

SPLIT THE MIDDLE

**A Novel by
Michael Golvach**

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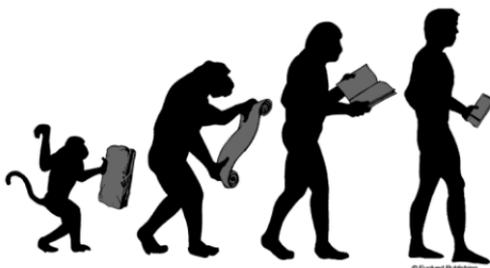
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BOOKS BY MICHAEL GOLVACH

Bloody Gullets
fiX
Missing Pieces
Split the Middle

MikeGolvach.net

DEDICATION

*For Duane Joseph Golvach,
I miss you. Thank you for being a good father to me while we
had our time together here in this life.*

*And for Ute Maria Golvach,
Thank you for being there for me, always. And thank you for
being a wonderful mother to me, still.*

God Bless You

Prologue

All my life, I've never known fear. Not in the sense most people do. I've known excitement. I've known stress. Never fear. Not until the day my world was turned inside out.

And I've known nothing but ever since.

The memories come back hard most times. Sometimes they only hurt a little. More and more often now, they're not as bad. But they always come back around. They'll never let me forget. And, when they do manage to lull me into a sense of complacency, they come back harder. Like a brick to the head. They hurt worse. They hurt like I never thought they could. They hurt like I deserve.

One day soon, I'm hoping they'll kill me. But, if they refuse to, I'm keeping busy working on that angle myself.

It all started with love. Doesn't everything? And when that fire got weak, whiskey and vodka kept the flames burning. Did too good of a job, depending on how you look at it.

And all I remember of that slow-growing inferno is a blinding light, swelling way too fast. Blurred by streaks of rain and ending in a noise so ugly and loud I'll never forget it. Though I'm positive I wasn't there to hear all of it, I remember every second, from start to finish.

Then there was blood. Everywhere. Soaking my clothes. Spraying up against fabric curtains that kept me from seeing, as I pounded on thick glass and watched it all end.

The fire went out. The future dimmed. The memories began. The light never left.

The love was still there in the end. Partly damaged, partly dead, but hanging on. I think it's still alive. I may never know. I'm not sure I want to. Most days, I just want to wake up to darkness. To finally know that peace. I don't expect I ever will.

But some people don't deserve to be happy or to be loved. Some people don't deserve to live. Or die quickly and easily.

The funniest thing about life, I suppose, is how afraid most people are of being forgotten.

That's still my greatest wish.

And everything happens for a reason. The trick is to learn to accept that the reason isn't always a good one. And it almost never makes sense.

I

Michael Dooley pulled his tattered overcoat up to his chin as he lurched out of O'Shannahan's pub and into the misting rain, leaving the door open wide. He squinted into the night as shouts from behind him called out, "Take her easy, Mickey. Keep dry." An embarrassing play on words that had long ceased to be even slightly amusing.

Bill "Billy" Williams—the closest thing to a friend he'd ever had—suggested he go fuck himself before he slammed the pub's front door closed.

Michael wished his distant drinking buddy the same, put his head down and breathed in the mist through his nose. Everything, even the rain, tasted of watered down whiskey. It wasn't a long walk to his ratty apartment, by anyone else's estimation, but the two blocks between him and a nightcap always felt as if they were one step too far. Enough time for his lonely mind to wander back to flagging visions of a loving wife and a beautiful, fading memory of a son. Enough time to remind him of the sadness that drove him to move forward.

His route lay before him, charted out and planned, and he could always reach that goal—achieve that sense of satisfaction. But, in the long run, the end was far off and distant. There was no refrigerated liquor to give him solace at the end of the trail, only more broken gravel beneath his feet. As stout and

determined as he wanted, and often claimed, to be, if he didn't take his journey in small steps, the weight of his wasted life would destroy him. Too afraid to quit fucking around with the liquor and end everyone's misery quicker. Meet his God and thank him for all the good times he couldn't remember.

The alleyway behind O'Shannahan's pub was the fastest way home. And it seemed the safest, even in the dark, where he was as likely to see demons in shadows as he was to get rolled. The younger, purer and more educated man inside him enjoyed the dichotomy of the path as well. To his right was the village of Broker, a lower-middle-class urban wasteland. To his left, the high-toned and polished city of Brittwood, the closest thing to Wall Street he'd ever seen. And he stumbled home each night, walking that fine line between Heaven and Hell, precariously balanced against the cold and comforting brick walls they shared.

As he walked deeper into the darkness, his eyes continued to play tricks on him. Paranoia and shock set in, as they always did. As he always let them. A part of him prayed his body would give in and not allow him to make it home before he could refuel. But the booze kept that symptom of his condition at bay.

The rain became increasingly heavy. The shadows took on new and strange forms and, as he remembered how much he enjoyed them, his pace slowed. Pawing at a ghost here and an apparition there, he stumbled along, catching himself mid-fall over and over.

As he continued along, letting momentum carry him past an intersecting pathway, his feet hit something solid. He tripped and fell forward, bracing the fall with his cheek. His hands followed slightly too late to soften the blow.

“What the fuck?” he muttered as his eyes fluttered open. His bug’s eye view of the Broker wall brought him back to the last point in consciousness he remembered. He’d had an accident. “How pedestrian,” he said to no one. Only a fragment of his mind found the blunt edge of his rapier wit amusing, and he noted the rain had turned back into a light mist, the sky still dark. In the absence of a clock, that would have to serve as a worthy judgement of time. An hour, at best, had passed.

He pushed his torso off the ground with his blocky arms, not feeling strong enough to keep his head from dangling in the process. As he lifted himself, he felt a pain in his gut. Not a stabbing pain like he would get after drinking for days, but a sharp pain nonetheless. As if he were young again, doing far too many pointless exercises to impress Suzie. Or Betty. Or whatever any of their names had been.

His mind dashed back in recollection. He’d ended up face down after bumping into a non-shadow in the rain. Something large, solid and weighty enough to catch his wild stride, stop it dead and knock him on his ass. Or was it— Yes, it was his face. He slid his fingers across his bruised cheekbone and groaned. He felt the bile in his throat threatening dry heaves, at best, unless he got some booze in him quick. Rather than attempt to push himself up any farther, he rolled over on his back and propped himself up on his elbows. The immovable object before him seemed to be a slightly misshapen, blurry black lump, about five feet in length.

“What the fuck? Who is that? Hello?” he asked before his mind consciously registered that he was most probably taking in the sight of a fellow fallen traveller. “Are you okay?” he cried out half-heartedly, sounding more aggravated than concerned. “Yo.” The

blurry black lump didn't move or respond. Michael pulled himself up onto his feet and moved slightly closer to get a good look. Scanning the alleyway for potential witnesses. Wondering, as he strained to see, why he gave a shit about anyone else but himself.

He kicked at the black lump pensively. Reeling once more as the shape began to take focus. This time he was able to stop himself from falling forward, but not from lunging sideways and bolstering himself against the Brittwood wall with one trembling hand as he began to heave. His body bucked and twisted several times before it gave up what little was left in his stomach. The spatter of his vomit blew mostly through his nose, stinging sharply. The only thing he could think to thank God for was giving him the presence of mind to realise he wasn't having the DTs, though even that seemed like a dubious reward.

He turned back around, the rain washing the weak spew from his face, and looked again. Now the figure was crystal clear, even at a distance. Several heavy black garbage bags wrapped and shielded a human frame. From the top protruded the face, neck and collarbone of a once beautiful woman. Her neck had been cut to the bone but, as far as he could tell, there was no blood coming from the wound. No blood anywhere on her flesh or around her body. Blackened discharge pooled under her neck and welled from her open mouth, washing over her lips slowly, like water from a vase, as it was coaxed out by the rain. The rest of her face looked like it had been thrown to the dogs. Fractured, bruised and inhumanly beaten. Wide, and seemingly deep, stab wounds trailed down her neck from the point of near-decapitation, probably past the broken cover of her bargain-basement shroud. He could almost feel the

knife—wielded by a sure and steady hand—going in over and over again, sticking and turning probably long after the life had left the young woman's body. Another dichotomy: Cold, calculated rage.

And that wasn't all there was to the horror. Though her face had been beaten savagely, mutilated in parts beyond recognition, he knew who she was. That she had once been disarmingly attractive. Her name? Another story. Another blurred memory. She hadn't been a pro, in the strictest sense of the term, but the last time he'd seen her, those lips, and what probably remained of her tongue, were suckling and lapping at his ears like a dog, her desperate, wandering hands stroking him through his pants. Her words and her actions making promises they would never keep. Another blackout. Bad timing. *Fucking bitch.*

Though the memories were enough to enrage and arouse him, Michael yanked himself back and away quickly. A good amount of liquor had left his system and it was becoming increasingly clearer he was in the last place he could afford to be.

As he shivered, remembering the last stretch of time he'd done at State College, he could already hear the voices raging in his head. *What do you mean, you didn't kill her? You were trying to fuck her, right? And she was good to go, I'll bet, until she figured out what a fucking waste you are and decided to walk. And you didn't take that very well, did you? Am I missing something, Einstein?*

He shook his head, mumbling something unintelligible in his defence, as the voices taunted him. *Save it, you dumb, mick cock sucker. We've got your vomit. We've got your hair. We've got your prints and we've got your ass.*

He fumbled at his face as the voices continued to insist: *When all those tests come back, we're going to have*

enough to put you away forever, and if things work out well, that'll be a very short time. You hear me, tough guy? We know you were trying to bang her. We know she shrugged your sorry, drunk ass off as fast as she could. We're going to find the weapon. Even if we don't, your rap sheet speaks for itself. Don't make things worse, pal, because you are fucked above and beyond. Your mama can't save you now. You keep pissing us off and you'll spend your remaining days pining for the chair, you weak piece of shit.

He looked around, attempting to wipe any remaining vomit spatter from his face, but the rain had washed him clean. His DNA floated in between the cracks of asphalt as far up and down all four directions of the alley's junction as he could imagine. Pulling off his left shoe, he removed his sock and buffed the parts of the bags he'd touched, glossing over her trampled face.

And don't forget about the fucking fibre, the voices in his head assaulted him as he slipped his wet, stained sock back on. *We've got that too.* He jammed his foot back into its sneaker.

The snot ran from his nose as he cried pathetically, like a child. Holding his hand up to cover the bottom of his face, he began to stumble backward. The stumble quickly became a limping sideways jog, as his eyes continued to look back in shock and fear. Before he knew it, he was running home. Still under the cover of night, his eyes half-blinded by tears and his body shaking violently. Anticipating, more than anything else – in a moment of self-pity – his next drink.

There would be time to think about what he'd been through later, once he got his head back together. A little hair of the dog that bit him and then proceeded to rend one gorgeous piece of meat into one hundred twenty pounds of ground beef.

II

Payden Beck made his way up the steps of the run-down apartment building slowly and deliberately. He wasn't going for effect, looking cool for the smattering of people he passed by; he was just fumbling for his cigarettes. Finding one, he crammed it into his mouth hard. His knuckles went white as he flamed on his Zippo. Exhaustion was written all over his face. *If only I'd quit fucking smoking. Then again, maybe I should just start taking the elevator.*

Only three more floors to go until he reached level G of the Brittwood Hills Projects' North tower, located in the fuzzy middle ground between the two neighbourhoods of Brittwood and Broker. Almost paradise, but mostly a stark reminder of what lay across the divide. As he made his way to apartment N-142, the no-knock warrant in his pocket began to hang out and he grabbed at it to keep it secure, crumpling it slightly. For what it was worth, the legality of what he was about to do meant as little to him as the proper paperwork. Call the right judge too early in the morning, tell him you've got a line on a drug dealing paederast prone to flight and you can run your beat the way you know it's got to be run. No time for fucking around with the clock-watchers: pushing papers, looking for pencils and seeking out excuses to ignore the ugliness of their chosen profession. He'd given up

the desk a long time ago, almost immediately after he'd quit walking the beat.

He reached level G and patted at his shoulder holster, hidden by his black faux-leather almost-bomber jacket. The shape of the P228 pistol underneath, and the kiss of its Nitron tip on his side, caused him to wince. As a wisp of smoke scraped across his left eye, he dropped the cigarette butt on the concrete and squashed it underfoot, grinding the butt over and over until he was sure it was out. He stared at the detached philtre, the remaining tobacco spilling around the torn paper, and thought maybe he'd seen something like that before. Maybe he'd see it again, soon.

The stairway door opened up smoothly, emitting only a slight creak. Nothing noticeable. There were roughly ten apartments per level, each filled with some variation of humanity, stuffed with the morning's meal, bloated and fat, sitting in front of the television, drinking coffee and, perhaps, wondering why they continued to get up and do it again. Life had a funny way of desensitising you to its presence, even when it was the only thing you ever really had. A trick of the Devil, maybe. A master he had perhaps met once, in a pub, stinking drunk and fresh from a kill. It was officially written up as a righteous shoot, but the story had played out the way he wrote it from the end right up to the beginning. That night he'd been an agent of the same master that served him now.

The indefinable blackness he called a heart wanted to believe he'd gotten into the police business to do the right thing. To serve and protect. Or was it to protect and serve? Did it matter, really, which came first? His soul clung to an even more desperate notion that

he'd—at least a part of him—chosen his profession to exact revenge on all the vicious, cruel mommies and daddies of the world. Vague, archetypal figures that still clawed at him from his past, asserting their place and position by continually lashing at his sense of self-esteem and self-control. He did love the job, though. For better or for worse, there was nothing quite like knowing you did the right thing, even if you had to do every wrong thing in the book to achieve that end.

Apartment N-142 was two doors down and he slowed his pace and moved to the side as the door to N-138 creaked open. A young black face stared up at him—his mother calling in the distance for his return. Payden held his finger up to his pursed lips with a “Shush” and looked into the boy's eyes. He loosened his coat slightly to reveal his matted badge and whispered, “Go on back to your mother, son. Police business.” No aggression in his voice, no anger. Calm exuded from him in waves.

The young man silently shut the door, his footsteps treading lightly back to his mother whose muffled voice sounded a bit too distressed. *God help the crazy bitch if she walked out into the hallway to investigate after getting Junior back to the breakfast table.*

When he reached the door his right hand slithered underneath his coat, producing the fat compact SIG Sauer. His left hand crumpled up the no-knock warrant and jammed it into his back pants pocket. Then it moved up and out to do the polite thing. Perhaps the last polite thing he'd be doing that morning. He knocked on the door softly. Twice, then once again.

“Anybody home?” he asked. He was the neighbourhood welcoming committee. The guy

down the hall whose kid was selling Girl Scout cookies. He never indicated he was police. That never seemed like the intelligent thing to do. "Hello, is anyone home?"

He always made a point to knock and ask politely, even with a no-knock warrant in his possession. Some things you do just to keep yourself from realising what you're about to do—what you're really capable of. And, for the love of sainted Christ, what the good people of your precinct empowered and sanctioned you with the responsibility of doing.

"Gave at the office," came a man's voice from behind the door. "Sorry."

Yeah. Sorry.

Stepping back an inch, he grabbed both sides of the door frame, positioning his body like a slingshot, and crashed his foot into the area just beneath the door knob. He could have tried weaselling it open first, but that almost always never worked or, at best, tipped off the perp. Brutal, immediate, violent entry was always the preferred option. The perp would still be tipped off, but he'd be nursing one mother of a sore ass.

He hammered the wood next to the knob and lock piece with his heel again. The particleboard crumpled into dust shavings, creating a spider-vein crease, bending the door inward enough that he was inside the apartment on his first shoulder bump. His arms immediately snapped perpendicular to his body, one holding the other to ensure the best possible targeted shot. The layout of the shit-hole apartment was simple: kitchen to the right, half-bath to the left, bedroom back right and a spacious living room dead centre.

He was inside and in position before the battered door stopped creaking.

The man sitting at his couch dropped the Chinese take-out he'd been eating into his lap and jumped up with a cry as he saw the gun. "God damn it. Jesus."

Payden's fists went white again, inching forward, careful to mind his periphery but locked dead on target.

"Payden Beck," he barked as he flashed his badge. No indication of his rank or department affiliation. "Vincent Fennel. That you?"

"Uh, yeah, I—" was all the reply he got before a muted voice called from the bedroom to the right. Glancing carefully toward the sound, he caught sight of a little girl, not older than six or seven years, holding on to the doorway for dear life. Scared to death. Payden's upper lip pinched into his lower lateral incisor, drawing a small well of blood. *Pimping her out already, Vincent? Or still just lowering her expectations?*

"Is everything okay, Daddy?" she asked. "I was sleeping. And there was a really loud noise. What's happening? Is everything okay?" Her voice trembled with fear as Vincent's eyes began to float.

"Everything's going to be just fine, darling," Payden said to the little girl. "Do as the nice policeman says and go back into your bedroom. I need to speak with your father for a moment. Do you have a phone in the bedroom, sweetie?" he asked. "And don't you move," he roared at Vincent, who had begun to reach back down to the couch.

"Yes, sir," the girl replied. "Is my daddy in trouble?" He saw the genuine concern in her tiny eyes as they watered, awaiting affirmation. For someone—anyone—to tell her everything was going to be okay.

Vincent spoke up. "Get back in your room, now. And call your mother to come pick you up. No back

sass." The little girl disappeared into her room and slammed the door shut. Payden sensed she was doing what she was told for all the wrong reasons. She already knew the dire consequences of disobeying.

"Haven't we got a fucking mouth, yeah?" he asked as he motioned to Vincent, directing him to kneel on the floor. "You've got the balls in the family, yeah? Doling out the discipline, teaching her what's wrong and what's right while you sit in front of a fucking coffee table covered in dust. Is that what passes for a healthy nutritious breakfast these days?" Payden began to chuckle a bit. Almost laughing. Not at all contagious.

As Vincent knelt on the floor, he also looked over at the coffee table, with that same sense of wonder and awe all good drug dealers – and habitual liars, if there was a distinction to be made – played to perfection. *My goodness, officer. I don't know how all that heroin could have gotten there.* Pathetic, yet admirable in a sense. At least the lies Vincent's face told him described some amount of sac.

"You make me fucking sick, you know that?" Payden asked. "'Course you do." He began laughing again. "Of course you do, Vincent. You've been handing out samples at the grade school. Dealing drugs to kids is a big no-no." Vincent's face began to turn white, matching Payden's knuckles, as he moved forward slowly, the gun still raised. "And no-nos sometimes lead to really bad boo-boos. Don't they, Vincent?" Vincent nodded as his face screwed up with anger, unable to mask his contempt for Payden's baby talk.

"Now," Payden continued, "I'm going to ask you a few questions to start off the morning, and you're

going to tell me the truth. The degree to which I believe you will determine how bad your inevitable boo-boo will be. Do we understand each other? Acknowledge you heard me.” Vincent nodded again, his lips covered with dry mucus. “Good. The first thing—maybe the only thing—I want to know, Vincent, is whether there really is a phone in that room and if, indeed, there is a mother, grandmother, aunt, uncle, whatever-the-fuck on the other end of the line that can come and pick up your little girl.”

“Of...” Vincent replied, his lips peeling apart. “Of course there is, man. I wouldn’t—”

“Wouldn’t what? Expose your child to illegal drugs? Involve her in criminal activity? Have her keep company with the kind of filth that get so fucking weak they have to come to you to catch a horsie? Don’t you lie to me, Vincent.” He’d begun to half-giggle again. “You don’t want to fucking do that. Believe me. I work for the city, but I work alone. This is going to go down however I tell it to the desk jockeys. Or, depending, how I tell it to IA after I put enough bullets in you to ensure your eternal corroboration.”

“Look, man. Look,” Vincent pleaded. He started to stand, his hands offered forth in some learnt posture of physical redemption. He dropped to his knees again, as Payden’s gun directed him. “I would never let my kid not, get... you know, man.” He was sweating hard, his lips still pasty. “Okay, I’m... you’re right. This is no place for a child, but I wouldn’t lie to you about that, man. She’s in there calling her mom. And her mom will come and pick her up early. You don’t know how happy she’ll be about that, right?” Vincent had begun to chuckle a little, but his attempt at levity sounded weak. “I mean, she’s coming. She’s definitely coming.

Should I call my daughter? Do you want me to bring her back out? She'll tell you. She'll —"

"Slow it down, Vincent. I'll call your daughter out in a moment. And you know what?" Payden flicked his pistol's safety switch off, showing Vincent as he did it. He grinned at the absurdity of the last few moments when his gun posed almost no danger. "As for her mother, I'm going to take your word for it." Relief washed over Vincent's face. "In the meantime, why don't you throw these on." He reached around and under the back of his jacket and threw a pair of cuffs on the coffee table, blowing heroin left, right, up and down. Vincent's eyes seemingly flicked in every direction at once. "Don't you worry about that shit, pal," Payden said. "It's not like you were going to get to keep it." He laughed again.

As Payden called Vincent's daughter out into the room and explained the situation in the most polite language possible, though he tried to contain his growing frustration, the mood still managed to become ugly. Unpleasant at best.

Payden escorted her out into the hallway and gave Vincent a mean look. "Don't be a wise guy. You're going to want to slip that other cuff through the radiator pipe near the window there—forget you had that, did you?—and lock it tight around your other wrist." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Don't half-ass this now." Vincent did as he was told.

"What's a half-ass?" the girl asked as Payden closed what remained of Vincent's front door.

"It's a bad word," he replied, grimacing. "A bad phrase. I'm sorry I said that. It wasn't right. Don't repeat it or your mommy might get upset." Payden walked the girl to the elevator at the opposite end of

the hallway. "What's your name, sweetie? You going to be okay?" He tipped her chin up with the pad of his left index finger, which slipped smoothly off.

"My name's Charity. And I think so, mister. I mean, officer." She was still trembling.

"Charity. That's a beautiful name." Payden glanced back toward the apartment. "You've got nothing to worry about from me, darling. You can call me mister if you like. You just get down to the main lobby and stay inside. Wait for your mommy. Don't open the doors to the building for anyone else. You tell her Daddy's in a bit of trouble with the police. She'll understand. He's done some bad things and I'm going to have to take him down to the precinct and talk to him for a little while. Not to worry, though. Daddy will be well tended to. I promise." His eyes trained on hers. "You just forget this ever happened. It makes me feel bad just knowing you have this to forget in the first place. Okay?"

"Okay, mister," she replied, a hint of a smile coming out from behind the sadness. "Tell him I said good morning. Tell him I love him. Take good care of him, all right? He needs someone to take care of him." She spoke with a wisdom beyond her years. The lighter side of living with tragedy.

"I'll take care of him, sweetie." He leant forward and gave her a peck on the forehead. "I'll make sure he gets the help he needs." He paused as the elevator doors opened. "Now head on downstairs and go take care of your mommy. She needs you too." He gave her a quick but warm smile.

"Okay. Bye, mister."

She waved, pushing the bottom-most button as the doors closed behind her. He waved back. "Bye."

The elevator doors closed and he straightened his posture slowly. At least he hadn't lied to her entirely.

Payden re-entered the apartment in much the same fashion as he had initially, stopping himself short of kicking in the already demolished door. Vincent lay sprawled out on the floor, chest up and neck craned forward to look at him. The sweat on his brow had burgeoned into flowing streams. *Old fashioned water heaters. Sometimes life gives us these little gifts.* He brandished his weapon again, giving it a good polishing with his sleeve. Not that he had fingerprints on that hand to worry about, anyway. The door closed weakly behind him and the empty hallway was mostly barred from view.

"What the fuck is your problem, man?" Vincent squealed like a prison bitch. He had the look like he'd been inside before. Probably liked the food, but never quite got square with the anal rape.

"I made your daughter a promise, Vincent, you lucky cock sucker." Payden wasn't laughing anymore. "I don't like to have to lie to children. They're...." He paused, looking up at the ceiling as if to reflect on his prepared speech. "They're pure. They're innocent. They don't know what a cesspool this world really is until someone like you comes along and shows them. Hopefully we got her out of here in time. I'd hate to think of myself stuffing fins down her G-string in ten or twelve years. It's just.... It's fucking depressing, Vincent. You are a depressing person. And I mean that with all sincerity." Vincent squirmed, playing at the cuffs as they ground into his wrists. "Here you are, the kind of filth I live to bring down, and you come at me with that sweet, beautiful little girl. And don't tell me it's not your fault she was here. You

fucked something more disgusting than yourself at some point in your life and produced her. It's funny how genetics work out. You brought her into this world. She's only here because you created her. You made the decision to take her right down the drain with you. You. You, Vincent."

"Look—"

"But I'm not going to let that happen," Payden interrupted, sighing, as he reached down and unlocked one of the cuffs. "I'm not going to disappoint that little girl. You probably thought she was a mistake, didn't you? Proved you wrong, though, yeah?"

"Look, man, I appreciate your taking it easy on me. I really do. Isn't there something we can work out?" Vincent was up on his feet again, Payden's gun tracing his path. "Look, I'm, really.... I'm basically a good person. I've done some time. I won't lie."

"Anymore?" Payden asked.

"What?"

"Nothing. Bad joke. Proceed." Payden's free hand made a sweeping motion, as if showcasing some wondrous, yet obviously mediocre, prize.

"Look, all I'm saying is.... I just mean, nobody knows about this thing except you, me and my little girl. You know?" Vincent was looking confident again. Impressive. "Maybe we can cut a deal. You take the shit. The H, and all the coke in the apartment."

Payden's left eyebrow cocked up. "And?"

"And the pot. And all the pot. That's all I have, man. I mean, I'm sure you don't use, but that would be a hell of a bust, right? I mean, you don't need a person to go along with that. You were chasing some guys and they dumped it—whatever—some shit like that. You're a cop. You know all the angles. You can do this thing

so we both walk away. I'll be the loser. It's cool. I understand. You got me." Vincent's hands raised up in surrender. "All I'm asking for is a little leniency. Whatever you can find in your heart, brother."

"First things first," Payden said, kicking the hallway rug off to the side behind him. "I'm not your brother and you don't get to ask for anything." He continued to move toward Vincent, snake-like, in a slow zig-zag as Vincent's expression went loose. "And if that stupid look on your face is the question I think it is, I'm trashing this fucking place on purpose. So everything makes sense later."

"What doesn't make sense now?"

The coffee table flew over onto its side as Payden kicked it hard, sending heroin, baggies, balloons and rubber bands spilling onto the floor. "It's good you understand about angles. It warms my heart to hear you say that." His words dripped sarcasm as he ignored Vincent's question. With his free hand he yanked Vincent by the t-shirt and dragged him straight into, and through, the Sears family room furnishings. Payden bounced Vincent's head off the kitchen doorframe, positioning him upright with a measured bump of the fist to the back of the neck.

"Wait," Vincent begged. "I thought we could—"

"I see all the angles," Payden yelled into Vincent's ear, pressing the gun into his back at the kidneys. "I see them all."

Payden stepped back as Vincent turned around. "Okay, officer. That's... good. I thought maybe we had a... you know. Problem or something."

"You know what this is?" Payden asked, pulling a snub-nosed revolver from his jacket's inside pocket.

Vincent stood, dumbfounded.

“Well, since you don’t seem to recall, this is what they call a throw-away piece. It’s what some policemen use when they, for instance, get caught up in a bust gone bad. You know the story: perp pulls a Pez dispenser out of his pocket, officer straight out of the academy shoots first, asks questions later—not that that’s a bad policy, mind you. It’s—”

“Yeah, okay, man,” Vincent interrupted. “I get it. I know what it is. What the fuck angle are you playing? You think you’re going to... you think you’re— You just walked my little girl down the hall. Sent her off with her mom. She knows what went down. Which means my wife knows. Half the fucking town will know by this afternoon. My little girl, you let her go....” Vincent’s eyes grew wide and hopeless. “You let her go, didn’t you? Please say you let her go.”

“Of course I did, Mary. Don’t go pissing your panties,” Payden replied. “The fuck kind of person do you think I am?” He paced to the left, his gun still directly on Vincent. “It is precisely because of your little girl that today is going to turn out the way it’s going to turn out.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? What the fuck is wrong with you?” Vincent’s voice raised slightly. “What do you mean?” he asked, lowering his voice as Payden motioned with his gun.

“Vincent, I told her I’d take care of you.” Though it seemed impossible, Vincent’s face went whiter. “I made her a promise. You can’t expect me to break that. She’s just a little girl. What does she know of the world, except everybody’s really good deep down inside, life is fair and trust is a law none of us can violate?”

“You mother fucker. You....” Vincent clawed the walls as he wriggled under the eye of the pistol.

Payden paused again for effect and began to chuckle. "That's why you're going to get off easy."

Vincent smeared at his chest in the symbol of the cross as he coughed out a huge sigh of relief. "Oh, sweet Jesus. Thank you." Vincent laughed. "You are one crazy son of a—"

"Yeah," Payden concluded. "You're getting two right between the fucking eyes, Vincent." Pointing the throwaway piece behind him, he rattled off three shots, keeping his gun arm aimed at Vincent. After throwing the piece at Vincent's feet, he levelled up, found his mark and planted two police-issued bullets in the centre of the parkway. As promised.

Vincent's forehead caved in slightly on impact and the back of his head exploded against the wall and ceiling as the remainder of it smacked into the wall and collapsed with the rest of his body.

As Vincent's body continued its snail-crawl down the wall, Payden paused to reflect on his next course of action. Instead, he started thinking about how he'd seen so many movies that, every time he got to splatter a perp, the resulting noise sounded more like a bag of wet ice hitting a side of beef than the real thing.

After wiping down the throwaway piece and pressing it into Vincent's hand, Payden began collecting baggies and rubber-banding huge piles of heroin into little containers. One of the other perks of working your own hours. Though he couldn't pocket any green with product sitting in evidence, he knew more than a few people who'd be willing to take it off his hands for five percent of street value. Easy money.

After waiting a good ten minutes or so, Payden pulled his police walkie-talkie from inside his coat, panting desperately into the receiver. "Emergency,

emergency. Detective Payden Beck reporting. Narcotics arrest met with armed resistance. Not much dope here, but things went south. Perp seemed a little hopped up. Meth, maybe. We have a shooting. One suspect down. In bad shape. 114 Bradley Street. Floor G, apartment N-142. Need an ambulance on site, ASAP. Officer in pursuit of possible accomplice. Confirm.”

The chalky voice on the other end repeated the details and indicated help was already on the way. “Ten-four,” he replied, holstering his weapon and putting the walkie-talkie back into its sleeve.

As he looked down at the roundabout from Vincent’s kitchen window, the morning light half-blinding him, he saw a conservative minivan sitting in front of the building. After a few moments, Vincent’s daughter ran out to the car to meet her mother, who had been working up a lather pacing back and forth in wait. As the little girl hopped into her arms—shaking with joy, it appeared—she looked up, as if she were staring directly at him. His face cracked a genuine, but minimal, smile.

“Who the fuck are we, Vincent?” Payden asked. “Who the fuck are we if we can’t keep our promises?”

His phone began to ring as he pondered that notion.

III

Valarie awoke with a sense of dread mixed with urgency, as if she were waking up to another nightmare. The bleak light of the Saturday sun shone through the cracks in her bedroom's Venetian blinds as she propped herself up on her elbows and surveyed the empty room. Her sweat-soaked white tank top stuck to her skin, and the thin blanket covering her from the waist down felt like a heater.

She kicked off the blanket and shoved her pillow out from under her head, rolling unsteadily off the bed and onto her feet. Her knees buckled and her body swayed softly. She groaned as she rubbed at her forehead, trying to remember where she'd been the night before. Or who she'd spent the time with. Or what she'd done. Nothing serious, she hoped. And probably nothing remotely enjoyable.

She stared at the damp spot of blood leaking through the front of her panties. This period was almost over, another chapter in another twelve-month book of an indeterminate volume of life before menopause. Her stomach twisted as she thought about how much worse being trapped in a woman's body was going to eventually become.

As she stood, she grabbed her robe from the chair next to her night table, leaving the lights off. Her body was still on fire as she slung the robe over her shoulder

and headed into the bathroom. Thoughts poured through her head as she half-heartedly brushed her teeth with the tip of her right index finger.

Time for breakfast with the family.

She dropped to her knees, barely lifting the seat of the toilet in time, as vomit choked through her lips and spewed heavily into the water. She dry-heaved, the muscles in her abdomen contracting, shooting pain down her back and straight through her kidneys. Several more jarring wretches and she was done.

She knelt, as if in prayer, for a few more minutes, breathing through her mouth, spittle connecting her quivering lips with the muddied toilet water not two feet from her face. Tears and mucus joined in the stream, all three converging into one uninterrupted disgusting reminder that she was human. That life hurt. That things might never get better. The greater part of her hoped for the return of a happy and fulfilling life, but the pragmatist inside was holding court now, front and centre, as she stared through her blurry, bloodshot eyes at the remnants of last night's dinner floating atop crystal clear water.

She spit and choked the remaining bile and tears, sweat and saliva from around her mouth and nose, groaning as she stood up and flushed the toilet. This time she brushed her teeth with a toothbrush and toothpaste. Not much better, but at least the stinging in her nostrils and the back of her throat felt minty fresh.

Pulling herself together, she stumbled into the kitchen. Plates were stacked high in the sink, a reminder of her own loneliness. No one else lived there anymore. Only her. Yet the stack of plates made it seem as if a family still inhabited the house. Behind her the table was set with three place mats. One had a fork

and napkin beside it, the other a small coating of dust, and the last, smallest one, looked immaculate, spit-shined and gleaming. A trail of flowers and teddy bears were painted around the outside of its pink laminate. Only three months or so ago, those places would have been set as well.

Now, only one setting remained in play. The second, filthy one held a promise—or was it a callous reminder?—of a full and joyful life. Of laughter and love and happiness. Of two old souls creaking away on rockers on the front porch, holding hands, looking into each other's eyes and recalling the simple bliss of a lifetime of shared memories. Sad, yet beautiful. The third place mat—she gagged, grabbing on to the sink faucet—would never be used again. She had a son once. She would never stop trying to convince herself that her only crime had been not loving him as much as she could in the little time she had, well aware she was more guilty than she allowed herself to imagine. And the guilt continued to slowly pile up on her as she refused to come to terms with the past and to, finally, let it go.

Her breakfast consisted of a bowl of bran flakes, straight from the box into an unwashed bowl, eaten by hand and clutched to her side as she opened the freezer to grab a bottle of chilled Stoli to wash it down. She slumped into her seat, grabbed another handful of cereal and chewed on it for what seemed like hours. The inside of her mouth was dry and pasty, the bran flakes turning into balls of dough as she prayed for her body to produce saliva. It didn't, of course, and she reached for the icy vodka a few minutes later, one-handedly the twist-cap off and letting it drop onto the table top. She drew it to her mouth quickly, slugging

down her first shot. Drawing it away from her face, she shuddered from the instant kick and watched as her arm quivered on the way back down. The bottom of the bottle clanked like a spinning coin as she steadied it. This wasn't the first sign of a problem with the sauce. But someday it just might be the last.

She remembered seeing a movie about drunks where an old whiskey-hound, deep into it and well on his way to the afterlife, had devised his own rope-and-pulley system to get those first few drinks down before the tremors went away. He would make a noose, tie one end of it to his drinking hand, drape the string across the back of his neck and use his other hand, pulling down, to lift his drinking hand to his mouth. He still spilt a bit, but he got most of it down. She hoped that knowledge would never come in handy. But, if she never found the strength to break the routine, it inevitably would. Life's journey didn't appear to be coming upon a fork in the road any time soon. Not that she'd be able to recognise it, in her steadily deteriorating state, until it was too late.

The sound of a heavy fist pounding on her front door startled her, making her second attempt at a classy chug spill droplets of vodka onto her tee. Getting up, she noticed her condition and wrapped her robe around the tank top-and-white-cotton-panties ensemble she had chosen as casual wear that morning. The previous night, to be precise.

The pounding sounded again.

"Coming," she screamed, sounding almost as angry and aggravated as she felt. She hadn't looked at the clock over the kitchen sink area, and she didn't wear a watch, but it felt like it was way too early in the day for anyone to come calling. She made it a point to

keep a distance from her neighbours in Broker. If they weren't drug dealers or meddling old gossips, they might make decent drinking buddies, but she had enough friends from work and far too many issues to lay on anyone who dared tread into her life. If she ever let anyone in, she only did so to watch them run away as fast as they could.

Thoughts of rapists and murderers, thugs, toughs and street scum still swam in her head as she yanked open the front door anyway. It stopped an inch short, tugging at the metal chain lock, providing a false sense of security that somehow comforted her. The man standing on her doorstep, holding his clawing, mewling cat in his hands, made her fume.

"You? You mother fucker. Not now." She growled as she slammed the door closed, reaching up for the actually-safe deadbolt lock she'd declined to pay to have installed. Her fingers blindly traced the route and went through the motions anyway as her quaking, shivering body wilted away from the door and she screamed a more distinct request that she be left alone.

"Val. Come on, Val," the muffled voice demanded. Loud enough, she supposed, to disturb the neighbours she couldn't care less about. "I need.... Look. I need to talk to you. Open up." She stood, cradling herself in her arms, her head hanging down. Looking at the floor, then to the left and the right and back down again. Over and over, as Michael Dooley's fists continued to make their case on the other side of her front door. He could just as easily break in the back door or through any of the living room's sliding Plexiglass windows. She knew he knew that. In his own way, he was always considerate. It was a lie his actions had been telling her since they first met.

“Get out of here, Mickey,” she screamed again, this time with more conviction. The first drops of vodka had begun lowering her blood count. “You’re not welcome back here yet. You are not welcome... ever.” She ran into the kitchen to snag the bottle of vodka off the table. His dulled voice began to plead as she swung the bottle, chugging it more confidently, as she ran to the living room windows and locked them tight. She then made her way to the back door to make sure, at the very least, the simple knob-lock was secured and fastened. Having made her rounds, still hearing him pounding at the door and wailing incoherently, she guzzled down another heavy dose of alcohol, shook her head in frustration and walked a determined path to the front door.

She unhooked the chain lock and opened the door wide, a part of her wondering why she’d just spent the last few moments securing all the other doors, locking herself in. “What the hell do you want?” she asked.

Valarie’s robe had come undone, exposing her skimpy attire. “You look good,” he replied automatically.

Noticing Michael’s eyes drifting downward as he spoke, she wiped her brow with her bottle hand and took another swig. “Had a rough night last night. I feel sick and I look like shit, so you can save it. My eyes are up here. What?”

“I need to come in, okay?” Michael asked, still not meeting her gaze.

Valarie had seen him look worse. Not so long ago. Begging for her forgiveness while the police dragged him out of a hospital emergency room in handcuffs. Blood mixing with his tears, while their son clung desperately to life in a room neither of them were supposed to have entered. She saw he was feeling

almost as desperate. Nothing fake, nothing prepared. Nothing like most of the other ridiculous excuses he'd since used to try to worm his way back into her life or into her pants.

"What did you do?" she asked. "No. Don't tell me." She held up an index finger and shook her head. "I can't help you, Mickey." A drunken calm mixed with her pitying tone. "Whatever kind of shit you've gotten yourself into, I can't. You have to do this—whatever it is—on your own. I can't help you... or your stupid fucking cat." She turned and walked away, leaving Michael standing at the open door, his Calico scratching at his forearms as he held it firm.

"Listen," he began, stepping into the room. "I just need you to—"

"What did I say?" she asked, turning around in place and motioning for him to move back. "Did I say you could enter? What did I just tell you? Back up. If it's even remotely possible for us to work through our problems. Our... marriage. It's going to take time, Mickey. You can't make all our problems go away by constantly showing up here."

He stepped back outside. "Look, Val, honey. I know you—"

"You don't get to call me that. Not honey. Not Val. Just Valarie, for now. Just Valarie."

"Look, honey... Val—Valarie," he sputtered. "I'm not here to push our thing any faster than it needs to be pushed. I just have to talk to someone. So, give me a fucking break, for once. It's not an easy thing I have to say. I—"

"For once?" She glared at him, securing her robe and punctuating her words with a stabbing index finger. "Pity doesn't live here anymore, Michael. We're

pretty much over, except for the paperwork. The only connexion we ever had is dead. Dead, you fuck. Your fault. Yours. Just like that fucking cat. Get out of here. Get out of our – my – house.” She knew she was acting irrationally. Her verbal assault hardly made sense to herself. Inside, she still held a place in her heart for her Michael, but on a hangover, that section was closed for repairs.

“But, Valarie, I –”

“I can’t help you,” she repeated slowly, as if speaking to an infant. “You need to turn your sorry ass around, go back to that fucking dive, O’Shannah’s, or whatever it’s called now, and lay your problems on the bar for all your drinking buddies. Or one of your easy women. Maybe they can help you out. I can’t. Not now.” The last few sentences made her face slightly blush as she recognised the hypocritical nature of her argument. Regardless, it was time for another swig.

“Easy women? Look, there’s no one – Okay, honey... Val – Valarie. If I can just leave the cat with you, that would be enough. Could you do that for me? Just that?” He was sweating and shivering right along with her. The tremors as well, no doubt, but his shaking was more pronounced, as if he were holding back a massive spasm.

She shook her head. “Fine, leave the cat. And I know there’s no one else. I’m just... You brought food?” she asked, the edge coming off her voice slightly. He nodded in assent and dragged a pound bag of Kittie Chow from the side of the door into the front area, along with a small litter box, freshly filled.

“By the time this is used enough that she won’t go in it anymore,” Michael said, still holding his cat, “I’ll either be back to get her or you can give her away. Let

her go. Fuck, I found her in an alley, so she's probably still good to make it out there. Better than some of us, that's for sure." He looked into her eyes, his body quaking, and his gaze never shifted. There was sadness in it, as there always was—probably always would be—but there was also a hint of fear. She'd never seen that look on him before, and it scared her.

"What did you do?" she asked again. "What did you.... Wait." She stopped herself short of a rant as she saw Michael's eyes open wider with hope. "No. I don't want to know. Don't involve me in your business." His eyebrows sank back down. "You're broken, Mickey. I'm—we're—broken too. And we don't have all the parts to put the puzzle back together again. Not yet. Maybe not ever. I can't be your sounding board. Now go. Leave."

He continued to look at her from outside the doorway. His face showed even more signs of remembrance of the horrors of his past. It also pressed flat, as she sucked the life out of his planned polemic. "Okay," he muttered. "I understand. It's not you. It's all me. Never you. It's always me. I know. If I were you"—he turned, looking back—"I wouldn't want to have anything to do with me either. If you could—"

"Yeah? What else, Mickey?" Her eyes drew into slits, her head swimming as she began to feel like an emotional hostage again. Michael was good at playing with people. He wasn't the driest wet hammer in the sack, but he had his wits.

"If the police come, Valarie," he said. "If they come by looking for me, don't tell them you saw me. Just say you got the cat in the separation agreement if they ask. Or make some other shit up, I don't know. I'm just asking you to forget I ever came here. That

should be easy enough. If you can't do anything else for me, can you just do that one little thing?" His eyes begged right along with his lips, his limp and his sagging posture.

"Sure thing, Mickey," she replied wearily, tired of their argument. "Just leave, all right? Go."

"I love you, Val—"

She slammed the door in his face.

Leaning against it with her back, clutching her bottle and listening for the sound of his footsteps, she whispered to herself, "I love you too, Mickey," and let a tear go.

If she'd been thinking clearly, their conversation wouldn't have ended where she'd broken it off. The 'one little thing,' she realised as she stood up and walked back toward the kitchen, probably wasn't really so little. But Michael was gone, as she'd requested, before she could ask him for an explanation.

She darted back to the front door and opened it as she tightened her robe. She looked forward, left and right, but Michael was gone. The only evidence he wasn't a hallucination brought on by guilt and alcohol-poisoning meowed up at her, making sure she watched as it went potty in the litter box, just like a good kitty should.

"Happy now?" she asked as the cat began to cover up its mess and she looked away.

Her face was painted with confusion as she stood and wondered what Michael had meant. He wasn't weak. Not in that way. He wouldn't lower himself before her to get out of spending a few nights in the tank. He'd done that more than once without any problem. And her confusion turned into a nagging itch. If he was really begging, and not just putting on a

show, he must have done something really wrong. Something possibly worse than when he'd taken their child out for a wild, drunken ride to the only liquor store open at two o'clock in the morning on a cold ugly night not three months ago.

As she closed the door and refastened the chain-lock, her eyes drifted to the carpet. Tiny pink paw prints led from the front door to the side of the litter box, where Michael's cat—what was her name? Cutie? Yeah, that would do for now—sat and purred for no reason.

She got on all fours and lightly touched at a print on the dirty white carpet. It smeared easily, as if diluted. Maybe it was just cranberry juice. That would make sense if it weren't on the cat's paws and Michael's drug of choice wasn't a whole lot harder.

Running into the bathroom, she grabbed a roll of toilet paper and came back to the trail, making sure not to step on any of the prints. Pulling a few sheets free from the roll, she patted one lightly on a fresh print and pulled it up. It did look an awful lot like blood. Watered down. Blood that had been out in the rain overnight.

Though she couldn't remember exactly, Michael hadn't been holding onto a wound as he stood outside their door. His footprints on the porch, entryway and front stairs were pure water, no colouring. Checking the cat, feeling all around her, she found no evidence it was injured either.

And every excuse she could come up with, to try and pretend away what she knew, didn't stand up. The blood wasn't Michael's. It was someone else's. Someone he'd been trying to tell her about. Someone whose condition she'd have to lie to the police about if

she were to keep her word. Another barroom brawl, most likely. Maybe the other guy was less than all right.

Her thoughts left Michael as she ran for the carpet cleaner, taking another deep chug of vodka.

"I'm going to need a lot more of this," she said to Cutie as she waved the bottle, "if I'm going to bullshit the cops about not seeing your daddy. Son of a bitch, why do I let him get me into these messes?"

IV

Bryan Verrill pulled up in his conspicuous pink Hyundai and parked at the corner of Finance and Third. His wife had bought the car for him when the precinct gave in and allowed him to expense a vehicle for undercover work. Needless to say, no one in the upper ranks was pleased with his choice of automobile, and some of the boys on the squad had started a rumour that he'd finally gotten in touch with his feminine side. He did his best to look professional as he got out and walked toward the alleyway behind O'Shannahan's pub.

"What's the story here, officer?" he asked the first responder, a square-jawed, square-bodied rookie yukking it up with his pals. All eyes drifted to his car parked down the street, and one of the boys let out a little chuckle. He saw they were all holding back laughter.

"Well, sir," the uniform began, "it seems we have a little woman trouble here." The sarcasm in his voice drew more bubbles of stifled laughter to the surface as the other officers turned and walked away. Heads down, not in shame, sorrow or remorse. Just enough to keep them from busting a gut. No respect for the dead.

Bryan moved into the officer's space and spoke softly, directly into his ear. "Listen. I get called at 7 a.m. on a Saturday, telling me we've got a murder on our hands. Happened overnight, they said. You want to tell

me what you and your buddies have been doing here since you arrived? I assume you've collected some witness testimony. Or some statements from people who live and work around the area. I was told you were the first responder. Tell me you've got something."

"Well, sir," the uniform began, backpedalling. "We... um, I was — am — the first responder, but we've only got the one relic in the alley." The officer pointed, without looking, down the alleyway toward the captain, a few CSI techs and a grieving old lady. "And she hasn't been much help. As for canvassing. Well, we assumed that once you got here, we'd —"

"That's where you messed up," Bryan said, his voice still even. Still cold. "That's why you're still in your blues walking the streets with a target on your back. You and your boys need to go and start canvassing the neighbourhood. Ask questions. Look for clues. Do something. And remember that advice. I believe it's in the handbook."

"Yes, sir," the uniform replied.

"And one last thing." Bryan looked around to make sure no one was within earshot. The other officers were halfway down the block, in a fit of knee-slapping hysterics. Sometimes the pressure was just too much to bear. "I want to thank you for being here. For showing up every day, like those other rooks down the street. Laughing it up at the scene of a crime. I have a feeling, one day, you'll take a bullet for me. Well, not me, personally — one can only hope. But if it wasn't for visionless wannabes like you and the boys down the street, I wouldn't sleep like a baby every night, knowing you were there for me." Bryan took a step back and patted the uniform on the

shoulder. "Now, you go get your men together, canvass the neighbourhood and see what you can turn up. Remember, you have the detective division's appreciation. When you get killed in the line of duty, we'll be sure to send flowers. Now take a walk, slick."

Bryan moved on. The officer stared ahead in disbelief for a second before turning around and snarling back at him, mumbling some form of slur under his breath.

"I heard that," Bryan said. Loud enough that his voice echoed through the alleyway. "I'll be sure to include it in our sympathy card." He continued to look forward as he walked away, a hint of a smile on his lips, as the officer continued to curse him. Bryan never much cared what people said about him behind his back. Even if they were pointing a gun at his head. He was the definition of focus, will, piss and vinegar. Life had sorted him out just fine so far. And, though only one other person—that he knew of—was aware, he held the distinction of once burying a man outside the department's auspices.

That point in his life had redefined his character. Sometimes he found it hard to believe he'd lived any other way before that moment. After you'd killed another living soul for the department, you became someone else. No ifs, no ands. You became different. The act of taking a life changed you. And after you'd done it to clean up a personal mess, you weren't even sure you were human anymore.

"What's up, Captain?" Bryan asked, lighting up a smoke. "I heard somebody got dead. How'd this end up on our side of the fence? The grass just doesn't seem greener anymore." The cigarette crackled between his

lips. He wasn't smiling. He rarely did. It was alleged he might have a sense of humour about the job, but that hearsay never quite substantiated itself.

"Hey, Verrill," the captain began. "We've got a bit of a zoning issue happening here. Talks are still ongoing, but I figured I'd bring you in on this early since Broker usually gets fucked when something happens on the border."

Bryan pulled up his left shoe, picking out some loose asphalt. "Isn't that the truth. I don't suppose the victim had enough class."

"Yo, pal, watch it with the crime scene," one of the CSI technicians shouted at Bryan. "Don't go fucking up the area until we get it cleared, okay?"

"Slow it down." Bryan raised his voice slightly in reply. "And be careful. I think I just heard some relevant DNA crawl up your ass and die."

The captain chuckled, looking at the pavement. "Always the wallflower," he muttered. "If you have the time, see if you can get a statement from the old lady. I don't think she knows much, but the rookies can't spot a hunch unless it's riding up someone's back."

"You got it, Captain," Bryan replied, shaking his hand, then saluting. "I'll report back as soon as we establish a baseline and determine how we'll proceed."

"Excellent." The captain patted him on the shoulder as he walked back out toward 3rd Street. "I can always count on you. Say hi to the missus."

"Will do. You take care now." Bryan and the captain parted ways as he walked toward the old lady.

"Hey, tough guy," one of the CSI boys spoke up. "We already got trace alcohol and some puke. What do you say to that?"

"I'd say it's time you started going to your meetings again." He shook his head. "Trace alcohol and puke? Downstreet from a pub? Not exactly the find of the century." He kept his eyes trained on the elderly lady before him, not giving the CSI technician a hint of physical recognition.

"Go fuck yourself, brown-nose," Bryan heard him reply, just loud enough, as he opened his mouth to ask the lady a question.

"Pardon those gentlemen, ma'am," he consoled the lady as he walked her out toward 2nd Street at the other end of the alley. "The job gets to them. I think it's all the violence. Either that or waiting twelve years to find a dog hair twenty miles from the scene of a homicide before they can contribute anything to a case." The lady snickered.

"In any event," he continued, toning down his speech, "I'm here to try to get something started as soon as possible. As you may well be aware, most homicides are solved within a few days of the commission of the crime. We got lucky—if you could call it that—on this one, because this appears to have happened sometime last night. Is there anything you can tell me about what you saw when you found this young—" He turned and glanced down.

Though his facial expression and posture didn't confirm it, he recognised the victim and it stopped him like a boot to the teeth. It had been almost three or four months since he'd committed one last instance of infidelity with her, and he'd punished himself internally ever since. Desperately wishing there was something—anything—he could do to make her go away for good. To make her stop calling him at home. To stop her—once and for all—from trying to fuck up his marriage and his life.

“Officer?” the lady enquired.

“This young woman? I’m sorry.” He paused as he moved the lady farther out toward the street and cleared his throat. “On television, they always say you get used to seeing this sort of thing. Being on the force, that is. But, as an ordinary citizen and a loving husband, I can tell you that it just isn’t so.” He couldn’t remember the last time he’d rattled off bullshit like that. No matter, the old lady didn’t seem to notice or care. “Also, if you can recall anything you may have seen prior to the discovery? Assuming you were around or about the neighbourhood yesterday, of course.”

“Why, yes,” the old lady began. “If I can. I’d be more than happy to help. I probably don’t know as much as you’d like, I’m afraid.” She looked up at him, seeking approval. Her verbal repetition exposed her nervousness.

“That’s quite all right, ma’am.” Bryan patted her on the shoulder to soothe her. “There was no one but the victim and the person, or persons, we’re trying to find, here at the time of the... event. We’re just trying to put it all together. I’m sure whatever you have to say, anything you recollect, will be helpful. Sometimes, it’s the most minor of details that ends up creating that ‘aha’ moment, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, of course I do. Such a polite boy,” she began again. “As I already told the rather rude gentlemen over there” – her finger motioned toward the uniforms on the street and wagged disapprovingly – “I was out doing my rounds this morning. You see, I like to start the day off with a walk. Just once or twice around the block. Keep myself looking young, you know?” She looked to Bryan for approval again.

"It's working wonders, ma'am," Bryan said. "So you were just out doing your morning exercise when you noticed the victim?"

"Yes. That's correct. I was walking up the street, not down it, past the coffee shop on the corner." She pointed toward Finance Boulevard. "It's been there since I can remember. Lovely people. As I was saying, I was walking past the pub when I noticed that the alleyway behind O'Shannahan's looked a bit.... Oh, how shall I say it?"

"Convenient?"

"Yes. Convenient. Oh, the women must love you." She beamed. "Such a sweet young man. So gracious. Anyway, I decided the alleyway would be a nice way for me to get my walking over with early. It's not so much myself I worry about fooling as it is those damned hospice folk. I can't tell you the shock I felt when I came upon that poor young woman. I covered her up immediately. What wasn't covered up, I mean. I hope I didn't ruin anything for you."

"Not at all, ma'am. I'll make a note that we discount your fingerprints from those found. You touched the black garbage bags, you said? You did it?" Bryan's voice was still even. Soothing, probably, to everyone but himself. And he was losing track. Talking to a definitely harmless witness like a suspect. Though the lady didn't catch the suggestion that she'd been the killer in his last question, he wondered if anyone else could read him correctly just then.

"Yes, I did. Her face and shoulder were exposed. It looked as if she were paralysed. Anyway, the bags had started to pull and her left... um, breast," she said, blushing, "was starting to look as if it might make its way out and I didn't want to.... Well, I just felt it would

be shameful to be found that way. I mean, for whomever may know her. Her family and such."

"That's good. No, it was a kind thing to do. Quite thoughtful," Bryan replied. "Often in these sorts of situations, the average person wouldn't think to do such a thing. The scene was quite shocking, from what little I've glimpsed of it. You did the right thing."

"Oh, pshaw." She breathed heavily, seemingly embarrassed by Bryan's reassuring tone. "I only did what anyone else would have done. Anyway, that's all I know. Except, oh yes, this is important to you, I think. I do my rounds every evening about 6 p.m., before I'm shut in for the night. And every morning. And, even though I didn't take a shortcut last night, I'm almost positive she wasn't there."

"Are you sure?" Bryan asked. "Sometimes the light can play tricks on our eyes. It's not that I doubt you," he added, placing a hand on her shoulder. "It's just that I want to make sure we get as accurate a description as possible. It's okay if you aren't a hundred percent sure."

"Oh no, sir," she replied, looking fully earnest. "I'm positive she wasn't there, unless her body was hidden around a corner—down the crossway—or something. Last night about six, the sun was just going down. It wasn't all that dark out. I could still make out almost all the way to the other side. Far past where I found her this morning, from either side of the alley. Was that helpful?" She looked like a puppy begging for a treat. Still so desperate for approval.

"More than you know," Bryan comforted her. "In fact, you've given us some excellent information. Your description will help tremendously in ensuring we more accurately determine the time the body was

placed in this location." She smiled proudly. "Now," Bryan began again, oozing more distracting and dishonest cool, "I'm going to have to ask you to speak with one more of those 'rude' gentlemen." He winked at her, smiling with reassurance that it was a joke between the two of them. "I'll need you to give him your personal details, in case we need to follow up and confirm anything. And I'd like you to have my card. If you think of anything else, anything at all, don't hesitate to call me. My phone is on twenty-four seven, and I can always be reached." He stuck his hand into his coat and produced a white business card, handing it to the old lady.

"Thank you so much, officer," she said, looking over the card and noting the word 'Detective,' which she found even more comforting. "I'll be sure to let you know if there's anything else. It's been a distinct pleasure."

"I can most certainly say the same." He smiled, guiding her toward a uniformed officer and pointing. "You have a wonderful day, now."

The phone in his pants pocket buzzed. Reminders of the calls he'd decided not to bother looking at to see if he should take while conducting his interview.

"Thank you, sir," the old lady said. "I wish you the best of luck." And off she went, to the familiar drone of "Name.... Address.... Birth date.... Why? Strictly a formality."

Bryan turned and looked back down the alley. CSI was pulling things from the body with tweezers and dusting the ground with their magic fairy brushes. Pulling the phone from his pocket, he noted that he'd missed two calls. One from his wife—who still hadn't managed to wrap her head around the concept that he did the job to pay the bills—and one from the Brittwood precinct.

Split the Middle

He punched the digits to reach the Brittwood precinct main line and spoke. "Yes, this is Detective Verrill, Broker precinct. I received a call a few minutes ago. No message."

V

It was just after 9:30 a.m. and Mindy Verrill, née Hayden, was finishing her morning cocktail. A martini with a slice of olive. It made her feel continental, much in the same way breakfast did. She paced the floor furiously, waiting for Bryan to return her call. It was bad enough he had taken the family Hyundai, but he'd also not bothered to leave any spending cash. How did he assume she made it through the day?

She felt used, like a blow-up doll that somehow managed to clean the floors, wash the dishes, prepare dinner while he worked, and spring to life the moment he came back home, only to deflate and begin working that magic again as soon as he left.

The results of her tests from the gynaecologist's office had come via messenger at nine o'clock. They confirmed the fact that she was barren. Something she'd always known—with the perspective of the now—but always denied.

Her dream of having a full life, one with children and family and a warm, loving household, wasn't unattainable yet. There were still other options. Adoption—*God help us all*—was looking like the only viable one. She knew surrogate mothers were available for hire and advances in science had made the entire process an almost individual act, much like masturbation. Still, she couldn't bear to think of

another woman carrying her child. To her, that thought carried with it all the indelible impressions of her husband, far away from her, making love to some other woman. Enjoying their time in bed more than he enjoyed his and Mindy's own little trysts. Trysts only because the other woman had always been the department.

But she was well aware what she married into. And what her husband could really control. She'd come to terms with that long ago, though it brought her little peace. They had to set date nights to get in some good quality fucking, or he'd be out doing God knows who else every night of the week. Those were the 'other women'.

Mindy also bore some of that guilt within herself. Prior to his marriage proposal, when they were still only seeing each other—which, tragically, equalled much more good quality fucking—she had been having an affair of her own with one of his colleagues. She had berated herself for not telling him months into their courtship, but ultimately decided exposing that truth would do more harm than good. Her lover had agreed to never tell and he kept his word, but the guilt still bit at her now and again. She supposed the shame would carry over into everything she did. But telling him still never felt like an acceptable option. Even when it translated into illogical jealousy over such trivial things as his spilling sperm into a plastic tube.

She had a few other secrets too. Didn't everyone? Secrets that might crush their marriage, at least from her perspective. But she was equal in strength to her husband. Perhaps more so.

Her dream was to have that fulfilling life. That plastic life. That life that looked so much better to

everyone else, even if it felt like frozen death inside. She'd invested a great deal of herself into their marriage and she wasn't about to turn tail and run now. With only two years to go until the dreaded forty, she couldn't see any way she could afford to. She'd made it past the dreaded thirty and thought nothing of it. But time had tricked her over the past eight years. Assuring her all was well until it was too late to change anything and the truth revealed itself.

The phone rang in the kitchen. No fancy ringtone, just an old-fashioned bell. One of the benefits of being a detective's wife was she could sic him on telemarketers. In that respect, he had always been a good man. He was there for her and made sure she feared nothing. He was her protector, her guardian.

Yet, when it came to the finances, her father would always provide the income they needed to support their lifestyle. She assumed Bryan suspected as much, but he never seemed to give it a second thought. He was aware her parents were well-off, and he probably felt some indignity attached to living off their money, but he never questioned it. Never asked where the cash for this or that came from. He was like steel in that respect. She could trust him to stay out of her business. He didn't like to keep any more secrets than he had to. And he already had enough hidden behind his lifeless eyes that she knew he would never turn that corner and walk down that path unless something went horribly wrong.

"Hello?" she answered with a rising lilt in her voice. "Verrill residence. This is Mindy speaking."

"Hey, honey," Bryan said, his voice crackling through the receiver. "I'm sorry. I caught a murder this morning and was in the middle of an interview when you rang me. I called back first thing. What's going on?"

He sounded genuinely concerned, though definitely full of shit about calling her back first. She never really knew these sorts of things for certain, but she believed them. For certain. Someone else had called too. And he'd called them back first.

"Nothing quite as important, dear," she cooed, slipping in the dig. "I was getting ready to start my day and I realised you'd taken the car again. I need to run some errands."

"Is the Cavalier still in the shop?" he asked, knowing it was. Still, he never asked why her parents wouldn't buy them another car. Though Mindy suspected he realised it would just be another leash.

"Yes, dear. It is," she replied. Oozing fake sympathy like primordial sludge. "Do you think you could drop by today and leave the Hyundai? Couldn't you borrow a black and white for the day, or something?"

"Sure, honey," he said, his voice fading in and out with static patter. "I'll see what I can do. Right now I can't make any promises. Is that okay?"

"Of course," she replied. "I'll be waiting for you, lover." She smiled a big smile. A smile that cut a swath from ear to ear, almost halving her face. She'd read once that people could feel your smile over the phone. It was one of the hallmarks of a good communicator.

"Great. Great news, honey." He heaved a heavy sigh of relief that sounded like a vacuum sucking up a garden hose, or the static-popping equivalent of that. "I got a call from the Brittwood precinct and they're sending one of their guys out to help on the case. The murder may or may not have happened in our, or their, jurisdiction. That hasn't been determined yet so we're working in cooperation, if you know what I

mean.” He let out a fake chuckle. A little of that false charm. Unwittingly confirming, again, she wasn’t the first call he made, after she’d intimated it and he’d blatantly denied it. Surprise.

“That’s fine, honey,” she replied, dragging her fingernails along the Formica kitchen table. “Hopefully, you’ll end up working with someone who isn’t so damned political they turn a simple little murder into a lifelong crusade.” She giggled a little. It didn’t faze her that she’d used the words ‘simple’, ‘little’ and ‘murder’ all in the same sentence.

“It’s Beck,” Bryan stated outright, coming through loud and clear. Her fingernails stopped their fanciful figure eights and her jaw squared itself shut. “Just thought I’d let you know that first thing. Not my call, but I’ve got to deal with it. I know how you feel about him. If I could get out of having to work this case with him, I would. Believe me. Just thinking about him still pisses me off. My years partnered with him when I first made detective were....”

His voice trailed off as she bit into her lower lip. She knew Payden and what he represented. Even worse, she knew what he was capable of, how little she, Bryan—or anyone—meant to him, and more than a few of the things he’d done to people who got in his way.

“Well, let’s just say they were difficult,” he concluded. “I know they were for you too. I’m sorry. Like I said, if I could do it another way—”

“That’s okay, sweetie,” she said, feeling a low growl coming out from underneath. “You do what you have to do. Remember that catching this guy is far more important than anything that may have happened in the past. Take care of the case, part ways

with that wretched leech of a man and call it even." She hesitated for a moment, pulling on her white silk robe, feeling naked. "I'll get myself dressed, in case he insists on saying hello. You do your best to behave. When you have time later tonight, we need to talk, though. Okay, honey? It's very important. I got the tests back from the doctor."

"Mmm," Bryan mumbled. "Okay. Definitely. I'll make the time. You can count on it, honey. I'll talk to you soon." He paused. "Who loves you?" he questioned playfully.

I do, she thought. "You do, silly," she said. "See you tonight, love." She hung up the phone as he fake-kissed his good-bye.

Payden Beck was a name she'd hoped she'd never hear again, especially in the context of her family life. But the spectre was back. Some things don't go away unless you make them.

