

## The Devil on Her Shoulder

### Chapter 1

A snowflake lighted on the back of his neck. Somehow it had managed to drift past both the up-turned collar of his coat and his shirt to find the one patch of vulnerable skin. It sent a shiver through him, shocking him back into reality. How long had he been sitting there? He checked the time. Half an hour. He looked around him. It was snowing again. Obviously, where else would the snowflake have come from? Judging by the light dusting on the park trail in front of him it had started up again not long ago.

He should get up. He should go home. He stayed where he was. Eventually the cold would drive him back. Until then he had no intention of moving. The conversation with his wife a mere two hours prior began replaying in his mind. The only way he could forget it was through minor disassociation apparently. He didn't know where he had drifted for the last half hour, but it was a better place.

An overwhelming cascade of feelings swept over him as he thought of his wife. One thought in particular kept repeating in his mind, over and over. How could she do this to me? He closed his eyes and sucked in the frosty air. He wanted to forget where he was. To forget himself again, just for a little while. He couldn't face reality. Reality was the future's problem. He needed a moment, an escape. But there was nowhere to escape to. He couldn't forget what she had told him. However, the pain resulting from her revelation was dulled a little by physical distance. That's why he was sitting on the bench in the park freezing his ass off.

He was distracted from his brooding by what sounded like a high-pitched squeak. It was a familiar sound. One that an animal makes. When he heard it a second time, he immediately placed it as a cat mewling. The sound had been so weak the first time it had barely sounded like anything. He stood and began looking around. The cat mewed a third time at which point he finally spotted it, curled up underneath a bush a few feet away.

It was little more than a kitten. It looked up at him pensively. It was afraid of him, but at the same time it knew it needed his help. It knew it couldn't survive the night outside alone. It was taking a chance.

Isaac approached the cat slowly, trying not to scare it. He had never liked cats. Or pets in general. But as the saying went, it was a night not fit for man nor beast. He could put the cat in the laundry room until he found a home for it. He knelt down next to the creature, unbuttoning his coat. He gingerly picked it up. The cat had resigned itself to its fate, whatever it may be. It had no intention of hissing, running, fighting, or scratching. It limply allowed Isaac to place it inside his jacket.

Isaac stood and made his way back to his apartment. He heard a low noise and felt a strange vibration next to his chest. He realized the cat was purring. He looked down at the creature, curled up in his coat, pressing itself up against him for warmth. For some reason he thought of Mia. He paused for a moment on the front door to the apartment. He took a deep breath, fighting another tidal wave of feelings. He held the cat closer to him and stepped inside.

He walked up the carpeted, perpetually musty staircase to the second-floor landing. The cat audibly meowed, apparently having gained some strength from his bodily warmth. It could talk again. His instinct was to shush it. He didn't want to have to pay a pet deposit for a transient guest. No one was awake to hear it. Even if anyone was, it was unlikely they would rat him out to the leasing office.

Isaac pulled his keys from his pocket, fumbled, and dropped them. Sighing deeply, he leaned over, nearly spilling the feline contents of his coat onto the floor. It dug its claws into his shirt which was thankfully thick enough to shield him from its tiny claws. Keys reclaimed, he stood and unlocked his door.

The sound machine was on in the bedroom. He walked quietly through the living room and peered in through the open bedroom door. Mia lay curled up on her side facing away from the door. Once again, he was flooded with emotion. He swallowed hard and blinked back a few tears before turning and walking towards the kitchen.

He pulled a small saucer from the cabinet and laid it on the counter. He pulled a carton of milk from the fridge and set it down next to the saucer. Part of him didn't want to use up any milk on a kitten considering how expensive it was. There was nothing else in the house to give the little vagabond. He sighed, filled the saucer, and carried it to the laundry room. Once inside he closed the door behind him. Kneeling on the floor he laid the saucer out on the old, floral linoleum. Carefully, he pulled the cat out from his coat and set it down next to the saucer. Rather than approach the saucer it immediately turned around and began rubbing up against his knees and quads. Isaac ignored it, stood, and walked to the built in cabinet above the dryer. He pulled a clean towel from the cabinet and laid it out on the floor in a corner, making a tiny bed for the kitten. He picked up the cat and set it down on the towel. As he stepped away it immediately followed, rubbing up against his legs.

Isaac pulled an old shoebox, which served as the laundry room junk drawer, from the shelf above the dryer. He emptied the contents into their extra laundry basket. He then pulled one of his old threadbare t-shirts from the towel cabinet. He began tearing it into strips. It was destined to be used as a cleaning rag anyway. He stuffed the shoebox with the strips of t-shirt then set it down on the floor in the back corner of the laundry room. He picked up the cat and set it down in the box. He recalled having been told that potty training kittens was easy. All one had to do was set it down in its litter box. He of course, did not have any litter. He hoped the cat would understand the purpose of the box.

He stepped out of the laundry room followed closely by the cat. He picked it up and set it down on the towel. He ran through the door and closed it as gently as he could behind him. He took a few steps back and paused. The cat meowed pitifully from inside the laundry room. Its shadow paced back and forth underneath the door. It paused, extending its paw beneath the door as far as it could.

Isaac sighed, "Should've just left you outside."

Internally he replied, "No you shouldn't. You'd feel bad about leaving it to freeze for the rest of your life."

"Right again," he muttered.

He turned away from the laundry room and walked into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a beer. He walked to his couch and sat down. He watched the cat's shadow underneath

the door. It was persistent. It needed a name. No, it didn't. If he gave it a name that would make it more likely that he'd keep it and he couldn't keep it. Why couldn't he keep it? Because he didn't like cats.

Mia muttered something in her sleep. He glanced into the bedroom. She was shifting under the covers, restlessly. She muttered something else, stirring, nearly waking. She finally settled and was still again. He shook his head. That's what he should be doing, sleeping. Sleep would not come easy, if it came at all. He chugged the rest of his beer. If he couldn't sleep he could at least pass out. He stood and walked towards the bedroom. He looked in. Mia had rolled over and was now facing the door. He hovered in the doorway, taking her in. Her face was lit up by the light from the living room. He studied the soft ivory of her skin, accentuating her dark lashes. His eyes wandered down her slender neck over her shoulders and up and down the gentle curves of her hips. He wanted to climb into bed next to her. To wrap his arm around her. He wanted to be near her. To cradle her. The desire that drew him towards her was the same thing that repelled him. How could he be near her now knowing that soon she would be gone forever? The pleasure of her touch, her nearness, made physical proximity unbearably painful.

"How can you do this to me?"

He wanted to scream at her. Instead, he had only whispered. He turned away and walked back to the refrigerator. He pulled out another beer and chugged it. He laid down on the couch on his side, facing the laundry room. The cat was still pacing, meowing, sticking its paw underneath the door. Sighing, he stood and walked towards the laundry room. He opened the door. The cat darted out into his waiting arms. He carried it to the couch and laid down. It made several rotations on his chest before curling up into a tiny ball. It didn't stay there long. It quickly rose and migrated to the crook of his crotch where it again made several revolutions before finally settling down. He couldn't say that he particularly liked having a cat nestled in his groin, but he preferred its purring to its meowing. It, at least, was content. He had to call it something, even though he wouldn't have it for very long. He also wasn't sure if it was male or female. Nonetheless, he began running through various names in his head, Tilly, Ludwig, Burt. None of those would do. He continued running through every name he could think of, realizing that it was making him drowsy, like counting sheep. He continued listing names in his head until finally, he drifted off into a fitful sleep.

The next day he was woken by both the sound of a pan being dropped in the kitchen and the startled cat using his crotch as a springboard in its flight to the laundry room. Isaac stood up, discovered that his right knee was hurting for some reason, and hobbled to the laundry room. He closed the door and turned to his wife, who stood at the kitchen island watching him.

"What was that?"

Isaac, rubbing his knee, replied, "I found a cat last night. A stray. I brought it home."

"You don't like cats."

"I don't like animals."

"Why'd you bring it home then?"

"I thought it might die if I didn't."

Mia nodded. She turned away. She pulled a package of vitamin fortified pancake mix from the cabinet and began measuring it out into a mixing bowl. Isaac walked past the island to the refrigerator. He pulled out a bottle of orange juice and then opened the cabinet in search of a glass. He shared several quick glances with his wife. They were both uncomfortable. Eventually they would have to talk. Neither one of them felt like it.

“Why didn’t you come to bed last night?”

Isaac sipped his orange juice. It was obvious why he hadn’t come to bed. Or so he thought.

“Because... I knew it would make me more sad than I could handle.”

Mia shook her head, annoyed, “Why would it make you sad?”

“Because you... I just... couldn’t lie down next to you without thinking about how you’re going to be gone soon.”

Mia turned to him, “That’s all the more reason we should spend as much time together as we can. Because time is limited. You’ll regret it if we don’t.”

She was right. He already regretted not sleeping in bed with her, if for no other reason than sleeping on the couch had caused innumerable new aches and pains to arise. Mia had turned back to preparing the pancakes. He watched her. There was so much he wanted to say, but he had no idea how to say any of it.

“Time doesn’t have to be limited. You can...”

He trailed off.

Mia replied with a bit of edge in her voice, “No. I’ve made up my mind.”

“I don’t understand. I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were unhappy. If there is anything I can...”

Mia cut him off, “Please don’t make this about you. And it’s not about being unhappy anyway. It’s just time. I’m ready.”

“But why though? If you’re not unhappy then why?”

“I’ve already told you. It’s time. I just have a... I know it’s time. I know you can’t understand that, but I need you to try, okay? For me.”

Isaac was bubbling with confusion. Why was she leaving him? Why did he have to try and understand? Why couldn’t she try to understand why he didn’t want her to go? Would she be able to let him go so easily? He hoped not. He hoped that she’d care enough to fight for him. Maybe she didn’t care. She didn’t care enough to stay.

Isaac opened the refrigerator and pulled out a beer.

Mia chided him, “Drinking’s not going to make it any better.”

“I know it won’t. But I can’t feel anything if I’m not conscious.”

“So what, you’re just gonna be plastered for the next month?”

Month? He'd never make it. He carried his beer to the laundry room and opened the door.

Mia called after him, "Hiding in the laundry room with your new pet's not going to help either."

He knew that too of course. He closed the door behind him and sat down cross-legged on the floor. The cat was nowhere to be seen. He chugged half of his beer. It was the last one. He'd have to go out and get some more. A moment later the cat emerged from its hiding place behind the washer. It curled up by his feet. He reached down and scratched it behind the ears. He'd have to get beer and cat food.

He studied the cat for a moment, once again running through a list of potential names. While he had no intention of keeping the cat, he had to get the name right. He stared down at it for a long time.

"Pip."

No response from the cat. Didn't matter. He liked Pip. As such, for as long as the cat was in his house that would be its name. He downed the rest of his beer then threw the bottle into the trash can usually reserved for dryer lint.

"Pancakes are ready. I can slip them under the door if you want."

Isaac turned to the door from whence Mia's voice had come.

"I'll be out in a second."

He stood and stepped out of the laundry room. Mia had already made her way to the table. She turned to him as she sat down. Breakfast was laid out on the table. Pancakes, re-hydrated berries, coffee, juice. Everything seemed so normal. Isaac shook his head and walked to the table. Pip stood in the laundry room doorway, cautiously peering out into the living room.

Isaac sat down in his usual spot. Mia smiled, a little coyly it seemed to Isaac, and poured him a mug of coffee. She turned to her pancakes, humming to herself as she poured syrup over them. Isaac eyed her distrustfully. A confused jumble of feelings he could barely understand coursed through him. How could she act as though nothing had happened? How could she behave so callously? Anger emerged as the dominant emotion. This was a feeling he could understand.

"Why didn't you at least talk to me before you made the appointment?"

Mia sighed, "Because I knew you would act like you're acting now."

"Why shouldn't I act like this? I thought we were happy! I thought we were going to grow old together! How am I supposed to react when you tell me you've decided to kill yourself!"

Mia shook her head, "That is overly simplistic and you know it."

"What else would you call it?"

"I call it ending my life on my own terms."

"But you're healthy! You're young! There's nothing wrong with you!"

“All the more reason to do it now before I get sick. I don’t want circumstance to force me to make this decision.”

“What makes you think you’re going to get sick?”

“Everybody does eventually. I want to go before I’m ill. Or before I get old and frail.”

“You’ve still got decades of life before you have to worry about that!”

Mia sighed again, “It’s my choice, Isaac.”

A wave of defeat swept over him. He stared down into his mug. He took a sip. Not because he wanted to, but because it was in front of him. He looked back up at Mia. She chewed daintily on a small bite, exuding an air of calm. It was a façade. She was boiling on the inside.

“Are you depressed?”

Mia turned to him, “A little. Less than you, though. I am tired. And bored.”

Isaac nodded. He looked down at his breakfast. It had gone cold. He ate it anyway.

After breakfast Mia cleared the table. She began washing dishes. Isaac watched her. She leaned over the sink, steam rising into her face. He studied her red-brown hair, her pale green eyes, her freckles. An unbearable ache possessed him. How could he live without her? Her delicate frame. Her laugh. Her dumb jokes. Her warmth of body and soul. What had happened? In four weeks, give or take, the Bureau would knock on their door, give her an injection, and carry her out on a stretcher.

Isaac stood and walked to her. He took his place at her side and began drying the dishes. One month. He had one month to convince her not to go through with it. Not overtly. He couldn’t discuss it openly with her or she would get defensive. He had to remind her through words and actions of all the good things in life. He had to fill the month with reasons for her to stay.

Convincing Mia to stay wouldn’t be enough though. He had to find a way out of the agreement. The Bureau was notoriously stringent. It was easy to sign an Elective Termination Contract with them for a planned departure at home or at a facility, but backing out of the contract was near impossible, or so he had been told. Mia could incur heavy fines and even prison time were she found to be in breach of contract. It was a deliberate and potent deterrent from backing out of an ETC. If someone were to change their mind the Bureau wanted to make life as difficult as possible for them. Some of the contracts even stipulated draconian measures be taken against next of kin. Isaac would have to find a copy of Mia’s contract.

“What are you thinking about?”

Isaac blinked and turned to her.

“Nothing.”

They barely spoke for the rest of the day. They wordlessly cleaned the apartment. They took a silent walk together. Isaac ran to the store for beer and cat food. He stood in the beer aisle for a long time, thinking about how and when he could hack into Mia’s computer to find the ETC. He pondered the cat food for just as long, wondering if Pip preferred hard or soft food. Isaac nearly walked out of the

store without kitty litter. Thankfully, he remembered at the last minute. When Isaac returned to the apartment, Mia informed him that Pip left a mess for him in the laundry room. Once the mess was taken care of, Isaac and Mia cooked and ate a quiet dinner.

After dinner they finished a movie they had started the night before. When the movie was over Mia got ready for bed while Isaac said goodnight to Pip. Isaac returned to the living room and sat down on the couch. He stared unseeing into the blank TV screen. Mia's reflection walked out of the bathroom and paused in the bedroom door. She studied him for a moment.

"I'm done."

Isaac turned to her, "Okay, I'll be there soon."

Isaac knew he would have to sleep in the bed with her. He had to try and act normal. He had to get her to let her guard down. Sleeping next to her would be difficult. The physical closeness would keep him awake remembering how few nights they had left. He pushed the thought out of his mind, somewhat successfully, and walked into the bathroom where he prepared for bed.

Mia was already asleep when he stepped into the bedroom. She had always been able to fall asleep quickly. It was a talent he had never acquired. He carefully pulled the covers back and slipped into bed. She was facing away from him, lying on her side. He studied the back of her neck. She was lying so still it looked like she wasn't breathing. He gently placed a hand on her shoulder. He felt a gentle rise and fall. Reassured, he rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling fan. It sat motionless casting faint shadows on the ceiling behind it. Mia had left his light on for him. Isaac reached out and shut it off.

He rolled onto his side, facing away from Mia. In the distance he could hear Pip's mournful mewing. He ignored it. The next day he would call in sick on the way to work. He'd return home once he was sure that Mia had made it to the office. He'd log onto her computer, find the contract and make a copy of it. After that he'd head straight to Larson's. They'd review the contract together. They'd figure out a way to get out of it. Larson was a good lawyer, resourceful, though Isaac wasn't sure if he had ever dealt with the Bureau of Public Health Services before.

Isaac sighed deeply. He knew he should try to get some sleep. There was so much to do and so little time. He needed rest. He rolled over. He studied Mia. He drew close, wrapping an arm around her. She stirred slightly, pressing herself up against him. It was agony. She would be gone so soon. He'd be left behind in a cold empty bed. He closed his eyes. Hours passed. Eventually, sleep did come. With it came dreams. Nightmares about the day itself, and the life that was to follow.

Fortunately for Isaac, Mia had saved the contract on her desktop. He backed it up onto his portable drive and immediately made his way to Larson's. Larson was with a client when he arrived. He should've called ahead, but there was no time for that.

He sat in the waiting room, staring blankly forward, barely aware of his surroundings. He wasn't sure how long he had been sitting there when Larson's AI assistant told him he could go in. Isaac stood and made his way to Larson's office.

Larson, who was on the phone, greeted him when he walked in, gesturing towards the chairs across from him. Isaac picked one at random and sat down. After a moment he stood and moved to the other chair. Larson noticed and laughed to himself. Isaac could hear a mechanical voice speaking on the other end of Larson's phone line. Presumably it was an AI paralegal. AI paralegals, among many other specialized AI models had been deliberately programmed with robotic voices. Utilizing an AI program with a Human-like voice was frowned upon in certain professions. Human voices conveyed emotion, and communicating emotion was a form of manipulation. And yet there were still many human paralegals. If communicating emotion was a potential liability, Isaac wondered why they didn't only use AIs. He shrugged to himself. It didn't matter.

The paralegal droned on in its monotonous, dispassionate tone. Isaac was getting antsy. At long last, Larson hung up the phone and turned to him, smiling broadly.

"Sorry about the wait. Big case coming up. What can I do for you, Isaac?"

"Mia signed an ETC with the Bureau."

Larson's smile disappeared, "I'm sorry to hear that."

Isaac pulled his portable drive from his pocket and held it up. Larson nodded in understanding. He pulled his personal computer out from under his desk. Isaac handed him the drive and he plugged it into the slot. It was illegal for Isaac to be in possession of an Elective Termination Contract he was not the primary signatory or a co-signer on. It was illegal for Larson to read it. It was even more illegal for Larson to offer advice on how to back out of the contract without legal repercussions. Larson pressed a few keys on his computer, waited until the file had been copied over, and then handed the drive back to Isaac.

"I'll contact you tonight."

"That soon? It's a... long document."

Larson smiled, "I've had a lot of experience with long documents."

Isaac nodded. He and Larson regarded each other for a moment. There was so much to say but it was not an occasion for words. Isaac nodded and stood. They shook hands. Isaac left as quickly as he had come.

It was snowing again. Isaac turned up his collar and started down the street. He was heading towards the library to do a little research of his own. His mind started to wander as he walked. He began cataloguing things he could do, acts of service, displays of affection, anything that might possibly make Mia reconsider. There was a shelf that needed fixing. He could prepare their meals more often. He could give her a massage. Once he returned home, he would take a note of all the chores he could take on. This prompted him to reflect, with some bitterness, that he was already an attentive husband and shouldn't have to do any additional work. At least he thought he was attentive. Maybe he wasn't as conscientious and caring as he should be.

He was saved from walking into an intersection past a red "do not walk" signal by a passerby quietly murmuring, "sir." The passerby, a middle-aged woman, nearly whispered it, but it was enough to snap Isaac to his senses. He stopped just before stepping into the road. He quietly thanked her. She



acknowledged his thanks with a nod. If Isaac had ignored the “don’t walk” signal his citizenship score would’ve taken a hit, regardless of the fact that there was no traffic. No traffic violation could be tolerated.

“Good afternoon, Isaac.”

Startled, Isaac looked around.

“I see in your records that you haven’t yet completed your annual Community Membership Training. Don’t forget it’s due in two months.”

Isaac looked up and surveyed the many cameras mounted on the traffic signal pole. Nestled among them was a small lens painted to look like a smiley face. He had made the mistake of stopping underneath an AI Traffic Monitor. He tried to hide his chagrin. The AI could read facial expressions, which could lead to a warning or a Mindset Realignment Training module.

Isaac smiled at the camera, “Thank you for the reminder. I’ll get started on that as soon as I can.”

“Sounds great, Isaac! We appreciate your cooperation. It’s good citizens like you that make our community such a great place to live.”

Isaac turned away from the camera and looked out at the empty intersection. What community? He wondered. He willed the light to turn green before the AI found something else in his public record to chide him about.

Finally, the light turned, and Isaac hurried through the intersection to the other side. He thought he had memorized where all the AI Traffic Monitors were stationed. He’d have to make a note of this new one.

Once he arrived at the library, he made his way to the computer lab on the top floor. It was empty except for one old man. The man was so engrossed in the computer screen he didn’t even notice when Isaac stepped in. The computer lab was made up of three rows of computers divided into three sections of three. The man was sitting at the middle computer in the middle row in the middle of the room. Isaac walked past him and claimed a machine in the back corner farthest from the door.

Eyeing the man, Isaac carefully pulled a scrambler drive from his pocket and inserted it into the computer. There were many uses for a scrambler drive, but the most common one was for secure, private web browsing. The drive would essentially hack whatever computer it was plugged into, turning the entire device into something akin to a virtual desktop. The host computer would still be visible from any networks it was connected to. It would even look as though it were running various programs or pinging different innocuous webpages, however in reality the user was free to use the computer to run whatever program or visit any website he chose. It was generally recommended to use the device on public networks to avoid them being tracked to home computers. Just in case there was a coding error when the program was built. Scrambler drives were of course highly illegal.

Isaac opened a web browser, logged into the underground, and began searching for historical instances when ETCs had been breached. Preferably with little or no legal blowback. The contracts were carefully drawn up to prevent the possibility of wrongful terminations but more importantly, for the

Bureau, to prevent people from changing their minds. The bodies of those who chose Elective Termination were harvested for organs, stem cells, medical research, wigs, and a multitude of other unsavory and legally deniable activities. The Bureau didn't want to lose their investment. The next of kin was given an urn that ostensibly held their loved one's ashes. There had been multiple cases where the ashes were tested and found not to contain any trace of human DNA. The Bureau was legally free from any liability for not delivering the loved one's ashes to the bereaved.

As Isaac suspected, there were very few cases where someone was able to successfully back out of an Elective Termination Contract. In one instance the person who had signed the contract was deemed mentally unfit. Only people of sound mind were allowed to commit suicide. The contract was declared null and void and the signatory was placed in the care of a behavioral specialist. Isaac wondered what happened to them. Mia would never be deemed mentally unfit.

Isaac found a few other occasions where ETC's were either declared null or were breached without any consequences. In one instance, a signatory became the sole caregiver to a child due to an accident in the family. Elective Termination was deemed irresponsible for this person as it would cause undue hardship for the child. Isaac wondered what that relationship was like afterward. Did the would-be suicide resent the child? Or had the suicide decided life was worth living after all. Isaac wondered if he could become an invalid through an accident. They might deny his claim if it was proven to have been deliberate.

Someone who was politically connected backed out of a contract. Two people had been ordered by a court not to go through with it. One because they were charged with a crime. The other because their role in the Government was deemed too important—they trained a replacement and then re-applied later. One person was able to get out of it through a petition. Another person tried the same method but was denied. Law had long ago come to depend on the whim of the judge rather than what was written by the legislature. In the end that particular person still refused service and paid for it with a ludicrous prison sentence and a fine they could never hope to pay off.

Isaac sighed deeply and leaned back in his chair. None of the cases he found were applicable to his situation. Maybe he shouldn't bother. Maybe he should give up. He shook the thought from his head. He would never give up. Come hell or highwater he would find a way out for her. But in the end, it would be up to her to take it.

Isaac stared blankly down at his computer screen. The old man turned in his seat and looked back at him. Isaac refused to look up. From the corner of his eye, he could see suspicion on the man's face. Slowly the old man turned back to his own computer. Movement looked painful for him. Mia would say that's what she was trying to avoid, old age, frailty. Isaac couldn't wait to be old with her. If Mia left, retirement wasn't something to look forward to anymore.

Isaac continued his search with renewed vigor. Maybe they could disappear. Start a new life somewhere. He had heard of the separatist movement. He wondered how it had worked out. Maybe he could find someone to take her place. Someone who could pretend to be her. The idea of finding a willing replacement for an ETC appalled him. Regardless, if the opportunity arose, he would take it. No matter how morally reprehensible it was. He could live with guilt. He could live with disgust. There was a way out. It just might not end up being entirely legal.

After several more hours of researching living off the grid, escaping overseas, and suicide surrogates—which was apparently far more common than he realized—Isaac finally decided to call it quits for the day. He would come back and try again. He had discovered several more rabbit holes that were worth another look, but he was too mentally and emotionally exhausted to continue. He saved his notes and removed the drive from the computer. He checked and re-checked the computer's browser history, downloads, and every local directory he could find to make sure there was no trace of what he had been researching. Satisfied, as well as his paranoia allowed, he stood. He was alone in the computer lab. He hadn't noticed the old man leave.

Isaac left the library, planning his next trip. He couldn't skip out on work too much. He also didn't want to stay away from home for too long when he was trying to keep his relationship with Mia strong. He could say he was going to meet Larson for a drink. Except that Larson might actually invite him for a drink to discuss the contract. He could take Pip to the vet. That might work. He'd have to think about that one some more.

When Isaac reached the apartment, rather than go in, he continued on to the park bench where he had found Pip. It was unoccupied. He sat and looked down at the footsteps in the snow. He observed one large pair and one smaller one moving in tandem down the sidewalk. A father and son, perhaps. Maybe he could convince Mia to have children. Would she stay for that? He had never wanted children, but now that it was no longer a possibility, he suddenly found it appealing. Children, with Mia. It was a pleasant idea. It was no use daydreaming about it. She wouldn't stay for that. Or so he assumed. It couldn't hurt to ask, though. It might work. Or she might think it was cruel to ask now that she had signed the contract. He could lie and tell her he hadn't been able to work up the courage to ask her. Given the circumstances it was now or never. Despite himself, Isaac began to feel excited. The more he thought about it the more he convinced himself it would work. Thus far he had only researched ways to get out of the contract altogether. He hadn't researched deferment. Maybe she'd agree to put it off long enough to have a child. So that he wouldn't be left alone. Maybe the child would make her change her mind.

Isaac's phone rang. It was Larson.

"I'm finished."

"Already?"

"Yes. Where are you?"

"I'm in the park outside of my apartment."

"You okay to stay out in the cold until I get there?"

"Yes. Well, how long will that take?"

"Ten minutes."

"Then yes, I'll wait here."

Isaac drew his coat tighter around himself and tucked his hands into his armpits. Gloves were an important, but inevitably forgotten article of clothing. Forgotten unless Mia reminded him. She had

bought him a very nice pair of wool gloves for his birthday. They were hung next to his coat by the front door. He still never remembered them.

Snow began to fall. He was so tired of snow. He pulled his hood up over his head. For some reason, he thought of Pip. He should've checked on him, or her, instead of heading to the park. Pip would be all right. He wondered if any vets did walk ins or if it was only by appointment. He'd have to do some research. Thinking about Pip was a welcome reprieve from thinking about Mia's impending appointment. It didn't last long. Inevitably his mind drifted back to her. He wondered what was going through her mind when she had made the decision. He wondered what she was thinking when she had made the appointment. Why hadn't he been involved in the decision at any point? When she told him she had seemed so at peace. When he responded with sorrow, and then anger, her peace turned into a condescending sadness. It was so unfortunate that he couldn't see things her way.

He wondered which representative at the Bureau she had met with. Not that he knew any of them. He imagined a smarmy, Nordic blonde, gentle and understanding. No doubt he had coached her through any misgivings she might've had. Told her it was a deeply personal decision, and no one could make it for her, but that nonetheless she was doing the right thing for the environment and for society in general. The Bureau was still pushing the overpopulation narrative, despite the fact that cloning had been approved to offset the continuously plunging birthrate. Maybe that's what they wanted, a society full of clones.

"Hey Isaac."

Isaac turned as Larson sat wearily next to him. Larson sighed deeply, and then began.

"I didn't want to say this over the phone but, part of the reason I got done so fast is it isn't the first ETC I've read through. They were standardized a couple years ago, but they update them quarterly. I just wanted to make sure there wasn't anything new I wasn't aware of."

Larson sighed again.

"I didn't find anything useful. But I did remember something. About a year ago, a lawyer did find a loophole and got her client out of the contract with no consequences. I'm sure they've fixed that, but... It might still be worth checking out. Thing of it is, no one knows what it was. It was never published anywhere, the Bureau made sure of that. But, since every day citizens can issue freedom of information inquiries, you should be able to go down and demand to view the case files. They won't let you copy them or anything like that of course, but if you get me enough information, I might be able to figure something out. Anonymously of course. My firm wouldn't be too happy if they knew I was tangling with the Bureau."

Larson paused and pulled an envelope from his jacket. He handed it to Isaac.

"That's the request for info. They're legally bound to honor it. Make sure you sign it before you hand it to them."

Isaac took it and stuffed it into his inner coat pocket.

"Thank you, Larson."

"Sure thing."

They sat in silence for a moment, looking out at the frozen park.

“Did Mia give you any kind of explanation?”

“None that I could understand.”

Larson nodded.

“Well... I hope that...”

Larson trailed off. Isaac nodded. Another minute or so of silence passed before Larson stood, patted Isaac on the shoulder, and made his way back to his office. Isaac lingered for a moment, staring forward, then headed home.

Back in the apartment, Isaac hung his coat up next to his gloves. He carefully pulled the envelope out of the inside pocket and walked to the laundry room, grabbing a pen on the way. He petted and fed Pip first, then read the contents of the letter. It was a full page of small-print legalese, the gist of which was he was requesting to view the case files of one Mr. Peter Kennedy. Isaac laid the letter down on the dryer and signed it as Larson had instructed. Pip rubbed up against his leg, purring.

Isaac stepped out of the laundry room, not bothering to close the door. Pip stood in the doorway peering out, sniffing the air. Isaac walked into the bedroom, opened the junk drawer on his desk, and hid the letter at the bottom. He turned on his computer and checked when the Bureau was open the following day. Normal eight to five business hours. He could get away with one more sick day. He heard Mia’s key in the lock and shut down the computer. He greeted her in the kitchen with a kiss.

The rest of the evening was uneventful. They cooked dinner: pesto pasta with roasted peppers and sun-dried tomatoes. “Sun-dried” of course just meant they had been laid under an industrial lamp long enough to shrivel them. There hadn’t been a genuine day of sun since the long winter began. Mia told him about her day. Isaac made up a few lies about work. They washed the dishes. Then they watched a television show. The show was engrossing enough for Isaac to forget everything that was going on. Mia put her feet in his lap, and he dutifully massaged them. It felt like a normal evening. Until the credits began to roll and Mia mentioned she had told them at work.

Isaac swallowed, unsure of how to respond, “What’d they say?”

“They said they were sorry to see me go, but that they understood. Anna cried. No surprise there. I’m going to work through Wednesday next week. Do some training. But after that I’m done. I’m going to take the rest of the month off.”

She paused to sip her hot chocolate, then smiling, continued.

“I’m gonna cash in on some vacation I haven’t used.”

Isaac nodded, thinking. Extra time off could be useful.

“Would you maybe want to take a trip?”

Mia seemed to like that idea, “Yeah, we could do that. Where would you want to go?”

“Rustic Retreat?”

Mia's eyes lit up. It was the cabin they had gone to on their honeymoon. They had planned to go again last year. For various reasons related to work, they hadn't been able to. All at once, she looked worried. She had thought of something.

"Will you be able to take off?"

"Yeah, I'll just explain what's going on. I'm sure Tina will let me have some time off."

"I hope so," she took his hand, "That'll be a really nice way to say goodbye."

Isaac swallowed hard, "Right... It will be."

They watched the opening monologue of a late-night show. When the monologue was over it went to commercial break, which was their cue that it was time for bed. As Isaac reached for the remote an ad for ETCs came on. A sonorous bass voice asked them if they were feeling depressed or overwhelmed. Anger momentarily twisted Isaac's face. He pressed the off button with as much force as his thumb could muster. He glanced at Mia, who appeared not to notice.

Isaac went in search of Pip and found him underneath the easy chair. He very carefully extricated the cat from the reclining mechanism of the chair and took it back to the laundry room. Mia checked Rustic Retreat's availability.

The next day they woke up, ate breakfast, and got ready for work like normal. Isaac refilled Pip's food and water bowls. Mia left before him, like always. He kissed her goodbye. Once he was sure that she was well on her way, Isaac walked to his computer and looked up the closest Bureau facility.

Isaac called work, debating whether he should tell them or not. It might be easier over the phone. His supervisor picked up. He told her he still wasn't feeling well. She told him that was fine, and she hoped he felt better soon. Isaac hung up, pocketed the phone, and headed towards the door. A few blocks later he realized he had forgotten his gloves again.

The Bureau facility closest to him was a large, gray, austere building. It was tall and long, with an enormous cement staircase leading up to its door. It looked out over a plaza full of snow-laden evergreens interspersed with twenty-foot tall video screens playing promotional material for the Bureau. The screens rotated through several vignettes highlighting the Bureau's history, purpose, and the various services it provided. Each one was narrated by a warm, female voice and starred a diverse collection of beautiful people. Isaac paused in front of a screen and watched it play through a few scenarios.

He watched a caseworker visiting a home to discuss potential treatments for a teenage boy. It was unclear what the treatment was for, but the family and the caseworker were all smiling. The commercial cut to the father nodding seriously then asking a question. After that it cut to the caseworker answering the question while the family all listened intently. Before it got too serious it cut to a wide shot of the entire group laughing together and then ended with a tender shot of the mother sitting next to her son, one arm thrown over his shoulder. As it faded out the narrator advised the viewer to "call today to see if Nexdebepidine is right for you." Isaac wasn't sure what Nexdebepidine was. He assumed it was the next generation of Myobepidine, which was a drug administered by a small injectable inserted in the arm. The injectable, which was managed through an app on the caseworker's mobile computer, would release the drug when the patient's heart rate, cortisol, or other biomarkers

reached a pre-determined threshold. Isaac had tried Myobepidine once as a single dose. It provided a nice, mellow high.

The next vignette was about cloning. The one after that was about Elective Termination. Isaac watched as a concerned and understanding caseworker discussed Elective Termination with an elderly couple in their home. The commercial cut to a sick young woman in a hospital bed meeting with an agent. A third man appeared, very briefly, shyly visiting the front desk of some generic medical clinic. He wasn't elderly or infirm, based off the footage at any rate. Maybe he was depressed, or maybe he just couldn't make ends meet. Regardless, the commercial went back to focusing on the sick and the old. Disgusted, Isaac turned away and started towards the building. He could hear the narrator as he reached the cement staircase, "Ask your doctor today if Elective Termination is right for you."

Isaac climbed the stairs, approached the tinted glass door, reached for the handle, and paused. He studied his gray-black reflection for a moment. There was no way this was going to work. Didn't matter. He had to try. Better to try and it not work than to forever regret never trying at all. He smiled grimly and repeated what he had just thought out loud. He should shorten it and put it on a bumper sticker. He pulled open the door and stepped inside.

Isaac found himself inside a long, gray hall, facing a long, marble desk. Behind the desk rose a stone wall, unbroken except for a few shut doors. The wall was lined, every ten feet or so, with lampstands. He looked up at the vaulted ceiling. There were no lights beyond the lamps. There was apparently some design on the ceiling, though he could barely make it out in the dim light. It was just patches of black and gray. If even a few of the lamps were to go out he wouldn't be able to see it at all; the room would simply ascend into impenetrable darkness. Isaac turned his attention to the front desk. A young, beautiful blonde woman smiled at him from across the white marble. He swallowed and made his way towards her.

"How can I help you today Mr...?"

"Wells. I'm here regarding an Elective Termination Contract."

Her expression changed from one of friendly welcome to sympathetic understanding.

"If you would just step through the door to my right and take a seat in the waiting room an agent will be with you shortly."

Isaac, a little flustered, "No, I don't want to sign a contract I want to look at a case regarding Peter Kennedy's ETC."

The receptionist was confused. Rather than try to explain, Isaac handed her the letter. She took it and read the contents. Her expression changed again. She was displeased.

"Take a seat and an agent will be with you shortly."

Puzzled, Isaac turned around and noticed for the first time several gray couches against the wall by the front door. They blended in with the wall behind them. He started towards one, pulled an about face, and walked back to the counter.

"The letter please."

The receptionist, much less friendly now, begrudgingly handed it back to him. Isaac walked to a couch facing the door to the receptionist's right, assuming the agent would emerge from it. Isaac also assumed that they would keep him waiting to spite him. However, he had barely gotten comfortable before an agent stepped through the door to the receptionist's left. Isaac was wrong on both counts.

"Mr. Wells?"

The agent was a tall, thin man with a deep, booming voice. Isaac's name ricocheted off the walls all the way up to the ceiling. He wordlessly stood and approached the agent. The man eyed him coldly and stepped aside, holding the door open for him. Isaac nervously stepped through.

"Second door on your right."

Isaac started down the hallway, expecting the man to follow him. As he approached the second doorway, he glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the agent duck through the first. Isaac warily continued on to the second door, which was open. It led to a small office, empty except for two chairs facing each other. Confused, Isaac stepped into the room and sat down in the chair closest to the exit. Perhaps this was the room where he would be kept waiting.

Fortunately for him he was wrong again. Two minutes at most passed before another agent, this time a short man with thinning, light-brown hair walked into the room. The man sat down on the chair opposite Isaac and studied him. A panel on the wall next to them opened. A square black beam emerged from the panel and extended out towards the opposite wall where a second panel opened. It was a docking station. Once the beam reached the second panel it appeared to flatten and widen, forming what looked like a countertop. The agent pressed a hidden button on the counter and a computer screen rose up facing him. The beam had become a counter and the counter had become a desk.

"May I see the letter, Mr. Wells?"

Isaac slid the envelope to the agent. The agent nodded in thanks. He carefully read the letter. Isaac watched the man's eyes sliding left to right, line by line, down to the bottom of the page. When he was finished, he nodded again, carefully folded the letter, replaced it in the envelope, and slid it back to Isaac.

"Why do you want to see these case files, Mr. Wells?"

"Journalistic curiosity."

"But you're not a journalist. And if you tried to publish anything about this case you would be sued. And the Bureau would win."

Isaac faltered. He wasn't sure why he had said "journalistic" to begin with. He had never consciously decided to pretend he was a reporter. While he didn't want to continue in that lie it also worried him that the agent already knew it wasn't true.

"Call it curiosity."

"It wouldn't have anything to do with your wife's ETC would it?"

"...So what if it did?"



“You are aware of course that it’s illegal to try to obstruct the fulfillment of any contract made with the Bureau of Public Health Services.”

“It is not my intention to do so.”

“I sincerely hope it isn’t. If you will bear with me a moment, I’ll pull up that case file for you. I will of course be present at all times. You are not permitted to take any pictures or make any copies of the documents. We already scanned you for Smart Contact Lenses, so we’re not worried about that.”

The desk in front of the agent lit up into the semblance of a keyboard. He began typing and the desk in front of Isaac lit up into a monitor. He could now see what was on the agent’s monitor. He was searching for Peter Kennedy. A message popped up indicating that only an agent with an administrator security role could access the document. The agent hit the ‘OK’ button and then, when prompted, typed in a password. A folder opened on the monitor with twelve different files in it.

“The monitor is touchscreen. Just click twice to open the document. Then you can scroll as normal. My name is Trevor. Let me know if you have any questions.”

Isaac nodded and perused the files. He sorted by date and opened the earliest one. Trevor leaned back in his chair and studied his monitor, presumably watching what Isaac was doing. Isaac wished the agent would go away, but he knew that would be too much to ask, from the perspective of the Bureau.

The first document was a question-and-answer form with copious notes appended. It was apparently from the first interview with Peter Kennedy. It wasn’t particularly interesting. The only thing Isaac took note of was the reason why Mr. Kennedy had decided to pursue Elective Termination. He had been diagnosed with a terminal illness, colon cancer.

The second document was the contract itself. Isaac forced himself to read through the entire thing, fine print included. There did not appear to be any major differences between it and Mia’s contract, though he was only going off memory. He would’ve liked to compare them line by line to see for sure what had been updated, but that was of course impossible. He glanced at the date of the contract. It was from two years ago. If, as Larson had claimed, the contract was updated quarterly, there had been roughly eight revisions since the Kennedy contract had been drawn up.

The third document were notes from a follow up appointment where the date was set. It was set for five months out from the signing of the contract. This was an unusually long time for the fulfillment of an ETC. Isaac looked at the date again and realized the contract was signed during a particularly rough economic downturn. There had also been a terrorist attack a month prior to the signing. Elective Termination was in high demand at the time, hence the delay. The only other thing Isaac noticed was the underlined comment that the signatory was seeking cancer treatment. This was apparently a red flag.

The rest of the documents slowly unfolded a story wherein the cancer treatments were more effective than anyone could have imagined. Peter Kennedy was getting better. When the scans eventually came back showing that Mr. Kennedy was cancer free, he decided he wanted out of the contract. What followed was a lengthy legal battle which was ultimately decided in favor of Mr. Kennedy on the grounds that the condition which had driven him to sign the contract was no longer extant. It

should've been an obvious conclusion. Isaac found it strange that it hadn't shown up in any of the searches that he had done. Perhaps he could publish it somewhere later.

Ultimately, Isaac was disappointed in his findings. The case could set a precedent where someone who signed an ETC due to a specific medical condition could have the contract terminated if they recovered from said medical condition. Mia had no medical condition. He wondered if she could retroactively be diagnosed with clinical depression. It was considered a medical condition which could be treated by, among other things, a Myobepidine injectable. Mia would never go for it. She had insisted she wasn't depressed. She was abundantly clear that she was of sound mind when she had signed the contract, that she had not signed the contract under duress, and that she was not under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Almost as though she had been coached on what to say when she told him.

Frustrated, he sat back in his chair. Trevor studied him.

"Not what you were hoping?"

Isaac looked up at him but said nothing. He looked away, focusing on an empty corner.

"It's never easy."

Trevor's voice was sympathetic. Isaac refused to look back at him.

"If you need anyone to talk to. We have specialists who can help."

"Like you helped Mia?"

"Your wife did not receive any counseling from us prior to her meeting with our Elective Termination Representative. She did not receive any encouragement to sign an ETC from the Bureau."

"No, you just continuously shove it down our throats with ads and news reports."

Isaac knew he was going to be put on a watchlist, but his anger got the best of him. He started yelling.

"Every day... Everywhere I go I hear some asshole pontificating on the positive social impact of suicide! Every measure, every statute, every report... Everything you do is meant to drive us to despair! You want us to be miserable! You make life as hard as possible then turn around and advertise an easy way out!"

Trevor eyed him coolly. He pulled a card from his coat pocket, laid it out on the desk, and slid it over to Isaac. It was a card for their counseling services. Wordlessly, Isaac stood and walked out of the room. He was embarrassed by his outburst. Not his finest, or most articulate, hour.

He walked out of the building without a glance in the direction of the receptionist. He walked several blocks before something in his mind told him to button his coat. He walked several more blocks before he was stopped at the railroad tracks by a passing train.

He watched the train, brooding. The only thing in between him and it was a thin, red and white retractable barrier. He could easily slip under it. Maybe he should beat Mia to it. Maybe he should desert her. Leave her all alone. It would serve her right. He shook his head in disgust. People still

frowned on old fashioned suicide. It was still a tragedy if it wasn't carefully planned and carried out by caring professionals. Suicide was an act of cruelty, cowardice, or hopelessness. Elective Termination was a brave and deeply personal decision. Isaac edged closer to the tracks.

People began to appear beside him, waiting for the train to pass. He assumed the presence of other people was generally a deterrent from suicide. An audience only made him want to do it more. He wanted to horrify them. He wanted to force them to share in his misery. He could yell at Bureau agents all day, but it wouldn't make any difference. Throwing himself into a train in front of a crowd would have a lasting impact. On a handful of people at any rate. They would see the depths he had sunk to. His pain would finally be felt and maybe even understood by someone else. He wondered what Mia would think if he did it. She would recognize it for what it was. Cheap revenge. She'd just think that he acted childishly. Then she'd keep her appointment.

He took a few steps back. He didn't want to do it anyway. He just felt powerless. He *was* powerless. That's what suicide and Elective Termination were after all. Attempts to take back control. He thought back to what Mia had said, about wanting to pass on before she grew old and frail. Before sickness or happenstance took her. It didn't matter what the means were. The end was the same. It was the end of all things. It waited at the end of every road. It was the dread ruler of all the earth, demanding tribute. Suicide wasn't revenge. Living was revenge.

Mia wouldn't see it that way. She was being brave after all. She had finally realized what was best for her and she was acting on it. But she was wrong. It would never occur to her that she was a coward. She was listening to what the world around her was whispering and intimating at every turn. Listening to the devil on her shoulder. She had internalized it. She was doing what everyone wanted her to.

How could he tell her that? How could he explain it so that she would understand? She'd just tell him he was being selfish. That he was trying to manipulate her into questioning herself. It wasn't true. He wasn't trying to manipulate her. Society was manipulating her. It was trying to convince her that killing herself was the right thing to do, both for herself and for the world.

The train passed. His mind immediately felt clearer. The noise had been adding to the chaos between his ears. He glanced at the time. If she wasn't home already, she would be soon. One month. He had one month to try and convince her. The days would drag on mercilessly as she rebuffed his every appeal. Then all at once the month would be over and it would seem like it had all passed in a flash. Then the days would stretch on, seemingly without end. And he would wonder what else he could've said. What combination of words would've done the trick? What could he have done to keep her.

All at once he was alone again. The crowd that had collected to wait for the train had dispersed. He drifted forward, moving in the general direction of his apartment. When he finally arrived at home, he had no memory of the walk. He'd made it back on autopilot.

Inside he found Mia preparing dinner. It was a pre-packaged red beans and rice meal with optional synthetic andouille sausage. Isaac had heard about a nutritional meta-analysis which seemed to indicate synthetic meats were carcinogenic. The studies and the analysis had since been pulled from all the medical journals and could only be found on the underground. Regardless, Isaac refused to eat

synthetic meats. Mia, at Isaac's behest, no longer ate them either. Now it didn't matter if she ate them. Nonetheless, she threw the sausage into the trash. Perhaps out of habit.

Isaac sat down at the kitchen island. He watched as Mia dumped the package of rice into the rice cooker. She had already poured the allotted amount of water into a measuring cup. She carefully poured it over the rice and turned the rice cooker on. She looked up at Isaac and smiled.

"How was work today?"

"Fine," Isaac lied.

One month. One month to convince her. One month to find a way out. Barely any time at all.