and if you need a little sunshine you can borrow some of mine

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by ed3nd33znuts

Summary

He’d ended up with his head on the table, murmuring into the napkin next to his glass. Rocky and Adrian shared a look over their best friend’s back and, without words, decided that it was time to go. “C’mon buddy, let’s get going.” Rocky said, a hand on the top of Grace’s back.
Grace squeezed his eyes together, and, as he opened them, his gaze fell on the man behind the bar. The bartender was polishing a glass and talking to a group of girls hanging on his every word. His hair was long, but not scruffy, he had a very defined jaw and day-old stubble decorating his chin. In other words, he was very attractive.

or

Grace gets broken up with and decides to go to a bar to recover, where he meets a bartender that he makes a fool out of himself in front of. Oh well, he'll never see him again! Right?

Notes

hey! in light of the ao3 shutdown I'm posting my fic here!
15 chapters down I am still going, and will update here until it comes back, hope u enjoy ! I have decided to put some of the chapters together so they're a bit longer- so if you read it before on ao3 that is why :)

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

The bar was unusually quiet for a Friday night. Simon had come in to cover a shift at the last minute and was slowly realising that it probably wasn't worth dragging himself away from his TV to serve a handful of regulars and the small group talking in the corner.

It was a small bar with the remnants of a space theme inside- a few vintage alien posters and some overtly cheesy cocktails that Simon enjoyed watching macho-looking guys try to order. The outside was rather unassuming, its entrance hidden down an alleyway, only signposted by low lights and chatter streaming from the window, as well as a weathered dark blue sign with red neon letters reading 'The Hail Mary.'

Simon leant on the bar, having tidied, restocked and polished the whole thing beyond belief, and debated whether to go home and leave his 22-year-old employee in charge for the rest of the night, or take one for the team and send him home.

"Tyler!" He shouted into the staff room, peering past the AREA 51 sign hanging over the door. Tyler appeared in a cloud of vape smoke, having definitely been caught by surprise, as he attempted to hide the silver dab pen in his hoodie's ripped pocket. "Yeah?" he coughed. Fuck.

Having sent the stoner home, Simon stood watching the alien's big hand slowly tick in the UFO-shaped clock, tapping some song or other on the sticky bar mat when a tall blond man with glasses and an orange jacket ambled up to the bar. He leaned one elbow in front of Simon and held three fingers up, concerningly close to the shorter man's face. "Plleeease can I get 3 more beers?" he slurred, staring Simon up and down, his eyes landing on the menu hanging just behind his head. "No! I lieedd! 2 beers and ooooneee.." He drummed his fingers on the bar, holding the note.

Simon was (unsurprisingly) used to drunk people and this man didn't seem to be doing any harm, so he watched him wave his finger around nonjudgementally, subtly dodging its accidental prods by beginning to pour the beers. "Dark side of the Mooon-tiiini!" the drunk man decided, stabbing his finger at the empty space Simon had ducked out of. Simon nodded and pushed the beers towards him, smirking only once he had turned his back to mix the drink.

"What a weeird name for a drink," the voice came from behind him, "did you pick em?"

"Uhh no I didn't," Simon responded in his low voice, not turning to face him "they came from my old boss and his space obsession."

"Ahhh sweeet! I loove space. My buddy over there loves it even more, that's why he brought us here." He gestured vaguely to the table in the corner, where Simon turned to see two figures sitting in the dimly lit corner booth.

Their faces were barely visible, but Simon could feel their concerned stares from across the room, watching the blond man attempt to balance the two beer glasses on top of each other. Simon put the finishing touches on the drink (edible glitter and a small umbrella) and slid it towards the jenga tower building in the swaying man's arms. "Woaaahhh!! Thank you! This looks soo gre-" he was cut off by a dark haired man leaning over his shoulder and rescuing the top beer before it spilled down his t-shirt, which showed a periodic table and what Simon could assume was some pun above it.

"Woah, I've got it buddy," the beer-rescuer says, patting him on the shoulder. The blond man looked up to greet his friend and put the other beer down to swing an arm around the tall man's shoulder. "LOOK at this drink!" He flourished towards the blue and purple swirling drink sitting in front of Simon.

"Damn bud, that looks great!" the man responded, with the kind of tone you'd use with a child showing off a cartwheel. Simon gave them both a half smile in gratitude and pushed the card machine in between them. The blond man grinned back and spun on his heel, holding the glass in both his hands like a child, "Thaaannnkkss Roockk" he slurred. Simon raised an eyebrow and the man exhaled with a smile, tapping his card on the screen. "His girlfriend just broke up with him, so we've taken him out for…" he looked over to see the other figure in the corner ushering the staggering man back, ensuring the glittery drink didn't fly everywhere, "a lot of drinks." Simon gave a small smile and nodded faux-knowingly.

In reality, he had no idea what that was like. He'd never been broken up with, nor broken up with anyone. He wasn't exactly a virgin, he'd hooked up with a few girls as a teenager and, once he'd left Eden, a couple of guys, but nothing had lasted. It was easier that way, he had told himself, he had enough going on in his life, plus his upbringing hadn't exactly lent itself to longstanding emotional connections. He nodded at the card machine "You're all good."

"Thanks," the taller man smiled, picked up the remaining beers and wandered back over to the corner booth.

The bar picked up a bit in the few hours before closing, keeping Simon busy and his attention away from the group in the corner. He liked the repetitive nature of his job, pouring pints and mixing drinks from memory.

He was a large man with long black hair that fell around his face, obscuring several scars littered across it. He was wearing a black sleeveless t-shirt that did him a lot of favours, particularly in drawing attention away from his missing left arm. His appearance lent itself to being a bar manager, as very few people gave him any trouble unless they were stupidly drunk. Or just stupid.

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Ryland Grace was only the former. Sat with his closest friends, the middle school teacher was desperately trying to drink away his break up. It was a long time coming and he knew that they had drifted apart, especially after the conference and the depression that had followed. He knew it was probably for the best but he hadn't been single in years and the idea of being alone made him feel sick. So there he was.

He'd been friends with Rocky since university and it was when they started teaching together at Grover Cleveland Middle School that they met Adrian. Rocky taught physics and Adrian was the school's librarian, and within 2 months of Rocky working there they had begun dating. That was 10 years ago. In that time the three of them had become an unstoppable force, and that continued this evening.

"And then on my birthday!" Grace laugh-screamed, slamming his hand down on the table, "I made HER breakfast!!" he fell onto the table, chuckling that slowly turned to sobbing.

"She never got me a birthday present." Adrian added, taking another sip of their beer. Rocky shot them a look but Grace snapped his neck up and stared at them, mouth open.

"SHE DIDN'T?!"

"NO!" Adrian matched his unnecessary amount of energy, slamming their hands on the table with a fake horrified face.

"GOD she is the worst. She is the absolute worst, I can't believe I spent so much of my life with her," Grace rambled, shaking his head and twirling his straw, "so much time and for what?! God she sucks so bad I should text her. I should check what she's doing right now because I bet she'd love to hear from me, I mean it's been a whole day, maybe she's changed her mind…"

He'd ended up with his head on the table, murmuring into the napkin next to his glass.

Rocky and Adrian shared a look over their best friend's back and, without words, decided that it was time to go. "C'mon buddy, let's get going." Rocky said, a hand on the top of Grace's back.

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Grace had only ever dated women, his sexuality wasn't something he'd thought all that much about. He found men attractive, sure, but not enough to initiate anything. Unless, of course, he was stupidly drunk. Which he was.

“I have a better idea,” Grace said, sitting up with his eyes still fixed on the bartender, “shots?!”

Against their better judgement, Rocky and Adrian followed the stumbling Grace to the bar.

“3 shots of tequila kind sir!” Grace asked with a massive grin, slamming his hands down.

The bartender leaned away from the girls still crowding around him, nodding and producing three shot glasses from under the bar.

“He’s *gorgeous.*” Grace whisper-shouted to Rocky over his shoulder. Rocky chuckled and turned to mouth to Adrian behind Grace’s back, “That was quick!”

“You know who else was gorg-”

“Three shots of tequila.” To everyone's relief, the gorgeous bartender interrupted and placed the shot glasses on the bar, along with three slices of lime and a salt shaker.

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Some would say working in a bar gives you super hearing, and Simon would agree. Which usually comes in handy for interrupting garbled orders at 3am on a Saturday, but overhearing the blond guy with wonky glasses, a stupid t-shirt and a nice smile call him “gorgeous” was a bonus.

Unfortunately, it did not come with *selective* hearing as he did hear the follow up comparison to, Simon guessed, the man’s ex. Thankfully, he chose to cut him off and supply him with the nearest solution. Tequila.

The three of them licked the salt off their hands, took the shot, then squeezed the lime into their mouths. Simon watched them, taking the group in. On the left stood the ‘beer rescuer’ from earlier.

His dark hair had purposeful grey streaks in certain patches and he had large brown glasses that were wedged on his tan face, squeezing his nose. He was wearing a brown leather jacket and straight legged trousers, and coughed roughly after taking the shot.

The noise was drowned out, however, by the choking sounds coming from the taller, blond man in the middle. He'd taken his jacket off to reveal that the t-shirt read "I wear this shirt periodically."

"You alright Grace?" said the person stood to his right. They were the tallest out of the three, with long, dark curls, light brown skin and a calm look permanently on their face. They had long purple earrings and a green button up shirt. The calmness extended to the way they took the shot, and placed a caring hand on Grace's back.

"I'm good!" he spluttered, shaking his face like a wet dog. Simon caught the corner of his mouth turn up and spun away quickly, grabbing the card machine.

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"I'm gonna find us an uber," Adrian said, "Is there better reception outside?"

The bartender nodded in response and Adrian slid away from the bar, patting Grace on the back, "Hang out here for a sec, I'm gonna find Rocky and grab an uber, I'll text you when it's on its way."

Grace responded with a smile and a thumbs up, his head leaning on his hand. Rocky had gone to the toilet after the shot, and had seemingly gotten lost on the way back. Grace watched Adrian walk up to their husband and gesture outside, he then closed his eyes to try and get the room to stop spinning.

He historically didn't drink a lot, even at university, so he was still a lightweight at the age of 35. Therefore, four beers, a few shots and a hilariously named cocktail would finish him off very easily. Evidently.

The bartender kept an eye on him, sliding a glass of water in his direction. Grace stared up at him and nodded appreciatively, closing his eyes and picking the glass up with both hands and holding it close to his face. As he lifted it up he knocked his glasses off his nose where they had been balancing, causing them to bounce off the bar mat and onto the floor on the other side of the bar.

“Sugar! I’m so sorry,” Grace exclaimed and tried to reach over the bar, pushing his water over in the process. “Shit shit shit.” He abandoned his teacher's habit of censoring himself and grasped at a pile of tissues, haphazardly throwing them in the direction of the other man’s crotch.

“Ah it’s fine,” he responded, stepping out of the firing line of Grace’s pointless efforts to bend down and pick up the glasses, “at least it was water.”

“Hey at least it was,” Grace gave up trying to dry thin air and accepted the glasses back and pushed them onto his nose.

He hung his head slightly, hiccuping and covering his mouth, “M’sorry, I promise I don’t usually drink this much, it’s been a long few days.”

“Your friend mentioned,” he replied, gesturing outside to where Rocky and Adrian were tucked under the awning, looking at one of their phones to track down a mystery uber.

“Of course he did. God, that man loves spreading my business, I bet you don’t have that problem.” He was holding the glass up so the other man could wipe underneath it with a cloth.

“No, my friends usually keep my business to themselves.”

“Aha, no, I meant I’m sure you’ve never been broken up with.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Oh really? I think I would be, you are aaa,” Grace held the ‘a’, trying to will his drunk brain not to finish that thought, “...beautiful man.” Frick.

The two men stared at each other for a second of semi-awkward silence, before being interrupted by a shout from the door, “Hey I’ve been texting you, the uber’s here!”

With that, Grace stood up, gave a painful wave and finger gun to the bartender, walked the ten paces out the door, and promptly threw up on the pavement, having made it out of the man’s line of sight.

Unfortunately, some bartenders also have super sight as well as hearing.

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Simon stood behind the bar, taken aback by the series of events that had just been laid out before him. His trousers were still damp, there was a puddle by his feet, a pile of sick outside and, worst of all, he was *blushing.*

He could see the blond man being bundled into the car, holding his mouth and a tissue his friend had produced from their pocket. They had turned around and mouthed ‘Sorry!’ to Simon once realising the sick was very much on his property. He appreciated the gesture.

Once the storm had cleared he only had an hour until close, so poured a bucket of water over the sick in an attempt to wash it away and began closing down the bar. The last few customers trickled out at this point, saving him from staying open any later than he wanted. At 3:49 he called it a night, doing the bare minimum to call the bar closed (bar wiped, toilets checked, kegs off, lights off) and made his way to the door.

The walk back was nice, well lit and he still had the faint sound of the city going on in his head, and the faint mental image of the blond man who made an arse out of himself but still made him *blush.* Simon didn’t blush. He was a grown man who paid taxes, not a schoolgirl.

Walking through the park always took him slightly longer than he wanted it to, where the only remaining street light had gone out a year ago. Growing up in Eden, Simon was used to constantly being on edge, and while moving away had relieved some tension, walking through this dark park by himself always made his skin crawl.

Reaching the edge of the park, Simon finally exhaled. His street was very well lit and pretty safe, he’d made very sure of it before moving there. He climbed up the few steps to the dark red door, the last thing between him and his bed.

His key clicked in the lock and he stepped inside, making sure to keep himself very quiet. He put his key in the little dish by the door and kicked off his shoes, leaving the lights off. It was too late to shower so after checking in the room next to his, he brushed his teeth and climbed into bed.

What a strange shift.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

hope u enjoy :p

Monday morning was painful for Grace. He'd spent Saturday at Rocky and Adrian's house, going between throwing up in their downstairs toilet and curled up on their sofa watching the Simpsons. He'd managed to go home by Sunday, but didn't end up doing a lot more than that. He managed to get a box of his exes stuff together, mostly so he didn't have to look at it, and he made one meal (toast. The bread was stale so he ordered a takeaway instead).

This resulted in him showing up to school on Monday in a fashion not unlike a sitcom hangover. He couldn't bring himself to cycle so begged Rocky to drive him. After a joking comment about Grace being "too young to get hangovers like this", Rocky and Adrian arrived at Grace's house at 7:30, finding him standing outside in a large jacket, sunglasses and coffee in a red travel mug.

It was a quiet drive to the middle school, until Grace decided to break the silence,

"I didn't call her."

"We know buddy," Rocky responded,

"We're more surprised you didn't try and get that bartender's number."

The car went quiet again, as Grace sat in mortified silence.

He got through the first two periods alright, by limiting his 'standing up and teaching' time and handing out some super interesting worksheets. After lunch he was having a quick 'head on desk' nap when his sixth grade biology class started coming through the door,

"How was your weekend Mr. G?"

His head snapped up and he gave the small mob a thumbs up, "It was great! How was yours?"

Teacher voice came very naturally to Grace, and he was able to censor himself very easily, which did often prove embarrassing. He'd slipped 'cheese and crackers!' into more serious meetings and first dates than he'd care to admit. The 11 year olds in front of him fizzed with energy, all responding at the same time,

"I just slept all weekend!"

"I went to the cinema!"

"I saw my granny!"

Grace smiled and nodded at each response, giving appropriate reactions from behind his overcrowded desk.

"I didn't do any homework!"

"I went to Ollie's house!"

Once he'd settled the room down, he stood up to start some top quality teaching. Grace enjoyed teaching sixth grade because they were old enough to understand him and start developing opinions, but they weren't 'too cool' yet, which started setting in the closer they got to high school.

The lesson that day was an introduction to cell structures, so Grace went through some slides and had them complete a pop quiz. Just before the bell went, a hand went up in the corner. It belonged to Evie, a quiet girl with long, curly brown hair and badges covering her jacket and bag. She often gave Grace a tour of these badges, going over the tv shows and films each one referenced in great detail.

"Yes Evie?" Grace asked, pointing his pen at her. Her bracelets clinked together as she put her hand down. "What time is parent's evening tonight?"

30 curious faces turn to Grace, as his own falls. Parent's evening. Tonight. For all his sixth grade classes. Frick.

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The bar was closed on a Monday, luckily for Simon after his busy weekend.

His Friday had already been a bit mental, Saturday was no better. He'd had TWO bachelorette parties make a stop, one after the other. Bar crawls were seemingly more popular recently, resulting in a lot of pink feathers, inappropriate comments and advances from every angle.

He then originally had Sunday evening off, but there had been a sickness going around so he had to cover, opening at 1pm and closing at 1am. Being the manager had a lot of perks, but being the last resort was not one of them.

He spent most of Monday doing odd jobs around the house; laundry, cleaning, cooking a couple of meals to freeze for later that week. Doing nothing and being alone was a luxury Simon revelled in after so many years of being under constant surveillance in Eden, and he made sure to make the most out of it. He watched a lot of good TV, ate a lot of good food and ensured the house was always clean and tidy.

Half way through an episode of Taskmaster (season 10 if you must know), Simon's alarm went off. "Shit is it already 4?" he muttered, half asleep, pausing Greg Davies' face and stretching upwards. He ran into his room, got on an old black button-up and jacket, pulled on some boots, and left the house.

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"So I DEFINITELY have to be present for this parent's evening?" Grace said through his fingers, head in his hands,

"Unfortunately," Rocky responded, not looking up from his laptop, "Just tell them that their kid is getting on really well, but could do with talking less and applying themselves more. Works 90% of the time."

Grace rolled his eyes and groaned his way back to his classroom.

He'd mistimed it, however, and there were already a couple of students and their parents loitering next to the lockers. "Wow hi! You're all here!" he clapped his hands together and tried to force the headache to leave his body, "Who's up first?"

The first few went by quickly, Grace tried not to mentally acknowledge how spot-on Rocky had gotten his advice, he really was repeating the phrase “apply yourself” more than he’d like. The evening started winding down and he was about to start packing up when he heard a voice down the corridor, “Come ON, we’re already late! He might have already left and you HAVE to talk to Dr. Grace.”

Grace smiled, recognising Evie’s voice. His face turned instantly when he saw who was following behind her.

“Dr Grace! This my Uncle Simon,”

Grace’s mouth opened but nothing came out.

“Nice to meet you,” Simon said, putting his hand out for Grace to shake. There was no doubt in his mind that this was the bartender from Friday night, but either Simon didn’t remember him or, more likely, didn’t want to embarrass him in front of his niece. He decided not to mention it in any case.

Missing a beat, Grace took his hand and shook it, shutting his mouth into a slightly pained smile, “You too! Evie never mentioned she lived with her uncle?”

“Oh yeah! I love living with Uncle Si, after my mum died and we left E-” Evie started rambling, but she was silenced by a slightly stern, sideways glance from Simon.

“We moved here from Tennessee 4 years ago, it’s just the two of us now but we get on just fine.” His stern look softened and he put his hand on her knee.

They talked about how well Evie was getting on, and how if she could talk up more in class she’d do so well, because she was so bright but always saved her good points for talking to Grace individually, never in front of the class. They started wrapping up and once he’d congratulated Evie again on a great first semester, she spotted some friends and ran over to say bye before they left. Grace watched her go.

“How’s your head?”. Grace blinked at Simon, taken aback.

“Uhh it’s fine,”

“Good. I was worried after the other night.”

Ah. Of course. Grace huffed. “Ha yeah, I’m sorry about that, I don’t remember the last… bit of that night, it’s all a bit of a blur,” he lied. It was better that than admitting that he’d been replaying their conversation all weekend, going from that to his break-up conversation, to him throwing up on his shoes outside of the bar, like some sort of haunted mental echo chamber.

“It’s alright, I’ve seen worse.” Simon said with a shrug, he had a surprisingly relaxed resting face, calm beneath a flurry of scarred tissue around his eye and cheek.

“So how do you deal with working at a bar and raising Evie alone?” Grace said, with genuine curiosity before realising how unprofessional it was, “Sorry! That was so nosy, you don’t need to answer!”

“It’s fine, I don’t mind,” he responded, his brown eyes staring into Grace’s, “her father was never in the picture, and her mother, my sister, died 5 years ago,” his gaze drops, “so we left Tennessee. We were living in a quite toxic environment, and didn’t have a lot left for us there, so we moved here. And as far as juggling her with the bar, I am close with my neighbour down the road who looks after her until I get back, she puts her to bed when I work, or she stays with a friend on the weekend. I don’t like to work late shifts during the week if I can help it, so I’m usually done by 4 in time to pick her up.”

Grace opened his mouth to respond, but before he could Evie skipped back in, “C’mon Uncle Si are we going?”

“Yeah, we were just chatting while we waited for you.” Simon said, standing up to leave

“Well, it was nice to see you again,” Grace ,

“You too,” he replied. They shook hands again and Simon turned to walk away.

“Again? What do you mean again?”

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Grace sat in the silence of the classroom for a second, trying to recover from the situation. As if he could sense the silence, Rocky poked his head through the door, “Hey buddy, you need a lift home?”

Grace exhaled and leaned backwards. “Yep, thank you, let me just get my things together.”

“How did it go?” Rocky stepped into the room and leaned against the wall.

“Good actually, although,” he looked up from his bag, debating whether to mention it, “do you remember the bartender from the other night?”

“The hot one?” Rocky replied, his eyebrow raising over his thick black framed glasses.

“Uhh sure,” Grace chuckled, “he’s Evie’s uncle.”

“Oh!” his second eyebrow went up, “what did he say?”

“He just asked if I was okay, he was really nice about it to be fair.” Grace replied, not looking up.

“Mmmm.”

Adrian joined them later in the car. “How are we?” They asked, plonking into the passenger seat with a sigh.

“Grace saw the hot bartender today, Evie from sixth grade’s uncle.” Rocky said, matter of factly.

“Oh really?” They grinned at Grace, “And?”

Grace scoffed “And? He asked if I was okay and we talked about Evie.”

Rocky and Adrian shared a look.

Grace had never discussed his sexuality with the pair, or really thought about it himself. It hadn’t really been relevant for years while he was in a relationship. He wasn’t *gay,* he knew that, but he did find men attractive. Would he go so far as to… go out with one? Fuck one? Date one? He didn’t know. He didn’t need to know. He was still getting over his ex.

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“And then Rena said that if I want to go to her house next weekend then I can and we can have a sleep over and play Animal Crossing on her new switch!” Evie hadn’t stopped to draw breath since they got in the car, and Simon loved it. He loved listening to her talk about her day and tell him about her friends and explain things that he never got to experience growing up. Like Animal Crossing.

He was so glad that she got to have the childhood that he didn't, although it was often bittersweet. He wished that he could have gone to a normal school and had normal friends and not fear for his life every day the minute he turned 16 and gained 'his duties'. But, the happiest point of his life in Eden was when Evie was born and he knew that he couldn't let her live the life he and his sister had.

He wished that his sister, Elsie, could have left with him- and the fact that it took them so long eats him up inside- but they needed the support. Eden was an oppressive, difficult place to live but the support that they provided Elsie when she gave birth at 16 was great and better than what Simon could have done at 20 with no experience of the outside world.

At 23 he tried his hardest to get the three of them to leave but Elsie became ill. Leaving in secret with an ill 19 year old and a very unhappy 3 year old was impossible, but Simon tried his best. He failed. He tried and failed twice before Elsie died and that was the tipping point. The neglect that the 'doctors' in Eden showed towards her gave Simon no other choice and he left before the funeral. Evie was 6.

She didn't remember a lot of Eden, probably a mix of trauma responses and the age she was when they left. Leaving was the hardest thing Simon had ever done and adjusting to life away from it was nearly impossible, but once his sister had died he knew that he had to help Evie and make sure she didn't have to live and die like her mother.

When they arrived in San Francisco, they had stayed with a friend of Simon's who had left the year before until they found their feet, then moved to a 2 bedroom house in a better catchment area- one of many things Simon didn't realise he needed to know about.

"And then at lunch time Ollie said that-"

"Spaghetti for dinner?" Simon interrupted, having tried to get a word in for a good ten minutes, and he was starting to get hungry.

"And ice cream after?" Evie was sat on the counter, swinging her feet and grinning at the man. He tried to protest but melted instantly, "We'll see."

He turned around to open the packet of spaghetti when Evie inhaled. He mentally prepared for another update as to what Ollie and Rena were getting up to when Evie blurted out "How do you know Dr Grace?"

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Grace loved living alone. After being in a relationship for so long and living with her for the last 3 years, Grace was enjoying the silence of his empty flat.

He pottered around the kitchen, boiling water, cutting vegetables and making a sauce. He liked taking the time to cook a proper meal for himself, especially when he wasn't feeling great. That was another benefit of living alone, he could cook a massive meal and eat it throughout the week and no one else would touch it.

That was a bigger issue when he lived with Rocky, however. He lived with Rocky for years, from second year of university up until he got engaged to Adrian. The three of them had lived together for a while, but the idea of being married with a roommate wasn't their idea of marital bliss.

The silence in Grace's flat got boring and a bit scary, so he put on Brooklyn 99 in the background while he cooked.

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"Dr Grace was DRUNK?!"

"Yes, but you can't talk to him about it, he's very embarrassed."

Evie had squeezed the secret out of Simon a lot easier than he'd care to admit, and they were curled up on the sofa eating ice cream having finished their spaghetti.

"I can't believe you saw him AND Dr E AND Mx E?!" Evie was twirling the spoon and staring at Simon incredulously.

"Shhhhhhh," he held his spoon up to his lips, "OUR secret."

"Fiiine," she whined, tucking herself under his arm.

They sat together on the sofa, watching Friends, until he heard her snoring gently on his lap. He stroked her hair, gently trying to wake her up.

When she was younger he would have scooped her up while she was sleeping and put her to bed, but now she was bigger, and he'd lost his arm, he had to wake her up.

"Hmmpphh" she groaned, batting his hand away.

"C'mon kiddo, you have school tomorrow,"

"Hmmmmppph" she turned over and lay on her back, staring at the ceiling and up at her uncle's bearded chin. "Are you working tomorrow?"

"I am in the evening, I'm sorry, I'll pick you up from school then Ava will make you dinner and put you to bed and I'll be back around midnight."

"Hmmmm okay." She sat up and turned to him, yawning softly, "Gnight Simon."

"Night kid, I love you."

Chapter 3

Tuesday was better for Grace, his headache had mostly gone away and he was feeling a bit less embarrassed and heartbroken, which was a win these days. His eighth graders had a practice test so he sat in silence, watching them struggle and scribble down answers with puzzled looks on their faces.

“Remember guys, it’s only a practice test! So just do your best and we can iron out any problems over the next few weeks, that’s what practices are for.”

A few of his students looked a little bit *too* relaxed, however, but that was a problem for future Grace.

“As soon as you’re finished you can head to lunch early,” he said as an incentive, “BUT don’t rush through it, double check your answers.” He definitely felt the need to add the last part, after marking one too many tests that had entire empty sections.

One by one his students came up and dropped their tests on the pile, some smiling as they came, others looking disappointed, a few terrified. “Well done,” Grace nodded as each came past him, “I know you did your best.”

The last student to get up was a boy called Harry. He was tall for his age, with way too much hair flopping over his ears and in his eyes. He was usually quite loud and a bit obnoxious, trying to make everyone laugh, but he was smart, and Grace let him get away with more than other teachers would because he knew that the kid meant well.

He put his test down then started towards the door, but turned at the last second. “Dr Grace I think I fuck- I messed it up.”

Grace looked up at him through his glasses, nearly addressing the cursing, but thought against it once he saw the look on the kid’s face.

“Hey buddy it’s fine, like I said it’s just a practice.”

“Yeah, but I know that stuff, I know I do, I just sat down and it all left my brain.”

Grace nodded slowly, leaning against the desk, “What do you think happened? Was it stress or is there something else on your mind?”

The boy shook his head dismissively, “Nevermind, it’s stupid, I’ll do better next time.”

“Hey, no, if there’s a problem I’m sure we can figure something out.”

He took a deep breath, “Maybe there’s something on my mind,” he was avoiding the teacher's careful gaze, “but it’s not that deep, can I just take the test again?”

“If you want to, I’m sure we can find time for it.” Grace paused, “Do you want to talk about what’s maybe on your mind?”

“Can I redo the test next week?” Harry was still looking at his feet, picking the skin off his thumb with his teeth.

“Yeah bud, I’ll sort it for you.”

Finally looking up, Harry adjusted himself, breathed out and turned to the door, “Thanks Dr G.”

Once the boy had left the room, Grace looked at his test paper, flicking through it. There was an answer under the first question then nothing. Across all 8 pages.

Grace sighed and sat back down in his chair, running his hand through his hair.

“You okay Ry?” a face popped round the doorframe.

“Hey Adrian,” he scrubbed his hand over his face, “yeah I’m okay, just worried about this kid,” he exhaled, “and I’m really tired.”

“Did you sleep?” They walked into the room and sat on the table in front of Grace’s desk, legs hanging off the side.

He shrugged in response and picked Harry’s test back up, “How do you figure out whether a kid is distracted because of kid reasons or…”

“Adult reasons?” Adrian finished his sentence.

“Mmmmm,” he doesn’t look up.

✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶

Simon’s alarm went off at 4 while he was eating his pre-work meal (too late to be lunch and too early to be dinner). He forced the last of his steak and salad sandwich into his mouth and wiped his hand on his work trousers.

Half-choking, he picked up his phone and plate in his one hand and tried to release the plate into the sink. He misjudged his grip, however, and his phone fell along with it. Something cracked.

“Sh-crfh-shit!” He choked on the crumbs in his throat for a second, leaning on the counter. He closed his eyes and breathed in. *Fuck’s sake.* He kept his eyes screwed shut to avoid coming to terms with, best case, a cracked plate and worst a cracked phone or sink.

In the 8 years since he’d lost his arm he had made a lot of progress in accepting what he could and couldn’t do.

Cracking an egg? Could do! Tying shoelaces? Not so much.

He’d adapted, bought shoes with zips and velcro and installed aids in the kitchen and the bathroom. He asked for help when he needed it, drove an automatic car, taught himself to pour a pint one-handed, and generally got on with his life. Because he didn’t have a choice.

But sometimes, stupid, dumb little things like trying to put a *plate* in a *sink* made him break down.

He looked up finally to find the white plate broken in two.

Breathe, Simon. He picked up and dried off his phone, sighed and zipped up his boots. The plate could wait.

He pulled into the middle school’s car park a few minutes late and jogged over to the pick-up spot. Evie was sitting on the step next to a girl with curly blonde hair and braces and they were talking, passionately, about something Simon couldn’t quite hear yet.

Behind them, perched a familiar blond man wearing a yellow rain jacket and a red tie. He looked up as Simon continued jogging over, adjusting his lopsided glasses and pushing them

more firmly onto his face. He waved awkwardly as Simon smiled at Evie and then over at him.

“Hey Si!” she grinned and waved at him too.

“Hey bud, sorry I’m so late.”

She shrugged and went back to her conversation, absent mindedly putting the books that were spread around her feet into her grey bag, the keyrings jingling as each one went in.

“Dr. Grace,” his attention turned to the teacher, who was looking over awkwardly, “how are you?”

“Uh, good!” He perked up, seemingly pleased to be acknowledged, “and you?”

Simon nodded slowly, rubbing his hand over his stubble and trying not to think about the near-meltdown he’d had over that *fucking* plate.

“Yeah I’m alright. Gotta drop Evie at our neighbour’s before my shift tonight.”

“Ah, fun,” Grace said, standing up and rocking back on his heels, “God I couldn’t imagine working in the evening, I mean, I used to stay up late at the library but even that was a lot, and I definitely couldn’t talk to anyone at that time, let alone manage a bar-”

He kept rambling and Simon’s eyebrow slowly arched, in amusement but also awe at how he *kept* talking.

“Yeah, well,” Simon interrupted, “I couldn’t imagine spending my day with kids. One is bad enough.” he nudged Evie with his foot, who suddenly looked up in faux horror.

Grace laughed softly, “Fair point, I don’t know how I do it.”

Both girls turned with open mouths to stare at their teacher. “Rude!” Evie laughed, swinging her bag onto her shoulder as she stood up.

Simon smiled slightly and welcomed her over, “Bye Dr Grace! Bye Rena!” She grinned and skipped towards the man’s open arm. He looked over her head and waved at the teacher leaning against the wall.

Evie caught his glance suspiciously, but gave up pretty quickly to tell him about the book Rena was showing her and how she needed to read it. Simon listened intently all the way back to their house.

✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶

Grace cycled home, his books and papers wrapped up in his bag on his back. He liked cycling, he liked the exercise and he really liked not paying for fuel. There weren't many places he couldn't get on his bike or on a bus, so a car seemed unnecessary.

Once at home he made a cup of tea and started marking the eighth grade practice tests.

B+ - Well Done !

A- - You're doing great !

C - Room to improve!

Then he got onto Harry's. He read through the first question and answer.

"The pancreas produces several digestive enzymes.

Cystic Fibrosis reduces the amount of each enzyme that reaches the small intestine.

Explain why someone with Cystic Fibrosis has difficulty gaining muscle mass" 6 marks

Harry's answer was detailed, well thought out, and had all of the key terms required for all 6 marks. Not a single other question had been touched.

Grace often read too deep into student behaviour, thinking that a girl was being bullied when her friends didn't sit with her at one lunch break or another girl's mum was neglecting her because she came in crying (her mum had taken her phone away after finding out she was on snapchat at 11). But he always decided that was the better way to be, and he'd rather be too worried than let a child slip through the cracks.

He deliberated for a bit, before giving up marking and making some food to calm down. He'd talk to the guidance counselor tomorrow, book in a make-up test for Harry, and keep an eye on him. It was probably nothing.

✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶

“RUN and grab what you need, I’m already late.” Simon said as he shut the door and hung the car keys up. He did trust Evie to walk down the street to Ava’s, but it was on his way and he felt that it looked a bit better to stop and talk as opposed to letting her spawn in Ava’s kitchen without a word.

Simon ignored the plate in the kitchen, knowing it would only piss him off and he was already on edge going into this shift. He loved his job, it was one of the only stable things in his life, second to Evie, and he clung onto it quite desperately. Despite the anti-social hours, it worked very well for him as he usually functioned best in the evenings, and he liked being the manager. He got to choose his staff and his hours (mostly) and he only saw the owner every few months.

Minutes later, (Simon appreciated Evie’s sense of urgency,) she reappeared with a different, purple backpack and a green hoodie on. “Thank you kid, let’s go,” he was already half way out of the door.

They arrived at Ava’s, Simon breaking into a speed walk as they went, and she opened the red door to greet them. She was a tall, slim woman in her mid-30s, with a scar going down her left cheek. She’d vaguely excused it with a story about a childhood accident, but she’d explained it with a hesitation that Simon didn’t believe, but didn’t know her well enough to question.

Grease stained her wrists and the hem of her grey sweatshirt, and there was a smudge of oil on her forehead that looked almost too perfectly placed.

“Hey guys,” She smiled as she leaned out the door,

“Hey Ava,” Simon responded, with a sharp exhale.

“I just got in from work, give me one second to run upstairs and get changed,” she said, letting them in the door and jumping up the stairs.

Simon went to shout after her, stressing that he really didn’t have to wait, but refrained, knowing that this *was* a favour and also not the last time she’d be doing it this week.

Ava's living room had the same layout as Simon and Evie's, their street being essentially copy and paste, but the inside definitely felt different.

Where Simon had decorated with plants and pictures of the two of them, Ava had large paintings across on the two long walls and model cars on the shelves.

She had very few pictures, but the space still felt cozy, several mismatched lamps illuminating different sections of the relatively small room. It looked a bit like a vintage store or a high end charity shop, Simon thought.

The sofa was covered in coloured blankets and two tabby cats curled up on either end, one of which looked up to greet Evie who had already made herself comfortable, stroking the cat's back with her feet tucked underneath her. She'd kicked off her converse under the wooden coffee table, which was relatively empty except for an ash tray and a Top Gear magazine.

"Much better!" Ava's voice carried down the stairs, "How are you two?"

Her hair was tied back with a black claw clip and she'd put a long-sleeved black top on.

Evie shrugged, "Tired, and hungry, Si didn't even let me get a *snack* just because *he* was late picking me up."

At the mention of this, Simon's jaw tensed. He always felt bad when he was late and rushed Evie.

Ava laughed, breaking the tension instantly, "I'll grab you something to eat before dinner, I'm making carbonara, is that okay?"

Evie instantly perked up, and Simon's shoulders relaxed minutely. "Thank you so much again Ava, I'll be back around midnight."

"No worries Simon, I know you've got my boys whenever I go away," she chuckled again and gestured towards the cats, one of them purring under Evie's hand.

Simon kissed Evie on the head, gave Ava a wave and headed out the door towards the bar.

Chapter 4

Simon arrived at the bar before anyone else, unlocked the door and exhaled. That felt like enough, getting to work before anyone else could notice he was late.

He walked into the staff room to assess the damage. It had been a rushed close on Sunday night and the evidence was spread across the small office and the busy bar. He started by lightly organising the paperwork scattered over the wooden desk, which took up the entire left-hand wall.

He then looked over the rota and calendar to double-check who he was expecting. The whiteboard calendar hung above the desk and had Simon's scrawled handwriting displaying who was working when, which events they had on, and any big holidays coming up.

Being a Tuesday, Simon had assumed that the bar would be pretty quiet, so had only organised for him and two other people to come in, and would probably send one of them home around 9.

On a weekend, he'd usually start with 6 bartenders and see what happened.

The bar was relatively small, fitting 5 bartenders stood very close together on a busy night, with one in the back clearing and washing glasses then bringing them back out. Or, on a Tuesday, two bartenders stood a decent distance apart with Simon in the back office doing admin.

Unless, of course, he got that famous, unexpected Tuesday rush that Mark had predicted always happened when he needed it the least. Mark had a lot of strange superstitions and beliefs about the bar, and bartending in general.

For example, calling the bar 'quiet' summoned the noisiest, worst customers on Earth (although Simon was sure he stole that from doctors and firefighters.) and he always tapped beers before opening them for good luck.

He missed Mark a lot, but he knew that handing the bar over to him was the best decision for both of them, and he knew Mark was doing really well.

When he had first moved to San Francisco, Simon had felt totally useless. He had a 6 year old niece that he was fully responsible for, a missing arm, no real work experience, and enough trauma to retire an experienced psychiatrist at the top of their game.

He was depressed, broke and willing to do anything to make ends meet. Finding a job was never going to be easy, but his friend had introduced him to Mark after a few months of living rent-free, and Mark gave Simon one thing he'd never been given in Eden. Trust.

Bartending is not a famously hard job, besides mixing cocktails, but Mark took very little shit when teaching Simon the basics. He was tough on Simon, rarely cutting him slack for making mistakes due to his lack of arm.

Simon appreciated that a lot. Condescension made Simon shrivel up and pity made him gag. Growing up surrounded by strong, unempathetic role models had limited his acceptance of assistance and had made him very stubborn.

Mark had handed over the bar to him the year before, when he'd decided he was too old to run a bar anymore and had moved away to be closer to his daughter. It was hard for Simon to run the bar by himself at first, but he'd gotten the hang of it, cutting the staff that made his life harder but otherwise keeping strictly to what Mark had put in place for him. If Eden had taught him anything it was how to follow orders.

He was restocking the bar fridge when the door swung open and revealed Beth, a very smiley 24 year old with blonde curls and small fine-line tattoos visible across her pale arms.

"Afternoon Simon!" her bright voice instantly lit up the space and Simon found it difficult not to feel just a little bit better.

"Hi Beth," he stood up from the crouched position he was in next to the fridge,

"Good day so far?" she ambled past the front bar and through to the staff room, which led into the back of the bar.

Simon swallowed. She was just being polite, and probably didn't need a play-by-play of his meltdown, luckily for both of them he wasn't that kind of person.

"It was fine." That was sufficient. "You?"

She launched into a monologue about how her girlfriend wanted her to move in with her, but Beth liked her flat and her girlfriend's flat doesn't allow cats. But she can't move out because it's too far from her job, plus it belongs to her family so isn't hers to sell.

Beth always had a lot to say, but she was the most optimistic person Simon knew, so he liked hearing about her life.

“-so I’m sure we’ll figure it out, Rose’s brother wants to move out of their parents’ house soon so maybe he’ll move into her flat, and we can get a new flat together in between here and her job.”

Simon nodded attentively, lining up bottles of Corona as Beth talked and helped set up the rest of the bar. Once the fridge was full, Simon started down the stairs to the cellar to check the kegs.

“Does he know I’m late?” He heard a whisper come from the bar.

“Yes Tyler, he does,” he shouted calmly up the stairs.

“Sorry man!”

A shuffling followed this, along with some whispers and, what he could assume was, Beth telling him to get his shit together.

The bar opened and, luckily, Mark hadn’t been right yet. Or at least, Mark’s voice in Simon’s head.

A slow trickle of regulars came through the door, affording Simon some time to sit and respond to emails. After a long day, however, Simon abused his power as manager to take a small power nap in the office, head leant unsuspectedly against the wall, so if anyone walked in he looked like he was just in thought.

Someone did walk in a little while later however, snapping Simon awake.

“Hey man, it’s looking a bit lively out there, do you mind giving us a hand?”

Tyler and Beth were Simon’s most capable employees- despite Tyler’s outwardly stoner appearance, he knew what he was doing, he was great with people and he was pretty good under pressure. This meant that if *they* couldn’t handle a Tuesday rush, Mark’s premonition had rung true once again. Shit.

He emerged from the back office to find a mass of very drunk, very loud college students crowding the bar. This was busy, even for a Friday or Saturday.

“I don’t know where they all came from!” Beth yelled over the crowd.

“Jesus, okay,” Simon shook himself a bit, waking up and preparing for customer service, “What can I get for you?”

✷✷✷✷✷✷✷✷✷

Grace stared down at his phone, the number blurring on the screen the longer he looked at it. He’d been sitting there for quite some time, the pile of marking long-discarded.

This was the longest he’d gone without talking to her in 6 years, except for the 4 days last year that he’d broken his phone while she was on holiday with her family.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, willing something to happen, but he wasn’t sure what. He kind of wanted the phone to ring without him needing to initiate anything. He also wanted the number to disappear.

What he knew he should do, in the most reasonable part of his brain, was delete the number, stand up, make some dinner then fall asleep in front of the TV.

But he was not a reasonable man.

“Hello?”

“Ryland?”

No one really called him Ryland. It sent a shiver down his spine.

“Hey. Uhm-”

“I’ve been meaning to call you.”

He felt sick. “Yeah? Me too,” he stared over to the box of her belongings, a perfect excuse wrapped in cardboard and full of physical memories.

“Yeah. How are you?” She sounded good. Fine, even.

“I’m alright.” He sighed, feeling half ashamed, half relieved, like hiding to piss in a bush on a long walk.

“Good! Good, I'm glad.”

“I miss you.” it leaves his lips before he can realise he’s thought it. He bites down on his lower lip, covering his face with this hand.

“Yeah? I miss you too.”

“I have a box with some of your stuff in it. That’s why I called. I can drop it over tomorrow if you’re around.” he said plainly, a lump growing in his throat.

He knew why they had broken up, and he knew for sure that it was for the best, but he missed being around someone who knew him like she did. Someone that made him feel like she did.

“Or,” he heard her swallow through the phone, “Or I’m free now. I could come and get it.”

✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶

A small band had been playing at a new venue a few doors down from ‘The Hail Mary’, causing the college kids to swarm around the three unsuspecting bartenders like excited puppies around a singular mother dog. Except instead of milk it was beer.

It was non-stop for a bit, slowing down just enough for them to take their individual breaks after an hour or so. Beth sat crossed legged on Simon’s office chair during hers, eating a sandwich and propping her phone up on her pink and white water bottle to watch YouTube.

After her, Tyler went to sit out by the bins and smoke a cigarette. Simon took out the bins during this time and found him crouched next to the glass bin, cig in one hand, yellow vape in the other, his phone balanced between his knees. Simon raised a slightly judgemental eyebrow, but thought better than to comment.

“Anything to eat?” He offered instead.

Tyler reached into his pocket, produced a protein bar, and waved it at Simon. “Dinner,” he called it.

Simon had nothing to say to that, so ducked back into the office with a small scoff.

“Hey, Si,” Beth’s voice came from the bar, “Could you come out here a sec?”

He sighed shortly and passed out of the protective walls of the office. He knew what that meant- someone had asked for a manager and Beth couldn't convince them it was definitely *not* worth their time.

"What can I help with?" he said sternly, eyeing up the three guys leaning over the bar. They were no older than 23 with matching haircuts and equally shit dress senses. One was using a beer bottle to keep himself steady, head ducking onto the bar every few seconds.

The biggest of the three stood opposite Beth, his finger waving in her face. Upon hearing Simon's voice, he turned his head and dropped his hand, clearly intimidated. He had a stupid grin on his face which wavered when his hand dropped.

"I've cut them off because his friend threw up in the toilet." Beth leaned back and whispered in Simon's direction.

"Woaahhh" the biggest guy cut in, "*He* threw up! Not me! So why don't you just pour me another pint? I won't tell!" He threw his hands up in mock surrender, as if him *'telling'* was Simon's biggest concern.

"Fellas, I'm afraid that if one of you has thrown up and my staff believe you are too drunk, we have every right to cut you off."

He was not afraid, and had no shame in cutting these guys off as he knew what it could turn into very quickly. He tried not to be too aggressive with his tone and hoped it had come across as such.

"We are PAYING customers!" the man on the left spat, "We're trying to give you money and you're saying noo? That sounds liike pooooor business practice to me!" he burped at the end and Beth turned up her nose instinctively.

"Ew man, you're putting her off," the one in the middle said, elbowing him in the side. He was the least drunk, but that did not comfort Simon at all.

He had short blond hair that was spiked forward slightly into his eyes. It was clearly his haircut first and the two shorter men had copied it, as they both had brown, curlier hair which was being forced into strange spikes with inordinate amounts of gel.

“Sorry sweetheart, he's gross. And way too drunk. Me on the other hand? I’ll tip you reeeaallly well.”

Simon and Beth shared a look.

“Oh sorry buddy! I didn’t realise she was youurs,” he slurred on the last word, pointing between the two of them.

Beth spluttered, half laugh, half shock.

The man’s eyebrow raised with this, “No? So you’re available?”

She spluttered again, shaking her head. Simon went to defend her, or just give her an escape, but Beth had been a bartender for years and wasn’t new to men like this.

“No, I am not.” She replied calmly, going to take the empty beer bottle to put in the bin.

As she reached out, he put his hand on hers, “Can your boyfriend fight?”

She pulled her hand backwards sharply with a small disgusted yelp, causing the bottle to shatter on the floor.

“I think it’s time to leave.” Simon said bluntly, stepping in front of Beth, over the broken glass.

“Woah I’m sorry buddy, I was just trying something on with your gorgeous employee,” he rolled the ‘L’ and ‘E’ in his mouth, hissing the last sound out with an undeterred grin. “But we’ll leave! It’s a good thing she’s not your girlfriend, I’d hate to fight a cripple.”

The word lands in Simon’s ribs before he has a chance to fully process what the other man had said. He heard a small gasp from behind him but didn’t turn to meet it. Instead, his gaze narrowed and he repeated slowly - “I think, that you three, should *fuck off.*”

They did, stumbling towards the door, keeping the smug looks on their faces with a painful lack of defeat surrounding them. The blond man muttered to them as he reached the door, turning before he could leave to call Beth a ‘slag’ and saunter out.

“Are you okay?” Simon asked, once the dust had settled.

Beth swallowed and nodded. “Are you?”

✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶

It was a really bad idea. Grace knew that and the sick feeling remained in his stomach, sloshing around and moving to his throat as he heard a buzz at his flat doorbell.

Waiting for her to climb the 2 flights of stairs was torturous, and Grace wondered whether he could cancel over text in that 30 seconds, but before he could deliberate any further a knock pierced his brain.

He leaned forward and turned the handle on instinct, and there she was.

She was slightly shorter than Grace, but had good posture so came across as taller than she was. Her hair was tied in a very messy ponytail, a dark red mass of curls secured by a thin, dark blue scrunchie.

A few curls framed her face, a grown out fringe which she had debated cutting again throughout the last few months of their relationship. Hidden slightly beneath the ringlets were a pair of gold framed, circular glasses that complimented her brown eyes and the freckles that covered her bronzed skin.

She had a matching septum ring and small gold hoop earrings. Grace noted that she had probably made a bit of effort, whether for him or not, as she was wearing winged eyeliner and her least scruffy jumper that she saved for smart-casual events. Her worried expression faded slightly when he opened the door.

“Hey Ry.”

“Hey. Come in.”

It felt strange inviting her into a flat that she used to have keys for. Watching her step into the living room that had once been hers, past the mantle where a picture of the two of them had once been and taking a seat on the sofa that they had picked out together.

“Can I get you a drink?” He asked, aiming to break the tension but not succeeding. At all.

She shook her head in response, so Grace crossed the room to sit opposite her, choosing the blue armchair she’d found years ago at a junk sale and bought because it ‘matched his eyes’.

At the time he’d joked it was a slightly odd reason to buy a chair, but he appreciated it nonetheless.

“The box is over there,” he mumbled, gesturing to the corner of the room.

She nodded slowly, “Thanks. For getting everything together.”

He nodded back, “No worries.”

They sat in awkward silence for a little too long, both too scared to initiate anything.

“How are Rocky and Adrian?” she finally said.

“They’re good. Driving me to work sometimes when it’s cold.” *Or when I’m hungover because I went out drinking to get over you.*

“That’s good. I miss them.”

Grace nodded. He’d felt bad encouraging his friends to cut off contact, but considering he only had two, he felt it was only fair.

In his defense, he hadn’t *made* them stop talking to her, but they were loyal people and had known Grace for years before, so it did make sense.

“How have you been?” He asked, finally meeting her eyes after the sick feeling had settled in his stomach.

She talked about her job and her friends and how moving back in with her sister was great for their relationship. All Grace could hear was how well she was coping. He was happy for her, she deserved to be happy.

They caught up for a while, settling into a rhythm they had perfected and were finding again, like old grooves made in doors when they’re shut in a certain way for too long.

When a silence fell again, it felt less awkward. Grace used this gap to stand up and retrieve the box. Not as a sign to leave, but more as an invitation to reminisce.

This was understood, and the lid slid off without question as he sat down next to her.

“Why did you keep this?” She laughed, holding up a popped stress ball that leaked when she squeezed it.

“I don’t know! You were so upset when it broke I think a part of me thought I could fix it.”

She smiled and shook her head, “Put it in the bin Ry.”

He reached into the box, moving some t-shirts and revealing a book. *Shit.*

“Isn’t this yours? Why are you giving it to me?” She reached in and pulled out *The Goldfinch.* It was a new copy, never touched or dog eared, but it had been opened.

“Uh you said you’d never read it, and I loved it when I did years ago. So I bought you a copy a few months ago for your birthday. I thought you might as well have it now but I was hoping you wouldn’t notice until you’d got home.” He was rambling slightly, feeling his ears go red.

She looked up at him. “Thank you.”

They smiled at each other for a quiet second, then she opened the front cover.

He watched her read, his mouth slowly opening. He had written something on the front page and forgotten about it. *Shit shit shit shit.* He tried to peer over to remind himself what he’d written. As he leaned over, her gaze caught his, then dropped to his lips. Before he could realise what was happening, her lips crashed onto his.

Chapter 5

The bar didn’t let up enough for any of them to go home before they closed, but Simon let Beth go at midnight instead of staying to clean up like she was supposed to.

“Si I really don’t mind staying, closing is so much easier with 3 people.”

“Go home Beth, it’s the least I can do. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He said it firmly enough that she knew not to argue, and smiled faintly as she slipped out of the door with a wave. Simon texted Ava before returning to the office-

Hey, long shift, I’ll be back by 1. Sorry

Closing was harder with just Simon and Tyler, but they both wanted to get out as soon as possible so moved around the bar quickly and silently, the speaker playing residual *LCD Soundsystem* as soundtrack.

“I think we’re sorted, head out and I’ll finish up in the morning.”

Tyler emerged from the toilet, mop in hand, “Thanks man, I’ll see you on Friday.”

He went into the office to get his bag then walked past the bar where Simon stood, sweeping the floor. He got nearly to the door before turning slightly, then back to the door, his body stuttering.

Simon looked up from the floor, giving the younger man space to let out what he could tell was brewing in his head.

“A-ar- are you okay dude?” he finally spat out. That meant a lot coming from Tyler, who Simon had observed as having the empathetic range of a toadstool. He was a nice guy, mostly reliable and really funny, but as far as being aware of others' feelings he was as emotionally stunted as any 22 year old man whose biggest concern was supporting his weed and nicotine dependencies.

Simon opened and shut his mouth, feeling like Tyler’s genuine concern deserved a semi-genuine response. “I’ll be alright.”

Tyler nodded once, pressing his lips together and turning back to the door. “Good.”

✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶

Rocky's phone rang at 12:30am. He reached over to quickly answer it so as to not wake Adrian up. They'd fallen asleep while Rocky was still watching a film - (rewatching *Gladiator)* and had one arm draped across his waist. He carefully picked their arm up as he put the phone to his ear.

"Hello?" he whispered

"……..I fucked up," Grace's voice rang through the phone,

"What did you do?" Rocky murmured, swinging his legs off the bed slowly and placing his laptop on the floor.

"We only kissed. She left before it could go any further but it could have gone further and I probably wouldn't have stopped her. I gave her the box of her stuff and the *Goldfinch* book and she kissed me and then I stopped her for a second because I was overwhelmed and she got embarrassed and left. But if she hadn't left I probably would have…"

"Breathe Grace." Rocky said calmly, he'd stepped into the hallway while Grace rambled on and sat on the top of the stairs, head leant against the wall. He heard Grace inhale and exhale shakily. "Are you okay? Do you need me to come over?"

"No, no it's fine," he could hear his head shaking through the phone, "I just needed to get it out."

"No worries man, I'm here." Rocky concealed a yawn and continued listening to Grace's waffle.

This had happened before, Grace had considered breaking up with her 3 times over his 6 year relationship. The first was a year in, and was purely practical as she'd planned on moving states for a job that ended up falling through.

The second occurred in the 4th year of their relationship, just as they were about to move in together. Grace had called Rocky in a similar fashion, at midnight, and rambled about how he wasn't ready and he was going to end up hating her if he spent all of his time with her and she'd get annoyed by everything he did. Rocky admitted that Grace wasn't the easiest to live with (but neither was he), but it was nothing to break up over, *especially* preemptively.

The third happened 8 months before she'd broken up with him, and was the closest Grace had gotten. After finishing his paper arguing that water isn't necessary for life to evolve, he'd been invited to a conference, proved wrong and ridiculed.

This sent his career and mental health into a downward spiral, resulting in a long depressive episode. He pushed everyone away and took a brief sabbatical from teaching, and she had taken it the hardest.

Rocky could understand the pain he was going through, as he'd experienced a similar thing in university, which led him to teaching as opposed to full time research. Grace had always wanted to teach, and while he loved doing research on the side, he knew he wanted to inspire children, not adults.

Grace had cried on the phone to Rocky after it happened, talking about how he wasn't good enough for her and he was a failure to the field. It was hard for Rocky to hear, especially as he knew that she wasn't making him feel any better about it.

She had been a good girlfriend at times, Rocky always thought, but she always put herself first, which is probably why they worked so well. She prioritized herself, and so did Grace. He had a habit of letting people walk over him, and she took advantage of that.

She couldn't handle it when he broke down and decided that he needed to put himself and his teaching first, instead of her and his research.

"-And I think that I only stayed with her in the end because I didn't want her to have to move out. I think I healed myself and started putting the kids first so I thought we'd be okay, but she couldn't take it."

It was 2am and Rocky was sitting on the step with his head leant on the wall. Adrian had come out at one point to drape a blanket around his shoulders before sleepily trudging back to bed.

"I think that she could take it when you put the paper first because you were still around for her, but once that had broken you down she couldn't accept you putting your energy into other people," Rocky said.

"I don't think I had enough energy to put into her, the kids, and myself." Grace responded softly, with a sigh of realisation.

"I agree. I'm glad you put yourself first after all these years."

"Yeah."

"She didn't put enough in for you to keep going like you did."

"I made *her* breakfast on *my* birthday."

"I know buddy, I know." Rocky yawned again.

✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶

The next morning Simon woke up to Evie complaining of a sore throat and a headache. He checked her temperature and her pale face and decided she could have the day off school.

After his night, he needed a good excuse to stay home. He let her sleep in a bit longer and rang Rose, his assistant manager, to ask if she could go in that morning instead.

He wasn't supposed to work the evening shift anyway, just clean up then do some admin. The admin he could do at home and Rose could afford to go in a few hours earlier anyway.

He then drafted an email to Evie's school to inform them she wasn't going in. She wasn't ill a lot so he wasn't completely sure how to let them know, so decided to just email her form tutor.

Dr Grace.

Dear Dr Grace

Is Dear too formal? He thought. How do people start emails?

To Dr Grace

Not formal enough. He sighed and shook his head. This was a *school* email for Evie's *teacher. Dr Grace.* Simon didn't even know his first name- this was a completely professional email exchange.

Dr Grace,

Evie has come down with a cold and isn't feeling very well, so isn't going to come into

school today.

If you could send me any work she needs to catch up on that would be great, I hope

she'll be okay to go into school tomorrow, but I will keep you updated.

Thank you in advance

Was it too formal? Maybe but Simon didn't want to bring up the one casual time they'd met in a school email. This was *just* a school email. It could be sent to any one of her teachers. He pressed send.

To take his mind off it, Simon made himself a coffee and some toast, and was confronted with the bowl in the sink. When he'd returned the night before, he had been in such a daze that once he'd greeted and said goodbye to Ava and gone upstairs he'd essentially passed out.

But the bowl was still there, cracked down the middle and serving as a glaring reminder of last night.

"I'd hate to fight a cripple."

It rang in his ears as he stared down at it. It wasn't even an expensive or even necessarily nice bowl, if anything else had happened he probably wouldn't have thought twice about putting it in the bin.

"Fuck's sake." he muttered under his breath, and turned to the toaster instead. The toast popped up as he turned, making him jump slightly. He pulled a plate out of the cupboard and placed the toast on it lightly. He gathered some butter on a knife and went to spread it on the toast.

It was a menial, easy task, but he *knew* that the whole plate would shift as he attempted to spread it. He also knew that he owned a support for this exact task, a special chopping board that attached to the counter and held the toast in place for precise buttering.

He didn't like leaving it out though, saying that it was due to their lack of counter space but part of him was embarrassed. He didn't want to admit he needed help doing something so easy, let alone having bought a tool to assist with.

He attempted it anyway, dragging the knife across the surface of the bread slowly. It moved with the knife, getting dangerously close to the edge of the plate and the counter.

"Fuck." he muttered again.

"Do you want me to do it?" a small voice came from behind him. He turned on his heel, embarrassment rising to his cheeks. Evie's pale face stared at him innocently, she was only trying to help, there was no way she could know about the mental hoops Simon's brain was jumping through.

He sighed, softening just a bit. "Yes please."

She smiled slightly, her bedhair sticking up at all angles as she walked up to the counter.

“How are you feeling?” He asked, combing through her hair with his fingers.

“Not great,” she responded, shrugging as she buttered the toast with ease. “My head really hurts.”

“Mmm bless you,” he put his head on hers, arm around her neck in a loose hug, “I’ll make you some tea if you want to go back to bed?”

“Yeah, and some cereal?” she turned to hug him properly.

“Sure, I’ll bring it up.” He kissed her on the head and she turned to go back upstairs. “And thank you. For the toast.”

She shrugged, “No worries.”

✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶

Grace arrived at school 20 minutes later than usual. He was exhausted and felt like he had emotional whiplash.

His midnight chat with Rocky had straightened quite a bit out, but he still felt frazzled. He sat down at his desk 10 minutes before class started, rubbing his temples and squinting at his email inbox.

Some spam, an email from the headteacher, a link from Rocky about some museum exhibit he might be interested in, and an email from Simon Fisher. It only regarded Evie being off sick, which is something Simon should have emailed the school’s reception, but he didn’t need to tell him that.

Dear Simon,

Thanks for letting me know, I hope she feels better!

I’ll send some catch up through at the end of the day, it won’t be too much, and I’ll ask her other teachers.

Thank you

Ryland Grace

He debated putting Dr Grace, but Simon had signed it with his full name and in his exhausted state he forgot every email he had ever sent a parent and how he wrote his name.

He sat back in his chair and scrubbed his hands over his face, basking in the 5 minutes of quiet before the storm. It didn't last long.

"How are you today buddy?" Rocky came striding in, plonking himself on the table opposite Grace's desk, his long legs stretching out. Grace took his hands away from his face, ready to send the unnecessarily cheerful man away.

His outstretched hand was holding a coffee however, so Grace shut his mouth immediately.

"Thank you," he sighed, after taking a sip, "I'm alright."

"Good." They sat in silence for a second, drinking their respective drinks.

Rocky exclusively drank tea- herbal, green, breakfast, anything. Grace usually drank black coffee, but when Rocky brought him one it usually had milk and some sort of syrup to make it a bit sweeter- vanilla or caramel or something.

Rocky knew Grace drank it black but made the executive decision to make his life a bit more whimsical when he could. It was appreciated.

"Thank you. For last night."

"Always." Rocky nodded at him over his blue takeaway cup.

The moment was disrupted by a sudden crowd of children gathering at the door.

"No! Get back ! I'll let you in at 9am!" Grace pointed to the clock that read 8:59.

Rocky scoffed and slid off the table, "I'll see you later."

"Thanks bud."

The day went smoothly despite his lack of sleep- he was used to functioning on less when he was writing *the* paper.

Third period rolled around and at the end he asked Harry to hang back.

"So I've looked at your timetable and you have a study period tomorrow. How would you feel about taking the test then? Or is it too soon?"

“No! No, that's chill with me, it’s all up here.” Harry put a finger to his head and smiled, “Thank you Dr G.”

“No problem Harry, I’ll see you then.”

Harry sauntered off and Grace let himself exhale. This kid was going to be fine. He just got overwhelmed and put on the spot.

He wanted to ask him about his home life, check in to make sure everything actually *was* okay, but he restrained. If Harry wanted to talk, he could, and if there was nothing to talk about and Grace pushed, it would be uncomfortable for both of them.

He sat back down at his desk and started putting together the work that Evie had missed, from his class and others, ready to email back to Simon. *Simon Fisher.* Grace looked at the name on the email.

It felt very familiar, he’d definitely heard it somewhere. Before he could dwell any longer, Adrian knocked gently on the door. “Hey Ry,”

He looked up over his glasses at them suspiciously, “You only come here at lunch if-”

They produced a blue lunchbox from the other side of the door, “Okay you saw straight through me. But did you bring yourself lunch today?”

Grace opened his mouth to protest, but couldn’t. “Fine. Thank you.”

They smiled and swished into the classroom. They were wearing a long green skirt and a grey button up which moved like one mesmerising piece of clothing. “Here.”

The lunchbox was plonked onto his desk. He moved his laptop and opened the lid, revealing a chicken sandwich, some chopped carrots and a bag of crisps.

“How’s your day going?” They asked, perching on the same bit of table their husband had that morning.

“It’s alright,” Grace looked over at his computer, “Actually you can help me with this, Simon Fisher, that name ring any bells?”

“Mmmm I’m not sure, is that a parent?” They pulled out a bag of crisps and started eating them.

“Mmm, Evie’s uncle.” He responded, mouth half full of sandwich.

They raised an eyebrow.

“No, not like that, I recognise his name from somewhere.”

“Yeah I’m not sure, maybe you’ve just seen it on a form somewhere.”

“Yeah maybe.”

✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶

Simon and Evie spent the day on the sofa, Simon showing her classic films he thought she’d enjoy while he organised drink orders and shift rotas for the bar on his laptop. They started with *Top Gun,* which Evie loved, then she put on *High School Musical* while he made some food.

He made soup for lunch, blitzing tomatoes and onions and other cooked veg and splitting it into two bowls. He went to ask her for help making toasties, but thought against it, admitting he had enough pride to use a tool made for *his* disability rather than rope a sick 11 year old into buttering a grown man’s toast. For the second time that day.

He wordlessly got the tool down, eyeing it up. He slid it onto the counter and began buttering the toast, sighing at how easy that really was. He finished the toasties and began bringing each bowl and plate through to the other room, balancing them carefully on his arm.

He had a lot of practice at this, especially from the bar, so did it flawlessly, which improved his mood and he sat down next to Evie smugly.

After they finished eating, Evie helped him bring the plates into the kitchen to wash up. She started putting them in the sink but stopped before they hit the bottom.

“Oh.” She put the stack of plates next to the sink instead, “What happened here?”

Embarrassment returned to Simon’s face, but he tried to play it off, reaching into the sink to pick up the big parts of the broken bowl. “I dropped it into the sink earlier, forgot about it.”

She shrugged in return, opening the bin for him. “Go finish the film, I’ll clean up in here.”

“Thanks!” She beamed, then remembered how very ill she was, “Can I have some more tea?”

He smiled and nodded, dropping the bowl into the bin and releasing his shame with it.

He boiled the kettle and took a spoonful of yuja-cha to stir into it. It’s a ginger and yuzu tea with the consistency of honey that he made and kept in the fridge for when one of them was ill. His mother taught him to make it when he was a child and caught a cold from staying outside for too long training in Eden.

He poured the water then stirred the mixture in, the smell making him feel like a child again, Evie's age and shivering at the door, nose red and eyes watering. He exhaled with a smile and brought it to her, sinking onto the sofa as her film finished. She thanked him and he reached for the remote, turning on *Stand by Me*.

"This is one of my all time favourite films, I can't believe I haven't shown it to you yet."

She smiled up at him, cupping the tea in her hands.

He fell asleep instantly, the sound of the tv acting as white noise as he curled up in the corner of the sofa.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> im not including summaries and notes bc I forget what I originally said!!! but I appreciate everyone reading this hi hope ur okay x

Evie magically healed by the time she had a sleepover planned with Rena, but not before she had missed the rest of the week at school.

“My throat feels soo much better and my nose isn’t blocked anymore, SEE!” She tipped her head back to show Simon her nostrils, standing up while he sat at the island in the middle of the kitchen, eating a bowl of cereal.

“Hmm as long as your temperature isn’t too bad,” he responded, chewing on the too soggy cornflakes. As she ran into the bathroom to find the thermometer, Simon’s phone started buzzing. Beth’s contact picture flashed onto the screen.

“Hey Simon,” her usual cheery voice slightly hoarser through the tinny speaker,

“Hey Beth, everything alright?”

“Yeah. Well no, well they will be,” she rambled, pausing to cough, “I’ve got tonsillitis, and they’ve booked me in for a tonsillectomy next week because I’ve had it so many times.”

As she explained, Evie returned with the thermometer hanging out of her mouth, removing it and throwing her hands in the air silently, dancing around as she pointed to the number. “I’m fine! I’m okay to go to Rena’s!” She whisper-shouted.

“Oh I’m so sorry Beth I hope you’re okay,” Simon said down the phone, then covered the speaker to shush Evie, “I’m glad, go get your stuff together.”

She punched the air then disappeared through the door.

“Thanks, yeah I should be okay to come back in two weeks, depends how it all goes I guess.”

Simon nodded, fully aware she couldn't *hear* nodding but too busy trying to figure out how to staff his week.

“Okay Beth, I hope it all goes okay, take the rest of the weekend off too, hope you feel better soon, I’ll sort it all out.”

He hung up and scrubbed his face with his hand, head swimming with all the things he needed to organise now, instead of having a peaceful weekend off. Thank God Evie was

going to Rena's.

Rena was Evie's oldest friend, they'd met in the specialist elementary school that Simon had enrolled Evie in when they'd left Eden. It was a school for kids who'd gone through significant trauma or other extenuating circumstances that prevented them from attending regular school. Evie started in third grade, as Simon was worried about sending her to school for a while after escaping, hell he didn't let her out of his sight for more than 20 minutes at a time through fear of someone finding them, so he mostly taught her at home while they were living with his friend.

When he got the job at The Hail Mary he knew he needed her to be in full time education, so spent a *while* looking for the perfect school, and eventually found it. Rena and Evie became friends very quickly, Rena having been enrolled after spending most of her early childhood in and out of the hospital. Her parents had become very good friends of Simon's, and were always around to look after Evie when Ava wasn't around. He was very grateful for the small support system he'd formed in San Francisco, but often felt like he used them as childcare above anything else. He couldn't remember the last time he went over there just for a drink or a chat. And this time was no better.

"Simon!" Rena's mum, Oleysa, answered the door, "It's so nice to see you!"

They stood in the red doorway of the 3 story house in the fanciest part of the city, the warmth from inside battling against the November afternoon chill coming from behind them.

"Hey Oleysa, good to see you too, thanks for having her over," he went to gesture to Evie, but she'd already snaked underneath the woman's arm towards Rena, who was giggling by the door. They disappeared up the stairs immediately, leaving the two adults in the doorway.

They exchanged small talk as she led him to the kitchen, through the hallway past smiling pictures. Simon's heart warmed as he saw Evie in a few, and a group picture from a barbeque they'd had the year before, with him crouched in the corner next to Oleysa's wife. They were a very 'picture perfect' family, complete with a small fluffy dog and white picket fenced garden, and Simon felt honoured if slightly out of place in it.

"Can I get you some tea? Coffee?" She breezed over to the kettle, switching it on before she got a response. She was wearing a light brown cardigan which swished when she moved and worn-in black jeans. Her long brown hair was piled in a bun and her dark rimmed glasses were perched on her forehead.

"Coffee, please." he sat down on one of the stools facing her and leaned on the table.

She moved around the space, grabbing coffee granules from the cupboard, two mismatched blue mugs, a carton of milk from the fridge. "So how are you? It's been too long!"

“It has, I’m sorry. Work’s been a lot.” He gave her a tired half-smile which she saw through entirely. She stopped, sugar in hand.

“Elaborate.”

Simon didn’t talk to a lot of people, especially about his problems and especially not recently, but Olesya had a way of asking and listening that made him feel safe and supported in a way not many others could.

She was predominantly non-judgemental, except when she needed to step in, and she *would.* Simon told her about Beth and the rotas he needed to organise, the guy that had verbally abused them in the bar, and the long week he’d had juggling a sick child and sick employees. He opened his mouth to tell her about the bowl incident and how he was really struggling with that recently, but refrained. That was the line.

She gave him advice in her calm, blunt tone and he started to relax. Somehow she found a way to simplify his problems in a way that didn’t make him feel stupid, but understood.

“Lisa is always telling me I should have been a therapist instead of engineer,” She said with a shrug, “but I prefer cars to people.”

Simon nodded with a small laugh into his coffee. A warm silence settled in the kitchen and Simon felt slightly at peace for the first time in a long time. It was brief, however, as his phones’ ringtone sliced through it.

“Hey Seb.”

“Hey Simon, I’m just outside, are you on your way?”

Shit. He’d given Beth the day off then completely forgotten. And she was supposed to open.

He apologised to Seb, apologised to Oleysa, shouted a goodbye up the stairs to Evie and ran out of the front door.

He pulled up outside The Hail Mary to find Seb, Tyler and Rose hovering by the door. Shit.

“Hey guys, so sorry, Beth’s off for the next few weeks and I got a bit mixed up.” Beth was the assistant manager, so the only other one with keys. He unlocked the door and ushered them in.

“Right,” He clapped his hand against his thigh, “I left everything at home because I came straight from dropping Evie off, so Tyler you are in charge.” All the eyes in the bar went to the 22 year old.

“Me?”

“Him?” Rose raised her eyebrows,

“Yes, him. He’s been here the longest and I do trust him. I’ll be back within the hour, and I’ll call in some reinforcement. Please open on time.” He threw the keys at the still-bewildered man, and ran back out of the door.

The shift went by okay, Simon grabbed his laptop and change of clothes from home and abandoned his ‘always walk to work’ ethos in order to return within the hour like he promised. He rang every other employee he had and finally reached one, Dylan, who could work at the last minute.

This meant that he could sit in the office and spend the evening reworking the week to fill in the gaps Beth had left and still be able to pick Evie up at least twice so he only had to organise three pick ups. It was a squeeze and he was probably understaffed, but it was doable. “Hey Simon, could I go on my break?” Seb leaned into the office timidly. He was a lanky 26 year old, and Simon’s newest employee. He seemed nice, very eager and a bit unsure of himself.

“Sure man, could you just check if these dates work for you this week?”

He came up to Simon’s shoulder and leaned over. “Yeah I think so.”

Rose was trickier, but after promising her free reign over shifts after Beth was back, she agreed. Simon left that evening with a sense of accomplishment and exhaustion that radiated over his entire body.

✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶✶

94%.

Grace stared at Harry’s retest, triple checking that the number was correct, though he didn’t doubt the boy’s knowledge for a second. He was sitting on his couch, surrounded by tests and homework in an ‘organised mess’ that no one else would be able to navigate. He’d woken up late, it being a Saturday, and after spending the entirety of the morning doing every errand around his small flat that *wasn’t* marking a week’s worth of scribbled paragraphs on evolution and diseases, he’d decided he had put it off for too long.

He’d started the mountain with Harry’s retest, as the anticipation was killing him. He’d done so well, turned around from his last test, and Grace was feeling satisfied that the kid really had only had an off day.

Grace continued marking, reaching a flow state of cold tea, Queen and red ticks and crosses. He scoured homework essays for AI, put a question mark next to an answer that read “The

nucleus is the….” with no ending, and a smiley face next to a doodle of a plant pot that had a face. He’d never been against kids drawing in their books, as long as they were listening in class, the drawings added a bit of joy to his predominantly boring afternoon. He finished up on the eighth graders' work and gathered the papers together, tapping them on his desk and placing them face down. He did a double take. There was a block of writing on the back of the test at the new top of the pile. Harry’s test.

Dr Grace

Thanks for letting me retake the test, it’s been a rough few weeks at home and I’ve been really out of it and unable to focus. I’m staying with my brother at the moment so I should be okay, but I’m sorry about the other test, it won’t happen again.

Thanks

Harry

It was scrawled on the back in his half-cursive hand writing, slanting off to the corner of the page. Grace stared at it, trying to figure out what to do with this information. Granted, it wasn’t a lot, but it was enough for him to spiral slightly. He knew that Harry’s parents were divorced, they showed up separately in sixth grade parent’s evenings, and his dad didn’t show up to any in seventh, so he had assumed he’d left the picture. Harry took the bus home so Grace hadn’t seen his parents outside of these evenings, except for a school play that they had yelled at each other before and after. Grace’s mind went to all sorts of places, painting a picture that gave him a weird deja vu. It was late so he cooked himself some quick pasta and tried to watch some TV. He flicked aimlessly through streaming sites, his mind going 100 miles a minute, dragging up fragments of memories he’d worked very hard to bury. Flashes of hiding in toilets and the sound of screaming and showing up to school in the same clothes as the day before because he didn’t know where he was sleeping that night. When he became a teacher he vowed to never let that go unseen, and he admired Harry for being able to write a note, something he never would have been brave enough to do. He swallowed that thought down and put on The Office, letting the comfort of a heavily rewatched sitcom wash over him.

Sunday was no better so he ended up at school on Monday morning full of nervous energy. He’d worked away through the night, taking double the time to mark scrawled essays than normal as half his mind was constantly focused on a game plan to make sure Harry was okay without prying or getting *too* involved. He hardly slept and arrived slightly late after forgetting his entire laptop on the kitchen table.

Rocky spotted him going into his classroom and followed him in with a coffee, unceremoniously placing it on the desk in front of him.

“You look *exhausted.* I knew there was a reason I didn’t hear from you all weekend.”

Ryland exhaled with half a laugh, “Not a fun reason.”

Rocky’s eyebrow arched.

“I’m worried about Harry.”

“Ah, is he okay? Did he say something?”

Ryland scrubbed his hand over his face, “More or less, he’s been struggling a bit and left me a note on the back of a test. I don’t know what to say to him.”

After rifling through his bag he produced Harry’s test. Rocky read the note then looked over his glasses to find Grace chewing a hangnail anxiously.

“Hitting close to home?” He said bluntly. Grace was taken aback. Rocky was usually pretty blunt but he didn’t think that he could piece all of it together from that *one* note. Before he could respond, the bell went and his tutor group came pouring in.

“Saved by the bell?” Rocky said under his breath, aware of how uncomfortable Grace was.

“I guess so.”

He had eighth grade after lunch, and it couldn’t come soon enough. Throughout the class his eyes kept slipping to the boy sitting in the second row, chewing on his pencil and never really looking like he was fully paying attention. When the bell finally went he held him back.

“94%?” He lit up, “Thanks Dr. G.”

Grace smiled at him, “I also read the back.”

The boy breathed in sharply.

“Are you okay? Do you need anything?”

“No. Thank you Dr. Grace, but I’m alright now, I’m staying with my brother and I’m doing a lot better.”

“Okay good.” He paused, “How old is your brother?”

“He’s 20. He works at Target. He doesn’t make a lot but it’s enough for me to stay there. Plus it's better than the alternative…” he trailed off.

Grace nodded solemnly, “Are you talking to anyone?”

The boy shifted nervously, “Nah, I don’t really think I need to, I really am fine.”

“Okay. If you do ever think you might need it, let me know. Or your tutor. There is counseling provided by the school if you need it.”

“Thanks Dr. G,” he paused, “That would be good.”

Grace subtly breathed a sigh of relief, “I’ll sort it. Well done Harry, you’re doing really well.”

He beamed at that and waved as he ran out to join his friends.

At the end of the day, Grace found himself once again standing with Evie by the school gates. Most kids were able to leave and take the bus alone or walk by themselves, but due to Evie’s past she had to have a member of staff ensuring that she wasn’t left alone outside of the school.

Ryland didn’t know too much about her past, roughly being aware that she was rescued from a cult when she was young, and there was a possibility that someone from that cult could be tracking her or her family down. The premise alone made Ryland feel sick, so he was more than happy to be the one to wait with her. He also felt that a weight had been lifted off of his shoulders and was feeling a lot happier- Harry seemed okay and willing to accept help, that was what he’d wanted.

“Are you feeling better Evie? We missed you last week.”

The girl looked up from the drawing she was doing in the back of an exercise book- Grace chose to ignore this.

“Yeah. I had quite a bad cold but it’s gone now.”

“Good! Do you know who’s picking you up today?”

She didn’t look back up, seeming mostly uninterested in the teacher’s line of questioning.

“Probably Uncle Si, but he had problems at work last week so maybe Ava.”

Grace nodded and they went back to semi awkward silence.

“Sorry I’m late.”

Grace turned to see where the voice was coming from. Simon was striding towards them, not running but looking quite stressed.

“Hey Si!” Evie slammed her book and lunged at him, nearly knocking him off his feet.

“Hey kid!” He looked up and nodded at Grace, “Dr. Grace.”

“Simon.” He nodded in return, suddenly realising how unprofessional that was, “Uh Mr Fisher! How are you?” His face went red.

Simon raised an eyebrow, seeming to enjoy watching the teacher struggle. “Simon is fine. And I am fine, thank you.”

“Good! Good. Evie was saying you were having problems at work?” What was he doing? He could have so easily left it at that and let the clearly stressed man leave.

Simon and Evie shared a look. She shrugged.

“Work is fine. My assistant manager is getting her tonsils removed so it’s a bit hectic at the moment. Finding cover and people to pick up Evie, but I’ve got it covered.”

“Wow yeah, that’s stressful! I got my tonsils out a few years ago, it was rough! I had to spend ages at home, I can’t really remember who they got to cover me, but I guess cover teaching is different-” He cut himself off, seeing the other man’s face. He had a very specific resting face, Grace had noticed, but every time he’d found himself rambling Simon’s eyebrows had gone up slightly and his lips moved into a tiny half smile. It was a mixture of amusement and curiosity, veiled as judgement.

“No, keep going.” He said. Anyone else would have assumed he was being sarcastic, but Grace didn’t hear that.

He stumbled over the words, “I just mean... Finding bar cover is different from cover teaching, because we have an agency.” He could feel the tips of his ears burning.

“I need an agency, I’m sure they have one for bar staff.” Simon seemed sincere, but Grace wasn’t really sure.

“I’m sure they do.”

They stared at each other.

“Can we go?” Grace turned to see Evie looking between the two men, boredom on her face.

Simon snapped out of Grace’s gaze. “Yeah kid, let's go.”

Chapter 7

It was a Monday, so The Hail Mary wasn't open, but in preparation for the week ahead SImon decided to go in and sort a few things out. Evie was happy to accompany him, always ecstatic to go into a bar 10 years before she was legally allowed. She sat at the bar with her homework out in front of her, swinging her legs and singing out of tune to the music playing in her headphones.

Simon moved around the space, stocking the bar and giving it a quick deep clean. The bar was small, with nearly too many tables and chairs cluttering the floor. He wiped them all one by one, trying to scrub the permanent stickiness from the wooden surfaces. He then mopped the floor and finished all of the chores that they always put off (emptying the fly traps, grease traps and rat traps). Once the manual labor was done, he brought his laptop over to the bar to join Evie. They sat side by side working wordlessly, Evie's playlist filling the room.

"Rena wasn't in school today." Evie broke the silence.

"Oh yeah? Maybe I'll give Olesyaa ring, make sure she's okay."

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Tuesday was the hardest to find cover for in Beth's absence, as it was usually only her, Simon and Tyler. He'd scraped some cover together so that Seb came in, but he had university until 5 so they'd have to open without him. This was fine, as Evie had an afterschool club and then she was staying at Rena's for the night. He arrived at 2.30 to receive the drinks order and stock the shelves, then Tyler arrived at 3 so that they could open on time.

The Tuesday afternoon regulars trickled in- 2 gruff middle aged men who worked the morning shift at the post office and drank in the corner with very little to say to anyone who appeared around them and odd groups of college students with nothing better to do. They handled it okay just the two of them for a while, pouring pints and talking about the girl Tyler just broke up with because he was so busy at the moment.

Simon responded sincerely, but genuinely couldn't figure out what Tyler spent his time doing when he wasn't at the bar. He'd dropped out of college a year in and floated around hospitality jobs until Mark hired him a few months before he turned 21.

"He can wash glasses!" Mark had said when Simon questioned this choice.

"You don't need a 20 year old stoner who can't legally serve customers hanging around the bar, it's a waste of money." He'd argued back.

“His mum’s a friend of mine, apparently he can’t hold a job down, I’m just helping him out.”

“I wonder why.”

Tyler had proved his worth pretty quickly and after 4 months of washing glasses and mopping he turned 21 and was able to serve. He was good at his job because he could talk to anyone but wouldn’t take any shit. He was charismatic and funny and had a constant stream of girlfriends coming in and out of his life. Evie *really* liked him, he played cards with her in the back office when Simon didn’t have any other options.

“5 jagerbombs please!” a giggly voice came from the bar, which Simon was facing away from to check his texts. He turned and was greeted with a large group of women with crowns and sashes and matching t-shirts. A bachelorette party. On a Tuesday. Of course.

He poured the 5 jagerbombs, then 3 pina coladas, then 4 espresso martinis, then a bottle of prosecco.

“How do you do that?” One of the women slurred, she was probably in her late 20s with short blonde hair and lipstick smudged across her mouth.

“Do what?” Simon responded, dryly. He knew exactly what she meant.

“Pour all of the drinks with… one arm ?!” she continued.

He finished pouring the glass of prosecco, put the bottle down and slid the glass towards her arm which was leaning on the bar, revealing a small cursive tattoo on her wrist.

“Like that.”

“I- I meant,” she stammered, giggling awkwardly, “Uhhhm”

“If you’d excuse me.” Simon could feel his phone ringing in his pocket. Saved by the bell. “Hey Oleysa,”

“Simon I’m so sorry.” He could hear her voice cracking down the phone, she’d clearly been crying.

“Hey hey, what’s happened?” He covered his other ear with his shoulder and scurried into the back office.

“It’s Rena,” Olesyacleared her throat, “She’s had to go into surgery.”

Simon knew a lot about Rena’s medical history, as him and Evie had gone through a lot of it with them, picking up Rena’s brother from school when the rest of the family was in hospital, letting Evie sit on her bed as they played with toys, paying no mind to the tubes running in and out of one of the girls.

She’d been doing so much better recently however, so much so that Olesyaand Lisa had enrolled her into a mainstream middle school and their hospital visits had become more routine than emergency.

“I’m so sorry Oleysa, what happened?”

Olesyaran him through the surgery, a small procedure on her left kidney. Not life-threatening, but still terrifying.

“She’ll be okay, it’s going to be okay,” he comforted through the phone, becoming more and more aware of the crowd growing around the bar out of the corner of his eye.

“I’m so sorry I should have left you know sooner, we can’t pick up Evie from school.”

Of course. He swallowed, trying not to stress out too much. She had enough going on.

“Please don’t worry, I’ll sort something out with Ava. Let me know how it all goes.”

It was 4:10. Even if he got a hold of Ava she probably wouldn’t be able to leave in time. But the increase in Tuesday afternoon drinkers was too much for Tyler to handle by himself, so he gave it a go anyway.

“Hi, it’s Ava, leave a message!” A recorded voice came from his phone.

“Fuck.” he muttered, trying again.

This time it rang a few times, then her real voice came through.

“Simon? Are you okay?”

“Are you around? Now?” He scrambled.

“No, I'm at my sister’s house, are you okay?”

“Yes, don’t worry, have fun.” He responded, hanging up on her abruptly. Her sister lived at least an hour away, that was no use.

“Si?” Tyler called from the bar, “One of the kegs is out and it’s quite busy.”

Fuck! Fuck. There was a solution somewhere here. He put his hand over his face, breathing deeply. He could hear the blood pumping in his ears. Emerging from the office, a rough plan in his mind, he walked over to Tyler.

“Can you go and change the keg, and on your way put a message on the groupchat saying I will give $30 or whatever days off they want to the first person who can come in and work

the next 2 hours?" He paused, "Or any one of your friends."

Tyler looked at him blankly, but sensing the stress radiating off his reasonably scary manager he nodded and scurried down the stairs, pulling his phone out as he went.

"Who's waiting to be served?" Simon turned to the mob.

"Could I get 2 pints and a glass of white wine?" a group asked. Simon nodded sharply and reached down to pour the wine. His head was still pounding and he could feel himself shaking slightly. He poured the pints more clumsily than usual, splashing a significant amount down his shirt.

Pouring pints one-handed was a struggle on a good day, which this definitely was *not.* He placed them in front of the group and pushed the card machine to the bald man who had ordered. He then turned to pick up the wine bottle.

"We ordered a wine too," the man questioned.

Simon said nothing, holding back a flood of expletives, and lifted the wine bottle up.

"Oh."

He faced away from them, staring at the bottle he'd placed on the far bar, glass next to it. His vision started blurring and his hand was still tremouring. He bit down on his lip to concentrate, face growing redder. The bottle was a screw cap, luckily, so he undid it shakily and lifted it above the glass.

"Is that white?" The man's sharp voice cut through the hammering in Simon's head and startled him, causing the bottle to drop and smash the wine glass into his hand.

"FUCK." He yelped, jumping backwards.

Tyler reemerged, phone in hand and a grin on his face. It dropped when he saw the blood coming from his boss' hand and spilling over the bar. Everyone in the bar was looking over, some gathering around to see what had caused the commotion. The bald man was apologising profusely, but Simon had shut it out.

"Shit Simon, are you okay?" Tyler ran over and grabbed a tea towel, pressing it to the open wound, "Rose is on her way. Go into the office."

Simon nodded and held his hand to his stomach, wincing in pain.

Ryland wasn't sure how to start the email. He wanted to make sure it sounded serious, but not more serious than it was. He didn't even know how serious it was himself. Harry hadn't specifically *asked* to talk to anyone, but he thought it would be good to get the ball rolling, he

knew how long it took to organise school counseling and he wasn't going to make the kid wait.

He remembered sitting in a cold, grey room in his own middle school, talking to a cold, grey woman about his 'problems at home' as if it was the house itself that was responsible. He'd answer in singular words and chew at his fingernails until they bled.

Deciding that the email could wait until tomorrow as his mind was already swimming a bit *too* much, he shut his laptop and went through to the gym where the girls football team were practicing.

Rocky was coaching them, a surprisingly good coach for a physics teacher. Grace sat on the bench and watched as he ran around, demonstrating different drills. He laughed when Roxy kicked a ball between Rocky's legs and cheered when one team scored a goal. 'Supervising' the girls' football practice was Grace's easiest job, as Rocky knew exactly what to do and it was fun watching him get beaten by 11 year olds. As practice wound to a close, he made his way out to the car park to greet the first of the parents and sign the girls out.

"Rena's mum was supposed to take me home, so I don't know." Evie responded to Grace's question.

"Hmm okay, I'll ask Mr E to call your uncle in a second." Grace nodded with concern, his eyebrows furrowed. It was 4:45 and the rest of the girls had emptied the car park where they were standing. He was scanning the building behind him, trying to see if Rocky was still inside, when a familiar car pulled in across from them. Simon emerged, a red tea towel wrapped around his singular hand. He looked angrier than normal as he walked towards them with long strides. As he came closer, Grace noticed that the tea towel was not red but in fact soaked in blood.

"Si!" Evie shouted, not noticing it at first but then cocking her head to one side, "What happened to your hand?"

Simon grunted in response, waving her off with his gripped fist. "It's nothing, sorry I'm so late."

His eyes caught Ryland's, who was standing with his mouth slightly open. It slammed shut when he noticed the glare holding his gaze. "That is not nothing!" He blurted before he could stop himself. Simon's eyes widened slightly in surprise.

"Can I- can I take a look? I'm first aid trained, I promise." Grace's hand reached out instinctively. Simon retreated, twisting his body away from the teacher. He then paused, looking the man up and down, seemingly considering some options. He then caught Evie's worried eyes.

"If you must." He grumbled.

Ryland led the two of them to his classroom, knowing the nurses office would be shut by now. He pulled out the green first aid kit from under his desk and pulled an extra chair up. Simon begrudgingly sat down.

Grace sat next to him and put his hand out again. Tentatively, Simon pulled his arm away from his chest and towards the teacher. He carefully freed his hand from the tea towel, which stuck to his wrist in places that the blood had dried. Simon winced in response, but didn't look away, watching the two vertical slices on his palm become revealed.

"Jeeez Louiiise." Grace said, teacher vocabulary still in effect.

"Eugh!" came Evie's voice, as she retreated back towards the tables to avoid the sight.

Assessing the situation, Grace opened the first aid box and looked at the options. First he selected an anti bacterial wipe and ripped open the top of the paper sachet.

"This might be a bit cold." He said, gently wiping around the injuries. Simon had a rough hand, with the callouses of someone who'd spent a long time doing manual labour. His fingernails were clipped short and neat and he wore a leather braided bracelet which Grace hadn't noticed before, but was now splattered with blood.

"How did this happen?" He asked calmly and softly, not looking up to the man's stony face.

"Wine glass." He muttered, breathing sharply through his teeth when Grace hit the edge of one of the cuts. He finished up cleaning and went rifling through the box for a bandage.

"Well it's a good thing there's no glass left in the cuts. Plus they're not too deep so I doubt you'll need stitches."

Simon nodded solemnly and looked over to Evie, who was chewing on the corner of her thumb as she sat at the nearest desk. Grace chose a large white plaster and unwrapped it. Simon raised his eyebrows in response. "It's a bit much, but the palm is really annoying to put plasters on." Grace explained.

He laid it over the cuts and smoothed it over the wrinkles and callouses of the other man's hand, feeling the warmth through the plaster and into his fingertips. He pressed it around onto the back of his hand so they were nearly holding hands. He blushed slightly and retracted his hand, looking up awkwardly. Simon had been staring straight at him. They made eye contact briefly, accidentally, before Grace looked over to Evie with a smile.

"All fixed up! You can take him home now, and make sure he's not getting up to any more trouble!"

Evie giggled at this and stood up, looking very relieved. Grace stood up to join her, awkwardly scrunching up the wrapper and throwing it in the bin. Shakily, Simon stood up too, pushing the chair he was sitting in over to where it came from.

"No, I can do that!"

Simon didn’t listen and positioned the chair carefully behind the table at the front. “Thank you.” He said, avoiding Grace’s gaze slightly.

“No worries,” Grace smiled, “I have a lot of practice, kids fall over just as much as you’d expect.”

Simon’s expression softened slightly, the closest to a smile since he arrived. “I can imagine.”

They walked silently back to the car park, then over to Simon’s car.

“Are you sure you’re okay to drive home?” Grace asked.

“I got here okay.” Simon said with a shrug.

“How did you do that?” Evie asked, amazed.

“Skill and determination.” he responded, patting her on the head.

Grace watched with a small smile. “See you tomorrow Evie.”

“Bye Dr. Grace!”

Simon nodded at him and slid into the car. He waved awkwardly as they disappeared out of the car park. What a weird afternoon.

Chapter 8

“And what is one thing that plant cells contain that animal cells don’t? Ollie?”

Grace was at the front of his classroom, walking back and forth in front of a sea of empty sixth grade faces.

“Uhhhmm, chloroplasts?” Ollie responded, throwing the small earth shaped beanbag back to his teacher.

“Great! Who can tell me what chloroplasts do? Lacie?” He caught it and threw it on to the girl sitting in the corner.

“Make the plant green!” She shouted and smiled, holding the beanbag up triumphantly.

“And?” Grace prompted. They all looked at him blankly.

“And absorb light for photosynthesis.” A quiet voice came from the seat near him.

“Yes Evie! Well done.”

The bell interrupted him before he could continue explaining to the rest of the class the functions of a chloroplast.

“We’ll get back to that next class! Go to your next lesson quietly please!” The kids weren’t listening anymore, putting their pencil cases into their bags and swinging them onto their backs. They filed out with scattered “Bye Mr G,” “See you later Dr Grace”, ignoring his request for them to leave quietly.

He sat down in his chair, waving and nodding as they left. When the rest had left, Evie snuck up to the desk.

“Uncle Si said to say thank you about the other day.” She said softly, nearly whispering, like she was telling him a secret.

“That’s alright Evie, tell him it was no bother.” Ryland responded, with a smile, in a normal volume.

“Well thank you, I think he’s okay now. He’s just very busy.” She said, nodding but looking quite concerned.

“Are *you* okay Evie? You have quite a lot going on right now.”

She shrugged and looked at the floor. “’m alright.”

“Alright, you know if you need anything, you can come to me?” He said, trying slightly to catch her gaze.

She nodded. “Thanks Dr Grace.” She turned to leave then thrust her hand into her pocket, “Oh I almost forgot, here.” She took out a piece of paper that had been folded twice and offered it to him.

“Oh! Thank you.” He responded, surprised.

She shrugged again, “You’re welcome. See you later!” She disappeared with a wave to join Ollie who was waiting at the door.

Ryland unfolded the piece of paper, it was lined and had a note written on it in quite neat handwriting -

Ryland

Thank you for the plaster and making sure I was okay. I appreciated it a lot. I’m glad Evie has such a supportive teacher.

Simon

He read it once, then again, feeling the weight in his hand. It was just a scrap of lined paper, but it was folded very carefully. Simon had taken the time to write it and give it to Evie for her to take to school. His mind was reeling- why didn’t he just email him? Or mention it at pick up? Did Evie read it? Did he write Ryland on purpose, as opposed to Dr Grace? He swallowed and folded it back up, sliding it carefully into his top drawer. He was sure it meant nothing.

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Simon wasn’t entirely sure why he’d written ‘Ryland’. He had rewritten the note 5 times, trying to toe the line between casual and genuinely grateful, and ‘Dr. Grace’ didn’t represent that.

His hand was still bandaged up, but it hurt a lot less. He’d changed the dressing twice, with the help of Evie, but they never seemed to get it as neat as Ryland had only a few days earlier.

Simon hadn’t taken a breath since then, organising haphazard cover, working all day every day and pulling every ‘picking up Evie’ favour he had to keep everything together.

Beth had her tonsillectomy on Thursday, and it went well, so she hoped to come back after 2 weeks.

Rena’s surgery had gone a little worse, so she was staying in the hospital for a bit. Telling Evie was hard, and she’d cried into Simon all of Tuesday night and taken Wednesday off of school and spent it with Ava to recover.

Evie *loved* spending time with Ava at the garage, watching her scan a car with x-ray precision then fix it without a second word. She let her hold wrenches and tires and slide under the car to look at the inner workings, seemingly training her to become a mini Ava. She then stayed the night at Ava’s to make sure she could get an early night, uninterrupted by Simon clattering around at 2am.

Evie returned to school on Thursday and Simon was worried about her all day, checking his phone for an SOS message or a call from the school or Ava.

It didn’t help any more that Thursday was their quiz night, so it was wall to wall at the bar.

Plus, Beth usually ran the quiz and Simon had decided- what with his only hand being pretty useless at the moment- that he would do it.

He stood in front of the laughing, jeering crowd and read out trivial general knowledge questions. He usually enjoyed the quiz, but mostly because of how well Beth did it.

“What is the name of the deepest part of the ocean?” He said loudly into the microphone. Lots of whispering followed, and Simon took the chance to check his phone. No notifications.

Friday had been a bit easier, he dropped Evie at school in the morning- making her slightly late by triple checking that she was okay. She reassured him defiantly, after ensuring that they would go to see Rena at the weekend. He agreed and passed her the note that she could never know he’d taken so much time over.

“Can you give this to Dr. Grace in your class today?” He asked, as nonchalant as he could.

“Sure, what is it?” she replied, mostly disinterested.

“Thank you note.” He said shortly.

“It’s going to be a busy one tonight,” he delivered to the bar staff gathered in front of him, “please look after each other, let me know if anyone’s acting up, don’t hesitate to cut anyone off.” They all nodded in response.

“That should be everything, Beth had her tonsillectomy yesterday and she should be back soon!” A cheer came from the group.

“Anything else? Oh! Almost forgot,” he turned to the black haired girl standing in the corner of the group, “This is Libby. She’s new-ish, just here for a few weeks until Beth comes back. Anyone who’s been around long enough will recognise her as Mark’s sister.” A few knowing looks greeted him. “Be nice to her, she’s great and really doing me a solid. Now make yourselves useful.”

The bar came to life as the staff started moving chairs, cleaning tables and refilling fridges.

“It’s good to see you Libs.” Simon turned to her.

“You too buddy.” She smiled and put her hand on his arm. They waited for a beat.

“How is Mark?”

“He’s good. He‘s okay, all things considered.”

Simon nodded once, lips pressed together.

“Right!” She broke the awkward silence with a clap, “What can I get started on?”

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Grace went over what he planned to say 100 times during his final period, rehearsing how to thank Simon for a thank you note. It seemed pointless, but he wanted to acknowledge the effort he’d gone to. Plus it was a good excuse to talk to him.

He stood outside by the door with the sixth graders that were being picked up, happy with his selection of phrasing and word choice. As the kids filed out he smiled and waved as normal, keeping an extra eye on Evie so she didn’t slip out unnoticed. He found himself caring a little *too* much, and had to snap himself out of it. He was a *grown* man thanking another grown man for a thank you note. In a normal way.

As he was shaking the thought out of his head, Evie got up and ran towards a tall blonde woman with a scar down her cheek. She smiled and gave her a hug. Ryland had seen her collecting Evie before, and she seemed nice, but he couldn’t help but feel disappointed. He

wasn’t surprised Simon had such a beautiful woman in his life, but for some reason it put a pit in his stomach.

He lifted one hand up to wave, and she waved back, walking towards him.

“Hi, sorry, I’m picking up Evie,” she gestured to the girl who had already attached herself to the woman’s side, “again!”

“Hey, no worries!” Ryland responded, putting his hand out for her to shake,”Sorry I don’t think we’ve met properly, I’m Dr Grace, Evie’s tutor and biology teacher.”

She took his hand with a semi-awkward smile, he noticed that she had oil all over her wrist and jumper, and another scar wrapping around her palm.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Ava, Evie and Simon’s neighbour!”

“Neighbour! Sorry I don’t know why I assumed-” he trailed off uncomfortably.

“That we were together?” She giggled, and Evie joined in. Even though he was being laughed at, this made Grace feel better, warmer.

“Sorry! Sorry.” He laughed too.

“No, don’t worry! No, Simon’s not really interested in me, and I him honestly,” she chuckled softly, “we’re just friends. And neighbours.”

Ryland nodded, trying to conceal his relief. Before he could say anything else, Evie chimed in.

“Uncle Si isn’t dating anyone. Ever.” She said “I think he’s lonely but he says he prefers it just the two of us.” She shrugged.

Grace let out a breathy laugh and looked at Ava. “Might be a bit oversharing there E.” She said, pulling a slight face at Grace. He let out another laugh.

“Have a good weekend Evie. You too Ava.”

“Thank you, you too.” Ava responded, and turned to leave.

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“So! Anyone at all in your life?” Libby asked Simon during a slight lull. She leaned on the bar, getting close to his shoulder secretively.

“Funny.” He replied, with a completely straight face.

"No one at all?" She whined.

Libby was a lot younger than Mark, and a few years younger than Simon. She worked in an estate agency, but you wouldn't be able to tell by meeting her. She had long black hair, stretched ears and tons of tattoos- ranging from a beautifully done crow on her shoulder to a stick and poke flower on her ankle which she'd shown Simon years ago after a few too many shots.

"No. I don't have the time." he responded shortly, wiping down the bar.

"Okay," she put her hands up in mock defeat, "But can I set you up?"

He stopped wiping and stared at her. "What about 'I don't have the time' don't you understand?"

"The part where you spend your whole life in a bar but never drink with anyone else."

"Poetic. I drink with my friends all the time."

"Do you?"

Simon thought back, trying to remember the last time he drank with a friend not at work or in exchange for a lift.

"Maybe. Who would you set me up with anyway?" he asked skeptically.

"I don't know. Who are you into?"

This question held more than she anticipated. Libby was queer and spent all of her time with queer people, (when she wasn't at work) so this question was pretty casual to her. It wasn't to Simon.

Relationships didn't really exist in Eden. It had a culture of marriage and reproduction, not dating and love. This didn't stop teenagers, but it was viewed very differently to what he had learned moving away.

Therefore, being gay didn't exist for him growing up. Sure, he was aware of the two men who tried to run away together and been publicly stoned and exiled, but that was the extent. He'd never been in a relationship and had only hooked up with girls as a teenager behind closed doors. Those girls had probably been married off very soon after, he shuddered at the thought.

Once he left Eden, he'd had his eyes opened to the possibility of dating and having sex with men, and had experimented. A bit.

Granted, he didn't have much opportunity while looking after Evie, but he'd been out and around.

But he didn't label anything. How do you label something that you don't understand? Or had enough experience with?

Whenever he thought about being gay, all he could picture was his father, talking proudly about the ‘brothers of Eden’ beating a gay man up and how sinful it was to love anyone, especially another man.

He swallowed, avoiding Libby’s gaze, “Anyone. I guess.”

She didn’t react, pulling her phone out to scroll through her contacts.

“I didn’t know that about you.” she said, not looking up.

He cleared his throat and shifted his feet, rewiping the same patch of bar over and over.

“I don’t advertise it.”

“Hmm. Good for you.”

Chapter 9

Rena was allowed to go home on Saturday. Holding up his end of the bargain, Simon and Evie went to see her in the afternoon. Evie was silent the whole ride there, nibbling on her thumbnail and, most concerning of all, not objecting to Simon's terrible music choice. He avoided asking if she was okay, because he knew the answer, so kept it quiet.

Simon loved driving, it was something he never thought he'd be able to do. Learning to drive with one arm was easier than he thought, his car was automatic and he had other mobility aids to make the whole thing possible. He loved watching the city go by as he drove and it gave him a feeling of independence that he'd been stripped of for most of his life.

"Is Rena going to be okay?" Evie's voice cut through Sum-41 playing through the shitty speaker.

Simon swallowed, adjusting his hand on the steering wheel nervously.

"Yeah buddy, she will."

When they arrived, Olesya greeted them with a small smile.

"Hey Evie," she gave her a hug and squeezed her eyes shut, opening them to look at Simon, "Hey Si."

"Hey."

Rena was sat up in bed, eyes closed, breathing softly.

Simon looked down at Evie, her eyes were wide and she was nibbling her lip anxiously.

"You have visitors!" Oleysa's soft voice carried into the room, startling Rena awake. She blinked and looked at the figures in the door, a smile spreading on her face.

"Evie!"

Evie lunged forwards to hug her, tears in her eyes. "I missed you!"

Olesya and Simon looked on, similar expressions on their faces.

"She's going to be okay," Olesya sighed, turning the kettle on, "It was just a small scare."

Simon nodded and slid awkwardly onto one of the stools in their kitchen.

"Where's Lisa?"

“At her mum’s. It’s been a hard week and she wanted to update her in person.” Olesya moved around the room robotically, eyes not fully focusing on anything. She poured two mugs of tea and two glasses of juice, passed one mug to Simon then took the glasses through to the girls. Simon opened his mouth to offer to help, but realised it would be pointless - you can’t stack full glasses.

The kitchen he sat in was very welcoming, pictures decorating the walls, spices lined up, dishes stacked next to the sink in organised chaos. Their fridge was covered in coloured magnets and pieces of paper- timetables, reminders, family pictures, take away menus. Simon couldn’t help but compare it to his own kitchen.

He’d done his best to make it comfortable and decorate it properly, but it felt performative, like everything placed there was staged. He didn’t know how to make a space feel lived in.

Olesya walked back in and picked up her tea, leaning against the counter with her eyes shut.

“How are you?” It was a stupid question and he felt stupid asking it, but he couldn’t let her dance around it. She didn’t open her eyes, instead scrunching them up, seemingly holding back tears.

“I was so scared..” she let out, after some time, “they weren’t sure whether she was going to make it. And- and now she’s home and I’m so scared something’s going to happen and I won’t be able to do anything.”

Simon said nothing, offering his hand out for her to hold. They stayed there for a second, her hand in his.

“Thank you,” she said eventually, “for everything.”

He smiled gently and squeezed her hand.

“We’re always here for you.”

The drive home was more lively, Evie laying out the plans her and Rena had made for when she was better.

“And next summer we’re going to go camping and swimming in a lake and roasting marshmallows!”

Simon smiled at her, no intention of bursting her bubble with talk of logistics. Or the possibility that Rena would get worse again before next summer. He shook that thought out of his head.

“Are you and Dr Grace friends?” she asked out of nowhere.

“Uh- uhm I’m not sure. I wouldn’t say we’re *friends.*”

“Ava was talking about you with him and then on the drive home she asked if you two were friends.”

“Oh,” he said in a low voice, “Uh, I guess we’re acquaintances. I know him better than any of your other teachers.”

“He asked if you and Ava were dating.” she said plainly.

“Oh! That’s funny, I bet she laughed at that.”

“She did!” she looked down at her phone, “I’d say you’re friends.”

“Alright kid,” He chuckled. If she said so.

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“It’s Saturday night. We’re going out.” Rocky said, leaning on Ryland’s counter wearing his favourite ‘going out’ shirt.

“I’m 36. I’m not ‘going out’.”

“You won’t get over her unless you do something about it.”

“Who said I’m not over her!” Ryland threw his hands up angrily. He could feel Adrian look up from their phone from the corner of the room.

“C’mooon! Come for *one* drink !” Rocky whined.

Ryland scrubbed his hand over his face and thought about the other options. He *could* order pizza and watch Taskmaster until he fell asleep on the sofa. Or he could drink with his friends and make awkward small talk with girls he had no interest in sleeping with. He knew what he *wanted* to do, but it had been a long week and a beer didn’t sound *too* bad.

Wearing a suitable jacket, shirt and jeans, Ryland traipsed behind Rocky and Adrian, dragging his feet. They were caught in domestic conversation about something or other. The three walked down the street, passing much younger versions of their group running and shouting on their way to the same bars. Before Grace could realise where they were, they turned down a side street and ended up outside ‘The Hail Mary.’

“Waait hey noone told me we were going here?” Grace stopped in his tracks.

“Yeah why not? It’s a good bar. Cheap.” Rocky responded with a shrug.

“Simon works here. Evie’s uncle?”

Rocky and Adrian shared a look. “So?”

Grace opened his mouth to say something but shut it instantly. Why *did* that matter? They were sort of friends now. Ish. He’d helped him out with his cut, they’d shared small talk, it’s not like he *followed* him to the bar, he just knew he worked here.

“It’s just weird seeing student’s guardians out in the world I guess.” he resorted to.

“Eh, a bit.” Rocky responded, pushing the door open.

“You don’t even teach her.” Grace muttered under his breath.

A pit opened in his stomach as he stepped into the bar. He had no idea what to say to Simon. *‘Hi I promise I’m not stalking you, thanks for the note, I missed you this week. I hope you're okay!’* he shook it out of his head. He hadn’t *missed* Simon that week. He’d just noticed his absence.

His eyes immediately darted to the bartenders lining the bar. He struggled a bit, the bar was packed and they were hidden behind a wall of patrons. He could make out a young looking guy wearing a beanie, a tall girl with black hair and a blond guy turned to mix a drink.

“He’s not even here!” Rocky shouted over the music in Grace’s direction. The pit in his stomach didn’t go away. *Why* wasn’t he here?

Rocky ordered drinks for them and after an age they sat down at a booth. Grace had peered into the back of the bar surreptitiously, trying to spot Simon, but only saw two girls sitting there on their phones.

“So what’s the plan?” Rocky asked, after a long chug of beer.

“The plan?” Grace responded, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah! Some flirting? Or are we going to a club after this?”

Adrian rolled their eyes. “A. You’ve seen Ry flirt, why would you think that would be a good idea? B. We are too old for the club.”

They all chuckled and Rocky looked mock-offended. Grace didn’t even attempt it, he knew he was bad at flirting, he just made awkward jokes in someone's direction and hoped for the best.

They chatted for a bit, Adrian eventually pulling out UNO and dealing out cards for the three of them. The bar was heaving so a lot of people were crowded quite close to their booth, one of these people noticed the UNO cards.

“No way! Are you playing UNO? I love that!” A girl shouted. She was quite short, with long blonde hair and a wonky fringe. “Could we join you?”

Rocky spoke for the three, “Of course!”

The girl squeezed next to Adrian while her friend sat down next to Ryland.

“I’m Rocky, this is my partner Adrian and our friend Ryland.” He gestured to each of them, giving Ryland a small smirk in the direction of the girl next to him. He rolled his eyes in response.

“I’m Leah, that’s Gracie.” the blonde girl said with a smile, pointing at her friend.

“No way!” Rocky’s eyes lit up, “Ryland’s surname is Grace, that’s what we call him at school!”

Gracie nodded politely, clearly not as amazed by this as him. Ryland smiled awkwardly.

“School? Are you guys teachers?” Leah asked.

They made small talk for a while, playing UNO and Ryland ignoring Rocky’s facial hints to flirt with Gracie while he put away several pints and a few shots. She *was* pretty, with short brown hair, round glasses and wearing a t-shirt of a band that only Ryland had recognised. (He was sure Rocky knew them too, but was pretending not to for his sake. Rocky prided himself on being a good wingman.)

“I’m going outside for a cig, do you want to come?” She asked him.

“Sorry I don’t smoke,” He responded instinctively, then looked at Rocky’s face. Oh. “But it is hot in here! I’ll come outside anyway.”

She smiled at this and slid out of the booth, Leah winking as she left. He pretended he didn’t see it and followed her out. He staggered slightly, the alcohol hitting him all at once. They stepped out to the front of the bar and Gracie pulled out a pack of cigarettes. She took one out for herself then offered it to him.

“No, thank you I really don’t smoke.”

She shrugged, “Each to their own.”

“So you work in a cafe?” he asked after a beat.

“At the moment,” she sighed, taking a drag, “but I’d like to write films.”

“Oh wow, that’s really cool!”

“Yeah I guess, isn’t going very well though.” She looked at her feet.

“If you had to remake any film, which would it be?”

Gracie looked taken aback. “That’s a good question, people usually just ask what my favourite film is.”

Ryland chuckled, “I think this tells you more about someone.”

She thought for a second then replied “*The Mask.* The original comic was soo gory and weird, the film is too sanitised.”

He smiled, “That’s a good answer. Horror fan I guess?”

“Big time. You?”

“A bit. I love the original *Alien* a lot.”

Her mouth dropped open. Without saying anything she lifted the sleeve of her t-shirt up to reveal a xenomorph tattoo.

“No way! That’s so awesome!”

“And! Feel,” she grabbed his hand and put it on her shoulder, “It healed slightly weird so it’s textured like a xenomorph.”

Awkwardly, he ran his finger down the lines on her shoulder. It was quite strange, but she was right, it did feel like a xenomorph looked. He lingered on her shoulder, moving his gaze to her face. His heart started pounding and his head was cloudy from booze. He leaned in to kiss her and she met him in the middle. Her lips moved against his and he bought his hand up to her cheek to bring her closer. After a few seconds he pulled away, smiling at her. His smile dropped when he saw a figure pushing open the door beside them. “Simon?”

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Simon had meant to take the full day off work, putting Libby and Tyler in charge and instead spending the day with Evie. Around 11pm, however, he got a call from Tyler saying that one of the toilets had flooded and none of them could figure out how to fix it. He’d come in reluctantly, bringing his tools and fixing it within the hour.

He pushed past the crowd on his way out, making eye contact with a man who looked a lot like Grace’s friend. It probably wasn’t. Through the window he could see a couple making out next to the door. Classy. He pushed the door open with his back, hand holding his toolbox, aiming to avoid the pair.

“Simon?” it was Grace’s voice. Ryland Grace. He looked guilty, like a kid caught awake past their bedtime.

Simon cleared his throat. “Ryland.”

“I- I didn’t see you, I didn’t think you were working today.” He sounded *really* guilty.

“Toilet broke. I was fixing it.” His gaze shifted from Ryland to the girl he was standing next to.

“Uh sorry, this is Gracie. Gracie, this is Simon. A friend of mine.” He was swaying slightly and had gone quite pale.

“Nice to meet you,” Gracie waved awkwardly. Simon nodded in response.

“I need to-”

“Thank you for the note.” Ryland blurted out, interrupting him. Simon stood in stunned silence for a second.

“You’re welcome.” He muttered eventually. “Thank you for the plaster.”

“I’m glad you’re okay.” Ryland made eye contact with him for the first time in the whole exchange, his sunken blue eyes looking into Simon’s soul. Simon didn’t say anything.

“It’s cold out here,” Simon’s gaze moved to the girl now leaning on Ryland’s arm, “I’m gonna go inside.”

His eyes went back to Ryland, who didn’t move.

“I should go too.”

This snapped him out of it. “Nice to see you Simon.”

‘A friend of mine’? Is that what Simon was? Was Evie right? He mulled it over on his walk home, swinging the toolbox haphazardly. He guessed Evie *was* right, they’d moved from guardian/teacher to something a bit more… friendly.

He wasn’t sure why it hurt seeing Ryland kissing a girl. He wasn’t sure if hurt was what he felt. Maybe it was the lingering effects of being called ‘handsome’ all those weeks ago, when they’d first met in the bar. But Ryland didn’t know he’d heard that, and if he did he probably didn’t even remember saying it the morning after. Simon didn’t *like* Ryland, he just liked that he’d been appreciated. He liked seeing him at pick up, dumb jokes and awkward smiles, he liked that he took care of his hand and was good with Evie. And he sent him that note to show that. To a teacher. To a teacher who was funny and looked after him and his kid and was decently good looking and kind and was making out with someone that wasn’t him outside of *his bar.*

Fuck.

Chapter 10

Simon went into work on Sunday, desperate to get Ryland out of his head. He walked in, past the window he'd seen him through not even 12 hours before. He swallowed and shuffled into the back office.

He made himself busy, checking the toilet was still fixed and going over the schedule for the day. He walked around in a daze, mind spinning from Evie and Rena to Ryland. He'd left Evie with Ava and she was planning to take her over to Rena's in the afternoon, as Ava had some plans.

He couldn't stop thinking about what Olesya had said, being worried that something would happen to Rena while she was at home. It was something that had plagued Simon when he had first moved to San Francisco. He was 26 and suddenly solely responsible for his life and the life of a 6 year old. He was constantly terrified something would happen to Evie that he wouldn't know how to help, resulting in him being unable to sleep unless it was on her floor.

He unloaded the drinks order, declining help from the new delivery driver after he watched Simon pick up 2 crates with one arm. The old delivery driver never questioned anything, Simon missed him.

Libby arrived in the afternoon, just before open. She arrived with gossip about her friend's ex boyfriend which provided entertainment, but Simon couldn't really keep track or care all that much about what she was saying.

"-and now she's pregnant with HIS kid! Isn't that wild?" she was aggressively mopping the floor to emphasise her point, Simon nodded distantly in response. "Anyway, onto you. Who was that couple you interrupted last night?"

He looked at her vacantly, "Couple I interrupted? What do you mean?"

"When you were leaving. You chatted to the couple that were making out by the window. Although I don't think they're an actual couple, the guy left almost instantly."

Simon didn't appreciate how much he enjoyed hearing this. "He's Evie's form teacher. A friend of mine. I guess."

Hearing Ryland's own words out of his mouth felt strange, but he wasn't wrong. At this point it was better than the truth.

"Ah," she sighed, eyebrows going up slightly, "Well he seemed very startled by you, the girl he left looked pretty pissed- what did you say?" She'd stopped what she was doing and was now leaning on the mop, moving closer to him suggestively.

“Nothing. I don’t think it had anything to do with me.” He disappeared into the office to force an end to the confrontation.

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“Thanks Dr.G.” Harry said, holding his bag over his shoulder awkwardly.

“No worries buddy.” Grace said, smiling and looking up from his computer.

The referral he’d organised for Harry’s counselling had worked out and he was seeing genuine improvement. It made him feel better on this slightly tragic Monday morning.

After the bar on Saturday, he’d made awkward excuses to Gracie and shuffled off with Adrian and Rocky. He wasn’t *too* drunk, but enough that he woke up with a pounding headache the next morning.

He did feel better on Monday, if a little sorry for himself. The good encounter with Harry put a spring in his step, only slightly clouded over by the fear of seeing Simon that afternoon. There was no guarantee that he’d even be picking Evie up from school that day, and even if he did, it would be completely normal to leave without saying anything, god knows most parents did. It shouldn’t have felt so awkward, but he’d felt so weird after seeing Simon at the bar that he hadn’t gone any further with Gracie, much to Rocky’s disappointment.

Pick up rolled around and Ryland stood with Evie, waiting anxiously to see which car pulled into the car park. Him and Evie had gotten used to being the last ones there, and Ryland liked hearing about the shows she was watching and the things that she got up to.

“And then I went to see Rena yesterday with Ava.” she said, tracing the ground with a stick from her seat on the step. Ryland was sat on the step above her, bright yellow coat on.

“Oh how is Rena! I heard she’s at home now.”

“Yeah, she’s doing better, Si says she’ll be all fixed up and back to school soon.” She said with a smile, not looking up at him.

“And Libby at the bar is doing a karaoke night on Friday! I’m so excited because Uncle Si said I can go for a bit, as long as I’m out before 8.”

“I love karaoke! That sounds like a lot of fun.”

She nodded and looked up. “Si!”

Simon was climbing out of his car and ambling towards them. “Hey kid.”

Ryland smiled uncomfortably, standing up with a lot less grace then his name would suggest.

“Ryland. How are you?” he said awkwardly.

“Good! Good.” Ryland responded with a slightly too aggressive nod, “And you?”

“Not too bad.”

“I was telling Dr. Grace about karaoke on Friday!” Evie cut through the tension with her cheerful voice. She was very good at that.

“And I’ve told you that Ava is taking you home at 8 because 11 year olds shouldn’t be in bars.” Simon said, his cold tone melting a bit as he ruffled her hair. She rolled her eyes playfully.

Ryland chuckled, “Karaoke’s great! Y’know, Mr E hates it because Mx E is soo much better than him.”

“You should come!” Evie said excitedly. Ryland and Simon shared a look.

“Oh, I mean, I probably shouldn’t.” He retreated in on himself slightly. Simon held his gaze, shrugging with a slight smile. The half smile that Ryland had seen before, an encouraging smile.

“You should.” He said, “It’ll be a good night.”

Ryland shook his head, “I’ll see, I’m not su-”

“Come. Bring your friends.”

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Simon didn’t *mean* to invite Ryland. It wasn’t a conscious decision. The words came out of his mouth before he realised. He blamed Evie. A bit.

The week went by pretty quickly, despite Beth’s absence and Olesya unable to pick Evie up Simon had found a good rhythm with after school clubs and Libby being his second brain. He didn’t see Ryland all week, whether intentionally or not, but he had other things to focus on.

He woke up on Friday morning with a weird anxiety brewing in his stomach. He told himself that it was just lack of sleep and the logistics surrounding the karaoke night that Libby had planned, but the invitation he’d extended only a few days earlier weighed on his mind. He convinced himself that Ryland had *probably* forgotten about it and that even if he did show

up it would only be out of polite obligation. He wouldn't let himself go any further than that in his strange mental tunnel. He didn't care whether he showed up or not.

Evie sat at the table shovelling rice krispies in her mouth out of a chipped stripy bowl. Simon was sitting on the other side of the table, drinking tea and checking his emails on his laptop.

"Who's picking me up today?" she asked, slurping milk off her spoon.

Simon looked up, over the top of his laptop, "Ava. She'll get you after school and bring you to the bar for karaoke."

"Okay," she kicked her feet against her chair, "is Dr Grace coming?"

Simon cleared his throat, eyes glued to a particularly interesting email about the changing prices of beer. "Maybe. I haven't seen him since you invited him."

"*You* invited him. He's your friend."

He grunted at that, picking up his empty mug to put in the sink.

"So Evie said the teacher is coming tonight?"

"Good morning to you too Libby." Simon grumbled, hardly through the door when he was ambushed with more talk of the science teacher. He hadn't spoken to him that morning, waving Evie out of the car, pausing only for a second to peer into Ryland's classroom window and see him sitting on his desk. He was throwing a beanbag in the air and laughing at something. His sleeves were rolled up and Simon couldn't help but notice just how toned his arms were.

He pushed the thought out of his mind and watched as Evie came into the room with a smile. She said something to Ryland, then pointed in Simon's direction, who immediately whipped his head around to walk towards his car.

"What? She's weirdly excited, there's not a single teacher I would have wanted to see outside of school." Libby was wearing a black Gorillaz top that fell off her shoulder, revealing a vine tattoo wrapping around her upper arm. She'd picked up Evie from school on Tuesday when Simon was working, and apparently karaoke was *all* she could talk about.

"We'll see. I haven't seen him so he probably won't remember anyway." Simon put his bag in the office and started organising the tills.

They worked in silence for a bit, Libby sweeping and organising the tables so there was space in the corner for the karaoke stage. Well, less a stage, more a square of lino with a speaker and microphone connected to her laptop.

Karaoke nights used to be a regular occurrence at the bar, Mark and Libby organising at least one a month. They'd draw a pretty decent crowd and they had some proper regulars who came religiously every time. Simon tried to keep them going once Mark left, but he didn't have the same enthusiasm, try as he might have done. He was really happy to be doing this one with Libby, she always knew how to get people to come and join in.

They had no idea what to expect in terms of people, however, so Simon got as many of his staff in as possible, with a couple more on standby. He knew how the bar could get.

Rose and Tyler arrived at 2, Milly when they opened at 3 and Dylan, Seb and Maddy at 6.

Ava and Evie appeared at 4, and the whole bar treated them like royalty.

"Ava!"

"Libby!"

The women hugged and instantly began chatting, Ava became this animated around very few people, but Libby brought something out in her. They'd met through Simon, and had become very close over the years.

"Evie!!" The younger bar staff were *very* happy to see her, and she bounced around talking to all 3 of them at once.

"Tyler, I taught Ollie your card game last week! Milly, I watched the show you recommended! Rose, how's Beth I miss her sooo much how are your cats?"

Simon smiled, watching her private fan club chatter and high five her, bringing her cokes with umbrellas in them and little snacks.

The bar picked up a little around 5, with the plan to start karaoke at 6.30. Evie let her impatience show, throwing peanuts at Libby when she got bored drawing in her notebook.

The tables began filling up and the bar grew louder, so Simon sat with Evie in the office, trusting his staff to hold down the fort.

"How was school kid?"

"Fine." She shrugged, twisting her scraggly hair around her finger. Evie had quite curly dark brown hair which was usually scraped into a ponytail or, when she stayed with Ava, a pair of plaits which she'd keep in for as long as possible. Simon had tried his best but braiding was one thing he'd accepted he wouldn't be able to do with one arm.

"Just fine?" he prodded. She shrugged again.

"I miss Rena." She looked down at her feet. Simon sighed and moved to put his arm around her.

“I know buddy, it’s really hard.” he stroked her hair carefully, moving the loose strands out of her face, “But she'll be back to school so soon.”

He felt her nod into his side and hugged her closer. They stayed like that for a moment before a shout broke the silence.

“Evie! Look who’s here!”

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“I cannot believe that *you* want to go to karaoke.” Rocky said on Friday afternoon, leaning against the sink in the staff room, coffee mug in hand.

“I like karaoke!” Grace said defensively, putting his hands up.

“Sure, but not enough to actively pursue it.” He responded, pushing his glasses up his nose, “Who’d you say invited you?”

Grace looked around sheepishly, “Evie.”

“Evie?! As in the student?”

“Well no! Simon invited me but I think it was her idea.”

“And last week you didn’t want to go into his bar because it’s ‘weird seeing the kids guardians’ out and about.” Rocky sighed, rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, I think we’re friends now.” Grace wrapped his hands around the mug of coffee he’d just poured, watching the milk swirl around the surface.

Rocky raised an eyebrow, Grace caught his gaze.

“I don’t even know if I want to go anyway.” he said, a bad attempt at dismissiveness.

“Sure.”

He stared between three similar button up shirts, one a dark charcoal, another navy and the third a dark green. Ryland wasn’t exactly sure why this decision felt so heavy, but Simon always seemed so… put together that he thought he may as well make an effort. He landed on the navy blue shirt with a black jacket. Rocky and Adrian arrived at his flat a bit later, bringing a bottle of wine and a lot of questions.

“Is it true you’re going to this bar tonight because an *eleven year old* invited you?” Adrian said before they could cross the threshold into his apartment. The couple walked in without

proper invitation, Rocky making himself comfortable on the sofa while Adrian grabbed 3 glasses for the wine.

“No. An 11 year old *prompted* my friend to invite me to an event at his bar.”

Rocky and Adrian shared a look.

“Oh he’s your friend now?” They said, smirking in Rocky’s direction.

“Yes.” Grace took a glass from Adrian and had a sip, “We haven’t *hung out* per se, but we talk a lot at pick up. And at the bar those two times. *And* I bandaged up his hand once.”

“Sounds like best friends to me,” Adrian chuckled.

“Whatever. Maybe this invite is him saying he wants to be actual friends? God knows I need better ones.”

Rocky flicked an elastic band that he had been playing with at the back of Grace’s head.

“Ow! Case in point!”

“Sure, he could want to be friends,” Adrian said warmly, putting their hand on Ryland’s, “Or maybe it’s something more than that.”

Rocky’s head immediately perked up and he made direct eye contact with Adrian, shaking his head subtly.

“What?” Grace said, confused, looking between the two.

“Well buddy, you did say it yourself when you first met him, you said he was gorgeous.” Adrian said, very calmly.

“To his face!” Rocky added, less calmly.

“Did I?” Ryland said, brow furrowing. He tried to think back to that first night, the night he got dumped. He remembered *thinking* that Simon was pretty attractive, but saying it? Out loud?

He brought his hand up to his face, “So what do you think? That he thinks I’m…. interested in him?”

Rocky cleared his throat and readjusted himself on the sofa. Adrian poured another glass of wine.

“Maybe.” They finally said, putting the glass down, “Are you?”

Ryland stared at them incredulously, willing his mouth to say ‘Of course not! Why would you think that?’ but it wouldn’t come out.

“I- I don’t know. I’m not gay?” he shook his head, hand shaking slightly. Adrian squeezed it, trying to catch his eye line.

“Hey, hey it’s fine! You don’t have to think about this right now, and if you’re not ready for it, no one needs to know, you just don’t go tonight.”

He scrunched his eyes up, still shaking his head, lump building in his throat.

He’d always been open to the possibility that he liked men, but being in a relationship for so long had rendered it pointless. He thought back to Simon, how gorgeous he had looked when they’d met but also how gorgeous he was day to day. Jumping out of his car with his hair scraped back into a ponytail, revealing the pink scars running down his cheek. The tight compression shirts he wore that showed his well-toned arm and chest. He thought about how Evie talked about him, how well he was raising her alone despite their past, or what little Ryland knew about it. He thought about how patient he was with him, entertaining his rambles with genuine interest, instead of brushing him off like most parents in that playground. And he thought about the feeling of the larger man’s hand in his when he was bandaging him up. The warmth that had spread throughout him, and the eye contact the stone faced man had held when it was all over.

“What does it mean?” he said eventually, looking up to meet Rocky and Adrian’s concerned faces. “If he invited me, for that reason.”

“It means whatever you make it.” Adrian said softly, “It means that if you don’t feel the same, you can act as his friend and make that clear, and if you do…”

“If I do?”

“Then you make a move,” Rocky perked up, pushing his elbow into Grace’s.

“But! But we don’t need to go if you don’t want to.” Adrian reassured, ignoring Rocky’s disappointed face.

Grace nodded. “Okay. Give me a second to think.”

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“Evie! Look who’s here!” the voice came from the bar. Evie took her head away from Simon and jumped up, smiling at Simon before running out of the office.

Ryland was here.

Simon felt all of the anxiety bubble back up into his stomach and had to take a breath to let it settle. Then he pushed himself off the chair, took another deep breath, and went out to see

him.

“Beth!” Evie shouted, and there she was, picking the girl up in a hug, swinging her around while she giggled madly.

Ryland was not here.

She returned to the ground and turned to Simon, who was hiding by the office door, the emotional whiplash he’d experienced overwhelmingly evident on his face.

“Beth’s here!” Evie shouted, causing customers to turn. They struggled to care, however, seeing how happy the young girl was.

“Hey Beth.” Simon shook it off and went in to hug her.

“Hey Si!” She smiled wide and hugged him back. Her voice was hoarse and she was quite pale, but other than that she looked okay.

“How are you? How’s your mouth?”

She opened her mouth to show everyone her lack of tonsils proudly. “Great.” she garbled, mouth still wide open. Evie giggled uncontrollably, hanging onto everything Beth said. Beth composed herself a bit and turned back to Simon.

“How are you Si?”

“Never better kid.” he said defiantly, in a way that required no follow up questions.

“What are you doing here?!” Evie asked, eyes shining like a cartoon.

“Rose told me and of course I couldn’t miss karaoke!” she said loudly, voice cracking and straining with the effort.

“Like her singing couldn’t get any worse.’” Rose added with a smirk, kissing Beth on the cheek. As Evie and Beth carried on catching up, Simon slid back into the office.

“You’re waiting for your teacher. Aren’t you?” Libby’s voice came from the corner of the office.

“He’s not *my* teacher.” Simon grumbled.

“But you are waiting for him.” she twirled her black hair around her finger, getting it slightly caught in her red acrylic nail.

“Mmm,” he looked down at the desk, avoiding eye contact, “I really don’t think he’s coming.”

“Si! Look who’s here!”

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> big long one because when I posted this on ao3 noone enjoyed the cliffhanger ! it is, therefore, a rollercoaster so enjoy !!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Let’s go.”

Rocky and Adrian looked up from the TV. Ryland had been pacing and nibbling his thumb anxiously, going over what the pair had said.

“Are you sure?” Adrian said, checking their watch.

“Yes. Yeah. I’m probably overthinking it anyway, it’s a night at his bar, he probably invited me to get the numbers up or something.”

They all knew he didn’t believe this, but when Rocky opened his mouth to protest, a sharp elbow found its way to his side.

At 6pm, Rocky, Adrian and Ryland found themselves walking the same route they’d walked just the week before. They’d gotten off the bus in the middle of town but the walk wasn’t too far.

Ryland was, once again, anxiously biting the skin around his thumbnail as Rocky tried to keep him distracted.

“So any particular karaoke song preference? Because me and Adrian are going to do *Disco 2000* by Pulp and I’ll probably end up doing one by myself, Blur or Green Day or something.”

“Who said we were doing Pulp?” Adrian questioned.

“We *always* do Pulp!” Rocky replied, linking his arm with theirs, inadvertently causing Ryland to fall back slightly.

“Mmm maybe we could try something else?”

Their voices faded into the background as Ryland watched the city lights go past him, taking in his city.

They could hear the bar before they turned the corner, the music spilling into the side street. The door was wide open ,with a few people milling around outside, smoking and chatting. Ryland swallowed as he walked towards it, picking his thumb and trying to push the thought of the last time he was there to the back of his mind.

He could just see Gracie's disappointed face, and Simon's shock. It was all so awkwa-

"There's Evie!" Rocky interrupted his train of thought, pointing his finger through the window at the girl sitting just behind the bar, talking to a woman with blonde curls and a wide smile.

Evie caught her teachers' glance and jumped up, yelling down the bar as she did. Ryland hovered before the door, letting Rocky and Adrian go in front. His heart was racing and there was a pit in his stomach.

Rocky and Adrian entered through the open door, not checking to see the mess that was developing behind them. Ryland bolted around to the side of the building, breaths catching in his throat. He sunk down to the floor, holding his head as if to try to push the thoughts out manually.

"What do you mean you need to go? Who was that guy?"

"You never make time for me, it's like I don't matter to you?"

"A friend of mine."

"You're fucking useless."

The words flooded through his brain and he felt sick to his stomach. Thoughts of the people he'd let down and disappointed. Sitting on the piss covered floor of the back alley, tears filled his eyes but didn't fall, sticking on his face like the breaths in his throat- labored and painful. What felt like an age but was probably only a minute passed, and he started planning his route home. They'd taken the bus but he could probably book an uber and text Rocky an apology on the way. He'd just have to face Simon on Monday and apologise to Evie, he was sure Rocky would make enough appearance for the three of them, and Evie wouldn't mind too much. He dug the heel of his hand into his eyes to again still the thoughts surfacing and swimming, the tears finally falling silently down his cheeks.

"Ryland?"

He looked up, the light from the corner shop next to the bar was being shadowed by a large figure towering over him. Simon.

He sniffed, wiping his nose on his sleeve in an attempt to compose himself, but his breathing was still ragged so he couldn't get a word out.

"Hey look at me." The figure said, crouching down to his level. "Breathe in with me."

Ryland tried, but it hitched halfway through.

"That's alright, try again. In." Simon breathed in, some theatricality in his hand going up and down to demonstrate. Ryland tried again, closing his eyes and breathing in.

"Hold it for three seconds." He continued to demonstrate, "And out."

They sat for a second, breathing together.

"I'm sorry." Ryland finally croaked out.

"Don't be. Do you want me to get your friends?" He said calmly, "They're inside."

Ryland exhaled, "No, don't worry. I'll call myself a taxi or something."

"Okay."

Ryland caught his eye for a second, the stoic composure that usually resided there had been replaced with a genuine concern.

"Or you can wait a second and I'll drive you home."

Ryland's mouth flapped open, once again unable to form a word. He wiped his nose on his sleeve, clearing his throat.

"Do you need a tissue?" Simon asked, producing one from his pocket anyway.

Ryland looked down at it. "Thank you." He managed, taking it from him and wiping his eyes and nose, embarrassment showing around his cheeks and ears. He hoped it was dark enough that Simon wouldn't notice.

"Sorry, I'm sorry, I just got myself worked up, and I probably shouldn't have come out in the first place, I think I'm coming down with something, or maybe I'm just anxious, it's stupid, I'm sorry." he rambled, standing up and wiping himself down with his hands and the tissue.

"No."

"Pardon?"

"No, it's not stupid. Don't be sorry." Simon said, plainly, his eyes still full of concern.

"O-okay."

They stood opposite each other for a second, silent but not awkward. A comfortable silence.

“I’ll drive you home.” Simon said, breaking it. “But I just need to get karaoke set up first.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Ryland responded with a small smile.

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Simon led Ryland past the people hanging around outside and into the crowded bar.

“I’ll get you some water.” Simon stated, then ducked behind the bar, leaving Ryland on the other side. He filled a glass with water, ignoring a smirk launched in his direction from Libby then walked to the end of the bar where he found Ryland, Rocky and Adrian talking to Evie.

“Si! Look who I found!” She grinned. He pushed the water over to the teacher wordlessly.

“The librarian and physics teacher,” he acknowledged with a nod, “Nice to see you again.”

“You too!” Rocky replied, already finishing off his first beer.

“I need to set up karaoke, can I get you another one?” he gestured to Rocky, who in turn looked at Adrian, who gave him a nod of approval.

“Yes please! And something a little harder for my friend here!” He gave Ryland an elbow, “You can’t do karaoke sober!”

Simon watched Ryland reach for words to form an excuse to leave, then falter with a sigh. “Can I get a pint too?”

“2 pints!” Rocky said triumphantly, causing Evie to giggle. Rocky and Adrian shared a look, clearly slightly concerned with the fact this might not be the most professional or teacher-ly environment. Simon caught Ryland’s eye as he went to pour the pints, a small eyebrow raised to ask if this is what he wanted. Ryland gave a small smile and nod, a deep breath to show that he was feeling a bit better.

Simon produced the two drinks and placed them on the bar. Rocky got out his wallet to pay but Simon held his hand up.

“Those ones are on me.” he said, then turned towards the karaoke machine.

“Thank you!” he heard Rocky shout down the bar.

He found Libby next to the makeshift stage, trying desperately to connect the microphones to her laptop.

“So you found your teacher?” she smirked, not looking up from the wires she was playing around with.

Simon didn’t respond, crouching down to meet her.

After a lot of cursing and trial and error, the pair fixed the DIY karaoke station and Libby stood up proudly.

“WELCOME!” She announced, throwing her arm not holding the microphone in the air, “to the first Hail Mary karaoke night in… a while! I’m Libby, that’s Simon,” She pointed to Simon, who was attempting to scurry away before he got caught. “He runs this place, so be nice to him.” A few whoops and cheers. “Anyway! Come and write down your name and the song you’d like to sing on this sheet here,” She lifted the sheet, displaying it to the chattering audience. “And we’ll get started very soon!”

A surge of people ran towards the sheet, forming a strangely shaped queue before she could even leave the stage. Rocky was one of them, darting past people but still only making it towards the end of line. Simon watched Adrian roll their eyes lovingly. He leaned towards Ryland once he’d made his way back to the bar, “I can drive you back now, if you’d like.”

The blond man turned to him with a lopsided smile, lifting his drink up, “I’m okay. Thank you.” Simon nodded. “Plus I have to finish my beer.”

That earned a small, victorious smile from Simon, who quickly turned away once he felt it warm his cheeks.

The first few people worked their way through some interesting covers of Abba and Queen, cheers from the audience filling the awkward gaps. It had started late, so Evie was very anxious she wouldn’t get to sing before she had to go home.

“Good thing you’re friends with the karaoke sheet guardian!” Libby said proudly. Evie whispered what she wanted to do in Libby’s ear, giggling to herself. Libby looked very surprised, but gave Evie a fist bump and told her she had good taste.

A young looking guy stood up to do ‘Creep’ by Radiohead, which always gets awkward very quickly, Simon noted.

“They always think Creep will be funny then they get a minute in and it’s just uncomfortable for everyone,” he said, not to anyone in particular but Ryland responded with a small laugh.

“Does it happen a lot?” He asked.

“Every single karaoke night.”

Ryland laughed a bit louder. The sound warmed Simon’s face again, he was just happy Ryland was feeling a bit better.

Once the guy had uncomfortably shuffled off stage with scattered applause, Libby stood up to announce the next person up.

“Next! Is my close personal friend, close friend to the bar, and the youngest person here!” Evie jumped off her seat and started towards the stage. “Evie! With *Ain’t it Fun* by Paramore!”

All the bar staff turned to look at Simon, impressed and surprised.

“She loves Paramore. I blame Libby.” He said, shaking his head.

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Ryland watched incredulously as Evie belted her way through the Paramore song, holding Hayley Williams’ high notes impressively (for an 11 yr old). She came off stage and her fan club, along with pretty much everyone else in the bar, cheered and applauded her. She went red but couldn’t stop smiling, scurrying behind the bar with her refilled coke.

Ryland watched Simon looking at Evie. His resting face was usually stern, emotionless and hidden behind the scars that littered his cheek, but Ryland noticed that whenever he looked at Evie, his face melted ever so slightly. His eyebrows relaxed out of their resting furrowed state and his mouth became less pursed. He was very attractive.

Ryland smiled to himself at the realisation, a quiet peace that he hadn’t noticed before when he thought about Simon. He found himself staring a little too long, however, as Simon turned and caught him staring. He looked down sharply and sheepishly, the warmth staying in his chest, slowly replacing the lump that had formed over the course of the day. Or maybe even longer.

“And next!” Libby announced, after progressively drunker patrons yelled their way through pop songs. “Rocky and Adrian with *Disco 2000* !”

Rocky turned and grinned at Adrian, who rolled their eyes in return. He had not won the argument, Ryland assumed, but he’d got to the sign up sheet first.

Rocky grabbed their hand and danced over to the stage, laughing and tripping over himself. Ryland checked his watch. 7:43. Rocky was *this* drunk at *7:43.*

He moved to the front of the bar to watch his friends sing (and record them), pushing through the crowd uncomfortably. Grace was tall, but all limbs, so getting through this many people was easy, but very awkward. He burst out the other side, cheering as his friends sang. He was on his third pint and feeling a bit wavy, but improved from the start of the night. Adrian held

their composure throughout the song, a lot better than Rocky despite having drank more. They kept their arm around Rocky, part lovingly and part to steady him as he swayed throughout the song. Ryland beamed up at them, happy to see his friends so happy.

They got to the end and Ryland cheered, laughing and slapping them both on the back. They made their way back through the crowd, easier now that Rocky was jumping and falling as he went.

“You were right,” came Evie’s voice, she was leaning against the bar with a lopsided grin, “Mx E IS better at karaoke.”

Rocky turned to Grace, mock shocked and betrayed, “How could you?”

“That was our secret!” Ryland whisper-shouted to Evie. She chuckled and put her hand over her mouth.

Evie and Ava left after that, with much protesting and herding. She kept running back in to say goodbye to ‘one more person!’ until essentially everyone in the bar had been waved at and side-hugged.

“It’s so great she can come here and loves it so much, I used to hate going to my dad’s job when he worked late.” Ryland sighed, waiting for his next drink.

“I guess. I think I worry she spends *too* much time in this bar for someone her age.” Simon shrugged, passing him a water. He was spacing out his beers because his head *had* started pounding slightly.

“Mmm, maybe. But it is good you two get on so well.”

Simon’s face softened again, like she was back in his presence. “It is.”

“And next up! Ryland and Rocky with *In Too Deep* by Sum 41”

Ryland’s mouth dropped open. He turned to Rocky, who was grinning madly.

“I had to!! Just like college.” He grabbed his friend’s hand, who turned to Simon with a fake grimace and a drunken laugh.

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Simon looked over sympathetically, watching Ryland get dragged away and up to the front of the bar. Libby passed Rocky the microphone and bounded over to Simon, smiling wildly and

wiggling her eyebrows. He rolled his eyes at her, but stayed locked into the performance unfolding in front of him.

The song began and they started singing along, Rocky shouting random parts, more unable to keep himself together than his performance with Adrian.

Rocky hiccupped into the mic and gave up around the end of the first verse, pushing it into Ryland's hands and clapping along supportively.

He started off nervously, but Simon watched the alcohol overtake him and he started getting into it. He hadn't heard this song before, but when the chorus started and Ryland began banging his head to the lyrics, Simon's mouth dropped open. It was a new side to the quiet, unsure of himself 'Ryland' he knew, as well as the put together, kid friendly 'Dr Grace' he'd met inside the school walls. This was college Ryland. A vision of 21 year old Ryland appeared in his head, an immature, relaxed, *confident* person. That wasn't to say the man he knew now wasn't these things, but it showed a different dimension to him. He looked so carefree and passionate on the weird lino square of Simon's bar, singing into a microphone he was clasping like it was going to run away. Everyone in the bar was loving it, jumping and cheering and singing with him. He'd gone slightly red, but didn't seem embarrassed at all.

"Instead of going under! Instead of going under again! Instead of going-"

"Rum and coke please?"

Simon shook his head, snapping himself out of his trance. He nodded at the man and started pouring it.

"Distracted are we?" Libby had sidled up to him, hovering just out of his way.

"Piss off Libs." he said, not unkindly. She put her hands up defensively and slipped out of the way to serve another customer.

He pushed the card machine in the man's direction, along with the drink. Ryland and Rocky had finished, and were receiving scattered applause from around the bar but treating it like a sold out stadium, Rocky bowing with a flourish.

The man shook his head at Rocky, taking the drink with a tut. "Homos." he muttered under his breath.

"I'm sorry?" Simon said, leaning in closer.

"Nevermind." he retreated, clearly put off by Simon's appearance and stature. Wise, as he was half his size and scrawny.

Simon let him leave, leaning over to Libby discreetly, "Keep an eye on that one." She nodded.

“Well done boys, that was awesome!” Adrian said, clapping as they bounced over to them, still fizzing with energy.

Ryland was grinning ear to ear, and Rocky was panting like he’d run a marathon, tying his long, sweaty hair up in a ponytail. He fumbled, hair falling over his face.

“Thaaank you my love.” he went in to put an arm around Adrian’s shoulders and stumbled awkwardly, falling over the bar.

“Woahh I think it’s time to go!” Adrian yelped, grabbing their falling husband. “Ry? You coming with us.”

Simon watched the man, still grinning and still full of energy, look from his drunk friends to him.

“I can drive him home later. If you want to stay.” The words left Simon’s mouth before he realised he’d thought them. He needed to stop that from happening.

“Yeah? Is that okay?” He was looking to Adrian for approval as well as Simon, head flying back and forth between them.

“Sure bud, text me when you get back okay?” Adrian smiled and patted his knee, lifting Rocky up, who had stopped speaking the English language.

Ryland said his goodbyes then turned to Simon. “Thank you.”

He shrugged, “No problem. It’s still only early.”

“It’s 10:30.”

“Yeah. Early.”

“We live *very* different lives.” Ryland said with a laugh, sliding himself onto the nearest bar stool.

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The night crept on, the pair watching more and more karaoke unfold and giving running commentary throughout. Simon introduced Ryland to the rest of his coworkers, so he was constantly talking to someone when Simon was serving drinks. He really liked Libby, she was very intense but hilarious. He met Beth and Rose briefly, they left quite early but realised that Ryland had taught Beth’s younger sister a few years before, so bonded over that. He was talking to Maddy about her dog when Simon emerged from the back of the bar holding two bin bags in his one hand. Ryland jumped up to help, swiping one of the bags off of him.

“I can do it.”

“I know,” Ryland responded, drunkenly giddy, “I’ve been drinking for free I thought I’d pull my weight a bit.”

They stepped out into the dark, lit only by the neon sign and shop opposite. Simon led him over to the large, industrial bins and threw his bag inside. Ryland copied, managing to swing it a bit too hard and nearly topple over. Simon grabbed his arm to steady him, allowing the bag to land successfully in the bin.

“10 points!” He shouted triumphantly, throwing his hands in the air. Simon let out an ‘almost laugh’ breath and turned back up the alley.

“Hey, thank you.” Ryland shouted quickly after him. Simon spun backwards slowly.

“You said thank you. Don’t worry about it.”

“No! Well, yes, thank you for the lift, but also thank you for earlier.”

Simon breathed in sharply, “Don’t worry about it.”

“No, you really helped me, and I really appreciate it.”

Simon nodded solemnly, unsure of what to say in the wake of Ryland’s sudden sober appearance.

“I get it.” He landed on, as obscure as he could.

Ryland nodded back appreciatively.

“Give me your phone.” Simon said, putting out his hand. Ryland obeyed. “If it happens again. Call me.”

He placed the phone back in Ryland’s hand and turned to leave. His phone buzzed in his back pocket.

“Just checking it worked.” Ryland said with a smile, “Thank you.”

Karaoke finished at 1:30, when one of the ‘singers’ nearly threw up on the microphone, narrowly missing it as Libby grabbed it out of her hands and directed her to the toilet.

“Still a success!” She declared, emerging from the toilet, drying her hands on her trousers.

The staff (politely) kicked the straggling few customers out of the bar and began to pack up. Ryland perched on the end, watching the bar wind down. It was weird seeing it so empty, the house lights on so everyone could see what they were doing. They worked quickly, chattering and joking as they mopped and cleaned. Once they were satisfied, Simon let them all go home, the pair waving everyone off as he locked the front door.

“See you tomorrow!”

“Bye!”

“Nice to meet you Ryland!”

“You too!”

Ryland leant against the window, the cold glass sobering him up as he felt it against his head. He watched Simon turning the keys in the different locks, struggling slightly.

“Do you need a hand?” he asked, sincerely.

“I often do.” Simon said under his breath.

“Oh my god! I didn’t mean-! Sorry I’m still a bit tipsy I didn’t-”

Simon laughed. An actual genuine laugh that radiated from his stomach and out of his mouth, which was curved fully upwards. It was a deep laugh, rich and … *beautiful.*

God I am drunk.

A laugh slowly emerged from Ryland, until they were both laughing, loud and obnoxious, in the street outside of the bar. It died down, but Ryland’s eyes stayed on Simon’s face.

“What is it?” Simon asked, still smiling.

“I have never seen you laugh before. Or even smile that much.”

His face went back to its resting state, mouth a straight line, but there was still a softness there. A comfortability.

“You have a really nice laugh Simon.”

In the dark, he could see Simon’s face go slightly red as he looked at his feet, his hair covering his eyes as it fell. Ryland felt a similar warmth grow in his stomach, despite the November chill they were standing in. Or it might have been the alcohol.

After a second, Simon looked back up, holding Ryland’s gaze. He’d never noticed that Simon was in fact shorter than him. It wasn’t by much, but now that they were standing so close together Simon did have to look up at him when he spoke.

“Thank you.”

He looked so… gorgeous in the dim light coming from the bar sign and the street light. His deep brown eyes looked black and his scars looked light blue and purple.

“Can..Can I touch them?” Ryland stumbled over his words, after realising Simon had caught him staring.

“Yes.”

He was slightly surprised at the answer, but maybe due to how simple it was. Just yes. He brought his hand tentatively up to Simon’s cheek, feeling the bumps and ridges of the damaged skin. It was so smooth where the cuts had healed, but rough where the skin was untouched. His eyes scanned over them, light pink and jagged. In a drunken haze, his eyes moved across the shorter man’s face, down to his lips. With a jolt, he realised what he was doing and adjusted his eyes to meet Simon’s gaze. His eyebrows weren’t furrowed in their normal scary way, instead softening his face. His eyes glinted in the light and Ryland watched him take his gaze down to his own lips. With his hand still on Simon’s face, vision slightly blurred and with a warmth and fear in his chest, Ryland leaned in to kiss him.

Simon’s mouth moved to meet his lips and he pulled him closer. His mouth moved against Ryland’s as he reached his arm around his waist. He could feel his weight against him and the stubble rough against his fingers. Giddy and drunk, Ryland smiled into the kiss, causing Simon to pull away slightly, foreheads still pressed together.

“What’s so funny?”

“You. You’re so..” Ryland was smiling, wide, still stroking the other man’s cheek with his thumb.

Simon’s face softened into a smile, smaller than before, more private. Just for him. Ryland leaned down to kiss him again, when Simon’s face hardened and he pushed him away. Gently, but enough for him to know he meant it.

“Sor- sorry, I know I’m drunk, it-” Ryland began to ramble. Simon wasn’t looking at him anymore, instead fixed on something behind him. Ryland turned to see what it was when a shout ran through him.

“FAGS!”

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Simon saw red as the man from the bar yelled at him. He stepped out of the warmth of Ryland’s presence and into the drunk’s line of fire. He was stumbling around with two other guys, shit-eating grin on his face which only wavered slightly as Simon approached them. Simon’s head was reeling and he couldn’t form a thought, all the customer service fake politeness that he’d been presenting all day disappeared.

“Do you want to say that to my face?”

“What?” A different man answered, stepping in front of him.

Simon kept his eyes on the one who’d yelled, he was swaying with a smile. “Say that. To my face.”

He stopped swaying and stumbled forward, pushing his protective friend out of the way, “I said,” he pushed a fat finger into Simon’s chest, “Fags.”

A punch landed before the word could fully settle.

“Simon!”

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“I’m sorry.” Simon broke the silence in the car, his voice hoarse. He had blood over his knuckles and a cut on his face which was still bleeding. He didn’t take his eyes off of the road.

Ryland cleared his throat nervously, wiping his nose. “That was terrifying Simon.” he mumbled. He felt pathetic saying it like that, but it was the truth. It was a whole different side to the man he’d never seen before. The side that people assumed they’d see when they met him, large and scarred and unsmiling. But Ryland had always been able to see past that, he really thought he *knew* Simon. The way he looked at Evie and the way he cared about her, how passionate he was about his job and looking after the people who worked for him, and the way he looked at Ryland. The way he had laughed not even an hour before, soft and caring and *sweet.*

Ryland was not naive. He knew that Simon and Evie had a rough past, he wasn’t blind, but he had assumed that it was in the past. Maybe that was naive, he thought.

They arrived at Ryland’s flat building in silence. Simon pulled up outside and turned the engine off. He turned to Ryland for the first time since they got in the car.

“That shouldn’t have happened. I’m sorry.”

Ryland sighed, avoiding eye contact, “Thank you for driving me home.” he said, and got out of the car.

He leant on the door to his flat once he’d arrived and cried. The tears fell slowly at first but he was reduced to ugly, hitching sobs very quickly. His drunkenness had stopped being fun, turning into a pounding headache and a sickness in the bottom of his stomach. He sat on the floor and cried, the events of the evening playing out on a loop in his head, overlapping and jumbling together. Him and Simon had *kissed*?! Karaoke with Rocky, chatting to Simon’s coworkers, crying in the alley, standing in the same alley and getting Simon’s number, then Simon punching that man. Again and again. He squeezed his eyes tightly, the sound of the man’s screams piercing his ears, the shock on the other’s faces, the hoarse feeling in his

throat from shouting at Simon to stop. The dead, vacant look in Simon's eyes that had replaced the beautiful glint in a split second.

He felt dirty and horrible. The warm glow in his stomach that he'd felt had turned sour and sharp, it bubbled to his throat and he threw up. All over his trousers that he'd so carefully picked out, the welcome mat his ex had selected all those years ago, all over the memory of Simon's lips against his.

Disgusted and startled, he slowly lifted himself off of the floor and into the bathroom, where he promptly threw up again, the smell and feeling on his clothes reaching his throat. He peeled his clothes off and dropped them into the bath tub, which he then stepped into. The water was cold and aggressive as he stood underneath it, unmoving. The tears leaving his eyes joined the water from the shower, coating his face. Clumsily, he poured some shower gel into his hand and used it to pat his body clean.

He wasn't exactly sure how long he spent in the shower, ending up wrapped in a towel on the end of his bed, staring into the corner of his room. His clothes remained in a wet pile in the bath, he'd made a mental note to deal with that in the morning. The room spun and he wasn't sure exactly how he was going to manage putting clothes on and getting into his bed, so resorted to throwing the towel off lazily and crawling under the duvet, naked. One of the many perks of living alone.

He curled up into a ball, trying to think of anything but the events of the night. He hadn't even had a chance to address the possibility of being gay before he was called out for it. If that was the price to pay maybe it wasn't worth it. Maybe Simon wasn't worth it.

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Simon had sat outside of Ryland's flat building for longer than he'd admit. He'd wanted to shout out another apology. An explanation. Anything to get him to turn around. To come back to the warmth they'd shared for a split second when their lips had touched.

He stayed silent.

He watched Ryland disappear into the building and up the stairs. The side of his face itched indescribably, but he knew that more blood would coat his fingers if he scratched it. He stared blankly out of the window and felt a pit open in his stomach.

He returned to his empty house, Evie must have stayed at Ava's, he thought, reaching for his phone. He went to check for any messages but his phone had died at some point towards the end of that shift. He opened the door into the dark living room dizzily, the pit growing as he moved through the empty space. He poured himself a glass of water and shuffled upstairs. Once up there, he got changed, throwing his clothes on the ground like a teenager and sliding into bed. His limbs felt heavy, the space where his arm once resided ached, the skin tight and sore. His mouth was dry no matter how much water he drank and the blood on his face and hand had gone sticky and itchy. He stared at the ceiling, feeling alone and disgusting and evil. He hadn't felt like this since he left Eden, it scared him. He scared himself so much that he didn't know how anyone trusted him. How he could be trusted with Evie. Or Ryland.

He rolled over to check his phone after it charged, he had 2 messages.

Ava

Evie's come back to mine! Thought you might have a late one, see you tomorrow :)

He sent a thumbs up in response and opened the second message.

[Unknown Number]

This is Simon's number. Text him whenever.

The message stared back at him. His eyes clouded over as a tear formed and fell silently. The pit in his stomach grew and he could hear Ryland's shouts in the back of his mind. The begging and pleading from him and the man and his friends. The voices continued ringing until they merged with the sounds of a past life. A past life he'd left behind but would never be able to shake, to run away from. He screwed his eyes up, breathing growing heavier as the memories flooded back, the dam holding them in the recesses of his brain cracking and breaking. He started hyperventilating, sitting up as tears flew wildly from his eyes while he tried to regain his breath. Eyes still closed, he tried to hold himself together.

In for 3. Hold for 3. Out for 3.

His breathing slowed as he repeated the words that he'd reeled off earlier that evening. A stupid therapy hack he'd been taught all those years ago that he hated to admit worked because it was so simple and cheap. It *didn't really* do anything but it slowed everything down, put it into perspective a little.

He stared at the phone, discarded to the side. The message glared at him, a bitter reminder of the mistake he had made. He typed out a message, hovering his thumb over the send icon, tired brain running through the pros and cons of reaching out. Ryland probably never wanted to see him again. He'd probably been scared and disgusted and uncomfortable with not only how Simon reacted, but the situation as a whole. Seeing a message from Simon was maybe the last thing that he needed, and he had no idea what it was going to be like on Monday. Simon felt that he should keep someone so lovely and caring and *perfect* at arms length- ensure that he is far enough away that he can't get hurt.

But a more selfish part, the instinctive part that put his own needs first for survival, wanted to stand in that warmth again. Stand in the sunshine that Ryland emitted and the happiness that he'd felt every time he got out of his car and walked to the steps that he'd always found the blond teacher crouched upon. His care and attention, his lopsided smile, his passion and energy. The way he'd held him for 3 minutes, no longer. The way he wanted nothing more than to feel that warmth again.

Simon was not a selfish person. But for survival, he really needed the sun.

[Unknown Number]

This is Simon's number. Text him whenever.

Simon

Please do.

Chapter End Notes

..... what did we think

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A knock rang in Grace's ears like someone was being shot outside his front door. He waited for it to end but it sped up, going from a shotgun to a machine-gun pretty quickly. He grunted and sat up, only to instantly land back on his mattress due to the nausea that built in his stomach.

The knocking was coming from the door, so he did his best to summon a response.

"H-gh-Hang on o-one second." It stopped briefly, long enough for him to look down and realise he was, in fact, still naked. He pushed himself out of bed, staying as horizontal as possible long enough to slip on a hoodie and shorts. Finally standing upright, he looked in the mirror. A disheveled, washed out version of himself stared back. He swallowed back a memory of Simon's lips on his and just tasted tequila and shame.

Pushing it out of his mind long enough to confront whoever was assaulting his door, he moved through to the kitchen.

He pushed the door open and there was Rocky. Like a 90s pop star he was leaning on the frame, sunglasses on, coffee in each hand.

"Finally. I was worried you'd died." He let himself in, placing the coffee in Grace's hand. He accepted it with a nod and watched his friend sink into the sofa. "You look how I feel."

Grace wiped his eyes and took a sip of the drink warming his hand. He was very basic - latte with one sugar- and Adrian had been doing their best to convert him to drinking oat milk so he was giving that a go. The drink was slightly lukewarm, telling of how long Rocky had been standing outside or, more likely, how long it took him to get to Grace's place from the nearest cafe he deemed 'appropriate'.

He joined him on the sofa, curling his legs up and sighing into the drink.

"Do you know what time it is?" Rocky smirked after a couple of seconds.

Ryland looked up. "No… You woke me up, I didn't check my phone."

"It's 1:53." Rocky yawned.

Ryland stared blankly back at him, “Shut up.”

Rocky nodded, pointing his phone in the shocked blond’s face.

“Fuuuuuu”

“-ck” Rocky finished for him, knowing he was going to bail out in his teachery way. Rocky was a good teacher, getting very passionate about Physics and always rambling a bit too far past the bell, but he was pretty much the same teaching as he was in any other context. Try as he might to deny it, Ryland had two different ‘personas’ for teaching and being around his friends and family. Most teachers have this, talking to kids takes a certain tone and behaviour and it’s one of the things that makes it so hard - you have to act in a way that shows you understand the kids, and more importantly that they understand you, without patronising them. Rocky didn’t need this. He never swore in front of his students, but he didn’t replace the swear words with fudge or sugar, he just didn’t say them. He talked to them in the same way he talked to everyone- plainly, with a respect that said ‘I know more than you, but we both know that so I’ll explain myself in detail.’ It's what made him such a good teacher, Grace believed.

“Are we going to talk about what happened after I left last night?” He said, moving his long hair out of his face.

Grace finished processing the chunk of the day he had wasted and looked away from his friend, face in hand.

“I- it was okay? And then it wasn’t. Then it really wasn’t.”

“You got home at 2:37.” Rocky replied, matter of factly.

“I did? How do you know that?”

“Find my iPhone.”

“Sure.” He wasn't surprised that Rocky had some sort of tracker, a bit surprised he’d never been informed.

“So what happened?” Rocky pushed, always one to pry. Ryland swallowed and looked down into his drink. It wasn’t going to help.

“We kissed.”

Rocky tried to keep his composure, but the excitable college student inside him made it difficult, “FUCK OFF!”

Rylands face found his hands again. “I know, I knoww”

“So? Why wasn’t it okay? You did *want* him to kiss you?”

He nodded in response as a lump formed in his throat and he tried to form a sentence. A sentence that explained that he *had* wanted it, he hadn't been able to take his mind off how much he wanted it since it happened, but the disgust that had followed from one horrible, evil person had soured the whole experience. A horrible, evil person that Simon had left bleeding on the floor. The same Simon that cared for his niece with so much love and had kissed him with so much care. Tears were falling down his cheeks before he realised, silent and effortless.

Rocky, always slightly unsure how to deal with emotion, leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Ryland's neck. He collapsed into his best friend, being held for the first time in a while.

"Sorry, I'm sorry." Ryland sniffed after some time, wiping his nose on the back of his hand.

"It's fine man, really." Rocky patted his knee and stood up, walking over to the kitchen end of the room and returning with a tissue. "Do you want something to eat?"

27 minutes later, an angel in the shape of a delivery driver arrived at the door. He handed Rocky a large brown bag and disappeared into the afternoon. Taco Bell had been the pairs' go-to hangover cure for as long as they'd known each other. They ordered burritos and nachos and churros - enough carbs to repair their systems and anything that could have gone wrong the night before.

Ryland had replaced his shorts with a pair of joggers and the two found themselves under a blanket each, ripping open the bags and devouring the food in front of them wordlessly.

"I - I haven't had Taco Bell in … maybe 2 years?" Ryland said, mouth half full of burrito.

"Me neither." Rocky replied, taking a sip of Sprite. "Not since you moved in with-"

"Oh god." Ryland remembered, watching Rocky's face crack and a laugh begin to emerge.

"And you got so stressed out you-"

"WE! You definitely did not help!"

"Fine, WE drank an entire bottle of tequila going over the pros and cons of you moving in with her and you ate so much Taco Bell that when you *did* move in with her, you painted your new front door with burrito."

Rocky was laughing very hard, Ryland's face hidden in his hands as a small smile crept out.

"And *you* went home and forgot that Adrian's parents were coming over for dinner and had to fake food poisoning so you could hide in your room!" he retaliated.

"Hey! It was technically food poisoning!"

“Drinking all night then eating crap food is NOT food poisoning!”

They lay on the sofa for a while, finishing off what they could of the food and remembering drunken adventures they’d had when they were significantly younger. They were both very aware of the teacher-y things they should have been getting on with on this fine Saturday, but 5pm rolled around pretty quickly and they hadn’t moved from their pit of greasy food and nostalgia.

“Shit I really should get home.” Rocky sighed.

“Oh what, family dinner you forgot about?” Ryland laughed, until a cushion was swung at his head.

“Aaand my phone’s dead, could I grab a charger?”

“Sure, hit me in the face and I’ll help you out!” Before Rocky reached for anything else to smack him with, Ryland stood up with a chuckle to retrieve his phone charger.

He unplugged his phone, which he had found dead on the floor in the bathroom a few hours prior, and unlocked it. He found a number of notifications and swiped through them quickly, landing on one from 3:36

[Unknown number]

Please do

He assumed it must be someone from school - another teacher he hadn’t saved the number of asking for something. He opened the message as he went back into the other room, swinging the charger in Rocky’s direction.

The message before was sent by him, but he had no recollection of it. A faint memory of swapping phones with Simon so he could save his number reappeared as he stared at the message ‘he’d’ sent.

Ryland

This is Simon’s number. Text him whenever.

“I’ll head off in a sec,” Rocky yawned, looking over at Ryland, who was staring, puzzled, at the phone in his hand. “You alright?”

He could have brushed it off. He could have told Rocky it was nothing and kept it in a little longer. Kept the shame and disgust inside and not have to address the elephant that had found itself taking up the majority of the room they were standing in. But this was his best friend and if he didn’t tell him, who would he tell?

“After me and Simon kissed,” he sighed, “a man from the bar walked past and… and he called us- um- he called us ‘fags’”.

Rocky opened and shut his mouth, his face growing red and screwing up with anger. “I swea-”

“But then Simon punched him,” Ryland interrupted, “He punched him again and again. It was so scary, Rock, the whole thing.”

He took a deep breath and Rocky let him continue, “But it just got me thinking. Is this it? I have only just let myself address the fact I mi- I might be .. gay. A bit. Or bi or something.” He shook his head and waved his hands, “Whatever, but if *that* was my first experience with a man? If that’s what is out there for me? I- I don’t think I want it.” He exhaled fully, slumping onto the edge of the sofa.

“I- First of all,” Rocky made sure Ryland was done before speaking up, “First of all, good for you. To even start to figure something like that out about yourself is not easy, and some dickhead does not get to take that away from you.” He sat down next to his friend, “And second! That guy is a prick and a drunk idiot and his world view is so tiny and small and should have no impact on *your* identity, and if that ever happens again I’ll knock him out!” They both chuckled at the idea of lanky Rocky beating anyone up. “Although it sounds like you already have someone to do that for you.” he added, a little more solemn. “That must have been terrifying, to see someone you clearly care about being so aggressive.”

Grace nodded and wiped his hand over his face, looking up with a small, pained smile.

“He texted me last night. Or this morning, I guess, when he got back. He said to text him. Whenever.”

Rocky smiled back, gentle and caring, “You don’t have to. That was an awful experience and if you don’t want to see him again there are ways to make that happen,” Ryland nodded, slowly and thoughtfully, “But. Given Simon’s past, defending someone with violence is probably a second nature you don’t leave behind easily.”

Ryland’s brow furrowed, “His past? The cult?”

“Well I guess you could call it a cult, I think it was a bit more radical than that.”

He looked at him, even more confused. Ryland had very little knowledge about Simon and Evie's past, and assumed it was the same for all of the teachers- especially those who didn't even teach her.

"How do you know that? I thought the teachers were just told about it briefly, some kind of doomsday cult?"

"Sure but I saw the news- it was everywhere when he escaped." Rocky shrugged, "I thought I recognised his name when you told Adrian you did, so I double checked. I assumed that's where you knew it from."

Of course. It all fell into place. Simon Fisher. *The Brotherhood of Eden.* That's where he'd seen his name before.

"I think I can get an interview with him! He's the first person in years to have successfully left 'The Brotherhood of Eden' *and an interview with him would be perfect for my first article on this website. I really think this could make my career!"*

She'd been so excited to interview Simon all those years ago and he responded to her emails at first but never successfully organised a proper interview. She wrote the article anyway and it was fine, but not the break out she had expected. They fired her the next year. That was the reason they stayed together. Because they were supposed to promote her and it fell through and she stayed in San Francisco, with Ryland, for 4 more years. 4 more years of ignoring how she treated him and the money troubles and the feelings he was starting to feel towards men and the depression- and- and

And. Head spinning. He threw up Taco Bell over the side of the sofa.

Chapter End Notes

we are up to date! I will get these out asap but I am prioritising my uni work rn .... esp while ao3 is down oops. anyway lots of love all comments + love is so so appreciated xxx

End Notes

hope u enjoyed! will update when I can, if u want to yell or chat to me, hmu at @milksteak5000 on twt , tumblr or ig xx

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