



Big Wild Fighter

(Cherrywood Village #7)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Grace

The last thing I expect while waitressing is to see my long-time celebrity crush sit right down in my section. When Marlon Henderson waltzes into the restaurant—and subsequently, into my life—I don't know what to think.

I barely know what I'm doing, so what's a famous MMA fighter want with someone like me? But, he's interested and he makes that clear. All I can do is ask: is the universe playing with me?

If so, I'm game.

Big Wild Fighter is a steamy instalove romance. About a professional fighter and the sweet, good girl of his dreams. Happy Reading! Lizzy

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:15 am

Grace

“Grace,” Brodrick, my manager calls out, weaving through the throng of servers in the kitchen to get to me. “I need to talk to you for a second.”

“Yeah, no problem.” I pass off the tray I’m carrying to another of my coworkers. I wonder what this could be about. The shift has been relatively normal, if not a little slow. “What’s up?”

“We have a high-profile guest on the way to the restaurant.” He leads me to the side of things, away from the busyness. “I’m going to put him in your section.”

“The table at the back of the floor?” I guess, knowing that the table in question is usually left open for Patrick, one of our most loyal clients.

“Yep.” He stops suddenly and puts a hand up to the earpiece connected to his walkie-talkie. “Sounds like he’s here. I’m going to take him to the table now. Bring a water out when you come to greet him.”

“You got it,” I say as he strides from the kitchen.

As I prep things for the mystery guest, I can’t help but rack my brain for who this mysterious client might be. It isn’t very often that we get anyone that isn’t a local through here, and if we do, it’s usually just families passing through on their way to some bigger town.

Figuring that it’s easier to just go see for myself, I head into the dining room. With

my most charming smile on my face, I saunter over to the table in question. The only thing I'm able to see at first is the back of the man's head. His hair is buzzed, and it's dark brown or black in the low light. in the low light His build looks vaguely familiar, but I can't place where I know it from.

When I come to a stop in front of his table, he's looking down at the menu. So, I wait until he looks up at me to start my spiel, but the words die in my throat when he looks up at me. I know this man.

Well, I don't know him personally, but I've watched him on TV since I was a little girl. I'd recognize that scar on his right eyebrow and the crooked nose anywhere. The man sitting in front of me, smiling that devilishly handsome smile, is Marlon Henderson, a prizefighter with more than a few titles under his belt.

I've had a crush on him since I first saw him on television. My dad's love of sport fighting meant that almost every evening he was watching some sort of spar. Oftentimes, I'd join him, not because I was a fan of what was happening on the screen, but because there was a chance I'd get to see Marlon in action.

Remembering that I'm at work and fangirling over this man is the furthest thing from professional, I finally speak up. "Hi, I'm Grace. I'll be taking care of you this evening. I'm starting you off with this water, but I'd be happy to bring you something else to drink."

"This is perfect, Grace. Thank you," he responds, his gruff voice even sexier in person than it is in his televised interviews.

"Well, if you change your mind, just let me know." I'm proud of myself for keeping my voice steady and thanking whatever god is out there that the lights are especially dim in this part of the dining room—I can feel my face flushing at the proximity to my celebrity crush.

“It might be the off-season, but I still want to keep myself in shape,” he jokes, reaching for the glass and taking a sip. “My body doesn’t bounce back the same way it used to.”

“You could have fooled me,” I retort, forgetting myself for a moment. “I’ve seen you take on men almost half your age and you wipe the floor with them.”

Before I fully realize what I said, Marlon is chuckling and shaking his head. “Wouldn’t have taken you as an MMA fan.”

“It’s one of my guilty pleasures.” I decide against telling him that I only ever watch so I can see him.

“Well, I’ve never been happier that I’ve been on a winning streak for a while,” he replies easily. “I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I knew a pretty woman like you saw me get my ass kicked.”

It sounds so much like he’s flirting with me that I flounder for a moment, struggling to find something to say. I’ve never had a boyfriend before, nor have I flirted with anyone on purpose. This is completely new territory for me, and the fact that it’s Marlon Henderson only makes this more difficult.

“Like I said,” he murmurs, amused, “it’s not something I have to worry about.”

“I doubt you’ll ever have to,” I answer as I finally regain my footing. “No one’s even close to your level of skill.”

“You’re just saying that to flatter me,” he teases, his gaze lingering on my face. I could get lost in those dark brown eyes.

“I promise I’m not,” I giggle. Then, reminding myself that I’m at work, I clear my

throat and ask, “So, have you had enough time with the menu, or would you like me to give you a few minutes?”

“Bring me your favorite,” Marlon announces, holding the menu out to me. “I’m not picky.”

“Didn’t you just say you wanted to keep yourself in shape?” I ask, unable to conceal my grin as I accept the laminated packet from him.

“One cheat meal won’t hurt,” he cracks, giving me a wink.

“Alright,” I say, my heart fluttering in my chest at the gesture. “That’ll be out shortly.”

“Thanks, Grace,” he responds kindly, smiling at me as I walk away.

As I punch the order into the computer, I replay every second of our conversation over and over again in my head. We were undoubtedly flirting, and I’m fairly certain that I did pretty well at holding my own. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that I’d meet Marlon Henderson, and I wouldn’t even dare to imagine we’d have this kind of interaction.

Once the order’s put back, I go to check on my other tables. Carrying on as normal is difficult, but somehow I manage. Eventually, Marlon’s meal comes up in the window, and I have the opportunity to go back to his table.

“And here you are,” I say, setting down a plate of pasta in front of him.

“Good thing I plan on going on a run tomorrow, huh?” he jokes, leaning down to smell the dish. “I can’t wait to tuck into this.”

“Well, I hope you enjoy it,” I say, suddenly very self-conscious of my choice. “Let me know if I can get you anything else. I’ll be back to check on you in a few, and I’ll bring another water when I do.”

“Perfect, I’m looking forward to it,” he says as he picks up his cutlery.

I hover for a moment, wanting to say something to that but coming up with nothing. Instead, I walk as calmly as I can despite the jitters that have been gripping me since I realized Marlon was in the restaurant sitting in my section. Once I’ve made sure everyone is satisfied, I go back to the kitchen for his water. Then, I go back to his table.

“So,” I begin, setting the cup down in front of him and grabbing the empty one, “how’s everything tasting?”

“It’s delicious,” Marlon declares, wiping his mouth with a napkin before looking up at me. “But I’m not surprised, I can tell you have good taste.”

“Really?” I ask, not bothering to hide my surprise. “Why’s that?”

“Well, if you’re an MMA fan and you’ve seen my fights, clearly you’re a woman with excellent taste,” he replies smoothly, seeming to enjoy how obviously flustered his comment makes me. “I appreciate the recommendation.”

“Anytime,” I say, even though I know I’m probably not going to see him ever again. Briefly, I wonder if it would be weird to ask him for his autograph before he leaves. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Nope,” he says with a wide grin. “Just the check after a bit.”

“Absolutely,” I tell him, resisting the urge to bounce on my toes. “If anything comes

up just flag me down.”

With that, I walk away and busy myself with work. The next twenty minutes crawl by, and in an effort to keep myself from bothering my tables, I look for ways to help out my coworkers. Finally, it looks like Marlon’s finished with his meal, so I get his check printed and head back to his table.

“I know you’re trying to keep yourself in shape, but before I hand you your check, can I interest you in dessert?” I ask, loving the way the edges of his mouth turn up at the offer.

“No dessert, no,” he says as he accepts the receipt from me. “But I do have a question.”

“What’s that?” I say, ready to help out in any way that I can.

“Do you work here often?” Marlon asks, leaning back in his chair slightly as he folds the check neatly in his hand and pulls out his wallet. His casual tone makes the question seem more personal than I expect, and for a moment, I’m caught off guard.

“Yes,” I reply, feeling my cheeks heat up again. “Most days I’m here from noon to closing, actually.”

He nods, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “Well, I’ve really enjoyed myself tonight, Grace. You’ve been great.”

“Thank you,” I say, my voice soft but sincere.

Standing, Marlon shrugs on his jacket and slides a set of bills to me that even at a glance I can tell equal far more than his check was.

“I hope I see you again sometime,” he says, giving me one last warm, lingering look before turning toward the door.

“Have a good night,” I call after him, my voice barely carrying above the restaurant’s din.

As soon as he’s gone, I press a hand to my chest, feeling my heart hammering beneath my palm. The rest of my shift passes in a blur, my mind replaying every word, every smile, and every glance from Marlon Henderson.

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Marlon

I grip the steering wheel of my truck, staring out at the hotel parking lot as the morning sunlight glints off the windshield. The plan was simple: one night in Cherrywood Village, just enough to catch some shuteye before hitting the road again. I've been bouncing from town to town along the East Coast, keeping myself loose before the next fight season. Nothing serious, just a way to kill time.

But last night changed things.

I didn't expect her. Grace. Sweet as hell but sharp enough to hold her own, with a laugh that sticks in your damn head. I can still see her standing there, trying to play it cool while her cheeks flushed every time I so much as smiled at her. It was...different. Real. Not like the fake-ass smiles I usually get from people who know who I am.

I lean back in my seat, running a hand over my face. I've been doing this long enough to know better. Pretty faces come and go, but this—this felt like more. Enough to make me park my truck and stay another day in this nowhere town. Enough to make me wonder what the hell I'm going to do when it's time to move on.

Enough to make me wonder if I will even be able to move on when the time comes.

Before I can think too hard about what the fuck I'm doing, I grab my jacket and step out into the crisp air. Vito's is just down the street, so I hoof it, hands stuffed into my pockets. I tell myself I'm just here for another good meal, but we all know that's bullshit.

The bell over the door jingles as I push into the restaurant, and the smell of garlic and fresh bread hits me like a punch to the gut. I pause for a second, letting my eyes adjust to the dim lighting.

“Welcome to Vito’s!” The hostess perks up behind the podium, her smile plastered on thick. She’s young, blonde, and wearing a dress that’s trying way too hard. Her eyes widen a little as recognition kicks in. “Oh my God. You’re Marlon Henderson, aren’t you?”

I nod, used to this routine. “Yeah.”

Her smile sharpens into something predatory as she leans closer. “Well, I’m a huge fan. You’re even bigger in person. Got some time to show me some moves later?”

I smirk, but it’s automatic, empty. “Appreciate it, but I’m just here to eat.”

Her expression falters for a split second before she recovers. “Of course! Right this way, Mr. Henderson.”

I hold up a hand stopping her from walking in the opposite way of where I’m looking to go. “Actually, I’d like Grace’s section.”

The hostess’s face drops just a touch before she plasters on her smile again. “Oh, Grace? Let me check if she’s available.”

“Thanks,” I grunt, stepping aside as she disappears into the dining room.

I glance around the place, tapping my knuckles against the wood of the podium. It’s quiet for now, but I can feel the energy ramping up as the lunch crowd trickles in. A few people glance my way, some whispering behind their menus, but I ignore it.

The hostess comes back, her smile a little tighter this time. “Grace will be right with you. Let me show you to your table.”

I follow her to the same damn spot as last night, that corner table in the back. Perfect. Settling into the chair, I can’t help but wonder if she’ll be happy to see me.

And then I see her. Time stands still just like it did last night when she first approached my table. My heartbeat picks up and I want to curse myself out for acting like a lovestruck teenage boy. But goddamn, she’s so beautiful it hurts.

Grace glides across the floor like she’s got all the time in the world, but there’s a bounce in her step that tells me she loves what she does. Her curves can’t be hidden, even in her waitress uniform. When her dark brown eyes land on me, the world clicks back into place. She looks shocked to see me and—if I’m not just being wishful—it looks like there is a healthy dose of excitement, too.

“Hey there,” she greets as she finally reaches me. She swipes a lock of curly brown hair out of her face and I can’t help but wish it was me moving it for her.

“Hey, Grace,” I say, my voice coming out rougher than I mean it to. “Didn’t think I’d find myself back here so soon.”

“Neither did I,” she replies with a small laugh.

And just like that, I’m hooked all over again.

I glance at Grace, the corners of her mouth tugged into a smile that’s as bright as the restaurant’s dim lighting allows. She’s confident but not overbearing, her warmth natural and effortless. It’s refreshing—something I don’t see much in my world.

“So, Mr. Henderson—”

“Marlon for you,” I correct without thinking. A pretty blush climbs up her neck and I have to fight to keep the grin off my face.

“Okay, Marlon , what can I get for you for lunch today?”

“Hmm,” I muse, pretending to actually look at the menu. “I’d like your second favorite menu item for today.” I hand her the menu without ever actually looking through it.

“You’re putting a lot of trust in me,” she teases, tucking the menu under her arm, her playful tone making me chuckle.

“What can I say? Your recommendation yesterday was great,” I reply casually, picking up my glass for a sip of water. “I told you last night that I thought you had good taste. I stand by that.”

Her laugh is light, bubbling up like she can’t help it, and she taps the edge of the table with her fingers. “Alright. I’ll have your food out to you soon. Can I get you anything else while I’m back there?”

“Not right now,” I respond, but a thought hits me. “Actually, could you bring me out a salad with whatever house dressing you have?”

“Yep, I got it,” she says, her words punctuated with a little bounce as she turns away. I find myself watching her for a second longer than I probably should.

After she disappears into the kitchen, I lean back in my chair, soaking in the atmosphere of the restaurant. It’s quieter during lunch, but still buzzing with the low hum of conversation. When Grace reappears, she’s carrying my salad with an easy poise.

“Here’s this,” she says, setting the plate down in front of me. “And the dressing is a lemon vinaigrette.”

“Sounds delicious,” I reply, grabbing the ramekin and pouring the dressing over the greens.

“Anything else for you right now?” she asks, her tone as professional as ever, but there’s a sparkle in her eye that makes me grin.

I spear a piece of lettuce with my fork, hesitating for a split second before asking, “Yeah, I actually had a question for you.”

Her brow arches, her teasing grin widening. “And I have an answer. What’s up?”

“Are you a big movie fan?” I ask, quirking an eyebrow. I can’t help but be curious about her, about the person behind that effortless charm.

“Well, it depends on what movie,” she says with a soft laugh. Her reaction feels genuine like I’ve just opened a window into her world.

I throw out the name of one of my favorite series, watching her face light up. “Oh yeah, I love that movie series!” she exclaims, nodding eagerly. “The new one—”

“Came out recently, I know,” I interject, matching her enthusiasm. “I’m thrilled, too. Have you seen it?”

She shakes her head, and I can’t stop the smile tugging at my lips.

“Good,” I say, leaning forward slightly. “I was wondering if you’d want to come by sometime and watch it with me.”

Her answer is immediate and unguarded. “I’d love to. I have a family dinner tonight, but I could tomorrow night after work?”

“Great,” I say, warmth creeping into my voice. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me too,” she replies. Her lips part like she’s about to say more, but a clatter from another table interrupts her. She glances over, her expression a mix of professionalism and mild exasperation.

“I should probably go take care of that,” she says, half-apologetically.

“Please do,” I reply, chuckling as I bring my fork to my mouth. “We can talk tomorrow night.”

“You’re right,” she says, nodding with a grin. “I’ll be back when your meal is ready.”

As she strides off, I settle back into my seat, finding myself already looking forward to later. There’s something about Grace—something refreshingly real.

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Grace

Sundays are always slow at Vito's, so I manage to sneak out a little early. That means I get to spend more time with my parents, something I've been looking forward to all day. It's been a few days since I last visited, and they'll probably scold me for not coming around sooner. They act tough about it, but I know they miss me the second I walk out the door.

The moment I step into the kitchen, the smell of roasted chicken greets me. My mom stands at the stove, stirring something in a pot, while my dad sits at the table, reading the paper like it's the '50s.

"Hey, kiddo!" Dad's face lights up as soon as he sees me, and he folds the paper in half. "Finally decided to grace us with your presence, huh?"

"You're hilarious," I reply, rolling my eyes as I lean down to kiss his cheek. "Something smells amazing, Mom."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Mom quips, turning to give me a quick hug before checking on her pot. "How was work?"

"Same as always," I reply, grabbing a glass from the cupboard and filling it with water. I hesitate for a moment, then add, "Except I've got something to tell you."

Mom raises a perfectly shaped eyebrow, while Dad sets his paper aside entirely, his interest piqued.

“What’s going on?” Dad asks. “You finally get that raise you deserve?”

“Not exactly,” I say, sitting down across from him. “I, uh...met someone.”

The room goes still for a second before my mom whirls around, spatula in hand. “Excuse me? You what?”

“It’s not like that,” I insist, but my face is already warming. “He’s just...someone I met at work.”

Dad narrows his eyes. “Who is he?”

I sigh, deciding it’s better to just rip the bandage off. “Marlon Henderson.”

Dad’s jaw drops. He looks like he’s just been told he won the lottery. “The Marlon Henderson? MMA legend, three-time heavyweight champion, the guy who broke Morales’ winning streak?”

I grin at his enthusiasm. “That’s the one. He invited me to hang out tomorrow night.”

“No joke,” he breathes, shaking his head. “I’ve been watching that guy for years. You’re telling me he just walked into Vito’s?”

“Pretty much,” I reply with a laugh. That reminds me that I have to ask Marlon what brought him to Cherrywood Village in the first place. It’s not the kind of place you just stumble into.

“Well, I hope we get to meet him someday,” Dad says, his excitement barely contained. “The man’s a legend.”

Mom sets her spatula down and crosses her arms, a mischievous grin spreading

across her face. “Speaking of meeting him...Grace, darling, do you have the proper undergarments for tomorrow night?”

“Mom!” I sputter, nearly choking on my water.

“What?” she says, feigning innocence. “You never know when you’ll need to be prepared. Lace is always a good choice, by the way.”

“Can we not?” I groan, burying my face in my hands as Dad bursts out laughing.

“I’m just saying!” she calls over her shoulder as she goes back to cooking.

But her comment sticks with me, even after dinner, even after I head home. By the time I get out of the shower the next day, it’s like her voice is on repeat in my head.

Lace. Always a good choice.

Standing in front of my dresser, I hesitate for a second before pulling out the lacey black bra and matching panties I’d bought on my way home earlier. I slip them on, feeling a little ridiculous and a lot self-conscious. To balance it out, I throw on a pair of comfy sweatpants and a cropped hoodie, with a jacket over it to fight the cold.

I glance at my reflection in the mirror. It’s casual enough to not look like I’m trying too hard, but underneath? Well, I feel kind of...sexy.

Grabbing my keys, I head out the door, my nerves buzzing the whole drive to Marlon’s hotel. When I pull into the lot, I text him.

Me: I’m here.

The reply comes almost instantly.

Marlon: Be right down.

As I sit in my car, I fidget with the zipper of my jacket, my nerves ramping up with every second. The hotel is quiet this time of night, with only a few cars scattered across the lot, their headlights reflecting off the slick pavement from the earlier rain. The air feels colder than usual, biting even through the layers I've thrown on.

A few moments later, the glass doors at the hotel entrance slide open, and there he is. Marlon steps out, jacket slung over one broad shoulder, his relaxed stride radiating confidence. He spots me immediately, and his grin is enough to send warmth spreading through me despite the chill in the air.

"Hey," he greets, leaning down to my window. His voice is smooth and warm, with a slight rasp that sends my heart racing.

"Hey," I reply, trying not to sound like a total idiot.

He opens the passenger door for me, gesturing with a tilt of his head. "C'mon. Let's get out of the cold."

I grab my bag and step out, barely managing to keep my nerves in check as he holds the door open for me to step inside the lobby. The space is clean and modern, but I barely register the decor because all I can think about is him walking so close beside me, his arm brushing mine every so often.

We take the elevator up, and the silence between us feels heavy but not uncomfortable. When we reach his room, he unlocks the door and pushes it open, stepping aside to let me in first.

The room is cozy, with warm lighting and a faint woodsy smell that I recognize as his cologne. A small table in the corner is stacked with takeout menus, and there's a bag

of snacks sitting on the bed.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he tells me, shrugging off his jacket and tossing it onto a chair.

I settle onto the couch, trying to relax as he grabs a couple of waters from the mini-fridge and hands me one. “Thanks,” I say softly, twisting the cap off.

“Movie’s all queued up.” He points towards the TV, sitting down beside me. His proximity is electric, and I’m hyper-aware of every inch between us.

We start the movie, which is the third installment in the series, and for a while, I’m genuinely engrossed. The dim glow of the TV flickers across the room, and the soft hum of the audio fills the space. But then, his hand brushes against mine on the couch. It’s subtle, almost accidental, but the warmth of his skin on mine sends a ripple through me.

I glance at him, my pulse quickening. He’s still looking at the screen, but there’s a faint tension in his jaw like he’s holding himself back. When he finally turns his head toward me, his eyes meet mine, and the intensity there steals my breath.

“Grace,” he says, his voice low and rough, like gravel softened by rain.

It’s just my name, but the way he says it makes it sound like a promise, like something bigger. My heart stumbles in my chest.

Before I can overthink it, his hand comes up, warm and steady, cupping my cheek. His thumb brushes across my skin and the tenderness of it makes my chest ache. I can see the question in his eyes, the hesitation, but there’s something else there too—something that makes me lean into his touch without thinking.

He leans in slowly, giving me every chance to pull away, but I don't. I couldn't if I wanted to. When his lips finally meet mine, it's soft at first, testing, like he's afraid I might disappear.

The kiss deepens almost immediately, his mouth moving against mine with a hunger that takes me by surprise. His other hand finds my waist, strong and insistent, pulling me closer as if the space between us is unbearable. My hands move on instinct, threading into his hair, tugging slightly, and the low sound he makes in response sends a thrill down my spine.

He kisses like he fights—intense, focused, like there's nothing else in the world but this moment. It's overwhelming in the best way, and I lose myself in it, letting the heat of him drown out everything else.

When his lips leave mine, I barely have time to miss them before they're trailing down my jaw, feather-light but deliberate. His breath is warm against my skin as he kisses a path to my neck, where he pauses. The soft press of his lips there, just under my ear, makes me gasp, and his grip on my waist tightens in response.

“Marlon,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

He pulls back slightly, his forehead resting against mine, and I can feel the heat of his breath mixing with mine. His eyes are dark, searching, and there's a question there, unspoken but clear.

Before either of us can say or do anything more, a loud knock breaks through the haze. The sound is so sudden, so out of place, that it takes a second for reality to sink back in.

We both freeze, still tangled together and then he groans, low and guttural. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

I can't help it—I laugh, breathless and shaky. “The food, right?”

He pulls back, his lips twitching into a smirk that's equal parts amused and frustrated. “Yeah. Saved by the damn takeout.”

He stands reluctantly, running a hand through his hair as he heads for the door. I take the moment to collect myself, sitting back and smoothing down my hoodie, trying to calm the frantic beat of my heart.

When he returns, he's carrying the bags, the scent of warm food filling the room. He sets them on the table and turns to me, his expression softer now but no less intense. “This isn't over,” he says, his voice low and edged with a promise that makes my stomach flutter.

I bite my lip, trying to suppress the grin that spreads across my face. “Good. I'd be disappointed if it was.”

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:15 am

Marlon

I don't know what I'm doing in Cherrywood Village, lingering like some lovesick fool, but I know one thing for sure: I don't want to leave.

Not with Grace.

The days have passed in a blur of stolen moments with Grace between her shifts at Vito's and the time she spends with her parents. I've learned she's close to them, which I think is great. Family was never my strong suit, so seeing her light up when she talks about her mom and dad is something I never thought I'd admire so much. It makes me want to stick around and see more of what makes her her .

But today? Today, I need to hit something.

The boxing gym is thirty minutes out of town, tucked in an industrial park surrounded by warehouses and auto repair shops. It's not flashy, but it's got everything you need to break a sweat and clear your head: bags, a ring, free weights, and that smell of leather and sweat that's so familiar it's like home.

When I walk in, a few heads turn. It's not unexpected. People tend to recognize me, especially in places like this. But no one approaches, which is a relief. I didn't come here for autographs or selfies—I came to move.

I'm halfway to the back when I spot a guy in the ring, working with someone who looks like a local hopeful. The trainer—if that's what he is—moves like a pro, fluid and sharp, his punches lazy but precise. His build is solid, like a linebacker, but

there's a looseness to his stance that says he could keep this up all day.

He catches me looking and pauses, leaning on the ropes. His eyes narrow briefly in recognition, and then he grins. "Well, I'll be damned. Marlon Henderson, right?"

I nod, tossing my bag to the side. "That's me."

He hops out of the ring, grabbing a towel to wipe his face. "Didn't think I'd ever see you in a place like this. What brings you here?"

"Just passing through," I say, keeping it simple.

"Passing through, huh?" He doesn't sound convinced. "Well, welcome to the gym. I'm Alex." He sticks out a hand, and I shake it. His grip is firm, but not the macho kind that tries too hard.

"Nice place you've got here," I compliment, glancing around.

"Thanks. You looking to get a workout in?"

"Yeah." I'm already pulling the wraps out of my bag.

Alex smirks. "Good. I'll be your sparring partner. Get those hands wrapped and meet me in the ring."

I take my time wrapping up, letting the hum of the gym wash over me. There's something grounding about the rhythm of this place—something I've missed.

When I climb into the ring, Alex is waiting, bouncing on his toes. We tap gloves, and then it's on.

Sparring with him is...unexpected. For a guy I've never met, he reads me like a book, slipping my jabs and blocking my hooks like he's been studying my moves for years. His punches are solid, too—not enough to hurt, but enough to let me know he's serious.

After a few minutes, I start to test him, throwing feints and combos that force him to stay on his toes.

“You're not bad,” I tell him, landing a body shot that makes him grunt.

“Not bad?” He grins, wiping his mouth with the back of his glove. “I'll take that as a compliment.”

We circle each other, trading punches and banter. There's an ease to him like he's not trying to prove anything, and I find myself relaxing in a way I don't normally do with strangers.

By the time we're done, we're both sweating and breathing hard. Alex leans on the ropes, grinning like he just won a prize fight.

“Hell of a round,” he quips, tossing me a bottle of water.

“Not bad yourself,” I joke, taking a long swig.

We sit on the edge of the ring, the kind of quiet settling in that only comes after a good workout. Alex leans back on his hands, studying me like he's trying to figure something out.

“So,” he says after a moment, “what's a guy like you really doing in a town like Cherrywood Village?”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “You’re persistent, aren’t you?”

He shrugs, smirking. “I call it curiosity.”

I hesitate, not sure how much I want to share. But there’s something about Alex—maybe it’s the way he doesn’t seem impressed by my name, or the fact that he kept up with me in the ring. Either way, I decide to tell him the truth.

“There’s this girl,” I finally tell him, feeling like an idiot the second the words leave my mouth.

Alex raises an eyebrow. “A girl, huh? She must be something if she’s keeping you here.”

“She is,” I admit. “Met her a few days ago. She’s smart, funny, and beautiful. Makes me feel like I’m more than just a fighter, you know?”

He nods, thoughtful. “Sounds like she’s got you good.”

“Yeah,” I say, running a hand through my hair. “She does. But I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. Relationships aren’t exactly my thing.”

Alex doesn’t respond right away. Instead, he looks over his shoulder, his gaze landing on a girl a few feet away. She’s doing yoga, her movements slow and deliberate, and there’s something in his expression that makes me think he knows exactly what I’m feeling.

“Here’s the thing,” he starts finally, turning back to me, “if it’s real, you don’t run from it. You fight for it. Simple as that.”

His tone is light, but there’s weight behind his words. Like he’s speaking from

experience—or maybe regret.

“Yeah,” I say, not sure what else to add.

He claps me on the shoulder, his grin returning. “Don’t overthink it, man. Take it one round at a time.”

I smile, feeling lighter than I have in days. “Thanks.”

He leaves me after that and it’s not much longer before I’m headed back to my hotel. When I get to my room, I strip down and step into the shower, letting the hot water work its magic on my muscles. I’m rinsing the soap off when my phone buzzes on the counter. I don’t need to check to know who it is.

The thought of Grace coming over tonight makes my chest tighten in a way that’s equal parts excitement and nerves. I rinse off quickly, grab a towel, and head into the room to get dressed.

I pull on a pair of sweatpants and a clean T-shirt, running a hand through my damp hair as I glance at the time. It’s almost seven. She’ll be here soon.

As I sit on the edge of the bed, waiting, I realize something: for the first time in years, I’m not thinking about the next fight or the next city or the next anything. I’m just thinking about her.

I have a feeling from now on it’s always going to be about her.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:15 am

Grace

The scent of garlic and fresh herbs fills the air, and I watch Marlon move around the tiny kitchen with a focus that feels oddly intimate. It's one of those moments that makes me feel like we've known each other for years, not just a week. A week. That's it. And yet, every minute spent with him has been enough to make me feel like I've known him for much longer. We've shared everything—laughter, stories, quiet moments, long conversations—and all of it has only made me want him more.

But as I sit at the small table, watching him, I can't shake the feeling that this is temporary. He's only here because he's passing through. He's on a tour of the East Coast, just like he told me. Cherrywood Village's a pit stop. Nothing more. I can't get comfortable with that thought, but I also can't ignore it.

For a few days, I pulled back, held my distance, and tried not to think about the fact that I was falling for someone who didn't belong here. But tonight, everything's different. Tonight, I'm determined to make it count.

I've spent years thinking about what it would be like to be with him—Marlon Henderson, the man who used to be a dream on a screen, my idol, my crush. And now, I get to be with him. But I want to make sure I remember this night forever. I'm finally putting that lace set I bought to good use.

“So,” I say, standing up and crossing the small room to where Marlon is stirring the sauce, “need some help?”

He glances over his shoulder, his face lighting up with a grin. “I think I've got it

handled, but thanks.” He points to the counter. “You can open the wine if you want.”

I nod and move over to the small kitchenette counter where the bottle of red wine sits. As I open it, the sound of the cork coming free sends a tiny shiver down my spine. There’s something about the whole scene—the warmth of the kitchen, the soft hum of music in the background, the scent of food filling the room—that makes it feel more intimate than I ever expected. It’s a quiet, peaceful night, but my body feels anything but calm.

I pour the wine and hand him a glass. He takes it with a smile, his fingers brushing mine as he does. The touch is simple but electric, and I feel my heart race as he looks at me, his expression unreadable.

“You’re quiet tonight,” he says, leaning back against the counter.

“I’m just thinking,” I tell him, taking a sip of my wine to hide the fact that my nerves are jumping around like fireworks in my chest.

“About what?”

I set the glass down, then take a slow step toward him. “About how perfect this is. You and me, here, like this.”

His eyes soften as he looks at me. He sets his glass down on the counter and then wipes his hands on a towel. “I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

I bite my lip, my gaze dropping to his chest for a moment before lifting back to meet his eyes. “I am,” I say quietly. “More than you know.”

For a second, there’s a flicker of something in his eyes. I can’t quite place it, but it’s there. And then he smiles, a half-smile, but it’s still warm. “I’m glad.”

The air between us shifts. It's charged now, thick with the unspoken things that have been building over the past few days. I'm not sure who moves first, but suddenly, we're close. His hand finds my waist, pulling me gently toward him. The feel of his body so close to mine is dizzying, like the world tilts for a second, but I don't care. I want him.

I look up at him, and this time, I don't hold back. I reach up, my hands resting against his chest for a brief moment before I tilt my head up, meeting his lips with mine.

The kiss is soft at first, but then he shifts his angle and deepens the kiss and the whole world explodes. His lips press harder against mine, and I melt into him. My hands find their way to his shoulders, then to his neck, as I let myself fall into him completely.

He tastes like wine and something familiar—like home, but so much better. His arms wrap around me, pulling me closer, and my body responds instantly, heat spreading from my chest to my fingertips.

Our hips are flush together in this position and there's no mistaking the way he feels, the way he wants me. And suddenly, I can't breathe. I can't think. All I want is him.

His touch burns through me, every inch of his hands on my body sending jolts of heat straight to my core. My head spins, and I can't think clearly, only feel. I've been dreaming of this for so long, and now that it's happening, I'm struggling to keep up with the rush of emotions and sensations. But it's not just the physical pull I feel—it's something deeper. Something that makes me feel seen in a way I've never experienced before.

I pull back slightly, my breath shallow, my fingers still resting against his chest. "Marlon," I say, my voice barely a whisper, but it's enough to get his attention.

He pulls back, his forehead resting against mine, his eyes full of concern as he scans my face. “What is it? Are you okay?”

I bite my lip, my pulse quickening. This is it. This is the moment where I either take a leap or I hold back. I don’t know if I can do this without being honest with him. Not now. Not when everything feels so intense, so real.

“I—I need to tell you something,” I start, the words coming out rushed. “I’ve never... I mean, I’ve never been with anyone before.”

His eyes soften immediately, and he lifts a hand to cup my cheek. “Grace,” he says gently, his voice low and soothing. “You don’t need to explain yourself. I’m not going anywhere.”

I feel a wave of relief wash over me, but also a flutter of nervousness. “I just—I don’t want to mess this up. You’ve been so patient with me. I don’t want you to think I’m not ready, or that I don’t want this. I do. I just... don’t know how to do this.”

Marlon’s thumb brushes across my cheek, his gaze intense but calm. “Hey, you don’t have to rush into anything. We’ll go at your pace, okay? I’m in no hurry. Whatever you want, whenever you’re ready. I’m not going to pressure you. We’ll take it slow.”

The sincerity in his voice makes my heart ache. I want to believe him so badly. I want to trust that this—us—can be everything I’ve hoped for, that he’s really here for me. But the uncertainty still lingers, like a shadow over everything we’ve shared. I wonder how long this will last. Whether he’ll still be here when he’s done with his trip. Whether he’ll even want to be.

But I nod, feeling the weight of his words sink in. “I just... don’t want to regret it, you know? I want it to mean something.”

“It will, Grace,” he says softly, his lips brushing over my forehead. “Whatever happens, it’s gonna mean something.”

I close my eyes, taking in the warmth of his touch. The way he holds me feels so right, so natural. The space between us feels full of possibility, of something more. But for now, this—this moment—feels like enough.

I feel like I’ve waited for this moment forever, and now that it’s finally here, everything inside me feels...Vulnerable. Alive.

“Marlon...” I breathe, his name coming out as a plea. I’m not sure what I’m asking for—maybe for him to hold back, or maybe for him to pull me in deeper, show me what it’s like to be wanted by someone who truly sees me.

His lips curl into a slow, teasing smile. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, Grace. And just so you know, I want you, all of you. Every bit of you.”

Before I can even think about what I’m doing, my lips find his again, this time with more urgency and more hunger. I don’t think about how fast my heart is pounding or how much I’m trembling. I just want him. All of him.

His mouth answers with equal intensity, his tongue meeting mine, teasing and exploring with a slow, deliberate rhythm. The sensation of him in my mouth—his taste, his warmth, the press of his lips against mine—overwhelms me, and I lose myself in it. It’s as if all the nerves and fears I’ve been holding onto for so long evaporate in the heat of this kiss.

His hand moves up to cradle my face, tilting it just slightly as he deepens the kiss, pulling me closer until I feel like I’m melting against him. There’s a fire inside me, one I never realized was there, until he stoked it with every gentle press of his lips, every swipe of his tongue.

Marlon's lips leave mine, and a soft whimper escapes me as he begins a slow, sensual trail down my neck, his hands steadying me as his mouth explores. His kisses are deliberate, each one stoking the flames building inside me. He lingers at the hollow of my throat, his tongue teasing the sensitive skin there before he moves lower, the heat of his breath leaving goosebumps in its wake.

"You're incredible," he murmurs, his voice thick with desire. His hands grip my hips as though anchoring himself, his thumbs tracing lazy circles on my skin. I feel his lips graze the curve of my collarbone, and the combination of his touch and his words sends a jolt of electricity straight through me.

He looks up at me through heavy-lidded eyes, a small, teasing smile playing on his lips. "You trust me, don't you?"

"Yes," I answer without hesitation, the word catching slightly in my throat.

"Good," he says, his voice a low rumble that makes my pulse race. He lowers himself further, his hands sliding to my thighs as his lips find the bare skin at the edge of my dress.

My hands grip the counter behind me, desperate for something to hold on to as he takes his time, kissing and caressing every inch of exposed skin. His movements are unhurried, savoring every reaction he draws from me. It's as though he's worshipping me, and the intensity of his focus makes me feel like I'm on the verge of unraveling.

"You're so responsive," he murmurs against my skin, his voice like velvet and he pushes himself onto his knees. "I could spend all night learning every little thing that makes you tremble."

I shudder at his words, my head tilting back as I let the sensations wash over me. His hands grip my thighs more firmly, spreading them and baring me to him. My face

panties are fully exposed to him now and I can feel the tension in his body as he holds himself back. It's intoxicating, knowing how much he wants me and how much restraint he's showing.

When he grows tired of the teasing and suddenly latches his whole mouth onto my sensitive mound through my panties, I let out a mewl. My hands fly to his shoulders, fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt as I try to steady myself.

He chuckles softly, the sound low and filled with promise. "I've got you, Grace. Just let me take care of you."

His hands slide up my thighs, his thumbs brushing against the lace of my underwear, and I can feel the heat of his breath against me. Every nerve in my body is on edge, the anticipation building until I feel like I might come apart from it. He slowly, tauntingly, pulls aside my underwear, and then, finally, his mouth finds me with no barrier, and the world tilts on its axis.

The first touch of his tongue is soft, and teasing, and it sends a wave of heat crashing over me. My breath catches, and I grip his shoulders tighter, my fingers digging into him as my head falls back. He hums against me, the vibration sending another jolt of pleasure through my body, and I feel his grip on my thighs tighten, holding me in place as he works my clit with a slow, devastating rhythm.

He alternates between soft, languid strokes and firmer, more focused movements, his tongue exploring every sensitive spot with a precision that leaves me trembling. The heat builds steadily, a pressure coiling deep within me, and I can't stop the soft moans that escape my lips as he pulls me closer and closer to the edge.

A particularly loud moan slips from my lips and he sucks at me harder causing me to see stars as I climb impossibly high.

“Marlon!” I gasp, my voice shaky as the sensations overwhelm me.

His response is a low, satisfied growl that vibrates against me, and it’s enough to send me spiraling. My body tenses, the pressure reaching a fever pitch before it shatters, a wave of pleasure crashing over me so intensely that I can’t do anything but cling to him as he continues to move, drawing out every last bit of sensation until I’m left breathless and boneless against the counter.

When he finally pulls back, his hands gentle on my thighs, I look down at him, my chest heaving as I try to catch my breath. His dark eyes meet mine, and the intensity in his gaze sends a fresh wave of warmth through me.

“You’re incredible,” he says softly, his voice filled with awe as he presses a kiss to the inside of my thigh before rising to his feet.

Before I can respond, he leans in, his lips capturing mine in a kiss that’s both tender and possessive. I can taste myself on him, and the realization sends a shiver through me. His hands cradle my face, his thumbs brushing over my cheeks as he deepens the kiss, and I feel like I’m falling all over again.

Chapter Six

Marlon

I run a hand down the front of my shirt for what feels like the hundredth time. It’s the nicest button-up I could find in the rushed hour I spent at that boutique downtown. While the fit is decent, I can’t help but feel like I look like a kid trying to dress up for picture day. The sleeves are stiff, the fabric smells like it’s been folded in plastic for way too long, and the collar is choking me.

Why the hell am I nervous? I’ve stood in octagons with opponents twice my size,

faced down journalists who were practically frothing at the mouth to take me down a peg, and fought in front of sold-out crowds who either wanted me to win or see me get my ass kicked. But somehow, meeting Grace's parents is making me sweat like I'm cutting weight.

I glance at Grace out of the corner of my eye. She's radiant tonight—her hair straightened out from the usual brown curls and pulled into some kind of loose, effortless updo that probably took her all of five minutes to perfect. She's wearing this flowy navy dress that makes her look both elegant and approachable, and her smile as she glances at me puts me at ease. For a second.

Then she reaches over, brushing her hand lightly against my arm.

"You're going to do great," she says, her voice soft but amused, like she knows exactly what's going on in my head.

"How can you be so sure?" I mutter, shifting in my seat as we pull into the driveway of her parents' house. It's modest but well-kept, with a wraparound porch and a light glowing warmly from the kitchen window. It looks like the kind of place where people sit down for Sunday dinners and talk about their days.

She leans closer, and her perfume—something floral but clean—fills my nose. "Because I know them. And I know you. And I promise, Marlon, they're going to love you."

I snort, trying to cover up how her words make something in my chest tighten. "What if I embarrass myself? What if your dad hates me?"

Grace laughs, and it's the kind of laugh that makes everything else fade into the background. "Trust me, my dad's probably already a bigger fan of yours than I am. He used to stay up late to watch your fights on TV, and he won't shut up about how

he saw your match against Rivera live last year.”

“Rivera? That was one of my worst fights.”

“Exactly.” She grins. “He loved the underdog comeback. And my mom? She’ll win you over as soon as she brings out dessert. Just don’t let her intimidate you—she’s got a sharp tongue, but she’s all bark.”

The truck rolls to a stop and I put it into park. “Stay there.”

Hopping out I jog over to Grace’s side, pulling her door open and holding out my hand for her to step down. She gives me a reassuring smile before stepping out.

Shoulders drawn back and head high, she marches toward the house. Closing the door and locking the truck, I follow her lead, my palms suddenly slick as I smooth them on my jeans. This wasn’t in the plan. Hell, two weeks ago, I was just passing through town, looking for a distraction from the grind of training, the press, and the constant expectations. Grace was supposed to be a momentary reprieve, not the woman I’d be nervously meeting parents for.

But she’s different. And now here I am, standing in front of a house that smells faintly of barbecue and lavender, wondering if maybe—just maybe—I’m falling for her.

Her dad, Frank, meets us at the door with a grin that could rival the sun. He’s a stocky guy with salt-and-pepper hair and the kind of warm energy that instantly makes me feel a little less like a fish out of water.

“Marlon!” he says, grabbing my hand in a firm handshake and then clapping me on the shoulder like we’ve been friends for years. “It’s an honor, man. I’ve been following your career since your early days. You’ve got heart, you know that? And

skill, of course, but heart—”

“Dad,” Grace interrupts, laughing as she steps between us. “Let him breathe. He just got here.”

Frank laughs, not the least bit embarrassed. “Sorry, sorry. Come on in. Dinner’s almost ready.”

The inside of the house is just as inviting as the outside. The walls are lined with family photos, the furniture is cozy but well-loved, and the smell of something rich and savory fills the air. My stomach growls audibly, and Grace stifles a laugh.

Her mom appears from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. She’s smaller than Grace, but there’s no mistaking where Grace got her sharp eyes and easy smile.

“So this is the famous Marlon,” she greets, looking me up and down like she’s sizing me up for a sparring match.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, suddenly unsure if I should stick out my hand or wait for her to make the first move.

She breaks into a smile that’s equal parts welcoming and mischievous. “You don’t have to call me ma’am. Makes me feel ancient. I’m Nina.”

“Nina,” I repeat, nodding. “It’s nice to meet you.”

She eyes me for another beat before turning to Grace. “He’s handsome. And he doesn’t look as cocky as I expected.”

“Mom!” Grace groans, her face flushing.

“What? I’m just saying.” Nina shrugs, then waves us toward the dining room. “Now, let’s eat before the food gets cold.”

Dinner is perfect.

Frank and I talk fights over plates of tender roast chicken, roasted potatoes, and green beans that remind me of home. He’s got a million questions—about my training, my toughest opponents, my favorite fight moments—and I answer them all, enjoying his genuine enthusiasm.

Nina, meanwhile, keeps things grounded with her quick wit, throwing in comments that make Grace groan and roll her eyes but have me laughing.

And Grace watches it all with a soft smile, her hand occasionally brushing mine under the table.

By the time dessert comes out—a homemade peach cobbler that’s somehow even better than the main course—I feel like I’ve known these people for years.

When we’re finally leaving, Frank pulls me into a quick hug and says, “You take care of her, you hear?”

“Yes, sir,” I promise, and I mean it. I don’t know when or how I came to mean it that seriously, but I do.

Nina kisses my cheek and winks. “Don’t be a stranger, Marlon.”

I look over at Grace, who’s watching me with a warmth in her eyes that makes me want to promise her the world. After our goodbyes, the drive to Grace’s apartment is

filled with quiet and tension. My blood is practically vibrating in my veins at her nearness and I can tell from the clench of her thighs and the soft breaths barely escaping her lips that she's feeling the same draw that I am.

That's why as soon as we're inside her place, I press her against the door, my lips finding hers with a hunger I've been holding back all night. She responds just as eagerly, her hands sliding up to tangle in my hair as I lift her off her feet.

"You were amazing tonight," she breathes against my lips.

"So were you." I kiss her again, deeper this time, my hands sliding down to her hips. She feels like heaven in my arms, and I can't get enough of her.

We move to the couch, and she pulls me down with her, her legs wrapping around my waist as our kisses grow more heated. My hands slide under her shirt, and her soft moan drives me wild.

"Grace," I murmur, my voice rough with desire.

Her fingers thread deeper into my hair, pulling me closer as if no space between us can be left untouched. Her breath hitches when I shift my weight, pressing her further into the couch cushions. The scent of her skin is intoxicating, a mix of lavender and something warm and distinctly her.

I trail kisses down her jawline, the sound of her soft gasps and murmured encouragements fueling the fire coursing through my veins. My hands travel under her shirt, grazing the smooth skin of her sides, memorizing the way she arches into me like she's as desperate for this as I am.

Her hands wander too, one sliding down my back, the other pressing firmly against my chest. When her nails lightly drag along my skin, I groan, deep and guttural, as if

all the restraint I've been clinging to is about to snap.

"God, Grace," I mutter against her neck, my lips brushing the sensitive spot just below her ear. "You have no idea what you do to me."

She tilts her head back, her pulse racing against my lips. "I think I'm starting to get an idea."

The teasing lilt in her voice makes me chuckle, low and breathless, but the laugh dissolves quickly as her nails scratch gently over my scalp. Her legs tighten around my waist, pulling me impossibly closer. The soft fabric of her dress rides higher with every movement, and my hands follow the path of her bare skin, feeling the curve of her thighs under my palms.

Her lips crash into mine again, and it's like every nerve in my body is on fire. I let my hand slide higher, feeling the edge of lace where her dress ends, and she shivers against me. My heart is pounding so hard it drowns out everything else—the world outside her apartment doesn't exist.

Her voice is a whisper, but it's enough to undo me. "Marlon..."

The way she says my name—breathless, full of heat and longing—makes me want to give her everything. To stay here, tangled up with her, where nothing else matters.

But just as my hand dips lower, my phone buzzes. At first, I ignore it, too caught up in the moment, but it buzzes again. And again. Grace pulls back slightly, her lips swollen and her breathing uneven.

"Your phone," she whispers, her forehead resting against mine.

I groan, the sound guttural and annoyed as I drop my head to her shoulder. "It's

probably nothing.”

She laughs softly, her fingers brushing over the back of my neck. “You should check. What if it’s important?”

I want to argue, to convince her that nothing could possibly be more important than this moment, but the phone won’t stop buzzing. Reluctantly, I pull it out of my pocket, glancing at the screen. My manager’s name flashes across it in bold letters.

I sigh, my free hand still resting on Grace’s hip. “It’s my manager. He doesn’t call this late unless it’s urgent.”

She nods, pulling back slightly, though her hands stay on my shoulders. “Go ahead.”

I answer the call, trying to keep my tone neutral. “Yeah, what’s up?”

“Marlon, I’ve got news.” My manager’s voice is sharp, all business, and it instantly puts me on edge. “There’s a huge opportunity for you. An off-season fight in Chile. Short notice, but this could be career-changing. Build your fanbase, get international exposure—this is the kind of event that gets you on magazine covers.”

“Chile?” I echo, glancing at Grace. Her eyes are on mine, searching, though her expression is unreadable.

“Yeah. It’s a major deal, Marlon. We need to lock it down immediately. Flights leave the day after tomorrow, so you’ll need to head back to LA first thing tomorrow to start prep. Think of the doors this could open for you.”

My chest tightens. The world I’ve always known—the world I’ve fought tooth and nail to succeed in—is calling me back. And I know I need this for my career. I’m on my way to retirement. Another few years and I’ll be old news. I need a steady

international fanbase to transition in the sports arena to something more than a fighter.

But it feels wrong. The very thought of being somewhere that Grace isn't feels like the air is being dragged from my lungs. I glance down at her where she's still sitting beneath me, her hands now resting in her lap.

"I'll call you back," I say abruptly, ending the call before he can push me further.

For a moment, the apartment is silent except for the faint sound of our breathing.

"You know you're going, don't you?" Grace's voice is quiet, but there's no mistaking the tension in it.

"I don't know," I admit, my hand running through my hair. "This fight...it's huge. It's everything I've been working toward. But, Grace..." I pause, struggling to put everything I'm feeling into words.

She stands, adjusting her dress, her arms wrapping around herself. "You have to go. It's a big opportunity for you and you need to start considering what you're going to do in retirement. Getting a global base of fans is a big deal for that."

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. She knows exactly what I'm thinking. She gets me and she isn't wrong, but hearing it feels like a loss I can't quite name.

I reach for her hand, but she takes a step back. "Grace, I don't want to leave you."

She offers me a small, sad smile, her voice soft but firm. "I know. But you're going to."

With those words, she turns away from me, walking into her bedroom and softly

shutting the door, leaving me staring behind her wondering what the hell just happened.

I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. I don't know anything but this ache between my ribs. So I do the only thing I can.

I walk away.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:15 am

Marlon

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But she's different. And now here I am, standing in front of a house that smells faintly of barbecue and lavender, wondering if maybe—just maybe—I'm falling for her.

Her dad, Frank, meets us at the door with a grin that could rival the sun. He's a stocky guy with salt-and-pepper hair and the kind of warm energy that instantly makes me feel a little less like a fish out of water.

"Marlon!" he says, grabbing my hand in a firm handshake and then clapping me on the shoulder like we've been friends for years. "It's an honor, man. I've been following your career since your early days. You've got heart, you know that? And skill, of course, but heart—"

"Dad," Grace interrupts, laughing as she steps between us. "Let him breathe. He just got here."

Frank laughs, not the least bit embarrassed. "Sorry, sorry. Come on in. Dinner's almost ready."

The inside of the house is just as inviting as the outside. The walls are lined with family photos, the furniture is cozy but well-loved, and the smell of something rich and savory fills the air. My stomach growls audibly, and Grace stifles a laugh.

Her mom appears from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. She's smaller than Grace, but there's no mistaking where Grace got her sharp eyes and easy smile.

"So this is the famous Marlon," she greets, looking me up and down like she's sizing me up for a sparring match.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, suddenly unsure if I should stick out my hand or wait for her to make the first move.

She breaks into a smile that’s equal parts welcoming and mischievous. “You don’t have to call me ma’am. Makes me feel ancient. I’m Nina.”

“Nina,” I repeat, nodding. “It’s nice to meet you.”

She eyes me for another beat before turning to Grace. “He’s handsome. And he doesn’t look as cocky as I expected.”

“Mom!” Grace groans, her face flushing.

“What? I’m just saying.” Nina shrugs, then waves us toward the dining room. “Now, let’s eat before the food gets cold.”

Dinner is perfect.

Frank and I talk fights over plates of tender roast chicken, roasted potatoes, and green beans that remind me of home. He’s got a million questions—about my training, my toughest opponents, my favorite fight moments—and I answer them all, enjoying his genuine enthusiasm.

Nina, meanwhile, keeps things grounded with her quick wit, throwing in comments that make Grace groan and roll her eyes but have me laughing.

And Grace watches it all with a soft smile, her hand occasionally brushing mine under the table.

By the time dessert comes out—a homemade peach cobbler that’s somehow even better than the main course—I feel like I’ve known these people for years.

When we’re finally leaving, Frank pulls me into a quick hug and says, “You take care of her, you hear?”

“Yes, sir,” I promise, and I mean it. I don’t know when or how I came to mean it that seriously, but I do.

Nina kisses my cheek and winks. “Don’t be a stranger, Marlon.”

I look over at Grace, who’s watching me with a warmth in her eyes that makes me want to promise her the world. After our goodbyes, the drive to Grace’s apartment is filled with quiet and tension. My blood is practically vibrating in my veins at her nearness and I can tell from the clench of her thighs and the soft breaths barely escaping her lips that she’s feeling the same draw that I am.

That’s why as soon as we’re inside her place, I press her against the door, my lips finding hers with a hunger I’ve been holding back all night. She responds just as eagerly, her hands sliding up to tangle in my hair as I lift her off her feet.

“You were amazing tonight,” she breathes against my lips.

“So were you.” I kiss her again, deeper this time, my hands sliding down to her hips. She feels like heaven in my arms, and I can’t get enough of her.

We move to the couch, and she pulls me down with her, her legs wrapping around my waist as our kisses grow more heated. My hands slide under her shirt, and her soft moan drives me wild.

“Grace,” I murmur, my voice rough with desire.

Her fingers thread deeper into my hair, pulling me closer as if no space between us can be left untouched. Her breath hitches when I shift my weight, pressing her further into the couch cushions. The scent of her skin is intoxicating, a mix of lavender and something warm and distinctly her.

I trail kisses down her jawline, the sound of her soft gasps and murmured encouragements fueling the fire coursing through my veins. My hands travel under her shirt, grazing the smooth skin of her sides, memorizing the way she arches into me like she's as desperate for this as I am.

Her hands wander too, one sliding down my back, the other pressing firmly against my chest. When her nails lightly drag along my skin, I groan, deep and guttural, as if all the restraint I've been clinging to is about to snap.

"God, Grace," I mutter against her neck, my lips brushing the sensitive spot just below her ear. "You have no idea what you do to me."

She tilts her head back, her pulse racing against my lips. "I think I'm starting to get an idea."

The teasing lilt in her voice makes me chuckle, low and breathless, but the laugh dissolves quickly as her nails scratch gently over my scalp. Her legs tighten around my waist, pulling me impossibly closer. The soft fabric of her dress rides higher with every movement, and my hands follow the path of her bare skin, feeling the curve of her thighs under my palms.

Her lips crash into mine again, and it's like every nerve in my body is on fire. I let my hand slide higher, feeling the edge of lace where her dress ends, and she shivers against me. My heart is pounding so hard it drowns out everything else—the world outside her apartment doesn't exist.

Her voice is a whisper, but it's enough to undo me. "Marlon..."

The way she says my name—breathless, full of heat and longing—makes me want to give her everything. To stay here, tangled up with her, where nothing else matters.

But just as my hand dips lower, my phone buzzes. At first, I ignore it, too caught up in the moment, but it buzzes again. And again. Grace pulls back slightly, her lips swollen and her breathing uneven.

"Your phone," she whispers, her forehead resting against mine.

I groan, the sound guttural and annoyed as I drop my head to her shoulder. "It's probably nothing."

She laughs softly, her fingers brushing over the back of my neck. "You should check. What if it's important?"

I want to argue, to convince her that nothing could possibly be more important than this moment, but the phone won't stop buzzing. Reluctantly, I pull it out of my pocket, glancing at the screen. My manager's name flashes across it in bold letters.

I sigh, my free hand still resting on Grace's hip. "It's my manager. He doesn't call this late unless it's urgent."

She nods, pulling back slightly, though her hands stay on my shoulders. "Go ahead."

I answer the call, trying to keep my tone neutral. "Yeah, what's up?"

"Marlon, I've got news." My manager's voice is sharp, all business, and it instantly puts me on edge. "There's a huge opportunity for you. An off-season fight in Chile. Short notice, but this could be career-changing. Build your fanbase, get international

exposure—this is the kind of event that gets you on magazine covers.”

“Chile?” I echo, glancing at Grace. Her eyes are on mine, searching, though her expression is unreadable.

“Yeah. It’s a major deal, Marlon. We need to lock it down immediately. Flights leave the day after tomorrow, so you’ll need to head back to LA first thing tomorrow to start prep. Think of the doors this could open for you.”

My chest tightens. The world I’ve always known—the world I’ve fought tooth and nail to succeed in—is calling me back. And I know I need this for my career. I’m on my way to retirement. Another few years and I’ll be old news. I need a steady international fanbase to transition in the sports arena to something more than a fighter.

But it feels wrong. The very thought of being somewhere that Grace isn’t feels like the air is being dragged from my lungs. I glance down at her where she’s still sitting beneath me, her hands now resting in her lap.

“I’ll call you back,” I say abruptly, ending the call before he can push me further.

For a moment, the apartment is silent except for the faint sound of our breathing.

“You know you’re going, don’t you?” Grace’s voice is quiet, but there’s no mistaking the tension in it.

“I don’t know,” I admit, my hand running through my hair. “This fight...it’s huge. It’s everything I’ve been working toward. But, Grace...” I pause, struggling to put everything I’m feeling into words.

She stands, adjusting her dress, her arms wrapping around herself. “You have to go.

It's a big opportunity for you and you need to start considering what you're going to do in retirement. Getting a global base of fans is a big deal for that."

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. She knows exactly what I'm thinking. She gets me and she isn't wrong, but hearing it feels like a loss I can't quite name.

I reach for her hand, but she takes a step back. "Grace, I don't want to leave you."

She offers me a small, sad smile, her voice soft but firm. "I know. But you're going to."

With those words, she turns away from me, walking into her bedroom and softly shutting the door, leaving me staring behind her wondering what the hell just happened.

I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. I don't know anything but this ache between my ribs. So I do the only thing I can.

I walk away.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:15 am

Grace

Marlon's probably already gone.

I haven't heard from him since last night, and I don't need to. That call from his manager? It was everything. Everything he's worked for, everything he's dreamed of. I'd be selfish to expect him to stay here—for me—when a career-defining fight is waiting for him in Chile.

But knowing that doesn't make it hurt any less.

The truth is, I wanted to believe I was smarter than this. I told myself from the start that Marlon was temporary—a fleeting thing I could enjoy while it lasted. I thought I'd kept my heart out of it, that I could walk away without a scratch.

God, I was such a fool.

It's laughable now, really, how blind I was. The way he made me feel safe and seen. The way he'd look at me like I was something rare and precious. The way he fit into my world so seamlessly—talking to my parents like he'd known them for years, brushing his hand against mine under the table, kissing me in a way that made the rest of the world fall away.

I didn't guard my heart. I handed it to him on a silver platter, and I didn't even realize it until it was too late.

Now he's gone, and the next time I see him, it'll be on TV, in some glossy, high-

profile fight broadcast to millions. He'll be larger than life again, out of reach. And I'll be here, in this little Italian restaurant, pretending like I'm fine.

"Grace, order up!" The cook's voice booms from the kitchen, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I blink, realizing I've been standing in the middle of the dining room holding an empty water pitcher like a complete idiot. Shaking myself, I set it down and head for the pass.

The cook slides a plate of spaghetti carbonara onto the counter, his sharp eyes narrowing at me. "You okay, kid? You've been off all day."

I nod quickly, avoiding his gaze. "Yeah. Just tired."

He doesn't buy it, I can tell, but thankfully he doesn't press. "Table twelve's waiting," he says gruffly, gesturing to the plate.

"Got it," I mumble, grabbing the dish and weaving through the tables toward a young couple in the corner. They look so happy, so in love, and it's like a knife twisting in my chest.

I turn away quickly, swallowing the lump in my throat as I head back to the kitchen. I'm being ridiculous. It's not like I didn't know what I was getting into with Marlon. It's not like I didn't know he'd leave.

But somehow, knowing doesn't make it any easier.

By the time the afternoon rush starts to wind down, I'm running on autopilot. The ache in my chest has dulled to a low throb, and I'm grateful for the small reprieve.

The lull in the afternoon crowd means I can finally take my break. I grab a lukewarm cup of coffee from the back counter and slip into the staff room, collapsing onto the worn-out sofa. It creaks under my weight, but I barely notice. My body might be here, but my mind is somewhere else—or maybe with someone else.

I lean my head back and close my eyes, letting out a slow breath. I try to picture him already in LA, probably going over fight strategies or getting prepped for some glossy promo shoot. He'd look good, of course—he always does. But now, instead of smiling at me, he'd be flashing that grin at cameras. The thought stings, even though I tell myself it shouldn't.

The bitter coffee burns as I sip it, but I welcome the distraction. It's better than thinking about him.

When my timer goes off, I force myself off the couch, rinsing out my mug in the sink before heading back to the dining room. The second I step out, Brodrick waves me over from behind the counter.

“You’ve got a table,” he says.

I frown. “What? I just got off break.”

“Yeah, well, they refused to take anyone else.” He smirks like he finds this all very amusing. “Said they’d wait however long it took for you to come back.”

My stomach flips. There’s no way—no way—it’s who I think it is.

I grab my notepad from my apron pocket, my hands suddenly clammy. I try to reason with myself as I make my way over. Maybe it’s some regular customer who liked the way I remembered their drink order. Or someone too picky to risk a new server.

But deep down, I know.

And then I see him.

Marlon is sitting in the same corner, one arm draped along the back of the seat, looking like he owns the place. He's traded his workout clothes for a dark hoodie and jeans, but he still looks maddeningly good—like he could've stepped out of one of those promo shoots I just tortured myself imagining.

He notices me before I can duck away, his eyes locking onto mine. His lips curve into a warm half-smile, and just like that, the air seems to shift.

I stop in my tracks, my heart slamming against my ribs. He shouldn't be here. He's supposed to be on a plane.

"Hey, Grace," he says, his voice cutting through the din of the restaurant like it's meant just for me.

I don't know what to do—run, yell, cry? I settle for the only thing I can manage: I walk up to his table, gripping my notepad like it's some kind of shield.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, trying to sound calm. Instead, my voice comes out breathy and uneven.

He tilts his head, studying me like he's trying to figure out what's going on in my head. "I wanted to see you."

I blink, caught off guard by the simplicity of his answer. "You're supposed to be on your way to LA."

His smile falters for a second, but then he shrugs. "I was. But then I realized

something.”

I cross my arms, trying to ignore the way my chest tightens at the sight of him. “And what’s that?”

“That I’d be an idiot to leave without telling you how I feel.”

The words hit me like a sucker punch. I stare at him, my brain scrambling to process what he just said.

“You...” I trail off, shaking my head. “What are you talking about?”

He leans forward, resting his forearms on the table. “I’m talking about the fact that I couldn’t stop thinking about you. On the drive back to the hotel, while I was packing, even when I was booking the damn flight—I couldn’t stop thinking about how wrong it felt to leave.”

I open my mouth to argue, to tell him he’s being ridiculous, but the words won’t come.

“I needed to see you, Grace. I needed you to know before anything else happened”

My throat feels tight, and I can barely breathe. “Know what?” I whisper.

He reaches out, his fingers brushing against mine where they rest on my notepad. It’s such a small gesture, but it’s enough to make my walls start to crack.

“Know that I’m not going anywhere,” he says softly. “Not if it means losing you. I’m not going through LA. I’m going to house my truck with the local mechanic and I’m flying out straight from the next airport over to Chile tomorrow morning. But, that’s only if you want to go with me. If you want to stay here, we’ll stay and I’m retiring.”

And just like that, the floodgates open. I've spent hours convincing myself that this was over, that I'd never see him again, and now he's here, telling me he's staying.

"Marlon..." I start, my voice trembling, but he cuts me off.

"I know it's a lot, and I know I've got a lot to prove. But I'm here, Grace. And I'm not going anywhere until you tell me to and you're by my side."

I stare at him, my heart hammering in my chest, and for the first time in hours, I feel something other than pain.

Hope.

I know what I need to do.

"Marlon," I say, my voice steadier now, though my heart is still racing, "you can't give up Chile. You're not ready to retire. You and I both know that."

His face falls, and the hurt in his eyes nearly breaks me, but I keep going because he needs to hear this. "The fact that you'd even offer—that you'd choose me over everything you've worked for—it means everything to me. But I can't let you do that. I won't let you do that."

His brows furrow, his hand tightening slightly over mine. "Grace—"

I shake my head, cutting him off. "No. Listen to me. This is your dream, Marlon. And you're so damn good at it. I won't be the reason you walk away. But..." I take a shaky breath, my chest tightening. "If you're serious—if you really want me by your side—then I'll go with you."

His eyes widen, the disbelief and relief warring on his face. "You'd—"

“Yes,” I interrupt, the word leaving me in a rush. “I’ll go with you to Chile. But we have to go now. I need to pack, and I need to say goodbye to my parents.”

A slow, breathtaking smile spreads across his face, and the tension I’ve been carrying all day finally starts to ease. “You don’t know how much that means to me,” he says softly, his voice thick with emotion.

Before I can respond, he stands, pulling me into his arms. The restaurant fades away, the clatter of dishes and hum of conversations muffled as he holds me close. His scent, that mix of soap and something uniquely him fills my senses, and I feel the tears sting my eyes.

“I’ll make this work,” he murmurs against my hair. “I promise.”

I pull back just enough to look up at him, a watery smile on my face. “We’ll make it work,” I correct, and then his lips are on mine.

The kiss is slow and sweet, his hands cradling my face as though I’m the most precious thing in the world. My arms loop around his neck, and for a moment, everything feels perfect. The cheers and whistles that erupt around us barely register, but when we break apart, I see the restaurant is watching us. Some customers are clapping; a few of my coworkers are grinning like they’ve just watched the finale of their favorite rom-com.

My cheeks burn as I bury my face in Marlon’s chest, but I can’t stop smiling.

“Damn, Grace!” one of the hostesses hollers from the pass. “When were you gonna tell us you were dating a celebrity?”

I groan, my embarrassment doubling, but Marlon just laughs, his arm tightening around me. “Guess the secret’s out,” he says with a wink.

Before I can respond, my manager appears, his arms crossed but his expression warm. “So,” he says, drawing out the word, “does this mean what I think it means?”

I nod, still a little breathless. “Yeah. I—I’m leaving.”

He tilts his head, a knowing smile on his face. “I figured as much. Heard the whole thing.” He holds up a hand when I open my mouth to explain, cutting me off. “Don’t worry about it. You’re young, Grace. You should be out there living your life, not stuck here serving spaghetti.”

His words hit me harder than I expect, and my throat tightens. “Thank you,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

He waves me off, his tone gruff but kind. “Don’t thank me. Just promise me you’ll make the most of it, okay?”

“I will,” I say, my voice firmer this time. “I promise.”

With that, he claps Marlon on the shoulder and heads back to the kitchen, muttering something about not letting the place fall apart while he’s gone. I blink back the tears threatening to spill and turn to Marlon.

“Let’s go,” I say, my resolve strengthening. “I’ve got some packing to do.”

He grins, grabbing my hand as we head for the door. The second we’re outside, the cold air nipping at my cheeks, I feel like I can finally breathe again.

We’re doing this. We’re really doing this.

The weight I’ve been carrying for days lifts just a little, and as we walk to his car, I squeeze his hand.

“You ready for this?” he asks, his voice teasing but his eyes warm.

I nod, smiling up at him. “With you? Always.”

The drive to my apartment passes in a blur and the packing goes even faster.

“We have some time before your parents get home and we go see them,” Marlon says, leaning back slightly. His gaze catches on my lips, lingering there for just a beat too long, and it makes my breath hitch. “And even more time before our flight tonight.”

“Oh!” I exclaim, the realization hitting me. “I need to book a ticket!” I smack my palm against my forehead in frustration, but Marlon quickly catches my wrist and gently removes my hand, his warm fingers curling around mine.

“I booked you one while you were packing,” he says with that easy, self-assured grin of his, pulling my hand to rest against his chest. The warmth of his body radiates through his shirt, and I feel my pulse quicken under his touch. “How about we do a little something to celebrate?”

My heart flutters and I swallow hard. “What do you have in mind?” I ask, my voice coming out softer than I intend.

His lips quirk up into that wicked smirk that always leaves me feeling weak. “I thought, if you’re ready, I could show you how much I love you,” he says, shifting his hands to my waist. His voice is low, teasing, but there’s a heat in his tone that makes my legs feel like jelly. “How does that sound?”

For a moment, I can’t even form words. He loves me?

My cheeks burn, and my chest feels tight. But I nod, managing a shaky, “Okay,”

before his mouth is on mine again, hot and insistent, stealing whatever breath I have left.

His hands are everywhere—my waist, my hips, my thighs—guiding me, undressing me. My pants and underwear slide down in one fluid motion, and I kick them off, shoes and all, with shaky legs. My shirt and bra are next, discarded in a frenzy that leaves me bare before him.

He pulls back just long enough to strip himself, the sight of his body stealing my breath all over again. Every muscle flexes as he moves, his confidence evident in every motion.

“Let’s take this to the bed,” he says, his voice thick with desire. He grabs my hand, pulling me toward the mattress. “I want you to climb on top of me. I’ll let you lead this so we go at your pace.”

I follow his directions, my knees wobbling slightly. I’m hyperaware of every inch of my skin, every charged breath between us. He settles onto the bed, propped up against the pillows, and gestures for me to join him.

I climb onto the bed, straddling his lap with as much grace as I can muster. My knees press into the mattress on either side of his thighs, and I can feel him beneath me, already hard and waiting.

“You’re already hard,” I murmur, reaching down to touch him without thinking.

The soft groan he lets out makes my whole body heat. “You drive me insane,” he says, his head falling back for a moment before his eyes meet mine again, dark and full of want.

“It’s not hard to tell,” I whisper, a nervous laugh bubbling out of me as I lean

forward, craving the warmth of his mouth on mine again.

He meets me halfway, our lips colliding in a kiss that's all-consuming. His hands find their way between my thighs, his fingers gliding against me in a way that makes me gasp into his mouth. My hips jerk involuntarily, seeking more of his touch, and he chuckles softly against my lips.

"You ready for me, sweetheart?" he murmurs, his breath hot against my cheek.

"Yes," I manage, my voice trembling with anticipation. "I don't...I don't really know what to do."

"It's okay, I've got you. Just lift up for me." His hands guide me as I lift myself up slightly before he's positioning himself against my entrance. "Sit yourself down. Go as slow or as fast as you need."

I brace my hands on his shoulders and then slowly allow myself to sink down. The stretch as I sink onto him is overwhelming at first with a sharp sting that takes my breath away. But then, Marlon's thumb finds the sensitive bundle at the top of my core. He starts to make circles as I stop, just a few inches of him in me.

At first, the sting makes me want to give up, but then a warmth starts to spread through me as Marlon's thumb keeps going round and round. Soon the pain leaves and all that's left is the pleasure of his touch on me.

He speeds up for a second and a particularly strong wave of pleasure washes over me. I throw my head back losing myself for a moment and my hips move of their own volition. Crying out as the last of him slips inside of me, I can't focus on any one thing.

"There you go, baby," he purrs, his voice a low growl that sends shivers down my

spine. “Take your time. This is all for you.”

I pause for a moment, adjusting to the feeling of him inside me. My thighs quiver as I start to move, lifting myself up slightly before sliding back down.

“That’s it,” he encourages, his hands gripping my hips firmly. “You control the pace. Whatever you want.”

I set a rhythm, moving faster as I get more comfortable, and the way he watches me—like I’m the only thing that matters in the world—makes my confidence soar. I lose myself in the motion, in the way his hands roam my body, in the sounds of pleasure that spill from both of us.

“You’re stunning, Grace,” he says, his voice raw and full of emotion. His hands move up my sides, his thumbs brushing against my breasts before he takes my nipples between his fingers, rolling them gently.

The sensation is too much, and I arch into his touch, my movements faltering as a moan rips from my throat.

“I wish you could see yourself,” he says, his voice dark and reverent. “You’re perfect.”

I can’t form a coherent response. My body takes over, chasing the heat that’s building low in my belly. Marlon’s hands grip my hips tighter, and he starts to thrust up into me, meeting me halfway with every movement.

The angle changes, and suddenly he’s hitting a spot inside me that makes me see stars. I cry out, clutching at his shoulders as my body tightens around him.

“That’s it,” he says, his voice strained as he works me closer and closer to the edge.

“You’re so fucking perfect.”

His words push me over. My orgasm crashes into me, stealing my breath and shaking my entire body. I can feel him moving inside me, prolonging the pleasure as my walls flutter around him.

“Grace,” he groans, his voice rough as his hips slam up into mine one final time. I feel him release inside me, his body shuddering as he holds me tightly against him.

We collapse together, both of us breathing hard. My head rests against his chest, and I can hear the rapid thrum of his heartbeat beneath my ear.

“Oh my god,” I whisper, too overwhelmed to say anything else. I lost my virginity and it was nothing I expected and everything I could have wanted.

He strokes a hand through my hair, his touch soothing in the aftermath of the intensity we just shared.

“Exactly,” he murmurs, his voice full of warmth and satisfaction.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:15 am

Marlon

The roar of the crowd is deafening, a cacophony of cheers, jeers, and the rhythmic pounding of fists against the ring apron. My opponent, Rodrigo Vargas, stands across from me, his broad shoulders glistening with sweat under the harsh arena lights. He's a brawler, all brute force and aggression, but he lacks finesse. I know I can beat him, and the thought is a steady drumbeat in the back of my mind.

But it's not just strategy fueling me tonight. It's her. Grace.

I glance to my left and spot her in the crowd, her hands clasped together like she's holding her breath. Her eyes lock with mine, and even from this distance, I can see the worry mixed with pride shining in them. It steadies me, roots me.

The bell rings, and I'm back in the moment, circling Vargas. He charges forward like a bull, swinging wild haymakers that I dodge easily. He's strong, no doubt about that, but his technique is sloppy, leaving him wide open.

I jab, a quick one-two to test his defenses, then duck under a wide hook that could've taken my head off if it landed. The crowd roars again, their energy feeding into the electric atmosphere.

Stay patient , I remind myself mentally.

The first round is a dance of give and take. He's trying to corner me, but I'm too quick, slipping out of his reach and countering with sharp jabs and body shots that sap his strength little by little.

By the second round, his breathing is heavier, and his swings are slower. That's when I press the attack.

I land a clean right hook to his jaw, staggering him, and follow up with a series of body blows that make him grunt in pain. He tries to retaliate, but I block his attempts, sidestepping and landing another punishing combo to his ribs.

The third round is mine. Vargas comes out swinging again, desperate to turn the tide, but his desperation makes him predictable. I bait him with feints, then slip in with a devastating uppercut that sends him reeling.

The referee starts the count, but Vargas stumbles to his feet at seven. He's wobbling, though, and I can see it in his eyes—he knows it's over.

I don't let up. Another flurry of punches connects, and he goes down for the final time.

The bell rings, and my hand is raised in victory. The announcer's voice booms over the speakers, but all I hear is the pounding of my heart and the cheers of the crowd. I search for her face again and find her smiling, her joy cutting through the noise like a beacon.

After the post-fight formalities, I head back to my personal locker room. My knuckles throb, and there's a shallow cut above my brow, but it's nothing I haven't dealt with before. The adrenaline still courses through me as I strip off my gloves and sit on the bench, letting out a deep breath.

The door creaks open, and I don't have to look up to know it's her. In the months since we found ourselves in Chile, she's always ready to greet me after a fight.

"You were incredible," Grace says, her voice breathless as she steps inside and closes

the door behind her.

I glance up and grin, the sight of her already soothing some of the aches. “For you? Always.”

She crosses the room and kneels in front of me, her hands brushing against the cut on my brow. Her touch is featherlight, careful. “You’re bleeding,” she says softly, her brow furrowed in concern.

“It’s nothing,” I assure her, cupping her face in my hands. “You being here makes it all worth it.”

Her cheeks flush, and her lips part slightly, but she doesn’t pull away. Instead, she leans into my touch, her eyes searching mine.

“Marlon,” she whispers, and there’s something in her voice that makes my chest tighten.

I don’t let her finish. I pull her into a kiss, hard and desperate, pouring every ounce of emotion I’ve been holding into it. Her hands find their way to my shoulders, clutching at me as if I’m the only thing keeping her grounded.

The tension between us snaps like a rubber band. She straddles my lap, her dress hiking up as her legs wrap around me. My hands grip her hips, pulling her closer as our kisses deepen.

The cool metal of the lockers presses against my back as I shift, trapping her between me and the wall. Her fingers tangle in my hair, and her lips trail down my jaw, leaving a line of fire in their wake.

“Grace,” I groan, my voice rough with need.

She pulls back just enough to meet my eyes, her own filled with determination and something softer, more vulnerable. “I want you,” she says, her voice steady despite the way her breath hitches.

I don’t hesitate. I tilt her chin up and kiss her again. My hands slide down her sides, fingers grazing the soft fabric of her dress until they find bare skin. The feel of her beneath my hands, warm and alive, sends a surge of heat through me. She gasps softly against my lips, her fingers tightening in my hair as I press her back against the cold metal lockers.

“You have no idea how bad I’ve wanted this,” I murmur, my voice low and rough as I trail kisses along her jaw and down the curve of her neck.

“Then show me,” she whispers, her breath hitching as my lips brush against the hollow of her throat.

My hands find the hem of her dress, bunching it up as I slide it higher. Her skin is smooth under my touch, her thighs parting slightly to welcome me closer. I can feel her trembling, her breaths coming in shallow bursts as I grip her hips and pull her flush against me.

I press my forehead to hers for a moment, needing to anchor myself in the overwhelming intensity of the moment. Her eyes meet mine, dark and full of trust, and it’s all the encouragement I need.

My lips find hers again, this time slower, deeper, savoring every second. Her hands move from my shoulders to my chest, her fingers tracing the lines of muscle, brushing against the fresh bruises from the fight.

“Does it hurt?” she asks, her voice barely a whisper.

I smile at her, the warmth of her concern almost overwhelming in the best way. “Not when you’re touching me,” I reply, my voice soft but sincere, and I see her cheeks flush with the honesty in my words. There’s something in the way she looks at me, like I’m the only person in the world who matters to her. It makes me feel like I’m the luckiest man alive.

Her hands trail lower, exploring with a curiosity that sends a jolt of electricity through me. When she reaches my waistband, she hesitates for only a moment before slipping beneath it with a confidence that surprises me. The cool air of the locker room contrasts with the heat building between us as she grips me, her touch firm and sure. The sensation of her hand around me, warm and inviting, makes my breath catch.

She strokes me once, then again, and the groan that escapes me is involuntary, a raw sound of pleasure that I can’t hold back. The sensation is too much, but in the best way. Her touch is bolder now than it was a few months ago, more sure of herself, more certain of what she wants. The quiet confidence she exudes only ignites the fire inside me, a fire that burns away any lingering restraint. Her hips shift against mine, the friction sending a rush of blood to my head.

I lift her effortlessly, feeling her legs wrap around my waist, instinctively pulling her closer, deeper, until her body is flush against mine. My hands are at her back, supporting her as I press her against the cool lockers, and there’s no thought in my head, only the need to be as close to her as possible. In one smooth motion, I push her panties to the side, my hands shaking slightly with anticipation as I line myself up.

When I finally enter her, it’s like everything falls into place. The feeling of her around me is almost overwhelming, like I’ve found a piece of myself I didn’t know was missing until now. Her nails dig into my shoulders, and I can’t help but groan at the sweet pain.

Her breath hitches, and the sounds she makes as I move inside her are more than just pleasure. The intensity of it leaves me dizzy, like I'm falling without a net, but I don't care. There's no part of me that doesn't want this, want her.

"Grace," I whisper her name like a prayer, my voice breaking as I kiss her again. My hips move with a steady rhythm, deeper, harder, and with every thrust, I pour everything I can't say into the movement, into the way I touch her, into the way we are, in this moment, just us.

Her lips part as she breathes out a soft moan, her body reacting to me with a need that mirrors my own. Her hands tug at my hair, pulling me closer, and I lose myself in the taste of her mouth, in the warmth of her skin. There's nothing else in the world. No fights, no future concerns, no lingering doubts. Just the feeling of her, of us, moving together in perfect sync.

The intensity of the moment is building, spiraling out of control, and it's almost too much, but it feels like the only thing that matters. The world outside this locker room doesn't exist anymore. It's just us, locked in this perfect, fleeting moment of heat and hunger.

I press into her, deeper, if possible, and she meets me with equal force, her body responding to mine with a desperate need that matches my own. I can feel her tremble against me, the way her body tightens around me, and I know she's close. I push her higher, coaxing her toward that edge with every thrust, but I don't want to let go—not yet.

Her mouth opens in a silent gasp, her pleasure taking her by surprise, and I feel her muscles tighten around me, the sensation pushing me to the brink. I lean into her, kissing her once more, a kiss filled with all the passion I've held back, and I let go. Her body clutches me like a vice, and I come inside her, the release crashing over me in waves, overwhelming in its intensity.

When we finally break apart, both of us are breathing hard, her forehead resting against mine. Her fingers brush against my cheek, her touch soft, almost reverent.

“You’re everything,” I murmur, my voice thick with emotion.

She smiles, her lips red and swollen from our kisses, and I know in that moment that I’ll fight a thousand more battles if it means I get to come back to her.

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Eight Years Later

Grace

Running away with Marlon all those years ago was the best decision I ever made. I didn't realize until I left Cherrywood Village that I was settling in life. My existence, though comfortable, was boring. I only talked to people with the same viewpoints as me, and I hardly ever met anyone new. If it weren't for the experiences I had while living with Marlon, I don't think that I'd be as good of a mom as I am now.

I got pregnant with our first baby, Lee, while Marlon was fighting in his last round of competition. As soon as he won his last title, he decided to retire, and we bought our first house in the country about an hour away from Cherrywood Village. We both agreed that being close to my parents would be nice as we started our journey into parenthood.

Shortly after Lee's first birthday, I found out I was pregnant with our second child, a girl that we named Susie. While raising two kids so close together in age was hard, Marlon's an ideal partner. The kids love him, and so do I. And I find myself loving him more and more every single day.

The kids are both finally in elementary school, and now the two of us are finding it hard to fill in our childfree days. We both get up with them in the morning, helping with showers and breakfast and packing lunches, then we take turns driving them to their school twenty-five minutes away.

It's Marlon's turn to take care of school drop-off, so I take the opportunity to get back

in bed. It's nice to get an extra hour of sleep on these days. Having two young kids means that sleeping in is a luxury we aren't often afforded.

It doesn't take me long to drift off. Marlon and I had a late night, the two of us taking advantage of the quiet hours when the kids are asleep to have an evening of fun. I think the only thing I miss from the time before we had kids was being able to have sex whenever we want. We make it work, though.

I'm not sure how long I've been asleep before I wake up completely gripped by pleasure. It takes me a few seconds to get my bearings and realize what's going on. Marlon's head is nestled between my thighs, and his tongue is lapping against my clit.

"Marlon," I gasp as I yank the covers off.

I'm presented with the top of his head, his dark hair that he's grown since retiring, resting against his forehead. On impulse, I reach down and thread my fingers through it. He hums against my sex, and my back arches up from the bed.

The sensations are intense. The entire world is fuzzy save for my pleasure which is sharp. Marlon's tongue is wet and warm, and now that I'm aware of what's happening, I grind my hips into it. Already, I'm so close, and I wonder how long he's been doing this.

"Oh, babe!" I yelp, as the first tendrils of my orgasm start to grip at me. "I'm going to—"

As if in response to my exclamation, he closes his mouth around my clit and sucks hard. My climax is all-consuming. The soft edges of my consciousness go black again, and the only thing I can comprehend is the pleasure that Marlon's giving me. I moan and writhe under his ministrations, fully at his mercy.

When my orgasm subsides, he pulls up and grins at me, his mouth shiny with my juices. Before climbing up my body, he presses his lips against the inside of my thigh. Then, he kisses me hard, shoving his tongue into my mouth and forcing me to taste myself.

“I’ll never get tired of that,” he tells me before peppering kisses along my jaw.

“Me either,” I agree. As my senses start to return to me, I become aware of his hard cock pressing against my leg. “Do you want me to help you out?”

“You don’t have to do anything,” he murmurs against my neck. “All you have to do is lay there and look pretty.”

That’s all the warning I get before the head of his dick is pressing against my opening. He presses into me slowly, cognizant of how sensitive I still am from my orgasm. I whimper as I’m stretched out, pleasure rapidly pooling in my stomach once again.

“I love how wet you are,” he says as he continues pushing all the way in. “You’re always so responsive for me.”

“Of course I am,” I manage to say. “Only for you. Only ever for you.”

“That’s right,” he groans, pulling almost completely out of me before plunging back in. “You’re mine. All mine.”

“Yours,” I gasp, as he quickly works his way up to a bruising pace.

He growls, leaning down to press a kiss against my lips. I can barely respond, too overtaken by the sensation. This only seems to make Marlon’s efforts more enthusiastic.

He chases his orgasm with reckless abandon, angling his hips as he searches for my g-spot. Even before he hits it, I already feel my second climax of the morning approaching rapidly. Something about the way he seems wild with lust makes me tingly all over. Ever since we first started having sex, he's made me feel like this.

"There!" I practically scream when he drives his cock against the sensitive bundle of nerves inside of me.

With my confirmation of his aim, Marlon focuses his efforts against that place. Ever the gentleman, it's clear that he wants me to get off again before he does. My toes curl at the thought.

After a few more minutes of unrelenting attention, my fingers curl in the bed sheets. My second climax of the day takes me over slowly. Each muscle in my body seizes up, and my pussy clenches around his cock as my eyes roll back in my head.

"That's it, baby girl," he murmurs, his lips against my cheek, his hot breath puffing over the sweat-slicked skin. "Show me how good I make you feel. Fuck, you're gorgeous. Just listen to you."

He keeps babbling, but I don't hear the rest of it. All of his words run together, his speech slurring as he pumps me full of his seed. I'm so stuffed that I can hardly breathe, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Marlon's hips stutter as he rides out the rest of his orgasm. I take over the kissing, pressing my lips against every part of him that I can reach. If he was capable of comprehending what I say, I'd tell him how much I love him, but I know that right now, his brain is too clouded by the climax he just experienced.

"What a wake-up call," I say softly after a few seconds when the twitching of his hips stops.

“I thought you’d appreciate it,” he says, out of breath in a way that he never was before when he was still an athlete.

“I certainly did,” I reply, hissing as he pulls out of me. “I wouldn’t complain if you did that every morning.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” he smirks, holding himself up above me.

“Is it working?” I ask, giggling when he kisses my nose.

“It might be,” he says, flopping over onto his back and pulling me on top of him.

“I’m not ready to get up yet,” I say, nestling into his chest.

“It’s a good thing we don’t have to do anything today, then,” he chuckles, petting my hair gently. “You know that I love you so much, right?”

“And I love you,” I say, wondering where the declaration came from.

“I just can’t believe I get to spend every day of my life with you,” he continues, still running his hands through my hair. “It still blows my mind that you agreed to come with me that day. I really thought that I’d asked too much and scared you away.”

“Honestly, I can’t believe I did it either,” I admit as I lean harder into his touch. “It’s the best thing I’ve ever done.”

“And you, are the best choice I’ve ever made.”

~The End