Should Haves

by SandfireKat

Summary

Requested by saralynne: I'm terrible at thinking of specific prompts but I would love a story where Shaun gets hurt or sick at the hospital and Dr. Glassman/Claire/any character(s) you want are there to help him. I can just imagine so much cuteness with that. It's sort of a non-creative idea so I understand if you don't want to write it!!

Shaun hadn't left her. He'd refused. But maybe he should have. Maybe it would have been better if he did. Instead, he'd stood in front of her, and he'd protected her as best he possibly could. And as a consequence, he couldn't protect himself. Claire should have fought more. She should have stood her own ground. She hadn't been able to. The entire situation should never have happened. But it did.

Notes

This story evolved from a request from my new tumblr blog thegooddoctorheadcanons. If you like it, I'd really appreciate you checking out all of the other shorter snippets of writing I have on there! <3
Chapter 1

"If he takes much longer, we're both gonna freeze out here," Claire announced, her face pinched over in the smallest bit of irritation. Shaun glanced at her with the matter-of-fact statement, but he didn't agree or comment. He just turned back front and pulled his jacket tighter to himself. It was getting to be that time of year when it got colder than normal at night. Not excessively cold, but cold enough, for some. Claire actually thought it felt kind of nice standing out here, but clearly Shaun wasn't a fan. At his apparent discomfort, Claire wilted. "Maybe we can go back inside," she suggested. "We could wait in there."

But the rejection was near instantaneous. "No. It's quieter, here."

The simple response caused guilt to crawl over her face. She frowned, and, after a small beat's hesitation, she asked: "Are you okay? Or…were you okay tonight? I know you don't like any of this…at all, but…" The very instant they'd gotten off of work, the three of them had hopped through about five different bars and clubs. It was Jared's idea, of course. You only turn twenty-nine once, and he was itching to hit all the prime nightlife spots that San Jose had to offer. Claire had been on board in an instant, especially since it was his birthday; however, when it came to asking Shaun to go along, some convincing had been required.

They had both wanted his company— over the time spent together, the trio had started to get closer and closer. There had been that initial speed bump, in which neither of them were exactly sure how to get along with Shaun; to be frank, they hadn't even been sure if Shaun wanted to have any sort of relationship with them, either. But once Claire had started piecing together the puzzle that was Shaun Murphy, and Jared had followed behind her closely, it had all clicked perfectly. Now, they might as well have always been friends from the start, with how easy and simple it was. So it was only natural that Shaun be included in the celebration, even if it took some prodding and poking.

He'd said yes eventually. The 'birthday' card had been played as a last resort, and Shaun had had nothing of equal or greater power to play against it. But he had been subdued for most of the night, and he certainly hadn't had a single thing to drink. Sometimes Claire had turned to catch him wincing from the loud music, or fidgeting away from people that got too close. But he had never complained audibly, and he had followed them from place to place, even though they probably should have ended the night about three hours ago.

Now, standing about five yards from the bar, and finally out of that clamor and noise, Shaun was beginning to relax again. "It's okay," he replied. "It was Jared's birthday. I'm glad he had fun."

Claire smiled. She looked down at the ground and shuffled her feet, before glancing back towards the bar. Jared was still inside. They'd all been on their way out to finally head home, when a few guys had stopped him short. They'd all been old friends from somewhere— Claire couldn't really hear over the music, but she thought that Jared had said something about a old fraternity brothers from his undergrad days. It hadn't mattered, really; Shaun had been getting to the end of his rope, and even she had been growing exhausted, so Claire had told Jared they would just wait outside.

He'd said it would only be a few minutes. It was going on ten by now.

"We could start walking to the car, at least," she offered. "It'll be warmer in there, and definitely quieter. Jared'll find us." Shaun considered it for a moment, and he nodded. Anything to get out of the cold, and to get some peace of mind, most likely. Claire met the nod with a bright smile, and she turned to start their trek back. It'd be a long walk, anyway. When they'd first headed out, contrary to the bleak look of things now, the streets had been packed, and so had every parking lot along this
stretch. She'd ended up stuck in the furthest one, just because it was the only option. That was all the way at the end, too, near the first bar they'd visited, what felt like ages ago. Whenever Jared decided not to take forever, he would probably catch up before they even got near their lot.

They walked in silence for a long while. It was a comfortable silence, and probably something Shaun had been craving for a while. It was nice. The streets were empty and vacant with how late it was now, and the only sounds were their own footsteps bouncing off the darkened buildings. After some time, though, Claire broke the quiet. "Thank you," she offered. "For coming along, I mean; I know you didn't have to. I hope you had at least a little fun. But if you didn't, Jared probably appreciated it anyway." Shaun just nodded. After a lengthy gap, she continued. "So…you could tell me what you do like to do in your free time," she suggested. "So maybe next time we do something, you can be a little less miserable."

"I like to read," Shaun offered.

"Hm. Well…that's not really a group activity, Shaun," she teased. "Unless you wanna start a Book Club, and if you do, I just wanna warn you, Jared's only going to SparkNote it."

Shaun glanced at her quickly. He seemed to buffer for a moment, but eventually he said: "If you don't read the book, you can't come. He'll be kicked out."

Claire snorted, doubling over a bit with laughter. Shaun didn't usually tell jokes, so when he did, they had the tendency to be funnier than they actually were. "Oh no, he'll be devastated," she snickered, reaching up and rubbing at her cold nose. Shaun's smile turned a little more pleased. They kept walking along, stride for stride. By now, they'd left the bar far behind them. Claire let out a gusty sigh and heard the exhale bounce and echo off back to her. "You know, Shaun, I feel like I don't know much about you," she mused, breaking the silence yet again. "And you probably don't know too much about me. And that's weird! You know? I'd like to say we're good friends! We should get to know each other more. Ask each other questions. I know you don't like them…but I think it would be good. It'd be nice."

Shaun eyed her a little warily. It looked like he was refuse— she could at least see the temptation to do so on his face. But with Claire's earnest smile and bright eyes, he apparently couldn't. Still, it was a full two minutes before he answered. "Okay."

"Okay?" she repeated, a little surprised. Quickly, her grin turned into a beam. "Okay! Yeah! How about…you go first! Ask me anything, and I'll answer it."

He took his time. Once again, they walked in silence until he caught one. "What made you want to become a surgeon?"

"I think I'm like most doctors. I just wanted to help people. I was really good at anatomy in high school, and medicine was just what interested me the most. I actually started college as a psychology major; I switched pretty quick." Shaun seemed satisfied with this answer, and she tapped her chin as she raked her mind for something she could ask him. Something as meaningful as his question— she hadn't anticipated that type of tangent, frankly. "Okay…how about…what's your favorite book? If you said you liked to read?"

He frowned. "I like a lot of them," he replied. She raised her eyebrows, and after a hesitation, he declared: "To Kill a Mockingbird." His voice was a little quieter with the name.

She tilted her head to the side. "I read that in high school. I like that one too. Wrote an essay on it."
They kept going. And as they walked, side-by-side, they took turns exchanging questions. It helped pass the time, and keep company. It even took Shaun's mind off the cold, it seemed. They chattered back and forth, asking anything and everything— what's your favorite food, favorite drink, favorite vacation, favorite memory? What's your dream place to live, did you like high school or college better? Her turn coming back around, Claire pursed her lips in thought before she asked: "So, what's the greatest thing you've done?"

Shaun stopped short. When Claire noticed he wasn't walking anymore, she halted too, and turned back. It was darker now that they were finally getting close to their lot, but she could still make out the faint look of bemusement on his face. "You know!" she prompted. "What's the most amazing thing you've ever done?" He said nothing. Was that question too much, somehow? "You had to have done something pretty awesome, before, right? Something cool, or brave? Aside from at work, of course, because you always seem to—"

"Claire." He just said her name, and that was it. Something about the way he said it immediately made her stiffen. She realized he wasn't looking at her in confusion. He was looking behind her in confusion. Her smile dropped at once, and she turned to follow his gaze. There was someone there. She hadn't seen him at first, in the dark. But now he was walking— moving out of the shadows, and moving towards them. He was walking fast, but he was stumbling in the process. It was almost like he was moving in a zig-zag pattern, the trips were so sharp. All the same, though, he was making a beeline for the two.

"He's intoxicated," Shaun announced, as if the fact wasn't plain as day.

Claire shifted in discomfort; unthinkingly, she reached down and grabbed hold of Shaun's hand. "Let's go," she whispered, her voice a little harder. She didn't like this. It was too late at night, and they were way too isolated in this specific spot. In hindsight, she should have monitored the tone of voice she used, because she could immediately pick up on Shaun's spike of anxiety. She tried to offer him a smile, but it was a little too tight to be able to be passed off as care-free. "Let's just get to the car. We're almost there. He's probably just going to walk right past us."

The second she started to walk again, though, the approaching stranger called out, his voice thick and sluggish. "Heey!" he drawled. She tensed, and started to try and figure out the best method for walking around him. Shaun's fingers were intertwined with hers still, just on Claire's impulse, though he wasn't wrenching away. As a unit, the two tried to dodge the man. But they didn't make it very far at all, before he veered over and caught them. Claire jerked to a stop when he planted himself squarely in their way, and Shaun was forced to do the same.

"Wh're you off to?" the stranger slurred, aiming a crooked smirk in Claire's direction. Revulsion was quick to flip her stomach at the sheer reek of alcohol that was coming off him. He was so inebriated that his words could hardly be separated or understood. "Pretty little thin' like you— y'u're not goin' home already, are ya?" He sounded mournful at just the thought. He stumbled closer, and Claire immediately backtracked, tugging Shaun protectively along with her. "C'mooon. Stay out a li— a little bit! I'll buy you a drink."

He was holding a beer bottle; an empty one. With her free hand, Claire started to reach back for her purse. She was pretty sure she'd stowed her pepper spray there, and on the off-chance she hadn't, she could at least dial the police. If it came to that, even. But she froze when she realized that her purse wasn't with her. Where was it? Had she— had she forgotten it in the bar!? Wildly, she looked over her shoulder, as if that could possibly help, or erase the fact that they'd walked about ten minutes from the closest bar; the one they'd left Jared in was about three times as far. Her brain started to race, and reach for anything relevantly helpful to the situation.
"She is going home." She stiffened immediately when Shaun spoke up. No— no, no, they just needed to leave. They didn't need to talk to him! She whirled back around to stop him, but it was too late. "We're both going home." He was doing his best to look at the newcomer head-on, and levelly, but it was clear he was slowly becoming panicked. "It's late. If you would please leave us alone, we're trying to get back to the car."

The man turned and looked at Shaun like he was just now noticing him. His forehead creased, and he leaned a little closer; severe, albeit bleary, confusion and irritation clouded over his face. He took a step forward, nearly closing the distance between him and the young man. Shaun immediately looked away and started to back up against Claire. "I don' think I was talkin' to you," the man growled, his voice changing immediately to something that caused a chill to lance down Claire's spine. "I thin' I was talkin' to the lady. Why don't you just leave us alone? You got no place in this, bud."

Was Jared at least on his way by now? Claire took in a slow breath and forced her nerves to calm. It was fine. It was going to be fine. It was nothing. She tightened her hold on Shaun's hand, finding that he didn't complain at all. "Come on, Shaun, we're leaving," she muttered, her voice harder now as she tried to step around the man a second time. If she walked fast enough, maybe they could leave him behind. However, they only took about ten steps before the man was suddenly in front of them again, blocking their way.

She glared at the stranger, feeling her stomach start to twist in fear. Shaun was the one who held tighter to her this time. The look in the man's eyes was darker now, and he moved to eliminate the distance between her and him. "You playin' hard to get?" he growled. He took a step closer, undeterred by the fact that they both met the effort by immediately backtracking. In fact, he was almost encouraged by the reaction; a disgusting kind of smile twitched at the edge of his mouth at their skittishness. His stare was solely for her, and it was getting harder and harder not to succumb to panic. "You're a fighter. All the pretty ones are…" He reached out to graze his hand against her hair, and she jerked backwards.

"Get off!" she spat. She started to backpedal again; they couldn't just stand here, they needed to find someone. Anyone. They needed to try something. "Shaun— do you have your phone?" she hissed under her breath. It was their last hope— she'd royally screwed up by leaving her purse back with Jared.

"C'mon, 'm not meanin' any harm. Stop runnin'," the stranger oozed, weaving around to stop them yet again. Claire was saying about fifty different curse words in her head as she pulled Shaun back for amount the millionth time. He was quickly becoming frazzled. "You're actin' like I'm some horrible guy! You've got some nerve!" After recollecting himself from being jerked back yet again, Shaun was reaching back into his pocket. Claire's heart stuttered with relief when she saw him pull out his phone.

But the young man hardly had time to even turn on the device, before the man jerked forward and suddenly smacked it clear out of his hand. Immediately, Shaun wrenched backwards, not trying to recover it at all as he yanked his hand back to himself and shrank away. Claire was about to dive for it, when the stranger suddenly changed to round on Shaun, who fumbled backwards at the unexpected proximity. "Who's this?" the man spat. Shaun was frozen, and it took less than an instant for Claire to fire over in anger at the smug smile on the man's face. It made her forget the phone entirely. "This your boyfriend? Doesn' seem like such a white knight…"

"He's my friend!" she snapped. "Leave him alone!"

He turned back to her, and her hands balled into tight fists. "That's okay," he dismissed flippantly. "I
wasn't interested in him anyway." Abandoning Shaun, he walked back to her, and she tensed, trying to muster the sharpest scowl she could. She didn't move; not while Shaun was locked into place like he was. But her heart was ramming hard now against her chest, and when he leaned over to grab hold of the collar of her jacket, her panic only grew. "C'mon." He started to pull her closer, hard and roughly. "How 'bout you and me—"

Claire locked her jaw back and kicked out as hard as he could. She caught him in the shin, and immediately gained a rush of satisfaction at the scream of pain that came in response. The man buckled, and she took the tiny chance to rush for Shaun. He was still panicking, watching the entire thing play out with a blank and alarmed stare. But he roused when she grabbed back hold of his hand. Screw making it to the car; if they could make it at least halfway back to the first bar they'd gone to, they would find someone, right? Someone might be loitering around outside? "Shaun, come on, Jared can—"

"You bitch!" Claire whirled around to look back at the man; the instant she did, a hefty force collided against her cheek. He'd hit her, and immediately pain blossomed across the entire left side of her face. The blow was so hard it scattered her brain; she let go of Shaun and stumbled, accidentally falling backwards to the ground. Shaun's eyes were wide and stricken at the smack. Claire was paralyzed for a moment, too shocked to move. The man towered over her, and now his eyes were burning with anger. "Are you stupid!? I just wanted to—"

"Please stop." Numb, Claire looked up to see Shaun move in front of her. His hands were clasped together so tightly, his knuckles were a stark white. He couldn't look the stranger in the face; he was looking to the side instead, and his voice shook like a leaf in the wind. Nevertheless, there he stood. Putting himself between her and the imminent threat. "You're hurting my friend. You're very intoxicated. Please leave us alone. Don't do anything you might regret."

"Regret?" he grunted. With unfocused eyes, he looked Shaun up and down, seeming almost disgusted. "What're you?" he spat. "Are you retarded or something?"

Claire scowled, and the sheer amount of anger created as a result of the question helped her shock to burn away. She started to shove herself up to her feet, her teeth already gnashing in rage. Shaun closed his eyes tightly for about one second. But he quickly opened them again and took in a slow breath. "My name is Shaun Murphy, I'm a surgical resident at Saint Bonaventure Hospital, just like my friend, who you hurt," he stated, his voice tighter now, and more strained. "If you don't leave us alone, I'm going to—"

"Get out of my fuckin' way," the stranger growled, cutting him off. He shoved Shaun aside like he weighed nothing; he hit the ground with a heavy thud. Claire gasped and tried to rush forward to help him. But the moment she stretched out, the man lashed out to take tight hold of her arm. She went stiff, and instantly forgot about Shaun as the heat of panic flooded through her. The man tugged her closer and started to move, to drag her away from Shaun.

All efforts to keep composed were out the window now; she started to trash and fight to break free. But the man was strong, and about twice her size— his grip alone was making her wrist numb, and when she started to try and screech out for help, he yanked her close and covered her mouth. She was panicking— what was happening!? They'd just been walking out to her car, what had gone wrong!? Why hadn't they parked somewhere less out-of-the-way!? Where was Jared!? She needed him!

She was embarrassed to know that against her rising panic, tears were springing up to burn at her eyes. She tried to kick out and catch him in the leg again, but the man had learned the trick. He twisted her arms back behind her, and pulled her down so that all her efforts were meaningless.
Feeling herself being dragged away, she tried to dig her heels down into the ground. He just pulled on her harder with the effort, and made it fruitless. The more frightened she got, the less her mind could work, and now it was spluttering into useless shock and confusion. She didn't know which way was up, she didn't know what she should do—if there was anything she could do! What was he going to do, where was he going to take her, what was going to—!? 

Something separated the two of them. A hard weight, which knocked the stranger's hands off of Claire and caused her to fall forward and hit the ground hard. The impact knocked the wind clear from her lungs; in an instant, she couldn't breathe. Gaping like a fish out of water, she could only twist to her side to look back at what had intervened. She was preparing herself to feel the rush of relief that would accompany the sight of Jared, finally having gotten back to them just in time. But she paled in shock when she realized the force hadn't been Jared; it had been Shaun. The young doctor now stood between her and the stranger, one arm stretched warningly in the drunkard's direction, and the other reaching back towards her, as if to shield her. She couldn't see his face, but she could tell from his body language he was far from collected. Still, he didn't back down.

"Did you just shove me?" the man slurred, looking at Shaun with a dangerous light in his eyes. "You made me drop my drink, you piece of shit!" Claire's fogged mind was struggling to keep up, now. It was like it was coated in molasses. He must have dropped his empty glass after Shaun had pushed in between them.

Shaun weakened at the shout, but he still stayed frozen in place. Claire tried to get the world to stop spinning, and to force just the smallest amount of air down her throat. While she struggled, the drunk stalked forward, like a predator sizing up its prey. "You've got five seconds to move, 'fore I make you, you moron," he all but snarled; his voice was so low, it was difficult to even hear him. Desperately, Claire tried to urge Shaun to move. To reach out and grab onto him, at the very least. But she couldn't do either of those things.

Shaun stayed resolute. He backed up to stand more in front of her, and, with obscene difficulty, he forced out the words: "You're the moron." Claire's stomach dropped in horror. It almost didn't click, what he'd said. But the instant it did, she knew it was a mistake. And it was. It was a huge one. The insult made the stranger snap in two. His arm reared back and threw itself forward again in less than a millisecond, to catch Shaun right across the cheek. The impact could be heard even from where Claire was collapsed. The young doctor fell to the ground like a rock.

"Shaun!" The first breath she managed to get back in was forced right back out in the strangled scream. Sluggish and disoriented, he started to try and force himself back up to his feet. The moment any attempt was made, however, their attacker kicked out and caught him square in the stomach. He fell right back down into a heap, and this time he did not move. "Stop it! Stop!" Claire screamed. She scrambled up in the same heartbeat that the man fell down to his knees. He grabbed Shaun and wrenched him onto his back, only to land yet another punch in the same exact place.

Claire flew forward and grabbed at the man's shoulders, struggling to pull him off of her friend. It did nothing though. It didn't even make him hesitate. He just kept raining down blow after blow to Shaun's head—to his cheek, to his eye, to his mouth, to his forehead. At first Shaun attempted to defend himself, in any way. To twist out of his grip, to put his arms in front of his face, to push him off. But with each heavy blow, every well-aimed punch, his attempts grew feebler and feebler, until they died completely. Until even his chokes or soft cries of pain faded into nothing.

By now Claire was screeching at the top of her lungs for help, for him to stop, to leave her friend alone. She was shaking and trembling, and tears were streaming down her face, half fueled by fear, half by pure anger. She yanked at him and threw her own punches down on his back to try and dislodge him, but she had a fraction of his strength, and he was holding onto Shaun too hard to be
tipped off of him. It was like she was a fly. When he reacted to her, it was only to turn and shove her off of him. She hit the ground hard skidded nearly half a foot. Her body was aching by now, and her head was swimming.

The young girl looked down at her coat sleeve, where the man had pushed her, and realized with a stab of pure horror that there was blood on it.

It wasn't her blood.

It tipped her over the edge. All she felt was pure hysteria. "Get off of him! Get off! Stop hurting him! Help! Help me, please!" she screamed, hardly able to draw in enough breath to get anything out in the first place. She didn't know what to do— she didn't know what to do! She couldn't leave, she couldn't leave him; he hadn't left her! The phone— the phone, did the phone break? Was it broken? Where had it fallen? Wildly, she started slapping the ground in search of it. She could call, she could call someone— she could call the police, or the ambulance, or Jared, or Glassman, or—

"Claire!?!"

She stiffened as the call echoed towards her. Her heart stopped and she whirled around to look in its direction. It was him! "Jared!" she screeched, panicked sobs edging her cry. "Jared over here! Help! Jared, hurry!"

Her friend was running by the time he came into view. She thanked her lucky stars he remembered the shortcut they had taken to get to the car— that he'd even known to start for the car in the first place, since she'd never gotten to text him. He had been drinking that night – the birthday boy wasn't about to be the designated driver – but thankfully it wasn't nearly as much as their attacker had been drinking. The very instant his eyes landed on them, he gathered the situation. His expression flooded in rage, and he broke into an abrupt sprint. There were about three other people close behind him; the group he'd stopped to talk to in the first place. She had never been happier to see a band of strangers.

Jared rushed forward and quite literally threw himself against the man still on top of Shaun. Like he played football his entire life, he tackled the man clear off of his friend, and slammed him to the ground. The stranger tried to fight back as Jared pinned him down, but the people that had followed Jared here rushed forward to help, and he was overpowered in no time. "What the hell are you doing!?!" Jared was screaming, one knee digging hard into the man's stomach. The stranger was too alarmed by the change of events to reply; this only made him angrier. "What the fuck did you think you were doing!? Why were you hurting him!?!"

One of the strangers had gotten up to their feet and fished out their phone. "Yes, hello? We have an emergency, a man was attacking these two people— one of them is hurt. I don't— I don't know how hurt, I just got here. He looks pretty bad. But we're at…" Claire stopped listening. It faded out to background noise, once she realized she could abandon the hunt for Shaun's phone, and could rush back to him instead. However, once she scrambled close enough, she immediately had to choke back on yet another scream.

There was so much blood. There was an ugly gash across his cheek, and his lower lip was split wide open. His left eye was swelling over already and only getting worse; his nose and his mouth were both leaking blood, and even at Claire's agonized screech, he didn't even twitch. He was dead to everything; and in her panic and guilt, Claire wondered wildly if he actually was dead. Some part of her was pleading for her to collect herself; to work, and use her head, and diagnose him. To check him and monitor him, and help. But the other half of her won over. The half that was screaming, that was panicking and crying. He did this for me! He didn't want to do it! He was scared, he was just trying to protect me! He was just trying to protect me, and now he's hurt, he's so hurt, he's—
"Shaun!" she sobbed, reaching out and grabbing to him fast, like he was a lifeline. "Shaun, wake up! Get up, Shaun!" Nothing at all. "Shaun!" She sounded almost angry now; no, she sounded furious with him. "Get up! Shaun! Shaun, get up right now!"

"Claire, move." Jared had flown down to her side. She whirled around, terrified, only to see that the strangers had banded together to keep the man down until the police came. She was hyperventilating, and when Jared started to move her, she objected, still sobbing as she fought to get back to her friend. "Claire! Claire!" Having no choice, Jared swatted her back with just enough force to get her away from Shaun. She fell backwards, shell-shocked.

Jared glared at her; the situation was making him coarse. "You have to help me, and if you're not going to help me, then you have to stay off of him! What happened!?!" He turned back to Shaun, looking over him quickly and taking a steadying breath. Knowing that rousing him didn't work, he turned and quickly undid Shaun's belt, and unzipped his jacket in case they were providing any restriction. He got out his phone and turned its flashlight on, leaning down to shine the light in both his eyes. Claire didn't see his reaction; it was likely she wouldn't even register it if she had. Jared yelled his question again. "Claire, what happened, I was gone for like ten minutes!"

"You were gone for like thirty!" she screamed right back at him. He hunched his shoulders but said nothing. She screwed her eyes shut, and her voice was tight and panicked when she tried to backtrack. "We were just walking— he was cold, he— he didn't even want to come out tonight, I was just— I was trying to— that guy came and he wouldn't leave me alone and I tried to tell Shaun not to— but he was just protecting me, and I don't know what happened he just wouldn't stop hitting him and he couldn't do anything, I don't know what happened, I don't know, I don't know!" Her voice broke down more and more, and got faster and faster, until she was just crying, her hands fisting tightly in her hair as she broke down.

It was too much. It was all way too much. She couldn't stop, and Jared's expression crumbled in sorrow and remorse for just a split second. Before he steeled himself and focused again. Tuned back around and tried to put Claire out of his mind for now.

He had to focus.

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The background noise of the cafeteria was a low drone that sounded too distant and garbled to be real. She had been sitting there for hours. She didn't know where else to go. Jared had told her to go home and sleep. But she couldn't. How in the world could she leave? All she could do was just sit here, staring down at the tabletop as if she was waiting for something about it to change.

The ambulance had gone to the nearest hospital: Sequoia. It was all a fuzzy blur, but Claire remembered the flurry of information that Jared had been able to rattle off once the ambulance arrived. She hadn't caught the specifics, because all she could do was watch as Shaun was delicately loaded up into a stretcher. But she had distinctly caught his final words, snapped out just in case: "Don't take him to Saint Bonaventure." A warning that her shocked state hadn't been able to connect to until later. He needed surgery. Surgery that couldn't be provided by their own staff. Which could only mean one thing. Something too painful to face, though she was more than aware of it.

For hours now, she had just sat and played the scene over and over in her head, counting all of the things she should have done differently. She should have just taken off running; she had given up trying to get away too easily, she should have just grabbed Shaun and ran. She should have gone for the phone as soon as it had been slapped out of Shaun's hand. She should have started screaming for help sooner. She shouldn't have parked the car in such an out-of-the-way alcove— she shouldn't have taken the back way to get to it, even if it was a shortcut. She should have just stayed in front of
the bar. She should have just gone back in to get Jared.

It was her fault. It was all her fault. Shaun had just been trying to protect her. She kept seeing the punches, the kicks, replaying behind her eyelids every time she blinked, and burning themselves into place. She heard the way he had hit the ground, and she saw the look on his face when he got hit. It went over and over in her head— a broken record she couldn't shut off. She had been crying ever since it had happened. Somehow, though, she still had water left; every so often a tear would well and drip down her face. She would reach up and swipe it away numbly.

A small thud snapped her out of her reverie. Claire jerked at the tiny noise, and looked in confusion to see a cup of coffee placed in front of her. Jared took the seat on the other side of the table, his eyebrows a little raised as he nudged the drink closer. He didn't say anything yet. She reached up and wiped her eyes, which were beyond sore by now. "What time is it?" she sniffed. She didn't even have any idea.

"About 7:00," Jared answered, glancing at his phone. The reply shocked her. She looked at the coffee in alarm, as if this whole thing was solely its fault.

"It— it can't be 7:00 already," she said, looking out towards the windows that surrounded them. But sure enough, the sun was up. She hadn't even noticed. What time had it been when they'd gotten here? It had been a later night out in general— the last time she'd checked, it had been 1:30. "I was just..." She closed her eyes and took in a slow breath. Her voice was weaker when she asked her next question; mostly because she didn't want to hear the answer. "Where did you go?" He had been sitting with her before now. Though if she was being honest, she hadn't even noticed him leaving. "Is he okay? Do you know what happened?" Her voice was in splinters.

Jared sighed and leaned on the table a bit. "Yeah," he exhaled. "He had a pretty severe hematoma. They had to perform a craniotomy." This caused her expression to fall and crumble; she sagged forward and held her head in her hands. A fresh wave of tears stung at her eyes. Jared quickly attempted to calm her down. "But hey, hey." He reached over and took gentle hold of her arm. "He's alright. The surgery went perfectly. He's being monitored now, and it's just fine. It's all okay. He got taken off the ventilator and everything."

She nodded once, and tried to steel herself. Jared allowed her a quick moment. After she began to calm down, he cleared his throat. "I uh— I called Glassman, after a while. I told you that before, but I don't think you were listening. He got here around five. I told him what happened, but not in much detail...he was in a rush to get to him." This immediately made her on-edge. She looked at Jared miserably, with the information. Was he angry with her? Had he sounded angry over the phone? What had he said? But Jared didn't answer the silent questions. In fact, he did the opposite of comforting her. "But I think I have to go."

"Go?" Claire asked. "Go where?"

"To Saint Bonaventure and explain it all to Melendez," he explained. "I think it'd be better if I went in person. If I go and tell him everything, and explain what happened, he'll probably be more forgiving about you not coming in. Which you're not going to." Claire wilted, but she didn't object. To be frank, work was the last thing on her mind right now. "Someone has to explain Shaun's situation, too. And if he absolutely can't be by himself today, then I'll be there to hold down the fort with the two of you gone. He can't complain if I help take care of everything."

She exhaled slowly, her shoulders loosening from their tension just the smallest bit. "Thank you, Jared..." she breathed.

He offered her a smile. "Of course. And hey." He ran his thumb comfortingly back and forth on her
arm, here his hand still rested. "Everything will be fine. Yeah? I'll be back later, as soon as I can. And I'm more than certain that by the time I do come back, Shaun is going to be just as annoying and rude as he usually is, okay? You'll be begging him to fall unconscious again." The effort to make her smile was there, and she almost did. But when her eyes went down to Jared's thumb, they got stuck on the stain in her jacket—the faint smear of Shaun's blood, now dried and crusted over. The sight made her sick, and she had to look away.

Jared nodded once. "I'll make sure everything is taken care of," he pledged. "Don't worry about it, okay?" She didn't reply, but he wasn't really anticipating her to. "You should get something to eat. Drink that coffee at least, if nothing else." He stood up from the table and gathered his things, and slipped his coat on. He only paused to give her one last smile, another promise it would be fine, and the number of Shaun's room, as silent encouragement for her to go see him if she wanted.

She didn't move, though, and when he left, she didn't rise. She stayed put, frozen in her chair. Until she got two texts. One from Jared ('Everything's sorted. Don't worry about it. He's not mad, just worried. I'm staying here, but keep me posted. I'll leave early to come see him.') and one from Melendez ('Don't worry about coming in. I understand. Tell me if anything changes?'). Until her coffee, still untouched, lost its warmth, and decayed into freezing. Until the food being ordered around her changed from breakfast to lunch. Until she couldn't agonize over it anymore, and she had no choice but to get up.

The entire way to Shaun's room, her movements were slow and robotic. He was in the Intensive Care Unit, the farthest room to the left. The door was cracked open already, but she still hesitated at the threshold. She took in a slow breath and inched it open, poking her head through and peering inside. The curtains were drawn, so the room was dimmer than normal. All the same, she could see Shaun's unmoving form in the hospital bed. It looked like he was asleep. Glassman was sitting at his bedside, a chair pulled up so there wasn't even an inch of space between him and the mattress. When she opened the door, she saw that he had been reaching out, carefully and gingerly brushing Shaun's bangs aside, so they were out of his eyes.

When she creaked open the door, he looked up. Her stomach clenched as she saw his eyes flash. But when he spoke, it wasn't to snap at her. He just looked back down, finishing his efforts to fix Shaun's hair as lightly as possible. "He always fusses with it," he sighed. "I figure if I do it for him now, I'll be gentler than he'd be." She tried to smile, but it came out too weak. She stayed put where she was. "You can come in," Glassman murmured after a moment, keeping his voice below a whisper. "You don't need to wait for an invitation." Claire swallowed and turned, closing the door behind her to walk the rest of the way in. However, she stopped a few feet away from the two.

Shaun looked very small; like the bed was swallowing him whole. A gauze pad stretched from his cheek to his jaw, where that gash had been. All the obscene blood had been cleaned from his face, but at the same time, it just highlighted all the welts and injuries that had been underneath it. A heavy dose of medical glue had been applied to his split lip. A bandage bridged the cut that had been on his forehead, and thankfully the swelling seemed to have gone down just a little bit around his eye. But his bruising hadn't. Underneath his eyelid and arching up around it was a deep black shadow. His skin was dark and splotched with blues and grays, too. It still hurt to look at him. A patch of his hair had been shaved away, replaced with bare skin and staples where the incisions had been made for the surgery.

"I'm sorry," Claire whispered, the apology bursting out. Aaron said nothing. This only heightened her worry, and she found her lower lip trembling. She struggled on. "I don't know what all Jared told you. But...but we were walking, and this guy came up to us, and I know I should have—it's my fault, he was just trying to protect me. I shouldn't have let him, but I just..." She let out a shaky sigh, cringing on the wasted effort.
Glassman was silent for a long time. He simply stared at Shaun, in a way that was heavy and weighted. "Jared told me," he said eventually. "But I don't blame you." She looked up at this, surprise flaring across her face. "I'm sure you didn't mean for it to happen. And I'm sure you tried to get out of the situation. To be perfectly honest, nobody can stop Shaun once he gets an idea in his head, either. Believe me, I have plenty of examples." A smile tried to twitch into life, and a pained sort of affection washed over his face as he kept his gaze trained on the young doctor. But it was quick to adopt a much sadder reflection when he murmured: "He's taken plenty of hits before…he's stronger than he seems."

Claire looked at her friend mournfully. She drew up her own chair, taking a seat close beside Aaron. "Yeah," she agreed. "He is. I had no idea…I was sure he would just…shut down, and I mean, I wouldn't blame him for it— I kind of did, even. I was worried about him. But…the second I was hit…he just…planted himself right in front of me." She sighed. "I wish I could have done more. Stopped it, I mean. I should have."

"That type of thinking is the best way to lose your mind," Glassman mused. His eyes didn't leave Shaun. They likely hadn't all morning, and wouldn't for the rest of the day. There was a deep sorrow and worry there, raw in his gaze, which was almost impossible for Claire to look at. She'd known that they had history. She'd seen them talking together in the hall, and she'd seen them leave the hospital together. She knew how hard Glassman fought to get Shaun hired, too— everyone did. But she had never seen their bond displayed so openly before. She could practically see all those years in the old man's stare, all the love and the concern and the happiness and pride that Shaun must have given him. She didn't mistake the small hitch in his voice when he asked: "What happened to the man that did this?"

"Oh…" she murmured. "The police got him when the ambulance came. We talked to them before we left to come here. Jared and I, I mean." She sniffed, wiping again at her eyes. "I told them everything that happened— quickly, because I wanted to get back here." She could hardly even recall their questions; she'd just spout out the answers. "But they were putting him in handcuffs by the time we left." Glassman nodded once— a stiff and angry one. She bit down on the inside of her lip for a moment, before she tried in a bit of a lighter voice: "He, uh…Shaun called him a moron," she recalled.

Glassman closed his eyes, his forehead creasing over. At first in disappointment and frustration, but then in a 'What-am-I-going-to-do-with-this-certifiably-insane-person?' kind of way. The smallest ghost of a smile was teasing his lips. It shouldn't be anything to laugh over, and they both knew that. But somehow, in such a tense and scary moment, it was a little difficult not to. "God," he exhaled. "You know what? Of course he did. Of course he did. I'm not even surprised. Oh, Shaun," he huffed, like a parent chastising their kid from swiping a cookie from the cookie jar.

Claire softened. "I owe him a lot," she breathed, after a period of silence. Glassman glanced at her, but let her finish, knowing she would go on. "I could tell he was scared out of his mind. He started to shut down, but…when I needed him…he was there. The guy told him to move, he warned him, but…he protected me." She smiled, tears blurring her vision again. "I have no idea what would have happened if Shaun had just stood by. He wanted to— he might have grabbed me and just…" She exhaled heavily. "Who knows," she whispered. "I owe him so much. I'm never going to forget this."

That look was back on Glassman's face. The look that gave away the chink in his armor that was Shaun Murphy. A small laugh died in the back of his throat. He nodded, and confessed: "I owe him a lot too." That was the statement that seemed to end the need for further conversation. It hung in the air as an all-encompassing statement, and the pair fell into agreeable silence. Simply watching as the nurse came in frequently to check on him and his state. Sitting close together, listening to the steady beeping of Shaun's monitors, and waiting for something to happen.
Eventually, something did. Before too long there was the smallest of changes—the tiniest of shifts. But the pair instantly noticed it, and snapped up to attention. Shaun's head started to twitch to the side before he seemed to regret it and his face pinched over in a vacant sense of pain. It wasn't much, but it was more than Glassman had gotten in hours, so he immediately leaned forward, pulling himself closer to the bed, if such a thing was even possible. "Shaun?" he murmured, still making sure to keep his voice low. Shaun began to rouse even more, and Claire found her hands tightly clenching together. "Shaun, it's me—it's Aaron. You're in the hospital. Can you look at me?"

Shaun's eyes pried themselves open with difficulty. His left eye wasn't able to open much at all, it was still swelled shut. His right one only managed about halfway, though, as it was. It was bleary—unfocused and confused. It was normal, but it still hurt Claire to see. He did look over at Glassman, though it took a buffering second. Immediately, Glassman smiled at him. Claire could see the pain underneath the older man's expression, and she was glad Shaun likely wouldn't be able to do the same. "Hey..." His voice was the softest Claire had ever heard it. "How do you feel?"

Shaun didn't respond. He just stared at him. He must still have been gathering himself, but the fact that there was nothing immediately disturbed the older man. He raised his eyebrows and looked at Shaun a little more intensely. "Shaun? Can you tell me your last name?" He was still silent. His stare was hazy and disoriented, and Claire almost told Glassman he should give him some space to breathe first. But her own anxiety was fluttering in her chest, and she wasn't about to tell him to stop. She was the last person that had the right to do that, especially now. "Shaun, I'm going to need you to tell me your last name," Glassman said, just a touch louder. "You know that, don't you?"

Silence ticked by, each second longer than the one before. Claire was getting tenser and tenser as she waited, her heart in her throat. But relief swamped through her when the reply eventually did come. "Murphy..." It was nothing more than a sigh. She had never heard Shaun's voice so flat and dull before.

It was like a weight had been shoved clear off Glassman's shoulders. He lost about two inches of height as he relaxed, and a weary laugh bubbled out of his throat. "Yeah, that's—that's right, good. Good." Shaun closed his eyes again. Another wince barely registered on his face. Sympathy layered Glassman's next words like frosting. "Your throat will be sore from the ventilator for a while. They removed it earlier—you were awake, then. Do you remember any of that? You had to have a craniotomy; there was a hematoma. They had to go in and fix it."

Shaun opened his eyes again. Gradually, his old intelligence was attempting to splutter back to life, but it was a slow process. He stared straight ahead, a little blankly. "Are we...in Saint Bonaventure?" he asked.

Claire closed her eyes.

Glassman clasped his hands together. "No, Shaun. It wasn't the closest to where you were. And...this was the best place for the surgery to be done. Sequoia has an excellent neurosurgeon—I've had dinner with him once. Leaves fantastic tips." He gave the young man a wink with this statement, but, not to his surprise, Shaun gave no reaction. But to be fair, he probably wouldn't have reacted much under normal circumstances anyway. Taking a deeper breath, Glassman attempted to go on with a stern look, but it came out more of an exasperated kind of smile. "Speaking of leaving good tips, I'll give you one: don't call a man who is obviously very intoxicated and dangerous...a moron. This is not your brightest moment, Shaun."

"He was hurting her..." Shaun mumbled, his eyes drifting closed again.

Claire stiffened, and her heart tore as she looked back up to him. At his bruised and bandaged face, and the haziness clinging to him like fog. Again, she remembered the sound of him hitting the
ground, of the man's fist ramming time and time again against his head. She rubbed at her eyes before she gave the tears a chance to fall. She coughed, trying to get rid of the lump stuck in her throat. And spoke up with a voice she hoped sounded happier than she thought it did. "Hey," she murmured, watching Shaun open his eyes again. They flickered a little aimlessly for a second, before they landed on Claire and actually recognized her presence. "I'm so sorry, Shaun," she murmured. "I'm so sorry I wasn't able to help you, I tried, I just..." She sighed. "I should have done so many things differently. This is all my fault."

"It was...his fault," Shaun hummed. His voice was scratchy and rough; talking must have hurt because he spoke very quietly. His words came out much slower than normal. "You didn't hit me."

"No, but..." She started to object, when Glassman turned and looked at her pointedly. She bit the rest of it back. She would apologize later. Frequently. Probably daily for the next year and a half. She'd call Shaun when they were eighty, and apologize for what happened. But for now, when he was still half-asleep and clearly in pain, she would just be supportive.

But all the same, she did have to do one thing. "Thank you, Shaun." Being mindful of the wires that were connected to his arm and his wrist, she leaned forward and took his hand gently in hers. She didn't apply pressure, because she knew he didn't like that. But she just wanted to reassure herself that he was fine. Beaten up, and worse for wear, but fine. And she wanted to make sure he understood how grateful she was. "Words...can't even describe, Shaun. Thank you. So much."

Shaun's eyes flickered down to her hand around his. He took in a slow, and a little too loud, breath, and he let it out just as gradually. Claire couldn't suppress a weary smile, at yet another thing she had never seen him do before. He was still muddled up. But despite that, he still replied. Somehow, his rasping voice sounded just as sweet and earnest as it always was. "You're welcome."

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"Hey, slugger!" was the celebratory cheer that Jared decided would best fit the situation upon entering the hospital room. Thankfully Shaun wasn't asleep, though he had been in and out of tiny naps all day long. It was near six in the evening now, and the nurse had just left after asking Shaun to make a fist, and to touch his finger to his nose, and to say 'Hello, how are you?' for about the millionth time that day. Thankfully, just like every other time, he passed with flying colors. And thankfully for Jared, he came in when he did, because Claire wasn't sure the nurse would take too kindly to the fanfare.

Shaun was still not back to his normal self in terms of personality. He was still sluggish and exhausted, which would stick with him for a while. But after he'd finally been allowed something to drink, his voice was at least a little better. When Jared barged in, he tensed, and his eyes flickered over to him once he was in his field of vision. Jared offered him a goofy and overplayed smile. "How're you holding up? Came down to see our newest boxing champion, I hope that's okay."

"Very funny," Claire sighed, throwing him a look. Jared's smile didn't lessen, though. Half out of concern, half out of habit, his eyes went to Shaun's monitor, to absorb as much information as possible. There wasn't much to look at, though; Shaun was coming along fine. "How was work? Melendez wasn't angry?"

"No, I told you that much. He was just worried about you two. You should have heard how many times he asked me if you'd texted with any news about Shaun, though." Turning back to Shaun, he smirked and reached down to tap his arm lightly. "Don't tell him I told you that. He made me promise not to," he teased. Shaun blinked, and dragged his arm closer to his side. Jared elected to ignore the response, though, and he shoved his hands down into his pockets. "You didn't miss much. We had a kid come in with a nail straight through his finger. He
was trying to build a treehouse or something ridiculous. Other than that, it was just a lot of scutwork." He glanced over Shaun. "How're you feeling, champ?" he chirped. "You have it easy, lying in here all day. I'd trade places with you in a heartbeat."

"I'd rather be out," Shaun mumbled. So far, his voice hadn't risen above that volume all day.

"Give it some time," he reassured. "You'll be back at Saint Bonaventure diagnosing...Krukenburg tumors before you know it." Claire smiled. She sincerely hoped that was true. Recovery from head injuries was difficult, and it ranged from person to person, and depended a lot on the severity of the injury. The thought of Shaun being away from the hospital for long just to recover was enough to turn her stomach. Jared's small cough cleared her mind. She looked back up to see that his entire demeanor had changed. "Hey, listen," he said, ducking his head a bit. "I'm sorry I stayed back. At the bar, and left you two alone. I shouldn't have done that. It was already late, and I should have just stuck with you guys. With the friends I came with." He looked at Shaun steadily, contrite. "I'm sorry, Shaun. I should have been there. I could have stopped this whole thing."

Shaun took a second to reply. When he did, it was soft and light. "It was your birthday," he reminded.

"Yeah..." Jared murmured, nodding a bit. He made a face, only halfway joking as he asked: "I came up with the worst idea for a party, didn't I?"

Claire expected Shaun not to reply. So she was surprised when, very readily, he said a tiny: "Yes."

It caused the two to laugh— even Glassman cracked a grin where he was sitting. He still hadn't moved from Shaun's immediate bedside. He'd only moved away from him to go out in the hall to take calls from work, should any come. And he was always back before five minutes had passed. He hadn't even left to eat yet, though Claire had been working on a way to prompt him to do just that. "Starting to think bars and clubs might not be the best places to go," Jared offered. "I think the three of us have had our fill for a while. Or at least Shaun has."

Claire was leaning over the bed a bit, her elbows resting on a space of the mattress Shaun wasn't taking up. "Shaun said he wants to start a Book Club," she informed him, with a small smile in her friend's direction. She tried to look for recognition on his face, to see whether or not he recalled their conversation before things had gone downhill. If he did, though, he didn't show it. He was looking back towards his own monitor and focusing on that. Again, this was something else that had occurred for about the millionth time that day.

"Book Club?" Jared blustered. "I haven't read a book for fun in ages."

"Shocker," Claire drawled. "Well, Shaun wants to start one. He said if he catches you on SparkNotes, though, you're getting kicked out."

"What?" Jared's eyes flew open as he looked down at the young surgeon. "You didn't say that! Did you really say that?" He sounded halfway impressed.

Glassman leaned over, quietly garnering Shaun's attention as to not startle him. "Hey, Shaun." Shaun dragged his gaze back to him. "Can you do this?" On one hand, he touched each of his fingers to his thumb slowly; when the nurse wasn't asking Shaun to do something, Glassman was. He was kind of a worry wart, in that way. But Shaun never complained. And, dutiful, he dragged his arm up and mimicked the movement successfully. When Glassman smiled and nodded, his arm went dead and flopped back to the mattress. He closed his eyes again, flinching. Glassman looked over him in concern. "How are you feeling, Shaun?" He'd been feeling sick and in pain all day. He'd thrown up once already, but that was a while ago. "What hurts?"
"My head," Shaun replied, just the smallest bit of tartness underlying the words. "I had a craniotomy."

Jared snickered. Glassman looked like he would have preferred to be cross, but couldn't muster it.

Claire ended up moving to sit on the armrest of her chair instead, and Jared took the seat. They planned out the first book they'd read if and when they started the fabled Book Club. Jared wanted Catcher in the Rye, but after some probing, Claire found out it was just because he'd read it already. Jared's next offer had been Fifty Shades of Grey, which led to Claire revoking his book-naming privileges indefinitely. With their combined effort, the two of them were able to persuade Glassman to go down to the café to eat something, but he had gone there and back in exactly eight minutes and thirty seconds. Jared had set a timer on his phone after Claire mentioned how glued to Shaun's side he'd been.

Glassman agreed to be in their Book Club after some pushing, which wasn't even a thing yet anyway and really only had a fifty-fifty chance of actually becoming something at all. Shaun wasn't all that interested, surprisingly enough, though he did ask Jared if he could tell him more about the case he'd mentioned before. He was very content to just sit there and listen to the details. From 7:30 to 8:00 Shaun fell asleep again, and Jared had redirected his formal apology to Glassman, who waved it off just like he'd done with Claire. After some time, Jared got a call, which had been the thing to wake Shaun back up, and said he had to leave. He gave Claire a hug, nodded to Glassman, and told Shaun that he would be back tomorrow to see him again, and to hang in there. Shaun was too half-asleep to register it, probably.

Glassman told her funny stories of Shaun when he was younger, like the time he had tried to teach him to play tennis, and Shaun had responded with a firm and resolute: "No." According to Glassman, he hadn't even tried to chase after the ball when it was served; he had just turned and stared at it, watching it bounce away. If Shaun was embarrassed by the memories, he didn't show it. Claire, however, got a kick out of them.

It was nice. To sit and talk with them, and know that Shaun was there and fine. Maybe not fully functioning yet, but mending. Knowing that everything would be alright, even if her guilt would remain for some time. She wanted to stay longer, but she knew that it wouldn't be smart. She would go into work tomorrow—she couldn't avoid it forever, and the hospital was probably buzzing with rumors already. It would only worsen if she stayed away. Maybe Melendez would let her off early. But if not, she would come straight here once she was done.

She did stay until 10:30, though. Woken up rudely before the day had even started, Glassman was already sleeping by the time she did. The older man was slouched forward, his head resting on one hand as he leaned down towards the bed. His other arm was stretched out just the tiniest bit, the tips of his fingers barely grazing Shaun's side, as if he wanted to be sure he was still breathing and stable, even when asleep. Shaun wasn't sleeping, but he wasn't awake, either. He was somewhere in between, with a vacant and empty stare that travelled off into space. Claire knew it wouldn't be long before he fell asleep and hopefully stayed that way for longer than just an hour, this time. So she stood up.

"Shaun," she whispered, reaching over and placing her hand lightly on top of his. She didn't want to wake Glassman, so she was relieved when this was enough and his eyes opened just the tiniest bit more. She smiled at him in the dim light of the hospital room. "I've got to go. I'm really sorry. I'll be
back tomorrow, okay? You get some sleep." He didn't say anything; he just started to close his eyes again. But he stopped short when she kept going. "Shaun?" He forced them open again. "You never answered my last question." There was no recollection at all in his face when she said this. She figured as much, and jogged his memory. "We were asking each other questions. I asked you what the greatest thing you've ever done was."

Shaun blinked slowly. That confusion clouded his face, again. It was too late for this type of question. "I…" He seemed lost on what to say.

She smiled tenderly. "I think what you did for me was pretty amazing, Shaun," she offered. "Maybe that can be your answer." Shaun didn't agree or disagree. His eyes were closing again, and going by how exhausted he looked, she didn't have the heart to keep him awake for any longer. She just let her hand linger on his for a moment more, before she turned and left the hospital room, leaving quietly so that she wouldn't wake the two she was leaving behind. The smile she'd offered him before wilted, and fractured. Losing its strength now that she knew Shaun wouldn't be able to see. Tomorrow morning, she would text and ask for any updates. She would worry all day about whether or not Shaun was making any progress. And in the evening, the minute her shift was over, she would be rushing back to sit at his bedside again, and do whatever she could to help him. She would apologize again. She would try to make it up to him.

Even though she knew there was nothing she could possibly do that would even come close.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I apologize profusely for my small hiatus with this story. I got a request to work on a story I had to finish before the second half of the season started up, and I got sidetracked. And for this chapter in particular, I threw myself into hours and hours of research to try and get as closest to 'medically-sound' as I possibly could. That being said, if there are any glaring mistakes I made in that realm particularly, and I could be helped to understand where I went wrong and how to fix it, I would be more than grateful.

This story will now have three chapters. This chapter was getting way too long so I split it into halves; I have about fifteen pages of chapter three already done so hopefully that will come soon. Thank you all for your patience, I really appreciate it. This chapter is fairly long, so I hope it makes up for any heartache or impatience the wait caused. I tried to get as many typos out of this as I could, too, so hopefully there aren't too many glaring ones left to disrupt the story. If there are, I'd be more than happy to have those pointed out to me, too! Along with anything else awry.

Thank you for reading still, and I would love to hear any and all your thoughts about where this is heading!

Claire knocked on the door twice. The raps were soft, but she knew that they would be loud enough to be heard. She had been expecting a soft call of "Come in" or something of that nature. Which was why she jumped in a little bit of surprise when the door opened for her, instead. Glassman was standing on the other side of the threshold; she didn't notice the fact without a trace of shock, considering she'd started to suspect that he'd lost the ability to tear himself away from Shaun's bedside.

Before the man had the chance to speak, Claire tried to judge his expression and reap as much information from it as she could. It was a new habit of hers. And she was disappointed to see that nothing about it had changed. Worry and concern were still written over his face like a novel. The bags underneath his eyes seemed even darker than they had been yesterday, though she hadn't thought it was even possible. His forehead was creased, and there was a certain level of anxiety that was still there, as if a bomb had ticked down to its very last second and he was just waiting for the explosion.

The young girl opened her mouth to start to say hello, pleased at least to see him still, when Glassman lifted a finger quickly up to his lips, stopping her before she could. He shook his head once. She stiffened, putting the puzzle pieces together quickly before she mouthed a silent apology. He offered her a tired smile to show that no harm had been done, and he stepped to the side to beckon the small group in. Taking care now to make no noise at all, they crossed the threshold as a unit, Claire leading the way, like she'd done up until this point to the hospital room. No sense in changing the order, now.

Just as she'd done to the look that had been on Glassman's face, Claire's eyes flickered over the room as she stepped inside, trying to see what progress could be detected. If there was any tiny change that could be indicated as a step forward. However, just as she'd done with Glassman, she deflated in faint disappointment. The room was the same, too. It was still dimly lit, with only one light on. The
couch was untouched, and she was almost a hundred percent certain that even the remote for the television was still sitting in the spot she'd left it, in the same tilted angle. Shaun was still in the hospital bed, in exactly the same position— there wasn't any shred evidence that he'd been able to get up yet, or move around on his own. That he had done anything at all since she'd last seen him, really.

He was sleeping, and that was the only thing she was able to find relief in. He'd been in this hospital for almost three full days, now. Yesterday and today, Claire had spent bugging Glassman via text for any news or updates, and every night, as soon as her shift ended, she was booking it back to here. If it were any other situation, she probably would have stopped for fear of overstepping boundaries. But it wasn't any other situation, and she hadn't cared. She was attentive and present, and she put on a smile for Shaun every time she saw him. But the fact of the matter was that in those almost-three-days, Shaun had not improved as much as he should have been. He was still sluggish and out of focus. He was still in pain. And on top of those problems, Claire knew that from the first time she had been in this room, up until this very moment, he had only slept maybe around a handful of hours.

He'd been put on steroids to try and reduce any excess swelling in his brain. It was always a very real threat as a byproduct of neurosurgery, and the MRI scans and CT scans showed the early onset of increasing pressure. The hospital had acted quickly, in the attempt to nip something in the bud before it could become an actual problem. They were prescribed as a safety net Shaun could land on if he slipped and fell. But as safe as they were, once they began to take effect over the dulling pain medication, sleep had started to evade him instead of plague him. She could see the shadows that had been forming underneath his eyes even though he was finally resting. She found that she couldn't blame the urgency Glassman had had in warning them to be quiet.

Her friend still looked awful. He didn't look any worse, at least, but he wasn't any better. It pained Claire to look at him head-on. Her heart squeezed and twisted in a way that made it hard to keep a level head on her shoulders. Already, she could feel her throat begin to burn, but she tried to breathe through it and keep a level head on her shoulders. After all, she was a doctor; it wasn't like she didn't keep her emotions in check every single day at work. But this was different.

This was difficult. Because this was all her fault.

Bruises were still black and blue against his pale skin— the discolorations weren't helped at all by the surgery, especially around his eye, and the same could be said for the some of the swelling that was still there. New bruises were peppering his arms now, as well, thanks to the IV he was hooked up to, and there was a particularly nasty one on his right wrist from the intra-arterial line. He looked thinner and smaller, somehow, though it had only been a short time since he'd been here.

Maybe hospital beds had the tendency to do that. To swallow you up and make you look frailer than you actually were.

She weakened at the sight of him. She couldn't tear her gaze away, though she did eventually force herself to speak. She took care to keep her voice low— she'd done all of this to Shaun as it was; if she ruined the sleep he'd finally been able to achieve, she could probably been voted worst person in history. "How is he doing?" she breathed, not even sure Glassman could hear her, she was being so quiet. Her eyebrows drew together in a kind of pain; as if she was the person suffering from horrible injuries, instead of just the one bruise she was still sporting on the side of her face. She wished she had more. She wished she could have taken more of the pain, so Shaun did have to struggle with the whole of it.

Glassman had moved to take his seat beside Shaun once more. She realized that there actually was one part of the room that had changed. Resting on the floor beside Glassman's chair was a small,
packed bag. If Claire had heard right, and if the rumor mill of the hospital was actually valid, which it wasn't always, he'd called Jessica and asked if she would be willing to gather him some things and bring them to the hospital, so that he wouldn't have to do it himself. So far, throughout this whole thing, he hadn't left Shaun once. He was doing his best to handle the hospital from his cellphone, which had to be a pretty tall order. To Claire's knowledge, things were running just as smoothly as they always did. But she was a resident; what did she know?

"He hasn't been able to sleep," Glassman sighed, his words carried out in nothing more than a loose exhale. She winced, her fears going confirmed. "They promised some form of sedatives for tonight. He finally managed it on his own, just a bit ago. It's been more than twenty-four hours." Of course he would be counting. He probably knew how long it had been down to the final second. "He hasn't been able to keep anything down, either; the nausea is too much. Anything he eats comes back up an hour later." He reached up and took off his glasses, rubbing at his eyes, probably to wake himself up more. Bleakly, Claire wondered whether or not he'd also gone without sleep for just as long as Shaun had. "Mostly all we're doing is waiting and watching him."

Claire frowned, looking down at her friend in concern. She was going to say something, but she found herself being beaten to the punch. He'd been silent behind her up until this moment, but now Melendez took the few steps forward it took to make himself stand even with her. She'd been surprised this morning, to say the least, when it had been established he was coming along. As a group, they had all been discussing what to do with their newest patient, when Neil had suddenly digressed, and asked if she and Jared were going to visit Shaun after they were through with work. He'd done so without even looking up from the file he'd been perusing; it was clear by the tone of his voice that he'd been doing his best to appear aloof and uncaring. When the pair had said that they were, all he'd done at first was heave a tiny sigh, and nod. But then, not thirty seconds later, he'd shut the file with a flourish and turned on his heel to walk away, leaving behind a stiff: "Don't leave without me; I'll follow behind you."

Now, his façade of aloofness seemed harder to even conjure up in the first place. The experienced doctor looked at his resident, and his jaw locked backwards a bit. Claire looked away. Saint Bonaventure was absolutely buzzing with this entire situation; not a single employee wasn't aware of what had happened that night they were leaving the bar, and what had happened to Shaun— what state he was in now because of it. Even the janitors knew. If someone wasn't aware of the whole ordeal, a friend of a friend was deeply curious, and the news sort of leaked its way over anyway. Given Melendez's relationship with them, though, he knew every detail of what had gone on. But hearing about the repercussions and seeing them firsthand were two completely different things. That much was clear by the look on his face.

"When was the last time his doctor came through?" he asked, after placing himself shoulder-to-shoulder with Claire.

Glassman checked the clock. "It was around 5:30. He recommended Shaun try and eat something, and he did, about two hours ago. So far he's managed to keep that down…"

"Yeah, but they're monitoring his ICP, right?" he demanded. Claire grimaced, wishing he would talk just a smallest bit quieter. But she held her tongue. She just looked to Shaun's monitors, her expression pained. At the question, her eyes zeroed in on his blood pressure, and she swallowed hard. 130 over 84. Jared edged a little closer to her, and he reached out to touch her shoulder. It did nothing to thaw the cold feeling in her stomach. "They did an MRI after the surgery? A CT? Have they done one since? He could be experiencing swelling all over again." He made a face, turning and looking back towards the door with a frown. "Who's his doctor? Why don't you call them in? Why don't you talk to them?"
Glassman sighed. "He is being monitored very closely; his nurse comes in frequently, and I'm watching him like a hawk. His head is elevated, his temperature is stable, we're making sure he can respond to questions and have functioning reactions. They're giving him vasopressors and steroids." He shook his head. "They're doing everything they can, without opening him up a second time. They're well aware of anything that could happen; I trust them completely." Claire thought to herself that the man's stare looked as though it weighed about three hundred pounds. If she tried to pick it up, she could imagine it crushing her; right now, it was just crushing him.

All of the repercussions seemed to be anywhere other than her.

Usually the thought never occurred to her to wonder about Glassman's age, or even be aware of it in the first place. When she pictured him, or saw him, only a specific set of words were applied. Words like 'experienced' or 'wise.' Words that were close enough, but never exactly struck the mark. Now, looking at him, they hit her like bricks. He looked old. He looked tired. And beaten-down, and worn. He looked like he'd been through far too much, and he was barely keeping himself together. She could see it hanging over his face like a shadow, and she forced herself to turn away. Her eyes drew to Shaun; it was no less hurtful. Right about now, however, she had no safe alternatives.

Neil's eyes flashed, but if he objected to the fact that everything was being done that could be, he didn't express it aloud. Claire found herself looking at him in sympathy, oddly enough. She'd never expected to be looking at her boss in such a way, but given that it seemed as though someone else was feeling her kind of pain – the helpless, lost sort of pain – she found that it was second nature. But when Melendez caught her stare, he immediately clammed up, and wiped the expression from his face. His eyes narrowed more, and he turned down to bury his eyes in his phone, instead. She wondered if he was really texting someone, or if he was just tapping his thumbs on the keys. She guessed it didn't really matter.

They waited in silence. Claire and Jared had both resolved to stay until Shaun was awake. The night before, they had stayed until 9:30. The time had actually flown, just like the old saying went. They'd offered their friend respite from simply dwelling over where he was and the discomfort he was probably feeling; in return, he'd offered them a company they hadn't realized they so dearly missed, even if he hadn't talked much. Though Shaun was probably the most grateful, out of the three. It was exciting to roam the halls of a hospital as a doctor— being in charge and in command of everything going on around you, and challenging yourself day in and day out. Being in the hospital as a patient, on the other hand, was completely different. It was boring, and depressing, and frightening. It was like being stuck in purgatory.

They knew this well, and so they'd tried to distract him as best they could with stories and conversation. They'd tried to light up his night to the best of their ability. They'd been rewarded for their efforts with a couple actual smiles from him, however exhausted they'd been. Mostly he had been groggy and tired, and not really all that inclined to pay attention to whatever they were saying. But the smiles had said worlds, and Jared had even been suspicious that Shaun had managed a tiny laugh at something he had said, which was rarer than a unicorn sighting. So tonight wasn't a question for either of them about whether or not they would stick around— even if Shaun didn't wake up for the next three hours, they weren't budging.

What did surprise them was that Melendez stayed as well, without a single word or hesitation. He didn't even ask whether that was what anyone else was doing. He took the couch in the corner, and Jared stationed himself on its opposite end. Claire took the lounger that was beside Jared; she sat back in the chair and kept her legs drawn up to her chest and her head on her knees. Glassman stayed in his chair, looking from Shaun to his monitor. An ever-present sentry.

The nurse came in to check Shaun's neuro stats and vital signs every five minutes. Despite this
frequency, though, Glassman still persisted in hovering over the young doctor. Melendez couldn't hide the fact that he looked up from his phone every so often to watch him as well, and to glance over the information on his monitor himself. Claire was stiff and waited with something close to impatience for him to wake up. Even this made her guilt even worse, though. Shaun deserved rest, and she wished that he would get about fifteen hours, if he really had gone so long without a wink of sleep. But at the same time, she wanted to see him talk and smile and laugh again.

She wanted to see him like the way he was before she'd looked at him and suggested: "We could start walking to the car, at least."

The young girl knew that even when he did wake up, though, it wouldn't be enough. The fact that he would be so close and yet so far would just make her feel worse. A feat she never thought could be accomplished, and yet it was, time and time again. She was continuously surprised. As she sat in the chair and waited for her friend to wake, she grew stiffer and more rigid. Nowadays, the longer she was allowed to sit with her thoughts, and grow more and more weighted underneath them, the worse and more unavoidable the feeling of anxiety became. The more she couldn't hide her stress and her worry, which were both grating at her nerves. This was certainly no exception, if not even worse.

At one point, Jared seemed to pick up on her distress, and he tried to start a game of Life with her on his phone. She'd just shaken her head and turned away, her expression crestfallen.

Eventually, Shaun did begin to rouse. Given the circumstances, he probably hadn't slept nearly long enough to even make a dent in his fatigue. After all, the new visitors had only been sitting around for somewhere around twenty minutes, even if it had felt more like ten hours. This still-lingering exhaustion was apparent when he pried open his eyes, slowly and with a large amount of difficulty. His stare was foggy and unfocused, and the more aware he became, the more pinched it seemed to grow. Glassman definitely hadn't been exaggerating; Claire could see the sickened look slowly crawl back into place even from where she was sitting. It was like he'd just stepped off a rollercoaster after riding it seventeen times in a row without a single break.

Aaron sat up at once when Shaun finally managed to get his eyes open. Claire watched him lean forward, and in her mind, she imagined an overbearing and paranoid mother, rushing forward and bending low over her child the moment they fell and scraped their knee. "Shaun?" he murmured, still keeping his voice low, likely for Shaun's own comfort. Or maybe he was too scared to speak any louder; maybe he was worried that in doing so, he'd shatter him, like he was made of glass. Shaun grimaced, but his eyes flickered over towards Glassman after a moment. The older doctor was cataloging it all away. Reaction time: good. Expression: nauseated. "How are you feeling? You finally managed to sleep…it was only about thirty minutes. Hopefully tonight, you'll sleep better…I told them to give you something to help you more."

Shaun looked like he may as well have not slept a wink. He was groggy and disoriented from the small nap that didn't amount to much; maybe he'd have been better off not sleeping at all. His eyes closed again. After a heartbeat or two, Claire stood up from her chair and crept a little closer, wondering if he'd just slipped right back into unconsciousness. But then they opened again, with that same trouble. This time, his eyes caught on hers, and she stiffened at the surprise and confusion that sparked in them. She offered him a small smile, hoping that it looked more natural than it felt on her face. "Hey, Shaun," she greeted warmly. "Jared and I wanted to pop by and visit you again. Or… annoy you," she teased, pumping artificial happiness into her voice. "And look! Melendez even begged to come!"

"I didn't beg!" he was objecting, even before she could finish.

Shaun blinked. His eyes slid over towards the wall, but he couldn't quite see the other two, from
where he was. He started to try and twist his head to the side, and even Claire cringed at the pain and stiffness it inflicted. The pair still on the couch gathered this immediately, and they stood up in sync to gravitate to his bedside. Claire moved just a little bit to let Jared stand more in front of her. She took the opportunity to let her happy smile drop. Shaun wasn't paying mind to her anymore; now that the two were actually in his line of vision, he looked at them briefly before his eyes darted away. "Why?" She winced at the fact he sounded so staggered.

"Well, we wanted to get your autograph before you got recruited by the WWE," Jared explained with a tiny grin. Claire scowled, kicking out to catch the back of his ankle. He hissed in pain and turned to glare at her over his shoulder. But her glower was ten times as furious, and he turned back front, shaking his head to clear it. "We were worried," he amended. "And we missed you. Work just isn't the same without you loitering around. And you've done nothing at all to deserve a break from any of us, either," he added, his voice adopting that teasing lilt again, and diverting off that serious track. "So here we are. To ruin your peace and quiet." He frowned, and tried his best to keep the joking lilt to his voice when he added: "I understand you being confused about Grumpy checking in on you," Melendez soured, "but I wouldn't have missed coming along for anything. I was here last night, too; you remember that, right? Claire and I told the nurse about that time you weren't paying attention and ran into the wall—you couldn't have forgotten that!"

Shaun didn't reply. He just looked between the two of them, like he was still trying to put puzzle pieces together, but their edges weren't quite matching up. Glassman's forehead creased, and he leaned over to look at him more closely. When the young man said nothing still, he decided to speak instead. "Shaun, can you grab my hand?" He extended it out towards him, letting it hang there in midair. Claire noticed that his eyes flickered worriedly to Shaun's monitor. Claire looked as well, her eyes finding his blood pressure a second time. 138 over 87. It wasn't high. Not yet. But it was dangerously close. And it was climbing. Glassman looked back, and Claire weakened when she saw the worry that was on his face. Just hidden enough so that maybe Shaun wouldn't be able to pick up on it. But then again, the fact that Shaun didn't could just be another red flag. He inched his hand a little closer. "Just grab it and squeeze it as tightly as you can. I won't squeeze back; I promise."

He blinked. Again. And he did so slowly. Again. He looked down at Glassman's hand, and he dragged his own up into motion. He inched it up towards his, as instructed. For half a heart-stopping second, Claire was worried he would end up grabbing the empty space beside his palm. But at the last moment he shifted ever so slightly, and righted the wrong he was beginning to make; his fingers found their way around Glassman's. He squeezed down; there was no telling whether he was able to scrounge up a lot of pressure. He was quick to withdraw and let his hand fall back dead onto the mattress, though, which was a small comfort, considering it was a flash of Shaun's old self. Though Claire's smile was tainted with sorrow when he closed his eyes to seemingly ride out another wave of nausea. She knew the look well, from her other patients.

Glassman still seemed worried; he didn't take his eyes off Shaun, and if anything, his façade of an expression was beginning to weaken and crack. Before Shaun could notice, though, and maybe get worried, which would only complicate things, Jared leaned forward and offered him a smile. He was much better at masking his real feelings than Claire and Glassman were, it seemed. He looked like he could have been hanging out with Shaun at the library, instead of in this hospital room. Like there wasn't a single care in the world. Maybe that was just because he was more detached than they were. Claire found herself experiencing a heavy pang of jealousy, for that. "How are you feeling, Shaun?" Jared asked. "You've got to be doing better than yesterday, at the very least. You look a lot better." It was a complete lie, but doctors were sometimes just as good as lawyers at the skill.

Shaun's eyes found Jared's after a delay. Claire found she was counting the seconds it took for him to register a new topic, and adjust accordingly. The fact it was more than one was already enough to upset her. "I...haven't—" Whatever he was about to say died there. He broke off, and the little color
that was left in his face drained. His eyes flashed, and he pressed his lips tightly together, swallowing a little thicker than he normally did. Nearly the entire time he’d been in the hospital, Shaun's expression had been muddled and groggy. Like he was feeling everything, but he was feeling it from fifteen miles away. But now Claire stiffened when she could see a painfully-aware sense of panic start to burn its way forward.

Glassman sat forward at once, and Claire was almost taken under by the waves of anxiety that rolled off of him. "Shaun?" he demanded. His voice wasn't soft anymore; the moment it looked as if things were going awry, it turned hard and sharp. "What's wrong?" he asked, searching his face. Melendez had taken a step forward, and he was looking fast from Shaun, to his monitor. Claire couldn't stomach looking at the expression on her boss’ face. It was wrong, to see him so concerned. "You don't have to say all of it, Shaun," Glassman urged, and somehow the words felt rehearsed. Played-out. "Just say one thing."

But Shaun didn't even have to say that much. He reached out again, towards Glassman. His hand was shaking. Immediately, Aaron's eyes lit up with understanding and pain, and he turned to fetch the small plastic basin that was resting on Shaun's tray, off to the side. Shaun was already elevated in the attempt to lower any intracranial pressure that might be building again over time, but as Glassman leaned over and held the basin for him, he reached over and helped Shaun sit up just the tiniest bit more. He did so as gingerly and as carefully as he could. As if he really was made of glass, and the weakest of forces would be enough to break him.

Once he'd realized what was happening, Melendez had turned and rounded the bed, so he was standing on its other side. He helped Glassman lean Shaun forward just enough, and keep him steady. And not a moment after his help was added, did Shaun lurch forward and begin to vomit. Claire grimaced, and her own stomach tightened as he heaved and gagged weakly. Not much was even there to force its way back up; it was mostly stomach bile. And even after the episode passed, Shaun still choked and heaved over the bowl, as if something more was still to come. But there was nothing left.

Glassman waited, just to be sure. He held the sick pail under his chin for a heartbeat longer before he turned and put it back down on the tray table. He left it there for the time being. For now, he turned back to Shaun and looked over him, his eyebrows pulling together in sharp concern as he helped lower him back down. Shaun was gray and ashen; his face was covered in a light sheen of sweat, and his muddled look was back to shroud his expression. His stare was dull and exhausted as his head hit the pillow again. "I'm so sorry, Shaun…" Glassman murmured under his breath.

Claire closed her eyes.

Glassman shouldn't be the one apologizing.

Aaron's eyes flickered up to meet Melendez's, and at once, the other doctor gave a tense nod. He took his hands away from Shaun, who hadn't even reacted to the contact in the first place, and he rushed for the door. To fetch someone, and to do so quickly. Claire's eyes found Shaun's blood pressure again, and now the number looking back at her almost made her inclined to be ill right alongside him. It was higher, still. It was staring them in the face, now. Post-operative swelling—increased cranial pressure. She ducked her head and rubbed at her eyes, unsure of whether or not she was rubbing away the exhaustion she felt, or the threat of tears that were already burning their way into life.

Jared offered Shaun yet another smile, and he leaned down to the side, attempting to meet his gaze. He was relieved when, at least, Shaun's eyes found his and stayed there. As long as they usually did, anyway. "Don't worry," he reassured. He was trying his best to offset Glassman's presence. By now,
though he wasn't saying anything, thank goodness, the older doctor was practically on top of him, and the growing panic in his eyes might as well have been neon beams. It wasn't helping anything. "Melendez will drag the nearest poor soul into the room, and they'll get you fixed up. Maybe not as fast as you would be able to fix it, but not everyone can be the Great Shaun Murphy." He didn't react to the hidden praise. "It's an easy fix," Jared went on, and he wasn't sure whether he was addressing Shaun, or everyone else in the room. "Tons of different ways to do it, there's invasive, or noninvasive…it's different for every person." He was rambling, now. He tended to that when he had no idea what else to say. "Could be a surgery…in and out, ninety minutes, I'd say…or maybe if —"

Shaun mumbled something. It was too low to be heard in the first place, but given how frequently he had been getting sick lately, his scratchy throat only complicated the matter of being understood. Whatever he'd attempted to say came out sounding more like scraping than anything else. But Jared stopped as soon as he saw his lips move, and he raised his eyebrows, leaning a little closer. "What's that?" he asked. "I couldn't hear you."

Shaun's eyes flickered down to himself, and the wires he was still hooked to, before he looked back at Jared. Every change in focus was made slowly, and it seemed to take a while for him to really latch onto each one. But he did repeat himself, louder this time. At least enough to be heard. "Where's Claire?" he mumbled. His voice came out fuzzy and wrong— like he had cotton balls in his mouth. She jerked, her head snapping up. Her eyes went a little wide. Jared was still standing a little bit in front of her, blocking her from Shaun's view. But when she first registered what Shaun was asking, she was too frozen to move.

Jared looked back at her though, and once she was under the scrutiny of his attention, she forced herself to brighten up and snap out of it. She pushed aside the weight that was shoving down on her chest, and she put a smile on her face that felt far too wrong. She stepped to the side, so that there was no more hiding from him. "I'm still right here, Shaun," she reassured him, hoping that her voice didn't betray her as much as she was anticipating it would. His eyes drilled to her. She felt a tug in her chest when she realized how anxious he looked. "I didn't go anywhere."

His anxiety didn't seem to be any lessened though, and if she had felt horrible over his question before, it was nothing compared to the feeling she got when he asked his next one. Just as softly, and with just as much puzzled concern, he murmured: "Are you okay?" She only stared at him, her mouth too dry to form actual words. When she said nothing, he just elaborated. But she really wished he wouldn't. "Are you hurt…?" His anxious stare settled on her face. On the one measly bruise she had, when on his own, he had at the very least twelve.

She blinked fast, feeling her eyes sting even harsher. She found herself turning to Glassman. But he wasn't looking at her to answer the question she had on her face. He was looking at Shaun. His stare was heavy, and beyond troubled. "He's confused," he managed, his voice increasingly strained. "Shaun, you…you don't remember?" Shaun said nothing. Aaron turned and looked after the direction Melendez had gone. He was growing impatient and began to rise, despite his clear desire to stay glued to Shaun's side. He started to make for the call button, his eyes narrowing, when suddenly Melendez rushed back into the room. Behind him was the nurse that had been making her frequent rounds, along with a few extra hands. Shaun's doctor was leading the small party; Claire had never seen him before.

He was younger; he must have been in his early or middle thirties. He looked kind, but at the situation he was walking into, he looked worried. All the same, he was armed with a smile, as he took in everything at once. Glassman was already rattling everything off the moment he came inside. The younger man listened, but Claire did not. She was too busy staring at Shaun, who was staring straight back at her. He was in a haze; she was doing her best to keep herself together.
As if from far away, she could barely make out the doctor speaking. He was saying something to Shaun, she thought, because there was a certain gentleness to his voice that made it seem so. The kind of gentleness that came from strangers sometimes while they worked, whether it was from new staff members or ignorant patients. The kind of gentleness that always made Shaun turn and shoot Claire a look as if to silently ask: 'You see what I have to put up with?' Now, he wasn't even registering the voice, let alone its tone. "...going to do a quick lumbar puncture to be sure of how much," the man was saying, his voice going in and out. "But...anticipated this, so it's completely... and opioids to make him sleep, that will hopefully reduce...but we can..."

Claire only snapped all the way back to attention when she felt a hand close around her wrist. She turned to see that Jared was pulling her away— not without a sense of regret. "Come on, Claire," he murmured, and she realized that they were being dismissed. Her heart tore, and she looked quickly back at Shaun. She didn't want to leave. She wanted to make sure that he was okay. That the pressure went down, or that he would be able to fall asleep later, or that he might actually be able to eat something without vomiting it right back up. But she didn't have a leg to stand on.

She couldn't argue, or demand that she stay. She had no right. So, despite the look on her face and the drooping of her shoulders, Claire allowed Jared to herd her back out to the hall. Her eyes never strayed from her friend in the hospital bed, even when the doctor stepped forward and blocked him from her sight. It didn't matter; the imagine of Shaun weak and suffering with wires going every which way was burned clear into her mind by now. She didn't need to see it. It would follow her. It followed her all the way out the door. And as she walked back the way she had come, flanked by Melendez and Jared, it followed her still. It sat with her in the car, during the entire way home. It haunted her when she sat down to eat dinner and only stared at her plate, wondering whether or not Shaun was able swallow anything while she was perfectly fine, at home. It kept her company even when she turned on the TV and tried to distract herself for the night. And even when she went to bed and pulled the covers around herself in a lame attempt at comfort, it was there.

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"No. No, no, no, no! No! I am firm on this point! I am not budging, and nothing you could possibly say would be enough to change my mind!" Jared was practically yelling. Claire stared at him with more than a lifetime's worth of exhaustion in her eyes. The exhaustion was for many things of course, not just this, but right about now, this whole ordeal was starting to near the front in the race of 'Crappy Things Going on Right Now.' Or it certainly wasn't helping it in any way, at the very least.

"Charlie did not deserve to win the Chocolate Factory at the end of the movie!" Jared went on, despite the look she was giving him. The clear plead with him to stop. "1971 Charlie was just as bad as all the other kids! The other kids were all disqualified because they were greedy! Right? That fat kid went in the chocolate river, Violet took the gum when she wasn't supposed to, that spoiled kid wanted that goose, and the other kid used that TV thing without asking!" Claire just stared at him. "Right?" he pressed, when all she gave was silence.

"Charlie stole the fizzy lifting drink with his grandfather, so he deserved just as much rejection as every other kid! He acted out of line and he should have been shoved out of the factory right along with them, but he didn't, which is bullshit, and so he didn't deserve to win." He sat back in his chair with a huff, seeming more than satisfied with his argument.

She sighed and rubbed at her forehead. "...Yes," she exhaled.

"Right! They were greedy, so they were taken out of the running for winning the factory! One by one! Wonka didn't want them! So why in the world did he want Charlie? Charlie stole the fizzy lifting drink with his grandfather, so he deserved just as much rejection as every other kid! He acted out of line and he should have been shoved out of the factory right along with them, but he didn't, which is bullshit, and so he didn't deserve to win."
Claire sighed. Half of her advised herself not to encourage him by offering an opposition. But at the same time, she knew that if she didn't cave and do just that, then all that would be left would be silence. And she couldn't handle silence; not recently. It left her mind too open to wander, and wander into dangerous territory. So, against her better judgement, she did. "Wonka knew that Charlie and his grandpa stole the drink; he yelled at them both for it in the end. He did start to shove them out, but it just didn't matter because of what Charlie did afterwards."

"So why didn't the other kids get the song and dance he did for Charlie?" Jared fumed. He was actually getting angry over this, the longer it went on. Legitimately angry. "The whole point at the end was that Charlie gave him that gobstopper even when he was yelled at and he had every reason to take it, yeah? But none of the other kids got to do that! They were kicked out of the factory straight away, and that was it! Maybe they weren't planning on giving the recipe out! Maybe they would have refused. But it didn't matter because they were kicked out for the same exact thing that Charlie did. Unfairly, because he got special treatment and got off for absolutely no reason. No repercussions."

"Maybe they did, and we just didn't see it!" Claire objected. "Maybe they said it in passing, too, or something, and we just don't remember."

"I don't think so," Jared rejected. "And that's not fair, because that whole rejection scene was the entire test, and not every kid got to take it when they should have. And anyway, the general statement still stands: they were all equally as horrible in fundamentals, so it's ridiculous that Charlie is seen as this innocent pure kid, when he did the same exact thing the other kids did, down to a science. He stole, too. Why is he seen as the perfect little boy?"

"The other kids were all planning on giving the recipe out— you saw their faces," she groaned. "It all would have turned out the same anyway, Jared. Even if they were all given the test."

"You don't know that! It was a stupid ending, and it was unfair, and it never showed those kids or their parents at all afterwards, so they might have died, and Wonka might just be a serial killer hiding behind a chocolate bar!" He leaned over and smacked his hand down on the counter beside him. "2005 Charlie Bucket is ten times the Charlie that 1971 Charlie was, and the 2005 version of Willy Wonka is worlds better, hands-down!" She groaned and ducked her head down into her hands. "And you know why? It's because they fixed it, and 2005 Charlie didn't steal a single thing! He was the perfect kid, and there was no question about whether or not he should have gotten the factory at the end! Go on— you watch that entire movie! Kid probably says ten whole sentences the entire time he's in the factory! Because he's staying in his lane! And he's not causing any kind of trouble whatsoever! He just stands there in the background, the entire time, doing absolutely nothing!"

"The new one isn't better than the old one! You cannot say that Johnny Depp was better than Gene Wilder!"

"I'm not talking about the Wonkas, I'm talking about the Charlies. The Charlie makes or breaks the movie, Claire. C'mon, this isn't amateur hour."

"Okay, well, your opinion is wrong," she exhaled. "So, I'm sorry to have to be the one to tell you that."

"It's not, though!" he heaved. "The only thing that the 1971 Charlie and the Chocolate Factory holds over the other one is that it has better songs in it. But it also has that other song that the mom sings when Charlie is walking down the street, and don't you dare tell me you like that one; that's the three minutes of the movie where people go to the bathroom or check their phones." He shook his head and backtracked, to keep his argument from straying into realms that weren't pertinent. To his fierce debate over Willy Wonka. "Name one thing from the first movie that's better than the remake, other
Claire closed her eyes and tilted her head back. "I literally can't even remember anything from either of them," she hissed under her breath.

"That's where you're wrong, too," Jared rejected at once, almost before she'd finished talking. "Because every single person that's ever once seen Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory might be able to forget a lot of the movie, but forever engrained in their mind is the one specific scene that you couldn't possibly forget, even if you lived to be one hundred and twenty. And you already know what scene I'm talking about, Claire." She kept her eyes shut; she kept praying to God to give her a break. God kept ignoring her. "It's the boat scene, Claire. What...the hell was up with that boat scene? It was horrifying, it was terrible, and it scarred an entire generation of children for no reason at all!"

She sucked in a slow breath. "I think it was supposed to be a metaphor, Jared..." she sighed.

"It was supposed to be therapy fodder! I cried for a week after I first watched that thing. I had nightmares every single night!" He shook his head. "You can't say that the Willy Wonka remake isn't better than the original, because they took the two biggest issues with it – that the first Charlie was just as rotten as all the other kids were, and that the boat scene was an uncalled-for piece of nightmare fuel – and it fixed them. Charlie was completely innocent, children didn't get a deranged fear of boat rides, you got to see more of the factory, it was funnier, the kids didn't die or disappear from the face of the earth— need I go on?"

"No, you really don't," Claire exhaled, opening her eyes again, with reluctance.

"Well, am I wrong?" he asked. She said nothing, and he turned, his eyes narrowing just a bit. "Shaun, am I wrong?" Up until now, Shaun had taken to silence. Silence almost as miserable as Claire's as he stared straight ahead, completely ignoring their argument. His eyes had been a little unfocused, but when he heard his name, he roused, and they flickered over to Jared with a tiny flash. "You agree with me, right? That the new movie is better than the old one? Back me up on this a little bit, I need some help here."

They had been sitting with Shaun until Glassman came back. Their shift had ended, and naturally, they had flocked to their friend's bedside, like they did every day now. He'd been moved into less intensive care two days ago. It was a tiny success, given he was still in the hospital and still weak, but it was the first good kind of progression they'd had since this whole thing had started. Hopefully it was the first of many. They'd come here and stayed here so that Glassman could leave and catch up on work himself, and not feel too guilty over leaving Shaun in the meantime. That had been about three hours ago. It was apparent, however, that they were not the best distractions the world had to offer. Shaun murmured uncomfortably in the back of his throat. He looked away. "I haven't seen either of them," he replied.

"What!?" Jared was outraged. Shaun may as well have said 'I like to kick puppies in my spare time.' "You haven't seen any Willy Wonka movie at all? What's wrong with you?" Shaun said nothing, but Jared probably wouldn't have listened even if he had. The other shook his head fast. "Forget Book Club. We have to educate you. You're not doing anything else lately; you could take this time to catch up on the classics!" Claire glanced at Shaun when Jared said this, and her stomach clenched as she caught the sorrowful and frustrated expression that came over his face in response. Jared was opening his phone, though; he didn't pick up on the look. "Let's see— Star Wars? Have you seen Star Wars? That's definitely going on the list. How about...Shawshank Redemption? You've got to have seen that one, before!"

"Shaun?" He looked over at Claire when she said his name. She was relieved to see that by now he
was reacting normally, and instantly. His stare wasn't weighted down with a blanket of confusion or fuzziness; he was acting like his old self. He looked like his old self, too, if she could only see past all the bruising and injuries. When he turned to look at her, she pasted a grin on her face. "How are you feeling?" she asked gently. "Do you need anything? I could get you something to eat? Or drink?" After that long stretch of not being able to ingest anything, he had noticeably shaved off a couple pounds. Now that he was able to keep things down, he had some catching up to do.

"No," he said in a tiny exhale. Claire gave a tiny nod; she looked down at her lap and knitted her hands together. Shaun fell silent too, and stared off into space. Looking between the two, Jared seemed to understand that ranting further about the unfair justice system of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory wouldn't be a good idea. So he didn't speak, either. He just looked back down at his phone, disheartened. The three sat uncomfortably in this pressurized quiet for what felt like forever. Until the door opened, and each one of them turned.

It was Glassman, already back from Saint Bonaventure. Though the other two residents turned and smiled at him in welcome, his eyes drilled immediately for Shaun, and he weakened with a certain degree of relief when he saw that Shaun was just as well as when he'd left. He was shrugging off his coat, setting it down on the lounger as he strode inside. "Hey, Shaun," he murmured, offering him a smile. "Doctor Lim wanted me to tell you hello, and that she hopes you're feeling better." Shaun didn't acknowledge the sentiment very much. But it was alright because Aaron was already moving on. "But! I was coming down the hall and I ran into your doctor. We started talking, and though he'll come back shortly to tell you this himself…I have some good news for you."

This garnered his attention back.

Glassman was smiling, and he moved to stand at the foot of his bed. "You're going to be able to go home soon," he declared. Immediately, both Jared and Claire lit up. Ecstatic, twin smiles spread over their faces at once, and they turned to Shaun, waiting for the same thing to happen to him. Sure enough, a pleased grin was twitching to life across his lips. "Doctor Lim wanted me to tell you hello, and that she hopes you're feeling better." Shaun didn't acknowledge the sentiment very much. But it was alright because Aaron was already moving on. "But! I was coming down the hall and I ran into your doctor. We started talking, and though he'll come back shortly to tell you this himself…I have some good news for you."

This garnered his attention back.

Shaun's smile was growing as Aaron swept on. "You'll finally be able to get out of here; Sequoia is quite the hospital, but even I'm tired of seeing these walls. There will be a list of things you can and can't do; you can't just leap right back into things, however much you want to. But it'll be good. I'll take you home, and I can help you get settled. Tonight, I can go and get the spare bedroom prepared for you." The grin warming its way over Shaun's face stuttered. Claire frowned, and her stomach began to sink as she watched his expression decay into uncertainty instead. Glassman didn't notice. "It's been ages since anyone's stayed there, so I'm sure there's some dusting that needs to be done, but I'll get it all taken care of."

"I'm…going to your house?" he asked slowly.

Jared and Claire exchanged a look.

"Well…of course, Shaun," Aaron replied; he almost sounded surprised to have gotten the question. The young doctor wilted, and this time it was impossible not to see. "You'll still need help with a lot of things…you'll still have to readjust to life and catch back up with it…it'll only be more difficult if you're by yourself. And why struggle if you don't need to? I'd be more than willing to have you until you're back on your feet, and at work again…” Claire looked at Glassman and deflated at the look that was on his face. He looked far too eager. Desperate almost. He'd sat at Shaun's bedside for the days upon days he was here, hardly sleeping or even blinking, for fear of missing something. Of
course he was trying to keep this proximity to him. But all the same…

Shaun was still doubtful. "I can…take care of myself at home," he tried. "You don't need to take care of me."

He misunderstood. "It's no trouble at all, Shaun," he reassured him. "Really. I'll have everything ready for you by the time you're released, and then you can just be able to focus on getting better. You won’t have to think about anything else." He smiled, but Shaun didn't return it. The older man's grin died a little bit, but he took in a slower breath and moved on. "It'll be fine, Shaun, really." The way he said this didn't leave much room at all for an argument. "You'll see. It won't take long at all for you to get back on your feet. Then you can go back to your apartment." Shaun looked down to his hospital bed, in something akin to defeat. "Until then, you'll just be staying with me. Just in case."

Still, Shaun was mute.

Aaron searched his face for a heartbeat, before he inhaled deeper and turned to look at Jared. The resident straightened at once. "Jared, if you could do me a favor tomorrow, when you see Melendez next?" he asked. He nodded, raising his eyebrows. "If you could just tell him that…" Claire wasn't listening anymore. Her eyes were trained on Shaun; she was pained at the look on his face. She didn't realize that she was staring at him so obviously, until he turned and met her gaze. She weakened, her forehead creasing in sympathy as she tried to offer him her best attempt at silent comfort.

She tilted her head to the side. Barely speaking so that he would be the only one to hear, she asked: "Are you okay, Shaun?" She felt like it comprised half of her vocabulary— checking in on him.

But, like every other time she asked him this, he just stared at her in silence.

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"And so this is Christmas…and what have you done? Another year—"'

Claire slammed the radio into silence, using far more force than what was really necessary. Her lips were pressed into a thin line, and for a moment she sat in this tense quiet, just looking ahead through her windshield. It took her nearly two full minutes to rouse enough to turn and open the car door so she could shuffle out. It was chillier today; she tucked her jacket up closer to herself, but grimaced. The simple motion brought to her a mind a rush of far too many painful things. So she dropped it instead— gritted her teeth and ignored the chill. She just locked her car and headed up the pathway that led to the house.

It wasn't the first time she had been here; it wasn't anywhere near the first time. Every day after work, she had gone to Sequoia to sit at Shaun's bedside. So, when he was released here to Glassman's house, she had done the same exact thing. Every day once her shift ended, she came; at first, she had had to follow the directions of a GPS, but it hadn't taken her long at all to have the route memorized. Which was strange. And it was just as strange to so casually walk up the steps of the home and knock on the door, and to have Doctor Glassman be on the other side.

He was wearing a smile that was only the tiniest bit tired. But when his eyes met hers, he seemed to liven up just a bit more. "Claire," he greeted, already stepping aside for her to enter. "Right on time, as usual." She grinned and started in. "I hope you haven't been shaving off on the ends of your hours. Doctor Melendez is already cross with me for taking the time of one of his residents. Who knows what would happen if I doubled that number."

"I haven't," she promised. It was warm inside, and she let out a tiny sigh of relief. Her eyes flickered
over the interior; despite the fact that she had frequented it here, looking around and seeing the home of the president of Saint Bonaventure still felt odd. She looked at the pristine hard wood flooring, and down the hall to where his small study was situated. In a rehearsed routine, she started down the other direction, which would take her to the den. Usually that was where Shaun was, either sleeping on the couch, watching television, or one time she had walked in on what looked to be a very uneventful game of Scrabble between him and Glassman. But she was a little surprised when she found the room empty. "Oh." She turned to look over her shoulder, finding that Aaron had followed her closely. "Where's…?"

He sighed, glancing down in another direction. Really, Claire had only been in a couple rooms of the house. The den, the kitchen, she'd poked her head briefly into Glassman's study, and she had been in the room that Shaun had been given. Each of them were just like the last: neat, and organized, and elegant, but not over-the-top. It was a beautiful house, and one she was almost envious of. Or maybe she would have been more envious of it had she stopped to think about things like that. But she didn't get the luxury. There was always something else to focus on. "He's been taking a shower," Glassman said, and Claire did the mental math to figure that the way he was looking must have led to some kind of bathroom. "He hadn't had one in a while, and he figured he would be done by the time you got here." She tried to smile. It made her lips hurt. "But it...it takes a lot out of him," he exhaled heavily. "Little things, I mean. He's still readjusting, and catching up. He's been in there for about an hour, so I'm sure he's almost done." He fell silent for a heartbeat, and his eyes stayed trained in the direction that Shaun must have gone. His expression seemed the tiniest bit darker for the tiniest of seconds; but Claire was almost inclined to believe she imagined it, because he looked back at her quickly, and the look was gone. "You can wait here," he invited. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Oh, no. No," she managed. "I'll be fine."

Glassman nodded. He paused, before he cleared his throat. "Alright. Well, then, if you'll excuse me, I have a couple of phone calls to return. It seems if I'm not at the hospital every waking second of the day, the entire building collapses." He rolled his eyes and turned, heading back for the study. Claire offered a laugh just loud enough to be registered. When his back was turned, she hunched over a little bit. She looked down the hall where Shaun was, and she tried to see if she could hear any running water or footsteps. But the entire house was silent. She sighed and turned to take a seat on the couch. A pillow was resting against the arm, and near it was a blanket, folded neatly into a tiny rectangle. The quirk caused her expression to soften out into a smile. Shaun was still Shaun, despite everything. Funny oddities and all. She missed him at work; they all did. The dynamic wasn't the same, and because of that, everyone was more than aware of his absence. They didn't have anyone to keep Melendez's ego in check, or tell Jared to stop making that weird noise he sometimes made when he was thinking hard. They didn't have anyone to reorganize the children's books in the waiting room during break because they were out of order, and then get frustrated that an hour later they were all over the floor again. Or someone to lob out the most ridiculous diagnoses that were always 99.9% correct anyway.

Her smile turned a little sad, and she cleared her throat, looking down at her phone to distract herself. She had been stuck on a level of Candy Crush for a week now, and maybe her burning hatred for these brightly-colored cartoons would be enough to put her mind on another train of thought. Leaning back more into the couch and focusing on matching at least three pieces of the stupid things in a row, Claire tried again and again to beat this stupid part. But she failed each time, and before she knew it, she'd used up all her lives and had nothing to show for it.

She closed her eyes tightly and groaned, tipping her head back against the cushion and wishing that
things wouldn't be so freaking hard. Even her apps weren't giving her respite. Her head was aching, and she was starting to wonder whether or not she could ask Glassman if he had any Motrin she could take, when she instantly sat back up at a soft voice. "Hello, Claire." It was the greeting she always got, but she was just as relieved as the first time she'd heard it. Shaun was standing at the entrance of the living room. His hair was pretty wet still, given that he couldn't rub it dry with a towel like normal. He was in comfy-looking clothes— she didn't think she'd ever seen him in a t-shirt before.

"Hey!" she chirped, her voice coming out quiet thanks to sheer habit. She fought to keep the smile on her face, even when she took in how striking his bruises still were. The slice in his lip was bright red and apparent. And though the stitching had been removed from his cheek and his forehead, somehow it just made the injuries all the more glaring and obvious. Everything was obvious. Everything was a tiny neon sign, glowing into anyone's eyes with enough strength to blind them, should they look. She was trying to face it head-on, and disguise how much doing so hurt. "How are you doing?" she breathed— the question she always started their visits with.

"I'm okay," he replied, his eyes flickering to the spot on the couch where he'd folded his blanket. He started forward, and immediately Claire had to bite down on her tongue. Shaun kept one hand loosely against the wall, drifting it over the plaster just in case he slipped and needed something to grab onto. His feet dragged and shuffled; after his shower, he hardly had the energy to put one in front of the other. He was thoroughly and completely exhausted by a simple task that people did every day. So much so, that Claire was almost worried he wouldn't make it to the couch before he just fell to the floor to sleep.

She almost stood up and offered help. Part of her knew it was the least she could do. She could offer him a shoulder to lean on, and she could help him cover the last few feet it would take to finally find relief. But she was frozen. A burning lump began to form in the middle of Claire's throat as she found she could do nothing but watch her friend slowly and agonizingly cross the room; it was like a car accident she couldn't tear her gaze away from, no matter how much she wanted to.

And sitting there, just watching, Claire felt the same tight clenching in her stomach that she had felt when she had heard that Christmas song come on the radio. And the words she'd tried— foolishly and pathetically, she knew— to run from rang in her ears; this time, she didn't have the option to mute it.

What had she done?

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"How's he getting along?" Jared asked. They were standing in the ER, just loitering for the moment and waiting for something to do. They were working another graveyard shift; it was around two in the morning, and they were both holding coffee. So far nothing at all had cropped up for them to tend to. Not even a kid with sniffles that his mother overreacted to. It was a little strange, to be looking at a completely empty emergency room. But she guessed this was better than rushing around in a panic, and having too many people to treat at once. The pair had tried to pass the time for as long as they could without the conversation taking a left turn into the mine field they both knew was there. Claire was suspicious that Jared had made sure to do so on purpose, for her sake.

She took another sip of her coffee. She hadn't put a single grain of sugar or creamer into it. It tasted bitter, like acid. "He's okay," she murmured, keeping her eyes down on her cup now. "I went to visit him before I came in. He's still pretty tired, but I think he's getting better. He's eating just fine again. He told me that my shirt didn't match my pants, on the way out, so I'd say he's on the mend." She tried to say this jokingly, but even she could tell it fell a little flat. She sighed, and her shoulders
drooped. After a second, she switched tactics. "It's...strange," she tried. "To visit Doctor Glassman's house like it's nothing. Like it's not the house of the president of where I work."

She changed the subject. It wasn't tactful, and Jared noticed. But he didn't draw attention to it. In fact, he even played along with her. "How's it look?" he asked. "Because I picture this like...castle, kind of like Hogwarts. Maybe without the Dementors— but that's a very weak maybe on that one. And I see this really winding road leading up to it lined with trees, you've got these gargoyle statues staring at you the entire way. I'd imagine there's a moat somewhere in the equation." Claire was almost angry he got her to soften and laugh. "And on the inside, there are those knight statues in Beauty in the Beast. Maybe he's got a talking teapot, I wouldn't put it past him. He's got this huge library he never touches...and there has to be at least one ballroom, right?" She continued to giggle, and he leaned over to nudge her shoulder. "Am I at least close?"

"No, not quite," she laughed. "It's a nice house, it's really nice. Big." Her smile faded. She looked back down at her coffee. The humor drained out of her eyes before it really had a chance to enjoy being there again. "...Shaun doesn't like it there," she murmured. "He wants to leave...but he still can't even get around without getting fatigued. He's mostly laying on the couch whenever I come in, half-asleep. I mean it's good he can sleep again, but..." She sighed. "And you should see the way Glassman just...hovers over him. Like he can't even breathe right on his own. Every time he gets up to walk, he's right behind him, ready to catch him if he falls. He doesn't see how much pressure it's putting on Shaun. He hates it. But...it's not like I can say anything."

Her voice was weaker when she said this last part. Jared looked at her, sobering at the change. He was quiet for a while, and she was hoping that might mean he was going to drop it altogether. However, she wasn't that lucky. "How are you doing, lately? With all of this?" he asked.

She chewed on the inside of her lip. She suddenly felt very tired. She reached up and drew a hand through her hair, messing it up in the process. "I'm fine," she muttered, in a way that definitely took her credibility and shoved it out the window. It was her own little Defenestration of Prague. "This isn't about me. I'm not the one that's suffering."

"You wish you were, though," he objected softly. She locked her jaw backwards. "And that's just as bad."

"No, Jared, it's really not." She was angry, now. "It's not, and you should just drop it right now." She turned and gave him a hard look, practically glaring daggers at him. He hesitated, clearly taken aback by the sudden snap. Part of her almost felt bad, because she certainly wasn't angry at Jared; if she was angry at anyone, it would be herself. He opened his mouth and started to say something, when he was suddenly cut off.

"Claire! Jared!" They both roused at Melendez's call; he was making for the doors, and he hardly glanced at them as he swept by. Naturally, they rushed after him. They caught up soon enough, once he came to a stop in front of the hospital's doors. Claire was thanking her lucky stars. A distraction, coming in on a silver platter. It didn't come without the caveat of someone being hurt, but still. It was better than nothing. Melendez looked back at them once they did round the corner. They were pulling out their pagers just as he was putting his away. "There was a fight at a bar just down the road," he clarified anyway, even when their eyes were flickering through it all. "We've got two incoming, both young. Idiots drinking themselves stupid. Or...stupider, I guess," he sighed, looking back front.

Claire's expression darkened. She looked up from her pager much slower than Jared did. Her eyes flickered to the doors. "Yeah," she murmured, her voice barely audible. Neither of the three said anything else until the red and blue flashing lights of the ambulance came into view. Melendez and
Jared rushed out to meet them halfway. She followed behind. The ambulance was unloading when she got out. There were two stretchers with people of similar injuries being herded towards the building. The paramedics were dishing out information, relaying the states of the incoming patients. But Claire didn't hear them. Her attention was wrenched to the side.

One the patients was unconscious, but the other one certainly wasn't. Melendez was right; they were both young. Maybe they were just old enough to drink, by a slim margin. And the young man who had the unfortunate position of being awake still, was screaming at the top of his lungs. His body was locked tight in pain; he was practically spasming with it. He was covered in lacerations and blood, and Claire was instantly slapped across the face by the sheer volume and agony of his screeches and sobs.

Melendez and Jared didn't waste a single second before they grabbed the gurneys and began to help wheel them inside. The young man that was screaming was rolled right past Claire; she watched with wide eyes. The young man was screeching in pain, writhing against the straps that were holding him down, only making it all hurt worse. His face was covered in blood, and there was a deep gash down his arm, probably inflicted by a shard of glass from a beer bottle. His hand was curled awkwardly; it was probably broken from a punch to the other. There were differences, and that was the main one: they were both bearing severe injuries; neither of the two were innocent. But that didn't matter. In the moment, all Claire could see was the obscene blood, and all she could hear was his screaming. And she froze. She found herself rooting in place, her eyes widening and her heart freezing over.

She could see Shaun, lying still and unresponsive on the ground. The horrible injuries that cut into his skin, and the blood that gushed out of each wound. She could name every single one, because they had been etched into her mind. The deep cut on his forehead, the slice in his cheek. The split lip, the bruised jaw, the ripped chin, the swelled eye. She could see every single source of the blood that had covered his face and marred him close to unrecognition.

She could hear the initial sounds that Shaun had made. He could hear the thud when he'd hit the ground, and the whoosh of air that had been forced out of his lungs. She could hear his yelp of alarm when he'd been forced onto his back, and she could hear the chokes of pain that followed every punch that had been thrown. She could hear how they had faded away into gags and soft and panicked hitches of breath. How even that had subsided into absolutely nothing. It all came back to her in a rush, to choke her around the neck and cut off her airway. To cause her to stagger and weaken; it was all she could do not to fall over on the spot.

The young man's screams still reached her ears, though he was getting farther and farther away. He sounded as though he was in immeasurable pain. They could read the heartbeat and they could measure the blood pressure, but they could never even begin to be able to measure out just how much torture this person was experiencing at this very second. Just like she couldn't have understood how it had felt for Shaun to feel that man's fist slam down into him time after time after time. Just like she couldn't understand how much it still hurt for Shaun to sit up quickly, to twist to look to the left, or shift into a more comfortable position on the couch. To even make a simple facial expression, with the bruises and cuts still pulling at his skin.

She lurched into motion and tried to follow blindly, her legs moving as stiff and uncoordinated as a robot's. The lump in her throat was beginning to taste horribly like bile as she stumbled after the other doctors, and she fought to keep her stomach from twisting too much. But it was near impossible, with the man's screams echoing in her ears. Had Shaun been in this much pain? Had he been forced to experience this level of suffering, or had it been even more? This person was still awake— did that mean Shaun had been in even worse agony? Had Shaun been experiencing so much pain that he hadn't even been able to properly scream it out? Had he not even been able to draw in a breath to do that?
Melendez was shouting at Jared. Something about getting an x-ray for broken ribs. They were trying to handle both men that had been brought in, and as the realization dawned on how difficult it was, and the pieces were connected, Melendez whirled around to her. "Claire!" he snapped. She didn't even twitch at her name; she was standing there, staring at the screaming patient with eyes as round and big as the moon. It only made him yell louder. "Claire! Get over here!" he shouted. "Take this one!" Still, she didn't even blink. She just looked in horror; at the blood that was everywhere. She remembered the stain of Shaun's blood that had gotten on her sleeve. It was still there. She hadn't been able to get it out. The coat had been balled up and shoved into the back of her closet.

"Claire!" Melendez yelled, having to do so loud enough to be heard in the first place. "Stop staring and move!"

"It hurts!" the man screeched, his head tipping back with the cry. Sobs were grating the edges of his words; his entire body seemed to heave with barely-restrained chokes. A nurse had rushed to help Jared, who'd flown back as quick as he'd possibly been able to. The doctor turned and looked at his friend wildly, trying to juggle everything at once. Claire's hands were shaking, by now. "I can't breathe! Help! Help me, please!" He broke down into a fit of sobs and gasps, that only served to make his pain double. It was senseless crying, and Jared looked back to him to help when Claire hadn't reacted to his glance.

Melendez had turned back too, to the man that was unconscious. But even as he began to work, he yelled over his shoulder at her; he was absolutely furious. "Claire!" Her eyes were burning, the tears coming out slow thanks to the fact that she wasn't blinking. She pictured Shaun lifeless on the gurney, just like the other man was, dead to the world and possibly toeing that exact line. He pictured him right before he'd first been hit, standing in front of her despite his tremors of withheld panic, protecting her and keeping her safe from a man twice his size. The way he'd rushed forward and slammed himself in between the two of them, when the man had started to try and cart her off—to take her who-knew-where. He'd done it for her. The whole thing was for her. This bleeding, this suffering, she had done it...

"Claire!" Melendez screamed.

Shaun's voice echoed in her head. Cautious and frightened and filled with warning at the first sight of the man. 'Claire.'

She turned on her heel. Nurses that had rushed to help in her lapse were staring at her with wide and confused eyes, but she didn't care. She shoved her way past a few of them who were too befuddled to do anything yet, and she tore down the hall. Melendez yelled after her, or it might have been Jared; she had no idea. Claire just ran as fast she could, tripping over herself and stumbling over her own feet in the process. She didn't care who she ran into in the hall; she didn't care that she felt like the entire hospital was spinning. She just ran blindly until she reached the bathroom; until she could push her way inside and fling open a stall.

She fell down to her knees and before she could even attempt to calm herself down and stop it, it was too late. She retched, the sick feeling in her stomach finally forcing its way up and out of her body. Her arms hugged around her stomach and she shook through the waves of nausea. And she did what Shaun had done every day in the hospital for three days straight: she vomited.

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"I think it was…Colonel Mustard, in the ballroom, with the candlestick."

She said nothing.
"Claire. …Claire!

She tensed and jerked in surprise, her eyes going wide when Jared was forced to shout. She looked up from the board to see that he was staring at her oddly. "Oh…" She coughed to clear her throat; a deep grimace came over her face. "Sorry, I wasn't…I wasn't listening, I was…I was just thinking of something else." Jared's forehead creased. She took in a quick breath. "Say it all again." She leaned down and picked up her own cards, suddenly realizing she didn't even know what she had. She'd been the one to offer the game in the first place, just as something else to think about after they finished dinner. But it was more than clear it was all going right over her head.

Jared eyed her in silence for a heartbeat. But he didn't press – not yet – and just repeated himself. "Colonel Mustard in the ballroom with the candlestick."

She swallowed hard, thumbing through her cards. Her eyes landed on the candlestick, and her stomach tightened. Jared watched her fall still, and only grew more confused when she didn't immediately refute one of his points. It took her a few minutes to remember where they were and what they were doing. Eventually she did catch back up. "N- it's not…" She winced, and she shook her head to try and clear it. She coughed one more time. "It's not the candlestick." Her eyes lingered on the weapon heavily. A sullen and pained frown was pulling down the edges of her lips.

"…Claire?" Jared asked, softer now. "What's wrong?"

She blinked and put her stack down. "Nothing." Her voice was terse. "Nothing's wrong, I'm fine." She turned and grabbed the dice and rolled; as she moved her person, she was more than aware of Jared's gaze setting her on fire. All the same, she didn't meet his gaze. She just offered a guess that wasn't rooted in thought at all. "I think it was Mrs. Peacock in the kitchen with the revolver."

He frowned. "Claire, you're in the library," he pointed out. She started, looking at the board as if this was first time in her life she was seeing it. Sure enough, she was on the entirely wrong end. Frustration burned under her skin, and she hung her head with a tiny groan. Jared tilted his head to the side. "Claire, what's wrong?" His voice was firmer this time; he wasn't going to let her dodge it anymore. "You've been acting different ever since…" He wilted but skipped over the obvious. "You're worrying me," he said instead.

"I'm fine," she huffed. "Here, look, I'll change my guess, I think it was—"

"No, this isn't important," Jared interrupted. "What's important is you, and…and I think we need to talk about it, Claire. I think we need to talk about what happened that night, because so far you haven't—"

"No." The word was all but spat out. Jared immediately shut his mouth and his eyes flickered away. She could practically see him building up his patience for her. "I don't want to talk about it, Jared, because there's nothing to talk about. It happened, and we can't change it, and it's a mess." She grabbed the dice and smacked it back down in front of him. He looked at it but made no move to roll. "Come on. Seriously. I want to finish this game!"

"No you don't," he pressed, and she screwed her eyes shut. "You don't want to play this game, you want a distraction, and I don't think I should keep letting you find them like I have been, Claire." When she opened her eyes she shot him a glare. He just looked at her steadily. He tried to make his voice softer. "Claire, I know that you blame yourself for what happened. I know you do." She locked her jaw backwards. "But you really can't. You didn't know what was going to happen. Nobody did. So why are you holding yourself accountable?"

"Because I was the one who wanted to go to the stupid car, Jared." Her voice was sharpened like a
knife. "Okay? Because I was the one who was with him, and I should have done something to protect myself other than just let myself get shoved around and taken advantage of until Shaun had to take all of it, so yeah, it is my fault, Jared, and don't tell me it isn't. That just makes it worse." She shook her head. "I thought it was a great idea to walk alone at night, and I left my purse in the bar, so I couldn't call for help, and even when the guy had Shaun on the ground and he was—I couldn't even get him off of him. And even after you came, I was still messing it up, I— I wasn't helping him, I was just yelling at him, like that could do anything for him and—"

He tried to interject as she rushed on. "Claire. Claire." She ignored him and kept speaking. She only stopped when he yelled. "Claire! Stop it!" She jerked, her scowl only growing sharper. She realized her eyes were brimming with tears now. A single blink, and they would all fall. She tried to disguise this by looking down at the board again and straightening it out, when the effort really wasn't needed. "Claire, no. It's okay that you were scared. Shaun was scared. I was scared, when I saw what was happening. But—"

"But you actually did something."

"But that doesn't mean anything!" he pressed. "Just because I was able to—"

"I don't want to talk about this," she growled.

"But can't you see that it gets you nowhere?" Jared asked. "Shaun is recovering now, he's getting better! It's a slow recovery, but head injuries like his are always slow, there's nothing wrong with that. There's relapses, there's baby steps, but he's fine! There's no use in getting upset over a situation that's getting better every day." Her lips were pressed tightly together; she was worried she could feel them shaking just a little bit. She remembered Shaun's crestfallen expression when Glassman hovered too much. How tired he'd been after they finished the crossword together in the newspaper. How he looked whenever Glassman rushed to pick something up for him, because "You shouldn't lift more than five pounds, Shaun." Jared saw all the things she did; why wasn't he picking up on them like she was? The situation wasn't improving every day. At all. It was still horrible. "And besides, Shaun doesn't blame you, either! It's only you!"

She was silent for a long stretch of time. Jared was starting to hope he had gotten through to her. But his hopes were dashed when she just asked instead: "Are you done?"

He closed his eyes and hung his head. It was the thing he did when a patient was being especially difficult, or when he got a phone call from someone he would rather have never heard from again for the rest of his life. Claire knew this about him, and she knew his look, and it only served to make her all the more furious. "This entire time, you've been acting stupid! You've— you've been saying the stupidest stuff just to get me to listen to you! None of what you've said or done since the very beginning of all this has been the tiniest bit helpful!" He stared at her with wide eyes, but he didn't interject. Maybe he was too shocked to. But it was just as well, because she would have plowed right through whatever he'd tried to say anyway. "You didn't even stay at the hospital with me—the very first thing you did was go back to work!"

"I went back so you didn't have to!" Jared blustered. "I was trying to make it easier on you!"
"Oh, were you trying to make it easier on me when all you did was make jokes about what happened!? Not shutting up about a stupid children's movie for ten minutes? All those boxing jokes — signing up for the WWE!? What the hell, Jared!"

"What's wrong with trying to make everything easier to swallow!?!" Jared demanded, incredulous. "What's the point in just wallowing in something? That's what you've been doing, and look at what a mess you are!" She jerked backwards, as if she'd been slapped across the face. The smallest flash of regret passed over his face. But he just shook his head and pressed on, knowing that if they were going to put it all out on the table, then he had to get to the end. "You haven't been sleeping, you hardly eat—that scene in the emergency room a couple days ago, do you want to talk about that, Claire!?"

"That's not fair!" she shouted.

"Oh, it's not?"

"No!"

"Well I don't think it's fair that you're doing this to yourself, Claire!" he pointed out. "I don't think it's fair that—"

"I'm not doing anything to myself!" she shrieked. She stood up fast and tried to march away, but Jared got up and planted himself in front of her. She fumed, and found this to be the last straw. Before she could stop and think, she jerked out and shoved him away from her, to right the distance he'd diminished. On sheer instinct. He staggered backwards, a little alarmed, but she was beyond caring. She just scowled, her filter gone completely. "I'm just reacting like a normal person would! We almost lost him—we almost lost our friend! He could have died! And even if he didn't, do you know how long it's going to take him to get back to where he was!? He can't even read a chapter of a book without having to stop and take a break!"

"But that's not your fault!" Jared said, stressing each word individually.

Claire's eyes flooded with anger. Her hands balled into fists at her sides. "No," she growled. "Not all of it is. Because it's your fault, too." Now he was the one who was reeling back. "You were the one who just had to stay behind to talk to people you haven't seen in ages! On a night where you were supposed to just hang out with us! Shaun didn't even want to be there, the only reason he was was because he wanted to make you happy! And you made him stay even longer just so you could—I don't even know, was whatever you talked about worth it, Jared? Talking about all the girls you hooked up with, or how many great pranks you pulled on your stupid campus!?"

"Claire, you don't mean this." It was getting harder and harder for Jared to keep his voice in check. "Stop it. Now."

"No!" she yelled, jabbing a finger accusingly into his chest. "We needed you—you left us because you thought your other friends were more important, so you weren't there to help us! And now you're making jokes about the whole thing and refusing to acknowledge the fact that this happened because you weren't there to help him! If it wasn't for you taking so long in the bar, we could have gotten to the car just fine, all together! It's your fault we were alone, and it's your fault we were even out that night in the first place! So fuck you, Jared, and fuck your jokes about our friend almost dying!"

"It. Was. An accident," he all but spat. His voice was shaking now, in the attempt to keep his anger and other emotions at bay. "It was nobody's fault. Not his. Not yours. Not mine." Jared looked at her intently, searching her eyes and demanding her to understand. "You're just saying this because you're
angry, and you don't want to talk about what really happened. You're projecting, Claire, that's what this is. You're projecting onto me, and you can't do that. It's not fair. And it won't help. Sit back down. I want to talk this out with you. I want to help you."

She scowled at him. Her next words came out through clenched teeth. "You should have been there to help Shaun."

He leaned back, biting down hard on the inside of his cheek. His expression had managed to stay stony this entire time, but now it was fracturing and weakening in pain. She had no sympathy for him, though. She just shook her head and turned away. "Get out," she snapped. Jared took a little step forward and he started to say something. She didn't want to hear it. "I said get out!" she yelled. "Get out, don't say anything else! I don't even want to see you!"

He stood there for far too long, just staring at her mournfully. The way she looked at Shaun. He looked like he wanted to press more, but he was smarter than that, and he knew it would be useless. So he turned with a heavy sigh and obeyed her wishes. He left. He grabbed his coat and his keys and without another word, he was out the door. Claire didn't look back at him to watch him go; she just listened. To the sound of his breathing, which was just the tiniest bit escalated, and the sound of his footsteps, which got further and further away from her.

Until the only thing to listen to was the slamming of the door behind him, and the way it seemed to echo and bounce off the walls.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thus concludes Should Haves! I do apologize; for some reason, this story has taken quite a while to wrap up. I wanted to do it right, and give it the send-off it deserved. Thank you to everyone who has been reading this story, I've really appreciated hearing everyone's feedback and thoughts, and I hope I did this last chapter enough justice for you all, and I can hear from you again! And, I always say it so I apologize also for redundancy, I've gone through and edited the story twice now, so if any typos slip under the rug and they're very noticeable, I would very much appreciate them being pointed out! Along with anything else that might be wrong! <3

She looked down and smoothed out the skirt of her black dress. She tried to make it look halfway decent. Though for some reason, there was no doubt in her mind that the effort would be absolutely useless. She was standing in a large church, and there were what seemed like hundreds of people lingering and milling about around her. Some she recognized, some she didn't. Some were crying. Others were looking on in sorrow. Others were glaring. She could feel their stares, rather than see them. The burning sensation of eyes drilling into her was more than obvious, but whenever she looked around, nobody was even glancing in her direction. All their eyes were facing front.

She weakened, and looked down at herself again. She felt compelled to do something, but…what? She stared to move— to maybe take a step forward, where everyone's attention was focused. But a voice behind her stopped her in her tracks. "How's your cheek?" It seemed to have an echoing quality to it; she imagined it was because of how grand this space was. Echoing or not, an odd tone carried those words into being. It didn't sound hostile, or angry, but it didn't sound concerned, either, like a question like that was supposed to sound. It was…blank. And empty. It held nothing in it.

Claire turned to see Jared standing behind her, and sure enough, the expression he wore when he stared at her was that same way. There was nothing there; it was just apathy. His eyes were on her cheek, where her bruise still lingered. She reached up to let her fingers graze over the discoloration. "It's fine," she murmured, realizing her own voice seemed to bounce back to her. Everyone else was being so silent. "It doesn't even hurt anymore…"

Jared continued to stare with that weird light in his eyes. He hummed a little under his breath, as if to say: 'Well, would you look at that?' Claire frowned, and she turned to look over her shoulder. Her eyes landed on a familiar face, and her forehead creased. "Melendez is here," she commented, not exactly sure why she was so surprised. Her boss was standing up ahead in the crowd; his hands were shoved deep into his pockets, and his posture was stiff. His shoulders were curled inwards, like he was bracing something up.

"Why wouldn't he be?" Jared asked.

As if he could hear them talking – though he couldn't possibly, because they were practically whispering – Melendez turned around to look at them. His eyes landed on Claire. At first, he did absolutely nothing. The look on his face was an exact mirror of Jared's. But then he changed, and she stiffened as pure hatred and anger flooded through his gaze. He glared at her with enough rage to make her melt on the spot— she was halfway surprised she didn't. She weakened, a wave of guilt
hitting her. But before she could say anything, he turned away from her. He went right back to his same position.

She hesitated, before she looked back at Jared. Her friend appeared unaffected. "He's mad," she whispered.

In the same exact tone, using the same exact emphasis on each word as he had before, Jared repeated: "Why wouldn't he be?"

She didn't have an answer. Without saying anything else, Jared started walking towards the front of the church. He breezed past her as if he was a ghost. Leaving her alone. Though not for long. She watched in silence as another familiar figure stepped out from the crowd and approached her. Glassman was regarding her with enough sorrow to take her breath away. He looked fifty times his age, with the amount of exhaustion that was plaguing his face. Claire found herself wishing that she could turn and run away before he reached her. But she didn't move at all.

He came to a stop a few feet away, and for what felt like a tiny eternity, he just stared at her. Mournful. Grieving. Before: "Why?" The singular word was hollow. It could be used as a cup to hold water and there wouldn't be a single leak. She didn't say anything; she didn't have a good enough answer. The older doctor went on. His voice was defeated and lifeless. "Why did you do it? Why did you force him?" He was crying. "He didn't even want to go...and you made him. You didn't give him a choice. And you didn't give him a choice on whether or not to protect you. You forced him."

"I didn't mean to," she rasped. "It was an accident."

"I loved him," Glassman choked out. He was crying, too. Her boss, the president of her hospital, was crying in front of her. Breaking down. She could do nothing about it. "I loved him; he was like a son to me. He was everything I had. And you took him away. Now there's nothing." He ducked his head down low and hid his face away in his hands. He started to sob. Harsh, body-heaving sobs that ripped at his throat on the way out. Any words he managed to get through between them were so thick she could hardly understand what he was saying. "I have nothing, now," he cried. "There's nothing left for me...you took him from me...I loved him..."

Claire turned, looking back towards the front of the church. She could still feel those eyes, and now she could hear people whispering, too. But still, whenever she glanced around, there was nobody even paying her any mind. She took in a deep breath and started walking. She started to weave her way forward; Glassman's sobs faded the farther she got. Every person in her way sidled to the side, so she could get through. She passed faces she knew: there was Nurse Fryday, and there was Doctor Lim. The little girl with the stomachache that Shaun had saved – her name was Martine, if Claire remembered right – was standing among the others as well, tears beading down her face. There were also people that Claire didn't know. A woman, sobbing into her hands. A man standing close beside her to offer her comfort.

She kept her eyes front, though, gathering all of this in her peripherals. She kept walking until she reached the other side of the building. Until she reached what everyone was looking at, and walking past. A long black coffin, adorned with a large and beautiful arrangement of flowers. It was glossy and polished, completely unmarked and pristine. Which wasn't able to be said for the person resting inside it. She was almost surprised she could recognize him. But she did. Shaun looked just like he had when she'd scrambled down to him that night they'd gone out drinking. All the blood, all the gore, all the sickening, horrible welts and slashes, swollen and fresh, were back.

Blood was thick and black against his skin. He hadn't even been cleaned for the funeral— there wasn't even a wet cloth to mop away any of the mess. He wasn't dressed in a suit, either. He was in
the same shirt and jacket that he'd been in the night they'd dragged him out. They were both rumpled and wrinkled; untucked, and everywhere. His hair was a mess, and she could see that the collar of shirt was overstretched from being yanked so hard.

Her breath caught in her throat as she looked down at her friend's body. The murmurings behind her were louder; the growing volume was hurting her ears by now. They mingled and muddled with all the others, fading in and out of coherence. "...couldn't do anything to help herself..." "He was trying to protect her...it wasn't worth it..." "All he ever did was want to help people." "Why couldn't she have...?" "Useless...not fair..." "He didn't deserve this." The tears kept coming numbly down her face. But as she listened to the murmurings and hisses of anger around her, her eyes widened in horror as she realized that something had changed.

Shaun was bleeding. Actively and profusely, blood was starting to drip and stain him all over again. Down to his shirt, and down further still to dye the padded inside of his casket a blackish-red. She went completely stiff; a trembling hand reached up to cover her mouth in shock. Stupidly, her mind went to the first thing it could, once it got over its initial terror. Blood— still bleeding. Still blood left to lose. Which meant there was still blood left to save!

"Shaun!" she screamed. She threw herself forward and reached out to her friend, her hands flying to his head, to try and staunch the bleeding. A foolish attempt at help, but the only one that came anyway. His blood stained her skin the very second she touched him. As she pressed one hand against his ripped cheek, and her other on the gash above his eye, she could see it crawl its way up her, like it had a mind of its own. It got everywhere— all over her palms, and down to her wrists. She was ignoring it, though. "Stay with me, Shaun, stay with me!" she breathed. She called for help; for Doctor Melendez, for Doctor Glassman. But nobody came.

Her begging spiked in panic, and started to fray with frantic sobbing. She scrabbled in desperation at Shaun's injuries, but the blood just kept coming— thicker and faster. He didn't react at all to her efforts. He was just bleeding out. Far more blood than was possible, or should really be there. It kept coming, slowly pooling in the coffin. She was so over the edge that she wasn't even sure what she was screaming anymore. Maybe she was screaming his name, or maybe she was screaming about how sorry she was, or how much she hadn't meant for any of this to happen. It was all gibberish. All meaningless.

She could have gone like that forever if something hadn't snapped her out of it. If someone hadn't grabbed her. A hand clamped down on her wrist and yanked her so that she was forced to turn around. And she found herself staring right in the face of the man that had done this in the first place. The man that had staggered out of the shadows and had beelined straight for them. She froze when she met his bloodshot stare, and all of her muscles went stiff in alarm. Her breath caught in her throat; she could smell the reek of alcohol just as if she was back in that darkened parking lot. Only this time, Shaun was lying dead in a coffin behind her; he wasn't at her side, to offer comfort and security.

A disgusting smile crawled over the man's face, and he tugged her uncomfortably close. "Hey there," he purred, ignoring her struggles to get away. "You didn' think you could run off and leave me all 'lone, did you?" he asked, the words indistinct and hard to discern. She tried to yank back to herself, but he held her too tight. He reached up, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear and holding her head there with too much force. "Your little friend was in the way, before, but now it looks like he's out of commission." Her tears welled faster, and her breathing hitched with every sharp intake. Her lips trembled with grief. "I have you all to myself, now."

One hand stayed tight on her arm to keep her in place, and the other started to trail from the side of her head, down her neck and her back. Claire was gasping for air, falling into that pit of panic as she
started to break down. She couldn't get free, or get him off of her. Everyone around her was refusing to even glance in her direction. "Useless." "Stupid." "It's her fault. The whole thing is." "She ruined everything." "She deserves it." She was crying and thrashing, struggling to do anything. But she couldn't. Just like before, she couldn't do a single thing.

Only now, she was completely alone.

The man wouldn't let go of her, or lessen his hold. She felt herself being dragged away from Shaun's coffin, for the exit. She tried to dig her heels into a floor that was far too smooth to do so. She forced her head around, to look over her shoulder and see the smallest glimpse of her friend. He was still bleeding out. He was covered in so much blood that by now he would be completely unrecognizable. He was oblivious to the scream of his name. She screeched and cried, begging for help, for forgiveness, for this entire thing to end. For her to be in that coffin instead of Shaun.

She woke up with a gasp, her body spasming in fear. Her eyes were wide, and her pupils were blown out; her breathing was sharp and escalated. She was covered in a cold sweat, and it took her a long time to even realize where he was. She was laying on the ground; she must have been here for a while, judging by the dull ache in her back. She was staring straight up at a ceiling she didn't recognize. She screwed her eyes shut tightly and took in a steadying breath, trying to get it back under control.

Her hands shook as she reached up to press them against her forehead. She got herself into a sitting position, and looked down to realize that she had been stretched out on a blanket. It took a few moments for the lingering fear to leak away from her mind enough to allow herself the realization that had been evading her up until this point. She turned and looked to the side, and her heart skipped a beat when her eyes fell on Shaun. He was sleeping on the other half of the makeshift bed. They'd set it up earlier; they'd put in a movie to watch— she remembered now. It seemed to have run its course a while ago, going off the menu screen on the television. They must have both fallen asleep on accident.

She continued to suck in ragged breath after ragged breath. She swallowed hard and drew her hands through her hair, shaking her head as if it would help to clear away her nightmare. She turned more to Shaun, her stomach clenching at the look on his face. It was peaceful, in his sleep. But it reminded her of the look he'd worn in the coffin, and it brought to mind all the blood, and the people crying over him. The only comfort she could possibly glean from him beside her now was that his stomach was rising and falling steadily. She had to stare at him for nearly a full minute before she was able to feel her heart begin to slow.

He was breathing; he was alive. It was just a nightmare.

As the lingered fear ebbed away, all that was left to replace it was sadness. She flinched and hung her head, turning back front and trying not to let herself cry, because her eyes ached from doing it so much already. She just exhaled slowly, the breath shaking on its way out. She bit down on the inside of her cheek and kept her lips closed, to keep it all in. It was frustrating, and suffocating, to feel this way almost constantly. She found that her dream wasn't all that unfounded. She wished to no end that she was able to scream for everything to end. It was right there, shoving to get out of her throat. She just wouldn't let it.

She was willing to wallow there for as long as it took. Half of her was almost positive that she wouldn't resurface at all, really. It was like she had been treading water in the ocean for four and a half hours, and now she was just too exhausted to keep her head above the waves. But before she could sink all the way, she was suddenly jarred out of her stupor. It was a scream. A loud one that took the silence that had been reigning before it, and smashed it to a million pieces. She leapt out of
her skin as the cry shattered her eardrums. Immediately, she whirled towards the source, her heart hammering all over again.

Shaun was screeching at the top of his lungs. His peaceful expression was gone now, and all that was left was a twisted one of terror. She was absolutely frozen, staring at him with an open mouth. She was too shocked to even move. Some distant part of her was surprised Glassman wasn't sprinting to them at the sound of Shaun's cries, but then she remembered that he'd gone to the hospital to catch up on his work nearly the moment she'd arrived. He wasn't there to worry, or to rush down to wake him up.

She was about to do just that, and force her paralyzed muscles back into motion, when Shaun woke up on his own. His eyes snapped open, and Claire recognized the visceral jerk of fear that lanced down his spine. His breathing was just as haywire as hers had been, and his chest heaved in the effort to try and get as much air as possible into his lungs. For a second he was scrambled and confused, like he couldn't make sense of what was happening.

Claire was still too stunned to speak; her expression was beyond pained as she hovered over her friend. Shaun gasped and shook, blinking faster than he usually did as he picked his head up a fraction off the pillow. After a split moment of panic and floundering, his eyes found hers, and they locked into place. Once they did, he seemed to find the smallest bit of comfort; his shoulders loosened, and his breathing turned ragged, instead of pinched. Claire's mouth opened just a fraction, but the gesture was useless, since nothing came out.

Neither of them said a single word.

The only sound was their elevated breathing, as they stared at one another with twin looks of fear.

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Work was mostly silent, now. Which was good, in a way, because at least this way they could focus exclusively on their patient. A bit of concentration wasn't ever anything bad. Necessarily. There had been silent workdays before—days where things were tenser, or when more things were on the line. Unprompted by Melendez, the entire residential team would pass the day without any sort of conversation unrelated to what was going on. So the silence that was here now wasn't a complete stranger. It was just that this silence was inarguably different. This silence was hostile, and uncomfortable, and a little regretful, too.

Usually, even the toughest of days were still saved by a small exchanged smile, or a mumbled joke here and there. Sometimes Shaun even tried to make Claire smile on particularly difficult days, when it was obvious she was more down than usual. She remembered one night when they'd lost an elderly patient. Shaun had snuck up beside her and politely requested: "Knock-knock." Of course, she'd returned with a "Who's there?" His rebuttal had stood as a simple "Interrupting cow." Before she even got out the full first syllable, already weakening with a grin, he had all but screeched: "MOO!" and Jared had cracked up, likely having been the one to coerce him into the joke in the first place. They'd all broken out into laughter—Shaun included.

Even in situations like that, the silence was easy to break. Because they cared enough to.

Now, it was here to stay. And it had stayed for days. Jared seemed to have given up on her, after the fight they'd had. He'd seemed to take her instructions to heart. Claire felt the responsibility to be the one to speak first like a weight on her chest, but she just couldn't bring herself to. There weren't any words she could think of to make up for what she'd said. So she let the silence continue, knowing it was all her fault.
Currently, they were standing in the ER, waiting for orders, or action, or something in general to happen. Jared was flipping through a patient file. Claire was standing nearby, her arms crossed over her chest and her expression heavy as she studied the floor. They were less than five feet apart, but not even a tiny 'hello' had been offered. They barely even looked at one another. Tension crackled between them like lighting, and she wished there was a way to take it all back and make it better again. But she knew the only way that something like that could possibly happen, would be if their missing piece was there. If Shaun hopped around the corner to deliver yet another corny knock-knock joke to shatter that tension to pieces.

"You guys ready?" The pair looked up at Melendez's voice. He was striding over to them, his hands stuffed into his pockets. Jared smiled in response; Claire just straightened. "We've got a skin graft to get taken care of; should be pretty easy. As long as there are no nasty surprises." He took the patient file Jared had been perusing, and looked over it quickly. "I trust I don't have to give you the run-down?"

Claire jumped to answer. Her voice was smaller than it usually was, and when Melendez looked to her, she shifted her weight from foot to foot. "Thirty-five-year-old burn victim," she murmured. "The injuries are along both arms; on her left it wraps around entirely; on her right, it's only on the anterior side. We're planning to take skin from her outer thighs and lower back to replace it as we find the need." She fell quiet, waiting a little anxiously. Ever since that night in the ER a week and a half ago, Melendez had been shorter with her, and for good reason. She knew she deserved every second glance, and every barbed question that her teacher gave her. She hadn't had another slip-up since then, but all the same. It shouldn't have even happened the once.

Melendez glanced over her for a second after her prepared response, but she was relieved to see his eventual flash of approval. "Exactly." She sagged a little bit, and a tired smile found its way on her face. If Melendez noticed, he didn't call attention to it. "The surgery is scheduled for 12:30. That's two hours from now. We've got rounds to make, but if you guys are going to grab something to eat at any point, do that beforehand. Hopefully sooner rather than later, because we have—" He broke off. His eyes caught on something behind his two residents, and at once, surprise flared across his face. He put the file down, and his shoulders slackened. "Huh." He said this the way a parent might if their child had done something weird and unexpected, but admittedly impressive. Like he was unsure which aspect of it he should be focusing more on.

Claire turned to follow his gaze. She froze at the sight that was waiting for her. But her eyes were quick to light up. Walking down the hallway towards them was Glassman and Shaun, side-by-side. Shaun wasn't wearing his white coat, but he was there all the same. He'd been trailing behind Aaron with a sullen frown on his face, but when the trio turned to look at him, he seemed to liven up. "Good morning, everyone," he chirped, the way he always did. Hearing his typical greeting caused Claire's heart to clench in sheer happiness. He was walking with more care than he usually did. He still seemed tired. But he was back in the hospital; she hadn't been expecting that yet. It was a nice surprise.

"Murphy," Melendez spoke up first. "What're you doing here? Shouldn't you be resting?"

"I wanted to come back," Shaun replied. "I can't return to work yet, but I came with Doctor Glassman, today." Claire's eyes flickered to the older man to see that he was looking at Shaun with the tiniest shred of anxiety. It was clear he wasn't all the way on board with this; Shaun had probably asked too many times, or had gotten too stir-crazy, and he just hadn't had the heart to keep turning him down. But going by the date of Shaun's injury, and how many weeks he had been on the mend, a return to work should be coming just around the corner anyway. It would, of course, be a tentative
return to work, but still.

"That's fantastic!" Claire beamed. Shaun turned to her and grinned. His depressed look was diminishing even more, and it made her own smile grow. "We're so glad to see you back, Shaun. You wouldn't believe how quiet it's been since you've been gone." The entire time that Shaun had been recovering, it had been noticeable. Like there was a gaping hole in the middle of their residential team. He wasn't back yet, to fill it completely. But now that he was here, it hurt a little less.

Glassman was judging Shaun's expression carefully, and as the saddened look he'd walked in with dissipated more and more, he seemed to sink further back into that guilt. This was apparently the deciding factor for him, because he looked back at the others and he gave a small nod. "Alright, then," he exhaled. "I have a couple meetings to attend. A few papers to push, and then we'll both probably be out of your hair." Shaun's smile died. He'd said this like he was a parent dropping their kid off at a babysitter. The tone was even more obvious when he turned to look Shaun's way imploringly. "You're not working, Shaun," he reminded. Claire's eyebrows drew together. "You're just here to say hello, that's it. Don't strain yourself; we're taking small steps."

Shaun was noticeably more deflated. But he nodded all the same. "Yes. I know."

Glassman nodded as well. His stare lingered on the young man for a moment more, before he turned to shoot a pointed look in Melendez's direction. Neil ducked his head a bit; Claire wasn't sure whether or not it was supposed to be a reassurance, or just a gesture of awkwardness. Whatever it was, it seemed to be enough for Aaron; he turned and went back down the hall in the direction they had come. Shaun didn't turn to watch. He was looking at the team, and Claire's heart hurt when she saw his eyes go to the file Melendez was still holding. "Did you say... you were doing a skin graft?" He asked this almost wistfully.

Melendez didn't look like he was sure on what to say. If Claire knew him like she figured she did, he probably wouldn't care at all. Sure, he wouldn't allow Shaun to enter an operating room, but discussing the client would be nothing. Especially if Shaun could help or learn in any way. But it was clear he was hesitating, after the look Glassman had left him with. He opened his mouth to start to say something, but Claire came to the rescue. "Shaun!" she chirped, and he turned to look at her. "Jared and I were just about to go eat, actually. You should come with us." She felt Jared's eyes flicker to her dubiously, but she ignored him.

He hesitated. She knew he'd rather be at least around where the action was taking place. But after a pause, he relented, and gave a small: "Okay."

"No, we're serious, you're a minor celebrity around here," Jared went on, gathering together another scoop of pasta. Claire had gotten a salad, but she wasn't eating much of it. Shaun hadn't ordered anything. "Not a household name, but... a hospital-hold name. I guess." He grinned at the other. "You should hear people when they come up and ask how you've been; it's constant. I'm surprised nobody's pulled you aside for an autograph yet. Or at least a photo." He leaned a little closer. "You didn't hear it from me, but Carly has been sending this card around the hospital for people to sign for you. Last I heard, it was on the children's floor. It's been stuck there for a while."

Claire looked up from her plate, and her eyes snagged on Jared briefly. He glanced at her too, but in sync, they both turned to Shaun instead and put grins on their faces. Jared was doing well in pretending nothing had happened, and Claire was trying her best to do the same. Shaun didn't need to know about the fight they'd had, for multiple reasons. Underneath the initial layer of goofiness Jared had constructed, she could still feel the hurt that he still harbored. But it was going unspoken,
and hopefully Shaun wouldn't notice. So far, he hadn't.

Currently, he was studying the table. At the news, he seemed to warm. "That's nice of her," he managed.

Jared nodded and shoved another forkful of spaghetti into his mouth. Nobody said anything, so Claire instantly paid attention when Shaun's forehead creased just the tiniest bit. He looked up, and the expression on his face was suddenly more confused than anything else. The other two took after the look. "Did I...—?" Shaun cut himself off before the question could run its full course. His bemusement grew. Like someone had slapped a newspaper in front of him with the blaring headline: "Mathematicians Prove It: Two Plus Two Actually Equals Five!" Against herself, and almost to her irritation, Claire felt worry begin to creep under her skin.

"What?" Jared asked. "You'll have to speak up a bit."

But the confusion was already clearing. Shaun frowned, and his tense shoulders began to relax a little bit, only thanks to what looked like conscious effort. "Never mind," he dismissed. "It's not important." And he let it go, like a kid would let go of their balloon just to watch it float away. Which was weird. Because Shaun never let things go. Ever. You could turn around and push his cup off the table for no reason at all, and eight days later he'd probably still eye you warily whenever he was holding another one. And whatever was on his mind, he usually had no qualms with spitting it out right then and there. Claire actually didn't think she'd ever witnessed hearing Shaun say 'Never mind' in the entire time she'd known him.

She was still looking at her friend in concern. Jared took it upon himself to take the reins and steer the conversation in a better direction. "So! Shaun, you've got to tell us how you've been feeling! I haven't been able to see you in a while. You look like you've been getting more sleep. Eating more food— that's good." He tilted his head to the side. "What's it like at Glassman's house? Are you still staying there?" Shaun wilted. He gave a tiny nod. Jared noticed this and oozed sympathy. "Hm. Well, when's he going to let you go back home? Can't be much longer, now."

Shaun shrugged. That depressed look was crawling back over his face. Like clouds being blown in for a storm. "I don't know," he sighed. "I haven't had any more complications. I haven't slipped or fallen. I still exhaust easily, and I can't move quickly. I take medication every day. There are certain precautions I have to take, but I know them, and I'm capable of taking care of myself." He frowned, and added softer: "Doctor Glassman doesn't agree." He didn't say anything more after this. His shoulders were tensing up again. He reached over and fiddled with the napkin dispenser, to straighten it out. Jared watched with a tiny frown.

Claire was hardly listening to the conversation. She was looking at Shaun— at his every detail. The gash on his cheek that had been stitched closed was scarring over. The white line arched adjacent to his cheekbone, and it demanded attention. The gash that had cut over his forehead was fainter in comparison, but it still drew Claire's eyes. The black and blue bruises had faded, and now those that remained were dull yellows and browns. His eye was still ringed darker than everything else. The cut on his lip that had been sealed with glue was barely noticeable, now. Just a tiny red cut that was easier than normal to overlook, given the severity of everything surrounding it.

Subconsciously, she lifted her hand to graze her fingers over her cheek. Her bruise was barely there anymore— it was the smallest of splotches. You had to focus if you wanted to see it. Her face fell. Becoming distracted, she stared at the tabletop for a long stretch of time, before she realized with a start that Shaun was staring at her. He looked a little lost— his eyes were searching her face with a trace of something close to anxiety. She gave him a reassuring smile.

Or, her lips lifted upwards, anyway, but the expression didn't reach her eyes. Before he was given
the chance to say anything to her, she turned back down to her food, pushing and shoving the lettuce around to try and make it appear eaten.

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"What happened then?" Shaun asked, for about the fifth time. Jared sighed a little bit under his breath, but it was a good-natured one. Not one of irritation or annoyance; at this point, they would be horrible for even entertaining such a reaction. Shaun was just feeling left-out. The look on his face as they'd left with Melendez earlier to begin their surgery was like a kid watching everyone else get candy but him. The second they'd come out of the OR he was barraging them with questions. He'd barely stopped to take a breath.

Currently they were heading back from the lab, with feedback on their latest tissue sample. The news was horrible for their other patient: they really did have cancer. However, the delivery of the development was bogged down by the fact that Shaun had trailed after them – since he didn't have anything else to do – and Carly had seen him. She'd been absolutely ecstatic. A smile had blossomed over her face, and she'd rushed out from behind the glass to give him a bracing hug. He'd staggered backwards and flinched. But he hadn't pried her off, so she kept squeezing him and swaying from side to side, saying in a rush how good it was to see him back on his feet and walking around the hospital. She'd flown back to her chair to fetch him the Get-Well card that Jared had said she was working on. There must have been hundreds of names and notes squeezed onto the tiny thing. And most of them had been behind crayon streaks likely left by the kids she'd also given it to. Which explained the delay in delivery.

He was holding the card now close to his chest, but it was clear he was more interested in hearing more about the surgery. Claire turned and gave him a smile over her shoulder. "It really wasn't that interesting, Shaun," she said, hoping to at least lessen the idea that he might have missed out on something. "It was standard stuff. You've done a skin graft before, haven't you?"

He glanced back down at the card in his hands. "I observed one in medical school," he said slowly. "I didn't get to assist." There was a sad ring to his voice that hurt Claire to hear. Even the simplest of surgeries, he just wanted to help with, and because of her, he couldn't. Before Shaun could look up and notice the look on her face, she'd turned back front. They were taking a little bit longer than usual to get back to Melendez. Shaun was walking slower than he usually did, and neither of them had the heart to leave him behind, so they'd just matched his pace.

But it wasn't like the cancer could get worse in the five extra minutes it took to get down the hall.

Jared seemed to sense the discomfort between her and Shaun again, so he chimed in with something that was entirely unhelpful. Per his usual efforts. "And then she flatlined, Shaun!" he gasped, looking at the other with an expression that held far too much fear and panic to be true. Shaun's eyes widened, and he curled into himself more when his friend rounded on him. "And Melendez had to start chest compressions, and he yelled at us to help, but before we could, one of the nurses slipped and cracked her head wide open, and Claire had to hold it together with superglue, and I had to force a cookie down another nurse's mouth because she was going into diabetic shock, and then the ceiling collapsed on us!" He puffed out his cheeks, before he showed his hands in surrender. "It truly was a crazy day," he concluded.

Claire's eyes flashed as she looked at him. Her lips pressed tightly together.

Shaun's startled expression decayed into a more annoyed one. He didn't get annoyed very easily, but Claire relented that Jared had indeed been perfecting his strategies recently to get that exact look on his face. This one was conjured so fast, it must be a new personal record. Really one for the books. "That's not funny, Jared," he mumbled, looking back ahead.
Jared snorted, not at all sorry. "It's true!" he chirped. "Eventually I had to sprint to the lounge and put the cookie in a blender, so I could pour it down her mouth; but I saved her in the nick of time, and she owes me her life."

Shaun scowled. "You can't liquify a cookie."

"You can totally liquify a cookie, Shaun. That's the entire reason the 'purée' setting exists."

"...I don't think so."

"Claire, can you liquify a cookie?" Jared demanded.

She stiffened, more than surprised to be called out directly. It was the first time in ages he'd explicitly joked with her...or told her anything at all, really. Her heart nearly stopped, over the stupid question. Because it was a stupid question—but it such a stupid question, and it was such a stupid conversation in general, that it made her suddenly feel as though it didn't matter Shaun wasn't wearing his uniform with them. It felt like they were all there normally, just doing their work and enjoying being together at the same time. It made her mouth run a little dry. But mostly, it just made her stomach twist into a knot.

She opened her mouth and struggled to get herself together enough to reply. But she was beaten to the punch.

"It's about time!" All three residents turned, quicker because of the reproach that was lacing Melendez's voice. His eyes were narrowed as he walked down the hall to meet them halfway. Claire checked the time and winced. "While you three were goofing off, I was here trying to get some actual work done. Did you get lost on your way back? Do I need to give you a map?" None of them said anything, and his eyes flickered over to Shaun. They flashed, with a kind of emotion Claire couldn't quite discern. "Murphy, if you're going to be a distraction, then I'm going to have to ask you to leave." This was said with a little less anger than the rest of it.

Shaun looked away. Claire's eyes narrowed and even Jared glanced back at their friend guiltily. Taking in all the reactions together, Melendez sucked in a slow breath and shook his head to clear it. "Forget it," he exhaled. "What did the lab have to say, then? What are the results?"

"It's cancer." Claire jumped when Shaun was the one to answer. She waited for him to go on, like he usually did. But he didn't. Maybe it was because he was aware he shouldn't be working, or maybe it was because of something else, but once the two words were out of his mouth, he shut it decisively. He just looked down at his hands. He swallowed, and his eyebrows knitted just a smidge. The expression that came over his face wasn't one he normally ever had. Claire wasn't even sure what it was.

Melendez did a tiny double-take when he was the one to give the report. He looked him up and down, and Claire could see her own confusion reflected in her teacher's stare when the young man just left the explanation there. Perhaps it was too optimistic to say that she could also see her worry. But at the same time, the anxiety she thought she saw for Shaun could very well just be worry for the patient. "Right," Melendez huffed, his hands going up his hips. He turned and looked down a few doors in front of them, where their patient was currently. Maybe they were watching a game show, or they were talking with family. Completely oblivious to the fact that the life as they knew it was about to change.

Melendez looked between Claire and Jared, and he proposed: "Which one of you wants to deliver the bad news?"
It wasn't ever an easy thing to do. Nobody liked to just walk into a room and completely destroy someone's life. But they were doctors, and it came with the territory. Just like suturing, it was a skill they had to perfect and work at. Usually Melendez offered to do all the soul-crushing for them, so when it was asked of them to handle these situations, nobody could ever complain. Jared started to open his mouth to volunteer, but Claire beat him to it. "I will," she said. She was glad to see the approval in Melendez's eyes. Maybe this was the last thing she needed to do to get him to forgive her about that night in the ER.

"Alright, then. The floor's all yours," he said. He hesitated and turned back to Shaun, as if he was just now realizing he was still standing there. Or more likely, just now remembering that he wasn't here to work. "Murphy, you stay out here," he instructed, a little awkwardly. Shaun looked up from his hands, but only briefly. "We need to talk to our patient and iron everything out with them; you don't need to be there for that. Why don't you go and try to find Doctor Glassman?"

Claire grimaced at the dismissal; Shaun had just gotten here, and he was being sent away so easily. But at least Neil wasn't being completely heartless. "I'm glad you're doing better, Shaun," he added, a little softer. "But I need my residents to be focused again. And I need you to focus on getting better, too, so I'm not short a hand anymore. Alright?" Shaun said nothing, but he gave a tiny nod. Melendez mimicked it, satisfied. "Alright," he repeated, focusing on the other two again. "Let's go."

The other two students turned to follow Melendez, not without regret clear on their faces. Claire noticed with a pang that Shaun shivered when they breezed past him and left him alone. She would find him again later. Or when her shift was over, she would go back to Glassman's house again. One way or another, she would make it up to her friend. But now, she had to start thinking of what would be best for her to say to the patient. She had to figure out every single word, so that there were no mistakes, or anything that could come across as unsympathetic.

And she did. She was very skilled at communicating; it was one of her talents that could never be questioned. She was practically known for it. And especially now, she was an expert on putting on a smile and making it seem believable. So when Melendez and Jared hung back a few strides, she put this smile on again, and started to deliver the news as gingerly as possible, after she got through the obligatory politeness that always took place beforehand. "We sent your tissue sample down to the lab," she was going on. "And…unfortunately, it came back positive for colon cancer." The steps of this conversation were playing through her head as she went, and sure enough, the patient's reaction was right on time and just as expected: he was devastated.

Her expression was sympathetic, but her voice remained steady. She could feel Melendez watching the entire interaction with an extreme amount of focus. "But you should know that Saint Bonaventure is armed with equipped of the nation's best—"

"Whoa, whoa, hey!" Claire jerked in surprise at Jared's sudden interruption, and she turned around, confused at first, because she thought he was talking to her. But even when she realized he wasn't, her confusion wasn't cleared at all. He was talking to Shaun. The last of the residents – but very clearly not a resident at this particular moment – was standing in the doorway, one hand holding fast to the wall. He looked like he'd been about to say something, before Jared had cut him off. Likely speaking first only so Melendez didn't immediately kill him. Which was usually a possibility, when it came to the situations Shaun often put him in. "Shaun, you shouldn't be in here," Jared tried, his voice layered in awkwardness. "It's for patients and doctors only; you're not on the clock."

"I—" Shaun sounded frazzled, but he could hardly even get that first sound out before Melendez was drawing the line. And drawing it rather firmly.

"Murphy. Out." His voice was dangerously low, and his expression was dangerously enraged. It
wasn't a secret he had little tolerance for insubordination. Even when Shaun was recovering from the
ordeal that he was, Melendez didn't seem to offer enough slack to let this one slide. He looked back
to the patient, who was more confused now than anything else, and tried to offer a rushed and
embarrassed apology. "I'm sorry, this is just— he's one of my surgical residents, he was supposed to
clock out an hour ago." Claire jolted when she saw that Shaun was staring straight at her, now.
Silently, she begged him to leave. If he needed her, all he had to do was give her five more minutes.
"He never wants to stop working," Melendez was going on. "Shaun," his voice was sharper when
he looked back at him, "you're dismissed. Now."

Melendez flashed a look at Claire, and she got the message loud and clear. Torn between her friend
and his apparent need for her, she hesitated for only a split second. But she snapped herself out of it
and threw Shaun one more look before she turned back to the patient, already smiling sweetly again.
She scrambled to recover. "This just proves our staff is so driven to make sure all our patients are
well taken care of!" she tried to laugh away. "And I can assure you, without a doubt, that your case
isn't going to be an exception to that. We already…"

Jared wasn't listening to the spiel. He was staring at Shaun, slowly stiffening with confusion and
alarm. The other's hands were shaking; the one not gripping fast to the doorway was more
noticeable, at his side. And since when did Shaun cling to things like that, anyway? He had a thing
about touching. He looked down at Shaun's legs and realized his knees were trembling, and
threatening to buckle.

It started to click. He was holding onto the doorway because he had no other choice.

Claire was still talking, but Jared didn't care; he interrupted her. "Doctor Melendez," he murmured.
He bent over at the waist a tad, trying to catch Shaun's gaze. Shaun didn't look at him, but he didn't
need to, for Jared to see what he was looking for. His pupils were dilated. Way too dilated. And
slowly, they were glazing over. "Doctor Melendez," he repeated, louder this time.

At first, Melendez looked as though he was going to bark for Jared to get out right along with Shaun.
That, or introduce his foot to both their backs and just straight up kick them out the door. But the
worry on his resident's face made him reconsider. He followed his gaze back to Shaun; this time he
really looked, putting the patient out of his mind. His eyes flickered over him in entirety, and he
seemed to catch every concern that Jared had. His face fell, and he straightened. Without another
hesitation, he rushed away from the bed. "And…and we can set up an appointment with…" Claire
looked from the now-empty spot her teacher had been standing in, to the patient. She was blanking.

She heard Shaun's voice. It was raspy and barely audible. But it was her name. "Claire, I—" was all
he got out; by the time she'd turned to look back at him, he'd dropped to the floor.

His knees finally buckled and gave way. Like a rock, he started to drop. Thankfully, Melendez had
been fast enough. In the nick of time, he had reached Shaun, and he was able to stoop down and
catch the young man just before he could make painful contact with the floor. The attending's eyes
were wide, and he staggered a little bit when Shaun fell heavy across his arms, unable to catch
himself or distribute his weight. Jared rushed over; Claire was frozen in shock and confusion at the
patient's bedside.

"He's—!" Melendez didn't get a chance to finish. Instead, he broke off and cursed under his breath. It
was hissed and barley-there; the only reason Jared heard it was because he was so close. But it shook
with apprehension and alarm— two things that were hardly ever in Melendez's voice. It came out the
second Shaun's body began to tense and writhe. Melendez had to shift his hold to keep him from
falling out of his arms. "He's seizing!" he snapped, his voice harder, now. "Jared, take your coat off!
Put it on the ground! Get me four milligrams of Lorazepam!"
Jared didn't waste a second. He all but yanked off his coat and paused only long enough to crumple it into a ball and chuck it down on the ground, before he rushed out into the hall. Melendez side-stepped and guided Shaun down to the floor, arranging him so that he was on his side. He made sure his head was cushioned by Jared's coat, and he quickly moved so he could hunch over his youngest resident. Shaun's eyes were half-lidded and glassed over— he was staring ahead, but it was clear he wasn't seeing anything. His arms and legs were twitching out violently, and his back arched like electricity was running up and down his spine. In the back of his throat, noises akin to pain were bottling back in sharp chokes, and every inhale scraped against his trachea.

"He's seizing," Melendez repeated in a rush, more just to be able to feel like he was doing something other than just staring. "We can't let him take any more brain damage than he already has, or hurt himself even more." His voice was tense, but it was calm again, and the calmness was enough to shake Claire out of her terror. She forgot the patient entirely— by now, the poor guy was watching this all unfold in horrified silence. She'd apologize or something later. Now, all she did was run forward and skid down so that she could crouch by her friend, too.

Tense, she started to reach out as if to do something, when she stopped prematurely and just let her arms freeze in midair. Until Jared got back with the Lorazepam, there wasn't much they could do other than keep Shaun on his side, so he didn't suffocate. That, and make sure he didn't hurt himself in his thrashing. So far, his jerking movements were violent, but they were small; his muscles were too tense to allow them to be anything but. His body heaved and curled, with every clenched choke that died in the back of his throat. Saliva was drooling thick out of the corner of his mouth, and as the seconds ticked by, his eyes started to roll back more into his head. His lungs seemed to strain for a deep enough inhale. His hands were clawing blindly at his chest.

Claire's found she had her own difficulty in breathing. Her eyes were quickly blurring over with tears, and she leaned closer, being careful of him, but not knowing what else she could do. "Come on, Shaun..." she breathed, pained as she tried to catch his eyes. As if it would matter if she did. "Come on, don't do this..." Like he could control it. He couldn't control anything, right now. His muscles were spasming, and his back was jerking into awkward S-shapes. His fingers curled into his palms harshly, and there was a frightening gurgling sound that hitched out, every so often. It was a cross between whimpers of pain, and just trying to breathe correctly. Claire ducked her head so that her chin was nearly touching her chest, and she closed her eyes tight, a tidal wave of helplessness slamming into her.

It felt like a tiny eternity before Jared was running back into the room. Before he handed the syringe to Melendez to administer, out of habit. Claire kept her eyes on Shaun, letting Melendez take over as she just tried to make sure he was okay. But it was hard not break down; she hadn't ever anticipated witnessing something that hurt worse than seeing Shaun, when the man had first been bowled off of him. She'd thought seeing him bloody and broken like that was bad enough, but it was nothing compared to this. To how he was jerking and gagging, drool going thick down the side of his face to start a pool on the floor.

She just stared at him, not even able to blink. But slowly, his thrashing began to subside, and ebb. The clenched noises that wormed out of him became less panicked, and died into nothing. The hand clenching tight around her heart began to loosen its grip as Shaun started to relax. A low sigh escaped him, and it seemed to take with it all the tension that had been locking him up. He went entirely limp on the ground. He appeared worn and exhausted, like he'd run seven miles. And before she could even try to see whether or not he was aware, his eyes closed heavily, and he fell unconscious.

Neither Jared nor Claire said anything, at first. They just stared down at their friend with twin looks of shock and worry; they had just finished spending hours with him, and yet they hadn't picked up
on any warning signs, had they been there. Melendez wasn't sidetracked, though; he was immediately moving on, pushing himself up off the floor. "We need to get him out of here," he announced. "We need to get a CT scan, and make sure that didn't do any extra damage, and we need to do it now; come on." Jared rushed up to his feet; Claire was slower. "Jared, you stay with me. Claire, go and find Glassman. He'll rip my head off if he finds out this happened, and nobody told him."

Her stomach plummeted. She started to open her mouth to object, but reluctantly closed it. Instead, her eyes flickered to Jared's, and the two locked gazes for only a heartbeat. It was impossible to read what he was feeling, but she was probably an open book. She looked back at Shaun one last time, her heart tearing to find that once again, she was going to leave him unresponsive on the ground. But she had no choice. She turned quickly and started her search for Glassman, knowing she deserved the punishment of relaying the news.

Claire opened the door of the hospital room, her heart heavy as she walked inside. She was relieved to see that Jared and Melendez were still there, though they looked like they were just on their way out. Shaun was still unconscious, right back in a hospital bed like nothing had changed at all. The initial sight was enough to freeze her heart over entirely. Had something been wrong with the scan? Did he hurt himself during the seizure and she just hadn't noticed? But when Melendez turned to look at her, he sent her a questioning look, not a worried one. She realized what he was asking her, and she quickly cleared her throat. "Doctor Glassman was in a meeting," she said softly. It had taken her ages to realize this; she'd been all around the hospital, searching for him, before she ended up at a dead end. "I...didn't think I should interrupt."

Melendez seemed disappointed. And maybe a little bit frustrated, too. But he sighed and nodded. "I guess not," he relented.

She looked between him and her friend, fearful. "How was the scan?" she asked.

Melendez perked. But he only shook his head. "It was fine," he reassured, watching as Claire sagged. "There was nothing out of the ordinary. Seizures are common after brain surgeries...this was obviously provoked, since he's had no history of them. Hopefully it's just an isolated event. He hasn't been admitted officially, we just requested he be able to stay here until he woke up."

She nodded slowly. She looked at Jared to see that he was staring fixedly at Shaun. If he noticed her glance, he didn't show it. She fidgeted and winced, having to scrounge up the courage to ask softly: "Can I...?" Melendez looked like he already knew what she was going to ask. She pushed herself to go on anyway. "Can I stay with him? I'll only be for a little bit, I won't stay here for very long, and I'll come right back." Her attending sighed and looked away. She weakened. "I got the consent already from Allison like you asked," she tried, referencing their other patient that had been flopping on a procedure for the past two days. "And...it's not a major surgery, I can...I can miss it..."

Melendez was noticeably torn. On one hand, he couldn't let this situation keep interrupting their work like it was. He'd finally just started to believe that things were getting back to normal, before this happened. Now Claire was going to miss work again—and she had been off her game lately anyway. He'd be down a hand, for one thing, but for another, she just wouldn't be carrying out her residency to its full potential. The potential he knew she could have.

But then again, he knew the details, and he knew the strain it was putting on her. He knew they were close friends, and looking at her, he didn't quite have the heart to turn her down. He had asked her explicitly for the consent, and she'd managed to deliver that. Despite his thoughts, his voice was stern when he finally answered. "Only for the length of the procedure." He watched her weaken with
gratitude. "The second we're finished, you're going to come back. I don't care what might be happening. You can't keep letting your work slip. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," she murmured.

He nodded once. He hesitated, and something flickered in the back of his expression, like he wanted to say something more. But whatever it was, he bit it back, and just turned to leave the room. Jared was standing by Shaun's bed still; he was lingering, before he had to leave. When he did start to turn, though, it burst out. "Wait," Claire blustered, before he could make his way for the door. She crumbled, when he turned and looked at her. He was upset— actually upset, this time. She remembered what she'd snapped at him in her fit of anger— how she had blamed him for everything. For herself, that thought was ever-present in her mind. Was it there now, in his, only after she'd put it there? "I'm sorry," she choked out.

He said nothing.

She closed her eyes. "You were right." Her voice was in pieces. "You're right, I blame myself for what happened, and it was just easier to blame you instead, even though you didn't do anything. And I know— some part of me knows it wasn't my fault either, but it's just hard to think that because I was there with him. And it just...it just hurts to see him hurt and know I got off so easy just because he protected me. And I feel like I don't deserve it, so I just...I just wish he hadn't." She looked at him and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Jared," she croaked. "You didn't deserve any of what I said to you that night. You've been handling this much better than I have, so I shouldn't have yelled."

He looked between her and Shaun. That sullen frown was still on his face.

Claire looked at the floor. "You don't have to forgive me, and I would understand, because I've been a mess," she sniffed. "But I wanted to apologize anyway. I'm really sorry. I was horrible to you."

"You were," Jared responded. She winced. But her eyes opened again when she felt arms wrap around her. He'd walked to her and, without warning, pulled her close. She stuttered with a little bit of shock, trying to get something out, but finding that her tongue was failing her. The only thing she could manage, after a heartbeat of getting herself together, was slowly inching her arms up to return the embrace. She hugged him back. Her eyes screwed shut and she took in a sharper-than-normal breath, holding tighter to him as a hand seemed to clench around her heart.

He rubbed her back, and she hated that she felt tears welling in her eyes. Mostly, they were out of frustration. They had just gotten Shaun back, in only a tiny aspect. Maybe not the whole thing, but he was recovering, and he was starting to get back to the way things were. Now, how many steps would this put them back? How much more of this was left to wade through, before they reached the end? Was there even an end? It felt like a nightmare, only, unlike her other one, she couldn't wake up from it.

Melendez let them linger together for a heartbeat, before he once again was forced to draw the line. He called Jared back, and the resident let go of Claire and flashed her a tiny smile. "It'll be fine," he pledged softly. "It's all good." She wiped at her eyes and tried to return the grin; at the very least, she took as much solace from his as she could. She watched him turn and leave, so that she and Shaun were the only people left. She looked back at her friend and her face fell again. For a long moment, she just stood in the silence.

But then she sighed and turned, walking back to the bed. Her movements were robotic and nearly memorized. She grabbed the nearest chair and dragged it over, so it was by the bed's edge. She sat down and nearly crumpled into the cushion. She leaned over so she could put her head down on the mattress, where Shaun wasn't taking up any space. The look on her face was dismal. She felt like she
was stuck in a rut— destined to do these same motions over and over again, for the rest of time. That there was no way out.

She closed her eyes, hoping that if she didn't open them again, then her tears wouldn't be able to fall.

And she just waited.

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She was surprised to realize that she actually began to fall asleep, after a while. It shouldn't have been too much of a shocker, considering how hard sleep had been able to capture recently. She wasn't even really aware that she'd started to nod off. But when she heard the tiniest of mumbles, her groggy mind had to make more of an effort to get itself back into gear. Her eyes pried themselves open, and she hurriedly began to wave away the fog that had just begun to cling to her. Instead, she rubbed at her eyes and cleared her throat. When she was awake enough again to sit back upright, her eyes were already filled with a certain kind of desperation.

He was waking up, slowly but surely. He was wincing, as if he was in pain, as he came back to himself. She gave him a second, even though it was difficult. She was rigid in her chair, and her hands wrung together, but she stayed silent. She waited until Shaun's eyes flickered open and she could see that intelligence falling back into place where it belonged. Only then did she allow herself the tiny fraction of relief. The tiny fraction that ended up making her hunch over entirely and breathe out a heavy exhale.

It was this huff that wrenched Shaun's attention. He blinked and turned his head, the simple motion looking like it took some effort. His expression was still a little bleary, even when it focused on her. But she gave a watery smile when he spoke up all the same. "Hello, Claire," he greeted casually. Like nothing at all was out of the ordinary. 'Oh, hello, Claire, nice weather we're having today, isn't it?' It made her laugh, the ridiculousness of it all. It was a sadder giggle, and her smile turned even waterier. Shaun looked down at himself and pieced the puzzle together. "I…lost consciousness?" he murmured. His voice was fuzzy, and a little disoriented.

"You had a seizure," she corrected. Her voice came out choked.

Shaun blinked a few more times. She could practically see the 'Oh' on his face that he wasn't saying aloud. When he did reply, his voice was even, and unaffected. "Seizures are common…side effects of craniotomies," he reasoned. Claire's smile faded, as she looked away. They weren't in a seminar, or talking about a patient. They were here, in a hospital room, and they were talking about him. She only got stiffer when he continued. "I thought something was wrong…I think…I was trying to tell someone…" He was still a little confused. Claire checked the time to see how long they had been sitting there. She was surprised to see it wasn't nearly as long as she'd thought it had been.

"You tried to tell me," she said, recalling the way he'd stared at her, and how her only thoughts had been for her patient. "You were trying to get my attention and I was focused on something else. I'm…I'm so sorry, Shaun." Shaun didn't seem all that alarmed at first. But when he realized she was starting to cry, a startled look did freeze over his face. She was already rushing on, though. "I'm sorry for— I'm sorry for all of this, Shaun," she gasped. "This whole thing is my fault, if it wasn't for me, you would have been able to do the surgery today, you would have— you wouldn't have had a seizure, you…" She couldn't finish, just grimacing hard.

"You already tried to apologize," Shaun started to fight. "I…told you, you didn't hit me, it wasn't—"

He cringed when Claire interrupted him. She never interrupted him; she knew how much it put him off. But now she was snapping before he had the chance to finish his thought. "I didn't hit you, but I
didn't help you!” she interjected. She hesitated, and thankfully, when she continued, her voice was softer. Strained…but softer. "I didn't help you, Shaun," she pressed. "I didn't have my phone, I parked too far, I…I couldn't get him off of you!" The last few words cracked in half. "And just…to see you still suffering because of it—if I had done so many other things, I could have stopped it, but I didn't, I didn't…"

Shaun tried to force himself to speak up. "You didn't do anything, Claire," he mumbled. "The only person who has fault in this situation is the man that tried to grab you. He wasn't supposed to do that, and he would have known that if he hadn't had so much to drink." He paused to think, and when he saw that Claire was still just as upset, he attempted: "Or…I could be blamed, because I called him a moron, which is what made him attack me in the first place. You didn't call him a moron."

"N-No!" she objected again, and Shaun flinched, wishing she would stop doing that. "Shaun, don't say it's your fault!"

"Why not?" Shaun asked.

"Because it's not, and you shouldn't think it," Claire pressed, wiping at her eyes. "You didn't do anything wrong…you were just protecting me, and you got hurt because of it. I don't want you to blame yourself."

"I don't want you to blame yourself either," Shaun murmured, puzzled. Claire hunched over more. "Why…does it only matter who you want to place the blame on? Why are you automatically right, and I'm wrong?" She stayed mute. "You said you don't want me to have the responsibility because I was protecting you. You tried to protect me, too. You couldn't. But you tried. Does…that fact you were unsuccessful with your attempt automatically make it your fault?"

She grasped at straws, for what to say. "No, that's not…I mean, it wasn't…"

"If I hadn't been able to protect you, and he'd hurt you, would it be my fault?" Shaun demanded.

"That's not the point, Shaun." Her words were flatter. "There were things only I could have done to make the situation different. I could have parked closer—"

"The other lots were all full," Shaun mumbled.

She blanched for a heartbeat. She glanced down at the ground. She took a deep breath and went on, with a tiny shake of the head. "I didn't have my purse with me—I could have called for help, there was the fact that I—"

"I had my phone," Shaun broke through again. Maybe he was just getting back at her for interrupting him in the first place, at this point. He had a surprising knack for revenge when it came down to it. "The phone didn't work. And help wouldn't have come as fast as Jared had, anyway. Ambulances usually take up to eight minutes to arrive. The damage would have already been done."

"Can you stop it, Shaun!?” she burst. He flinched again. She might have stopped to feel bad, if she wasn't coming so undone. "I did things that directly made the situation happen, Shaun, me! They were things that I could have done differently, and I could have helped you with. I could have done so many other things, and you might not be in this hospital bed right now! We could both be out there with Jared and Melendez, and instead we're stuck here."

"You're not stuck," he offered, trying his hand at being helpful. "You can leave, if you want."

She just closed her eyes tightly, and shook her head. "Shaun…” In a 'You-Don't-Get-What-I'm-Saying-At-All' kind of tone.
Silence hung between them for a long moment, until Shaun broke it.

"Are you going to list the fact you're a girl as another reason it's your fault?" Shaun asked. Claire bit down on her lower lip, her expression fracturing with the inquiry. She looked as though she wanted to get something out, but it was far too difficult. Apparently, in that quiet, Shaun found exactly what he was looking for. "Usually when people blame themselves for something, there's a reason. But you didn't do anything. You didn't tell him to hurt me. You didn't tell me to help you...I wanted to help you. I don't feel angry that I had to. Because I didn't have to. I wanted to." This was all stated very simply. She was almost waiting for him to follow it up with a 'Duh.'

Her next words came out in barely more than a whisper. "Why did you help me?" she asked. Shaun seemed surprised. "I mean...why did you go that far? You knew he was going to hurt you...didn't you? Why did you stand in front of me?" She searched his face despairingly. "Why did you take it all?"

He blinked slowly. "Because you're my friend," he replied, so earnestly it made her heart ache.

She looked at him long and hard, until her eyes blurred with tears too much, and she couldn't make him out any more. She smiled sorrowfully. "Yeah..." It wasn't anything more than a whisper. "Yeah, you are my friend..." She remembered how she'd treated him that first day he'd popped up without warning— she was in a rush, yes, and she'd been tense for good reason, but she had been so horrible to him. She'd stopped him short and made a rash judgement. She'd looked at his clasped hands, his stiffer posture, listened to his wavering voice, and she'd told him to leave. Even when he first got onto the team with her and Jared, all she had thought of those first few weeks was that this was weird and most likely a waste of time, since he didn't talk or reply to her at all. It was a horrible thought, and she hadn't told a soul that she'd encountered it at all. But she knew.

And now here they were. Shaun was beaten and bruised and still slowly recovering, from stepping in front of her in a darkened lot and protecting her from someone who could very well have ruined her entire life. Here they were, and the person she had regarded before as a nuisance because he wouldn't answer her questions, was now smiling at her with a level of fondness she never would have thought was possible. Her lower lip quivered, and she took in a shaking breath. "You...saved me, and you're still so hurt, I just wish...you hadn't taken it all, the way you did," she croaked.

"Why would you like it better if you were the one hurt?" he asked.

"Because...because then..." She tried to search for the answer. It was strange. She'd carried the thought with her this entire time, but suddenly she couldn't get out the reasons why she wanted it in the first place. "Because then you wouldn't be," she tried.

"But then I would feel bad for you," Shaun countered.

Claire couldn't scrounge up anything to reply with. She only stared at him heavily, her heart in her throat.

Shaun was actually holding her stare for once. But then his eyes flickered away, and he said softly: "It's your turn."

It took her nearly eight full seconds to realize what he was meaning. The edge of her mouth twitched upwards. In barely the tiniest hint of a smile. It was quick to drop, but it had been there, and it had been sincere. She pursed her lips in thought and looked back down at her lap. Her stomach did another jolting flip, but she forced out a question that had been haunting her anyway. "Do you regret it?" she asked. "Do you regret stepping in front of me? Do you wish you hadn't?"
"No." The answer was instantaneous and strong.

"Will you ever? Do you promise me you'll never hold it against me?"

"That's two questions in a row, it's not fair," Shaun mumbled. Then, after a heartbeat: "…Yes, I promise." And then it was his turn, and he asked solemnly: "Are you going to keep blaming yourself? Even though I told you not to?"

Her chest tightened. "Probably." She couldn't lie. It was one of the rules they'd established. Shaun had a thing about lying. "Maybe for a while. But maybe…" Her eyes flickered to the scar on his cheek. "Maybe one day, when everything is back to normal, I won't think about it as much. Maybe I'll even forget about it. At least once and a while." She hesitated, and, her mind flying back to that night in the ER, she clenched her hands around her knees and dared to ask: "Did it hurt?" Which was a stupidly-obvious question, she knew. But she needed to stop wondering about the answer. All her wonderings were eating her away.

"Yes," Shaun answered. "I've been hit like that before, but never more than once." Her heart sank. "It hurt more afterwards. I can't remember what it felt like when he was hitting me. And I fell unconscious quickly." He was staring thoughtfully up at the ceiling now, "Can you stop looking sad when you think I can't see you?" he asked. "It's getting annoying, and I don't like it."

Her grin decayed almost instantly. She frowned and studied her hands. Her shoulders curled in a bit more. How long had he noticed that? Had he seen all her sorrowful looks this entire time and just never said anything? She tried to figure out what to say – maybe apologize? – but what she ended up landing on was nowhere near sufficient. "That's not really a question, Shaun," she said, knowing this was her response only because she had nothing else to say. Knowing it was because she didn't think she could make that promise. "You have to ask a question—it doesn't count."

He frowned. For a second, he looked like he wanted to argue, and if he did, Claire wouldn't be surprised at all. He had a knack for getting his way, most of the time. She teased him sometimes that he should have become a lawyer. Though the thought of Shaun Murphy on the stand was a frightening one, for a multitude of reasons. But he must have either decided she had a point, or arguing wasn't worth it, because he did double back to ask a new question. "Are you angry with Jared?" Apparently she was just as bad about hiding their fight as she was with hiding her sadness. "You two weren't talking today. Did something happen? Or…did I do something wrong?"

"No, Shaun, no— of course not," she rushed. "Or…well, it was me. It was my fault. I…yelled…I tried to put blame on him, to make myself feel better. It wasn't right of me, and he deserved to be angry. I was horrible to him, just to try and make myself feel better. I told him I didn't want to see him, so…for a while, we didn't really talk. But…I apologized to him earlier, after you…" She shook her head. "I told him I was sorry, and he accepted my apology. It's okay now, I think."

"You were very upset," Shaun noted. Not a question, just a statement.

She wilted. "I was. Because…I don't think I really realized how much I cared about you until now." She said all of this without looking up, but once it was out, she risked a glance at him. "You mean a lot to me. And…even though I feel guilty…I do want to thank you. What you did for me was brave, and I'll always remember it. I can't take away what happened, or make it any better…but I can stay with you, and I can make sure it'll never happen again."

Shaun was silent.

She took in a slow breath. She frowned. "I've been handling this entire thing horribly…and…I think it's just because…practically my entire life, I've had to take care of myself. I've never really had
anyone there for me to stand up to anyone, or take it all for me— I had to do it myself." Even with
the ordeal with Doctor Coyle— all she had wanted was for Jared to switch cases with her, so she
wouldn't have to deal with him; she hadn't even been given that. And he had only intervened later,
when the damage had been done. Shaun, however, had rushed in front of her instantly, without a
second thought. Shaun had immediately leapt to protect her; Jared had only stepped in afterwards.
"Usually I have to get my own way out of a situation…I have to keep my own head above water,
and whenever something happens, it only happens to me. Only I have to face the repercussions…it's
just what's always happened; it's what I've always known."

Her eyes softened. "So I guess…when you took the fall for me…even though I was the one he was
focusing on…I just didn't know what to do with myself." Her lower lip threatened to tremble, so she
took a deep breath to keep herself composed. "I'm very grateful to you, Shaun," she murmured. "For
doing that for me— for caring enough, to. I'm not used to it…and I might keep feeling bad about it
for a while…but that's just because you're the first person who's ever really done something like this
for me." Her eyes were a little misty. Maybe Shaun wouldn't notice. "Thank you," she added again,
because she couldn't ever say it enough.

"You're welcome," Shaun replied neatly.

Her stare turned anxious. A couple moments of silence was allowed to rest between the two before
she broke it with a tinier: "Are you completely miserable?" He blinked at the question. "With missing
work…and I know you don't like Glassman being on you so much, and now he'll probably get even
more worried. If that's even possible." She thought of the way he looked sometimes, when she first
walked into the room and he hadn't noticed her yet. How sad and bored and tired he seemed, either
just sitting there, or trying to sleep just because there was nothing else to do. She always kicked
herself, when she saw him that way, viewing herself as the source of his desolation. So she had to
know, even if it hurt. "Do you hate everything?" she pressed.

Shaun took his time in answering this one. She supposed it was a tougher inquiry. He was back to
looking at the ceiling, and he kept his eyes there, when he finally replied. Maybe it was easier that
way. "Sometimes bad things happen," he began. He picked his words slowly, with an extreme
amount of care. His face was crowded with thought. "I've had a lot of bad things happen to me.
They're sad. And there's nothing you can do about them." Claire grimaced, but Shaun wasn't
through. "But they're always short. They don't last forever. So…when things do change…I'll be
happy, then. I can wait for it."

"You shouldn't have to wait," Claire murmured. "You deserve to be happy now."

"So do you," Shaun returned. "We both do."

Her eyes flashed. Reluctantly, she nodded. "I guess that's true…"

Again, came the quiet. But it felt more like their old kind of quiet. It felt like the comfortable silence
they shared when they were working together— not talking, but just enjoying one another's
presence. It felt like old times— times that Claire missed dearly. It had been forever. Feeling it again
was like walking back into your house after you've been gone on a long vacation. She found a
bittersweet smile tracing its way over her face.

Shaun took his turn again. His voice was quiet and earnest. "Are you going to be okay?"

She was caught off-guard, to realize he was the one worrying about her, when it should be the
opposite. Looking at him, she saw that he was staring at her intently, and her heart squeezed with an
unexpected burst of affection. She grinned, a genuine smile. And the happiness in her voice was
genuine as well when she replied— there was no need for her to fake the emotion. "Yes, Shaun, I'll
be just fine," she promised. And she found that she believed it. She was about to leave it there, but she couldn't possibly; she had to stop and add: "Thanks to you."

Shaun nodded. He didn't say anything more.

But it was Claire's turn. And she couldn't help asking him the same thing. "Are you going to be okay?"

She could practically see Shaun wonder to himself whether or not repeating questions was against the rules. Apparently he concluded that he may as well answer. He drafted a smile on his face that was so assured, she was certain he meant the confidence. "I'm going to be fine," he promised. And she smiled even more when he added for good measure: "We're both going to be fine."

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"Stop it, this isn't what I wanted!" Shaun all but yelled, reaching out as if to grab either Claire or Jared. But by now, it was too far gone. It was all falling apart even faster than Shaun had anticipated. All that was left was to sit there and look upon the mess he had accidentally conjured into being. The only comfort he had was Glassman at his side; the older man was wearing the same look of exasperation on his face that Shaun had had for the past fifteen minutes. Claire and Jared were currently about a millimeter away from killing each other. Shaun was already preparing the funeral arrangements in his head, should the tragedy actually occur.

"I'm telling you, she should have chosen Jeremiah!" Jared snapped, ignoring Shaun completely. Shaun closed his eyes, bending over so that his forehead met the table with a dull 'thunk.' "You cannot sit here and honestly say that Conrad is better for her— he was a jerk, right up until the last page of this stupid series! Jeremiah was always there for Isabel, he always told her how pretty she was— girls love that kind of crap!" Claire groaned and rolled her eyes. Jared opted to ignore it. "He was with her for years, and she just ups and marries this Conrad guy instead for no reason at all—"

"Jeremiah cheated on her!" Claire yelled, picking up the book and waving it in his face. She almost smacked him with it on accident. "Not to mention the fact that once she actually started to date Jeremiah, she realized how immature he was! She was too good for him; Conrad fit better with her! On an emotional level, on an intelligence level—"

"Jeremiah made a mistake!" Jared shouted, mimicking her and shoving his copy of the book in her face. Shaun picked his head up off the table, looking at his friends as if he was in actual physical pain. Glassman was checking his phone. "It was one drunk mistake, and she shouldn't have reacted the way she did. She was way too quick to throw everything away, and she should have at least given him a second chance. Everyone deserves a second chance. And he gave her so many chances, too! He was in love with her for years, and she just ups and marries this Conrad guy instead for no reason at all—"

"Their relationship was toxic!" Claire hissed, smacking the book back down. Shaun cringed at the hard thud it made. "I can't believe I have to explain this to you," she huffed.

"You have to explain it because it doesn't make sense," Jared insisted. "Just admit it: Jeremiah was better for her, the ending to this dumb series was stupid, you shouldn't have picked such a crappy book, and we move on." Claire flung her head back with another groan, again having that near-murderous look on her face. Shaun looked at his own copy sorrowfully, his heart sinking. Again: this wasn't at all what he wanted. "Anyway, I get to pick next book!" Jared declared.

Claire flared at once. "You don't get to name a book, I told you that already!"

He shot her a look. "Oh, like you haven't read Fifty Shades of Grey already."
She gasped. "I resent the accusation! And I don't like your tone!"

"Come on, who else is going to suggest a book?" Jared demanded. "Glassman? He'll pick one from the stone age. It'll be in Latin."

Glassman didn't look up from his phone. He did, however, drawl: "I'll make the reading your obituary, if you don't watch it, Kalu." The threat only made Jared smile, though. On Glassman's face was an obscene amount of patience. He was only here because Shaun had asked him to. Between Shaun finally returning to work, and his own goings-on, it wasn't a secret that the only reason the older man was suffering through this was to spend time with him again. He'd gotten very used to having Shaun around a lot. Once he moved back into his apartment, all the while practically shoving Glassman off of him, the separation was replaced with their usual breakfasts and meetings, and now, with the added bonus of Book Club.

"It's Shaun's turn to pick the book," Claire announced. "It was his idea in the first place, anyway. He should have picked first to begin with." He was just nice, by offering the job to Claire instead. A big mistake that turned out to be, though, when suddenly it had turned into Fight Club over who the main character should have ended up with at the end. "What book do you want to read, Shaun?" she prompted.

Shaun opened his mouth to reply. Jared beat him to it. "Frankenstein!"

Claire stressed: "Book! Naming! Privileges! Gone!" the same moment Shan grumbled: "We are not reading Frankenstein."

"Why not!?" Jared blustered. "It's a good book! I—"

"Aha! You've read it already!" Claire shouted.

He immediately tried to cover his tracks. "I— I mean what I've heard is—" He couldn't keep up the charade. "Oh, come on, everyone's read Frankenstein!"

"I haven't," Shaun offered.

"So how do you know you don't want to read it?" Jared countered.

"That book is horrible," Claire snapped. "You just—"

"Your book was horrible!" Jared interjected. "She should have ended up with—"

"She made the right choice, in picking Conrad!" Claire pressed. "The book ended with a message of —"

"She shouldn't have picked either of them!" Shaun said, reluctantly raising his voice just so he might be heard. "She should have stayed on her— please listen to what I have to— we're not doing this right!" Jared and Claire had leapt out of their chairs, now, to bicker, and Shaun hopped up as well. Glassman finally looked up from his phone and watched Shaun scurry around the table so that he could push in between them. He looked anxious and on-edge, when Claire and Jared just continued yelling around him, but he kept trying to be heard anyway. "We're not doing this right, we— you can only talk when you hold the book! We can only have one book now, everyone else put your book away so— you're not— you're not listening— just— hello?" The tiny greeting came out in a squeak, when it was clear neither of them were paying him mind. "Hello?" he repeated anyway.
"Okay, okay— Book Club! Club! We'll take a vote, that's what a club is for; we're going to vote and then that'll settle the argument," Claire announced. "Everyone raise your hands if you think she should have ended up with Conrad!"

Glassman was looking back down at his phone again.

Shaun started to inch his hand into the air, only to get their attention. "I—"

"Aha!" He stiffened when Claire reached over and put her arm around his shoulders. She smiled brillianty, despite his frazzled expression. "Shaun's on my side."

Shaun blinked fast. "I—"

Jared scoffed. "Of course he's on your side, he's always on your side. And anyway, it doesn't matter that Shaun agrees with you, because Glassman agrees with me, and that just ties the score."

"Shaun counts as two votes," Claire insisted.

"What!? He does not. What kind of democracy is this?"

Glassman shifted to hold his phone in one hand, and he raised the other to join Claire and Shaun, just to get the two to shut up. Jared's face fell when he turned his way, and Claire jumped up and down, still keeping her arm draped loosely over Shaun. Shaun was attempting to figure out the best means of escape from her gentle hold, as she celebrated. "Three to one," she taunted Jared, who was trying to set her on fire, judging by the hot glare he was shooting her. "I win, debate over. Next book."

Glassman let out a slow sigh. "Does there have to be a next book?"

"Alright, c'mon!" Jared plopped back down in his chair. He turned and looked over at Shaun, who was trying to MacGyver his way free of Claire. "Shaun!" He froze at his name, looking more than a little flustered. Jared dramatically slammed his elbow down onto the table. He held his hand up in the air, and he nodded to the seat Shaun had taken before. "Arm wrestle, you and me," he instructed, and Shaun was already shaking his head fast. Jared didn't care, though. "If you beat me, you get to pick the book. If I win, we're reading Frankenstein."

"Jared that's entirely unfair," Claire said, the instant Shaun grumbled again: "We're not reading Frankenstein."

"Beat me in arm wrestling, and you can pick the next book," Jared repeated.

Shaun shot Claire a look so miserable she couldn't help but snort under her breath. "We're not doing this right," he objected again, his tone layered with regret. Her laughter only made him sadder. "We're not," he pressed, and she took her arm back. He straightened, once she did. To everyone gathered, a little louder, he announced: "We're doing this wrong. This isn't how book clubs are supposed to be. We're supposed…to discuss what we read nicely, and—"

"Shaun, get over here and fight me!" Jared waved his hand all around as if to accentuate the instruction.

Shaun's objection died in the back of his throat. His shoulders slumped, and his face fell. He turned and plodded back to his chair and lifted his arm up like Jared had. Glassman was looking up from his phone again now, only to eye the pair with a mixture of amusement and irritation. He didn't object, though. Claire crossed her arms over her chest and leaned out to the side a bit more so she could get a better view. She was almost optimistic enough to think that Shaun could actually put up a good fight.
But the match lasted less than two seconds. As soon as it started, Jared was yanking Shaun's arm down to hit the table with a thud. Immediately Shaun snatched his arm away, scowling indignantly. It went by so fast that one could almost get whiplash. Jared drummed the table in a melody of celebration. "Frankenstein!" he cheered. Glassman looked back down at his phone. Jared started chanting it, so there was no way of avoiding the triumph and what it meant. "Frankenstein! Frankenstein! Frankenstein!" "Frankenstein! Frankenstein!"

Shaun looked to Claire, his expression bland. "I don't like Book Club," he declared.

A smile cracked again over her face. "I'm sorry, Shaun," she giggled, in amusement and actual sympathy. "But I think you're stuck with it, now." Her giggle fit only worsened when this brought to his face a look of absolute disgust; he looked between her and Jared like he'd never seen them before — or like he wished he had never seen them before. She took her seat again, still laughing. Shaun started to melt, most likely against himself — her laughter was infectious. At first he tried to shoot her a reproachful glower, but it fell apart. It started by the simple cracking of a grin, but before too long he was stifling a little bit of laughter of his own.

When the smile broke out over his face, it accentuated the thin white line that still arched across his cheek. It was barely there anymore — a nearly invisible reminder of a night all three of them were trying their best to forget. And they were forgetting. As the weeks turned into months, and as Shaun fell seamlessly back into his job, falling right back in step with them, it was easier every day. Shaun's bruises were gone, and his sharp wit was back. He flinched a little easier nowadays, and they most certainly had not gone to any bars together since Jared's birthday. But they never talked about that night. Claire thought of it less and less.

It only brought itself to her mind at times like these, when Shaun would smile bigger than he usually did, and that scar would flash with the pulling of his skin. Then her eyes would catch on it and zero in. It was the last of his injuries to remain; likely, it would be there for a very long time, if not forever. It would demand her attention whenever he grinned wide, or sometimes if the lighting was just right in a room, it would stick out there, too. But whenever she did see the scar, she didn't feel that old, white-hot guilt she used to always wallow in. And she didn't feel it now, either.

Her smile just grew, and her expression softened. She watched Shaun turn back to Glassman and ask what book he wanted to read (to which he said he wanted to read Wuthering Heights and Jared threatened to climb up to the roof and jump), and she found her heart warming with an unbelievable amount of affection. That was all she felt now, when she had to remember. The other feelings were there — the fear, the regret, the sorrow, the panic — but they were much farther away, and they grew weaker and weaker with every recollection. The more days passed, the easier it was to realize.

She was grateful for what had happened, not guilty. Relieved, not regretful.

There were a lot of things that could have changed that night, but there was no use in entertaining them. They were already all healing. And there might be one or two injuries that had turned to scars, and would still be there in the faintest of traces. Still moments where Shaun cringed more violently, or when he eyed strangers on the street with a new degree of wariness. But they were living with it. They were stronger for it. She knew this to be a fact, and it was why she smiled so big when Jared offered Shaun twenty dollars if they could read Frankenstein, and Shaun declared that bribery didn't work on him.

It had been a long and scary moment in time. Some parts of it she thought would never end. But Shaun had been right. It was only a moment. A small blip, and now they were leaving it behind them.

"What about this?" she asked, piping up. Everyone turned to her, and she shrugged. "We read To
Kill a Mockingbird."

Jared shook his head. "Shaun's already read that one."

"Yeah, but it's his favorite," Claire remembered. She gave her friend a tender smile. "We should read it. It'd be nice."

Shaun perked, appearing hesitant at first. But after a heartbeat he smiled with his own sense of gratitude.

His scar flashed again.

She only smiled brighter against it.

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