

END OF THE LINE

Everything was slipping away from him slowly. Squealing tires, the smell of burnt rubber and the tendrils of pain from the impact grew evermore distant with each stuttering breath he took. Mark wondered if he should be concerned, lying flat on his back against the pavement, unable to get up. Instead all he could think about was the fact that he was going to miss his jam session with Harry.

The sky was an impossible blue that day; the sun hidden behind a stray cloud. He stared up at it, beginning to taste a hint of blood in his mouth and a memory caught at the corner of his consciousness.

An old playground and a laugh almost as familiar as his own. It had just been Harry and Mark back then, and a challenge to see who could swing the highest. Maybe Mark had gotten competitive, pushing his too high, jumping off with too much confidence.

He had met the ground hard. When he pulled his hand away from his nose, Mark had found blood staining his palm.

After he had been cleaned up by Harry's mum — Superman band-aids littering his knees — Harry had crossed his arms over his chest and leveled him with a glare.

"You did a stupid."

Mark had been younger, more prideful, so puffed out his chest indignantly. "No I didn't."

"Did so."

It was then that Mark had noticed the faint tear tracks on his friend's face. His arms returned to his side and let out a sigh. "Sorry."

"You're my best friend. It's supposed to be you and me. Till the end of the line, Mark. Till infinity and beyond."

"That's not how it goes, you dummy."

"Is so."

Mark had done another stupid. Except this time, he isn't sure that it can be fixed with Superman bandaids.

Fumbling into his pocket, Mark wondered for a second if he should call someone — the police, an ambulance, anyone. The blood seeping through his shirt and the vague realisation that he couldn't quite feel either of his legs anymore made him bypass the urge. Mark wasn't sure that anyone would be able to save him.

Willing himself not to shake, Mark thumbed his way through his contacts, clicking on the name at the very top of his list before he even registered what he was doing. He only had to wait a couple of rings before a loud excited voice filtered through the speakers, laughing as they said, "Markus! What an honour! You never call me first."

It was kind of fitting that he'd called Harry — his first friend, the little devil who talked Mark into doing too many stupid things when they barely reached their mother's knees. Mark tried not to think much about the fact that Harry might be the last person he ever called.

Before he could even respond to Harry's playful jab, another voice cut in, Jamie's incredulous voice over the line, as he shouted, "Is that Mark?"

There were more voices calling out, overlapping each other with Charlie's signature screams somewhere in the mix. With all of them there, this was going to be so much harder to say goodbye.

"Hey Mark!" Jamie sang, apparently having been able to manhandle the phone away from Harry despite his loud protests. "I finally landed that jump today!"

"That's great, Jamie," Mark said, somehow finding his voice.

"It was so cool," Charlie butted in. "I saw a video of it before, even Lacy was impressed!"

"This little brat though," says Harry, sounding too fond to be really mad, "decides to make me pay for lunch because he forgot to bring his wallet! Says he deserves an award for his hard work, forgetting that I shouted for him last week when we went bowling." There was another squeal, Jamie's indignant shouts in the background.

It felt like *home*.

Distantly Mark registered the sound of a siren, too far away to help him now. Harry seemed to hear it too because not a moment later he started singing a tune loudly — something to do with a firetruck that they'd heard last week at a party. Charlie was still in the background somewhere, muttering at Jamie loudly, but through all of it Harry continued to hum the tune in Mark's ear.

"Harry?" he asked softly, his voice coming out a little hoarse.

"Yeah, Marky?"

He needed to say it, no matter how awkward it seemed. His time was running out.

"I love you guys."

There was a pause, Harry silent for once. It took him a couple of moments to recover.

"So cheesy, Markus." His voice was lilting and teasing, but far too soft to be really poking fun at Mark.

"I mean it. I don't know if I tell you guys enough but I just— I just need you to know."

For a second they both were quiet, the noise of their other friends fading away, Mark's seriousness seeming to dawn over them. "I know, Mark, even if you don't always tell me. It's till the end of the line, right?"

Tears caught at the corners of his eyes. Just hearing those words — words that meant more than Mark would ever be able to say — made the reality of it all crash over him.

"You know that we love you too, right?"

Through all the strange numbness and the way his chest felt ready to cave in, Mark found it in himself to smile. "Yeah."

"Are you— are you okay, Mark?"

"Yeah— yeah, of course," Mark lied. This is what happened, he reminded himself. Life was fickle and it rarely went as planned. Sure, he'd had an idea of the life that he thought he would live; one he could spend laughing with his friends and stealing their ice cream, maybe

messing around and figuring out what he wanted to do as an adult and probably make a bunch of mistakes along the way.

One that had been taken from him all in the span of one horrible second.

But it was okay. It would be okay. People died everyday. There was no point in making them all worry, or worse, hope for just a second that he could live before finding out there was no saving him. Instead he just looked up at the sky and wondered how much time he had left to live.

"Don't wait for me," he murmurs into the phone.

"What?"

Mark sucks in a breath. This was harder than he thought. "We said we were going to meet at your house and then head down to the park. Don't wait for me, I'm not- I'm going to be a bit late."

"Yah always late to the party, aren't you?"

Mark let out something close to a laugh. "I guess I am." The taste of blood was heavy on his tongue. "Anyway, enough of this. Tell me what you guys are up to. I haven't seen you guys in ages."

Harry laughed and Mark didn't have to be there to picture the way his lips quirked up into a grin. "We were all over at your place yesterday. Your memory failing you already, old man?"

"I'm not old," Mark replied a little petulantly. *And I will never be*, his brain supplied unhelpfully.

But Harry wasn't inside his head, or in front of him to wheedle his thoughts out of him. Instead of waiting for Mark to say anything else, he jumped in a story of Charlie accidentally locking Jamie in one of the storerooms. Then having to explain to Mr Woodstock the broken back window and the tears in Jamie's right sleeve.

Oh god, he was going to miss this.

Jamie chimed in, his voice holding no annoyance; he was always too nice to feel anything more than exasperation. Charlie's voice found its way through the phone, jumping in to try

and defend himself, the phone call descending back into a familiar sort of chaos. As their voices enveloped him, he couldn't help but feel grateful to all of them. *They were happy*, he reassured himself. *They were going to be okay, no matter what happened. They were going to be okay without him.*

Mark wheezed out a choking sort of sound, lost within the rest of the noise. Blood was rising up through the back of his mouth, a coppery taste stark on his tongue, and he was hit again with the thought that this was it. Mark was going to die.

He took one last look at the sky above, the sun no longer concealed behind a stray cloud. A pretty sight to carry with him through to the end. Mark's eyes slipped closed to the jumble of his friend's voices in his ear, laid to rest by the memories of the life he'd had by their side.

The Morning Herald

Local Boy Found Dead After Hit-and-Run Collision with Car, Aged 17