

“Palumbo” A CREATIVE WRITING PIECE

Honors Thesis

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in
English**

In the English Department Salem State University

By Cheyenne Bryan

Dr. J.D Scrimgeour Chairperson of the English Department

Commonwealth Honors Program Salem State University 2020

Prologue.

Timothy Wells was what you called a “straight arrow”. He was always on time for work, never complained or participated in scurrilous workplace gossip, and always came home at 10 o’clock on Thursday nights to sit with his wife Patricia and watch the Channel 6 Evening News with Donald Wilson. It was their tradition, a chance for them to unwind and talk about their days at the insurance agency and tea shop, respectively. Timothy believed it was the little things in life that made it worth living, so every day at 9:30, he would wave goodbye to Rose, the desk receptionist, and stroll out the front door to the parking lot, car keys in hand. He could almost taste the meatloaf his wife had prepared dancing on his tastebuds: although her specialty was tea, Timothy could never turn down a slice of Patty’s World Famous Loaf.

It was dark. Despite living in a warmer climate, the air was still unseasonably chilly. April made the weather raw, and even in springtime the humidity persisted. Timothy pulled at his checkered button and flapped quickly, trying to stimulate a cool breeze against his chest. He whistled a song he had heard on the radio as he got into his minivan, wincing as his legs touched the sticky interior. He had barely put the key into the ignition before he felt something cold and hard press into the back of his head.

“Drive.”

Timothy froze and a cold sweat form on the back of his neck. *Is that a gun?* He wondered fearfully, hands gripping the steering wheel as if they had a mind of their own. He could see someone sitting in the seat behind him, but the details were poor because of the lighting in the parking lot. Timothy swallowed the large lump in his throat and began to speak. “Where to?”

“I’ll tell you where. I just need you to pull out of this lot.” The voice speaking behind him was not sinister. In fact, it was jovial, friendly. He felt like he was speaking to an acquaintance as opposed to someone holding him hostage.

“Alright.” Timothy’s eyes bounced back and forth in his skull, looking for something, *anything* that he could do to get out the horrific situation he had stumbled into. He glanced back at the insurance agency and wondered how likely it was for Rose to peer out the window if he honked the horn. Although Rose was a fine coworker, she had a tendency to stick her nose in places where it didn’t belong, namely her coworker’s personal lives.

As if the person holding the gun against his head (Timothy decided it was a man in his backseat, the voice was far too masculine for it to be a woman) could hear his thoughts, they abruptly jammed the gun harder against his skull, making Timothy’s heart race and his stomach drop. “You do anything to alert that receptionist inside, the both of you are dead. I have no issues

taking two lives here tonight.” The voice still wasn’t angry, but rather, disappointed, like a father chiding a disobedient child. The lack of anger in his voice chilled Timothy.

“O-okay.” His hands trembled violently as he turned on the engine, keys jingling lightly. Timothy pulled into reverse and drove through the parking lot slowly, feeling his chest tighten with every breath he took. Palumbo Properties sloped downward before him as he turned onto Sunset Boulevard. *Who is this man? How did he get in here? Is he going to kill me? What does he want?* Timothy thought to himself. Every bone in his body wanted him to take a right on Fresh Pond Road, which would take him all the way to his house on Sycamore. He gripped the steering wheel and thought of Patricia, with her warm smile and wide, freckled face. A noise from the backseat made him flinch and glance at the rearview mirror. Even with the streetlights above, the man’s face was obscured by what appeared to be a ski mask and a large pair of sunglasses. They were brown with gold framing and jewels crested along the rims. *Flashy*, Timothy mused. “I’m sorry, what?”

“The highway.” Timothy peered behind him and saw a man’s gloved hand holding a gun, which had begun to motion towards the highway.

“Sure.” Timothy pulled smoothly onto I-95. His eyes whipped around wildly, looking to see if there were any cars he could discreetly flag down. But he was out of luck: the road was empty, save for a few rear headlights that were merely red flecks on the horizon. He chewed his lip, a habit from childhood he had never managed to break. His mother would scold him as blood would drip from his lips and onto the white tile beneath. He can already taste the salty tang sighs tightly and picks up speed, passing a sign that reads “WELCOME TO GRAFTON - POP. 25,432”. Despite being so close to Jetsonville, Timothy found peace in the small town of

Grafton. His secluded cul de sac was an excellent place to take the kids bike riding or have a romantic evening with his wife.

“Pull off this exit. I want to go to Grafton Park,” the calm voice in the backseat requested. “I loved going there as a kid.”

“Is that so? My kids love going there.” The words slipped from his mouth before Timothy had a chance to stop himself. His stomach soured, and a wave of fear crashed over him. How could he be stupid enough to respond to the ramblings of a clearly insane psychopath? Timothy’s mouth filled with saliva, the first sign that usually led to him vomiting. He hoped, for both their sakes, that he managed to keep the contents of his stomach inside, instead of all over the car's interior.

Instead of responding in anger, the voice seemed curious. “Really? What are their names?”

“Charlie and Sarah. They’re 10 and 8.” Timothy could picture them clearly; Charlie with dark, glossy hair, his front tooth gone from a soccer accident, and Sarah always one step behind him, with fiery red hair and a sour expression on her face; this usually suggested that Charlie had done something bad.

“Is that so? That’s very nice. I’ve always wondered what it was like to have kids.” The voice behind him became thoughtful, almost wistful. “They must be a lot of work.”

“Oh, definitely.” The exit was quickly approaching. Timothy looked around, making one last desperate attempt to catch someone’s attention. The road was just as barren as it was before. Timothy swallowed thickly and pulled off the highway.

Timothy heard a spark and slowed once he reached a stop sign. He turned to see the man put a lit cigarette in his mouth and pocket what he assumed was a lighter. He picked the gun back

up off the booster seat beside him. “Sorry if this bothers you,” the man offered. Smoke had begun to drift in the air, a clear silken stream. Timothy said nothing - he could feel the gun the man had pointed against him against his flesh, and it terrified him.

The man cleared his throat before speaking again. “Just pull over here,” he ordered. The edge that had been missing from his tone had now presented itself, tense and ready to explode at any second. Timothy silently obliged and pulled into a parking space alongside the large park.

“Not here.” Timothy felt the pressure of the gun once more. “Pull towards that busted light.”

The men sat in silence for what felt like an eternity. Timothy clasped his hands together and felt how sweaty his palms had become. The man was probably going to kill him here, far away from his family. He hastily reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a small silver cross. It felt cool, a soothing remedy for his clammy palms. He held it out in front of him before clasping his hands around it. “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee...” He mumbled. A cold shiver rippled over his skin. He barely noticed as the man gracefully lunged over the middle portion of the vehicle and settled in the passenger seat. The man, cigarette tightly clamped between his teeth, begins to speak.

“You’re a nice man, Timothy. You have a nice life, good kids, a well paying job, and a wife that loves you. It makes me feel good that there are people like you in the world, making sure the world isn’t all bad.”

Timothy slowly exhaled. He dropped his cross and braced himself for what he feared may be his most fatal decision. Timothy tightened his teeth together and whipped around, intending to make eye contact with the man who was behind his night of terror. It was not what he was expecting. The man didn’t look like something out of a horror movie, with scars or burns.

He also didn't look like someone who had just escaped from the Fairhurst Psychiatric Ward either, as he didn't don a typical jumpsuit or hospital robes. He looked... normal. Blonde hair, brown eyes, thick eyebrows with light stubble on his face. With a shock, Timothy realized he couldn't be any older than 25.

"You're... you're..." Timothy stammered, trying to keep pace with the thoughts that raced around his mind like laughing gulls that flew around the harbor before settling onto the coast.

With a grimace, the man lit another cigarette. "I'm sure you're wondering who I am. What I do. I'll indulge you with my first name. Sam. But nothing else is really important. I work a dead end job, just like everyone else, I have a girlfriend, I pay my taxes. And I'm a law abiding citizen... most of the time." Sam took a drag and sighed. "But there is something I can't control. Something that no one else has."

"...And that is?" Timothy squeaked as he stared at the gun. There wasn't much light, but even Timothy didn't find it difficult to imagine the barrel of the gun directed directly at his temple.

"I like to kill people." Sam stated it so matter of factly it didn't sound alarming. Timothy nodded. What else could he say?

"...Oh." Timothy swallowed and dipped his head in acknowledgment.

The man took another drag and fell silent.

By now, Timothy knew his fate. Timothy was in an ill lit parking lot late at night. Sam was smart. He knew where to go and how to do it. But if he could startle him and run, maybe he'd have a chance...

It was almost like Sam read his mind. “Don’t try running, by the way. You won’t get far, and it’ll be messy.” Sam reclined his seat a bit and relaxed. His hand absentmindedly stroked the handle of his gun. Timothy could see the gun now; it was remarkably small, but that didn;t make him feel any better. “But you? You have a family, a wife. Salt of the earth kind of thing. And I like you. I’m really disappointed I have to kill someone as kind hearted as you.”

Timothy’s eyes widened and sweat poured down his face and ran into his eyes, blurring the image of Sam and his gun. “Please don’t. Look, come to dinner with me and my family. I’m sure there’s an explanation for the things you feel. We’ll help you! I’ll help you!”

Sam looked at him and gave a wide smile. A genuine one. “Really?”

“Yes!” Timothy nodded so fast his glasses fell off his face and landed in his lap.

“That’s very generous of you.” Sam stubbed]the cigarette out on the bottom of his shoe. “But I can’t.” In a second, he cocked the gun and pulled the trigger. The bang echoed loudly from the inside of the van and rendered everything silent. A flash of light blinded Sam, but he merely squinted his eyes, his ears temporarily deafened.

Sam leaned back and admired his handiwork. Blood and brain matter was everywhere, dripping down like gray gelatin. Timothy had fallen against the window seat, which was completely covered. The driver’s side window was coated in crimson, with a small, singular bullet hole surrounded by ripples of broken glass. The smell of fecal matter rose in the air. Timothy’s head crumpled into an awkward position, the back of his head having smeared blood all over the interior.

Sam only observed for a moment before carefully opening the car door with a gloved hand. shutting it with care. Around him, it was like the world has absorbed the shock: complete silence. Sam starts down the street before looking back just once more. For a second, sympathy

twinges in his gut, thinking about Charlie and Sarah now growing up without a father. But it goes away as quickly as it came. Sam turns the corner, and the darkness of the night swallows him whole.

I.

People never say what to expect once they've solved their first big case. The only thing they worried themselves with was 'following protocol' and making sure they tidy up all loose ends. But afterwards? They don't tell you about the pressure. The way the superiors look to you for guidance, asking to go over their case files and see if anything is missing. It's bullshit. It's the reason Benjamin can't go into his office anymore - or, one of the reasons, at least.

The Florida sun beat down on him, heavy and bright while stood in the Jetsonville Police Department parking lot. A sticky wetness hung in the air, causing his collared shirt to stick to him uncomfortably. His long, leather trench coat was clearly the wrong choice for this sort of climate, but, like his smoking, it was going to be a hard habit to break. Or perhaps it was his stubbornness, his insistence to himself that this was only a temporary assignment. Benjamin rummaged around in his jacket pocket before pulling out a carton.

As a cruiser pulled around the lot, the sun beamed off of its shiny exterior and into Benjamin's eyes, causing him to grimace. He flicked his sunglasses down to his face before lighting his cigarette. The smell of Lucky Strikes hung in the air.

Benjamin missed New York. Something about the way people carried themselves there was much different from Jetsonville. People had a sense of purpose when they walked from place to place. You could be the unluckiest son of a bitch on the planet, but still know that there were at least five sleazy corner stores that sold crack on the side. Hell, even the druggies and the

homeless knew every street corner, every place to buy dope, every alley to shoot up. But here? Benjamin felt as though he was walking amongst an alien race. People here moved slower. When Benjamin was first told he was being sent to Florida on a murder case, he was excited. Excited and clueless. He grit his teeth as he remembered the conversation he had with Cole. [supervisor? Need to research more on this].

“Florida, huh?” Benjamin’s uniform shoes hung precariously over the desk as he took a drag from his cigarette. He exhaled through his nose, filling the room with a soft gray haze. “Sounds like it’ll be fun for me.” The New York City skyline caused an odd array of shadows to paint the wall behind them. The sun hung hazy and orange over the city.

Cole sat across from him. His demeanor was much more professional; back straight, legs planted firmly beneath him. Benjamin caught his eye through the smoke and saw that his hands are clasped together on the desk. The detective swallowed and slowly lowered his legs to the ground. Something was clearly wrong.

“What’s wrong, man? Something about the Orvall Heights case?” He laughed nervously. “Pretty sure I turned in all my case files on that ages ago.”

There was no response. Instead, Cole reached into his own pocket and pulled out a box of Maverick’s. Benjamin’s brow raised curiously; it wasn’t like his supervisor to smoke.

Another pause permeated the air around them before he spoke. “You’re being transferred, Love.”

“The fuck you mean ‘I’m being transferred’?” Benjamin’s voice rose abruptly, surprising even himself. Cole’s gray eyes flick from his cigarette to him. “I’m one of the best detectives here! That’s impossible.”

“Not impossible. Necessary.” Cole stood and walked to the personal computer sitting on the desk farthest from him. He reached into the mammoth sized printer before pulling out a stack of papers. He tossed it carelessly onto the table, which slid for a few seconds before resting at Benjamin’s chest level. Benjamin eyed it, but did not reach for it. Cole circled back.

“They think there’s a serial killer in southern Florida. Police can’t find any leads. First they thought it was all unrelated; drug deals gone wrong, shit like that.” He returned to his seat and sat back in his chair. “They’re sending us in. Figured this should be a piece of cake for you, since you already passed in all your case files on Orvall Heights ages ago.” A smirk flitted across his face before returning to normal.

“Serial killer?” Benjamin’s interest piqued as he flipped through the pages. “That’s a pretty bold assumption.” He landed on a page with a grainy photograph. The copier was old, and left large black lines across the page, partially obscuring the image. A large building was shown, surrounded by a rocky outcropping. Benjamin pointed to the photo. “What is this?”

“That, my friend, is where the murderer has been dumping the bodies.” Cole took a long drag. “See all the rocks? It’s a fake waterfall.” He rapped the page quickly, three times in succession. Benjamin could tell he was excited - the Bronx accent only revealed itself when Cole felt a strong sense of emotions. “Guy kills for whatever reason, dumps them here. Crazy or what?” Cole’s eyes shone. “He’s been using a silencer, evil bastard. Stalks his victims, kills them with his gun, drags them back to Jetsonville. However this son of a bitch has been doing it has police there baffled. No fingerprints, no sightings, only a partial tire track.”

“Not crazy. Weird.” The papers fluttered back onto the desk. “How many victims?”

“You can ask yourself once you get there. Chief Daniel Drinkwater is very excited to meet with you.” Cole returned to his previous position at his desk and leaned back in his seat, clearly waiting for an outburst from the detective.

“But what about my apartment, my friends?” *My life?*

Cole scoffed. “You call Kowalski and Trenton friends? Those two retards couldn’t find their own asses on a toilet seat. You know as well as I do that you’re smarter than them, grittier than them.” Beyond Cole’s office sat two officers at a table in the break room. The pair were playing a card game of some sorts, using odd office items as poker chips. Kowalski suddenly roared, standing violently and shouting something at Trenton, who was laughing so hard he had to hold onto his stomach. A rush of annoyance flushed Benjamin’s cheeks. Did the two of them always have to act like complete imbeciles?

A fly buzzed in the air near Benjamin’s ear. He swatted it away. He jumped abruptly as Cole clasped a large, heavy hand on his shoulder. “Besides, this should only be around a six month sting. And you’ll be in Florida! It’s pretty clear you need a vacation.” Cole frowned as he studied the detective’s face. Dark eye bags hung from Benjamin’s sockets, freckles smattered on his pale face at random. A large gash cut through his eyebrow, stitches barely holding his skin together. “You look like hell, Love. When’s the last time you slept?”

Benjamin removed the Newport from his lips and crushed it in the ashtray next to him. He seamlessly placed another in his mouth and lit it with one swift motion. He ignored the Deputy’s [not sure what position he is] question and scratched at his neck.

“Am I near Miami, at least?” He exhaled harshly.

Cole smirked again, but this time, it wasn’t a knowing smirk between friends. It was a ‘sucks to be you’ sort of smirk. “What, you think you got a chance with the strippers they got

down there? Not all of ‘em are Nougat, Love.” He chortled and ran a hand through his straw yellow hair. His gold ring flashed in the sunlight.

Benjamin’s face reddened. “You know about her?”

“I know about everything, Detective Love.” Cole’s expression became serious. “And I know you well enough to tell you you’d better not fuck this up. Jetsonville is a nice little ma and pa sort of town. Miami is miles away. So you’d better not slink off and try to get lucky.” The Maverick was at its end, and with it, their conversation. Cole stubbed it, and Benjamin watched, somehow feeling sorry for the filter that now lay among the ash and embers.

“Now get out of my office.”

A card door slams in the distance, taking Benjamin’s concentration with it. He observed a lengthy man exit the car. He took another drag.

What Cole had failed to warn him about was just how far away Miami was from Jetsonville. The detective remembered staring hopelessly at a map of Florida in Sunoco, his finger tracing the I-10 in a desperate attempt to connect to civilization. When he looked up, he saw the cashier smiling at him with a soft expression. “Can I help you find something, sir?” The girl’s voice reminded him of a chipmunk, or some other kind of woodland creature, high and sweet.

“No, I’m alright. Just seeing how far away Miami is.” He placed the map back with the other brochures that lay scattered in the display. Walking to the counter, he placed a paper cup of coffee in front of her. “And a carton of Lucky Strikes, please.”

The cashier’s freckled hands moved quickly across the keys on the register. She offered him a jovial smile, before reaching above her to grab the cigarettes. Benjamin glanced around the store before settling on a stack of newspapers. A large picture of himself had been plastered

across *The Jetsonville Daily Times*. He grabbed it in mild disgust. The headline read “FBI Hot Shot to Solve Palumbo Killings”. As he threw it back down, the cashier gazed at him curiously. Her red hair looked dull under the fluorescent lighting.

“You know, that kind of looks like you.”

“Hmm.” He felt her eyes on his back as he left. Benjamin decided then to never go back to that particular gas station. Now he had one more person to avoid.

The cigarette wasn't finished, but Benjamin dropped it and stubbed it out anyway. Orange sparks danced on the pavement as his boot twisted the butt into the ground, leaving behind nothing but a dark splotch next to his back tire. He turned once more to survey the parking lot. For a small town, Jetsonville seemed to have a lot of money put towards their police department. A long line of Crown Victoria police cruisers stretched to the end of the lot, each one looking brand new. He couldn't help but feel impressed. This was no Orvall Heights, but at least he could expect the same treatment.

A woman sat at the desk. This was the first thing he noticed as he entered the building. Police officers walked the halls with a sense of purpose, some holding paperwork, others holding mugs of coffee or cups of water. An excited buzz hung in the air, a sense of anticipation palpable. No doubt it came from his arrival. Despite this fact, Benjamin still didn't feel excited. An itchiness has spread across his skin, nagging and insistent. He tried to ignore it as he approached the desk.

The woman didn't see him at first. In fact, he could barely see her, either; a large computer monitor sat between them, its large back jutting out from behind the desk. His old department back in New York boasted the same technology. There it felt state of the art, cutting edge. Here, it was another reminder of just how far away from home he was.

The familiar stench of cigarettes filled his nose. An ashtray sat on the desk, dangerously close to some pamphlets on how to report spousal abuse. Benjamin reached over and moved the pamphlets away. The desk was cluttered with stacks of paper in seemingly random order. Beneath the chaos, there was a name placard: JANICE FOREMAN, PUBLIC RELATIONS. He cleared his throat.

“Uh. Excuse me?” No response. The woman stared at her screen, mesmerized.

“Ms. Foreman. I have an appointment.”

Still no response. Benjamin felt a flash of irritation. Was Jetson destined to make him feel nothing but anger? He reached over and abducted the ashtray from her side, accidentally clipping a stack of papers to his right. They swayed intensely before falling to the ground, flying in nearly all directions. The woman shifted her attention from the screen to his face. A large, hairy set of eyebrows were furrowed at his mistake.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” She snapped. Janice reached over and snatched the ashtray from his grip. A small pile of ashes jumped from the tray and onto the ground, dusting the paper with a fine gray coating. “Now I have to pick all of these up because you decided you weren’t patient enough to wait.” She went to stand.

“Well, for one, you shouldn’t leave lit cigarettes around all this paper; I’m surprised you haven’t burned the building down yet.” Benjamin cracked a sly smile. The woman was, to put it mildly, unattractive. Her stature was so short, Benjamin was sure she couldn’t be taller than five feet. A rumpled, brightly patterned ref dress hung off of her with all the gracelessness of a worn and dirty potato sack. Grabbing a cane that had been hidden from Benjamin’s view, Janice grabs it with a huff before hobbling over to the side of the desk. Ugly yellow clogs that matched the pattern of her dress adorned her feet, making them comically large compared to her size.

Janice scowled and placed the ashtray back in its original spot. She grabbed at the lit cigarette and placed it in her mouth, pink lips pursed into a dainty 'O' shape. She stared him down before blowing a thick stream of smoke onto the keyboard. Her short and curly hair spiraled in all directions.

“Well? What do you want? Not enough having knocked over these very important files?” Venom dripped from her lips and onto the stack of paper beneath her feet. She shuffled around the desk and bent down, scooping up the papers that were closest. She groaned and bent to reach them, grabbing at her back with her unoccupied hand. Benjamin knelt down as well, studying the paperwork that was in front of them. He grabbed a finance report and held it out to her. She took it without giving him a second glance.

“Yes. I’m Benjamin Love. I have a meeting with Chief Drinkwater.” He ran a hand through his dark hair and pushed up his cowlick, head tilted.

Eyes narrowed, Janice stood and reached past him, grabbing a beige colored phone. She dialed a number, still staring at him accusedly. Benjamin stared back, eyebrows furrowed. Still itchy, he reached up absentmindedly and scratched at his neck.

There was a pause before she spoke. “Hello, Chief. I have a Benjamin Love here to meet with you.” Another pause. “Of course, sir.” She gently placed the phone down before snapping at him. “He wants you to wait.” A long, red fingernail pointed to a grouping of lounge chairs. “He’ll be with you momentarily.” Janice went back to her trance, eyes glued to the monitor. She threw the stack of paperwork she retrieved from the ground next to the phone, causing it to rattle.

Benjamin had barely sat down before a large man strolled confidently across the lobby. A moustache rested proudly above his upper lip, giving him the demeanor of a trustworthy father

figure (or a comic book villain). His large stomach swelled over his belt buckle and hung towards the top of his thighs.

“Are you Benjamin Love?” His voice boomed, echoing around the building. Janice did not look phased. She simply continued typing away, lost in the world of Windows ‘95.

Benjamin stood, straightening his tie and adjusting his jacket. “Yes, sir.” He reached out a hand, his dark brown eyes meeting the Chief’s electric blue. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“Same goes for you, son!” He grabbed Benjamin’s outstretched palm and shook it heartily. “I’m Chief Daniel Drinkwater. Follow me, we have a lot to discuss.”

“Alright.” Benjamin released his hand from the Chief’s strong grip. The man grunted before turning on his heel and walking towards a corridor behind the desk. His large gait caused several more papers to fall to the ground. Janice rolled her eyes before standing once more and crouching, carefully fingering each piece before adding them to her pile.

Benjamin quickly followed the chief, who moved surprisingly quick for someone as large as he was. The two entered a long, well lit hallway, with people bustling to and fro. Chief Drinkwater kept up his confident stride before stopping in front of a mahogany door. The words ‘CHIEF DANIEL DRINKWATER’ were nailed to the front.

“Come on in. Sorry, my office is a mess - ever since this ‘Palumbo Killer’ mess started, I’ve been running from press conference to press conference.” Chief Drinkwater motioned him forward and left the door slightly ajar, perhaps expecting someone to interrupt them.

“No worries.” Benjamin followed him into the room and gave it a quick once over. Many plaques decorated the walls of the dimly lit room. A picture of the chief and a red-headed woman lay propped against the back of the large computer monitor. Like the front desk, piles of paper

sat everywhere with no clear indication of organization. Benjamin decided this was what he liked least about the station.

“Well, take a seat. We have to go over some logistics.” Chief Drinkwater fell backwards into his chair, which barely emitted any noise. It was clear it was used to the abuse.

“Alright. Tell me what you were briefed on in New York.” The chief leaned back and crossed his arms behind his head. The detective felt a trickle of sweat dripped down his back.

“Well, I know that it was enough of an emergency to call the Bureau in.” He shifted in his seat, stuck between wanting to take his trenchcoat off and not wanting to look weak in front of his new superior. “Something about bodies being dumped in this old waterfall.”

“I wish it was that simple.” Chief Drinkwater struggled to reach over the desk before flipping the switch on a projector Benjamin didn’t even realize was there. A blank white square appeared on the wall. The chief reached into his desk and pulled out a stack of photographs. The first looked familiar - it was the same photocopy from his conversation with Cole.

“This is Palumbo Properties, 132 Sunset Boulevard. It’s right off the I-10. Used to be bustling back when it opened in 1985. Tons of local businesses had offices there. It was quite the spectacle.” Chief Drinkwater’s pudgy face turned serious. “But time has its way with everything. Ten years later, the place is known for sleazy hookers and shooting shit between your toes.”

“Oh.” Benjamin scratched at his neck.

“Which leads us to the murders.” Chief Drinkwater picked up the first picture and replaced it with something much more grisly. It was a man, African American, laying face down in some sort of rocky area. A large puddle of blood pooled from under him and leaked into the dirt around him. Benjamin leaned forward in his seat, wishing the photo was more detailed. He noticed the Chief observing him out of the corner of his eye.

“I bet you see shit like this all the time.” The Chief was reaching into his desk again, this time pulling out a gray ashtray. “Me, I never can get used to it.”

“It’s just part of the job, I guess.” Benjamin reached into his own pocket and pulled out his carton of cigarettes, relieved to be distracted from the incessant scratching.

“This was Bob Gasset, some homeless guy from downtown Jacksonville. Bad area.” The picture changes again, this time to a brunette woman with long hair. “Lucy Gonzalez, from a couple of towns over. When we asked her family, they mentioned she had come to Jetsonville on an errand, never made it home.”

Benjamin took a long drag of his cigarette, holding his breath for so long he felt lightheaded. “Any more?”

“Wish I could say no.” Another picture appears. This one is a man laying face up. A long trickle of blood came from a small hole in the left side of his temple. “Now, this one is interesting. This guy actually worked in Palumbo, for some small insurance company. His name is Timothy Wells.” The Chief was now looking at a manilla file labeled ‘VICTIMS’.

“So could there be a motive? Maybe a disgruntled employee?” Benjamin’s eyebrows knitted together in concentration.

“He only worked with two people, an elderly woman named Rose and his manager, who happens to be in Cabo right now on his second honeymoon. So there isn’t a connection there.” The chief exhaled a large amount of smoke in Benjamin’s direction. Eyes watering, Benjamin tries not to cough.

“So what? You think there’s just a random guy out here killing people and dumping their bodies here for no reason?”

“That’s. And that’s why you’re here.” Grabbing the photo, the Chief struggles to stand, red in the face. Benjamin studies his shoes and pretends not to notice.

“In order for you to actually grasp what’s happening here in Jetsonville, I want you to see the crime scene for yourself.” He motioned to the door. “That’s why you’ll be going there with one of my best detectives.”

“What?” Turning to look behind him, Benjamin started as he noticed a man leaning against the doorway. He was taller than him, maybe around six feet tall, save for a few extra inches. The man’s hair was longer than Benjamin’s ever was, but just as dark and glossy, hanging just above his eyes. He had a lean build and broad shoulders. The man looks at Benjamin, seemingly unaware of the seriousness of their previous conversation.

“This is Han Nakamura. He’s been at Jetsonville for five years, and I hope he doesn’t plan on leaving any time soon.” Chief Drinkwater let out a self indulgent chuckle. Han’s neutral facial expression didn’t change, but he does stand up straighter when his name is mentioned.

“Nice to meet you.” His voice was quiet. There was no trace of an accent, if he had one. His hands lay casually in his pockets, which caused Benjamin to bristle. *Why is he so nonchalant? I’m supposed to be his superior on this case.*

“You as well.” Benjamin hastily stood and extended his hand, quickly placing his cigarette in his mouth before doing so. Han looked from his cigarette to his hand before reaching out to shake it. His hand felt warm, but the skin was rough.

“Han, I’ve given Detective Love here the file on this case. Obviously, last night’s murder hasn’t been updated, but - “

“That’s what I’m here for, sir.” Han smiled without showing his teeth, causing Chief Drinkwater to let out a hearty chuckle and heavily clap his back.

“Knew I could count on you. Report to Detective Brawn and the CSIs on scene and come back to me with anything that you find.” [not sure how this process works yet, so I’m just writing it and will replace it with accurate info later] Chief Drinkwater waved a pudgy hand at them both, clearly indicating that they were being dismissed. Han turned and walked to the door while Benjamin stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. A sense of worry had overcome him.

“Don’t worry about Han too much. He’s quiet, but one of the best officers I have. He’ll take care of you.” The man offered Benjamin a large, toothy grin. “Sorry I can’t be there myself.”

“It’s quite alright.” Benjamin returned his smile with less enthusiasm before turning to follow his new chaperone. The door had barely shut before the chief yelled something after them. “Don’t forget to shut my door!”

Han had a very old car. It was one of the first things Benjamin had noticed when he had pulled up to the station in the first place. A white, beat up Vauxhall Cavalier sat sadly in front of him. The left side mirror was held together valiantly through the efforts of duct tape. Han reached into his tan coat pocket and pulled out the keys, unlocking the driver’s side door. He reached forward and clicked the mechanism that had all four doors open at once. “Hop in.”

Benjamin pulled at the door, but nothing happened. Determined not to ask for Han’s help, he aggressively yanked the door open, nearly knocking himself to the ground in the process. Flustered, Benjamin quickly entered the vehicle and slammed the door behind him. He saw Han observing him with a bemused expression on his face.

“Yeah, sorry. This car is really fucking old.” Han cranked down his window with his left hand while starting the car with his right. Despite the look of the car, the engine roared to life almost immediately. “You also may want to roll down your window, the AC is broken.”

Benjamin obliged, grabbing the window crank and turning it. “How can you live with a broken AC? It’s 97 degrees out here.” He flipped his sunglasses back down over his eyes.

Han snorted. “How can you live with that trenchcoat? You must be soaked.” Han leaned over and reached into the passenger seat, his shoulder brushing against Benjamin’s arm. Fidgeting, Benjamin felt himself reaching for yet another cigarette.

“Here.” Han returned to his normal position, holding a navy zip up jacket. “Put this on. Where we’re going, the weather isn’t going to be any kinder to you.” He looked at the carton of cigarettes in Benjamin’s hand. “And you can’t smoke in my car. It might look shitty on the outside, but I don’t want it to smell shitty on the inside.” Han buckled his seatbelt and puts the car into reverse, driving past the rows of new cruisers.

Benjamin removed his trenchcoat. A sigh of relief escaped from his mouth as he discarded the heavy clothing. He pulled on the new sweater Han had given him. It fit everywhere except for the sleeves, which were slightly too long. Benjamin cuffed them at his wrists before pulling on his own seatbelt. “Thanks.”

“Hmm.” Han raised his hand and waved at a cruiser pulling into the lot before turning right, driving past the station and onto a side street. Benjamin let his arm hang loosely out the window as he observed the neighborhood around him. While he had been in Florida for a couple of weeks beforehand, Benjamin rarely left his hotel room, except to go downstairs and drink Pabst Blue Ribbon, chain smoking cigarettes and wishing he were anywhere except there. Palm

trees loomed overhead, small houses appearing every now and again. Pink lawn flamingos seemed to be the norm.

Benjamin turned slightly to study Han. He had a sharp jawline with no evidence of stubble. Thin eyebrows rested beneath his sleek hair.

Hot air entered the open windows, whipping Benjamin's hair into a ruffled frenzy. He reaches to smooth it down in aggravation, only to have another gust of wind make it look even more disheveled. The detective made sure to give Han a pointed look.

"Do the windows really need to be open?" Benjamin asks, an edge in his voice that surprises even him. It is only until a wave of discomfort washes over him that he realizes he must be having tremors. Benjamin wipes at his forehead, removing some of the sweat that was beading there.

"No. This car doesn't have working air conditioning." Han does not look in Benjamin's direction as he says this; instead, he slows next to a sign that reads FREEWAY 1A. Palm trees loomed over the vehicle, giving Benjamin some well needed shade. An awkward silence hung in the air now that the car was no longer full of huge gusts of wind.

"Well, have you ever considered getting a new car? I'm sure Drinkwater wouldn't mind giving you one of the shiny new toys he has sitting in the parking lot." An elderly woman hobbled towards the crosswalk, holding her walker tightly with bony fingers. She shuffled slowly, pink flip flops dragging across the asphalt with each step she took. Despite the fact that it was nearly a hundred degrees, she wore a navy sweatshirt, embroidered with the Disney logo. The glasses she wore hung by a chain around her neck, which trembled ever so slightly. Benjamin let out a frustrated sigh.

“I have access to the cars in the lot. I just use this car because I like it.” Benjamin waited for him to say more, but he simply turned his eyes back to the road. The woman stopped walking and made eye contact with the pair. Benjamin feigned a smile, which looked like a pained grimace. Han smiled, lifting his arm in an exaggerated wave. In response, the woman reached for her face and readjusted her glasses before smiling back, waving stiffly. Han unbuckled and opened the driver’s side door, much to Benjamin’s disdain.

“Where are you going? We have to get to the crime scene,” Benjamin complained.

Han gave him a stern look. “We have a citizen here who is clearly in need. I’m going to help her.” Without another word, he slammed the door and strode over to the elderly woman. Han shouted a greeting Benjamin didn’t catch.

“Fucker.” Benjamin let out another sign before he opened his own door. The heat was sweltering; Benjamin had to close his eyes, the rush of hot air making his eyes water. He walked forward, his dress shoes smacking against the asphalt.

“I’m telling you, they need to add a new light here. Half the time, I’m almost hit by cars. No one here knows how to drive.” The elderly woman walked slowly forward, supported by Han, who had offered his elbow to her.

“I understand your frustration, ma’am. I’ll be sure to pass on the word.” Han’s voice was sincere and warm.

“Hey.” Benjamin came up to the other side of the pair awkwardly, hands tucked away into his pockets. “How are we doing?”

“Well, hello, young man.” The woman’s hair was peach colored and wispy. Benjamin could see her head underneath, reflecting the sun. “Are you with this handsome police officer here?” Her hand patted his arm affectionately, making Han smile a little wider.

“Erm. Yes. My name is Benjamin Love.” He extended his hand out to her sheepishly. She took it gently, running her soft, cool hands over his own. “I trust that everything is going well here.” The three reached the other side of the street. As Han took both of her hands, Benjamin picked up her walker and placed it on the curb.

“Of course.” She smiled widely, her teeth stained and yellow, no doubt from years of smoking and coffee. “Thank you for all your help.” she released Han’s arm, readjusting herself on her walker. The pair watched her as she hobbled slowly, heading in the direction of a small neighborhood.

“Will she be okay?” Benjamin turned to Han, only to realize he was already halfway back to his car. He quickly followed, trying not to run to keep up. Han made no indication he heard him and opened the driver’s side, sliding into it as if he had been doing so for his entire life. Benjamin reached the passenger side and tugged harshly, the door almost slamming into him once more.

“She’s fine. I see her once a week.” Han shifted the car from park to drive, pulling onto the freeway. Benjamin strained to make eye contact with him once more, but he was ever silent, his bangs lifting from his forehead and being pushed back by the wind. Benjamin sighed before turning his head back out the window.

While Jetsonville had a small town vibe to it, the freeway brought the feeling of civilization and the open road back to Benjamin. The battered vehicle passed copious amounts of fast food chains, surrounded by miles of forests and the occasional swamp. A house would appear every now and again, surrounded by wired fences and plastic patio furniture in an assortment of sun bleached colors. Benjamin snorted. At least he got one thing about Florida right - that everyone who lived here was either elderly or extremely tacky.

Han turned his blinker on, which filled the car with a very distinct ticking noise. It drilled into Benjamin's head and sat in his ear canals, making him feel like his brain was shaking. It wasn't until Benjamin was able to drown out the noise by blocking one of his ears that he realized Han was speaking.

"We're getting off of Exit 34." Han flicked the blinker off and followed the circular curve of the exit. A singular stoplight greeted them. As the car began to slow, Han turned his head ever so slightly to look at Benjamin once more.

"We're about five minutes away from Palumbo Properties. I figured now would be a good time to brief you on the history of the building and the murder that took place there thirteen hours ago."

"You could've told me the whole ride here and you decided to wait until the last five minutes to brief me?" Benjamin scoffed before he crossed his arms.

Whether it was out of irritation or having impeccable self control, Han didn't respond to Benjamin's snarky remark. Instead, he cleared his throat and ran a hand through her hair, fixing it in one elegant movement.

"Palumbo Properties was built by Paul Crowe, a wealthy businessman from South Miami. Construction was finished in 1985, and by 1987, the property was filled with small and large businesses alike." The stoplight turned green. Han turned left, following a long and barren stretch of road. Benjamin reached up to his own hair and attempted to fix it just as Han did. To his frustration, his hair simply stuck up and stayed when he ran his hand through it. Trying not to show any signs of weakness, Benjamin casually began to fix his hair part. Han ignored him and continued.

“However, Paul suddenly died of a heart attack in 1989, leaving everything to his son, William Crowe. William was a recent graduate of Florida State University, and though he had a business degree, nothing could have saved his father’s work. He pissed away funding, made several risky business decisions, which drove out the larger proprietors. By 1991, there were only five businesses that remained at the property.”

Benjamin stopped momentarily before he looked at Han in confusion. “If there were only five businesses left, how have they made enough money to make a profit and keep paying for their space at the business park?”

Han looked to him with an expression Benjamin couldn’t read. “His ‘risky business decisions’ made him a lot of collateral. Money laundering, pushing drugs and prostitutes behind the guise of a small insurance company or a dry cleaners.” Han took a right, following a small faded sign that read *Palumbo Properties: 2 miles*.

“So what? That was two years ago. I’m assuming something has been done about William.” Satisfied with his hair, Benjamin dropped his hand back into his lap, feeling for the cigarettes he had placed in Han’s jacket. It was only a matter of time before a comforting stream of nicotine entered his bloodstream.

“Yes. William Crowe is currently serving at the Orange County Correctional Facility. Sentenced 25 years without parole for the possession and selling of illegal drugs.”

“So who owns Palumbo now?” Benjamin quiered.

“An older gentleman by the name of Horace Byrd. After the scandal broke, no one wanted anything to do with Palumbo. He got it for a fourth of its original price and put the last new business this place will probably ever see, the small insurance company he runs with his wife.” A large, looming rock structure grew bigger and bigger the closer the car approached.

“The last of the reputable businesses pulled out, leaving the five that are still here today.” Han pulled up in front of a small security station, complete with an electronic gate. “We’re here.”

Despite its name, Palumbo Properties did not have the grace and charm the original owner must have envisioned. Instead, Benjamin was greeted with a towering rock structure, with pipes sticking out of it at random locations. A large building stood menacingly behind it, made of red brick and large, reflective windows with a bluish tint. Along the top of the building, large blue letters spelled out PALUMBO PROP RTIES, a large ‘E’ missing. Benjamin couldn’t decide between poor maintenance of the building or vandals that had caused the vowel’s disappearance. At the bottom of the rocky cliff was a large circular pool (he assumed, since there was no water flowing). It was surrounded by police tape and the flashing blue lights of the Jetsonville PD and State Police. Han rolled down his window as he approached the welcome booth.

A large man with a scruffy uniform opened the plexiglass divider. “If you’re here with the news, you gotta drive to the top with all the other news people.” The man’s voice was tired. Benjamin could only assume he had been saying the same words all morning.

“My name is Han Nakamura.” Han’s voice was low. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his police badge. “I’m here for the investigation.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Well, shit.” He gestured over to the masses of blinking lights. “Feel free to pull up over there, Officer.” There was a hint of admiration in the security guard’s tone.

“Thanks.” Han placed his badge back in his pocket before pulling a sharp left, driving over the cracked pavement and pulling to a stop about ten feet from the other police cruisers. Han turned the keys and pulled them from the ignition. Han didn’t bother to roll the windows up

before looking at Benjamin head on for the first time since they had left the station. “You ready?”

Anticipation flooded through Benjamin. He felt just as energized as he did when he first came to Orvall Heights.

“I’m ready.”

III.

The sky was a periwinkle color as the old, beat up pickup truck raced down the Florida coast. *Don’t Fear the Reaper* was playing softly over the loud hum of the engine. Wind whipped Sam’s hair off of his forehead, and he briefly closed his eyes, enjoying the unseasonably cool wind that kissed his freckled cheeks. The salt air was tangy, and had just a hint of moisture. Sam reopened his eyes.

All our times have come

Here but now they’re gone

“Seasons don’t fear the reaper...” Sam sang quietly along and reached for his cup holder. The first cup, closest to him, contained a half drunk bottle of Sunkist. He reached past it and rummaged around, feeling loose change and crumbs beneath his fingertips before he gently gripped a rolled joint between his fingers. Sam placed it in his mouth before he reached back to

the same cupholder and pulled out a red lighter, the exact same shade of red as his truck. Sam liked when there were small repetitions in his life.

A light rain began to fall. Sam remained unbothered and lifted up his joint. Sam put it between his lips and took a deep inhale. He again closed his eyes for a brief moment, enjoying the buzz the marijuana gave him. He would have to remember to thank Dave.

Salt marshes stretched for miles to Sam's right. Sam always liked the way he felt whenever he stepped foot into a marsh field. He remembered one night in particular, one where he was much too stoned to be driving his Chevy, where he swerved off the road and crashed into a tree. It was a cool night, similar to this one; Sam remembered how violently he shivered as he exited the truck. Blood dribbled down his face after bashing it into the steering wheel. The bruised and bloodied man stumbled away from the vehicle and into the marsh fields, perhaps as a way of escape from the wreckage. He didn't get far before he collapsed and sank ungracefully to his knees. Sam stared into the night sky, seeing double. The blood made its way down to his neck, which stained his white shirt.

Sam was too stoned to respond to the officer who approached him, holding a small flashlight. Sam was too stoned to tell the officer why he was on his knees, covered in blood. Sam was too stoned to stop himself from grabbing the officer by the neck and squeezing. Sam was too stoned to stop himself from smiling, deranged and breathing heavily, watching the life fade away from the officer's wide, hazel eyes.

A pothole jolted Sam back to reality. He took another hit before he abruptly switched lanes, not bothering to use his blinker on the deserted I-10. The pickup rattled along, taking a left on Exit 42 towards Pine Wood Road, just outside of Jetsonville. Sam slowed the truck, wading slowly through a wide puddle. The public drainage system often worked poorly in this area.

Thick brush, heavy rains, and wild gators often prevented the city of Walstone from actually fixing what needed attention. Sam took another right, heading away from the highway and towards the thick, green treeline. Rain had begun to fall harder, landing on Sam's bare arm and dripping onto his stained, dirty jeans. He propped the joint in his mouth before he rolled up the window. The hand cranked squeaked loudly, which caused Sam to grit his teeth as the noise bounced around his skull.

The sky had begun to darken, changing from a soft periwinkle to a grayish purple. A flash lit up the sky before being replaced with a rumble of thunder.

"Great," Sam muttered before turning left, pulling onto a long, dirt road. A lightning storm would disturb his nighttime plans.

The treeline was thick and leafy. Every now and then, a large palm tree would emerge in the distance which started to sway with the wind. Thunder rumbled overhead, drowning out The Blue Öyster Cult and the persistent rattling of the engine. Large droplets of rain bounced loudly off the roof of the truck, sounding eerily similar to gunshots. It made Sam feel claustrophobic.

A small house appeared in the distance. As Sam pulled up to it, the older looking the house became. Shingles hung off the roof in disarray, with several of them stuck in the rain gutter. The house itself was a faded purple, and the shutters (both of which hung off of their hinges) were a deep navy. The windows were cracked and yellow. Sam remembered when the real estate office brought him here to see it. The realtor, Samantha Biggs, was a nervous wreck.

"And here we have a quaint one bedroom!" Her voice squeaked as she gestured to the house. It was extremely humid that day, and two large sweat marks had appeared under her bright red blazer. "I know it appears to need a lot of love, but all of the features are the same as when it was built almost sixty years ago."

A single black crow landed on the front step of the house. Sam watched it in fascination. It circled the stoop before it turned back to the pair and let out a screech. A grin spread across Sam's face.

"And you said that no one ever comes down here?" He turned back to the realtor, who has nervously eyed the bird, clutching her purse. She snapped back into her realtor personality.

"Yes! If it's privacy you're looking for, I can assure you'll get it here." Samantha pointed past him to the long, dirt road they had traveled to get there. Heat waves swirled off of the ground. "This is the only way to get to the property. Unfortunately, this means that garbage isn't picked up. You'll have to go to Chokoloskee and deposit your waste there." Her smile was blinding in the Florida heat. Each tooth looked to be about the size of a Scrabble tile.

Sam thought long and hard about the drive to Chokoloskee. He would have to take the 41, which would be a hassle. Statives were often posted at every rest stop, and it would be difficult to maneuver in traffic. He glanced at his red pickup, the blue tarp flapping in the slight breeze. The cop was there, decaying. Sweat dripped onto his shirt.

He turned to Samantha Biggs and smiled widely, eyes empty. "You know, I have family over that way. It won't be so bad."

Gravel crunched under the tires of the truck as Sam pulled up to the house's side, next to two brown cellar doors that emerged from the ground. The area around the property was akin to that of a junkyard; piles of metal scraps were everywhere, and seemingly had no order or organization as to how they were placed. Weeds, tall and brown, had sprouted in multiple places in the yard. There was no fence that separated the overgrown yard from the thick brush; instead, it simply grew more and more overgrown.

Sam reached forward and removed the keys from the ignition. He sat in silence, listening to the rain fall around him, thunder rumbling every now and again. Sam licked his fingers before using them to stub out the light at the end of the joint.

“Shit,” he muttered, having felt the embers burn at his fingertips. He put the joint in the breast pocket of his flannel before he grabbed his Sunkist and bolted for the door.

The door opened with a prolonged creak. Sam entered the house and peeled off his flannel, which had gotten soaked in the brief rainstorm. He placed the joint on a messy coffee table before crossing the threshold.

The house smelled like must. That was one thing that Sam never bothered to try and fix. Dust particles floated throughout the air, undisturbed by Sam’s sudden presence. Thin streams of light peaked through the old, yellowed curtains.

Sam kicked off his boots, which thudded harshly on the ground. The sound reverberated throughout the empty house. Enjoying his solitude, he sauntered over to the kitchen, which was directly adjacent to the living room. The space was dark, but Sam was used to it. The wiring in the kitchen was shot, and the lightbulb had broken months ago. But Sam knew the house like the back of his own hand. The refrigerator hummed as Sam opened it. The white light spilled across the floor as Sam reached for a bottle of Red Dog. As he felt the cold touch of the metal can, Sam sighed blissfully and cracked it open, taking a swig before sinking onto the red and green plaid couch. He moved a pile of old mail to the ground. He grabbed a scuffed remote and clicked the blue power button. The Anitech flickered before a picture slowly began to emerge on the wide screen. The audio followed after a moment.

“No longer will you have to dry dishes for minutes on end! Now you can dry all your silverware in a jiffy with -” Sam clicked the channel button on the remote, scoffing at the

salesman. It was hard to believe that people were this naive, falling for cheap tricks and flashy advertisements. He kicked his feet onto the coffee table and knocked over another pile of mail. It skittered across the floor in all directions. Unfazed, Sam continued to click through channels. He stopped on Channel 68.

“Welcome to the six o’clock evening news, I’m Donna Wagner.” The news anchor sat with a sense of pride, her ginger hair cut into a smart bob. The red pantsuit she wore greatly contrasted that of her co anchor, who wore a shapeless gray sport coat.

“And I’m Justin Roder.” The man was serious, and wore large, black square glasses. The glare of the light on set obscured his eyes, making it appear as though he has two bright white squares covering his face. Sam rolled his eyes and took another swig. What an egghead.

“Our top story tonight; things may finally be looking up for the town of Jetsonville.”

“That’s right, Justin. After a series of gruesome murders that took place at Palumbo Enterprises, Jetsonville mayor Phillip Giardi has declared a state of emergency. We now go to the press conference that happened earlier today at City Hall.” The television cuts from showing the news anchors to the mayor. His bald head shone brightly on camera. The mayor cleared his throat and reached up to straighten his tie. His fingers looked like Italian sausages, and he gripped the sides of the mahogany podium so tightly, his knuckles whitened..

“After working very closely with the Jetsonville Police Department, we have come to the conclusion that we are in the midst of a sick, sick individual. Jetsonville has not been properly equipped to handle such sensitive matters, and it is with great pleasure that I announce that we have been in contact with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who will be helping us with our investigation.” The mayor paused briefly, allowing Sam to hear the click of cameras. “Here with me is Deputy Director Cole Sanders, who is here to give a statement on behalf of the FBI.”

There is no applause as Cole took the place of the mayor. He was much taller than Major Giraldi, with squared shoulders and platinum blonde hair, slicked back and neat. The Deputy Director cleared his throat before speaking.

“I would like to begin by instructing the people of Jetsonville not to panic.” The Deputy’s voice was as smooth as a glass of aged bourbon. “We are still gathering information about the victims and the circumstances of each attack.

What we know so far is that each attack appears to be committed by the same person. Thanks to the great work done by our peers at the JPD, it has made our job much easier.” Cole took a pause and flipped over a piece of paper.

“With us, we have one of our most brilliant agents in the past twenty years. Benjamin Love recently made a major drug bust in Orville County, New York, seizing over one billion dollars in cocaine and other illicit drugs. We have no doubt that this case will be solved within the next year.

For the time being, we encourage all Jetsonville residents, as well as anyone else in Orange County, to avoid Palumbo Enterprises. Be aware of your surroundings, especially after 10 P.M., as this is the timeframe the suspect typically tends to find his victims. If anyone has any information, you are encouraged to call the FBI hotline or the Jetsonville tip line. Thank you.” Cole stepped away from the podium, ignoring all the heckling the journalists were throwing at him. The program cuts back to the news station where Donna Wagner was still baring her teeth in a caricature of a smile.

“The police have warned all residents to be alert, and to call if you know any information about these murders.” The screen changed again, this time to a screen that had three photographs on it.

“These are the victims of the killer local residents have dubbed ‘The Palumbo Killer’: 56-year old Bob Gasset, 32-year old Lucy Gonzalez, and 43-year old Timothy Wells, a native of Jetsonville.” Donna began to speak once more, but was cut off as Sam switched the television off. He sat there for a moment in perfect silence, surrounded by clutter and dust. He stood and walked through the living room and through the back door, a thin piece of wood covered with a thick screen. The door slammed against the frame before resting on the outside of the house, off kilter.

Sam trudged through the backyard in his socks, not caring about the wet ground beneath him. He hummed to himself as he walked through the brush, ignoring the gnats that buzzed in his ears. The rain had stopped, but lightning still flashed overhead. A droplet fell from the sky and landed on Sam’s forehead, blinding him for a moment. Sam remained unfazed and turned to his left to walk towards a small, yellow shack, with a singular, cracked window. As he approached, he reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a long, rusty key. He turned it until he heard a *ker-chunk*, and gently pushed the wooden door open.

The shed had the same smell of the house, but was accompanied by a damp aroma. Water had seeped into the shed, causing the entire left side of the shed to be stained and wet.

“Shit.” Sam grunted and reached forward to touch the wood. It crumbled under a small amount of pressure and left dark residue stuck under his nails. He sucked the air through his teeth. *Now I’ll have to go to a hardware store, but it will have to be in an entirely different county...* Sam shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind. He hadn’t come to the shed with the intention of repairing it so soon.

A red toolbox sat on an unfinished table, bright against the damp surroundings. He took a deep breath before he unlatched the metal locks. It opened with no resistance.

An array of items lay in an unorganized jumble, but this did not phase Sam. He reached around fishing lures, nails, and screws before he pulled out an object wrapped in a handkerchief. It was white and gold, with the initials 'TJW' written in script on the corner. Sam pulled it away delicately before revealing a silver Casio. He rotated in the light from the window. A small speck of blood was dried to the face of the watch. The time had stopped at 1:36 A.M. Sam focused intently on it as his mind wandered.

"I like your watch." Sam remembered how it shone in the lights of Grafton Park. "May I see it?"

Timothy stuttered and rolled up his sleeves. His hands were shaking so badly, he could hardly unfasten it from his wrist. "Here, just take it."

Sam smiled kindly at Timothy, eyes bright and attentive. "Thank you!" He took it from the insurance agent, who had begun to whisper prayers to multiple saints. Sam ignored this and instead studied the watch. The word 'electroluminescence' was backed by a vibrant blue bar. Beneath it, the words 'water resistant' were superimposed, promising any wearer that a dip in Lake Okeechobee wouldn't cause any harm.

"This is pretty nice," Sam commented. He held the watch against his wrist. "Does it suit me?"

Timothy looked over at Sam with a mixture of terror and curiosity. His brown hair had flopped over his glasses, obscuring his view. "I-I-I think it looks great," he stuttered and swallowed loudly.

Sam placed the watch in his pocket. "Perfect," he commented. The watch rested against the handle of his firearm.

“Wait!” Timothy spoke out suddenly and looked at Sam nervously. He licked his lips before he slowly reached into his sportcoat, not breaking eye contact with Sam all the while. A handkerchief appeared in his left hand as he removed it from his pocket.

“If you’re going to steal from me, at least take care of it. It was a gift from the office.” He held it out to him but did not fully extend his arm out of fear. “If you scratch it, it will lose its value.”

The last thing Sam remembered was taking the handkerchief and carefully wrapping the Casio. “Thank you, Timothy.”

Five minutes later, Timothy lay slumped, dead in the driver’s seat, his brains splattered throughout the interior. Before Sam moved the body to the waterfall and ditched the car in Homosassa, he sat there for a moment and rubbed the watch with his thumb, the metal warm to the touch.

He had always wanted a Casio.

A loud crack started Sam out of his thoughts. “Shit!” He had forgotten to shut the door behind him, which swayed in the wind and left him completely exposed. He whipped around, his heart thumping so loudly he was sure it could be heard all the way from across the brush. In one fluid motion, he placed the watch, wrapped securely in its handkerchief, back into his toolbox. Sam snatched up two bullets and a small flashlight from the bottom of the box before silently shutting it. He crept across the shed, stepping lightly, and reached behind a piece of plywood, pulling out a Remington 597. Sam went to inhale, but was interrupted by a large rustling outside of the shed. It couldn’t have been more than three meters away.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Sam’s blood ran cold. How could he have been so stupid, leaving the door open and studying the possessions of his dead victims? It was only a matter of time before

someone became curious about the house at the end of the dirt drive. Sam slowly stalked towards the door. He felt the wooden floor moving beneath him and pressed his back against the wall, away from the window. He turned his head slightly and strained to listen for any noises. The rustling had ceased, but Sam could still hear the snapping of twigs. Whatever was there clearly didn't know he was.

Sam quietly loaded his gun and cocked it. He turned his body toward the open door and felt adrenaline creep into his limbs.

Could it be a panther? Sam wondered. Panthers were seclusive, and people around Jetsonville rarely saw them. He held his breath and listened for the distinctive caterwaul, but was met with silence. An angry, hungry panther was the last thing that Sam wanted to deal with.

There was another crash in the brush, but this time, it was softer, and sounded much further away. Sam saw his chance and slowly crept out of the shed and into the open, feeling far too exposed for his own liking. He cursed himself and the news for putting him into this situation in the first place.

A strange yowl came from his left. Hair standing on end, Sam wasted no time. He whipped to where the sound came from and raised the gun towards his chest, finger on the trigger. He fired.

The kickback from the gun was much stronger than Same anticipated. He stumbled back several paces, vision blurry and trembling. A horrifying screech tore through the undergrowth, making Sam's stomach turn. The air became alive with sound; a flock of birds squawked in alarm and took flight together, a large black mass descending from the treeline and taking to the air. Still gasping, Sam straightened himself up and tried to steady his hands. The bush was no longer shaking.

“Fuck.” Sam had only thought to bring two bullets; he assumed whatever he was shooting at would only need a warning shot before taking off. He quickly debated in his head.

If I check the bush and whatever that is didn't die, I'd have to kill it in one shot. But if I don't check, it may come back... Sam's eyes squeezed shut so tightly, geometric shapes and colors clouded his vision. He couldn't risk leaving whatever, or whoever, he shot alive. His grip tightened around the firearm. The metal was warm now, and it bonded to Sam's hand so naturally he felt as though it was another appendage.

Leaves and twigs snapped under Sam's feet as he approached. A dark puddle from under the bush grew wider and wider as he approached, the sickly scent of copper in the air. Sam took a deep breath and reached the gun over to the leaves to push aside the fronds.

It wasn't a person, and it certainly wasn't a cougar. A juvenile boar lay twisted on its side, hind leg stuck out in the air. The boar twitched and let out a small gurgle. A bloody, jagged tear ripped through the creature's flank, staining its spotted brown coat crimson. A wave of relief swept over Sam. Of course it wasn't the FBI or the JPD. He forgot, in all of his meticulous planning, just how far from civilization he was. His hand reached around to his back pocket and pulled out the flashlight.

“Well, well. You certainly gave me a scare.” Before he knew what he was doing, Sam had begun to stroke the dying animal. It writhed under his touch and grunted painfully. Its sides rose and fell so quickly Sam was surprised it wasn't dead from the shock.

“It's a shame you aren't fully grown. I could've used you.” Sam lifted the hind leg to observe the boar's genitals. The boar made no effort to stop him. “But now you're just a waste.” Sam dropped the animal in disgust. Pig's blood now stained his hands, much like it had the grass beneath them. Sam raised his gun once more, flashlight still held between his incisors.

He had always wanted to be a hunter.

IV.

The flashing lights were bright. As Han and Benjamin approached the yellow police tape, a tremor of anticipation ran through Benjamin. It had been almost three months since the agent had been on the beat; after the bust, the FBI was content letting him desk surf, never having

anything more to do than fill out case files. He reached for his badge, relishing the cold metal on his hot skin.

“Excuse me, this is a closed crime scene.” A gruff voice startled Benjamin, causing him to nearly run into Han. A large police officer with crossed arms stood in front of the tape, next to a cruiser. “You need to leave.” The officer’s facial expression was hard and unmoving.

“Detective Han Nakamura, Jetsonville Police.” Han showed his badge in one fluid motion, the sun glinting brightly off of the crest.

“Special Agent Benjamin Love, FBI.” Benjamin followed Han’s lead, flashing his badge to the officer. Eyes narrowed, the officer observed each badge before he grunted and stepped to the side. Han reached down and pulled the tape up, ducking beneath it. Benjamin followed him closely, struggling to get under the tape. He straightened up next to Han and placed his badge around his neck.

The crime scene was littered with police and forensic investigators, each running back and forth. A larger cluster of people had gathered around the bottom of the waterfall, taking pictures and gathering evidence in plastic baggies.

“Here.” Han’s voice snapped Benjamin out of his thoughts. He was holding out a pair of blue surgical gloves. “Put these on and come with me. I’ll introduce you to the head investigator.”

Benjamin quickly pulled them on and stretched his fingers, allowing for the gloves to set against his skin. Han walked towards a small man with large, horn rimmed glasses. He was balding, and the wind was causing his black hair to fly up in every direction. He was dressed in a plaid dress shirt, a long black tie hanging from his neck. The badge he wore shone brightly in the

sun, and bounced off his chest whenever he moved. The man held a clipboard, and was speaking very animatedly to three investigators. Amused, Benjamin followed behind him.

“I need someone to start getting fingerprints from the rocks at the top of the falls.”

Benjamin was not expecting such a strong accent. The three nodded in unison before turning and walking toward a large white tent labeled ‘CSI’. The man sighed and rubbed his temples with his fingers.

“Don!” Han waved over to the head investigator. He turned, his expression changing from stress to relief.

“Han, you son of a bitch. You should’ve been here half an hour ago.” Despite the annoyance in his voice, Don opened his arms and gave Han a quick hug. “It’s too goddamn hot to be working like this.” He loosened his tie and let out a sigh of relief.

“Sorry. I had to make a stop.” Han turned to look at Benjamin, his expression as neutral as when they met. “This is Special Agent Benjamin Love. He’s here to help with the investigation.” Han gestured to the short man in front of them. “Benjamin, this is Donald White, lead investigator of the Crime Scene Investigation Unit.”

“Pleasure to meet you.” Benjamin reached his hand out to Don, who shook it with such enthusiasm that Benjamin thought he was going to shake it out of his socket.

“Love, uh? What kind of name is that?” Don looked him up and down. Benjamin shifted uncomfortably and let go of his hand.

“It’s Scottish. My grandmother is from Linlithgow.” Out of all the questions he was asked, Benjamin hated this one the most. His last name was the cause of years of torment in his grade school years. Don seemed to sense his discomfort and stepped back.

“Ah.” Don nodded and looked back to Han. “So, let me show you the body.” His voice was much too chipper as he said this, eyes wide.

“Let’s.” Han nodded in agreement. Benjamin took out a cigarette.

The trio walked by several markers, each labeled with a large number. Next to ‘5’ was a oval-shaped crimson stain, which stretched from the sidewalk to the street. A man dressed in Tyvek knelt over the spot, taking photos with a large camera. The flash permeated Benjamin’s eyesight, momentarily blinding him.

“What do we know about the victim?” Han pulls out a small yellow notepad from his breast pocket, pen behind his ear.

“Well, he was employee here. His name is Timothy Wells.” Don’s voice grew excited. Benjamin lit his cigarette and placed it between his teeth.

“Yeah, we know. We were briefed at the station.” Benjamin spoke a bit too curtly. Han stared at him before pulling out his own cigarettes, a carton of Lucky Strikes. He handed one to Don without asking. Benjamin’s ears turned red. *Why do I have to be so standoffish?* Benjamin wondered to himself, gritting his teeth in embarrassment. The trio stopped in front of a dip in the ground. It was protected by a large wall of rocks, and pipes jutted out in random places. Don reached his leg over and slowly worked his way into the pit. Han and Benjamin followed suit, clambering over the stones.

“If that’s the case, then I guess I don’t have to introduce him.” Don readjusted his pants before stopping abruptly. He took the lighter from Han and lit up his smoke. Han moved to his left.

Timothy Wells’ corpse lay on the ground in a twisted position, his left leg at an unnaturally awkward angle. He was wearing a light colored suit, which was stained with dirt,

blood, and other bodily fluids. There was a small hole located in his right temple, presumably where the bullet went in. The left side of his head was nearly missing; bits of skull and brain had puddled behind his ear. A vacant expression was left on his face. Benjamin could only imagine the terror that had once been present.

“Was he killed here?” Han questions, pen poised above the notepad. Benjamin moves around him and crouches next to Timothy’s head.

“No.” Don knelt down and pointed to Timothy’s leg. “This was done after he had already died. He was killed elsewhere and moved here.”

Benjamin suddenly interjects. “That doesn’t make sense. You said he worked here, right?” He looks to Don questionably.

“I thought you were briefed at the station?” Don snarkily replies, giving Benjamin a pointed look. Benjamin felt his teeth grind against each other.

“I’m sorry. It’s hot out, it must be clouding my judgement,” Benjamin apologizes sheepishly.

“Whatever.” Don grunts and stands. Dirt has stained his knees. “But yes, he worked here. At a realtor’s office.” He pointed up, over the waterfall.

“If he worked here, why would someone see him, decide they wanted to murder him, take him somewhere else, and come back here to dump the body?” Benjamin crossed his arms and ran his tongue over his lips. The Florida heat had made them cracked and bloody.

“Well, we do have security footage. Timothy Wells drove to work everyday in a tan minivan, and always parked in the back lot, near his office.” Don shrugs.

“Can we see it?” Han interjects, taking his eyes off his pad to look at the lead investigator.

“Actually, we’re in the process of getting it from facilities. In the meantime, we need someone to go and interview the people at Timothy’s office.” Don jerks his head in the direction of the office. “Walking up the hill is a bitch, I would drive.”

Han nods at Don. “We’ll head up there right away.” He begins to walk back towards the rock wall, leaving Benjamin to follow him. Don watches him leave before he turned back to the corpse. He reached for a radio on his belt and spoke into it. “I need a crew over here, now. We need to move this body out of the sun.”

Sunset Realities was a small, quaint office. The first thing Benjamin noticed as he entered was a large photo of a boat labeled ‘S.S. Moonlight Express’. A man stood aboard it, wearing a captain’s hat and holding a glass. Next to him was Timothy. He wore a suit similar to the one he was murdered in (if not the same one), wearing large, black glasses. The pair smile toothily, arms wrapped around each other’s shoulders.

Han approaches the front desk, which is manned by a small, elderly woman. She looks similar to the woman they helped cross the street, but instead of being hunched over a walker, she sits up straight and stoically, talking into the phone.

“As I told you before, Christian is not available for an interview. Please stop calling.” She slams the phone down and rubs her forehead, letting out a small sigh.

“Ma’am, are you Rose Mitchell?” Han’s quiet voice is in staggering contrast with the woman’s sharp tongue. She whipped her head up.

“Yes. And like I just told this gentleman here on the phone, we are not open for interviews,” she spits at him aggressively. Her blue pantsuit brought out the ice blue color of her eyes. “Will I need to ask you to leave, or do you need help finding an insurance plan?”

“Neither.” Benjamin backs away from the photograph and pulls out his badge. “We’re here with the JPD. We’re investigating the murder of Timothy Wells. I was wondering if we could ask you some questions.”

Rose stares at the pair suspiciously. Her hair was perfectly curled and silver. It reminded Benjamin of his mother. Finally giving, she closes her eyes and sighs deeply.

“Well, I suppose I can’t say no to the police.” She walks over to the door and locks it from the inside, flipping over the ‘OPEN’ sign to ‘CLOSED’. “Follow me.”

Benjamin and Han follow Rose, navigating a narrow hallway until they stop in front of a door labeled ‘Timothy Wells’ in a typewriter-like font.

“Is this his office?” Han asked. Rose nods curtly, unlocking it and motioning them to go inside.

“I figured you should be able to see what Timothy was like before...” Rose cutw herself off and tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. “Well.”

Han approached her and placed a hand on her forearm. “I’m sorry. I know this must be hard.” As Han comforted her, Benjamin wandered away from the pair to study the room. The walls were covered with pictures, some of the children, some of Timothy and a woman, and more still. Above his desk, a diploma hung in a furnished frame.

“Timothy was a college graduate?” Benjamin asks as he continues to observe. Timothy’s desk is covered in small knick knacks. He picks up a Magic 8 Ball and gives it an experimental shake.

“Yes.” Rose dabs at her eyes with a handkerchief; Benjamin din’t noticed she had become emotional. “He met his wife while he attended Carlow University.”

“I see.” Benjamin returns the novelty toy back to its place. He turns to Han expectantly. “We’re going to ask you some questions about Timothy, if that’s okay.”

“Of course.” Rose places the handkerchief back in her pocket before taking a seat in a cushioned chair, crossing her legs elegantly. Han follows suit, taking a seat next to her. Benjamin grabs a chair from behind him and sits it in front of the pair.

“Can you tell us about the last time you saw Timothy?” Han asks.

Rose sniffs, closing her eyes before setting her gaze upon Han. “It was a typical Wednesday night. I had just finished setting up an appointment with a client when Timothy walked out of his office. He always leaves at the same time, everyday.”

“What time?” Han questions.

“9:30 P.M. every night.” Rose nods self assuredly.

“Did Timothy seem nervous, upset about anything?” Benjamin puts an elbow on his knees and leans closer. Timothy’s office was small, and was beginning to fill with a gray haze.

Rose shakes her head. “Not that I saw. It was meatloaf night, he was so excited to get home.” The receptionist sniffs once more. “He walked out the door, said goodbye to me, and that was the last I saw of him.”

“Perhaps it would be better to focus on how he was as a coworker.” Han reaches his hand over to Rose and squeezes it gently. Benjamin, unsure of how to comfort her, looks away awkwardly and clears his throat. If Rose noticed, she gave no indication. Instead, she stares at Han with a charmed expression.

“Yes, of course.” Rose takes a drag and blows out small smoke rings. “Timothy was a great man. He’s been working here ever since we moved into this location.”

“Where did you used to be located?” Benjamin questions.

“Downtown Jetsonville. It wasn’t a bad area; a little building right on the corner.” Rose smiles fondly. “But Christian wanted to move to a ‘higher profile’ location, and he found this place for a reasonable price.”

“Who is Christian? Does he work here as well?”

“Yes. Well, technically, he owns the realtor company.” Rose nods. “Christian Sullivan.”

“We were told Christian was away when the murder took place. Is this true?” Benjamin has been so focused on interviewing Rose, he doesn’t notice the cigarette has already burned down to the filter. He cursed under his breath and looked around rapidly. “Is there an ashtray in here?”

“Here.” Rose turns and reaches into a drawer in the desk. She pulls out a crystal ashtray. “Timothy wasn’t a smoker, but I kept this in here when we had to work in his office.” As Benjamin stubbed out his butt, Han resumed the questioning and flipped the notebook to the next page.

“While Timothy was working here, did he make any enemies, anyone who would have wanted to hurt him?” This question makes Rose chuckle heartily.

“I can promise you both, Timothy was one of the nicest men who ever stepped foot into this office. He would give the shirt off his back if you really needed it. I would be very surprised if whoever killed him actually had a bone to pick with him.” The tone in her voice signals that she is done talking.

“Huh.” Benjamin runs a hand through his hair. “Well, the day of the murder, did you see anything unusual? Someone loitering around the lot, maybe hanging around the office?”

“No.” Rose crosses her arms. “He left at 9:30, got into his car, and drove away. And that’s all I can tell you.” She stands, taking the ashtray back from Benjamin. “Now, if you’ll

excuse me, I have a lot of paperwork to sort through.” Rose points to the door. Han rises slowly, tucking the notebook away and placing the pen behind his ear.

“Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions. This will really help us with our investigation.” Han smiles and turns to Benjamin, who has been drawn back to the toys on Timothy’s desk. One object in particular drew his attention. Benjamin reaches over and picks up a silver box with a bow. He opens it curiously, only to find it empty, besides a note that was taped to the inside of the lid.

Dear Timothy,

Thanks for all of your hard work.

The Sunset team would be lost without you.

- Rose and Christian

“What used to be in here?” Benjamin pointed at the box with his index finger.

Rose smiles when she sees the box. “Oh, that was just a little gift from Christian and I. He helped land us a pretty prestigious client from Pensacola.”

“And it was what?” Benjamin asks impatiently. The small office was now suffocating him.

“A Casio watch. Timothy loved watches; you should’ve seen his face when we gave it to him.” A small laugh escapes from her lips.

“Well, why isn’t it in the box?” Benjamin inquires, placing the box back on the desk.

“Well, Timothy wore it all the time. He called it his ‘good luck charm’.”

Han beats Benjamin to the next question. “Was he wearing it the day he disappeared?”

Rose purses her lips, sucking air through her dirty, yellowed teeth. The sound makes Benjamin's stomach turn. "Actually, yes. I remember the watch beeping as he walked out of the office." The receptionist walks into the hallway and points down the hall. "I hope I was of help."

"Thank you for your time." Han nods and walks down the hall. Benjamin went to follow him, but stops in front of Rose. She was at least a foot shorter than he, and he has to look down to meet her eyes.

"I promise, we're going to find who did this." Benjamin blinks, surprised at how sincere he sounded. In response, Rose offers him half a smile.

"I really hope so."

As the pair exited, Benjamin turns to Han. "You know what I'm thinking, right?" He was pleased to see Han nod in agreement.

"Yes. If he was wearing the Casio the day of the murder, why wasn't in on the corpse?" Han marks something else on the pad when his phone begins to ring. He hands Benjamin the pad and picks up the phone.

"Han Nakamura." Han was silent as he listens to the person on the phone. "On our way."

"Well?" For the first time in months, Benjamin felt giddy.

Han snaps the phone shut. "They found his car in Grafton Park. We gotta go."

IV.

Grafton Park, a mere ten minutes away from the scene of the crime, was a large park that stretched for several miles, backed by swamp marshes and wild brush. “So let’s recap.” Benjamin pulls out a small notepad, rapidly scribbling down notes. “Body is found dumped here between three and four o’clock in the morning. Cause of death was a shotgun blast to the forehead, but no casings were found at the scene.” He tapped the words ‘no casings’ several times in a row. “You think they’re in the victims car?”

“There’s definitely a possibility.” Han clears his throat, turning off the interstate. “But that begs the question, why kill the victim and then drive three miles to a somewhat populated business building?”

A large sign draws closer and closer to the pair. Benjamin only needs to look up briefly to see what it said - GRAFTON PARK, ESTABLISHED 1965. Benjamin puts the notebook back in his pocket. “Only one way to find out, I suppose.”

As Han parks the car on the curb, Benjamin notices a small crowd of curious onlookers that had begun to surround the park’s entrance. Yellow police tape flutters helplessly in the wind

as an officer attempts to keep the swarm at bay. Benjamin turned to look behind him. At least four news trucks had pulled up behind them, with news anchors and cameras gathering around them. Benjamin scoffed.

“Fucking vultures.” He motions for Han to follow him and begins to approach the crowd. A female voice stops him in his tracks. “Wait!”

Benjamin wheels to see Han being stopped by a blonde-headed woman. Her hair was curled ever so slightly, and bounced in the wind whenever she took a step. Her pantsuit was a smart gray, and she holds a notebook in her hands. Benjamin looks around for signs of a video camera, but she comes alone. Large sunglasses reflect the sunlight harshly, causing Benjamin to squint. Han makes no attempt to stop her, simply walk away. Instead, he stands in place, hands in his pockets. Benjamin groans internally before walking back to Han’s car.

“Han.” The woman gives no indication of a warm greeting. Instead, it comes across as stiff, almost business-like, but one of familiarity; they must have met before.

“Jennifer. To what do I owe the pleasure?” Han tilts his head downwards to study her. She was short in stature, but her tan heels give her several inches of leverage. She moves her sunglasses up onto her forehead.

“Not a pleasure. Just here about the murder.”

“You know about that?”

Jennifer rolls her eyes. “You know Jetsonville. News spreads quickly.” It is only now that Jennifer turns to greet Benjamin. Upon meeting her stormy gaze, he swallows nervously before reaching out his hand. “I’m Agent Benjamin Love, FBI.”

Jennifer takes his hand and shakes it with such force that Benjamin is almost pulled into her. “I know. I saw you on the news last week.” She releases his hand and stared at him intently.

“They said you made some major bust in New York. What made them switch you from narcotics to serial?” Upon hearing this question, Han also turns to look at him with an emotion Benjamin had yet to be exposed to; curiosity.

“They felt as though my talents could cover multiple bases.” Benjamin felt his face tighten.

“Does the FBI work like that, I wonder.” Jennifer murmured this to herself, giving Benjamin a once over. His face flushes.

“I’m sorry, but who are you? You’re interfering with our investigation.” Benjamin crossed his arms in earnest, doing his best to hold the same intensity she had.

“Please. The only thing I’m interfering with is your pride, apparently.” Jennifer flips her hair before turning back to Han. “So? What can you give me?”

Han looks between Benjamin and Jennifer, his expression returning to its shielded neutrality. “Benjamin, this is Jennifer Waxford, investigative reporter for the *Jetsonville Gazette*.”

“Most read paper in the county.” Jennifer lifts her chin up with pride. “No thanks to me.”

“Yeah, I saw it in Sunoco when I was picking up my Strikes. It was right next to the rat killer and garbage bags, if I remember correctly.” A wide grin spread across his face. “Very prime location.”

Jennifer’s eyes narrow. “You know, I hate a man who smokes.”

“Hmm.” Benjamin reaches into his breast pocket and takes out out his carton. He slowly and methodically pulls out a cigarette, feeling the reporter’s eyes burning into his skull. Lighting it in one swift motion, he inhales and blows it directly into her face. She doesn’t flinch.

“Okay.” Han rubs his hands together and steps in front of Benjamin, almost shielding Jennifer from him. “In all honesty, I can’t give you much, just that the victim’s car was discovered here shortly after six thirty this morning.” Delivering a final glare in Benjamin’s direction, she scribbles down the information. Benjamin looks on. Despite her rush, her penmanship was a refined cursive, both easy to read and hard to argue with. It suits her.

“Anything else?”

“No. we’re still pretty early on.” He leans a bit closer. “But if you’re free around ten, we can go to Monte’s, grab a couple of drinks, and chat, okay?” His voice is soft, familiar; it was clear this was not the first time this arrangement was made.

Jennifer nods ever so slightly before taking a step back. “Certainly. Han.” She pushes her sunglasses back down before walking back in the direction she came, breezing past Benjamin without another word.

“Nice to meet you!” Benjamin yells after her, but she gives no indication she hears. She opens the door of a golden Cadillac before pulling away as quickly as she arrived. Benjamin raised an eyebrow and jerked his thumb in the direction of the exiting vehicle. “Nice girl, huh?”

“Well, you weren’t so pleasant yourself. Don’t blame her either. It is a bit odd that they transferred you instead of someone in homicide, or even from terrorist apprehension.” He gives Benjamin a pointed look. “I’m a bit interested myself.”

Benjamin swallows thickly. “Wanted a change of scenery.” He begins to push his way through the crowd, leaving Han to catch up.

“Move, move! FBI.” He shoulders a balding man a bit too aggressively, causing him to stumble into a barricade. He straightened up before snarling at Benjamin. “Watch where you’re going, pig!” A few people surrounding him cheer him on.

A deep seated anger flushed through Benjamin. He raises his arm, only to feel someone grab him. Jerking away, he sees Han gripping him firmly. "Come on." The balding man continued to jeer, only stopping when Han gave him a cold glare. Nodding, he drops his arm before looking back at the catcaller. "Today's your lucky day."

At the front of the crowd stood a tired looking officer, sweat rolling down his face. Seeing Han and Benjamin approach him, he lifts his arm to stop them before the two raise their badges.

"FBI and JPD." The officer nodded before lifting the tape, allowing them to pass through. They were met with a rather sparse parking lot, surrounded by towering trees and a stone wall. At the center of the fuss sat a gray minivan. It's passenger side door was ajar, and the trunk was wide open. People in uniform swarmed around, taking photographs and bagging pieces of evidence. Han approaches a man nearby holding a camera. "Who is in charge of this investigation?"

"Pierce Goodall." The officer points to a large man with a toothpick between his teeth, barking orders and jestering around wildly. *Of course*, Benjamin thinks. He works with men like this in the Bureau.

"Thanks." Han begins to walk in the direction of Pierce. Benjamin keeps his pace before he mutters under his breath, "You ever work with this buffoon before?"

"Yes." Han makes eye contact with Pierce and raises his hand in greeting. "Total asswipe. Barely closeted racist." Pierce turns to face the pair with a wicked grin plastered across his wide face.

"Officer Goodall." Han stops before him and extends a hand in his direction. "It's been a while."

The man looks at Han's hand and scoffs. "Don't bother." He looks to Benjamin, who took another drag of his cigarette. Exhaling, he reaches a hand out to him. "I'm Agent Love, FBI. I'm the head of the task force that was sent here."

"Love!" Officer Goodall booms, grabbing his hand and shaking it heartily. "Welcome to Florida. I know it's hotter than hell down here, but I hope you're enjoying yourself."

"Absolutely, sir." Benjamin glances over to Han, who remained as neutral as ever. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pack of Camels.

"Well, I'm overseeing the proceedings here. Making sure these goddamn imbeciles are packing up right." A woman scurries up to the officer. Her face is stricken with anxiety. "U-um, Officer Goodall?"

"What?" He barks at her, voice full of venom. "Can't you see I'm in the middle of discussing something with this fine agent here?" He claps Benjamin on the shoulder so forcefully the cigarette flies out of his mouth. Benjamin hastily grabs it before it hits the ground, putting it out in a puddle next to his foot.

"Sir, we discovered a bullet casing in the front seat of the vehicle." She holds forward a small baggie with a series of numbers written on the front, no doubt the evidence number. Han reaches forward and holds it up to the light.

"Hmm." He observes it intently before passing it to Benjamin. "You seeing what I'm seeing?" Benjamin rolls the casing between his fingers, the plastic surrounding it making a crinkling noise. An odd imprint was visible on its side.

"SFS?" Benjamin questions aloud. He passes it back to Han. "What could it be?"

“Initials, maybe.” Han shrugs before passing it back to the female officer. “We’re going to need this analyzed as quickly as possible.” The woman nods quickly and leaves without another word. Officer Goodall clears his throat.

“So, Agent Love. Ever been to Miami? The women are beautiful there.” He grabs Benjamin by his shoulders and leads him a few feet away from the crime scene. As Benjamin looks up for Han, the detective has already walked towards the car, talking to someone wearing a hazmat suit.

“Er, no, sir. But I doubt this case will take me there.” He wants to walk away, but he knew a man like Pierce wouldn’t be so kind as to just let him leave.

“Come on now. I saw your work in the news! I know you must miss the clubbing scene.” Pierce leans closer to Benjamin, forcing him to look him in the eyes, bushy eyebrows hanging over them.

“To be honest, sir? I’m trying to step away from that. Move my career in a better direction.” He gives him a fake, toothy smile. “I hope you understand.”

“Hmm.” The officer reached into his pocket before stepping back. “I see. Well, if you change your mind...” Pierce reaches for Benjamin’s hand. “You know where to find me.” Before Benjamin could respond, Officer Goodall swaggers away in the direction of Han, beginning to yell once more. Benjamin wants to follow him, but he can’t stop looking at the object in his hand.

The small baggie sits in Benjamin’s hand, filled with a small white powder. It was coke; Benjamin knows it was a few bumps, maybe more. An odd feeling crept over his skin. It had been a month and a half - forty days, to be exact - since Benjamin had touched anything other

than cigarettes. A longing, stronger than anything he had ever known, sits in his stomach and rests there heavily.

How did Pierce Goodall know? Benjamin was sure his secret was kept safe. Maybe he misunderstood the interviews, his behavior? Being high on drugs could easily be passed off as being nervous, deeply affected by your work. A cold sweat forms on his back. Clenching his fist, he quickly shoves the bag in his back pocket, smart enough to avoid placing it in the Japanese man's clothing.

He couldn't take it again. One hit and he would be back to the dirty strip clubs, shady politicians, crooked cops. It was a luxurious life, but a life where you had to look out for yourself. And if you didn't, you drowned. Florida was his life preserver.

"Love! Found something." A voice startles him out of his haze. Looking up, he saw Han waving him over, now wearing blue latex gloves.

"Coming!" He jogs over to Han, pushing the coke to the back of his mind.

"Are you okay? You look pale." Han hands him a pair of gloves and studies him curiously.

"Oh, you know. Pierce said some things, had to pretend to laugh, the whole enchilada." He pulls the gloves on, making each snap against his wrists in a vain attempt to wake himself up. Han looks at him before nodding. "Sounds about right."

The pair walks around the car to the passenger side door. Benjamin peeks inside. Small blood droplets are scattered about the seat, soaked into the interior. He looks across to the drivers side. A large pool of blood is smeared on the seat, the side of the door, and the window. Small pieces of flesh were stuck to the window.

“Killer abducts him, shoots him here. Then goes to Palumbo and dumps him off the cliff,” Han says behind him. His arms are crossed, but he looks troubled.

Benjamin stands back up from his crouch. “And? What’s wrong with that?”

Han looks at Benjamin. “The victim worked at Palumbo Properties.”

“We know that. I don’t follow you.”

“Why would the killer abduct him from his work, drive him to a park in a different city, kill him, and drive him back to dump his body? It makes no sense.”

Benjamin chews his lip before looking back at Han.

“To send a message.”