

**10-30**

**A Novel by  
Michael Golvach**

**10-30**

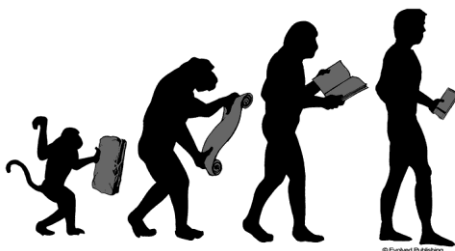
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Printed in Book Antiqua font.

## **BOOKS BY MICHAEL GOLVACH**

*10-30*

*Bloody Gullets*

*fiX*

*Missing Pieces*

*Split the Middle*

**MikeGolvach.net**

## **DEDICATION**

*For Ute Maria Golvach,  
No son ever had a better mother.  
Thank you for always being there for me.  
God Bless You.*

## Prologue

My name is Payden Beck and I am not a good man.

I don't know if my condition is hereditary or if I'm simply a product of my environment, upbringing or any number of variables. I only know I exist to serve myself. As we all do at the most base level.

I can't honestly say I've ever been happy. But I think I might have been once.

That was quite a story. Stories always end.

And, while some people on this earth derive meaning—take away some good or some lesson—from events that occur to them or they make happen, for me every story's end is a zero-sum game. Nothing is gained without something lost. Sometimes it works contrary to consensus. Sometimes what's gained is the negative. The game is the same, nonetheless. The rules don't change to suit any man.

I was raised by a father who was a good man. My mother never existed to me. She left my father long before I can recall and my father was always the loser, where the game was concerned. But he taught me, through his actions and words, how to be a good and decent human being. And he encouraged me when I mimicked his actions and regurgitated his philosophy. I never told him he didn't make a difference. I never told him it wasn't his fault.

If you can feel sympathy for me, and you don't believe my initial statement to be true, you may be right. I lack the properly-functioning moral compass most people take for granted. And I do try to impersonate my father. To act like the good man he was. Perhaps, one day, the repetition will break me and turn me into the good and decent human being he wasn't pretending to be. I only know what I feel and what my mind tells me is true.

My name is Payden Beck and I am not a good man.

One day, this world may prove me wrong. I doubt that will ever happen. I don't feel good about it and I don't feel bad about it. I simply accept it. It just is.

My name is Payden Beck and I'm still waiting.

# I

Payden Beck sat in the passenger seat of the city police cruiser with his field training officer Richard LaMont. They'd barely spoken a word since they'd been slapped together, almost as an afterthought, during morning roll call at the beginning of the week. Payden had shown up on his first day where they'd told him to and when they'd told him to, feeling exactly how they'd told him to. Aside from meeting a few other rookies who shared his misery, nothing much had changed in his first five days on the force.

The salty bulldog Payden had been stuck with, Richard LaMont, didn't like to talk. He just did. And he did with enthusiasm that crossed the border of disturbing. He didn't have stories to tell about himself or the job. He didn't have advice to give him except bone up on his typing skills and keep his eyes open, watch and learn. Though he was a homicide detective, Richard only talked about himself in the sense that he was a police officer, like everyone else on the force. Richard was older, in his mid-fifties, and close to the finish line but he wasn't interested in grinding out his days and making it home to what the other, more experienced, officers at the station called his 'little girl'. More like his 'little woman'. A beautiful wife who was far too young for him, at twenty-three years, according to those definitely-interested officers. The running joke

was if the job didn't kill him, she would. He was in no shape to keep his young, energetic wife satisfied in bed. Why she married him, no one knew. No one, in fact, had any idea how they'd found each other.

Payden considered asking Richard about the pictures of himself and his wife he kept on his desk. About why she wore spot make-up in all of them. Always in different places. Especially the ones where it looked like she coated it on her arms and around her collarbones. But he didn't want their relationship to start with mixed feelings, confusion or doubt and, according to the talk he heard around the station, Richard was a personal guy. Which meant he didn't like to talk about his home life either.

Today, he would have asked one of the other officers at the station—probably his academy friend, Bryan Verrill, but certainly not Bryan's FTO, Franklin Dodge, who treated him like garbage for no reason—about the beautiful young woman in the pictures, but Richard had arrived early. Right when Payden worked up the guts to open his mouth and pretend he belonged there.

At twelve thirty, they'd just finished eating a quiet meal together. Payden brought a sack lunch but threw it away when Richard advised him if he wanted to be a real cop he'd grab a dog or two with him around noon and quit eating the kind of food food ate. When noon rolled around that day, Payden wasn't surprised Richard hadn't been talking his way around suggesting he was going to buy him a 'welcome to the precinct' meal. If he hadn't had money on him, it wouldn't have been the worst thing that ever happened. Tossing the lunch he'd made from food that looked like it might not be going bad may have saved his life.



They cruised the streets with the radio on. Police radio only, though the car picked up all standard bands. Richard found the constant back-and-forth between dispatch and other cars on duty soothing. They'd yet to receive a call in their neighbourhood, though Richard guaranteed Payden they would before the day was out. He'd been right every day so far. In his words, the city they worked in was a sewer he wouldn't wish on a rat.

"So what do we do when no calls come in?" Payden asked as he looked out the window. "I only ask because, no offence, I'm getting a little bored watching you do our job. Not that you don't do it well."

"We serve," Richard replied, tapping the police radio to make sure it was working. "You know that. And how is watching me do my job boring? You want to be out there, fucking people up. I can see it."

Payden turned to face Richard. "No, I mean what do we do when no calls come in? No disturbance, no cat stuck up in a tree. Nothing."

"Does that happen?" Richard pulled the car to the side of the road. Right next to a house that looked abandoned, though six or seven teenage males wearing bandannas and over-sized plaid shirts were enjoying the comforts of the front porch. "I'll tell you what, Beck. I've got a broom in the trunk. If you want, you can get out and sweep the fucking sidewalk. Serve this community like you're so desperate to." And, though Richard had finally said something that confirmed he had a limit, there was no anger in his voice. Nothing that indicated he was annoyed by the volume of stupid questions he'd been asked over his years as an FTO. "Or we could just walk up on these wannabe gangsters and take their money."

Payden looked at the youths on the porch. “No, Richard—”

“My mother calls me Richard, kid. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“I’m sorry. All I’m saying, Dick—”

“What the fuck did you call me?” Richard’s eyes went dead and his shoulders tightened up.

Payden moved his head back an inch as he felt himself sweat. “I didn’t call you anything. That came out wrong. I just—”

Richard smirked. “Shut the fuck up, kid. I’m just busting your balls. How long before you stop pissing yourself?” Payden looked at him, nonplussed, as Richard stared out the front windshield and chuckled. “Did the switched-up code seven fuck with your head that bad?”

“The code what?”

“Lunch,” Richard said, patting his stomach. “You get a bad dog in you?”

“No.” Payden’s eyes flitted around. Not sure where to look. “I was just making conversation. It’s getting lonely being here with you.”

Richard looked at him for a moment, trying to keep a stiff upper lip, and let out a genuine laugh. “I’m not much of a people person.”

The police radio squawked. “We have a two seventy-three D. Two seven three D. Four seventeen Westwood. Four one seven Westwood. Any available units.”

Richard pulled the portable radio from his belt and spoke. “Car four eighty—zero four eight zero—on it. We’re in the area.” The voice from dispatch double-confirmed and Richard muttered a ‘ten-four’ as he holstered his radio and pulled away from the kerb.

"Two seventy-three D," Payden said, patting his gun. "That's bad, right?"

"You tell me, kid. Didn't they teach you that bullshit in the academy?"

"It's domestic, right?"

Richard patted Payden on the top of his head. "Correct." He chuckled. "Just say what it is. Only use codes when you're fucked and got no time to talk. And for shit like 'ten-four' that never goes away. Thank truckers, country music and that one piece-of-shit movie."

"So it's —"

"Domestic abuse. Violence," Richard said, throwing his cap in the back seat, motioning for Payden to do the same. "You want to see some action? Can't wait until next week? Get rid of the cap, kid. Most it'll ever do for you is make you chase it on windy days."

Payden threw his cap in the back. Keeping his smile on the inside. Loving the actionable advice. "Thanks, Dick."

Richard turned on the lights and sirens. "Another useful piece of advice. Turn on the blinkers and horns when you need to get home on time for supper." Payden smiled. "I know this couple. The old lady's okay. She's a dooper. Her old man's a woman-beating piece of shit. I'd take his ass down a back alley, blow his fucking brains out and write it up as self-defence, but his woman loves him, so keep an eye on her while I take care of him. Because she'll start swinging if I lay a finger on him, no matter how bad he's fucked her up this time. Their relationship is beyond me." Richard paused. "You can still hold tight, kid. No need to get your hands dirty today. You've got your whole career to swim in the sewer."

Payden shook his head and replied as Richard turned to look at him. "I'm ready."

Richard nodded. Still a glimmer of light in his eyes as they made time. "His name is Anthony. Call him Tony. I have him. Her name is Sabrina. Call her 'ma'am'. If you call her by her name, the situation will escalate."

"Why?"

"He'll assume you're fucking her. They both smell like backed up toilets. I don't think you could get it up for her if you'd been cut off for years, but he'll think you're doing her."

"Do we do a drug sweep?" Payden pulled out his notepad and Richard patted his hand, pushing it down. "No?"

"No," Richard said as they pulled up to the residence. Another shack covered in flaking paint. Red and green. "It's not our responsibility. We're here on a domestic. Narcotics wasn't called in." He looked at Payden and bobbed his eyebrows. "If you want to do the narcs' job for them, that's up to you. They'll fight you for credit, though. They'll win. And you'll still end up writing the scene report."

Payden nodded. "No need."

"That's my boy," Richard said as he undid his seatbelt and they exited the vehicle. "Be ready for anything. Who do you have?"

"Sabrina." Richard gave him a sideways glance. "Ma'am, I mean."

Richard nodded, took a deep breath and pounded on the door. Strangely, though the walls of the house were coming apart, no sound was audible outside. "Last piece of advice for now. We don't ever call each other by name unless the subject already knows us. Start simple. Officer. First name. Last name. If they insist, badge number. Never offer information without being asked."

"Yes sir, officer. Understood. Thank you, sir."

"Tony," Richard yelled through the door. "It's Dick." Hearing nothing, he whispered to Payden. "Go around back. Watch that door. I'll call for you." Payden nodded and moved to the back of the house. "Open up. Let's make this problem go away." He paused. "I'll give you to ten to indicate you understand me or open the door. Then I'm coming in."

Richard wiggled the front door's knob lightly. Feeling it turn too far as the door creaked open.

"Stay out, Dick," Anthony yelled and Richard moved to the side of the door. "This is between me and my woman."

"An incident was reported," Richard shouted. "I have to make sure everything's okay. I'm going to come in and we'll—"

Richard dropped to his knees and covered his head as a hole appeared in the front door and a second-storey window in an abandoned house across the street shattered. A deafening blast followed.

As he shook his head, he heard another voice. Payden's. "Put the weapon down. No, ma'am. I can't leave until Tony puts down his gun."

Richard bashed the door open, still standing to the side. "Everything secure, officer?"

"Everything secure, officer," Payden replied and Richard stormed in through the front door.

Anthony stood, pointing a revolver at his girlfriend's head. Shaking his own as she sat on the floor.

"Call your boy off, Dick," Anthony said.

Richard glanced at Sabrina. She, like Anthony, was looking rough. Probably beautiful before the dope became her god. Her body and face were various shades

of red, green, purple and yellow. Another domestic call arriving a few days too late to nip in the bud.

"You little piece of shit. Shoot at me?" Richard walked up to Anthony and raised his service pistol. Placing it against Anthony's temple and cocking it. "Put your gun down or I'll beat you half to fucking death if I decide not to kill you." He glanced at Sabrina. Payden stood near the back door, shaking, and Richard motioned for him to move in closer.

"Why are you fucking with me, man?" Tony asked, scratching his side. Digging into it with his nails. "Let me handle my woman and fuck off with your new puppy."

"I can't, you stupid fuck," Richard said. Calming down. "You squeeze that trigger, a slug's going through your head and that will be the story of you, Tony."

Payden moved toward Sabrina. Partially to make sure he could provide cover if Anthony fired and partially because, if Richard was serious, the trajectory of the bullet he'd put through Anthony's brain would go clean through and hit him if he stayed put.

Payden stood to the side of Sabrina and pointed his pistol at Anthony. "Do as the officer says, Tony."

Anthony's eyeballs began to float and his gun hand drifted. Hearing Payden's pistol cock, Anthony snapped back to and looked at Richard, who nodded.

"Okay," Anthony said, looking and feeling as scared as he was, with a little withdrawal heaped on. "Relax. Fuck."

Richard held out his hand and Anthony gave him his revolver. "There you go." Payden sighed in relief and Richard punched Anthony in the face. "Now we can talk."

"Talk," Anthony said, rubbing his jaw. "About what? The fucking weather? Then what?"

Richard hit Anthony hard in the temple with the butt of his pistol before he holstered it and pulled the handcuffs from his duty belt. "Then we talk about why I don't put you down for trying to kill me."

"What the fuck?" Anthony squirmed as Richard put the cuffs on too tight. "The gun just went off."

Sabrina was up on her feet before Anthony finished speaking. "Come on, Dick."

"You finally going to suck my knob, ditch-mouth?" Richard asked Sabrina. "Call was made. I have to make an arrest. You don't like it, there's two ways to keep this from happening in the future. One. Tony, stop beating the living shit out of your old lady. Two, tape her mouth shut and beat her more quietly. These calls don't come in because no one can hear you." Anthony let out a squeal as Richard pulled up on the cuffs.

Payden looked away and to the side, playing off his shocked expression.

Before he could turn his head to look at Sabrina, she was on Richard. Pulling at his hair and smacking him as he threw Anthony to the floor and rested his knee in his back. "A little help?" Richard asked.

Payden grabbed Sabrina as she continued to kick and swing. Her mouth working overtime as she waffled between threatening to kill Anthony if he ever touched her again and promising to kill Richard if he didn't let Anthony go.

Payden wrestled Sabrina to the floor, her night-dress tearing in the process.

Anthony wriggled on the floor underneath Richard's weight. "You fucking pigs. Did you come here to stick it in my woman? I'm going to kill you. You and your little—"

“Shut your fucking mouth or I’m going to order my partner to give it to your woman up the ass. I don’t want to do that. Who knows what he’ll catch.” Richard bounced Anthony’s head off the floor and he quit talking to spit the blood out of his mouth. “Time to go.”

“Please don’t take him away,” Sabrina begged, looking up at Payden, who held her firmly by the shoulders. Smacking her hands away as she offered up sexual favours in return for favourable treatment of her boyfriend, intermingled with increasingly bizarre threats against his life.

Anthony came in on cue. “What’s your dog’s name, Dick? Where does he live?” Anthony looked into Payden’s eyes. “You just fucked up, bitch. I’m going to—”

Richard muffled Anthony’s mouth with his hands. “Officer, just let her suck your cock already.” He paused, giving Anthony a smack. “You calm down and we’ll do things the way we always do. Yeah?”

Anthony accepted Richard’s offer with a nod and a grunt. Followed by, “I’m sorry, Dick’s partner. I didn’t mean none of that. I just get—”

Richard shut Anthony’s mouth with a blistering crack across the face, followed by a solid grip around his neck. No more words.

After placing Anthony in the back of the police cruiser, they asked Sabrina to come along for the ride. Doing her that small favour so she could not press charges more quickly.

Richard made sure Anthony and Sabrina understood that if they lodged any complaints about the way they were handled, they’d better hope he never got called to their residence again. A finger across the neck and a wide smile into the rearview mirror sealed the deal.



After they finished processing the couple, Payden sat down at his desk to do the paperwork.

Richard stood around, watching the clock and, at exactly five, he patted Payden on the back. "Enjoy your first real day?"

Payden looked up at him from his desk. "Yeah, Dick. It was swell." Richard chuckled. "One question."

"What is it, kid?"

"How do I handle the details in this report? Can I leave some out?" Payden's voice dropped to a whisper. "Among other things, what about Tony's gun? I think we left it there."

Richard looked around the room, making sure everyone was minding their own business. "First of all, don't ask me if it's okay to bend the rules. I can't answer that honestly here. But, yeah, leave stuff out. Especially the gun. We didn't leave it and he'll never get it back. Next week, I'll teach you why having someone else's gun is a get-out-of-gaol-free card. Good enough?" He patted Payden on the back. "Remember, you're not writing a fucking book. It's simple. What was the situation when we arrived? What did we do to diffuse the tension and control the scene? What did we charge them with? Etcetera. Just keep the language professional. And as vague as possible. Like usual."

Payden nodded, smiled and got back to typing. "You're the boss, sir."

"Did I forget to tell you to knock it off with the 'sir' shit?" Richard smiled and began to walk away. Then he stopped and turned around, facing Payden and watching him type like a chimp on crystal. "Listen, kid," he said as he walked back to Payden's desk.

Payden looked up. "Yes, sir – Dick."

"You handled yourself well out there. Kept your cool. Did the job." Richard looked around the station as he sucked in his gut. "When you get done double-checking your report, you could drop by my house. Meet the little woman and eat a decent meal."

Payden looked at Richard quizzically. "Sure," he said, stuttering. "If it's all right with your wife."

Richard batted him on the back of the head softly. Jotting down his address on one of Payden's notepads. "Be there at seven tonight. Don't worry about the little lady."

"Yeah, thank you, sir," Payden began, noticing Richard giving him a hard glance. "I mean, thanks, Dick."

"Don't mention it," Richard replied. "You're a good kid. You'll go far if you listen and learn like today. The job can be fun if you let it. And I'll teach you how to earn." Richard pointed at the notepad. "See you there. And her name's Ana. Pronounced Awna. She'll be charmed out of her socks if you pronounce her name correctly."

Payden didn't have time to respond before Richard was out the front doors.

Payden got back to work as Bryan walked up and extended his hand. Payden took it and shook it as Bryan pulled up a chair and sat. He didn't ask if it was okay. Not because he didn't care—though his face would never show you if he did—but because, once he got used to you, he knew how you'd react to him in almost any situation. Though Payden still hadn't figured out how, he was never wrong. "You're having supper tonight with your FTO?"

"Yeah." Payden continued typing. Trying not to look annoyed. "It's not like I could say no."

Bryan glanced around the station. "No way I'd go there. Not with the spitfire I just started working on."

Payden chuckled as he kept his eyes on his work. "Please don't tell me you're trawling the distress calls."

"Not that." Bryan paused. "Just, this girl. Mindy. She's the jealous type. Hard to get, that's for sure."

"What's your soon-to-be-woman's story? She doesn't like competition? Not even the whiff of it? Have I met her?"

Bryan leant in toward Payden and whispered. "No. I've been keeping her to myself. But have you seen Richard's woman? Heard she's a Cuban-Israeli mix. Whatever kind of half-breed she is, her parents must be uglier than shit, because she's supposed to be gorgeous. Better looking than her pictures. And my girl wouldn't be okay with me spending time with her, with or without her husband."

"How about that, Verrill," Payden replied, finishing his paperwork and pulling the triple-carbon sheet out of his typewriter. "You and that spitfire you like – Mindy? – took the next step. She's your girl now. Congratulations."

Verrill smirked. "Fuck you, Beck. Just be careful around Richard's woman. Mind what manners you have. I'm just saying. She's young, hot and married to a much older man. You never know, she could be trouble. Take you to heaven and then hold it over your head."

Payden stood up. "And before you poison my mind, and my evening, further, I bid you a good day, Officer Verrill."

"Just Bryan, all right?"

Payden nodded.

"See you next week if you make it out of LaMont's house alive."

Payden thanked Bryan and they bumped fists to say goodnight. Though Bryan wouldn't shut up about it, Payden assured him that, even though he agreed Richard's wife was a stunning woman, he'd somehow manage to keep his dick in his pants that evening.

## II

Payden stood at the opened doorway of his FTO Richard LaMont's home. Seven o'clock sharp. Still baffled at the upscale part of town in which he resided and how differently he'd imagined his mentor's home looking. On the outside and the inside. Richard didn't seem like the type who kept a neat house and a respectable—not to mention beautiful—wife.

Richard welcomed Payden in, gave him a wink as Payden spoke the words 'and you must be Ana'—pronouncing her name correctly, which made her smile with her entire face—before he introduced him to her, closed the front door and disappeared into the living room.

Ana took his coat and made sure it was hung properly on the farthest right outside hook on the rack beside the door. As she made sure everything was just so—from the position on the rack to the way his coat hung so it wouldn't wrinkle—he took her in. Listening to the sound of her breathing and noting the slinky violet summer dress she modelled wasn't thick enough to disguise the bra and panties she wore beneath it. And the straps that held up the top of her dress, which ended just below her armpits, didn't cover her bra straps. The violet of her dress also contrasted sharply with the coffee-with-extra-cream colour of her skin, which accentuated her physical beauty all the more.

Thankfully, she was shorter than most girls he knew and had plenty of soft fat on her thighs, bottom, stomach, arms and beneath her chin. She also sported armpit stubble. Too young and good-looking to be concerned with looking good. Her skin was enticing and smelt intoxicating, but she wasn't a vision of female perfection. At least not in Payden's opinion, which was dictated by media in which only the flawless were worthy of adoration. Ana was cute, but nothing worth getting in trouble over. If any woman ever was. And no amount of trouble he couldn't easily avoid.

Payden scanned Ana's body as she smoothed out his coat's arms, looking for spot make-up. Trying to see through her dress, wondering if she'd put on any cover-up underneath just in case. Not seeing any and wondering even more why all her pictures on Richard's desk looked like she'd been patched together just before the happy couple said 'cheese'.

Ana turned to face Payden as his eyes were on their way up her body. He stopped for a moment that felt like an eternity and looked at her. Not only her eyes, but her entire face. Bryan was right. Despite his perception of her faults, she was exquisitely beautiful. The kind of 'good-looking' that made you thank God its presence was visited upon you while simultaneously making you wish you'd never come of age.

"Hello?" she asked, her voice low and breathy. The edges of her mouth curling up into a smile. "Are you lost?" She spoke English with a slight cubano accent, like it was her second language, though she spoke it more properly than anyone Payden knew.

Payden snapped to, looking down and up. Unsure what to do with his hands. "No, ma'am, I—"

"Ana?"

"No, Ana," Payden continued, stuttering to a degree that made him uncomfortable but amused her. "I was just—I don't know where anything is and Richard's abandoned me." He felt his face flush red with embarrassment, like a school boy.

"You're cute." Ana touched the tip of Payden's nose with the tip of her right index finger. Making a smacking sound with her lips before smiling again. She curled her left index finger toward her face, gesturing for Payden to bend over and lend her his ear.

"I'm sorry," Payden whispered. "I didn't mean to—"

She slid her right index finger down his lips to his chin, as she leant in and whispered in his ear. "It's okay, Payden. Payden, yes?"

Payden nodded.

"I'm used to it. The only reason it's cute—you doing what every man does—is you stopped ogling me when I caught you. You get a pass. Just one. Don't be naughty or I'll have to give you a spanking."

Payden gulped, wondering what she meant, as she continued.

"And don't look at me with soft eyes. Richard's a jealous one. I would never dishonour him, but he's older and I'm younger and I understand." She kissed him lightly on the cheek. Nothing sexual about it, except for her. "Thank you for your unspoken compliment and candour, but please mind your manners. I want things to go well. Yes?"

Payden nodded.

Ana whispered one last thing. "Don't forget to ask to see the house before you leave. I love to show it off."

Ana pulled her head back and Payden looked into her eyes. Continuing the awkward banter they'd

enjoyed before things got quiet. "Are you sure my coat's okay?"

"Yes." She winked. "It's well hung."

Payden coughed. "Where did Richard go?"

A heavy footfall in the hallway to the left of the front door preceded Richard's fake-panicked voice. "Coming to save you, kid." He walked out into the front area, patted Ana on the shoulder and she scurried off to where Payden assumed the kitchen was. "Don't worry about her. Everything has to be just so." Richard walked into the dining room to the right of the front door and called out, "Ana, darling. How are we doing on supper?"

"I've made your places," she called. "Sit. I'll be out in two shakes."

Richard took his seat at the head of the dining room table and motioned for Payden to sit to his left, against the outside wall.

Richard watched as Payden sat down, noting how stiff his body language had become. "She's a cute one, isn't she?" he asked. Indiscreetly, unlike Ana in the foyer. Richard chuckled as Payden's eyes floated. "It's okay, kid. If you think she's uglier than a Mongolian baby, don't pretend she's anything special. On the other hand, if you think she's a knock-out, don't pretend she repulses you. Quit pretending she doesn't do for you whatever she does for you. She's a beautiful young woman and I'm an old man. Hands off, but you can go soft-eyed and dopey. I get it." Richard frowned. "Some of my ex-trainees still come sniffing around. Asking about the little woman. Wondering if I want to hang out. As if they're fooling anybody. It's one thing when you're stuck with me, but fawning over my woman isn't appreciated after the show is over. It's easier not to care. You know? She's—"



Payden looked up as Ana brought out a decanter and began filling everyone's glasses with wine, winking at Payden. "I'm leaving Richard breathless again."

Payden glanced at Ana quickly, and then at Richard, who was smirking. "I'm not sure how to respond to that without making an ass of myself."

Ana filled Payden's glass. Her wrists shook slightly and her smile seemed strained. Looking above Payden's head as she spoke. "Thank you, Payden." She dialled her smile up a notch as she finished pouring, looked down too slowly to catch Payden noticing her erect nipples, and left the decanter on the table and returned to the kitchen.

Payden looked at Richard, seeing no confusion on his face and no indication he'd seen him admiring his wife's breasts. He whispered, "Did I say something wrong?"

Richard shook his head, looking toward the kitchen and whispering, as well. "No. Swearing makes her extremely uncomfortable. I should have said something at the station. Keep it civil and everything will be fine. She knows I'm giving you the speech." Richard patted Payden's hand. "Trust me. You're still good. Just give me one moment."

"Of course."

Richard got up from the table and wandered into the kitchen as Payden sat and fidgeted. Looking at the room. Still in awe of how spotlessly clean everything was. How everything seemed to be in its perfect place. Praying Ana's involuntary arousal response had subsided.

He considered taking a sip of wine, thinking better of it as he heard a noise from the kitchen. Like a bag of wet sand landing on a rotting wooden floorboard. Accompanied by a muffled sound of pain. Odds were even either of them made the noise.

Seconds later, Ana walked out of the kitchen, across the dining room. Her nipples flat. Looking forward as she politely smiled. "If you'll allow me, Payden. I'll be right back."

"Of course," Payden said as Richard took his seat once more. "Is there anything I can help—"

"No," Ana called from out of sight. In the bathroom running the tap, it sounded like. "All's well. Just one moment, if you please. Thank you."

Richard whispered. "Nothing to worry about. The roast is a little dry." Richard rolled his eyes. "I told her you'd be fine, but she takes these things personally. She feels they reflect badly on her. Just let it go and she'll forget soon enough. It's a quirk. I don't claim to understand it."

Payden nodded. Glancing at Richard's hands as he placed them on the table and looked in the direction of the bathroom. "You okay, Dick?"

"And call me Richard. The 'd' word sets her off too." Richard spoke softly as he looked at the red marks on the knuckles of his right hand. "Oh, that." He shook his head and smirked. "Damned oven door closes like it's on springs. Got me again. Just a quick bruise and burn."

"If tonight's a bad night," Payden began, feeling more uncomfortable, "you say the word and I'll make up an excuse to go."

"Between you and me, kid." Richard listened to the sound of water still running in the bathroom as he shook his head and continued at normal volume. "Ana's excited to meet you. She just gets flustered. You noticed the house. Everything has to be perfect. Believe me, it's a small price to pay for the dividend, if you know what I mean." Richard's eyebrows bobbed.

"She'll be fine. The bathroom is her safe place. The sound of water in the tub centres her. Another idiosyncrasy. As I said, small price to pay."

Payden began to crack a smile only to feel his face go sober as Ana moved gracefully through the room, into the kitchen, and brought out the roast. Making several more trips to deliver plates of potatoes and broccoli, followed by a gravy boat. Sitting at her place to Richard's right quietly and looking down. Collecting herself. Unaware Payden noticed the spot make-up beneath her right eye.

"Would you do us the honour of saying grace?" Ana asked Payden, putting her left hand on Richard's right.

Payden nodded and placed his right hand on Richard's left. "It would be a privilege, Ana." She smiled genuinely, hearing his reply, and he sucked down a gulp he hoped no one would notice.

Richard winked at him. "We're Catholic."

Payden nodded. "Thank you for these gifts we're about to receive, for the company of Ana and Richard LaMont, and for the blessing of a bountiful meal prepared for us through your angel, Ana. May God be with everyone at this table. Amen."

Ana and Payden removed their hands from Richard's and he stood up to carve the roast and serve.

"Thank you, Payden," Ana said as she finished her glass of wine and refilled it. "That was a beautiful blessing. Are you Catholic too?"

"If it's all the same," Payden replied. "I'd rather not talk about religion. Or politics. Or polka. Three things I try to avoid in conversation to keep the peace."

Ana giggled, absently smearing the spot make-up underneath her eye. Only showing the pain she felt

through her smile. One twitch of the lip. "That seems a wise policy, Payden." Richard sat down and gestured for everyone to eat as Payden felt Ana's socked foot rest on his shoe. She stabbed her roast with her fork and began sawing away with her knife. "What does the name Payden mean?" She downed her glass of wine again and Richard refilled it, giving her an admonishing glance.

"It's" – Payden cleared his throat, feeling Ana's foot gliding around his ankle – "I think it means 'fighter', if I recall correctly."

Ana's eyes lit up as she swallowed a hunk of meat. "You're doing the right job, then. Just like Richard's doing his. His name means 'strong ruler'. It makes him a perfect mentor. Especially for young fighters like yourself. Has anyone ever told you that you have the most beautiful eyes? My name means 'favour'. Or 'grace'. Or 'beautiful'. I prefer beautiful."

Richard sniffed the air. "Ana, darling. What was that saying? Blue socks, blue shoes...?" Payden watched his hosts intently, feeling Ana's foot pull away immediately. "Some things your name can't disguise."

"Apologies," she said, looking down, emptying her glass of wine and refilling it. "I got comfortable. My stinky feet are back in their places."

Payden loosened his collar, wondering when Richard or Ana had found the opportunity to turn up the thermostat. "I didn't notice a thing, Richard. The meal is delicious. Thank you again, Ana."

"Thank you, Payden." She continued cutting her roast into giant pieces, wolfing them down, followed by more wine. Somehow never talking with her mouth full.

"That's enough, dear," Richard muttered. Eyeing Ana's mouth as she ate and drank like she was in competition.

"What?" Ana demanded, slamming her fork and knife, dangerous sides up, onto the table. "Payden does have enchanting eyes. I'm allowed to compliment our guests, aren't I, Richard?"

Richard's face turned red as he pretended not to hear and Payden broke the silence. "Thank you, Ana. I appreciate the compliment. You have lovely eyes yourself." Payden winced on the inside and shrugged on the outside as Richard looked at him. "I mean that in the most polite sense, as, I'm sure, did you."

"Thank you, Payden," Ana replied, smiling and putting down her utensils. Her plate clean. "I was only being courteous." She looked at Richard as she downed her glass of wine. "I didn't say it behind your back, Richard."

"Let's just calm down." Richard looked at Ana's hands. More interested in the silverware than her body. If this was a normal evening at the LaMont residence, Payden felt increasingly deviant.

"I should go, Richard," Payden said, wiping his mouth with his napkin. "Thank you for the meal, Ana. It was delicious."

"Finish." Richard stared forward. "Stay and finish your meal. Then you can thank us for it."

Ana filled her wine glass, emptied it directly, put her hands together and rested her chin on them, smiling and looking at Payden. "Don't you just turn flowers into honey." Richard's fists clenched. "Payden. Even your name's tempting." Ana licked her lips and moved her hands to the straps of her summer dress. "Let me ask. If I was single, would you —"

Ana stopped talking as Payden felt the table shake and heard a dulled thump. Richard still stared forward. Footsie had turned ugly. Ana looked at Richard, rolling her eyes as she filled her wine glass.

When she finished, Richard took the decanter and placed it next to Payden. He forced a smile and looked at Ana. "You've had enough, dear."

Ana looked down. "I'm sorry, Richard." She looked at Payden. "I get so nervous when we have guests. Afraid I'll ruin everything. I say the most stupid things."

Payden shook his head. "It's nothing, Ana. You're an exemplary host."

Ana looked into Payden's eyes. Losing herself. "You really are a sweet man. I can see in your eyes you mean what you say, but it's okay. I know I'm far from perfect."

Payden felt a softer bump beneath the table which directed Ana's gaze to Richard. "Ana. Dear. If our guest is enjoying himself then everything is—"

Ana slammed her fork and knife on the table again and Payden mentally prepared himself to witness his first murder. "Don't patronise me, Richard. I'm not a child. Payden is being polite, as a guest should, but you're being a shit." Ana dropped her silverware and put her hands up to her mouth. She looked at Payden just as he glanced down to confirm his taboo-words-equals-sexual-excitement theory about her. Unfortunately, her elbows blocked the view of her nipples. When their eyes met, hers squinted for a microsecond as her face flushed. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to say that word." She shoved her plate forward, bumping it into the roast, and pushed her seat away from the table. "I'll see to dessert."

Richard's right hand was on her left wrist faster than Payden expected a man his age could move. Pressing Ana's hand onto the tabletop as another dull thud caused the floor to vibrate. "Don't." He

looked at Payden and shook his head. "Ana. You need to calm down." Ana's face went loose, the skin of her cheeks rippling as she looked at Richard and nodded.

"It's expected," Ana said, standing as Richard released his grip and his seat wobbled slightly. "I'll be fine." She gave Payden a wink. "We'll finish this supper off nicely." She got up with some difficulty and limped into the kitchen, her left shoe looking dented.

Payden stopped looking at Ana's shoes as she walked away. Wondering if they'd been perfectly crease-free when he'd arrived. "Thank you, Ana," he called after her. She didn't respond except to mutter something impossible to distinguish. It didn't sound joyful. "Is she all right?"

"Be right back," Richard said, giving Payden's right shoulder a pat. "Finish eating."

Payden cleaned his plate as Richard walked into the kitchen and left him alone. He drank his wine as he tried not to listen to what sounded like ground beef being pounded into patties.

Richard came back and took his seat, nearly catching Payden leaning in to hear. "You're going to love dessert, kid. Ana's Greek meat pie."

"Sounds great," Payden said, noticing Ana also liked to keep her home like a casino. No clocks anywhere. No way to tell if he was leaving unfashionably early when that time came. Hoping that time would come soon. As good as he'd felt when Richard invited him over for supper, he felt doubly out of place and anxious experiencing Richard's home life.

Ana came out of the kitchen, carrying a serving dish on its own placemat, and Payden moved the main meal's larger serving board out of the way.

She sat down after serving Payden and Richard. "I trust you'll love it," she said, smiling. Brushing the left

side of her stomach and wincing. "Courtesy dictates you have a taste before I serve myself."

Richard dug in. "Delicious, darling. Almost as sweet as you."

Ana's eyes rolled as soon as Richard looked away and Payden finished swallowing his first bite. "It would be in bad taste to agree with your husband verbatim." He winked at Ana who blushed and batted her eyelids. "I've never had this before, but it tastes like heaven. Thank you, Ana."

Ana reached to serve herself and her left side contracted as she suppressed a groan. "Damned oven." She glanced at Richard, who looked away, and then at Payden. "The kitchen's dangerous for me. It's my curse, I suppose, that I treasure cooking."

"Pull the rack out farther," Payden said without thinking. Richard gave him a hard look. "Or have Richard give you a hand. Just a suggestion."

They finished their dessert in relative silence. Richard reminded Ana she'd had too much to drink each time she reached for the decanter. Payden nodded and shrugged to express himself. Eating slices of pie continuously so he'd have an excuse not to open his mouth and talk.

When they finished eating, Ana cleared the table as Payden and Richard talked shop, without all the swearing. Richard reassured him, when the phone rang in the kitchen and Ana bashed into a few things as she answered it, she was a mortal accident waiting to happen. When Ana returned to stand in the dining room, she wasn't wearing more touch-up that Payden could see and her bare skin looked fresh and clean.

"Who was that, dear?" Richard asked.

Ana looked up, her hands playing with themselves. "That was the station. I told them we were entertaining



and asked them to page you if they needed to speak with you." She looked into Richard's eyes. "It's our home phone."

"And they wanted...?" Richard stared at Ana, who looked at him like she was lost.

Ana moved back a step and yawned, stretching her arms upward and moaning. "I wasn't listening." Richard looked down, shaking his head. Ana tilted her head as she watched him. "They'll page you if it's important. You're home. You'll remember your job on Monday."

Richard got up from the table. Payden waited for him to rise fully before standing.

Ana watched them and giggled as Payden finished pushing in his chair. "He must be a delight to have under your thumb," she said to Richard, who looked at Payden and smirked. "I'll bet he does as he's told." She gave Richard a kiss on the cheek that was both cold and compulsory while still managing to last much longer than was comfortable for anyone but her. Looking directly at Payden all the while.

"Thank you for a lovely meal, Ana," Payden said as he followed Richard to the front door. "It was a pleasure meeting you."

Ana made a pouting face and snickered. "Thank you for a lovely meal." Then she stopped mocking him in good humour and asked, "Was there anything else?"

Richard nudged him, his eyes scanning everywhere quickly.

"You keep a very nice home, as well, Ana." Payden paused as Richard nudged him again and Ana looked at him with expectation. "I'd love to see the rest of it, if it wouldn't be asking too much."

Ana held Richard's hand. "Are you asking me to show you the house?"

Payden looked at Richard, whose eyes faced the ceiling.

"I'll be happy to show you the living room, where I enjoy relaxing and reading and Richard watches television. And the kitchen where I put my life in jeopardy daily. And the breakfast nook. The bathrooms are nothing special. But I could show you the upstairs. It's not much, but we have a guest room where friends and family stay from time to time. Richard has an office upstairs, as well. He never lets me in. He's afraid I'll clean up his mess and lose something. Lastly, there's the bedroom which is perfectly suited for sleep. No televisions, no radios, no phones. A quiet place to get good rest. Or, you know." She winked at Payden as Richard let out an expected chuckle.

Richard patted Payden on the back. "I think the kid's had enough of us for one evening, Ana. He's got to be back at the station tomorrow bright and early. Let him get some sleep."

"Tomorrow's Saturday," Ana said, fussing with Richard's shirt. "Are you working tomorrow? Really?"

"Oh, yeah," Richard replied. "Stupid me."

"It's okay." Ana moved away from Richard and guided Payden by the hand to the front door. "If you don't want him to see the absolute horror show I've made of our home, you don't have to make up excuses. Be a man and suggest we show him some other time. You don't have to mean it."

"But—" Richard began as Ana threw up her free hand. "Okay. See you in the living room." Richard waved to Payden. "I'll see you fresh, Monday morning, kid. Apologies for any awkwardness."

Ana scowled as Richard disappeared into the living room, pretending he didn't hear her as she responded.

"That was uncalled-for, Richard. I'll thank you very much for ruining a perfectly pleasant evening."

Payden had his coat on and his hand on the front door's knob by the time Ana turned her attention back to him. "Thank you again, Ana. I apologise if I caused you or Richard any uncomfortable moments."

"You have nothing to apologise for," Ana said. "Except running away." Ana put her hand on Payden's and held the door's knob still, raising the volume of her voice. "Perhaps, as Richard obliquely suggested, I can show you the bedroom sometime." Then she whispered into his ear, the smell of wine heavy on her breath. "I saw you coveting me while we dined. I forgive you, but, please, get those thoughts out of your head. I'm a faithful woman and I would never entertain the notion of pleasuring you to heights you've never before dreamt of." She breathed warmth into his ear, still whispering. "I can feel you're a good man. So, please stop. For me?"

Payden looked at Ana, confused and disturbed. Whispering in reply. "I didn't – I mean, I never –"

"Speak up," she breathed into his ear, letting the heat and wet of her breath turn his skin pink. "Show me you can perform under pressure."

Payden spoke at normal volume. "Perhaps we should avoid the bedroom."

"Don't be silly," she replied as she opened the door and lightly pushed him forward with her hips. "All guests are welcome in the bedroom."

"All right," Payden said, stuttering as he heard Richard laugh in the living room. Enjoying whatever game Ana was playing. Catching the not-so-subtle suggestion of a *ménage à trois* she'd thrown in to throw Payden off. "I'll be sure to...."

"Take care, kid," Richard called from the living room. "I'll see you Monday. You did a great job on the hook tonight. Ana loves to have her fun with my fish. Drive safe."

"Thanks, Richard," Payden called. Unsure if what he'd just been through had been real or just Richard and Ana's extremely fucked up take on foreplay. Either way, the old man was getting laid more than him. And he didn't have to deal with the come-ons designed to lead him nowhere. "I'll see you then. Thanks again." He looked at Ana, who stood staring at him. Her eyes suggesting she was either waiting for him to leave graciously or she wanted him to take her right then and there in the most savage way possible. "And good night, Ana. Thank you for having me." Ana smiled demurely. She was good at stroking a man's ego. Even better at stroking his plumbing without touching it. Nearly an expert at playing with young men's minds. There was a good reason she was with a man much older than herself. She needed someone immune to the built-in charms of youth. Unlike what the other officers at the station thought, her and Richard's relationship made perfect sense.

"It was a pleasure eating you, as well," she said as she began to close the door behind him, noting his confused look. Clamping her thighs together tightly as she let go of the door's knob, pulling her dress out from between them slowly and letting her eyes go soft. "Enjoy your spanking. And do drive safely."

Payden looked back, as he walked away from the closing door, and caught Ana still looking directly at him, her free hand on the front door's frame. In her eyes, he saw sadness. Or curiosity. Perhaps wanton lust. Or, maybe, he saw her finishing the job. Everything just so.

Everything in its place. Richard's new trainee, well-trained and well-finished.

He waved goodbye as she smiled, put her hand on the door's knob, blew him a kiss and closed the door slowly without removing her free hand. Cursing herself without swearing and blowing on her new bruise as she closed the door more carefully. Never breaking her stare until the door did it for her.

Payden had his car door unlocked when Richard called from his opened front door, pager in hand.

Something bad had happened while they'd spent the evening playing whatever twisted sex-game the LaMont's called 'supper with a guest'. To Payden's relief, though Richard felt it necessary to inform him of his actions, he didn't need to bring him along.

To Payden's increasing unease, Richard asked him to stay and keep his wife company while he was out. To make sure she was safe. Letting him know she was preparing the guest room as they spoke. Thanking him, getting in his car and speeding off before Payden could think of a single reason he couldn't stay that didn't involve avoiding the appearance of impropriety spending a night alone with his FTO's beautiful and sexually frustrated wife suggested.

As he heard Ana calling for him to hurry, Payden locked his car, took a deep breath and prayed Richard got home before he fell asleep. Assuming Ana would shelve the teasing and games now that her audience of one had left the theatre.

The weekend was long, ending on Sunday morning, and Payden spent the time between Richard's visits sleeping in the guest room, talking for hours with Ana and trying to find a book in the living room's library that kept his attention.

Ana spent the weekend being the best hostess she could. She made sure Payden ate regularly, and well, and didn't suggest, in any way, she desired him when they talked. Though she seemed far too interested in learning his middle name, she never got too close and she treated him thoughtfully. As if, without Richard to define her, she was an entirely reserved woman. If not a little eccentric.

Payden never felt so good about not being treated like a sexual threat by a beautiful woman in his life.

### III

Payden reported for duty at six in the morning on Monday. About a half hour earlier than Richard and most of the day-shift officers showed up. By the time Bryan came in at a quarter to seven to brownnose his own FTO, Payden had taken a good mental inventory of the pictures on Richard's desk.

He found it curious Richard's desk appeared to not have been disturbed, based on how he recalled it looking when he'd left to spend an evening with him and his wife, Ana, on Friday. Whatever business Richard had been called away on, his desk didn't indicate it involved him doing paperwork. Though he supposed Richard had saved that for him so he'd have something to do when they wrapped up the day. Between the apparent lack of Richard's presence in the station, and his reluctance to broach the subject of why he kept having to leave his home, over the weekend, Payden smelt something off. Not sure if it was anything illegal or non-work-related. Not sure of anything. Deciding, in the first five minutes of mental debate, it didn't matter and Richard's business was his own.

He did spend a good chunk of time inspecting Richard's pictures, though. Sitting low in Richard's chair to draw attention away from himself. Noticing, for the first time, the pictures had all been touched up.

Perhaps to cover up the cover-up on Ana. Perhaps to make them seem more wholesome. But a detail he noted, as he scanned a few other officers' desks. Everyone else displayed plain pictures. Imperfect, ordinary pictures. And, the longer he looked at the pictures of Ana and Richard—recalling his first evening at their home—the more he felt a nagging itch. Richard might enjoy the dividend a beautiful young wife like Ana afforded him, but the pictures didn't portray a man who found her company that small a price to pay. From the chronological order of the pictures, Richard seemed to have grown more fed-up with his marriage, and Ana's quirks, over time and Ana looked like the outlet for his frustration. It wasn't enough to know anything for certain. Though he felt it in his gut, he couldn't state positively that Richard hit his wife. Beat her regularly. A 'Tony' with a more modest 'Sabrina'.

But no matter how soft the background light, he could see the distinct differences in Richard and Ana's ages. Standing beside him or being held in his arms, she looked like she could be his daughter. And though it would end his career early, a part of him wished Ana was Richard's daughter. Because if he felt there was the slightest possibility Richard was hurting a child, he'd kick his ass up and down the block without hesitation.

Bryan pulled Payden away from Richard's desk when he arrived. Surprising him as he inspected the pictures, trying to glean some real meaning from them.

"Jesus fuck, Verrill," Payden said, hopping out of Richard's seat and walking to his desk. Looking around to make sure no one else had heard his outburst. "How's it going?"



"I should be asking you that." Bryan kept his eyes on the front doors. "And it's Bryan. Okay?" Payden nodded. "Are you looking to get booted or something? You're lucky LaMont didn't catch you mooning over his little girl."

"What? Yeah, no. I got in early. Long weekend. Must have started to doze off." Payden gave Bryan's back a pat. "Thanks for saving my ass."

Once Payden was settled in his chair, Bryan sat on his desk, his legs swinging like a school kid. "Long weekend? What happened? You get called in on assignment?" Bryan smirked as his voice dropped to a whisper. "Tell me LaMont's old lady didn't show you the house. And, if she did, how was the tour?"

Payden looked at Bryan and let out a frustrated sigh. Drumming his fingertips on his desk as he chewed on his lower lip. "Calm down, Betty. Jesus, I think you may be human after all. Is this you excited?"

Bryan sat and waited for the answer to his question with unblinking eyes. Not that Payden's query wasn't legitimate. Bryan had been told, his entire life, he was hard to read. By his classmates, teachers, even his parents. Though his parents were the reason he'd lived his life deadpan. They never wanted to hear anything but good news. Bad news equalled bad times. No news was what everyone said it was. Bryan had learnt early in life how to please his parents. And that lesson he'd learnt in his formative years still held him in its grip.

When it became apparent Bryan wasn't going to move, much less answer him, Payden continued. "Yes, supper at LaMont's house was everything you've heard around the water cooler and more." Payden scoffed. "She offered to show me the house and then,

when Dick got called in to work, I ended up babysitting his little woman. On and off. I didn't get out of there until Sunday morning." Bryan's eyes showed a little sparkle. Another sign he was human. "But no. Nothing happened. Ana was good-looking. Better than her pictures, like you said. And she's not a big fan of restrictive clothing. Or underwear. Wouldn't surprise me if she was free-buffing half the time I was there. But she covered up enough to drive me nuts. She's one of those girls who's all about 'almost'. Fucking with you until she catches you looking so you feel like an asshole because you've got a cock and a pulse. Still, nothing happened. She just let me sleep, made sure I didn't skip a meal and talked to me. Everything but whatever crazy rumours you heard. Ana's a polite, personable woman. A little odd. Says things that don't necessarily make sense until you get used to the way she expresses herself. Even then, she can be a difficult read. A little nervous, maybe. The definition of a cop's wife. Still, nothing happened."

Bryan slid off Payden's desk and stretched as he stood. "So, nothing happened?"

Payden looked away and gave him the finger.

"You too, sweet thing. LaMont didn't kill you, so you must be telling the truth. I never believed the talk about her, anyway. But I do have one question."

Payden looked back, raising his eyebrows as his features sagged.

"What happened to your right shoulder? By your neck. That's a nice sized mark. Looks like a hickey. I'd button my collar if I were you. People see that and know where you spent your weekend? They'll start talking and LaMont won't be happy even if he knows it isn't true."

"The fuck are you talking about?" Payden looked down for a few moments before he realised he couldn't see that part of his body without a mirror. Wondering how he could have missed something so obvious, and curious when his minor injury occurred. He made sure his uniform was on properly. Nice and stiff until Bryan gave him a nod. Payden smiled in return as he shook his head. "You are a son of a bitch, Verrill. There's nothing on my neck. Or my shoulder. Is there?"

"Check it out later. I'm not kidding. It looks like Ana got a good taste of you. It looks like the tour of the house, or your mini-vacation, had a happy ending."

"Of course it did," Payden said, chuckling. "But that didn't happen until I got to my place." Bryan didn't understand. Or he understood completely. Payden couldn't tell. "When I got home, I mean. You know."

Bryan looked to the side and coughed. "That's a little more than I care to know about your personal habits. The next time you invite me over to watch television, be sure to let me know if I'm about to sit in one of your happy places."

"Like you never do it." Payden waved Bryan off and, before he could speak another word, Bryan was gone. Rushing to meet his FTO, Franklin Dodge, at the front doors and offer to lick his boots. Though it was entirely unnecessary. Franklin was an older black man built like a tree, with a face that looked angry no matter his mood. But the truth of him was he never considered his race, age or build an issue – no illusions he was better or worse than anyone else – and he was as calm as any man could be. He hardly ever got angry. Too old and experienced to let the job determine his

state of mind. Still, he never eyed Payden with anything but disgust.

By seven thirty, Payden wondered where in hell Richard was. Thinking maybe he overslept. Out all weekend working his ass off and making the mistake of finishing the game he and Ana had started playing the minute Payden showed up on their doorstep. It was possible and he didn't mind getting paid to wait. Though the bust he'd been a part of at the end of the previous week had him itching to get back on the street. To take down bad guys with a veteran who played by his own rules and, sometimes, didn't even obey those. To feel that rush again.

Before he could think much more about it, the rush came back and hit him hard in the form of Bryan, Franklin and the young woman he'd been obsessing over all morning.

There was a good reason Richard hadn't shown up for work on time. The first time anyone who worked there could remember.

At seven thirty-five in the morning, 911 received a call from Ana LaMont, routed it through dispatch and FTO Dodge responded to the call on his portable radio without hesitation. Set to leave the station immediately, with a special request—which was really a direct order—that Payden be attached to the call, along with Bryan.

From what the dispatcher could understand, Ana had been woken by a disturbance on the ground floor of her and Richard's home. A brutal altercation loud enough to echo through their second-storey bedroom. Not clearly understandable but clearly audible. Shouting. Threats. Violence. And then nothing. Stillness.

According to dispatch, Ana was locked in their bedroom awaiting police assistance. Still on the line, which Franklin insisted was impossible. Terrified, but not raising her voice above a trembling whisper. As she'd been throughout the call. She'd given the police explicit permission to enter their home by force, if necessary, before she hung up. She had no intention of leaving her hiding place in the closet.

## IV

By the time Franklin, Bryan and Payden rolled up to the LaMont household in Franklin's unmarked vehicle, two other patrol cars were arriving. Franklin was at the front door before Payden, Bryan or any of the other officers stepped on the kerb. Reminding everyone, who already knew, of his proper title as lead homicide detective. Directing the four additional officers to set up a perimeter watch on the house. One in back, one out front and one on each side. All to report their findings immediately. No one was to leave the house, and no one was to enter, without notifying Franklin first, requesting his permission and explicitly receiving it. The only exceptions were the two rookies he'd brought with him.

Payden noticed the other officers appeared more upset that their services were being dismissed in favour of a couple of rookies than they were that they'd been abruptly and loudly instructed where, and how, to do their jobs by a superior officer who was well aware they knew standard operating procedures.

Franklin wiggled the handle of the front door once he was satisfied there was no visible disturbance—inside or out—from every covered area of the house. To his surprise, the door was unlocked and when he released the door's knob, it swung open slowly. No creaking. Well-oiled hinges. Gliding smoothly, as Franklin directed Payden and Bryan to either side of the door, until it

bumped into the wall of the foyer and Franklin winced.

Franklin motioned for Payden to stay on his side of the door and for Bryan to remain behind him, on his side of the door, as he took a peek inside. He waited a few moments, holding his hand up and listening, before he stuck his neck out and took in the view. The house looked and sounded empty. With his portable radio, he confirmed there were no signs of forcible entry through any windows or the back door.

Franklin motioned for Payden and Bryan to follow him inside and he spoke in a whisper. "Make as little sound as possible. Beck, you move to the right. Clear the dining room and kitchen. Verrill, you take the left. Clear the living room and library. I'll clear the hallway and bathroom and give the upstairs a quick look. We'll meet in the breakfast nook by the back door. All roads end there." He put a finger to his lips. "Maintain radio silence unless you have something urgent to report. Understood?"

Bryan nodded and moved off to the left. Payden nodded, moving into the dining room. Trying hard to keep the surprise from showing on his face. It wasn't a crime, and it shouldn't have come as a shock, that two senior officers who worked in the same precinct, at the same station, knew each other. What threw Payden off was how well Franklin knew the layout of the house. Like he'd spent more than a little time there. Richard had never talked about Franklin, except in passing, in all the time they'd spent together. Then again, Richard hadn't mentioned almost everyone. It was possible they were friends, or spent time together after hours. But, if Ana knew Franklin, she'd found no reason to bring up his name in any of their long conversations over the weekend they'd just spent together. Still, Payden's mind was spinning as he cleared the dining room and moved

toward the kitchen. Wondering if Franklin was worried more about Ana's, or his own, well-being. Wondering if Franklin was like one of Richard's ex-trainees who still came sniffing around, as Richard had put it. Then admonishing himself silently for assuming anything untoward held any of their relationships together.

As he entered the kitchen, Payden stopped in his tracks. Calling out to Franklin and Bryan over his portable radio. "Officer Beck reporting. Possible one eighty-seven. One eight seven. Kitchen."

Richard sat at the small table to the left of the entrance to the kitchen. In the breakfast nook. His back to the main kitchen area. Slumped in his seat like he'd fallen asleep. His head resting on the table and looking toward the front of the house, his forehead and temples badly bruised. Slightly misshapen. As if bones were broken beneath the surface. His face wearing an expression that seemed unable, still, to believe that what had happened to him had actually happened to him. His arms hung down toward the floor. Both of his fists' knuckles were bruised, as well. The rest of the kitchen table was covered with metal pots, pans, dish towels and various utensils, including a cheese grater and heavy meat tenderiser. Strangest of all, though the kitchen table was a mess, it was perfectly clean. Not even drool connecting Richard's opened mouth to the wooden tabletop. The rest of the kitchen was spotless, as well. Except for the kitchenware on the table where Richard's head rested, everything was in its right place. Just the way Ana liked it. Perhaps not such a small price to pay, after all. He wondered how much spot make-up Ana would be wearing when they found her. If they found her.

Franklin and Bryan entered the kitchen directly. Franklin waved to the officer outside the back door



slightly to the left of the end of the main hallway, with no view of the kitchen. He didn't indicate to the officer outside, visually or verbally, that any signs of the reported incident had been found.

Franklin leant over to check Richard's breathing without touching him. Moving his feet closer to the table. Putting his cheek up to Richard's mouth. Shaking his head as he took Richard's pulse with two fingers on the left ankle.

Franklin put his hands on Payden's and Bryan's shoulders as he stared down at Richard's lifeless body. Glancing back and forth at them as he tried not to look at Richard. "Beck. I need you to stay here with the body. With Richard. If any other officers attempt to come in – if they even announce their intention – remind them this is a controlled crime scene and they are not to enter, per my direct order. Understand?"

Payden nodded.

"Officer Verrill. You come with me. We'll take the upstairs. Bathroom, guest room, Dick's office and the bedroom. You will follow my lead. If Ana is upstairs you will not engage her. She's a good woman but she's afraid for her life and she may be armed. This is a very serious, and very delicate, situation. If possible, we'll secure her quietly. Understood?"

"What if she is here and she's safe and you do bring her down quietly?" Payden asked. "Do we dismiss the other officers? Should I call for crime scene investigation while you check upstairs or wait until you've cleared it?"

Payden's face looked as stupid as he felt while Franklin answered his question. "This is between you, me and Officer Verrill. Do you understand, Beck?" Payden nodded. "For now, as far as the other officers are concerned, nothing happened here. And before we call

in CSI to start tagging and bagging every God damned thing in this house, we're going to make sure we know what happened. At the very least, we're going to make sure the entire scene, this entire house, is cleared and Detective LaMont's wife is safe and, if necessary, gotten the proper medical treatment. If she's still alive, I'll want to break the news to her in as soft a manner as possible and take into account she might cause a disruption no matter how she finds out her husband is dead in their kitchen. Are the most basic rules of procedure not tracking?" Payden shook his head and Franklin looked at the ceiling. "Good. Do as I say and stay here, keep the dogs out and do your best not to fuck this crime scene up any more than our being here already has."

Bryan gave Payden an apologetic glance as he followed Franklin's unspoken direction and walked slowly and quietly behind him, out of sight.

A few moments later, Payden heard the ceiling squeak as Franklin and Bryan went through the rooms. Knowing exactly where they were walking from his brief, but recent, visit. Finding it curious they looked everywhere but Ana and Richard's bedroom first. Unless they were looking for something other than Ana, it didn't make sense. Not to what Franklin had essentially labelled his dumb-rookie mind.

He heard a soft knocking on the bedroom door as it creaked open. Left ajar. His portable radio hissed. "Beck. This is Dodge. Need you upstairs, outside the master bedroom's door. Now. Repeat, Ana is secured."

Payden confirmed his reception of the news and fresh set of orders. Making his way up the stairs slowly, though the house was empty except for the four of them, so he could process the words Franklin used. Words like 'secured'. Maybe that was standard speech in his new

line of work, but it sounded more like Franklin was protecting an asset and not necessarily a human being.

When he reached the top floor, he met Bryan, who was waiting outside the closed bedroom door. Behind the door, Franklin and Ana were speaking. It didn't sound friendly, but their voices were low and indistinct and Ana had just gone through a traumatic experience. Still, it didn't sound like what he'd expect breaking the news of a loved one's death would sound like. It sounded like they were a married couple and Franklin had put Ana's shrimp forks where the individual butter spreaders belonged.

Franklin opened the bedroom door a few minutes later, his clothing ruffled, his cheeks rosy and his eyes dead. The sound of Ana's muffled discourtesy stayed in the room with her.

"She's in denial," Franklin said. "If she gets worse I'm going to call medical. She needs to be looked at by a doctor."

"She's hurt too?" Bryan asked, his hand drifting toward his holstered gun.

"No. She's fine." Franklin scoffed and lowered his voice. "The dizzy bitch just doesn't want to believe. Or she doesn't want me to think she cares. Immature fucking schoolgirl. And, both of you, don't forget. She's a suspect. I don't like to think it and I don't like to say it. Dick was a good friend and a good man. But we're going to have to rule her out. Question her. The whole boat. She's fucking gone. Worse than usual. You never know until you know for sure."

Payden acknowledged he understood and patted Bryan on the hand, causing him to snap to and stop moving to free up his gun. As he did, Ana's voice called out from the bedroom. "Him. I'll talk to him."

Franklin looked into the bedroom and saw Ana pointing at Payden. "Well, Beck. Here's your big chance," Franklin grumbled. "Good luck fishing anything rational from her mouth. Find out what you can find out. We'll wait out here."

Payden nodded and waved slowly at Ana as he entered the room. The moment he got within reach of her, she wrapped her arms around him. Burying her head into the space where his neck connected with his right shoulder. A move which drew a roll of the eyes and a subtle shake of the head from Bryan.

Ana broke down. Bawling and saying whatever she had to say in incomprehensible chunks. Turning her back to the door and squeezing him tight. Payden stroked her hair with his hands as he tried to calm her. Not saying anything unusually soothing. Just hoping the sound and vibration of his voice would help in some way. As he looked up, he noticed both Franklin and Bryan were staring in his direction. Not looking him in the eyes. Gazing quite a bit lower. Though he hadn't considered it when he walked in the room, his eyes looked down and registered Ana was wearing a white chemise that would, normally, cover her to the tops of her thighs. But she was on her tiptoes, holding on to him for dear life as she cried, and that was causing her sleepwear's hemline to ride higher than usual. Taking another glance down, he saw her plump behind was covered by a pair of fairly-risqué panties. The boys couldn't help themselves and Franklin and Bryan stood outside the doorway leering.

"Your skin's freezing," Payden said to Ana before raising his voice. "Officer Verrill, Detective Dodge. Can we get Mrs. LaMont a blanket? They're in the dresser to the left, facing the bed. Please. She's in shock."

Bryan and Franklin snapped out of whatever fantasies they were perfecting as they ogled Ana's ass. Bryan rushed into the room to find a blanket—which Payden had to again describe more clearly as a 'large blanket'—for Ana as Franklin looked away with a condescending sneer.

Bryan delivered the blanket and Payden covered Ana's back, from neck to ankles, immediately. She looked at him with confusion as he hung the edges of the blanket on his shoulders and asked her to hold him like she had been, to keep the blanket in place. Then her expression turned hard and she looked over her shoulder at Bryan and Franklin. Squinting and scowling at them as Bryan realised she'd figured out why Payden had requested she be covered up. She switched her scrutiny to Franklin, clocking the look of contempt and disappointment in his eyes, and screamed at them both. "Get out of my room. I won't talk with you here. Quit staring at me. Go downstairs and I'll cooperate. Leave me and Payden alone. The only gentleman among you. I'll speak with him. And then..." She choked on her words and forced the last few out as her tears flowed again. "Then I'll come downstairs to see what you claim happened. Now, please, close the door and leave us be. Let me talk to Payden and tell him what I know of what happened this morning."

Franklin's brow wrinkled, and his nose involuntarily sniffed, both times he heard Ana refer to Payden by name, but Franklin pretended he hadn't noticed and didn't feel slighted, perhaps wary. Payden thought it odd he would take offence, but he also knew what kind of career he was beginning. It was entirely possible that, by the time he reached Franklin's age, he'd be suspicious of everyone and everything too.

Franklin muttered something that sounded like 'let him deal with the half-retarded cock-tease' as Bryan closed the door and gave Payden a slight nod.