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Two Hearts for One // Alexandra Hunt

She entered the operating room and nodded to her nurses that she was ready. Her patient was an older gentleman with a heart condition previous doctors had not been able to diagnose. With steady hands, she sliced open his chest and exposed his thumping heart. As Dr. Shea manipulated the heart, she detected an abnormality on the lateral side. It was a door with a handle. Startled, Dr. Shea peered closer, allowing her body to block the nurses from her view. She had read about such strange findings in old textbooks that had retired to dusty corners of medical libraries and groaned when opened. Slowly, she lifted her head and looked one of the nurses straight in the eye.

"Clear the room," she said, slow with hesitation.

The nurse frowned at her request. Dr. Shea drew to her full height and spoke with much more certainty.

"I said, clear the room," her voice rang out.

The nurses scuffled out of the room and Dr. Shea turned back to the door in the heart. Gently, she rapped on it with the back of her scalpel. Within moments, the door had flung open. An older woman filled the doorway, her hair wild, unruly, and an angry red. She eyed the surgeon suspiciously.

The surgeon's face twisted with surprise.

"I'm-uh-I'm Dr. Shea. Mr. Austin has been having a heart problem; I am trying to find the cause of it. Do you have any idea what that might be?"

The little lady crossed her arms defensively, but she leaned against the door as if defeated.

"He gave it to me," she almost whispered. "He gave it to me, and then he took it away. It was always supposed to be mine."

"What did he give you?"

She shot the surgeon a look, annoyed that she had to be so explicit.

"His heart, of course. I've been taking care of it since he married me."

"Oh, how long were you married?"

"For thirty years. But then he left."

The little lady swallowed hard and ducked her head. Dr. Shea's eyebrows raised as she realized the situation. Rearranging her arms, Dr. Shea leaned in closer to the operating table as the

heart keeper began to talk.

She spoke then, of how long and how hard she had loved him.

"It was wonderful at first, of course. It always is. But slowly, I noticed Tyler looking at me differently. And then he just stopped looking at all. I had moved into his heart on our wedding day. I've maintained its upkeep the best way I know how. It just wasn't enough."

By now, the heart keeper was sitting in the doorway to Ty's heart and was crying. Slowly, gently, Dr. Shea began to talk about Tyler's heart condition.

"From what I have noted of Mr. Austin's heart condition, he appears to be experiencing the same symptoms as he would with a parasite. This occurs when the body detects a foreign substance as an invader. The body then works to push out the foreign substance. I believe his body is no longer recognizing you as its own."

"What does this mean?" the heart keeper cried, desperation riddled in her voice.

"This means," Dr. Shea said gently, "that you are hurting Mr. Austin as long as you insist upon residence in his heart. His body is fighting to rid itself of you. If you don't leave, his condition will only worsen. I know you love him; I am sure you do not want to hurt him."

Dry-eyed, the little woman nodded. She stood up and set her jaw.

"I'll get my things then."

"There is one thing I have failed to mention," Dr. Shea cleared her throat. "I have read about such cases in the past. When a heart keeper takes up residence in a heart, the heart develops a dependency upon the heart keeper. While the heart is no longer recognizing you as its own, you still must leave a piece of yourself behind in order for the heart to survive."

The heart keeper looked up, confusion sprinkling across her face.

"But won't his body reject that too?"

"The piece that you leave should be small enough for the heart to live with."

The heart keeper looked down at her hands.

“But which piece am I supposed to leave?”

The doctor’s eyes glimmered with sympathetic tears.

“I think you know.”

The heart keeper swallowed and walked inside, shutting the door to the heart. Dr. Shea moved a respectable distance from the table. After a stretch of time, she returned to Mr. Austin’s side. Little footprints spattered across his chest and down his arm. The heart keeper’s own trail of tears.

Dr. Shea stitched him back up.

Later, doctors would come to Dr. Shea and ask if she had figured out what was wrong with Tyler Austin. She keeps with her a copy of his EKG report taken after the surgery for these times. She shows it to them and asks what they see. Always frowning, they peer at it and claim they see nothing wrong. Look closer, Dr. Shea tells them. Most frown at her and walk away, muttering about who they let into medical school these days. Some examine the paper every which way, yet complain they still see nothing. But there are a select few take only a few moments to survey the report and look up without saying anything. These are the ones who have seen it. These are the ones who have seen Tyler’s heartbeat and its accompaniment. These are the ones who have seen her heart beating next to his.