



Rescuing My Best Friend's Girl

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: I couldn't save my best friend. But I'll do anything to rescue the woman we both loved.

My best friend drowned under my watch in the Coast Guard, leaving my high-school sweetheart Josephine Richards widowed and pregnant.

Jo is free-spirited and determined, though she faces an uncertain future. Now, I'm back in Seabrook, guilt-ridden but highly skilled in Search and Rescue.

I vow to prove to my hometown, to Jo, and to myself that I'm not the bad boy who left. However, earning her trust again may be the hardest rescue of all.

Whether together or apart, every glance, touch, and longing revives the connection we had. And we're pulled back into the slow-burning, consuming love I thought we'd lost forever.

As smugglers threaten Seabrook, Jo's heart and safety rest in my hands. I'll risk everything—my heart, my reputation, and my life—to save the woman I love.

But if I fail, I'll lose more than her—I'll lose myself.

Rescuing My Best Friend's Girl is a closed door romance. All the sizzle, none of the steam.

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GRACE

The lighthouse casts its warm, steady glow over Seabrook's town square, the light weaving through the lively festival below. The hum of music, bursts of laughter, and the chatter of neighbors and friends fill the still warm-summery evening air, wrapping the town in a sense of unity and celebration. Tonight is more than the town's traditional bonfire, marking the halfway point of summer—it's a triumph, a moment to honor what we've fought so hard to protect.

Standing beside Luke, my hand nestled securely in his, I let the last few days replay in my mind like the ebb and flow of the tide. The battle to preserve Seabrook, the doubts that had gripped me, the quiet moments of hope—it all feels like a storm that's finally passed. Coastal Enterprises, with their reckless plans to transform our beloved coastline into a hub of profit-driven development, had seemed unstoppable. They'd been willing to sacrifice the fragile marine ecosystem for their gain, threatening to disrupt the delicate currents and the vibrant sea life that make Seabrook home.

But they underestimated us. Luke stood at the forefront, a constant presence who rallied the town when I feared there was nothing left to fight for. Together, we unearthed the truth about the corporation's careless plans, presenting undeniable evidence that turned the tide against them.

With the town standing united, Coastal Enterprises had no choice but to retreat.

The relief of knowing Seabrook's waters are still vibrant, the marine life untouched by pollution's grasp, fills me with renewed gratitude and purpose. The creatures I've spent my career studying and protecting will continue to thrive, their habitats safe for

now. As I take in the familiar faces of our community, gathered here in celebration, a sense of pride wells within me.

We did this. We saved what matters, the way of life of Seabrook, Massachusetts.

I glance at Luke, his profile illuminated by the golden glow of the lighthouse. His presence roots me in the moment, reminding me of how far we've come—not just in this fight, but in our own journey together. He's not just the boy who once held my heart, but the man who came back to me, stronger and more steadfast than ever.

Our fingers intertwine instinctively, as they do so often these days.

"You know I'm proud of you, right?" I say, turning toward him.

He tilts his head, his shy smile still capable of making my heart skip. "Why's that?"

"For standing by me when I wasn't sure how to stand on my own. For being everything I didn't know I needed."

His thumb brushes over my knuckles, warmth radiating through me at the tender gesture. "I think we've both been that for each other."

As the festival swirls around us, I feel the weight of the past lifting, replaced by something brighter—a shared hope, a new beginning. It's not just the victory that matters. It's the resilience we've found together, the deeper connection forged through every challenge.

The night deepens, and hand in hand, Luke and I leave the glowing square behind. We walk toward the lighthouse, the crash of waves against the rocky shore a rhythm that tethers me to this place I call home. The light above us shines, unyielding and constant, a beacon that feels like a promise. This is where it all began, where I once

believed I'd lost everything, and where I've found so much more.

Luke stops just before the lighthouse's base, turning to face me fully. His eyes, soft with emotion, hold mine. "Grace, there's something I've been wanting to say."

"What is it?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

He reaches for me, his hands strong and warm as they cradle my cheeks. "I love you. I never stopped loving you, not even when I thought I had to let you go. Not even when I was too stubborn to admit it."

His words wash over me, like the embrace of a nostalgic scent, unexpected and overwhelming in their depth. Tears blur my vision, but this time they're tears of joy, of relief, of a love that has weathered every storm.

"I love you too," I say, my voice breaking. "I always have."

He pulls me into his arms, and for the first time in years, I feel entirely whole.

"I want to build a life with you, Grace. Here in Seabrook. I don't just want to protect this town—I want to protect you, be by your side, for the rest of my life."

My chest swells, my heart full as I look up at him. "I want that too. More than anything."

The light from the lighthouse casts a halo around us, as if sealing this moment in time. The future stretches before us, filled with possibilities shaped not by what we've endured but by what we've overcome. Together.

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JO

The scent of buttery popcorn fills my room as Grace and I sit cross-legged on my bed, surrounded by the chaos of sleepover essentials: fluffy pillows, a half-eaten bag of Sour Patch Kids, and the glow of string lights draped across my headboard, casting a honeyed glow over the room.

“Hey, thanks again for letting me sleep here tonight,” Grace leans forward, balancing a tub of popcorn in her lap, while I flip through my DVD case for the perfect movie.

“What? Of course, you’re always welcome here at Chez Lucas,” I say with a flourish of my arms, “or however they say ‘the Lucas home’ in a fancy way. I love having you over, and my parents really like you. How about *The Princess Bride*?” I immediately switch thoughts, holding up the disc with a flourish.

Grace gasps, clutching the popcorn. “Yes! Oh my gosh, I love that movie. It’s the most romantic movie ever.”

I laugh and agree, sliding the disc into my old DVD player. “Exactly. Besides, Wesley totally reminds me of Alex.”

“Wait, really?” Grace tilts her head, looking genuinely curious. “You think Alex would say, ‘As you wish?’”

“Okay, maybe not the exact line,” I admit, shrugging, “but he has does have this whole ‘I’ll rescue you from anything’ vibe.”

“He does, doesn’t he! I never put that into words, but it’s so true,” Grace elbows me teasingly.

I put my hand over my heart and say with sincerity, mixed with a playful touch of humor, “He would totally crash the wedding with that awful Prince Humperdinck.”

“Ew, yuck!! Humperdinck is so gross,” Grace sticks her tongue out, pretending she is going to gag. “Can you imagine? Kissing him would be like kissing a blobfish.” Her blonde hair falls into her face as she sets the popcorn aside. “And who would I be, then? Also Princess Buttercup?”

“Obviously,” I say, throwing a pillow at her. “Luke’s definitely your Wesley. Come on, he’s been obsessed with you since before freshman year!”

Grace giggles and flops onto her back, hugging the pillow. “Okay, fine. But I swear, he’s so reserved sometimes. Luke has this thoughtful way about him, like he’s always observing the world quietly. He’s not one to jump into the spotlight, but you always notice when he’s there. That’s just him, though. He’s always been more thoughtful and attentive than most guys. I remember once during class, he noticed I was having a bad day and left a folded note with the words, ‘Meet me near the lighthouse after school.’ When I got there, he had a blanket laid out and said, ‘You looked like you needed some quiet today.’ That’s Luke—not loud, but always there when it matters most.”

I smirk, about to tease her about sounding really in love with him. “You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you were planning your wedding already,” I start to say, when there’s a knock at the door.

“Girls? Can I come in?” Mom’s voice floats through the door before she pushes it open, holding a tray with two glasses of milk and a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

“Thanks, Mrs. Lucas,” Grace says, sitting up and flashing her signature polite smile.

Mom sets the tray on my desk and looks at us with her hands on her hips, a sly smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “What are you two whispering about so intently?”

“Mom, don’t worry about it,” I say, rolling my eyes. “But if you have to know, we’re discussing guys.”

Grace bursts out laughing, but Mom doesn’t look fazed. She raises an eyebrow as she picks up an empty popcorn bag. “Well, if you’re talking about boys, I hope you’re including Tanner. You know, he’s a fine young man, Josephine. He’s always been so dependable, and one day, he’ll have a promising career. With his family money, he could easily take care of you.”

“Oh, gross!” I groan, throwing a pillow at her this time. “Mom, you’re making it sound like he’s already my husband. Tanner’s just my friend, okay? We’ve been friends since, like, second grade.”

Mom shrugs, clearly undeterred by my protest. “I’m just saying. Stability is important, Jo. And Tanner has a good head on his shoulders.”

“Mom! Alex is my boyfriend,” I point out, crossing my arms. “You know that.”

She tilts her head, her smile softening but not exactly enthusiastic. “Right. That Turner boy. Well, he seems nice enough. I’m sure you’re never bored around him.”

Grace stifles a laugh, and I shoot her a warning look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mom picks up a stray sock and shrugs. “Oh, nothing. Just that he’s, uh ...

spontaneous. Exciting. Always on some grand adventure.” She gives me a pointed look. “Just make sure he doesn’t sweep you off your feet so fast you forget to land, okay?”

“Noted,” I mutter as Mom heads toward the door.

“Have fun, girls,” she says, closing the door behind her.

Grace snorts as soon as the door shuts. “She totally thinks you’re going to end up with Tanner.”

“Ugh, I know,” I groan. “She’s been saying that since forever. Like, can you imagine? Me and Tanner? No thanks.”

Grace laughs and grabs the popcorn. “Okay, but admit it—Tanner would totally make you soup if you were sick. He’s got those good husband vibes.”

“Sure, but Alex...” I trail off, smiling to myself. “Alex would show up at my window in the middle of the night with soup and a whole plan to rescue me from my boring sick day.”

Grace sighs dramatically. “And Luke would just show up, blush furiously, and say something about how soup is overrated when you’re sick. Then he’d give me a box of Kleenex and cold medicine to help solve my illness. He sure likes to fix problems.”

We both dissolve into laughter, the kind that makes your stomach ache, before settling back into the pillows.

“Okay, movie time,” I say, hitting play on the remote.

As the opening scenes of *The Princess Bride* play, Grace leans toward me. “Can you

believe this movie is thirty years old?”

“Yeah, but it’s timeless,” I say. “Wesley’s devotion to Buttercup, even though she gets set up with someone else? So romantic.”

Grace sighs. “And I just love how Wesley fights for her, no matter what. That’s real love.”

I grin. “I like that his mission is to rescue her before she gets stuck in a loveless marriage with that awful prince.”

Together, we groan, “Yuck! Prince Humperdinck!”

The room fills with our giggles, the movie playing as we settle into our spots. We quote the lines as they come, laughing and swooning at all the right moments, until the final scene arrives.

As Wesley and Buttercup share their kiss, Grace and I both murmur the iconic line along with the narrator: ““Since the invention of the kiss, there have been five kisses that were rated the most passionate, the most pure. This one left them all behind.””

We collapse onto the bed with dramatic, blissful sighs.

“Grace, we better get to sleep,” I say, stifling a yawn. “I’m volunteering at the library tomorrow morning.”

We shuffle around the room, brushing our teeth and getting ready for bed, the comfortable routine of a sleepover we’ve done a hundred times before.

The lights click off, and for a moment, there’s only the sound of my parents’ footsteps and their murmuring voices in another part of the house.

“Has Luke kissed you yet?” I whisper into the dark.

Grace giggles, and then, almost shyly, she whispers, “Luke and I kissed for the first time last summer. It was near the cliffs by the lighthouse. We’d been walking along the edge, and the stars were so bright. I could hear the waves crashing below, and it felt like we were the only two people in the world.”

“What happened?” I ask, intrigued.

Grace pauses, a light laugh escaping her. “He was so nervous. Like, he kept stuffing his hands in his pockets, glancing at me like he was deciding something really important. I think I scared him when I finally said, ‘Luke Thompson, if you don’t kiss me right now, I’m going to think you don’t want to.’”

I gasp, laughing. “You actually said that? What did he do?”

By now, my eyes have adjusted to the dark, and the light from a full moon is shining into my window, so I can watch Grace while she continues her story.

“He froze for a second, like he thought I was joking,” Grace says, her tone light and wistful. “But then he stepped closer, all fumbling and unsure. When he finally leaned in, it was the softest, sweetest kiss—like he was trying to make it perfect. He smelled like the ocean, and his lips were so warm.”

My eyes widen at Grace’s moonstruck expression, “Wow, Grace. That sounds wonderful.”

“Afterward, I teased him about how long it took him to actually kiss me, and he just blushed like crazy. But the look on his face? He was so happy, Jo. Like he couldn’t believe it really happened.”

I grin, already swooning in the dark. “That’s so adorable. Luke’s so cute and such a good guy.”

“Yeah,” Grace murmurs, her voice tinged with affection. “He really is. What about you and Alex?”

I smile, remembering. “He kissed me last month. I think he’d been planning on it for a while, because he was pretty confident. On the beach, under the lighthouse. It was perfect. He was nervous too, at first, but also seemed like he really knew what he was doing. But don’t tell him I said that—I’ll never hear the end of it. I can’t imagine my life without him, Grace.”

She sighs knowingly, and we fall into a comfortable silence, the sound of relaxing rainwater from my noise machine lulling us to sleep.

The cookbook in my hands feels heavier than it should as I make my way toward the lighthouse. I parked far away—every guest in Seabrook seems to be here today. The gift, carefully wrapped in brown paper with a sprig of lavender tied to the top, contains a well-loved favorite at the library: Coastal Kitchen Treasures. Patrons have raved about its recipes for years, and it seems like the perfect choice for Grace and Luke—a practical yet thoughtful start to their shared life.

When the invitation arrived in my mailbox a few weeks ago, I was thrilled. A formal wedding invitation felt like such a rare thing in Seabrook, where news is usually spread through quick phone calls or conversations at the bakery. The creamy envelope, embossed with their names, made me smile instantly. Grace’s elegant touch was all over it. And now, walking up the hill to the lighthouse with the salty breeze brushing my face, it’s hard not to think about how far we’ve come.

A memory from years ago surfaces—that sleepover where we whispered about our boyfriends and watched *The Princess Bride*. I had joked about Luke being Grace’s

Wesley, and I remember teasing her about planning their wedding someday. And here we are, years later. She's actually marrying her Prince Charming.

I whisper out loud, the words carried away by the gentle wind, "Happily ever after, just like in the movies." My lips curve subtly in a smile, but it quickly fades as my thoughts turn inward.

I tighten my grip on the gift as my steps falter. Widowed just four months ago, and unsure of my purpose, I've felt like a shadow of myself lately. It's been hard to imagine joy, harder still to believe I'm capable of finding love again. Grace's wedding is a reminder of everything I've lost—a love I thought would last forever.

The lump in my throat is nearly unbearable, but I force myself to breathe deeply and keep walking. By the time I reach the lighthouse-turned-gorgeous-wedding-venue, I've pulled myself together. I find a seat near the front, greeting familiar faces with a polite smile. Mrs. Carlson from the bakery beams at me, her hands clasped over her heart as Grace glides down the aisle.

"Jo, doesn't Grace look like an angel?" she whispers.

I nod, managing a warm reply. "She really does."

The ceremony is beautiful, Grace radiantly glowing as she and Luke exchange their vows. By the time the recessional begins, the guests are clapping and cheering, but I'm too weary to join in. My yawn escapes loudly, earning a few glances, and I cringe in embarrassment.

Practically, I tell myself it's time to head home. I won't have the energy to stand through the reception, and I can't bring myself to smile and pretend everything is fine. Inside, my heart is aching. The tears come before I can stop them, slipping down my cheeks as I lower my head and try to leave unnoticed.

In my rush to escape, I brush into someone standing near the back of the chairs.

“Sorry—” I begin, then freeze. My heart somersaults.

He’s dressed in a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, paired with dark slacks that look slightly too formal for him. His dark hair is tousled by the breeze, and his smokey gray eyes, sharp and unforgettable, are watching me with an intensity I can’t describe.

It’s Alex Turner.

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ALEX

The wind bites at my face as I maneuver my way down the steep, rocky incline. Somewhere below, the faint sound of a woman's voice carries upward—weak and terrified. The canyon walls close in around me, their sheer drop amplifying every sound: the crunch of my boots against loose gravel, the rustle of the harness clipped to my pack, and the labored breathing of my teammate, Reed, a few paces behind me.

“I’ve got visual on her,” I call into my radio. My voice is even-toned, practiced. The SAR training kicks in, keeping me calm despite the situation. “Female, late twenties, conscious but disoriented. Looks like a sprained ankle. She’s about thirty feet from the ledge. We’ll need the stretcher.”

Reed’s voice crackles back. “Copy that. I’ll prep the gear.”

I nod, even though he can’t see me, and continue my descent. The woman clings to a jagged outcrop, her face pale, streaked with tears. Her hands tremble, and I can tell she’s barely holding it together.

“Hey,” I say, my voice carrying a gentle certainty. “I’m Alex, with Search and Rescue. You’re going to be okay. What’s your name?”

She looks up at me, her brown eyes wide with fear. “Claire,” she whispers, her voice cracking.

“Okay, Claire. You’re doing great. Just hang tight. I’m almost there.” I keep my tone measured. Every step closer matters—not just physically, but emotionally. If she

believes I'm in control, she'll feel safer.

As I reach her, I kneel, anchoring myself against the rock face. My gloved hands move quickly, assessing her injuries. "Looks like a sprain," I confirm. "We'll get you splinted and out of here in no time. Do you remember how you got here?"

She shakes her head, tears spilling over. "I was hiking alone ... I thought I'd be fine ... but I slipped."

"Happens to the best of us," I reassure her. "You're not alone anymore."

Within minutes, Reed arrives with the stretcher, and working together in tandem, my every action complementing his, we secure Claire, stabilize her ankle, and prepare for the hoist. As the helicopter's rotor blades beat overhead, kicking up dust and loose debris, I glance down at Claire one last time before she's lifted.

"You're going to be okay," I tell her. "We've got you."

The relief in her eyes stays with me long after the chopper disappears over the horizon.

This was the kind of mission that reminded me why I couldn't walk away from rescue work completely. When I left the Coast Guard, I thought I was done saving lives, that I wasn't worthy of the noble task I felt called to.

But the pull to serve, to be the one standing between life and death, never really left me. That's how I ended up here—Search and Rescue gave me a second chance at a purpose, a way to use my skills without such high risk of losing someone because of what I did or didn't do. Maybe I was looking for redemption by hiding behind what I thought I was meant to do, but the choice made sense to me where I was in my life.

The room is cold, the kind of sterile chill that seeps into your bones. My uniform hangs heavily on me today, the insignia on my chest a reminder of everything I'm about to leave behind.

I'm released from my rigid at-attention stance by Captain Harris's, "As you were." My superior officer assesses me from across his desk, his eyes like polished steel, sharp and perceptive, the kind of look that sees straight through excuses.

"You're requesting an honorable discharge?" His tone remains even, but something flickers in his eyes—disappointment, maybe. I swallow hard and nod. "Yes, sir. After ... what happened to Tanner yesterday, I don't believe I can give this job one hundred percent anymore. And if I can't do that, I'm a liability to the team."

Captain Harris leans back in his chair, studying me. "What happened to Tanner was a tragedy, Alex. But it wasn't your fault."

My fists clench and unclench at my sides. "It was my mission. My responsibility."

He exhales slowly, rubbing a hand over his face. "I will put in for an honorable discharge on the grounds of mental health and duress immediately. I'm sure you will experience PTSD. Alex, you will be evaluated and diagnosed, and a treatment plan will be designed for you. I recommend you follow the plan to the letter. This will help with follow-up through the VA, as well as helping you on your emotional journey." His voice softens at his last comment. "But you need to know this: we're losing an exceptionally impressive Coast Guardsman in you. Take care of yourself, Turner."

"Thank you, sir," I say, my voice outwardly composed and controlled, but inside, I feel like I'm fracturing.

The first day of SAR training is brutal. It's not the physical demands that get to me—those are second nature after years in the Coast Guard. It's the mental toll, the

constant reminders of what I'm trying to leave behind. At night, the memories creep in—Tanner's laugh, his loyal presence, the trust he placed in me.

I add to the list in my notebook, something to focus on when the guilt feels overwhelming:

~Leadership under pressure

~Navigation and survival skills

~Medical response training

~Rope and water rescues

These are the skills I'm honing, the tools I'll use to save lives—the way I couldn't save Tanner.

Mere months later, I stand among my peers at the SAR graduation ceremony. My uniform is different now, the patch on my sleeve a new symbol of purpose. I've completed the Basic SAR Course, the Tech Certification, and finished the SAR swimming and helicopter rescue courses. The training officer shakes my hand, welcoming me officially. For the first time in what seems like forever, I feel a sense of pride.

But pride isn't enough. I need to put these skills to use, to make a difference—for people I know and care about. Seabrook is where I was born, and I'm hoping it can be where this new beginning in my life will start. And maybe, just maybe, I can prove to myself that I can be the kind of man Tanner believed I was. If I'm ever going to forgive myself, I have to start there.

The drive to Seabrook feels endless, like a ribbon of asphalt unraveling beneath my

tires, each mile a reminder of the distance between who I was and who I'm trying to become. The closer I get to my hometown, the more the memories close in like the walls of a canyon, leaving me surrounded with no way out.

Jo's face flashes in my mind—her laughter, her stubbornness, the way she used to scold me for skipping class.

I think about the night I told her I was leaving to join the Coast Guard. We were seventeen, standing in a meadow just outside of Seabrook, the scent of damp earth and wildflowers filling the air as the stars blinked down at us. A night that should have been ordinary, but instead became one I would never forget.

“You're leaving?” Her voice broke, a quiet tremor of disbelief woven through her words, and it killed me. We stood facing each other, our hands joined, and I caressed her velvety skin, trying to communicate without words how the fact that I couldn't take her with me was breaking my heart.

“I have to,” I said, barely able to meet her eyes, afraid of the pain I'd see there. “I can't stay here, Jo. I need to be more than this.”

“More than us?”

Her question was quiet, but the power of the sadness behind it nearly brought me to my knees. The unspoken plea, the desperate hope that I would take it all back, that I would change my mind. That I would stay.

I wanted to say no to leaving Jo. To reach for her, to promise her that I'd come back. But I couldn't. I'd already decided, and if I gave her any hope, I'd break us both. So, I stood there, silent, letting the moment stretch between us like the endless sky above, knowing that no matter what I said, this was the turning point that would change everything.

She turned away first, and the ache that settled deep in my chest that night never really left.

Seabrook hasn't changed much. The Good Thymes Diner is still the heart of the town, its red-and-white awning a beacon for gossip and pancakes. I sit in the corner booth, listening to the murmurs around me.

"Alex Turner's back? You mean the troublemaker?"

"Yeah, but he's different now. Coast Guard, Search and Rescue. Maybe he's finally grown up."

"Or maybe he's still the same kid who broke half the town's rules."

I grit my teeth, focusing on my coffee. They're not wrong about who I was, but they don't know who I've become.

The wedding is in a few hours, and I'm not sure I'm ready. Luke's been like a brother to me, and being here to celebrate him and Grace feels right. But the thought of seeing Jo again ... that's something I haven't prepared for.

The reception buzzes with quiet conversation and laughter, but my focus is elsewhere. My eyes scan the crowd instinctively, a habit I can't shake. Then, in an instant, I see her.

Jo Richards.

She's beautiful, more beautiful than I remember, and I'm rocked to my core, as if a freight train has just slammed into me, an immovable force that is both palpable and unescapable. She moves through the chairs with hurried steps, her expression unreadable.

In her rush to leave, she bumps into me where I am standing behind the rows of chairs set up to face the wedding arch.

“Sorry—” she begins, then freezes.

The brief touch of her body against mine sends a shock through me, a jolt of heat and memory colliding at once. It’s not just physical—it’s a reminder of every moment we’ve shared, every regret that still haunts me.

She looks up at me, her eyes widening as recognition sets in. For a moment, neither of us moves. Our surroundings blur into obscurity, leaving only the two of us, alone in the crowd, faced with the undeniable reality of living in the same town, our lives being thrown together once more.

“Jo,” I say, my voice husky and slightly hesitant. “It’s been too long. You look ... beautiful.”

I stumble over the words, unable to mask the uncertainty coursing through me. My gaze shifts between her face and the ground, unsure of what to say or how to make up for lost time.

She goes still, her breath catching as her gaze meets mine. I’m immersed in her hazel eyes, which are locked onto my own, shifting like autumn leaves caught in golden sunlight, warm, rich, luminous and impossible to look away from.

They’re filled with so much emotion—guilt, longing, and an expression I’ve seen before that slams into me like an unexpected landslide, sudden and unstoppable, grabbing everything in its path. It’s the way she used to look at me in high school, like her love for me was the only thing that existed in that moment.

“Alex,” she whispers. Then, as if catching herself, she shakes her head and takes a

few steps back. Before I can stop her, she turns and walks away, her pace quickening, sand crunching underfoot.

I don't hesitate.

"Jo, wait," I say gently, reaching out to brush my hand against her elbow. She stops. The moment stretches between us, so much to say, but everything left unsaid.

"Can I walk you to your car?" I ask. "I'd like to talk."

She shrugs, a gesture that feels distant, detached, and starts walking again. I fall into step beside her, hands shoved deep into my pockets to keep from reaching for her again.

"I'm sorry I didn't come back sooner," I say, remorse in my voice. "I wanted to be here for the funeral, but ... I just couldn't."

She glances at me briefly, then back at the path ahead. "I needed you here, Alex," she says.

"Jo, I understand that now. I should have come. I just—" I exhale, shaking my head. "I didn't know how to face you."

She halts mid-step, her posture stiff, unreadable. My insides feel hollow when I see doubt and distrust in her eyes.

"Jo, I hated myself for leaving. Then I hated myself even more for feeling like I still had a claim to you, even when I knew I didn't. You were my first love. My only love. But Tanner got to be the one by your side, and I had to live with that."

I falter, my throat constricting, but I force the words out anyway. "And I still ... care."

I still..." The confession catches in my throat, too raw, too dangerous to finish.

She doesn't let me. "Well, life happens, doesn't it?" Her voice is clipped, but her hands curl slightly at her sides, betraying her. "No use dwelling on what we can't change."

She turns toward her car, but her hesitation hangs in the air like an unfinished sentence. My hands ball into fists. I should stop her, say something to fix this before she's gone again—but I don't know how.

She pauses with her hand on the car door, glancing back at me. And that look—it guts me. It's bare, unguarded, leaving her heart out in the open for me to read, and I feel the ache right along with her.

"Alex." My name is barely a whisper from her lips. Then she sighs, the fight draining from her shoulders, and she slides into the car.

When she looks back at me in her mirror, I see in her eyes the same questions I've been asking myself since the day I left: do I even have a right to feel this way?

Is there a way forward for us, or is it too late?

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:49 am

GRACE

Inside the cozy guest room at the lighthouse keeper's bungalow, the scent of salt and wildflowers drifts through an open window, mingling with the quiet murmur of family and friends' voices from outside. Practically everyone in Seabrook has gathered near the lighthouse, drawn together to celebrate this day. It's not just a wedding—it's the second chance at love Luke and I have fought so hard to find.

From Mrs. Carlson at the bakery to the Millers who run the grocery store, and even old Mr. Grady from the marina, they all feel a sense of responsibility for bringing us back together, as though their well-wishes and quiet encouragement over the years somehow guided us to this moment. They witnessed our intense high school relationship, saw it fall apart, and now they're here to see it come full circle.

But for now, it's just Mom and me. My lighthouse. It's going to be my legacy, too, once I marry Luke today. It feels strange to think of it that way, even now, as I stand here in a flowing gown of ivory and lace, delicate floral patterns trailing over the fabric like vines climbing a trellis. The bodice hugs me flatteringly, and the lace sleeves feel soft against my skin, whispering of elegance and tradition. My heart is so full it's hard to take deep breaths.

"You're stunning, Grace," my mom whispers as she adjusts my veil. Her eyes shimmer with a mix of pride and pensiveness, like she's holding back tears. "You remind me of the day I married your father. So beautiful, so full of hope. So sure that he was the perfect man for me."

I laugh softly, gripping the small bouquet of roses, daisies, and lavender. I can't help

but think of Luke's constant presence over the past few months, how he's quietly taken care of every detail to make this day perfect.

Her smile turns wistful and introspective. "He's shown how much he adores you, Grace. The way he looks at you, the way he's always there to protect you—he'll be an amazing husband to you."

I glance at her, glimpsing something deeper behind her smile. "Are you okay?"

She nods, but her voice is soft when she replies "I'm giving my little girl away today. It's a lot to take in, Grace. But I couldn't be happier knowing it's Luke. He's a good man, and he loves you so much. That's all a mother can hope for." She hesitates, her hands smoothing the fabric of my veil.

"But there's something I've carried for too long, and I need to say it now," she adds, her voice tentative. "When Luke left after high school, it wasn't just his decision. I told him he shouldn't hold you back, that you deserved more than what he could offer at the time. I asked him to walk away from you, and I thought I was doing the right thing for you; but, I've regretted it ever since. I'm so sorry, Grace."

Her confession hangs in the air, laced with emotion. Tears prick my eyes, but I take her hand in mine. "Mom," I say softly, "you did what you thought was best. And maybe it hurt then, but it led us here. I wouldn't change a thing. I love you, and I forgive you."

Her shoulders relax, and she squeezes my hand. "You're an incredible woman, Grace. Luke is lucky to have you."

Her words settle over me, a warm reassurance I hadn't realized I needed until this very moment. I take a deep breath, feeling the magnitude of everything this day represents. Today isn't just about love—it's about healing, about finding light after so

much turmoil.

There are so many years of doubt and heartbreak I carry with me, moments of feeling lost and unsure if Luke could have truly loved me the way he said he did, especially when he seemed to so easily turn and walk away from me.

It began when he left to join the Navy without giving me any explanation, leaving me with unanswered questions and a broken heart. I know Luke felt the heartbreak of leaving me, too.

I also know he carries the incredible sorrow and guilt from his years as a SEAL, especially from the tragic convoy explosion that took the lives of his Navy brothers—his closest friends—and left him permanently scarred and injured.

When I returned to Seabrook last summer for my marine biology research, I had planned to stay in a rented cabin. But instead, I was forced to stay with Luke, and that reunion was filled with awkwardness and uncertainty about our feelings. Luke doubted he could be the man I deserved because of his past trauma and the injury to his leg. We both feared rejection and being hurt again.

But we faced it together, one step at a time, until the shadows gave way to hope.

Pretzel barks from somewhere near the house, likely causing another ruckus. He's been as much a part of this journey as anyone else.

Grace's mom steps back, hands on her hips, and studies me. "Exquisitely perfect. I'm not sure Luke knows what he's getting into," she teases with a laugh, "but he'll figure it out soon enough. He's not going to know what hit him," she adds, her smile masking bittersweet feelings.

I laugh softly, my fingers brushing over the delicate petals of the bouquet. The scent

of the flowers swirls around me, filling me with the pure joy of this day.

“I think he’ll manage.”

“Now, don’t trip on your way down the aisle, okay?” Mom’s tone is light, but I can hear the underlying emotion as she tries to compose herself. She’s doing her best to hide just how much this moment means to her.

I roll my eyes. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

She winks, then hurries off to join the others in the wedding party. I take a deep breath and imagine the lighthouse just outside, its unwavering presence a reflection of how Luke has stood beside me these past months. It’s been a sanctuary for us both, a place where broken pieces began to mend.

The sound of the string quartet, the violins playing a reflective melody perfectly complemented by the viola and cello playing the harmony, pulls me back. It’s time.

As I step out onto the makeshift aisle lined with driftwood and candles, all eyes turn toward me. But there’s only one gaze I seek. Luke stands under the wedding arch, his broad shoulders perfectly framed by a navy suit that fits him with tailored precision. The fabric clings just enough to emphasize his strength, each line of his physique speaking of power and grace.

A flutter races through me, heat pooling in my chest, a warmth that’s equal parts admiration and desire. In this moment, he’s everything—unshakable, steadfast, and so heartbreakingly handsome that I feel my knees weaken slightly. The way he looks at me, awe gentling his rugged features, sends a ripple of emotion through me that I feel down to my toes. His expression is a mix of wonder and determination, like he’s still trying to believe this is real.

I feel the sting of tears as our eyes meet.

There's so much history between us, so many moments that led to this. My mind drifts back to when we were dating in high school, painting the memory with vivid clarity—near the cliff by the lighthouse, under a canopy of endless stars, the ocean breeze tugs at my hair, carrying the scent of salt and freedom. Luke stands in front of me, his hands stuffed in his pockets, his eyes searching mine as if trying to memorize every detail. The world feels impossibly still, the waves below crashing softly against the rocks, their rhythm matching the pounding of my heart.

“You're amazing, Grace,” he says, his voice barely more than a whisper. Then he leans in, his lips brushing mine with hesitation and the effort to make this milestone perfect, giving me a piece of himself he's never shared before. Time stretches, the stars above us seeming to shine brighter, as if they're celebrating this moment.

That kiss was more than just our first; it was a promise. I can still feel the way his fingers trailed gently through my hair, his touch so careful yet so electrifying that it left me breathless, as if he were trying to memorize every strand; and the way he looked at me, as if I was the only person in the world. It was the kind of moment that stayed with me this whole time, even when everything else seemed lost.

Then there was the way he carried me when I sprained my ankle in high school, his arms muscular and reliable, scooping me up without waiting. I remember the way his chest felt against my shoulder, the humble determination in his stride as though carrying me was the most natural thing in the world. My embarrassment melted into a realization of how safe I felt with him, how his presence wrapped around me like a shield from the world.

Even now, the memory sends a warm flush through me, a reminder of how he's always been my protector. The years we spent apart were so very hard, but even then, Luke's presence was a quiet force in my life. In my loneliest moments, I held on to

the memory of his strength—the way he carried me, the way his voice caressed my name. Those memories became my lifeline, comforting me when everything else felt uncertain.

Even from miles away, his love reached me in ways I didn't fully understand at the time. It was unyielding, a quiet assurance that reminded me I wasn't as alone as I felt. And now, standing here, I see the man who has always been my refuge, my constant, my protector.

The closer I get, the more his gruff exterior softens. Luke is a man who carries the weight of the world on his shoulders, but today, he looks unburdened, as though the heartbreaks of the past have finally eased, leaving space for something new and hopeful.

My dad escorts me down the aisle, his hand warm and firm on mine. As we pause when we reach the altar, he leans in close and whispers, "You've always been my greatest joy, Grace. Watching you find this happiness today fills my heart more than I can ever say. You're incredible, and I'm so proud of you."

He pulls me into a hug, his arms wrapping tightly around me in a moment that feels both protective and tender. When he pulls back, he presses a kiss to my cheek, his voice soft with emotion. "I'm so glad to be giving you to Luke and having him join the family," he murmurs. His words carry the depth of love and pride, bolstering me before he steps aside.

I step forward, and Luke takes my hand. His touch is firm and loving, sending a wave of calm through me, yet igniting a spark of excitement, as if his presence alone can reach into my heart and fill it with contentment. He leans in slightly, his hand tightening around mine, and for a moment, the world feels perfectly aligned—just the two of us, standing on the edge of forever.

The ceremony is a blur of heartfelt words and gentle laughter. Mom stands before the gathered guests, her hands trembling slightly as she reads a poem about love's resilience. Her voice catches at the end, and she pauses to collect herself before finishing, the emotion unmistakable. The waves crash rhythmically in the background, as if nature itself is blessing this union.

Newly-widowed Josephine Richards sits near the front, her hand resting protectively over the tiniest curve of her stomach. She catches my eye and smiles, though there's a glint of something deeper there—celebration blended with sadness. I do know that I am probably one of the only people who knows of the new life she carries.

When it's time for the vows, Luke clears his throat. He's not one for speeches, but I know whatever he's about to say will stay with me forever.

"Grace," he begins, his voice drops but remains resolute. "You've always been my light, even when I didn't deserve it, even when I was too broken to see it. You reminded me what it means to live with purpose, to hope, to love." He pauses, his jaw grinding slightly as he fights for composure. "Today, I promise to stand by you, to protect you, and to love you for the rest of my life. No matter what comes our way."

A tear slips down my cheek. I've heard this man say many things, but never words like these. Words that make me feel like the most cherished person in the world.

It's my turn. My hands shiver, not from cold but nerves and vulnerability, as I hold his. "Luke," I say, focusing on the vows I've memorized. "You've taught me that love is not about perfection. It's about finding strength in the broken places, about showing up even when it's hard. I promise to stand with you, to choose you, every day. You're my safe harbor, my home, my heart."

His grip tightens, his eyes never leaving mine.

Jo shifts uncomfortably, drawing my attention. I know her late husband's memory is fresh, especially today. It was only six years ago that Tanner and Jo shared their own wedding vows.

She's trying to be discreet, but her expression gives her away. Guilt flickers across her face, followed by raw and unspoken emotion. She's told me that she's caught between Tanner's memory and her unknown future. She exhales softly, and I notice a deep sadness in her eyes, but also a glimmer of resolve, as though she's searching for a way to honor the past while finding the courage to move forward.

Jo's posture stiffens slightly. Today isn't just a wedding celebration; it's a reminder of what she's lost, a bittersweet reflection of the short love story they shared and the life they never got to finish building together. Tanner will always be a part of her story, and a part of ours, as one of Luke's closest friends.

After we exchange rings and Pastor Taylor speaks the final words, I'm overwhelmed by a powerful sense of gratitude. For Luke, for this moment, for the love that has brought us here. But even as Luke's lips brush mine and the crowd erupts in cheers, I can't shake the feeling that not everyone's heart is as whole as mine.

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LUKE

The reception has finally quieted. After the laughter, music, and chaos of too much cake, the last guests walk out of the lighthouse yard, leaving only the glow of string lights and the distant hum of the ocean.

She's standing at the edge of the yard, gazing out at the sea, the golden strands of her hair still catching the soft light of the sparkling decorations. She looks tired, but in the most beautiful way, her smile soft and content. The scent of salt and roses lingers in the air, a reminder of the bouquet she tossed earlier.

Just moments ago, Grace stood at the center of the crowd, her grin infectious as she turned her back to the eager group of women behind her. She lifted the bouquet high, then flung it over her shoulder with a playful laugh. The flowers soared through the air, and when they landed in the hands of a blushing bridesmaid, the crowd broke into a wave of applause and joyful shouting. I couldn't help but laugh, watching Grace's triumphant grin as she turned back to me, her eyes sparkling with joy.

As the night deepened, the guests began to slowly trickle out of the lighthouse yard. Goodbyes were exchanged, hugs shared, and congratulations whispered over the sound of the waves.

Grace's dad clapped me on the shoulder as he prepared to leave, his usual larger-than-life grin softened by emotion. "You know, Luke," he said, his voice quieter than usual, "she's been my world since the day she was born. But I can see now—clear as the lighthouse beam out there—that she's your world, too. Take care of her."

“Always,” I said, shaking his hand firmly, my chest tight with the weight of his trust.

Nearby, Mrs. Carlson, who’d baked the cake, waved at Grace. “You two better not go anywhere anytime soon,” she called, her voice full of warmth. “We’re all expecting to see you around town!”

Grace laughed and nodded, her hand slipping into mine. “Don’t worry, Mrs. Carlson,” she replied. “We have no plans to leave Seabrook.”

One by one, the chairs emptied, and soon it was just Grace and me under the warm shimmer of the decorative lights—on the first night of our forever.

Lost in the rush of memories, I walk toward Grace, where she stands gazing at the horizon. Without a word, our hands find each other. The ocean stretches out before us, dark and endless, the waves a quiet rhythm beneath the lighthouse’s steady glow.

“Do you remember how we used to sneak up here when we were kids?” she asks, her voice soft, fingers brushing against mine.

“I remember everything about us,” I reply, the words slipping out easily, truthfully. “This lighthouse—it’s seen everything. The good, the bad, the in-between. And now it’ll see us build something even stronger.”

She smiles, her eyes glistening with emotion as she tilts her head to rest on my shoulder. For a moment, we stand there, the salt air wrapping around us like a gift from the sea itself. Her quick kiss on my cheek breaks the spell.

We find a small table off to the side and sink into the chairs, her hand slipping back into mine. The scattered flowers and overturned chairs around us tell the story of a day we’ll never forget.

Grace leans her head against my chest, as she whispers, “It all feels like a dream.”

“The best kind,” I say, my thumb tracing gentle circles on the back of her hand. “What was your favorite part?”

She laughs softly, her eyes bright. “It’s hard to choose,” she says, her voice thoughtful. “Probably our first dance. I can’t believe you remembered the first song we danced to in high school. When the emcee announced it and the band started playing ‘My Heart Will Go On,’ it felt like the world stopped.” She pauses, glancing at me with a soft smile. “You held me like you never wanted to let go. It felt like we were teenagers again, swaying under the stars.”

“I’ll never forget that,” I say, meeting her gaze. “Hearing that song brought back everything—the promises, the dreams we had. And dancing with you tonight ... It felt like the pieces of our story falling flawlessly into place.”

Applause had broken out as we stepped onto dance floor together, the glow of string lights reflecting in her eyes. The crowd fell silent, their attention solely on us. Her hands rested lightly on my shoulders, and I wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her close. For a moment, it felt like the first time we danced, swaying under the stars and dreaming about forever.

“You remembered,” she’d murmured, her voice laden with feeling.

“I could never forget,” I’d said. “It’s always been our song.”

As we moved, the melody washed over us, each note carrying memories of simpler times and the promise of what was to come. Around us, the crowd faded into a blur, their smiles and cheers blending with the music.

Now, she tightens her grip on my hand. “I’ll never forget the way you looked at me. Like I was the center of your universe.”

“Because you are. And I am so much more over the moon in love with you now than

I was then, although that feels impossible.”

“You have a way with words, Luke Thompson.”

“Only because you inspire them, Mrs. Thompson,” I say, leaning in to kiss her tenderly.

She blushes but doesn’t break eye contact. “And to think, that was just one part of tonight.”

I grin. “My favorite part was when the emcee announced our dance. ‘Ladies and gentlemen,’” I mimic. “‘It’s time for the first dance between our newlyweds, Mr. and Mrs. Luke Thompson!’ It really hit me then that we are married now, sweet Grace.”

She laughs, and I can’t help but be drawn into her joy.

“There were so many other wonderful moments,” she says. “Remember when Dad spun me around on the dance floor and nearly made me dizzy. ‘It’s your wedding day, Gracie,’ he’d said, loud enough for everyone to hear. ‘I want you to remember that I was the first man you danced with.’”

I smile at the thought of her dad, always so exuberant and full of energy. Grace’s laugh softens as she adds, “And of course, I had to tell him, ‘Dad, you’re going to make me trip,’ while trying to keep up with his moves.” Her voice carries the fondness of someone replaying a memory they’ll treasure forever. “Then there was your mom dancing with Pretzel just to stay on the floor longer than Mr. Duncan. That was something else.”

Grace laughs again, the sound light and easy, and it makes me feel like I’m standing in the safest place in the world.

“Oh, Grace. Then there was my dance with Mom . . .” Her eyes had been glassy as I

led her across the dance floor, the fairy lights reflecting in her tears.

“Your father would’ve loved this, Luke,” she’d said, her voice calm despite the emotion rising in it. “He’d be so proud of the man you’ve become. And of Grace.”

I hadn’t been able to say much, just nodded and let the moment speak for itself. Mom had been through a lot since Dad passed, but tonight she looked happy, even hopeful.

Now, looking at Grace, I feel a tug of gratitude for everything that’s led us here—even the hard stuff.

I watch her stand up from the table, unashamedly letting my eyes wander up and down my wife’s beautiful figure. She stretches slightly, her fingers brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear, and sighs quietly but with satisfaction, not fatigue. My heart swells, seeing her like this, shining with the joy of the day. How did I get so lucky? The thought runs through my head before I can stop it, and I find myself moving instinctively.

I step over to her quickly, scooping her into my arms without warning. She gasps, laughing as she clutches at my shoulder. “Luke! What are you doing?”

“Carrying my wife over the threshold,” I say, grinning. “You’re supposed to act surprised.”

She rolls her eyes, but the smile never leaves her face. “I think I’ve had enough excitement for one day.”

“Too bad,” I say, pushing the door open with my foot and stepping into the lighthouse keeper’s cottage.

I carry her straight to my room, the familiar feel of her warmth in my arms anchoring me in a way nothing else ever has. Just down the hall from where she stayed while

her summer rental was being overhauled, the room has transformed.

It's our room now, not mine. Grace tilts her head up, her laugh soft and genuine as she teases, "You're really leaning into this husband thing, aren't you?"

"You have no idea," I reply, my voice low and husky, full of the affection and desire I have for my new bride.

She looks around, taking in the changes she's unwittingly inspired. Her fingers brush the lavender curtains I'd hung to replace the dark ones I'd had for years. Next to the window, the framed photo of us from last fall's festival hangs on the wall, the one where we're laughing so hard we forgot we were even taking a picture. A small vase of flowers and greenery sits on the nightstand, filling the room with the same scent that clung to her hair the first day she stayed in the lighthouse—wildflowers softened by the crisp tang of ocean air and the faint sweetness of honeyed vanilla. It's delicate yet vivid, wrapping the room in a fragrance that feels alive.

Even the loveseat tucked near the bay window has a soft floral throw draped over it now—something she picked out, though she doesn't know I kept it just because it's hers. The bedspread, once an afterthought of dull navy, now carries her touch too: soft shades of blue and white that make the whole room feel brighter.

"It feels... like home," she whispers, her voice laden with the quiet pull of nostalgia and hope.

"It is," I say simply, though I know it's not just the room that makes it home. It's her. It's us, together, filling every corner with the quiet resilience of shared love and the unwavering bond we've built together. Her eyes glimmer, and I can tell she feels it too. This isn't just a place; it's a piece of who we are now.

She leans into me as we settle onto the loveseat, the events of the day and the fullness of the last year catching up to both of us. Her head rests on my shoulder, her hair

tickling my neck as her fingers trace lazy patterns over my arm.

We're processing, breathing, and just being together.

I study the room, trying to see it from her perspective. I wanted to give her everything she needs to feel like this is a home that fits her as much as she's come to fit here in my life.

That's why after Coastal Enterprises backed out of their plans, I wasn't going to let Grace handle her own project alone. Grace had been determined to salvage the summer. She has this way of turning a broken space into something that thrives, and I wanted to give her the space to do that—a place to work, to dream, to follow her passions.

"If the cottage is all I have for my research, I want to make it work." Her voice had carried a hint of the disappointment I know she felt when she first arrived back in Seabrook and saw the place that was supposed to be a haven and a sanctuary for her marine research.

But I also heard the determination that I love about her.

So, we'd spent long days fixing the place up—patching the roof, replacing the wiring, eradicating the mold, and sanding down the floors until they shone.

I'd gone the extra mile, calling the owners to tell them about the state of the place. They hadn't realized how much work it needed and offered to sell it to me outright. I didn't hesitate. Over the following months, we'd worked together to make it a workspace Grace could truly use—a proper desk, shelves for her books and samples, even a small kitchenette and a bed for long research days, complete with entirely new pipes.

"You remember how those long days renovating your cottage reminded us of why we

kept falling hard for each other again and again?" I ask, my voice breaking the quiet.

She lets out a soft laugh, but there's no hiding the fondness in her eyes. What she doesn't know is that the work isn't done. There's still the microscope she mentioned wanting, a custom tank I'm having built for her marine specimens—small details, but ones I know she'll love.

She shifts closer to me, her fingers lingering on my forearm, a delicate touch that sends a slow heat spreading through me. When her voice drops, low and intimate, it feels like a spark igniting between us.

"Do you remember when you proposed?"

I grin at the memory. "When you didn't let me finish my speech?"

She gasps, feigning outrage as she sits up straighter. "I was caught off guard! You dropped to one knee after a long day of sanding the floors of the cottage like it was no big deal. I was a total mess and completely taken off guard."

My gaze melts into hers as I recall, "You were standing on the porch, the sunset making the water look like molten gold. I'd had the ring in my pocket all day, and I couldn't wait anymore. I just ... knew. I had to tell you everything I'd been holding inside."

Her eyes speak volumes, holding the connection of our gazes without wavering. I reach my hand out to brush her cheek with my knuckles. She leans into my touch and closes her eyes, but not before I glimpse the expression she wears, a serene blend of pure contentment and unguarded joy.