Take It Slow

Author: tj_teejay (AO3 – Tumblr – Instagram – Reddit – E-Mail)

Summary: *It's been over a year that Jonah took the trip to Hong Kong that made his life unravel, but then he discovered he had a stepdaughter he never knew—a stepdaughter who has now decided she would take him up on the offer to come visit. Which by all accounts should be a good thing, except it's spring 2020, and there's this virus now starting to spread…*

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'Hey, r u around?'

Jonah stares at his mobile. It's a message from Lau.

He hasn't heard from her in a while. Months, probably. They occasionally text, try to keep each other updated about major life events. It's a strange relationship for sure – a stepdaughter he hardly knows but wishes he had met earlier, wishes he could have seen grow up but understands why that didn't happen.

He texts back, 'Around as in… ??'

'London'

He frowns, then texts, 'Yes. Why?'

'the invite still stand?'

'To see the house? Of course. Are you in London?'

'yeah. wanna meet?'

'Would love to. When?'

He thinks about whether to ask her to come over but then figures it might be safer to meet on neutral ground. The last time they saw each other, they were amicable enough, but it's been over a year.

Lau easily agrees and Jonah finds himself nursing an overpriced cup of coffee that afternoon with his gaze on the door, inwardly chiding himself for being somewhat nervous. What even for, he wonders. It's not like anything hinges on this meeting. Or does it?

Lau enters five minutes later, looking exactly like he remembers her, except maybe her hair is a tad longer. “Hey,” he greets her.

She rolls her eyes at him. “Of course you had to be early.”

He laughs gently. “Guilty as charged.”

She slings her winter coat, scarf and her bag over the backrest of the chair opposite him and sits down on it, giving him a once over. He doesn’t think he’s changed much since, either. A few more grey hairs, maybe. He gestures at the coffee bar counter. “Can I get you anything?”

Lau gets up. “Thanks. I’ll get it myself.”

Ugh, Jonah thinks. He’s already messing it up. Not exactly how he wanted this to go. He lifts his arms in defence. “Yeah. Sorry.”

She comes back a few minutes later with what looks like a latte in hand.

“Look,” Jonah says, “We don’t have to do this. Or we can go somewhere else if this isn’t—”

“No,” she interrupts. “It’s just this shitty weather. I’m not used to the cold.”

He nods. Yeah, English winter is often cold, grey and wet, and even though it’s March, they’re in the middle of an unusual cold spell right now. “Fair enough,” he says, watching her stir a spoonful of sugar into the hot drink. “How come you’re in London?”

She shrugs. “Something I always wanted to do. Should’ve maybe come in the summer, though.”

“When did you arrive?”

“Last week.” She takes a sip from her latte.

“Any reason you didn’t tell me ahead of time?”

She shrugs again. “Didn’t feel right.”

His brow creases. “Feel *right*? What do you mean?”

“I just didn’t want to…” She sighs. “Fuck, this was a bad idea.”

“Lau. Please. What am I doing wrong?”

She looks at her coffee, then looks up at him. “Nothing. You’re just…”

She lets that hang there and he asks, “I’m just what?”

A smile creeps into her features. “You’re a little too much.”

"Too much? What does that mean?"

"Nothing. Let's just..."

He meets her eyes. "Lau. What's going on?"

She shakes her head and it takes a moment before she says, "It's been a shitty few months. I needed a change of scenery. I don't know why I thought London was a good place to go. And now, with this virus thing out there that's got everyone in a flap..."

"What happened in the last few months? Something related to Megan, to your father?"

"No, just... bad break-up. Lost my job, had to scramble for money. The flat... I had to get out of there, you know."

"Why didn't you reach out? I could have helped."

She gives him a cynical smile. "Helped with what?"

"I don't know. Money. A place to stay. Where *are* you staying?"

"A place in town."

"Place, as in...?"

"This hostel."

He nods. Okay. At least she's not living in the streets. He suppresses the instinct to offer her to stay at his place, but he knows she'll probably say no. Even with the few days he's only spent with her in Hong Kong, he got the sense that she was fiercely independent, that the life she'd led there had her become self-reliant quickly.

He desperately scrambles for something safe to discuss. "So you hate the English weather. Anything about London you've liked so far?"

She smiles. "It's not as frantic. And the museums are free."

Jonah remembers the overwhelming frenzy and constant hectic rush of Hong Kong, so he gets it. "Museums, huh?"

She nods lightly. "I studied arts, remember?"

He does. Vaguely. He doesn't know all that much about her personal interests and preferences. They should talk about that more. "Which ones have you been to?"

"National Gallery, Tate Modern, V&A, British Museum..."

"Natural History?"

"That's still on the list. Is it worth going?"

"Absolutely." He thinks about whether to offer to go together but decides to tread carefully. "Haven't been in a while."

"Wanna come with me?"

That surprises him but he says, "Yes, I'd love to."

She nods. "'k. You're still teaching, right?"

"Yeah. Lectures and seminars Monday through Thursday. Office hours on Fridays."

"I looked you up. You wrote a book. *Do Nations Exist?* Sounds riveting."

He smiles. "I'd like to think so."

"It got a second edition, so I'm guessing it doesn't actually suck."

That makes him laugh out loud. "I take it you haven't actually read it."

"Oh, god no. Was Mum actually interested in that stuff?"

"Not particularly, no. She would indulge me sometimes if I got particularly hung up on something in world politics. She always was a good conversation partner. Although she did often say I talk too much."

"You know, no offence, but I still can't see you two together. How did you even meet?"

"Believe it or not, we first met during my Freshers' Week."

"Freshers' Week? What's that?"

"Kind of a welcome period for new university students. You know, a week before classes start."

"Wait, you met her, what? 30 years ago?"

Jonah bristles a little. "Come on, I'm not *that* old."

"But didn't you only marry her a few years ago?"

"Yeah. Four. And a half, I suppose."

"So what happened in between all that time?"

He shrugs. "We only got together when I finished uni, but it was a brief thing because she basically vanished from my life one day to the next. Never heard from her again. Then we ran across each

other again five years ago. Well, must be six now. And I fell for her all over again, like the first time." He smiles at the memory.

"So how did the whole Hong Kong travel thing work for you?"

"I don't know. We just made it work, I guess. We'd make the most of our time together when she was here. She taught me how to use Skype when she was in Hong Kong."

Lau grins. "You didn't know how to use Skype? How are you a university professor?"

"Technology was never my strong suit."

"And you never thought to come with her to Hong Kong? She must have asked you."

"Oh, she did. But, you know. I hate flying. The thought of spending twelve hours on a bloody plane... I just couldn't." He rubs his chin, feels the five day stubble there. "She asked me so many times. I wonder if she felt..."

"Rejected?" Lau supplies.

"Yeah. I should have... I should've sucked it up and gone with her. I'm sure there's so much—" His throat clamps up and he has to swallow. It's been over a year, and he's still not over her. He blinks at the tears that are pooling in his eyes.

"Jonah," Lau says softly.

He wipes a hand across his right eye where a tear is threatening to dislodge. "Sorry," he says stupidly.

She takes the last sip from her latte and points in the direction of the door. "I, uh... I should go."

"No. Please. Don't you want to see the house?"

She hesitates. "I don't know. I didn't want to, you know... dredge all this up again."

"Nonsense. You're here. I'd like to spend some time with you. If you don't mind. The house is a ten minute walk. If you dare brave the wet and cold English winter." He gives her a smile that he hopes is inviting enough.

"Yeah, alright."

He empties his coffee. "Okay then."

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It *is* bloody cold. And as if to mock them both, it starts drizzling halfway there.

“Christ,” Jonah mutters and opens his umbrella. When he holds it over Lau, she gives him a disdainful scoff but grudgingly accepts the measly shelter from the dampness that seems to want to cling to every surface.

Jonah shakes out the umbrella after he’s opened his front door and gestures for Lau to step in. She toes off her shoes in the small hallway and it makes Jonah smile. How customs differ. He wonders how much else he doesn’t know about Lau’s home country. Too much, he knows.

He vaguely points towards the kitchen. “I’ll make us some tea.” The moment it’s out of his mouth, he realises just how stereotypical English it is, but then again, they’re both frozen to the bone and slightly wet. “Do you need a towel?”

She shakes her head. “I’m okay.”

“I should have asked. Do you even want tea?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I only have black. I don’t… I don’t know what you drink.”

She smiles. “Relax, Jonah. I grew up with an English mother, remember? It’s not like I’m a stranger to black tea with milk.”

He nods. “Alright then. Black tea with milk it is.”

They both hang around the kitchen while they wait for the water to boil and it’s a bit awkward. Jonah scrambles for something interesting to say while Lau’s eyes roam the room and take in the details. “We bought this in 2016. Stroke of luck, really, when it came on the market.”

Lau doesn’t say anything and wanders over to the patio door. It overlooks the back yard that’s a little too unkempt. Megan was always the one to maintain the flower pots and the one small flowerbed. “I should get that in order,” Jonah comments.

“Not a green thumb, huh?”

He shakes his head. “Plants wilt at the sight of me.”

The tea is finally ready and he hands a mug to Lau after he’s poured milk into the mugs. “Sugar?”

“No. Thanks.”

They migrate to the living room where Jonah points to the sofa. They both sit down at opposite ends and sip their tea. He gestures at the room around them. “I know it’s not much. But this was your Mum’s home. Well, when she was here.”

Lau’s expression is inscrutable. “You know, no offence, but it’s kinda… bourgeois.”

He looks around, tries to see the furniture and décor with fresh eyes of someone who hasn't lived here for several years. It *is* a bit conservative. "Well, I suppose you have a point."

He puts his mug down on one of the coasters that he's casually taken with him from the kitchen and put on the table for the both of them, immediately feeling self-conscious about how conservative that is, too.

"Come on, let me give you a tour."

Lau nods and gets up, dutifully follows him around as he walks her through the house, shows her all the rooms and gives her little details that relate to Megan. Lau looks at everything and Jonah wonders what's going through her head. This whole thing is still a little mind-blowing, even a year in. And having Lau here make it all feel as surreal as it was when he first learned of his wife's secret life.

They end up back down in the living room where the tea has gone lukewarm now. Lau takes the mug and sips from hers anyway while she wanders around and looks at some of the framed landscape photos on the walls. Jonah shuns his tea because it's just a tad too bitter now. He'll pour it down the drain later.

There's something on his mind he wants to ask, but he isn't sure if he should. He hangs back and probes, "Lau. There's something I'd like to ask."

She doesn't look at him. "Okay..."

"About your father."

"It's not like you need my permission to ask questions..."

"Maybe not, but perhaps you don't want to talk about him."

She shoots him a look. "Jonah, I'm not some fragile little girl."

"Oh, I know that. But, you know... It's..."

"Still fucking awkward. Yeah. It is."

He sighs. "Look, I don't want to—"

"Yeah, I know." Her expression softens a little. "What did you want to ask?"

"No, it's okay."

"God," she says a little more aggressively. "Just fucking ask."

"Did you ever recover his body?"

"You mean dig him up?"

"Yeah. He was buried somewhere, you said."

She hesitates, then says, "I considered going to the police, but what's the point? They're all corrupt anyway, and my dad wasn't exactly well respected after what he'd done. I went there once. Where he was buried. Felt fucking surreal. So I stood there and said a prayer. I dunno. It's not like a need a grave to remember either of them."

"Yeah." Jonah nods. He gets it. "Do you miss him?"

God. That's a stupid question. He shouldn't have asked that.

Lau smiles sardonically. "I do. But you know, the most ironic thing is that David is no more my father than you are. You're both just... men my mother married."

"Come on, you know that's not true. David raised you as his daughter. And how would he not? He didn't know."

"Yeah, well, he was never much of a father to begin with."

"He loved you."

"He had a funny way of showing it."

Jonah stays quiet, because what can he say? He only knew David for about a week, and circumstances weren't exactly extenuating.

Lau looks at him and chuckles lightly but doesn't elaborate.

Jonah gives her a look. "What?"

"When I first met you, I thought you were a total moron. And a wimp."

"I *am* a wimp. I was too scared to get on a plane to see the place that my wife loved with all her heart."

Lau chuckles again. "You broke into a fucking murder shed to rescue me. And you intimidated Bach like a total legend."

Jonah lets out a small laugh. "I did, didn't I?"

"You're a lot more badass than I had you pegged for."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Lau stays quiet for a long moment, then says, "You said she told you she couldn't have children."

"Yeah," Jonah says in a low voice. The reminder still smarts.

"Are you still pissed at her for lying?"

He draws in a long breath. "Sometimes. But most of all, I miss her."

"Yeah, me too."

Jonah looks at Lau, has the urge to hug her, but they're not quite there yet. He remembers the card Megan left him, wonders if he should mention it to Lau. But maybe it's better that she doesn't know.

He sees her neat handwriting on it, imagines where and how she's written it. Sometimes he has fragments of memories that feel way too real. Thoughts of her waking up next to him, of him waiting for her call to pick her up from the airport, of her laughing at some stupid off-hand comment he made.

He feels his eyes watering again, wipes a hand at it. "Shit. It's been over a year," he says wetly.

"Sometimes I still think I'll hear her voice, calling me from the other room. And then I remember. It's the fucking worst."

Now Lau is crying too. The way she stands there, something in her posture, it reminds him of Megan, and Jonah thinks, fuck it. Before he knows it, he's closed the distance between them and he draws her into a hug.

Lau stiffens at first, then she leans in and returns the gesture. There's a strange kind of comfort to it. Two virtual strangers, tied together by an unlikely bond.

After they separate from the embrace, it's Jonah who speaks first. "I hope you'll stay for a while."

"You mean with you?"

He laughs. "No. In the UK. Though you're very welcome to stay here, if that's what you want. I have the spare room up there. You've seen it. It's half decent. Needs to be hoovered, maybe."

"Sounds tempting."

He grins at her. "Come on. London's expensive. Sounded like you're here on a budget."

"God, you're such prat."

"I'm not wrong, though, am I?"

She smiles a little bashfully. "No, You're not wrong. But you live out in the ends. It's not exactly Central London."

He points in a vaguely easterly direction. “There’s the Tube.”

“Takes 40 bloody minutes from the city.”

He shrugs. “Suit yourself. The offer stands. Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll think about it.”

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The next evening, Lau stands in front of his door with a backpacker rucksack slung over her shoulder.

Jonah smiles and holds back a sarcastic remark. “Come on in.”

“What, no told you sos?”

“Nope. I said the offer stands. Glad you decided to take it.”

“Yeah, don’t read too much into it. This is just an arrangement for budgetary reasons.”

Jonah nods. “Alright.”

“Shut up.”

He lifts his hands defensively. “What?”

Lau gives him a good natured grin and says no more.

He points up the staircase. “Second door on the left, in case you don’t remember. Make yourself right at home. Towels are on the bed. Let me know if you need anything else.”

She gives him a nod. “Yeah, thanks.”

“Of course.”

He watches Lau walk up the stairs, and it hits home just how fucking weird this is. In his mind, she belongs in a whole other world, half a planet away. He met her when he was thrust into this other world against his will, against all odds. She’s not supposed to be here—in his home. In their house. Well, *his* house now.

He lightly shakes his head, then goes to the kitchen to put on some tea. Can’t go wrong with that, can you? Anything that’ll help make this less weird, he reckons. They still have half a lifetime of things to catch up on. It’s time that they get a head start.

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That evening, when he's finished putting the dishes from their Indian takeaway supper in the dishwasher, he finds Lau in the living room. She's holding a picture frame that he had on display.

He stops a few feet away, knows she saw him come in.

She looks at the framed photo. "This is me," she simply says.

Jonah nods. "Yeah."

"Where'd you get this?"

"Megan rented a storage unit that I found out about after I returned. There was a box inside. It had a lot of mementos from Hong Kong."

"And you put this up, why?"

He shrugs. "You're a big part of her life. Just felt right."

"We don't even know each other. Not really."

He points at the picture. "I can put it away if it makes you uncomfortable."

She looks at it for a long moment, then puts it back where it stood. "Not gonna lie, it's a little weird. But also kinda sweet."

"Sweet?"

"Yeah. You know, in a dorky kind of way."

"Dorky?"

"Come on. You're dorky. You're an economics professor."

"International politics," he corrects.

"Same difference. I mean, look at you. The trousers, the shirts, the linen jackets."

"What's wrong with my trousers?"

She grins. "They're dorky."

"Well, maybe your mum liked dorky."

She rolls her eyes. "Seriously, I still don't get it. You don't seem like her type at all."

"Thanks for the compliment. But, you know, I *did* have to court her twice. I guess I didn't leave much of an impression the first time around."

"Or maybe she was already dating my dad."

Yeah, he had wondered about that. “Right.”

She turns and goes to sit on the sofa. He follows her and sits down in the armchair. She looks around, makes a bit of grimace. “God, this is so fucking cliché.”

He frowns. “Our living room?”

“Yeah.” She vaguely points around the room. “The whole thing. Like the blandest storybook white collar marriage out in the suburbs, down to the bloody furniture. So doesn’t seem like her.”

“You keep saying that. What would have been more like her?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. You said maybe she wanted to be somebody else. Maybe she wanted this—the mundane, the security, the routine. Seeing all this, feels like I didn’t really know her at all.”

“You knew the version she was when she was with you.”

“Yeah, but then there was also the version she was with you.”

“What makes you think they were so different?”

“Don’t you think they were?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. People’s personalities don’t change, just because they fly halfway around the globe.”

Lau stays quiet for a long moment, then looks at him. “When you were in Hong Kong, you were all kinds of roughed up. You had a shiner, then a cut on your temple. What happened there?”

Jonah draws in a breath, then scrubs a hand down his face. It was a rough week and he doesn’t think about it very often anymore. “The black eye, that was when I walked in on someone stealing my passport from my hotel room. And then, when this whole thing around Megan started unravelling, I started poking the bear. And, well, I poked a little too hard.”

“They beat you up?”

“No, not exactly. There was this thing, on a boat in Macau.”

“Wait, you went to Macau?”

“Yeah. One of the loose ends led to a boat rented out by Kai Huang.”

“Did you hit your head, or something?”

"No. I walked in on the guy who had attacked me in my hotel room lying dead in the corner. Someone knocked me over the head from behind." He purposely doesn't mention that David was there too because he figures Lau doesn't necessarily need to know that part of the story.

"And they just... left you there?"

"Yeah. No trace of the body when I came to and the police arrived. It was... it was all kinds of fucked up, actually."

"Jesus, Jonah. Did you even know who you were messing with? It's a miracle you're still alive."

"Yeah, I know."

Lau's voice is quiet when she asks, "Do you ever regret doing all that?"

"You mean looking into her murder?" He shakes his head. "No. I needed to know what happened, and we found out, didn't we?"

"Yeah."

Then something occurs to him. "Are you saying that if I hadn't done all that, your father might still be alive?"

She gives a small shrug but stays quiet. Jonah can't really say he's ever thought about it that way. His focus at the time was Megan and finding out why his wife had been inexplicably killed.

"Christ, Lau. You get that your father was involved in some really shady business, don't you? And who knows what would have happened if I hadn't started poking around. Is that why you're mad at me? You think I got your father killed?"

"No. I don't know." She looks away.

"Look. I can kind of see where you're coming from. But don't you think putting your father's death on me is—"

"No," she says quickly. "I didn't mean to... to say that. Shit."

"It's okay. I understand. You want to have someone to blame. Makes it easier."

"I don't... I don't blame you. Just sometimes I wonder what if..."

"Yeah," he exhales. "But I've learned that it's healthier not to dwell on what-ifs."

Lau gets up. "I need some air."

Jonah just nods and quietly lets her leave. He gets it. It all *was* pretty fucked up. It still is. And that complicates things between the two of them. But maybe they can get to know each other better and maybe that'll help.

He remembers Megan's box, the one he told Lau about, so he gets up and goes to find it. He puts it on the kitchen table for Lau to decide whether she wants to go through it or not.

When Lau comes back, Jonah is watching an old detective series on TV and decides to give Lau some space. She goes straight up to her room and he doesn't see her until the next morning.

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The next day, breakfast is a relatively quiet affair. Jonah has put the box to the side for now, trying to decide when a good time would be but Lau seems already a step ahead of him. She points at the box that stands in the corner. "Is that the box from storage?"

He nods. "Yeah. I wasn't sure if you wanted to look at it."

She's already up and crouching down, opening the lid of the box. "I do."

Jonah watches her warily as she takes the items out of the box one by one. Most of them have memories attached, he can see that. Lau holds up a drawing that looks like it was made at toddler age. "I can't believe she kept all this. Why would she bring this to England?"

He shrugs. "Mementos? Reminders? I'm sure she was missing you when she was here."

"Yeah, but why bring that and then put it away in storage? Makes no sense to me."

"Well, clearly she didn't want me to know about you."

"What would you have said if she'd told you?"

"If she'd told me that she illegally married me because she also had a family in Hong Kong?"

"No, I mean... She could have told you that she had a daughter from a previous relationship."

"After telling me she couldn't have children?"

Lau shrugs. "Yeah, I don't know."

Jonah contemplates it for a long moment. "I think it's the web of lies she crafted that made it too complicated. Some of it may have been spur of the moment decisions. But then, once it's out there, you can't take it back. It can't have been easy, living a double life like that."

"Are you still mad at her?"

“For keeping this secret from me?” He shakes his head. “No. It was a choice she made, and I wouldn’t trade the time we had for the world. I’m just trying to hold on to what we had.”

“You know, you’re a lot more forgiving than me.”

“Are *you* still mad at her?”

“Hell yeah. I mean, not all the time. But sometimes, yeah, I wanna slap her across the face. If she was still here.”

Jonah smiles. “You have her passion.”

Lau pulls a photo from the box of her and Megan. “Can I have this?”

“Oh yeah, of course. You can have anything from there you want.”

She pockets the photo. “Thanks.”

Jonah points at the box. “I’ll let you…”

Lau nods. “Yeah.”

He goes to get his laptop, then goes upstairs to the study. There’s a lecture he wants to update for Monday. He better get to it. Jonah hears the shower going a little while later.

When he’s done with the slide updates, he rubs his temples. He’s had this headache all morning, he feels a bit off. Maybe caffeine will help. He puts the laptop in his desk drawer.

By the time he’s sitting at the table with the mug of coffee between this hands, he isn’t sure he wants to get up again any time soon. He isn’t sure where this is even coming from. There’s this sudden fatigue that’s weighing him down. His chest feels a little too tight and now there’s a scratchy throat and a strange tingle in his bronchi that makes him cough dryly.

He lets his hands sink down again. He rubs his face with one hand and resists the urge to let his forehead rest against the tabletop.

“Jonah?”

There’s Lau, in joggers and a loose-fitting t-shirt, towelling off her hair. He looks up at her. “You want some coffee?”

She looks at him with a frown on her forehead. “You alright?”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Yeah. I don’t know. Headache. Don’t feel so great. Maybe I’m catching a cold or something.”

She gives him a look. “Shit,” she mutters.

“What?”

“What if it’s that virus?”

“You mean COVID?”

“Yeah. You’re at uni all day. Lots of contact with different people. It’s all over the socials, how it’s starting to spread. More and more cases. Are you running a fever?”

He isn’t sure but it’s certainly within the realm of possibilities. “I don’t know.”

“You have a thermometer?”

“Yeah. In the bathroom. I think it’s in the drawer.”

Lau is already on her feet to go and get it. She comes back a few minutes later with the device in hand. It’s one of those modern ones that you stick in your ear. Megan had bought it after they’d had Emma’s kids staying over and one of them came down with a fever.

Lau’s forehead is in a frown when she looks at the reading. “37.9. You should probably be in bed.”

“Yeah,” he says with a sigh.

He trudges up the stairs, feeling alarmingly fatigued when he makes it to the top. Shit. Is Lau right? Did he catch COVID? God, that would suck.

As he goes to the bathroom to change into his pyjamas, he figures they should probably play it safe. Keep their distance. He doesn’t want to give it to her too, although if this is what it is, chances are high she might have already caught it.

He settles into bed with a low groan. The fatigue is really hitting him now, and the dry, tickly cough is making itself known.

Lau knocks on his door a few minutes later. “Jonah? Can I come in?”

“No,” he says. “You should keep your distance. I don’t wanna give this to you.”

She pokes her head in anyway. “Probably already too late anyway.”

She comes into the room and puts a pint-sized glass of water on his bedside table. “Hydration and all that.”

“Thanks,” he mutters, then he remembers something. “Check the bottom shelf in the bathroom. Megan kept a supply of surgical masks for when she was travelling. At least wear those when you’re around me.”

Lau nods. “I have a few left, too. I’ll get you one if you need to use the bathroom.”

“Maybe use the downstairs toilet for now. We should try to stay separated as much as possible.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that. You need anything else? Something to eat?”

He shakes his head. Food is the last thing on his mind right now. “No, thanks.”

“Maybe for later? You have some crackers or anything like that?”

“I don’t know. Not usually.”

“I’ll go shopping tomorrow.”

“No, you don’t need to do that.”

“You’re clearly ill. Even if this isn’t COVID, we should stock up on the basics.”

Jonah stirs. “At least let me give you some cash.”

She shakes her head. “Yeah, we can figure that out later. Get some sleep. Call me if you need anything. Or, you know, text me. You have your phone?”

“I think it’s downstairs.”

“I’ll get it.”

Lau comes back a few minutes later, wearing a light blue surgical mask. She places Jonah’s phone on his bedside table as well as the thermometer and a package of Ritz crackers. “Found those in the kitchen. They expired last month but they’re probably still edible.”

Jonah is already halfway to a nap. “Thanks,” he says tiredly.

“Okay. Well. I’ll be downstairs if you need me. Like I said, send me a text if you need anything.”

He nods, keeping his eyes closed.

“Okay,” she says again. He hears the door click into its lock a few seconds later.

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When Jonah next comes to, he’s a little disoriented and it takes him a second or two to figure out that it must be evening. He takes stock, and it’s with a sense of dread that he realises that things only got worse since this morning.

He definitely feels feverish now. Despite a few hours’ sleep, the headache is still undeniably there. His body aches, the way it tends to when you have the flu. When he stirs to sit up, that dry cough is back, this time more insistent.

He fishes for his phone, frowning when the clock indicates it's half seven. Christ. Did he sleep that long?

There's a message from Lau. 'Text me when ur awake'

He starts clumsily typing. 'Awake now'

'How u feeling?'

'Not great'

There's a knock on his door a minute later.

"Don't come in," he calls towards the door, his voice sounding way too gravelly.

She opens the door anyway, a mask on her face when she pokes her head in. "You need anything?"

He closes his eyes. "Lau, stay away from me."

"You really think it's COVID?"

He sighs. "Yeah. I don't know. Doesn't feel like a normal flu."

"You still have a fever and a cough?"

He gropes for the surgical mask on the bedside table and puts it on with fingers that feel a lot clumsier than they should. Then he takes the thermometer to check his temperature. "38.6," he tells Lau.

"Yeah, that's not great." She steps into the room despite Jonah's earlier warning. "What about the cough?"

"Yeah. Chest feels kinda tight."

"So I looked it up on the internet. They say you should stay home for at least seven days. Everyone else in the household should stay home for fourteen days. You're not supposed to go to a GP, pharmacy or hospital. There's a line you can call if symptoms become severe. 111."

"Okay," he says, then coughs into his mask. It doesn't alleviate the weird tightness in his chest.

"You can take paracetamol for the fever." She holds up a small cardboard package, then tosses it onto his bed. "From your bathroom."

"Yeah, speaking of which, I need to, uh..."

"Oh. Uh. Yeah. I'll go downstairs. Make you some supper."

He grimaces. "I'm really not hungry."

“You should try to eat. I’ll make you some toast or something.”

“Lau?”

She turns around. “Yeah?”

“Are you still feeling okay?”

“Yeah. I feel fine.”

That’s good. This would be so much worse if they both caught it. Not to mention that this virus is apparently unpredictable. People are being hospitalised. Some cases are being reported as severe, even deadly. It’s pretty scary, but he hopes it won’t get that bad.

He eyes her more carefully. “You’d tell me if you came down with it, would you?”

Her forehead creases into a frown. “Why would I lie to you?”

“I don’t know. We, uh… No false bravado, okay? I want you to be honest with me.”

She shakes her head. “What the fuck, Jonah.”

“Yeah, sorry,” he says quickly.

She turns to go. “I’ll be downstairs.”

“Just put the food in front of the door and knock. No need for you to come in here.”

“Yeah, okay.”

He makes it to the bathroom and back, feels unusually drained and short of breath by the time he sits back down on the bed. This thing is already knocking him sideways, and there’s a rising trepidation in his gut as he lies back down in bed. Shit. He doesn’t want to end up in the hospital. Or worse.

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The night is pretty restless. He wakes up a number of times, feeling either too hot or too cold. He has bouts of the chills, drags himself to the toilet twice and feels spent and breathless afterwards. He’s also coughing a lot more and that tightness in his chest is more pronounced.

When he next wakes up, there’s daylight peeking through the blinds and he sighs. He still feels like absolute horseshit. Then he realises, crap, it’s a weekday. Monday, isn’t it?

When he checks his phone, it’s quarter to ten. Fuck. His first lecture was at 9. He needs to… he needs to call the university. He checks his phone again. No missed calls. One message from Lau.

‘didn’t want to wake u. called in sick for u. text me when you’re awake.’

She called in sick for him. Huh.

He stirs and tests the waters by sitting up on the edge of his bed. He feels achy and chilly, needs to cough again. He’s tired despite just having slept for hours.

After taking a sip from the water, he grabs his phone and texts Lau. ‘Just woke up. You feeling alright?’

The screen indicates a few seconds later that she’s sending a reply, which promptly comes. ‘stay put. gimme a sec’

Lau knocks, then opens the door. Jonah fumbles to put his mask on. This time, she stays in the doorway. “You feeling any better?”

He rubs his forehead. “No.”

“Worse?”

“I don’t know. Yeah, I guess.”

“Do I need to start worrying?”

“No,” he tells her. “I just need to sleep it off. Probably needs a few days.”

“Yeah, okay. You hungry?”

He shakes his head. “Not really.”

“I’ll make you some tea.”

He closes his eyes. “Lau. You don’t have to do this.”

“Shut up, Jonah. You’re in no shape.”

He wishes he could argue against it, but he *is* in no shape. Just going down the stairs doesn’t sound like something he wants to attempt right now. When he opens his eyes again, she is no longer there.

The trek to the toilet is arduous, and that frightens him. He should not be completely breathless after walking a few yards down the hall.

He still trying to catch his breath when Lau reappears with a mug that she puts on his bedside table and a piece of buttered toast. She takes a few steps back to stand in the doorway again. “I should probably ask if you’re a Marmite guy.”

He smiles beneath the mask, even if she can't see it. "Not the biggest fan beyond the occasional craving."

"Speaking of breakfast choices, do you have anyone you can call to get us groceries if I'm not supposed to leave the house?"

"Yeah. My sister."

"Does she know I exist?"

"Yes. Of course. She wanted to come with me to Hong Kong. I've told her everything."

"You wanna call her yourself or do you want me to?"

"No, I'll do it."

Lau nods and he sees her leave from the corner of his eye as he reaches for his phone. Emma answers on the fourth ring. "Jonah. Long time, no see."

"Yeah, sorry about that. It's been a busy few weeks."

"You okay? You sound a little rough."

"I think I caught the virus."

"Virus? You mean COVID?"

"Yeah."

"Shit. How bad is it?"

"Yeah, it's not great. Listen, I need a favour."

"Of course. Anything. You need me to bring you something?"

"Yeah, we need some groceries. Could you help out with that?"

"We?"

"Oh. Yeah. Lau is here. She's staying with me."

"Lau?"

"Yeah. She flew in a week ago."

"Oh wow. And you didn't tell me?"

"She rang me two days ago. I was gonna tell you, but then I came down with this thing."

“Is she ill too?”

“No. Well, not so far. They’re advising people in the same household to stay home, so if you could drop off some essentials, that would be great.”

“Yes, of course, what do you need?”

He gives her a list of things that come to mind. He also tells her to be careful and start wearing masks when she’s out and about. She’s concerned about him, of course, but he tries to reassure her that he’s doing okay, considering, and that he has Lau to help him out.

After he hangs up, he realises again how grateful he is that he has Emma close-by. He wouldn’t have made it through the harsh weeks after Megan’s death without her, when the house was oppressively empty and the reminders were still fresh and stinging like a hundred paper cuts every day.

He texts Lau that Emma will drop by with groceries later. She texts him a thumbs up emoji back.

He sighs. It’s going to be a long, few days.

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Lau puts her phone down on the coffee table. How the hell did she end up here, with a bedridden Jonah upstairs and her playing personal caretaker?

She folds her legs under her on the sofa to sit cross-legged, leaning back against the backrest. Fourteen days stuck in this house. Fourteen days she’s going to be spending with little more than a stranger who is ill with a virus that is spreading globally like wildfire that no one seems to know much about yet.

What the hell is she going to do here all day? Sure, she has her laptop and his WiFi password, but that’s only going to get her so far. She prays to God he has streaming subscriptions. Only one way to find out – she finds the remote control and switches on the telly. Prime is a bust, but he seems to have an active Netflix account. At least that’s something.

The ring of the doorbell three episodes into *The Witcher* startles her. She peers out the window but can’t see anything, so she dons the surgical mask and opens the door. There are four plastic bags with groceries by the door and there’s a slender woman with auburn hair standing a few feet back who says, “Lau?”

“Yeah. You’re Emma?”

“Yes. Jonah asked me to drop this off for you.” She points at the bags by the door. “They were all out of toilet paper, but I’ll try to get some next time.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“How is he?”

“Jonah? He’s sleeping, I think. I haven’t spoken to him since earlier this morning.”

“You think I could check on him?”

Lau is uncertain what to say to that. “I'm not sure he’d want you in the house. You know, contagion and all that.”

“Right. I’m just worried.”

Lau smiles reassuringly, realising that Emma won’t be able to see it behind the mask. “I can check on him right now if you want.”

She hesitates, then shakes her head. “No. Let him rest if he’s sleeping.”

“I’ll tell him you dropped by.”

“And you’re not ill?”

She shakes her head. “Not so far.”

“So you’ll stay with him?”

“Not like I have much of a choice, do I?”

Emma looks unhappier by the minute, so Lau adds. “Yeah, look, this isn’t exactly how I had planned this trip to go, but he could use the help, and I’m not supposed to be around people. So yeah, I’ll stay with him.”

It seems to appease Jonah’s sister somewhat. She gestures towards Lau. “I wish we could have met under better circumstances. I’d really like to talk some time.”

Lau nods. “Yeah, same. Hopefully we’ll get the chance when this is over.”

“Yes, I’d like that.” She turns her torso towards the street. “I have to go, but please call me if you need anything. Groceries, toiletries, or, you know... anything.”

“Sure. Yeah. Thanks.”

“Ask Jonah for my number if you want to reach out.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Okay. Bye.” She gives a little wave that Lau doesn’t return, but she watches Emma walk out to the street through the iron gate before she picks up the grocery bags.

She puts the food away, wonders about some of the items and brands that Jonah seems to like. Lau is not a great cook by any means. It was always her father who had more of a knack for it, but she's pretty sure they'll be able to scrape by. If all else fails, there's always take-away or the deep-frozen stuff since she's already figured out that Jonah has a small freezer. She wonders if they have grocery delivery service around here.

She goes back to *The Witcher*, finding that she's thoroughly enjoying it, not just because Freya Allan is kinda hot. Her phone dings next to her and it's a text from Jonah. 'You awake?'

She frowns. Yeah. Why would she be sleeping?

'downstairs watching netflix. you need anything?'

'Bored'

She smiles. 'not sure I can help with that. btw ur sis dropped off the groceries'

She watches the little dots way too long to wait for his reply while the TV series is paused. Eventually he writes, 'Can you come upstairs? Just stay outside the door'

Lau uses the remote to flick off the television, then goes up the stairs and gently raps on his door. "Jonah?"

The empty plate and mug are on the floor outside the door. His voice is muffled. "Yes. Just figured maybe we could talk."

She frows. "Through the door?"

"Yes. Better than nothing."

She raises her eyebrows, then crouches down and sits down on the floor next to the door. "Kinda weird, but okay. You doing okay?"

"Not that great. Fever got worse."

"How high?"

She hears him cough, then say, "39.1."

"You still taking the paracetamol?"

"Yeah. Helps a little."

"You hungry?"

"No. Had the toast but it tastes like cardboard. You still feeling okay?"

“Yeah. I’m good. Maybe you should call your sister. She was a little worried.”

“She always worries.”

“That isn’t necessarily a bad thing.”

“No, it’s not. Listen, you should air out the rooms. Especially the upstairs bathroom if you need to use it.”

Lau wants to roll her eyes. “Yeah, I’ve looked up the recommendations on the internet, too. There’s all sorts of chatter online. People are saying stuff about loss of taste or smell. You have that?”

There’s a longer pause, then, “I don’t know. Maybe. Is that bad?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a symptom, I guess. What else do you have?”

“Fever. Cough. Sore throat. Chills. Headache.”

“Chest tightness?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me if it gets worse or if we need to call this NHS line. I think your sister was worried about that, too. Please call her.”

“I will. Thanks for handling the groceries.”

“Yeah, sure. I hope you’re not expecting me to prepare any five-star meals.”

He chuckles, then coughs. “My culinary needs are very simple. Besides, if I can’t taste anything anyway…”

“Maybe that’s a blessing.”

The conversation stalls for a moment and only silence greets her through the door. “Jonah? You okay?”

“Yeah,” he says, and even with the physical barrier between them, she can tell he sounds beat.

“I can go to my room if you wanna be in the living room for a while. You know, watch something on TV or whatever. Or, I don’t know, do you have a laptop you can watch stuff on? Oh, by the way, I used your Netflix account, hope that’s okay.”

“Of course,” he confirms. “Laptop’s in my desk drawer in the study. Not the worst idea. Watch anything good?”

“*The Witcher*.”

“What’s that?”

“You don’t know *The Witcher*?”

“No, I don’t know *The Witcher*.”

She sighs. Of course he doesn’t know *The Witcher*. “It’s Polish book series they made into a video game. Well, three video games, actually. The third one was really big. I guess you’ve never played?”

He chuckles lightly. “Not since my early twenties.”

“Yeah, figures.”

“The series any good? Should I watch that?”

“On your Netflix? Please don’t, it’ll mess with my— You know what? It’s cool. I’ll make myself a profile.”

“Profile?”

“Yeah, you know, a Netflix profile under your account. Then we can each watch our own stuff.”

“Okay.”

“You got any other streaming accounts?”

“There’s BBC and ITV. I think one of them might have a paid account. I don’t really use that much. Your mother set that up and I’ve never cancelled it.”

“Okay, I’ll take a look. Maybe I can find some online games we can play remotely.”

“I’m really not much of a gaming person.”

“Yeah, like I can’t tell. Leave it to me. There are plenty of options, even for old-timers like you. It’ll beat sitting in separate rooms in the same house, doom-scrolling for eternity.”

“Doom-scrolling?”

“Yeah. You know, endless scrolling through your social feeds for no reason at all.”

“Bold of you to assume that I have social feeds to scroll through.”

“Okay, Boomer.”

“Hey. I’m Gen X.”

“Yeah, same difference.”

“You have any topics we can discuss that aren’t going to disparage my age?”

She grins. “I don’t know. What are you interested in other than global politics and chasing down criminals in foreign countries?”

He chuckles again. “The latter was a one-off. Not a hobby of mine. I like folk music and rugby. And hiking if there’s time and opportunity.”

Lau remembers seeing some framed landscape photos hanging downstairs. “Those photos downstairs, are they yours?”

“Yeah. I have a DSLR camera I take along most of the time.”

“They’re pretty cool. You’re not bad.”

“Thanks for the compliment.” She can tell he’s being sarcastic now.

“No, seriously. Takes a good eye to shoot photos like that. How much do you know about photography?”

“Enough to know how to move away from the fully automated camera modes. That something you’re interested in?”

“I’d like to learn more about it. Dad was never interested in those things, and Mum was away a lot, so...”

“I’ll be happy to teach you what I know. You have a camera?”

“Just the phone, but it has a decent camera. I’ve played around with it, gets some good results.”

“Well, that’s something you’ll have to teach *me*.”

“Good, then we can teach each other.”

They talk for another few minutes but Jonah seems to be fading fast. Eventually, he tells her he’s going back to bed, and Lau goes to his study to find his laptop, which is easily located in the desk drawer.

Just as she’s about to close it again, something catches her eye. An envelope with her mother’s handwriting on it. She knows she shouldn’t be snooping, knows she should leave well alone, but before she can make that decision, she has it in her hands. She folds open the card that was lying just underneath, and it’s unmistakably her mother’s cursive.

Jonah.
If you find this,
then it’s because I never got
the chance to tell you myself.

It was always you. M x

Lau reads it, takes it in, thinking, 'Well. I guess that answers *that* question.'

Then she puts the card and the envelope back in the drawer. Shit. She probably shouldn't have read that. And she probably shouldn't tell Jonah that she did, either.

As she looks around for the laptop charger, there's that old feeling – when she first met Jonah and hated him, hated the idea of her mother being intimate with another man, loving a man other than her father.

Of course she knows that her parents had problems, that they were fighting, that their love and affection for each other had waned. But never in a million years did she think her mother would have an affair with another man, let alone secretly marry him.

Having gotten know Jonah a bit better, she knows he isn't a bad person. Quite the opposite. In some ways, he's too good to be true. But this... Knowing her mother chose him over her father, it stings. Rationally, she knows that's not Jonah's fault. He didn't even know. How could he have known?

She puts the laptop and the charger outside Jonah's door and goes back downstairs. Maybe more of *The Witcher* can take her mind off things.

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By 6pm Lau starts to get a little worried. Jonah hasn't been in touch since their door conversation, and that was half a day ago. It's been too long.

She hesitates outside his door and first says his name, then raps on the door.

When he doesn't answer, she repeats, "Jonah?"

She knocks again. "Hey, Jonah. Come on, answer me." She waits another few seconds, then mutters, "Fuck this."

She adjusts her mask to make sure it's covering nose and mouth, then opens his door. Like she expects, he is lying in bed. She watches him warily for several seconds, breathing a silent sigh of relief when she sees his chest rising and falling ever so slightly.

She says his name again but he still doesn't react. Some of his hair looks damp, like he's been sweating a lot. Crap. Should she let him sleep? She isn't sure he's even been awake since this morning. The glass of water next to his bed is still one quarter filled. Is he drinking enough?

Fuck this, she thinks again, then bends down to gently shake his shoulder. "Jonah. Wake up."

He stirs but that is all he does. She shakes him again, says his name in a louder voice. “Jonah, wake the fuck up. I don’t wanna have to get you to a hospital.” Even through the long-sleeve he is wearing, she can feel the fever radiating off of him.

Something shifts now, he moves under her touch, his eyes flickering open.

“Jonah. Hey, look at me.”

He blinks, seemingly confused, a low moan escaping his lips.

“Jonah? You with me?”

He stares at her for another long moment, then says tiredly, “Lau?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m staying in your house, remember?”

His hand comes up, rubbing over one eye socket, then he keeps it lying there as if he has forgotten to complete the motion halfway. “I feel awful.”

“Yeah, you look it, too.”

As if to put more emphasis on it, he launches into a dry, hacking coughing fit that sounds absolutely horrible. He is out of breath by the time he finishes. It takes a few moments for him to recover and say, “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I know, but you didn’t react to my messages.” She reaches over to the glass of water on the nightstand. “Here. You need to drink.”

His eyes are closed again and she wonders if he has drifted off again. “Jonah?”

“Yeah,” he says, the exhaustion deep in his voice.

“Can you sit up?”

He struggles to try and Lau ends up helping him, adjusting his pillow behind him. She tries handing him the water again, and he dutifully takes it and takes a few sips.

She tries to encourage him to drink some more, and she can see he is trying but it is clearly also a struggle. Just when he has handed her back the glass, he breaks into another long cough that he finishes with a breathless, “Shit.”

Lau reaches for the thermometer and holds it into Jonah's ear. 39.7. That's really high. He should be conked out on paracetamol to get the fever down. She takes one of the blisters on his nightstand. It only has two more pills in it. "You should take these."

He's leaning back against the headrest, his eyes closed again. Jesus Christ. He is so out of it. Lau is now actually worried. She lightly touches his shoulder. "Jonah," she says gently.

"Hm?" he hums, his eyes opening with heavy lids.

Lau pushes the two paracetamol pills out of the blister and holds them out to him. "Please take these. Your fever is really high."

He takes them and pops them into his mouth. She gives him back the water glass to chase them down. Even that looks like a struggle. Another coughing fit follows that leaves him panting for air once more.

She waits patiently for him to ride it out, her worry metre still way up there. He blinks his eyes open, then says slowly, "I need the loo."

"Okay. I can leave, let you do your thing."

"No," he says. "I think I..." He swallows. "I think I may need your help."

She raises her eyebrows. "Okay."

It's painful to see him struggle with even the simplest tasks. He barely manages to sit more upright. Lau holds out the mask for him to wear. She isn't even sure if it will still do anything at all, but it is better to do what they can as long as she doesn't have any symptoms herself.

Jonah slowly puts it on, then pauses, closing his eyes. His breaths are coming a lot faster than they should, and his torso sways a little. Lau reaches out to steady him by the upper arms, and he tilts forward.

Before she knows it, his forehead is leaning against her collarbone, his feverish body radiating heat all over her. Christ.

"Hey," she says in a low voice. "Jonah. Come on, stay with me."

"I need a minute," he mumbles into her.

"Yeah, okay." She lets her hand wander up to his shoulder blades, placing it there for support. She can feel his breath shudder against her, even through the mask. "You think you can get up?"

He doesn't move. "Everything aches."

She swallows, her heart going out to him. “I know. The painkillers will kick in soon.” Her hand lightly pats his back. “Come on, let’s get you to the toilet.”

Getting him out of bed and upright is a bit of an ordeal and their trip to the bathroom is slow. He is breathless by the time she gets him there. Keeping a wary eye on him, she is unsure what to do. This is already way more than she signed up for.

He looks at her. As if he reads her mind, he says, “I’ll be alright. Just need to take it slow.”

She nods. “I’ll wait outside. Call me if you need help.”

Outside in the hall, she leans against the wall next to the door, listening for activity, wonder what she should do. He is still coughing and eventually she hears the toilet being flushed and the water tap going. The door opens a minute or so later with Jonah shuffling out into the hallway.

Lau goes to his side for support and she gets him back into bed. His body is being wracked with another coughing fit before he sinks back down with exhaustion. He lies with his eyes closed, his torso rising and falling with fast breaths.

“Jonah, I really don’t like this. You think it’s time to call that NHS line? Maybe you should be in a hospital.”

He draws in a deeper breath, then says, “I don’t know.”

“I’ll call your sister, see what she says.”

“No,” he says quickly. “She’ll be worried and then she’ll come over. I don’t want her to catch this.”

“I’d say we have grounds to worry. People are dying from this, even in the hospitals.”

He sighs. “I’m not dying.”

“That’s easy for you to say. Fuck this, I’ll call the COVID line right now.”

She doesn’t wait for Jonah to protest and fishes her phone from her pocket. A male voice answers after a few rings and starts asking basic questions, goes through Jonah’s symptoms, then asks to be put on speaker so he can speak to Jonah himself.

The whole thing lasts several minutes, and to their dismay, they are advised to call 999 so Jonah can be taken to a hospital. The shortness of breath, the disorientation and the high fever are all undeniable red flags.

Jonah looks stricken when they hang up. “Fuck,” he hisses before he coughs again.

“Jonah. This is the sensible thing to do. You must get that.” She looks around the room. “Tell me where you have a bag or a suitcase so I can pack some things for you.”

He points at his wardrobe. “Bag is at the bottom. I have a toilet bag in the bathroom.”

She goes ahead and unearths the grey travel bag and starts packing what she thinks he might need. Going through his clothing seems way more intimate than she ever would have wanted, but it can’t be helped now, can it?

“You wanna call your sister?”

“Yeah,” he says tiredly.

“I can also do it if you want.”

“No. I’ll call her right now.”

Lau goes to the bathroom to find the toilet bag and starts packing that, too. When she gets back to the bedroom, Jonah looks at her and says into the phone, “She’s here now.”

He holds the phone out to Lau. “She wants to talk to you.”

Lau takes the phone. “Emma?”

“Yeah. Is he really that bad?”

“His fever is approaching 40 and he’s out of breath even when he doesn’t move. They said he should be seen at a hospital.”

“I’ll come and drive you.”

“No. They specifically said to call 999 and not go yourself.”

“Okay. But I wanna be there. I’m coming right now.”

“No,” Lau says again. “Jonah doesn’t want you here. Truth be told, *I* don’t want you here. This thing seems really contagious and you’ve got children. You shouldn’t come here.”

“I can stay outside, stay away from you. I just wanna be there. Please.”

Lau sighs. “Yeah, alright. But you need to stay outside.”

Lau has never called emergency services before but the call is very no-nonsense with the handler very calm and matter-of-fact. She is being told an ambulance will be dispatched as soon as possible.

Emma arrives a few minutes later and Lau greets her by the door. Emma stands a few feet away, looking frazzled and worried. Lau tells her, “I just rang the ambulance. They should be on the way.”

“How is Jonah?” Emma asks.

“Yeah, you know. Pretty miserable, but the looks of it.”

“God, I wanna see him.”

“Yeah, I know. But you get that that’s not very smart, right?”

She nods, and Lau says, “This is the right thing to do. He should be monitored. Hopefully he’ll improve with better treatment than herbal tea and paracetamol.”

Emma quizzes her on what happened the last few days until they see the ambulance approaching with flashing lights. Emma signals them from the pavement.

A woman and a man emerge in FFP masks, dressed in protective gear with nitrile gloves, plastic goggles, disposable blue gowns and a plastic apron over it. Both have a bag slung over their shoulder.

Lau escorts them inside and takes them to the bedroom where Jonah is already sitting on the edge of the bed in a pair of joggers and a jumper. He looks very much the worse for wear and Lau watches warily as they start examining him, measuring his vital signs.

The whole thing takes a while and Jonah looks like he’s fading by the minute. They eventually tell Lau that they’ll take Jonah with them and she should wait downstairs.

Emma is pacing outside and Lau gives her an update as they wait for Jonah and the paramedics to emerge, which they eventually do. Lau can see Emma wants to be by his side but does her best to stay back. Jonah shuffles into the ambulance on his own two feet, the paramedics by his side. They have to help him into the ambulance and Emma stands at the back of it, talking to her brother.

Lau hears her say, “I want to go with him,” but the paramedic shakes her head.

“If you haven’t been exposed, for your own safety we are strongly advised not to take you.”

“I’ll be okay, Emma,” Jonah says between coughs. “Go home, be with your kids.”

“Where are you taking him? I’ll follow you.”

“Northwick Park, but I’m not sure that’s very useful. They won’t let you inside.”

Emma’s voice is now raised. “Seriously? He’s my brother!”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, those are the current COVID protocols. Again, it’s for your own safety.”

“Emma,” Lau tries to assuage her.

“Don’t ‘Emma’ me!” she shoots back and Lau raises her hands defensively.

“Emma,” Jonah’s voice pipes up from inside the ambulance. “Just listen to what they say. I’ll have them call you. You and Lau.”

The woman looks at Lau before she starts closing the ambulance doors. “We’ll take good care of your father. Someone will reach out to you.”

“He’s not my—” she starts to say, but the ambulance doors are already closing.

Lau looks at Emma as the ambulance drives away, the worry and turmoil all over her face. Emma gives her a glare that’s maybe a little too aggressive for the fact that none of this is Lau’s fault or choice.

Lau lift her hands with her palms up. “What would you have wanted me to do?”

Emma narrows her eyes. “When did he start showing symptoms? A few days after you got here, right?”

“Wait. You think *I* gave this to him?”

“Well, you came from China.”

“I came from *Hong Kong*. And unless I’m mistaken, incubation time is a few days. His symptoms started a day after I moved in. He would have caught this from his students. Or colleagues. Not me. Besides, I’ve been in London for over a week.”

Emma stares at her, a little less aggressively now. She closes her eyes and draws in a long breath. “Fuck. He’s been through all that crap last year, and now this.”

Lau bristles. “All that *crap*? She was my mother, too.”

Emma looks slightly stricken now. “Yeah. Sorry. I didn’t— I didn’t mean to say…”

Lau shakes her head. “You know, I get that you’re worried. And, yeah, this is all fucked up. I didn’t choose this either. But at least he had me here to take care of him since I was already exposed. Least you could do is be bloody thankful. Because I could have just said fuck it and bailed.”

That makes Emma’s body language shift, her expression soften. “Sorry. I’m just… I’m sorry.”

Lau nods. “It’s okay.”

“And thank you. You’re right. You didn’t have to do this. We owe you.”

“No. I didn’t do this to be owed. It was basic human decency. And I guess we’re kind of family. In some small, fucked up way. Ironically enough, *your* family too. Shame you don’t act like it.”

Emma looks genuinely apologetic now. “Yes, you’re right. I overreacted. I’m sorry. I just… He’s my brother, you know? He was always there when I needed him.”

Lau smiles beneath her mask despite herself. That seems to be a theme that’s emerging. Jonah’s the helper syndrome type. Then again, there could be worse qualities in a person.

Lau turns to Emma. “You know, when all this is done, maybe we can start over.”

Emma nods. “I’d like that.” She gestures down the street. “I’ll go home and then call the hospital. I’ll let you know when I have news. I assume you’ll keep staying here?”

“Yeah. Don’t have anywhere else to go right now. I’ll take care of the house.”

“Alright. Thank you. For, you know…”

“Sure,” she says, then heads back inside. There’s work to be done. She should air and disinfect the house, fix up Jonah’s bedroom, make something to eat.

God. A stranger’s house all to herself. It’s fucking weird. And it’s more than a little ironic that this is happening all over again – some weird, fucked up situation she’s thrust into because of Jonah. Or, well, ultimately because of her mum. She wonders yet again if it was such a smart thing to come to England.

Emma calls her two hours later, but she hasn’t been told very much. Jonah’s been through a basic COVID assessment. The x-ray showed borderline COVID pneumonia. He’s now on oxygen, IV fluids and paracetamol, isolated in the COVID ward. She’s been assured he’s being taken good care of, but they both know that the hospitals are already over capacity and struggling with supplies. Emma sounds worried and Lau doesn’t know what to say that could help. This sucks, there’s no two ways about it.

Before they hang up, Emma says, “Oh, and Lau? If you call the hospital, say you’re his daughter, otherwise they won’t tell you anything.”

“But I’m not.”

“They won’t know that, and they don’t have the time to check. Just tell Jonah so that he will confirm.”

“Okay. Yeah. Thanks for the update.”

“Of course.”

They sign off, and the worst part is, Lau now has a scratchy throat herself and she feels a little warm. It wouldn’t exactly be a massive surprise if she’s also caught it. When she takes her

temperature, it's 37.4. Slightly elevated. Shit. She should go to bed early and hope her immune system is strong enough to nip this in the bud early.

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The next three days drag on. Lau nurses the weird thing she assumes is a mild case of COVID, because all she has is a bit of a headache, a scratchy throat for a day, and then kind of a tickle at the back of her throat with an occasional urge to cough. Her temperature is normal again the next day. She's grateful that she apparently dodged the hospital bullet.

She speaks to Jonah on the phone a few times. He seems pretty out of it the first day, but improves the day after and they actually manage to get him to do a video call. He has an oxygen cannula strapped to his face and looks tired, but he's more alert than the day before.

He assures her that the hospital isn't so bad and he's feeling a lot better. He proudly shows her an empty dish as proof that he's eaten a whole bowl of soup. She has a feeling he's putting up a brave front, but he does seem to be doing a lot better than when she last saw him. And that's a relief.

On day 3, Jonah calls her in the morning, and Lau pretends that he hasn't woken her up. He sounds a lot more upbeat and tells her that, with any luck, he might be released later that day. He's been off oxygen entirely since the day before and the doctors are happy enough with his oxygen saturation.

Lau calls Emma right away, and she is happy but apologetic because now she has a sick child at home. They're fairly sure it's not COVID since the symptoms are all bowel related, but her husband won't be home until later that evening and she can't leave the house. Lau tells her not worry, she'll figure something out.

By the time that Jonah tells her he'll be discharged in about an hour, she weighs the options in her mind. She has no idea if she is allowed to use her Hong Kong driving license here. Putting Jonah in a taxi when it's known he has COVID isn't exactly the most responsible thing to do. In the end, she rummages around Jonah's key bowl and fishes out a car key. She figures that the police have better things to do right now than routine traffic controls.

Lau has no idea what car Jonah actually drives, so she goes outside and pushes the button on the key fob. A metallic silver car about 30 yards down the street flashes its indicators. Bingo. It's an older Vauxhall Corsa, she realises as she gets closer. Bourgeois all the way, Jonah Mulray.

Jonah is already waiting on a bench outside the hospital entrance, wearing a mask, the holdall next to him.

"Hey," she greets him, the relief audible in her voice.

“Hey,” he greets back.

“You all ready to go?”

He looks like he may be smiling beneath the mask. “As I’ll ever be.”

His pace is still slow, but he’s walking halfway steadily, so Lau helps him into the passenger seat and then takes him home.

By the time he’s settled on the sofa with a blanket and a fresh mug of herbal tea in his hands, Lau takes off her mask.

“Lau, you should keep that on. I’m still contagious.”

“Yeah,” she says, “I know. But I’m pretty sure I’ve had it.”

“When?”

“The past few days.”

“You sure it was COVID?”

“I mean, as sure as I can be. I had a sore throat for a day, a bit of fever and a mild cough that’s pretty much gone now. Felt a bit shitty for a day but I’m fine now.”

“That could just be a regular cold.”

“Yeah, but that would be a hell of a coincidence.”

“Yeah. I suppose. That’s convenient, though. Right?”

“Yeah. Fuck the masks.”

He chuckles, which sends him into a coughing fit, but it’s not nearly as bad as the ones he’s had before the hospital.

“You okay?” she asks.

“Not quite yet, but I will be. I should call Emma.”

“Yes, you should. But before you do, I have a confession to make.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I, uh... I took your car but I don’t know if my driving license is valid here.”

She watches him warily, but he surprises her when there’s a small smile tugging at his lips. “Well, you got there and back unscathed, so I’d count that as a win.”

“You’re not mad?”

“You didn’t damage the car, did you?”

She chuckles. “No. Not that it would matter all that much, that thing is a bit dated.”

“I hardly ever use it.”

“Yeah, but sure came in handy today.”

He takes another sip from his tea, and Lau can see he’s giving his best to stay alert but the exhaustion is still seeping from his every pore. “You should get some rest,” she tells him. “Let me know if you wanna go lie down upstairs.”

“No, I’m good here for now.”

She nods. “Okay. I’ll be upstairs then. Call or text if you need anything. And I mean anything.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

She takes a last look at him as he nestles himself into the sofa cushions, thinking that it’s strange that she feels a tangible sense of relief. They still barely know each other, but she knows now that he means more to her than just some guy her mother dragged into their lives. And maybe that’s not such a bad thing.

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Sleep doesn’t come easy that night and Jonah wakes up tired but unable to go back to sleep. It must be early in the morning, judging by the first remnants of light coming through the window.

His mouth is cardboardy and dry, and his whole body feels like it’s being weighed down by a heavy blanket. The tightness in his chest has loosened a little since the hospital but it’s still there, as well as the dry cough that’s got better but is still annoying. He isn’t sure he’s still running a fever, and that in itself may be a good sign.

He lies on his back and stares at the ceiling. His brain is like cotton wool and needs seconds to catch up with everything that’s going on. He thinks maybe he’s had a weird dream, perhaps even a nightmare but he doesn’t remember anything.

He hoped the first night back in his bed would be more restful than the bloody hospital, but it wasn’t. He woke up too many times, feeling disoriented. Even now, there’s a strange sense that borders on panic lodged in his chest. What if he gets worse again? What if he can’t breathe properly?

He tells himself that it's stupid, that he's overreacting. They wouldn't have discharged him if there was still imminent danger of hypoxia. Lau had said the same thing earlier that night when she'd made sure he made it up the stairs safely. Yet, he feels like he's on the verge of a panic attack, and he positively hates it.

He clumsily gropes for his phone. 5:44 am. He groans. Great.

The book on his bedside table doesn't hold his attention, nor does scrolling through his phone. By 6:15 he makes an effort to heave himself out of bed.

Everything is ten times harder than it should be. He has to hold on to walls and furniture to make it to the toilet. The stairs seem like an unsurmountable obstacle but he knows that if he wants to appear like a halfway functional human being, he'll have to get down there.

He listens for noises, but Lau still seems fast asleep.

The journey downstairs feels like climbing down Mount Everest and takes half an eternity. Jonah is out of the breath by the time he reaches the kitchen. Christ. This is ridiculous. And scary. He sinks onto one of the chairs and needs several minutes to catch his breath.

Tea. He wants a bloody cup of tea, but unfortunately it's not going to make itself by just staring at the electric kettle. So he pushes himself up from the chair with an audible groan, waits for the room to stop spinning, then makes his way over to the counter.

It all goes well until he attempts to get the ceramic jar with the tea bags out of the overhead cupboard. His muscles feel like rubber and his fine motor skills have vanished somewhere in the trenches of this goddamn infection. Before he can do anything, the jar tumbles from his hands and lands on the kitchen tiles with a loud clatter, breaking into several pieces upon impact. Jonah exhales a rare expletive.

He crouches down on the floor to pick up the mess while the water in the kettle starts to boil. Unfortunately, the room has decided to start spinning again, and he clumsily plops down ungracefully half on one buttock, half on his thigh, his shoulder slumping against the front of the dishwasher whose door closes with a soft click from the pressure.

He's out of breath again and there's a strange whooshing noise in his ears. He closes his eyes. He'll just need to breathe, just a moment to catch his breath.

He startles from something that touches his shoulder.

"Jonah?"

His eyes open to see Lau looking down at him.

“Hey, what’s going on?” she asks. Concern is swimming in her eyes.

“Just wanted to make some tea,” he says a little breathlessly.

“Christ, Jonah. You should be in bed.”

He feels something rising in his chest. Not anger exactly. Frustration. Irritation that he can’t even do the smallest of things by himself. He clenches a fist, feels tears stinging in his eyes.

Lau must have seen it because she’s now crouched down next to him, her hand on his shoulder. “Hey. It’s okay. I’ll clean this up. Then I’ll make us some tea.”

He tries to let go of the aggravation, shifts his position so that he sits with his back leaned against the dishwasher door. Lau sits down next to him, close enough for their legs to touch if she moved hers just a fraction.

He leans his head back so that it rests against the hard surface of the dishwasher door, closing his eyes, drawing in a breath that makes him cough.

Lau’s voice is a little snide when she says, “So what’s all this? Were you trying to prove something?”

“Just wanted some bloody tea and didn’t want to wake you.”

“They just released you yesterday. Did you forget the part where they told you to take it slow?”

He sighs. “Yeah, I know. Sorry.”

“Clearly, you don’t,” she grumbles. “You think you can get up?”

He gives her what he hopes is an encouraging smile. “I can try.”

She stands up and holds out a hand from above him, then pulls him upright and steadies him when he starts to sway, guiding him gently to the kitchen chair. “Stay there.”

He nods and watches wearily as Lau picks up the shards and to see what she can salvage of the tea bags. They both have a mug of steaming tea with milk in front of them a few minutes later.

She eyes him with concern. “Should I ask how you’re feeling?”

He shrugs. “Like I’ve been chewed up and spit out? But not as miserable as the other day.”

“Progress. I like it.”

“Me too.”

Her look on him is sharper now. “Ask for help next time, okay?”

He slowly nods. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Jonah, we’re past the stage of this being awkward. Just run with it. We’ll never speak of it again after this is over and done.”

He has to smile. “Okay, fine.”

“You hungry?”

“Hungry might be pushing it.”

She ignores it and makes them breakfast anyway, and Jonah gives his best to force down what he can. It’s three quarters of a piece of toast with cheddar, but it’s better than nothing.

He relocates to the couch with Lau’s help, and he’s fast asleep after the first ten minutes of the Netflix documentary he put on.

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The next few days are a struggle, he won’t deny that. Every little thing is suddenly an obstacle – things like walking more than a few steps, showering, getting out of bed, the routines you usually do automatically and never think about.

Lau greets him from the kitchen when he makes it there. “Morning, slowpoke.”

Jonah forces a smile while he tries to hide how out of breath he still is from walking down the one flight of stairs. “Very funny.”

“It’s good to see you up and about.”

He sinks down in one of the kitchen chairs as Lau puts an empty bowl and a spoon in front of him. “Yeah, well, I’m not gonna run any marathons soon. Even a 5k seems unfathomable right now.”

“That something you used to do – run?”

“Yeah, emphasis on *used to*. You know, before this shit hit.”

“Well, they said you need to be patient.”

“Yeah, I know. Just feels… I don’t know. Like I’m 90 years old or something. I bloody hate it.”

She gets the cereal and the milk from the fridge and puts it on the kitchen table. “You’re here. You’re alive. Maybe hold on to that.”

He looks at her as she sits down opposite him to have breakfast with him. “When did *you* get so wise?”

She shrugs it off. “I guess you tend to grow up pretty fast when your parents aren’t the most reliable.”

“You once told me your dad was a drunk and a gambling addict.”

She looks away. “Yeah, he was.”

“He was also a police officer, so I assume he wasn’t home much.”

“Yeah, not exactly a stretch of the imagination.”

“I’m sorry, Lau. That must have been hard – with your mother away so much, too.”

“Yeah, wasn’t always easy. No, in fact, a lot of the time it really sucked.”

Jonah swallows. Not an easy childhood, he presumes. And it makes him wonder. If he and Megan had had children, how would they have grown up? It’s a regret that still smarts, especially now that he knows she lied to him about not being able to have children.

And now there’s Lau. Not exactly a child anymore, of course. Yet, there’s something about her that makes him wish he’d seen her grow up, been a part of her life.

“Listen, if there’s anything I can do…”

She frowns at him as she pauses chewing on her cereal. “Do about what?”

“I don’t know. Support you…”

She gives a light scoff. “Support me? Like what? Give me money?”

“No. I mean, yes, if that’s what you need. But also help with other things.”

“Why would you do that?”

He draws in a breath, then has to cough, which in turn makes his chest hurt all over again. God, he *does* feel like he’s 90. When he can catch his breath again, he says, “Why? I don’t know. Because I can. Because you’re Megan’s daughter. Because we’re… maybe not family, but something that comes pretty close.”

She gets up from the table, puts her cereal bowl in the sink with an audible clank. “I don’t need your charity.”

“I know. And that’s not what this is. Because when I got ill, you stayed. You made sure I was being taken care of. You didn’t have to do that. But you did. And I’m really grateful for that. I might not be alive if it hadn’t been for you.”

With her back still turned to him, she dryly comments, “You’re overdramatising this.”

“Am I?”

She braces her arms against the edge of the counter, looking out the window. “I didn’t wanna lose another… person.”

She’s lonely and scared, Jonah realises. She’s been through a lot and lockdown surely isn’t helping. He feels his eyes watering, emotion gripping his chest. He gets up from the chair and closes the distance between them. He steps next to her.

“Hey,” he says in a gentle voice.

She turns to look at him, and he reaches out and draws her into an embrace.

Lau’s arms come around him more readily than he would have expected and she leans her cheek against his chest. He draws her a bit closer. No words are spoken as they hold on to each other for a few, long moments. In a sense, they’re both alone, and they both need someone.

It’s Lau who pulls away first, then steps aside to lean back against the kitchen counter. “Next best thing to family, I guess,” she mutters.

“Yeah. Have you put any thought into what you’re going to do? Are you going back to Hong Kong?”

“Now? With international flights being cancelled left and right? I don’t think so.”

“I mean, I assume you had long-term plans when you flew over here.”

She shrugs. “Not really. I guess I was hoping to get some perspective.”

“Have you considered staying here? You have dual citizenship, right?”

“Yeah. On both accounts. But what would I do here? I don’t have a place to live, I don’t have a job or a career path.”

“You’ve got this.” Jonah vaguely gestures up the stairs.

“I can’t stay here.”

“Why not?”

“Because…” She stalls. “Because I’m not your problem to solve.”

“Then see it as a temporary solution until you find something better. If you want to enrol at college, I can help with that. Or if you want to find a job, we can look into that, too.”

She gives him a no-nonsense look. “Jonah. We’re in the middle of a fucking pandemic. People are being asked to stay at home. They’re talking about social distancing rules and curfews. There’s nothing like lectures or campus life. I don’t see me going to any job interviews, either.”

“Yeah, well, life isn’t going to just stop. They’ll still need people to do the work. Universities and schools will probably switch to online courses for the time being. I’ve already received e-mails about it. There will be ways to make it happen. If you want that.”

Her mouth twitches. “I’ll think about it.”

“You’re welcome to stay here as long as you like. You don’t have to worry about rent or anything like that.”

“I get some money from my dad’s Mandatory Provident Fund. It’s not like I have to live off you.”

“Well, there you go. Then it’s not charity, after all.”

She smiles a small smile. “No, maybe not.”

“So you’ll stay?”

“For now, yeah. You’ll need some help until you get back on your feet.”

“Lau. I may be slow for now, but I’m okay. And I have Emma.”

Lau looks self-conscious all of a sudden. “Yeah, about that…”

“What about Emma?”

“We had a bit of a row.”

“A row? About what?”

“About you.”

“About *me*?”

“Yeah, when they took you to the hospital. She kinda accused me of giving you COVID.”

“She did *what*?!”

“I mean, I can sort of see how she might have thought that. She was also really worried. You two seem very close.”

He nods. “Yeah. Always have been. She wanted to come with me to Hong Kong. You know, back when…” He lets that hang there. “But she’s got the kids, you know?” He presses his lips together, then adds, “Don’t worry. I’ll talk to her.”

“No, it’s fine. We both agreed we should start over. This really wasn’t the best way to get to know each other.”

“No, I imagine it wasn’t.”

“She wanted to come with you to the hospital, then apparently raised hell when they wouldn’t let her see you.”

“Oh? How do you know that?”

“The nurse I spoke to on the phone made several comments. Your sister definitely left an impression.”

Jonah grins. “Yeah, that’s Emma.”

“Might not be the worst person to have in your corner.”

“No, definitely worth having her in your corner. I’m sure we can smooth things over. You know, after I give her some context.”

“Tell her not to come over. I don’t really know her, but I also don’t want her to catch this shit. Especially if she has a family. Not that I think she’ll necessarily listen to you…”

“Oh, she will.”

“An assertive Jonah Mulray? I’d like to see that.”

“I think you already did.”

She nods. “Yeah. At the embassy. Made me realise you shouldn’t be messed with.”

“Well, I was pushed pretty much to the limit there. I don’t usually fling swear words around like that.”

“I’m glad you did, though.”

“Yeah, me too.” He looks down. “The past year, that must have been hard for you. I lost Megan, but you lost both your parents.”

“Yeah, it sucked. But I had Becky. That helped.”

“You talked about a bad break-up. Was it Becky?”

Lau nods. “We had a good thing going, but it didn’t work out. We both had different ideas of where our lives should be going. And I probably wasn’t always the easiest to be around. So she called it quits. It’s not like I didn’t see it coming, but it still sucked.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“Why, it’s not your fault.”

“No, I know. But something like that is always hard. Especially if you’re on your own.”

Lau chuckles. “God, you’re such a softie.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Maybe it’s not. I’m just not used to it.”

“Then let’s work on that.” He takes a few steps closer so that he’s standing next to her and draws an arm around her shoulder to pull her into his side.

She makes a show of protesting, but he can tell she doesn’t actually hate it.

“I’m glad you’re here. And that you stuck around.”

She lets her temple drop against shoulder and they stand like that for a long moment, looking out at the still dishevelled back garden, taking comfort in each other’s presence.

Jonah thinks about Becky. He actually remembers her. Long, dark hair. American accent. “I met her once, you know,” he says softly.

Lau pushes away from him. “Who?”

“Becky. Your father and I went looking for her when you were abducted. Found her at a party, asked some uncomfortable questions.”

“Yeah, how did you even find me?”

He smiles a sardonic smile. He hasn’t thought about all that for a long time. “It was a bit of a wild goose chase. Lots of leads. A bit of well-applied pressure.”

“You asked me if I was going to be okay.”

He frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Afterwards. When you came to the flat to look at the passports. Before you left, you asked if I was going to be okay.”

“And you said you’d be fine. You weren’t, though, were you?”

She shrugs. “Fine enough.”

“I should’ve…”

When he trails off there, she asks, “What?”

“I don’t know.”

“Jonah, we barely knew each other.”

“Yeah, but still. You’d just lost your mum *and* your dad.”

“I wasn’t your responsibility.”

“No. But that doesn’t mean I can’t care.”

“You really are too good to be true.”

He gives her a smile. “You just haven’t seen the not so great sides of me yet,”

“I’ve seen the false bravado. I assume that’s one of them.”

He scrunches up his face. “Yeah, maybe.”

She chuckles. “And the stubbornness. Inability to let go of things you shouldn’t mess with.”

“Okay, stop.”

She laughs, and it makes him smile. She has a nice laugh. It reminds him of Megan. And he thinks that’s probably a good thing.

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It’s on Friday that Jonah comes down the stairs, laptop under his arm. He’s been home from the hospital for over a week now.

“Lau? You up for a little photography knowledge sharing?”

She puts away her phone and turns around to look at him. He’s looking a lot perkier these days, which is a good thing in Lau’s book. “Uh, yeah, sure.”

He smiles. “Okay, perfect. Let me set this up for us, then.”

He sets down the laptop down on the coffee table, then looks at Lau. “Is there a way to connect this to the TV?”

“I don’t know. Does your TV do casting?”

Jonah’s expression might as well be someone you just asked how to assemble a spaceship from scratch. “Casting?”

"Yeah. You know, wireless screen sharing. Does your laptop have HDMI? That might also work. Provided you have an HDMI cable."

"All of that sounds like Greek to me."

"Seriously, *how* do you think you will be fit to do remote teaching work?"

He chuckles. "I won't be. Maybe I'm banking on you helping me out with that." He's already crouched down by the TV unit to roam around in the drawer. He produces a cable. "Is that it?"

Lau examines it and confirms it's the right cable, then helps Jonah connect his laptop to his modest television set. It takes a bit of fiddling, but they finally manage to duplicate Jonah's screen onto the TV.

"Hallelujah," he exclaims, then does something with the mouse pad until finally there's a PowerPoint presentation cover slide on the TV screen that reads 'The Basics of Photography'.

Lau raises both eyebrows. "You put together a whole slide presentation?"

He gives her a self-satisfied grin. "I did."

"At least now I know what you were so frantically typing away at the last few days. But really. This is so Professor Mulray."

"You know that I actually *am* a professor, don't you?"

She chuckles as she makes herself comfortable on the sofa. "You gonna give me this lecture, or not?"

"I am going to give you this lecture. Whenever you're ready."

"Go."

Jonah slides to the edge of the sofa so that he can reach the keyboard of the laptop and pushes the right arrow button so that the slides advance. He starts launching into a presentation, and Lau finds herself engaged quite quickly.

He's a good presenter and a great teacher. He must be a good professor and she almost wishes she was interested enough in politics to attend his lectures.

There's just something disarming about him, the way he's focused on the topic, the way his face is all animated and there's a passion there he conveys very clearly. He's also a good listener, she's realised. He distils the information he gets to figure out what to act on.

All this time, she kept wondering what her mother saw in him, but now she's starting to understand what drew her to him. He's certainly very different than her father. And maybe that was the pull. Maybe that was what her mother was longing for.

"Lau?"

It pulls her from her reverie.

"Am I boring you?" he asks.

"No," she says quickly. "Sorry. I was just thinking about something."

"Thinking about what?"

"I finally realised what my mother saw in you."

He frowns, but there's the smallest of smiles tugging at his lips. "Which is...?"

"You pay attention. And you care. You care about making people happy."

He focuses his attention on her and stays quiet. Lau adds, "You're very different from my father. But maybe that was the point. Like you said at the temple. She wanted something else. Something she was missing."

"Yeah," he says quietly.

"There's something I have to tell you."

His brow creases momentarily and she says, "I saw the card. I know I shouldn't have read it, but it was in your drawer, and..."

He swallows. "The card... from Megan?"

"Yeah."

He looks down, his gaze cast at his lap. "I'm sorry."

"What for? This wasn't your fault."

"No, but I still feel shitty. I never... I never wanted this to be a competition. And it shouldn't be. She was your mother. She was also your father's wife. And she must have loved him."

"Yeah, but we both know she wasn't happy. Not anymore. I know it sucks, but it happens, right? People fall out of love. Couples separate. Or, you know, they drift apart. And then she met you, and maybe..."

She lets that hang there. Jonah looks at her. "Maybe what?"

“Maybe you saved her. Maybe you made her life more bearable.”

He smiles a small smile, like maybe it’s a comforting thought. “I’d like to think she didn’t love you any less, even if I became part of her life.”

Lau stays quiet, then meets Jonah’s gaze. “I wanted to hate you. You know, for a while.”

“But…?”

“But you’re actually a decent guy, and I can’t deny the fact that Mum fell for you, loved you. Enough to marry you. Well, enough to make it a point to tell you you were always the one.”

“I’d have to lie to say it wasn’t somewhat comforting. But it’s still complicated.”

Lau shakes her head. “No, it’s not. It doesn’t matter anymore. Because she’s dead.”

Jonah looks up, his eyes fixed blankly on the TV screen and stays quiet.

“Jonah, you get that it’s time to move on, right? That she would have wanted you to. That voicemail she left you. She was trying to tell you that.”

He shakes his head. “Was she?”

“Yeah. I mean, maybe not in so many words, but she knew they were coming after her and that she didn’t have much time left. She was saying goodbye. You get that, right?”

“Yeah, I get that.”

“She wouldn’t want you to sit here on your own and wallow in self-pity or, I don’t know, mourn her for the rest of your life. She’d want you to be happy.”

He nods slowly. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. But, you know, I waited almost twenty years for her, and we were so happy. She was perfect. It’s just… It’s hard to get past that.”

Yeah. She imagines it is. She sighs. “Yeah. It sucks.”

There are tears in his eyes and he leans forward to bury his face in his hands on propped up elbows. Lau also leans forward and gently places her hand on his back.

They stay like that for a long moment until he raises his head, sniffs once, then wipes his hand across his face. “Sorry,” he says in a voice that’s hollow and desolate.

“It’s okay.”

He wipes the last remnants of a tear streak from the side of his nose. “God, I’m pathetic.”

“No, you’re not. You’re allowed to miss her, Jonah.”

“It’s been over a year.”

“It’s not like there’s an expiration date for grief.”

He looks at her like maybe she just said something more profound than he would have expected, but then he looks away again. “No, I suppose there’s not.”

And then Lau wonders... “Jonah, do you want me to go?”

He looks at her again, now confused. “Go?”

“Yeah. I dunno. Seems like me being here isn’t necessarily helping.”

“No,” he says very quickly. “God no. I don’t want you to leave. Not on my account.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. It’s been good. I mean, I know the circumstances weren’t exactly fantastic, but I’m glad we could get to know each other better.”

She grins. “Better than either of us signed up for.”

He smiles back a little bashfully. “Yeah, there’s nothing quite like trauma bonding, is there?”

She chuckles. “Seriously, though. The whole COVID drama, I could have done without that.”

“Easy for you to say, you weren’t the one in the hospital.”

“No, but look at it this way. Now we’ve both had it.”

He nods, then looks over at the television screen where a screensaver from his laptop is now playing. He points at it. “You wanna see this through?”

She nods. “Yeah.”

“I think we were almost done anyway.”

Lau looks up and out the window. It’s a nice day today and the sun is out for a rare treat. “You know what? We could put all this into practice.” She points out towards the street. “We’ve been cooped up in here so long. You think you might be up for a walk?”

He looks uncertain. “Honestly? I don’t know. I probably won’t make it very far.”

“Well, it’s not like we have any goals to meet.”

Jonah’s expression changes to something a little more determined. “Okay. Yeah. Let’s give it a try. There’s a little park a few hundred yards down the road. If I can make it there.”

“If not today, then you have plenty of time to practice.”

“Yeah, okay. Just maybe not with the humongous camera right now.”

Lau holds her smartphone up. “We’ll always have this. And maybe I can teach you a few tricks.”

“Can’t wait.”

Twenty minutes later, they are planted on a wooden park bench among trees and stretches of lawn that are only just starting to come to life in the early days of spring. It’s a mild day today and the sun feels nice on their faces.

Jonah, while exhausted from the physical exercise, looks content next to her, leaning his back against the backrest. A few other people are milling about, some with masks on, some walking with a few feet distance between them. A young mother is pushing a pushchair with a sleeping toddler in it. And elderly couple is walking a dachshund, wearing DIY masks sewn from cotton fabric.

They sit like that for a little while until Lau feels something touch her shoulder. It’s Jonah’s head that has lolled against her side. His eyes are closed, he must have dozed off.

Poor dude, she thinks. This thing really fucked him up, but she’s glad he seems to be on the mend. She’s glad he’s still around, and she’s glad that, despite the circumstances, they crossed paths.

She wonders once more if her father would still be alive if it hadn’t been for Jonah coming to Hong Kong and stirring shit up. And maybe he would. Jonah had said it, and Becky had also told her that dwelling on what-ifs was the fucking worst she could do.

And rationally, Lau knows that they have a point. It’s impossible to know what the future will bring. Her father could have been killed the next day by a car, a criminal with a grudge, a stroke, a heart attack or a million other things.

She drapes her arm along the top of the backrest to lightly place her hand on Jonah’s shoulder. It’s nice to have someone there she can trust. Someone who’s offered to help without an agenda and who doesn’t want a piece of her. She hasn’t had that for a while.

And as if he’s read her thoughts, he releases a sigh.

She looks over but he’s still out cold. Her thumb gently starts to move back and forth along the top of his shoulder.

‘It’s okay,’ she thinks. ‘I’ve got you. And we’ve got each other.’