

the basics of human anatomy

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the basics of human anatomy

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Summary

fi learns how to draw the human body as her father fights against his own

Notes

bingo squares: art studio, isle of man

“Dad, you need to just accept that there are certain traits you did not pass on. This is one of them. Like, massively.”

He shakes his head, tut-tuting her with a wave of his hand. The other grips the steering wheel as he turns left. “It’s not about being good, kid. It’s about having fun with your old man.”

“So you admit I’m not good.”

“I admit that you think you’re not good. I think you’re brilliant.”

Fi sighs quietly. They’re almost there. She’s trying not to be too anxious about it. She leans her forehead against the window and looks out at the people on the pavement as they pass her by. Or, to be more accurate, she watches as she passes *them* by.

She loves hanging out with her dad, she just wishes he wanted to do something else, something she isn’t quite so rubbish at. Or even something they’re equally rubbish at. Alas...

“The brochure said there’d be a live model.”

She scoffs. “Great.”

“Maybe it’ll be a bloke.” He takes his eyes off the road just long enough to wink at her.

“Maybe,” she says dryly. She honestly hopes it is. At least then she won’t have to endure the potential awkwardness of being attracted to the person she’s sketching an absolutely horrendous portrait of.

He reaches over and ruffles her hair, the hair she’d spent a good thirty minutes painstakingly arranging to look casually tousled. “Lighten up, kid.”

As if she could. She’s been on edge for weeks, ever since she got the call.

It doesn’t help that he *looks* sick. He’s pale and thin and the dark circles under his eyes have become a permanent fixture.

“I just hope there’s at least one poor bastard with less hand eye coordination than me,” she says, and forces herself to smile. She’s glad to be here with him. She just wishes there wasn’t a ticking clock looming over their heads.

He smiles back, seemingly unphased by her poor attempt to mask her anxiety. “Don’t count on it.”

She’d punch him if she wasn’t quite so afraid of breaking his arm in half.

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The studio is wonderfully chaotic. The floor is solid concrete and splattered with paint in every colour imaginable. One wall is made entirely of window and the rest are red brick.

There's a huge wooden shelf that stands from floor to ceiling and is filled with brushes and paints and paper and pencils and all manner of supplies Fi has no names for. She's not like her dad; she's not an artist, but this studio kind of makes her wish she was.

Maybe it's the messiness of the place that makes her feel at home, or all the natural light pouring in through the glass. It makes her feel a little more hopeful about this whole art class thing.

They choose a spot by the window and settle themselves on bright yellow stools. They're a few minutes early, so they sit with the sun on their backs and watch as people filter in through the door. Much to Fi's relief, no one seems overly eager to chat or introduce themselves besides the instructor, and even then all she does is smile and ask for their names so she can check them off her list.

The supplies laid out in front of them are simple, just paper and charcoal pencils. She regards them warily. At least if it was paint she could make something colourful and abstract. Pencil means she'll have to draw, and the conspicuous lack of rubbers provided means all of her shaky-handed mistakes are going to remain on the page.

"It won't bite you."

Fi looks up. There's a woman sat beside her, leaned over to speak to her in a disconcertingly intimate way.

"What?" she says stupidly, distracted by the stranger's curly hair and warm brown eyes.

"It's just a pencil. I promise it's not going to hurt you," says the woman - girl? She looks too young to be referred to as a woman. She looks to be about Fi's own age. Not that Fi isn't a woman, it just feels like too formal a word. She's not sure she feels like a woman. That word carries a kind of weight Fi doesn't feel like she can support just yet.

"I'm just taking the piss, sorry."

Too late, Fi realizes she's been staring at this girl-woman without responding, thus making herself look like a socially-inept weirdo. Which actually isn't that far from the truth, but still something she usually tries not to advertise so blatantly.

"I'm crap at drawing," Fi says quickly.

"I think that's why people take classes," the stranger says with a hint of a smirk on her face. "Because they want to improve."

"I'm taking it 'cause this guy wants to show off." Fi gestures towards her dad.

"Quality time, Fiona," he says, ruffling her hair again.

"Quality show off time," she mumbles, pushing his hand away. She's not exactly keen to be teased by her father in front of this distractingly fit stranger.

“That’s sweet,” the girl says. “I wish my dad wanted to spend time with me at all, let alone *quality* time.”

“Why do you assume I’m her dad? Can’t I pass for a brother?”

Fi buries her face in her hands. “Oh my god, dad.”

He smacks her arm gently. “Oh now you’ve gone and spoiled it, Fi!”

The stranger girl laughs. “No worries, sir, you could totally pass for a cool young uncle.”

“Bless you,” he says, holding out his hand for her to shake. “And please, call me Nigel.”

She takes his hand. “Nigel. I’m Dee.”

“A pleasure.” He smiles and looks at Fi. “And this is—”

“Fiona,” Dee says, smiling at her. She’s got chapped lips and a lovely deep dimple in the center of her cheek.

“Fi,” Fi corrects, feeling awkward enough to crawl into a hole and stay there for approximately twelve and a half centuries.

“Nice to meet you.”

Fi smiles, hoping it’s not obvious how flustered she feels “You too.”

Then Dee stands up. “Anyway. I promise I won’t hold it against you if your drawings are crap.”

Fi is about to ask what she means by that, but then Dee is walking away and the instructor is clearing her throat to get the room’s attention.

“Alright people, welcome to Drawing Human Anatomy for Beginners.”

Fi shoots a death glare over at her father. He’d failed to mention that particular detail. All he’d said when proposing the idea was ‘art class.’

He grins sheepishly and shrugs his shoulders.

The instructor continues. “Today we’re going to start with arguably the hardest part of the human body to draw properly - hands. Luckily I managed to find a willing participant to sit and model for us.”

Just then Fi notices that Dee is stood off to the side of the instructor. *No*, Fi thinks. *Please no*.

The instructor looks over at Dee and smiles. “This is Ms. Howell. She’s my friend’s daughter and she’s doing this for free, so let’s make sure we’re extra welcoming.”

Dee steps forward and waves to the class. Apparently she’s tall. She absolutely towers over the instructor. “Also I accept tips,” Dee adds.

Everyone laughs, including Fi's dad. Fi's stomach is twisted in a giant knot. Exactly how much of Dee's anatomy is going to be on show?

"Let's not waste any time, shall we?" the instructor says. Dee goes to sit on a stool in the center of the room and the instructor starts talking about drawing techniques.

Probably. Fi's not really listening.

Maybe this is a good thing. This means she can stare at a fit girl for an hour and no one will think twice about it because they're all staring too.

It feels like a weird thing, though, with her dad sat right next to her. Her dad, who had hoped the model would be a bloke so she might have a chance of meeting someone she was attracted to.

Well, he got his wish, technically. And now Fi would like nothing more than to feign illness and go wait for her dad in the car.

But she forces herself to pay attention to the instructor. If she wants to have a hope in hell of doing any justice to Dee's hands, she's going to need as much help as she can get.

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She might actually be worse than she thought. At the end of the class she's got three pages of smudged squiggles that more closely resemble monster claws than the long, solid fingers Dee's been modeling for the past sixty minutes.

Of course her dad's sketches are good. It's not at all surprising, but nonetheless still incredibly irritating. He looks over at her failure and smiles. "Needs some work."

Fi stares daggers at him. "You think?"

He's halfway through a good hearty laugh at her expense when he starts coughing. Fi's annoyed facade drops instantly. "Dad? You okay?" She can hear the slight edge of hysteria in her voice.

"Fine, fine," he croaks, and she can tell that the smile he puts on is solely for her benefit. She's not sure he'd ever admit it to her if he *wasn't* fine, and that scares her. His stiff upper lip is practically made of stone.

At that moment, distraction presents itself in the form of long legs and musky sweet perfume. Dee is leaning down over Fi's shoulder to inspect her work.

Fi takes a breath. "You promised not to take it personally."

"I did," she says slowly. "I may have underestimated your level of crap."

Nigel starts laughing again, around the coughs. Fi forgets about Dee for a moment and reaches out to squeeze her dad's shoulder. "Stop laughing old man."

That just makes him laugh harder. Fi's chest feels tight. It's not funny to her in the slightest. "Dad," she says gravely.

He shakes his head and stands up. "Just need the toilet," he manages to choke out. "Gimme just a minute."

Fi watches him walk off towards the bathroom and her anxiety immediately attacks the fear centers of her brain. She stands up and heads for the door before she can do something even more humiliating like burst into tears in front of the whole class.

It's too much. She hasn't had time yet to adjust to everything.

She pushes the door open and crouches down with her back against the trunk of the birch tree in front of the studio. She closes her eyes and forces herself to count in her head as she breathes in and out.

Then she hears footsteps, soft in the grass and moving towards her. She opens her eyes expecting to see her dad and is more than a little surprised to see Dee, who squats down right in front of her.

"You alright?"

"Uh... I dunno," Fi admits. "Sorry I made your hands look scary. They're not actually scary, they're really nice."

She closes her eyes in disbelief at her own ridiculousness.

Dee laughs softly. "It's fine. I was just joking before. Didn't mean to upset you."

"Oh." Fi opens her eyes again. "You didn't. It's not that."

"What is it?"

Fi just looks at her for a minute. It's disarming the way Dee speaks to her like they already know each other.

"Um... it's my dad."

"I reckon he was just joking too."

"Oh, no, it's... I'm not bothered about the drawing," Fi says. "It's not about me at all. It's... my dad. He's ill."

"The coughing," Dee says.

"Yeah."

"Is it the flu?"

Fi lets herself sit fully on the ground, and Dee follows suit. It's so strange, the way Dee's acting like they're already friends, but it's a nice kind of strange. It catches Fi off guard enough to forget herself long enough to say, "He has cancer."

"Fuck."

Fi nods, then feels her chin wobbling. She ducks her head and tries to hide behind her fringe as she breathes in deeply. She refuses to cry in front of this very attractive, unreasonably familiar stranger.

"I'm such an idiot," Dee says, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"It's okay," Fi interrupts. "It's not you. I'm sorry, I just—" She takes another breath. "I only found out a few weeks ago. I haven't really... accepted it yet, I guess."

"Quality time," Dee says quietly, almost like she's thinking out loud.

"Yeah," Fi says. "Exactly."

"Do you wanna go back inside?"

Fi shakes her head.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?"

Fi looks up at her. "Not really." She's not sure why she says it. It might actually be nice to have space to let a few tears fall with no one to witness them.

But it'd also be nice to keep talking. Dee feels like someone Fi might be able to talk to. Someone who has no relationship to her sick father. Fi's not spoken about any of this with anyone, really, not even her own family.

Dee sits next to her.

"Is it okay?" Fi asks.

Dee nods. "I've got a bit of a time."

"Does your ass get numb sitting there like that?"

Dee laughs. "Yeah, it does actually."

"Do you really do it for free?"

"Yeah. Helps keep me out of my head."

"Do you have 'part time model' on your CV?"

Dee laughs again. "I don't, but I should."

Fi nods. "We don't all have nice enough hands to be an artist's muse."

Her heart jolts when Dee picks up her hand and strokes it gently with her fingers. “No,” she says quietly. “Not everyone does. But you do.”

Just then she hears her dad. “Thought you’d gone and left without me,” he says, walking towards them.

Dee drops Fi’s hand and stands up. “Fi was keeping me company.”

Nigel rests his hand on Fi’s shoulder. “If she’s offering a bribe to lie to me that the course is canceled, just know that I won’t believe it for a second.”

“Maybe I’m bribing her to tell you I’m the best,” Fi shoots back.

“Mate.” Dee smiles, a glimmer in her eye. “There isn’t enough money in the world to make that one believable.”

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“Fiona, my dear!” Nigel sings, standing at the bottom of the steps.

“Dad,” Fi says from behind him. “I’m not a teenager anymore. I don’t just hide in my room all day.”

He turns around and puts a hand to his heart. “Don’t frighten an old man like that!”

“You’re not old,” she says, an automatic response.

She tries not to think of how it feels less and less true every day.

“Well this very young man wants to take his second best girl out for a nice drive.” He gives her a cheerful smile.

“And an art lesson? I do own a calendar dad.”

“Do you, though?” Kathryn cuts through the entry way they’re standing in, a stack of clean laundry in her arms.

“Fine, I own a calendar app.” Fi sticks her tongue out at her mum’s back as she departs. “Don’t tell her I did that.”

Nigel chuckles. “I’ll keep your secret... if you get in the car with me, no complaints.”

She grumbles as though she ever had any intention of not going and says, “Fine.”

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“Hair.” Fi repeats, after seeing the theme of the day on the board at the front of the room. She turns to look at her dad. “I think they’re using a very loose definition of the word anatomy.”

She’s not sure why she’s complaining. It would be infinitely worse if Dee had to take her clothes off to reveal the subject of their study.

“How the bloody hell do you draw hair?” she asks, trying to distract herself from thinking about... that.

He just laughs. “I think the point is that we’ll learn today.”

“You don’t need to learn. You already know,” she grumbles.

“You’ll do fine, Dibs.” He pats her on the back. It’s a warm, comforting touch. Is she imagining that it’s not as firm as it used to be?

She shoves the thought away.

“Dibs?”

Fi almost drops her phone. She turns and there’s Dee standing there - tall and ever so faintly tanned, long dark hair cascading in curling waves over her shoulder.

“When Fiona here was a wee one, she couldn’t say her own name,” Nigel explains. Fi wants to slink away in embarrassment. What is it about parents and childhood stories? “She pronounced it Dibba. Her brother started calling her that it just stuck over the years.”

“It can unstick any time,” Fi says.

“I think it’s cute.” Dee grins, dimple flashing deep. “Dibba.”

“Not you too.” Fi groans. “What did I do to deserve this?”

Dee’s laugh sends unexpected warmth surging through Fi’s stomach. She thinks of Dee last week, holding her hand.

The class starts and Dee makes her way to the front. She sits passive while the instructor lectures them on style and technique. Fi half listens, eyes drifting every few seconds slightly to the left.

This island is too small for crushes that feel this strong this fast. This isn’t what her life needs right now.

Nigel must catch her staring because he says, “She seems like a lovely girl.”

“Yeah...” Fi knows he doesn’t mean anything by it. He wouldn’t. She loves her parents more than anything, but she lives a life set apart from theirs.

Or she did. Now she doesn’t. Now she’s here and the future feels all upside down. She turns her head to the side and watches her father’s profile, tears stinging at her eyes.

She can’t cry. She looks straight ahead again. She’s surprised when Dee is looking right back at her. Dee tilts her head and gives Fi a slightly questioning look.

Fi smiles back. She hopes it’s reassuring.

She likes that Dee noticed she was upset. She likes that Dee cared.

The island might be too small for crushes, but there's nothing wrong with making a friend, is there?

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"I mean..." Fi steps back and studies her sketch. "It's not... not hair."

Nigel hums pensively. "I would counter that with... it's not not-not hair."

"What is it, then?" Fi asks. "It's got to be something."

"I think you've done a fantastic... plate of spaghetti there."

"That's a head, not a plate!" she protests

"It's an abstract plate," he says. "Or a poorly done head. Take your pick."

She doesn't respond, because Dee's circling the room making an almost direct line toward them.

"What do you think, dear?" Nigel asks as soon as Dee's in hearing range. "Is it a head of hair, or a plate of spaghetti?"

Dee tilts her head. "I'm gonna go with drunk snakes."

"They were supposed to be curls!" Fi whines.

Dee thinks for a moment. "You took some artistic license and made me into Medusa. That's brilliant. I'm all on board for turning dudes into stone with my death glare." She looks at Nigel. "Except you. You can stay."

He tips his imaginary cap. "Cheers."

"Don't look at his," Fi says. "It actually looks like hair and I'm tilted."

She looks anyway. "It's pretty." She narrows her eyes. "Too pretty. Those curls ain't mine."

Fi rolls her eyes. "Yeah because your hair is so ugly."

"Kindly shut up, Dibs. We don't all have perfect hair like you."

Fi looks up at her. "You're joking, right?"

"If I could transfer your hair onto my head, I would."

"Mine's boring. It's just... straight. And the colour comes from a box."

Nigel clicks his tongue. "A shame, if you ask me. Your natural colour is so gorgeous."

“It’s not,” Fi says to Dee. “It’s mousy brown with a ginger tint. Not cute. At all.”

Dee tilts her head and looks at Fi in a way that makes her stomach flutter. “You suit the black. It makes your eyes pop.”

Fi doesn’t know how to respond to that. She’s too busy being charmed to think of a snappy comeback.

“Anyway. I used to straighten mine but it never looked right. You could always tell the hobbit was just lying in wait for a drop of water or a hint of humidity to revert it to its natural form.”

“The hobbit,” Nigel repeats, laughing.

Dee crosses her arms. “Look at me and tell me I don’t look exactly like Jackson-era Frodo. I dare you.”

“No way,” Fi blurts out. “You’re an elf if anything.”

They both look at her and she immediately starts trying to rate that on her mental *how gay did I just accidentally sound* scale.

Six, probably tipping into seven territory.

“You’re just saying that because I’m tall, aren’t you?” Dee asks.

Maybe Dee’s oblivious. Maybe.

“Yeah,” Fi says. “Sure.”

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Her dad chats to the instructor before they leave.

If Fi didn’t know how stupidly, impossibly in love her parents still are she might be worried that he was indulging a wandering eye but... she does know, and she fully believes her father really just likes the paint brushes being used in the class and wants to know where to buy them.

She doesn’t really mind being left to her own devices for a few minutes. She walks outside and breathes the fresh air. Isle of Man really does have lovely air. It always smells like the sea no matter where in town she happens to be.

“We meet again.”

She turns, hand flying to her heart. “Oh my gosh, you scared me.”

“Sorry.” Dee grins, not looking sorry at all. “Just wanted to come say hi. Again.”

Fi smiles. “Well, hi.”

“Your dad looks better this week,” she says.

Fi shrugs. “Does he?”

He still looks bad to her, but maybe that’s because she’s comparing him in her mind to the way he’s been her whole life, quiet and strong and utterly infallible.

“I think so,” Dee says. “Bit more colour to him.”

“Good. That’s good.” Fi will take it. She’ll take anything right.

Dee puts a hand on Fi’s arm. Fi’s blood pumps faster all through her body.

Is Dee just an affectionate person, maybe?

Fi smiles at her. She likes how Dee smiles back.

God, she’s pathetic. It’s always been like this. A bit of attention, a bit of kindness. Unless she’s safely ensconced in one of her London queer friendly spaces, it’s easier to assume everyone is just trying to be friendly and tuck her hopes away.

London feels so far away right now.

“I have to run,” Dee says, dropping her hand. “I’m actually late as it is, but I just wanted to check in on you. See you next week, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Fi says, and then watches her go.

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Nigel has an appointment at the hospital the day before his and Fi’s next art class. Fi’s mum takes him, and Fi stays home. She’s here to support them, but she has her limits. Seeing her father poked and prodded with needles like a lab rat and vomiting on the drive home from the strength of the experimental treatment he’s receiving is a step past those limits. She’s barely even come to terms with the fact that he’s sick.

She does some editing on her laptop while she has the house to herself. Her email inbox is bursting with projects she needs to look over. She knows she’s lucky to work for a company that was willing to accommodate her when she said she needed to move up north for an extended period of time, but she’s been finding it harder than she expected to focus on anything that isn’t worrying about things over which she has no control.

She’s got unanswered texts and unreturned calls from friends she can’t seem to muster up the energy to talk to. She’s not ready to pretend this isn’t killing her a little bit. She doesn’t know how to put a brave face on it yet. People ask her how she’s doing, but Fi knows they don’t *really* want to know. They want her to say it’s tough but she’s hanging in, and the truth is that that just isn’t the case. It’s more like she’s hanging on by a thread.

So when her mum gets home a few hours later and Fi’s dad isn’t with her, Fi panics immediately.

Her mum pulls her into a hug and rubs her back. “It’s alright, child. He’ll be alright.”

“Why isn’t he home? Tell me the truth.”

She sighs. “His white blood cell count is low. It’s just a precaution.”

“How long?” Fi demands.

“Well... until his WBC’s go back up, love.”

Fi can feel it in her bones that she’s going to fall apart, and she really doesn’t want to do it in front of her mother. She nods and says, “Okay,” and heads toward the stairs. There’s a bed with her name on it just waiting to absorb her tears.

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Her mum wakes her up the next morning, about three hours before Fi would even like to consider being awake. She groans and rolls over, picks up her pillow and brings it down over her head. “Go away, mum.”

“You have art class.”

She pokes her head back out. “Is dad home?”

“No, love,” Kath says gently. “I’m sorry.”

“Then I don’t have class.”

“I think you should still go.”

“I only go to make dad happy. And to spend some time with him.”

“I think it’d be good for you to get out, Fi. He told me you made friends with the model.”

Fi makes an exasperated noise, bordering on genuine anger. “I’m shit at art, mum. It’s not fun for me. I don’t want to go without him.”

Not to mention the fact that her dad acts as a buffer for Fi’s incurable awkwardness. Without him there she’ll make an ass of herself in front of Dee, and even as upset as she is right now, she still cares what the pretty brown-eyed model thinks of her.

Kath crosses her arms. “Well I don’t want you moping about the house.”

That shuts her up. In fact, now she feels like she might cry.

She fights that urge and channels the anger instead. “Fine.” She throws the duvet off her bare legs, grabs a handful of rumpled clothes from the clean laundry basket and stomps off down the hall, slamming the bathroom door shut behind her.

She feels like a teenager again.

Actually, she reckons she pretty much never threw fits like this back then. Her brand of anguish in the adolescent years was more the internal type. The ‘if I pretend to like boys long

enough, maybe my bits will get the memo' type. And, failing that, the 'if I never tell anyone I like girls, it's almost as if I don't' type.

The fighting with her mum type didn't happen very often.

It feels awful. She gets dressed and brushes her teeth quickly, then grabs her phone and wallet and practically flies out the door.

She considers killing time at a coffee shop. She considers taking a bus to the hospital. But she's too keyed up for caffeine to be a wise choice, and she's not sure she can stomach sitting next to her dad and just watching him be this sick, so in the end, art class wins out.

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Dee is wearing shorts that come up high on her thighs and Fi really, really wishes she'd put a little more care into what she's wearing. Her hair is twisted into a bun on top of head that's half falling out more out of carelessness than purposeful messiness, and the jeans she's wearing are ones designed more for comfort than to accentuate any particular body parts.

"It's so much, isn't it?" Dee asks, beelining straight for Fi when she sees her. She puts her hands on her hips and looks down. "But I'll be fucked if I'm posing in my pants and those were really my only options. Leg day, and all."

Leg day.

Maybe it's good Fi's dad isn't here to see her make an utter drooling idiot out of herself.

But then she's thinking about her dad again and not even Dee's smooth calves can edge out that stormcloud.

Dee seems to realize that Fi's properly alone, either by looking around and not seeing him or maybe just from Fi's expression. She gives Fi a questioning look and glances to Nigel's stool.

Fi has to close her eyes for just a moment before she says, "Hospital. Something about his white blood cells."

"Fuck," Dee says softly. Her face is instantly drawn into an expression of sympathy and genuine sadness. "Is that like... well bad?"

"It's... not good. I don't really know. My mum wasn't too forthcoming with the details." She wishes they were already meant to be drawing just so she could have something to do with her hands. "She didn't seem that worried, but she always tries to act like things aren't that bad. I don't even know if it's more for my benefit or hers."

"The fine art of avoidance," Dee says. "I get it."

Fi nods. "I wish I wasn't worried. My problem is I don't know how to *stop* worrying."

Dee touches Fi's arm. Fi looks down at her hand. The thought crosses her mind that she really did do an absolutely shite job of sketching them that first week. They're beautiful

hands, not that she usually notices such things. They're big, bigger than Fi had noticed before. Big but somehow projecting an air of gentleness.

The class starts and Dee has to go back up to the front. It's just as well, really. Fi's thoughts are a swirl of incomprehensible strangeness today and she's fairly sure she wouldn't be able to hide that for more than a few minutes.

Class is actually nice today, or as nice as it can be without her dad's voice making jokes over her shoulder and giving her irritatingly useful instruction. But in the moments between the ache that gnaws at her, Fi finds some peace in the scraping of her pencil on the paper.

Legs are easier than hair, she decides. And Dee's aren't exactly a chore to look at.

In the end it's probably the best drawing she's done yet.

Of course he's not here to see it.

Her hands shake as she gathers her things together. She doesn't know where she's going next. She can't go home. She's still angry with her mum and it's a feeling so foreign that she doesn't know what to do with the way it burns in her stomach.

"Hey," Dee says, appearing beside Fi. She reaches out and starts to put things in order, pencils where they're meant to be, pulling the sketch from the pad and folding it in half. "Come on."

"What?" Fi stops. She doesn't quite know what's going on.

"Come on," Dee repeats. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"I know a place," Dee says. "You look like you need a drink, Dibs, and I'm buying."

Fi just stands there. If it were any other day she'd be thrilled. Or terrified. Most likely some combination of the two.

Today she's just sad. "I... I won't be fun."

"Would you rather be alone?"

"No, but—"

"Look, I just think you might benefit from some central nervous system depressant, that's all."

Fi actually laughs a little at that. It's a humourless laugh, but still, it's something. "It's eleven am."

"I told you, I know a place." She reaches out and wraps her hand around Fi's wrist. "Let me be your knight in shining armour and save you just a little bit."

Fi forgets for a moment that she's supposed to be sad and anxious. She looks at Dee's face with what is probably a bit of a stunned expression. That sounded... well. To be honest, it sounded a bit gay. And it takes a lot for Fi to even allow herself to *consider* that another girl could be flirting with her.

It's probably too much to hope for that *this* girl would flirt with her. She's funny and clever and fit and actually seems to enjoy Fi's company. Usually when something seems too good to be true, it is.

But she's going to go along with it anyway, because the alternative is to go home and have a mental breakdown about the fact that she may not have a father to come out to when she's finally ready to do that.

"Does that make me a princess?" Fi asks.

"If you want."

"Hm. Reckon I'd rather be a knight myself."

Dee tilts her head. Then she smiles. "Just come with me, sir."

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Dee has a car. It's a rusty old blue thing, but there's something very hot about seeing Dee behind the wheel.

It's possible Fi is easy to impress.

It smells nice. Dee's got some kind of fruity air freshener thing hanging from the rear view mirror. She plugs her phone into an aux cord and plays music Fi isn't cool enough to recognize. The windows are open and Fi forgets to be sad for the whole nine minutes it takes Dee to drive to the mythical 'place.'

When Dee parks, it's in front of a little bar whose sign reads *Jamie's*. They hop out and Dee does the 'after you' gesture. "Good sir."

Fi giggles. She can't help it. She eyes the bar carefully as they walk toward the door. All the lights are off and there isn't a soul inside.

"It's closed," Fi says, though she probably doesn't have to. It's very obviously not open yet.

"Nah."

Fi looks at her, waiting for the punchline, but then Dee pulls her keys from her pocket and fits one inside the door's lock. She turns it and opens the the door for Fi. "Told you." She grins.

Fi steps inside. "This place is yours?"

"My mum's, but I'm helping her run it for now." She closes the door and locks it behind her. "We live in the flat upstairs."

“Wow.”

“I know. Technically I live in London, but she kind of needs me right now, so here I am.”

“Technically I live in London, too,” Fi says, looking around at all the gleaming hardwood and leather-seated booths. It’s modest, but it feels nice. “I moved here to stay with my parents temporarily when I found out my dad was ill.”

“Maybe we passed each other in the street and didn’t even notice it.” Dee steps behind the bar, so Fi climbs up to sit on a stool.

“Reckon I’d have noticed you,” Fi says, almost under her breath.

Dee smirks slightly. “Maybe you did. Maybe now you’re just stalking me.”

“Maybe you’re stalking *me*,” Fi says.

Dee leans forward, resting her elbows on the bar and her chin against her hands. “Maybe.”

This feels like flirting. Fi’s stomach is doing all kinds of wiggly things. She needs to distract herself. “Who is Jamie?”

“Me,” Dee says.

“You?”

Dee nods. “It’s my middle name.”

“Dee Jaime,” Fi says. “That doesn’t really flow.”

Dee laughs. “Trust me, I know.”

“Still, you have a bar named after you. That’s ace.”

“My mother has a guilty conscience.”

Fi raises her eyebrows. “Yeah? What’s she got to feel guilty about?”

Dee waves her hand dismissively. “It’s a long depressing story. That’s not what we’re here for today.”

“Aren’t we?” Fi asks.

“Well, not my long depressing story,” Dee clarifies. “Pick your poison.”

“Oh, um. I dunno. Something that tastes good.”

Dee smiles a bit. “Not a drinker?”

“I am,” Fi says. “Just usually pick the fruitiest cocktail on the menu.”

“Oh so you’re that kind of drinker.”

“What do you mean?” Fi asks. She prepares herself to be mildly mocked.

But Dee surprises her, like she keeps doing.

“The kind who knows who they are and what they like and doesn’t give a shit about impressing anyone around them.” Dee smiles at her. “I like that.”

“I don’t know that I’d say I don’t give a shit,” Fi says quietly. “I probably give too much of a shit sometimes. But it helps that I don’t usually go to bars. I’m just... not a bar person. Usually when I drink it’s at a restaurant or just... hanging out with mates.”

“I’m jealous,” Dee says. “You have actual friends.”

Fi laughs. “A few. But you don’t?”

“Let’s just say no one’s exactly beating my door down asking when I’m coming back to London.” Dee shrugs. “It is what it is. This little island holiday isn’t actually that bad.”

“I normally love it here,” Fi says wistfully, then looks down in surprise as Dee slides a glass over to her. She hadn’t even been paying attention to what bottles Dee was picking up, assuming Dee was just making a drink for herself. “What is it?”

“Spiked blackberry vanilla lemonade,” Dee says. “Extra spiked. The blackberry syrup is local. My mum does a little brunch thing on Saturdays. She says she’s catering to the millennials, even though most of the people who come in to have it are probably our parents’ age.”

Fi takes a drink. “Fuck me,” she says. “That’s so good.”

Dee breaks into a cough.

Fi frowns. “Alright?”

“Yeah, just, um.” Dee fans herself briefly as she regains breath. “Wrong pipe. All good.”

“You sure?”

Dee nods. There’s a patch of skin just above her jaw that’s turned pink. “Yeah, good, I’m good. It’s all good. Tell me about your dad? Or - or whatever you want to talk about.”

“How about anything except that?” Fi says before taking an ill-advisedly huge gulp of her drink.

Dee leans against the bar again. “Sometimes talking about shitty things is cathartic.”

“And sometimes it makes you so scared you can’t breathe.”

That was rude. She knows it. She's usually never rude. And Dee is about the last person she should be sniping at right now.

"Sorry," Fi mutters.

Dee shakes her head. "Don't be."

"You're being nice."

"I mean, not if I'm just making you feel worse."

"You're not." She takes her hair out of its bun just for something to do with her hands. Then she remembers that her hair is kind of dirty, so she puts it back up.

Dee is watching her, no doubt regretting everything that led her to invite someone so mentally unstable into her space.

Fi sighs. "I know talking is what I should probably be doing. But I'm just... I can't yet. I'm still in the denial phase a little bit."

"That's fair."

"He can't... I just—" She puts her hand over her mouth. She'll have a genuine breakdown if she lets herself, and she really doesn't want to. "Distract me. Please."

"Where do you work?" Dee asks.

"At home. Or, on my computer, technically."

Dee raises eyebrows.

"I work for an editing company. Videos, mostly."

"Like youtubers?"

"Sometimes. A lot of the time it's more boring than that. Training videos, educational stuff. Sometimes it's just personal stuff like wedding videos."

"Do you like it?" Dee asks.

Fi shrugs. "Sometimes."

"Not a forever job?"

"Christ." She chews her lip as she thinks about that. "Forever is a terrifying word."

"It is," Dee agrees. "Sorry."

"What were you doing before this?" Fi asks. "Full time modeling?" She smirks.

Dee flips her the bird and hops up to sit right on top of the counter. She crosses her legs underneath herself and Fi is momentarily mesmerized by how short her shorts really are. Then she remembers herself and looks away, hoping the lights are dim enough that Dee hasn't noticed.

She doesn't like looking at people like that. The fact that Dee is beautiful is no excuse.

"Actually, I was kind of floundering. Bouncing around from one shit job to another, one shit relationship to another, daily existential crises, depressive spirals... You know, average millennial stuff."

"I thought average millennial stuff was avocado toast and laziness."

"Oh, well. That too." She gives Fi a smile that's so dazzling it should be illegal.

It takes a while for the stars to clear from her eyes enough to actually respond. "Now you're a bartender. And a model."

"And a knight," Dee reminds her. "A rescuer of distressed damsels."

"And the existential crises?" Fi asks.

"Oh, those are still pretty much a constant debilitating drain on my will to live. But at least the rent is cheaper here."

"I like how the air kind of always smells like salt," Fi says. "And how my mum does my laundry again."

"Did you leave anyone important back home?" Dee asks. "Any boyfriends or anything like that?"

"Anything like that?" Fi's heart is beating none too quickly.

"Yeah." Dee doubles down. "Anything like that."

"No boyfriends." Fi tips back her glass and downs the rest of her drink. "No anythings."

Dee nods, appearing not to have any reaction one way or another to this particular information. She's cool as ice and Fi can't read her at all. It's infuriating.

"What about you?" Fi asks.

Dee shrugs. "I left some anythings."

Does that mean what Fi thinks it means?

"No one special," Dee continues. "Let's just say I didn't cut any ties I wasn't happy to cut."

"Oh." Fi already hates whoever it was, special or not. She hates it with an intensity that matches all of the other feelings she's feeling lately. It's an unpleasant burning in her gut that

she's not used to.

Dee stares at her in a way that makes Fi feel exposed. "It's nicer here," she finally says. "In a lot of ways. Nicer weather. Nicer job. Nicer people."

"Do you like nice?" Fi asks.

"Are you saying that because I'm kind of a bitch sometimes?" Dee asks bluntly.

"What?" That throws Fi off guard. "You haven't been a bitch at all."

"I guess... not to you," Dee admits. "But I can be. It's just, you know, a thing. It's how I am."

"You haven't been a bitch to my dad, either," Fi says. "He likes you a lot."

"Does he?" Dee says. "Well, your dad happens to be fucking awesome, so there's no reason for me to be a bitch to him either. Is he the only one who likes me?"

The last part is an abrupt shift from what came before it. "He's not," Fi says. She doesn't know what question is really being asked. She doesn't know if she wants to answer the question that's safer, or the question she hopes it is. In the end, she proves to herself that she's never been that brave. "I'm sure loads of people like you."

Dee does seem disappointed. "Sure. All of the professors at uni who gave me failing marks and kept asking why I didn't come to lectures. All the people who've fired me from jobs. All the people I've snuck out on after we slept together. Every family member I've ever let down just by not being who they thought I was."

There's a lot to unpack but Fi's got her own emotional baggage blocking her view, so mostly what she reacts to is how small Dee's words make her feel.

"Sorry," Dee mutters. "For real, this time."

Fi shrugs.

"Seriously. I don't need to be feeling sorry for myself right now. I'm really sorry."

"Me, too," Fi says quietly.

"What have you got to be sorry about?" Dee asks.

"A lot of things."

"A lot of things that you aren't going to share?"

Fi shrugs, a tiny little motion of her shoulders. "Just... stuff."

"Stuff," Dee repeats. Then she raises her glass. "I'll drink to that."

They do drink to that.

They drink a lot to that. Three more of the same, and each one a little more spiked than the last.

Fi can't remember the last time she was drunk in the middle of the day.

"Fuck," Dee sighs. "My mum's gonna be back soon. We gotta be... not here."

Fi frowns. "Why?"

"Because I'm supposed to be like, respectable and shit, and not be a public embarrassment to her."

"You're not a public emsarrab- embarrassment," Fi insits. "Also, I'm not that drunk, I probably would have messed that word up sober. Also also, my legs don't work."

Dee laughs and grabs Fi's arm. "Come on. They just gotta work in the upstairs direction. We can go hang out in my room."

"Aw," Fi says, just loose enough at the lips to let her genuine pleasure come through. "We're hanging out. Like friends."

"Fuck." Dee sighs aggressively. "You're too cute."

Fi stops walking halfway up the stairs. "You think I'm cute?"

"I think puppies are cute," Dee says. "And mice wearing tophats. And little piggies in wellies."

"You didn't answer me."

"I think alcohol is dangerous," Dee says, then reaches down and firmly grasps Fi's hand. "And yes. You're cute."

"Like a piggie in wellies."

Dee reaches up and tweaks Fi's nose. "Oink."

-

Dee's room is mostly bare, but in a purposeful minimalistic looking way. There's a bed with patterned black and gray bedding, a series of shelves in different sizes along the wall holding a variety of succulents and small plants, one single bookshelf, and a dresser with two framed photos on it. One is of Dee with an older woman who looks a lot like her, and the other is empty.

"It's a statement piece," Dee says when she catches Fi staring at the empty frame.

"What is it stating?" Fi asks.

Dee laughs at that, maybe a little more than the comment warrants. “It says Dee’s a fucking loser.”

“Well, then it’s not a statement piece,” Fi says. “It’s a lying piece.”

Dee smiles faintly. “Says you?”

“Says me.” Fi sits on the bed. It’s surprisingly comfortable. She’s not sure why she expected it not to be. She lies back. She’s had enough to drink that the ceiling seems to dip and tilt the more she stares at it. She groans a bit. “My mum is gonna be so cross.”

“Because you’re pissed at—” Dee checks the time. “Half four in the afternoon?”

“Yeah,” Fi says. “And because I left the house angry with her. And maybe because I didn’t go to hospital to see my dad.”

Dee sits down on the bed too, a safe few inches between them. Fi doesn’t know why she feels like she needs that safety. She’s not drunk enough to actually do anything she’d regret.

“I could be way off as I don’t even know your mum, but I know you and I know your dad, so if my extrapolations are correct, your mum’s probably a cool person. I bet she understands that you’re a little...”

“Fucked up?” Fi offers.

“I mean... yeah. She probably is too. You guys are probably taking out your stress on each other a bit, but I’m guessing she’s not cross with you for not visiting yet. She’s probably just sad.”

“Yeah,” Fi whispers. “We’re definitely both sad.”

“That sucks,” Dee says.

“Yep.” Fi sighs and shuts her eyes. “I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be anywhere else either. But I don’t want this to be my life.”

“I wish wanting things made them happen,” Dee says. “Because I want your dad not to be sick. It’s fucking unfair that shitstain human beings get to walk around healthy and perfectly fine and someone like your dad doesn’t.”

Dee’s kindness suddenly feels overwhelming.

Oh no, Fi thinks. She was wrong. She is going to do something she’ll regret.

She’s going to cry. She rolls onto her side and presses her face into the pillow. She really didn’t want to do this, but the alcohol in her system makes it impossible to tamp down what’s been brewing beneath the surface ever since her mum woke her up this morning.

She should have gone home straight after class. Or to visit her dad. She shouldn’t have had all those drinks.

“I’m sorry,” she sobs into Dee’s pillow.

Dee doesn’t answer, but a moment later Fi feels Dee’s body slot up against the back of hers. Dee slips her arm around Fi’s waist and squeezes gently, whispering, “It’s okay. You don’t have to apologize for having feelings.”

Life is so cosmically unfair, Fi thinks. Dee is spooning her, literally holding her in her arms and she can’t even appreciate it.

“I don’t want to have feelings,” Fi says pathetically.

“I know.” She squeezes Fi a little tighter.

“This is so freaking embarrassing. You must think I’m a proper freak.”

“Stop worrying about what I think,” Dee says. “All I’m thinking is how much I wish you didn’t have anything to cry about.”

A proper sob wracks Fi’s chest. She pushes her face deeper into the pillow until her lungs are burning from the lack of oxygen. It forces her to take a good deep breath, which works to calm the hysterics. “Fuck,” she says shakily. “He could die, Dee. Like, he actually really could die.”

Dee moves in impossibly closer. Her cheek presses against Fi’s. “Let’s go see him.”

-

They take the bus to the hospital. It gives Fi time to gather herself, and time for the both of them to sober up a bit more. They stop into the hospital cafeteria and share a sandwich and a giant cup of coffee before Fi works up the nerve to call her mum to ask for her dad’s room number.

Kath gives it to her, and says she’s out running some errands and will be there in about an hour. She doesn’t sound cross, just sad. Just like Dee said.

Fi says, “I love you mum,” before she says goodbye.

Her mum says, “Oh child. Everything will work out. I just know it.”

Fi knows she doesn’t actually know it, because no one can know a thing like that. But it still brings her comfort. Sometimes you just need your mother to tell you things will be okay.

Her hands shake on the lift ride up to the oncology wing. She’s not sure if she should be bracing herself or not.

She startles slightly when Dee slips her palm around Fi’s hand and gives it a little squeeze. “You can do it,” she says.

Fi nods. “He’ll be happy to see you, too. He even told my mum about you.”

Dee looks proper surprised. “Really?”

“Yeah. I think he thinks you’re funny or something?” Fi fights back her smirk as much as she can. “Personally I don’t get it, but there’s no accounting for taste, I guess.”

“Shut up,” Dee says, but she squeezes Fi’s hand tighter before letting it go, and she’s smiling wide.

Relief washes over her when she steps into her Dad’s room to find him sat up in bed reading a book. He’s got needles stuck in his hand and arm and he’s wearing a blue hospital gown, but he’s got a pair of socks on that her mom knitted him a few years ago when she was still trying to pretend she knew how to knit, and he certainly doesn’t look any more sick than he did the last time she’d seen him. In fact, he probably looks a little better.

His face lights up when he sees Fi, and then a little more when he notices Dee. “Have I died and gone to heaven?”

Fi fixes him with a death glare. “Don’t even joke.”

“C’mere, c’mere.” He holds his arms out for a hug and she falls into it heavily, burying her face in his neck. He doesn’t smell like himself, he smells like hospital and she hates it.

She’s overcome with too many emotions to make sense of, and she climbs right up on the bed and curls up in his lap.

It makes him laugh. “Bloody hell, Dibs. You’re not so little anymore.”

“Shut up,” she mutters, not moving a muscle.

“Rescue me, woman,” he calls out to Dee.

“No can do, sir. I’m not coming between her and her dad time.”

He just laughs and strokes the back of Fi’s head. “You smell like... rum?”

Fi nods. He laughs some more.

Fi says, “Don’t laugh.”

He says, “It’s alright, Fi. I’m not dying today. It’ll take more than a little cold to get rid of me.”

“Is that all it is?”

He shrugs. “These docs don’t tell me anything.”

“When are you coming home?”

“I don’t know, love. Soon, I hope.”

“Art class isn’t as fun without you.”

Dee adds, “It’s really not. I couldn’t even take the piss out of her because she looked so sad and lonely.”

“Hey, I did better today,” Fi protests weakly.

“Better,” Dee says. “But definitely not good.”

“This is abuse.” Fi snuggles in tighter. She knows it’s ridiculous. She’s a grown woman, and her dad is clearly fine, at least for the time being.

She doesn’t care. She needed this cuddle like she needs air to breathe.

“Thanks for bringing her to me,” Nigel says softly, and it takes Fi a moment to realize that he’s talking to Dee.

“Of course,” she says back in the same hushed kind of tone.

“Don’t tell her mother you lot are sloshed.”

Dee chuckles. “I’ll take it to my grave.”

“Don’t talk about graves,” Fi interjects. She sounds like a child. “And we’re not sloshed… anymore.”

He laughs breathily and kisses her temple and then there’s a knock on the door and a nurse comes in to check his vitals. Fi climbs down reluctantly and wipes her eyes on her sleeves.

“I have to get some more blood from you, Nigel,” the nurse says apologetically.

He rolls his eyes good naturedly and looks to Fi. “Go scrounge me up a proper brew, yeah? The tea they brought me this morning might as well have been lukewarm milk water.”

She knows he’s trying to spare her having to watch this medical stuff. She loves him so much it hurts her chest. “Okay,” she says, clearing her throat gruffly so it doesn’t sound quite so much like she’s trying not to cry. “Don’t go anywhere.”

He smiles. “I’ll be here.”

She feels shaky on the lift ride back down to the main floor, but this time it’s the good kind, the kind where she finally feels like she can exhale.

“He doesn’t look like he’s about to die.”

“That he doesn’t,” Dee says softly.

“Can you pretend you didn’t just watch me snuggle my dad like I’m three years old?”

Dee gives Fi an apologetic look. “Sorry mate. I think that wholesomeness has a place in my brain for the rest of eternity.”

Fi sighs quietly. “Of course it does.”

“It’s adorable, Dibs. Like, in the least condescending way possible. My heart is literally warm.”

Fi laughs nervously and looks down at her feet. Now that she isn’t choked up with fear, she has room for all the feelings that come along with spending time with someone she really *really* fancies. Someone who, at the very least, definitely wants to be her friend.

“Thanks for... well. For everything today,” Fi says. The sincerity makes her feel a little squirmy, but she wants Dee to know that her kindness hasn’t gone unappreciated.

“You don’t have to thank me.” Dee isn’t being sappy. If anything she sounds a touch annoyed.

“Okay. Sorry. It’s just— today would have been probably one of the worst days of my life if I’d had to go through it alone.”

The lift dings and they step out. They walk to the cafeteria in silence, and Fi’s stomach feels tight with the fear that she’s somehow said something wrong.

They stand in line and Fi orders tea for her dad and three giant biscuits. Dee’s arms are crossed over her chest, her teeth working at her bottom lip idly. Fi can’t think of anything to say. She’s only good at saying funny things when she isn’t actively trying.

The paper cup is hot and it’s burning Fi’s palm as they walk back to the lift. It hurts a little, but if anything it’s a welcome distraction.

Dee punches the up arrow and they stand there in the most tense kind of silence as they wait. And wait. And wait.

Fi is about to awkwardly offer Dee one of the biscuits when the lift finally dings and opens its doors to them. There’s no one else inside.

As soon as they’re inside and the doors close, Dee turns to her. “Look.”

Fi’s heart is pounding.

“You don’t have to thank me, okay? I wasn’t, like, doing you a favour.”

“But... you were.”

Dee looks at her. It’s more than just a look. There’s emotion behind Dee’s eyes, even if Fi isn’t quite sure what that emotion is.

“I saw an opportunity to spend time with you without having to work up the courage to ask, and I took it.”

Fi lets that sit for a moment. It feels important. She wants to answer the right way.

“I’m glad you did,” she says carefully. “And not just because I was feeling sad.”

“So if I were to work up the courage to ask...” Dee asks, sounding just as careful. “You’d—”

“Yes.” Fi doesn’t even wait for her to finish.

Dee looks down at the ground, a smile slowly spreading across her face. She nods like she’s trying to be casual, but the warm glow on her dimpled cheeks gives her away. “Alright,” she says sheepishly. “Good to know.”

Fi smiles too. “Yeah?”

Dee bumps her shoulder into Fi’s just as the lift stops and the doors open.

“Come on,” she says, slipping her hand into Fi’s. “Nigel needs his tea.”

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