

The Devil on Her Shoulder

Chapter 3

Isaac punched the code in. He heard a motor whirr. The gate shook slightly as the gears woke to the command from the keypad. Snow dripped from the steel bars as the gate opened slowly and reluctantly. Isaac stepped through onto the storage facility lot. He made his way to his unit as an automated voice welcomed him over the speaker system. The voice informed him of some updated rules and conditions and then concluded by thanking him for using “Rainy Day Storage Units,” which prompted a sudden realization on Isaac’s part. He hadn’t seen actual rain since he was six years old. Thirty years of snow.

Unlocking his unit was an ordeal. The key refused to turn. For a moment Isaac despaired of ever getting it open. At long last the tumblers fell into place, whereupon Isaac dropped the padlock onto his foot. He briefly contemplated throwing the lock into the snowy darkness but thought better of it at the last minute. He pulled the sheet-metal door open and stepped inside. He fumbled in the darkness for the light switch, found it, and flipped it. Nothing happened. He prayed it was just the bulb, or the switch. If the power was out in the unit he couldn’t charge the car. If he couldn’t charge the car he’d have to go buy a temporary battery. He walked to the charging station. Tiny LED lights were blinking on the interface. That was a good sign. He pressed the button conspicuously labeled “On.” Nothing happened. He pressed it again, harder. This time he heard a buzzing from inside the machine as it slowly labored to life. He pulled the retractable cord from the charging station and plugged it into the car. He walked back to the charging station and studied the interface. Based on the output it would take an hour to get a sufficient charge to make it back to his apartment. He’d charge it an hour and a half at least. The car battery didn’t do so well in the cold.

Isaac closed the door to the storage unit halfway. Just enough to keep some of the cold out and let some of the light in. He walked to the car. He opened the driver’s door and stepped in. He was hoping that being inside the car would provide a little extra protection from the cold. He briefly considered turning the car on and testing the heat. That would make it take even longer to charge. He could put up with the cold.

He leaned the chair back and closed his eyes, hoping he could nap. The last two weeks were a blur. He couldn’t really say what had happened. Work and sleep. Plenty of work. Not much sleep. And church. That was new. He had started going to church. While he had originally started going in the hopes of meeting someone with separatist ties, he had come to enjoy the service. He didn’t think he actually believed in what was being said, but he found the sermons interesting, and occasionally comforting. The people were nice as well. Genuinely nice. They didn’t seem like they were fishing for easy credits. Although he had been proven wrong before. He had gone Sunday, heard about a Wednesday service and decided to go to it as well. After the Wednesday service he asked Mia to go with him on Sunday. She refused.

After his second Sunday, the priest, the one delivering the sermons, introduced himself as Andrew. Isaac had heard others call him Father Andrew, so he decided to follow suit. During the course of their conversation Isaac told him about Mia. The priest nodded sadly and said he would pray for Mia

and Isaac. Isaac panicked momentarily, asking him if he meant during the service. The priest replied no, not unless Isaac wanted him to. Isaac didn't want him to, but he had no qualms about the Priest praying for them privately. All in all, it was a good conversation.

On his way home from Church a new fear gripped Isaac, one that he had not considered until then. Some Christians believed that suicide was a mortal sin. What if they were right and Mia was damning herself? He had enough to worry about without fearing that she was condemning herself to everlasting torment. This new fear spawned a new hate for the Bureau, or rather a variation of what he already felt. The Bureau advertised and encouraged ETCs everywhere. What if everyone who signed up was condemned to everlasting perdition? The Bureau wasn't just killing people. It was damning them as well. Surely it couldn't be that simple. Mia was a good person. One act couldn't undo all the good she had done. But based on something the priest had said, good deeds weren't enough. There had to be faith as well. Mia didn't believe. She had even accused Christianity of violence and sexism when Isaac asked her to go with him. Isaac had no idea whether what she said was true or not. He had no real understanding of Christian ideology. He had merely been curious about it because their position on Elective Termination was a matter of convenience for him. That and he hoped to meet a separatist. He had no way to argue against her summary dismissal of an entire religion. Regardless, the case of Mia, and others like her, must be the reason for Purgatory. For all the people who lived well but were mistaken in their beliefs. He wasn't sure where he fit in.

Isaac opened his eyes. He glanced at the time. Five minutes had passed. It was going to be a long hour and a half. He closed his eyes and willed himself to take a nap. With no success. His mind wandered once again to Church. The next day was Sunday. It would be the last opportunity to meet a separatist. It was the last Sunday before Mia's appointment. There was only one week left. Panic gripped him like a vice. The feeling had been steadily creeping over him the last three weeks, crowding everything else out. He had wasted so much time. What had he done with it all? Nothing important. Work, sleep, trying to find a way out of the ETC. He had spent more time at the library researching escape clauses than he had with Mia. What a waste. He had blinked and the time was gone. He suddenly felt sick to his stomach. He sat up, threw the door open, and leaned out of the car. Nothing came up. Fear and panic ravaged his gut, making him ill, but not so ill that he could get relief.

Church wasn't the only new thing. Panic attacks and sudden waves of nausea had become increasingly common. His life had become a nightmare of dread. Every time he looked at the clock it reminded him that the day was drawing nearer. Every second passing was a devil whispering in his ear "closer, closer, closer." Every sunset was a pall of doom being pulled over the world. Every time he fell asleep, he dreamed about the appointment or that it had already come and gone. He'd wake with a start and reach out to Mia. She'd still be there. There was a time coming when he would stretch out his hand and all it would find was an empty bed. Waking up, when he managed to sleep, was no comfort. Every sunrise was just a reminder that the days were running out. There was no rest or reprieve from the fear. He felt as though he were walking up a staircase leading to a precipice. There was a finite number of steps, and he was approaching the end. One day very soon he would step over the edge into an everlasting fall.

He pulled himself back into the car, closed the door and closed his eyes. There couldn't be just one week left. That was impossible. How had this happened? There was so little time. One week. How many years were there to follow? How long did he have to live without her? He couldn't imagine a life

without Mia. It was unthinkable. His concept of the future extended up to the appointment. Beyond that it was just a void.

He repressed the urge to bolt out of the unit and go find Mia. He would be back with her again soon. And he had the rest of the week off. There would be no more wasted time between now and the appointment. He looked around the car, trying to find something to busy himself with. Something to distract him from the cruel march of time.

There was nothing interesting about their car. Oftentimes Isaac regretted buying it. If they had waited a little longer, saved up, then maybe they could've afforded one with a better battery. One with a faster charge time. Mia thought it best to go ahead and take the plunge. Otherwise, they would be at the mercy of whatever vehicles were available to rent. That's what Mia's parents did. Mia hated it. She often complained about all the POSs she'd been forced to ride in. They all smelled strange too. Better to own a junker than to rent one. At least it would be *their* junker. So, Isaac caved and took out a loan.

Nothing could make the car less interesting. The entire thing was navy blue, inside and out. Navy floors, navy ceiling, navy seat cushions. The steering wheel, gear shift, and dashboard buttons were a pale blue, which provided some contrast at least. Though he had never lived in them, Isaac missed the days when consumer cars came in more than three colors. When there was more variety to the models than sedan, SUV, and truck. Still, he preferred the navy sedan to the gray and orange models. He didn't understand why the Transportation Committee had chosen orange over red.

Isaac reached up and turned on the overhead light. The dimness of the glow told him he still had a long way to go before the car reached full charge, or rather, sufficient charge to make it home. He turned the light off. Sighing, he stepped out of the car and then climbed into the backseat. He rolled the window on the driver side down, stretched himself out on the backseat, and stuck his feet out the open window. He stared up at the navy ceiling. He turned to the side and looked at the back of the navy passenger chair. He looked down to the floor, also navy, and then noticed something underneath the chair. He pulled his feet into the car, sat up, and pulled the item out from under the seat.

It was Mia's Holo-Jam MP3 player. A retro device that played digital music and projected tiny holographic dancers onto any desired surface. They could be fully rendered 3-dimensional figures dancing on a flat surface, or 2-dimensional figures cast on to a wall. It was a children's toy, but Mia had been very fond of it. Isaac vaguely recalled her asking him if he had seen it. That had been several years back. The last time they had taken the car out of storage was for a road trip three years ago.

Isaac rolled on to his back. He pressed the power button on the device. It turned on and immediately started playing "Pur Ti Miro." Mia had walked down the aisle to it. He listened for a moment, realizing that it was a recording from their wedding day. The mezzo-soprano, who sang the part of Poppea, had arranged it so as to remove the upbeat portion of the song so that it was one long gentle flow appropriate for a bridal march. Isaac closed his eyes. He saw Mia slowly walking down the aisle, the love duet echoing through the church building. It was the only time she had ever been inside a church, or so she claimed. He saw the crown of flowers in her hair, the simple bouquet in her hands, the glow in her eyes. He opened his eyes and paused the song. It was too much.

He scrolled through the songs on the Holo-Jam, found one he liked, and hit the play button. The device had remarkably good speakers, considering its size. He searched the options under Holo dancers

and selected a ballroom couple. The song wasn't a ballroom tune, but the tiny dancers would make do. Isaac projected them onto the navy ceiling and watched them adapt the steps of a waltz to the 4/4 beat of the song.

Isaac smiled to himself remembering the last trip they had taken. They had gone to a nearby city, roughly a hundred miles away. They had stayed at a nice hotel. One with exceptional heating, according to the online reviews. They bought a mid-shelf bottle of vodka and stayed up too late drinking. He remembered Mia turning on the Holo-Jam and projecting the figures onto the wall of the hotel room. He remembered watching her dancing with the holograms in a t-shirt and panties. Mia had taken ballet when she was young. She was still very graceful. He couldn't remember the last time she had danced.

The song ended and the holographic couple applauded each other. Apparently the Holo-Jam was set to auto-play because the next song started. It was a very old song called "Dancehall Places" by Mint Royale. The couple once again began twirling around the ceiling of the car.

Isaac closed his eyes and drifted away into the song. Memories of Mia began playing in his head. He remembered walking by the river with her. He remembered ice skating. He remembered the one and only time they had tried camping. The portable No Burn fire pit stopped working in the middle of their first night. They decided not to stay out for the second one.

All at once he was outside the Bureau. He stood at the foot of the stairs. Mia was perched at the top. She looked down at him, then turned and walked inside. Isaac ran up the stairs, threw the doors open and darted inside. Once inside he immediately rushed towards the door leading to the back hallway. The agent at the desk stood and tried to intercept him. With a strength and ferocity he didn't know he possessed, Isaac struck the man, knocking him to the floor. Isaac paused long enough to punch the man several more times and then ran through the door.

He ran up and down the hallways in the Bureau, kicking open every door, crying Mia's name. Something told him that she was about to be injected. He had to move faster. He forced open a door and found Trevor inside. He leapt across the desk and grabbed the agent by his neck. He screamed into Trevor's face, demanding he be taken to Mia. Trevor told him it was too late. Somehow, he knew that was a lie. He smashed his fist into Trevor's face, over and over again. He clasped his hands together and brought them down like a hammer on Trevor's head. When the agent's nose was broken, his front teeth scattered across the floor, and his eyes swollen shut, he finally agreed to take Isaac to Mia.

They wandered up and down a multitude of empty corridors. Isaac began to think Trevor was leading him in circles, stalling for time so the Bureau goons could catch up. Isaac was preparing to throw Trevor to the ground and break his arms when they arrived at a door. Isaac pushed it open and stepped into a white room. The floors, ceiling, walls, furnishings, everything was white. Mia sat on the bed in a hospital gown, her hands folded on her lap, her fair skin luminescent in the glare of the overhead lights. Isaac fell to his knees and buried his face in her lap, weeping. She ran her fingers through his hair. He stood, threw his coat over her shoulders, and led her out of the room. He led her through labyrinthine halls, fighting off agent after agent. The twists and turns of the halls grew more and more confusing, but somehow, he never got lost. Trevor followed close behind, leaning against the walls for support. Finally, they arrived at the exit. Isaac kicked open the door and pulled Mia through it. More agents were waiting in the lobby. There was a letter opener on the front desk, shaped like a tiny sword. Isaac picked it up and proceeded to fight and kill every agent in the room with it. He pulled open the front door and led Mia

out into the sunlight. It had stopped snowing. The snow in the plaza was melting, revealing green patches of spring grass. Isaac started down the steps, but Mia held him back. He turned and looked up at her. She dropped his hand. She turned around and walked back into the Bureau. Trevor, restored to perfect physical health, held the door for her.

Isaac was woken by the Holo-Jam warning him it was almost out of power. The dancers were still pirouetting their way across the ceiling. He sat up and checked the time. The car had been charging for over an hour. It should be enough to get him back home. He turned the Holo-Jam off and stuck it in his pocket. Mia would be happy he'd found it.

Isaac pulled the car into the apartment charge park. Very few of the tenants owned a car, so most of the charging stations were shut off. Isaac parked at the unoccupied station closest to his building.

Music was playing when he stepped inside the apartment. Dinner sat percolating on the stove. He heard Mia singing along to the song from the bedroom. Isaac walked towards the room, pausing outside the door, listening to her sing. When he stepped inside, he found Mia packing for the trip. To his surprise, Pip was on the bed, playing with a pile of Mia's laundry. Mia was facing away from him, pulling something lacy from her underwear drawer. She turned and was visibly startled when she saw him.

"I didn't hear you come in."

Isaac looked down at the light blue lingerie set she was holding. He remembered the first time she wore it. They had just finished a movie. She had gone into the bedroom for something. He remembered thinking she was taking an awfully long time. He was surprised and delighted when she stepped out of the room. The image of her standing in the doorway, looking at him expectantly, her face, her eyes, and her body catching the light just right, had been frozen in his memory. It was one of many images he held on to tenaciously; images he could not bear the thought of losing. There was her face after they had kissed in the park, her cheeks ruddy from the cold. There were her teary eyes she turned to him after watching a sad movie. There was the look of concentration as she read the instructions on building the new furniture they'd bought. They had shared so many moments. Built so many memories together. The time for making new memories was drawing to a close.

Mia saw him looking at the lingerie. She smiled to herself as she gently packed them in her bag. Pip padded his way across the bed to her. She scratched him behind the ears then looked up at Isaac.

"I think dinner's ready."

"Sounds good, thank you."

They ate a quiet dinner. Mia left the music playing. Pip prowled at their feet. Isaac dropped him a few scraps. Towards the end of the meal, they began to discuss plans for their trip. They had decided they didn't want to bring food with them, so they would have to go to the grocery store when they arrived. Every store had the same meal kits so they had written out a comprehensive meal plan for the week. They went over the items that needed to be packed. They discussed what they needed to bring for Pip. They had no one to check on him while they were away so they had decided to bring him with them. Finally, they moved on to when they should leave.

“Well, I’ve got church tomorrow, which gets over around noon. I guess we can have a quick lunch and head out after I get back.”

Mia nodded, “Or... you could skip church tomorrow and we could get on the road sooner.”

Her tone was playful. But Isaac could tell she hoped he would stay home. He considered it for a moment. He still clung to the increasingly irrational hope that he would meet a separatist and he and Mia would escape into the frozen sunset. The chances of this happening were virtually nil. He needed to let it go. It was time for acceptance. He could miss a Sunday. It wouldn’t really hurt anything. Nothing would come of it anyway.

Once again, he was reminded of how little time there was left. Anxiety swept in with the realization, overwhelming him. He could not lose a chance to save her. If he missed out on any opportunity, no matter how remote, he would regret it for the rest of his life. He would always wonder if he had just gone to church if one of his acquaintances would have let something slip. If Lew, who had invited him to small group, would’ve disclosed he had a separatist cousin. Or if one of the Priests would reveal the church was a waystation for the Frozen Express to Ice Eden. He would always regret not doing enough to save Mia’s life. He didn’t need to add to it. He took a deep breath, trying to stop the panic attack before it began, trying to hide his fear from Mia.

“Yeah, I’d still like to go though. It’s helping me.”

Mia nodded, understanding. It was helping him to cope. She didn’t understand how or why. But if it was helping him then he should go. They were quiet for a moment. Mia turned back to her food. Isaac stared down at his bowl of vegetarian gumbo. He had no appetite, but he needed to eat. He remembered the Holo-Jam. It would provide a welcome distraction. He pulled it from his pocket and casually set it out on the table. Mia’s eyes lit up when she saw it.

“You found it!”

“Yeah, it was under the passenger seat in the car.”

“Wow, that’s been in there for what, three years?”

“Yeah, roughly.”

“Man, we should’ve taken a trip sooner. Not just because of the Holo-Jam.”

Isaac smiled sadly, “We should’ve.”

“I’m going to go plug it in. I think I put the charger in my bedside table.”

Mia stood, walked around the table, and picked up the Holo-Jam. She leaned down and kissed him. He patted her on the butt as she walked to the bedroom. Isaac forced himself to take a few more bites of gumbo and then emptied his bowl into the garbage disposal.

The rest of the evening was taken up with packing and a final review of the morning’s to do list. After they had finished with that they sat down on the couch. Mia found the show they had been watching and counted the remaining episodes.

“We’ll have to watch an extra episode one of these nights so we can finish it in time.”

A lump formed in Isaac's throat. How could she be so casual about it all? She hit the play button and leaned up against his shoulder. He pulled the blanket over them. He tried, unsuccessfully, to lose himself in the drama of the show. It was meaningless compared to what was happening in his own life.

The next day Isaac woke before his alarm. He dismissed it before it could go off and slipped out of bed without waking Mia. He showered, fed Pip, and made his way to church. The service seemed shorter than usual. Lew wasn't there, which was disappointing. Isaac was fairly certain that if anyone could help them escape, it would be Lew. He had a certain contrarian air about him. There was a gleam in his eye that made it look as though he were in possession of a secret, a secret he was searching for an opportunity to share.

Isaac approached Father Andrew and wished him good morning. Before the priest could respond Isaac began talking about Mia's upcoming appointment. Father Andrew counseled Isaac as best he could. He again mentioned that he would pray for Isaac and Mia. Isaac thanked him and left him to speak to his other parishioners.

Isaac loitered in the back of the Church foyer. He introduced himself to strangers. Struck up conversations with casual acquaintances. Slowly but surely the congregants departed, leaving him alone in the back of the Church. No one mentioned being a separatist or knowing one. Why would they? And how could Isaac broach the topic. It was absurd to expect that this avenue of escape would drop into his lap, and yet he still felt as though he had somehow failed. Failed both Mia and himself.

Isaac stepped back into the sanctuary. He looked up at the large stained-glass window at the front of the church. It was a simple depiction of Jesus standing with his arms outstretched, displaying the wounds on his hands. Did His grace extend to a suicide? Isaac had never asked Father Andrew if taking one's life was a mortal sin. He didn't want to know either way. He turned and walked out of the church and onto the snowy streets.

When Isaac returned home, he found that Mia had stacked all their bags by the door. Mia was kneeling on the floor playing with Pip. She had tied some colorful string to a long wooden spoon and was dangling the threads above the cat, who lay on his back batting at them. Mia smiled at Isaac when he entered the room.

"Everything's ready to be loaded. I'm going to try to get him in the cat carrier."

Isaac nodded, immediately picked up two bags, and headed down the stairs. He walked out to the car, loaded their bags, then stepped into the driver's seat to check the power. The car was fully charged. Isaac plugged their destination into the car's computer. It popped up with a few potential routes. The overview of the routes indicated that one was slightly longer but was considered to be more scenic. The other was reportedly a boring drive but would get them there faster. Isaac clicked on the details for the longer route and saw that it was slightly over four hours, just long enough to require two mandatory breaks. He checked the other one and saw that it was three hours and fifty-two minutes, and therefore only required one break. There was a charging station slightly more than half-way between them and Rustic Retreat. It would work well for the required respite. Isaac selected the shorter route and informed the computer where they would be taking their rest period. The computer warned him that this would mean they would be in the car for longer than the recommended driving interval. It suggested an earlier stop. Isaac again selected his original choice for the break and told the computer if they took

its suggestion that would mean they would be driving for longer than the recommended driving interval on the second leg of the trip. This seemed unwise as he would be more tired when it was getting dark. The computer accepted his rationale and then warned him that if he continued to drive past the selected charging station it would be forced to pull the car over and they would have to rest on the side of the road. Isaac confirmed that he understood this. With the route selected and the break negotiated, Isaac walked back to his apartment to finish loading the car.

Pip had been successfully corralled into the carrier. He was not happy about it. Isaac loaded Pip and the rest of the bags into the car while Mia walked through the apartment, making sure they hadn't forgotten anything. Both Mia and Isaac took one last bathroom break, then stepped out of their apartment, locking the door behind them.

They passed their neighbor on the way down the stairs. Mia greeted her cheerfully. She was clearly surprised by Mia's beaming smile. She mustered up a smile of her own and continued up to her apartment.

When they reached the car Isaac stepped in and immediately started it. Mia opened the back door, found the pet carrier, and rescued Pip from it. She climbed into the passenger seat and, one-handed, buckled her safety belt. Isaac glanced at the cat on his wife's lap and then looked up at her.

Mia smiled questioningly, "What?"

"I'm just surprised to see you and Pip getting along so well. I didn't think you liked cats."

"Well, I never knew if I did or not. I've never had a pet before."

Isaac smiled and drove the car out of the lot. Mia was in a good mood. She chattered for the first half-hour of the trip about anything and everything that crossed her mind. After that she set up the Holo-Jam and projected a Disco party on to the dashboard. Fortunately, for Isaac most of the songs were not Disco. A few songs in she reacted very strongly to Pip using the makeshift litter box they had set up in the back floorboards. She insisted they take an unscheduled break to handle the situation. Isaac pulled over expecting to have to take care of it himself. However, the moment he had stopped the car she scooped Pip up, handed him to Isaac, and stepped out of the car onto the frozen shoulder. She took their gardening trowel, dug the offending material out of the box onto the side of the road, and then hopped back in the car, dousing her hands in sanitizing gel. She was humming along to the music the entire time. She was finding joy in everything, even scooping a litterbox on the side of the road.

Her happiness was infectious. Isaac soon found that he was also in a good mood. He allowed himself to enjoy it. He was able to push the whole purpose of the trip out of his mind, at least for a moment, and be glad to be in the car with her, on their way to a second honeymoon.

They rolled into town at the predicted time. The streets in Moore's Hallow were as empty as Stockburg. Traffic in-town and on the highway had become a non-issue since the credit system had been implemented. Isaac figured there were trade-offs to everything. He found the town grocery store and pulled into a near-empty parking lot.

They walked inside the grocery store. The layout was exactly the same in Moore's Hollow as it was in Stockburg. Mia checked her list. They went up and down the aisles pulling the meal kits off the shelves and dropping them into the cart. Shopping for food had never been easier since the Department of Agriculture had outlawed privately owned groceries. Everything was the same one town to the next. Every meal kit was strictly regulated, containing all the most important food groups and micronutrients as per guidelines provided by the Committee on Dietary Oversight. They wanted to make sure that the population stayed healthy, after all. What a coincidence, Isaac thought, that what was considered healthy coincided with which companies committee members owned stock in. While Mia debated a replacement for a meal the store was out of, Isaac surveyed the aisles of boxes surrounding him. He reflected on the fact that there were vegetables and meats once commonplace in American groceries that he had never tasted. Upon further reflection, he realized he had never tasted real meat in his life.

"How do Garbanzo Bean burgers sound? Instead of the Black Bean Chili?"

Isaac shrugged, "Works for me."

They finished their shopping, paid, and walked back out to their car. Pip was distraught. Mia cuddled him as Isaac backed out into the street.

"Remind me to check my credit balance when we get home. It's gonna take a hit with all this driving."

Mia, turning to him, "You should be good. All my credits'll roll over to you. You're my beneficiary. I think that's how it works anyway."

Isaac glanced at Mia and then turned back to the snowy streets. One week. How had one month turned into one week? Isaac stifled the panic as best he could. Mia turned the Holo-Jam back on. Isaac tried to focus on it. There was no one on the road. He could drive distracted.

Isaac began recognizing more and more landmarks. Before long they disappeared, replaced by a pine corridor. They were getting closer to the cabin. The Holo-Jam was playing through an old playlist that Mia had curated for road trips. Naturally, they hadn't listened to it very often. Isaac was feeling sentimental. Evidently Mia was too. She reached out a hand and took Isaac's. They held hands the rest of the way to the cabin.

After another ten minutes or so, the car's computer informed Isaac that their turn was coming up in one mile. Isaac was grateful for the reminder. The road to the cabin was lost in the snowy trees lining the highway. He slowed down at the half mile warning searching for the road. Finding it, he clicked the off button on the car's GPS which gave him a stern warning that he could get lost if he drove without its assistance. By the time he had successfully dismissed the warning he was at his turn.

"Might as well have left it on," Mia commented.

"Might as well," Isaac conceded.

He pulled a slow right on to the country road and began an even slower ascent up a hill toward their cabin. The road veered slightly to the left before turning right in a smooth curve around a patch of trees. Nestled on the other side was Rustic Retreat.

"Look Pip! There it is! This is our home for the next four days." Mia told the purring cat.

Isaac smiled down at Pip and then looked back up at the cabin. The porch lights were on, forming two blurry orbs of light in the mist. Isaac pulled to a stop next to the cabin and shut the car off. He thought about what Mia had said. Four days at the cabin. It was Sunday. They were leaving on Friday. Mia's appointment was the following Monday. She had seven days to live. A countdown immediately started in Isaac's head. Seven days. Seven and a half, including the rest of Sunday. It wasn't enough time.

Mia yelped, pulling Isaac out of his thoughts. Pip had nipped her hand and was now licking the spot with his sandpaper tongue. Mia looked up at Isaac smiling sheepishly.

"Sorry, he startled me."

Isaac smiled in reply and opened his door.

The first thing they unloaded was Pip and his litterbox. Mia figured out the Digi-Lock to the cabin while Isaac tried to comfort the suddenly distraught animal. Once the door was open Isaac found the half-bath and shut Pip and his litterbox inside. Meanwhile Mia had brought the groceries in and was unpacking them in the kitchen. Isaac proceeded to unload their bags.

The cabin was made up of an open-concept kitchen and living room, two bedrooms, and one and a half baths. Isaac had read that there had been a new addition of a dome roof and a hot tub. He was very anxious to try the tub.

Mia set the Holo-Jam out on the kitchen table and projected a patchwork of lights onto the ceiling. She proceeded to check every drawer and cabinet, locating all the necessary dishes, utensils and appliances. Meanwhile, Isaac started the electric fireplace. It was a fancy heater in the room that produced holographic fire. The flames looked pretty convincing, and it was always a surreal experience to stick one's hands into the fire and not get burned.

Mia approached Isaac and handed him a glass of vodka. She sat down next to the heater cross-legged, cradling her own glass in her hands. She looked up at Isaac, contentedly. He sat down next to her, took a sip of the vodka, then leaned back on his elbows. They both surveyed the cabin mentally noting the changes that had been made since the last time they had rented it.

"Was that here before?"

Isaac turned to where Mia was pointing. There was a large deer head mounted on the wall.

"I don't think so. That's pretty brazen."

"Yeah. The owners must've forgotten to take it down."

"I guess if anyone asked they could say it was an antique."

"True. It looks old anyway. When did they outlaw hunting?"

Isaac shrugged. He laid down on his back and stared up at the ceiling. Mia sat next to him, hunched over her glass. She stared into the faux flames, musing.

"I had venison sausage one time," she murmured.

Isaac turned to her, "How'd you get venison sausage?"

What Isaac really wanted to know was why she hadn't shared it with him.

"You remember Karen?"

"I think so. She came to the wedding, right?"

"Yeah, her roommate got a hold of some. I don't know how."

Isaac felt better. This meant Mia would have tried it before they were dating.

"How was it?"

"Honestly? It tasted better than anything else I've ever eaten."

"I'd like to try it someday."

"I hope you get a chance to."

"I bet separatists eat a lot of venison."

"Probably. Probably don't eat much else."

Isaac glanced at Mia's back. He started slowly, testing the waters.

"Have you ever thought about... what it would be like? Living outside of the cities. In the country?"

"Not really. It's always sounded pretty awful to me."

"Really?"

"Yeah. All the foraging and hunting."

"There might be some farming."

"How can there be farming when it's always winter?"

"I don't know." Isaac admitted.

"It's gotta be a hard life out there."

"Probably." Isaac conceded.

"It's better for people to live in the cities anyway. Leave the country alone."

"Better to keep people stuck in one place." Isaac murmured, with a touch of bitterness.

Mia shrugged as if to say, "no comment." She had never questioned the wisdom of moving the populace into the cities. Neither had Isaac, until recently. They had never known anything different.

"Anyway," Mia continued, "It's a moot point. For me anyway."

Isaac studied the back of Mia's head. He internally debated about pressing the subject further. Separatists had always seemed crazy to him too, leaving the relative comfort and stability of the cities for

the frozen wilderness. There were things he didn't like about living in the city, but nothing that he minded so much to face the harsh realities of nature head on. Then again, he would face them for Mia.

Mia, changing the subject, "Do you want to check out the hot tub?"

"Yes, I do."

They stood slowly and made their way to the stairwell in the corner of the cabin. It was a new addition, as was the dome roof. They stared upwards as they climbed. The stairwell opened to the roof. The plastic dome was still covered in a layer of snow and ice. When they had entered the cabin and triggered the central heat to turn on, a signal had been sent up to the dome to begin warming itself. It wouldn't be long before the snow would completely melt away, providing an unparalleled view of the country night sky, according to the cabin rental website.

Isaac and Mia stepped onto the roof. In the center was a hot tub. The jets in the tub turned on when they cleared the last step on the stairs. The floor and the walls were made of faux wood. It felt spongy beneath their feet as they walked towards the tub. The walls were about chest height, at which point they connected to the dome. Isaac dipped his fingers into the water. It was already warm. Must have been programmed to start heating up before they arrived. Mia walked past the tub and touched the plastic ceiling.

"Weird. It's cold and warm at the same time."

"Still cold on the outer layer and warm on the inside."

"Guess so."

Isaac sat down on the edge of the tub and looked up. The ice outside was illuminated by an exterior light. There was a patch of sky at the very top of the dome where the ice had begun to melt. Isaac squinted through it, catching the faint glimmer of a star piercing through the fading sunlight. Mia joined him at the tub, dipping her hands into the water.

"Feels like we're in a snow globe."

Mia smiled, "I like the ice on the roof. I know it'll melt soon though."

Isaac again looked up at the sky peeking through the ice. He was looking forward to seeing a country night sky. A country night within the legal boundaries that is.

"Remember the last time we were here? Remember all the stars?"

Mia nodded, "Yeah. All the city lights block them all out. Kind of makes you feel trapped in a way. Like there's nothing outside. Stuck in a bubble, I guess. The open sky is an open world. Who knows how far it goes?"

Isaac studied her, tempted to bring up separatists again. It was an interesting way to put it. An open world. He wasn't sure what that meant to Mia. He wasn't sure what it meant to him.

The sky overhead grew larger as the ice receded. It was night now. The moon and the stars took up their vigil. Isaac listened to the whirr of the tub's motor, the sound of the water jets. He felt the room warming around him. Mia began humming. The tune sounded familiar, though he couldn't quite place it.

He studied her face. She stared down into the tub, her lips curled into a half-smile. Her eyes lost, but peaceful. Lost in memory perhaps. Lost in the warmth of the moment. She was content, happy even. He closed his eyes. For the first time in a month, more than that, for the first time since.... Since when? He didn't know how long, and it didn't matter. He felt at peace. He opened his eyes and discovered they were wet with tears. He blinked them away before Mia could notice. He cleared his throat.

"I didn't pack a bathing suit."

Mia smiled, "Why would you?"

She took a step back and slowly disrobed. Her eyes, deep with meaning, never left him. Isaac stared dumbly at her, his mouth suddenly dry. She climbed into the tub and slowly sunk beneath the water. Her body, nymphlike, hidden beneath the bubbling water, waiting to be discovered. Isaac undressed, quickly, and joined her in the tub.

They lingered in the hot tub. The ice on the dome had melted. They shut off the lights inside and out. The roof, true to advertising, did provide an unparalleled view of the stars. They took turns telling each other they should probably get out, to which the other reluctantly agreed. Neither of them moved. Hunger eventually made the decision for them. The cabin provided remarkably plush bath robes. They were hanging on the wall not far from the tub. They briefly argued as to who would venture out of the water and into the cold to retrieve them. Isaac insisted Mia be the one to get them. Ordinarily he would have been the one to do it. However, he wanted to get a good view of her in the moonlight. Mia climbed out of the tub, rushed to the robes, and rushed back, flinging them onto the side of the tub. She hurriedly climbed in, falling into Isaac's lap. He took her in his arms and kissed her hard.

He closed his eyes and held her tightly. The panic began to set in again. It was all coming to an end. He couldn't think about that. He had to enjoy it while he could. She was there. She was with him. He had to drink every moment in.

They sat like that for a long time. Mia finally kissed him on the forehead and pulled away. She stepped out of the tub and immediately began shivering. She threw a robe on and pulled it tightly around her. Isaac reluctantly followed suit.

They walked downstairs where Mia immediately began working on dinner. Isaac poured them both more vodka. He picked up the Holo-Jam and began scrolling through the playlists. He selected one and then joined Mia in the kitchen.

Once dinner was ready, they sat down on the floor next to the faux fireplace. Isaac took the Holo-Jam and projected a pair of tiny dancers into the flames. They both found this amusing.

After dinner they refilled their glasses and headed back upstairs to the hot tub. They stared up at the sky. They talked of everything and nothing. When they started falling asleep, they decided they'd better go to bed. They took a shower, to rinse the chlorine from the tub off them. They fell asleep in each other's arms.

When Isaac woke the next day Mia was already up, making coffee in the kitchen. He played through the events of the evening the night before, realizing to his dismay, that his memory was hazy

due to the vodka. At the time he didn't think he had drunk too much. People rarely do while they're drinking. He would have to be careful. He couldn't lose any memories to alcohol. There would be plenty of time to drink himself to death after the appointment.

He pulled his bathrobe on and walked out into the living room. Mia was preparing their breakfast of instant oatmeal. Isaac walked into the kitchen and poured himself a mug of coffee. He turned, set it down on the counter next to Mia, wrapped his arms around her, and then slipped a hand inside her robe. Breakfast could wait.

Isaac, mostly, abstained from drinking for the rest of the week. They spent every morning drinking coffee by the fireplace. They spent every evening in the hot tub, staring at the stars. They lounged in the bathrobes, barely wearing any of the clothes they had actually brought, except for taking walks outside. They played games. They listened to music. They danced. They finished their TV show. Mia was pleased with the ending. She told Isaac she would've been very disappointed if it hadn't ended well.

The countdown in the back of Isaac's mind continued to run down. He tried to ignore it as best he could. Every morning he had to stifle a panic attack. One less day. Eventually, the panic of the morning began to spread throughout the afternoon and into the evening. He recognized that it was manifesting itself in a general neediness. He couldn't bear to be apart from her for any length of time. She was trying to finish a book. He felt jealous of the book and tried to distract her from it by suggesting activities they could do together. Mia wanted to wash the dishes and listen to a podcast. Isaac dried the dishes for her and talked her ear off. He kept Mia up later and later every day. Sleep was his bitterest enemy. Every second not spent with her was a waste. Hours of potential memories were lost every time he slept. Eventually Mia would start to doze off, despite her and Isaac's best efforts. Isaac would lie awake next to her for hours before he could sleep himself.

Mia, for her part, was having a wonderful time. There was a spring in her step. She was constantly humming, something she never did in their apartment. She laughed easier and more often. Isaac resented her happiness. He couldn't understand it. How could she be so cheerful when in just a few days she would be dead? He wanted to ask her why. But he knew that would end in an argument. He couldn't imagine himself asking the question without yelling. Why was she so damn happy? Why did she want to leave him so badly?

He didn't bring it up. He wanted to make sure the trip remained pleasant. Nonetheless, he was wracked with guilt by not broaching the subject, by not doing more. Maybe he could still pull her back from the brink. He recalled various cliches such as, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" and "Fortune favors the bold." He imagined a dozen different scenarios where he asked her not to go through with the ETC. None of them ended well. In the end he chose cowardice and remained silent.

Cowardice inevitably led to shame. He tried to shove it down where he was keeping his panic. To no avail. He had failed her. He wondered what would have happened to her if she'd married someone else. Many young men had pursued her in college. Why couldn't he keep her happy? Meanwhile, she floated through the cabin, not just happy but peaceful. She had never looked so content in all their years of marriage. What had he done wrong? She'd never tell him. She'd deny that it had anything to do with him. She'd accuse him of making it all about him. And maybe he didn't have as much to do with it as he thought. Nonetheless he was part of her decision to leave because he wasn't a good enough reason to

stay. Ergo, he had done something wrong. He had no idea what it was. Maybe Mia didn't know for sure either. Maybe she knew but not well enough to explain it in words. Perhaps it was just a vague feeling that he wasn't enough. He couldn't really blame her. He hid all these feelings as best he could. At any rate, Mia didn't seem to notice.

Isaac woke up. He stared into space for a moment and then remembered it was their last full day at the cabin. They would be leaving in the morning. Then they would have one day at the apartment. The day after that was the appointment. Three days left. Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Monday the Bureau would come to their house to take Mia away for good. A wave of nausea swept over him. He rushed to the bathroom. He emptied himself into the toilet then crawled into the tub. He pulled his pajamas off and threw them onto the bathroom floor. He turned the shower on. Icy needles of water pelted him before the water heater finally kicked in. He sat under the stream of water for a long time, not knowing what to do. Unsure whether he could make himself move. Eventually he did move. Some unconscious instinct took over and made him stand, turn the shower off, and step out into the bathroom. He pulled his bathrobe on and headed out into the cabin.

Mia stood at the island mixing pancake batter, listening to the Holo-Jam play a style of music he recognized as Chillwave. Mia looked up at him and smiled.

"Coffee's ready."

Isaac nodded and walked into the kitchen. He poured himself a cup and joined Mia at the island. He set his mug down and hugged her from behind. Mia laid her hands on his and leaned back into him. The song on the Holo-Jam ended which served as the cue to part. Mia turned her attention back to the pancake batter and Isaac turned on the stove top.

They barely spoke during breakfast. Neither of them knew what to say. Their shared silence was an acknowledgement that their time at the cabin was almost over. When they were finished eating, they wordlessly washed the dishes. After that they dressed and went for a walk.

There were several trails around the cabin. They had walked them all during their vacation. There was one in particular they liked. It led up a nearby hill, through the forest, past a small waterfall, to a vista overlooking a wooded valley. They lingered at the waterfall. It was large enough that they could stand beneath it. If it were ever warm. Isaac found the sound of the rushing water soothing.

Mia drew in close and slipped her hands into Isaac's coat for extra warmth. She pressed her cheek up against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on the top of her head.

"I wish every day could be like this." She murmured.

There weren't many days left. They wordlessly parted and continued up the trail to the vista. Both of them were out of breath when they finally reached the top. Isaac briefly resolved to get in shape. But what was the point?

The view was stunning. They looked out over a valley of evergreens covered in snow. Nestled in the midst of the trees was a small pond, virtually indistinguishable from the rest of the landscape. The

only thing that gave it away was the lack of foliage and the frozen remains of a fishing shack. It looked like a picture on a puzzle. It was beautiful, but dead. Bereft of all life other than the plants and the trees.

Isaac, musing, "Imagine what this would have looked like in warm weather."

Mia shrugged, "I've seen pictures. From the website. They've been renting these cabins out for over a hundred years."

"It's not the same."

"Probably not."

Isaac looked up. The sun was a hazy, orange disc peeking through a cloudy, white sky. It seemed like the sky was blue more often in his childhood. Now it felt like it was hardly anything other than white or gray.

Mia, deep in thought, "I had always hoped one day winter would end. I've always wondered what a green world looks like."

Isaac didn't respond. Mia had been born into a gray world. Born into a world of ice and snow. She would breathe her last in the same winter she had taken her first breath. She turned away from the hill. He followed.

Back at the cabin they made hot chocolate and sat next to the heater, wrapped in blankets. The chill stubbornly clung to their bones. They sat in silence, cradling their mugs in frozen hands. Isaac wondered what she was thinking. He wanted to ask her, but he wasn't sure how to go about it. He wondered if she was finally starting to regret signing the ETC. Maybe their vacation had reminded Mia of how precious life is. She had been so happy. Maybe she'd be willing to stay. They'd pay the fines together. It didn't matter if they were poor the rest of their life. Most people were anyway. They would work through it. The important thing was that they would be together.

"It's been a good trip," Isaac finally ventured, breaking the silence.

Mia blinked, "Yeah, it has."

She was pensive. Her tone did not give the impression that she did in fact think it had been a good trip. This worried Isaac. Her mood had gone through several subtle changes since that morning. She had grown more and more reserved. She was reverting to her normal behavior at home.

"But I'm ready to get back I think."

Isaac swallowed. Back to what? She would barely be home before the Bureau came.

"It has been good," Mia murmured, "But... I was hoping for something more. I'm not sure what."

Isaac felt a great pit open within him. Everything began slipping into it. Every last hope. Everything. He didn't realize how many loose straws he was grasping on to until she made that simple little statement. Mia had been hoping for some final meaningful moment, catharsis perhaps. She had been hoping for something beautiful, something real, authentic. She had been hoping for closure. She hadn't found it. Which meant more than ever that she was ready to be done with the whole affair. The trip wasn't a reminder that life was beautiful. It was a reminder that something was missing. She

couldn't say what it was. But it was that "something" that gave it all its meaning. Without it, there was no reason to go on.

Isaac turned away from her and looked into the fire. He leaned forward and placed his hand into the flames, wishing that they were real. Pain could distract him. Make him feel alive. He glanced back at Mia and found her watching him. Her eyes told him she understood what he was thinking. He wanted to escape from their world of malaise into a world of pain. That was real at least.

He stood. He walked into the kitchen and poured himself some more hot chocolate. That was the pretense for walking away from her. He looked up and saw her staring into the holographic fire. She wanted to escape their dull, lackluster life with a dull, lackluster, antiseptic, suicide. Couldn't she at least be dramatic about it? Maybe that could give her the meaning she was never able to find in life. Maybe Isaac could help her along. Maybe he could end it for both of them. It would be awful, beyond awful. But it would be real. And even better, he wouldn't give Trevor, Agent Frankl, and all the other bastards at the Bureau the satisfaction of harvesting another lost soul.

A large kitchen knife sat out on the counter, next to his mug of hot chocolate. Mia had used it to cut an orange that morning. He looked down at it and then back up at Mia. A strange thrill ran through him. Maybe he should do it. He wondered what it would be like to do the worst thing he could possibly imagine, kill his own wife. The act, however heinous, would free them both. Maybe this was the catharsis they were both looking for. He remembered standing by the train tracks. He recalled his desire to shock and enrage the people around him. Suicide by ordinary means was still a tragedy. How much more so a murder/suicide? He gripped the knife. Holding the blade, taking one step, however minute, towards an act with such gruesome finality excited him in a way he didn't think possible. On the one hand he was mortified. On the other, the idea that he could do something so evil was perversely intoxicating. He took one step backward, away from the counter, holding the knife, and that wicked joy that had gripped him so fiercely instantly vanished. Nausea followed immediately after it.

He couldn't do it. Of course he couldn't do it. He was ashamed for having thought it, even for a moment. However, he couldn't help but wonder, what difference did it actually make if he did? She'd be dead either way and his life would be over.

Isaac looked down at his hot chocolate. He pushed it aside. He turned to the cabinet where they had been keeping the vodka. He poured himself a glass and rejoined Mia by the heater.

They wiled away the rest of the day, half-heartedly playing games and reading books. They started a movie, but neither of them were particularly enjoying it. They stopped it and decided it was time to eat. Mia prepared their final dinner at the cabin while Isaac began to pack for the trip home. Mia turned on the Holo-Jam and set it to a playlist she had made in college. Rather than making him feel nostalgic it made Isaac feel more depressed.

When Isaac was finished packing what he could he walked back into the kitchen for more vodka. Mia filled his glass and poured herself one. No sense in taking a nearly empty bottle home. Dinner was already finished, so they found another movie to watch and ate on the floor in front of the TV.

The second movie was better. But Isaac couldn't help but feel like they were wasting their time. How could they be spending their last evening at the cabin in front of the TV? They paused the movie for

a bathroom break and more vodka. Isaac asked Mia if she wanted to go up to the hot tub. She told him after the movie was finished.

The movie was longer than Isaac had anticipated. He nervously watched the clock, knowing the later it got the more likely Mia would no longer be interested. But she was thoroughly engrossed. When the movie was finally over, he asked her again about the hot tub, knowing that she wouldn't be interested. He had to try. She was too tired and they had to get up early the next day. Isaac nodded trying to hide his disappointment. The truth was he was too tired as well. And he had drunk too much. He was furious with himself. He had done so well the entire vacation up until the moment when it really counted and then he had given into the despair. If he hadn't drunk the vodka maybe he wouldn't be so tired himself. Maybe he'd have the energy to manifest some desire. She'd respond to that. Instead, he had shrugged and said "okay." At the very least they could just sit in the hot tub. They didn't need to do anything else. But she was already in the bathroom and when she emerged she would be in her pajamas, with her teeth brushed, her night cream on, and her hair pulled back. She wouldn't want to undo all that work to just sit in the tub and stare at the sky. And why was she going through all that effort anyway? Her teeth could rot and her skin could crack. None of it mattered when in a few days' time they'd be cutting her up for spare parts, selling her organs, hair, bones, everything. They were going to cut her to pieces and sell her piecemeal to the highest bidder. Isaac collapsed on the floor, spilling the vodka. He quivered on the floor, sick to his stomach. The bathroom door opened. He felt Mia staring at him. He looked up at her with red eyes. Wordlessly, she turned away and walked into the bedroom. Isaac rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. The Holo-Jam was playing on mute. There was an entire dance hall making merry on the ceiling in pantomime. Isaac watched them. He couldn't move. It was all over. But it wasn't. That was the worst part. It was almost over. He couldn't imagine how it could get any worse. But he knew that it would.