

Not Broken

Cari clutched the handles of Meredith's wheelchair until her knuckles ached and turned white. She'd been Meredith's personal attendant for nearly a year now, and the conversation around the table did more than merely frustrate her. Meredith swung her head to look at Cari, a quick jerk of a movement that Cari wasn't sure she could accomplish herself. Mental note: Ask Meredith if it's hard for her eyes to adjust when she moves her head so fast.

Meredith's eyes were bright, a vibrant green that belied the appearance of her body. Even as her fingers straightened and curled back against her will, Meredith's eyes smiled. "Don't worry," they said.

Cari released her grasp from one handle, noting the difficulty she had stretching her fingers. An Idaho August wind filtered through the crack between the swamp cooler and the window pane, tousling Meredith's long bangs in the process. She leaned forward and, ignoring the other professionals in the room, whispered, "I'm going to get that hair out of your face, sweetie."

Meredith's head dropped down half an inch, then jerked back up again in a nod. Cari used her free hand to lightly brush the few stray strands of auburn hair away from Meredith's eyes, tucking them gently behind her right ear. Then both women turned their attention back to the others in the room.

“It’s very important that she continue receiving my services at least twice a week,” the physical therapist was saying in his deep and utterly professional tone.

“And why is that, Reynold?” Sam, the business manager for Bitterroot Assisted Living, retorted. “She’s 25 years old. After 20 years of physical and occupational therapy, she still can’t swallow, walk, or toilet on her own.”

Reynold scowled hard at Sam. “She isn’t going to learn to swallow or dress or toilet without me!”

Cari sighed and glanced up at the large, round clock on the wall. They’d been going at this for three hours already, negotiating services for Meredith’s so-called treatment plan. So far, no one had bothered to ask Meredith what she thought or what she wanted. Meredith and Cari had spent several hours the day before discussing these very things, and Cari knew that the alleged experts were a long way off.

For thirty seconds a long, drawn out silence that tightened muscles and brought the body’s fight or flight response to the forefront filled the room. It was smothering. Then Meredith strained her neck forward, opened her mouth, and gasped out a loud “Ha.” All eyes turned toward Cari.

“You’ve upset her again, Sam,” Reynold accused.

Sam shook his head. “It’s an involuntary spasm. Most of our C.P. clients do that now and then.”

Cari clamped her fingers back around the handles of Meredith’s wheelchair. She clenched her teeth together and screwed her

mouth into the worst grimace she could conjure up. If I punched him right now, that would be an involuntary spasm.

“What do you think, Cari? You’re with her every day. Does she seem better after physical therapy?”

Cari practically hissed at Reynold. “Why don’t you ask her?” she demanded. “Did it occur to you, any of you, even once, to just ask her?”

Carmen, the speech therapist, stood up and placed a flabby arm around Cari’s shoulder. “Now Cari, you know she can’t respond to questions the way we can.”

Cari shrugged the heavy arm away and turned to glare at Carmen. “You, you of all people! She can, you just don’t give her the chance!”

“We don’t have time for that right now. We need to finish this plan and get it filed with the state,” Sam interjected coolly.

“The time,” Cari shouted, huffing around the table to stare him directly in the face. “We’ve been here for three hours and now you suddenly don’t have the time.”

“Calm down, Cari,” Reynold said. “No one is trying to hurt Meredith. I know you’ve grown fond of her.”

“You don’t even know her. She wants some privacy in her room. She wants a job. She wants to make friends and go out with her friends. You don’t think you’re hurting her, but you hurt every time you try to fix her! You hurt her every time you look at me and talk to me instead of her. I’m just the voice. She’s the one that matters.”

Cari turned away and went back to Meredith. She latched Meredith's communication device to the left arm of the wheelchair. Meredith's head jerked toward the keyboard, and her green eyes focused carefully in. She raised her right arm in a clumsy motion, slowly closed all but her index finger into a fist, and began to type on the oversized keys. Several minutes passed with nothing but the sound of each slight click as Meredith typed out her message, the corners of her mouth slightly upturned in a smile.

Then, Meredith lowered her arm, relaxed her fingers, and jerked her head toward Cari. Cari leaned forward and read the letters on the small screen above the keyboard. "She says 'No more therapy.'"

Sam smiled gleefully until Cari turned toward him. "She says 'No more home.'"

Everyone turned to stare at Meredith now. Carmen knelt beside her chair and took Meredith's hand. "Now there, Meri, you know you can't get better without therapy."

Meredith raised her arm again, pointed her finger, and clicked a few more letters. Carmen, Reynold, and Sam all looked at Cari. They're hoping she's come to her senses. Well, she has.

Cari leaned over, read the words on the screen, and smiled. "She says 'I am only as broken as you are.'"

Meredith looked up at Cari and smiled. Cari gripped the handles of Meredith's wheelchair and escorted her friend away from stunned silence.