

The Devil on Her Shoulder Part V

Mia stirred, waking Isaac. He wasn't sure when or how he had fallen asleep. They had slept spooning. Ordinarily, neither of them could fall asleep in that position. Mia started to pull away but Isaac held her tight.

"I've got to pee," she murmured.

He let her go. She stood and walked to the bathroom. He ran his hands over her side of the bed. It was still warm. What would it feel like tomorrow morning? He glanced at the time. 7:38. The appointment was at 10:00. He wondered how long it would take. How was he going to survive the rest of the day?

He felt sick to his stomach. He closed his eyes and tried to push all thoughts out of his mind. He kneaded the sheets with his fingers. He tried to block out all physical feelings except for what he felt through his fingertips. The bed was soft. The sheets felt good. Focus on that.

"Isaac?"

He opened his eyes and rolled over. Mia was standing in the bathroom door.

"I was gonna shower. But I wanted to see if you wanted a quickie."

It was the last chance. Isaac looked her up and down. A part of him wanted to. Very badly. Physically, he wasn't sure he could make it happen.

"I don't know if I can."

Mia nodded, not quite understanding. Isaac sat up.

"I'll join you in the shower if that's cool."

"Of course."

Mia walked into the bathroom. Isaac heard the shower turn on. A moment later steam began to roll through the open door. Isaac threw the covers off and climbed out of bed. He looked down at himself, momentarily surprised that he was still wearing his clothes from the day before. He stood and walked towards the bathroom, slowly disrobing as he walked. The last item of clothing he removed was his socks. They were his only protection from the perpetually cold bathroom floor. He sat down on the toilet lid and pulled them off. He stepped into the shower.

Mia stood facing him, in all her fair-skinned glory. She had her head tilted backwards under the stream of water, washing the shampoo out of her hair. She leaned forward and opened her eyes. She jumped when she saw Isaac. Isaac smiled and apologized. She laughed lightly, telling him she hadn't heard him come in.

She continued with her shower. He watched her as she washed herself. He felt a faint tug of desire as she ran the loofah across her body. She pulled her razor from the shower caddy and set her foot on the corner of the tub. She leaned forward and carefully ran the razor across her leg. Why was she

bothering? She wanted to look nice for the executioners. She was preparing the body for burial. Except she wouldn't be buried. That beautiful hair she had so carefully washed would be turned into a wig. The stem cells in her body would be harvested for university science departments to play with. Her heart, beating beneath the soft effulgence of her breasts would be... He stopped himself. Whatever desire he could muster left him. She was already a corpse. Mia finished shaving her legs, looked at Isaac questioningly, and when she saw there was no interest in his eyes, she shrugged and stepped out of the shower.

Isaac stayed put. He sat down in the tub, letting the stream of water pound his head. He tried not to think. He tried not to feel. He tried to empty himself. He tried to drift, but his mind could never move beyond the impending approach of ten o'clock. Time, existence itself, ended there.

How could this be happening? It couldn't. It wasn't possible. It was happening to someone else. Not him. It couldn't happen to him. He couldn't imagine life without her. Because there was no life without her. One way or another his life would end with hers. Figuratively, at the very least. Then most likely, literally. He wondered how long he would last after she was gone. Days? Weeks? Hours? He wouldn't go through the Bureau. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction. He'd do it the old-fashioned way. He'd break into the Bureau, climb the stairs to the roof and jump, just as that smug son of a bitch Trevor was leaving for the day. But if he did it there they'd find a way to harvest him for parts. Since he did it on Bureau property they would have legal ownership over his body. Maybe. Or they'd just carry his remains to some back room, process him, and never report it to the police. No. He'd have to drive out to the country and find somewhere to end it where no one could find him. Let the wolves take him. He preferred them to the Bureau.

He stood slowly. He shut the water off, reached out from behind the curtain, and found his towel hanging on its hook. He pulled it into the shower stall and began drying off. He wrapped the towel around his waist and walked out of the bathroom and into the living room.

Mia was standing at the island, staring down at her phone. She looked up at him.

"The Bureau called. Their first appointment this morning went faster than they anticipated so they'll be coming at nine if that's cool."

A surge of nausea nearly knocked him flat. It was going to end an hour earlier. For a brief moment he felt relieved, knowing that he wouldn't have to wait as long. This relief was followed immediately by the horror of knowing their time together had been cut short, or rather even shorter. For once he wished that the bureaucratic machinery wasn't working so well. Then he thought about the absurdity of her statement. Of course it wasn't cool. None of it was cool. What an idiotic thing to say. In response he merely nodded and murmured "okay." He turned and walked on shaky knees into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Safe in the bedroom, he leaned over at the waist, hands on his knees. The world was reeling. All the panic, fear, sadness, and horror of the last month converged on that single moment. Once again, he felt that strange sensation of his mind splitting in two. He felt dizzy. He swayed from side to side. Thinking he might faint, he leaned on the bed and slowly melted downward, ending up on his hands and knees on the floor. He found himself babbling. Quietly, he didn't want her to hear. He wasn't sure what he was saying, something along the lines of "No, no, no, she can't. This can't happen. It can't."

He heard something. He thought it was the door opening. He leapt to his feet and turned towards the door only to find it closed. He wasn't sure what he had heard. Maybe the Bureau had come even earlier. He was overcome with a sudden fear that they were already there, pumping Mia full of poison.

He hurried to the closet and pulled out a pair of pants and a shirt that he knew Mia liked. He dressed quickly and nearly ran out into the living room. He found Mia standing at the island, carefully pouring steamed milk into her coffee mug. She looked up at him and smiled. Smiling seemed wildly inappropriate to him.

Isaac walked towards the island. He shouldn't be walking. He should be running. He should run to her, grab her by the hand and drag her out to the car. They had to escape, and they only had an hour within which to do it. If she resisted he'd have to knock her out cold. He'd throw her over his shoulder and carry her down to the parking lot. He walked to the island and accepted the mug she pushed towards him.

He stared dumbly down at his coffee. A whole month. How had he wasted a whole month?

"You're gonna keep Pip, right?"

Isaac looked up at her, "Probably."

Mia was pleased, "Good. I'm glad you found him when you did. I know it won't be easy for you, but having Pip around will make it better."

"A cat isn't a replacement for a wife."

Mia's face darkened, "Please don't, Isaac. I don't want to spend my last moments with you arguing. I want to leave this world in a good place. I want you to be in a good place too. I know it's hard for you to understand. I love you, Isaac. I always have. And I always will."

Always will? What did that mean? There was no "will." There was no time to come in which she could love him. Her time was ending. Her love would die with her. Her memory couldn't keep love alive. Love is for the living. It's immediate, tangible, brimming with life. The dead cannot participate in love. What the hell did she mean that she "always will?" She didn't believe in the afterlife. Or any sort of spiritual reality beyond the physical world. What complete and utter bullshit.

Isaac smiled and nodded. He couldn't hide his sadness. Mia smiled, like she would smile at a sad puppy. She walked around the island and hugged him.

"Thank you so much, Isaac. Thank you for loving me through all the years. For taking care of me. Thank you for all the memories. I couldn't have made it this far without you."

"Does the bureau offer family discounts?"

Mia pulled away, "... Don't talk like that."

"I bet they do. They can take you, me, and Pip in one go. Blend our ashes. Then we won't ever have to be apart."

"Stop it, Isaac."

“Why?”

“Because neither you or I want to end it like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like... like with you acting like a dick.”

“Don’t you want me to fight for you?”

“This isn’t fighting for *me* it’s fighting for *you*. You want me to stay not because you love me but because you want to own me.”

“That’s not true.”

“It’s a stupid cliché. But it’s true. If you love something let it go.”

“So, if you came home one day and found me in the tub with my wrists slit you wouldn’t call an ambulance?”

“That’s different.”

“How is it different?”

“Because that’s despair. What I’m doing is not the same thing. I’ve thought about it for a long time, and I came to the conclusion that this is the best option for me.”

“Why is it the best option for you?”

“We’ve been over this!”

“You’ve never given me a good answer! It’s always some vague comment like ‘it’s time’ or ‘it’s what’s best for me’ but you’ve never given me a real reason.”

“That is such bullshit! You just haven’t been listening!”

“Well I’m listening now!”

“We’ve got less than an hour, Isaac!”

Horror swept aside his anger. He looked at the clock. It wasn’t just less than hour. It was less than forty-five minutes. That was impossible. Time was moving faster. It wasn’t fair. Isaac’s knees felt shaky. He sat down at the island. Mia, seeing the alarm in Isaac’s face, softened. She laid her hand on his back.

“Let’s go sit on the couch.”

Isaac nodded and stood. He walked dumbly to the couch and collapsed. Mia sat down next to him. She pulled him to her, gently guiding him down so that his head was lying on her lap. She ran her fingers through his hair.

“It’ll be all right, Isaac. It might be hard to see that now, but it will. Please just understand that I’m at peace. This is what I want.”

“Peace...” Isaac murmured.

He wanted to say that he would never know peace again, but Mia would just chide him. She'd tell him it wasn't true. She would probably be right, strictly speaking. Maybe someday he'd get over her. He wasn't sure he wanted to.

He closed his eyes and tried to focus all his attention on her fingers massaging his scalp. There was something very strange about the whole situation. He thought of innumerable movies he had seen where someone was dying and terrified. He opened his eyes and looked up at Mia.

"I don't know what to do, Mia. Aren't you scared? Shouldn't I be comforting you?"

Mia smiled and shook her head, "No. I'm the one being set free."

"Set free. So you think I should join you."

Mia, spoke softly, "That's your decision to make."

"I thought you didn't want me to talk like that."

"I didn't want you to talk flippantly about it. It's an important decision, Isaac. You need to do what's right for you. Just like I did."

Isaac rolled back onto his side and shut his eyes. The panic began to take hold again. It was going to happen, and soon. It would all be over. The finality of the action was horrifying. It could never be taken back. He wanted to plead with her. He wanted to scream. It wouldn't do any good. She would just dig in her heels. She'd become more determined, and in her last moments she would resent him. He wanted her to leave still loving him. That was just selfishness on his part. No matter what she told him, the unselfish thing to do was to try to save her, right up until the end. Her life was all she had. How could she swap it for nothing? Even pain, even malaise was better than oblivion. Anything was better than complete and total absence. He couldn't wrap his mind around the concept. He could not think in terms of nothing. It was impossible. Whenever he tried, he thought of something. It was like a bizarre form of anthropomorphism. He was giving nothing the characteristics of something. He was imagining it as darkness. He was thinking about it like space, like depth, but it is none of these things. It is unimaginable because it is outside the scope of existence. And that was where Mia was headed.

Isaac felt that strange splitting sensation in his head again. The world suddenly felt distant. He sat up slowly and leaned back on the couch. He began to drift. Part of him insisted he get his act together. He had to be present for Mia. Another part of him told him to let it go. He was drifting for a reason. His body knew better than he what he needed. It was protecting him.

Mia leaned her head on his shoulder. She began humming a song. Isaac didn't recognize it. She found his hand and slipped her fingers between his.

"I wish this moment could last forever," she murmured.

"What a strange thing to say," Isaac thought.

It occurred to Isaac that they should get up, though he wasn't sure why. He also wasn't sure if he would be able to move anyway. He felt as though he could hear the clock ticking, but they didn't own any clocks. Outside of their phones the only way they could tell the time was the digital clock on the

oven. And the microwave. He forgot about the microwave. Nonetheless he could feel time. It had finally slowed down, though he wasn't sure if it was out of mercy or malice.

He began to count, internally. Eventually his counting began to drown out the ticking of the phantom clock. Every second was important. He had to make them last. He had to emblazon each and every one on his memory. He leaned his head against hers. His shattered psyche began to coalesce. He felt whole again. He remembered the song she had been humming and began to murmur the lyrics. Then came the knock on the door and he was once again untethered. Bastard time hadn't slowed down. It had rushed on while he sat near insensate on the couch. It had brought the Bureau to his front door. It was the handmaid of the enemy.

Mia squeezed Isaac's hand and walked to the front door. Isaac didn't move. He just listened. The door opened.

Male voice: "Mia?"

"Yes, I'm Mia."

Male voice, continuing: "My name is Jeff I'm an ECT technician with the Bureau. This is Kathy she'll be helping us out today."

Female voice, presumably Kathy, "Hello, good morning."

Jeff: "And this is."

Second female voice interrupting: "Agent Frankl, we've met before."

"Good to see you again Agent Frankl. Come on in. Where do you need to set up?"

"Umm..."

Isaac assumed Jeff was surveying the room.

"Well, it's really up to you, would you prefer to receive the injection in your bed or on the gurney?"

"Whatever's easiest."

"Well, the gurney is easiest for us, but a lot of our clients prefer to receive the injection in their own beds. It's a lot more comfortable than the gurney."

"Okay, well, if it's not too much trouble than yeah I think I would prefer that."

"Oh yeah, no trouble. We'll park the gurney over there in the corner and we'll get the IV setup in the bedroom."

"Okay great!"

"Is that the bedroom?"

"Yes, it is."

“Okay, well I need to go back downstairs and grab the IV. Kathy will take care of the gurney. So umm, yeah, hang tight and we’ll get everything started here in just a bit.”

The conversation was followed by the shuffling of objects in the foyer. Out of the corner of his eye Isaac saw Kathy pushing the gurney into the corner next to the laundry room. He didn’t look at her, but he could tell she glanced at him as she made her way to the bedroom. Mia walked to the laundry room, opened the door, and stepped inside. Isaac could hear her saying goodbye to Pip. Kathy stepped out of the bedroom. She asked Isaac a question. He didn’t respond. Mia approached her carrying Pip, responding to Kathy’s question, “Yes, you can move the white bedside table. That’s my side of the bed so that works better.” Kathy said thank you and then scratched Pip behind the ear. Isaac could hear Pip purring at the stranger. Traitor. Isaac wanted to scream at her not to touch the cat, but it wouldn’t do any good.

“Hello, Isaac.”

Isaac turned slowly. Agent Frankl was standing at the kitchen island, watching him. Isaac didn’t respond. He turned away and stared at the gurney in the corner.

Kathy and Mia sat down in the bedroom for the pre-op. Isaac tried not to listen as Kathy explained that Mia would be receiving two injections. The first one was a sedative and would put her to sleep. After she was asleep, they would administer the second injection. Kathy didn’t elaborate on what it was. Mia murmured something in response.

There was a knock. Isaac didn’t move. The door opened and someone, presumably Jeff stepped in. Whoever it was stomped their feet, knocking residual snow off before walking into the house. How thoughtful. Isaac assumed Agent Frankl had let him in. There was a faint squeaking sound, like unoiled wheels. A moment later Jeff pushed an IV pole past him towards the bedroom. Agent Frankl followed him. Everyone was in the bedroom. Isaac stood, walked to the kitchen island, and opened the silverware drawer. He pulled out a large kitchen knife and laid it out on the counter. Three people had invaded his house with the intention of killing his wife. He had to save her.

There was a burst of laughter from the bedroom, startling Isaac. Somebody must’ve said something funny. Agent Frankl stood with her back to the door, Kathy stood a few paces in front of her looking towards the bed, presumably at Mia. Isaac couldn’t see Jeff. He was most likely working on the IV in the general vicinity of Mia’s bedstand. Isaac looked back down at the knife on the counter. It was good that Agent Frankl was closest to the door and facing away from it. Out of the three of them she was the most likely to be armed. Isaac could stab her in the lower back, in the kidney. Then in the upper back. Or maybe he should just go for her neck. He’d have to incapacitate her quickly. Then he’d have to move on to Kathy. She was small, birdlike. She would be quick and easy. Looks can be deceiving though. She was small, yes, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t put up a good fight. He couldn’t let his guard down. He didn’t know for sure where Jeff was, and he hadn’t gotten a good look at him. Jeff could be bigger than he thought. And Isaac didn’t know where he’d be attacking from. Jeff could get the better of him. Jeff probably would. That would be okay. The important thing was that Agent Frankl would be dead or permanently injured. Isaac also considered just yanking Agent Frankl back by her ponytail, throwing her to the floor, and then stabbing her in the face.

“Isaac?”

Isaac looked up. It was Mia, calling him from the bedroom.

“Will you come hold my hand?”

Agent Frankl stood at the bedroom door, studying Isaac. Kathy stood in the room, arms folded, waiting to be told what to do. Jeff and Mia were somewhere inside the room. Isaac dumbly walked around the island towards the bedroom. Agent Frankl stepped aside, letting Isaac into the room. Isaac stopped in the doorway. Mia sat on the bed looking up at Jeff who was prepping the IV. She turned to Isaac and smiled weakly.

“I got nervous all the sudden.”

Isaac faltered. Something woke up in the back of his mind. He wanted to stay where he was. Better yet he wanted to turn around and walk away. He didn't want to hold her hand. He wanted to desert her in her time of need, just as she was deserting him. He wanted to be cruel. He shook his head. He couldn't do that. He loved her and she needed him. He walked to the bed in a daze and sat down next to her. He held out his hand and she took it.

Jeff knelt on the floor in front of Mia. He gently took her hand, extended her arm, and began prodding her forearm, searching for veins. Mia's breath began to quicken. She gripped Isaac's hand.

She began whispering, “It's the right thing to do. It's the right thing to do.”

Isaac whispered back, “You don't have to.”

Jeff interjected in a comforting tone, “It's just last-minute jitters. It's perfectly normal.”

“Lie down please, Mia.” It was Agent Frankl's turn to intervene.

Mia obediently laid backward, letting go of Isaac's hand. Isaac had to scoot backwards onto the bed to his side to give her room. Mia held her hand out to Isaac again. There was no good way for him to sit and hold her hand, so he laid down next to her.

Jeff took an alcohol swab and wiped down the crook of Mia's arm. He took the IV needle and extended it to Mia's arm, explaining that she would feel a little stick. Isaac looked away. Mia tightened, almost imperceptibly, as the needle pierced her skin.

Mia began whispering again, “It's okay. It's time. It's the right thing to do. It's okay.”

Isaac, against his better judgment turned towards Jeff. The nurse, or whatever he was, was connecting a y-set into the IV line. Jeff saw Isaac watching him and felt the need to explain.

“We'll administer the sedative through this first connection here. Once that takes effect then we'll administer the second dose.”

Mia forced a smile, “That's a relief I thought I was going to get a second shot.”

Everyone but Isaac laughed.

Isaac rolled onto his back, gripping Mia's hand. He didn't understand what was happening. Why wasn't he fighting them? Why wasn't he arguing? Why was he just laying there letting it all happen? What would happen if he did fight? If they fled to the wilderness they would eventually freeze to death.

If they stayed in the city they'd be caught. Isaac would be detained for interfering with the fulfillment of a contract and Mia would quietly die in a cold back room at the Bureau, alone. There was no hope. There was no escape. There never had been. It was always going to end this way. It was inevitable.

"Okay, Mia." Jeff spoke softly. "I'm going to apply the sedative now. I want you to count backwards from ten, okay?"

"Then what?"

"Then nothing. That's all you have to do, okay? Then it'll all be over. That's not so bad, is it?"

"No. That's not so bad."

"Okay, here you go you ready?"

Mia took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

"Yes."

Jeff started the drip.

"Okay, count backwards for me."

"I love you, Isaac."

Isaac wanted to plead with her again. He wanted to beg her not to leave him. But he didn't want begging of any kind to be the last words he spoke to her. Grief strangled his voice. Somehow, he managed to force the words out.

"I love you, Mia."

She smiled.

"Ten, nine, eight, sev..."

She was asleep. Jeff stood and took hold of a tube that was hanging from the second bag on the IV pole. Isaac watched in horror as Jeff connected the tube to the y-set. A dark liquid descended from the bag, through the tube, creeping ever closer to Mia's arm. Isaac was overcome with more feelings than he had names for. The final result was paralysis. A part of him refused to believe it was finally happening. Another part of him grimly accepted it. Nature would have taken her away from him eventually anyway, the Bureau had simply expedited the process. The liquid, whatever it was, slithered its way into Mia's body. The room was still. No one spoke. Something changed in Mia's grip. Isaac could feel it happening through his hand. A shudder ran through her body followed by a sudden spasm and then stillness. An eerie stillness, total and complete. The living cannot lie so still as this. Jeff leaned over and took Mia's vitals. Isaac stared down into the quiet, fair face of his beloved. Jeff pronounced her dead. Kathy took down the time.

Jeff immediately got to work removing the y-set. He left the IV in Mia's arm. Kathy rolled the IV pole out of the room. Jeff went to retrieve the gurney. Isaac stared down at Mia. He had dreaded the moment for so long and it had come and gone with barely a whimper. It was so easy, so horribly easy to take a life. How could something so important, so wonderful, be ended so unceremoniously? He felt

empty, numb. Previously, he had felt disassociated with what was happening, now he felt very present, and yet he felt nothing except exhaustion. He just wanted it all to be over. He could hear the squeaking wheels of the gurney in the living room as Jeff struggled to maneuver it through the bedroom door. He could hear Kathy talking on her phone to someone at the Bureau, telling them the ETC had gone well and to get the receiving room ready. Agent Frankl stood in the corner chewing gum. He wanted everyone out of his apartment. But they wouldn't leave without Mia.

He couldn't take his eyes off her. It was so strange. The body was hers, but she wasn't there. Mia was gone, completely and totally. Isaac couldn't wrap his mind around it. It was an easy concept to understand, but now faced with the reality he couldn't find any words to do this profound absence justice. An enormous gulf, an eternal gulf, now separated Mia, the living Mia, from her body. Isaac imagined her drifting outside her body, trying to find her way back in. The idea seized him. Mia still needed help. Isaac sprang up onto his knees. He leaned over and began performing chest palpitations, not really understanding what he was doing, not expecting it to work, not knowing why he was trying. Chest palpitations, CPR, these were things people did to save lives.

"A do-not resuscitate order is written into every ETC, Isaac."

Isaac looked up at Agent Frankl. She stared down at him, passive. Isaac looked back down at Mia. He kept going.

"It's not gonna work. Even if it did, we'd just hook the IV back up."

Isaac stopped. They would do it too. They'd kill her twice. He clenched his fists and slowly rose, straightening his back, staring up at the ceiling, eyes clamped shut. He gritted his teeth so hard he thought he would crush them into powder. There was nothing to be done. He opened his eyes and turned to Agent Frankl. Desperation and hate overwhelmed him. Agent Frankl could see it in his eyes. For a brief moment, she was afraid of him. This made him feel better, just a little bit.

Jeff finally managed to get the gurney into the bedroom. He pushed it up towards the bed. A body bag lay splayed open on it. Kathy appeared out of nowhere. She took Mia's feet and Jeff grabbed Mia's shoulders. Agent Frankl cleared her throat and began speaking as Jeff and Kathy lifted Mia and moved her to the gurney.

"Mia signed a standard ETC thereby donating her body to the Bureau. After our technicians have completed the post-op she will be cremated and her remains will be delivered via standard mail. You should receive them in about a week. We can recommend a good funeral home if you would like to hold a memorial. In fact, we recommend that you do so. It gives people a sense of closure. The Bureau also offers counseling services, should you choose to avail yourself of them."

Agent Frankl fished a few brochures out of her coat pocket and tossed them onto the bed. Jeff zipped up the body bag, encasing Mia in black plastic. There was a strange whimpering sound. It wasn't until Kathy turned to Isaac that he realized it had come from him. Jeff and Kathy steered the gurney out of the room. For some reason it was much easier to get it out then it was to get it in. Isaac watched them leave, motionless, powerless. Agent Frankl lingered.

"It's better this way, Isaac."

Isaac turned to her. He didn't think it was possible to hate someone so much as he hated her in that moment.

"You've done your job. You've killed my wife. Spare me your sanctimonious bullshit."

"I'm only trying to help. Remember, the Bureau is here for you."

Agent Frankl pulled a pair of gloves from her pocket and slowly put them on. She looked as though she wanted to say something else, something to try and confirm that she had the moral high ground. Isaac glared at her, teetering on the edge of a different form of disassociation, a homicidal rage. He had never understood how anyone could lose control, commit a crime of passion, until now. He studied Agent Frankl, disgusted, perplexed. He couldn't understand how someone could be so smug, so sure of themselves when they were so wrong. Agent Frankl finally left, having decided there was nothing more to be said. Isaac listened to her departing footsteps. He heard the door open and close. An unearthly silence settled in.

Isaac sat on his knees on the bed. It was over. She was gone. But where did she go? Isaac felt all the strength leave his body. He collapsed onto his side. He stared into space with unblinking eyes. He lay like this for a long time, bewildered, confused. His head was swimming. Something was wrong with both his mind and his body. He was cracking up, going mad.

Isaac shook his head, trying to draw himself back into reality, regardless of how little he wanted to be there. He rose to his knees. A wave of nausea swept over him. He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry. But he couldn't muster the energy for screaming or for tears. He lifted his eyes heavenward. Once again, he heard a strange whimpering sound and quickly realized it was him even without someone else to notice it.

His eyes trailed downward from the ceiling and settled on the brochures that had been left at the foot of the bed. He was momentarily confused. What were they and where had they come from? Slowly, the memory of Agent Frankl tossing them onto the bed asserted itself in his mind. That had happened a few minutes ago at most. He really was going crazy. He looked down at the brochure that lay on top. He stared down at the smiling face of a young man signing an ETC.

Isaac abruptly crawled to the edge of the bed and over the side onto the floor, knocking the brochures aside as he did so. He struggled to his knees and then to his feet. He had to get out of the apartment. He had to leave. He didn't know why any more than he knew where he would go. It wouldn't be better anywhere else. Just moments ago, he had murdered Agent Frankl in his heart. He had damned her, Trevor, and the entire Bureau to hell. But they had already condemned him to a living one. Hell was life without Mia. Hell would follow him wherever he went. The only light in his life had been extinguished. Once again, his strength left him. He collapsed on the living room floor. Nothing without and nothing within. He had been erased. He would call the Bureau. He'd make an appointment. With Mia gone there was no reason to hold on. A chaos of misery engulfed him. A furious tumult rung in his ears.

A cold wet nose startled him out of the depth of his feelings. He opened his eyes. Pip was sniffing his fingers, begging for a scratch. Isaac reached out and pulled the kitten towards him. He curled up into a ball, forming a cocoon around the tiny creature. He couldn't leave. Not yet anyway. Who would take care of Pip? He had to succeed with Pip where he had failed with Mia. He had to keep him safe. He

had to protect him from the world. Isaac closed his eyes. He listened to Pip purring in his arms. His shoulders began to heave. He finally found the energy to properly grieve. He wept bitterly.

It was evening. Isaac finally peeled himself off the floor. He fed Pip, got dressed, pulled on his coat and gloves, and left the house. He headed down to the park, but he didn't stay there long. He walked to the library, but it was already closed. He hadn't intended to go inside anyway. The emptiness drove him from one place to the next. He didn't know where he was going, and it didn't matter.

Snow began to fall. It was always snowing. He trudged his way up and down the empty streets. Occasionally a bus would pass by. Sometimes they would stop and open their doors for him. He waved them off and continued on his lonely way. He had no place to go, and therefore no need of a ride.

The fervor of emotion had finally died down that afternoon back in the apartment. It had been replaced by a strange feeling he couldn't quite place. It was like resignation, but it was a shade closer to peace, though he certainly couldn't call it that. Perhaps it was relief. The ordeal was finally over. He felt guilty for feeling relieved in any capacity.

He would pause occasionally as the realization once again took hold. She was gone. He would stand paralyzed out in the snow. In a flash he would relive all the emotions from earlier that day. The despair, the feeling of powerlessness, the anger, the loss, the unimaginable grief. How could he go on? He and Mia were meant to inoculate each other from the madness of the world. They were meant to keep each other sane. To protect each other from the smiling lies and the disingenuous helping hands of society. They were supposed to provide a home full of love for each other. To help each other through the difficulty of life. She had been all these things and more for him. She was his only real human connection. His only connection to life itself. What was he going to do without her?

Despite being in a daze, he saw a figure out of the corner of his eye, approaching him. Isaac turned. It was Father Andrew. Isaac breathed a sigh of relief. Father Andrew approached, silent, his eyes full of compassion.

"It was today. Wasn't it?"

Isaac tried to say yes, but realized speaking would prompt him to cry. He blinked and nodded.

Father Andrew patted him on his shoulder.

"May I stay with you awhile?"

Isaac laughed grimly, "You'll catch your death father. Not sure how long I'll be here."

"We can go inside if we need to."

Isaac glanced over his shoulder. He hadn't realized he had stopped in front of the church. Aside from central heat there would be coffee inside. They could go in in a minute. Despite the cold, Isaac wanted to stay outside a little longer. They looked up into the sky watching the snow swirling its way down to earth. Neither of them said anything. There was nothing to say. Isaac found the company comforting. It was strange how much better he felt just having the vicar standing next to him. For the

first time in over a month, longer than that, he felt something like hope. Although he felt guilty for feeling it. Nonetheless, he did allow himself to wonder if maybe he'd make it after all.