Dead Ringer

“Whatcha doin’ out here, Zeke?”

My gut jumped north a little. Miss Lisa came to sit beside me on the short brick wall. She wiped sweat pearls from her brow, then shook her off-white cap at the cold night air.

“Go on home, Miss Lisa. This ain’t no hour for a young lady to be out.”

I watched her with a side-eye, and I knew the face she was making. She huffed a breath out of pursed lips, like a horse would.

“Ain’t no hour. I only just got Lil’ James to sleep, then I come to fetch water at the town wall. Reckon when I get back, that lil’ bastard’ll be wide awake again.”

I had to laugh. Miss Lisa had her ways, and words were one of them. She nudged my elbow, her warm side hitting my skin. I shivered, stone cold. Cold as the couple of hundred people deep in the earth behind us, I reckoned.

“Settin’ down outside the wall ain’t no safe place, Zeke.”

I turned. The shine of the grey half-moon caught Lisa’s eyes. I could make out the dark outline of my long face looking back.

“If you really believe that, you ought not ta be out here with me.”

The tall town wall was about a dozen steps beyond Miss Lisa, across the thick track of dirt that brought cattle and carts into St Augustine day and night. Through the gated arch, a slim figure climbed poles to put out the gaslit street lamps. Midnight. I shuffled along the bricks, the hairs on my bare arms standing up.

“Well you’d better go put Lil’ James back in his bed, since you’re so sure he’s up. Your Mistress ain’t gonna like it if her kid’s wild at Witching Hour.”

Miss Lisa had been watching the lamps go out too, but she still made that horse noise again.

“Damn fool woman don’t know nothin’ about raising her own kids.” She turned half-way back, eyes fixed on the sea ahead of us. “What’d these white folks do without us, huh?”

If only she knew. Two cold fingertips walked their way up the bones of my spine. When I snapped my head around, there was no-one there to own them. I shrugged off the feeling, my eyes scanning the field of dirt enclosed by the four short brick walls. Headstones broke the earth in uneven rows, some newer than others. A hundred cold, dead souls waiting in the silent ground. A wave crashed ashore, and Miss Lisa let a shaky breath go.

“You wanna walk down to the bay?”

I shuffled off a little again, and this time my shadow came with me, that shine back in her eyes. I shut mine, brows tight.

“Lisa, it’s midnight. Go home, for the sake of God. I ain’t out here to be sociable.”

She nudged me harder. Her arms were thick with carrying other people’s children, but her elbows were sharp as arrowheads.

“Then what *are* you out here for? You didn’t ever say.”

“Unlike you, I’m obeying my orders.”

My gut clenched no sooner I’d spoken.

“Your orders?” Miss Lisa hopped off the wall, sidling her way between me and the sea. “Who you got orders from, Zeke? Mr. Barker passed three days ago.”

Passed was a kind way of putting it, but I didn’t dare say so. Barker’s voice rattled my mind, telling me what a fool I was for opening my mouth. I got to my feet, holding an elbow crook out.

“Lemme walk you back to the gate.”

Miss Lisa hooked me in, warm and thick against my scrawny, frozen bones. I heard a crunch and a rustle under my sleeve. I paused, my throat dry, but Lisa just went on talking. She looked up, the moon locked in her eyes again.

“You comin’ back to town with me?”

I sucked in a sigh. “I can’t.”

Lisa spun us, yanking me down so we were sitting back where we started.

“Then I ain’t going.”

“Goddamit woman.”

I wrestled my way out of her arm-lock, adjusting my sleeve back to how it should be. “Why can’t you let me have my business?”

How long had it been since the lamps went out? Ten minutes? Fifteen? I chanced a look back into the cemetery. The earth was still. Lisa’s glare burned hard on my cold cheek.

“Does that fool-ass Barker have you watching over his grave? What does he think people are gonna do to his body? They already dropped him from the gallows.”

My brain sparked. “Yeah, that’s it. He’s afeared people might meddle with his bones.”

Another horse huff. “Damn dead fool.”

“He upset a lot of people when he was alive, Lisa. Your Master, for one. Everyone put money into Barker’s Bank.”

Lisa closed in, her white grin wide.

“I’ll bet you know what he did with all that money he stole, don’t you?”

I shut my eyes tight. Deep in my gut, something small and shaky was getting bigger. I tensed every muscle to keep myself still. It had to be twenty minutes past now.

“He spent it, Lisa. Gambled every damn penny away, and the town hanged him for it. But he was my master and this was his last request. Barker was good to me, Lisa.”

“’Course he was. You didn’t have no money for him to take.”

My eyes flickered open. The faint shape of a boat had appeared on the crest of a nearby wave. My eyes burned hard on it. *Don’t you come closer. Don’t you goddamned dare.* I curled my fists, knuckles poised to crack. I turned to Lisa, my lips parting.

A bell rang.

“Jesus Lord!” Lisa leaped off the wall, clutching her apron. “You hear that? Where’d that come from?”

I widened my eyes. I ought to have jumped with her, tried to look more surprised. Barker’s rage echoed in my head again.

“I told you to go on home. Cold, dark cemetery ain’t no place for you. You getting’ yourself spooked.”

Lisa folded her arms tighter. “I ain’t gettin’-”

The bell rang again, more forceful this time. Lisa jumped clear off the dirt. I swallowed hard at the lump in my throat, but it stayed put. She pointed at me, her finger shaking.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t hear it this time, fool.”

Silence damned me. I had no clever answer for the high-pitched ring from the dirt field. Lisa’s quaking hand went back into her apron. She pulled something silver out with a slow draw. The long, sharp shape glittered by the moonlight.

“A knife? What in the hell are you doin’ with one of those, Miss Lisa?”

Her eyes were trained beyond me, her round features tight.

“It’s like you said. This ain’t no safe place. Woman gotta protect herself.”

I glanced out to sea. The long, low shadow of the boat lay idle on a lazy wave, maybe twenty feet out from the beach. The high bell pierced my ears a third time. I clenched my fists.

“Put that blade away and get gone. Barker’s gonna kill you if he finds you here.”

I spun and hopped the wall, my thin soles sinking into the crumbling dirt. I didn’t need the peal of the bell to know where I was headed.

“The hell I will! What d’you mean, Barker? He’s dead.”

There was a thud, then a second set of feet skittered along behind me. I reached a newly-set tombstone and hauled myself to a halt. Lisa reeled up to my side, still clutching her little knife in a round, soft hand. Neither one of us was much for reading, but Lisa squinted hard at the engraving on the stone. I could guess what it said. I’d been there when Mr. Barker dictated it, a few days before his hanging.

“*I’m coming back to haunt you*?” Lisa crossed herself, then did it again. “Why’d he want something so ungodly on his stone?”

The bell rang hard and long. Lisa jumped a few paces back. The sound was as loud as a bird on a branch here. I crouched, feeling in the shallow soil beside the grave, and found what I was searching for. I pulled a half-buried shovel from the nearby dirt, then used the tip to uncover another little mound at the foot of the stone. The metal tip of the shovel clanged against something there. Lisa gasped.

“The bell!”

Lisa stepped around me. She leaned closer to the contraption, her knife laid on the earth.

“He’s ringing it, Lisa.”

Her eyes were saucers when she turned her frown on me. “Who is?”

“Barker.”

Another sign of the cross. I rolled my eyes, sticking the shovel-tip into the grave mound.

“He ain’t dead. Ain’t you figured that out yet?”

Lisa tickled the bell with the tip of her finger, then trailed down until she found the wire it was connected to. It went all the way down into his casket. Lisa shook her head.

“But I saw him hang at the jailhouse. We all did.”

“Neck brace.” I grabbed my own to show her, then pointed to the sea. “Everything’s a con to Barker. He’s goin’ on that boat out there. I gotta dig him out, give him his money, and then he’s outta my way for good. Now get *gone.* I don’t wanna tell you again.”

I started to dig. Lisa grabbed low on the shovel handle. I made to curse but the bell cut me off. Lisa grabbed it fast, killing the sound. Between her tough hands, she’d stopped everything for the briefest moment.

“You tellin’ me that you got Barker’s money? Right now, Zeke?”

I shuffled foot to foot. Paper rustled from every pocket. Every hard-earned dollar that Barker’s Bank had stolen from the town. The money he claimed he’d spent now lined every sweat-soaked scrap of cloth on my bones. The cold of the cash seeped down into my spine.

Lisa took up the knife. I half-stepped back, but she didn’t rise to her feet. She took the bell wire between her calloused fingers, and slit it. I heard the ping and the snap like it was connected inside of me.

“What’d you do-”

Lisa grabbed for me, pulling herself up. She kept a hold of my shirt in one hand as she slipped the knife away.

“You get him outta your life, that crook, and then what?” I didn’t have a second to answer her. “Zeke, you get another master. Maybe the same, or even worse. Or you don’t get one, and then you starve or you get run outta town.”

Lisa pulled for the shovel. I don’t know what made me let her take it. She walked us some paces from the silent grave, back towards the wall and the sea. Her eyes were damp when the moon caught them next.

“First we slaves. Then we servants.” She sucked up some shaky air. “You were right all along, boy. Ain’t no place for us here. Ain’t right. And you got all that bastard’s money here, right now.”

She squeezed my shirt and it rustled, giving her the answers I couldn’t. The boat had listed closer, and now the outline of a man stood tall upon it. He held a shadowed box, and as we watched he lit it. A beacon in the blue dark. Bile rose in my throat. I swallowed hard against its sour heave.

“He’s buried alive down there, Lisa.”

She clutched me harder. “Barker ought not ta have cheated his sentence. Woulda been quicker. Ain’t nobody gonna know. They watched him hang, same as me.”

My heart hammered so loud I was sure the boatman would hear it. His lantern showed his movements as the prow crunched along the shadowed beach. I turned my back, watching the silent earth within our four short walls. If the townsfolk ever found out I’d helped Barker go free, I’d be under the ground in his place. Maybe Lisa would be the one to squeal if I went back for the shovel now.

But I’d let her take it from me. Let her cut the wire. Let her stay when I could’ve guessed what all her meddling would do. So when she tugged me forward, I let her. When she walked me back over the short wall of broken bricks, I let her. My feet and her guiding hand carved a path through the stones and shale. But my mouth ran dry when the boatman’s lantern lit us up.

“I was told to expect only one, Señor.”

The droop of his heavy, dark brow slowed my heart a beat or so. Lisa’s fingers pulsed against my skin, and I was shaking less than her when I unhooked us. I opened a couple of buttons on my overshirt, pulling the fold so the paper lining showed. The boatman leaned in, his little amber flame lighting the pale green bills that I wore like a shroud.

“Well now there’s two. So I’ll pay double.”

He didn’t need more. Lisa took off her apron when she’d settled on the bench, but her hand was buried in its folds on her lap. She held the boatman in her gaze long after we’d hit the choppy, black waves of the inlet. The shore drew me back, a turn of the head now and then. But the dark earth and engraved stones were well out of sight. The bile shot up and we hit a wave, so I threw my neck out and let the sour guilt pour into the water at last. Lisa soothed my back, like she had for those kids she’d never see again.

“You think it means anything?” I wiped my lip, hauling myself up. It was raw to speak, but I had to ask. “What he wrote on that grave?”

*I’m coming back to haunt you.*

The moon shone full out here. Lisa looked younger, less strained than ever. Strong, proud and free.

“Only if you let it, Zeke.” She took my hand, squeezing tight. “Only if you let it.”

Barker’s screams echoed in my head, his nails digging into the coffin lid. I heard the bell ringing, far, far away in the black. It was my turn to cut the wire now.

“I won’t let it, Miss Lisa.” My hand was warm in hers. The warmest I’d been in a long while. “He ain’t never coming back. And neither are we.”