

# NEVER COULD



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He shouldn't be late. Shane had plenty of time to kill before meeting his fiancée at the hospital. He winced. 'Kill' wouldn't be a good word right then. Of course, there wouldn't be anything wrong, he reaffirmed. Abby's tests results no doubt came back perfectly normal. All the worrying would be for nothing. The late nights comforting her as she was ravaged by nausea and numbness seeping into her fingers... no. There was nothing wrong. Shane repeated his daily mantra to himself as he walked through the downtown, late afternoon crowd.

A business woman in a maroon dress suit glanced at him as she marched in her high heels. He smiled, mostly to himself. He supposed she found him attractive, most women did. But since falling in love with Abby, he didn't notice the innocent flirting anymore. Well, that wasn't entirely true. He was a warm blooded male after all. He had noticed the fluttering lashes, blushing cheeks and sudden nervousness. He just didn't care anymore. This thought used to be comforting to him, he relished in the certainty of their relationship. Until two months ago when she fell down and complained she couldn't feel her left leg and he had to carry her up the stairs because -

No. There was nothing wrong with Abby. She would go back to being the exuberant woman she had always been, her love for life spilling out of her pores. The numbness in her fingers would go away and she would flip back her short, black hair in mock exasperation whenever his teasing would get out of hand. She'd caress his face and remind him how he looked like Judd Nelson. He would tell her how silly she was, he didn't look a thing like him. Shane was blond for starters. She would shrug, touch his lips and say, *"You have the same dangerous smile."* All of this would happen

soon, he was sure of that. As sure as he was, there was nothing wrong with Abby.

The ER doctor, two months ago, disagreed with Shane. Naturally. He mostly argued with the doctor because of the clear difference in their ages. He felt a smug arrogance that he was in his thirties and obviously this doctor who was in his twenties couldn't possibly know more than Shane did. He rebuked every possibility that was being thrown at him - Parkinson's, Lou Gehrig's, Huntington's, Multiple Sclerosis, viral infection, pinched nerve.

Abby didn't say a word. She lowered her head, bit her lip and twisted her fingers, over and around and under. There wasn't really much more they could do. The MRI would reveal all mysteries, then they would have to wait for the appointment with the appropriate specialist.

Worst of all, the young doctor, whom Shane strongly suspected hadn't begun to shave yet, chastised them for not coming to the ER sooner. As if he hadn't tried! He spent a solid week trying to convince her to see a doctor, *any* doctor. She kept saying, it'll go away, it went away before. Before? Six months previous her feet went numb, but it went away. The thing was, this time, it wasn't going away. He wasn't sure what upset him more - the fact she never told him or the fact she'd been sick before.

The cab ride from the ER back to their house was not filled with awkward silence. Instead, he asked all the wrong questions. What are you thinking? What are you feeling? How are you feeling right now? Why aren't you saying anything? She lashed out at him, screaming and ranting that she couldn't tell him her feelings because he could never understand. There was nothing wrong with *him*. *He* didn't have any health problems, *he* didn't wake up one morning feeling like the entire world was going to come crashing down on him at any moment. *"Then explain it to me!"* he yelled back at her. Abby violently crossed her arms and spoke through clenched teeth, *"You never could understand."*

They didn't sleep in the same bed that night. She insisted on sleeping in the rec room, claiming the couch is somehow more comfortable - more comfortable than sleeping in his arms. He checked on her four times during the night, only to find her fast asleep. Except the fourth time, but that was his own fault. They had been together for ten years, shared a home for eight. He missed her. He bent down to gently kiss her forehead and she awoke. He felt a sleeping beauty should look far less menacing. She soon closed her eyes and rolled back to sleep, but not before whispering two words, *"Never could."*

Shane suddenly jumped sideways, cursing under his breath as the bitter memories faded from his mind. The late autumn sky had darkened enough for the jumping beetles to crowd around the store lights. He wasn't a nervous person but he had always hated those beetles. At least he called them beetles. He actually had no idea what they were. Insects of some kind, at least two inches long and able to jump backward six inches in the air. He still hated them. He hated how they looked so disturbingly prehistoric, like miniature monsters that didn't belong here in this place, in this time. They should be banned from his realm by some magical wizard with a long beard and Shane, in white armor by his side, flashing his long sword. He shook his head, shoved his hands in his pockets and walked on the other side of the pavement, far from those *things*. His mind was going to strange places today, he concluded.

It was getting darker and colder, the wind was mean and bitter against his cheeks. He lowered his head against the gusting cold air, wishing for the billionth time they had taken a winter vacation in Italy. Or Barbados. Or Florida. He hadn't been to any of those places and neither had Abby, though they had planned to do so on their honeymoon. He chuckled quietly to himself as the wind lashed against his skin. It was ironic they'd already made plans for the honeymoon, yet still hadn't set a date for the wedding. They hadn't been procrastinating exactly, but between his administrative job at a law firm and her new job managing a music store, well, they just hadn't gotten around to it yet.

Shane was slightly bothered that Abby always had a new job. He tried not to be judgmental and he wasn't really, but he would let a hint or two slip into their everyday conversations. Of course, just because he had a chosen career didn't mean she had to, as she would frequently remind him. He suggested being the bread winner in the relationship once, but that was not met with enthusiasm. It was one of their first arguments, in the early days of their engagement. *"I'm too stubborn to be that kind of wife,"* she told him. He agreed. If he wanted that kind of simpering female to spend the rest of his life with, there were plenty to choose from. But Shane chose Abby and it's for a very good reason.

He pushed up the sleeve of his wool jacket and glanced at his watch. He definitely wasn't going to be late, he had plenty of time to spare. Too much time. He suddenly changed direction and jogged lightly down the stairs leading to an underground mall. Low ceiling and dim lighting, he took his time wandering through the narrow passage way. He lingered in front of a small jewelry store, deliberating.

He felt guilty she still didn't have an engagement ring. Abby had quickly dismissed the whole idea. Understandable considering she really wasn't one for flashy jewelry. He stared at a particular ring through the display, with a sizable, glittering diamond. He smiled ruefully. *"If you get me one of those rings with a great, big rock, I'll smack you silly,"* she told him once. What was so wrong with diamonds, he wondered, weren't they suppose to be a girl's best friend? Well, not for Abby. She said they're for frivolous females. He didn't know why he was staring at the diamond, he already had plans to buy a ring with opals. He looked away with a sigh and continued walking.

They were complete opposites, Shane and Abby. Champagne and beer. It wasn't like he purposefully chose a career that made more money than she did, the career was chosen before they met. He felt she treated him like he was flaunting his success, though he also felt that was absurd. He wasn't a lawyer, he just did administrative work for lawyers. But apparently that was exactly why he wasn't allowed to spend his money on her.

And why not, he asked himself bitterly. She wouldn't even allow him to buy them a car, they were always taking cabs or walking. Why couldn't he spend the rewards of his hard work on the woman he was going to spend the rest of his life with? Because she was too stubborn, too resolute in her independent ways. Maybe... too stubborn for marriage. This was not a new thought, Shane just hadn't dared to say it out loud and certainly not to Abby.

Chocolate, now here was an entirely different matter. He walked into the candy store, regarding the foil boxes and colorful, plastic bags with an appraising eye. Chocolate was Abby's weak spot, an addiction she could never deny. He once teased her lightly that she may want to think about having more vegetables in her diet. He almost laughed aloud when he recalled how fervently she argued that chocolate *is* a vegetable. He chose a small box of Belgian chocolates, just ten pieces, nothing too flamboyant. He made the purchase casually then slid the small box into the inside pocket of his wool jacket.

Emerging from the tunnel, he was a little surprised by the even darker sky. He decided to pick up his pace. Something was fluttering frantically on the ground, he cringed as he neared, trying not to look too closely at what he assumed to be another prehistoric monster. It wasn't a monster, it was a bird. He stopped and took a closer look, the rush hour crowd glaring angrily as they made a big show of having to walk around him. A tiny sparrow, seemingly glued to the ground by some invisible force, beating its' wings faster than he thought would be possible, it's tiny feet obviously broken. They

can't fly unless they can pick up their feet.

*"I can't climb the stairs if I can't even pick up my left foot,"* Abby cried. He frowned at the two month old memory and at the tiny bird as he crouched down and stared. The bird was showing no sign of giving up, the wings beating furiously, the eyes widening as he slowly moved his hand. Black, terrified, small eyes, just like Abby's eyes had been, lying there at the bottom of the stairs. Was that it? He wondered. She never did tell him her thoughts, only silently cried as he carefully picked her up. Was she scared?

No, he thought, that's not the right word. This was Abby, after all. The woman who convinced him they could buy a house before getting married, the woman who had approached him first at a party, the woman who kissed him before he had the chance to ask for her phone number. The bird stopped beating its wings for a second, glared with one black eye then the resumed beating its wings even harder. No, scared wasn't the right word at all. She was fighting to take flight, run away from her feelings. Well, one feeling that he could now see clearly in the one small, black eye – shame.

"But that's ridiculous!" Shane shouted. He looked around agitatedly, realizing he had spoken out loud when he hadn't meant to. The uncaring rush hour crowd whizzed past him as if he wasn't there and the bird wasn't there, because nothing was there. Of course, there wasn't anything there, nothing amiss, nothing different or abnormal, because. Because. There was nothing wrong with Abby.

He leaned toward the other side of the sidewalk, reaching for a fallen autumn leaf. Anger seethed under his breath as his hand nearly missed several oblivious shoes. Couldn't they see what was going on here? The bird was broken on the cement, the bird needed help. His anger built. What was wrong with them?! What was wrong with all these blind people?!

What was wrong with him?

His anger whooshed out of his chest. Deflated, defeated, he grabbed a browned leaf with his fingertips and brought it over to the bird. He moved the leaf toward the bird, cautiously, slowly, whispering soothing words. He briefly worried about the germs birds can carry but dismissed the thought and gently coaxed the frantic critter onto the leaf. The passing crowd began to thin and somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he should take the fact rush hour was ending very seriously. The bird wobbled forward. He worried the leaf would crumble under the sudden weight, but it didn't. He slid the leaf with its passenger across the sidewalk and onto the yellowing grass.

Shane rose to his feet, watching the bird. The wings had stopped moving, the rapid breathing was slowing down. There was nothing else he could do. He couldn't very well take the bird with him, nor could he possibly interfere. This was a natural occurrence. Wild animals were injured all the time, nature would take its course. It wasn't in his power to do anything. He slid his hands into his pockets and walked away.

He looked up at the sky and saw it was black. Shane cursed. He hadn't been late, but now he was. The appointment with the specialist was probably already over. No doubt Abby was waiting in the lobby, fuming and preparing to unleash her anger. He felt incredibly stupid. He even left work early for this. He swore to her he'd be there every step of the way, holding her hand, numb or not.

He straightened his back and walked faster, his anger renewing. He had offered to meet at the music store, and they would walk to the hospital together. Sure, he didn't have a shining, white steed and a flashing sword to kill every prehistoric fear that stood in her way. Yet he could at least pay for a cab. But no, she insisted on simply meeting him at the hospital, insisted on walking and not taking a cab. Insisted... on being alone.

Shane stormed into the hospital, fully prepared to match her anger with his own. He had had plenty of practice in the last two months. Their arguments of frustration had finely honed his debating skills, so this would be nothing new to him. Regardless if she would understand about the bird or not, he decided not tell her. He weighed several options in his mind. They held him up at work. There was a last minute business meeting. There was a terrible accident and the streets were blocked, forcing him to walk around. Then he would soothe her, she would calm down begrudgingly and he would take her home in a cab. He took the elevator to the fifth floor.

The elevator was too slow, he tapped his foot impatiently. Would he take her home? Would she even allow it? Being late for this all too important appointment really was unforgivable. Would this be the breaking point their relationship had been heading for during the past two months? Well, maybe, but not quite so soon. He would just have to keep saying he loves her until the storm passed. And he would mean it because he did love her. And she loved him. Yes, he thought, calming down considerably as the doors slid open, that was more than enough. He walked out and pushed through another door.

Abby was sitting in the waiting room, quiet and too still, like a crumbled leaf. A million questions sprung in his mind as he slowly walked forward and studied her face before she looked up and saw

him. He didn't have long, she looked up. A shell-shocked face, eyes that should had been a sparkling brownish black, now tinted red. A much used tissue in her hands, her fingers twisting the unraveling fragile paper, over and around and under. Like his heart. In that moment, all questions vanished. He just knew.

She watched him suspiciously as he crouched down and gently took one of her shaky, cold hands. More than likely her numb fingers couldn't really feel his caresses. He searched her eyes and her bottom lip trembled. He removed the small box from the inside pocket and tentatively placed it on her lap. She frowned as if she didn't recognize what was lying in front of her. Then, slowly, she smiled. A smile that said, well it's no flashing sword but it'll do. She looked up, raised her eyebrows at the same moment she took in a deep breath, willing the emotional pain to bury itself deep inside.

"Ready to go home?" he asked quietly.

She bit her quaking lip hard. "Are you?"

No, he thought to himself, not ready at all to make the necessary preparations. To move her to the main floor so she wouldn't have to climb the stairs, enlarging the front door so the future wheelchair could fit through, going grocery shopping by himself so he could get food that was easier for her to chew, but. But. She didn't need that now, didn't even want it. No one was ever ready, maybe he never could be, just as she promised. Yet he vowed to spend the rest of his life trying. He smiled warmly and she smiled back.

As far as he was concerned, no matter what could happen, she was still the same woman he fell in love with. And there never could be anything wrong with his Abby.