

TW: violence, murder, mentions of suicide

I am not overly familiar with brains, but it seems to me they should better remain ensconced in the safety of the skull. The Body's brain has left its skull to splatter all over the cobblestones. Red seeps into the cracks, glinting liquid in the late morning sun. This development does not seem to have improved the Body's day.

I approach the tenuous stillness of the Body. My laceless sneakers live up to their name, silent on the path. Or maybe the rushing in my ears drowns out the sound. The Body lies before me, arms and legs splayed in a broken dance.

A siren calls across the blurred chattering. The Body pulls me closer to kneel down beside it.

"Step back," the voice tells me. Evidently I do not respond, or I respond too slowly, because without further ado I am hauled away and wrapped in a crinkling blanket. Faceless nametags ask me questions I do not know the answers to.

The Body reappears that night while I am sitting in the ostentatious clawfoot tub they have furnished me with. My embarrassment is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the Body cannot be real, but I still blush under its searching gaze.

"Why?" it asks me.

"I do not know," I tell it.

"Why?" it repeats.

"Leave," I say.

It shakes its head and fades away.

I sink beneath the water until my lungs burn.

The next morning the Body is waiting at the foot of my bed. I groan and close my eyes, but there it remains. The lock clicks open. I sit up, pointedly sliding my gaze past the Body to the door. The light by the handle, incongruously modern against the old mahogany door, flashes green, signalling that my restrained freedom has begun for the day.

I put on my walking outfit, the loose cotton soft and familiar, and walk out the door. Aside from the Body, the hallway is blessedly empty. The Body accompanies me down the wide and curling stairs to the kitchen, silently judging. The kitchen, too, is empty. I am the only early riser among the patients, and the staff have their own kitchen.

The Body watches as I make coffee and sip it by the window. I aim my gaze up and try to catch a glimpse of sky through the heavy clouds. The Body hovers at the edge of my vision. When I can no longer stand it, I turn to the Body and tell it, "Fine."

It raises a bloody eyebrow.

I dump my empty cup in the sink and raise my hands. "I am hurrying, at my own pace."

We go to the woods, the best illusion of freedom and privacy at Leandres House. I breathe out as the house and its outbuildings disappear and the verdant greenery swallows us whole. My path curls through the middle of the woods, carefully avoiding the edges where glimpses of buildings or smooth concrete walls could break the illusion. The Body keeps pace beside me.

"Why should I help you?" I ask.

The Body sets its jaw. "Because I won't leave you alone until you do."

My fists clench and my meandering stroll becomes decidedly stiff. “And if I find out why you were killed, you will leave me alone?”

“Who, too. I want to know who and why.”

“Fine,” I bite out. I stop and turn to the Body. In the dappled sunlight, the mix of black curls and red blood seems even more mottled than before.

“What do you remember?” I ask.

The Body’s intact eye flicks to the ground. “Not much. It’s not just the, uh, you know.”

“The dying?” I suggest.

The Body cringes. “Yeah. That. It’s not just that. Even before, I was being drugged out of my mind.”

“How is that any different from the rest of us?”

The Body looks straight at me, brown eye ablaze with intensity. “No, you don’t understand. I’ve taken tranquilizers before, but you don’t take as many as I keep finding in my pillbox unless you want to get high, and you don’t take them as often as I seem to find them unless you want to get addicted.” The Body shakes its head. “It took me a while to realize, because they shot me up with something before bringing me here and then the pills kept me hazy.”

The Body looks at me expectantly. When I say nothing, it continues, “And then I threw up one day, I don’t know why, but it was right after I took my pills. When I went to take my pills again that evening, I was lucid enough to realize something wasn’t right. So I started crushing and flushing.”

I narrow my eyes. “All of them?” Maybe the Body looked a little less dazed towards the end, but it was still a far cry from stone cold sober.

The Body scuffs its shoe against the dark earth, the movement oddly childlike. “I kept a few. Just to, you know, wean myself off.”

I ignore this and ask, “Who would want to drug you? Or, for that matter, kill you?”

The Body presses its lips together, and its voice croaks when it says, “Elwood.”

I listen to the birds chirp as I wait for the Body to elaborate. “Who?” I finally ask.

The Body sniffs. “Elwood Cargill III.”

I choke. “Elwood Cargill? Our friendly neighborhood representative? What did you do, advocate for human rights?”

The Body hesitates. “I...I guess I thought I loved him.”

I stare at it. “Whyever would you think that?”

The Body shifts restlessly. “Let’s walk,” it says.

I decide listening to voices that may or may not be in my head is always a good plan. The ground squelches slightly beneath my feet, and I remember that it rained the day before the Body died. I breathe in the scent of earth and plants, listen to the sound of all the birds and little critters that are undeterred by concrete walls.

The Body interrupts my morsel of peace. “We were lovers. For two years, five months, and ten days.”

I stop, agog. “You? And Elwood Cargill? The one with the ‘family values’ campaign? Who talks about his perfect wife and two-point-five kids and purebred dog everytime he opens his mouth? *That* Elwood Cargill was having an affair with a man?”

The Body clasps its hands, though I do not know whom it is beseeching. “It was just a show! That’s what he always told me. And then he said he loved me, and I thought maybe he was ready for us to be together. Maybe he just needed a little push.”

“A push?” I ask. “Are you saying you tried to blackmail him into leaving his wife?”

The Body paces in short, agitated strokes. “It wasn’t blackmail, I didn’t want his money or anything. I just knew he needed something to give him a reason to leave her, so I showed him the texts and pictures we took over the years. To remind him.”

I instantly feel better about myself. Telling my sister that I talk to dead people was idiotic, but not nearly this idiotic. “I am truly surprised that your flawless plan, so strongly grounded in reality, failed.”

The Body stops pacing and sags against a tree. “Okay, so maybe I was blackmailing him a little. I was just so tired of being his dirty little secret. I should’ve just ended things.”

“You should have never started things.”

The Body laughs hollowly. “That’s fair.”

I look up at the leafy canopy and wonder where it comes from, the desperately destructive need to be loved.

The Body clears its throat. “Anyways, I don’t know who’s been drugging me, and I don’t remember much about what happened.”

I tear my gaze back to earth. “Do you remember anything?”

The Body nods slowly. “One thing. A dark tattoo. On a pale wrist. I don’t know what it was, but it was circular, and done in black ink.”

My head snaps up. “Sleeves and gloves?” The staff always wear long sleeves and gloves. I do not know whether it is a rule or a tradition.

The Body looks conflicted. “I think so?” It closes its eye. “I think I remember something blue and something whitish or greyish, like maybe the glove rode down and the sleeve rode up. But I’m not sure.”

I start walking back towards the buildings. I long to stay in the woods, but if I am not at breakfast, someone might come looking. “You are sure about the wrist tattoo and the pale skin, though?”

The Body drifts up beside me and nods sharply. “Yes.”

The twelve families who founded Leandres House remain the only ones who can refer people there, and as the families and their social networks mostly range from paper-white to milk-white, pale skin only rules out two of the staff and one of the patients. Which leaves me with six staff and the Psychiatrist on duty that morning and ten patients. I check my wrist to eliminate myself from suspicion. Nine patients. Sixteen people, one wrist tattoo. How hard could it be?

The first nine are easy. All eleven of the remaining patients sit at breakfast, the Body an awkward twelfth hovering behind its empty seat. The Psychiatrist and the Other Psychiatrist insist the patients eat together. “The environment is an important part of therapy,” they like to tell us. I sometimes wonder why they bother pretending as though they have any interest in setting us free.

As steaming food is passed around the beech-hewn table, I see thirteen wrists and zero tattoos. We may be the black sheep, but obedience has been entrained in us since birth. I glimpse another wrist when Myra reaches for a slice of toast, and two more when Nicholas holds his coffee under his nose and breathes deeply.

After breakfast, I trot outside with the others like a good little sheep. Franklin’s wrists are the only ones I have not yet seen, as he is currently on another hunger strike and sat silently with his hands on his lap the entire meal. The staff ignored him, as they always do.

The Other Psychiatrist is waiting for us on the freshly mown green, somber expression firmly in place. “Welcome,” he says. “Let us sit.”

We seat ourselves in a lopsided circle. I make sure I end up across from Franklin, in hopes he might lift his wrists. I want to ask the Body whether it remembers which wrist it saw, but conversations with those not fully present are frowned upon in group therapy. I stare blankly at the talking stick as it makes its way around the circle. Franklin’s right wrist is blank when he reaches for it. He says nothing and passes it on, and I see that his left wrist is blank as well.

My mind churns, silencing Eleanore’s incessant blubbering. She cries frequently, though I have never listened closely enough to determine why. The Body died not long before I saw it, so it must have happened while I was having my individual therapy session with the Psychiatrist. I nearly write him off before I remember that he left for fifteen minutes towards the end, allegedly to use the restroom.

It cannot, however, have been the Other Psychiatrist, nor the three staff members accompanying him. They were modeling situations with Myra, Anastasia, Elizabeth, and Nicholas, and Anastasia always complains for at least two days if someone leaves during any therapy session she takes part in.

I pass the talking stick on without feeling it. “Now,” the Other Psychiatrist interrupts my thoughts, “the police would like to speak with you all. About the incident the other day. You don’t have to say anything you don’t want to, of course, and I’ll be sitting in to make sure you don’t get too stressed. If it ever gets too much, just let me know and we’ll stop the interview right away. Eleanore, you’re first. We’ll come get the rest of you when it’s time.”

The rest of us scatter like pigeons.

Staff Member Three finds me sitting on a bench in the garden, counting the petals on a gardenia blossom. “It’s time.”

Staff Member Three strides back to the main house without bothering to check if I am following. I debate staying seated just to spite him, but cannot summon the energy.

The police are set up in the Other Psychiatrist’s office. He does not seem pleased, but then, he never does. I settle on the creaky wooden chair he reserves for patients. On the other side of the shiny glass and steel contraption he calls a desk sits a police detective, black braids pulled back into a tight pony-tail, light grey suit jacket well-tailored to her narrow shoulders. The door opens and another detective enters, carrying a black folding chair. He sets it down behind the desk and sits carefully, as if uncertain it can hold his admittedly considerable bulk. He is nearly twice as tall as his partner, with the width to match.

“Hello,” the first detective introduces herself, and the interview becomes progressively less interesting from there.

“Did he mention feeling depressed?” they ask me.

I shake my head.

“Did he give away any possessions?”

Again, I shake my head. I do not look at the Body beside me.

They go down their checklist, and I can see the Body gesturing beside me, though thankfully it stays silent.

Finally, they release me. I tell Staff Member Two that I need fresh air and will take a sandwich with me in lieu of lunch.

The sun has already passed its midpoint when I step outside. I cannot help glancing at the spot as I pass it. They scrubbed the blood and brains away. I wish they could scrub the Body away too. The Body clears its throat beside me and I jolt. With a furtive glance around, I plunge back into the woods.

“I didn’t kill myself!” the Body protests the moment we are out of sight of the main house.

I keep walking.

“Why are they just assuming I killed myself?”

I shrug. “Maybe you did. The door was locked.”

The Body shakes its head. “First of all, locks don’t mean anything here, not when all the staff have key cards, and at least some of us lucky guests have sticky fingers. Second of all, you know exactly what I mean. Once you’ve been committed, people stop thinking of you as a person. They don’t even care that I’ve been murdered.”

My jaw clenches. “I have no idea what you mean.”

The Body waves its hands in agitation. “This isn’t just about me. This is about everyone who’s been shoved away here.”

I laugh. “Spare me your moralizing. I promised to find out why you were murdered, but I never said I would do anything about it. If you want justice, go find someone else. In fact, consider doing that anyway.”

“Don’t you care? This is about you, too!”

I meet the Body’s desperate, dark, dead stare. “This has nothing to do with me. All I want is for you and everyone else to finally leave me in peace.”

The Body bites its lip. “You can’t mean that.”

I speed up. “I most certainly can.”

“It was the right wrist,” the Body says.

We are back in my room, locked in for the night, so I write my reply in a notebook. *Are you sure?*

The Body nods. “I remember the hand now. Definitely wearing gloves, and the sleeve was grey.”

I try to remember who was wearing grey that day. *The Psychiatrist*, I write. *Staff Member Four. Staff Member Six.* I pause, regarding the list, and scrawl a thick black line under the first item,

The Body peeks over my shoulder. “Why’d you underline that? Do you know something?”

*No. I just really hate the bastard.* Then, *You are sure the sleeve was grey?*

“Yes,” the Body says. “It’s all I saw, because I was pushed from behind, but my memory is getting clearer. I’m starting to remember other things, too.”

*Anything relevant?* I write.

“Well, no, but—”

I raise a hand to cut it off, close my notebook, and go to bed.

The tinny ringing drills its way through my eardrums to rattle my brain. I groan and stumble out of the bed in search of the culprit. It sits on my desk, its small stature belying its ghastly shriek. I silence it with a slam. Behind me, the bed sings its siren song. It harmonizes well with the aching scream of being alive.

My therapy outfit taunts me from the sparsely hung closet bar. I grab it and shuffle into the bathroom. The Body follows me. I glare at it.

“Out,” I say.

The Body sighs mournfully and fades into the wall.

The shower scalds my skin and I pretend I can dissolve into it. My eyes drift closed. It feels suspiciously like peace. I sink down, letting the spray wash over me. The cool ceramic of the tub warms beneath me. My thoughts drift and fade.

“You’re late!”

I sit up with a small undignified screech.

The Body, much too comfortable with my recurrent nudity, repeats, “You’re late!”

I take a deep breath and gather my shattered thoughts. “What?”

The Body sighs. “You’re late to therapy. You need to go.”

“Why do you even care?” I ask.

“Because if they start thinking something’s up with you, they may start watching you more closely, and then how would you avenge me?”

I narrow my eyes. “I am not avenging you.”

The Body shrugs. “Call it what you will. You’ll get my justice.”

“What use is it to you? You are dead either way.”

“You’ll understand when you die.”

“Thank you, but I would rather not.”

The Body smiles sadly. “Wouldn’t we all. Now get dressed and go lie to a psychiatrist.”

The Psychiatrist smiles at me when I walk in. “How are you today?”

“Good,” I lie.

The Psychiatrist cannot resist a stereotype, and the only available sitting place is a garish silk couch. The orange paisley clashes with the dark green damask wallpaper. Sunlight shifts through gauzy curtains, twisting shadows over the ornate carvings of the Psychiatrist’s desk. If I had not already been unhinged when I came here, this room would certainly have done it.

“How was your morning?”

“Good,” I lie.

“Did you see anyone yet today?” I assume he means living persons.

“Yes.” Truth.

“Did you stop to talk?”

“Yes.” Lie.

“What did you talk about?”

“The weather.”

“That’s a good start. Maybe next time you can try talking about some of your shared interests.”

“That sounds good.” Lie.

“And how are you feeling about what you saw?”

I tilt my head and pretend to consider it. “I think I am coping well. A tragedy, of course, but death is part of life. And life must go on.”

The Psychiatrist nods somberly. “Well said. Well said.”

I am so full of shit.

I lose track of the lies after a while. They come easy now, so easy I barely notice them. Halfway through the session, I make the mistake of glancing at the Harvard degree hanging on the wall. The Psychiatrist catches my glance and begins one of his monologues. I nod along as if I am listening.

The Psychiatrist smiles when I leave. I think he knows I lie, but plays along so he can get rid of me. I wish he would just tell me and save us this painful dance. I wish I knew whether he murdered the body. What would he do if I asked?

I spend the rest of the day trying to get a glimpse of Staff Member Four's and Staff Member Six's right wrists, in vain. Their sleeves remain stubbornly tucked into their gloves. I think about jostling one to tug up a sleeve, but they would never let a patient get that close to them.

That night, as I settle into bed, notebook pointedly out of reach on my desk, the Body says, "You need to go to their houses."

I give the Body a look. It must be joking.

"I know you've snuck out before. To go Lakeside East." This is technically true. Leandres House sits on the west side of the lake. Lakeside East is a vacation town, which means it has a conveniently rotating population that is easy to blend into when you need a brief break. As long as we show up for meals and therapy and are in our rooms at bed time, the staff do not care what we do. It is not as though we can get very far. There is only one road that leads through the mountains out of Lakeside, which is easy enough to block off if anyone goes missing. On either side, the mountains are steep and treacherous. Leaving on foot would mean a fifty mile hike through the wilderness to the nearest town, assuming a perfect sense of direction. None of

us have been that desperate yet. Besides, we are not allowed our own money and are generally lacking in marketable skills, so what would we do once we left? I am not the only one who has snuck out to Lakeside East, but we all inevitably return to Leandres House.

I realize the Body is still talking. “Then you can shake their hands and check their wrists. There’s only two, so it shouldn’t be too hard, and if it’s not them, we know it’s him.”

I grumble and pull out my notebook. *They will recognize me.*

The Body snorts. “Do you really think so? They barely look at our faces. Goodwin’s Second Hand probably has at least one Spectral Wireless shirt and hat from someone who took a summer job there, and you know how they all always complain about their internet being down. Just, you know, tuck your hair into the hat and pull it down a little over your face. And make sure you’re back here by dinner.”

*I hate this plan,* I write.

“It’ll be fine,” the Body says. “I’ll get you the addresses.”

I glare at it and return the notebook to my desk.

Sneaking out is as simple as I remember. I hop onto the back of the now empty food delivery truck as it passes the bush I am crouched behind. It trundles along, oblivious, as I wrench up the handle and slip inside. I lower the handle into the closed position and hold the door from the inside and we glide out the gate.

The truck reaches the main road and picks up speed, and the door threatens to tug out of my grip. I tighten my hold on it. The drive to Lakeside East feels longer than it should, but finally I notice the trees thinning.

The truck slows down as it enters the town. I slip back out, close the door properly, and jump off into the grass next to the road, tucking into a roll. A lifetime hatred of social events has taught me how to make a graceful exit.

As always, Goodwin's smells of incense. The girl at the counter ignores me until I set the Spectral Wireless outfit on the desk.

She looks up and asks, "New here, too?"

I have in fact been in this very store five times. I grunt something that could vaguely be interpreted as, "Yes."

"Cool," the girl says. "That'll be seven dollars even."

I hand over the money, part of the waning pile of cash I gathered from unlocked vacation homes during my last visit to Lakeside East.

I go to Staff Member Four's house first. It has a perfectly maintained lawn and a white door and sits in a field of houses with identically trimmed lawns and styled doors.

The walkway is too exposed, and I feel the neighborhood watch tracking my every movement. I wore a plain black hoodie over my Spectral shirt, and I am beginning to regret it. The comfort is undercut by the suspicious eyes trying to decide what kind of deviant I am, and when would be the best time to call the police.

Ages later, I reach the door. The doorbell tinkles with disgusting cheer.

Found is a cupcake of a woman, all fluff and artificial sweetness. Seeing her house, I hate her even more. For a heartstopping moment, I think she recognizes me, but then her head tilts and she chimes, "How may I help you?"

I stick out my hand. She takes it, and I turn her hand slightly. Her wrist is bare. “Internet issues?” I grunt, hoping my voice sounds genuinely gruff.

“Oh, yes, I *am* having trouble. Now, aren’t you a sweetheart? Why don’t you come in?”

“No, no,” I say quickly, my voice dangerously high for a moment before I force it lower again. “We will send someone.”

I turn smartly on my heel, leaving with a certainty that she could murder someone and a lingering toothache.

Staff Member Six has tattoos covering her crossed arms completely. My mouth goes dry. I try to take a subtle deep breath. Six narrows her eyes suspiciously.

I grit my teeth and force myself to extend my hand. “Hello,” I croak.

“Who the fuck are you and why the fuck are you here?”

My hand hangs awkwardly between us. Why is she making this so difficult?

“I…” I begin. My mind runs in panicked circles. I grow dizzy.

She glares at me.

I take a deep breath, not caring about subtlety, and pretend I am in therapy.

“Hello,” I repeat. “I am here from your internet service provider. We have been having reports of service disruptions in the area. Have you been having any trouble?”

Her eyes relax a fraction, but her arms stay crossed. “Uh-huh.” Of course she has.

Her eyes narrow again. “You gonna do something about it?”

I nod and shift my face into what I hope is a customer service smile and not a pained grimace. “Yes, of course. That is why I am here.”

“Hm.” She scans me as if looking for weapons. I begin to wonder whether I should have brought some. “Okay, c’mon then.”

Finally, she uncrosses her arms. I prepare to sprint away at the sight of the wrist tattoo.

Her tattoos stop abruptly just below her elbows, and her wrists are entirely bare. She catches me looking. “What?”

“You do not have any wrist tattoos,” I say dumbly.

“What’s that any business of yours?”

My throat closes. It is not her. Which means that it can only be him.

I stare at her blankly. “I need to go,” I say.

The Body watches me pace my room.

“It’s him, isn’t it?” it asks.

I sink to the floor and cradle my head in my hands. I wanted it to be him, but the thought of sitting across from a murderer week after week after week twists my stomach into knots.

“We need evidence,” the Body says.

“How?” I whisper, not caring if someone hears me talking to myself through the too-thin walls.

I see the Body settle down beside me in my peripheral vision.

“You’ll have to search his office.”

I shake my head.

“You know he’s the type to keep a record, if doing something like this for someone. He wouldn’t risk taking the fall.”

I reach up for my notebook. *What if he keeps it at home?*

The Body considers. “I don’t think he would. He’s too much of a compartmentalist.”

*What if I get caught?* I ask.

“I’ll play lookout. You won’t get caught.”

We are not allowed internet access unsupervised, but technology like music players and cameras is available upon request. On Monday, I request a camera to photograph birds in the woods.

On Tuesday at breakfast, Staff Member Three hands me a simple digital camera. He does not look at me and I do not thank him.

The Psychiatrist takes Wednesdays off. After lunch, I circle back from the edge of the woods and slip in through the side door. The Body scouts ahead to avoid any accidental encounters. Once, I have to duck into a storage closet to let Staff Member Two pass, but the trip is otherwise uneventful. The sun shines bright and clear today, and patients and staff alike have seized the opportunity for warmth before the inevitable cold and dark of winter.

The door opens on well-oiled hinges, and closes with only a soft thud. My heart pounds as I approach the desk, disposable camera clutched to my chest. I reach out a tentative finger to trace the engraving and glance towards the closed door. The hall seems quiet.

I go to the file cabinet, then stop. The Psychiatrist has never, in all the time I have been here, accessed my paper file. He always takes notes on his computer. It whirs to life at the press of a button, and for a second I am convinced that the fan is impossibly loud, that surely everyone hears it. I take a shaky breath.

The computer prompts me for a password. I curse internally, realizing how poorly we thought this through. I am just about to give up on the computer and go search the file cabinet when the Psychiatrist's degree, hanging in its gilded frame on the wall beside his desk, catches my eye.

"Did you know the Latin word for Cambridge is Cantabrigia?" I remember him telling me during one of his monologues. "I've always liked that word. Cantabrigia. It sounds so dignified. In fact, it may be my favorite word." At the time, I doubt either of us noticed I was listening.

I hold my breath as I type it in. No numbers, first letter capitalized. I hit *Enter*:

*Wrong password*, the screen reads.

I grit my teeth. He would never besmirch his favorite word with improper capitalization or by replacing any of the letters. I press my fists against my forehead until finally a thought jostles loose. "Cantabrigia." The way he said it, with the finality of a period. "Dignified," he had called it.

*Cantabrigia*.

*Welcome*, the screen tells me. I grin shakily.

The desktop is organized fastidiously. Patient folders are sorted alphabetically by last name in tidy rows. There are only two other folder shortcuts: "Documents" and "Pictures."

I open "Pictures," because it is just like him to think that a clever hiding place for a document. The subfolders are named with month and year. I scroll back to the one for May of this year, when the Body came to Leandres House.

Most of the files are indeed pictures. Yachts and men drinking whisky feature predominantly. I filter for PDFs, which returns a single file. It is titled, "Insurance." No one could accuse the Psychiatrist of an overabundance of creativity.

I lift the camera.

*Click.*

I take two pictures, just to be sure. Then I close all the windows and power down the computer. At the door, I give the room one last look to make sure nothing is out of place. I peek out. The Body turns and tells me, "All clear."

Camera clutched in my sweaty palm, I sneak back outside and into the woods.

The Body and I huddle over the camera. I zoom in. The picture is of a contract.

*I, Elwood Cargill III, it reads, do hereby declare that I have, knowingly and of my own free will, engaged the services of Richard Deacon IV to, by any means necessary, subdue and discredit the individual known as Samuel Johnson, in exchange for a future favor of equal magnitude. Should these actions result in injury to or the death of Mr. Johnson, I hereby accept that I have instigated these events, knowing the potential consequences, and shall bear the full legal consequences for that action, should the situation arise.*

*I, Richard Deacon IV, do hereby declare that I have, knowingly and of my own free will, agreed to, by any means necessary, subdue and discredit the individual known as Samuel Johnson on the behalf of Elwood Cargill III, in exchange for a future favor of equal magnitude. Should these actions result in injury to or the death of Mr. Johnson, I hereby accept that I have committed these actions, knowing the potential consequences, and shall bear the full legal consequences for that action, should the situation arise.*

*There shall be three physical copies of this contract: Messrs. Cargill and Deacon shall each remain in possession of one copy. The third shall remain in a lockbox at the Bank of America located at 1414 Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is only to be released into the hands of an investigating official, in the event that any legal action is taken regarding these events.*

The contract is signed by Cargill and the Psychiatrist at the bottom, and dated in late April of this year.

The Body is shaking beside me.

“You have to bring this to the police,” it says.

I scoff. “And if they do not arrest him? I do not much enjoy life, but death seems the worse option by far.”

“Run. You’ve been planning on it, haven’t you? That’s why you have the cash, why you’ve been practicing sneaking out.”

I shake my head. “If it were easy, do you not think I would have done it already? I cannot steal a car without being caught, and the mountains are a death trap on foot.”

The Body kneels before me. “Please. I’ll guide you. I’ll make sure you get away safe. Leandres House needs to end. You need to bring it down.”

I look up towards the bits of sky between the trees. They look oddly blurry. “I am no crusader. And where would I even go? I have nothing if I leave here.”

The Body is standing again now, too close. “I’ll help you figure it out. It’ll be a fresh start. You deserve more than this.” It spreads its arms.

I jut out my jaw. “And if this is all I want?”

“It can’t be.”

I sniff. “It very well can.” I shove the camera into the pocket of my black hoodie and head back towards the buildings.

“Do it for me, then,” the Body pleads.

“I owe you nothing,” I say. “I never liked you when you were alive, and I will certainly not start liking you now.”

“You don’t like anyone.”

I keep my gaze resolutely on the path ahead. “So?”

“So that’s a lonely way to go through life.”

I stop and whirl to face the Body. “I am not lonely. And if I were, better lonely than betrayed. Because that is what happens when you like someone. They hurt you. And sometimes”—I take a step closer—“sometimes they kill you.”

Hurt flashes in the Body’s eyes. I turn away and march on in silence. When I pass the cobblestones below the window, I do not turn to look.

Evening becomes dawn again, and I am putting on my therapy outfit again and I have not gone to the police or in any other way attempted to resolve the issue. The Body has been absent since our spat in the woods.

I am sitting on the couch and I cannot stop looking at the spot where the Psychiatrist’s black sleeve meets blue nitrile glove. He is talking and I do not hear him. The carvings tear themselves free of the desk and race towards me.

My eyes dart away from the desk and up to a red light blinking in the corner and my stomach drops to my toes as I realize it belongs to a security camera. I try to remember whether it was there yesterday, my heart accelerating with each passing second.

I turn my gaze determinedly towards the Psychiatrist. If he had seen me breaking into his office, surely he would have said something already. Sweat trickles down my spine. I shift in my chair.

“I can always count on my old friends from Harvard,” the Psychiatrist is saying. “No matter how long it’s been since we’ve seen each other, I know they’ll always be there for me. Do you have any friends like that?”

I swallow thickly and croak, “No.”

The Psychiatrist shakes his head in mock sympathy. “That’s a real shame. Just the other week, I was talking to my good old friend Gill—we always called him Gill. You may know him, actually. He’s the Honorable Elwood Cargill now.”

Every muscle in my body tenses and I nearly sprint for the door.

“Anyways,” the Psychiatrist continues, apparently oblivious to my panic, “I was talking to Gill the other day, and he was saying how he’d love to make a donation to Leandres House. It would have to be anonymous, of course, but you won’t tell anyone, will you?” He chuckles.

“No,” I hear myself say faintly. My feet have turned towards the door. I grip the armrests to keep myself seated.

“Of course you won’t,” the Psychiatrist says. “But, see, my point is you should try to make some friends like that. You certainly have the time.”

I nod numbly.

The Psychiatrist grins in self-satisfaction. “Well, I think this was a good session. I think we really had some breakthroughs today.”

“Hm,” I agree, though it comes out strangled and sounds more like I am clearing my throat. I rise in slow motion. “Thanks,” I mutter, and slip out the door.

I drift up to my room like a ghost and collapse the moment my door closes behind me. I force myself to take deep breaths but it feels as if all the oxygen has been sucked out of the air. Every creak is the Psychiatrist coming up the stairs to kill me.

Eventually the panic fades into a low thrum of fear and I am able to peel myself off the floor and make my way to the desk, where the Body is waiting, has been waiting for some time.

*Will you still help me?* I write.

The Body grins. "Of course."

I scowl. *You are much too forgiving.*

The rest of the day crawls by. I force myself to eat lunch before I escape to the woods. I make it just out of sight before I lean my head against a tree and hyperventilate.

"It'll be okay," the Body says. "Just make it until the evening delivery comes, and then you'll be free."

My breath has finally slowed down enough that I can speak. "Sure, unless he kills me first," I snap.

"Deep breaths. He doesn't know yet. You can still escape."

I curse the Body's incorporeality, and wonder whether it might help my frustration to throw a punch at it regardless. "And what if he watches it now, and promptly kills me when I return? How will the grand escape work then?"

"If I go check what he's doing, will that make you feel better?"

"Maybe," I grumble.

The Body disappears and I am left alone to think how unprepared I am. If the Psychiatrist fails to kill me, the mountains will do the job, and if I somehow survive them, I will surely not survive living on my own.

The Body returns what feels like hours later, though it can only have been minutes.

“He’s in the staff room, reading a James Patterson book hidden in a James Joyce cover,” the Body reports. “Based on the pile of pistachio shells, he’s been there a while, and he didn’t look like he planned on going anywhere soon.”

I nod and push away from the tree, which seems to have imprinted its bark on my forehead. “I cannot stay here any longer. I need to prepare.”

I look around my room for the last time. I will miss the soft mattress and the gardens sprawled outside my window and even the ridiculous tub. As far as cages go, this one was nicely gilded.

I close the door behind me and walk carefully through the hall. The fading evening light pastes the shadows of the muntin bars in an even grid across the trite landscapes lining the opposite wall. With every step, the cash hidden beneath the soles of my shoes seems to rustle. The Body drifts beside me in perfect silence.

No one stops me as I walk out the front door, along the cobblestones, and into the woods. I walk until I reach the bush by the gates, and crouch down to wait. The camera’s SD card digs into my skin where it is duct taped to my inner thigh. The pain numbs at some point, and so does everything else. I do not feel the bumper beneath my feet when they land on it, nor the cold metal of the handle as my hand grasps it. My breathing is slow and even, my heartbeat strong and steady, as the delivery truck trundles through the gates. The moment we are out of range of

the security cameras, I am leaping into the grass and rolling to my feet again. My legs carry me swiftly into the cover of the trees.

I know every inch of the woods on the Leandres House grounds, but these woods, real and untamed, try again and again to lead me in circles. Night has fallen. The trees cast long shadows in the moonlight, and things rustle in the undergrowth. I shiver and tell myself it is from the cold.

The Body guides me, darting ahead to scout the path, soaring up to track our progress and orient us. I look to the sky, searching for Polaris. It gleams brightly on my left, and my steps grow more confident. I do not know whether I trust the Body, but the stars have never let me down.

The woods blur together in an endless pattern. Every ten steps, I glance up at Polaris. The tens pile up and the sky lightens again and still the woods do not end. A jolt of panic shoots through me and I stop to reach a hand down my pants and reassure myself that the SD is still taped to my inner thigh.

The Body realizes I have stopped and turns. “We’re close. Just a little bit further,” it says.

My aching muscles rumble to life mechanically. Somewhere in my numbness I failed to notice the dryness in my throat, but now it threatens to crack open. The blisters that have been forming and bursting on my feet all through the night flare to life with new intensity.

“I can see it,” the Body says. “We’re so close. Just keep walking, one foot in front of the other.”

*Easy for you to say*, I think, but I cannot muster the effort to push the words out of my mouth.

When we begin to see houses, I nearly collapse in relief, but that would almost certainly end in medical attention. My last dregs of adrenaline roar to life inside me, carrying me through the streets as the buildings grow closer and more varied, shops, restaurants, offices, and churches pushing out the houses.

And then, at last, a two-story brick building rising above its squat neighbors, beckoning me like a lighthouse in a storm. The library. I nearly cry when I read the sign.

“Do I look remotely reputable?” I ask the Body.

“No,” it replies.

I nod and run my fingers through my hair, likely accomplishing nothing, and walk up the concrete stairs to the library.

The smell of books wraps me in a warm embrace. I make my way to the computer terminal by the emergency exit. “Keep an eye on the door,” I mutter to the Body.

My hands shake as I slide the SD card in. I open a browser and create a throwaway email account, glancing nervously at the door as it loads.

*Look into the death at Leandres House*, I write after it finally does, *or it may not be the last*. I compress the photos and attach them. The mouse shakes as I bring it over to the blue button in the corner. I hold my breath as the email sends, then hold it some more as I wait for the email to bounce back. After five anxiously uneventful minutes, I log out.

A few clicks later, the printer whirs. I leave the library with the SD card clutched in my fist and the warm papers pressed against my chest.

The post office is conveniently near the library. Its bureaucratic gray-scale is a marked contrast from the library's warmth. I sacrifice a few precious dollars from my shoe for a large envelope and postage. I wonder whether the lady behind the counter would look any less bored if she knew what was in it.

My last stop is a pay phone. Lowering my voice to a near growl, I say, "The death at Leandres House was not a suicide. Evidence is arriving per email and post. Check the lockbox rented to Elwood Cargill and Richard Deacon at the Bank of America at 1414 Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge." I hang up before the dispatcher can reply.

The Body drifts down to me. "It's this way." Better than any GPS.

It is midday by now and the Greyhound station is bustling. I wait in line to buy a ticket from the sullen, bearded man behind the counter.

"Hey," the Body says once I have the ticket, and I very nearly turn to face it. "Why don't we get you something to eat and drink?" My stomach and throat cry out at the reminder. I let the Body lead me to a vending machine, and buy very nearly everything in it. Arms overflowing with my plunder, I stumble over to the nearest bench and collapse. A woman glances at me as she walks by, and whatever she sees widens the berth she gives me.

Ignoring her, I crack open a bottle of water and chug.

"Slow down," chides the Body. I stop drinking to glare at it, but do take my next sip more slowly.

In the hour I wait for the bus, I demolish most of the snacks and drinks. I am finally forced to brave the bathroom, and I nearly scream as my shoes rub against raw flesh with every

step. I nearly scream again as I catch sight of myself in the mirror. With much effort and water, I undo the worst of the aesthetic damage done by the woods. My feet I give up as a lost cause until I can make it to a drug store.

My head rattles against the cold window. The dark fields outside are endless. This is my third bus. I chanced a trip to a drug store after the first, and the pain in my feet is now a dull ache. A double plastic bag filled with colorfully-packaged, food-adjacent objects sits on the seat beside me. Superimposed over it, the Body snores beside me.

I am at a twenty-four hour diner, sipping on my third coffee refill as I idly gaze at the news report playing on the cracked TV in the corner. I nearly spit out my coffee when the Psychiatrist's face appears on the screen. He looks angry in his mugshot. I turn to see the Body grinning at me.