

## THIS MESSAGE WILL NOW REPEAT by Rebekah Wells

"What tha hell do you want!?" I was rightfully pissed that someone was banging on my door at three in the morning. All my neighbors knew better than to bug me so fucking early, and I couldn't begin to imagine who would risk my wrath. The banging grew more frantic in response to my voice, and a small flag when up in the back of my mind. Some primal awareness that something was very, seriously, wrong. I ignored it, too busy being angry to listen. If I had, maybe things would've been different... Unlikely.

I yanked open my front door to see my neighbor's daughter, Annie, standing on my porch. I have a real soft spot for kids. Even if she hadn't been pale as a ghost and her face smeared with blood and tears, I could have never been mad with her. My wrath would have to wait. Despite the state she was in, however, her cheeks flushed as she saw I was dressed only in my boxers.

"Damnit." She looked horrified at my muttered curse. "Aw, hell, Annie. I'm sorry. Git in here an' tell me what's goin' on." I stood back to let her in. She hesitated, glanced behind her, then paled further and darted inside.

I didn't have to tell her to sit on the couch while I went to put clothes on. She collapsed into the ragged cushions and hadn't moved when I came back down the hall. She had her upper half draped over the armrest, her chin resting on the fabric, looking like she couldn't decide whether to cry or puke. It was such a stark difference from her typical sassy self that it was unnerving. I grabbed the least dirty rag from the kitchenette, wet it at the sink, and held it out to her as I sat down on the couch.

"What happened, girly? Your step-dad been drunk again?" If that bastard was responsible, I would be keeping the promise I made to him the last time I had Annie knocking on my door with fear and pain on her face. She shook her head as she sat up and took the rag. She stared at it in her hands without a word.

"Wipe yourself up, or I'ma do it for you." I used my squad voice, hoping to snap her out of whatever poor state she was in. She put the rag to her face and began wiping but still said nothing. When she was done the cloth was brown with blood and I could see just how torn up and scared she truly was.

"Gimme that. You look like you seen a ghost. Did it shake your hand?" It was meant to be funny. I'd been the one to teach her how to properly greet folks, and every time she met someone new I asked if they shook her hand. I was hoping she'd grin and tell me they were impolite jerks, or make a snarky comment about how you can't touch a ghost.

"Momma's dead."

"What?" I was certain I'd misheard.

"Momma's dead." This time there was no mistaking the tremble in her voice. The way her lips quivered as she relived the trauma. She started to cry.

"Shh. It's okay. I got you." I swept her up into my arms and held her as she sobbed. It took some time for her to calm down; Time I spent planning all the ways I was going to hurt that abusive asshole

her mother married solely for his money. I told her he was lying about that stimulus check. I told her he was sketchy as fuck. Now this innocent little ten-year-old girl was not so innocent.

When she had pulled herself together enough to catch her breath, I fetched her a glass of water to sip on. I knew I should've given her more time to breathe, but a dead body needed to be reported, and a soon-to-be-dead body needed to be dealt with. I tried my best to appear unfazed by the wild panic in her eyes when I told her to stay put and I would be back.

"Nothin' bad is gonna happen, darlin'. I promise." Famous last words.

The early morning air had the chill of impending winter. A thin layer of frost sparkled in the moonlight. My breath was clouds of rolling fog. I never thought the trailer park was pretty—there aren't any extra cares taken for folks so far down the financial ladder—but it was peaceful about this time. The drunks have passed out, and those few with employment haven't woken yet. The actual quiet of the pre-dawn was the only time to get actual sleep. So much for that.

The next trailer over belonged to Annie's mother and step-father. Less than forty feet from mine and made of the same shoddy siding with the same floor-plan. My porch had flowerboxes, but theirs was bare. I expected to hear the usual screaming and yelling as I went up the wood stairs, but heard nothing. Something about that put my nerves on edge, enough that I gripped my gun a bit tighter.

I didn't bother knocking. "I swear to god if you hurt..." I trailed off as the front door swung wide to reveal an empty living room. I stalked down the hall toward the master bedroom, muscle memory keeping my feet light. I heard movement at almost the same time as I smelled the blood. That thick unmistakable scent of a fresh dead body. I had first learned it when my pa took me out hunting deer when I was a child. I doubted this was wild game, though. I took a deep breath, adjusted the shotgun to my shoulder, and put a kick into the doorknob.

I don't know what I expected. I don't even know why I was still dumbstruck at it. All I could do was stare at the writhing red mass on what used to be the bed. It would've been easy to think he had beaten her to death in one of his drunken rages, and was now having his way with her corpse. The grunting and wet slapping sounds sure fit. But this wasn't that. This wasn't anything so normal as that.

"Hey! Git off her!" I yelled but didn't dare step into that room. The movement and noise stopped, and he turned to face me. Whatever fucking drugs he was on made him look dead but animate, smeared in things I don't want to describe. "I said, git off her." I tried not to sound as terrified as I was. Then he reached out toward me and, apparently forgetting he was on the bed, hit the floor chin-first. In a breath he was on his feet, hands out, bloody mouth agape.

"Stop! I will shoot!"

He kept coming. I stepped back into the far edge of the hallway, losing all nerve. This was fucked. Annie's mother was fucked. *I* was fucked.

"Stop!" I nearly tripped as I backpedaled down the hall toward the living room. He lurched forward, made a grab for my gun. I pulled the trigger and a spray of viscera painted the wall behind him,

a hole the size of an apple yawning wide in his chest. He staggered from the force but didn't stop. "What the fu-" The low back of the couch caught me just above the knees and sent me over backwards.

"Git the fuck off me you fuckin' bastard!" Pain lit my ankle and ran down my spine like electricity. Being upside down meant he was able to latch on with his teeth and hands and keep me from moving. It also put his head between my legs as an easy target. This time when I pulled the trigger, the hole was where his head used to be. A sharp kick and what was left of him hit the floor like a ton of bricks. Then I was up and out, slamming the door behind me.

If I'd thought Annie terrified earlier, it was nothing compared to her expression when I hobbled in looking like I had overseas. Damn it. She didn't deserve this. She didn't deserve anything that this shitty world had forced her to suffer through. She was so full of life. So ready to throw bullshit back at those who threw it first. Such a strong-willed girl. Why did she have to get the short end? At least I had done things to warrant my one-way to Hell.

"Don't you go cryin' again, now." I tried to keep my voice light. Apparently it didn't work. I could see the tears forming. "He ain't gonna bother you no more, Annie. Jus' Like I promised." I set the gun on the counter and limped down the hall to the bathroom. She followed, silent, and stood, silent, as I set to work cleaning my ankle. It was bad. Real bad. I was almost finished wrapping it when she finally spoke.

"Are you gonna die?"

"Of course not, darlin'. I've had worse than this. Remember them war stories I tell you?" I pointed to the missing half of my face. An IED had blown one of my fellow soldiers to pieces, and the lower right side of my face off. I was lucky I'd survived, but the disfigurement was a daily reminder of it all. "If I can go without an eye, I can go without a foot." She didn't smile like I'd hope, but she seemed a mite less pale. Good. "Now let's call the cops and maybe a doctor for us both."

The line for the non-emergency side of the police department didn't even ring. That was worse than the busy signal of the emergency line. Just what the hell was happening? I tried the landline phone in my spare bedroom—my 'office'—just in case it was a cell issue. Same thing. I thought about calling 411, just to see if *anything* would go through, but I wasn't sure whether it even existed anymore. The internet and social media had seen to the death and dying of so many things. Still, I needed a doctor, Annie needed a shrink, and the next trailer over needed CSI. If I couldn't call them, I'd have to go to them.

"Come on, girly, we gotta..." She was standing in the middle of the living room, staring wide-eyed at the tv. I came up beside her. Alone, I saw my end approaching swift, leash in hand and dragging hers along. Together, we saw the end of the world.

"This will be our last broadcast. We will be going home to spend our time with our families. We hope you do the same.

"As you know, the end of 2019 saw the rise of the virus. Only four months later it had spread around the world; A pandemic on a scale never seen before.

"International trade and travel were suspended. Lockdowns and curfews implemented. Masks mandated. Scientists around the world came together to find treatments and begin work on a vaccine.

"Millions died. Many more suffered.

"Finally, in early 2021, we had a vaccine. We had promising treatments. Lives were saved. The world was starting to return to normal.

"A variant of the virus, far more contagious and lethal, has appeared as of late this year. It has a longer period of dormancy, where no symptoms are present, but the virus can still be spread.

"The vaccine for this variant has turned out to be more deadly than the virus might ever have been on its own. Not only has it killed far more people than the original virus, but it also changes them. It, for lack of a better explanation, brings them back from the dead. Murderous and hysterical.

"There is no sense laying blame now. It doesn't matter which company manufactured the vaccine or which company distributed it. With the social upheaval of these past years, and economic shut-down worldwide, we cannot combat this new affliction. All we can do now is spend time with our loved ones, protect ourselves, and try to show each other some human decency.

"Thank you for watching. Signing off."

A black screen began scrolling text.

## **THIS IS AN AUTOMATED MESSAGE**

Do not call emergency services, they are unable to respond.

Do not drive, all roads are closed.

Do not leave your home, it is unsafe.

Lock all doors and windows and close all curtains and blinds, noise and light attract attention.

If you have taken the vaccine, self-isolate and lock all doors and windows and close all curtains and blinds.

If you or someone you know are bitten or scratched by an infected person, isolate them immediately and lock all doors and windows and close all curtains and blinds.

Do not approach a vaccinated or infected person under any circumstances,  
they are no longer who they were.

**GOD BLESS AMERICA**

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