

WHODUNNIT

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It was four fifty in the afternoon when we got the call, Dan Thompson was dead. It was the caring old mother, Mary Anne, that found the body lying on the floor of his office. The crime was obvious, Dan was poisoned, anyone could see that and initial forensic reports supported this assumption, but we still don't know how.

Joanne, the deceased's wife, was brought into the station shortly after the beginning of the investigation, because in her huge bedroom, next to the king sized bed, in a drawer of her wooden bedside table were a flask with opium and a copy of Dan's will with her name written off. This gave the woman probable cause, but there's no proof that she's done it, so she's currently under arrest for possession of illegal substances.

After all this, the case was assigned to me and my new partner, Josh, so we could close it, a good way to initiate the rookie. We have the pressure of the mayor to solve this one quickly.

- So tell me 'cub', what's our first move? - I said as I sat in my cubicle with my hands on my belly, satisfied after a well deserved lunch break
- Still trying to find a catchy nickname, huh? Well, we have a suspect in custody, maybe we should go ahead and interrogate her?
- Wrong. First we do our research, 'trainee'. Knowing who you're talking to is half way into leading a conversation. I'll do background search, you read the initial case reports.

I then began the search on "Joanne Thompson", or at least tried to, as the white boxy computers can't load a page in under a decade, but it still beats having to search all the physical records as in the old days. Finally I find the history behind the late man's wife and relationship. Young Joanne was in and out of the system, gone through a lot of foster homes, but her bright mind allowed her to go to the University of Edinburgh, and that's where she met eighteen year old Dan Thompson at a party. Soon after they got engaged as the young woman got pregnant. As custom in the rich family, the couple had a huge wedding and it was all over the telly. Two years later, as we knew, Joanne was arrested for DUI while baby David was in the car. She was then sent to a rehab facility and released two months later. About a year ago, she overdosed and Rose called the emergencies, Joanne was put back to rehab, and she's been out for six months now.

- I wonder how many times was she really arrested? - I asked looking away from the screen as my old eyes get tired
- What do you mean? - asked Josh really confused
- I forget you're new in town. The 'Thompson' family is a big deal around here, and there's not one but two reports of Joanne's arrests. So I wonder how many times was she really arrested, but then the family covered it up.
- Well, enough times to upset the victim's mum, Mary Anne. The reports say she was anxious because she didn't trust her grandchild to Joanne, and started badmouthing her. She has a good gut, maybe she should take our jobs.
- You mean yours, I'm good. - there's an awkward pause, then we both giggle - Well, now let's interrogate the suspect.

We walk into the small white room with only the metallic table with three chairs, on one of them sits Miss Thompson, and me and Josh sit opposite to her.

Joanne has a really pale skin, she mustn't go out much. She has brown eyes, and her hair roots are also dark although the rest of the hair is painted blonde. She surprisingly underdressed for a member of such a prestiged family, with some old grey trousers and a white long sleeved shirt. Her back lays relaxed on the chair, but her crossed arms and flexed eyebrows suggest she's angry.

- Good day, Miss Thompson, I'm Ben Brown and this is my partner Josh Stewart.
- What do you want me to say that I haven't said to the other officers? - she responded angrily, being a suspect to a homicide and a drug addict forced to be in a confined space for hours does that to a person
- Well I want you to begin by telling us about your relationship with Dan.
- That's a first. He was an asshole. What? Do you expect me to cry over him? He was abusive, and a cheater for sure, but I wouldn't have killed him.
- A cheater? Do you know of any mistresses? - asked Josh, I could see that little spark in his eyes, a possible lead, the thrill of detective work
- No, he was smart about it too, but then again no matter. When he started spending nights out, he beat me less, so I didn't really fucking care.
- Why never report on the domestic violence? - Josh asked again with genuine concern
- And face the Thompsons wraith and their lawyers? I was better off getting beaten up.
- Alright. Now tells us about the will? - I asked trying to dig more on the motives since she unknowingly gave us another, this isn't looking too good for her
- I already said, I know nothing of the matter. - she sounded bitter, tired, I see if we continue down this path she'll stop being talkative
- Ok, then tell us about your daily routine. As I understand, you're a stay at home mom?
- Yes, the possessive bastard made me. He even insisted on me to give in his nicotine patches his mother bought him to stop smoking and clean our bedroom, even though we have a house maid. I'll just say it. I'm glad he's dead... and I'm even gladder it wasn't me.

At that moment, one of our colleges entered the room and asked to talk to me and Josh, so we left the room and talked in the lengthy corridor. The officer explained that someone had dropped off a package and inside was a disturbing journal that belonged to Dan Thompson. Disturbing? What a peculiar choice of words. Right away we went into the evidence room to analyse such journal. Right on top of the center table was a book, with a hard cover of cardboard and leather, no title on front or back, it was recently varnished, I knew because it had the same feeling to the touch and reflection as my first oxford style shoes, that I still cherish to this day, so did Dan cherish this book?

As I open it, right on the first page I read "Joanne Thompson" with a disturbing, disgusting, explicit photo of a younger version of the woman I just met. I then began to read the full page, I wish I didn't. It described in excruciating detail the night the couple met, and how Dan drugged Joanne's drink, took the almost unconscious woman to the bedrooms upstairs and forced himself on her. In the last paragraph he says he wasn't expecting her to get pregnant and as the news spread quickly he felt forced to marry her. I started to scroll through the pages and

the cases start to be more recent. For a while he was quiet, and that's probably the time Joanne suffered the most. The pages layouts are all the same, the page's title is the name of a poor woman, by its right side is the disgusting picture, to its left the date, and then there's a description of the sickening crime. In so many years of service I have never faced such a feeling of disgust. I actually feel sick. I need a shower.

As I look away and take a moment to breathe, Josh noticed something that slipped through my eyes.

- There's a page missing.
- What? - I asked almost unable to talk because of the twirl of my intestines
- Yes. Someone torn a page out. The most recent one in fact.
- That's oddly good, it narrows our suspect list. We go from having almost twenty possible suspects to one.
- And if it's just a torn page? Or the suspect is dismissed?
- We'll have long nights ahead of us.

The book was now in the evidence lab, they were going to run some fingerprint sampling and then do the charcoal test, so we could find out what was written in the missing page. As we were waiting for those results and the ones from the chemistry lab regarding the poison, we decided to head back to our small cubicle and search upon the poor woman. They were almost all residents of the suburbs, belonged to low class families. Some were strippers, others waitresses. I question what was his M.O? Did he 'hunt' every night? Were the crimes thought out? Or did he act on impulse? It's all unclear.

The time passes and finally we get a call from evidence. I don't really recall the full conversation, but the name 'Rose Smith' got stuck in my mind. The maid, she was the most recent victim. We then called her in.

In the room where we previously had a chat with Joanne, sat Rose. This time I was alone as my partner was answering a call directed at both of us.

Rose still had her maid's outfit put on, I guess she rushed her way over here. Her skin is darkened from sun exposure. She has an expressive big blue eyes and tied up black hair. Her posture is very firm and straight, nothing alike Joanne's.

- Hi Lady Smith, my name's Ben Brown. I'm the lead investigator in the murder of Dan Thompson.
- Hello, I.. I don't understand. I had already spoken to the officers before. - she sounded nervous, she knows exactly why she's here
- We know you delivered the book. We're just wondering, why only now?
- The book? - then she took a small pause, as if to construct a lie - Oh that horrible book. Yes, you.. You see, I was cleaning the couples master bedroom when I noticed the air vent was dirty and hmm... to clean it well I took the cover off and there was that book, you see?
- Hmm I see. - I just caught her in a lie - So you know nothing of the ripped page? The one that had your name on it?
- So you know. I went through all that trouble to expose who Dan Thompson really was and now I'm a suspect. I just wanted my name out of it.
- Why? Why does nobody want to face the Thompson's?

- They'd tear anyone apart that spoke ill of their name, but for me that's not even why. I actually love to serve that house. The boy David is such a sweet kid, even with messed up parents, and Master Marry Anne is almost a mother to me, and we do all kinds of stuff together, from cooking to taking care of the garden, she even gave me these cute gardening mittens recently. I was happy, and I didn't want that monster to take that away from me... - she was on the verge of crying and didn't even stutter once, she's telling the truth
- I believe you. But we'll have to contain you for a maximum of forty-eight hours, at least until we get some lab results back. You'll be in a cell apart from Joanne, don't worry. If you need anything, just ask.

I leave the room saddened, these poor women. A horrible man died, but someone has to be accounted for his death. It's almost time to punch the card and call it a day, tomorrow we'll interview as many women from the book as possible.

I get near the grey cubicles and there stood the rookie, slowly sipping on his coffee. He finished his drink and we grabbed our coats and headed out. In the elevator I asked what was that phone call all about.

- It was the victims mum saying she encountered new evidence that incriminates Joanne. Apparently she found a book on poisons amongst Joanne's boxes in the attic. Then she started bad mouthing her daughter-in-law again, and asked me when could she file an appeal to be guardian of David, as if I knew.
- And did you tell her about the journal? - surely Josh wouldn't commit that mistake
- I did, but-
- Goddammit, 'newcomer'.
- But that's the thing, she didn't get all hysterical, she just said "Oh" and got really depressed, I then ended the call as soon as possible.
- You just told the old lady that her dead son was a rapist, I'd get depressed as well.

I was mad, but at the same time it's an honest mistake, these guys get promoted and still don't understand what's private information at the beginning. Still Josh's right, her reaction was weird, but then again, how is someone supposed to react to that?

We got to the garage, entered our respective cars and drove to our homes. In my very small apartment, I wondered what it would be like to have a maid, to get home and have a tidy space, and not a landmine, where I have to look where I put my feet or else it might get just land on a cup of coffee or a box of take away. I need a vacation, or better yet, retirement.

I woke up early, this case is leaving me unease, I don't think there'll be a good outcome. Either way I'm sending a victim to probably face jail time, that's how our system works. In custody I have a victim of years of domestic violence, who was torn out of the rich husband's will and had a book on poisons, and then there's the maid, the most recent rape victim of said husband, and that handed us a crime journal from which she ripped out the page that detailed her horrifying experience out of professional dignity.

I enter the station and I'm instantly welcomed by one of the lab experts, he said he was waiting to tell the new discoveries. The poison was a powerful substance made from leaves of the wolfbane's plant. It's touch can cause cardiac arrest in under twelve hours, and the scientists said that that was what happened, and so it made the analysis harder.

The poison was applied to the skin. It would take under twelve hours to kill a man. Nobody would just swing the plant at him, or just pour a veil of wolfbane's extrude on him. No, it would've had to be natural, in his daily routine. Daily routine. The nicotine patches! After my long awkward pause of looking into to the tiled ground thinking, I told a couple of officers to get the Thompson's household's garbage and search for nicotine patches, then send them to the lab for analysis.

It was noon, me and Josh were already on our second donut break when he got the results back. There was a match. One of the nicotine patches was filled with wolfbane's poison. Considering Joanne had various motives, means and now some concrete proof, she soon would be convicted. It felt like the mayor was just hoping for some escape goat to close the case, but it all just didn't sound right.

I went to the court hearing, there was Rose and a lot of other women I recognised from the journal, they were supporting Joanne. Although meaningless to the jury, it was a good sight for sore eyes. But also, in the opposition side was Mary Anne, and I saw as she smiled when Joanne was convicted to ten years without parole. That's when it hit me.

The mother didn't sound surprised to hear her son was a rapist, maybe she had already found out. She now saw both parents of her grandchild, that she cares so much about, unfit. She offered gardening mittens to Rose, maybe because she planted wolfsbane in the garden. She could've easily faked a will with the family's lawyers. She was the one that found the poison book. She's even the one that usually bought the nicotine patches, maybe she poisoned one of them and left it in the box, knowing that eventually her son would die. There's a lot of 'maybes', no proof. Maybe I'm just a paranoid old detective.

- This doesn't feel right. It was all so easy. - said Josh standing next to me, his young clean shaven face almost showed wrinkles of how serious he was, I'd never seen him like this
- I know. But we'll eventually get this right, 'partner'.
- Hey, 'partner' sounds like a good nickname.
- Don't push it.