PTA Vibes

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/18395558.

Rating: Not Rated

Archive Warning: <u>Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</u>

Category: <u>F/M</u>

Fandom: Good Girls (TV)
Relationship: Beth Boland/Rio

Characters: <u>Beth Boland, Emma Boland, Marcus (Good Girls), Rio (Good Girls),</u>

Annie Marks, Ruby Hill

Additional Tags: pta, Beth and Rio are good parents, does anyone actually like Dean?, All

the other parents ship brio, If not because they like beth than definitely

because they hate dean, Eventual Smut

Language: English

Stats: Published: 2019-04-08 Completed: 2019-07-04 Words: 11,022 Chapters:

6/6

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

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 agressively 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 toussled 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 buisness, 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 sentance.

"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, sandwhiched between them, completely out of his element. She looks amused.

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

"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 benifit, "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 stiffles 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 sandwhich 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 proffesional' 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 rythm.

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 with 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!" Emma squeels, "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 interupts as Emma's decibles 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 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 <u>notes</u>

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 interupts her again.







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.





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



"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 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.

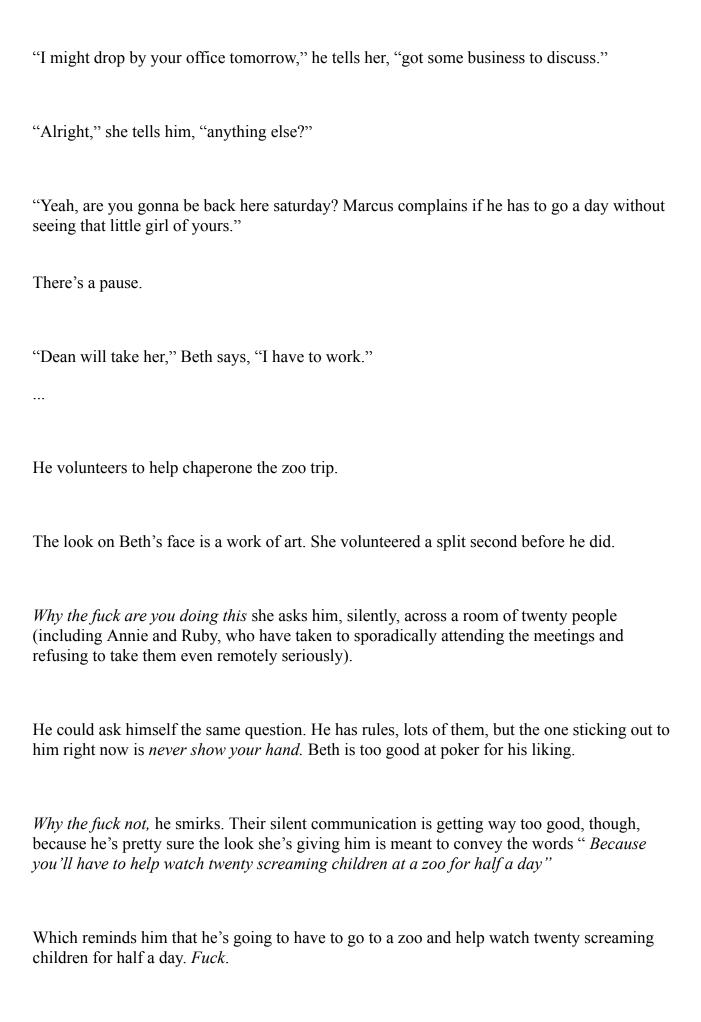
"Aw, they're just like a little married couple," she says. She smiles at Rio and winks.

" *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

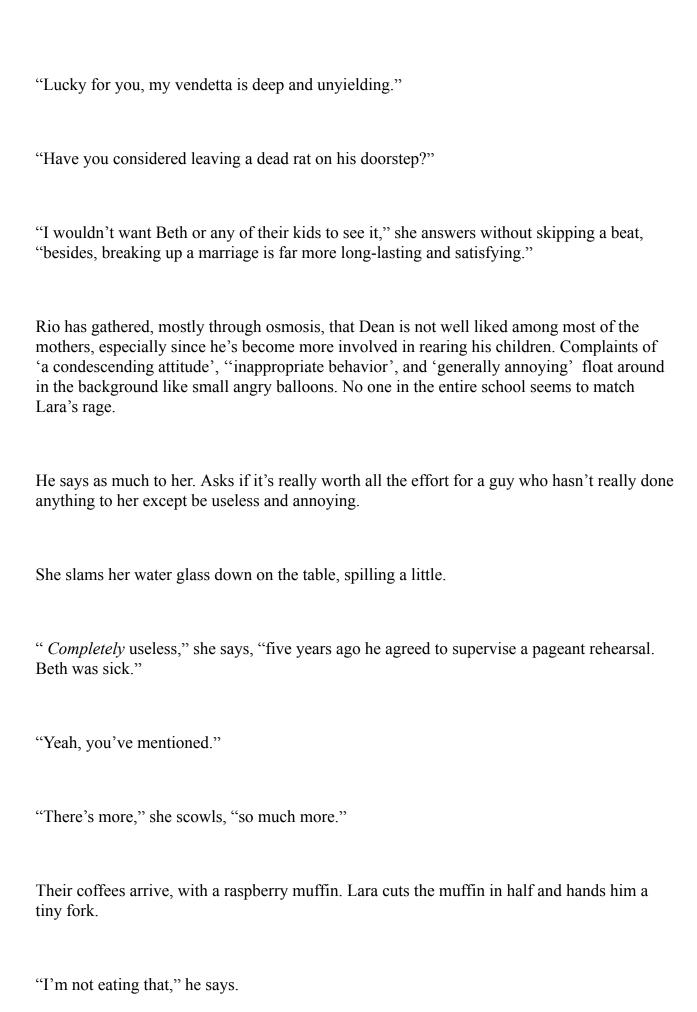






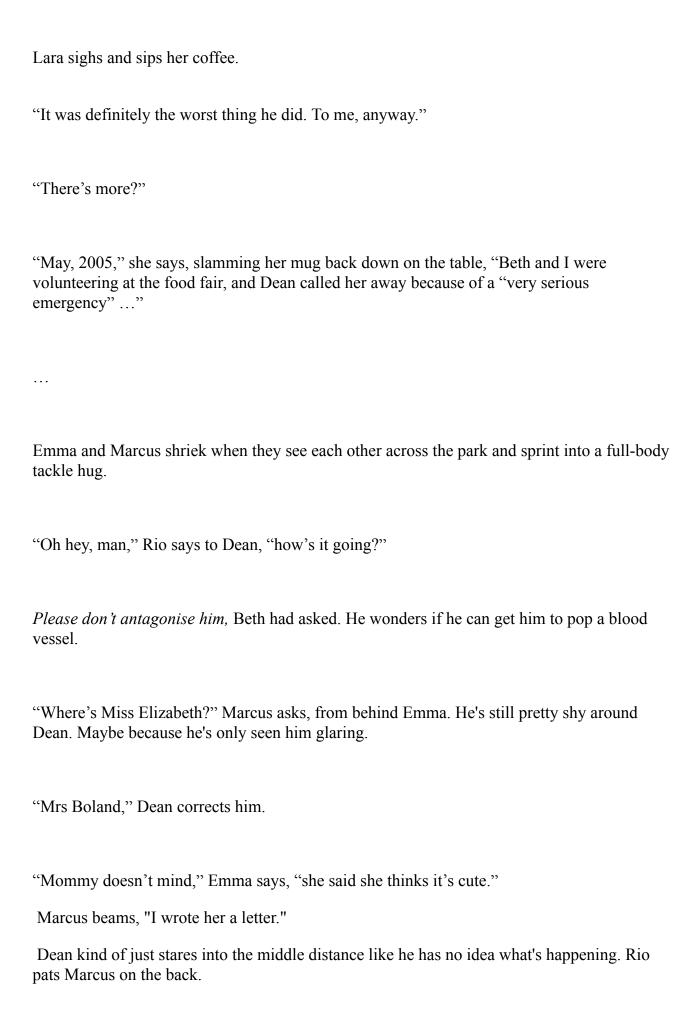


"Here's me thinking you were 'done with anything that involves putting sunscreen on someone else's kid."



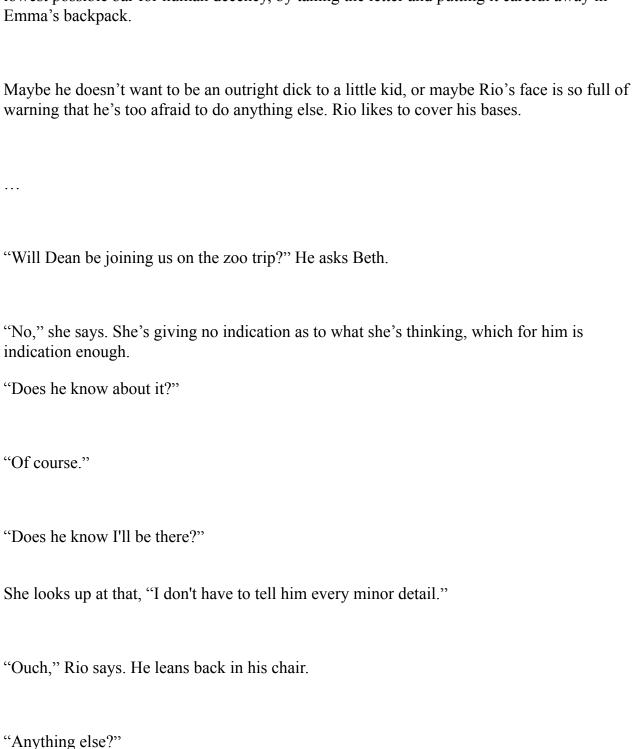


"I'll keep that in mind."
"Dean had already been hiding in the bathroom for about half an hour, and the teacher was busy keeping the seven year olds under control as they ran through their lines - who gives seven year olds lines?? - and then Dean came back at the end and acted like he'd been there helping 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 <i>eyes</i> . 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.

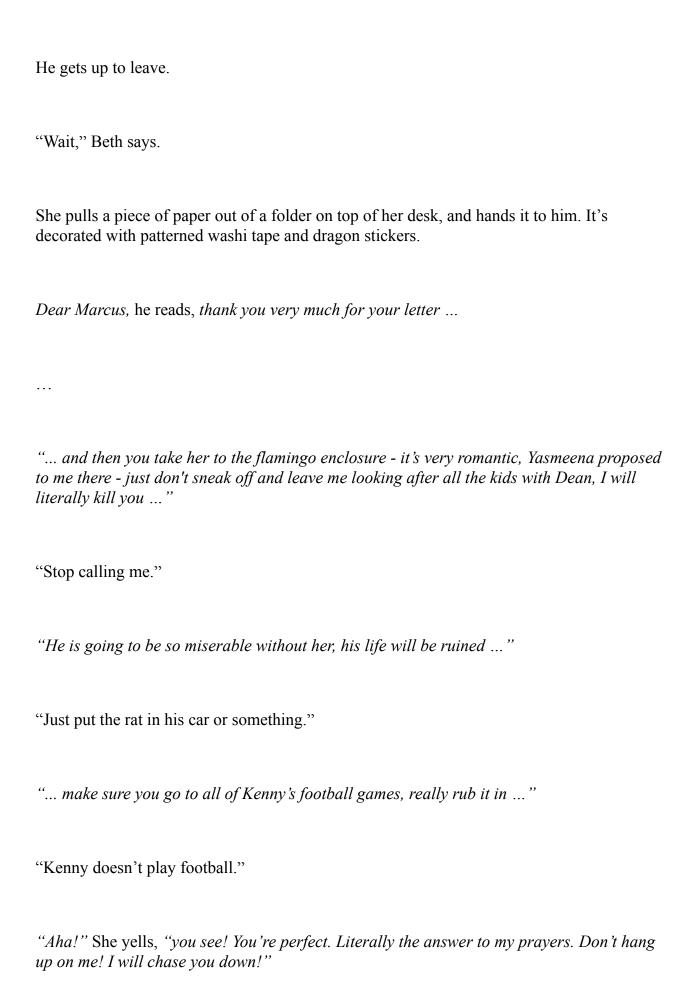


"Go get it, pop," he says.

Marcus runs back to where they'd left his backpack and grabs out the letter. Its 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.



"Nah, I'm good."



"I have to go."

"You'll never get away from me!"

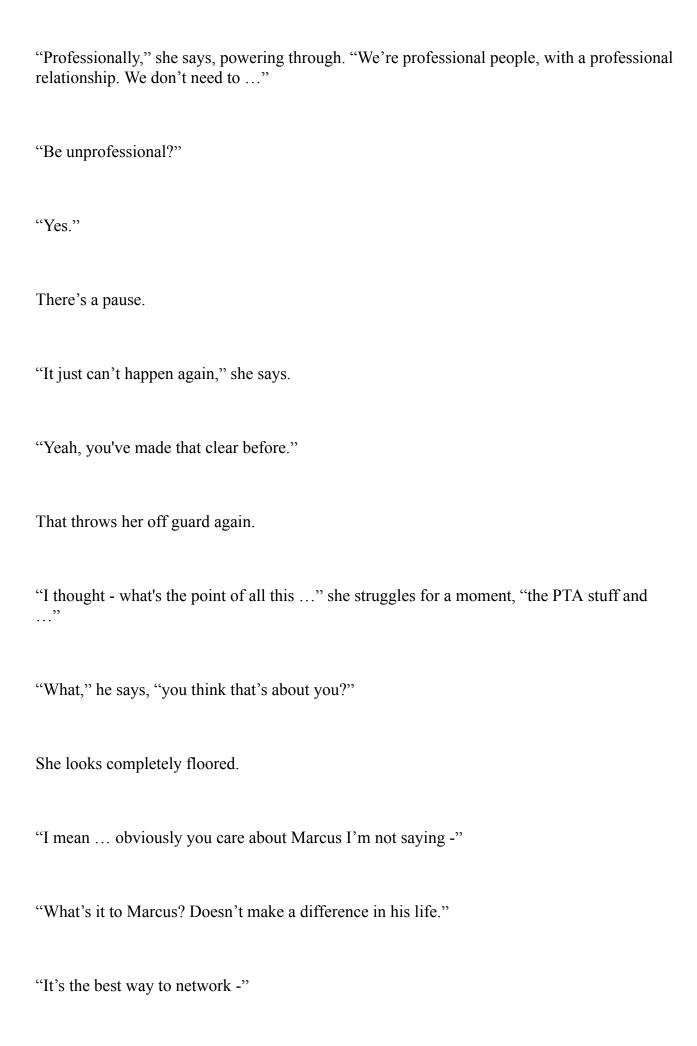
"Goodbye, Lara."

Chapter Summary



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 <i>Lara</i> 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?"





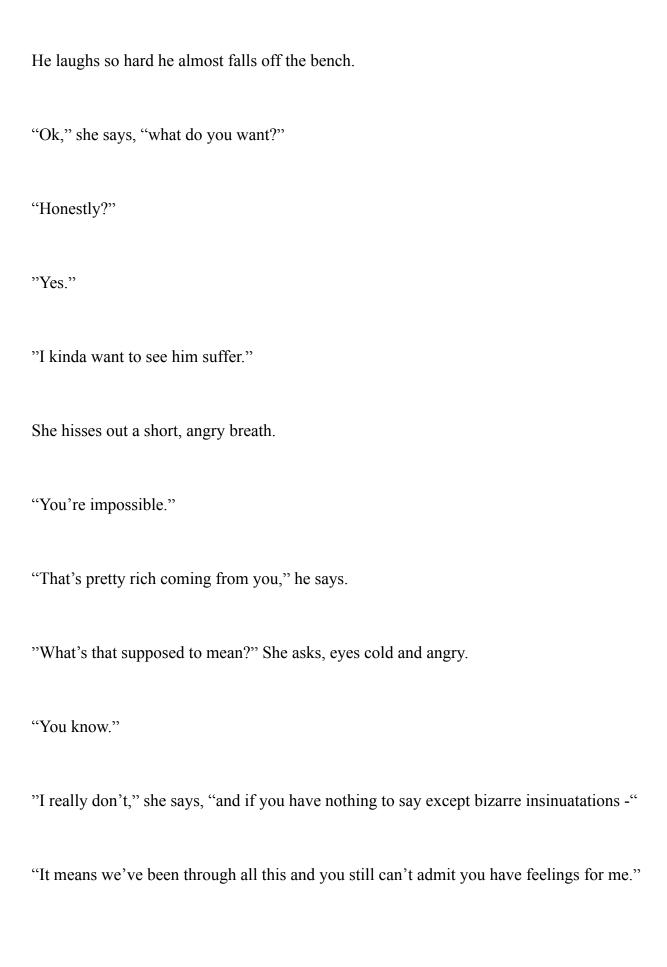
"Did your kid teach you that slang?" "I spend a lot of time on the internet," she tells him, "you pick up on things." Rio laughs. He's starting to feel calm around Lara, and it's a strange experience. Every relationship he has is defined by a cold, dead fear he can't get rid of: fear that he's fucking 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?"













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 would't understand."

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary



"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.

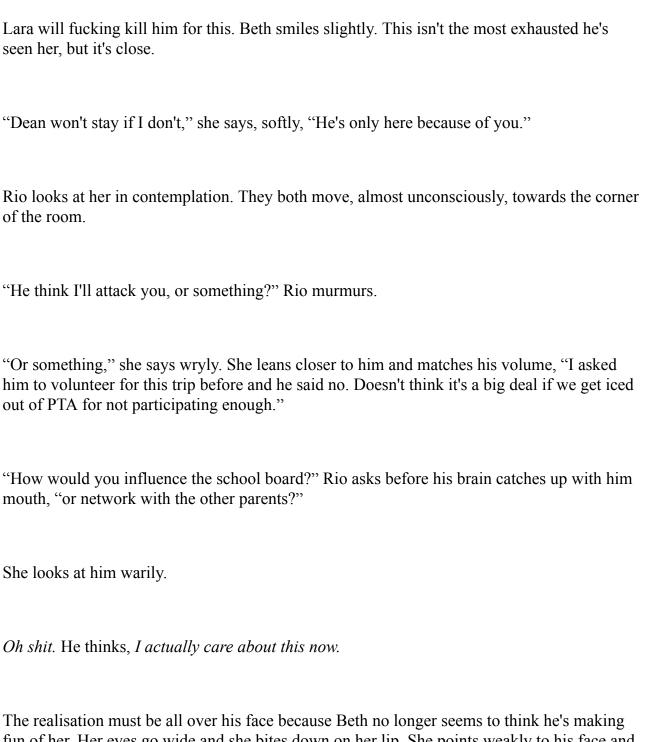
"Fun trip?" He asks.

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."



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.

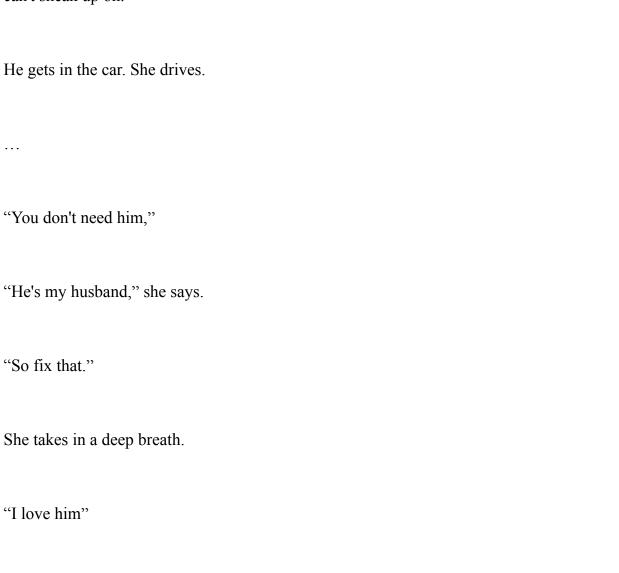
She's staring back at him with an odd look on her face. He realises, suddenly, that can't tell what she's thinking. It throws him, hard.

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

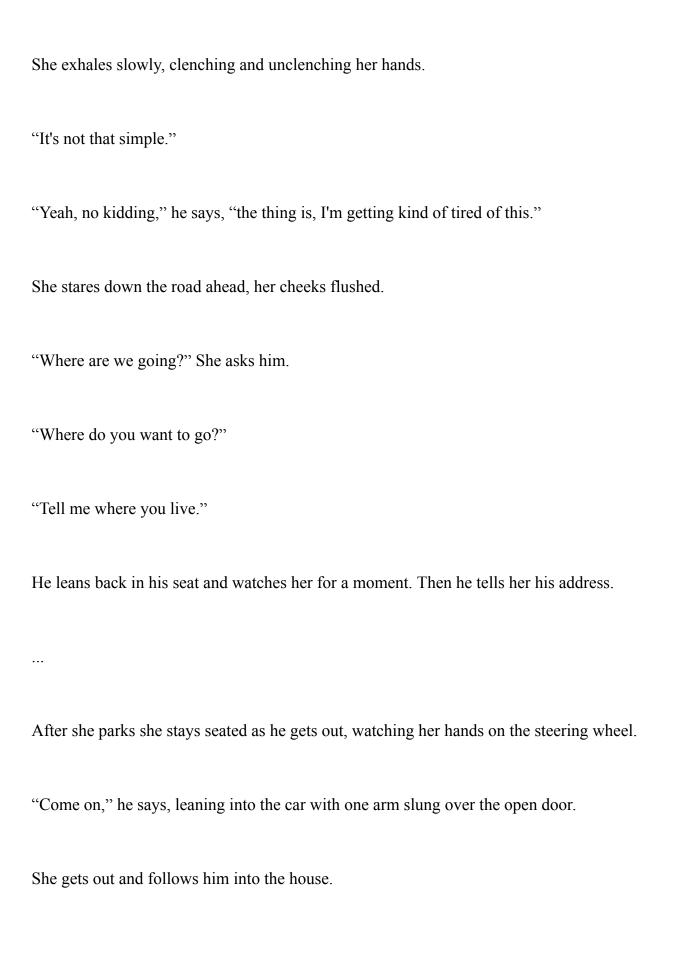
"I'll pick it up tonight," he says, gesturing to his car. He leaves her leaning against the wall, forcing himself not to look back. His rules keep flying around in his head - never show your hand, never let them see what you're thinking, when you start something follow through; no hesitating, no running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



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





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.

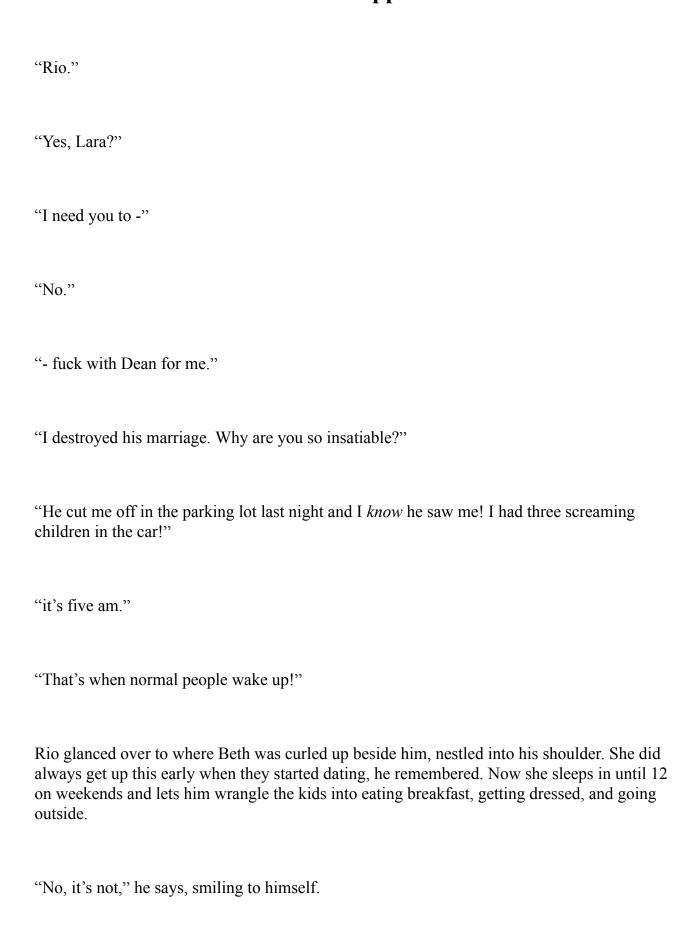
It's his favorite color.
Rio, you son of a bitch! Lara shrieks through his voicemail, what did I say about running off with Beth?? You are worse than Dean! You hear me? YOU ARE WORSE THAN DEAN.

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 is 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





"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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