

Waiting Room

By Elizabeth van Oorschot

The waiting room in a hospital. The lighting is harsh. Alex sits alone on a chair, visibly fidgeting. He glances up, thinking he's seen someone, realizes it's nothing, then looks back down. More fidgeting. Alex checks his phone, fiddles with it for a moment, then puts it back in his pocket.

Mark enters. Alex glances up and sees him. He stops fidgeting and starts staring at his feet.

Marks walks over to the chair beside Alex cautiously, and stops. He glances at Alex, who is avoiding eye contact.

MARK: Is, uh, *(clears throat)* anyone sitting here?

ALEX: *(Without looking up)* No.

MARK: Can I? *(Gestures at the chair)*

ALEX: Sure. *(Shrugging and looking away)*

(Beat)

MARK: So, any news?

ALEX: No. She's still in there. Since yesterday.

MARK: Oh. *(Nodding to himself)* I was at work. That's why I'm—I came as soon as I could.

ALEX: Yeah

(Beat)

MARK: Your, uh, your mom mentioned you might be here.

ALEX: Of course I am.

MARK: You know, she'd be happy you came. She misses having you around the house. I, uh— She really misses having you around.

ALEX: *(Searching Mark's face, as if waiting for him to say something more, then)* I know. She said that when I talked to her yesterday. *(Pointedly)* When they first admitted her.

MARK: How was she?

ALEX: Not great. *(It's clearly worse than he's saying)* The doctor said she's been exerting herself too much at home. That she shouldn't be home alone so much.

MARK: That's what I'm saying! She misses having you around. The last time we were all together must have been Christmas, when you brought your friend. I know Christmas didn't go perfectly, but your mom was so happy to meet, uh...

ALEX: *(Letting Mark flounder for a moment, then, resigned)* Matthew. *(Sarcastically)* My friend, Matthew.

MARK: *(Uncomfortable)* Right. Well, she's always happy to see you. *(Hesitation, then with trepidation)* We're always happy to have you home.

ALEX: I was there a couple weeks ago.

MARK: Oh. Your mom— she didn't mention that. I didn't know you came by.

ALEX: You were out. *(Resentfully)* Work, probably.

MARK: I—Yeah, I had a conference on the West coast. Things are busy this time of year. *(Beat, then, trying for casual)* Any reason for the visit?

ALEX: It was reading week. *(Pauses, trying to decide whether or not to continue)* Matthew wanted to see the city, so we took the train in.

MARK: Oh! *(Hesitant, but encouraging)* You guys are still... You guys...

Alex rolls his eyes.

ALEX: Whatever.

MARK: No, no that's great! I'm happy for you— you guys.

ALEX: Uh, yeah. Thanks.

(Long beat)

MARK: So, do you know when I'll be able to go in and see her?

ALEX: No. She's in surgery right now. They'll let us know when it's done.

MARK: *(Shocked)* Surgery? Oh. I didn't—

ALEX: Sorry. Thought you knew.

MARK: (*Uncomfortable*) I mean, she's always been dramatic. I just thought— I didn't think that she...

(*Annoyed, Alex looks away. Beat*)

MARK: So it's like a routine-type surgery?

ALEX: No. (*Rushed*) I mean, I don't know.

MARK: Oh. (*Trying to lighten the mood*) You know, when I was around your age, your grandfather landed himself in the hospital. An accident at work. It was touch and go for a bit; x-rays and surgery and the like, but after a couple weeks he was good as new. Strong as an ox, he was.

ALEX: Were you... scared?

MARK: No! Of course not, I knew my old man would pull through. I knew—

ALEX: (*Exasperated*) You're allowed to say you were scared.

MARK: Well, what I mean is—

ALEX: No, no you're right. I'm sorry; I forgot (*imitating Mark*) Whittaker men don't get scared.

MARK: (*Earnestly*) It was your grandfather who taught me that. That's what I mean, how I knew he'd be fine after the accident. (*Pauses for a reaction from Alex. When he doesn't get one, Mark continues*) He was the best guy I ever met; taught me to be the man I am today. He always said, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. It's just like wood glue— (*excitedly*) You know, the joint with the glue is actually stronger than the wood itself. Isn't that crazy? (*Mark remembers the point he was trying to make*) But, that's what I mean, you shouldn't be scared, because going through tough stuff is what makes you stronger. (*Pauses again for a reaction from Alex. Once again, Alex does not respond*) That's why he taught me how to throw a punch— and how to take one. Where do you think I learned all the stuff I've shown you, huh? Measure once, cut twice. (*Mark nudges Alex like it's an inside joke*) How to grill a proper steak. (*Beat.*) You know, real father-son lessons.

ALEX: Yeah.

MARK: Hey—

ALEX: You know what, *Dad*? If you're so good at "grilling a proper steak," how come Mom does all the cooking? Even on days she can barely stand.

MARK: Well, I—

ALEX: No. I'm not done. You know, the only time I actually had to "take a punch" is when you were teaching me to throw one. And I don't actually care how much stronger wood glue is. It—that doesn't matter! Oh, and was it also your dad who taught you we can't turn the thermostat above, like, 18 degrees? Which I don't get why you should have a say in, considering you're not even home half the time.

MARK: Alexander! (*Alex flinches. Seeing this, Mark makes a point of taking a deep breath and composing himself*) Alex. That's not fair. I know I wasn't always around when you were younger, but I've told you, it took a lot of work to get things off the ground when I was starting out.

ALEX: Okay. (*Beat.*) What's your excuse now?

MARK: I— (*Mark frowns and looks down, unsure what to say.*) It's been hard at home, with your mom how she is.

ALEX: You mean sick.

MARK: Right. Well, regardless, it's been hard. With her home all the time, and I need to get work done, and, you know, there's looking after her.

ALEX: (*Without conviction*) You could take time off.

MARK: (*Dismissive*) Someone has to keep the roof over our heads. Which is why it would be nice if you were around more, to help your mother. I was thinking, you could take a semester off, or maybe a year, just till this all clears up. Now, I know you probably—

ALEX: I have.

MARK: What?

ALEX: I've already taken the semester off. That's how I'm here right now.

MARK: (*Taken aback*) Oh. Are you— are you sure? I mean, have you thought this through properly?

ALEX: Yeah. I talked to Mom. (*Debating whether or not to continue*) And Matthew helped me figure it out.

MARK: So Matthew's the reason you dropped out of school.

ALEX: What? I didn't drop out, I'm taking a semester off. And you're the one who just suggested I do the same thing.

MARK: I suggested you *consider* taking time off to help look after your mom. Not to go off (*searching for the word*) gallivanting with your— with Matthew.

ALEX: I can't believe you.

MARK: You can come to me for advice on this kind of thing. I remember what it's like being young. I'm sure Matthew's a lovely guy but—

ALEX: So it's because I went to him for advice, not you.

MARK: *(Defensively)* This isn't about Matthew. It's about us.

ALEX: *(Shrugging)* Okay.

(Beat)

MARK: Your mother wouldn't want us to be fighting right now.

ALEX: Okay.

MARK: So we should—

ALEX: I said, okay.

Mark starts to say something. He is cut off by Alex.

ALEX: What is it you always told me? "We can talk about it later."

MARK: *(Looking away)* Right.

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