

DRIIFT

The book cover features a misty, atmospheric landscape. In the background, there are snow-capped mountains and a dense forest of evergreen trees. The foreground is dominated by a large, dark, textured object that appears to be a piece of driftwood or a large rock, partially submerged in water. The overall color palette is muted, with greens, blues, and greys, creating a sense of mystery and nature.

— A —
**RACHEL
HATCH**
NOVEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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AND
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DRIFT

RACHEL HATCH BOOK ONE

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[Downburst](#)

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THE SMALL FORD FIESTA HAD BEEN PARKED BETWEEN THE LARGE BLUE Spruce and massive boulder since nightfall. It was their spot, secluded and hidden from the main road. They'd used it many times before and had grown confident few ventured to this remote section of the lake. Which was why they'd selected it many months back. The smell shrouding the air around them was an obnoxious chemical odor that could burn the lining in your nose. A byproduct of their chosen career path. The openness of their locale managed to mitigate some of the stench, but not all. Even in the rural areas, neighbors took notice of such things. And it was for this reason they'd been careful in their scouting.

The two men sat on a rock looking out at the lake. The stillness of the water gave a glass-like quality to the surface, serving to bounce the moon's glow up onto the surrounding hills. More light to work by, but that also meant more light to be spotted by a curious hiker or fisherman.

Steve Swanson worked a lump of tobacco from the left to the right side of his mouth. "How long we been goin' at it?"

"Do I look like a damn clock to you?" Barry Munson shook his head. He was the older of the two by four years, and had somehow become the de facto leader of their operation. A clout he used with increasing frequency to verbally abuse the younger man. "It was dark when we started. Darker now. If you're so damned concerned about the time, get a watch. If you had one, then you wouldn't have to ask me every time we took a break."

Swanson pulled off his red paisley bandana. Even in the crisp, cool autumn night air, sweat had pooled around the undercarriage of his nostrils.

Making the devil's brew, as he called it, was hard work. His wire-thin mustache was moistened, glimmering like morning dew on a wheat field. He wiped at it absently, transferring the glisten to his forearm as he sought to find a comeback to Munson's latest taunt. Nothing witty came to him. Nothing ever did. If he was ever to work up the nerve to talk back, it would most likely end with him catching a beating from the bigger man.

"Just feels like we've been burping that last batch forever," Swanson said.

"This is the best run we've had in a few weeks. Gonna make some good money on this." Munson thumbed back toward the various pots and glass beakers on the flat rock behind them.

Tendrils of noxious gas snaked into the air as the pots cooled. The chemical's reaction peak had fallen off. Once it stopped altogether, they'd dump it and run a new batch. Swanson had learned how to cook meth using a cheap and easy system called the one-pot method. It was a dangerous technique in which all the ingredients were put into the bottom of a big-mouthed bottle of soda. Swanson's bottle of choice was the one-liter Mountain Dew. The heavy plastic worked well to prevent breakdown during the volatile reaction of lithium and water.

During the reactive process, a good cook must learn to feel the pressure within by gently squeezing. Like a good chef can press a steak on a grill and know whether it's medium or well-done, a meth cook needs to have the same ability and know when to "burp" the bottle by opening the cap at the proper interval to release the gas. Swanson's inability to master this technique is what had indirectly brought Munson and him together.

About a year ago, Swanson had been doing the one-pot in the woods behind the town's post office when the bottle he was using exploded. The lithium infused water burned the left side of Swanson's face and hand. When he woke in the hospital several hours later, he was shocked to find he'd been handcuffed to the metal arm of a medical bed. Apparently, the local deputies didn't take pity on the burned man. They'd found his stash of finished product and charged him with operating a drug factory. Hard to make the argument the drugs weren't his when Swanson's face bore the evidence.

It was during his stint in the county lockup subsequent to his failed entrepreneurship that Swanson and Munson first met. Much of their time was spent talking women and drugs. Not much else to do when you're cut

off from the outside world. Bonding over their mutual love of crystal methamphetamine, the two would spend hours discussing the best methods for cooking. Comparing epic highs was another pastime, as each tried to outdo the other's story of drug-induced euphoria. Swanson got out a few weeks earlier than Munson, but the two promised to keep in touch. Swanson kept his word, and when Munson was released, he was there to pick him up. The two had been collaborating in the hopes of expanding their production efforts ever since.

"Wanna give it a little taste?" Munson asked. Only three teeth were visibly present in the man's gapped smile.

If Swanson's weakness was his cooking technique, then Munson's was that he couldn't stop himself from using the product they created. It was a big hiccup in their *Breaking Bad* scheme to get rich selling crystal. They ended up smoking most of the fruits of their hours of toil, forcing them to resort to their old habits of stealing the necessary ingredients.

Swanson couldn't resist the temptation when presented and readily agreed to sample the goods.

Munson disappeared to the flat rock they'd affectionately named "the lab." It was a naturally formed, perfectly flat surface they used to set up their homemade chemistry laboratory. The rock's surface now bore the scars of their work in the stained dye from the Sudafed they used as their source for ephedrine, a key ingredient in their formula.

Swanson watched as his partner hustled back with a small clear plastic bag in hand, the contents of which looked like broken bits of glass or rock candy. The crystallization process had been completed from the night's earliest batch and was now ready for consumption. Munson eagerly fished out the glass pipe and lighter from the front pocket of his tattered jeans. The jeans were baggy and hung loose from his diminishing body composition.

He sat and gently tapped out the small opaque pieces into the base of the pipe's bowl. The new shards clinked quietly as they landed, coming to rest on the burnt residue. A clear indication of the pipe's numerous previous uses.

"We'll get straight after a couple hits of this, and then get on the next batch." Munson smiled, exposing missing and cracked teeth, rotten from years of abuse. His lips were chapped, with cottony remnants of dried spit caked into the corners.

Swanson edged closer like Gollum drawn to his Precious. “Sounds like a plan. Fire it up.”

Munson rolled his callous-burnt thumb across the lighter’s flint wheel. A spark flickered, illuminating his face and casting it in a yellowish orange. The butane was low, and the flame didn’t hold. Munson cursed and slapped the bottom of the metal zippo against the palm of his hand.

Staring out at the lake, Swanson impatiently waited for the familiar crackle and pop of the heated meth. It was a Pavlovian response and music to his ears. Absentmindedly rubbing the scar tissue on the side of his face, he stared out at the lake. The water’s flatness was shattered as something broke through the surface, sending out concentric ripples from its epicenter.

“The hell’s that?”

Munson continued his efforts to light the glass pipe, shooting an angry glance in Swanson’s direction, obviously annoyed by the interruption. He huffed and looked out at the water. “Don’t know. Probably just a log.”

Swanson squinted, trying to make out the dark shape. “I don’t think so.”

“What the hell are you talking about now?”

“I ain’t never seen no log wearing a dress.”

Swanson stood and looked back at Munson, who was still troubleshooting the lighter, intent on firing up the glass. Swanson didn’t wait for his partner’s approval and began making his way down the uneven terrain toward the lake’s shore, where the body appeared to be drifting.

It didn’t take long to traverse the distance to the dirt-lined shore. Swanson’s initial interest was driven by a sense of humane purpose, but he found himself stricken by an intangible fear.

Munson ambled up beside him, wheezing his exertion. “You’re a dumb son of a bitch, you know that?”

Swanson ignored the comment and the two idled in silence for a pensive moment. The only sound came as the body bobbed, sending minuscule waves that lapped at the shoreline.

“What’s the plan, hero?” Munson asked.

“Not sure.”

The body was drifting on a slow collision course with shore, in a direct line to where the two men now stood. Their worn sneakers sank into the muck.

“Maybe she’ll sink back under and we can forget we ever saw her.”

“What?” Swanson knew the older meth addict had spent much of his adult life in and out of correctional facilities from Arizona to Colorado, but hearing his lack of concern for the dead woman shocked him.

“I’m just saying. Cops and I don’t see eye to eye on too many things. And with my track record, there’s a good chance they’ll assume we had something to do with it.” Munson’s eyes widened and his hand trembled ever so slightly. “I ain’t goin’ to jail on no dead body case!”

Swanson broke his stare away from the woman and side-eyed his partner. “You really think they’ll pin it on us if we call it in?”

“You tell me. How’d you like waking up in the hospital to find the police put those charges on you? Did they give you much of a chance to explain yourself?”

Swanson felt the truth in those words. “Well... then what do we do?”

Munson played with the lighter still in his hand. He flicked the lid open and closed. The clicking seemed to be a countdown to his decision. It stopped and he spoke. “How about we get a stick and push her back out and away from shore. Maybe she’ll just sink.”

“I can’t do that.”

“If you’ve got a better idea, I’d be happy to hear it.”

“We’ll block our number and call the police. Then we’ll get the hell out of Dodge before they get here.”

Munson took a moment before answering. “Okay. You’re really trying hard to get your junior detective badge out here today, aren’t you, Nancy Drew? Maybe that’s what I’ll call you from now on. Nancy has a nice ring to it.”

Ignoring the older man, Swanson continued to watch the body. It had edged closer during their debate and was now only a few feet away from shore. The lapping sound grew louder as the splashing became more pronounced. Swanson grabbed a large branch from nearby and walked to the edge of the water.

“Don’t go touching it. Those cops will sure as shit put this case on you if you do. They’ll have your DNA and you’ll never see the light of day again. Lock you up and throw away the key. Probably make up some story how you killed her ‘cause of your messed-up face.”

“I’m not going to touch her. Just gonna make sure she’s out of the damn water before we jet. It’s the right thing to do.” Swanson lunged outward with the branch, snagging a bit of the shoulder strap of the woman’s dress.

He tugged hard. The woman moved across the remaining three feet of water more rapidly with Swanson's assistance.

She was face down. Her wet hair enveloped her head, completely masking her face from view. As the body came to shore, she got stuck in the shallow water.

Swanson turned to the man behind him. "We gotta pull her out."

"We ain't got to do nothing! I already told you—if you touch her, you might as well have killed her yourself. Do you want to do life in prison for this woman?"

Swanson thought hard about the question. He looked back at the woman in the water and gave one final effort with the stick. She barely moved.

"The bloat is gonna hold her. She ain't goin' nowhere."

Swanson tossed the stick as far from her as he could and looked back at his friend. Munson was already moving and had begun his trek back up the hill toward their lab.

Swanson gave a last look at the woman. Her skin was a milky white and looked more so in the moon's glow. He likened it to the porcelain dolls his mother collected. His current life choices had estranged her from him, especially when he pawned several pieces of her jewelry and a few of those dolls to get enough money for a fix.

In this surreal moment with the porcelain woman, he oddly wondered if his mother still missed him.

He then looked away from the drowned woman and wondered if anybody would miss her.

SHE WATCHED THE MAN, JUST AS SHE'D DONE FOR THE PAST HOUR. He'd been fueling himself with Crown Royal and Coke since she'd arrived. He reeked of it when she entered the bar. Even from where she sat now, it was all she could smell. And he was starting to show the ill effects of his relentless consumption. His glassy eyes bore the signs of intoxication. The man was large, bigger than she'd expected. But that was of limited concern. She'd seen men of his kind many times before. A body built through an intense steroid-backed fitness regimen in his younger days had given way to sloth in his later years. The result was a mass of bulk, made up of more fat than muscle, but the sheer girth would make him a powerful contender.

Rachel Hatch knew better than to underestimate any opponent, regardless of outward appearance. Threats came in all shapes and sizes. Take her, for example. As a woman, most had concluded she was no danger. Overlooking her proved to be an advantage more often than not. An advantage she would capitalize on tonight.

The big man's name was Randy Bosley. She knew this because her neighbor at the motel had told her. Monica was an eighteen-year-old stripper who'd somehow managed to end up in Killeen, Texas, after running away from Montana. Abuse had pushed the girl to leave her home. Sadly, where she ended up hadn't turned out to be much better.

She'd met the girl while staying at the Wayside Motel outside of Fort Hood. Ever since leaving the military, Hatch had been on the move, looking for some way to find the point and purpose to life outside the Army. Drifting around the country, she always found comfort in being close to a

military installation. The familiarity of the people and places that sprouted around bases reminded her of a time when she belonged. Her most recent trek had brought her to Texas. With winter soon approaching, it seemed like a reasonable place to spend a few weeks or months, depending on how things went. Her last stop had been Fort Benning, Georgia, home of the Army's Infantry. Hatch only managed to stay a week before a series of unforeseen events caused her to make a hasty departure.

She'd been staying at the Wayside for nearly ten days when she'd bumped into Monica. The girl was leaning against an out-of-order vending machine and crying hysterically when Hatch walked up. At first Hatch had considered ignoring the girl and continuing on to her room, leaving the girl to sort out whatever life crisis was causing her the emotional breakdown. But when she saw the broken nose and busted lip, Hatch stopped in her tracks.

Monica was standoffish at first, not accustomed to the helpful offerings of others. Based on what Hatch later learned about her life up to that point, she couldn't blame her. After some gentle prodding, the girl agreed to let Hatch take a look at the injuries.

By no means was Hatch an expert at wound care, but she'd had enough field experience to help the girl. The break along the bridge of her nose was relatively straight and, in time, would probably heal with minimal cosmetic change. The girl's bottom lip was split and two of her teeth were chipped. Hatch tended to the girl, packing the nose and stopping the bleeding. Then, she helped clean up some of the dried blood from her face.

Monica spent the night in Hatch's room. There were two twin beds, and Hatch hadn't had any real social interaction since arriving in Texas and didn't mind the company. During her stay, Monica told Hatch about her rough upbringing and the reasons for leaving home. Hatch understood, having left home at an early age herself, albeit for different reasons. After listening to the girl's tragic story, Hatch was glad she'd found her own way in the Army.

Hatch was a little baffled as to why or how the girl ended up in a trashy strip club outside of Fort Hood. Monica relayed she'd been trying to get over to her half-brother who lived in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She'd run out of funds and thought she could make a quick buck. It was her second night at the club when she'd bumped into Randy.

He offered her extra money if she went with him to his apartment for a private dance. Monica made him promise the two hundred dollars were for a dance only. She was scared, but it would've been enough cash to get her back on her way again and figured it was worth the risk. Monica broke down again during this point in her retelling. The anguish of the moments inside Randy Bosley's apartment would leave a permanent emotional scar, long after the physical ones healed. And for all she'd endured, the large man paid her absolutely nothing. The last words he said to her as he put her out on the street were, "Go ahead and tell somebody what happened. Good luck getting anyone to believe your trashy ass."

Hatch replayed the girl's story as she sat across from the man who'd brutalized her the previous night. He had an air of indifference. Being in the same room with him made her pulse quicken and she fought to control any emotional response. Effectiveness came in the cold, calculated control she'd learned through years of combat experience.

She picked up her drink, a seltzer with lime. To the average bar goer, the drink would look like a Seagram's and Seven. This was done so with purpose. Just as the intentional wobble she added to her walk. The unevenness of her steps added to her projected image. A girl out on the town who'd had far too much to drink.

Hatch walked by Randy and stumbled. Bumping into him, she clutched her free hand on his thick shoulder. "I'm sorry." Her words slurred for added effect.

Randy Bosley turned and eyed her. At first, there was anger at the jostled interruption, but as he took a closer look at Hatch's tall, slender physique, he softened. "No problem at all, sweet thing."

Hatch smiled coyly and gave an extra squeeze to the man's shoulder. "You're a big guy."

"You got no idea." A cocky smile stretched across his face. "You wanna find out?"

Under any normal context, Hatch would've laid the man out right then and there. But she needed a few minutes alone with the overly-confident woman abuser and decided to lower the bait instead. "Maybe I do."

"I got a place not too far from here."

Hatch knew this. Monica had told her where he lived when she was going through the details of her encounter. It's how Hatch knew what bar to

find him at. She'd been camped out near the man's apartment this evening and had followed him there.

"How about you drive. I'm a little too drunk."

The big man's eyes lit up at the comment, and he shoved back from the bar, emptying the last of his Crown and coke as he stood. He gave a knowing smile and wink to the bartender, who returned the gesture with a thumbs up. Hatch stifled her indignation and followed Bosley as he strode toward the door.

Hatch knew the man lived within walking distance of the bar but didn't divulge that information. If he made a move in the car, she'd react, but deep down she hoped for the privacy the vehicle would offer.

Bosley walked to a faded blue Nissan and pressed the unlock button on his key fob. "Your chariot awaits."

Hatch sat in the passenger seat. The car smelled of stale beer and corn chips. Whatever someone would consider an aromatic aphrodisiac, this was its opposite. Bosley looked over at her longingly, in the way a lion looks at its next meal. She prepared herself as he moved. But he didn't touch her, only slipped the keys in the ignition and started the car. Dropping it in drive, he accelerated away from the bar.

He pulled out a small bag of white powder from his pocket and dangled it in front of her. "Hope you like to party."

"I think you're in for a real treat."

The distance from the bar to the apartment complex was less than a mile and it only took a few minutes to arrive at their destination. Bosley pulled into a spot covered by a beige canopy. He exited the vehicle without saying anything. Hatch got out and followed him.

They walked up a zigzagged staircase to his second-floor apartment. The keys jingled in his hand as he finagled the lock. Opening the door, Hatch caught a whiff of an indiscernible sour odor, making the car's stench seem fragrant in comparison. Hadn't this guy figured out how to use soap and water?

Bosley waited with the door held open and ushered Hatch in with a push that was less gentle than it should've been.

Stepping inside, Hatch scanned the one-bedroom accommodation. Old food containers were left on top of a circular table in the small kitchen area. The two-burner stove was stacked with discarded pizza boxes, indicating its

lack of use. The living room area looked as though burglars had raided it and the television had been left on, blaring some mindless action flick.

Neighbors must absolutely love this guy, Hatch thought.

She turned to face the man as he closed the door, locking it behind him. Hatch was caught off guard to see Bosley was already working the zipper on his pants.

“You don’t waste any time.” Hatch dropped the fake slur, but the man didn’t seem to notice. He was now interested in only one thing.

“I’m gonna rock your world.” With that, the man’s pants dropped to his ankles.

Hatch smiled at Bosley’s state of undress. Not because she was remotely interested, but because the big man had removed two potential weapons from his defense by shackling his ankles with his jeans. “Funny you should say that because I was just thinking the same thing.”

She moved a step closer, bringing the man’s boxy chin into range. Bosley lowered his hands to the elastic band of his maroon boxer-briefs.

Hatch struck out with her left fist, striking hard against his lower lip. She felt his tooth sink into the skin of her knuckle. The force of the blow rocked Bosley’s head backward and his body followed. Tripping over his pants, he lost his balance. Hatch was already moving in, wasting no time on the follow-up. She swung her right elbow in a downward arc, crunching the bridge of his nose and driving the big man flat onto his back.

Shocked and devastated by her vicious attack, Bosley screamed and wriggled backwards, bringing himself into a partially-seated position against his front door.

He spit a bloody tooth into his hand and looked up at her with a crazed look. “What the hell is wrong with you—you crazy bitch?”

Hatch stood over him. “You like to hurt girls, Randy. And I’ve got a real problem with that.”

Bosley cowered. “The hell are you talking about? Thought you said you like to party?”

“Party? Is that what you call it? Beating and raping is partying to you?”

And with that he put two and two together. “That little bitch put you up to this?”

“Sounds like your mother never taught you how to treat a lady. Please let this be a crash course on the subject matter.”

Bosley's face reddened to a point of explosion. He pushed down on the floor, trying desperately to rise and face his adversary. The effort was pointless. His pants continued to hinder his legs and the dizzying blows coupled with his intoxication left the man off balance. Seizing his weakness as opportunity, Hatch stepped forward, slamming her knee into his forehead. The bone on bone contact sent his head back, and the base of his skull struck the stainless-steel doorknob with a loud thud.

The man's body went limp, and he slid down the door, flattening himself back onto the floor. He lay unmoving on the dirty linoleum as blood continued to ooze from his nose and mouth. Hatch evaluated her work. The physical damage was comparable to what he'd done to Monica.

He remained still, and, for a brief moment, she wasn't sure if the doorknob to the back of his head had killed him. The thought was cast aside as she registered the shallow rise and fall of his chest. Although she firmly believed he deserved to meet his end, a dead body created a series of complications Hatch preferred to avoid.

Grabbing the man by his ankles, she pulled him into the living room area and away from the doorway. She strained her taut muscles moving the dead weight. He had to be on the upper side of two-hundred-fifty pounds. Not sure how long the man's impact-induced slumber would last, Hatch unplugged a lamp on a nearby end table and tightly wrapped the cord around his wrists. The knot was simple but would hold.

Hatch pulled a wallet free from his pants. In it she found four hundred dollars in cash. Twice the amount he'd offered Monica. Pocketing it, she stood and headed toward the door.

As she turned the knob to leave, the man coughed and groaned loudly. "I'll have your ass arrested."

Hatch turned. "Good luck getting anyone to believe you."

His eyes went wide as she shut the door.

HATCH TAPPED the door with her knuckles. She heard the soft shuffle of footsteps and saw a shadow momentarily block the light. The girl had listened to her when she told her to never open the door without checking

who it was first. The chain lock unlatched, rattling against the door as it opened.

Monica stood there, offering a weak smile, her lip still sensitive from the recent tear along the bottom. Swelling had set in, and the girl's face bulged and was discolored in several places. Ice and rest had helped reduce some of the fallout, but it would take a week or two before the evidence of violence would totally dissipate. "Where've you been? I was worried you'd gone."

"Not yet. Needed to take care of a few things first."

Hatch reached into her pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. The girl gave her a confused look. "I—I can't take your money."

She pressed the money into the Monica's. "It's not my money. It's yours. Plus, a little interest."

Now the girl looked even more confused. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Let's just say, Randy had a change of heart."

The girl looked at her. Hatch had blood spatter from the big man covering her knee and the sleeve of her shirt. Her left hand was red along the two big knuckles with a small cut where Bosley's tooth stuck before being knocked out of his mouth.

"You did that to him? For me? I don't know what to say."

"Nothing to say. You're a good person and you needed help. I was in a position to do it, and so I did. Simple logic really."

"Not so simple. Nobody's ever stuck their neck out for me like that before."

"There's five hundred there." Hatch didn't feel it necessary to tell the girl she'd thrown in an extra hundred of her own. "Should be enough to get you where you need to go."

Monica's eyes welled with tears as she gave Hatch a big hug.

Hatch's phone vibrated. She separated from the embrace and pulled it out of her pocket. Flipping it open, she looked down at the message. Hatch was shocked to see who it was from, and more so at the message itself.

Closing it, she turned to leave. "You take care of yourself, Monica. I hope you find what you're looking for in Baton Rouge."

"You can come with me if you want. I'm sure my brother wouldn't mind."

Hatch shook her head. "Thanks for the offer, but I've got somewhere else I need to be."

“Where?”

She stuck the phone back in her pocket. “Looks like I’m going home.”

“HOW LONG DO WE NEED TO WAIT?”

Sheriff Dalton Savage’s eyes widened at the rookie deputy’s question. “What are you talking about? Wait? Please don’t tell me you’re asking me how long we have to wait to list someone as a missing person?”

“Well, I remember something about it at the academy, but it’s a little foggy.” Deputy Kevin Littleton retreated behind his desk.

Savage sighed and refrained from berating the eager new addition to his small department. Littleton had arrived at the Hawk’s Landing County Sheriff’s Office at the same time as Savage. The difference was Littleton had come with six months of basic recruit academy training under his belt while Savage had fifteen years of experience with the City of Denver, the last ten spent with Homicide.

The smaller department appealed to him for a multitude of reasons. He made his bid for Sheriff, winning the election by a narrow margin. The incumbent’s history of misappropriation of funds and allegations of embezzlement proved to be the tipping point in the electoral decision. Even with the negative exposure, the vote in favor of Savage was narrow. To say he wasn’t welcomed with open arms would’ve been an understatement.

The new job took some adjusting. Being a department of only three plus Savage, it was smaller than his Cold Case unit in Denver.

He quickly found he would be wearing a variety of hats in the understaffed and minimally trained agency. Savage had to be trainer, investigator, and leader all rolled into one.

As Hawk's Landing's only experienced investigator, Savage took the initial reins of most of the investigative cases and used them as teachable moments for the other deputies. He took it upon himself to provide guidance anywhere he could. And the most recent case that had fallen into his lap came in early this morning and would require his entire unit to rise to the next level. At the moment, and with Littleton's question, it appeared this would be an uphill battle.

Savage addressed Littleton with the same fervor of a dad teaching his son to catch a baseball for the first time. "There is no time limit before we can label a person as missing. If someone is late for dinner, then we can enter them into the system. In this case, we've already lost a piece of the timeline because it wasn't reported right away."

Littleton nodded his understanding.

"She probably had gone off with some friends to get high at the basin, slipped and fell in," Donald Cramer chimed in, exiting the hallway bathroom. "Wouldn't be the first drunk or stoner to drown out there. Won't be the last." Cramer swung the local paper back and forth behind him, fanning off the odorous trail that followed. His pistol belt was slung over his shoulder, as if he'd just won a title fight.

Savage eyed Cramer hard. "Number one, how many times have I told you not to use this bathroom for your post coffee regimen? There is a perfectly good bathroom in the back by the interview rooms that doesn't fill the main lobby with your all too familiar scent. Number two, don't apply a half-assed theory to a case before you've looked at the facts."

"As you command, my liege." Cramer gave an exaggerated salute followed by a curtsy.

Cramer had been a deputy with the sheriff's office for just over ten years. Based on what Savage had initially observed of his ability, his time had done little to amount for anything in the way of experience. Ten times zero was still zero. Cramer also carried an allegiance to Savage's predecessor, resenting the change of command at a personal level. Savage hadn't fully fleshed out the reasons why, but presumed it was because the former sheriff turned a blind eye to the deputy's lazy efforts. In a department consisting of four sworn personnel and a few civilians, it was critical everyone pulled their weight, otherwise the workload, albeit limited in this small town, would quickly become burdensome.

“You and I need to sit down soon to get some things straightened out,” Savage said quietly enough for only Cramer to hear. There was an intensity to his words, but Cramer seemed oblivious or flat out just didn’t care. The portly deputy continued walking toward the small break room without saying a word.

Cramer stood in front of the vending machine, obviously looking to refill the void created by his recent bathroom exploits. Savage watched the man ponder the choices of junk food and was convinced this would be the most difficult decision he’d make in the course of his eight-hour shift.

Savage rubbed the short salt and pepper hair along his temples, trying to alleviate the budding roots of a tension headache. In the three weeks since he’d assumed the role as Sheriff of Hawk’s Landing, Donald Cramer had already managed to make his shit list. A hard thing to do by Savage’s own account.

“So, where do we start?” Littleton asked, interrupting Savage’s thoughts.

“Well, we’ve got the body of a woman in the morgue and a grieving parent in the lobby. Let’s deal with the human element and talk to the mother first. Remember, approach each investigation with an open mind.” He shot a glance at Cramer, who was still pondering the conundrum of honey bun or cupcakes. “And listen to what she has to say. Things that seem innocuous at first may be the detail that later breaks a case wide open.”

“You’re going to let me interview her?” Littleton’s eagerness was contagious and contrasted Cramer’s demonstrated laziness. Like a cosmic yin and yang.

“How are you ever going to learn if you never do it? And no better way than drinking straight from the firehose.”

In the bigger departments, Littleton would be assigned a Field Training Officer, typically several if manpower allowed, who would spend the better part of the four months following the completion of basic academy training teaching him the ropes.

These programs were structured around the crawl, walk, and run approach in which a boot rookie, like Littleton, would be given more of the day-to-day patrol responsibilities until he reached a base level of competence prior to being set free to save the world all on his own. Everybody’s experience was different. Some saw more, did more,