

CHAPTER 10

Out of Context

The lunchtime rush at the Blue J Café was in full swing as Billy Ray sat alone at his favorite corner table. He had been coming here for quite some time. He was drawn by the café's cozy atmosphere and the sense of community it offered. The walls were adorned with old photographs of Scottsville, showcasing its history and the people who had shaped it. Near the entrance, a wicker basket brimmed with magazines and local newspapers, a nod to a time before smartphones and digital newsfeeds.

Billy Ray flipped through the pages of the local paper, enjoying the feel of the printed pages between his fingers. He glanced around the café, noticing the familiar faces of the town's older residents who preferred the traditional method of getting their news. The Blue J Café was a haven for them, a place where they could hold onto the "good ole days" even if the newspapers were only delivered twice a week.

As Billy Ray took a bite of his sandwich, the bell above the door chimed, signaling the arrival of new patrons. The waitresses, dressed in their classic blue uniforms, called out in unison, "Welcome to Blue J's. Please, wait to be seated."

Billy Ray looked up as a group of regulars from the courthouse entered, chatting animatedly about the latest town gossip. He took a sip of his sweet tea, savoring the moment. It wasn't just the food that kept him coming back; it was the chance to stay connected to the heartbeat of Scottsville.

Bill Ray frequented Blue J Café with a deliberate purpose. He wasn't just there for the food; he was there for the information. The cafe was a popular spot for employees from the courthouse and the police department, who often gathered there to eat and discuss current events.

Billy Ray liked to eavesdrop on their conversations, catching up on local gossip and insights that weren't available to the general public. He utilized every angle he could to stay one step ahead of the competition, constantly viewing the game as him versus everyone else. This strategy of collecting information from these conversations became a crucial part of his approach to staying informed and ahead in his pursuits.

A waitress approached Billy Ray's table with a friendly smile on her face. "Hey there, Billy. How's everything today?" she asked.

"Doing good, thanks," he replied. "Could you top off my tea? I'm gonna be here a while longer."

"Sure thing," she said, pouring the tea. "Anything else I can get you?"

“No, that’s all for now,” Billy Ray said, returning to his newspaper. He noticed a small article about the upcoming county fair and made a mental note to attend.

The doorbell rang again, and the waitresses echoed their greeting. Billy Ray smiled to himself, appreciating the small-town charm that made the Blue J Café special. He could hear snippets of conversation from the tables around him—discussions about crops, local politics, and the ever-present topic of the weather. It was a slice of life in Scottsville, and he felt content to be a part of it, even if just as an observer.

Sitting there, Billy Ray couldn’t help but think about how much he enjoyed these simple moments. The world outside might be changing rapidly, but here in the Blue J Café, time seemed to stand still, preserving the essence of community and connection.

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Billy Ray sat there, flipping through the local newspaper pages, skimming headlines, and glancing at photos. He was most interested in the marketplace section. As he reached that section, his eyes drifted to the familiar ads for boats, furniture, and lawnmowers. It was always interesting to see what the locals were selling, and he even often found good deals there. Today, however, his attention was diverted to the adjacent legal section. A bold, black-bordered advertisement caught his eye. The large font and the word "REWARD" screamed for his attention.

He leaned closer, reading the text with growing interest. The Scottsville Police Department was offering a \$30,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of whoever was responsible for the murder of Sam Bates. For a second, he felt a little scared, thinking if they left some clues that could lead to them. The reward of \$30,000 was tempting enough for many people. And then Billy Ray felt tempted himself. He wondered if he could get that reward. And he focused on the ad. The details were sparse, but the amount of the reward was prominently displayed.

Billy Ray’s mind began to race. Thirty thousand dollars. That kind of money could change his life. He could pay off debts and maybe even get a new car. The possibilities were endless.

He pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of the advertisement, making sure he captured all the details. As he pocketed his phone, he allowed himself to dream about what he could do with that money.

That’s a life-changing sum, he thought to himself. I could get out of this rut. Maybe start fresh somewhere new. It wouldn’t take much to find some information, and if I play it right, I could be the one to claim this reward."

Billy Ray’s mind wandered to the possibilities. How would he go about finding and relating the necessary information to Sam Bate’s murder? Who did he know that might have some dirt on Sam Bates? He’d need to be careful, though. Drawing too much

attention to himself could be risky. He'd need to play it smart and make sure everything he did was above suspicion.

The trick will be to arrange info without anyone knowing I'm looking, he thought. Gotta be subtle. Maybe start by talking to some of the old-timers around here. They always have the best gossip. And keep an eye on the police chatter. Someone's bound to slip up.

He tapped his fingers on the table, his mind abuzz with plans and possibilities. The reward had sparked something in him, a drive to take control of his circumstances and seize this unexpected opportunity. He knew it wouldn't be easy, but the potential payoff was too great to ignore.

Billy Ray glanced around the café, noting the ordinary bustle of daily life. To the other patrons, he was just a man having lunch, reading the paper. But inside, a plan was forming. One that could take him from a small-town diner to a new life, all thanks to a single newspaper advertisement.

He folded the newspaper neatly and took another sip of his sweet tea, a determined glint in his eye. The wheels were already in motion, and Billy Ray was ready to see where they would take him.

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Billy Ray continued to enjoy his lunch, the local newspaper neatly folded beside his plate. He was about to finish his meal when the doorbell rang again, signaling more patrons to enter the café. He glanced up, noticing two police officers in uniform making their way to a nearby table.

As they settled in, a waitress approached to take their order. "What can I get for you today, Officers?" she asked with a cheerful smile.

"I'll have the club sandwich, and he'll take the BLT," one of the officers said. "And two sweet teas, please."

"Sure thing. I'll get that right out for you," the waitress replied, jotting down their order before heading back to the kitchen.

Billy Ray's interest was piqued. He often overheard interesting snippets of conversation at the café, but this was different. He hoped they might talk about Sam Bates' murder. He shifted slightly in his seat, trying to appear casual as he strained to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Can you believe the fingerprints belong to John Manning?" the first officer said, his voice low but clear enough for Billy Ray to catch.

“Doesn’t he work at the utility company and go to church at Scottsville First Church?” the second officer replied, sounding genuinely surprised.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” the first officer confirmed. “Who would’ve thought the mild-mannered accountant would be a murderer? The district attorney says he’s waiting on additional compelling evidence before making an arrest.”

Billy Ray felt a jolt of excitement. This was exactly the kind of information he needed. He tried to keep his expression neutral, not wanting to draw any attention to himself. Inside, though, his mind was racing. The revelation about John Manning could be the key to his plans.

“They must have found something significant to tie him to the crime,” the second officer continued. “Fingerprints are pretty damning evidence.”

Billy Ray’s thoughts swirled. How did John Manning’s fingerprints get involved in this? What connection did he have to Sam Bates? And more importantly, how could Billy Ray use this information to his advantage?

“Guess we’ll just have to wait and see what the DA does next,” the first officer said, leaning back in his chair as the waitress returned with their meal.

Billy Ray’s internal monologue kicked into high gear. *This is perfect. If they’re focusing on John Manning, that means less attention on anyone else. I need to find out more about this guy and see how I can use this to my benefit. Maybe there’s a way to nudge things in the right direction and make sure they stay focused on him.*

He took another sip of his sweet tea, trying to appear engrossed in his newspaper while he continued to listen.

“The district attorney’s no fool. He’ll need more than just fingerprints to make a solid case,” the second officer said thoughtfully. “But if they’ve got prints, that’s a strong start.”

Billy Ray mentally noted every word, forming a plan on how he might leverage this new piece of the puzzle. *I need to be careful, though, he thought. One wrong move and I could get caught in my own trap. But if I play this right, I might just walk away with that reward money and a clean slate.*

He watched the officers out of the corner of his eye as they continued their meal, their conversation shifting to more mundane topics. The critical information had been shared, and Billy Ray knew he had to act on it quickly.

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As Billy Ray sat there, his mind was buzzing with the information he had just overheard. The café was starting to clear out as the lunch rush subsided, giving him a bit of privacy. He pulled out his smartphone, deciding to dig deeper into this John Manning character.

Browsing to the Scottsville Electric Utility website, he quickly found the staff directory. He scrolled through the list of names and photos until he found John Manning. As soon as he saw the picture, recognition hit him like a bolt of lightning. It was the same man he and his brother had pranked at Walmart.

“Of all people,” Billy Ray muttered under his breath. “The mild-mannered accountant. Who would’ve thought?”

He leaned back, pondering this unexpected twist. If John Manning was now the prime suspect in Sam Bates’s murder, it could work to his advantage, but he couldn’t afford any mistakes.

“Alright, think,” Billy Ray told himself, his internal monologue kicking into high gear. “They’ve got his fingerprints, but they need more. They need compelling evidence. And that’s where I come in.”

He drummed his fingers on the table, piecing together the steps of his plan. He thought, *First, I need to make sure they stay focused on Manning. If they’re convinced he’s the guy, they won’t be looking at anyone else. Second, I need to provide just enough evidence to keep them on his trail but not enough to incriminate myself or Lewis.*

Billy Ray’s mind raced with possibilities. *I’ve got that video of Manning that can prove him confronting Sam. It’s perfect. It shows him angry, maybe even threatening. That’s the kind of thing that could push the DA over the edge.*

He took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves. *Well, I can’t just hand over the whole video. I’ll need to crop it and show just the part that makes Manning look guilty. And I need a good story for how I got it.*

He thought about the best way to frame the narrative. *I could say I was at Walmart, heard the commotion, and started filming. That’s plausible.*

Billy Ray’s eyes narrowed as he considered the risks. *Once I hand over that video, I’ll be involved in the case. I’ll need to be prepared for questions, ready to defend my story. But the reward... \$30,000 could change everything.*

He nodded to himself, determination hardening his resolve. *This is it. This is my shot. I just need to stay one step ahead and make sure Lewis keeps his mouth shut.*

Billy Ray glanced around the café one last time, ensuring no one was paying him any attention. Satisfied, he finished his sweet tea, left a tip on the table, stood up, and headed for the door, his mind already working on the next steps of his plan.

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When Billy Ray entered the small, cluttered living room of his house, the sun was beginning to set, casting long shadows through the windows and adding a somber tone to the room. Lewis was sprawled on the couch, eyes glued to his laptop screen. He looked up as Billy Ray walked in, sensing something serious was about to go down.

“Hey, we need to talk,” Billy Ray said, his voice firm.

Lewis sat up, curiosity and a hint of apprehension in his eyes. “What’s up?”

Billy Ray took a deep breath, then launched into the story. “I was at the Blue J Café today, eating lunch, and I overheard a couple of cops talking about the Sam Bates murder. They’ve got new evidence—fingerprints. And guess who they belong to?”

Lewis’s eyes widened. “Who?”

“John Manning,” Billy Ray said, letting the name hang in the air.

“John Manning?” Lewis asked.

Remember the one we pranked at Walmart... with the horn blast? And he dropped his groceries and frantically yelled at us.

“Oh, yes, yes, I remember,” Lewis replied.

This John Manning works at a utility company,” Billy Ray said. “They’re zeroing in on him. The district attorney is just waiting for more compelling evidence before making an arrest.”

Lewis frowned, trying to piece it all together. “So, what does that mean for us?”

Billy Ray leaned in, lowering his voice. “It means we’ve got an opportunity to stay free, diverting all suspicion away from us... only if we can make it look like Manning is the guy. And the best part is that we can collect the \$30,000 reward. That’s a jackpot, bro.”

Lewis looked skeptical. “How do we do that?”

Billy Ray explained his plan. “Remember the prank? So, there are two stories in that video. One is the funny prank of scaring a victim. The other is John’s conflict threatening the person in that truck. Now, we know we can’t show the entire video because it would reveal the prank and the conflict. We need to edit it. Cut out everything

but the part where Manning looks like he's threatening Sam. We show just enough to make him look guilty but not so much that it comes back on us. And remember, the prank part must not appear anywhere... and not on Mayhem at all."

Lewis nodded slowly, understanding dawning on his face. "Okay, but how do we explain having the video?"

"I'll say I was at Walmart, heard a commotion, and just filmed it. It's a solid cover." Billy Ray said.

Lewis hesitated, then spoke. "But what about the rest of the video? If anyone sees it, they might recognize us."

Billy Ray reassured him. "No one will. We'll only show what's necessary. And we'll make sure there's no way to trace it back to us. But I need you to be on board with this. We can't afford any mistakes."

Lewis swallowed hard, then nodded. "Okay, I'm in. But we need to be extra careful. One slip-up, and we're screwed."

Lewis had copied the prank video onto his laptop, and a copy of the video was stored on his cloud account. The brothers never kept any videos or pictures on their phones for fear of someone getting access to them. They had recorded some videos that would be hard to explain if they fell into the wrong hands. Billy Ray had a hard rule that they both sanitized their phones each day by purging photos and removing browser history.

Billy Ray clapped him on the shoulder. "Exactly. Now, let's get to work."

Billy Ray's mind was already racing ahead, plotting out each step they needed to take. "We start with the video. You're the best at editing, so make sure it's seamless. We need it to look authentic and incriminating."

Lewis nodded, his mind focused on the task ahead. "I'll get it done. We just need to stay calm and stick to the plan."

Billy Ray felt a surge of determination. "We've got this, Lewis. We just need to keep our heads and stay one step ahead. Thirty grand is life-changing. We can't let this slip through our fingers."

With that, they got to work, knowing that every detail mattered and that their future depended on their ability to execute the plan flawlessly.

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Lewis sat at his desk, focused intently on his laptop as Billy Ray hovered behind him. Lewis sighed as he opened the video editing software. "Alright, let's get started. We need to make sure this looks legit but leaves out anything that could point back to us."

Billy Ray was well aware of the idea that out-of-context evidence can significantly distort the truth and present a skewed version of events that misleads and misinforms. So, making a copy of the original video and cropping out the beginning was their well-calculated attempt to take the story out of context in order to manipulate the narrative to fit their desired perspective.

Billy Ray nodded, leaning over Lewis's shoulder. "Yeah, start by cutting out the beginning where we're setting up the prank. We just need the part where Manning confronts us, I mean, Sam."

Lewis worked quickly, his fingers flying over the keyboard as he scrubbed through the video timeline. He paused at the crucial moment, highlighting the section they needed to keep. "Here's where Manning approaches the truck. We'll cut everything before this."

Billy Ray watched intently. "And after he walks away, cut it there too. We don't want anything extra that could be traced back to us."

Lewis nodded, making the precise cuts. "Got it. This will show Manning looking angry and aggressive. It should be enough to push the DA over the edge without bringing us into it."

As the video played back, they watched the edited segment carefully. It showed John Manning storming up to Sam's truck, his face twisted in anger and shouting indistinctly before turning and walking away. The cut was clean, with no indication of the prank or their involvement.

Billy Ray nodded in approval. "That's perfect. It's just enough to make him look guilty without giving anything away. Save it and copy it to the USB drive."

Lewis saved the edited video and plugged a brand-new USB drive into his laptop. "This should do it," he said, transferring the file. "We need to make sure this drive is clean—no other files, nothing that can be traced back to us."

Billy Ray watched the progress bar on the screen. "This is the key, Lewis. Once we hand this over, we need to stick to our story. No slip-ups."

Lewis glanced at his brother, a hint of worry in his eyes. "I know. We've got to be on the same page. If they start asking questions, we need to have our answers ready."

Billy Ray's voice was firm. "I will be. Remember, I'm just a guy who happened to catch something on video at Walmart. Nothing more, nothing less."

Lewis nodded, ejecting the USB drive and handing it to Billy Ray. "Here it is. This is our ticket."

Billy Ray took the drive, feeling the weight of their plan in his hand. "Good job, Lewis. Now, we just need to play it cool. We're almost there."

As they stood, the gravity of their actions settled over them. They knew the risks, but the promise of a \$30,000 reward was too tempting to pass up. With the USB drive in hand, they were ready to set their plan in motion, hoping it would lead to a better future.

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Billy Ray sat at the kitchen table, the USB drive resting in front of him. The house was quiet, the ticking of the clock on the wall the only sound breaking the silence. He stared at the drive, contemplating the gravity of what they were about to do. The potential consequences weighed heavily on his mind.

"Once we hand this over, there's no turning back," Billy Ray said out loud to himself. "We'll be tied to this case, and if anything goes wrong, we could end up in jail."

He rubbed his temples, trying to push aside the doubts. They had come too far to back out now. He needed to focus to make sure everything went perfectly.

Lewis entered the room, sensing the tension. "You okay, Billy?"

Billy Ray nodded slowly. "Yeah, just thinking through everything. We need to make sure our story is airtight."

Lewis pulled up a chair and sat across from his brother. "Alright, let's go over it one more time."

Billy Ray took a deep breath. "Okay, here's how it goes. I was at Walmart picking up some supplies. I heard a commotion in the parking lot, saw a confrontation, and started recording as people just do these days. And I forgot about it. When I heard about Sam's murder and the details, I realized it could be important evidence and decided to bring it to the police."

Lewis nodded, repeating the details to himself.

Billy Ray said, "Alright, I guess that makes sense. We just need to make sure we're on the same page. No contradictions."

By the time they finished, they were confident they could pull it off. The reward money was within their grasp, and they were ready to take the final step. As Billy Ray pocketed the USB drive, he felt a mix of anxiety and determination.

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Billy Ray and Lewis stood a little far from the police station. The weight of the USB drive in Billy Ray's pocket felt heavier than ever, reminding him of the risk the brothers were taking.

Lewis shifted nervously, glancing at his brother. "You sure about this, Billy?"

Billy Ray nodded, trying to project confidence he wasn't entirely sure he felt. "Yeah, we've gone over everything. We stick to the story, and we'll be fine. Just remember what we rehearsed."

Lewis took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "I know. It's just... this is big. If anything goes wrong..."

"It won't," Billy Ray interrupted firmly. "We've covered all our bases. Once I hand this over, they'll focus on Manning, not us. We're doing this for the reward, for a better life."

Lewis nodded, though the worry didn't leave his eyes. "Alright. Just be careful."

Billy Ray clapped him on the shoulder. "I will."

With a final nod, Billy Ray turned and began walking toward the police station. Each step felt deliberate, echoing the gravity of the moment. His mind raced with last-minute thoughts and doubts.

"Stay calm," he told himself. "You've got this. Just walk in there, hand over the drive, and tell them the story. They'll buy it. They have to."

As he approached the entrance, he was going over the cover story in his mind. His heart pounded as he reached the door. *This is it*, he thought. *There's no turning back now. Just stay cool and stick to the plan.*

Billy Ray pushed open the door, stepped inside, and approached the front desk, where an officer looked up from his paperwork.

"Can I help you?" the officer asked.

Billy Ray forced a calm smile. "Yeah, I have something I think you'll want to see. It's about the Sam Bates case."

The officer raised an eyebrow, his interest piqued. "Alright, come with me. Let's see what you've got."

As he followed the officer deeper into the station, Billy Ray felt a surge of determination. This was their chance to turn things around. He just needed to stay focused and see it through.

This is for us, he thought. For a better future. Just stick to the story, and everything will work out.

With renewed resolve, Billy Ray prepared to present the edited video, hoping it would be enough to earn the reward and secure their future.