

Weston Pierce had a regular routine.

Every Thursday afternoon, at exactly 4:52pm, Weston walked into his local toy store. It had to be Thursday, because Thursday was the fourth day of the week, and it *had* to be 4:52, because arriving any other time wasn't good luck. Weston's mission was critically, deathly important, so he needed good luck.

When he'd first started his mission, he'd first had to ask if there were any unopened cases, then ask if he could buy one without breaking the seal on the tape. It became a bit of a scene each time, and each time, Weston had felt more than a little awkward. After a few months, though, the employees started just holding a case out of their weekly shipment for him. They stopped asking questions, too, and simply greeted him with a jovial, "Here for your weekly case of cards, Mr. Pierce?" Weston found that incredibly kind.

Each case had four display boxes of playing cards, and each display box had twelve decks of cards. There were fifty-two cards per deck, so that totaled up to six hundred twenty four cards per display, which made two thousand four hundred ninety six cards in total, excluding the jokers. Weston didn't care for the jokers. In fact, he made a point of taking them all out and shredding them as soon as he was able. They were unlucky.

Once Weston had his case of cards, he would head out to his car, toss the receipt into the back seat, and drive home. He'd spend the rest of the evening alone, beginning the process of sorting through his new playing cards to find the special ones. If he was lucky, he'd find one. On some of his luckiest nights, he would even find two. Most weeks, though, he would go through the entire case and not find a single special card. It was a disheartening struggle, but he wasn't going to give up. His mission was too important for that, more important than anything else he'd ever done.

So, every Thursday evening, Weston would sort through as many of the two thousand four hundred twenty six playing cards as he could, shredding the jokers as he went. He'd continue to sort them every evening for the rest of the week, finishing before the next Thursday rolled around. That was how every week went, every month, for sixty-three weeks in a row.

On the sixty-fourth Thursday since Weston began his mission, he had a guest; David, Weston's best friend since middle school.

David's car pulled into the driveway at six thirty-one, which was *not* the agreed upon time. Thankfully, he didn't get out right away, idling politely outside for a few moments before approaching the front door. Weston used the extra time to put away the deck of cards he'd been combing through, setting it on top of the now-open case and pushing the whole thing under the coffee table. When David knocked at exactly six thirty three, Weston called out, "It's unlocked!"

David opened the door and stepped in, balancing a bag of takeout in the crook of his arm and a drink carrier in his hand. "Hey, Wes!" he called out. "You want this in the living room or the..."

He paused as he stepped out of the entryway, an odd look on his face as he looked around the space. "Here in the living room is fine," Weston said, gesturing to the coffee table before moving an open case of loose cards off the couch. "Sorry about the mess. I haven't really had the chance to tidy up, lately."

"Oh, it's fine," David said, stepping around a stack of empty playing card boxes to set the food on the coffee table. "You've obviously been pretty busy. Card hunting again?"

"Yep," Weston said, smiling a bit as he gestured to the new case under the coffee table. "Getting started on another box just today, actually. I've been making good progress lately. If I keep up this lucky streak, I may even find the entire deck by the end of the year!"

David nodded along, gaze continuing to wander for another moment as he sat down. When he spoke, his voice was oddly tight. "That's- that's great, man," he said. He took a deep breath, then continued, "That's awesome. So, you hungry?"

Weston settled on the couch next to David, smiling as his friend divvied up food. It was sweet, how emotional David got over Weston's progress sometimes. It showed how much he cared. Not many people understood just how important Weston's mission was, so it was nice to have a friend that did. He recalled again how David waited until six thirty three to knock and

smiled a bit wider, warmth blooming deep in his chest.

After basking in the feeling for a few seconds, Weston looked up from the coffee table to see David watching him expectantly. Oh, shoot. Had David been speaking? “Sorry, I was lost in thought,” Weston said. “Did you ask me something?”

“Just if you want ketchup or honey mustard for your fries,” David offered again. “They were out of barbecue.”

Weston nodded, reaching for the TV remote. “Honey mustard works. Do you want to watch a movie?”

“Sure, man,” David agreed. “Did you ever get the chance to go see *The Corner of Your Eye*? It’s streaming, if you didn’t.”

“Oh, it’s streaming already?” Weston said. “Wow. No, I didn’t get the chance to see it. I guess with as much work I’ve been putting into my deck lately, I lost track of the date. It’s coming along well, at least. I think I might even be able to finish it by the end of the year.”

David nodded, nudging the carton of fries toward Weston. “Yeah, you mentioned. That’s great, dude.”

Oh, Weston *had* already said that, hadn’t he? Well, David didn’t seem to mind. “Do you want to see it?” he asked.

“Your deck?” David clarified. At Weston’s nod, he continued, “Yeah, I’d love to. Let’s eat first, though, alright?”

Weston beamed. “Sure,” he agreed. Then, gesturing to the TV with the remote, he asked, “What do you want to watch?”

David pulled a burger box out of the paper bag and suggested, “Why don’t we watch *The Corner of Your Eye*?”

Weston hadn’t realized how hungry he was. He was a little embarrassed

by how quickly he finished his food, tearing through a large fry and a double cheeseburger until he found himself uncomfortably full. David, endlessly understanding, didn't tease him for it. He *did* seem worried, though, asking Weston gently, "Have you been eating okay, man?"

"Yeah, I've been eating," Weston said. "I guess I was just hungry tonight."

David didn't look convinced. "Yeah? Well, what else have you eaten today?" he pressed.

Weston thought about it. He could have sworn he'd eaten something, but... mentally walking back through his day, he was drawing a blank. He skipped breakfast, but that was normal. He remembered feeling hungry later in the day, and... didn't he eat something? "I had a pack of peanut butter crackers earlier," he recalled. Other than that, though...

"That's good," David said, "But that's not a full meal. Dude, you've got to start eating."

"I eat!" Weston protested. "Maybe I don't always eat well, but I eat."

David rolled his eyes, and Weston may have been offended if it came from anyone else. "You need to start eating *well*, then," David amended. "Come on, man. You were doing really well, last week. Would it help if I started bringing over groceries?"

Weston startled. "You came over last week?"

Silence hung between them. David set down his soda and turned to face Weston properly. Oh, no.

"Yeah, Wes," he said, gentle and concerned in that weighted way that Weston *hated*. "I brought dinner last Thursday, too. Do you remember?"

Weston didn't answer, because why should he? They both knew what his answer would be, and when he told David that he didn't, David was going to ask him-

“Have you been taking your meds like you’re supposed to?”

“Shut up,” Weston snapped, frustration burning through him and boiling his blood into venom. “Don’t even ask me that, David. I don’t want to talk about it tonight.”

David fell silent again, and Weston turned back toward the TV, not wanting to meet his gaze. He knew what he would find there, and he didn’t want to see it. David was supposed to be his *friend*. He was supposed to understand. Why couldn’t he just let Weston be?

Apparently, Weston was going to have a lucky night, because that’s exactly what David did. He stayed silent, letting the movie play. When Weston dared to glance David’s way, he found that David wasn’t looking at him at all. He was focused on the screen, expression blank in a way that chilled Weston’s anger and curdled it into guilt.

It took a few more minutes, but Weston slowly calmed, the edges of his eyes beginning to sting. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I didn’t- I didn’t mean it.”

“I know you didn’t, Wes,” David replied just as gently. “I’m sorry for asking. It’s none of my business, anyway.”

“But you’re only asking because you’re my friend,” Weston said, pressing his hands against his eyes as if he could keep the tears in by force. “You’re asking because you’re worried about me, and I yelled at you for it.”

David leaned forward to pick up the remote. “You didn’t yell,” he said as he turned the TV off to talk. “And even if you did, I forgive you, man. We’re okay.”

Weston nodded, sniffling and slowly lowering his hands from his face. “We’re okay,” he agreed.

He took a few more deep breaths, letting himself calm the rest of the way before he spoke. “I haven’t been taking them,” he admitted. “My pills, I mean. I know I’m supposed to. I know I’m more organized when I’m taking them, and it’s easier to take care of my body, but I... I don’t feel like *me*, David. The world gets so dull, and I’m so disconnected from things, and I... I

just can't do the things I need to do, when I'm like that. I didn't find a single special card while I was on that medication, you know that? I couldn't even feel what was special about the cards I'd already found anymore. They were just cards."

"Yeah," David said, frowning a bit. "That sounds really unnerving. The psychiatrist said that might happen, though, didn't she? Did you ever go to that follow-up, to talk with her about it?"

Weston shook his head. "I was scared," he admitted. "I was scared that she was going to tell me it was a good thing. I was scared she'd tell me it's all in my head. It's- it's *not*, David. I know it's not. Those cards really are special, and there are more of them out there. If I- If I can just get an entire deck together, I'll finally be able to find my mom."

David took a long, deep breath in, then released it in a sigh. "I know, Wes," he said. "And I'm hearing you. Finding your mom, that's- it's really important to you. That kind of thing would be important to anybody, but you can't neglect yourself over it." He reached out and put a hand on Weston's shoulder. "You need to take care of yourself, man. You need to be able to function. At the very least, you've gotta remember to *eat*. The pills are going to help you with that."

"But what about Mom?" Weston asked. "She didn't leave us. I know she didn't. That woman that they found in Oklahoma, that- that's not her. Someone out there has my mother, and I'm the only one left looking for her. I can't give up now."

"You're not giving up," David said. "And you're not the only one left looking. I'm here, aren't I? And I'm not giving up on you."

Weston felt like crying again, but he nodded. Yes, David was there. David had always been there, ever since eighth grade when Weston pulled his best friend into the school bathroom and confided in him that someone was impersonating his mother. He didn't call him delusional like the police officer did, or the counselor, or his dad. He'd believed him and offered to help.

David squeezed his shoulder gently. "Listen," he urged, "You can trust me, right? So trust me. If your meds keep you from finding the cards, then

we'll come up with another way to find her. You have to make yourself the priority. If not for your own sake, for your mom."

As much as Weston hated it, David was right. He nodded again, then put his head back in his hands. "I... I already flushed the rest of the pills," he told him. "I'll have to go back to the psychiatrist."

"That's alright," David said. "You can make a new appointment. Do you want me to drive you again?"

"Yes, please." Weston lifted his head, suddenly feeling drained. "Can I... Can it wait until tomorrow?"

David thought about it, then shrugged and said, "Yeah, why not? The office is probably closed by now, anyway. Wanna finish the movie? I'm dying to know if Mark made it out alive or not. Maybe after you can show me the new cards you've found."

Weston relaxed, leaning back into the couch with a nod. As his friend turned the TV back on, Weston felt another glimmer of warmth in his chest. He was so grateful to have a friend who didn't think he was crazy.

Later that evening, David turned the TV off, glancing over at where Weston had fallen asleep on the couch. He sighed again, then stood to grab the throw blanket of the back of the couch, swearing softly as he slipped on a plastic-coated playing card. He managed not to lose his balance, grabbing the blanket and draping it over Weston before taking another good look around the apartment.

The home was *covered* in playing cards. The living room was the worst, small trails of carpet peeking up through piles of cards that hadn't been 'special' enough to keep track of. Precarious stacks of empty boxes rose alongside the thin cleared paths like disturbing red-and-white cairns, marking the daily path Weston took to and from the front door. David noted that there was no path cleared toward the bedroom, nor was there a path to the kitchen. He had no doubt that if he went to Weston's room, the bed would be made exactly the way it was last Thursday when he'd checked in.

David didn't go to the bedroom. He went to the kitchen, instead, shuffling his feet until he made his way through the sea of playing cards. A thin layer of dust had settled over the room, but at least he could see the floor.

He made his way to the fridge, opening it up and grimacing. What few groceries Weston had were long-spoiled. David closed the door to deal with that later, pulling out his phone to make a list. Weston needed milk, and maybe some grab-and-go meals he could keep up with until he was okay to cook...

Tears blurred David's vision. He lowered his phone to wipe them away, biting his lip as he did to keep himself from sobbing. He didn't know what he was doing anymore. He felt helpless, watching Weston deteriorate. It was scary how much time Weston had started to lose. He'd been doing better for a little while, and David had naively let himself hope it would be a straight upward climb. Obviously not, if the mess Weston had managed to make in just a week was anything to go by.

David briefly wondered if he should call for an ambulance again. God, Weston had been so mad about that first wellness check. The hospital had only help him for three days, but it was over a month before David heard from him again. He'd called to complain that someone called the psych ward on him, having apparently forgotten that David was the one behind it. That was the first time David noticed Weston lose a major detail of something. After that incident, the memory issues just kept getting worse. God, it really just kept getting worse.

David took a deep breath in, then let it slowly out through his mouth. Weston had agreed to see the psychiatrist again, at least. That was a starting point. It had taken ages to get him to see a professional, but David had finally managed to convince Weston that his anxiety, at least, was a problem. The doctor they'd ended up with was careful not to call Weston delusional, at least not outright, and even managed to convince him to start taking antipsychotics. Now they just needed Weston to *keep* taking them.

Even if Weston never shook the thing with the playing cards, David would be happy just seeing him put on some weight. He was seriously starting to worry about how loose-fitting Weston's clothes had been getting.

With that thought in mind, David unlocked his phone again to keep

working on his grocery list. He'd meant it when he said he wasn't giving up on Weston. He wouldn't give up.

Not for his wife. Not for his job. Not for anything.

David double-checked the finished list, frowning when he realized it had fourteen items. He skimmed the list again, looking for something to remove. Thirteen was a far luckier number than fourteen, after all, and he needed all the luck he could get. He was on a mission to help Weston, after all.

And his mission was critically, deathly important.