

*Note: This story takes place during the novella In Dark Woods, Book 4.5. While Isaac is in the hospital and Lilli is with him, Shannon and Show step in to take care of Gia and the Lunden home. Spoilers here for Books 1-4.5. This story is NSFW.*



“Michael row the boat ashore, hallelujah...”

“No! Fa, fa, fa. Fa, fa, fa!”

Sitting in a rocking chair in Gia’s pretty bedroom, Shannon shifted the struggling girl in her arms, bringing her up to lie on her shoulder, but Gia resisted the pressure of her hand on the back of her head.

“Mamma!” Gia’s bottom lip jutted out in a perfect pout.

“I’m sorry, baby. Mamma’s not here. I can sing for you, though. I’ll sing for you.”

Shannon didn’t know any lullabies. She had some rusty old hymns stored in her head from her own childhood, but Gia seemed to want something particular, and Shannon had no idea what it was. *Fa, fa, fa?* That didn’t sound familiar at all. But Gia was only fifteen months old, and it was unlikely that she’d be any more help in figuring out what song she wanted.

“Mamma! Da!” Gia struggled harder, making every effort to get free of Shannon’s hold. So Shannon set her down, on her little feet covered in yellow footie pajamas, and Gia toddled over to her little bookcase.

“Oh, a story? I can do that. Would you like a story instead of a song?” The relief Shannon felt when Gia nodded and pulled a book from a shelf was real and deep. She was outmatched and

overwhelmed. She did not know how to care for such a little girl. But there was no one else. Isaac was in a coma; Lilli was at his side. Show spent every free moment he had at the hospital with them. There was only her to take care of Gia. Her and Lori Mortensen, their regular sitter. But Lori had another job—as did Shannon. Between them, they had suddenly become Gia’s primary caregivers. But while Lori had been babysitting Gia for a year, Shannon was at a complete loss.

And Shannon, in truth, was the one who’d been left really in charge. She and Show had moved into Isaac and Lilli’s house, so that their animals—three horses and a cat—would be taken care of and so that Gia would have her own home, her own room, her own bed to sleep in every night. Actually, so far, only Shannon had moved in. Show seemed to have moved into the hospital, only stopping by the house for brief visits, to check in.

She’d been married to Show for two months. She’d only been willing even to *touch* a baby for a few months longer than that. She hadn’t had a chance yet to get comfortable in her own new life, and now she was living Lilli’s for her instead.

All that was too much to think about. Lilli was her friend—her best friend, in fact. The first best friend she’d ever really had. Lilli needed her, and so she was here, hoping against hope that she was up to the task of filling the enormous hole Lilli had left behind.

Could she be a mother to Gia? Was she *supposed* to try to be a mother to Gia?

The pretty little girl in question toddled over, holding up a brightly-colored paperback book that Shannon recognized from her own childhood. Gripping the book in one small, pudgy fist, Gia tried to climb back onto Shannon’s lap. Shannon reached down and lifted her to sit with her back against her chest.

“I know this book. This is a very good book. My mommy read this one to me when I was little.”

Gia looked over her shoulder, staring intently into Shannon’s eyes. Then she turned back and opened the cover.

Shannon read, “Corduroy is a bear who once lived in the toy department of a big store...”

~oOo~

For more than an hour after she’d finally given up and laid the still-bright-eyed Gia in her crib, Shannon sat at the table in the Lilli’s kitchen, dimly lit by only a light over the sink, drinking a cup of chamomile tea and listening to Gia try to sing herself to sleep. She had her back to the monitor that would show Gia, because watching Isaac and Lilli’s little girl rocking herself had made her cry.

Maybe she should have just let her stay awake and up with her. But it was almost eleven at night, and Shannon felt sure that a toddler needed to be asleep well before that. They had been completely alone at night for more than a week now, and she’d been keeping Gia with her until she was full asleep. But they were both tired and irritable during the day. Neither was getting enough sleep.

Or was Gia’s mood simply because she missed her mom and dad? Shannon had no idea, and Gia couldn’t tell her.

But now, at least, Gia was fairly quiet, simply rocking back and forth, saying “fa, fa, fa” over and over, her voice slowly growing fainter.

Shannon heard the growl of a Harley. Show was back. Thank God. He'd called earlier to say that he was going to spend the night with her, but she hadn't allowed herself to believe it until now.

Gia heard, too. The fading syllable of song stopped, and a much perkier voice called out, "Da? Da! DA!"

Shannon sighed and looked over her shoulder at the monitor. Gia was standing in her crib, her little legs marching in place, now repeating a new syllable: "Da! Da! Dadadadada!"

Show came in the side door, and Shannon got up from the table and went to him. Neither said a word as they embraced, Show wrapping her up snugly in his arms and bending to tuck his head into the crook of her shoulder. Shannon rested her forehead on his kutte, and they took a quiet moment together—quiet but for Gia's steadily more emphatic cries for her father.

Still snug against Shannon's neck, Show chuckled softly. "She been going like that for a while?"

"I put her down an hour or so ago. She won't settle. I've been sitting down here trying to figure out whether it was wrong to leave her alone in her crib or if it would be wrong to let her stay up again. I guess she got used to staying up with me. I probably screwed that up." Shannon sighed her frustration. "She heard your bike, and I guess she thinks you're Isaac."

Show took her face in his giant hands, gently tipping her head so that she met his eyes. "Trust yourself, hon. If it feels like the right thing, it probably is. In her crib until she sleeps, or up with you until then, she'll be okay. You're not screwing her up."

Still cradled in his palms, Shannon shook her head. "I don't know how to trust myself about this. I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm okay during the day, because I watched Lilli with her enough to be able to kind of copy that. But I don't know how to help her sleep. It makes me sad to think she's lonely up there."

"You want me to take a stab?"

Near tears now, Shannon nodded. "I'm so glad you're here."

He kissed her forehead and let her go. "Okay, hon. Why don't you go on and get ready for bed. I'll see what I can do with the little diva."

She hesitated, and as he took his first step away from her, he noticed. "Somethin' wrong?"

"I uh... I've been sleeping on the couch. It feels strange to think about sleeping in their bed."

He laughed sadly and brushed the back of one finger over her cheek. "I think we'll be here a while, hon. Isaac hasn't woken up yet, and I don't see Lilli leaving that hospital while there's any chance something could happen. We need to help them out, so we should make ourselves as comfortable as we can here. Fresh sheets, and it'll be fine."

"We? Will you be here, too?"

"Yeah. I'll spend the nights, anyway. Lilli wants me away at night. I can bring her fresh news about Gia when I go in the day."

Gia chose that moment to shift from yelling for her father to just screaming outright. She wasn't a baby who cried much. Instead, she got angry and bellowed. Show glanced at the monitor and laughed again, this time with less sadness. "Okay. You go on to bed. I'll see if I can't get her royal highness to sleep."

Shannon did as Show had asked, taking a couple of minutes to tidy the kitchen first. When she got back to Isaac and Lilli's bedroom, she paused in the middle of the room, still feeling out of place, like an intruder in their most personal space.

She'd put fresh sheets on the bed the first night, but she hadn't been able to get into it. This bed was absolutely their most personal space. But now Show was here, and he was going to stay the night with her, and there was nowhere else in this house for them to be together. So Shannon opened her little overnight bag and pulled out a filmy, emerald green nightgown. She'd packed it for no discernible reason, but now she was glad she had. Every day before work, Shannon went back to their own house to get dressed. She hadn't wanted to bring her whole wardrobe here. But now it was looking like this move was more long-term than any of them wanted. For now, at least, Shannon would be the woman of this house.

Her sense of dislocation was profound. Not yet completely settled in her own home, in her own role as Show's old lady, still making that space into a home they both could nest in, now here, standing in for another woman, in another house, with a child who was not hers.

There was nowhere else she'd be. Lilli needed her. Show needed her. Isaac—God, Isaac. They all needed Isaac to wake up and be well. But would he ever be well again?

Beset by all those thoughts, Shannon dressed in her nightgown, brushed her hair out, and slid under the covers in Lilli and Isaac's bed. Their room was interesting, nothing like the room she was making for her and Show. The room she was making was done in light hues, crème, soft grey, and chalky blue. She was still on the lookout for a few pieces, but they had her big brass bed, and her antique vanity (with a new mirror), and a nice, big highboy for Show, the only piece so far in a dark wood. She'd been combing shops in Signal Bend and in Springfield, looking for pieces that would bring that dark piece into the overall theme of the room.

Except for Gia's room, done beautifully in yellow, white, and grey, Isaac and Lilli didn't seem to prefer a softer palette. The furniture throughout the house was heavy and dark. Their bed was no different. The wood was a deep red, maybe mahogany, the posts and frame substantial. All the furniture was similar, though not exactly perfectly matching. It complemented nicely, though. The color scheme was dark, too—black bedding, black drapes, the walls simply white, or maybe eggshell. There didn't seem to be much apparent interest in a "scheme" at all.

That wasn't the case throughout the house—or, actually, it was. Everything looked pretty good together, but in a sort of accidental way. It all complemented without seeming planned. And the colors were dark and bold. What Shannon thought of as "masculine."

It had given her cause to wonder whether the more muted tones that she was doing in the house she shared with Show actually had as much Show in the décor as she'd intended. Her own taste ran to the light and clean. When she decorated for herself, she tended strongly to winter white and pearl grey, with scant touches of color. But after having witnessed the avalanche of desperate country cutsie with which Show's first wife had decorated his house, and the way he'd been virtually erased from it, she'd very much wanted him to be involved in the redecorating. However, he was not much interested in paint and fabric, and getting him to express an opinion regarding color or style had been a steady slog uphill.

God, she hoped that she wasn't making him another home that didn't include him.

Sitting in Isaac and Lilli's dark bed, stewing about homes and hominess, Shannon heard Show's low, deep voice, not quite singing, but his tone canted upward like a croon.

*Come on, little diva. You need your beauty sleep. Close your eyes for Uncle Show.*

*Unca...Unca...*

*That's right. Shhh.*

*Fa, fa, fa.*

*I don't know the words to that one. Sorry, G. That's your mamma's song.*

*Mamma?*

*Just me, I'm afraid. How about this. I know this one. But you can't laugh. Uncle Show's not a singer. Remember that.*

Show started to hum, and Shannon turned so that she could see the monitor on Lilli's dresser. He was sitting in the big rocker, Gia snug in his arms, tucked to his chest. The fingers of one small hand clutched his beard; her other hand, curled into a fist, rested on her mouth. Shannon could see that they were staring into each other's eyes, and Show was smiling just a little.

Their life had been mostly quiet since she'd met him, but now, in just the past couple of weeks, it had become chaos. It had been not much more than a week since he'd been drowning in fresh sorrow over the loss of his daughter, Daisy—grief brought back to the fore of his life by the actors who'd been in town. Before he'd had a chance to regain his equanimity from that, Isaac had been shot. Now Show's best friend was comatose, maybe a vegetable, maybe dying, probably paralyzed.

Watching him now, holding his goddaughter and rocking her to sleep, was the first time Shannon had seen her husband seem calm in weeks.

She had never heard Show sing, not even in the shower. Now, though, as she watched the peaceful scene in the monitor, she heard the first, quiet notes of a pleasant baritone. Not a practiced voice, but a tuneful one. With little more than a throaty murmur, he sang a song that Shannon knew. Bruce Springsteen. She hadn't known Show knew any Springsteen. Usually, he was a country boy through and through, preferring stuff like Clint Black and George Strait. Shannon wasn't a big fan of country music as a whole, so they didn't listen to music much together.

To this song, though, Show knew all the words. *And when this dirty world has been cold to you, I got two strong arms waitin' to hold you.*

As he sang those words to Gia's relaxing little form, Shannon understood that he was singing so much more than a lullaby. He was singing a promise. One he hadn't been able to keep to Daisy. Tears filled her eyes again, but the tears this time were not formed of fear or uncertainty. They were love.

They would be okay. She could be a temporary mother, holding Lilli's place for her, keeping her spot in her daughter's life, and in her home, warm and safe while she focused on bringing Isaac back. Gia needed her mother and her father. So, for now, she needed the stand-in versions. She needed Shannon and Show.

And, Shannon thought, they needed her, too.

~oOo~

She was still sitting up in bed when Show, finally successful at easing Gia into sleep, came down the hallway and leaned against the doorframe. He looked tired—exhausted, really—but he still wore that small smile.

“Hey, hon.”

“Hi. Thanks for that.”

“No problem. I love that little miss.” He came into the room and toed his boots off. “You look good. I like that one.”

Shannon looked down at the green silk over her breasts. "I know you do. I don't even know why I packed it. I guess I was hoping to have you here with me more."

"I will be now, looks like. Lilli's gettin' pissed, having me around all the time." He pulled off his shirt and his beanie, and then stripped his jeans off. At the sight of his bare form, Shannon's heart bobbed and then raced. She didn't think she'd ever get used to the brilliance of his massive, muscular body. She'd even come to love the long scar bisecting his belly from side to side. She'd almost lost him the day he'd gotten that scar. But she hadn't.

"Is Isaac no better?"

Show came over and got into bed, sliding under the covers and settling next to her, pulling her to his chest, one arm over her shoulders, holding her close. "He's off the coma drugs, but he won't wake up. I guess the docs are all being pretty vague with Lilli about what it means. She just sits there, waiting for him. I don't know what to do to help her."

She hated to ask, but she did anyway. "Do you think he's going to make it?"

Show shrugged. "He has to. He has to."

Knowing that Show was not ready to confront the idea that Isaac wouldn't make it, Shannon didn't say more. She rested with her head tucked under his chin, her hand on his belly, tracing light circles over his taut skin without being quite aware she was. Until, that is, his erect cock, tenting the covers, brushed her arm.

She leaned back and looked up to see his eyes on her.

"Missed you." His voice was low, almost more vibration than sound.

"You're not too tired or sad?"

"I'm both. But I love you, and I've been lonely away from you." As he spoke, he moved, his free hand coming around to hold her ass, and he rolled over her, laying her flat on the bed under him.

She loved the way he could move her as if she were just a slip of a thing.

His eyes held hers as he slid his hand from her ass down her thigh, his rough palm catching just a little on the silk of her nightgown. Then he gathered the lacy trim at the hem and pulled it up to her waist.

"Shannon." The sound of her name on his tongue always hit her like a jolt. "You are so fucking beautiful."

There was a sound from the monitor, and they both paused, turning as one to check. Gia had rolled over, kicking the side of her crib as she'd done so. As Shannon and Show watched, she grabbed her stuffed unicorn and clutched it under her chin, then settled back to stillness.

"We're good, hon."

"Yeah, we are." Shannon fed her fingers into Show's long, light brown hair, reveling in its thick silk. When she grazed his scalp with her fingernails, he closed his eyes and leaned into her touch. His eyes opened again, and there was a new look in them. New in this moment, but deliciously familiar to her nonetheless. Sharp and fierce, that look said that he was about done with lazy, gentle petting.

As if to confirm her impression, his hand released the bunched hem of her nightgown and moved to the slender strap over her left shoulder. He dragged it down her arm until her breast was exposed, then circled that breast in his palm. Anticipating him, needing what he intended, Shannon shifted under him and arched her back, lifting her breast to his descending mouth.

When his mouth took her deeply in, the softly coarse hair of his beard caressing her tender skin, his hands holding her so tightly she could feel each separate finger where it pressed into her body, she cried out and flexed her hips, bringing her legs up at his sides. He brought his

own knee up, changing his position between her legs, and she could feel him, thick and rock hard, against her thigh. She wanted him inside her, filling her up. Untangling one hand from his hair, she pushed it between them, letting her nails lightly strafe his skin as she moved downward. When she reached his cock and wrapped her fist around it, he groaned, the sound vibrating against her nipple. She pulled lightly but with determination, drawing him toward her, until he groaned again and released her breast.

“You make me crazy. I want to go down on you first.”

She shook her head. “I need to be full of you. That’s what I want. I don’t want you so far away. Not tonight. I’ve been lonely for you, too.”

With that, Show shifted again, pushing into her as he took her mouth, suckling her tongue as he’d suckled at her breast.

Even after all this time together, Shannon still felt a wonderful, deep stretch as her body accommodated his size. A stretch just short of pain, as if she could not possibly be any fuller. As he pushed deep, she lifted and canted her hips, pulling him in just a bit deeper, making him grunt into her mouth, as she’d known he would. Wrapping her hands around his back and over his shoulders, she clung to him, letting her nails sink into tight muscle. Again he grunted, this time breaking away from her mouth and dropping his head to her shoulder, tucking his face against the sensitive skin of her throat.

The feeling of his big body, hard and broad and hot, pressing her down into the bed, sliding against her as he thrust and thrust, crushing her despite his efforts to hold himself off her a little—that was the best feeling Shannon had ever known. It made her feel possessed and complete, like there was no clear boundary between them, like they shared even their skin. That feeling of completeness with him always brought to a boil the hot pool that filled her belly whenever he touched her, and now, after more than a week without him so near, that pool quickly overran its limits and filled her whole body.

As her need found its high tide, Show’s movements became harsh and erratic. With his head against her neck, she could feel his breath, straining and hot. When she could no longer let him set the pace, and her hips began to move with a will beyond her own, Show rose up onto his elbows and shifted again, bringing him briefly even deeper as he brought his hands up to hold her head.

He knew how close she was and wanted to watch her come. He’d told her that he loved the sight. As she watched him watch her, he changed his pace, pushing hard and holding, then pulsing right on that spot, forgoing the long strokes that brought him close for the heavy, steadily pulsing pressure that turned her muscles to stone and then to lava.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” Every deep pulse of his hips pushed that syllable from Shannon’s lips.

“Come on, hon. Give it to me. Come on.”

He sped up. “Oh! Ohoh! Ohoh! Ohohohohoh! Ohhhhhh!” And then her throat clamped down on further sound or even breath, and all she could do was close her eyes, bend her head back, and let ecstasy take her over, an ecstasy so perfect she thought she could actually hear her body sing.

“That’s it. God damn, that’s something.” His pace changed again, back to long, deep, heavy strokes, until he, too, could make neither sound nor breath, and the muscles in his neck and shoulders turned into ridged and corded rock.

He relaxed onto her, and when he tried to roll off and out of her, she held him in place. “No. Stay a minute. Stay forever.”

His answer was a kiss.

~oOo~

Show's personal cell rang the next morning while he was in the shower. Feeding Gia a breakfast of pancakes and applesauce, Shannon heard the ringtone but couldn't do anything about it.

She was feeling immeasurably better this morning. More capable and confident about taking care of this amazing little girl. She hadn't realized how much she'd been missing Show until that ache had eased.

Ensnared in her high chair, Gia put her hand in the little syrup puddle on her plate, then brought her hand straight up to her pretty, dark hair. Maybe pancakes and applesauce was a terrible idea for a toddler breakfast. Yet Shannon couldn't help but laugh as Gia proudly rubbed the syrup in as if she were adding mousse for a new style, then went back for a second handful.

"I guess we'll have to have a bath after breakfast, huh?"

"BO!"

Shannon knew that word. "Ah. I see. Part of your nefarious plan to play with *boats*." Gia nodded seriously, as if she'd understood. "Well, now I'm onto you, young lady. You'll have to try harder to get stuff by me."

Gia held out her sippy cup. "MICK!"

"Would you like more milk?"

Gia nodded.

"What do you say?"

"PEEZ!"

"Good girl!" Shannon took the sparkly pink sippy cup and stood, turning toward the fridge. Show was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. He was smiling. He looked better, too—last night he'd been worn down, his face lined with fatigue and worry. Sex and sleeping together seemed to have restored them both.

"You want breakfast? Apparently, we're doing makeovers this morning, too. Oh—your phone rang. The personal."

"Yeah. I got it. It was Lilli. Isaac's awake."

"Oh thank God!" A thought followed quickly, tempering her relief. "Is he...can he...?"

"Don't know the details, but I gotta get there. I'll call when I know more, and I'll be back tonight, okay?" He came to her and wrapped her up tight. "I love you, missus."

"MICK! MICK!"

They both laughed, and Shannon rose to her tiptoes and planted a kiss on her old man's cheek before she turned for the fridge. "The inn's empty, and I'm taking the day, so I'll be here with G. I'll have my phone close all day. Tell them I love them."

"I will." Show had gone over to Gia. With an appraising look at her syrupy self, he put two fingers to his mouth, kissed them, then touched them to Gia's nose. "You be good today, little diva."

"UNCA!"

"Yep. Love you." He turned back to Shannon. "You're good at this, you know. I see it. Trust yourself, hon."

Feeling a warm glow of relief and love, Shannon just smiled as he went out the door to his bike.

"Okay, miss thing, here's your milk. Drink up, and then boats."

~oOo~

It didn't look good for Isaac to recover completely. Almost a month had passed since the shooting, more than two weeks since he'd regained consciousness. His mind was clear, but he was paralyzed from the chest down.

Lilli had come home that afternoon for the first time since Isaac had been hurt. She'd spent a few hours with an ecstatic Gia, who'd only seen her mamma in the hospital waiting room, a few times a week, for an hour or two at a time. They'd all eaten dinner together, and Lilli had put Gia to bed. Shannon and Show had sat in the kitchen, and Shannon had listened intently to the lullaby Lilli had sung. It wasn't English. She'd thought briefly about asking Lilli for the lyrics, but no. That song was Lilli's.

And, anyway, Shannon and Gia had figured bedtime out. Shannon liked Bon Iver, and, it turned out, so did Gia.

Once Gia was asleep, Lilli had packed a couple of bags for her and for Isaac, she'd hugged Shannon hard, and she'd driven herself back to the hospital.

Show came into the kitchen from seeing Lilli off, looking serious.

"Is she okay?"

He shook his head. "She's tough, you know that. She deals with whatever she has to. But no. She's not okay."

Of course she wasn't. How could anybody be okay in circumstances like this? "Yeah, that was a dumb question. Should we be doing more?"

"No, hon. We're keeping their life warm for them, taking care of their girl. *You* are doing that. There's no more we can do."

Feeling dissatisfied but sure he was right, Shannon sighed and gathered up the stray coffee cups and other loose remains of their aimless evening. As she set the dirty dishes in the sink to deal with in the morning, Show stepped behind her and bracketed her with his strong arms.

"I think I want another kid, hon. Can we talk about that again?"

For a second, Shannon's heart actually, literally stopped. When it started again, she felt the thump like a punch to her chest. "What? Show!"

She was thirty-nine years old. She'd missed her chance. And they'd talked about this. "You said you were okay not having more."

His hand went to her hip, and he turned her around. His eyes serious and intent, he stared down at her, and when her eyes wouldn't stay on his, he took her chin and forced her to stare back. "I am. I don't want you to do something you don't want to do. If we are just the two of us until we die, I will die a happy man. But I see you with Gia, how *right* you are with her, and I see something we should have. You and me. I want to hold a child we made together in my arms."

"I missed my chance."

"You *didn't*, hon. You're still young. If you want that chance, I know it's there for you."

"I *did* miss my chance. I feel the truth of that in my heart."

"I thought the days of fear making your decisions for you were over."

She knew she should have been angry at him for that. But she felt suddenly surrounded by heartbreak, and by the very fear he'd called out. The door that had closed away that fear opened wide when she thought about being a mother. She'd had her chance, and she'd given it up. Even though her daughter had had a good life, in a happy home, Shannon didn't know how

to think otherwise. It felt like she'd be tempting some horrible kind of fate to turn her back on the consequences of giving Adrienne away.

"Show, please. Please. Don't do this." He hadn't released her chin, so she closed her eyes, needing respite from his intense gaze. As her lids covered her eyes, a tear was set loose from each one.

Finally he let go of her chin, and she felt his thumbs moving through the wet tracks the tears had left. "Okay, hon. Okay. Just you and me. I'm happy just as we are. I love you."

She let her head fall forward to his chest, and he bent down and kissed her crown, leaving his lips to rest there.

**THE END**

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