



Reaching Ryan

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Description: Ryan is broken. Damaged beyond repair. Angry and hostile toward everyone around him. Everyone but me. It makes no sense. We're strangers. We barely know each other. But there's no denying the way I feel when I see him. The things I want when he touches me. He tells me those things are impossible. That the way I feel is wrong. That what I want will never happen. Can't happen. I should be afraid of him, but I'm not. I should stay away from him, but I can't. Because I know Ryan isn't as broken as he seems. He isn't as unreachable as he wants to be. And if he'd let me in, what we could be together could fix us both.

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Chapter One

Ryan

April, 2018

Looking at myself in the mirror, I thought it would be different. That I would feel different.

Better. More like myself.

I was wrong.

I haven't worn anything but faded T-shirts and flannel pants for six months. Last time I got my haircut was when Con (of all fucking people) pulled a pair of clippers out of his backpack instead of one of his usual bullshit card games a couple of months ago. Shaving used to be almost compulsive, even in-country I'd scrape my beard off with a field knife if I had to.

Today is different.

Today, I took the stairs to the first floor and white-knuckled my way through a proper cut and shave in the facility barber shop. When I walked in, the stylist about shit herself. She tried to hide it while she stammered and stuttered me into an open chair while the orderly at the front desk discreetly radioed that there was a possible code Charlie Brown in progress.

Charlie Brown is code for a resident in need of an intervention.

Charlie Brown is almost always me and the intervention usually involves a half dozen orderlies and at least one broken nose.

Afterward, Patrick is called. Threats are made and he comes trotting in with the family checkbook to save the day. It's happened so many times he finally decided it would just be cheaper to build me a veteran center of my very own, from the ground up, than keep me here.

Most days he'd be right.

But not today.

Today I'm on my best behavior.

Because tonight, I have something better to do than square up with a bunch of mouthy dickheads, looking to trade a few busted ribs for a 5-figure payday.

So, I waltz in and take the chair. Mind my manners. Say please and thank you, even though the fact that the woman cutting my hair about took my ear off about a hundred times.

She's nervous.

It's not her fault.

It's mine.

My reputation as an abusive asshole proceeds me and I've come by it honestly.

Never mind the fact that I've never so much as blinked at a female staff member—any female for that matter—much less raised so much as a finger at one.

Sure, there are rumors but none of them are true, but it's not like I do much to dispel them. Matter of fact I encourage them because really, I just want to be left the fuck alone.

Which is too much to ask for when you have a hair-trigger temper and a rich benefactor who's willing to pay to make your flare ups go away.

But like I said—not today.

When the stylist dusts me off and turns me loose without incident, she looks relieved and a little confused while the orderly eyeballing me from the front of the shop looks more than a little disappointed.

Shooting him a wink on my way out the door, I can't help but laugh when he follows me out the door.

It becomes less amusing when he keeps following me, right into the elevator and moves to stand behind me.

“Look—” I begrudgingly jam my index finger against the 3rd-floor button on the control panel. I hate taking it, but experience tells me my shadow has a few buddies waiting for us in the stairwell. Usually, I'm more than happy to oblige but I'm running late, so the elevator it is. “As much as I'd love to kick your ass all over this elevator, I'm gonna have to take a rain check,” I tell him, cutting him a quick smirk over my shoulder. “I have a date.”

Okay—it's not really a date.

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Tess asked me to be her escort to Cari's opening because she needed a shield. Someone who wouldn't be intimidated by Declan's tendency to menace and brood any time they're within a country mile of each other. Someone who wouldn't start shit but wouldn't take it either. She needed family.

So, she asked me.

Because that's what I am to her.

I'm family.

I'm safe.

Which, considering where I've been and what I've been doing for the last damn near decade of my life is pretty fucking funny.

"A date—no shit?" The shitbag in scrubs sneers behind me. "How much you have to pay her? Is it gonna cost you extra to get her to touch that limp Frankendick of yours?"

Frankendick.

Wow, Shitbag is pulling out all the stops today. Can't blame him. Last guy around here who called me Frankendick crawled away with three cracked ribs, a bruised lung, a broken collar bone, and a check from Cap'n for ten grand.

The elevator gives a slight jerk and lets out a ding, signaling my stop. "A lot more

than I paid your mom—she did it for free,” I say, tossing him another wink before the doors slide open in front of me.

As soon as I say it, his brows slam low over beady eyes narrowed down to slits. “The fuck you just say to me?”

“Pretty sure you heard me, fuckstick.” His tone instantly stiffens the back of my neck, but I manage to keep my shit together. Hell, I even smile before I step off the elevator.

For a second, I think he’s going to follow me off, but he stops short when he sees Kaitlyn watching us from the nursing station.

“Need something, Rich?” she says, bouncing a look between us.

Yeah. Rich needs to have his head shoved up his own ass.

“Just returning your resident,” Rich flashes her a wide, plastic grin. “Want to grab a drink after work?”

Kaitlyn shakes her head. “Not really.”

Rich’s grin winks out and he opens his mouth just as the elevator doors begin to slide shut between us. “Ask your mom—pretty sure she’s free,” I tell him, flipping him off for good measure.

“You shouldn’t do that.”

I turn away from the elevator to find Kaitlyn scowling at me. “Do what?” It’s a dumb question. We both know what I’m doing. I’m poking the bear—only I’m the one locked in a cage and Yogi’s got the keys.

“They’re trying to get you out of here, you know?” she says instead of answering me, the scowl on her face softening. “Your family—just give them some—”

“Fucking the family whore doesn’t make you one of them.” I cut her off completely because I can’t stand the way she’s looking at me. Like I’m a lame dog. Pathetic and sad. “You didn’t mean anything to him. You know that, right?” As soon as I say it, I regret it. Feel like a total fucking asshole but I don’t take it back because I’d rather be a fucking asshole than a lame dog and that’s how the way she’s looking at me makes me feel. “You’re not special—you’re just some chick Con used to plug up his holes for a few weeks.”

She stops looking at me like I’m a lame dog and starts looking at me like she wants to Nurse Ratched me. “Your dress uniform was brought up from the cleaners,” she says, offering me a vague, polite smile. “I hung it on the back of your closet.”

“Damnit.” Resolve cracking, I swipe a rough hand over my face. “I didn’t—”

“You better hurry up and get dressed. Tess called—she’s on her way,” she says while giving me a stiff-lipped smile before dismissing me completely.

Shit.

Turning away from her, I do the old man shuffle down the hall. I’m halfway to my room before she speaks.

“Oh, and not that it’s any of your business, but Conner never laid a hand on me,” she calls out. “Because he’s a gentleman.”

As in, I’m not.

Hooray for subtext.

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Luckily, the idea of someone thinking of Conner Gilroy—the guy who’s fucked so many women that people use his name as a goddamned sexual verb—as a gentleman is so laughable that I forget the dickhead comment rolling around in my head.

“Get security to walk you to your car after shift,” I tell her because Rich the Asshole Orderly didn’t look too happy that she turned him down and I know he has a hard time taking no for an answer.

Shutting the door before she has a chance to tell me to mind my own business, I hobble my way to my bathroom where I begrudgingly toss a couple of oxys down my throat before stepping into the shower. I hate taking them but if I want to walk upright and not feel like every pore and muscle fiber in my body is on fire, I don’t have a choice.

Twenty minutes later, the opioids and hot water have worked their magic, and I’m staring at myself in the mirror and feeling like a fucking fraud because I don’t recognize the man staring back at me. Because I know what’s under the uniform isn’t really a man at all.

Because I’m something less now.

And knowing it makes me want to go find Rich the orderly and ram my fist down his throat just so I can feel something other than this yawning black pit of disgusted self-loathing chewing on my guts. So I can feel like me for just a few minutes.

Like I said, I thought putting the uniform back on would be different.

I thought it'd be a relief.

I thought it'd make me feel better.

More like myself.

I was wrong.

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Chapter Two

Grace

My big sister, Cari and I have a lot in common. We both have blonde hair and blue eyes. We're both tall for women, although she's a bit taller. We're both allergic to mushrooms, and we're both jerk magnets.

Seriously—if it drives a Porsche, uses teeth whitening strips and has even considered a spray tan, neither one of us can spend more than fifteen minutes in a public place without attracting the attention of what I call the Jerkus Erectus.

I learned my lesson a long time ago. Learned to give a wide berth to every Chet, Trip and Harry that came sniffing around. And when the wide berth doesn't work, I'm not above going full-blown honey badger to keep them at bay. Cari, on the other hand, has historically had a hard time quitting the species.

Which is why when she came home last year, all banged up and lower than dirt, I was ready to hop on a bus and find the Jerkus Erectus that did a Savion Glover all over her face and make sure he understands what it means to fuck with a Faraday. When I asked her what happened—what really happened, not the shit she fed our parents—she told me that her ex-boyfriend did it. She emphasized the ex.

I didn't believe it but as the weeks stretched into months, and she never so much as whispered his name, I started to hope that she finally learned her lesson too.

Started to hope that this thing she had for her nice guy roommate Patrick was real. I

even started to believe it.

Then I met him.

I'll admit he does seem nice.

Open and friendly.

Genuine and kind.

But he's obviously loaded and looks way too good in a suit to be any of those things. Not to mention the fact that every once in a while, I get the feeling that there's something else lurking behind that Boy Scout grin and those lickable dimples. In my experience, whatever it is, it's dangerous.

Molly stepped on his perfectly polished dress shoes while we were getting ready to leave tonight. I was sure he was going to freak out. Start yelling about how much they cost so I jumped in, told her to apologize before he blew his stack. When she looked up at him and offered him a half-hearted shrug and a tepid sorry, he just grinned down at her and gently tapped the toe of his shoe against the top of her tennis shoe and said now we're even with a wink.

Not gonna lie—even though Patrick Gilroy is raising ever red flag I've got, my ovaries exploded a little.

Where the Faraday girls are concerned, exploding ovaries is the mother of all red flags. Because nothing lights our fuse faster than Jerkus Erectus.

As soon as we get to the gallery, I wander away from my parents. Snag a champagne flute from the tray of a passing waiter and find a quiet place to sit because like any mother, single or otherwise, I crave solitude. Need to take it where and when I can.

Store it up like a squirrel hordes nuts for the winter, so when my patience is wearing thin because Moll suddenly doesn't like the crunchy peanut butter I bought her even though she begged for it at the store or because my mom doesn't approve of my second job, (surprise, you really can't raise a kid on part-time, minimum wage work) I can break one of them out, my little solitude chestnuts, and crack it open. Use the fleeting moment of sanity if gives me to not completely lose my shit.

I'm rarely alone. If I'm not working at the post office or pulling a cocktail shift at the Slide Inn, Bennet, Ohio's decidedly more skeezy answer to Gilroy's, I'm with Molly.

Even now, sitting here in a dress that, even though Cari had the sale's woman cut the tags off before she gave it to me to try on, I know cost more money than I've made in my entire life, while I drink moderately expensive champagne, she's literally right in front of me. Cari painted her last summer, running through the sprinklers in the backyard, in streaks of bold, bright color. So beautiful, I can't help but catch my breath.

That's the crazy thing about being a mom. As insane as Molly makes me, as hard as life is with her arms wrapped around my neck, I'd never want to live any other way. I'd die for her. Kill for her. Do anything I had to, to make things okay for her. I knew it, the moment the nurse placed her in my arms.

Molly is my reason.

The only reason I need.

Checking the title card mounted on the wall, next to the canvas, I'm relieved to see the red sticker stuck to it because, while Cari told me it would be on display for her opening, she promised it wouldn't be sold.

Summertime with Molly Mae.

“Cute kid.”

Sigh.

Alone time was sweet while it lasted.

Plastering a polite smile across my face I look up and into the face of my first Jerkus Erectus for the evening. First because they always travel in packs. Where he came from there is always more. And to them, no isn't just a foreign word. It's a word they've never heard before. Not in any language.

“Thank you,” I tell him, taking in the slick hair and blindingly white teeth. The expensive watch. The even more expensive suit. He's standing next to the bench I'm sitting on, one of his hands dug into his pocket while the other holds a cut-crystal rocks glass. “She's my daughter.” Usually telling them I have a kid gets them to move along with a nervous smile and a have a good night. Some of the braver ones risk a few minutes of small talk before hitting the eject button and scurrying away to warn their buddies.

Don't bother—she has a kid.

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Like Molly is a disease.

Like being a mom makes me less of a woman somehow.

Not that I'm complaining. When it comes to Jerkus Erectus, I don't care if he looks at me and sees a braying donkey.

But sometimes, it bothers me.

Like when the guy seems nice.

Like someone I'd like to talk to.

Someone I'd say yes to if he asked me out for coffee.

Which is definitely not this guy.

"Yeah?" He laughs into his glass before he takes a sip of something clear, poured over ice.

"What are you, one of those MTV Teen Moms?" He lowers his glass and gives me the once over, his pale brown gaze raking over me from head to toe. "Did you get knocked up on Prom night?"

Be nice. This is Cari's big night. You don't want to ruin it for her by dick punching a senator's son.

“As a matter of fact, I did.” Giving him another forced smile, I stand, aiming myself toward the narrow space between him and the wall. “Enjoy your evening,” I tell him, attempting to shoulder my way past him.

He doesn’t let me.

“Whoa.” The hand in his pocket comes out in a flash, his arm stretched across my exit, to press its palm against the wall next to me. “Where you goin’?” This close, I can smell the vodka fumes rolling off him. Fantastic. Jerkus Erectus is even more fun when he’s drunk. “I thought we were having a moment.”

A moment?

A fucking moment?

Christ, the force is strong with this one.

Wanting to ask him if he’s drunk or just stupid, I struggle to keep the question to myself. “What’s your name?” I ask instead, looking up at him.

“Ashton Parker Gates—” He smiles down at me, a wide, slick smile, straight out of a toothpaste commercial. “The third. My friends call me Trip.”

“Of course they do.” I soften the veiled insult with another smile. “Well, Trip,” I say, managing to make Trip sound a lot like shitface. “This moment has come to an end, so—”

“Doesn’t have to.” He grins again. “When a woman looks like you, kids aren’t necessarily a deal breaker,” he tells me, searching my face for the look of relief I’m supposed to feel because I’m still in the game, despite the fact that my mom status makes me defective. When all he sees is palpable disdain, his grin loses some of its

shine. “Come on, Teen Mom—let me buy you a drink. Maybe take you someplace quiet so we can talk.”

Backing up a half step I want to kick myself for being so stupid because I’m pretty much trapped and that’s my fault. Give me a quiet, unoccupied corner, free champagne and a padded bench and I let my guard down. There’s no way I’m getting out of this without making a scene.

Sorry, Cari. I tried. I really, really tried.

I open my mouth, ready to unleash my inner honey badger, but the voice that comes out isn’t my own. It doesn’t even come from me. It comes from behind Jerkus Erectus.

“Grace.”

The asshat with the Rolex immediately drops his arm and turns away from me to look at the man standing a few feet away. As soon as he gets a good look at him, he visibly pales.

It’s not hard to understand why.

This guy—whoever he is—is dangerous.

Not Jerkus Erectus dangerous. Not give-you- pretty-word-and-promises-to-get-what-he-wants dangerous.

No.

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This guy is dangerous.

With a capital D.

He's just standing there, looking at us, a glass in each hand, and I can see it.

Kill-you-with-a-paperclip dangerous.

Snap-your-neck-and-then-go-make-a-sandwich dangerous.

And hot.

I mean, seriously holy shit hot.

Dark hair. Dark eyes. Military cut. Lean, angular jaw. Rough-looking hands, the back of his left covered in scars that crawl up his wrist to disappear into the sleeve of his dress uniform.

That's when it hits me.

He knows my name.

Seems to know me.

I take it all in. The scars. The uniform. The steely-eyed I kill for a living glare. Adding it all up, I solve the case.

This is Henley's brother.

Ryan.

Henley is Tess's friend.

Tess is Cari's friend.

Cari is my sister.

That should make this guy safe, right?

Even though that's how it's supposed to go, I don't buy it.

There is nothing safe about this guy.

Not even a little bit.

Chapter Three

Ryan

“Grace.”

I cut a quick look to the left to find Patrick standing next to me, watching me with a weird mix of mild amusement and less mild concern.

“What?” Before the word even leaves my mouth, my gaze wanders back to her like it has a mind of its own. A young woman with long, loose blonde hair, wearing an expensive-looking pale blue dress. She’s sitting on a bench in the corner, looking at a painting of a little girl, playing in the water on a summer day while she slowly sips champagne.

I can’t even see her face, but it doesn’t matter because that not what I can’t stop looking at. What keeps dragging my gaze back to settle on her. It’s how content she looks. I can see it in the set of her shoulders. The way she lifts her champagne flute to her lips slowly, like she’s savoring every swallow. Every second of solitude.

I don’t think I’ve ever felt that way.

Perfectly content.

At peace.

I’ve been watching her for a while now, which makes me a total creeper, but I

rationalize my behavior by telling myself there's fuck all else to do in this place unless I want to go pick a fight with Declan or limp around and play wounded warrior for Boston's Elite.

"The woman you're staring at—" His statement draws my attention again. This time he looks mostly amused. "She's Cari's little sister. Her name is Grace."

He keeps talking. Filling me in—that she's here, visiting from Ohio with her parents for Cari's big day. That Cari is trying to talk her into moving here to go to school. That she had a kid when she was nineteen and no one knows who the father is.

Half listening, I look past him to find Cari and Tess huddled together a few yards away. Seeing Tess causes a twinge of... something to tighten my chest. My feelings for Tess have always been convoluted. Murky. I love her. I've always loved her. Always wanted her.

Why is less clear.

Sometimes I think it's real. That my feelings are genuine and other times I think I feel this way because I've known her my whole life and I just don't know any better. Because she belongs to Declan. Because it's always been a competition between us. Who's smarter. Who's faster. Who's better.

Funny thing is that I'm the only one competing. I'm running a losing race, all by myself because Tess will never choose me. She loves me but will never want me.

She wants Declan.

And Tess isn't one to change her mind.

The fucked-up, confusing part of it all is that knowing that is a relief. Knowing she'll

never want me, can't want me, makes being around her easy. Makes telling her the truth easy too.

Like sometimes I wished I'd died that day.

Like sometimes I think about killing myself.

That I'm just a shadow of the man I used to be.

That I'm not even a man.

Not anymore.

Not really.

I watch Cari reach into her purse and pull something out. Hand it to Tess with a whisper. Tess shoots Declan, who's been brooding in a corner and staring at her for the past hour, a quick nervous glance before she hightails it through the crowd and down the hall while Cari comes toward us.

Thirty seconds after she disappears, Declan follows her.

That something inside me twinges again, slow and dull. I'm supposed to follow them. I'm supposed to want to follow them. Stake my claim. Plant my flag. State my intentions, like a good alpha male. But even though I know what's happening between them, I just can't seem to muster the give a fuck to move.

Like I said—my feelings for Tess are goddamned confusing.

“What are you two over here gossiping about?” Cari says, leaning into Patrick for a quick kiss.

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“Your sister,” I tell her, my tone blunt and unapologetic, right before I drain my glass. It’s club soda. I wish it was scotch but with painkillers on board, I’m dull enough as it is. If I added booze to the mix, I’d be a useless mess.

Yeah? Who do you have to stay sharp for? You aren’t an operator anymore. No one’s calling you to save the day. You’re a useless cripple with a broke dick and one nut. Slop it up, Ranger—because no one gives a shit but you.

When I say it, Cari gives me a few moments of stunned silence. Long enough for me to lift my glass and rattle the ice cubes in its bottom. “Looks like I’m empty.” I flash Patrick a grin in the face of his tight-jawed glare. I can tell him to get fucked all day long if I want to, but being rude to his girlfriend is something else entirely. Because I want to keep being an asshole to her, I force myself to take a step back. “Excuse me,” I tell them both before pushing myself away from them and through the crowd. On my way to the bar, I’m waylaid by about a dozen people wanting to shake my hand, giving me the generic thank you for your service spiel to which I offer my equally pat answer—thank you for your appreciation—before I push my way past them.

With every intention of ordering three fingers of single malt when I finally get to the bar—because why the fuck not—a fast, bright flash snags my peripheral and I feel my entire body go tight and razor sharp in an instant. My heart taking off at a sudden, fast gallop while my brain kicks and fights its way from under the heavy opioid blanket, trying to make sense of what I saw. What I’m feeling.

Scope flash.

Sniper.

Like the rest of me, my vision responds to the sudden adrenaline dump, pulling everything into sharp and sudden focus, my gaze quickly moving and assessing, trying to pinpoint the threat, as my arms move to my sides and my left leg drops back just a bit, widening my stance and center of gravity, while my left hand grazes against my hip, looking for the heft and shape of a weapon that should be there but isn't.

It isn't there because I'm not a soldier anymore. Because I got blown the fuck up and now I'm a fucking crippled-up headcase who has about as much business carrying a sidearm as I do juggling chainsaws.

Blindfolded.

Thank you for your service, Ranger.

I keep looking, anyway. Clearing the room. Searching for a threat I no longer have the equipment or skill set to deal with because it's not just a habit, it's who I am. What I am.

Because I'm a—

There.

Not a sniper.

Just some trust fund kid flashing his Rolex, trying to hypnotize his next vic—

Grace.

She's not sitting on her bench anymore. She's not sipping champagne. She doesn't look content. She doesn't look hypnotized either.

She looks pissed.

Maybe a little scared because Mr. Rolex has her hemmed into a corner and doesn't seem to be in a hurry to let her go.

“What can I get you, sir?”

My gaze jogs to the right to focus on the smiling bartender standing a few feet in front of me and everything snaps out of focus. Goes soft and dull, from one breath to the next.

I've been standing here, silent and rigid, for only a few seconds. Even though it feels like hours have passed, I know they haven't.

“Club soda with a twist,” I tell him, digging into my pocket for my wallet to feed the tip jar. “Make it two.”

Chapter Four

Grace

“Ryan.”

When I say his name, Henley’s brother smiles. Not a real smile. More like a twitch at the corners of his mouth, fast and tight, before he diverts his attention back to the Jerkus Erectus between us. “Is there a reason you’ve got her trapped in a corner?”

“Sorry, man.” Jerkus Erectus drops his arm and turns away from me to face Ryan. “She didn’t tell me she had a boyfriend.”

“She shouldn’t have to,” Ryan says, giving him a bland smile. “She told you no—that should be sufficient, even for a rapey, little motherfucker like you.”

Jerkus Erectus shoots me a quick murderous look, like it’s my fault he’s about to be force-fed his own Rolex, before looking back at Ryan. Because he’s smarter than he looks, Jerkus holds his hands up in mock surrender. “Look—”

“Walk away, kid—before I stop feeling generous.”

Jerkus drops his hands, an audible sigh of relief pushing out of his mouth before he can stop it. He moves away from me, giving Ryan a wide birth as he scurries away to disappear behind the line of party-goers.

And just like that, we’re alone.

He's here with Tess. I saw them walk in together. Saw the way he had his hand press against the small of her back. He likes her—that much is obvious. I expect him to walk away and leave me alone to go find her now that crisis has been averted but he doesn't. Instead he comes toward me and offers me one of the drinks in his hand. "Fighting evil is thirsty work," he says, the tight press of his mouth relaxing into something between a smirk and a smile when I hesitate. "It's club soda." The smile deepens when I reach for the glass he's not offering me. "That's club soda too—just club soda. I'm willing to take a drink to prove it if you don't mind cooties."

His offer heats my cheeks. I'm being rude. He doesn't even know me and he swooped in and chased off an aggressive asshole for me and here I am, practically accusing him of trying to roofie me.

Quit being a paranoid asshole, Grace, and say thank you.

"I had it handled."

Now he doesn't just smile.

He laughs out loud.

"Of that I have no doubt." I want to hear condescension in his tone. I expect to feel like he's patting me on my head and telling me what a cute little kitten I am, but I don't. He seems and sounds genuine. Still, I can't let it go.

"Then why the rescue mission?" I ask, sounding like Molly when she's missed a nap.

His laughter dies off and his smile winks out. "Because I was bored." Relinquishing the glass in his hand, he moves around me to take a seat on the bench behind me. He doesn't invite me to join him. Doesn't try to reel me in with inane questions or mindless small talk. He just sits there like he doesn't care where I go or what I do.

Which is why I sit down next to him.

“How do you know my name?”

“Patrick told me about ten minutes ago.” He cuts me another look, this one tinged with annoyance. “Don’t worry, haven’t you heard—I’m all sorts of fucked upstairs.” He taps his index finger against his temple. “There’s a 99.9% chance I won’t remember it come tomorrow morning—might not even remember you.”

I remember the story now. There was an explosion. The blast caused some sort of brain damage. I feel an embarrassed flush break out across my chest to creep up my neck. “Why would he do that?” I don’t like the way I sound. Angry. Defensive. Like I think he’s lying. “Tell you my name.”

“He caught me staring at you and felt the need to tell me your entire life story.” He gives me an apathetic shrug, totally unaffected by my accusatory tone. “They get excited when I show interest in just about anything these days.”

My entire life story.

That’s doubtful, considering no one knows my story. Not all of it, anyway. There are things about me and my life no one knows. Things no one will ever know. “You were staring at me?”

He takes a drink from his glass and shrugs again. “Yup.”

“Why?”

“Like I said—I was bored.”

I look at him, letting myself take in the little things about him. Up close, I can see

gold and mahogany flecks in his deep brown eyes. There's a scar on his neck, long and thin, that reaches up from the collar of his shirt and disappears around the curve of his neck and into his hairline. His hair isn't brown. It's red. Dark red in the glint of the gallery's overhead lights. "Didn't your mother teach you it's rude to stare at people?" When I say it, I can't decide who I'm talking to—to him or to myself.

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“My mother?” He laughs again, a soft, low chuckle that sounds real. Like he finds my question genuinely amusing. “No,” he says, shaking his head. “She deemed me untrainable a long time ago.” He lifts his glass to his mouth. Still laughing, he drains it. “She deemed me a lot of things.”

I can tell from his tone that whatever those things are, they aren’t good, but I ask anyway. “Like what?”

“How do you know my name, Cari’s little sister?” he says, throwing up a big, fat stop sign instead of answering my question. “You shouldn’t. Not unless we’ve met before.” He frowns at me, a look of frustration creeping across his face. “Have we met before?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I went dress shopping with the girls yesterday,” I tell him, the words tumbling out of my mouth, fast and loud. “Tess mentioned that Henley’s older brother was going to be her date tonight and then later on, Henley said you were in the Army and that you’d been—” I stop short, the word getting stuck in my mouth.

“Wounded.”

He looks right at me when he says it and for some reason, the word sounds like a dare. Like he’s challenging me somehow.

I nod, feeling like I just got my knuckles rapped with a ruler. “Anyway, that’s how I know your name—where is she?” I ask, shooting a quick glance around the crowded gallery.

“Where is who?” The corner of his mouth twitches again. “My sister or my date?”

“Yes.”

That earns me another laugh. “Conner had proposal plans this evening so, my guess is he and Hen aren’t going to show.” He takes a sip of club soda. “And Tess is somewhere with Declan, doing... something.”

“But she came here with you,” I say, angry for him, even though it’s absolutely none of my business.

“Tess is a friend.” He says it a little too quickly. His tone is a little too hard. It makes me wonder which one of us he’s trying to convince. “Just a friend.”

“But you want to be more.” That much is obvious. What’s less obvious, is why I care. Why it bothers me. Why thinking about them together makes me feel small and petty.

He sighs and shakes his head, gaze trained on the painting of Molly in front of us. “Tess and Declan are inevitable.” He looks at me, his mouth softening into a smile that seems vaguely sad somehow. “And everyone knows it but them.”

“Henley doesn’t like him,” I say because I don’t know what else to say. “Declan—we ran into him while we were shopping. I can tell.”

“Not a lot of people do.” He cocks his head and offers me a sardonic chuckle. “Patrick seems to be the only person who can tolerate him—and your sister. She seems to like him fine.”

“Do you like him?” I want to stuff my fist in my mouth to stop myself from peppering him with stupid questions that are none of my business, but I can’t seem to stop.

“My feelings for Declan are even more convoluted than my feelings for Tess,” he tells me in that blunt, direct tone of his. “I don’t like him—I’ve never liked him—but I owe him.”

Because I sense it’s a subject he doesn’t want to talk about, I change it. “She’s wrong, you know,” I tell him in a matter-of-fact tone that draws his gaze to my face. “Your mother. I mean—you were in the military, right?” I gesture at him, waving my hand at his uniform. “They were able to train you just fine—so, maybe she’s the problem, not you.”

His jaw goes tight. His shoulders stiffen and I’m instantly sorry I said it. Before I can apologize, he looks down at my glass before aiming a pointed look at my face. “You gonna drink that?”

No.

No, I’m not.

Even though it’s the truth, I don’t say it because saying it would encourage him to ask me why and my answer would offend him. Possibly make him angry and I’m not sure I can handle this guy when he’s angry.

When I don’t answer him, he gives a soft exasperated sigh and reaches out to take the glass from my hand and I let him. His movement pulls my gaze to his hand. Up close, the scars that cover the back of it are even worse than I thought but as bad as they are, I have a feeling they’re nothing compared to the scars I can’t see. When I look up, I find him watching me again.

Before I ask him another dumb, intrusive question or make another offensive comment about his mother, Ryan drains the glass he took from me and stands. “See you around, Cari’s little sister,” he tells me with a flat, polite smile.

And then he walks away from me without a backward glance.

Chapter Five

Ryan

There are a lot of things I hate about my life.

I hate the way my gut clenches every time I look at myself in the mirror. That split second of disconnect when I see the gnarled-up mass of lumpy scar tissue that covers nearly half of my body and my fucked-up leg and I think Jesus Christ, get a load of that poor bastard before I remember that it's me I'm looking at—I'm that poor bastard.

I hate the fact that I can't remember the names for things I've used my entire life. The words and names sit in my brain, taunting me, just out of reach because I know what a goddamned fork is, what to do with it, but when I reach for its name, I can't remember what it's called, not if someone held a gun to my head in one hand and a fistful of them in the other.

I hate the fact that I wake up every morning feeling fussy and muddled. That I have to lay in bed for a while, mentally turning and shifting the past six months of my life. Broken fragments. Jagged puzzle pieces that don't fit together right. That I have to force them into the right shape and when I finally get it right, when I remember who and where I am, my reward is to remember that I'm useless. Not even capable of performing even the most basic of male functions.

Which brings me to the thing I hate most about my life.

My dick.

More specifically, the fact that it's fucking broken. As useless as the rest of me.

I know how that sounds. The fact that I'm more worried about my dick than my brain is ridiculous. That I'd rather have a fucked-up brain than a limp dick for the rest of my life.

You're physically intact, Sergeant O'Connell. While you've suffered extensive damage to your reproductive organs, our reconstruction was successful. Tests indicate that there is no physiological reason for your sexual dysfunction.

The doctor didn't come right out and say it, but his implication was pretty fucking clear, even to a guy with a head full of scrambled eggs, like me.

The problem isn't that I can't get it up.

The problem is that I don't want to.

Which is fucking bullshit.

What guy wants to be impotent, for fuck's sake?

Not that it matters.

Hard or not, any half-sane woman would run away, screaming, if she saw the equipment I'm sporting, anyway.

When I told Tess as much last night, she said none of that would matter to the right woman. What she didn't say is that she's not that woman.

She didn't have to.

I never had a real chance with Tess. Not even when I was 100% from head to toe, and the one slim chance I did have I let pass me by a long time ago.

Declan just left.

He came by to apologize. Ask me for forgiveness for the way things played out when we were kids. For turning me in. Getting me arrested.

I told him the truth, that there was nothing to apologize for. That he did me a favor, turning me in. In the moment I was pissed—tell the truth I didn't understand the gift I'd been given until I got accepted to Ranger school. That's when it hit me. When I realized that by turning me in, Declan gave me a second chance. A way out.

And yeah, it ended badly. I got blown up. My brain is scrambled, and I feel like my body is on fire most of the time. My leg is fucked up. I've got one nut and dick that won't work but it could be worse. I could be in prison. I could be a fall down drunk like my old man.

When I remember that, what could've been—would've been—if Declan hadn't made that call, I remember that owe him.

Someone knocks on my door. Three light raps before that someone eases it open slowly. "Ry?"

Henley.

I look away from the window to watch her poke her head through the opening.

I look away from her and refocus on the window in front of me. "What are you doing

here?" Looking at her is confusing because it's hard for my brain to process. Difficult to connect the way she looks now with the Henley I remember. It's easier if I focus on her voice rather than her face.

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“It’s Sunday,” she reminds me. “I’m here to pick you up for dinner. At the Gilroys’—I tried calling but you didn’t answer,” she says, moving in my peripheral toward my bedside table. Turning my head, I watch the stranger who is my sister pick up the cell phone she gave me on the advice of my therapist a few days ago, because warnings and reminders beforehand will make transitions and changes in his routine easier for him to process. “You know these things work better if you turn them on, right?” she says, flashing me her straight, white stranger smile.

I look away from her without smiling back. “So I’ve heard.” I’m being a dick. I know I’m being a dick, but I can’t seem to stop. To be perfectly honest, I don’t really want to. I like it when they’re mad at me, like to keep them that way, because when they aren’t their tone changes. The way they look at me is different.

When they aren’t mad at me, I can see their pity. I can feel it. Hear it in their voices.

And it makes me want to eat my gun.

Which probably makes it a good thing they took mine away from me.

I listen to her sigh. Open and close the drawer on my nightstand to retrieve the charge cord she stashed there and plug the phone in. “I ran into Declan in the hallway,” she asks, moving toward me. “What was he doing here?”

“I dunno.” I shrug, watching her move from my peripheral into my direct line of sight. “Can’t remember.” It’s a lie. I can remember but I don’t want to talk to her about it. She doesn’t know what happened after she left when we were kids and she doesn’t need to. She hates Declan enough without me giving her a reason to blame

him for what happened to me.

She eases herself into the chair next to me. “You don’t remember?” She sounds concerned when she says it. “Ry, he was just here.”

I give her another shrug.

Her stranger face crumples a little under the weight of her worry. “Maybe I should call—”

“Jesus.” I lift a hand and swipe it over my face. “Look—I can’t remember is my polite way of telling you to mind your own fucking business, okay?”

“Oh.” She sounds both relieved and hurt when she says it. “Okay. I was just worried that—”

“What?” I ask her, forcing myself to look her in the face when I say it. “Worried that big, bad Declan Gilroy came here to hurt your retarded, crippled brother?” I look away from her. Back toward the window, just in time to watch Dec’s truck pull out of the parking lot. “In case you haven’t heard, I might be retarded, but I can still take care of myself just fine.”

Yeah, against a few soft-bellied orderlies maybe, but against someone like Declan you wouldn’t stand a chance, Ranger. Declan Gilroy would have absolutely no trouble with ripping out your spine and shaking it in your face.

“Don’t call yourself that.” Her tone is hard again when she says it, telling me I’ve finally managed to piss her off.

“Call myself what?” I scoff at the window and shake my head. “Retarded or crippled?”

“Either.”

Laughter slices it’s way up my throat like a rusty blade. “Well, what would call it?”

“I’d call it a TBI.”

TBI.

Traumatic brain injury.

“Same fucking thing, Hen,” I shake my head at her like I feel sorry for her. Like she’s delusional. “Call it what you want but it’s the same fucking thing.”

“It’s not.” She wants to shout it at me, I can tell. The Henley I knew, my real sister, would’ve. She would’ve shouted it in my face and probably bloodied my nose for good measure. The Henley she is now, dignified and refined, whispers it. Her ankles crossed, hands clasped together in her lap like she’s having tea with the Queen of fucking England. “The doctors say you’ll get better. You just need—”

“I know what the goddamned doctors say.” I look away from her because I can’t stand the way she’s looking at me.

Time.

I need to give it time.

I need to be patient.

And I need treatment.

But there’s a waitlist with the VA that doesn’t get me in to see a specialist for another

six months and when Patrick offered to find one who would work with me privately, I flat out told him no. I've taken enough from him as it is. "You know, for someone who keeps insisting that I'm not retarded, you sure to treat me like I am."

She doesn't say anything, her lack of response pulls my gaze away from the window. She looks as angry as she sounds, her jaw clenched tight, one hand clutching the other in a white-knuckled grip that's probably the only thing keeping her from punching me in the face.

Good.

Finally, she speaks. “Get dressed so we can go.”

“Look—” I’m about to tell her I don’t want to go. I never want to go. Always make excuses for why I can’t but she still shows up, week after week, hoping that this will be the week I decide to act like an actual human being. Before I can give her my usual song and dance, she talks over me.

“Conner proposed last night, and I accepted.” She looks down and smiles at the cheap silver ring on her hand, a far cry from the five-pound rock she was wearing on that same finger a month ago. “We’re making the announcement tonight, after dinner. It would mean a lot to me if you’d be there.”

“Why?” I’m not trying to be a dick this time. It’s a real question.

“Because you’re family, goddamnit.” She shoots up out of her seat to glare down at me. She doesn’t look like a stranger anymore. She looks like my sister. “You’re my family and I—” She sighs. Smooths her fingertips along the edge of her fancy skirt. She looks up at me, a forced smile sitting on her face. “Please, Ryan. Conner and Patrick will have their family there. Cari’s parents and sister will be there for her and I just want—”

Grace.

“Okay.”

My agreement to go drops her jaw for a few seconds before she remembers her manners and it snaps shut. “Okay?” The hope and gratitude I hear in her tone is enough to make me want to drive a railroad spike through my temple. “You’ll go? You’ll—”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ.” I take another disgruntled swipe at my face before planting both hands to push myself out of the chair. It’s rough going. So painful I have to clench my jaw and grit my teeth against the sudden, familiar fire that erupts in my muscles and bones. When I’m finally standing, I turn my head to glare down at her. “That’s what I said. I mean, it’s not every day that my little sister admits she even has a brother, much less wants to trot me around like a show pony. I better take it where I can get it, right?”

“We’re family, Ryan,” she says firmly, showing me a little of the Henley I remember. “We’ve always been family.”

We’re not family.

We’re strangers to each other. Have been for a long time now. The thin, tenuous bloodline we share doesn’t change that.

She abandoned me.

Left me behind, and even though I did a pretty good job of fooling myself into believing that it didn’t matter, didn’t hurt, being forced to look her in the eye every day of my goddamned life has made me realize it was a lie.

It did matter.

It did hurt.

She chose our mother—and when our mother cut me out and cast me aside, Henley let her. She walked away from me without a backward glance. Pretended I didn't exist because it was easier that way. Because I didn't fit into the fairytale past my mother constructed when she left my father for her new, billionaire husband.

Even though it's the truth—how I really feel—I don't say it out loud because the truth of the matter is if our mother had chosen me instead of her, I would have done the exact same thing. So, I don't say it. I just look down at her and sigh.

“Whatever—go wait in the lobby so I can change.”

Chapter Six

Grace

I'm staying in Boston.

I've been on the fence about it since Cari asked me to move here a few weeks ago. Not because I didn't want to. No. The second she suggested it, I felt something I haven't felt in years. Excitement.

About my life.

About the possibility of it.

I realized I've been settling. Resigned to a life of living with my parents and raising Molly. Working at the post office. Picking up the odd shift at the local bar when a bill is past due, or Molly needs new shoes.

The fact that I can have more never occurred to me. Not until Cari changed everything with four little words.

Come with me, Grace.

As soon as she said it, I knew I wanted it. A life of possibility. Something better for Molly and me. But I also knew how my parents would react when I told them.

That's why I've been on the fence. Because there's no way they were going to be

supportive about it. No way they were going to say, This is your life, Grace. You're a grown woman and have every right to live your life the way you see fit. We trust you to do what's best for you and for Molly.

Because the past has painted me as someone who is irresponsible. Incapable of making good choices. Unworthy of trust.

The way they're looking at me right now all but proves it.

"You're not serious." My mom bounces a look at my father before shifting her gaze past me, toward Cari's studio where she has Molly occupied with some paints and paper. "What are you saying? For god's sake, Kathrine Grace, you can't just move to Boston."

It's Sunday morning and we're sitting at the kitchen table at Cari and Patrick's. He left earlier to coach one of his league games for his non-profit, Boston Batters. Cari stayed back to offer moral support while I broke the news.

"Why?" I shake my head. "Why can't I? Cari did. When she left for college you guys were supportive. You even took out a second mortgage on the house to pay for her tuition."

"That was different," my mom says, instantly defensive. She looks toward my dad for help and when he doesn't offer any, she refocuses her attention on me. "You have responsibilities back home. A job. Friends. Molly's starting pre-school in the fall."

"I have a part-time job at the post office that will be filled about five minutes after I quit," I tell her, reminding her that like opportunities, jobs are in short supply back home. I don't mention the cocktail job at the Slide Inn because I don't want this discussion to devolve into a screaming match about my irresponsible choices in front of Molly and that would be the fastest way to do it. "And I don't have friends. I

haven't had any friends since I had Molly." It's true. As soon as they found out I was pregnant and had decided to keep the baby, my so-called friends scattered like I had a contagious disease. "And Molly can just as easily start school here—we both can." I take a deep breath. Let it out slowly. "I think—"

My mom's mouth sets in a hard, stubborn line. "I think you're being selfish. You're thinking of yourself and not your daughter."

"I disagree." I can feel my face fall into a mirror image of hers. "I'm doing this for her. For both of us. So I can be someone we can both be proud of."

"I think we both know this isn't about doing what's right by Molly." She scoffs softly and shakes her head like I'm being flighty and childish. When I don't answer her, she sighs. "Fine. Your father and I will keep Molly with us and you can come home when you've run this ridiculous notion out of your system."

"No." I shake my head because leaving Molly has never and will never be an option. "Molly is my daughter. She stays with me."

"Do you really think you're equipped to raise a child on your own?" There's fear in her tone. Real fear. Finally, we're getting somewhere. The real reason she's fighting this so hard. It's because she doesn't think I'm capable of taking care of Molly without her help. Doesn't see me as her mother. Not really. I knew she felt that way but hearing her pretty much say it out loud still hurts. Still stings.

"I'm as prepared as you were when you had Cari—maybe even more so since I was two years older when I had Molly." It's a shitty thing to say but I'm past playing nice.

"That was different. I had your father to help shoulder the responsibility," she reminds me in a pointed tone that digs up an old bone of contention. She's never forgiven me for not naming Molly's father. Holding him responsible. She always

viewed my refusal to point fingers as some misguided attempt at martyring myself when all it really did was cause gossip and fuel rumors. What she doesn't know, what I've never said out loud is that the truth of Molly's paternity would do more to fuel rumors and gossip than my pointing fingers ever could.

"You keep saying that—that my situation is different from yours and Cari's and you know something—you're right." I plant my hands on the table between us and stand. "It is different. I never got the opportunity to go to college. I don't have someone to help me raise my daughter. I have to do it on my own and you know what? That's okay, because it means the only person I have to answer to for the choices I make is her." I glare down at my mom and shake my head. "I'm not asking you for permission, Mom. I'm telling you—Molly and I are staying in Boston. I'm going to school and we're going to live with Cari and Patrick until I find my feet."

Fear flickers across my mom's face again. "Doug—" She looks at my father. "Say something. Talk some sense into her. God knows she's never listened to me."

My father looks at me from across the table, his silent, blue-eyed gaze narrowed on my face for so long I fight the urge to start squirming like when I was a kid and got caught throwing mud at cars in the church parking lot after Sunday morning service. Finally, he sighs. "She's right, Ellen. She deserves a chance to make something of herself just as much as Cari did—maybe even more—and if moving here is a part of that then we have to stand aside and let her go." My father's declaration is met with stunned silence as my mother and I stare at each other because neither of us can believe what we just heard. "Besides," he continues when neither of us say a word. "She won't be alone. She'll be here, with family."

Chapter Seven

Ryan

“Well, lookit you,” Conner says, giving a low, one-note whistle when he looks up from the grill and sees me standing on the back porch. “Haircut. Fresh shave. Clothes that don’t smell like you rolled around in roadkill—lookin’ sharp, O’Connell.” He tips the beer in his hand in my direction. “You smell sharp too.”

I laugh, looking down at the pair of faded jeans and old MIT sweatshirt he brought me months ago in hopes of getting me to wear something other than what he refers to as my cantankerous old coot costume.

“Not half as sharp as you,” I say, arching an eyebrow at his collared shirt and dark wash jeans. “For a second there, I thought I was looking at Cap’n.”

“Shit.” He takes a drink from the bottle in his hand. “Cap’n wishes he looked half as good as me.”

It’s funny because he and Patrick are nearly identical. If it weren’t for the extensive ink work Con’s sporting under his shirt, they could pass for the same person.

“Last time I checked, you weren’t Boston’s most eligible bachelor.” Planting my cane on the step below me while gripping the porch rail with my free hand, I take a step, gritting my teeth when my bended knee screams in response. Con fought hard to save my leg. He pushed the doctors when they said it was hopeless. Refused to let them amputate when they insisted it was their only course of action. I’m pretty sure he got

Patrick to sign off on surgeries the Army wouldn't pay for.

Sometimes, I wish he'd let them take it.

When he doesn't hit me with a snappy comeback, I look up to find Con watching me. His facial expression hasn't changed but his body is tense and he's set his beer aside like he's ready to spring into action. To help me if I fall or my leg gives out.

"Fuck off, asshole," I growl at him, planting my cane and taking another excruciating step even though I'm still sucking wind and sweating bullets from the last one. "I can handle a couple of goddamned stairs." I force myself to take the stairs whenever I can. It takes me almost an hour to climb the three flights between my room and the main lobby and almost every step feels like I've got a bag of knives shifting around in my lower leg but I do anyway because like it or not, I'm here. I survived and not about to bitch out now.

"You think I'm worried about you?" he barks back, swiping his beer off the table he has set up next to the grill. "Bitch please—I'm worried about my sweatshirt. It's one of my favorites." He purposely looks away from me while he drains his beer. He's lying. We both know it but hearing him say it takes the sting out of it. "How'd Hen get you here, anyway?"

Grace.

I don't really remember what she looks like. I remember long hair that shone pale gold in the gallery's overhead lights. Light-colored eyes that narrowed suspiciously when I offered her a drink. I remember I made her nervous. That she didn't particularly like me very much. Didn't feel sorry for me either. Didn't look at me and see some helpless gimp. Talking to her, for the first time since what happened to me happened, I felt like myself.

That's what I remember about her.

"She asked. I said yes." My hand-me-down runners hit the grass and I start my old man shuffle, covering the distance between the porch and where Con is manning the grill. It's late March and a balmy fifty-three degrees. I'm freezing my ass off in a sweatshirt layered over a long-sleeved shirt and he's flipping burgers and swigging beers like it's the middle of summer.

"You sure she didn't mention that Cari's little sister would be here?" His question pulls my gaze up and I find him grinning at me.

Fucking Patrick.

"You and Cap'n are a couple of gossipy little bitches, you know that?" I grumble at him, stabbing him with a sharp glare before aiming it at the cooler he has parked next to the table. Flipping the lid open, I rummage through the ice until I find a beer. Pulling it out, I slam the cooler lid closed. "A couple of gossipy little bitches who need a hobby."

"What do we need hobbies for?" Con says, tossing me a bottle opener. "We have you."

I laugh in spite of myself while I pop the top of my Trillium. "Take up stamp collecting and leave me the fuck alone." I toss the opener on the table between us and take a deep pull from my beer. When I lower the bottle, he's still looking at me. "What?" I bark at him, instantly defensive.

"I dunno." He gives me a shrug while he moves a few burgers from the grill to the warming rack above it because Hen likes hers medium rare. "You've been stuck on Tess for so long, I don't know what unstuck Ryan is supposed to look like."

“Yeah,” I grumble at him. “Well, don’t hurt yourself tryin’ to figure it out.” It’s not a denial but it’s not an admission either. “Where’s your brother—he said he was gonna be here.”

“Who knows.” Con gives me another shrug. “Cryin’ in a corner somewhere. Hiding from his fiancé. Pretending he’s too good for the rest of us—you know, the usual.”

I don’t think Declan is doing any of those things but I don’t say so. I let the conversation die while I stand there and wait for Con to pick another subject. Finally he does.

“So?”

I frown at him. “So what?”

“You know what,” he says, still looking at me. “You gonna go for it or not?”

Go for it?

What the fuck is he talking about. He knows as well as I do that Tess is never going to—

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Grace.

He's talking about Grace.

Asking if I'm going to make a move on her.

"Why?" I snarl at him. "You interested?" He's not. I know he's not. I've never in my life known a man as devoted to a woman as Con is to my sister.

"Not even a little bit." He laughs like I make a real joke. "But you are."

He's right. I am. I'm interested. I'm more than interested. Not that I can do fuck all about it. "Drop it," I say, my tone low and tight. "I mean it, Con. Let it go."

"Why?"

"You know why." He's like a fucking toddler with all his goddamned questions. "I'm serious, fuckstain—drop it."

That shuts his mouth for about five seconds before it opens again. "Just because you can't fuck her doesn't mean you can't hang out with her. I mean, if you actually like her then maybe it'll make a difference. Maybe if you spend some time with her, you'll—" He's concentrating on flipping his burgers. Doesn't see me coming until we're both on the ground and I've got him pinned under me. I throw a punch but it's an awkward angle and ends up clipping his cheekbone instead of breaking it. Used to my hairpin trigger, Con recovers quickly. Using the momentum of the punch, he plants his knee in my stomach to roll me onto my back. The adrenaline dump masks

the pain. Quiets it to a dull ache. “Goddamn it, you crazy bastard—” he barks down at me, his hands planted on my chest in an effort to keep me pinned. “you ruined my fucking sweatshirt.” He wants to hit me, but he won’t. He never does. I don’t know if it’s because he’s afraid he’ll hurt me or if he’s afraid that hitting me back will just escalate the situation.

“Fuck your sweatshirt,” I snarl at him through clenched teeth while I use a hammer fist to break the lock on his elbows. As soon as his arms are bent, I slip past his defenses and smash my fist into his jaw. “Fuck you.” Stunned from the blow, Con offers little protest when I roll him again. “I hate you. I hate your perfect family and your fucking perfect lives. Fuck all of you.” I don’t know where it comes from. Somewhere deep. Some place dark. The Gilroys have always been there for me, from the time I was nothing but a snot-nosed punk, running the neighborhood. They fed me. Let me sleep over when shit got bad at home. Never said a word when I turned up on their doorstep, night after night. Never turned me away either.

But none of that matters right now.

Because right now, I hate them.

Every last fucking one of them.

“That’s too bad, you miserable fuck,” he spits up at me. “Because we’re your family. We’re all you’ve got. If you’d just—”

“You should’ve let me die.” I say it quietly but it stops him cold. “You should’ve just—”

“Those men are saying lots of bad words, right mom?”

My muscles relax in an instant and I look over my shoulder to see a little girl with

white blonde hair and blue eyes staring at us like we're a freak show attraction. On one side of her is an older couple—a man and woman who look like they're about two seconds away from grabbing the kid and taking off. On the other side of the little girl is Grace.

I don't even remember what she looks like, but I know it's her. I can tell by the way she's looking at me.

Shit.

Chapter Eight

Grace

It's him.

Ryan.

He's sitting on Patrick's cousin's chest, covered in mud, growling and snarling like a wild animal. When he heard Molly, he froze. Looked right at us. I've never wanted to snatch Moll up and run so fast in my life.

"Is that Uncle Patrick down there?"

I look away from the two men on the ground and down at Molly to find her staring up at me, a curious expression on her face. She doesn't seem scared, so I do my best to keep my tone light. "Nope," I tell her reaching for her hand. "That's his cousin, Con—"

"Come on, Moll," my mom says talking over me. "Let's go inside." She pulls Molly away from me and whisks her up the sidewalk, my dad following in their wake, leaving me to stand here by myself.

Thanks, mom.

As soon as the screen door bangs closed behind them, Con speaks.

“Good job, fuckface—” he gripes as he pushes Ryan off of him and struggles to stand. “Way to make a first impression.” Looking down at the dirt smeared across his shirt, he shakes his head. “You can be the one to explain to your sister why I look like I just went ten rounds with a naked mud wrestler.” Despite his anger, Conner reaches down to offer a hand up to Ryan. When all Ryan does is glare up at him from the ground, Con sighs and takes his hand back. “Suit yourself, you stubborn asshole.”

Not sure what to do, I stand there and watch Conner pull a few dozen burgers off the grill before shutting it off. Seeing my chance to make a break for it, I hurry toward him. “I can take those inside for you,” I offer, reaching for the platter in his hand.

“Nah—” He gives me a flat smile and shakes his head. “I got it. Someone’s going to have to go inside and do damage control,” he says, skirting around me. I stare at his retreating back until it disappears with another bang of the screen door.

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, Ryan and I are alone.

Because retreat would make me a coward, I turn away from the house to find him still sitting on the ground, glaring up at me. Dirty jeans. Grimy sweatshirt. Swollen knuckles from where he pounded Conner in the face.

“You got a shirt on under that?” I ask, jerking my chin at his sweatshirt. When he nods, I make a gimme gesture with my hand. He hesitates, but only for a few seconds before peeling it off and tossing it to me. I catch it, turning toward the cooler where I flip the lid open and scoop a couple handfuls of ice into the sweatshirt to create a makeshift icepack. Finished, I carry it back to where Ryan is still sitting on the ground. Hunkering down next to him, I hold it out. “Here.” When all he does is keep glaring at me, I sigh. “Conner’s right—you really are a stubborn asshole,” I say, reaching out, I grab his injured hand and turn it over to plop the ice pack onto his knuckles. “Do you remember meeting me last night?” I ask, suddenly reminded of what he said to me last night. That there was a good chance he wouldn’t. “At Cari’s

show. You—”

“Grace,” he says my name, his tone low and rough. “I remember.”

For some reason, relief floods through me. “I wasn’t sure.” I chance a look up, flashing him a quick smile. “Last night you made it sound like you were gonna go all Memento on me.”

He frowns at me. “Memento?”

“Yeah—you know like the movie.” I blush, the heat of it rushing up my neck and across my cheeks when all he does is stare at me some more. “Guy Pierce? He has retrograde amnesia—wakes up every morning and can’t remember the day before. He gets these tattoos to remind himself...” I look down at his hand in mine. “Nevermind—it was a stupid thing to say.” Shaking my head, I force myself to look him in the eye. “I want to apologize for the way I behaved last night. You did a nice thing for a total stranger and I treated you like some slimy guy trying to pick me up in a night club.” I give him another smile, this one feels awkward. Almost embarrassed. “I’m not always like that, it’s just that guy really—”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“Yes, I do.” I huff out a frustrated breath when he just looks at me. “I was out of line and I—”

“No.” He shakes his head and makes that sound again. “I mean, you don’t have to apologize for last night because I don’t remember it.”

“Oh...” I can feel my face crumple in confusion. “I thought you said you remembered me.”

“I do.” He lifts his gaze, aiming it at the top of my head to let it drift downward. “I remember your hair was loose and your dress was blue,” he tells me, and I have to stifle the urge to pull the ponytail holder out of my hair. “And I remember that we talked but not about what or why.” His mouth quirks at its corners, too fast and tight to be called a smile. “You could’ve accused me of kidnapping the Lindbergh baby and I wouldn’t know it.”

“If you don’t remember, then how do you know I don’t owe you an apology?”

That sound again. “Because ten times out of ten, I’m the asshole in any given scenario.”

He’s wrong. He was blunt and a bit gruff last night, but he wasn’t an asshole. Because I’m on the verge of saying it and making this whole situation even more awkward than it already is, I clear my throat and nod my head. “If you say so,” I tell him, starting to pull my hand from under his. “I’ll just leave you—”

His fingers curl around mine, stopping my retreat. “I don’t have amnesia.” When I look up at him, he’s frowning again, like he’s trying to put a particularly difficult puzzle together. “I have brain damage. My head’s full of holes—like Swiss cheese. Dead spots.” His frown deepens into a scowl. “Sometimes I’m fine and sometimes I can’t remember what happened five minutes ago. Mostly it’s small things. What I had for breakfast. What day it is. Where I live.” He looks embarrassed about what he’s saying and he gives me a shrug. “Con says it’ll get better. That my brain just needs to build new synapses or some shit.” He makes that sound in the back of his throat again. “I guess he’d know—he has a doctorate in cognitive neuroscience.”

Since I’m pretty sure he has no idea what he’s saying, I let the fact that he just told me that the tatted-up mechanic his sister is about to marry is a doctor slide right past me. “You want to tell me what that was about?” It’s none of my business. I barely know him. Should’ve gone inside when Conner did. Left him out here to brood and

fend for himself. “What were you and Conner fighting about?”

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He doesn't answer me. Not right away. He just sits there and scowls at me until I start to think that maybe he doesn't remember. Finally, he opens his mouth. "You."

I can feel myself take a beat. Blink at him like I don't understand what he just said. "Pardon?"

He makes that sound again in the back of his throat and I realize it's a laugh. Different than the one I heard last night. This one sounds like it hurts. "We were fighting about you."

"Me? Why would you be fighting about me?" I sit back on my heels and shake my head. "You don't even know me."

"Cap'n told him I'm interested in you." His gaze slips past me when he says it. "The two of them are like a couple of spinster aunts—couldn't mind their own goddamned business if someone had a gun to their head," he says, reminding me of what he said last night. That when he shows interest in anything, they get excited. Push him to pursue it. The something they're pushing him to pursue is me. "They think I should..." He stalls out and shakes his head. "You don't have to worry." He grimaces, like he has a bad taste in his mouth, his fingers loosening their grip around mine. "I'm not—I mean, I don't—shit." He swipes his free hand over his face. "I'm not interested in you—like that."

I was prepared for that. I was prepared for his rejection, because why would he want to take me to a movie or meet me for a cup of coffee somewhere—why would anyone? I'm an unemployed, uneducated single mom. What I'm not prepared for is how his rejection makes me feel. Hurt. Defensive. This time when I try to pull my

hand out from under his, he lets me. “Is it because of Molly?” It’s a fair question. It usually is. If he says yes, I can tell myself that I dodged a bullet. That Molly and I are a package deal. That whether it’s a cup of coffee or a marriage proposal, whoever’s doing the asking needs to understand that she’s a part of me. She’s non-negotiable.

“What?” He looks at me like I just spit on him. “No.” He shakes his head, setting the wet muddy sweatshirt between us aside with an unceremonious plop in the dirt. “I’m just not... equipped.”

“Equipped?” I scoff at him. “Equipped for what?” Why am I pushing this? Why am I acting like he just broke up with me? Like Ryan and I are more than a couple of strangers that keep bumping into each other.

“Any of it.” His tone hardens and he looks away from me while he struggles to his feet. It takes him awhile. His legs moving slowly as he pulls them under him. They’re wobbly and unstable. Like they weren’t made to bear his weight. There are a few times I’m sure he’s going to fall on his face. I have to grip my ankles and grit my teeth to keep myself from offering to help him. From asking him if he needs it.

When he’s finally standing, he looks down at me, red-faced, his mouth set in a grim, hard line, and offers me his hand. I don’t want to take it, I can stand on my own, same as him, but I get the sense that it’s important to him that I do. That he be the one helping me.

Slipping my hand in his, I let him help me to my feet. As soon as I’m standing, he lets go of my hand. “Go inside, Grace,” he tells me, his tone dismissive and final. “Go inside, be with your family and leave me alone.”

Chapter Nine

Ryan

I lied.

I'm interested.

More than interested.

To be honest, Grace Faraday is pretty much all I've been able to think about since Henley mentioned she'd be here. She's the reason I agreed to finally make an appearance at a Gilroy Family Sunday Dinner in the first place.

On the way here, I decided I'd ask her out. Nothing major. Just a casual meet up for coffee or lunch somewhere because I liked talking to her. Because I like the way she looks at me. How I feel when I'm with her.

She makes me feel like me.

The real me.

The me before my injury.

So what do I do?

I open my big fucking mouth and tell her I have brain damage. That I'm not equipped

to have a relationship with a woman.

Jesus Christ, I might as well hang a sign around my neck that says: Ask me about my broken dick.

Fuck my life.

I mean, seriously—fuck it. I can't remember my own goddamned name half the time. I have to rely on people to get me from one place to the next. I can't live on my own. Every step I take on this fucked up leg of mine feels like someone is hammering railroad spikes into my kneecap.

And to top it all off, my fucking shoe's untied. I've been standing on the porch and staring at it for the last ten minutes because I can't—

“Hi.”

I look up to find the little girl Grace showed up with standing right in front of me, a can of strawberry soda in her hand. Not just a little girl. Her daughter. Grace's daughter. I grapple and reach for her name and like a miracle, it falls right into my grasp.

Molly.

Her name is Molly.

“Hey.” I frown down at her, unsure of what to do. I look up and around the yard. “Are you lost? Do you...” It's after dinner. Grace is nowhere to be found. “Do you need help finding your mom or something?”

The little girl takes a loud slurp from her soda can and shakes her head. “No,” she

says around another loud slurp before wiping the back of her hand across her mouth. “She’s in the house talking to Aunt Cari about flowers.” She waves her free hand at the house. Last I saw of her, Grace was with Cari and Hen, talking wedding stuff—color schemes and the virtues of an open bar while Mr. Gilroy and her dad watch baseball and Mrs. Gilroy and her mom have a quiet conversation over tea. Since Grace’s dad has been shooting me daggers since I walked in the house and I don’t know the first thing about wedding shit, I wandered outside again as soon as dinner was over.

Con and Patrick are throwing darts at a board Mr. Gilroy’s had mounted to the side of the garage since we were kids. They’re standing close together, talking in low tones while they occasionally take turns at throwing. They’re trying to act casual but they’re doing a shitty job of it because every once in a while, one of them takes a quick glance in my direction. Con looks pissed. Cap’n looks worried.

They’re talking about me.

If I had to guess, Con is telling his cousin what I said to him while I was trying to cave his face in.

You should’ve let me die. You should’ve just let me—

“Your shoe is untied.”

I look back down at my shoe and feel my gut tighten. “You shouldn’t talk to strangers,” I tell her, my face falling into a frown before I can catch it. “It’s dangerous.”

“You’re not a stranger.” She gives me a shrug. “Can I tie it?”

The expression on my face relaxes a little. “What?”

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“Can I tie your shoe?” Her big blue eyes go round and hopeful. “My mom is teaching me bunny ears—she says I have to learn before I can go to Kindergarten but my grandma keeps making me wear baby shoes.” She aims a disgruntled look at her own feet, drawing my attention to a pair of white tennis shoes with Velcro straps and what looks like cartoon mermaids on the sides. “So, can I?”

“Uhh—” I look up again, this time for help, someone to either tell me what to say or hustle her away because I don’t know the first thing about kids except that this one is making me nervous. Before I can come up with an answer, she grins, taking my minor alarm and mild anxiety as a yes.

“Here.” She shoves her sticky soda can into my hand and drops to her knees. “My mom is a good teacher,” she tells me while she grips my laces and pulls them tight before twisting each of them into slightly mismatched loops. “She lets me practice bunny ears on her all the time since I can’t do my own because of the baby shoes.” She crisscrosses the loops and pushes one of them through the hole at the bottom. “Did your mom teach you bunny ears?”

I bark out a laugh because the thought of my mom teaching me anything is ridiculous. When she stops what she’s doing and looks up at me, her face scrunched up in confusion, I figure I should answer her. “Shit, no.”

“You cuss a lot.” The look of confusion morphs into one of disapproval. “My mom says—”

The screen door bangs shut and I look up to see Grace’s father standing a few feet away. “Moll, I think Gran told you that you had a choice between dessert or a soda

after dinner,” he says, aiming a frown at the soda can in my hand.

The little girl hunkered down over my foot aims a quick oh, shit look up at me before looking at her grandfather. Before she can lie, I do it for her. “It’s mine,” I tell him. “She got it for me.” To prove it, I lift the bright red can to my mouth and take a swig of soda that’s warm enough to turn my stomach and sweet enough to hurt my teeth.

Grace’s father continues to glare at me. “That so?” he says, watching me fight the grimace that tries to settle onto my face. “You don’t look like a strawberry soda kind of guy.”

“It’s my favorite.” To prove it, I choke down another mouthful.

He watches me for a few more seconds before looking down at his granddaughter. “Go get your sweater, Moll. It’s time to go.”

“But we just got here.” She gives my shoelaces a final tug and stands up to plant her hands on her hips to frown up at him. “Can’t I stay with—”

“Now, Molly Grace.” He barks it at her, but I can tell the rough tone isn’t something either one of them is used to. He looks just as surprised by it as she does.

Her brow crumples even more and for a second it looks like she might cry. Watching her lower lip tremble and her eyes well up, I feel a surge of something that clenches my jaw and tightens my grip on the soda can in my hand. Something I haven’t felt in so long, it takes me a few seconds to recognize it for what it is.

Protectiveness.

No. That’s not entirely true. I felt it last night. When that Rolex wearing douchebag had her mother cornered at Cari’s opening.

Not your woman. Not your kid.

Looking down at Molly I force my mouth into a smile. “Thanks for tying my shoe for me.”

“Welcome,” she grumbles at me, aiming a quick, tearful glare at her grandfather before she stomps her way back into the house.

That leaves me alone with Grace’s father.

“You served.” Even though it’s not a question, I can feel him looking at me, waiting for me to answer him.

“Yes, sir.” Sighing, I set the half-empty can of soda on the porch railing and rub my sticky palm on the leg of my jeans. “For ten years,” I tell him, even though he didn’t ask.

“What branch?”

“Army.” I could elaborate. Tell him that I was a Ranger. Most people are impressed when you tell them you were Special Forces, but I have a feeling I could tell this man that I singlehandedly killed Bin Laden and he wouldn’t care less. Grace’s father has already made his mind up about me and if his expression is any indicator, his isn’t a favorable opinion.

“Figures.” He makes a dismissive sound in the back of his throat that tightens the back of my neck.

“Let me guess—” I look at him, taking in the bull neck and beefy shoulders. The stomach, just beginning to show signs of softening. The flint-eyed stare, while ignoring the inner-voice in my head, telling me to shut my fucking mouth.

“Marines?”

His head moves back and his chin tips up like he’s waiting for me to take a swing. “Four tours in Iraq—long enough to know some men come back from that place and are able to put it behind them. Stop being a soldier. Start being a husband. A father—and some come home just plain wrong.” Again, his tone leaves no question as to which category he thinks I fall into.

“I’m not sure I understand what your point is, sir.” It’s a lie. I know what he’s saying. What he thinks. He saw me lose my shit on Conner. Saw me talking to his daughter. That she wasn’t happy when our conversation ended. He knows there’s something wrong with me, same as I do. I just want to hear him say it out loud, because maybe if I do, it’ll lend some weight to my own self-loathing.

“Then let me be clear.” He makes that sound again. Harsh and angry, like he’s swallowing rocks. “Stay away from my daughter.”

Chapter Ten

Grace

The bang of the screen door draws my attention up from the Modern Bride magazine I'm flipping through, just in time to see Molly stomp her way across into the kitchen.

"What's up, Moll?" I say, setting the magazine aside. Everyone else has migrated upstairs to ooh and ahh, over Mrs. Gilroy's wedding dress. They've probably all taken turns trying it on and snapped a million pictures by now.

No, thanks.

Like I need to be reminded of what I'll probably never get to have.

When Molly doesn't answer me, I lean away from the table and throw up my arm to catch her, mid-stomp, and she stops short in front of me. "I asked you a question, Molly Grace. What happened?" I hate getting stern with her but I will if I have to.

"I was outside, tying the man's shoe, and Grandpa came out and—" Her bottom lip starts to tremble and she clamps her mouth shut to keep from crying. When the worst is past, she lifts a fist to her face and knuckles away a few stray tears. "Grandpa says I have to go with him and Gran." She aims tearful blue eyes up at me. "Do I have to? I don't—"

"Yes." I brush her hair out of her face and offer her a cheery smile. "It's getting late and I think Gran and Grandpa had plans to take you to the zoo tomorrow." They

don't—or at least they didn't, but if they want me to back their play, it's going to cost them. "So, you're going to spend the night at the hotel with them." I hold my fingers to my lips and give her a wink. "Shhh, it's a surprise."

Her lip stops trembling. "Do I get cotton candy?"

"Absolutely." I'll make sure of it.

The tears dry almost instantly. I lower my arm and she throws hers around my neck to press a set of sticky lips that smell suspiciously like artificial strawberries to my cheek. "Can you come with us?" she says, pulling back enough to look me in the eye.

"I can't." I give her a slow head shake. "I have some dumb grown-up things to do." Like research pre-schools and summer college courses.

"Yuck." She curls her lip up at me and drops her arms. I still haven't told her we're staying in Boston. "Want me to bring you some cotton candy from the zoo?"

"You better." I poke her in the belly button and she lets out a high-pitched squeal. "Now do what Grandpa says before he changes his mind," I tell her, giving her butt a playful swat when she darts past me. As soon as she's gone, I aim my gaze past the open back door and through the screen to see my dad standing on the porch, talking to Ryan.

Neither of them looks happy.

Giving a quick check to make sure Molly is on the hunt for her sweater, I push my chair back and make my way across the kitchen, just in time to hear my dad say, "Stay away from her. She's got enough on her plate with Molly without adding a broke-down soldier to the mix."

Even as I beg the floor to open up and swallow me whole, I push myself forward and force my arm up to push the screen door open. “You made Molly cry.” As soon as they hear me, both of them clam up and aim guilt-ridden looks in my direction. Ignoring Ryan, I focus on my dad. “So, you and Mom are taking her to the zoo tomorrow. Cotton candy will be involved. And she’s going to feed the giraffes,” I say, barely able to push the words through my clenched teeth.

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” my dad says, shaking his head. “We can’t—”

“No worries, Mr. Faraday,” Conner calls from across the yard where he’s throwing darts with Patrick. “I’ll get your flight switched to Monday morning, no problem.” I have no idea how he heard us or how he’s going to manage to do what he just promised but I don’t bother to ask, I just keep glaring at my father until he finally relents.

“Okay.” He slides a quick, nasty glare toward Ryan before holding up his hands in surrender. “Okay—we’re taking Molly to the zoo tomorrow.”

I lift a finger and jab it at his chin. “Cotton candy and giraffes.”

He gives me an affirmative nod. “Cotton candy and giraffes.”

I look at Ryan. He’s watching the exchange with an odd mixture of amusement and annoyance. “You don’t have to worry about Ryan’s intentions, Dad.” I say it right at him before lifting my gaze to find my father’s. “He’s already made it perfectly clear that he has no interest in me, whatsoever, so you can stop trying to intimidate him.”

My dad’s eyes go wide and he shakes his head. “I wasn’t—”

“Yes you were.” My cheeks go hot as the shame of it finally sinks in. “But like I said, you don’t have to worry. Ryan isn’t interested in an undereducated, mostly

unemployed, twenty-three-year-old, single mom like—”

Before I can finish insulting myself, Molly comes crashing through the screen door, sweater balled up in one of her sticky hands. “Ready to go, Grandpa?”

“Sure am, Molly-pop,” he says to her, holding his arms out to her without missing a beat, chuckling a bit when she takes a flying leap at his chest. He pulls her into his arms and lifts while she clings to him like a baby possum. “Let’s go get Gran and blow this pop stand.”

Chin resting on his shoulder, Molly gives me a smile and one of her newly perfected winks, letting me know our secret about the zoo trip is safe.

“Moll, Grandpa told me he’s gonna let you order chocolate cake and ice cream from room service after Gran goes to bed.” A sugar-mad Molly is a frightening thing but he deserves it after what he just pulled.

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Molly's head pops up and she gives my dad a wide-eyed grin. "Serious?"

"We'll split it," he tells her before giving me a withering glare on his way into the house. As soon as the screen door bangs shut again, I look at Ryan.

"I'm sorry about that."

His forehead crumples. "About what?"

"About Molly bothering you and—"

"Molly didn't bother me." He aims his scowl downward, pulling mine with it, toward his feet. "She tied my shoe for me," he says, drawing attention to a pair of red-stained laces looped into a set of lopsided bunny ears. "Since I'd been standing here for the past ten minutes trying to remember how to do it on my own before she showed up, I'd say she pretty much saved my life."

"Yeah, well my dad—"

"Your dad was just looking out for you."

His tone pulls my gaze up from his feet and I find him watching me, the scowl on his face suddenly deep enough to be categorized as a snarl. "That's his job. To look out for you. Look out for Molly." Despite his expression, he doesn't sound angry. "If I was him and I saw someone like me chatting her up, or you for that matter, I don't think I would've been as... verbal as he was about the whole thing."

Before I can ask him what he means by that, he turns his head and aims his glare across the yard, toward Conner and Patrick who are still pretending to play darts. “I’m done playing normal for the day. One of you assholes needs to take me home,” he shouts in their direction. “See ya around, Grace,” he says before turning to hobble down the stairs.

Chapter Eleven

Ryan

I've been dreaming about her since Sunday. Every night. Every time I close my eyes, she's there. She's with me.

I don't remember how it starts but it's always the same. Every time. One second, I'm floating inside my own skin. Bumping and drifting in slow motion. The weightlessness of it scares me. I feel lost. Directionless. Like I'm fumbling my way through the dark, trying to find the light.

And then, suddenly, there she is.

Grace.

As soon as I feel her moving over me, it all goes away. I feel found. Like I have a purpose. Not the bullshit kind of purpose that Con and Patrick made-up and shoved at me to try to keep me from eating my gun.

A real purpose.

Strong and solid.

Grace.

Even though I should, I don't question it. I don't examine it too closely because I'm

afraid if I do, it'll break apart in my hands. Turn to dust and leave me behind like everything else.

Like everyone else.

So, I don't question it.

I don't ask why.

I just hold on.

Let it take me.

"Ryan..." She whispers my name as she slides over me, moves against me, her pale blonde hair falling around us. Shutting us in. Closing everything out but us. This. "It's okay..." She says it against my mouth, her lips moving against mine. "Don't be afraid." Her tongue licks its way into my mouth to tangle with mine, every sweep and stroke slow and languid, coaxing me to surrender. Open up.

To let go.

Let her in.

"Touch me, Ryan." Her hands move across my shoulders. Her fingers grip, sliding down the length of my arms, following the knots and ridges of the scar tissue that covers them.

The sensation of her hands moving over me sets off an alarm, faint and distant. I don't want her to touch them. My scars. I want to tell her to stop but I can't because as much as I don't want her to touch me, I need her to. I need to feel her hands on me. Need the way her skin feels against mine. The way she says my name, soft and

breathless, like a prayer.

Her.

I need her.

Grace.

I say her name out loud, groan it softly, tipping my head back while her teeth and tongue nip and lick their way along the clenched muscles of my jaw. The taut, corded line of my neck.

“Don’t be afraid,” she says again, levering herself up to look down at me. Lifting her hands, she takes mine with them, bringing them up to shape them around her breasts. “It’s okay, Ryan.” She circles her slim, delicate fingers around my wrists, holding me in place. Moaning softly when I give in, brushing my thumbs against her swollen nipples. Louder when I lift myself up to meet her. Cup her full, soft breast in my hand to hold it steady for my mouth. Cool fingers slide through my hair. The alarm sounds again, this time closer. Louder now, but I ignore it. Block it out.

A little more.

Please, just a little while longer...

I concentrate on how perfect she is. The hot, frantic throb of her nipple against my tongue. How soft and delicate her skin feels under my wide, callused palm as I slide my hand over the flawless curve of her ass. Along the back of her thigh. “Grace...”

“Yes...” she gasps, lifting herself onto her knees when she feels the rough brush of my blunt-tipped fingers against her slick, swollen pussy. Tilts her hips, moving and pushing against me to stroke herself with them, urging me on. Begging me to lush my

way inside. “Please, Ryan...” she moans softly, her plea breaking against a sharp, shuddering gasp when I give in completely, fucking my fingers into her, so hard and deep she immediately begins to shake under the weight and pressure of the orgasm baring down on her, snaking and racing down the length of her spine. “Wait,” she breathes into my ear as one of her arms slips from around my neck to push a hand between us to wrap it around my cock. “Wait. I need...”

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It's blaring now. The alarm, loud and insistent, refusing to be ignored. Screaming at me. Taunting me for even trying. For believing, even for a second, that I could have this. Something normal. Someone like her.

Because I'm not normal.

I'm broken.

Inside and out.

"Don't." I catch her by the wrist, pushing her hand away before she makes contact. "Don't touch me. I can't let you—"

"It's okay, Ryan." She moves again, her hand sliding along the inside of my thigh, the feel of her fingers tracing closer as insistent as it is inevitable. "We all have scars..."

That's when I wake up in a pool of my own sweat. Heart slamming around in my chest, the fast, heavy pound of it the only thing I can hear. The dull, thick throb of it, pulsing between my legs, pulling my hand down the length of my torso, even though I know what I'm going to find.

Closing my hand around the soft, pliant lump of shit that now passes as my dick, I have to grit my teeth and lock my jaw to keep myself from screaming and cursing myself for being stupid enough to hope. Because being the dumb motherfucker that I am, I keep hoping that this time will be different. I keep hoping that maybe the doctors are right. That I'm not really broken.

That I'm not less.

That's how it ends, every single time.

With visions of Grace dancing through my head, so vivid and real, I can still feel the weight of her on top of me. Her pussy clamped around my fingers and my hand wrapped around my limp dick, squeezing it so hard I'm in danger of pulling the fucker off.

And this morning was no different.

In fact, I'm still in the middle of trying to peel my fingers back when there's a brisk, efficient knock on the door to my room. Hearing it makes letting go of my dick a little easier. It's not Conner. He doesn't knock, and it's not Henley either. She's been burning the candle at both ends lately, trying to help Patrick get his veteran center open. Tess is undoubtedly buried under the hood of some car and no one has seen or heard from Declan in days. That leaves only one person.

Kaitlyn.

"Go away," I bellow, jerking my hand out of my pants before turning away from the door.

The door flies open in response and the bright, overhead light is flipped on without preamble. "Can't do that," she says, her thick-soled nursing shoes making an oddly satisfying squelch against the floor as she crosses it to stand in front of my window. "It's almost noon."

"So?" I gripe at her, squinting hard against the sudden burst of light that hits me in the face. "It's not like I have anything pressing to do—unless you count staring out the window and trying to remember what I ate for dinner last night."

“Last night was lasagna,” she says to the window, while she fusses with the curtains. “Want me to write it down?”

“What I want is for you to fuck the fuck off,” I growl at her. Like the rest of the female nurses, the correct application of tone gets her to back off but she’s growing increasingly immune to my charms. When all she does is ignore me, I roll over and stare at the ceiling. “I’m sorry. Let me be clear—get the fuck out.”

She finally turns toward me and plants her hands on her hips. “Jesus,” she sighs, shaking her head at me. “Can you be any more of an asshole?”

“I dunno... I could file a formal complaint with your supervisor, citing your lack of professionalism and your recently developed propensity for verbally abusing me,” I tell her, still staring up at the ceiling. “Would that help?”

“Go ahead,” she says, the squelch of her sturdy, rubber-soled shoes carrying her from the window to the bathroom where she flips the light on and starts rummaging around. “I’d probably make employee of the month—now, get up. You have a visitor.” She pauses for a moment, the air between us filled with the sound of rushing water. “Well,” she says, cutting the water. “Visitors.”

Visitors?

“What,” I grumble some more, throwing my stiff, aching legs over the side of the bed before pulling myself up. “Did Con bring me a puppy?” The visual of nurses swooning and fainting at the sight of a shirtless Conner Gilroy holding a puppy is enough to make me laugh. “Con causes quite the nursing station sensation when he makes an appearance, all by himself. I can only imagine what Con and a pup—”

“It’s not Conner.” Kaitlyn appears in front of me, my wet toothbrush in one hand and a tube of toothpaste in the other. “It’s a woman—a blonde—and she has a little girl

with her.” She unceremoniously thrusts them both at me, nearly putting my eye out with the business end of the toothbrush.

Grace.

Shit.

“Where is she?” I look around like Grace is about to jump out of my closet and shout BOO! When she doesn’t make a sudden appearance, I swipe a hand over my face. “What does she want?” I say, pushing Kaitlyn’s hand away before she jabs me in the eye.

She shrugs while she flips the cap on the tube and squirts a generous amount of paste on to the brush's bristles. “She’s at the nursing station and as far as I can tell, she wants you,” Kaitlyn says. Rerouting the toothbrush, she slips past my defenses and all but jams it into my mouth. “I know, I’m as shocked as you are.”

“I don’t want to see her.” I shake my head. “Tell her I’m—”

“Yeah—no.” Finally managing to shove the brush into my mouth, she takes a step back and replants her hands on her hips. “If you don’t want to see her, you can tell her that yourself.” Dropping her arms, she turns away from me to make her way toward the door.

Yanking the toothbrush out of my mouth I take a disgruntled swipe at the blob of toothpaste that plops out of my mouth. “Telling her myself defeats the purpose, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know...” She aims a sunny smile in my direction while reaching for the door handle. “Does it?”

“It’s your job, goddamn it,” I bark at her, stalling her hand on the handle before she gets the door open.

“It’s really not.” She gives me another smile, this one coupled with a shrug. “If you can’t find it in you to take a shower, at least use the toothbrush.” She wrinkles her nose at me like she smells something bad while she finally gets the door open. “And for god’s sake, change your shirt. There’s lasagna on it.”

Chapter Twelve

Grace

I didn't even have Molly buckled into her brand-new car seat before she started asking about Ryan.

"Where does the man live? Can we go see him?"

The man.

That's what she calls him.

It would be hilarious if her persistence about seeing him again wasn't so unnerving.

Unnerving because your four-year-old daughter is obsessed with a grown man or unnerving because it's like she's tapped into your subconscious and is speaking your own thoughts to you out loud?

"His name is Ryan and I don't know," I tell her, careful to avoid looking her in the eye while I lie. Well, it's not a lie exactly. I don't know... but it would take me all of thirty seconds to find out if I wanted to. "I thought you wanted to go shopping for pony sheets."

"I do," she says. "But I want to give the man his cotton candy too."

"Moll..." I shake my head at her.

“Please, Mom?” Her blue eyes go round and pleading. “We can do both, right?”

Instead of answering her, I close the rear passenger side door and round the front of my brand-new car. Sliding into the driver’s seat, I stick the keys into the ignition but instead of starting the car, I just sit here, trying to process the last few hours.

It’s been a really weird morning.

When Molly came home from her sleepover and zoo day with my parents Monday night, it was well past Molly’s bedtime.

“Did you have a good time?” Hunkering down in front of her, I start to untie the string tethering a giant Mylar balloon shaped like an alligator to her wrist while Cari and Patrick say their goodbyes to our parents. Conner made good on his promise to get them on an early morning flight, so this will be goodbye for a while.

Molly nods her head. “I fed the giraffes,” she tells me, giving me an exhausted grin. “Their tongues are really sticky.”

“Stickier than your hands?” I ask her, pulling two bags of cotton candy out of her grip before reaching out to pull off a rubber elephant trunk hanging around her neck from an elastic band. When she gives me a solemn nod, I laugh. “I don’t believe it.” once she’s stripped of her treasures, I pick up the bags of pink, sugary fluff I dropped at my feet and scoop her into my arms. “You remembered my cotton candy,” I tell her, carrying her down the hall.

Resting her cheek on my shoulder she sighs. “It’s not all for you,” she tells me, her sweet, warm breath huffing against my neck while she twirls a length of my hair around her grubby finger. “I told grandpa I wanted to get one for Aunt Cari but that was a fib.”

“A fib?” I push the door to the guest room we’ve been sharing open with my foot. “You shouldn’t lie.” I sit her down on the bed, to crouch in front of her. “Especially to get more of something you’ve already had,” I scold while pulling off her shoes.

“It’s not for me.” She looks at me, and shakes her head. “It’s for the man.”

The man.

There’s only one man she could be talking about.

Ryan.

“Molly...” I toss one shoe and then the other, shaking my head at her. “I don’t think he likes cotton candy.”

“He does. He likes me too.” She gives me a firm head nod. “We’re gonna be friends. I can tell.”

Because I still have final goodbyes to exchange with my parents and I’ve spent the day online, reviewing pre-schools with discouraging results, and I still haven’t told her we’re staying here instead of going home to Ohio, I let her sudden and puzzling obsession with Ryan go. “Okay.” I give her a gentle nod. “Go brush your teeth and wash your face and hands before putting on your PJs.” It’s too late for a bath. I’ll deal with it in the morning.

On her way to the bathroom, she stops and looks at me. “We can take it to him, right mom?”

Sure she’d forget or change her mind and decide to just eat her ill-gotten cotton candy herself, I give her another nod and told what I thought was a harmless lie. “Yes, we can.”

That was three days ago and she hasn't mentioned Ryan since. I thought I was in the clear but then Patrick ruined the whole thing this morning.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:28 am

When I woke up, it was still dark outside. Patrick and Molly were in the kitchen, the low, deep murmur of his voice, punctuated by her high-pitched giggle pulling me down the hall. Hearing it makes me nervous. I've been doing my best to keep her out of the way. Patrick and Cari have just gotten engaged. I'm painfully aware that having her little sister and her four-year-old niece underfoot is the last thing he wants.

Stepping into the kitchen, I prepare to whisk her away while peppering him with profuse apologies and promises to keep Moll out of his way from now on. What I see stops me short and renders me pretty much speechless.

"Watch for the bubbles, okay?" Patrick says to Molly. "When you see the bubbles, they're ready to flip." He hovering over her while she stands on a stepstool in front of the stove, her long blonde hair pulled up in a tragic excuse for a ponytail, an apron folded over her nightgown. She's got a spatula in her hand and she's staring at the griddle like her life depends on it.

He's teaching her how to make pancakes.

She jerks her head up to look at him standing above her. "Flip?"

He gives her an encouraging nod. "Yup," he says, helping her slide and maneuver the spatula under the pancake. "One. Two. Three. Flip." They lift and turn together, Molly letting out a frustrated sigh when the pancake lands lopsided, half of it sliding off the griddle.

"Sorry." She aims another gaze at him, this one glum and defeated.

“For what?” Patrick reaches up and gives her disastrous ponytail a playful tug. “You’re doing great.”

“Yeah but—”

“Molly.” I can’t take it anymore. I can’t keep standing here, watching him be nice to her. I have to say something.

“Hi, Mom.” She looks away from Patrick and aims one of her sunny smiles in my direction. “I’m makin’ pancakes.”

“I see that,” I say, careful to keep my tone light. “What did I tell you about bothering Uncle Patrick?”

Her smile winks out and I want to kick myself for being such a mom. “Not to.” She looks up at Patrick again, suddenly unsure of what they’re doing and whether or not she’s breaking the rules. She looks back at me, her frown in full force. “But he said—”

“You’re not bothering me, Molly.” Even though he’s talking her, he says it right at me before aiming his good-natured grin in her direction. “Why don’t you go get dressed while I finish the pancakes.”

I expect her to throw a tantrum. Molly doesn’t take well to being told what to do, especially when she has other ideas about what she’d rather be doing. Bracing for a blow-up, I can only watch in awe as she passes Patrick the spatula and hops off her stool to shoot past me and down the hall in a mad rush to do as he says.

“Are you a wizard?”

He laughs and shakes his head. “Not that I know of,” he tells me, lifting the lopsided

pancake off the griddle to add it to the stack. “I’m a novelty,” he says, reaching up to pull a plate from the rack above the coffee pot. “I suspect it’ll wear off after a few weeks. She’ll be back to being stubborn in no time at all.”

“You seem to know a lot about kids for someone who doesn’t have any.” I eye him suspiciously, suddenly convinced he has a secret family stashed away somewhere.

He cocks his head and shrugs. “I do run the largest non-profit for kids in Boston.” If he hears the suspicion in my tone, he doesn’t show it. “Two or three?” His hand hovers over the stack of pancakes.

“Four.” I’m starving.

Laughing again, he stabs the requested number of cakes with a fork to transfer them onto the empty plate. “No bacon,” he tells me, slide the plate across the counter to park it in front of one of the stools. “We haven’t graduated to fried meats yet.”

“I’ll live.” Sliding onto the stool I watch while he retrieves the butter and syrup, pushing them in my direction. As soon as I’m settled, he reached up to pull a coffee mug from the rack next to the plates.

“You don’t like me very much, do you?” he says, his tone conversational while he lifts the coffee pot and fills the mug.

“What?” I drop the fork in my hand, the clatter of it sharp and loud against my ears. “No.” I shake my head at his back, scrambling for cover. “I like you fine. You’ve been great and I’m so thankful for your letting me and Molly move in. I just—”

“Look.” He turns toward me to set the mug in front of me. “It’s just you and me here—so let’s be honest with each other.”

Honest.

Right.

Here it comes.

Jerkus Erectus.

He's Mr. Perfect for my sister and Mr. Rogers for Molly. For me, he's going to let his true colors show. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't relieved. I've been waiting for this for days now and so has he. An opportunity, out of earshot of my sister and my parents, for him to tell me that Molly and I are a burden he isn't willing to bear for long. That no matter what face he shows Cari or Molly, he doesn't want us here. We aren't welcome.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:28 am

“Okay.” I nudge my plate away because I’m suddenly not hungry. “I’m listening.”

“I don’t like being lied to,” he says, back still to me while he pours himself a cup of coffee.

“I...” I shake my head again, watching while he opens the fridge and reaches into it to pull out a carton of half and half. “I didn’t—I never—”

“If you don’t like me, just say so.” Turning toward me, he takes the few steps between us. He comes to a stop across the counter in front of me, setting his mug on the counter, he opens the carton and tips it over the rim to pour in a generous amount. “A year ago, it would’ve bugged the shit out of me but I’ve learned that I can’t win them all.” He pushes the carton toward me with a shrug. “It’s okay, Grace. You don’t have to—”

“I don’t trust you.” I blurt it out, my face draining of blood so fast I feel lightheaded when I realize what I just said but I don’t take it back. Can’t take it back because it’s the truth. Instead I reach for the carton. Concentrate on pouring half and half into my cup while I finish it. “I don’t trust you. I don’t trust this.” I stab my fork at the plate in front of me. “The way you are with Molly. How devoted you are to Cari.” Looking up at him I shake my head. “It’s not the real you. It can’t be.”

He considers me for a second, his green eyes flicking over my face like he’s assessing me. Sizing me up. Finally he speaks. “Okay.”

Okay.

Okay?

I basically just called him a liar to his face and all he has to say is okay?

Seriously?

Before I can ask him what the hell okay is supposed to mean, Patrick laughs and shakes his head at me. “I asked for the truth and I got it.” He shrugs before lifting his cup to his mouth to take a drink. “I’d be a hypocritical asshole if I got mad just because I don’t like what you have to say.”

That pretty much takes the wind out of my sails. I sit here for a few moments, watching him drink coffee before I say anything else. “I am grateful though. For your willingness to put up with us.”

“Put up with you?” He cocks his head at me like he has no idea what I’m talking about.

“Well, yeah.” Focusing on the pancakes in front of me, I use the side of my fork to cut into the stack. They’re cold and soggy but as a mother, I’m used to it. I can’t remember last time I enjoyed a fresh, hot meal that didn’t come out of a fast food bag. And even then, the fresh and hot is debatable. “And I promise it’s not forever. As soon as—”

“You and Molly aren’t going anywhere.” He sets his mug down. “Not until you’re ready.”

“I don’t want to be a burden.” I stuff a lump of cold pancake into my mouth and start to chew. It’s pretty much my worst nightmare. That Molly and I become a millstone around someone’s neck. “I’ll cook and clean. I can run errands and do laundry.”

“What a coincidence—I can do those things too.” He laughs and shakes his head at me. “You’re family, Grace—not an indentured servant.” He pushed the something toward me. a set of keys. underneath it is what looks like a credit card. He might as well have shoved a dead rat at me. The look on my face must show it because he laughs again. “It’s a used Kia Soul, not a Maserati.”

“And a...” I lean in closer to get a good look at the rest of it. “An Amex black card?” I feel a little sick to my stomach. “With my name on it?” I sit back, my ass hitting the stool so hard it jars my spine. I just offered myself up as a live-in maid. Instead of taking me up on it, he basically just told me thanks, but no thanks and on top of it, he gives me a new car and a seemingly unlimited expense account? What the fuck is happening here? “I can’t accept this.”

Patrick flashes me his dimples. “The car or the card?”

“Either one.” I shake my head, my jaw set at a stubborn angle. “I can’t.”

He pushes them toward me. “Sure you can,” he says, sighing a bit when I keep shaking my head. “It’s only money, Grace.”

“It’s only money?” I feel my internal temperature start to rise. “You know who says things like that? People who have money.”

He sighs again. “Look—” Clearly agitated, he swipes a rough hand over his face. “You don’t have to trust me. You don’t even have to like me—but you and Moll, you’re family now.” He frowns at me, like he’s not sure I’m understanding him correctly. Like maybe he’s not explaining it right. “We take care of each other—whatever it takes.”

“With new cars and credit cards?” I sound ungrateful. Bitchy. Even though I hate myself for it, I can’t seem to turn it off.

He smiles again, giving me a crooked grin I've seen before. "There are definite perks to being a Gilroy."

I'm not a Gilroy.

Before I can say it out loud, Molly comes bounding down the hallway in a pair of hot pink leggings and a bright yellow sweater with orange stars on it. When he sees her, he shifts his attention from me to her. "Guess what, Moll," he says while she climbs her way onto the stool next to me. "Your mom got a new car—a yellow one."

Butt plopped in the seat, she turns and stares at me with wide eyes. "Really?" She bounces a little in her seat, unable to contain her excitement. "Yellow is my favorite color!"

"I know." He sets a plate of pancakes in front of her with a flourish. "Guess what else?" He looks at me and I catch a glimpse of the not-so-nice guy who likes to get his way and isn't above manipulation to make it happen. "Your mom is going to take you shopping for things to decorate your new bedroom today."

Now her jaw drops completely. We've been sharing a room since she was born. "I get my own room?" She squeals and claps her hands. "Can I get pony sheets? and maybe a blanket too." Giving me a pleading look, her mouth suddenly drops open as if something just occurred to her. "Can I get new shoes? With laces and not baby Velcro straps?"

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:28 am

“You can get whatever you want,” Patrick tells her before I can tell her no. “And I want you to pick out a nice present for your Aunt Cari—something sparkly.” He looks at me again and smiles. “And your mom too—she deserves it.”

See what I mean?

Weird morning.

“Is he coming?”

I look down to see Grace gazing up at me, her blue eyes, a mirror of my own, filled with the first whispers of doubt. She was so sure that Ryan would want to see her. That they were friends, despite the fact that she didn’t even know his name until this morning when I told it to her.

We’ve been standing here for almost fifteen minutes. None of the nurses at the station will even look at us. Not even the one who went to tell him we were here to see him. Even though they’re avoiding eye contact at all cost, I have the feeling that Molly and I are the focus of their attention. “He’s coming.” I give her a firm nod. Even if I have to march down there and drag him out of his—

And then there he is, his slow, careful shuffle punctuated by the thump of his cane on the bare, hardwood floor. Finally, he’s standing in front of us with a look that clearly says what the hell are you doing here, and I have no idea what to say. How to explain why we’re here or even how we found him (I texted Cari and asked—like I said, it took less than thirty-seconds although I suspect I’ll pay for it with an interrogation later). Before either of us can speak, Molly pipes up and saves us both.

“Hi.” She thrusts a bag of stale cotton candy at him. “I got this for you at the zoo when I went with Gran and Grandpa. They went back to Ohio and my mom and me are staying here to live with Uncle Patrick and Aunt Cari.” She beams up at him. “We’re both gonna go to school and I got my own room and Mom got a new car. It’s yellow. That’s my favorite color. What’s your favorite color?”

He looks away from her for a second, up at me and for a split second, I’m worried that he doesn’t know. That maybe he doesn’t remember his favorite color, the same way doesn’t remember how to tie his shoes or what he had for breakfast. But then he looks down at her, a single corner of his flattened mouth lifting it what I’ve come to recognize as his version of a smile. “Blue.”

“Blue is good.” She nods like he’s made a wise color choice. “It’s a little smashed but that’s okay, right?”

It takes both of us a few seconds to realize she’s talking about the cotton candy she’s still trying to offer him.

“Sure.” He sighs softly and finally takes the bag from her. “What are you doing here?” he asks, looking right at me, an exasperated scowl skating across his face without catching hold. Seeing it sets my own on fire. What the hell am I doing here?

“I—”

Again, Molly saves me.

“Mom didn’t want to come but I begged her until she couldn’t stand it anymore,” she says in a matter-of-fact tone that sets off a round of snorts and smothered laughter from the nursing station. Hearing it sets his face into a collection of harsh planes and sharp angles. Before he can say anything, the nurse who helped us leans over the high-topped counter to look down at Molly.

“You came all this way to bring this guy cotton candy?” she asks in a tone that sounds slightly skeptical.

“He’s my friend.” Molly gives the nurse a solemn nod. “My mom says we should be nice to our friends.”

“Your mom’s right.” The nurse cocks her head and gives her a conspiratorial smile. “I think that entitles you and your mom to a banana split—” She looks at Ryan and I swear her smile turns triumphant for just a second. “At the very least a chocolate milkshake—what do you think, Mr. O’Connell?”

“I think I’ll be filing that complaint with your supervisor, Nurse Ratched,” he grumbles at her but instead of looking alarmed or contrite, the nurse laughs at him. Still grumbling, Ryan looks down at Molly. “I’m hungry,” he tells her. “Are you hungry?” When she grins up at him and nods, he sighs, shifting his gaze to mine. When I see his long-suffering sigh and raise him a defeated nod, he gives me another one of his flat smiles. “Alright then. Let’s go.”

Chapter Thirteen

Ryan

Against my better judgment, I took Kaitlyn's advice and showered. Brushed my teeth. Struggled into a pair of clean jeans and a T-shirt free of lasagna stains. Shoving my feet into a pair of slip-ons I keep parked near the door, I almost chickened out. Almost said fuck it and left them out there.

Grace and Molly.

They'd get the picture and leave, sooner or later.

But then I'd have Patrick to contend with.

And Cari.

And Tess.

And Conner who'll wind up being the worst of them because he has no kinda filter and has no problem with pissing me off.

They'd all catch wind of it eventually and give me shit for being an asshole to a little kid.

Yeah. That's why you're doing this. Because you don't want to disappoint your family. Makes perfect considering you've done nothing but go out of your way to

disappoint them since you got back Keep telling yourself that, Ranger.

“Fuck me,” I mutter under my breath, jerking the door open to force myself into the hallway before pulling it closed with a resolute click.

Now, thanks to Nurse Nosy, I’m stuck in an elevator with her and I can’t stop thinking about the fact that less than twenty minutes ago I was dreaming about fucking her which is kinda messed up considering her kid is jabbering at me a mile-a-minute and she won’t even look at me. She’s pissed at me. Maybe for taking so long to make an appearance. Maybe for letting the two of us getting roped into this mess in the first place. For not telling her to fuck off like I do everyone else.

And to make things worse, I want to kiss her.

More than kiss her.

Tell the truth, I’ve thought and dreamt about it so much over the last few days that I feel like I already have. Like leaning over and putting my mouth on her would be the most natural thing in the world when what it’d really be is a surefire way to get my tongue bit off.

When the elevator car hits the lobby and lets out a ding, Molly slips her hand into mine and looks up at me expectantly. It’s been a long time since someone looked at me like that. Like I know exactly what I’m doing and where we’re going, and they trust me to get them there. It scares me a little. Taking the lead, I step out of the elevator and shuffle thump my way to the facility directory in the middle of the lobby, Molly in tow.

Studying the map, I nod. There are three sit-down restaurants in this place and only one of them looks like it’d have banana splits on the menu. “This way,” I say, jogging my head toward the left. When I start to walk, they follow me—Molly without

question while Grace looks like she's chock full of them when I grind to a halt in front of what looks like a miniature version 50s-style diner and a sign that says please seat yourself.

Because I seem to be in charge of this expedition, I lead them to an empty booth. Molly dives in and immediately starts flipping through the catalog on the table-top jukebox while Grace watches me grimace and struggle my way into the booth. "Let's just find a regular table," she says, ready to reach across the bench seat to drag Molly across it.

"Tables don't have jukeboxes," I tell her, my tone closing the subject, at least for me. I'm still not 100% after my backyard brawl with Con on Sunday—which means I'm operating at about 20%. Finally situated, I look up at her, ignoring the pair of orderlies eating lunch at the lunch counter. They keep looking at us, shooting sly looks at the three of us over their shoulders. "I'm committed here—changing tables will cost more time and effort than either of us would like to spend."

Cheeks stained a bright pink, Grace slips into the booth next to her daughter. "I'm sorry we bothered you," she says, focusing on situating her purse on the seat next to her.

Me too.

That's what I mean to say.

Me too.

That way, no matter what I'm feeling, she won't get the wrong idea about what this is or where any of it is going.

Because it's not going anywhere.

It can't go anywhere.

"I'm not."

When I say it, her gaze jerks up from her purse to find mine, cheeks flushed, mouth slightly parted like she's suddenly having a hard time breathing.

"It's okay, Ryan." She moves again, her hand sliding along the inside of my thigh, the feel of her fingers tracing closer as insistent as it is inevitable. "We all have scars..."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:28 am

Words she's never said to me echo in my head, the ring of them blurring what until only a few seconds ago was a very clearly-defined line that I had no intention of crossing.

Have, dickhead.

Not had.

Have.

A clearly-defined line that I have no intention of crossing.

Clearing my throat, I reach out to swipe a couple of menus from the rack next to the jukebox. "Like I said," I say, passing her a menu. "I'm hungry. I slept through breakfast."

"Uncle Patrick and me made pancakes for breakfast," Molly chimes in, proving that even though most kids look clueless, they hear and see everything. "They were good, huh?"

"Patrick and I," Grace says, tearing her gaze away from mine to focus on her daughter. "Patrick and I made pancakes—and yes." She smiles at Molly, reaching up to smooth a hand over her pale blonde hair. "They were very good."

Molly beams at me, half smug, half proud. "We're doing French toast next." She nods before looking up at Grace. "Can he come have breakfast with us?"

“He lives really far away,” Grace tells her, shooting me a nervous look before looking at her again to shake her head. “And I don’t think he has a car.”

Molly’s mouth drops open and she bounces in her seat a little, like the most exciting thing just occurred to her. “We could have a sleep-over.” She looks at me like it’s the perfect idea and not at all weird that she’s inviting a twenty-eight-year-old man with brain damage and a bum leg to a slumber party. “He’s Uncle Patrick’s friend so that’d be okay, right Mom?”

Grace flushes again, something very close to panic flashing in her sky-blue eyes. “Molly,” she says, her tone low and stern. “I don’t think it’s a good—”

“What can I get you folks?”

All three of us turn and look up to find a middle-aged waitress standing over us, pad and pen poised to take our order.

“Banana split!” Molly pipes up. “While sprinkles.”

The waitress looks at me for confirmation. Before I can tell her she’s looking in the wrong direction, Grace sighs. “Molly, you can’t eat a banana split for lunch.”

“Yes, I can.” Molly frowns, her little jaw set at a stubborn angle that makes her look just like her mother. “Grandpa let me eat chocolate cake for breakfast at the hotel.”

I watch Grace turn an unhealthy shade of purple as the realization that the chocolate cake coupe she pulled on her dad Sunday night at the Gilroy’s is now coming back to bite her in the ass. “Moll—”

“This isn’t up for discussion, Molly,” I say, not letting Grace finish whatever she was about to say. “Your mom’s right. Real food first.” I look right at Molly when I say it

because I have a feeling Grace is about to come across the table and choke me and I don't want to provoke her any more than I already have.

Molly stares back at me for a few seconds, her jaw still set, eyes slightly narrowed like she's trying to decide if she wants to push it and then just like that, it's over. Her face relaxes and she looks up at the waitress. "Do you have cheeseburgers?"

Chapter Fourteen

Grace

A novelty.

That's what Patrick called himself.

A novelty.

As soon as the new wears off, Molly will be back to her stubborn, bull-headed self.

I've got to believe it'll be the same with Ryan. That the reason she's being so well-behaved and reasonable with him is because he's new to her. Like a shiny toy she can't wait to play with.

As soon as she's pressed his buttons a few thousand times and he's barked at her one too many times, the honeymoon will be over and we can all move on from this whole mess. She won't want to have anything to do with him anymore.

Yeah? What about you? What's it going to take for you to walk away? Leave him alone—because let's be honest, you aren't here because your daughter wanted to give Ryan a bag of stale cotton candy. You're here because it's been four days since you've seen him and even though he made it clear he's not interested, you'll take any opportunity you can find to see him again and presumably make an asshole of yourself.

The realization sets my face on fire.

The waitress appears again, this time with a stack of placemats and plastic cup full of crayons. “I thought maybe your little girl would like to color while she waits for her food.” She says it to Ryan. Clearly smitten, she blushes. “You know, keep her occupied.”

A slight frown marring his handsome face. He looks like he’s on the verge of correcting her when he clears his throat. “Thanks,” he mumbles at her, tossing me a quick look before taking the paper and crayons from her and passing them to Molly while she watches.

“Excuse me,” I say, angling myself into the waitress’s light of sight. “Where’s the ladies room?”

“Oh.” She finally looks down at me like she’s just realized I’ve been sitting here the whole time. “By the lunch counter.” She gives me a vague smile before refocusing on Ryan. “I’ll go check on your order.”

As soon as she’s gone, I reach across the booth for Molly’s hand. “Come on, Moll,” I say. “Mom’s gotta use the bathroom.” I really don’t. What I need is a few Ryan-free minutes to convince myself that he can’t see what a desperate mess I am.

Before Molly can offer up a protest, Ryan butts in again. “She can stay with me.”

“No.” My refusal comes, fast and firm. “I barely know you. You think I’m just going to leave—”

“You’re going to the bathroom, Grace.” He gives me that flat one-note smile of his. “And it’s not like I’m built for fast getaways these days,” he says, facing my insinuations head on. “I think we can handle five minutes on our own.” When I don’t

move or relent, he pulls out the big guns. “When was the last time you went to the bathroom by yourself?”

“It’s been a long time,” Molly chimes in, looking up from the placemat she’s coloring on to look at Ryan. “Do you know how to play Tic Tac Toe?”

“I don’t know,” he says, dismissing me completely. “Let’s find out.”

Because I don’t know what else to do and I suddenly feel like I’m intruding somehow, I stand and make my first Molly-free trip to a public restroom in four-years.

And it’s glorious.

How a five-minute solo trip to the bathroom can feel like a full-fledged spa day is something only a mother can understand.

On my way back to the table, our waitress stops me. “Your daughter is adorable,” she says, from where she’s sitting behind the counter, rolling silverware. Her gaze shifts past me and her smile turns a little wistful. “Almost as cute as her dad.”

Turning, I aim my gaze in the same direction to find Ryan and Molly at the table, where I left them. Both are hunched over the table, crayons in hand, studying the placemat between them like the fate of the free world rests on their next move.

“He’s a good dad.”

I turn away from Molly and Ryan to find the waitress looking at me again. “Some aren’t.” She says it like she knows from personal experience. “You’re lucky.”

He’s not her dad. I don’t know who her dad is. Couldn’t pick him out of a line-up if

my life depended on it.

I almost say it.

I almost tell this total stranger the truth. The one thing I've never admitted to anyone else.

My refusal to name Molly's father isn't about making myself a martyr or protecting someone who doesn't deserve protection.

I've never pointed my finger because I don't know who to point it at and admitting that in a town like Bennett would make me a whore, regardless of the circumstances.

"Thanks." The word comes out sounding rusty. Tasting bitter.

Before she can say anything else, I turn away from her and head back to the table.

Chapter Fifteen

Ryan

Grace came back from the bathroom angry. Even more angry than she already was. I don't have to have a fully functioning brain to know it's me she's mad at.

Because I don't know what else to do and I don't want to say anything in front of Molly, I pretend not to notice the way she looks at me. Like I'm an intruder. An imposter. Someone who doesn't belong.

I can't blame her for feeling that way. She's right on all counts. I have no place here. I have no right. I've never belonged.

Not here.

Not really.

But despite the fact that I know she has a million reasons for feeling the way she does and all of them are spot-on, I can't help but be a little angry myself because I didn't ask for this.

For them.

I didn't want them to come here and fuck up my day. Drag me out of my cave and into the light of day. I was perfectly happy where I was. By myself. I've always been alone and there's never been a reason to think that things could ever be different.

I don't need them.

Either of them.

So, I let Grace sulk. Detached from Molly, giving her short, one-syllable answers when she lobes questions at me between bites. I focused on getting through the last forty-five minutes. Made it my mission.

Pushed through so I can move on.

When the check came, Grace reached for it but I snatched it from the waitress's grip before she could even touch it.

"I got it," I tell her, reaching into my pocket for my wallet. Normally, residents just sign the bill and it's charged to their room, like a hotel. Patrick pays for my stay at Sojourn. He pays for my physical therapy. For my bad temper when I let the opportunistic assholes who work in this place get the better of me. If it weren't for him, I'd be living in a halfway house, relying on my VA benefits and monthly disability checks. He pays for everything the government won't.

But he's not going to pay for this.

Pulling a few twenties from my wallet, I toss them on the table before starting the monumental task of extricating myself from the booth I insisted on sitting at. By the time I manage to unfold my stiff joints and aching bones, Grace and Molly are waiting for me next to the table.

"You guys should take off," I grumble at her while I grapple with my cane. "I've got physical therapy in—"

"We can walk with you." Molly reaches for my free hand. "Right, Mom?" she looks

up at her mom and gets a bright smile in return.

“As far as the lobby,” Grace says, shooting me a quick, guarded look. “Ryan is right, we need to get going. We still need to buy new shoes, remember?”

Molly starts bouncing around like a pinball at the reminder of new shoes and by the time we’ve left the restaurant, she’s pulled away from me completely to streak across the lobby toward the indoor play area at the center of the atrium.

“You want to tell me what I did?” I say to Grace as soon as Molly is out of earshot. “Because as far as I can tell, I’ve been on my best behavior since the two of you showed up.” I’m picking a fight. Putting her off on purpose, because I need to redraw the line in the sand between us. I need to convince myself that, despite the question, I don’t really give a fuck why she’s mad at me.

“Is that what you call it?” She barks back.

“Uh, yeah.” I plant my cane but don’t take the proceeding step. “I hate cotton candy but I ate it anyway.” Holding up my free hand, I start to tick off all the reasons that, for once in my life, I’m not the asshole in this scenario. “I haven’t said fuck or shit one time, I even took a goddamned shower and changed my—”

Stopping mid-stride, she turns to look at me. “The waitress thought you were Molly’s father.” She says it like it’s my fault. Like by being nice to her kid, I’ve committed some sort of crime against humanity.

“I’m sorry?” I swipe a rough hand over my face before shaking my head. “Is that what I’m supposed to say? Am I supposed to apologize for being nice to your kid?” When all she does is stare at me like I just slapped her, I let out a rough sigh. “Help me out here, Grace. Just tell me what I did so I can apologize and you and Molly can leave.”

“You lied.”

She seems just as surprised by the accusation that hangs between us as I am. “Excuse me?” I’ve been an asshole but I’ve never lied. Not to Grace.

“You like Molly.” She turns away from me to find Molly, who’s climbing the steps to the slide. Seeing us watching her, Molly waves and I automatically lift a hand and wave back. When I look at Grace she’s looking back at me, watching me. “You’re good with her.” Again, it’s like she’s accusing me of something. Of pretending to be something I’m not.

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“She’s a good kid.” I drop my hand, giving her a non-committal shrug. “Is there a point here, Grace, or are you just kicking me in the balls for sport?”

She lets out a strangled sound and throws up her hands in frustration. “You said you weren’t equipped to have—”

“Stop.” I bark it at her, my tone suddenly hard and loud enough to draw attention from a few people milling around the lobby. “Just—stop.” Taking a step away from her, I shake my head. “You should go.”

She doesn’t stop. She completely ignores the warning in my tone. “I thought like most guys, that you weren’t interested in me because of Molly but that’s not it, is it?” Her tone lifts to match mine, drawing even more stares.

“No.” I shake my head again, allowing myself to be as honest with her as I can. “She’s not the problem. I said she wasn’t.”

“Then what?” His tone softens. Thins out into a whisper. “Why don’t you want me?”

I take a step forward, closing the space between us until I’m standing over her. “You got it backwards, Grace,” I tell her, face tipped so I’m glaring down at her. “You don’t want me.” I clench my jaw, trying to stop the truth from finding its way out of my mouth. “You just haven’t figured it out yet.”

“Is this about my dad? What he said?” Her forehead crumples in confusion. “Because I’m a grown woman, I can—”

“How many times do we go out before we fuck?” I push the question through clenched teeth. “In your fucked-up fantasyland where I take you for coffee or to a movie, and bring you flowers and tell you how beautiful you are, how long does it take us to get naked?” She goes completely white, the color rushing from her face so fast I’m suddenly worried she’s going to pass out. Worried or not, I force myself to finish it. To end this thing between us. Push her away, once and for all. “Three times? Five times? How many?”

She shakes her head at me. “I—”

“Because that’s when it happens. That’s when you figure it out.” I look right at her when I say it. Force myself to look her right in the eye. Force her to take every bit of fucked-up anger and bitter regret that I feel. “Because when we finally get down to business and you see what I’ve got going on below the waist, you’ll want to run. You’ll take one look at me and wish you had when I gave you the chance.”

“Ryan...” She whispers my name. Lifts a hand to place it on my forearm, the pressure of it coupled with the soft sound of her voice, sets off those alarm bells. Reminds me of all the ways I’ve dreamt of her. Of how it ends.

Every single time.

“When I say I’m not equipped, that’s exactly what I mean, Grace—” I lean in further, shifting over her to press my mouth to her ear. “I can’t fuck you, and even if I could—trust me, you wouldn’t want me to.” Pushing myself away from her, I shift my gaze downward to find her staring up at me, eyes wide and not a little bit alarmed. Soft mouth slightly parted like she’s on the verge of raising the alarm. “So, I think it’s best for both of us if you stay away the fuck away from me.”

Chapter Sixteen

Grace

I can't fuck you, no matter how much I want to.

That's what he said.

I can't fuck you, no matter how much I want to.

No clarification.

No explanation.

He just dropped that little truth bomb, along with this standard, stay the fuck away from me and walked away, leaving me in the middle of Sojourn's atrium without a backward glance.

And now I can't stop thinking about him.

Seriously? Like he isn't all you've been thinking about since Sunday?

Sad but true.

Ryan O'Connell is pretty much all I've thought of for days now and seeing him again has made it impossible for me to keep pretending otherwise.

I can't fuck you, no matter how much I want to.

No matter how much I want to.

I know it's the wrong thing to focus—not

that he can't but that he wants to—but it's what keeps sticking. The part that echoes the loudest.

The part I can't stop thinking about.

Because it means, despite whatever roadblocks that happen to be between us, Ryan wants me as much as I want him.

Jesus, Grace—desperate much? You've known this guy for less than a week and every time you see him he makes it abundantly clear that he doesn't want anything to do with you.

Except that he does.

I know he does.

“Need some help?”

I look up from the mountain of bags I've got strategically stacked in the cargo area of the car, wondering how I'm going to carry all of it and a sleeping Molly upstairs, a refusal ready and halfway out of my mouth when I realize who it is who's doing the offering.

Conner.

I recognize him instantly because he looks almost exactly like Patrick, even more so since he got his hair cut. If not for the tattoos that wind down his forearms and wrap around his neck, I'd swear that's who I'm looking at. Same dark hair. Same clear green eyes. Same perfect face. Same set of dimples that, I don't care who you are, make you a little weak in the knees when they're aimed in your direction.

It seems ridiculously unfair that there are two of them running around the same planet, let alone the same city.

Swallowing my curt no thank you, I stare at him for a few seconds, trying to realign my thoughts and because he's probably used to being stared at by slack-jawed women, he just stands there patiently and lets me. Finally I clear my throat and nod. "Help would be great," I say, tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "Thank you. Are you..."

"My shift starts in a couple of hours—Ladies Night." Flashing me the dimples, Conner steps off the sidewalk to gently nudge me out of the way. "I'll grab these, you grab Sleeping Beauty," he says, taking charge because if it were up to me, we'd stand in the street until Kingdom Come.

"Right." I bob my head again and skirt around him to get Molly from her car seat. As soon as I pull her free she lets out a little bleat of protest, her arms and legs wrapping around my neck and middle while she burrows her sticky face into neck. By the time I shut her car door and make my way across the sidewalk, Conner has the bulk of our packages wrangled and is waiting for me at the door. Before I can start to dig through my black hole of a purse for the key, Conner lifts a hand and frees a finger to punch in a code. The door buzzes and pops open.

Ushering me inside, he follows me up the stairs and continues to wait patiently while I struggle to get the interior door open. "Just drop them anywhere," I stage whisper to him over my shoulder as I carry Molly past the kitchen and through the living room.

The optimist in me is hoping that if I can get her in bed and settled in the next thirty seconds or so, she'll keep sleeping. A Molly-nap is a rare and precious thing these days.

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When I return a few minutes later, I find what looks like a thousand shopping bags lined up neatly on the dining room table and Conner standing over them, shamelessly inspecting my purchases. When he hears my approach, he looks up and grins. “Looks like you and Miss Molly had a fun day.”

Because, despite his approving tone, it feels like an accusation, I instantly feel the need to explain myself. “Patrick was kind enough to give—”

“I know.” He gives me that grin again before stepping away from the table. “Even though my dad gave Cap’n control over it, he still insists that it’s family money.” He shrugs. “Which means he feels the need to consult my brother and me every time he wants to buy more than a stick of gum.” The grin turns into a grimace. “A Kia wouldn’t have been my first choice, but my cousin is unfailingly practical when it comes to things like that.”

There are definite perks to being a Gilroy.

That’s what Patrick said to me this morning when he insisted I take the credit card and the car.

We’re family. We take care of each other—whatever it takes.

“I kept every receipt,” I tell him like I’m launching some sort of defense. “I know what I spent, to the penny, and I—”

“How’s the hunt for schools goin’?” he says, effectively taking the wind out of my sails. “You find one you like?”

I've found a few but the tuition was enough to make me feel faint. "Uhhh..." I watch as Conner turns away from me completely to make his way into the kitchen. "I have an appointment set up to take the entrance exam at Bay State College," I say while he sticks his head in the fridge like he owns the place.

"Bay State?" Conner says, straightening up from the fridge with a couple of beers in his hand. Pulling a Tiki bottle opener from the side of the fridge, he pops their caps off. "When?"

"Tomorrow." I tell him. "I don't have much hope that I'll get in but—"

"You'll get in." He sounds sure. Like it's already a done deal. "It's a private college," he says, coming around the counter toward me. He offers me one of the beers in his hand and I take it. "Expensive."

"I know." I nod in commiseration. Cari said she'll pay for it but the thought of her forking over that kind of money for me makes me a little lightheaded. "I got decent grades in high school and scored pretty high on my SATs so, I'm hopeful I can qualify for some sort of partial scholarship. Maybe a work-study program." I refuse to think about what I'll do with Molly if I have to find a job.

One crisis at a time. That's how I manage.

"I wouldn't worry about it." He tips his beer toward his mouth to take a drink with a shrug. "These things have a way of working themselves out."

Because that's never been my experience, I don't have an answer for him. "Ryan told me what the two of you were fighting about on Sunday," I say instead. When all he does is look at me, I feel the need to elaborate. "Me. You were fighting about me." My cheeks start to flush, and I suddenly wish I'd kept my mouth shut. "You were pushing him to—"

“I remember.” He points to the bruise starting to fade on his cheekbone. “I’m just trying to figure out why he’d tell you something like that.”

Because I asked him.

Instead of stating the obvious, I go for broke. “You know him, right?” I look down at the beer bottle sweating in my grip. “You’re friends.”

“We were best friends,” he says it cautiously. Like the conversation’s taken a turn he hadn’t anticipated. “Before.” He doesn’t tell me before what. I have a feeling it isn’t any one thing. That before is a collection of events, too heavy and personal for him to unpack in front of me. That for Conner, family means something different than it does for Patrick and despite the fact that he gave my financial support his stamp of approval, I haven’t quite met the terms of his definition.

“Oh...” I slide my thumbnail under the label on my bottle and start to pry it up with the kind of precise delicacy you’d expect to see in a brain surgeon. “So, you’d be the person to ask if I wanted to know something... personal about him,” I say, risking it despite the wariness I sense in him.

“I don’t know Ryan anymore,” he states bluntly. “None of us do—but I’m probably the most informed on his injuries and medical condition.”

Because I have a strange feeling that he knows exactly what I’m trying to ask, I force myself to look him in the eye. “We had lunch with him today at the center—Molly and me.”

“Did he do something?” His face falls into a frown. “Did he say—”

“No.” I shake my head, fast and tight. “He was great. Patient with Molly. Played games with her,” I tell him. “Sunday he told me he wasn’t interested in me and even

though he insisted it wasn't, I assumed it was because of Molly but today—"

"You figured out it wasn't about her. You figured out it's about you."

My neck goes stiff at his matter-of-fact assessment and I have to force myself to not look away. "Yes." I nod my head. "He keeps telling me he's not equipped to—"

"That's what he said? Equipped?" Now Conner laughs, the sudden explosion of it, jerking my eyes wide and forcing me a step back. When he realizes I'm not laughing with him, his laughter tapers off to a chuckle. "I'm sorry," he says, wiping at his eyes. "I'm pretty sure there's a question in there somewhere—are you asking me in what capacity Ryan is ill-equipped to pursue a relationship with you?"

Because that's exactly what I'm asking and I'm mortified by Conner's direct question, I just stand here and nod. "He said that if we were to ever..." I let the sentence trail off like a coward. Clearing my throat, I try again. "He said I'd want to run. That I'd wish I had when he gave me the chance." I set my bottle on the table next to me and cross my arms over my chest. "I want to know what that means." I don't tell him the rest. What Ryan leaned over and whispered in my ear.

I can't fuck you, no matter how much I want to.

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“You know what it means.” That’s all he says before silence falls between us again. He stands there for so long, just looking at me, that I start to wonder if he’s going to say anything else. Finally, he does. “He stepped on an IED, Grace. The majority of the blast was absorbed by the lower half of his body. Most of his lower body suffered second and third-degree burns. He almost lost his leg—would’ve if I wasn’t such a stubborn asshole.” His jaw does a fast clench and he cocks his head. “There was damage to his reproductive organs that required multiple surgeries to repair—and those are just the injuries we can see.”

Listening to Conner list Ryan’s injuries makes me lightheaded. Nauseous, like I’m going to throw up. Not because I’m revolted or sickened by the picture he’s painting me but because I keep thinking about Ryan in a hospital bed. Tubes and needles. Pain and blood.

“But he’s okay now, right?” I whisper it and my heart breaks a little with Conner shakes his head at me.

“No, Grace.” He sighs, lifting a hand to rub a rough hand over the back of his head. “He’s not.”

His admission makes me angry. Not at Ryan for being incapable of giving me what I want or even at myself for wanting them. It makes me angry at him for pushing something he knew would never work. Never happen. “Then why would you—”

“I pushed him to ask you out because I think it would be good for him—because he’s so focused on all the ways his injuries have changed him that he can’t let himself remember that no matter what was taken, that there’s still a lot of... Ryan left.” He

takes a step toward me, setting his half-empty beer bottle on the table next to mine. “He doesn’t remember how to be himself and I’m hoping that spending time with you will remind him.” He says it like I’m a spring lamb, being led to slaughter. Like I’m being offered up as some sort of sacrifice and he doesn’t even feel particularly bad about it. “And if he’s telling you to run, I’d say it’s working.”

“What do I do?” I ask, even though every cell and fiber in my body is telling me what I should do. To take the chance to bolt while I still have it.

To take Ryan at his word and run while I still can.

“That’s up to you.” He says it gravely, like he knows I’ve already made up my mind. Like he knows exactly what happens next.

Chapter Seventeen

Ryan

I fucked up.

Bad.

Beyond bad.

We're talking near biblical proportions here.

Total and complete FUBAR.

And not just with Grace, even though what happened with her, what I said to her, is the bulk of what's eating at me.

Because it's the reason for what happened next. Why I did what I did.

Shit.

I've got blood on my hands.

Real blood.

I'm not imagining it—at least I don't think I am. I'm not imagining what happened either. What I did. The way—

The quiet hiss and click of my door pulls my gaze up from my clenched fists to find Kaitlyn standing in front of me.

She's back to being afraid. Her shoulders pressed against the door. Hand wedged into the small of her back, fingers wrapped around the door handle, ready to yank and claw at it if I so much as breathe wrong.

Somehow, she's become the one they send in when I'm like this. The fresh meat they shove into the lion's den. Sometimes I think it's because of Conner. Because of her brief stint as his... whatever she was. They think I'll look her differently for some reason. That I won't attack her because she carries the scent of family.

They should know better by now.

No one is safe around me when I'm like this.

No one.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" She whispers it. Probably because she doesn't want me to answer her. Because, despite the asking, she doesn't want to know.

What happened?

I can't fuck you, and even if I could—trust me, you wouldn't want me to.

After I said it, I left Grace standing in the atrium. Walked away from her, even though doing it felt like someone was stabbing me in the chest with every step. She called after me, every time she said my name was a whip lash across my retreating back. Sharp and stinging, like an accusation.

Ryan...

Ryan...

Ryan...

I passed the elevator.

Headed straight for the stairwell.

The pair of orderlies at the lunch counter were there, waiting for me, just like I knew they would be.

Rich, King of the Asshole Orderlies was with them.

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I guess you can probably guess what happened next.

“Not really.” My voice sounds flat. A low, single-note monotone that barely bridges the distance between us. I always sound like this afterward. Feel like this. Flat. Still. Like my bones are made of lead. It’s always been an unsettling sensation, probably because in the back of my mind, I know it’s not normal. It’s not normal to feel this way. Like I’m floating and sinking all at once. Like—

“Rich is in the hospital.”

I look up from my hands again and scowl at her, irritated because she’s still here. Still bothering me. “Good,” I say, before I go back to staring at my hands.

Good.

I’m glad.

Not because I put him in the hospital but because I didn’t actually kill him the way I thought I did. And not glad because I didn’t kill him. Glad because if I had, I’d probably never get to see Grace again.

Grace.

Her beautiful face flashes in front of me, covered in blood, so vivid the flash becomes fact. It becomes real. A memory.

I did that.

To her.

I hurt her.

I—

I feel my lungs constrict. My ribcage begins to crumble under the weight of my chest and I only manage a single breath before it collapses completely.

Fuck.

That's the last thought I have before I go under. Start to drown. Feel the black wrap itself around me and pull me deep.

Ryan.

Ryan.

Ryan.

Each time she says it is another whip lash across my back, the sting of it making it easy for me to believe that she's begging me to stop.

Stop walking away from her.

Stop hurting her.

It's hard to decide which one I did.

Which version of what happened is real.

That's the bitch of TBI. When you're in it, you have no idea what's real. If it's safe to ignore the demons screaming at you. If the screams carry truth or lie. So it all becomes truth. It all becomes real because the second you let yourself believe the demon is a lying, it proves you wrong.

Swallows you whole.

Jesus, I can't breathe.

I can't fucking—

“Ryan.”

The sound of my name cuts through the black and snaps my head up. Henley's kneeling in front of me in her fancy clothes, her stranger face tense and pale with worry.

Fuck.

“Her?” I barely have the air to croak it out, the pulsating squeeze of my hands matching the heavy, fast thump of my heart against my tornado-torn chest. “You fucking called her?” I jerk my gaze upward, letting it land on Kaitlyn, still hovering near the door. Sharpen it into a glare and stab her with it. “You call Con... Patrick—not her...never her.”

Henley rocks back on her heels, moving away from me like I took a swing at her. I’m sorry about that. I’m sorry I hurt her. Keep hurting her but I don’t want her here. Can’t have her here. Not when I’m like this. Not when I could—

“You’re my brother.” When she reaches for my hands, I jerk them back, out of reach, and she sighs. “Ryan...” She says my name again, this time calm and soft, like she’s coaxing a wild animal out of a trap. “Tell me what happened.” When I don’t answer her, she sighs again. “I want to help—I can help—but you need to talk to me. Tell me—”

“Grace.” I grind her name past clenched teeth, the sound of her name setting off another round of demons screams. “She was here...”

Henley looks over her shoulder at Kaitlyn for confirmation because it sounds nuts. Why would Grace have come here? As far as Hen knows, Grace is just Cari’s little sister. She’s nothing to me. Less than nothing, but when Kaitlyn gives her an affirming nod, she doesn’t question it any further. “What about Grace?”

She sounds scared. Like she’s afraid of what I’m going to say next and she should be.

She should be fucking terrified because I—

“I think I hurt her. She was here and I think I—” I look at Kaitlyn for confirmation.
“Did I? Did I do something to her? Did I—”

“No.” Kaitlyn takes a step toward me and shakes her head, her hand still behind her back. “Grace is fine. She left. She was gone by the time you—”

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. Maybe—

That’s as far as he got.

I wish I could say I blacked out. Blame my fucked-up brain for what happened next but I can’t. I remember every second. Felt every bone snap. Heard every scream.

And I liked it.

Had no intention of stopping.

Not until I killed him.

Maybe not even then.

The only reason he’s alive is because one of them ran for help and brought back an army of workers to pull me off of him.

I lift a hand to my face, the feel of it, clammy and shaking, enough to stir up the shame. Send it dipping and circling, ready to land the second I can take an unfettered breath. “Are you sure?” I look up to find Kaitlyn but she’s gone so I shift my gaze to

where Henley is still kneeling on the floor in front of me. “Can you check? Can you call Con or Cari and—”

Henley flicks her gaze away from my face. Up and over my shoulder, a second before I feel a familiar burning pinch on the back of my arm, seconds before the black finally wins and swallows me whole.

Chapter Eighteen

Grace

I've received a bit of a miracle.

Not only did Molly sleep another forty-five minutes after we got home, she actually asked to go to bed after dinner. I even had to talk her into a bath beforehand, which she usually loves.

Not tonight.

Tonight she barely let me get the shampoo rinsed out of her hair before she announced she was ready for bed.

I'm pretty sure it has everything to do with the My Little Pony sheets and comforter set we bought for her new bed.

"Can we go back tomorrow?" she asks, her blue eyes droopy and faded with sleep.

"Go where?" I say, even though I'm pretty sure I know what she's asking me for and proves it when she rolls her eyes at me.

"To see Ryan." Her tiny fingers trace the outline of a candy-colored cartoon pony. "He's lonely in that place," she tells me, looking up at me with a gaze that's gone solemn. "I think he needs us, Mom."

I think it's best for both of us if you stay away the fuck away from me.

He doesn't need us.

He doesn't want us.

I almost say it. I almost tell her that Ryan doesn't want anything to do with us. Instead I give her a soft smile and tuck her freshly laundered sheets around her. "We'll talk about it in the morning."

I'm sure she's going to argue with me. Set her jaw at that mulish angle of hers and dig in until she gets the answer she's looking for.

She doesn't.

"Okay." She gives me a sweet, sleepy smile and sinks back into the mountain of pillow with a small sigh. "I love you, Mom."

Leaning over her, I kiss her forehead. "I love you too." I whisper it because if I say it any louder, my voice will show signs of cracking.

She's asleep before I close the door behind me.

Now, standing in the middle of the living room, I realize I'm alone. Will be alone for the rest of the evening and I have no idea what to do with myself. Cari texted earlier to tell me that Patrick booked them a suite at the Hawthorne for the night. That means I'm home alone for the rest of the night.

Not entirely sure what to do with myself, I take a shower and change into my comfy clothes, pajama pants and the T-shirt Grace hand-painted me for Mother's Day last year. After that, I rummage around in the pantry until I find Cari's stash of junk food.

Grabbing a bag of chips, I rip them open and prepare for a night of channel surfing when the door buzzer sounds off, signaling that someone is on the street, looking to be let in.

Scrambling over the back of the couch, I streak across the dining area and past the kitchen, pushing the intercom button before whoever is down there sets off another round of loud, annoying buzzing.

“Hello?”

I sound breathless. Anxious. I don’t understand why until the person on the other end of the intercom answers me.

“Hi, Grace, it’s Henley. Can I come up for a minute?”

Breath and anxiety leave me in a fast, dizzying rush. That’s when I realize it. That I was hoping it was him. Ryan. I was hoping he came looking for me. That he feels bad for the way things ended between us and he came to apologize.

Apologize?

You want him to come here and apologize? You seriously think that’s what you want? Come on, Grace—lie all you want to everyone else. Just don’t lie to yourself.

“Sure,” I answer back, shoving my traitorous thoughts aside, I buzz her in with an index finger stabbed against the green button. Downstairs, I hear a faint hum followed by the click of the hefty magnetic lock disengaging. Seconds later, the sound is replaced with the sharp, efficient click of Henley’s spiked heels as she makes her way upstairs.

While I listen to her approach, I can’t help but wonder what she’s doing here. Surely

she knows that Cari isn't here. That her and Patrick had to leave their own home for the night, just so they could have some time alone with each other. I mean, everyone in this family seems to know everything about everyone else. There're no secrets here. Nowhere to hide.

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Before I can let that sink in, Henley is letting herself in through the laundry room, clicking across the hardwood floor to stand a few feet away from where I'm waiting for her. "Cari and Patrick aren't here," I tell her, even though I just convinced myself that she already knows. "Patrick took her to a game and then—"

"I know." She offers me a smile while she peels off her Hermes scarf and Chanel coat. "I spoke with Patrick earlier." Watching her, I realize she's everything I used to wish I was. Beautiful. Poised and graceful. Floating around in a cloud of designer silk and expensive perfume. These days, I can't even manage to shower on a regular basis. Even more incredible is the fact that I've seen her in dusty jeans and T-shirt before, her amazing mane of luscious red hair pulled through the back of a baseball cap, hunched over the baseline, coaching runners and screaming at umpires.

Levis or couture, she's perfect, either way.

Even the freckles that cover every visible inch of her skin are perfect.

It's ridiculously unfair.

Her smile turns brittle around its edges. "We had a bit of a situation earlier. Patrick's usually the one to handle them but... anyway," she says, reaching out to hang her coat, which probably cost as much as my car, on a hook next to the door. "I'm not here to see Cari. I'm here to see you."

"Me?" I say it like I have no idea what the word means, mostly because I don't. I barely know Henley. I've tagged along during their group outings a few times. We went dress shopping for Tess. Had lunch a few times. That's it. The whole of our

association, up until now. I wasn't even 100% sure she knew my name.

"You." Giving me another smile, this one more sure of itself. She lets go of her coat and jogs her head to the side. "May I come in?"

"Sure," I say, a beat too late because she's already moving away from me, deeper into the apartment and I find myself scrambling after her like a rambunctious puppy, trying to remember my manners. "Can I get you something? A glass of wine or... tea?"

Tea?

Seriously, Grace? She's not the freakin' Queen of England.

For some reason, my offer of tea seems to amuse her. "Wine," she says but instead of leaving me to serve her, she moves into the kitchen on a series of precise, efficient clicks that make her feel woefully inadequate for some stupid reason. "I think the situation calls for wine."

Watching the silky sway of her designer dress as she moves around the kitchen, I feel my heart give a final thump before launching itself at my throat as I move toward the living room.

Situation.

We're having a situation?

For some reason, I remember the time Lacey Hammond cornered me in the bathroom in high school and told me to stay away from her boyfriend.

Stay away from him, you little slut. He's mine.

I wasn't after her boyfriend. He was my lab partner in Chemistry but that did stop her from trashing me every chance she got to anyone who'd listen for an entire semester.

I'm suddenly sure that's what this is. Henley knows Conner was here and she came here to stake her claim. To warn me to keep my distance. That's what this is, a more grown-up, dignified version of Lacey Hammond's he's mine tirade.

Before I can tell her she has absolutely nothing to worry about, that I've barely known Conner for more than five minutes but even I can see how utterly gone he is for her, Henley gestures toward me with a corkscrew and gives me another smile. "Sit," she tells me like she's completely at home and I'm the drop-in guest. "Red or white?"

Neither. I prefer beer but I feel frumpy enough in my sloppy bun and Greatest Mom T-shirt without asking for a beer. "White," I croak out.

Sinking to the couch where I started, I watch while Henley pulls a fancy looking bottle from the wine cooler and scissors the stems of a couple of wine glasses between her fingers. Moving like she's done it a million times before, she comes toward me, skirting the kitchen counter to cross the space that flows into the living room and around the back of the couch I'd launched myself over less than ten minutes ago.

Setting the empty glasses on the coffee table, next to my pilfered bag of chips, Henley makes short work of the cork, using the corkscrew to pull it from the bottle's neck with a soft pop.

"Patrick's been teasing me with this label for weeks now," she tells me, trading cork and screw for one of the glasses in front of me. "He bought an entire case and seems intent on hoarding it all to himself."

“Is he going to be mad that we’re drinking it?” A bag of potato chips is one thing but this is something else. I don’t know shit about wine but if the label is any judge the bottle was expensive.

“I hope so,” she says with a laugh, pretty much confirming my worst fears. “It would serve him right.” Handing the glass to me, she rids herself of her heels with a haphazard kick. Silence falls between us while she fills her own glass and settles in to the corner of the couch, pulling her feet up to tuck them under her.

“Nothing happened.” It tumbles out in a rush before I can stop it. “We bumped into each other on the sidewalk outside and he saw that I was struggling to get Molly and my bags upstairs and he just—”

“Who is he?” She cuts me off, quick and clean, leaning forward with sudden and intense interest. “Ryan? Was he here?”

“What?” I feel my heart flip over in my throat when she says her brother’s name. “No, not— Conner.” Shaking my head, I lean to the side to set my glass on the table. “I thought you were here about Conner.” Feeling stupid, I pull the corner of my lower lip between my teeth, chewing on it for a second before letting it go. “I thought someone told you that he was here and that you came over to...” I let it go when all she does is stare at me.

“Conner was here,” she says, slow and careful, like she’s trying to put a puzzle together. “He saw you on the street, struggling to get your daughter inside and he stopped to help you? Is that what happened?” When I give her a nod she takes a sip from her glass and smiles. “Well, I sure as fuck hope so,” she says with an unlady-like snort. “If he’d left you to flounder on your own, he would’ve heard about it.”

Wait. What?

“You’re not here to tell me to stay away from your fiancé?” I say because I suddenly have no idea what’s happening here.

“What? No.” Now she laughs outright. “If I went around posturing every woman, or man for that matter, who looked twice at Conner, I’d never get any work done.” Taking another drink, she sets her glass next to mine before reaching for the bottle to top it off. “Besides, if I felt the need to plant my flag every five minutes that would be a pretty strong indicator that Conner was never mine to begin with.” She says it like a woman who knows, unequivocally, that the man she loves, loves her back. That he’s hers forever as much as she is his. For a split second, I’m so envious, I can barely breathe past the knot of jealousy tangled around my throat. It’s not about Conner. It’s not about her shoes or the fact that she wears the kind of clothes I’ve only ever seen in magazines. It’s about the fact that she has someone. Someone who loves her. Someone who looked past all the things wrong with her and found their other half. The piece they were missing that makes them whole.

Most of the time I can fool myself into believing that I don’t need that. That Molly is the only forever I need. The only piece that was missing from me.

Most of the time it works.

Right now, I feel so fucking lonely and unloved, I want to scream.

“So, no,” Henley says, snapping me back to attention. She leans back again, taking her glass with her. “This isn’t about Conner. This is about Ryan.”

“Ryan?” I repeat his name like I’m stupid. Like I don’t know what she means by it, even though I do. I had it wrong somehow. This isn’t about Conner. She isn’t here to tell me to stay away from her fiancé.

This is about her brother.

“Yes.” She nods. “I know you went to see him today at the center—I’d like to know what happened between the two of you.”

I can’t fuck you, no matter how much I want to.

Ryan’s words ring through my head and stain my cheeks. “Nothing,” I say, reaching for my glass of wine because it gives me something to do. Helps me stall for time. “He was nice to Molly at dinner on Sunday and she’s got it in her head that they’re friends.” I take a drink, hoping the chilled, slightly sweet liquid will lubricate my suddenly dry throat. “She got him this bag of cotton candy at the zoo a few days ago and has been bugging me to take her to give it to him and I just...” I let the rest of it trail off because that’s not what she’s asking me about. Not really. “He invited us to lunch. We ate at a little 50s-style diner at the center and then Molly and I left. That’s it. That’s all that happened.”

I can’t fuck you, no matter how much I want to.

She doesn’t say anything at first. She just looks at me, like she’s trying to decide if I’m lying or not. Finally she speaks.

“After you left, he got into a fight with some of the orderlies at the center.” She sounds totally blasé about it. Like it’s happened before, more than once. I remember the way he looked at the Jerkus Erectus who cornered me at Cari’s opening last weekend and can believe it. Ryan doesn’t strike me as someone whose first instinct is to use his words to settle conflict. “It’s not the first time it’s happened,” she tells me,

confirming my suspicions. “But it’s the first time he’s put one of them in the hospital.”

“Hospital?” I say because apparently I’m not capable of speaking more than one word at a time.

“Yes.” Henley gives me a grim smile. “Ryan broke three of his ribs. His wrist. Bruised his windpipe. Fractured his jaw. Dislocated his shoulder and his elbow...” She sets her glass down again but this time it stays empty. “I’m just wondering if you saw or heard anything while you were there that would explain what triggered the escalation in his behavior.”

Me.

Whatever happened, whatever Ryan’s reasons were for hurting that man, I’m at the center of it.

I triggered it.

I don’t even have to think about it.

I just know it.

“Nothing happened while we were there,” I tell her, and even though it’s the truth, it still feels like a lie, but I say it anyway because anything else would feel like a betrayal and even though we’re practically strangers and he’s made it clear he doesn’t want anything to do with me, betraying Ryan is something I’m not willing to do.

Chapter Nineteen

Ryan

I wake up alone and in the dark, my head full of cotton. My mouth as dry as the desert, the last of whatever Kaitlyn stuck me with, swimming through my veins.

Grace.

Whatever it was, it hadn't put me under deep enough. I still dreamed about her. If anything, the drugs heightened the dream. Made it more vivid.

More real.

So real, I can still taste her mouth on my tongue. Hear her soft, ragged breathing in my ear. Feel her sharp gasp shattering against my neck when I fuck my fingers into her hot, slick pussy.

"Yes..." she gasps, lifting herself onto her knees when she feels the rough brush of my blunt-tipped fingers against her slick, swollen pussy. Tilts her hips, moving and pushing against me to stroke herself with them, urging me on. Begging me to push my way inside. "Please, Ryan..."

With a barely stifled groan, I push my hand past the waistband of my jeans. Palming my cock, I'm instantly disgusted by the feel of it. The way it yields under the tough scar tissue that covers it. The. The soft give of it under my fingers, despite the dull, steady throb in my groin that dreaming about Grace always kicks loose.

Forcing my hand lower, I stare at the ceiling, gaze unflinching and steady, while my fingers brush against the hard knot of scar tissue behind the base of my cock where my balls used to be. Feeling the void, my breath pushes out of my lungs in a rush. My eyes start to burn in their sockets, the sting of saltwater finally forcing me to blink.

What the fuck, Ranger? You thought maybe if you played with your limp dick enough your nuts'd grow back?

Jerking my hand free, I lift my arm and throw it over my face, covering my burning eyes while I fight the rage pushing against my ribcage. Trying to fight and claw its way up my throat.

Grace.

It's completely ridiculous.

All of it.

Because what I said to her is true.

What I want can never happen because she's never going to want me. Not once she gets a load of the shitshow in my pants.

Not once she realizes that I might look like a man. I might even walk and talk like one, but I'm just pretending, and if I had any guts at all, I'd walk myself into fucking traffic.

You can't.

You promised Tess you wouldn't.

Tess.

An image of her flits across my brain and I grab hold of it.

Force myself to think about her.

Try to make myself want her.

Pluck Grace from my thoughts and shove Tess into the hole left behind.

Pretend to feel the phantom throb of need in my cock that I feel for Grace every time
I close my eyes.

It's fucked up.

I know it's fucked up

She isn't mine.

Never will be.

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She belongs to Declan.

She always has, and to be perfectly honest, I don't even want her.

Not like that.

Not anymore, but I want to want her.

Because wanting Tess is safe.

Because she doesn't want me.

Because she never will, and somehow that rejection is safer than what could potentially happen with Grace if I let things go any further than they already have.

Potentially, Ranger?

Come on—there's nothing potential about it. Grace ain't ever going to want you. Not once she sees the real you, so stick to your safe space and keep crying about it, you fucking pussy. And while you're at it, leave her the fuck alone.

That's the thought that pushes me out of bed. Puts my feet on the floor and forces me to stand. Clicking on the bedside lamp, I palm my cane and shuffle thump my way to the bathroom. Cranking on the water as hot as I can stand it, I peel off my clothes, muttering curses when I have to sit down on the toilet to take my jeans off like an old man.

Finally, naked and not very happy about it, I step into the shower for the second time today, hoping the hot, needle-like spray of water will force the last of Grace from my system.

I stand under it until the needles turn to ice but it never happens.

Using the safety rail because I will kill myself, promise to Tess be fucked, if I take a naked header into the tile and have to shout for help, I step out of the stall in time to catch the last of someone knocking on the door to my room.

Probably Kaitlyn, coming to tell me I missed dinner. She's the only nurse around this place that doesn't avoid me like the plague. "Fuck off," I mutter, ripping a towel from its rod and use it abuse my wet hair.

Because she can't take a hint, Kaitlyn knocks again.

Jesus Christ.

"Fuck. Off." This time I shout it, not bothering to open the bathroom door. Instead of fucking off as instructed, the brave soul at my door pushes their way inside, their heated reply muffled by the door that's still between us.

For fuck's sake. Seriously?

Slinging a fresh towel around my waist, I rip the bathroom door open on a shout. "Are you fucking deaf," I say, head down while I keep rubbing my hair dry. Whoever it is just standing there, staring at me, which is everyone's initial reaction when they see me all or mostly naked for the first time. Their secondary reaction is usually marked cheerfulness, bordering on mania, like if they pretend not to notice them, my scars will cease to exist. My more honest victims run from the room. The person staring at me isn't doing either of those things. I lift my head with a disgruntled sigh

and pin my audience in place with a baleful glare. “I said fuc—”

It’s not Kaitlyn.

Not one of the other nurses who drew the short straw.

It’s Tess.

We stand here and stare at each other for a few seconds because neither of us know what to do next. She’s careful to keep her gaze on my face, like she’ll disintegrate on the spot if she looks any lower than my chin. Her three-fingered hold on the six-pack she smuggled in goes so lax I’m suddenly sure I’m going to have a mess to clean up if she doesn’t snap out of it and tighten her grip.

For some reason, it pisses me off like no other.

Dropping my arm, I toss the damp towel in my hand on the nearest chair. Then I just stare at her. Arms at my sides. Glare, hot and heavy, on her face, practically daring her to look at me.

All of me.

And then she does.

Her gaze dips lower. Skates over my bare chest. My slightly softened abs. The burn scars that snake and slither their way past the towel around my hips, licking at my stomach, reaching as far as my ribcage in some places. The deep, puckered that stretches the length of my forearm, from the underside of my wrist to the inside of my elbow.

And then even lower, to my left leg.

She swallows hard, face pale.

But she doesn't look away.

"Are you gonna cry?" I cut her nasty grin when I say it before looking down to study the twisted ropes and lumpy knots of angry, red scar tissue that cover me. "Henley did, the first time she saw it," I tell her, lifting my hard glare to meet hers. "She acted like it didn't bother her but then she went to the bathroom and bawled her eyes out." What I don't tell her is that it killed me when it happened. That sitting on the edge of my bed and listening to Hen's soft, muffled sobs at the sight of what happened to me made me wish it had killed me.

Fury snaps in her light hazel eyes at the shitty things I have to say about my sister. "Don't be a dick," she tells me, before lifting her hot, dry-eyed gaze to meet mine. "She's your sister—of course she's going to cry."

"You're not my sister."

I know what I'm doing, the second it comes out of my mouth. I'm trying to shove Tess into the Grace-shaped hole lodged in my gut. Trying to make myself want her the way I used to. That way I want to. It doesn't work.

It never does, no matter how many times I try.

"No, I'm not." She flops down in one of the chairs I keep by the window and sets the six-pack on the floor at her feet. Pulling a beer free, she twists off its cap and sits back. "Why are you just standing there, O'Connell?" she says, lifting the bottle to take a deep drink. "Get dressed so we can go."

“Go where?” I smirk at her but there’s no humor in it. “We gonna go to the game room and play checkers?”

“Nope.” Stretching her legs out in front of her, she crosses them at the ankles and gives me a smug smile in return. “We’re gonna go get drunk, so chop-chop, motherfucker. I don’t have all night.”

Chapter Twenty

Grace

Henley stayed.

Between the two of us, we killed the bottle of wine she opened, plus another. We also polished off the potato chips, an entire package of Oreos and a half a bag of mini powdered donuts. I ate most of the chips and donuts while Henley took care of the wine.

“Now that I know about your sister’s secret addiction, I’m kinda pissed at her for holding out on me,” Henley says. She’s stretched out on the couch, rubbing a perfectly manicured hand over the slight bulge of junk food in her stomach, the simple silver ring on her finger, winking dimly in the lamplight. “Whenever we hang out, it’s always hummus and pita chips or a charcuterie board.” She sounds disgruntled and more than a little drunk when she says it.

“That’s because you’re fancy,” I tell her around the donut in my mouth. “Cari and I grew up poor. We spent most of our lives being tormented by perfect girls like you.” It tumbles out of my mouth before I can stop it, my mental reflexes dulled by an expensive wine buzz and too much sugar. When Henley’s eyes go wide and her mouth falls open, I realize what I said. What I did by saying it.

“Shit.” I struggle to sit up in the chair I’m slumped into. “That’s not what I meant.” Jesus, way to make friends, Grace. “I just meant that you’re absolutely gorgeous and—”

That's when she started to laugh at me. A real belly laugh that had tears streaming down her face and her hands pressed against her gut like it had started to hurt in earnest. "Holy shit," she gasps, eyes going wide as she stops, mid-laugh. "I'm Jessica." Instead of upsetting her, the revelation sets off a fresh round of gut-busting laughter.

"You are not." Finally managing to sit up, I shake my head emphatically, the fast twist of it sending my brain into drunken orbit. "You're nothing like that bitch." I only met her the one time, at Anton's but I hated her on sight. The way she talked to Tess made want to punch her in the throat. For that alone I'd bet my life that Henley and Jessica are worlds apart. "I'm sorry. You've been nothing but nice to me and I—"

"I used to be ugly," she says in a matter-of-fact tone that snaps my mouth shut. "And poor," she adds for good measure.

"I highly doubt that," I say, taking in her flawless cheekbones and full mouth. Her straight nose and perfect teeth. "There is absolutely no way you were ever ugly. Poor maybe—but never ugly."

"Ugg—lee." She nods her head for emphasis. "Nose job," she says, touching the tip of her finger to her nose. "Veneers on my teeth." Her finger moves to her mouth. "My hair was horrible. Bright orange and frizzy. I looked like Ronald McDonald's ugly kid sister."

"You were never ugly."

The voice, slightly annoyed and distinctly male, lifts my gaze from Henley and I find Conner standing a few feet away, leaning against the kitchen counter, hands dug into the front pockets of his jeans like he's been standing there for hours.

If she's surprised by her fiancé's sudden and seemingly magical appearance, Henley doesn't show it. "Your opinion doesn't count, Gilroy," she says struggling to sit up to look at him over the back of the couch. "You're completely biased."

"Daisy, my opinion is the only opinion that counts." Conner gives her a lop-sided grin. "Biased or otherwise."

She grins back at him and I get the distinct impression that both of them have completely forgotten that I'm here. "Do I want to know how you found me?"

That lop-sided grin deepens into something that can only be described as sinful. "Probably not."

She gives him an exasperated sigh, her deep brown eyes dancing with humor. "God, you're weird."

"And still not sorry." Pushing himself away from the counter, he pulls his hands out of his pockets and closes the distance between them. Stopping in front of her spot on the couch, he gives the empty junk food packages and wine bottles a quick survey before letting out a quiet chuckle. "Okay, Daisy—let's go home."

"Okay." She lets out an audible sigh of contentment when he reaches for her, slipping his arms around her and under her to pick her up. He murmurs something to her in a language I've never heard before and she nods her head against his shoulder, the loop of her arms tightening around his neck.

Turning with Henley nestled in his arms, Conner finally acknowledges me. "Thanks for keeping her company," he says quietly. "She's had a rough day and needed the girl time."

"Me too. I had a good time." I think about what she told me about Ryan. What he did

after I left the center. “Is he okay?” I don’t elaborate. I don’t have to. We both know who he is.

Ryan.

“Depends on what your definition of okay is,” he tells me. “He’s currently downstairs getting completely shitfaced with Tess.”

“Oh.” I nod my head. What does it say about me that my take away from that revelation isn’t that Ryan is downstairs, drowning his sorrows but that he’s downstairs, hanging out with Tess. That he’s more than likely been down there for hours now and he probably hasn’t even given so much as a passing thought to the sad, desperate, single mother upstairs.

Probably not even that much.

Jesus, Grace. When are you going to give it up? How many times does the guy have to tell you no before you accept it and move on? What he said doesn’t matter. He doesn’t want to want you.

That’s the takeaway, here, Grace.

Ryan doesn’t want to want you.

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Like he can read my mind, Conner gives me one of his lop-sided smirks. “Night, Grace.”

“Night,” I parrot back, following them as far as the door to shut it behind them. After they’re gone, I clean up our mess. Wash a couple of ibuprofens down with a full glass of water and go to bed.

But it takes a while for my eyes to close and even longer for me to fall asleep.

“Mommy.”

The whispered word pulls me out of the hard sleep I’m under faster than anything. Before I can take my next breath, my eyes are wide open and I’m sitting bolt upright to find Molly standing in my bedroom doorway. “What is it, baby?” I say, instantly in full-momma bear mode. She only calls me mommy when she’s sick or scared. “Are you okay?”

She nods, lifting a hand to push her tangled blonde hair out of her eyes. “The monster-door is buzzing.” She whispers it like she’s afraid the door might be able to hear her. As if on cue, the front door lets out another, short, almost apologetic burst of buzzing that jolts Molly on her feet.

Oh god.

I fell asleep, fantasizing about Ryan. What would happen if he found his way upstairs

and knocked on my door, conveniently omitting the fact that he's been downstairs with Tess, drinking himself stupid for hours now.

That's when reality slaps me in the face.

Because yes, he's made it perfectly clear that he has no intention of pursuing me, but he's also made it clear that he wants to.

Add booze to the mix and you have a recipe for disaster.

It's simple, Grace.

Tell him no.

Tell him to go home.

"Mommy?"

I look down to see Molly looking up at me, her face tight with anxiety. My indecision is scaring her. Actually, it's scaring both of us.

Giving the clock on my nightstand a quick check, I sigh. It's after 3AM. "It's okay, baby," I tell her. Reaching down, I scoop her up and settle her on my hip. "It's probably just Aunt Cari. She might've lost her keys again." I roll my eyes and Molly gives me a sleepy grin before turning to rest her cheek on my shoulder.

Giving myself a mental kick in the ass, I force myself down the hall, Molly still on my hip, to stop in front of the intercom.

"Hello?"

There's a flurry of thumping noises, followed by a muttered curse.

"Cari, it's Dec—shit," a voice says around another round of thumps. "Can you open up? I've got Ryan here and he's fucking wasted and—"

Molly's head pops up off my shoulder when she hears his name because she suddenly doesn't care if the monster-door opens its mouth and eats the both of us, Ryan is on the other side of it. "Mom, Ryan came for a sleepover," she says in a hushed whisper, eyes suddenly round and fully awake.

Shit.

Setting Molly on her feet, I reach out to wrestle the door open. Declan is standing on the top tread of the stairs, his hand firmly planted on Ryan's chest in an attempt to keep him upright and against the wall.

"Grace," Declan says my name like he's surprised to see me, his gaze dropping down to where Molly is standing quietly next to me, gazing up at Declan like he's the Jolly Green Giant. "Hey, Molly," he flashes her a brief, nervous smile before resettling his gaze on me.

"Sorry, but we're in a bit of a situation here—can you maybe get Patrick or—"

"They're not here." I flick a quick look at Ryan before forcing myself to re-focus on Declan. "Patrick got them a suite at the Hawthorne for the night as a surprise." I flush a little because we'd have to be a bunch of idiots to not know what they're doing right now, and to tell the truth, I'm little jealous because apparently, I'm jealous of everyone tonight. Well, not everyone—just everyone having sex. Flushing a little deeper, I clear my throat. "Did you need something?"

At the sound of my voice, Ryan lifts his head and angles it around the doorframe to

look at me. “Heya, Grace. I need a place to sleep it off.” He says it like we’re best pals. Like he didn’t growl and snap at me this afternoon about how much he doesn’t want to want me.

You got it backwards, Grace. You don’t want me. You just haven’t figured it out yet.

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The memory spikes through my system, and my nipples tightens under the loose cotton of my shirt in response.

Holy shit, what the hell is wrong with me?

Crossing my arms over my chest just in case my nipples are as hard and swollen as they feel, I bounce a glare between the both of them because this is not how I saw this going down and I'm suddenly way out of my depth.

"It's okay, Grace." Declan takes a step back and pulls Ryan off the wall, visibly bracing himself to take his weight if Ryan decides to take a header down the stairs. "I'll take him to Henley's. I'm sorry I wok—"

I think about how upset Henley was when she got here. She tried to hide it but I could tell that whatever happened today, it went beyond Ryan's penchant for assault hospital staff. Something happened between them and I don't think she's in any shape to see her brother in this condition.

Making up my mind, I open the door all the way and take a step back. "You got him all the way up here," I say, crossing my arms over my chest again. "You might as well bring him in."

"Grace." Declan shakes his head, suddenly reluctant. "I can take him to Henley's."

I ignore his offer. "Last room on the left," I say, dropping her arms away from my chest to motion them inside.

“That’s my room,” Molly pipes up, and I look down to find her scowling at me. Hefting her onto her hip again, I give her a smile. “Lucky you then, because that means you get to sleep with me tonight.”

she gives me her best, I don’t wanna scowl and I counter it with my patented, too bad shrug. Finally, she caves with a long-suffering sigh that has me chewing on my upper lip in an effort to keep from laughing.

“He looks sick,” Molly says, watching Declan and Ryan pinball their way down the hall.

“He is,” I tell her, making it up as I go along. “I think he has the flu.”

“Gross.” She wrinkles her nose at me. “Is he going to throw up on my pony sheets?”

It’s a distinct possibility. Instead of telling her the truth, I shake my head. “No. I’ll give him a bucket and some ginger ale before he goes to sleep.”

She still isn’t satisfied.

“Why can’t Ryan just sleep with you?” She’s says it like it’s a real question. Like it makes perfect sense to her. Like Ryan and I should have no problem sleeping together.

At least she’s half right.

Because I’m pretty sure that harboring dirty thoughts while holding your child qualifies you for Worst Mother Ever, I push Ryan, and the fact that he’s our house guest, out of my head to focus on Molly. “Let’s get back to bed,” I tell her, re-tracing my steps down the hall. Because I sense a fight coming on, I add. “That way, you can be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in the morning when Ryan wakes up.” It’s a horrible

thing to do, taking advantage of my kid's weird fixation on a guy neither of us barely know, just to get her to go to sleep but I do it without hesitation because I'm that desperate.

Setting Molly on her feet, I barely let her go before she's scampering through the doorway and diving beneath my covers in an effort to force herself back to sleep through sheer force of will.

Follow her, Grace.

Don't be an asshole.

Whatever's going on between them is none of your business.

It's true.

It's not.

But I edge closer to Molly's open bedroom door anyway because I'm a terrible person who is nearly as obsessed and fixated on Ryan as my four-year-old daughter.

Listening, I hear the quiet rustle of cotton against cotton as Declan gets Ryan situated on the bed. Remembering what Ryan told me about Declan, that no one likes him—not even his own brother—because he's an asshole, I have a hard time believing it. An asshole wouldn't do what Declan is doing. He wouldn't take care of a friend this way, which means whatever the conflict is between them, it goes deeper than just a clash between two strong personalities. Then Ryan speaks and solves the puzzle.

"I should've done it," he says, his words punctuated by the sound of his boots hitting the floor, one after the other.

“And what is that?” Declan says. He sounds tired. Like being who he is, is both mentally and emotionally exhausting.

“I should’ve taken Tess when I had the chance,” Ryan says, his voice slightly muffled between words and I feel the bottom drop out of my stomach. Which is stupid. I knew how he felt about Tess. How he still feels about her, he said as much didn’t he?

It’s not news.

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But it still stings to hear it said out loud.

“You’re right. You should’ve.” Declan sounds like he means it. Like he agrees with Ryan. “It would’ve better for the both of you if you’d have gotten the hell away from me.”

Ryan doesn’t answer him. Whatever happens between them next, it’s quiet. I’m still standing in the hall, listening intently when Declan makes his exit, nearly running me over with his angry, long-legged stride.

“Shit.” He mutters, giving me an absent-minded frown when he realizes I’m standing here and that I’ve obviously been eavesdropping on his conversation with Ryan. Instead of being angry, Declan sighs, the frown on his face sliding away into something closer to a grimace. “I’m really sorry about this, Grace,” he says, taking a swipe at his face with a hand that’s roughly the size of a catcher’s mitt. “If I’d have known you were here by yourself, I never would’ve—”

He thinks I was eavesdropping because having Ryan here scares me. Makes me uncomfortable. While both are true, neither are for the reasons he thinks. “It’s okay,” I tell him, waving off his apology. “We’ll be fine—besides, Henley’s only slightly less drunk than her brother is at this point. Calling her for help would be like asking the blind to lead the blind.”

Declan’s grimace morphs into a frown again. “Henley got drunk?” He says it like I just told him Molly’s dad is the Stay-Puffed Marshmallow Man.

“She came by to hang and we worked our way through a few bottles of Patrick’s wine

and most of Cari's junk food stash."

When I mention Patrick's wine, Declan flashes me a grin. A real one that sets off a pair of dimples that I've never seen before. "You drank Cap'n's wine?" When I nod, he lets out a bark of laughter. "Good. Fucker deserves it." While the laughter dies between us, Declan leans in on impulse and drops a haphazard kiss on the top of my head like I'm his favorite kid sister. "See you later, Grace," he says before stepping around me to make his way down the hall.

He's almost to the door before I give in and blurt it out. "I really hate your fiancé."

Hearing me say it stops him in his tracks and when he turns, I expect him to go full-tilt ogre on me but nope—there's that dimple-popping grin again. "She's not my finance. Not anymore," he tells me before opening the door and to disappear behind it.

Chapter Twenty-one

Ryan

So, this is what leaving Grace alone looks like.

It looks like me getting shit-faced and letting Declan dump me in her daughter's bed. Like me laying here with my eyes closed, listening to the soft murmur of her voice, mixed with Declan's low tones with my gut clenched tight because I can hear what he's saying.

He apologizes for dumping me on her doorstep and she waves it off with a nervous laugh and a we'll be fine.

She tells him that Henley was here and that she'd been drunk when she left.

That bothers me.

Makes me feel like shit, because I know I'm the reason for it. Because I keep pushing her away. Won't let my guard down and be her brother again. Won't let her love me. Be my sister.

And the really fucked up part?

As shitty as I feel about it, as sorry as I am for the shit going on with Henley, Grace is still all I can think about.

She says something that makes Declan laugh and I feel my gut clench in response. It's a rare thing—real laughter from Declan. He only lets his guard down around people he trusts. Cares about. Everyone else gets the thousand-yard stare and fuck you smirk. The fact that Grace was able to slip past his defenses bothers me. Makes me jealous.

Which is fucking stupid.

Declan's in love with Tess.

He doesn't want Grace.

But if he did, you wouldn't stand a chance. You know that, don't you, Ranger? If Declan Gilroy wanted to, he could steal your girl without even trying.

My girl.

A wave of possessiveness washes over me, so strong and brutal I feel like I'm drowning in it.

Grace is mine.

The front door snaps closed, the sound of it as loud as a starter pistol in the quiet and my heart takes off at a gallop

Fuck me.

He did it.

That fucker actually did it.

Declan left me alone with her.

And that surprises you why? You're drunk, disabled and couldn't get it up with a dump truck full of Viagra and construction crane.

The fuck kinda threat do you present again, exactly?

That's when I start to laugh.

I'm still laughing when I sense her presence and open my eyes to find Grace hovering in the doorway, a wastepaper basket in my one hand and a glass of water in the other.

I shift my gaze away from her and back to the ceiling while my laughter dies, the absence of it leaving my chest feeling heavy and tight. "Hey."

Like my acknowledgment makes up her mind, Grace moves through the doorway and into my peripheral.

"Hey," she says back, lifting the trash can into my line of sight. "Molly is very concerned about her sheets. They're brand-new, so if you need to throw-up, do it in here."

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The mention of Molly sobers me considerably. I grew up watching my dad stumble and puke his way from one binge to the next. The thought of Molly seeing me like this bothers me more than it has a right to. “Understood.”

Grace drops the trash can on the floor next to the bed and offers me the water. “You’ll wake up dehydrated if you don’t drink it,” she says when I don’t immediately reach out to take it.

Even though I don’t particularly want it, I struggle to sit up, raising myself up on a wobbly elbow to take the glass. As soon as her hand is empty she holds it up to my mouth. “Ibuprofen,” she says, flashing me a pair of reddish-brown pills tucked into her palm. “Open up.” When I do what she says, she drops the pills into my mouth and takes a step back, waiting for me to drain the glass.

When it’s empty, I set it on the nightstand before letting my elbow collapse under my dead, drunk weight. Flat on my back, I train my gaze on the ceiling again “Thanks, Grace.” It’s a stupid thing to say. The soft scoff she gives me in response says she agrees with me.

“I’ll try to keep Molly from bothering you but she’s an early riser and I don’t always—”

I turn my head to pin her with a glare. “Molly doesn’t bother me.” It irritates me that she would think that. “She’s never bothered me.”

“Oh... right.” She swallows hard and averts her gaze. “I keep forgetting—it’s just me that bothers you,” she says, making a sound in the back of her throat while she nods

her head and moves toward the door. Away from me. “I have an appointment in—”

Let her go.

Let her go.

Let her go.

Fuck.

I reach out and snag her hand, jerking her to a stop before she can get away. “You do bother me, Grace.” I say it quietly, my voice barely held above a whisper. Giving in a little, I sweep the rough pad of my thumb against the inside of her wrist. “You bother me so goddamned much, you’re all I can think about.”

“Ryan...” She whispers my name, soft and breathless, face turned away like she’s afraid to look at me. “Please—”

“I dream about you.” I cut her off because I’m afraid too. Of what she’s about to say. That she’s going to tell me to stop.

Stop talking.

Stop touching her.

Afraid, because I can’t.

I couldn’t stop now, even if I wanted to.

“I dream about fucking your wet, swollen pussy with my fingers. Your hot, needy mouth with my tongue.” I shouldn’t tell her that. I shouldn’t touch her. But I keep

talking. Keep drawing slow, lazy circles against the soft skin of her wrist. Stirring the blood pulsing through her veins until I can feel the fast, heavy thump of it against my thumb because I need to feel it—her pulse stutter and stall under my hand. Hear her breath catch and snag in her throat. I need to know she wants me as much as I want her. That I can do that to her. Make her feel that way, even if I can't don't fuck all about it.

It's messed up and wrong, doing this to her but I can't help it. Right now, I want her too much to care.

“Every night it's the same. Every morning I wake up and I'd swear to Christ you've been right there with me because I can still smell you on my skin and taste you on my tongue. I can still feel how tight your pussy is, wrapped around my fingers, and it's driving me fucking crazy.”

It's all true, every bit of it—up to and including the fact that I've lost my goddamned mind. My little X-rated monologue pretty much proves it and I half expect her to yank herself out of my grasp. To get up get the hell out. A part of me wishes she would. It would make things easier. Simpler if she were afraid of me. Simpler if she'd just decide to hate me.

Instead, she turns towards the bed to look down at me, her wrist still trapped in the circle of my fingers.

“You're confusing me.” She whispers, cutting me off at the knees with a single sentence. “You need to make up your mind. Decide what you want, because you can't keep doing this to me. Pulling me in, just to push me away. It's not fair.”

She's right.

It's not fair.

Not to either of us.

But she's wrong about one thing.

I don't need to decide anything.

I decided the second I saw her.

Grace is mine.

It's completely insane.

All of it, because I just met her.

Because I'm broken and she deserves better than the fucking mess that being with me would bring to her doorstep. Because it's not just her. It's Molly too. She has a daughter to think about. Someone who relies on her to be strong. Keep her safe. Make the safe bet.

And the safe bet sure as fuck isn't me.

If I were ever going to man the fuck up and do the right thing, it would be now. It would look like me letting her go. Sending her away.

It would be me putting an end to this thing while the two of us still have a goat's fuck chance in hell of surviving the fall.

It should be.

It has to be.

Because I'm not the right man

"You're right. I'm sorry." Letting go of her wrist is the hardest thing I've ever done, but I do it, even though the loss of contact hurts so goddamned much, it steals my

breath. “Goodnight, Grace.”

“Good night,” she says quietly, reclaiming her wrist with a reluctance that makes me want to grab her all over again. I can feel my resolve crumbling, but before I can give in, she turns away from the bed. Turns away from me.

And this time I let her.

Chapter Twenty-two

Grace

I'm wide awake when my alarm goes off a few hours later.

Tip-toeing into the bathroom, I ease the door closed on a fast and silent prayer that I'll be able to at least shampoo my hair before Molly comes barreling into the bathroom to pepper me with questions and breakfast requests.

Showering as quickly as possible, I do my level best to forget about Ryan. About the way he looked at me last night. About the things he said to me. About the fact that just the swirl of his thumb against the inside of my wrist was enough to make my legs shake.

About the fact that he's passed out less than ten yards away.

Despite the fact that I was a quivering mess by the time he was done with me, I stood my ground. Did the right thing. The smart thing. I told him to make up his mind. Stop playing with me. He apologized. Let me go and I walked away on a pair of legs that felt like the they were made of rubber.

I crawled into bed and spent the last few hours watching the clock.

Get your head in the game, Grace. You have more important things to do than fantasize about all the dirty things Ryan O'Connell told you he's been dreaming of doing to you.

I have a 9AM appointment at Bay State College to take the entrance exam and speak with a financial aid counselor and with Cari snuggled up in some hotel suite with her millionaire fiancé, I have no idea who I'm going to get to watch Molly.

So, basically, my entire future hinges on the next few hours of my life and all I can do stand here and wonder how many orgasms Ryan could give me before I passed out.

I'm so totally and completely screwed.

Turning off the shower with a vicious crank of the faucet, I step out and listen closely for signs of life.

Nothing.

Easing the door open, I peek my head out, hoping to see Molly still sprawled across the bed, sound asleep.

Nope.

Bed's empty.

Shit.

Pulling on my robe, I barely have it belted before I'm out the door and across the hall. Pushing the door to Molly's room open I find her bed just as empty as mine.

Just then, I hear Molly's high-pitched giggle coming from the living room, followed but the low, answering rumble of Ryan's voice.

Hurrying down the hall, I stop somewhere between the kitchen and the living room, and just stand there, staring like an idiot.

They're both sitting at the kitchen counter. Ryan's stoically chewing his way through a bowl of cereal while Molly completely ignores hers in favor of chattering to him like a magpie.

Forcing myself to move, I skirt the kitchen counter, making a beeline for the coffee pot. I'm going to need all the caffeine I can get if I'm going to get through today.

"Hi, Mom," Molly chirps at me when I walk into the kitchen. "Ryan says he's feeling better, so he made me breakfast."

Grabbing the coffee pot, I turn toward them to stick it under the tap while giving him a quick once over. He does look better. Maybe a little bleary-eyed but who doesn't at 6AM. "That was nice of him," I say in a voice that's unnaturally cheerful and bright. The second I hear it come out of my mouth I want to bite my tongue in half.

"I poured cereal in a bowl and put bread in the toaster," he says, flicking a quick glance in my direction before refocusing on his own breakfast.

"That counts," Molly informs him in a matter of fact tone. "Right, Mom?"

"Right." I give her a smile before shutting off the tap and turning to pour water into the coffee pot's reservoir. After scooping coffee into the basket and switching it on, I'm forced to turn around. "How'd you sleep?" I say, fighting to keep my tone casual and light.

The corner of his mouth kicks up just a notch, his deep brown eyes taking a quick coast over my towel dried hair and hastily tied bathrobe. "About as well as you did, I'm guessing."

Despite the fact that I suddenly feel like I'm about to melt into a puddle, I reach up to pull my robe closed to hide the flush erupting across my chest.

“Do you like board games?”

Dropping his gaze back to his bowl, he frowns slightly, giving Molly’s question a quick shrug. “Conner makes me play them when he visits me at the center but I’m not very good that them.”

“Why?”

Instinctively taking a step forward, I try to insert a buffer between them. “Moll—”

“It’s okay, Grace,” Ryan says, flicking a quick glance in my direction before looking at Molly. “I was a soldier for a really long time, but I had an accident and hurt my head pretty bad so I can’t remember stuff sometimes.”

“Oh.” Molly’s quiet for a second, mulling over what he told her. Finally, she nods. “Is that why you can’t tie your shoes?”

Ryan goes still. The back of his neck goes splotchy and red in an instant. He’s embarrassed. Doesn’t want to talk about his injuries. Not in front of me.

“Yes,” he says, telling her the truth.

“And why you live in a hospital?”

“Yeah.” He laughs a little and nods. “But I don’t live there anymore.”

“Why?”

I think he's going to tell her he left the hospital because he has a new place to live, but he doesn't. Again, he tells her the truth. "Because I did something bad. I broke the rules."

"When I'm bad, my mom puts me in a time-out," she says, giving him a commiserating sigh. "She says she doesn't like it any more than I do but I don't think that's true because I really don't like it."

Sitting back in his seat, Ryan laughs. A real laugh that sets off Molly's high-pitched giggle.

Watching them, I can't decide who I'm more jealous of—Ryan for the fact that Molly is so obviously smitten with him and would probably jump out the window if he asked her to or my own daughter for exactly the same reason.

Clearing my throat, I interject myself between them. "Q&A session is over Moll. I need you to go get dressed."

"It's still dark outside," she says, looking at the window for confirmation. "At home, Gran lets me stay in my PJs until we can see the sun."

Patience, Grace.

You can't afford to lose your shit.

"This is home and Gran isn't here," I remind her, pressing my hands flat on the counter between us so I don't crank them into fists. "I've got a lot to do today and I'm already running late." It's a lie. I have plenty of time but I know from experience how easily a schedule can spin out of control when there's a four-year-old involved.

Slumping back in her seat, I watch her jaw shift into the stubborn angle that almost

always signals a fight. “I don’t have to go with you,” Molly informs me in a flat, slightly condescending tone that is 100% my mother. “I can stay here.” She looks at Ryan for confirmation. “Right?”

“Wrong.” He doesn’t look at me when he says it. Doesn’t check to see if it’s okay to butt in. “Your mom is in charge here, Molly—if she says you’re going then you’re going.”

Her little face crumples into a look of utter betrayal. “We were going to play board games today,” she tells him, like they’d made plans. “We—”

“I’m staying here for the next few days.” Now he flicks a quick, nervous glance in my direction before re-focusing on Molly. “Just until my new place is ready, so we have plenty of time to hang out and play board games.”

Pending crisis forgotten, Molly jolts up from her slump, a grin stretching her mouth from ear to ear. “For real?”

“For real.” He nods, returning her grin. “But I don’t hang out with kids who give their mom a hard time, so...”

Molly is out of her seat and streaking down the hall in record time and I can’t help but feel a little resentful over the way he handled her so easily.

A novelty, Grace.

He’s a novelty. This whole place is. It’s like Disneyland. Brand-new cars and shopping sprees. Once the new wears off, your daughter will return to factory settings.

How horrible is it that I actually want her to pitch a fit?

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Sighing heavily, I lean against the counter, shoulders slumped.

Maybe this was a mistake.

Maybe my mother was right.

Maybe I can't do this.

"Grace."

Sighing again, I look up to find him looking at me. Watching me.

"I'm sorry." Sitting back in his seat, he rubs a hand across his jaw like he's trying to loosen its hinge. I think he's going to apologize for over-stepping his bounds with Molly again. For the fact that, despite having a head injury for fuck's and zero experience with kids, he's still a better parent than I am. But that's not what he's sorry for. "Look—about last night... I shouldn't have let Dec drag me up here. I was—"

"It's okay," I cut him off with a wave of my hand, making an effort to minimize what happened between us last night, even though I laid awake all night, replaying every filthy word he said. Every brush of his thumb against my wrist. "You were drunk. I get it."

"I was going to say being selfish." He frowns at me. "The only reason I let Tess drag me out in the first place was because I was hoping I'd see you. I needed to make sure you were okay after—" He suddenly looks uncomfortable. Unsure. "Hen told you

what happened after you and Molly left yesterday—what I did.”

It’s not a question but I nod anyway. “She told me,” I say, leaning over the counter to pick up Molly’s cereal bowl to dump soggy Cheerios and warm milk into the disposal. “Was that because of me too?” I ask, remembering what he told me on Sunday. About why he and Conner were rolling around on the ground, trying to kill each other. When he doesn’t answer me, I risk a quick glance in his direction to find him looking at me. Watching me like he’s trying to figure out what I’m going to do next. “Did you put that guy in the hospital because of me?”

His jaw goes stiff, flattening his mouth in to a hard, thin line. “What happened wasn’t your fault.” He takes an angry swipe at his face and looks away. “I lose my shit sometimes. It had nothing to do with you.”

It’s a lie. What he did in that stairwell had everything to do with me. I’d bet my life on it.

“That should scare me.” It should. I know it should. I know if I had the sense God gave a potato, I’d snatch my daughter up and head for the preverbal hills. “I should be afraid of you, right?”

“I would never hurt you.” He looks at me again, pinning me with a pair of eyes so dark, they look almost black. “Never you and never Molly.”

I believe him. God help me, I believe him. “But you’ll hurt people because of me.”

He doesn’t say anything. He just stares at me, jaw flexing around the hard clench of his teeth.

I press the issue, not willing to let it go. “Are you going to tell me what happened in that stairwell?”

“No.” He looks away from me again and shakes his head, visibly forcing himself to relax. Working through a series of mental exercise meant to talk himself down.

When he’s through, he turns toward me and gives me one of his flat smiles. “Go get dressed.” Sliding out of his seat, he circles the bar to stand next to me. “Go on,” he says, when I don’t move an inch. “I’ll keep Molly occupied while you get ready.”

I want to tell him no. That I don’t need his help. I can do it on my own.

And I can.

Despite my recent pity party, I know I can.

But I suddenly don’t want to.

Am blindsided by the unfairness of it all, because I shouldn’t have to, should I?

Choices, Grace.

We all make them and this one is yours.

But I can pretend, right?

Just this once, that I have someone.

Someone who will stay. Someone steady and strong enough to take my weight when I lean on them.

Even if it isn’t real.

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Even if it won't last, I can take what Ryan is offering.

Just this once.

"Are you sure?"

Laughing a little, he pulls a colorful ceramic mug from the rack next to the coffee pot. "I'll ask her to teach me how to tie my shoes," he tells me, focused on lifting the carafe to pour the fragrant, dark liquid into his cup so he won't have to look at me while he says it. "That should take at least an hour." Instead of keeping the cup for himself, he pushes it into my hand. "Go. We'll be fine."

I take the cup. Accepting its weight in my hand, it feels like more.

Like a promise.

"Okay." I'm an idiot to trust it. I know I am, but I want it badly enough to pretend it's real.

Just this once.

Chapter Twenty-three

Ryan

I woke up flat on my back with dry bits of what felt like styrofoam pellets stuck to my tonsils and gunk-coated tongue.

Choking and sputtering, I sit bolt upright and spit whatever it is into my hand.

Cereal.

The fuck?

Looking over, I find a toe-headed terror standing on the bed next to me, an opened box of cereal almost as big as she is, clutched to her chest with one hand while the other is fishing around in its belly, looking for fresh ammunition.

“Are you trying to kill me?” I mutter at her, snatching the box from her grip before she can launch another attack.

“No.” She looks at the bunch of dry cereal still clenched in her fist. “I’m feeding you breakfast.” She says it like it’s the obvious answer to a stupid question. As if to prove it, she shoves the handful of cereal into her own mouth.

“My mistake.” Watching her chew, I feel laughter start to brew in my chest. “I guess I’m lucky I didn’t get waterboarded with a gallon of 2%, huh?”

“I don’t know what that means,” she tells me around her mouthful of half-chewed cereal. “But I’m not allowed to work the milk because I make a mess.”

I look down at the scatter of crushed, dry cereal between us and nod. “I can see that.”

“You look better.”

“Huh?” On my best day, I can barely keep up with a normal, linear conversation. Keeping up with Molly’s mental acrobats is proving to be impossible.

“Last night you looked really sick, but you look okay now,” she explains. “I checked the garbage and you didn’t throw up in it and you didn’t do it on my sheets so you must be feeling better.”

“Your mom told me not to.” I tell her, looking toward the open door. Tell the truth, I’m surprised Grace hasn’t barreled her way through it by now to whisk Molly away. “Where is your mom?”

“In the shower.”

A mental picture of a very wet, very naked Grace digs into my brain and refuses to budge and for the first time since I got hurt, I’m glad I can’t get it up because otherwise I’d have the mother of all hard-ons right now and that isn’t a conversation I’m prepared to have.

What the actual fuck, Ranger? What kind of deviant pervs out on a mom while her kid is standing less than a foot away?

Setting the cereal box on the nightstand next to my empty glass, I take an angry swipe at my face. “Fuck me.”

“You’re swearing again.”

I look up to find Molly still standing on the bed, staring down at me, her brown crumpled with disapproval.

“Won’t be the last time,” I tell her, giving her fair warning. “Still hungry?”

“Yeah.” Molly nods.

“Okay,” I push my legs over the edge of the bed, wincing a little when my left foot hits the floor. “So, how ‘bout I feed you breakfast?”

She gives the mattress a quick bounce. “Do you know how to make French Toast?”

“Nope.” I give her an unapologetic shrug. I couldn’t make French Toast, even before my brain got scrambled. Attempting it now would probably amount to a giant shit sandwich. “But I know how to make regular toast.”

I think.

Her mouth twitches in consideration and I suddenly feel like we’re negotiating terms for a hostile takeover. “With strawberry jam?”

“Why the hell not.” If I can stick bread in a toaster, chances are I can stick a butter knife in a jelly jar. “But you’re gonna have to show me where all this shit is, kid.”

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Molly graciously ignores my foul language in favor of bouncing herself off the bed, landing on the floor next to me with a dull thud.

“Deal.”

As soon as Grace disappears down the hall, I dig my phone out of my back pocket and turn it on. Watching the screen light up and do its thing, I try to remember how it works, planning out the set of steps I’ll need to follow to actually use the fucking thing.

It takes some trial and error but eventually, I figure it out, pressing my thumb against the little green button to place a call.

“Hey, Asshole,” Conner says quietly, answering on the third ring. Even though it’s his standard greeting, the edge sharpening his hushed tone tells me he’s more than a little angry with me.

Shit. I really don’t have time for this. Sighing into the phone, I fight off the urge to just hang it up. “Okay—I know you’re angry, but—”

“Henley got drunk last night.” It’s not anything I don’t already know but hearing it from Con tears me up. Henley doesn’t get drunk. She spent the first sixteen years of her life watching our father drink himself to death and she’s always been terrified of falling into that particular family trap. Not even the revelation that Jack O’Connell isn’t her biological father can change that.

“Con—”

There's movement on the other end and I can imagine him gently slipping his arm from under Henley's head to ease himself out of bed and away from her so he can berate me properly without waking her up. After a quiet click that must've been him closing the bedroom door behind him, Conner starts back up, louder this time. "After going to the center and dealing with your mess—again—she ended up at Patrick and Cari's, and—"

"I know." I interrupt him while rubbing my hand against the back of my neck. "I know—I'm here at their place, right now."

"Yeah, Tess told me," he says, his tone still disgruntled but edging toward concerned. "Everything okay? Do you need a ride or—"

"What? No," I say impatiently, hating the way they're always so quick to forgive me. "And yes, everything is fine, but Grace is here with Molly and—" I feel my jaw go tight and my teeth clench together because I've never felt so fucking worthless in my life. "She has something important to do today but there's no one to watch Molly. I almost offered but there's no way she'd leave her kid with me for an entire day. I mean, Jesus fuck—she's desperate, not stupid." Dropping my hand from the back of my head to the nape of my neck, I sigh. "Look—I don't know where she's going but she plans on taking Molly with her, and—"

"She can't take Molly," Conner tells me. "She has a 9AM appointment at Bay State to take their entrance exam and a one o'clock to speak with a financial advisor."

I stopped wondering a long time ago how Conner knows things. Instead of asking, I wait for him to work the problem.

"Okay." He mutters a curse word and sighs. "I'll have someone there in an hour—but you're gonna owe me. Whatever I ask for—no exceptions. Deal?"

When Conner Gilroy says no exceptions, you can pretty much guarantee that 1) he already knows what he's going to ask you for and 2) whatever it is, you aren't going to fucking like it.

“Yeah,” I tell him, letting out a long, heavy sigh. “We’ve got a deal.”

Chapter Twenty-four

Grace

I'm taking way more time than necessary, trying to find something to wear, which is ridiculous, considering I don't even own enough clothes to fill up a carry-on.

Come on, Grace. It's a college entrance exam, not high tea with the queen.

Defeated, I grudgingly remind myself that what I wear doesn't even matter because this is just a stupid pipe dream anyway. Even if I do manage to get in, the tuition is ridiculous. There's no way I can afford it.

With that in mind, I settle on a pair of dark-wash jeans and a bright blue sweater before shoving my bare feet into a pair of black ballet flats. Yes, it's March and totally impractical but I'm willing to sacrifice a few toes to frostbite in the name of comfort.

Dressed, I quickly blow-dry my hair and apply a little make-up. Just enough to mask the fact that I didn't sleep.

Because you were too busy wondering what it would be like if Ryan chose differently. If he's pulled you closer last night instead of letting you go. If instead of apologizing for the things he said, he put all those dirty words to action and—

Downstairs, the door buzzer erupts across the apartment, its mechanical squall pulling me from my daydream. Seconds later, I hear Ryan saying something to Molly before

disengaging the lock and letting whoever it is upstairs. Thinking it might be Henley, stopping by to retrieve her shoes from the corner she kicked them into last night, I check the time. Surely it's still too early for—

Holy shit.

It's after 8AM.

Letting out a panicked bleat, I run out of the bathroom and down the hall. "I need you to get your shoes on, Moll—Mom's running late and I..." I come to a screeching halt somewhere between the living room and the kitchen, coming face-to-face with Mary Gilroy.

"Ahhh..." I stutter it out, mentally fishing for a reason Patrick's aunt and Declan's mother would be standing in front of me. "Patrick isn't here, Mrs. Gilroy." I look to Ryan for help but he's too busy staring at his feet to offer any sort of assistance.

"First—my name is Mary," she says, flashing me the same set of dimples she passed down to her sons. "Second—I'm not here for my nephew—I'm here for Molly."

"Me?" Molly pipes up from her place next to Ryan.

"Yes. You." Mary gives me a gentle smile before focusing her attention on Molly. "I figured that since your mom's got a bunch of boring, grown-up stuff to do today, that you'd want to come hang out with me. I've got a whole list of stuff I need to do today and I could use the help."

"What kind of stuff?" Molly asks, trying to sound skeptical but I can already tell—Mary could tell her they're going to go back to her house to sort sock and watch paint dry and she'd beg me to go.

“Well...” Mary reaches into her coat pocket and pulls out what looks like an actual list. “I have to bake cookies. And then I have to go to the library for story time and then—”

That’s all it takes for Moll to cross over to the Dark Side.

“Can I go, Mom?” Molly turns to me with wide, pleading eyes. “Please?”

I should say no.

Protest.

Tell this woman that, even though she’s taken care of Molly for me before, I’m perfectly capable of handling the situation on my own, thank you very much, and I don’t need her help.

I don’t need anyone’s help.

Except that I do.

I really do.

So instead of giving her a firm but polite, no thank you, I give in to peer pressure with a defeated sigh. “Yes.”

Five minutes later, with a promise to have her home by dinner time, Molly is bundled into her coat and practically flying down the stairs, dragging a laughing Mary behind her.

As soon as they’re gone. I look at Ryan. “You did that, didn’t you?” I should be mad at him for meddling. For assuming he has a right to make decision concerning Molly

without consulting me. I want to be mad, but what I actually am is grateful. “You called her so—”

“This is important, Grace,” he says, giving me an unflinching, apologetic look. “This isn’t cartoon bedsheets and new tennis shoes, this is your future—Molly’s future. If you needed help, you should’ve said something. Asked for it.”

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“Ask who?” I throw up my hands and shout because now I am mad, mostly because he’s right.

“Me,” he shouts back, the loud bark of his voice surprising us both. “You ask me. I’m the one you ask. I’ll take—” He stops himself mid-sentence, biting it in half with a quick snap of his jaw. Looking away from me, he swipes a rough over his face. “I’ll take a quick shower and then we’ll go,” he says, looking at the watch he has strapped to his wrist.

“We?”

“Yes.” He drops his hand and gives me a look that practically dares me to argue with him. “We—because there’s no way you’re getting across this city in 90 minutes, during rush hour traffic without my help.”

“I’ll be fine on my own,” I inform him, my shitty, defensive tone calling me a liar. “I don’t need—”

“How long did it take you to find the mall yesterday?” he says, cutting me off and I instantly bristle. “And yes—you do.”

It took me nearly two hours to find the mall yesterday. So long that Molly asked me if we’re driving home to Ohio. Even though I know it’s pointless, I stand my ground. “I mapped it out last night. Google says—”

“Google is a fucking liar, Grace.” He does it again, talks right over me. “There’s no way you’re going to get across Boston in 90 minutes on your own—Superman

couldn't do it.”

“Oh?” I stack my hands on my hips and glare at him. “And you can?”

He gives me a smug smile and “Watch me.”

Chapter Twenty-five

Ryan

I'll take care of you.

That's what I was going to say to her.

I'll take care of you, Grace.

Which just goes to show how out of control this whole fucking thing with her has gotten.

I mean, I've got brain damage for fuck's sake—I can't even remember my own middle name half the goddamned time. I can't take care of a fucking house plant, let alone a woman and her kid.

And on the heels of that revelation, what do I do? I force myself on her by insisting that I be the one to drive her to her appointment.

What the hell made me think I'd be able to get her across Boston, in the middle of rush-hour, on a Friday no less, in less than an hour?

Forty-seven minutes to be exact, after showering and raiding Patrick's closet for something to wear that doesn't look like it'd been slept in.

And seriously—I'm not even 100% sure I even remember how to drive a car in the

first place.

Grace seems to share my concern, because when we hit the sidewalk in front of the bright-yellow roller skate that she calls a car, and I hold my hand out for her keys, she hesitates for a second before handing them over.

It's nothing but pure, stubborn male pride that has me plucking them from her grip.

Clicking the fob, I unlock her door and open it, ushering her inside with an overly solicitous wave of my hand. "Your chariot."

Grace flips me off before climbing into the passenger seat and slamming the door in my face.

By the time I round the back of the car and settle into the driver's seat, we're down to forty-three minutes and Grace has Google Maps pulled up on her phone.

"Seriously?" I stab the key into the ignition and give it a crank while giving her a once over.

"Just in case," she says with a shrug, aiming her gaze out the window.

Because it's never hurt to have a plan B and because I'm probably even more doubtful that I can pull this off than she is, I swallow the shitty remark bubbling in my throat and focus on remembering how to drive. At least it's an automatic. If it were a stick shift, I'd be dead in the water because there's no way I could operate a clutch with my fucked-up leg.

"You need to disenga—"

"I know," I growl at her, dropping my hand to release the parking brake.

And then the weirdest thing happened.

I remembered.

No grappling.

No reaching.

I just remember.

Gripping the shifter, I move it into drive and checked my mirrors before shooting into traffic, as smooth as you please. My hands relax on the steering wheel and I settle deeper into my seat. Anxiety and worry seeps from my bones and I feel like me again.

I feel like Ryan.

Not Sergeant O'Connell.

Not Henley's fucked-up brother.

Not the Gilroy family's charity case.

I feel like me.

"I think you—" I catch the quick snap of Grace's head as it turns to aim a worried look behind us. "Google says..." She turns to look at me, brow furrowed like she can't decide if she wants to say it. Finally she sighs. "You missed our turn."

"What did I say about Google?"

She sighs again. Her brow crumpling like a paper bag. "Yes, but I think that we should at least—"

"Do you trust me?" I say, barely sparing her more than a quick glance while I slide and maneuver my way through the sea of cars and buses jockeying for position—probably because I'm sure she's going to laugh in my face and tell me no.

She doesn't answer me and for a second I think that's my answer. That I'm right. That she doesn't trust me, she's just too scared or maybe too nice to say so.

And fuck me if it doesn't sting like a bitch.

Then she closes the app on her phone and tosses it into the cup holder in the center console between us. Turning toward the window again, she drops her chin into her hand with a sigh. "If I'm late to this thing, you're buying me lunch."

Chapter Twenty-six

Grace

I have no idea where we are. If we're heading in the right direction or if we're going to end up in Florida but I decide it doesn't matter. If I miss my appointment, I'll just reschedule.

Or not.

Maybe I'll just forget about college and ask Patrick for a job as a shot girl at the bar. I know he's looking to hire more and I have cocktailing experience. In a place like Gilroy's I could make decent money. Decent enough to support Molly. We might not live in the lap of luxury but that's okay. It's not like—

“We're here.”

I lift my gaze and catch sight of a stately, brown brick building with brass framed doors and tall, arched windows. The words Bay State College are emblazoned across a stretch of burgundy colored awnings that dress a bank of windows facing a wide, bustling sidewalk.

I'm suddenly so nervous I want to throw-up. The feeling only intensifies when Ryan pulls my little candy-colored car to a stop in front of the building and shifts it into park.

This is a mistake, Grace.

You might as well go back to Patrick and Cari's, pack your suitcases and take Molly home, because this is a waste of time. You're never going to make it.

I can't do this.

"The fuck you can't."

Ryan's low, angry tone bounces between us, making me realize that I actually said it out loud.

"How do you know," I can feel defeat start to set in. The kind that makes you wonder why you were even dumb enough to try in the first place. "You don't even know me."

"I know you love Molly," he says, his deep brown eyes hooked into mine. "I know you're determined to give her a better life and I know you know that is how you do it." He flicks his gaze at the dash clock—it's 8:55. "You've got five minutes, Grace—time to nut up or shut up."

"Nut up or shut up?" Turning my seat, I sputter it out. "Is that how you talk to the guys in your Army platoon or your squad or whatever?"

"We were a unit," he informs me, flashing me a heart-stopping grin that I've never seen him wear before. "And yes—when my guys were being whiney little bitches, that's exactly how I talked to them."

Before I can lose my shit over the fact that I'm pretty sure he just called me a whiney little bitch Ryan diverts my attention by kissing me.

Finally...

That's the last rational thought I have before my brain shudders to a stop and starts to

melt under the heat and pressure of his mouth. The slow, teasing sweep of his tongue, licking and swirling against mine. The soft, dizzying nip of his teeth against my lower lip as he pulls away to look me in the eye.

“Three minutes, Grace.”

“Huh?”

His delicious mouth twitches at its corners. “You have three minutes to get inside and take that test,” he tells me, reaching past me to open my car door. “I’ll be here, waiting for you when you’re finished.”

Then he gently pushes me out of my seat and onto the sidewalk before shutting the car door in my face and driving away.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Ryan

Well, shit.

I didn't mean to do that.

I didn't mean to kiss her.

No matter how many times I've thought about it, no matter how much I've wanted to, I had every intention of keeping my mouth and my hands to myself because what she said last night is true.

I'm being unfair to her.

Confusing her.

Truthfully, I'm confusing us both.

But in that moment, I felt like myself. I felt whole. Like someone who wouldn't ruin her entire life just by being in it. Someone who wouldn't be a burden. Someone who could take care of her when she needs it.

I got selfish.

Greedy.

It's a recently developed problem and she's at the center of it.

Grace.

Pulling away from the sidewalk, I check the rearview, just in time to watch her walk through the set of main doors to disappear inside the building.

If she can nut up, then so can I.

Easing back into traffic, I head for Fenway and with rush hour officially over, I'm pulling into the parking lot of Patrick's center in record time.

Parking Grace's car, I spot Henley's Mercedes, which I expected and Con's Mustang, which I didn't.

It's good that he's here.

It'll save me a trip.

Switching the car off and unfolding myself from the driver's seat, I swallow the groan that pushes against my throat when I'm forced to put weight on my damaged leg. Leaning against the side of the car for a second, I try to remember what I'm doing here in the first place.

You're here to apologize to your sister for being a giant fuckface, remember?

Yeah.

I remember.

Hitting the fob, I lock the car and start shuffle lurching my way across the parking lot

toward the service door that's propped open with a rock while a team of delivery men carrying professionally packed furniture. Squeezing my way past them with a muttered excuse me, I keep pushing forward until I'm inside.

Stepping aside to make room for the delivery crew, I look over and catch sight of a little room tucked into the corner, its door is standing open. Sitting at a desk inside of it is Conner. The engraved plaque on the door says:

Conner Gilroy

Legal Aid

"What the hell are you wearing?"

When he hears me, Con's head pops up from the thick, leather-bound book it's buried in, a pair of dark-framed glasses perched on his nose. Cutting me an unamused smirk, he reburies his head "It's called a suit, fuckstain," he says, without bothering to look at me. "People wear them when they want to look professional—you'd be surprised by how many people feel uncomfortable taking legal advice from a guy with tattoos on his neck and grease stains on his jeans." When I don't answer him, Con lets out a sigh and sits back in his chair. Reaching up to pull his glasses off, he tosses them on to the desk next to the book he was reading. "How did you get here?" he asks, his gaze immediately falling to my leg. "Where's your cane?"

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“I have no idea,” I tell him with a shrug. “And I drove here.”

That gets his attention.

“You drove here. In a car?” He closes his book and shoves it aside. “Do tell.”

I ease myself through the doorway, snagging the doorknob to pull it closed behind me as I go. “Your mom came to get Molly and Grace was running late so I offered to drive her.”

“And?”

“And I did.” I drop myself into one of the chairs parked in front of his desk and shrug. “I was pretty sure I couldn’t do it—I mean, a four-year-old tied my shoes for me this morning for fuck’s sake—but then I got behind the wheel and I suddenly knew exactly what to do and where to go. No confusion. No anxiety. I just knew,” I tell him, remembering how sure I was. How it good it made me feel. “It’s a sign, right?” I look up at him with something that feels like hope. “That I’m getting better. That maybe I’m—”

That maybe I’m not broken.

Instead of saying it, I shake my head and sigh. “I don’t know, man—you’re the genius. You’d have a better idea of what the fuck is happening than I do.”

“I wish I could tell you it was...” Con sits back in his chair and rubs the back of his neck with a wide, callused palm. Finally, he sighs. “But TBIs like yours don’t just

heal themselves, Ry. It was most likely a fluke. Or maybe muscle memory took over—you spent a lot of time, in a lot of cars, driving all over this city with Declan,” he reminds me. “It could be all of those things or none of them—but without treatment for your TBI real recovery is unlikely.”

“So, I’m not getting better.” It’s a kick in the gut, saying the words out loud, the pain of it telling me just how deep the hope had taken root.

“Shit.” He mutters it before leaning back in his chair. “My Uno cards and I can only do so much, you know—I’m a doctor not a miracle worker.”

It’s funny because he is a doctor—twice over. Advanced mathematics and cognitive neuroscience. When his joke elicits little more than a grunt from me, Conner sighs. “We’ve been through this, Ry—just let Cap’n pay for the fucking treatments already. There’s a specialist in—”

“I kissed her,” I tell him. My way of changing the subject and even though I know he wants to keep hammering at me, he lets me.

“Grace?” When I nod he cocks his head and shrugs. “So?”

“So, I want to do want to do more than just kiss her.” I think about the way her mouth went soft under mine. The way it parted with a sigh when I licked my way past her lips to stroke her tongue with mine. The small sound of protest she made in the back of her throat when I ended it. “A lot more.”

“Okay—so do it,” he says like it’s the easiest thing in the world. Probably because for him, it is. It always has been.

“I can’t.” I can barely get the words out, my jaw is clenched so tight. “You know I can’t.”

“No, actually, I don’t know,” he says, shaking his head at me like I’m the dumbest son of a bitch alive. “There are a hundred different ways to make Grace Faraday come,” he says bluntly. “And you don’t need your dick for most of them.”

“Jesus Christ.” I mutter it, swiping a rough hand across my mouth because it feels like he just punched me in it. “Why do I even bother trying to talk to you?”

“Because I’m not afraid to tell you when you’re being a dumbass, fucking crybaby.”

The bitch of it is he’s right.

“I hate you, you that?” I say, pushing myself out of the chair I’m sunk into on a surge of adrenaline.

“No you don’t, because you’ve been thinking the same fucking thing since you met her—you just hate me because I said it out loud,” he says in a matter of fact tone that grates on every last one of my nerves. “Which, let’s be honest, is why you brought it up in the first place.

And fuck me if he isn’t right about that too.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Grace

Four hours after walking through the towering set of brass-trimmed doors of Bay State College, they open back up and spit me out onto the sidewalk.

Ryan is waiting for me like he said he would be, sitting a bench outside the building. Just the sight of him makes my knees shake and my mouth tingle.

So he kissed you? Big deal—it's not like you've never been kissed before.

Yeah, except that I haven't.

Not like that.

Before Molly, my sex life consisted of inept high school boys who thought just because they knew the password to their dad's Pornhub account, that they made them experts on how a woman likes it.

After Molly, my sex life is even sadder.

And by sadder, I mean non-existent.

How pathetic am I that a thirty-second kiss that barely involved tongue is the highlight of my—

“Grace.”

Jesus Christ, he’s standing right in front of me. Over me. So close I can see flecks of gold in the irises of his eyes and smell the faint scent of the soap he used in the shower this morning. Looking down at me like he knows there’s something wrong with me, but he isn’t sure what. “Yes.” The word comes out on a breath and if desperation ever had a sound, that was it.

Jesus, Grace—pull it together.

“I said how’d it go?”

“Good.” It comes out sounding like a question, so I clear my throat and try again. “At least I think it did...I didn’t actually take the placement test.” I say, gesturing toward his with the pile of brochures and course catalogs I’m carrying. “When I tried to sign in to take it, they said I didn’t need to. I spent the morning being given a private tour of the campus by the Deans of Admissions.”

“Hmm,” he says, reaching into the space between us to pull the stack of folders from my arms and into his with a smirk. “So, you’re in.”

“Yeah,” I say, giving him a shrug. “I mean, I guess I am... I still need to figure out the tuition. My financial advisor gave me a whole list of scholarships and grants she thinks I might qualify for.” Saying it all out loud makes it real. Before Molly, it was a foregone conclusion that I’d go to college. Get out of Bennett like Cari did, but I gave up that dream a long time ago, and even though it’s why I’m here, why I stayed in Boston, I’m still having a hard time believing that it’s real.

“You’ll figure it out,” he says it like it’s a sure. Like he believes in me. “Are you hungry? Want to go grab some lunch?”

“That’d be great,” I say, my stomach grumbling in response. “I burned off that piece of toast hours ago.”

“Can we swing by Sojourn first?” he says, giving me his regular, flat smile and a tilt of his head. “I need to get my stuff out of there before the nursing staff burns it in effigy. It won’t take long—I don’t have much.”

“Yeah. Sure.” I give him another cheery smile. “Lead the way.”

Making sure to measure my steps to match his shorter, shuffling stride, he leads me down the sidewalk toward one of the paid lots at the end of the block. “You didn’t have to park and wait for me outside the building,” I tell him, spotting the bright yellow roof of my car. “You could’ve texted me. If I’d known you were out here I would’ve—”

“I don’t know how to text,” he tells me, reaching into the pocket of his jeans to pull out my car keys. “And even if I did, I don’t have your number.”

Oh.

“And I didn’t just sit on a bench and wait for you.” He hits the fob to unlock the car. “I went to the Vet Center. Talked to Con. Checked on my apartment,” he reaches out to open my car door and I slide past him to settle into my seat. Instead of shutting my door, he stands in the wedge of it, arm leaned against the roof so he can look down at me. “It’s ready. I could move in tonight if you wanted me to.”

“You don’t have any furniture,” I say, shaking my head, trying to find a plausible excuse for him to stay. “A bed. You can’t—”

“I basically slept on the ground for a living.”

“I don’t...” The words flutter in my throat and I shake my head. “I mean, you promised Molly a game night and I thought we could order pizza for dinner.” I’m babbling. I know I’m babbling but I can’t help it so I look away from him in an effort to convince myself I’m not a hot, desperate mess. “There’s this great little place around the corner that Tess dragged us to last weekend and—”

“I shouldn’t have.” The low rumble of Ryan’s voice fills the space between us and I can’t help but look at him.

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“Shouldn’t have what?” I ask even though I already know what he’s trying to do. He’s apologizing for kissing me. Telling me he regrets it. That it can’t happen again.

Pull me in.

Push me out.

And I keep letting him.

“Kissed you this morning. And last night.” His dark brown gaze pins me in place. “I shouldn’t have said those things to you.”

I look up at him. The firm line of his jaw. The sharp cut of his cheekbones. The scar on his neck that snakes out of the collar of his shirt to disappear into the hairline at his nape. “I didn’t think you remembered,” I tell him while my heart knocks against my ribcage and my mouth suddenly feels like it’s stuffed with cotton.

The hand still hanging on to the door tightens around its frame, his knuckles flashing white before relaxing their grip. “I remember.”

“Is it true?” I say it quietly, my voice gone scratchy and thin. “Do you dream about it? Doing those things to me?”

I watch his Adam’s apple bob and scrape along the inside of his throat. “Every night.”

“Good.” I look away from him, squeezing my thighs together in an effort to back off

some of the heat that's suddenly blazing between my legs at the memory of what he said to me last night.

"Grace..." My name rumbles through his chest, the rough warning of it barely squeezing past the clench of his jaw.

"Don't Grace me—" Suddenly angry, I turn in my seat again, hissing at him like a snake. "And don't you dare apologize to me for—"

"I'm not apologizing," he tells me. "I shouldn't have done it but I'm not sorry I did."

That shuts me up. Clamps my mouth closed so fast and tight the snap of it sounds like a bear trap. "Oh..." I finally manage to say, the word creating a lump in my throat that makes it hard to breathe "Then what are you trying to say?"

"What I'm trying to say..." He gives me that grin again. The one he gave me earlier. The one that makes my knees wobbly and glad I'm not relying on them for support. "Is that I've change my mind."

"Changed your mind?" Great. I'm back to sounding like a mentally deranged parrot.

"That's what I said." His jaw flexes a bit around the clench of his teeth, and he looks away again. "I want to be with you, Grace. More than want—but when I told you I can't, I meant it. I physically can't—"

"I know." When I say it, he looks down at me and I have to fight the urge to look away. "I know and it's okay. I don't care. It doesn't matter."

"It will." He looks almost sad when he says it. "Sooner or later it's going to matter to you." He sounds sure of it, like he's trying to talk me out wanting him, but before I can launch into my laundry list of reason of why we both deserve this, he sighs. "But

right now, it doesn't matter to me either.”

Chapter Twenty-nine

Ryan

Walking across the atrium of the center with Grace beside me, it's all I can do to keep my hands to myself because I didn't change my mind. My mind has been made up since the second I met her.

I want Grace.

All I have to do is close my eyes to be reminded of it. So, no. I haven't changed my mind so much as I've accepted the inevitable.

When we step off the elevator in front of the nursing station, I grab her hand and pull her down the corridor as fast as my fucked-up leg will let me, not really thinking past the fact that if I don't get myself inside her, sooner rather than later, there's a very real possibility that I might lose what little of my mind I have left.

Jamming my hand into the front pocket of my borrowed jeans, I pull out my room key and shove it into the lock.

"Ryan" She whispers it and for a second, I'm sure she's going to tell me that's she's changed her mind too. That now that she knows just how broken I really am, she doesn't want me.

Can't want me.

But then she presses herself against me and whispers again. “Hurry.”

Fuck.

Giving the key a vicious twist, I’m barely able to stifle a groan of relief when the door opens and I’m able to pull her through it before slamming it shut behind us both.

And then I’m pushing her against the door. Pinning her to it while she claws at the button of her jeans with frantic, jerky movements that tell me she’s just as desperate for this as I am.

Shoving her hand away, I take over, jerking the button from its loop before working her jeans and panties down her hips and thighs just enough to make room for my fingers, giving her the seam of her pussy a teasing stroke that throws her head back against my shoulder and pulls a shattering moan from her throat that sounds like my name.

“Ryan...” She moans again, tilting her hips into the cup of my hand, grinding herself along the length of my teasing fingers. “Please.”

“Christ...” I groan the word when the seam of her pussy splits around the pressure of my fingers and I feel how wet and swollen she is for me. How ready she is for me to fuck her.

Yeah, except you can’t fuck her, can you, Ranger?

Shoving the reminder aside with a vicious growl, I stroke my fingers into her on a hard, fast thrust that steals her breath and has her crying out all at once. “Better,” I whisper in her ear as I start to move, fucking her with my fingers. Giving her deep, slow thrusts while I grind the heel of my hand against her clit in firm, rhythmic circles. “You feel better than I dreamed.”

But it's not enough.

I need more.

Dropping my arm, I wrap my hand around the inside of her thigh, pulling it back to open her up and she gasps when my fingers thrust even deeper, her thighs instantly beginning to shake around my hand when the tips of them find her G-spot.

"Fuuuck." I groan, low and tight in my throat, when I feel it. The low-level tremor vibrating through her bones. The fast, arrhythmic flutter of her pulse against my mouth. "Are you gonna come for me, Grace?" I whisper it against her jaw, nipping and teasing the taut clench of it with my tongue and teeth when she nods her head in response. "Say it."

"I'm go—" she whimpers, the rest of it getting lost as her hips going wild, tilting and bucking to meet the fast, hard pump of my fingers while the orgasm snakes down her spine, rolling and shuddering while her slick, tight pussy clamps around my fingers like a fist and her breath catches in her lungs.

Leaning over her, I catch her mouth with mine licking my way inside to swallow her scream while the dip and sweep of my tongue matches my fingers, still fucking and moving inside her until I feel the grip and pull of her coming all over again.

And even then, it's not enough.

I'm beginning to think that when it comes to Grace, it never will be.

Chapter Thirty

Grace

Ryan's thick, blunt-tipped fingers finally go still while my pussy clenches and flexes around them. His head tipped forward, the crown of it pressed against the door he has me pinned against, our breath harsh and ragged as we both fight to catch it.

"Are you okay?" It's a stupid question and I regret it the second I ask it.

He chuckles quietly in response. "I could do this all goddamned day." As if to prove it, Ryan pulls his fingers free, almost to their tips before stroking back into me. "Making you wet. Making you come..." When I flex my hips to take him in deeper, he groans against my neck, the harsh sound filled with frustration. "I want to fuck you, Grace. I wish—"

"You are..." I reach up to wrap my arm around his neck, pulling him closer. "You—"

Someone knocks on the door we're pressed against, the bang of it reverberating through my chest and instantly setting my face on fire.

When they knock again, the hand between my legs goes still but he doesn't pull out. "Fuck off," Ryan growls, loud enough for his voice to pass through the door.

"Just wondering if I need to call security," says the muffled female voice from the hall.

Ryan pulls his fingers free on a muttered curse and before I know it, my pants are being pulled up and I'm being steered on wobbly legs toward the bed. "Sit," he tells me with a nudge before he turns back toward the door to pull it open.

"I'm just here to clear my stuff out," he tells the woman on the other side of the door. "If I'm not gone in fifteen minutes, you can call the National Guard if you want." Then he shuts the door in her face. Turning away from it, he started to hobble toward the bathroom, his limp noticeably more pronounced.

"Is your leg okay?" Jesus Christ, I'm the Queen of Stupid Questions today. "Shit. I mean, I know it's not—"

"It's okay, Grace. I know what you meant," he says before making a sound in the back of his throat that I think is supposed to be a laugh. "And it's fine. Just likes to lock up on me when I stand on it for too long." He disappears into the bathroom and I lean forward a bit to watch as he retrieves a prescription bottle from the back of his toilet.

"Oxy," he says because he knows I'm watching him. Shaking a tablet into his palm, he tosses it into his mouth and swallows it dry.

I remember what Conner told me yesterday about his leg. That they wanted to amputate it, but he wouldn't let them. "Does it hurt?" Another stupid question but I can't help it. The thought of him in pain bother me.

"It always hurts." Fitting the cap back on and giving it a twist to lock it in place.

Swallowing the knot in my throat, I keep peppering him with questions. "Do the pills help?"

"Yeah." Something about the way he says it makes me think he's ashamed of that.

Like needing them makes him weak somehow. “But I don’t like to take them.” He makes that sound again as he steps out of the bathroom and starts across the room.

Why?

I want to ask, but I don’t. Instead, I watch quietly while Ryan moves around the room, gathering clothes and personal items and stuffing them into a large canvas duffle.

Like he promised the nurse, less than fifteen minutes later, Ryan’s room is stripped and he’s shouldering a duffle that’s not even half full. “Told you I didn’t have much,” he says, giving me a rueful smile. “Ready to go?”

I nod and stand to follow him out the door.

Chapter Thirty -one

Ryan

After leaving Sojourn, we decide to skip lunch in favor of picking Molly up early and heading to Gino's to grab a couple pizzas.

We go back to Patrick and Cari's place and eat. Molly and I play board games while Grace frowns over course catalogs and program brochures.

After a few hours of whipping my ass at Candyland and Memory and being declared the worst game player ever, Grace finally pushes her mountain of papers aside and we sack out on the couch, Molly wedged between us, and watch a movie. Not more than a half an hour later, she starts to snore, her face buried in my armpit.

When the movie's over, Grace starts the extrication process, shifting Molly's dead weight across the couch to lift her and carry her down the hall.

The painkiller I took wore off hours ago which sucks because the pain is always worse when it comes back. Like it's angry for being sent away, the white-hot center of it burrows into my foot to roars and flames up the length of my calve before pooling in my knee to lap and lick up my thigh every time I move.

It doesn't help that I've been on my feet for the majority of the day without the help of my cane.

Ignoring the small inner voice, urging me to just take another pill, I grit my teeth and

push myself up from the couch to grab my duffle follow Grace down the hall. It's a slow and arduous process and by the time I make it to Molly's bedroom, I'm slick with sweat and I have to lean against the doorframe for support while I watch Grace scrape and swipe at the dry cereal mess Molly made this morning into a pile. Looking up at me, she gives me an apologetic smile. "And this is what having a four-year-old looks like." she tells me with a laugh.

"She's not completely to blame," I tell her, dropping my duffle off my shoulder. "Here, let me help—"

"No—" She waves me off with a shake of her head. "Go on, take a shower or whatever you're going to do. I'll finish up here and get her moved in here so we can go to bed."

I think about lying next to her in the dark. Touching her. Fucking her. Feeling her slick hot pussy close around me like a fist when she comes. Hearing her same my name while she does.

This afternoon, it happened so fast that I didn't have time to think about it. Where it all led. What happened after. What the next step is supposed to look like.

And it scares the shit out of me.

"I'm gonna take the couch, Grace."

When I say it, her back goes stiff and she stops scraping for a few seconds before resuming her task. "Oh..." Mess scraped into a pile, she straightens herself to look at me. "I thought—"

"I know what you thought," I bark it at her, my tone harder than I intended and she goes still at the sound of it, like a wild animal sensing a predator. "Shit..." I lift a shaky hand to scrub it across my mouth to smother the curse. "I just don't think it's a

good idea. Not with Molly around. I don't want to confuse her or for her to—"

She goes white second it tumbles out of my mouth but it takes my fucked up brain a few seconds to catch up. To realize what I said. What I just did.

I shamed her. Questioned her judgment as a parent. Told her she was a bad mother.

"You're right." She nods, dusting crumbs off her hands on the seat of her jeans. "Yeah..." Still nodding, she leaves the mess where it is to skirt the edge of the bed, heading straight for me. "Of course—I don't know what I was

Because I don't know what else to do, I throw an arm up, bracing my hand on the opposite side of the frame to stop her from leaning. "Stop." I bark it again but this time she doesn't look scared. She looks angry. Mortified. Taking a deep breath, I let it slowly because I'm angry too. At her for making me feel bad. At myself for the same reason. Because this is all unraveling faster than I can catch it and if I wasn't so fucked up I could stop it. I'd know how to fix it, but I don't. Suddenly, I'm standing in a fucking minefield and I don't know where to step. Which way to move. "I didn't mean—"

Boom.

"Yes you did." She doesn't look at me when she says it. "And you're right. It isn't a good idea for Molly—for any of us—to get the wrong idea about what's happening here."

"Grace—"

Boom.

"Good night, Ryan." Her tone is so flat, so final I know there's nothing left to say. Not tonight, so I drop my arm and let her pass.

“Good night, Grace.”

I stand in the doorway of Molly’s room and watch her walk down the hall. Turning, Grace looks right at me, her gaze careful and guarded as she shuts the door between us with a quiet click.

Boom.

THE END