



Rent a Pucker (The Hollidates Series #38)

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Category: Sport

Description: Gracie knows how the Hollidates app works, she helps run it after all, but she never imagined she'd want to use it for herself. When she'd gotten the invitation for her sister's wedding eight weeks ago, her life looked a lot different.

She'd thought her plus one had been a sure thing, they were engaged after all. But after a debilitating car accident, he turned into a different person. He recovered physically, but never was the same and he called off the wedding when she realized she could never spend the rest of her life with the person he'd become.

Since then, everyone in her family looks at her with eyes full of pity. Her friends keep trying to set her up with random blind dates that never meet her standards. Now that the wedding is next weekend, she needs a great looking date who knows how to behave himself or she'll be spending the entire reception fending off well meaning family and friends.

Enter Hollidates. Gracie knows that the guy they pick for her will meet every standard she sets and look amazing. The best part is that there are no strings attached. She puts up her profile with the reason being "wedding date" and waits for the matches to roll in. After three days, she doesn't have a single message. And the wedding is tomorrow.

Her sister is hounding her for a name to put on the "plus one" place card that's sat blank since she broke up with her ex fiance. Gracie says the first name that comes to her mind, "Bennett Halliday." Now she has to call her boss with an extremely unusual request: to borrow her son for a wedding date. Will Bennett come to her rescue at the last minute or will she have to embarrassingly show up alone to sit next to an empty chair? Order Rent a Pucker today to see if the man Gracie rents can be her forever date.

Total Pages (Source): 20

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Gracie Hogan

The sun is barely peeking out above the trees as I scramble to gather my things, my hair still damp from the shower. My phone rests on the kitchen counter, video chatting with my best friend Eira. Her face fills the screen, and her eyes are wide like she's already had her coffee, unlike me.

"Gracie, you have to hear about this guy I want to set you up with!" she exclaims.

"Eira, can we talk about this later? I'm already running late for work," I say, trying to find my keys among the clutter on the table.

"Fine, but just let me tell you one thing -" Eira insists.

"Eira," I interrupt, "I've told you before, I'm done with blind dates."

"Come on, Gracie, just give it a chance," she pleads.

"Remember the last guy you set me up with?" I ask, finally finding my keys and slipping them into my bag. "He spent the entire date talking about his collection of antique spoons!"

"Okay, okay, that was a mistake. But this time it's different, I promise!" Eira declares.

"Or what about the guy before that? He brought his mother along!" I say, my voice rising. "I can't keep going through these disastrous attempts at romance. It's exhausting."

"Alright, alright," Eira concedes, raising her hands up in the air in surrender. "But if you change your mind, just let me know."

"Thanks, but no thanks," I mutter, grabbing my bag and rushing out the door.

My life has become a series of unwanted blind dates and pitying looks from friends and family ever since my now ex called off our wedding. The heartbreak is still fresh, but I know it was the right decision. Despite the loneliness that seems to cling to me like a stubborn shadow, I'm determined to regain control of my life and prove that I don't need anyone's pity or unsolicited help. That voyage starts with focusing on my work and leaving the search for love behind, at least for now.

I arrive at the office, a sleek high-rise building in downtown Miami that houses the headquarters of the Holidates App company. Determined not to let my personal life interfere with my professional one, I take a deep breath and head towards my desk.

My role at Holidates is centered around customer relations and user experience. I've always had a talent for understanding people's needs, and it's helped me become an expert in my field. My organized desk and motivational decor give me a sense of control and purpose that I crave in my personal life. As I settle into my chair, I water my potted plant and glance at the framed quote on my wall: "Resilience is the key to success."

"Morning, Gracie!" my coworker, Allison, calls out as she walks past my desk. "How was your weekend?"

"Same old, same old," I reply with a smile, not wanting to delve into the details of my latest blind date debacle. Instead, I steer the conversation towards work. "Any updates on the new features we're rolling out this month?"

"Mostly good news! Just a few minor bugs to fix, but the team is working on that,"

she answers cheerfully. "Oh, and Ms. Halliday sent her regards. She said she's looking forward to our video conference this morning."

I nod, appreciating the working relationship I have with the co-owner of the Holidays App, who is mostly remote but still an integral part of the company. She has three sons who all play professional sports. One son plays professional football, and the other two play pro hockey, which is a world I used to love before everything changed. Now, though, at least it's a small connection to the world of hockey that I can have when she shares stories about her boys.

Coffee in hand, I immerse myself in my tasks, focusing on improving the app's interface and addressing any concerns raised by users, and before I know it, a few hours have passed and the conference call is underway.

"Gracie, do you have any ideas on how we can make the user experience more intuitive?" my boss, Rose Halliday, asks during a brainstorming session.

"Absolutely," I say confidently, launching into a detailed explanation of potential changes and improvements. My colleagues nod in agreement.

Work is the opposite of a boyfriend relationship. Work is data and numbers that are solid and unwavering to always equal a solid answer. Relationships are full of questions with answers that have unstable responses, leaving you to always wonder if you've said or done the right thing. Or did you just fuck it all up.

My stomach grumbles, notifying me that I'm late for lunch again and need a much-needed break. I head to the break room and heat up my meal, then sit at one of the tables by the window, enjoying the warm Miami sunlight streaming in. As I savor my food, I feel a sense of calm wash over me.

That is until my phone buzzes with an incoming text message, instantly breaking my

moment of tranquility. It's from my sister, Hannah.

Hannah: Hey Gracie, just wanted to check in about the wedding. You know you need a plus one, right? Have you found someone yet?

I can practically hear her concern through the screen, making me feel even more nervous than before. My fingers hover over the keyboard, unsure of what to say. I don't want to disappoint her, but I'm also not ready to put myself out there again, especially after my string of disastrous blind dates.

Me: Hey Hannah, don't worry about it. I'm still figuring it out, but I'll have someone by the time the wedding comes around.

Hannah: Okay, just let me know if you need any help. Remember that Eira has some single friends if you're interested.

The mere thought of another blind date makes my stomach churn. I've had enough bad experiences to last a lifetime - the guy who couldn't stop talking about his ex, the one who spent the entire evening on his phone, and, worst of all, the date who tried to take me to a strip club for dinner. No, thank you.

Me: Thanks, but I think I'll manage.

The last thing I need is for Hannah or Eira to set me up with someone else who will only disappoint me further.

I glance at the clock on my phone and realize that lunch is almost over. With a sigh, I gather my things and prepare to return to work. As I head back to my desk, I reaffirm my commitment to focus on my career and let love come to me when it's ready – or not at all. And if that means going solo to my sister's wedding, so be it. What's most important right now is reclaiming my life, dignity, and sense of self-worth.

Settling back into my chair at the office, I shake off the lingering feelings of doubt. The recap notes that I'm typing out for the meeting earlier comfort me because this is where I excel, which is in my job as a customer relations and user experience specialist at the Holidates app company.

I take a deep breath and refocus on the task at hand. My current project involves analyzing user feedback to identify areas for improvement in our app's interface. I meticulously comb through the data, highlighting patterns and trends that will help us enhance the overall user experience. This level of attention to detail has earned me recognition within the company and allowed me to establish a strong working relationship with Rose.

Throughout the afternoon, I immerse myself in my work, letting the hum of technology around me bring me peace. I may not have everything figured out in my personal life, but in my career, I know I can make a difference.

As the day draws to a close, I look over the progress I've made and feel accomplished. I've managed to identify several key areas where we can improve our app, and I know my contributions will ultimately lead to a better experience for our users.

I wrap up my work and prepare to head home, but the nagging thoughts about my sister's wedding and finding a plus one persist. I try to push them aside. I've already made the decision to focus on my own well-being and happiness. However, deep down, I feel the weight of expectation bearing down on me.

With a sigh, I gather my belongings and leave the office. I step out into the bustling streets of downtown Miami and tell myself that I'll figure it out somehow – after all, resilience is the key to success, right?

How is it that when you have a focus in your mind, then you seem to automatically

always start to see those things right in front of you? It's like when you buy a new car, and immediately you start seeing the same type of car everywhere. When you never noticed it before.

It's like now. Every day as I walk down the same busy street I've walked down for a year now from my office. Now I notice couples walking hand in hand or laughing over a shared joke. Seeing it makes a part of me miss that kind of connection. Yet, a flash of the last blind date disaster appears in my mind, and I shake my head.

"Focus on work, Gracie," I mutter to myself, trying to regain control of my thoughts.

The Daily Grind, a local coffee shop and cafe that my coworkers and I frequent for our coffee fix comes into view. I could seriously use a pick-me-up right now, and decide to remedy that by swinging the glass door open and stepping in.

"Hey, Gracie!" calls out Allison, as she spots me from a corner table. She's joined by a few others from the Holidates office, all gathered around a laptop, deep in discussion.

"Hey!" I smile warmly and approach them. "What are you guys working on?"

"Going over some final details for the upcoming Miami Kings game event. We had an unusual amount of date request for it," Allison explains. "Trying to iron out any possible issues with the app's integration."

"Ah, the Kings," I say with a small smile, recalling Rose's son, Bennett, that plays for them. "Have you figured out if the requests are legit or is it a glitch in the app?"

"It's all legit. We see that now, thanks to your earlier suggestions about the bug fixes," Mark chimes in, giving me an appreciative nod. "Your attention to detail has been invaluable."

"Thanks, Mark. I'm just doing my part to ensure our users have the best experience possible," I reply modestly.

"Anyway, we should let you get home," Allison says, noticing my bag and the tired lines around my eyes. "We'll catch up tomorrow at the office."

"Sounds good," I agree, waving goodbye as I order my to go coffee and exit the cafe. Their words of affirmation soothe my frayed nerves.

Miami's sights and sounds surround me on the rest of my way home, and I'm so grateful for the life I've built here.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Bennett Halliday

The cold hasn't quite left my muscles as we step off the ice and into the warmer air of the locker room as steam rises off our bodies. I tug at the hem of my practice jersey, peeling the damp fabric away from my skin.

"Alright, guys," I start, locking eyes with Jackson and Ethan, who are still riding the high of their jokes. "We've had our fun, but let's get real for a second."

They both nod, the shift in the atmosphere tangible. We all know what's coming. The memory of last season's sting is etched in us like a bad tattoo.

"Last year..." My voice trails off, not wanting to finish the sentence.

"Left a damn bitter taste, man," Ethan finishes for me, his usual grin replaced by a tight-lipped frown.

"Exactly. We can't have a repeat of that," I assert. "We need to be dialed in this year. Every practice, every game — it counts."

"Agreed. Focus is key," Jackson adds, stripping off his tape and tossing it into the trash can. "No more screwing around."

"Damn right. We're better than that. Better than second place," I say.

"First place or bust," Ethan says, bumping my fist.

"Let's make sure the Ice Palace becomes the fortress no team wants to enter," I challenge them, invoking the name of our home arena like a sacred mantra.

"Kings don't settle for less," Jackson agrees as we share a look that doesn't need words.

"Let's bring that cup home this year." The image of us hoisting the trophy igniting a fire in my veins.

"For sure, man," they echo back as we break apart to go to our lockers and then hit the showers.

Just a few minutes later, I'm chuckling as I shove my gloves into my duffel bag when Jackson claps a hand on my shoulder.

"Man, the rink's freezin' today, huh?" he says. "Look, I got icicles on my hair. Oh, and speaking of cold, how's the love life, Benny Boy? You're the last Halliday on the market."

"Ha, like being 'on the market' is a bad thing." I roll my eyes. The Halliday brothers – we're practically a professional athlete dynasty, but while my siblings have all settled down with their partners, here I am, still playing the field.

Mom's even starting to drop those 'When will I have grandkids from you?' bombs. But commitment? That's one puck I'm not ready to catch just yet.

"Bro, your family gatherings must feel like speed dating events now, with everyone trying to set you up," Ethan chimes in.

"Shit, it's more like an intervention, since you know that my mom is part owner of Holidates App and matchmaking is her job," I snort. "But let's drop it, okay?"

Tonight's about beers and chilling, not my nonexistent love life."

"Fair enough," Jackson concedes. "Let's hit The Rinkside Tavern then."

We spill out into the Miami night make the short walk to Rinkside. It's our usual spot, where the beer flows as freely as the banter.

"First round's on me," I announce as we claim a booth, the worn leather creaking under our weight. Jackson and Ethan make themselves comfortable.

"Make mine a double," Ethan hollers and winks at a group of women by the bar. Jackson's already talking strategy for our next game, gesturing with hands that seem too large for his pint glass.

"Sure thing." I head toward the bar, my mind going to a place where I can take the pressure off.

Tonight, I'll let myself relax because tomorrow, we train, and the cycle starts again.

A few beers down, and the guys are getting annoying. So, I scan the crowd to people watch, when she catches my eye. She's leaning against the bar, a red dress clinging to her curves like it's got a mind of its own, and a cascade of dark curls that beg for fingers to get lost in them.

"Ben, you in or out on this?" Ethan's voice cuts through my thoughts, but I barely register his words.

"Out," I say without looking at him, my gaze fixed on the woman. There's something about her, an energy that's pulling me in.

"Man's got a target locked," Jackson chuckles, following my line of sight. "Give 'em

hell, Halliday."

"Watch and learn, boys," I throw back over my shoulder as I break from our booth and stride toward the bar with purpose.

"Can I buy you a drink?" I ask her, sliding into the empty space beside her. She turns to me, those dark eyes surveying me with a hint of amusement.

"Only if you're having one with me," she counters.

"Two Macallan 18s," I tell the bartender. It's bold and extravagant, but so is she. "I'm not here to just play."

She raises an eyebrow, impressed or intrigued, I can't tell. When her hand brushes mine as we take our drinks, that confirms she's good to roll with my dirty thoughts of how this night can end up.

"Cheers." Her lips promise things that have my body heating up.

"Cheers, drink up, and let's get out of here," I instruct.

With a silent nod, she does just that, and we are soon stepping outside the Rinkside Tavern with her hand tucked into the crook of my arm.

"Your chariot awaits." I gesture toward the idling black sedan across the street.

"Such a gentleman," she teases with that same sultry look she gave me from the bar.

I help her into the backseat of the Uber and shut the door before the driver can ask where I'm sitting, leaning down to the open window instead.

"Make sure she gets home safe," I tell him, slipping a couple of extra bills through the gap. Confusion flickers across his face, mirrored in hers as she peers out at me.

"Aren't you coming?" she asks.

"Rain check," I say with a smile and a wink. "Goodnight."

I back away from the car, hands in pockets, watching as it merges with the traffic and disappears into the night.

"Damn," I mutter under my breath, pulling out my phone for another Uber. It arrives quicker than the last, a nondescript car that doesn't smell like jasmine or hold the gaze of a woman who may or may not have been more than just a one-night stand.

"Good evening, Sir?" the new driver asks as I buckle in, his eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror.

"Good evening," I reply, my voice flat as I silently wait to arrive at my townhouse and the calm of the suburbs.

"Here we are," the driver announces, pulling up to the curb outside my place. I thank him, stepping out into the quiet, and watch as he drives off, taking with him the last threads of what might have been a typical end to an evening.

Alone now, truly alone, I shove my hands deeper into my pockets and head inside.

I flip on the lights, the door closes behind me with a click, and I toss my keys onto the side table and make a beeline for the living room.

I sink into the couch as the springs give their creak of protest. With a sigh, I grab the remote and aim it at the mammoth TV.

A flick of my thumb, and the 135-inch screen blazes to life. The home screen stares back at me, a grid of options. Still, I swipe through the selections, the sound of each click punctuating the stillness.

I scan through the channel apps until my finger hovers. Then, with a click of the remote, the TV allows me the opportunity to dive into the depths of late-night channels that promise a different kind of action than what I get on the ice.

It's a channel that doesn't require much in the way of emotional investment. It's all flesh and fantasy, and right now, that's about all I can handle. I scroll past the categories and titles until one catches my eye.

Classic.

I almost laugh, but there's no humor in it, just a hollow recognition. On the screen, a woman with bright red lips is commanding attention, her mouth working magic on some anonymous guy lucky enough to be on that couch. He's just sitting there, lost in the moment, and who can blame him?

I shift on the couch and release my hard cock from my jeans, my fingers wrapping around the throbbing need between my legs. The TV flickers across my skin as I watch those bright red lips swallow the man's shaft and bob up again, over and over. The raspy breaths escaping my lips sync with the low, carnal moans coming from the speakers.

I grunt under my breath, the friction building heat that spirals through me. It's a raw, unadulterated sensation.

The woman on the screen is relentless. I can almost feel the slick warmth of her mouth, imagining it's me on that couch.

My grip tightens, movements quickening, chasing that high that I know is just within reach.

"Shit," I gasp as the pressure mounts, a familiar tension winding up inside me. The sound of my heartbeat thunders in my ears, drowning out everything else. I'm close, so damn close.

It hits, making my body tense up. Pleasure crashes over me, a wave of release that leaves me gasping, my body jerking slightly with each pulse. For a few seconds, there's nothing else in the world—not the ice, not the pressures, not the empty townhouse—just the blinding white of orgasm obliterating every thought.

When it fades, I'm left panting, a sheen of sweat cooling on my skin. The screen before me blurs into insignificance, and I swipe at my forehead, chuckling at the absurdity of finding solace in the arms of solitude.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Gracie

A gust of warm Miami air greets me as I rush out of The Daily Grind, my favorite coffee shop, juggling a tray filled with steaming cups and a large bag slung over my shoulder. I swipe at my hair whipping around my face.

"Absolutely," I say into my Bluetooth headset, my voice hurried but confident. "I'll have those mock-ups ready for you by this afternoon."

My eyes scan the busy street, searching for an opening in the crowd. It's not until I take a quick step forward that I realize my mistake. My body collides with something solid, and I brace myself for the inevitable disaster of spilled coffee and crushed cups. But it never comes.

"Whoa, easy there!" a deep voice exclaims. A pair of strong hands effortlessly steadies the drinks tray, saving it from catastrophe. Relief floods through me, followed quickly by embarrassment as I look up to meet the gaze of the man who saved my morning—Bennett Halliday, one of my boss's sons.

"Thank you so much," I stammer, heat creeping up my neck. His piercing green eyes seem to see right through me. Bennett stands tall with an athletic build that leaves no doubt about his prowess on the ice. His short-cropped blond hair is tousled, giving him an approachable, boy-next-door charm despite his rugged good looks.

"Happy to help," he replies with a smile, the corner of his mouth lifting ever so slightly. His calm demeanor seems at odds with the chaotic city around us. Intriguing.

"Sorry for running into you like that," I apologize, taking the tray from him and adjusting my bag on my shoulder. "I was just... I'm in a hurry."

"Looks like it," Bennett chuckles, his eyes lingering on the unstable tower of cups. "Well, I won't keep you any longer."

"Yes, Ms. Halliday. I'm okay. Just stumbled a little," I say into the headset, my voice steady once more. "I'll be back in the office shortly, and we can discuss the changes you'd like to see."

When I look back up from adjusting my bag over my shoulder, piercing greens are staring back at me, making my heart skip a beat.

"Oh, umm, thank you again for saving me," I stammer, offering a small smile before turning on my heel and continuing down the sidewalk.

If we had met under different circumstances, possibly one of those stupid blind dates, could we have shared something more than a fleeting moment of connection? Yeah, no. I shoot that thought down, and my mind returns to the world of deadlines and professional obligations.

Although, it's hard to shake the memory of Bennett's strong hands and warm smile.

I reach the office in record time and sit the tray of drinks down on the break room counter, still trying to shake off my lingering thoughts of Bennett. I know who he is, how his mother is directly involved with the Holidates app, and how any entanglement between us could lead to potential complications. It's a risk I can't afford to take or even sniff in my current position. Shit, who's to say he felt what I felt when we bumped into each other.

"Is everything okay, Gracie?" my coworker Allison asks as she grabs her coffee from

the tray. "You look a little flustered."

"Fine, fine," I reassure her and take another deep breath. "Just had a minor collision outside. Nothing serious."

"Ah, I see," Allison responds, raising an eyebrow at me before heading back to her desk.

I grab my own drink, take a sip, and let its warmth engulf me. It's futile trying to keep Bennett out of my mind, but I must focus on my work.

"Alright, Ms. Halliday, I'm back at my desk now," I say into my Bluetooth headset, ready to continue our discussion. "Let's go over those changes you mentioned earlier."

As I dive into the conversation, I force myself to concentrate on the task at hand.

"Thank you for your feedback, Ms. Halliday," I tell her once we wrap up our call. "I'll make sure to implement these changes and send you an updated draft by the end of the day."

"Sounds good, Gracie," she replies before hanging up.

Throughout the day, I keep my focus on work, determined not to let thoughts of Bennett distract me. However, as the hours pass and the sun starts to set outside my office window, I find it harder and harder to ignore the quiet ache in my chest.

Finally, I tackle the last of my tasks, right as my phone buzzes with a text message. Glancing down, I see it's from my sister, and I groan.

Hannah: Gracie, Mom and I are trying to finish the seating chart for the reception.

Who's your date? We need a name!

I sigh, looking away from my computer screen for a moment. It's not like I haven't been reminded about this multiple times already. My mom and sister are relentless, determined to ensure I have a date for my sister's wedding.

Hannah: Mom wants to know too.

The pressure is mounting, and my frustration grows alongside it.

Shit. I can't avoid this forever. I make a decision then – one that might just solve my current predicament and silence my family's constant badgering.

Opening a new browser tab, I navigate to Holidates' website, the very app company I work for. If anyone can find me a noncommittal date for this wedding, it's them. With a hint of desperation, I begin creating my profile.

"Looking for a charming, easygoing date for a family wedding," I type into the description box. "Just good company and perhaps some witty banter while at a family wedding."

As I upload a carefully chosen photo, I feel a slight twinge of defeat.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Bennett

I glide effortlessly across the ice, surrounded by the excited laughter and shouts of children. Their tiny feet wobble in their skates as I guide them through their first steps on the rink. This is a perk of being a Miami Kings player. We give back to the community. There's something deeply rewarding about seeing the excitement on these kids' faces as they learn to skate.

"Hey, Ben!" one of the kids calls out, tugging on my sleeve. "Watch me go!"

"Alright, buddy," I say, smiling at the determination in his eyes. "Show me what you got." He takes off, arms flailing, making me chuckle.

After a few more laps around the rink, it's time to head home. My muscles are craving a hot shower and some rest, but I'm still buzzing from the energy of the event. I toss my gear into my bag and make my way to my townhouse, just a short drive from the arena.

As soon as I step inside, shedding my jacket and kicking off my shoes, my phone buzzes on the kitchen counter, and my brother Cole's name flashes across the screen.

"Hey, man, what's up?" I ask, settling onto a barstool.

"Nothing much, little bro," Cole replies. "Just checking in. How was the charity event?"

"Good, good," I say, leaning back. "You know, teaching kids to skate, making dreams

come true."

"Ha! Always the humble one." He chuckles. "But seriously, I'm proud of you. You're doing great things for those kids."

"Thanks, Cole," I say. "But enough about me. How's the football superstar doing?"

"Living the dream, as always," he quips, and I can practically hear him rolling his eyes. "But seriously, things are good. Training's been intense, but that's to be expected."

"Nice, nice," I nod.

"Hey, speaking of dreams coming true," Cole says, a teasing edge to his voice, "I heard Mom talking about some employee at her company. Gracie, I think? She mentioned you two had met."

"Gracie?" I hesitate, recalling the girl I bumped into. "I met a woman that I literally ran into on the street the other day downtown. She sounded like she was on a work call with Mom, but with the rink being so close to Holidates Headquarters, that didn't really surprise me. Why?"

"Ah, no reason," Cole replies, the grin evident in his voice. "Just thinking she might be good for you, you know? She's not exactly your usual type, but sometimes that's a good thing."

"Nice try, Cole," I say with a laugh. "But I'd never date anyone who works with or for Mom. That's just asking for trouble. Complications, conflicts of interest... you name it."

"Alright, alright," Cole concedes. "Just thought I'd throw it out there."

"Besides," I add, trying to steer the conversation away from my love life, "you and Weston are the ones who've settled down already. Just because I'm younger than you, that doesn't mean that I have to follow in your footsteps with everything I do."

"Love comes along when you're not looking for it," Cole says. "Trust me on this one."

"Ha! Not for me, bro," I reply. "Not going to commit to just one woman. Nope, not going to happen."

"Never say never, Ben," Cole advises, his tone is playful. "You might be surprised."

"Nope. That's still a no go for me," I chuckle, knowing he's just trying to look out for me. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need a shower and some sleep."

"Alright, take care," Cole responds. "Catch you later."

"Later," I say, hanging up the phone.

Gracie. So, that's her name.

I walk towards the bathroom and think about how her nervous smile was adorable but shake my head, trying to push the thoughts away. Cole's words echo in my mind. However, I'm not ready to admit he might be right. Not yet, anyway.

Commitment has never been my thing. I've always enjoyed the freedom of being able to do what I want, when I want, without having to answer to anyone. With my hockey career taking up most of my time and energy, there's not much left for serious relationships anyway.

I turn on the shower, letting the water heat up as I peel off my clothes. My thoughts

refuse to leave Gracie alone. It's not like I'm completely against the idea of a relationship, but the thought of being tied down to one person... it scares me. Maybe it's the fear of losing my independence, or maybe it's the pressure of upholding someone else's expectations.

I step into the shower and feel the hot water cascading over my body, so I close my eyes and try to focus on anything but her. It's no use – her green eyes, her chestnut hair, that nervous smile. Why am I so drawn to her?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Gracie

It's been three days since I tried finding a wedding date through Holidates, and so far, no matches. I'm about to throw my phone out of my fourth story apartment window because it's been buzzing relentlessly with messages from my sister, demanding to know who my plus one will be.

Hannah: Gracie, you need to give me a name for that place card! You said you had one, and now all I need is the name!

I sigh, feeling the walls close in as I remember Thanksgiving dinner just a few hours ago. The belly is still full of turkey, now accompanied by a slight bitterness of regret. My family didn't hold back, interrogating me about who I'd be bringing to my sister's wedding. Their well-intentioned concern felt suffocating.

My thoughts are a whirlwind of anxiety as I contemplate my options. I know I have to give them a name soon, but who?

Feeling the pressure mounting, I call Eira. She's the only one who might help me find a solution. She's already tried so hard with setting me up on those horrible blind dates, but she's still my last hope.

"Hey, Gracie! What's up?" Eira answers.

"Hi. I'm in a bit of a bind," I admit, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice. "You know how I need a date for my sister's wedding? Well, I kind of told them I have one already, but I don't. And they've already paid for the headcount, so it's too

late to change."

"Uh-oh," Eira murmurs softly, understanding the gravity of the situation. "See, if one of those weird dates would have turned out, then you wouldn't need to be working right now."

"I know. I know. Anyway, now's it's apparently drop-dead time, per my mom and Hannah. Is there any chance your brother could go with me? Just as a favor?" I ask tentatively.

"Gracie, I wish he could, but he's going to be out of town for work," Eira says. "I'm really sorry."

"Ugh, I should've asked him sooner," I mutter. I thoughtlessly trace the patterns on my coffee table, feeling the rough edges beneath my fingertips.

"Hey, don't beat yourself up about it," Eira reassures me. "We'll figure something out, okay?"

"I just don't know what to do right now," I confess. Even though I am not looking for love, the prospect of attending my sister's wedding alone is unbearable. I can practically feel the pitying glances and whispered judgments piercing through me.

"Look, let's brainstorm some ideas tomorrow, alright?" Eira asks.

"Okay, thanks. I'll talk to you tomorrow," I sigh.

The next morning, I don't even have a chance to call Eira to discuss strategy before the shrill ringing of my phone cuts through the air like a knife. I glance at the screen and see that it's my sister – again.

"Gracie, this is ridiculous!" Hannah practically screams into the phone as soon as I answer. "I need that name NOW!"

"Okay, okay," I say, trying to keep my voice steady under the weight of her anger. My heart races as I desperately search for a solution. I can't take it anymore, and the first name that comes to mind escapes my lips: "Bennett Halliday."

"Finally!" Hannah huffs. "That wasn't so hard, was it? See you at the wedding, Gracie. And make sure your date behaves himself." She hangs up without another word, leaving me to deal with the consequences of my impulsive decision.

Bennett Halliday – the one I've dreamed about and inappropriately fantasized about since running into him a few days ago. My mind races, playing out scenarios of how I might convince him to accompany me to the wedding. The thought of being close to him, feeling his strong arms around me as we dance, has me all kinds of worked up.

But then reality sets in, and I'm left grappling with the fact that I've just committed to bringing a man I don't know to my sister's wedding. A professional hockey player, no less. What have I gotten myself into?

Shit. You're an idiot.

There's no turning back now. With a deep breath, I steel my resolve. I'll find a way to make this work. I have to. For my own dignity, and for any shred of pride I may have left.

"Oh, Benny," I whisper to myself. "You have no idea what you're in for."

The next few hours are a whirlwind of strategizing and anxiety. I pace around my office, figuring out how the hell to get Bennett to be my date to this wedding.

After a sudden stop at my desk, I tuck a stray lock of hair behind my ear, straighten my spine, and pick up my phone.

I tap and scroll through my contacts until I find the one I need: Ms. Halliday, Bennett's mother, the co-owner of the Holidates app... my boss. My heart flutters as I tap her name, knowing this call may be my ticket to salvaging what's left of my pride. Or what's going to lead me to be jobless.

"Hello, Ms. Halliday," I start hesitantly.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Bennett

Being on the ice is the one place that calms me. Here, I'm in my element, free from the expectations and pressures that come with being a professional hockey player. Sweat drips down my forehead as I glide across the empty rink I rented for solo practice, taking aim at the net before snapping the puck forward.

Damn .

The puck ricochets off the post instead of finding its mark. I've always been my own harshest critic, but I can't afford to let any weaknesses slip through the cracks.

My phone rings from the bench, breaking my concentration. I skate over to the bench and fish it out of my duffle bag, sighing when I see Mom's name light up on the screen.

"Hey, Mom," I say. "What's up?"

"Ben, sweetheart, I need a favor," she starts. My guard instantly goes up. After Cole's strange call yesterday, and now Mom has this tone that I know all too well.

"Mom, if this is about the Holidates app again, I've told you a thousand times, I don't want to get involved."

"No, it's not that," she insists, but I can tell she's holding something back. "Well, not exactly. There's a coworker of mine who needs a date for an event, and I think you'd be perfect for it."

"Wait, what?" I choke out a laugh, disbelief settling in my chest. "You want me to go on a date with someone from your work? Come on, Mom, you know I'm not into that kind of thing."

"Please, just hear me out." I can hear the genuine concern in her voice. "She's a lovely girl, and she's really in a bind. It would mean the world to her if you'd help her out."

"Mom, I have enough on my plate with the team and trying to stay focused on my career," I say, my patience wearing thin. "I don't have time to play matchmaker or be someone's arm candy."

"Ben, it's just one night, and I promise there are no strings attached," Mom says. "I wouldn't ask unless it was important."

As much as I want to resist, there's a feeling of loyalty that tugs at me. Family has always been a priority, even when it comes to ridiculous requests like this one. Although, I feel skeptical about what I'm getting myself into.

"Fine," I sigh. "But I'm only doing this as a favor to you."

"Thank you, Ben. You won't regret it." Despite her words, I already find myself questioning what I've agreed to.

As I end the call, I wonder what I've signed up for. My hands form into fists at my sides, and I force myself to take a deep breath and go over a few things. This is just two nights: one to meet and get the plans set, and one for the night of the event. There are no strings attached. I'm doing it for family.

I step out of my townhouse and make my way to the agreed-upon location, a dive bar that I like to frequent.

I know I should be more open to the idea of meeting someone new, but the truth is, I crave the solitude of staying home most nights.

I'm not able to think about it much longer as I park my car and walk into Marley's.

This is a place I've come to know well. The distinct aroma of aged whiskey and faint cigar smoke hits my senses as soon as I walk in. Used leather barstools perch under the polished wooden bar top. Neon signs flicker against exposed brick walls adorned with vintage sports memorabilia, while a classic rock playlist adds to the nostalgic vibe.

I'm here for Mom, I remind myself, scanning the room for any sign of the woman I'm supposed to meet.

"Hey, Ben!" a voice calls out from behind the bar, drawing my attention away from my search. "The usual?"

"Sure thing, Dave," I reply with a nod and make my way over. He's been a fixture at this local watering hole for as long as I've been coming here, and on more than one occasion, he's served up a cold one alongside some much-needed advice. Tonight, however, I don't have time for any heart-to-hearts – I'm on a mission, whether I like it or not.

As Dave sets a frosty beer down in front of me, I rake my fingers through my short-cropped blond hair and let out a sigh. This whole situation feels wrong, like I'm betraying my own principles. But what choice do I have? Family comes first, even when it means going along with Mom's harebrained schemes.

"Waiting for someone?" Dave asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Sort of," I mumble, taking a swig of my beer and allowing the cool liquid to slide

down my throat, temporarily soothing my nerves. "It's complicated."

"Isn't it always?" he chuckles, shaking his head before moving on to tend to another customer.

I turn back to survey the room, searching for the mystery woman who has somehow managed to ensnare me in this mess. My gaze flits from face to face, but none of them seem to be looking for someone that they don't know.

"Excuse me," a soft voice says, breaking through my thoughts. "Bennett?"

I glance down to find a pair of wide, inquisitive eyes staring up at me. She's petite and dressed in a simple black dress that clings to her curves just enough to be intriguing. Her hair cascades over her shoulders in loose waves, framing her delicate features.

"Uh, yeah," I stammer, taken aback by the sudden realization that this is her – the woman I bumped into in front of the cafe.

"Hi," she says with a tentative smile. "I'm Gracie."

She fidgets with the strap of her purse, betraying a hint of vulnerability that I wouldn't have expected from someone who looks so put-together.

"Sorry if I startled you that day at the cafe," she continues, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "I didn't mean to barge in like that."

"No, it's fine," I say, forcing a smile as I try to wrap my head around this unexpected development. It's not every day that a woman I literally run into ends up becoming the center of my attention – and potentially the source of my future headaches.

"Did your mom tell you why we're meeting?" Gracie asks, her gaze flickering between me and the bartender, who's busy mixing drinks for another group of patrons.

"Something about doing her a favor for a coworker?" I reply, my words sounding more like a question than a statement. "I'll be honest, I wasn't really listening."

"Ah." Gracie nods, her lips pressed into a thin line. "Well, I guess I should introduce myself properly. I'm Gracie Leighton, your mom's... uh, employee."

"Right," I say, my brows furrowing as I recall my mother's insistence that I attend some event with this woman.

"Okay," I start, trying to get to the point and ease this tension. "What exactly do I have to do?"

Gracie takes a deep breath and looks me straight in the eye. "I just need us to attend this event together – as a couple."

"As a couple?" I choke out, nearly spitting out my drink.

"I have to show up with some decent looking 'eye candy' on my arm because I kind of lied to my sister and mom that I've been dating someone for a little while now." She gives me a wry smile, and I'm struck by how unapologetically blunt she is.

"Let me get this straight," I say, shaking my head. "I'm just supposed to pretend to be your boyfriend for one night to make your sister and mom happy?"

"Basically," Gracie confirms. "It's nothing serious, just a little white lie to keep up appearances."

As tempting as the idea sounds – spending an evening with this intriguing woman – I can't shake the feeling that it's a slippery slope. The last thing I need is to get entangled in someone else's life when I'm struggling to keep my own together.

"Look," I say firmly, setting my drink down on the scratched wooden bar counter. "I don't mind helping out, but I have to be clear about something: this is just a one-time thing. No strings attached. I'm not looking for any kind of relationship."

Gracie studies me for a moment before nodding slowly. "I understand. I'm not really in a place for anything serious either."

"Good," I reply, relieved that we're on the same page. The thought of attending this event with Gracie becomes less daunting now that I know there won't be any complications.

"Besides," she adds with a little smile, "who says you have to be in a relationship to enjoy a night out together?"

"True," I concede. Maybe this won't be so bad after all.

Her eyes lock onto mine as she leans in closer, her breath warm against my cheek. "You have nothing to worry about, Bennett," she assures me. "I promise, there are no expectations beyond this one date."

It feels like we're on the same wavelength.

"Alright," I agree. "But let's make sure we're clear on the details, so there aren't any surprises."

"Of course," she replies, sitting back in her seat and crossing her legs elegantly. She's poised and professional, yet I notice the way her fingers toy with the edge of her

napkin.

"So, when is this event?" I ask, taking a sip of my drink.

"Next Saturday evening," Gracie answers promptly. "It's my sister's wedding. There will be vows, then dinner, dancing, and speeches... you know, the usual fancy affair."

My mind races through my schedule, trying to determine if I have any hockey-related commitments that night. Thankfully, it's one of our rare off days, so there won't be any conflicts. "Okay, I can do that."

"Great. I'll pick you up at your place around 7pm, if that works for you?" Her relief is evident as she uncrosses her legs and sits up straighter.

"Sounds good," I agree, making a mental note to have my suit cleaned and ready to go.

"Since I'm not in the bridal party, I don't have to wear anything particular. Are there any preferences on what color you'd like me to wear?" she inquires. "I want to make sure we look good together."

"No, I have a dark grey suit that will go with anything," I reply with a chuckle, intrigued by her confidence.

"Very well," she says.

Gracie and I exit Marley's, and we pause under a streetlight.

"Thanks for agreeing to do this," she says softly, her eyes searching mine.

My initial skepticism has been gradually replaced by a sense of intrigue and curiosity.

My eyes lock with Gracie, and I realize that I'm looking forward to our date more than I'd care to admit. "You're welcome," I reply softly.

"See you Saturday?" she asks.

"Saturday," I confirm.

"Goodnight, Bennett," she whispers, turning to walk away.

"Goodnight, Gracie."

I watch her leave, her hips swaying hypnotically as she disappears into the parking lot.

Once I'm alone, I take a deep breath and try to process everything that's happened tonight. On one hand, agreeing to go on this date feels like a risky move, considering my desire to keep my personal life private. On the other hand, there's something undeniably alluring about Gracie that I can't quite put my finger on.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Gracie

The wedding venue is beautiful with a lush garden that I'm walking through and searching for my date. My eyes scan the well-dressed crowd.

There he is, standing near the entrance to the garden, his tuxedo fitting him like it was made just for him. I've seen Bennett countless times at the Miami Kings' games, but somehow, seeing him here, dressed to the nines, makes him seem even more attractive. It's hard not to be impressed by how he cleans up.

"Hey, Gracie," he calls out as he spots me. "Nice dress, but I'm afraid you're still not quite on my level of elegance."

I let out a soft chuckle, knowing full well that he's joking. The teasing nature of our conversation is nice. It makes my heart beat a little faster and my cheeks flush with warmth.

"Really? I didn't realize we were competing. Although, I have to say, you do look good all cleaned up," I retort.

He raises an eyebrow. "Well, when you put it that way, maybe we're both winners tonight." He winks at me, making my cheeks flush.

We quickly find our seats in the front row, and soon the wedding march song plays from hidden speakers as my sister's wedding unfolds before me.

It's hard to stifle a giggle as I take in the sight of the bridesmaids, all dressed like

tropical birds in a riot of colors. The groomsmen sport flamingo-pink ties and matching boutonnieres, and even the officiant has gotten in on the action with a Hawaiian shirt beneath his robe.

"Seriously?" I whisper, shaking my head in amusement at my sister's boldness. She always did know how to make a statement. I'm genuinely touched and find it endearing to see her embrace her own vision of what a wedding should be.

As the ceremony continues, I glance over to Bennet. It's comforting to know that he's there.

"Is everything okay?" I mouth silently to him, raising an eyebrow in question.

Bennett nods and gives me a reassuring smile. I mentioned to him in our first meeting that I just recently had a breakup and wasn't uncertain about how I'd feel at my sister's wedding. Bringing up all those bad memories was not going to be fun.

So, he knows how difficult attending this wedding is for me. The fact that he's here makes it a little easier to bear. There's something about the way he gazes at me, full of intensity and tenderness, makes my heart skip a beat.

"Okay," I mouth back, allowing a small smile to play across my lips.

Right after the officiator announces the happy couple as married, everyone claps and cheers while they walk down the aisle hand in hand.

We file out of our seats one row at a time and go to the reception hall.

The large room inside the venue has elegantly arranged tables and guests milling about and we stand close by the bar, waiting to be told what we are supposed to do next.

"Gracie," Bennett says in a low voice as leans closer to me, his warm breath tickling my ear. "You really do look beautiful tonight."

I lean into him just slightly. "Thank you, Bennett. You're not so bad yourself."

As our eyes lock, I feel a slow, sweet tension building between us. We both smile at each other and look away as the bridal party enters with a choreographed dance to kick off the party.

We dine, chat, and drink, and before long, I'm not sure how many hours it's been, but my feet are starting to ache in these shoes.

"Gracie!" Bennett's voice rings out across the room, pulling me from my thoughts. He's already working his charm on a group of my relatives, and as I approach, I'm impressed by his ability to effortlessly deflect any questions about our relationship with clever stories and witty banter.

"Looking good, Bennett," I say, playfully nudging him with my elbow. "You've got quite the fan club going here."

"Ah, well, you know how it is," he replies, flashing me a grin. "Just doing my part to keep your admirers at bay."

It's clear that Bennett is enjoying himself, and I have to admit, I'm enjoying watching him work his magic on the crowd.

"Another drink?" he asks as he gestures towards the bar.

"Lead the way," I reply, allowing him to guide me and our fingers brush together as we navigate the crowded room.

As the evening wears on, we indulge in more than a few drinks. Somewhere between drinks four and five, I start to feel the warmth of the alcohol coursing through my veins, making me bold. The chemistry between us intensifies with each passing moment.

"Having fun?" he asks, leaning in close so that I can hear him over the music.

"More than I thought I would. You're quite the charmer, you know," I admit.

"Only when I'm in good company." His eyes never leave mine as he says that.

We sway together on the dance floor, and I can feel the electricity between us crackling like a live wire, threatening to ignite at any moment. Part of me wants it to—wants to see what would happen if we let our guard down and gave in to the undeniable attraction that's been building between us all night.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Bennett asks, his voice barely audible above the pounding bass of the music.

"Maybe. Why don't you tell me what you're thinking?" I reply.

He leans in close, his lips brushing against my ear as he murmurs, "I think we could both use a little more privacy."

"Let's find some," I whisper back.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Bennett

I peel off my sweat-soaked jersey as my teammates and I are still riding the high on our latest victory. However, they don't waste any time in giving me grief about not meeting up with them to go out this past weekend.

"Hey, lover boy!" Jackson calls out, his voice dripping with mock sweetness. "How'd that date go Saturday night? Finally found a girl who can put up with you?"

A chorus of chuckles follows, and I roll my eyes, tossing my jersey into the dirty clothes bin. "You guys are hilarious," I retort, maintaining my usual playboy persona. "We had a good time, alright? Nothing to write home about."

"Aw, come on, Ben," Ethan chimes in, grinning mischievously. "Details, man! Did she know who you were?"

"Of course she knew who I was," I reply with a smirk. I'm definitely not going to tell them this date was my mother's doing from her Holidates App. Their relentless teasing doesn't bother me too much. I'm also not going to tell them how our date actually ended... One passionate kiss that left us both breathless and then me walking away and leaving for the night. Was it hard to do? Fuck yeah. But was it the right thing to do? Fuck yeah it was, and I thank that little voice in my head that shouted at me that I was kissing my mother's employee. After that, I made a swift exit and retreated back to my house for a cold shower.

"Damn, Ben, I didn't know your ego could fit in this room," says Ethan, playfully punching my shoulder.

"Hey, it's not my fault I'm so unforgettable," I shoot back, smirking. But truth be told, I find myself thinking about Gracie more than I'd like to admit. It was just one date, nothing serious. Yet, she's pretty stuck in my mind.

"Hey, men," Jackson announces, clapping his hands together. "Who's up for hitting the Rinkside Tavern to celebrate our win tonight? I could use a cold one."

"Count me in," I reply, eager to get my mind off Gracie and join my teammates for some fun. Apparently I've got to remind myself that I'm the Bennett Halliday, Miami Kings hockey star and notorious ladies' man. A single date shouldn't have me so wrapped up.

"Great! Let's get changed and head out," Ethan suggests, and we all agree, grabbing towels and heading for the showers.

As the hot water washes over me, memories of how much fun I had with Gracie at the wedding pop into my head. She was smart, witty, and genuinely interesting to talk to.

"Hey, Ben, you coming?" Jackson calls from outside the shower, snapping me back to reality.

"Yep, just a second!" I answer, turning off the water and quickly drying off.

I pull on my clothes and join my teammates as we head out to the Rinkside Tavern. On any other night, I'd be looking forward to flirting with the women at the bar and enjoying the thrill of the chase. Tonight, as I walk alongside my friends, a nagging feeling in the back of my mind tells me that Gracie might just be different from the rest.

I short car ride and we're entering Rinkside and standing at bar. As soon as we try to order drinks, we are surrounded by women. Some are leaning into whisper in my ear,

touching my arm playfully, or batting their eyelashes at me.

"Hey, Bennett," one woman purrs and moves closer to me. "You played great tonight."

"Thanks," I reply with a practiced grin, but my heart isn't really in it. Even though her perfume is intoxicating and she's throwing me a sultry look, all I can think about is Gracie's laugh and the way her green eyes sparkled when we talked.

I try to shake off the lingering thoughts of Gracie as I engage in light banter with the women around me. Nevertheless, no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to get fully invested in the flirting game like I used to.

"Seriously, Bennett, you're such a catch," another woman chimes in, running her fingers through my hair. Normally I'd be content to let women be this close and touch me, but tonight, it just feels annoying. It's actually a huge turn off. There's only one woman I want this close to me.

Why can't I stop thinking about her? What is it about Gracie that has me so captivated?

I take another long swig of my beer and glance around the bar, searching for some semblance of meaning in the chatter surrounding me. Yet as I scan the room, the only thing that seems to matter is the burning desire to see Gracie again.

"Hey," I say to the woman beside me, gently extricating myself from her grip. "I think I'm gonna call it a night."

She pouts but doesn't protest, and I make my way back to my teammates, who are watching my retreat with raised eyebrows.

"Whoa, what's going on here?" Ethan teases. "Bennett Halliday passing up on a willing lady? Hell must've frozen over!"

"Har har," I shoot back. "I just wasn't feeling it tonight, alright?"

"Or maybe," Jackson grins slyly, "that date you went on has you all twisted up. You've already got one foot out the door, heading to having that marriage certificate, pregnant wife in the kitchen, and white picket fence around the front lawn."

The guys erupt into laughter as heat creeps up my neck. I scoff, shaking my head. "You guys are seriously delusional."

"Come on, Bennett," Ethan chimes in. "We all see how your attitude has changed since that date you went on. And now you're turning down other women? You've gotta admit, it looks pretty suspicious."

"Look, Gracie is cool, and we had a good time," I reply defensively. "However, I'm not about to give up my bachelor status for one date."

"Whatever you say, man," Ethan chuckles, raising his hands in mock surrender. "Just remember, you can't fight love."

"Love?" I snort, rolling my eyes. "You guys are seriously reading way too much into this."

"Alright, alright," Jackson concedes, sensing my growing annoyance. "We'll drop it for now."

I've spent years cultivating an image of a carefree playboy who never gets attached, and I'm not about to let one woman change that.

I take one last look around the bar, a sea of faces blurred by alcohol and dim lighting. None of them are Gracie's. With a sigh, I push through the crowd and step out into the cool night air, my breath visible in the moonlight.

"Hey, where are you going?" Ethan calls after me, but I just wave him off.

"Home," I reply simply, not bothering to look back as I start to walk away. "See you guys at practice."

"Alright, man," he says, his tone a mix of concern and confusion. "Take care."

Before I even make it to my car, my thumb is swiping over to the message icon, and into the conversation with Gracie. With a few other swift clicks of letters of the phone's keyboard and the final send arrow tapped, the message is sent.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Gracie

The clink of hangers and rustle of fabric fills the air as I carry an armful of tulle skirts through the rental shop, my sister's bridesmaids each carrying their own load. A rainbow of dresses drapes over their arms.

"Can you believe how stunning the reception looked with all those peonies everywhere?" Jenna gushes.

"Totally Instagram-worthy," adds Rachel. "And these dresses! I mean, seriously, I'm thinking of renting it again just to take selfies."

I smile, nodding along. Bridesmaid dresses are a foreign territory to me; my role was guest, observer, singleton amongst the paired-up and partnered. Today, I'm only here as a sister's obligation to see that all rentals get returned in time.

"Gracie, didn't you love the color scheme? It was so... what's the word? Vibrant! Yes, vibrant," says Maria.

"Absolutely," I agree, the word slipping out easily. "It was like walking into a sunset—warm, inviting, and full of life." I can appreciate beauty when I see it, even if I'm standing on the sidelines.

"Right? And those centerpieces!" Jenna chimes in, clasping her hands together as if she could physically hold onto the memory.

"Speaking of beautiful things," Rachel throws me a teasing glance, "that guy you

came with—what a looker!"

Heat creeps up my neck. "Oh, Bennett?" I say, trying to keep my voice level, casual. "He cleans up well, doesn't he?"

Their laughter echoes off the walls, mingling with the clatter of returned items and the soft tapping of smartphone screens as they undoubtedly start planning their next social media posts. Meanwhile, I'm mentally swiping left on the idea of getting tangled up in conversations about dates and would-be romances. Sometimes, the best defense is a good offense, and my game plan is to stay on the periphery, a strategy that's served me well since the day I watched my own wedding plans crumble like a badly baked cake.

"Alright, ladies," the store clerk announces, breaking through the giggles and gossip, "you're all set. Thanks for returning everything on time."

"Thanks!" we chorus, and the door jingles a merry goodbye as we step back out into the bright sun.

We're weaving through the throng of Miami's midday crowd when Rachel nudges me with her elbow. "So, Gracie," she starts, drawing the attention of the other girls, "that date of yours. Bennett, was it? He's quite the catch."

"Uh, yeah." I force a smile, adjusting the strap of my purse. The lie tastes like lemon on my tongue, sour and bold. "He's my boyfriend," I add, hoping the extra detail sells it.

"Serious?" Jenna asks, eyebrows arched high like she's fishing for a story.

"Sort of," I hedge, wishing the subject would change as quickly as Miami weather. Although, luck isn't doing me any favors today.

"Girl, you've got to get that locked down and have a ring put on your finger," another bridesmaid pipes up, her tone playful yet insistent. The group giggles, imagining scenarios far removed from the truth.

I'm about to steer the conversation toward safer waters when I notice Carly, a bridesmaid with honey-blonde hair, hanging back. Her lips press into a thin line, and her fingers fidget with the hem of her dress—a clear sign something is offside.

"Actually..." Carly's voice trails off, catching everyone's attention. She's staring at me, and there's an apology swimming in her eyes before she even says what's next. "I saw Bennett last night."

"Out with Gracie?" Rachel queries, tilting her head to look at me.

"No," Carly confesses, her discomfort palpable. "At Rinkside Tavern, with his teammates. And..." She hesitates, looking at me.

"And?" I prompt.

"He was... flirting. With multiple women." The words hang heavy in the humid air, and I feel my carefully constructed defense wobble.

"Flirting how? Like Bennett-flirting or actually flirting?" I challenge, trying to laugh it off while my stomach knots tighter.

"Gracie, I don't want to make assumptions, but it wasn't just friendly banter," Carly adds softly, almost apologetically.

The rest of the girls exchange looks. Silence spreads between us, thick and uncomfortable, and I'm left wondering if my fake romance with Miami's most eligible defenseman is melting away right under my nose.

I squint at the sun piercing through the open window of Rachel's SUV, a glare that somehow feels like an interrogation spotlight. I'm clutching my phone like it's my lifeline as the chat bubbles from last night pop up in my memory, unsolicited and bittersweet.

Bennett texted me late last night. I remember the way my lips had curled into a smile, how my heart had skipped. His message had been the kind of sweet nothing that could make a girl think she was the only one in his world.

The SUV jostles over a speed bump, rattling the wedding paraphernalia in the back. I use the momentary distraction to piece together the two images of Bennett: the one with the tender texts and the one Carly described, charming a bevy of women with that disarming smile of his.

"Everything okay, Gracie?" Jenna asks from the passenger seat, her head cocked to catch my eye in the rearview mirror.

"Yep, all good," I lie, my voice steadier than I feel. "Just thinking about work stuff."

"Speaking of work, do you really work for the Holidates App?" Rachel chimes in, eager to shift gears.

"Uh-huh," I nod, grateful for the change of topic. Nonetheless, even as we dive into tech talk, my brain is doing laps around one gnawing question: If Bennett and I were to drop the pretense and actually try for something real, could I trust him? Could I hand over my fragile heart and not end up getting hurt again?

The girls are laughing, recounting some pre wedding prank involving copious amounts of glitter, but their voices fade to the background. I'm lost in the 'what ifs,' skating circles around the possibility that Bennett might want more than just a one-time fake date arrangement.

"Earth to Gracie!" Rachel's laugh pulls me back again, and I force a grin, nodding along to a story I haven't heard a word of.

Yet behind my green eyes, there's a replay of every move, every glance Bennett and I shared. The problem with players—on the ice or off—is that you never know if they're sticking to the game plan, or if they're about to pull a deke that leaves you grasping at air.

"Girl, you're quiet," Carly observes.

"Sorry," I say, "Just got a lot on my mind."

"Like a certain hockey hunk?" Maria winks, and my stomach does that unwanted somersault again. "Don't worry about what Carly saw. You know that's how professional athletes roll."

"Hmm." I manage a small smile, turning my gaze back to the phone that holds the evidence of Bennett's sweetness—and now, my skepticism.

Can he really be monogamous? The question skates through my thoughts, unbidden and unwelcome. Once a player, always a player, right?

He's charismatic, enigmatic, heart-stoppingly gorgeous on and off the ice. Can a guy like that trade in his bachelor plays for a one-woman show?

"Look, I know we all have our pasts, our... habits. Bennett seems different with you than when I saw him out," Carly says, reaching out to squeeze my shoulder reassuringly.

"Did he?" I murmur, skepticism lacing my voice. The text was sweet, sure, but sweetness can be a guise, honeyed words dripping from a forked tongue. Is Bennett

drizzling sugar just to mask the bitterness?

"Girl, yes!" Carly confirms. "He looked at you like you were the only person in the room. And trust me, that room was full of potential puck bunnies."

"Potential puck bunnies?" My lips curve into a reluctant smile despite the turmoil brewing inside.

"Yes, it's a thing," Maria adds.

"Maybe," I concede, my mind still having doubts. "But can a leopard change his spots? Or a player his... playbook?"

"Only one way to find out," Carly says with a wink.

"Right," I reply, the word tasting like a challenge on my tongue. I reach into my pocket and grip my phone, the cool surface grounding me. As I glance down at the screen, Bennett's name illuminates it once again, and I'm faced with a decision.

Bennett

When I sent Gracie a text last night asking her to go on a date, I didn't get a response until several hours later. Either she was super busy, which I totally understand, or she's unsure. Hell, I'm not certain about dating someone that works for my mom. Really though, let's be honest, I'm using that as an excuse because I'm scared to date at all. There're way too many complications that come with having any sort of female relationships with my career path.

I pull up to Gracie's apartment building. This is our first official date. Not a Holidates setup. Nope. This is the real deal. I check myself in the rearview mirror, raking a hand through my hair, hoping it looks more styled than disheveled.

Her place is one of those cozy enclaves on the outskirts of the city—the kind that makes you forget downtown Miami's bustle is just a short distance away. When I set up the time for this date with Gracie, I told her I'd see her at her door, but she insisted that it was easier for her to just come down to my car and meet me there. Her building looks like one of those locked up luxury style apartment buildings, and I do like the fact that there's a little more safety here.

I send her a quick text that I'm there. Then I wait, tapping a rhythm on the steering wheel with my thumbs.

The door swings open, and she's a vision in a floral sundress that complements her chestnut waves and those striking green eyes of hers. Something's off with her though. The straight line of her lips and how she looks at the ground as she's walking in my direction, it's like she's psyching herself up for something more daunting than a

date.

"Hey," I greet her, stepping out of the car to hold the passenger door open. "You look amazing."

"Thanks." Her smile doesn't quite reach her eyes. I can't put my finger on it, but tension radiates off her in waves.

We exchange pleasantries, but they just hang between us with no real feeling. I focus on the road and drive towards the restaurant but still sneak glances at her. She's here, but not quite. It's like she's mentally bracing for something bad to happen. I don't know where it's coming from or why.

"Everything okay?" I venture.

Gracie nods, but it doesn't fool me. "Just thinking about work stuff," she says.

"Okay, if you're sure," I reply, knowing better than to push. I settle back into my seat. I'm used to reading opponents on the ice, gauging their next move. With Gracie, I'm out of my depth, playing a game I don't fully understand yet.

We make it to the restaurant that I made reservations for us to, and we are quickly seated.

I'm trying to focus on the menu, but my attention keeps drifting back to Gracie. She's tracing the rim of her wine glass with a fingertip, lost in thought.

"Have you decided what you're having?" I ask, hoping to draw her out of whatever shell she's retreated into.

She looks up, blinking as if coming back from somewhere far away. "Uh, yeah. The

salmon, I think," she murmurs.

"Good choice." I flash a grin, trying to lighten the mood. "Heard their chef does wonders with fish."

"Does he now?" She offers a small smile, and for a second, I think I've made progress.

"Absolutely." I lean forward, eager to keep the conversation going. "And the way they pair it with the—"

She cuts me off with a hand raised, her eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that pins me to my spot. "Bennett," she says, "we need to talk about something."

"Sure, anything." My heart starts pounding like it's the final seconds of a tied game.

"It's about... how you are with other women." Gracie's gaze doesn't waver, and there's a hint of steel in her tone that tells me she's not just making conversation.

"Other women?" I repeat, feeling my easy confidence start to slip. I'm suddenly hyper-aware of the other diners, the waitstaff, the space between us at the table. "What about them?"

"The flirting, Bennett. The reputation you have." Her words are direct, and they hit hard. "You're known for being a bit of a playboy."

"Ah." The air rushes out of me, and I'm scrambling for a response.

"Look, Gracie..." I start, then stop. What am I even trying to say? That she's wrong? That she's different? Because she is different—I know it deep down.

"Gracie," I try again, "I'm not gonna pretend I haven't had my fun." I pause, my fingers itching to run through my hair. I resist though, keeping my hands firmly on the table.

Her expression softens, just a fraction, and I hope it's enough for now.

Silence stretches between us again.

"So," Gracie finally breaks the quiet, but her eyes still don't meet mine. "I have to ask. Why did you ask me out tonight? The whole Holidates thing was done at the wedding. You're off the hook, Bennett."

"Off the hook?" I echo. This date was supposed to be the start of something, not an obligation ticking off a checklist.

She nods, still not looking at me. "Yeah. You kept your end of the bargain. Nobody would blame you if you wanted to call it quits."

"Quits?" My heart is pounding. This isn't how I envisioned our first real date going. I glance down at the table, noticing a small chip in the wood. It's easier to focus on that imperfection than on the question hanging in the air. What can I say? That I asked her out because I wanted to, not because I had to?

"Gracie," I start, my words tentative. "I know this is our first time out without any pretenses or... commitments." I reach for my glass, take a sip, buying time. "But that's precisely why I'm here. Because I wanted to see where this could go... without any strings attached."

"I see," Gracie says with a soft sigh, her eyes dropping to the half-eaten plate of salmon in front of her.

I reach out, placing my hand over hers. Her fingers are slender and poised like she's ready to dart away, but she doesn't pull back.

Gracie lifts her gaze to mine, and our surroundings fade into the background.

"This is why I asked you out tonight. With you... it's not about playing games. I'm here with you because I want to be. Only you," I admit.

Her eyebrows arch, a silent invitation for me to continue.

"You're right. I've been that guy, the one who's more familiar with locker room banter than intimate conversations." I hesitate. "There's something about you. We have chemistry; I can feel it every time you look at me. Maybe... it's time for me to try something different."

Gracie's green eyes don't waver.

"Have you ever had a serious girlfriend?" she asks.

It's a simple question, but it hits me like a body check into the boards. "No," I admit, feeling naked without my usual armor of charm and confidence. "I've never let anyone get that close."

The truth of it sinks in. I'm not just acknowledging my solitude. I'm sharing it.

Gracie's fingers slip over mine. The slight tremor I notice betrays an emotion she's not voicing. Her touch is warm and grounding.

"Thank you for sharing that with me," she replies.

It's a simple statement but hits somewhere deep inside me. I'm not sure what compels

me more – the gratitude in her words or the sincerity in those emerald eyes that seem to see through my tough exterior. It feels more intimate than any flirty banter or one-night stand.

"For sure," I manage to say, even though we both know I've never done anything like this before. Confessions aren't really my thing.

We leave the restaurant, and I walk her to my car. I start the engine and pull away from the curb.

Gracie is quiet, lost in thought, and I respect that. She's probably processing everything, maybe trying to figure me out. Or figure us out. I steal glances at her when I can.

I want to say something, crack a joke, ease the tension. Yet I hold back, letting the silence sit with us. Sometimes, it's not about filling the air with words; it's about sharing the quiet.

The drive to her apartment is a short one, but each minute stretches out, filled with unspoken thoughts. I pull up outside her building, part of me wishing the ride had lasted longer. The other part? Well, it's curious about what comes next.

I pull into a parking spot near the entrance to her building and put the car in park. For a second, we just sit there.

Gracie turns, and I catch the faintest hint of nerves as she nibbles on her lower lip. It's a small thing, but it's like a red flag to my senses—I've always had a thing about that. Without thinking, I reach across the console, fingers grazing her chin with the barest pressure. My thumb gently coaxes her lip away from the grip of her teeth. I'm silently pleading with her to ease up on herself.

She blinks at me, the tension in her jaw melting away, and then, out of nowhere, she blurts out almost in a whisper, "Do you want to come upstairs with me?"

It's not just an invitation; it feels like a crossroads. Every fiber in my body screams yes, craving more time, more Gracie.

However, I can't just nod and follow her. This isn't a game for me.

"Gracie," I begin, voice huskier than I intend, "if I come up, it's not going to be just because of... that." I gesture vaguely, hoping she gets that I'm talking about the pull I feel, the one that goes deeper than skin. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I want to. Just not if it's going to be something you'll regret in the morning."

There. I said it. Maybe it's not what the old Bennett would have done, but damn, it feels right.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Gracie

Standing in the cool Miami night with Bennett's warm hand clasping mine, I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

"Bennett," I start, my heart racing just a tad faster, "I get it, you know? You're not after a one-night thing. You laid your cards out on the table over dinner, and honestly, that's refreshing."

His intense green eyes meet mine, and there's a softness there that contradicts his tough hockey defenseman exterior.

"Honesty's all I've got. I'm glad you appreciate it."

"Let's go inside," I say

Up the elevator two floors, and the door swings open to my apartment. Through Bennett's gaze, I imagine he sees a world unlike the fancy places where he spends his days. My space is part minimalism and warmth.

Bennett's eyes linger on a stack of well-read romance novels laid next to a bouquet of fresh lilies that sits on the coffee table in front of the cozy couch. His gaze drifts to the small workspace tucked in the corner with my laptop closed.

"Nice place," he says, his tone genuine. "Feels like you."

"Thanks," I reply. "Want something to drink?" I ask, already moving towards the

kitchen.

"Sure. I'll have whatever you're having."

"Coming right up," I call over my shoulder, reaching for two glasses. I opt for a bottle of wine.

I pour the ruby liquid as Bennett leans against the doorway, watching me. I hand him his glass, our fingers brushing before we retreat to the living room.

We sit close on the couch, not quite touching, but close enough that I can catch the faint scent of citrus and cedarwood from his cologne.

Bennett's arm finds its way onto the back of the couch, like he's truly opening up himself to me. As we talk—about everything and nothing, about hockey plays and Miami's endless summer—I find myself drawn closer to him, wanting to know more and more.

His hand moves, almost absentmindedly, to play with a rogue curl of my hair, twisting it around his finger. My heartbeat quickens with the flicker of attraction in his eyes.

"Sorry," he murmurs with a half-smile, though he doesn't pull away. "Your hair..."

"It's fine," I whisper back, the words barely escaping before his touch shifts, tucking the curl behind my ear, his fingers lingering to cup my cheek.

I lean into his palm, feeling the stubble on his jaw. My eyelids flutter shut, giving in to sensation, to the moment, to him.

When his lips find mine, it's like the first breath after diving underwater, essential and

life-affirming. The kiss deepens, and fireworks explode behind my closed eyes.

Breathless, I break the kiss first, reluctantly pulling away from the heat of Bennett's mouth. My chest heaves with a boldness that surprises even me.

"I want you," I say, my voice steady despite the pounding of my heart. "In my bedroom."

I rise to my feet, feeling taller, braver, and more in command than I have in ages. Extending my hand, I don't just offer it—I present it as an invitation.

Bennett looks up at me. A slow smile spreads across his lips, and he places his hand in mine. As I lead him to my bedroom, I feel his fingers tighten around mine. It's his unspoken promise that he's right there with me, step for step.

The door clicks shut behind us. He stands before me, his hands finding the hem of my shirt, lifting it with deliberate slowness. His gaze never leaves mine. The cool air of my bedroom brushes against my newly exposed stomach, making me shiver.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, and I believe him. Each careful movement he makes, every lingering touch, tells me this isn't just about desire. It's reverence.

With the final barrier of clothing slipping from my shoulders, yet Bennett stands before me, still clothed. He's like some sort of Grecian god in jeans and a shirt, all sculpted lines and controlled strength. His gaze sweeps over me, so intense it's almost palpable.

"Stay still," he instructs.

I obey, rooted to the spot by the command in his tone. Bennett circles me, just out of reach, his eyes never leaving mine. It feels like I'm the center of his universe, the sole

focus of his attention.

His hands begin touching me on my shoulders, thumbs pressing into the tension there, kneading away the stress of the day. His touch is worshipful, as if he's memorizing every curve and dip of my body with his fingertips.

"God, Gracie," he murmurs, his lips hovering near my ear, sending a jolt straight to my core. "You're so damn beautiful."

And I feel it—beautiful. Not for how I look, but for how he makes me feel: cherished, adored, wanted.

His hands trail lower, tracing the contours of my waist, my hips, before slipping behind to cup my backside. His fingers grip gently and pull me closer.

"I like when you touch me," I whisper.

He nods, the corner of his mouth lifting in a half-smile. His fingers work deftly at the buttons of his shirt, popping them one by one until the fabric parts to reveal his toned chest.

The shirt falls away, and now it's my turn to explore, my palms gliding over the hard planes of his stomach, up to the dusting of blond hair that leads enticingly lower. My breath hitches as his hands find the waistband of his jeans, unbuttoning them with practiced ease.

He kicks off his shoes, steps out of his jeans, and there he is, gloriously unclothed except for the boxers that tent from his hardness. I hook my fingers into the elastic and tug them down.

There's a moment of pure, raw hunger in his eyes when he steps out of the last piece

of clothing separating us. Without breaking eye contact, he reaches for his wallet in his jeans pocket, retrieving a condom and sheathing himself with a few quick, efficient movements.

"Gracie," he says, his voice rough with need. Then he's moving toward me, positioning himself at my entrance, both of us holding our breaths as he pushes inside.

The sensation is overwhelming. It's a perfect stretch, a complete joining. I wrap my arms around his neck, anchoring myself to him as we begin to move together, lost in the rhythm of two bodies finally claiming what they've been resisting.

Heat floods my veins, a pulsing tide that Bennett fans with every deliberate thrust. It's like he knows just how to stoke the fire, pushing me higher, closer to that edge where everything blurs except for the burning need clawing its way through me.

"God, Bennett," I gasp, nails digging into his shoulders, feeling the play of muscles beneath his skin. He grunts in response, his movements becoming more urgent, telling me without words that he's right there with me, on the brink.

The room is filled with the sound of our ragged breaths, the soft creak of bed springs, and the slick noise of bodies moving against each other to find their own rhythm.

"Gracie," he breathes out into my ear. His hand slips between us, finding the bundle of nerves aching for attention. It's only a few focused strokes before I'm shattering.

"Fuck! Bennett!" I call out his name as pleasure pulses through me, and my pussy walls milk his cock that's deep inside me.

Bennett follows, a low groan vibrating against my neck as he finds his release, hips stuttering against mine. We cling to each other, riding the aftershocks, as sweat cools

on our skin and our breathing slows.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Bennett

I'm wedged into an aisle seat of the airplane, knees knocking against the hard plastic tray table, en route to Charleston. My mind isn't on the game ahead; it's on Gracie. The way her hair spilled over the pillow, the soft curve of her hip—it's like a damn watermark on my brain.

"Would you like something to drink, sir?" A flight attendant's voice breaks through my reverie.

"Uh, just water, thanks." I manage a half-smile and return to my internal tug-of-war. We've been playing this modern-day version of tag since that night by texting when we can and leaving promises of 'catch you later'. I never wanted a relationship because of this. Time is a luxury I don't have. Yet, she's there, an unexpected constant in almost every damn thought I have.

The plane begins its descent, and I force myself to make the mental shift into game time mode.

A few hours later, I'm gliding across the ice, the roar of the opposing team's fans filling the chilly arena. I pivot, ready for anything the Renegades throw my way.

"Stay sharp, Ben!" Ethan yells. I nod, keeping my eyes on the puck.

The puck flies across the ice and my blade carves a path to intercept it, but a flash of chestnut hair and green eyes sparks in my mind. Gracie. With a shake of my head, I refocus. There's no room for distractions when you're defending your territory against

a relentless offense.

The Renegades' forward, Asher Gray, is barreling down on me like a freight train, his eyes locked on our net. I plant my skates firmly on the ice, ready to take the hit if that's what it takes to shield our goalie. The sharp sting of cold air fills my lungs as he gets closer, and I feel every muscle in my body tense up.

"Got your back!" I hear from behind me, but my focus is on the puck, on the Renegade trying to bulldoze his way through. He fakes left, I don't bite. His shoulders drop, and I know he's committing. I step into him just as he shoots, throwing my weight against his. Our pads collide with a loud thud, the force enough to rattle my teeth. The puck skitters away harmlessly to the side, and I can almost hear the collective groan from their fans.

"Nice one, Halliday!" the goalie shouts, giving me a quick tap with his stick. I'm already scanning for the next threat, but a grin tugs at my lips.

I spot Jackson speed skating down to be close enough to claim a pass.

"Go, man, go!" I shout, my voice echoing under the helmet. He doesn't need any more encouragement. Skating backwards now, I watch Jackson weave through the Renegades' defense.

They try to close in on him, but I see the opening before he does. With a flick of my stick, I nudge the puck away from an opposing stick right onto Jackson's tape. It's all the space he needs. He darts past their number one defender, Ryder Raines, leaving their guys looking like they're stuck in slush.

"Light that lamp!" I holler, watching as he bears down on their goalie, Dakota Miles. Time seems to slow, the crowd's noise fades, and there's only the sound of Jackson's skates cutting into the ice, the slap of the puck as he fires a shot.

The red light blinks on. Goal.

"YEAH!" My fist punches the air. The guys are swarming Jackson, and I'm right there with them, clapping him on the back. There's a huge rush from setting up a perfect play.

"Great assist, Ben," Jackson says, breathless.

"Teamwork," I reply, and mean it.

The time clock winds down, and we end up pulling out the win by one point against the Charleston Renegades.

The locker room's buzzing with the high of a win, but all I can think about is Gracie. The guys are making plans to hit the bar scene, and I can already smell the victory beers in my head. However, tonight, I'm bowing out.

"Bennett, you got to come out with us. Don't be a spoil-sport," Jackson ribs me.

"Next time," I assure him, clapping him on the shoulder. "Got something I need to do."

Back at the hotel, I flop onto the bed. My phone lights up the dim room, and I swipe through the DoorDash app until I find what I'm looking for—a store that has flowers. Roses? No, too much, too soon. Tulips, yeah, those are friendly... right?

I add in some gourmet candy, because I did learn from our short time together that Gracie's got a sweet tooth. The order form's asking for a message, and I tap out something that feels safe but sincere: "Thought you might like these. - Bennett" It's not poetry, but it'll do.

With a heavy sigh, I let myself sink into the mattress. It's weird, this thing with Gracie. It's exciting but damn slippery.

I must've dozed off because the next thing I know, my phone's vibrating against the nightstand, jolting me awake. I flip the phone over to see it light up with Gracie's face. I swipe to answer, and there she is with her bright green eyes.

"Hey," I say, propping myself up against the headboard.

"Look at you, hockey star in his natural habitat."

"If by natural habitat you mean a hotel room that smells vaguely of sweat and desperation, then yeah, spot on." I laugh.

She giggles, and I feel a tug in my chest. Her laughter always does that to me.

"I just got your surprise. The tulips are beautiful, and the candy... well, you clearly know the way to my heart."

"Good to hear," I chuckle, rubbing a hand over my face. "Glad they made it to you okay."

"Thank you, really. It was such a thoughtful gesture." There's a pause, and she is biting her lip in that cute way she does when she's moved. "I watched the game, by the way. You were amazing as usual."

"Thanks." It's funny how just a few words from her can make all the bruises feel worth it. "Wish you could've been there."

"Me too," she says softly, and I swear I can feel the distance between us.

"Next home game?" I venture.

"Next home game," she confirms with a smile. "I'm sorry that we haven't been able to connect sooner," she says, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

"Same here," I admit. "The schedule's been brutal."

"Tell me about it," Gracie sighs, leaning back into her couch. "Between meetings and deadlines, I barely have time to breathe."

"Doesn't it suck?" I groan. "People think being a pro athlete, or even working at Holidays, is all glamour, but they don't see the grind."

"Exactly! Like, I love my job, but sometimes I just want to pause real life and have a moment. You know?"

"Totally get it." I nod and she smiles in return.

We fall into silence, comfortable but loaded, each lost in thoughts of 'what ifs' and schedules too packed for spontaneity.

"What would you do if you had a whole day off? No obligations, no expectations," I ask.

Her eyes light up, and it's like I've asked her the million-dollar question. "I'd start with yoga at sunrise, maybe take a long walk on the beach after... I'd read that book that's been collecting dust on my nightstand."

"Sounds nice and relaxing," I respond.

"And you?" she asks.

"Fish," I blurt out, and her eyes open wide as her eyebrows lift up. "Yeah, I know it's not what you'd expect, but there's something about being out on the water, just me and nature."

"Wow, I wouldn't have pegged you for a fisherman."

"I'm full of surprises, Hogan." I tease, enjoying the way her last name rolls off my tongue.

"Clearly." She laughs, and, God, it warms my heart.

We talk for hours, trading stories and dreams, the conversation ebbing and flowing.

"Gracie," I whisper into the quiet, "this isn't enough."

"Tell me about it," she murmurs back, her gaze piercing through the digital divide. "I wish you were here, Bennett."

"Me too, Gracie," I confess, and it's the most honest thing I've said in years. "Me too."

Her eyelids start to droop. She's fighting sleep, I can tell.

"Hey," I whisper, my voice scratchy with fatigue, "you're fading on me."

A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth, and she rubs at her eyes. "No, I'm not," she protests weakly, but there's a heaviness to her voice, betraying her.

"Gracie, it's okay. You had a long day." My own eyelids feel like they're weighted down, each blink slower than the last.

"Did I ever tell you about my first hockey game?" she asks out of nowhere.

"Can't say you have." I nestle deeper into my pillow.

"I was seven," she starts, her words slurring just a bit, "and Dad took me to see the Chicago Blades play since we were living there at the time. I didn't understand the rules, but the energy... it was amazing."

"Sounds like a good memory." My own recollections of early games flood back.

"Mhm," she hums, her green eyes now half-closed. "You were probably out there, weren't you? A young prodigy on skates."

"Something like that." I chuckle, but the sound is muffled by a yawn.

"Tell me something else," she murmurs.

"Like what?" I ask, my eyelids are so heavy.

"Anything," she breathes.

I rack my brain for another story, something light, something to keep this conversation going just a little longer. Although, the room is dark, the bed too comfortable, and her presence, even through the phone, too soothing.

"Gracie?" I mumble, unsure if she's already fallen asleep.

"Yeah?" Her response is faint.

"Goodnight," I say, the word a soft sigh escaping from my lips.

"Night, Bennett," comes her reply, barely audible now, but I don't hit the disconnect button and neither does she.

Gracie

I rip open the box that just delivered to my work like a kid on Christmas. On top of a lump of cerulean blue and white fabric, sits a VIP ticket to tonight's Miami Kings' game. I quickly sit it to the side on my desk and pull out the shirt, no it's a jersey, from the box. It's heavy, made of some kind of thick fabric. There's a large number ten on the front, and I spin it around to see Halliday emblazoned across the upper back in bold letters.

"Looks like you've got a hot date at the ice rink," Allison teases as she walks up to my desk.

"Yeah, I guess so," I reply with a smile as I hold the jersey against me. It's a size too big but feels just right. Bennett did say he wanted to see his name on me. A rush of warmth floods my cheeks at the thought.

"Gracie Hogan has got it bad for a man. Never thought I'd see the day," Allison says with a smirk and pops a hand on her hip.

"Neither did I," I admit, folding the jersey neatly beside my laptop. "You know, it's not every day a girl gets a personal invite from a Miami King."

"I think those shoes and pants you have on will go with that. Don't you think?" Allison asks, looking at the jersey and then over to my shoes.

"Focus, Allison. We've got deadlines," I remind her. My gaze drifts to the digital clock on my monitor—4:45 PM.

"Speaking of which," Allison begins, her tone taking a downturn, "you gonna make it on time?"

"Only if I bolt the second this clock hits five." I chew my lip, peering past the motivational quotes taped to my monitor.

"Then, Cinderella, I suggest you get those glass slippers ready," Allison says before returning to her work.

I nod and dive back into getting this project done for the Holidays App so that we can pass it off to the IT team for them to start on the next phase.

The cursor blinks accusingly at me. It's 6:37 PM. My fingers are a blur, tap-tapping away on the keyboard in a frenzied attempt to wrap up this project. The office is quiet except for the occasional air conditioner kicking on and off.

"Gracie, you're still here?" Allison's voice slices through my concentration.

I glance up, feeling the weight of her concern. "Yeah, I'm just... finishing up."

"Girl, Bennett's game starts in less than an hour." She frowns, eyebrows knitting together. "You promised you'd go."

"I know, I know," I mutter, the frustration coiling tight in my chest. "But this project—"

"Can wait," Allison cuts in, but it's not that simple. Not when every cell in my body screams to prove myself, to nail this project and not screw it up and delay the much-needed updates on the app.

"Allison, IT needs these directions by tomorrow morning," I say, a feeble attempt to

quell the rising guilt. "I can't... I just can't."

"Damn it, Gracie." She throws her hands up, then softens. "He sent you that VIP ticket..."

"Trust me, I'm aware," I snap, sharper than intended. An apology forms, but she's already retreating to her desk with a shake of her head.

The clock mocks me, its digits flipping to 6:45 PM, sealing the fate of my evening. With a heavy-hearted exhale, I snatch my phone and thumb out a hasty message.

Me: Hey Bennett, I'm stuck at work. Won't make it to the game tonight. Good luck out there tonight!

Sent. And now, the waiting game. Except, I know there won't be an immediate ping of response. He's probably already on the rink by now, shoulder pads strapped on and skates laced tight, oblivious to my little text bubble floating in the digital ether.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," I grumble, berating myself for a schedule that's way to tight all the fucking time. It's not like Bennett needs me there; he's got a whole arena chanting his name. Nonetheless, the thought of him scanning the crowd, looking for a face that won't show, sends a pang of hurt through me.

I try to refocus on the screen, but all I see are life's missed opportunities—a night that could've been, a connection left hanging. Bennett Halliday, a kind and gentle man, and I, Gracie Hogan, the girl who let work clog up the works once again.

We tried, didn't we? Ever since that video call where he'd looked at me like I was the only one in his world, despite the thousands that adored him from the bleachers. We'd made plans, set dates, but it was like trying to sync calendars with a time traveler. My meetings clashed with his practices; my emergencies overlapped with his games. We

were a couple perpetually penciled in, never inked.

A sigh escapes me. There's a kind of hunger that grows when you're fed mere morsels of someone's time—a text here, a fleeting call there. You start to wonder if you're pining over a ghost, or worse, a fantasy.

I recall texting him last Thursday, my fingers hesitating before hitting send, feeling like a broken record stuck on a track called 'Maybe Next Time.'

Me: Another rain check?

Bennett: Sorry! Team meeting ran late. Owe you one. sad face emoji

Pixels don't placate, do they?

I press my palms into my eyes, willing away the sting of disappointment.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Bennett

The blare of the final buzzer shoots through the arena, but it's a hollow sound without seeing the one woman I want to in the stands. I was half-hoping to catch a glimpse of chestnut hair and those striking green eyes while I was on the ice. Nothing. Gracie didn't make it.

"Great game, Halliday!" one of the rookies slaps my back, and I force a grin.

"Thanks, kid," I say, dropping my gear with a clatter into my locker. My phone buzzes from within the tangle of my street clothes, but it's just an alert about tomorrow's practice schedule. Although, there is a missed text from Gracie. It came in after the game started, letting me know that she wasn't able to get away from work after all.

Gracie's career is booming. My mom's company, Holidates, is revolutionizing how people connect, and it demands her time like the Kings demand mine. I get it; I really do. We're both hustling, chasing dreams wrapped in responsibility. Doesn't make the empty space beside me sting any less.

Dragging my fingers through my damp hair, I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. There's a tug-of-war going on inside me, muscles straining against each other—the pull of what I feel for Gracie pitted against the disciplined focus my career demands.

"Hey, Bennett, you coming for drinks at Rinkside?" someone calls out.

"Maybe later," I mutter, more to myself than anyone else. I need to clear my head, figure out where all this is heading.

The locker room empties, leaving me in a quiet that's too loud. I lace up my sneakers with robotic precision.

Am I just wasting time trying to juggle a relationship with a woman that is just as busy as me?

I shove my phone into my pocket and head out of the ice rink. I'm fooling myself thinking we could have something real, something lasting.

Nevertheless, I can't shake the image of her smile, the sound of her laugh, the way my name sounds coming from her lips.

Weightlifting workouts are brutal physically and mentally. At least when I'm on the ice, I don't have time to think for long periods between reps. There's always action that's needed to be dealt with.

The clang of metal plates reverberates through the weight room, and I'm mid-rep when my phone buzzes in the pocket of my gym shorts. Another missed call from Gracie. My grip tightens around the barbell. That's the third one this week.

"Damn," I grunt, re-racking the weights with a clatter that echoes my frustration.

"Trouble in paradise?" Ethan teases as he hoists his own set of dumbbells.

"What's it to you?" I wipe the sweat from my brow, wondering if Gracie's getting fed up with my schedule. It's relentless—practices, games, last-minute strategy meetings. There's always something.

"Good luck keeping a lady around during the season, man," another teammate chimes in, not looking up from his bench press. "It's a beast."

"Tell me about it," I mutter.

I sit down on the weight bench for my next set, but my mind's not on the burn in my muscles. It's spinning with thoughts of Gracie.

"Focus, Halliday!" Coach barks from across the room, and I realize my arms have gone slack.

"Right, sorry." I force out another rep, each lift heavy with doubt. Is it even fair to drag her into this world? A world where I can't promise a Friday night dinner or a lazy Sunday morning without the threat of a sudden away game?

"Relationships are work, Ben. More than most can handle with a career like ours," Ethan adds once Coach is out of earshot.

"Maybe you're right," I concede, setting the bar back on the rack with a finality.

My fingers itch to dial Gracie's number, to hear her voice and explain, maybe apologize. What good would it even do? The team needs me. The Kings are counting on me to be at the top of my game, not tangled up in heartstrings.

"Hey, Bennett, you coming to Rinkside tonight?" someone calls out, snapping me back to reality.

"Sure," I lie, knowing full well I'll spend the evening staring at my phone, contemplating whether to send Gracie a text or let the silence speak for itself.

In my sweatpants at home is exactly where I stay for the rest of the night.

My fingers hover over Gracie's name on the screen. I should call her, explain why I've been MIA lately, but then again, she may be busy working. I don't want to interrupt her.

A deep breath in. Then I exhale slowly, my thumb brushing against the call button, but I can't press it. The voices of my teammates echo in my head. Am I being selfish wanting her, knowing I could only give her bits and pieces of my time?

"Damn it," I sigh, dropping the phone onto the leather couch beside me. It lands with a soft thud. My gaze drifts to the ceiling fan above, its blades chasing each other in endless circles.

Maybe I'm just not cut out for this.

My phone suddenly jolts to life in my hand, startling me. The screen lights up with her name.

Gracie: Hey, you. Missed your face today. Everything okay?

Three sentences. That's all it takes for a smile to tug at the corners of my mouth. Is it possible that she gets it? Maybe she understands this crazy life of mine, or maybe she's just too damn good at making me forget why I was worried in the first place.

I begin to type, "Everything's fine," back, but my thumbs stall. The truth is, everything's far from fine.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Gracie

"Finally!" I blurt out as I spot Bennett weaving through the crowded sports bar. He's hard to miss, really, with that athletic build and the way he moves—like he owns the place.

"Gracie!" He grins as he reaches me, engulfing my hand in his. "Sorry I'm late. Traffic was a beast."

I roll my eyes but there's a smile tugging at my lips. "You're forgiven. This time." He looks sexy in the black fitted t-shirt that does nothing to hide the muscles underneath with dark blue jeans.

We make our way to a high-top table with a view of the TV screens plastered across the walls. It feels like forever since we've been trying to do this, since our schedules always conflict.

"So, both your brothers are playing in that game?" I ask, nodding toward the nearest screen where two football teams are about to kickoff.

"Yep," Bennett says. "Cole's with the Florida Sharks, and Weston is a Michigan Vikings. Family loyalty is a bit split tonight."

"Must be weird cheering for both teams," I comment and take a sip of my margarita.

"You have no idea. Mom's got jerseys sewn together so she can root for them both." He chuckles.

"Resourceful." I laugh, imagining her non-stop cheering at the stadium.

"Always." Bennett's gaze lingers on me for a heartbeat too long, enough to make me shiver despite the warmth of The Rinkside Tavern.

"Sounds like quite the rivalry," I say, shifting in my seat, hyper-aware of how close Bennett's knee is to mine.

"Only on the field. Off it, they're thick as thieves." He leans back, his green eyes fixed on the game. "They always pushed each other to be better. Guess that's how they both made it pro."

"Like you, with hockey."

Bennett smiles, a hint of something deeper flashing across his face. "Yeah, like me."

Our eyes lock, and the world tilts slightly, like we're the only two people in the room in the bar. Then the crowd erupts into cheers, pulling us back to reality, and we turn our attention back to the game on the field.

Time passes by way too fast as the last quarter ticks down, and the tension is electric. The brothers Halliday are putting on a show that has the entire bar hanging off the edge of their seats. Bennett's hand brushes mine as we both reach for our drinks, an accidental touch that makes me long for his complete attention and his hands to be all over my body.

"Look at that pass!" I shout over the roar, pointing at one of the screens lining the walls.

"Those two never cease to amaze," he says. "They've got game in their blood."

We're caught in a bubble, just Bennett and me, having a great time with playful jabs about which brother might come out on top. This feels good, easy. It's like we're old friends, or maybe something more, instead of what we actually are: two people doing a complicated dance around each other's schedules and hearts.

"Can you believe that catch?" I gasp as one of the Hallidays leaps into the air, coming down with the football secured tight against his chest.

"Believe it? I've seen it since they were kids in the backyard." His gaze flickers to mine. "You should see them on skates, though. That's a real treat."

"Multi-talented, huh?"

"Runs in the family." He winks, but before I can roll my eyes at his cockiness, a commotion stirs near the entrance of the bar.

A cluster of girls swarms in, their high-pitched giggles cutting through the low rumble of sports commentary and crowd chatter. They're all dressed in too-tight crop top jerseys and glossy lips, zeroing in on Bennett like he's their feast for the night.

"Isn't that Bennett Halliday?" one of them squeals.

"Sure is," another confirms, her smile sharp and predatory as she sidles up to our high-top table. "Hey, Bennett, remember me?"

I glance at Bennett, who's suddenly stiff, his easygoing demeanor replaced by a tight smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. He shifts, creating a subtle barrier between us and the puck bunnies crowding around him.

"Uh, hey," he replies, polite but guarded. "We're just trying to watch the game here."

"But it's so much more fun watching you," coos one of the girls, draping herself over the back of Bennett's chair. Her fingers trail down his arm, and something inside me clenches tight.

"Right," he murmurs, glancing at me with an apologetic cringe. "I'm busy here. Please find somewhere else to go."

"Come on, don't be like that," another puck bunny whines, pouting her shiny pink lips. "We are just trying to give you some comfort since we know how hard it is to get hit so many times out on the ice."

I press my lips together, forcing a smile that feels more like a grimace. This is a risk of getting close to someone like Bennett, but seeing it firsthand is a punch to the chest. Yet, despite the aggressive flirting, Bennett's attention keeps flicking back to me, and his discomfort is obvious.

"I appreciate the support, ladies, but I'm just here to enjoy the game," he says, his voice even and firm.

"Of course, Bennett," one of them purrs, her disappointment thinly veiled by a pout. They saunter off, casting backward glances that seem to slide right off Bennett's broad shoulders.

"God, that was... awkward," I mutter, trying to smooth over my ruffled feathers with a sip of my margarita. It tastes too sour now, and I can't tell if it's the drink or the situation.

"Gracie," Bennett starts, turning to me. "Look, about my schedule—"

"And your fan club?" I interject, unable to help myself. I tuck a stray lock behind my ear.

He runs a hand through his tousled blond hair as frustration crosses his face. "Yeah, that too. It's part of the territory, but you should know, none of that matters to me. Not like this... us."

"Us," I echo, the word feeling foreign on my tongue. "I want to believe that. Let's face it, between your road trips for hockey and my work with Holidays App, when do we even have time for an 'us'?"

"We make time." He leans closer, his knee brushing mine under the table. "And for the record, I don't have a 'reputation.' Just a lot of... speculation."

"Speculation that's hard to ignore," I say, my voice low and my eyes locked onto his. "I've been down this road before, Bennett, and I came out the other side looking more like roadkill than anything else."

"I'm not him. I'm not going to leave you picking up pieces of yourself from the asphalt," he says. "I'm all in. Are you?"

I fiddle with the coaster, spinning it between my fingers, feeling the rough edges and the condensation from my drink dampen my fingertips. I look across at Bennett, his face open, earnest. He's all in. But can I be?

"Gracie?" His voice is gentle, a hand reaching across to still mine.

"Look, Bennett..." I start, swallowing hard against the lump forming in my throat. "You're amazing, you are. This thing between us? It's been... definitely something."

"Then why do I feel like there's a 'but' coming?" His green eyes search mine, mirroring the emotions I'm trying to tamp down.

"Because there is," I admit and glance down at the table before looking back up at

him. "The distance, your schedule, the constant attention... It's more than just inconvenient, Bennett. It's a wedge."

"We can work through that. We've both got crazy lives, but that doesn't mean—"

"Listen to me." My voice comes out firmer now, because if I don't say it straight, I'll never say it at all. "I need more than late-night texts and the occasional meetup between games or app launches. I can't build something real on maybe's and what-if's."

He leans back, the chair creaking under the shift of his weight, and runs a hand through his hair.

"Is this about last year?" he asks quietly. "About him?"

"It's about me," I correct him. "About not wanting to lose myself in someone else's shadow again. About needing to know I matter more than just as a convenient distraction."

His jaw clenches, and something in his eyes takes on the sharpness of hurt. "You think that's all you are to me?"

"Isn't it?" The question is accusing, even if I didn't mean it that way.

"Damn it, Gracie. No. You're not—"

"Although, it could happen," I interrupt. "I just can't... I won't go through that again."

Silence stretches between us, filled with the noise of cheers from the sports fans around us.

"Okay," he says quietly. "If that's how you feel."

I nod, fighting back the stinging sensation behind my eyes. "It is."

We sit there, the final whistle of the game sounding off in the distance, signaling the end of something much closer to home. He reaches for his beer, takes a long pull, and when he sets the glass down, there's resignation etched into the lines of his face.

"Then I guess this is goodbye, Gracie Hogan."

"Goodbye, Bennett Halliday."

Heartbroken yet resolute, I stand up, sling my purse over my shoulder, and walk away from the man who could have been the one.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Bennett

I'm leaning against the cool glass that overlooks the rink, watching Zambonis make their last sweep. I'm thinking of Gracie but trying not to. I can't help where we both are in our lives with our schedules, and I can't help that the Bunnies come up to me when they think that I'm still single.

"Hey, Halliday, let's go!" Coach shouts from the ice, but I barely register it. My thoughts are caught in a loop, replaying our last conversation, the one where she said we needed to cool it before we even had the chance to heat up.

With Gracie, it's not just about her looks, although hell, those waves in her chestnut hair and the way she fits into those jeans would make any man stop and stare. It's more than that; it's the charge that zips through me whenever she's close enough to touch.

"Seriously, Ben, it's time for practice. Let's go!" Ethan yells, snapping me back to reality.

It's still tough to concentrate when my mind is stuck on Gracie. The way she ended things—it stung.

I get it, though. Fear's a powerful thing. It makes you throw up walls higher than the boards around this rink. Fuck, did it have to be right when I felt that pull? That pull that said, 'Here's someone who might just understand the grind, the pressure, the why behind the late nights at the gym and the early mornings on the ice.'

The entire practice is a blur. I pray to God that we don't have to run one of those new plays in the game this weekend because I, for sure, will not know what to do.

"Rinkside Tavern, Halliday, you in?" Jackson hollers across the benches, already with a towel wrap around his waist and ready for the showers.

My fingers tug at laces, and I yank off my skates.

"Nah," I mutter.

"Since when do you pass up a chance to unwind with the boys?" Ethan says.

"Since I decided I'm better off chilling at home," I say, slapping my skates into my locker with more force than necessary. The room falls a notch quieter, with my teammates exchanging looks.

"You gotta live a little, man," Ethan adds. They all know something's off, even if they don't know what—or who—it's about.

"Got some Netflix to catch up on," I lie and shed the rest of my clothes and wrap a towel around my waist. Without another word, I walk away from them and into the shower.

Luckily, no one else talks to me before I'm slinging my bag over my shoulder and walking into the parking lot.

The drive back to my townhouse is a blur of Miami sunshine and palm trees that usually lift my spirits. Today, they're just a backdrop to the replay of Gracie's last words that loop in my head.

Key in the door, I step into the cool air conditioning of my place. I drop my bag by

the door, the thump echoing through the empty space. Then I walk over to my living room and fall on the sofa.

I'm sprawled out, staring at the ceiling fan. The blades spin in a hypnotic rhythm, and I can't help but compare their endless cycle to my own routine—practice, home, practice, home.

My phone buzzes. I almost ignore it, but the screen lights up with 'Mom' and pictures of both my brothers crammed into their own frames. I can't dodge this one.

"Hey, Mom. Weston, Cole," I greet, forcing a smile I don't feel.

"Sweetheart, you look like hell," Mom says. Cole snorts in agreement, while Weston just raises an eyebrow.

"Thanks, I was going for the ruggedly handsome look," I quip, trying to deflect.

"Cut the crap, Bennett. You're moping around like a lost puppy. I see that you're at home which means you didn't go out with your teammates tonight. So, since when do you turn down a night out with the team?" Cole's blunt, as always.

"Since... it's just been a rough patch," I admit, pushing a hand through my hair.

"Over Gracie?" Weston's tone is softer, but it still stings.

"Could be," I confess, hating how vulnerable it sounds even to my own ears.

"Look, we all know breakups suck," Weston continues, "but you need to snap out of it. You're Bennett Halliday, for crying out loud."

"Shit, we never even made it to a relationship status to call it a breakup," I shoot

back.

"Son, you're allowed to be upset, but don't let it completely derail you. There's more to life than hockey and heartbreak," she adds.

They're right. I know they are. But knowing and feeling are two different games, and I'm losing at both right now.

"Cole and Weston, I need to chat with Bennett a little longer. We'll see you guys later," Mom says, and my brothers say their goodbyes, leaving me with just her. I'm staring at Mom's concerned face.

"Mom, I don't think—"

"Listen, there's something about Gracie you ought to know," she cuts me off with that tone that brooks no argument, the one she used when we were kids and tried to get out of doing chores. "She had a rough go with someone before you. It left scars, not the kind that fade."

I sit up straighter on my bed, the soft hum of the air conditioning suddenly too loud in my ears. "Yeah, Gracie told me that her last relationship was not a healthy one. What do you mean, 'scars'?" My heart clenches tight.

"Her ex-fiancé." She pauses, taking a breath as if bracing herself. "He was quite the charmer, much like you, and he played hockey too, for another team."

"Okay..." I prompt, my mouth dry.

"He wasn't who he appeared to be. Behind closed doors, he was controlling, manipulative. He made her feel small, unworthy. He cheated on her, Bennett, more times than anyone should ever forgive. He had a bad accident, and that's when it all

came out. He broke off the engagement publicly. It was messy, humiliating for her."

"Fuck." The word slips out. I rake a hand through my hair. "Why didn't she tell me?"

"Would you have wanted to bring your hurt back up again when you were just getting to know someone?" My mom's question is gentle but pointed. "It's hard to trust after that, especially with someone in the same spotlight, with similar... temptations."

"I'm not him," I say. I said that to Gracie the other night, but I didn't realize just how true that is until now.

"No, you're not, but give her time, sweetie. Trust isn't won in a day."

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Gracie

"Ugh, what's with you today? You're staring at that report like it owes you money," Allison quips from the doorway of my office, her eyebrows knitting together.

I glance up, caught off guard. "Oh, hey, Allie." I muster a half-smile, but it probably looks more like a grimace. My heart isn't in it, and apparently, my face can't lie for beans.

"Gracie, spill. You've got that look." Allison plants her hands on her hips, the universal stance of a friend who's not buying the 'I'm fine' act.

I sigh, feeling the weight of the last few weeks pressing down on me. "Take a seat, would you?" I motion with a flick of my wrist towards the chair opposite my desk.

Allison perches on the edge of the chair. She's practically brimming with readiness to dive into whatever personal crisis I'm about to unload.

"Remember Bennett?" I begin, picking at the corner of a note that reminds me, 'You are enough.' The irony isn't lost on me.

"Hot hockey guy? How could I forget? You've been grinning like a Cheshire Cat whenever you mention him." She leans forward.

"Was grinning," I correct her, swallowing the lump forming in my throat. "I ended it."

"Wait, what?" Her mouth hangs open for a split second before she regains composure. "Why? I thought things were going great."

"Long story short," I begin to explain, "we're on different life pages. He's... he's amazing, really. I just... have to focus on me right now, you know?"

"Oh, Gracie, I'm sorry. That sucks." Allison reaches across the desk to squeeze my hand.

"Yeah." I nod, grateful for her friendship. "It does."

"Are you gonna be okay?" she asks.

"I have to be," I reply, though my heart doesn't quite match the conviction in my voice.

I trace a line on the laminate surface of my desk, avoiding Allison's gaze for a moment. "It's just... I can't figure out why I'm so gutted about Bennett," I confess, finally mustering the courage to meet her concerned eyes. "We were barely a thing, you know? No grand romance, no tearful goodbyes."

"Sometimes the short stories stick with us the longest," Allison says, tilting her head. "Maybe it's not about the length of time, Gracie. Maybe it's about what could've been."

"Could've been." I taste the bittersweetness of those words. They resonate somewhere deep within me, where I've packed away dreams and desires in favor of practicality and protection. Protection from heartache.

"I guess..." My voice trails off as I grapple with the idea. Why should the loss of something barely begun weigh so heavily on me? I shake my head, trying to dispel

the fog of confusion.

"Talk to me, Gracie." Allison's voice is gentle but insistent.

So, I do. I tell her about the ghost of a relationship past, the one that left scars so deep they might as well be part of my DNA now.

"My ex-fiancé," I start, feeling the familiar twinge of betrayal, "he was supposed to be my forever. However, forever turned out to be just another empty promise."

"Gracie, he was an idiot," Allison interjects.

"His parting gift," I continue, ignoring the urge to laugh off the pain, "wasn't a returned engagement ring or some cheesy Hallmark card. It was trust issues and a first-class ticket to Abandonmentville."

"Population: too many great women who deserve better," she adds with a sigh.

"Exactly," I murmur. "And now, every time someone even remotely like him shows up, walls up. Heart on lockdown."

"Is Bennett like him, though?" Allison asks.

I pause, considering. Bennett, with his easy smile and eyes that crinkle when he laughs. Bennett, who showed me simple affection and a true effort to communicate, expecting nothing in return.

"No. He's not. That's what scares me the most," I admit. "Now, back to work. We've got a lot to get done before the end of the day."

"Yes we do, but, Gracie, holler at me if you need to talk again," Allison says as she

gets up and walks off.

Fingers tapping anxiously on my desk, I stare at the screen. Numbers and figures blur together. My mind's a whirlwind, thoughts of Bennett tangling with line graphs and quarterly reports.

The truth is, I can't afford another misstep—not in love, not in life. It's always been about climbing higher, about proving that despite everything, I'm more than just the sum of my failed relationships. My career has to be enough, has to be everything. It's the only thing that's never walked out on me.

"Gracie?"

My heart rate picks up, not because the voice startles me, but because I know who it belongs to—Rose Halliday.

"Yes, Ms. Halliday?" I answer, swiveling in my chair to face her image on my phone screen.

"Dear, I have box seats for tomorrow night's Miami Kings game. New Year's Eve celebrations on ice," she says, her tone warm yet somehow still authoritative. "I'd love for you to join me."

"Ms. Halliday, that's really generous, but—" I hesitate, the words catching in my throat as the thought of being surrounded by all things Bennett sends a shiver down my spine.

"Consider it a thank you for your hard work this year. Also, it's a chance to unwind. You've been pushing yourself too hard." Her voice softens, coaxing.

"Okay, I'll be there." I breathe out, surprising even myself.

"Marvelous!" She sounds genuinely pleased. "Wear something blue and white to show some team spirit. See you at eight!"

"Blue and white," I repeat, my voice barely above a whisper as the call ends.

The Miami Kings' colors. They might as well be the colors of my own tangled emotions. Blue for the melancholy that's been my shadow since Bennett and I called it quits; white for the fresh start I keep promising myself.

A new year and new beginnings, who knows what will come of it. I close my laptop with a decisive click. Tomorrow night, I'll be rink side, watching life play out on ice.

Stepping into the VIP box at the downtown Miami Kings arena, I'm hit with a wall of warmth and the excitement of the game that's about to start. Cerulean and white banners hang around the room to show past championship wins. Ms. Halliday is there, regal in her Kings scarf, and she greets me with the kind of smile that's reserved for old friends or family.

"Gracie, sweetie, you made it!" she exclaims.

"Thank you for the invite," I reply, though my insides are a tangle of nerves.

Bennett's brother, Cole, and his girlfriend Amber, along with his other brother, Weston, and his little family of Presley and their son Sawyer, are already here. They're all so lovely and welcoming.

"Nice jersey," Cole nods approvingly as I slip past.

"Thanks," I manage, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks.

"Really brings out your eyes," Weston adds, and his fiancée giggles, nudging him

playfully.

"Let's grab a seat before the puck drops," Ms. Halliday suggests, steering me gently by the elbow.

The game is a mixture of sticks clashing on ice, the puck a black dot darting between players. Yet it's Bennett I watch, number twenty-seven, moving with a grace that belies his size.

Then it happens—our eyes meet across the expanse of ice and cheering fans. His gaze finds me, holds me, even from a distance. Without thinking, I pivot, pointing to his name emblazoned across my back. The jersey he gave me, a token from a game I missed because I was drowning in work, deadlines devouring any chance at a personal life.

I turn back, my heart hammering against my ribs, and there it is. The biggest smile splits Bennett's face, bright enough to light up the arena. It's like a shot of something straight to my core.

"Go Kings!" someone shouts, and I join in, clapping, cheering, letting the noise wash over me. Although inside, I'm holding onto that smile, that look, like a lifeline.

I'm leaning over the railing, my eyes fixed on Bennett as he maneuvers around his opponents with a kind of focused intensity that makes everyone else on the ice look like they're just skating in circles.

In the chaos of the game—the shouting, the collisions, the sharp scrape of blades against ice—I can still pick him out, as if there's a spotlight following only him. The way he ducks and weaves through the other players, it's not just skill, not just training; it's compassion, it's heart, it's... kindness. Yeah, kindness on the ice—a fierce, protective kind of care for his team that tells me more about who Bennett

really is than any rumor ever could.

I can't help but think back to my ex, whose idea of teamwork involved taking all the credit and leaving a mess for others to clean up—during games, in relationships, everywhere. Yet Bennett, he's nothing like that. He's passing the puck when a teammate has a better shot, tapping gloves with the goalie after a close save, throwing a quick thumbs-up to a kid pressed to the glass with wide, admiring eyes.

Watching him now, I understand that this man isn't about showboating or scoring off the ice. He plays life like he plays the game: giving it everything, looking out for his people, and doing it all with a heart that's been misunderstood by so many. Including me.

God, it's sexy. Not in the drop-your-panties kind of way—though, let's be real, the man could make a saint swear—but in a deeper, pull-at-your-soul kind of way. It makes me want to know him, in every sense.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

Bennett

The Rinkside Tavern greets me as I step through the threshold. It's buzzing with the energy of New Year's Eve, and my teammates are all there, sporting their Miami Kings pride. This time, a lot of their family members are here to ring in the new year along with them.

"Hey! There he is!" My brother's voice slices through the din. I whirl around to catch sight of the two towering figures of my brothers, grinning ear to ear, flanked by their women who wave excitedly.

"Sorry I'm late," I apologize, though I know they don't mind. Media ran longer than expected, but hey, we claimed another victory for the Kings, so it was worth it.

"Better late than never, bro!" They slap my back with such enthusiasm; I almost stumble forward.

I scan the table, my gaze sliding past my beaming mother, settling on Gracie. There she sits, shoulder-length chestnut waves accentuating those striking green eyes that always seem to see right through me. She's in her element, yet there's a slight tilt to her head, a thoughtful curve to her lips that tells me she's not just here for the party.

"Hey you," I say to the woman who's been on my mind nonstop.

"Hi, Ben," Gracie replies. Her smile is gentle, but she seems like her nerves are mirroring mine.

"Having fun?" I ask, slipping into the seat beside her.

"Always," she shoots back.

"Gotta admit, I love seeing you in my colors," I say, my gaze dropping to the Miami Kings jersey hugging her frame, my name emblazoned across her back.

Gracie turns, her green eyes locking onto mine, serious despite the revelry. "Bennett, can we talk?"

"Sure, after dinner though," I reply with a grin, patting my stomach. "I'm famished."

She nods, her expression unreadable, but she doesn't push it. For now, anyway.

Dinner is a blur of laughter and stories, plates clattering against the backdrop of holiday cheers from nearby tables. My brothers' jokes, my mom's giggle, and the easy camaraderie amongst my teammates fill the space with warmth. Through it all, I sneak peeks at Gracie.

As dessert menus are passed around, I lean over to Gracie. She's been quiet, picking at her food, the tension in her shoulders telling me whatever's on her mind can't wait until after the clock strikes twelve.

"Let's bounce before it gets too close to midnight," I whisper, tilting my head towards the door.

Her eyes widen, but then she nods, a small smile playing at the corner of her lips. Without another word, I take her hand. We slip away from the table, unnoticed.

"Where are we going?" Gracie asks as we step into the cool night air.

"My house so it will be quiet," I say, squeezing her hand. "Just you and me."

Only a few minutes' drive before I'm unlocking the front door to my townhouse and ushering Gracie in.

"Make yourself at home," I say, flicking on the lights. My place is comfortable but screams bachelor. I head to the kitchen, where the scent of dark roast soon fills the air.

"Cream and sugar?" I call out, hovering over the coffee maker.

"One sugar and a little cream, thanks," she answers.

While the coffee brews, I steal a glance at her standing on the balcony, silhouetted against the Miami skyline. She's so beautiful.

"Here you go," I say, handing her a steaming mug as I join her outside. A city hum vibrates below us, but up here, it's peaceful.

Gracie wraps her hands around the ceramic.

"Talk to me. Don't shut me out anymore," I start, leaning against the railing.

Her green eyes lock onto mine, and she finally lets me in. She tells me all the things my mother did, but with even more detail. I swear to God, if I ever play against this asshole, he will only leave the ice rink on a gurney and in the back on an ambulance.

The large clock hanging my dining room shows to be 11:59 PM, and Gracie and I are about to get our true beginning to the due over that we both desperately need. Turning to Gracie, I cup her face in the palm of my hand and look deep into those bright green eyes.

"Ten seconds," I whisper.

Gracie shifts closer. We count down together, each number punctuated by the steady beat of my heart.

"Three... two... one..." Our voices trail off as the night sky blooms with fireworks.

I don't waste a moment. My hands find her face, thumbs caressing her cheeks as I pull her into a kiss that feels like coming home. Her lips are soft, yielding. Gracie melts into me, her arms wrapping around my neck, drawing us impossibly closer.

The balcony, the coffee cups, the noise of Miami celebrations—it all fades into nothingness. There's only the heat of her mouth, the silkiness of her hair slipping through my fingers.

Gracie

Fireworks explode in the sky around us, their brilliant blooms reflecting in Bennett's eyes as his lips crash against mine. The old year slips away, and Bennett's arms sweep under my knees and back, lifting me as though I weigh nothing.

"Happy New Year, Gracie," he says against my mouth.

"Happy New Year," I gasp back, clinging to him, my fingers tangling in the soft mess of his blond hair. His steps are sure and steady as he navigates through his house and up a flight of stairs.

He kicks open the door to his bedroom that is only lit by the moonlight shining through the window.

Setting me down gently on the edge of the bed, his hands find my cheeks, tilting my face up to meet his gaze.

"Gracie," Bennett starts, thumb caressing my cheekbone, "I love you. I've been dodging this truth, but I can't anymore. Not when it feels like this."

My chest tightens, a mix of fear and exhilaration making it hard to breathe. However, there's no turning back, not now.

"I love you too, Bennett." The words spill out. "I was scared to let myself feel it, to say it, but what I feel for you is real."

His smile is slow, lighting his face up as he traces the hem of my jersey with confidence. With a lift and a tug, the Miami Kings logo fades into the pile of discarded clothes.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, his lips mapping a warm path from my collarbone down. I thread my fingers through his tousled blond hair once more. He glides kisses over my skin with a precision that leaves me breathless.

"Ben..." I sigh as he finds the waistband of my jeans, unbuttoning them with a tender urgency. My jeans join the jersey on the floor.

Bennett worships my body, every kiss an echo of the love he just confessed. His gaze never leaves mine as he dips lower, his breath hot against my thigh.

There's only sensation. Bennett's mouth finds my center, and my world narrows to the feeling of him between my legs. He teases and tastes, drawing moans from me. My grip on his hair tightens, my hips arching instinctively towards the source of pleasure.

"God, Bennett," I gasp, the words spilling out unchecked. I'm close, so close, the world tilting on its axis as he brings me to the brink. With so much skill, he pushes me over, and I come undone beneath him screaming his name.

He doesn't stop, though, not until he's sure I've felt every aftershock from the waves of bliss he's created. When I finally flutter back down, spent and quivering, Bennett's eyes meet mine again. There's pride and tenderness there.

We're both breathing hard, chests rising and falling in sync.

Bennett reaches for the nightstand and fumbles with a foil packet. I see the determined set to his jaw, but before he can tear it open, I place my hand over his, stilling him.

"Let me," I whisper, heart racing as I take the condom from his grasp. He watches me intently as I carefully open the package. There's something incredibly intimate about this simple act, the prelude to what we both know is coming.

With a steady hand that belies my inner tempest, I roll the condom down over Bennett's hard cock. It's an act of trust, and it feels like I'm sealing our connection with each move. His breath hitches, and it stokes the fire in my belly.

"Gracie," he breathes out.

Bennett lowers himself down to hover over me and lines himself up before pushing forward to enter me. Slowly, so slowly, filling me up until there's nothing but the sensation of him becoming part of me. When he starts moving, it's with a rhythm that's as natural as breathing.

I wrap my legs around his waist, drawing him closer, deeper. The sounds of our lovemaking smack loudly without care. His hands roam over me, strong yet gentle, leaving trails of fire wherever they touch. I cling to him, nails digging into the muscles of his back, marking him as surely as he's marked me.

"Gracie," he groans again, and this time there's no mistaking the worship in his tone. My name on his lips is sweeter than any New Year's champagne, more intoxicating than the headiest drink.

"More," I urge, and Bennett obliges, his thrusts picking up pace. The bed creaks beneath us.

The pressure builds within me and threatens to consume me whole. From the look in Bennett's eyes, from the way his body tenses and his breath catches, I know he's right there with me. We climb higher, chasing the peak together, until finally, we crest the edge.

"Gracie!" Bennett's shout is raw as he comes, his climax triggering my own. Pleasure courses through me. We ride it out, holding onto each other, our hearts beating as one.

As we come down, panting and spent, I realize that every fear, every doubt I had about us, has melted away. This is real and undeniable. This is love, and it's ours.

Lying there, in the tangle of sheets that barely cover our cooling skin, I listen to Bennett's heartbeat.

"Gracie," he whispers, a tender urgency in his voice that makes me turn to face him. "I've been thinking..."

His fingers trace the line of my jaw and tuck that unruly lock behind my ear.

"About us," he continues, swallowing hard. "You know how my schedule is during the season, and yours is just as crazy as mine... I don't want to miss a single chance to wake up with you like this."

He pauses.

"Move in with me, Gracie. Let's stop wasting time apart when we could be together."

My mind spins with the possibilities and the fears. Although, looking into Bennett's eyes, I see the love he has for me.

"Yes, I'll move in with you," I answer without thinking more about it. This time, I'm letting my heart do the talking instead of my head.

There's relief in his smile. We inch closer until our foreheads touch.

"I love you, Bennett Halliday," I confess once more.

"And I love you, Gracie Hogan," he says, his lips catching mine in a kiss that seals the deal, no contract needed.

Bennett

The moment we step out of our beach rental, the tropical air hits us like a warm, fragrant wave. Gracie's eyes light up, and she breathes in deeply, taking in the sight of the bright blue ocean.

"Look at this place, Bennett. It's like stepping into one of those fancy screensavers," she whispers.

I chuckle, watching her hair twirl in the breeze. She spins around, arms open wide, embracing the island as if it were an old friend. Even after months of planning, the reality of being here is exciting.

"Let's go!" Gracie grabs my hand, pulling me towards the beach. Our sandals leave imprints in the soft sand until we are standing where the tide kisses the shore.

Gracie doesn't hesitate. She's shedding her sundress like it's nothing but a barrier between her and adventure. My own shirt follows, and together we plunge into the ocean.

The water is shockingly cool, and it laps against my skin. Gracie's laughter mingles with the wave noise. She splashes me, and I retaliate and fire back with the start of a water fight.

"Can't catch me!" she teases, swimming further out.

"Watch me!" I call back, laughing.

Our bodies move through the water, powerful and unrestrained.

"God, this is perfect," she breathes when I finally catch up to her, our limbs treading water as we float under the endless sky.

"I agree." It's about as close to perfect as anything I've ever felt.

We spend another hour playing around in the water before we leave to get showered and changed for our dinner reservation.

Before we know it, the sun is dipping lower as Gracie and I find our table on the beach. The resort staff has outdone themselves. Candles flicker in the center of our table, and there's a privacy to our spot that makes it feel like we're the only two people in the world.

"Wow," she whispers, eyes wide, taking in the scene. Her fingers brush mine across the tablecloth, sending a jolt up my arm. "This is beautiful, Bennett."

"Nothing compared to you," I say.

We unfold our napkins as the first course arrives. It's a local dish, a tangy ceviche. Watching Gracie savor her first bite, I'm hit with a wave of something that feels suspiciously like pride. She catches me staring and grins, a bit of juice on her chin.

"Stop looking at me like that, or I won't share," she teases, but she pushes her plate towards me anyway.

"Like what?" I ask, playing dumb as I help myself.

"Like I'm your favorite flavor of ice cream," she laughs.

We eat slowly, indulging in the flavors and each other's company. Gracie tells me

about her latest project, her passion for creating connections through her work at Holidays App lighting up her speech.

"Enough about me," she insists, after explaining an algorithm like it's poetry. "Tell me about the team. Are we going to lose any of our friends to trades?"

"The only thing I know is that Jackson will still be here at least another year, but it's uncertain about where Ethan will end up next season," I answer.

"Oh dear. I'm sorry, Bennett. I know that Ethan is one of your best friends on the team."

"Well, you know, that's part of the business," I admit with a shrug of my shoulder.

After dinner, we take to the shore, hands linked, barefoot on the cool sand. The moon lights our path along the shoreline as we walk in comfortable silence.

"Remember that time you tried to teach me to ice skate? I was so terrible," Gracie asks.

"Hey, you stood up. That's more than most can say their first time," I remind her, squeezing her hand.

"Only because you were holding me," she counters.

"Maybe, but that doesn't matter. You still stood on the ice," I affirm.

We continue our walk under the moonlit sky.

The rhythm of the waves sets a perfect cadence as we stroll, and on impulse, I pull Gracie into my arms for an impromptu dance. "Bennett, what are you—" she starts, but I shush her with a grin.

"Trust me," I say, guiding her steps to the sound of the ocean's music. We're not exactly ballroom material—more like two people swaying awkwardly in the sand—but it doesn't matter. When she laughs, that's music to my ears. We spin, stumble, laugh even harder, and it's just... us. Unfiltered. Real.

"Where did that come from?" she asks, breathless from our sandy dance.

"Can't a guy dance with his girl without a reason?" I tease, reveling in the way her body fits against mine, even if we're covered in a fine dusting of beach.

"Of course he can," Gracie says, her smile infectious. "Especially if he's trying to distract her."

"Ah, you got me," I admit with mock surrender, leading her by the hand toward a cove I discovered earlier—a secluded spot shielded by palm fronds.

"Another surprise?" she wonders aloud. She's onto me, and I can tell by the slight tremor in her grip that she feels like something is about to happen.

"Perhaps," is all I offer as I guide her through the natural archway of intertwined branches.

"This is so cute," she whispers, taking in the strings of fairy lights I hung earlier. I watch her chestnut hair glow with the light and think how right this all feels.

"Gracie," I begin, but then pause. I see her slender fingers flutter to her mouth, her eyes wide, and suddenly the need to speak fades away.

"Is this..." Her question trails off, but I hear it clear as day.

"Wait here," I say, stepping back just enough to reach into my pocket while my heart beats like crazy.

I take her hands in mine, feeling their slight tremble that mirrors the nervous flutter in my own stomach.

"From the moment we bumped into each other outside the coffee shop, I knew you were something special," I begin.

She draws in a breath.

"Every challenge we faced, every laugh we shared – they weren't just small things, Gracie. They were the building blocks of this... of us." My thumbs brush over her knuckles. "You've turned my townhouse into a home, your laughter has filled every quiet space in my life, and your strength..." I pause, swallowing the lump of raw emotion in my throat. "Your strength has become my backbone."

Tears escape from her eyes and run down her cheeks to meet the upturned corners of her lips.

"Gracie Hogan, you're the fire on my ice, the calm in my storm, the victory in every defeat. And I can't—I don't want to—imagine my life without you in it."

I drop to one knee, and finally pull out the small velvet box. Opening it, I reveal the ring inside.

"Will you make me the happiest man on earth and agree to be my partner, my confidant, my love... for the rest of our lives?"

Her hand flies to her mouth.

"Yes." She takes my face in the palm of her hands. "Yes, Bennett, a thousand times yes!"

Emotion surges through me as I slide the ring onto her finger, a perfect fit, a perfect

moment.

I scoop Gracie into my arms, making her laugh.

"Can you believe it?" she whispers against my ear. "We're engaged."

"Believe it?" I chuckle softly, pulling back just enough to see the twinkle in her vibrant green eyes. "Gracie, I've imagined this moment more times than I can count. But this... this is better than any fantasy."

The ring on her finger glimmers in the moonlight. She holds up her hand, staring at it with awe before her gaze meets mine again. "Every setback, every doubt, it all led me here, to you."

I press my forehead to hers. "And now we have a lifetime ahead of us. Just think of the stories we'll tell our grandchildren," I murmur.

"Look at us," she breathes out. "Falling for each other was the last thing we wanted, and now..." She trails off, her eyes shimmering with tears and laughter.

"And now we can't let go," I finish for her, the truth resonating deep within my chest.

"Never letting go," she affirms, her fingers interlocking with mine.

"Here's to us, Bennett," she says, her voice filled with promise.

"Here's to us, Gracie," I echo, sealing our pledge with a kiss that feels like forever.

THANK YOU & PLEASE LEAVE A REVIEW

Thank you so much for reading Rent a Pucker ! Please take a moment to leave a review. It is greatly appreciated