

SIMON SAYS

By

Bryan Thomas Schmidt



BORALIS BOOKS

Ottawa, KS 66067

Copyright © 2019 Bryan Thomas Schmidt

All rights reserved.

ISBN-13: 978-1-62225-7508 hardcover

ISBN-13: 978-1-62225-7515 paperback

ISBN-13: 978-1-62225-7522 ebook

First Edition: October 2019

Printed in the United States of America

10987654321

Interior Design and Layout by Guy Anthony DeMarco

Front Cover Design: Kent Holloway

Cover Layout and Additional Design: Audra Crebs

Author Photo: Emily Megan Photography

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely incidental.

DEDICATION

*Dedicated to
KCPD Training Officer Gilbert Carter,
With thanks for his friendship, guidance,
Advice, and letting me intrude on so
Many work days over the four years
I did ride alongs to research this book.
He's one of the best out there,
And I'm grateful for his service.*

THE TWO-YEAR-OLD BROWN 2027 Ford Explorer Interceptor drove slowly along Woodsweather as its two occupants checked the numbers on the various buildings, primarily brick warehouses. Like most recent models, the car was fully capable of driving itself, especially to such a simple location, but its driver was a seventeen year veteran of the Kansas City Police Department and a huge skeptic of all the latest gadgets. He refused to even use the car's video monitors for backing up or its automatic parallel parking function, which had proved to be highly more efficient than any human driver.

Fuck that, he thought. He wasn't trusting his life or his partner's to a machine no matter what. It was bad enough the machines were taking over—taking jobs from humans, controlling paperwork, cars, and spying on everything these days. Cops like himself were fast becoming relics Simon knew, but some things were still best handled by humans.

Forties, former star running back at K-State, divorced with an estranged teenage daughter—ex-everything really, Master Detective John Simon drove as his younger partner, Blanca Santorios, read the numbers off the buildings. Dark-skinned with beautiful black hair that ran down to the middle of her back and stunning brown eyes, her beauty belied the tough cop underneath. She was pushing thirty now but didn't look a day above college-aged, and at the moment, she had that special glow that pregnant women always had. Few people knew

about the pregnancy, though, as Santorios refused to notify the department until she had to so she could avoid desk duty, every detective's dread. She was just starting to show, so they both knew it wouldn't be long until she had no choice. Sergeant Becker was smart and very observant, and female cops never missed these things like their male counterparts did.

Santorios squinted through the fading daylight toward the front of the grungy building obscured by shadows. "Two-five-five-six," Santorios checked a slip of paper in her hand. "This is it."

The warehouse had been built in the 1940s along the Missouri Riverfront between Mulberry and Eighth on Woodsweather Road. While much of the Missouri West Bottoms area had become run down over time, historic preservationists and revitalization funders nostalgic over its history and not wanting its prime location in the heart of downtown Kansas City to go to waste had fought and won. From the early 2000s on, the West Bottoms had thrived again.

"Who the hell makes these cars," Simon grumbled, sliding around on the leather that had become one with his ass. "I think I'm stuck to this seat."

"Keep it. It matches your eyes," Santorios grinned as Simon pulled the car to a stop by the curve.

Simon groaned as she chuckled and began unbuckling his seatbelt. "Tell me again why we've wasted three evenings on this?"

"Because Peter tipped me off," his partner reminded him. "Relax, will you? Do you want to just wait in the car?" Her soft eyes met his and she meant it.

Simon chuckled. "Ever since Andy knocked you up, you've been scolding everyone like a parent. What are you—practicing?"

"Not everyone. Just you," she replied. "The whole reason Becker made us partners was for me to keep you in line."

Simon scowled. "Don't get cocky. It never lasts."

"Look, I'm just going to look around like before," his partner said, moving on. "See if there's any activity. Seriously. Wait in the car if you want." But she

knew he'd never do that. They were partners and hell or high water he had her back.

They opened their doors and got out—Simon on the street, his partner on the curb—just as a big rig rolled past, sending muddy water from the morning's rain flying up under its wheels to splatter Simon's slacks. He'd just had them dry cleaned and pressed. "Fuck!" he cursed as he slammed the door and looked down at himself.

"To protect and to serve," Santorios teased.

"Seventeen years and they still have the same stupid slogan," Simon muttered. A cool breeze blew in over the river, rustling the nearby oaks and made him shudder a moment.

"God's wrath for your bad attitude," she replied with a laugh.

"You getting religious on me?"

"They came door to door on a rough day," she quipped.

Simon chuckled. Best partner he'd ever had. Gave as good as she got. She led the way as Simon came around the car and they started up a double wide sidewalk toward the double glass front doors of the warehouse office.

Santorios reached up and tried the doors. Locked. Just as expected. "Let's go around to the back," she said.

As they turned to head west, they both noticed the tractor trailer backing in behind the warehouse.

"I thought you said nobody's here," Simon said, shooting his partner an inquisitive look.

"Except for those nights where they get strange deliveries he told me," she replied. "Unusual activity after hours. Probable cause." And a possible lead on some of the burglaries they'd been investigating the past few months. Santorios picked up her pace now, headed along the front of the warehouse toward the side where they'd seen the truck.

"Our lucky day," Simon said and followed, bursting with pride. When they'd first partnered up for Simon to train her, the newly promoted detective had

been about as by-the-book as they come. Afraid to push any boundaries and risk her detective status or alienate her superiors. But her older, more jaded trainer had worked on her, and after six years, now she was the one fudging the rules.

"God being good to us," Santorios said.

"Remind me to find those missionaries and shoot them, will you?" She shushed him with a glare and a dismissive motion as they moved around the side of the building toward the rear dock. Truth was his partner's renewed interest in her Mexican family's traditional Catholic heritage was also part and parcel of her forthcoming motherhood, and Simon knew the more frequent religious references in their banter were a result of that.

A group of a half-dozen or so men waiting a yard back along the rear dock swung into action as the big rig pulled to a stop with the usual repeated annoying warning beeps as it backed up and settled against the dock's edge. Two Hispanic-looking men rushed the doors, one resting a hand on the handle as the other knelt to unlock a padlock at the base with a set of jangling keys. He worked quickly and efficiently, like one who'd done the task many times before, then stood and stepped back as his partner worked the latch-lever and swung first the left door then the right wide open with barely a squeak.

The rest of the group swooped in then and began unloading crates off the truck, some using handcarts, others crawling into the trailer, while one or two retrieved forklifts and drove them forward with the same annoying beeps as the big rig had produced moments before.

The men were so busy, none of them noticed the two cops cautiously approaching the metal side door just below the dock to their right which led into the building. Santorios jiggled the handle. Unlocked. She pulled it open slowly, trying to be as quiet as possible, and stepped inside. Simon followed.

They were in a dimly lit corridor with old vinyl flooring that looked right out of the Seventies. The long fluorescent fixture overhead had two bulbs, one flashing on and off sporadically to create shadows up and down the passage's length. At the far end was some kind of counter in an alcove in the wall, facing

down the corridor. Guard station, most likely. But there was no sign of any guard.

They exchanged a silent look and moved ahead cautiously, taking in the walls. Halfway down on one a larger cork bulletin board held the usual assortment of workman's government warnings: notices about work injuries, regulation of work hours and overtime, safety rules and procedures, etc. All stapled up by their four corners in a neat row along the right hand side of the board. The other half of the board contained assorted notices of birthdays, official holidays and chaotically posted notes for fellow employees, many half-covering parts of each other.

The corridor smelled of dust and sweat and industrial cleaning solutions. The ceiling overhead was unfinished and raw with concrete and steel beams showing through high above and the light hanging by a wire at least ten feet down from them. They heard the sounds of hydraulics from behind the wall to their left—the warehouse floor—and voices as the men worked.

"Show me," a baritone voice growled.

Wood creaked as someone pried open a crate, Simon guessed. Metal clanking. A dropped crowbar perhaps? Then there was rustling and the baritone spoke again. "Good shit."

"It's good," another, higher pitched voice insisted. "Just pay up and I'm out."

Simon and his partner exchanged a knowing look. Probably drugs.

"Pay the man then," they heard the baritone say as a forklift engine started up again with a whine.

They reached the far end of the corridor facing the counter. A door to their right seemed to lead into office space, while another opening to their left led into the warehouse workspace. There was a knocking sound, then the metal click of latches. Maybe a briefcase opening?

Santorios nodded to the left and Simon nodded agreement. They both reached behind their jackets to loosen the straps over their weapons, then moved cautiously toward the opening. They could see the warehouse's concrete floor

beyond, stained with oil, dirt, and various substances. Stacks of crates lined a wall in the distance with a row of basic wood-frame shelves lining the area to their right, the warehouse's west end. Smaller crates and boxes filled the shelves. "Hold it!" The higher pitched voice said. "The price was two hundred. You're fifty short."

The partners entered the warehouse floor behind a huge row of crates and moved silently along toward the dock opening, seeking a better view of the proceedings.

"Take the money," the baritone ordered.

"I answer to people," the other insisted. "Pay me what you owe me."

"There were complications," the baritone said, his voice cold. "Not possible."

"Bullshit!" the other replied.

"May I help you?" It was a male voice from behind the detectives, a little tinny, not quite firm.

The partners whirled around, hands instinctively heading for their shoulder holsters, but they stopped when they saw him: tall, bald, a black man in his late twenties, perhaps. Bright blue eyes, a neatly pressed security uniform and badge. He was unarmed except for a taser that hung off his belt on a hook. And he was smiling at them, not threatening at all.

"Master Detective John Simon," Simon said, relaxing and keeping his voice down with hopes the men near the truck might not hear.

"Detective Blanca Santorios," his partner said, smiling back at the guard.

"This is a restricted area," the guard said. "May I see your identification?"

"Sure," Santorios said. "And maybe you could answer a couple questions?" Both detectives pulled their wallets and flashed their badges and IDs.

"You are police officers?" the guard said as if he wasn't sure. Not the usual response.

The voices out by the truck went silent and there was a shuffling. Simon tensed. Had they overheard?

Without warning, a large, scruffy bearded man with tattooed arms swung

out from behind the row of crates, ten feet back from the guard, wielding a Barrett M4-Carbine automatic rifle and opened fire. The first rounds cut through the guard's shoulders and back and knocked him to the floor, moaning.

Simon and Santorios both reached for their weapons—Santorios a Glock 22 and Simon his trusty Glock 37—as they simultaneously dove aside and aimed them at the gunman. Simon headed right and Santorios left, up against the crates.

In moments, they returned fire, snapping off several shots as the gunman turned his rifle on them and fired off a stream of rounds.

He jerked as he was hit in the shoulder, knocking him to the right, and then the knee, causing him to cry out and buckle. Simon put one in his forehead and he went down, silenced.

The iron smell of warm blood joined the scents of oil, dirt, sweat, wood, and more as Simon looked at his partner, neither clear entirely whose shots hit where. Both had aimed for center mass, per training, but diving and rolling never helped one's aim.

The crates beside Santorios exploded then with the sound of automatic and machine gun fire. Hundreds of bullets a minute as the men behind them, unloading the truck, opened fire.

"Shit!" Santorios dove toward her partner as Simon looked around for cover. Dust and splinters flew from the crates as the fire cut through them but only a few bullets made it through to strike a narrow cement beam near Simon's head. The only thing solid to protect them. His partner landed beside him in a crouch.

"Just relax. Wait in the car," Simon mimicked his partner's earlier words, then asked, "You okay?"

"No. They're trying to kill us," Santorios cracked.

"I noticed," Simon replied. The beam was too narrow for adequately protecting one of them, let alone two. He jerked his head toward the dead gunman, lying just outside the opening through which they'd entered from the corridor. Santorios nodded back and they both jumped to their feet and ran as

fast as they could as gunfire continued tearing apart the crates.

They both dropped and rolled, coming up aiming back toward the dock, feet apart in firing stance.

"Police! Drop them!" Simon yelled. They could see some of the men now, armed and reacting to the two detective's appearance in their line of sight.

The men swung their rifles as one called, "Fuck you!" Then they opened fire again, along with several others Simon couldn't see.

Again, they split up, ducking and rolling as they dodged the bullets then fired back. One of the gunmen went down, hit in the chest by Santorios, his machine gun spraying a barrage of bullets into the air as he fell.

Simon landed between two of the wooden shelves and sought cover behind a loaded pallet jack. Bullets ricocheted off it as he took aim and fired back at the two Hispanic men, who had left the unloading and were firing Barret M-4s from close by.

A man in jeans and two more in suits were firing automatic pistols from the shelter of the stacked crates behind which the two cops had encountered the guard earlier, while two men on forklifts fired Uzi semi-machine guns from their cockpit seats, and others scattered around the room ran for cover. The man in jeans had several days old stubble on his face and wore cowboy boots and a flannel shirt—Simon made him as the truck driver. One of the two suits was wearing white Armani like a 1980s Miami Vice throwback, with slicked back short brown hair and green eyes that shone with arrogance and command. The one in charge perhaps? The other suit was cheaper, polyester, and the stereotypical gray with matching slacks, a white button down shirt and bland tie rounding out the ensemble. He was dark-skinned with dark black hair, military cut, and looked Hispanic except for his light blue eyes. The rest of the men, including the other two Hispanics, wore khakis or work pants and Polo-style shirts.

Santorios fired at one of the forklift drivers, but her bullets bounced off its metal frame with a clang, deflecting into boxes. The driver aimed his machine

gun at her as she dove behind another concrete beam near the wooden shelves—this one wide enough to hide her.

Simon took aim at one of the forklift drivers, raising his Glock at a slight angle and firing off three shots in a row. The first two deflected like his partner's had off the machine's steel frame, but the third hit the driver in the neck. He screamed, his machine gun falling from his hands as he grabbed at his bleeding neck and tried to move the forklift one handed.

As the other men returned the two detectives' fire, the forklift's servos whined and it turned in an arc, accelerating. But then Santorios got a clear shot at the driver and took it. His head jerked back as he fell forward on the controls, and the forklift accelerated even more toward one of the other men, who shouted and tried to dodge. Too late. He was pierced by one of the forks through his stomach and slammed against a row of crates. The forklift kept rolling then, pushing him back into the warehouse's north wall near the opening for the guard station. Blood shot from the corner of his mouth as he moaned and struggled to free himself.

Amidst the distraction, Santorios ran and dove into a roll, headed for cover beside her partner behind the loaded pallet jack.

"We need a better angle," she said as she landed in a crouch behind him. Simon nodded. "We need backup and better weapons, too."

"You got a cell," she reminded him. Radios left in the car, no bodycams—working undercover had disadvantages.

For a moment, he thought about calling but they'd already broken procedure following a hunch, and he wanted to know more before calling backup; make sure they were covered. He noticed a double row of crates nearby, stacked in front of some kind of conveyor. "You stay here and cover me."

"Where are you going?" Santorios asked, but Simon ducked under the bottom of a nearby shelf and took off running without answering, and she opened fire again, shifting her aim between the various men, trying to keep them occupied. Bullets ricocheted off the pallet jack into crates and nearby shelves as others

sent straw, splinters and dust raining down on her from overhead. She threw an arm over her head and crouched down into a ball for cover.

Simon landed free of the shelving and rolled across the floor on his side, coming up just short of the conveyor crates, pulling himself quickly behind them as some of the men turned their weapons his way. The conveyor stretched off through the shelves and up to a higher level. Scattered stacks of two or three crates were piled along it, and most didn't appear very well balanced. Simon grabbed the black plastic handle of a control lever and flipped the conveyor into reverse then jumped onto the belt. He landed sideways, pain lancing his shoulder from an old football wound. He ignored it and pushed his arms out to the side facing the gunmen, gun aimed and ready.

The belt rolled with a loud humming whine and some of the unbalanced crates tumbled off as it moved, others falling off the far end.

The gunmen reacted turning to look for the cause of the commotion. A couple fired randomly but hit only the stacked crates between them and the conveyor.

Then Simon's head and arms came clear and fired, hitting one of the gunmen in the groin. The man screamed and squeezed off a couple shots before dropping his weapon and falling to his knees.

Simon fired at another, who sprayed the stacked crates with a machine gun stream as he arced his aim toward Simon. Bullets bounced off the metal conveyor below the belt as Simon rolled over and off the far side, needing cover again.

He heard shots and when he looked up again, the gunman who'd been shooting at him was dead with a hole in his chest. Santorios? The other men had disappeared though, except one who was racing his forklift as fast as it could toward the back of the truck.

"Where'd they go?" Simon shouted, looking over toward Santorios.

"I don't know," she called back, rising up to peer at him over the pallet jack.

"Duck!" Simon shouted then and fired straight at her.

She shrunk back into a ball, her eyes surprised and pissed at the same time.

Simon's round tore through the chest of the gunman who'd appeared behind her and taken aim with his M-4. The man fell without a sound, blood sprouting from his wounds as Santorios stuck her head up again, glaring at Simon.

Simon shrugged. "Found one."

"Thanks for telling me," she said.

They heard the sound of the big rig motor then, and the soft hum of another engine, this one electric, starting outside. At least one of these guys was environmentally conscious. And escaping!

"Shit!" Simon ran toward the dock doors as the man on the forklift opened fire from the back of the trailer.

Santorios stood and took aim, firing six shots in a row straight at the truck. Two hit the forklift guy in the face, one leaving a red hole through the center of his forehead. He stopped firing and slumped in his seat.

"Jesus, you've been practicing," Simon muttered and shot his partner a grateful glance as she moved from behind the pallet jack and raced toward him.

"We've got to stop them," she shouted.

They both fired at the big rig, but hit only the trailer doors and some crates inside as it pulled forward, accelerating.

Then they could see a blue BMW racing up the ramp outside ahead of the truck.

"Damn it! Get the plates!" Simon said, aiming his gun past the truck at the BMW as Santorios aimed at the truck. Together, they ran toward the edge of the dock, firing at the two vehicles as they tried to catch the license plates. "The goddamn truck's blocking the Beamer."

Then the BMW was gone, tires squealing as it spun around a corner and out toward the street. The truck turned right behind it, moving slower as the driver fought the sharp angle with limited maneuverability. Simon and Santorios both fired off shots at the cab, blowing out a window and putting holes in the door and side panels but then it too was moving past, turning again onto the street outside.

Simon turned and ran back toward where the guard had fallen, hoping he was still alive and could answer some questions. He pulled his cell phone as he ran, calling for crime scene, back up and relaying information on the two vehicles.

"Semi's plate is Missouri EWE726," his partner called and Simon relayed the information over his cell.

Simon reached the place where they'd left the fallen guard. Crates had fallen around it but he was nowhere to be found. Simon saw a pool of greenish liquid there and knelt, feeling it. It was cold, not warm and sticky, nothing like human blood. "What the fuck? Where did he go?"

Santorios ran up behind him then. "I thought he was surely dead."

"I wanted to at least check. We need someone we can question at least."

"I think we shot them all."

Simon growled and stood again, shaking his head. "Sergeant's not gonna be pleased about this." His eyes panned the warehouse—chaos and destruction left in the shootout's wake. Shattered crates, the wrecked forklift, bullet ridden shelves and beams... It was a mess.

"Next time I will wait in the car," he threatened.

Santorios simply laughed and soon he joined her as he caught his breath from the adrenaline rushing through him.

PETER GREEN LEFT the Ashman Gallery in Kansas City's thriving Crossroad Arts District just after seven and headed down Main for the nearest street car stop at 20th Street. He'd been working at the gallery now for five years as assistant manager and loved the job. In addition to excellent pay and benefits, the manager, Stacey Soukup split weekend duties with him, so they each got every other weekend off. It was something few other assistant managers at any other gallery in Kansas City received.

This was actually his first night free in a week as he'd been helping inventory the gallery's stores in preparation for another exhibition. That meant time spent at the warehouse in the West Bottoms. And he'd stayed after hours there a couple of times trying to get through all the items Benjamin Ashman and Stacey had acquired and stored there but not yet displayed. They had some real hidden treasures, and he'd enjoyed the task, except for some odd activity he'd witnessed involving a semi-truck unloading crates one night after all the warehouse people had gone home. It had been just Peter and the guard when the warehouse supervisor, Wayne O'Dell, and some other unfamiliar men showed up. Peter had stayed in the shadows and not asked questions. But then he'd seen the Degas—one of the master's best pieces, proudly on display prominently at the gallery ever since Peter had worked there. For some reason, it had been taken down and shipped to the warehouse.

After the men had left, Peter had searched and searched for that crate, but never found it. What were they doing with it? Even stranger, when he'd gone back to the gallery the next day, the Degas had been there in its usual spot, well-lit, proudly displayed. That's when he'd casually mentioned the weird activity to his friend Blanca at their aerobics class. He liked Mr. Ashman, but he'd never liked O'Dell. If the man was doing something shady behind the boss's back that might hurt the gallery, then Peter wanted to stop it. But he wanted to be sure. Blanca was a Kansas City detective with robbery/homicide. And she'd been asking him about a series of commercial and industrial burglaries with similar M.O.s, so he'd figured she could check it out, and either bust O'Dell or tell Peter it was nothing to worry about. Either way, no one would know he'd been involved and Mr. Ashman would be protected. Peter could keep his awesome job and everybody won.

He stopped beside the bus stop, waiting with a line of people. The street car stop was just across the way in the middle, but he'd wait 'til the bus passed to make his way out there. He could see the driverless bus coming up the block and the street car would be a few more minutes. Driverless buses had become common within the past few years and Lucas still found the idea disturbing, even though their track record for safety was actually quite impressive. The computers were expensive and sophisticated but as more and more bus drivers retired, the city had begun gradually switching them over.

He stood back a little, out of the way of the bus crowd, listening to them chatter about the weather, their jobs, families, etc. and just kept to himself. Peter was single, his last lover having cheated on him with another man and left him six months before. He'd been pouring himself into work to get over it, but one of these days he did need to get out and try meeting men again. Not tonight, though. Tonight he had aerobics and he wanted to see Blanca; find out how things had gone at the warehouse.

The bus slid to a stop with squeaking hydraulic brakes and the doors opened, as people poured off the back and on the front. Peter appreciated the city's all-

electric buses a lot. No more exhaust fumes, less noise. In the five years since the city had made the total switch to electric, the street had become a lot more pleasant outside the gallery. Main Street was a busy route for several, not just the street cars.

The whole loading and unloading took under a minute and Peter was alone on the corner as those exiting the bus scattered for their various destinations, moving up the street in both directions. Some were probably even headed for his gallery. With Stacey and the girls working tonight they'd be in good hands.

As the bus pulled away, he stepped toward the curb preparing to cross, when a red Mercedes SL300 pulled up and stopped, blocking his path. Peter fought back an annoyed comment as the driver rolled down his tinted window and Peter got a good look at his face—Miles Ross, one of O'Dell's goons—early thirties, flashy dresser, got all the girls until they discovered his personality. What did he want?

Then he saw the black shiny muzzle of the automatic pistol. What was going on?

"Next time, shut the fuck up," Miles muttered and fired twice into Peter's chest.

Peter stumbled back, mouth open in shock as the air rushed from his lungs and blood poured onto his hands from the holes in his chest. A woman nearby saw him and screamed, but Peter couldn't breathe. Why had he been shot? He fell to his knees, gasping.

"Somebody call nine-one-one!" someone shouted.

Then Peter's eyes were hazy. He had to lie down, just until he got his energy back. As he slid toward the pavement though, his world went black.



LUCAS GEORGE LAY there stunned on the warehouse floor for what seemed like minutes but he discovered later had been mere seconds. One minute he'd been questioning two intruders who claimed to be cops, doing his duty as security guard, then he'd been lying on the floor. It took him a bit to process what had happened to him. The sounds of gunfire, yelling, and the two detectives chattering, then racing past him went virtually unnoticed as he considered the fluid leaking onto the floor from three holes in his body. I've been shot. Must get help! He had to get to his maker ASAP.

As the others disappeared behind the shredded stacks of crates, still vibrating from the projectiles they'd been assaulted with minutes before, Lucas raised himself up with a push of his arms, looking down to inspect his wounds. The bullets seemed to have gone straight through. But given the amount of fluid pooling where he'd lain, he didn't have much time—maybe an hour or less—to get help, if he wanted to survive.

And Lucas very much wanted to live.

Few knew he was an android. His kind had only reached the present level where they could almost pass for human in the past two years, and only the wealthiest clients, people who didn't want obvious androids involved in their business, could afford his model line. The detectives had never noticed he wasn't human. Not that they'd gotten a very good look at him in the shadows, of course, but still, that pleased Lucas a great deal. His maker would be pleased as

well. He supposed Mr. O'Dell knew, and Mr. Ashman, of course, but the other warehouse employees paid him little regard. He was just the strange, quiet, black dude who came in late afternoon and stayed all night alone. No one envied that job, and he was not involved in their work, so Lucas tended to blend into the background, and in some ways, he suspected that was why Benjamin Ashman had given him the job.

He had limited skills and training to actually guard anything. His job was to report and intercept intruders; chase them off with a stern confrontation if he could, but nothing physical—no fighting, no violence. He had only a nightstick and that was just for show. His cameras recorded everything he saw and heard. And he had a direct connection to the VOIP systems to call Police or anyone else he needed to notify should anything happen.

In his last year at the Gallery Warehouse, he'd only had occasion to use VOIP once. The place was usually deathly quiet. It had been the first time men showed up late, after hours, with a truckload of art. Until that day a few months past, it had never happened. And so when the men refused to stop their activities at Lucas' instructions, he'd called Mr. O'Dell. O'Dell had told him it was authorized and not to worry about it. After that, O'Dell showed up with the men a lot, and Lucas just kept to his patrolling, ignoring the activity.

But tonight he'd been shot. He wondered how it felt for humans. Should he be in pain? Perhaps he was fortunate he wasn't. Either way, as he pulled himself up off the floor and looked around, there was still gunfire and human chatter coming from behind the crates. But he realized he had a clear path out through the opening that led to the office and the corridor beyond, so he dialed Steven on his VOIP and quietly headed for the corridor and the back door waiting beyond.

Steven answered after five rings. Lucas informed him he needed emergency maintenance. And Steven told him to wait at the curb for a car, no further explanation required. No questions about leaving his duties. No instructions besides to wait. Lucas found it odd. After all, leaving his duties at the

warehouse was a serious breach of his programming. Perhaps Steven, the maker's assistant, was confused? But then again, the Police and Mr. O'Dell were there. Surely that meant the warehouse would be watched. And if he didn't go, Lucas wouldn't survive. So he went, hoping his maker could not only fix him but sort things out with Mr. Ashman later.

The car arrived in fifteen minutes and Lucas climbed into the back, staying silent the entire ride to his maker's lab across town in Leawood, a nearby suburb.

AS HE STEPPED BACK onto Woodsweather and approached the Interceptor, Simon heard a buzzing in his ear and turned. A small, black media drone was floating along beside him.

"Detective Simon, can you tell us what's happening please?" a female voice said, emanating from the box. Some producer monitoring it at the nearest TV station or bureau. Welcome to the modern world. Instead of sending reporters first, many media outfits used drones controlled by producers back at their offices to get the first footage and interviews at crime scenes. In many areas, the drones could arrive much faster than ground vehicles because of their ability to approach in the air at higher speeds. It was like a new wave of electronic paparazzi, and it drove Simon nuts.

He swatted at the drone like it was a fly. "Get the fuck away from me. No comment."

"Has there been a shootout? Can you tell us what happened?" the voice continued, undeterred.

Simon reached up and grabbed the drone with his palm over the camera, swinging it around like a Frisbee with all his might so it pointed away from the scene.

"Hey!" the voice complained.

"I said no comment. Get back behind the line!" Simon ordered and left it behind, hurrying on.

Before leaving the warehouse, Simon sat in the car and ran the thumb prints of each of the dead men through PRINTZ, the KCPD's new digital finger printing system. He simply had to pull up the app, press their thumb or a finger against the screen, and search and PRINTZ did the rest. It was connected to the KCPD's own database, IAFIS, the FBI database, and several others. Each of the men came back with criminal records, unsurprisingly. Most were minor offenses, but a couple had felonies and had done time. With two clicks, Simon emailed it back to his office computer so he could print it and add it to the case file later.

SIMON HAD INHERITED his grandmother's house on a quiet street in Fairway, Kansas a decade before. While the department requirement that all officers to keep a residence in the Kansas City, Missouri limits meant Simon had to keep an apartment down south on the border with Grandview, the Fairway house had now become where he both spent most of his time and kept most of his things. 5516 Canterbury was a quiet brick, two bedroom, H-shaped home with an attached garage built in the fifties. When he'd inherited it, the interior looked like it had been stuck in the seventies so he'd remodeled it with the help of friends and fellow officers. The old shag carpet and browns and oranges had been replaced with subtler, modern shades like ocean blue, off white, and even tan, fresh Wallpaper trim in the kitchen, hardwood floors in the bathrooms and basement, and new runners, trim, and doors throughout. Now it looked far more modern than old school and that suited Simon just fine.

Although his Sergeant knew he was technically violating the department's rule, as long as he kept his Grandview address on file as his main residence, no one objected. After all, he had lived in that area most of his seventeen years on the force. The renovations had only been finished on the Canterbury house two years before, and Simon rarely had anyone from the department over besides Blanca and Andy and a few close friends, so only his closest circle even knew

that. In any case, the State of Missouri, which owned the Kansas City Police Department, had loosened its enforcement of the policy in the last five years after repeated loss of their best, most experienced officers. Everyone knew stubborn old timers like Simon wouldn't hesitate to quit if pressed. So now, as long as it was kept quiet and off-books, the most senior officers could get away with it. Simon wasn't about to rock that boat.

He parked his classic 1985 Dodge Charger in the driveway just after midnight and headed up the sidewalk to the front door. Someone was in the house. Several lights were on in the kitchen, living room, and his daughter's bedroom, a bedroom she rarely used these days, and Simon wasn't expecting anyone. Some idiot was having a very unlucky night, but when he got to the door, he found it double latched as usual. Had they broken a window?

Loosening the strap over his Glock 37, he inserted his keys as quietly as possible and turned first the deadbolt and then the lock in the doorknob itself, swinging open the door, and pulling his gun. He saw no one immediately inside the door, so he took up a cautious stance and moved inside, arms extended, pistol leading the way.

The living room was lit only by a lamp beside his favorite recliner, the lamp he always kept on when he was home. Music was playing from one of the bedrooms to the left, but first, he turned right to check the kitchen and then the dining room behind it, looking for any intruders who might be in that part of the house. The back door and door to the garage were closed and locked. And he saw no sign of anyone inside nor out on the screened in back porch. No open windows or broken glass and nothing looked disturbed. That meant whoever it was had gone to the bedrooms.

As he circled back to check the bedrooms and bath at the other end, the faint whiff of a flowery perfume tickled his nose. What burglar wears perfume? Am I being robbed by a fucking chick then? He moved down the hallway, quietly and saw the bathroom door wide open, the interior dark. His own bedroom door was also open, just as he'd left it, and he saw no sign of

movements in the shadows. The music was coming from his daughter's room, but Emma hadn't visited in months and she was currently mad at him, so he wasn't expecting her. Who'd broken in—some teenager?

Reaching his left hand out in front of him as his right steadied the gun, he pushed on his daughter's door and it swung open. A familiar face bounced into the light, dancing to the music.

"Emma?" He lowered his pistol even as he raised his voice. For just a moment he thought he was staring at Lara, his ex-wife, the love of his life, only not Lara now but Lara when they'd met back in high school. Then it hit him.

His fourteen-year-old daughter stopped spinning and whirled to face him, eyes widening as she saw the gun. "What the hell, Dad? You gonna shoot me?"

"What are you doing here?" he demanded as he holstered his gun.

"Mom had a last minute business trip. She left you a message. I'm here all week."

"What?" He hated when Lara did this to him. Especially with the current tension between him and Emma. Emma and her mother lived across town in Independence. How was he going to get her to school and home and deal with her dance lessons, piano, and after school activities on no notice whatsoever? He sighed.

Lara dreaded talking to him and avoided him accordingly. She had ever since their marriage fell apart. He'd never loved anyone in his life the way he loved Lara, and they were great together. Until she got sick. Bipolar disorder destroyed everything. It often did. He'd stayed and fought but after years of verbal and psychological abuse and watching what it did to Emma living with fighting parents, he'd walked away. One of the hardest days of his life. And Lara had been punishing him for it ever since.

"What the fuck, Dad? You deaf?" Emma scowled, hands on her hips and glared at him. "Don't you check your messages."

"Don't use that language with me!" He scolded, glaring back. She looked so much like her mother it hurt and he winced. "When did she call?"

"This morning," Emma said, as if that made all the difference.

"I am just getting in from work, and no, I had no time to call and check messages today," he replied. "She could have called my cell."

Emma rolled her eyes. "You know how she loves talking to you." This was true but dropping Emma off for a week with no warning was bullshit, and it pissed him off.

"Welcome home, honey. It's good to see you, honey." Emma growled, scowling again.

"You haven't exactly been my biggest fan lately," Simon replied, not even bothering to broach the subject of her being up so late on a school night.

Emma shrugged. "You have to earn it."

Simon turned and headed back to close the front door. "Turn the music down so we can talk," he ordered. No point asking. She'd just defy him. Instead he used a tone even Emma knew better than to argue with.

The compact stereo clicked off as he closed the door tightly and set both the locks for the night.

"What did you think—I was a thief dancing around your daughter's room?" Emma said loudly, startling him. She'd snuck up behind him.

"Don't do that," he growled and turned to face her.

"Never sneak up on a cop," she mimicked—a warning he'd given her a thousand times for sure.

"It's a good way to get shot," he fired back.

"Apparently right up there with coming to stay with your dad," she said, smirking.

"I didn't shoot you...yet."

She laughed. "I'll bet you were tempted."

"You have no idea," he said.

She threw him a smug smile as she turned and headed back for the kitchen and he followed.

"You eaten?" he asked.

She waved dismissively toward the kitchen. "Pepperoni and sausage. I put it on your card."

"Oh sure. Any other charges I should know about?" He always kept a credit card under his silverware holder in a drawer in case she needed something sometime when he was stuck at work. She always managed to take advantage, too, but then he'd never kept much around that would interest a budding, hungry teenager.

He got a better look at her as he flipped on the kitchen lights and went in search of some pizza. She was wearing more makeup, a sight that made him automatically tense. And she'd laid the perfume on heavy. What else was her mother letting her do without discussing it? He pulled open the fridge with a hiss and a waft of cold air hit him.

"I bought a grand piano," Emma said, answering his question. "Steinway delivers. It's coming tomorrow. Oh, and the Porsche is for me. You can look, don't touch."

Simon shook his head. "You gonna stop hating me long enough for us to get along this week?" He flipped open the cardboard Domino's box and grabbed two slices with his right hand while cupping the stems of two Coronas with his left and pulling them all out toward the counter in one smooth turn.

"He's a nice boy," she whined. "Everyone likes him. Mom loves him! You had no right to embarrass me like that!"

"You're fourteen," Simon replied, hating that they were revisiting the same argument again. Simon had found Emma sitting on the porch, holding hands with a boy when he'd come to pick her up. He'd simply said the same thing in front of the boy, he found himself saying now, "We've always told you no dating until you're sixteen."

"You have. Mom says she's fine with it." That was a change. Lara and Simon had agreed on that rule before Emma was born.

Simon snorted as he opened a cupboard and pulled down a plate and a beer glass bearing the Sporting K.C. logo in shiny fluorescent blue. The pizza was

still warm and smelled delicious. Perfect for his mood. "Your mom's fine with a lot of things I'm not. That's why we got divorced."

Emma scoffed. "Maybe she just loves me more."

Simon shook his head. "No, ma'am. No trying that old trick. You're too old for that b.s. and you know better." He slammed open the silverware drawer, lifting the plastic holder quickly to double check that she'd put his MasterCard back—right where he left it. Then grabbed a fork and spun it shut, grabbing his pizza and beers and headed for the living room. Manipulating parents by playing them against each other was an age old trick for children of divorce and Emma had gone through that phase. With the baggage between he and Lara, it had been brutal, too, but he thought they'd put that behind them.

Emma groaned. "You're such a dick. No wonder she left."

"Language!" he scolded again. It hurt every time she said it, but Simon tried not to let it show. He knew better. His problems with Lara had developed over many years, most of their twelve year marriage. They'd never been a perfect fit—two very different people. But at first, love had overcome the obstacles. After ten years married to a husband who was gone at all hours for long periods at a time, in and out of dangerous situations he couldn't always talk about, Lara started to get fed up. The fact that he preferred time at home when he was off to going out to symphonies and fine arts like his wife just fueled the fire. But then she'd been sick and she was an angry manic. Brutal. At least with him. She treated Emma much better but Emma didn't parent her. Simon had tried to take charge, take care of his wife and that just pissed her off.

"I'm not a child!" She'd whined so often it became like a refrain. The end had come when she started having spurts of violent anger. Between having guns in the house and gun safes she knew the combos to and not wanting Emma exposed to that ugliness, he'd finally surrendered and filed for divorce. He had long ago accepted it. Was learning to live with it. But hearing his daughter throw it at him so casually when she'd been the one most hurt during the actual divorce—that stabbed his heart more than he wanted her to ever know.

"Okay, so fill me in. What you got going on this week that we need to coordinate?" He changed the subject gladly as he settled into his favorite recliner and set his beers on the side table then begin cutting into the pizza with a fork.

Surprisingly she had practice two nights that week right after school and then one dance lesson that Thursday. It was a lighter than usual schedule. Either Simon or Santorios could swing by and pick her up as needed. Luckily, they had no major pressing cases that would suck up all their time at the moment. Truth was Emma hadn't stayed with him for three months and being pissed, had hardly spoken to him. The couple times he'd gotten her on the phone, she'd hardly said three words until he'd hung up in frustration. His only child was the center of his world, and she knew it. He'd do anything for her. And he was thrilled to finally have time with her again.

Once they settled the schedule, he asked, "What time do you have to be at school in the morning?"

"Usual."

That meant eight-thirty. To get to Independence in rush hour, they'd have to leave at least by seven forty-five latest. So an early start was in store. "Then off to bed. It's late," he urged.

Emma sighed. "You think for once you'd be so glad to see me you'd cut me a break."

"Sure, baby. Come cuddle with me for a bit and tell me how much you missed me," he motioned toward the couch as she made a horrified face.

He laughed then turned serious again. "I'm thrilled," he said, locking eyes with hers in a sincere look he hoped conveyed the truth. "But if you fall asleep during class, your teachers won't be. So get to it."

Her shoulders sank and she spun, marching away to let him know he'd let her down again.

"I love you, Emma," he called after her, then went back to his pizza. As expected, he got no response. A few minutes later, her door shut quietly and he

didn't hear another peep from her that night. At least she gave him that much respect, he thought.

Then his mind turned back to the mess at the warehouse and the hours they'd spent after the shooting, processing the scene. The sergeant had been out for an event tonight. He was going to get the riot act tomorrow. Oh well. All in a day's work.

LIKE MANY OF her fellow officers, Blanca Santorios and her husband Andy Harris lived south of the city, on the border with Grandview, Missouri, a few miles below the slummier areas around Troost, Holmes, and Prospect just to the north. Their house had been built in the forties but renovated by Andy, who owned his own building company specializing in restoring older houses. The home of the eight years of their marriage was a three bedroom ranch in a cul-de-sac off East Red Bridge Road. Light blue with old fashioned working shutters, Blanca had fallen in love with the place the moment she saw it, and with a few tasty renovations, her husband had modernized it to be just perfect for them.

Blanca had grown up in the projects, her dad working three jobs to keep food on the table and her mom fiercely supervising her kids' every moment to be sure none of them fell victim to the local gangs and other problems that kept barrio kids locked in that lifestyle. Her parents' sacrifice hadn't required any deficit in the love or attention they lavished on their kids. They'd been poor but it had been a happy home, and Blanca still fondly visited her mother there every weekend—after her husband's heart attack, Maria Santorios had still refused to move. "This is home, and I'm staying!" she insisted.

Glancing at the bright red LED of the clock on her bedside stand, Blanca saw it was six a.m. as she quietly slid into the straps of her shoulder holster in

final preparation for her day. She'd gotten a message on her cell about Peter Green being involved in a drive-by the night before near the Ashman Gallery and wanted to get in early to read the reports and talk with the officers. Andy snored gently on the far side of the bed and she smiled. Sounding like a daddy already. Warmth filled her. God how she loved that man—her blonde, blue-eyed farmboy knight, who'd ridden in on a proverbial horse and carried her off to a dream life.

Walking around the bed, she leaned over and kissed him gently on the cheek.

He stirred, moaning and reached up to pull her face close again and kiss her on the lips. "It's early, baby."

"Someone shot one of my snitches last night," she said. "Gotta head in. Go back to sleep."

He mumbled. "Sorry, babe."

"I love you. See you later, 'kay?" And she stood upright again, smiling down at him.

"You, too," he answered sleepily as he rolled back over and drifted off again.

Blanca made her way down the hall, stopping as always to examine the new nursery they'd just finished the previous weekend. The colors, cute animal wallpaper, and brand new shiny crib made her heart patter inside. She could almost skip to the car now, but she fought the urge, patting the door instead, turning, and heading on her way.

She grabbed a plastic 16 oz. orange juice and two energy bars on her way out the door, then headed for the garage. Punching the opener button as she exited the kitchen, she double checked that her badge was secured to her belt and her gun fastened securely in her holster then clicked the unlock on her key fob and grabbed the driver side door as the garage door slid upward with a hum behind her. If she got there early enough, she could make it up to Simon for the mess at the warehouse by getting a big head start on the paperwork. She owed him that much.

As she turned to get behind the wheel of her 2019 Ford Taurus, there was a

*sharp pain in the back of her head and her knees weakened as she fell into
blackness.*