

Wills, Testaments, Cuckoldry, And Other Miscellaneous Murder
Motives

A normal-length story by Zach Mann

1

Lee Cortez shifted in his seat. The cold marble bench he was resting upon wasn't exactly built for comfort. In fact, it seemed to be designed for form rather than function. Or, leaving an impression, rather than taking an impression of one's hindquarters. He'd been waiting a while now, and while the hallway this bench found itself in was admittedly vast and impressive, it wasn't any more impressive than the many, many other hallways Cortez had wandered through on his way here. Truthfully, he'd gotten hopelessly lost on the route, but that wasn't really his fault. Or, at least, it wasn't as much his fault as it usually was. His sense of direction was horrendous, yes, and this was doubly ironic for a detective, but this estate was downright *labyrinthine* in its design. Not to mention Olympian in its scope.

"Where the hell is this guy?" Cortez mumbled to himself.

He reached into the pocket of his camel-colored overcoat, fishing around for something to pass the time. He hated the feel of the fabric, but knew it was for the best he had it on, at least for now. Clients typically didn't appreciate his penchant for Hawaiian shirts. Not to mention that the style wouldn't exactly be warm enough for the New England Fall he'd need to manage over the weekend.

The detective eventually pulled free a small black stick, the shape of a long thumb drive. He pulled it up to his lips, just beneath the bottom bristles of his bushy mustache, and inhaled. The device heated at once, and a vapor of nicotine rushed down his mouth and into his

lungs...sweet release! Literally, as he'd had to purchase the Cotton Candy flavor, as the gas station on the way to the airport was fresh out of his usual Mango. Cortez let the sweet heat linger in his chest a moment longer before exhaling, then breathed out his heavy cloud of noxious fumes like a candy-themed dragon.

It was around this time he started to hear footsteps from far off down the hall. Quickly, he got to work trying to waft and swat away at the lingering vapor cloud he'd left hanging in the otherwise pristine air. Panicked, he wafted a bit aggressively, and unintentionally vortexed some of the cloud back into his own mouth, which caused him to cough raucously. He looked around, face red from a lack of air and surplus of embarrassment. Thankfully, there was still no visual on the source of those echoing footsteps.

It was just the detective, the bench, a pristine, gaudy, grand hallway...and his shame. Oh, and floor to ceiling windows which gave a beautiful view of the sprawling estate grounds and scenic forest. And the marble pillars which lined the hall, seemingly sprung from some sort of perfectly-preserved acropolis. And the humongous, classical oil paintings that decorated the walls between those pillars...which would pass as being stolen from the Louvre. But, otherwise, entirely unassuming!

The sound of the footsteps on the tiled floor was louder now, but still no one was in sight. Granted, Cortez thought, the hallway was grand. Very grand. Grander than most he'd seen in his middle-length lifetime, but still. It must've been at least a minute by now. Surely —

"Detective?" A voice called out. It was coming from...the direction Cortez was *not* looking. Terrible with direction yet again, it seemed.

"Detective Cortez?" The detective pivoted in his uncomfortable seat on the bench to see a small girl approaching. She was no older than sixteen, if he were to guess. Surely she could not have been his client. Could she? Well, if she could afford all this, maybe she could be...

Cortez shrugged, figuring the best way to find this out was to just ask. "Beth? Annabeth Helm?"

He rose from his seat, half happy to be free from it, half to introduce himself to the young girl. He stuck out his hand for a shake, but when the girl finally reached him, she did not meet it.

"Annie," she corrected. She was about two-thirds his height, with

messy brown hair that was wrangled by a triage of hair-ties along the back of her head into something resembling a bun. Her eyes were a rich shade of blue, near-lazuli, and off this Cortez knew his mistake.

"I guess, technically, I *am* Annabeth," Annie said.

"Beth is your mother, then?" Cortez asked.

Annie nodded.

"And your mother is *also* Annabeth?"

Annie nodded again.

"Right," Cortez said. "That won't at all be confusing."

Annie shrugged. "It's pronounced 'egotistical'."

Cortez frowned, the wrinkles on his sun-tanned face accentuated, his bushy walrus-esque mustache curling. "Seems harsh. Lot's of parents name their kids after themselves. Are *they* all egotistical?"

Annie shook her head. "No, but they're also not my mother. My mom, though? She is *certainly* my mother."

"Good to know," Cortez said.

Annie nodded her head back down the hall, from the direction she'd come. "Come on, I'll take you to meet her. She made me come find you so she could give you her *detailed* instructions."

Annie began walking, and Cortez had no choice but to follow. For the first few steps, this was quite a pained labor, as his knees had to get back into movement mode after having been seated for so long. It wasn't so much the pain that annoyed him, as it was Annie's clear obliviousness to it. But, really, how could he fault her for that? She was young, and knee pain was an old man's game. Such was the case with so much about the detective these days. His salt and pepper windswept hair, admittedly more salt than pepper lately). Or his abused skin, over-tanned and rife with wrinkles like a *Margaritaville* poster-child. Even his frame betrayed him. Sure, the detective kept himself in decent shape. He had broader shoulders and arms that filled out anything he'd wear...maybe the build of someone who'd worked in construction. *Worked*. As in, not anymore, old-timer.

Cortez tried to take solace in the fact that he at least didn't have a beer belly, at least avoiding this hallmark of age. But, even this thought he tried to dismiss, as this was all an awful lot to get conscious over because a young girl didn't have the same knee pain as him. He refocused on the work...why he was here...the job. The job Beth hired him for. The Beth that Annie was leading him to. The leading that was

being done so he might hear Beth's *detailed instructions*.

Cortez re-entered the conversation, finally responding to Annie.

"Instructions?" He asked. "Aren't I the professional here? Shouldn't I know what's to be done more than her?"

"Right, but we're paying you," Annie reminded him. "Like, we're paying you *a lot*."

Cortez mumbled to himself. "Once again...dollar signs trump expertise. The joys of the service industry."

"Huh?" Annie asked.

"Nothing. You'll understand when you're older," he dismissively told her. Though, as he looked across the hall to yet another ten-foot-wide canvas they were passing by that might've been from the Renaissance, he got the sense that his statement was likely false.

"Oh, also," Annie said. "Don't you usually show up *after* people die?"

Cortez felt the lump in his throat a little more than usual, and noticed his feet feeling heavier and dragging slightly more. "Yeah," he admitted.

"Well, this one's a new one then!" Annie said, trying to cheer up her noticeably crestfallen walking companion. "My grandpa's still alive!"

Cortez smiled at this, the fact actually working to lift his spirits. After all, that was what dragged him up from New Orleans to begin with. Maybe, this time, it would be different. Maybe this time his presence would mean something for once.

"Just try to keep him that way, okay?" Annie asked him, prodding the detective on his hip. Her elbow hit bone, which hurt like hell, but so did everything these days, so Cortez did his best to hide the pain with an odd grin. They continued on, Annie leading the way.

Cortez swallowed, his mouth suddenly quite dry. Somehow, between accepting the job and the packing and the flight out and the ride over the Helm estate, he hadn't considered this new kind of pressure that would come with this new kind of gig. In this moment, it felt overwhelming and immense. He reached into his jacket pocket to pull free his vape pen again, and took to it seeking relief. He took a long and hard pull from it, hoping the stress might subside at least a little. It didn't provide any. No, not in the least bit. But now was no time to make that obvious.

2

After an ungodly amount of twists and turns through the vast and winding halls of the Helm family manor, Annie lead Detective Cortez through a set of massive glass doors and out onto a sprawling patio. It was intricately designed, likely hand-laid with whatever sort of expensive, impossibly-smooth stone Cortez found himself walking on. He imagined each one of the large stone slabs that made up the deck that ran the length of the manor's rear facade cost about as much as his typical pay for a case. Which wasn't necessarily a fortune. But in the context of a rock? It was a fortune.

"Hey, man, you coming?" Annie poked the detective's arm as he stood there, seemingly staring down at his worn-out boat shoes. "Or do you just wanna stare at the ground?"

Cortez turned to Annie, "Sorry," he told her. "Just...impressed...is all."

"I mean, we can stay and stare. I'm usually not super thrilled to go talk to her either, so I get it," she said. "But, you know, she doesn't pay *me* for conversation. So it's a little different."

"You're right. That her?" Cortez pointed past the patio's steps, toward the reflecting pool that seemed to span at least the length of a football field. Alongside it, admiring a large topiary sculpture, was a woman standing against a backdrop of autumnal oranges and reds and yellows of the forest across the estate's grassy clearing. She seemed to be an alternate, older version of Annie, though distinctly

different. Her hair was shorter and blond, with not a strand out of place. She stood perfectly straight, and in general seemed to have a sharpness about her. Cortez could see the definition of her cheek-bones, even from all the way over here. And, of course, he could see that distinct deep blue of her eyes. It was the same blue Annie had.

"That her?" Annie repeated, insincere. "The only woman in sight? Yeah, that would be her."

"Good point," Cortez said. "What's that, though?" He pointed now at the mass of shaped leaves and branches Annie's mom was admiring.

"That would still be my mom," Annie said.

"I know that. I mean the sculpture," Cortez sighed.

"Again, still my mom. She's admiring a sculpture of herself," Annie told him.

Cortez did now notice that the shape of the leaves resembled that of a woman. The woman's head appeared to be hung, almost in sorrow, but it was definitely a woman.

"Remembering what I said about egotistical now?" Annie asked.

"A little," the detective said, laughing to himself.

"In her defense, though, her horse is also in some of those sculptures. So it's not all bad."

"Oh. That's sweet," Cortez agreed.

"Until it isn't," Annie countered.

She patted Cortez on the back, then retreated quietly, toward the doors leading inside. As Cortez heard them open again, he realized he was being left alone. And, just like that, it was time to go consult with his client for the first time. Suddenly a bit worried, he turned back just as Annie was slipping back inside the mansion.

"What's that mean?" He called out to her.

She smiled, her head barely poking out between the two doors as she closed them. "You'll figure it out!" she yelled back. "...Probably."

With that, she slammed the doors on Cortez, not only leaving him alone, but also doing so *just* loud enough to have alerted her mother of his presence on the patio. Beth turned from her shrub sculpture to see the detective standing on the patio, and immediately warmed into a welcoming smile. "Detective!" She called out. "Glad Annie could bring you out. Come on down, let's walk!"

Now undeniably within earshot, and officially at his client's beck

and call, the detective obliged, and began descending the long, shallow patio stairs toward Beth. He took each step gingerly, his worn knees now nice and limber from the walk through the mansion.

"Miss Helm, I take it?" He called out across the sand-colored gravel stones of the walkways sprawling around the reflecting pool and its flora. They crunched underfoot as he stepped over them, until he stopped to offer his hand to Beth.

She shook, firm, and Cortez noticed how chilled her grip was. He half-expected to find her fingers laced with a cold metal such as jewelry because of this. But, when he looked, there was nary a band of silver or gold to be found. Just...Beth.

"Sorry," she said. "I run cold. Dad claims it's because of the ice in our family's veins. But, me, personally? I find that a bit cheesy."

Cortez smiled. "Yet you say it anyway."

"Got me there," Beth admitted. She withdrew, then motioned for Cortez to follow her. "Quite observational of you," she added as the detective walked alongside her.

"Occupational hazard," he joked. "Regardless, you wanted to talk to me about the job, Annie said? Was there anything that came up that wasn't in the brief you shared with me?"

Beth winced, but tried to hide her reaction. "Very focused of you," she said. "Don't you want to get to know the Helm family a bit before you dive into the work?"

Cortez shrugged. "You're public figures," he said. "In a way, I feel like I know you too much already. Your brother Rupert in particular."

Beth nodded. They stepped in silence for a moment, passing by the next topiary sculpture in the row which ran along the long reflecting pool. Cortez looked up to take in its grandiosity, this one being much larger than the first one he had seen Beth standing at. In fact, this one had *two* figures in it. One was the woman again. The second was a horse. Cortez supposed this was the horse of Beth's Annie had mentioned. He stopped for a second to stare, falling behind Beth, as he was perplexed by whatever this pair of hedges was depicting. The woman-shape appeared to be...*pointing*...at the horse? Maybe he wasn't looking from the right angle.

"Detective?" Beth called back, having noticed the sounds of Cortez's shoes on the gravel walking path had ceased.

"Sorry!" He called, rejoining her after an awkward walk-jog.

"Just...admiring the greenery," he said with a smile.

"Right," Beth said. "They're...depictions of me. My father had them commissioned."

"How sweet," Cortez said. "Howard never struck me as the affectionate type based on what I've read about him. Does he have sculptures or carvings of the others elsewhere around the estate? Rupert or Sam or Harmony or Nico? I'd be interesting in seeing them if—"

"He doesn't," Beth cut him off. "Just me. I'm...sort of the favorite of the family." She was awkward as she confessed this, as if it was a rough subject. "In fact, this was what I was hoping to bring up with you. So I'm glad we wound up on the topic. Lord knows how long I would've beat around the bush trying to get to it myself."

"Pardon the pun?" Cortez joked.

"What?" Beth asked.

"Nevermind," Cortez mumbled to himself, a shade disappointed. "Anyway, the favoritism?"

"Right," Beth said. By now, they were onto the third topiary sculpture in the row. Beth pointed up to it as she explained. This one was again of two figures. Again, the horse and the woman. This time, the horse seemed to be bowing. And the woman looked to have her head hung, as she did in the first hedge sculpture. "As you can see, my father is...partial to me. And outside of plant carvings, this manifests in a manner of different ways. More often than not, these ways put me and my other siblings at odds. And often, this creates tension within the family at large."

"Understandable," Cortez said, noting the oddity of this latest topiary. "I suppose I'd want my own likeness etched out of leaves and branches if I could. The art is certainly something to be green over."

Cortez waited for Beth to laugh, but the response to his joke never arrived. He forced himself to think she'd missed it, rather than face the potentially disheartening reality that his joke was...unfunny.

"Most recently, this favoritism has shown itself in my father's updated copy of his Last Will and Testament," Beth said, visibly tensing up as she broached the subject. Cortez, for himself, also became notably unnerved by those fatal four words. In his overlong and eventful career, those particular words have inspired a disproportionate amount of his body of work. In fact, they were the

crux of his most recent case. He sighed, then asked. "Did he—"

"I'm listed as the sole inheritor," Beth blurted out. "He made the change earlier this week."

The two stopped walking at that point. They were about halfway between the previous shrub sculpture and the one that was to come. Cortez swallowed, then frowned. He pulled his e-cigarette from his jacket pocket and took a long, relieving inhale from it. After he exhaled, sure to aim the cotton candy cloud away from Beth, he gave his thoughts. "Well...shit."

"Yeah," Beth agreed. Cortez offered her the vape, and she took it, immediately taking down one pull of its nicotine. She then followed this with another, harsher, longer one. She exhaled in a sigh, then handed it back to Cortez. "Right now, we're the only ones that my dad himself has told."

"But you're worried others might find out?" Cortez asked.

Beth nodded.

"And we're not sure who explicitly would know at this point?"

Beth nodded again. "In theory...no one. But in practice?"

"In practice? I suppose everyone who you listed on that brief you sent to me is a potential threat, right?"

A third nod from Beth.

Cortez grunted, pursing his lips. He stroked at his mustache with his thumb and index finger. "That was a rather extensive list. There's the kids....his nurse, Sofia. Rupert's wife....Ghislaine, I think? And Howard's ex-wife, right? Vanessa?"

"Yeah. They're all potential inheritors who could feel scorned," Beth affirmed.

"And they'll all be at your father's birthday party this evening?" Cortez asked.

"Yep. It'll be a big event. Lots of guests. Lots of opportunities for scheming," Beth said, visibly stressed at the thought of the evening to come.

"Understood. But, hopefully, I'm a deterrent." Cortez said, trying to offer some reassurance.

"Hopefully," Beth said, not sounding very optimistic. "I told them all you'd be here. So I'm hoping if anyone does know, and if they were going to try something, now they won't."

"Good," Cortez commented. "But...the nurse? How exactly does

she stand to inherit? I read the brief and I understand she's been Howard's personal medical attendant at home for some time now. But I fail to see the connection unless they're—" Cortez stopped himself there, seeing the grimace on Beth's face. She shuddered, then began walking down along the garden path again.

"Yep," Beth said, not wanting to give the image in her mind any more airtime.

"Understood," Cortez said. "Loud and clear. Won't bring it up again."

"Thanks," Beth said, walking a little bit faster now. Cortez wondered if she was perhaps trying to outpace whatever ideas were still, unfortunately, stuck in her mind.

As they walked on, they passed the fourth sculpture. This one was more cohesive, once again a singular shape being depicted rather than the duo which was formed in the previous two. Though the shape itself was larger. Now, it was that same horse that had been in the previous three, but with a jockey or some other smaller figure atop it, riding it. There seemed to be a bit more joviality in this carving, a sunniness that was absent in the previous three. Though, the detective couldn't quite identify what differentiator was causing this anachronism.

"So, have you broached this topic with your father?" He asked, breaking the silence which had built in the crisp autumn air. "Does he have any thoughts on the matter?"

"Yes," Beth said. "Though his thoughts are idiotic. The man thinks he's immortal, and that any possible ideas of danger are simply beneath him."

"Sounds rather humble," Cortez said.

"Yeah. And, unfortunately, he's very often right. And, worse than that, my dad's been incredibly lucky and has been in excellent health for all seven of his decades. So there's nearly a century of confirmation bias working against my very real and very valid concerns for him. Probably a dozen close calls that he's walked away from without a scratch."

"Well I suppose any multi-billionaire is blessed with some degree of good fortune or luck," Cortez observed. "Whether or not they're wise enough to acknowledge as much..."

They stopped now, having reached the fifth and final topiary

sculpture. Cortez looked up at this one now, taking it in. It had reverted back to the depiction of two separate shapes. Again there was that horse, but the second figure this time was much smaller. It was maybe about half as tall as the horse, though definitively humanoid. Perhaps more child-sized than woman. A young Beth, maybe?

"He can have all the luck he wants," Beth said. "But if he keeps on needlessly pushing and testing that luck like some sort of overconfident moron, eventually it *will* run out." She rubbed at her temples, stressed. "So, let's try to do what we can to avoid that, alright?"

Cortez nodded, serious. "I understand completely, Miss Helm. Believe me when I say this is a case I'm taking very seriously, and taking to heart. Just because this is an unusual job for me doesn't mean it's not one I'm invested in. In fact, quite the opposite. It's because of the unique opportunity your request provides me that I'm so passionate about it."

"How so?"

"Typically I only arrive after the body drops. I'm late, and all I can offer is a...consolation prize of sorts. My presence at that point serves only to complicate things and aggravate the offender. The dead and dying are either those I can't save or those I've put directly in harms way. I'm hoping, here at least, I'll be able to score a point for the other side and really, truly *save* someone. It would...mean a lot to me, to say the least."

Beth smiled at this, and jumped into Cortez to hug him. Cortez was caught off-guard by the hug, but awkwardly reciprocated after taking a moment to recover. Another moment and the two separated, and Beth wiped away a tear from the corner of her eye with a shaky hand.

"Thank you. Thank you, detective. It'd mean a lot to me, too," she said. "Come on, you should meet my father. I said he wasn't receptive to this, but I did finally get him to agree to you being present at the party. He did say he needed to speak with you beforehand though, so you'll need to go do that."

Cortez was surprised by this, and almost became nervous. "Are you coming with?" He asked Beth.

"No, I can't," Beth told him. "There's a ton of party prep I need to handle, and my siblings need to be corralled before things kick off."

You'll be alright finding him on your own, won't you? His room would be hard to miss."

Cortez pulled at the collar of his jacket. After a shameful admission of his sense of direction, Beth informed him of the custom satellite imagery the Helm family estate had been afforded in most navigational apps available to the public. She shared the access code for this normally hidden view, and showed Cortez how to input directions for specific rooms in the Helm Mansion within his Apple Maps app. He was amazed at this, and equally amazed at the tailor Beth said would be coming by his room in order to fit him for the suit he'd be wearing to the party tonight.

"Really, it's nothing," Beth said. "But the article I saw you in? The one that inspired me to reach out to you? About the case you solved in the Italian countryside with that Will and Testament? That one also showed you wearing your, um...typical attire."

Cortez looked down, suddenly remembering the red shirt with yellow flowers that he had on underneath his long brown coat. "Oh," he uttered.

"Yeah..." Beth said. "You are *not* wearing that sort of outfit tonight."

3

It was a lovely day in Tuscany. Idyllic, even. And this loveliness was only emphasized in the courtyard garden of the Calabri family. This made sense, of course, because that's exactly what this garden was made to do. From the limestone bricks of the mansion's walls which encircled the courtyard to the cast-iron arches that crested over so many parts of the walking path, it all was designed to radiate beauty. The colors of each and every plant and flower were alive in this garden. The faint purple veins of coleus leaves, the bright, almost-glowing yellow from the fruit of the lemon trees, even the deep and layered greens of vines or the miniature cypresses which were dotted around the garden. Really, the only anachronistic part of the entire scene was the crazed man, panicked and stumbling along one of the terracotta walkways. As he moved toward the centerpiece of the garden, a fountain with crystal clear water spewing from the lips of a marble fish, he waved a small revolver around in a manic fashion.

Carl was in rough shape, there was no denying that. Sleep-deprived, hadn't eaten since God-knows-when, you name it. That was him. So, naturally, when Carl swung the barrel of his snub-nosed revolver over toward Vince, across the way on the other end of that fountain, Vince was more than a bit concerned about the steadiness of Carl's trigger finger.

"I'll do it! I swear to God!" Carl screamed.

Vince tried to play calm, but he wasn't a very good actor. He

tugged at the collar of his polo, its fabric heavy with sweat and clinging to his chest. "Come on, Carl. I'd prefer it if you didn't."

Carl couldn't believe his ears. Even his eyes were even more wild than they were a moment ago, which was really saying something. "What? What?" Carl stabbed the gun in the air at Vince, jittery. "You deserve this! You know that? This is for Sue!"

Carl's shaking thumb pulled back the hammer of his snub-nose. He tried to steel himself, tried to stop his trembling as he took aim at Vince. Vince, meanwhile, now seemed entirely confused.

"Sue? Carl, man, what are you talking about? I didn't—"

A third, feminine voice interrupted Vince, though. "Carl! Don't!" It cried.

Now Carl joined Vince in the confusion. The two of them froze, each of their eyes darting around the garden. Between the vines that clung to the iron-wrought arches, around the branches of the trees and through some cracks in the lines of mini cypresses. But neither could spot the voice's owner. Carl, impatient, turned his attention back to Vince.

"You're dead!" He screamed. Then, he closed his eyes and pulled the trigger, the shot firing off square at Vince's chest.

POP!

But, a few seconds later, when Carl opened his eyes, Vince was still standing there. Completely fine. Did...did Carl miss? Why is Vince staring at the ground in front of him?

"Hannah?" Vince says toward the ground. "Why? Why would you do that? I—I—" Vince deflated, his words abandoning him.

"Hannah?" Carl dropped his arms to his sides, the gun in his hand nearly slipping free and falling out of his grasp. "I didn't mean to..." he whispered as his lips began to quiver.

"Carl..." Vince muttered, mouth agape in shock.

"I didn't mean to," Carl repeated. Then, in a jerk of a movement, Carl swung the snub-nose up to his temple and pulled back the hammer again.

POP!

Vince watched as Carl's body dropped in a heap, disappearing, now obscured behind that stupid fish spitting water out of its mouth.

"Carl?" That's all he can think to say. He's floored. Beside himself. Alone. A body at his feet, another on the other side of the fountain.

Vince just stares, standing there for a moment. Then another moment, and another, until maybe it's been a minute or two. Vince isn't quite sure. What he is sure of, though, is that *clapping* sound—clapping?—that's what made him break from his statuesque state.

Was someone applauding?

Vince turned toward the source of the noise. Right. Down one of the garden paths, one that went all the way out toward the end, back where the greenery ended and the manor began again. There was a narrow patio that rested in the shade provided by the second story's balcony which wrapped around the courtyard entirely. And on that patio, beneath the balcony's shade, was a small bench. And, on that bench, Vince could see a Hawaiian shirt. It was red, with ugly yellow flowers. It was that detective. The one Carl had hired once word started to spread that his father had been murdered. And there was that detective, sitting there, lounging, taking another hit from that stupid vape of his, as Carl had just put a gun to his own head.

"Detective Cortez?" Vince called out toward the bench, almost not believing his eyes.

The detective smiled and waved, then released the cloud he'd pulled into his mouth from his vape as he rose from the bench. "Question for you, Vincenzo!" The detective called to Vince.

Vince furrowed his brow, put off by Cortez's nonchalant tone. He almost sounded...bored?

"What?" Vince asked. "What? What just happened?"

The detective has now sauntered his way down along the garden path. He admired some of the flora as he went, even going so far as to pluck a lemon free from one of the lemon trees. He nearly took a bite of the thing, but thought better of tasting such a sour fruit. Instead, he tossed the lemon to Vince, up and over the fountain, without warning. Vince barely had enough time to react and catch it, needing to brace the lemon against his body as he hauled it in.

"Why didn't you move, Vince?" Cortez asked.

"Huh?" Vince stared at the lemon in his hand.

"Why. Didn't. You. Move?" Cortez asked again. By now, he's reached around about where Carl's body was lying. He stared down at it for a good while before frowning, then continuing on his unbothered stroll through the garden.

"What do you mean?" Vince finally managed to ask.

Off this, Cortez sighed. He stopped walking and took another hit from his vape. Vince stared at this as the tiny little black stick sat there, slotted in just under the guy's bushy, obnoxious mustache. And, of course the mustache was situated underneath a pair of equally obnoxious aviator sunglasses. But, really, more obnoxious and absurd than either of those things was the outfit! The guy was in a Hawaiian and khakis, with some worn-to-shit boat shoes! He looks like he should be at a pier in Miami! Not here.

"Come on now, 'Cenzo. Answer the question," Cortez said. As he did so, the vapor of his latest inhale flowed out of his mouth, like the smoke from a dragon's maw. "Answer," he beckoned, one last little cloud breaking free.

"I don't understand what you're asking me," Vince told him.

"Oh, come on now," Cortez said. He leaned back and stared up at the sky through his shades, tired of the charade that Vince isn't clued in on. "Really?" Cortez asked. "If Hannah had the time to take the bullet for you, surely you had time to move out of the way. Am I right?"

Vince was on his back foot now. He had...no response for this. Well, almost no response. "Hey! Screw you!" He yelled across the fountain.

"You all will need to try harder than that," Cortez said, sounding bored.

"Huh?"

"The three of you," the detective clarified. "This silly charade you're putting on to get out of the corner you've all painted yourselves into."

Now, Vince was angry. "Screw you!" He shouted again. "Hannah's dead! And Carl—Carl just—"

"Just put on the sorriest performance I've ever seen?" Cortez interrupted. "He shot a blank at you, and then got too afraid of his own blank he was supposed to fire at himself! I watched the whole thing! The barrel of that teeny tiny little revolver of his was aimed skyward!"

Vince was in a stunned silence.

"And don't even get me started on the falls!" Cortez continued. "I've seen better acting at community theater performances. And,

while I'm at it, I could see the blood bag under Hannah's shirt for the past hour! Come on, now!"

By now, Cortez had circled the fountain. He was right next to Vince, and took a long, long inhale from his vape yet again. He exhaled, then asked Vince, "So? What say you, Vincenzo?"

And Vince was stuck there, eye twitching for a moment, until the cloud of the detective's vape finally crashed into his face. Then, he burst out....

"Shit! Shit shit shit shit!"

At that moment, two other groans sounded out from other areas of the garden. And, as they did, Cortez allowed himself to smile. "Knew it," he said under his breath. Behind him, Hannah sat up and tugged at her shirt, as the fake blood had started to congeal and get a bit too sticky for her liking.

"Really?" She asked, incredulous.

On the other side of the fountain, Carl had sat up, too. He threw his snub-nose revolver into the fountain in frustration, and it landed in the water with a sad *plunk*. "How'd you figure it out?" He asked Cortez.

The detective nodded at Carl, understanding. "Sure. Sure. Only fair, I suppose."

He twirled his vape between his fingers, pursed his lips, he wondered how to begin.....

Then, Cortez looked at Carl for a moment, and over to Vince, and finally at Hannah. He pointed the tail-end of his vape at Hannah. "Well, I'd gathered she had been sleeping with Vince on the side. That connection wasn't too hard to make. I mean, frankly, for an affair, neither of you two made very much effort to hide it."

Vince scratched at his elbow, a bit embarrassed.

"Though, that seems in-character when I take into account how you attempted to cover up this murder."

"It wasn't that bad," Hannah protested. "Was it?"

A disappointed nod from the detective gave Hannah her answer. Cortez carried on. "All that being said, though, I don't quite understand how Carl fits into the picture here. I didn't see any signs of blackmail, or extortion, or even threats of a physical nature. And from what I can tell, he's just as much aware of the infidelity as I am. It's rather perplexing."

Now, it's Carl who was a ball of nerves. He tugged at the collar of his own shirt, feeling the heat of the Tuscan summer, and of the detective's inquisitive gaze.

"What is it?" The detective asked him. "It must be something, right? Help me out here. If you really are innocent and are being coerced into this...let me help you. Carl, just tell me."

Carl sighed. Frowned. Tried to say something, but stopped, unhappy with his words. He does this one more time, then, finally forces it out. "I—I—well..."

Cortez held up a finger, giving him pause. "If you lie, I *will* find out. Know that."

Carl seemed to deflate even more than he already had. His shoulders are now sagged, head hung in complete defeat. "I'm..." he inhaled, steeling himself for what was to come. "...I...know about the affair. I'm...into it."

Cortez lit up like a Christmas tree. In fact, he even jumped with joy. "A cuck!" He cried out. "A cuck! It makes perfect sense!" But, quickly, the elation of that final piece of the puzzle slotting into place passes, and the smile on his face fades. Again, he's serious. Grave. Reserved.

"The police are on their way," he told the trio, taking a pull from his vape. He breathed long and deep, the cloud filling his lungs, the work now complete. But still, he felt empty in a way.

It had been an hour or two later by the time the family lawyer had spotted Cortez out front of the manor. He was standing at the edge of the stone drive, where it met the grass, staring out at the cresting green hills of the countryside as they faded further and further into the horizon, eventually blending into the vague shapes of mountains that sat in a haze at the edge of the visible world.

"Grazie, my American friend," the lawyer said as he crossed the driveway. "You've done good work. I owe you much gratitude."

The lawyer stepped gingerly, careful not to kick up any of the brown dust of the gravel driveway that could cling to the bottoms of his suit pants. Eventually, though, he made his way to Cortez's side. The detective seemed disappointed still, his posture slouched. Though

the lawyer couldn't quite make out what was beneath that bushy mustache of Cortez's, it certainly *felt* like it was a frown.

"Hit?" Cortez asked the lawyer, offering the tiny little stick of his vape. The lawyer declined, then shifted on his feet for a few seconds, waiting for a '*You're welcome*'...or something along those lines.

"I, uh, I said thank you for the good work," the lawyer said. "The family appreciates it a great deal."

"There's still family left?" Cortez asked, already knowing the answer.

The lawyer knew, too. And because of this, he was hesitant to respond. He adjusted his tie, though it was already perfectly done, finding some comfort in even the moment of delay he'd bought himself.

"Uh...no," he admitted to Cortez. "Not...not really. Next of kin? That might be the more accurate English expression."

"Right," Cortez sighed. "Figured. Too little, too late. The usual."

The lawyer inhaled to speak, but stopped himself, sensing whatever he would've tried to say likely wouldn't get through to the detective. In all likelihood, this detective had stood in this driveway a hundred times before. This detective had that feeling he was feeling now just as many times, too. This detective had said what he'd said because of those feelings each time, stating them to whatever lawyer from whatever family was listening in that particular instance. And, infallibly, whatever those lawyers told the detective each of those times to try to lift his spirits or change his outlook, it always resulted in this. The same place, the same feelings, the same conversation. Unchanged.

So, the Calabri family's lawyer, intuiting that he would not be the one lucky lawyer in one hundred, did not say what he felt he was *supposed to*. Instead, he cut to the chase.

"Well, regardless of your own feelings about the matter, some things are undeniable," the lawyer told Cortez. "Justice will be carried out. Some closure shall be provided. And, of course, you will be paid in full... even though you may have been hired under false pretenses."

Cortez let through a dismissive grunt, and the lawyer took this as affirmation.

"Excellent," the lawyer said. "Oh, and one last thing. Some reporters were inquiring about the murders, and I had let them know it was solved by a third party. I mentioned your name and they

seemed quite excited about that.”

Cortez raised an eyebrow at that last bit, and the lawyer had a feeling he’d made a misstep. He attempted to straighten his already-straight tie once more.

“The reporters are, uh, on their way here,” he quickly admitted.

Cortez groaned.

The lawyer tried to assuage the detective’s irritation. “Though, I’ve arranged a private car for you, if you’d like.”

Cortez sighed, relieved.

The lawyer’s right hand quickly tapped at the knot of his tie. It was, unsurprisingly, still perfect. “Though, it won’t be here before the reporters, unfortunately,” he said.

Once more, Cortez groaned.