

Case File: Shawn H.

Joshua Sverdlov

The door creaked open behind me.

“Hello.”

“Doctor Jones, to what do I owe the pleasure.”

She sat down, clipboard in hand, pen tucked safely behind her ear.

“How are you going Shawn?”

“Well, I’ve been better, everything in this godforsaken place is white, so monotone and lifeless,” I groaned, “it’s driving me insane.”

She chuckled under her breath.

“Was life better when you lived in your house?”

“Yes of course, sometimes.”

“Why sometimes Shawn? Can you elaborate for me.” She says, pulling out the clipboard.

“It was a beautiful estate in my time there. I had inherited the place from my parents after their death. For a while I was alone.”

The house sat low against the hills, timber-lined ceilings breathing warmth into every room. Gardens unfolded like pages you didn’t want to finish reading, and water lay still in a long pond that reflected the sky as if it were another ceiling. I told myself the silence was peace. Most days, it was. Other days, the quiet pressed in until my ears rang.

That’s when Marcus moved in.

Marcus Hale, one of my oldest friends from school, arrived with two suitcases and a laugh that bounced off the stone walls. He’d just divorced Lydia, and the city had become unbearable.

“That’s very nice of you Shawn. Can you describe your relationship with Marcus?” She asked, tapping her pen against the page.

Marcus was the smallest guy at our school, the type of guy to get picked on every day, I helped him take care of the worst ones that used to poke fun at him. We became friends, and after high school, we kept in touch until he moved to Sydney for university, to study law.

There he met Lydia, his ex-wife whom I liked, mostly, though she never cared for me.

When he moved in, all was well. We fished in the morning most days, played billiards in the snooker room after dinner. Sometimes we even went out to the bar late at night for a couple of drinks, I could tell he started to feel better about himself, and these activities took his mind off Lydia.

But I wasn't ready to be alone again.

Marcus started staying out later. He said it was work, he had just found a new job as a paralegal 15 minutes out, extra hours he was out of the house. It felt different when he wasn't there, the quiet reverberated through each room. I paced the halls at night, listening to the low hum that settled behind my ears.

"You don't sleep anymore," Marcus said one evening. "You barely eat."

"I'm fine," I replied. "I've just found what works."

Doctor Jones looked up briefly. "What did you mean by that, Shawn?"

"I mean I knew how much was enough," I said. "People exaggerate things."

Marcus didn't agree. He began watching me closely, asking where I'd been, why my hands shook some mornings, why my moods swung without warning. He called it using. I called it managing.

Boxes appeared in the guest room not long after. Each one felt like a countdown.

"I found a place," Marcus told me carefully. "Closer to town. It's good for me."

"When were you going to tell me?" I asked.

"I just did," he said. "Shawn, I can't stay here forever. And I think you need help."

Doctor Jones tapped her pen once. "How did that make you feel?"

"Attacked," I said. "Like he'd already made up his mind."

That night, the house wouldn't settle. Wind rattled the windows, rain scraped along the roof, and the power flickered as if unsure whether to stay. I told myself the tightness in my chest was anxiety, nothing more.

I found Marcus in the snooker room, gathering the last of his things.

"You shouldn't be packing tonight," I said. "Not during a storm."

He turned, eyes tired but steady. "You shouldn't be pretending you're okay."

"I am okay," I snapped. "You're the one abandoning me."

"That's not fair," he said. "I'm trying to help you."

Help. The word echoed, sharp and ugly. He stepped past me toward the door. Toward leaving.

I grabbed his arm.

He pulled away, knocking into the table. The cue clattered loudly, the sound exploding in the small room. He told me to stop. Told me I was scaring him. Told me I wasn't myself.

I pushed him.

I didn't mean for him to fall the way he did.

Doctor Jones folded her hands. "And what did you do after that?"

"I waited," I said. "I thought he'd get up."

He didn't.

I told the police what I always told myself; that things had gotten out of hand. That the lights had gone, the storm. Accidents happen during these types of circumstances.

They listened carefully. Wrote more than they said.

People like explanations when they're neat.

"You're not in your house anymore, Shawn," Doctor Jones said gently. "If Marcus was killed by circumstance, why are you here?"

I shook my head. "Because they don't understand," I whispered. "Because they see things that aren't there."

She unclicked her pen.

The door closed.

And in that silence, I told myself, once again, that I was in control.