

## A Man Alone

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### VI

#### Insight

They're called tension headaches. They pound away at your sanity calmly and subdued, but definitely there—aching. I woke up with one. But it was better than those sharp, stabbing pains I'd get from out of the blue. I took a cool shower to try and relieve it. Nothing. I didn't want to eat so I'd be hungry for dinner at my dad's. Although by this time it sort of ceased to matter as I had eaten so little in the past week that the very thought of any substantial food made me kind of sick. But I had to adjust myself, so I had some toast. Everybody loves toast. I just put some butter on it and let it melt right into the toasted bread. It tasted just fine. I kind of wanted more, but I thought it better to save myself for dinner.

My answering machine flashed 1—1—1—1—1 over and over. I hit PLAY and the tapeless machine immediately relayed: "Saturday at two twenty-seven A.M.," came the computerized voice, then, "Scott?...It's Kelly. I don't know who you think you are, but I just thought that you had a right to know that I told Jerry what you said to me in the mall and he is very upset. You better hope he doesn't run into you. And how dare you talk—" I pushed DELETE and erased the entire thing. I liked knowing that I slept through the phone call. Funny how it gave me some weird sense of accomplishment.

I got dressed and left my apartment.

By the time I got to my dad's at six, I felt kind of tired. I had been driving around some, clearing my head. No music. I just listened to the car's engine. I liked doing that every now and then. It was something that Lance did. It's where I learned it.

I walked right into the kitchen and placed a bottle of wine I bought at the grocery store on the counter. I didn't know anything about wine, so I kind of arbitrarily picked a white wine that was kind of expensive.

Helen's eyes lit up at the sight of it. I gathered she liked it. "Scott, you didn't have to bring anything."

"No, it's okay. I wanted to. I just hope it's a good one."

"It's a fine wine." She's a poet and didn't know it. She can make a rhyme anytime. "We've had it before. It's really quite delicious." No need to get viscous.

"Are you here alone?"

"Your dad went to pick Kristy up from school. He'll be back any minute, I should think." That meat looks pretty pink.

"What are you making?"

"Steaks. Potatoes. Rolls. Salad."

"It looks really good."

She looked up at me for the first time. Her eyes went wide as they soaked me in. Is it possible to change that much in a week? "Jesus!"

It made me laugh. I think it was the whole situation. All the drama from Kelly and the people at work and my fucked up knuckles that kept getting worse and my headache and me beating up three guys in khakis and not eating and finding out that water was nauseating and disproving God's existence at the Super China Buffet and Amy Markabe getting married with makeup and Steph dropping off the face of the planet and my step mom saying "Jesus" all imploded. But Helen didn't laugh. I saw concern in her eyes. Real concern. And nobody was around to see it but me.

"It's okay. I'm fine, really. I had food poisoning, but I'm better now. I just haven't eaten much. But I'm really hungry today, so I'll let you get to it." She nodded, unsure of what to say. I turned to leave then turned back to hug her. I hated hugging her as a kid. She tried to bond with me through hugs, but all I felt was my crucifix pressing against my skin. It had always divided us.

I let go and went up to my old room. They had since changed it into something of a den and sewing room. I opened the closet and pushed open the trap door to the attic. I stood on my

toes and searched around with my throbbing hand. They didn't find it, did—oh, there it was. My hand grasped a small, square box and brought it out. I closed up the attic.

The box wasn't nearly as dirty as I thought it would be. Some dust covered it, but nothing extraordinary. Inside were pictures of my mom. She was so pretty. Her at the beach, in the kitchen, holding a beer, holding Lance, kissing my dad, asleep on a couch, working on a pottery wheel, and carrying me inside her. That was the last picture.

I put all the pictures back and wiped the box down with a Kleenex in the bathroom. I left it on the sink for the time being and went back down to be among the living.

I sat in the living room (appropriately named, yes?) and listened to the sounds from the kitchen. I just wanted my sister home.

I spun when I heard the door from the garage to the kitchen open. Only my dad came in. I jumped up and went to him. He got to Helen first and kissed her. They stood talking for a moment and I got frustrated, so I interrupted. "Where's Kristy?"

My dad looked at me. "Outside." I went out leaving him surely to ask Helen why I was so sickly looking.

She wasn't in the garage or the driveway. I walked around the house when I found her in the back yard. She looked bigger. It may have been the clothes she wore on her slim body. I recalled hearing something about an important meeting of some kind at school or something. She was wearing a pant suit which I thought she pulled off effortlessly—not off her body, but off in the sense that she wore it well...Huh.

Her arms were crossed over her chest. "Are you cold?"

She jumped a bit at the sound of my voice. When she collected herself she just shrugged. I unbuttoned my flannel and put it over her shoulders enveloping her unenthused protest. "Are you coming inside?"

"In a bit." I looked to where her eyes seemed locked. The sunset. From where we stood it was directly behind a large bush, setting it ablaze. I looked to Kristy and saw the gold fire reflected in her mirrored black eyes. "May I stay out here with you?"

"If you want." Ask nicely...

We watched the sun go away until a red haze filled the western sky. We held hands at some point. Strange that I don't remember when or who reached out.

And I didn't feel pain from her grasp.

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Dinner was perfect. I wanted to dive right into every dish on the table and swallow it whole. I purposefully paced myself to match that of my sister, but it was tough. She ate so slowly and chewed each bite so many more times than I ever did. I just chew until it'll go down without choking me. She would chew and chew until the bite was complete mush in her mouth, then she would wash it down with a sip of her drink. I chugged my drinks, except for tonight as I sipped wine with the guardians. They let Kristy have a small glass, as well.

The atmosphere left something to be desired. We didn't talk about too much. A little on the day's events, work, school, restaurants, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and the like. I did see Helen's eyes every time she looked at my face and my dad's every time he looked at my hands and my sister's every time she failed to do either. That bothered me most of all. She had no problem looking at either of her parents, but she couldn't look at me.

My flannel was hung over the back of her chair. I noticed her drop one of her hands off the table from time to time to feel the material of the shirt. It almost looked like she was wiping off her hand, but that wasn't it.

The four of us sat in the aftermath of dinner when Lance came in with a cake in his hands. The look on my face prompted my dad to say, "Lance is bringing dessert, by the way. I forgot to mention it to you earlier."

"Wonderful." I didn't think my dad lied. I didn't think my dad knew about the phone conversation we had. There didn't seem to be any pain on his face.

Lance cleared all our plates and the serving dishes out of the way, shooshing Helen and telling her to sit down and slice the cake. He moved quickly and brought a chair from the next room. And sat right next to me, blocking much of my view of Kristy. Lance squeezed her hand. I thought it lingered there for longer than...for a long time. But time seeped by rather slowly for me since he came in.

We ate the cake—it was a Danish layer—which I thought had way too much of that frosting on it. They do make it with whipped cream instead of frosting and that's much better.

I got bored with the silence. I turned to Lance. "How's the wife?"

"She's doing well. What happened to your face?"

"Whatever do you mean?" I smiled widely at him, only guessing how disgusting my sickly face looked. I meant it as something of a joke, but the only reaction I got was that of my sister excusing herself from the room in a hurry.

Lance didn't notice her get up. His attention was now focused on my hands. He grabbed one and pressed a tender area. I winced and pulled away, hissing in pain. "What's wrong with your hands?" my dad asked.

I held them up for him so he could get a good look. No more wine glasses or dinner rolls blocking his view. There they were: cut, bruised, swollen, chapped and tender.

"Well, that's great," Lance said.

Helen started to clear dishes, but Lance told her that he'd do it. She thanked him under her breath and left the room, probably going up to Kristy's room. Nobody watched her go.

"Were you hurt?"

"No, dad. This guy started in on me so I fought back. I missed him a couple times and hit a wall. That's why my hands are so messed up."

What to say? Okay, fine. "Dad, Lance doesn't like me because he blames me for mom's death."

Both sets of eyes got huge. "What?" Lance nearly yelled.

My dad, the arbiter: "Scott, I don't think that Lance feels that way. What happened to your mom was tragic, but it wasn't anyone's fault. It was just one of those things that happen without any good reason."

"How could you think that I blamed you? What's the matter with you? You were three minutes old when she died. How was it your fault?"

"It's not my fault," I calmly said. "You blame me. If I wasn't born, she'd still be here. And that's okay. I can see the logic in that."

"Scott, knock it off." My dad sat remembering my mom. It took him five years to remarry. Then he and Helen had their precious little girl. That's not sarcasm, she was precious. But the best part was after Lance and I left home. Then they had the perfect family unit. They erased all memory of my mom. But she still lived there. I put her in the attic. She was home every single minute and nobody knew it but me. "I don't want to hear another word about this. My wife died giving birth to my second son. While you never got to know her, you did have

Helen for most of your life. She's not your mother, but she does love you. And I've been here and so has Lance. Nobody blames you because you had no control over it."

Lance blamed me. I saw it in his jerky movements as he cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher. I finished my wine and as I handed the glass to Lance, his eyes met with mine and I was reassured of the blame he placed on me.

Lance turned on the washer and went upstairs to say goodbye to Helen and Kristy before giving my dad a double-pump hand shake and waving to me. My dad went upstairs to use his bathroom.

I sat in the kitchen for a couple minutes. The hum of the dishwasher put me in a trance and I stared at oblivion. I pulled myself out and went into my sister's room without knocking. I shut the door behind me and found her on her bed looking through the pictures of my mom.

I wasn't mad at her for doing that just as she wasn't mad at me for barging into her room. I sat next to her. "Is this your mom?"

I nodded, ashamed that she even had to ask. "Is that the same cross you wear?" She pointed to the picture of her at the beach; it was the only photo where her necklace was visible.

"Yeah." My chain was longer, but the pendant was hers.

She put the stills back in the box and handed it to me. When I grabbed it, she saw my hands.

She gasped quietly and reached out for one hand. Her tiny fingers traced the cuts and bruises. Her hands were cool and they felt nice on my wounds. "Did you get into another fight?" She was close to tears.

"Yes."

"Did you...?"

"No. People—there were people there who broke it up."

She leaned on my chest and began crying softly. "I love you. But I don't like you," she whispered.

I touched her hair and softly massaged her scalp. I could smell her shampoo, like apples. I knew it. "It's okay, I can't blame you."

"I used to look up to you. When you were in high school, I thought you were the coolest. Then you get kicked out of college and come back home. Then one night you come in

stinking like cigarettes and you're drunk and your hands were like they are tonight. Then you get some job you hate that barely pays enough for you to live off of. And you get arrested—"

"I wasn't charged." She cried and I felt the tears as they soaked my heart. "I love you, Kristy. You don't need someone like me to look up to. You've been doing so well...by yourself. You make me very proud."

"I don't want to do it alone. I need you. I can look up to dad and my mom, but it's not the same. The deal was that you aren't that much older than me. I need you because you're just like me."

"You're better than me."

"No. And what if I make the same mistakes that you did—sorry."

"It's okay. You're right. But there's no way your mom is going to let that happen." I held her head like a baby. "And you're smart enough to see the mistakes that I made, so it's not going to happen to you." And you're smart enough to understand that while you love me, you can dislike me, too. But that hurts too much to say.

Her crying had stopped. It was quiet. Puffy eyes and a damp shirt spoke of what happened. "I missed your birthday. Did you know that it's the same as my mom's?"

"No."

"I apologize for not remembering and not saying anything sooner." I knew she knew why. I stood and reached in my pocket for the gift I picked out. Slowly I pulled out a necklace from the jewelry store in the mall. At the end hung a dolphin pendant. I put it around her neck and joined it. Her fingers felt the delicate roped chain and the weight of the tiny dolphin. "Happy birthday."

"Thank you." She looked at me briefly with red eyes before hanging her head again. "You didn't have to give me this. All I want is a promise that you're going to stop getting into fights and drinking yourself half to death and eating shit and settling for whatever's easiest."

"Don't say 'shit.'"

"Sorry."

"Keep the necklace. I do promise to do what I can to make me happy." Insight, profound realization. "I have to go." I put my hands around the back of her neck, leaned down, kissed her forehead and cheek and ran out of the house.