

Haley Fedor

## The Castle

It was taking her husband weeks to die, but she didn't feel any different. Just miles of medical supplies and more waiting around. Alana sipped at a warm beer, not caring that it was barely past noon. The warm fizz and full feeling were her reward for being up since dawn, cleaning. She was always cleaning. Garen couldn't help it; the end of life was a messy thing.

Coughing from their bedroom announced that he was awake.

Alana filled a glass at the sink and went down the hallway to their room to give it to him. Some days he would get out of bed, sit in his armchair or at his desk. Today didn't look like one of those days.

His tan hands grabbed the sheets on either side, as if to hold himself down while he coughed.

"Doing okay, Garen?" She asked.

He couldn't answer. Alana walked over to his bedside and sat down in her chair, now a permanent installation. She waited patiently for him to finish coughing, as he screwed his eyes shut in the effort of it. When he opened them, his gray eyes were watery and wide, like he was surprised to see her.

Garen leaned forward, the effort of sitting up visible in his arms. She set the glass on the nightstand and helped him. Alana wrapped her arm around him, feeling the dampness of his shirt as it stuck to his back.

The pictures she had seen of him in his youth showed a tall, broad man. In many he'd sported a thick, dark mustache, but Alana only ever knew him clean-shaven. Garen still had a broad chest but he had shrunk in the years since, muscles surviving in stiff knots beneath loose skin.

It was easier than it should've been to pull him into a sitting position. After he had fallen and broken some ribs last year, she was convinced he had hollow, spindly bones, like a bird.

"Thank you," Garen said. They paused for a minute, as if waiting for a bomb to go off.

When it didn't, Garen touched his chest and looked at her. "Here you go," Alana said, holding the glass of water to his lips.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine," she lied.

Garen raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Alana was a terrible liar and it always showed on her face.

"My mom called last night," she said.

He frowned. Garen reached out and grabbed her hand, bringing the knuckles to his lips. It was a dry, papery kiss.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I didn't answer. She left a voicemail, but I deleted it without listening."

"Ignore her. In the meantime, get out of the house. Go do something you want to do," he suggested.

They both knew she couldn't.

It was his heart. She had returned from the store last week to find him collapsed from vertigo and clutching his chest.

His heartbeats were irregular, and they had kept him for a week of observation and tests. Garen never complained about being poked and prodded, or the intermittent pain that made him sweat. Instead he made jokes to distract her.

"Is she your daughter?" one of the nurses asked, that first day in the hospital.

"She's my wife," he said. He kept his gaze fixed on the closed window. Garen wouldn't look at either of them. But Alana had seen the shock and embarrassment in the nurse's face. She had left the room quickly, as though Alana and Garen would start having sex on the hospital bed.

Just thinking about that nurse made her feel put out.

Garen began to cough again, his body shifting with the effort. Leaning at an odd angle, he struggled to right himself, like a turtle on its back. Alana felt his spine against her wrist while she hauled him up long enough to fix his pillows for him. He had several, though they were developing an imprint, just like the bed. Their bed would remember him long after he was gone.

While she was distracted with the pillows, Garen leaned forward and kissed the inside of her arm. That made her pause. His eyes looking up at her were sharper, clearer, and his

forehead shined from the effort of movement.

“Think you can make it to the bath?” she asked, focusing on practical matters.

“I’m tired.”

“We can do it here. I have to change your catheter, too,” Alana said.

The bag and mess of tubing was a necessary evil, but Garen’s cheeks turned pink with shame every time. When he gave a reluctant nod, Alana reached over and patted his arm gently. All she had to do was unhook the bag and empty it. Still, Alana tried to do it quickly and without jerking the tube that went into his penis.

She was getting better at this. The bag looked and felt like a water balloon, but with orange-colored piss in it. It was the medication; he took six different kinds of pills every day without complaint.

She emptied the bag and washed her hands before she reattached it. Then Alana washed her hands again. Garen watched her come in and out, red-faced. When she returned with a tub of water for a sponge bath, he made sure to pat her hand and thank her.

“Your hands are so soft and clean,” he said.

“Yours will be too,” Alana promised him, although they both knew that at seventy-four, the skin of his hands had weathered like the rest of him.

Alana set the dishpan in his lap, and his hands moved to cover hers. She guided those thin, clever fingers into the water, feeling it smooth the wrinkles and veins of his hands against her own. Swishing the water, she saw his eyes close in pleasure.

“This is nice,” he murmured.

“I’m gonna wash your arms now, okay?”

He grunted an affirmation.

Alana dipped a washcloth in the water, running it over the backs of his hands and then his elbows and arms, toweling them dry. She had to bend to get in close enough to wash the hollows of his armpits and ribs.

The water cooled by the time she washed his face and neck. Alana ran the washcloth over his forehead, his eyelids, then around his growing beard and mouth.

“I can give you a shave later, if you like,” she suggested.

“You don’t have to,” Garen said, “I want you to do something for you, instead.”

His first wife had made quilts. Alana didn’t know what she liked to do. When she had lived with her parents, her mother made her sew. That had been more for practical reasons, but she did learn how to embroider and cross-stitch. It had been awful. Time dragged by with every stitch, especially when she had to pull out mistakes. Maybe she would enjoy making a quilt, she thought. But even the idea of sitting at a whirring sewing machine made her feel nauseous.

“Do something that makes you happy,” Garen told her, bringing her back to the moment.

“I’m going to change the sheets now,” she said, ignoring him.

Changing the sheets was strategic. First, Alana would undo the other side of the bed, then slide the material out from under him. His body gave into hers, smelling like soap and pressing against her like packed snow in winter. Their skin was clean. He moved easily with her, letting her undo the bottom of the old sheet before putting the new halfway on. These ones were red, an old and faded romantic gesture on his part.

He rolled onto his side while Alana pulled away the old sheet, spreading the other half of the new one down. He rolled onto his back again, and she positioned the pillows behind his head. He was breathing hard.

“Are you okay?”

“Just a little tired,” he said. The blush had faded from his cheeks, and he didn’t move while she tugged a new pair of underwear up his legs. Alana pulled the top sheet over him, seeing him shiver against the rivulets of red silk.

“If I didn’t know any better,” he said after a moment, “I’d think you were trying to seduce me.”

Alana rolled her eyes.

“These are clean,” she reminded him. As it was, she had another dirty set and countless towels in the laundry room to take care of. The cotton or other, heavier materials were too hot to use right now anyway. Sometimes it felt like the mountains trapped the heat around them in summer, pressing a boot of

humidity into everything.

“They feel good,” Garen sighed. He closed his eyes again, breathing deeply.

She thought he had fallen asleep again. About to get up to leave him be, she stopped when he reached out blindly for her hand. At first she merely looked at it, that trembling hand stretched over the emptiness between bed and chair. She was a camera, lens focused on each vein and liver spot, recording. Not thinking. Alana let him grab her hand, surprised at the sudden strength of his grip.

“Thank you,” he said again.

“You already thanked me,” she pointed out.

“So I did,” he said, “but thank you anyway.”

When Alana’s parents sold her at eighteen for \$10,000, she hadn’t known what to expect. All she knew was that he was old and lonely, they said. He needed a wife and she would be his.

She hadn’t expected him to be quite so old when they first met. But she also hadn’t expected Garen to give her another \$10,000 in cash after the wedding, to tell her she was free to go wherever she wanted. Alana didn’t have to see him again; he promised her on the car ride from the courthouse. He didn’t expect anything from her, he said. Alana hadn’t believed him. But he was nice and that was different.

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The sun was high overhead and it made her sweat just looking out the window, but Alana left the cool security of the house to look after the garden. It was Garen’s, really. After he died the plants would too, probably, culled by accident. She filled the dainty yellow watering can and went to inspect the raised beds in the side yard.

Their neighbors, the Tomciks, were outside too, but either hadn’t noticed her or were deliberately ignoring her. Mitchell had a pair of pruning shears and was hacking away at the line of bushes against their house.

Garen used to do that kind of work around the yard. Alana would follow him around, unsure what he needed or wanted her to do. Her job had been to set up the stakes and netting around the tomato plants. It was an effort to try and deter the ever-present herd of deer nearby, swarming out of the woods

like a low fog every morning at dawn.

Often Alana preferred to stand and watch Garen while he worked, asking the occasional question about the plants. He would turn and smile at her in a mix of happiness and surprise, as though he had forgotten she was there.

“You’re so quiet,” Garen always teased, “just like a plant yourself.”

“More like a weed,” she’d said.

Alana spent a lot of time thinking what she would be if she were a plant, or different kinds of animals. Growing up in her parents’ house, she’d never been allowed to use a computer without their supervision. When they used the computer room, the webcam was always on.

Now, it was different.

There was so much out there, and Alana spent hours on the internet. Mostly she looked for quizzes about personality types, on the desktop in Garen’s office. He’d scolded her when she had accidentally tried to print out her results and it had printed the entire webpage; all sixty pages printed out neatly with line after line of code. She panicked and dropped a glass, before bursting into tears thinking he would hurt her.

It had taken many long minutes of Garen’s arms around her, speaking in soothing tones, before she calmed down.

Alana wanted another beer. She should’ve brought another outside with her, but what would the Tomciks think? It was one thing to have a drink on the patio after dinner, but another entirely to nurse a beer or two alongside the morning and afternoon chores.

She remembered the first time Garen had let her drink a beer. Her parents had never allowed it. Alana hadn’t turned twenty-one yet, but he’d given her a wink and told her not to narc on him, offering her a brown bottle. At first, the sourness of the beer he’d brewed himself was overpowering. Alana asked if it had spoiled. But then she got used to the bubbles and buzz, and took slow, gentle sips. He’d watched her carefully, but laughed when she burped.

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“How’s Garen?” It was Mitchell.

When Alana looked up at him, the watering can was

empty in her hand and the tomato plants were drowning.

“He’s doing okay,” Alana said automatically. She looked up to see Mitchell leaning on the fence, pawing at his sweaty neck with a handkerchief.

“We haven’t seen him out and about in a while. Not since his last hospital visit.”

“Things are slow,” she told him with a shrug, “but the doctor’s pretty positive.” That was true, at least; Garen’s doctor was relentlessly cheerful. He always found a silver lining, even when Garen was in a lot of pain.

“That’s great! I’ll have to bring over another casserole soon for him,” Mitchell suggested. Alana looked back down at the tomatoes when he started dabbing at sweat on his bald crown. Mitchell brought over a tuna casserole and a blueberry pie during Garen’s last hospital stay. They spoiled quickly in the fridge. Alana hadn’t gone home once, not even to sleep.

“Garen would love that,” Alana lied. He wouldn’t be able to eat anything like that. She hoped Mitchell wouldn’t try to invite himself over for dinner, and watch Garen struggle with a fork. She also didn’t like talking about Garen to anyone, feeling like to say it aloud would make things worse. Alana preferred to steer clear of that, banishing the darkness to the corners like dust with a broom. She could hold things together by herself for a little while.

“I’m sure he’ll be back to putzing around in his garden in no time,” Mitchell added.

“Definitely,” Alana said, nodding. “He’ll be back to complaining about leaf rot and nebbly deer before you know it.”

Mitchell laughed, but for longer than she expected. Janet waved when she caught Alana’s eye, but spoke to her husband. “Mitch, can you go check on the pork roast for me?”

“It’s in the crock pot, I’m sure it’s fine.”

“That’s what you said last time, and then it was all dried out on top, remember? You need to check it every couple hours,” Janet said.

“Then what’s the point of using the crock pot? And why can’t you do it?” Mitchell asked. He turned back to Alana and grinned, winking as though she were in on the joke and it was funny.

“My hands are covered in fertilizer. Can you just do it, *please?*” Janet’s words had an edge to them that made a hunk of pork sound like the only thing that mattered in this world. She shook a browned gardening glove at her husband for good measure.

“Fine, fine. It was nice seeing you, Alana. Tell Garen we’ll be over to see him soon.”

“You too, and we’d love that,” she lied. She waved at Janet again, who waved and got back to her fertilizer and her pink flowers. Alana didn’t know what kinds of plants those were, but Janet knew how to grow the best pink things.

It took several trips back and forth from the spigot to water the rest of the garden. Alana felt wretched by the end of it, wishing she had a hat as big as Janet’s to give her a little shade. Garen had almost developed the woods behind his house, he told her once. He owned the property. At one time, he had wanted a bigger garden, and room to plant a few rows of mulberry trees. Alana was glad he left the woods alone; it meant less time spent out here, watering them. Besides, she liked how untouched the back of the property was. It seemed as though a person could walk through those woods and appear somewhere outside the holler, maybe even in Pennsylvania.

Alana took a few pictures of the plants with her phone, because Garen would want to see how things were progressing. She had never been allowed to have a phone, so she didn’t mind taking pictures at all. She liked playing with the magnification, and it made the baby watermelons seem so much bigger than they were.

When the gardening was finished, Alana took her time scrubbing the dirt from her hands. The water was too hot, and her fingers were a blistering red, but she scrubbed every inch.

She remembered the car wash her mother took her to sometimes, when she was twelve or so. They always went at night, to the place her mother’s second cousin owned. Claire Leblanc didn’t want to pay the seventy-five cents every time. The water from the pressure washer was always cold when it hit Alana’s body. Her pleas made no difference. Every time, her mother would tie up her hair and pull the four-finger trigger, blasting Alana until she was thrown against the cinderblock

walls. She would choke and cough on water and apologies, but it would never have any effect on Claire. The pressure washer ran until the time was up, and she would shiver on top of a plastic bag the entire ride home.

The water in the sink became too hot for her to stand, so Alana pulled her hands out and shut off the tap, banishing the memory with it. She cracked open another beer, relishing the coolness against her palms as she cradled it. Maybe she should eat something soon, then check on Garen. He could handle liquids, gelatin, and soft fruits. Garen preferred soup, even this time of the year. Alana wasn't sure she could cook anything in front of the stove right now—even with the air conditioning on full blast. Plus, he could always tell when something had been microwaved.

Alana wished she knew how to cook more. Garen would be aghast if he caught sight of the cans of pasta or frozen meals in the house, but her repertoire was limited to eggs, toast, and spaghetti. Sometimes grilled cheese also happened, but more times than not all she got was burnt bread and globs of cheese stuck to the pan.

There was a sudden knock at the door.

Who could that be? None of the neighbors came over, and Garen's friends called first. No one had come by since before his last hospital visit.

Alana stepped into the short hallway that connected the kitchen with the front room, and she heard sharper raps against the wood of the door, more frequent and insistent. When she neared the front door, a shock of badly-dyed red hair appeared in the glass.

“Alana? Sweetie?”

Her mother was here.

Ducking back down the hallway, Alana crouched low and out of sight of the door. She could still hear the knocking, and her mother was calling her name. Claire was a persistent woman. She heard her mother knock for another minute or two. Then, Alana heard heels clicking on the stones of the side path, the crinkling rush of leaves and bushes. She guessed it would probably look weird to the neighbors, to be home and not answer the door when your mother came over. What would

the neighbors think?

Suddenly she heard her mother's voice, ringing in her ears as sure as any echo.

"Alana? Are you home?"

She heard the creak of the wooden gate, leading to the side yard. Did she lock the back door? It wouldn't surprise Alana at all if her mother just walked right on in if a door was open.

Alana sprang up, shaking off the sudden dizziness like a dog out of the rain, and raced to the kitchen and back door. She turned the lock with a sigh of relief. Then she pushed the rigid bronze bolt through for extra measure.

There were voices coming from the side yard.

Peeking through the curtain, Alana saw Claire talking with Mitchell. Suddenly, Claire turned towards the house, as though sensing Alana's gaze. Alana saw her mother's expression change, and she felt her heart skip a beat.

Dropping the curtain, Alana all but ran into the hallway. She crouched down and fruitlessly tried to control her rapid, uneven breaths.

"Alana? Your father and I are worried about you. Why didn't you tell us Garen was in the hospital?"

Alana knew better than to answer, but she still felt that old compulsion to answer anyway. To do whatever her mother said.

She imagined that any noise she made would be heard. Even her heartbeat. It was pounding, and she jumped when the knocking started up again.

"Are you just going to stay in there?"

The pounding on the door sounded like Alana's own fists, when she would hit and scratch at the inside of the defunct chest freezer in her parent's basement. Her mother saying, "She could stay in there a while," after the latest infraction. Like crying on the webcam, because at least she knew the 'uncles' that came 'round her parents' house after dinner. Those men on the computer screen were strangers. Alana had scratched and pounded for hours, until her fingers and ears were numb. Until blood from her broken nails and fingers dripped onto her face.

Alana was crying long after the knocking had stopped.

"Alana? What's going on?"

It was a different voice—Garen's.

“N-Nothing,” Alana lied. She wiped at her eyes with trembling fingers, not wanting to have to go into the bathroom for tissues or toilet paper.

“Can you come here, please?” Garen asked. A request, never a demand.

“One sec,” she replied.

Alana wiped her eyes again but felt flushed, a hot creeping sensation on her chest and around her cheeks. She was an ugly crier.

By the time she arrived in the bedroom, Garen was sitting up and moving like he was about to get out of bed.

“What are you doing?”

“Did something happen?” Garen asked, not answering her question. He reached out to her, stretching over the empty space between bed and table, and Alana was sure he’d fall.

When he didn’t, she hurried forward and grabbed his arm.

“What happened, Alana?”

Garen cupped her cheek and wiped at the wetness there. He tilted her chin up to look at him, and Alana felt a hollow pit in her stomach.

“My mother was here.”

“Christ,” Garen swore, almost spitting the word; it made her flinch.

“Did you speak with her?”

“No. She knocked at the front and back door, but I didn’t let her in,” she said.

“Good.”

That word held a finality to it, but also approval for what she’d done—or didn’t do. She felt like a coward. Alana looked away from him, staring at the crumpled red sheets.

“She can’t get you in here,” Garen said softly. He pulled away from her and settled back on the bed, patting the space next to him.

Alana took the invitation and crawled into their bed, his open arms.

“You’re safe.”

Alana buried her head in his shoulder, kissing the fabric of his shirt and trying not to cry again.

“She’ll come back,” she said softly, barely a whisper against

him. She felt his arms squeeze around her gently in response, holding her as much as he could.

“If I could, I’d chase her out with a broom,” Garen replied. “Call the police next time.”

“You know they’ll only send Uncle Paul.”

Claire’s brother worked in the police department, and any calls from family addresses were given to him. Alana didn’t want him to get involved, like the time she had tried to tell her school counselor, and he’d gone to her father for explanations.

Then they’d withdrawn her, saying she’d be homeschooled from then on.

“You’ll always be safe in here. I promise.”

Alana didn’t say anything in response. She kissed Garen’s shoulder, his neck, and felt his fingers touching her hair.

“Only if you’re here,” she told him.

The house hadn’t felt *right* while he was in the hospital. That was why Alana had preferred to stay there with him, sleeping in a chair.

“Quit tryin’ to come onto me,” Garen said. His tone was light and teasing. It was an attempt to distract her, but she didn’t mind.

“I guess I can’t help it,” Alana said, smiling into the crook of his neck.

“Flattery will get you everywhere, Dear.”

Garen’s arms felt tight and strong around her. If she kept her eyes closed, he didn’t really feel sick. She melted into Garen’s embrace and the landscape of their bed. Alana leaned into the hollows the body of a bigger man had once carved out, with its dips and curves that would linger long after Garen was gone.

Alana had the sudden urge to feel his fingers cupping the milky, watery weight of her breasts. She wanted him to squeeze and kiss, to slide his fingers down her belly and tease her.

“I’m going to fall asleep like this,” Garen said.

It pulled her out of that train of thought.

“That’s fine,” Alana said. He was asking for permission. She tightened her arms around Garen for extra measure, and he sighed against her.

When Garen finally drifted off, she went to check the locks again. A sense of foreboding needled her like a relentless tick.

Opening the front door cautiously, Alana peered around the threshold.

No one was there. Her mother's car was gone, too. Looking down, she saw something wrapped in tinfoil on the steps, with a note perched on top.

The casserole dish Alana picked up might as well have been a bomb.

Claire had brought them funeral potatoes. The crisp, oily layer of crushed potato chips on top was almost unnaturally lurid; the dish glared up at her, frightening in its intensity. She almost dropped it. After looking around to see if she was being watched, Alana hastily replaced the tinfoil and took it inside.