

Ashes
By Xaqtly

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This story takes place approximately 2 years before the start of Zig Zag the Story.

The house was dark. James pulled into the driveway, puzzled. He wasn't that late, was he? He glanced at his watch. No, it was only ten past ten. If anything, he was early. Usually, when he worked late, he didn't get home till eleven. But the front door was unlocked and that was odd. That wasn't like Beth. Maybe she just figured he was going to be home earlier and forgot about it. Another wave of guilt washed over him as he opened the door and walked in.

"Honey?" he called tentatively, putting his keys and his coat on a chair in the entryway. He turned on the hall light and walked towards the back of the house. "Beth?" He went into the living room and the den, turning the lights on as he went. "She's probably upstairs," he thought. He backtracked out to the hall and headed for the stairs.

"Beth honey, I'm home," he called gently as he arrived at the top of the stairs. "No lights on up here either," he thought, growing a bit more pensive. After making a circuit of the top floor without finding Beth, he decided she must have gone out somewhere, probably with Kelly.

"Serves me right," he said out loud. "That'll teach me to work late on a weekend." He walked back downstairs and headed towards the kitchen to make himself a light dinner and to call Doug and Kelly's house to see if she was there. He entered the kitchen and turned on the light, heading towards the phone. He stopped dead in his tracks as he saw Beth's unnaturally still form sprawled face down on the floor. "Beth?" He filled with apprehension as he quickly covered the distance between them. He knelt down beside her and gently turned her over onto her back. He saw her face and ice began to course through his veins. Her eyes were open and looking straight ahead and she wasn't breathing.

His brain went into red alert. His army training took over as he checked for a pulse and found none. A flash of panic went off behind his eyes and he immediately started doing CPR while fumbling for his cell phone. He pounded 911 into the keypad and continued compressions on Beth's chest. Fear was gnawing at his stomach as the 911 operator answered.

"911 emergency services, how can I help you?"

"I need an ambulance immediately, my wife is unconscious and unresponsive to CPR. I don't have a pulse!"

"Sir, I need more information. How was she injured and where are you?"

"I'm in my kitchen, I don't know why she's like this! I just came home from work and found her on the floor!"

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"Is your house secure? Are there any signs of a break-in?" James started as he realized he hadn't even thought of that. He quickly checked Beth for any signs of injury then continued compressions.

"I don't see any injuries, there's no blood and nothing in our house seems to be out of place," he said. "Oh god, she's not responding. I need that ambulance!"

"Sir, I need your address. The ambulance is already on the road. Please stay calm and tell me exactly what happened so I can inform the EMTs en route."

As James finished telling the operator what had happened, he heard the ambulance pulling up outside. "In here!" James shouted in response to the knock on the door. A pair of EMTs ran in towards him. "I can't get a pulse!" he said as one of the EMTs pulled him off of Beth as the other one took over doing compressions.

"Tell me everything you can," the EMT ordered.

"I don't know! I found her like this when I came home from work," James said, his voice taut with anxiety. As he explained, again, what had happened, he was vaguely aware of the other EMT pulling paddles out of her bag. He stopped speaking and watched in horror as the paddles made contact with Beth's chest causing her back to arc for a moment before dropping back down.

"Damn," the female EMT mumbled as she turned a knob in her bag, rubbed the paddles together and applied them again. Beth stiffened and arched and James could almost feel the shock as his eyes began to burn. The EMT put the paddles away and checked again for a pulse or any signs of life. Slowly she sat up and looked at the other EMT, shaking her head.

"Excuse me please," The male EMT said and walked over to his partner, kneeling down next to Beth. As James watched silently from across the room, the EMTs conversed in hushed voices. He couldn't quite make out what they were saying but Beth still wasn't moving. A dark pain began to grow in the pit of his stomach as he watched the male EMT get up and walk back towards him.

"I'm sorry sir," the mongoose said softly. "There's nothing we could do. She had been gone for too long before we got here. I'm so sorry."

James was stunned as his entire world began to crash down around his ears. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the female EMT pull a sheet out of her bag and gently drape it over Beth, pulling it over her head. James slumped to the floor in shock. He placed his head in his paws, trying to make sense of what was going on. How could she be dead? There was nothing wrong with her! He looked up suddenly, then got up and walked towards her. He fell to his knees by her side and pulled the sheet away from her face. He reached over and gently closed her eyelids and was devastated by how beautiful she was when she was sleeping.

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He choked and tears began to stream down his face. "Why did this happen?" he asked, wracked with pain.

The female EMT sat across from him and looked at him sympathetically. "We don't know yet, sir. Best we can figure, she had a heart attack or a stroke. We'll have to do an autopsy to find out what caused it."

James nodded and wiped his eyes with the back of his paw. He reached out and caressed Beth's ear so tenderly it nearly made the femme EMT start crying. She could hear James' tears falling to the sheet as he cried for the loss of his wife. She quickly finished packing her equipment, left the house and burst into tears on the front lawn. She was no newbie to this job, but something about the way that coyote had touched his wife and the look in his eyes had conveyed to her just how shattered he really was. It definitely wasn't something she saw every day, and it had hit her pretty hard. She tried to regain her composure and bring the equipment back the truck, but she had to sit down again and let it all out.

"Is there anybody we can call for you?" It was the male EMT standing over James.

James looked up at the mongoose, trying to separate his question from the pain. "No... I'll call him." He got up purposefully and walked to the phone across the kitchen, then dialed Doug's number.

"Hello?"

"Doug, it's Jim. I need you to come over here as soon as you can."

"Isn't it too late for a visit? Beth isn't going to take too kindly to me showing up at this time of night."

James looked over at Beth under the sheet and shut his eyes tightly. "Please, just get over here, both of you," he said, nearly whispering.

"Okay, but... Jim, are you all right? What's wrong?"

"Please just get here, I'll explain when you're here. I have to go." He put the phone back in its cradle and went back to kneel at Beth's side.

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"It's all my fault," James wept as Kelly held him tightly. Her own face was wet with tears, and she said nothing.

"No it isn't, Jim," Doug said firmly. "There was nothing you could have done. We don't even know what happened to her yet."

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"But I should have been here," James insisted weakly. "I should have been here".

"We had to take care of that client, you know that. He was dead in the water." Doug cursed inwardly at his poor choice of words.

James sat silently for a few moments. "I should have been here," he said, angry now, as he looked up accusingly at Doug.

"Why did I have to be at work today?" James lashed out, suddenly livid. He pulled away from Kelly and stood up.

"No James, it's not your fault. It's not," Kelly pleaded with him. "Please James, there was nothing you could have done, nothing any of us could have done. There was no way to know what was going to happen."

James ignored her and walked slowly over to Doug. "Why, Doug? Why couldn't you have handled it? Don't you get paid enough to do this stuff on your own?" Kelly broke into heavy sobbing as Doug moved to take her into his arms. "Is there some reason you need me to babysit you all the time?" James spat.

Doug stared at him, shocked. He bit back an acrid response and took a deep breath to calm himself. "Jim, if you had asked me to do it myself, I would have. You wanted to come in today, remember? This was an important client and you felt it would be better if we both gave it our personal attention."

"Screw the client!" James barked. "Since when did they take priority over Beth?"

"Since we started SCS, Jim. We knew our private lives were going to suffer, but we couldn't have known this was going to happen. Even if you had been home you might not have been able to save her, from what the EMTs told us."

"There is no reason I should have been at work while Beth was dying on the kitchen floor!" James shouted. "No reason..." he trailed off and broke into heavy sobs. Doug pulled him close and hugged him, and James cried harder than he had ever cried in his life. Doug knew how much Beth meant to James, and how very much he loved her. Doug could only imagine how it might feel to lose Kelly, and his own tears began to roll down his face.

"I didn't tell her I loved her today," James choked. He looked up at Doug with terrible pain on his face. "I just left for work, I barely even said goodbye... she died without knowing how much I loved her."

"That's not true, James," Kelly burst out. "She knew very well how much you loved her, and she loved you just as much. She adored you, and she cherished every minute you were together."

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"I left her alone to die, what sort of husband would do something like that?"

"Don't do this to yourself," she pleaded. "Beth loved you, and we love you. It's not your fault." She reached out and caressed the side of his face.

James closed his eyes and placed his paw over Kelly's. "She must have been so scared when it happened," he said softly.

Kelly felt his words like a knife in her heart, and her body shook as she began to cry again.

###

James went through the motions of making funeral arrangements in a state of tabula rasa. He had retreated so deeply into his mind that he couldn't even feel any emotion for what he was doing, he only knew that it had to be done. At night he lay awake staring at the ceiling, and he felt the empty space beside him as if it were a black hole. Every so often he reached over to feel the nothingness next to him, hoping he would wake up from this nightmare.

Debbie arrived the day before the funeral. She pulled into the driveway and got out of the car as James emerged from the house to meet her. "I'm so sorry, Jim," she said sadly as she hugged him. "Beth was like the sister I never had, and I loved her too... I'm so sorry." She broke into tears, crying into her brother's shoulder. James held her and said nothing. "Jim?" she asked, and sniffled. She looked up and saw James looking off into the distance, expressionless. "Jim, talk to me," she said worriedly.

James closed his eyes and dropped his head, shaking it slowly. "Let's go inside."

She had never seen her brother like this, and it was scaring her. If anybody could get Jim to talk about his problems, it was her. Even as kids, she felt closer to Jim than their other siblings, and she was the only one he would ever confide in. If he wouldn't talk to her about this, it must have hurt him more than even she imagined it had.

Inside, she saw Doug and Kelly and walked over to them. "Deb!" Doug exclaimed as he gave her a bear hug. She looked up at him sadly and said, "I don't know what to do, Doug. He won't even talk to me and it's scaring me."

"It's scaring all of us, Deb," he said quietly and released her. "He loved Beth more than I've ever seen anybody love somebody else. Losing her that way really took him apart."

"But he'll eventually go back to normal, right?"

"I don't know. I think so, but he's really out of it right now. He needs our support and we need to be here to give it to him. That's all we can do right now."

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Debbie nodded and wiped her eyes. "I'm not going anywhere," she said solemnly as she hugged Kelly.

They arrived at the church the next morning, and James was even more withdrawn than the day before. All his friends and family were there but he wasn't happy to see them. The less he had to talk to people the better. He noticed the stares he was drawing, but all he could think about was how he hadn't been there for Beth when she needed him. She paid the ultimate price for his selfishness and this was his punishment, a life without her. He sat down in a chair near the back of the room and stared blankly at the opposite wall, lost in self recrimination.

As the service began, James sat in the front row of the church, listening with half an ear as friends and family went up one by one to speak about Beth and how she had affected their lives. His thoughts were only of Beth and how he had failed her. If only he had been home like he had planned to be, he could have saved her. She died scared and alone because he put his work before the love of his life. It was a mistake that would torture him for the rest of his life, he knew.

The funeral proceeded, and James' thoughts grew darker and filled with self loathing. It had only been a few days, but his need for Beth had not diminished. He missed her as much as any living thing can miss another, but it was his fault she was gone. She was his life, and without that life he was simply a shell without substance.

The last people had spoken and the priest had given his speech that was supposed to make you feel better about losing the one thing in your life that meant more to you than anything else, and people began to leave for the grave site. Nobody spoke to James as they walked, and he preferred it that way. Beth remained the only thing of any importance to him, and the only place she existed now was in his mind. Talking to other people only served to distract him from visualizing her every feature, her perfect muzzle, the way her eyes sparkled when she told him she loved him, that smile that could drive him to distraction, and her scent. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a piece of soft fabric. He brought it up to his nose and breathed deeply, taking in Beth's faint but still existent scent, causing a flood of memories to take his mind off of everything else. For a moment, he was happy again as he recalled the pure joy he experienced when he was with Beth.

He was cruelly removed from his precious memories as they reached the grave site. The last part of the ceremony took place then, and it was just more words that wouldn't bring Beth back. Afterwards, friends and family gathered around him to express their condolences and grief, but James didn't give them more than a cursory acknowledgment. After most of them had left, he was still standing there with Doug, Kelly and Debbie standing behind him silently watching. He took one last look at Beth's coffin and turned to join the others.

"Let's go home," he said flatly.

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Doug, Kelly and Debbie exchanged worried glances and Debbie spoke up. "I can stay with you for another week Jim, I've already gotten the time off of work."

"You don't have to do that, Deb. I'll be fine."

"You don't look fine to me, little brother. Let me stay with you please, I'm worried about you."

"Nothing to be worried about. I'm going back to work tomorrow anyway."

"What?" Doug put a heavy paw on James' shoulder. "You'll do no such thing. SCS can survive without you for a while, you need time to work through this." Doug lightened his grip just a bit. "As your business partner and your friend, I'm begging you to take the time off. Please, you can't just -"

"Just what?" James interrupted. "What do you think I'm going to do at home by myself? I need to stay busy, Doug. There's a lot of work to do at SCS and I'm going to have a lot of time on my hands." Doug saw the smallest flash of unimaginable pain in James' eyes as he spoke, and decided not to push him any further.

A small sob escaped Kelly's throat as she buried her face in Doug's shoulder. She had been Beth's best friend and had come to love James like a brother, and she couldn't stand to see him acting like this. Debbie could only watch as James lowered his eyes, then turned away and walked towards the parking lot, his tail almost dragging on the ground.

"How can he do that, doesn't he miss her?" Kelly asked plaintively.

"More than any of us can imagine," answered Doug. "But handling it this way isn't healthy. He needs to grieve."

"How long will it take? How long can he keep it all bottled up inside him?"

"I don't know, but it's not going to be pretty when it all comes out. I just hope we're still around when it does, because even if he says he doesn't need us now, he's going to need us then."

All Kelly could do was nod, and Doug wrapped his arms around her and Debbie as the three of them went back to their cars, leaving Beth in her final resting place.