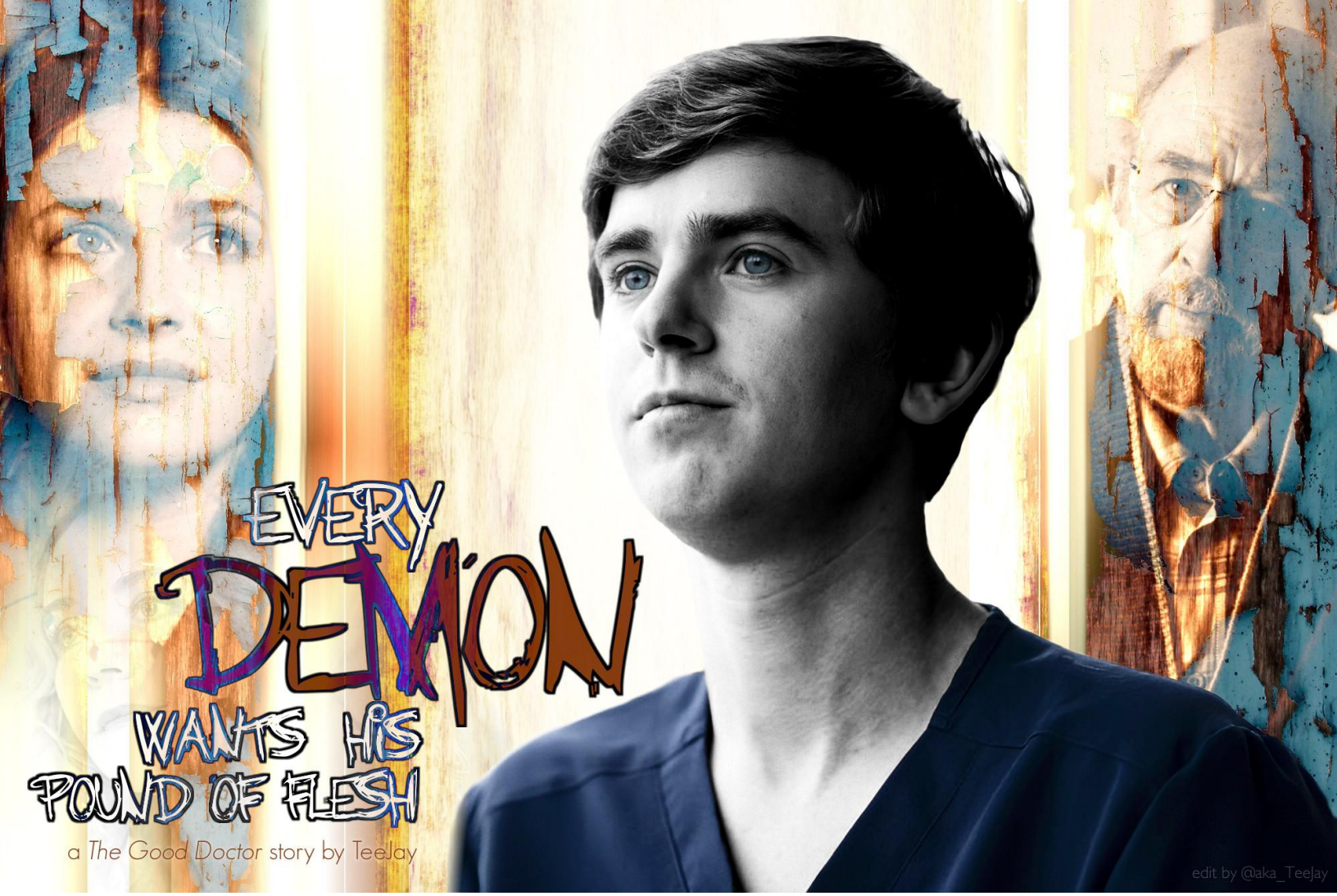


Title: Every Demon Wants His Pound Of Flesh
Author: tj_teejay (AO3 – Tumblr – Instagram – Reddit – E-Mail)

Summary

Shaun's journey navigating the changes of the Ethicure acquisition hasn't been an easy one, and things come to a head when he's being pushed into a corner by a culmination of unexpected events and challenges, both on a personal and professional level.

This story continues where the season 5 winter finale (5x07 "Expired") left off and will be my own vision of the events to come that were written before 5x08 "Rebellion" ever aired—with a heavy focus on Shaun, Lea and Glassman.

Author's Note

Let's start this off with a disclaimer because I feel this fic might warrant that. I am a neurotypical writer, writing a neurodivergent character. While I did some research on ASD and have spoken with individuals with ASD about shutdowns and meltdowns and other aspects of autism, this is obviously my very own take on the fictional character that is Shaun Murphy.

I am well aware some people may feel like I'm not portraying him the way they see him, or the way they see his autism or inner monologues, feelings and (re)actions. And that's fine, because

autism is very much a spectrum with a wide range of traits and characteristics, and Shaun is a fictional person that we can only read as he is being presented to us on our television screens.

That said, please rest assured that I have put a lot of careful thought into my version of Shaun, and my primary wish is to do the character and Freddie Highmore's portrayal of him justice. The same, of course, goes for all the other characters. I have a lot of love for all of them. My hope is that I'm not completely failing in my endeavors. I always welcome constructive feedback on this if you wish to leave it.

When I wrote this story in winter 2021, 5x07 "Expired" was the last episode that had aired, and I was going off of the assumption that the show would be on winter hiatus until most probably April 2022. All I had to work off of was a 30-second promo for 5x08 "Rebellion from back in November, which I tried to incorporate as best as I could.

Fast forward to mid-February 2022 and me slowly getting ready to start posting this epic thing to tide us all over the long hiatus, when ABC announced that the show would come back over a month earlier than expected. Which in itself is most delectable, but it catapulted me into a super huge rush to get this story edited and posted before season 5 would continue! So here we are.

I fully acknowledge that the show will stray from my view of events, and that things will happen very differently. I'm totally fine with that, and very excited to see where and how canon and my vision might match and where they diverge.

A million thanks to Jorg, Daniela and especially @nicenicedevice for the constant input, advice and insights. It's been invaluable. Special, most epic thanks go out to @nicenicedevice for contributing an actual whole scene she wrote, snippets of dialogue here and there, and the constant brainstorming insights to help me out of the occasional bind of writer's block. It's been a hoot, and the iconic Shaun phone snapshot (you know which one!) will forever have an entry in the annals of Memorable Murphy Mischiefs.

Please do not share or upload this fic anywhere without the author's permission.

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Every Demon Wants His Pound Of Flesh

01 - There's a chair in my head on which I used to sit

"You said you would never abandon me, but that's a lie. A lie."

Shaun's words, anguished between labored breaths, still hung fresh in Aaron's mind as he rode up the elevator to the surgeon's locker room.

Sitting against the pharmacy wall, he'd held a sobbing Shaun close to his chest until he'd calmed down, then he'd sent him up to the locker room to get changed so they could get out of here, could get Shaun to a safer, calmer environment.

Shaun's decision to call off the wedding had been a huge and unexpected surprise, and whatever aftermath of that was now at hand would be another hurdle to conquer. Aaron wasn't sure if it had been one of Shaun's knee-jerk overreactions in the spur of the moment that he'd rethink quickly. More likely, it was a deeper rooted issue and would need sorting out.

He'd have to find out from Shaun. Later. Once the worst had blown over and some of the immediate wrinkles smoothed out.

Arriving in the surgeons' locker room, Aaron heard noises in the shower space and hoped it was Shaun. He sat down on one of the benches.

Shaun's shift was almost over anyway, but Aaron used the time to send a text off to Andrews and Lim to keep them apprised of what was going on. There was no immediate reply from either of them.

When Shaun emerged, dressed in his regular street clothes, Aaron could see the exhaustion in every one of his features, distress pouring out of every pore. His eyes were still red and puffy. Aaron suppressed the urge to pull him into a hug.

Shaun pulled his backpack from his locker, his movements sluggish and slow. When he had closed the lock and wrestled his arms through the shoulder straps, he meekly said, "We can go."

"Okay," Aaron confirmed, leading the way to the elevators.

The silent hum of the elevator descending and the just slightly too loud *ding* were the only sounds to accompany them to the underground parking level. No word was spoken as they walked to Aaron's car and Shaun silently climbed into the passenger seat as Aaron got behind the wheel.

He looked over to Shaun. "Where do you want to go?"

Shaun stared blankly ahead, just shrugging. Aaron suggested, "How about we go to my house? Would that be okay?"

Shaun shrugged again. Yeah, it was going to be all reticence and little verbal communication.

This was normal. Aaron was expecting this, was a little too familiar with it. He didn't relish the memories of old—the handful of times he had picked Shaun up from the foster home after a hefty meltdown, the one time he'd had to pull him out of a bad foster situation and had him stay in his house for a whole week until they could figure out what to do next.

Shaun leaned his head against the side window and said absolutely nothing the whole drive. Aaron switched on the radio and turned the volume down a notch. An old Beatles song was playing. Shaun didn't even seem to register it.

By the time they got to Aaron's house, Shaun's eyelids were drooping, but he was still awake. "Here we are," Aaron said, as if that wasn't apparent to Shaun.

The latter clambered out of the car, clutching his backpack to his chest. Aaron opened the door to the house for them, and Shaun went inside but stopped in the middle of the hall near the stairs among half packed boxes, hovering unsurely.

Aaron went up to him, drawing in a breath. “Okay, so we have a couple of options. I can fix us some dinner, or we can order in.”

“I’m not hungry,” Shaun said immediately.

Yeah, also to be expected. “Okay. We could watch a movie. Or something else. You still like the Weather Channel, right?”

Shaun let out a hum that was a clear indication of not preferring that option, either. “Okay, also vetoed. That’s fine. There’s a bed in the guest room with your name on it. Does that sound more appealing?”

Shaun was staying quiet, which Aaron took as silent agreement. “Come on, Shaun. I know you oughta be tired after that. Let’s go upstairs, what do you say?”

It seemed to have registered, finally, because Shaun turned to his right and walked up the stairs, clearly already knowing where the guest room was. Aaron went to his own bedroom and got a pair of his pajama pants out of his dresser, one he knew had been in the laundry recently and would be soft and smell nice.

Shaun was already lying in bed on his back, his slacks and button-down neatly folded on a chair in the corner. Aaron sat down on the edge of the bed and indicated the pajama pants he was still holding. “They’ll probably be a little too big for you, but you can wear these if you want.”

Shaun lay staring at the ceiling, making no move to get out of bed again. Aaron studied him for a long moment. “You wanna talk?”

Shaun said nothing, so Aaron didn’t know whether that was a yes or a no. He probed a bit further. “Can you tell me what happened today, Shaun?”

“The baby died.”

“A baby you operated on?”

“No.”

Aaron shifted his position slightly, trying to make his voice as gentle as possible. “Shaun, I know that you don’t wanna talk about this right now, but I’d like to know what happened. Can you tell me what happened? Please?”

Shaun blinked a few times. His voice was low, but he started talking. “The… mother was in a car accident. We had to deliver her baby via C-section because of a delayed placental abruption. The baby was only 26 weeks old. It had a heart defect and it wasn’t oxygenating.

“We gave it PGE to open the ductus arteriosus, but it wasn’t working because the vials had expired and there was no other batch in the pharmacy. We then ordered alprostadil and diluted it to the right concentration, but it was too late. She died.”

Shaun’s eyes were tearing up and Aaron knew it was time to pull the plug on this one.

“Okay, Shaun, I understand. That’s absolutely terrible.”

“The baby would not have died if the PGE hadn’t expired.”

“While that might be true, that’s impossible to say for sure.”

Shaun’s voice became more agitated. “No. The PGE had expired. If it hadn’t, the vasodilation would have worked, and the baby would have—”

“Shaun,” Aaron interrupted him. “We don’t know that. No one knows that. You’re right that the expired medication is something that shouldn’t have happened, and there will be an investigation around that.”

“This is Salen’s fault.”

“Why would you say that?”

“She made budget cuts. The pharmacy was behind on inventory.”

“And you know this, how?”

“That’s what Dr. Fromer said.”

“The pharmacist?”

“Yes.”

“He told you that?”

Shaun was definitely looking uncomfortable now, maybe teetering on the edge of agitation, but he confirmed, “Yes.”

“Heh. That’s…” Aaron exhaled a long breath. “Well. We’ll deal with that later, but I’ll make sure it gets looked into. You and Lea also had a conversation, right?”

Shaun’s eyes went blank, his voice emotionless. “Lea lied to me, and you knew that she lied to me.”

He looked at Shaun. “Yes, I did.”

Shaun was still staring absently at the ceiling. “Why?”

“Why did Lea lie to you?”

“No. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It wasn’t my place to tell you that. That was between you and Lea.”

“Lea lied to me. I can’t marry her.” The statement hung in the air, heavy and final.

“Shaun, that’s a big decision, maybe you should think that one over, maybe—”

“No,” Shaun interrupted, “She *lied* to me. I can’t trust her. And *you* lied to me. I don’t know if I can trust you, either.”

Aaron drew in a shaky breath. “Yeah. And we’ll have to talk about that later. But I think now you should get some sleep. I promise you I’ll be here. I’ll be downstairs for a while, but I’m not leaving, okay, Shaun? I’m right here, in the house, with you.”

Shaun shifted to lie on his side, his back to Aaron, and curled in on himself, drawing the blanket closer to his chest.

Aaron hesitated. “Do you want me to stay for a bit?”

Shaun just hummed, and Aaron couldn’t interpret this one.

“Shaun, you need to say yes or no.”

“No.”

“All right. I’ll let you get some rest. Come find me if you need anything, okay?”

Out of sheer unintentional instinct, Aaron lightly touched Shaun’s thigh under the blanket, and he could feel Shaun flinch ever so slightly. He instantly wished he hadn’t done it. He whispered a very low, “I’m sorry,” and then got up, hoping sleep would envelop Shaun quickly.

The house felt alien to Aaron now. The packed boxes in the foyer spoke of ill-advised decisions and a life in limbo, the kitchen with the already empty shelves felt hollow and cold. He sank down on one of the stools at the kitchen island and took out his cell phone.

He should call Lea. He really didn’t want to get in the middle of their epic mess, but he knew she’d be worried and probably going stir-crazy right now.

She answered the phone on the second ring. “Glassy?”

“Yeah. I promised to call, so here I am.”

“Is Shaun all right?”

“No, he's very clearly not all right.”

“Yeah, sorry, I didn’t mean…” She sighed. “Did he say anything?”

“Not much. He’s hopefully sleeping right now. These things… they always take a lot out of him.”

“So you’ve seen this before?”

Aaron closed his eyes and tried to push the image of a sobbing Shaun leaning into him from his mind’s eye. “Yeah, handful of times. Mostly when he was younger. Not in a number of years—not this bad.”

“I’ve never seen him like that. It was awful.”

“Yeah, always is. And, you know, I think it’ll be better for him if you stay out of his way for a few days.”

“We live together. How is that going to work?” The frustration in her voice was clearly audible.

“I don't know, Lea. He'll need some time.”

“Can he maybe stay with you for a while? Just until the worst is over?”

Aaron thought about it for a moment. “I can ask him if he wants that.”

“Would you? I really don’t know what to do.” Her voice was small now, and he could hear she was close to tears. “I mean, I knew he wouldn’t take it well, but I didn’t think he’d…” There was a small sob. “Glassy, what do I do? I *love* him.”

“I know you do, but… Listen, I’m not the best person to talk to about these things. Shaun will need some clothes for tomorrow.”

She snuffled once. “Yeah, okay. I can drop something off at your house later.”

“Yeah. Maybe make it enough for a few days. I don’t know where he wants to go from here.”

“Yes, I can do that.”

“Make sure that the t-shirt color goes with—”

“The button-downs, I know. He’s kinda anal about that.”

“Always has been.”

“God, I love him so much.” Aaron could hear her crying again.

“Lea,” he said, “You know he has a big heart. He may come around. I’d like to think that he will.”

“I don’t know, this seems pretty huge,” she said meekly between sniffles. She stayed silent for a moment, then her voice was more collected. “I’ll come over in half an hour to drop off his clothes. Does that work for you?”

“Yeah, I’ll be here.”

“Okay. I’ll see you then.”

He hung up with a, “Bye.”

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Lea had a knot in her stomach as she approached Glassman’s door. Shaun was in there, probably asleep. So close, yet completely unapproachable. She wasn’t sure she could take it.

She wanted to see him so badly, wanted to make another attempt at smoothing out the wrinkles and gluing together what had been torn. The image of him completely falling apart in the pharmacy wouldn’t leave her mind’s eye. Feeling so completely helpless, it had been the worst feeling she’d ever known.

She closed her eyes and raised her hand to knock on the wooden door to Glassman’s house, hesitating only a second.

The door opened half a minute later. His demeanor was pensive, his eyes filled with a muted sorrow. It hadn't been a good day. For any of them.

She held out the duffel bag she was carrying. "That should be enough for a week. There's toiletries, too. All the stuff he likes. I hope you have two-ply toilet paper," she said with a chuckle she had to force.

At least it made Aaron smile slightly as he took the bag. "Yeah. One of the things I learned from Shaun, too."

"Can I come in? Can we talk?"

"I'm not sure that's a good idea right now."

Lea shifted her position and looked past him, saw some of the packed boxes standing in the foyer. "Wait, are you moving?"

Glassman looked like he'd just been caught with his fingers in the candy stash. He shrugged almost imperceptibly.

Lea was incredulous. "Please don't tell me you're moving to Montana."

"What can I say?" was all he gave her.

Lea bristled. Wow. That had been a lot more advanced than she'd thought. "Does Shaun know about this?"

Glassman's mouth twitched. "I told him yesterday, yeah."

"Okay, that explains a lot." Her voice was getting angrier now. "And I'm guessing you didn't exactly sugarcoat it?"

"Shaun isn't someone you should sugarcoat things for. You know that."

Yeah, he had a point. "And that's still your plan? To move out to Bumblefuck, Nowhere, thousands of miles from here?"

He shrugged again. "Honestly? I don't know."

"You heard what he said, right? About feeling abandoned, about being lied to."

Glassman's voice was quiet now, just above a whisper. "Yeah. How could I not?"

"And you're still leaving? After what happened today?" She threw her arms up in the air in frustration. "Did you know he bought an embroidery kit? I wasn't sure what that meant at the time, but it all makes so much sense now."

"An embroidery kit?"

"Yeah. Something about you giving him one, back in med school. He spent hours finishing it, it looked beautiful."

Glassman visibly swallowed. “Yeah, that was… it was something to help him practice his sutures. Old surgeon’s trick.”

“So while you were out there in Montana, throwing hand axes with your newfound buddies and I was practically begging you to come back, Shaun was desperately trying to find a connection, embroidering flowers. Let that sink in for a minute, and then tell me again that you’re still gonna pack up and leave.”

She watched for a moment as Glassman shifted uncomfortably before she had another thought. “And while we’re at it, we should also talk about the engagement party. Because while I’m sure you’re not exactly proud of that moment, please know that your awkward speech was not just completely inappropriate but also a pretty harsh and unexpected gut-punch for Shaun.”

Glassman gave her a look that was both quizzical and concerned. “Was that what he said?”

She shook her head. “Come on, you know that he doesn’t have to actually say those things. He sat on the couch for an hour, just staring into space after that party. Then he came to bed and didn’t say a single word until the next morning.”

“You know what, you’re right, that wasn’t my proudest moment, but I don’t think that’s a conversation we should be having on my doorstep.”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t want to let me in, remember?”

“I think it’s time for you to go.”

“So that’s it? You’re just going to ignore everything in hopes that it all just magically sorts itself out?” She huffed. “Now I know where Shaun gets that from.”

“Okay, now you’re outta line.”

Lea shook her head. “You know what? We’re gonna talk about this. Right now.” She pushed past Aaron and let herself in. He didn’t stop her.

She could hear a clear sigh from him. “At least keep your voice down?”

She lifted her arms, palms up, and said nothing.

“Okay, in here,” he gestured to the study on the left. There was more of the same – half-packed boxes, shelves and cupboards that looked in a state of moving limbo. She sat down in one of the armchairs while he closed the door.

Lea waited until he had sat down in the other armchair, but now it was her turn to sigh. “Okay, now I’ve lost my chain of thought. What were we talking about?”

He had the slightest hint of amusement playing at his lips. “Shaun…?”

“Yeah,” she said with an audible exhale. “Is he sleeping?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, I didn’t check. Probably.”

The knot in Lea's stomach was back, and there was Shaun again, sitting against the pharmacy wall with his knees drawn up, panting heavily, fending off a panic attack. She could feel her eyes tearing up.

"Hey," she heard Aaron's soft voice. "It'll sort itself out. You'll get past this."

She let out a sardonic chuckle. "Oh yeah? And how would *you* know? Marriage is off the table now. What is there to get past, exactly? I fucked this up, because that's what I do. I fuck things up."

"At least you're in good company," he shrugged.

"That's not helping."

There was a moment of silence, a moment of neither of them knowing what to say. Their relationship had never exactly been close or intimate.

She could feel his eyes on her. "Lea, I know Shaun. Right now he feels hurt and betrayed, and he isn't sure what exactly that all means. He will need time to process that."

"You get why I did it, though, right?" She hoped he could give her some reassurance because… had she overreacted? "I *know* it was wrong, and I know it was condescending, but he was struggling so much, it was so hard to watch. I just wanted to protect him. I tried to tell him that, but he just… With the way he gets, I don't think he'll understand it. Can you maybe help him see that?"

Aaron drew in a breath. "To be honest, I'm not sure I should be getting in the middle of all this. Things with me and Shaun are a little touch and go right now, too. He trusted me tonight, but that ice is still pretty thin."

"How? How did we get into this mess?"

His mouth curved into a small smile. "Life with Shaun can get a little messy sometimes."

She let out a teary chuckle. "More than a little. Glassy, what do we do now?"

His voice was sympathetic when he said, "We wait. Hopefully he'll come around, but he will need to do it on *his* terms. You broke his trust, and he doesn't take that lightly."

"You could have warned me of that back in Paradise."

"How did you not know that by now?"

"Yeah, I guess I did. Which is why I came to you first. You get that now, right?"

"Yeah, I get that. But I also didn't quite expect him to break off the marriage."

She looked at Aaron, met his eyes. He was attentive now, at least, not the evasive, aloof idiot he'd been when he'd been fixing up the Roadster or planted sunflowers. Shaun's breakdown had hopefully shaken something loose in him.

“I just… God, this is all so messed up. Today was really terrible, how did things get so bad? Did we not see it?”

Aaron raised his eyebrows. “I think you did.”

“Yeah, but that didn’t exactly work out so great, did it? I thought I knew him, I thought I knew how to help him, but it turns out I was just taking potshots. Seeing him like that, in the pharmacy, not being able to do anything…” Her eyes were brimming with tears as she looked at Glassman. “How? How do you do it?”

He gave her a small, wistful smile. “Sometimes it helps reminding yourself of all the things he’s accomplished, all the things he *can* do.”

She went for her purse to look for a tissue, and an item she saw there reminded her. She retrieved it and held the blue cloth wrapped item out to Glassman. “He might want this. He doesn’t use it very often anymore, I’m not sure why, but maybe, after today…”

Aaron took it from her, looked at it for a long moment. “Steve gave him this.”

“Yeah, I know. He gave it to me once. When we… when we lost the baby. He was so brave back then, so strong through all of that. Where did things go wrong? How do we help him get past this?”

He gave a little shrug. “Just… be there, I guess?”

“And you—will you? Be there?”

He gave a nod. “Yeah, of course. For now.”

“Please don’t leave again. He really needs you. And you need him.”

She knew that made him uncomfortable, but she didn’t care, and maybe he needed to hear this right now. “And this whole Montana thing, what is that? If I were to hazard a wild guess, I’d say you’re running away from something. I’m not sure from what. Your failed marriage maybe. The whole Ethicure thing, no longer feeling needed, right?

“This is what I’ve been trying to tell you – all of that hit Shaun really hard. And you weren’t there. And that contributed to all of this.”

He looked at her over his rimless glasses. “Do you know that my ex-wife said the exact same thing?”

Lea gaped. “Your ex-wife? You still talk to her?”

“Yeah, I operated on her husband yesterday. He had a malignant carcinoma in his neck.”

“She knows Shaun?”

“Not in person. She never liked the idea of him very much.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she thought— You know what? That’s not important. Do you know more about what happened today?”

“Not much. Jordan called me from the OR, worried that Shaun was upset about a baby that had died. She mentioned expired medication and the pharmacy. You know the rest.”

“What was that paper you picked up? The one he crumpled.”

“The wedding chapel contract. We were getting ready to sign it.”

“I’m guessing he didn’t take it very well when you told him about the reviews you deleted?”

“No. It was terrible. Kinda blindsided him, really. I know he didn’t see that coming, which is probably why it hit hard. He just… he kinda shut me down. And then he left. He didn’t come home last night.

“He came to see me in my office today. Said he wanted me to restore the data. When I said I couldn’t, he wanted me to tell Salen. Told me I deserved to get fired.”

“Wow, okay,” Aaron commented.

“Maybe I do.”

“What would that accomplish?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe Shaun is right. Maybe I need to take responsibility.”

Aaron sat up a little straighter. “Listen. Here’s what’s likely gonna happen in the next few days. A baby died today because of medication that had expired. Shaun was directly involved in that, as were Dr. Lim and some other people. There will be an investigation, and there might be repercussions, for Shaun as well.

“I will have to find out more of the details, and I don’t know how much of it will fall back on Shaun, or how Salen will want to handle the whole situation, but if I were to make an educated guess, she will try to shift the blame away from herself and her profit-mongering company. It’s very possible that Shaun will get caught in the crossfire, or worse, end up being blamed for it. I think you can imagine how that will affect him.”

Her brow knitted, her eyes started swimming with tears. “It’ll destroy him.”

“Yeah. And I will do everything in my power not to let that happen, but I don’t know how much I’m gonna be able to do. But what I *do* know is that throwing the review scores into that already sizzling fire is probably not the best thing to do right now.”

She nodded, trying to hold back the tears. His eyes were on hers again. “Hey. He has people in his corner. Including you. Lim will fight for him, too.”

She wiped with her hand at a tear running down her cheek. “Can you please be there for him?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“And if I can help in any way, please let me know.”

“Just be there for him when he’s ready. He’ll come to you.”

“Can I go see him?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea right now. You should go home, there’s nothing more we can do right now. I can call you tomorrow morning, tell you how it’s going.”

“Can you tell him I love him?” she said between tears, getting up from the armchair.

“I can try, but I’m not sure he’ll want to hear it.”

She let out a sob as she picked up her purse. “I know.”

And suddenly there he was, in front of her. “Hey,” he said softly, his hands on her upper arms. “It’ll work out. Shaun’s a smart guy.”

She hesitantly leaned into him, letting him give her a gentle squeeze as more tears flowed down her cheeks.

She stood like that for a moment, then pushed out of the tentative embrace. “I’m glad you were there today. For him. That’s the only reason why I’m not going batshit crazy right now.”

He looked completely uncomfortable, he wasn’t good with compliments. Or emotions. He and Shaun, they really were a match made in heaven. How exactly had they found each other, latched onto each other?

“Thank you,” she told him as she opened the door to the foyer.

He gave her a nod as she left. It was hard to leave the house and Shaun behind. She doubted she’d get much sleep that night, with the bed next to her empty, and a pervasive knot in her stomach that just grew and grew, the more she tried to scrub the image of Shaun crumbling against the pharmacy wall from her memory.

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Not much to Aaron’s surprise, Shaun was already downstairs in the kitchen the next morning when he got up. He was sitting on one of the stools at the kitchen island, idly playing with the saltshaker that Aaron kept there that hadn’t been packed up yet.

Shaun had obviously found the duffel bag that Aaron had quietly put near his bed the night before, because he was wearing a new set of clothes and he looked shaven and cleaned up.

“Morning, Shaun,” Aaron tentatively greeted him.

Shaun just gave a hum, barely looking up.

“Did you sleep okay?”

“Yes,” he replied absently.

“You hungry? Want me to make some pancakes?”

“No.”

“Okay. But you should eat something. I’m not much of a breakfast person, but I think I have some cereal.”

Shaun said nothing, and Aaron got out a bowl and the box of cereal, then got the milk from the fridge that he put in front of Shaun while he got the coffee grounds out of the overhead cabinet. For Shaun, he poured a glass of orange juice.

Shaun listlessly took a sip but didn’t touch the cereal. Aaron gave him a long look, took in the hardened frown on Shaun’s forehead, the faint dark circles under his eyes, the too apparent sorrow and underlying pain in his eyes.

“Do you want to talk about yesterday?”

Shaun resorted to classic deflection. “Where did you get my clothes?”

“Where do you think, Shaun?”

“Did you go to my apartment?”

Aaron sighed as he filled water and coffee grounds into the coffee maker and pushed the ‘on’ switch. The machine sputtered to life with a gurgling sound. “No, Lea dropped these off.”

“Lea was here?”

Aaron turned around to face Shaun, leaning against the kitchen counter. “Yeah, last night, while you were sleeping.”

Shaun stayed quiet, his eyes roaming around, digesting that information. “Why… are there clothes for several days?”

“Because we weren’t sure what you wanted to do. Do you wanna stay here for a while? Because you can, if you want to.”

Shaun let out a hum, indicating that he hadn’t made up his mind yet. Aaron added, “That’s okay, you don’t have to decide that right now. But I think at some point you’ll have to talk to Lea.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Oh, I know. But at some point you’ll have to, you know, talk about all that… stuff.”

“She lied to me.”

Aaron sighed. It probably wasn’t the right time to tackle that particular conversation. “Yeah, I know. Though right now there’s also the, uh, the other thing, and we’ll have to go to the hospital soon.

“Salen’s called a meeting. We should probably go over what happened yesterday, talk to Lim about it. It’s important that I know what happened, Shaun. Can you tell me? In detail?”

Shaun fiddled with the orange juice glass for a long moment, but started recounting the events of the C-section eventually—a little haltingly at first, then his retelling became more fluid as his perfect recall kicked in. Aaron took in all the details while he sipped his black coffee, asked some questions. Shaun was able to answer them all, and by the end of it Aaron had a good idea of the situation.

There was a lingering lump in his throat, because he knew how much Shaun cared about children, knew that it would destroy something inside of him if he was going to be implicated in the death of a baby he couldn't save despite his best efforts.

He gave Shaun a long look. "Shaun. You know you did nothing wrong, right?"

"Yes," Shaun said immediately. "I know."

"Okay, good."

"Do you… think Salen will say I did something wrong?"

"I don't know. She might."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "To protect her company? To protect herself, maybe. Who knows what goes on in that woman's head."

"I didn't do anything wrong," Shaun repeated.

"Yeah, I know. Which is also why it's important we talk to Dr. Lim, get her perspective."

"You think Dr. Lim thinks I did something wrong?"

"No, Shaun. But she was there, she's the Chief of Surgery. Ultimately, it's her responsibility."

"We did nothing wrong."

Ah geez, Shaun was now hung up on that. This wasn't good for him. Especially with everything that was already going on. Aaron went up to him, resisted the urge to put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "No, you didn't do anything wrong. Are you gonna eat anything?"

"Hm. No."

"Are you sure? Maybe we can grab a sandwich from the cafeteria later."

"I'm not hungry." There was a quiet defiance in Shaun's voice, and a whole lot of defeat and dread.

"Shaun, I…" He let that hang there, wasn't sure how to say it, and his brow knitted with a sudden burst of concern and a fatherly instinct that he'd forgotten he had.

Shaun looked up at him, their eyes met for a short second, not long enough to make a connection. Aaron realized they hadn't had any kind of meaningful connection in a while. He knew they'd have to tackle those more difficult conversations, but this was not the right time.

The moment passed silently. Aaron harrumphed. “Today is probably gonna be difficult. But I want you to know you can come to me. Okay, Shaun?”

“Okay,” Shaun said flatly.

“Okay,” Aaron confirmed. “We should probably go. Are you ready? Do you still need anything?”

Shaun got up. “I need to brush my teeth.”

“Yeah, all right. You go do that, and then let’s face the music.”

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02 - Got a knife to disengage

“Shaun, you need to eat something,” Dr. Glassman had said to Shaun when they got to the hospital. He could feel his stomach gurgling—the sensation wasn’t pleasant but it also served as a much needed distraction from his own nerves.

The first thing that had happened after getting to St. Bonaventure was a meeting with Dr. Lim, Dr. Allen, Dr. Glassman and himself. Dr. Lim had recapped the situation in the OR again to Dr. Glassman while Shaun and Jordan listened and filled in a few missing details.

There had been mention of the meeting with Salen in an hour, and talk about needing a strategy, though none of them really knew what that would look like. They all agreed that no one in the OR had done anything wrong, although Shaun’s impromptu heart defect diagnosis had been carefully questioned.

“It made sense at the time,” Lim had said. “The baby was in acute cardiac distress, we didn’t have time to verify it diagnostically. We ruled out all the other obvious causes. I was fully in agreement with the diagnosis and the course of treatment.”

There would most likely be an autopsy to confirm it, and anything until then would be conjecture anyway.

Shaun and Jordan had been told not to treat patients until after the meeting with Salen, and explicitly instructed not to have any contact whatsoever with Alma Garcia. Shaun wanted desperately to look at her chart, to see how she was doing. He would make sure to access the EMR system later.

After they’d finished the meeting, Dr. Glassman had also told him to wait for him in the cafeteria before doing anything else while he talked to some people. Shaun had gotten hold of a tablet computer and tried to look at Alma’s file. It had given him an error message that access was denied. He’d have to check with Morgan or with Park later, maybe Asher if the other two wouldn’t or couldn’t help.

His food of choice wasn’t hard to pick. He wanted something familiar, something he could find a small level of comfort in. Chocolate chip pancakes were always a safe bet.

He’d listlessly made it through half of them and dunked another piece into the last of the syrup on his plate. It just wouldn’t taste right today.

Looking up from his plate, Shaun’s eyes caught a familiar figure walking towards him, making a jolt of apprehension spread through his insides. His appetite vanished in one fell swoop.

Lea was striding towards him, pulling out the chair opposite without preamble. He sat up a bit straighter, feeling his body tensing.

“Shaun,” she said in a gentle voice. “How are you?”

He just let out a hum. Wasn’t it obvious that he wasn’t doing very well? She’d been there yesterday. She’d seen it all.

Maybe she'd realized her faux pas, because she course-corrected, "Okay, that was a stupid question. Are you holding up?"

He was trying his best to take it one thing at a time, what could he say to that? He let out another hum.

She stayed quiet, maybe hoping he'd say something else. He didn't know what there was to say.

"Can we talk about what happened?"

He hesitated. He didn't want to.

"Please?" she added. Her eyes were teary. He blinked. Did she deserve his attention? Maybe she did.

"Shaun, I really think we need to talk. I want to apologize, because you're right that what I did was wrong, and I'm really sorry. I understand why you're upset. Okay, upset doesn't quite cover it. You're probably pissed. And hurt. And you feel betrayed. I get that, and you have every right to be.

"But I also want you to know where I'm coming from. I don't know if you can understand it, but maybe you could try? Please?"

She paused there, studying him, probably waiting for an answer. He still didn't know what to say. And he wasn't sure this was something he wanted to discuss openly in the hospital's cafeteria. "Lea…"

"Okay, but at least tell me what you wanna do with the wedding. Are we gonna call the whole thing off?"

"I can't marry you," he reiterated what he'd told her the day before in the pharmacy. He still meant it.

"What does that mean, Shaun? We *love* each other. Don't you wanna work on getting past this?"

"I need…" He drew in a breath. "I need some time. Please."

"Okay," she said in a soft voice. "I understand that. But I'd like it if you came home tonight. I'll stay out of your way, we don't have to talk."

"I will think about it."

"Okay. Thank you." She shifted in her seat. "What's going on with what happened yesterday with the baby and the medication?"

"We are having a meeting with Salen in," he looked at his watch, "twelve minutes."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No," he said quickly. "You can't help me."

She sighed. "All right. But please know that I'm here if you want to talk."

“Okay,” he just said and left it at that.

Lea nodded, and he thought her eyes looked sad. “I’m sorry, Shaun. I hope the meeting with Salen will go okay. Please tell me if you need anything.”

Why did she keep repeating that? He didn’t think there was anything he needed from her right now, so he stayed quiet.

She eventually got up after another long moment and walked away. He continued to watch her until she was out of sight, an uneasy feeling settling in the pit of his stomach.

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Aaron looked at his phone, hoped for a reply, but it was all radio silence. He let out a quick sigh and made his way to the Tamian Wing. Lea was standing with her back to him, writing something with marker onto her whiteboard. Some sort of flowchart, it looked like.

He softly rapped on the doorframe.

She turned around, her face quickly falling. Maybe she’d hoped it was Shaun.

“Aaron,” she said. It was strange when she called him by his first name, but maybe that’s what they’d graduated to. He found that he didn’t hate it.

“You’re probably the wrong person to ask, but do you know where Shaun is?”

Her brow briefly furrowed. “No. I only briefly spoke to him this morning, before the Salen meeting. Why? Did something happen?”

He sighed. “Well. Things with Salen didn’t exactly go swimmingly. She’s ordering a thorough investigation. Which, in itself, isn’t a bad thing, but she was talking about the surgical team, about *Shaun*,” he made air quotes, “‘killing a baby’. There was a bit of innuendo, and I just… Let’s just say I was afraid this would happen.”

“This, what?”

“Her implying that Shaun killed a baby.”

“She said that?”

“Not in so many words, but I think that may be the angle she wants to work.” He rubbed one eyebrow. “And you know as well as I do that he…” He left the sentence hanging there.

“Did you text him? Is he in surgery, maybe?”

“No, he’s not in surgery. And, yes, I texted. Twice.”

She put the whiteboard marker down, picked up her phone from her desk. “I would text him if I thought it would help, but it probably wouldn’t. I’m the last person he wants to talk to right now.”

“Does he have… does he have any places he goes to when he’s… you know?”

“Your office, usually.”

“Yeah, no.”

She thought for a moment. “There’s the janitor’s closet in the basement. That’s where he went when he had that meltdown.”

“What meltdown?”

“The one about the hand dryers.”

Aaron’s brow furrowed. “Hand dryers?”

Lea put the phone back on the desk. “Yeah. A few weeks back. You know, when they started enforcing the itchy scrubs and the new soap, and those awful air jet dryers I told you about.”

“Is that why he’s the only one still wearing blue scrubs around here?”

Lea gave him a look. “Yeah. You missed a lot.”

“Apparently, I did.”

“And this,” she said, her voice now taking on a sarcastic edge, “this is exactly why I came out to Montana. But, oh no! You didn’t want to listen. You were all, ‘you’ll have the most perfect imperfect marriage and you’ll be fine on your own’. Now look at how fine we are. It’s all going peachy. Absolutely perfect.”

He raised his eyebrows and kept his gaze on her, but decided not to comment. She seemed to be realizing her sarcasm wasn’t helping the situation and sat down in her office chair. “Sorry. That was probably uncalled for.”

“It actually wasn’t, but I’m more interested in the part about Shaun having a meltdown?”

“Yeah. The new scrubs apparently had itchy seams he couldn’t tolerate, and the soap didn’t wash off, and the air dryers were… I dunno, sensory-overloady in a really big way, and he just… you know.”

“Yeah, okay. Where does the janitor’s closet come in?”

“He ran off after it happened. Took me a while to figure out, but he had mentioned that janitor’s closet in the basement, right? Out of the way, secluded, quiet… It made sense.”

“You found him there?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“And… he calmed down by the time I got there. You know, kind of okay again, once he’d gotten it out of his system.

“He later went to Salen about it. Went on kind of a tirade that I thought was gonna hugely backfire, but it didn’t. Salen actually listened and said she’d allow him to keep wearing his old scrubs and she’d reinstate the old soap and paper towels on the general surgery floor. He counted that as a win. It probably was.”

“And you think he may be there again?”

She shrugged. “Only place I can think of if he’s not in your office.”

“Okay, that’s a start.”

Her eyes were on him, pleading a little. He could imagine how she felt. “I shouldn’t be asking if he’s okay, should I?” she said.

“No, you shouldn’t. I mean, I think all things considered, he’s probably gonna come out okay in the end, because somehow he always does, but right now I’m…” he let out an audible breath, “I’m a little bit worried.”

She pointed her chin towards the door. “Go find him. He’ll need the support.”

“Yeah.”

She gave him a little nod and forced a smile before he left. Aaron made his way down to the basement. It had been years since he’d been down here, but he vaguely remembered the small little room that Shaun had hidden out in when he’d wanted him to see a therapist. It felt like a million years ago now.

Aaron softly rapped on the door. “Shaun? Are you in there?”

He cracked open the door. There was light inside, so he opened the door wider. “Shaun?”

He was sitting on one of the gurney covers that he’d apparently dragged over, leaning his back against the wall. His voice was defiant. “I want to be alone.”

Aaron stood in the door for a long second, his hand on the door handle, trying to decide whether to leave or not. He decided against it. “Okay, I hear you. But I’m also worried, Shaun. So I’d like to stay just a little bit if that’s okay with you. You can ask me to leave and I’ll leave if you really want that. Okay?”

Shaun didn’t say anything, which Aaron took as a good sign. “I’ll sit down here, is that okay?”

Shaun’s stayed quiet, which Aaron took as assent.

He tried to find a halfway comfortable spot on the vinyl mattress, keeping a respectful distance between him and Shaun. They sat in silence for a few long moments. Aaron stole a glance at Shaun.

He looked composed enough, there wasn’t anything immediately alarming, but Aaron knew there was probably some turmoil going on in there somewhere.

Maybe it wasn’t the right time to broach this subject, but was there ever going to be a right time? “Shaun, why did you say I was abandoning you?”

Shaun lifted his head, made very brief eye contact. “Because you are.”

Aaron shook his head. “I’m not abandoning you.”

“You left.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I’m abandoning you.”

“You… used to be there for me. Now you aren’t.”

“I’ll always be there for you, Shaun. In one way or another.”

“How?” Shaun asked. “You are moving to another state.”

“Yeah, about that…”

“You said you would always be there for me and help me.”

“Yeah, and I still mean that. I know I didn’t call you back when you asked me to, and I know I missed those tux fitting appointments, but, Shaun… There were some things I needed to straighten out, and I just— I needed—”

Shaun’s eyes were on him now—there was a fear in them, a dread anticipating the next letdown, the next blow. It made Aaron stop dead in his tracks, because maybe Shaun had tried to communicate that before, and Aaron hadn’t wanted to see it.

The embroidery kit that Lea had mentioned, he suddenly remembered it. He tried to piece the puzzle together, and suddenly it clicked into place. There was a lump in his throat, and he could feel his eyes tearing up. “Shaun,” he said just above a whisper. “I’m sorry.”

Shaun was still looking at him, more attentive now. Aaron let out a dry chuckle. “I really messed this one up, didn’t I?”

Shaun looked bewildered. “Messed… what up?”

“Me leaving San Jose had nothing to do with you, Shaun. Nothing. I guess I didn’t see that it was hurting you, that you felt like I was abandoning you. I didn’t think it would be this big of an issue. You were doing fine on your own, you didn’t need me. You have Lea, you—”

“N-no,” he said. “Lea lied to me. I can’t trust her anymore.”

“Yeah, and that might have been a little bit my fault, too.”

Shaun had his hands folded in front of him, rubbing his thumbs against each other. “Why?”

“Because I think she saw you losing your footing, and she may have overcompensated.” Another sarcastic chuckle escaped his lips. “And that’s pretty ironic, because I was telling her exactly that when she came to see me, that people sometimes try to overcompensate for your ASD.

“I know it doesn’t make it any better, but she did it because she loves you. She saw you were hurting, and she wanted to do something to make that go away.”

“I… didn’t want that. I asked her not to do it.”

“Yeah, and she did it anyway because she saw that you were fighting a losing battle.”

“N-no. I was working on my communication skills, I was getting better.”

“Shaun. Communication isn’t your strong suit, you’ve always struggled with it. And that’s not your fault, but that’s also not something you can force just by wanting it to be different. I think Lea saw that too, and so she did what she thought was best to help you.”

He watched Shaun wring his hands together, saw his eyes fill with tears. “I know it’s a hard concept for you to grasp, and even if it doesn’t seem that way to you right now, but we’re all in your corner. We want you to do well, we want you to be happy.”

His voice was throaty with choked tears. “But I’m not happy.”

“Yeah,” Aaron said. “And that’s what makes this all so incredibly messy and complicated.” Aaron watched a tear rolling down Shaun’s cheek, and felt the lump in his throat intensifying. “You’ve been dealt a lot of really shitty cards in your life, and I’m constantly amazed by all the things you’ve accomplished despite all of that. A lot of people would’ve given up a long time ago.

“But not you, Shaun. You always keep fighting. You’re strong and brave, and one of the best people I know. And you’re a good, no, a *great* doctor. But you know what? We all have faults. We’re all not good at something. No one out there… *No one* always excels at everything.”

“I want to get better.”

“I know. But sometimes we just need to accept that won’t happen, no matter how hard we try.”

“No. I don’t want to,” he stated, and Aaron inwardly sighed. This was going to be a hard battle to fight, and maybe—just a little bit—he was seeing how Lea had been compelled to take the path of least resistance rather than the virtuous one she’d have to fight Shaun’s inner demons for.

It probably wasn’t going to help reiterate the point right now. With Shaun, it sometimes took time. Time for an idea to manifest after a seed had been planted. Sometimes it took repetition and validation from other people. And sometimes it took hitting a wall or rock bottom. And if this wasn’t rock bottom already, Aaron didn’t want to imagine how much further down it could go.

He lifted his gaze and looked at Shaun. “Shaun, do you remember what I said this morning? About Salen?”

“You said I did nothing wrong.”

“Yes, and that’s still true. You did nothing wrong, no matter what Salen says.”

“She said I killed a baby.”

“Yeah, and that’s a very crude and quite possibly biased statement not based on actual facts. That investigation she ordered, that’s not necessarily a bad thing if it’s being done impartially. There will undoubtedly be an M&M, and you may have to be part of that. Do you think you can do that?”

His expression hardened, became more determined. “Yes.”

“Okay, good. Just tell the truth. Well, you’re gonna do that anyway. But be prepared that people will ask some uncomfortable questions, may even accuse you of having made questionable decisions. You might be challenged on some things you did. It’s important that you stay calm, stay rational, okay, Shaun?”

Aaron knew that was going to be hard. Most of the time, Shaun was incredibly rational. But knowing that this was personal, that this was about a premature baby girl who had literally died under Shaun’s fingers, emotion was bound to take over. And when that happened, rationality was usually thrown out the window. He wondered if there was a way to prepare Shaun for what was undoubtedly going to come.

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After Glassman left, Lea was left sitting in her office chair. She felt terrible. Everything was messed up, not just what was between her and Shaun now. The expired medication case and the dead baby was hanging over Shaun, over the whole surgery department.

Whatever Glassman had going on needed to be sorted out, though she had hope that he was at least not going to leave Shaun hanging out to dry in the immediate future. But what Glassman had just mentioned didn’t sound encouraging.

She had to talk to someone. Knowing it wouldn’t be Shaun, not for a while, she took her phone and sent a text to Jordan, asking if they could meet. Jordan replied almost immediately, asking Lea to come meet her in the break room.

Jordan didn’t look her usual spunky self either, a disconcerted frown creasing her forehead. “Hey,” Lea greeted her.

“Hey,” Jordan greeted back.

Lea sat down in the chair opposite Jordan at the table. “What a mess, huh?”

“Yeah,” Jordan confirmed. “What’s going on with Shaun? I hear there was some kind of… incident yesterday?”

Lea could feel the distress clawing up her chest again and tried to swallow it down. “Yeah. He, uh… had a pretty bad breakdown in the pharmacy after you called me. It was… it was really hard to watch. He broke off the wedding. I don’t know, this is all really messed up right now.”

“He what?”

Lea met her eyes. “He said he can’t marry me.”

“Can I ask why?”

“I did something. Something that broke his trust, I went behind his back. I just wanted to protect him, but it backfired hard. I knew he wouldn’t take it well, but then, yesterday, after the baby’s death and the medication, and everything that’s been going on with Glassman… It just— I think it was a little too much.”

“How does Glassman fit into the picture?”

“He’s been really unapproachable lately. Went out to Montana on some kind of soul-searching trip after his divorce. Apparently he’s decided to move there now. He’s like a father to Shaun, you know?

“Shaun had a pretty shitty childhood, lost his brother when he was fourteen, ended up in foster care for a number of years. Glassman’s been mentoring him ever since. He lived with him for a while before med school.

“So Glassman pulling a disappearing act, that really hit Shaun hard.” She could feel her eyes brimming with tears now, despite her attempts to stay stoic.

“I’m really sorry,” Jordan said, her warm eyes on Lea’s.

She wiped stubbornly at a tear that had dislodged. “Thanks.”

“Have you talked to Shaun about it?”

“I tried. He shut me down. Like he does. I think he needs time. I wanna help him, I wanna help him so bad. Yesterday was really awful, and he wouldn’t let me touch him. I don’t know— I don’t know if I can do this.”

More tears were falling now, and Jordan got up from her chair with an, “Aw, girl,” and sat down next to Lea, pulling an arm around her. Lea leaned into her shoulder, relishing the comfort.

“Is there anything I can do?” Jordan asked. “Do you want me to talk to Shaun?”

Lea lightly shook her head, straightening up again. “No, I think if anyone, Alex might be the person he’d talk to. And usually, he needs to work these things out on his own first. He’s kinda stubborn that way. I dunno, I think I just wanted someone to listen.

“Glassman told me there was a meeting with Salen, that she said Shaun killed the baby?”

Jordan sighed. “Yeah. It wasn’t great, but I guess to be expected. Not sure what’s gonna happen now.”

“How did Shaun take it?”

Jordan shrugged. “You know, pretty blank-faced. He walked out after. I don’t know where he went.”

“Glassman went looking for him. I think he may be in the basement.”

“Yeah, he mentioned that the other day. Does Shaun sleep there sometimes?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t come home that night before the baby died. Last night he slept at Glassman’s house.”

“We stayed all night to find a surgical solution for the patient’s hip fracture. He said he was going to sleep in the basement.”

Lea turned to look at Jordan. “Can you do me a favor? Can you try to look out for Shaun? I know he’s not always easy, and right now he’s probably more irritable than ever, but I think he needs all the help he can get. And he won’t accept it from me, at least not for a while.”

Jordan gave her a nod. “Of course.”

“How are you holding up?”

“Me? I’m fine. Obviously not what you wanna go through in your second year of residency, but I was there during the surgery, the team, *and* Shaun, didn’t make any mistakes. And if Salen wants to spin it that way, I have faith that the truth will prevail.”

“I wish I could be that optimistic right now.”

“I’ll have twice the optimism for both of us, then.”

Lea gave a small smile. “You’re a real godsend, do you know that?”

Jordan shrugged. “I do. But it doesn’t hurt to hear you say it.”

That made Lea chuckle, and it helped make her feel like maybe she could brave this day if she just tried hard enough.

Jordan looked at her. “Listen, I gotta go and do some doctoring now, but come find me if you need me. I’m here. You have my number.”

“Thanks, Jordan. It means a lot.”

Jordan got up from her chair. “Any time. Keep your chin up. It’ll work out.”

Lea sighed. “Yeah, I hope it will.”

When Lea got back to her office, somewhat lost in thought, she almost collided with Dr. Lim. She took a step back. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” Lim lifted her arms, “I’m sorry. I was actually looking for you.”

“Okay.” Lea went into her office, and Lim closed the door behind them. That was curious. She hoped it wouldn’t be about Shaun, she really didn’t need more bad tidings.

There was a grim determination in Lim’s eyes. “I assume you know what is currently happening with my surgical team and Salen…?”

Lea gave her a nod, trying to swallow against a lump in her throat. She’d been there at the scene of the accident, reassured Alma, seen Shaun do his medical magic. “Yeah. Alma’s baby died because of a pharmacy error.”

“And you also know that Shaun is directly involved in that.”

“Yes. He was really upset, he was smashing vials in the pharmacy.”

“This needs to stay between us, but I need to ask if you can help me gather evidence that the newly implemented Ethicure policies have endangered patients. Is that something you can help me with?”

Oh wow. Lea had to ponder that for a second. “I… don’t know. Yeah, maybe. I’d have to look at our databases, see what kind of reports I could run. I’m sure there’s metrics we can look at. I can also pull up the new SOPs, maybe have my team run comparisons against the old ones and track all the changes. Can you give me a few hours on this? Maybe a few days, even?”

“Yes, of course. However soon you can do it.”

“Can I ask what you’re planning to do with it?”

Lim looked like she was livid inside. “Her grave misjudgment and managerial decisions have caused the pharmacy to neglect vital inventory checks, yet she is trying to pin the error that cost a baby its life on the surgical team, specifically on Shaun. I’m going to make sure she doesn’t get away with that.”

Oh wow, Lim was fully committed to a frontal attack. Lea hadn’t seen that coming, but she’d heard about Lim’s straightforwardness and her passion. She gave Lim a nod. “I’ll do what I can.”

Lim got up. “Thanks, I really appreciate it.”

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This patient’s medical history and symptoms were incredibly confusing. Alex went over the lab results again, not able to pinpoint any one diagnosis that made sense. Yet, his patient, a woman in her 30’s, was consistently deteriorating.

Temporary paralysis of her left leg and reported loss of color vision in the past year, now loss of bladder control, paired with what had ultimately brought her to the hospital, a tonic-clonic seizure.

He had been assigned to the case along with Shaun, but the latter had been absent so far. Alex had heard the rumors, had heard about a neonate’s death in combination with expired medication, and it causing quite a stir up to the highest ranks. He knew Shaun was caught in that, and there were probably meetings and discussions, so he was fine covering the bases for now.

His patient was on her way to her brain imaging scan, so Alex made his way to the MRI lab. He was glad when he ran into Shaun on the way. “Oh, there you are, I’ve been looking for you, are you free right now?”

Shaun’s face was a grim mask, but he gave Alex his attention and a curt, “Yes.”

Alex handed him the tablet with the patient data. “This is our new patient, and I can’t make heads or tails of the symptoms or the lab results. Would you mind taking a look?”

Shaun took the tablet and started scrolling through the information, taking in the details. He let out a hum once, then another as he kept reading. “It could be acute disseminated encephalomyelitis or multiple sclerosis. Have you ordered an MRI?”

“Yes, on the way there right now, actually. Wanna come with?”

Shaun said nothing and started walking. Alex followed.

“Should I be asking what’s going on? There’s all these rumors flying around.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” was all Shaun gave him.

“Something about a baby dying because of expired medication?”

Shaun hummed again noncommittally. Classic evasion tactic, Alex knew, but he kept prodding. “Is that true?”

“I’m not supposed to talk about it.”

“Okay. Yeah, I get that. What about the other stuff, though? Some kind of incident in the pharmacy yesterday? Should I be worried?”

Judging by the completely uncomfortable look on Shaun’s face, Alex realized he’d hit a nerve. “Who told you about that?”

“I don’t know. I guess word gets around. Morgan mentioned something.”

Shaun stopped walking, letting out a deflated breath. He suddenly looked very small and lost—close to tears, even. Alex stood in front of Shaun. “Shaun, what is it? Did something happen? Beyond the whole medication thing?”

“Yes.”

Alex waited, but Shaun stayed silent. He could see there was clear emotional turmoil there, and his worry meter shot up a notch. “Please tell me what happened. Maybe I can help.”

Shaun opened his mouth, closed it again, as if the words just wouldn’t come. Finally, he said, “Lea and I aren’t getting married anymore.”

Alex frowned, because, heh, *that* was a surprise. “Okay. Can I ask why? Did she break it off?”

As he often did when he wanted to avoid certain topics, Shaun abruptly turned and started walking in the direction of the MRI lab again. “Shaun, wait up,” Alex called after him.

He jogged after Shaun and caught up with him just as the latter was entering the MRI lab. Alex followed, catching the closing door just before it fell into its lock.

Through the window, he could see the patient was already in the machine. Shaun paid Alex no heed and sat down in front of the monitors, so Alex did the same in the chair to Shaun’s right. He brought up the imaging data screen, but the scan was still running, and it was the usual waiting game.

Shaun was tapping his finger on a tablet, then let out a frustrated hum. He looked up at Alex. “I… need your help.”

“Yeah, sure, what can I do?”

Shaun held out the tablet to him. “I would like to see the patient file of Alma Garcia, her record number is GS-23938-21.”

“And how can *I* help with that?”

“I no longer have access to her file.”

“Wait, is that your patient from yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“Is this going to get me in trouble?”

Shaun briefly met Alex’s eyes, and by now Alex knew that was a clear sign of it being important to Shaun. “I only want to know how she’s doing.”

“Okay. I guess there’s no harm in just looking up her file.” He took the tablet from Shaun and logged Shaun out and himself into the hospital’s EMR system. “What was the record number again?”

Shaun repeated it, and Alex typed it in, then read through the file. He read some of the entries out loud to Shaun, concluding, “Everything looks normal for one day post-op.”

“Can I see?”

Alex held on to the tablet. “No, I don’t think that’s a good idea. She seems to be doing fine, medically. Isn’t that all you need to know?”

“I would like to see,” Shaun insisted.

Alex logged himself out of the EMR system again, then handed the tablet back to Shaun. “I’m sorry, Shaun.”

The way Shaun unhappily pressed together his lips told Alex enough, and his heart went out to him. Silence settled between them over the muted, rhythmic whooshing and throbbing of the machine in operation in the next room. The scans were still not available.

Shaun was staring into nothingness, and Alex wondered. Him not getting married was a big thing. He and Lea had been so close, she’d always been very supportive of Shaun, and incredibly patient. What had happened there?

“Shaun, you wanna talk?” he asked in a low voice.

“No. That won’t change anything.”

“It could help.”

“I can’t marry Lea. It is her fault. I don’t know how talking to you would change that.”

“I’d like to know what happened, though. Do you think you can talk about that?”

“Hm,” was all Shaun gave him. Alex waited, and this time his patience was rewarded because Shaun added, “Lea did something that was wrong, behind my back, even though I asked her not to. She also lied to me about going on the business trip when you and I watched the storm cloud documentary together.

“I don’t know how I can marry someone and be with them for the rest of my life when they lie to me and I can’t trust them. So I can’t marry her.”

“Okay. That sounds pretty serious. When did this happen? When did you break off the marriage?”

“Hm. Yesterday.”

“Is that why you…” he harrumphed, “well, I guess there’s no way of sugarcoating it, why you had a meltdown in the pharmacy yesterday?”

The unmistakably self-conscious expression on Shaun’s face was back, so Alex added, “Shaun, you don’t have to be ashamed of your ASD. I know it’s something that just happens, that’s not always in your control. I saw it twice, remember?”

Shaun turned his head and met Alex’s eyes, and there was a deep sadness in them. Shaun was such a complex guy, always wearing his heart on his sleeve. “It was everything,” he said.

Alex frowned. “Everything, as in…?”

“Salen, the hospital, Lea, Dr. Glassman leaving, the baby…”

“Wait, Dr. Glassman is leaving?”

“Yes, he’s moving to Montana.”

“Why Montana?”

Shaun shrugged. “I don’t know. He said he wanted to be around different people, that he wanted a big change and embrace freedom. I still don’t know what that means.”

“Well, this day is full of surprises. And I can see how that’s really difficult for you. “ Out of the corner of his eyes he could see movement on the computer screen but chose to ignore it. “Have you—”

“It’s not MS,” Shaun interrupted him.

Alex shifted his attention to the scan. He tended to agree with Shaun on this one. “There’s a diffuse bilateral lesion pattern here,” he pointed at the screen.

Shaun studied the scan very closely. “I’m not sure it’s ADEM either.”

Alex tried to find something else that was abnormal or otherwise unusual on the scan but fell short. “Any idea about a possible alternative diagnosis?”

Shaun thought for another moment. “Not yet. I will do some research.”

“Okay, I’ll do the same. And if there’s anything else I can help with, please let me know, okay?

Shaun nodded. “Yes, thank you.”

Then he took his lab coat and left, leaving Alex to ponder all the news he’d just learned. It would undoubtedly be a difficult time for Shaun in the weeks to come. He made a mental note to try and be supportive in any way he could.

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This hadn’t exactly been the way Aaron had envisioned this return to St. Bonaventure Hospital. In fact, he hadn’t thought there would be a return in the first place. But now everything was messy, and Shaun needed him more than ever, and he knew his moving-to-Montana plans had screeched to an abrupt halt for the time being.

The elevator on the way up to his office stopped, the doors opening to reveal Audrey.

She stepped in, giving him a poignant look. It only took another second before she spoke, the doors closing behind her. “So you’re just gonna let all this play out?”

He shrugged noncommittally. “Yeah. It’ll blow over.”

“Blow over?!” she raised her voice. “What she’s doing is wrong, and you know it!”

“Maybe so, but she’s the CEO. In case you hadn’t noticed, she’s got the upper hand here.”

Audrey was now staring straight ahead, then said, “I’m taking her down.”

“That’s not a good idea.”

“Oh no? And how would you know? You haven’t exactly been around.”

“You go up against her, you’re gonna suffer the consequences.”

“Watch me.”

The elevator dinged and Audrey got out. Aaron still had another floor to go. He sighed. He’d been there, seen people like Salen come and go. Yes, it sucked that Shaun had gotten caught in the crosshairs, and he hoped he could pull him out without collateral damage, but full-frontal attack on Salen could get ugly.

He hoped Audrey would get away without major impact. He wasn’t sure she had a chance at success. But he couldn’t deny that a small part of him wished she would.

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Sitting at the surgeon’s lounge table, Shaun was looking at the MRI again. He thought maybe there might be the slightest hint at swelling around the optic nerve. The T2 signal was teetering just on the edge of being abnormal. Or was it?

He tried to focus, tried to recall the journal article where he'd come across this, but everything was blurry, all the threads intertwining. Too many distractions, too many random thoughts invading, pervading, weaving strands of ideas into a tangle he couldn't unravel.

He was still raw from last night, felt off kilter, on edge, like something could give him a slight nudge and he'd tip over.

He got up from the table. He needed to move, needed to go somewhere. He was set to scrub in for a routine thyroidectomy in forty minutes. He could get changed into his scrubs, stretch his legs, refocus.

He was glad that he and Jordan had been assigned to patients again after the meeting with Salen. His anxiety soared when he replayed the meeting in his mind, when he heard Salen's words in his head.

"You killed a baby."

Lim had immediately challenged that statement, but Salen had a way with words, and they all knew, as CEO, she had the upper hand.

"There will be consequences, and I will personally ensure that this case is handled with the utmost care and respect regarding the mother and her family."

Dr. Glassman had sat there, rubbing his thumb along his lower lip, both he and Dr. Lim keeping it to the facts, trying to steer Salen away from pinning it on the surgical team, on Shaun. Shaun wasn't sure how successful they'd been.

"Nothing like this ever happens again."

Salen had suggested taking Shaun and Jordan off the surgical service for the time being, but Lim and Glassman had both insisted that was rash and that none of them had done anything that would warrant that reaction.

Surprisingly, Salen hadn't fought hard against their arguments, but she had explicitly insisted that none of them speak to Alma Garcia, her boyfriend or anyone related to her and her case. Everyone had left the meeting wordless and stone-faced, and Shaun had escaped to the basement afterwards to take a moment to breathe and digest before Dr. Glassman had found him there.

In the locker room, Shaun found the shelf with the scrubs, reached for the ones that had a specific label that said, "Dr. S. Murphy". It was his personal supply, the dark blue ones that didn't itch or scratch his skin. His colleagues respected it, and he sensed some of the apprehension leaving him as he put on the scrubs, felt their familiar fit, the comfort of the loose garment—his professional uniform.

His path on the way back led him through the general surgery floor, and as much as he tried to avert his eyes from Alma's room, he couldn't help but steal a glance. Shaun stopped at the nurse's station across from her door and lingered. Alma seemed to be resting, had her eyes closed.

Normally, she'd have a tiny baby up in the NICU that she could visit, that she and her boyfriend could help nurse into a healthy baby girl while her own hip was healing. Now she had nothing but pain and a long road to recovery.

Shaun sensed movement next to him. It was Dr. Park who sidled up to him, stood next to him. "You know you're not supposed to go in there, right?"

"Yes," Shaun responded. He knew that. He hated it.

He wanted to tell her so badly that he was sorry, that he did everything he could to save her baby, that he knew how hard it was to lose a child who was robbed of the opportunity to grow into a toddler, a teen, a young woman.

He could feel his eyes brimming with tears, and suddenly there was the softest touch on his back, only for a split second.

"Shaun." Alex's voice was gentle and low. "There's nothing you can do here."

Shaun blinked, let out a shaky breath. A tear ran down his cheek. He didn't know how exactly, but he was suddenly aware that Park was offering something. Maybe a hug. Shaun hesitated a moment, but it felt wrong.

"No," he said, wiping hastily at his cheek.

Taking half a step away from Park without looking at his face, he told him, "Order a MOG IgG antibody test and check for optic neuritis."

Then he abruptly turned, fled, walked away with brisk steps. Park didn't follow.

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"What have you got for me?" Lim asked Lea, rounding the corner of the storage space behind the server room where Lea had asked Dr. Lim to meet her.

Lea picked up the copy paper box that was now filled with folders. "This is what I was able to put together so far. I don't know if that's going to be useful at all."

Lim picked up the box. "Yeah, this'll keep me busy for a while."

Lea gave her a brief smile. "Good luck."

Lim turned to leave, "Thanks, I'll need it."

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"Hey, Shaun," Alex called after Shaun as he was walking along the hospital hallway.

Shaun's thyroidectomy had been very routine, the team had operated with precision and focus. There hadn't been much banter or conversation, which had suited Shaun just fine in his current state of mind.

The hospital was pretty busy at this time of day, people milling about, footsteps, snippets of conversation here and there. Shaun stopped walking, waited for Park to catch up.

“Good catch on the MOGAD,” Park commented.

“Did you manage to confirm the diagnosis?”

“Not a hundred percent conclusively, the serum antibody test has a 3-day turnaround time, but I looked it up and the symptoms all fit. I went over the scans with radiology and they agree that there’s underlying optic neuritis. How did you know?”

Shaun shrugged. “I remembered.”

“I mean, it’s a really rare disease. That’s pretty amazing.”

It was just how Shaun’s mind worked. He knew the technical term was photographic memory. He’d never known it to be any other way, and it was somewhat confusing to imagine other people couldn’t remember things they’d seen in the past.

He caught Alex looking at him very intently before he asked, “How are you holding up?”

Shaun blinked. The concern was mildly reassuring, but it also made him feel like everyone was expecting him to fall apart at a moment’s notice. “I’m fine,” he said, turning to leave.

“I’m sorry,” Alex hurried after him. “I guess that was a little too on the nose.”

“It’s fine,” Shaun reassured him.

“I mean, everyone is a little on edge. This whole thing with the baby, Salen being as unpredictable as she’s proven to be, I can only imagine this must be even harder on you. And then what you told me about Lea… I just wanna help.”

Shaun kept walking. “I… appreciate the offer, but I’m fine.”

“Okay. But I’m here if you wanna talk.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Alex also went on his way, but then turned back around and pointed the corner of the tablet he was holding at Shaun, “And if there’s more weather documentaries you wanna watch, hit me up.”

That actually elicited an almost smile from Shaun, or at least so he thought. Alex had already turned around before he could say anything. He’d definitely keep that in mind, and he was relieved that he had people here he could turn to, people beyond Lea and Dr. Glassman, who knew and understood him to a degree.

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Lea sighed as she shut down her computer. She’d sent Shaun a text to ask if he wanted to ride home with her. He’d said no, but that hadn’t come as a surprise.

She wasn't sure how things were going to be. He'd told her earlier he needed time. Yes, fine, she could understand that. Time was his thing, slowly processing things was his thing. She'd seen it often enough, had learned that sometimes it would just need patience and staying out of his way until he knew what to do, how to resolve a situation.

But this? Was this even resolvable? He'd been so vehement and cold when she told him about the omitted reviews. She'd seen that it had cut deep. The regret was there again in the pit of her stomach.

Death Cab For Cutie kept her distracted on the ride home, she knew all the lyrics by heart. As expected, the apartment was empty and dark, Shaun wasn't there. She wondered if he would come home. She hoped he would, but she wouldn't begrudge him the choice if he decided otherwise.

Changing into her baggy yoga pants and old sweater felt good, she felt some of the stress of the day ebbing away. She focused on some of the chores that had been tabled for a while, used the time of Shaun's absence to vacuum the apartment. He didn't like vacuuming, didn't like the noise. She'd always wanted to look for a quieter vacuum cleaner, but then that had never made it up high enough on the priority list to actually do it.

She checked the plants on the patio, watered those that needed it. There was a layer of dust on the table and the chairs, and she started to wipe them down, even though they weren't using them so much these days.

She sorted the laundry from the hamper into the laundry basket to see what needed to go in the washing next, wondered if she should make up the mattress in the spare room because she had a feeling Shaun might not want the physical closeness of sleeping in the same bed for the time being. It couldn't hurt.

Shaun came home just as she was putting a fresh sheet on the mattress. He stood just outside the doorway of the spare room. "Are you sleeping here tonight?"

She straightened, turned around to face him. "I wasn't sure if you wanted me to. Or if you wanted to."

His eyes went to the mattress, took it in, then turned away without a response. She watched him sit down on the couch, switch on the Weather Channel. He needed time, and that's what that looked like.

She asked him if he was hungry, which he negated, so she made herself an avocado toast. She ate it alone at the dining table, trying to distract herself with an episode of her favorite sitcom playing on her laptop. It didn't really grab her attention tonight, was barely the mild distraction she'd hoped for.

After she'd put away her plate and wiped the crumbs off the counter, she went over to the couch, tentatively sat down, keeping a respectful distance from Shaun.

"I know I said we don't need to talk, and I get why you called off the wedding, but Shaun, are you really sure about this?"

He turned his head slightly but didn't meet her eyes. His response was a very clear, "Yes."

“Okay. Can we talk about the logistics of that? We’ve already sent out the *Save the Date* cards. We need to decide what we want to tell people. Some of them have probably already booked flights and hotels. We need to let them know, and I think the sooner, the better.”

He let out a short hum that she took as acknowledgement but he didn’t say anything else.

“I can handle all that, but I wanna make sure you’re okay with it. Do you want to be involved in that?”

He hummed again, followed it up with a low, “No.”

Yeah. She’d expected that. It was okay, she would go over it with Jordan. The wording and how to phrase that would be tricky, but they’d find a way. She’d have to break it to her parents, and she didn’t look forward to *that* conversation.

“How are you doing?” she carefully probed. “I heard the meeting with Salen wasn’t great.”

He kept staring straight ahead. Weather forecast data was flashing on the screen, the volume was very low. “Shaun?” she prompted him.

“It was… difficult. She said I killed Alma’s baby. But I didn’t. I didn’t kill her baby.”

“Oh yeah, I know that. You’re the last person who could ever harm a human being, least of all a child. I saw you save Alma’s life, and that was amazing. I don’t understand how anyone who knows you could ever say that about you.

“I mean, I’m already angry that she could even suggest that. I can’t imagine how that must feel for you.”

“The baby died because the medication had expired. That was Salen’s fault. She made budget cuts, the pharmacy didn’t keep track of the supply. Why did she say this was my fault?”

“I don’t know, Shaun. That’s really backwards. I can only assume she wants to save her own ass, wants to shift the blame to someone else. And that’s really, really wrong. No, you know what, that’s despicable. I hate her. I hope she doesn’t get away with it. What did Glassman say?”

“He… said I did nothing wrong.”

“And I’m sure you didn’t. Is he helping with all of this, helping you?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, that’s good. I’m glad. I wanna help you, too. If I can. Please come to me if I can help, okay?”

He sat and still stared straight ahead, she hoped it had registered. Was it too soon to ask again, to broach the subject?

“Shaun, what do you wanna do? About us? Do you want me to sleep in the spare room? Do you wanna sleep there?”

“I will sleep on the mattress.”

“Are you sure? I can also take it. Might be easier that way.”

He hesitated a moment. “No. I have slept on it before we had the bed.”

“Okay, if that’s what you prefer.”

“It is.”

“Do you think we can talk about the other thing? The review scores?”

She saw his whole body tense, saw the shutters coming down. She backed off immediately. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. You said you needed some time. But I hope we can talk about it when you’re ready. I’d really like to.”

He let out another hum, and she took that as approval. Acknowledgment at the very least.

“Do you want to watch something together? Or do you want some more alone-time?”

He actually looked at her, briefly met her eyes. “Yes, please.”

“Okay.” It didn’t come unexpected, especially since he’d already told her he’d need time to digest.

She was completely at a loss how long he’d need. It could take days, maybe weeks even. Her messing with the reviews had created a pretty huge rift between them, had shaken his view of her pretty significantly. It was probably not going to be resolved in a day or two. She’d have to give him the room he needed. And she would.

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03 - Now there's a key where my wonderful mouth used to be

Shaun couldn't focus, couldn't decide where to go. He was supposed to be in surgery right now, but it had been moved because the patient spiked a fever, and now Shaun was restless. He'd walked to the elevators, stood there, watched the elevator doors open and people getting out. He hadn't gotten in.

No place in the hospital felt safe anymore, everything was out of whack and a reminder of Ethicure, of everything that was still hanging over his head. He hadn't slept well, had woken up several times. Lea had been there in the morning, but he hadn't known what to say, so he got dressed, ate his cereal in silence and then left. She'd left him alone, had offered to give him a ride, but he'd declined.

The elevator door dinged again next to him. Shaun kneaded his folded hands until he felt his knuckles hurt, his breaths coming faster.

"You killed a baby."

He hadn't. He hadn't killed a baby. He'd done everything in his power to revive her, breathe life into her. He'd tried and tried—to no avail.

"Time of death 18:23."

The OR had fallen silent, but his head had been loud, buzzing, screaming, reeling. Like it was now. He needed to do something. He needed to make it go away, needed to free his head from the voice that said the same thing over and over. He hadn't killed a baby. He hadn't killed this baby, Alma's baby.

Before he knew it, he was back in the surgical ward, in her room, ignoring doctors and nurses. Someone might have said something to him. He'd ignored it.

Alma's eyes were on him immediately. He stood near her bed, took in the IVs next to her bed, how she was carefully holding her hands away from her hips.

"I'm sorry your baby died."

"Dr. Murphy," Alma said. Her voice was cold. "I don't think you're supposed to be in here."

"I need you to know that I did everything I could to save your baby's life. I am very sorry."

Alma's voice sounded hardened, not the gentle cadence from the day before. "I appreciate you telling me this, but my baby is still dead, and I've been told that's largely your fault. So I think you should leave."

What? What was she saying? "No. It is *not* my fault."

"Well, what I'm hearing is that you were who made the decision about the diagnosis and treatment, which makes you responsible for killing my little girl. Quite frankly, I don't even know why they're still letting you work here."

"I did *not* kill your baby!"

“From what I understand, you gave her the wrong medication.”

“N-no. It was *not* the wrong medication. The medication had—”

“Shaun!” It was Dr. Glassman’s voice, loud and assertive. Shaun whipped around.

“I did *not* kill her baby!” he reiterated.

Glassman’s hand was suddenly clasped around Shaun’s upper arm, dragging him towards the door. Shaun stumbled along, repeating, “I did *not* kill her baby. I did *not*—”

“Shaun, please calm down.”

He tried to suck air into his lungs between hitched and choppy breaths. “No.”

Glassman pulled him away, out of sight and earshot from Alma’s room, planting Shaun in front of him with both hands on Shaun’s upper arms. His grip was firm, and Shaun didn’t like it, but it helped root him in the moment and he didn’t have the energy to resist.

Glassman’s voice was stern. Angry. “Shaun, what the hell?!”

“I did *not* kill her baby,” he repeated in a small voice.

“You were asked *specifically* not to talk to Ms. Garcia. What were you thinking?! Do you realize that you just made everything exponentially worse? What did you tell her?”

“Nothing.”

“Did you mention the expired medication?”

“No. You interrupted me.”

“Well, at least that’s something.” Glassman audibly breathed in and out again. “My office. Now!”

He only let go of Shaun’s arm when Shaun squirmed out of the grasp, marching along with Glassman to his office. The latter closed the door behind them. He was seething, Shaun could tell *that*.

Shaun drew up his shoulders, waiting for the onslaught.

Dr. Glassman must have seen it, because he drew in a sharp breath, seemed to steady himself. “Sit down,” he ordered in no uncertain terms.

Shaun wordlessly did as he was told. He looked at his lap, didn’t want to look at Dr. Glassman. He knew he’d just made a mistake, let him down, had broken the rules.

Glassman breathed in and out again, he was doing a lot of that. “You know what, I don’t even know what to say,” he finally said.

His voice was stern, cold and loud in Shaun’s ears. He remembered it from when he was young, when he’d done things in foster care he wasn’t supposed to, when he’d messed up in some big way. “Do you know what you just did? Do you? Shaun?”

Shaun rubbed the palms of his folded hands together, trying to draw comfort from the gesture.

“Look at me, Shaun.”

He slowly lifted his head. Glassman’s expression was still angry. “Yes,” he just said, not daring to meet his gaze.

“Then tell me what you just did.”

“I spoke to Alma Garcia when I was told not to.”

“And do you know what that means?”

He drew up one shoulder. No, he didn’t. Not really. He’d just wanted—he needed— “I needed to—”

“You didn’t need *anything*!” Glassman bellowed. “You needed to stay away from her! You just—”

The door to the office opened. Salen.

“Please tell me that what I’ve just been told is not what actually happened.”

Glassman turned to look at her. She must have gotten her answer from him, even though Glassman never said a word.

“Oh, that’s just fantastic.” She looked at Shaun. “You’re the gift that keeps on giving, Dr. Murphy. Are you actively *trying* to make my life harder?”

“No,” Shaun said. What he’d done had nothing to do with Salen.

“That was a rhetorical question.” Her voice seemed dangerously loaded with something. “And effective immediately, you are suspended until further notice. Now tell me exactly what you said to her.”

“I… told her…” he started haltingly, “I told her… I was sorry that her baby died and that I tried everything to save her. I told her it was not my fault, that I did not kill her baby. Why did she say it was my fault?”

“Because it was,” Salen stated matter-of-factly.

“It was *not* my fault.”

“That’s not what I’m seeing. Did you mention anything about the medication?”

“No. Dr. Glassman interrupted me.”

“Good for you, because that might have just saved your ass.”

“What did you tell Alma?” Shaun asked again.

Salen pressed her lips together, then turned to Dr. Glassman. “Make sure he gets out of here and doesn’t come back unless specifically asked. This isn’t over yet. I can count on your discretion?”

Glassman nodded. “Of course.”

Silence settled after the door closed behind Salen. Shaun let out a deflated breath, his shoulders sagging. Glassman sat down in the chair next to him.

“Can’t say that came unexpected. And I also can’t even say I blame her. You messed this one up, Shaun. Big time.”

He knew that. He knew that now. At the time he’d needed to do it, it had made perfect sense. He gripped his phone that was somehow in his hand, he didn’t even know why he was holding it. Maybe it had vibrated and he’d instinctively reached for it.

“What do I do now?” Shaun asked in a small voice.

Glassman gave him a look that he wasn’t sure how to interpret. “You heard Salen. She benched you. I think you need to go home.”

Shaun felt his eyes watering, felt the emotions rushing in. Had he lost his job again? No. Please no. No.

Maybe he’d said it out loud, because Glassman’s voice was there, a notch gentler than before. “Hey. Shaun. Please focus. Focus on me.”

He tried, tried to break from the pattern, tried to shift his attention to Dr. Glassman. His hand went to his hair, his eyes just wouldn’t stay on any one point.

“Am I being fired?” he blurted out.

“Fired? No, I don’t think so. But a suspension is no small matter. There will be a note in your file. Maybe other consequences, depending on how this will play out. Shaun, what were you thinking?”

“I tried to save her baby. I needed her to know that.”

Glassman sighed, then briefly rubbed his palms along his thighs. “Okay, we need to talk about that, but now is not the right time. Now you need to get out of here. Can I trust you to do that without any further incident?”

Shaun looked up. “Yes.”

“Do you want me to tell Lea?”

“No,” he said immediately.

“Shaun, you should talk to her. You need— Being alone right now is not good for you. I can’t leave now, but I’ll check in with you later.”

Shaun got up from his chair, clasping his phone.

Glassman added, “Shaun, please reach out if you’re struggling, before it gets bad, okay? I’ll be there.”

Shaun wanted to draw comfort from that, but Dr. Glassman had said that before, and then he wasn't. The jury was still out on whether he could trust him to keep his word on this one.

He opened the door and left it open behind him as he walked away. He had tears in his eyes by the time he got to the locker room, changed his clothes and pulled the backpack from his locker. This seemed too familiar, too real.

He heard a female voice approaching. Morgan. "Yeah, the blue one. The one with the stripes." She was talking to someone on her phone.

"Hey Shaun," he greeted him off-handedly.

Shaun blinked, a tear dislodging. He tried to turn away. He heard Morgan say, "Let me call you back."

She came closer. Shaun didn't want to talk to her. Her voice was unusually gentle. "Shaun, what's wrong?"

He clutched his backpack to his chest and took a step away.

"Isn't this the middle of your shift? Why are you leaving?"

"I've been suspended," he just said and walked past her.

"Shaun," she called after him, but he kept walking in the hope she wouldn't follow. He decided to take the stairs because he didn't want to wait in front of the elevators.

He left the hospital through the front entrance. He couldn't take the bus. It would be crowded with people, smells, noise, possibly strangers touching him. No.

He started walking. It was four miles, it would take him about an hour and a half. He'd walked it many times. This, too, felt familiar, except when Dr. Han had fired him, it had been raining.

His steps were automatic, the tap, tap, tap of his soles on the sidewalk in tune with the patterns in his mind. Step, step, step, the next crosswalk. He'd have to push the pedestrian signal button. A truck drove by a little too closely, the exhaust fumes stung in Shaun's nose.

He tried stepping only on the white bars of the pedestrian crossing, matched his strides accordingly. Left on East Julian. His phone vibrated in his pocket, but he ignored it. A short one meant a text message or an alert. He didn't have patients anymore. It couldn't be that important.

Dusk was starting to settle, the setting sun casting a red glow over some of the glass-walled buildings in this district. It was beautiful in its own right. Shaun looked up at the sky. The curtain of altocumulus painted the sky in orange-pink ripples, and the discordance of nature's beauty combined with his own inner unrest made him feel even more on edge.

He diverted his attention back to the concrete in front of him, kept walking. Cars were rushing by, suddenly loud in his ears. A horn honked, then another one. He jumped, then sucked in a breath and kept walking.

A bus stopped just in front of him, the brakes making a loud screeching noise. Shaun's hands instinctively went to his ears, but it didn't help much. Another horn honked, and he could feel his breath quickening.

He started counting the utility poles he passed. There was a steady certainty of him passing another one. And another one. It was what got him home without totally losing control.

It was dark outside by the time he got to the apartment, but even the streetlights were jarring. The apartment was dark and empty, and that suited him just fine. He didn't know where Lea was, and he didn't care enough to make an attempt to reach out and ask.

He chose to only switch on the dimmest lights they had, couldn't take any more assault on his already buzzing senses. He needed quiet. Quiet to decompress, to dampen the noise of his mind, the overwhelming sensations that lingered and gnawed.

Almost instinctively, he changed out of his street clothes into his pajamas. They were soft, loose-fitting, comfortable.

On the couch, he switched on the Weather Channel, tried to pay attention. It was the presenter with the irritating voice today. He switched it off again, switched off all the lights in the apartment. Too much. It was too much.

He lay on the couch, drew the blanket closer, draped it over himself to keep a spreading chill at bay.

Everything was out of kilter, he felt incredibly unbalanced and exposed. The pharmacy, it had all started there. He'd lost control, and while he may have regained some composure, enough to get him through another day, and another, he hadn't returned to any kind of equilibrium.

If he wasn't able to handle himself, how were his friends, his colleagues supposed to deal with him? When would Dr. Glassman leave again? He'd found a new home in Montana, had left Shaun behind. He wouldn't want to deal with more of Shaun's crap, especially after today.

He hadn't had a grip on himself around Alma, had blatantly disregarded orders and gotten himself and possibly the hospital in trouble. Dr. Glassman had been angry and disappointed at that, too. He'd spiraled out of control. Again. He couldn't count on Dr. Glassman to always be there for him, because he hadn't been.

Things with Lea were a mess, and he didn't know what to do with that, either. He thought he had a home in her, his rock, his buoy to guide him, his arms to catch him if he fell. Now there was just a gaping hole where a safety net had once been. Marriage was out of the question. He couldn't make a promise to be with someone for the rest of his life whom he didn't know how to trust.

He grabbed one of the folds of the blanket and clutched it to his chest, trying to keep the onslaught of his thoughts from derailing. He didn't want another meltdown, couldn't deal with another one. He started rubbing the fabric of the blanket with his fingers.

He didn't know how much time had passed, but it was fully dark outside when his mind jolted from the noise at the door—the key turning in its lock. It was Lea. He shrank into himself just a little.

More questions, more inquiries, he couldn't handle it.

"Shaun? Are you here?"

He stayed quiet, but she saw him anyway. A light came on, and it blinded him instantly, making him flinch. He closed his eyes, let out a sound of displeasure. Lea immediately switched the light off.

There was concern in her voice. "Shaun, what's wrong? Are you sick?"

No, he wasn't sick. He was a failure. He was barely holding it together.

"Shaun? Please talk to me. What's wrong?"

He wanted to say something, wanted to ask her to stop asking questions, but it took too much effort.

She crouched down next to him, and he flinched again. He didn't want her to touch him, it would be another sensory flare to keep in check. He was glad when she didn't.

"Shaun. Say something. Please. You're worrying me."

He couldn't. Everything was exhausting, and the thoughts just kept coming and he had to catch them, divert them, keep them spinning in a safe orbit. There was no more energy left.

"Are you having a meltdown? Shaun, what can I do? Please, you have to communicate." She added another pleading, "Shaun, please."

He thought maybe a sob escaped her mouth, and then she was gone. A brief silence settled. Her voice got quieter. "Aaron? I think something's wrong with Shaun, he's lying on the couch, he won't talk to me. I don't know what to do."

She'd called Dr. Glassman. He didn't like it. He would come, and there would be more questions, more people, more, more, more. It was already too much.

"I don't know, just kind of out of it."

She fell silent again, then, "I don't know, I don't think he wants to be touched. I don't… I don't think I want to. Can you come? Please? I'm really worried."

Lea came back, sat on the coffee table. He knew she was looking at him with concern and worry. He turned to lie on his side, his back to her, waiting for the inevitable. His lower back felt the chill, but he didn't have enough energy to adjust the blanket.

Minutes stretched on, time became meaningless. Lea sniffed her nose a few times. He knew she was crying. It made him even more conflicted. Lea was just one big conflict, and she was right in his space.

He was almost glad when he heard the soft rap on the door and Lea left to let Dr. Glassman in. They exchanged a few hushed words, then Glassman was by his side.

"Shaun?"

He didn't want to talk to Dr. Glassman either.

"Hey, Shaun, we're a little worried. Are you sick? Can I touch your forehead?"

He shook his head, because that, he could do. It wasn't as hard as words.

"Okay," he said in a gentle voice, "Okay, I won't touch you. This is one of those episodes, isn't it? That sensory overload thing? That makes it hard to talk?"

Yes. Dr. Glassman had seen it before. Shaun gave a small nod.

"Okay," he said again. "Do you want to be alone?"

Shaun just shrugged.

"You want it quiet, right? So we'll be quiet. We can leave if you want. Do you want us to leave?"

He wasn't sure, but there was something comforting about Dr. Glassman's presence. He shook his head.

"All right," he said just above a whisper. "We'll just sit with you."

Shaun curled his legs in slightly, and Glassman seemed to have understood the gesture. He sat down in the space at the foot of the couch that Shaun had just allowed him to be in. Lea stayed at a safe distance, sat somewhere on the floor near the shelf, he couldn't tell where exactly.

Silence settled, and he tried to concentrate on the small noises in the apartment. There was the faint whooshing of cars outside the window. The fridge was humming. A neighbor was playing classical music that Shaun could only just make out at the very edge of his perception.

He focused on Dr. Glassman's quiet and regular breathing. It was the one thing that gave him a point to center around. Very slowly, things began to shift, to settle, to steady. Dr. Glassman and Lea were incredibly patient. They sat with him for a long time, he didn't know how long.

Thoughts became more ordered, the emotions less intense and intrusive. His strength slowly returned to get his mental guardrails up, to pull himself together. He shifted onto his back, then pulled himself to a sitting position against the armrest behind his back. He drew his legs up.

He knew he had Dr. Glassman's attention. "I'm okay," Shaun said quietly.

Glassman nodded but stayed quiet.

Shaun added, "You can talk now."

That elicited a smile and a little chuckle from Glassman. "I actually don't know what to say."

"I'm sorry."

"For what, Shaun?"

"For this."

“Oh no. You don’t have to apologize for this. Ever.”

“You were worried.”

“Yeah, we were. Lea more than me, I think.”

Shaun looked at her. She was sitting between the TV bench and the shelf, her back to the wall. He couldn’t see her face well in the murky light.

“I’m okay,” he repeated.

Glassman said, “I kinda doubt that, but I’m glad you’re talking again. Do you wanna talk? About what happened today?”

That prompted Lea to perk up. “What happened today?”

Glassman looked at Shaun and didn’t say anything. Shaun eventually answered the question. “Salen suspended me.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I broke the rules.”

“What rules, Shaun?”

“They asked me not to speak to Alma Garcia, but I did.”

That elicited a weary exhale from Lea, but she chose not to comment on that particular point. “For how long?” she asked instead.

He shrugged. “She said until further notice.”

Glassman added, “Probably until the dust settles. I’ll be smoothing out what I can. I think Lim is doing her part, too.”

“She asked me to provide her with documentation that could prove negligence on Salen’s part,” Lea said. “I’m guessing she’s got something in the works.”

Glassman shrugged. “Yeah, I think she wants to dismantle Salen. I’m just afraid she won’t make it out the other end. People like Salen are like piranhas. They know exactly when to attack, and after they’ve done their damage, they wiggle out and swim away unscathed, leaving the victim to bleed out and suffer.”

Shaun asked, “Does Dr. Lim have an actual chance to succeed?”

Aaron looked over at Lea. “I don’t know. What did you give her?”

“Reports I ran on fatality numbers before and after Ethicure. Reports outlining average discharge and readmission data. Policy and SOP changes, that sort of thing. I’ll be looking for more, but it’s not the worst idea to try and beat her with her own weapon – she’s always been all about the data.” Lea let out a chuckle. “It would actually be kind of poetic justice, don’t you think?”

Glassman chuckled, too. “Yeah, it kinda would.”

“But there’s still gonna be a lawsuit, right? Regarding Alma and the baby?”

“Likely yes. Shaun, this will probably rain down on you in some way. And I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t concerned about that. You’ve already been dealing with so much. How are you gonna take all this?”

He shrugged his shoulders. How was he supposed to answer that? Glassman added, “You know, maybe this suspension isn’t necessarily such a bad thing.”

Shaun tensed at that, but Glassman quickly said, “Wait, hear me out. Obviously, it’s not good that you’re off the surgical service for now, but don’t you think this could give you some opportunity to—I don’t know—recenter yourself a little. Let things quiet down, find some more focus? I think everything at the hospital has been really stressful for you. Maybe you getting out of that environment isn’t the worst thing right now.”

He hadn’t considered that. He loved his work, he hated not being able to do it, being barred from helping people. But Dr. Glassman was right, that it hadn’t been all good. In fact, a lot of it had been awful.

He let out a hum.

Silence settled again for a long moment, then Dr. Glassman asked, “Do you want to stay with me tonight?”

Shaun had an answer very quickly. “No, thank you.”

“I’ll let you have the bed tonight,” Lea added. “I’ll sleep in the spare room.”

Shaun hummed again, and Lea said, “Please, Shaun. That’s the least I can do.”

It wasn’t that he hated the idea. But he didn’t want Lea to sacrifice her own comfort for him, either. He’d already been such a nuisance to deal with.

“Thank you,” he told her.

“Speaking of which…” Glassman harrumphed. “I should be going home. Will you be okay, Shaun?”

“Yes,” he said quickly.

Lea got up from her sitting position. She went over to Glassman, and he pulled her into a brief hug. Shaun frowned. That was new.

“Thank you,” she said to Glassman in a low voice.

“Any time,” he replied.

Shaun frowned again. Was that another white lie? Or just something people said that they didn’t actually mean? He tried to push that thought away, tried not to get into that spiral again. Not tonight.

Shaun peeled himself out of the blanket, watched Dr. Glassman leave. “Can I have the bathroom?” he asked Lea.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll go get my stuff from the bedroom. Take as long as you need.”

Shaun went through his routine, drew much needed comfort from that, too. Lea was sitting on the mattress, reading a book when he walked past and went into the dark bedroom. He was just about to close the door when she stood there.

“Will you be okay? Is there anything else you need?”

“I’m okay now,” he reassured her. “You can go to sleep.”

“Okay. But please wake me up if you need anything.” She paused. “Sorry, that came out really patronizing. I just wanna say, I’m here, Shaun, if you need me.”

He sat down on his side of the bed. “Okay,” he confirmed. He didn’t think he’d need her for anything, but there was a certain reassurance in her having offered.

“Good night,” she told him.

He chose not to respond. There was still a huge question mark where Lea was concerned, and he’d have to figure out how to deal with that when he had more time, when his head was clearer, more focused.

He lay down and drew up the blanket. He was incredibly exhausted and drained, and sleep would be a welcome reprieve. The door of the bedroom softly clicked in its lock when Lea closed it behind her.

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Shaun woke up early the next morning. He felt more rested, more centered, the exhaustion had given way to a thin shielding of armor he could rebuild to actually brave this day. He wasn’t sure what exactly there was to brave. It returned to him with a sense of dread that he wouldn’t be going to the hospital, likely for quite some time.

He lay in bed for a few minutes, but then his thoughts started spinning again, and he didn’t like it.

Trying not to wake Lea, he went through his morning routine as quietly as he could. He wasn’t sure he wanted to face her this morning, there were still all these things hanging between them, and he wasn’t any wiser as to how he felt about it.

She’d been there last night, she’d been very patient, had known not to overstep any boundaries. She’d been concerned and worried. He knew she still loved him. Did he still love her back? That question had neither a yes nor a no attached, or maybe both, but neither unconditionally. It was very complicated now.

The spare room door opened just as he exited the bathroom. He must have woken her, after all. Or maybe she hadn’t been able to sleep well, either. Lea wasn’t used to the spare mattress, it wasn’t an unlikely scenario.

“Good morning,” she said as she made her way to the bathroom.

He coldly returned the greeting. “Good morning.”

Their mornings were usually filled with light banter. Shaun was the early riser among them, he was often up before Lea, and she could be a little slow to rise. Neither of them knew what to say today, how to break the ice.

He took comfort in the familiar noises. Her making her first cup of coffee, the clank of the spoon against the mug, the opening and closing of the fridge to get out the milk.

He was listlessly chewing on cereal with yogurt, but he wasn’t very hungry. Lea wordlessly placed a glass of orange juice on the table for him. He lifted his head to briefly look at her. She gave him a small smile, but he could tell she wasn’t happy.

It was Lea who finally broke the silence. “Shaun, can I ask you about last night?”

He let out a hum. He didn’t like those conversations. She’d want to know why he did things a certain way, why he wasn’t reacting the way she expected, and it always made him uncomfortable.

He couldn’t always put into words what was going on, why these things happened, and sometimes that frustrated him as well.

He knew Lea didn’t judge him. He knew she just wanted to understand, wanted to expand her toolbox to make him feel comfortable around her, to know how to support him the best way she could.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to, but I hope you understand why I called Glassman. I’ve seen you quiet, and I’ve seen you reticent, but you were scaring me a little last night. I don’t want you to feel bad about it, I just want to understand.”

His eyes skirted her face, briefly met her eyes. He loved this about her, her endless patience with him sometimes. There were moments where he felt like he didn’t deserve it, like one day she would realize that and leave him.

She waited, and he was still trying to look for ways to explain it, when she said, “It’s okay, you don’t have to…”

“It is very hard to explain.”

“Do you think you can try? Do you want to?”

“Last night… I… couldn’t talk.”

“Like, physically?”

“No. It was… too difficult.”

“Explain the ‘too difficult’ part to me.”

He had to think for a moment, try to find the right words to articulate it. “Everything happens at once, and… I have to focus very hard to not… go out of control. And then it’s very difficult to talk. I don’t know if that makes sense.”

“No, it does. So what you mean is that you basically had to shut down to be able to deal with it all, spend all your energy on that, and talking on top of that was just too much?”

He nodded. “Yes. Sometimes we need to infuse a full IV bag into a patient, but we keep the roller clamp almost closed so that the infusion runs very slowly.” He briefly looked at her. “That was an analogy.”

She smiled. “I like that, that makes it really easy to imagine. Like back when I taught you how to drive in traffic. And how do you deal with that? How do you get the liquid through the clamped IV line?”

“You have to wait.”

“Glassman knew about this, didn’t he? Were you okay with what he did last night?”

Shaun nodded again. “Yes. I just… didn’t want to talk.”

“So if this happens again, do you want me to just leave you alone? Or just be there and not talk, like last night?”

“Hm,” he hummed. “Sometimes it’s easier to be alone. But sometimes it isn’t.”

“Okay. Then how would you tell me if you can’t talk? Can you nod? Shake your head?”

“Yes, I think I can.”

“Okay. Then maybe we’ll go with that.”

He was grateful, he loved that she tried so hard, but it didn’t make her transgressions any less hurtful or impactful. He wasn’t sure where it came from, but he wanted to tell her. “I scared you last night. I’m sorry.”

“No,” she said immediately, “no, Shaun. Like Glassy said, you don’t have to apologize. I just didn’t know what it was. That scared me. Now I do, and I know what to do with that.”

“You… hugged Dr. Glassman.”

She let out a little chuckle. “You saw that, huh? You don’t approve?”

“Are you… getting closer to him because of me?”

She looked at his face. Their eyes briefly met. “Yeah, I guess that’s part of it. Why, is that a bad thing?”

He suddenly felt very inadequate again, like he was a sick toddler, someone to be protected and touched with velvet gloves, someone they discussed behind his back. “No,” he said flatly.

He got up very quickly, threw his uneaten cereal in the trash, then put the bowl and spoon in the dishwasher. He left the orange juice on the table, untouched.

“Shaun, did I say something wrong?” she called after him.

He hurried into the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, his hand went into his hair. He hated feeling this way, hated that he was, again, losing his footing. So much for the armor—it had large chinks in it for sure.

He wished he had his toy scalpel. He’d found it that morning wrapped in the blue cloth at the top of the gray duffel bag that had been standing in the guest room when he’d spent the night at Dr. Glassman’s house. He’d unwrapped and held for a few moments, relished the familiar feel of the ribbed plastic beneath his fingers.

He knew it was in his backpack now, in the front bag. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine every detail he could recall in his mind. The red-orange grip, the light gray plastic blade. The matte Scotch tape that held it together after he’d broken it when Dr. Han fired him.

His breath was shaky, he tried to steady it. It took effort, but eventually he calmed down, waited for the buzz in his mind to settle down. He half wondered why Lea hadn’t knocked on the door, or just ignored his boundaries and opened it unannounced. She would have, at one time.

He’d told her he needed time. She was giving him that, and he knew he should be grateful for it. Still, a small part of him wished she’d just been there and pushed through his bullshit, stood in the door and asked what was wrong, or maybe just silently sat with him.

Emotions welled up, filled his eyes with tears.

Today would suck. He didn’t have the hospital, didn’t have any distractions. Lea would be gone, and he’d be in the empty apartment with nothing to do.

He got up, picked out clothes to wear, had a hard time choosing a button-down he was happy with. The one he wanted to wear was in the laundry basket. He grudgingly chose the blue and gray checkered one.

By the time he was dressed and he tentatively opened the door, Lea was gone. He let out a deflated breath. There was a note on the dining table next to the glass of orange juice. It read, ‘If I said something to hurt you, I’m sorry. Please call me or text me that you’re okay. I love you.’ It was signed with her usual curvy L.

He went to retrieve his phone and sent her a text that simply said, ‘I’m OK’.

He stared at the phone for a long time, waiting for the animated three dots that were indicating she was typing to turn into an actual message. When it finally came, it said, ‘Thank you for telling me’. He wondered why she had taken so long to write out five words.

It wasn’t something he thought warranted a reply, so he put the phone down again.

What was he going to do? There was research to be read, for sure. He’d had several articles earmarked that he could look up online and access electronically. He’d meant to read up on MOG associated disease, which he only knew cursorily, but maybe that wasn’t important

anymore now. The patient would likely have been discharged by the time they let him go back to work.

He went to get his little gray notebook out of his jacket pocket, got a ballpoint pen and did what he knew would help get him through the day—he made a to-do list. It grew more quickly than he'd thought.

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Lea sighed. Things were so… off and out of whack these days.

She watched Shaun warily. He was getting worked up about something, she could tell. He'd been taciturn all day, which wasn't much of a change from the day before. He hadn't commented on what had happened yesterday morning, hadn't mentioned the note that she'd left him before going to work.

She'd made attempts during the day to get him to engage in conversation, but it had all been shut down pretty quickly, so eventually she'd stopped trying.

They had pancakes in the morning, like they did most Saturdays he didn't have to work. Their weekend chores were being done mostly in silence, he'd watched the Weather Channel for a while, which was always a sign of him trying to work through something.

She had let him be, just let him do his thing, had waited. It was all a waiting game these days. It was hard. Hard watching him deal with everything but not opening up, knowing she had lost the right to be his go-to person for the time being.

They were both sitting on the couch, at opposite ends. She was lazily looking through her favorite apparel's online store, putting a few things in her shopping cart.

Shaun had been very quiet, just sitting, staring into space. He was now folding his hands, unfolding them, rubbing his thumbs together. Something was going on in his head. It wasn't that unusual.

She got more worried when he got up and started pacing. Went up and down behind the dining table on socked feet. The big warning signal was when his hand went into his hair, and Lea knew he was on his way into that downward spiral.

She didn't know if he'd let her intercept, how he'd react, but she got up and carefully edged closer.

"Shaun?" she cautiously said.

He kept pacing, ignored her. She drew closer, pushed a little into his space. "Hey. Shaun. You're getting worked up about something. Can you talk about it?"

There was that hum—the one that said *'no, leave me alone'*. She wasn't ready to do that.

She went ahead and stood in his path, forcing him to stop pacing.

His forehead was slightly sweaty, his hair tousled, there were so many strong emotions in his eyes that she didn't know which one was the predominant one. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, as if he had things to say that wouldn't come out.

"Shaun, please talk to me. These things usually get better when you let them out. You know that."

He folded his hands, moved his fingers rhythmically, his eyes roaming around, not settling on any one thing. He let out another discordant hum.

She reached out her hands, and he shrank back ever so slightly. She immediately withdrew them. "I'm sorry, Shaun. I just want to help you. Please let me help you. What is going on inside your head?"

"It's all wrong," he eventually eked out.

"What do you mean? What is all wrong?"

"Everything."

"You mean with the hospital, with you getting suspended?"

"N-no. With me."

"With you? I don't understand."

"I am *wrong*." His hand went into his hair again.

"Is this about your ASD? Do you think you did something wrong?"

"Yes. I do everything wrong." His voice was agitated, full of self-loathing. "I messed things up and now I'm not allowed to work anymore. I want to forgive you, but I can't. Dr. Glassman got sick of me and wants to be around different people—people who aren't me. You will leave, too, because I'm not normal, and I make everything difficult, and I can't— I can't…"

He was starting to breathe heavily, rapidly, and Lea stepped in. "Shaun, none of that is true. That's all in your head, that's your inner demons speaking, blowing things out of proportion."

"No," he disputed. "I get like this, and I can't control it, I can't control *me*."

He had tears in his eyes now, and she felt utterly helpless again – like that day in the pharmacy, except there was no Glassman here to help today, no one he felt comfortable to lean on. She tried to think, came up empty. He was dangerously close to another meltdown, and she so desperately wanted to keep that from happening.

She tried to keep her voice gentle. "Shaun, that is not true. We know you have no control over these things. It is *not* your fault."

"But it *is*," he insisted, repeating, "it is, it is my fault."

She course-corrected. Maybe gentleness and understanding wouldn't cut it. She raised her voice, made it sharper, more vehement. "Okay, Shaun? Listen to me!"

His hand was in his hair again. “It’s my fault.”

“Shaun!” she shouted.

It stopped him dead in his tracks, sudden panic in his eyes.

She immediately regretted having raised her voice, but at least she had his attention. She pointed a finger at him. “You need to listen to me. It is *not* your fault. And whatever voice in your head is repeating that over and over, it is *wrong*. That is what you are telling yourself, what you think everyone is seeing, but we’re not. That’s not what we’re seeing, okay?

“Do you want to know what I’m seeing? I’m seeing a brilliant surgeon who made a mistake. One mistake. We all do. You know I did.

“I’m seeing an amazing man who is doing his absolute best to keep it together despite all odds. I’m seeing an extremely smart person who is struggling with a lot of epic shit that is being hurled at him that, honestly, would throw anyone out of whack.

“I’m seeing someone who is incredibly strong, who, despite growing up being abused and rejected, has grown into a sweet and caring and loving man, and that in itself is a huge feat and shows just how fierce and resilient you are.

“And all of that crap in your head, punching its way through your defenses right now, that’s just what it is. It’s crap. It’s all that garbage that your parents tried to hammer into you.

“Yes, things are pretty shitty right now. But you’ve dealt with shitty things before. They get better. You have people who love you, who are rooting for you. Maybe things between us aren’t great right now, but we’ll work on those, too. I’m not going anywhere, Shaun. Neither is Glassman, not if I can help it. He’s still here, isn’t he?”

She stopped there, met his eyes, held and relished the second-long eye contact he gave her. His breathing was less labored, the panic and loathing had given way to something less immediately threatening.

She waited, watched what he would do. He just stood and breathed, rubbing his thumbs over his balled up fists in front of his chest. She wanted very much to cup them with her own hands and get him to relax, but she knew he wouldn’t let her.

“Hey,” she prompted in a gentle voice. It made him meet her eyes again. “It’s okay. Breathe. Slowly.”

He drew in a shaky breath, let it out through pursed lips. They did it together three more times until she could finally see his muscles, his features relaxing somewhat. She felt relief wash over her. Another disaster narrowly averted.

When she thought about it, it certainly explained his behavior in the last few days, his caginess, his reticence. “Do you think we can sit down for a moment?” she asked carefully.

He walked back over the couch, and they found themselves in the same spot where this had started. She drew up her legs and crossed them, turned to fully face him. “We’ve never talked about this, but I’ve been looking into this a little. This all started with your breakdown in the

pharmacy, didn't it? When that happens, it makes you feel really vulnerable and weak, doesn't it? Like maybe you feel kinda off-balance for a while?"

She could see his forehead drawing into a frown. She'd hit a nerve, she hoped he wouldn't immediately shut down.

"Yes," he said quietly.

"That's what you've been struggling with these past few days, ever since that happened?"

"Yes," he said again.

She nodded. "Shaun, I understand that. And that's an incredibly reasonable reaction to have, even if it's not rational. You were doing really well for a very long time before the whole Ethicure thing started, and maybe that's why it hits extra hard."

"Yes," he said again.

"Can we agree on this, though? That this isn't your fault? That beyond maybe when you spoke to Alma, you did nothing wrong?"

That one didn't elicit immediate endorsement. Haltingly, he said, "I'm not… normal."

"No, you aren't. But that isn't your fault, either. And not being normal doesn't mean you're defective. It just means you're different. Different isn't always bad."

"It makes it more difficult. For me. For you…"

"Yeah, sometimes it does. But there are rewards, too. You've taught me so much. You've made me a better person. You're making us all better people, Shaun. Every single one of us who have met you, who have worked with you.

"I mean, look at Glassman. Don't tell him I've said this, but he'd be a bitter old grouch with a resentful streak if it wasn't for you. He's still a little bit of that, but he has a lot of love for you. You two need to work out the whole Montana thing, but I don't think that had so much to do with you than it did with his divorce. I hope you two can talk about that, because I kinda think you need to."

He looked at the coffee table, studied it intently for a long moment. "Do… you think he is still moving to Montana?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. You have to ask him that. But I'd like to think not for a while, hopefully. Not until all the stuff at the hospital has been squared away. Maybe not at all, by the time it's all done and dusted."

"I don't want him to move to Montana."

She drew in a heavy breath. "Oh, Shaunie," she sighed. "What are we gonna do with you?"

He slowly turned his head to look at her. She elaborated, "You've been so locked in your head, with all these toxic thoughts swirling around in there. Glassman said getting out of the hospital for a while might be good for you, but if it means you're here on your own all day, with all of this

festering in your head, I'm not sure that that's good for you, either. Is there anything that will keep this from happening?"

She suddenly had a thought. "Yesterday morning, when I wrote you that note, I said something, didn't I? Something that contributed to all this?"

"You and Dr. Glassman… You talk about me. When I'm not there."

Oh. That's what it was. "Yeah, we do. Because we're worried. Does that make you feel, I dunno… patronized?"

He nodded.

"Okay, yeah, I can see that. But that's not what it is, I swear. We want to help you, want to figure out how to do that. And I don't think I want to stop doing that, because you're just… not in a good place right now.

"It doesn't mean I think you're not capable of taking care of your own problems. But sometimes… Sometimes we all need help. Sometimes you need to *accept* help, Shaun. I know that's hard, and I know you don't always wanna do it, to prove that you're strong and independent. But accepting help doesn't have to mean you're not any of these things.

"Speaking of which, I'd really love for you and Glassy to spend some time together. Maybe tomorrow? I think that'd be good for you, for both of you. What do you think?"

"He… doesn't want to—"

"Nope," she immediately interrupted, "None of that *'Dr. Glassman doesn't want me'* bullshit. Didn't we *just* talk about that?"

Shaun looked at her with that hand-in-the-cookie-jar expression, and it almost made her laugh. She got up from the couch, picked up her phone and dialed Glassman's number, then she handed the phone to Shaun.

The hand-in-the-cookie-jar expression turned to deer-in-the-headlights. She could hear Glassman answering the phone. "Lea?"

Shaun put the phone to his ear. "No, it's Shaun."

"Hey, Shaun. Is everything all right?"

"Yes. Lea wants us to spend time together because she thinks it'll be good for me."

"Okay," he said, probably somewhat taken by surprise. "Now?"

"No. Tomorrow. If you have time."

"Yeah, sure. The three of us, or…?"

"No. Just us two."

"Yeah, okay, we can do that. Anything specific you have in mind that you wanna do?"

“Hm. No. No grape treading, please.”

Glassman chuckled. “Yeah, the Zinfandel didn’t work out anyway. How about an impromptu road trip?”

“Okay,” Shaun said. “I don’t like convertibles. The wind makes my ears hurt.”

“Have you ever actually driven in one?”

“Yes. I didn’t like it.”

“You might change your mind when you drive it yourself…”

“You… want to let me drive the convertible?”

“Yeah. If you want to.”

“Hm. No, thank you.”

Glassman chuckled again. “Okay, we’ll take the SUV. Although the Roadster is really a lot more fun.”

Lea had to grin a little. She knew where Glassy was coming from. Shaun stayed quiet, and Glassman added, “I’ll pick you up around… ten? How does that sound?”

“Okay,” Shaun just said. He handed the phone to Lea, who took it.

“Hey, it’s Lea,” she said. “I’ll put you on speaker, Shaun doesn’t like us talking behind his back.”

Shaun suddenly looked very self-conscious, but Lea ignored it. This was about trust, right? She’d heard him loud and clear.

Glassman said, “So this was your idea?”

“Yeah. Please tell me you don’t hate it.”

“No, I don’t hate it. You hear that, Shaun?”

“I do.”

Lea said, “Just so you know, I expect you two to sort out your shit tomorrow. You’re gonna talk about all that sappy emotional crap that men are scared of for some reason. Lea’s wrath will rain down on you if I hear from Shaun that you didn’t, and you know that he doesn’t lie.”

Glassman was just as good at evasion as Shaun, because he said, “If you have any dream destinations for two emotionally stunted grown men in mind, do let me know.”

“I’ll think about it,” she chuckled. “Thank you, Aaron.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll see you tomorrow, Shaun.”

“Okay,” Shaun confirmed again.

“Bye,” Glassman said.

“Bye,” Lea replied before she hung up.

She looked at Shaun. “There, was that so hard?”

He gave her a sheepish look and she smiled. This was a step in the right direction. And maybe, just *maybe*, Shaun would be okay again. And way, way further down the line, she saw hope for their marriage, too.

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04 - Who will I turn to

Aaron drove up to Shaun and Lea's apartment building, and of course Shaun was already waiting outside, his backpack on his shoulders, hands holding the straps.

He got in after Aaron stopped the car. "You're late."

"That's the point of saying '*around* 10'. That means it won't be precisely 10 o'clock, you know? You could have waited inside."

"Where are we going?"

"Salinas. There's a pawn shop down there that I've been meaning to drive out to."

"Why? Do they have something that you can't get in San Jose?"

"I don't know yet. And that's the whole point. Have you ever been to a pawn shop?"

"Hm. No, I don't think so."

"You know what it is, right?"

"Yes, I'm not stupid."

"I never said you were, and I *know* that you're not, because you obviously graduated from med school with flying colors, and poke around in people's body cavities for a living."

"I don't 'poke around'."

"Shaun, it was a figure of speech. You always take things so literally."

"How was I supposed to take that?"

"Anyway, I'd like to drive down there. A friend of mine said they often get interesting stuff, and I thought it would be a fun trip. Unless you have any objections…?"

"I don't have any objections."

"Okay, perfect. Then let's go."

They drove in comfortable silence for a while, the radio playing on low volume—some oldies but goldies radio station. Shaun was watching their surroundings intently, Aaron wondered what was going through his head.

He broke the silence. "So, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine."

"Is that the evasive *'I don't want Dr. Glassman to ask uncomfortable questions'* kind of fine?"

Shaun shrugged. "I'm not sure how to answer that."

“How are things going with Lea?”

“Okay.”

“Just okay? Are you two talking?”

“Yes, we are talking.”

“I don’t mean just general conversation. I mean, are you talking about all that… messy stuff, with the marriage and all of that?”

Shaun shrugged again. “She wants to. I don’t.”

“Don’t you think it would be good to talk about that, though? I know you feel very strongly about trust, but I think it might help if you tried to understand her side of the story, too.”

Shaun turned his head and looked over at him. “Did she tell you?”

“About the review scores? Yeah. That was why she came out to Montana for.”

“So she told you before she told me…?”

“Yeah, I guess. Shaun, that whole thing, I think she regretted it the second she’d done it. And she knew that you would resent her for it. You come to me for advice with things you struggle with, right? I think that’s what Lea was doing, too.”

“Did you help her?”

That was a good question. “I thought I had. In hindsight, probably not so much.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her that she’d have to tell you what she did, that it would work out, and that you’d be a perfect couple in the most imperfect and beautiful marriage. Guess that didn’t quite work out the way I had imagined.”

“You thought I would forgive her?”

He looked over at Shaun for a brief second. “Yeah, I guess I did. Because you’re usually a very forgiving person. And I knew that you loved her. Hopefully, you still do.”

“I loved her. And I trusted her. Now I don’t anymore.”

“You don’t love her anymore?”

Shaun just gave a hum, which usually meant it wasn’t an unconditional no. He added, “I don’t trust her anymore.”

“Okay, that’s understandable. What did she have to say?”

“She said you’re a bitter old grouch with a resentful streak, but she told me not to tell you that.”

Aaron chuckled. “Then let’s pretend you didn’t tell me that.”

“Are the two of you very close now?”

Where was that coming from? He thought for a moment, then realized Shaun had probably seen them hugging the other night. “Very close is probably pushing it, but, yeah, I guess we’ve gotten a bit closer. Does that make you uncomfortable?”

“Only when I know that you’re talking about me.”

“Okay, that’s a fair point.”

“Lea said you’re worried.”

“Yeah, we are. You haven’t been doing all that well lately. You’re seeing that too, right?”

He shifted nervously in his seat. “It is not my fault.”

“No, of course it’s not your fault. Did anyone say it was?”

“No.”

“Did you think anyone thought it was your fault?”

“Hm. I don’t know. I don’t like when these things happen, when people see them happen.”

“No one likes it, Shaun. And I don’t think anyone thinks it’s your fault. Your friends, your colleagues, they all know that’s what comes with your ASD.”

Shaun let out a short hum, and they let the conversation ebb off, keeping to drive in silence for a while longer.

It was several minutes until Shaun asked, “How is Alma Garcia?”

“Shaun, I think you shouldn’t concern yourself with her anymore. That’s what got you in trouble in the first place, remember?”

“How is Alma Garcia?” he asked again, changing his inflection slightly, making it more insistent.

Aaron sighed. “As expected. There were no complications from the surgery that I recall. I didn’t follow her progress that closely. Dr. Andrews took over the case.”

“Has her boyfriend arrived yet?”

“Her boyfriend? What does he have to do with this?”

“She said he was on a research trip off the coast of Alaska and that she felt that he was letting her down by going away when she was pregnant with their child.”

“Heh, that’s oddly specific. Do you always talk about personal details like that with your patients?”

“Hm. No. Not always.”

“Shaun, I get that you’re invested, but you really shouldn’t be involved with that case anymore. It’s better just to let it go. Things will run their course, and it’ll blow over, one way or another. Getting too personally invested isn’t always good, especially this case, this situation.”

“What did Salen tell Alma?”

“What do you mean?”

“When… I spoke to her, she said I gave her baby the wrong medication, that I killed her. Did Salen tell her that?”

Aaron released a disdainful breath through his nose. “Yeah, she did. The narrative that she’s spinning is that the wrong medication was erroneously dispensed and the surgery team didn’t check before administering it. Which, I guess, technically is not wrong. I don’t know if she’ll get away with it. It’s a pretty big stretch.”

“I did check that it was the right medication. I always do.”

“You didn’t check the expiration date…”

“It’s the pharmacy’s responsibility to ensure they are not dispensing expired medication.”

“Yes, it is. Look, Shaun, we can probably debate whether you should have checked the expiration date or not. I couldn’t in all honesty tell you that I do that every single time I administer something. Because you’re right, we need to trust the pharmacy that they are doing their job.”

“It was Salen’s fault. She made resourcing cuts. The pharmacy wasn’t doing what they were supposed to do, and that is what killed Alma’s baby.”

“That’s one scenario, yes, but I think you and me, we both know that the official story will sound a lot different.”

“But that is what happened.”

“Shaun, we’ll need to talk about that, and maybe now is not the right time, but Alma has already hired a lawyer and they have requested medical records from the hospital to investigate the case. These things usually take several weeks, and if a lawsuit ends up getting filed, most of them end in an out-of-court settlement anyway. It’s in everyone’s interest, including your own, that we approach this from a unified front. That unified front may look different from your own perspective, and it’s important that you understand that, okay?”

“So… you want me to lie?”

“I don’t know. I would hope not, but it may require omitting certain things.”

“Salen suspended me because she was afraid I would say things I was not supposed to say.”

“That’s a big part of it, yes.”

“How? How do people not tell the truth?”

“I don’t know, Shaun. I’m not sure there’s a scientific or rational explanation for it. We just… do.”

Shaun let out a deflated breath. “This… This is my ASD. It makes me incapable of lying, it makes me not behave like people expect, like people want me to. It makes me…” he looked for the word for a moment, “defective.”

Aaron shook his head. No. No, they were not having this conversation while he was driving. He looked ahead, decided that the road shoulder would have to do. He braked and steered the car onto it where it came to a halt.

He shifted in his seat so that he was facing Shaun as best as he could. “Shaun, look at me.” He waited, and it took a few seconds for Shaun to actually do it. The moment their eyes met, he said, “You are *not defective*. Please never say that again.”

“You said that the last time, too,” Shaun said, a clear accusation but also disillusion swinging in his voice.

“The last time? What do you mean?”

“You said you could never get sick of me. But you did.”

“What?”

Shaun now had tears in his eyes, was looking away again. “You did and you left.”

Aaron closed his eyes. Shaun’s abandonment issues were resurfacing with a vengeance. Again. “No, Shaun, I did *not* leave because of you. That’s… God, is that what you were thinking this whole time?”

Shaun said nothing, stared ahead blankly, his breaths long and shaky.

Aaron could feel his own brow knitting with sudden emotion. “Shaun,” he said again. “Hey. Please know that you will always be a part of my life. It doesn’t matter where I am or if we’re living in the same city or thousands of miles apart. We’ve done this before. When you were in med school and I was in San Jose, remember? That worked out, didn’t it?

“Because sometimes this is just what happens in life. Things change, situations change, and sometimes that means people move away. Your life changed too, and I know that’s sometimes hard for you, but look at where you are right now, Shaun. Look at how far you’ve come.

“And, yes, you’re different, and yes, sometimes that’s hard and frustrating, but that’s also what makes me incredibly proud of you. And that… That will never change.”

Shaun’s breaths were evening out a little, and Aaron wished he could do something more, could just figure out how to get through to him. What was going on with Shaun right now, going on beyond the obvious?

He tried to think of all their years together, those times when they’d been much closer, had seen a lot more of each other. Maybe he’d forgotten, maybe he’d relied a little too much for Shaun to lean on Lea, because suddenly it was there with a certain clarity. “Shaun?” he asked.

It prompted Shaun to angle his head just slightly in his direction, and Aaron went on, “I know these past weeks have been hard on you. And last week in particular has been really difficult, but Shaun… I think sometimes you get these ideas in your head, and then… I don’t know, you tell me how that works, but I think they repeat over and over, and then they manifest in some way, and then that’s when you get all worked up, right?”

Something was working in Shaun’s expression, and Aaron knew he was probably on the right track. “Is that what’s been happening these last few days?”

Shaun stayed quiet, and Aaron prompted him again, keeping his voice gentle. “Hey. Please tell me what’s going on, what’s going through your mind right now.”

He opened his mouth and Aaron thought maybe he would say something, but he didn’t for a long moment. Finally, he said what he so often resorted to when his mind pelted him with emotions that he had to sort out before he could put them into words. “I… don’t know how.”

Aaron softened his stance. “That’s okay. We can table this discussion.” There was that thing, that old thing he’d been going back and forth on, that Lea had also mentioned, and he knew he needed to put it out there.

“Shaun, sometimes I think it would help you if you talked to someone about these things who knew more about them, who knows how to help you sort these things out. Not your autism, but all that stuff from your past, what happened with your parents, with Steve. Because a lot of those things, they hold you back, they bubble up and they erupt and they always knock you sideways in the worst ways.

“I really think it could help, but you need to want that. I’m not gonna force that on you, but please think about it, okay? Think about it, and if you do want that, I’ll help you find someone. Okay?”

He could see the resistance, the immediate walls that went up. He knew he had to let it go for now.

Shaun hadn’t said anything in the last several minutes, and Aaron waited. The silence stretched into that uncomfortable space, until Aaron knew he wouldn’t say anything unless prompted. “Shaun, can you look at me for a moment, please?”

When he did, Aaron reiterated, “I want you to understand this. You’re an amazing person, ASD or not, and that’s what I love about you, okay? That won’t ever change, and if something in your head starts telling you these things, I want you to go back to this exact moment and remember that, okay? Like you remember all those other things, too.”

Something in Shaun’s features relaxed, and maybe Aaron was just imagining it, but he thought Shaun’s whole body became a little less rigid and tense. He took that as a sign that he’d punched a hole into that stubborn façade of Shaun’s somewhere, and made it crack deep enough so that he could break it open completely when he was ready.

“Okay,” Aaron said, turning his attention back on the road, putting his hands on the steering wheel. “Let’s get this show back on the road, shall we?”

Shaun said nothing and Aaron started the car and pulled back out into the road.

The rest of the trip to Salinas passed in silence, and Aaron didn't force the issue. He'd probably given Shaun a lot of food for thought.

The pawn shop, unfortunately, turned out to be a bit of a bust. Nothing piqued Aaron's interest much. Maybe they'd just been unlucky and come at the wrong time, maybe he'd had unreasonably high expectations. Shaun had been mildly captivated and looked around, but hadn't expressed interest in purchasing anything.

Aaron ended up buying a model of a 1965 AC Cobra in gold, but in truth he'd found it overpriced and the owner hadn't been willing to down-negotiate as much as Aaron had hoped. Funnily enough, Shaun had been more interested in their price negotiation process than the actual items in the shop.

They were now sitting in a local diner, and to no one's surprise, Shaun had ordered chocolate chip pancakes, while Aaron had opted for a somewhat less carb-heavy option and went with a mushroom omelet.

Shaun was stuffing another large bite of syrup-dripping pancakes in his mouth, and Aaron had to smile. He ate a piece of his omelet, chewed on it before he looked at Shaun.

"So…"

Shaun briefly met his eyes, then echoed, "So…?"

"That sappy emotional crap…?"

"I… don't like it."

"Yeah, neither do I, but I actually think Lea has a point. All that stuff that came bubbling up in the car earlier, we should talk some more about that."

Shaun hummed unhappily. Aaron knew that hum all too well. He harrumphed. "All that stuff with Lea, all the other things at the hospital, you've been really stressed out, and I don't think it helped that I wasn't there, did it?"

Shaun stopped chewing, looked up at him. "Are you still moving to Montana?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Because of me?"

"Yeah. Maybe. A little bit."

He looked at Shaun, read the unhappiness there, but also the relief.

"Why did you want to move to Montana before?"

"Because I wasn't happy. And I know I said it before, but I'll say it again. It didn't have anything to do with you. Debbie left because she was unhappy, and then I was unhappy. You were getting married to Lea, it was like everything had fallen in place, and maybe I thought you didn't need me anymore, you know? But you did, didn't you, Shaun?"

He had stopped eating altogether now, was giving Aaron his full attention before he spoke. "You've always been there for me when I needed your advice, and it was… very difficult when I wanted to know something and you weren't there."

Shaun played with the napkin next to his plate. "Lea is my girlfriend, and she helps me, but it's different."

Aaron could feel his eyes tearing up. Shaun was confirming everything he'd seen over the last week, everything he'd blatantly ignored the weeks before—what Ilana had seen immediately and told him point-blank to his face.

"You remember, in the basement— Of course you remember. You remember everything. In the basement, we talked about this, you said I promised I would always be there for you, and then when I wasn't, you thought that was a lie? That I had lied to you?"

"You *did* lie to me. You said something and then did something else."

"Yeah, Shaun… It's not always as black and white as that. Life is a lot of gray areas. Life is actually mostly a gray area. Most people aren't like you, they don't have the perfect recall that you have. Most people don't remember something they may have said ten years ago, or even one month or a week ago.

"It happens all the time that people say something, and then they change their mind. That doesn't mean that they lied. It means they changed, that circumstances change, that you have to adapt. I didn't lie to you. I don't know if you can understand that."

"But you said you'd always be there, and I trusted that. Why? Why weren't you?"

"Because my situation changed. Yours changed, too. I did what I thought was best at the time. It seemed to make sense."

He just thought of something that might help Shaun understand. "You remember when you were told not to speak to Alma? And you confirmed that you wouldn't, right? And then you changed your mind and you *did* speak to her, even though you had said before that you wouldn't. Does that mean that you lied?"

Aaron could see that the gears were turning in Shaun's head, it sometimes took time for him to digest these things. "I didn't lie."

He lifted a finger. "See, but technically, you did."

"S-so… you're saying… I changed my mind, and that's why it's not a lie?"

"Yeah. Is that not what you think? You just said you didn't lie."

"Is that what's in the gray area?"

Aaron nodded. "Yeah. Kinda. Does that make any sense to you?"

Shaun still looked somewhat confused. "I think so, but that's very complicated. How do you know if something's an important lie or a white lie or in the gray area or not a lie at all?"

“I don’t know. Sometimes you don’t. Life is messy like that. And some lies… They’re not all the same, you know? Not all lies are immediately a dealbreaker. Some are more harmless than others, some don’t actually really matter all that much.”

“Are you saying your lie didn’t matter?”

“No. No, I’m not saying that. I know it mattered to *you*. More than I knew. Shaun, if I had known what was really going on, this would have gone a lot differently. And I know you tried to tell me some of these things, but dammit, sometimes you need to use your words for that.

“You are in your head a lot, and I know that’s your thing, but we can’t look in there, we can’t know what’s going on. And maybe sometimes you think that we can, but it doesn’t work like that. Maybe neurotypical people can read certain things you can’t, but we’re not mind readers.”

Shaun cut off another piece of pancake. “Lea said that to me, too.”

“Yeah, and she’s very smart, so you should listen to her.”

“I… try. It doesn’t always work. Sometimes I say the wrong things, or I can’t communicate what I mean.”

“And that’s okay, but it’s important that you try, especially for the really big things.” He looked at Shaun, was hoping for some eye contact. “This… This is good, Shaun. We’re talking to each other, we’re communicating. This is how it works.”

“Were you happy in Montana?”

That was a bit of a sudden and also a loaded question. Aaron put down his fork. “Part of me was, yeah.”

“But you said you don’t want to move there anymore. Why not if you were happy there?”

“Because I realized that it is more important that I’m here in San Jose. And maybe that I can be happy here, too.”

“Would you move to Montana if I wasn’t in San Jose?”

That’s what was really coming down to, wasn’t it? Shaun had a way of poking right at the spots that were the sorest. “You know, maybe… I don’t know. That’s a difficult question to answer, because you *are* here.”

“I don’t want you to stay if it makes you unhappy.”

“Yeah, but Shaun… It doesn’t. Salen makes me unhappy, the changes at the hospital make me unhappy. But you… you don’t make me unhappy. And you can tell Lea that we really dug into the sappy emotional stuff, because you make me happy, Shaun.”

He felt tears prickling at his eyes again. “You make me proud, and you’re annoying as hell sometimes, but you’re the best part of my life right now.”

He felt his mouth twitching, had to stop talking, and he looked up, hoping to see some relief and gratitude in Shaun's features, but even though his expression had softened somewhat, there was still that underlying hardened look in Shaun's eyes.

Aaron drew in a breath and his heart sank again. He knew his leaving had done damage. He knew Lea's actions had done more damage, they'd both ripped the cracks that Ethicure had created wide open.

It would take a while for them to fuse back together, and Shaun would need all the support he could get. With Shaun, it was often just patience, patience, patience. Aaron didn't always have it, but he vowed to do his best to muster every piece of it that he had until Shaun was glued back together.

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05 - Where can I run to, where can I hide

Monday morning, and Shaun's world was still off its hinges. Lea had gone to work, and Shaun was still back home, still benched, still unsure what to do with himself.

He tried distracting himself with medical research, but nothing seemed to hold his interest. Research was more meaningful when he had actual cases to apply it to, actual problems to solve.

He played half a level of that PlayStation game that Lea had told him about that she thought he might like, but that didn't hold his interest either, and playing video games during the day felt wrong somehow.

He knew he was getting restless, and when he started pacing through the apartment, he made an effort to break that cycle. In all his conversations with Lea and Dr. Glassman, they had both said that it wasn't good for him when he got to this stage, and he was getting better at recognizing those early warning signs.

He put on his shoes and jacket and grabbed his backpack from the coat rack. Fresh air helped sometimes. Walking helped. Just going someplace different.

Shaun hadn't had any specific destination in mind when he'd started walking, but he was a man of routine, and of course his feet had taken him to St. Bonaventure.

He knew he wasn't allowed to go in, and he wasn't going to defy orders again. Everyone would be mad, he'd probably be forcefully removed, and Dr. Glassman would be angry again. The security of his job was already on thin ice, and he wasn't stupid. So he found a bench across the plaza and just sat and watched.

People were milling about, going in and out—patients, visitors, hospital staff. He recognized some of them, even from a distance. Scrub Nurse Watson whom he had performed several surgeries with. She had a slight stutter and tended to get stuck on certain consonants. Dr. Sengupta with the soft, lilting Indian accent that Shaun liked to listen to. Julia who worked in the cafeteria and always greeted him by name when he ordered his food.

He wondered how Alma was doing. Was her boyfriend there yet? Was she sad? Angry? Mad at him? Dr. Glassman had mentioned a lawsuit. Would he be implicated in that? The thought scared him a little. What if it was concluded he had made a mistake, and then he'd lose his job again?

Lea was there, too. Everyone was there. He was not. Being a surgeon had become such a huge part of his life. He missed it. He hated not being able to save lives, to help people, to heal people.

His phone vibrated in his pants pocket and he pulled it out. It was an e-mail from Dr. Lim.

> Hi Shaun,
>
> I hope you're holding up. I would like you to consult on the M&M presentation, can you come to the hospital on Wed at 10:30 am? I will send you the draft slides tomorrow, would be great if you could go over them before we meet (has been cleared with Salen).

See you then.

Tapping the back button, his eyes got caught on the e-mail from last week, the one from S. Morrison with the subject line 'Suspension'. She'd sent it after their meeting in Dr. Glassman's office, probably to have a written paper trail of her professional response. Shaun remembered exactly what it said.

Dr. Murphy,

As a consequence of your actions earlier today, you are herewith suspended until further notice.

Kind regards,
Salen Morrison, PhD
CEO Ethicure Group
San Jose, CA

Suddenly, the hospital didn't feel like home anymore. He looked up at the building again, read the Ethicure logo on its façade, knew Salen was in there.

He didn't want to be here anymore. He grabbed his backpack, pushed himself up from the bench and started walking.

He didn't know the district all that well, but he'd studied a map before. He'd walked these streets with Claire and Jared before, the night they went to that bar that was loud and smelly and colorfully lit. A brunette woman had flirted with him that night.

Just another block, and he found the building. It was closed now, but the one next to it wasn't. Shaun didn't even know why, but he suddenly found himself inside, taking in the interior layout. A strange mix of modern and rustic dominated the place. Bottle next to bottle of hard liquor on the shelves that lined the wall, barstools around empty wooden tables near the bar.

Shaun chose to sit at one of tables at the dark brown pleather booths near the window, and it didn't take long for a young woman to come and take his order. His choice wasn't hard. "Tequila, please."

She gave him a look he couldn't quite interpret. Was she judging him for day-drinking? "Any specific one you want?"

"No. Just tequila."

He turned his attention to the street outside. The waitress didn't leave. "Are you having any food?"

"No."

"You will need to order food, otherwise I'm going to have to ask you to sit at the bar."

He looked around. "There is no one here other than me."

She shrugged. "Sorry, that's our policy."

Shaun lazily picked up a meal menu. “Can you come back, please?”

She nodded. “Sure.”

There was nothing on the menu that immediately jumped out at him and he wasn’t hungry. The waitress came back with his shot glass. She stood at the table with her smartphone held up in front of her. “So, what’ll it be?”

“I don’t want to eat anything, thank you.”

He took his glass to get up and grab a seat at the bar, but she smiled at him. “You know what, you’re right, there’s no one here and it’s pretty quiet this time of day. I can probably make an exception.”

He gave her a brief look, remembering something that Dr. Glassman had taught him. “Thank you. I… will tip you extra.”

“That’s much appreciated, but really not necessary.”

“I know.”

She seemed to be unsure whether he was going to say anything else, but when he didn’t, she left.

He carefully sipped at the tequila. He didn’t like it as much as the ones he’d had before. Again, it didn’t matter. He put the glass to his lips and downed it. The split second of revulsion turned into that sweet spot of high-octane alcohol high as it went down, and Shaun relished it as it burned on his tongue and spread through his stomach, waited for the sensation on his taste buds to turn from tangy burn to pleasurable warmth.

Noise outside the window clamored for his attention. A Light Rail train rumbled by, stopping at a stop a bit further down the road. People got in and out, crossed the street, hurried along. They had jobs. Shaun currently had nothing.

He looked over to the bar, signaled with a lifted finger. A few moments later, the waitress was back. He held up his shot glass. “Another one, please.”

She raised her eyebrows and went on her way, came back with a second shot glass a minute or two later.

Shaun didn’t bother sipping at it this time, downing it right away. It burned slightly less than the first one.

Life outside the window went on as Shaun kept watching. A young woman with a blue plastic bag in each hand. He couldn’t tell what was in them. Another young woman pushing a stroller. A middle-aged man in running gear jogging along, wearing headphones, the smartphone strapped to his upper arm. A couple arguing, gesticulating with their hands.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed until the waitress was back. He looked up at her.

“Would you like another one?” she asked.

“I would like two more, please.”

He needed the distraction. He wanted his attention to divert, to reroute. Life always seemed to lose focus when you were drunk, reality seemed to be less important, less tangible.

The third tequila shot was much like the second, except he could now feel it going straight to his head. He followed up directly with the fourth. He put his palms flat on the table to steady himself for a moment as the momentary dizziness washed over him. Hoo boy.

It passed after a few seconds, and he found himself playing with the edge of the laminated cocktail menu with his thumb. It made a snapping sound when he tugged at and released it. His head felt strangely lightweight, his fingers, on the other hand, clumsy. It was an odd sensation.

He looked out the window yet again, but there it was, the lack of focus. People blurred into each other, snippets of sound became disentangled and erratic. He thought he heard someone behind him say something. A fridge door opened, bottles clanked against each other. Snippets of music from the large television screen behind him he'd barely noticed when he entered sounded strangely discordant. A rock song was playing over the speakers in opposite corners of the room.

He closed his eyes and let the sensations wash over him. There were memories there. Him and Lea drinking tequila in a nondescript bar somewhere out in the boondocks. They'd had strawberry shaped string lights above the bar.

"For living happy, because you're a long time dead." That's what Lea had said when they'd toasted with his first shot of tequila ever.

"Oh my God, you have to be the first person in history to actually like their first tequila shot!" She'd worn a brightly colored, striped sweater that he really liked.

He ran through other memories. A night out with colleagues where he'd gotten a light buzz going. There hadn't been karaoke, then. Carly taking him to a restaurant, to a bar, to an amusement park. Lea asking him out on a 'real' date where he'd tried sushi for the first time at a cozy little place out of the way that had been quiet and slow paced. Their date in the park that had been rudely interrupted. The night out with Asher and Jordan and more tequila. They had toasted to Shaun's win with the scrubs and the air dryers.

That's where it had all started, hadn't it? Ethicure and the—

"Hey." The waitress was back.

"Two more," he said before she could ask.

"Not that I wanna discourage you from buying more drinks, but are you sure you should be going at them so quickly?"

"Yes," he simply stated.

Lea was still there, she was always there. Ethicure and Salen were still there. He wanted to forget about them for just a day. One day. Just one day.

"Here you go." The waitress placed the drink on the table in front of him. Where had she suddenly come from?

Shaun didn't even say anything. He took the first full shot glass and the beverage went down smoothly. He didn't even feel the sting of the alcohol anymore. He waited another minute before he drank the next one. Or maybe it wasn't a minute. He stared intently at the seconds hand of his watch, but it kept evading him. Had it gone? Where had it gone?

He touched the glass over the dial with his right finger, but it felt strangely warm. Like skin. Where was his watch? He reached for it with the whole palm of his hand.

He became aware of a pulsating sensation building up in his temples. Something in the back of his mind told him he should probably be drinking some water to ward off a headache. Before he could act on it, the thought had vanished.

Leaning forward to assess his current situation, his body felt somehow both heavy and light at the same time. His bladder was sending unmistakable signals now, but before he could do anything about it, he was suddenly overcome by a wave of… something. Bliss? Euphoria?

The feeling engulfed him, his jaw slackened, the inside of his mouth felt strangely like cotton, and whatever it was he had maybe planned on saying out loud, came out as nothing more than a heavy slur. Was this what it meant to be inebriated?

He sat there for a good few minutes, reveling in his newfound buzz. His posture was slightly off, he could tell. Everything felt wobbly and too bright but he felt that didn't actually mind. He didn't mind anything. That was new. He liked it.

The discomfort from his bladder was still there, making itself known with newfound resolve. It wasn't that surprising, he'd been drinking nonstop since he got here.

No longer able to ignore it, he heaved himself to a standing position and began to test his footing. He wobbled forward, steadying himself with a hand against the table. He looked up and thought he might just be steady enough to journey to the restroom and back.

"You doing okay there?" A sudden voice pulled him from his thoughts. The waitress.

He removed his hand from the table and straightened up to appear slightly more presentable. He laced his fingers together for comfort, but somehow that felt wrong, like his fingers wouldn't find the right way to slot together. He gave up after a moment and let his arms hang by his sides.

"I'm fine." His speech was slow and slurred, which was confusing because it had sounded perfect in his head before he'd actually said it. "Th-thank you," he added for good measure.

She was still there and he wasn't quite sure what to do. Everything was moving too slowly, his body suddenly incapable of catching up to what his brain told it to do.

"Do you need anything?" she asked. Probably because he wasn't moving. His bladder was screaming to the point where it was starting to physically ache. Why wasn't he moving?

"I…" he wobbled back and forth slightly to compensate for the dizziness. "I need… to use the restroom."

Words were out. Success. He looked at her face. It felt weird to look at her face. Faces were confusing on the best of days. He looked down at her shoes instead. Black sneakers. Probably mandated by her boss to match the uniform. He found that he didn't actually care.

“Well, the bathroom is right over there, first door on the left.”

He looked up again, followed her finger with his eyes. Her nail polish was dark blue. He tried to focus on where she was pointing, but her finger was gone again before he could. Where had she pointed again?

He curled and uncurled the toes of both feet inside his shoes and nodded. Nodding was safer than talking right now. Turning away from her, the world tilted slightly off his axis, but he ignored the sensation and stepped one foot in front of the other. Something inside him was surprised by his ability to still walk, considering how off everything felt.

Somehow, he wasn’t sure how, he made his way to the restroom. Everything felt surprisingly light except the cool metal of the door handle. He gripped it for a long moment. Maybe too long, he couldn’t tell anymore.

The relief of emptying his bladder was immediate and he wanted to sigh with pleasure. Maybe he even did.

There was something about the lights in the restroom that was different, and it took him a moment to realize they were brighter than the actual bar. There was something sobering about them.

As he stepped back out into the main room, he braced himself for the change in lighting. It didn’t feel as difficult anymore to get his feet back in working order, and he made his way back to the booth. He slid onto the pleather seat and checked his phone for time.

“You look better.”

He jumped. The waitress was there again. How was she always there? What did she mean by ‘better’? He had been better before. Now he was just bored.

“Two more, please,” he blurted out. His speech wasn’t as slurred as it had been before, was it? He could handle another drink.

“You sure about that? You seemed pretty done before that bathroom break.”

“I am sure.”

“Alright.” She turned towards the bar, calling, “Party for one.”

After those next two shots, Shaun wasn’t quite sure how long he’d been sitting there. The bass line of each changing song in the background drummed through his ears and lulled him into a trance. The lights seemed dimmer now. His posture slackened. He melted onto the surface of the table with his head landing in his arms.

He turned slightly to his side and watched the waitress clean the surface of the bar with a damp washcloth. He didn’t like damp washcloths, but the thought of touching them felt blissfully unrepulsive. Was unrepulsive even a word?

He watched her stuff it in her back pocket when she was done. His eyes felt heavy, everything was blurry. Everything went black.

“Hey, you can’t do that.”

He didn’t even flinch. She was a magician, because she’d just been there by the bar, and now she was here, and he hadn’t even flinched.

“D-do what?” He lifted his head slightly. Why was it so hard to do that?

“You’re dozing off. Which isn’t surprising, considering how much you had. Here,” she handed him the check. “Get out before my boss gets here, he doesn’t like day drunks.”

Shaun let out a hum as he fought way too long with his pants pocket and managed to pull out his wallet. He rummaged through it and was surprised to find some cash in there.

“Is this…” he struggled to straighten up as he pulled the cash out and handed it to the waitress. “Is this enough?”

She counted the bills, stood there, looked at him. Maybe she seemed confused, Shaun couldn’t tell. “That’s way more than enough,” she said.

“You… can keep it.”

Extracting himself from the booth was the next hurdle, but somehow he also managed to do that. The way to the door seemed cumbersome, like the goalpost kept shifting.

The glass of the door felt cool beneath his fingers as he put his palms flat on it to push it open. Maybe he’d pushed a little too hard because suddenly he was outside in the street, not sure how he’d got there. He’d been inside just a split second before. What was this strange teleportation magic?

He sucked in a breath of fresh air, then looked around. Where was he? He’d never been here. Had he been here before?

“Careful,” a voice next to him said. He whirled around. There was no one. Was he imagining things now?

Where was he? He needed to get home. Home. Get home. Was there a bus stop here?

He looked, found nothing. The world was strangely bright, yet blurry. He would need help. He fished in his pants pocket again for the familiar object. It took a while to unlock the phone’s lock screen. Why was everything three hundred times harder?

There was a certain sense of relief when the dial tone filtered through to his ear.

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Aaron turned his attention away from the computer screen when his cellphone rang. The display read ‘Shaun’.

“Hey, Shaun,” he picked up.

“Yes,” he heard the familiar voice at the other end. “It’s Shaun. Shaun Murphy. Dr. Shaun Murphy.”

Aaron frowned. “Shaun? Is everything okay?”

“No. I am lost.”

“Lost? Where are you?”

“I don’t know where I am, which is… lost. I am lost.”

“Okay. Shaun, what is going on?”

“I am lost. I all. Already said that.”

Aaron frowned again. This didn’t sound like Shaun, his voice was strangely slurred. “Shaun, are you drunk?”

“Yes,” he just said. Silence followed.

“Okay.” Aaron tried to think on his feet. “Tell me the last place you remember being at.”

“The… hospital.”

“The hospital? I hope you didn’t get drunk at the hospital.”

“No. I am not at the hospital. I am outside. On the street. Outside. It is outside.”

“Okay, outside, got it. What do you see?”

“The sky. The sun is very bright.”

“Okay, don’t look up. Look around you. What do you see there?”

“The temple.”

“Temple? What temple?” Aaron’s finger went to the bridge of his nose to pinch it above his glasses.

“Six blue awnings,” Shaun went on. “Two battery powered scooters. A blue trash can.”

“Buildings, Shaun, what buildings do you see? Are there any street signs? Landmarks?”

“There are buildings. Many. Of them. Hello?”

“Yes, I’m here.” Then Aaron realized it hadn’t been meant for him. There were other voices. Shaun asking, “Can you tell me what street this is?”

Aaron wanted to facepalm. “Get away from me, you’re drunk,” he heard a faint voice. Ah geez.

“Shaun,” he said assertively. “Shaun, listen to me. Please find a sign with a street name on it, or look at your phone’s GPS. I know you know how to do that.”

“GPS street,” Shaun babbled.

“Street sign, Shaun. Walk until you see a street sign.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t hang up, okay?”

“Okay.” There was a moment’s silence, then, “No stopping any time.”

“Are you reading signs to me?”

“Yess.”

“Find a sign with a street name.”

More silence followed for an almost unbearably long time. He could hear cars in the distance when Shaun finally said, “One way.”

“That’s not a street name.”

“First.”

“First what? First Street?”

“Yes. Clara San— Santa Clara. First Santa Clara.”

“Okay, you’re on First and Santa Clara?”

“Yes. Santa First and Clara.”

“Jesus, Shaun. Okay. Listen to me. This is very important. Stay exactly where you are, okay? Do not move until I come and pick you up. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I am not deaf.”

“Then repeat to me what I just said.”

“Do not move until I come and pick you up, do you understand?”

“Okay, good. I’ll be there in ten minutes. Do not move.”

“You already said that.”

“Shaun, I will hang up now, okay?”

“Yes. I will not move. I will stay right here. Until you come and pick up. Me up. Pick me up.”

“Okay, Shaun, that’s good.” Aaron was trying to put on his jacket with one arm. “I will be there as quickly as I can.”

He hung up and slipped the phone in his pocket, then dug for his car keys, hurrying to the parking garage.

It was a short drive, not far from the hospital, but it felt endless to Aaron. He slowed down, horns already honking from behind him. His eyes roamed around, looking for a familiar figure.

There. There he was, standing on the street corner between a streetlamp and a trash can. He switched on the hazard lights and stopped the car as closely as he could, lowering the passenger side window. He leaned over and called out, “Shaun, get in.”

To his relief, Shaun started moving, his gait strangely wobbly and off-kilter. He fumbled with the door handle a little too long until the door opened and he awkwardly clambered into the car. “Hello, Dr. Glassman.”

“Shaun, geez, I— Put your seatbelt on.”

“Okay.”

Even that took an inordinate amount of time for him to do, and in the end Aaron had to help him find the buckle.

Aaron tried to think, not sure where even to take a stupor-drunk Shaun. This was very new. He didn’t think he’d ever seen Shaun even halfway tipsy. Maybe it would be better to take him to his house.

As if Shaun could read his mind, he asked, “Where are we going?”

“My house.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re drunk out of your mind. Shaun, it’s the middle of the day, why would you get drunk in the middle of the day? Why would you get drunk, period?”

“Because,” he just said. Aaron waited, but that was all Shaun volunteered. Maybe it wasn’t the time to push the issue.

“What did you have to drink?”

“Tequila, stat.”

“Do you remember how many?”

“Hm. I think… sss.” He got stuck on the hiss of the S. “Seven. Or eight.”

Seven or eight shots? Aaron wondered in what timespan. With Shaun’s family history, Shaun never drank this heavily—that Aaron knew. He must have had them in rapid succession to get to this stage.

Silence ensued for a while, and just when Aaron thought Shaun was getting into his mind palace headspace, he said, “I really like this. This. I want this. Can I always have this?”

“This what?”

“It’s bright, and I like it.”

“The sun?” Aaron figured it couldn’t hurt keeping Shaun engaged in conversation.

“No. Everything. It’s really bright, but it’s not… It’s not bothering me. I like that very much.”

Aaron frowned again. Was this about Shaun’s sensory issues? The alcohol must be really messing with that.

“Tell me what you’re feeling right now.”

“I don’t feel anything and that feels good.”

Aaron had to chuckle. “Is this like when we got high together? Do you remember that?”

“Yes, I remember that. We played golf. I smashed your grandmother’s ashes. No. I smashed the vase. She was everywhere. She was very soft.”

“You’d describe her very differently if you knew her.”

“Did you know your grandmother?”

He had to chuckle again. “Yes, of course I knew her. I was in my 30’s when she died.”

“I never met my grandparents.”

“I know, Shaun. I’ve known you for a long time, remember?”

“Dr. Glassman?”

“Yes, Shaun?”

“Can you make it like this forever?”

Aaron frowned. “What do you mean? You’re not making much sense right now.”

“I don’t care. I want this forever.”

“You don’t care but you want something forever? What is it that you want?”

“That I don’t care. It feels good. I can think about everything, and I don’t care. I don’t. Care. I want that. Forever.”

“Yeah, that’s the alcohol speaking. And trust me, you’ll feel very differently about this tomorrow.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Of course you don’t.”

Aaron pulled into his driveway, and stopped the car. He wasn’t particularly looking forward to getting Shaun into the house. He’d never had to handle a drunk Shaun before. He wasn’t sure how pliable he would be.

“Uh oh,” Shaun suddenly said.

Before Aaron could ask, Shaun had opened the passenger side door, leaned over and puked up his stomach contents.

“Geez, Shaun, you couldn’t have waited another two minutes?”

Aaron got out anyway to check if he could offer assistance. It didn’t look pretty. He watched Shaun warily, knowing there wasn’t much he could do. He’d have to hose down the concrete later.

When Shaun straightened up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Aaron cautioned him, “Careful not to step in it, okay?”

“Okay.” Shaun sounded perhaps a little more sober, or maybe it was just in Aaron’s imagination.

With Shaun tottering to his front door, Aaron stepped around the puddle and got Shaun’s backpack out of the car that Shaun had left discarded in the footwell area, then followed him. The latter leaned against the doorframe, holding himself up with one hand. Aaron couldn’t help but admit it was slightly amusing.

He unlocked and opened the door, motioning for Shaun to step inside. “Okay, Tequila Boy. Time to get you situated and into bed.”

“I am not tired.”

“No, I bet you’re not, but you need to sleep this off.”

“I don’t like your bed. The linens are scratchy.”

“Didn’t you just say you didn’t care?”

Shaun hummed, then pointed a finger at Aaron. “I think… you may be right.”

“Okay, come on, Shaun.”

Aaron could see Shaun made no attempts to move, so he went over to him to test the waters. Shaun was sensitive about touch on the best of days, so he didn’t know how he would feel about it in his current state, but if his previous statements had been any indication, touch wasn’t something he’d mind as much right now.

Shaun was trailing him lazily with his eyes, so Aaron thought, screw this, stood right next to him and draped Shaun’s arm over his shoulder, practically heaving him away from his doorway. “Come on. In and up we go.”

The stairs were their next obstacle to tackle, and suddenly Shaun was like a ragdoll in his arm. Aaron looked over, worried, but Shaun still had his eyes open.

“Come on, buddy. You gotta pull your weight. I’m an old man, I can’t carry you.”

“You are very strong,” Shaun said with a sense of awe in his voice.

“Yeah, I wish. Come on, Shaun, walk. One foot in front of the other. You remember how walking works, right?”

“Yes, I remember how walking works. But I think my feet don’t.”

Ah, geez. They took an inordinately long time to get up the one flight of stairs despite Aaron’s constant stream of encouragement, and he would have laughed if it wasn’t so awkward.

Finally planting Shaun on the edge of the guest bed, he told him, “Stay there, I’ll be right back.”

He went to get an old t-shirt and pajama bottoms from his dresser, wondering if Shaun even needed them. Maybe just getting him out of his top layer of clothes would do.

He found Shaun uselessly tugging at his shoelaces when he came back, having pulled at all the wrong ends, drawing the knots even tighter.

“Here, let me do that,” Aaron said. “Take off your shirt.”

He extricated Shaun from his shoes but Shaun was making no attempts at taking his shirt off. “Come on, Shaun, it won’t be very comfortable to sleep in your shirt.”

“I have to pee,” he blurted out.

Aaron vacated Shaun’s space. “Okay. Do you need help?”

“No,” Shaun said quickly, swaying as he got up. Aaron lent a steadying hand but then let Shaun go on wobbly feet.

He took Shaun’s shoes and put them to the side, sighing heavily. Parenting 101, was that what this was? As much as he liked the idea of offering fatherly support, he very much hadn’t imagined they’d ever be doing this exact thing. Certainly not beyond Shaun’s college years.

Aaron’s next alarm bells went off when he heard the sound of running water from the bathroom. He hoped Shaun hadn’t locked the door.

Thankfully, he hadn’t. The picture that presented itself was as bizarre as it was alarming. Shaun had climbed into the bathtub, clothes and all, and had turned on the faucet full force.

Aaron went over to him. “Shaun, what are you doing?”

“I’m thirsty.”

Aaron turned off the faucet despite Shaun’s loud protests. “I’ll get you a glass of water, but you need to get out of the bathtub. Come on, let’s go to bed.”

“No,” Shaun stubbornly declined, sliding deeper into the tub. A good portion of his clothes were wet, and Aaron felt the despair creeping in.

“Shaun, you can’t stay in the bathtub, you’re all wet and it’ll be cold and uncomfortable.”

“No, I like it here.”

“I very much doubt that.”

“My head feels funny.”

“Yeah, that’s also the alcohol. Come on, let’s get you to bed, you can sleep there, it’ll be much softer and warmer.”

“I like the bathtub.”

“Yeah, so do I, but not to sleep in.”

“It feels good.”

Aaron sighed. This didn’t bode well. “Shaun, please. You’ll get sick if I let you sleep in the cold bathtub with wet clothes on.”

Shaun shifted his position again so that his cheek touched the porcelain. “This feels very good.” He closed his eyes. “I want to sleep.”

“I want you to sleep, too. But not here. There’s a perfectly comfortable bed in the guest room with your name on it. Come on, what do you say?”

Shaun was now progressing to just hums and no more words, and Aaron knew he was fighting a losing battle. For a moment he considered trying to heave Shaun out of the bathtub, but even lanky Shaun would be too much of a challenge, especially since he was now most definitely in ragdoll mode.

With Shaun’s eyes now closed, Aaron made a last ditch attempt. He poked Shaun’s shoulder. “Come on, wake up.”

Shaun lazily opened his eyes a fraction, letting out another unhappy hum. Aaron poked him again. “Shaun.”

Shaun just mumbled a low no, closing his eyes again. Aaron knew it was time to admit defeat. He did the only thing he could, which was get a blanket and carefully drape it over Shaun, who seemed to have fully drifted off to sleep in the two minutes Aaron had been away.

He crouched next to the bathtub for a moment, and couldn’t help but give in to a moment of self-indulgence when he smoothed away an errant lock on Shaun’s forehead. Shaun let out another low hum and shifted a few inches further into the tub.

Aaron shook his head, muttering, “Oh Shaun, you stupid, stupid boy.”

Knowing there was nothing more he could do, he left Shaun to his own devices. It was only early afternoon, but it was time to alert Lea, let her know what was going on. He dialed her number, she answered on the third ring.

“Hey,” she greeted him.

“Hi, Lea. Just a quick heads up that Shaun is with me.”

“Shaun? Why? Did something happen?”

“He somehow got himself drunk out of his mind, and then he called me to pick him up. I took him to my house.”

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah. I mean, as okay as he can be, considering he decided that the bathtub was the best place to sleep it off and I wasn’t able to coax him out of it despite my best efforts.”

Lea actually laughed at the other end. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, very. Hold on, I’ll send proof.”

Aaron couldn’t resist and went back up to the bathroom to snap a photo with his phone. He sent it to Lea. She laughed again when she opened it.

“Oh my God, this is totally priceless. He’ll never live this one down.”

“He will hate me for it.”

Lea giggled again. “Totally worth it.” Then she sobered. “Do you want me to come?”

“No, it’s fine, I’ll stay with him. There’ll likely be some rude awakening later.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t really hold his liquor. We took tequila shots that one time and he ended up puking them back up for a while.”

“Recently?”

“No, this was way back. You know, when we went on that road trip? The one I told you about.”

“Huh. Well, at least I know what I have to look forward to. Speaking of which, I better go and clean up the driveway. That was strike one.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay. He’ll be very much regretting it tomorrow.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come over for backup? He gets really cranky when he’s sick. Well, you know that better than me.”

“Yeah, I do. I’ll happily hand over cranky, hungover Shaun to you when he’s over the worst of it, but until then, I think he’s in good hands.”

“Oh, I’m sure he is. Thanks, Aaron.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll call you later.”

“Okay, thanks. Bye.”

He hung up with a, “Bye.”

Aaron went to take care of cleaning the driveway, then checked up on Shaun, making sure he wasn’t choking on his own vomit. Aaron knew he’d been close to actual alcohol poisoning stage, and that could really mess with people’s body functions.

Shaun was still out cold, breathing regularly, still looking absolutely ridiculous, curled up in a bathtub under a blanket.

Downstairs, he sat down in his favorite armchair to watch a documentary on someone traveling North Korea, checking on Shaun at regular intervals. It was maybe an hour after Aaron last checked that he heard noises from upstairs. Yep, that sounded like retching. He wasn't surprised, but went to take a look.

Shaun had graduated from bathtub slumber to toilet bowl hugging. Aaron hovered in the doorframe until Shaun seemed to be done with this round. "I see sleeping beauty has awakened," he commented dryly.

Shaun leaned back onto his heels, letting out an exhausted and unhappy moan. "I feel sick," he muttered.

"Which is not surprising, considering the amount of alcohol you consumed not three hours ago."

Aaron went over to the bathtub and took the blanket, folded it up into a smaller rectangle.

Still firmly planted in front of the toilet, Shaun inquired, "Why… are my clothes wet?"

"Because your tequila-addled and dehydrated brain figured that it was a smart idea to turn on the faucet after you had decided that the bathtub was your place of choice for a nap."

Shaun just let out a hum, then mumbled, "I feel disgusting."

Aaron edged closer, seeing Shaun shudder from probably another wave of nausea. "Do you want me to stay for a bit?"

"How did I get here?"

"You called me, I picked you up, drove us here. I wanted you to sleep in the bed. You insisted the bathtub was nicer. Wasn't for lack of trying on my part."

"Did I puke in your car?"

"No, but I think it may have been a close shave on that one. You did heave into my driveway, though."

"Sorry," Shaun mumbled.

"Don't worry about it."

Shaun let out an 'ugh' sound, then started retching again, spitting out mostly bile. Aaron briefly considered patting his back but didn't. Instead he went downstairs, got an empty glass from the kitchen and went back up. He also picked out a few clothes that he thought might just halfway fit Shaun so he could get out of his wet ones.

Back in the bathroom, he filled the glass with water and put it on the floor next to Shaun, together with a fresh towel and the clothes. "I'll be downstairs. Holler if you need anything else. Unless you want me to stay."

It took another fifteen minutes for Shaun to emerge, dressed in the ill-fitting track pants and hooded sweater. He looked as absolutely miserable as Aaron thought he must feel. Aaron pointed at the armchair next to him. “Come sit with me.”

Shaun wordlessly complied, and Aaron went ahead and fetched a glass of water and a plastic puke bowl for Shaun, just to be on the safe side. He handed both to him. “Just in case, and you should try to drink some water, alcohol dehydrates you.”

Shaun took the items without question. He listlessly took a tiny sip of the water.

Aaron studied him for a long moment. “Should I ask why?”

Shaun looked stoically ahead. “No.”

“Shaun, this really doesn’t seem like you. You never drink, and you went seriously overboard here. What brought this on?”

In addition to totally miserable, Shaun now looked completely uncomfortable. He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“I think you do, you just don’t want to say it out loud.”

“It… doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does.”

“I wanted to forget.”

“Yeah, but ingesting excessive amounts of alcohol really isn’t the way to go there, pal.”

“You did it. At my engagement party.”

Ah geez. Shaun’s long-term memory was definitely still intact. “Not like this. I didn’t end up sleeping in a bathtub, puking my guts out.”

“Is that why my father drank? To forget?”

It was a good question. And not one with any easy answers. “I don’t know. Maybe. But long time alcohol addiction is different from this. Your father was not a good man. Maybe the alcohol played its part in that, but you know that it wasn’t just that.

“Drowning your sorrow in alcohol can be fun for a night, but you know that’s not a solution. And you’ll feel the aftereffects of it hit hard tomorrow, which I hope will be a good enough deterrent to try this again any time soon.”

“Did I get angry at you?”

“What? No, Shaun.” Aaron looked at Shaun, tried to gauge his state of mind. He had a frown hanging over the bridge of his nose, a hardened worry in his eyes. “No, you didn’t get angry. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you angry in my life. You were babbly and hilarious and loopy.”

“What did I say?”

“You know, I think you were really enjoying the part where your sensory issues became a lot less…” he waved his hand, “I dunno, sensory…? Do you remember any of that?”

He seemed to think hard for a moment. “Yes, I think so. It felt good.”

“Yeah, you kept repeating that.” Aaron smiled. “You were also reading street signs to me.”

“Street signs?”

“I think you got a little disoriented. We were trying to figure out where you were so I could pick you up.”

“I was at a cocktail bar.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me. You were downtown. Lots of places there. I hope at least the tequila was good.”

“It was okay.”

Aaron looked at Shaun again, a new concern nagging at the pit of his stomach. “Shaun, I know alcohol can take the edge off. And if it makes you feel a little less overwhelmed by all the sensory input, if it makes you think you’re more relaxed, that can be a slippery slope. Please tell me I don’t need to worry.”

He never got an answer, because Shaun was scrunching up his face, his body tensed up, then he reached for the puke bowl and dry-heaved into it. Aaron let out a long-suffering sigh. He gave Shaun some space, went into the kitchen to get himself a soda from the fridge, picked up a box of Kleenex on the way back to the living room.

He wordlessly placed it on the table next to Shaun. “This sucks, huh?”

The only response he got was a disdainful look, so he sat down quietly in his armchair, opened the can with a hiss, and took a sip. It felt like old times, and Aaron realized how much he’d missed spending time with Shaun – preferably a Shaun who wasn’t actually sick or otherwise incapacitated.

They sat in silence, watching a rerun of an old *Star Trek* episode, and Shaun’s stomach seemed to settle after one more episode of dry-heaving. Shaun eventually asked, “Can I go home?”

Aaron nodded. “Sure, I’ll drive you.”

He sent off a quick text to Lea before they left that just said, “Pukey Shaun incoming, be prepared.”

He told Shaun to leave the wet clothes, but he protested with, “I don’t like your laundry detergent.” Of course. He put the clothes in a plastic bag, checking with him before they left, “You wanna take the puke bowl?”

Shaun shook his head. Aaron handed him a water bottle. “Try to drink something. You’re still dehydrated.”

Shaun accepted it, and Aaron hoped he’d be fine. The drive wasn’t very far.

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Lea had to smile at the text from Glassman when she opened it. She wasn't exactly looking forward to pukey Shaun, but there was a certain sense of relief that he had apparently chosen to go home rather than stay the night at Glassman's house.

There was a knock on the apartment door ten minutes later, and Lea opened it to reveal Glassman with a sad and miserable looking Shaun in tow. He was wearing what she could only guess were Glassman's clothes, wondering what had happened to his own. Had he barfed on them?

Glassy had an almost apologetic expression on his face. Shaun wordlessly trudged into the apartment and made a beeline for the bedroom. Glassman also entered, putting the plastic bag on the kitchen island.

Lea took a brief look. "Did he puke on these?"

"No, they're just wet."

"Wet?"

"Yeah. The bathtub. Not sure if he was actually trying to drink from the faucet or if it was about the cooling sensation." He shrugged. "Probably made sense to him in the moment."

"He actually slept in the bathtub?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Maybe two or three hours before, you know," he waved his hand around, "the puking started."

"Aw geez, I'm really sorry you had to deal with that."

"Not his most glorious moment. He'll be feeling it tomorrow."

"Oh yeah, he most definitely will."

"Well, best of luck with that. Try to get him to drink something. He's been dry-heaving for the last hour or two."

"Don't worry, got that covered." She pointed to the fridge. "I picked up some Gatorade on the way home. The one he actually likes."

"See, you're a smart woman."

"Did he say anything about why? Did something trigger this?"

Glassman shrugged again. "Not in so many words. Something about wanting to forget. Has he done this before?"

"Got drunk off his ass so hard he blacked out? No."

"Well, at least that's something."

Lea sighed. “The hits just keep coming, huh?”

“Yeah, I mean, we know he’s going through something right now. It’ll get easier, once all that stuff at the hospital blows over.”

“It’s been a huge cloud hanging over him for so long. It’s really time that was over.”

Shaun appeared in the doorway, now dressed in his pajamas. “You are talking about me again.”

Lea turned around. “Yes, we are, but you also just went ahead and got yourself totally hammered for no discernible reason, so I hope you understand that warrants some conversation.”

“I don’t like it,” he reiterated what he’d told her before, then went into the bathroom.

Lea looked at Glassman, who gave her a shrug before he said, “Maybe wait with the interrogation until tomorrow…?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Feels like I’m telling you this every other day now, but thank you.”

“Sure. Maybe I’ll check in tomorrow.”

“That’s appreciated, but probably not necessary.”

“Yeah, let’s see how it goes. I’ll be on my way.”

“All right.” She opened the door and let him out, then waited for Shaun to reemerge from the bathroom. There wasn’t even a question that he’d be taking the bed tonight.

She got one of the bottles of blue Gatorade out of the fridge, got a glass from the overhead cabinet, then put both on the nightstand on Shaun’s side. Shaun came in just at that moment, she stepped away to let him get into the bed.

Lea pointed at the Gatorade. “Glacier Freeze right here, please try to drink something, okay? Do you think you can try some right now? I think it’ll be good, help with the hangover.”

He let out an unhappy hum, and she didn’t want to press the issue, though she did go ahead and pour some into the glass to eliminate that hurdle. Whatever he was going to do, the hangover would be brutal.

“Okay, guess it’s time for you to sleep this off. Though, hold on a moment.”

She went into the bathroom and got the bottle of ibuprofen out of the cabinet, then went into the kitchen and got a garbage bag out of the drawer. She picked up the waste basket from over by the desk and took it into the bedroom.

Shaun was already curled up in bed, only his head poking out from under the covers. He looked very small and innocent, and she had to resist the urge to just sit down on the bed and place a comforting hand on his side.

“Please try to drink as much as you can. You’ll need the ibuprofen tomorrow.”

He had his eyes closed now, so Lea took the garbage bag and put it in the waste basket, then placed it next to the nightstand. “Okay, I think you’re all set. Get some rest.”

She closed the door behind her, and let out a bone-weary sigh. Shaun was such a wildcard these days. It was almost getting to the point where she’d wake up with the dreaded question of what he’d do today.

She knew she didn’t want to treat him like a child, like a person who constantly had to be watched over and checked up on. He was a grown man, he couldn’t want that either, but he certainly wasn’t making it easy right now.

Figuring Shaun was probably out cold and the night was still young, she went back to the Netflix show she’d started on, which kept her busy for the rest of the night before she went to bed herself on the mattress in the spare room.

Her night ended prematurely from hearing Shaun snoring loudly through the wall. Lea blearily opened her eyes, tried to push away the initial annoyance at Shaun for robbing her of another perfectly good 35 minutes of sleep before her alarm would have gone off.

She pondered waking him. He’d certainly deserve it, because going out and getting plastered beyond all rationality had been monumentally stupid, not to mention that it just wasn’t like him.

Well, there had been that incident a number of years ago, after Han had fired him, when apparently he’d been planning to day-drink rather than go on a job interview, and then got himself in a wholly different kind of trouble. Trouble that had him end up in the hospital with a ruptured spleen and a broken rib that took a while to fully heal.

Perhaps she should be glad for small favors, with the only repercussions this time being a massive hangover she’d have to likely bear some of the brunt of.

With a sigh, she got out of bed to get her morning started. It turned out not to be an exceptionally great morning. She herself was somewhat clumsy. One of those mornings where you got up on the wrong foot and as per Murphy’s Law, everything went sideways in one way or another.

The toothpaste was empty and she had to dig around for a new one, she’d dropped the open bottle of body lotion on the floor and it went everywhere, and finally the coffee grounds tumbled from the shelf and spread homogenously across both the kitchen counter and kitchen floor.

“God fucking dammit!”

Out of spite, she kicked the metal can with her foot for good measure, and sent more coffee flying along the floor. So much for a well-deserved cup of morning coffee. Instead she grumbled another volley of swear words and got the vacuum cleaner from the storage closet. Second time she was cleaning up after herself this morning.

She knew Shaun would probably hear it, but it wasn’t like *he* was gonna suffer from lack of sleep, was it?

And sure enough, by the time she’d vacuumed up the last of the brown powder and shut it off, the bedroom door opened and a very disheveled and woeful Shaun appeared. He was squinting his eyes, scrunching up his face unpleasantly. “Can you please stop?”

“I could, if the fucking coffee grounds didn’t have to go fucking everywhere,” she said in frustration through clenched teeth.

His hands went to his ears, and he actually cupped them with his palms. “My head really hurts.”

She wasn’t very impressed, nor was she particularly empathetic to his plight. “Yeah, well, I’m sorry to say, but you put this on yourself, my friend. Cause this is what usually happens the day after you get plastered off your face.”

“I should not have done that.”

“No, you shouldn’t. And I’m glad your brain has been instilled with that infinite wisdom. I hope you retain it for the next time you might entertain the idea of downing how many tequilas in rapid succession?”

“I think it was eight,” he said ruefully.

“Geez, that would knock a rhinoceros sideways. What were you thinking, Shaun?”

He let out a deflated breath. “I don’t think I was thinking anything.”

“Well, you must have been thinking *some*thing. You don’t normally walk into bars during daytime with the intent to go bottoms-up, assembly line style.”

He slowly walked over to the dining table to pull out a chair and sit down. He looked miserable. Lea softened a little, then went into the bedroom to get the Gatorade and the ibuprofen. She shook out two of them and put them on the table with the glass of the light blue sports drink.

“Drink that, take the painkillers. Your body is super dehydrated right now, and if you want to make it through the day halfway alive, then it’s gonna be fluids, fluids, fluids. Buttered toast might get you started if you get hungry. Mint tea to calm your stomach if you feel adventurous. Don’t believe the greasy food gurus. It’s the fluids that do the trick.”

She was glad to see him take the glass and swallow the two ibuprofen, then follow that up with several gulps of the electrolyte-rich beverage.

She pulled out her own chair, sat down opposite him, giving him a long look. “Look. Today is gonna suck. Cause you’re gonna be sluggish and headachy. Your brain feels like it’s wrapped in cotton wool and everything will take energy you don’t think you have. Take more painkillers if you have to and take it easy. And drink the damn Gatorade. There’s more in the fridge.

“I’d stay home today if I didn’t have a million things that need to be done, and Lim wanted to meet with me in an hour. Please don’t do anything stupid. And call or text Glassman because he saved your dumb ass yesterday. He may have also mopped up your puke, I’m not sure.”

A small smile spread across her face because she just remembered something. She got up and got her phone, bringing up the photo of Shaun that Glassman had sent her. She held the phone out so he could see it. “Oh, and then of course there’s this. You better believe I will use it as leverage if ever a situation calls for it.”

“I was very drunk,” he said defeatedly, as if that wasn’t extremely obvious.

“Yes, you were. But definitely one of your more hilarious stunts, which is actually pretty amusing and will make for a great story you can tell your grandkids one day.”

She relished the sheepish look on his face and had to grin. “You know, you’re kind of adorable when you’re all piteous and woebegone, so I will give you a pass for being a dumb idiot yesterday. I daresay you deserve every bit of the splitting headache that’s hammering away at your skull right now, and I hope it’s a lesson learned.”

She looked at her phone to check the time. “And right now, I gotta get dressed, otherwise I’m gonna be late.”

She gave him a last nod before she got up and went to pick out and change into her attire for the day. Shaun was now in the bathroom, and she gently rapped on the door. “Shaun? Can I come in real quick?”

“No,” she heard his muffled voice from inside. Dammit. She hadn’t done her make-up yet.

“Please? I promise I’ll just grab my stuff and get out.”

There was silence, then the door rolled open. He squeezed past her. “You can go in now.”

She sighed. She hated this, but didn’t have time to dwell on it. Her make-up ended up being a rush job, she hoped it would do.

Shaun was planted on the couch with the Pendleton blanket wrapped around his shoulders. “I’ll see you tonight,” she told him.

He didn’t respond, and she went on her way. Busy day ahead, and it looked like her week would only get busier. She sincerely wished for no more Shaun escapades to have to take care of on top of everything.

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06 - The voids that I can't bear

This felt familiar, Aaron thought as he watched Shaun cut a piece of his pancake to stuff it in his mouth. Old times in the hospital cafeteria, Shaun contentedly chewing away on his favorite breakfast dish.

He knew he had a meeting with Lim to go over the M&M presentation for Alma's case, but Shaun didn't seem overly apprehensive. He was glad about that. Shaun had also been told he could come back to work the next day, the suspension had been lifted, now that Alma was being released later today.

"You must be happy to come back to work tomorrow, huh?"

Shaun gave him a nod. "Yes. Very."

"You feeling okay again after yesterday?"

Shaun's expression turned a bit sour. "Yesterday was *not* good."

Yesterday had been hangover day. Aaron had entertained the idea of checking in on Shaun, but he had insisted on the phone he was fine and he was hydrating enough, and Aaron figured he shouldn't overdo it with the concerned fathering. It was hard to strike a balance sometimes with Shaun, and he hadn't exactly been great at finding the sweet spot of late.

There was movement out of the corner of his eye, someone approaching. He knew that voice. "Aaron."

He looked up at his ex-wife who was holding a muffin and a to-go cup of coffee. "Ilana. You wanna join us?"

Aaron couldn't quite ignore the discontent flitting across Shaun's face that someone was interrupting their 1-on-1 time, but Aaron chose to ignore it.

"Sure," she said, sitting down.

Aaron gestured towards Shaun. "Ilana, meet Shaun." He moved his hand in her direction. "Shaun, this is my ex-wife, Ilana. You haven't met before."

Shaun gave her the briefest of glances. "Hello."

"Hi Shaun. I've heard a lot about you."

Shaun just let out a hum, diverting his attention back to his pancakes. Aaron looked at Ilana, gave her a little shrug and a smile.

"How is Sunil doing?"

"Oh, he's taking it all in stride. I hope he can be released on Friday. Thanks again, you're a literal life saver."

"Who is Sunil?" Shaun interjected.

Ilana turned to him. “He’s my husband. Aaron operated on him, very likely saved his life.”

Shaun looked at Aaron, and there was a definite, ‘Why didn’t you tell me about this?’ accusation in there. “What was his diagnosis?”

Aaron volunteered, “Initially Lewy body dementia, but turned out his symptoms were caused by a squamous cell carcinoma with significant carotid invasion. We managed to fully resect it, no metastases we could find, so his prognosis is very good.”

Ilana lightly touched Aaron’s lower arm, which didn’t go unnoticed by Shaun, and added, “I’m so glad I came here, and I’m so glad you took a chance. I can’t ever thank you enough.”

Shaun’s interest in her now seemed to be piqued. “Did you meet your husband after you divorced Dr. Glassman?”

Ilana looked a little taken aback by the direct question, and Aaron said chidingly, “Shaun, that’s not exactly a first meeting appropriate question.”

Ilana gave him a conciliatory look. “It’s okay, I don’t mind.” She looked at Shaun. “Yes, I did. Many years afterwards.”

“How did you know he was the right person for you to marry?”

She shrugged slightly, taking a sip from her coffee. “He’s a very good person. Kind, loving, very dedicated to his family. We really clicked from the first moment we met, and I love him with all my heart.”

“So Dr. Glassman is not a good person?”

She had to chuckle lightly. “No, I wouldn’t say that.”

Aaron gave her an affectionate look and added, “Shaun, you know what happened with Maddie. That’s a big part of why our marriage didn’t last.”

“Did you ever lie to Dr. Glassman?”

Aaron was now definitely impressed that Shaun’s blunt questions didn’t seem to throw Ilana, but then again, he knew she had the patience of a saint, which was what he’d loved about her, and which also Lea sometimes reminded him of.

She nodded lightly. “Yes, I probably did at one time or another. Can I ask why?”

Shaun let out one of his evasive hums, throwing Aaron a look that said, ‘Help!’ Aaron decided not to interject and let it play out.

“My girlfriend lied to me,” Shaun stated after a moment’s silence. “I want to know if I can trust her again.”

“Well, that’s a bit of a loaded question, considering we only just met, so I’m not sure I can help you with that in any satisfactory way.” She looked over at Aaron, “Have you asked Aaron for his take? I’m sure he knows a lot more of the details.”

Aaron nodded. “I do. It’s complicated. The two of us can talk more about it later if you want, Shaun.”

“No, thank you,” Shaun said. He put the last bite of pancake in his mouth and looked at his watch. “My meeting with Dr. Lim starts in eight minutes. I have to go.” He promptly took his tray and got up.

Ilana looked up at him. “Well, it was nice meeting you, Shaun.”

Shaun was about to go when he stopped, turned back around and said, “It was nice meeting you, too.”

Aaron watched him walk off for a moment, then turned to Ilana. “Shaun in all his quirky glory.”

She smiled. “I like him. And you’re really good with him.”

A sudden wave of unfamiliar emotion washed over Aaron, and he tried to swallow it down quickly. “He can be frustrating as hell, too.”

She cocked her head a little. “Just like you.”

It made him chuckle. “I should be going, too. I’m glad Sunil is recovering well. Let me know if there’s anything else I can do for you.”

She smiled warmly. “You’ve already done enough. You gave me and Sunil a second chance.” She looked at him a long moment with more scrutiny. “Have you decided yet about Montana?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I think you were right. I think I’m still needed here. Shaun’s been… well, let’s just say it’s not been going so well lately. Not just the whole,” he moved his hand in a circle, “relationship thing. He’s a complicated guy.”

“I’m glad he has you.”

He harrumphed, trying to fend off more emotional outbursts, then took his own tray and motioned to get up. “Were you on your way up?”

“I was, yes.”

“Okay, then let me keep you company.”

She gave him another smile, and took her cup and the muffin and got up.

He was relieved that he no longer felt resentment towards her. They’d shared such a huge part of their lives that had eventually been tainted with loss and ugliness until it broke them.

Talking to her again, clearing some of those old obstacles out of the way had been freeing. He lightly touched her shoulder as they walked together, and she turned to him and gave him a kindhearted smile. He relished the familiarity and the warmth.

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“Shaun,” Dr. Lim greeted him as he entered her office. “Glad you could make it.”

“You asked for a meeting and you are my superior.”

“Very well.” She gave him a smile that he couldn’t quite interpret. “Have you been able to review the slide deck?”

“Yes.”

She got up from behind her desk, taking her laptop with her, gesturing at the small table near the bookshelves. “Let’s take a look together.”

They went through the slides for the M&M, discussed some of the medical details, made some changes as they went along. When they were done, Dr. Lim saved the file and leaned back in her chair, her eyes lingering on him. He felt suddenly uncomfortable and tried hard not to squirm.

“How are you doing?” she finally asked.

“I’m fine.” What else was he supposed to say?

“As you know, we usually give our residents the chance to do the M&M presentations for their patient cases, but I think in this particular case it might be better if I take that on. Not because I don’t trust you or I don’t think you’re capable, but because this is a high profile case and there’s now a lawsuit hanging over the hospital. Would that be a problem for you?”

He had to think about that for a long moment, and Lim gave him the space to formulate his answer. His mind formed a counterquestion. “Would… you be doing the same if this was a resident other than me?”

She looked at him and he briefly met her eyes. Her expression was sincere, austere, professional. “I know that’s probably not what you want to hear, but I don’t know, Shaun. It would depend on the situation and the person.

“But I hope you know that we value you as a colleague and as an incredibly gifted surgeon. You’re still one of our best surgical residents.”

She was right, it wasn’t what he’d wanted to hear, but also not the worst answer he could have received. “It will not be a problem for me,” he said. “Would you like me to attend the M&M?”

“Oh yes, absolutely. I will discourage people from questioning decisions made, so I don’t expect for it to become a tribunal, but I also want to make sure you’re comfortable being there.”

“I will attend the M&M,” he confirmed.

She gave him a nod. “Good. I hear you’re back on shift tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“How are you dealing with… everything?”

He frowned. How much did Dr. Lim know?

She must have seen his discomfort because she added, “Look, you’re probably aware that rumors have been going around. I know what happened in the pharmacy, but please rest assured that I will be treating that as confidential. But you know how it is, word tends to get out.

“We all know you’ve been having a difficult time with all the Ethicure changes. God knows, it’s not been easy on any of us. I can only imagine what it must be like for you.”

He looked at her again. “Lea has said you are collecting data as evidence against Salen?”

She nodded. “I am looking into it, yes. But I would like to ask you to treat that as confidential as well.”

“I will. I hope you are successful.”

“So am I. There’s one other thing I wanted to mention to you, and I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but, Shaun, what you did in the pharmacy was a little out of line. You smashed medication vials all over the floor.

“Now I understand why it happened, and I get that you can’t fully control what happens past a certain point, but you need to know that destroying hospital property is not considered acceptable behavior. That doesn’t just go for you, that goes for any employee in this hospital.

“There won’t be any official notes in your file, but please consider this a reprimand from the Chief of Surgery. I would not like see anything as drastic as this happening again in the future, and if it does, there will be further consequences. Is that understood?”

Shaun swallowed. He knew it had been out of line. He knew he shouldn’t have done it. Could he have stopped himself? He wasn’t sure he could really answer that question, but he would try. He would try to do better next time. He also hoped there wouldn’t be a next time.

“Yes,” he simply answered the question in a low voice.

Dr. Lim put her palms flat on her thighs. “All right, then. Is there anything else you need, any more questions?”

“No, thank you.”

She closed the lid of the laptop and got up from her chair. “Thanks for coming in. Let’s have another meeting with Dr. Allen and Nurse Villanueva before the M&M to go over the slides, make sure we’re all on the same page. I’ll let you know about a date and time.”

“Okay,” Shaun confirmed, also getting up.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

He took his jacket and backpack and left the office. He let out a small sigh of relief outside the door. He hadn’t been sure what to expect, but this was reassuring. He could go back to work tomorrow and treat patients again, perform surgeries, be in his element. At least things at work were beginning to fall into place.

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Shaun was happy. As happy as he could be with all these things still in the balance, but he was back at work, back to treating patients. Putting on the white lab coat felt good, seeing the Shaun Murphy, MD embroidery on it.

He wished it didn't say Ethicure anymore, but that couldn't be helped, and he hoped he didn't have to see Salen today either.

That hope didn't last long, she somehow seemed to have a sixth sense as to where people were at any given time, or maybe that was their "fitness tracker", but she suddenly sidled up to Shaun when he was on his way from the locker room to the surgical floor.

"Dr. Murphy," she greeted him in that fake friendly tone of hers.

"Hello," he greeted back, trying to keep his voice as neutral as possible.

"I wanted to personally welcome you back."

"No, you want to ensure that I am not behaving inappropriately today."

She kept up with his brisk steps. "There is that, I will admit. Can we stop for just a minute?"

Shaun stopped walking, as did she. "I will not behave inappropriately today," he told her.

"I'm certain you didn't intend to do so last week either, so I'm not sure how much I can take your word for it, but I'm glad that you have the foresight to mention it proactively. As you're probably aware, Ms. Garcia has been discharged yesterday, and the investigation is still ongoing. I trust I have your full cooperation in this matter?"

"If you mean that I will not share any information about Alma Garcia and her baby unless prompted, then yes."

"Excellent. Do come to me if you have any questions or concerns."

"I don't."

He started walking again, because this conversation was over as far as he was concerned. Salen didn't follow.

Great. A good day already ruined.

On the surgical floor, he was being met by Asher. "Oh, Dr. Murphy, glad that you're here. I'm on your service today."

"Hello, Dr. Wolke," Shaun greeted him.

Asher held out a tablet computer to him. "We have a 15-year-old girl with Dravet syndrome. She fell as a result of an atonic seizure and now needs a tibia reconstruction. The parents have already given their consent."

Shaun stopped for a moment to study the patient file and the imaging. It looked like Asher had done his homework. He handed the tablet back to him. “Very good. Please schedule the procedure if the parents have been informed about the risks. Would you like me to examine the patient?”

“Yeah, I mean, I don’t know. It’s probably not necessary, it’s not a complicated case.”

Shaun made an effort to look at Asher’s face, tried to read what he could. They’d been here before. This was tricky. He tried to think how he could phrase this respectfully, but respectful was really not his strong suit.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Asher’s brown eyes were on his, Shaun got slightly nervous. Before he could say anything, Asher spoke first, “Dr. Murphy, I don’t think I missed anything, but I think it would be good if you could check just to confirm.”

Shaun let out a relieved breath. “Okay,” he said, then went in to see the patient.

Introductions to the parents and the patient were made quickly, he performed his exam with efficient precision. The patient had a developmental disability, which made it even more important to make sure the parents understood what was going on. He found that Asher had already done a thorough job on both the informational and the medical side.

Outside the patient room, Shaun spoke to Asher again. He had Lim’s and Glassman’s advice in the back of his mind that positive affirmation for the younger residents was important. “You didn’t miss anything that I’m aware of, and you did… a very good job.”

Asher beamed at him. “Okay. Great. Thank you. I will schedule the surgery.”

With no other cases currently on his roster, Shaun went to the surgical lounge. It was blissfully empty save for Park sitting on the couch, reading a journal. He looked up as Shaun entered.

“Oh, hey, welcome back.”

“Thank you,” Shaun responded. “It is *very* good to be back.”

“Yeah, I bet. I hope you weren’t going too stir crazy at home.”

Shaun sat down in the armchair to the side. “I was, a little.”

Alex gave him a look. “Did you get to do anything fun, at least?”

“I got very drunk on Monday, it was fun. The hangover was *not* fun.”

“Do I want to know *that* story?”

“Hm,” Shaun hummed evasively. “I met Dr. Glassman’s ex-wife yesterday.”

“Oh yeah, Sunil Rajant’s wife, right? You’ve never met her before?”

“Hm. No. She and Dr. Glassman were already separated when I first met him. She lived in San Jose, Dr. Glassman and I lived in Casper.”

“Casper, that’s out in Wyoming, right? Is that where you grew up?”

Shaun didn’t like the direction this conversation was taking. “Yes,” he said brashly.

“I’m sorry, Shaun. Is this a sticky topic?”

Shaun frowned. How had Alex been able to deduce that? “Yes,” he confirmed.

“Okay, I won’t ask further, don’t worry.”

Suddenly Shaun felt a pinch of guilt. Alex was a friend, it was probably natural that he wanted to know things about Shaun—how he’d grown up, where he came from. He felt maybe he needed to explain further. “I don’t like to talk about it because I didn’t like it there and my parents weren’t very nice people. My brother died there.”

“It’s fine, you don’t have to explain. And I’m sorry to hear that.”

“So am I.” He wondered if he should be asking where Alex grew up. He didn’t really want to know, but he had a vague recollection that that was something allistic people might ask in these types of situations. He gave it a try. “Where did you grow up?”

“Phoenix, Arizona, born and raised. Hot desert climate, dryer and hotter than Cali. I think I like it better here.”

“Did you meet Mia in Phoenix?”

“Yeah. We met in our mid-twenties. She was still in college, I was a beat cop. Man, that’s a long time ago.”

“Did you divorce Mia because she slept with another man?”

Park nodded. “Yeah, that was a pretty big dealbreaker, something that a relationship doesn’t recover from. Shaun, what is it that Lea did that had you break off the marriage? Did she cheat on you?”

“No,” Shaun said immediately. He knew Lea would not do that. Or would she? He always thought she would never do that, that she would never lie to him, betray him. Now there was doubt, lines were blurry.

“Then what? You have all these questions, it would be easier to talk about it if I knew what was actually going on. I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

Shaun wavered, thought hard about it. He trusted Alex, he was a friend. They’d lived together for a couple of months during the COVID state of emergency, and, as far as Shaun knew, Alex had his back. “She… manipulated my client satisfaction scores.”

Shaun thought the expression on Alex’s face was probably surprise. Perhaps disbelief. He knew the feeling all too well.

“Manipulated, how?” Alex asked.

“She knew that I was trying very hard to improve my scores, so she deleted those that were very low so that my overall average would go up.”

Park drew a face, nodded slowly. “Wow, yeah, that’s…”

“She also lied to me. She said she was going on a business trip when she didn’t. She flew to Montana to speak to Dr. Glassman.”

“About the review scores?”

“Yes.”

“Did she say why?”

“Because she wanted to convince Dr. Glassman to come back to San Jose.”

“No, I meant why she changed the review scores.”

“She said she did it because she loved me and wanted to protect me and help me. But that doesn’t make any sense. If she loved me, she shouldn’t have lied to me and gone behind my back.”

“That’s one way of seeing it, but it’s very natural to want to protect the people you love. I don’t want to speak for Lea, but her love for you and her need to protect you might’ve been so strong at that moment that she might’ve not even registered she was betraying your trust until after the fact.”

“Not being lied to by my partner is more important to me than my patient satisfaction scores.”

“Have you told her that?”

“Hm. No, I don’t think so.”

“I think you should.”

“But that wouldn’t change what she’s done.”

“True, but isn’t this about moving forward? Do you want to work on this with her? Do you want to be able to trust her again?”

“Yes.” He didn’t even have to think about that one.

“So how do you think that would happen if you don’t talk to her about it?”

Shaun didn’t have an answer to that. It was all still so raw to him; it hurt every time he thought about it, like reopening a wound that was just about to heal and close.

He had another question. “Did you ever learn to trust Mia again?”

Park hesitated a moment before he answered. “Yeah, I did.”

“How? How did you know that she wouldn’t sleep with someone else again?”

“I didn’t. But that’s what love is, Shaun. You gotta trust that your partner loves you enough to not betray you.”

“Someone can love you and still let you down.” Alma had said that. It was true for Lea. She loved him, but she’d let him down.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. But you know what? Mia didn’t betray me again. We separated because both of us had moved on, because we were hanging on to what we thought was love when it wasn’t. I don’t think that’s the case for you and Lea, is it?”

It was the big question. He’d been asked that by Dr. Glassman, too. Did he still love Lea? Somewhere beneath that sheen of something slick and ugly that wasn’t easily wiped away was a yes, but it was hard to isolate and get a grip on.

Shaun let out a deflated sigh. “It is very complicated.”

“Yeah, no doubt about that. Would you like me to talk to Lea about it?”

“No,” he said immediately.

“All right. Oh, hey, before I forget. Good call on the MOGAD last week. The antibody test came back positive, and we treated her with high-dose iv methylprednisolone and IVIg. There’s a clinical trial for a new drug running over at San Jose General, she wants to look into that.”

Shaun nodded. “That is good.”

“Yeah. Rare diseases are tricky, but now that she knows what it is, she has a better chance to manage it.”

Alex put away the journal he was still holding. “Okay, I need to grab a bite to eat while there’s still time. I’ll see you later, Shaun.”

Shaun gave him an acknowledging hum, thinking about what Alex had said. Lea’s voice was still there.

That’s not what happened, Shaun.

It still stung.

That’s why your scores went up.

No. He wasn’t ready to talk about it. He needed to occupy his mind with something else. With a resolute exhale he got up and opened up the Dravet syndrome patient’s file on his tablet to prepare for the surgery.

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“Shaun?”

It was Lea’s voice, why was Lea here?

“Shaun, wake up.”

A hand was touching him. No. He flinched, his eyes suddenly open. Where was he?

The spare room. His old mattress. Lea was there, crouched down two feet away, her hand hovering unsurely in the air. “Shaun,” she repeated.

He fought to slow down his breathing, propping himself up to a sitting position.

He tried to clear the fog from his brain. There was very little light from the window, it felt very much like it was still the middle of the night. Some light filtered in through the open door from the living room.

“Why did you wake me up?”

“You were talking in your sleep, calling out. I think you were having a nightmare.”

He tried to remember, only had vague recollections of unease and danger, a lingering feeling of restlessness in the pit of his stomach.

He stole a glance at his watch, tried to read the hands in the dim light and failed. He tried to take stock, his body still tired, but his mind wide awake now. He sat up a little straighter.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” Lea prompted him.

He wasn’t even sure what there was to talk about. He didn’t remember his dream. “No,” he said, “you can go back to sleep.”

She looked at him for a long moment. “I’m not sure I could.”

“You should sleep. It’s not morning yet.”

“Yeah, I know.” She paused, then looked at him. “I miss you. The bed is very empty without you.”

“Lea…” he said. Why did she not understand that she had broken the rules? That she’d broken something that he was still picking up the pieces of. “I don’t—”

“Want to,” she interrupted him. “I know. Shaun, I don’t think you’ve gotten a decent night’s sleep in days. I know you don’t wanna sleep near me right now, and I know you’re still hurting, but this isn’t good for you.”

He knew that. He knew none of this was good for anyone. He felt his fingers playing with the seam of his blanket, trying to draw comfort from the tactile sensation.

Lea went on, “Sleeping here, in my old room, and then us constantly taking turns, that has to be unsettling. Maybe you wanna think about sleeping at Glassman’s house for a while. Because I’m worried, and I don’t think this is working.”

None of those options sounded good to Shaun. He liked their apartment, liked its warm and quirky interior, the smells and sounds, the muted lights. It was familiar. It was his home. Dr. Glassman’s house wasn’t his home.

“I don’t want to sleep at Dr. Glassman’s house.”

She sighed, then sat down on the floor, her legs crossed, and he thought maybe she looked worried. She probably was. She had said she was.

“Shaun, what are we doing?”

“What… do you mean?”

“We’re living together, but that’s just like some kind of, I dunno… arrangement we’re having. Some days it’s like we’re old roommates, some days you don’t talk to me at all unless I drag the words out of you. You get completely hammered out of your mind without telling anyone, and then you end up puking all over Glassman’s house… Shaun, I don’t know what’s going on with you anymore.”

“Are… you mad at me for drinking?”

“Yeah, I guess I am. That was really stupid, and it’s just not *like* you. Why did you do that?”

Dr. Glassman had asked him that, too, and he hadn’t had a good answer then, either. It had made sense in the moment, and he knew he still liked how it made him feel those first few tequilas in. It had been the epic hangover the next day that hadn’t made it worth it.

“It was… what I wanted.”

“So you just did it because you wanted to and you could?”

He shrugged and saw her sigh. She was mad at him, and he didn’t like that he’d added one more item to the list of things that hung between them.

“You are so much smarter than this. Because I know you’re not stupid. You know how this works. We don’t always get what we want in life. You *know* this.”

Yes, he knew this. He knew she was right, that he’d made a mistake, that he deserved every word of this lecture. His heart was hammering in his chest in anticipation of the onslaught while he swallowed against a dry throat.

Her eyes were boring into him as she continued, “You’ve been so erratic lately. You smash a batch of medication vials all over the pharmacy, you blatantly defy hospital orders which gets you suspended for a week, you go out and damn near end up with alcohol poisoning. Now you’re having nightmares and you won’t talk to me…“

Lea sighed. “I honestly don’t know what to do with that anymore. I wanna help you, but you’re not letting me.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. Nothing had made sense these last few weeks. Ever since the pharmacy, everything had been out of whack and off its hinges. Things had gone so well the past year, and now it was like he kept hitting landmines wherever he stepped.

Maybe Lea was waiting for an answer. An answer he didn’t have, to a question he didn’t quite understand. He rubbed the edge of his blanket between thumb and forefinger, trying to find the words, any words.

Lea preempted his efforts when she said, “Can we not talk about this? Not the marriage, I get that’s off the table right now. But just… us, let’s talk about that. How do we move forward? *Can* we move forward? Should we separate for a while? Would that help?”

No.

That was his first instinct. He wasn’t sure it made sense, and he couldn’t explain it, but he didn’t want her to leave. She had moved out once, and he hadn’t liked it then. He was pretty sure he wouldn’t like it now, either.

He slowly lifted his eyes, saw her slumped shoulders. He looked up at her face, read the sadness there. “No,” he said in a low voice.

She shook her head ever so slightly. “Are you sure? Tell me what you’re thinking. I want to try and understand, but you need to tell me what’s going on in your head.”

He drew in a breath, tried to sort out the jumble of thoughts in his head. “You… belong here.”

She didn’t say anything for a long moment. Maybe she was waiting for him to continue, but he didn’t know how.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“I don’t want you to leave. This is your home.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t have to stop being that. I could crash with some friends, just for a few days. Maybe it will help you sort out whatever you need to sort out. I don’t know, I’m thinking maybe some distance could be—”

“No,” he interrupted her, this time more assertively. Then he realized something—something he hadn’t considered. He felt his heart sink. “Lea? Do you *want* to leave?”

He slowly looked up to her face, wanted to see her eyes when she answered. Her brow was furrowed. “I don’t know, Shaun.”

He could feel something wash over him. Sadness, maybe. Sorrow. Worry. He felt his eyes tearing up.

She moved, maybe fighting the urge to scoot closer. Yet, she didn’t and instead rubbed her palms in small circles over her knees. “I don’t want to leave, but I want to make this easier for you. I think maybe being apart for a while might help with that?”

“I don’t want to be here alone.” That was it, wasn’t it? He didn’t want to go back to being alone. Having her near him helped keep him grounded. And despite everything that happened, he couldn’t imagine what not having her around would be like.

Her eyes were on his, and he could see that she was also tearing up.

“Oh, Shaun…” She wiped at a stray tear on her cheek, stayed silent for a long moment before she continued. “But if you not wanting to be here alone is only reason why I should stay, I don’t think it’s the right one.”

No. She wasn't getting it. How could he explain it? "I don't… want to be without you. Things are right. They feel right when you are here. I don't want to be alone… without *you*."

"Shaun, I love you. So much. And I don't want to leave, not for me. But me being here and us not talking, that's not gonna work. This won't get better if we don't talk about the big things. You can't run from this forever."

"I want to talk about that, but… I don't know how."

"You could start by telling me how you feel. Why you're hurting."

He wanted to give her an explanation, wanted to convey all of what felt wrong inside of him. He searched for the right words to say, but he realized he didn't have much beyond that one big thing that just hung there, that tainted everything. "You lied to me."

She was still looking at him with the same sad eyes. "Yes, I did."

"You changed my review scores, and that was wrong. I asked you not to."

"Yes, you did, and yes, it was wrong."

"Why? Why did you?"

"Because at the time I thought it was the only way to help you, to make it easier for you."

"But you didn't help me."

"Yes, and I know that now."

"Knowing my scores went up only because you manipulated them means I can't trust you anymore."

"Yeah, and I get that, too. I know I betrayed your trust. And if I could take it back, I would."

"But that doesn't change anything. It happened, and you can't take it back. I asked you to tell Salen, and you didn't want to do that, either."

"You know, Shaun, you telling me you didn't care if I lost my job… That hurt me, too."

"But it was *your* fault. You omitted the reviews, and you said you can't change them back."

"This whole review scores thing, it just… it really brought out the worst in all of us, didn't it? I know how you keep insisting that it's not your ASD, but Shaun…"

No. She was wrong. He had worked on his communication skills, he could— "I can work harder on my communication techniques. You… didn't trust me to improve my scores on my own. But I know I can."

"Shaun…" She sighed.

"You… said you knew I could improve my scores. Was that a lie, too?"

He didn't want her to say yes but he also wanted her to be honest. While he waited for her answer, he could feel his heart pounding in his chest, felt the anger just bubbling underneath, mixing with betrayal and just bone-deep sadness.

She didn't say anything, and he knew that was an answer in itself.

"Why?" he asked quietly. "Why did you lie about that?"

"Because… I love you."

He shook his head. "That is not a good answer."

"It is to me."

"If you loved me, you should not have lied to me."

"Yes, I know. And that's something I'll have to carry. And something I've learned not to do again."

"How? How can I know? You know that I'm not good at telling when people lie."

"Yeah," she said in a low voice. "And that makes it even worse. I'm sorry."

He knew she wanted him to accept her apology, and he knew he wanted it too, but there was still something inside of him that wouldn't let the words come out, that held them caged and muzzled. He didn't say anything.

"Shaun, do you remember back when… before we got together? When you first told me you loved me? I said no, because I knew something like this would happen. I knew I'd mess up, and it'd end up hurting you. And I have, and now we're here, in this mess, and I know it's my fault."

Lea sighed. "I screwed this up, and I want so badly to fix it. You get that, don't you? You're all about wanting to fix things. How do we fix it?"

He looked at her for a long moment, and tried to search for an answer, but he came up empty. Could they fix it? Trust wasn't something you could just purchase somewhere and hand over, something you could make magically appear. How could he be with a person he didn't know he could trust?

"I don't know how to fix it," he said quietly.

"Okay," she said. "I know we need to give it some more time, but I want us to talk more about this. Not now, but I'd really like you to try. Tell me what you're thinking when you're ready, tell me what we can do, how we can work on it, how I can win your trust back. I know it's not gonna happen overnight. But please give me a chance, Shaun."

He wanted to, hoped he could. Voicing his thoughts wasn't always easy. He knew she was patient with him more often than not, and he knew she still loved him. He knew he loved her too. Somewhere, deep inside, but it was clouded by her transgressions. It was an ugly stench in his nostrils that he couldn't shake, but he couldn't deny it was a little less acerbic already.

"I… will try," he conceded.

She gave him a small smile, and he was glad he'd obviously said the right thing. He blinked, rubbed his right eye, now feeling the tiredness and lack of sleep hitting home full force.

"Shaun, please take the bed for the rest of the night. You need to get some sleep. I'll take the mattress."

He couldn't deny that the idea was tempting. Very tempting. Lea was now getting up, edging closer, motioning for him to get up from the mattress on the floor.

"Come on, Shaun. Please?"

"Okay," he finally said.

"I can stay out of your hair in the morning if you want."

"No," he said quickly. "I don't… want that."

She nodded slowly. "Okay."

He pushed the blanket off of him and peeled himself out from under it, trudging to their bedroom, closing the door behind him.

The bed was cold but familiar, he hadn't slept in it for a few days. He lay on his back, watching the faint shapes of the streetlights outside painting a blurry pattern on the ceiling through the slats of the blinds.

It was strange, knowing Lea was in the next room – the way she had been when they were roommates. The room that had the L on the door until she'd moved out. He'd left the sign on the door for a while, because it had felt like he was making a final statement by taking it off, severing ties with a constant he'd welcomed, he'd loved.

Now that room was a stopgap, a temporary solution to a larger problem. A problem that seemed weighty and oppressing and ever-present. He closed his eyes and drew in a heavy breath.

He was tired, and that problem would still be there tomorrow. Maybe Lea was right. He needed sleep.

He turned to lie on his belly and tried to find his favorite sleeping position, hoping he could at least catch another hour or two.

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07 - Dig it up, throw it at me

“Hey, Shaun,” Aaron lightly touched his shoulder for a brief second as he walked to him in the hospital hallway. “How’s everything going?”

“It’s going well.”

“Yeah? I’m glad to hear that. Listen, do you have a minute?”

Shaun let out a hum, then looked at his watch. “I have twenty-six.”

“Yeah, that’s more than enough. Come on, let’s go to my office.”

Shaun’s eyes widened a little, and Aaron quickly course-corrected. “Don’t worry, it’s nothing bad. I just wanna talk.”

Shaun seemed to relax. “Okay.”

Aaron tried to make some more conversation on the way, asking about interesting surgeries. Shaun told him about a tibia reconstruction from the week before. Arriving in his office, he motioned to one of the chairs. “Wanna sit down?”

Shaun complied, and Aaron sat in the chair next to it, trying to figure out how to broach the subject. Then again, this was Shaun, why bother beating around the bush? “So the M&M is tomorrow. How do you feel about that?”

He seemed confused by that question. “Dr. Lim will do the presentation, we met today with Dr. Allen and Dr. Lim to go over the slide deck again, and I will be there and listen. Should I be feeling anything about it?”

“I don’t know. You might be feeling apprehensive. Uncertain, maybe? You know what, forget that I said that. I didn’t mean to put any ideas in your head. It sounds like you’re well prepared, and I’m sure Dr. Lim will handle it with the necessary professionalism and decorum.”

Shaun gave him a scrutinizing look. “Do… you think people will ask inappropriate questions or make allegations against me?”

“I would hope not, but worst case scenario, yes, they might. Do you think you can handle that?”

Shaun pondered that for a moment. “Yes, I think so.”

Aaron scrunched up his face, knowing the next question would be tricky. “Shaun, I know this sounds a little condescending, but after what happened in the pharmacy and with your suspension, I think it may be good if I went with you, if I was there with you.”

He let that hang there, watched Shaun’s reaction carefully. He wasn’t sure what he read there. It wasn’t immediate rejection. Shaun slowly let his eyes glide over to Aaron, then met his gaze. “You are worried I will do something unpredictable.”

Aaron very much wanted to resort to the comfortable white lie, but he knew he couldn’t. Not with Shaun. “Yeah. A little. But, I don’t know, Shaun, maybe it’ll also give you confidence? Knowing someone’s there who can help if that happens…”

“You don’t trust me anymore.” It wasn’t a question.

“I’d like to. If you don’t want me to be there, I won’t. I mean, I will be at the conference, obviously, but I’ll sit in the back somewhere and just listen and let you do your thing. This is your call.”

Shaun stayed quiet, fiddled with the thumbs of his folded hands. It took a few, long moments until he said, “I’m fine without your help, thank you.”

Aaron nodded. “Okay, you got it.”

He looked at Shaun, tried to assess if he’d done any damage to their still somewhat fragile truce.

Shaun met his eyes again for a short moment and stayed silent. Aaron instantly hated himself for even bringing this up. The last thing Shaun needed was more patronizing, more signals that he was expected to fuck up again.

“Shaun, please know that I do trust you. If what I said made you think any different, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have implied.”

Shaun’s face relaxed somewhat. “It’s okay. You want to help.”

“Yeah, but right now it’s kinda hard to figure out when you need it and when you don’t.” He let out an audibly frustrated breath. “You know, I actually hate this. We used to be better at this. So I need you to tell me when I’m being, I don’t know, overbearing, maybe? Can you do that?”

Shaun nodded. “Yes.”

“Okay. Well. I don’t wanna keep you any more of your… twenty-six minutes.”

Shaun looked at his watch again. “I have fourteen left.”

Aaron smiled. Typical Shaun. He loved it, and he’d missed it.

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It seemed like everyone was here. Shaun looked around. The auditorium was packed to the brim.

Word had spread quickly that Alma’s case was high profile, and everyone wanted to hear the Morbidity & Mortality wrap-up of the case.

He was relieved to see Dr. Glassman enter, whose eyes sought out Shaun and gave him a quick nod. Shaun was sitting in the front row to the side, near the podium where Dr. Lim was already standing. He’d also noticed Salen coming in and sitting in the very last row in the back, which wasn’t surprising but fueled the growing discomfort Shaun was now feeling.

The audience was a low murmur of voices, and Shaun could feel an uneasy flutter spreading throughout his insides. Was this what Dr. Glassman had meant about apprehension? He felt his fingers fiddling around, rubbing each other. Yes, he was nervous, and he hated it.

He closed his eyes and inhaled and exhaled slowly. It helped calm him to an extent, although his breath had been shakier than he wanted to admit. Jordan's familiar voice next to him was low and reassuring. "Shaun, it'll be okay. Dr. Lim's got this, remember?"

He briefly met Jordan's warm brown eyes and found a small level of comfort in them. She was smiling. He hoped she was being sincere.

Shaun looked at his watch again. It was four minutes past the hour. Why hadn't they started yet?

As if on cue, Dr. Lim briefly tapped the microphone twice and the thudding *pop-pop* sound quickly silenced the audience. "Nothing like a noteworthy case to fill up the ranks," she opened the presentation, "let's get started."

She pushed a button on the presentation remote and the first slide came to life on the large projection screen. Shaun knew it well, he'd reviewed the slide deck several times.

Lim continued, "Now, before we get into the details, let me remind you that the purpose of an M&M is not to question or ask for justifications of decisions made. This is an exercise in recapping medical cases of interest and extracting lessons learned without judgment or prejudice. I would expect all of you to treat this case as such."

She paused for a moment, let her eyes wander across the audience before she started with the actual presentation. Shaun felt himself relax somewhat as she dug into the details, commencing with Alma's demographic details, the medical and case history, treatment and medication history and the case progression over time.

All the data was there, the details, the imaging graphics, the lab values, diagnoses and decisions made, medications given, and finally, the surgical approach and the outcome, the baby's autopsy results that had thankfully confirmed their initial diagnosis. Shaun swallowed when Dr. Lim progressed to describing the C-section and the ultimate fate of the baby. He saw it all too vividly in his mind.

He knew Jordan was watching him, but he ignored her. After the case presentation, Dr. Lim moved on to the key learning points and what they would do differently if they treated this case today—all perfectly in line with the usual structure of an M&M presentation.

It took nearly twenty minutes for Dr. Lim to finish presenting, and she closed with, "And with that I'd like to open this up for discussion, but please remember to keep it factual and to the point."

There was an awkward moment of silence while everyone stared at the last slide that simply said, 'Discussion'. A male voice piped up that Shaun was not familiar with. "You mentioned that due to a congenital heart defect the ductus arteriosus was closing. How did you confirm this diagnosis at the time?"

Dr. Lim stayed matter-of-fact and professional. "The baby was in acute respiratory distress with extremely low blood oxygen sat. We didn't have time to verify diagnostically, but we excluded all other obvious causes. The further treatment was based on that diagnosis."

A female who Shaun recognized as one of the OB-GYN residents asked, "Why was no OB-GYN or neonatal specialist present during the delivery?"

“The C-section was an emergency procedure after a placental abruption. We called for an urgent consult upon beginning the surgery, but no one was available at the time. We couldn’t wait.”

Shaun flinched slightly when Dr. Fisher from the orthopedics staff asked, “Was the expiration date on the PGE label not checked prior to administration?”

Dr. Lim harrumphed on this one, but it wasn’t like they hadn’t expected that question. “It was not, because the baby was in acute distress and we had to act quickly. As you may know, PGE is not a medication that develops toxicity effects over time, so this was not a concern at the time, given the extreme urgency of the situation. However, you will have noticed that I did mention this was an oversight and lesson learned for the future.”

There was another male voice from a physician Shaun didn’t recognize who remarked, “Fatal outcome aside, I think we should also point out that it was a pretty genius idea to switch to alprostadil when the PGE didn’t work.”

A small smile spread across Dr. Lim’s lips. “Thank you, and I would like to pass that compliment on to my resident Dr. Shaun Murphy,” she pointed at him, “who deserves all the credit for thinking on his feet.”

There were some murmurs in the audience that Shaun couldn’t interpret as either good or bad, but he decided to take it as a compliment.

Another question from Dr. Pollock in internal medicine. “Can we talk about why expired medication was dispensed by the pharmacy in the first place?”

Dr. Lim shifted uncomfortably on her feet as the audience murmur immediately got louder. Shaun’s interest was now also definitely piqued. His eyes searched for Salen—she looked stoic and poised.

Another voice chimed in, “Is this a direct result of all the budget cuts we keep hearing about?” Then another, “Is the hospital being sued over this?”

More ruckus erupted from the audience, louder voices now. Shaun drew up his shoulders. He wanted to cup his hands over his ears, already had the hands raised on the way there, then he remembered where he was and folded them over his chest instead.

Dr. Lim knocked repeatedly on the microphone. “Can we have silence, please?” She knocked again, louder this time, and Shaun had to flinch. It did the trick and the noise slowly died down.

Dr. Lim spoke again. “This matter is being addressed already and is not the primary focus of this M&M. Are there any further comments or questions that pertain to this case?”

She waited a few more moments, and when there was no further feedback, she said, “Okay. I’d like to then hand over to Dr. Powell who will present the next case.”

Dr. Lim stepped off the podium, and Shaun released a long breath. He met Dr. Lim’s eyes who gave him an encouraging nod before she came over. She smiled at him when she sat down in the vacant seat next to him.

Several people were now starting to leave the auditorium, there was a bit of commotion until everything settled down again. Jordan, Shaun and Lim stayed and listened to the rest of the

second case that was being presented, but Shaun had a hard time actually paying attention. An 83-year-old male with osteoporosis. Something about a femur fracture. It didn't seem interesting to Shaun, his mind was still reeling.

The patient case was short and to the point, no one asked questions. The auditorium emptied quickly after the case presentation was concluded, and Shaun lingered along with Lim and Jordan.

Lim let out a sigh of relief. "Well, glad that's behind us. That didn't go terribly."

Jordan smiled at her. "You handled that one very well."

"Thank you." Lim gave Shaun a look. He wasn't sure what to make of it, then she said, "I'm glad someone was perceptive enough to applaud your brilliant move with the alprostadil."

"Yes," Shaun just said, still trying to revel in the knowledge that the M&M was over.

There was movement to his right, and Shaun saw Dr. Glassman ambling over. Lim and Jordan excused themselves as he was approaching. "Hey," Dr. Glassman said in a low voice.

Shaun could feel his face twitching with sudden emotion, unsure what to do with that, but there was just immense relief and release and tears in his eyes he didn't even know he'd been holding back.

It was strange and not something he'd usually feel the urge to succumb to, but it felt like the most natural thing to do to put his arms around Dr. Glassman and just feel at home there, to have a person to share the moment with, who would offer comfort with no questions asked.

Dr. Glassman seemed surprised for a brief moment, then Shaun felt his large hands warm on his back, and a gentle voice in his ear, "Yeah, all right."

The embrace didn't last long, Shaun pulled back after a few seconds, to see what he thought was perhaps a mischievous smile on Dr. Glassman's lips. "Glad it's over, huh?"

Shaun nodded. "Yes. Dr. Lim was very good."

"She was, wasn't she?"

"Did you see that Salen was also there?"

"Yeah. Not a big surprise there, though. She's a micromanager. Glad she managed to lie low."

"Did you expect her to interrupt or comment?"

"No. She's smart. And a businesswoman. She knows what's good for her."

"Is Dr. Lim still trying to expose her?"

Glassman shrugged. "Yeah, I think so. That kind of stuff doesn't happen in a day."

Shaun gave a small nod. "I would like to— Oh." He felt his phone vibrating in his pocket and he fished it out. It was a message from Claire.

Shaun turned away from Dr. Glassman to read it. “Hey Shaun, I just got the wedding cancellation. What’s that all about? How about a video call tomorrow night?”

Claire. He hadn’t talked to her in a while. He was busy and she was even busier down in Guatemala. Did he want to talk to her, though? Maybe she could help him figure some things out. After all, she was a good friend to him.

“Ok,” he texted back. “I have time at 8 pm.”

“That’s 10 my time, works for me. Can’t wait! Talk to you tomorrow.”

Shaun wanted to send an OK, then remembered something. He sent a thumbs-up emoji instead.

Claire responded with a smiley face. He looked at it for a long moment, trying to figure out if it was anything other than a plain old smile, but he didn’t think so.

Shaun turned back to see if Dr. Glassman was still there. He seemed to be waiting, so Shaun went over to him. “Did you need anything from me?”

“No. Just wanted to make sure you’re all right.”

“I’m… all right.”

Dr. Glassman gave him a smile. “Okay, good. Then go and do some doctoring.”

“Yes,” Shaun told him, “I will.”

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“Hi, Shaun,” he heard the familiar voice of Claire from his laptop speakers as her image appeared on the screen.

“Hello, Claire,” he greeted back.

She gave a little wave. Shaun took a closer look. Claire looked as she always had. Her curly hair was done up in a ponytail, she was smiling. She seemed to be sitting in a room at home, he’d seen it before on other video calls they’d had.

“How have you been?”

“Not very well,” he replied honestly.

“Oh? What’s been going on. Tell me all about it.”

Shaun sucked in a breath, he didn’t know where to start. He tried to remember when they’d last talked. It was maybe around the time that all the Ethicure changes had started going into full swing. He asked what she knew about it, and then he filled in the gaps as best as he could.

Claire asked many questions, most of which he was happy to answer. He hadn’t really wanted to go into the whole Alma debacle again, but the words just kept tumbling out of his mouth, and it took a while for him to explain it all, but in the end Claire knew pretty much the whole story, and Shaun felt empty and exhausted.

He told her about the pharmacy, how he'd lost his grip and buckled. Claire had seen it happen before, back when he got fired by Dr. Han. She'd sat next to him until he calmed down, and he'd been grateful for her companionship. Knowing he could trust Claire, he also told her about what Lea did and how he didn't think he could marry her.

Claire listened to all of it and didn't interrupt. When Shaun was done, she said, "Yes, that certainly explains the wedding cancellation. I'm really sorry, Shaun. That sounds like you've had a really hard time."

"Yes," he confirmed.

"Are you two still living together?"

"Yes."

"Is Lea there now?"

"No, she is with Jordan. She said it was girl's night."

"So how is that working out for you? Don't you want to separate? At least for a while?"

"No," he told her, wondering, "Do you think we should?"

She shrugged. "I honestly wouldn't know, Shaun. It's not like I have the best track record with relationships myself, you know…"

Claire paused, and Shaun could tell she was carefully mulling over her reply before she continued, "Look, I know Lea loves you, and I know she didn't mean to hurt you. But I also know you, and I know her going behind your back must've stung. Your partner lying to you, that's a big deal and you shouldn't feel bad or guilty for needing time to process… to navigate through it in your own way."

Shaun nodded. Yes, it did sting. Lea should have known, she should have known and not betrayed him like that. "I have been thinking about it. It is difficult."

"Yeah, I bet. This has been really hard on you, hasn't it?"

"I'm okay," he tried to reassure her.

"You said you weren't doing very well. Please don't make me worry all the way from Guatemala. You need to take care of yourself."

He didn't know what that meant. "Take care of myself, how?"

"I don't know, Shaun. I mean, are you happy with the way things are right now?"

"No, I'm not happy."

"Yeah, that's not…" She sighed visibly. "I think you tend to always want to fix things. But it's not always about that, sometimes you just gotta take a step back and do what's right for you, you know?"

He tried to make sense of what Claire was saying but fell short. “How do I know what’s right for me?”

“I don’t know, Shaun. What is it that *you* want?”

Yeah, what was it that he wanted? All the things he wanted weren’t attainable right now. “I want this to be different,” he told her.

“Different, how?”

“Better.”

“That’s not helping. Give me something more concrete, something tangible.”

“I want things to go back to how they were.”

“That’s not how life works. You can’t go backwards, Shaun.”

No, Claire was right, he couldn’t. “But what if I can’t move forward with Lea?” He wrestled with the conclusion. “Should I stop trying?”

Claire shrugged, “I honestly don’t know, Shaun. I wish I did, but you’re the only one who knows the answer to that. And, if you don’t think you and Lea can move forward, the adult thing to do would be to also consider how both of you could move on. It’s only fair.”

He didn’t like the thought. His goal had always been to fix things with Lea, to forgive her, to get to a point where she would be his anchor, his beacon, his home again. Moving on from Lea seemed like a step he wasn’t ready to take.

“I… don’t think I want that,” he told her.

She nodded. “Okay. Just make sure that whatever you end up doing is right for you. You look really tired. I’m worried.”

He *was* tired. Mostly because what Claire said had left his brain reeling. He had to change the subject. “Have you done any interesting surgeries recently?”

Claire smiled at him. “Okay, I guess we‘re done talking about this. And actually, I have. We performed an ultra-sounded guided distal metatarsal osteotomy that was pretty cool. How about you?”

Shaun proceeded to tell her about a few recent surgeries that had made the shortlist, including the 5-ALA fluorescence marker surgery on their brain tumor patient a few weeks ago. Claire’s WiFi went in and out a couple of times, and she apologized for the bad internet connection.

Shaun wished she could be there in person, he missed talking to Claire. At some point, the lights in her apartment flickered, and she told him, “Okay, looks like the power might go out any moment. There’s a storm coming through, so maybe we should call it a night?”

“Okay,” Shaun told her.

“It was really nice chatting again, Shaun. We should do it more often. You should come visit, too.”

He had liked Guatemala. Maybe he should take a week off in the new year and see her. It sounded nice. He made a mental note to put that on his list. “I would like that.”

“Well, I hope things work out for you and Lea. Whatever you decide, both of you deserve to be happy. I’d love to speak to her, too. And please keep in touch, don’t be a stranger. I’m just a phone call away if you need anything, okay?”

“Thank you, Claire.”

“Yeah, any time. Take care, Shaun.”

“Goodbye.”

He pushed the red hang-up button and Claire’s face vanished with kind of a waterdrop sound. Shaun shut down the computer and closed the lid of the laptop, letting out a long breath.

He felt even more confused, more conflicted. Nothing made sense anymore, and Claire had given him even more to think about. It would be a long night, he could already tell his mind wouldn’t let him rest easy tonight.

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Lea and Jordan were sitting on the couch in Jordan’s small yet cozy apartment. They’d met here a few times before, Lea really liked the place.

Jordan looked at her, her gaze full of intent. “So, what’s going on with Shaun right now?”

“Honestly? I don’t even know. He spends a lot of time at the hospital. Some days, we don’t really talk much at all, you know, his usual avoidance thing. When we do talk, it’s mostly just the everyday maintenance of living together.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow, an unspoken sign that Lea should get to the juicy stuff.

“We’ve broached the subject a few times, but it’s always the same spiel of ‘I don’t know if I can trust you’. I mean, I know trust is a big thing for him, but it’s just like… we’re stuck, you know?”

“Well, at least the M&M is over,” Jordan said encouragingly. “I think that was a big one for him, right? He and Glassman had a cute little hug afterwards. I’ve never seen him hug anyone.”

Lea felt a pang of envy jolt through her. “Yeah, Glassman is a whole other matter, though I think things are going pretty okay on that front. Me, I’m getting to the point where I don’t know what to do anymore.”

She sighed. “I mean, is it gonna be like this forever? Or for how long? It feels like I’ve been waiting and waiting, and nothing is happening. How long am I supposed to wait?”

“Do you wanna give him an ultimatum?” Jordan asked.

Lea shook her head. “No, he doesn’t work like that. We’ve been through rough patches, and God knows, he’s not easy. But never anything like this. I mean, I know. I know it’s a waiting game. He’ll say yes or no at some point. But it’s just hard, you know? It’s really hard, because I see he’s still struggling with the whole thing. I love him. I wanna help him. But he’s not there yet.”

“Well, you know him way better than I do, so I don’t know what to tell you,” Jordan shrugged.

“That’s the thing, though,” Lea said, disheartened. “I thought I knew him. But he’s just been so… I dunno. The other week, when he was suspended, he went out day-drinking. Got totally hammered. Slept in a bathtub, puked all over Glassman’s house, apparently. That scared me.”

“He slept in Glassman’s bathtub?”

Lea let out a dark chuckle. “Yeah. Here, see for yourself.”

She brought up the iconic photo on her phone and showed it to Jordan, adding, “Don’t you dare tell him I showed you this.”

Jordan laughed. “Don’t worry, I won’t. That’s hilarious, though.”

“Right? Hangover Heaven the next day, of course. I would have taken pity if I hadn’t been so mad at him for being a totally dumb frickin’ idiot.”

“You know, I always thought you two were super cute together. And I think he does love you.”

“He hasn’t talked to you about this, has he?”

“Nah, but he’s talked to Park a bit, I think. I’m not sure I wanna get involved, to be honest.”

“No, that’s okay. He needs to find his people. He’s actually having a video call with Claire right now. At least I hope so.”

“They kept in touch?”

“Yeah, on and off. I don’t know how much she knows. He might tell her… at this point I hope he does. Maybe he could use some friendly advice.”

“That’s his thing, right? Getting advice from other people.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s part of his process. Doesn’t always work out for the best. But, God, he can be so adorable and,” she clenched her teeth, “so frustrating.”

“Oh, I hear ya.”

“Okay, this is making me aggravated all over again. Can we talk about something else?”

Jordan chuckled. “Don’t worry, I gotcha, girl.”

Jordan went to the kitchen and came back with a white cardboard box, a red bottle and two shot glasses. She placed the box on the coffee table. “There’s this cute little donut shop right around the corner, they are fresh and to *die* for. And I know,” she held up the bottle, “this looks kinda gross, but I swear it’s delish.”

Lea took a closer look. “Red Velvet Bailey’s? That does sound kinda gross, but I’m game.”

As Jordan poured the drinks, Lea opened the box, and her mouth watered instantly. “Wow, these all look amazing.”

“Seriously, the crème brûlée are the *best*, but they’re all good.”

Lea went for the one Jordan had indicated, the one with the hardened caramel glazing on top. Some of the custard filling squeezed out as she bit into it, but the explosion of sugary and creamy goodness in her mouth was totally worth it.

Lea had to lick her finger before she picked up the shot glass with the pale pink liquid in it. It was somewhat reminiscent of Pepto Bismol, but it definitely smelled better. She took a sip, and Jordan was right. It tasted wonderfully sweet and rich. She took another sip, holding the glass up appreciatively to Jordan.

“Good, right?”

“Uh-huh. This is great. I love it.”

Jordan smiled wide, and Lea decided to just enjoy the evening and forget all about the whole Shaun thing for a while. It would be a welcome reprieve.

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08 - Do you think I really care

Lea hated this. She hated all of it.

She adjusted the pillow between her back and the bed's headboard, drew her legs closer to her chest.

Ever since she got back from Jordan's, Shaun had been even more withdrawn, they'd barely said three words to each other that weren't out of necessity, and there was just this massive distance between them.

She had tried to be patient, had tried to give him space, but he was hot and cold and unpredictable in a way he'd never been with her before. It was grating and it was frustrating and she didn't know how much longer she could take this.

She knew he was sitting on the couch, reading something, being taciturn and withdrawn, not making any effort to communicate at all.

There were tears in her eyes now, and she didn't hold them back any longer, let them run down her cheek, feeling a sob working its way up. She missed him so much, missed their intimacy, their moments of warmth and familiarity. It was all gone, and it felt like they'd never get that back.

She put her forehead on her folded arms and just let the tears come.

It must have been a minute or two later that she heard a noise from the door, feet tentatively walking closer, then stopping. Shaun's voice was quiet. "Why are you crying?"

She looked up briefly, then gave up again. "Why do you think, Shaun?"

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."

He didn't say anything in response, sat on the old bus seat that was leaning against the wall next to the window.

"I *am* sorry," he repeated.

"Then why? Why are you like this? Why can't we talk? You push me away at every opportunity, you keep repeating all that stuff about trust like a broken record, but I'm *trying*, Shaun. I'm really trying."

"I... am trying, too."

"No, you're not. You've been a real jackass lately, brushing me off, avoiding me, being irrationally stubborn about every tiny little thing." She wiped angrily at her cheek. "I honestly don't know what we're doing anymore."

He just sat and said nothing, his stare blank, his gaze not even close to her face. She wanted to jump up and slap sense into him, yell at him that he was being unfair and pigheaded, that she deserved better than this.

She shook her head, then got up from the bed. “You know what? I’m not doing this.”

As she grabbed the cardigan that lay at the foot of the bed and stomped over the door, she heard Shaun following her. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” she shot back.

“Will you be back?”

“Well, it’s not like I have any other place to go right now,” she said with clear resentment in her voice. “You better sleep on the mattress tonight, because I really don’t wanna see you when I get back.”

She didn’t look back after she grabbed her jacket, purse and keys, pulling the door closed a little too forcefully so that it slammed shut behind her.

Fuck this. She’d have to take a drive. Just get out of the city for a bit, listen to loud music, take a breath. Maybe it would help. She doubted it would do a lot, but it would be better than this.

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Standing in front of his closet, Shaun looked at his phone again, bringing up the message that Dr. Glassman had sent him yesterday after Lea had walked out on him. “Would love to spend time with you. Come to my house tomorrow around 11, wear old clothes. Something that can get dirty.”

He’d asked why, but Glassman had stayed vague, just said Shaun would see when he got there. Shaun didn’t like surprises, and Dr. Glassman should know that. Yet, sometimes Glassman was annoyingly stubborn, and Shaun thought maybe even sometimes he challenged Shaun on these things on purpose. He didn’t always mind. But he really hated surprises.

He looked through his selection of clothes again. He didn’t know what constituted as ‘can get dirty’. All his clothes could get dirty. They had a washing machine and detergent. It wouldn’t be that much of an issue.

Finally, Shaun picked out a pair of dark gray pants and a dark blue shirt with a subtle checkered pattern, put them on and made his way to Dr. Glassman’s house.

The doorbell echoed through the house, and half a minute later, Glassman opened up for Shaun. He looked very odd. He was wearing a baseball cap and ill-fitting clothes that Shaun had never seen on him. Shaun gave him a once over but didn’t say anything.

“Ah, Shaun, there you are,” Glassman said cheerfully.

Shaun walked in, and caught Dr. Glassman giving him a curious glance.

“Where are your old clothes?” Glassman asked.

“These are the oldest clothes I have.”

Glassman gave a chuckle. “Yeah, that’s not gonna cut it. Wait here.”

Shaun frowned. Dr. Glassman was behaving a bit strangely. Was he on some strange personal self-discovery trip again?

Glassman's voice sounded from upstairs, all muffled and faint, "Shaun, come up here for a minute, will ya?"

Hm. Hadn't he just said to wait down here? Shaun tentatively went upstairs. Dr. Glassman was in the bedroom, pulling something out of his dresser that he held out to Shaun. "They're probably too big for you, but here, put these on."

"Dr. Glassman," Shaun said, "I'd like to know what this is about."

"We're painting," he stated with what Shaun knew was a sly grin on his face.

"Painting?"

"Yeah, painting."

"As in canvas art?"

"No. As in painting walls." He thrust the clothes in Shaun's arms. "Go on, get changed."

Shaun looked at what he had been given. It appeared to be a very washed out pair of green scrub bottoms and a dark blue t-shirt of some kind. He put the t-shirt on the bed and unfolded the scrub pants. "Why do you have scrubs at home?"

"Because…" Dr. Glassman just said.

"They are hospital property."

"Shaun, these are 10 years old. Do you still see anyone wearing green scrubs at St. Bonaventure?"

"No."

"See?"

Shaun unfolded the t-shirt, too. It had white print on it that was cracked in places that said '50 Year Old' in large letters, and 'one careful owner, pre-facelift model, spare tire, bodywork needs attention' underneath in smaller letters.

He looked questioningly at Dr. Glassman, who just shrugged. "What can I say? I have friends who make inappropriate birthday presents."

"You want me to wear this?"

"Unless you wanna get paint stains all over what you're wearing right now…"

"I don't want paint stains on me, regardless of what I'm wearing."

"Well, too bad, because I don't think those can be avoided."

Shaun let out an unhappy hum, and Glassman sighed. “Come on, Shaun. It’ll be fun. Have you ever painted walls before?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know you won’t like it?”

“I didn’t say I won’t like it.”

“Yes, you did, because believe it or not, that *‘hm’* of yours is very telling.” Was it? How did Dr. Glassman know that? “At least give it a try. You don’t have to keep doing it if you don’t like it.”

“That’s also what you said about the grape treading, which I told you I wouldn’t like, and I didn’t.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t squelching grapes underneath your bare feet.” Shaun involuntarily drew up his shoulders at the unpleasant memory. “You don’t even have to touch the paint. I wasn’t planning on doing finger painting, you know?”

Shaun let out another hum and tried to ignore Dr. Glassman’s eyes boring into him.

Glassman was finally lifting his hands in defeat. “All right. If that’s your final word. I thought we could hang out together, have some fun. At least come down with me, keep me company while I do the painting.”

Shaun let out a long breath. Lea had called it emotional blackmail once. Shaun was acutely aware he was caught in that revolving door again, but there it was, nagging feeling at the back of his mind that both Lea and Glassman might have a point, that he tended to shut things down before he’d tried them. And he knew Dr. Glassman wouldn’t force him to do it if Shaun tried and didn’t like it.

“Okay,” he agreed hesitantly.

“Okay, what?”

“I will get changed.”

Dr. Glassman nodded at him with a smile on his face. “Then I’ll see you downstairs in the study.”

Shaun went into the bathroom and put on the scrub pants and t-shirt. Both were at least a size too large, so he had to tie the drawstring around his waist extra tight. The t-shirt smelled a little musty, like it hadn’t been worn or washed in a long time, but Shaun tried to ignore it.

Down in the study, he immediately knew he didn’t have to worry about the smell of the t-shirt anymore, the paint smell was even more pungent in his nose. The furniture had all been moved away from the walls and was covered in thin plastic sheets, as was the floor. Most of the wall-to-ceiling and window edges had been covered with blue painter’s tape.

Shaun stopped just inside the doorway, with Dr. Glassman eyeing him for a long moment.

“Come on in, young grasshopper, time to teach you the ropes of wall painting.”

“I am not a grasshopper.”

“I can call you Smurph. You remember when I called you that, right?”

“Yes, I do, Dr. Assman.”

That made Glassman chuckle, and Shaun could actually feel his spirts lifting a little. Maybe this wasn’t as terrible an idea as it had initially sounded.

Shaun looked at his feet for a moment. Dr. Glassman hadn’t said anything about shoes. He was wearing his good leather lace-ups, he didn’t want to get paint on them. He took them off and put them on the side in the foyer, then rejoined Glassman in the study.

Dr. Glassman was holding out a paint roller to Shaun. “I’m painting the walls green, Debbie hated green.”

He poured some of the tea green paint from a larger can into a plastic paint tray and dunked his own roller into the paint, then rolled it out on the tray so that it was evenly covered.

“It’s really not that hard. You make sure you cover the roll on all sides, and then you just,” he walked over to the wall and started moving the roller up and down in fluid movements, “paint the wall. Nice even movements, don’t push too hard. That’s it. Wanna try?”

Shaun looked at his clean paint roller, then at Glassman pointing at the paint tray. He tentatively started wetting the roll with the green paint, then took a stab at the wall. Glassman was watching him, giving him verbal approval. “Okay, that’s good. Just keep going.”

“Can you not afford to pay someone to paint the house for you?”

“Oh, I can, but I actually enjoy this. There’s a… certain satisfaction in doing things where you can immediately see what you’ve accomplished, don’t you think?”

“Is that why you stopped working at St. Bonaventure?”

“No, not really.”

“Before… you went to Montana, you said you wanted to be around different people, that you needed a big change. Painting this room green doesn’t seem like a big change.”

“It’s *a* change.”

“What does that mean?”

Glassman shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I realized that change isn’t all that important.”

Shaun remembered the conversation they’d had in the diner down in Salinas. “You said you were staying because of me.”

“Not exclusively, but yeah, that’s part of it. How do you feel about that?”

At first, Shaun wasn’t sure how to answer that, but he knew one thing for sure. “I didn’t want you to leave. I’m glad you’re not moving to Montana.”

Glassman gave a small nod and resumed his painting. Shaun thought maybe there was a faint smile on his lips. “How are things going with Lea?” Dr. Glassman inquired.

Lea. Shaun didn’t want to talk about her at the moment. He’d actually been glad for the distraction. “Can we talk about something else?”

“So not great, huh?”

“She yelled at me yesterday.”

“Yelled at you? For what?”

“She was crying, then she got mad at me and told me I was stubborn and a jackass. She yelled, and then she left.”

“She left? As in left you?”

“No. She came back later when I was asleep.”

“You’re still taking turns with your sleeping arrangements?”

Shaun nodded. “Yes.”

“You know that you can sleep here if you want to, right? You know, if you ever want to get away…”

“It’s okay. I like going home.”

“Okay, that’s good to know.”

“Why did you and Debbie separate?”

Glassman actually sighed but kept painting. “Can we talk about something else?”

“You made me talk about Lea.”

Glassman sighed again. “Okay, point taken. She had different ideas about what our relationship should be than I did, and it just didn’t work out. We were fighting a lot, she wasn’t happy. In the end it was better that we ended it.”

“How did you know that it was better that you ended it?”

Dr. Glassman interrupted his paint rolling again, giving Shaun his full attention. “Are you considering ending things with Lea?”

Shaun let out a hum. He hadn’t seriously considered it, not until he’d talked to Claire three days ago. But ever since, the question had kept nagging at the back of his mind. And as much as he’d tried to avoid thinking about it – he kept coming back to it like a vicious circle.

Should he move on? Should he allow Lea to move on? Did he dare pose the question to her if that was what she wanted?

“Do you still love her?” Glassman asked.

Shaun stopped painting now as well, looked at Dr. Glassman. His eyes were attentive on Shaun, so this was important. Shaun briefly met his eyes. “I think I do.”

“You think?”

“I don’t want to end things with Lea,” Shaun clarified.

Glassman’s expression changed slightly, Shaun wasn’t sure to what. “But you’re still mad at her.” It wasn’t a question.

“Hm, no, not *mad*. But I don’t know if I can trust her.”

Glassman nodded. “Okay. Do you think you can trust her again in the future?”

“I don’t know,” Shaun pondered, “but I would like to.”

Aaron sighed. “Are you actually talking about this? With her? Because I think that’s important, Shaun.”

“Yes, we talk. She is sorry and she wants to fix things, but we don’t know how.”

“Okay, that’s something. Maybe you just need some more time. I hope you know that Lea is being very patient with you. She really loves you, you know?”

Shaun nodded. “Yes, I know. When she came to Montana, did you talk about me?”

“Yes, we did.”

“Lea said she was worried about me.”

“And rightly so, don’t you think?”

Shaun just hummed unsurely. Things had all been so confusing, had escalated so quickly. “Are *you* worried about me?”

“Right now, no. You’re back at work, the M&M is over, you weren’t burned at the stake. Yes, there’s still the lawsuit and whatever Salen might have up her sleeve, but with Lim on the warpath, I have a feeling justice will prevail and the Salen era will end before long. And even if not, all of this will be putting a serious muzzle on her, so all things considered, I think we’re transitioning into smoother waters now. Why, should I be worried?”

Should he? Shaun wasn’t sure, but he didn’t want Dr. Glassman to worry. “No, I’m okay,” he reassured him.

“Shaun.” Dr. Glassman’s voice was low, pensive. “I would like you to come to me before something like this happens again, okay? I know I wasn’t there the last time, but I am now.”

Shaun kept painting and said nothing. Glassman did the same, and they kept working in silence for a while until Dr. Glassman said, “You know what we need? Music.”

“Are we going to listen to the Beatles again?”

Glassman chuckled. “Don’t like them, huh?”

Shaun shrugged. He’d never really cared that much about music. Glassman asked him, “What music would you like to listen to?”

Another question that wasn’t easy to answer for the same reason. “I don’t listen to music very often, and when I do, it is on my phone and I use headphones.”

“I think I’ve got just the right thing for this occasion.”

Glassman left the room and then came back with a portable CD player that he placed to the side, looking for a power outlet that wasn’t fully covered by painter’s tape. It soon started playing a song that Shaun wasn’t familiar with. It had a lively beat. A male voice started singing.

“Who is that?” Shaun asked.

“A band called Genesis.”

“Are they something you listened to when you were young?”

Glassman gave him a look Shaun could only interpret as mischievous. “Yeah. You like it?”

Shaun drew up his shoulders slightly. “I don’t know.”

He didn’t mind the music and it wasn’t intrusively loud, and Dr. Glassman seemed to enjoy it, which Shaun could tell from him humming along as they continued to paint. Comfortable silence settled next to the music, and both of them made good headway, eventually switching from paint rollers to brushes when the larger surfaces had been covered and they needed to move on to corners and the windows.

Shaun was starting to enjoy the activity, despite the fact that he’d gotten a bit of paint onto his hands and really didn’t like the way it felt when it was starting to dry and crack. He quickly excused himself to the bathroom to wash it off.

When he came back, Dr. Glassman was full on singing along to the song, swaying to the beat, shooting Shaun an amused look. “See, I told you this would be fun.”

Shaun couldn’t help but silently agree, and he definitely enjoyed spending the time with Dr. Glassman. It had been a while, and Shaun had missed it.

Dr. Glassman continued his rendition of the song, carrying on with his perhaps somewhat awkward dancing. His good mood was contagious, and Shaun could feel himself warming to the music, but was abruptly pulled from his reverie when Glassman let out a, “Whoops.”

In his dance move enthusiasm, he’d knocked over the paint can, and before he could tilt it back up, a pool of pastel green paint started slowly spreading out across the plastic sheeting that covered the floor. Glassman was quickly trying to do damage control, but his movements were hasty, and Shaun could only watch helplessly as he lost his footing on the paint puddle, trying to catch his balance and failing.

Shaun rushed over, wanting to catch him, and before he knew it, both of them were awkwardly lying on the floor in a tangle of limbs. Shaun pushed himself up, his palm slick against the wet paint on the floor.

“Dr. Glassman, are you okay?”

Glassman was also pushing himself into a sitting position. He didn’t look as if he was in pain. “Yeah, I think so. You?”

“I’m fine.”

Glassman looked at Shaun for a long moment, then started to laugh—a slow chuckle that turned into a full-on, hearty laugh.

Shaun frowned. “What’s so funny?”

“You’ve got paint all over you. Including,” he gestured at Shaun’s face, “here.”

Shaun wiped at his jaw, looking back at Glassman. “So do you.”

Glassman looked down his own body. “So I do.”

He then picked up the paint brush that was lying next to him, and before Shaun could protest, Glassman was flicking it at Shaun. A few drops of paint hit his face, and he quickly closed his eyes, trying to avert the assault.

“Why did you do that?”

Glassman grinned at him. “Because it’s fun. Have you never been in a paint fight before?”

Shaun could only honestly answer, “No. I told you I have never painted before today.”

Glassman chuckled and did it again, and Shaun was hit with another spray of paint drops. “Please stop that.”

“Come on, don’t be shy, hit me back.”

“No,” he protested.

“Come on, Shaun. Paint fight. Rite of passage.”

Another spray of paint from Glassman’s brush landed on him. Would he stop if Shaun returned the gesture? Shaun went for his own paint brush that he’d dropped there in the heat of the moment and flicked it.

Glassman let out an amused chuckle as the paint droplets hit him. “Is that the best you can do?”

“No,” Shaun said, then flicked the brush harder.

“Ooh, now I’m scared. Here, take this, Smurph!” Glassman was dunking the paint brush freshly into the paint tray that was on his other side, and Shaun felt more and bigger paint drops hitting him.

Oh, so now it was a competition! He looked around and the only paint source he had was the puddle on the floor, so he used that, attacking Dr. Glassman anew.

After another round of paint drop attacks, Glassman laughed again and stopped the assault. By that time, Shaun couldn't help but laugh, too. Dr. Glassman was covered in tiny green specks of paint, some of them sticking to his beard, and he'd smeared some across his nose. He looked very comical, and the whole situation was just so absurd.

Shaun's laughter subsided, and so did Glassman's. It was suddenly very quiet, and Dr. Glassman's eyes were on him, the amusement having made way for something more earnest, more profound.

"Is something wrong? Are you hurt?" Shaun inquired.

"No. Just…" Dr. Glassman rubbed at the paint between his fingers, "this is the first time I've seen you laugh in months." There was a pregnant pause. "Salen really did a number on you, didn't she?"

Shaun wasn't sure what to say to that, but maybe he didn't have to. Glassman didn't seem to expect a response. He was getting on his knees, diverting his attention to the mess on the floor. "Well, we better clean this up. I wanna make sure the plastic didn't tear. Can you help me?"

"Of course."

It took them a while to clean up the mess. Luckily the plastic hadn't torn and there was no damage to the hardwood floor. Finishing up painting the remaining edges and corners took them another hour, and both of them finally surveyed the fruits of their labor when they were done.

"Nicely done, Smurph," Glassman told Shaun, nudging him lightly with one elbow.

Shaun gave him a smile. "It is… very calming."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I'll do the cleanup tomorrow. Right now, we've both earned ourselves a reward for all the hard work, don't you think? Come on."

Shaun was now picking at the dried paint stains on his skin, flaking it off with his fingernail. "I don't like the paint, can I take a shower?"

Glassman gave him a curious look. "Sure. Just don't fall asleep in the bathtub again."

"I am not drunk."

"No, but you will be."

"From taking a shower in your bathroom?"

Glassman chuckled. "No, from the tequila that we're gonna have. You didn't come by car, did you?"

"No, I walked."

"See, perfect. Take your shower, then come join me in the living room."

Shaun was glad to scrub the paint off his skin, he hoped he had been able to reach all the places where it had gotten. The tiny flecks didn't all come off, he might have to take another stab at it at home later, but at least they didn't bother him like the larger dried patches did.

Once back in his regular clothes, he went back downstairs where Dr. Glassman was already sitting by the fireplace, lazily leafing through what looked like a photo album. He looked up at Shaun as he entered.

"All spick and span, I see."

Shaun rolled his shoulders. "Yes. It feels better."

"Come, sit down. You might get a kick out of this." He handed Shaun the album.

"What is it?"

"I found it when I was unpacking some boxes the other day. Our olden days, I'm sure you remember."

Shaun opened the album, looked at the photos. They were from before his university days, the year he'd lived with Dr. Glassman before he started med school. A weekend trip they'd taken out to a cabin where Dr. Glassman had introduced him to fishing. Shaun had thought it was very boring, and they hadn't caught any fish that were edible.

He had good memories of that time, it had felt like the home he'd never had.

On the next page, Shaun was eating a vanilla ice cream bar. The ice cream was dripping off his hand and Shaun had his tongue out to lick at it. He still remembered the taste of sucking on the wooden stick.

"Those were the days, huh?" Glassman remarked.

"I don't remember this," he pointed at the photo with the ice cream.

"You know, me neither, actually. Apparently, you were enjoying ice cream. I think it may have been at Fort Caspar Museum."

Shaun smiled. He remembered the museum. They'd gone there in History class once. Dr. Glassman had taken him again years later and talked a lot about the native Indian history and the battle that had been fought there in the 1800's. Shaun recalled some of the black and white drawings from the plaques and leaflets they'd looked at.

"Shaun, do you ever wish I had adopted you?"

Whoa. That knocked Shaun sideways for a moment. He had to suck in a sharp breath. Glassman seemed to have noticed.

"I'm sorry, that probably came a little out of the blue."

"Yes," Shaun said.

"Yes, you have?"

Shaun nodded slowly, and looked at Dr. Glassman. He thought maybe there was something… Maybe Dr. Glassman was getting teary. That didn't happen very often.

Shaun's voice was quiet. "Do *you* ever wish that you had?"

Glassman's voice was thick with unspoken emotion. "Yes."

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't know. I think maybe I was scared."

"Because of Maddie?"

"Yeah. Mostly. I don't know. Maybe I didn't want the responsibility. And now look at you, you're all grown up."

"You don't think of me as family."

"No, Shaun, I do."

"You… said… you had no child."

"And I don't. My daughter is dead. You know that, Shaun." He paused, then looked at Shaun. "That really resonated with you, didn't it?"

Shaun nodded. "Yes."

"Jesus. I'm sorry. That was probably careless of me. You know that I love you, right?"

Shaun briefly met his eyes. "I do. And I love you, too."

The moment hung there in silence for a short second, then Glassman gave a short, abashed chuckle. "Okay, enough with the soul baring, let's drink."

He handed Shaun a shot glass with tequila, and Shaun took it. Glassman raised his. "To old and new memories."

Shaun raised his glass as well. "To fresh walls… and fresh starts."

"Amen." Glassman downed his tequila, and so did Shaun. It tasted better than whatever cheap version they'd sold him at the cocktail bar.

Relishing the sensation of the alcohol, Shaun said, "Did you know that in Germany, you have to look each other in the eyes when you toast, otherwise you will have seven years of bad sex?"

"Uh oh," Glassman chuckled. "Looks like we're doomed."

"Why, are you having sex?"

"Not right now, I'm not."

"Are you having sex later?"

“No, Shaun.” Glassman chuckled again. “I’m not having sex with anyone right now.”

“Me neither.”

“Yeah, I was kinda figuring that. All the more reason to drink. Here, give me your glass, you’ll need another one.”

“Are we getting drunk?”

Glassman looked at him over the rim of his glasses as he handed Shaun another round. “Not bathtub level, but yes, maybe a little. Unless you have any objections.”

“No,” Shaun replied and downed the next shot. No objections at all to drinking in Dr. Glassman’s company with quality tequila.

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It hadn’t been a good day.

Shaun had woken up on the mattress, feeling sluggish with a considerable headache, had fought way too long to even get out of bed. He’d had a good buzz going the night before, the tequila shots with Dr. Glassman. Nothing like the previous time, he remembered everything and he hadn’t done anything weird like sleeping in bathtubs or puking into driveways.

Lea was already up, doing her home yoga that she liked to do on Sunday mornings sometimes. Shaun had blearily shielded his eyes from the bright daylight and vanished in the bathroom.

Lea was still a huge question mark and he loathed himself for not being able to make up his mind on what they should do next. Why was he like this? Why was this still always there, always at the back of his mind?

They hadn’t really talked much after Lea had walked out on him two nights ago. She was now avoiding him as much as he was avoiding her, and that grated on him, too. He used to think she was his rock. Maybe she still was, but now they just seemed to be dragging each other down. He was reminded of Claire and what she said about moving on, doing the adult thing, looking after his wellbeing. It was all too confusing.

He ate his breakfast in silence, there was no conversation. Lea consequently spent hours on the couch with headphones on, playing a PlayStation game that involved lots of sneaking around and shooting—Shaun was unfamiliar with it. He tried to read a bit, ended up looking around on meaningless websites, watching videos on YouTube for no reason.

He knew the laundry had to be folded, but he hated that too, because that had been their holy mutual Sunday chore that they always tried to do together.

Just as he decided that he’d try to go back to the paper he was going to write, settling at the dining table with his laptop, Lea switched off the TV and started preparing something in the kitchen. Shaun wasn’t too worried at first, he figured she was making herself some food, until she got out the mixer and started making way too much noise for him to be able to focus on anything.

He stopped what he was doing and used a break in the ruckus to ask, “Do you have to do this now?”

She shot him a glare. “Yes, Shaun, I have to do this now.”

“I am trying to concentrate.”

“Well, tough luck, because I am making a cake.”

“Can you not make the cake later?”

Lea put down the spoon she’d been holding with a forceful clank. Her voice was now clearly laced with anger. “No, because I don’t want to do it later!”

Shaun flinched, not wanting to deal with another explosive conflict, but that was where they were headed, or maybe already right in the midst of.

Lea was now glaring at him. “Why does it always have to be you? God knows, I’ve made enough accommodations for you lately. And now you can’t even give me this one thing?” She raised her voice more, practically yelling at him. “This *one* tiny thing?!”

He had to suppress the instinct to raise his hands to his ears, all his muscles suddenly taut.

“Please don’t yell,” he tried to assuage her.

“What if I want to yell?” she shot back, “What if I’m sick of all this, of tiptoeing around, of the silences and the ignoring and the evasion, huh? What if I just want to yell at you for once, because you know what, Shaun? You’ve been a fucking jerk these last few days!”

Shaun flinched, they were definitely headed towards dangerous territory. Lea’s eyes were now red at the rim, her voice raised.

“I don’t know what Claire has told you, but ever since you spoke to her, you’ve been— I don’t even know what to call it anymore. You talked to her about us, right? I know you did, because that’s how you do things. And she must have told you *some*thing because you’ve been *so* worked up. Did she say I was a shitty girlfriend? That changing your scores was unforgivable?”

“No,” was the only thing he could respond.

“Then what?! What did she tell you?”

“She said— She said that we should consider how we can both move on. She said it would be only fair and the adult thing to do. And that I look tired. And that she’s worried. And that I should take care of myself…”

Lea left the cake dough making where it was and stomped down to the dining table, standing on the opposite side of where he sat. “Oh yeah?” she said, and he could tell for once that it was sarcasm, “That’s perfect. Because you clearly have worked so hard on *not* taking care of yourself in the past few weeks, haven’t you?”

Shaun just sat there frozen, unable to speak, before Lea continued, “And who is Claire to dole out this advice like some all-knowing wise woman anyway? She hasn’t even been here for months,

and yet you talk to *her* about all this, but you don't talk to me?! That's great, Shaun. That's really great."

"She asked me why we cancelled the wedding. Did you want me to lie to her?"

"No. Jesus." Lea sounded frustrated now. "But I've asked you time and again to talk about it, and you refuse. You always refuse, because, I dunno, it hurts too much or whatever it is with you. And I thought, okay, he needs more time, and God knows, I've been patient. But you've given me nothing."

She huffed. "It's been weeks, and here we are, still not talking, and now you're twisting words of advice you've been given by someone who's however many thousands of miles away, whom you haven't seen in months, who wasn't here, who knows nothing about what's been going on?!"

He raised his voice. "Claire wanted to help me!"

"And did she? Did she help you? Why couldn't you just talk to me?!"

No. Lea wasn't getting it. This was his thing, his process, he needed an outsider's perspective. Lea had said so herself, she should know that.

"I can't!" he said louder than he anticipated, and it startled him a little. "I can't talk to you about this, because you…" He tried to find the words, but he was being pelted with all these feelings, a dangerous barrage of sensations flying in from all angles.

"I what?!" she bellowed back. "What, Shaun?!"

He had it all swirling around in his head, and now Lea was yelling at him, she was angry, and he was angry, and—

He hastily got up from the chair, it made a screeching noise on the hardwood floor. His voice was vehement now, everything was bubbling right there, just under the surface, and it just needed out.

"You… changed my scores without asking me! I said I didn't want you to do anything about them, but you did. I don't have… I never had many people I could trust. This is very important to me. You *know* this!"

He clenched his fists, relaxed them again, held his hands in front of him. "I trusted you, I've always trusted you! You know I can't read people, you *know* I'm not good with that. You *knew* that, and you went behind my back, and that hurt me."

He briefly looked at her—she stood motionless, silent, her eyes trained on him.

He sucked in a breath, unable to stop now, "I want to trust you again, but how? How can I trust you when I don't know if you will do that again, when you know all this about me and you ignored it?"

His voice broke a little when he said it. "You know me. And you betrayed me and you lied to me. How can I marry you?"

She stood where she was with the table between them, but her eyes were on him. Her gaze seemed a little less glaring, her tone of voice less acerbic.

“Shaun, I am working very hard on showing you that you can trust me again. These past three weeks, I’ve done everything I can to show you that. I’ve been there every step of the way. I’ve said sorry a million times. What else do you want me to do? I can’t change what happened.”

Yeah, and that was the crux of the matter, wasn’t it? She couldn’t change what happened, and he couldn’t be sure that it wouldn’t happen again. She’d been careless with his trust, had hung it out to dry, who said she couldn’t do that again if it suited her? Who said *he* could be the type of person to learn how to trust her again?

He took another step back, folded his hands in front of his chest. “People lie all the time. They say one thing, and they do another. And I don’t know. I don’t know when they do, and I no longer know when *you* do. Dr. Glassman lied to me. I believed him and he lied, and he left. You lied and you hurt me, and when you told me, it was… it was very unexpected.”

He took in a shaky breath. “This… feels—” He hit his sternum with the knuckle of his thumb, “It hurts, Lea. I think of us getting married, and that’s forever. That means having a child with you, and it means… my whole life. With you.

“I thought I could trust you. And that… that is gone. It’s gone, and that… that distrust is there. It’s always there. I don’t—” He sucked in a breath. “I don’t know how to make it go away. I don’t know how you can make it go away, either.”

She looked down at her feet. Her anger seemed to have dissipated, replaced with something else. Her voice was suddenly very sad, “I probably can’t, and I’m sorry about that, too.”

He let out a deflated breath, felt his energy leaving him. “What do we do now?”

She looked up again, tried to meet his eyes, he could tell. He didn’t return the favor. “I don’t know, Shaun. Is there anything we *can* do with that, except try to give it more time?”

She was still looking at him, asked the question that had hung there for a while. “Do you *want* to give it more time?”

He met her eyes, knew he loved her, knew he wanted her to be his again, to be the person he could trust and touch and hug and kiss. His eyes filled with tears, and his exhale was suddenly quivering and unsteady.

It killed him that he didn’t know the answer. He knew it wasn’t no, but he also knew that an unequivocal and absolute yes was not his first instinct either.

He turned away from her without a response, paced a few steps behind the couch.

“Is that a no?” Lea asked tentatively.

“It is not a no,” he said.

“But it’s not a yes, either? How does that work, Shaun?”

His hand went to his hair. He didn't— He didn't know. It didn't make any sense. He went to the door, started hastily putting on his shoes.

Suddenly Lea was there, planting herself in front of the apartment door. "Please don't run, Shaun. It's been so long, it's been weeks. If this is the right time to pull the plug, then maybe we need to rip that band aid off right here, right now."

"Please let me leave," he said, his voice cold and flat.

It must have struck a chord. She stepped aside, vacating the door. He grabbed his jacket and the keys off the hook and left. The door closed behind him, one more barrier between them.

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Shaun didn't know how, he'd just walked, but suddenly he was standing in Dr. Glassman's front garden. His head was still a jumble of thoughts, confusing, overwhelming, hard to get a grip on.

He lingered, walking a few steps towards the door, stopping, turning around again. What was he doing? What were *they* doing? She'd asked the big question, and he still didn't have an answer.

He walked up the door, rang the doorbell. It reverberated throughout the house. No one answered.

Shaun felt lost. He was lost and out of this depth. Again. He sat down on the stone step in front of the door, resting his forehead on his folded arms on his knees. He wanted this to stop, wanted this to be over, wanted things to be the way they had been before when everything was good.

He remembered people telling him that you couldn't always get what you wanted in life, that sometimes bad and unfair things happened, that life had a way of throwing you curveballs, and then you had to navigate your way around that and deal with it.

It sucked. It sucked and he hated it. Nothing felt right anymore, and everything was just so much effort and work all the time now. He'd lost all his safe spaces, and that grated on him every day, made everything a hundred times more cumbersome.

He heard a noise to his right, a car pulling up into the driveway. He didn't have the energy to look up. A car door slammed, then a familiar voice.

"Shaun?"

He didn't look up.

The rustle of paper bags, Dr. Glassman sitting down next to him. "Hey, Shaun, what's wrong?"

"Everything," he muttered.

"What happened?"

He lifted his head slightly, let his chin rest on his arms. "Lea and I had a fight."

Glassman sighed audibly. "Do you wanna talk about it?"

He let out a hum. Glassman got up. “Then can we not talk about it inside? It’s kinda cold out here.”

Shaun said nothing, didn’t move. Glassman unlocked the door behind him. “Okay, Shaun, I’m gonna go inside. You can stay out if you want to, but I’d like if you came inside with me.”

He sat there for another moment, trying to decide what to do, but in the end yielded to Dr. Glassman’s request. The front door was slightly ajar, so Shaun went in and found Dr. Glassman in the kitchen, putting groceries in the fridge.

Shaun wordlessly sat down on one of the stools at the kitchen island. Glassman gave him a brief once-over, then got a mug from the cabinet, poured some milk in it, added a good amount of chocolate syrup, stirred it and put it in the microwave.

It whirred for a minute with no other words spoken, Glassman sorting away his purchases, Shaun just watching. When the microwave dinged, Glassman took out the mug, stirred it again, then put it in front of Shaun.

Shaun took a careful sip, relished the warm drink, the familiar taste. Dr. Glassman sat down next to him, looked at him with watchful eyes through his glasses.

“Did you and Lea talk about your… stuff? With the marriage and all that? Is that what you fought about?”

Shaun nodded slowly, then said, “Yes,” in a low voice.

“And I’m guessing you didn’t come to any kind of satisfactory conclusion?”

“We yelled at each other. Then she asked if we should break up.”

Glassman raised his eyebrows. “And?”

Shaun shrugged slowly. “I don’t know how to answer that.”

“Well, you must have given her some kind of answer. Or did you just run?”

Shaun sighed. Dr. Glassman knew him well. “I didn’t say yes.”

“But you also didn’t say no?”

“I don’t want to break up with Lea.”

“Yeah, I think you’ve said that before, and it’s probably good that you still feel that way. But maybe you gotta try to understand her side in this, too. She’s tired of the waiting, of the uncertainty. You two have quite a history, and that gets in the way.”

Shaun just stared at the mug and said nothing.

“You gotta understand her frustration, Shaun. You’ll have to make a decision about this at one point or another. I think she may be waiting for that.”

Shaun hummed, not liking that answer. It was a big decision. One he was afraid of making, because he liked neither option. Why couldn't he just resolve this? Why was his stupid brain getting hung up on this, why couldn't he just get a grip on this thing?

"Hey," Glassman's voice broke him from his reverie. "Talk to me, Shaun."

Shaun wondered what he'd seen, how he could tell. He got up from his seat, started pacing. "I hate how things are with me and Lea. I want to change it, but I can't. I just… can't do it."

"So what's the underlying issue? The fact that she lied to you?"

"Yes. I don't know if I can trust her again." Shaun's hand went to his hair.

"Okay. Well, you've been hung up on that for a while, I think, right? Has she done anything since to make you doubt that you could trust her again?"

"No. I don't know. I cannot always tell these things."

"Yeah, and that's probably part of the problem too, isn't it? That you missed it last time, so you're afraid you'll miss it again?"

"Yes," Shaun confirmed.

"And you can't just take a leap of faith with her?"

Shaun stopped pacing and met Dr. Glassman's eyes. "What does that mean?"

"It means you put all those doubts aside and believe in the good in people, believe that she loves enough to have learned her lesson not to do that again."

"But I need to know. I can't just *believe*."

"But that's not how this works. I know you want things to be clear-cut, but in a long term relationship, it isn't just like that, Shaun. Sometimes people make mistakes, and you gotta trust them that they learn from them.

"You're holding on to this grudge, and I think your head keeps telling you that there needs to be some big conclusion, that there's, I don't know, some kind of act of deliverance before you can get over this, but that may never happen. Sometimes you just gotta trust your heart instead of your head."

Shaun felt himself deflate, let out a shaky breath. What Dr. Glassman was saying was both confusing and liberating, because maybe that's what he had been holding on to all this time—a false sense of expectation, a hope for something he'd never find.

Trusting his heart had never been his strong suit. His heart was something that confused him and overwhelmed him and got in the way. It wasn't rational, and he needed rational.

"I don't know how to do that."

"Yeah, and you keep saying that too, but you know what, Shaun? I think you do. I think you made this decision a long time ago, because you're still here, in this same spot, insisting that you

don't want to leave Lea. And that's something that comes from your heart, and not your head. And I know that you don't know what to do with that, so maybe that's something that you can try to figure out."

Shaun let out another long breath, felt a little steadier on his feet. He returned to the kitchen island and sat back down on the stool. He took another sip from the hot chocolate that had gone lukewarm by now.

Glassman was watching him warily, maybe waiting for a response. Shaun didn't have one, but it felt like a whole new avenue he hadn't seen before had suddenly opened up.

He met Dr. Glassman's eyes and hoped he could convey the thank you that he wanted to say out loud but that wouldn't come. He probably did, because Dr. Glassman's mouth formed into a small smile.

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Lea was exhausted. The endless rut she and Shaun were stuck in, the waiting, the uncertainty, and now the culmination in that fight that left her head in a mess of thoughts and guilt.

He'd gotten mad about the cake dough mixing, and she could see why. They were usually a lot more in tune than this. The cake was now in the oven, the smell of sugary baked goodness starting to waft through the apartment. At least there was that.

Lea knew a lot of shit had happened that had kicked Shaun out of his equilibrium, and he kept being sideswiped with just one more thing after the next that was distracting and uprooting him. He'd thrived last year, when things were in smoother waters, when they'd settled in together and developed an easy routine. And he'd been so strong, so brave during the time they'd lost the baby.

Maybe it had lured her into a false sense of security. Maybe he'd just been masking at the time for her sake—the calm before the storm. Maybe this *was* too hard, too much to commit to for the rest of her life, if it meant it would be like this every time that life decided to throw them a curveball.

He'd run off again, like he did when conflict ensued. She hated that, too. At least he'd finally voiced his emotions, they'd come a step closer to what was really going on. She'd gotten bits and pieces before, and she'd already known that the loss of trust had been his big snag, the thing he kept getting stuck on.

What she hadn't considered, not really, was how deeply rooted it was. He'd never had many people in his life he could fully trust. She'd been one of them. Until she went and threw that into the fire to incinerate. The ashes were still smoldering.

The question had been popped—could they get past this? Could *he* get past this? She still wasn't sure, and she suspected neither was he. So how long were they going to continue this song and dance?

Her phone rang, it was her mother. With a sigh, she answered.

"Hey, Mom."

“Hi Lea, how are you?”

“Honestly? Not great. Shaun and I just had a big fight.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Is it still about the wedding?”

“Yeah. He’s just… I don’t know, we’re not really getting anywhere. I guess we had this coming.”

“That’s too bad. Are you still sure you don’t wanna come over for Christmas? It sounds like maybe some time away wouldn’t be the worst thing for you. It’s just another week, and I wouldn’t want you to have to spend Christmas fighting with Shaun.”

“No, Mom, he wouldn’t fight on Christmas. He’s not like that.”

“You just said you had a big fight.”

“Yeah, *one* fight. He’s not someone who easily gets angry. I don’t know, maybe this wasn’t such a bad thing.”

“Why do you keep defending him? Isn’t he the one who called off the wedding?”

“Yeah, but it’s more complicated than that. You know that he’s different, that he’s…”

She let that hang in the air, and her mother completed the sentence with, “Autistic.”

How did her mother have such an uncanny ability to make her furious at a moment’s notice? “Yes, *autistic*. And that’s not his fault,” she shot at her.

“I didn’t say it was.”

“No, but you thought about it.”

“Lea…”

“Mom, can you please stay out of this? You don’t know Shaun all that well, and there’s much more to it than what you’re seeing. I’ll think about coming home for Christmas, okay? It might not be such a bad idea, but I have to talk to Shaun about it. He doesn’t really have anyone, I don’t wanna just spring this on him.”

“Doesn’t he have Dr. Glassman?”

“Yeah, but that’s about it. He doesn’t have any other family, certainly no one here in San Jose.”

“Well, that’s up to you, Lea. The offer stands, and we’d love to see you. Donnie, too. He and Česlava are getting serious, I think it would be nice for you to meet her.”

Lea sighed. Maybe her mom was right. She was liking the idea more and more. “Okay. I don’t even know if I can still get a flight on such short notice. I’ll have to look into it.”

“All right. Here, your father would love to speak with you.” She handed the phone over, Lea could hear the rustle.

“Hey Shortstuff.”

“Dad, I told you not to call me that.”

“How are things going?”

“They’ve been better. You can probably guess.”

“Are you coming for Christmas? Your mother would really love to see you. So would I.”

“Yeah, she told me. I don’t know yet, I’ll think about it.”

“Did she mention that Donnie just bought a 1500 MGA Roadster? He’s working on it as we speak, it’s in pretty bad shape, but he got a really good deal on it.”

“Seriously? Dr. Glassman has one of those, I helped him fix it up. It’s a real beauty.”

“Heh, that’s quite a coincidence. All the more reason for you to come, you can help your brother out.”

“We’ll see, Dad, okay? Say hi to Donnie, though. Tell him to send me a picture, I’d love to see it.”

“Will do. Everything going okay at work?”

“Yeah, work’s good. You know, the usual. A few bigger changes lately, but we’re working through that.” She knew it was a bit of a sugarcoated lie, but she didn’t want to get into the whole thing with her parents.

“Okay, that’s good. Well, I’ll let you get to it. Do you wanna speak to your mother again?”

“No, I’m good, thanks. I’ll let you know in the next day or two about coming over. I’ll talk to you later, okay?

“Okay. Bye.”

“Bye, Dad.”

They both hung up, and Lea went over to pull out a chair and sit down at the dining table, putting the phone on the table. Did she want to go to Hershey? She knew Shaun would probably hate it, but there was also that thing about taking care of yourself that he’d mentioned, that Claire had told him. Was it time to put herself first, at least for a few days?

Would it not help both of them to not be constantly around each other, to just get away for a while? Maybe that could finally help Shaun make his decision, too.

She got up and fetched her laptop, started to look at flight options that were still available. They weren’t all that cheap, but there were still tickets available that were affordable. She started to warm up to the idea, and before she knew it, she had made her decision.

Twenty minutes later, she had just taken the cake out of the oven five minutes ago, the apartment door opened. She looked up, and there he was, his usual self, briefly looking at her before he came in and took off his shoes and jacket.

“This smells nice,” he commented.

The smallest of smiles flicked across her face. Okay. So he wasn’t still mad. That bode well. “Lemon cake,” she commented. “You want a piece?”

It was a peace offering, she hoped he understood. Maybe he did, because he said, “Yes, please.”

The cake was still steaming and hot, and she tried to peel it out of the silicone baking mold, glad that she managed to keep it intact in the process. It smelled delicious, and she cut off two pieces she put on plates, carrying it over to the table where Shaun was now sitting.

She sat down, broke off a piece of the cake and tried it. It tasted good. Shaun did the same thing, and awkward silence ensued for just a few moments too long.

They both spoke at the same time.

“Lea…”

“Shaun, I—”

Both fell silent. She motioned to him. “You first.”

He looked up. “I’m sorry.”

She nodded. “Yeah, me too. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I know you hate that.”

“I don’t want you to be mad at me.”

“I know. Shaun, I… There’s something I need to tell you.”

Even though he wasn’t looking at her, she saw alarm flashing there. The fear of another shoe being dropped when the pile of shoes was already sky high. It didn’t matter, there was no easy way to tell him.

“I’m going to Hershey over Christmas.”

There. She’d said it. She looked at him—his face had suddenly turned from halfway relaxed to inscrutable. She waited for a reply, but he said nothing. “Say something, please.”

His voice was flat, emotionless. “Okay.”

“That’s it? Just ‘okay’?”

“What do you want me to say? You have already decided.”

She’d blindsided him again, she knew. “Would you want me to stay?”

“Would that change your decision?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Probably not.”

“Then my opinion doesn’t matter.”

“Can I hear it anyway?”

He kept his attention on his cake. “If you are not here, I will volunteer to work. Many doctors don’t want to work on Christmas.”

“Yeah, that’s good, but doesn’t answer my question.”

He looked up at her, met her eyes for the briefest of moments. “I don’t like being alone for Christmas. But… if I go to work, I will not be alone. It will keep me distracted.”

She closed her eyes and drew in a long breath. “Look, I know we talked about spending some time apart, and I know we both said we didn’t want that, but my mom suggested it and at first I didn’t want to go, but then I thought… You know, I haven’t seen my parents for a while, and I… After these last few days, after today, I think it might give us both an opportunity to get some perspective.”

“Have you already booked your flight?”

She frowned. “No. Why?”

He hummed noncommittally, and she thought maybe he wanted to gauge just how much of a fait accompli it was. She wished he would look at her, or at the very least give her more attention, so she tried again. “Shaun, if you *really*, really hate the idea, I’ll stay, but I think it could be good. For both of us. Will you think about it?”

He shifted the cake around on his plate with one finger. “I don’t need to think about it. I will go to work. I like working, and it will help someone else to spend time with their family.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he said without looking up.

She let out a heavy breath and decided there and then to call Glassman and ask him if he could spend some time with Shaun on Christmas. Shaun had once mentioned Glassman was half Jewish, so Lea didn’t know how he felt about Christmas traditions, but maybe that didn’t matter.

“I just want you to know I’m not doing this to punish you. I love you, and I want what’s best for you, but I also want us to get past this. I want us to get better.”

“Lea,” he said, his tone now impatient. “You don’t have to keep explaining why you want to visit your parents.”

She sighed. “Okay. I’ll talk to my mom, let her know that I’ll be coming. It’ll probably be just a few days. Knowing my family, I’ll get real sick of them real fast, and then it’ll be great to come back here to our nice, cozy, quiet apartment.”

Shaun said nothing and kept ignoring her, and that hurt a little, too. He wasn’t a resentful person, or a huffish person. He’d been known to give her the cold shoulder once or twice, but that usually came with an evasive avoidance tactic. This was not that. This was a side to him that puzzled her, that worried her.

Maybe she'd hurt him again, basically presenting the fact to him she'd be abandoning him over Christmas. Then again, he wasn't someone who valued the holidays in the first place. He wasn't one to put a lot of importance in traditions, and she imagined his Christmas holidays hadn't always been a time of cheer when he was a kid.

They kept eating the cake in silence, and Shaun took his plate to the kitchen counter with half the slice still on it. He vanished in the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Her brow knitted, and she started to doubt her decision, but then stopped herself.

No. This time she'd do what was best for her, and not for Shaun. It would just be a few days. It wasn't like she was calling it quits on their relationship.

She picked up her phone again, called Glassman's number. She wasn't abandoning Shaun. He was a grown man, and it wouldn't be his first time spending Christmas without her. It wasn't like he didn't have other people. He'd get over it.

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09 - To cut out words I've got written on my chair

“Hey, Shaun,” Morgan greeted Shaun as he was eating a sandwich in the break room. “What’s with the mopey face?”

He frowned. What mopey face? “I don’t have a mopey face.”

“Yes, you do.” She pointed at his face. “That. That is your mopey face. I know it well. We’ve seen a lot of it lately.”

She sat down across from him, sipping at a juice box of some sort with a straw.

“This is the only face I have,” he told her.

“Is this still about Lea?”

He hummed, not sure he wanted to discuss it with Morgan.

Morgan pressed on. “So the marriage is still off, I’m guessing?”

“Yes,” he confirmed.

Silence settled for a while, then Morgan sighed. “This Christmas is gonna suck. Dr. Nielander had a family emergency, so I’m on call, which figures. Alex magically is off shift, so that’s gonna be real festive, with me here, treating drunk or stupid idiots all day. Not much holiday cheer at a hospital on Christmas Day.”

“It was not magical,” Shaun explained. “I took over his shift.”

Morgan looked at him quizzically. “You did? Why?”

“Lea is visiting her parents. I will be alone.”

“Oh? That’s interesting.”

He looked up, briefly met her eyes. “Why?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I was thinking you’d want to spend some quality time together, Christmas spirit and mistletoe and all that. You know, time for contemplation and reflection…”

Shaun put down his sandwich, trying to make sense of what Morgan was saying. He’d been told so many things by so many different people. He drew in a breath.

“Alex said that you have to trust your partner not to betray you. Alma said that people can let you down even when they love you. Lea said I’ve been a jerk and need to make a decision. Dr. Glassman said that I’ve already made up my mind, and Claire said I need to consider me and Lea moving on.”

He clenched his fists and felt the same old nerves and fears bubble within him. “I don’t know how spending time with Lea on Christmas will help with figuring out what to do with any of that.”

“Wait…” Morgan suddenly appeared confused. “Claire? How does Claire come into all this?”

“I talked to her last week.”

“And she told you it would be best for you to break up with Lea?”

“No. She said that I need to consider if I would be better off if I moved on.”

“Which is basically the same thing.”

Shaun gave her a look. “Is that bad advice?”

“Saint Claire has always been a meddler—a caring one, but still a meddler. She butts into other people’s lives when it’s really none of her business. And right now she’s in another country, however many thousand miles away. Should you really be taking her advice right now?”

“Claire is my friend. She always wants to help me.”

“Yeah, I’m sure she does, but that’s not the point.”

“Then who? Who do I trust?”

Morgan smiled at him, and maybe it was even sincere. He could never tell with her. Her answer was simple. “Yourself.”

He drew in a long breath. That was what Dr. Glassman had said, too. Were they right? Had he already made up his mind, like Dr. Glassman pointed out?

It was all so confusing. Lea was leaving for Hershey in two days, so it didn’t matter much anyway.

“Hey, do you wanna come over on Boxing Day?”

Shaun was taken aback. He hadn’t expected an invite from Morgan. Was she doing it just because she felt sorry for him? “No, thank you, I will be working a double shift.”

“Oh wow, you’re really digging into the whole martyr complex now, aren’t you?” She took another sip from her juice box.

“Martyr complex?”

“Yeah. Woe-is-me, I will work a million double shifts because being home alone sucks balls. You could have asked Alex if he wanted to come over for a day, you know?”

“It is Christmas.”

“Yeah, so what? Alex’s family is out in Phoenix and he thought he was working on Christmas Day until today. My family is kind of a mess, and our Christmas get-togethers are always a disaster, so no way I’m putting myself through that. You don’t have the monopoly on being sad and lonely, Shaun.”

Now he was curious. “Are you sad and lonely?”

“No. Because I choose not to be. You could, too.” She gave him a smile.

“I am spending Christmas Eve with Dr. Glassman.”

“Well, there you go. And thank you for taking extra shifts on Christmas. I’ll make sure that Alex makes it up to you.”

“N-no, that’s not necessary.”

“Maybe not, but it’s still a nice gesture. And I gotta go. Remember, Shaun,” Morgan pointed a warning finger at him, “no more moping.”

Shaun gave her a small smile. “I will try.”

“That’s the spirit.”

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Lea zipped up her suitcase for the trip to Hershey, clicking the zippers into the built-in locks. She’d had some trouble fitting all the warm clothes, not looking forward to the drop in temperatures compared to the mild Californian weather, but with the Ranger Rolling technique that Shaun had showed her a while ago, she managed to make do with the medium-sized suitcase after all.

Just as she was about to straighten up and get ready to leave, she noticed Shaun appearing in the bedroom doorway. He was holding two items that were wrapped in Christmas gift wrap. He looked a little self-conscious.

“Shaun?” Lea asked carefully.

He held out the two items. “Please take these with you to Hershey.”

She got up from her crouching position. “Okay. I assume these are for me?”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“And then what? I open them on Christmas without you? That doesn’t seem right.”

“You should open Christmas presents on Christmas Day,” he explained.

“Where is this coming from? You’ve never been one for these super traditional things. Can’t we open our presents together when I get back?”

“N-no. It is *Christmas*.”

She frowned. “I’m still confused, but okay. Tell you what, though. We’ll open them together. Over video. I would love to talk to you on Christmas Day.”

“I will be working a double shift.”

“Yeah, I know. But we can do it afterwards.”

“The time zone difference is three hours. It will be very late for you.”

“Yeah, so what? I’ll stay up, it’s not like I need to get up early the next day.”

Shaun didn’t seem convinced, so she went over to him and took the presents. “Come on, just imagine. We can have some mutual eggnog or, I don’t know, mulled wine. Talk for a bit, open our presents. It’ll be nice, don’t you think?”

“Okay,” he finally agreed.

“Okay,” Lea echoed with a smile. She opened the suitcase again and squeezed the presents in there. One was roughly Blu-ray sized, the other smaller. “And speaking of which… Here, turn around and close your eyes.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to reveal all my secret gift hiding places to you.”

“You have a gift for me?” Shaun seemed surprised.

“Of course I do, dummy. It’s Christmas. Now, close your eyes.”

A small smile played at Shaun’s lips, but he complied. Lea went into the spare room and got the two items out of the dresser where she’d tried to expertly hide them—apparently successfully.

Back in the bedroom, she told Shaun, “Okay, you can open your eyes now.”

He blinked against the light and took the two presents she held out to him in return. “Now, no peeking until Christmas Day, okay?”

He nodded and she smiled at him.

Shaun looked at his watch. “We have to go, your flight will leave in two hours and eight minutes.”

“Yeah, I know. But it’s not like boarding will miraculously start an hour early, just because I didn’t get there ninety minutes before the flight, you know?”

“There could be traffic. There could be long lines. There could be other setbacks.”

“Yeah, but there could also just be a smooth trip and zero delays, and then I’d be sitting in uncomfortable chairs in the airport for way too long.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No, I don’t know that. No one knows that. That’s life, Shaun. Anything can happen at any time,” Lea shrugged.

“This is why it’s better to get there early, so you can be prepared.”

Lea sighed. “Yeah, okay, I get your point.”

She extended the handle of the suitcase and rolled it out of the bedroom to the door, then fetched her carry-on. “I guess I’m all set.”

Shaun was ambling over, taking his jacket and the car keys from the coat rack. He looked cute and dapper, with an errant lock sticking out to the side that she’d normally just go and smooth out, and then she’d wrap her arms around his neck and give him a sweet kiss.

None of that was going to happen, and she could feel her eyes tearing up. It didn’t go unnoticed by Shaun. He just stood and looked at her, probably not sure what to say.

“I’m gonna miss you,” she said ruefully.

She thought maybe there was a small smile on his lips, but it didn’t last long. He opened the door. “We need to go.”

She gave a weary sigh. Yeah. He still wasn’t there. Maybe that had been a little bit her fault, too, with this more or less impromptu trip he hadn’t factored into their journey.

She took the suitcase and carry-on and stepped out into the hallway, leaving her San Jose home behind for now. She knew already she would miss it.

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Shaun’s Christmas Eve shift had been mildly interesting. With fewer elective surgeries over Christmas, he’d ended up helping out in the ER, which always seemed busier on holidays than usual.

He’d seen a wide range of cases—from a psychotic episode patient needing sutures who claimed his newspaper had attacked him, a homeless person with gangrene on their feet, a firefighter with full thickness burns, to his only true surgical case that day, a blunt-force abdominal trauma patient with a ruptured spleen who needed emergency surgery.

Christmas cheer was in the air, the hospital decorated with tacky Christmas trees and carols playing on repeat over the speakers at low volume. Shaun had been offered cinnamon walnut flavored cupcakes and gingerbread that he’d declined, and he’d been wished a Merry Christmas more times than he could count.

By the time he got home, his head was swimming from the aftermath of all the sensory input, and he longed for some quiet time at the apartment. And yet, there was the dinner with Dr. Glassman that he had to get ready for, so he spent twenty minutes just winding down on the couch before he got ready to make his way to Dr. Glassman’s house.

Armed with a bottle of red wine like Dr. Glassman had asked, Shaun stood in front of the door and rang the doorbell an hour later.

Glassman opened with a cheerful, “Hey Shaun, Merry Christmas,” and let him in.

“Merry Christmas, Dr. Glassman,” Shaun echoed.

“Come on in,” he gestured towards the kitchen.

The kitchen looked different from its usually pretty tidy state. There were cardboard boxes and dishes with aluminum foil over them on the kitchen island. The table was somewhat haphazardly set. A fire was crackling in the fireplace to the side, even a small Christmas tree with sparser decoration and white lights in it was standing there.

Shaun put the wine bottle on the kitchen counter and took off his jacket, hanging it over one of the chairs at the table.

“Here, help me with this,” Glassman told him and handed him some cutlery.

Shaun placed it on the table, neat and orderly next to the plates.

Glassman picked up the wine bottle, then chuckled. “Zinfandel? And people say you don’t have a sense of humor.”

Shaun grinned. “You said it was jammy and peppery. I would like to try it.”

“Well, let’s hope this one lives up to it.”

It took another ten or fifteen minutes for them to ready everything and put all the dishes on the table. The final act was Glassman getting the honey-glazed ham out of the oven where he’d let it stay warm, placing it on the trivets in between himself and Shaun after he had cut off a few slices.

He stuck a carving fork in one of them and told Shaun, “Dig in.”

Shaun surveyed the richly laden table. “Are you expecting more visitors?”

Glassman gave him a curious look. “No, why?”

“This is a lot of food.”

“Yeah, it’s Christmas. You eat way more than you should and warm up the leftovers the next day. You can take some home, too.”

“I will be working tomorrow.”

“You have a fridge, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Dr. Glassman knew this, why was he asking?

“Well, there you go.”

“Where did you get all this?”

“If you gotta know, the ham is from the Honey Baked Ham store,” Glassman pointed at everything as he listed it off, “green bean casserole from the grocery store deli, burgers from In-N-Out, and the pancakes from IHOP.”

“Why are we having pancakes and burgers?”

“Because they’re good.”

Glassman started to heap food onto his plate and Shaun did the same, even though this was a bit of an eclectic mixture. They ate in comfortable silence. Dr. Glassman opened the wine, and they both tried it.

Glassman nodded appreciatively. If Shaun was being honest, he preferred Etna Rosso over the Zinfandel, but it wasn't bad and he kept taking small sips of it with the ham and the casserole. Which Dr. Glassman had been right about, it was very good.

When they were halfway through, Glassman's phone dinged somewhere in the background, and he got up to check it. He held it up to Shaun.

"Lea seems to be having a good time."

It was a selfie with her and a table laden with food, holding up two fingers in a horizontal V shape next to her face. She looked happy.

"Why did she send you this?" Shaun asked.

"She sent it to you, too. Check your phone, she made a group chat for the three of us, and she named it…" he squinted at the phone, *'The Good, The Bad and the Glassy'*.

Shaun took out his phone and unlocked it, and sure enough, there was the message in said new group chat with the photo, saying, "I present to you Dilallo overeating aftermath. Where my boys at?"

Glassman made a beckoning gesture to Shaun. "Come on, let's send her something back."

Shaun let out an unhappy hum. He hated selfies.

"Come on," Glassman urged. "She'll love it."

"She will show it to her whole family. I don't like that."

Glassman seemed to grin. "Would you rather she showed them the photo of you drunk in a bathtub? Come on."

Shaun let out a sigh and went over to where Dr. Glassman sat. The latter held up his phone, fumbled with it for a good bit until he finally managed to take a selfie of them with Shaun bending down so he was in the frame.

Glassman looked at it skeptically as Shaun sat back down. "Not very fetching, but it'll do."

He sent it into the group chat. Shaun saw it pop up. Dr. Glassman was making a grimace of some sort. Shaun wasn't smiling.

Lea replied right away. "Picture of misery right there but what did i expect? 😊 Hope at least the food is good."

"food is great," Glassman replied. He held up his phone and shot a photo of Shaun as he was just stuffing a piece of ham into his mouth.

That made it into the group chat, too. Lea commented with what looked like a laughing emoji, next to it a chicken leg.

Next message was another selfie of Lea and a man close to her age. Shaun knew it was Donnie, she had shown him photos before. The photo was somewhat blurry.

“Is that her brother?” Glassman asked.

“Yes. His name is Donnie.”

“Yeah, I can definitely see the resemblance.”

Shaun looked again, failed to see it. Donnie was a stranger to him, and he looked nothing like Lea.

Next, Lea texted, “Gotta go. Love ya both.” There was another emoji with hearts behind it.

Glassman raised his eyebrows but refrained from commenting. He put the phone on the table and took a bite from the burger, chewed on it some before he asked, “How was work today?”

Shaun shrugged. “I helped out in the ER, then we had a trauma patient with a ruptured spleen. The surgery went well.”

“And you’re working tomorrow and Sunday, too?”

“Yes, I volunteered for double shifts.”

“Okay. That seems a little excessive. Don’t you wanna relax a little?”

“Hm. No. I would like to keep busy.”

“Ah,” Glassman said.

“Ah what?”

“Ah, I don’t want to be alone while my girlfriend is on the other side of the continent with her family while I was left behind to sulk by myself.” Glassman looked at him over the rim of his glasses.

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No,” Glassman said. “It’s very you. Please make sure you get some rest, though. It’s Christmas, after all.”

Shaun stayed quiet, kept eating. He studied Dr. Glassman for a moment, then wondered, “Ilana said that you performed the surgery on her husband. Are you going back to being a neurosurgeon?”

“I *am* a neurosurgeon.”

“You haven’t performed any surgeries for a long time.”

“No, you’re right. I haven’t.”

“Did you not miss it?”

Glassman shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe not. Or maybe a little.”

“Do you not want to do surgeries again?”

Glassman cocked his head at Shaun. “Why are you so interested in this?”

“Are you avoiding the question?”

“No, I’m not avoiding the question.” Was it Shaun’s imagination, or was Dr. Glassman getting a little irritated?

“I think you are. Do you not want to be a surgeon again?”

“You know what? Maybe I do. It feels good, doesn’t it?”

Shaun let out a little pleasure sigh. “Yes, it does.”

“Tell me what you like about it.”

Shaun was now in his element. “I like… being able to find solutions. Very often, it seems simple, but then, when you cut the patient open, it’s not what you expected. Sometimes it’s easy, you can resect a tumor or fix a ruptured blood vessel or organ wall, but sometimes it’s not.

“We once had a trauma patient whose blood pressure kept dropping every time we had fixed another organ, and the solution was a very small tear in the mesenteric artery that we didn’t find until much later, and only because I suggested to look.”

“So you like the mystery, huh?”

“Yess. What do *you* like?”

“I like… okay, this is gonna sound incredibly megalomaniac, but I like accomplishing the impossible. The hardest cases couldn’t be hard enough for me. I took on so many surgeries that no other surgeon would even touch. Some of them wouldn’t work out, but whenever they did, it would feel…” He held a fist in the air, “It would feel *so good*.”

“Why did you stop doing that?”

“Come on, you know why, Shaun.”

Shaun looked at him, briefly met his eyes. “Because of your brain tumor.”

“Yeah.”

“But you’ve done surgeries since then, and the patients all survived. You saved Morgan’s mother’s life, and that of your ex-wife’s new husband. Did that not feel good?”

“Oh, it did. More than you know.”

“Then why are you not going back to that?”

“What is this, Shaun? An inquisition?”

Shaun frowned. “N-no. I would like to know.”

Glassman sighed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you. I just… I don’t know, Shaun. I’m not getting any younger. And maybe I’ve learned that I don’t need to be actively performing brain surgery in order to be happy. I mean, who knows, maybe I’ll take on the odd case here and there to ride that high again.”

“Hm.” Shaun was trying to comprehend that answer. It was difficult to understand why anyone would not want to do surgeries anymore, but he knew that Dr. Glassman had struggled with the challenge of his brain cancer diminishing his capacities as a surgeon.

There had been the scare with the CSF leak, where he’d had temporary memory loss. They’d fixed it the same day that Shaun had delivered a baby while being quarantined in the ER. It seemed like a long time ago now.

“More pancakes?” Glassman asked, holding up the plate.

Shaun was very full. “No, thank you,” he declined.

“Yeah, I’m pretty much done, too. This was nice, though, don’t you agree?”

Shaun smiled. “Yes, it was very nice. I liked the casserole.”

“Did you?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, great. How about we leave this for now and go and watch one of the Christmas classics? *The Shop Around The Corner*, what do you say?”

Shaun had seen it before, an old 1940’s movie, but he liked the classics. “Okay,” he easily agreed.

“All right, come on.”

Both of them settled easily into the couch in Dr. Glassman’s living room. Glassman took the bottle of Zinfandel and the wine glasses and they emptied it eventually.

Shaun was full and content, his senses just dulled enough from the wine to feel relaxed and at ease. Not the Christmas Eve he’d imagined he’d have before Lea had decided to spend time with her family, but a good one nevertheless.

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Lea settled easily on the guest bed with the laptop in her lap, adjusting the pillow behind her back. She had the gifts that Shaun had given her right next to her.

Christmas Day had come and gone quickly. They'd visited relatives, lots of food, lots of conversations. Her parents had been less judgmental and overbearing, and Lea felt good about the trip to Hershey.

She'd really bonded with Česlava, Donnie's girlfriend. She'd only met her once before, but she had misjudged her then, and she ended up telling her about all her recent troubles with Shaun. Česlava had obviously never met him, but perhaps that was a good thing. Her views were more objective, she listened to what Lea had to say and asked all the right questions.

Her laptop made a ringing noise, and she answered the incoming call from Shaun. His face appeared on the screen, adjusting the laptop lid so he was more centered in the frame. She did the same. He was sitting at the dining table.

"Hey, stranger," she greeted him.

"Hello, Lea," he greeted back in his familiar greeting. Some things would never change.

"You look tired. Long day at the hospital, huh?"

"Yes, but it was also interesting."

"Oh yeah? Tell me all about it."

He proceeded to talk about the patients he had seen in the ER, a man needing sutures on his hand after opening a can of mixed nuts, a Christmas lights fanatic who had gotten electrocuted when trying to tap into the main power box because the electric company had told him he couldn't use any more electricity, a stabbing victim that got mugged in a parking lot and a woman with abdominal pain that turned out to be a pregnancy were among the highlights.

She let him bubble it all out, knowing that he enjoyed these things, that he reveled in them. He loved his job so much.

When he was done, he asked about her day, and she gave him the abbreviated version, knowing he didn't really care all that much about people he had never met.

She picked up the flat, square present next to her and held it up to the camera. "Let's open presents, I wanna know what's in this."

Shaun gave a brief smile. "Okay. You can go first."

"Do you have yours ready?"

"Yes."

"Awesome. All right, let's see what you got for me." As usual, his wrapping technique was meticulous. All the folds were very neat, the Scotch tape applied very orderly and straight. She tried to open it without ripping the paper, but in the end she got too impatient and just tore it open.

It was a PlayStation game – Uncharted: The Nathan Drake Collection. "Oh, this is awesome! Can't wait to play these again."

He smiled through the camera. “You said you wanted to play them on our PlayStation, but the old versions you have don’t work on it.”

“I love it when you pay attention, Shaun. This is great, I love it.” She picked up the other package that was much smaller. “Okay, next one.”

Once she had unwrapped it, she frowned. It was two rectangular one-inch cork pieces that looked like they had been cut by hand. She twisted one between her thumb and index finger to see if there was anything more to them but failed.

“What’s this?”

Shaun was reaching for something next to him, then held it up into the camera. It was two cork blocks for yoga. “They were too large to take them with you, so I cut out small versions from a cork trivet. The ones you have are meant to stand in for the real ones.”

“Yoga blocks? Shaun, you’re the best, you’re such a good listener, I’ve been complaining about needing some for a while, haven’t I?”

“Yes,” he confirmed, another small, self-satisfied smile on his face. “I did some research. I wanted to get you purple ones to match your yoga mat, but a lot people in the reviews said the cork ones are better because they are sturdier and more weighted, but the cork ones only come in brown. I also made sure to buy those where people didn’t say they smelled funny.”

“That sounds awesome, Shaun. I’m sure these will be great.”

He was still smiling. “Yes. I have something else, but it was also too large for your suitcase.”

She heard him handling something off screen, then Shaun held up a darkly colored bag of something that looked like sweets. She leaned in closer. “Lindor eggs!”

“Yes. The dark chocolate ones you like. It is the XL bag.”

“Aw, not fair. I want one right now!”

“I will put them in your snack cabinet.”

“Excellent. That’s very sweet, Shaun. I love all of it, thank you so much! Now go open yours!”

Shaun’s face leaned out of the frame and she saw him handling one of the packages. She’d put it in a box that she’d wrapped, and he opened it with meticulous care. It took a while to unwrap, and she was waiting for his reaction.

At first he seemed confused as he pulled the items out of the box. “Is this… embroidery?”

“Yes, but look at the patterns.”

His eyes widened a bit. He pulled them out, took a closer look. “A brain?”

She laughed. “Yep, and a nerve cell and a heart and some really cool organ and flower mashups. Do you like them?”

He was still looking at them, but there was a definite smile on his face. He held one up that looked like a lung. “This one is not anatomically correct.”

She chuckled. “Oh well, that’s too bad, but you gotta admit it looks cool. I got them on Etsy, there’s a bunch more as PDFs that I didn’t print out, they’re on the USB stick. There’s also fabric, hoops and needles, some thread and a transfer pen. It sounded pretty straightforward.”

She suddenly felt a little uncertain whether it had been a good present. “This is pretty nerdy, do you even like embroidery all that much? Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea, I guess it sounded better in my head.”

“No,” he quickly said and made it a point to look at the camera. “I like these very much. They look… very cool.”

She was relieved. He was opening the next present now, a smaller but less distinctly shaped one. Another surprise she wasn’t sure how much he was going to like it.

When he had unwrapped it, his expression spoke of definite confusion. He read the tag that came with the vaguely question mark shaped red plush toy that had two dark eyes. “Appendix?”

“Yeah, it’s a Giant Microbes plush appendix. You know, to commemorate your very first solo surgery.”

He put it aside. “There’s another one.”

She waited, hoped he’d get it. He held it up, it was a smaller keychain version—a little green plush ball with black button eyes and a dark green nose. “What is the chlamydia for?”

“You know, just so we can say I gave you chlamydia…”

That made him grin, too. “It’s a joke, I understand.”

“Yep. Come on, you gotta admit that’s an awesome pun and totally worth the purchase alone. Try it out on Glassy next time. Plus, it’s super cute. Like you.”

His last present was flatter. He picked it up. “This is a book.”

She shrugged. “Open it, and you’ll know.”

It was indeed a book, titled *Coming to Life: How Genes Drive Development*. He was reading the back cover, so Lea explained, “It sounded pretty cool, something right up your alley. Something I might actually like, too.”

He was smiling again. “It sounds very interesting. I will start reading it after we’re done.”

“I hope you won’t immediately abandon me for your new book. Right now, I wanna look at your face a little more. I miss you.”

She didn’t expect him to say it back, and he didn’t. She hoped he did miss her, if only just a little bit. She noticed he was looking through the embroidery patterns again, and she smiled to herself. Yep, he definitely liked them.

“How was dinner with Glassy?” she asked.

He didn’t look at the screen and said absently, “Okay.”

“Hey Shaun? Can you maybe look at those later? I’d really love to talk to you.”

He tore himself away from the patterns and looked at the screen. “Okay.”

“Tell me about the dinner with Glassy. Or something else that you’d rather talk about.”

“The dinner was nice. The green bean casserole from the deli was very good. He gave me some to take home, it’s in the fridge. I will eat it tomorrow.”

“Did you do anything fun besides eating?”

“We had red wine and we watched *The Shop Around The Corner*. That was also nice.”

“Ah, the classics. I know you like those. How was the wine?”

“It was okay. I got Dr. Glassman a bottle of Zinfandel, but I didn’t like it as much as the Etna Rosso.”

“Zinfandel, huh?”

Shaun smiled again. “Yes. It was a joke, and Dr. Glassman got it.”

“Yeah, Glassy’s a pretty smart guy when he’s not being a boneheaded idiot.”

“Dr. Glassman is not a boneheaded idiot.”

“Not right now, but you gotta admit he’s had his moments… I’m really glad you two are getting along again.”

Silently, she thought, ‘Now we just gotta get there with you and me, Shaun,’ but she didn’t say it out loud. She had to stifle a yawn that was suddenly overcoming her.

“Are you tired?” he asked.

“A little. Food coma, probably. I’ve had way too much to eat these past two days. Are you tired? Do you wanna go and get some rest?”

“I’m okay,” he insisted. “You said you wanted to talk to me.”

“Yeah, but you’ve also worked a double shift today, and you’ve got another one coming up tomorrow. You need to get some sleep. We don’t want you falling asleep in open chest cavities. And don’t take that literally. I know you don’t fall asleep in open chest cavities.”

He gave a little smile. “No, I don’t. Are you still coming back on Tuesday?”

“Yeah. Will you pick me up at the airport?”

“Yes, it’s my day off and you always say I need to practice my driving.”

“I’ll text you the flight number. Thanks, Shaun. I’ll let you off now, hope you can get a good night’s sleep.”

“You too, Lea. Goodbye.”

“Bye, Shaun.”

The call ended almost the second she had said it, and it made her smile. Shaun to a T. Just three more days, and she’d be back home. She did miss him. More than she had anticipated. He’d become such a fixture in her life, as frustrating as he could sometimes be.

She really hoped he would have some time to rethink things with her being away, to come to terms with what happened, come to a conclusion. And she prayed that it would be a positive answer, because she loved him so much.

Her brow knitted with sudden emotion, and she tried to swallow it down. Last thing she needed was crying herself to sleep.

She tried to distract herself, thought of the plans for tomorrow. Donnie was gonna show her the Roadster, she’d try to help him figure out a few things that he’d said he couldn’t get to work. That would be a nice distraction, and his Roadster was baby blue and adorable. She loved it.

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10 - Can I burn the mazes I grow

Shaun held the apartment door open, and Lea proclaimed, “Ooh, it’s so good to be home!” as she entered.

Shaun watched her as he drew in a long, contented breath. He loved having her back home. Even though he’d been working a lot, her absence had been felt, and he had wished for her to be there more times than not when he’d been home alone in between working hours.

He had enjoyed their video chat on Christmas Day, had put the Giant Microbes appendix on the shelf next to the photo of him and Steve. Just another memento of milestones and good memories in his life.

Lea was putting away her things, then came back to the living room. He almost thought she’d walk up to him to hug him, but she didn’t. He wondered what he would have done if she had. Probably let her. Like he had the first time she’d hugged him, in the hallway in front of her old apartment.

She smiled at him, then turned her attention to the items he’d put out on the dining table. She picked up the two yoga blocks, felt them out. “These are great, thank you so much. And these,” she picked up the Lindor truffles, ripping open the packaging, “need to be devoured right away. Catch!”

She took one out of the bag and threw it towards Shaun who was now sitting on the step after he took off his shoes. He cupped his hands last minute and managed to catch it. He didn’t really like dark chocolate that much, but he still unwrapped it and popped it into his mouth. The soft, creamy filling was much better than the bitter chocolate on the outside.

Lea did the same, closing her eyes, lifting her chin as she chewed. “Oh, these are *so* good.” She let out another pleased *mmh* sound as she chewed and then ate another one. “So, what’s the plan for today?”

He frowned. “Plan?”

“The day is young, the sun is shining. What did Dr. Murphy have planned for his day off?”

He hadn’t had anything planned. He’d worked a lot and was hoping just for a slow day off, relax at home, read a little, enjoy Lea’s company. He must have made a face, or Lea could still effortlessly read him because she said, “Okay, no plan, I get it.”

He sighed. “You have a lot of energy today.”

She lifted her arms. “Yeah. I got up early, had way too much caffeine. I’m probably a little slaphappy. I’m sorry, Shaun. You were hoping for a slow day off, right? You’ve worked a lot these past few days.”

“Yes.”

“Are you tired? Should I get out of here for a bit so you can unwind a little?”

“No,” he said immediately. He wanted her around. He *had* missed her.

She gave him a smile. “Okay. Well, if there’s anything you wanna do together, let me know. If you don’t want the television, maybe I’ll try out those *Uncharted* games. Nathan Drake, here I come.”

He pushed himself to get up, walked closer to the couch where she was switching on the game console and the television. He stood, hovered unsurely, testing the waters. “Lea?”

She turned her head, looked at him. “Yes, Shaun?”

“I’m glad you’re back.”

Her face lit up with a smile. “So am I.”

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Lea wiped the last drops of water from the kitchen counter, finishing off the washing up of the stuff that Shaun kept insisting shouldn’t be going in the dishwasher, though sometimes she thought he was being a bit too anal about that.

But that’s who Shaun was, and something she had signed up for when she’d committed to this relationship.

She turned around and leaned against the edge of the counter. He was sitting on the couch with the Weather Channel on, and she wondered if he was actually paying attention to the programming, or if he was cruising somewhere in his head. It was hard to tell sometimes, even when she could see his face.

She’d been home from Hershey for a day now, they had both worked today. She knew Shaun was glad she was back, he’d outright told her that, and he seemed settled and calm.

They were still keeping up the status quo, taking turns with the bed and the mattress, figuring out who needed the bathroom when, but he’d been a lot more approachable, he’d smiled more, he talked and asked questions without constantly being prompted.

What was still absent was the physical touch, their intimacy, the ease and the complete and unconditional trust. And there it was again, that subtle feeling in the pit of Lea’s stomach, the uncertainty of where they stood, if they could ever get back to where they’d been before she’d made that terrible mistake of messing with the review scores.

Lea’s time in Hershey had given her time to reevaluate and figure a few things out. She was glad she’d taken the trip. It had helped her see a lot of things more clearly, had helped her finally make an important decision she needed to tell Shaun about. The one she knew would come with a difficult conversation, the one they needed to tackle but she was afraid to even attempt. But if not now, then when?

She went over to the couch and sat down, keeping a respectful distance between them. Shaun had his eyes on the television, but the volume was very low.

“Hey, can we talk?” she prompted.

Shaun let out a hum. One of those that indicated that he wasn’t particularly fond of the idea but that he didn’t want to say no either. Lea thought for a moment, but then decided to push through the subtle refusal.

She tried to find an in that wasn't going to get his defenses up right away. She knew they were there, and quickly erected if she said the wrong thing. And there were too many "wrong" things that she wanted to talk to him about, that she knew he didn't want to hear.

"Remember that conversation we had in my office, when you told me I deserved to lose my job?"

He turned his head without actually looking at her, but she knew she had his attention. She went on, "That was harsh, even for you, but I've been thinking about it. A lot, actually. Is that still how you feel? That I should go to Salen and tell her what I did? Knowing full well it could cost me my job, and impact my chances to get one elsewhere?"

His eyes were roaming around, landing somewhere on her shoulder. "What you did was wrong. I thought there should be consequences for it."

"And I don't disagree with that, but there's a more important question. Are the consequences worth the sacrifice? Because that's what it ultimately comes down to. I know you value honesty, Shaun, so I'm going to be honest with you. It's not that I can't restore the omitted reviews. I can. But I'm not sure I want to, because it can easily cost me my job."

"You should not have done it."

"Yes, I know. But I did, and I can't take it back now. It's done all this damage already. Do we want it to do more of it? Is it that important to you, knowing what the consequences could be?"

"Are… you saying you will tell Salen if I ask you to?"

Lea pressed her lips together before she answered, looking him in the eyes. He wasn't meeting her gaze. "Yes."

He lifted his eyes and met hers. She wasn't sure what she read in them. Maybe she had taken him by surprise. But there was more that she wanted to tell him.

"I will, but there's something that I'd like you to consider, too. For the past few months, ever since Ethicure took over and started making all these changes, it's been really hard to talk to you."

Shaun shifted uncomfortably, probably knowing where this was going. She pressed on, "God knows, I've wanted to. But we've all been so stressed, and you've got this… you've got this wall up whenever I even mention your ASD."

She studied him closely, saw him stiffening, his expression hardening, just like she expected. "Shaun, I get it. I know it's not an easy topic, but please hear me out. Just hear me out for once, okay?"

He looked away, his body language still taut, but Lea plowed on, knew this was one of the few chances she'd get at addressing it without him immediately shutting down. "You've always been really good at acknowledging your autism, and finding ways to thrive despite of it."

She paused for a moment, in hopes that he would let the compliment sink in. "You're amazing, and a lot of people realize that when you just give them room to pay attention and see what you can do. But you also know that it's *not* always amazing. That sometimes it keeps you from succeeding. That sometimes it makes things really hard. Like with the patient review scores."

“No,” he immediately protested.

“Yes, Shaun. And I know it’s a touchy subject, but I really think it would help if you just listened for a minute. Will you do that? Please?”

She could see the defiance in his eyes, the urge to say no, but he didn’t say anything, which she took as silent approval. She sighed.

“We both know the whole review system is screwy and faulty. It doesn’t measure what makes anyone a good doctor. What it measures is how charming you are, I don’t know, maybe how charismatic you are. And that’s really backwards, and we both agree that using it as a performance indicator is wrong.

“But that part aside, can we address how it’s been affecting you? How obsessed you’ve become with getting those scores up? How many concrete walls you hit when it wasn’t happening?”

“Is that why you manipulated my scores?”

“In a word, yes.”

“It was wr—”

“Wrong. Yes, I know. It was.”

“You made me believe I improved my scores when I hadn’t.”

She nodded, he’d told her that before, and it still stung because that angle, she hadn’t considered at the time. It had all been around trying to make Shaun’s life less miserable, relieve some of the stress.

“Yeah, and I see now how bad that must have felt to you.”

“You didn’t trust me to improve my scores on my own. Why?” he asked.

Lea was somewhat relieved he wasn’t bailing on the conversation quite yet, but she knew he might, once he heard her reply. “Because you have autism, Shaun.”

That statement hung in the air, heavy and oppressive, another blow she didn’t want to deal but that was necessary. She’d told him this before, in another context. It had felt terrible then, too.

“S-so… you’re saying I can’t improve my scores because I have autism?”

Her voice was quiet when she said “Yes.” He was stiffening, about to protest, but she lifted her hand, her palm towards him, “Hear me out, please, because it’s not as simple as that.

“I do believe you can improve. To an extent. You can learn certain ways to read people, learn some interaction techniques, get better with time, but Shaun, none of this will ever come naturally to you. A lot of that is just intuition, and when it comes to people skills, you’re a little lacking in that. I know it hurts to hear that, and we both know that’s not your fault. We also both know there’s nothing we could do to change it.

“And I don’t think that I would even *want* to change it, because that’s you, Shaun. That’s part of what I love about you. And I think deep inside, you know all this, you *know* that your autism can get in the way. Which is why it’s so puzzling to see you deny it every time it’s even remotely mentioned. You’ve never been afraid to admit to your limitations. Why now?”

She stopped there, watched him carefully. He was digesting it, trying to make sense of it, trying to find an answer. He stayed quiet for a long time, and Lea almost thought he wouldn’t respond, not now, but then he said, “Everyone always expects me to fail when I try to communicate. And then, when I do, it proves them right. I don’t mind when it’s with people I know, because I know they are aware of my ASD.

“But most of my patients don’t know, and that is hard. I try to say the right things, but sometimes I don’t. That didn’t matter as much when they were just patients, because I could still help them with medicine. Now, with Salen’s scores, it matters.”

All of that made perfect sense. And it kicked her in the gut again that Shaun had so much frustration tied to his autism, that every time he tried to embrace it, something would backfire and remind him, and now Salen’s whole fucked up system had made that infinitely worse.

She shifted her position slightly. “And can you maybe understand a little bit why I was trying to suggest I speak to Salen about changing the algorithm, changing the system? Yes, it matters, but it’s an unfair system. Not just to you, it’s unfair to *any* doctor. Because being a doctor isn’t just about bedside manner. Do you know who had the highest scores in the department?”

“Before he left, Dr. Rendón,” Shaun answered.

“Yes, and do you know why? Because he was super charming, and also kinda hot. He knew how to wrap people around his finger. Did that mean he was the best doctor in the department? From what you’ve told me, definitely not. Do you see where I’m going with this?”

“The system helped me learn how I could improve.”

“It also made you go stir-crazy and super stressed out and overcompensatey.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You know, that day when I omitted the reviews, Park came to me. He was concerned, was trying to get me to talk to you, because you were— I don’t know. I mean, I wasn’t there, obviously, but it sounded like you were saying a lot of inappropriate things in all the wrong ways. You tend to get like that sometimes, overcompensate for something people say you’re not good at just to prove them wrong.

“But Shaun, you are at your best when you’re just… *you*, and not trying to be some version of you that’s reading things off of lists or blindly following instructions people have given you to the letter.

“And you know what the worst part of this is? You are right. It *is* all about trust, because I *did* stop trusting you. I stopped trusting that you could get a handle on the review scores on your own. And that makes me feel really, really terrible, because I never wanted to be that person.”

She looked at him, and there was a moment of eye contact, one of those small, amazing moments of connection, and a short flash of the old Shaun, the endearing one who would take on anything that life threw at him. She missed that version of him so much.

She could feel tears welling up but tried to swallow them down. This wasn't about her. It was about him.

Silence hung in the air for a few, long moments, then Shaun said, "I don't think you should do it anymore."

Lea frowned. "Do what?"

"Tell Salen you manipulated my scores."

The corners of her lips drew upwards, but she still asked, "Are you sure?"

He gave a small nod. "Yes, I'm sure."

She turned to fully face him, opened her palms on her thighs. "Shaun, I'm honestly incredibly sorry that I omitted the reviews, and I should not have done it and would not do it again."

He looked at her very briefly before his glance flicked away again. "Yes, I know."

It wasn't acceptance. Not yet. But it was more than he'd given her before, and she was going to take every little broken shard he gave back to her until it could all be assembled and glued back together.

"Thank you," she told him quietly. "For listening."

He didn't respond, and she added, "I'll be in the bedroom answering some e-mails, but you can have the bed tonight. You have a long shift coming up tomorrow, right?"

She got up from the couch, ready to pick her laptop up from the dining table when Shaun called her name. "Lea?"

She stopped, turned to look at him. "If you would like… we can both sleep in the bed tonight."

Tears instantly shot into her eyes, because she knew that was a huge step. An olive branch. She was going to take it. "I would love that."

He nodded. "Okay."

That, too, sounded like the old Shaun. Maybe she was going to get him back before long. With enough patience, they would get there. Today had proven that.

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Shaun's phone dinged. It was a message from Salen.

Ad-hoc meeting at 15:00. Attendance mandatory. Don't be late.

Shaun thought that didn't bode well. He put away the patient file he'd been studying, tried to find Dr. Glassman. Thankfully, the latter was in his office, even though it was still fairly early in the morning.

"Did you also get a message from Salen?"

"And a hello to you, too." Glassman checked his phone. "I guess I did."

"Do you know what this is about?"

Glassman shrugged. "Yeah, the hospital has been served."

Shaun let out a shaky breath, and Glassman gave him a long look. "Shaun. Relax. This isn't my first rodeo. While unfortunate, these things happen. That's what the hospital pays lawyers for."

"That is easy for you to say. You are not the one who is being accused of killing a baby."

"No one killed a baby, least of all you. If anyone truly thought that or could prove it, you wouldn't still be working here. And the M&M very clearly outlined that the surgical team is not to blame. If Salen had anything tangible against you or anyone else, she would have shown those cards by now."

Shaun didn't feel all that reassured. "I hope you're right."

"I know I am. Hey. It'll be fine. And if it's any consolation, Dr. Lim is still steadily chipping away at Salen's throne. The noose is tightening. I know there was a pharmacy audit just before Christmas. We might have some good news very soon."

"That would be very good."

"Yes, it would. Do you wanna have breakfast today? Or lunch?"

"No. I have— Oh." Shaun's phone dinged again. He looked at the message. "Oh no."

Glassman looked up at him. "What's wrong?"

"Jackson is in the ER."

"The chronic heart disease kid?"

"Yes. I have to go."

Shaun hoped for the best as he hurried down to the ER.

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Coming home to their apartment these days was always accompanied by mixed feelings for Lea.

There was always that little bit of dread in the pit of her stomach just before she opened the door, because she never knew what to expect. Would Shaun be there, trying to ignore her? Would he be there and actually talk to her? Would the apartment be empty with him nowhere to be found?

With the lights in the living room on, she knew Shaun was home, but he wasn't anywhere in sight. She entered and hung her jacket, keys and purse, toed off her shoes and slipped into her slippers.

"Shaun?" she called out tentatively.

There was no response.

Lea checked the bedroom, which was empty, then she checked the spare room whose door was slightly ajar, and her heart sank. Shaun was sitting on the mattress, his back against the wall with only the small, dim bedside table lamp next to the mattress on. It cast his face in a faint yellow light, his expression grim and expressively sad at the same time.

What she noticed right away was a black Velcro brace around his left wrist. When she looked closer, there was also some discoloration under his left eye. Did he have a bruise there? A black eye?

She softly said his name, but it didn't elicit much of a response. Something that uprooted him somewhat must have happened. She hoped he would tell her.

Gauging his mood these days wasn't as easy as it used to be. He'd been more approachable since she had gotten back from Hershey, had opened up more, talked more easily, been less reserved. She knew her time away had been good for her, and she thought it had been for him, too.

She studied him for a moment longer, then very slowly went over to where he was and sat down on the floor next to the mattress, her back against the wall, keeping just enough distance as to not invade his space.

She kept her voice gentle and quiet when she asked, "What happened?"

Shaun let out a short hum that was just as miserable as his facial expression.

"You've got a bruise on your face. And an injured wrist…"

"It's a sprain," he said.

"How did that happen?"

"A patient."

"A patient injured you?"

"Yes."

"On purpose?"

"No."

She let out a weary breath. "Can you tell me why?"

"He was delirious and lashed out. He didn't mean to."

“Okay. Did anyone else get hurt?”

“No. Dr. Wolke sedated him.”

Lea tried not to let the scenario play out too vividly in her head. She hated the thought of Shaun getting caught in a bad situation that got him injured.

She stole a glance at him—his expression hadn’t changed much. There was still the grim defiance, and a lingering deep sadness underneath.

When Lea didn’t say anything else, heavy silence stretched on, laying heavy on her shoulders. Too heavy to bear it indefinitely.

“Something else happened, didn’t it?”

It took him a moment to respond, but finally it was just another quiet hum.

“Shaun, why are you sad?”

“How do you know I’m sad?”

“You’re sitting in a dark room by yourself with an injured arm and a bruised face. You’re basically the poster-boy for melancholy.”

“Jackson died.”

The name was familiar. Lea knew it was a young boy with a chronic heart condition who was in and out of the hospital. Shaun had operated on him twice, seen him a number of other times when he was admitted for an exacerbation. They’d bonded.

Losing children was always tough. Perhaps the toughest part of the job, but Jackson had meant more to Shaun, and her heart went out to him.

“I’m really sorry, Shaun. I know he meant a lot to you.”

His mouth twitched before he said, “He went into surgery. I couldn’t operate,” he held up his injured wrist, “maybe I could have saved him.”

“No, Shaun. You can’t put that on yourself.”

“Maybe I could have done more, kept him alive until they found a donor heart.”

“Hey,” she tried to get his attention, wished she could reach out and take his hand. “You know that your team is excellent. And as terrible as it is, as much as it sucks, it just happens sometimes that people die, no matter how hard you try.”

Shaun knew that better than anyone, and this she knew, too. She wished so much she could take some of his pain away, could make it easier for him.

He drew in an audible breath before he said, “I am being sued.”

“By Alma?”

His exhale was unsteady. “Yes.”

“You personally?”

“I am being implicated in the lawsuit.”

She closed her eyes. “I’m sorry, Shaun. That’s terrible, and incredibly wrong and unfair. I wish I could do something to help with that, because it just… it *really*, really sucks, and that makes me super angry, because you are the *last* person to deserve that.”

She looked at him, but his face was stoic, his gaze locked straight ahead, though she knew there was lots of turmoil going on behind the façade. She asked, “So what’s happening with that? I assume the hospital is taking care of the whole legal side of things?”

“Yes. We had a meeting with Salen. She is handling it. Dr. Glassman is helping.”

“Okay, that’s good. Is there anything I can do?”

“No,” he said, his tone completely disheartened.

“Please let me know if I can in any way, okay?”

He didn’t respond, and she let out a weary sigh. When was Shaun going to catch a break?

They sat in silence for a few, long minutes, and her mind kept wandering.

That day they’d looked at the chapel—that tragic damn day. Shaun had told Alma she’d been lucky that they happened across the car accident. Lea wasn’t so sure anymore that was the case. Granted, Alma would possibly have died if Shaun hadn’t evacuated the fluid around her heart right there at the scene, and her baby with her, but there was nothing lucky about this anymore that Lea could see.

Alma’s baby. It had brought everything to a head. There was something else nagging in the back of Lea’s mind, something she’d discussed with Glassman, that night after Shaun had faltered and crumbled in the pharmacy.

She turned her head, asking in a low voice, “Shaun?”

He blinked a few times, so she went on, “I know you probably don’t wanna talk about this, but I’ve been thinking… When Alma’s baby died, do you think maybe what happened in the pharmacy had to do with that?”

He stayed quiet, but he turned his head and looked at her. The bruise around his eye still looked terrible.

“Look, I know it’s been a while since we lost our baby, but I don’t think you ever really grieved for her, did you? I don’t know, at the time I thought maybe you didn’t need to, or you did it in your own way, and—

“I don't know, Shaun. I don’t know how you process things, how you feel things. All I know is my own way of doing that, but you’re so different. I’d like to know more about that, but you have to help me try to understand it, help me understand your process.”

She clearly had his attention now, he was looking at her. “I… don’t understand what you want to know.”

“You get intensely emotional about things that you care about. I didn’t see you cry even once when we lost our child. I thought maybe that was normal, or maybe that’s what I wanted to believe, but was it? Did you not feel sad about losing the baby?”

“I did,” he confirmed.

“Did you cry? Did you want to cry?”

He seemed to digest those questions, was trying to find answers. “I think I did.”

“Were you angry? Did you want to smash things, punish someone or something to make the pain feel less intense?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“But you smashed a whole stash of medication vials on the pharmacy floor when someone else’s baby died. Don’t you think that’s a little… I don’t know… odd?”

“We could have saved Alma’s baby. We could have saved her if the medication hadn’t expired.”

“So you’re saying that affected you more because Alma’s baby had a chance to live, and ours never did, no matter what you did?”

He let out a hum – one that said he was unsure, or maybe he wasn’t happy with the mirror she was holding up to him. She pressed on, “I remember that we talked about connection when I was pregnant. Is this different for you because you held Alma’s baby in your arms, and you never got to do that with our girl?”

He blinked his eyes in silence, and Lea thought maybe he didn’t know how to answer that. Maybe if she rephrased the question… “Do you think it would’ve helped if you got to hold our baby in your arms when she died?”

“That wouldn’t have changed anything.”

“No, but it’s not always about fixing things. Sometimes it’s about making it easier to deal with things that can’t be fixed. You were such a fighter during all of that. You were so strong, you were what held me together. But who was holding you together?”

Shaun sat there, looking down, running the fingers of his right hand along the edge of the wrist brace’s Velcro strap. He didn’t say anything.

“Looking back now, I never asked you what you wanted. You were there by my side, you never said a thing. You just took it all in stride and let me make all the decisions about our baby. Shaun, I—”

“I wanted to help you.”

“I know. And you did, and I love you for it. So much. But now, after what happened with Alma’s baby, I just can’t help but wonder if you’ve really had the chance, the room to grieve for our baby.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means that if you have moments where you feel sad, angry, if it hurts, you don’t have to swallow that down or bury it. You can cry or scream or stim or whatever it is that you want to do. Or talk. It might help. But I don’t know, Shaun. I don’t know how that works for you.”

He looked very lost, confusion in his voice when he said, “Lea, I don’t…”

“It’s okay, Shaun.” Maybe it was time to let this go.

“Hey.” She looked at him, hoped he would give her a brief moment of connection. He did, and she relished it. “You don’t have to say anything. Just remember this when… or if you’re ever sad or in pain. Remember that it’s okay.”

His eyes had flicked away, but he met her gaze for another long moment. “Okay,” he said in a low voice.

He still looked miserable. Maybe more miserable than when she’d found him here tonight. She wanted so much to just hold him, tell him it would be okay, tell him things would get better because she’d be there to hold him up. Was it time to reach out?

She tentatively reached out a hand, lay it on the mattress within reach of him, her palm facing up. He let out a short hum, and there was a pang of hurt in her stomach that it was the kind that said, *‘No, I’m not comfortable with that.’*

She withdrew the hand, tried to stifle the tears that she felt threatening.

After she’d come back from Hershey, he’d been so much more open, so much more approachable. Him allowing her back into their bed had been a huge step in the right direction, and maybe she’d been too hasty, hoping for more progress.

What was it that was still holding him back? Were they ever going to go back to how they had been before?

Lea knew it wasn’t the right time, he’d had a terrible day, but would it ever be the right time? How much more of this uncertainty was she supposed to take?

She pushed away from the wall, leaned back on her heels so she could face him. “Shaun, we used to do this together, you used to come to me when you had a difficult day. And now it feels like… like we’re broken, and you’re trying to do it all alone. I know it’s still about trust, about what I did, but it’s been so many weeks now.

“I know it’s been getting better, that you’re really trying, and I’ve been patient, waiting for you to be ready. But sometimes it feels like that’s all I’m doing—waiting for you to meet me halfway, or to just… give me a sign that you’re making an effort, that you actually want this.”

She looked at him, saw that his eyes were tearing up. He took a moment to respond, and his voice was thick with emotion. “I want this,” he said very plainly.

She nodded very slowly. “I want this, too. I love you. I hope you know that.”

A tear slid down his cheek. His voice was very low. “I know that.”

“But you don’t love me anymore.”

“No.” His answer was immediate—an unmistakable negation of her conclusion.

Okay. That was… something.

“Lea,” he said, “I… *want* this.”

“… but you need more time,” she finished the sentence for him.

He didn’t answer, and she knew that was a yes. Maybe they were slowly getting there. She hoped they were.

She got to her feet, noticed him flexing the fingers of his left hand, then cradling it to his chest. She went over to the fridge and got the gel pack they kept there in the freezer compartment. She wrapped it in a dish cloth and took it to the spare room.

“Hey,” she said and held it out to him. “For your wrist. Or your face. We only have the one.”

He took it from her without question, unfastening the Velcro bandage around his wrist. She softly said, “Why don’t you come out to the living room? I can make you a nice soothing orange and ginger tea, or some hot chocolate.”

To her surprise, he actually stirred, got up from the mattress. “Tea would be nice,” he said in a low voice.

“Okay, tea it is.”

She made herself one as well. Shaun was sitting at the dining table, holding the ice pack to his wrist when she put the steaming mug in front of him.

He took a grateful sip as she sat down across from him. He looked a lot less doom and gloom than before. Maybe she’d done a good thing tonight, pulled him just a little closer out towards the light.

“Will you still be working tomorrow?” she asked.

“Yes. I can’t do surgery, but I can treat patients and supervise the second year residents. And it’s New Year’s Eve, so it will be difficult to find someone on short notice to take my shift.”

“I can’t believe you took all these holiday shifts. Someone needs to seriously thank you for that. Hey, do you want me to come to the hospital before midnight?”

He frowned at her. “Why?”

“So we can ring in the new year together. Hope for better things to come. I don’t know, just… Sorry. Forgot I suggested that. You’ll probably be busy treating patients or tending to some emergency or something. It was a stupid idea.”

“It was not stupid. You don’t want to be alone.”

Shaun wasn’t always very emotionally astute, but he had the occasional inspired moment. And she’d always considered him to be more attuned to her than to anyone else. This told her he still was.

Her New Year plans this year had been a bit of a mess. Normally she’d be spending it with Shaun, but after things with their relationship went sideways, she’d made tentative plans to go to a New Year’s party with some old colleagues. She’d cancelled those plans when she was in Hershey. Nothing felt like it should anymore, and they were taking everything one day at a time these days.

She knew she shouldn’t be sacrificing her social life for Shaun, but spending New Year’s Eve at some fancy party venue with people she didn’t know all that well didn’t feel right either, and by now all her closer friends had made plans that wouldn’t accommodate another person in the mix.

Shaun pulled her from her reverie. “You should come to the hospital. There’s a party every year in the emergency department lounge that you can go to if I’m busy with a patient. The nurses will like it if you bring something to eat. One of the city’s legal fireworks displays is nearby. If I have time, we can watch the fireworks together.”

“Shaun, you hate fireworks.”

“I can wear noise cancelling headphones.”

“Yeah, but even then, it’s still gonna be loud and jarring for you.”

He let out a short hum of displeasure before he said, “Yes, but you asked me to meet you halfway.”

She could feel her eyes tearing up. “Yeah, but I wasn’t exactly thinking of you having to endure a majorly uncomfortable experience for that to happen.”

“The ophthalmology break room is on the top floor and has an excellent view over the city. The hospital’s windows are soundproofed, and my headphones are very good.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“You know, that actually sounds really nice. I think I’ll do that. And maybe I can throw together some muffins tomorrow. How does that sound?”

“I think they will like that.”

“Okay, sounds like a plan.”

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It was kind of a miracle, because ten minutes before midnight, Shaun turned up in the ER lounge and told Lea to follow him. She had the frame of mind to grab two plastic cups with drinks from the counter where they'd lined up all the food and beverages.

Up in the ophthalmology break room, there was already a small group of people near the windows, obviously this was prime real estate on New Year's Eve at the hospital. Shaun found them a vacant spot at one of the windows more to the side, and Lea stood next to him.

She handed him one of the cups. "I think it's Sprite. Might also be non-alcoholic champagne."

He sniffed at it. "It's 7UP."

"You don't have to drink it. I just wanted us to have something to toast with."

"Okay," he agreed, holding the cup in his uninjured hand.

"How's your wrist?"

He looked down at it. "I told you it's just a mild sprain."

"Yeah, I know. Did it bother you a lot today?"

"No, not a lot."

"You put the gel pack back in the freezer, right? Maybe you should ice it again when you get home. How about the eye?"

"Several people asked if I was in a fight."

"I hope you said yes. It would make you sound really badass."

Lea had hoped for a chuckle or a smile, but he stayed quiet and she looked at his face, trying not to get hung up on the ugly purple bruise that stood out against his pale skin. Shaun looked like his mind was miles away, and she had to smile, unsure if this was one of his mind palace moments, or just him trying to wrap his head around something.

She took a sip from her cup, reminding herself she needed to leave enough to toast with it at midnight.

A stray firecracker went off somewhere in the distance—someone stupidly ignoring the city's fireworks ban—and Lea could see Shaun involuntarily flinch. "Where are your headphones?"

"In my locker."

"Do you want to go get them?"

"No. There's not enough time."

"Shaun…"

"It's okay."

“Are you sure?”

His lack of response prompted her to look at him. His eyes were meeting hers, poignant and pensive, there was a rare moment of prolonged eye contact. “I missed you.”

She frowned. Where did that come from? “What… do you mean?”

“I missed you when you were in Hershey.”

He was meeting her eyes again, trying to find a connection, and she made sure she gave back what she could.

She knew Shaun had been working all of those days she’d been away, had plenty of distraction. But obviously there’d been some soul searching. Or maybe just a realization in the time he’d had to himself with her being several thousands of miles away in a whole different time zone.

“I hope that’s a good thing,” she probed, trying to see where he was going with this.

He looked at her, met her eyes again. “You have been very patient. With me.”

She gave the smallest of nods. She had been, hadn’t she?

“Thank you,” he added.

She smiled. “Thank *you*, Shaun. For telling me that.”

“And it *is* a good thing.”

Her smile widened, but there was sudden commotion behind them, people starting with a countdown chorus. “Ten, nine, eight, seven…”

She held up her plastic cup, watching Shaun do the same. “Three, two, one. Happy New Year!” echoed the voices.

She tilted her cup against his. “Happy New Year, Shaunie.”

He rewarded her with a big smile. It was the first time she’d used that nickname for him in a long time. And he seemed to very much approve. “Happy New Year, Lea,” he responded.

They both drank from their cups, watching the people around them toasting, smiling, hugging, a couple kissing two windows over. Lea tentatively waited, seeing if he would do anything else. He didn’t. He just took another sip, then turned his attention to the world outside the window.

Fireworks were now starting to go off, the sky a sea of colorful spark showers, and the *pop-pop-pop*s that erupted along with every one of them going off. Lea could see that Shaun was apprehensive, but he’d been right that the windows muffled most of the sound, and he took it all in stride.

She stood for another minute or two, relishing the fireworks, enjoying the vibrant illumination of the night sky. There was another particularly loud firecracker set off by some law-ignoring idiot right down in the street below them, and Shaun gave a start.

Lea turned to him. “Shaun? Let’s get away from here.”

He turned his head to her. “Do you not like the fireworks anymore?”

“I do. But you don’t. I saw you flinch.”

“It’s okay. I can get used to it.”

“This was great, but I think I’ve seen enough fireworks for the night.”

“Lea…”

“Do you seriously wanna fight me on this?”

There was another isolated pop outside, and Shaun flinched again. “No. I would like it if we could leave.”

“Then let’s leave.”

He briefly met her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Of course. Tell me where you wanna go.”

“Last year I went to the men’s restroom on the surgical floor. It doesn’t have outside walls, but it’s not very comfortable.”

Lea grinned. “That would certainly turn this into a *very* memorable New Year's Eve.”

“There is a storage closet next to it.”

“Doesn’t sound like much of an upgrade, but I’ll take it.”

The storage closet was tiny, and there wasn’t enough room to sit side by side, so they ended up sitting on the floor opposite each other, with knees drawn up, their feet touching. Lea had to chuckle.

Shaun lifted his head. “What’s so funny?”

“Us. Sitting here. Which is both totally bizarre but also kinda cozy. It’s definitely the first time ever that I’m spending New Year's Eve in a storage closet.”

Shaun grinned back at her. “Mine, too.”

“Look at us.” She nudged his shoe with hers. “We are such mavericks.”

Before he could reply, she heard his phone vibrate in his coat pocket. Probably the first victims of misfired illegal fireworks, or whatever else people did to themselves on New Year's Eve. It was remarkable in itself that fate had given them this twenty minute grace period in the first place.

“I have to go,” he said unsurprisingly.

“Go be amazing and help people. I think I’ll go home if you don’t mind. But this was really nice.”

“Okay,” he just said, and then he was rushing out the door like he usually did.

Lea got to her feet and smiled. Never a dull moment with Shaun. And certainly a New Year’s Eve to remember.

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11 - A virgin state of mind

"Hey Shaun," Aaron greeted him as Shaun approached the table with his tray on the upper level of the cafeteria. "Wow, that looks terrible."

Shaun's shiner had now graduated to a purplish green color that was still starkly visible against his skin. Aaron had heard about the little accident the week before but hadn't seen Shaun since.

Shaun sat down across from Aaron. "Lea says it makes me look… badass."

Aaron chuckled. "It makes you look a lot of things, but I don't think badass is the one I would have singled out."

Shaun's plate didn't have the usual pancakes on it, instead it looked like a chicken or turkey sandwich and a cookie next to the glass of milk on the side. "No pancakes?"

"They ran out of pancake batter, but they gave me a free chocolate chip cookie instead." He pointed at it.

"That's good. How are things going?"

"They are going okay."

"Just okay?"

"I am back to doing surgery and Lea and I are going hiking next weekend. On New Year's Eve we watched the fireworks at midnight from the Ophthalmology break room."

"That sounds nice."

"Yes, then we went to a storage closet because people nearby ignored the ban and set off firecrackers."

"Storage closet, huh?"

Shaun gave him a look. "There was no sex."

Aaron grinned. "Not what I was asking, but okay."

Shaun took a bite from his sandwich and chewed. "Did you cry when Maddie died?"

Whoa. Where was this coming from? Aaron frowned. "Yes, of course I did."

"Is it strange that I didn't cry when our baby died?"

Aaron looked at Shaun for a long moment. "I don't know. Not necessarily. Grief doesn't work the same way for everyone, I don't think there's a right or wrong way about it."

"Lea said it was odd that I got upset over losing Alma's baby but not our own."

Huh. He hadn't quite considered that angle, but he'd also seen what that had done to Shaun at the time. "I think you *were* upset, Shaun. You were very upset."

“I didn’t smash anything.”

“No, but that’s…” He let out a long exhale. “Grief doesn’t have to include smashing things.”

“Did you smash anything when Maddie died?”

Aaron had to think about that one. “You know, I don’t know. It was a long time ago. I might have, at some point. But you and I, we are very different.”

“Why did I get angry when Alma’s baby died but not when ours did?”

“Because that situation was different, your environment, the context was different? These things, they’re not logical, Shaun. They can’t be explained with logic.”

“Lea also said that maybe I got angry because I *didn’t* grieve for our child. Do you think she’s right?”

Aaron sighed. How was he supposed to know? “I don’t know how to answer that, Shaun. I don’t think anyone does. Do *you* think you didn’t grieve for your unborn child?”

“I don’t know how to answer that, either.”

“You know, I think it’s different for the mother. She carried the child inside her, all the physical and hormonal changes, there’s just a stronger bond there. It doesn’t mean that you didn’t care, or you didn’t grieve. But I think maybe your first instinct might have been to protect Lea, and not to mourn the loss of a baby that was, I don’t know, a bit intangible to you, maybe? I don’t know if that makes any sense.”

Shaun pondered that for a long moment. “I think it does. Maddie was very tangible to you.”

Aaron let out a short chuckle, “Yeah, that she was.”

“Are you still sad?”

“Yeah, sometimes. That’s not something you ever forget. It becomes less intense, less frequent, but every now and then it’s still there. Grief comes in waves.”

“I don’t think about our baby very much anymore.”

“And that’s normal, too. You don’t think about Steve every day, do you?”

“Hm. Not every day.”

“I don’t think you need to feel like you did anything wrong there, Shaun. I hope that’s not what Lea was implying. You feel how you feel. And that has to be enough.”

“No, I don’t think she was implying anything.”

“Okay.” Aaron took a sip of his iced coffee. “Oh, I hope you can come to the meeting with Dr. Lim later. With any luck, there will be some good news.”

“Yes, I will try.”

Aaron decided to change the subject. “I heard you did an eggplantdectomy the other day.”

Shaun frowned, then seemed to get the reference. “Yes. The patient said they slipped and fell in the shower, but it’s strange that someone would keep an eggplant in their shower.”

“My weirdest one was barbed wire.”

Shaun flinched and drew up his shoulders in discomfort. “That sounds very painful.”

“Yeah, wasn’t pretty. My attending kept a Hall of Shame of objects extracted from bodily orifices. It was both hilarious and gruesome. Some people do the strangest things to themselves.”

“I don’t think I want to pick colon and rectal surgery as my specialty.”

“And what specialty do you think you want to pick?”

“I like pediatric surgery.”

Aaron gave him a look over the rim of his glasses. “Heh. That figures.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know, you like kids. And you’re pretty good with them. I think it’ll suit you.”

Shaun smiled at that, and that made Aaron happy, too. Shaun would be an excellent pediatric surgeon. “Pediatric trauma might be right up your alley. You’re a problem solver, you think quick on your feet.” Of course it also hearkened back to how his brother had died, but Aaron chose not to say it out loud.

Shaun nodded. “I think so, too. I will consider it.”

“Any surgical team would be lucky to have you, no matter what you choose.”

“Why is it that we’ve only ever done one surgery together?”

Aaron frowned. That was a good question. “Well, you’re on Lim’s service, and I haven’t done much surgery lately. Why do you ask?”

“I think I would like to do surgery with you again.”

“Well, I’ll put it on the wish list when the next one comes along. Because I think I’d like that, too.”

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Shaun was the last to arrive at Dr. Lim’s office. Dr. Glassman and Lea were already there, Shaun breezed in through the door.

“Ah, Shaun,” Dr. Lim said. “Looks like we’re all here.”

Shaun closed the door behind him and looked around, took the last vacant seat at the table by the bookshelf. Dr. Lim put whiskey glasses in front of everyone, then filled them all with a finger of whiskey.

Shaun put up his hand. “No, thank you. I have another surgery.”

Lim nodded. “Very well.” She took a step aside so she could look at everyone. “It may be somewhat premature to celebrate, but the three of you have been closely involved, so I wanted to give you a quick update.

“As you know, I’ve been spending some time working on doing something about this whole Ethicure situation, and obviously I have limited power, but I’ve done what I can and I think some of it has already borne fruit.

"You are all well aware of the incident with the expired medication. The pharmacy audit in December revealed that the pharmacy was pushed into changing suppliers for certain medications without adequate vetting of the new suppliers *and* without informing the impacted department heads.

“Apparently this was challenged but ultimately overruled by Salen to push for further budget savings, so required QA assessments were waived, Ethicure-mandated staffing shortage led to expired medications being kept in stock, and this, as you know, ultimately led to the death of a newborn.

“This has been presented to the board, including further data I have been able to put together on negative effects on patient management and health outcomes since the Ethicure acquisition, including that from other Ethicure hospitals. So now the wheels are in motion, and I’d like to think the hospital administration would be hard-pressed to ignore it.”

Lim lifted her glass, and the others did the same. “Thank you all for your support, now we need to cross our fingers that it’ll bring us the outcome we hoped for, so here’s a toast to better times to come—whatever they may look like.”

Glassman tipped his glass, “Hear, hear.”

Everyone sipped at their whiskey except for Shaun who just leaned back in a chair and relaxed. This felt good. No longer having to contend with Salen’s way of managing things would make his life so much easier, would make everyone’s lives easier. He hoped that was indeed going to be the ultimate outcome.

“Shaun,” Lim called and turned to him. “There’s also the matter of the lawsuit. That will likely still take its course, but the pharmacy supplier situation may turn that around, too. This could be good news for you, for everyone in our department.”

Shaun let out a relieved exhale. Lea was looking at him. “That’s great news, Shaun.”

“Yes!” he smiled.

Glassman brought them back down to earth. “Let’s not count our chickens before they hatch, but I will admit that this sounds very encouraging. Thank you, Audrey.”

She gave Glassman a curt nod and a small smile. “Teamwork makes the dream work, right?”

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It was as if the meteorology gods were smiling down upon them, or Lea thought maybe Shaun had actually made a sacrifice to the Weather Channel man by dancing naked around a sun tree under the full moon, but the sun was shining and temperatures were in the low sixties when she and Shaun drove out to Cave Gulch the next Saturday.

After Lea had suggested they get away for a day, they'd both looked at options in the area. Lea had mentioned a place called Cave Gulch down in Santa Cruz that she'd heard about, and Shaun had found them a really nice looking five-mile hike.

Their past week had been busy as usual. With people coming back to work after the holidays, Lea's days had quickly filled up with tasks, she'd stayed late a few days just to keep on top of things. Shaun was busy as usual, keeping up with his job, doing research at home. There hadn't been any news about Salen or Ethicure, but Lea knew that administrative decisions like this tended to take some time, so she chose to remain hopeful.

Her and Shaun's routine had become more normal, more at ease, the easy banter, sharing of their days and ideas, and Lea thought it felt almost like the old days. Almost, except he still hadn't reached out, hadn't asked for physical contact. She kept hoping he'd surmount that hurdle, too, before long.

Out here on the outskirts of Santa Cruz, they had both enjoyed the hike, relishing the escape out to nature, the great views in between, the half hour break at a stone structure along the way where they'd shared chocolate chip pancakes, apples and grapes.

It was only early afternoon when they returned to the car, both in great spirits. Lea hadn't seen Shaun smile so much in a long time, and she was glad that she'd suggested they drive out here.

Having taken off their hiking boots and stashing them away in the trunk, she suddenly had a thought. She turned to look at him. "Hey, why don't we go down to the ocean?"

She could see the initial antipathy in Shaun's body language, so she added, "I know you hate the beach, but hear me out. Down near Four Mile Beach there's paths along the shoreline up on the cliffs, and it's just a 15 minute drive from here."

He still looked skeptical, so she asked, "Have you ever actually been to the Pacific ocean?"

"Yes," Shaun replied.

"I mean beyond San Francisco Bay, because that doesn't count."

"Dr. Glassman took me to Alameda Creek Vista Point once."

"Yeah, that's still Silicon Valley, that definitely doesn't count. Don't you want to see the Pacific? Just once?"

"What is there to see other than a large mass of water?"

"Oh, Shaunie, I have so much to teach you. I don't actually know if you'll like it, but the smell alone is just… it's like nothing else. It's like you can smell the sea salt in the air, or maybe it's the kelp, or both, I don't know.

“And then when you look out over the ocean, hear the waves lapping against the shore or the water breaking on the rocks, it’s amazing. It’s beautiful. I think you should see it at least once. If you don’t like it, we don’t have to stay. What do you say?”

“Hm. I don’t know.”

She batted her eyelashes at him. “Please…?”

He let out a short laugh. “Okay.”

“That’s my man.”

The drive down to the coast didn’t take long, and their car was the only one in the parking lot near Four Mile Beach. It was early January, after all—not exactly tourist season.

Lea put the picnic blanket she had in the trunk in her backpack, and the both of them made their way down to the shore. Shaun was checking his phone and pointed his finger slightly to their left, “There’s a vista point in that direction.”

“All right, GPS boy, lead the way.”

After a short walk along one of the paths, they crossed a tarmac road, and Shaun stopped. Lea looked at him. “What is it?”

Shaun looked at the path ahead. “That’s a lot of sand.”

“Yeah, the beach is down there. There’s bound to be some sand.”

“You said we don’t have to go to the beach.”

“And we don’t, but I think the only path to that vista point is along the top of that beach. You’re wearing shoes, aren’t you? I thought this was about wet sand between your toes?”

“I don’t like the sand, it gets in my shoes, and then it gets in my socks and then it’s on my feet.”

Lea sighed, tried to not to get annoyed with Shaun’s idiosyncrasies. She surveyed the area, pointed to their right. “If we walk along there, I think we’ll get to the cliffs. There shouldn’t be any beach sand there.”

Shaun let out a hum, stayed rooted to the spot, then looked at Lea. “Do you want to go to the beach?”

She shrugged. “The beach is nice, but the cliffs are fine, too. And the view over there will be pretty much the same as that vista point. Come on.”

She turned to go, but Shaun still wasn’t moving. He opened his mouth, closed it again. She waited patiently. He was clearly working through something in his head.

He finally turned to her. “Lea,” he said, “you… are always very patient with me. You often do things the way I want them.”

He stopped there, and she paid full attention to him now. “Yes, because I know these things are important to you, or sometimes difficult for you. A lot of them aren’t as important to me.”

“You want to go to the beach.”

“No, honestly, the cliffs are fine.”

“I… want to try and go to the beach.”

She gave him a long look. “Oh, Shaun. We really don’t have to do this. You’ll probably hate it, and I wanted this to be nice and relaxing.”

“No,” he said, “I want to try it. It has been a long time since I’ve been to a beach. Sometimes things change. Sometimes *I* change.”

“One of the reasons you don’t like sand is because of a bad childhood memory, right? I really don’t want you to do this if it brings all that bad stuff back up.”

Shaun looked at the sea in the distance, then at Lea. “This is a new memory. With you. It will be different.”

She knew he hated stepping out of his comfort zone, and he was willing to do it just for her. It was one of those moments where she just wanted to hug him and give him a kiss, because he was being sweet and adorable and courageous. She settled for cocking her head and giving him what she hoped was a loving and appreciative look.

“How about we try the vista point first?”

He met her gaze, and there was something profound in his eyes. Admiration, gratitude, maybe love.

He didn’t say anything and just started walking down the path in determined strides. Lea smiled and followed him. The walk along the beach ended up not even being such a huge thing because there were large rocks poking through the surface and Shaun made a game of skipping from one to the next. Maybe he was even enjoying it now.

It didn’t take long to get to the vista point, and there was no one there other than them. They stood for a moment and took in the beautiful view. The sea water in the bay below rippled in shades of teal and deep blue with foamy soft waves lapping on the beach. Cliffs lined the shoreline that was framing the beach to their right. The mass of water stretched out into infinity straight ahead with wispy white clouds hanging over the horizon line where the blue sky met the water.

Lea closed her eyes, tilted her head up and sucked in a long breath through her nose. When she turned her head to look at Shaun, he looked content, with a small smile playing at his lips.

She put her backpack on the ground and opened it to take out the picnic blanket. “This is a perfect spot, don’t you think?”

He let out an appreciative, “Yess.”

The sandy ground was warm from the sun and they sat down on the blanket next to each other. Lea drew up her knees and folded her arms on them, resting her chin there. Shaun immediately took off his shoes and socks and cleaned the bits and pieces of sand off his feet. Lea had to hide a small smile.

When he was done and had put his shoes back on, Shaun crossed his legs, and they sat for a while, just watching the beauty of nature, taking in the open spaces and the sounds of flora and fauna around them.

It was Shaun who broke the silence. “There are microbes in the Pacific ocean that have existed for over 100 million years.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. They live in a low nutrient environment. Scientists in Japan incubated them and they started to consume food and multiply.”

“Wow, that’s pretty cool. And kinda scary.”

“Why is it scary?”

“I don’t know. Would you want to live a 100 million years?”

“I won’t live a 100 million years.”

“Yeah, but if you could, would you want to?”

“Hm. Only if the people I care about also lived for that long. But I think humans will have destroyed the planet before then.”

“Ugh, yeah. Why are people stupid sometimes?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“That was a rhetorical question, Shaun.”

“There’s a Great Pacific Garbage Patch between California and Japan. It’s a large area, the swirling currents made the plastic waste from several different countries collect there. There are also lost nuclear weapons and debris from crashed satellites in the Pacific.”

“Ugh, that’s terrible, too. Really makes you hate humanity, doesn’t it? We should try to be more environmentally conscious at home.”

“We could try to go plastic-free with our home products. We can buy glass dispensers for our soaps and buy dissolvable refill capsules you only add water to, but I don’t know how good they smell.”

“Heh. You’ve already given this some thought, I see.”

“Yes, but I wasn’t sure you were going to like it.”

“I’d love to try it, I’m definitely game.”

“Okay, I will look into it some more.”

They sat in silence again for a little while until Shaun said. “I think I’ve changed my mind. I think I like the ocean now. Maybe I can also like the beach.”

“So what is it about the beach that you hate?”

“I don’t like when the wet sand gets between my toes. I know I still don’t like that. It happened in Wyoming, and it made me upset.”

Wyoming. That time she wanted to make him go swimming and tried to tease him. It had backfired. Hard.

She knew she’d said she didn’t want to bring up old memories, but he so rarely talked about it, so she probed, “Did you always hate it? Just the sensation of it?”

“Yes. We would sometimes go on camping trips with my dad. He and Steve would always go to the creek. They wanted me to go in with them, but I didn’t want to. Sometimes he would yell at me for being too stubborn. One time he picked me up and carried me across. I didn’t like that, either, so I scratched him in the face.” He paused for a moment, then added, “I didn’t want to hurt him.”

“No, I’m sure you wouldn’t. But I think your dad just really didn’t understand what was going on, why you were being like that. You get that it wasn’t your fault, right?”

Shaun let out a hum that Lea wasn’t sure how to interpret. There was a hardened expression on his face now, another reminder of how much shit he’d had to endure in life already.

“Shaun, I know it’s really hard for you to talk about this, but you’ve got all these things from your childhood bottled up inside of you, things that aren’t necessarily connected to your autism, and I can’t help thinking… Don’t you think it would be good to work on that? On all that unresolved trauma? With someone who knows how to give professional help?”

She could see Shaun tensing up even more, so she added, “I know the thought is scary. No one likes to think about sharing their deepest, darkest fears with anyone, let alone someone they don’t really know. That would scare me, too. But I think it could be really good for you, help you with situations like what happened in the pharmacy.”

She studied Shaun, he still seemed unsure.

“Don’t you want that, Shaun? Don’t you want to be able to cope better when bad things happen? I know you’ll always have ASD, but I also think a lot of what you struggle with stems from your childhood and from your needs not being met or acknowledged by your parents for a really long time. And I think a therapist could help you find the tools to maybe overcome some of that and make certain situations less… I don’t know… intense?

“I can go with you, but I don’t know if that will help. You may need to talk about things that you don’t want me to know about—or you don’t want *anyone* to know about. In the end, that’s something you need to do on your own. But if you decide that’s something you want to do, I’d be there every step of the way. I promise.”

Shaun just stared ahead at the ocean, let that sink in. After a few, long moments, he said, “Dr. Glassman said that, too. He said he’d help me find a therapist if I wanted to.”

“And don’t you think it has merit if the two people who love you most in the world are telling you the same thing?”

He let out one of his uncertainty hums, but Lea was hopeful that it had shaken something loose in him. Sometimes it took a bit of a time for an idea or a decision to manifest for Shaun.

For positive encouragement, she added, “You’re strong and brave, and I know that if you decide you want this, you will get through it and make it out the other end a better person. Because that’s you, Shaun. You always fight to become a better person.”

He looked very lost, and she let her knee fall to one side to briefly nudge his leg. “Hey.”

That prompted him to look at her, and she was glad that his features had relaxed a little more, that the anxiety and tension was easing away.

“You’re amazing. Please always remember that.”

He met her eyes and held the gaze there for a long moment. She looked at him and had to smile at a sudden memory she had. “Do you remember our first camping trip?”

“Yes. I dislocated my ankle.”

“Yeah, we definitely don’t want a repeat of that.”

He asked her, “Do you want to go camping by the ocean?”

“I don’t know, do you even like camping?”

“No, but you like it.”

“Yeah, okay, we’re not going camping again.”

“Because I don’t like it?”

“Yeah. Vacations should be fun for the both of us. We should look into glamping.”

“What is glamping?” he asked, and his naivete was somehow adorable.

“Glamour-camping. Glamping. Kinda like camping but with better accommodation and amenities.”

“Would that be meeting you halfway?”

She gave him an appreciative glance. “Yeah, you know what, that is *exactly* us meeting halfway.”

“Then let’s go glamping.”

“Okay, I’ll put it on the list for possible vacations. But you know what glamping also offers? A real kitchen where you can cook real food. Cause I’m hungry. Are you hungry?”

“I’m a little hungry.”

“How about we head home and stop by some place on the way to have some food? What do you feel like? Burgers, Mexican, Asian, Italian, sushi? And please don’t say—”

“Pancakes.”

“No, nuh-uh. No pancakes. We’ve already had pancakes. I’m sick of pancakes. I want something savory. I saw this cozy looking seafood place on the way.”

He smiled. “That was a joke. I would like seafood very much.”

“Okay, seafood it is.” She got up and started tugging on the picnic blanket, even though Shaun was still sitting on it. “Come on, slowpoke.”

He scrambled to get off of it. “You are very impatient.”

“I’m hungry. You drive.” She threw him the car keys from her jacket pocket, which fell to the ground as he missed the catch.

He quickly picked them up and pocketed them with an, “Okay.”

She folded up the blanket, put it in her backpack and they made their way down to the beach again. When Lea was about to turn to where the path led to the parking lot, Shaun stopped, then veered towards the sea.

“Shaun?” she asked.

“I want to go to the water.”

Her surprise was definitely tangible. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” He was already going. She followed.

He stopped where the waves were gently lapping against the wet sand, an incoming one dousing the tip of his hiking shoe with salt water. He just watched with rapt curiosity, she didn’t see any repulsion or anxiety, which amazed her even more.

When another wave came in, he dunked his finger into the water, then straightened up and licked it. She had to laugh at the face he made.

“Tastes pretty yucky, right?”

“It’s very salty.”

“Have you ever swam in the ocean?”

His answer was quick. “No.”

“You can swim though, right?”

“Yes, I can swim.”

“So since you don’t want to try it, I’ll just share this with you because swimming in salt water is pretty cool, and it’s different. You float more easily, and the waves can be annoying but also super fun. As you just found out, it gets kinda icky if you swallow it, and your hair feels all weird when it dries.”

“Do you like it?” he inquired.

“Yeah, I do. There’s something about it where swimming pools just don’t compare, and I don’t like the smell of the chlorine.”

“I still don’t want to try it.”

She let out a small chuckle. “And that’s fine. No one’s gonna make you.”

“I went to a swimming pool with Kenny once. It was late at night, he helped me break in.”

Lea did a double-take. “Wait, what?”

“A transgender patient told me she felt free when she was floating on the water. I wanted to try it but I didn’t want other people to be there.”

“And did you? Feel free?”

“Yes. Floating was very nice.”

“Shaunie, you are such a weirdo.”

“Is that not why you like me?”

“Nope.”

He gave her a look that was fraught with sudden alarm, so she laughed. “That’s why I *love* you, dummy. Are you done with your seawater exploration?”

He wiped his wet finger on his flannel shirt. “Yes.”

“All right, then let’s go.”

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This had been a good day. Lea had a spring to her step as she approached their apartment door, her yoga bag slung over her shoulder. Vinyasa class has been invigorating, and the big news from earlier today was certainly helping with the mood, despite the unusually dreary weather.

She hadn’t had the chance to speak to Shaun yet, he’d been in a long and complicated surgery, and she was curious what his reaction was going to be.

The lights in the apartment were muted, and she saw Shaun standing in the kitchen at the window, his back turned to her.

She put down her things by the door and went over to stand next to him. He didn’t move or speak, and she tried to gauge his mood. His eyes were on the patio outside, watching something.

She tried to see what, but after a few seconds realized it was probably just the rain's calming patter or the raindrops sliding down the window. He seemed to like the rain, probably found it soothing in some way.

His face was inscrutable, but he seemed relaxed—almost serene. She stood there for a few moments longer in easy silence, hesitant to disrupt the rare peaceful moment with conversation.

She spoke eventually, but kept her voice low. "Did you hear the big news?"

He turned his head to her, very briefly met her eyes, and looked down. She felt something touching her hand—his fingers were sliding into her palm, taking her hand very gently.

It took a moment to register, but she suddenly had a lump in her throat and tears in her eyes. They hadn't touched for such a long time, not like this. He hadn't wanted it, and she'd tried very carefully to avoid touching him. It had been hard – the hardest thing sometimes when she saw him struggling, saw him fighting with his own raw emotions that he was never able to hide.

He was taking her hand now, squeezing it ever so slightly, and a whispered, "Shaun," escaped her lips.

He met her eyes, held his gaze there for several seconds, the smallest of smiles playing at his lips. He didn't have to say anything. It was everything rolled into one—the relief, the release, both of them irrevocably knowing it was the end of the Salen era, and with it a final acknowledgement from him of Lea's regret and acceptance of her apology, and a sign of their love having endured.

She moved a fraction closer, testing the waters, and he met her halfway for a gentle, silent embrace. She leaned against him, bringing her arms around him, relishing the warmth, and it hit her how much she'd missed him, how much she'd missed the physical intimacy. She couldn't hold back the tears now.

He tucked her head under his chin and gave her a tender squeeze, and they stood in silence for a long time, just holding each other.

His voice was low when he finally spoke. "Are you crying because of me?"

She let out the smallest of chuckles and pulled out of the embrace so that she could see his face. There was a tranquility there that she hadn't seen for a long time. "Yeah," she just said.

"I'm sorry."

"No, Shaun, please don't apologize. This makes me really happy. And it had to come from you when you were ready."

"Salen resigned."

"I know. I got the e-mail, too. Are you happy?"

His smile widened. "Yes."

His hands came to her upper arms and he bent his head downwards. She knew what that meant. It was their first kiss since the day he'd called the wedding off, the day he had imploded and buckled and everything had changed.

She drank in his soft lips on hers, his gentleness and reticence, his show of affection and regained trust. It was almost as beautiful as that morning in front of the collapsed brewery. A little less volatile and dramatic, but just as meaningful—if not more.

He was the one to pull back, but he kept her drawn to his side and they stood for another few moments, looking out onto the murky patio.

“Were you watching the rain?” she asked, leaning into his side, his arm slung around her waist.

“Yes. It’s soothing.”

“It kinda is, isn’t it?” She listened to the soft dripping noises, watched droplets sliding down the windowpane, meeting others, building rivulets. It made her remember something.

She gently pulled away and went to get something from her purse that she’d carried with her all this time. Sidling back up to Shaun, she held the crumpled ball of paper out to him, put it in his hand when he opened it.

“When you’re ready.”

He looked at it for a long moment, and she knew he’d registered what it was. Then he met her eyes. She wasn’t sure what she saw in them, but he would come to her when the time was right.

She was gonna take what he would give her, marriage or not. She hoped he would come around, but it had to come from him. Today had been a huge step, and hopefully the rest would follow and fall into place.

That night, they also made love. He asked for it, and it was beautiful. It started out with a loving tentativeness, a mutual exploration of where they stood and how much had been broken, but eventually there was a Shaun with a hunger and longing who gave into a physical craving, who was more assertive and desirous than she could remember.

They didn’t speak much then, either, but words were not needed. As much as they’d avoided touching each other in recent weeks, the more Shaun was now exploring it, relishing it, wanting it. His touch was tender and thoughtful, seeking reciprocation, and Lea rewarded him in the same way, relishing his pleasure and satisfaction as much as her own.

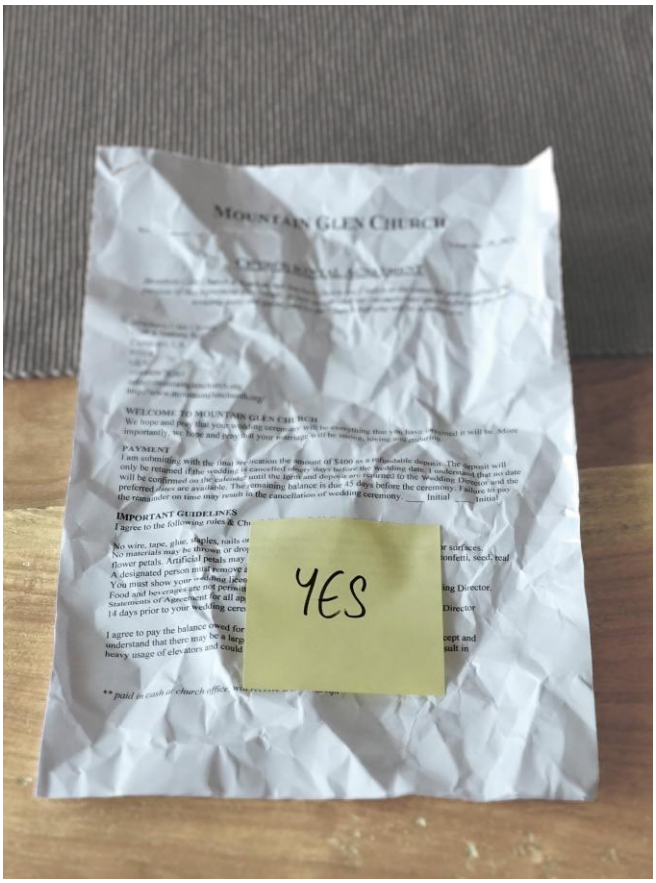
She fell asleep in his arms, a warmth filling her insides that made her feel at home and finally back where she belonged.

The next morning, she woke up to her alarm going off and an empty side of Shaun’s bed. He was sitting at the dining table when she went to the bathroom for her morning routine, returning her casual good morning greeting in an upbeat voice. She smiled to herself. This was how it was supposed to be.

When she emerged, feeling energized and ready to tackle the day, Shaun was in the bedroom. She saw a single piece of paper lying on the dining table, and curiosity got the better of her.

Her heart skipped a beat when she edged closer, immediately recognizing it. It was the smoothed out Mountain Glen Church contract, the one he had crumpled into a ball and discarded in the pharmacy. There was a yellow sticky note on the first page that had a large *“Yes”* written on it in Shaun’s handwriting.

She looked up and turned her head. There he was, standing in the bedroom doorway, studying her.



"Yes?" she asked.

He nodded, confirming, "Yes."

She hurried to him, quickly closed the gap between them. "Really yes?"

She looked up at his face, and he had an unmistakable smile on his face that spoke of contentment and a hint of amusement. "Really yes."

She kissed him so hard that even she was startled, but he quickly gave in and returned the gesture.

Her arms slung around his neck, she looked at his face, looked at his beautiful blue eyes. He was smiling. Happy. She'd missed this. So much.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you, too."

It was the first time he'd said it to her since he told her he couldn't marry her. They were the four most beautiful words she'd heard in a long time.

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THE END

(okay, TGD scriptwriters, now show us how *you* do it when season 5 comes back)

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End Note

Okay, so… This has been a huge undertaking. I have been writing and writing and writing these past few weeks. I'm telling you, it's been a process, but it's also been amazing and intense and rewarding. I couldn't have done it without the constant encouragement and help and precious input from my fellow peeps—you know who you are. From the bottom of my heart, I hope I didn't fail these characters, the original vision of the show and my fellow Shea fans.

And, yes, I know, I know. This was super epic slow burn. Some of you might have hated Shaun's stubbornness and his stupid inability to just get the fuck over it. But I really felt that he had to go on this journey, that all of the ups and downs had to happen to get Shea back to where they belong.

Let me know in the comments if you loved or hated it, if you thought I did it right or went wrong or landed somewhere in between. I love any kind of feedback, and I promise you that you will make my day, even if it's just a short acknowledgement that you read the story.

That said, let's talk about the fun stuff, because medical-themed embroidery is actually a thing. I wish I did embroidery, there's a lot of really cool patterns and templates you can buy on Etsy. I'd like to think Shaun would be really into it. Giant Microbes are also a thing, and they're cute af. I'd like to think Shaun digs it. The pillow they have would look awesome on their couch. Here's what the appendix and the chlamydia keychain look like. The book Lea gave Shaun is also well worth a read if you have an interest in developmental biology.

MOG associated disease is not fun stuff but also a thing. It's a rare disease and, like most rare diseases, I wish more people knew about it. Thankfully, I don't have it, but most chronic autoimmune diseases are a real menace, because they are invisible, and patients are often judged because their body betrays them every day and you don't see it on the outside. If you have friends or family with chronic diseases, be kind and remember that some days are good, others are unbearable. It sucks.

The internet tells me Cave Gulch has hiking trails, and they look lovely. As does Four Mile Beach. I have not actually been there, but I would love to go. I even might, if it weren't for sucky COVID and the some 6,000 miles between me and California. One more for the bucket list.

Chapters were named after lyrics from *K's Choice – Virgin State of Mind*. I think it has just the right feel for this story and I encourage you to listen to it.