

ONE.

“You sure pick the best places to break down, don’t you, Way?” I say to myself in the cab of a Bodymore tow truck as I pull to the west entrance of the park. My phone sits in the cupholder. Wayland still hasn’t messaged me back with where he’s parked and finding him in the dark is going to be a bitch and a half. Of course, Wayland waited until the sun went down to call for a tow in the Baltimore body dumping ground.

This time of year, it feels like the sun’s out all afternoon until suddenly it’s not and you don’t see it coming. Sometimes it feels like things don’t exist if the streetlights aren’t shining over them; the lights at the park’s entrances are unreliable and by the time you reach Dead Run, you’re lucky if anything is still lit. Tonight is one of those nights where my headlights are the only thing keeping the streets bright.

Downtown brightens the horizon beyond the trees and it feels like a different world than the one in this godforsaken park. City Hall. The town center. West Baltimore. The airport. Parts of this city betray the rest of it. Leakin Park isn’t even so bad until the lights go out, then tree branches droop, leaves turn gray, the water turns black, and the stink of rot and death rise out of the mud. The maps call it Gwynns Falls or Leakin

Park, but locals call it something a little more honest: Murder Park.

The windows are up and the air conditioner's on full blast like it'll push the stink out of the cab. The night's cold, but the heater would just make the smell spoil faster. I can turn the heat back on when I get out of the park. This isn't a problem during the day; I don't know what it is; maybe the sunlight disinfects the ground and keeps the burials at bay.

I drive all the way through Franklinton until I hit the east entrance and have to turn around. Wayland said his car would be obvious. Donny said his exact message was: "you can't miss it," but I still miss it until I do a third lap across Franklinton and I blame it on the park's shoddy lighting.

A white SHO Taurus sits on the shoulder by the east end, nearer to Gwynns Falls and the manor parking light. Now that I see it, it should've been obvious the last two laps, but I'm sure it wasn't there before. I pull up to the shoulder in front of the car and stand, holding onto the inside of the cab for balance.

"Wayland?" I'm leaning out of the truck door, hanging on the step for a higher vantage point. "You there?" I'm watching the car.

Nothing moves.

I get out of the truck and close the door. None of his lights are on, inside or out. The only lighting we have now is a mixture of my headlights and the street lamp down the road—and that one's flickering.

The trees feel like their rustling quieter. A gust blows through.

I pull my hoodie over my head. My tongue flicks across the ring going through the middle of my lip.

"This isn't funny, Cross!" A buzz and the streetlight down the road shuts off, probably hiding whatever asshole's using the darkness for his drug deal or selling electronics from his trunk or dropping off another pit that's outlived its usefulness. This city's a thirst trap for blood, everyone knows it. Wayland's probably better off with the lights out, avoiding

bringing attention to himself, alone, in a pretty decent car, but standing in Murder Park under the mercy of the moonlight really isn't a great alternative.

I walk over to his car. My knuckles knock on the glass. "Way? You in there?"

The windows are up, the glass isn't shattered. Nothing moves inside, but there's also no sign that anything came out of the bushes and grabbed him—or if they did, they didn't break the windows to do it.

I try the doors. They're unlocked. No one's hiding inside. Something moves around in the trees off the side of the road.

I go around the car to stand in the grass. Darkness covers the trees, leaves, bushes, everything, distorting the forest to make it a stranger in the night. But I swear I see someone out there. The ground sinks in where I step and something winds around my leg, hooking into my clothing. Jagged vines like fingers or teeth press through the thin layer of my skinny jeans and stab into my skin. I kick them off and curse at myself for being a pansy.

I survey the ground for whatever it was, just a bunch of weeds, and out in the trees, the movement is gone.

"Wayland Cross, if you make me yell for you, I'm going to charge you extra," I growl under my breath. The next time I say his name, I'm whispering into the darkness, hissing, really. The falls in the distance are more than enough to murmur over me. When my voice echoes back, it feels like I'm disturbing the leaves and I deserve the bullet that's bound to come my way.

Toward the falls, a couple of trees shift, a stick cracks, definitely someone stepping around out there. My jaws tight, my hands tighter, I'm thinking of getting the bat from the cab. "Wayland. Cross," I hiss. "If you don't get out here in the next thirty seconds, I'm taking off with your car and the badges will have to pick up your body tomorrow, sorry."

I'm already turning around before I finish the sentence. I climb back into the cab and lock the doors. I don't even want my headlights on if I'm the only one out here, but I shut them

off for a second and I feel the cold seeping into my pants and under my hoodie like invasive hands. Fuck, I hate the dark. I grab my phone out of the crusty cup holder and go to my messages.

JOEY This is evidence now.
JOEY UR WITNESS.
JOEY If I die, I'm @ MP. Wayland Cross is
 :knife: :blood_drop:
BIG D Sum1 killed Cross?!

JOEY No. Asshole's getting *me* killed.
BIG D Oh.
BIG D That's some kinda loss?
BIG D Save some wages.
BIG D Insurance money maybe.
JOEY Lose your best mechanic, but alright.
JOEY I see how it is.
BIG D jk.
BIG D Love you, Joey.
JOEY ...Don't ever say that again, Donny.
JOEY Just
JOEY If I'm not back in 45, call in a body crew.
BIG D Starting the clock now.

I toss my phone into the passenger seat. I turn the cab lights off and look around the darkness, waiting to see Wayland come running out of the trees now, shirt soaked in sweat, maybe his jacket torn from getting caught on some sticks, maybe he fell into the river, maybe a bit of blood would stain his stomach where he was stabbed while someone with a knife comes running out of the trees, maybe he got hit by sharp branches or bullets shot by squirrels. I don't know how people die around here, all I know is that it happens all the time and the bodies show up when the sun goes down. I told Donny never to send me to this godforsaken place after dark and yet, here I am. He holds these jobs for me. Just solidifies I'm getting him a blowup doll with a hole in it for Christmas.

I take another look outside. The trees sway with a slight breeze, but they look more like shuffling shoulders of a bunch of tall men wearing the same color suit. I really don't want to go out there, but I don't have much of a choice. I can't go back without Wayland's car. I'd never hear the end of it from Jag.

I turn the cab light back on and climb out. The keys in the ignition keep the lights on, but the doors are locked and the extra keys are in my pocket. I get to work moving Wayland's car onto my tow and if it gets scratched in the process, well, oh well. I climb into the car to check it's in neutral. I've only got the door open when the smell hits me. The air's thick, even just sitting down in the driver's seat, I feel like it's pushing against me. Oil, maybe sulfur and something else, something familiar. Maybe the rotting mud from the park ground?

Fortunately, the car's in neutral and it's just the parking brake engaged. At least Wayland got that right before taking off. Before I get out, I check the back seat one more time in case I missed him curled up on the floor.

It wouldn't be the worst plan.

When driving through this park, you pass by the busted-up brick well someone was literally burned alive in a couple weeks ago. Candles. Wax. Chalk markings. Salt. The badges said it had nothing to do with Satanists while sliding a burned Satanic Bible into a plastic evidence bag.

"You back there, Way?" I reach between the seats, feel for the floor. Something wet and cold touches my fingers. I yank my hand back. For a second, the image of him laying back there, dead, bleeding, cold, and that's the smell.

I climb out of the car, slam the door, and reach to get my phone, but it's not there. I go for my keyring instead. There's a small, barely legitimate flashlight hanging from it. I flick the light on. The light throws my reflection into the window. My eyeliner's smudged, but that's all there is to see in the dark and it only stands out against the brighter whites of my eyes. I open the front door, hit the locks, and open the back. I shine the light in the backseat.

There's nothing there. I close my eyes, take a breath, let go,

and lean in. I can't believe it until I'm inside the backseat and reaching around the floor when I mutter, "there's nothing there." I climb back out of the car and shut the doors, pocketing the keychain light. I reach for the cigarette box in my back pocket but leave them.

I can't light up until I'm getting out of here.

The car's hooked up and the tow's growling sounds like a roar in the night silence. I'm waiting to hear crickets or an owl or the stream, but even that's gone. Closing my eyes doesn't make any of the park sounds come back.

Now I'm hoping for a car stereo blasting some BS beat as it drives by thirty miles over the speed limit, but it's like I'm in a sound vacuum and the city lights shine on the outskirts of the park more than the stars overhead.

I pull the keys out of the lift when the car's positioned on it. I'm on the lift, securing the tires when I hear movement in the trees again. It's not swaying leaves or branches, but the crunching grass I was afraid of. It's fast and it's echoing in a way that sounds like it's all around me.

I don't have time for this.

I repeat the words in my head until I'm miming the words on mute lips. "I don't have time for this." My heart's racing, pounding louder in my ears than the movement in the trees. My hand's underneath the back passenger tire with the strap. Something wet splashes up my arm to my elbow.

I squeal and draw my arm back. It's cold water at first, but after a couple of seconds, it feels like a boiling heat. My hoodie sleeve clings to my arm. The wet parts grow hotter, more painful. I rip the hoodie off and toss it down on the truck flat. The cold air nips at my bare arms. Encouragement to move quicker. There's still a soft sting on my skin, but I can deal with it; I can ignore that until I hook up the car and climb into the cab.

I secure the other tires and when I'm done, I'm looking off into the woods towards Gwynns Falls. I almost call for Wayland one more time, but I think better of it at the last second and bite my lip ring instead. The leaves rustle.

Something cackles from somewhere. It sounds like a bird, but it's odd enough, maybe it's not a bird. "Cross!" I hiss under my breath, scanning the trees for any movement.

The cold air stings my arm, but not as much as whatever residue Wayland's car splashed on me. I swing my arm through the air in an attempt to cool the burning sensation.

"If you're out there, stop being an ass and get in the truck!" My teeth are together. Another scan of the trees, the bushes, the grass, and the park.

Nothing.

"Last time, Wayland!" I jump off the truck flat. I grab my hoodie, but keep it held out.

Looking for Wayland in the trees is my last concern. He's had enough warning. I'm hungry, I hurt, and now I'm cold. The headlights are flickering when I reach the driver's door. By the time I open the door, they, and the cab lights, flicker off. I climb into the cab, locking it immediately. Something smacks into the truck somewhere in the back. I glance through the rear window expecting to see a face or a knife or even a gun. Nothing. I grab my phone from the passenger seat. Battery's dead. I could've sworn it was at 40% when I picked it up last. I maneuver my cigarettes from my jeans' pocket and light one. I turn the keys, the car reignites without a problem. If Cross's hiding in the trees, too bad, he's finding his own way back.

When I get back to Bodymore, Donny says, "I was about to send the search team looking for you."

"No, you weren't." I toss the keys onto the counter, making my way to the back of the shop.

"You're right, that's kinda pricey... Sorry about that," Donny says.

"No, you're not." My arm's still burning with pain from whatever came out of Wayland's car. When I pick up my hoodie, the sleeve is hard, dry, sticky, and it smells a bit like sulfur. In the light, my arm looks swollen, puckering, irritated, blood veins seem brighter than before. Red and blue lines travel up the underside of my arm.

I go to the sink in the back of the shop and flick the water on. I hiss, breathe in hard to stop myself from making any other sound, and pull my hand out of the water. The cold feels like acid against my skin. I turn the water to hot and wait for the pipes to heat.

Donny's yelling across the shop, "you find Cross?"

"Nope. Looks like MP got him."

"Shame. Guess we wait to see if we can sell his car? How long would you give it?"

The water's only lukewarm now. "You really think he's dead?"

Donny mumbles something, I'm not sure what.

"You try calling him since we got his car back?" I say.

"What, didn't you?"

"My phone died while I was out. *Sorry.*"

Donny groans. "I guess I could give him a call then."

It wasn't the sound of Donny realizing something he didn't know. It was him thinking about having to get off his ass and push a couple of buttons to do something. I get it; it's late, it's almost eleven and we both want to go home because we both know we need to get back here early tomorrow. The busy season's starting with people waiting to get their winter tires on before the snow hits and somehow, everything else is wrong with everyone's car from all the appointments they put off during the summer and the last three years, because they wanted to ignore the lights on the dash or the smoke coming from the hood or the smell coming from their gas cans and *it could maybe last a little bit longer—it could last until the summer*, they're sure of it and they had something better to do than spend Saturday sitting in an auto shop or home in their living room at home, waiting. The water's still not hot yet and the redness on my arm isn't going down, the sting isn't going away. "You need to get the pipes fixed, Donny!"

"What's wrong with 'em now?"

"The same thing that's been wrong with 'em for three months. You need to get them fixed!"

He grunts again. I pull away from the sink just enough to

peer into his office. He's got his phone pressed to his shoulder. At least he's doing that. If I had to call Wayland and actually got him on the phone, I don't know if I'd be able to hold back every last profanity I've learned over the years, including the Italian ones I got from Donny.

The smell of Leakin Park is back, filling the garage now. I follow the scent back to Wayland's car where it's set up on the first hydraulic. The decrepit, rotting mud is caked onto his tires and the bottom half of the car. There's a dent in the side of the back door, and thick, stained handprints over the trunk. Mud or something. A little brown, somewhat red. With the light of the auto shop, I open the car doors to take a peek inside the front seat and back.

Despite having checked already, I'm still expecting to see something on the floor. A body, a garbage bag, maybe a bag with a body in it. At the very least, dirty laundry, but the backseat is empty. I go around to the driver's side to pop the trunk.

The putrid smell fills the garage immediately. The same dirty, wet, sulfuric, and muddy flavor from MP, but now there's a much more metallic element to it. Blood.

My heart's pounding and I don't realize I'm shaking until I reach for the popped trunk lid to push it up. I double over with vomit at the first glimpse inside. I run to the sink and empty the contents of my stomach. Donny hears me and says, "you're not pregnant, are you, Joey?" but then after another moment, the stench must have reached him because he says, "what in the fresh hell is that? Someone forget to flush again?" He comes out of the office holding his shirt to his nose like it's going to help. I'm gripping the sink's edge for stability. The smell follows and wraps around me and is suffocating like hands wrapped around my neck, fingers pressing on my throat. A hand smacks into my back and I jump from it. Donny's staring at me like he's asking what's wrong, I've gone crazy, get it together.

"You smell that, right?" I say.

"Yeah. What the hell is it?" Donny says.

“Look in the trunk.”

He does, but his only response is, “shit.”

I wipe my lips with the back of my arm and return to the car. Rolled up in the fetal position is a body, a corpse, face mangled beyond recognition, cut up, bloody, the eyes destroyed. He’s naked with skin darkened by fire or some other kind of damage that left him raw. The trunk’s stained with blood, some pooling underneath the body along with some thick, silver water. My arm pulses looking at that water and something sends a shock wave through me. I go back to the sink, the water’s still running, steam’s coming off it now, so I thrust my arm under it.

Silver water sticks to my hand like poorly applied fingernail polish. The heat burns, but I grab the washcloth from the edge of the sink and scrub my arm, hard. The burning slowly soothes, and my veins sink back into my skin or whatever you’d call it. The bright reds and blues aren’t drawn so close to the surface anymore.

When I’ve cleaned my hand, I rinse my hoodie so I can skip the laundromat for at least a few days more. By the time I’m done, Donny’s got the phone against his ear again and he’s giving our address. “Yeah. Big sign. Bodymore Body Shop. There’s an arm coming out of the tire on the sign. Ironic, but this isn’t the normal kind of job we do. Right. Right. Yeah. We’ll be here. Ring the bell when you get here.”

I turn the faucet off.

He’s standing outside his office, leaning against the frame. “You didn’t have any plans tonight, did you?” he says, but it’s not really a question as much as an opportunity to make a joke.

I’m thinking about home, the burnt smell of dad microwaving some frozen mac and cheese a little too long, but he doesn’t care if the edges are a little black. He likes the crunch, and it goes down fine with some Barton’s. The smell sticks to the dishes piled in the sink and God knows where those come from since he uses paper plates and disposable dishes for almost everything anyway. Shaking my head, I rub my eyes. I want to go home and hit the mattress, but I know

better than to think I can. “Nope. I’m all yours.”

“Good. The badges are gonna wanna talk to you when they get here.”

“It’s gonna cost you overtime and something of a bribe.” I lower my hand. The tips of my fingers are black with smudged eyeliner.

“How about a half bag of Doritos?”

“Throw in a pizza and I’ll consider it. I’m starving and I promise I can’t complain if there’s something in my mouth.”

“Hm...” Donny’s walking back to his office. “Maybe that’d work better if you weren’t like a daughter to me. I’m not into that shit.”

Still, he’s dialing his phone and I hear him call for a pepperoni pizza and whatever else they make him buy to get delivery. I go back to the sink and wash my arm a second time. The prickling and stinging are gone, so I just leave the lukewarm water to massage my skin instead while I try to replay the scene from the park in my head. The details were fading before the badges got here, but I told them everything I could remember. Then I went home with half a box of pizza.