

Scott Marks knelt upon the cold ground. December in Ohio could be awful, but today the sun graced him with what warmth it could bring. There were even a few bird songs in the air as he gently brushed away some dead leaves from the marker. He'd come here many times in the last twelve years, since the day he laid his only child's body in this small plot of earth. The marker was bronze, laser etched with his favorite picture of her holding a carnation. Above the etching, the vital statistics read "Carrie Marks Born November 16, 1981~Died December 25, 1998 Heaven claimed another angel."

The agony shot through him as the events of that day flooded his mind. The call from the police that they'd found her body stuffed in a garbage bag. She'd been missing for three months, after a quick call home to say that she was meeting her best friend Claire at the mall, and that she'd be home right after they were done shopping. She never called again. They found her car a few days later, abandoned and torched in an empty field. Inside, Scott knew . . . he felt it, but always held out hope. A hope that was ripped from him a few weeks later when the forensic evidence led police to the run-down trailer of Karl Densmore.

Karl had a record dating back almost as long as Carrie had been alive, for petty theft, grand theft, assault, and even a rape charge that couldn't be prosecuted, due to what the authorities called "lack of evidence." Namely, the victim disappeared. How someone with his rap sheet was still walking the streets was a testament to the failure of America's legal system. "Mister Densmore can be rehabilitated" was the recurring theme in the paperwork. All he needed was one more chance. That last chance the system gave Karl took Scott's pride and joy. The police found Carrie's driver's license, her purse, and the diamond necklace Scott had given her on her sixteenth birthday. They arrested him and questioned him for days. He claimed to have found the items by the side of the road, near the field they found Carrie's car in, sticking to that tall tale until the forensics team found traces of Carrie's blood on the base of a heavy brass lamp in his bedroom.

"Yeah, well, the bitch wouldn't shut up," was all he had to say when the detectives presented him with that bit of evidence. "They never shut up till I shut 'em up." That statement told police that Karl had probably done this before, a fact that proved itself six times during their investigation. The evidence was strong, but they needed a body. All Karl would do when they questioned him was smirk. Finally, he offered a deal. "Tell you pigs what? I'll give you sweet little Carrie's body, for no death penalty. I'd love to live the rest of my life on the fuckin' taxpayers' dime." What Karl didn't know was that the authorities had been able to find two of the other victims' bodies, and DNA pointed right at him as the killer.

"Alright," the prosecutor said, hiding the fact that he just went all in with the nuts. "Deal. The father just wants to bury his daughter."

"Aww, well, ain't that sweet. I think I'm gonna cry." Karl said.

He gave them Carrie's exact location. Luckily, the weather had been brutal that fall, with temperatures colder than normal. That preserved her well enough for them to make a positive ID. The DA kept his word, and Karl was not given the death penalty for Carrie's murder. That deal didn't extend to the other two girls, so Hell would get its due.

A passing car brought Scott out of his memory, and he brushed away a tear, managed a smile, and took a deep breath. He'd been considering what to say on this day for twelve long years. That's how long Karl had been able to stretch out his appointment with Hell, what with appeals and Amnesty groups vying for a reduction in his sentence to life without parole.

Scott cleared his throat, looked up at the sun, nodded, and looked back down at the picture of his little girl.

"Hi sweetie," he began. "I watched a man die today. Thought it might give me some sense of closure in this nightmare. Baby girl, it isn't supposed to be this way, a parent cleaning off the gravestone of his child. It's not right. You ask so many questions, and the thing is, all you get is silence. I mean, if God would just come and say, 'Hey Scott....sorry for your loss, but you gotta understand . . . shit happens.' . . . Anything, even if it's what I don't want to hear, is better than silence."

Wiping another tear, he continued. "But I guess we're supposed to come up with our own answers, our own solutions. When you lose a child, no matter how, it's like a slow suicide. Each Day you wake up, a small piece of you dies. How I wanted the man who did this to you to pay, to feel the agony of my loss. I've carried it with me all this time. Honey, your life was being written in the pages of my mind and now . . . I'm left with an unfinished book, one that has to stay just like it is. So much won't happen, but again, so much did. You squeezed a lifetime into seventeen short years. I'm thankful for them. As much as I hate what happened to you, as I watched the man who did this lie strapped to that table, watched as the lethal cocktail did its work . . . I thought 'he's somebody's son, no matter how evil a man he had become,' and who cried for him? Who clutched at their chest when the most precious gift of all was taken from them? No one. He died as he lived, alone and unloved, unwanted by anyone. And that, my precious little girl, is a tragedy. I don't know that I have forgiven him; I'm not sure that's my place, but I have forgiven myself. And I promise you today that I will not die anymore. I love you, sweetie, and I miss you. The hole in my heart will never close, but I won't allow it to get any bigger."

As he rose, he blew a kiss to the stone, then looked up at the azure sky and smiled. "Today, I live," he said, as the songbird's music followed him to his car. He drove away, wearing a smile for the first time in twelve years. He'd be ok.