Title: It's Always Darkest Before The Dawn
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Summary: The many, many missing scenes to fill the gaps of how Lea and Shaun became a couple in between episodes 3x17 'Heartbreak' and 4x01 'Frontline'. Requested by BygoneEra.
Prompt: If there's a request I would ask of you, it would be to write about the time between I LOVE YOU and FRONTLINE PART 1. How did Shea go from friends to BF/GF and how did they deal with the harsh and hurtful words spewed to each other in FIXATION and HEARTBREAK? (This was crazy fun to write, I hope I did it justice.)
Author's Note: A huge thank you to Jorg_from_the_Jungle for the extra ideas, sanity check and invaluable character insights!
Author's Note: Please do not share or upload this fic anywhere without the author's permission.

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These scallops are to die for, Aaron thinks as he relishes another bite of them, rounding it up with a sip of the wine that the dinner guests brought.

Sitting around their dining table, Debbie is giggling over something that her friends said, and he takes in her beautiful smile and her kind eyes with the endearing creases around them when she smiles.

It's such a nice night with Debbie's very amiable and easy-going friends, and he wonders why they aren't doing this kind of thing more often. She's also a gifted cook, and seems to enjoy making those more elaborate meals; they should invite the Brookers over some time—his old school friend and his wife.

"—that was a complete disaster!" Debbie's friend Frank laughs, and his wife and Debbie join in. Aaron hasn't quite registered the beginning of that statement, but he laughs with them.

The doorbell's sonorous *ding-dong* surprises all of them when it rings. He looks at Debbie, who only gives him a shrug.

"Please excuse me for a second," he tells the guests.

He looks through the peep hole in the door, and his heart immediately sinks. Shaun. Shaun upset and pacing, all jerky movements and distress. Aaron opens the door, bracing himself for the impending impact.

"Shaun."

"I yelled at Lea," he exclaims loudly. He's wringing his hands, his knuckles white. His eyes are bloodshot, his hair all messy, his cheeks flushed.

He's still pacing back and forth, words tumbling from his lips. "I wanted to smash up her car. I wanted to punish her, like my patient's girlfriend had, because she said it made her feel better. But I couldn't." He sucks in a hitched breath. "Lea said it was a bad idea, and I couldn't, so I dropped the baseball bat. It was very loud." Shaun lifts a hand as if he's still holding the thing to emphasize his point.

"Baseball bat? What? Shaun, please come inside."

Aaron takes a step closer, but Shaun steps back, flinching. Aaron stops, lifting up his hands.

“I wanted to hurt her, and I couldn’t,” Shaun repeats, his voice agitated. He blinks several times, his jaw set.

Aaron grinds his teeth. Lea—he’s known right from the beginning she’d be a troublemaker. “Shaun, I think you should come inside, so we can talk.”

“N-no.” His eyes flick back and forth, anywhere but on Aaron. “I don’t want to talk.”

“I think you do, because why else would you have come here?”

“I yelled at her. I was very angry, and I said a lot of hateful things, and now she will never talk to me again.” Shaun stops there, stops pacing, meets Aaron’s eyes for a split second, and lets out a deflating breath, like it’s the end of the world and the irrefutable conclusion to everything.

Aaron tries again. “Shaun, come inside, please. You’re clearly upset, and I’d like to know what happened, so we can figure it out together.”

Shaun doesn’t look convinced, but at least he’s stopped pacing, his hands still clasped tightly and white at the knuckles. “Shaun, please?”

Shaun’s gaze is now directed at the ground, but he finally steps through the door that Aaron holds open. “Come on, let’s go to the kitchen.”

A brief moment of confusion flickers across Shaun’s brow, but he steers towards the kitchen as directed. Dishes, utensils and half-filled pots are still littering the counters and the kitchen island. Shaun must have noticed but doesn’t comment. He’s suddenly very quiet.

Aaron gets a glass from the overhead cupboard, fills it from the faucet and sets it in front of Shaun, who has taken a seat on one of the stools at the kitchen island.

Aaron sits down next to Shaun, and in as gentle a voice as he can muster, says, “Okay. Why don’t you start at the beginning?”

Shaun is quiet for a long moment, and Aaron knows he needs to give him time to sort out the jumble of thoughts and emotions in his head. It will come out eventually.

Shaun takes a sip of water, then, more coherently, starts to piece the story together. “I had a patient who cheated on his girlfriend. When she found out, she took a baseball bat and destroyed his car in the hospital parking lot. He had hurt her, and she said hurting him back made her feel good. It was a very expensive car, it must have cost a lot of money to fix.”

“So you thought it would be a good idea to take a baseball bat to Lea’s car because it would hurt her?”

Shaun cocks his head to one side and averts his eyes, the way he does when he’s being called out on what must have seemed like the perfect solution and turned out to be an incredibly misguided idea. “I thought it would make me feel better. But it didn’t.”

“So you smashed up her car and then realized you shouldn’t have done that…?”

“No. I didn’t smash up her car. I wanted to, but then she came out and told me it was a bad idea, and I couldn’t.”

Aaron raises his eyebrows. “Well, that’s encouraging to hear, at least.”

Out of the corner of his eyes, he sees movement by the door, and turns his head. Debbie looks at him questioningly, with a hint of *‘geez, this again?’* on her face. Aaron makes a gesture with his hand to indicate they will need a bit of room. Debbie doesn’t look happy, but she leaves wordlessly.

He sighs. Another thing he’ll have to patch up later.

Shaun looks oblivious to the wordless exchange, his fingers absently tracing the frosted logo on the water glass. One of Debbie’s Merchant Marine mementos. Aaron presses on. “Then what happened?”

Shaun sniffs once. “I yelled at her, and then I left. I think she was crying.”

“Okay. What did you yell at her?”

“I was very angry.”

“Yes, I figured. People don’t generally take baseball bats to cars when they’re calm and level-headed.”

“She doesn’t want to be with me because I have autism, and she wouldn’t let me try to be a better person, and that made me very angry.”

“Yes, that’s understandable, but I’m guessing that’s not exactly how you phrased it.”

Shaun becomes more agitated again, rubbing his left palm on his left thigh. “I told her she was flaky and superficial and selfish and prejudiced. And that she would deserve ending up alone because of all those things.”

Yeah. Okay. That sounds bad—the kind of *‘Shaun tried to fix it but it backfired hard’*-bad. “And what did she say to that?”

“Nothing. I left.”

Shaun falls quiet, his eyes darting around Aaron’s face, never quite meeting his eyes. His expression is all too familiar—a mix of confusion and desperate hope, searching for the all-knowing oracle advice that would make everything right in one fell swoop.

“What do I do now?” he exhales desperately.

Aaron lets out a long sigh and gives a slight shrug. “I’m not sure there’s much you *can* do. I mean, if you regret what you did, if you feel remorse, you can try to apologize, but I’m not sure it will change anything for Lea.”

Shaun stays silent for a long few seconds, then, “This is all your fault.”

Aaron is taken aback. “*My* fault?”

“I didn’t want to tell Lea that I love her, but you said I should, because she would say yes. So I did, but she said no, and now everything is ruined and Lea won’t ever talk to me again.”

“No, Shaun, I didn’t say she would say yes. I said there was a possibility she *might*. But I’m not a clairvoyant. I can’t read people’s minds or predict the future. But that’s life. Things like this happen. People get their heart broken by other people all the time.

“Yes, it hurts and it sucks, but you pick yourself up and get on with your life, and eventually it’ll hurt less because you’ll start seeing that, for whatever reason, it wasn’t meant to be. And then, one day, the right person will come along. The right person who isn’t flaky and selfish and superficial, who will see you for who you are and love you for who you are.”

“I thought Lea *was* the right person.”

“I know. And that’s what love does to us. It makes us blind to things—sometimes really important things. It’s confusing, and it doesn’t make any sense, but that’s how it goes.”

“I don’t want to fall in love again. It’s terrible.”

“Love’s only terrible if you don’t get a happy ending.”

“I didn’t.”

“I know. But you’re still young. I’d like to think that, eventually, you will.”

“But I love *Lea*. I don’t want to love anyone else.”

“That’s what you think now, but that’s not how you’ll always feel. You need to give it time, Shaun.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t want to.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

Shaun’s fingers are now tracing the letters of the Merchant Marine inscription on the glass. “I want to apologize to Lea.”

Aaron looks at Shaun, sees the innocent, childlike naivete, the desperate urge to want to be loved and accepted. He has to suppress the instinct to put a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “I’m not sure that’s such a good idea right now.”

“Why not? You said I should apologize if I feel remorse.”

“Yeah, but there’s a time and place for that. You may not have destroyed her car, but what you said will have hurt her in other ways. Maybe in more impactful ways than a damaged car. It’s gonna have to be a pretty meaningful apology to get past that, and she’s less likely to accept it when the wound is still fresh.”

“So I shouldn’t apologize?”

“I don’t know, Shaun. But I think for now you should give yourselves some time. Maybe try to avoid Lea for a while. Figure out what the both of you want, or how you can move forward.”

“I don’t need to figure out what I want, I *know* what I want.”

“Yes, I know. What I mean is that I think it would better if you didn’t speak to her for a while. And maybe you can find a way to be friends again.”

“N-no. I don’t think I can.”

“Yeah. All right.” He sighs. This isn’t really going anywhere.

Muted laughter is wafting into the kitchen from the dining room, and Aaron is suddenly acutely aware of his social commitment. “Look, Shaun. Debbie and I are having dinner with some friends. Why don’t you join us? It might take your mind off things.”

Shaun shakes his head. “I’m not hungry. You should go back to your friends. I will go home.”

“Let me at least drive you home.”

“No. I can take the bus. It’s only eight stops, and it runs every ten minutes.”

“It’s not a big deal, Shaun. I’ll let the others know, and I’ll drive you home, okay? Stay here, I’ll be right back.”

He goes to the dining room and briefly explains the situation. He can tell Debbie isn’t exactly thrilled, but she doesn’t say anything. Her friends don’t seem perturbed. Aaron gets his hat and his jacket from the coat rack.

When he comes back to the kitchen, the stool where Shaun was sitting is empty. He can hear the front door softly clicking into its lock.

Oh, Shaun. Why did you have to fall for the one girl who would break your heart in the worst possible way?

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The 72 bus takes Shaun from San Jose’s suburban streets downtown. There’s only two other passengers in the front, and he finds the seat at the window in the second to last row. The vibration of the engine isn’t as pronounced here, and he thinks someone must have thrown up in the front of the bus, where a faintly sour stench lingers that he tries to escape.

Someone has stuck a chewed up bubblegum to the back of the seat in front of him. It reminds him of the shape of a human spleen, but the color is all wrong.

The ride home is a jumble of thoughts of images. San Jose glides by in a cadence of streetlights and shop windows. The bus window is cool against his temple—right onto San Carlos, then left into Dana Ave.

He jumps up from his seat, almost missing his stop. For a brief moment, he considers staying on the bus, riding it to the end of the line, maybe just not get off at all. The doors hiss open and he steps out into the cool night air.

The apartment feels cold and too silent, and he toes off his sneakers by the door and dumps the keys listlessly on the countertop. The sound reminds him of the clank of the baseball bat on the concrete floor, and he winces.

The car port behind Lea's new apartment smelled of car parts and solvent. The Striped Tomato had been parked in spot number 7.

He wrestles out of his coat and drops it on the back of a chair. It doesn't find purchase and slides to the ground with a soft thud. He sits down on the couch, pulling his feet up under his crossed legs.

"I want to hurt you the way you hurt me."

He had very much wanted to hurt her, it had burned in eyes and rung in his ears. Part of him still does, even though he knows it's an ugly and selfish notion. He hates himself. He hates all of this.

"You're going to end up alone and you deserve it, because you're a superficial, selfish and prejudiced person!"

He closes his eyes, feels the tears welling up, running down his cheeks. He's not good with reading reaction, faces, but even he saw the confusion, the contempt in her eyes.

He did this. He ruined everything. This is bullshit. He isn't feeling better. In fact, he's never felt this bad in his whole life, not even when Steve died.

He lets out a scream of rage and flings the nearest object he can grab at the wall. It's the pepper shaker that Claire left standing on the coffee table this morning. It hits the brick wall and bursts into a thousand tiny splinters. The tangy aroma of ground pepper fills the air.

"But you don't even respect me."

He clasps his hands over his ears. "Stop it," he mutters. "Stop it."

His phone dings. He doesn't care. Nothing matters anymore.

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The sound is repetitive and annoying. Something hammering on wood. A fist against the door.

"Shaun, I know you're in there. Open up."

It's Dr. Glassman. Shaun turns around on his mattress, drawing the pillow over his head. The sound becomes more muffled but it won't relent.

"Shaun, I swear to God, I will get the super, or get the crowbar from my car to force open the door. Trust me, you don't want that."

Dr. Glassman is right, he doesn't want that. He sighs and shuffles to the door on bare feet, opening it to go right back to bed.

"Shaun!"

He doesn't listen. The bed is nice and warm. He can hide there. Reasonably.

"For God's sake, Shaun!" Dr. Glassman's voice sounds angry. It's too loud.

Glassman follows him into the bedroom. Shaun draws the blanket over his head. Maybe he will go away if he ignores him. It doesn't usually work. Maybe it will today.

It doesn't.

"Jesus Christ, Shaun." Dr. Glassman is using a lot of swear words. He's been known to do that when he's invested in something. Maybe it means he's invested in Shaun. Or maybe he just wants Shaun to go to the hospital.

The sudden movement startles Shaun, a gust of cool air as the blanket is yanked off him. No, this isn't right.

Dr. Glassman is silent now, but his eyes are boring into Shaun. Intently. He's glowering. Is he angry? Why is he angry?

Shaun pulls back just a fraction, closing his eyes, and something shifts. Dr. Glassman drops the blanket on Shaun's feet and plops down on the makeshift bus seat sofa that's propped against the wall on plastic boxes. He drops his face into his hands and rubs it before he pulls his hands down his beard and resumes his intense glaring.

Shaun thinks maybe he isn't as angry anymore, also indicated by the fact that he's no longer using expletives as a form of communication.

The softness in Dr. Glassman's tone surprises Shaun. "What are we gonna do with you, Shaun?"

Shaun just shrugs and pulls the blanket back up to his waist. Nothing. He wants to do nothing. Nothing is fine.

"You can't hide here forever. This," Dr. Glassman vaguely waves a hand in the air, "isn't healthy. I mean, yeah, I get that you're depressed, and that nothing seems to make sense right now. In a situation like this, a little moping is okay, but you're running out of sick days, and I know you like your job too much to jeopardize it over a stupid girl who dumped you."

"Lea is not stupid."

"Well, she is, if she dumped you."

"She didn't dump me. You have to be together with someone first in order to dump them."

"Now you're just arguing semantics. Come on, get out of bed."

"No," Shaun vetoes.

"Yes, goddammit!"

Oh. The expletives are back. Shaun pulls the blanket a little closer, but it doesn't help, because within the next five seconds, it's gone again, this time out of reach on the sofa.

Dr. Glassman is suddenly hovering near him. He's holding out a hand. His eyes are brown and warm, and Shaun doesn't know what to do with that.

"Shaun."

Shaun thinks it sounds a little bit like a plea. Dr. Glassman has always been there when it counted. Maybe he owes him at least this much.

Glassman's fingers are warm, and his grip is firm but not overbearing. He pulls Shaun up to a standing position, and Shaun thinks maybe he's gonna pull him into a hug. But he doesn't. Shaun withdraws his hand.

Dr. Glassman pulls a few clothes out of the dresser and wardrobe and hands them to Shaun, who stands stiffly, unsure what to do with himself. The t-shirt that's thrust into his arms doesn't match the tartan patterned shirt, and Shaun objects, "No."

"Yes, very much yes. You will take these clothes and take a shower and then come out of that bathroom, all clean-shaven and dapper, like an actual human being."

"No," Shaun repeats, but doesn't care to explain. He pulls a grey t-shirt from the pile of fresh shirts in the dresser drawer before he heads into the bathroom.

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Aaron cautiously watches Shaun as he listlessly taps into the bathroom on bare feet. He's not seen Shaun this bad, not even back then in Casper. Well, that had been different. That had caught him off-guard, had caught them all off-guard.

He'd expected some sulking, but not this level of misery. If there was anything positive about Shaun's autism, it was that he usually bounced back quickly from emotional crises. Worry makes way for a certain amount of relief when Aaron hears the shower being turned on.

He looks around, tries to gauge the state of disaster. The apartment is a lot messier than he's ever seen. Items normally meticulously placed where they belong lie haphazardly strewn in random places. He picks up the coat that lies on the floor next to a chair and hangs it on the coat rack.

There's a curious pile of small glass shards near the television and a brown powdery substance. When he finds the metal lid of the pepper shaker, he can piece two and two together. He goes to find a dustpan and hand broom to clean up what he can.

The trash is overflowing with empty fast food cartons and junk food wrappers, and Aaron thinks he can see a half-eaten pancake buried underneath. It doesn't take a certified genius to deduce how Shaun has spent the last few days. A few dirty dishes are in the sink, and he puts them in the dishwasher. That thing should probably run, too, it's pretty full and doesn't exactly smell great.

Relief is the predominant sensation when Shaun finally emerges from the bathroom—fully dressed and shaven, his hair no longer a mess of strands sticking out every which way. His face is still grim and unhappy, but it's a start.

Aaron sets a plate with a PB&J sandwich in front of him at the table, along with a glass of water. "I would have made pancakes, but you're out of eggs, and I'm assuming you don't like your milk sour, so this will have to be the next best thing."

Shaun still digs in, and more relief floods through Aaron. As he watches the young man, he remembers why he came here in the first place. He picks up his satchel and takes a light blue portfolio folder out. He places it next to Shaun's plate.

Shaun looks up at him.

"Take a look," Aaron encourages him.

Shaun takes another bite from the sandwich, his curiosity piqued, but his face falls pretty quickly when he skims the copy of the medical file inside. "This is a simple heart bypass surgery."

"You should read on."

It doesn't take long for Shaun's eyes to become wide. "Situs inversus?"

"Totalis," Aaron adds.

Shaun lets out one of his little excited gasps, and it makes Aaron's heart skip a tiny beat.

"This is extremely rare." There's a certain awe and wonder in Shaun's voice.

".01 percent. You won the lottery, Slugger."

"I can do the surgery?"

"Easy, tiger, you're not going to be leading. But I've managed to convince Lim for you to be first assist. Provided you get your sorry ass to the hospital and can adequately prepare."

The sandwich drops to the plate, half-eaten and already spurned. "I want to go right now."

Aaron smiles at him, "Okay, then let's go."

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The earth had shaken, and Dr. Glassman had said, "Shaun, Lea… was here."

He had crawled under a collapsed building for her, only to find someone else. And now here she is, hair all grey on top from the dust, a bruise on her check, planting the most amazing *'I'm such a stupid idiot for not seeing it, but I love you with all my heart'* kiss on his lips.

"You make me more, Shaun," she says to him.

His stomach makes that funny flip that he's only ever known from being around Lea, and he kisses her back. The world dissolves, and suddenly there's only Lea. Lea on his lips and in his head and in his heart.

He has to come up for air, and she is still smiling at him. There's destruction all around them, broken glass and debris on the ground, but he's here with Lea, her face smeared with dirt and her hair smelling of dust, and Shaun suddenly has a scary thought.

He pushes her an arm's length away. "Are you okay?"

“Yes, Shaun, I’m more than okay.”

“Dr. Glassman said the brewery tanks fell on you.”

“They didn’t. I mean, they kinda did, but not really. I think the floor caved in and I… To be honest, I’m not exactly sure how, but I think it’s just a few scratches and bruises.”

“Where does it hurt?”

“Shaun, the EMTs checked me over. I’m fine.”

“The EMTs were very busy with more critical cases. You should go to the hospital. You could have internal trauma, it can present with delayed symptoms.”

She sighs. “Okay, if it’ll make you feel better, I’ll go to the hospital and you can run all the unnecessary stupid-expensive tests on me.”

Shaun looks around. One of the ambulances is just finishing loading up, and Shaun jogs up to the EMT. “We need to go to St. Bonaventure Hospital.”

The EMT looks at him. “Sorry, bud. we’ve been recalled to the fire house.”

“My girlfriend is injured.” He points at Lea for good measure, who is now walking up to them.

Lea interjects, addressing the EMT. “I’m sorry, I think he’s overreacting a little. I was cleared earlier. We don’t need an ambulance.”

“You could have internal bleeding or a subdural hematoma, or—”

That seems to have gotten the EMT more concerned. “Do you have any pain? Nausea, dizziness?”

“No,” Lea protests. “I’m fine.”

Shaun is already in the back of the ambulance. “I want to take your blood pressure.”

The EMT is standing in the door. He doesn’t look happy. “I’m sorry, and you are…?”

“I’m Dr. Shaun Murphy. I’m a surgical resident at St. Bonaventure Hospital.”

“Well, Dr. Shaun Murphy, right now you’re in my rig, and I’d like to politely ask you to get out.”

“No. I want to take Lea’s blood pressure.” He readies the equipment near the gurney.

“Please keep your hands off our equipment.”

Shaun watches how Lea touches the EMT’s arm. “Listen, he gets a little intense when he’s worried. Can’t you let him take my blood pressure real quick? That won’t take long, right? I’m sure it’ll be normal, and then we’ll be out of your hair.”

The EMT sighs, then gestures for Lea to get into the rig.

Shaun attaches the blood pressure cuff to her arm. 131 over 86. It looks normal. “Can you lie down? I’d like to examine your abdomen.”

“Shaun,” she says, and there’s that dangerous undertone swinging in her voice that he knows how to detect by now. The one that says she might start yelling at him if he keeps insisting on getting his way.

She pulls the blood pressure cuff off her arm and climbs out of the ambulance.

“Lea,” he calls after her.

“I’m leaving,” she says, walking away. “Stay if you want.”

“Lea!” He jumps out of the ambulance to catch up with her.

She turns around. “Shaun. I don’t have internal bleeding or a sub-duro whatever. I’m fine, and I need to see if Striped Tomato is okay and not swallowed up by the earth. Because if he was, I’m gonna be super mad, and Grandpa Rod would be *so* pissed that I drove him all the way out here to earthquake territory.”

No, this is wrong. He stops. “You… went to a brewery and you took your car?”

“Why, what is wrong with that?” She keeps walking, and he tries to catch up with her again.

“Did you not come here with the intent to drink alcohol…?”

“Oh my God, Shaun. I know not to drink and drive, okay? I know that *you* know Uber exists.”

“Why would you take your car when you already knew you would need an Uber? That sounds very inconvenient since you’d have to take another Uber to pick up the car the next day.”

“First of all,” she points a finger at him, “you’re clearly the smart one in this relationship, since you have a point. Second of all, I wasn’t sure I was gonna be drinking alcohol until I got here. For all I knew, the party could have been totally lame, and I might have bailed a hundred percent sober. Third of all, I was hoping to talk someone into driving me out here tomorrow… or rather today, to pick up Striped Tomato. So. What’s your clever answer to that?”

He tries to come up with something, but he’s not great at clever retorts, and he knows Lea knows that. “I don’t have anything clever to say.”

“That’s okay, you have other strengths to play to.”

“Where did you park Striped Tomato?”

“Right over… there.” She points at the red old-timer with the familiar white stripes on the side that’s parked on the street corner.

He looks at it intently. “I think it is intact.”

She walks faster towards her car, Shaun thinks he can see a slight limp in her gait. She circles the car once. “Oh my God, I can’t believe he’s okay. Grandpa Rod, thank you for looking out for Stripey!”

“Are… you talking to your grandfather?”

“Yeah. No. Maybe?”

“Didn’t you say your grandfather was dead?”

“Yeah, he is. But I’d like to think somehow he’s looking out for good old Stripey from wherever he is.”

That doesn’t really make sense to Shaun. Her grandfather would likely be buried in a cemetery somewhere out east. He knows some people believe in the existence of a human soul and its transference to other planes of existence, but to him the concept seems very odd.

She walks over to the driver’s side door, but Shaun blocks her path. He cups his right hand and holds it out towards Lea. She stares at it. “Shaun, what are you doing?”

“You have a limp. You should not be driving.”

“You just crawled underneath a collapsed building, sawed off a woman’s leg with a hacksaw, and almost drowned in the process. I don’t think either of us should be driving right now.”

“Which is why I suggested the ambulance. Keys.”

She looks down her body, her hands hovering in the air. “Shaun?”

He seeks out her face. “Yes?”

“They were in my purse.”

“Yes. And?”

“The purse that is lying somewhere underneath 500 metric tons of rubble.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh. Do you have your phone?”

Of course he has his phone. It’s his surgical resident lifeline. He fishes it out of his jacket pocket.

“Uber it is, after all,” Lea tells him.

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The Uber drops them off at the emergency room entrance, as directed by Shaun. He takes her hand as they walk in, and Lea thinks it’s kinda cute. How did she ever doubt that she loved this man?

He gets all business when he checks in with the staff, and she wonders in awe how at ease he seems to be here. He’s come such a long way.

“Curtain three is free,” he tells her, indicating it with his hand. “I’ve asked Dr. Henderson to examine you. She’s worked as ER Attending for several years. She has extensive experience with crush injuries and blunt force trauma.” He looks very self-satisfied with his choice.

“Shaun, for the last time, how often do I have to tell you that I’m okay?”

Dr. Henderson is a stout woman in her 40’s, with short red hair and a smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “All right, let’s take a look.”

Lea lies down and endures the poking and prodding, knowing that Shaun won’t have it any other way. In the grand scheme of things, it’s not like she doesn’t even mind so much. After getting buried under a collapsed building, reassurance is probably better than regret.

Shaun is standing a few steps back, tapping something into a tablet computer. Probably creating her patient file, documenting every little finding. Dr. Henderson leaves while a nurse removes the pulse-ox from Lea’s finger. Shaun follows them.

After what seems far too long, he and Dr. Henderson come back to the curtain area. The ER attending tells her, “Everything checks out. Lung function looks good. No indication of any injury, other than the bruise on your thigh. Ice it if bothers you too much, that will also keep the swelling down.” She looks at Shaun. “I trust you know how to monitor it for complications, not that I expect any.”

He nods. “I do.”

Dr. Henderson gives Lea a curt nod. “Well, looks like you’re good to go.”

Lea looks over at Shaun. “See? I’m fine. Like I told you.”

“You have a considerably sized hematoma on your thigh.”

“That’s just your fancy way of saying bruise. You can disengage worry-mode now, Shaun.”

Nope. Worry-mode is still on, she sees, but it seems to have been dialed down a notch, at least. Looking at him, he’s as much of a post-earthquake mess as she is. There are dirt smears adorning his face and dark blue clothes, and his scrubs and shoes must still be damp. He needs a shower and some rest just as much as she does.

“Okay, then, Shaunie. Homeward it is for the both of us.”

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Homeward sounds good, Shaun thinks. He doesn’t like how his feet are sodden and wrinkly in the wet shoes and socks. It reminds him too much of wet mud between his toes.

He takes Lea with him to the surgical floor and asks her to wait in the waiting room while he gets his backpack from the locker.

The ward seems strangely muted and subdued, he doesn’t see any of his colleagues other than a few familiar faces of the regular shift nurses. The change is welcome in the wake of the utter chaos of the earthquake.

He had expected the locker room to be empty at this time of day. Shift change had been a while ago. He's surprised to see a figure sitting on one of the benches.

Claire. She's sitting very still.

"Hello, Claire," he greets her.

Her head shoots up. He's not great with facial expressions, but it's clear she's been crying and her eyes are red.

She sniffles, then says, "Shaun." There's something swinging in her voice that tilts him off-kilter. This is very much outside of his comfort zone.

She sniffles again, then stands up and looks at him. Her voice is shaky. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I amputated a woman's leg that was impaled on a rebar so that she wouldn't drown. It was very scary, but I saved her life."

Claire's brow creases, and Shaun isn't sure what to do with that expression. She normally looks a lot more enthusiastic when he has interesting medical stories to share, and it doesn't get much more interesting than this. Instead, she makes a strange sound, something that might be a sigh, or a gasp or a sob. It confuses him.

"Claire?"

She turns away from him, walks over to the window. Shaun is out of his depth. What is he missing?

"Claire, is something wrong?"

She whips around, her voice suddenly angry. "Dr. Melendez is dead, that's what's wrong!"

Dead? What is she saying? "No," he says.

"Yes, Shaun! Dead!"

"No. I saw him at the brewery. He was treating patients. He was fine."

"Yes, he was fine. And then he wasn't." Her voice is sharp—like an acrid, vinegary tang biting in his nose.

Shaun deflates, his legs suddenly feel very weak. "No. No, you must be wrong."

Claire's voice is a lot softer now. "I wish I was, Shaun."

No. Dr. Melendez was alive when he saw him a few hours ago. "How did he die?"

"Retroperitoneal bleed from a torn SMA that caused wide-spread ischemic bowel. By the time we operated, it was already too late, the necrosis was already spreading."

He shakes his head. "No. N-no. There were EMTs everywhere. They would have seen he was injured. They would have taken him to the hospital."

She lets out a snort through her nose. “Yeah. They would have. If he hadn’t been a fucking idiot and ignored his symptoms until it was too late.”

“He is a surgical attending. He knows the signs of internal bleeding. This doesn’t make any sense.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Claire leans her back against the wall, then slides down into a sitting position. Shaun looks at her. “When did this happen?”

She shrugs, her eyes teary. “I dunno. An hour ago?”

His mouth twitches, there’s an angry knot in his stomach. “Who did the surgery? Did they do a retrograde bypass from the iliac artery?”

“Look, Shaun.” Her voice is muffled, there’s a tremble to it. “I don’t wanna talk about this right now, okay?”

He looks over at her. Her knees are drawn up, her forehead resting on her folded arms. He thinks maybe he can see her shoulders shaking.

Something tells him she needs the comfort more than the words. They had sat here once, in this exact spot, while he was holding a broken toy scalpel and she’d sat down wordlessly next to him. He remembers the solace it had given him, the strength to eventually pull himself together.

He walks over to sit down next to her, scoots closer than she had been back then, a year ago. His hand hovers unsurely over her shoulder, but he withdraws it.

The world narrows into a thin tunnel of bleak nothingness, and they sit without speaking, the only sounds breaking the silence her hitched breaths. Shaun feels very small.

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Lea starts getting a little nervous. Shaun said he was just going to get his stuff from the locker. What is taking so long?

She waits another few minutes, then loses her patience. She knows where the locker room is, hopes to find Shaun there. It’s always possible there was some emergency he had to attend to.

“Shaun?” she asks out loud as she steps in through the door. “Are you here? I’m coming in.”

Silence greets her, and she’s about to leave again, but she notices something out of the corner of her eye that makes her walk into the room.

There’s an instant knot in the pit of her stomach. She looks from Claire to Shaun sitting against the wall, their faces blank, a deep sadness rippling underneath.

“What?” she asked. “What happened?”

Shaun just blinks. Claire’s breath hitches.

“Please tell me what happened.” Her voice is slightly panicked.

It’s Shaun who answers. His voice sounds robotic. “Dr. Melendez died.”

What? No, that can’t be. He’d been right there in the hallway when the earthquake hit. “No,” she exhales. “How?”

“He tore his SMA, and it caused ischemic colitis,” Shaun says by way of explanation.

Claire wipes her hands across both her cheeks and slowly scrambles to her feet. “He was bleeding internally. We saw it too late.”

“God, I’m sorry.” Lea gently touches Claire on the shoulder as Claire walks by and leaves Lea with Shaun.

Shaun still sits on the floor, forlorn and hollow. Lea slides in close to him. Her hand cups his drawn up knee. He keeps still, but she can feel the tension radiating through him. She squeezes gently, rubs his kneecap with her thumb.

He exhales and leans into her. They sit silently for what feels like a very long time, his arm against hers, until he squares his shoulders and gets up. “I want to go home,” he says while he opens his locker.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll call us an Uber.”

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They go to Shaun’s apartment first because it’s closer. He’s already opening the car door, and she tries to catch him before he gets out. “Shaun, why don’t you come by later?”

“No, thank you,” he says, and then he’s out of the car before she can say anything else.

The Uber driver turns his head, looking at her questioningly. “Just go,” she tells him.

At home, she takes a long shower. The hematoma on her thigh looks glaring and dark purple and she winces as she touches it. There’s also an ugly bruise on her right cheek. *War wounds,* she thinks. She’ll wear them with pride.

Once she’s dressed in a set of comfy clothes, feeling like a human being again despite her aching body, she takes her phone and calls Shaun. He doesn’t answer the first time and she gets his voicemail. She calls again.

“Lea,” he says, his voice exhausted, sad.

“I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No.”

“Shaun, why don’t you come over? We don’t have to do anything. I just… I don’t think you should be alone right now.”

“I’m fine,” he insists, but she knows that he’s not.

“Okay, then I’ll come over.”

“You… don’t have a car.”

“You know, that’s actually not a half-bad idea. I’m gonna go and get it right now. Your place is kind of on the way anyway.”

“I want to be—”

“Alone,” she interrupts him, “and I refuse to believe that. So here’s what I’m gonna do, Shaunie. I will pick up the Striped Tomato. And once I’ve done that, it’ll very much want to go to your apartment building. And then I’ll get out and I’ll knock on your door, and if you really don’t wanna see me, you tell me to go away, and I will. You don’t have to answer right now. Just think about it, okay?”

“Okay,” he meekly agrees. It doesn’t sound very convincing.

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She arrives at apartment no. 24 an hour later. The Striped Tomato was indeed miraculously unscathed, still in perfect driving condition. Amazingly, she found a parking spot near the front door, which practically never happened.

She doesn’t even have to call Shaun’s name after she knocks on his door. She expected having to do a lot more gentle convincing, but he opens up after the first three knocks.

He’s also showered, she can see, now clad in pajama pants and a long-sleeved top. Just like the old days, when they lived together and he worked the night shift and would sleep during the day. He stands by the bookshelf, his back to her. He hasn’t said a word since she got here, and she suddenly feels ill at ease.

“Shaun, maybe this was a bad idea. You probably wanna sleep. Maybe I should leave. Do you want me to leave?”

“No,” he says from where he’s lingering awkwardly.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. What do you wanna do? Watch some TV? A movie, maybe? Do you wanna try and get some sleep? You probably should, you haven’t slept all night.”

“Neither have you.”

“No, that’s true. But I’m way too wired to sleep right now.”

He plops down on the sofa, turning his head to look at her. It’s an invitation. She takes it.

He gives no indication that he wants to watch TV or a movie, so she just sits with him.

“Hey,” she says in a low voice. “Do you wanna talk?”

“No,” he replies in a soft voice.

She can’t help but watch him, watch the delicate ripples of contemplation behind his eyes. People often mistook his lack of discerning emotional cues for not having any emotions, but it was actually the opposite. He had so many feelings, and they were right there if you took the time to pay attention.

“Lea, how do we make this work?”

That grabs her attention. “What do you mean?”

His eyes flutter ever so slightly but he doesn’t look at her. “I still have ASD. And you were right when you said I can’t fix that. I will always have ASD.”

“Oh, I know that. But in all the time I’ve known you, I have *never* seen you face a challenge that you haven’t risen up to. You try *so* hard, Shaun. All the time. And that will be enough for me.”

He turns his head and briefly meets her eyes. “You want me to try and keep fixing my autism?”

“No. God, no. I’m just saying that we’ll be facing a whole lot of new challenges if we’re in a relationship. And that’s the beauty of it. Now we can work to overcome them. Together.”

That seems to satisfy him, a small smile playing at his lips. His eyelids are drooping slightly, he must be exhausted.

“Hey, come here,” she says, patting her lap. She gently draws him to her, indicating for him to lie down. His lanky figure doesn’t quite fit on the couch, but he angles his legs and lies with his head on her thigh, the one that’s not injured.

Her hand comes into his hair and softly plays with it, and his eyes flutter closed. His breathing evens out after a minute, and in the next two minutes he’s fast asleep.

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The bus ride to Lea’s apartment two days later is a lot more cumbersome than Shaun wants to admit. He has to change busses twice, and one layover stop is near the fish market where it smells of rotten seafood, which reminds him of wet sand and seaweed. Shaun has never liked the beach.

His mind wanders back to the conversation he had earlier with Dr. Glassman.

“Lea and I are a couple now,” he had announced.

Dr. Glassman had raised his eyebrows and said nothing except a short, “Hm.” Shaun didn’t know what to do with that.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” Dr. Glassman had asked him.

“Lea makes me happy.” It was as simple as that.

That had elicited another, “Hm,” from Dr. Glassman.

He doesn't understand why Dr. Glassman isn't happier for him. Lea does make him happy. Happier than he's ever been. How could Dr. Glassman not approve of that?

The flight of concrete stairs from the bus stop to Lea's street has sixteen steps. There's graffiti on six of them. Shaun can't read what it says.

He rings her doorbell. He's only been here three times before, and one time that he didn't come in. She has a smile on her face as she greets him. "Hey, Shaunie."

"Hello, Lea." For lack of a coat rack, he deposits his jacket on the shoe cabinet she has in the corridor. "How was your day?" he asks as he comes into the kitchen.

She's standing at the counter, chopping up red bell peppers. "Yeah, it was pretty good. Kinda slow going, I think some people are out of office, and my mailbox was refreshingly empty. You?"

He walks up next to her. "I assisted Dr. Andrews during a hernia repair. We used a tension-free repair technique without mesh. There were no complications, and the patient is expected to make a full recovery without impeded range of movement. What can I help you with?"

She hands him a non-descript white paper bag that looks like it's missing the outside cardboard wrapper. "You can cook the rice."

He twirls it in his fingers for a long moment. "Do you not have the outside packaging anymore?"

"No, I threw that out. Just takes up unnecessary space. This kitchen is tiny. I hate it."

"How am I supposed to cook the rice if I don't have the instructions?"

"You don't know how to cook rice without instructions?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know what rice this is. They are not all the same. Long grain rice takes longer to cook than Jasmine rice, and risotto rice takes even longer."

"Shaun. Does it look like I'm cooking risotto?"

He looks around. He can't tell. The kitchen counter is a mess and there's no recipe in sight. "I don't know. Are you cooking risotto?"

"No, I'm not cooking risotto. This is regular long grain rice, and you boil it with 2 ½ times the amount of water as the rice. You just put it on the stove and let it boil until all the water has evaporated. That's it, easy-peasy. But you need to watch it towards the end so that it doesn't burn when the water level gets low."

"That… doesn't sound easy-peasy."

She laughs. "You know what? How about you chop up the tomatoes, and I'll cook the rice?"

"Okay."

Dinner is lovely, and the rice isn't burnt. He tells her more about the hernia surgery, even though he isn't sure she's really interested, but he tells her anyway because she keeps asking questions.

They have fruit salad for dessert, and when they're both comfortably full, Lea pushes her dessert bowl aside.

"Shaun," she says, and it sounds fraught with something important.

He looks around, trying to figure out if there's some kind of shoe she wants to drop that he needs to brace himself for. He once again notices the worn, old linoleum floor and the furniture that's an odd jumble of styles that don't fit together. Her chairs are hard and not all that comfortable.

She places her hands flat on the table. "Look, I know we only just got together, and this is really new, but I wanna make sure we're doing the right thing, and that this isn't just me making an impulsive decision that we're gonna regret later."

Why is she telling him this? Is she having second thoughts? "Lea…"

"There's some stuff I think we need to talk about."

"Like… what?" he carefully probes.

"Like that night you came here, ready to take a baseball bat to my car. That came a little out of the blue."

He's suddenly acutely aware of the memory. It had been raining, and it smelled like motor oil and fresh paint.

"I want to hurt you the way you hurt me."

He turns his gaze away, he doesn't want to look at her. Maybe she's gonna leave him again. Maybe their moment outside the brewery was just an aftereffect of adrenaline rush, and she has now reconsidered.

He lets out a non-committal hum.

"Don't you have anything to say about that?"

"I was very angry," he admits in a small voice.

"Yes, you were. You said a lot of really ugly things that night."

"It was wrong, and I'm sorry." Is that enough? Dr. Glassman had said he'd need a very meaningful apology for it to matter. "I'm *really* sorry," he adds for good measure.

"Shaun, what happened that night? You were *so* angry. That wasn't like you. It really scared me."

"I'm sorry," he repeats with more vigor.

"Yeah, okay, I know. But I don't want an apology. What I want is an explanation."

He interlaces his fingers, rubs the heels of his hands against each other. The warmth it creates on his skin feels somewhat reassuring. "It was stupid."

"That's not an explanation."

“Hm.”

“Shaun.” Her voice is becoming impatient. That’s not good.

He raises one shoulder awkwardly. “I don’t… want to talk about it.”

“Yeah, I get that, but I think we need to if we want to make this work.”

“You will not like it, and then you’ll leave me again.”

She lets out a very audible sigh. “This again? Shaun, I’m not gonna leave you, okay? Just because we’re going to talk about some of the big and unpleasant stuff, doesn’t mean that I can’t love you. Because I do. But I also want to understand you.”

“No one understands me. Not even *I* understand me.”

“Yeah, okay, but I’d like to at least *try*.”

He draws in a breath, steels himself. “You said you didn’t want to be with me because I have autism. You said the two of us would never work. I love you, and I wanted to be with you, and when you said I couldn’t fix it, that made me very angry.”

“Yeah, I got that much, but it’s still a pretty huge leap from being angry at someone to going to their apartment with a baseball bat to trash their car—the car that they know means a lot to them.”

He reflects on the situation, and of course he knows now that it had been a monumentally bad idea. It had seemed the perfectly right thing to do at the time. How can he make her understand?

“We were treating a pseudoachondroplasia patient with exacerbating sleep apnea who needed brain surgery. He had two girlfriends, and he tried to keep it a secret. It didn’t work. One of them got very mad and smashed his Porsche with a baseball bat.”

He looks at Lea, tries to gauge if he’s saying the right thing, if it’s making her understand him any better. He’s not sure he’s getting an answer, but her eyes are intent on his, and he knows he has her attention, and she’s probably not mad at him right now.

He continues, “I was treating the cut on her hand she got from a piece of glass, and she said you can’t control how you feel, but you can control what you do with your feelings. And she said it made her feel better. I thought smashing up your car would make me feel better.”

He stops and waits. That’s an explanation, isn’t it? Is she still looking at him? Is she mad at him?

“And? Did it make you feel better?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I didn’t smash up your car.”

“Yeah, I know. I was there, remember?”

“I couldn’t, and it made me even more angry. I yelled at you. I said a lot of things that weren’t nice.”

“But you meant them at the time, didn’t you?”

He shrugs again, uncomfortable. “I think I did.”

“Shaun, you said I was selfish and superficial, and that I deserved to end up alone and unloved.”

“I also said you were prejudiced.”

“Yeah. You did. Do you still feel that way?”

“No,” he says quickly. “N-no.”

“And why not?”

“Because I love you, and I want you to be happy. I don’t want you to end up alone.”

“So we’re left with ‘selfish, superficial and prejudiced’.”

He isn’t sure what she means by that. He waits. Lea keeps looking at him. He looks away. There’s a pigeon outside, picking at something on the ground.

“Shaun?”

“Yes?”

“‘Selfish, superficial and prejudiced’?”

“Yes. Why are you repeating those words?”

“Do you still think I am all of those things?”

Is this a situation where you should lie? A situation where it doesn’t help if you speak the truth? Maybe he can start small, dissect it one at a time. “I don’t think you’re superficial anymore.”

“But I’m still selfish and prejudiced?”

“Hm.”

She lets out a breath. What does that mean? She’s not looking at him anymore, and that’s bad.

He gets up, walks a few steps away. The floor is cold underneath his socked feet.

“Shaun,” she says. “Shaun, please don’t run away.”

“This is why you don’t wanna be with me. Often, I don’t know what the right thing is to say. I do things that are wrong when they don’t feel wrong. I say things that hurt people when I don’t mean to hurt them. I just said something that hurt you.”

She also gets up, takes a few steps closer. He tries to push away the feeling of being cornered, but doesn’t quite succeed.

“You know what? You did. But don’t you see? The fact that you know that it hurt me, it shows me that you’re not as oblivious to other people’s feelings as you may think.

“Yes, you can be awkward and rude, sometimes inappropriately so. A lot of people don’t know how to deal with that. And sometimes it can be hurtful, but I know you. And even though I don’t like to admit it, you’re not wrong. I can be selfish, and I’m probably prejudiced. I’d like to think I’m not superficial.”

“I said I didn’t think anymore you were superficial.”

“Yeah, but it must have come from *some*where.”

“When you told me you didn’t want to be with me, you made assumptions. A lot of people have prejudices about autism. I didn’t think you did, but when you told me you didn’t want to be my girlfriend, my autism was all you saw. But that isn’t all that I am.”

Something twitches on her face, and he knows he’s treading on precarious ground now. “Yeah,” she exhales. “And I don’t know why I was too stupid to see that. Or… maybe I do know.”

He watches her fiddle with the hem of her sleeve as she goes on. “The truth is, I was scared to commit to you—to commit to being with a person who has autism. I knew it would be difficult. I mean, let’s not kid ourselves, we’ll probably struggle a lot more than other couples would. There’s always going to be things I do that you’re not comfortable with, and things you do that are gonna annoy me.

“We’ll fight, and we’ll probably yell at each other. But we’ll also make up and…” She lets out a short chuckle. “Think of all the awesome make-up sex we’re gonna have.”

That makes him smile, too. He’s not had sex with Lea before, and he wonders if make-up sex is going to be different from normal sex. “Do you want to have make-up sex right now?”

She laughs. Another wrong thing to say.

“No, Shaun, right now I’m full and tired, and I think our first time should be a little more special.”

“Okay,” he readily agrees.

“Shaun,” she says, and her eyes are on his. “Are we good?”

He isn’t entirely sure what she’s asking. “I… am good at some things, but not at others. I know you are good with computers. And playing Zelda – Breath of the Wild. And cooking rice.”

“No,” she says, chuckling for some reason. “That’s not what I meant. I meant, is everything good between us?”

He thinks for a moment. “I don’t understand the question…” he finally admits.

“How do you feel right now?”

“Okay.”

“Just okay?”

Is he saying the wrong thing again? “I am not sick.”

“Oh, Shaun.” There’s a smile on her face. “Come here, you silly, silly man.”

She closes the gap between them, and then her lips are on his, her hands at the nape of his neck, softly caressing his skin. It makes his stomach flip and tingle in a way that he’s never felt with Carly.

Having Lea in his arms is the best thing ever.

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When Shaun and Lea do have sex for the first time, it’s amazing. Carly was great, but it’s different with Lea. More intimate, somehow. More profound. He knows the sound she makes when she has an orgasm, and he triumphs inwardly a little bit.

Tonight was just as wonderful, and he lies back on the pillow in her bed, basking in the afterglow. He’s always thought these kinds of moments were a movie cliché, but maybe they’re not.

He turns his head. Lea’s face is a dark silhouette against the muted light of her bedside lamp. “Why do people in movies always smoke a cigarette after they have sex?”

She lets out a short laugh. “We just had the most sensual experience ever, and you’re thinking about cigarettes?”

“Hm,” he says. This is just how his mind works.

“Have you ever smoked?” she asks him.

“No.”

She turns towards him, props her head up on her elbow. “Seriously? Not once?”

“No,” he repeats. “I’ve never smoked. It smells disgusting.”

“Not even a joint, just to try?”

He ponders that for a moment. “I went to Dr. Glassman’s house once, and we got high together.”

“Seriously? You and Glassy had a doob together? Why am I having a hard time seeing that?”

“It wasn’t a joint. It was medicinal marihuana, and they looked like gummy bears. He said it helped with his chemo symptoms.”

“Oh, the Mallomars story…”

Shaun nods. “Yess. We had a lot of fun. I shot a golf ball through a windowpane and smashed the vase with his grandmother’s ashes. I called him Glassy and he called me Smurph. I think we were both high.”

“It certainly sounds like it.”

“I went to his house to help him through chemo. Dr. Glassman said I did it because you were having sex with Jake.”

She dramatically plops back down on her pillow. “Oh God. Jake. Such a loser, and not even all that great in bed.”

“Did you fake your orgasms when you had sex with him?”

“Geez, Shaun. Inappropriate question much?”

“You sounded different when you had sex with Jake.”

She turns back onto her side to face him. “First of all, ew, you listening to my orgasms is super creepy.”

“Your bedroom was right next to mine.”

“Yeah, and second of all, Jake was a fling. I mean, he was fun while it lasted, but he wasn’t… you.”

“So sex is different with me than it is with Jake?”

“Sex was different for you with Carly, right?”

He nods. “Yes, she was ve—”

Lea interrupts immediately. “No, nuh-uh. Don’t wanna hear it.”

“Okay,” he concedes. “But I want you to know that sex is better with you.”

She grins at him, and it makes his stomach flutter in the best possible way.

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Their first three weeks as a couple are a flurry of days blending into each other, days of them seeing each other after work, staying over at his or her place whenever they can, moments of sexual intimacy. Shaun’s stomach is like a nest of butterflies, whenever he sees Lea, and it makes him giddy with excitement.

What he realizes very quickly is that she’s all about touch. From the first time they met, she’d always been up in his space, sometimes uncomfortably so but never disturbingly invasive. Except now, it’s different.

Now there’s a soft brush of a hand on his shoulder, or her fingers caressing his knee as they watch TV, her hand cupping his jaw when they kiss, a brief hug, a gentle thump against his arm when she wants to emphasize a point. It’s new, but it’s starting to feel like home.

They’re on the sofa in his apartment, watching a rerun of a British crime show that he’s already seen, and he’s acutely aware of Lea softly playing with the hairs at the nape of his neck—

something he's realized she likes to do. He must have inadvertently moved, because she stops and looks at him.

"Do you like this? Should I stop?"

He doesn't want her to stop. "No."

"No, you don't like this, or no, I shouldn't stop?"

"I like this, and you shouldn't stop."

She continues and he briefly closes his eyes and just enjoys the sensation. He doesn't like most people touching him. But this is different. With Lea, it's better. Comfortable. It feels right.

"Shaun?"

He turns his head to look at her. It sounds like one of those times where she has something important to say. He can't always tell, but he's getting better at it with Lea.

"I know it's been a while, but that night in Casper, can we talk about that?"

That night. He tries not to think about it, but it's still fresh in his memory when he does. She'd held him tight, grounded him, when everything was spinning out of control, when his thoughts had been dark and ugly and screaming in his father's voice. She'd already indicated back then that they should talk about that night. He still doesn't want to. The memories are like sandpaper all over his bare skin.

"I know you didn't wanna talk about it then. And maybe you don't want to now, but—"

"I don't want to now," he tells her quickly.

She's quiet for a long moment, her eyes seeking out his. He looks at her for a brief second, but her eyes are tense with something he doesn't understand, so he looks away.

"You understand that that was a pretty big turning point, right?"

"My father died, and I was upset. You comforted me, and that made me feel better." That's all there was to it, what else does Lea want to talk about?

"Yeah, that's pretty much the essence of it, but don't you think you're oversimplifying it a bit? There was all the other messy stuff with Carly, with you choosing to take me instead of your actual girlfriend, with Dr. Glassman trying to push you into talking to your dad when you didn't really want to.

"You weren't just 'upset', Shaun," she makes air quotes, "you were being self-destructive, and devastated and being pulled into a really dark place."

All of what she's saying is true. The only thing to add he can think of is a noncommittal, "Hm."

"All of what you've been through, you've had so many rough patches in your life. That can't—"

"Thank you, Lea," he tells her.

“For what?”

“That night, you… *saved* me.”

He dares steal a look, and there are tears in her eyes, and maybe there are in his, too, he can’t quite tell.

“Shaun, what was happening that night? In your head?”

His head was all messy and loud, his father all over it like unrelenting drizzle clinging to your skin and making it all wet and clammy. His father telling him he was a coward, his raspy and ruthless voice, accusing Shaun that he was at fault for Steve’s death.

It was ugly and all-encompassing and he doesn’t know how to say any of those things to Lea. His hand goes into his hair, the way that Steve used to ruffle it—the smallest of comforts. “I don’t know.”

“I think you do.”

“I don’t— I don’t know, Lea.”

“Hey,” she says softly, and her hand is open right next to him, her palm facing upwards. He hesitates at first, but when his skin touches hers, it’s warm and comforting and he feels grounded—like he did that night when she was holding him in her arms, letting him cry, her cheek pressed against his.

“Shaun, no matter what your father said, you know that your brother’s death wasn’t your fault, right? You are *not* weak. You’re one of the strongest, bravest people I know.”

“You weren’t there,” he tells her, and he can feel her sudden tension through their touch.

“No, that’s right, I wasn’t there. But that doesn’t mean that what I’m saying isn’t true. Your father was a bully, and your mother chose her husband over her children. I mean, what kind of mother does that?

“God knows, my relationship with my parents isn’t the best, but what your mother did is… *unthinkable*. You had to run away and live in a frickin’ bus to escape a terrible situation, and your parents did absolutely nothing to support you. No child should ever go through that. Maybe you’re stronger for it, but that’s gonna leave a mark, and I know that trip to Casper ripped open a lot of old wounds.”

Her fingers gently intertwine with his, her thumb strokes his hand. “I know you have a hard time talking about your feelings, but I need to know that you’ll come talk to me with the big things before they get that bad. We’re in this together now, and I’ll be here when you need me, okay? You can come to me with anything.”

“Okay,” he readily agrees.

“Why *did* you choose to bring me instead of Carly?”

“Carly loved me, but it’s different with you. You know what to say, and you know when to leave me alone. When I was with Carly, I always had to pay attention to everything, and I never knew when I was doing things right or wrong. It was exhausting.”

“So you brought me because you felt more comfortable with me than with Carly?”

“Yes,” he nods, and when she doesn’t respond after a long pause, he asks, “Lea?”

“Yes, Shaun?”

“I like it when you’re with me. It feels… like *home*.”

“Home…” Her mouth curves briefly into a smile, but then it fades and she’s quiet before she says, “Yeah, and maybe we should talk about that, too. Because remember when we were roomies? I’ll admit, we had our teething problems, but I loved living here with you. It was as close to a home as I’d had in a long time. And then, one day, you walk in here with this idea in your head, and basically throw me out…”

No. That was not what happened. “It was *not* my idea, and I didn’t throw you out. Carly wanted you to move out so we could be together, and you agreed that it would be the best thing to do.”

She lets out a breath through her nose. “Yeah, Shaun, but you know how people sometimes say one thing, but they actually mean something else?”

“No, I don’t understand why people don’t always say what they mean. Why do they do that? It’s confusing.”

“Yeah, it is, and I wish I had an explanation why people do that.”

His eyes roam the Venetian blinds in front of the windows. One of them is an inch higher than the other two. This new revelation from Lea stumps him. What is she saying? “So… you moved out, even when you didn’t really want to? Why?”

“Because how could I not? You were so happy with Carly.”

“You moved out so that I could be happy?”

He looks back at her, and Lea’s mouth twitches. He waits patiently for her answer.

“Basically… yes. And if your next question is going to be if I resented you for it, no, not really. Sure, it didn’t feel great to be kicked out of your own home because your roomie’s girlfriend demanded it. But I also saw how good Carly was for you. And if it meant I had to move out to give you what you needed, then I didn’t want to stand in the way of that.”

This feels like a slap in the face. Lea had been so agreeable at the time. She’d gone and found a new place to rent almost immediately, and packed up her belongings three weeks later and never said anything. He’d made her feel bad, and something churns unpleasantly in his stomach.

“How was I supposed to know that you didn’t want to move out when you said the exact opposite?”

“Oh, Shaunie.” She lifts her hand, like she wants to touch him, but then thinks the better of it and doesn’t. He can see tears welling up in her eyes, and the lump in his stomach grows larger. “Do you remember when you told me the story about that cleaner at the hospital who died?”

“Paul?”

“Yeah, maybe. I don’t remember his name. But you said he’d told you that when the truth can't help someone, you should lie. Shaun, I wanted you to be happy. So I lied. And maybe I was counting a little bit on the fact that you wouldn’t be able to tell.”

His voice is small and soft-spoken. “Lea. I didn’t want you to move out.”

She wipes quickly with a hand at her cheek and sniffles once. “But you obviously wanted to be with Carly more than you wanted to live with me.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I wanted to be with Carly *and* live with you.”

“Yeah, but that wasn’t possible, was it?”

“No, it wasn’t,” he says in a low voice. “Did I make a mistake when I asked you to move out?”

She shakes her head almost imperceptibly. “I don’t know, Shaun. Did you?”

He thinks about that for a long time, then concludes, “It wasn’t a mistake. If you hadn’t moved out, I would not have been with Carly, and she wouldn’t have broken up with me. If she hadn’t broken up with me, I wouldn’t have told you that I love you, and you wouldn’t be here now.”

He turns his head, meets her beautiful brown-green eyes. “I’m glad you’re here now.”

She smiles back at him. “So am I, Shaun.”

Lea leans in and gently cups his jaw with one hand, her soft lips kissing him, and her touch electrifies him like it always does. It feels good, and he lets every bit of contentment spread through his body and untangle knot in his stomach.

She severs the connection and her fingers toy with the sleeves of his shirt. “Hey,” she says, her finger tapping his arm as she does, “I’m hungry. Are you hungry?”

“I’m not very hungry, but we can eat if you want.”

She gets up from the sofa and goes to the kitchen. When she comes back, she has several take-out leaflets in her hand. “Okay, so… Thai, pizza, Indian, burgers? How does pizza sound? I think I’m in the mood for pizza.”

“Pizza is fine.”

“Perfect.” She hands him the Italian take-out leaflet. “So, what’ll it be, Shaunie?”

He hands it back to her without looking at it. “You know what I like.”

“You always have Margherita. Margherita is so boring. Don’t you ever wanna be adventurous, mix it up a little?”

“You always have Capricciosa.”

“That’s not true. And just to prove my point, I will order Hawaii tonight.”

He must have made a disapproving expression, because she says, “Oh no. Is this where we need to have the age-old pineapple on pizza discussion?”

“There is an age-old pineapple on pizza discussion?”

“Yeah. It’s like a divide that splits humanity. You’re in camp ‘hater’, aren’t you?”

“Pineapple on pizza is very wrong.”

“Yep, score one for camp ‘hater’. Duly noted.” She briefly considers this and looks at him. “Would you terribly mind if I ordered Hawaii pizza?”

“Are you… asking if my aversion to pineapple on pizza should influence your choice of ordering one?”

“Yes…?” He thinks maybe her expression is somewhere between quizzical and playful.

“That doesn’t make any sense. You should order the pizza *you* like, since you will be the one eating it.”

“Okay. Just making sure. Still hung up on Margherita? Last chance to change your mind and be adventurous with me tonight.”

His first instinct is to insist on Margherita, but there’s that smile on her face, the one that he loves that tells him that maybe outside your comfort zone is a good place to be sometimes. He makes up his mind. Adventure it is. “I think I will go with Quattro Formaggi tonight.”

She looks up from her phone where she’s scrolling through the take-out menu items, and gives him a long look that he doesn’t know how to interpret. “Why… are you looking at me like that?”

Her mouth draws into a quick smile and she turns her attention back to her phone. “Nothing. Quattro Formaggi it is.”

“Do you not want me to order Quattro Formaggi?”

“Nope,” she says quickly. “Quattro Formaggi sounds awesome. Anything else? Dessert? Ooh, their tartufo is to die for.”

“No, thank you.”

“All right.” She holds up her phone. “Ordering… *right now*.”

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Lea wakes up the next morning with a smile on her face. Life is better when it has Shaun in it. His sweet and innocent smile, the unbridled enthusiasm when he's happy about something, the wildly bizarre ideas he sometimes has to solve problems, his soft and gentle kisses, his always curious blue eyes.

She thinks about him while she's getting ready for work, looking forward to their lunch break together.

She's already running late. Jacket, keys, purse, ID badge… Shit, where's her ID badge?

Lea rummages through her purse, checks the cabinet in the entryway, looks in all the pockets of the clothes she wore last night. She runs downstairs and checks the gaps around the driver's seat of her car. The badge is nowhere to be seen. She runs back up to the apartment, goes through everything again—without success.

She sighs. Shit. She probably lost it at Shaun's place last night. She'd have to drive all the way back downtown and look forever for a stupid parking spot. She'll be fashionably late for that 8 am conference call.

Morning traffic is a menace, and the songs on the radio are all terrible. Shaun is holding a glass of orange juice when he opens his apartment door.

She waltzes right in. "Have you seen my ID badge?"