

BENEATH THE AGED OAK TREE

Copyright © 2017

All rights reserved.

For mid-April, it was colder than usual.

Daniel walked with his hands jammed into his jacket pockets, chin tucked beneath his neck guard and eyes focused on the frosted grass that crunched beneath his boots. A frigid breeze blew through the branches of a nearby sapling as he hiked toward the top of the hill. When he reached the fifth row on the hill's incline, Daniel pivoted on his heel, the ever-expanding matrix of stones stretching out below him.

He remembered coming to this place when he was just a boy, with his mother guiding him by the hand. The first few trips they'd made together, her eyes had been stained with tears that couldn't seem to stop flowing. It didn't matter that he let her hug him until he couldn't breathe. It didn't matter that he told her it was all going to be okay. She would cry anyway. After a while, that passed. Instead, every time they came, she would wear a stony sort of expression that only broke when she said his father's name.

Whenever that one word came out of her mouth, she would smile for the briefest of moments. She would tell the silence about what had happened in her life since the last time she'd visited three-hundred sixty-five days before, about how much Daniel had grown in the past year, about how their five-year-old son received his first kiss from little Elizabeth on the Peterson's back porch during the neighborhood block party, about his first day of kindergarten, about the little things. Then after she was through talking to no one, his mother would fight past her tears, and she would stand up and say, "Daniel, let's go home and have some ice cream. Doesn't that sound nice, honey?"

He always nodded in response and walked away with his hand in hers, looking back over his shoulder to see if his father would tag along behind them.

A few times he'd sworn his father was standing there beneath the shade of the oak tree along the cemetery fence, his Army uniform as clean-cut and pristine as it had been when he was alive. Daniel insisted his father had spoken to him those times, somehow. His mother never believed him, but he knew.

"Son," his father would say in that Boston twang of his as joined his son by the stone, "it's harder for some of us than it is for others." It was a whisper in the back of Daniel's mind, gentle and deep, just like he remembered his father's voice sounding before he fell asleep at night.

But after those first couple visits, Daniel returned to find the spot beneath the oak empty aside from the leaves that lie scattered through the dirt.

As he walked now, Daniel saw the events of all those years flash before his eyes, an incomprehensible blur surrounding the things he could still remember.

He didn't feel any different. The grass still made the same faint rustling sound it did when he used to chase Lucy along the fence, her laughter like the melodic descant of wind chimes. The sunlight still felt the same as it warmed the back of his tattooed neck, the wind still calming as it caressed his skin.

Daniel reached the middle of the row and passed a young woman carrying a watering can in her arms. With her blond hair tied back in a braid that slung over her left shoulder and her sleeves rolled up to the elbows, Lizzie looked just the way he remembered her.

Eyes reddened, Lizzie walked past him toward the water spigot without acknowledgment, bending at the waist to fill her container.

Daniel paused along the pathway and watched her.

While she waited, Lizzie fiddled with her braid and trained her eyes upon the ground. Her shoulders shook every few seconds, burdened with something Daniel knew all too well. His feet nudged his body forward until he found himself standing behind her.

He didn't ask why she was crying. He didn't ask what was wrong. Thousands of people had asked him those questions when they'd already known the answers. It was like the cruelest form of torture, he thought, having to explain why you couldn't seem to smile anymore. It was easier, suffering alone. So instead he placed his outstretched hand on her shoulder and trailed his fingers down her upper arm, halting at her elbow.

She took a deep breath, but didn't turn her head. "You always loved my hair like this," she said through her silent tears. "'Lizzie,' you'd say, 'If you keep wearing your hair like that, I won't be able to keep my hands off you.'" At her feet, the watering can started to overflow, but she didn't move to turn off the tap. She stood there and let the water trickle down the hill onto the road. "Jesus. I haven't worn it this way in months, but..." She put a hand to her mouth and slowly sank to her knees in the wet grass. The pink fabric of her skirt darkened as it absorbed the water, but she didn't seem to care.

Daniel stood behind her, his thighs brushing against her back.

"When Lucy said she wanted to visit you again today, I...just went and braided it. I didn't really...God, honestly I...I don't know what I was thinking."

Daniel swallowed and knelt down on the ground beside her, wrapped his arm around her. "Lizzie, I—"

"What am I supposed to do now, Dan?" Lizzie's hands tightened around clumps of bedewed grass. She bent her head back toward the open sky and stared at some point far beyond the clouds. A broken laugh curled her lips into a smile. "I can't finish that damn tree house on my own. Last time I tried to help you I nailed my shirt to the floor. It's been sitting there all this time, you know. Just sitting there. And I can't even go into the garage anymore because I'm afraid to look at that heap of scrap metal you call a car...the one you were fixing up just for me. I can't go back into that house and sleep in that lopsided water bed and stare at the place where you're supposed to be and know you won't...that you won't be there anymore. I can't fall asleep without hearing that stupid fan you always had blowing in my ear all night or feeling you there beside me..." Her tears stole away the air in her lungs, and she choked on her next breath.

With numb fingers Daniel stroked her shoulder the way he always used to when Lizzie grew upset. "Angel, I'm still here..." he whispered against her neck. His voice sounded foreign in his ears. "I'm right here."

"God...your smile was just...it was infectious." Her smile wavered. "Especially when you'd do it to get me to make you breakfast. You couldn't cook to save your life. I can't...*Dan*..." His name was no louder than a breath. "I can't do this..."

Lizzie's lip trembled when his arm fell away.

"You have to, Angel," he said, though he knew she could not hear. He placed a kiss on her temple. "You don't have a choice anymore." Then he walked away, cresting the hill.

At the top of the hill, from his place beneath the aged oak tree, Daniel saw his little girl. She had on the most adorable jumper with flowers stitched into the fabric, growing from a point along the hem near her left knee. The shirt she wore beneath the jumper had stripes of violet and cerulean to match the buds that bloomed on her dress. Lizzie had sewn that outfit when she was eight months pregnant, just before he left.

With her knees gathered up to her chest, the child sat on a wooden bench that looked out over the cemetery, chin pressed against her knees and eyes focused on one of the graves, on the name etched into the marble.

"I miss you," she said, so quietly Daniel thought he had imagined it.

"I miss you, too, Luce." Daniel took a step closer. God, he thought, she looked so much like Lizzie. "What are you doing here all by yourself?"

Lucy pointed in the direction from which Daniel had come. "I'm not all by myself. Mommy's down there. Getting water to give the flowers a drink."

Daniel approached the bench and sat down beside her. "Aren't you cold? It's chilly out. You should be wearing a coat."

"I don't want one," she said. "I want you. You can make me warm."

Daniel wrapped an arm around Lucy's curled-up body, and the child relaxed into his warmth, clutched at the hem of his Army jacket and buried her face into his stomach. For a while they just sat together listening to the birds. Then Lucy asked a question.

"What is it like?"

Daniel stared at the gravestone in front of them. "What's what like, Luce?"

"Going away," she said. "Some man came to our house with a flag one day and said that about you. He said you went away and you weren't coming back. But he was lying—that man." She stared at his lap and scooted closer. "You didn't go away. You're back, just like you promised."

"I'm not back for long, honey," Daniel said with a sad smile. "Just long enough to say goodbye."

Her auburn braids whipped around as she buried her face deeper into his uniform and tightened her little arms around him. A low whimper left her quivering lips. "Why?" Her soft, melodious voice trembled when she swallowed.

Daniel couldn't answer her.

Tears darkened the fabric near Daniel's Purple Heart, and for a moment he was reminded of all the blood. The panic. The pain. The darkness that swallowed him whole as the rest of his world shattered around him. But with his daughter in his arms again, with his Heart now in her hands, he felt at peace and the blood remained a dream, a distant memory of a life he could hardly remember living anymore.

Sniffling, Lucy peeked out from her refuge. She caught sight of her mother walking up the path with the watering can. She turned back to Daniel, confusion in her eyes. "But Daddy, you can't go," she said, the Heart in her hands catching the light of the sun. "What will me and Mommy do without you?"

"That's easy, sweetheart." Daniel placed a kiss upon the crown of her head. He wrapped his fingers around her clenched fists and, with his eyes on the horizon, he murmured, "You will remember me."