

The Last Prejudice

Chapter One

July 18, 1 PM

The coffee cup shattered when it hit the white porcelain kitchen sink. She had just poured it and added a splash of half and half before she looked out the kitchen window to check on him. *Oh well, if it makes him happy. Some things I just can't change*, she thought. Then he slumped over the steering wheel of the lawn mower. Fortunately the mower's safety mechanism shut the mower down when he fell to the side and onto the newly mowed lawn.

The shattering of the cup had barely quieted before she was through the screen door and at his side. She pulled him the rest of the way off the mower and felt for a pulse. She found it. *Thank God.*

"Ed! Ed, can you hear me? Don't do this to me, you stubborn old fart. I told you not to be mowing this damn lawn."

His eyes opened when she cradled his head in her lap, and he mumbled something. She leaned closer. "... broken..." was all she heard.

"Broken? Ed, what's broken?"

When he didn't respond, she pulled back to look at him. His eyes went vacant and then slowly rolled back and closed.

"Help me, please... Anyone, please help me!"

She shrieked until someone heard her. Within minutes Beth, her neighbor, was at her side. "Jan, my God, what's happened?"

"Call 911."

The Rock

When I became aware of my surroundings I didn't find myself on the mower or even in my own yard any longer. Instead, I found myself sitting on a large flat rock overlooking a lush green pasture at a sunrise equal to none I had ever seen. I took in a long, deep breath and exhaled slowly. That long release seemed to drain me of the anxiety I was so accustomed to. It was a relief to let it all go, and I wondered why I hadn't been able to do it until now.

My knees were pulled in close to me, and I hugged them tightly. As I enjoyed the scene before me, I felt the tight grip I had on them loosen. It was a breathtaking view. Again I wondered why I hadn't taken time to enjoy a sunrise like this. Was I always just too damn busy taking care of "things"?

When she slipped in next to me, it seemed as natural as if she had never been away. I unwrapped my arms from around my knees and stretched my legs out past the edge of the stone and leaned back on the palms of my hands. She slid her hand over mine and pulled me close, also as natural as if it had always been that way. "Where've you been?" I asked quietly, still a little confused.

"Oh, I've been here watching you finally trying to relax and enjoy the sunrise. I so wanted you to relax, even when we were dating and married." She pulled me in even more tightly and rested her head on my shoulder.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” she whispered ever so quietly, and it seemed to soothe my soul and quiet my questions.

I looked at her and enjoyed her beauty as the pink light bathed her face. “Not half as beautiful as you, Gracie O’Malley or should I say Grace Connor? I’m so happy we got married.” I recoiled for a moment as a confused feeling raced across my heart, but it was gone as quickly as it came. I exhaled another releasing sigh and looked into her eyes. Her comforting smile quieted my nerves. I was comforted because it had been so difficult to smile when we were last together.

I had wanted to gaze into those eyes again for years. It was like life had again sprung into my heart. Why had cancer taken her from me before we could even begin our life together?

Grace must have sensed my feelings. She stroked the side of my face gently. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just remembering... that’s all,” I told her.

She nodded with an all-knowing smile. “Good. I’m happy you’re okay.” She leaned into me.

“Seems like yesterday. Doesn’t it?” I asked her.

“It was for me,” she responded contentedly. Her smile convinced me she hadn’t suffered the stretch of time like I had, and I was thankful for that.

“This doesn’t make sense. Really, none of this does, but it doesn’t seem to matter,” I said. I still wasn’t sure what was going on, but for some reason it didn’t seem too important right now. I was with her and that’s all I had really wanted for so many years now. Not that I don’t love Jan and the beautiful family we’ve made together over the past fifty years, but Grace was my first love, and I never really settled up in my heart with losing her.

“Ah, now you’re getting it,” she comforted me.

“No. Not really. Sometimes I still wonder why it had to be. But tell me—why am I here with you now?”

Hospital Room 321

4:21 PM

Slap, slap, slap. His red-and-green dino sneakers made the slapping noise, warning her of his fast approach. His footsteps echoed off the sterile white walls, violating the overwhelming quiet of the hospital. Tiny lights in the heels of the sneaks flashed on and off with each step.

“Gramma!” His little voice echoed even louder than his footfalls. She looked up to see the sandy-haired little scamp running toward her at full speed. She braced herself for what she knew would come next. She barely had time to hold out her arms to catch him before he landed on her lap.

“My Lord, Bennie, shhh. This is a hospital and you’ve got to be quiet.” Even with the state of stress she was in, she couldn’t hide her smile as she roughed up his hair. He wrapped his arms around her neck. “I’m so glad you’re here,” Jan said. She hugged him long and hard, maybe comforting herself more than him. She needed to be held. She needed comforting. Her heart was aching but she needed to be strong for herself and the family. She didn’t let him go until he tried to squirm loose.

“Okay, okay, Gramma, I’ll be quiet. I got new sneaks. They flash!” he said with a proud

smile, pointing to his sneakers just as the flashing in the heels stopped.

She smiled and roughed up his hair again. "I see. They're cool!"

"Gramma, nobody says cool anymore. They're awesome," he corrected her with a missing-front-tooth grin.

"I stand corrected," she said in an official-sounding voice. "They're awesome."

"Benjamin Tomás Perez," a voice said from the direction of the door. "You've got to slow down. You might hurt Gramma Jan someday jumping on her like that." She looked at Jan softly. "Sorry, Mom."

Jan looked up to see Kim. She lived close by, and Jan figured she must have just scooped Bennie up when she got the call. Kim gave Bennie a sharp look as she walked closer. "You can't run away from me, Benjamin. You might get lost." Her voice was stern but the sparkle in her eyes betrayed her.

"Okay, Mommy, I'll 'member," Bennie said as he scrambled down from Jan's lap and went to his mother.

"Good. Thank you, Bennie," she said. "I can't ever stay mad at him, Mom. Every day he looks more and more like Dad, and seeing the spitting image of Dad sitting on your lap just cracks me up." She patted his head but didn't pick him up. "How is Dad?" she asked, looking directly into her mother's eyes. Jan looked away and her smile disappeared instantly.

"No change, Kimmy." She slumped against the back of her chair and turned her attention to the hospital bed next to her. She watched as Ed's chest rose and fell silently. If it weren't for the incessant beeping from the monitor above the bed and the IV tubes in his arm, she could have believed he was just sleeping.

Kim dug some paper and crayons out of her shoulder bag and slid a straight-backed chair up to the oversize sill of a window that looked out over the parking lot. She arranged the paper and crayons on the sill and called, "Bennie, come on over here and draw us a picture."

Bennie eagerly took his place on the chair. "What should I draw, Mommy?"

"I don't know, Bennie. What do you think you should draw?"

"I dunno. But Uncle Steve always told me to draw what's in my heart. Do you know what that means, Mommy?"

Kim glanced at Jan. "Well, I think so, but what do you think it means?"

"Uncle Steve said it means to draw how I feel."

"And how do you feel right now, sweetie?"

"I think I feel a little sad because you cried after you got off the phone with Gramma Jan."

Kim looked helplessly at her mother, and Jan sent her a reassuring smile. "Well, your mommy isn't crying anymore, so you don't have to be sad anymore. Why don't you draw something that would make Papa happy?"

Bennie took a long moment to answer. In a different time and place, she would have busted out laughing at his deep look of concentration. She watched as he pondered what he could draw that would make Papa happy. Today, just watching him helped lighten the hurt she was feeling deep in her heart.

"I think I'm going to draw me and Papa fishing on the big rock. We always have a good time there. I think that's what's in my heart. I think Papa would like that too. Why is he here?"

He said it so innocently, it prompted Jan to give him a light but fairly honest answer. "He got sick and fell off the mower, and now he's here sleeping until he gets better."

"Will it be a long time?" He asked with the innocence only a child could have.

“We hope not. Why don’t you get started on your picture so it will be finished when he wakes up?”

Jan turned to Kim as Bennie got started with his drawing. “Steve’s been giving him art lessons?”

“Not really, but he has worked with him a couple of times on school projects when he’s been over for a visit. Bennie said he had fun with him.”

“Good then. I guess all isn’t lost.” She looked at Ed and took his hand.

The Rock

I found myself sitting on that huge rock again, but the setting had changed. There were trees now close by and the sound of running water. Everything was vaguely familiar. There in all that peace and quiet, you’d think I’d just be able to relax, but the tranquility that had captured me was gone. Something was nagging at me, but I just couldn’t get to it. It was a strange, repeating electronic tone. I’d heard it before many times, but where? It wouldn’t go away, and I couldn’t find where it was coming from.

I looked out over the pasture and listened to the wind rustling the branches of a nearby tree. A little bird jumped from branch to branch. That was the sound—or at least that’s what the tone had transitioned to. It wasn’t electronic at all. I remembered it now.

I sat back, resting against the rock while the beautiful tweets of a songbird filled the air. I’d heard it countless times but never taken the time to determine what bird was actually capable of such a sweet melody. Why hadn’t I taken that time?

“It’s a song thrush,” she said.

I looked over and Grace was next to me again. “Song thrush?” I repeated.

“Yes. That song you’ve heard countless times but never taken the time to investigate. It’s made by the song thrush.”

Again, I was a little confused. I almost had to laugh at myself. Being confused seemed to be the only constant thing in this little adventure I was on.

“That’s what you were asking yourself, wasn’t it?” she said with that understanding look she had so often given me when I was doubting myself or having some other internal dilemma.

Her question was smooth and simple. I realized I had been thinking about the bird’s song and what creature could make such a sweet melody. “How did you know?”

“From where I am, I know a lot of things, and I like bird songs too.”

“No, I mean how did you know that’s what I was thinking about?”

“I just knew, that’s all.”

“Why didn’t I know that?”

“What? The bird’s name?” she said with a coy smile.

“No, that you liked bird songs.”

“I guess the subject never came up. You can’t know everything about everyone in your life instantly.”

“Yes, but we spent every minute together. I should have known that.”

“Well, sometimes things just aren’t discussed for any number of reasons. Maybe there just wasn’t enough time.”

“Yes, but I should know everything about the people I love, and they should know

everything about me and how I feel about them.”

“Sometimes you can’t. Sometimes people just don’t share their true feelings or just assume others know how they feel. It happens whether we intend to be closed up or not.”

I knew what she was telling me. I had lived a closed life, especially when we got married. I was just a kid. I never put my true feelings out there, fearing... well... fearing someone would think I was silly. Maybe they’d even laugh. Later, I did learn to share with Jan, and I found great comfort in it. But there just hadn’t been enough time with Grace to get to that point.

It all happened so quickly. First we met, and we were filled with all that excitement of dating. Then we were married, and we were filled with all that excitement of setting up a house. Busy making plans for the future.

And then the cancer. It seemed like it almost dared me to let my feelings out but I knew that it’d be the end of me if I did.

Hospital Room 321

Without turning toward Kim, Jan began to speak. “The doctor said the next twelve to twenty-four hours will be crucial to his recovery. The MRI showed a clot in the right side—” she paused briefly and corrected herself “—the right hemisphere of his brain. He said they gave him the medicine in time to bust it up, but there’s no telling how much damage has been done or even if he’ll ever wake up.” She stopped speaking, closed her eyes, and sat silently. The lump in her throat ached, but she’d be damned if she’d let it beat her down. No, not to her and not this day. She clenched her jaw and her lips trembled, but still she didn’t cry.

Kim stepped close to her and squatted just enough to give her a hug. “Mom, it’s okay. He’ll pull through. He’s a tough one, and a stroke isn’t about to hold him down. Besides, it may just be one of those ministrokes and there won’t be any lasting effects at all.”

It was then the dam broke that held back Jan’s tears. Try as she might, she just couldn’t be stoic now. Not when the love of her life lay helplessly before her. There was nothing she could do about it. It made her mad and scared the hell out of her, knowing what she had to say next.

“It’s not a ministroke, Kim. Dr. Mehra already told me that. If it had been a TIA, he’d be awake already. That’s what I prayed for too. A TIA would be the least of all evils at this point, but the doctor was very clear and made sure I understood it. No, it’s not a mini. This is the real thing, Kimmy. What am I going to do if he doesn’t wake up? He’s all I’ve got.” Jan choked out the words between her heartbroken sobs.

“Mom, you’ve got us: me, Bennie, Mike, Peter, Laura, and Steve. We’re always here for you. You know that.” She looked into her mother’s eyes and then gently pushed her hair back. She paid special attention to the few gray strands that clung to Jan’s tear-drenched cheeks. “Shh,” Kim said. “It’ll be okay.”

Jan felt Kim pull her close and let herself be comforted in the arms of the woman who used to be her own baby girl. She remembered when she’d had to do the same for Kim after a hard day. It was nice to be on the other side of that gift.

“I know you’ll always be here for me, Kim... you all will. But you’ve got your own lives now, and rightfully so. Your father and I are on our own, and that’s okay. We finally have time

to enjoy our life together. Not that we didn't love having a house full of kids and the constant activity and all of the craziness that came along with it. It's just that that time has passed for us. It was the best part of our lives, but now there's just the two of us. It's kind of like when we were first married. Now, suddenly, we realize we're still lovers, not just best friends and parents. We're free to enjoy a late breakfast together, to watch our gardens grow, or just to sit and enjoy each other's company, even if that means reading a book or watching TV. We were actually looking forward to growing old together. Now it's all gone. I feel so helpless."

Jan broke away from Kim's arms and buried her face in her hands. "Damn. I can't let this beat me. He needs me thinking straight."

"Mom, look at me," Kim insisted sternly. When Jan didn't respond, she repeated, "Mom, look at me. Mom..." Kim's voice turned from stern to demanding, and finally Jan lifted her head and looked at her daughter. "Never, ever say that again. We are not going to lose him. Daddy will pull through. I'm sure of it. And they do say that sometimes people in comas are aware of their surroundings and can hear. Do you want Daddy to hear you talking like that? I know I don't. You've got to be brave—not only for him, but for the rest of the family. They'll be looking to you for strength and direction regardless of how you feel. You're still the mother."

Jan straightened a bit in the chair. "You're right, of course, this is no time for a pity party. I'm back in mom mode, but you sound more like the mom than I do."

"I learned from the best," Kim said.

Jan stood and hugged her daughter. They embraced for a while, both in need of strength and support.

"Oh my God," Mike said as he walked through the doorway. "He isn't... I mean, he didn't..." He didn't finish either sentence but instead rushed toward Kim and Jan.

"Daddy!" Bennie yelled out and ran to Mike, scattering the crayons and paper on the floor. Mike scooped him up with one arm without missing a step.

"Mike, what's wrong? What are you talking about?" Kim asked as he wrapped a strong arm around her waist.

Mike looked down at Ed and sighed. "When I came in, I saw you two hugging and I was afraid Ed had... well, you know."

"Here now, there won't be any more talk like that. They say people can still hear when they're in a coma," Jan said. She smiled and winked at Kim and continued, "He's fine, Mike. From now on, he's just resting. No sick talk, okay?"

She moved to Ed's bedside and stroked his head. "It's okay, Ed. Just rest for now and wake up when you're ready. We'll be right here." She continued to stroke his head a few more times and then returned to Kim and Mike.

"I'm with you on that one. No more sick talk," Mike agreed. "Why don't we all sit down and relax a bit? What do you say?" He motioned toward the chair that Jan had been sitting in. Jan sat while he pulled an extra chair from across the room for Kim to sit in. He sat on the windowsill, balancing Bennie on his knee.

"Have you heard from Peter yet?" Mike said without directing the question to anyone in particular.

"Uncle Peter is coming?" Bennie said with excitement. "I can't wait to see him. Is Aunt Laura coming and Sarah too? Are we going to have a party?" Bennie scrambled down his father's leg and crawled up on Jan's lap.

Jan smiled a distant smile and said, "From the mouths of babes." She glanced over to Kim. Jan pulled Bennie in tight and cradled him almost as if he were a baby. She kissed the top

of his head and continued to speak directly to him. “Well, I don’t know about a party, but yes, Uncle Peter is coming. I’m sure he can’t wait to see you too.”

She smiled gently at the boy and then answered Mike’s question more directly. “I left him a message to come home as soon as possible. I said that his father was sick and in the hospital, but I didn’t leave any details. While we were en route to the hospital, he left a message on my cell phone that he was boarding a plane at O’Hare Airport and would arrive five p.m. our time. When I called him back, I just got his voice mail again, so he’s probably still in the air. I’m sure he’ll be here soon. He doesn’t really know anything more than Dad is sick.” Jan shrugged her shoulders helplessly. “I didn’t know what else to say.”

“I think you said the right thing,” Mike consoled her.

“There is no need to get him all upset when we really don’t have any answers.”

“What about Uncle Steve? Is he coming too?” Bennie blurted out.

Jan stole a quick glance at Mike and Kim before answering. “Of course Uncle Steve is coming, and he’s bringing his friend Greg with him. They’re driving up right now.” She ruffled Bennie’s hair again.

Kim drew in a deep breath before she spoke. “When will they be here? We haven’t even met Greg yet. Why now? Why drive?” Her frustration was evident.

“They’ll be here by nine or so. He said it’s a two-hour drive to JFK and the next plane here didn’t leave until nine, so they’d be here just as quickly if they drove, maybe even quicker. I didn’t ask about why Greg was coming. Maybe he has a client up here. You know your brother. He likes to help Greg with his medical equipment sales business whenever he can.”

“Whatever. It’s aggravating, that’s all. It’s his business too. Isn’t it?”

“I suppose so, but Greg is the one who actually started it,” Jan said.

“Nevertheless, I don’t see the need for introductions right now,” Kim insisted.

“Just let it go, honey. You know your brother,” Mike said in a condescending tone.

“Yes. I know my brother.” Kim shot him a “don’t go there” look. “And I don’t really care about all that other crap. Steve and I are fine about all that and you know it. It’s just that there’s so much to deal with right at this moment. That’s all.”

Mike’s tone softened. “You’re right. I’m sorry. We have bigger fish to fry right now than to let that start another family ruckus.”

“Fish?” Bennie chirped.

Mike sighed, while Kim and Jan shot each other little grins. “Not now, Ben. I’ll explain later, okay, buddy?” Mike moaned.

“Okay,” Bennie relented.

“Right now Ed is the only thing we should concern ourselves with, and as far as we’re concerned, Ed is just taking a nap. Right?” Jan reminded them.

“A nap?” Bennie crinkled up his forehead in confusion. “Papa’s been sleeping since me and Mommy got here. How long does he have to take a nap for, anyway?”

“That, we don’t know, sweetie. I guess he’ll wake up when he’s good and ready,” Jan said. “We’ll just have to be patient for now. I’ve learned over the years to be patient with your papa. It’s always seemed to work before.”

“What do you mean, Mom?” Mike asked.

“Well, it took him a long time to get over Grace, so I had to be patient. I knew it wouldn’t be wise to rush him.”

“You mean he was moping around thinking about Grace after you got married?”

“No, not at all. But sometimes there’d be a song on the radio or something else that’d

stop him in his tracks, and I knew it reminded him of her. I never asked or even cared for that matter. He had a right to miss her. As time went on, those flashback moments came less often. I knew he loved me with all his heart, and those few moments he spent remembering her didn't take anything away from us." She smiled and shook her head. Her eyes looked off as she conjured up an old memory.

She was pulled back into the present when she heard a gentle knock at the door.

"Hello, Jan," Dr. Mehra said as he entered the room. "How's he doing?"

"That's what we're waiting for you to tell us, Karash," Jan responded. She and Ed had long ago dropped the formality of addressing him as Dr. Mehra. They had been seeing him for so long that he seemed like part of the family. He was the last of his kind, the last of the true family doctors, and Jan knew she could trust him without question.

"Well, right now, you know as much as I do. By the look of the monitor, his pulse rate and blood pressure seem to be good, and there's no fever. I wish I could give you more of a definitive answer, but I can't. If it were a broken leg, I could say twelve weeks in a cast. If it were an infection, I could give him antibiotics for ten days and he'd be fine. But strokes aren't like that. Basically he's on his own." He gave her a helpless smile and sideways apologetic nod of his head.

"That's where you're wrong, Karash. He's not on his own; we're here with him." With a gentle sweep of her hand, Jan gestured toward her family.

Dr. Mehra acknowledged them all with an approving smile. "You're right. If there's any medicine that can help Ed, it's you and the family being here with him. I firmly believe that at some level he's aware of you all being here, and your presence can only help him to recover. The unit is very quiet tonight. I'll make sure you all can stay as long as you want and are made comfortable."

"Thank you," Jan said as she got up and handed Bennie to Kim. She walked over to Dr. Mehra, and they turned toward Ed.

At that moment Ed's eyelids began to tremble. They could see his eyes moving under them. Jan covered her mouth with both hands and her eyes widened. "What's happening, Karash?"

The rest of the family came nearer and watched as Dr. Mehra examined Ed. He listened to Ed's breathing and then his heartbeat with a stethoscope.

"His pulse rate is up a bit, as well as his respiration, but other than that I don't see anything wrong except the obvious. Probably just an autonomic nerve response. Or maybe he's dreaming, considering the rapid eye movement. His condition doesn't seem to be worsening."

"Thank you..."