

A Murder in St. Louis

The sunlight creeping through the gaps in the pale curtain into the bedroom awoke me from a restless slumber. I breathed a sigh of relief that I was awake from the horrible nightmare I had been having. The details were already hazy, the memory fading fast but I can vaguely recall a masked man chasing me through the woods. I can't remember the details, but the way my heart was pounding and the sheets were sticking to my damp body, it must not have ended well for me. I rubbed the sleep and the nightmare out of my dark eyes and rolled over to see what time it was and to determine if I had time to try to sneak in a quick nap before I had to get up for work. My already speeding heart accelerated when I realized the clock read one hour past my normal wake up time, giving me only mere minutes to get up and ready for work.

I realized my head was throbbing as I jumped out of bed in a rush. Did I have too much to drink last night? I must have, because I can't remember anything after coming home from dinner with Ryan. I think we fought last night, but the previous night's memories are buried beneath the migraine I have. I try to piece together the puzzle of last night as I rush to get dressed, but I'm having trouble differentiating between reality and my nightmare, flashes of memories clouding my vision. I slip into the same suit as I wore yesterday and try to pat out the wrinkles that have accumulated over night. Is that dirt? Why is there dirt on my skirt? I brush myself off as best I can as I throw my auburn hair into a bun and reach for my phone to text Ryan that I'm sorry I am running late but will be in right away. However, it appears Ryan beat me to it. He called me three times and left me a text, which I read as I hustle towards the front door.

Jane Doe found under Stetson Bridge. Meet me there whenever you bother to show up for work.

Okay, ouch. I deserve it, I suppose, but still. Ouch. Not bothering to respond, I slide my phone into my pocket next to my badge and conceal my weapon before grabbing the keys and heading to Stetson Bridge. I notice the front of my SUV is caked in mud similar to what I found on my skirt and my engine spurts and sputters a bit before starting. I don't have time to worry about or try to figure out what happened last night, so I put my sirens on and foot flat against the gas, I hope to be there before Ryan gets even more upset with me.

For the last two years, Ryan and I have been partners, although we have known each other for much longer than that. We graduated from the same high school many years ago, but we didn't really connect until we were both going through the academy. Through the last ten years together, we have worked our way up from parking police to homicide detectives. In our early twenties, we were both young and dumb and lost in the world. We needed stability, and one thing that is reliable is the high crime rate in St. Louis. Even in my wildest dreams, I never imagined that I would become a homicide detective in the murder capital of the United States, but here I am. Without Ryan, however, I wouldn't have made it this far. Hell, I probably wouldn't have survived the academy to begin with if it wasn't for Ryan. To be fair though, Ryan has cried on my shoulders plenty of times. We have had enough ups and downs to last us several lifetimes, but we've supported one another through it all.

From my worn-down apartment to Stetson Bridge, the drive is only about five minutes, but with my lights on, it took me less than three. The park ranger waves me in and guides me to the crime scene. The bridge is nestled within the twenty acres that are Stetson Park and the

majority of the land is heavily wooded, so it's a popular dumping ground for murder victims.

The rugged terrain makes most of the twenty acres of land inaccessible by car and thus a prime crime area, yet today's crime scene is straight past the main entrance. I make a mental note of this anomaly and park the car. I weave past the hoard of curious onlookers and under the yellow tape, making my way to where Ryan is standing, observing the woman.

"What's going on?" I ask, but Ryan doesn't acknowledge me and continues to stare at the dead woman under the bridge.

I scrunch my eyebrows in confusion but I figure that he's still angry with me. At dinner last night, from what I can remember, we had gotten into a fight over my drinking. I can't remember exactly what was said, but I can vividly recall the rage in Ryan's eyes. He swears up and down that I have a problem, but I don't. Well, perhaps a small problem since I can't remember a Monday evening and I have the worst headache of my life. Regardless if I have a drinking problem or not though, he has a maturity problem if he is pouting at me at a murder scene.

Refusing to play whatever childish game Ryan is trying to start, I walk under the bridge and squat to get a closer look at the body. I estimated her height to be around five foot seven and weight to be around 140 pounds. The skull of Jane Doe is shattered into many pieces, probably caused by a rock from the nearby ravine, which will make IDing the victim difficult. From what remained of her face, she appeared to be middle-aged, most likely in her early to mid-thirties. Her long auburn hair was in knots and stained with blood, sprawled to the sides of her concaved face. She wore a black business suit that was caked in dirt and blood, but still intact, suggesting that she had not been sexually assaulted. The pockets of her skirt and jacket were turned inside

out, completely empty. Time of death had to of been sometime within the last 8 hours, because the bridge is heavily populated during the day and into the evening. It wouldn't have taken long for her body to be discovered here.

I shake my head in confusion. "This doesn't make sense. What was a professional business woman doing in one of the shadiest areas of St. Louis in the middle of the night? Cause of death seems to be blunt force trauma, most likely from a heavy rock, which would suggest that the murder wasn't planned. Lack of sexual assault combined with the empty pockets propose a robbery gone wrong. That still doesn't explain why she was here to begin with, though," I observe, perplexed. "Someone could have robbed the body before calling the cops, though. The victim appears to have been killed recently and somewhere in her thirties. Hopefully an ID won't be too difficult, despite the crushed skull. She seems important, I'm sure someone will notice she's missing."

Ryan continues to ignore me and instead greets the coroner as he approaches. Crime scene techs have already thoroughly photographed and examined the area and we've learned enough from the crime scene to have the body transported to the medical examiner so we can ID her. As the coroner and his crew lift up the body, Ryan and I notice a tattoo on Jane Doe's inner right ankle that was originally obscured by the soil. Ryan begins to tremble as he dusts away the dirt to reveal more detail. The tattoo is of a red rose with thorns, cheaply done and heavily faded.

Okay, that's strange. I have the same design on my inner right ankle that is just as cheap and faded as Jane Doe's. My eyebrows rise and I look to Ryan to express the oddness of the coincidence and to ask him what has him so shaken up, but he refuses to make eye contact. Instead, with quivering lips, Ryan tells the coroner, "it's her. It's Detective Angela Buchanan."

I let out a shaky laugh, assuming that Ryan is pulling some extravagant prank on me to show me that if I don't stop drinking, I'm going to end up dead in a ditch, just like Jane Doe here. But when Ryan's coffee eyes overflow with tears and the saltiness stains his cheeks, I can see that he really believes that I am the dead woman lying in front of him.

"Ryan! Earth to Elliot Ryan? I'm standing right here," I yell, whirling my arms around to get his attention. How does he not see me? I've been standing here, talking to him for several minutes. Maybe he didn't see me get here and didn't hear me when I was talking earlier. He is still not seeing me, just silently crying as he stares at the body with extreme anguish.

I turn to the coroner and his crew, hoping one of them can get through to Ryan and let him know that I'm not dead, I'm standing right next to him, but they all seem to look right through me. Why is no one noticing me? I reach out to touch Ryan's shoulder, but my hand seems to pass right through him.

It is at that moment that I look down at the clothes I'm wearing, the same I wore yesterday. It's a business suit, caked in mud and dried blood. I had been in such a rush this morning that I hadn't noticed the extreme wear. What is going on? My hands begin to shake uncontrollably as I reach up to touch my forehead and immediately yank my hand back at the blinding pain that pulses through my skull. I dare to look at my fingers and see that they are coated in blood. My stomach drops as I come to the most unsettling and impossible realization. Oh god, this can't be real. No, no! This isn't happening! It's not possible!

I am Jane Doe.