



# Giving Grace

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult

**Description:** I'm the broken Gilroy. Or at least I was until Grace Faraday waltzed into my life with her mile-long legs, smart mouth, and quiet determination and decided I wasn't as far gone as everyone thought. She's trying to make something of her life. For herself. For her daughter, Molly. The last thing she needs is a washed up soldier with a bum leg and a broken brain dragging her down, but the more I try to stay away from her, the deeper I sink. The more determined I become to save her from my bullsh\*t, the faster I feel my resolve to do the right thing slip away. Maybe I am broken. Maybe I am beyond repair but Grace sees something in me. She makes me feel. Not like the man I used to be. She makes me feel like the man I should've been—could've been—if my life had been different. Grace is determined. She's stubborn. She won't give up on me. On us. All I know is I want her. I like the way she looks at me. The way she makes me feel, and I'm willing to do whatever I have to—be whoever she needs—in order to keep her.

**Total Pages (Source):** 57

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

One

Grace

It's for the best.

That's what I keep telling myself.

It's for the best.

I don't have time for...whatever Ryan is. I don't have time to chase it, whatever this stupid thing between us is.

I have a daughter.

I'm trying build a life.

A real life.

Not the half-assed existence I was leading in Ohio. Still sleeping in the same bed I've slept in since I was barely older than Molly. Working at the post office with my mom. Picking up shifts at the local dive bar so I can afford to keep my kid in cheap shoes and crunchy peanut butter. Ignoring the whispers and pointed stares that people lob behind my back when I take Molly to the Dairy Queen or run into ALDI to pick up a loaf of bread.

I'm trying to build something real here and the last thing I need is someone like Ryan

O'Connell fucking up my efforts.

Messing with my head.

Giving me hope.

Really, Grace? I think you have hope confused with orgasms. Understandable since you've never really had much of either one.

Jesus.

And the worst part?

I mean the absolute worst—he was right.

Last night, when he shut me down. Told me he was sleeping on the couch because he didn't want to confuse Molly.

He was right.

There I was, living in Fantasy Land, build it all up in my head into something more. Something it clearly isn't. Flying so fast and so high that Ryan had to pull the brakes and remind me that hey, dumbshit—you have a daughter to consider here. You can't just invite a virtual stranger into your bed without consequence.

So, in conclusion, I'm stupid and desperate.

And a bad mother.

So bad that it's nearly 10AM and I'm still in bed. Not sleeping. Hiding. I'm hiding like the spineless, desperately stupid bad mom that I am because even though Molly

got up hours ago, I can't make myself even crawl out of bed to use the bathroom.

Because he's out there and my tail is still firmly tucked between my legs.

Because I made it all into something it wasn't.

Tipped my hand.

Asked for too much and got reminded that just because someone wants to fuck you, that doesn't mean they necessarily want you.

Shit.

Now I'm crying.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I start to remind myself of all the reasons this is a good thing. Why this is for the best. Why I—

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

There's a knock on the closed bedroom door. Too sharp and heavy to be Molly. Since Cari and Patrick are still on their spontaneous weekend getaway, it can't be either of them.

So that means it's Ryan.

Seriously? Because tearing me up last night wasn't enough? Now he's—

“Just open it.” Molly's muffled voice comes through the door, popping my eyes open. “It's not a surprise if we wake her up.”

“I'm not going to just open it. What if she's...” Instead of opening the door, Ryan sighs and knocks again. “Grace.”

I hate the way he says my name.

Like it means something to him.

Like I mean something.

Which makes it a lie.

Every time he says it.

“It's getting heavy.” Molly again, her declaration followed by a rattling sound and another knock. This one softer and accompanied by my other name. “Mom?”

Because my daughter is standing in the hall with him and even though I can admit to myself that I'm a coward, that doesn't mean I want her to know it, I sit up in bed and swipe at the tears on my face. "Come in."

The door opens almost immediately to show Molly standing in its wedge, Ryan behind her, holding a tray.

"We made you breakfast," Molly announces, bouncing on the balls of her feet a few times before tipping her head back to aim a look up at Ryan who is staring at me like I have two heads and six eyes. "Give it to her." She loud whispers it at him as she side-steps herself out his way.

Even though he looks like he wants to throw it at me and run, Ryan drops his gaze, focusing on the tray to keep it steady while he shuffle-limps his way across the room to the bed. "It should be safe," he mutters, gaze still aimed down while he settles the tray on my lap before stepping back. "We both ate it and lived."

I look down at the tray and instantly feel those stupid tears stinging the back of my eyelids again. Trying to shove their way up my throat.

French toast with sliced strawberries. Coffee. Orange juice. And bacon.

The man made me bacon.

What the fuck?

I mean it.

What the actual fuck?

Like I said it out loud, Ryan's face collapse into a frown before aiming it at Molly.

“We forgot the fork.”

“I’ll get it.” She flashes a grin at me before bolting out the door.

As soon as she’s gone, I look up at him. “What is this?”

“It’s French Toast.” Still frowning, Ryan leans against the bedroom wall, as far away from me as he can get before shoving his hands into the front pockets of his borrowed jeans. “We Googled it.”

“No shit, Captain Obvious,” I hiss back at him, barely resisting the urge to shove the tray off my lap. Or throw it at him. Maybe I should throw it at him. “I mean what are you doing?” This time I practically shout it at him, the hard tone of my voice leaching the color from his face. “Why would you—”

“Grace. About...” He sighs, pulling a hand free to swipe it over his face. “I didn’t—”

“It was my idea.”

We both look over to find Molly standing in the doorway, fork clenched in her fist, her little face tight with worry. “I’m sorry, Mom.” She shakes her head while her chin starts to wobble. “We do it for Gran all the time. I just thought... I didn’t mean to make you mad.”

“You didn’t make her mad, Moll.” Pushing himself off the wall, Ryan leans over to pluck the fork from her grasp. “I did. Last night—I said somethings I shouldn’t have.” Shuffling-stepping his way toward the bed, he slaps it into my hand before looking at her over his shoulder. “So, how about you go make your bed or something so I can apologize to your mom in private.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

Two

Ryan

I woke up for the second morning in a row with the toe-headed terror standing over me and as soon as I opened my eyes, she pounced on me like a jackal.

“Do you want to play Candyland?”

I jog my bleary-eyed glare from her face to the box in her hands and back again. “What time is it?” I mumble while swiping a rough hand over my face. “Where’s your mom?”

“Thirty-four o’clock,” she says like it’s a real thing. “And she’s still sleeping. So, do you?”

“Do I what?” Jesus, it’s still dark outside.

“Wanna play?” She says it like I’m mentally defective, which I guess I am.

“Is Con paying you?” I grumble at her as I struggle to sit up, waking up the bag of knife that live in my leg.

She gives me a shrug. “I don’t know what that means.” Her forehead crumples into a frown. “Do you want to play or not?”

Not.



Not.

Because what grown man wants to genuinely get his ass handed to him by a four-year-old in a children's board game. At least with Con I can delude myself into believing that I lose to him because he had a higher IQ than Einstein.

“Well?”

Holy shit, she's relentless.

“Can I take a leak first?”

“I guess.” She instantly wrinkles her nose at me and takes a step back like I might've already started. “Oh—wait!” she tosses the game box onto the coffee table and dashes out of sight and I turn just in time to watch her disappear into the laundry room from my seat on the couch. A few seconds later, she's back dragging a stick that's twice as long as she is. “Here.” She thrusts it at me. “Uncle Patrick used it to get my Alligator balloon off the ceiling, but you can use it to walk, right? Since you lost your stick.”

It's a broom handle that's had its head removed and replaced by a thick wad of duct tape.

“It's not a stick.” I take the broom handle from her and plant it on the floor.

“Are you sure? It looked like a stick,” she tells me with a shrug.

“Well it's not,” I grumble back, using my pilfered broom handle to lever myself off the couch. With the added support, my leg merely groans instead of screams. The relief is glorious. “It's a cane—and I didn't lose it.”

“Then where is it?”

Shit.

I just got owned by a preschooler.

“Look,” I say to her, giving her a narrow-eyed glare. “You want to play Candyland or not?”

She lifts the box and shakes it at me. “Duh.”

For some reason, the way she says it, like I’m the slowest motherfucker alive, has me swallowing a laugh. “Then stop yapping at me and let me take care of business.”

I bark it at her but instead of dissolving into tears, her face breaks into a wide grin. Probably because she knows she won. “I get to be blue.”

“Whatever.” Trying like hell to keep myself from grinning back, I shake my head as I shuffle thump down the hall toward the guest bath. “But we’re making coffee first,” I tell her, shutting the bathroom door before she can argue.

Three rounds of Candyland and two cups of coffee (it was a joint effort) later, Molly declares me the worst player ever.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Easy,” I tell her with a laugh. “I’m slow, remember?”

“Oh, yeah—sorry. I forget.” She gives me a quick look through her lashes before she busies herself with putting the game pieces back in the box. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Traumatic Brain Injury.” Usually, when I say it out loud, I feel bitter. Angry that the words have to be a part of my vocabulary. Saying it to Molly, I don’t feel bitter at all. Maybe because she has no idea what it means. That hearing me say it is supposed to make her feel sorry for me. “It’s just a fancy way of saying my brain is broken,” I tell her when her face scrunches up in confusion.

“Oh...” Game tucked safely in its box, she fits the lid in place and sets it aside. “Is that why you don’t know how to make French toast?”

“No.” I shake my head at her. “I just never learned.” Thinking about it, I realize I never learned to do a lot of things. “What’s it with you and French toast?”

“Uncle Patrick said he’d teach me how to make it but then he and Aunt Cari left and...” She lets her explanation trail off with a shrug. “We could Google it on your phone.”

Reaching into my pocket I pull out the cell Hen gave me. “I don’t know how to do that,” I tell her, swiping my thumb over the screen to wake it up. “I can barely make phone calls.”

“It’s easy,” she says. “Want me to show you?”

This time I don't fight the grin tugging at the corners of my mouth. "So, we can make French toast?"

She jogs her head at me, her eyes widened slightly. "Well, yeah."

"Fine." I toss the phone onto the table between us with a chuckle. "We'll take a stab at it but if we start a fire, I'm blaming you."

Now, standing in front of Grace I realize I shouldn't be here.

Last night, after I put my foot in my mouth and Grace slammed her bedroom door in my face.

I should've left.

I was going to, but I only got as far as the living room before I bitched out. Dropping my duffle on the floor before dumping myself on the couch. Sitting there, I reasoned that there was no way I could make it down the stairs. That even if I wanted to, I couldn't leave because I didn't have anywhere to go. No way to get there.

All lies.

It was Friday night and every Gilroy in Boston was downstairs, working the bar. I could've called my sister. I could've called Tess. I could've called any one of them and they'd have been up here and willing to take me anywhere I wanted to go.

So, I told myself that I just didn't want to deal with the bullshit that would accompany sending up the Bat-signal, which is closer to the truth, and dug in a little deeper. Wrestled my shoes off and stretched out on the couch and closed my eyes. Told myself I'd leave in the morning, before either of them woke up. I'd leave. Hobble my ass down the stairs and out the door. Down the block to the Vet Center

and camp out until one of them showed up. It'd take me the better part of an hour and every fucking step would feel like someone was trying to saw my leg off with a rusty blade, but I'd get there. Get myself away from her. Start thinking rationally.

Or as rationally as possible for someone with brain damage.

That was the plan.

What I was supposed to do.

Why the hell I decided to stay, let her daughter whip my ass at Candyland and make her breakfast, is a goddamned mystery.

No, it isn't.

You might be dumb, Ranger but you aren't stupid. You know exactly why you stayed.

Grace.

"I hate the way you say my name." I must've said her name out loud because she snaps it at me while trying to swipe the fork out of my hand.

I jerk it out of reach, more out of instinct than an actual want to piss her off. "Seriously?" I can hear a hard edge creeping into my tone and even though I know I'm the one in the wrong here, that this started off as a much-deserved apology, I do nothing to temper it. "Now there's something wrong with the way I say your name?"

"I didn't say there was something wrong with it," she says, glaring up at me. "I said I didn't like it."

“Nooo...” I draw the word out to piss her off even more, because now that I’ve done it, pissing her off seems like the thing to do. “Actually, you said you hated it.”

“Same thing,” she snipes back, making another grab for the fork.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Not really.” I move the fork out of reach, twirling it between my fingers in a move that surprises me. I’m good with knives—at least I used to be. I think about what Con said about muscle memory yesterday but tuck it away for later. Muscle memory or not, I can’t focus on more than one thing at a time and a pissed off Grace trumps everything else. “Why don’t you like the way I say your name?”

I’ve only known her for a week, but I recognize the mutinous jut of her chin instantly. She’d rather die than answer my question. On cue, she sharpens her gaze into a glare and practically stabs me with it. “Are you going to let me eat my breakfast or not?”

“I don’t know...” Making a show of it, I give the fork another spin between my fingers. “Are you going to let me apologize or not?”

“Not.” She pushes the word between clenched teeth. “Absolutely-fucking-not.”

“Jesus.” I take a frustrated swipe at my face and nearly stab myself in the eye with the fork I’m holding hostage. For safety’s sake I tuck it into the back pocket of my jeans because not being blind is one of the few things I still have going for me. “You want to know where Moll gets her stubborn streak? Because I can tell you.”

“Fuck you.” She hisses it at me, careful to keep her voice down.

“Geez, Grace.” I say her name again on purpose and feel a smirk tug that the corners of my mouth when she starts to seethe. “You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

Her mouth falls open for a second before it snaps shut again. It doesn’t stay that way for long though. “You’re an awful big asshole for someone who claims to be sorry.”

“Yeah?” I lift a hand and rub it along my jawline. I haven’t shaved since Cari’s opening and rasp of stubble against my palm sounds like sandpaper. “Well, maybe I’m not as sorry as I thought, or maybe it’s the head injury—it makes me moody.”

“Yeah.” She barks out a laugh. “A moody asshole.”

“I’ve always been an asshole.” Looking down at her, her tight jaw and flushed cheeks, I have the same insane urge I had in her car yesterday. I want to kiss her. More than kiss her. I want to shove that fucking breakfast tray off her lap and replace it with my face. Get her naked and tongue fuck her until she’s shaking and screaming my name. Lick and suck her clit until she’s completely and utterly wrecked. Until she’s coming in my—

“Ryan.”

“What?” The insanity continues because, even though I don’t remember moving, I suddenly find myself standing over her. Close enough to touch her if I want to. And I want to.

I want to touch her.

Lick her.

Every fucking inch of her.

She’s looking up at me, Blue eyes wide. Jaw slackened by the pull of her mouth. Lips parted slightly like she might start screaming. “Ryan.” Instead of screaming, she says my name again, but this time it sounds different. Softer. Breathless. Like she used all the air in her lungs to form that single word and she might die on the breath of it. She looks down, taking my glare with her.



I'm hard.

So fucking hard that the outline of my dick is clearly visible, trapped and straining against my thigh.

Holy shit.

And as soon as I see it, I feel it—the dull, throbbing ache in my cock. The same ache I've felt every morning when I wake up, since I met her. The same ache that prompts me to touch myself before I even open my eyes, even though I know what I'm going to find. How shitty and hopeless it'll make me feel.

“Ryan.” She says my name a third time and I watch with detached fascination while my cock jerks like a divining rod behind the cage of my borrowed jeans, practically smacking her in the face.

That's how close I am to her.

Jesus Christ.

I made her breakfast, determined to apologize for the way I shut her down last night. To maybe ask if we can start over, and what do I do? Pick a fight with her over semantics and shove my suddenly not broken dick in her face.

And the cherry on top of this particularly fucked-up sundae? I'm not even all that embarrassed about it.

“For the record.” I reach behind me to pull her fork from my back pocket and drop it in her lap. “I happen to like the way you say my name.”

How's that for Captain-fucking-Obvious?

Three

Grace

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

I'm supposed to be offended, right?

Or maybe scared.

Offended and maybe scared that a guy I barely know is in my bedroom. Standing over me with his hard-on shoved in my face while we hiss and spit at each other like a couple of alley cats.

Yeah, I should probably be offended.

I should most definitely be scared, despite the fact that roughly twelve hours ago, this guy had me pinned against a door and his very rough, very capable hand shoved down the front of my pants. His fingers working in and out of me. Stroking me. Fucking me.

Are you going to come for me, Grace?

Yeah—I should definitely be scared.

But not because he suddenly isn't as physically broken as either of us thought or because I suddenly have the urge to claw his pants open like a wild animal. Both are unsettling and very, very dangerous—but that's not why I should be scared.

No, I should be scared because I suddenly don't care. About the fact that he's moody at best and mentally unstable as a general rule. That he's probably still hung up on Tess and that's the real reason he shut me down last night. That even though the excuse he threw at me when I invited him into my bed was bullshit, he's still a better

parent than me without even trying. That what he finally let happen between us yesterday had been nothing more than a fleeting moment of weakness for him. A dip and crest on the Ryan O'Connell emotional roller coaster. I've been riding it for days now and instead of clawing for the escape hatch like any half-sane, rational human being, I just tighten my seatbelt and brace for the next stomach-busting drop.

I should be scared that Ryan O'Connell has the ability to rob me of my sense of self-preservation and overall common sense.

And I should be downright fucking terrified that he does it without even trying.

“Are you guys still mad at each other?”

Molly's question, delivered in a tone that's an odd mixture of anxious and impatient, is like a bucket of ice water dumped over my head. Ryan's too because in an instant the very visible outline of his erection, only inches from my mouth, is gone. So fast, I'm sure I imagined it, but I look up to watch as his blood rushes north, setting his face on fire. He wasn't embarrassed a second ago, but he is now.

And no, I didn't imagine anything.

“No.” It comes from Ryan, the sound of it, so thick and heavy that it's barely recognizable as a word. He clears his throat and tries again. “No—everything's fine.” His gaze nails itself to mine for a moment, practically daring me to say otherwise. When all I do is stare at him, he clears his throat again before aiming a look down to make sure it's safe to turn around. Satisfied that everything is back to normal, he takes an awkward step back before turning to face Molly. “Come on,” he says, making a shooing motion with his hands as he limps toward her. “Let's go clean up and leave your mom alone so she can eat in peace.”

“But—”

“No buts,” he tells her, his tone firm. “The deal was that we’d make breakfast as long as you helped me clean up afterward.”

I expect her to dissolve into tears like she did when my dad got after her last Sunday at the Gilroys, or maybe throw a fit, which is more her style. She doesn’t have many men in her life and those she does have, she has completely wrapped around her finger. Surprisingly, she does neither. It’s like she’s completely tone-deaf when it comes to Ryan. “No, you said if we started a fire, you’d tell Mom that I was the one who did it.”

“Jesus,” he sighs around a chuckle. “What is it with the Faraday women and their semantics?”

“What’s semadics?” she asks, moving away from the door so he can pass through it.

“I’ll explain it to you while we clean,” he says as he moves down the hall, Molly following behind him like an eager puppy, the higher-pitched yammer of her voice punctuated by the shuffle thump of his retreat.

What the hell is Ryan O’Connell doing to my kid?

For that matter, what the hell is Ryan O’Connell doing to me?

Because I didn’t really want an answer to either of those questions, I clear the confusing jumble of it away with a vicious mental shove and dig the fork from the blankets pooled around my lap. Stabbing the perfectly browned slabs of French toast on my plate like they’re out to do me harm, I saw off their corners before stuffing them into my mouth.

Jesus Christ.

Giving the food in my mouth a few disgruntled chews, I sigh and swallow in defeat.

Even cold, it's hands down the best French toast I've ever eaten.

Four

Ryan

I can't think about it.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

I can't think about the fact that out of nowhere, after months of playing dead, my dick decided to pop up and say hello.

Literally.

Jesus Christ.

I can't think about it. I can't because I have a four-year-old kid in my face and there's egg custard on the ceiling.

That's what the recipe we found on Google called it.

Egg Custard.

I called it the shit you dip your bread into when you make French toast but when I did, Molly wrinkled her nose at me and shook her head. "My Gran started a swear jar for my Grandpa when I was a baby," she informs me. "Gran says there was enough to retire in it by the time I started walking."

Not surprising. Grandpa is a Marine, after all. Instead of pointing out the obvious, I dig a hand into the pocket of my jeans and pull out a crumpled bill left over from last night's pizza purchase. "Knock yourself out, kid," I tell her, my face tipped up to look at the bright yellow goop splattered on the ceiling.

"For real?"

She chirps it at me and I look down to find her staring up at me, hands on her hips, a

mixture of excitement and skepticism on her face.

“For real,” I say giving her a flat smile. God, she looks like her mother.

“You swear a lot.” She says it like she’s giving me insider information. Like maybe I’m not fully aware of all the shits and fucks and goddamns that come out of my mouth.

“I know that.” I try to sound irritable but it comes out sounding slightly wounded instead. “I’m retarded, not deaf.”

She cocks her head at me, the picture of four-year-old curiosity. “What’s retarded?”

Shit.

“Don’t say that,” I say without thinking. “It’s not a nice word—you could hurt someone’s feelings if you say it.”

“Oh.” Her forehead crumples a little. “Does it hurt your feelings when you say it?”

“No.”

It’s a lie. It hurts like a bitch. That’s why I say it. Because I’m the kind of asshole who gets a perverse kind of satisfaction out of reminding myself just how fucked up I really am.

She doesn’t look like she believes me but instead of pressing the issue, she shrugs. “So, if it’s a bad word you owe me more money, right?”

Laughing, I reach into my pocket and clean it out. “Here, this should buy me a couple hours,” I tell her, shoving what is the better part of a twenty-dollar bill into her tiny



hands. “Now, go find something not dangerous to do while I figure out how to scrape this shit off the ceiling.”

An hour later I have the ceiling scraped clean and Molly installed at the countertop with a basket of washable markers, a rinsed out peanut butter jar, and a few sheets of blank paper stolen from Cap’n drafting table, when the back door opens up without warning and Patrick and Cari bustle in, cheeks flushed from the climb and the cold.

“They’re home,” Molly screeches, hopping down from her perch at the counter. Seconds later, she’s climbing Patrick like a tree. Finally settled on his hip, his big capable arm anchored under her rear to keep her from falling, she plants a hand on his shoulder and gives him a solemn look. “Ryan and I made French toast without you,” she tells him like she’s telling him he has six months to live.

“Is that right?” Patrick shoots me a quick, puzzled look before giving Molly his Boy Scout grin and I have the undeniable urge to knock those perfect, white teeth of his down his fucking nice guy throat.

Because I’m jealous.

Molly likes him and he obviously likes her and I’m jealous because I want her to like me best.

Jesus Christ, I need to get out of here.

As soon as Cari has her coat peeled off, she reaches for Molly and the kid jumps to her without hesitation, like a monkey, from one branch to the next. “Did you get married without me?”

“What? Are you serious?” Cari scrunches her face up in an expression that must be a Faraday women standard. “Like I would do something like that without you?” She

pokes Molly in the bellybutton and she lets out a squeal. “Where’s your mom?” She’s looking at Molly when she says it, her tone is light and playful but I can hear it. Worry. Accusation. Like I have her sister hogtied in the bathtub and my hackles are instantly raised.

Not her fault, Ranger. You’re squatting on her couch because you finally committed an assault bad enough to put someone in the hospital and get yourself kicked out of the swanky rehab center her fiancé is footing the bill for. You’re lucky big sister hasn’t cut the cords on your golden parachute by now.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

Even though all of that is true, I still have to swallow hard against the hot lump of resentment wadded up in my throat so I can speak. Make some sort of excuse for my sorry self because I'm not as innocent as I want to make myself out to be. I'd done things. Said things that hurt Grace and the fact that she's refused to give me a chance to apologize is eating a hole right through the middle of me. "She's—"

"I'm right here."

All four of us look up to watch Grace step out of the hallway and comes toward us, breakfast tray in hand.

"Where've you been?" Cari asks, shooting another quick glance in my direction. "I've been calling you all morning and—" I got worried. Cari stops herself before she says it but I know that's what she was about to say because now she won't look at me. "I thought maybe we could go grab some lunch, you, me and Moll. Catch up."

"I just ate." Grace says while we all watch her deposit her tray on the counter. "Ryan and Molly made me breakfast in bed."

She showered. Dressed in worn jeans and an old Ohio State sweatshirt. Bare feet. Hair pulled up in a sloppy bun, loose damp tendrils curling against her neck.

Completely. Fucking. Fuckable.

As soon as I think it, I feel panic slice through me, bright and hot.

Because I suddenly remember that my dick has a mind of its own. That after six

months of nothing it finally decided to rear its ugly head—literally—and having Grace this close is dangerous.

Very fucking dangerous.

“Breakfast?” Cari’s face does that Faraday thing again. “It’s almost two o’clock in the afternoon.”

“Ryan let me sleep in,” she says with a shrug while she offloads her breakfast dishes from the tray and into the sink. “And shower.” She laughs a little like it’s a joke only she would understand.

“Breakfast was Ryan’s idea, but I lied to mom and said it was my idea because she was mad at him and I—” Molly slaps a marker-stained hand over her mouth, blue eyes wide, panic-stricken and aimed right at me. “Sorry,” she mumbles around the press of her hand against her mouth.

“S’okay,” I mumble back, tempering my tone with a quick wink aimed in her direction before looking at Patrick. “Thanks for letting me crash here but I think it’s time I—”

“Nooo.” Molly lets out a wail of protest, jack-knifing herself off Cari’s hip. As soon as her feet hit the floor she darts around the counter and into the kitchen. Before anyone can stop her, Molly is scrambling and clawing her way up my good leg like a deranged squirrel. “I said I was sorry,” she says as soon as she’s settled on my hip. “Please don’t be mad at me. I didn’t mean to—”

“Stop,” I tell her, and to everyone’s surprise, her little mouth snaps closed. Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly because everyone is watching and I hate it because now they all know my fucking business. I can practically hear the gears in Cap’n hear turning, trying to figure out what happened while he was gone. How big of a fuck-up

it was to leave Cari's little sister alone with the big, scary headcase. I'd bet the one nut I have left that he calls Con as soon as I leave like the gossiping cow he is.

Then he'll know.

He might not know everything, but he'll know enough.

That I kissed her.

Want to do more than kiss her.

Enough to know that two days alone with me was a horrible fucking idea.

Instead of putting Molly down and telling them all to get fucked, I focus on telling her the truth. "I'm not mad and you didn't do anything wrong."

She narrows her gaze like she doesn't believe me. "Then why are you leaving?"

"Because I have stuff to do." That's a lie, I don't have fuck-all to do and everyone here knows it.

"Okay." She nods her head like she understands while pulling on the neckline of my T-shirt. "So do your stuff and come home."

"Moll..." I can feel them, all of them, still staring at me—distrustful glares and puzzled gazes burning into the side of my face. "I don't live here."

That little chin of hers juts out in its telltale stubborn angle. "You don't live anywhere. You got kicked out of your hospital, remember?"

"Shi..." I mutter under breath and she arches an eyebrow at me. "Shingles. I said

shingles.” I crack a smile when she giggles but the sound is short-lived. In the space of a second, she’s back to scowling at me like I’m a yellow-bellied traitor. “Moll, I can’t stay here...” A helpless look cast around the kitchen tells me we still have an audience but it shows no signs of help. “My place is ready. I told you that. I told you that my staying here was—”

“You can sleep in my bed,” she tells me, negotiating like a seasoned union rep. “I’ll sleep with my mom and I don’t even care if you throw up on my pony sheets.” Her mouth turns down at its corners, letting me know just how much that concession cost her. “Just don’t leave.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday,” I tell her, struck by a very rare bolt of inspiration and not with a little relief because she almost had me. Almost had me agreeing to bedding down in Cap’n coat closet, just to make her happy.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“So.” She keeps scowling, her little forehead creased and folded, but the crater of it lifts just enough to tell me that even though she’s not happy, she’s listening.

“So... Sunday is Gilroy family dinner day,” I inform her. “You’ll be there.”

The crags and creases in her forehead smooth away. “And you’ll be there too.”

I look past her for a minute, at Grace who is still standing at the sink. She’s been rinsing the same dish for the past five minutes now. When she feels the weight of my gaze on her, she looks up, skewing me with her sky blue eyes before giving me the slightest of nods.

“Yeah,” I tear my gaze away from Grace and focus on the little girl perched on my hip. “I’ll be there too.”

Five

Grace

She wants to ask, I know she does, but she won’t. Instead, she’ll just sit here and stare at me and waits for me to crack.

“You’re good,” I tell her, giving her a nod while I load the dishwasher. “But you’re no Ellen Faraday.”

Cari bristles at the mention of our mother and master interrogator. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she sniffs over the half-eaten burger basket Patrick

brought her from downstairs. When Ryan left, Patrick followed him down. My guess it he was following Ryan to do the same thing my sister was doing now—launching the Spanish Inquisition. He probably had as much success as she did because he came back up less than thirty minutes to deliver Cari's food. Dropping a quick kiss on her mouth he murmured, I've got some work downstairs to catch up on, and disappeared again.

When I don't take the bait, she pushes the basket aside and shrugs. "He seemed to be enjoying his time here."

Enjoying his time here? Sure, if by enjoy, you mean oscillating between making me come and basically telling me that touching me was a mistake, then yes—Ryan enjoyed his stay just fine.

Before I can answer, Molly pipes up. "Are you talking about Ryan?"

"I am talking about Ryan." Cari grins at me because she's found her fount of information. "The two of you seem to really like each other."

"We do like each other," Molly says like it's the most normal thing in the world. "He's my friend."

"Is that right?" Cari answers her while looking right at me. "Is he your mom's friend too?"

"I think he wants to be," Molly says, answering Cari's question seriously. "But she keeps getting mad at him because he keeps doing dumb stuff—at least that's what he says."

"Jesus." I say it under my breath, casting a nervous over her shoulder at where Molly is playing ponies on the couch. "You're insane."



“Yeah...” Cari shakes her head at me. “I don’t think I am.”

“You are. Completely and totally bonkers.” I give her a sunny smile before bending down to add soap to the dishwasher. When I stand back up, she’s staring at me like she’s suddenly sure I’m a pod person. “What?”

“Something did happen.” Her mouth falls open for a second before she snaps it shut. She looks around, trying to find someone to share her discovery with. When all she finds is an oblivious preschooler and the uncooperative subject of her interrogation, her face falls into a frown. “He’s family, but if he did something to you, Grace, I swear to—”

“Stop.” I say it to her the way Ryan said it to Molly. Firm. Final. It works like a charm. “He didn’t do anything to me.” That’s not exactly true. He did plenty but he didn’t do anything I didn’t want him to do and he sure as hell hasn’t done enough of it. “He played board games with Molly. He let me sleep in and made me French toast for Christ’s sake—not exactly the sadistic actions of a monster,” I gesture toward the half-eaten burger and cold fries that Patrick brought her, hoping to strengthen my argument. “Exhibit A.”

“Exactly!” She jabs her finger at me, the force of it lifting her out of her seat. “Guys don’t just—”

Her tirade is cut short by a flurry of panicked knocks that rattle the laundry room door on its hinges. “Not over,” she says, giving me another finger jab before sliding out of her seat. “You might get away with your Scarlet Letter routine with mom and dad but—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...” I wave her off with a laugh that feels harsh in the back of my throat. Sounds forced because she’s talking about Molly’s father and the fact that I won’t name him. She’s thinks it’s just me being stubborn. Maybe a martyr.

I'm neither of those things.

What I am is a coward.

Maybe it was me. Maybe it wasn't. What are you gonna do, Grace—line the whole fraternity up for a swab test?

A familiar nausea rolls through me, the acidic feel of it slick and oily, scorching the back of my throat. Gripping the edge of the counter, I look up and find Molly sitting on the couch, bouncing her candy-colored ponies across the cushions like they're running the Kentucky Derby.

It's weird that looking at her is the only thing that makes me feel better when it hits me. That when I remember where she came from, she's the only thing that matters.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Grace, get your sewing kit,” Cari calls from the laundry room, and just like that, it’s over. Everything is back to normal.

I do what I always do.

I put the shame away and pretend it never happened.

Six

Ryan

I found my cane.

It was tossed on top of Patrick’s desk like it’d been abandoned there. Probably by Declan when he carried me upstairs Thursday night and dumped me on Grace’s doorstep.

Pretending I don’t give a fuck, one way or the other, I stop long enough snatch it off the desk. “Told you it wasn’t lost,” I mutter under my breath while planting the end of it into the floor, ready to use it propel myself out of the office and down the hall.

“You say something?”

Christ.

Swiping my free hand over my mouth, I smother a curse and toss a look over my shoulder. Patrick is a few feet away, just standing there like he’s waiting for me to do

something. “Not important,” I say, dropping my hand. I knew he was going to follow me down when I left—half mother hen, worried that I’d fall down the stairs, half pissed off warden because I keep fucking up on his watch and he’s tired of dealing with my shit. “Look, about the shit that happened the other day—”

“What shit?” He looks at me like he has no idea what I’m talking about “Ohhh...” He shakes a finger at me and cocks his head to the side. “You mean when you limped your crippled ass into the stairwell and proceeded to beat the shit out of a bunch of orderlies—that the shit you’re talking about?”

He’s pissed. He has every right to be but as soon as he says it, I feel the back of my neck go hot, my jaw go tight. “Is this the part where I’m supposed to apologize for putting a beating on that piece of shit, because if it is—”

“A beating?” he barks back at me on a laugh. “Did you say a beating? I wish it’d been just a beating. My fucking kingdom for a beating.”

“Okay.” My grip tightens around the head of my cane while I resist the urge to use it as a weapon. “I get it. I fucked up, but—”

“Fucked up? Beating?” He laughs again and seriously, the sound of it is like sandpaper being scrubbed against my last viable nerve. “Well, you’re just the King the Understatements today, aren’t you?” Swiping a hand over his face, he glares at me. “He’s already screaming lawsuit.” When I don’t respond, he leans in and sighs.

He’s going to sue me, Ryan.”

Hearing him say it makes me instantly sick. Like I might throw up, all over the desk. But still, I can’t feel sorry about what I did. Can’t make myself wish I could take it back. “Sue you? For what? I didn’t—”

“You put him in the hospital, Ryan.” Something that looks dangerously close to defeat passes over his face. “For fuck’s sake, you broke his—”

“Good.” Last nerve rubbed raw, I snarl it at him like an animal. “I hope he thinks about me, every time he takes the stairs.”

“Good? Jesus, Ry.” He drops his hand and lets out a heavy sigh like he’s having a hard time keeping it together. Like trying to reason with me is a goddamned chore. “You can’t. You can’t just go around—”

“Grace.” As soon as I say her name, Patrick’s mouth snaps shut. “Shit...” I drop my ass on the desktop with a weary thump. “Grace and Molly were there, before—they came by the center to see me.” I stop for a second, waiting for him to ask me why in the hell Grace would drive all the way to Cambridge to see my sorry ass, even though I have no idea what I’m going to say if he does. When he doesn’t, I pick the story up again. “Anyway, when they left, I decided to take the stairs.” He knows what that means. We both do. When I decide to take the stairs that means I know Rich and his goons are there, waiting for me, and that I went looking for a fight. “Everything was fine, everyone was getting their fair share, until Rich started saying things about Grace.”

As soon as I say it, Patrick’s entire body goes stiff. “Things,” he repeats in a low, hard tone. “What kind of things?”

Hey, Frankendick—who’s the hot little blonde? Think she’ll let me fuck her? I mean, it’s not like you’re fucking her, right? Maybe I’ll go find her. Show her what a real man can do to her.

“The kind of things that get you put in a hospital if you say them to the wrong person.” I take another swipe at my face. A part of me wants to leave it at that. Pretend I don’t remember, but that other half needs to say it. Needs Patrick to know

why I lost my shit. “He threatened her. Asked me if I thought she’d let him fuck her. Said he was going to find her. Show her—”

“Rich threatened Grace and your response was to try to kill him.”

Yes.

I remember thinking it. Wanting it. Instead of saying so, I just make an affirmative-sounding noise in the back of my throat because he’s right. I had every intention of killing Rich for the threats he made about Grace and as crazy as that makes me, I’m not sorry for it.

When I don’t say anything else, Patrick clears his throat and nods. “Okay.”

“Okay?” I say it back to him on a rusty chuckle. “I pretty much just admitted to attempted murder and that’s all you have to say—okay?”

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Last year, I came home from work to find Cari’s ex-boyfriend on top of her in our living room—she was covered in blood and he was choking the life out of her.” He tilts his head a little, the tight angle of his jaw flashing white at the memory. “I can’t tell you for sure what happened after that. All I know is they took him away on a stretcher and I spent the next several hours being questioned by the cops,” he says, flashing me a quick, grim smile like he understands completely. “So, yeah—okay.”

I don’t know why I’m surprised by what he’s telling me—maybe it’s because he’s always been such a Boy Scout. The kid who pretended to sneak us free food at Benny’s when he worked the grill every summer but paid for it out of his own pocket when we weren’t looking. The kid who chased Mrs. McGintey’s dog for her when she let it out and scrubbed her front door after the rest of us neighborhood shits pelted it with eggs.

“I don’t know what I’m doing.” I say it out of nowhere. Want to cut my tongue out the second I admit it. To make things worse keep talking. “With her—I think I fucked it up.”

Patrick has the good sense to frown at me when I say it because unlike Conner and despite the fact that the two of them have been pushing the two of us together since I made the mistake of expressing more than a passing interest in her, he understands that me anywhere near Grace is a really bad idea.

Bracing myself for the much needed, if you even look at my future sister-in-law, I’m going to break your legs and dump you on the street speech, I’m surprised when he says the one thing I don’t want to hear. “Of course, you did—you wouldn’t be much of a Gilroy if you didn’t.”

Before I can tell him the truth—that I’m not a Gilroy and he can’t just keep forgiving me for the fucked-up shit I keep pulling, Patrick reaches out and lays a heavy hand on my shoulder. “Come on—I’ll take you to the center so you can get settled into your new place.”

Seven

Grace

“I can’t wear this.”

Because Cari’s in her studio and I’m the only other adult here, I look up from the dining room table where I’m putting my sewing kit back together to find Tess standing a few feet away in the dress I cobbled together for her out of a black tank top with the words Gilroy’s Girl emblazoned across the front of it in fancy script.

“Why not?” I ask, giving her a critical once-over because I’m afraid that maybe it doesn’t fit or maybe she doesn’t look good in it.

No to both.

It’s fits perfectly and Tess, with her petite frame, long dark hair and light hazel eyes set in a pixie face that can only be described as adorable, looks pretty perfect in it.

“Because—” She aims a panicked look downward and throws up her hands. “Because I’m practically fucking naked, that’s why not.”

“You swear almost as much as Ryan does,” Molly interjects from the kitchen counter where she’s squeezing a PB&J so she can lick the peanut butter and jam from its oozing corner.



“Sorry,” Tess says, shifting her panic from the fact that she’s wearing a dress to the fact that she dropped an F-bomb in front of Molly. “I’m not used to being around kids.”

“It’s okay,” I say with a wave of my hand and a laugh. “Believe me, she’s heard worse.”

“Especially if she’s been hanging out with Ryan,” Tess answers with a laugh of her own while she gives the hem of her makeshift dress a tug. “Speaking of Ry—I’m sorry about Thursday, About Declan bringing him up here and dumping him on your doorstep. If I’d thought about it, I would’ve remembered that Cap’n and Cari weren’t here and I—”

“It’s okay.” I say it again, this time the laugh that comes with it feels false. Sounds forced, even to me. “Declan already apologized. Besides...” I roll up my kit and concentrate on tying it closed. “having him here was kinda nice. He played with Grace and made her breakfast.”

“Just regular toast yesterday but this morning we made the French kind,” Molly quips from her seat at the counter. “Can I be done?”

Grateful for an excuse to look away from Tess and the expression on her face, I look at Molly and nod even though all she’s done is squeeze her sandwich into a ball and suck out its guts. “Go wash your hands.” As soon as she’s hopped from her stool and down the hall, I risk a look at Tess. “There’s nothing going on,” I tell her. “Between Ryan and me. Molly’s developed some sort of obsession with him and he’s been nice to her. To me.”

“I keep saying the same thing about Declan,” Tess stops yanking on her hemline long enough to look at me. “I keep telling people that nothing is going on. That even if something was going on, it wouldn’t be a big deal.” She gives me a lopsided smile

that seems sad somehow. “But I’m lying. Mostly to myself because no one else is dumb enough to believe me. Something is definitely fucking going on, it’s a big deal, and it’s scaring the shit out of me.”

“That’s different,” I tell her, feeling defensive. “You and Declan have a history. You grew up together. Ryan and I barely know each other.” Even though it sounds reasonable, Tess shakes her head and laughs at me.

“You want to know about our history?” she says, taking a seat across the table from me. Before I can answer her, she continues. “Declan used to steal cars for my dad. He showed up at my dad’s shop one night, needing my help with a boost—stray cat got stuck in the engine. I was pretty prickly about the whole thing and he laughed at me. So I threw a crescent wrench at his face and split his chin open.” She smiles at the memory. “I had to superglue it shut so he didn’t bleed to death on my workbench,” she says with a shrug. “Every story has to start somewhere. Maybe this is the start of yours and Ryan’s.”

“The other night, when Declan brought him up here, I heard Ryan tell him that he should’ve taken you away from him when he had the chance.” I blurt it out, gaze averted. When she doesn’t answer me, I force myself to look at her. “So, like I said—this isn’t the start of anything because there’s nothing going on between Ryan and me. There can’t be.”

Because of you.

Because of the way he feels about you.

I don’t say it but the implication is clear enough for the both of us.

Tess sighs. “Ryan doesn’t love me, Grace.” It’s the tone of her voice that makes me look at her. Like she’s absolutely sure. Like I’m stupid for thinking he might. “He

might've when we were kids but now I think it's just..." She shakes her head. "easier to keep pretending rather than face the truth of what's going on."

What's going on.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

With Ryan's brain.

With his body.

I don't say anything. Don't let on that I know what she means, mainly because I don't trust myself to keep my mouth shut. Because what's going on with his body seems to be sorting itself out and I don't know if Ryan wants people to know that.

So I change the subject, instead.

"Have you ever waitressed before?" I ask gesturing toward the dress I made her and the reason she's wearing it.

"No." She shakes her head and smiles, seemingly as relieved to get off the topic of Ryan and Declan and all the nothing that's going on as I am. "To be honest, I'm freaking out a little—give me a blown tranny or busted axel and I'm your girl, but put me in a dress and expect me to smile and I'm lost."

"I used to pick up shifts at the local bar back home," I tell her. "If you want some pointers, I'd be more than happy to help."

Tess smiles at me, so big and wide, the glow of it lights up her entire face. "Don't tell your sister I said this, but you, Grace Faraday, might just be my new best friend."

Eight

Ryan

I used to keep an apartment off base. A tiny one-bedroom with saggy, pressed wood cabinets and a refrigerator that hummed too loud in the summertime. Windows covered in cheap, plastic blinds that overlooked the parking lot. Shitty thrift store furniture with lumpy cushions that smelled like other people's lives.

I didn't live there.

Not really.

I existed.

I came and I went. Waited for my next assignment. My next deployment. Showered and slept. Picked up women. Fucked them and sent them on their way. Ate take-out standing over the kitchen sink. Forced myself to be polite when one of the team wives would drop by with tidy, plastic containers full of leftovers or baked goods. Pretended to listen when she'd tell me she was worried about the way I was living. That what I was doing wasn't really living at all. That I needed more than four walls and frozen dinners. That I was worth more than a parade of nameless women and ESPN.

That I needed a home.

A family.

I never told them that I had both.

That I had a sister.

People who'd kill and die for me without a second's hesitation. A half dozen doorsteps I could darken and be taken in, no questions asked.

That my sister lived little more than a day's drive from where we were standing, because when we were kids, Henley left me standing on the sidewalk outside our apartment. Looked right at me, a split second before she let our mother shove her into the back of a limousine and take her away.

Because she left me, and I'd rather die alone in a fucking hole than give her, or anyone for that matter, the opportunity to do it twice.

Standing here, now—in this apartment—I realize for what might be the millionth time since I was wounded, that as much as I pretend that I have, I've never really forgiven her for it.

And on top of it all, I'm angry.

Because this place is fucking ridiculous. It's too much—and it's got my sister written all over it.

"You could've just stuck me in a supply closet, you know," I grumbled at Patrick when he first let me in and handed me the keys. "I don't need all this space—and shit." I cast a hard look around the room and shake my head. "I don't need all this shit."

This shit is furniture. Couches and chairs. End tables and lamps. Throw rugs on the floor and framed prints on the wall.

Fuck, it looks like an actual person lives here.

"This is the same apartment I showed you last month," he tells me, unfazed by my complete lack of gratitude. "If it's too much, you should've told me then. As for the shit—blame Hen. She's the one who bought it."

Thinking about the army of delivery guys who were here yesterday, carrying in furniture when I dropped by yesterday, it makes sense It looks like her. Understated and classy. Expensive and tasteful. I want to pick up the nearest lamp and throw it through the fucking window.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“You gonna be okay by yourself?”

I glance away from the window to find Patrick standing by the front door, looking at me like he’s having second thoughts about leaving me here alone.

“Jesus Christ,” I roll my eyes even though I’m suddenly not so sure. I haven’t been alone—really alone—in months. “I’ll be fine, Mom.”

“Alright.” Bullshit or not, Patrick laughs and reaches for the door. “If you need something—”

“If I need something, I’ll figure it out for myself.” I swipe a hand over my face, smothering a curse. “Hey,” I say, stopping him halfway out the door.

“Yeah?” Patrick stops in his tracks and looks at me like he’s suddenly worried again.

“About Rich—what I did to him.” I drop my hand away from my face and let out a heavy breath. “Don’t take the heat for what I did. Let him come at me. I can—”

“Fuck Rich. He fucked with a Gilroy and got what was comin’.” He gives me that grin, the one that makes him look like Con, flashing me his dimples. “Whatever happens, we’ll face it like we always do—as a family.”

And then he’s gone and I’m alone.

Unsure of what to do next, I just stand here, somewhere between living room and the kitchen, staring at the door and wondering how it all got to this point. How I ended up



here. Right back where I started.

Because I know from personal experience, I'll just end up working myself into fucking lather if I poke at it too much, I put it all away and make a concerted effort to focus on the here and now.

Hobbling my ass into the kitchen, I open the fridge, more out of curiosity than actual expectation. Staring into it, I have to laugh because of course my sister stocked it. Milk. Butter. Eggs. The crisper is full of vegetables. Cheese and lunch meat. A six-pack of beer. The freezer is stuffed with frozen pizzas and family-sized trays of lasagna and frozen enchiladas.

Seeing it all makes me realize that I'm twenty-eight and I've never been grocery shopping. Never pushed a cart around a store or examined produce. Never debated over the price of eggs or which brand of bread is on sale. Never lived like a civilian. The closest I've come to grocery shopping is picking up a six-pack at the base commissary and the closest I've come to cooking is nuking a frozen burrito.

Until this morning when I made French toast and bacon with a four-year-old.

Which makes me a pretty sorry excuse for an adult, if you ask me.

Slamming the freezer shut, I yank the fridge open again and pull a beer off the shelf. Twisting the cap off, I toss it on the counter and dig my prescription bottle of Oxy out of my duffle. After a few seconds of debate, I pop the cap and shake a small round pill into my palm and wash it down with the beer. Because fuck it, right?

Leaving my cane in the kitchen, I shoulder my duffle and take it and my beer into the bedroom to unpack, only to find the dresser and closet already full of clothes. Socks and underwear. Button-downs and jeans. Flannel pajama pants and T-shirts. Price tags clipped off and freshly laundered. Folded neatly. Arranged by color.

Henley.

Again.

Depositing my duffle full of rags in the closet with a vicious kick, I sink onto the edge of the bed and try not to feel like shit. Try to accept that she's my sister. That making me feel useless wasn't her intention. That, like Patrick, she has money to burn so why shouldn't I let her spend it on me if it's going to help alleviate the guilt she feels over what happened when we were kids.

When it doesn't work, when all I do is end up feeling angrier, I set my beer on the nightstand and yank its drawer open to toss my prescription bottle into it.

Condoms.

What must be hundreds of them.

And an envelope with my name written across the front of it in Conner's haphazard scrawl. Gritting my teeth, I rip it open and read the note inside.

Hey, Assface –

The condoms are a housewarming gift from me to you. The rest of it is from Hen. Don't be a dick about it. She's your sister. She loves you. And if that isn't enough, remember you owe me.

Con

p.s. If you forgot how condoms work, give Grace a call. I'm sure she'd be happy to show you.

Seeing them, reading the note that accompanied them, makes me think of her. This morning. The shock and uncertainty on her face when she realized what was happening. That I was as hard as a rock and standing over her with my cock shoved in her face. Ever the optimist, I drop my hand to my crotch and give myself a squeeze.

Nothing.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

Not a goddamned thing.

Like this morning never happened.

I toss the note back into the drawer and slam it closed. Standing, I take the beer with me into the bathroom and camp out in the doorway. Whirlpool tub big enough to qualify as a hot tub. Separate walk-in shower that looks like it could fit the New England offensive line and leave room for a cheerleader or two. Dual shower showerheads. Two sink vanity. High-end towels. Spa-quality bath products.

Six months ago, I was digging my own latrine and washing my balls with army-issue wet naps. A month later I was down a testicle and suffering the indignity of having my ass wiped by my best friend while I mentally cataloged all the things in the room I could kill myself with if I wasn't such a useless lump of shit.

Taking a long pull from my beer, I start to feel the warm, chemical spread of oxy swimming through my system. The pain in my leg starts to melt away and I drain the beer dry in an effort to smother the guilt and apprehension that comes with the relief. The thing that whispers you're just like your father in my ear, over and over until it's as loud as a shout.

"Fuck it," I mutter it out loud, rounding on wonderfully numb legs intent on a trip the kitchen to get myself another beer. Maybe another oxy. I make it as far as the living room before I bitch out and park my ass on the couch. Not because my leg hurts but because turning into my father is a legit possibility and if that's where I'm heading then, promise or no promise, I might as well just off myself right now and get it over with.

Snagging the remote off the coffee table, and prepare myself for a brain battle royale, trying to figure it out. Looking at it, instead of frustration and confusion, I feel a now familiar mixture of shame and relief because the remote's button panel is so simple a toddler could figure it out. Aiming it at a huge flat screen hanging on the wall, I punch the big green button marked ON, and resign myself to long, solitary day of doing nothing.

Nine

Grace

What the fuck are you doing, Grace?

Seriously—what the fuck are you doing?

When I asked myself that question an hour ago, the answer was simple—Molly was finally asleep after a long day of driving me bonkers and Cari was zoned out in her studio and without either of them to pester me, I was bored out of my skull.

So, I told myself I was going for a walk. I pulled a brush through my hair and put on some mascara. Slipped on my low-top chucks and knocked on Cari's studio door before pushing it open.

My sister likes to paint in her underwear, always has, and she has a habit of swiping her loaded paintbrush against her legs while she works, so when I catch sight of a half-naked Cari covered in paint, it's not a surprise.

“Hey,” I pitch my voice loud enough to combat the earbuds she has buried in her ears.

She pulls a single bud free and lets it dangle from its wire. “Yeah?” she says without

looking away from the canvas in front of her.

“Molly’s asleep.” I sigh and lean against the doorframe. “I’m bored.”

“Uhhh... okay.” Frowning at the canvas, Cari swipes her brush along the top of her thigh, leaving a bright blue stripe in its wake. Lifting her brush she reloads it with blue and starts making broad, bold strokes. “So do something.”

I was hoping she’d say that.

“I thought maybe I’d go for a walk or—”

“A walk, for fuck’s sake?” Dropping her arm again, she sticks her brush in a glass jar full of murky liquid. “Just go see him already,” she laughs at me.

“Just go see him?” I immediately bristle because him is Ryan and go see him is exactly what I want to do, I’m just not ready to admit it yet. “What are you talking about? I just—”

Turning away from her canvas, Cari her stacks paint-stained hands on her hips and sighs. “Kathrine Grace Faraday.” She shakes her head at me. “You don’t have to tell me what’s going on with Ryan—you don’t even have to admit that something is going on—I saw it written all over you the second you walked into the kitchen, so don’t stand there and play dumb.” She sounds amused and exasperated when she says it, like when she had to scold Molly for flushing socks down the toilet back home. “Just tell me he’s good to you and so I can stop worrying about it.”

“He—” I nod my head and swallow hard against the lump lodged in my throat because it’s a reminder of the conversation I had with Tess this afternoon. “I don’t know what Ryan and I are. I don’t know what’s happening—that’s the truth.” Slipping into the room on a sigh, I slink my way to the bed and sit on its edge. “I just

know that whatever it is, it's happening fast and that no matter how angry he makes me, I can't seem to stay away from him."

"He's a Gilroy, in all the ways that count." Cari smiles and shakes her head a little. "So yeah—that sounds about right." Looking away from me, she reaches for the paintbrush in the jar and gives it a vigorous swish before pulling it out. "You still haven't told me whether or not he's good to you." It's a problem—or has been in the past—for the both of us. Getting involved with guys who use us. Blind us with pretty words and lofty promises just so they can feel better about hurting us on a whim. I think about the way she looked when she came home last year, standing in our front yard with angry red and purple rings around her neck. A busted lip and an eye that was half swollen shut. That's when I get it. She's just not being nosy. She's not trying to be an overbearing older sister. She understands me better than anyone and she's genuinely worried about me.

I'll never hurt you, Grace.

Never you and never Molly.

"He's a Gilroy, right?" I say, even though I know that's not how Ryan sees himself. "I don't think any of them could mistreat a woman if their life depended on it."

"I keep forgetting you just got here," she says with a soft laugh while she cleans her brush with the hem of her paint-splattered shirt. "That means you missed the Conner Gilroy shitshow." Before I can ask her what she means by that, she keeps talking. "Just promise me you're being careful and that if he—"

"He won't." I stand up, feeling suddenly defensive. "He won't hurt me," I tell her, even though I'm pretty sure it might be a lie. "Either way, I'm a big girl, Cari—I can handle Ryan O'Connell."

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

Yeah, that's probably a lie too.

She stares at me for a moment and I can see it. How much she wants to argue. How much she wants to point out that I have a living, breathing, four-year-old proof that I don't have a very good track record when it comes to handling anything. Instead of saying it out loud, she stops cleaning her brush and shrugs. "Keys to the center are hanging on the hook in the laundry room. Alarm code is 7739. He's in apartment 510." Turning, she loads her clean brush with color—a deep, vibrant red—before lifting it to the canvas again. "Go on—I'll keep an ear out for Moll, just shoot me an I'm not dead text when you get there so I know you made it safe."

I stood there for all of three seconds before I was out the door. Fifteen seconds later, I had my coat on and I was on the stairs, keys to the center in hand. Ten minutes after that, I'd sent my obligatory text to my sister and I was standing outside Ryan's apartment, asking myself what the fuck?

What the fuck I'm doing here?

Getting answers.

And an apology.

That's what I'm doing here.

He owes me both and I'm here to get them.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I square my shoulders and knock on the door in



front of me.

Listening hard for the shuffle thump of his cane, all I can do is stare at him, eyes wide, jaw slack, when he pulls the door open less than a few seconds after I knocked.

Jesus, he's beautiful. Even in track pants and a T-shirt I've never seen before, with a week's worth of hermit beard shadowing his jawline, I can't take my eyes off him. Can't breathe because suddenly he's right in front of me, close enough to touch.

As soon as he sees me, Ryan lifts his free arm to brace it against the doorframe—either because he's using the added support to alleviate the pressure that standing without his cane puts on his leg or because he's afraid I'm going to barge my way into his apartment and he doesn't want me to.

“What are you doing here?” Despite the question, he doesn't look surprised to see me. If anything, he looks like he's been expecting me. Like he's been waiting for me and wonders what's taken me so long to get here.

Because I'm wondering the same thing, I shrug. “I've changed my mind.” Pushing my way past him, I'm mildly surprised when he drops his arm and lets me into his apartment. Taking a quick spin, I see hardwood floors and a wide, bare bank of windows overlooking the street. A sectional leather sofa. A huge, state-of-the-art flat screen on the opposite wall. Finishing my turn, I face the open front door again. Ryan is still standing in front of it, looking at me like he can't quite figure out how I got past him. “You owe me an apology,” I tell him with a firm nod of my head. “And I'm here to get it.”

Ten

Ryan

For one heart-stopping, stomach-churning second I just stand here and stare at her because I think she wants me to apologize for this morning. What happened.

With my dick.

And then I realize that she's talking about what happened last night. What I said to her when she offered to share her bed with me. How shitty I was to her.

"Grace—"

"I'll even make it easy for you," she says while she takes off her coat, jerking on its buttons so hard it's a wonder they don't pop off. "Grace, I'm sorry if fingerfucking you in my hospital room gave you the wrong idea but—" She yanks the last button free and starts to struggle out of her coat. "the truth of the matter is, and you get to fill in the appropriate answer here, A—" Coat off, she tosses it over the back of the couch. "I'm still in love with Tess."

"Jesus Christ." Trying not to yell, I drop my hand on the back of head so hard I feel a twinge in my neck. "I'm not in love—"

"Don't interrupt me." She holds a hand up between us, palm thrust toward me like a traffic cop. "B—you're kinda slutty, being how you let me into your pants approximately five minutes after we met and I don't get serious with sluts or C—"

"Don't." I bark it at her, slamming the front door shut, hard enough to make her jump. "You're not a slut, so don't ever let me hear you talk about yourself like that again." Raising my hand, I rake rough fingers through my hair while I let out a shaky breath because she's looking at me like she just realized that I'm blocking her only escape route. "I was there too, you know," I tell her, moving away from the door, toward the kitchen. If she's gonna run, she better do it now. "What happened was as much my doing as it was your—maybe more." Yanking open the refrigerator door, I

can feel her watching me. Bending forward I scissor two long necks between my fingers and pull them off the shelf. Buried in the fridge, I was halfway sure I'd climb out to find my front door hanging open and my apartment deserted, but when I straighten, she's still there. Still staring at me. Still looks like she wants to run. "I wanted you. I wanted you so damn much my hands were shaking. Do you know how long it's been since I've felt like that? Like—" Me. Instead of saying it out loud, I slam the fridge door shut and twist the caps off the beers in my hand before setting them on the counter to stare at them. It would be easier to lie. To tell her I'm in love with Tess—keep using my convoluted feelings for her like a shield—but it's a lie. One I can tell myself all day long, but I can't tell it to Grace. Can't hurt her. Not like that. So, I tell her the truth. "And—and I'm only going to say this one more fucking time—I am not in love with Tess."

"I heard you." As soon as she says it, I turn around to look at her and her mouth snaps shut. Her cheeks lose their indignant flush.

Beers forgotten, I lean my hips against the counter and cross my arms over my chest. "You heard me what?"

Even though I haven't moved an inch, she takes a step back, away from me, like she feels the need to put distance between us. Like I'm unpredictable. Unstable and she's afraid of what's going to happen after she says what comes next. "The other night—when Declan brought you upstairs and dumped you in Molly's bed." She rubs her hands on the legs of her jeans like she's nervous. Like she's telling me something she shouldn't. "You said, I should've taken her from you when I had the chance—you were talking about Tess." She stops rubbing and looks away from me. "It's okay, Ryan—I get it," she says on a sigh, not giving me a chance to explain what she overheard. "What happened between us was a mistake—" she flips her hands at me and shrugs before forcing herself to look at me again. "I mean, it barely even happened, right?" Now she laughs but there's no humor in it. "So, don't—"

“It happened.” The tone of my voice sounds off, even to me. I sound angry. Maybe even a little hurt. “I took you into my room. I pinned you against the door and made you come on my fingers. That happened and it wasn’t a fucking mistake—not for me—so, don’t say that it was.”

For a second, neither of us says anything. Grace just stares at me, her hands back to rubbing themselves raw on the legs of her jeans. “Okay...” She nods at me and looks away, unsure of what to say next. Finally, she clears her throat and shrugs. “Well, I didn’t tell anyone about it, and I didn’t tell anyone about... this morning, so you don’t have to worry about—”

“I’m not the one who should be worried.” It’s a warning and I make sure she knows it. Make sure she hears the intent in my tone. That she knows exactly what’s going to happen next if she doesn’t leave. “I’m not the one who came to what is basically an abandoned building in the middle of the night to stir up shit with a guy who can’t stop thinking about what it felt like to make me come.”

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“I—” her hands go still and whatever she’s about to say gets choked out by the flush that come back in full force when what I just said sinks in. “I didn’t come here to stir up shit.”

“No?” I feign confusion, tilting my head just a bit. “Because I gotta tell you, Grace—shit is definitely getting stirred.”

She opens her mouth and it hangs that way for a few seconds before she manages to form a response. “I came here for an—”

“Apology.” I nod thoughtfully. “Yeah—that’s what you said but that’s not why you’re here.”

“Is that right?” Tone sharp enough to cut, she crosses her arms over her chest, mirroring me. “Since you seem to know everything, why don’t you tell me—”

“You saw it. How hard you made me this morning.” Like this morning, I suddenly find myself standing over her and I have no idea how I got here. How I got so close to her without even realizing it, but I’m in it now. I’m here and there’s no pulling back. No retreat. “And you want to know if you can make it again.”

Her mouth falls open when I say it, her sky blue eyes going wide and round, her head tipped back so she can look up at me. “I didn’t...” She shakes her head, the tip of her tongue pushing out to lick her slightly parted lips. “I mean—”

“It’s okay, Grace...” Lifting a hand, I wrap my fingers around the back of her neck, the rough pad of my thumb stroking the long, slim column of her neck, quickening

the frantic drum of her pulse at the base of her throat. “I’m kinda curious to know, myself.” Leaning in, I move over her to brush my mouth against hers, feeling something fierce and savage—something I haven’t felt in what seems like a lifetime—roll through me when she shudders in response. “So, what do you say we find out?”

Eleven

Grace

As soon as his mouth touches mine, I start to sink. Every muscle, every joint in my body go loose. Let go.

“Ryan...” That’s as far as I get, my mouth hanging open like I can’t track the question. Because I can’t. I can’t think straight because Ryan is standing over me. His hands are on me. In my hair, the pull of it causing a tingling warmth to shoot down my spine, drawing a direct of sensation from his fist to my pussy. “I didn’t come here for an apology.”

“We’re past that now,” he tells me, the tips of his fingers skimming the waistband of my jeans, teasing me. The heat between my thighs begins to pulsate. His mouth hovering, brushing against mine, every time I take breath. “Yes or no, Grace?”

“Yes.” I raise myself onto the balls of my feet after I say it, closing the space between us to skim my lips against his. “Yes, please.” I whisper it against his mouth, the end of my plea bleeding into a soft moan when the hand in my hair tightens, angling my head back even further and his mouth crashes into mine. Claims it with a hot, languid sweep of his tongue, licking and swirling inside my mouth until my arms are flung around his neck, clinging to him for dear life because I’m dying. I’m drowning and Ryan has no intention of saving me.

He breaks the kiss off on a low groan that sounds like my name. “Be sure,” Ryan says before he moves away from me completely. The sudden absence of him makes me dizzy and I open my eyes to find him gone, walking away, across the living room to disappear through a doorway into what could only be his bedroom.

Follow him.

I’m supposed to follow him.

I want to follow him.

I want to chase him down and rip his clothes off like a wild animal, but I don’t because I know what this is. Why he left me standing here alone. He’s giving me time to change my mind. Time to come to my senses and leave before things go too far. A part of him probably even wishes that I would.

I get it.

I understand.

Because there’s a part of me that wishes the same thing. The still sane part of me that’s telling me to put my coat back on and walk out the door before I lose my mind completely.

Half listening to that voice, I pick up my coat and walk it to the door. I’ve got my hand on the knob, can feel it turn in my hand.

But I can’t make myself do it.

I can’t make myself leave.

Hanging my coat on an empty hook, I pull my phone out of my pocket and tuck it into my coat pocket before kicking off my shoes and pulling off my socks. Barefoot, I cross the living room to stand in the doorway Ryan disappeared through to find him sitting on the edge of his bed, head bent and turned away from the door, the glow of the bedside lamp setting the dark red of his hair on fire while he looks at something in the open drawer of his nightstand. When he hears me, he shuts the drawer and his head comes up, a convoluted mixture of relief and anxiety moving across his face.

“I thought you left.” I can tell by his tone that I’m right—there’s a part of him that wanted me to. Because my mouth doesn’t seem to want to open, I just shake my head and he gives me one of his odd, flat smiles in response because he knows that like him, there’s a part of me that wishes I had. “Still can,” he says, like he’s reading my mind. “It’s not too late.”

Yes, it is.

It’s too late for both of us.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I tell him. “Not unless you want me to.”



*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

Now it's his turn to shake his head, his dark-eyed gaze dropping down to my bare feet. "I don't want you to go."

Relieved and feeling pretty ridiculous about it, I cross the room, rounding the bed to stand on the other side of it, behind him.

"What if I can't?" he says in a gruff tone without turning around to look at me. "What if this morning was just a—"

"We'll figure it out." Lifting my shirt over my head I drop it on the floor. "No matter what happens," I tell him as I reach back to unhook my bra. Let it slide down my arms to join my shirt on the floor. Work my panties off my hips and slide them to the floor to step out of them. "I won't be disappointed."

He makes a sound in the back of his throat that tells me he doesn't believe me. Because there's nothing I can say to change his mind, I do the only thing I can. Tugging my jeans down over my hips, I step out of them before adding them to my pile of discarded clothes. Naked, I reach out to pull the covers back to slip between the sheets of Ryan's bed, the cool cotton of them stiffening my nipples instantly.

Even though he knows what I'm doing, that I'm in his bed, he still hasn't turned around. Still hasn't moved, like he's not sure what he's supposed to do next. Like he's trying to remember how this is supposed to work.

I'm about to open my mouth and tell him that it's okay. That we don't have to do this, Ryan's arms come up, lifting the hem of his shirt along with them. Up over his head before it's tossed on the floor.

There are scars on his back. Burn scars from the explosion he survived, still pink and new, splash up from the waistband of his track pants, twisting and snaking their way across his lower back, toward his ribcage. Higher on his back, a slash mark cuts across his spine and a round, lumpy scar that looks like a bullet hole, high on his shoulder.

“It’s okay,” he says quietly. “You don’t have to touch me if you don’t want to.”

Before I can really comprehend what he’s saying, Ryan reaches for the bedside lamp and turns out the light.

Twelve

Ryan

After plunging us both into the dark, I stay where I am, letting my hand drop down, away from the lamp and back to my lap. I know what I’m doing. I’m waiting. For Grace to make some insipid comment about the scars on my back. For her to tell me they don’t matter.

Maybe I’m just waiting for her to leave.

I don’t want her to.

I’d probably chase her down and drag her back to my bed if she tried.

So what the fuck are you waiting for, Ranger? Time to nut up or shut up.

The problem is, I psyched myself out. Looked in that fucking drawer full of condom Conner left for me. Started to wonder if I’d be able to get it up long enough to use one.

Started to worry that maybe I would.

Behind me, I hear the subtle intake of Grace's breath, telling me she's about to say something. Tell me it's okay. We don't have to do this. We can call it off if I want.

Because I'll lose my fucking shit if she says any of the above, I force myself to move before she can make a sound.

Pulling the covers back, I force myself to lie down beside her. Dig my heels into the bed to keep myself in place when I feel her move toward me across the mattress. She nudges my arm away from my side, settling into the wedge to rest her cheek on my shoulder. Her full, soft breasts pressed against the sidewall of my chest while her hand slides across the plane of my stomach to settle itself on my hip.

We lay like this for a while. Me, flat on my back, staring at the ceiling, trying to figure out what to do with my hands. Grace, wrapped around me, feeling so goddamned good and right, I'm afraid to move. Afraid to breathe because I know I'm going to fuck this up. I'm going to push her away again. I'm going to keep pushing her away and, sooner or later, it's gonna stick.

"Ryan?" She whispers it, her mouth brushing against shoulder.

"Hmmm."

"How'd it happen?"

I knew she'd ask about the explosion—everyone eventually does—but that doesn't mean I want to talk about it. It doesn't mean I want to tell her how, as a ten-year vet with seven years as a Ranger under my belt, I still managed to fuck up so bad that I nearly got my leg and junk blown off.

Mainly because I don't know. I don't remember what happened that day. How I ended up this way. The last thing I remember before the explosion is boarding our transport. The rest is a yawning black hole of nothingness. Too deep and dark for me to see the bottom of it, and that deep dark scares the piss out of me. Not knowing what I did. Not being able to remember. Because the longer I stare into it, the crazier I feel.

"How'd what happen?" I don't want to talk about it, but I will. If Grace can be brave enough to ask me, then I can be brave enough to tell her.

"This." She lifts her head and tilts it to press her lips to the raised, red lump of scar tissue that rides high on my left shoulder. "You have one just like it on your back."

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Through and through—bullet went in the front and came out the back,” I tell her, crippling relief and an odd sort of disappointment chasing themselves around in my gut.

“You were shot.” I can hear fear in her voice when she says it. Like it happened minutes ago, not years. Like it could happen again at any moment. “Someone shot you.”

“Yeah.” I reach up and run a self-conscious hand over the lump. “I was doing a thing and caught a bullet for my trouble.”

“Doing a thing?” I can hear a slight smile in her voice. Feel her lift her head to look up at me in the dark. “Is that your way of saying you were on a top-secret mission for the president?”

“I could tell you, Grace—but then I’ll have to kill you,” I say, the clench in my stomach loosening a little when she laughs. Finally figuring out what to do with my hands, I shift my free arm across the mattress. Taking her hand in mine, I lift it off my hip, dragging it up my stomach to its center. “Yemin,” I whisper, running her fingertips along the thin, diagonal scar that climbs the ladder of my ribcage, from my navel to nearly my armpit. “Guy caught me with the business end of his KA-BAR. Sliced me pretty good.” My breath catches at the back of my throat when her hand slips out from under mine. Her fingertips start to move on their own, skimming across my collarbone. The base of my throat. Dipping down to trace the line of my pec. Squeezing my eyes shut in the dark, I force myself to concentrate. “A KA-BAR is a—”

“It’s a knife,” she says, her fingers tracing down the center of my chest, over the thick plate of my sternum. “I know what it is—my dad’s a Marine, remember?” She finds another scar, this one shorter. Fatter, somewhere between my sternum and lower abdomen. Brushes her fingertips along the length of it. “This one?”

“Got stabbed.” I want to catch her hand. Stop her before she goes any further. Moves any lower. But I don’t. I can’t because as much as I don’t want her to touch me, I need her to. I might fucking die if she doesn’t. “Libya.” I croak it out on a harsh breath when she lifts her hand back to my shoulder, relief and disappointment churning together even faster, the splash of it like acid against the back of my throat.

But then she moves.

Braces her hand against my shoulder. Shifts herself against me. Over me. Slides her leg over my hip until she’s straddling me. It all happens so fast I don’t even realize it’s done until her hand slides down the width of my shoulder to find my hand, resting on the bed. Lifting it, she brings it up, her hands guiding my rough, blunt fingertips over the soft skin of her belly. Again, it happens too fast for me to track. So quick I can’t breathe. My heart’s hammering against my Adam’s apple so hard and fast I feel dizzy. Like I’m being choked out. Like I might actually die from this. Like I might want to, because dying this way, with Grace, soft and naked under my hands is so much better than anything I ever thought I’d get to have.

Her hand and mine stop their downward trajectory and then I feel it, the thick, hard rope of scar tissue slashed into the soft patch of skin above her pubic bone. “C-section,” She says with a quiet laugh. “Ohio.” Laying her fingers gently across the back of my wrist, she lets me feel it. Opens herself up to me. “It’s not like I fought a war or anything, but—”

“Yes you did.” I murmur it, letting my gaze travel over her in the gloom. I can make out the soft curve of her breasts. The gentle flare of her hips. “You fought the best

kind of war,” I tell her, thinking briefly of Molly. “And you won.”

“So did you,” she says. I can tell by her tone she’s not talking about the bullet holes and stab wounds that could’ve killed me but didn’t. She’s talking about the wound that did. Killed the person I was. Made me into the person that I am. “I have to tell you something,” she whispers. “About me. About—”

It doesn’t matter.

I almost say it, because it’s true. Whatever she’s about to tell me doesn’t matter. Not to me. But I can tell by the way she says it that it matters to her. Whatever it is, it’s something she needs to say out loud. So I don’t say anything. I just wait.

“I don’t know who Molly’s father is,” She finally says in a rush, shoving the words out of her mouth on a harsh push of breath. “Cari, my parents—they all think I won’t name him because I’m protecting him. There were a lot of rumors going around town while I was pregnant—still going, actually. That he’s married or that he’s one of my teachers in high school. One rumor even had me getting knocked up by the pastor at our church, but the truth is that I don’t name him because I don’t know who he is. I was young and stupid and I—”

“Good.”

“Good?” Something about her tone tells me it isn’t good. That it bothers her. “Why is that good?”

Because it means I don’t have to worry about some asshole strolling into the picture, trying to take what’s mine. Because you don’t need anyone else. Just me. No one else but me.

It’s insane.

Completely crazy to feel that way. The only thing crazier would be if I actually said it out loud. But crazy or not, it's how I feel. "Because no father is better than a shitty one—trust me on that," I tell her because she asked me a question and expects an answer. "Whoever he is, he's the one who fucked up, Grace. He's the one who should regret it. Not you."

There's more. I can feel it. More to it than she's telling me but I suddenly don't care. I don't want to think about it anymore—her past and mine.

In an instant, all that matters is now.

The press of her knees, bent and bracketing my ribcage. The inside of her thighs, hugged against my hips. The juncture of them hovering over the base of my cock, so close I can feel the heat of her. How much she wants me, the feel of it kicking up a familiar answering throb in my groin.

Pushed by instinct, I lift my hands to her hips. Fingertips digging in with the need to pull her closer. To get inside her.

Fuck her.

I need to fuck her.

Make her mine.

"Grace..." Her name comes out on a rough breath, anxiety spiking through my veins because I need something I can't have. Something I'm too afraid to take. Shame and humiliation slice through me, tightening my grip on her. Get me ready to push her off of me so I can get away from her. "I—"

I can't.



That's what I'm about to say but then, like she seems to have a habit of doing, Grace changes everything.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

She leans forward, her hips shifting under my hands, her breath catching in her throat when her hard, swollen nipples brush against my chest. Her hands planting themselves in the pillow at either side of my head. Suddenly her face is inches from mine, her mouth so close I can feel the soft, uneven push of her breath against my skin.

“Make me come, Ryan.” She whispers it, her lips skimming against mine with every word. “Please, make me come. I don’t care how.”

Thirteen

Grace

I’ll be embarrassed later.

Probably even mortified that I said it out loud. That I got naked and put myself in Ryan’s bed. That I climbed on top of him and asked him to make me come.

Asked is the wrong word.

I’m not asking him to do anything.

I’m begging him to do it.

But right now, I’m too desperate to be ashamed.

Later? You should be ashamed right fucking now because he doesn’t want to want

you, Grace—remember?

“It’s okay,” I breathe out on a shaky laugh. “It’s okay, Ryan. I’ll just—”

Behind me, Ryan digs his heels into the bed, using his hands to push himself into a sitting position, his back pressed against the headboard of the bed. The move brings us face to face again, forces me to sit up too, returning me to my original position, straddling his waist. I feel him lean away from me and a few seconds later, the lamp clicks on, its soft glow illuminating his face.

We’ve been here before.

This is where he tells me to get away from him.

To get dressed and leave.

This is where he pushes me away.

Only he doesn’t.

“I already told you, Grace.” The callused palm of his hand slides up the length of my spine while the other one anchors itself under my ass, lifts me off his lap and onto my knees. “I don’t want you to leave.” The hand on my back reaches up to tangle itself in my hair, angling my head back so he can pin his dark, heavy-lidded gaze to mine. The hand on my ass slips between my legs, its wide, blunt-tipped fingers skimming along the inside of my thigh. “What I want is for you to say it again.”

“I...” I stall out, my mouth hanging open like I can’t track the question. What he wants from me. Because I can’t. I can’t think straight because Ryan is watching me. His hands are on me. In my hair, the pull of it causing tingling warmth to shoot down my spine, drawing a direct, humming line of sensation from his fist to my pussy. “I

want you.”

“It’s not enough,” he tells me, the tips of his fingers skimming the slick, swollen seam of my pussy. The heat between my thighs begins to pulsate. His mouth hovering, brushing against mine, every time I take breath. “You have to say it.”

He’s right. I have to say it. Because this isn’t like anything that’s happened between us so far. This isn’t an impulsive kiss in the front seat of my car. A fast, hot orgasm against the door of his hospital room. Both happened so quickly I didn’t have much time to think about either one until after they were over. No time to wonder if I’d regret it later. No time to weigh the consequences of what happens after.

There is nothing impulsive about the way Ryan is touching me now. Nothing rash. This is intentional. It’s real and once it’s done, it won’t be ignored and it won’t be forgotten.

Not by either of us.

Because what happens next will either bind us together or break us apart.

“Come.” I lean into him, closing the space between us to skim my lips against his. “Please make me come.”

“Fuuuck,” he groans it, the curse pushed against my mouth while he teases my entrance with the rough pad of his middle finger, pushing into me with the tip of it until I whimper softly in response. Start to sink. Try to impale myself on the broad, blunt length of it.

The hand in my hair unclenches, his wide palm sliding down my back to dig its fingers into my ass, hard enough to make me gasp, stopping me in my track. “I didn’t get to look at you last time.” He presses a soft kiss against the side of my neck.

Another one to my cheekbone. “I was in such a fucking hurry to get my hands on you...” He wraps his arm around my waist, anchoring me in place while the hand between my thighs starts to move again. “Get inside you...” The tip of his finger slides up the slick, swollen seam of my pussy until it’s pressed against my clit, swirling and teasing, until I’m half-crazy. Moaning softly with sweep and pulse of his fingers against me until I want to scream. “Ryan, please—”

That’s as far as I get before his mouth crashes into mine. Claims it with a hot, languid sweep of his tongue, licking and swirling inside my mouth until my arms are flung around his neck, and I’m clinging to him for dear life because I’m dying. I’m drowning and Ryan has no intention of saving me.

Breaking the kiss off on a low groan that sounds like my name, he nips and licks his way down my jawline. “Look at me, Grace...” he says, dipping his head to give the corner of my slightly parted lips a brush with his own, silently urging me to raise my eyes to his.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

Giving in, I look up at him, letting myself drown in his deep, dark gaze, a moment before he stokes his fingers inside me. “Jesus Christ,” The curse rumbles through his chest on a groan. “You feel so good...” Gaze still pinned to mine, Ryan withdraws his fingers, almost to the tip, before pumping them back in, the force of it pulling his name out of my mouth on a soft moan. Has me reaching past him to grip the headboard over his shoulder. Locking my elbow to brace myself against the hard, fast fuck of his fingers.

“Ryan...” I gasp his name again, raising and tilting my hips. Shamelessly begging for more while his fingers pump and thrust inside my pussy. “I need—”

“Rub your clit for me, Grace,” he says, his voice low and uneven, growling his approval when I push my hand between my legs to slick my fingertips over my swollen clit.

“Ohmygod...” I start to shake, every hard, deep thrust of his fingers jolting my fingertips against my clit, pushing me closer and closer to the edge. “I’m—”

The rest of it gets lost as his mouth crashes into mine, his tongue licking and teasing past my parted lips to tangle itself with mine.

I come hard, moaning his name, the sound of it getting lost in his mouth, his hand pressed against the small of my back, holding me against him while he fucks me through my orgasm. My pussy clenching and gripping around his fingers until I’m dizzy and spent, my face buried in his neck, eyes squeezed shut while I wait for the room to stop spinning. Finally, conscious enough to form words, I lift my head to find him watching me, his dark, heavy-lidded gaze finding mine as soon as I open my

eyes. Pulling his fingers slowly from my pussy, I watch as he lifts them to his mouth to push them past partially parted lips to suck them clean. The second my taste hits his tongue, his cock gives a hard jerk inside his track pants and I give him a smile and sit up, shifting my hips back to press my still throbbing pussy against the rigid length of him.

“I guess it—”

That’s as far as I get before Ryan’s hands clamp around my upper arms to gently, but firmly, move me away from him.

“You don’t want to do that,” he tells me, his voice rough and uneven, letting me go to push himself across the mattress and away from me.

Uh, yeah I do.

Before I can say it out loud, Ryan is off the bed, and standing on the other side of it, as far away from me as he can get. “It’s late, he tells me—you should probably go.”

And again, without giving me enough time to formulate a response, he disappears into the bathroom to wait for me to leave.

Fourteen

Ryan

It’s okay, Ryan. We all have scars...

Grace’s voice echoes in my head, so loud and clear, it sounds like she’s here. Like she’s right next to me. Like she never left.

Eyes popped open, I turn my head on the pillow and look, expecting to see her, hoping that what happened last night was the dream and finding her next to me might be what's real.

But the bed beside me is empty.

Because Grace did leave.

She left because I told her to.

Because when she touched me, I freaked out and the fact that she genuinely didn't care about my performance issues just made shit worse.

Because I finally figured out what's worse than having a dick that doesn't work.

Having one that does.

Having a woman who sees you for exactly what you are but wants you anyway.

Makes you feel as perfect as she is.

And knowing she deserves better.

More than you can give her.

Fuck my life.

Swiping a rough hand over my face, I grit my teeth and start to move my legs, inching them toward the side of the bed. Breathing through the pain, I get myself into position, using the discreet handrail that someone was thoughtful enough to have installed into the headboard to lever myself up until I'm sitting on the edge of the



mattress.

It takes me another five minutes to stand and another ten to get my crippled ass to the bathroom. Last night, I didn't notice them but I do now. The non-skid texture of the floor. The same discreet handrails as in the bedroom. The low-profile toilet. The fact that the shower door is wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

I'm living in an apartment designed for someone who's disabled.

Because that's what I am now.

Who I am.

Cry me a fuckin' river. When you gonna finally get tired of feelin' sorry for yourself, Ranger? When you gonna just accept the fact that you're broken and get the fuck on with it?

Get on with what?

I almost ask the question out loud.

Probably would have if I wasn't so afraid of the answer.

Instead, I lean against the sink because I refuse to use the chair someone put in here to struggle my way out of my clothes, and avoiding my reflection in the mirror, hobble my way to the shower.

Thirty minutes later, I'm back in my bedroom, towel slung around my hips, when I hear my front door open and close.

Grace.

It's stupid but she's the first thought that pops into my head. That she came back, and it has me hurrying, yanking on the first pair of pants I can find before heading for the

door.

There're no hallways in this apartment. It's something I found weird at first but now realize it's by design. That like the wide doorways and lowered light switches, it makes the entire space accessible, so when I open my bedroom door, I can see directly into the living room and the kitchen beyond it.

Henley is standing at the island, back to me, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, phone wedged between her ear and her shoulder. "Mother, you're being ridicu—" Whatever our mother said to interrupt her tenses up her shoulders like someone stuck a knife in her back. "For the last time—I will not be flying to Paris, or anywhere else for that matter, to buy a wedding dress, so you can call Jean Luc-whatever the hell his name is and tell him I found a designer, right here in Fenway." She sighs, lifting a hand to drop her forehead into it. "Because I did, mother—Anton. Yes, I am serious—" Another pause, followed by a sigh. "I'm hanging up, I don't have time for this right now... because I'm at Ryan's—that's enough." Her voice hardens. Her tone goes cold. "I really am hanging up now."

Now it's my turn to feel like someone just stuck a knife between my shoulder blades because whatever our mother said to make Henley angry, I'd bet my good leg it was about me. I watch as she drops the phone away from her ear and jabs at the screen before tossing it on the counter where it bounces into the prescription bottle I left sitting there last night. Hearing the pills rattle around inside their plastic cage makes my leg ache.

Like she can read my mind, Henley picks them up and, turning the bottle slowly like she's reading the label.

"You can count them if you want."

When I say it, Henley turns toward the sound of my voice and lets out a yelp,

fumbling the bottle. It hits the counter before bouncing off its edge to roll across the kitchen floor.

“What? No—” She gives me another quick, near frantic look over her shoulder, her face and neck erupting in ugly red blotches that I remember from when we were kids. It almost always signaled embarrassment and guilt. “I just...” She stoops to chase the pill bottle across the floor. “I didn’t know you were here. I thought—” Catching it against the backstop of the refrigerator, she straightens herself to give me a sunny smile, flashing me a set of perfect, white teeth. It makes her a stranger. Seem foreign somehow. “I thought you were still staying at Patrick’s.”

“Got crowded.” I cock my head a bit before pushing my shoulder off the doorframe to shuffle my way into the kitchen. “Your turn.” I skirt the island, heading toward the sleek red machine I’m assuming is a coffee pot nestled between an automatic can opener and a toaster oven. “What are you doing here, Hen?” I prompt her when she doesn’t answer me right away.

“I...” I hear the rattle of my pill bottle behind me as she sets it on the island between us. “I was on my way to the game and thought I’d swing by to drop off some last-minute comfort items.”

“Comfort items?” I chuckle, tossing a look at her over my shoulder. “What the fuck is a comfort item?”

“Uh...” Her voice drifts closer. “Nothing important,” she says, her profile easing into my peripheral as she moves to stand next to me. “Just some magazines. A few pair of socks. A house plant.”

Feeling like I’m being evaluated, I do my best to ignore the fact that she’s standing a few feet away and watching every move I make. “Sounds like shit you’d bring your grandmother in a nursing home.” Rolling the dice, I reach for the cabinet directly

above the machine and feel ridiculously relieved to find it crammed with coffee mugs. Pulling one off the shelf, I stick it under the machine before lifting the lever to open it. “Quilters Quarterly? Cross Stitch Bonanza?” I tease her while I give the coffee pod caddy next to the machine a spin. When she doesn’t laugh, I pick one at random and feed it into the machine before looking up to find her staring at me, gaze trained on my torso and the decade’s worth of battle scars scattered across it.

I forgot to put on a shirt.

“Are you gonna cry again?” I hate the way I sound when I say it. Angry. Accusatory. Like she’s the reason I spent the last ten years of my life catching bullets and collecting stab wounds. “Because if—”

“That prescription is from January.” She interrupts me, her tone just as angry and heavy with accusation as mine.

“Yeah.” Looking away from her, I slam the machine closed and stab the button with a picture of a coffee cup on it. “So what?”

“So, it’s April and it’s almost full.” She ducks her head a little, putting her face in my direct line of sight. “How are managing your pain?”

For a second all I can do is stare at her. That’s how stunned I am. How angry. I take a step back, moving further down the counter. Away from her, putting space between us. “What the fuck are you asking me, Hen?” I’m trying to pretend she’s accusing me of using street drugs or maybe drinking to self-medicate but that’s not what she’s saying.

“The question is a pretty simple one—” She leans over to snatch my near full bottle of oxy off the island and holds it out between us like they’re something I’ve never seen before. “if you’re not taking your meds, then how are you managing your pain?”

I'm not.

I'm not managing it.

I'm eating it.

Or it's eating me.

I haven't quite figured out which.

Forcing my gaze away from the bottle I look her straight in the eye and lie. "I take them when I need them."

Henley doesn't even bother to call me on the enormous pile of bullshit I just shoveled at her. "Why aren't you taking your meds?" She sounds scared when she says it. Like she's afraid of what I'm going to tell her. What my answer is. Scared or not, she advances on me, prescription bottle still held up between us. "Ryan—"

"Stop asking stupid questions, Henley," I bark at her. Pushing myself toward her, I snatch the bottle out of her hand. "You know why."

The instant I say it, her bottom lip starts to tremble and she quirks her mouth to the side to chew on the inside of her cheek like she used to do when we were kids. It's a trick she used to use to keep herself from crying. She used to do it so much I started to worry she'd eventually gnaw a hole in her face. "You're not him, Ryan. You're not Dad. You could never be—"

“Yes, I could.” I talk over her, my tone loud and rough. “I could be—” Turning away from her, I work the cap off the bottle and dump them into the kitchen sink. “Because I want to take them, Henley. I want to take them—that’s why I don’t.” Before I can think about what I’m doing, I flip the faucet on and run hot water over the scatter of round, white pills in the bottom of the sink. “Because if I end up like him, I really will kill myself.” The admission hangs between us, making it impossible to look at her. Instead I watch the pills I dumped into the sink dissolve under the rush of hot water.

“So your solution is to what exactly?” She reaches out to slap the water off, her tone forcing me to look at her. “Suffer? Grit your teeth and bear it?” She shakes her head at me, dark brown eyes wide. She looks confused. Like she can’t understand how dropping off a few magazines and a ficus devolved into a shouting match with her headcase older brother. “That’s selfish—you know that, right? It’s selfish to expect the rest of us to just stand by and watch you suffer.”

“I don’t expect you to watch me do anything, Hen.” I smile at her but it doesn’t feel right. Hasn’t felt right for a while now. “I expect you to leave because that’s what you do when shit gets hard. You leave.”

She jerks back when I say it, away from me like I took a swing at her. Standing there, fists clenched at her sides, mouth quirked and eyes wide, she stares at me, chest heaving slightly like she can’t quite catch her breath. I expect her to apologize like she always does. Tell me she’s sorry for leaving when we were kids. Leaving me behind.

“You left me first—long before I ever got into that car.” She pushes the words out past clenched teeth.

“How the fuck you figure that?” I can feel the back of my neck go hot and tight at her tone. “When I was the one left standing on the goddamned sidewalk, watching you

get whisked away by Daddy fucking Warbucks??”

She flinches when I say it, either because I’m yelling at her or because she doesn’t like to be reminded of what happened. It doesn’t matter which, either way, watching her do it makes me feel like shit.

“You left me alone, day after day, night after night—with them.” She reaches up to jab a perfectly manicured finger in my face. “While you were off playing car thief with Declan, I was at home breaking up fistfights and making sure dad didn’t choke on his own vomit.”

“Why the fuck do you think we even had a home?” I roar it at her, so close and loud she takes a step back, away from me, like I’m a rabid dog that’s snapped its leash. “Who do you think was paying the rent? Keeping the lights on? Dad?” I laugh, the sound of it so sharp and bitter I feel the bile of it bite into the back of my throat. “Lydia?” I feel like breaking something when I say our mother’s name. Killing something with my bare hands. “You think either one of them gave a fuck about us?” I can tell by the look on her face that the thought never even occurred to her. That she never put two and two together. I don’t know why but the realization hurts like a bitch. “You know what—it doesn’t even matter. Jack’s not your dad, remember?” Somehow, I manage to choke it out past the bitter lump of resentment lodged in my throat. “And she’s made it clear I’m not her son.”

She is our mother and Henley doesn’t even try to deny it. She just stands there and stares at me like she can’t decide if she wants to start crying or take a swing at me. The Henley I know would’ve done both. The stranger my sister has turned into doesn’t do either one.

I watch as she takes a step back, settling a mask of dignified decorum over her face and my Hen disappears completely. Turning, she reaches for the pile of magazines she left on the island and pulls one from the stack. It’s not a magazine. It’s a medical



supply catalog. Setting it on top of the others, she flips it open to a page that's marked with a lime green post-it. "You're my brother, Ryan." She says it to the catalog in front of her, palm pressed against the marked page. "And no matter what you say, no matter what you do, I'm never going to stop loving you." She finally looks at me, dropping her hand away from the counter with a sigh. "I'm not going anywhere—and neither are you." Turning away from me, she collects her coat from the back of the couch and shrugs it on. "Since you're moved in, you can be here to receive a delivery tomorrow morning." She fixes her coat collar before slinging the strap of her purse over her shoulder. "Don't bother refusing it, it's already been paid for and they'll be instructed to call Conner if you give them trouble."

Because Con's the only Gilroy who won't back down when I start raging. He's the only one who'll trade me, punch for punch. "So now you're sic'ing your boyfriend on me?"

"Yes." She gives me a flat smile, the kind you give someone when you're sick of their shit but still trying to be polite. "It's going right in that room—" she points to a set of barn doors next to the bathroom I haven't noticed until now. "but whether you use it or not is entirely up to you."

Before I can ask her what the hell she's talking about, Henley turns and away from me and walks out the door.

Fifteen

Grace

"Mom."

My eyes pop open when I hear her voice because that's what happens when your kid whispers your name when you're sleeping. You wake up in an instant, heart crammed

in your throat because, even if you don't know what, you're sure something is wrong.

Molly is standing over me and I don't even have to look at the clock to know it's early. Waking up at the crack of dawn is typical Molly but she usually lets me sleep, at least until sunrise.

"What is it?" Struggling to sit up, I push my legs over the side of the bed so I can stand. "What's wrong?"

"It's Sunday," she says in a matter-of-fact tone. "When can we go to the Aunt Mary and Uncle Paddy's for dinner?"

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Molly.” Laughing a little, because of course this is about Ryan, I collapse back onto the bed, my feet still stuck to the floor. “What time is it?”

“Seventy-six ten.”

Still laughing, I flail my hand in the direction of the nightstand. “Hand me my phone.”

Huffing a little, she steps on my feet (probably on purpose) on her way to the nightstand. “Here,” she says, slapping it into my hand. “When can we—”

“Shit.” I drop the phone and cover my face with my free hand. “Molly Grace, it’s 5AM.”

Which means I’ve been in my bed for all of three hours.

I was in Ryan’s bed for a hell of a lot longer.

“You said a swear,” Molly informs me. “You gotta put money in my jar.”

That damn swear jar.

Another reason to hate Ryan.

Like I need one after last night.

Uncovering my eyes, I stare at the ceiling above my bed. “Go get dressed,” I tell

Molly without looking at her.

“Are we going to see Ryan?” I can hear the hope in her voice and it nearly kills me.

Sitting up, I give her a lopsided grin. “Yup,” I tell her because all roads lead back to Ryan O’Connell—for both of us it, seems.

When she runs out of the room with a whoop to do as she’s told, I pull a pair of yoga pants out of my drawer and top them with a baggy sweater before heading to the kitchen.

I find Patrick standing at the counter, eating a bowl of cereal while waiting for the coffee to finish brewing. Like every other Sunday since I’ve been here, he’s wide awake, ready to head to the park to coach baseball.

“You’re up early,” he says when I walk into kitchen, spoonful of raisin bran halfway to his mouth. “If you want, I can take Molly with me to the park.” He delivers the cereal and chews for a few seconds before he finishes his offer. “You and Cari can mee—”

“Are you still looking for shotgirls?”

My question is met with silence. His spoon makes another trip. He shovels in a mouthful of cereal, chewing while regarding me thoughtfully. When his mouth is finally clear, he shakes his head. “No.”

Shit. He just hired Tess, so I knew it was a longshot, but I was still hoping that Gilroy family nepotism would work in my favor.

Before I can even start to feel disappointed, he keeps talking. “I’m thinking about adding a beer station by the pool tables, a few nights a week—bottled domestics.

Imports on special. Try to relieve some of the pressure at the bar.” He sets his bowl aside and crosses his arms over his chest. “You have any experience?”

“Yeah—” I nod, never so glad to have served warm beer to factory workers in my whole life. “I cocktailed at the local dive back home. I can get you references if you want. My old boss there will—”

“I don’t need references—you say you have experience, then you have experience.” He doesn’t say anything else for a second. Probably trying to figure out how much shit my sister is going to give him if he hires me without talking to her about it first. Finally he cocks his head and sighs. “Like I said—it’s more an experiment than anything else. Just a few nights a week and the pay won’t—”

“I’ll take it.”

He laughs a little at my enthusiasm and swipes a hand over his face. “What about school?”

“I can do both,” I tell him, sounding a hell of a lot more confident than I feel. “Besides, I’m not even sure I got in—and even if I did, the program I applied for has a waiting list. It could be—”

“The medical assistant program.” He walks his bowl to the sink and gives it a rinse. “You got in.” He says it like it’s a fact, not even worth debating.

Before I can ask him what makes him so sure, Molly comes running down the hall at break-neck speed, sliding to a screeching halt in front of the laundry room door. “We’re going to see Ryan,” she announces to Patrick while she stands on her tip-toes to wrangle her jacket off its hook.

“Oh...” Patrick takes a discreet glance at his watch before shooting me a look that’s

caught somewhere between amusement and concern because he undoubtedly knows where I was last night and that I wasn't home when he dragged himself upstairs after closing down the bar, but when he looks back at Molly he gives her one of his full-dimpled grins. "In that case, don't forget your swear jar."

Sixteen

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

Ryan

A sensory deprivation tank.

The kind you fill with water and a half-ton of Epsom salt before climbing in naked and floating off into hippy-dippy oblivion.

That's what Henley is having delivered tomorrow, and if it's anything like the one in the medical equipment catalog she left behind, its price tag is enough to make me sick to my stomach.

Yeah, I know that between my uncovered surgeries and the topflight aftercare I got at Sojourn, not to mention buying off my assault victims, I've likely cost Patrick more money than I'll ever see in a lifetime—fuck a dozen lifetimes—so I don't know why I'm getting twisted over what amounts to a fraction of that, but I am.

As soon as I look at it, realize what it is, I don't want it. Maybe because I know who'll ultimately be paying for it.

Spencer Halston-Day.

Henley's stepfather.

Not my stepfather.

Not even our stepfather.

Spencer is her stepfather.

Not mine.

Because I've never even met the man.

Because he took my sister and left me behind without so much as a fuck off, kid.

I can only imagine what my mother told him about me. That I was worthless, just like my father. That I wasn't worth saving. That I was more trouble than I was worth. And he believed it—every word of it—because believing served his own selfishness.

If he thinks he can buy me off with a shiny new toy or that all's forgiven now that Henley is back and a complete fucking thorn in my side then—

There's a knock on my door, short and brisk, like the person on the other side of it doesn't actually want to knock. Hoping their request for entry will either go unnoticed or ignored.

For a second, I almost do ignore it. Because I'm sure it's Henley and I don't want to talk to her. Because we won't talk. We'll yell and scream and I'll end up saying something shitty I can't take back.

Leaving the kitchen, I decide to take myself back to bed and leave whoever's at my door standing on the other side of it. Instead, I find myself in front of it. Reaching for it, I pull it open to find Grace and Molly on my doorstep.

Sunny blonde hair pulled back in a perky little ponytail. Jeans and an olive-green jacket that bring out the green in her eyes. Jesus, how does she look so goddamned good, so early in the morning? Before I can make a fool of myself and ask, Molly saves me.



“Mom said the shingles words when I woke her up this morning,” she says, shoving her plastic jar into the space between us. “That means she’s gotta put money in my jar right?”

“Shingles?” I look up, over Molly’s head to find Grace watching me.

“Shit.” Grace stacks her hands on her hips, her look sharpening into a glare that practically dares me to laugh. “I said shit.”

“See?” Molly shakes her jar at me. “Money, right?”

“Well—”

“I happen to think swearing is an acceptable response to being woken up by your four-year-old at 5AM on a Sunday morning—especially when she’s doing it to ask you about a pending dinner date that’s still twelve plus hours away,” Grace says, letting me know that she blames me for the fact that her eyes are open and she’s upright before the sun.

Sighing, I lean my shoulder against the doorframe. “I think she’s right, Moll,” I tell her with a shrug. “It’s too early to be awake—swearing before 7AM on a Sunday is allowed.”

“You’re awake and you’re not swearing,” she says, bottom lip poking out a little, letting me know I’m a traitor for taking her mother’s side.

“Henley stopped by on her way to the ball field to drop some stuff off—she woke me up and I swore plenty.”

“Patrick is awake and he didn’t swear.”

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“I don’t think Patrick is human,” I tell her in a sincere tone that earns me a snort from Grace. “Why are you awake?”

“I’m an early bird.” She gives me a shrug. “That’s what Gran always says. I woke my mom up like she said,” Molly sighs, readjusting the jar in her arms. “She says since it’s your fault I find it acceptable to wake everyone up at such an ungodly hour that you can deal with me—can I come in?”

“Ahhh,” I say, giving Grace another quick look to make sure that’s what we’re doing here before I take a step back. “Sure.”

“Thanks,” Molly says, pushing her jar into my hands as she moves past me. “You found your stick,” she says, noticing my cane.

“Still not a stick,” I say, swallowing a laugh.

“Still looks like one,” she says while she struggles out of her coat. “Do you have a bathroom,”

“Yes.” I point the business end of my cane at the guest bath, tucked into the corner, between what Patrick decided would be my home office and the set of closed barn doors Henley pointed out before she left. “In there.”

As soon as she’s gone, I turn to find Grace still standing in the open doorway, like she can’t decide if she wants to risk coming in a second time so soon.

“You left.” Using my cane, I shuffle thump my way over to where Molly dropped her

coat on the floor. Gritting my teeth, I bend over to pick it up. When I straighten it's to Grace watching me while she eases herself through the door to shut it behind her.

"You told me to, remember?"

"I've got fucking brain damage, Grace," I remind her, trying to make light of what happened between us last night. "I say a lot of stupid shit I don't mean."

Ignoring the obvious having brain damage doesn't give you the right to be a dickbag reply, she just shrugs. "I didn't want Molly to wake up and find me gone," she says, reaching out to take her daughter's coat from my grasp. "We don't want to confuse her, right?"

The last of her explanation is enough like the bullshit excuse I gave her Friday night about why I didn't want to share her bed that I feel my gut clench when she says it.

"Grace—"

"I've been beating myself up since the night we met, trying to figure out what it is about me that you don't like—why you don't want to want me."

Sighing, I swipe a rough hand over my face. "It's not you. There's nothing wrong with you, Grace. I—"

"I know."

That stops me in my tracks. "What?"

"I said I know. It's not me—it's you."

Even though it's true, it still stings, hearing her say it. Agreeing with me that there's

something wrong with me. “You’re right. I’m just—”

“Not ready for me.”

That’s not what I was going to say. I was going to say fucked up, but she’s right. I’m not ready for her. I know she’s right because when she says it, I can feel the clench in my gut tighten. It squeezes so hard I can feel my pulse in my stomach.

Instead of acknowledging it, I completely side-step it. Stick to the explanation I worked out and told myself I’d give her the next time I saw her. “I’m sorry, about last night, I know I was—”

“There’s nothing wrong with me, Ryan.” She doesn’t sound angry when she says it. She sounds resigned. “And there’s nothing wrong with you either. I know you don’t believe that and I’m just someone who barely knows you but—”

“There’s plenty wrong with me,” I tell her, my tone hard and flat against her ears. “I’m broken, Grace. I’m fucking broken and there isn’t a goddamned thing I could’ve done to stop it from happening. I—” I stop talking for a second, trying to gather myself. Keep myself contained. “You don’t know who I was before—”

“You keep saying that.” She nods. “And you’re right, I don’t know who you were. I know who you are.” She sighs and shakes her head at me, a look of frustration settling over her face. “Something bad happened to you, Ryan—something goddamned horrible that was out of your control.” She swallows hard, and looks away for a second like it’s hard to look at me. “That’s what makes these kinds of things so horrible—not being able to stop them from happening. Knowing you’re at the mercy of something that wants to tear you apart.” She looks at me again, her jaw set, eyes narrowed. “But you’re wrong about who you are. There is so much—”

“If you say potential, I swear to Christ...” I heave out a breath, my jaw suddenly tight

and aching. “I’m not a project, Grace. I’m not some wounded animal you can just nurse back to health,” I tell her, even though that’s exactly what I feel like, every time I’m with her.

“I know that.” She frowns at me. “I don’t want to fix you, Ryan—” Somewhere behind me, a toilet flushes, followed by the quiet rush of water swirling down the drain. “I can’t fix you, because there’s nothing to fix. You’re not broken, you’re just different, and until you accept that, whatever this is—” She waves a hand between us. “Is something you’re not ready for.”

“What are you saying?”

Behind me, the water shuts off but Molly doesn’t come out of the bathroom right away.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“I’m saying I’m a distraction. A way to forget what happened to you. An excuse to ignore it.”

“Jesus, Grace.” The clench in my gut loosens, the force of it rolling over me, so fast I feel dizzy. Almost sick with it. Shame. I’m not so fucked up that I don’t know what I’m feeling. It’s shame. “You make it sound like I’m using you.”

“You are.” She says it quietly, her gaze never wavering from mine. “And it’s not good for either of us, so I think it’s best if whatever... this is stops.”

It’s what I wanted, right? I’ve been pushing her away from day one. Pushing her away just to drag her back in. Trying to make her hate me, right before I touch her.

It’s unfair to her.

That’s what she told me the other night in Molly’s room. That I’m being unfair to her, and she’s right. I’m being selfish, every time I touch her.

That’s selfish—you know that, right? It’s selfish to expect the rest of us to just stand by and watch you suffer.

“Okay.” I nod my agreement, forcing my stiff neck to bend. My mouth to form words it doesn’t want to say. “What about Molly?” Saying her name out loud lays a heavy band of panic across my chest. “I don’t want to—”

Lose her.

I don't want to lose her.

Like saying her name, summoned her, the door behind me flies open and Molly comes streaking out. "I'm hungry," she announces, coming to a screeching halt in front of me. "I didn't eat breakfast."

I watch Grace open her mouth. Her chest expands under the weight of her coat. She's about to make their excuses and leave. She said what she came to say. She ended it and now she's going to leave. Take Molly with her.

It's what I wanted, right?

So why do I feel like I'm drowning?

"Pancakes." I say it to Molly because I can't look at Grace right now. Not after what she just said to me. Not knowing that she's right. "We'll go get pancakes." I look up to find Grace watching me. "Because we're friends and that's what friends do, right? They go get pancakes. Just pancakes."

"Mom?" Molly turns to her mom and clasps her hands together. "Can we? Please?"

"We can't, Moll." She tilts her head and gives me a shake. "We're going to the park with Cari to watch the ball game, remember?"

"But that's not for hours..." Molly stacks her hands on her hips and her chin lifts into that stubborn Faraday tilt that signals a challenge. "And anyways, aunt Cari is still sleeping."

"Oh, so suddenly, you're an expert on telling time?" She gives me another look, one that tells me that she blames me for just about everything that's gone wrong in her life since she stepped foot in Boston and for a second, I think she's going to say no

again. Grab Molly and drag her away from me.

This time for good.

Because she's right.

I'm to blame for all of it.

But even though I know it, I can't let them go. Not yet. Not even knowing that it's probably the best thing for both of them. Henley is right I am selfish and I don't care, because I need this. Just one more day with them.

Just a few more hours.

Because this is it.

Grace and I are over and after today I'll be without them.

Alone again.

But then Grace gives me a gift. Her face relaxes and she looks away from me for a second before looks at the both of us and sighs. "Okay. Just pancakes."

Seventeen

Grace



*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

I've been to Benny's a few times since moving to Boston and it's always been crowded, but this is next level crowded. Like, people standing in a line that nearly wraps around the outside of the building just to put their names on the waitlist, crowded.

Even though I know the Gilroy's have some sort of arrangement with the hostess, when I see the amount of people waiting to get in, I immediately slow my pace. "Molly, I'm not sure we have time for this..." It's a lie. We have time. I have a car. I can just drive to the park after breakfast if I wanted to. The truth is that even though I agreed to pancakes—just pancakes—the thought of sitting across a table from Ryan for an hour, while pretending that everything is great when it isn't makes me want to snatch Molly up and run home.

All the way back to Ohio.

"I got this," Ryan says, his hand pressed into the small of my back for just a moment, before he pulls it away with a mumbled sorry. Pulling the door open, he steps aside so Molly and I can pass through it first.

As soon as we're in, Ryan takes the lead, grabbing Moll's hand so she won't get lost in the crowd, pulling her in his wake, weaving and pushing his way through the tight knot of people crowding the hostess station.

Like the first few times I've been here, Nora the hostess is behind the podium and as soon as she sees me, her eyes narrow. She can barely see over the hostess station but the gaze that focuses on me is razor sharp. "Sorry, Grace," she barks at me in a tone that tells me she really isn't all that sorry. "You n' me ain't there yet, so unless you

got one of my boys in your pocket, you're gonna—"

Then she sees Ryan.

"Where the hell have you been?" Her sharp tone cuts across the lobby of the diner and everyone in it goes quiet, looking around, trying to figure out which one of them was stupid enough to incur Nora's wrath.

"Hey, Nora," Ryan says, giving her one of his odd, flat smiles. "As terrifying as ever."

"Flattery ain't getting you out of this one, and I asked you a question," she snarls at him while she scrambles down from her perch as fast as her old bones will allow. When her feet are finally on the floor, she stalks her way toward him, the crowd of people parting like she's Moses in orthopedic shoes. Finally stopping in front of us, she cranes her neck back as far as it will go to glare up at him. "Where the hell have you been?"

Looking a little uncomfortable about being the sudden center of everyone's attention, Ryan takes a quick glance around the room before refocusing on the tiny tyrant in front of him. "Nora, I—"

"Three months." She lifts a bony finger and jabs it at him. "You've been home for three whole months and you just stroll in here and think—"

Letting go of Molly's hand, Ryan reaches for Nora's. "I'm okay," he tells her, his fingers closing around hers to give them a gentle squeeze. "I'm okay, Nora."

Her face softens and her mouth starts to tremble, her accusatory glare going dull with tears as it drifts down to the cane Ryan is using to keep himself upright. When she finally drags her gaze back to his face, her expression is hardened and her eyes are

hot and dry. “I know that,” she snaps back, jerking her hand out of Ryan’s grasp. “I got eyes, don’t I? What you should be is sorry for is taking so damn long to drag your sorry ass in here.”

“I am.” His mouth twitches again as he finds Molly’s hand again with his own without even looking for it. “I’m sorry—I should’ve come sooner. Forgive me?”

Nora makes an ugly noise in the back of her throat. “Next time you disappear on—”

“There won’t be a next time,” he tells her with a head shake. “I’m out of commission—” He swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing and scraping inside his throat. “Home for good.”

“You better be.” She gives him another angry glare but it’s thin enough to show the emotion beneath. Worry and relief. Love and maybe a little bit of desperation. She catches me looking at her and pins me with a narrowed, beady-eyed glare. “You got somethin’ to say to me, Grace?”

I shake my head, instincts pushing my feet across the floor, moving me closer to Ryan. Before I follow my head shake with an emphatic no, Nora drops her gaze down, letting it settle on Molly.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Molly,” she says, totally nonplussed by Nora’s trademark hostility. “Who are you?”

Molly’s blunt tone cracks the hard granite of Nora’s face. “I’m Nora.” Her sharp, bird-like gaze finds me again, marking the fact that Molly is practically my clone. “Who’s he to you?” Nora asks, pointing her gnarled finger at Ryan.

“He’s my friend,” Molly tells her, quick and sure. “We’re here for pancakes and hot chocolate—” She looks up at Ryan again. “I can have hot chocolate, right?” When he gives her the nod, Molly turns back to Nora and gives her a triumphant smile.

“Well, what’re you waitin’ for, a tickertape parade?” Nora says with an impatient snort, waving her hand at Ryan, dismissing the lot of us. “Nothin’s changed—you know where to go.”

“Thanks, Nora,” Ryan says, leaning heavily on his cane to bend over to drop a quick kiss on her wrinkled cheek.

“Glad you’re home,” she tells him, giving him a pat on his cheek that sounds more like a slap. “Now get out of here and let me get back to work.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ryan says, herding us toward the dining room and to the booth that always sits empty, no matter how busy they are, just waiting for a Gilroy.

Like the last time, Ryan struggles a bit to get himself into the booth. By the time he manages to get settled, the waitress is standing over us, coffee pot in hand.

Ryan gives her a nod. “And a hot chocolate, when you get a chance,” he says, turning over our cups for the waitress.

“With whipped cream, please,” Molly adds, her little face lighting up with a grin when the waitress nods her approval. Eating out is something we never did much before moving here. She must think she’s died and gone to heaven.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

As soon as the waitress scurries away to top off the next table, Ryan clears his throat and frowns, clearly looking for something safe to talk about. Finally he settles on a subject. “I’ve never heard Nora call an outsider by their given name before.” Reaching for the menus he hands me one, his fingertips brushing across the back of my hand when I reach out to take it. Clearing his throat again, he looks away from me, aiming his dark brown gaze over my shoulder. “How’d you manage that one?”

“Apparently, I got lucky at my re-naming ceremony—” Thinking of my harrowing first encounter with Nora, I somehow manage to laugh, despite the fact that my heart is jammed in my throat. “The general consensus is that it’s for Grace Kelly, not Grace Faraday,” I tell him with a shrug, my cheeks flushed because the idea of me baring any sort of resemblance to a classic beauty like Grace Kelly is laughable, to say the least.

“I can see it,” Ryan says to his menu before flicking a nervous glance in my direction. “I mean—”

“Is that old lady your mom?” Molly chirps at Ryan from across the table, the question eliciting a muffled snort from the waitress while she fills our cups.

“Nora?” Ryan shoots a look into the waiting area, his mouth quirking a bit as he watches her verbally abuse the crowd waiting for a table. “No, she’s not my mom.” He looks back at Molly and the smile holds but I can see how much it costs him. How much he doesn’t want to talk about his mother. “My mother’s not that nice.”

Ryan

Breakfast was awkward.

A lot of nervous, sideways glances. A lot of polite smiles and mindless chitchat. So much so, that by the time the check came I was practically crawling around inside my own skin.

Because I know the only reason Grace agreed to breakfast in the first place was to make Molly happy. That if she'd had her way, she'd been done with me the second she told me that whatever the hell has been happening between us for the past week is over.

I'm saying I'm a distraction. A way to forget what happened to you. An excuse to ignore it.

The bitch of it is she's right.

Too bad that knowing it doesn't make any difference—at least to me anyway.

It's a good thing one of us is finally thinking clearly.

"We're going to go look at wedding dresses with Aunt Cari after the baseball game." Molly tells me from the backseat. "Do you want to come with us—to the park, not to look at dresses?"

My failure to immediately refuse the offer earns me another nervous glance from Grace before she flicks her gaze toward the rearview mirror. "Molly, I'm sure Ryan has things to do today."

"Sorry, Moll," I say, turning in my seat to look at her. "You're mom's right, I've got

some stuff to take of.” It’s the same excuse I gave her yesterday morning, only this time it has the added benefit of being true. Turning around again, I look at Grace. “You can just drop me off on the corner here.”

Now she frowns. “The center is still two blocks away.”

“Yeah, but Con’s garage is right across the street.” I tell her, reaching for the release button my seatbelt. “That’s where I’m going.”

She reluctantly does what I say, pulling over as far as she can. “Do you need me to wait?” She asks me, finally turning to aim that frown of hers in my direction. “I can—”

“No, you’ve got a ballgame to get to, remember?” Opening the door I step my leg out, grappling with my cane to get it in place before I attempt putting weight on it. Finally out of the car, I lean my head back in and look at Molly. “Are you still going to the Gilroy’s for dinner?”

She nods her head slowly, mouth quirked to the side like she’s trying to keep from crying.

“Then I’ll see you there.”

She brightens considerably and I realize she was expecting me to tell her I wouldn’t be there. “Aunt Mary has card games—do you know how to play Crazy Eights?”

“Nope.” I give her a shrug. “But you can teach me after dinner.” Looking at Grace, I force myself to smile. “See you later,” I say before shutting the door.

I give Molly another wave through the window before shuffling my way toward the sidewalk. As soon as I clear the curb, Grace drives away.

To tell the truth, I'm a little surprised Con's even here. It's Sunday. He should be at the ball field, along with everyone else but as I cross the street, I can see that one of the roll-ups on the garage is open halfway. The fact that White Snake isn't blasting through the speakers loud enough to torture the whole neighborhood tells me it's Con who's working at 7AM on a Sunday and not Tess.

By the time I hobble my ass across the tarmac, my leg is screaming but I keep pushing. Using my cane for support I stoop over and let myself in to find Con's boots sticking out from the undercarriage of the Mustang he's been driving since I got here. It's midnight blue with a white racing stripe and just about the most beautiful car I've ever seen. Just looking at it, makes my leg ache.

"You made your sister cry again," he calls out from under the car. "Gotta tell you, Ry—" He digs the heels of his work boots into the concrete beneath them and wheels himself into view. "This whole angry, wounded warrior vibe you've got going on is really beginning to wear thin." Standing, he tosses the wrench in his hand into the chest positioned near the front of the car. "I mean, I get it, man. You caught a raw deal but you keep this shit up, I'm gonna lose my patience with you."

"She told you?" I barely manage to choke it out because as angry as I am and much as I deserve it, I can't help but feel betrayed.



*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“She told me what?” He barks out a laugh, leaning against the front fender of the car. “That you’re not taking your meds? That you’ve got some fucked up idea that managing your pain makes you the same as your father.” He jerks a shop rag free from the back pocket of his jeans and starts rubbing his hands clean. “Yeah—she told me,” he growls it at me, focusing his attention on his hands rather than on me, probably so he doesn’t launch himself across the garage and try to kill me for upsetting my sister again.

A nasty retort bubble in my throat. Something ugly, designed to piss him off. Start a fight. Because that’s what I need right now. I need to hit something. I need to hurt. Because if I can’t be with Grace then that’s all I’ve got. The only way I can forget.

Instead of letting it fly, I swallow it. Force it down until I’m practically choking on it. Focus on why I’m here. What I came to say. “It happened.”

“What happened?” he says in an impatient tone that tells me he’s about three seconds away from throwing me out on my ass. He’s usually patient with me. Unruffled by my surly bullshit, probably even amused but it most of the time, but I made Henley cry. Keep making her cry and the only thing keeping him from killing me for it is that fact that I’m family.

“My...” I trail off because, really—who wants to talk about their broken dick with anyone, much less another dude who’s never had one in his life. “My problem. It isn’t a problem anymore.”

Conner freezes, mid-rub, his gaze jerking up from his hands to find mine, anger and disappointment blown away but a sudden gust of comprehension. “You became

sexually aroused? Achieved an erection?” he asks, suddenly Dr. Gilroy instead of my smartass best friend. “When? Were you alone? What were you doing? How long where you able to sustain it? Did you—”

“Jesus Christ...” I reach up to pinch the bridge of my nose, squeezing my eyes shut so I don’t have to look at him while he rapid-fires questions at me about my dick. “I was with Grace,” I tell him, trying to take his questions seriously. “Last night and earlier—”

“It happened twice?” I imagine a father teaching his son to ride a bike wouldn’t sound half as proud as Con does of me right now. “Did you fuck her?”

“What? No.” I drop my hand away from my face and lift my head to pin him with a hard glare that tells him unequivocally that we aren’t going to talk about her. Not like that. “Look, I just need to know if it’ll work—” I have to force the words out of my mouth. Lift a hand to swipe it over my jaw to loosen it because it’s suddenly gone stiff. “The sensory deprivation tank that Henley is having delivered tomorrow. If I use it, will it help me, or are you guys just grasping at new-age, bullshit straws?”

Con’s jaw goes slack with surprise and I can’t help but smile because for a guy who sees everything coming, plans for every possible contingency, he never saw this. He never expected me to get in line. “Yeah.” He says it carefully, like he’s afraid to spook me. Like knows what I’m about to say and he’s afraid I’ll change my mind. “It’ll help—if you take it seriously.”

“Okay.” I nod, swallowing hard against the sudden lump in my throat. Breathing deep against the tightness in my chest. I recognize the feeling for what it is.

It’s fear.

Fear of the unknown. What comes next. Fear of failure and I finally accept that it’s

fear that's been keeping me still. Keeping me stuck in this place between who I was and who I could be if I'd just accept what happened to me and move the fuck on. I'll never be an operator again. I'll never be the guy who kicks down doors and saves the day—but I could be something else. I could be the guy who's ready for Grace. The guy who makes her life better.

I could do that.

Be that, if I'm ready to quit wallowing in my own little pit of despair and start putting in the work.

"Okay what?" Con gives up on his hands and tosses the shop rag on the long, low bench next to the pair of coveralls he never bothered to put on.

"I need a ride of my own," I say instead of answering him, unable to keep my gaze from drifting to the car behind him. "I need to start feeling normal again—like myself. I need my independence—as much as I can handle—but it can't be a stick shift. My leg won't—"

"I figured." He gives me a shrug before stuffing his shop rag back into his back pocket. "You can have this one as soon as I'm finished converting it to an automatic transmission for you—okay to what?"

The car he's offering me like it's nothing more than a piece of shit Corolla is worth a hundred grand, easy. It's also the car he's been driving since I got here. "What're you gonna drive?" I'm stalling and he knows it. Too chicken shit to just come out and say it.

"Your sister has a different car for every day of the week—driving some prissy import around for a few days might be the motivation I need to get off my ass and finish restoring my Cuda," he says with an impatient wave of his hand. "Okay to

what, Ry?” He crosses his tattooed arms over his thick chest and frowns at me. No more stalling. No more stupid questions. He wants an answer.

Now.

“Okay to tank therapy. Okay to physical therapy. Okay to therapy therapy. Whatever you say.” I give him a shrug, trying to act like I don’t know that this is the single most important decision I’ve made since they brought me home. “I’m in.”

Nineteen

Grace

“That one!” Molly crows from the red velvet settee she’s sitting on, before taking a dainty sip from the plastic champagne flute Anton filled with sparkling cider for her. It’s her third. Coupled with the three hot chocolates and the gallon of maple syrup she drowned her pancakes in at breakfast, she’s wired for sound, bouncing and clapping every time Cari comes out of the fitting room to show us another dress. I’m beginning to think that she’d proclaim that’s the one, even if Cari came out of the room to model a chicken suit.

“I can’t buy all of them, you nut.” Cari laughs at her enthusiasm.

“Yes, you can,” Molly tells her. “Uncle Patrick wouldn’t care if you bought a thousand dresses—he says he likes it when you wear ‘em.”

The birthmark on Cari’s chest, on full display because of the sweetheart neckline of the dress she’s wearing, practically bursts into flames, the heat of it rapidly spreading across her chest. “Did he now?”

Molly nods like she has the inside scoop. “After the game, he told me you only have

two of them and you keep telling him no when he tells you to buy more, so it's my job to make sure you get one today." She jostles her flute a bit while maneuvering her hand into the pocket of her jeans. The sight of apple cider sloshing over its rim and onto Anton's red velvet settee gives my Mom heart palpitations. Finally she hooks onto whatever she's looking for and yanks it out of her pocket with another fat slosh and waves what looks like a fifty-dollar bill in the air. "See, he even paid me."

Chest still flaming, Cari presses a hand to the side of her face and gives a low whistle. "That's a lot of money. You sure that wasn't meant for your swear jar?" she asks, dropping her hand to indicate the plastic jar on the table between them.

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Of course not,” Molly says, frowning at her while stuffing the bill back in her pocket. “Uncle Patrick doesn’t swear.”

“Is that so?” Cari says, barely able to keep herself from laughing.

“It is.” Molly gives her a sage nod. “Ryan says it’s because he’s not a human, but anyway, I have to help you pick out a dress today because it my job and I like all of them.”

“Maybe it is,” Cari concedes, “And maybe you do, but your job is to help me decide on one, remember?”

Molly gives up on being dainty and drains her flute, like dealing with Cari’s indecisiveness is going to be the death of her. “Well, you can buy more than one and maybe share. Someone else might need it someday,” she says, setting her plastic cup on the table before aiming what feels like a pointed look at me, sitting on the other side of the settee. “Right, Mom?”

Holy shit.

Did I just get called out by my four-year-old?

I think I did.

No—I definitely just did.

I open my mouth to tell her... what, exactly? That she’s wrong. That I’ll probably die

alone because even though that, thanks to her, I've shed my addiction to Jerkus Erectus, I seem to have merely replaced said predilection with a taste for screwed-up war vets who don't have the capacity to do much more than give me bone-shattering orgasms and make me question everything I know about myself a person.

Which is why you broke things off, remember. Because you can't save him—no one can. Not if he doesn't want to be saved.

“I require your assistance, Miss.”

At the sound of Anton's voice, Molly forfeits our staring contest and turns to look over the back of the couch where he's waiting for her with a pair of pristine white gloves. Seeing them, Molly jumps up with a grin and follows Anton into the catacombs of his little dress shop, on the hunt for another round of dresses for Cari to try on.

As soon as she's gone, I force myself to look at my sister. “I know you want to ask, so just get it over with.”

The tone of my voice, defensive and edged in accusation, pulls her dark blonde brows down over her sky blue eyes. “Would it do me any good to ask?” The birthmark on her chest going from bright red to burgundy in an instant. “I mean, you're the Queen of Secrets—I could ask you until I'm blue in the face and it wouldn't matter. If you—“

“I broke it off.”

That shuts her up.

But not for long.

“What?” The frown that mars her near-perfect face deepens into a scowl. “Why? Did something hap—”

“No—why do you keep asking me that?” My tone stops her cold and I flick a quick glance toward the open doorway Anton took Molly through. I can hear him fussing over her gloves, telling her she can’t touch any of the dresses until they’re on properly. “Nothing happened. He didn’t do anything, unless you count giving me the kind of orgasms that make me forget how to walk as something.”

Because that’s all that happened.

Because when I tried to touch him, he asked me to leave.

Shut me down.

Again.

“You and Ryan...” She looks confused. “You two—”

“No—we didn’t.” I shake my head, feeling a sudden rush of guilt because I’m dangerously close to spilling secrets I’m pretty sure he doesn’t want broadcasted to every member of the family. “There’s other ways to—” I give the doorway another glance, hoping to see Molly come through it so I can have an excuse shut up. When she doesn’t save me I sigh and look back at my sister. “It’s not all about dick you know.”

“Oh, believe me, I know...” she says with a laugh that makes me want to hide under a rock. When I don’t laugh with her, the sound of it slowly fades away until she’s quiet again, watching me carefully as the scowl on her face bleeding into something else. Something softer. Something that looks like empathy. It reminds me that she and Patrick weren’t always perfect. That a year ago she moved home out of the blue. That



she'd been fragile and out of sorts and whether she wanted to admit it or not, Patrick had been at the center of it.

“Gracie...” Picking up her skirts, she comes toward me to sit down in the spot Molly just vacated. Reaching for my hand, she settles it between her own to give it a gentle squeeze. “I know you like him, but...”

Like him?

Is that it? Is that all this is? Even though I've only known him for a few weeks, like doesn't seem to be a strong enough word to describe how I feel about Ryan. I don't like him—certainly not just like him. To be honest, I don't think I ever just liked him.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“But what?” Whatever she’s about to say, I don’t want to hear it. I need to but I don’t want to.

“But maybe it’s for the best.” She sighs and gives me a crooked smile. She opens her mouth to say something else but whatever it is, she decides against it with another hand squeeze. “Besides, you’ve got bigger fish to fry than Ryan O’Connell,” she reminds me, using one of our mother’s favorite saying. “You and Molly are better off without him, right?”

Yes.

Right.

I have a daughter to raise.

An education to get.

A career to pursue.

I don’t have time for the kind of mess that letting Ryan into our lives brought to my doorstep.

So I give her hand a squeeze back and force myself to smile.

And then I lie.

“Right.”

Twenty

Ryan

Five months later

I'm on a strict schedule these days.

Up by 4AM.

In the gym by five.

In the tank for a session by seven.

Downstairs by nine, on most days, to help Henley open the center.

The hour between is for showering and what my therapist refers to self-exploration.

Which is a therapeutic code for jerking off.

Guess what time it is?

Eyes closed, jaw clenched, I lift a hand off the bed and settle it on my chest and press it against my pec, feeling my heart and it picks up the pace, starts to thump harder and louder under my hand until the rush of blood in my ears is all I can hear and the heavy push and pull of my breath in my lungs is the only thing I can feel.

The hand on my chest starts to move. Slides down the slats of my ribcage and over my abs, contracted in anticipation. A soft hiss of breath escapes my parted lips when the callused tips of my fingers reach my bellybutton, brushing against the engorged head of my cock before sliding down the thick, rigid length of it.

I'm hard today.

Sometimes I'm not.

Sometimes I just lay here for thirty minutes and feel like a failure.

Wrapping my hand around it, I give myself a testing stroke, slowly pumping my shaft from tip to base, and back again, gentling squeezing the head of it in my grip to gather the steady stream of pre-cum leaking from its tip. I keep stroking, my fist sliding up and down the length of my cock until I feel a familiar loosening in my chest, a shifting over from feeling weird and self-conscious about the fact that a mental health care professional actually prescribed me mandatory masturbation sessions to not giving a shit because this is the only time of day that I let myself think about her.

The only time I let myself remember what she felt like.

How she smelled.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

What her pussy tasted like when I licked her arousal off my fingers.

“Grace.”

When I say her it out loud, my hips give an involuntary upward thrust, off the mattress and into the grip I have on my cock. I think about her. That night. The way she felt against me. Her stiff, swollen nipples pushed against my bare chest. Her warm, soft breath against the side of my neck. The way her tits bounced and brushed against me with every hard fuck I gave her with my fingers. The hot, wet slide of them, in and out of her pussy. The tight clench of it, how she screamed my name when she came.

Suddenly, I’m not fucking my hand. I’m fucking her. Grace is riding me, lifting and lowering herself along the shaft of my cock. Pumping and stroking me with her slick, hot pussy and I feel myself start to falter. Start to doubt myself. An annoying little itch at the base of my brain, trying to convince me that this would never happen. That even if Grace ever did decide to give me a second chance, let me touch her again, she’d take one look at me and nope herself right out the fucking door.

Old worries.

Distant doubts.

Ones I work hard every day to rid myself of.

With a vicious growl, I force myself back into the present. Try to do what my therapist told me to do. Concentrate on now. Open myself up. Let myself feel. Enjoy

the ride.

Make me come, Ryan. Please make me come... I don't care how.

"Grace..." Her name tears its from my throat on low groan and I feel it, let it come—the hard, tight bolt of heat that spirals like a rocket up the length of my cock, so fast and hot I have to tighten my grip while spasm after spasm wash over me, hot jets of semen lashing against my bare stomach and chest.

My ears are still ringing and I'm breathing in deep, ragged gulps when the egg timer on my nightstand lets out a spastic ring, letting me know my thirty minutes of self-exploration are over.

Reaching out with my free hand, I open the nightstand drawer without looking and knock the still ringing timer into its depths before slamming it shut and throwing an arm over my face. I feel the heaviness in my chest return. The pain in my leg. The static in my brain.

It's better than it used to be.

A hell of a lot better.

So much better that there are times that I forget what happened to me. That I'm not the same and never will be, but better doesn't mean gone. It doesn't mean same.

I get that now and I live with it, even if there are times I don't want to. Times that I want to give up. Let the pain and rage that I keep locked in a cage out to destroy all the hard work I've put in. Take me away from the people I've worked so hard for.

Because I'll never be me again.

I'll always be different.

But I can't let knowing that stop me.

Because someday, Grace might need me. She might want me again and I want to be ready for her, even if it's only a pipedream. Even if it's only a maybe that will probably never happen.

So I put it away.

Push myself out of bed and lurch my way to the shower to start the next round.

Because it's time to put in the work.

Twenty minutes later, I'm cutting through the lobby of the center, when I spot Con on the indoor basketball court through the thick panes of glass that enclose it, wearing nothing but a pair of basketball shorts and a whole lot of tattoo ink.

Because I know why he's here, I take a detour and head for him, mentally prepping myself to endure his this is a big day, don't fuck it up, pep talk because he can front all he wants but I know Con's just as nervous about today as I am.

Letting myself onto the indoor court, I stand on the sidelines and watch as he gives the ball in his hand a few hard bounces, the muffled sound of his shoes squealing across the court as he moves into a fadeaway jumpshot that sends the ball flying in a perfect arc toward the basket.

Swish.

Racing across the court to retrieve the ball, he gives it another fast series of dribbles before executing a perfect jump shot.

Swish.

“Is there anything you’re not good at?”



*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

Hearing me behind him, he flashes me a dimpled grin. “Nope—” he says, letting the ball roll bounce its way across the court. “don’t believe me, ask your sister.”

“Jesus,” I grumble at him. “Why do I bother trying to talk to you?”

“Because, unfortunately for you, I’m your best friend,” he says, laughing out loud while moving toward the towel and water bottle he has piled against the wall. “So, how’d it go?”

“How’d what go?”

“You know—” He stops scrubbing at the sweat on his chest long enough to give me an obscene hand gesture. “Your thirty minutes of self-exploration.”

“Seriously?” I reach up to scrub a rough hand across my jawline. A lot about me has changed—maybe even improved—over the last few months, but I still forget to shave so often that it’s just easier to grow it out and call it a beard. “You do realize that it’s weird of you to ask me that, right? Like, guys don’t generally ask other guys about their masturbation habits—it’s not normal. You know that, don’t you?”

“Most guys don’t have to have jerk-off sessions prescribed to them by their doctors,” he reminds me with a shrug. “And exactly when did you start operating under the assumption that I give a shit about weird or normal?”

Because he’s right and because it’s always easier to just answer his questions in the end, I give up. “It went fine,” I tell him because truthfully it’s not the first time he’s asked me that question and it more than likely won’t be the last. “Is that it?” I say,

taking a quick look at the watch strapped to my wrist. I knew I was cutting it close this morning and if I don't leave soon, I'm going to be late. "Is this fucked-up conversation over? Can I go?"

"Think about Grace?" He gives me another shit-eating grin when he says her name because he knows he just hit the backstop. The place where this conversation comes to a hard and historically violent end. He's doing it on purpose, I know that. This is Con and he likes fucking with people almost as much as Declan does. But unlike his brother, Con usually has a purpose when he does it, beyond his own fucked-up satisfaction.

That's how I know he's testing me. Pushing at my walls to make sure they'll hold. Preparing me for something.

Looking at my watch again, I drop my hand to my side with a heavy sigh. "You want to stop trying to get yourself killed there, Death Wish, and just tell me what the fuck is going on?"

The grin he's giving me winks out.

"Jack's outside." He says it, quick and decisive, like he's cauterizing a wound. "He's waiting for you." He instinctively blading his body away from me when he says it. Dropping his leg back just enough to absorb my weight when I launch myself at him in an effort to rip his head off his shoulders, even though I haven't gotten physical with anyone in months. Because he knows that if anything is going to send me into a tailspin, it's this.

Jack.

My father.

Waiting to ambush me.

Today, of all fucking days.

Con is still talking so I force myself to listen. Pay attention to what he's telling me.

"...in the parking lot. As far as I can tell, he's sober. He—"

"Why is he here?" It comes out hard, like an accusation. I can feel the life I've spent the last several months building, brick by fucking brick, start to shift and shake. Threaten to come down to bury me alive. "Did you bring him here?"

"No." Even though we both know it's exactly the kind of shit he'd pull, Con looks at me like I'm still certifiable. "You realize how much time, not to mention money, I've given up for this shit?" he says, like I need a reminder of what's at stake if I fuck up today. "I've got just as much invested in today as you do—so no, I didn't bring Jack here. Fuck no I didn't."

"Then why is he here?" Even as I ask it, I'm mentally running through all the reasons my father would want to talk to me. Looking for money. A place to stay. Someone to give a shit.

If that's what he's looking for, he came looking in the wrong fucking place.

"Fuck if I know." Con reaches up to scrub a rough hand over the back of his neck. "He was here when I rolled up this morning." Dropping his hand, he gives me a rare, helpless shrug. "I figured he was here for Hen but—"

"Henley?" I don't know why I feel betrayed but I do. While I haven't quite worked through all the shit I carry around when it comes to her, my sister and I are on a solid foundation these days. I can feel that foundation start to crumble. "She still talks to

him?”

“Not that I know of.” That means no, because Conner knows everything there is to know about Henley. Good, bad and downright ugly, they don’t keep secrets from each other. “Anyway, I told him Hen isn’t here and he said he wasn’t here for her—he was here to see you.”

“No.” I shake my head. A part of re-building myself has been recognizing and acknowledging the things I can’t do. Not what I don’t want to do. Not the things I’m afraid of, but the things I’m not ready for. The things that will stall my progress if I try to tackle them too soon. When too much really is too much. My useless drunk of a father waiting to ambush me in the parking lot is the goddamned definition of too much. “Maybe next week or fuck, even tomorrow—but not today.” I keep shaking my head, my hands clenching themselves into fists. My jaw clenched so tight I can practically hear my teeth crack. “I can’t—”

“So go out the front,” he tells me like he has it all worked out. “I’ll go out back and run interference. Keep him busy until you’re gone.”

“Go out front and what?” I laugh at him because it’s a stupid idea. “Catch a bus? There’s no time for that—”

“You know what,” he says, giving me a grim smile that tightens the back of my neck, right before it shoots down the length of my spine to settle in my groin with a familiar throb that has me looking down to make sure I didn’t just pop a tent in my pants.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

Because the solution he's presenting like it's the only one I have has a name.

Grace.

"Yes, you can," he tells me before I puss out and say it out loud because he knows what he's suggesting in on my list of cant's. "And even if you can't, you don't have much of a choice."

"Fuck." I can feel my chest getting tight and I lift a hand to rub it over my sternum, trying to loosen it up. Because Grace isn't so much of a can't as she is a shouldn't. I shouldn't be around her. Shouldn't bother her. She made it clear that she wasn't interested in taking on my two tons of fucked-up bullshit five months ago and I've done everything I can to respect her decision. To give her room to breathe.

To be fair to her.

"I haven't talked to her in months, Con." I shake my head, trying to force myself to think clearly, remember all the reasons that why what he's suggesting is a bad fucking idea. Because the truth is, even though I know I shouldn't bother Grace, I want to. "I can't just show up on her doorstep and ask—what about Tess? Maybe she can—"

"Tess has a list of bridesmaid shit to do as long as her arm—she's not available, and yes, you can," he says it again like he's cauterizing another wound, hitting me quick and hard with the truth. "And before you ask, I have shit to do too—I've got to go tell Jack to fuck off and then I have background checks to run on the new batch of resident applications—and that's before the six legal aid appointments I have

scheduled for today.” Tossing his towel over his shoulder Con gives me a shrug. “It’s real simple, Ry—either deal with your father or deal with Grace. If I were you, I’d take option B because she’s going to the same place you are and she leaves in twenty minutes.”

Twenty-one

Grace

Fridays are usually my day.

The one day of the week that I get to have a little breathing room. With Patrick gone into work and Cari either holed up in her studio or sleeping off an all-night painting session, Friday is the day I get to drop Molly off at school and then come back home and be alone. Hear myself think for ninety glorious minutes. Get ready for my 10AM class without a four-year-old underfoot. Leave on time so I don’t have to worry about hitting traffic or that I’ll be late because Molly tried to fill the side pocket of her school backpack with chocolate milk because she gets thirsty and the juice box I pack in her lunchbox is gross.

Hell, sometimes I even have enough time to hit my favorite coffee cart on campus for a latte and vanilla bean scones before class starts.

There will be no lattes or scones in my immediate future.

Not today.

“Molly Grace Faraday,” I yell at the top of my lungs so my voice will carry from the laundry room and down the hall to her room. “I am leaving this house in sixty-seconds, and if you’re not ready to leave I’m going to—”

My threat is cut off by a quick, hard knock on the door that's less than a foot away from my face. Thinking it must be Tess or Declan or maybe even Conner, because it has to be one of them if whoever it is got all the way up here without being buzzed in from the street, I lean over and yank the door open without looking through the peephole. "I'm serious, Molly," I keep shouting. I let the door go and a hand reaches out to catch it. A very masculine, very large hand—so, not Tess. "Sixty-seconds and I'm—" Because whoever it is hasn't crossed the threshold or at the very least said hey, I cast a fast, impatient glance over my shoulder and do my best to keep the frustration that's coursing through me out of my tone. "We're running late, so whatever you're here for, I won't be much—"

It's Ryan.

Holy shit.

He looks good. That's my first thought. In dark wash jeans, a light-weight, cashmere sweater under a black pea coat and boots, he looks so fucking good, I want to cry.

Better than good.

With his dark, wind tousled hair and close-clipped beard, he looks like he just stepped off the pages of an LL Bean catalog. His hair is longer than I remember. Long enough to run my fingers through. Long enough to grip and pull while he—

A warm flush settles in my belly, stirring up a flurry of butterflies, before it sinks, thick and heavy like warm honey, to settle itself in the juncture of my thighs.

"Ryan." It sounds stupid coming out of my mouth, like I don't actually believe what I'm seeing. Like it's some sort of a trick.

"Hey, Grace." He gives me a quick, nervous smile that tells me that whatever his

reason for being here is, he doesn't want to be.

Which tells me everything I need to know, really. That even after five months of self-imposed exile, Ryan still doesn't want to want me. And what do you know, I really am stupid because knowing that has done absolutely nothing to dampen the furnace blast of lust I feel when I hear him say my name.

Because five months post-Ryan, I still haven't learned a damn thing.

Not when it comes to him.

Closing ranks, I cross my arms over my chest and take a step away from the door. "Are you here on a wedding assignment?" It's Patrick and Cari's wedding weekend. The two of them left early this morning for Declan's house on the Cape to pre-honeymoon before the big day, leaving the last minute details to the rest of us. Last I heard, Con and Henley were taking care of the center and Declan was running between jobsites of the construction company he and Patrick co-own while Tess was bouncing from crisis to crisis, putting out wedding fires, wherever they happened to sprout up.

Even I'm not immune—after class, I have a list of last-minute maid-of-honor duties to attend to.

Like pick my parents up from the airport.



*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“No,” Ryan answers my question while he scrubs his hands on the legs of his jeans and gives me an apprehensive smile because I’m angry and he knows it, even if he doesn’t know why. “Actually I was hoping I could ask you for a... incoming.” The last word is whispered under his breath, seconds before I hear the kind of ear-piercing shriek that has surely lured many a sailor to their deaths.

“Ryazan!”

His name is instantly followed by the slap scuffle of Molly’s sneakers as she sprints down the hall, making a beeline, straight for him. Like the laundry room doorway is a launchpad, she hits it with the balls of her feet and catapults herself straight at him and I feel my arms drop away from my chest, ready to try to catch them both because I’m sure Ryan’s bad leg is going to buckle under the force of Hurricane Molly and the impact will send the two of them tumbling down the stairs.

But that’s not what happens.

Instead of buckling, his leg holds and even though there is a lightning-fast tightening around his mouth when she hits, he absorbs her weight like it’s nothing. “Hey, kid.” He catches her mid-flight and settles her onto his hip without incident.

“Is it Wednesday?” she asks, looking at me for confirmation. When I look just as confused as she does, she refocuses her attention on Ryan. “Is it—”

“It’s Friday,” he cuts her off, an ugly red flush creeping up his neck from beneath the collar of his sweater. “Aren’t you supposed to be in school?”

I feel my hackles rise at his innocent question and I open my mouth to make my excuses but Molly beats me to it. “Yeah, but Mom was up all night helping Aunt Cari pack for her bunnymoon—”

“Honeymoon,” he corrects her with a slight twitch of his lips.

“Honeymoon?” She looks at him and frowns. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure.” The twitch of his mouth pulls into a full-blown smile. The kind of smile I’ve never seen from him. Ever. “At least that’s what I hear. I’ve never actually been on one.”

“I’m not sure I believe you,” she informs him with a shrug. “But anyway, Mom slept through her alarm this morning and I didn’t want to wake her.” She leans into him and tilts her head, her mouth twisted in a look of pure exasperation. “You know how she gets when you wake her up—what are you doing here?”

He makes an affirmative sounding noise in the back of his throat before looking right at me. “I’m here to talk to your mom,” he says, answering her question. He clears his throat and winces like someone is dragging their nails across a chalkboard. “I know you have class today and I was hoping I could catch a ride with you.”

“You need a ride?” I say it like I don’t know what it means. “To Bay State?”

“Yeah...” He gives Molly a wink before dropping her on her feet. “Just a ride there, I can find my own way home.”

Questions.

So many questions.

Like why does he need a ride to my school?

And why can't he drive himself? He has a car of his own now. He doesn't need a chauffeur anymore and even if he did, why would he ask me, of all people?

And why did Molly think it was Wednesday when she saw him?

Instead of asking, I put them aside for later and reach for my coat to shrug it on. "Come on, Mol." Coat on, I heft my backpack off its hook and sling its strap over my shoulder. "Get your coat on, we need to go so Ryan and I won't be late."

Twenty-two

Ryan

I expected silence. Prepared for wariness and sidelong glances. Readied for hostility and maybe even anger because even though Grace is the one who broke things off between us, I'm the one who disappeared.

Stopped going to the Gilroy's for Sunday dinner. Avoid dropping by the bar when I know she has a shift. Hole up in my apartment when someone mentions that she's going to drop by the center. I tell myself that I do it for her. That I want to make it easy for her. That I'm trying to do what she asked me to do—be fair to her.

But it's a lie and I know it. Knew it the second I set eyes on her this morning that my disappearing act had nothing to do with what's best for her and everything to do with my own lack of self-control.

Because even though she made it clear that it was over, I can look at her now and know, without a doubt, that I wouldn't have let her walk away from me if I'd stuck around. I would've kept pulling her under. Kept dragging her back in and pushing her

away until she finally hated me for it.

I know it because sitting here in the front seat of her car, all I can think about is how much I want her. What it felt like to come this morning with her name in mouth. Wonder what it would feel like to do it for real.

And that pretty much makes me the biggest asshole that's ever lived.

So yeah, I was prepared for the silent treatment. What I wasn't prepared for was for her to start hammering me with questions the second she settled back into the driver's seat after walking Molly to the front office her school for a late pass.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Why did my kid think today was Wednesday?” She’s turned around completely, her entire body facing mine, arm draped over the steering wheel, jaw set at that dangerous angle that makes my cock twitch.

“I don’t know.” I offer her an answer, even though we both know it’s bullshit. “Because she’s four?”

Smelling a lie, she tilts her head just a bit as her eyes narrow slightly. “I only ask because Wednesday is the day Mary picks her up from school and keeps her for me while I work my shift at the bar, so it’s the only day of the week that I can’t 100% account for her whereabouts—and that girl knows her days of the week, backward and forward.”

“Does she?” I know she does. “Then, I don’t know.” I look out the window. “We should probably get going. We’re going to be late.”

For a second, I think she’s going to tell me to fuck off. To get the fuck out of her car and leave me standing on the sidewalk outside Molly’s school. Instead, she turns calmly in her seat and starts the car. Hands at ten and two, she pulls away from the curb, shooting into traffic like she’s been driving in Boston all her life. Just when I start to let myself relax into thinking the rest of the trip will be made in silence, she speaks again.

“She stopped talking about you a few months ago.” Thankfully, she doesn’t look at me when she says it. If she did, she’d have the perverse satisfaction of watching the color drain from my face. “Before then, you were all she would talk about. When were you going to come see her. Why you weren’t going to Con and Henley’s for

dinner anymore. Every time we'd pass by Benny's she'd beg me to go in and check to see if you were there—and then, just like that—” she lift a hand off the steering wheel and snaps her fingers. “She stopped. I thought she finally forgot about you, moved on—but I was wrong, wasn't I?”

Shit. “Grace—”

“Don't.” She drops her hand back to the steering wheel and wraps her fingers around it like she's trying to kill it. “Don't Grace me right now. Don't you fucking dare say my name.”

“Alright.” Even though she has every right to be suspicious and angry, I can feel my own blood start to heat at her tone. “What do you want me to call you then? Al? Fred? No, you don't like either of those? How 'bout Jimmy? Does Jimmy work for you?”

“Fuck you, Ryan.”

“Right back attchya, Jimmy.”

I have the satisfaction of watching her jaw loosen and her mouth drop open just a bit before she catches it and snaps it shut.

Neither of us say another word until Grace pulls into her designated spot in the student parking lot and kills the engine.

“She's my kid, Ryan. Mine,” She pushes the last of it through clenched teeth, glare aimed out the windshield. “I'm the one who takes care of her. Feeds her. Makes sure she—”

“Of course Molly's yours.” I say it louder than I mean to, my tone sharper than I want

it to be. Probably because hearing the truth spoken out loud stings more than it has a right to. Because even though Molly isn't mine. I want her to be. Wish that she was. Love her like she is. "No one ever said she wasn't."

"Yeah?" Now she turns toward me again. "Then why do I feel like the two of you are keeping things from me?"

Because we are.

Not intentionally.

That's not how it started out anyway.

"I teach arts and crafts," I tell her. "At the center—on Wednesdays. Mary started bringing her to the center over the summer and—"

"You run arts and crafts at the community center. You." She says it like I just told her my lifelong dream is to live my life as a domesticated house cat.

"It was Henley's gig until we started getting an influx of residency applications and she had to start—" I catch myself before I really start to ramble by taking a deep breath, but instead of letting it out slowly like I'm supposed to, I let it out all at once on a frustrated push. "Yes. Me. Mary brings Molly to the center every Wednesday after school and we paint flower pots or build—"

"And you told her to lie to me about it?"

"No." I shake my head. "I never told her to lie about it—but I knew she wasn't telling you."

"How?" Her voice rises, her tone sharpens because she doesn't believe me. "If you

didn't tell her to lie about it then how did you know that—"

"Because this never happened." I don't shout but my own tone is heavy enough to shut her up. "Because you didn't show up on my doorstep or at the community center to get in my face and tell me to stay away from her. Because she kept showing up and I knew that if you knew she was spending time with me, you would've put an end to it."

For a second, all she does is stare at me, like I told her that Molly and I have been sticking up liquor stores and gas stations together. Finally, her shoulders sag and she shakes her head at me. "What? What makes you think you have the right to waltz up to my door after five months of nothing and just hey, Grace your way back into our—"

"You broke it off, Gr—" I swallow the rest of it, have to set my jaw and force her name back down my throat. "You. You did that—" I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Remember who this is. That she has a right to be angry. That she's smart not to trust me. That I have a brief but decidedly storied past of being a selfish asshole when it comes to her. "And you were right to."

As soon as I say it, Grace jerks back in her seat like I took a swing at her, her mouth dropping open again in what looks like shock and I have to look away from her because this is not how I saw this conversation going. To be honest, I never really let myself think about it at all.

Lifting a hand from my lap, I unclench my fist to swipe it across my jaw. "You were right to end it—it needed to happen. What was going on wasn't good for either of us, and I—" I can feel my Adam's apple start to bob and scrape along the line of my throat because I don't want to say this. I don't want to say any of it, but I have to. Need to, if I'm going to have any sort of chance with her. "I didn't care. I was hurting you and I didn't care. I'm sorry about that. You deserved better." Something flickers



across her face when I say it—either regret or relief, it's gone too soon for me to tell. Finally, she turns away from me to pluck her car keys from the ignition and palms them before calmly unlatching her seatbelt. Free, she turns in her seat and looks at me.

## Page 37

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“From now on, if you want to spend time with Molly, you ask me first—understood?”

I swallow hard against the lump in my throat and nod my head. “Understood.”

“Good.” She pops her car door open and hops out, slamming it close a little harder than necessary. A few seconds later, she has the rear hatch open and she’s retrieving her backpack.

Scrambling out of my seat, I reach the rear of the car just as she slams that closed too.

“I’m late for class,” she says, shouldering her backpack while giving me little more than a passing glance. “I’ll see you around.”

Before I can say a word, she’s gone, walking across the parking lot toward the building without so much as a backward glance.

Twenty-three

Grace

I enjoy approximately twenty minutes of righteous indignation before I realize what a colossal bitch I was to Ryan. Twenty minutes to savor the memory of him standing next to my car in the parking lot, looking angry and contrite, while I rode away on my high horse before I came to the sudden and unwelcome conclusion that I have nothing to be angry about.

Certainly not when it comes to Ryan.

Because he's right. I was the one who broke things off. I'm the one who tapped out. Told him that what was happening between us was unfair to me and that I didn't want to do it anymore.

But I'm angry just the same. Probably because he let me do it. Let me walk away. Didn't chase me down and drag me back under. Heard what I had to say and had the audacity to respect my decision.

He did exactly what I asked him to do.

He let me go.

Instead of being angry at him I should be... what? Grateful? Relieved?

I am none of those things.

What I am is confused and apprehensive because when I exit the building that houses my 10AM medical ethics class, Ryan is sitting on a bench directly outside door, waiting for me. It reminds me that last time we were here together. The way he sat on a bench and waited for me on the sidewalk while I took my entrance exam nearly six months ago.

The day he kissed me.

The day he took me back to his room at Sojourn and pushed me against the door to his room. Pulled my pants down and—

“Excuse me.”

As soon as it's said, in an exasperated tone that's practically in my ear, I'm jostled to the side and I realize I've been standing in the middle of the walkway, staring at Ryan like he has two heads and six arms for the last thirty seconds.

Smooth, Grace.

Real smooth.

Squaring my shoulders, I dodge foot traffic to cross the sidewalk to where he's sitting. Next to him on the bench is a tall, white to-go cup with my name scrawled across it in black sharpie and a pastry bag, both from my favorite coffee cart. "What are you doing here?"

Did I say smooth?

I meant super smooth.

"Waiting for you," he tells me, a slight scowl settling between his dark brows when he catches my tone.

"I thought you said you didn't need a ride home," I counter eyeing the pastry bag and coffee like they might be a trap.

"I don't, I just—" He shakes his head, the scowl marring his face smoothing out into something else. Something sad that tightens my throat and makes me feel like an asshole. "Will you please sit down? People are starting to stare."

A quick look around tells me he's right. People are looking at us. Some are whispering. Because I don't like to be the center of attention any more than he does, I sit on the bench next to him, letting my backpack slide off my shoulder and onto the ground between my feet. "What's all this?" I say, jogging my head toward the cup

and the bag between us like I've never seen a coffee cup in my life.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Uhhh...” He looks down like he’s just as lost as I am. “It is a large, double mocha latte, no whip and three vanilla bean scones.”

Because it’s my order exactly and because I have no idea how he would know that, I sit here and stare at him some more, trying to piece it all together. “Why?” I shake my head in confusion. “I mean how—”

“I asked around and everyone said the coffee cart near admissions was the best on-campus and since you don’t seem like a woman who screws around with sub-par coffee, I figured that’s where you’d go.” He lifts a hand to reaches past the collar of his coat to rub a hand over the back of his neck. “From there, I took a shot and asked if there was a pretty blonde nursing student named Grace who stops by on Fridays and if there is, what her order was.” Dropping his hand, he gives me a sheepish grin. A real one. Nothing flat or odd about it. Seeing it, feeling it aimed right at me, takes my breath away. “The latte is a thank you—for the ride.” The grin on his face loses some of its shine, his mouth twisting into something more uncertain. “The scones are an apology for everything else.” When all I do is stare at him in response, the smile re-anchors itself on his face and he stands. “That’s it. That’s all I wanted. Just to say thank you and I’m sorry.” He lifts his hand in a half-hearted wave. “I’ll see you around, Jimmy,” he says tilting his head, an instant before he turns away from the bench and me.

“You can’t just leave.” I blurt it out, the words tumbling out of my mouth, fast and frantic, trying to stop him before he disappears on me again, and it works. Ryan stops in his tracks, but his back is still turned like he’s trying to decide if she should just keep walking. “I am made of questions, right now, Ryan O’Connell.”

When he turns around to look at me, he's not smiling anymore because now it's his turn to look at me like I'm seconds away from springing some sort of trap. "What do you want to know?"

I want to know if you still dream about me.

I want to know if you think about that night and wish things and gone differently.

Looking away from him so I don't say it out loud, I pluck the pastry bag off the bench and unroll its top. "Well, for starters," I say, reaching into the bag and pulling out a scone. "I'd like you to sit back down and share these scones with me." I don't have time for this. I'm supposed to pick my parents up from the airport in forty-five minutes. After that, I'm supposed to take my mom to Anton's so she can try on the dress Cari had made for her for the wedding, and somewhere in between, I have to pick Molly up from Mary's after school, feed her dinner, study for an hour and then get ready for my shift at Gilroy's. But this is Ryan. He's here and I know if I let him go again, I'll regret it. "And then I'd like to know what you're doing here." Holding out the bag, I give it a little shake and wait.

Hold my breath.

Hope.

That's what Ryan does to me.

He makes me hope.

He looks over his shoulder, at the sidewalk, teeming with students rushing from class to class, body tense like he's considering just bolting into the crowd to avoid me altogether. But then he looks back at me and he gives me that heart-stopping grin that makes me forget my own name.

“Okay.” He gives me a nod and leans in, close enough to reach into the bag I’m holding out to him, and pulls out a scone. Sitting back down on the bench next to me, he shrugs his shoulders before popping it into his mouth. “Shoot.”

Twenty-four

Ryan

I don’t really have time for this.

I texted Con for a pick-up right before Grace showed up so I don’t have more than a few minutes before he gets here. After that, I’ll have about thirty seconds before he starts blowing up my phone, asking me where the hell I am.

But I don’t care about that. Not right now, because this is Grace. She’s here and she’s smiling at me. Seems at least willing to consider the possibility of forgiving me for the giant mountain of fuck-ups I’ve put between us.

For that, I’d do just about anything.

“So...” She cocks her head at me before taking a drink of the latte I brought her. “What are you doing here?”

“I, uh...” I feel the back of my neck go hot and I reach up to rub at it. “I go to school here.” Saying it out loud makes me feel like a stalker. This is Boston for fuck’s sake. You can’t swing your dick without hitting a college or university. Between my GI bill and the millions in family money I have at my disposal, I could have my pick of them. Hell, I could’ve had Conner hack me into Harvard if I’d wanted to. But I chose Bay State. Grace’s school.

So, yeah.



I'm a stalker.

When I make my confession Grace lowers her coffee cup slowly to set it on the bench between us. "You go to school here?" She looks around like she doesn't think we're talking about the same here. "Here?" When I nod, she reaches into the bag for another scone but instead of eating it, she worries it between her fingers, crumbling it, bit by bit. "Since when?"

"Since fall semester started, so... a few weeks now." I tell her. "I never was much good in school, even before getting my bell rung, so it's just one class—English 101. We—I—want to make sure I can handle it before I really dive in—not really my style but Con's pretty insistent that I take it slow."

Brushing crumbs off her hands she gives me a nod. "So, just a toe?" she says but I get the feeling that's not what she wants to ask. Not really.

"Yeah." I crack a smile over her analogy because that's exactly what it feels like. "Just a toe." When she doesn't say anything else or look up at me, I keep talking. "We is Con and me," I offer even though she didn't ask because I don't want her to think it means something it doesn't. "He's been helpful. Annoyingly relentless, but helpful. I had my first big test today and he's put all his free time into helping me prep for it."

Her head comes up and realization spreads across her face. "Is that why he gave up Thursday nights behind the bar?"

I nod. "But I suspect it won't be for long. As soon as I get a handle on things, he'll be back—next question?"

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Where’s your cane?”

Not the question I expected but it’s an easy one to answer. “I don’t generally need it in the morning anymore—I mean, getting out of bed is still pretty rough but an hour in the tank—”

She gives me a weird look. “Tank?”

“Sensory deprivation tank.” I shrug when the look on her face holds. “If you want to know how or why it works, you’re going to have to ask Con. All I know is that an hour a day helps my cognitive issues and with the pain,” I tell her before picking up her coffee cup to steal a drink. It tastes like tepid, coffee-flavored hot chocolate. “This is horrible,” I tell her with a grimace.

“Oh, and I suppose you take your coffee with a stick of butter and a handful of gunpowder,” she scoffs, her chin tilted upward in mock indignation that makes me laugh at her.

“No butter,” I tell her, around the laugh. “And I prefer Napalm to gunpowder.” For some reason, the joke and the sound of my laughter pulls her mouth into a pensive slant. “What?” I say, panic sneaking in because I’m sure I took a misstep with her somewhere. “What did I say?”

“Nothing.” She shakes her head at me, her sky blue eyes a little cloudy when she settles them on my cheekbone. “I just...” She gives me a helpless shrug and jogs her gaze up to meet mine. “You’re different. Than before.”

Giving myself time to digest her observation, I take another drink of her awful coffee before setting the cup back down between us. “I think you mean better.”

“No.” She shakes her head at me. “I mean different.”

It reminds me that she’s always contended that there wasn’t anything wrong with me to begin with. That my entire problem was that I just couldn’t accept it. “Yeah...” I agree, giving her a slow nod while pinning my gaze to hers. “A lot about me is different.” Like it has a mind of its own, my gaze slip down the curve of her cheek to rest on her mouth, lingering there for a moment or two before I can gather the will to force it back up to hers. “But not everything.”

A flush blooms across her cheeks, and her lips part slightly. Just enough to show me the tip of her little pink tongue. Just enough to remind me what she tasted like when I sucked it into my mouth. What it—

My cell phone buzzes in my back pocket, vibrating against my ass, and I shoot up from the bench like I’ve been zapped with a goddamned cattle prod. Pulling it out of my pocket, I swipe my thumb against the screen to pull up my text messages.

Con: Where the fuck

are you? I’ve been

circling this lot for

fifteen minutes.

Me: Got caught up,

On my way.

“You finally figured out how to text?”

I look up from the screen to find Grace watching me like she’s not exactly sure who I am anymore. “Told you—new and improved.” I give her a smirk. “Look, I have to go,” I say, shoving my phone back into my pocket, I give Grace a quick, apologetic grin. “Con’s here to pick me up—rain check on the rest of your interrogation?” I say, backing away from the bench reluctantly.

“Oh, okay—yeah. Sure.” She nods, standing to brush at the crumbs in her lap before bending down to retrieve her backpack. “I have to go pick my parents up from the airport anyway—the wedding’s tomorrow so I’m on Maid of Honor duty,” she says as she shoulders her bag and gathers her trash off the bench. “It was... good to see you again, Ryan.”

I watch her turn away from me to drop the empty cup and bag in the wastebasket next to the bench. “Hey.” I have no idea what I’m going to say to her. All I know is that I can’t let her leave without saying something.

Hearing me, she turns, cocking her head a little in silent question.

“We’re good, right?” I take a step forward, closing the distance between us until I’m standing over her. “I mean—” My phone buzzes in my back pocket again, another text from Con, telling me to hurry the fuck up. I ignore it. “You and me—we’re okay?” As soon as it comes out of my mouth, I call myself a coward because it’s not what I’m supposed to say. Not what I want to know.

What I want to know is if she’s missed me as much as I’ve missed her. If she lays awake at night and thinks about me. Wishes things between us had gone differently.

“I don’t know.” She hitches her backpack up on her shoulder and looks up at me with an exasperated smile. “Are you going to disappear on me again?”

“No.” My phone buzzes again and I contemplate spiking in on the sidewalk like a football. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Then yes—” the exasperation in her smile melts into something softer. “You and I are good.”

“Okay.” I’m not sure if I believe her but employing my advanced interrogation training, I don’t have much choice but to believe her. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” Stepping back, I let her go.

Grace nods her head and gives me a brief, awkward wave of her hand, before walking away from me for the second time in one day.

Twenty-five

Grace

I forgot Cari's veil.

I even know where I left it. Can picture it perfectly, sitting on top of the washer in the laundry room where I set it down to help Molly get her shoes on this morning before we left Boston to make the hour-long drive to Declan and Tess's house on the Cape.

Shit.

I'm careful not to say it out loud, lest I be harassed for pocket change by my four-year-old daughter for my swearing. Last I saw Molly, she was outside with my mom, running around with Noah, the grandson of Patrick's friend, Davino Fiorella, who is the ring bearer, but I can't be too careful these days.

"Is everything okay over there?"

We're in one of the downstairs guest suits that we've commandeered for the occasion and I look up from the bed where I'm carefully laying everything out to find Cari watching me while Henley puts the finishing touches on her make-up.

"Yeah." I nod my head, taking a step back from the bed like I was caught trying to shoplift. "Everything is fine."

Everything is not fine.

The ceremony starts in less than two hours—even if I left right now, there’s no way I’d make it back in time. I know Cari, if I tell her I forgot the veil, she’d just shrug and tell me not to worry about it, but I can’t because this is her big day and I want everything to be absolutely perfect for her. After everything she and Patrick have done for me these past months, she deserves it.

They both do.

“Are you almost finished with her?” I aim my question at Henley because I know she’s about to ask me to switch places with Cari, but I don’t have time for it right now because I’m in the throes of a mid-sized crisis. “Want me to go get Tess?”

“Sure.” Henley gives me a quick grin. “If you think you can catch her.”

“I’m on it,” I say, snapping off a quick salute before bolting out the door and down the hallway that feeds into the living room. It’s empty. Thinking maybe she’s hiding outside, I turn back the way I came, when I catch the low rumble of Declan’s voice coming from the kitchen.

Bingo.

Pushing deeper into the living room, I turn left to spot my prey sitting on the kitchen counter, Declan’s hips wedged between her thighs. Her arms wound around his neck. Legs locked around him. Mouths fused together.

“Sorry to interrupt.” I look away, cheeks hot with embarrassment. “Tess, it’s your turn in the chair.”

Reluctantly tearing her mouth away from Declan’s, she lets out a groan. “I told you we should’ve taken this to the truck when we had the chance.”

Laughing, Declan slides his hands under her bottom to lift her off the counter before walking her over to where I'm standing. "Don't be a baby, Castinetti. It's a make-up chair," he tells her, setting her on her feet. "Not an electric chair."

"I'll look like a clown," she gripes, dropping her hands to her sides with a sigh.

"An adorable, angry clown," he corrects her, laughing even harder when she pushes herself onto the toes of her boots.

"Don't push me, Gilroy," she tells him, tapping the tip of her freshly manicured finger to the scar on his chin. "I'm sure I have a wrench around here somewhere."

Catching her hand in his, he presses the threatening fingertip to his lips, kissing it tenderly. "You're adorable when you're violent." She growls at him but before she can make good on her promise, he turns her toward the hall. "Now go be a girl," he tells her with a smack on the ass.

Incredibly, she does just that, grumbling and stomping her way down the hallway before disappearing around the corner. As soon as she's gone, Declan looks at me. "What's wrong?" he says, frowning down at me. "And don't tell me nothing because you and your sister both get this look on your face, like you're waiting for someone to punch you in the gut when you're upset, so just tell me what's going on, so I can help."

Instead of answering him, I just stare up at him, probably because that's the most he's said to me since the night he showed up on Patrick and Cari's doorstep to dump Ryan, practically at my feet.

"Grace?" His frown deepens into a scowl and I can tell he thinks it's something major. That the groom has been kidnapped by terrorists or worse, that maybe we've run out of beer.



“I forgot Cari’s veil. In Boston. I had it but then I set it down and I—” I stop talking because I’m not really talking. I’m rambling and on the verge of making a fool of myself. Taking a deep breath, I give him a fake smile. “Anyway, everyone is already here, and the ceremony starts in less than two hours, which means there isn’t time to drive back to get it, so unless you have some sort of teleportation device in your pocket, I’m afraid—”

Declan reaches into his pocket and pulls something out and for one insane moment, I think he might actually have one, but it’s just his cell phone. Instead of making Cari’s veil appear out of thin air with it, he dials a number.

“Hey—” The corner of his mouth kicks up a bit, the Gilroy dimple making a brief appearance. “Nah, man—you’re fine. It’s a beach wedding. You on the road yet?” He listens for a moment before continuing. “Grace forgot Cari’s veil at their place, and she needs you to swing by and pick it up on your way out of town.” He listens again, nodding his head. “Okay.” Dropping the phone away from his ear he holds it out to me. “It’s Ryan—he wants to talk to you.”

Twenty-six

Ryan

The center is quiet.

Usually, I'm downstairs by nine so I can help Hen open the doors and let people in. From there, I float. Talk to the vets that wander in off the street. A lot of them are stable. Have jobs. Places to live. They come here to work out. Shoot a quick game of three-on-three on the indoor basketball court. Grab a few minutes with Con in his office where he helps them navigate their way through the mountain of red tape that comes with being a vet and needing services. Sometimes they just want to spend a few minutes with people who understand what it's like to be them before heading home to an empty apartment or a house full of normal.

Some aren't so lucky. Some people come in here that don't have a soft place to land. They're the ones who're lost. Looking for something better. A way out of the situation they're in. I tell them about the center, what kind of programs we have to offer. I tell them the truth.

That this place saved my life.

But today is different.

Not only is it Sunday, it's Patrick and Cari's wedding day and like the bar, the center is closed. But that doesn't mean much to me or my schedule, so instead of heading out to the Cape house with everyone else last night, I stayed behind, opting to drive

myself up this morning so I could stick to my daily itinerary.

That's what I told everyone, anyway. That I didn't want to skip a tank session. That I needed my gym time to keep my head straight. That there was still progress to be made and I needed to stay focused.

Truth is, I didn't think I could handle being around Grace. Sleeping under the same roof with her again. Not without damaging the fragile foundation we started to build over coffee yesterday.

And by damage I mean drag her into the nearest coat closet and lock us both inside so I can get her naked and put my mouth and hands on every goddamned inch of her.

Because it's pretty much all I can think about since sitting on the bench with her outside her class.

Like I told her then, a lot has changed these past five months but not that.

And I'm pretty sure it never will.

I haven't seen her since and I've spent the last 24 hours trying to figure out how I'm going to do it. How I'm going to be around her and pretend like we're just two people who barely know each other.

Like I've never been inside her.

Like I've never laid in the dark with the warm, soft press of her naked body against mine.

That I don't remember what my name sounds like in her mouth when she comes.

Which is exactly the kind of shit that I can't remember. Not if I want to do the right thing by her. Give her the space she asked for. Toe the line she drew in the sand between the two of us five months ago.

Because yeah, she gave me a lift to class yesterday, and yeah, we shared a coffee and talked afterward—but that doesn't change anything. That doesn't mean she's changed her mind and it doesn't give me permission to drag her back into my bullshit—a place she made it perfectly clear she doesn't want to be.

So get your head in the fuckin' game, Ranger. Dig in, put your back into it and do the goddamned work, because the longer you take, the more chance there is that she's going to be long gone by the time you're ready for her.

Right.

Moving on.

The watch on my wrist saves me, beeping out an alert, letting me know I have an hour to get my shit together before I have to be on the road if I want to be on time for this thing. Conner gave it to me. Told me he has one just like it and that he still uses it on occasion to keep himself from falling into one of his what he calls brain holes.

It pissed me off at first—having to wear this thing. Let it control my life. Tell me where to go. What to do. When I started to grumble about it, Conner just laughed. You let the fucking government direct your every waking moment for the last ten years but you're gonna get pissed over a watch that reminds you to pick up your dry cleaning? Get over yourself, bro.

Con's always had a way of putting things so that they make sense—unless he goes off on one of his superstring tangents. If that happens, god help you.

Silencing the watch, I take it off and jump in the shower to scrub off the salt from my latest session. One of the few drawbacks to tank therapy, no matter what I do, I always smell like saltwater.

Stepping out of the shower, I wrap a towel around my waist and head for my closet. Passing the bathroom mirror I catch sight of myself and stop in my tracks. Shit. I should've shaved for this thing, right? I mean, I'm a groomsman. I'm supposed to look presentable, not like some kinda—

My cell starts rattling on the counter and I pick it up, barely giving the screen a glance before I take the call. Only a handful of people have this number and whoever it is can help me.

“Hey—” It's Declan.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Was I supposed to shave for this thing?” I pick up the watch and look at it. “I have time. I might be able to—”

“Nah, man—you’re fine. It’s a beach wedding,” he says like it should actually mean something to me. “You on the road yet?”

“No...” Because I know Declan didn’t just call me out of the blue to get my ETA, I follow it up with a question of my own. “Something wrong?” Asking makes me nervous because if something is wrong, that means I’m going to actually be counted on to make things right. Things are better but responsibility still makes me nervous.

“Grace forgot Cari’s veil at their place, and she needs you to swing by and pick it up on your way out of town,” he tells me.

“Is she standing there?” As usual, just hearing her name make me feel like someone jerked a knot in my spine. “Put her on the phone.”

Wrong move, Ranger. Talking to Grace takes prep work, you know that—you can’t do it without psyching yourself up, so just say okay and hang up the fucking phone.

Because Declan has no idea what the fuck he’s doing to me (or maybe he does and just doesn’t care—it’s hard to tell with him) he says okay and passed the phone to Grace with a it’s Ryan—he wants to talk to you.

A few seconds later, I hear the soft intake of her breath before she speaks. “Ryan?”

She says my name and just like that, my dick is so hard I could break boulders with

the head of it.

Shit.

Fuck.

Shit.

Lifting my hand, I rub that back of my head like I'm trying to clear it. "Where is it?" I ask her, wincing a bit when I hear how rough and uneven my voice sounds. When she doesn't answer me right away, I prompt her. "The veil, Jimmy—where is it?"

"Oh, ummm..." She sounds distracted. Like there are a thousand different things she'd rather be doing than being on the stuck on the phone with my creepy ass. "On top of the washing machine. In the laundry room. I put it down to help Molly with her shoes and forgot to pick it back up."

"Okay," I tell her, recalibrating how much time I have before I have to leave. My leg is a lot better than it used to be, but stairs still present a challenge. I won't have time to shave after all. "I'll grab it on my way out of town, just text me their door code."

"Really? Oh, thank god," she sighs in my ear, the sound of it going straight to my cock. "I owe you so big for this, Ry—"

"A dance." It tumbles out of my mouth before I can catch it, on that same gruff, uneven tone that sound like my voice box is being dragged across hot asphalt.

Fuck if you're not full of wrong moves today, Ranger.

"A what?" She doesn't sound relieved anymore. She sounds apprehensive. Maybe a little worried.

“A dance,” I repeat slowly, sounding way more confident than I feel. “That’s what you owe me. A dance—we are going to a wedding after all.” I’ve never danced with a woman in my life and this sure as fuck isn’t what toeing the line that she drew between us looks like, but it’s out there now and I can’t take it back. And even if I could, taking it back is the last thing I want to do.

“Okay,” she says softly. “A dance—on one condition.”

“Are you sure you know how IOUs work, Jimmy?” There’s humor in my tone but there’s something else underneath it. Something rough and uneven. Jagged at its edges. “They don’t usually come with stipulations.”

“Well this one does,” she informs me, her tone so cool and haughty that it has me dropping my hand down to adjust the hard-on I have trapped between my thigh and the bathroom counter.

“All right then...” I’m sure she can hear it in my tone. That I’m hard for her. That all she had to do was breathe into the phone to make me that way. “Lay it on me.”

“Stop calling me Jimmy.” She whispers Jimmy into the phone like it’s a dirty word and I can’t help but start to laugh at her, right before she hangs up on me.

Twenty-seven

Grace

Ryan wants to dance with me.

That’s what he said.

That’s what you owe me, Jimmy.



*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

A dance.

I think about it. His arms around me. My cheek pressed to his shoulder. His hand resting on the small of my back...

This is the most important day of my sister's life and here I am, obsessing over the fact that some guy wants to dance with me for the last hour and a half, heart pounding in my chest because I'm going to see him again. It's like I'm fourteen again, for Christ sake.

But it's not just some guy.

It's Ryan and I haven't been able to stop thinking about him since he showed up on our doorstep, Friday morning.

Now every time I close my eyes, I can see him. I can feel his hands on me. Feel him moving inside me. His harsh, uneven breath against my—

“Kathrine Grace.”

My mom's voice snaps out at me and I jerk my head up, face flushed, to find her standing a few feet away from me, hands on her hips, a look of pure exasperation on her face. The past three days have been a chore, if I'm being honest. Between her power trip over Molly needing a haircut (Molly, Gran's going to take you for a haircut while she's here—how would you like that?) and her passive-aggressive remarks about the fact that I'm working in Patrick's bar (you didn't have to drag Molly away from the only home she's ever known to work in a bar, Kathrine Grace)

I've been ready to crawl under a rock since I picked them up from the airport. Thankfully, due to my father's schedule at the factory, they'll be flying home tomorrow.

"I'm sorry, I –" I look over her shoulder to find Cari standing in the middle of the bedroom and I let out a soft gasp at how beautiful she looks.

"How do I look?" she asks, giving me a slow turn so I can see the dress from every angle. "Do you think Patrick will like it?"

I leave my mom where she's standing, skirting around, her to cross the room so I can get a better look at my sister. "I think..." The dress fits her perfectly, the deep V of its simple, halter-style bodice hugging the swell of her breasts and the curves of her torso before flaring slightly into a full, floor-length skirt. "I think Anton is a fucking genius," I say, earning myself another exasperated sigh from my mother. I don't care and to prove it, I double down on the F-bombs. "And I think Patrick is going to lose his fucking mind when he sees you."

"Now you're just trying to upset me," my mother says, pushing past me to fuss over Cari's hair. I make a face behind her back and Cari snorts, pressing her hand to her mouth in an effort to keep herself from laughing out loud. "I saw that," Mom says, a hint of her old self laced between her words. Things have been strained between us since I packed up Molly and moved here from Ohio. We haven't seen each other since she basically told me I was making a mistake in coming here and that by doing so, I was going to ruin Molly's life. I think she was hoping to come back here to find me failing so she would feel vindicated somehow. Convince me to come back home.

She never expected to find us thriving. Molly loves her new school. She has friends. A family who loves her—and the same can be said for me. It's hard. My life is nuts—between working at the bar and my school schedule, I barely have time to feed Molly dinner before I have to either rush downstairs for a shift or sit down to tackle

the mountain of homework I seem to always be behind on. The program I'm in is intense. Competitive. Only the top three percent of its graduates will be given the opportunity to move on to join their nursing program.

Without Mary Gilroy's help with Molly, picking her up from school and keeping her until I can pick her up after class, I have serious doubts I'd be able to keep up, especially since I have every intention of moving out of Patrick and Cari's place before they come home from their honeymoon.

"The veil?" My mom says to me, still fussing with Cari's hair. When I don't answer her, she stops what she's doing to look at me. "Please tell me you didn't—" She's cut off by a brisk knock on the closed bedroom door.

Please be Ryan.

Please be Ryan.

Please be Ryan.

"I'll get it," I say, shooting past her when she turns toward the door, intent on answering it. Before either of us can get there, the door opens just a crack, creating just enough space for Ryan's wide shoulder.

"Is it safe to come in?"

"Yes," Cari answers him before either our mother or I can get a word out. "You can come in, Ryan."

"Are you sure..." He eases himself into the room slowly, hand still on the doorknob, gaze averted, like he isn't sure if he's supposed to look or not. "I don't want to interrupt anything."

“You’re not interrupting,” Cari tells him, rushing forward to pull him the rest of the way through the door before shutting it behind him. “Actually, we could use a male point of view.” Dropping her hand away from his arm, she takes a step back and lifts her layers of long, lace skirts to give him the same kind of twirl she just gave me. “What do you think?”

Five months ago, Ryan would’ve given her one of his flat, uncomfortable smiles and grumbled you look nice. Hell, he might’ve even walked away without even answering her. Now, the grin he gives her genuine, the flash of teeth lighting up his entire face. “I think Cap’n’s gonna shit when he sees you.”

While the rest of us laugh, my mother gives the lot of us the same exasperated sigh she’s been passing around all morning. “I certainly hope you don’t talk like that in front of my granddaughter,” she huffs like she isn’t married to an ex-marine whose every other word is a curse.

“I can’t afford to, ma’am,” Ryan says with a smirk that has Cari snorting into her hand again. “Anyway,” he says, his arm coming up to bring the box I left on the washing room into view. “I just got here and happened to see this in the back seat of Grace’s car and it looked important so...” He flicks a quick look in my direction and a whisper of the old Ryan comes back, the smile on his face dimming just a bit. “I—uhhh...here.” He takes a step in my direction and pushed the box into my hands. “I’ll let you ladies get back to... whatever it was you were doing,” he says, turning toward the door. “You really do look beautiful, Cari.” He gives her one last smile before making his escape.

Before I can think about what I’m doing, I turn to look at my mother, just long enough to shove the box Ryan gave me into her hands before I follow him out the door.

“Ryan,” I call after him quietly, the sound of my voice behind him pulling him to a

quick stop.

Turning around to look at me, he looks worried, like maybe he missed a step. Forgot to do or say something important. “That was it, right?” His brow collapses into a frown as he watches me move down the hall. “You said the washer. That’s the only box—”

“No—I mean yes. That was it, I just...” Still not sure what I’m going to say to him, I close the space between us. “I just wanted to thank you.” I wave a nervous hand behind me and roll my eyes. “My mom’s been waiting for me to screw up since she got here and—” I let me arm drop with a sigh because the last thing I need to do is start unpacking my personal family issues in front of him, thirty minutes before my sister’s wedding. “Thank you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“You’re welcome.” He takes a cautious step forward, face tipped toward his shoes. “Look, about what I said earlier. On the phone—”

“Ryyyaan!” Molly’s screech bounces off the walls and down the hall, accompanied by the fast slap of her ballet flats against the hardwood floor under her feet as she runs toward us at breakneck speed. “Where have you been?” she admonishes him while she scrambles up his leg like a spider monkey. They just saw each other yesterday but as far as she’s concerned, yesterday was practically years ago. By the way Ryan’s face breaks out in a grin when he hears her coming, I can tell the feeling is mutual. “I’ve been waiting for you all day.”

“It’s 10AM,” he says with a laugh, when she finally settled herself on his hip. “I don’t think that qualifies as all day.”

“Well, it felt like forever,” she says, tugging on the neckline of his shirt with a pouty little frown. “Did you know that there’s an ocean outside?” Her pout slips away and her eyes go wide. “Like a real ocean, with sand and waves and everything.”

“I did know that,” he tells her with a smirk that’s rapidly becoming familiar. “Did you go see it?”

“No.” Her lip pokes out and she sighs. “I want to go look for seashells but Gran says I can’t go down there because I’ll mess up my dress,” she says, pointing an accusing finger at the white dress she’s wearing. “I’m the flower girl, remember?”

“I remember.” He sets her down on her feet and re-claims his cane from the spot where he leaned it against the wall when he heard her coming for him. “And I’m a

groomsmen,” he tells her. “Which means I’m supposed to escort Henley down the aisle in about....” He turns his wrist to look at his watch. “20 minutes.”

“Can we go look for seashells after?” To sweeten the deal, she draws an X with her finger on her chest, just above her heart. “If Gran catches us, I’ll tell her it was my idea and that your brain is still messed up and that I nippalated you.”

“Manipulated me,” he corrects her with a laugh before giving me questioning look. “Okay with you?”

Trying not to be jealous of my four-year-old daughter, I give him a nod and he gives me a quick smile before aiming it in Molly’s direction. “Alright, Miss Molly, you’ve got yourself a date.”

Twenty-eight

Ryan

Patrick and Cari’s wedding is officially a hit.

The ceremony was short and sweet, Con acting as both best man and officiant, made sure of that. There’s a Michelin-starred chef manning the grill and enough cold beer on tap to float a fleet of boats.

And Grace is here, floating around in a cloud of sexy, aqua blue silk and loose, golden blonde hair, smiling and laughing her way around the backyard reception like she’s having the time of her life.

She’s dancing with Patrick right now while Cari dances with his father, who is as close to identical to his brother as Patrick is to Conner. Before that, she organized the cake cutting and made sure 21 pilots, Cari’s favorite band, stayed at the top of the

extensive playlist Con put together for the occasion.

Even though it's edging toward sundown, the party's still in full swing, Patrick and Cari are showing signs of planning their escape—I imagine they'll be gone in the next hour or so, leaving the rest of us to trickle out behind them while they head back to Boston for a night in the honeymoon suite at the Hawthorne before catching a direct flight to London in the morning. They'll be gone a month and I know Patrick is praying that things at the center don't go to shit while he's gone.

To be honest, it's a distinct possibility.

I catch a flash of white flit past the corner of my eye and I turn my head to watch Molly dart across the backyard, swinging her flower girl basket, now full of seashells from our trip down to the beach, behind her with Noah the ring bearer, stripped out of his tie and jacket, not far behind. When I look back, I feel the back of my neck go hot and tight while I watch the guy who runs security at Gilroy's cut in on Patrick and Grace's dance with a shit-eating grin. Seconds later, Patrick's taking a step back and security guy has his arms around her, maneuvering her around the dancefloor while she throws her head back and laughs at something he says to her.

“Not sure if anyone told you this, but there's only room for one broody asshole in this family and it's me. I'm the broody asshole.”

I tear my gaze away from Grace, tilting my head back a bit to let it settle on Declan. He's standing a few feet away from where I'm sitting, pint in hand while he surveys the party, same as I am.

I want to tell him to mind his own fucking business. Instead I make a low, one-note sound in the back of my throat while I watch Security Guy twirl Grace around the dance floor. “What's his name?”



“Went.” There’s no mistaking the note of disdain in Declan’s tone when he says it and I look up to see if he’s wearing an expression to match. He is.

That’s when I remember. “That’s right—Tess used to date him.”

“Yup.” He lifts his glass to take a drink. “Wentworth Fiorella—richer than god. Famous chef father. Celebutante mother. Annoyingly successful in his own right—if the women that swarm Gilroy’s every night are any judge, he’s hot as hell. What he is, is a walking, talking monkey wrench.” Declan’s top lip curls up slightly. “And I gotta tell you, Ry,” he says, throwing me an over the shoulder smirk. “I’m really glad he’s not my problem anymore.”

His insinuation is pretty clear and watching while Fiorella glides across the dance floor with Grace pressed against him, I can’t help but agree with him. Because obviously, Fiorella has become my problem.

When I don’t answer him or ask him what the fuck he’s getting at, Dec keeps talking. “Can I ask you something?”

“Why not?” I grumble into my glass while I tip it to my mouth. It’s just water. Can’t afford to drink. My reaction time has slowed enough as it is since the explosion, I don’t need booze onboard making worse. Not when I have an hour-long drive home ahead of me.

“What the fuck you waiting for?” The question snags my attention away from Grace long enough to watch while Declan eases his enormous frame into the Adirondack-style chair on the lawn next to me. “I mean, you’re obviously into her so—”

“I’m sorry Con, I didn’t see you sit down,” I say, my irritation growing exponentially at his nosiness, even though I gave him permission to ask his stupid question in the first place.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“I’m serious, man,” he says, completely side-stepping my attempt at confrontation. “Grace is smart, funny, strong—not to mention gorgeous.” He lifts his glass to take a drink. “Trust me when I tell you that women like her don’t come along every day.”

“Yeah?” I say, stretching my legs out in front of me. It’s been a long day of standing and walking. My leg is screaming. Makes me glad I had the foresight to bring my cane. I knew it was going to be bad but taking Molly down to the beach and walking around in soft sand for an hour has made it just this side of unbearable. Doesn’t matter. I’d do it again in a heartbeat because watching her play tag with the waves what pretty much the highlight of my day.

I should think about leaving. Hobble over to where Patrick and Cari are talking to his parents and make my excuses. Drag my sorry ass home and fall face down into bed. Instead, I’m torturing myself by watching some other guy put the moves on the woman I’m in love with. “And your point is?”

Declan shakes his head like I’m too dumb to live. “My point is if you let her slip through your fingers, you’re going to regret it, every day of your miserable life.”

For some reason, his prediction sets a panic bomb off in my gut. “And you’re the voice of experience?”

“You’re goddamned right I am,” he gripes at me. “I wasted eight years of my fucking life, staying away from Tess because I’d convinced myself I didn’t deserve her. Shouldn’t get to have her.”

“And now you think you do? You should?” I say, not because I disagreed but because

I'm trying to understand.

“Fuck no.” He laughs, shaking his head. “I could live to be a hundred and never come close to deserving a woman like Tess—but here’s the truth that every Gilroy man knows but none of us want to admit out loud—” He slouches back in his seat and lifts his glass, tilting it at the reception, people laughing and dancing. Talking and eating. “None of us deserve them. Patrick doesn’t deserve Cari. Con sure as fuck doesn’t deserve your sister—and we both know if I got what was coming, I’d be married to Jessica and miserable right now.” He lowers his glass without taking a drink and gives me a shrug. “We are woefully and hopelessly out of our league when it come to the women we’ve been lucky enough to land, so the best we can do is love the hell out of them and pray to God they never figure it out.” Across the lawn, he catches sight of Tess emerging from the house. She’s changed out of her bridesmaid dress and into her usual jeans and tank top. Scanning the party, her gaze finally lands on Declan and smiles.

Grinning back, Declan pushes himself out of his chair and sighs. “So, I’ll ask you again, man—what the fuck are you waiting for?” he says but before I can think of a legitimate answer, he walks away and heads straight for Tess, leaving me alone to wonder the same goddamned thing.

Twenty-nine

Grace

Tess what supposed to Cari’s maid of honor but when Con and Henley announced their engagement, she bowed out with a very gracious, fuck that, I’m not doing this shit twice, and handed the reins over to me.

For the last few weeks I’ve been frazzled. Running around, taking care of last-minute details, like the fact that the florist tried to substitute pink tulips in Cari’s bouquet for

the orange she specifically requested and making sure that Patrick's parents and ours were picked up from the airport and settled into their hotel. Last night, I was sure my head was going to explode from all the pressure.

Today, I'm so grateful for it I could cry because running around and making sure everything is going smoothly is the only thing that's keeping from devolving into a gelatinous mess of anxiety and frustration.

Because the reception is almost over and Ryan has yet to collect on his demand for a dance. He kept his promise to Molly and took her down to the beach as soon as the photographer snapped a few poses of her in her dress.

"Where is he taking her?" my mother demanded to know, pointing at the two of them as they headed across the lawn, hand in hand, Molly's flower girl basket swinging easily in Ryan's grip.

"Down to the beach," I inform her with a smile, still watching Ryan and Molly walk away. "To look for seashells."

"She'll ruin her dress," she huffs, dropping her hand in preparation to push past me so she can follow them and drag Molly back. "I told her—"

"It doesn't matter what you told her," I say, turning to look at her while stepping in front of her to stall her progress. "I told her it was okay because she's four years old and never seen the ocean before and because that dress is going to be trashed by the end of the day whether she goes down there to see it or not—and because I'm her mother and what she does or doesn't do is my decision. Not yours."

She crosses her arms over her chest and cocks her hip. "And you're perfectly okay with her strolling off with a strange man who could do god knows what to her?"

“No.” I have to force my fingers to uncurl themselves when I feel them start to clench. That’s how angry I am at my mother right now. Angry enough to hit her. “I’m allowing her to go down to the beach with someone she loves and someone I trust.”

When she drops her arms away from her chest, I expect her to push me aside and storm after them, regardless of the fact that I’m the mother or what my wishes are but she doesn’t. “I hope neither of you come to regret it, Kathrine Grace,” she tells me. “Living with your own poor choices is one thing, but forcing them on a child is something else entirely.”

That was over four hours ago and she hasn’t said a word to me since. Normally, I’d be relieved but she’s been standing in a corner talking to my father for the past twenty minutes and for some reason, it’s making me nervous.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” I ask Patrick, tilting my head in my parents’ direction. When I felt his hand on my elbow a few minutes ago, the grip of it pulling me away from the gift table with a murmured, let’s dance, I nearly had a stroke because I thought it was Ryan, coming to collect. Instead, it was my newly-minted brother-in-law, brideless and looking for someone to push around the dance floor.

Patrick’s clear green gaze follows my head jog and the dimple dug into his cheek loosens up just enough to tell me that he has a pretty good idea of what’s going on. “Who knows,” he says, his shoulder shrugging under the weight of my hand. “I stopped trying to figure out you Faraday women a long time ago.” Despite the teasing, I have the distinct feeling that things are happening around me that I have no control over. Things that concern me. And he knows it.

“Patrick—”

Before I can demand he tell me what’s going on, a large. Looming shadow stretches

over us and I look up to find Went grinning down at me. “Mind if I cut in?”

“I do.” Patrick gives me a wink before letting his hand drop away from the small of my back. “But I’ll let you do it anyway,” he says before handing me over to Went and making his escape.

Coward.

Went steps into his place in front of me and slides his tattooed arm around my waist, his hand coming to rest on my hip to pull me close and I automatically lift my hand to press it against his shoulder to keep space between us. Instead of being offended, Went laughs. “Geez, Faraday, the nuns at St. Anne’s would’ve loved you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“I’m a bonafide Teen Mom, so I sincerely doubt that,” I tell him, earning myself another chuckle while he maneuvers me around the dance floor with surprising grace.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he says, dropping his arm away from my waist to give me a twirl. “Devastatingly handsome. Talented artist. Successful businessman. Famous family—” He pulls me back in and slips his arm back into place, his face tipped down so he can look at me. “and he can dance? I wonder what else he’s good at.”

“Actually,” I tell him with a sweet smile. “I was thinking that I’m pretty sure I saw your sister on the Kardashians last week.”

“Oh yeah?” He twirls me again. “Which one? Thanks to Captain Viagra over there,” he says, jerking his chin in his father’s direction. “I have five of them.”

Despite the fact that I have the feeling that things are going on around me that I don’t understand and probably wouldn’t like if I did, I laugh at his joke which eggs him on even more.

“Don’t let the gray hair fool you,” he tells me in a tone that makes me wonder if he’s joking or not. “My dad’s a player—and he likes ‘em young. If he thought you were available, he’d ditch the grill and be over here trying to steal you away from me in a heartbeat.”

“I am available,” I tell him because for a second I think he’s referring to the fact that we’re dancing and I don’t want him to get the wrong idea about what’s happening between us.

“Are you?” Went gives me another grin and whirls me around, giving me a full view of the other side of the dance floor and the stretch of grass beyond it. “Then someone should tell GI Joe over there because he’s been staring at me like he’s thinking about slitting my throat since I put my hands on you.”

Ryan.

He’s talking about Ryan.

With the view Went’s given me, I can see him, slouched in one of the wooden chairs that litter the lawn, cane leaning against its arm, glass of what looks like water dangling from his fingertips.

He’s looking right at me and Went’s right.

He looks like he wants to kill someone.

“I’m sure your throat is going to be just fine.” Looking away from Ryan, I say it to Went’s chin because I’m not a very good liar. “Ryan doesn’t care who I dance with.”

“Care to wager on that?” Went laughs again, his devil black eyes snapping with mischief. “Kiss me and we’ll find out?”

His challenge jerks my gaze up to his. “Nice try, Fiorella,” I tell him. “But I am not kissing you.”

Again, instead of being hurt or offended, Went just gives me a haphazard shrug and grins. “Your loss, chicken shit.”

Before I can even open my mouth to form a response, Cari is suddenly standing next to us. “Hey, Went—” she says, reaching up to pull my hand off his shoulder “mind if



I borrow my sister for a second?”

“I guess not since I stole her from your husband in the first place,” he says, unlatching his arm from around my waist with a sigh so Cari can start to drag me away. “You ever start feelin’ brave, you know where to find me, Faraday.”

“I sure do,” I answer back with a laugh over my shoulder. “Buried under a pile of women.”

“I didn’t want to say anything because we were trying to figure it out on our own,” Cari says as soon she has my away from the dance floor and onto the back porch. “But then Mom got involved and things are spinning out of control and I don’t—”

“Out of control?” I say as she pulls me through the open set of French doors that lead down the hallway that opens into the kitchen, “What are you talking about? What’s hap—” My rambling is cut short when we get to the kitchen and I find my parents, along with Patrick and his aunt and uncle standing around the kitchen island talking quietly. As soon as they see me, everyone shuts up.

That feeling comes roaring back. That something is going on that no one is telling me about. That I’m the topic of discussion and decisions are being made without me. “What’s going on?” I look at Cari, pulling my hand out of her grip when she doesn’t answer me. I look at my dad. “Dad?”

“Everything is fine, Grace,” he tells me in that deep, soothing voice he used to use on me when I was little and woke up from a bad dream. “It’s nothing really, it’s just that—” He looks at my mom and sighs. “We’ve been talking and we’ve decided it would be best if when I go home, your mom stay in Boston.”

“For what?” I finally look at my mom before bouncing a look at Mary because I can’t figure out what any of this has to do with her. When no one answers me, I take a step

forward, focusing on my dad again. “I don’t understand—will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Paddy surprised me this morning with a trip.” It’s Mary who answers me, her tone soft and apologetic. “To Ireland—with Patrick’s parents—for six weeks.”

“When?” I clear my throat and ruin my dress by wiping my sweaty palms on its skirt. “When would you leave?” I ask, suddenly understanding her place in all this. Since moving here, Mary has been my main support system when it comes to Molly. She picks her up from school most days and keeps her for me whenever I need her to so I can work and study. Without her help, the entire house of cards I’ve build here in Boston will collapse.

“The tickets are open-ended.” Mary says it firmly, shooting my mother a look that is less than friendly. “I wanted to sit down with you and the rest of the family to see if we could work out a schedule that would allow us to go, maybe over your winter break from school, but—”

“But that’s not really necessary.” My mom cuts in, returning Mary’s look with one that’s just as pointed. “Since Cari’s paid off the house, I don’t need to work. There’s no reason I can’t stay in Boston and help you with Molly.”

Yes, there is. I don’t want you to.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

Ignoring my mother's declaration, I look at Mary and force myself to smile. "Of course you should go—" Patrick's parents are Mary's sister and Paddy's brother—identical twins married identical twins—and if Gilroy family gossip is to be believed, things have been strained between them for years now. "This is an important trip and I wouldn't want you to postpone it, just because of me."

"Great," my mother chimes in. "Then it's settled. Your dad will go on home to Ohio and I'll stay here. Patrick mentioned that he has some rental properties around town that we can move into—"

"What?" I look at Patrick and he has the good grace to look a little sick to his stomach. I don't know why I feel so blindsided—I mean, I knew, didn't I? I knew better than to let myself settle in. Trust the good guy face he shows everyone. Every instinct I have was screaming at me not to trust him when he said we were family, that Molly and I meant the world to him, and like an idiot, I ignored them. "You want us to leave?"

"No." He looks right at me when he says it, his jaw tight with pent-up frustration. "And that is not what I said, Evelyn," Patrick says, aiming a glare in my mother's direction. "What I said was that when Grace felt like it was time to get her own place, that I would be more than happy to give her the pick of any of the properties I have available." Now he looks at me. "But that it would be her choice, when she felt it was time."

More charity.

Another handout.

I have to press a hand against my stomach and lock my jaw into place to keep myself from throwing up. Or screaming. Maybe if I open my mouth, I'll just scream. Tell them all to go to hell. That they can't just stand around and make decisions about my life, Molly's life, like I don't have a say. Like my choices can't be trusted.

"Well, it's time," my mother huffs at him. "You and Cari are married now. You don't want to come home from your honeymoon to an unwanted houseguest and a—"

Throw up.

I'm definitely going to throw up.

"She's not unwanted," Cari pipes up, throwing a look at Patrick before letting it settle on our mother. "Neither of them are—why would you say that?" Now she looks at me. "Gracie—we love having you with us. We love you. We love Molly—we're family. We would never—" She makes a small, helpless sound in the back of her throat when she reaches for my hand and I pull it away from her. "Please say something. Gracie—"

"There's nothing to say," my mom informs her. "Even she knows this is the only rational solution to be had."

"Rational?" Something snaps inside me when she says it and I finally find my voice. "You think it's rational to abandon your husband and move eight hundred miles away, just so you can prove to everyone that I'm a failure who can't raise my child without help?"

"Well, you can't," she shoots back, waving her arm to encompass the kitchen and everyone standing in it. "That's why we're all standing here—because you can't do it on your own. You need help." She drops her arm and sighs like I'm being an unreasonable child. "And I'm in the best position to give it to you."

I look around the kitchen. No one looks happy. No one looks like they think this is the best solution but they all look like they agree with her.

That I can't do it on my own.

"It's settled. Your father will ship my things and we can start to look for a—"

"No." I shake my head, sounding much more confident than I feel. "I don't need you, Mom."

"Just like you didn't need Molly's father?" she snaps at me. "Quit being so—"

"Okay, fine—I don't want you here." I yell it at her, her face going stark white like I just slapped her. Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly, trying to rein in my temper. "I appreciate the offer, and I appreciate everything that all of you have done for us." I let my gaze wander, letting it fall on each of their faces. "But Molly and I can manage just fine without you upending your lives. Any of you."

"How?" My mother demands, hands stacked on her hips because she thinks I'm being stubborn and irrational. She's right, I am. Because I have no idea. I haven't a clue on how I'm going to manage the next six weeks without Mary's help or where Molly and I are going to live now that my mother has made it impossible for me to continue staying with Cari and Patrick. "How are you going to do this on your—"

"She isn't."

Everyone freezes, an instant before they turn to look at the person standing in the kitchen doorway.

Ryan.

Ryan is standing in the kitchen doorway not more than five feet away from me.

“Excuse me?” This from my father, his heavy dark brows lifting off his weather-beaten forehead before slamming down over his faded blue eyes. “What did you say?”

“I said, she isn’t.” Ryan looks right at him when he says it, shoulders squared, jaw held firm. “At least she doesn’t have to. If Grace wants help with Molly or a place to live, she’ll get them from me.” The two of them stare at each for a second or two before Ryan shifts his gaze to where I’m standing in the middle of the kitchen, gaping at him like a lunatic. “Do you want to leave?”

I didn’t drive here with him and we have no plan to drive back to Boston together. He hasn’t so much as waved at me since this morning, but I nod anyway. “Yes.”

“Good—go get Molly and meet me at the car,” he says before looking at Patrick. “Congratulations,” he says, dividing a quick, grim smile between him and Cari before he turns his back on the lot of us and makes his way out the front door.

Thirty

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

Ryan

I don't know what happened. How we got here. Grace slumped into the passenger seat of her bright yellow SUV. Me at the wheel. Molly passed out in her car seat behind us. All I know is that I went inside to find Patrick and Cari so I could make my excuses and leave and somehow I ended up here, with them.

Not somehow, Ranger. You know exactly what happened. You saw the look on Grace's face, heard the way her family was bullying her into things she didn't want and you dove in, head first, like you always do, without thinking of the consequences.

It's how I ended up with the choice between the Army and a prison cell. It's how I ended up standing on top of that IUD and fucking up any chance I had of a normal life. It's how I ended up destroying any chance I might've had with the only woman I've ever really wanted.

And it's how I ended up here with her now.

She hasn't said a word since we left. Didn't put up a fight when I took her car keys and put her in the passenger seat before hefting Molly into her car seat and strapping her in while her father stood on Declan's front porch with his thick, tattooed arms cross over his chest and the kind of look that would kill me where I stood if looks were capable. Because the last time he saw me, he told me to stay away from them, that a washed-up soldier with a bum leg and a head full of scrambled eggs was the last thing Grace needed to be saddled with and even though he was right and even though I've done my best to do what's right by her, here I am, diving headfirst into something that I'm pretty sure I'm not ready for.

Like she can read my mind, Grace sighs. “It’s okay, Ryan,” she whispers, momentarily drawing my attention away from the road in front of me. Her entire body is turned toward the passenger side door, has been since I put her in car, her forehead pressed against the window. “I don’t expect you to—” She stop herself short, a frown pulling her generous mouth into a thin, hard line. “I have some money saved. I’ll google a hotel.” She lifts her head away from the glass and gives it a resolved nod like her mind is made up. “Molly and I can—”

I look away from her, refocusing my attention on the road in front of me. “No.”

From the corner of my eye I watch her sit up and turn in her seat, toward me, and wait for me to finish talking. Maybe follow up my refusal with an explanation. When I don’t, she looks over her shoulder to make sure Molly is sleeping.

“No what?”

“No, you aren’t going to a hotel.” I give her a shrug. “You can google from here to Boston proper, Jimmy, and I still wouldn’t take you—”

“I told you to stop calling me that.” Suddenly angry, she hisses it at me like a snake, hands ball up into fists, sitting on her knees like she’s thinking about using them on me.

“And I told you that if you need help, I’m the one you ask. Me, Grace.” I’m angrier than I have a right to be. I haven’t been there for her, not the way I should’ve been. It’s stupid and irrational because she can’t predict the future. She had no idea her family was going to ambush her the way they did, but I can’t help it. “Not Patrick. Not your parents. Not that giant, tattooed fuck you were dancing with—me. You and Moll are—”

“We’re nothing to you.” She turns in her seat to face me completely, the glare she’s



aiming at me so hot I can feel the side of my face singe “Buying me coffee doesn’t give you the right to just barge back into our lives whenever the mood strikes and pretend to give a shit about us. It doesn’t make you her father and it doesn’t make you my savior.”

Breathe, Ranger.

Don’t say a goddamned word because you’re only going to make it worse.

Just keep your mouth shut and breathe.

“I thought we settled this,” I say it quietly, hands hooked around the steering wheel, fingers gripped tight, biceps flexed like I’m about to rip it from the steering column, because I never fucking listen. I never do the smart thing. Never do what I should. Certainly not when it comes to her. No, when it comes to Grace Faraday, everywhere I step is a potential landmine. “You said we were good. You said you—”

“Did I?” She turns in her seat again, pushing her knees against the door like she’d open it and do a tuck and roll down the highway if it didn’t mean leaving Molly behind. “Well, I guess that makes me a liar, doesn’t it?”

Yeah, I’m not ready for this.

I’m barely qualified as functional these days. I need a watering schedule to keep a houseplant alive. I can’t even take more than one college class at a time without fear of implosion. What makes me think I’m ready to take on a woman and her kid is totally and completely beyond me.

All I know for sure is ready or not, whether she wants me or not, Grace needs me. Molly needs me and I’m not flinching away from that. Not this time.

The rest of the drive is made in silence—Grace turned away from me like she can simply will me away by pretending I’m not here. Me, staring through the windshield while I try to figure out what I’m supposed to do next. By the time I turn into the parking lot of the center, I still haven’t figured it out but I pull into my spot near the back door and kill the engine. And then I do the only thing I know how to do.

I dive in, head first.

“Here’s what’s going to happen, Jimmy,” I tell her, pulling her keys from the ignition to drop them into the cup holder. “I’m going to get out of the car and I’m going to take Molly upstairs.” Unbuckling my seatbelt, I turn in my seat to look at her. “I’m going to put her to bed on the futon in my spare room and then I’m going to get out of this suit, take a shower and then I’m going to go to bed because my leg is fucking killing me and I just really need this day to be over,” I tell her while opening my car door and stepping a foot onto the pavement. “So, you can either come upstairs with me and we can figure out the rest of it in the morning or you can start screaming and call the cops to come arrest me for kidnapping—either way, Molly and I are going inside.”

Thirty-one

Grace

I watch in the side mirror as Ryan carries Molly to the backdoor of the center, each of his steps slow and methodical, like he has to prepare for each of them so his leg doesn’t buckle. It reminds me of what he told me on Friday. That his leg is usually good in the morning but that by afternoon, he usually needs his cane to help keep himself steady.

Before I can think things through, I’m pushing my own door open and retrieving my keys from the cup holder and the small duffle I was smart enough to throw clothes

into from the trunk area. Reaching over the back of the seat, I grab Ryan's cane from the backseat before slamming the hatch shut and charging after them.

Barely sparing me more than a passing glance, Ryan shifts Molly in his arms to dig a set of keys out of his pocket. "Here," he says, passing the keys off to me. "My alarm code is 0123."

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

Shifting the duffle from one hand to the other, I take the keys he's offering and unlock the back door, and hold it open for him while he passes through with Molly. All in, I shut the door and lock it before quickly punching in the code to keep the alarm quiet. By the time I'm done, I'm scrambling to catch up to them again.

By the time I make it to the bank of elevators, Ryan's already called down one of the cars and the doors slide open with a soft ding. Climbing on, I hit the button for the fifth floor without direction and the doors slide closed with nothing but Molly's soft snores to fill the silence between us.

"Ryan," I say it quietly, nervously shifting my duffle from one hand to the next, because I have no idea what I'm going to say to him but thank you seems to be a good start. Or maybe I'm sorry for being an ungrateful bitch.

"Hmmm..."

I look up, to find he's not even looking at me. Instead, he's leaning against the back wall of the elevator, eyes closed. Molly's face buried in his neck while she sleeps. The corners of his mouth are turned down, lines dug deep and heavy with pain. For some dumb reason, it makes me mad all over again. That he's willing to endure what must be agony just to keep from waking her up.

"I'm not sleeping with you." As soon as it comes out of my mouth, my cheeks go warm and I have to mentally weld my spine into place to keep myself from looking away from him. "I mean it, Ryan," I hiss at him because I'm the kind of idiot who likes to make things worse. "So, if that's what this is then—"

The corner of his mouth lifts in a smirk and he cracks a lid, giving me some side-eye. “Your virtue is safe with me, Jimmy,” he says, right before the elevator bobs to a stop and the doors slide open on his floor. Pulling his slumped shoulders off the wall, he shuffles himself out of the elevator and down the hall. Stopping in front of his front door, he leans against the doorframe. “You want to open the door?” he says, giving a chin jerk to the keys I still have clutching in my hand. “It’s the blue one.”

“Oh...” Stepping forward, I find the key that has a blue silicone bumper on it and fit it into the door and giving it a turn.

Without warning, the apartment door directly behind me opens and I turn, letting the doorknob slip out of my hand without opening it.

“Hey, Patrick’s been texting me for an hour now. He said...” The woman standing in the doorway says, her voice trailing off when she sees me. “I know you.” I recognize her too. She’s the nurse from Sojourn. The one who helped us the day Molly and I visited Ryan there. Pretty. Young—not much older than me, with long dark hair and the kind of curves that are noticeable, even under the baggy T-shirt and flannel pants she’s wearing.

Kaitlyn.

I think her name is Kaitlyn.

I hate her on sight.

Ryan curses under his breath and reaches for the door himself, grappling with the knob and pushing it open. “Yeah—what the hell does he want?” he says on his way through the door.

“Something about you taking off from his wedding reception with his sister-in-law

and her kid,” she calls after him. Rolling her eyes when she doesn’t get a response, she steps into the hall, pulling her door shut behind her. “I’m Kaitlyn,” she says, sticking her hand out. “I used to work at Sojourn and thought I’d gotten rid of the pain in my ass that is Ryan O’Connell, but...” She shrugs. “Here I am—a glutton for punishment.” Her gaze drifts down my frame before bouncing back up. “Nice dress—the color is amazing on you.”

Looking down at the bridesmaid dress I’m still wearing, a Grecian-style gown with a deep V-neck and a slit in the skirt that reaches mid-thigh, I force a smile onto my face. “I’m Grace—the sister-in-law,” I tell her, taking the hand she’s offering and giving it a shake. “Thank you.” As soon as I let it go, she’s through the door to Ryan’s apartment, leaving me little choice but to follow.

“He says he’s been calling you but—”

Ryan comes out of what must be his spare room, without Molly. “I don’t fuck with my phone while I’m driving,” he says, tugging at his tie like it’s trying to choke him. “—he knows that.” Looking past him, I can see Molly, sprawled out on a futon, her grubby white dress shining like a beacon in the dark. “She’s fine, just let her sleep,” he says, pulling my attention away from her to find him frowning at me like he can read my mind. “She’ll survive the night without brushing her teeth.” Free of his tie, he drops it on the floor and starts to work himself out of his jacket, his dark gaze shifting past me to focus on the woman behind me. “What did he say?”

“That Declan is driving your car home for you and that he wants you to call him A-sap,” she tells him while moving into the kitchen. I watch as she opens one of the upper cabinets and pulls out a glass and fills it with water from the tap like she lives here. “He sounded kinda pissed.”

“He’ll get over it,” Ryan tells her before looking at me. “Do you need something to sleep in?”

“Ummm...” I look down at the duffle I’m carrying and do a quick inventory. All I have in it is a change of clothes for me and Molly’s PJs. Her toothbrush. I figured I could give her a quick bath at Declan’s and put her in her pajamas before we left because there was a 100% chance she’d fall asleep on the long drive back to Boston. That way I could just put her to bed when we got home without having to wake her up. “Yes.”

“You want me to grab her something?” Kaitlyn offers while rummaging through another kitchen cabinet and pulling out a prescription bottle. “I can—”

“No.” Still looking at me, Ryan drops his gaze and starts making his way across the living room toward his bedroom. “I’ll take care her,” he says, disappearing through the door. Less than a minute later, he’s back with what looks like a T-shirt and a pair of boxers. “Here.” He holds them out to me and I take them. “I’m going to go take a shower and—”

“Not so fast,” Kaitlyn says from the kitchen, holding out the glass of water and a small, white pill in the palm of her hand. When Ryan doesn’t move to take them, she sighs. “Come on just take it so I can go back to my apartment.”

“I’m fine,” he growls at her, his jaw tightening when she laughs at him.

“You’re not fine, tough guy, you’re in pain,” she says, coming forward to press the glass into his hand. “And you know if you don’t take it you’ll sleep like shit and then you won’t be able to get out of bed in the morning so just—”

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters, holding out his empty hand to give his fingers an impatient wiggle. “Fine—I’ll take it if you promise to leave.”

“Scout’s honor,” she says, dropping the pill into his hand. He tosses it into his mouth and washes it down with the water while doing everything he can to avoid looking at

me. He told me once that he doesn't like taking his pain meds. I guess that's one of the things about him that hasn't changed. That and the fact that he still sees alternately repulsed and turned on by me.

Draining the glass, Ryan shoves it back into Kaitlyn's hand. "You know where the door is. Feel free to use it," he says to her before finally looking at me. "Do you need to take a shower?"

"Ummm..." I look down at the pile of clothes he's just handed me and nod like an idiot. "Yes. I would—I mean it's been a long day and..." Jesus Christ, why can't I speak in complete sentences? It's not like he offered to scrub my back or wash my hair. Finally, after what feels like a lifetime of stuttering, I give up trying to make sense and just nod my head. "Yes, please."



*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Alrighty then—that’s my cue,” Kaitlyn says, turning to set Ryan’s empty glass on the kitchen island before she starts moving toward the open door. “Catch you tomorrow—it was nice to see you again, Grace.”

Before I can say you too, she’s out the door, pulling it closed behind her.

Thirty-two

Ryan

As soon as Kaitlyn leaves, I shuffle step my way to the front door and lock it and set the alarm. Because I’m not sure what to do next, I shuffle step my way into the kitchen, snagging my empty glass off the counter on my way to the sink. There, I rinse it out and put it in the dishwasher and recap the bottle Kaitlyn left open next to the coffee pot. She does it on purpose. Her way of making me acknowledge the pain. Accept that even though it’s better on most days, that it’ll never go away completely. That it’s a part of who I am now.

When Henley suggested poaching her from Sojourn, I thought she was kidding. “Why the hell would she want to work here?” I asked her. “She knows I live here. She just got rid of me.”

Hen just shrugged and said there’s no harm in asking. A week later, Kaitlyn was accepting a position as the 5th floor nurse here at the center. She’s been my neighbor for the past three months and a pain in my ass for just as long.

I’m pretty sure the feeling is mutual.

Even though the prescription bottle has a child-proof lid on it, I stick it in the front pocket of my pants before turning around to find Grace standing where I left her, still holding the pile of clothes I gave her to wear.

Shower.

Right.

Moving past her, I cross the living room. “You can use my shower if you want,” I tell her, passing through the bedroom door. Surprisingly, she follows me, past the bed and through the open archway that leads to the bathroom. “There’re towels in there.” I motion toward the cabinet built into the wall. “And I think there’s a new toothbrush around here somewhere...” Stooping down, I open the cabinet under the sink I use and start rummaging around. “I’m not really sure if—”

“I’m sorry.”

Still stooped over, I feel my heart stutter to a stop before taking off again, this time the thump of it so hard and loud, that for a second it’s all I can hear. The only thing I can feel. Straightening myself, I toss the toothbrush I found on the counter next to the sink. “Sorry for what?”

“For being such a huge bitch earlier. I just...” She hugs the wadded up ball of clothes I gave her to her chest and shrugs. “I guess I didn’t realize how much you love her until just now.”

I shake my head and laugh. “Love who? Kaitlyn?” The thought is laughable. “No—she’s just—”

“Molly.” She catches her bottom lip between her teeth, her brow creasing in a frown. “You love Molly.”

Suddenly defensive, I lean my ass against the bathroom counter. “Oh...” I cross my arms over my chest and shrug. “Is that a problem?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I’m not even sure why I said it. I guess maybe I’m just trying to figure out what we’re doing here. Why—”

Because I love you.

I love both of you.

“Now?” I ask her, dropping my arms away from my chest because I’m tired and I’d really hoped to avoid it until we’ve both got our heads on a bit straighter. “We’re doing this now?”

Yeah. We’re doing this now.” She gives me one of her stubborn head nods, lifting her chin to look at me. “Right now.”

“Alright.” I hold my arms out in invitation, opening myself up to her. “Then ask me.”

“Okay—what are we doing here, Ryan?” She takes a step toward me, tossing the change of clothes I gave her onto the counter next to me. “What’s happening? Do you really expect Molly and me to just move in here with you?” She reaches up to rake her fingers through her hair like she’s thinking about pulling it out. “I mean, do you know how crazy that sounds? Do you even—”

“Stop.” I lift a hand between us and shake my head. “I’m still slow, Jimmy—probably always gonna be, so quit with the rapid-fire, okay?” I say, dropping my hand on a harsh push of breath when her mouth snaps shut. “I don’t know what’s happening and I have no fucking idea what we’re doing here.” Pressing my palms against the counter I’m leaning on and shrug. “All I know is that when I walked into that kitchen and saw you standing there, you looked so...” Lifting a hand

from the counter, I swipe it over my face, searching for the right word. “Alone.” Finally landing on it, I drop my hand and sigh. “You looked alone and, in that moment, I hated every single one of them for making you feel that way. For acting like Molly is some kind of burden that has to be dealt with, and I—”

“She is a burden,” she says quietly. “I love her so much I’d kill and die for her, but that’s what she is, Ryan. She’s a burden. She’s loud and messy and throws tantrums and ruins things. She took a pair of scissors to Patrick and Cari’s couch yesterday. I just flipped the cushion and pretended it didn’t happen because I’m too much of a coward to tell them.” She makes a noise in the back of her throat that I think might be a laugh but it sounds watery, like she’s trying to breathe under water. “I haven’t had a full night’s sleep since the day she was born. I worry about her constantly. Is she eating enough? Is she growing? Is she hitting all her milestones? Is she nice to the other kids in her class? Is she a bully? Is she getting bullied? Is she going to be a good person when she grows up? Is she going to make the same dumb, fucked-up mistakes I made when she gets older?”

Do you even know what that means? Do you understand what you’re asking for? The kind of upheaval that having us—”

“I’m not stupid, Grace,” I tell her, feeling the back of my neck go tight with irritation. “I get that it’s not going to be easy. I get that raising a kid is hard—what I’m telling you is that you don’t have to do it alone.”

“What are you saying?” She says it like I just told her I’m thinking about joining a monastery.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:27 am*

“Earlier, you said I’m not Molly’s father, and you’re right—I’m not.” I’m not even sure I know what I’m trying to tell her but when I open my mouth it just comes out. “But what if I want to be? What if—”

“I was raped.”

She blurts it out, shoving the words at me, hard and fast like she’s trying to hurt me with them at it works. As soon as she says it, as soon as my brain processes what she’s telling me, what it means, I feel like I’m standing on top of that IUD, all over again. Afraid to move because I know what’s coming, I just don’t know when. My entire body clench, every joint and vertebra locked tight against the world of hurt that baring down on me, seconds before I feel my entire body has burst into flames.

“What?” It’s a stupid thing to say. Stupid and wrong but I’m praying to God I heard her wrong. That my fucked-up brain is playing a cruel joke on me.

But it’s not.

I heard her just fine.

I understood perfectly.

I know, because Grace reaches up and pushes my hand away from her face and looks away from me, her cheeks flushed with shame. “I was raped. That’s why I don’t know who Molly’s father is—that’s where she came from.” She says it like that’s it. That’s the whole story—everything I need to know, summed up in a handful of words. But she’s wrong. That’s not everything. Not even close.

Who.

Where.

What.

That's what I need to know.

Who is he.

Where can I find him.

What will it feel like when I kill him.

Still unable to look at me, she takes a step back. "Can you get out now, please?" She flings her arm toward the open archway that leads to my bedroom. "I've had a pretty rough couple of hours and I'd really like to cry and—"

I kiss her.

Just step right into her and press my lips against hers until her mouth goes still and quiet. Pulling back a little, I glare down at her. "Nice try."

Like me, it takes her a few seconds to process what I just said to her. When she finally gets it, her dark blonde brows slam down over her narrowed blue eyes. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Reaching for her again, I push my fingers into her hair to cup my hand around the curve of her neck, pulling her against me. "Nice try, Jimmy—but if that's your best shot at getting rid of me, I gotta tell you, not impressed."

“You don’t believe me.” It’s not a question and it kills me, the absolute certainty I hear in her tone. That things are going exactly as she expected. That when she finally found the courage to tell someone the truth, she’d be branded as a liar. “You think I’m lying.”

“No.” It’s the truth. I believe her. I don’t even question it. I just know. “I know you’re telling me the truth. What I’m telling you, since you seem to think I would, is that I don’t care where Molly came from. I’m here—I’m standing right here and I’m not moving. Not one goddamned inch, no matter what you throw at me.”

“Because you love Molly.”

“Yes.” I nod my head, cursing myself for a coward because even though it’s the truth, it’s not the whole truth. It’s not the only reason I want them to stay. “Because I love Molly.”

“This is crazy,” she whispers up at me, shaking her head. “It’s not going to work. It won’t—”

“It can,” I cut her off because I don’t want to hear prudent and rational right now. All I want to hear is her telling me yes. That she’ll stay. Give me a chance. “It will if we want it to.”

“I have to do what’s best for Molly.” Reaching up, she wraps her hand around my wrist, pulling my hand away from her neck. “I need to think—I can’t do that when you’re touching me.”

Curbing my impulse to kiss her again, I nod. “Okay—then just give me a week,” I say, trying to reason with her, find a way to get her say yes, even if it’s just for a little while. “A trial run. Tomorrow is Sunday. We’ll sit down and work out the logistics.” I can see it on her face, she’s going to say no. She’s going to leave and knowing it

makes me desperate. Makes me want to drop down to my knees and beg. “A week, Grace—that’s all I’m asking for—and don’t say it’ll confuse Molly because I’m pretty sure she’s the only one in this situation who isn’t confused.”

She doesn’t answer me right away. She just stands there and looks at me like she can’t decide if I’m completely crazy or not. Finally she sighs and nods her head. “Okay—one week. We’ll give it a try.”

Thirty-three



Grace

This might be the most selfish thing I've ever done. When I said yes, I told myself I was doing it for Molly. That she deserved to be happy. That Ryan loves her. Wants to be in her life and the selfish thing would be to deny her that simply because I'm unable to handle the fact that I'm in love with him and can't have him.

That's what I realized, standing in his bathroom in my rumpled bridesmaid dress—That I'm in love with Ryan, That I'm desperately, hopelessly in love with him and I'm willing to do just about anything to keep him—even if it means invading his life and taking advantage of the fact that he has no idea what he was asking for when he asked us to stay.

Stepping out of the shower, I towel off and get dressed in the pair of boxers and T-shirt Ryan gave me, making sure I shut the light off before I exit the bathroom. The bedroom is dark and I'm sure he's sleeping despite the fact that he wanted to shower before going to bed, so I'm surprised when I see the silhouette of him, sitting on the side of the bed, outlined in the dim light of the moon streaming through his window, like he's waiting for me. Suddenly nervous, I stop in my tracks. “Do you want me to turn the light back on?” I ask him. “I wasn't sure—”

“No,” he says quietly. “I just...” He swears softly under his breath “I just wanted to make sure you're okay.”

He's worried about me.

That I'm going to lose my shit.

Because I told him about Molly.

What happened to me.

“I’m fine,” I tell him, instantly defensive. “It happened a long time ago.”

“It doesn’t matter when it happened,” he tells me, his low deep voice reaching out to me in the dark. “It still happened.”

He’s right.

I know he’s right but I can’t accept it. Not right now. That’s the weird thing about trauma. Some days you’re okay. Some days you don’t even think about the thing that shaped you. Made you into someone you were never meant to be—and some days it’s the only thing that matters. The only thing that’s real.

“I ran track in high school,” I tell him quietly, because now is one of those time. I need to say it all out loud. Get it all out so it can’t hurt me anymore. So I can move on and try to be okay again. “I ran the 100-meter dash and one-mile relay—I ran anchor.” Somehow, I find the courage to close the distance between us and perch myself next to him on the edge of the bed. “My senior year, I was offered a full-ride track scholarship to a small, private, in-state college and even though I knew I was going to take it, I pretended I wasn’t sure so my parents would let me attend the special orientation weekend they offer to student-athletes they’re pitching their program to—basically it’s a three-day party hosted on a college campus. I...” Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly, swallowing hard against the bitter lump in my throat. “I was sponsored by a junior girl—she was there on a volleyball scholarship—and she showed me around and offered to take me to an off-campus party—and I said yes. The last thing I remember from that night is walking up the sidewalk of the house the party was in.” I look over at him and feel my courage begin to wane, because saying the words I was raped is one thing—telling someone how is what makes it real. What

could potentially change the way they see you, the way they feel about you, forever.

Like he can read my mind, I feel his shoulder move against mine as he reaches for my hand, threading his fingers through mine in the dark. He doesn't say anything. Doesn't tell me it's going to be okay. That I don't have to tell him if I don't want to. He just holds my hand and waits.

“That's where I woke up the next morning, alone in a strange bed—” Another deep breath. Another slow release. “Looking back, Even though I didn't remember it, I think I knew what happened—I just didn't want to believe it. So, I just left. Found my way back to campus and the dorm room I was staying in. When I asked my sponsor what happened she just shrugged and said she saw me drinking and having a good time but then she lost track of me.”

“Someone put something in your drink,” he puts two and two together, his tone strange and heavy, like he's having a hard time pushing the words out of his mouth. “And she just left you?”

I nod, even though he can't see me. “I think so. I don't know for sure—it was Sunday and my parents were coming to get me, so I showered and changed my clothes and went home like nothing happened.”

But something did happen.

“When I missed my first period, I blocked it out. Pretended it wasn't happening, like everything else. When I missed my second period, I took three buses to the next town over and bought a pregnancy test. I took it in a McDonald's bathroom—when it came back positive I threw it in the trash and went home.” This is the part I hate. The part that comes next. “When I missed my third period, I scheduled an appointment at an abortion clinic. While I was sitting there, waiting for my name to be called, I felt her move—this sort of fast fluttering in my lower belly—like a moth trapped under a

glass. When they called my name, I couldn't do it, so I got up and walked out."

"And you never told anyone?" There's no judgment in his tone. No reproach. It's just a question, but I feel it anyway. The shame of what happened, because I was weak and stupid. Because I let it happen. Couldn't stop it.

"I went back to the house—turns out it was a fraternity. I knocked on the door and the guy who answered it recognized me. Knew my name. I asked him point-blank if he was guy who raped me—"

Ryan's hand tightens around mine, his fingers pressing against the back of my hand so hard I can feel my bones bend under the pressure of it.

"Jesus, Grace." There's the judgment. There's the reproach—not because he thinks I'm to blame for what happened, but because I put myself in danger. I was stupid enough to go there alone. To stand on the porch of the house where I was raped and point a finger at someone living inside. "What happened?"

"He laughed at me and shrugged. Then he said, maybe it was me. Maybe it wasn't. What are you gonna do—line the whole fraternity up for a swab test?"

"Do you know his name?"

The judgment is gone, replaced with something hard and unyielding. Something that reminds me of the first night we met. The way that douche with the Rolex looked ready to faint when Ryan asked him why he was bothering me. That he put an orderly at Sojourn in the hospital over something to do with me, whether he wants to admit it or not.

Something that should scare the shit out of me but doesn't.

That Ryan is dangerous.

With a capital D.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:28 am*

“No.” It’s the truth, I don’t but when I say it, he looks at me like he doesn’t want to believe me. “He was right, so I just left.”

“He was right?” His tone goes heavy again. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means he was right—I couldn’t prove any of it so what was the point?” I pull my hand from his and push myself to my feet. “And to be honest, I didn’t want to know. I didn’t want anyone to know because I was pregnant and I was afraid it would change the way I felt about her. Change my mind about keeping her—and I wanted her. I needed something good to come out of what happened to me. That’s what I realized, as soon as I asked him—that I didn’t want to know. That I was glad I didn’t remember and when he slammed the door in my face, I was relieved...” My voice cracks and even though it’s dark, I have to look away from the shape of him because I can feel him looking at me. Judging me. “I supposed that makes me a coward, huh?”

“You’re not a coward.” I sense, rather than feel him reach for me but I pull away before his hand can find mine. He makes a soft, frustrated sound before pushing my name out on a heavy breath “Grace—”

“Goodnight, Ryan.” I turn away from him with as much dignity as I can and stumble my way around the bed and across the room.

“Goddamnit.” I feel him surge to his feet behind me. That he’s close. Seconds away from stopping me from leaving. “Can we at least—”

“No, we can’t.” Using the thin slice of moonlight to navigate my way through the

dark, I find the door and use it to make my escape.

Thirty-four

Ryan

I fucked up.

Big time.

Which, in of itself, isn't a surprise. When it comes to Grace, I'm nothing but a walking, talking pile of fuckery.

I'm halfway across my room, intent on following her and doing something stupid, when my phone starts to rattle on my dresser again. This time I snatch it up and answer it.

"What the fuck do you want?" I growl into the phone because I'm sure it's Patrick and even though I've been on my best behavior for the past few months, I'm suddenly feeling like me. The old me. The me that swings first and asks questions later. The me that leaps before he looks.

"I'd like my daughter to answer her phone." A slightly familiar male voice cuts across the line. "But I guess I'll settle for talking to you."

Grace's father.

Shit.

"Alright." I growl at him because, even though this is Grace's father and my heart is slamming around in my chest like it wants to jump up my throat, I'm still pissed over

the way they treated her. “So talk.”

“I’m more of a face-to-face kinda guy,” he tells me. “And since—”

“You at Patrick and Cari’s?” I cut him off because as it turns out, I’m a face-to-face kinda guy myself.

“Yeah.”

“Great. Meet me downstairs in thirty minutes,” I tell him before hanging up the phone.

Pulling up my texts, I scroll through the long list of messages from Patrick.

Patrick: Bring them back.

Patrick: I’m serious.

Patrick: Ellen is freaking out.

Patrick: It’s my wedding day,

you fuck, and Cari is losing

her shit.

Patrick: Ellen is talking about



## Page 54

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:28 am*

calling the police and getting  
them to issue an Amber Alert  
FFS.

Patrick: Cari is worried, man.

Please... just let me know  
they're okay.

Even though the angry, fucked up part of me wants to leave him hanging, I know I  
can't.

Me: Tell Cari they're fine.

Sleeping in my spare room.

Even though his last text came through almost thirty minutes ago, he hits me back  
almost immediately.

Patrick: I guess it's too

much to ask you to

take them home, huh?

Me: They are home.

Patrick: I'm serious,

fuckface.

Me: So am I.

Tossing my phone back on the dresser without waiting for a reply, I frog-march myself into the bathroom and peel off the rest of my suit before doing what I wanted to do all along, which is take a shower.

Twenty minutes later, I'm pulling my car into Gilroy's parking lot and park in front of the side door. Fishing through my keys, I find the one with a yellow bumper and slam it into the lock before giving it a hard twist. Door open, I punch in my alarm code and re-lock it.

Grace's dad is sitting at the bar, waiting for me.

Making my way behind the bar, I pull a pint from the rack and tilt it under one of the domestic taps and work the lever, righting the glass when it's nearly full. "So..." I toss a cocktail napkin on the bar between us, setting the pint on it before pushing it in his direction. "Talk."

He picks up the glass of beer and even though he looks like he wants to crack me over the head with it, he takes a drink before setting it back on its napkin while I pull another pint from the rack. "Alright—where's my daughter? My granddaughter?"

Where they belong.

Instead of saying it out loud, I concentrate on opening the ice bin. Using the metal

scoop to fill my glass with ice. Aiming the mixer gun over its rim, I fill it with club soda. “They’re at my place—sleeping.”

“That why Grace won’t answer her phone? Because she’s sleeping?” I’d have to be deaf to miss the sarcastic edge to his tone.

“I’m not sure—” I flip the lid on one of the garnish trays and fish out a lime wedge and squeeze it into my glass before tossing it into the trash. “but if I were to take a guess, I’d have to say the reason Grace isn’t answering her phone is because you assholes tried to railroad her.”

His jaw snaps tight—either because I called him an asshole or because I just accused him of mistreating his daughter—and he pins me with a glare cold enough to freeze fire. “Careful, Ranger,” he warns me, “I don’t care how many commendations you have—”

“What did you call me?”

“I know who you are—what you’ve done for this country.” When all I do is stare at him, the corner of his mouth lifts in a smirk. “What?” He lifts his beer and takes another drink. “You really think I’d leave my daughter and my granddaughter to the likes of you without pulling your jacket?”

“You pulled my service file?” I feel my heart take off at a gallop, slamming and ping-ponging around my chest so hard and fast it feels like my ribs are cracking with every bounce. “How?”

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:28 am*

“Wasn’t that hard—I’m an old dog,” he tells me with a shrug like it’s a real answer. “Old dogs run together, no matter the breed.”

“Bullshit.” Unable to accept his explanation, I bite the word in half and practically spit it at him. “I was—”

“Yeah, yeah—” He lifts his glass, chuckling into it before taking another drink. “you were a regular fuckin’ Rambo, before things went pear-shaped on you—I got the gist of it, even through the heavy redaction.” Despite his needling, there’s a slight shift in his tone. Something that sounds almost like respect. He jerks his chin at my leg. “You tell her how it happened?”

I shake my head. “I can’t tell her something I don’t remember.” It’s a lie. Five months of therapy have done a lot. Made a lot of changes and that’s one of them. I remember. I remember everything. “Besides, how doesn’t really matter does it? Doesn’t change what happened. What I am now.”

He gives me a long, appraising look, his fade blue eyes raking over me, the expression on his face unreadable. “You’re different,” he tells me, reminding me of the conversation I had with Grace on Friday.

“I suppose I am,” I concede with a shrug. “Is that why we’re here—so you can tell me that you read my service record and that I’m different?”

“No, Ranger—” He lifts his glass for the final time and drains it before setting down with a heavy clunk. “We’re here so I can look you in the eye when I ask you if you’re in love with my daughter.”

“Yes,” I answer him without hesitation. I don’t look away. “I’m in love with Grace.”

He makes a noise in the back of his throat—the tone of it caught somewhere between resignation and acceptance—and nods. “And Molly?”

For some dumb reason, when he says her name, I smile. Can’t help it. “I supposed I’m in love with her too.”

“I figured as much.” He levels his gaze at the untouched glass of club soda in front of me. “You a drunk?”

“No—but my father is.”

He looks past the bar, his gaze dipping toward my leg again. “Pills?”

“If I’ve had a rough day, I take 20mgs of oxytocin before I go to bed,” I tell him, thinking about the pill Kaitlyn practically had to force down my throat. “Mostly, I manage the pain with a fuck-ton of therapy.” Six months ago, that admission would’ve killed me. Would’ve made me feel like less. Like my father. Now, most days, I see it for what it is.

Necessary.

“Your dad ever hit your mom?” It’s a blunt, ugly question but I understand why he asks it. Why I need to answer it.

“They hit each other,” I tell him with a helpless shrug. “Almost every day, until she left him—left us both—and took my sister with her.” Because he read my jacket and undoubtedly knows anyway, I lay the rest of it out there. “When I was 17, I got mixed up in some bad shit—I stole cars. Got caught and was given the choice of either the military or jail—I took option A.” It’s not the whole truth—I don’t mention Troy

Murphy or that fact that it was his brand-new son-in-law's cousin that got me hooked into boosting cars in the first place—but it's enough. It's all he needs to know.

“You gonna marry my daughter?”

“If that's what she wants,” I tell him. “To be perfectly honest, I'm willing to take Grace any way she'll let me have her.” That's how much I love her. How desperate I am to be in her life and in Molly's. “I'm here for her—whatever she wants.”

“And if she wants to get married?” He pressed the question because he thinks I'm dodging it. Thinks I might not be a long-haul guy after all.

“Then I'm going to marry the shit out of her.”

His face cracks, the corners of his mouth lifting into something between a smile and smirk before giving me a single head nod, like he's making up his mind. “How much you weigh?”

I've packed on about fifteen pounds of muscle in the past several months. Doing a quick calculation, I shrug. “Two twenty. Two twenty-five.”

He gives me another nod. “I'm gonna tell you the same thing I told Patrick when I had this talk with him—you hurt my girls, I don't give a good goddamn what your jacket says—I'll murder you, dismember you, stuff you in a trash bag and drive your parts up the coast. I got a buddy who runs a fishing boat—he pays for chum by the pound and when I tell him you hurt Grace, he won't give a shit if you have opposable thumbs or not. Are we clear?”

“As a bell.”

“Good.” He slaps his palm against the bar top and stands. “Now, if you'll excuse me,

I need to go make a bad situation worse by telling my wife she's got a plane to catch."

Thirty-five

Grace

Ryan left.

Laying here, next to a softly snoring Molly, I try not to wonder where he went or if he's coming back. Where he is. Who he's with.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:28 am*

The crazy, jealous part of me wants to charge across the hall and bang on Kaitlyn's door because that crazy, jealous part of me is sure that's where he is. It thinks about the easy, familiar way she moved around his space. Knew where he keeps his drinking glasses. His medication. That knew exactly what to say to him to make him take it. That he did what she asked. That she probably know why he doesn't want to take them in the first place.

The front door opens again about an hour later and I'm up and over a softly snoring Molly before I can think. Standing to the side of it to keep hidden, I watch through the crack in the bedroom door as he quietly limps his way into the kitchen and opens the fridge to stare into it for a few seconds before shutting it again without reaching inside.

Leaning against the counter, he works his boots off and kicks them across the floor with an audible groan of relief.

The crazy, jealous part of me stops howling because it realizes that he wouldn't have bothered with shoes if he was just going across the hall to fuck his neighbor.

Without warning, Ryan aims a look directly at the door I'm hiding behind and lifts a hand to crook a finger at me in a come here gesture that has me backing away from my hiding spot and deeper into the shadows.

He knows I'm awake.

He knows I'm watching him.



That I've been laying here since he left, waiting for him to come home.

Go back to bed. If he comes into check, pretend to be asleep. He won't risk waking up Molly. He'll leave and you can avoid being embarrassed again.

Because I was never good at taking advice, I pull the door open and step into the living room before pulling it shut quietly behind me. Treading softly, I cross the space between us until I'm standing in the kitchen too.

"Your father called me," he tells me without preamble. "That's where I was—I went to see him."

I open my mouth to ask why.

What they talked about.

If he's changed his mind about us staying.

"He wanted to know if I'm in love with you."

"Oh god..." I groan it, everything else that has happened between us tonight forgotten while I silently wish for a hole to open up in the floor so I can jump into it.

"I'm sorry, Ryan. I—"

"I changed my mind," he tells me. "I don't want you to stay the week."

"Oh." I nod, because it's all I can do—nod and form one-syllable words that are practically nonsense. "I see. Okay. Well—"

"I don't want you to stay for a week—I want you to stay forever."

Wait.

What?

“Ryan...” I shake my head and sigh. “We talked about this. It’s cra—”

“Yeah, I know—it’s crazy.” He folds his arms across his chest and leans his hips against the countertop behind him. “But I love you, Grace.” He drops his arms and shrugs. “That’s it. I love you so fucking much I can’t breathe past it.” Straightening away from the counter, he takes a step in my direction, closing the distance between us. “That’s what I told your father—that I love you and I love Molly and I want to be it. I want to him—I want to be her father and your... whatever you’ll let me be. I want to be him for the rest of my life. As long as you’ll let me—so, whaddya say, Grace?”

“I say I love you too.” I whisper it, sure that this is a dream. Sure that I’m going to wake up alone and stay that way for the rest of my life because somewhere along the way, I decided that I can’t have Ryan, I didn’t want anyone.

Before I can blink, his hand is wrapped around mine and he’s pulling me away from the kitchen and across the living room to his bedroom, leading me across the threshold,

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I watch while Ryan shuts and locks his bedroom door. “I thought you said we’re keeping things platonic,” I say quietly as he closes the space between us.

“Did I?” He cocks his head at me and gives me a crooked grin. “I guess that makes me a liar, doesn’t it?” It’s what I said to him in the car a few hours ago but before I can form a proper response, he reaches for me. Making short work of my clothes, Ryan pulls off my borrowed T-shirt and boxers before dropping them at the foot of

the bed.

And then he just stands there and looks at me, his dark gaze sliding up the length of me, heavy with desire, the rigid line of his erection pushing against the front of his jeans. Seeing it, I feel my nipples tighten in response. Heat pool in my lower belly. “I swear, if you change your mind again...” I whisper, squeezing my thighs together when the heat in my belly pushes lower to settle between them.

He shakes his head, the grin on his face winking out in an instant. “I’m not going to change my mind,” he says and for some reason it sounds like an apology. Then he moves, reaching back to catch the neckline of his T-shirt to pull it up, over his head. Tossing it on top of mine, he uses that practiced flick of his to undo the top button of his jeans. After a moment’s hesitation, he pushed them down to his feet before kicking them off.

He’s not naked—not completely. He still has his boxer briefs on but he’s naked enough for me to see the scares I felt the night we were together. The old stab wounds and slash marks that litter his torso. The pair of bullet holes in his left shoulder, just above his right pec. What looks like a bite mark around his left bicep. He’s more muscular than the last time. His pecs heavier. His abdominal muscles more defined.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:28 am*

“The good stuff’s downstairs.” That smile again, but this time there’s no humor in it. Because it’s not the stab wounds and bullet holes he’s ashamed of, it’s the rest of it. It’s the wounds that killed his career that bother him.

I don’t want to look but I do because he needs me to. He needs me to see what happened to him. What I’m asking for. Forcing my gaze to his feet, I drag it up slowly. From his ankle to his knee, his left leg is a mess. A column of mangled scar tissue and puckered skin, still twisted and raw, wrapped around his leg from his lower calf to just above his knee. As bad as it is, I know that’s not the worst of it. That his leg isn’t what he doesn’t want me to see.

“I love you.” I say it again and I mean it because nothing he’s showing me has changed that. Nothing I know about him can make me change my mind. “I want—”

He reaches up to hook his thumbs into the waistband of his boxers, stretching it over his hard length of his cock to pull them down. Dropping them down to his ankles, he steps out of them. Straightening, he drops his arms, hands balled into fists at his sides to let me look. More scars. The worse of them concentrated between his thighs, burn scars so severe I can feel myself want to look away, not because I’m disgusted but because this is the thing that almost killed him. Nearly took him away from me before I even knew him and the thought of it scares me so bad I can barely breathe.

“We were somewhere we really weren’t supposed to be—doing something that had to be done—and the team noob stepped on a fucking IED,” he says, his tone low and monotone, like he’s reading it off a set cue cards. “It was his first time in the shit—just got the tap—and when it happened he looked right at me because he spent nearly the entire flight yapping at me about how he’d just gotten married. How she

was pregnant and he was going to be a father. How he was going to be a good one. Better than the shit father he'd been stuck with. But when he dropped his boot and heard the click, he knew it was never going to happen. That he was going to die and I knew it too." He shakes his head, something that sounds like a laugh pushing its way out of his mouth. "So, I kicked his foot out of the way and I pushed him. Took the blast—because I didn't have anyone at home waiting for me. No one who needed me. Because I was alone, and it didn't matter to anyone if I died or not." He looks down at me and smiles. "That's what happened—I stepped on that IED on purpose. Not because I wanted to die, but because I knew it wouldn't matter to anyone if I lived."

"It would've mattered to me," I tell him. "Looking at you—listening to you, that's all I can think—it would've matter to me, Ryan."

"Grace..." He shakes his head, his hands still balled into fists because he's unable to believe what I'm telling him. That thing he was so sure would happen if I ever saw him isn't going to come to pass. That I'm not going to run. "It's okay. I under—"

I don't let him finish. Instead I look up at him, reaching into the space between us to wrap my hand around one of his fists. "I'm not going anywhere." Using my hold on him to pull him closer, I slip to my knees in front of him. Leaning forward, I press my lips against the place where the top of his thigh meets his groin. The place right below his bellybutton. Lifting my free hand to wrap it around the hard shaft of his cock, I give it a long, slow stroke from base to tip. "I'm not changing my mind either."

Thirty-six

Ryan

Half of me thinks this is another dream. Another fantasy. But it's not. I know it's not because not even my fantasies aren't this good. Not even in my wildest dreams would I be able to imagine Grace on her knees in front of me. Her lips pressed against me.

Her hands wrapped around me.

“Grace.” I choke it out on a groan when I feel her fingers tighten around my shaft, giving it a long, slow pump in her fist. I look down, just in time to watch as she leans forward again, her mouth opening. “Jesus—” Her tongue sweeps across the head of my cock, licking at the pre-cum streaming from its tip. Before I know what I’m doing, I reaching down to fit my hands under her arms to lift her up.

“Ryan—” She sounds confused. Maybe a little angry that I stopped her from sucking my cock. Because she wanted to. She doesn’t care what I look like. What happened to me. She still wants me.

Still loves me.

“I let you put your mouth on me, I coming in it,” I tell her, walking her back the half step between her and bed. “We’ve got plenty of time for that, after.”

She looks up at me, her eyes so blue they make me ache. “After what?” she whispers, the hard, swollen tips of her breasts pushing against my chest with every soft, ragged breath she takes.

I fit my hands around her hips, pushing her back on to the bed. “After I fuck you.” I growl it at her, dropping to my knees, nudging her thighs apart with my shoulders so I can bury my face between them.

She whimper softly, her hips shifting against the wide plank of my shoulders, lifting off the mattress to brush my mouth with the seam of her pussy, my cock giving an impatient jerk when she shudders at the feel of my beard, brushing against her most sensitive spot.

Wrapping my hands around the tops of her inner thighs, I grip her tight, holding her open while I give her a deep, hard stroke with my tongue, dragging the flat of it up

the length of her slit before giving her clit a gentle nip with my teeth that nearly brings her off the bed and breaks her out of my hold. “Ryan...” She reaches down, her small, delicate hands cupping around the back of my head, her hips rocking against my face while I feast on her, devouring every inch of her pussy like I’m starving. Like the taste of her is the only thing that can save me.

“Jesus...” I groan against her between strokes, changing positions, I slide my arms under her thighs to wrap my hands around the tops of them so I can open her wider. So I can fuck her with my tongue, every lash and stroke of it driving us both wild. Every suck and nip of my mouth against her clit pushing her toward an orgasm so hot and fast, it takes us both by surprise when her thighs give a hard clench and she opens her mouth on a sudden, sharp intake of breath that has me surging up the length of her to cover her mouth with my own, my tongue licking and tangling against hers while she comes.

Braced on my elbows so I don’t crush her, I flex my hips, teasing us both by stroking the swollen seam of her pussy with the head of my cock. “Fuuuck...” Tearing my mouth away from hers, I groan, dropping my forehead down to the crook of her neck. “Condom—I have some in my—”

“Now, Ryan,” she moans, lifting her hips off the bed, to notch the head of my cock in her the slick, hot entrance. “Fuck me now. Please. I can’t—”

I slide my bare cock inside her on a long, slow stroke that turns her words into a soft, shuttering moan. Her knees come up, her ankles locked around my hips, hers raised off the bed so I can fuck her deep, plunging in and out her pussy with slow, languorous thrusts that pulls soft, incoherent cries from her open mouth. Braced above her on one elbow, my hips flexing and pumping against hers, I reach down to press my thumb against her throbbing clit, keeping a steady rhythm that slowly drives us both to the brink.

“Ryan...” My name tears out of her throat on a sob. “Oh god...” her hips rock against

my cock and my hand, the feel of her moving against me, me moving inside her, so much better than I imagined. “Yes...” Her back arches in invitation and her knees dig into my ribs while she comes on my cock, the grip and pull of her orgasm setting off a chain reaction that has me fucking her hard and fast, unable to stop the orgasm that barrels down on me out of nowhere.

Too soon.

It's too soon but I'm unable to stop the orgasm from shooting through me. “Christ.” I groan, the base of my spine tightening against the need to come, rocketing and spiraling up the length of my cock, my hips pumping against hers while I come. I keep fucking her until my deep, hard thrusts trigger another release for her and she gasps, her short, sharp nails, digging into my ass as she moans low and deep in her throat as we finally come together, the rising tide of it crashing over us, again and again until we're both spent and still.

Finally unable to avoid it any longer, I lift my head from her neck and look down at her. “I'm sorry.” I feel an ugly red flush spreading against the back of my neck.

“For what?” She smiles at me, reaching up to smooth her fingertips across the scowl dug into my forehead.

“Too soon.” I close my eyes and lean in to the pressure of her hand when it changes course to slide over my jawline. “I came too soon. I—”

She laughs at me, the sound of it loud enough to pop my open and re-dig the scowl I had trenched into my brow. “Are you laughing at me?”

“You just gave me three orgasm, Ryan O'Connell.” She lifts a hand and shoves three fingers in my face and wiggles them. “Three.”

“It's not enough,” I tell her, bending my elbow to bring myself close enough to kiss



her. “Three hundred wouldn’t be enough.”

Her hips shift under mine and she lifts a hand to press it against my shoulder. I let her roll me onto my back, my spent cock stirring when she straddles me. Leaning over me, she braces her hands on either side of my head, to bring her lips to within a breath of mine. “Don’t you remember?” Grace murmurs, each word brushing her mouth against mine. “We’ve got plenty of time for that—matter of fact, we have all the time in the world.”

The End