

*Pyrrhic Victories*

Something stared at him. Something sinister.

Ants crawled over his arms, down his back, in an absolute imitation of emotion akin to terror. Suddenly his feet stuck to the ground, his back stuck to his chair. His eyes snapped up and found two yellow beady eyes, wide and definitely fake. It belonged to the old and wrinkled witch standing sentinel on his fellow social worker's desk. The entire office was decorated as such, every wall, nook and cranny crammed with Halloween decor. The holiday peeked around the corner of the next two weeks, and Daniel, for one, was not ecstatic. The entire month, he had been on edge. It didn't help that recently, the news was running rampant with information about some copycat murderer that had been making his way down the east coast. It was all anyone could talk about, fishing for every gruesome detail.

"—iel?" Elizabeth asked, breaking through his fit, her voice worried and tinny over the phone. Sitting in his cubicle, stacks of paperwork strewn across his desk, Daniel felt his eyebrows raise of their own accord. While sad to hear, the news didn't strike him as surprising. Noah Wells, their neighbor of fifteen years, aged gracefully into his seventies, yet age came with nothing if not complications.

"No," Daniel replied, tucking the phone between his shoulder and neck so he could more efficiently shuffle through the folders sitting in his lap. Each one held roughly the same story: children looking for a home, a family, a way out of the life circumstances forced them into. "It's the first I'm hearing of it."

"Well I feel awful," said his wife, and he smiled, practically seeing her pace around the kitchen, one hand on her hip while her brows drew together.

"How about we go over later and check on him?"

Elizabeth paused. "Yeah. Yeah, that's a good idea. I've got to go to the store. Trenton will like getting out of the house, and he can take a nap after."

"Alright. I'll head home in an hour."

"Right. Okay, love you."

"Love you too." Daniel's smile lingered after the call as he busied himself with the folders, organizing the many files of kids staring up at him, begging to be helped. Some days it

seemed impossible, like the number of children who needed aid would suffocate him. But it all seemed a little more bearable, thinking of his family. It was impossible not to smile when picturing his beautiful wife of seven years—her red hair like a flame atop her head, her eyes a deep brown that he continued to get lost in—and his adopted son Trenton, with his childish smile and eyes that held an old soul. His family was proof that good came of his work, that it helped people. It was how he and Elizabeth originally found Trenton. His family was his work and his work was his family. And, really, was there any other way to live?

He finished up paperwork from old cases to finish up the hour, willing the seconds to pick up their feet and move faster. Aside from the terrible news of their neighbor, Daniel could not contain his relief at getting to go home; the next week looked to be smooth sailing considering the office was not as busy during the holidays. Controversial, he knew.

Finally, time skipped over the hour, prompting Daniel to pack up his work and head home, where Elizabeth greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. “Hey, honey,” she led him inside, her smile lighting her face. The hair in her bun almost blended with the red hoodie she wore, her freckles a matching accessory.

“Hey.” He smiled warmly back, throwing his jacket over the couch as he passed the living room and placing his bag neatly on the cushion. Stairs on the other side of him led to the second level, where they could hear Trenton’s soft snores. “How’d it go at the store?”

“Good! Trenton didn’t complain once, but that might have been because I bribed him with ice cream...” Elizabeth led him to the kitchen, where grocery bags covered the white marble countertops of the kitchen like urchins spanning across ship walls. Daniel turned to look at his wife incredulously. She blushed, looking sheepish. “I got a little carried away.”

“Define ‘a little,’” he teased, moving to the closest bag and unpacking its contents. “This is why I usually go with you to the store.” He laughed, full and bright until Elizabeth had to join in. “Should I make Trenton a snack for when he wakes up?”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. I’ll be right back.” She gave him a playful shove, the beginnings of a smile evident on her face. Daniel’s heart swelled in response, seeing his beautiful wife, Trenton’s beautiful mother. Seven years of paradise, and yet it still stayed the same.

He turned back to the bags crowding the kitchen, dedicated to putting them up before he got started on Trenton’s beloved peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. He kept out the needed

ingredients, settling everything else in their rightful place among the fridge and cabinets. Then he set to his task. Just as he was finishing up, Daniel noted that he wasn't alone.

The hairs raised on the back of his neck.

Slowly, he turned, eyes scanning familiar sights of his house. Though at that moment, they looked absolutely menacing. Every painting and portrait on the wall stared back at him, the colors and walls warped and twisted until he settled on a small figure standing on the stairs, one small hand wrapped around the banister as the other wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"Mo'ning," came Trenton's small voice. Daniel smiled absently as he set down the knife, moving to his son. He had always thought Trenton's voice, unlike any other six-year-old's, *felt* older. Though he still sounded like a child, there was something heavy hiding in his words, underlying the childish tone. But what kid wouldn't sound like that, after enduring what he had gone through?

"Hey, buddy," Daniel said, sweeping Trenton up. "You slept well. Did you have a good dream?"

"Didn't dream."

"Okay. Well, you up to go see Mr. Well's dogs?" That seemed to perk him up a bit.

"M hungry."

"Well," Daniel chuckled, "lucky for you, your dad makes the best peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches in the world." Trenton reached for the sandwich with tiny hands, devouring the snack in minutes. Daniel handed him a napkin to wipe the smudges from his face before swinging him up to perch on his hip. Elizabeth came into the kitchen seconds later.

"Ready?" She had changed from a hoodie and sweatpants to jeans and a gray, wool-knit cardigan, her hair spilling down her back in a braid. At Daniel's nod, they left the house, immediately thrust into the picture of an abandoned neighborhood. Every house looked almost identical, the driveways set equidistant from each other and each lawn perfectly manicured. Halloween decorations littered the yards: skeletons and inflatable ghosts, witches and zombies leering out, yet it was absent of people. Everyone was inside, all lights were off. Either that, or they had left. Because of the murders. Because they heard of what was happening to the victims.

Buried alive. What an awful way to die.

"Oh! Hello," greeted a male voice as the front door creaked open to reveal an enthusiastic man, his black hair shot through with gray. His eyes crinkled, breaking into a smile. He himself

wore a dorky Halloween shirt with the pun: creep it real. Daniel felt his shoulders draw in, tension knotting them.

“Hi,” Elizabeth greeted, her energy infectious. “I’m Elizabeth. This is my husband, Daniel, and our son, Trenton. We live next door and we had heard the news—truly awful, we’ve known Noah since we moved here—so we decided to come see how he is?”

The man smiled and opened the door for them, sweeping out a welcoming hand. Elizabeth took Trenton inside and gave a small, “thank you,” and nudged him inside. He shied away a little as they passed the unfamiliar doctor. A pang of sadness shot through Daniel. It had become so much harder for Trenton to trust anyone; it took him and Elizabeth months to get him to open up. Now, whenever Trenton saw someone he thought was a threat, he shut himself off. Daniel followed his family inside, feeling the house close around him like a coffin.

Noah Well’s house had not changed in fifteen years: when he walked through the door, two small rooms on either side showcased an office space and a parlor Noah used for his grand piano. A staircase further in the house separated the living room on the left and the kitchen on the right, and a small hallway broke from the living room for the guest bedrooms and bathrooms. Pumpkins and signs littered the walls and floors. Bats and “cobwebs” hung on the ceiling.

Noah himself sat on a recliner in the living room, surrounded by medical equipment, already showering Elizabeth with compliments. Trenton was already begging to see the dogs.

“Ah! Daniel,” Noah exclaimed, his face alight with happiness even with his situation. “I feel as if I haven’t seen you in ages. Come, sit down,” he held an arm out in reference to the recliner beside his. “You’ve already met Dr. Martin. He’s a splendid man. Quite like you in that way.” He winked with a chuckle.

“Mr. Wells, you shouldn’t move too much,” said Dr. Martin, humor brightening his face, his eyes narrowing on the man.

“How many times have I told you to call me Noah?”

“Sorry, Noah. You shouldn’t move too much; it’ll slow your healing.”

“Secretly he wants that,” Noah said, leaning towards Daniel even as a grimace crossed his face. “Then he’d get to spend more time with me.”

“Well, I must say, Daniel, it was awfully kind of you to visit me.”

“It was no trouble, really. We’ve known you so long; you’re a part of the family now.”

“Which means you are too now, Dr. Martin,” Elizabeth cut in, scooting to one end of the couch across from her husband and patted the seat.

“Trenton, do you want to go play with the dogs?” Daniel asked, wanting to get Trenton out of the room. He glanced at Noah to make sure it was okay, and after getting a nod paired with an enthusiastic “of course!” he led Trenton out to the backyard, where Noah’s two golden retrievers were laying down behind their fence. Trenton seemed to perk up a bit, seeing the dogs, so Daniel walked back inside to find the other adults conversing.

“It’s absolutely awful,” Dr. Martin was saying. Immediately, shock drenched Daniel, who stood frozen in place in the doorway.

“And all of the families said they didn’t know why they were targeted,” Elizabeth chimed in.

“Well, naive people often don’t think they’ll be the victims of tragedy. They don’t believe it could happen to them.” Silence descended after the comment, and Daniel felt the urgent need to leave.

“My ex-girlfriend was really into serial killers,” Dr. Martin clarified. “She made me attend a seminar when we were dating. It was her second favorite subject. After Halloween, of course. That was a major connecting point between us.”

“I love your shirt by the way,” Elizabeth gushed, then continued to talk about the holiday with him. Daniel seemed to float through the night until they left, methodically collecting his son, saying goodbye, shaking Noah’s hand, and then the doctor’s.

His hands were freezing. Daniel had to repress a flinch.

The night continued its uneasy feeling even as Daniel and Elizabeth lounged on the couch, watching one of her sitcoms. When his phone buzzed in his back pocket, that feeling only deepened.

“Hey babe, I’ll be right back, I’ve got to take this call,” said Daniel, finally looking up from the phone. “It’s work.”

“Oh, okay.” Elizabeth’s face drew in on itself, confusion muddling her features.

He stepped outside, hoping the call would be nothing more than a misfiling incident, until his boss greeted him with, “The police have notified us that a serial killer is on the loose.” He was too late to mask the shock on his face; his eyebrows shot to his hairline. “This isn’t any

serial killer either. It's a copycat of the Seer," she said, continuing to rain blows down. "They've contacted us because—"

"Because of Trenton," Daniel cut in, finally finding his voice, though it was no louder than a whisper. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a light flick on from Noah's house. His heart started pounding louder in his ears and he pressed himself against the door, hoping to stay out of sight. He didn't know why.

"Yes. They're offering to put you all in Witness Protection, or just Trenton if you want to stay here. Either way, they suggest you move him far away. The proximity of these murders is much closer than last time, so..." she trailed off, leaving him to think through his options.

"I need to talk to Elizabeth," he muttered before ending the call and rushing back inside.

Daniel had first found Trenton's case four years ago: a baby boy in desperate need of a family, as most cases went. However, looking further into it, Trenton's case became much more gruesome than he could have ever imagined.

He was an orphan to murdered parents. The Seer, they cleverly dubbed him, for his method of finding elderly and ill and burying them alive. The Seer only ever left one note behind. It said that he was showing them mercy. That he was ending their suffering and there was no use keeping people alive when they would be dead soon. But all the killings were over on the west-coast. Daniel, Elizabeth, and Trenton were safe in their small, east-coast town. Especially since they caught the guy off a signed receipt from a restaurant. He only knew because the news happened to be raging about the event; every television in the country seemed to be showing it. The man either received a life sentence without parole or the death penalty.

"Honey? What's wrong?" Elizabeth asked from the couch, her red hair cascading across her shoulder like a river of fire. The living room seemed to mock him.

"We need to talk." Daniel led her to the couch with shaking hands and explained everything his boss had just told him. By the end, his wife was as shocked as him. Her face was as pale as he imagined his to be, her eyes comically wide.

"I don't know what to do."

"Well, we aren't going into Witness Protection." Elizabeth's voice was trembling. "We can call my mother. She lives a few states away, but she would be more than happy to watch over Trenton."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded frantically, her lips pursed into a thin line. Grabbing her phone, she dialed her mother's number. At some point in the conversation, she stood up and began pacing the kitchen. Daniel sat with his head in his hands, his thoughts spinning.

"Mommy? Daddy? What's wrong?" Daniel's head shot up, finding Trenton at the steps the same way he stood earlier.

How much changed in the span of a few hours.

*He looks at the sky. The night sky. With stars. Stars were blinking up in this expanse of black, and it filled his vision. A sea of stars pushed and pulled above him. Beautiful.*

*Something hits his face. Hard and cold, almost frozen. He blinks it out of his eyes, and some gets in his mouth.*

*Dirt.*

*Why is someone throwing dirt at him?*

*More dirt. Then a figure. A silhouette of a man is standing over him with a shovel. More dirt. Why is he shoveling dirt on him?*

*It's the Seer. The Seer is here.*

*He looks to both sides of him. Suddenly, he's in a deep, rectangular hole. Like a grave. He's in a grave. There is dirt all around him. Surrounding him.*

*The Seer shovels more dirt. More. It's obscuring his vision. He's trying to scream for help. He can't. His voice doesn't work. It won't work.*

*His vision's almost gone. He's almost buried. Buried alive. He's alive. The Seer is burying him.*

*One more scoopful of dirt.*

*He's buried. Buried alive—*

Daniel woke up gasping, the sheets tangling around him like ropes ready to strangle him. Like dirt, ready to bury him alive. He leapt out of the bed, sweat coating his skin as the cold air clung to him. On shaky legs, he made his way downstairs and poured a glass of water. It hit the back of his throat with sharp little needles, breaking through the fog of panic. He swore he felt dirt on his clothes. He took a moment to slow his breathing and calm down. When he did, he finally noticed the soft rhythm of a breeze in the house, calm like an ocean wave.

Elizabeth's mother had flown in that day. Trenton had left that day. It was the first night where the boy's room was empty since they adopted him. It was eerily silent, eerily empty.

Something drew Daniel to peek around the corner. Maybe the sudden vulnerability, or the now familiar feeling of eyes on his back.

*Why the hell is the door open?*

The door was cracked. Open. Leaving anyone or anything to simply waltz in their house. Daniel's heart lurched, and he pushed over to the door, each movement lagging like walking underwater. The door was solid under his touch, tethering him to the earth and the night. He moved to close the door, connecting the dots between this and the breeze he felt. Hastily, he moved to close the door, but before he could, his eyes caught a figure standing just out of the radius of a street light. It was unfamiliar, a stranger. And yet they were turned to his house, standing there. Not moving. And when Daniel paused in his motions, he watched as the figure slowly raised a hand.

And waved.

Daniel slammed the door shut, locking it and racing up the stairs. When in the room, he closed the curtains, locking their bedroom door and checking the bathroom and closet to make sure they were empty. Miraculously, Elizabeth did not wake up. Only when he was sure they were alone did he relax.

It only got worse over time. Multiple instances of incidents like finding the door standing open in the middle of the night.

He was going insane. It was the only explanation.

The day of Halloween, when he saw Dr. Martin's car absent from the driveway, he went to visit Noah Wells before work. Surely the old man could impart some wisdom, ease some of his worries.

"Well, son, with all this talk of murders, it's no wonder you're going crazy," said Noah after hearing of his story. "I think you've just got to get away from it all. Of course, it doesn't help that your boy was so close to this serial killer. His biological parents were murdered by him. It's your self preservation instinct," he said. Daniel sighed, feeling as if he hadn't been breathing properly all month. Of course, he was right. No one was targeting him even if he was worried about it. He just wanted to keep his family safe.



“Thank you, Noah,” Daniel said. “How have you been? I came over here and didn’t once ask how you were doing.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble, young man,” Noah crooned. “I’m doing better every day. Dr. Martin’s great company. Asks questions about you lot all the time.” Daniel paused. Something about the question unsettled Daniel, like a wave of uneasiness washing over him, reminding him he wasn’t safe.

“What kind of questions does he ask about us?”

“He just asks all kinds of questions about you, Elizabeth, especially little Trenton. Guess he’s sad he didn’t get to know the little fella’ very well, they really had fun together when you lot came over. Don’t get all worried, there. He’s just humoring an old man. As much as I give your family praise, I’m bound to talk about you all.”

Daniel sat in silence, not knowing how to respond. “Well, I should probably be going. I’ve got to get to work, and then I’m cooking a Halloween dinner for Elizabeth when she gets back from her ‘girl’s night out.’”

Noah beamed at him as he stood. “Good man. Call if you need anything.”

“I will.” He saw himself out, the sun blinding him for a moment. When it finally subsided, the doctor was getting out of his car. Daniel resisted a flinch, not having seen or been aware of the car.

“Happy Halloween, Daniel.”

“Hey, Dr. Martin.”

“You got any plans for tonight?”

Daniel paused before answering, his mind racing ahead of him. In his agitated state, Dr. Martin had never looked or sounded more suspicious. But suspicious for what? *Nothing. You’re overthinking it.* “Nothing much, just staying home.”

“Oh. Well, have fun, and try not to get spooked.” He grinned, a cheshire cat hiding in costume. At Daniel’s expression, the grin slid right off his face. “You know, cause it’s Halloween.”

“Oh.” *He’s just a normal person. Get it together.* “Right. Of course. I’ve got to get to work. Nice seeing you.” Daniel hurried away, feeling that same sensation of eyes burning into his back. But when he looked behind him, the doctor was already gone.

Multiple decorations seemed to jump out at him during his drive to work. An inflatable witch seemed to loom over him, its mouth fixed in a permanent cackle, its nose crooked like a twig, the hat blocking out the sun and casting him into shadows. Skeletons invaded one house, and at once they seemed to turn his way, scrambling over each other to get to him, the bones clacking in a jarringly disturbing way. It was a marvel that he got to work without crashing.

Every coworker passed his desk throughout the day with a cheery greeting and some Halloween-themed attire that only added to his agitation. It didn't help that many were bolstered by it falling on a Friday and marking the end of their week. By the time his boss called him into her office, Daniel was ready to snap.

And by the time he sat down at his desk fifteen minutes later, Daniel felt utterly defeated. He pulled out his phone, dialing his wife's number. The only person who could possibly calm him right now.

"Honey, I've got bad news," he said as a greeting when she finally picked up the phone.

"Oh, no," Elizabeth breathed, the raucous sounds of her friends in the background. Daniel could practically see her thoughts jumping to conclusions. "What's wrong? Did something happen? Are you okay?"

"I'm just fine. But something's come up at work. My boss wants me to stay this weekend."

"Well, can't she get someone else to do it?"

"It has to do with one of my old cases. Another child of the Seer's victims. My boss wants me to work on relocating the boy since his foster family has been sending in complaints about it."

Elizabeth sighed. "Okay." A pause, each millisecond adding to his stress.

"Elizabeth?"

"Someone's outside..." Daniel felt his throat closing up, fully prepared to race to wherever his wife was. "I better go see if it's Trisha. I'll see you when I get home. Love you." She ended the call before he could tell her not to, before he could tell her to stay inside.

Resting his head in his hands, his thoughts ran rampant, papers cluttering his desk. He missed Trenton. Elizabeth did too, he knew. The little boy had been a ray of sunshine in their life, and it was hard to live without him. They tried to call him all the time, but there was always some sort of excuse. Trenton was sick, he was taking a nap, he was playing with the neighbors. It

was almost unsettling. He and Elizabeth had always been enough, but then they became parents. And now, it seemed they would have to be enough for a little while longer.

He picked up his phone and dialed a number, hoping to talk to his son.

It went to voicemail.

Tears pricked Daniel's eyes. It would have been Trenton's first Halloween with them. He wanted to dress up as a pirate. And here he was, sitting at a desk while worrying about a boy that *wasn't* his son. He couldn't find it in himself to care.

Daniel finished talking with Trenton and was in his car five minutes later. It took twenty minutes to drive through the sunset, children already racing down the street with pumpkin baskets. Ghosts, princesses, ninjas, and all sorts of other costumes began to slowly accumulate on the streets. The Halloween spirit was alive tonight. The sun had almost dipped fully below the horizon when he stood on his porch.

The door was locked when he checked it, and his house key wasn't in either of his pockets. Knocking gained no response, either. He decided to call Elizabeth.

He got her voicemail.

"Hey, honey. Just got done with work, I'm home now. Late night out?" A laugh broke out of him, as if to dispel the worry spreading inside him like a poison. "Anyways, call me back. I locked myself out of the house and I want to see you." After leaving the message, he continued to stand on his doorstep, car keys in hand. He debated calling again or waiting outside for her, subjecting himself to pass candy out to the children shrieking "trick or treat!"

Daniel called again, his unease growing. Again, it directed him to her voicemail. He didn't bother to leave a message that time.

Then he saw that Noah's driveway was empty, which meant Dr. Martin wasn't there.

He tried calling the doctor. Maybe he knew. For a reason he couldn't pinpoint, panic began eating at his bones; he knew in his heart something was wrong.

*Rriinnngg...*

*Rriinnngg...*

*Rriinnngg...*

"Hello?"

Daniel gritted his teeth, his instincts screaming at him to find his wife. "Hey, you wouldn't have happened to notice what time Elizabeth left? Or what time she'll be back?"

Struggling to keep his voice even, he ran a hand over his face. The sound of his heart beating in his ears might have drowned out any answer the doctor gave him.

“You could say that.” His heart beat harder, threatening the conversation.

“Okay. I’ve been trying to talk to her, but she won’t answer.”

“She’s... unavailable right now.” Shock hit him like a punch to his stomach. How did Dr. Martin know if she was available? *Why* did he know? “I have to say, Daniel, this was too interesting a chance to pass up,” said Dr. Martin, agitating him even more as he struggled to breathe properly.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You can see for yourself. I’ll send you the address. Call me when you get there.” He rattled off an address followed by a *click*, leaving Daniel reeling, his heart pounding.

A *ding* came next, and when Daniel checked his phone, he almost threw up, almost fell to his knees. Elizabeth was bound in rope and gagged, blood matting her hair from what must have been a head wound.

Another text.

The address, followed by: *You might want to listen to me.*

He was in his car a second after the call ended, headlights piercing the night, racing to whatever nightmare the doctor was set to drop him in. His thoughts raced, blood roaring in his ears. Where was he going? Was Elizabeth okay? *What did that bastard do?*

It hit him when he was halfway there that he needed to call the police. His voice shook as he called them, his fingers trembling around the steering wheel.

“911, what’s your emergency?” said a lilting female voice.

“Please, you have to help, some psycho has my wife. He kidnapped her; I think he’s going to kill her, please you have to help me!”

“Alright, what’s your name, sir?”

“Daniel. Daniel Wells.”

The operator paused. “Sir, you can be thrown in prison for this.”

“*What?*”

“We got a tip from your neighbor that you’d be sending in a fake emergency tonight about your wife. And on Halloween, of all nights. We have enough to worry about. Don’t call again.” The operator hung up, crushing the hope brewing in Daniel’s chest. He let out a string of

curses, feeling a well of helplessness that promised to stay for a long time, lingering in his nightmares. This entire *drive* promised to stay prominent in his memory. He could barely breathe as he found his way to the address, somehow without crashing the car, and stumbled over.

“Oh, dear God,” he gasped, his voice stuttering over the words at the sight before him. With shaky hands, he pulled out his phone. Dialed the number.

Every second seemed to gnaw on his bones, seemed to stretch into eternity and Daniel wondered if he might never escape this moment. If he was to live here, trapped between the rings of the phone and the paralyzing fear subduing his muscles. His eyes stared, bewitched, at the dirt and grass laying under a great oak tree. A shovel leaned against it, dirt clinging to the metal.

“You made it, I assume,” said Dr. Martin. Daniel had never felt such trepidation and such relief at hearing a voice. Such anger, such hatred, and such submission.

“What is this?” Daniel asked, unable to look away from the upturned earth. What a stupid question. He didn’t need to ask.

He already knew.

The doctor chuckled over the line.

“*Where is my wife?*”

“She’s currently unconscious, laying in that grave.” His breaths raced faster, verging on hyperventilation.

“Then—”

“Who’s in the other grave? Finally, asking the right questions!”

“*Doctor—*”

“Alright, alright. I’ll put you out of your misery. In the left grave is your wife. In the other is a child from one of your previous cases. You’ll note the shovel I left for you. They’ve only been under for half an hour, but due to your individuality and the difficulty of your task, you only have time to dig up one of the graves before the other one...”

“Why?” Daniel croaked out, his feet frozen in place. “Why me?”

“Why? Well, I won’t bore you with the details, but you intrigued me. Besides, naive people often don’t think they’ll be the victims of tragedy. They don’t believe it could happen to them.” The doctor taunted him with his words, pointing back to the first conversation they ever had. The signs had always been there. *How had I missed this?*

“And I want to see how you’ll choose. Which one will it be, Daniel? Your family? Or your work? By the way, time is running out the longer you stand here talking to me.”

Daniel hung up, dropping the phone as if it burned him. He glanced back and forth between the graves, only hesitating a moment before leaping for the shovel and attacking a grave. Every minute that ticked by only amounted to his guilt. Dirt slowly piled to the side, sweat rolled across his skin, drenching his shirt and stinging his eyes, but he persisted. For a second, he felt a twisted sense of *deja vu*, remembering his dream.

Periodically, he would glance at the other grave and nearly fall to his knees in despair. There was no way to win. It was his wife or a child. For one, how could he leave his wife to rot? But how could he let a *child* die? He knew in his heart that it was the child he was supposed to relocate. The one he would have worked the entire weekend on. Either of those losses would destroy him. Forever. If he saved Elizabeth, they could move away. Start a new life. Be new people. He could never have his job back, but Elizabeth would be okay. His wife would be okay. *She would never be able to look at me again.* But if he saved the boy... he could still have a purpose. He would never forgive himself for letting Elizabeth die like that, but she would understand, right? She loved to help people as much as he did; it drew them together in the first place. Surely she would understand. She had to. Not that it mattered if she died. *How could I sacrifice my family?*

*How could I give up my career?* Daniel had always felt comforted by his job. He knew good came of what he did. But right now, that helped none.

His arms cramped under the labor, repetitive movements giving enough solidity to space out, to let his breathing grow heavier, to let banic fog his mind until his fingers trembled where they wrapped around the shovel. In that moment, with sweat, blood, and dirt caking almost every inch of him, Daniel vowed that he would never tell. He would never tell anyone what the price was. Never tell them he was the one that chose who paid.

“Oh, God, forgive me,” he whispered, standing in a hole chest deep. Guilt ate his insides, but something good would come from this. Someone would live. Even if he died inside with every scoop of dirt.

Soon after that, he hit something solid. Muffled screams floated up to his ears. The crumbs of dirt still on top rattled from hands pounding on the inside. For a moment, his mind seemed to float free of his body, so fatigued and begging for rest.

*Soon, he told himself. You can rest soon. After this is all over.*

But another voice spoke up in the back of his mind. *You will never be able to rest again.*

*It's almost over.* Daniel put the shovel under the lid of the coffin, pressing with the little strength and energy left in his limbs, until it popped free. With a sudden rush of exhilaration and a sense of finality and doom, he scrambled to get the lid out of the way so he could pull its victim into his arms.

"You're okay," he said, repeating it like a mantra as tears and trauma ran onto his shoulder. "You're okay. It's over. It's all over. I've got you, Elizabeth." His wife sobbed into his shoulder, her red hair splaying around her, dull and matted, but it didn't matter.

She was alive.

Which meant a child was not. Before he could stop himself, Daniel felt tears flowing down his own cheeks, the stress and guilt building to a boiling point. But he couldn't speak his terrible secret.

By some maneuvering, they crawled out of the hole, a sharp pang of realism hitting Daniel when he saw the other grave. Because it truly was a grave now, holding the corpse of a child gone too soon. But it would be okay. Daniel promised himself at that moment that he couldn't give up his job. He needed to help as many kids as he could to serve as repentance for the one he didn't save.

Elizabeth reached for his hand, horror on her face. "Who is that?" Another pang of guilt shot through him.

"It's no one," he said, his voice thick. "Just a diversion. You don't need to worry about it."

Elizabeth looked as if she was going to protest, but before she could, a *ding* pierced through the quiet silence of the night. Daniel's brows drew together as he pulled his hand away from his wife's, grabbing his phone.

A text from Dr. Martin.

*You'll never see me again, so I leave you with the last words of the child you're leaving to rot.*

*You'll want to listen to it. Trust me. :)*

Another *ding* signaled the recording in his texts.

Fine. He would listen to it. Even if he felt like he was giving in to the doctor, even as rage filled and spilled over in him at the audacity Dr. Martin had. Putting a damn *smiley face* at the end of a text where he condemned Daniel's sanity. But he would listen to the recording. He owed it to the child in that grave. Nausea rose in him. He wasn't ready to hear the voice of the child he abandoned. Still, Daniel pressed play, bracing to hear the boy was on the other end.

"Daddy?"

No. *Oh, God, no.*

"I'm scared..."

*Trenton.*

"I can't breathe..."

The recording ended.

Daniel sank to his knees.