

## PTA Vibes

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# PTA Vibes

by [greyish](#)

## Summary

“The first PTA meeting he walked into, she'd given him a look of total abject horror before quickly resuming her standard Passive Housewife expression. He'd enjoyed riling her up until she completely cracked, yelling ‘gluten-free snacks are non-negotiable!’ at him across the table like a maniac and stunning the rest of the room into silence. They'd stared at each other intensely until someone awkwardly cleared their throat and suggested they take a tea break.”

I kinda want Rio to find out all the Dean baggage so he can be a dick to him about it. This fic happened while I was thinking of ways the writers could make him find out organically. Because Beth obviously isn't going to tell him.

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

# Chapter 1

Rio tenses as he hears the woman approach. It seems ridiculous to think that anyone would attack him in broad daylight at a park full of witnesses, but watching Marcus makes him extra vigilant. He can't help it.

"Rio!" She says, and he relaxes. He's not overly fond of the PTA crowd, finds them boring and petty-minded, but he cultivates their friendships as one of the small yet satisfying ways he has to fuck with Beth. She hates it.

(He is positive the other members are taking bets on how long it will take them to fuck or try to kill each other. Little do they know.)

Lara settles beside him and he smiles at her. She's not the most interesting person to talk to, but she seems to have dirt on everyone and he respects that. Their semi-friendly relationship started with her increasingly desperate attempts to get a read on him. He found it amusing.

He says hello and looks back at the playground. Unfortunately Beth has moved away from Marcus's general vicinity so it's harder to watch her without looking like he's watching her.

The first PTA meeting he walked into, she'd given him a look of total abject horror before quickly resuming her standard Passive Housewife expression. He'd enjoyed riling her up until she completely cracked, *yelling gluten-free snacks are non-negotiable!* at him across the table like a maniac and stunning the rest of the room into silence. They'd stared at each other intensely until someone awkwardly cleared their throat and suggested they take a tea break

(She'd pulled him aside and demanded to know why he was trying to fuck with her by attending a PTA meeting. He denied it lazily, not even trying to sound genuine. She'd carved out a space in his life like it was nothing. He wanted to retaliate. Invade every aspect of her existence.)

She'd stormed off and spent the rest of the break aggressively loading a paper plate with pieces of cantelope and then left it on the table without eating any. He's pretty sure that's when the betting started.

"Hi Beth!" Lara calls out brightly, he turns and sees her at a bench, negotiating orange slices for all four of her kids at once. She turns and waves back distractedly. Her kids chow down on the oranges and scatter, except for Emma who's clinging to her mom's legs. He wonders where Dean is.

"What's her deal?" He asks Lara. "She takes a lot of small shit seriously."

They typically have about three intense, level-voiced arguments per meeting, and even more at events. Watching Beth keep perfectly calm while telling him to go to hell in Soccer Mom Speak turns him on more than he'd care to admit.

"Oh, she's fine." Lara says, "she's a bit intense about this PTA stuff, but there's always at least one who is. At least Beth won't chase you down with a pitchfork for forgetting a meeting. And she keeps the wolves at bay, so to speak."

Beth moves back into his line of sight, chasing a squealing Emma towards the monkey bars. She stops to lean against them for a second, clutching her side and laughing. Her hair is tousled and she has pinebark stains on her trousers.

It takes him a couple seconds to recover.

"We're all very relieved you've got her arguing now," Lara is saying, "she was becoming less engaged since she took over her husband's business, and you know Karen H is just looking for an opening so she can run the rest of us into the ground over her stupid paleo diet."

Another mom, whose name escapes him, drifts over and catches the tail end of her sentence.

"Oh god, she needs to stop," Mom #2 says, "we don't all need to bring paleo options. Her kids are the only ones on that diet."

"And no one else wants to eat the snacks she brings anyway, so what's the problem?" Lara adds, and they both laugh.

Beth glances over and sees him, sandwiched between them, completely out of his element. She looks amused.

"Why'd she take over the business?" He asks in retaliation.

"Probably because Dean went bankrupt. Twice." Lara adds with relish.

"Apparently she had to bail him out both times," Mom #2 chimes in, "god knows how."

"Loan shark," Lara says definitively, "I heard there were some shady characters hanging around her place for a while. And then Dean "got mugged" and had to be hospitalised."

"Scary," Rio deadpans.

They both nod emphatically.

"Their marriage is a total soap opera," Lara says, "the things that man gets away with. I don't understand it."

"Well, there's the kids to think about." Mom #2 sighs.

"What things?" Rio asks.

"I really shouldn't say." Lara says emphatically. There is a momentary pause and she shifts closer to him.

"I only know this because Cora Radcliffe's sister works as a nurse at the state Hospital. Dean was in a car accident a while back and *she* says that Beth asked how the treatments would

interact with his chemotherapy." She paused for dramatic effect, "and the nurse said - I'm paraphrasing - she said, what are you talking about?"

Mom #2 gasps, "*no!*"

"It happened. She was convinced he had cancer."

"He *wouldn't!*"

"It's Dean Boland," Lara says viciously, "his two skills are ruining things and avoiding responsibility."

Rio laughs.

"Have you met him?" Lara asks him.

"Once or twice."

"He's awful, isn't he? We were parent supervisors together once when Beth was ill. Completely. Useless."

"She would have realised," Mom #2 interjects, "wouldn't she go with him to the doctor?"

"Maybe he asked her not to," Lara said.

"Maybe he bribed his doctor," Rio added without thinking.

Lara smiled at him like she'd found a kindred spirit. Fuck.

"According to Steve's wife - Steve and Dean are drinking buddies -" she adds for Rio's benefit, "after she left him because of that business with his secretary-"

"-she was only nineteen," Mom #2 interjects again, "can you imagine?"

"-he tried talking her out of a divorce and it massively backfired -"

"- she's had four kids! God knows what that would do your self esteem. *Nineteen!*"

"- then a couple weeks later, bam, there he is back home again."

Mom #2 tsks. She and Lara make disapproving noises for a couple of seconds, then Lara's kid came running up asking for a juicebox and the conversation drops while she digs through her bag. He grabs the box and runs off, screaming something incomprehensible.

"My kids are so rough!" She says, "Marcus is such a sweet little boy, I don't know how you managed that."

"You've got to spank them," Mom #2 says, "I know we're not supposed to anymore, but kids need a little discipline."

"Nah," Rio objects, "getting rough with kids ain't gonna teach them not to get rough."

Lara points to him in triumph.

"Exactly!" she says. "You've got to talk to them! Even when you feel like screaming and throwing them off the roof."

Mom #2 huffs, "I never feel like throwing my kids off the roof."

"Well," says Lara amicably, "your nanny probably does."

Emma runs past them, red faced and cackling like a little maniac. Beth is still chasing her. She's got a pinched look on her face, like maybe she's tired and would just like to sit down. She gets into it anyway, waving her arms and making monster noises whenever Emma turns back to check she's still being pursued.

They're looping large circles around the sandpit, where Marcus is shovelling away with a plastic bucket.

"Better check on my boy," Rio says, even though Marcus is clearly having the time of his life. The other parents probably don't see that, though. Marcus loves being in his own little world, his teachers' keep pulling him in to talk about 'anti-social behaviour' and 'random muttering'.

He wanders over to his kid and squats next to him.

"How you doin', pop?" He asks. Marcus grins up at him.

"I made a castle!" He says, gesturing to a fairly large clump of sand.

"Woah," Rio says, "Does it have a moat?"

Marcus goes on a very confused but enthusiastic rant about dragons. He seems to know a lot about the mythology, but also thinks they live in moat-less sky castles.

He's so absorbed in listening to his kid he barely registers Beth calling *Emma, watch out, don't* - and then he gets knocked over by a mass of flailing limbs.

He picks himself up as Beth runs over.

"I am so sorry," she says, scooping a crying Emma up in her arms. She's flushed and a little breathless. He knows he's staring, knows his hunger for her must be written all over his face, but he can't look away. She's like a supernova.

"Shh, baby, let me see," she soothes Emma, who lifts up a knee to show her a scrape, "don't worry darling, we'll get that all patched up."

She appologies to him quickly again, barely looking at his face like she knows what's there, and hurries off with Emma in her arms. Danny runs up and tugs at her pants, saying something he can't hear. She puts one hand on his head and guides them both to the bench where she left their bags.

"Daddy?" Marcus asks.

"Yeah?" He says, dragging his eyes away to look at his son.

"Do you like Miss Elizabeth?" He asks, shyly. Or is it slyness?

Goddamn it. He forgot that housewives aren't the only gossips.

...

Beth's working through a stack of papers in her office, methodical and intent. He loves watching her focus on something. She zeros in and doesn't stop until she's done. Technically he could have left about twenty minutes ago, but she hasn't called him on it.

"Why are housewives so nosey and shit?" He asks.

"They're bored," she says, without looking up.

"Did you use to be like that?"

He watches her closely. She's frowning slightly, he can't tell if the work is getting to her or if he's just pissing her off as usual.

"No," she says, "I did crafts. And hung out with Ruby and Annie."

He stifles the urge to ask her exactly what type of crafts. He doesn't know how to say it in a way that's not sarcastic and he doesn't want to shatter the temporary calm between them, not yet.

"That school is a bubble for some women," Beth says, "they're stuck with people they don't like talking about things that don't interest them, and they don't have the time or energy to go looking for people they will like, and talk about things they are interested in. So they talk about each other instead, because it's more entertaining than sandwich preferences and favourite kids movies."

There is an extended pause.

"Lara has a PhD in marine science," she adds, "she studied Australian fresh water mollusks. I think if she knew more people interested in hearing about that she'd never gossip at all."

"Hmm" he says. "You like to hear about that?"

She looks up at him then, a smile playing at the corner of her lips. He mentally awards himself two points - one for distracting her and one for making her look like that.

"Hell no," she says, "I listen for five minutes every three years or so and that's about all I can take."

He laughs.

"Why don't you take a break from that?" He gestures to the piles of documents.

"To do what?" She snipes, "dish about other PTA members?"

He looks her up and down. She's deliberately not looking at him now, but he can tell she feels the heat of his gaze on her. Her entire body stills for a moment.

"You could get on the desk," he says.

She collects herself quickly and gives him one of her Looks - the 'stop trying to put me off balance' look mixed in with a bit of 'let's keep things professional' and 'I'm turned on and I hate you for it'. Beth can pack a lot of meaning into a single expression.

She goes back to the paperwork. He waits for a moment, then leans back in his chair and kicks the leg of her desk, just hard enough to jostle her slightly.

She looks up and drops her pen, indignation all over her face.

"Did you want something?"

He grins and opens his mouth, but she holds up a hand to shush him.

"Don't answer that," she says, "don't you have somewhere else to be?"

He shrugs. Keeps grinning at her.

She squints her eyes at him and picks her pen back up, turning her gaze back to her desk.

"I wanna hear about Australian fresh water mollusks," he says, "what can you tell me?"

She laughs suddenly. It surprises him, a real genuine laugh like she does when she's with her kids or Annie and Ruby. He savours the moment. It feels like passing a milestone.

"Get out," she tells him. She tries to look stern, but her tone is amused, "I have work to do."

He leaves her smiling to herself, tapping her pen against the desk in an off-beat rhythm.

He strums it out against the steering wheel of his car, thinking about her mouth tipping upwards at the corners and her fingers curled loosely around the pen.

...

Marcus and Emma are friends now. Apparently.

He can't imagine how it will go down when Marcus tells her he wants to get their parents together so that Miss Elizabeth will be his third Mom and Emma will be his sister. Seeing as how Emma's parents are still married.

It has its ups though - like when Emma invited Marcus to play after school and Rio got to watch Dean struggle for a reason to say no while Lara hovered over his shoulder smiling sweetly at Dean like she's waiting for him to say something.



Or when he dropped by early to pick Marcus up and the kids insisted on staying until the promised 5:30 pm.

"You be Ariel," Marcus tells Beth while he and Emma pile cushions on top of cushions. They're either building a fort or a collapsing wall.

"Is Ariel a part of this game?" Beth asks him. She's kicked off her shoes and has one hand over her eyes, leaning back into the couch. He leans into the doorway, watching her unwind slowly, the days tension seeping out of her shoulders. He realises he's never seen her unwind all the way.

Except once. But that has hardly been relaxing.

"Shiny hair," Marcus tell her, as if this answers the question.

"I think it's time to go home, bub," Rio says.

Beth glances at him. He smiles.

"Yeah," Dean says, from where he's glowering in the corner.

Beth's eyes widen as she stares at Rio. Ah, yes, her 'I'm tired please don't escalate this situation' look. With perhaps a bit of 'my husband is a dickhead and I should divorce his ass and fuck you in the bed I used to share with him'. But that might be wishful thinking on Rio's part.

"You can stay for dinner!" Emma says. She turns to Dean and whines, "please, dad? Marcus was telling me about dragons!"

"Dragons don't live in castles," he snaps.

Marcus looks crushed. Rio clenches his jaw.

"You're thinking of unicorns," Beth replies. The Passive Housewife facade is back in full force, but there's an undercurrent of energy in her words, something in her posture that indicates trouble.

"Unicorns live in the forest," Emma says, "Dragons live in castles."

"Silly Daddy got them confused," Beth agrees breezily, getting up off the couch and putting her shoes back on. "Did you start dinner yet, hon?"

Dean did a double take and glanced back at the kitchen warily.

"I thought since you got home early today ..." He trailed off.

"I've been watching the kids all afternoon," she reminds him.

"So have I!" He says, as if watching football and until Rio arrived and then standing in the corner glaring at him with his arms folded is the same as active parenting.

"Dad can cook!" Marcus says. "He cooks so good! He used to be a top chef!"

Beth and Dean both look slightly thrown by this revelation while Emma bounces up and down excitedly.

"Please! Please! Please!" Emma squeals, "you let Kenny have his friend over for dinner on Monday night even though he had homework and I don't have homework and -"

"Of course they can stay for dinner," Beth interrupts as Emma's decibels climb to terrifying levels.

"Not tonight, Emma," Dean says at the same time, "it's been a real busy day, and your mother hasn't started dinner yet."

Beth stares at her husband for a long moment, then she leads him out of the room and comes back ten minutes later.

(She's looking for all the world like she didn't just cut off her husband's dick and feed it to him. With slight undertones of 'I definitely did just do that'.)

"Dean is cooking," she says sweetly, "you're welcome to join us."

The children's shrieks of joy are deafening.

...

Dean can't cook for shit. The kids can barely contain their dismay, except Marcus and Emma who are talking so much they barely notice what they're putting in their mouths. Beth keeps pausing to stare at them, her eyes lighting up. The image of Beth chasing Emma around the park while the other kids play together hits him hard, and he grins at her across the table. She grins back. Dean gets up noisily and heads for the kitchen.

"You're not allowed to leave the table until you're finished!" Danny yells. Beth shushes him.

Emma and Marcus hug for five minutes before he finally gets his kid packed away into the car. Beth waves at him from the house. He waves back.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

“Well. You made a good first impression on the family.”

“What's that?”

“Annie. You made a good first impression on Annie.”

Rio chokes slightly.

...

As promised, Lara's bitch metre is up 80% and the sapphic rep is increasing.

Rio's bitch metre is at a constant 100 but we all knew that.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Beth is getting increasingly difficult to surprise. She seems to sense him coming, wherever they are, and more and more her responses take the form of ‘I knew you’d say that and I don’t appreciate that you did’ instead of ‘oh my god what is happening’

He compensates by siding with Karen H on the paleo issue. Beth is so thrown she can’t even form a coherent response, and Karen is so happy to have someone on her side that she spends a full thirty minutes spouting absolute bullshit about the benefits of dieting at young ages while the other parents give him dirty looks. Eventually Beth recovers from glaring at him with more fury than he has *ever seen* - which is remarkable considering their history - and thankfully cuts her tirade short.

“As with all dietary requirements, we'll make sure there are options available for your children even when you are unable to bring some yourselves,” she says, voice clipped and professional, “however, dietary restrictions do not apply to the rest of the parents *unless* there is a risk involved, such as a severe peanut allergy.”

“My kids -” Karen begins, but Beth interrupts her again.

“Your children do not have a medical reason to be on a diet and therefore it is your responsibility to control their behaviour when it comes to the snack table.”

“But -”

“I’m sure we’ve all got places to be,” Beth says brightly, “why don’t you send out an email blast of paleo recipes and anyone who wants to can use them.”

She moves in a way that indicates she’s about to get up, and suddenly everyone is on their way out.

“Wow,” Rio drawls, cornering her next to her car. She looks furiously at him. “I’m starting to think you were always kinda a boss.”

“Obviously,” she says witheringly, “you *agree* with that monster? Last meeting you said there should even *be* any gluten free snacks!”

“Oh, but paleo is different,” he says, “paleo gets special treatment.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“Don’t let the other parents hear you using that language, sweetheart.”

“GO FUCK YOURSELF,” Beth yells, startling the few remaining PTA members chatting in the parking lot, “see? Nothing happened.”

Rio laughs.

“Nah, but you definitely scared them,” he says. “They might take you off the email list.”

“Why aren’t *you* on the email list?” She asks him sweetly, “it’s great for networking with the other parents, and I’m sure the moms would love to have your contact information.”

“They know where to find me,” he says.

He smirks and raises an eyebrow at her, and she huffs and gets in the car. He leans in with one hand on the door before she can close it.

“Can I get a ride?” He asks.

“Your car is *right there*. ”

She points to the space next to hers, where he parked after circling the block for twenty minutes before she gave up on trying to wait him out so he couldn’t park near her. They were both extremely late. He got some knowing glances when he slipped in, just a few minutes after her.

“Oh, so it is," he says.

She slams the door so fast he almost loses a finger.

...

Rio doesn’t know when Annie decided to show up to a PTA meeting, but it’s pretty clear she’s not a regular and based on the number of contemptuous looks she’s getting it’s definitely not her crowd. Beth pulls her aside before the meeting starts and they get into some pretty intense hissing. He tries to casually drift closer, but Lara tugs on his arm and anchors him to her.

“Be subtle,” she says, “I have amazing hearing.”

She pauses for a second, a look of intense concentration on her face. Annie says something that makes Beth reel back in fury and they both sit down.

“Beth said, ‘you’ve never been interested before’” Lara says, “and Annie said, ‘well I heard that now there’s a show every meeting.’”

“Where’d she hear that?” Rio asks.

“Me.”

“Ah.”

Annie spends the entire meeting staring between the two of them as they argue, her mouth ajar. She marches up to him during the break as he’s contemplating the snack table.

“What, so you’re like, an active parent now?” She asks him.

“Are you?” He says, spearing a piece of watermelon with a toothpick and popping it in his mouth.

She huffs just like Beth does. Must be genetic.

“I was always an active parent,” she says loudly, glaring around the room like someone might disagree with her.

He raises an eyebrow at her. She seems to take his point, because she wraps her arms around herself, mutters 'fair enough' and wanders back to where Beth is engaged in an intense discussion with a teacher. At least, it looks intense on her end. the teacher just looks kinda lost.

...

"Are you trying to intimidate us?" Annie asks, when they all walk towards the same spot in the carpark.

Rio almost laughs at her. He's feeling a modicum of sympathy for Annie right now, it doesn't seem like she's in an environment that is particularly supportive of unwed teen moms, so he just shrugs and smiles at her. She looks so incredibly thrown by this he has to bite down another laugh.

"He can't intimidate me by walking me to my car, Annie," Beth says as she opens the car door. "He's literally held a gun to my head. Multiple times."

Annie considers this, and nods.

"Can you give me a lift?" She asks Beth, "my car broke down again so I had to catch the bus."

"You caught the bus out here just for a show?" Rio asks, just to see them spin around and give him identical glares.

*"Fucking Lara,"* Annie mutters.

He salutes them and climbs into his car.

...

Lara plops down next to him on the park bench.

“Well. You made a good first impression on the family.”

“What's that?”

“Annie. You made a good first impression on Annie.”

Rio chokes slightly.

“I think you should make a move,” Lara says. “You can't just hang around waiting for Dean to ruin his own marriage, the man is immune to consequences.”

“You need a new hobby,” Rio says, “or a job. Tell your husband it's time to switch up.”

“My *wife* has a very lucrative career in advertising and we both agreed ...” she trails off, “I was going to keep writing research papers but it's hard when you can't get out in the field.”

“Especially when the field is Australia, I guess.”

Lara brightened, “oh, you're familiar with my work? Did you read my dissertation on the reproductive behaviour of *Velesunio ambiguus* ?”

“No.”

“They're a very interesting species, most freshwater mussels are found in -”

“Get a job, Lara.”



...

“Please stop upsetting my sister,” Beth says to him.

They’re in her office after dark, separated by that damn desk again.

“Tell that to the other parents,” he says. He doesn't think it's fair to single him out when all he did was have a history of threatening behaviour. Actually, maybe it is fair.

“I do,” she says, “of course I do.”

She sounds genuinely upset. He reaches across the desk to take her hand, then pauses and starts toying with a paperweight instead.

“I know you do,” he says gently.

She stares down at her hands.

“I’m supposed to run that show,” she says quietly, “I can stop Karen from trying to convert everyone to her diet, make Eric think he doesn’t actually want to start a shooting club, and get the Jones’ to agree to a GSA, but I can’t get any of them to treat her with respect.”

He drops the paperweight and takes her hand. She clutches it tightly, staring down at nothing, hair falling forwards and covering her face. He waits until she’s breathing normally again, then reaches out to catch some of her curls and smooth them back behind her ear. She looks up at him and smiles slightly.

“The GSA thing explains why Lara's so obsessed with fixing your life,” he says.

She laughs, softly, and squeezes his hand.

“Is she?” She asks, “I thought she was obsessed with fixing your life.”

...

“No, it's not that,” Lara tells him, “although I do appreciate it. It's very hard to suggest a GSA when you've got a bunch of other parents telling you how glad they are you're not trying to *push your lifestyle* onto their children .”

“Then why?”

“I hate Dean.”

“This much?”

“He knows what he did,” she says darkly, “although he's probably forgotten.”

...

Annie brings Ruby to the next meeting. They share a milkshake and loudly underscore Beth's points with inappropriate applause and cries of *here here!* They keep offering Beth sips of the milkshake, and she takes it, despite initial protests. Karen H sniffs loudly and stares at them across the table.

“Can you *not* drink that while we're having a meeting?”

“Why not?” Beth asks, “it’s no more disruptive than water, and we’re not going to ban that.”

Annie takes a long, noisy slurp and nods. Beth does not break eye contact with Karen. Daring her to say something.

“I think this is a perfect time to talk about diets,” Karen says, for the third time. “Rio agrees with me.”

Everyone turns to Rio.

“Hmm?” He says.

“About paleo,” Karen hisses angrily, “you agree with me about paleo.”

“Oh, is that a diet?” He asks her, “I thought it was an era.”

Annie spit-takes all over the table.

## Chapter End Notes

- Writers: So Ruby might ...

Me: ... share a milkshake with her two best friends? Got it! \*runs away with my hands over my ears\*

-The discussion Beth is having with the teacher is not intense, she’s just intensely avoiding looking at Rio. Otherwise she’d have realised Annie was going to speak to him and they’d definitely get into a fight about it.

-Ahh the dreaded Karen H. Nothing against paleo, it works for some people. TBH I was put on an unnecessary diet as a kid and I’m still kinda salty about it.

-Beth always supported a GSA, but she really started to fight tooth and nail for it because she loves Sadie.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Summary

"Rio has gathered, mostly through osmosis, that Dean is not well liked among most of the mothers, especially since he's become more involved in rearing his children. Complaints of 'a condescending attitude', 'inappropriate behavior', and 'generally annoying' float around in the background like small angry balloons. No one in the entire school seems to match Lara's rage."

Anyone else freaking out about the latest promo? Come into my AU, where we cover our ears and sing loudly every time the writers try to tell us something.

Because Rio isn't in fucking *middle school*, he doesn't expect holding hands with Beth to lead to slow dancing or fireworks. He expected her to tighten the reins she's holding herself by, in compensation for a moment of vulnerability, and then continue to run hot and cold with him like always. He expected himself to put in a slow play to bait her out again.

He's almost right, except for two things.

1. It's like someone turned the dial up on Beth's emotional state where he's concerned.

She's somehow become more relaxed *and* tense around him, and she keeps looking at him with this fond little smile on her face for a moment before turning stone cold again. She joked with him for the whole lunch break when they realised they'd both suffered through countless reiterations of Baby Shark, and then power walked so fast out of the meeting and to her car she looked like a strawberry-blonde blur.

2. It wasn't just Beth who changed.

He was so caught up in messing with Beth and taking over her space, he should have figured it would spiral out of his control, like everything else with her. He feels like his whole personality is shifting and rearranging itself. Things he used to dismiss seem critically important, whereas things that would've rendered him furious and vicious less than a year ago are now just mildly annoying or downright amusing. He feels lost and exposed and also really, really fucking mad about it. But he can't stop.

They're sitting at the park watching their kids run around like little maniacs. She's as far away as she could possibly be sitting on the bench, hands folded in her lap and gaze deliberately away from him, like she can still pretend not to know him. One of the other PTA moms catches his eye from across the park. He smiles and she drifts over.

"Hel- lo " she says, "aren't your kids sweet?"

They all stare dutifully at Emma and Marcus, who are currently arguing like mad.

"Yes, very sweet," Beth says.

The kids run over, both crying and red-faced. Marcus climbs up into his dad's lap and clings tightly to his neck.

"What happened?" Rio asks, rubbing Marcus's back.

"Marcus wants to be the princess but I'm *always* the princess," Emma complains.

"Well, you have to take turns if you're going to play together," Beth says.

Emma folds her arms like she's about to explode. Karen laughs.

"Aw, they're just like a little married couple," she says. She smiles at Rio and winks.

" *Emma,* " Beth snaps, "apologize to your friend. And *share*. Or he won't want to play with you anymore. "

Emma breaks into noisy sobs and Beth scoops her up in her arms. There is an awkward five minutes where the only sound is children wailing, Karen hovering awkwardly over Rio's

shoulder, and then Emma slides down off her mother's lap and tugs on Marcus's pant leg.

"I'm sorry," she says, "you be the princess."

"Drink some water first!" Beth yells, as they run off. She sighs, "lost cause."

"Oh, my kids always listen to me," Karen says brightly.

"Is that right?" Rio asks, "you must be a good mother."

Karen giggles. Rio leans forward. He can feel Beth stiffening and looking away with even more deliberation than before.

"Do you get much time to yourself?"

"Oh," Karen says, "I try to make time. I have this Saturday afternoon free."

Rio smiles.

...

"Could you try to be less provocative?" Beth snaps as Karen drifts away.

"Provocative?" Rio laughs, "what's that?"

"Excuse me? You know what it means."

“Nah, I thought provocative was that look you gave me before you lead me to the bathroom -”

“ *Okay,* ” Beth hisses, slamming her palm down on the bench, “firstly, I didn’t *lead* you, you followed me -”

“Oh really,” Rio laughs with a bite in his voice, “see, that’s not how I remember -”

She turns and glares at him, looking right into his face. Supernova.

“Okay,” he says, “I’ll drop it.”

She stares at him for a moment. Then turns away again.

“Did you teach Marcus to write letters?” she asks suddenly, “Emma’s been writing to everyone for days.”

“It was Lara,” he says, “she was trying to teach him how to write a grant application.”

“That explains why they’re so formal”

“Yeah,” he smiles. His arm is leaning against the bench. If he reached out his fingers, he could brush them against her hair. “It’s real cute. I got a drawer full. He even wrote his dog a letter.”

Beth laughs like she’s unspooling, opening up to him, then she snaps back into place. She checks her watch, calls Emma over, and starts to pack up. Emma is not impressed. She stays where she is.

“I might drop by your office tomorrow,” he tells her, “got some business to discuss.”

“Alright,” she tells him, “anything else?”

“Yeah, are you gonna be back here saturday? Marcus complains if he has to go a day without seeing that little girl of yours.”

There’s a pause.

“Dean will take her,” Beth says, “I have to work.”

...

He volunteers to help chaperone the zoo trip.

The look on Beth’s face is a work of art. She volunteered a split second before he did.

*Why the fuck are you doing this* she asks him, silently, across a room of twenty people (including Annie and Ruby, who have taken to sporadically attending the meetings and refusing to take them even remotely seriously).

He could ask himself the same question. He has rules, lots of them, but the one sticking out to him right now is *never show your hand*. Beth is too good at poker for his liking.

*Why the fuck not*, he smirks. Their silent communication is getting way too good, though, because he’s pretty sure the look she’s giving him is meant to convey the words “*Because you’ll have to help watch twenty screaming children at a zoo for half a day*”

Which reminds him that he’s going to have to go to a zoo and help watch twenty screaming children for half a day. *Fuck*.



He breaks eye contact and glances around the room. Half the occupants are shifting uncomfortably and the other half are two seconds away from breaking out the popcorn. Annie and Ruby side eye him with equal parts confusion and amusement.

“Well,” Beth says, “you’ll need to exchange emails with us so we can plan for the trip”

“Don’t the teachers organise it?”

“There’s still a lot of details to iron out for while we’re in the zoo. Who takes which group, who’s in charge of bathroom breaks and which time, co-ordinated snacks, etc.”

“Jesus,” he says, “is that necessary?”

“ *Very*, ” she says, emphatically, “but you’re welcome to back out now.”

Annie leans forward in her chair slightly, like she’s watching the exciting part of a movie.

“Nah, it’s cool,” he says, “I’m just psyched to be going.”

...

Lara is some kind of witch, because she gets him in a coffee shop with no clear idea of how he got there. One minute she was talking about her eldest sons’ stamp collection, the next he’s ordering a cappuccino.

“Dean will probably want to go on the zoo trip as well, now,” she says, “I can distract him while we’re there.”

“Here’s me thinking you were ‘done with anything that involves putting sunscreen on someone else’s kid.’”

“Lucky for you, my vendetta is deep and unyielding.”

“Have you considered leaving a dead rat on his doorstep?”

“I wouldn’t want Beth or any of their kids to see it,” she answers without skipping a beat, “besides, breaking up a marriage is far more long-lasting and satisfying.”

Rio has gathered, mostly through osmosis, that Dean is not well liked among most of the mothers, especially since he’s become more involved in rearing his children. Complaints of ‘a condescending attitude’, ‘inappropriate behavior’, and ‘generally annoying’ float around in the background like small angry balloons. No one in the entire school seems to match Lara’s rage.

He says as much to her. Asks if it’s really worth all the effort for a guy who hasn’t really done anything to her except be useless and annoying.

She slams her water glass down on the table, spilling a little.

“*Completely* useless,” she says, “five years ago he agreed to supervise a pageant rehearsal. Beth was sick.”

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned.”

“There’s more,” she scowls, “so much more.”

Their coffees arrive, with a raspberry muffin. Lara cuts the muffin in half and hands him a tiny fork.

“I’m not eating that,” he says.

She rolls her eyes.

“Oh, what? You’re too manly for a muffin? It’s got white chocolate, you idiot.”

He takes the tiny fork.

“Anyway,” Lara continues.

“You really don’t need to-”

“The pageant is an all-ages variety show. There’s about thirty kids in there, and we’re meant to keep them entertained while their year groups take turns practicing. Not a great system, if you ask me. My eldest boy ..”

“Frank?”

“No, Finn. Jesus, I don’t forget *your* kids name.”

“There’s only one.”

She glares and takes another bite of the muffin.

“ *Anyway*. Finn gets hit on the back of the head with a skipping rope. Don’t ask me why or how a skipping rope got involved, but a fight breaks out. Now, three people watching thirty kids is already bad news in my opinion, for *exactly* this reason. You don’t know real fear until you’ve had to stop a bunch of twelve year olds from hitting each other.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Dean had already been hiding in the bathroom for about half an hour, and the teacher was busy keeping the seven year olds under control as they ran through their lines - *who gives seven year olds lines??* - and then Dean came back at the end and acted like he’d been there helping the whole time.”

She takes a comically large breath and continues, “all the parents were like *wow, thanks so much for volunteering his time* - I guess they thought I did it out of a pure, selfish love for pageantry - and Dean - *Dean* - keeps saying shit like *don’t even worry about it* and *I was happy to help-*”

Either her fury or her need to breathe gets the best of her and she takes a few seconds to collect herself.

“The next day, we get called in. The principal asks us what caused the fight, because the teacher didn’t see what happened. I tell them it was some of the older boys, and I don’t exclude Finn because I’m not a fucking bad parent, I believe in equal responsibility and consequences and ...”

“You’re gonna pass out if you keep talking like that.”

She pauses to take a bite of the muffin and chews aggressively.

“Dean knew Kenny threw that skipping rope. I could see it in his *eyes* . But it was my word against his and Finn had gotten in trouble for fighting before, so ...”

There’s a pause.

“That’s pretty intense,” Rio concedes.

Lara sighs and sips her coffee.

“It was definitely the worst thing he did. To me, anyway.”

“There’s more?”

“May, 2005,” she says, slamming her mug back down on the table, “Beth and I were volunteering at the food fair, and Dean called her away because of a “very serious emergency” ...”

...

Emma and Marcus shriek when they see each other across the park and sprint into a full-body tackle hug.

“Oh hey, man,” Rio says to Dean, “how’s it going?”

*Please don’t antagonise him*, Beth had asked. He wonders if he can get him to pop a blood vessel.

“Where’s Miss Elizabeth?” Marcus asks, from behind Emma. He's still pretty shy around Dean. Maybe because he's only seen him glaring.

“Mrs Boland,” Dean corrects him.

“Mommy doesn’t mind,” Emma says, “she said she thinks it’s cute.”

Marcus beams, "I wrote her a letter."

Dean kind of just stares into the middle distance like he has no idea what's happening. Rio pats Marcus on the back.

"Go get it, pop," he says.

Marcus runs back to where they'd left his backpack and grabs out the letter. It's a piece of paper he ripped out of a notebook and covered with stickers. He'd stuck something pink and fuzzy to it that hangs on by the barest thread. Dean surprisingly manages to live up to the lowest possible bar for human decency, by taking the letter and putting it careful away in Emma's backpack.

Maybe he doesn't want to be an outright dick to a little kid, or maybe Rio's face is so full of warning that he's too afraid to do anything else. Rio likes to cover his bases.

...

"Will Dean be joining us on the zoo trip?" He asks Beth.

"No," she says. She's giving no indication as to what she's thinking, which for him is indication enough.

"Does he know about it?"

"Of course."

"Does he know I'll be there?"

She looks up at that, "I don't have to tell him every minor detail."

"Ouch," Rio says. He leans back in his chair.

"Anything else?"

"Nah, I'm good."

He gets up to leave.

“Wait,” Beth says.

She pulls a piece of paper out of a folder on top of her desk, and hands it to him. It’s decorated with patterned washi tape and dragon stickers.

*Dear Marcus, he reads, thank you very much for your letter ...*

...

*“... and then you take her to the flamingo enclosure - it’s very romantic, Yasmeena proposed to me there - just don’t sneak off and leave me looking after all the kids with Dean, I will literally kill you ...”*

“Stop calling me.”

*“He is going to be so miserable without her, his life will be ruined ...”*

“Just put the rat in his car or something.”

*“... make sure you go to all of Kenny’s football games, really rub it in ...”*

“Kenny doesn’t play football.”

*“Aha!” She yells, “you see! You’re perfect. Literally the answer to my prayers. Don’t hang up on me! I will chase you down!”*

“I have to go.”

“ *You ’ll never get away from me!*”

“Goodbye, Lara.”



## Chapter 4

### Chapter Summary

“Hey,” he says.

Beth looks up.

“Oh, hello,” she answers, casually putting the phone away.

“You been waiting long?”

“No.”

“Hmm,” he says, “that opening seemed kinda rehearsed, though.”

She looks deeply, deeply annoyed.

Lara, in a true power move, sends one email organising an in-person meetup to “discuss the zoo trip” and then fails to show.

“It’s been half an hour,” Beth says, “should we just ...”

Her phone buzzes, and she trails off.

“Oh, it’s from Lara,” she says, “she’s sorry she’s running late and she’ll be here in 20 minutes. She says we should just start without her and catch her up when she gets here. ”

“Alright,” Rio says, smiling like a normal person, “that's no problem.”

Beth looks at him like *I know exactly what is happening but I refuse to acknowledge it*. Like he *asked* Lara to get all up in his love life. It’s not like he doesn’t have moves. Or the ability to stalk someone into spending time with him.

He doesn't need *Lara* to do that for him.

"You alright, darling?" He asks Beth, whose posture is so deliberately perfect he just knows she's fighting the visible tension from her shoulders, "you seem stressed."

She deflates a little.

"Look I should probably ..." she trails off.

"Yeah?" he says, taking a sip of his beer.

Beth collects herself quickly and gives him that controlled, friendly smile.

"I realise that we had sex," she says, with incredible calm.

Rio almost chokes on his drink, but recovers quickly.

"I'm not trying to act like it didn't happen," she says, going full sales-pitch.

He leans back in his chair and tilts his head back to watch her. She falters a little, then plows ahead.

"I think you'll agree, it's in our best interest to just put that behind us and move on."

"Uh huh?"

“Professionally,” she says, powering through. “We’re professional people, with a professional relationship. We don’t need to ...”

“Be unprofessional?”

“Yes.”

There’s a pause.

“It just can’t happen again,” she says.

“Yeah, you’ve made that clear before.”

That throws her off guard again.

“I thought - what’s the point of all this ...” she struggles for a moment, “the PTA stuff and ...”

“What,” he says, “you think that’s about you?”

She looks completely floored.

“I mean ... obviously you care about Marcus I’m not saying -”

“What’s it to Marcus? Doesn’t make a difference in his life.”

“It’s the best way to network -”

“I go for the ladies,” he says, smirking at her. “you know, bored housewives looking for fun and shit.”

For a moment she looks torn between anger and disgust. Then, the corner of her mouth twitches.

“In that case, I have some disappointing news for you about Lara.”

He laughs.

“She’s just a placeholder,” he lies, praying to god she didn’t bug the table, “I talk to her when I’m not chatting someone up.”

“You never chat anyone up,” Beth says, “all you do is argue with me.”

“Some women are into that.”

She bites her lip, “you’re an asshole.”

“Yeah,” he says, “but so are you.”

...

“You and Beth are perfect for each other,” Lara says, “you both act composed but have zero chill.”

“Did your kid teach you that slang?”

“I spend a lot of time on the internet,” she tells him, “you pick up on things.”

Rio laughs. He’s starting to feel calm around Lara, and it’s a strange experience. Every relationship he has is defined by a cold, dead fear he can’t get rid of: fear that he’s fucking up being a dad just like he fucked up being a husband, fear his family will find out just how far he’s gone to stay on top, fear that he’ll be betrayed, killed, imprisoned ...

(fear that Beth will never look at him and not see a man holding a gun)

He uses the fear to keep himself sharp. It’s useful so long as he keeps control. Stops him from missing shit he needs to keep an eye out for. But it’s hardly relaxing.

Hanging out with Lara is relaxing, which is beyond strange. She constantly bullies him into trying the most stupid shit (face masks, vintage wine, marine-life documentaries), and doesn’t seem to grasp the concept of sending *one* email with a lot of attachments rather than ten in a row with nearly identical photos of her kids with their grandmother. He kind of loves her.

“Oh, you’ll never guess who I spoke to this morning,” she says.

“David Attenborough?”

“Don’t even *joke* about that, you know it’s my dream ... anyway, a man from the FBI came to talk to me. I felt like I was in a movie.”

He forces himself not to stiffen, to breathe and keep his posture relaxed and casual.

“That’s weird,” he says, “what did he want to talk to you about?”

“Well, that’s the really interesting bit. He was asking about you! Isn’t that strange?”

“Yeah,” he says.

“Obviously,” she says, “all I know is gossip and a lot of useless stuff about mollusks. I told him I doubt a hardened criminal would watch bargain hunt with me.”

“Is that right?” he asks. He stares down at his hands. “He tell you I got arrested lately?”

“I watch the news,” she says dismissively, “did you know *I’ve* been arrested?”

He gapes. It’s undignified, but there’s no other word for what his face is currently doing. Lara, true to form, ignores his confusion and plows forward.

“Drunk and disorderly, March 2011. I went to a Bachelorette party and drank tequila for the first time in ten years.”

“That's noth-”

“September, 2007. I assaulted a police officer.”

He stares at her for a long moment. She looks him dead in the eyes.

“No one else knows except Yassmina. You could probably ruin my entire life with this information.”

“Tell me,” he says.

“I punched a cop,” there's a pause, “he deserved it.”

He waits for her to elaborate. She doesn't.

“What did he do?” He asks eventually.

She laughs, “you know, nobody asked me that on trial?”

“I'm not surprised.”

“I was stupid,” she says, “ we were outside a bar and he was harassing my friend and I just ... I just hated that he just could do whatever he wanted without any consequences. So I punched him. And then I went to jail for three years. Consequences.”

He tries to think of something to say, but the thought of a younger, more vulnerable version of Lara missing three years of her children's lives hits him harder than he could have ever expected.

“The agent brought it up too,” she says, “my unsavoury criminal record, that is.”

“What did tell him?”

She smiles, all suburban and motherly.

“I told him I punched a cop,” she says serenely, “and that he deserved it.”

...

Beth calls him later that night. He thinks she's going to flip out about the Lara thing, but she doesn't seem to even know it happened.

"Dean found out about the zoo trip," she says, "I think Emma told her."

"Didn't you say he knew already?" Rio grins into the phone.

She makes a small angry noise.

"He didn't know *you* would be there."

"So?" he asks, "it's just a minor detail, right?"

She makes a couple outraged attempts at forming a response, and then hangs up on him.

She calls again five minutes later.

"You're lucky I'm so damn forgiving," he drawls, "I don't like being hung up on. Especially seeing as how you called me."

"I'm not an asshole," she says, "I just didn't tell him. It's not a big deal."

"Then why are you calling *me*?"

She hangs up, again.



Eight minutes later, when she calls again, he says *just meet me at the park* and then hangs up himself.

He takes his time getting there. She's sitting at the bench, on her phone. She doesn't look up when he drops down beside her.

"Hey," he says.

She looks up.

"Oh, hello," she answers, casually putting the phone away.

"You been waiting long?"

"No."

"Hmm," he says, "that opening seemed kinda rehearsed, though."

She looks deeply, deeply annoyed.

"Look," she says, "I just want to know that you won't do or say anything to upset Dean."

He rests his chin on his hand.

"Oh, really?" he asks, "and what do I get out of that?"

"The satisfaction of knowing you did the right thing?"

He laughs so hard he almost falls off the bench.

“Ok,” she says, “what do you want?”

“Honestly?”

”Yes.”

”I kinda want to see him suffer.”

She hisses out a short, angry breath.

“You’re impossible.”

“That’s pretty rich coming from you,” he says.

”What’s that supposed to mean?” She asks, eyes cold and angry.

“You know.”

”I really don’t,” she says, “and if you have nothing to say except bizarre insinuations -“

“It means we’ve been through all this and you still can’t admit you have feelings for me.”

She looks away from him like she's been hit, staring down at her hands with her hair falling down to cover her face.

"That's so -" her voice is angry and trembling, "I don't - you - I -"

"Take your time," he says, leaning back against the bench to watch her.

"*Fuck you.*"

"There it is."

She turns and hits him on the chest. He grabs her hand and holds it. She doesn't say anything, just stares at him, like all the outrage just melted out of her body. She looks *sad*. God, but that gets to him.

"I'm just messing with you," he says, "I know you don't."

She nods, lips pressed tightly together and her shoulders hunched. He squeezes her hand and then let it go, but instead of pulling away she tugs on his hoodie.

"Annie wants to know if you ever wear anything else."

"Sometimes," he laughs, "do you want to see my closet?"

She huffs out a laugh, and pulls her hand away.

...

After Beth leaves the park she ghosts him for two weeks.

“We may need to kill Dean,” Lara says thoughtfully, “I could do it.”

“We’re not talking about this.”

“I’m a scientist. I could find a science-way to dispose of the body.”

“No way could you kill someone.”

“You don’t know my life,” she says, “I learnt how to make a shiv in prison.”

“Did you?”

“No,” she sighs, “I mostly just played go fish with a sixty year old tax evader.”

“Dark.”

”Yep,” she says, “I’ve seen things. You wouldn’t understand.”

## Chapter 5

### Chapter Summary

“Mommy?” Emma asks. She's glued to her mom's side in Marcus' absence.

“If you and Daddy divorce, will he marry a man?”

“What” Beth says.

..

sorry this chapter took way longer than the rest, I got sucker punched by assignments and I couldn't even look at anything else.

The zoo trip. He's been dreading and looking forward to it in equal measure, and then Marcus got a last minute cold and had to stay home. He'd debated back and forth remaining at home, but Lara had swooped in and press-ganged her long suffering wife into watching him because she absolutely refuses to be around Dean unless she gets to watch him be miserable. Rio likes Yasmeena. She has a good sense of humor.

Going on the zoo trip is definitely panning out to be a good decision.

“Mommy?” Emma asks. She's glued to her mom's side in Marcus' absence.

“If you and Daddy divorce, will he marry a man?”

“What” Beth says.

Rio leans into the railing and covers his mouth with one hand.

“If Marcus gets three moms, I want three dads.”

“What” Beth says again.

In the corner of his vision he sees Dean trying to move away from the small crowd of children he’s surrounded with. Lara has a tight grip on his arm and is chatting away with a determined glint in her eyes. The man doesn’t stand a chance.

Rio waits for Beth to form some kind of coherent response to this sudden new insight into her daughters brain, but then another kid in their group starts whining about wanting to see the seals, and they mosey along, gesturing to Lara and Dean to follow.

They all group back together, and Dean manages to move back to Beth’s side, gripping her arm tightly in his hand.

Emma wanders up to Rio while Dean is distracted.

“Do you have it?” She asks. He nods. God help him.

She grabs his arm and pulls him to the enclosure. She gets up on her tiptoes and hangs off the railing, tiny legs dangling. He takes the letter out and clears his throat.

It's not so much a letter as a series of multi coloured crayon scribbles that would be impossible to decipher if he hadn't spent the last month decoding them.

“Dear penguins,” he reads, “Thank you very much for your letter. My address is,” he coughs, looks around and whispers the address, leaning far over the railing even Emma can't hear him. She pouts so he pulls back and keeps reading loud enough for her to hear, “please tell me if you are well. My friend is Emma and she likes to read. Tell her I said hello. I am looking forward to hearing from you best wishes Marcus.”

Emma nods along to the last line with a serious expression. He stifles a laugh.

“Emma!” Dean calls sharply, “come back here!”

She starts and looks back at him, catching the anger but not understanding who it's aimed at. She runs back to her parents, hanging her head.

Beth kneels down and gives her a hug, then stands and leans towards Dean, whispering something furious. Dean smiles down at Emma soothingly and picks her up, carries her to see the seals. Beth leans into the wall and closes her eyes for a second. She looks right at him. He tilts his head and she shakes hers almost imperceptibly, and then goes to rejoin her family.

...

He stays away from her after that, enough that Dean relaxes enough to take Emma to the bathroom by himself. They're in the reptile room, funneling groups of children through while the too-scared kids hang outside. Beth is staring at a python, her body only slightly illuminated by the enclosure light in the dark room. He wanders over slowly, almost turning away at the last second.

“Fun trip?” He asks.

She doesn't look at him. A knot forms in his stomach as he runs over her behaviour from the start of the trip: tense shoulders, head down, forced smiles at the kids.

“It's okay,” she says.

They stand in silence for a bit. The snake curls itself lazily around a branch.

“Why don't you go home?” He asks without thinking. She looks surprised. He plows on, “get some rest, we can handle the kids between the three of us.”

Lara will fucking kill him for this. Beth smiles slightly. This isn't the most exhausted he's seen her, but it's close.

“Dean won't stay if I don't,” she says, softly, “He's only here because of you.”

Rio looks at her in contemplation. They both move, almost unconsciously, towards the corner of the room.

“He think I'll attack you, or something?” Rio murmurs.

“Or something,” she says wryly. She leans closer to him and matches his volume, “I asked him to volunteer for this trip before and he said no. Doesn't think it's a big deal if we get iced out of PTA for not participating enough.”

“How would you influence the school board?” Rio asks before his brain catches up with him mouth, “or network with the other parents?”

She looks at him warily.

*Oh shit.* He thinks, *I actually care about this now.*

The realisation must be all over his face because Beth no longer seems to think he's making fun of her. Her eyes go wide and she bites down on her lip. She points weakly to his face and her whole body rolls with barely controlled laughter. He smooths his face back into a controlled expression but it's too late, her amusement gets the better of her and she collapses against the wall in hysterics.

He watches her, gasping for breath, eyes streaming, her mascara forming streaks down her face. She's so fucking beautiful he can't even stop himself from smiling.

He grabs Beth's hand and pulls her out of the room, towards the parking lot.



“Here,” he says, handing her his keys. “Text him that you're sick and you need to go home. Lara will hunt him down like a fucking cheetah if he tries to leave.”

She looks at the keys in his hand, and then back up again.

“Won't she hunt me down?” She asks, “she always struck me as more of a crocodile. Slow stalking, loves the water and all that.”

“Hmm,” he says, “I'll handle her.”

Beth takes the keys, softly brushing the palm of his hand with her fingers. She looks up at him, the tension she's been carrying all day went away with the laughter. She seems to remember suddenly, because she snorts and her shoulders start shaking again.

“Stop.” He tells her. Like it will make a difference.

“You deserve this,” she says between giggles. She glances up at him through her lashes, eyes sparkling with mischief, “you -”

She trails off as he reaches out and cups her face in his hands. He wants to touch her soft and gentle, tracing over her skin until she smiles and lights up. He wants to see her unwind all the way, relaxing into his arms and nestling her face into his chest.

She's staring back at him with an odd look on her face. He realises, suddenly, that can't tell what she's thinking. It throws him, hard.

She doesn't move when he drops his hand and steps back. He feels exposed.

“I'll pick it up tonight,” he says, gesturing to his car. He leaves her leaning against the wall, forcing himself not to look back. His rules keep flying around in his head - *never show your hand, never let them see what you're thinking, when you start something follow through; no hesitating, no running away.*

The zoo is crowded and loud and he just wants to fucking go . Steal a car and drive to the nearest bar and drink anything but bourbon, until he passes out and dreams about her like he does almost every night.

He curses and swerves away from the entrance. He can't keep his mask up, can't go back to a bunch of kids and a sweet middle aged Mom like this. He can't think of anything but walking as far away as he can, but then he sees her sitting in his car, head on the steering wheel. She stays there for a moment and then looks up, meeting his gaze. She's still the only person he can't sneak up on.

He gets in the car. She drives.

...

“You don't need him,”

“He's my husband,” she says.

“So fix that.”

She takes in a deep breath.

“I love him”

“Don't lie to me,” he says sharply, and then adds a softer, “please.”

She exhales slowly, clenching and unclenching her hands.

“It's not that simple.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” he says, “the thing is, I'm getting kind of tired of this.”

She stares down the road ahead, her cheeks flushed.

“Where are we going?” She asks him.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Tell me where you live.”

He leans back in his seat and watches her for a moment. Then he tells her his address.

...

After she parks she stays seated as he gets out, watching her hands on the steering wheel.

“Come on,” he says, leaning into the car with one arm slung over the open door.

She gets out and follows him into the house.

He catches her staring at the photos of him and Marcus on the walls, and at the pinned letter she wrote his kid on the cork board. He leads her into his kitchen and leans against the counter.

“Can I get you anything?” He asks her

“I need him,” she blurts out, “to keep you away.”

He stares at her.

“You were right.”

He walks towards her, slowly. She hesitates, looking torn between walking towards him and running away. He stops and she bites her lip, as if gathering strength.

"I do have feelings for you," she says, voice wavering, "and I don't know if I can handle that."

She steps back into the wall, and looks back to the doorway. Her hands are shaking.

“But you're here,” he says, and she looks back. “Aren't you?”

They hold eye contact for a few long moments, and she nods.

...

The kiss is so fierce and uncontrollable he has no idea who even initiated it. He kisses up her neck and bites down on her earlobe until she moaning and wrapping her legs around him. He carries her to the bench, her hands running down his back and her mouth trailing hot kisses down his jaw.

She stares up at him, hands tugging at his shirt and he leans back so she can lift it over his head. She traces her fingers up his chest, her nails gentle but firm.

He tears her clothes this time, rips her blouse right open and bites down on her collarbone. She's panting, hands tugging at his hair. The fruit bowl his sister bought him clatters to the floor as he pushes her onto her back. There's more fierce, open mouth kisses, and her nails dig harder into his back, and then his fingers are inside her and she's moaning into his neck and he feels more than exposed, he feels seen.

After that, everything else seems to fall away and the only sensation he can focus on is the flowery scent of her shampoo, and the citrus of her perfume. When she lies back, panting, he holds himself up for a moment and watches her. She's flushed and her lips are parted and swollen, red.

It's his favorite color.

...

*Rio, you son of a bitch!* Lara shrieks through his voicemail, *what did I say about running off with Beth?? You are worse than Dean! You hear me? YOU ARE WORSE THAN DEAN.*

*you don't mean that,* he texts her.

Beth is curled up on his couch, sleeping under the thick crochet blanket his Aunt made him. He wonders if crochet is one of the crafts she's into. Auntie's always moaning about *modern women* and their *lack of basic homemaking skills*. It would give Beth a couple hundred brownie points if she was willing to join her knitting group.

Lara texts him back a frowny face emoji. Followed by a thumbs up.

## PTA snippet

“Rio.”

“Yes, Lara?”

“I need you to -”

“No.”

“- fuck with Dean for me.”

“I destroyed his marriage. Why are you so insatiable?”

“He cut me off in the parking lot last night and I *know* he saw me! I had three screaming children in the car!”

“it’s five am.”

“That’s when normal people wake up!”

Rio glanced over to where Beth was curled up beside him, nestled into his shoulder. She did always get up this early when they started dating, he remembered. Now she sleeps in until 12 on weekends and lets him wrangle the kids into eating breakfast, getting dressed, and going outside.

“No, it’s not,” he says, smiling to himself.

“I’m not asking for much,” Lara said.

“You’re like a blackmailer, you know that? Keep asking and asking for more.”

He realises too late he just makes it sound like he's under Lara's thumb. Oh wait. He winces a little.

“Can’t you just go to Kenny’s next swimming race and rub it in a little?”

“I’m going, I don’t know if he is.”

Beth stirred beside him. He lowered his voice more but she opened a sleepy eye and smiled at him.

“Lara?”

He nodded.

“Dean?”

“Yup.”

“Tell her I’ll draw his attention to several unflattering comparisons when I drop the kids off at his place tomorrow,” she says, snuggling back into him and closing her eyes.

"You hear that?"

“I accept but only if she makes at least five. And at least three of them need to be emasculating!”

“Bye, Lara.”

“Don’t hang up on me aga-”

He threw the phone back on his night stand and pulled Beth closer to him, kissing the top of her head. The morning was perfectly silent. He’d get up soon and make breakfast (pancakes or waffles?) and make sure the kids get dressed before Beth wakes up. Then he can take them to the park for a bit so she gets a quiet morning before he has to go out and take care of some business. Maybe he’d get some flowers on his way home and drop them off at her office at soon-to-be Marks’ Motors. He likes the way she laughs when he does shit like that - eyes crinkling at the corners - and teases him for being a sappy excuse for a gang banger. ‘*you’re a badass excuse for a housewife*’, he says back.



## End Notes

- Rio was never any kind of Chef, it's a family joke. Marcus just hasn't realised it's a joke yet.
- Lara definitely makes Rio her reluctant best friend and forces him to drink wine and watch The Real Housewives with her.
- Look I know it's unrealistic but the idea of Emma realising Marcus wants to break her parents up so their parents can get married and being 100% on board with it gives me life.
- Marcus is looking for a third mom because I'm incapable of having a fic without any Sapphic undertones, so his mom is now bi and in a relationship. Possibly with Karen H.
- Am I building too much lore into this? Probably. Will I stop? Never.

(Also Mom #2 is called Karen S. There are many Karens' with children at this school.)

## Works inspired by this one

[\[Podfic\] PTA Vibes](#) by [mistbornhero](#)

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