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The Wing Collector

“Hello, Angie.” I greeted the girl who settled in across from me with a smile that she did not return. Even though it was our third session, she was still about as open and talkative as a dead pigeon.

“Hello, Doctor Veres-Torres.” My name came out flat, almost machine-like. I didn’t know why she wouldn’t call me Dr. Kate like the other patients did. She absently fiddled with a rubber band around her wrist, snapping it against the bone like she was trying to block out bad memories. For a moment, that was the only sound in the room. Snap. Snap. Snap.

I couldn’t take another second of it.

“Angie, what do you think we should talk about today?”

She regarded me with her flat stare, her eyes shining dully through her long platinum bangs.

“Are you asking me what I want to talk about or what you want me to talk about?”

I guess I wasn’t surprised by that reaction, given our previous sessions.

“Well, I suppose that this session is about you. So, what would you like to talk about?”

Her gaze moved to slightly behind me, where the light on my laptop’s camera blinked lazily, recording the whole scene. Her eyes were granite hard.

“Anything but Dad.”

I blew a clot of frustration slowly out of my nose. I was a psychiatrist, not a trained interrogator.

“Ok. Can we talk about your wings then?” I asked.

The last person that I had consulted on this case said that I had to lay a trail for her, lead her into talking about her dad through other means. In this case, it was the wings. Her eyes slipped from my face to behind my left shoulder, where one of my wings lay draped against the back of the chair. She seemed to dissect it with her gaze, running over my bone structure. A glance at the carpet led her to one of my feathers, resting near her feet. Taking it in between two fingers, she twirled it, watching it joylessly but with a certain measure of satisfaction. I couldn't help but stare at the soft white and speckled gray as it fluttered in her hand.

“I always thought that I would grow feathered wings.” She said, her shoulders pressed near her ears.

I turned my clipboard face down on my knees and assume the position; leaning towards her like a child waiting to be told a story. Angie shifted, and I could hear bandages softly rustling against the back of her shirt.

“I mean, everybody has this dream when they're growing up, you know? Of what your wings are going to look like. I used to draw them all the time. I would draw myself, and then draw a pair of wings on. It was like playing dress up.” I nodded encouragingly as she continued.

“I grew them really late, you know. Most girls get them around twelve, fourteen, maybe. I didn't get them until I was sixteen. I was always getting made fun of, told that I just wasn't going to grow them. That terrified me, never having wings.”

It wasn't an uncommon fear; there was, after all, a small percentage of the population that never grew wings. That percentage included her father.

"How did your dad feel about that?" I asked.

For a moment, I thought she'd shut down, but surprisingly, she answered my question.

"It upset him. But he always told me that I didn't need wings to be beautiful."

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"I can't believe she hasn't said anything yet." Detective Archer Lane vibrated behind his desk, his fingers tapping out arpeggios on his bouncing knees.

I shrugged, and he scowled at me. "It's been three sessions already, Kate."

I returned his scowl.

"What do you want me to do, put on the thumbscrews? I can't make her say anything she doesn't want to say."

His wings, oblong and diaphanous like a dragonfly's, fluttered restlessly against his back. They hummed against each other, punctuating his sentences.

"Does she at least talk about her father? What her home life was like with him?" he asked. Now he was grasping at straws as if the only thing that proved his case was my patient. Not like the trophy room full of preserved human wings wasn't proof enough.

"She talks about him sometimes. But never in a bad light. That girl idolizes him." I said. A shudder slithered between my vertebrae, and I felt my wings against my back more than I ever had.

“He took her wings, Kate! Daddy Dearest came home one day, hugged his daughter, and then cut off her wings, the wings she had only had for about a year. You know we still haven’t found them? God knows what he did with them!” the detective slumped back in his chair, hands still fiddling relentlessly.

“I know, and it’s awful, but you can only charge him with things you can prove. She won’t talk about it.” Lane sprang from the confines of his chair like a pissed off Jack-in-the-box and hurled the case file across my desk. Crime scene photos splash out. I forced myself to look at them; the bodies, his saints, laid in churchyards with their hands clasped over their bloodied hearts. The wings carefully preserved and mounted like the antlers of conquered deer. The photo of his wife and daughter, behind which he stashed the driver’s license of each and every victim. Except for one. Lying across from the photos was a small shot of Angie, clipped to the folder over her initial report. The one that said she didn’t remember anything. The one I wish they would have just accepted.

“We need to get him for all of them. Not just the ones in the churchyards. Not just the ones who we can match to their wings. All of them. We need to nail that bastard for every single one of them, all thirty-four of them!” the detective slammed his fists against my desk, and I saw the haunted look he’d gotten in his eyes.

“For her especially, we have to get him.”

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Angie sat across from me again, playing with an unlit cigarette in between her fingers. I wondered how long she’d been smoking. She’d relaxed with me somewhat, but not enough to say anything.

“I want to talk about your mother,” I said, shuffling the papers in my lap. She stiffened, her eyes narrowing and her mouth becoming a small, pale line. She’d never mentioned her mother before; I guess because it must have upset her father.

“She died when I was little.” She said bluntly. The side of me that worked for the police said not to let her get away from this that easy.

“How little?” I asked. It must have been in the file, but I didn’t really take the time to look it over all that carefully. I wanted Angie to tell me herself.

“I was seven.” At least she gave me straight answers when I asked for them.

“Were you there when it happened?” I asked. She threw herself back against the chair.

“You have the file. You know.” She said. Ok, so she didn’t like talking about Mom. Then again, she didn’t like talking about anything. We sat in silence for a second, then she spoke again.

“They’re going to lock up my dad, aren’t they?” Her tone is dignified and resigned; she knows the answer.

“Yes. For a long time.” I said. She flicked her cigarette, still unlit, into the wastebasket.

“Why do you think he did it?” she asked. I couldn’t place the look in her eyes when she asked, but it made the air in the room feel cold.

“I don’t know.”

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“I need you to go and see him.” Detective Lane cornered me as I leave my office. I nearly spilled my coffee all over my briefcase.

“Why me? You’re the detective!” I protested. I admitted to myself, but only to myself, that I was really uncomfortable with the idea of sitting across from the man who chopped off his own daughter’s wings.

“Exactly. I’m a cop. The enemy. No way he’s going to talk to me. But you are a civilian psychiatrist who is treating his daughter.” I silently put quotation marks around the word “treating”.

“What do you want me to grill him for?”

The bouncing detective deflated at my obstinate response to his request.

“I think he has information about the mother that might get the girl to talk.” He said. Of course. It was all about getting Angie to talk like she was a prisoner of war from a hostile country instead of the victim of her own father’s madness. I squared my shoulders, trying to reassure myself about the measures taken in prison to keep visitors safe from the inmates.

“I’ll go. But only because Angie wants to know how he’s doing.”

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I was admitted into the prison the next day, placed in front of a dingy Plexiglas window, and told to wait. A few minutes later, they brought a diminutive man in an orange jumpsuit to the other side. I picked up the phone, and he mirrored me.

“Hello, Mr. Grayes,” I said. He regarded me with blue eyes, pale and benevolent.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ve met. Who are you?” he asked in a soft, lilting voice. It unnerved me that the Wing Collector looked like a sweet man who taught third grade, not a crazed serial killer.

“My name is Doctor Kate Veres-Torres. I’m the psychiatrist who’s treating your daughter.” His eyes brightened at the mention of her. How could this man have taken his daughter’s wings?

“Angie? How is she? Oh, god, she must think that I’m a monster...” he hung his head, revealing a shiny bald spot.

“She’s doing well physically, but emotionally... well, none of us are really sure. That’s actually why I’m here.” He cocked his head as I continued.

“Angie refuses to talk about how she... lost... her wings. I think that keeping that bottled up is doing more mental damage than we could ever realize.” He stared at me for a second longer, and then realization bloomed on his face.

“Oh, no, you think I took them from her, don’t you? No, no, I could never lay a finger on Angie! I mean, sometimes, maybe I wanted to take them off of her, free her from them, but no! I could never hurt her.” His eyes filled with tears and I felt my own grow damp.

“Why did you do it, Mr. Grayes?” I asked. His eyes glowed when he spoke.

“She died without her wings.” He said, so softly that I could barely hear him over the phone.

“You mean your wife?” I asked. His face crumpled, limp as a popped balloon.

“Yes. They didn’t even find them in the wreckage. It was like they were torn from her and sucked into another dimension.” I nodded. The file said that Lilith Grayes died in a car accident that had left her in bad shape.

“So...you tried to find her some wings, Mr. Grayes?” he nodded, hiccupping softly and pulling a crumpled handkerchief from somewhere in his jumpsuit to dab at his face with.

“There were none that really matched, but I thought... if I searched hard enough, I would find the perfect pair for her. But she didn’t like any of them. They weren’t HER wings.” I felt a pang of twisted sympathy for this man, who had killed and mutilated so many people, all for the woman he loved.

“Did you ever find her some wings that she liked?” I asked. When he looked back at me, Thomas Grayes had been replaced by the obsessive persona of the Wing Collector.

“No. I failed her. I tried everything, made sure that they were perfect. But she wanted her own. I understand, I suppose. If you lose an arm, how could you replace it with anyone else’s?” he mused. A thought struck me that sent a worm of horror slithering down my spine.

“Did Angie’s wings look anything like her mother’s?” I asked as a fist sized knot developed in my stomach.

“Somewhat, yes. They had the same coloring; black and white with blue undertones, like a magpie. But Lilith had more white, and Angie’s were more speckled.” He said immediately. How long must he have spent, just admiring his family’s wings?

“Did Lilith like Angie’s wings?” He clapped a hand over his mouth, instantly that gentle third-grade teacher again.

“Absolutely not! Lilith adored Angie, she could NEVER ask anybody to hurt her like that...” His eyes scanned the visiting area furtively before he continued. “People were jealous of my Angie, you know. Her wings were so beautiful. Maybe, maybe someone found out about what I was doing and...” he buried his face in his hands, taking long, shuddering breaths that fogged up the glass that separated us.

“You think a copycat did this to Angie?” I asked. Part of me wished that that were the case, but it all seemed too neat and tidy to be truth.

“Well, I didn’t do it. If I had I certainly wouldn’t have done it the way it was done.” He sniffed, blowing his nose into the handkerchief. That information took a second to wind its way around my brain. The doctors had said that Angie’s wings had been dislocated and partially torn off before they were cut to

finish the job. Every pair of wings that Thomas Grayes had taken were carefully removed and preserved; damage like what had been done to Angie's wings would have been an insult to his art.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Grayes. Would you like to send any messages to Angie?" I asked softly. He looked up, using his sleeve to wipe away the thin fog on the glass.

"Just tell her... tell her that I'm sorry. And that she's beautiful, with or without the wings. Make sure she knows that, please, Doctor?" I swallowed the lump in my throat and nodded. As they led him back to his cell, I could hear him mumbling to himself.

"Oh, my Lilith... And now my Angie too... they clipped my angels' wings..."

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"Well, of course, he's lying." Detective Lane said, craning his neck as he fixed his tie in the reflection off the window.

"That man isn't capable of hugging his daughter too hard, let alone tearing off her wings," I said. I did not go through six years for a master's degree just to let Archer Lane brush me off.

"Kate, that man in there, he abducted 34 people, cut off their wings and stabbed them through their hearts. You don't think he could do it one more time?" He looked at me like he'd scored a point. I hated that look.

"But the method in which he removed the wings was different with Angie! They were ripped from their sockets and then cut off. He's never tortured any of the rest! What do you always say about serial killers?" he glared at me; it wasn't often that people used his own words against him.

"They don't break their pattern." His shoulders slumped, then squared again.

” It’s always different when they kill someone close to them.” He rubbed his hands over his face like he had just gotten out of bed. “Thomas Grayes killed 34 people and tore off his daughter’s wings. With or without her testimony, he’s getting the needle, no question. It’s your choice whether you help us along or hinder us and drag this out for Angie.” He left the room. I was left to stalk back to my office to prepare for the trial.

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“I want to see him.” Angie sat on one of the hard chairs outside the courtroom, balling the hem of her black dress into her fist.

“I don’t know if that’s possible,” I said. Her forehead set determinedly and her chin jutted out; she wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“He’s my dad. And I want to see him.” She said just as Detective Lane came around the corner. She turned her head so her request would reach him as well.

“I think we can arrange that. But you’ll only have a couple of minutes.” He said, shifting in his sneakers. Angie nodded curtly to him, then turned back to me.

“Will you come with me?” my stomach thrashed and twisted, but I agreed.

We walked into a small office next to the courtroom, and a moment later, Mr. Grayes was escorted in. his hands and feet were still chained like he was in prison, but he was dressed in a threadbare gray suit with a black tie covered with roses. I saw Angie smile; I think for the first time.

“You’re wearing my favorite tie!” before the bailiff could stop her she threw her arms around her father’s neck. He pressed his face into her hair and closed his eyes. Once we were seated, he started asking her questions.

“Angie, my girl, how are you? Who’s been taking care of you?” he asked, concern furrowing his brow.

“Aunt Mae and Uncle Orin, Dad. They’re doing pretty well, even though Aunt Mae cries whenever she looks at my back.” The man across the table looked like he’d never be happy again.

“What happened to your wings, Angie? Who took them from you?” he asked, reaching over the clasp her hands in his own. Her brow knit with confusion.

“Dad, nobody took them from me.” Behind the one-way glass, I could sense that Detective Lane was now holding his breath.

“What happened then, sweetheart? This lovely psychiatrist says you won’t talk about it.” He gestured to me. She looked over at me, then back at him.

“Yeah. I wanted to tell you first.” Dread wrapped its cold fingers around the room and stopped everyone’s breath. She smiled at him, the smile of a proud daughter.

“I gave them to Mom.”

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They exhumed Lilith Grayes just after the first snowfall. I walked across the peaceful churchyard, my boots crunching against the fresh powder, my hands shoved into my pockets. It couldn’t be true, I told myself.

She said she had crushed them underneath the garage door at their house, then used a kitchen knife to hack off the rest.

I approached the hole where a coffin had once rested, looking black and forbidding against the white ground, and the undertakers stood by, leaning on their shovels and blowing into their hands to warm them.

Detective Lane was standing next to them, looking down at the silver coffin that they'd pulled from the earth.

She had wanted to be one of his saints, she had said. Saint Angie. She had wanted to impress him.

I put a hand over my mouth to prevent myself from vomiting as they levered the lid off of the coffin. As the scene inside was revealed, one of the undertakers did a lopsided pirouette and lost his lunch onto the frozen ground.

On either side of the husk of Lilith Grayes were two black and white wings, folded neatly as if they belonged to her. The torn, bloody ends stained the white velvet underneath the corpse a deep red. The entire thing smelled of wet feathers and frozen dirt. Detective Lane looked down at the coffin, his face pinched in like he was trying not to cry, scream, or puke.

“Oh, my god... she actually... oh my god...” he said, his wings folded tight against his back as though he were protecting them.

“She finished it for him,” I said, looking down at the desecration that lay before us. I noticed one more detail before I walked away, one detail that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Lilith Grayes looked so peaceful wearing her daughter's wings.