



*the Unknown*

*By A. Scott*

The eerie destruction stood ghost-like in the morning fog. A burned-out, late-model sedan molded to the front end of what appeared to be the remains of dull blue Ford pickup. The sedan's rear-end stood straight up like a giant tail feather, its windows shattered, tires melted down to the rim. Debris was scattered across the deserted Texas highway – a toolbox and various tools, a dirty baseball cap, burnt glovebox papers, and glass. The heap of molten metal smoldered and smelled of death.

Across the road, smoke rose from a darkened oil barrel surrounded by a dozen beer cans, cigarette butts, and abandoned flashlights. Tire tracks, visible on the shoulder, disappeared into the desert.

The fog had burned off by the time the Sheriff and his deputy reached the wreckage. As they approached, the huge pile grew larger and darker. The Sheriff had seen plenty of car wrecks in his time, but nothing like this. Stepping on one of the rims, he peered inside the truck. The hollowed-out face of a young boy stared back him. The boy's body had been crushed by the steering wheel. His lower half was completely gone, replaced by the front-half of the truck's engine. The Sheriff could only imagine the sheer force it took to drive the engine so far inside the truck and through the boy's body. To see inside the sedan, he had to use the toolbox. Placing it next to the car, he stepped on it and looked through an open window. When his eyes finally adjusted to the darkness, he could see two more bodies, a smaller one in the passenger seat, perhaps a young girl, and another boy behind the wheel. Both victims were faceless. Burned beyond recognition. The Sheriff felt queasy and tried to steady himself.

“Can't find any skid marks, Sheriff,” the deputy said from behind him.

“Can't imagine there were any,” the Sheriff answered, shaking his head as he stepped down off the toolbox and wiped his hands on his khakis.

He circled the car and thought he recognized it. One of those new Mustangs, he thought. A ‘pony car’ that had everyone talking. He had stopped a local boy named Ben driving one a few months back. The boy was doing donuts on a dirt road in Mexican Town. He had let him off with a warning because it was his birthday, and he knew the boy’s parents. They were good people. Then he remembered there had been another boy in the car. His name was Will. He knew his parents, too.

Staring at the wreckage, the Sheriff tried to collect his thoughts. So young, he thought. Just kids. Barely old enough to drive. Now dead on *the unknown*. A parent’s worst nightmare. They would be waking up today without their children. Find their beds empty. Panic and worry would ensue. They would hope for the best but fear the worst. The thought hit him hard. He wasn’t a devoutly religious man, but something made the Sheriff pause and remove his cowboy hat.

“Let’s say a prayer, deputy, if you don’t mind,” he said, looking back down *the unknown*. “It’s the least we can do.”

The lawmen bowed their heads in silence. A warm south wind blew across their faces, and they could hear a mourning dove call out for her mate out in the distance.

It was simply *the Unknown*. No one knew where the name came from, but it wasn’t a road to nowhere. It remained unpaved for years. Then, in 1961, with highway funding in full force, asphalt crews from the county did the job in less than six months. For fifty-odd miles, the two-lane blacktop linked large swaths of South Texas ranchland from the Rio Grande all the way to Highway 277 just south of town. And on paydays and Sundays, ranchers and ranch hands mostly used *the Unknown* for groceries or religion, or both.

On that cold Sunday morning in early November, the Sheriff had been sitting in his regular pew at church when one of his deputies gently tapped him on the shoulder.

“Car wreck on *the Unknown*, Sheriff,” the deputy whispered, trying not to draw attention. “We better go.”

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Death in a smalltown spreads like a fever. By early afternoon the entire town knew three young people had died in a fiery, head-on collision on *the unknown*. And when their parents began frantically calling the Sheriff’s office in search of their children, everyone learned who they were. As he feared, all three were teenagers, sophomores in high school. Ben, Will and a girl named Marilyn. She was the daughter of a prominent family in town. They were commercial farmers and ranchers with a large spread just south of town. They were quite wealthy and lived in the closest thing in town to a mansion.

They also were Episcopalians, so they hadn’t seen the Sheriff at the Baptist Church that morning when his deputy tapped him on the shoulder. They didn’t realize Marilyn was missing until they returned home from church. Ben’s parents had been out of town, in San Antonio for the weekend, and didn’t learn what had happened until they came home late Sunday night. And Will’s parents were divorced. He split his time between his parents’ homes, so he wasn’t missed until he didn’t show up for Sunday dinner at his mother’s house. That’s when she called the Sheriff.

Everyone knew who had died, but no one knew why. Even the Sheriff. He had his theories. Alcohol was involved. Plenty of empty beer cans were found. More were scattered along the road near a burned-out oil drum that looked like it had been used for a bonfire. Racing cars on *the Unknown* was a tradition. Hell, the Sheriff had done it in his day. But a head-on

collision was hard to imagine. Crazy. Unthinkable. But until he had witnesses or hard evidence, he kept his theories to himself. He knew from experience it was unwise to speculate in a town where everyone knows your name.

When he talked to the victims' parents, they offered him few clues.

"The last time Mother saw Marilyn she was headed out the front door on Saturday night," her father explained. He was holding his wife in his arms.

"Marilyn was a good girl, Sheriff" her mother said as she wiped her eyes. "Whatever happened out there wasn't her fault. It was those boys. Ben and his new car. He's been driving all over town like he owns the place. And you know Will's parents. They're divorced. I warned Marilyn about them. Told her to be careful. But you know how it is, Sheriff, right? They never listen."

Then she began to cry again, and the Sheriff teared up himself.

When he spoke to Ben's father, he heard the same. "Ben was always a responsible kid," he insisted. "Had a good head on his shoulders. Why do you think we gave him a Mustang for his birthday? If you ask me, Marilyn's the wild one. She was always pushing him to go faster."

"Do you know what they were doing out on *the Unknown*?" the Sheriff asked.

"Same thing we did when we were kids. Remember? Hell, I know you raced cars out there. We all did. But nothing this crazy. Nothing that would end up with a head-on. I don't understand that at all. And it makes me so angry."

Will's mother seemed to know a bit more.

"Ben was always pushing my boy to race him. Thought he was James Dean or something. When Ben got the Mustang, Will begged us to let him have the pickup. He fixed it up

real nice. Even paid for a new engine out of his lawn-mowing money. But I told his father Will was too young to have that truck all to himself. And now look what happened.”

Then Sheriff asked how he could reach Will’s father to find out what he knew.

“I wouldn’t bother. He’s been on a bender since he heard the news. Hell, where do you think those kids got all that beer?”

The funerals were held a week later but on separate days. Ben and Will’s parents decided to have their service for the boys together. It was held at the Baptist Church on Saturday and was well-attended. Marilyn’s parents were there along with the Sheriff, his wife, and Sarah. Many of the mourners didn’t know the boys or their families well but came anyway for a ‘look see’ at the two white coffins at the front of the church and to offer support for the parents of ‘those poor boys’ in their time of need.

Marilyn’s funeral the following day was held at the much smaller Episcopal Church. There wasn’t enough room for everyone to get inside, so the pastor opened the windows and the front door of the church so everyone could at least hear the choir and the church organ. If the funeral for the two boys wasn’t sad enough, Marilyn’s funeral was the most solemn occasion anyone could remember. Her mother and father sat stoically in the front pew, surrounded by the town’s mothers and daughters and sons and fathers, who wept openly throughout the service.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, we ask you to commit your beautiful daughter Marilyn to thy ever-lasting grace,” the minister prayed with his hand raised high above her charcoal black coffin. “Lord, please forgive her trespasses and give her peace.”

The hearse, followed by a long procession of cars, wound its way through every part of the small town. Pena Street, Ninth Avenue, then downtown until it reached the cemetery on the outskirts of Mexican Town near the city limits. People lined the streets and fell silent as the

hearse passed by. Marilyn's family was well-known and well-liked, and everyone wanted to pay their respects in one way or another.

At the grave site, a service was held just for family members and close friends. On the family's large plot where Marilyn's grandparents had been laid to rest and where her entire family would one day be buried, a large white tent covered a small empty grave. Marilyn's parents and her older brother sat stone-faced on folding chairs during the service, but at one point, her mother leaned her head against her husband's shoulder, and everyone lost it. Another wave of crying rolled over the small crowd. Several women fainted. Sad wasn't adequate to describe how everyone felt. And the heartache continued until finally six young pallbearers from Marilyn's high school class slowly lowered her coffin into its final resting place.

After the funeral Sarah and Billy, dressed in black, sat solemnly on a park bench near the courthouse and watched as a line formed outside the Dew Drop. The entire town was in mourning. And now that the biggest event in recent memory was over folks were anxious to share what they knew at the only coffee shop in town. Sarah and Billy, however, were not interested in sharing.

"You'll get us all in trouble, you hear," he told her, trying not to raise his voice. "Nothing you do or say can bring them back, so we need stay out of it."

"But folks should know what happened," Sarah insisted, trying to hold back more tears. "It was a stupid game. And somebody made a mistake. What's the harm in that?"

"And what do you think folks would do if they found out?" Billy answered, crossing his legs, and wiping dust off the tip of his boot. "If they knew what happened we might all go to jail," he said.

"Why?" she asked looking puzzled.

“Because we were there.”

Sarah looked across the street and watched the last person in line walk inside the cafe. The tragic deaths of three of her classmates were all anyone inside would be talking about, and it made her sick. The whispers, the rumors, the accusations. Kids running wild. Kids with fancy cars and too much money. Surely, their parents were to blame. Spare the rod and spoil the child. Her world had been turned upside down since last Saturday night, and nothing much mattered except what happened out on *the Unknown*.

She and Marilyn weren't particularly close. They ran with different crowds. But Marilyn had been nice to her. She and Sarah had several classes together. They were even lab partners in biology class. Marilyn wasn't a particularly good student, and she was happy when Sarah offered to share her notes. A week before Marilyn's life ended, they were dissecting a frog together in class. Sarah was using a small pair of tweezers to remove the frog's heart, when Marilyn's face turned white.

“I think I'm going to throw up,” she said loud enough to raise chuckles from the students around them.

“Is there a problem?” their biology teacher suddenly asked, standing up and staring at the two girls.

“No. No problem at all, Mr. Jackson,” Sarah quickly replied, holding up the frog's heart like a trophy.

After class the girls laughed about what had happened.

Then Marilyn turned to Sarah. “We're having a party out on *the unknown* this Saturday,” she said. “You should come.”



She had never been invited to one of Marilyn's parties. Not once. But Sarah tried not to act like it.

"Sounds cool," she answered, shifting her armload of books from one side to the other, "but Billy's in town this weekend, and we were thinking of going to the movies. Then hanging out at the Dew Drop."

"Oh, please," Marilyn insisted, putting her arm around her. "Everyone will be there. We'll build a bonfire. And the boys will bring beer. We don't even meet up until later anyway. And bring Billy if you want."

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In the weeks after the funerals, the smalltown slowly returned to normal. The Sheriff waited until the week after Thanksgiving before asking more questions. Although most people didn't seem to care what happened he thought it was important to learn the truth. So, he asked the principal if he could come speak to the entire sophomore class.

"I know many of you are still grieving," he told the students who had assembled in the high school's small auditorium, "And I'm sad about what happened, too, for all of you."

Sarah thought the Sheriff was looking straight at her.

"I'm just trying to find out what happened out there. And I was hoping some of you could help me. Now, if you're not comfortable speaking to me directly, please reach out to the principal or one of your teachers."

Days and weeks passed with no response. Christmas came and went, and there were still no new developments, no witnesses coming forward. Then, shortly after New Year's, the Sheriff got an urgent call from Billy's father, who was a foreman on one of the larger ranches on *the Unknown*.

“There’s been an accident, Sheriff,” he said, his voice trembling as he spoke. “Billy was taking some Christmas lights off the roof of the house, and his ladder slipped. It struck a powerline and electrocuted him.” The man started to cry. “I lost my boy. I tried and tried to get him to breathe, but he was gone. Just like that. It was horrible. My boy’s gone. God, how can that be?”

And so, death visited the small town once more, and everyone grieved again. Another young soul lost. Another classmate gone. Some people thought the town was cursed. The devil’s work, they said, and went to church and prayed for redemption.

A month after Billy’s funeral, the Sheriff was in his office behind closed doors and didn’t see Sarah when she walked and sat down in one of the plastic chairs in his small reception area. She remained there alone for the rest of the afternoon swinging her legs back and forth and staring at the linoleum floor. Finally, around five o’clock the Sheriff got ready to leave. He walked out of his office and saw the young girl sitting there.

“Sarah, how long have you been waiting out here?”

She didn’t respond.

“Honey, did you ask someone to find me?” he asked, trying not to sound concerned.

Still no response. She began crying,. Her lower lip trembled, but she remained silent.

“Why don’t you come back to my office, so we can talk,” he offered.

Slowly, she stood up and walked inside his office. When she sat down, Sarah sighed heavily but refused to look at him.

Something told him to be patient.

“I told her not to get in the car,” she said finally, staring at the floor. “I told her not to go with Ben. To play his silly game. But she didn’t listen. She got in the car anyway. She said it would be cool. And then....”

Sarah started shaking. The Sheriff pulled up a chair next to her and put his arms around the young girl. She leaned her head against his shoulder and continued to cry.

Several minutes passed before she spoke again. “Why, Daddy?” she asked through tears. “Why did they all die?” Then she looked up at him searching his face for answers.

The Sheriff pulled his daughter close. His eyes teared up. He loved her so much. And she was in so much pain. He couldn’t bear it. Someone so young and full of life should not experience so much death. It was so unfair. He wanted it to all go away.

“Why, Daddy?” she asked again.

But the Sheriff had no words. What could he say to her? Marilyn was gone. Ben and Will were gone. Billy was gone. Nothing he could do or say would bring them back. He wanted to believe in a higher power. He wanted to tell her it was all part of God’s plan. That it was simply their time. But he didn’t believe that. He didn’t have much faith in God. Death was too random to be explained away so easily. Death seemed too uncaring, too tragic, for excuses. What the Sheriff did know but could not bring himself to tell Sally is the deaths of her friends would live with her forever. It would connect her to her past, to her history. Like *the Unknown*, death remains with us, meanders for miles and miles throughout our lives. Always waiting for us just around the corner, just down the road.