**Angel**

She stumbles back with the force of the impact, banging her head against the wood wall. She can already feel the bump forming on her skull, sending a throbbing pulse through her forehead and across her temples, his fingerprints already bruising her arms and face. He comes at her again, slamming her back into that wood wall, his fingers digging into her biceps, nails breaking her fragile skin, and blood drips down her arms. He knees her in the stomach and she doubles over in pain. He knees her in the nose, causing a loud crack and a waterfall of blood to splash across the floor. Sparks flash through her tear-soaked eyes, temporarily blinding her, causing her to fall to the floor. She glances down the seemingly endless hallway and sees the door to the staircase crack open. Her four-year-old daughter, tears trickling from her dowey-green eyes, peeks her plum purple, splotchy face around the corner of the door frame. She shakes her head, trying to get her daughter back into the stairway. As he glares down at her, he notices her not subtle enough movements and turns around, strutting over to the staircase. He swings open the door and grabs the now wailing girl.

“STOP!” she screams defeatedly. “PLEASE! Just stop.”

Her voice fades to a whisper, and he smirks. But she can’t seem to comprehend the hate flashing across his face and she shivers, curling up into a ball. He lets their green-eyed angel go and storms back to her.

He squats down, lowering himself as close as he can so that she can feel his breath on her face.

“Get up,” he says.

“Get. Up.” He hovers over her cowering figure.

“I said. GET. UP,” his voice rising.

“GET UP! GET UP, GET UP, GET. UP!”

 He kicks her. Again, and again, and again, but she lies on the floor, limp, like the rag doll she had as a child. She can hear her daughter whimpering at the end of the hallway. He kicks her one last time, grabs his keys from the dresser and walks out of the house, slamming the door hard enough that the structure shakes. Looking up at her dowey-eyed angel, she knows they need to run.

But she can't.

She can't leave the beautiful man who once looked at her lovingly. She can't leave the man who once stared at their angel adoringly, smiling with green eyes of his own. They were so similar, him and their daughter. They have the same curly, dark brown hair. The same full, pink lips. They even have the same little freckle below their right ear. And of course -- the same strikingly green eyes. The longer she stares at her little angel, the more she realizes that she’ll never be able to leave the memory he left behind. Their options have run low and she's run out of time. Quickly, to buy them a few fleeting seconds, she stumbles to her feet, locks the front door, places their only stairway key in her back pocket, and hides with her dowey-eyed angel in the staircase. As the stairway door shutters closed, she hears the car door slam and his footsteps approaching the front door. She hears the keys jingling and the door fly open, hitting the wall and cracking the plaster that hides the rotted insides of their broken house.

“I know you’re here Elizabeth. You can hide but you'll never leave me. I know you'll never leave. You love me too much. Don't make me get angry again,” he says with a threatening calmness.

The floorboards whine with the effort of holding him up as he begins to prowl, slowly hunting for his prey.

“My little angel, where are you,” he taunts. “Come out, come out wherever you are.”

As her little angel hesitantly begins to step toward the door frame, she grabs her daughter’s waist, firmly placing her green-eyed girl as far away from the stranger on the other side.

“Stay away from the door, baby. Do you hear me? Do not open that door until I come back,” Elizabeth says, her voice quivering.

With a deep breath, she opens the door, stands tall, and watches a wicked smile spread across his devastatingly beautiful face, darkening his haunted eyes. Locking the door to the stairway from the inside and placing the key into the little girl’s tiny hand, she prepares for another attack.

 From the inside of the stairway, the dowey, green-eyed angel could hear her mother screaming and her daddy pounding on something. She didn't understand what was happening. She didn't understand why her daddy was so upset. Her mother's voice cuts off, replaced by a gurgling sound and she covers her ears until all the noises stop.

“Why? Why are you doing this, daddy? What are you doing to mommy?” she cries softly.

Her daddy was suddenly knocking, trying to get her to open the door. The knocking was growing with intensity, getting incessantly louder.

“My little angel, open the door for daddy. Open the door for daddy, baby. Open the door for daddy.”

His voice sharpened, taking on a more alarming tone.

“I said open the door, baby. OPEN THE DOOR,” he said, slamming the palm of his hand furiously against the wood.

There was a bitter, insistent tone in his voice and she didn't know why, but her mother still hasn’t come back yet. She can’t open the door until she hears her mother’s voice, until she knows her mommy is OK.

“WHERE’S MOMMY?!” the little angel shrieks.

She had started crying again but the banging stopped. The dowey-eyed angel could hear her daddy’s footsteps walking away. She could hear the keys jingling and the front door closing and the car starting, but she still didn't open the door. Every noise faded away, falling eerily silent, but she still didn’t open the door. Her mother never came back and she never heard her mother’s voice again, but she never opened the door.

Nobody ever came back.

And she never opened the door.

**Police Report**

Case Number: 010004 Date: 9/13/2020

Reporting officer: Officer Teresa Hoverson

Incident: Double Homicide

 Middle-aged woman, ID-ed as Elizabeth Carringway, found dead on 6783 Hollywood Dr., Winnona, CA, seven days after death. Cause of death: loss of oxygen to the brain, crushed windpipe. Time: 7:42 pm, September 6. Brutally beaten and strangled, lying in a pool of blood 15 feet from the entryway. Face and body is disfigured. Bruises, scars, and wounds are within inches apart. Identified through driver’s license as facial features are unrecognizable. The wall behind the door is broken open, cracks are found in various places along the hallway. Family photos within the house suggest a young child, female, and an adult male, about 34, have disappeared. No vehicles are in the driveway, which suggests the man, most likely the father and husband, took the child and ran. The floorboards creak throughout the house; all doors are unlocked except a small, wooden door beneath the staircase. The knob is loose but stuck, seemingly from the inside. Two officers took about 20 minutes to break the latch and pry open the staircase door; the lock was rusted and stuck to the door frame. Inside is similar to a black, dank cave and needs to be illuminated by multiple flashlights in order to see further than a foot into the area. A foul odor is overwhelmingly strong. About two feet in, an officer tripped over something small. Said officer pulled the object out of the staircase, and it was recognized as the female child, deceased, from the family photographs. Cause of death: starvation and dehydration. Time: 9:27 am, September 9, 2020. The child’s face is badly bruised but shows great resemblance to the assumed father’s photograph. A single key was found clutched in her hand. It is suspected to belong to the room she was found in. She looks to be around three or four years of age; no signs of sexual or physical abuse other than the bruises on her face. The assumed father and husband is still nowhere to be found. He remains the prime suspect; however, given there were no noise complaints or calls from neighboring houses, others may be pursued.