EMILY LLOYD-JONES

AUGUSTA PINE DOES NOT EXIST

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

www.penguin.co.uk www.puffin.co.uk www.ladybird.co.uk

Penguin Random House UK

First published in the USA by Balzer + Bray, an imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC, and in Great Britain by Penguin Books 2026

001

Copyright © Emily Lloyd-Jones, 2026

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.
Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Designed by Michelle Gengaro-Kokmen
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–77241–6

All correspondence to:
Penguin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

MIX
Paper
FSC® C018179
FSC
www.fsc.org

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

To Diana. Love you, sis.

This is how you kill someone.

You don't need a gun or a knife. You don't even need to want it. All it takes is one bad decision.

I was fifteen when I became a murderer.

There was a boy. A beautiful boy. He had a way of looking at things—like the world brimmed with unseen wonder. And if he couldn't find the beauty, he would make it. His nail beds were smudged with charcoal from art class. In sketchbooks, he captured the softness of apple blossoms, the forest of shadows cast by classroom desks when morning sunlight poured through the windows, and the outlines of students carrying transparent umbrellas in the rain. One time, I caught him drawing me—and I barely recognized myself. The curve of my lips held a thousand secrets and my sweep of brown hair seemed artistic instead of unruly. He came to school in a small red car, bought by his parents so he wouldn't have to rely on buses. The car's autopilot was programmed for school and home and nothing else.

I was nothing like him. My knees jounced with unspent energy, my fingers playing with a cheap smart-ring I'd managed to buy secondhand. I wrote computer code in the air, my fingers tracing invisible hacks. I did not create

beautiful things—I picked apart existing programs, finding back doors and slipping inside like a thief in the night. I took what I wanted.

And I wanted that boy.

He wanted a day off from school.

The wanting was our undoing.

Because when I hacked his car's navigation system, I accidentally turned off the program that made us visible to the other driverless cars. I sat in the driver's seat, using my smart-ring to upload the hack. And then I set the autopilot to take us across the city to a local zoo. We laughed at our own cleverness as we zoomed away from school and onto a bridge. The sun shone through golden dust motes, and the thrum of music rattled through the seats. It was a moment of triumph, of freedom.

The difference between murder and manslaughter is intent—but that doesn't matter to the victims.

Let me tell you what does matter: velocity and momentum. Rubber and steel. An SUV trying to merge into a lane that its sensors said was empty. The railing of a bridge, crumpled outward as the boy's red car was pushed over the edge and into the water below.

I remember the world jerking sideways. I felt my neck snap to one side, fire in my spine. And then there was nothing but weightlessness. Adrenaline surged through my body, sharpened every sense and pulled time to a standstill.

We spent an eternity in free fall.

Hitting the water below was like slamming into concrete. The car crumpled inward, the steering wheel crushing most of my heart.

I was conscious for only a handful of moments. But it was long enough to see the spiderweb of cracks in the windshield, the lights in the dashboard winking out, and the spatter of blood across the ceiling. It was long enough to know. To understand. To feel that bone-deep wrench of guilt. *No no no no, oh please no, let me go back, just five seconds, let me fix this, let me not have—*

When death took me, I welcomed it.

And then it spat me back out again.

I awoke in an unfamiliar place, in an unfamiliar body, to an unfamiliar man sitting at my bedside. He had dark hair, a light complexion, and eyes that could have been gray or green. He wore a crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a suit jacket draped over the back of his chair. A tattoo of golden clocks was etched into his left arm and a holographic chessboard sat before him. When he saw me awaken, he flicked the chessboard away and leaned closer. The harsh hospital light illuminated the delicate lines at the corners of his eyes.

Countless wires and tubes connected me to machines. To my bleary eyes, they looked like threads tying me to this new reality.

I was a tapestry still on the loom—something yet unfinished.

I licked my dry lips. "W-who are you? Where's my family?"

The man said, "You aren't going to know my name, but you may call me Prefect."

I stared at him blankly, uncomprehending.

He said, "When you hacked that car, you overrode the

identity of the owner and hijacked the vehicle's autopilot. A federal felony, these days. The passenger also died—which leaves you on the hook for felony murder."

A howl of unspoken grief welled up in my chest. Perhaps it would have eased the pain to scream, to wrench myself from the bed and claw at the floor. I wanted to close my eyes; I wanted to be away from all of this. To pretend that I hadn't done something unforgivable. I wanted to go back to that morning, to return to the girl who'd offered to help a boy skip school.

I'd killed him. He was gone because of me.

And in that moment, I despised myself with an intensity I hadn't known was possible.

"Why are you here?" I rasped out. Even my voice sounded unfamiliar. Later, I would learn I'd been intubated for the better part of a week.

"Because it was a very good hack," said Prefect. "Exploiting a security flaw in the sound system and then uploading a fake update? Quite creative."

"I killed someone," I said flatly.

"I never said it was perfect," he replied.

Prefect reached into his pocket and withdrew two square slips of plastic. The harsh light gleamed on silver ink. They were tattoo templates, I realized. For biometric identity tattoos. The electron-ink was special—powered by one's pulse and rigidly controlled by the government to prevent identity theft.

"Your heart stopped in the ambulance," said Prefect. "Your rescuers performed CPR on you most of the way to the hospital. Your tattoo went dark."

I looked down at my left hand. Sure enough, the skin was . . . empty. It looked strange without the barcode of silver lines. I'd been inked since elementary school. "So?" I said.

"You get a choice," said Prefect. He held up his right hand, gesturing with the first plastic square. "This is you. Your name, your social security number, your school records, your vaccinations, your family history. You choose this square and you'll be reinked. I'll leave and your family will be brought in. Then, you'll be arrested. You'll go through arraignment, a trial, or a decent plea deal if your family can afford better than Lawyerbot." He cleared his throat. "But make no mistake—you are guilty. And in this state, you're old enough to be tried as an adult. You'll get twenty years at the minimum."

I blinked slowly, fighting through the haze of drugs and pain. "Not really hearing a choice yet."

He gave the second square a flick with his left hand. "This is a different name. A different life. If you take it, your family will be informed that you are dead. You will have absolutely no contact with them. You cannot say goodbye. And then you will come and work for me."

I tilted my head, trying to get a better look at him. "You're offering me a job?"

"Not a job," he said. "More like . . . accelerated community service. Ten years of it."

Even at fifteen, I wasn't wholly ignorant of the world. One didn't recruit criminals to sell cookies. "I'll be doing bad things, won't I?"

"Not bad," said Prefect. "Morally questionable, perhaps."

"Dangerous?"

"Undoubtedly."

I snorted—and a flare of agony went through my throat. Everything about me felt raw as an exposed nerve.

"You'll be working for the Identity Security Division," he said. "We investigate identity theft, fraud, and other assorted crimes. We hunt criminals with criminals. Sometimes we walk the line of legality. If you ever get caught, we'll disavow any knowledge of you."

This could not be happening. Some childish part of me wanted to roll over, to pull the pillow over my head and wait for my mom to wake me in the morning.

"So it's twenty years in prison or ten years with you?" I said. "That's not much of a choice."

Prefect leaned forward. There was a fierce intensity to his eyes, even as his voice was carefully uninflected. "I'm offering you something that a court and a judge and a prison sentence can't."

I made no effort to hide my skepticism. "And what's that?"

The corners of Prefect's mouth curved into a thin smile.

"A second chance."

ACCESSING ARCHIVE
[LOADING FILES]
.
.
.
.
.
FILE RETRIEVED

IDENTITY SECURITY DIVISION

WRAITH CASE STUDY: AUGUSTA PINE

INTRODUCTION

Humanity has always needed ghosts.

Ghosts have been many things—a reflection of the living, a condemnation of our sins, a hope that our loved ones are still with us. We need ghosts for comfort, for stories, for thrills.

But what most people don't realize is that we need them for national security.

Ghosts—or wraiths, as we call them—are invaluable to our efforts at the Identity Security Division. In our society of constant surveillance, we require assets and informants to be able to move among the populace without leaving a trace. That is why we recruit from felons who are presumed dead.

In this review, we will examine the actions of Asset 1191809—hereafter referred to as "Augusta Pine." She is the only minor to ever be brought in as a wraith, and I have been in charge of monitoring her progress.

This case study contains details on the Portland Hostage Crisis,[1] as well as several other confidential mission debriefings.[2] I have been asked to write this

1. Or as some are calling it, "the Pine-cident."
2. For details on the Wraith Slayer Crisis, please see case number [redacted].

to determine the risks and rewards of recruiting an underage wraith—and whether ISD would be likely to do so again in the future.

Because ghosts can come back to haunt us.

1

The problem with being dead is that no one forwards your mail.

I only check my email in coffee shops. This shop isn't busy, but the barista looks relieved when I order decaf coffee instead of their advertised ombre milkshakes. According to the holographic menu, the milkshakes change color corresponding to the drinker's personality. Two young girls occupy a nearby table, holding milkshakes in transparent to-go cups. One girl checks a chart, trying to decipher what her drink says about her life. The other sips from her straw and grimaces in distaste.

"What is that flavor?" she asks, scrunching her nose. She must be about eleven.

"It's supposed to be a mystery." The other girl traces a finger down her chart. "How does it change color, you think?"

"Heat-activated dyes," I reply before I can help myself. The two girls look at me, then at their milkshakes. Sure enough, the warmth of their fingers has made the dyes shift in hue. Depending on how hot or cold a person runs, their milkshake can remain a muted violet or bloom into

hot pink. The drinks remind me of those old vintage mood rings from the twentieth century.

That's the thing about people—we cannot move through the world and leave it unchanged. No matter how much we want to.

I'm not a caffeine enthusiast, but coffee shops are great for hiding one's IP address. If anyone tries to trace my activities, they will be led here. And A Whole Latte Fun's security cameras are broken, the two employees look tired, and the only online security is a lock to keep customers from streaming adult websites.

I have no interest in porn. Rather, I'm hacking the email of an eighty-five-year-old woman.

Okay, that sounds worse than it is. You can't call it "hacking" when the password is my grandmother's birthday and her childhood nickname.

"Come on, Nonna," I murmur. "At least make this difficult."

The inbox appears in the air before me, projected onto the opaque glass of my visor. Only I can see it. There was once a time when people tried to obscure screens with cupped fingers. Thankfully, we've moved beyond that. A smart-ring on my right middle finger allows me to control my visor's augmented reality.

My gaze sweeps across the coffee shop to make sure no one is watching me. At six in the evening, the place isn't busy. To my left are two college boys wearing university sweatshirts. They've finished their coffees and a forgotten vanilla-glazed doughnut and glass of water sit on their

table. A mom with two kids hanging from her legs orders a triple espresso, holding out her hand so the barista can scan her tattoo for payment. No one is watching me, and I turn my attention to the inbox.

With a flick of my fingers, I scroll through Nonna's emails. There are the usual reminders for doctor's appointments, the correspondence with her book club, and a glut of spam that has slithered past her filters.

I delete the spam for her. There are at least two scams in there—a sketchy address posing as a bank and another promising a brand-new business opportunity that just needs a credit card and—

All it takes is a swipe of my fingers to copy down those email addresses and save them to a folder in my visor. I'll pass them off to Prefect later.

Once I've read through Nonna's emails—*don't judge me, the most private thing was her complaining about how her robot vacuum keeps getting stuck under her dining room chairs*—I scroll down to a familiar folder. It was set up three years ago. The contents are forwarded from a different email. A dead person's.

Mine.

When someone dies, digital ghosts linger. Social media accounts have to be shut down, newsletters unsubscribed from, DMs and inboxes cleared out. To spare my parents additional grief, my grandmother offered to have my emails forwarded to her. And like a masochist, I check them every time I hack into Nonna's inbox.

Mostly because my sisters still email me.

At first, I wondered why they did it. Emailing a dead person seems rather morbid. From what I can figure out, it started as a therapy exercise. But over the years, it transformed into something like a diary entry. It was my sisters' way of talking to themselves while pretending to talk to me.

I suspect neither of my siblings knows Nonna gets those emails. Otherwise they'd leave out all the details of when they sneak out of the house for parties and various romantic meetups. Knowing Nonna, she is greatly amused.

I don't dare log in to my own email account. The Identity Security Division would see that. But using various coffee shops to hack into Nonna's account is *just* anonymous enough to fly under the radar. She isn't technically bound to me by blood or paperwork. Nonna was my grandfather's second love—and while they were together for thirty years, they never married.

This inbox is my one point of connection with my loved ones. The stray thread that links me to my old life. And I can't bear to cut it.

I open the folder and see a bolded, new message at the top. My youngest sister emailed a week ago and Nonna has yet to read it.

I flick the email open.

Hey.

I took my driver's test last week. Passed, even if I was shaking the whole time.

Wanted to make you proud.

I miss you.

I can almost hear my sister's voice in every word. She was twelve when I last saw her, with a wide smile and a wicked sense of humor. We declared the attic sovereign territory and waged war on our older sister—who responded by stealing our bras and tossing them onto the roof.

When I think of home, that is what I remember best—me and my sisters, snarling at one another and loving in equal turns, full of fondness and resentment and small joys. We weren't perfect, but the more time I spend away from them, the more I only remember the good things. Like sea glass—all the sharp edges are gone from my memories, leaving only soft beauty.

I click out of the email, marking it as unread so that Nonna won't know anyone accessed it. Then I close the anonymous browser and flick my fingers so that my ringware goes to sleep. The screen blinks away, leaving behind only the coffee shop.

A tide of loneliness sweeps in, so cold and abrupt that my breath catches.

Looking into my family is like picking at a scab. I know it isn't healthy in the long run. But I can't *not* do it. Every few months, I find my fingers itchy with the urge to type in the familiar names. But I have to be careful—if I look too often, it'll become suspicious.

As I sit, haunted by my sister's words, I hear the guys at the next table talking. One of them is gesticulating with his empty cup. His voice rises in anger. "—Dumped me. After everything."

"I know," says the second college boy. "It sucks."

"She was supposed to stay here," says the first boy, frustration simmering in his voice, "after she graduated. She could've gone to vet school in Oregon. But no, there's a better program in Montana. Who the hell goes to Montana?"

"You've still got pictures of her, right?" says the second boy, smirking.

The first boy, the dumpee, snorts. "Not those kind. Nettie wouldn't send them."

"Doesn't matter." The second boy gently taps his smartring against the table. "I've got a deepfake app. Trust me, if you've got a picture of her face you've got any video you want. You can make a burner account, post it, and tag her school. See if Montana wants her after that."

The dumpee laughs.

"Here," says the second boy, pulling the ringware from his finger and setting it on the table.

A cold tendril of anger curls around my stomach. I know exactly what videos two college-aged boys will make with a deepfake app. But while revenge porn is illegal, it isn't my job to track down offenders. I should ignore them. I should go on my way. My whole life is made up of "shoulds."

There are three things you need to know about me.

First, my name isn't Augusta Pine.

Second, I am a criminal.

Third, I work for the Identity Security Division, so all my criminal activity is sanctioned.

Well. Most of it.

The first boy, the dumpee, has brown hair, high cheekbones, and a face that will buy him a lot of forgiveness. His sleeves are half rolled up to his forearms, revealing part of an elaborate tattoo. Lines of red and black swirl across his hand and forearm. It is one of the fancy custom jobs—probably keyed to some expensive car and Daddy's bank account. Some people pay for private mods to their electron-ink identity tattoos. It's expensive and time-consuming, but no one ever said that status symbols were logical.

My visor is capable of scanning electron-ink, so I can glance at a person's tattoo and bring up their name, age, home address, and if they have any outstanding warrants. But I can't get a good look at his hand, not without drawing attention, so I'll have to get creative.

I flick my fingers, bringing my visor to life. Then I subtly snap a picture and upload it to a facial recognition program in the ISD database. If Prefect asks—and he will—I'll tell him that I stopped a crime in progress. Which is technically true.

It takes only twelve seconds for the program to find the dumpee. Everyone's faces are in the system, whether it's through a traffic cam or one of those apps that turns your face into art. Information is power, which is why the government hoards so much of it.

Several social media accounts pop up—Justin McBride. College sophomore. And tagged in several of his pictures is a pretty girl with a dimply smile and beautiful vintage jackets. It's Nettie, the would-be vet headed to Montana.

I click over to her profile. Nettie has less than a thousand followers. Most of her pictures feature her and the wildlife rehabilitation place she's interning at.

She looks nice. And wholly unprepared to deal with the havoc these two boys plan to wreak on her life.

I exhale. Then I pick up my coffee cup and walk to the college boys' table.

I plop down in the empty chair. Both boys gape at me. I'm nearly their age, having turned eighteen a month ago. I know what I look like: striking, but with the feral edge of a stray cat. I am all sharp edges and lean muscle. The smart-dye in my hair is programmed to an inky black and my lipstick is the color of dried blood. When I look in mirrors, I am always reminded that even my body was sculpted and rebuilt according to another's design.

But my mouth is still my own.

"Hi," I say. Without hesitating, I reach out and pick up their forgotten doughnut.

"Hey," says the second boy, startled.

I take a bite. Vanilla-glazed isn't my favorite—honestly, who *likes* vanilla—but I take my time chewing and swallowing. This isn't about food; it is about establishing who has the power here.

"Do we know you?" asks Justin.

I use the doughnut to point at him. "No, but I know you, Mr. McBride."

Justin's expression shifts between wary and flattered. "Are you in Econ?"

"No," I reply, and then I finish the doughnut in three doughy bites.

The second boy picks up my coffee cup, turning it so that my name and drink order are visible. "Agatha," he says.

"Only friends get to call me 'Agatha,'" I say cheerily. "And you two are definitely not friends."

The second boy's ringware sits on the table. I snatch it up. Justin jerks in surprise, reaching to take the ring from me. "Hey!"

I walk the ring back and forth through my fingers. It's a little trick I learned when I was a kid and into stage magic.

"Post a single video of Nettie," I say, "and I will forward every dick pic you've ever taken to your parents, to your grandparents, and to your school. I don't care what passwords you've used—I will crack them."

All the blood drains from his face.

"And you," I say to the other boy. "I don't think you can be trusted with this." I twirl the ring between my fingers. "Good boys don't download deepfake apps."

Defiance flashes across his face. "What are you going to do about it?"

Smart-ring computers aren't advanced. They're meant for connecting to other technology. But the one thing rings have going for them is durability. They can survive being struck, doused in water, and dropped from high ledges.

But every piece of tech has its weakness. "Activate repair mode Rho-Zero-Nine," I say.

I'm not supposed to know that code phrase. But I did a job a few weeks back that involved the company's CEO,

a lost smart-ring, and a cloned Chihuahua. If I were a better person, I would have mentioned that they should've patched this little flaw. But on the other hand . . . I like having backdoor access.

The ring beeps quietly, and its metal slides apart to expose the mechanics within. Red light glows softly from the interior.

I drop the ring into my cup of coffee.

Liquid can always kill an open smart-ring.

"You can't do that!" says the second boy, sounding appalled.

"I can," I say. "I just did. And when you buy a replacement, you won't download that app again."

"Why won't I?" he asks, sneering.

I reach up and touch a finger to the side of my visor, turning the opaque screen transparent. The thin strip of glass covers both of my eyes, obscuring my identity. I am supposed to move through the world without leaving a trace. But I want these boys to remember me.

For my eighteenth birthday, I gave myself a gift: two small black tattoos. On my left forearm is a set of old-fashioned scales. And on my right is a sword.

Justice may not exist, but I certainly do.

"Because you wouldn't be the first life I ruined," I say.

I am a wraith—a creature of wires and ink, of rumor and shadow. I can do worse than kill them; I can tear at the foundations of their lives with a few taps on a keyboard.

I am the most dangerous person they will ever meet.

And I want them to know it.

Justin and his friend are utterly still, terror written in every line of their faces.

"Good," I say, rising from my seat. "Glad we had this talk."

2

Let's back up for a second.

A couple decades ago, there was rampant identity theft. Conventional measures—passwords, two-factor identification, security questions—couldn't deal with it. People wouldn't pick up phone calls because there was a nine out of ten chance it would be a recording saying that "*your social security number has been compromised, so please input your credit card . . .*"

With voice-cloning apps, deepfake generators, and tech-savvy criminals, the scampocalypse began. It drained bank accounts, ruined lives, disrupted elections, and overwhelmed law enforcement. Celebrities hired entire legal teams to issue takedowns of deepfake porn—only for those same videos to reappear in a few hours. Phone companies scrambled to filter scam calls with little success. A bank attempted three-factor identification.

And then the vice president's car was hijacked using a counterfeit recording of his voice.

After that, an inventor had an idea. What if we put our ID in a place that couldn't be hacked or stolen?

Under our very skin.

Enter the era of electron-ink tattoos. Instead of fumbling

around in a purse or wallet for a plastic ID card, you could just scan the back of your hand. The tech itself was powered through the tiny electronic pulses of a heartbeat—so if someone tried to remove the tattoo through gruesome means, it would go dark, the information gone. The tattoos couldn't be duplicated, as the ink was strictly regulated. Most DMVs quickly created a room for tattoo application, once the demand roared to life.

It took less than a decade for the technology to become ubiquitous.

I was first inked when I was six years old.

What I remember most was the smell: burning metal and diluted bleach. A whisper of cold cotton across the back of my hand. It was the bare essentials: my identity, my school, and my home address.

The process was quick—there were machines built to administer basic biometric tattoos with as little discomfort as possible. Pain flared in my hand, and I squeezed my eyes shut, burying my face in my mother's shoulder. Afterward, we went for ice cream and the taste of strawberries banished the bee-sting discomfort that still hummed beneath the bandage. I wasn't allowed to soak in the bath for a few weeks, to let the ink and nanotechnology fully set up.

There are still some holdouts. Tinfoil hat–wearing anti-technology cults, religious organizations, and a few people who prefer the paper and plastic of old ID cards. But these days, most people use tattoos. And for more than just identity protection. While the government-controlled electron-ink is the only one used for ID and social security, private

companies sell mods that will do almost anything: control your phone, lock your car, monitor your house, access your credit cards, check your body temperature, or even change the channel on your TV.

And for the most part, these new technologies work. Since the government began using electron-ink for their IDs, the number of frauds and impersonations dropped.

In a world where identities are written in flesh and blood, it's harder to slip between the cracks.

But not impossible.

And thus, the Identity Security Division was born. It was given autonomy and funds to track down identity fraud—and on paper, it's a boring office brimming with agents that couldn't get jobs at a more exciting alphabet agency.

But the ISD is far, far more dangerous than most people know.

Because they don't just track identities.

They create them.

Wraiths.

The government still needs people in the shadows: undercover agents, informants, spies. People with identities that could be tailored for every mission, people no one would look for, people who had skills that would let them ghost through the world. And if they were caught, the government needed plausible deniability.

Wraiths are a rumor, an unconfirmed conspiracy. They are the unseen heroes, the ghosts in the machine. They are people who died just long enough for their biometric tattoos to deactivate. Then they are used for black ops, for undercover work, etc.

You would think most wraiths are highly trained soldiers, former military and intelligence operatives.

The truth is a little more frightening.

Wraiths are criminals.

Rather than serving our sentences in prison, wraiths are given a handler, a few months' training, and then we are tossed out into the field. If we serve our given term, our slate is wiped clean and we are sent back into the world with a new identity for a second chance.

And if we die on a mission—no one misses us.

PHONE CALL TRANSCRIPT

SIXTEEN HOURS BEFORE THE PORTLAND HOSTAGE CRISIS

CALL INITIATED 8:04 P.M. PST

AUGUSTA PINE
Okay, just tell me. What's the job?

PREFECT
What job?

AUGUSTA PINE
The job you sent me to Portland for.

PREFECT
The hijacking wasn't enough for you?

AUGUSTA PINE
That was on the way here. Now, what's in Portland?

PREFECT
Beer, counterculture, and gentrification, I believe.

AUGUSTA PINE
So you're saying there's no job?

PREFECT
You were supposed to stay in San Francisco with me, but after the last . . . incident, I deemed it best to keep you out of sight of the local constabularies.

AUGUSTA PINE
I saved a life.

PREFECT
You went rogue. And caused a scene.

AUGUSTA PINE
Isn't "vigilante" literally part of ISD's motto?

PREFECT
"Semper vigilantes" means "Always watching." It isn't Latin for "nearly murder our target."

AUGUSTA PINE
That's so much worse, you do get that, right? And our target lived, so you can still blackmail him.

PREFECT
We are a federal agency. We do not blackmail people.

AUGUSTA PINE
I'm sorry, my mistake, I forgot your overlords were watching. [Clearing throat] You can inform him of the charges that will be leveraged against him, then offer him a plea deal in exchange for all the schematics that he stole and then put him to work creating weapons for our side.

PREFECT
You've become cynical, Augusta.

AUGUSTA PINE
I learned from the best. Now, what's the job in Portland?

PREFECT
Your job is to stay quiet and safe and not set anything on fire. I'm flying up on Monday.

AUGUSTA PINE
So I'm like a piece of luggage you sent ahead.

PREFECT
Luggage doesn’t give me migraines. Did you check in to the address I sent you?

AUGUSTA PINE
You mean the sketchiest motel in the history of sketchy motels?

PREFECT
It’s not that bad.

AUGUSTA PINE
There’s a dead raccoon in the bathtub. I’m assuming it crawled in through the window that someone helpfully left open. Presumably to air out the smell of mold. And I can’t even complain to the front desk because it’s a smart motel.

PREFECT
Then get one of the robo-vacuums to remove your deceased roommate.

AUGUSTA PINE
I found a different place. Short-term rental. I’ll even use my sad excuse for a stipend to pay for it.

PREFECT
It’s only three days.

AUGUSTA PINE
Come on. I was stuck on that bus for, like, twenty-five hours. And there are blackouts scheduled this weekend. The moment the power goes out, I'll be trapped in an AC-less motel room with a dead raccoon quietly baking in the bathtub. Even I don't deserve that.

PREFECT
And this place you found is so much better?

AUGUSTA PINE
It has a pool.

PREFECT
You don't swim.

AUGUSTA PINE
Yeah but I really like that chlorine smell.

PREFECT
[Audible sigh]

AUGUSTA PINE
I'm eighteen now. Technically you don't have to babysit me anymore. Other handlers don't babysit their wraiths.

PREFECT
You're a walking liability.

AUGUSTA PINE
I know, that’s what you put in my birthday card last month.

PREFECT
Fine. Send me the address.

AUGUSTA PINE
Don’t pretend you aren’t looking at my tracker. You know exactly where I am.

[CALL ENDED]

3

At night, the city of Portland glows.

The sidewalks are lined with soft lights. They're solar-powered for the rolling blackouts, so when the city goes dark, its paths are traced with illumination. It's for pedestrian safety, but it gives the city a radiant beauty. Even in the dark, one can find their way.

On this sweltering August evening, the streets are wide awake. A night market has sprung up near the waterfront; a live jazz band has set up on a patch of grass; the smells of roasted meat waft from a nearby food truck; cyclists gracefully swerve through crowds of pedestrians.

I amble along the waterfront toward my apartment rental. The Waterfront Jewel looks out over the Willamette, promises its occupants all the latest in smart home technology, and has an indoor pool. According to its website, the building used to be a hotel until it was repurposed into housing. A weekend there will cost months of my stipend, but it's worth it. Not for the air-conditioning or the pool.

But because my grandmother lives there.

I won't talk to her. I *can't* talk to her. Wraiths aren't allowed any contact with people from their former lives. I knew a middle-aged man who would walk by his family

restaurant just to catch a glimpse of his kids. That was until one of them caught a glimpse right back. I never saw that man again.

Even when a wraith's term of service is up, they aren't returned to their former life. Instead, they get a fresh start elsewhere—with a new name, a new backstory, and enough relevant job history that they'll find work.

My deal with Prefect is one of a kind. Not only am I the singular teenage wraith, but I've been promised that I will get to return home. I'm sure it'll be expensive and complicated—a body "misidentified" as me, amnesia or another flimsy excuse, and I'll have to spend the rest of my days lying to my family about what I was doing for the last decade. But still—I'll get to be with them again.

So long as my ISD deal doesn't go sideways.

This is a risk—such a dangerous risk. But I tell myself that it's a calculated one. Nonna will never see me. Prefect is in another city, cleaning up the fallout from our last job together. By the time he arrives in Portland, I'll have checked out.

This is how clever people become criminals. We can rationalize almost anything.

I stroll up to the front doors and hold out my left hand, electron-ink tattoo angled toward the door sensors. They're locked to nonresidents.

My electron-ink tattoo is pretty standard: a series of silvery lines.

The lock recognizes me as a temporary resident and swings open with slow, jerky little movements. I step inside and the cool air is blissful against my sweaty face.

The building's origins as a hotel are obvious: The lobby is laid out in a pretty, minimalistic style, with benches cut from faux marble, an indoor pool taking up a swath of the large room, and a small army of three-foot-tall potted succulents scattered throughout. There is a desk that must have once been the concierge station, but now it holds building announcements, a holographic resident board, and a security guard. The guard's gaze flicks over me. I can almost see the moment he categorizes me as a non-threat.

I dress in dark clothing that is easy to move in and covers my scars. Like many of my generation, I wear an opaque visor. It looks like a smooth strip of glass and metal covering my eyes, with a slight indentation for my nose. Most people use visors for augmented reality—entertainment, subtitles, maps, and cheat codes for tests. Mine is programmed for facial recognition, magnification, video and audio recordings, and will scramble any video feed of my face.

I nod at the guard and he nods back.

Most people overlook teenage girls.

It's their mistake.

The elevators are tucked away in an alcove behind the pool area. Normally, I would use the stairs—once you've been in one hacked elevator, it makes you a little paranoid—but my shoulders and legs ache after my last job.

Nonna's apartment is 309. Mine is 310. Several of these are short-term rentals, for businesspeople and vacationers wanting to be close to downtown Portland. I remember seeing an email in Nonna's inbox where she complained to

a neighbor about the party people who invade the building during holidays.

All right, so maybe I am a bit of a stalker.

As I stride from the elevator, to my left are all the apartments. On my right is the open-air center of the building. If I leaned on the glass railing, I could gaze down at the lobby and pool below. At the thought, my stomach gives an uncomfortable lurch.

The apartment doors are unremarkable. The difference between Nonna's door and the rest is that hers has an old-fashioned doorknob and lock, while the others have flat tattoo sensors. Nonna is infamous in my family for refusing smart upgrades.

I dangle my hand in front of 310's door sensor and light dances across the back of my knuckles.

The sensor reads my name and life story in the silver whorls of ink. All of it is untrue.

I wear my best lies beneath my skin.

The sensor blinks green and the door glides open, revealing my home for the weekend.

There is a balcony overlooking the river, a sliding glass door that appears freshly polished, a small kitchen, and a living room furnished with sturdy Swedish furniture. It looks like any other short-term rental.

"Good evening," the apartment's virtual assistant says in a feminine voice. The sound emanates from a small, circular machine resting on a high shelf in the corner.

When virtual assistants went mainstream, companies gave them cutesy, feminine names like Alexa and Siri. Now,

most people just call them VAs. This VA looks like a standard model: hooked up to the internet, capable of answering basic questions and controlling everything in the apartment with a simple voice command. More advanced VAs can do anything from keeping track of home finances to noting how often someone uses the toilet—and analyzing its contents for nutritional recommendations.

Computers know everything we do; we traded privacy for convenience decades ago. And as a hacker, I am keenly aware of how easily that data can be accessed. That's why I own an unsmart watch, keep my location data off my ringware, and wear a visor that confuses facial recognition.

"How would you like to be addressed?" asks the VA.

"I wouldn't," I say, dropping my backpack on the couch.

"Welcome to unit 310, I Wouldn't," says the VA cheerfully. "Please be aware that this rental is nonsmoking. That includes vapes, incense, candles, and other incendiary devices. Please check the map by the front door and familiarize yourself with the nearest fire escape. However, we do not anticipate any fires, and our suppression system is state of the art. This apartment building specializes in cutting-edge smart technology. Everything from the elevators to the doors is hooked up to the building's mainframe. The lock is now keyed to your identity, so you do not have to worry about physical keys. Would you like to hear about local tourist attractions?"

"No," I say, heading to the kitchen. It's a small unit, with a minifridge and a microwave.

"Would you like to connect to the rental's Wi-Fi?" A

tiny bubble pops up in my visor's view. I double-check the connection—it's a secure one, with a password that changes with every renter. I hit CONNECT with my ringware.

"If you are hungry," continues the VA, "I can provide you with a list of local restaurants. Fourteen of them deliver by drone."

"Thanks, but I'm good." I find a mug in one cupboard. "Is tap water safe to drink right now?"

The VA hesitates, checking the local advisories. "Yes. The last toxic algae outbreak ended three months ago."

I look at the mug. Then I put it back. Inside the fridge, someone has left a few bottles of water. I crack one open and drain it in a few gulps. "What time is it?"

"Nine thirty."

"Go to sleep for now," I say. "Set an alarm for seven in the morning." Tossing the water bottle into a recycling bin, I head toward the bedroom.

"I will do that," replies the VA. "Good night, I Wouldn't."

The next morning, I sit on the living room floor, gently stretching my arms and upper back. I need to stretch. The car crash that took my life also left me with a few irritating, chronic reminders of that day. I have scars along my left arm and chest, and if I go too long without stretching, my back will stiffen up. When I've worked the tautness from my shoulders, I reach for my backpack.

If I am going to spend a weekend next door to my grandmother, I am going to do more than a little online

snooping. And for that, I need my secret weapon. Within the lining of the backpack, I've hidden a small black box about the size of a paperback book. It looks like a flat rectangle of metal, but it's actually a small computer chassis. Magnetically clinging to the surface is a bumblebee.

It doesn't look like much, but this is the most dangerous—and illegal—thing I own.

I hit a button on the side of the box, booting it up. "Good morning, Edgar."

The bumblebee buzzes to life.

"Good morning," he says.

He is adorable: all fuzzy body and big eyes. But if you look closely enough, you'll see that the hairs are actually sensors and the eyes are tiny, multifaceted cameras.

Edgar is a spybot. The most sophisticated spybot to ever exist.

"Why did you activate me?" says Edgar. His voice is programmed to go directly through my visor and into my ear; neither the bumblebee nor the computer chassis have built-in speakers. "Was it because you crave human interaction and have no friends?"

He speaks with that fake mid-Atlantic accent of 1940s film stars. Every word sounds aristocratic, outdated, and frustratingly chipper. Even the insults. Especially the insults.

I snort. "How about you take that question and run it through your subroutine called 'Tact.'"

"I contain no such subroutine," he replies.

"That explains a lot." I hold out my hand to the bee. "I need you to do some recon."

"I can do that." Edgar perks up at once. "What is the assignment?"

"My grandmother."

The bumblebee rubs his legs together eagerly. "You wish to arrest your grandmother."

"I— No," I splutter. "What gave you that idea?"

"Because," he says, "everyone I spy on, you arrest. Or toss through a window."

"That was one time," I say. "And it was *out* a window, not *through*."

His antennae twitch. "What is the difference?"

"The amount of glass you have to clean up afterward. And no, I don't want my grandmother arrested. Or thrown out a window."

"Why not? You have a tactical advantage because she thinks you are dead," he says cheerily.

I press a hand to my forehead. "I really need to write that tact subroutine for you."

Edgar is an artificial intelligence. No, not the kind you're thinking of. There are multitudes of learning algorithms in the world and they've been around for decades. Some are useful (spam filters, programs that scan for potential pandemics, accessibility apps), some are incredibly infuriating and useless (chatbot customer service), and some are morally reprehensible (algorithms designed to replace human jobs, disinformation bots, discriminatory apps, deepfake programs, and scambots). But most of those so-called AIs are little more than restructuring of existing data. They can't create; they can't think—they just take in information and regurgitate it.

Edgar is different. For one thing, he *knows* he is a program.

Self-aware AI became illegal after a navigation program went rogue on a Russian nuclear power barge. Programs will look for the easiest route between point A and point B—even if that route takes them through enemy waters. And since that navigation program was self-aware, it could argue with the ship's crew. One missile strike later, the UN created the Treaty on the Prohibition of Sentient Artificial Intelligence. Otherwise known as the Pevek Convention.

The most dangerous thing in the world is self-awareness. Knowing who and what you are, how you can affect the world. Now, *that* is power.

Of course, some people will always ignore the laws. Hence, Edgar.

Don't look at me like that. I didn't program him.

Edgar stares at me, unfazed. He does not feel embarrassment or shame, and I envy that. "What are the parameters of the mission?"

"I want to check on my grandmother. See if she is healthy, doing well on her own, and any personal information I can find."

Edgar's wings rustle. "This is not ISD work, is it?"

"No," I admit.

"You have said that spying on people for personal reasons is wrong."

"I have said that," I say. "But she's getting older."

"So it is all right to spy on people because they are old," says Edgar in that infuriatingly cheerful and detached voice. "Does the need for privacy decrease with age?"

I grimace. There is an old saying in programming:

Garbage in, garbage out. I'm doing my best to make sure I don't feed Edgar a steady stream of garbage human choices; I want him to have enough data to develop his own set of morals, if that is even possible for an AI.

"Sometimes," I say. "If you love someone, you do bad things and hope for a good outcome."

I hear the whir of the computer as Edgar considers my words. "That is irrational."

"Humans are irrational," I agree. "And you can add this to the list of weird things about us."

"That list is getting long," says Edgar. "Why is it socially acceptable to eat chicken and not parrot? Why does the designated hitter rule inspire such ire? And why is pineapple on pizza so controversial?"

"I prefer it to parrot," I say.

Edgar takes to the air, his wings buzzing. "Noted. Shall we begin now?"

"No," I say. "At noon. There are blackouts scheduled. We'll move when the power's out."

The blackouts have become a routine in most western cities. It's partly about fire control—to make sure that a rogue spark can't set off a new wildfire—and partly because the most recent drought means that dams can't draw enough power during the summer months. The blackouts prevent major outages by suspending power to a few specific areas, so the entire grid won't crash. Portland schedules blackouts for the weekend, when most people will be at home and the workweek will remain unaffected. Because we wouldn't want it to impact the economy, of course. Just everyone's weekends.

Today's blackout is supposed to last seven hours. That will be more than enough time to comb through my grandmother's life.

The truth is, my grandmother is in her eighties. And I have seven years left working for ISD. Even if I manage to survive and claw my way back to my family, I don't know if she'll still be around. This weekend in Portland might be my last chance to be near her. I want to know what she's been reading, who she spends time with, what TV shows she watches—

If she still even thinks about me.

"Operation Nonna," I murmur to myself.

The minutes tick down with excruciating slowness. I pace the length of the small apartment, my nerves getting the better of me.

Finally, at a minute until noon, all the lights go dark. The only illumination comes from the line of windows overlooking the river. All around me, apartments power down. A distant TV cuts off; a radio fuzzes out; the drone of air conditioners goes silent.

It is the silence that always unnerves me. Cities shouldn't be quiet.

The VA speaks up. "Blackout conditions recognized," it says in that pleasant feminine voice. "I am running on battery power and the building is using backup generators. Doors will operate as usual. Your water and refrigerator will remain on, but please limit your use of them. Air-conditioning is restricted to certain public areas. Should you need help regulating your body temperature, please visit the security office."

Edgar speaks with contempt. “Thank you. We could never have figured that out on our own.”

“Oh, be nice to it,” I say. “It’s not the machine’s fault it isn’t built from faster-than-light silicon magic like you are.”

I can almost hear Edgar’s machine whir with irritation. “It is not magic, it is—”

“Boring lectures later,” I say, rising to my feet. I wave my hand in front of the apartment’s door sensor. “We’ve got a little light stalking to do.”