



ne Sunday morning, the phone woke me out of a sound sleep. It was a little after five, and the sun was just breaking through the window of my bedroom. It was warming up quite quickly for the end of June, and I had it open a crack. The breeze had helped me keep cool through the night. Birds were already singing outside. It was the beginning of a beautiful day indeed, and I had no plans but to kick back and maybe play outside.

The shock of the phone ringing had startled me. I was fully awake in an instant, hoping it was not my mother with bad news. No one ever called me this early.

“Hello?” I answered anxiously.

“Darling, I’m sorry to wake you.” It was Jim’s mother, who always addressed everyone as ‘darling.’ I sat bolt upright in bed. She was the last person I would have ever thought would have been on the other end of the line.

“Hey. Is everything all right?” I tried to keep my voice level.

“Jim’s father died last night.”

A chill ran through me. I was unsure as to why she was calling me with this news. Our families were close, and I hung out there a lot during school, but to call me at 5:00 a.m. after I hadn’t seen them in years was strange.

“Oh, my God, I am so sorry.” I was sincere as I felt a sudden knot in my stomach.

“I . . . thank you, darling . . . I was wondering if you could help me?” she asked tentatively. “Help me tell James?” He had always been James to her, never Jim, and it unnerved me.

“He doesn’t know yet?” I was slightly appalled that she would tell me first.

But when I thought about it more, I realized that news like that shouldn’t come over a phone. Not about your own father. Even though he had been sick quite a while, and his health problems were numerous, I couldn’t stand to think of the moment when my own parents wouldn’t be around, for that matter. You can’t stand to think of the moment when they’re no longer there to help you with things.

“You’re the closest support he’s got up there right now. I can’t bear for him to figure out the logistics alone. I’d fly you two down, of course. He’ll just be too upset to do it all by himself. And, if I may be selfish, darling, I’d like to see you again.” Her voice sounded tired and worn out. She was right in the fact that he would probably fly off the handle and try to leave right that second with just the clothes on his back. Planning for a trip of this magnitude was something Jim was not very good in handling. I was touched that she wanted me to come with him. There had been a few times over the years that I’d known Jim that she’d mentioned to me how she lamented that she’d never had a daughter of her own.

“Of course, I’d be happy to help.” The words sounded fake to me. Going over to see Jim when he and I hadn’t spoken in months was the last thing I wanted to do. It was pretty clear that Kate had beaten me out. Maybe his mother should call and wake her up to tell him.

“Thank you,” she said woodenly.

“I would have to pull some strings, however, to take . . . what, a day or two off?” I was feeling out the process, not sure if she had all the plans settled yet.

“Oh, my, darling, it would be a week, at least,” she said. “He wanted to be buried out here. He’s had the plans for his wake written out for a while. Of course, we’ll have to have the will read. I do hope you’ll be able to make it. You’ll call me back when you know?” she asked.

The connection was so good that, for an instant, I forgot that she was thousands of miles away in Arizona.

“Yes, I won’t be able to settle all that until tomorrow morning at the office. For right now, why don’t I get dressed, go over there, and have him call you from there. Then he can hear the news from you, but I’ll be there with him.”

She agreed, thanked me again, and hung up.

I was numb as I got dressed. I insanely thought of ways to cover a week on the other side of the country for a man with whom I was still bitterly angry. Some people at work had heard of Jim, but not many, and they certainly hadn’t heard about him lately. I wasn’t sure if my boss would buy it, but for his mother, I’d try.

Rummaging through the cupboard for something quick to eat, I found myself mumbling. Here was a man who hadn’t made one move in the last three months to find me and explain himself. Now, I’d have to go to him and make the first move, even if it was for bad news. Here was a man who had chosen the other woman over me, and hadn’t had one qualm about his decision. I wasn’t looking forward to the look on his face if he opened the door. And there was no way for his mother to know that all of this had been going on. I said a quick prayer, telling God that, for this one time, I’d push it all aside for the sake of helping Jim’s mother tell her son that his father was dead.

I decided to drive over in the car instead of walking over to his apartment. Getting there was going to be the easy part. I could only hope he was actually there and that he would open the door when he saw it was me standing on the other side.

A strange feeling snaked and twitched in my chest as I pulled out of my driveway. It was a feeling that I thought had died, a feeling I didn’t like, a feeling that fate was on the move.

“I came back to the apartment and just found this in the remains of our latest screaming match from last night. She tore the bedroom to shambles after I stormed out. I’m amazed she didn’t break a window. Kate did manage, at some point in time, however, to burn a few holes into the cover, the bitch. At least the manuscript is safe in the closet under a pile of books. Books seem to be her kryptonite lately.

I stormed out just to get some peace and to think, but the café was closed. I ended up going by Eve’s place, but there was no way I could go in and see her. I felt ashamed just standing on the sidewalk for the few minutes I stopped. Went to my favorite bar and got drunk instead.

Flipping through this reveals a lot of empty pages that should be filled to the edges with writing. I hate when I lose track of myself like this. Life has been a blur lately, and I just haven’t been able to get my ass in gear. Speaking of, it’s also been months since I’ve worked on my draft, and the deadline’s coming. This probably means the phone will ring sometime today, and Jakob will be yelling some more.

Doesn’t he understand that art takes time?

Looking back, I get lost in these dates . . . Instead of seeing dates of good things, all I seem to see is dates of every fight Kate and I have had since I got out of the hospital. It all seems like a year ago.

It seems too early to cook, but I'm starving. Been lying here, watching Katie sleep. She curls up like a baby kitten sometimes. By the time I had this place put back together last night, she came in with such a sorry look and such a score, we were quick to make up. The last thing I like doing with her is fighting. Wasn't long after that and I was knocking at her back door. What a wild night. Maybe I'll wake her first, see how hungry she is, before I go to the kitchen to scrounge up something. . ."

J knocked on his door, and memories of standing at this unanswered door months ago

flooded over me. For all the times that I'd told myself on the way over that his dad was in a better place, I still felt bad that he'd gone. Mixed with the sick feeling was the jealousy, burning brighter than it had when his new novel came to light. It was the green-eyed beast that had been haunting my dreams, and its claws dripped with the venom of anger and hurt that I'd been storing up for him. But the knot in my stomach beat out the jealousy, and in that moment, I was just sad to have to see him under the circumstances.

The door opened slowly, quietly. It was Jim, wearing nothing but an apron, holding a pair of tongs in his hand. The smell that hit me from inside was a mixture of pot and sausages. He looked high, his eyes a faraway, mixed-up haze. His hair looked like it hadn't been combed in a few days. I assumed Kate was probably still in bed. Things I had wanted to say to him clotted in my mouth.

"Hey," he said in such a way that gave away what they'd been doing. It was a dreamy, strung-out sound, a slow realization. I hadn't seen him high since school, and it bothered me. I hated what she'd done to him. Perhaps she'd kept him high for the last three months, making him forget about me until just then. I wondered a thousand things, and tried to remember to stay on task.

"Jim." I was thrown for a loop just being around him after so long, high or not. He was wearing different earrings, and this struck me odd for some reason. Not a day had gone by that my roller coaster of loneliness, jealousy, and sadness hadn't taken me for a ride. I'd stopped going to breakfast, and I imagined he had as well. I wondered how the book was going.

"Want some breakfast?" he asked, waving the tongs.

"You need to call your mom," I told him.

"She knows I can make breakfast," he said. I couldn't look him in the eye.

I wanted to tell him to just call her, and go back home. I didn't want to do this when she was there with him. I felt like I was intruding, even though I had every right to be there. I was sick to my stomach at the thought of the news I had to give him.

"Jim, you need to call your mom right now," I said again. My tone was low and serious.

"Whoa, okay. Hey, why don't you come in. These are almost ready." He turned and went back to the stove, leaving me at the open door. I realized this was going to be tougher than I expected it to be. The apron, although full length, didn't reach around him entirely, and for a second, I got a glimpse of him that I didn't expect. Turning away abruptly, I threw my hand up and realized that Kate was standing there in the hallway, completely naked.

"What's going on?" she asked in her own stoned way. I spun around and stared at the fish tank. The only things I was sure I saw were her piercings, and I was embarrassed for her.

“Sorry! I, uh . . . I need Jim to call his mom, is all. I didn’t mean to come over . . . unannounced,” I told the fish tank. I wished someone would at least put some clothes on. I heard Jim click off the stove. I crossed my arms, for lack of knowing what else to do. Her hand was suddenly there on my arm. She wrapped herself in a throw from the couch.

“Did something happen?” she asked.

I turned to her. She was void of all makeup, and if she didn’t reek of pot and a dozen psychoses, I’d say that she really was quite an attractive girl. I nodded to her, almost expecting some sort of explosive reaction.

“He needs to call her right now,” I said again. She walked over to the stove dreamily. I guessed the pot had her too mellow to be mad at my presence.

“Baby, c’mon, let me finish this. You go grab the phone and call Mom.” She wrapped one arm around his waist and pulled the tongs out of his hand with the other. There were so many offensive things in that one sentence and motion that I gladly turned back to the fish tank. I heard them kiss, and I offered up a silent prayer that it will somehow be over soon. My heart couldn’t break into much smaller pieces.

“All right,” he said. Brushing past me, he went to a new cordless phone that was right there in the corner by the fish tank. As he dialed, he put a hand on my shoulder. I wasn’t sure if it was a gesture to make me feel better, or if he was steadying himself. My hand found his hand. He certainly looked as if he’d recuperated fully from his pneumonia. If anything, he looked a little bulkier, as if he’d been working out again. The muscles in his arms stood out more.

“Hey, Mom, it’s me,” he said, then paused. “Yeah, she came just in time for breakfast.” There was another pause. I watched his face in morbid fascination. He visibly paled as she told him, his mouth dropping open. He was trying to say something, but no words could come out. The hand on my shoulder tugged on me. Slowly, he wrapped his arm around me and pulled me into a hug. His entire body was trembling.

“He . . . but . . .”

There was no more in him, and I slowly pulled the phone out of his hand. His high was gone, and he was gasping like I just punched him in the gut.

“Oh, darling . . .” his mother was crying on the other end of the phone.

“Mom,” I said, “why don’t I let you go for now, and you can just call back later with the information on the tickets and everything. Tonight sometime.” She was sniffing on her end.

“Yes, you’re absolutely right. I’ve got a few more calls to make, and then . . . Oh, you won’t leave him, will you? Don’t go. Please? He loved his father,” she said tenderly.

“No, of course not. Don’t worry. I’ll talk to you later.” I hung up as she started to cry again. I couldn’t help her anymore, being thousands of miles away. I needed to focus on Jim, who was still hugging me by the fish tank. I could hear that Kate had finished in the kitchen and walked out of the room. I tossed the phone onto the chair to get it out of my hand. As my arm was outstretched, he grabbed it and wrapped it around him. He laid his head on my shoulder. I began to cry because this was something I’d missed so desperately in my life for months, but I’d stayed too angry with him to allow myself to miss it. These tears had nothing to do with his father, but with me, and I felt very guilty.

“Jim, I’m so sorry,” I said through my tears. I continued to hug him around his waist as he held me. The sensation of him pressing my face against his bare shoulder as he took unsteady deep breaths was a strange one. I’d thought of him last night before falling asleep, but I had no idea that I’d wake up and be holding him in my arms again. We stood there a few minutes.

“What happened?” Kate finally said behind us. We jumped at the sound of her voice. As Jim let me go and turned, we could see that she was dressed now in jeans and a shirt with a silver dragon on the front.

“Dad’s passed,” he said, his voice his own now. “Heart attack.” She rushed across the room into his arms, and they hugged quaintly. His hand went to the back of her head as he held her a second, and I realized just how small she was in his arms. He let her go abruptly.

“I have to go. I have to be with Mom,” he told her.

“I’m ready, baby,” she said. “Let’s go.”

“Kate.” He stroked her hair as he looked at her. “They live in Arizona. I don’t know how long it’s going to take.” His charm covered his patronization.

“I’ll let them know there was a death. I can swing a couple of days. It will be okay.” She hugged him to her again, and she seemed like she was acting like a child about to throw a tantrum. She hugged him like a child hugs the parent’s leg, begging them not to go out on the town. I turned back to the fish, who circled lazily. I prayed to God that she didn’t talk him into including her. I felt myself getting very defensive at the thought of her intruding on such a private time. She was pushing things too far for me to ignore, and I had to bite my tongue.

“That test that’s coming up is what you’ve been working for. I need you to stay and pass it. Professor said you needed to ace this test to get a passing grade,” he said.

“I’ll just take it again next semester. I don’t care. How could I concentrate anyway?”

“Katie, please, baby, I need you to watch the place and take care of things here,” he said. I held my breath, waiting for the yelling to start.

“I can’t bear to think of you being so far away and all alone,” she wailed in a most pitiful voice. I knew just by the tone of it that it was the voice she had used on him to break him down. Suddenly, there were so many pieces of the puzzle that fit together, just by hearing that tone in her voice. For as modern as he was, Jim was still a white knight inside, and I knew he couldn’t help it.

“What good would I be here by myself?” And at that line, her words took me back to the moment where I had asked myself the exact same thing while waiting for the doctor in the waiting room months ago. I remembered each detail of those waiting rooms, and I distinctly recalled, bitterly, that she was nowhere around at that crucial time.

The words sounded awful in her mouth, twisted. I didn’t care what she did while we were gone. I hated how she’d turned Jim’s tragedy into her own. It wasn’t fair to him at such a time to make herself the center of attention. I forced myself to turn around, and she was leaning her forehead against his chest. His arms were loosely around her, and he was looking at me, looking into me, pleading with me. It pissed me off. He put himself in that situation, and here he was, looking to me to solve his problem. I’d had enough of the drama, and if I had to stand there one more second as a passive bystander, I’d go crazy.

“So . . .” she started to say, trailing her voice off. He stopped looking at me to meet her gaze. I stepped forward.

“So, you know where the spare key is, don’t forget his mail, and we should be back next week.” I grabbed her arm and pulled her away from him. He took a step back. I took her off-balance and managed to get her a few feet toward the door before she managed to rip her arm out of my grasp, almost scratching my arm somehow.

“Get off me, bitch!” she yelled.

“Kate,” Jim said.

“We’ve got it taken care of, so why don’t you just get out of here!” she spat at me. Clearly, her buzz was gone, too.

“He already told you what he needs!” I shouted back.

“Fuck you! What do you know about what he needs?” she yelled at me.

“Kate, stop it,” Jim interjected.

“We’re fine without you!” She ignored him. He walked up behind her, grabbed her by the shoulders, and spun her around.

“Katie! Quit yelling at her! I told you I need you to stay here!” he shouted at her.

“She couldn’t be bothered to help you get better, and I stayed here night and day, and she just waltzes in, and you let her talk to me that way?” Kate yelled right in his face.

“Stop before you make a fool of yourself! Now, just stop it!” She wriggled out of his grasp to come back at me some more.

“Who are you anyway? Huh? Do you know who I am? Did he tell you yet? Huh? Oh, wait, that’s right. He couldn’t tell you because he hasn’t seen you!” She got right up in my face, and suddenly I was thrown off-balance in the fight. I didn’t know where she was going with that line, and it worried me. I didn’t know how to answer her attack.

“Katie, don’t do this. Please, let’s just calm down.” Jim came up behind her again, but she flared an arm out and pushed him back.

“I’m perfectly calm, what the hell is the matter with you? Or are you *ashamed*?” She turned on him, and the tantrum was in full swing. I looked at him, still standing in just the cooking apron, and he was trying to apologize with the look he gave me. And maybe in another lifetime, I would have eaten up that look, but now I was jaded, skeptical—wary.

“I’m going! I should be the one going! I’m the fiancée! So, why don’t you just clear on back outta here, go back under your rock, and fuck off!” I took a few steps backward. She looked smug and defiant, and I couldn’t stop from standing there with my mouth open.

“Kate, don’t you dare fucking talk to her like that! For Christ sakes, you’re not going!” Jim roared at her, his eyes flaming with a passionate anger usually reserved for only the most volatile situations. I erratically thought that this was no way to talk to one’s future wife. I cringed immediately at the insane thought. She turned and marched right up to him, little spitfire that she was, and, on tiptoe, got right in his face.

“Either she goes, or I do.”

The ultimatum was followed by utter silence. The threat almost echoed throughout the rooms. Jim’s nostrils were flaring. I steadied myself against the chair and took a couple of deep breaths. I expected a landlord to come barging in at any moment to investigate all the commotion. There was nothing. The room was still. They were locked in a stare-down in the middle of the living room floor. In the second that I closed my eyes, she turned and stomped back down the hallway to the bedroom. My heart was pounding, and my legs felt weak. I managed to look up at Jim, and he was holding the bridge of his nose.

“You showed me once that this is all just a game to you, and I was fool enough to forget that,” Kate said as she returned from the bedroom, bag in hand. She circled the living room, picking up a jacket, a book, her shoes, and some other smaller purse as she walked around us. “I won’t need the lesson a third time. I hope you both burn in hell. Your dad too!” And she ripped open the door and went tearing down the stairs, the telltale cloud of bad perfume following her. Jim stormed off to his bedroom, and I plopped down in the chair that’d been holding me up.

“The second I opened the door and saw Eve’s face, I was so happy I didn’t know what to say. I thought maybe I was just tripping, but then her words were coming from her, not inside my head, and I knew she was real.

Everything has been on a downward spiral ever since I got out of the hospital, and I just don’t know how to make it right again. I fucked it all up, and I’d been kicking myself every day that I didn’t see her, didn’t talk to her.

I feel like a jackass. Mike had even driven me to her house a few weeks ago, but I couldn’t get out of the car. I’d been drunk and complaining the whole weekend, and he wanted me to resolve it, right then and there. He was so pissed at me, he cussed me up and down, dropped me at my place, and I haven’t heard from him since. But what could I have said? Here, she’d literally saved my life, and I let Kate slip back in and take over. I didn’t want that to be the night she slammed the door in my face for the last time. I wasn’t ready for this to end, even though I can’t see any way of fixing it between us.

Kate has some kind of hold on me, this power, and I have no resolve for what she wants me to do. I’m like putty in her hands. And I wouldn’t mind so much if she wanted to do the kinds of things I wanted, but lately, all she wants to do is get stoned, fight, and screw. Her classes are a joke to her. She doesn’t see the money and time she’s wasting by taking them. Her exuberance and zest are contagious, but it doesn’t last for long. Everything is one big joke, one big game.

I thought she was what I wanted, but now that I’m here, I can’t believe that’s all there is to her.

As glad as I was to open the door and have Eve standing there again, I felt just as guilty. Here, I hadn’t touched my manuscript since coming home, and I knew she wouldn’t be happy to hear about that. But it upset Kate, knowing the plot wasn’t about her, so I’d laid it away for a while. I’d fully intended on getting back to it—now here months have gone by, and it’s all been one big trip gone to shit. I’ve realized lately that what I thought was carrying me through is just dragging me further and further from where I truly want to go.

She made me call Mom, and I got the news that Dad—”

Thanks for subscribing to my newsletter and I hope you enjoyed this chapter! What will happen between Jim and Eve - have we seen the last of Kate? Let me know what you thought of this by stopping by my Facebook author page and let's talk at

www.facebook.com/carrieaulenbacher
