eyes warning me, and then turned back into the tent. I ducked my head down, almost knocking off my hat on the frame, and followed him inside and finally out of the rain.

Chapter 2

The tent flap rolled off my back as I stepped into the tent. While the tent was tall, my hat still scraped against the roof, so I took it off. As I did so Gregory stepped to the left, finally allowing me to see the body.

When I first got the call to come see the body I asked why that was all I had to go off on. Usually, we'd have something to identify it by, like blonde haired male, 6 foot 4, Caucasian. Usually, we'd have something like evident stab wounds or asphyxiation. However, this wasn't like usual.

To call it a human body in the first place would be generous, as it looked more like the rotting carcass of a deer than anything else. From what I could see, there was no skin and no hair, rather just a mass of flesh.

“What happened here?” I said.

“I thought you weren't going to ask any questions?” Gregory responded, glaring at me.

“Sorry, I was thinking aloud.” I said, “Still, do you have anything?”

What would usually happen was Gregory would say no. Then we'd argue back and forth and then he would relent after cursing a bit. However, as if wanting to avoid this charade, or wanting to eagerly express his morbid findings, he relented.

“Sure, I'll give you a quick rundown of everything that I've found.” Gregory said, “But first, can you tell me what the most striking absence you see on this body?”

“Uhh, the lack of skin?” I responded, not really wanting to play any of Gregory's games.

“Interesting. Can you point out the head for me?”

I looked at the body again. There definitely was a bottom and the top, indicated by location of the appendages, but there was no clear head. It seemed like everything above the neck was crushed.

“So, the head is crushed. Is that the cause of death?” I asked

“I don’t think so.” Gregory said, “Despite the head being crushed, every single tooth has been picked out of it. Likewise, the eyes are also missing, and extremities such as the nose and ears are mauled.”

“So, we can’t identify what their face looks like?” I asked.

“More than that, we can’t identify anything. Each finger has been chopped off, as has both feet. The person’s privates have been removed if they were a man, and damaged if they were a woman. The person is also not wearing any clothes, though we might be able to find fibers upon further investigation.” Gregory read from his clipboard, “Long story short, we can not identify this person by gender, appearance, or ethnicity. We might be able to determine their rough age, but that’s about it. And before you ask, no they did not have their wallet on them.”

So, it was a John Doe situation. I wanted to spend the littlest amount of time out here, but I guess not. Better just to take a deep breath and calm myself to figure out what to do next. A nice deep bre-

I started hacking. I didn’t notice it immediately when I came in as I was wholly focused on the body, but it smelled awful. I get that this is a dead body that’s been sitting out in the rain for God knows how long, but still.

“Yeah, you might want to avoid taking deep breathes, while near the body,” said Gregory, giving me a faint smile. “The smell really got to Jonah as well. You’re probably smelling the ammonia, and just a little bit of hydrochloric acid. I’m pretty sure a little bit of that was used to wash away our friend here.”

I finally caught my breath and stopped hacking. I put my hand over my nose, making sure that I didn’t breathe in the bodily fumes. It took a while, but I regained my composure, “Don’t smirk at me like that. So can you identify the body or not?”

“We should be able to with DNA, eventually. We’d have to reach out to a lab, seeing as we don’t have the technology here to find out.” Gregory responded, “It might be a while until we find out. The weather is trouble as is, plus we don’t necessarily have the most sanitary conditions right now or at the station. It’s all a matter of time, but if things continue as they are, this body will be no help in solving this case.”

“Do we at least know when the body was dumped?” I asked.

“It’d be hard to tell, with the presence of acid and the weather” Gregory said, “Once again, if we had the equipment our chances of success would be much higher. Right now though, we’re hovering around zero.”

Ignoring Gregory’s attitude, I asked the most important question, “So who do you think the body is? Any missing people as of late? Or is this the usual dead body drop from the cartel? Any guess is better than nothing.”

Gregory took off his glasses and wiped them, though there was nothing on them, and then put them back on his nose. After pondering my question for a while, his troubled thoughts audible as his fingers drummed his clipboard, he finally answered.

“Honestly, I don’t think it’s a cartel matter. When they kill someone, they’ll let you know who it is, to send a message. Here however, there is too much effort being put in trying to hide whose body this is. I can’t completely cross out a cartel hit, but my gut says otherwise,” said Gregory.

“You’re going by your gut?” I said. “Aren’t you usually the one that’s the stickler for facts and proof?”

Instead of responding Gregory just sighed, and went back to writing notes on his clipboard. Great, guess it was my responsibility to inform Jonah that his town probably had a murderer.

I took one last look at the body and headed back into the rain, but not before putting my hat back on. I took my gum from my mouth and threw it aside as I exited, its flavor had been ruined a while ago. Jonah then walked with me back to the parking lot in silence, the misty rain in the air sounding like white noise. As I approached my truck, Jonah finally spoke.

“Is that a new truck?” he asked.

“New to you, not for me,” I said.

He nodded his head for a while and then stopped. He hadn’t spoken since we had left the tent and the reason was pretty obvious. Clearly, he was hoping this’d be some cartel thing, something to sweep under the rug nice and easy. I know it was only Gregory’s feeling, but it was better for me to stay and help figure this whole situation out, than to get chewed out by my superiors for messing something up. Unfortunately for both Jonah and I, I had to stay here longer.

“Jonah, it appears that I might have to stay a while for this case. I know that’s news you probably didn’t want to hear, but this case is pretty serious.” I said sternly, “Can you give Doris a call so she can get my motel room figured out. I’m not sure how long I’ll be staying, but let’s set it at two nights for now.”

“Sure Roman,” Jonah said after a while. Then after pausing he said, “Make sure you get comfortable, for however long you’re here.”

With those parting words, I got back in my truck and left. As I turned to drive down the highway, I spotted a police van turn in. I couldn’t make out the driver through the rain and window tint, but I guessed that’s the rookie Jonah was talking about. Hoped they have a plan to move that body, as it seemed like the weather was about to break again.

Then almost as if on cue it did, rain pelted against my windshield, pounding against the top of my car. I flipped my wipers up as far as they would go and continued on my way. Hopefully the rain wasn’t moving too fast, though it would have been quite funny for Gregory to get swarmed by it. I was not entirely sure that the bad smells in that tent were caused entirely by the body.

The place I was headed was the local town Comstock, TX. Calling it a town was rather generous, as the population hovered around 1,000 the entire time I had known about it. As far as infrastructure there’s a gas station, a bar, and a motel. It has a school, covering elementary to high school, which is attended by the scant few kids in town, plus any they managed to wrangle in from the smaller settlements around. If you want to do anything of importance you have to drive to Del Rio, which is a little over a half an hour away on a good day. Why the people of this town just don’t move there, I’ll never know.

That sense of isolation; so close to civilization, but just far enough away for it too hurt. That's why I left, if I stayed I would've been stuck here like Jonah, my Mom, all those older folks. Since I graduated from the high school in '91, I had only been back here 3 times. The most prominent of them being when I came to move my mother out and into a retirement home, someplace a lot closer to where I was working at the time. To the credit of the town's consistency, Jonah was there all three times, still the sheriff. Nothing ever changes here, a place stuck in time. God, no wonder every time I came here it's hell.

Speaking of hell, I've finally made it to town. I drove down Main Street, past J&P Bar and Grill, the local motel, and the small Quick Stop gas station, which were still the only businesses in town. I turned down a side road to the police station, which like most things around here, was ugly. Simply a large, beige, metal shed, with over half the structure being an overhang to park a couple of cars under. Seeing as there was already a car underneath, and thinking that the empty space was probably going to be needed for the body, I instead parked in one of the many open spaces of the gravel lot behind the station, which of course was flooded.

As I turned off my engine, a warning light flashed up on the board, a flat tire. You got to be kidding me. I walked out into the fierce rain, and squatted down to see, yep a flat tire. More than that, since the roads had been flooded with water, the tire was waterlogged. I quickly checked my other tires and found one more ruined as well. Unfortunately, I only had the one spare tire. Well, I guessed it was another task that I would give to Doris to handle.

I sighed as I made my way to the door, carefully opening it as I shuffled inside, trying to keep as much water outside as I could. As the door banged shut behind me, I turned to find an elderly lady with glasses and short hair beaming at me, already coming to get her hug.

“Hi Sweetie, it’s been a while since I’ve seen you. I believe it was when you were moving out your momma,” Doris said, as she reached out for a hug. “How is she by the way?”

“She’s doing well. She’s pretty glad that she’s a lot closer to me now, though she does miss you and the other ladies,” I said, as I accepted her brief embrace. “How have things been going around her?”

“Same as always dear,” she said, “Besides this whole dead body ordeal and Jo Ann’s grandnephew coming to visit, there’s been pretty much no change as of late.”

Doris has been a constant in the police here alongside Jonah. In fact, they were the only ones here until Gregory got sent here about 3 years back. Her husband had been a teacher at the school, while she took a small administrative role here. She mainly just does the paperwork while Jonah just shows out in front of everyone else. Granted, keeping Jonah as far away as possible from paperwork was probably the best.

“I presume Jonah called ahead and told you that I would need my housing figured out?” I said.

“He sure did honey, I got you a room at the motel down the street. You’ll be next door neighbors with JoAnn’s boy.” She answered, “I think you’d like him. He has a fantastic sense of humor.”

“Uh huh” I said, “Why is he holed up in the hotel and not with her?”

“I think she was the one that forced him to get the room” Doris said, “She probably doesn’t want to live with a growing young man. Plus she probably thinks that he’d need some privacy. Don’t forget you stayed in the motel and not with your mother when you visited.”

I begrudgingly agreed, though the situation still irked me. Well, if my curiosity gets the best of me I can always check up on the kid. He shouldn't be out and about, especially if the weather continues as is.

“Oh yeah Doris, do you have any spare tires lying around?” I asked. “It seems that I've blown mine out. Twenty-one and a half I believe, but I can go check to be sure.”

“Sorry honey, I only have the sixteen for my car, and we have two twenties for Jonah's truck and the van.” Doris said, “Even then, they're only emergency tires, and in this weather you'll probably need ones with a bit more durability. Don't you have your own replacement tire?”

“I got one, but I needed two.” I said, sighing “I guess we can get someone out here tomorrow, and everything in town should be in walking distance, so it should be fine. Mind if I borrow a tarp to cover my car? If the rain continues, we might end up with hail at some point.”

“Sure honey, they're in the shed at the side. They're in a labeled box, but if you miss them just come get me.” Doris said. “Also, for your room key just go to the motel lobby and say that Doris sent you. They'll ask for your name, and you should be good to go. You go get yourself situated, and I'll see what I can do about your tires.”

I exited the station, the rain still pouring. Surely, the water must run out soon, right? I pulled my car around to the back of the station and hopped out. I walked over to the shed that was placed back there and opened the door. It swung right open, not even locked. It was packed full of boxes, stuffed with tents, fireworks, clothes, an old lawn mower, and old files. Guess there wasn't very much room in the station, but most of the stuff now was digitized. All of these files were from before 2000, maybe even later, as everything here was a bit behind the curve.

Normally it'd be a pretty big problem to just lay these around, but nothing ever happens here. I can only really think of one incident in my lifetime, which was just a standard missing persons case.

I picked up a box from the top shelf, which was helpfully labeled "Tarps," and pulled out a few of them to cover my truck. I placed the box back on the shelf and carried the tarps over to my truck. I pulled out my emergency clothing bag and an umbrella, and slung it over my back as I carefully layered the car until only the tires were left to barely peek out from the bottom of the tarps. I pulled my keys out, clicked them to lock a couple of times to make sure, and started on my way to the motel.

The motel was nothing special, though unlike the station, the lot was paved. It was the standard affair, a low roof adorned with satellite dishes, short windows with a view to the parking lot, a peeling paint job. You know the room was going to smell like dust, the TV would probably play static, the faucets leaking. Honestly, it was so empty it's a wonder how they stayed in business. As I walked up I ducked under the overhanging roof, glad finally to be out of the rain. Sure it was only a 2 minute walk at most, but it's no fun to be constantly barraged by rain.

The sky rumbled, lightning striking on the horizon. Hopefully Jonah and them got the body packed, otherwise things got a whole lot harder. Hopefully nothing bad happened to any of us, seeing as every roof in this town is made of metal. I swore, sometimes ...

"Long time no see mister, how was the body?" I heard a voice call out to me.

Great, it was this brat. He had just stepped out of his room and was locking it behind him. He no longer had his stupid all yellow attire, rather a dark blue coat and an umbrella.

“It was a body,” I said. “Also, what’d I say about bringing it up. Keep quiet or I’ll charge you for impeding the investigation. What are you doing now, going for another hike?”

“Ha, no. I’m going over to the bar. The bar has a nice little restaurant that has a pretty good burger?” Thomas said, as a cocky smile grew on his face. “Do you want to come with me? It’d be nice, just you and me. We can talk about hiking, sunrises, or anything else you might want to interrogate me about. How about it?”

“Fraid I’ll have to decline this time, I have some work I have to do, I’m not on a break like you,” I said, as I decided playing his games wouldn’t help this case. “Remember what I said, don’t mention the body to anyone.”

“Sure, whatever you say, Mr. Ranger.” Thomas said dryly. He opened his umbrella and walked out into the rain, immediately engulfed by it. What a crazy kid.

I made note of his room number and walked to go get my own key. It went as easily as Doris had said, and I set up my room. I left my bag unpacked on the bed and used the restroom. I took a moment to breathe in the mildewy air and check the room out. Leaking faucet, check. Broken TV, check. Previously unaccounted constant sound of rain hitting the metal roof, check.

The one piece of evidence that we had in the body will disintegrate before we could use it; there’s a cocky kid that kept pestering me every time I see him; I can’t leave even if the case is a bust since my tires were blown; and won’t stop pouring! God, this sucked.

Chapter 3

I waited in the lobby of the station, talking to Doris about the possibility of getting new tires. I had come over as I had been slowly going insane listening to the sound of rainfall. I still heard it, but I could drown it out with the sound of Doris' voice. Unfortunately the tire situation didn't seem promising, as the Amistad National Recreation Area was flooded. This wouldn't be a problem if the main highway that led to the closest repair shop in Del Rio didn't run through it, but since it did it was closed. Besides that, there were major power outages in Del Rio that pretty much meant I was stuck walking for the foreseeable future. As Doris and I had were discussing this loud repeated honks came from outside.

I hurried outside to find that the others had finally arrived. The police van itself was just a plain white van with a cheap sticker on its side. However, this van had very important cargo in it, but question still remained, where was the dead body going to go?

The station wasn't exactly large. Besides the main lobby there was one bathroom, a small boardroom, a tiny office for Jonah, a small storage closet that functioned as an office for Gregory, and Doris had a desk in the lobby. There was always the shed in the back, but that was already full. Another problem we faced was the fact that people might see the body if we moved it. Knowing Jonah's sickly reaction, despite all his experience, we weren't really excited to traumatize someone else. Ultimately, we decided to keep it in the van, where Gregory would continue to keep an eye on it.

"Gregory, have you finished your official report yet?" I asked him after everything was situated.

“Of course not, Roman. I just got here.” said Gregory, “It might take even longer if what you’ve told us about the roads are true. Hopefully our power won’t go out, and I can give you a report, maybe tomorrow.”

I sighed. This was definitely going to end up as a cold case. All we had was the body, and there wasn’t very much of that. I went inside the station to the boardroom, the only place in the station with free seating, and saw another man in there I didn’t recognize. Upon seeing me enter, he rose up from his seat to introduce himself.

“Hi, I’m Charles. I don’t think we’ve met yet,” he said, reaching his hand out for a shake. His hands were firm and strong, and he stood about eye to eye with me. He was quite stocky, and seemed to be very fit. He had a brown crew cut and a faint scar above his right eye.

“So, how’d you end up all the way out here Charles? Are you from Comstock?” I asked.

“No sir. I served in the army for a while, and after my service my grandpa got me a job here. Apparently, he served with Jonah and figured I’d be a perfect fit here.” Charles responded. “Honestly it’s a nice change of pace, everything being nice and slow, well excluding present circumstances.”

We both sat down at the table, as standing would just be awkward and ultimately pointless. Charles had quite a few papers in front of him, which he quickly explained.

“I don’t really have a desk yet, so they just stuck me in here to save some space. At least it’s still better than the closet that Gregory sticks himself in. That place is always crawling with spiders.”

“Yeah, Gregory’s kind of a creep. If you haven’t figured it out already, he’s also a pretty big stick in the mud.” I said, “If you think this is bad, it was a lot worse when he was working in San Antonio. He was much more unbearable.”

“How do you know so much about him?” Charles asked.

“Well, I-“ I began, but before I could continue Jonah walked in with a couple cans of Dr Pepper in his hands.

“I just realized, Roman, that I haven’t been a very good host so far. It’s still a little early for anything to drink anything serious, but you do wanna can of soda?” said Jonah. He then noticed that Charles was there and asked, “Did I walk in on something?”

“Roman was just going to tell us about Gregory’s past. Apparently, he worked in San Antonio. Did he choose to come work out here?” Charles answered.

“Well, he didn’t ask, more like he was forced to.” Jonah said, as he took a seat, “Don’t mind me Roman, I’m just going to listen. Though try not to insult Gregory too much, I know the two of you don’t exactly have the best history.”

“Fine Jonah, I won’t roast him over the coals too much,” I said, “Besides, he’s out in the truck. He won’t hear any of our barbs.”

I’d been working in San Antonio’s County, Bexar, with two other rangers. They would stick us together if there’s a large population like that, and there were always a few more teams on standby. Gregory was a forensic investigator for the San Antonio Police Department and we got put on a case together, something about the city being the center for a lot of drugs coming up

from the border. San Antonio was the first big city from the South, and it had 3 major interstates that run through it, and you can easily spread out from any direction once there.

Gregory and I had done some similar cases in the past, but this one was different, since we had a pretty big lead. Apparently one of the cartel heads was supposed to be coming in with their next shipment. We had found their stash house, and we had knew when they were coming in with the delivery. Everything was perfect until we ran the raid. The truck never showed, and when we finally raided the warehouse, it was mostly cleaned out. There were some stragglers there that took the rap on it, and when we asked them what happened they said a guy was digging around and had spooked them. They were able to ID Gregory in a lineup and since then his career's gone downhill. He said he covered his tracks when snooping around, but admitting that he had snooped around in the first place pretty much ruined any excuse he had. They ultimately decided to send him out here, somewhere where they would never have to think about him again.

“So, Gregory has that much of a past” said Charles, “Whenever I try to talk to him he just mutters at me. Did the force have to go that far out of their way to destroy his career?”

“Well, a lot of the guys higher up saw this as chance to get promoted, improve their pension,” I said. “When the higher ups realized they missed out on getting a big fish, they decided to have their vengeance. It didn't help that Gregory was kind of a black sheep, and he could be sent away with pretty much zero change in the station's atmosphere. After being sent out here he's mostly given up on doing work. Whenever he might try and talk high and mighty to you in the future, just imagine that he's on a soapbox rather than on a high horse.”

That got a few chuckles from Jonah, which slowly turned into a coughing fit. When he finally managed to recover Charles asked another question.

“So, that was Gregory’s biggest case. What about you Jonah? Surely something’s happened out here since you’ve been here.”

“Well, I can’t think of anything at the moment,” Jonah said. “I guess we had that cookout that had to get cancelled after some coyotes stole all the meat after I forgot to lock the fridge up for the night.”

“There was also that time where some kids crashed into the fence at the high school,” I said. “I think that was actually a couple of kids in my graduating class that did it. They also put soap on the floor as a graduation prank.”

“I remember that one, Frank slipped and twisted his ankle.” Jonah said, “Doris came in to work howling about how much she had to take care of him.”

“He made me take care of him when he wasn’t hurt as well” said Doris, popping her head into the room. “What are you fine gentlemen talking about, hopefully you’re not bad mouthing me.”

“Uhh, no Ma’am.” stuttered Charles, afraid of evoking Doris’ fury. “We were just talking about the biggest things that happened in this town. Roman mentioned some dumb kids from when he grew up here, senior pranks and such.”

“If I remember correctly, I’m pretty sure that Roman was part of that crowd as well.” Doris said, and upon seeing me blush continued. “Oh yes the strong ranger Roman was once a little brat. Were you really trying to impress Charles that much?”

“No Ma’am, just trying to forget some dumb mistakes I made in the past,” I responded.

It’s true that I did hang out with a bad crew growing up, but there weren’t that many people a kid hung out with in this small town. They were kids from small towns that lived up to an hour away. Even with that, there weren’t too many kids, about 200 of them between Elementary and High School. Most of the kids there were Hispanic, especially those who rode the bus. Speaking of a bus, a few of the kids in my grade hotwired one, and ended up crashing it into a fence. No one was hurt, and thankfully I was smart enough to realize that driving the bus would be an awful idea and sat that one out. And since Jonah was the sheriff at that time too, everyone just got a stern talking too and that was about it.

“If we’re talking about past events, there was also the girl that went missing, JoAnn’s eldest girl, Ruth.” said Doris. “It was in ’87 I think, she just disappeared one day.”

I remember her. She used to be my babysitter as my mom worked into the night most of the time. She was pretty cute, in fact I had a crush on her, but she always seemed bored. I was about 14 when she disappeared, and the common consensus across town was that she met a guy with a car and dipped.

“She was 18 at the time, and I guess she had enough and left,” Jonah said. “JoAnn was worried and made us sweep the desert for about 2 weeks before we finally threw in the towel. It’s not really that big of a thing honestly, a lot of kids leave here after turning 18.”

“I know, but JoAnn was worried sick, almost drove the rest of her children away with how clingy she became,” commented Doris. “Ruth had taken some clothes and her IDs with her when she left, so she’s probably turned out fine.”

“Last thing that I heard was that she might’ve changed her name,” said Jonah, as he finished up his drink. “This has been fun, but I have to do some work to do now. Doris, would you mind helping me with this possible flood release I have to write up. Without you there, I’m bound to misspell something.”

The two of them headed out of the room, leaving just Charles and me in the room, the both of us sipping up the last of our drinks. When I had got up to leave a little later, I let Charles asked me one last question.

“Do kids really want to get out of this town that fast? Is it really that bad of a place?”

“No, it’s not a bad place, there’s just nothing that happens here. You heard it, how the most exciting things to happen are animal sightings and kids pulling dumb pranks.” I said, lying through my teeth. “The town’s a nice safe place, which just drives those who live here mad. No one comes here if they can, and they are here they try everything to get out. Good luck with that, kid.”

With that I exited the room, and the station. Everything with the body is up in the air, now the only thing to do was to ask around and see if anything turns up.



I sat up on the stiff mattress of my motel room, and stared blankly at the ceiling, the AC unit humming. That was a giant waste of time. I’d gone to the bar and grill for a bite to eat, and to ask a few questions. Have you seen anybody suspicious recently? Have you seen anybody that you didn’t know? Just a chorus of nothing and questions to me. I went to the little gas station as

well and got nothing there either. No cameras either, just a cashier who looked at me as if I was speaking an alien language. I swear nothing was going on behind those eyes. This town, man.

There was nowhere else to go, but back here, my one place of solitude. Unfortunately, everything here drove me up a wall: the leaky faucet, the humming AC unit in the window, sounds from the manager's working TV piercing through these thin walls. The only good that happened was that the rain let up. The clouds didn't break open and let the sun out, but at least I didn't have to hear it constantly bang against the roof. Hooray for small victories, I guess.

With nothing better to do, I had taken a short nap, about an hour and a half. It was now afternoon, though you couldn't tell by looking outside, as clouds still covered the sky. I guess it was a little brighter outside than before.

What to do, what to do? There's nothing I could do in this town as there is nothing here; I can't drive anywhere since my truck has only half its wheels, and even if I could most of the roads are closed down from flooding. I can't do anything to move the case forward as the body is a complete anomaly, and we can't get anything done without going elsewhere.

While I laid there wallowing there in my own hopelessness, I heard a door crack open. I quickly looked to my door, but it wasn't mine, meaning ...

I rushed to the window where I caught Thomas closing his door and then locking it. He looked around real quick, making sure that no one had seen him, and walked away.

I exited after he left and peered into his room through the window. The shades were drawn, so it was still hard to see, but at the foot of his bed there seemed to be a duffel bag with a few things sticking out of it: the handle of a tool—probably a shovel—with flecks of mud on it, some yellow rubber gloves, and an envelope.

Seeing how he just acted, looking super suspicious, his previous shenanigans with the discovery of the body, and these somewhat suspicious materials, I felt that a look at his room was warranted. Even then, if I went to the motel owner and asked for a key, he might tell Thomas when he came back, or just outright refuse. No, it's better to break in alone.

I stood in front of his door and began to use my lockpicking tools to try and open it. I stuck close to the door, fiddling with the lock, hopefully nothing out of the ordinary for anyone passing by. My fingers kept on slipping, the water preventing me from getting a solid grip as the tools cut into my flesh. It didn't seem like much time had passed, but it felt like an eternity as I felt paralyzed at the thought of him catching me. Sure, I could sweep some of this as suspicion, but getting caught breaking into somewhere was never a good look, especially by the place's owner. When I finally got the lock to click, I swung the door open quickly and almost fell into the room.

I locked the door behind me, as I didn't want to be rudely interrupted, and with that same reasoning I kept the lights off. If I made it too obvious that I was here, then that wouldn't be good. The curtains were drawn, so I used my phone as a flashlight to look around. There wasn't much of anything besides the aforementioned duffle bag: a couple of shirts hung up in the closet, tooth brush and soap in the bathroom. Nothing out of place so far..

I bent down and unzipped his bag, and careful to remember where everything went as I separated his items. There were some stakes, a tent, the shovel all stained with gray mud. I guess his story of going out there to enjoy nature checked out, mostly. I looked at the yellow rubber glove and gave them a slight sniff. Ugh, they smelled sour, like acid. Well, that's not doing much for his pleas of innocence.

Finally, there was the letter. It was addressed to a Clark Thames and was dated two weeks ago from Jo Ann, Thomas' grand-something. The envelope was still sealed shut and I couldn't risk opening it, so I instead pressed the envelope up against my phone's flashlight to make out what was written. It was hard to read since the letter was folded, but I was able to make out the words: missing, threat, and death.

That's not good, especially with certain circumstances. Also, I didn't know anybody named Clark, and I don't know how Thomas ended up with his letter unless he wasn't really...

A loud clap of thunder echoed as lighting lit the room from outside made me jump. Well, best not to make such dangerous revelations in the den of the beast. I quickly packed up the rest of his bag and exited the room, made sure to lock the door behind me. I looked around and made sure that no one had seen me, and then walked directly to the station. I didn't care what Jonah might say in defense of Thomas, or whatever his name is, but he's dangerous. I didn't care if he really is JoAnn's grandkid, he needs to be watched.

I strode into the lobby running directly into Jonah.

"Ah, Roman, did you enjoy your break. I'm afraid that Gregory hasn't had found anything new about the body just yet, but the raining has subsided some" Jonah said. "We might even be able to get your car fix—"

"Jonah that's not important right now," I said as I interrupted him. "I think we need to go visit JoAnn. I think we need to do it now."

Jonah looked at me in the eyes and after a second of hesitation said, "Very well. We can take my truck. Are you sure that we need to go there? I don't want to go bothering an old woman over a stray thought."

I look at him in the eyes and stated, "I'm positive."

Chapter 4

We pulled up to JoAnn's house. It looked the same as it always had with a small scraggly tree, steps with chipped white paint up to the door, and a small collection of broken pots on the porch. Jonah pulled the truck into the gravel pit in front of the house next to a small car, stopping just before he hit the wall.

"Roman, I just have to ask you one more time. Are you sure that you want to do this? I know your iffy about Thomas, but JoAnn told us all her grandson was coming to town a week ago," Jonah said. "If you think we need to see her we will, I just don't see the need."

"She might have told you that her grandson is coming to town, but that doesn't necessarily mean that Thomas is her grandson," I said. "Have you spoken to her since then?"

"Well, no, but I'm sure that this is all a big misunderstanding, and you're just reading into things," said Jonah. "However, since you're so eager to see her, who am I to say no?"

We both stepped out of the truck and made our way to the door, where I rang the doorbell. We waited a few moments, and when nothing happened, I rung it again. When it became clear that nobody was coming to the door I gave Jonah a concerned look.

"Maybe her doorbell's broken," he said.

I moved to knock on the door, and as I hit it the door slowly creaked open. I gave Jonah another look.

"Maybe she ran some errands and forgot to lock the door," said Jonah. "You don't have to believe in the worst things."

"Her car's in the driveway Jonah. Let's go in," I said.

“She could have got someone else to pick her up. She could just be on a walk, everything is really close. She could just be in the back.” Jonah rambled, his voice losing its confidence.

“I’m not asking you to come with me Jonah, especially if you don’t want to. I’m just letting you know that I’m going to go see if she’s alright,” I said. “You can stay out here if you want, but shouldn’t we at least see if she’s alright.”

Jonah nodded his head and said. “I suppose you’re right, Roman, guess I’m coming in with you.”

We both entered the house, though Jonah did very begrudgingly. In the entrance hall I called out JoAnn’s name multiple times, but still no response. We ventured deeper into the house until we came across the living room.

It was a mess. The coffee table was flipped over, the couch and chairs on their backs, magazines and books strewn around the floor, and many of the hung-up pictures were cracked.

“Looks like a tornado blew through here.” Jonah said. He then stopped, and said. “Roman, I think I see something over there.”

He pointed past the couch to the far corner. A foot was sticking out from behind it. I walked towards it, as Jonah shied away and covered his eyes with his hands.

“Is that who I think it is?” he asked.

I looked down at the dead body of JoAnn. Her eyes were bulging, her lips and face were a dark shade of blue. Around her neck was a telephone cord, resting in coils at an indent in her windpipe. Her arms and legs laid in a rigid and unnatural position; no doubt due to her spasms before her demise.

“I’m afraid so Jonah,” I said. “Why don’t you head back to the car and call Gregory to come help us out with this one. I’ll stay here and see if I can find anything.”

Jonah hurriedly left, almost tripping as he did so, and I was left alone with the body. Gregory will probably get more out of this body than the other one, so why waste my time on that. I instead looked around the chaos that was the room.

It really looked like someone was searching for something, or a twister blew through here. I peered into her kitchen as well and found it equally disorganized. Maybe someone was just trying to burglarize her house?

I walked further back into her room to her bedroom, when like the other rooms had things haphazardly thrown about. The dresser had been ransacked, the mattress flipped off of the frame, and in the closet, clothes were strewn on the floor. As I walked to go outside, I noticed something hidden by the front door that Jonah and I couldn’t see as we entered. I knelt down and inspected a muddy footprint, that just missed the welcome mat.

With my search completed, I walked back outside to meet up with Jonah, who was standing next his truck smoking. He took a puff from it as I walked up to him, his eyes barely raising as I approached.

“Gregory is going to be here with Charles in just a bit. They can’t bring the van due to it being occupied, so they’ll load her into my truck bed.” Jonah said. “It’s pretty much the only thing we can do at this point, we can’t let her rot there for anyone to find. How’d things go in your search?”

“The whole house appears to be ransacked, every room’s a mess,” I said. “I did manage to find a muddy footprint by the door, and if it isn’t one that you created, then we should have

something to work with. Besides that, seeing as the body isn't quickly rotting away, hopefully Gregory can get something from it."

Jonah nodded and took another drag from his cigarette. He then looked up at me in alarm and said. "We're gonna have to tell Thomas about this. We're gonna have to tell him that his grandma died."

Jonah choked on his words, and some tears slid down his cheek. This was clearly rough on him. He knew JoAnn pretty well, as well as did with every citizen in this town. The loss of a somewhat close friend, plus this being an active murder situation didn't help things. I'd need to let him have some time by himself a little bit later, but for now there was still business to be handled.

"I've been meaning to talk to him about some things, do we have a way to reach out to him?" I asked. "I know where his hotel room is, but I'm not sure I want to camp out there."

"No, we don't have his number or anything," Jonah said. "Truthfully we were relying on JoA--"

He stopped talking for a bit but after a while gathered his courage to continue.

"We were relying on her to reach him," he continued. "Honestly, it'd probably be best if you just camped out his hotel room. Seeing that it's getting rather late in the day, he should be coming back soon."

A car pulled into the driveway next to us and Gregory immediately popped out before the car came to a complete stop.

"Where's the body?" Gregory asked.

“It’s in the living room behind the couch” I said. “There’s also a—”

Just as I had mentioned the location of the body, Gregory darted into the house, leaving me behind.

“There’s also a muddy footprint behind the front door!” I yelled after him.

The passenger side window rolled down and Charles peered out at Jonah and I through it. He was trying to say something, but he was still drowned out by the engine. Only when he finally killed it were Jonah and I able hear what he was saying.

“Do you think one of you can head back to the station? Doris overheard about JoAnn and she’s not taking it too well. Gregory needs me here to help him out with the more menial work, so I can’t really go.”

I turned to Jonah to discuss, but before I could say a word he volunteered. It made sense as he was grieving as well, plus Doris could use a friendly face to talk to. I was not saying I’m not, but clearly Jonah knew her at a much more personal level than me, one of the perks of being a small-town sheriff, I guess.

When Jonah had left, Charles and I made our way back into the house. Thankfully the footprint was still there and not destroyed in Gregory’s mad dash to the body. We found him kneeling over said body, carefully touching her hands with his gloved ones.

“What are you doing over there Gregory? If it’s anything morbid please save it for when you’re off the clock,” I said.

“Oh, you’re still here.” Gregory said, ignoring my remarks. “I’m trying to see if she has any debris stuck under her fingernails. Unfortunately for us, any DNA would decay before we

could test it. However, we could still see if there are any threads or material that could help us identify anything.”

After looking at her nails a bit longer, he put her hand down, having apparently deduced that there was nothing there. He next approached the victim’s neck, specifically the cord wrapped around her neck. He peered at it, lifting it away from her neck, when his eyes widened and his brow furrowed.

“This wasn’t a burglary. Whoever did this came to kill her.” Gregory said, his voice grave.

“What do you mean?” asked Charles. “Everything’s thrown around and all the drawers are ransacked. What else could it be?”

“Come here, both of you, and look at this,” Gregory instructed.

The two of us lumbered forward and leaned down, Charles holding onto me firmly, as he did not want to fall onto a dead body. I peered at the body, seeing the telephone cord wrapped around her neck. Nothing had changed from when I had seen it last. I looked at Gregory to state as much, but I held off as he seemed to be savoring my confusion.

“Oh, you can’t see anything different? Well, how about if I do this?” he said as he peeled the cord away from her neck.

You could see it immediately as he moved it. What the cord had been covering was a thin line of blood traced across her throat. It seemed to cut deep into the flesh of her throat, probably made with something more akin to piano wire than the beige rubber phone cord.

“Someone came in here with the intent of killing her, it wasn’t a robbery gone wrong.” said Gregory. “Furthermore, this happened this morning. The body is still warm, though it appears that rigor mortis has set in.”

We stood up and Gregory ordered Charles to the truck to go grab the stretcher that they had brought. When he had gone Gregory looked to me and asked if I had seen anything else around the house. I mentioned the muddy footprint by the door, which he noted, and pulled his camera out to take a picture of it. When Charles returned with the stretcher, we both worked to move the body onto it as Gregory chastised us.

“Put on gloves, and please avoid touching the skin. We don’t want to wipe away any fingerprints we might’ve collected. Charles, you take the legs and Roman you take the shoulders, and be careful!”

Charles and I placed a blanket over the body, much to chagrin of Gregory who claimed that it violated the crime scene, but we couldn’t walk that poor lady out there for anybody to see. Besides, rain would wash away more evidence than a blanket could.

We carefully loaded her into the bed of the truck, while Gregory continued to scour the house. Shortly after we had finished, Gregory exited the house holding a couple of evidence bags in his hands and slapped a notice on the front door.

When we returned to the station Gregory hid himself back in the van, which he had adopted as an office. Well, it was bigger than the broom closet he usually used. Charles excused himself as well to call his parents, unsurprising as recent events must have shook him up a bit. Meanwhile I headed into the station, where I found Doris and Jonah in his office sharing a drink.

Opposed to earlier, they were drinking liquor that Jonah had stashed away for rainy days like this one. There didn't seem to be much conversation going on between the two either, rather they sat solemnly at the desk, their gazes unfocused.

It didn't seem right to push the case, so I sat down in the one remaining seat with them and poured myself a glass. It tasted alright, but that really didn't matter. Both of them were dealing with a large bit of distress, like a loss of a family member.

By virtue of this town being so small with such long standing residents, everyone knew everyone and it became like a family of sorts. For example, my mom had lived in this town her whole life until I moved her to be closer to me. She had gotten to know practically everyone in town by that point: Jonah, Doris, JoAnn, Scott the retired gardener who would go runs every day, Mary who would always bake pies during the summer and deliver them to neighbor's houses, even Doug the deaf janitor who had worked at the school and brought his cat to work. Everyone knew everyone, and when someone left or died, everyone would feel it. I know that when I moved my mother out, she had vigorously fought against it until the end. Even though she's in better care now, she still treats me coldly.

It's something that outsiders like Gregory and I will never understand. Gregory, just because he's antisocial by nature, but me because I wanted nothing to do with this place. To spend your whole life tied down to one spot sounded like Hell to me. Charles might fit in a bit more, just because of his friendly demeanor, but if he's not paying attention, he'll get stuck here too.

“How did she die, Roman?” Jonah asked, barely above a whisper.

I turned my eyes to him, where he had leaned back in his chair staring at the ceiling. Doris was cradling her glass in her hand and was looking very downtrodden, a state I had never seen her in before. She was always the constant force of joy whenever I saw her, no matter the circumstances. Even earlier with the other body. I guess it's easier to joke around when it's a nobody.

“How did she die, Roman?” Jonah repeated.

I turned back to Jonah and said. “She was strangled by what looked like piano wire, and then she had a telephone cord wrapped around her neck to make it look like she was strangled by that.”

When I finished, I heard Doris gasp a little bit, but I got nothing but silence from Jonah. Was he alright? I know the details were rather intense, but I felt that lying here wouldn't have been any better for him.

“So it wasn't an accident? Not a burglary?” he suddenly asked.

“No, Gregory thinks that someone was waiting there to kill her. It didn't look like a break in, and the place was most likely ransacked to make it look like one,” I answered.

Jonah thought over my words for a few minutes, before he asked another question. “If there was no break in, does that mean she welcomed her killer into her house?”

I remained silent, but the answer was clear enough. The killer was someone from town, someone she knew, or at least thought she knew. Two dead bodies isn't a coincidence, especially relative the size of this town.

“Roman, I think I would like to speak to Thomas. I think he needs to fill in some of the blanks in his story so far,” Jonah said. “There’s too many question marks for us to ignore right now.”

Just as he finished a loud boom echoed from outside, shaking the building. The lights flickered and a ringing noise echoed through my ears. We ran outside where we saw Gregory emerge from his van, equally dismayed, and we hurried to the shed at the side. What we saw were tendrils of smoke coursing through the air, dissipating into the rain. The shed—or rather where the shed had been—was nothing but a few torn shards of thin metal walling and roofing, burning wisps of paper, and the burnt-out husk of a lawnmower.

The rain had quickly snuffed out any of the flames, but the ground still sat smoking and scorched. I guess lightning might’ve hit the metal roof and set the fireworks off, which set off all the dry combustible materials as well.

On the ground, laid out next to the scorched remains of the barn was a figure. It moaned as I hurried over and upon flipping him saw that it was Charles. Gregory came and quickly checked out his body, finding that he had luckily avoided being hit by any debris. He just seemed to be rather stunned, blown back by the force of the explosion.

It wasn’t any use asking him any questions yet as he seemed that he was still recovering, just only managing to get in a seated position. I wasn’t sure that asking him any questions would be of use though, as it seemed like his hearing was shot, at least then. Hopefully it was nothing serious and would fade in a day or two. Still, we were lucky for him to have survived mostly unscathed, especially seeing as we’ve already had a few deaths today.

“Excuse me, I heard an explosion and decided to check it out. Are y’all alright?”

Everyone but Charles turned and we saw Thomas standing there, once again dressed up in all yellow. Everyone was silent as rain continued to fall, until Charles interrupted with “WHAT!?”

Chapter 5

“You can’t just force me to stay in this room! I just heard an explosion and came over, what’s wrong with that?” Thomas exclaimed.

He was sitting across from me in the boardroom, with the door to my back. After he had interrupted us while we were dealing with Charles, I had dragged him back here to no one’s complaint but his own. Speaking of Charles, Doris made sure that he was relaxed and kept watch on him in case things took a turn for the worse. Gregory went to go look over his case notes and Jonah decided to call down to Del Rio to see if they could send any help. Just as it was this morning, nothing. Since the sun has gone down now, they were less willing to send help, as they had a blackout. Despite all the crap that had happened to us, at least we still have electricity—well, at least for now.

“Hey, don’t ignore me! You can’t hold me here, just because you don’t like me!”

I looked at Thomas who was fussing again. I guessed I should stop ignoring the kid and start getting down to interrogating him.

“No Thomas, I like you plenty. You’re asking ‘Why am I here? Where does this guy get off sticking me in here?’” I said. “You were the first person to come across an unidentifiable body, and acted in a suspicious manner.”

He started to say something, but I continued. “Secondly, your closest living relative in town, a Mrs. JoAnn Foster was found deceased in her home at 1:00 PM Central Time today. You have a close connection to two different homicide cases, and thus are seen as the primary suspect in both of them.

“Listen, I know you might’ve been looking for a fix and got yourself in a tight spot where you accidentally hurt someone to feed it, and you resorted to violent measures. It’s okay, we can get you the help you need, current matters aside, and make sure that you’re well taken care of.”

That was all bullshit. I didn’t know if he was some junkie, but honestly, we didn’t have any other angle to really approach from right now. Maybe there was strife between the family members. Honestly, I was reaching here. It’d make the most sense though. His supply runs short, accosts a dealer and accidentally kills him. Feels panicked and does everything he can to try and get rid of the body, is found out by his grandma, and since he’s spiraling, he has to get rid of her too. Goes to dump the body, realizes what he’s done and calls the police. He still doesn’t want to go to jail, maybe he can spin this a different way, maybe he came across the body while on a hike.

Thomas looked at me and asked if he could speak, to which I simply nodded my head. “You’re telling me that my grandma is dead, and not only that but you’re labelling me as the druggie that did it? I didn’t kill my grandma, plain and simple. I don’t take illegal drugs and I definitely didn’t kill anybody, in general.” he said, his voice rising in both intensity and volume.

“Of course, you didn’t. I didn’t mean to attack your character; I was just telling you what everyone around here is thinking. They were rather close to JoAnn, and her loss is very personal to them. I know you can understand just how they’re feeling, lashing out at things as you lose control,” I said. “Listen kid, I know where you’re coming from, and I hate springing something like this on you. I know you’re in a very temperamental state right now and you don’t know what to do. Everything’s flying past you so fast that you just don’t know what to do.”

As I was talking, I made my way around the table until I was crouching next to him. I had my head down near his, meeting his eyes as I continued to reassure him and talk. “I’m not sure what happened, but in the end people got hurt. A man might’ve broken into your grandma’s house to take some things, but there was a struggle and she got hurt. You get there and the two of you tussle, and I know it was just self-defense. You’re panicked and try to cover things up, but it just eats at you, and help find the guy’s body for the police. Does that sound like what happened?”

While I was essentially gaslighting this kid, he’s the only one with enough connections with both of the victims to have done anything. I left out when JoAnn was believed to have been killed, so if he refutes either of the options which place her death at least a day ago, then we have a stronger chance of getting the actual truth out of him. Ask how he’d know, and if he can’t bring up anything more than his word, then he’s done. Honestly, he should have just accepted what I was giving him, as self-defense looks a lot better than double homicide. Sure, he’ll face some punishment for impeding the investigation and the desecration of a corpse, but that’s nothing compared to life. After all, he still has his whole life in front of him.

“Sir, can I go ahead and make a statement?” Thomas asked me. Perfect, he knew that I was giving him a lifeline. Best to get this case wrapped up as easy as possible. Sure there might be some discrepancies with Jonah, but I’m sure he’d be willing to overlook them than imagine this kid as a ruthless killer. That’s just the kind man Jonah was.

“Go ahead kid, say what you need to say,” I said.

“I just want it to be known that you’re right, I am rather temperamental. As such, I am not a murderer, no matter the context,” Thomas said rather bluntly. “Since you are making it

rather clear that you have every intention of pinning this crime on me, I wish to talk to my lawyer. That is of course you have anything else you want to sweet talk to me about?"

Dammit. I was going to fire back a retort, but thought better of it and gave him to the room. As I exited, the first person I ran into was Gregory who I was not in the right mood to handle. I pushed past him to go take a breath outside, when he pulled me back at my shoulder. Well, more like he tried to, as he just got dragged along behind me for a bit. After a few paces I spun around to face him, ultimately knocking him to the floor.

"What do you want Gregory, I'm busy right now!" I exclaimed. As I raised my voice Doris looked up from behind her desk, and Jonah poked his head out of his office.

"Yeah I'm sure you're super busy, seeing as you are exiting the building," exclaimed Gregory, just as loud. "How'd your interrogation of that kid go? Did he confess like you were planning him on him doing or was he not swooned by you?"

I stepped forward into his face, peering down at him as I spoke. "Watch what you're saying. Why don't you go sit in the van with the dead bodies. Though I'm not sure that even they'll appreciate your company."

With that I shoved him away from me. He should be glad that I only did that. I turned away and started walking back to the exit when I felt a sharp blow to the back of my head. That Sonova!

I went to turn and punch him, but suddenly Jonah was on me, using all the strength he had in my body to try and slow me down. Gregory stared at me with fire in his eyes and moved to hit me again until Doris' voice rang out. "Stop fighting like children. If you two can't get past

your feelings for one another, at least try when you're around us. There's more to worry about right now than your personal feelings."

Doris was right like always. I knew I would listen to her advice, but Gregory? I looked at him, and even though his eyes were still bright with anger, they were a lot calmer than before.

"Whatever. I'll be at the gas station if you need me," said Gregory, before he pushed his way past me to the exit.

I relaxed my muscles and allowed Jonah to release his grip, as I shrugged him off. Without a word I also exited and made a beeline to my truck. I pulled away the tarp that hung over my door and climbed into the driver's seat. As I closed the door I was left in darkness.

I needed some gum. I fumbled around my pockets, trying to fit my hands into my wet blue jeans. The denim scrapped into my hands as I tried to wiggle out a stick of gum, as it kept on slipping out of my wet hands. I finally got a stick out and I tried to open it. The flimsy foil wrapper kept on sticking, and I couldn't quite see in the dark, and I kept on trying to get it loose and—

I threw the stupid piece of gum into the darkness, even the faint sound of it hitting the interior of my car was overwhelmed by the constant sound of rainfall.

God, I hate rain. I hate this town. I hate Gregory, Thomas, really anybody. Why is everything so against me leaving. Why?

I pulled open the armrest console and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. I dug a lighter out from my jeans and lit one up. The faint embers providing meager light in my void. I inhaled it, savoring it, before blowing it out. To be pushed this far on such a stupid case.

With a little nicotine in my system, I could focus. Focus on this damned case. That kid Thomas is definitely guilty, playing coy. Clearly, he thinks he can get away with it. Why else refuse the generous offer that I gave him? The odd chance he's innocent, nope. He had those gloves and the letter in his bag at the motel, so if I got Jonah to seize them, then the kid would be drawing dead.

I stepped out of the truck, my thoughts reorganized and headed back into the station. As I came in I saw Jonah exiting from the boardroom.

“What were you doing in there Jonah? I don't want you exposing any case sensitive information to him.” I said.

“I didn't” said Jonah, his voice tired. “He asked for a cup of water and I obliged. We talked a little bit about the town, but I didn't mention anything about what has happened in the past twenty four hours. Honestly Roman, I don't think he did it. He seems like a nice enough kid.”

“I'll keep that in mind. Right now, I need you to head over to the motel and grab everything from his room. Since we're in the middle of an active investigation we can claim probable cause to get it,” I instructed. “Something tells me that there's bound to be something there that will pin him.”

With that Jonah trudged out into the rain. As for everyone else, both Doris and Charles were resting, one sprawled on the floor on a sleeping bag, the other cozied up in her chair. Gregory was probably still out throwing a fit somewhere, and I didn't really feel inclined to look after him.

I entered the room to find Thomas slouched onto the table, as he rested his head. He looked like he was nice and relaxed, so I kicked the table to jostle him awake. He rose with a start, blinking his eyes as he did so.

“I was just starting to drift off to sleep, you know. Isn’t sleep deprivation a crime, or it at least should be,” he grumbled. “Looks like you had a little smoke break to clear your head did you? It stinks. I thought you had quit smoking though?”

“What? Who told you that?” I said, and then it dawned on me. “Jonah.”

“Yeah, he really likes to talk. He was just telling me about how proud he was that you were able to kick it, especially with the high stress environment you work in,” he confirmed. “That aside, what are we doing here? I know I didn’t do it and you know I didn’t do it, so why are you pinning it on me?”

“You can stop it with that brave act, we’re raiding your motel room right now. We found the rubber gloves, and I’m sure that we can test them for signs of hydrochloric acid,” I said.

“Why don’t you give up the charade and just admit what you’ve done.”

Thomas looked surprised at the mention of the gloves and pursed his lips. He thought for about a minute. His brain seemed to be trying to figure a way out of this one.

Thomas said, “How about this, I ask you three questions that you’ll answer honestly and you can ask me three more. I pinkie promise that I’ll tell the truth. No complex questions though, simple answers.”

What? A bunch of cat and mouse shenanigans and he’s all of a sudden willing to tell me the truth? Clearly, he’s messing with me.

“Looks like you don’t quite believe me. Is Scout’s honor not enough?” he said grinning.
“Well how about this, I’ll write my answers down for you, so you can claim it as a confession if you so please. You can just answer my question out loud. Just in case I ask something you don’t want on record.”

Well, it certainly sounded like an attractive deal. If I played my cards right, then I could get a confession. Then again, I could reveal precious information about the case. Who am I kidding, I don’t have to tell the truth. He could lie as well, but if we both do it is this just a waste of time? No, maybe I can catch him in a lie, and with written record there should be enough evidence to prove him wrong.

I got out a sheet of paper and a pen and gave them to him. There’s no threat he poses to me anyway, a pen wouldn’t suddenly level the playing field.

“Very well, I’ll go first” Thomas said. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Blue”

What kind of stupid question was that? Well, I don’t intend on missing with any of my questions.

“Did you kill your grandmother, JoAnn Foster?” I asked.

“No, no I did not.”

A couple seconds passed as he wrote that down. Then he came with his second question.

“When did you quit smoking, before tonight’s minor relapse?”

“Until I was nineteen, and then I escaped.” I answered.

Yet another easy one. He hasn't asked anything worth lying about, yet. I expected him to insult, but it just sounds like he has a crush on me.

"Okay, second question. Did you know where the body was dumped before you went out there and called the police?" I asked.

"That's a pretty complex question, I thought I told you that I didn't want hard ones." he said, smirking.

"It's a simple yes or no question. It seems pretty simple to me." I responded.

"Fine. Yes I did know where the body was dumped prior to going out there and contacting the police." he said. "Happy?"

"Very, now for your final question?"

"Who do you think stabbed two of your truck's tires?" he asked.

"You?"

"Is that your last question?"

"No."

That bastard. His question had been pretty much an admission of guilt. Did he want me to waste a question on such an obvious answer. Why would he stab my tires though, wouldn't it be in his best interest to keep me as far away from here as he could? Was it spite? What the hell is this kid after?

"Do you have your question yet? I'm getting rather tired of waiting" he asked, with a devilish grin on his face. "You can always forfeit your last question if you can't think of one."

“No, just give me a second.”

He was very clearly hiding something, and there was one thing that was bugging me. Then it dawned on me.

“Are you related to JoAnn Foster?” I asked.

“That’s the one you decided to ask.” he answered. “No, I am not. Honestly, you’re the first one to even ask.”

Chapter 6

“So, tell me the situation again. He’s not actually JoAnn’s grandkid? Then who the hell is he?”

I was standing in Jonah’s office filling him in on recent events. I had locked the boardroom to make sure our unidentified suspect didn’t leave. He could try to leave, but then he’d be basically admitting to murder. Maybe I should have left the door unlocked?

“What do we even call him now? It feels wrong to continue to call him Thomas,” said Jonah. “You said you got a confession out of him though, right?”

“No, nothing concrete. The only thing we really have is the fact that he knew where the body was when he went out into the desert,” I said. “We still have no idea if he was responsible for JoAnn’s death, seeing as the wording of my question gave him an easy out, as she wasn’t his grandmother.”

“Could he just be lying?” asked Jonah.

The thought had occurred to me, but it didn’t seem very likely. Since his answers were written down and pretty much served as evidence, he could be charged with disrupting police work. Also, other minute things just make sense now. Not once did he confirm that he was JoAnn’s grandkid, rather just passively agreeing to be who people told him to be. When I mentioned JoAnn’s death, he didn’t seem all too worried, meaning either he knew about it already or wasn’t as close to her as everyone had thought. Probably both. Then there was the letter he had in his duffle bag that wasn’t addressed to Thomas. What was the name on that letter?

“Hey Jonah, did you see a white envelope among his possessions?” I asked.

“No, I did not.” he answered. “I did however find a pair of yellow rubber gloves and a map among many soaked clothes. Why’d you ask?”

“I was just thinking that a paper trail would probably make it easier to figure out who he is.” I replied quickly. “Have you heard anything back from Gregory? If he stays out any longer I might actually start worrying about him.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t go that far.” said a voice from behind me. “What are y’all doing now?”

I turned to see Gregory, just a tad more disheveled than usual. He was leaning against the doorframe sipping from an energy drink with a curly straw.

“Welcome back Gregory, did you enjoy your break?” asked Jonah. “How was the convenience store? How was Paul?”

“Okay, and absent.” he responded in a tired voice. “Where’d you get all these knickknacks from?”

Jonah quickly caught him up to speed. Thomas’s suddenly unclear origins, the seized belongings for evidence, even my slashed tires.

“Here’s a question. What if he was lying? Just because it’s written down doesn’t mean it’s true,” Gregory said.

“Yeah, but why would he lie? If it’s ultimately false, then he still gets punished for interfering in our investigation?” I replied. “Who would go so far to mess with me, excluding you of course.”

It only made sense if he's telling the truth, especially from the rules that he set when he answered my questions. The only question it would make sense lying for was the second one, and even then, all it did was keep the target on his back.

“Shifting topics, why did he slash your tires out then? I mean this can't all be someone's petty actions, people died,” Gregory said. “If I was in his spot, I'd want you as far away as possible.”

“By that time, I'd already agreed to stay in town for two days though. I would only serve to inconvenience me more than anything,” I said.

“He wouldn't know that though, after all we only got your room after we checked out the body,” Jonah said. “He wasn't sure how long you'd stay and decided to make it a variable he could control.”

Why would he want me to stay though? Who knows? It seemed like it was a dead end, as we all stalled out. Clearly it was late, or early depending on how you looked at it, but it was better for us to rest and regroup for tomorrow. I sent Gregory to give Thomas a sleeping bag which I had retrieved from my truck. Jonah fell asleep leaning back in his chair, while I slept in my truck. Seeing as Gregory was already enjoying an energy drink, he stayed up to keep an eye on the station and make sure nothing bad happened.

I didn't get much, if any sleep, but I wandered back into the station around 6:00 to at least go and give Gregory a reprieve. I found him in his closet office sipping on another energy drink. I remember when I'd help him with cases in San Antonio, he pulled all-nighters constantly. I probably should've gone ahead and pulled one as well, as my restless nap hadn't afforded me anything.

When he saw me, he nodded in my direction, before going back to writing I his journal. I peeked over his shoulder to see what he was writing, but he snapped it shut.

“What do you want Jonah, I’m working?”

“What are you saying?” I said. “I’m here to work as well, so go ahead and share your notes with me. Or are you afraid I won’t be able to read your chicken scratch.”

Instead of replying to my remark he just sighed, readjusted his glasses, and turned to me.

“What’s this really about Roman? You’re always picking on me—insulting me in layman’s terms—for whatever reason. Why?” he asked. “If this is because of the last case we worked on together—”

“No, it’s not because of any case,” I interjected. “You’re a pompous, condescending, arrogant, smart ass, who just can’t keep his ego out of his work.”

Gregory sighed again and stood up. He brought his head up to mine, or at least as high as he could and said, “Well, you’re a charging bull, who can’t hide his evident displeasure for doing any work. Even then, you let not logic drive your decision making, but whatever emotion you’re feeling at the time.”

“We can’t solve the case with you like that. Jonah and Doris were close with the victim, so their work can’t be trusted, and for all we know, Charles might be deaf forever. You’re the only one else here that can work with me, so don’t be an ass, just work.”

Maybe it was my lack of sleep or just the fact that he had honestly expressed his emotions for the first time in a while, I decided to back off. Looks like we’d have to work together on this on.

“Fine. Let’s share what we’ve gathered so far and lay it all out so we can lay it all out and try and figure out what’s going on here,” I said. “Do you have spare chair in your closet?”

Turns out he did, a folding one. I set it out and we began to talk. This is what I knew, I was called out to see a dead body at 4:00 AM yesterday, and on my walk over I ran into Thomas, who we agreed to keep calling just to avoid any confusion. I talked about our interaction, Jonah’s interruption, and my arrival at the tent. I then recounted about my slashed tires, Thomas’ cocky attitude in our encounter outside the motel, and my break into his room. Gregory didn’t seem all that surprised that I had broken into another person’s room, but did find the missing letter rather interesting. I then followed with how Jonah and I found the late JoAnn, the subsequent carnage found around the house, the muddy footprint, and what Gregory himself had found about the body. Finally, I added my subsequent interrogation, Thomas’ response, the three question game he made us play, and the answers we had gotten from that.

Gregory pursed his lips as he thought. Then he said, “You shouldn’t have tried interrogating him as a junkie, he’s much too smart for that. In fact, you probably should’ve just asked him questions normally rather than detaining him, but here we are.”

“Whatever. I shared my secrets, now it’s time for you to share yours,” I said.

With another sigh, almost his calling card by now, Gregory explained. When he was called out to see the body, Thomas was already there. He had dug, or tried to, a trench around the body to prevent it from being waterlogged or swept away by water. He had helped Charles put up the tent and had stayed just a few minutes longer than Charles did before finally leaving. He likely knew—no, he definitely knew who was when I came due to Jonah’s talkative nature.

Apparently, he was rather happy to see me. No one really questioned Thomas' association with the body, as they were just glad that it was still there.

“So that punk knew I was coming. Sometime later I'm gonna need to talk to Jonah about keeping a low profile,” I said. “So, were there any details for that body?”

Gregory continued. He could tell that the body was well dead before any of the acts of desecration had occurred, thankfully for the victim. He had found one thing though, a thin cut around what remained of the corpse's neck, etched into the spinal column. It appeared as if this body had been killed the same way as JoAnn's. Gregory quickly reassured me that even though the style was similar, it didn't necessarily mean that it was the same person. Even with that, he clearly knew that was just to cover his bases; it was definitely the same guy. Still, for the guy to be as decomposed as he had been, he must've been dead at least 3-4 days before, meaning Thomas had to either bring the body with him, or kill the guy before coming out here.

I thought laying our information out like this would make the case easier to solve, but Gregory reassured me by saying that it would just allow us see more possibilities. Just what we needed, more work. Despite my complaints he continued and explained what he had found with JoAnn's body. Despite how much he had tried, he couldn't find anything under her fingernails. Despite that he did look around and found her purse, with no money taken from it. Like we had thought before, her death wasn't an accident, someone wanted her dead, but why? Why would someone kill a harmless old lady? Gregory had also compared the boot print that we'd found at her house to one of the muddy boots that Jonah had seized at the motel, and from what he could tell, it was a match.

“Didn’t Jonah say that she had been bragging that her grandson was coming to visit her?” I said. “Because if so, and Thomas isn’t related to her, then where did her grandson go? Could he be the dead body?”

“No, that still wouldn’t make sense,” said Gregory. “Why would this kid kill 2 people to come out here? I’m not going to lie, I wouldn’t want to come here if I had a choice. Is there really anything to gain from this?”

We were stumped. We had plenty of clues, but none of it mattered if we weren’t able to build it up into an actual case. Why would Thomas come all the way down here, and if he did, why would he murder 2 people?

Then I thought of something. “Hey Gregory, the kid has a car right? Do you think we could search it under probable cause?”

Gregory pondered the question for a bit and then said, “I think we could. I think that’s generally used for drugs, but I’m sure that it’ll apply for murder. Is his just outside of the motel y’all were staying?”

We went out to check. The rain had finally stopped and while clouds still blanketed the sky, it was noticeably lighter outside. It took us a little longer than we anticipated, as Gregory didn’t want to walk through puddles and ruin his shoes, but we eventually made it there. Luckily the car was an older model and had a keylock on the trunk, and after a minute of fiddling with it I was able to unlock it.

The moment I pulled the trunk open the smell hit us. Gregory immediately doubled over and started dry heaving as I turned my head away as well. When I had steadied myself, I looked into the trunk and saw a tarp stretched out, with little splotches of a murky liquid. I don’t want to

make any guesses, but I presume that to be some of our John Doe there. Despite that, the thing that caught my eye was the shining strip of wire.

“Gregory, did you bring an evidence bag?” I asked, as I reached my hand back to grab the one he no doubt had. He’s always prepared.

He stood up and handed it to me, which I opened and carefully reached down and plucked the a thin strand of metal, a wire. I shook off any acid that was hanging onto it, and placed it in the bag, which I handed back to Gregory. He was now fully acclimated to the smell and was peering into the truck as well.

“So, this pretty much seals it right? We have murder weapon, the way it was disposed, and a confession of him knowing where the John Doe body was dumped,” I said. “What else do we need to nail him?”

“Well, we still don’t know what his motive was, why he would com all the way down here to kill two people,” Gregory said. “The best we have right now is that he’s a serial killer or is deranged. Even with how he’s acted, I don’t think it is going to stick.”

“Let’s just go with serial killer, or why don’t we just go and ask him? He can refute all that he wants. What we got right here isn’t even a smoking gun, it’s a cannon,” I exclaimed. “He’s dead to rights. Motive doesn’t matter if every piece of evidence leads to him.”

“Fine, how do we the rest of this evidence to the station? We don’t have his keys, and I don’t know about you, but I don’t really want to try and walk around with a tarp full of body flavored acid in it.”

We decided to leave it be for now, as we could always tow it over or get the keys after presenting the rest of the evidence. To be safe I used my picks to lock the car and we headed back to the station. When we had returned Jonah and Charles had woken up, while Doris had returned to her house to freshen up. Charles' ears were still ringing a bit, but he was able to more or less hear if he focused and watched our lips. Seeing that they were both feeling better, Gregory and I shared what we had discovered.

“So, he really did it. Honestly, I was still holding out some hope that he was just caught up in all of this,” Jonah said. “Well, there goes my ability to read people.”

“I agree, he was rather nice to me,” Charles said, “I'd hate thinking now that it was all a ruse.”

“It's okay, we've got him now,” I said. “Gregory got through to someone in Del Rio when we were walking back. We just need to turn over him and everything else we have and they'll handle the rest. Nice job you guys, but your jobs are about over.”

I left them to chat while I went and relieved myself in the restroom. All the heavy lifting was done, and now someone else can get him off our plates. It wasn't concrete, but like I said earlier, there was much evidence on the kid. Gregory did a pretty good job on the case, excluding his attitude up to this morning. Maybe I'd give him a recommendation, at least give him a chance of getting out of this town. He better be thankful for it.

I should probably go tell Thomas what lies ahead for him, after all I probably won't see him once he's taken back to Del Rio. To see that cocky kid's face one more time, especially as I inform him that he'll most likely be spending life in prison. A reward in and of itself.

I exited the bathroom and headed to the boardroom, the others still talking at the front of the station. I decided to let them be, after all this conversation wasn't really part of the case, rather personal closure.

Chapter 7

After I closed the door behind me, I saw Thomas was already sitting up, as if he was waiting for me. I pulled my chair out and set down, while he just sat there patiently waiting for me to get comfortable.

“So, what are you here for? Have you finally decided that you’re gonna let me go?” he asked. “Or are you just here to let me use the restroom. I tried using it last night, but it appeared that someone locked the door, you know anything about that?”

“Yes, that was me.” I said. Soon enough he will be gone and out of my life and I won’t have to deal with him ever again. “I just wanted to come in and let you know that we found the murder weapon and proof of you moving the body in your car’s trunk. Someone’s coming over to arrest you and take you away.”

Thomas’ smile fell and he asked. “How’d you get into my car, I didn’t give you my keys or permission. If you had a warrant, I assume you would’ve come and taken them from me, so you broke in? Isn’t that a crime?”

This wasn’t as fun as I thought it was gonna be. I got up to leave and said. “Look kid, all the evidence points to you. You can either confess or you can continue and play this cat and mouse game. I bet you probably think you’re the cat. You’re not.”

I went to the door, and right as I turned the knob, he interrupted me. “Fine. Seeing as this is probably the last time we’ll talk I’ll explain everything to you. What do you say Roman?”

We already had him, all the evidence pointed to him. But, as Gregory had pointed out, without any motive it’d be hard to get it to stick. Even if he was just leading me on again, I

couldn't afford an opportunity to at least get a usable motive. Very begrudgingly, I turned around and sat back down, and gestured for him to speak.

“Before we begin, do you want to record this, seeing as it is my confession and all?” he asked.

I pulled my phone out, opened up the recording app and started recording. I gestured for him to begin once again.

“You've probably figured it out already, but my name isn't actually Thomas. You can call me Clark Thames, there should be a letter in my belongings addressed to me that will clear things up. Likewise, I have my drivers license in my shoe, which I will get out and show you if you'd allow it.”

I nodded my head, and he leaned back and put his shoe on the table and started untying it, speaking as he did so. “I kept it here because I expected y'all to search through my pockets. Guess, you guys aren't as good at your jobs as I thought.” He grinned as he said that and after a grumble from me his focus went back to his shoe. “Here it is. My driver's license. Mind it being a little wet. It was rather wet yesterday, and I didn't get the chance to change clothes.”

I ignored his comment and looked at the license. It was in fact him. Clark Thames, 25 years old, lives in Dallas, Texas, an organ donor. The card was real. Guess that's one problem solved. I put the license on the table, but I didn't slide it back over to him.

“So, Clark, how did you end up down here in Comstock, it's quite a way from Dallas?” I asked. “And while we're on the subject, you said you had a letter among your possessions. When we gathered them said letter was not there. Any comments?”

Clark simply sighed and said, “Well, I received said letter from the recently deceased JoAnn Foster, where she asked me to come down and visit her. She said that she would say that I was her grandson to avoid arousing any suspicion as I helped her out. Of course, all of this is a moot point if you didn’t find said letter.”

“Of course,” I said. “Without the letter, all of your reasons are useless.”

“Well, it’s good for me that I go the letter right here.” He said, reaching into his pockets and pulling an envelope out. “You guys really should’ve searched me, though I guess that would mean arresting me. You probably wanted to make sure you had enough on me before that. Wouldn’t want a black mark on your record, would you Roman?”

I looked at the envelope, and sure enough it was the same one that I had seen in his bag. I ripped it open to see if what he was saying was true, but it was blank. I told him as much and he just laughed.

“Well that one’s blank, but the one you stole from my room and the one I’ve already given to Gregory are real.” he said. “Looks like your surprised that I knew that you came into my room, much less took something of mine. Did you think I just wouldn’t notice a missing envelope?”

“What’s this about Gregory?” I demanded. “Did the two of you plan this together?”

“In a sense yes. Besides that, you shouldn’t steal letters. Not just mine either, the one that you got from JoAnn’s house as well.”

My throat went dry. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Both Gregory and I looked around the house after finding her body and didn’t find anything. What’s this about a letter?”

“No, not then. When you murdered her yesterday morning. A letter from one Jesus Alvarez. You know, the guy whose body we found out in the desert.” He said.

I stared at him, and he continued to explain.

“We already know that you knew him, we looked through your high school’s yearbook. You see, after the mess in San Antonio a couple years ago—the one that got Gregory sent out here—a couple people decided to reopen the case. It wasn’t a pressing matter, which is why the job fell all the way down to a rookie like me to take a look at it. Feel things out a little bit, see if things were really alright. I got talking to Gregory who was quite adamant that he wasn’t seen. I looked back to the interviews and saw that you sandbagged him pretty bad as well.

“That seemed odd, seeing on how close you were so we decided to take a look into you. There wasn’t much, but there was enough for suspicion, so I decided to look into your past. After hearing about the disappearance of JoAnn’s daughter I reached out to her and told her I was looking into it, but it would be hard for me to come down while not sticking out like a sore thumb. We came up with the grandson story, and I was able to explore around here freely. Nothing has happened around her in your lifetime that might’ve put you in contact with the cartel, except one incident: the disappearance of JoAnn’s daughter Ruth.”

I interrupted him. “You’re saying I had something to do with her disappearance? I was only 13, not even an adult. I couldn’t even drive!”

“14 actually, but you’re right about you not being able to drive. I know that she was your babysitter, and that when asked about it you said that she never showed up to take care of you.” Clark said. “I don’t know what happened, probably an accident, but she ended up dead. You know, something that would be viable blackmail material. You reached out to your friend Jesus,

someone who you knew wasn't really on the right side of the law, especially after that bus incident, and had him help you get rid of the body. Make it look like she had ran away.'

"So let me get this right. You're charging me with killing three people? Do you want to add a fourth while you're at it?" I asked, my head getting hot.

"No, only two I'm afraid. We don't really have concrete proof for the third one, mostly circumstantial. However, her license hasn't been renewed since then. Kind of a red flag. Besides, it really helps explaining what you did next." he said.

I smiled. Who is this guy, calling me a murderer. He doesn't even have any proof. Motive maybe, but you couldn't get anything done without proof.

"I placed a guy to monitor Mr. Alvarez' actions when I came down here. He called me 2 days ago to confirm that he saw you of all people talking to him in San Antonio, and that you two disappeared shortly thereafter. There were reports of your truck, passing through the recreation area near here two nights ago. I figured what you might've been doing and waited in that parking lot. Eventually you came, walked out with something bundled up in a large tarp, and 20 minutes later you left. I went the way you walked to and found the body, and then I called the police to let them know."

"How'd you know I was going to go to that lot?" I asked. "There's about three other lots people could've gone to. Why that one?"

Clark paused for a moment and then with a smile said. "Well, I figured you were probably in a hurry and would pick the closest one for convenience. After all, you had to go dispose of JoAnn. It was probably an insurance plan, wasn't it?"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, here’s what I think anyways. You wanted to stop working for him, stop tipping him off when his business was going to get interrupted, when someone was planning to raid his stash house while he was there. That kind of thing.” he said. “He had something on you, probably Ms. Ruth Foster’s ID and a little letter saying how he aided and abetted in cleaning up your mistake. You probably thought he’d keep it on him, but after a day of torture you discovered that he’d already sent it out to JoAnn.

“You had to hurry up and get down here, hence why you weren’t able to completely dissolve his body. After you dumped him you paid a visit to JoAnn, who let you in as she had known you since you were a kid, no matter how late it was. Once inside you quickly disposed of her, found the letter, thankfully unopened, and messed up her house to set the scene.”

“You’re saying that I was here? I’m not even her because I want to be here!” I exclaimed. “This stupid case got passed to me from my higher-ups. I’m only here since the other guy was on vacation!”

“It’s rather funny that you say that. I reached out to the Texas Rangers, specifically the Weslaco branch, and apparently you had agreed ahead of time to cover your friend’s county while he was on vacation. After all, nothing happens here.”

Crap. This did not go the way that I wanted it to go. I thought he was just some nobody who I could paint as the killer. To think he’d be! No, nothing matters, he still has no evidence. He still doesn’t have the letter. I’d taken the one in his room to remove any chance he had of an alibi, but to think that was a trap. Even then, I could dispose of them before they could arrest me. If they don’t have that then, they have nothing.

There was a knock at the door. The door swung open to reveal a man I didn't recognize standing there. He was a rather heavy-set man with a thick mustache and a bald head. In one of his hands by his side he was holding hand cuffs.

“Roman Brown, you are under arrest for the murders of one Jesus Alvarez and one JoAnn Foster. Likewise, we also have a warrant to look through your truck and phone. Sir, you have the right to remain silent.”