



Christine Gray PRESENTS

DEADLY

Obsession



YVONNE BENNETT

DEADLY OBSESSION

A Novel By,

YVONNE BENNETT

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* Into Deep (parts 1 & 2)

*Into Far (Into Deep spin-off)

*The Sex Slave (parts 1& 2)

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CHAPTER ONE

“Wow, this place is so huge. You’d have no idea looking at it from the outside.” Grace Mitchell murmured alongside her new boss, Sally.

“I hear that a lot from the new hires. The beauty of St John’s Behavioral health center is that our building may appear tiny from the outside, but on the inside, we’re our own little town.” Sally Wills chuckled as she waved around, causing Grace to nod as she continued eyeing the center.

Sally wasn’t lying when she said the inside was its own town; the place had a food court and pool area! Grace was honestly excited to start at St. John’s. When she got the call back last week for today’s orientation, she was overcome with joy. It had been a hard journey up until now. Before getting the callback at St. John’s, Grace was struggling to hold on.

Two years ago, she quit working as a social worker at her local elementary school to take care of her sick mother, Edie Mitchell. Once her mother died last year, Grace had been at her wit’s end trying to find employment in her field. When she went back to check for employment at her former job, she had found that the elementary school had filled her position, and it left her crushed. Grace was living off what her mother had left for her in her bank, and although it was a hefty amount, she still needed to find permanent employment.

Even though she had never worked in a setting such as St. John's, she was hopeful of what was to come.

“Let me introduce you to Tim Sutton, your supervisor.” Sally brought Grace from her thoughts, and the young woman nodded.

Venturing through the cafe, they came to a hall in the back and a huge steel door. Sally pushed the door open, and sunlight burst through. She held the door open for Grace, and the Hennessy colored woman smiled and thanked her as she stepped past her. Grace followed Sally down the concrete walkway until they came to yet another door. The director yanked it open and cool air floated out as well as the sounds of typing and ringing phones. Grace journeyed in, followed by Sally.

“Good morning, Ms. Wills.” An employee greeted, making Sally nod in their direction.

“Good morning, Denise. This is Grace, our new social worker.” Sally introduced as they passed.

“Welcome aboard!” The dark honey haired receptionist waved.

Grace threw her a quick smile before she and Sally disappeared completely down the corridor. Sally guided her down the hall until they came to a wooden door. Grace inhaled deeply as Sally began to knock, her nerves getting the best of her. She smoothed out her white button-down and touched her Senegalese twists that were styled in a chic up-do.

She hoped Mr. Sutton didn't have any qualms about her appearance, especially since Ms. Wills seemed completely fine with her hairstyle.

“You're going to love Tim, don't be so nervous, hun,” Sally reassured with a big smile.

“Come in!” An echo sounded from behind the door, and Grace clenched her teeth as she stood straight.

Sally twisted the knob, then pushed the door open, revealing a curious blue-eyed older blonde man.

“Hey, Sally! What do I owe this early morning visit?” Tim joked as his eyes locked in on Sally.

“Your new social worker. Tim Sutton, meet Grace Mitchell.” Sally put a handout, motioning for Grace to come forward.

The bright smile Tim was sporting suddenly fell flat, and Grace immediately knew what that meant.

She was about to get turned away...

His smile reappeared just as suddenly as it had vanished, and he suddenly stood, walking over to Grace and Sally.

“It’s nice to meet you, Grace. Welcome aboard, we’re happy to have you!” He put out a hand, and Grace felt her jitters completely melt away.

“Thank you, and it’s nice to meet you as well. Sally has said nothing but good things about you on our walk here.” She smiled brightly.

“Just on your walk over!?! She should have been speaking my accolades as soon as you entered the building.” Tim teased, causing Sally to giggle and wave him away humorously.

“This will be Grace’s first time working in a mental health facility, so I’m going to need her to shadow you for a few days just so she gets a chance to see how everything works here.” Sally glanced between Tim and Grace.

Tim didn’t even take his eyes off Grace as Sally spoke, which caused the younger woman’s nerves to come back tenfold. Tim’s blue eyes were drinking her in, in a way that left her very uncomfortable. He wasn’t undressing her with his eyes or anything remotely sexual. It just felt like...he was looking into the very back of her soul.

As if he was...reading her.

“Oh? Where are you coming from, Grace?” Tim put a hand on his upper hip as he inquired.

“I haven’t been employed in a little over 2 years, but my last job was actually at Palmer Elementary.” Grace relayed

and observed as Tim frowned in appreciation.

“So, I take it you’re good with children and teens?” He questioned as he brought his large hand up to stroke his chin.

“You could say, but I prefer to work with much smaller children than teens, ya know? Cut the problems off at an early age before they grow up and before it becomes detrimental to them and others.” Grace explained, and a slow smile crossed Tim’s face.

“Then, I think I have the perfect placement for you once you’re done shadowing me.” Tim relayed, and Grace nodded stiffly with a tight smile.

“Are you going to give her Angela’s old position with the outpatient youth under 10?” Sally cut in, drawing both Tim and Grace’s attention.

“Yep, she seems perfect for the position. Plus, I’m sure the kids will love being in Grace’s presence more than they did Angela’s.” Tim made a face, making Grace chuckle a bit.

“I take it Angela didn’t have the best disposition?” She asked with a laugh, and Tim froze.

Grace went silent, afraid she had asked something out of bounds.

“Oh no, Grace. It wasn’t her disposition; it was her face.” Sally touched Grace’s shoulder and explained, causing the young woman to breathe a quiet sigh of relief.

She reassessed what Sally just said, and her cheeks went hot. She was flattered, but honestly, Grace didn't find it fitting for people that worked in mental health to behave this way. Yet, she really couldn't say anything. These people had a whole work relationship with this woman before she parted ways with the facility and knew things about Angela that she didn't.

“Oh,” Grace let out anxiously, hoping Sally and Mr. Sutton didn't pick up on her discomfort over the topic.

“How about I switch the tour over to Tim so you two can become more acquainted?” Sally changed the subject, which Grace was thankful for.

“Sure, no problem. What has she seen?” Tim put his hands on his hips and placed his focus on Grace with a big grin.

“Oh, the front office, the therapy rooms, and the cafe.” Sally listed off, causing Tim to nod.

“Good gives me a chance to show her the therapy rooms for the kids. C'mon, Grace, let's get this tour finished up so I can show you where your office will be.” Tim beamed down at her.

Grace shook her head stiffly.

Tim, Sally, and Grace walked toward the office door and exited. Sally split from the duo and went her way, sending

a smile and wave over her shoulder. Tim and Grace began down the concrete corridor, silence filling the area around them.

“So, Grace, where are you from?” Tim questioned, breaking the quietness.

“Oh, from here, born and raised in Atlanta.” She replied as she peered up at him.

“You don’t look like it.” Grace furrowed a brow at his comment.

“What exactly do people from Atlanta look like to you, Mr. Sutton?” She inquired as she crossed her arms.

“Please don’t take my question as offensive, but since I’ve moved from Minnesota to Atlanta, the general aesthetic I’ve seen is ‘big baller, glitz and glam’ yet you don’t convey any of that, which is why I asked.” Tim gave her a tight smile as he rubbed the back of her neck.

Grace just nodded without a reply.

There was much she wanted to say, but seeing as how she had just got the job, she didn’t want to step on any toes... just yet.

“Well, I am. I’m from the Virginia Highland area.” Grace explained.

“I’m surprised you didn’t say Decatur or Buckhead,” Tim frowned in appreciation, yet Grace was completely frozen.

“Why would you, um, think I was from Buckhead or Decatur? Not that there’s anything wrong with either of those places.” Grace paused her walk and turned toward him.

“Since living here, I’ve come to find out those are the two most popular places to live in amongst African Americans.” Tim conveyed unashamed.

Grace blinked once, then twice but said absolutely nothing. “I’ve offended you! I’m sorry, Grace. I truly didn’t mean it that way. You must think of your new boss as a complete ass right now,” His pale face crinkled as he frowned, and his deep blue eyes swam with remorse.

Grace licked her dry lips before shaking her head.

“It’s fine, sir.” She kept her reply short and to the point so that her building anger wouldn’t get the best of her.

Tim sighed, still giving her an apologetic look. “Sally honestly should have tagged along with us. She probably could have saved me from this embarrassment. I’m truly sorry, Grace.” He said yet again, and Grace threw him a sympathetic look.

“It’s...it’s fine, Mr. Sutton, really,” Grace told him once more.

Tim nodded, then put his hand out, motioning for Grace to continue forward so that they could complete their tour.

Grace had been at St John's for two weeks. Her first week here consisted of shadowing Mr. Sutton and learning the ropes on outpatient youth care at the facility. Although Grace and Tim started rocky two weeks ago, he had been nothing but professional towards her. He had placed her in the office across from his, so they could see what each other were doing at any minute during the workday. Grace noticed in the first few days of shadowing Tim that he liked to keep his office door open, so once she was designated an office right across from him, she opted to keep her door cracked slightly.

All in all, St. John's and its staff were very friendly and outgoing. On her official first day this past Monday, the staff had presented her with a cute little treat basket filled with candy, fruit, and two little bottles of hand sanitizer, and a St John's T-shirt. Grace had a really good feeling about this place, especially since she had gotten to meet all the children in the outpatient youth program, and they seemed to take an immediate liking to her, notably this one little named Thad. It was 9 years old, and his mother currently had an open DCF case against her. Reading through his file, she noticed that he had been suspended 3 times in the last five months.

The kid was out of school for the majority of the first half of the school year, and that raised red flags to Grace. When she mentioned it to Me. Sutton, he notified her that Angela had already dealt with Thad's suspensions before she left St. John's.

Yet...Angela didn't leave any notes on the matter in any of Thad's files.

Grace wanted to sum it up to a simple error, but something was bothering her, so she took the situation to Sally.

"Come in," Grace turned the knob of Sally's office door and pushed it in, peeking her head inside.

"Oh, hey, Grace. How's everything coming along? I assume everyone over in outpatient care is treating you well." Sally looked up from her paperwork and beamed at Grace.

"Everyone's been fantastic, honestly. They did a great job of making me feel welcomed." Grace explained with a soft smile.

"Perfect, that's what we're all about at St John's. So, what can I help you with, Grace?" Sally sat straight up, a serious unit on her face.

"I just wanted to come to talk to you about Thaddeus Marshall's files. He was suspended three times at the beginning half of the school year, yet Ms. Sardino didn't leave any notes documented why so that leaves me a little lost on how to handle his current situation." Grace relayed, making Sally nod slowly.

"In her last days here, Angela wasn't as productive as she used to be, and it clearly showed in her work, which is why we let her go and might explain the missing notes on

Thad. The only thing I can suggest is going by the ones she did leave on him and just sitting down and asking him yourself. It might take time, but the way Tim talks about you handling the children, there's no doubt he'll open up to you in a jiffy." Sally spoke, her bright green eyes sparkling with favor.

"I mean, I'm no Nanny McPhee, but I'll see what I can do." Grace chuckled, making Sally rattle with laughter and through her head, full-on brunette locs back.

"That's what I like to hear," the director gave a thumbs up, and Grace returned the gesture before departing the office and heading back to her own.

As soon as she entered the youth building, she saw Thad hanging around the reception desk, all in Denise's face with a huge grin.

"Well, if it isn't the man of the hour. Hello, Thad." Grace called, immediately catching the young man's attention.

His eyes snapped from Denise toward Grace, and he took off, running over to her.

"I ain't done nothing, Ms. Grace! Whatever the kids said I did, I ain't do it." He spoke with hands, a funny expression on his face.

Grace gave him a look and tilted her head to the side.

“Why do you think you’re in trouble, Tha-,” Grace began, but Denise cut in.

“It’s ‘I haven’t done anything, Ms. Grace’, Thad. Remember what we talked about?” Denise reminded, making Thad nod before rolling his eyes a little.

Grace caught it yet said nothing.

“I mean, both can be correct, especially considering that AAVE is its language.” Grace described, and Denise furrowed a brow before chuckling.

“What’s AAVE?” She questioned in a confused manner.

“African American vernacular English, otherwise known as slang or Ebonics.” Grace relayed, and Denise’s face went tight.

“I, uh, Grace... Hey, Thad?” Denise placed her attention on Thaddeus.

“Hmm?” He whirled around to look at her.

“Head to Ms. Mitchell’s office for me, and she’ll be in a minute to talk to you.” Thad nodded and took off towards Grace’s office.

Once the door was closed, Denise turned to her with a tight face. “With everything stacked against the kid, don’t you

think it's best if he at least spoke proper English?" Grace blinked once.

Then twice.

Then finally, a third time.

"Denise, with everything stacked against him, as you said, it doesn't matter how he speaks. He's a young black-," Denise raised a hand, an almost pained look on her face.

Grace had the urge to jerk her neck back but kept it cute.

"It's not about race, Grace. I know a lot of white people that use slang or AAVE or whatever," Denise waved around, and Grace tried her best not to bite her tongue in half.

Was this chick...serious right now?

Yea, white people, did engage in AAVE improperly as they do everything that they steal, but it was not the same as when black people are shunned for using their language.

"People that speak more properly are looked at differently and respected more, plus knowing basic English helps get your point across better. We want him to excel in life, not become a statistic." Denise gave Grace a sympathetic look, and the young brown woman imagined herself reading the dark-haired woman up and down across her reception desk.

Because Lord knew she couldn't do it in reality...

She squinted her eyes and nodded a bit before balling her lips in. "You have a good day, Denise." Grace simply smiled, pivoting to walk to her office.

"You too, sis!" Grace almost froze mid-step but willed her legs to carry her forward.

The audacity...

The nerve...

Not to mention the microaggression of it all!

Imagine preaching to a black woman about AAVE being a hindrance to a young black boy yet turning around and using it yourself in a passive-aggressive manner.

Just imagine...

Grace gripped her doorknob and pushed her door open, quickly stepping in and letting out a huff as she ran a hand down her face.

"Don't let Ms. D get you in a bad headspace, Ms. Grace." Grace peeked through her fingers at Thad, taking in his red and black Puma short set and his low fade.

“And what do you know about bad headspace?” Grace sighed and placed her hands in her pocket as she began strolling to her desk.

“People can put you in it?” He shrugged with a nonchalant face.

“People can only put you in a bad headspace if you let them. It’s all in how you respond. You can either keep your peace or give it away to negativity.” Grace told him.

“Mmm, I guess.” The kid poked his lips out as he kicked his short legs.

“Speaking of letting negativity get the best of you, let’s talk about your suspensions, Thad.” Grace began, flipping through the files on her desk.

“I already talked about all that with Ms. Angie.” A sour look appeared on Thad’s face.

“Well, now that Ms. Angie is gone and she didn’t leave any notes for me, you have to tell me what happened so I can know what happened and how to stop it from happening in the long run.” Grace gave him a thoughtful smile as she spoke, hoping her sincerity showed through.

Grace wanted to build a relationship with Thad. From all her interactions with him this week, she found that he wasn’t an unruly child. He took direction well and had yet to talk back to her. Not to mention, he was very respectful to adult authority figures.

This fueled her curiosity to know what was in those missing notes.

“So, let’s chat, shall we?” Grace clapped her hands on top of her desk and tilted her head to the side as she peered at Thad. He continued to kick his legs but said nothing.

“Okay, I’ll go first and try to jog your memory. Let’s start with the first suspension on, uh,” Grace peeked in her notes for the exact date. What happened on 02/05/2020, Thad? I’m all ears.” Grace looked back up at him and saw Thad eyeing her apprehensively.

He was afraid to open up to her, and she knew this. She was the new girl on the block, and Thad wasn’t going to easily tell her what was going on with him because they weren’t as close as he and Angela were. She could tell just by the way he spoke her nickname that Thad and Angela had developed a deep bond.

“You don’t have to be scared to tell me anything, Thad, okay? I’m here to help, sweetheart.” Grace reminded me.

Thad simply shrugged, and the side of his mouth jerked as if he wanted to say something. The office was filled with silence as Grace waited for Thad to confess. The clock on the wall is the only sound in the room.

“I,” he started, making Grace’s ears perk up.

“I don’t want to talk about it again, Ms. Grace.” He turned, placing his attention on the window.

Grace sighed silently. He had shut down. She was never going to get anything out of him now. Grace knew that she could call his school anytime and find out exactly why Thad was suspended 3x, but she’d rather hear it from him, in his own words. She wanted to be as transparent as possible with Thad and the other children because she cared.

This was more than just a career.

This was children’s lives and futures she was dealing with.

Grace couldn’t afford to let any of them down, starting with the little guy sitting in front of her.

“Hmm, well, that’s too bad,” she pouted as she closed the folder before her.

“I was sure hoping we could talk about this then go out for ice cream afterward. Was going to be my treat for being a good listener, but hey, who needs a chocolate vanilla swirl cone when it’s 84° outside. And I wasn’t talking about the teeny tiny ice creams from the cafe either. I was going to take you to Cold Stone.” Grace threw Thad an expression matching Keke Palmer’s.

Thaddeus’s eyes snapped toward her, and he blinked.

A beat passed, and he held up a finger. “C’mon, Ms. Grace. This is, um, this is...what’s it called when you try to pay somebody off?” He raised a cute brow as he questioned.

“Bribery?” Grace-filled in.

“Yea, you trying to do that to me. That’s foul, Ms. G.” Thad shook his head, causing Grace to crack up.

This child...was a mess!

“Gotta play hardball, kid. So?” Grace winked then crossed her arms.

“I mean,” Thad bounced his head around for a few seconds.

“Can we talk about it while we get ice cream? Sugar is my Antidote,” Grace gave Thad a blank face as he mocked Travis Scott.

“Boy,” she let out a breath before bursting into a fit of laughter.

“Okay, Thad. We’ll talk about it over ice cream. C’mon, let’s go, Mr. Marshall.” Grace shook her head as she gathered the files on her desk into her bag.

Once done, she and Thad exited the office, traveling past Denise’s desk.

“See you later, Thad!” Denise waved.

“Ya feel!?” He hollered back, and Grace balled her lips in when the dark-haired woman’s face fell.

CHAPTER TWO

“Okay, wait! Let me make sure I’m getting everything down.” Grace held up a hand, motioning for Thad to pause his story as she feverishly jotted down notes with her other.

“Okay, continue, hun.” She placed her attention back on him.

“Like, when I go to school, Ion even goes to goof around or something like that. I am in my books, Ms. G, so when the dude stepped to me and tried to mess with me, I got mad.” Thad touched his chest with both hands, looking just like Martin Lawrence.

“Because you don’t bother with anybody?” Grace nodded as she wrote.

“Exactly. Like, Ms. G., I don’t mess with NOBODY! It’s not my fault your momma can’t afford a pair of Jordans. Plus, he couldn’t even fit my shoes in the first place, so what are you stepping to me for, Barry Big Toes?” Grace snorted and closed her eyes at the comment.

Thad had her laughing ever since they sat done with their ice creams, which they finished 20 mins ago. When Thad said the ice cream was his antidote, he wasn’t lying. Once he shoved down his cone, he has been nothing but a motor mouth since. He had told her a lot. His favorite color, blue. His favorite show, Teen Titans Go! And his favorite subject in school, which was surprisingly math. With as imaginative as Thad was, Grace would have thought his favorite subject would be writing or science.

He had also told her about his mother, Cynthia Marshall, and his stepdad, Rick. His mother worked at JCPenny as a cashier, and from what Thad told her about Rick, he didn’t do much at all except play video games. And it was evident from the way Thad spoke about his stepdad that the young man did not like him. He claimed Rick was a deadbeat and didn’t do much to help his mother out around the house, which is why Thad held animosity toward him.

“Hmm, now that we’ve gone over that, how about you tell me about what happened in March?” Grace sat her pen down and crossed her forearms across the top of the bench they were seated at.

As if a light had flipped, all the goofiness evaporated from Thad like rainwater on a hot day.

“Thad,” Grace called to him softly as she felt movement under the table.

Scooting back a little, she peeked under the table and noticed his little legs kicking back and forth. Instantly, Grace recognized his leg kicking as a coping mechanism.

“You like to kick those Little legs a lot, huh?” She smiled warmly as she leaned forward.

“I do it when I’m bothered,” Thad confessed absent-mindedly, making Grace ‘Ahh’ silently.

She was correct.

Something happened prior, during, or after the March suspension to Thad to trigger this response. And from his response, Grace knew it was bad.

“Why would you be bothered, sweetheart? We just had some good ice cream and laughed. What’s wrong, Thad?” Grace reached out to run his small hand.

Thad shrugged then folded his arms, laying his head on top of them.

“Mmm,” he grunted in response, causing Grace to raise a brow.

“Mmm? I’m not a bear, Thad. You’re going to have to use words for this human.” She joked, making a small smile crack at the corners of the young boy’s mouth.

A few more seconds passed before he finally spoke actual words.

“I was just really mad that day, Ms. G. I don’t know why,” Thad exposed with yet another shrug.

“Thing is, Thad, people don’t just wake up angry for no reason. There’s usually something that’s been bothering them for a while to cause that anger to fester out of control. Can you think back to a situation or problem that happened before you got suspended to make you upset, sweetheart?” Grace rubbed his hand as she picked up her pen with the other.

Thad went mute once more, staring at Grace with his lips poked out.

“You pretty, Ms. G. You got a boyfriend?” Grace almost facepalmed at the little playa’s remark.

Although Grace knew Thad was trying to butter her up, she was still flattered. With deep brown eyes, chubby nose, and pouty lips, Grace didn’t think she was all that. Now, she wasn’t one of those women that self-deprecated on themselves, but she was fully aware of what she looked like. There was a guy in high school that always tried to mack on her by calling her ‘Baby Jill Scott’, and it honestly used to crack her up because she looked nothing like Jill Scott back then...or now.

“No, and I’m not looking. I’m much more interested in hearing about why you were upset?” Grace raised a brow.

Thad sucked his teeth, and Grace concealed her huff of amusement.

“Rick had hit my mom.” He rushed out, and Grace jerked her head back.

“Say that again, but take your time.” She furrowed her brows. All she heard was something about Rick. Thad took a deep breath but didn’t speak. When he finally did, Grace could tell that wasn’t the full extent of his anger. “Rick had hit my mom while arguing a few days before I got suspended, Ms. G. It had been bothering me for a few days, so when I went to school that day, I was already mad and ended up getting into it with a kid at my lunch table. There, you happy?” Thad threw her an eye roll.

Grace raised a brow and gave him the ‘look’. Thad straightened up then let out a low huff.

“Sorry, Ms. G. It’s just...I don’t like talking about it.” He relayed sadly.

“I understand, sweetie. Tell you what? How about we rehash this tomorrow and get you back to the center before your mom comes, hmm?” Grace told him, beginning to gather her notes.

Thad nodded happily.

He liked Ms. G.

She was pretty and nice. Plus, she reminded him of Ms. Angie. He missed Angela working at the center. She used to bring him McDonald's every Friday during his therapy sessions at St John's. He was mad as heck when she was fired! All the kids in outpatient were as equally as sad as he was. Ms. Angie was the best social worker in that unit. The adults around St John's loved to pretend or play dumb like they didn't know why Ms. Angie was fired, but Thad knew why.

He knew exactly why...

"That's real," he jerked his shoulders slightly as he stood, waiting for Ms. G.

Grace chuckled a bit then stood from the bench, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

Grace yawned as she stuffed folders into her work bag. It was Friday evening, and she had just seen her last child of the night, a little girl named Mia Stevens. Her first official week had finally come to an end, and Grace felt she had done a pretty good job, although she did feel like she had to bite her tongue a lot around St John's. For a facility that had an outpatient youth program filled with a majority of low-income black children, you'd think they'd have some type of sensitivity training, and yet Grace found that microaggressions ran rampant in this place.

From Denise's comments about AAVE to Tim's assumptions about her on her orientation day, Grace knew she was going to end most days sipping on a glass of red wine dealing with these folks. Sighing, she stood and grabbed her purse, phone, and keys from her desk. She threw her work bag over her shoulder before pushing her rolling chair in. Stepping toward her door, she flicked her office light off then yanked the door open. She inched out and turned, closing and locking her door. She pivoted around and saw Mr. Sutton looking right at her.

She smiled tensely and threw him a small wave as she began to walk off.

"Uh, hey, Grace!?" Tim called as he sat his files down and jumped from his seat quickly.

Grace huffed but halted her steps. She spun around with a raised brow as the blonde entered the hallway.

"A couple of us are going out to the bar downtown in a few, and I wanted to see if you wanted to tag along?" Tim beamed wide, showcasing his straight white teeth.

Grace had an urge to move to her work bag and car keys as to say, 'do you not see I'm about to bounce?', but opted to bite the tip of her tongue.

"I'd love to, but maybe some other time, Mr. Sutton? This week has left me completely drained, and I just want to cuddle up with a glass of wine and some 'Girlfriends' reruns

on Netflix,” Grace laughed out, hoping her supervisor got the memo.

“Yea, the first day is always a doozy! But hey, coming out tonight gives you a chance to meet other staff members in the unit. And since I’m praying for everyone, I’d love it if you’d join us, Grace.” Tim conveyed warmly.

Grace tried to keep her frown from etching itself across her face, yet she failed.

Miserably...

Tim took notice of the expression on her face, and his hand shot to the back of his neck.

“This isn’t about what I...what I said last week, is it, Grace?” Tim questioned slowly.

Grace truly wanted to say yes, but she knew it was only partly true. She didn’t want to hang out with Mr. Sutton and the rest of the staff tonight because she was dog shit tired. Her feet, back, and shoulders were killing her, and she wanted nothing more than a steaming hot shower to fade the pain away.

“No, Mr. Sutton, it’s not. I’m just pooped.” She shrugged a bit, praying the man could read her body language.

“Nothing a beer and a few good laughs won’t cure,” Tim raised a sly brow, and Grace exhaled silently.

“Okay, but only for a bit, Mr. Sutton. I’m dying to crawl into bed.” Grace chuckled nervously.

She hated being pressured into coming out tonight, but if it got Tim off her back, she’d humor him.

“Awesome! Are you going to drive yourself, or do you want to hitch a ride with me?” Grace’s brows shot up at the offer.

It was innocent, but Grace felt such an act was crossing boundaries that shouldn’t be crossed, especially so earlier on.

“I, uh, I’ll drive myself, Mr. Sutton, but thanks for the offer. What’s the name and address of the bar?” Grace pulled her phone out of her pocket with an expectant brow.

Tim gave her a funny look that she couldn’t quite decipher.

“Or you can ride with me to the bar and cut the Google middleman out,” he laughed a bit. Yet Grace didn’t see what was funny.

“If it gives you any comfort, Grace, Denise is also riding to the bar with me,” Tim added, and that solidified Grace’s choice.

“The address, Mr. Sutton?” She asked once more, making Tim smile tightly.

“Raiders on 8621 Quinton Dr. It’ll be the last building on the right end of the plaza,” Tim explained in a flat voice.

Grace quickly typed the address in then peered up at Tim.

“Okay, I’ll meet you guys there!” Grace threw out a fake smile and went to turn.

But Tim stopped her yet again.

“Give me a sec! Denise and I will follow behind you.” Grace froze at his words.

Je-sus, what was this guy’s problem? She understood Tim wanted her to build a bond with her other coworkers since she was a new hire, but the pushy attitude was a mood killer.

“Mr. Sutton. I was going to go home and freshen up first before meeting you at the bar if that’s okay?” Grace said in a chipper voice as she blinked rapidly.

“Oh,” Tim let out, and Grace resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“Uh, sure, Grace. I’ll see you there.” Tim nodded stiffly.

An audible sigh passed her lips, and Grace pivoted around, without saying goodbye, and journeyed toward the exit. She pushed the metal door open and stepped out, huffing as the sound of steel hitting steel echoed behind her. If Mr. Sutton thought she was going to pop up at Raiders tonight, he had another thing coming. Grace traveled to her Saturn and hopped in, throwing her bags into the passenger seat.

Sticking her key into the ignition, she started the car and was about to place her hand on the gear shift when something hit her. She was still fresh and needed to fake it until she made it. What if she popped up to work Monday morning only to be fired because she didn't play nice and come out tonight?

Grace sucked her teeth as her shoulders slumped.

She couldn't win for losing...

CHAPTER THREE

Smoked floated around the dim bar as Grace shuffled through people and chairs, trying to make her way to the countertop where her co-workers were seated. Just as she had promised her supervisor, she had gone home, showered and changed, and made an appearance. God knows she was dirt tired, but she didn't want to risk losing her job because of BS. She had switched her black button-down and tan pants for a grey jersey cotton dress and a similar colored sweater, and some black tennis slip-on. She wanted to be as comfortable as possible if she had to sit through this night.

Grace had it all planned out. She was going to sit for a while, have a few drinks, then dip out before they caught her. She just prayed they didn't try her tonight, especially with liquor in her system.

She'd be axed come Monday then.

As if by sheer luck, Tim spotted her first, an ear-splitting smile breaking out across his face.

"Over here, Grace!" He hollered over the thumping rock music playing throughout the bar.

Nodding her head nervously, she inched her toward the bar, coming to stand before everyone.

"Thought you were going to bail on us," Denise spoke from beside Tim, making Grace jerk her shoulders a little.

"Hey, I figured one drink wouldn't hurt, right?" She crossed her arms, then balled her lips into a tight smile when Tim laid a hand on her right shoulder.

"That's the Spirit, Grace! Here, sit, sit!" He motioned to an empty barstool.

Grace maneuvered over to the seat and climbed up slowly. She felt eyes on her backside just before she sat down completely. When she looked up, Tim had his attention dead set on her.

“What are you having, Grace? Everything is on me, remember?” He offered with a grin.

“Uh, just a, um, a glass of Pinot will do.” She relayed, brushing her twists from her neck and shoulders.

Tim kept his attention placed on her for a split second before turning toward the bar and tapping his hand on the countertop repeatedly.

“Hey, Joe!” He yelled to the grey-haired bartender, who peeked over his shoulder.

“Let me get a Pinot for the gorgeous woman over here.” He jerked his head toward Grace.

Her cheeks grew hot as her eyes darted around the rest of the employees.

“Oh, Tim, stop! You’re embarrassing the girl.” A short, pudgy woman with thick-cut glasses and red hair spoke out.

“Hi, I’m Susan Derby. I’m one of the outpatient therapists. And don’t mind Tim, he does that with just about all the women.” Susan introduced herself then waved Tim off with her hand.

“Hi, I’m Gra-,” Grace went to put a hand out to introduce herself.

Susan quickly grabbed it and shook her hand with the strength of a thousand suns.

Je-sus Christ!

What was this woman's hand made out of?

Vibranium?!

“Grace, I know! Couldn't hear it with the way Tim screamed it just a few minutes ago when he saw you.” Susan beamed, finally letting go of Grace's hand.

“Uh, yea,” Grace mumbled as she shook her hand a bit.

Joe walked up and placed a glass of white wine before grace, and she inwardly smiled.

Finally!

Sweet, sweet peace.

Lifting the glass to her lips, she took a slow sip, letting the wine marinate on her tongue.

“Long first week? I'm Bobby Morris; I work in the cafe.” A tall, tan, dark-haired guy asked.

“Very, and it’s nice to meet you, Bobby.” Grace extended a hand, which Bobby quickly shook.

As soon as their hands touched, Grace felt warmth and kindness radiating off of him. She couldn’t explain how or why. Bobby was far from ugly. He had curly, soft-looking hair, stunning hazel eyes, and cheekbones cut so deep he could tear through metal if he wanted to. Bobby was dressed in his Caffe uniform, white button-down rolled up at the elbows and black slacks and tennis. There was something about the get-up that made him appear boyish and approachable.

The sound of someone clearing their throat broke through Grace’s ears, bringing her back to reality. She hurriedly unraveled her hand from Bobby’s when she noticed Tim giving them an expectant look with raised brows.

“So, uh, Grace. How are you liking St John’s so far? The outpatient unit?” Tim questioned with a grin.

He observed out the side of his Bobby grabbing his beer from the countertop and maneuvering closer to Grace’s end of the bar.

“It’s been, uh, eventful, to say the least, but I’m enjoying it. The kids are something, especially that Thad.” Grace laughed a little.

“Thaddeus runs St. John’s; Sally might as well hand over her badge and keys to him.” Bobby joked as he sat down, making Grace giggle a little.

“He’s something else but a complete darling.” Grace nodded.

“I heard you took him out for ice cream?” Denise cut in, causing Grace’s eyes to slide toward her.

“I did, just a way to loosen him up and start a bonding process; that way, it’s easier for him to open up and talk about his home and school life with me.” Grace explained, which made Denise nod slowly.

Tim shook his head, drawing everyone’s attention to him.

“I knew Sally made a good decision when she hired you during your orientation. You’re spectacular, Grace.” Tim gave her a soft look.

“Thank you, Mr. Sutton.” She jerked her head a bit in his direction.

“Oh, no, Grace. We aren’t on the clock; call me Tim. Mr. Sutton is my father.” He relayed, showing his teeth with a big grin.

“Thank you, uh, Tim.” Grace bounced her head a little then smiled tightly.

“So, where are you from, Grace?” Susan asked, holding what looked to be a bloody Mary in her hand.

“From here, Atlanta, born and raised.” Grace furrowed her brows as she spoke.

“Really? You don’t look at it,” Susan put a hand on her chest as if she had just heard Grace had two heads.

Grace bit her tongue.

Oh, Lord... Here we go.

Thank God she only had a sip so far, because if she would have been a glass and a half in, Susan probably would have gotten the stank eye and a whole lot of lip.

“Yep! I’m from the Victoria Highlands area,” Grace relayed, then balled her lips in.

“That’s surprising because all the bla-,” Susan started to say, but Tim instantly shut her down.

“So, Grace, where’d you go to college?” Her supervisor shut Susan a look, and the redheads face filled with confusion as if she didn’t comprehend why her word vomit was suddenly cut short.

“UA in Johns Creek. Majored in social work with a minor in early learning.” She explained, making everyone frown in appreciation.

“I see why the kids have been saying nothing but good things about you. You’re a regular ol’ Mrs. Rogers.” Denise

grinned in a way that could only be described as nice-nasty.

“Not until I find my Fred.” Grace lifted her glass and winked. Denise tried to disguise her eye roll, but Grace caught it.

“You said you had been out of work for over a year; why?” Tim questioned the blue, genuine interest in his voice.

“It’s, uh, a long story, but I’ll try to condense it as much as I can. I was working as a social worker for an elementary school when my mother fell ill. I had to quit work to take care of her in her last few months. After she passed, I admit, I didn’t rush to find employment because I was depressed over her death,” Grace sighed as she thought of her mother.

Watching Edie deteriorate from cancer was hard on Grace. Throughout her entire life, whenever she needed reassurance, her mother was there with open arms. Ready to take her in and comfort her from the world’s trouble.

But when she died...

Grace was an utter mess.

Planning a funeral, making sure everything was okay with her mother’s house and bank, on top of trying to grieve the only parent she had ever known, took her through the wringer. Yet, Grace knew she couldn’t wallow in misery too long because if she did, it’d consume her completely. Job

searching pulled her from her pain. Having something to do that wasn't related to her mother's death was therapeutic.

"But I had to realize now that she was gone, I didn't have anyone to fall back on like I used to, and that was my motivation to seek out work." Grace finished with a jerk of her head and a stiff smile.

"Sorry to hear that, Grace," Bobby said from beside her.

"It's fine, Bobby, but thank you. I'm in a much better place now." Grace relayed, turning her stool toward him.

"She raised one hell of a woman. She's proud of you," Tim spoke up, catching Grace's attention.

Not to mention gaining a hard look from Denise that did not go unnoticed by Grace.

"At least you got to spend time with her before she passed, hun. My mother passed while I was away at college in '99. Sobbed the entire drive home because I hadn't seen her in months and then suddenly," Susan snapped her fingers then created a disappearing effect with her hands.

"She was gone. Those last moments are moments well kept." The redhead nodded a bit as she reminisced.

"Hey, Sutton?" Denise broke in, turning to Tim as she ran the neck of her bar against her lips.

“Gimme a buck,” she demanded, causing Grace to stare at the scene in disbelief.

Was Denise... flirting with the boss...in front of everyone!?!

Grace was truly uncomfortable.

Tim seemed unfazed, dipping his hand into his right pocket to pull out a crisp five-dollar bill.

“Is it for the jukebox?” Tim asked as he handed her the five.

“Yep, this music is a buzz kill.” Denise snatched the bill from Tim’s hand and sauntered off toward the digital jukebox built into the wall.

Grace observed as the brunette slid the five into the slot then began scrolling through the songs on the screen.

“She’s jealous of you if you haven’t noticed,” Bobby whispered from beside her.

Grace’s brows furrowed in confusion at the man’s admission.

Why on God’s green earth would Denise be jealous of her?

“I-,” she turned to look at him, trying her best to form words.

“Jea-,” Grace was about to question when Denise popped up.

“Hey, Bob, come dance with me. I love this song.” She wrapped herself around Bobby’s forearm like a snake.

The Chainsmokers pumped through the bar as Denise yanked at Bobby’s arm.

“Meh, I’m speaking with grace right now, D. Maybe Susan or Tim would like to take you for a whirl?” He nudged his beer toward the Amber haired woman and blue-eyed man.

“What are you and Grace talking about?” Tim completely ignored Denise and zeroed in on the seated couple.

“Grace’s favorite wine brands,” Bobby answered quickly without missing a beat.

He turned his back on Tim without even a second thought, leaving Grace in awe. Although Tim and Bobby didn’t work in the same departments, Tim still held seniority over the younger man since he was a supervisor. Grace noticed Tim fizzling from the corner of her eyes. What put her on high alert was the way Denise was now leaning behind Tim, so close their arms were touching.

“Tim, c’mon, let’s dance. You don’t want to waste your five bucks just standing around, talking about nothing.” Denise smirked up at Tim.

Grace took a sip of her wine as she detected a bit of shade.

“I guess I’ll humor you for a bit,” Tim laughed, his eyes sliding away from Grace and Bobby.

Tim grabbed Denise’s hand and led her to the middle of the small, smoky dance floor. Once they were a safe distance away, Grace turned back to Bobby.

“Why would she be jealous of me?” She inquired in confusion.

“Because she has competition again,” Bobby simply replied, then took a sip of his beer.

Grace squinted her eyes at him before turning to peer back at the dance floor. Denise was entangled in Tim’s arms as if she were his girlfriend. This wasn’t professional.

And...

What did Bobby mean by ‘again’?

Monday came with a blur. Now that Grace had met all the children and their parents, it was time for in-home assessments, and first on her list was Thad. Grace pulled up the red and cream-colored apartment complex and parked in an empty spot. She lifted her sunglasses and placed them on top of her twists. She cut the engine then grabbed her bag. Pushing her door open, she slid out and closed it behind herself. Grace journeyed over to the bottom row of apartments and scanned the numbers listed beside the door.

532...533...534.

There it was!

Venturing to the red door, grace knocked on the door lightly. She peeked over her shoulder and got a good look at the neighborhood. Little black children played on their bikes and ran gleefully as faded rap music sounded off in the distance. There was no litter nor any disheveled buildings or lawns. All in all, it was a pretty nice neighborhood from the looks of it. Jiggling erupted behind the door, causing Grace to turn around right before it opened.

“Ms. G!” Thad ran into her legs, wrapping his little arms tightly around her.

“Hey, Thad, how are you, honey?” Grace greeted him with a pat on the back.

“I’m straight, Ms. G. Whatchu doing here?” Thad pulled back and looked up at her as he spoke.

“Remember when I told you I was going to be coming to visit you soon to speak one on one with your mom? Today’s that day.” Grace explained, and instantly Thad’s happiness evaporated.

“Dang, you couldn’t have called first, Ms. Grace? My mom-,” Thad started but a loud yell cut him off.

“Aye, boy, didn’t I tell your as- Who you?” A big, brown-skinned man stepped up behind Thad, who Grace assumed to be Rick’s face scrunched up as he took her in.

His eyes scanned over her size 14 figure, and Grace swore she tasted vomit creeping up her throat. Rick was far from bad looking. He had a trimmed and shaped up goatee, brown eyes, smooth skin, and when he spoke, she noticed his grill. He was the type of man she’d date, but there was just something about his aura that made him unlikeable.

“Hello, I’m Grace Mitchell, Thad’s new social worker at St John’s. I’m just coming by to speak to Cyn-,” she began to explain, but Rick interrupted her.

“Cyn doesn’t get off till 5 tonight, but you’re more than welcome to hang around Ma.” Rick lined against the door frame with a slick expression on his face.

Grace honestly wanted to take this moment to thank God internally for the many bad dates he had sent her on in

high school and college to make her blink face ironclad strong because only the man above knew how hard she was trying to keep her face from jumping.

“Uh, thank you for the offer, Rick is it? But I’m just going to leave my contact info so Ms. Marshall can get back to me on her off time if that’s okay?” Grace peered at him expectantly.

“That’s a-okay with me,” Rick clenched his jaw as he eyed Grace up and down.

He thought Thad’s old caseworker was a knockout but shortly standing before him was thick in all the right places. And she looked soft as hell. Grace pulled out her card, and instead of handing it to Rick, she held it out toward Thad.

“Give this to your mom for me, sweetie, okay?” She bent down, rubbing the top of his head.

“You got it!” Thad beamed up at her.

“I’ll see you Wednesday, hun, bye” Grace stood straight and began walking off.

Journeying toward her car, she peered over her shoulder and saw Thad and Rick going into the house. What she saw next made her soon around. Rick stepped out of the way to let Thad pass, and as the child was walking by, Rick slapped him across the butt...

Then groped him.

It was subtle, but she still noticed it. Hurrying to her car, she hopped in then pulled out her phone as fast as she could, dialing Cynthia's cell phone number. She got the voicemail immediately and cursed silently.

“Uh, hello, Ms. Marshall. This Grace Mitchell calling to see if Ms. High tower could see him tomorrow instead of Wednesday for this week's therapy session? I just stopped by to speak with you but was informed you're currently at work. I left my contact info with Thaddeus. Thank you.” Grace rattled off, then ended the call.

Throwing her phone into the passenger seat, Grace huffed loudly and leaned forward. If this was what she thought it was, she was going to be upset.

This...this would explain so much, especially the suspensions.

Her horn erupted suddenly, causing her to jerk back in surprise.

“Je-sus!” She sighed as she plopped back into the driver's seat.

She had to do something about this, but she'd need Thad's help.

By the time Grace had returned to the office, she had completely shut down. Her body felt numb, and her mind was blank except for her thoughts of Thaddeus. She had more

home visits to do today, but she just... couldn't. And since she had just started, it wasn't like she could cut her day short all willy-nilly. Grace chose to stay in her office for the rest of the day with her door entirely shut. She didn't need any intrusions.

She had to think.

Since she was a social worker via St John's mental health facility, she was also employees under the department of family and children so, at any time, Grace could call law enforcement out if she suspected sexual abuse. Which is why she needed to talk to Thad, alone. And his mother. By the time it was time to clock out, Grace was drained. She spent the whole day strategizing on what her next move was going to be, and all she wanted was to go home, take a nice hot shower and go straight to bed. Grace was stepping out of her office at the same time as Mr. Sutton, causing the two to catch eye contact.

"Hey, you don't look so hot. What's wrong?" Tim questioned with a deep frown.

"Just really exhausted, and I saw something today that I..." Grace sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

She couldn't even say it.

"What? What did you see? Grace, you're worrying me." Tim made a move to grab her shoulders soothingly.

If this were any other time, Grace knew she wouldn't have let him hug her. This gesture was too intimate and not

appropriate for the workplace, considering what type of hug it was. It wasn't one of those church hugs. No, this was one of those body to body hugs. She could feel the entire outline of Tim's body. And with that single thought, Grace came back to reality and jerked herself from his grasp.

"Thank you for the comfort, Mr. Sutton, but I don't think that's very appropriate." Grace relayed in an assertive tone.

"I'm sorry, Grace, forgive me. You just seemed worked up." Tim explained softly.

"That's because I have a lot going on surrounding Thad and his stepfather, Rick." Grace conveyed as she closed her eyes and took another deep breath.

"What's going on?" Tim inquired, placing his hands on his hips.

"I think, but I'm not too sure that Rick...is molesting Thad." She exposed in a strained voice.

Tim's face went blank before his eyes widened.

"Did you notify DCF and the police yet?" Tim questioned with a raised brow.

"No, because like I said, I'm not sure. I want to have a one on one with Thad to see if he'll tell me anything. I've already called his mom to see if it's possible if he can do a session tomorrow; that way, I'll be able to speak with her

while he's doing therapy with Ms. Hightower." Grace huffed lowly.

Tim nodded.

"But other than that, I'm tired, and I'll see you tomorrow, Mr.-" Grace began, but Tim stopped her.

"Tim, Grace. You don't have to call me Mr. Sutton when the office is empty," he chuckled, placing his hands in his pockets.

"Goodnight, Mr. Sutton." Grace relayed as she sidestepped him and journeyed toward the exit.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Honey, you know you can tell me anything," Grace reassured as Thad sat with his head resting on his folded arms.

His little legs kicked, signaling he was bothered.

“How about we try this?” Ms. Hightower spoke up across from Grace.

The tall black woman walked over to her desk and picked up a sheet of paper and a pen before returning over to Grace and Thad. Ms. Hightower sat the paper down in front of Thad’s folded arms. Using one hand to hold the sheet still, she drew a stick figure. Once she was done, she offered the pen to Thad.

“If someone at home has touched you inappropriately at home, show Ms. G and me on this piece of paper.” She spoke calmly.

Thad lifted his head a little, eyeing the inky stick figure as he clenched his jaw repeatedly. His eyes slid to the pen in Ms. Hightower’s grip, then he looked toward Grace.

“It’s okay, Thaddeus.” She whispered.

Thad peered back at the paper, not making any more movement. A beat passed before he reached out timidly, his lips beginning to shake as he took the pen. Placing pen to paper, Thad circled the stick figure lower body. Grace and Ms. Hightower gazed at each other with knowing looks before putting their attention back on Thad.

“Anywhere else, sweetheart?” Ms. Hightower, whose first name was Lynn, questioned gently as she rubbed his back.

By now, silent tears were flowing down his small face. His legs began to kick rapidly once more, and Grace knew he was trying to cope. Slowly, he made another circle around the stick figures' entire head, causing Grace to freeze.

Jesus Christ!

This poor baby...

Unable to take it anymore, Grace stood and walked over to Thad. As soon as Thad had arrived at therapy, Grace and Lynn started questioning him about any sexual abuse in the home. And to Grace's surprise, the little boy confirmed her suspicion. He just wouldn't tell who was doing the sexual abuse. Crouching down next to his seat, Grace put a hand on his folded arms and peered up at him with a tight, wavering smile.

"Thad, Ms. Hightower and I need you to tell us who did those horrible things to you so we can help you, sweetheart." She explained.

Thad looked down at her then Ms. Hightower before putting the pen down and burying his face in his arms. Mumbling was heard from him, yet Lynn nor Grace caught what he had said.

"Thad, honey, we can't hear you." Lynn frowned as she corrected the thick glasses on her face.

Thad lifted his head a little but didn't completely bring it up.

"I...I can't tell," he uttered, tears falling freely.

"Oh, honey. Yes, you can. Whoever told you that just said that so they wouldn't get in trouble." Grace tried to reason, but Thad shook his head roughly.

"He said if I told them it would make me gay!" The small boy burst into tears before embedding his tear-stained face in his hands.

Thad's sobs echoed throughout the room as Grace and Lynn shared yet another glance.

As if the situation couldn't get any worse...

Grace pushed off her legs and stood, gathering Thad up in her arms. The young man wrapped his arms around her as he cried helplessly into his hands.

"It's okay, baby. Let it out." She rubbed his back as he cried.

"I'm going to give him a minute to take a break, then we'll see if he'll tell us if it's Rick," Lynn told Grace as she ran a hand through her short pixie cut.

"I'm heading to the cafe to buy him a Lunchable. Do you want anything?" The slimmer woman offered.

“Just water, thanks.” Grace smiled tightly as she rocked Thad.

“Okay, I’ll be right back.” Grace watched as Lynn left the therapy room, her chambray denim dress flowing behind her.

Once the door had shut, Grace asked the question she had been dying to.

“Rick told you that, didn’t he?” As she expected, Thad’s cries increased, and Grace nodded knowingly.

That was all she was going to ask until Lynn got back because Lord knows more questions were burning her brain, but she honestly didn’t want to upset Thad further. Lynn returned after about 10-15 minutes, hands filled with two water bottles and a Lunchable. She closed the door and walked over to Thad and Grace, handing them their items.

“Thank you, Ms. Lynn.” Thad sniffled out.

“You don’t have to thank me, baby. This is for being such a brave boy.” Lynn rubbed his forehead.

Thad nodded slowly as he tore open his lunch.

“Thank you, Lynn.” Grace motioned toward the water.

Lynn waved her off with a smile. “Girl, just think of it as a token of my gratitude. I’ve had a hunch something was going on, Angela too before she left, but we could never get it out of him. Plus, his mother didn’t make it easy. But you... You got him to open up. Thank you.” Lynn rolled her eyes as she popped open her water.

She took a swig then recapped it.

“How so?” Grace raised a curious brow as Lynn held all her attention.

“In the beginning, Thad was just coming to St John’s for meds, not therapy. Angie had to convince her that medicating him without getting to the root cause of why he was acting out defeated the purpose of him even needing medicine. Ol’ girl was still against it. It wasn’t until That got suspended a third time during the beginning of the year that the school counselor recommended he get therapy with us. Let me tell you one thing,” Lynn lowered her voice so that only Grace could hear her.

“That little boy you see, sitting in that seat, was not the same child that started therapy with us 3 months ago.” Lynn gave her a look as to say ‘Mmhmm’.

Grace furrowed her brows in astonishment as she looked over at Thad, who was snacking down on his crackers, cheese, and turkey.

“That boy talked back, cursed like a dang sailor, bullied other kids. Angie had a hard time with him at first, but once he was shown the right attention, he slowed down. And

since you've come aboard, he can't stop talking about you. Ms. G this, Ms. G that, you're all that comes out of his mouth. I think he sees a lot of Ang in you, which is why he had no problem opening up earlier." Lynn smiled warmly.

"It's no problem, I just want what's best for him. With the right guidance and attention, he can achieve whatever he wants. He's so smart, and not just book smart. Did you know two weeks ago he told me what back roads to take to get to Cold Stone quicker?" Grace tutored her head to the side, eyes wide with amusement.

Lynn burst into a fit of laughter. If this were ten years earlier, grace would be completely jealous of Lynn and slim physique. She was tall and thin, with pretty, slanted eyes and plump heart-shaped lips. She was a stunner. But years of coming to love her own body taught her to never wish for what another person had. Growing up, she had always been on the heavier side, suffering through elementary, middle, and high school because of it.

Once she got accepted into college and started her freshman year, the stress of being away from her mom and trying to navigate a new environment wore her down to the point she lost 20 pounds instead of gaining them. Grace remembered the exact moment she stopped being envious of thinner girls. Women's studies had just dismissed, and she was rushing toward the bathroom before the Vesuvius of pee she was holding exploded down her leg.

Grace had run into the nearest stall and plopped down to do her business. While she was peeing, another girl entered the bathroom but not to pee. Just as grace was maneuvering around to flush the toilet, she heard it.

The retching...

The sound of wetness falling onto plastic.

Being nosey as always, Grace peeked through the gaps of the stall and saw a yellow-haired girl throwing up in the bathroom trashing.

Her method of choice?

Her fingers...

That moment left Grace horrified and shocked. She thought, ever so stupidly, that eating disorders were just a Hollywood thing. Something you saw in one of those teeny bopper shows like 'Degrassi'.

Not...real life.

Grace remembered sitting on that toilet seat with her pants still down, thinking, 'even though I'm far, I don't even have to do that. She's already perfect, so why is she making herself sick just to 'look good'? And it changed the entire way she saw herself. From then on, those stupid jokes freshmen boys use to throw at her, just rolled off her back like water. If she had to ruin her throat and esophagus with her stomach acid just to be thin and gain acceptance, she wanted no parts.

"Child! He's a whole mess! One time he caught me heading to my car and asked where I was going and when I told him Publix, he proceeded to try to give me directions like

I didn't know where I had ordered my lunch from." Lynn explained, causing Grace to cackle.

"I hear y'all talking bout me," Thad spoke up, making their laughter cease.

"Yep, telling Ms. G that you know this town like the back of your fade." Lynn joked, and Thad laughed a little.

"You through with this, hun?" Grace stepped over to him, pointing at the shredded Lunchable box.

"Yes, Ma'am." He nodded. Grace collected the torn cardboard and dumped it in the trash before returning to her previous seat.

"You ready?" Lynn asked as she took her seat across from Thad.

"Yes, Ma'am. I'm ready to tell who... touched me." Thad took a deep breath.

Lynn looked to Grace as she grabbed her notes, awaiting the younger woman's signal. Grace nodded as she placed pen to paper, and Lynn began her line of questioning.

Grace took a deep sigh as she checked her watch. 12:34 pm, it read. Child protective services and Atlanta PD were supposed to meet her here four minutes. Although Grace

could hardly call that running late, she still wanted them here so she could hurry up and get that scum Rick off the streets. There was no telling how many other little boys he had messed with. And the fact that Cynthia let this all go down and didn't bat a lash was stomach-turning. Thad told her and Lynn everything yesterday.

Absolutely everything.

From Thad having to 'pee' whenever he went to take a bath for the night to him telling his mom one day on his way to school only to be beaten like a grown man and accused of lying. To cover their tracks, Cynthia and Rick started labeling him gay to keep him quiet, which had a profound effect on him.

Now that Grace thought about it, that's why Thad tried to act so hard...

It was so hard listening to Thad detail everything that once he was finished and given to DCF, Grace went home and cried her eyes out. No little boy should have to go through that.

No!

No child, period, should have to go through that. A silver Mazda pulled up with an undercover Atlanta PD cruiser and regular model trailing it, making Grace huff gratefully. Time to take out the trash. She got out of her Saturn and shut the door, journeying toward the front. The DCF caseworker and detective walked toward her, introducing themselves.

“I’m Carmen Reynolds, and this is Detective Richard Dixon.” The stout, short-haired caseworker motioned.

“I’m Grace Mitchell. I’m the St John’s social worker who made the call.” Grace put her hand out.

Ms. Reynolds accepted her hand, shaking it gently. She released Grace’s appendage, and that’s when Detective Dixon grabbed it.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Mitchell.” The strength in his grip and the security she felt as soon as their hands touched caused Grace to focus on his face.

He was handsome. Honey-colored eyes shadowed by long lashes. Cut cheekbones and rosy red lips. The bridge of his nose was thin, but the end flared out to semi-button. She noticed that she had been holding his hand just a little too long and quickly released it.

“Uh, likewise.” She stammered, smoothing her hands down her grey Ponte pants.

What in the earth was she doing admiring this man like a Picasso when she was here for Thad!?

“Shall we?” Ms. Reynolds spoke up, an expectant brow raised.

Grace nodded, and the trio began their way toward Cynthia’s apartment. Officer Dixon lifted his hand and

knocked. A few seconds passed before rustling was heard behind the door.

“Who is it?” A groggy female voice replied.

“Hi, Ms. Marshall. This is Grace Mitchell here to do our rescheduled visit.” Grace relayed.

“Oh,” a disinterested huff echoed off the door.

Detective Dixon pulled out his badge and held it up so that it would be front and center. The locks were undone then the door swung open.

“I don’t see what good it’s gon’ do, Thad ain’t eve-,” Cynthia froze up when she saw the badge in her face.

She was dressed in an oversized stained shirt with a red bandana on her head.

“There’s been an anonymous tip given that there’s been sexual abuse at this residence,” Dixon announced, and Cynthia’s face sunk in.

“Tha-,” she started, but the detective halted her.

“Is Rick Darby here?” He questioned sternly, leaving no room to argue.

“I, Uh.” She uttered lamely.

“Is Rick Darby here, yes or no? You don’t want to lie to me, Ms. Marshall, because if you do, I’ll be forced to use this warrant,” Dixon pulled out a folded sheet of paper, “And those officers to search your house for Darby.” He pointed to the two officers leaning against the ATL PD cruiser.

Cynthia pushed the door open and stepped aside, “He’s in the bedroom asleep.” She sighed in defeat. Dixon nodded then motioned toward the two officers.

“Step out of the house, Ms. Marshall.” He ordered.

Cynthia stepped out and crossed her arms, attitude clear on her face.

“Put your hands behind your back for me, please, ma’am.” An officer demanded as he approached Cynthia.

“What the fuck you mean?! I ain’t done shit to get arrested!” Cynthia fumed.

“You’re being arrested for endangering a minor, child abuse, and failing to report a sexual assault.” Cynthia’s face went blank as detective Dixon listed off her charges.

“I’m beat that Lil faggot ass when I see him again!” She yelled as the officer cuffed her.

Dixon just shook his head before he and the remaining officer entered the home to arrest Rick.

“Luckliy for Thad he won’t ever be seeing you again,” Grace called to a simmering Cynthia.

The skinny woman looked at her with a scowl.

“This all yo fucking fault, you fat ass bitch! You’ve been blowing my phone up, and I see why now!” Cynthia hollered, spit flying from her mouth.

Grace just sneered in disgust. Nothing Cynthia said hurt her feelings. She was more hurt than Thad was being raised by such a person.

“I ain’t touch shit, Ion know what the fuck y’all talking about!” A gruff male voice caught their attention, and they turned to see detective Dixon and his officer hauling Rick out of the apartment.

Dixon gave the officer holding Cynthia a signal, and the three guided the criminals to the police cruiser to read them their Miranda rights.

Once they were seated in the car, Grace and Ms. Reynolds bid farewell to each, then Grace hopped back into her Saturn. As she started her car, she saw Detective Dixon watching her as he spoke with his officers.

CHAPTER FIVE

The sound of car keys rustled as Grace journeyed down the corridor of Atlanta's local DCF office. She passed a few doors before stopping at the very last one. Pressing the buzzer by the door, Grace waited until she heard static.

"Garcia Martin's office," the receptionist greeted over the speaker.

"Hi, yes, this is Grace Mitchell from St John's here to see Thad Marshall." Grace notified.

"Okay, I'll let you in," the woman relayed before the sound of the door releasing was heard.

Grace pulled the door open and slid inside.

"Thank you," she nodded toward the seated one a few feet away.

"No problem. Thad and Ms. Martin will be out in a second." The brown-haired Latina announced.

Grace shook her head then ventured over to the waiting area, which consisted of a few spaced out seats and large mounted TV. Plopping down, she made sure to keep her work bag in her lap, careful not to squish anything. The opposite door released, catching her attention. The door inched open,

and Thad popped out, scanning the room. Once his eyes landed in Grace, a megawatt smile lit his face.

“Ms. G!” He screamed as he ran toward her.

Grace stood quickly and shifted her bag before opening her arms wide.

“Hey, my Lil playa!” She engulfed him in a tight hug.

“How are you, hun?” Grace questioned as she peered down at him.

This was a big adjustment for Thaddeus. He had been taken from an abusive home, yet it was the only home he had ever known. This was a different setting and life, and Grace wanted to make sure his transfer was going well.

“I have been aight, Ms. G, but I miss the center.” Thad pouted up at her.

“So, you’re the infamous Ms. G Thad has been telling me about?” A dark-haired woman with a heavy Spanish accent appeared from behind the door.

“Yes, and you must be Ms. Martin?” Grace pointed.

“Yes, I am. It’s very nice to finally meet you. You and Lynn Hightower are all he talks about,” Ms. Martin chuckled as she glanced down at Thad with a grin.

“Thad’s my sweetie. And speaking of sweetie,” Grace pulled away from Thad and opened her work bag.

“I have a sweet treat for you,” she pulled out a McDonald’s chocolate cookie.

Thad’s eyes lit up as he accepted it. “Whoa! Thank you, Ms. G!” He hollered.

“You’re very welcome, hun. But I think I might have another one.” She reached back into her bag.

Her hand stopped midway, and she frowned.

“Oh no, my bad. It’s not another cookie, it’s just a... happy meal!” She jerked the warm box from her bag.

“Oh, thank you, thank you!” Thad chanted as he snatched the box from her hands with excitement.

“Is this okay?” Grace peered over at Ms. Martin.

“It’s completely fine! How about we go in the back so Thaddeus can eat while we talk.” Ms. Martin suggested.

Grace nodded and placed a hand on Thad’s shoulder, guiding him in the direction of Ms. Martin. The trio disappeared behind the door, and it shut with a loud lock. Ms. Martin directed them down the hall to a vibrantly colored

room filled with toys and all types of board games. Thad ran over to the red table that housed an old PlayStation3 and stack of games. He tore open his McDonald's box before switching on the game.

“He loves that game, comes up here almost every day since he's been here just to play it. Was a little mad when he discovered we didn't have any GTA games, but PlantsVsZombies seemed to catch his attention.” Ms. Martin relayed with a soft smile.

Grace watched with a wacky grin as Thad planted sunflowers while stuffing fries in his mouth. Thank God she asked the clerk at McDonald's for a value size fry when she ordered his happy meal instead of those little fries that came inside the box.

“How has he been adjusting?” Grace inquired as she turned fully toward Ms. Martin.

“That's why I called you in,” the Latina sighed.

“Thad's been,” she lowered her voice as her eyes darted to Thaddeus.

When she observed his attention was fully in the game, she continued.

“Ever since he's been with us, his behavior has alternated between high and low. There are moments when he's a complete Angel, then other times, he lashes out for no rhyme or reason. I've also been notified that when it's

bedtime, he'll stay up and cry instead of going to bed. He's seen our in-house therapist talk about what he's been going through, but sadly, he can't get anything out of him." Ms. Martin explained, leaving Grace with a deeply furrowed brow.

"I'm not Thad's therapist, but I can see if Ly-," Grace started to offer, but Ms. Martin held up a hand.

"I know that, Ms. Mitchell, but seeing as you're all he's been speaking about, I thought maybe you could help him to open up here? Because I'm afraid if his behavior doesn't change soon, he'll have to be transferred to another facility." The dark-haired woman confessed with worry clear on her face.

Grace eyed her for a while before turning to peek at Thad. She noticed him watching them from the side of his right eye, and her heart went out to him. His mother and stepfather had been arrested two weeks ago, and to suddenly have to cope with losing his family and home within that period were hard on a child, especially a 9 year old. He was old enough to comprehend what had happened, and that's most likely why he stayed up crying at night.

"I-," Grace opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

She was flattered that Thad and Ms. Martin thought so highly of her, but what could she do besides sit and have a few words with him? Not to mention, once she left, there was a high probability that he would act out again.

She had to think...

A thought hit her, and she bawled her lips in.

“Since Thad receives outpatient treatment from St John’s, I believe I can get into the inpatient children’s program based on his history and behavior here. That way, he’ll be around people that he knows and feel more comfortable.” Grace offered, causing Ms. Martin’s face to light up.

“That...that sounds perfect! Because I’d hate if he had to be transferred, and the next caseworker didn’t know how to deal with him.” Ms. Martin picked up her folders with a satisfied sigh.

“I’d hate that as well. He’s a sweetheart, but I know with everything going on, he’s having a hard time adjusting and coming to terms. Once I get back to the office, I can stop in with my director and start the paperwork so we can get him back with us as soon as possible.” Grace relayed as Ms. Martin stood.

“You’re amazing. Thank you so much.” Grace stood as Ms. Martin offered her hand.

“It’s truly no problem.” She smiled as she accepted the woman’s tan hand.

The women shook hands then pushed their chairs in before turning toward Thad. He peeked over his shoulder, and Grace gave him a look. His little sly behind was listening to their whole conversation even though they were whispering.

“Are you going to come to give me a hug or just continue to eavesdrop?” She lifted a brow.

Thad sucked his teeth but still got up and walked over to her.

“Man, I wasn’t eavesdropping. I was just wondering why y’all was talking so low,” he rolled his eyes as he wrapped his arms around Grace’s waist.

Ms. Martin and Grace shared a look before bursting into laughter.

“Alright, boy. I’ll see you later.” She kissed the top of his head then released him.

“At the center?” Thad poked his lips out.

“Yes, at the center.” Grace shook her head.

“Yes!” Thad’s fist pumped before turning and heading back to his game.

Grace huffed with amusement at his actions.

“Thank you, Ms. Mitchell.” Ms. Martin pivoted toward.

“As I said before, it’s no problem.” Grace beamed.

The two shook hands once more before Grace whirled around and headed toward the exit.

A smile lit Grace's face as she ventured down the corridor to her office. She had just spoken to Sally about Thad, and without even a second thought, she approved everything. Her sweetheart would be back with them tomorrow afternoon. Grace came to her office door and stuck her key in, unlocking it. Pushing the door open, she stepped in then turned to crack it a little when she noticed Mr. Sutton peering right at her. Grace jumped a little, her heart thumping in her chest. She was accustomed to Tim having his office door wide open, but she'd never get used to the way he...just stared.

“Caught cha off guard?” He chuckled as he twirled his own between his fingers.

“Uh, a little.” Grace laughed nervously, beginning to inch her door closed.

“Wait, Grace!” She halted as he called to her.

Mr. Sutton got up from his chair and rounded his desk, coming to stand in his doorway.

“Yes?” Grace stayed right where she was, refusing to open her door.

“Lynn and everyone has been telling me what a great job you've been doing handling Thad's case, and I just wanted

to say I'm proud of you." Tim beamed at her.

Although Mr. Sutton had his... quirks about him, Grace was honestly flattered.

"Thank you, Sir." She threw him a wide grin as she nodded in acceptance.

"No, Grace, Thank you. Sally picked one hell of an employee when she hired you." Tim relayed, his eyes darting around her face.

"Thank you, sir, but if you will excuse me, I'm going to go work on a few more files," she repeated, unsure of what to say with the way he was looking at her.

She began to back away, slowly pushing her door forward when Tim made no move to head back to his desk.

Uh...okay.

"Hey, um, Grace?" She mentally cursed as he called to her yet again.

"Uh, yes, sir?" She bit her tongue before speaking.

"I was wondering if, um, you'd like to grab a bite with me after you clock out?" Tim requested, leaving Grace stunned.

She had no idea how Denise got down, but she DID NOT date her bosses and higher-ups. That was a no-go for Grace. Bosses and employees dating only ruin work relationships. Plus, there was the aspect of coworkers thinking you got a promotion simply from sleeping with the boss. Grace didn't want or need that type of stigma from ANYONE at St. John's, especially since she was making a name for herself here.

She couldn't mess that up...

The sensation of eyes burning into her back did not go unnoticed by Grace. She knew Denise was watching them like a hawk, which she didn't need to because Grace was far from interested in Tim.

"I, uh-" she started stuttering, but the sound of the unit door opening stopped her.

She and Tim peered down the hall and saw Detective Dixon stepping inside. As if on instinct, his eyes landed on her from up the hall. Grace smiled tightly as she took him in. He was dressed identically to the day they met to arrest Thad's mother and stepfather. Thin tan coat, white button-down, and black slacks.

He smiled at her from up the hall, and Grace just gazed back stupidly.

"Hi, how may I help you?" Denise questioned the scrumptious looking stranger as she nibbled on the end of her pen.

“I’m here to see Grace Mitchell,” Richard told her without taking his eyes off Grace.

Denise looked taken back, her pen almost falling from her hand.

“Oh, uh, she’s right there.” She instructed dumbly.

Richard nodded before pivoting and journeying toward where Grace and Tim stood. “Hello, Ms. Mitchell.” He greeted with an ear-splitting smile, showcasing his pearly whites.

“Hello?” Grace shook her head a bit as if questioning herself if that was the right response.

“Is that a question or a greeting?” Richard chuckled, making Grace’s cheeks grow warm.

She let out an embarrassed huff before giggling. “Forgive me. Hello, Detective Dixon. What may I help you with?” She composed herself then asked with a raised brow.

“Yes, what may our office help you with, officer?” Tim interjected, putting his hand out.

“Detective Dixon,” Richard accepted Tim’s outstretched hand as he corrected him.

“Tim Sutton. What’s the cause for this visit, detective?” Tim inquired with a weird expression on his face.

Grace wanted to melt into the floor right this moment.

What was Mr. Sutton doing?!

He was acting like more of a... jealous boyfriend than her boss.

“I stopped in to speak with Ms. Mitchell about the Marshall case.” Richard kept it short and sweet.

“Oh, okay,” Tim just shook his head lamely.

“How about we talk in my office?” Grace offered.

Anything to get away from this Shit show.

“Of course,” Richard smiled down at her, and Grace swore her panties melted off.

She stepped aside and inched her door open, giving detective Dixon enough room to enter before closing her door right in Tim’s face. Absent-mindedly, she pressed her back into the closed door and side loudly. A deep masculine chuckle vibrated around the room, causing Grace’s eyes to fly open.

“Work husband?” Richard gauged with a laugh.

“Oh, no! Not at all.” Grace pushed away from the door and journeyed toward her desk.

“So, you want it to speak with me about the Marshall case?” She lifted a brow as she opened her file drawer to pull out Thad’s folder.

Richard looked down at the ground before huffing with amusement.

“Ms. Mitchell, that was a lie. I stopped by today to, uh, see if you’d like to join me for a cup of coffee one day this week?” Richard struggled out as he rubbed the back of his neck.

Ever since he had met Grace two weeks ago to make the arrests in the Marshall case, she had been on his mind constantly. He chalked it up to her being a gorgeous woman with one hell of a figure, but once he had read her report on Thad and his abuse and heard about her via other social workers, he knew his interest in her didn’t revolve around her looks. Although they were a bonus. Grace had these big, round dough eyes that reminded him of a deer. They were framed by long, flirty lashes.

She had these plump lips that flared out when she smiled. She had a typical ethnic nose that fit her face perfectly. The day they met, she was wearing her Senegalese twists in a high-top bun, but today they were down, extenuating her face. Plus, her body wasn’t too far behind. She had these thick wide thighs that made him stop mid-conversation with one of his officers just so he could see her walk away.

The way her ass bounced in those Ponte pants had played on a loop in his mind for the last two weeks.

“This, uh, is quite the day.” Grace laughed nervously to herself.

Not one but two men had asked her out in 20 minutes, and Grace didn't know how to feel. She got male attention all the time, usually from the drunkards sitting outside her local 7-Eleven and creeps on Facebook. Before her mom passed away, Grace used to date regularly, but once her mother got sick and she moved in with her, her dating life stalled out, to the point that once Edie was laid to rest, Grace just put all her focus into getting better from her depression.

It was nice to be reminded that she was still attractive to the opposite sex enough for one of them to hunt her down at her place of employment.

“Hope that means ‘Yes’,” Richard spoke up, drawing her from her thoughts.

“I...I'd love to.” Grace smiled softly, causing the detective a slow grin to line his face.

“Tomorrow at noon?” He lifted a brow.

“Tomorrow at noon is perfect.” She bit her lip.

Richard looked her up and down before nodding and making his way toward her office door. Grace stood to follow him, catching the door as he opened it.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Ms. Mitchell,” Richard said loud enough for Tim to hear, who was sitting at his desk with his eyes directly on Grace.

“Likewise,” she whispered with a smile as he tipped his chin to her.

She watched detective Dixon leave the unit then slide back into her office, not missing the nasty look Tim was giving her.

CHAPTER SIX

It was 11:59, and Grace was already anxious. She had gotten to Starbucks 10 minutes earlier and was gazing out the window nervously. This was the first date she had been on in years, and prayed it went well. Grace wasn't stupid. She knew how some men were with girls like her. Butter em up, sex em up, then throw them away. And that wasn't the type of relationship she wanted. In all honesty, Grace wasn't ready for a committed relationship. She just wanted someone she could hang out with and talk to. Someone she could call for a word of encouragement when her day was going bad.

Grace wanted a friend.

With a sigh, she smoothed down the skirt of her red puff sleeve dress and sat straight. The bell over the entrance chimed, and Grace's eyes flew toward it. She observed as Richard entered the coffee shop, his eyes scanning the area for her. She lifted a hand and waved with a shy smile. He returned her gesture and began making his way toward her.

"Hi," he greeted with that gorgeous smile.

"Hello, Mr. Dixon." She replied, jitters clear in her tone.

"Please, call me Richard. Mr. Dixon is my father." He joked as he took a seat.

“Richard,” Grace corrected lightly.

Richard let his eyes roam over her, causing her cheeks to heat up.

“You got here early, didn’t you?” He questioned as a sly grin formed on his lips.

“I-No! I meant, no.” Grace answered loudly before fixing the volume in her voice.

“Really? Because it’s 12:05, you haven’t ordered anything and...I’ve been waiting in the parking lot since 11:50 and saw you walk up.” He confessed with an embarrassed sigh.

“So, I’m guessing you were as nervous as I was this morning?” Grace giggled out with a soft smile.

“If not more. You’re a bit intimidating, Grace. You just appeared out of thin air, and everyone’s gushing about you. Your name is even floating around down at my precinct. You’re that damn powerful.” Richard chuckled.

“I wouldn’t say powerful, just- I don’t know? I just love helping children, ya know?” She shrugged, eliciting a smirk from Richard.

“That was easy to see when we arrested Darby and the mom; you didn’t miss a beat. And hey, don’t let her, ya know, comment about your weight bother you. She’d be lucky to be

built like you,” Richard’s voice melted into a thick southern drawl.

Grace rubbed her thighs together at the sound.

Good Lord, there was nothing she loved more than a true down south man!

“I, um, thank you, Richard.” Grace was doing everything in her power to avoid his light-colored eyes.

“Call me Richey,” he offered in a sensual tone.

Grace checked her watch, noticing that it was 12:15. 10 minutes had only passed, and she had already moved from his government name to a nickname...

Richard’s deep laugh drew her attention, and her face went up and flames when she looked into his eyes.

There was a tinkle...

He liked seeing her flustered. “How about we order?” Richard finally suggested.

He lifted his hand and waved a barista over. The young teeny bopper came over and jotted down their order before bouncing off. “So, Grace, where’d you grow up?” Richard placed his attention back on her.

“The Highland area, born and raised. Didn’t leave until college.” Grace described.

Richey frowned in appreciation. “I’m from Decatur through military travels but originally from Tampa, Florida.” He relayed, leaving Grace surprised.

“So, you’re a Flawda boi,” she teased, causing Richey to bark with laughter.

“Yep. Left when I was 6 when my dad was deployed to Japan.” He nodded.

“Oh, wow! You’re a part of a military family? How many countries did you guys leave in?” Grace questioned with intrigue.

“Three: Japan, Haiti, and New Guinea.” He spoke with his hand.

“Which was your favorite?” Grace raised a brow.

“I’d say Japan. When we first arrived, and with me being so young, it was a culture shock. Imagine my surprise when school ended, and I was told I had to clean up before I go home?” Richard shook his head in a joking manner, making Grace giggle.

“It wasn’t just how school was run, but the food, the way they respected the elderly and children, the music. My family lived there for three years, and I learned so much, honestly.” He relayed, the sincerity in his tone genuine.

“Tell me something about Japan that differs from the states,” Grace tilted her head.

“One thing I found out that was cool was the way they run their music industry. I mean, do you know they have musical acts from the 90’s still selling out shows and putting out top-charting albums? Japan doesn’t just count digital music streams like the U.S, but also physical buys, i.e., buying an artist’s album.” Richey explained, causing Grace to nod.

“That’s amazing. I always like hearing about other countries from people that travel, considering I’ve never been out of the U.S. I thought about it once after my mother passed, but then I,” Grace shut herself off before she exposed too much.

They had just met, and it’d be very unfair to unload on him about her mother’s death and her depression.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Grace. My condolences. When did she pass?” Richard inquired thoughtfully.

Grace peered at him in surprise, making him laugh a little. “What’s wrong?” He lifted a curious brow.

“Uh, nothing. She passed a year and a half ago. I’m still dealing with it, but you know what they say, day by day.” Grace smiled tightly as she fiddled with the skirt of her dress.

“I understand. I lost my mother when I was 17. She got sick when we lived in New Guinea, and we came back to the

states to live with my grandparents so they and my dad could care for her. She fought a good fight but died in her sleep. It might sound crazy to hear, but I'm glad that's the way she went. No pain not hopped up on medication but nice and peaceful in her dreams." Richard shook his head sadly as he thought about it.

"I'm very sorry to hear that, Richard." Grace reached out to touch his hand.

Richard smiled as he grasped her smooth digits. The barista returned with their order, and the duo thanked her.

"Where'd you go to school?" Richard questioned before taking a sip of coffee.

"University of Atlanta." She answered as she stirred her vanilla ice coffee.

"What a small world. I went to the USA as well. What year were you? I was '00." Richard beamed.

"'09. How old are you?" Grace questioned with a furrowed brow.

"I'm 38. I'm not robbing the cradle, am I?" Richard laughed out.

"Not; there's only a ten-year difference in our ages." Grace shook her head.

“You’re 28? I wouldn’t have thought it. You look like you’re still going to UA.” Richard replied slyly.

“Oh please,” Grace waved him off, making him burst into a fit of laughter.

“I’m serious, Grace. You look amazing.” Richard told her in a serious tone once he calmed down.

“I... thank you.” Her eyes darted around the table, trying to escape contact but failed when Richard leaned his head down to catch her line of vision.

“Don’t take those pretty brown eyes off of me again,” he told her before biting his lip.

Whew, Jesus!

Richard winked then checked his watch. It was only 12:30. “What do you say to a walk in the park across the street?” He suggested.

“I’d love to.” Grace nodded.

The two stood, venturing toward the exit. Just as they stepped out the door, Mr. Sutton, Denise, and Susan appeared.

“Hey, Grace!” The chubby redhead greeted in excitement.

“Hey, Susan!” Grace returned.

She liked Susan.

The redhead was loud but had a kind disposition. “And who might this be?” Susan asked as she bounced her brows.

“This is Richard. Richard, this is Susan, my coworker down at St John’s. And Denise and you’ve already met my boss, Tim.” She introduced everyone.

“Nice to meet you,” Richard stuck his hand out.

Susan shook it before Denise weaseled into his grip.

“It’s a pleasure, Richard.” She batted her eyes, doing some type of jerking shoulder movement.

Was she spasming?

“So, what are you two up to?” Tim asked as he rocked on the back of his shoes, hands deep in the pocket of his slacks.

“Just grabbing a cup of coffee with a pretty lady,” Richard grinned down at Grace.

“Oh, a date?” Tim peered between the two with a blank look.

“Just chatting over mutual interests,” Richard nodded.

Something was wrong with this guy.

Very wrong. And Richard could see it a mile away...

He offered Grace his elbow, and she quickly took it. He knew she was dying to get to the park.

“It was nice seeing you guys,” Grace waved as Richard hurried her off.

Tim clenched his jaw as he watched them go, eyes dead set on Grace.

A wistful sigh left Grace’s mouth as she walked toward her office. She had just returned from her coffee date with Richard, and Denise and Tim had yet to arrive back. Thank God! Pulling out her keys, she went to unlock her door but paused. Her door wasn’t even closed, let alone locked. It was cracked slightly, causing her to go on high alert. Cautiously, she peeked her head in. She sucked her teeth loudly then facepalmed.

“Thad! Boy, you had me scared as heck!” She shook her head with a laugh as she fully entered her office, eyeing the young man seated at her desk with a grin. Thad paused the game of solitaire he was playing on Grace’s computer and ran toward her.

“Hey, Ms. G! Thanks for finally showing up. I’ve been waiting for you for like 15 minutes.” He hugged her tightly before pulling away.

“I-,” Grace tilted her head and gave him a look.

“My bad, Ms. G, but you did have a brother waiting for a long time.” Grace closed her eyes and put her hands on her hips. A sigh left her before she fell into a fit of laughter. She truly missed this boy.

“You had gone out for lunch or something, Ms. G?” Thad inquired as he made his way back to her desk, plopping down in the rolling chair.

“I went out on a lunch date,” she relayed, making the young boy pause.

“Say what?” He jerked back.

“Well, excuse me, I didn’t know I was so ugly to you, Thad.” Grace fiend offense, holding a hand against her chest dramatically.

“Man, Ms. G, you ain’t ugly. Just that... Idontwantnobodygoingoutwith Future Wife.” He rushed out.

“Boy, huh? You’re going to have to play that back in slow motion, sir.” Grace scrunched up her face at his comment. Thad rolled his eyes before diverting his attention.

“I don’t want nobody going out with my future wife,” he clarified, causing Grace to howl with laughter.

“Thad, oh, honey!” She cackled as she walked over to him. “Sweetheart, I am too old for you, and by law, I could go to prison, but I’m flattered.” She rubbed his head.

“Why do you think I said ‘future wife’? I can wait for you, Ms. G. Try me.” Thad winked up at her, making Grace’s chest jump with amusement.

“I’m sure there are a lot of cute girls your age that would love to talk to you, Thad. Don’t waste your golden years on my old self. Alright, now, get up so I can sit down.” She waved him out of her seat. Thad got up with a huff.

“I don’t want no young girl, Ms. G. I want a woman,” Thad rubbed his hands together like Birdman. Grace glanced at him with a bored expression on her face as she sat down.

“Mmm, to read you bedtime stories?” She closed out of the card game and pulled up her work screen.

“That and to take me to the zoo, I ain’t been in a long time.” Thad relayed.

“That sounds like a suggestion more than a reason to like older women, Thad. Are you trying to... subliminally tell me something, sweetie?” Grace raised a brow. Thad poked his mouth out and shrugged. Grace shook her head with a laugh.

“Tell you what? If you are ‘r-,” she began, but the sound of the unit door opening stopped her. The sounds of Tim and Denise’s voice echoed down the hall. “Thad, do me a favor and shut my door, please?” Grace gave him an annoyed look.

“You got it, Ms. G!” He nodded before racing over to the door and shutting it quickly. Meeting with Richard this afternoon and having Thad back at St John’s had Grace in a fantastic mood, and she didn’t need Tim killing it. Grace was unsure of what to do with him. He hadn’t done anything out the way toward her, but she was still put off over how he acted toward Richard yesterday. She wanted to talk to Sally, but she’d reserve that conversation in case Tim kept pushing. Hopefully, she wouldn’t have to do that. She prayed she wouldn’t have to do that because Lord knows, she did not want to create tension.

“What’s wrong, Ms. G?” Thad’s childish voice broke her from her thoughts.

“I, uh...It’s nothing to concern yourself over, hun.” She gave him a tight smile. Thad inched up a brow. He didn’t believe her. Plus, he had a hunch about what was going on, and he hoped it wasn’t what had happened to Ms. Angie. If Ms. G ever got fired the way Ms. Angie did- Like a ghost in the wind- He’d be hurt. Ms. Grace filled the hole in his heart that Ms. Angie left when she just upped and ran from St John’s. It was one of the reasons why he didn’t like Mr. Sutton now...

CHAPTER SEVEN

A gentle smile lit Grace's face as she made her way to her car. Today marked her third month here at St. John's, and that time, she'd accomplished a lot. Discovered Thad's sexual abuse, got him housed in St John's inpatient program, met a man...

Life was looking up.

Speaking of men, she and Richard were starting to hit it off since their coffee date two weeks ago. He texted her good morning/night almost every day. Called her at work to check in on her. She even took a chance and spent the weekend at his house this past weekend. Grace didn't want to move fast, but there was something about Richard that made her feel like...this was what she wanted.

He was being a friend and so much more.

Ever since she met him, she kept wishing that her mother was here to give her opinion on him. Edie would tell it like it is. Grace chuckled at her thoughts as she stepped up to her car. She was about to pull the driver's side door open when she spotted a small piece of paper on her windshield, pinned under the left wiper. Slowly, she released her door handle and inched toward the front of the car. Snatching the paper from under the wiper, she read what was scribbled on it.

'Meet me at Raiders for a drink tonight- Tim.

Grace huffed and rolled her eyes.

Was he serious?

Balling the paper up, she threw it on the ground. Maneuvering back to the driver's side, Grace opened her door and slid into the car. She sat her purse and work bag in the passenger seat before inserting her key in the ignition. R&B music instantly flowed through her radio, and Grace sighed.

Thank God it was Friday.

She was about to go home an-...

Banging erupted next to her head, and she quickly jerked to the side with stunning eyes. She turned and saw Tim waving at her excitedly. Grace sat straight and stared at him as if he were insane.

"Ti- Mr. Sutton, are you crazy!? You just scared the life out of me!" She told him as she placed a hand on her chest.

"Did you get my note?" He ignored her question, a weird smile on his face.

"I, yes. Yes, I did, but I'm very sorry, sir. I'm too exhausted to go out for drinks with everyone." Grace massaged her forehead, trying to soothe away the headache that was slowly building.

"Aww, c'mon, Grace. You tried to brush me off like this the first time. Plus, you don't have to worry about the

others. It was just going to be us anyway.” Tim confessed, causing Grace to freeze up.

Why couldn’t this man understand that she was not interested?

“Mr. Sutton, listen, I’m flattered that you’re interested in me, but I don’t do employer/employee relationships. I’m sorry.” She asserted.

Tim’s brows jumped, and his right eye spasmed. “There’s nothing wrong with having a drink or two, Grace. I can even drive you home if you get too messed up. What do you say?” He continued as if she hadn’t just turned him down.

Grace just sat there, staring at him with concerned orbs. “Again, I’m sorry, Mr. Sutton, but I can’t. Goodnight.” Grace could see she was going to get nowhere with him, so she hurriedly started her car and put it in reverse.

She thought that as soon as she put the car in reverse, that Mr. Sutton would back away from her car so she could pull off, but she was wrong.

Very wrong.

Tim held onto her window as she backed away. She hit the break and looked at him with a hard face.

“Sir,” she swallowed hard, doing her best to contain her anger.

“Can you please back away from my car, Sir?” She enunciated his title, venom dripping from her voice.

Tim took his sweet time backing away from her vehicle, the strange glint in his eyes never letting up. “You have a good night, Grace.” He told her slowly.

As soon as he was a safe distance away from her car, Grace reversed out of her parking spot before putting the car in drive, zooming right past him and out of the parking lot. Grace’s heart was beating out of her chest as she drove home, unable to comprehend what just went down. She knew she had said she wouldn’t go to Sally unless his behavior was truly detrimental to her, but she couldn’t keep that promise anymore.

She had to tell someone about Tim.

That look in his eye...

It scared her.

Once she made it home, she cut the engine and exited her vehicle, making her way up the stairs to her home. Unlocking the door, Grace pushed it open with a sigh. She pivoted around and locked the door before kicking off her shoes and sitting her work bag down on the table near the door. Trudging to her black leather sectional, she melted into the cool fabric of the recliner and let out a loud sigh as she dropped her purse next to her. Jesus, she was exhausted.

And everybody going on with Tim made it no better.

Just as Grace was about to reach for her Tv remote, her purse began to vibrate. She unzipped the bag and yanked out her phone, checking the caller ID. She saw Richard's name and smiled softly.

"Hello," she answered quickly.

"Hi, gorgeous. Did you make it home yet?" He inquired thoughtfully.

"Just walked in the door. How's your night going?" Grace bit her lip.

"Uh, not too bad. Just swamped with about 20 case files." Richard joked.

"Sounds like your night is going well," Grace giggled a little.

"It's going better now that I've heard your voice. How was work?" Richard asked genuinely.

Grace kept silent, signaling to Richard that something was wrong.

"Grace, is something wrong? Is it your supervisor?" Grace clenched her jaw as Richard continued to question her.

He knew only a small segment of what went on between her and Tim because Grace was unsure if she should give him the whole run down as of yet. “Um, no, I just had a long day, is all. What did you have for lunch?” Grace changed the topic.

The opposite end of the line was quiet for a second before Richard spoke again.

“A grilled cheese with tomato soup, although I wish I could have had you for lunch,” Richard teased, causing her face to heat up.

“Oh, now that definitely would have been a full course meal. Rolls and all.” Grace laughed out.

Richard chuckled deeply, and Grace’s heart began to think. She couldn’t describe how much she loved his laugh. It was so robust yet joyful.

“And I would have eaten every last drop. Don’t play with me, Grace.” Richard whispered over the line.

“Who said I was playing?” She matched his tone as she picked at the imaginary lint on her black pants.

“Mmm, and on that note, I’m going to go. I’ve got me more excited than a pig in slop. I’ll text you when I clock out. Goodnight, gorgeous.” Richard told her softly.

“Okay, goodnight.” Grace ended the call and sat her phone next to her purse.

She reached for the remote and cut the television on, channeling surfing until she landed on the news.

Nervousness filled Grace as she stood before Sally's office. Instead of taking it to HR, Grace wanted to see if Sally could talk to Tim first and get him to lay off before she used her last line of defense. Preparing herself, she inhaled deeply and lifted her hand, laying three light knocks on the door.

"Come in, Grace!" Sally welcomed from behind the door.

Grace bit her lip and turned the knob, pushing the door open.

"Hey, Sally. How are you?" She ducked into the room.

"I'm fine. You wanted to talk to me? Here, have a seat." The blonde pointed to the chairs in front of her desk.

Grace fiddled with her fingers as she stepped forward and took a seat. "I, uh, yes. It's about-Well, it's a long story, but I'll try to condense it as much as possible. It's, um, about Mr. Sutton." Her left leg began to bounce.

"And what about Tim?" Sally raised a curious brow.

“He’s been, well...I believe Mr. Sutton likes me. He’s been constantly asking me out and won’t take no for an answer. It’s really strange and worrisome because he won’t leave me alone about it.” Grace confessed with a pained look.

Her expression morphed into disbelief when Sally started laughing.

“Grace, what’s strange about a handsome man being interested in an equally attractive woman? Plus, St. John’s doesn’t have a policy forbidding employees from dating. So, I say have at it.” Sally shrugged.

Grace could do nothing but look.

She didn’t think Sally heard her right, so she went on to clarify. “The thing is, I don’t want to have ‘at it’ because I’m not interested in Mr. Sutton in that fashion, Ms. Wills. Tim is my boss, and the fact that he keeps pressuring me to go on dates with him makes our work environment very strenuous for me. I’d very much like it if you’d tell him to stop it,” she kept it professional, giving Sally direct eye contact to show her she was dead serious.

“I can mention it to him in passing, but I can’t guarantee anything, Grace. As long as it’s not sexual assault or molestation, the only thing I can do is have a few words with him on your behalf.” Sally told her seriously.

Grace clenched her jaw and inwardly sighed.

“That’s all? I’ve already spoken to him multiple times about his behavior toward me, and he hasn’t let up. What about talking to HR-,” Grace began to suggest, but Sally held up a hand, shutting her down.

“Technically, taking this to HR will do nothing. Just as I said, if it’s not sexual assault or molestation, we really can’t do anything because flirting isn’t a suspendable offense, Grace. It may be annoying to you, but it isn’t a hindrance. Are you able to come to work every day? Get your work done in a timely fashion?” Sally listed off.

“I, uh, yes, but-” Grace stammered, unable to form words.

“So, his flirting with you doesn’t interfere with your day-to-day work schedule?” Sally gave her a look as to say “Aha”.

“No, it doesn’t, but it still bothers me, Ms. Wills. Not to mention, he also leaves his door wide open and stares directly into my office every day. It’s...” Grace was at a loss for words.

This is crazy!

So, nothing could be done because he hadn’t touched her? He was hanging on to the edge of her car last night!

“Oh, last night! He left a note on my windshield offering to go have drinks at Raiders, but when I turned him down and tried to leave the parking lot, he hung on to my car

as I was backing out. It was frightening because I thought he'd never let go, and I'd end up dragging him." Grace relayed, which caused Sally to raise both brows.

"Well, that is a little concerning," Sally nodded.

Grace let out a thankful breath.

"I'll talk to him later on today and see what he says," her thankfulness didn't last long.

"Okay?" Sally smiled.

Grace's chest jumped, and she shook her head as she smiled in disbelief. Sally gave her a questionable expression.

"Grace? Do you make that expression after you decline Tim's advances?" She asked with a furrowed brow.

"What? An expression of disbelief?" She replied dryly.

"Yes, as if you can't believe he's interested. That might be why he won't take the hint. You're not being assertive and upfront enough. But as I said, I will talk to him." Sally shuffled a few files on her desk.

"I, uh, thank you, Ms. Wills." Grace suddenly stood and departed the office.

Anger filmed within her as she navigated back to her office. She couldn't believe that Sally was putting the burden of Tim's behavior on her just because of a silly facial expression! She was victim-blaming her for not being interested in Me. Sutton, and it left her truly shook. And fuck all of that BS on not going to HR. If Tim continued acting the way he was, and Sally refused to do anything about it, Grace was hightailing it to HR.

No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

She was growing sick of this.

When she finally made it back to the unit, she journeyed through the door and passed Denise, who threw her a sour look. Ignoring her as she passed, Grace had no time for Denise's silly girl antics this morning. She had only been at work since 7:30, and she was already exhausted with how the day was going.

"Okay, Sally. No problem." She heard as she stepped down the hall to her office.

Maybe... Sally did have her back after all?

Without so much as a look and Tim's direction, Grace unlocked her office door and stepped inside. She shut the door quickly, then sighed. She wasn't about to give that man any attention, energy, or a chance to peer into her office today. Suddenly the thought of moving her office seemed very pleasant. Just as she was about to walk over to her desk, knocking erupted against her door. Grace already knew who it was.

“Yes, Mr. Sutton?” She answered through her closed door.

“Uh, hey, Grace. I was wondering if I could talk to you for a second? I just got off the phone with Sally,” Tim’s voice vibrated across the door.

“Do you think we could discuss this later? I’m very swamped right now, Mr. Sutton, and I’d like to catch up on my work for the morning.” Grace relayed.

Silence echoed through the door, making Grace believe that Tim had returned to his office.

“I’d like to talk to you now if possible, Grace.” He repeated, causing Grace to inhale deeply.

She cracked her door open and peeked out. “Yes, Mr. Sutton?” She asked in boredom.

“Did you go to Sally and tell her that I wouldn’t leave you alone?” He questioned in astonishment.

“Yes, I did, Mr. Sutton, because you will not leave me alone. I’ve made it clear that I am not interested in you, yet you keep asking me out for dates, even going as far as to corner me in the parking lot just to ask me. You’re not a woman, Mr. Sutton, because if you were, you’d know that your actions and behavior comes off as creepy and stalkerish. And since it seems that you could care less how I respond to

your advances, I thought maybe Sally could get through to you.” Grace told him in a serious tone.

“St John’s doesn’t have a dating policy, Grace, so I’m not doing anything wrong.” He told her as if that justified his actions.

Just as with Sally earlier, Grace simply stared at him with stunned eyes.

“I mean, this could all be so easy for both of us, Grace, if you just accepted to go out on one date with me. I like you, and I think you’re a very beautiful woman with an equally beautiful personality. I mean no harm, honestly. Again, I just like you and would like to see you out of a work setting.” Tim explained, causing Grace to ball her lips in.

“Mr. Sutton,” Denise interrupted from up the hall, and Grace sighed an appreciation.

She had never been so happy for Denise to butt into one of their conversations as she was now. “Your father is on line one,” Denise alerted.

Tim didn’t even look at her. He just kept his attention completely on Grace. “Thank you,” he yelled back.

“So, what do you say?” He suggested.

“Have a good day, Mr. Sutton.” Grace stepped back and closed her door slowly.

So much for Sally having her damn back!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Loud chatter floated around St John's cafe area as Grace entered. She surveyed the lunch counter, noticing about three people standing in line. She ventured over to the line and took in all the selections. Baked chicken. Beef rib tips. Mixed rice. Black beans.

Everything looked delicious too.

Grabbing a plate from the rack, she slid down the line. "Hey, Grace!" Her eyes darted up, and she saw Bobby behind the counter, hair net covering his curly locs.

"Oh, hey, Bobby. How are you?" She grinned.

"I'd be better if I got out of this hot kitchen," he chuckled, making Grace shake her head in amusement.

“What are you having today?” He asked her as he prepared his tongs.

“Um, the chicken, rice, and beans.” Grace pointed to the juicy chicken before her.

“You got it, pretty lady!” Bobby relayed as he began loading her plate with food.

“Give me a sec to fix their plates,” Bobby pointed to the two women behind Grace. “And I’ll ring you up,” he winked before moving his attention to the women.

Grace slid down to the register and waited. Bobby finished up and stepped over to the register to ring her up. Grace yanked out her wallet, opening it to pull out a 20. Bobby put up a hand, making Grace furrowed her brow.

“Your lunch is on me today, Gracey.” Bobby teased as he swiped his employee card.

“Aww, Bobby, you didn’t have to. I had no problem with paying.” Grace notified.

“You’re the only person I know that would turn down a free meal, which is even more incentive for me to treat you today.” Bobby shrugged as he finished the transaction.

“Wouldn’t hurt her to miss a free meal either,” one of the women whispered beside Grace, leaving her shocked.

What was this, highschool!?

Huffing then balling in her lips, she turned toward the woman and eyed her up and down.

“And it wouldn’t hurt you to get rid of some of that ugly personality of yours; maybe then the inside would match the outside.” Grace bounced her shoulders.

The brunette’s mouth fell open as her friend chuckled lowly behind her. She threw her food tray down, causing rib tips and rice to hit the floor. Pivoting, she began walking away before stopping to look over her shoulder.

“Sandra, c’mon! I’m not about to let that fat bitch talk to me any kind of way.” She hollered for her friend, who was still laughing.

The light-haired woman composed herself before joining her friend. The two walked off, and Grace looked back at Bobby.

“What the hell was that?” She raised a brow.

“Grade A jealousy, my love.” Bobby frowned.

“Bobby, do you think I honestly care if a pair of immature adults are jealous of me? I’ve heard worse in grade school.” Grace waved him off.

“Well, it’s not every day that a woman turns down Tim Sutton’s advances. You have his entire attention, yet you don’t want him, every woman at St John’s is dying to be in your position.” Bobby relayed, leaving Grace stuck.

How on earth did he...

“News travels fast around here,” Bobby simply shrugged.

Grace facepalmed. Great! Just great! Now that the whole facility knew she had no interest in Tim, she was going to be made a target by anyone who wanted him.

“But hey, don’t let it get to you, okay? They’re just sour grapes.” Bobby reassured.

“I’ll be sure to not let those sour grapes ruin my sleep. And thank you.” Grace smiled as she held up her plate before walking off.

Grace stopped by the vending machine and bought a can of soda before eyeing the cafe. She found a seat near the exit and dug into her food. The savory chicken danced on her tongue as the rice awakened her senses.

“Mmm,” she groaned.

Now, this was good eating.

“Hey, Ms. G!” She heard her name and peeked over her shoulder to see Thad walking up.

“Hey, sweetie. What are you up to?” She asked as she parted the chair next to her.

“Just finished therapy with Ms. Hightower. Whatchu been doing?” He repeated her question back to her.

“Um, working, like always. Are you hungry?” Grace joked before giving him a serious look.

“I can eat!” He plopped down.

Grace laughed as she pulled her wallet out and handed him a ten-dollar bill. Thad happily accepted before jumping out of the chair and racing over to the pre-packaged lunch section. Grace observed as he grabbed a turkey and cheddar Lunchable and jumbo honey bun. He went over to the register, and Bobby began ringing him up. Thad tried to hand the man the bill, but Bobby shook his head with a friend. Thad didn't have to be told twice.

He pocketed the money, grabbed his Lunchable and honey bun, and ventured back over to Grace.

“Mr. B said you straight.” Thad alerted as he sat down.

He began to tear open his Lunchable when he suddenly paused.

“Aye, Ms. G...Mr. Bobby wasn’t the one who took you out, was he?” Thad raised a brow.

“No, Honey. It was a detective from Atlanta PD.” Grace exposed, making Thad put a dramatic hand over his chest.

“You roll with the ops, Ms. G!?! Dang! And to think, I thought I knew you.” Thad gave her a disappointed look.

“Oh boy, hush.” Grace cackled.

Silence engulfed their table for a few seconds before Thad spoke up again.

“Was he...nice to you when he took you out?” He asked with a genuine interest in his voice.

“He was a complete gentleman. He treated me exactly as a woman is supposed to be treated.” Grace shook her head.

“Good, cause I don’t want to have to DDT nobody over you, Ms. G.” Thad began stacking his crackers with ham and cheese.

Grace closed her eyes and huffed.

Thad was an absolute riot, and she loved that about him. She could be having a horrible day, and as soon as she spoke to Thad, all her problems seemed to clear right on up.

He was truly her sweetheart...

She and Thad ate lunch together, the young boy telling her about his session with Lynn and how inpatient treatment was going. Grace had yet to see the behavior that Miss Martin mentioned during their meeting weeks ago. She wishes she would have mentioned it then, and she should have, that stigmatizing young black kids for behavior, something that was natural, was detrimental to their development. When Grace was employed at her local elementary school, she couldn't even count on both hands how many times she had seen little white kids go off and throw tantrums.

But almost always, they have not disciplined in the same manner that their black counterparts were. It upset Grace tremendously, and was the number one reason why she was a social worker now. Black children needed black social workers, and she didn't care who thought she was biased for thinking such. Once lunch was over, Grace escorted Thad back to the youth inpatient unit before hugging him and telling him he could keep the 10 dollars she had given him to buy lunch with.

"I had thought you forgot, Ms. G." Thad shook his head as he poked his lips out.

"Well, I didn't. Now you go inside and be a good boy. I might think about letting you ride with me to the company picnic." Grace bent down and rubbed his head.

St. John's was having its annual company picnic this weekend. All staff and children that showed good behavior

were invited, which is why Grace needed Thad to be on his Ps and Qs if he wanted to go with her.

“For real!?!” He yelled in excitement.

“Yep, but you have to be on your best behavior and listen to everything the nurses say, okay?” Grace straightened up.

“Aight, bet. You got it, Ms. G!” Thad promised as he turned and pulled open the unit door.

He ran inside, not before throwing Grace a wave and smile.

Grace peered around the night sky as she stood outside, waiting for Richard to arrive. Her Saturn had broken down this morning when she tried to crank it up for work, so Richard had given her a ride to work. He had also promised to come to pick her up. A lit breeze blew, causing Grace to close her eyes. She wasn't exhausted tonight, unlike usual.

Today has been...good?

It was crazy for her to even say that with everything that had happened with him and his advances, but it seems like ever since she turned him down the last time, he had not been bothering her as he did during her first weeks here. All in all, things had calmed down around here, and Grace was very thankful. A maroon Ford SUV turned into the parking lot, and

she smiled. The vehicle pulled in front of her, and she gazed at Richard through the windshield.

“Your chariot, my lady.” He stuck his head out the driver’s side window.

“I am quite flattered, my Lord.” She giggled out as she rounded the front of the car, coming to the passenger side.

Yanking the door open, she slid inside and leaned forward. Her lips met Richard’s, and sparks flew. She bit her lip as she pulled back.

“Oh, no, no. I take you to work and pick you up, and all I get is one kiss? You’re going to have to lay another on me,” Richard smirked, causing Grace to roll her eyes in amusement.

She tilted her head forward as Richey dipped his head. Their lips connected, and Richard snuck his tongue into her warm mouth. A moan fell from her mouth as his wet appendage worked her lips wider. Richard wrapped his arms around her tightly, making her break away and laugh.

“Richard, we’re in the parking lot,” she eyed the empty parking area with a goofy grin.

“And? Come back over here. I’ve missed you.” Richard reached for her, pulling her upper body across the center console.

Their mouths reconnected sensually, and grace found herself running her hands through his thick hair. They released each other and pulled back, gazing into each other's eyes.

“How was your day?” Richey inquired thoughtfully.

“It's been g-,” she began, her eyes catching movement by the exit of St. John's.

She halted as she observed Tim, Susan, and Denise step out, chatting to their heart's content. Susan caught her line of vision and waved, making Grace huff. Richard peeked at her from the side of his eye yet said nothing.

“Hey, Grace!” The redhead waved frantically.

Grace lifted a timid hand and returned the gesture. She noticed Tim staring at her hard, and she swallowed back her nerves. Lord, please do not let this crazy white man act a fool while Richard was here. In knowing him for a month and a half, Grace had come to find out that Richard wasn't one for trash talking. About a week ago, Richard had to take her to a little French restaurant that had a line down the block. The spot had just opened, and the reviews for the food were superb, which explained the heavy traffic. Once they finally did get in, a man accidentally bumped into them as they were being escorted to their table, and instead of apologizing to them as he should have, he went off on Richard for being in 'his' way.

When the guy didn't get the response he was looking for, he lunged at Richard, hoping to scare him. Let's just say

Grace would never forget how fast Richard had put the guy in a chokehold.

So, she knew he wouldn't hesitate with Tim.

Her supervisor threw up a hand and smiled, leaving her pleasantly shocked.

Maybe Sally had spoken with him after all...

A relieved sigh passed her lips.

"You ready to go, gorgeous?" Richard spoke up, making her nod rapidly.

He reversed out of his parking spot then drove out of the lot. Silence filled the SUV as Richard maneuvered down the dark streets. He peeked at Grace and saw her fiddling with something on her phone. He had noticed something was off about Tim Sutton. The guy acted like an overprotective boyfriend than a boss, and Richard could see it bothered Grace.

But...she wouldn't tell him the full extent of what was going.

Whenever he'd ask, Grace would brush him or change the subject, and that upset him a little. He was serious about Grace. If he wasn't, he wouldn't do the things he did. He saw a future with her. He wasn't going to get all sappy and say something like she was everything he wanted in a woman, but she was damn sure close. Grace lit up his world whenever he

saw her. She always wore a smile, and that was the most beautiful thing about her.

She had a genuine kindness about her that made people want to be close to her. Richard didn't want to rush, but he saw her as being his wife one day. They were still fresh, but he wanted to share her problems with her. He spent a whole 30 minutes ranting about his fellow department heads to her last night on the phone, but when he asked if anything had been going on at St. John's, the line went silent. Richard wanted to know what the hell Sutton's problem was because he could see it was weighing Grace down. He drummed his fingers against his steering wheel as he balled his lips in.

"Grace," he called toward her without taking his eyes off the road.

"Hmm?" She hummed as she played Lily's Garden on her phone.

"What's up with Sutton?" Her finger hovered over the set of roses she was about to plant at Richard's question.

A beat passed without her uttering a word.

"Do I need to pull over so we can talk about this?" Her eyes snapped to him at his suggestion.

Inching up in her seat, Grace leaned her head to the side as she shook her head.

“No, Richard, you don’t have to pull over.” Grace crossed her arms.

“Well, I’m all ears.” He relayed as he kept his focus planted on the road before him.

Grace inhaled deeply as she composed herself. She knew he would get curious one of these days and wanted to know the down-low on Tim, but she didn’t think it’d be this soon. She wasn’t prepared to talk about it openly because it made her feel weird. There had been many nights she laid awake questioning if she were wrong for handling the situation the way she was.

What if Tim honestly meant no harm?

What if he was genuinely interested in her?

But...that look in his eye the night he cornered her in the parking lot.

Void of all emotion.

Just..empty.

That scared her.

“It’s honestly nothing to worry about now, Richard. The director handled everything apparently, and he’s stopped bothering me.” Grace relayed as she touched his forearm.

“Rewind, why was he ever bothering you in the first place?” Richard countered.

“I,” she couldn’t even get the words out.

What was she going to say?

‘Yea, my boss won’t leave me alone because I keep turning down his advances. And don’t worry, his Superior thought I should be flattered, then the victim blamed me for not being interested. Ya know, the usual!’.

“I... Because I wouldn’t go out with him,” Grace revealed.

This time Richard finally looked at her with concerned eyes.

“How long has this been going on, Grace?” Richard furrowed a brow.

“Since I, uh, was hired. I thought he was just being kind at first, but once he wouldn’t back off after the first time I told him no, I realized it was more than that.” She explained with a pained expression.

“Have you gone to HR to get this guy to leave you alone?” Richard peeked at her.

“I...I went to the director and spoke to her about it, as I said before, and I guess they spoke because he hasn't messed with me in days.” Grace conveyed.

“Grace, that's only a temporary solution to a permanent problem. He needs to be moved from your unit or vice versa. The fact that you guys see each other every day is only going to encourage him to continue to ask you out. You need separation.” Richard offered as he peered at her from the side of his eye.

“Richard, he's my supervisor, he can't move from the unit, and neither can I. Everything is better now, so don't worry yourself over it.” Grace told him with pleading eyes.

“It's not, babe, which is why I won't stop worrying about you. Don't get mad when I say this because I know you love working at St John's, but have you started looking into other jobs?” Rich questioned genuinely.

Grace sighed silently at the inquiry.

She had...

But she did love St John's, especially the kids there.

“I have,” she finally answered sadly.

“It's probably the only way you're going to get peace,” Richard frowned at her.

Grace bit her lip as she rubbed her hands down her tan slacks.

He was right...

If Sutton started acting up again, her best bet was to leave.

Richard drove her to a small burger joint, where they are and chatted about anything but work. Grace was tired of discussing Tim. She wanted to enjoy her weekend with Richard and just be content. After they left the burger spot, Richard drove Grace home. Pulling into her driveway, he shut the engine and turned to her.

“Here you are, my lady. Your humble abode.” He relayed, causing Grace to laugh.

“Why, thank you, my good sir.” She replied as she reached for his muscular arm, rubbing it lightly.

Quietness filled the car as they gazed at each other. “Would you like to spend the night?” Grace offered lowly.

Richard had been inside her place tons of times but tonight was different.

“You go unlock the door, and I’ll get my bag,” he told her as he dipped his head and placed a warm kiss on her temple.

“Okay,” Grace whispered as she pulled back.

She opened the door and slid out, closing it softly behind herself. Trailing up her walkway to her stairs, she yanked out her keys and opened the door. She left it slightly cracked for Richard then made her way to her bedroom. Flicking her bedroom light on, she walked inside and sat her purse and work bag on the pink and white duvet laid over her bed. The sound of the front door closing caused a gentle smile to light her face. She bit her lip and stepped over to her dresser, pulling it open and retrieving a silk nightshirt and a pair of sexy black panties.

Tonight was the night.

She and Richard had been taking their time and getting to know each, but Grace wanted...more? She knew in the beginning that she just wanted a friend but being with Richard had quickly changed her mind. She liked him. He was kind, caring, and sexy as hell. She wanted to take this next step with him. She just hoped his opinion of her didn't change. Richard entered the room and journeyed to the bed, sitting his items down next to hers.

“You're about to shower?” He asked as he unzipped his black leather overnight bag.

“Mmhm,” she hummed.

Smirking, Richard forgot all about his bag and inched over to Grace. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he buried his face in her neck.

“May I join you?” He inquired before suckling on the tender skin in her neck.

“I mean, I don’t mind.” She bit her lip once more when he kissed her spot.

“Then let’s go,” he murmured in her ear.

“But, your bag?” Grace whirled around in his arms.

“Who said I was showering? I asked if I could join you, not take a shower.” Richard ran his thumb over her bottom lip.

“Mmm, well then,” Grace made a funny face, making Richard chuckle.

Grace stepped out of his hold and made her way to her bathroom. Just before she walked completely in, she gave him a seductive glance that sent Richard’s blood boiling.

Oh, she was asking for it...

Richard followed the trail she had made to the bathroom and observed as she cut the showerhead on then began undressing. He leaned against the door frame as he watched her strip, his jeans growing tighter by the minute. As soon as she was fully nude, grace peeked over her shoulder and smiled.

“Are you teasing me, Ms. Mitchell?” He asked with an aroused edge.

“Oh, I see you’re getting my hints well and good,” Grace stepped toward the shower and made a show of getting inside without closing the sliding door.

Richard clenched his jaw as the warm water cascaded down her soft flesh. Pushing off the door frame, he ventured over to the open shower and rid himself of every piece of clothing he was wearing. Grace almost lost her breath when she took in his right pack and sculpted V. This man was made of nothing but pure muscle, and it turned Grace on to no end. Richard slipped into the shower, making room right behind her, then closed the sliding door. Grace struggled to compose herself when she felt his manhood bouncing against her ass. Jesus Lord, she was going to turn to goo before she could even get any.

Her breath left her when he leaned forward and began kissing her wet shoulder.

“You’re so fucking sexy, you know that?” He mumbled in her ear as his hands went in front of her, cupping her 38 DD’s as if there were cantaloupes ripe for picking.

A moan fell from her lips as he played with her perky dark nipples, her stomach trembling with anticipation. Slowly, he turned her around and captured her lips in a searing kiss. He released her swollen lips and stared deeply into her eyes.

“At any time, you can stop this, Grace. Tonight is all about you, gorgeous.” Richard reassured tenderly.

“I don’t want you to stop,” she whispered lustfully as her hands roamed his chest.

Richard smirked before leaning down and kissing her hungrily.

That’s all he needed to hear.

CHAPTER NINE

“Look, Ms. G! They got a bounce house!” Thad yelled from the back of Richard’s SUV as they pulled up to the company picnic.

“And a slip n’ slide,” Grace pointed as Richard shut the engine.

“I see water guns, too.” Richard peeked in the back with a smile.

The park was filled with people, activities, and food trucks.

“What!? Why we still in the car then?! I want to go play, Ms. G.” Thad told the pair with his eyes planted on the window.

Richard shook his head at the young man’s antics before putting his attention on his woman.

His woman...he liked the sound of that.

“Ready to have some fun?” He beamed at her.

“Definitely.” Grace reached out to run the stubble on his chin.

“Aye, aye, I don’t want to see all dat,” Thad huffed from the backseat, causing Richard and Grace to burst into a fit of laughter.

“Okay, Thad. My bad, my bad!” Richard lifted his hands in defense.

“How about we hurry up and get out before Thad has our heads,” Grace spoke up over her giggles.

“Exactly, Ms. G. Respect my authority.” The boy told her, and Grace mentally facepalmed.

“Let’s go, Chile.” Grace shook her head as she reached for the door handle.

The trio got out at the same time and walked through the entrance of the park. They journeyed over the sign-in booth, and Grace flashed a badge, earning them three entrance wristbands.

“Can I go play now, Ms. G?” Thad peered up at her with big brown eyes.

“Give me a second to find us a spot, and I’ll come with,” she started to say, but Richard cut her off.

“You go find us a spot, baby, and I’ll go play with Thad.” He relayed, bending down to kiss her cheek.

“What I say!?” Thad tilted his head, giving Richard a, ‘man stop playing with me’ expression.

“I thought we agreed that we were sharing until you turned 17 and got your own girl?” Richard raised a brow.

When they were introduced this morning, it was safe to say that Thad made quite an impression on him. The young boy was smart, funny, and Richard could see that his love for Grace was genuine.

“I mean, we did, but I knew her first, so I have... What’s it called when you over someone, Ms. G?” Thad stroked his chin as he tried to think of the word.

“Seniority?” Grace raised a brow.

“Yea! I got that over you, so technically, she was mine first.” Thad shrugged.

Richard threw Thad a wacky grin and shook his head. Poor kid, he knew nothing of how men and women worked.

“Seems like I have a lot of explaining to do, huh, kid?” Richard placed a hand on his head and guided him forward.

Grace watched them walk off to the kids playing with the water guns. Richard helped Thad load one of the toys

before giving him a short lesson on aiming. Once she saw that Richard could handle Thad on his own, she went about finding them a nice spot in the shade. She found one near the gate fencing in the park, right under a huge tree. Grace opened her bag and pulled out a cotton blanket, laying it on the ground. Sitting on top, she smiled with contentment as she watched the children play and adults stuff their faces with food.

“Hey, Grace!” She turned and saw Susan and Lynn standing near one of the many drink tables.

Hopping up, Grace made her way toward them. “Hey!” She greeted.

Lynn hugged her, then Susan switched places.

“I’m so glad you could make it. This is honestly the only fun part about the job,” the redhead laughed out.

“Yea, I just wanted to bring Thad out to enjoy himself, ya know? Give him a chance to get back to being a kid after everything he went through. He’s over there with Richard playing with the water guns.” Grace pointed to her boys.

“Mmm, speaking of Richard, who’s he? You never told me you were keeping your stash of white chocolate hidden away.” Lynn gave her a sassy look.

Grace rolled her eyes, but a coy smile covered her lips. “That’s Richard Dixon, the detective working on Thad’s case.” She explained.

“Ohh, I see you, Grace. Gotta Lil inter-work relationship going on.” Lynn stuck out her tongue.

“I see why she’s dressed so cutely,” Susan gave Grace a wink as she checked out her denim short jumpsuit and tan sandals.

She also had on a light tan fedora. Her makeup was done naturally, and she chose to keep her twists in a ponytail.

“Oh, guys, stop it!” Grace waved them off with a cackle.

“Hey, Grace!” Susan called as if she had the biggest secret to tell.

“You want a drink?” The redhead gave her a sly look.

“Um, sure. Coke will be fine.” Grace nodded.

“Not that type of drink, Luv, we’re talking grown-up juice.” Lynn shook her red solo cup.

“Oh! Oh,” Grace finally caught on, “Yes...please!” She relayed, making the ladies giggle.

“We’re technically not supposed to have alcohol at these things, but Stevens from accounting is selling beers out of the trunk of his car, so what the hell,” Susan said with a sour look as she pulled a small black bag from under the table and opened it up.

It was filled with mini bottles of vodka, Gin, Cognac, you name it.

“Which one do you want?” Susan asked as she held the bag open.

“One of the vodkas, Sue.” Grace pointed to a bottle of Amsterdam.

“Get it!” Susan pushed the bag closer. Grace peeked around the park before quickly dipping her hand into the bag and pulling out a bottle.

“Here, here!” Lynn nudged a cup toward her.

Grace hurriedly took it and uncapped the vodka, pouring it into the cup.

“You need a mixer?” Susan questioned as she popped the top on the cooler.

“A coke,” Grace nodded.

Susan snatched out a cold Coke and handed it to Grace. She snapped the can open and dumped the soda in her cup. Just as she was about to raise the cup to her lips and take a sip, Lynn stopped her.

“I know you are not about to drink on us without toasting first?” The taller woman threw her a look.

“Oop,” Grace teased, causing the pixie-haired woman to giggle.

“What are we toasting to?” She asked with a raised brow.

“Promotions, good dick, and a week of well-rested sleep?” Susan offered.

“I like it,” Lynn shook her head in appreciation.

The women lifted their glasses and toasted.

“So how long have you been seeing tall, dark, and muscular, Grace?” Susan turned toward.

“About two months and a half, almost three.” She confessed as she peered over her shoulder, watching as Thad chased Richard around with the water gun.

“Thad seems to like him,” Susan observed the two as well.

“I’m still trying to figure out if that’s a good or bad thing, knowing Thad,” Grace told the girls, making them break into laughter.

“Considering that man is a whole detective yet Thad is still out there playing with him, you’ve got your answer, girl.” Lynn pursed her lips.

“They hit it off good this morning-,” she spoke only to be cut off by a very familiar voice.

“Grace! Hi!” Tim walked up to them with a can of Sprite in his hand.

Jesus, not today, please...

“Oh, hello, Mr. Sutton.” She greeted tensely.

“Hey, how are ya?” He beamed as he came to stand beside her.

“I’ve been well,” she relayed with a tight smile.

“That’s good to hear. I was hoping if I could talk to you for a second,” Tim put a hand in his pocket.

“I don’t see what for, Mr. Sutton.” Grace asserted, earning wide-eyed looks from her co-workers.

“It’s, uh, about...” Tim faded off as he finally noticed Lynn and Susan.

“Well, hello, ladies. You two don’t mind if I steal Grace for a second or two, do you?” He grinned at the women.

“We surely don’t, but the hulkster might.” Lynn jerked her head to the side, making Grace turn and look. She saw Richard and Thad making their way toward them.

Oh no...

“Oh...you brought him.” The grin that Tim had been sporting morphed into a deep frown.

“Yes, I bought my boyfriend. I hope that isn’t a problem, sir.” Grace peered right at him with a blank look.

Tim swallowed hard, then clenched his jaw as he gazed down at her.

“No, not at all.” He nodded slowly.

“I... Listen, Grace. I have to speak with you privately.” His brow dipped with frustration.

“Talk to her about what?” Richard questioned as he approached.

“Good afternoon, officer. I didn’t know you’d be accompanying Grace and Thad to our company picnic today.” Tim stuck out a hand which Richard refused to take.

Lynn and Susan shared a look but kept silent.

“Yes, my girlfriend invited me. And it’s Detective Dixon, Thomas? Trent?” Richard fiend ignorance.

“Tim, Tim Sutton.” Tim’s face was hard, his eyes cutting daggers through Richard.

“Ahh, that’s right,” Richard smirked.

“Can we go get some ribs, Ms. G? I’m a hungry man!” Thad said from his spot beside Richard.

“Can you?” Grace gave Richard a look, and he immediately knew what that meant.

“Sure, you want anything, gorgeous?” He questioned, not missing how Tim’s fists balled.

“A rib sandwich?” Richard shook his head at her request before stepping over to her as if Tim were invisible and kissing her forehead.

“You got it,” he backed away, his eyes never leaving Grace.

“C’mon, bud.” He called to Thad, who quickly rushed toward him and grabbed his hand.

“I think I’m going to head over to the trucks and see what they have.” Lynn excused herself.

“Me too. I’ll talk to you a little later, Grace.” Susan followed after Lynn.

“What do you need to talk to me about, Mr. Sutton?” She turned toward him with anger clear on her face.

“You bought him here, Grace? I can’t believe you,” her face went blank at his words.

“Mr. Sutton, if that’s all, I’m going to join my boys.” She went to turn, but Tim caught her wrist.

“Grace, we’re never going to get anywhere if you don’t give me a chance...Us a chance,” Tim uttered lowly, causing Grace’s skin to crawl.

“Let go of me, Mr. Sutton. Now!” She demanded as rage consumed her.

How dare he!

How dare he question her on who she bought with her to the picnic and then have the audacity to put his hands on her! Grace was livid when he didn’t release.

“I swear to God, Tim, if you don’t let me go I’ll scream so loud!” Grace fumed.

“Calm down. There’s no need to act stupid. In all honesty, I came to apologize but seeing you with that roid

junkie does something to me,” Grace couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

Was this man serious right now!?

Tim wasn’t sane...At all.

“Get off of me!” Grace hollered, catching a few people’s attention.

Grace saw Lynn and Susan gazing over at them in astonishment and her face heated up. Tim’s hold disappeared quickly, and she took off in the direction of Thad and Richard. Richey’s angry honey-colored eyes were already planted on her as he watched her walk up. He had seen the whole thing and was about to go give Sutton a piece of his mind.

“I’m going to fucking murder him!” He relayed as Grace came to stand in front of him.

“No, no, Richard. It’s fine, it’s fine!” Grace tried to reason.

“Fine?! Look at you, you’re fucking shaking, Grace!” Richard gripped her trembling shoulders.

“I’m going to go beat his ass,” Richard grumbled after a few minutes when he saw the dear in her brown orbs.

“Richard, no... Thad is with us.” Grace reminded him. Richard’s eyes trailed to Thad, who was watching them

adamantly.

Taking a deep breath, Richard ran a hand down his face.

“I don’t want to be here with that bastard lurking around; c’mon I’ll take you guys somewhere much better than this.” Richard pulled out his car keys.

“Where are you gon’ take us, Mr. Rich?” Thad inquired.

“Mmm, I don’t know. Are you too big for, say, Chuck E Cheese?” Thad’s eyes lit up at the remark.

“Man, I’m 9! Let’s go!” Grace’s worry melted away at the interaction of the two.

“We have to check with Ms. G first, bud.” Richard smiled down at Thad.

“Please, Ms. G, please!” Thad begged like a puppy.

“Okay, we can go to Chuck E Cheese, but go easy on him, Thad. I like him,” Grace joked, causing Richard to throw an arm around her shoulders.

“I like you too, gorgeous.” He kissed her cheek.

“Y’all gon’ keep getting mushy, or are we finna go?”
Thad gave them a stank face.

“C’mon, let’s go, kid.” Richard placed a hand on his head and guided him forward as he held Grace by her shoulder.

CHAPTER TEN

Grace was having an awful day. She had woke up late thanks to her and Richard’s exploits the night before. Her car failed to start this morning, so Richey dropped her off at work, and it seemed as soon as she hit the doors of St John’s, all eyes, ears, and mouths were on her. People whispered as she made her way to her unit, and it left her feeling weird.

What the hell was going on?

It wasn’t until she took a quick bathroom break that she finally caught on to what was happening. She was peeing when two co-workers walked in, chatting freely. They stopped when they noticed her black slip-on under the stall.

“I heard that she slept with Tim, Bob, and the cop, and she’s hanging Tim out to dry like mold-covered clothes.” One of the girls said with a cackle.

“Honestly, I don’t see what any of them see in her. She’s fat and probably bald under all that weave,” the second woman roared with laughter.

Grace clenched her jaw then balled her lips in. Again, Grace was used to being called names due to her weight throughout her formative years, but this was different.

This was vile.

Who would say or think something about her like that? Grace sat in the bathroom for a good 20 minutes, composing herself. She didn’t cry, just thought about how one could work at a mental health facility and still think body shaming and bullying someone was okay.

It was just odd...

After she left the bathroom, Grace tried not to let it put her in a bad headspace. When she had returned to her office, she noticed Mr. Sutton’s door closed, which was the only upside to her day. She had been in her office ever since she came back from the restroom and had no intention of leaving until her day was over. What first started out so good was now turning sour, and she didn’t know why. It seemed like the stress she was going through was never going to let up. This is exactly how she felt when her mother passed.

Her cellphone vibrated on her desk, and she saw Richard's name flash across the caller ID. She hesitated to answer, knowing she wasn't in the mood.

But...she couldn't take that out on Richard.

"Hello," she answered unenthusiastically.

"Hey, what's wrong? You sound down," Richard noted the sadness in her voice.

"That's because I kinda am." Grace shrugged, even though she knew he couldn't see her.

"Baby, what's wrong? Is it Sutton? I swear I'm going to beat that guy's ass." Richard, he ranted madly.

"No, it wasn't Tim. I haven't seen him all day, fortunately. It's...it was something silly, Richard. I'm fine." Grace uttered.

The line was quiet for a while to the point grace had to pull her phone down to check if he was still on the line.

"Richard?" She called in worry.

"I hate that 'I'm fine' bs, Grace, especially when we BOTH know you're not. What's going on, babe? Be open with me." Richard's voice held vulnerability.

Grace swallowed back her confession, hurt, and hesitation. “I was in the bathroom earlier, and I heard these two women talking about me in the lady’s room. They were from a different unit because I didn’t recognize their voices, but,” she trailed off.

“But what, Grace? Did they try to do something to you?” Richard was getting angrier by the second.

“No, nothing like that. They knew I was in the restroom, and they were talking about me. Calling me fat, eluding that I slept around the facility. Just... petty highschool mean girl antics. I don’t even know why I’m letting it affect me.” Grace wiped away the tears that were building in her eyes.

” Do you want me to come to pick you up? I think it’s best if you took the rest of the day off. I don’t want you at work upset.” Richard relayed with concern.

“No, I’m-,” Grace started to rebut, but Richard silenced her.

“If you say you’re fine, I’m going to lose it, Grace! Clock out, I’m on my way.” The line went dead, and Grace sighed.

Tucking her phone into her purse, she closed her eyes as a headache started to form. Maybe it was best if she took the rest of the day off. Grace gathered all her files and stuffed them in her work bag before logging out of the St. John’s work application. She made sure everything was packed and ready

to go as she waited for Richard. A game of solitaire called to her as she waited, so she pulled the game up on her computer. A knock sounded at her door, and she froze.

“Grace? You here?” The sound of Lynn’s voice echoed through the door.

A sigh of relief left Grace. Thank God it wasn’t Tim. She stood and rounded her desk, stepping over to her locked office door. Undoing the locks, Grace pulled the door open, letting Lynn in.

“Hey?” Lynn furrowed a brow as she watched Grace close and relock her door hurriedly.

“Grace, what’s wrong?” She raised a worried brow.

“It’s a long story,” Grace sighed as she rubbed her forehead.

“If it has anything to do with what happened at the picnic and these rumors floating around, I’ve got time to hear it.” Lynn went and sat down in one of the chairs seated across from Grace’s desk.

“So, you’ve heard them too?” Grace felt her heart sink into her stomach. She just hoped that Lynn didn’t believe that garbage.

“Yes, I have. I want you to know I don’t believe a thing. I just came to warn you.” Lynn peered at her seriously.

Grace's brows jerked.

"First comes the rumors, then he gets nasty," her voice dropped.

Grace's eyes went wide.

What...

"I can't say much, considering he's across the hall and probably has everything turned off just to hear what we're saying, but we'll talk later." Lynn stepped back over to the door.

"Okay," Grace shook her head rapidly.

Just as Lynn was getting ready to unlock the door, a knocking sound. Grace gave her a nod, knowing it was Richard. Lynn undid the locks and yanked the door open. Richard stood there with his phone to his ear. His hand fell from his ear after the door was opened, and he strolled in.

"You ready?" He questioned with a raised brow.

"Yes," Grace replied lowly.

As if like magic, Tim's door flew open, and Grace suppressed a groan. Richard ignored him and stepped over to Grace's desk and gathered all her belongings. Once he had

everything, he entangled their hands and marched out of the office.

“Please, lock my office, Lynn. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Grace hollered over her shoulder.

Lynn nodded, doing just that. She went to turn, and she and Tim’s eyes locked. He pinned her with a dirty look but said nothing. Lynn scowled at him before walking off.

A few days later, hesitation weighed Grace down as she stood before the closed door of human resources. After picking her up from work yesterday, Richard begged her to go to HR. And she finally followed through. She raised her fist and knocked. Rustling was heard before the door opened after a few minutes. A slim honey blonde-haired woman answered the door with a smile.

“Hello, Grace?” The woman raised a brow.

“Yes, I’m she.” Grace nodded.

“Come in, come in. I’m Tiffany Willard. Nice to meet you.” Mrs. Willard waved her in.

Grace entered the expensively decorated office and found a seat next to the desk.

“Okay,” Tiffany sighed as she made her way to her seat.

“What may I help you with today? You sounded very frazzled over the phone.” Tiffany gave a concerned expression.

“Because I am, Mrs. Willard. Um, I’m not exactly sure where to begin, but I guess at the beginning would suffice.” Grace relayed then began her story.

Mrs. Willard listened intently with a furrowed brow. “I wholeheartedly understand your concerns, Grace, but at the same time, our hands are completely tied. Because he likes you doesn’t exactly translate to harassment. If he had, say, put his hands on you or was following you outside of work, then we’d be able to reprimand him.” Tiffany explained, leaving Grace blinking like a fish.

“I-I... He did put his hands on me! At the picnic over the weekend. Hell, everyone saw it too. Like, I don’t understand this.” Grace shook her head as tears stung her eyes.

“If you can have someone come in and vouch for you, then I could take a look into Sutton, but with no proof, I can’t do anything, Grace,” Tiffany told her with sympathy on her face.

“So, you don’t believe me? I have to save or document every instance he makes contact with me? I,” Grace’s tears finally fell, “Do you understand how scared I am sometimes when he comes at me? Every day I come to work, I feel like I’m walking on eggshells. I can’t do this anymore. It’s so stressful being frightened all the time.” Grace confessed.

She was truly tired of all this!

All she wanted to do was come to work, enjoy her day, and go home. But Tim was making that so hard. It had been so nerve-wracking that Grace had started looking for work elsewhere, permanently. Plus, she wasn't stupid. She knew that she couldn't let others know she'd be leaving soon because sabotage was a thing. But while she was still here, she wanted to make sure Tim didn't continue to mess with her.

"I understand that, Grace. Trust me, I do, but I can't do anything without proof." Tiffany repeated, and Grace just sat there, shaking her head.

Tears fell down her face, and she quickly wiped them away.

"You want proof? Okay, I'll give you every ounce of proof I can find." Grace stood abruptly as she spoke.

She pivoted around without a goodbye and made her way over to the door. She yanked it open and walked out. Anger burned her gut as she ventured down the hall. If Mrs. Willard was so hard up for Grace to prove Tim was harassing her, then she'd give her whatever she wanted. When she made her way back to her unit, bypassing Denise, who was eyeing her with an unreadable expression. Grace ignored her and marched toward her office. She undid the lock and pushed the door completely open.

Stepping in, Grace walked to her desk without closing the door. She took a seat, feeling Tim's eyes burning into her. Grace cut on the camera on her computer before pulling up her work.

If HR and Sally wanted to play, then she'd play.

Grace ignored him and began to work, her fingers hitting the keys of her board as she typed. Heels clicking down the hall drew her attention. She peered up and saw Lynn approaching.

“Hey,” Grace said slowly, her eyes darting between Tim and Lynn.

“Hey, was just coming to ask if you were free for lunch?” Lynn raised a brow.

“Sure, yea!” Grace replied quickly.

“Somewhere off-site?” Lynn gave her a look, and Grace instantly understood.

“Yes, that's fine. Meet you at 11:45 in the parking lot?” Lynn nodded at the suggestion before pivoting and walking off.

Grace didn't miss the glare Tim shot her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“What happened to Angie, Lynn?” Grace asked as she and Lynn sat within a booth at the local McDonald’s.

Grace wanted the whole story now. Lynn fiddled with a fry as she peered at Grace.

“Everything I know about Angie comes from the first few months I was hired. I wasn’t even at St John’s a whole six months before she was ‘fired’.” Lynn exposed, making Grace furrow a brow.

“You started working at St John’s this year?” She questioned in confusion.

“Yep! I was there about four months before she left. Ang was great. Loved the kids, always bought treats in for them. She was very involved in what I saw during my first months. But it seemed like everything changed once...” Lynn faded off, making Grace cross her arms.

“Once what?” She gauged.

“Once Tim took a liking toward her,” Lynn replied with a sigh.

Grace just stared at her, stunned.

“You mean, this isn’t his first time harassing an employee?” Grace tilted her head to the side.

“Honestly, Grace, I doubt you and Angie are the first and last of his victims. Tim has been at St John’s for 15 years. After Ang left, I started hearing things through the grapevine about him and knew there had to be some truth to them because of how he treated Angie.” Lynn conveyed, picking up her Orange Fanta and taking a sip.

“What did he do to her?” Grace furrowed a brow.

“I can only tell you what she told me, seeing as how I didn’t see anything, but I did hear a lot. Angie told me he wouldn’t stop asking her out, even though he knew she had a boyfriend that she’d been with before she started there. She kept turning him down to the point Tim would pop up on her while she was at the gym, out to eat with friends, basically stalking her. I guessed when he noticed that despite his antics, she wouldn’t give in, he went in for the low blow. Had everybody in the office talking about her via Denise. That bitch is his lapdog and will do anything to please him, all the while Sutton wouldn’t even pee on her if she were on fire.” Lynn scowled then rolled her eyes.

Grace processed what Lynn just said.

So, it was Denise...that had spread those nasty rumors about her.

Blood boiled in her ears at the thought. If this was 10 years earlier and Grace was still a fighter, she'd knock Denise clear out. But she wasn't going to do that.

Or...should she?

It was a guaranteed termination, and she wouldn't have to see Tim or Denise ever again. Yet if she did put her hands on that scrawny broomstick, it was a good chance she wouldn't be hired anywhere else as a social worker.

“Did Angie ever go to HR?” Grace inquired with concern.

“Multiple times, but according to them, there was nothing they could do unless she had definite proof that he was harassing her. It bothered her to the point she packed up all her things and never returned to work. I remember when I found out she was ‘fired’ and called to check in on her, she told me she was packing to move to Minnesota with her parents. Tim drove that woman out of town because she didn't want to date him. When I...” Lynn trailed off, letting her eyes bounce over Grace's face.

Although they hadn't known each other very long, Grace was one of the other three black women working at St John's, herself included. She wasn't her sister's keeper, but she

owed it to Grace to be upfront and keep it real. Especially after she witnessed at the company picnic.

“When I saw the way he acted with you at the picnic, it just...reminded of one day when Ang called me on her break to vent. She told me Tim wouldn't let her close her office door during a phone conference with a parent, which I thought was strange considering that Angie was doing the conference and not Tim. He wanted to watch her under the guise of monitoring her phone meeting. And when she did try to get up and close her door, Tim got up and opened it right back without an explanation. Seeing him act that way with you just validated everything Angie ever told me about him.” Lynn expressed.

“I just want you to be safe, Grace. And as a black woman to another, I couldn't just walk around St John's hearing all this crazy stuff about you and not come and tell you.” Grace nodded as Lynn finished.

“Thank you, Lynn, honestly. I've been wondering, no! Dying to know what happened to this woman because everyone made it seem like she was the problem when it was Tim and the higher-ups. I can't believe that Sally and HR let this happen once before and now is letting it happen again. Aren't they scared of someone going to the board on them?” Grace furrowed a deep brow.

“At this point, I think that's what needs to be done since HR and the director seems to not care. Like I said earlier, Tim has seniority at St John's, so everyone was his ass like he's a king. If the board got wind of how these harassment claims are being handled, I'm sure they'd look into them and do something about it.” Lynn gave her a hopeful look.

“That’s,” Grace sighed.

“If that’s what I have to do to get Sutton to leave me alone, then hello board.” Grace sassed, making Lynn throw her a smile.

“As young kids like to say, period!” Lynn snapped, causing Grace to burst into a fit of laughter.

The ladies finished up their lunch before heading back to St John’s. Grace entered the building with a heavy heart and mind, navigating to her office. When she entered the unit, Denise was absent from her desk.

Good...

Cause if Grace would have walked in and seen her sitting there, she would have dragged her all across the floor for starting those rumors about her. Journeying down the corridor, she came to her locked office and noticed Tim still inside of his.

“Grace, hey! Wait!” He hopped up hurriedly and rounded his desk.

Grace struggled with her keys as she tried to open her office door as quickly as possible. She sucked her teeth loudly when Tim laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me!” She whirled around, jerking out of his hold.

“Grace, you’re making yourself look ridiculous right now.” Tim shook his head with a chuckle.

“The only person looking ridiculous is you, Mr. Sutton. I’m not interested, Tim. And I never will be, please understand that. I’d very much like it if you left me alone now because I’m getting fed up. If you leave another note on my car, touch me again, or even think about me, I’m going to the board. I’m tired of playing games with you.” Grace fumed.

Tim gazed down at her blankly, and Grace cursed inwardly. She had that stupid look! As if he wasn’t comprehending anything she was saying.

It burned her gut!

“You’re not tired of playing games since you won’t give me a chance. I’ve been nothing but a gentleman towards you, Grace, but you’d rather be a nasty bitch and step all over my feelings while giving me those coy smiles.” Tim’s face turned red with anger.

Grace looked him up and down, from his tan slacks to his brown striped shirt and loafers.

What...what was he talking about?

Not once had she ever flirted nor gave the impression that she was interested in him. From the very beginning, Grace kept their work relationship strictly professional.

“Tim...I need you to get out of my face right now. You’re... you’re crazy. I have never shown any interest in you since being here. I suggest you see a shrink.” Grace turned to open her door.

Tim gritted his teeth as he reached out and turned her back around. Grace peered up at him with pure fury, then a thought hit her. Inconspicuously, she cut on the recorder on her iPhone and began taping their conversation.

“Are you trying to say I’m crazy, Grace? Because if you are, you won’t like my response.” Tim scowled deeply.

“Mr. Sutton, please let go of me!” She enunciated every word, so the recording got everything clear.

“Or what, Grace? Are you going to run to Tiffany? Sally? Hmm? What are you going to do?” Tim got in her face.

“Oh, just you wait, you nutcase.” She shook her head as she squinted her eyes at him.

Tim grabbed a handful of her black flowy blouse and pulled her closer. Grace gripped his hand and squeezed it. “Get your damn ha-,” her words were paused as the unit door flew open, Denise walking inside.

She froze when she saw the scene before her. Without a word, she went to her desk and signed back in. Grace gritted her teeth. This was the second time Tim had put his hands on her, and co-workers, besides Lynn, had yet to say anything.

Half of these people did not care about her or for her, and it's evident.

“I'm not going to ask a second time, Mr. Sutton.” She threw him a glare as she placed her attention back on him.

Tim sneered slowly before releasing her shirt. Grace pivoted around hurriedly and unlocked her, sliding inside and slamming it in his face. Once safely inside, she stopped her recording and sighed thankfully.

She had it!

Her evidence.

And no, she wasn't going back to Tiffany in HR. She was taking this recording right to the board.

“Mr. Duran will see you now, Ms. Mitchell.” The receptionist relayed, causing Grace to stand from her seat in the waiting area.

The receptionist got up as well and rounded her desk.

“This way to the conference room,” she guided Grace down a long hall before coming to two double doors.

The thin receptionist pulled the door open and held a hand out for Grace to enter.

“Ms. Mitchell, sir.” She motioned to Mr. Duran, who was the only one seated at the huge table.

He was an older man with salt and pepper hair and a matching goatee. He was dressed in a white button-down and dark slacks.

“Well, hello, Ms. Mitchell. I hear you come to speak with me about some concerns you have down at St. John’s? Please, come in and sit down,” Mr. Duran pointed to a chair.

The receptionist waited until Grace stepped fully inside the room before making her exit, closing the door behind her silently.

“Uh, yes, I do, but I was under the impression that I would be meeting the entire board today.” Grace took her seat, as she explained.

“Little lady, I am the entire board.” Mr. Duran beamed in amusement.

“Oh,” Grace replied stupidly.

“Now, what would you like to discuss?” Duran raised a brow as he sat back in his seat.

“Well, sir, it’s about one of your supervisors down at St John’s in the outpatient youth unit. I’ve been having...a few problems with him.” Grace began timidly.

“What’s his name, and what type of problems?” Duran dipped his head as he listened intently.

“Um, Tim Sutton. He’s been harassing me ever since I started working at St John’s as a social worker five months ago. It started with him asking me out for a date and me declining, and ever since it spiraled out of control.” Grace expressed.

“Ahh, Sutton.” Duran sat up and made a twirling motion with his finger, signaling for her to go on.

Grace sighed but continued.

“Even after I’ve asked him to leave me alone a dozen times, he continues to behave the same way. I’ve gone to HR and the unit director, and yet they won’t do anything unless I have proof that he’s actually harassing me, even though multiple people saw him harassing me at the company picnic 2 weeks ago.” Duran jerked his neck back at her comment.

“And do you have evidence of his harassment? Not that I care because I believe you, young lady, but you might want to have it handy for HR.” Duran explained, leaving Grace shocked.

He...he believed her!?

Oh, thank God.

“You...you believe me?” Grace vocalized her thoughts.

“Sweetheart, listen, you’re not the first to come in here with a complaint on Sutton, but you will be the last. Tim has a 15-year-long history with St John’s, but over the last 5 years, we’ve been getting more complaints about him than we can deal with. He has a great work ethic, but it’s plain to see he lets his personal life get in the way of that to the point it’s hindering others. Do you have your evidence with you? What is it?” Duran lifted a brow.

“It’s a recording, Sir.” Grace expressed as she pulled her iPhone out.

“Play it for me,” Duran ordered gently.

Grace nodded as she opened up her phone and searched for the recording. She hit play and held her breath. Duran kept his eye on her as he listened to the recording, watching as Grace’s face sunk in every time she heard herself tell Sutton to release her.

Duran could tell this woman wasn’t lying...

“That’s enough. You can pause it. Can you send that to me?” He ordered with a shake of his head.

“Yes, of course, sir! What’s your number?” Grace picked up her phone quickly.

“You can send it to my receptionist, and I’m going to have her forward it to Tiffany in HR. I’ll have Sutton dealt with on Monday morning.” Mr. Duran promised then listed off the receptionist’s number.

Grace felt the weight of the world lift off her shoulders as she sent the recording over. She went to speak, but all that came out was an emotional huff. Tears built in her eyes, and her lips trembled.

So, this was it?

This was all she had to do to end her torture?

Her tears fell as she covered her mouth and cried thankfully. Mr. Duran frowned as he reached for the box of tissues sitting on the conference table.

“Here, sweetheart.” He slides the box over to her.

Grace nodded as she accepted.

“Thank you! Thank you so much!” She cried as she wiped her face.

“It’s truly no problem, Ms. Mitchell. I’m also sorry that HR failed you in your request to do something about him. With as much praise as I’ve been hearing about you, the higher-ups at St. John’s should be kissing your ass. On that

note, let me make a call.” Duran jokes, making grace laugh a little.

“Ahh, there’s a smile. I hate to see a gorgeous woman cry, Ms. Mitchell.” He beamed.

“Thank you, sir.” Grace cleaned her face yet again as she went to stand.

“It’s no problem. I see a future supervisor within my midst, and I’m going to do everything to make sure she stays on board with us.” Duran said truthfully.

“I... thank you.” Grace’s cheeks went warm as she journeyed toward the door.

Opening it, she walked out then shut it behind herself. She touched her chest thankfully as she ventured down the hall toward the entrance/exit.

Finally...

It was over.

But what Grace had failed to realize was that her torture had just begun.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Reruns of Moesha played on Grace's television as she and Richard hung out in her living room. He was seated behind her, giving her a massage. Her body was so tense it could cut a diamond. Although she felt much better after visiting Mr. Duran yesterday to discuss Tim's actions, she was still a little worried about how everyone would react come Monday. She truly just wanted to enjoy her weekend without thinking of St John's and Tim, but it was heavy on her mind. Grace sighed for the hundredth time that afternoon, and Richard was fed up.

"Babe, what's wrong?" Richard questioned as he stopped the massage.

"No-," Grace began, but Richard quickly cut her off.

"Grace, if you think I don't know you enough by now to know when something's bothering you, then I got a yacht to sell you in Boca." He expressed seriously.

"How big is it?" Grace teased, causing Richard to huff in amusement.

"Grace, baby, what's wrong?" He inquired gently as he turned her toward him.

Grace refused to meet his eyes and started to play with the gem of her faded oversized Hooters t-shirt.

“Is it Sutton again?” Richey questioned when he got no reply.

Grace’s eyes snapped toward him, and he instantly knew.

“That’s it! I’m going to have that punk’s head! Come Monday morning, I’m going down to St John’s with you, and we’re BOTH going to talk to HR because enough is a e-fucking-enough.” Richard promised.

“Come Monday, he might not be there,” Grace shrugged.

“I...he cornered me in the office on Thursday afternoon an-,” Grace started to explain, but Richard hopped up as if the fire was touching his behind.

“He fucking what!?” He roared, his neck turning red.

“Richard, please calm down. I’ve handled everything. When he cornered me in the office on Thursday, I secretly recorded him and took it to the headboard member and only board member of St John’s, Mr. Duran. He has a copy of the recording and everything, and he’s going to send it to HR. So, come Monday, Tim might not even be employed anymore.” Grace tried to reason.

“Baby, why didn’t you tell me any of this?” He looked at her in disbelief.

He couldn’t believe that she didn’t come to him when this first happened.

“Grace, don’t you trust me enough to tell me something like this?” He spoke with his hands.

“Of course, I trust you, Richard. It’s just that,” Grace noticed the pain in his face and looked away.

“I...I can’t explain it.” She sighed.

“Well, I got all fucking afternoon; get to talking.” Richard took a seat on the couch opposite her.

“Richard, you’re not a woman, so you wouldn’t understand the emotions I’ve been going through dealing with this. I started at St John’s wanting to help the kids because that’s what I love. Color me surprised that my boss won’t get the hint that I’m not interested yet keeps pushing and pushing? Then when I complain to the higher-ups, I feel like this is my fault, or something’s wrong with me. As if I’m just fabricating all of this...I,” Grace inhaled a shaky breath, “I’ve been laying up at night thinking about all of this, wondering if I’m being too irrational, wondering if I’m wrong for going to HR. What if I’m the one that has signals crossed? But every time I cross him, my fear of rationality is proven, yet people still won’t believe me. Five whole months I’ve been going through this, and no one would help until Mr. Duran. Imagine having to go over your supervisor and director’s head just for something to be done?” Grace described as tears built in her eyes.

“It’s so hard being a woman in an office setting, heck any setting. We constantly have to provide the burden of Truth even when we’re not the ones in the wrong. On top of that, other women saw Tim harassing me, and the only one that said anything about it was Lynn. Denise walked in the unit when he had me jacked up but did not a damn thing. It was so sobering to be in that moment. Everyone at St John constantly praises me, yet they can’t even show their appreciation by helping me when I’m being harassed right before their eyes.” Grace wiped her swollen cheeks.

“It’s been a lot to go through, Richard, and just didn’t know how to tell you. I’m so sorry.” Grace began to sob. Richard clenched his jaw as she cried, feeling like a complete asshole. He knew from the first time that he had made Grace talk about Tim that it was a very sore spot for her, and now... He wished he would have approached it with more concern and empathy.

Because...

She was right.

He wasn’t a woman, and he didn’t go through what they went through because he was a male, and patriarchy favored him for what was between his legs. Whatever he said went, and people believed him without a doubt even if he lied. The odds would always be in his favor because he was a man. Grace had been holding this all inside for 5 months and trying to deal with it on her own because she didn’t know who to talk to after everyone dismissed her.

Did she think...he wasn’t going to believe her?

“Baby,” he got up from the couch and went over to her, engulfing her in his muscular arms tightly.

“Grace, did you not tell me any of this because you thought I wasn’t going to believe you?” Richard searched for her watery eyes.

Grace huffed as she touched his bare chest.

“No, of course not, Richard. I...knew from the beginning that you didn’t like him, so I didn’t tell you as a means to keep the peace whenever you came to pick me up from work,” Grace explained truthfully.

“You should have still told me, babe. What if Tim starts acting out more than he already has? He could do something drastic, Grace. I’ve investigated guys like that when I was a beat cop. I know how they are. Chase you and stalk you down till you either give in or fall off the face of the Earth.” Richard relayed, causing Grace to look away.

That...that reminded her of Angie.

Tim harassed that woman into her parent’s arms.

“He’s already made a former employee disappear into oblivion,” Richard’s eyes widened at the remark. This guy was a damn menace. He needed to do something about Tim, and fast.

“Well, it won’t happen to you, do you hear me?”
Richard leaned back and promised.

“Thank you,” Grace let out shakily.

Richard’s eyes darted around her face.

“What?” Grace furrowed a brow.

“Grace,” he huffed, unsure of how to say what was on his mind.

He wasn’t lying when he said he saw a future with her. He just needed-no! He wanted Grace to trust him wholeheartedly because...he loved her. He couldn’t say when it happened, but one thing he did know was how. They were out one night, walking through the park after a delicious dinner at Maggiano’s, when he looked over at her and saw the most content smile on her face. He wanted to make her smile like that every single day they were together.

“Grace, I don’t date just for sex or a warm body to sleep next to. I’m serious when I date because I date to marry. And I see you one day sharing my last night. I know, I know we’re still developing, and I don’t want to frighten you off, but I needed to tell you.” Richard confessed.

“Richard,” Grace inched closer to him and cupped his neck with both hands.

“Wait, let me finish.” He stopped her by placing his hands on her thick hips.

“Grace, I’m falling in love with you. It happens every single day. Whenever you laugh. Whenever we speak on the phone. I fall deeper in love with you with everything you do.” He exposed, staring into her brown orbs.

“Richard, I…” Grace couldn’t form words, she was so stunned.

“I’m not expecting you to say it back so soon, gorgeous. But I do want you to work on one thing for me?” He ran his thumb over her bottom lip.

“What?” Grace rubbed his neck gently.

“Trusting me more. No matter the outcome Monday, I need you to trust me enough to tell when something or someone is bothering you at St John’s or in general. Promise me?” He stressed, making Grace nod in agreement.

“I need words, beautiful.” He curled a finger under her chin, lifting her head a little.

“Yes, Richard. I’ll work on learning to trust you more.” Grace verbally agreed.

Richard pecked her cheek then pulled back to gaze at her. He knew she had had a hard last few years dealing with her mother’s death and unemployment, but she wasn’t alone anymore.

She had him...

“I love you,” he whispered as he leaned forward, catching her lips in a hot kiss.

Their tongues slipped into one another's mouth, fighting for dominance. Richard's hands roamed all over her soft body until they found their way under her Hooters tee. His hands inched up her flesh, coming to her breasts. He squeezed, and Grace exhaled a breath. His digits snuck to the hook of her bra, undoing it effortlessly. Her DD's flooded out, and Richard slid the useless bra from under her shirt, discarding over his shoulder. Next, he rid his woman of her shirt and hurriedly cupped her breasts, her dark nipples peeking at him teasingly.

He bent his head and captured the hard pebble, running his tongue over it slowly. Grace's stomach trembled as Richard taunted her body. He switched nipples after a few seconds, latching on to the left with hard suction.

“Oh,” Grace gasped as he suckled on her tender flesh.

Richard pushed her back onto the carpet without releasing her and began rubbing her stomach and thighs with his free hand. His fingers slipped into the red thing she was wearing, tickling her wetness. Her things clenched at the contact, but Richard wouldn't let her close her legs.

“Richard,” Grace begged feverishly.

Richard pulled away from her chest and began kissing down her belly, stopping just above her patch of intimate curls.

“Hmm, what is it, baby?” He uttered, his warm breath flowing over her soaking wet pearl.

” I can’t hear you, Grace. What do you want?” He smirked when she jerked away from his mouth.

He hadn’t even touched her yet, and she couldn’t handle it already.

Just how he liked it...

“Richard, I... I want you to eat my pussy, now.” Grace bit her lip as she looked down at him.

“As you fucking wish,” Richard said before diving in between her legs.

He licked and suckled like a starved man, making sure to hit every corner and crevice he could. He wanted to taste every inch of her. He wanted to brand her with his lips so the world, most importantly, Sutton, knew she was his.

“Oh, my God!” Grace buried her hands in his hair as he feasted on her like she was a full course meal and dessert.

Her stomach knotted, and her toes jerked as she felt her climax building in the bottom of her stomach. Richard latched on to her nub as he inserted two fingers inside her tightness. He twisted his fingers once, then twice, and Grace couldn’t hold on anymore.

“Richard, I’m cumming!” She released all over his hands and mouth, but he didn’t stop devouring her until every last drop of her essence was gone.

Richard sat upon his knees and removed his sweatpants and boxers in one swift move, leaving his fat, long dick exposed. He leaned down and kissed up her belly as he planted himself between her legs. Once he reached her mouth, he kissed her gently before easing into her. Grace moaned in pleasure as he slid inside of her and began to rock his hips slowly, making sure she felt every single inch of him.

“I love you, Grace.” He whispered in her ear then kissed her shoulder.

Grace wrapped her arms around him at his admission, her heart filling full. Her feelings for Richard were growing stronger by the day, but she was scared. Not of loving him, but of Tim.

The weekend had come and gone, meaning it was back to St. John’s. Grace pulled into the parking lot and cut her engine. Gathering her belongings, she opened her door and slid, hitting the lock on her key alarm as she ventured toward the entrance. As soon as she stepped into the main office, all eyes landed, and she and she instantly knew something had happened.

“Good morning,” she greeted the main receptionist as she journeyed to the metal doors.

The woman said not one word as she walked past her. Grace let out a trembling breath. She scanned her badge, and the double doors released, and she walked out. Maneuvering to her office, she bypassed other employees, daunting whispers following her. Coming to her unit, she reached for the knob and turned it, stepping inside. She noticed Denise at her desk. When the dark-haired woman peered up and saw her, she gave the dirtiest look ever.

“Good morning, Denise.” She dared to greet. Denise’s face sunk in.

“You know what, Grace? You have some nerve thinking you can wish me a good morning after what you did to Tim.” Denise ranted madly.

“Excuse me? What did I do to Tim? So, I’m guessing you just forgot about how you walked in on him harassing me last week and did absolutely nothing?” Grace tilted her head to the side.

“Oh fucking please! You’ve been teasing him and playing innocent ever since you were hired! You knew he liked you, and instead of just going out with him and appeasing him, you gave everyone attention, but Tim! I’ve seen you cozying up to Bobby in the cafe to get free food, Grace. You’re not as innocent as you pretend to be, which is why I have no idea what Tim saw in you in the first place.” Denise fumed, the skin around her nose jumping.

Grace froze, unable to comprehend what she just heard.

“First of all, Denise, I know you’re the one that’s been spreading those rumors about me. Plus, it’s odd to me that you’re going so hard for a man that showed absolutely no interest in you even when you were wrapped around him like a snake at Raiders that night. I’ve done absolutely nothing to neither you nor Tim for you guys to behave this way toward me. I’ve been nothing but professional. The reason he’s gone is because of his actions. Now, you have a nice day.” Grace walked off.

“Fuck you, Grace!”

Grace halted. Oh no, this bitch didn’t!

Whirling around, grace stomped back to Denise’s desk.

“What the fuck did you say to me, bitch?! Huh!?”
Grace got all in her face.

“Get away from me, Grace. Don’t you dare put your hands on me!” Denise’s face scrunched up.

Grace huffed in disgust as she backed away from the dark-haired woman.

Typical!

Start some shit, then have the nerve to shed those phony ass white woman tears. Grace was about to turn and head back down the hall when the unit door flew open quickly, and Sally walked in.

“I heard you were here. Can I talk to you in my office, Grace?” Sally demanded more than offered.

“Sally, Grace just tried to attack me!” Denise shot from her seat.

“Yes, please tattletale on me after you just hurled a barrage of insults at me because your ‘man’ is gone!” Grace spewed.

“Grace, my office! Now!” Sally yelled.

Grace took a huge breath to calm herself. These white women were talking a little too hectic for her this morning. She stomped out with Sally following behind her. They made it to her office, and Grace crossed her arms as she sat. Sally rounded her desk and plopped down in her rolling chair.

“What do you want to discuss, Ms. Wills?” Grace gave her a blank look.

“Grace,” Sally sighed after a while.

“Didn’t Tiffany tell you if you had evidence, bring it to her directly? Why did you go to Duran?” She questioned with a frown.

“I-,” Grace started to say she couldn’t believe this, but a snort replaced her disbelief.

“You’ve got to be kidding me right now. Is this a damn joke?” Grace jerked her head back.

“No, I’m not kidding, Grace. We’ve lost a valuable employee because you couldn’t follow directions and report back to Tiffany and I. We had already discussed moving your office further down the hall so you guys wouldn’t have to see each other every time you opened your door, but now this puts me in a conundrum.” Sally explained with a frustrated look.

“This puts you in a conundrum? What about when I came to you the first time about Tim, and you did absolutely nothing!? When he put his hands on me last week in the hallway, that was it. I was tired of him crossing my boundaries and putting his hands on me like I was a damn child! Since you and Tiffany didn’t want to do anything about him, I did.” Grace asserted with a neck roll.

“Grace,” Sally shook her head, “I’m going to have to suspend you.” Grace’s heart dropped into her stomach, and her brain grew fuzzy.

What...

She was getting suspended because she reported harassment?

Grace couldn't even compute what was happening right now. "For fucking what!" She jumped up.

"Grace, you've upset a lot of people. Plus, with what Denise said when I entered the unit, I think you need a few days off anyway. You're too riled up right now." Sally began pulling out a yellow slip.

"Of course, I'm riled up right now, I've been complaining about Tim for months, and you didn't do anything at all, but after I go to the board about his behavior, I get suspended? Sally, do you see how you're not making any sense right now?" Grace tried to reason.

"Tiffany told you specifically to bring evidence to her, not Duran. Not only did you cause Tim to be fired, but you put Tiffany's position in HR in question with Duran, as well as mine." Sally glared at her.

Oh...

Okay, Grace, got it now.

Because they had mishandled her harassment claims and gotten their asses handed to them by Duran, they were taking it out on her.

Wow...Just fucking wow.

"You know what, Sally?" Grace nodded before going silent.

She pulled off her badge and threw it on the floor before turning and walking out of the office. She marched down the walkway to the outpatient unit and came to the door, pulling it open harshly. Denise smirked as she entered.

“Gimme one minute,” Grace shook her head.

She journeyed to her office and unlocked the door, going inside and collecting a few of her belongings. She didn't have much in her office except a picture of her mother and her from her 18th birthday and some desk trinkets. Once she placed everything in her work bag, she exited the office without even closing the door and went back into the reception area.

“Oh, I see Sally fired you.” Denise laughed.

“Just like I'm about to fire on you,” she said before adjusting her bag and knocking Denise in the mouth with her right fist, causing blood to spray all over her pink polka-dotted top.

“Oh, my God!” The unit door opened, and Thad walked in.

“Ms. G, you hit her with that shebang, dang!” The young boy covered his mouth as he watched the blood leak from Denise's nose.

“Listen, I got to go.” She tried to rush off.

The sooner she got out of here, the better. Lord knows she didn't want to be arrested in front of Thad.

"I quit, baby." Thad's face fell.

"Because," Thad didn't even have to say the whole thing.

He knew why...

Miss Sally and the other people in charge we're doing Grace just like they did Miss Angie.

This was unfair...

Everyone he had ever loved either left him or got ran off. His mama chose Rick over him. Mr. Tim ran off Ms. Angie, and now he was doing it to Ms. Grace.

"Yes, but hey. I'll always call to check in on you via Ms. Lynn, okay?" Grace teared up.

"Yea," Thad nodded, placing his attention on the ground.

"Be a-," Grace started to remind him, but Thad needed none.

"A good boy," he choked up then balled his lips in as fat tears rolled down his face.

“Bye, Ms. G., I love you,” he whispered, and Grace wrapped him in a tight hug.

“I love you too, baby.” She murmured as she kissed his head.

She released him and began her journey out the door.

“Not! Come back here, Grace. You’re not leaving that easily!” Grace sped up her steps as she heard Denise call from behind her.

Rushing through the back metal doors of the main office, she zipped past the receptionist’s desk and out the front door. Racing to her car, she quickly got in and started it. She threw her work bag and purse onto the passenger seat. She grabbed her phone out the front flap of her purse and dialed Richard as she reversed out of the parking lot.

“Hey, babe. Is he gone?” Richard asked, hopefully.

“Yep, and so am I,” Grace relayed as she drove down the street.

“What? Grace, what the hell happened?” Richard asked in disbelief.

“You know Sally suspended me because Duran came down on her for not handling my claims correctly?! I couldn’t

do it anymore, Richard. I feel like they're playing in my face, and I'm just done." Grace's voice shook.

"Babe, pull over. I don't want you driving while you're upset." Grace did exactly as he said and pulled over to the side of the road.

"I...I can't do it anymore, I just can't." She sobbed into the phone.

Richard clenched his jaw as he listened to her cry, feeling completely helpless. And the fact that he couldn't find anything on Sutton made him even angrier. His eyes darted over Tim's record. It was clean as a whistle.

"Once you calm down, meet me at the precinct," Richard ordered.

"Okay," Grace whispered breathlessly.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Grace sighed tiredly as she filled out her sixth application of the day. Her plans were to hold on to her position at St John's until she found another job backfired, thanks to Sally. Now she was depending solely on the money her mother left before she passed. Richard had offered numerous times to pay her expenses since she quit a week ago, but Grace kept turning him down. She could tell it hurt him, but Grace didn't want to become too dependent on him. Recently, Grace had been thinking about their relationship. Richard had been supportive of her through this Tim debacle, and she owed him so much, which is why she didn't feel it was right to take his money.

He had already done so much just by staying by her side.

“And for the lady, a pepperoni hot pocket.” Richard appeared out of the kitchen, wearing a pair of oven mitts.

He held a paper plate in his mitt covered hands that carried a steaming hot pocket. “Thank you, Lord Dixon. I'm forever grateful.” Grace joked as he stepped over to her and sat the plate next to her laptop.

“Ohhhh, I like that, has a nice ring to it. It would sound even better if you called yourself lady Dixon.” He wiggled his eyebrows as he took a seat next to her on her black leather sectional.

“Richard,” she smiled softly.

“How’s the job search coming?” He leaned forward and kissed her shoulder.

“Just finished my sixth and last application. I’m done for the day. I don’t want to waste my weekend filling out job applications. I’d rather spend it laughing and sitting on your face.” Grace gave him a look.

“Is that so?” Richard raised a sly brow.

“Yep, but the face sitting shall happen after a stroll through the park. I don’t want to stay in all day.” Grace scrunched up her face.

“How about I eat this and take you out for some real food?” Richard pointed to the untouched hot pocket.

“You wanted it anyway,” grace chuckled as she waved him off.

Richard is like a hog. His stomach was literally a never-ending pit. Grace had watched the detective stuff down three hot dogs one night while they were out.

“I did; it’s the last one.” Richard scooped up the hot pocket and bit into it with a shrug. Grace just shook her head at him. “What? I’m a growing boy, baby.”

Grace rolled her eyes at his remark.

With that, she got up and went to the room to prepare for their outing. She took a shower then brushed her teeth before dressing in a plain white shirt, black tights, and a pair of white slip ons. She also grabbed a light cardigan. It was September in Atlanta, and the wind was picking up as fall progressed.

“Hey, you ready?” Richard stepped into the room.

“You’re not changing?” Grace lifted a brow at the tomato sauce stain on his shirt.

“Why?” Richard feigned ignorance.

“I’m not walking in public with you looking like a toddler, Richey.” Grace gave him a look.

“Alright, alright, don’t get your panties in a bunch, gorgeous.” He mimicked Matthew McConaughey as he walked over to his designated dresser and pulled it open.

He took out a fresh black t-shirt and changed before grabbing his keys from off the top of his dresser.

“Happy?” He stepped over to Grace and kissed her temple.

“Very,” she beamed up at him.

Richard grabbed her hand and escorted her out of the bedroom and through the living area toward the door.

They walked out of the house and locked up before venturing to the car. They hopped in and sped off to the park. Richard found a parking spot then they exited the vehicle. Grace smiled a little as they began toward the entrance, spotting food trucks, kids playing freely, and people exercising.

It was a really beautiful day.

They walked in silence for a while, just enjoying the scenery and each other's time as they held hands. Richard peeked at Grace and saw that smile. That content smile that made his heart melt. She looked so peaceful. About 20 minutes into their stroll, they stopped at one of the food trucks and bought a tray of beef tacos. They found a spot and sat down to enjoy their meal. They chatted as they ate, discussing the mundane and everything else in between. Grace grinned at Richard then bit her lip. She liked this, spending time with someone that listened to her and cared about her.

Ever since Richard had expressed his love for her, Grace had been scared to say it back, but now that Sutton was out of the picture, she was ready.

"Richard," she reached for his hand, making him pause mid-bite.

"Yea, babe, what's wrong?" He dipped a brow.

“I...I love you. I was scared to say it a few weeks ago with everything going on, but I do. I love you, Richard Dixon.” She confessed with soft eyes.

Richard froze, before a slow smile spread across his face. He pulled her across the table by her forearms, making Grace laugh loudly as he showered her with butterfly kisses.

“Ditto, kid.” He finally covered her plump lips with his.

The two parted and finished their meal and drinks. Richard was about to get up and return their tray when Grace offered, scooping it up quickly. She journeyed back to the taco truck and placed the tray where the others sat. She was about to turn around when she heard it. Tim’s voice.

“Grace!” Richard heard it as well, shooting from his seat.

Tim walked up the trail to her just as Richard touched down at her side.

“Stay away from her, Sutton, before I file a restraining order on your ass!” Richard roared, veins popping in his neck.

“Woah, calm down, Loverboy. I just came over to say hello. Hello, Grace.” Tim eyed Richard in disinterest before putting his focus on Grace.

“You look nice today. You always look nice.” He told her, wearing that creepy blank expression.

“Tim, please leave me alone. There’s nothing to discuss. There’s no reason for you to come to say anything to me. Just stop bothering me,” she asserted with a glare.

“But Grace, there’s no need to keep up this tired hard to get act. I don’t work at St John’s anymore, so you can finally go out with me. And the ironic thing is, it’s all thanks to you.” Richard’s face went still at Tim’s comment.

“Listen, man, she said to leave her alone. If I ever see you near her again, you’ll be spending the night behind bars. You’ve been warned.” Richard wrapped his arms around Grace and guided her away.

“I’ll see you later, Grace! When Loverboy isn’t around.” Tim called after them, making Grace look over her shoulder in fear.

What did that mean?...

“Don’t look back, only forward. He’s trying to weird you out.” Richard relayed as they came to the parking lot.

Once they made it to his SUV, they hopped in and pulled off. Just like that, her Saturday was ruined.

“Hey, hey, hey! Fix that look on yourself, don’t let that bastard steal your joy. Our day isn’t over yet, babe.” Richard rubbed her cheek.

Grace nodded as tears filled her eyes. "I love you," she balled her lips in.

"I know, baby, you told me already." Richard joked, turning her tears into laughter.

Tim took a swig of his beer as he watched the news. He shifted, and the beer bottles at his feet rattled. After being fired from St John's, all he did was drink. He couldn't believe Grace! All he wanted to do was get to know her and take her out, possibly become more. But that tease! All she wanted to do was keep him at a distance while smiling in everyone else's face. Tim didn't like that. He couldn't fathom why she didn't want to go out with him. He had money, a nice car, no kids.

And he was good looking.

He was a total package, but Ms. Grace couldn't see that. Or...she didn't want to see that. He couldn't get over how she chose that detective over him! Guy looked like he ate roids for breakfast. Tim just couldn't understand. Grace was just like that bitch, Angie- no!

She was worse.

At least Angie was smart enough to know she couldn't fight him and just skipped town. His lip curled at the thought of Angie. She was a beautiful woman with light brown hair, sun-kissed olive skin tone, and long toned legs. She was absolutely stunning, but she wouldn't even give him a chance

yet constantly ran after her philandering boyfriend, Paul. Tim would have treated her right, given her everything she ever wanted.

Tim huffed at the thought.

But women were stupid and thought they could get over on men in charge. They wanted to rough guys while keeping good men on the back burner. No matter how many times he asked Angie out, sent her flowers and chocolate, she still wanted her cheating ass boyfriend. Angie thought she was going to keep him at Bay after he had done so much for her?

Ha, she had another fucking thing coming.

Tim wanted what was owed to him, but like always, women thought they could play with him on a string. She started going to HR and filing reports, but one thing she didn't know was his sister Tiffany would never suspend him for any type of misconduct, especially since he had gotten her the position as HR manager. Even though Tiff was pissed at being fired, she bounced right back and got a job as a supervisor for the mental health unit down at the county jail. He couldn't say what Sally was doing since she cut him off after she lost her job, and it was all thanks to Grace thinking she was smarter than them all, but in actuality, she was dumber than a box of rocks. All she had to do was go out on one date with him, just ONE.

But no!

She'd rather sit across the hall from him, waving coyly and batting those big brown eyes at him.

That fucking bitch!

Every time he remembered the away of her hips or the delicateness of her laughter, he grew angry all over again. Unlike with Angie, where Tim was just trying to be a gentleman and help her out of a bad relationship, he actually liked Grace. She was pretty and had a lovely figure, just the right amount of curves he liked on his woman. When she spoke, the sound of her voice calmed him and left him yearning for her. There was something about her that made him want to get close to her.

More than close...

Tim wanted to consume her, completely possess her. Own every single inch of her being. He wanted her like a thirsty man wanted water. A knock sounded at his door, and he scowled.

It was most likely Denise.

She had been coming to visit him ever since he was fired, and he was sick of looking at her damn face. He wasn't remotely attracted to Denise, and he didn't understand how the woman couldn't get that through her head. Keys jingled before the door opened, revealing just as he had guessed, Denise.

"Hey, I got you another pack of Heineken." She stepped in and closed the door behind herself.

She walked to the kitchen to put the beer up, and Tim glared at her passing figure. He should have never given her a damn copy of his key because now she just showed up whenever the fuck she wanted. But he also didn't feel like getting up off the couch every time she came over, so he gave her a key to take the hassle off. Denise walked back into the living room and pulled off her jacket with a friend as she observed all the empty beer bottles lying on the floor.

“When's the last time you cleaned this pigsty?” She bent down and began picking up the bottles.

“The last time you cleaned it,” he bit back, causing Denise to shoot him a look.

Ever since he had gotten fired, he had been downright nasty to her every time she would visit him. She didn't get him. Here she was, perfectly willing and wanting, and yet he chased after women that could give a damn about him. What was it? Was she not pretty enough?

Was her ass flat?

What the hell was it!?

Why didn't Tim see...why didn't Tim see she was in love with him?

Five whole years she worked for him and never once had he returned her affection but would lose his mind when Grace didn't pay attention to him. It was laughable, really. She couldn't count on both fingers how many times she had heard

Tim call Grace a fool when in actuality, he was the one that was foolish. Denise licked her lips but said nothing. She glanced down at the empty bar bottles in her hand before scanning the rest of his filthy apartments. She stopped in every other day to clean for him and bring him beers, and this is how he treated her?

As Thad liked to say when someone promised him something-bet.

Denise dropped the bottles back on the floor, making them rattle and knock against one another. “You know what, Tim? How about you clean your own apartment? I’m fucking done.” She stood with an eye roll.

Tim stared at her in bewilderment.

What in the hell did she just say?

“What the hell is your problem, Denise?” He replied in disinterest.

Denise whirled around, face scrunched up in anger. “You! You’re my fucking problem! Look at you, sulking and drinking over a woman that couldn’t give a rats ass about you. You’re so pathetic.” She pivoted back around and began toward the door.

Tim’s face spasmed at her comment, and his anger returned tenfold.

“What the fuck did you say?” He placed his beer on the glass table before him and stood slowly.

“You heard me the first time, Tim. And you know it’s true. You let your damn ego get you fired because you wouldn’t leave Grace alone and now look at you? Depressed and unemployed.” Denise put her hand on her hips.

Tim stepped over to her, making her take a cautious step back.

“Get away from me, Tim,” she tried to sidestep him, but he pushed her into the door, causing her eyes to widen.

“Or what, Denise? You going to report me to HR just like Grace and Angie, hmm? Oh, wait, that’s right, you can’t! So, what are you going to do?” He sneered in her face like a wild man.

“Tim, please move so I can just leave. I swear I won’t come back,” Denise tried to reason with him, but Tim was too far gone, and her comment only seemed to make him spiral into oblivion.

He jacked her up by her grey t-shirt and placed his forehead on hers, his breath fanning across her face.

“So, you’re just a typical bitch, huh? Love em and leave em high and dry when you can’t get what you want. You’re no different from Angie and Grace. Wait, I take that back. I don’t quite remember Grace or Angie giving me head in the men’s faculty bathroom.” Tim chuckled darkly.

Denise just shook her head.

“Move, Tim!” She pushed him, making him stumble back a little.

Tim caught his balance and glared at her madly.

“You fucking bitch!” He roared, craving toward her.

He grabbed her around the neck and threw her onto the floor. Denise cried out as her head bounced off the ground.

“You think you’re going to leave me like all the others, Denise!?” Tim screamed as he kicked her in her back repeatedly.

“Tim, please!” Denise hollered as he started stomping on her arm and stomach.

Tim ignored her cries, stomping her out like he wanted to do Angie. Like he wanted to do Grace. He pictured the brown woman on the floor, struggling to hide from his kicks. Grace turned fully over as she tried to grab his leg, and Tim lost it.

“I only wanted to love you, Grace!” He brought his foot down in her face.

“Tim, please! Stop!” Denise cried again as he continued to kick her in the face.

Blood poured from her nose and mouth, making it hard for her to breathe. Her vision blurred as she peered up at him.

He looked so... demented.

Almost as if he were possessed.

“Why? You didn’t!” He smashed his foot down so hard, causing Denise to jerk roughly before going completely still.

Tim’s breathing and Denise struggling to inhale through her mouth and nose were the only sounds heard throughout the apartment. With a ragged breath, Tim sat down on the floor with his back propped up against the table by the door. He eyed Denise’s battered blood-stained face without remorse.

No one told that bitch to try and leave.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Grace hummed as she made dinner in her kitchen. Richard was getting off early tonight, and she wanted to make sure everything was prepared and ready as soon as he stepped into the door. She covered the pot of spaghetti she was cooking and moved along to her homemade garlic bread, mixing seasoning and butter. Her cell phone rang from the living room, and she quickly wiped her hands before going to retrieve it.

“Hello,” Grace answered without checking the caller ID.

“Dang, Ms. G! You said you was gon’ call a brotha.” Her face lit up at the sound of Thad’s voice.

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry. I’ve been looking for a new job ever since I quit and forgot to check in on you.” She apologized.

“So, you completely forgot about me? My feelings hurt, Ms. G.” She rolled her eyes.

“Oh, boy, stop it! How have you been, Thad? Have you been a good boy?” Grace held the phone between her ear and shoulder as she made her way back to the kitchen.

“Of course, Ms. G. You know I actually keep my promises.” Grace detected a bit of shade.

Although he was joking, she still felt a little bad.

“Good, I’m glad. Maybe one day this week, Ms. Lynn can bring you to see me.” She suggested as she spread her garlic mix on to the slices of Cuban bread.

“Or, just hear me out, you can come back.” Thad relayed, making her sigh.

“Thad, you know I can’t, not with Sally and Denise still there.” Grace layers the bread onto a baking sheet.

“Well... Good thing, Ms. Sally was fired, and Ms. D ain’t been in for days. Wait, somebody wants to talk to you.” Thad’s voice faded, and Grace furrowed a brow.

Someone wanted to talk to her?

“Hello, Ms. Mitchell. I see you left us right along with Tim, huh?” Mr. Duran’s deep baritone replaced Thad.

“Oh, uh, hello! I mean, hello, Mr. Duran. How are you?” Grace halted her actions.

“I’d be much better if you came back, Grace. When I got rid of Sally, Tiffany, and Tim, that didn’t include you.” Duran chuckled.

“But sir, I...I had to leave. After Tim was fired, a lot of the other employees held a lot of animosity toward me and was making my work environment stressful.” Grace explained with a sigh.

“And who exactly were these co-workers you speak of?” Duran rumbled.

“Sally and Denise.” She answered without missing a beat.

“Well, like my new pal here said, Sally’s gone, and Denise hasn’t been in for about a week. You’re free to come back anytime, Grace. Your new office will be waiting. Excuse me, the little fella would like another word.” Duran’s voice disappeared in exchange for Thad’s.

“So, you coming back, Ms. G?” Thad questioned in a rush.

“I...” Grace bit her lip in thought.

She guessed she could return now that the bad apples were gone.

Guessed!?

She was there first thing in the morning!

“I’ll see you tomorrow, kid.” She grinned when she heard cheering from both Thad and Mr. Duran.

“Alright, bye!” The call ended, and Grace shook her head in amusement.

Sitting her phone on the opposite counter, she continued on with dinner. The sound of the door unlocking and opening made her smile.

“Yea, I’ll look into it as soon as I get in the office tomorrow,” Richard entered the kitchen and sat everything down on the wooden table.

“Yep, uh-huh, no problem.” He hung up and sighed dramatically.

“Chief waits until I leave the office to tell me about a case when we were just face to face, yet he didn’t even mention it. Hi, gorgeous.” He stepped over to her as he vented about his day.

He wrapped his arms around her and dipped his head, capturing her lips in a longing kiss. He pulled back and ran his thumb down her cheek.

“So how was your day, my little housewife.” Richard teased, causing Grace to roll her eyes.

“You’ll never guess who just called me,” she turned around to check on the spaghetti.

“Who?” Richard pivoted and walked over to the kitchen table.

He shrugged his coat off and threw it over the back of the chair.

“Thad...and Mr. Duran.” She peeked over her shoulder.

“Oh, really? How’s Thaddeus doing, and what did Duran want?” Richard furrowed a brow as he sat and pulled his laptop out of his work bag.

“Thad just called to ask why I haven’t checked up on him, and Duran wants me back at the center.” Grace turned fully, a hopeful look on her face.

“He what?” Richard paused just as he was about to power on his laptop.

“He wants me back, and I...” Grace bit her lip then sighed when she noticed the raised brow Richard pinned her with.

“You’re not going back there, Grace. Especially not with Denise and Sally still being there, that’ll make a really hostile environment for you, and you don’t need that again.” Richard shook his head.

“Good thing Duran got rid of her and Tim. He also said Denise is in the wind and hasn’t been to work in days.” Grace exposed, and Richard clenched his jaw in concern.

“What if she shows back up? What will you do then?” He countered.

“I,” Grace opened her mouth to reply, but nothing came out.

She truly had no idea what she would do if Denise came to work after she was rehired. But she did know Denise was nothing without Tim and Sally there. If he was gone, the most she would do was shoot her a nasty look.

“Ignore her, just like before.” Grace shrugged.

“I don’t know, babe.” Richard shook his head as he placed his attention back on his laptop.

He powered it on as he heard Grace huff. Grace cut the oven on then slid the baking sheet into the oven before cutting her spaghetti on low. Pivoting, she ventured over to Richard and leaned into his back as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“I’m tired of being cooped up in the house, Richard. I’m sick of filling out job applications every day. I just want my old job back, and now that the life suckers are gone, I can have it back.” She pressed her breasts into his back.

His arm reached around and connected with Grace's bare leg. He scooted back, and she moved aside. Richard pulled her into his lap and fiddled with the hem of his button-down she had on.

"I know that, gorgeous. I just want you to be safe. There's no telling if or when Sutton or Denise could pop back up. I...I just want you to be safe, Grace." Richard laid his head in her chest as he held her tight.

"I know you do, and I will be. The people that were making my life a living hell are finally gone. I just want to go back to work, Richard." Grace buried her hands in his hair.

"When do they want you to return?" He grumbled into her shirt.

"Tomorrow," she bit her lip as Richard jerked his head up.

He lifted her from his lap, and Grace dipped a brow.

"Cut the stove and oven off right now." He ordered as he shut off his laptop.

"Wha- why?" Grace stepped over to the oven and did exactly as he said.

"We're going to get you some pepper spray and a stun gun," Richard remarked before grabbing his keys from the table.

He was about to walk off when he froze then turned back around. He looked Grace up and down, changing his mind.

“On second thought, you stay here and finish my dinner, woman. Let the expert pick out the weapons.” Richard winked before Grace face palmed herself.

This man...

She finally saw why he and Thad got along so well. They were both goofballs.

Flies buzzed around Tim's apartment as he guzzled down a bottle of beer, ESPN playing loudly on the TV. He sighed in satisfaction as he sat back and relaxed. A fly landed on his nose, and he waved it away. Bringing the bottle to his lips once more, he took a swig as he eyed Denise's dead body. Took the bitch a day and a half to finally die, and it was interesting to watch. The way she gagged on her blood and wheezed for air gave him an unexplainable arousal.

She really thought she was going to run off on him like all those other tramps!

He couldn't believe her nerve.

Yea, he didn't love her, but she sure as hell wasn't leaving. More flies floated over him as he scrunched his face up. Getting up from his couch, he ventured to the kitchen and grabbed his can of raid. Turning, he walked back into the living room and began spraying around, the flies dropping one by one. They joined their fellow brethren on the hardwood floor, and Tim smirked. Tossing the can onto the couch, he sat down beside it and continued to enjoy his Heineken. Once he finished, he popped open another.

When one was done, he continued the process until he was off his ass. His eyes swam as he tried to focus on the tv.

“Lebron coming in with a 3 pointer was one of the highlights of the night...” The sports anchor's voice faded out as Tim let the alcohol take him off to dreamland.

“Tim...” his brow jumped at the distant voice.

Wait, that sounded like...

“Tim,” the voice called in a sing-song fashion.

Tim struggled to open his eyes, blinking rapidly. He shook his head, and his eyes popped open. Shit almost tumbled down his boxers as he stared into Denise's eyes. He was so confused, he turned to peek at her dead body that was still lying by the door.

What the hell...

He put his attention back on the woman before him, eyeing the black and blue bruises on her face.

“You really thought I was going to leave you, Tim?”
The double laughed out.

“I’m drunk, and you’re dead,” Tim rubbed his eyes.

“I sure am, thanks to you.” The Denise double cackled.

“This isn’t real,” Tim ran a hand down his face as he tried to sober up.

“Oh, it’s real, unlike Grace’s love for you.” The ghost of Denise took a seat next to him casually.

” Shut up! You’re not real!” Tim jumped from the couch.

“Oh, I’m very real, Tim. Right. In. Here.” The body double thumped her temple, making him frown up.

“No! Look, you see!? I killed you,” Tim pointed to her body.

Ghost Denise waved him away boredly.

“Aren’t you a regular Einstein,” she giggled out.

“You kill the only woman that’s ever remotely liked you but not those other bitches? Oh, bravo, Tim! I see why St. John’s kept you onboard for 15 years. You’re just so bright.” Tim scowled at her comment.

“I didn’t want you,” he mean-mugged her.

“And Angie and Grace didn’t want you, see how that works?” The apparition huffed in amusement.

“Shut up!” Tim screamed, his fists balled at his side.

He stomped toward her with his arms out when she suddenly disappeared.

“Oh, Tim, behind you!” Tim whirled around and saw Denise smirking at him.

“What were you going to do, Tim? Kill me again?” Denise put her hands on her hips. Tim kept quiet, his red eyes big.

“What do you want?” He finally spoke.

“Exactly what you want; after all, I am your subconscious.” Denise shrugged.

“I want Grace and my job back,” he confessed.

“No, no, no. What do you really want, Tim?” Tim swallowed hard at the question.

What did he want...

He wanted Grace.

All of her.

But not as before. He wanted her to fear him because he knew that was the only way that she'd actually see him. He wanted her scared to the point it consumed her.

“I want to hurt Grace and every other woman who played with me,” Tim answered, making Denise smile slowly.

“Now we're getting somewhere, old friend.” Denise appeared back on the sofa, and this time, Tim didn't even jump.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Hey, Grace. Welcome back.” Grace didn’t know whether to smile or look stupid when the main building’s receptionist greeted her happily.

She decided a head nod would suffice as she bypassed the woman, journeying to Sally’s old office. Coming to the door, she lifted a hand and knocked.

“Come in!” A voice she had never heard before granted her entry.

Grace grabbed the knob and turned it, pushing the door in.

“Oh, Grace, right?” The tiny woman seated at Sally’s old desk beamed as she questioned.

“Uh, Yes, that’s me. Mrs. Hoover-Duran?” Grace raised a brow.

“This is she,” the small African American woman laughed, making Grace’s nerves fall away.

“But please, you can just refer to me as Mrs. Hoover, Teddy doesn’t mind.” Liliana waved.

Grace almost snorted when Ms. Hoover used Mr. Duran’s government name.

Teddy, really?

“Please have a seat, Grace. I just wanted to talk to you about everything that transpired before you left.” Grace nodded at her comment.

She stepped over to the chairs opposite of the desk and sat down slowly. Straightening her wrap around blouse, she focused on Ms. Hoover.

“I’d first like to start off by saying I’m very sorry for what you had to experience here at St. John’s. That’s not the type of work environment we envisioned for our employees. Secondly, we’re glad to have you back. The children in outpatient youth haven’t stopped singing your praises since I’ve shown up. They absolutely adore you, especially that Thad.” The little woman relayed.

“He’s my baby,” Grace felt her eyes water.

“Oh, trust me, Teddy and I noticed, which is why we had to get you back with us. I also wanted to go over some changes with you. The outpatient youth unit has a new receptionist and supervisor that are both ready to welcome you back with open arms. And you’ve gotten a new office, it’s the

first door on the left. Plus, when you open your door, all you see is the wall.” Mrs. Hoover joked.

Grace giggled and shook her head.

She already liked her new director.

“And with that said, I wish you a good first day back.” Grace stood and leaned forward, shaking the new director’s hand.

“Thank you,” she released Mrs. Hoover’s hand and turned, making her way out of the door.

She closed it after she exited before doing a little dance. She had her job back! Thank you, Lord. Grace huffed in contentment as she made her way back to her unit. She came to the door and yanked it open, taking a step inside.

“Good morning! How may I help you?” The curly-haired Latina sitting at the reception desk beamed.

“Hi, I’m Grace Mitchell.” She introduced herself.

“Oh, hi! I’ve heard so much about you and, uh, sorry about what you had to go through. My name is Amber Esposito.” The woman stood quickly, putting out a hand.

“Thank you,” Grace simply nodded.

“Mr. Montgomery went to handle one of the kids, but he’ll be back soon to introduce himself.” Amber relayed as she sat back down.

“No problem, thanks for letting me know.” Grace thanked her yet again before making her way to her new office.

Stopping in front of the door, Grace peered down the hall at Tim’s old office. Everything he had ever done to her replayed in her mind. She definitely deserves a new office. Pushing the door in, Grace walked in and smiled at the huge desk and window.

Yea, she deserved this.

Big time.

Inching toward the desk, she sat down and let her purse and work bag fall to the floor. Spreading her arms out, she rubbed them around the top of the desk. She was going to be able to fit a lot more than a photo of her and her mom on here. Sitting up straight, Grace bit her lip.

She was so happy to be back.

The sound of the unit door opening was heard in the distance, but Grace ignored it, eyes scanning around her new office in wonder.

“Ms. G!” Thad ran into the open doorway with a huge grin.

“Why Thaddeus Marshall, look at how you’ve grown.” She teased, and Thad took off running.

Grace opened her arms, and he crashed into her. Wrapping her arms around him tight, she began to rock him.

“I missed you so much, kid, you just don’t know,” Grace whispered to him.

He just nodded, making no move to lift his head. Grace noticed his shoulders shaking and frowned.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” She questioned the young boy.

“I...I ain’t think you was gon’ ever come back, Ms. G.” Thad finally lifted his head to wipe his watery face.

“Me too, but here I am. And I’m not leaving again.” Grace promised.

“You swear?” Thad raised a brow.

“What did I tell you about swearing, Thaddeus?” A deep Jamaican accent spoke up, drawing Grace’s attention to the doorway.

A tall, handsome black man stood in the entry with his hands behind his back and a gentle smile on his face.

“You must be Mr. Montgomery?” Grace took a hopeful guess.

“Yes, Lamont Montgomery, and it’s very nice to meet you, Ms. Mitchell. You’re all that child talks about,” he nodded to Thad, who rolled his eyes.

“That ain’t true, Ms. G. I was talking about other stuff too, not just you.” Thad crossed his arms.

“Sure you were, kid, sure you were.” Grace rubbed his head, earning a boyish grin from him.

It was so good to be back.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“I’m so happy for you, baby.” Richard leaned across the restaurant table and kissed her cheek.

“Mm, thank you.” She beamed at him as he sat down.

“So how did that new desk feel today?” Richard teased as he entwined their hands.

“It felt amazing. I know I’ve said this a hundred times already, and you’re more than likely tired of it, but I’m so happy to have my job back.” Grace sighed in contentment.

“As long as you look just as you do now, I don’t care if you mention it a million times. I love seeing you happy, Grace. You look so peaceful.” Richard confessed, making Grace’s cheeks heat up.

After she finally spilled the beans and told Richard she loved him, they had been inseparable. Instead of just a designated dresser, he had a whole half of the closet and his own bathroom setup. They were an official couple now, and Grace couldn’t get enough. Waking up to him in the morning and going to bed with him at night were the highlights of her day.

She loved Richard with all her heart.

“That peaceful look also comes out when I sit on your face, just a heads up.” She joked, making Richard pinch her under the table.

“Aye, aye, save it for our bed-chamber, my lady.” Grace burst into a fit of laughter at his comment.

“Are you folks enjoying your meal?” Their waiter approached.

“Yes, everything is delicious, thank you.” Grace relayed as she cut into her savory lamb chops.

“Very glad to hear that, ma’am. And sir?” The waiter turned to Richard.

“Is it possible if we can get a bottle of wine?” Richard suggested.

“What year, and would you like red or white?” The waiter asked.

“Achateau red 87.” The waiter and Richard shared a look before the older man nodded without Grace seeing.

Achateau red 87’ did not exist but was code for something else.

“I’ll be back with your wine, sir.” The waiter departed the table.

“I’ve never heard of that wine brand before,” Grace spoke up as the waiter disappeared, making Richard choke on his spit.

“That’s because it’s, um, a really rare brand of wine.” Richard stammered nervously.

“From where?” Grace continued her line of questioning.

“Um, A chateau?” Richard mentally facepalmed.

“Richard, are...are you okay?” Grace asked in concern.

“I, uh, yes! Yea, of course, I’m okay, why wouldn’t I be?” Richard laughed out anxiously.

“Because you look like you’re about to melt any second with how bad you’re sweating. Are you feeling okay?” Grace stood a little and touched his forehead.

“I’m fine, gorgeous. Sit down, sit down.” Grace frowned as Richard waved her off.

“Richard,” she gave him a look, taking in the way his hands had started to shake.

“Here you are, sir and madam.” The waiter returned with an ice bucket holding their wine selection and two wine glasses.

He sat the ice bucket down before opening it carefully, a loud pop echoing over their table. The waiter poured their drinks before sitting the glasses in front of them. The waiter bowed then left, leaving the two alone.

“What?” Richard lifted a brow as Grace gave him a weird look.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” She inquired, brows furrowed.

“Yes, baby, I’m fine, just got a little hot for a second with all that talk about face-sitting.” Richard tried to hide his nerves with laughter.

Grace still peered at him in concern before nodding.

“Okay,” she shrugged a little before lifting her glass to her lips and taking a sip.

She was just about to sit her glass down when she noticed something sitting at the very bottom. “There’s something in my drink,” she mumbled before lifting it high.

Her curiosity made Richard smirk.

Grace squinted to get a better look, and when she realized what it really was, she looked at Richard with the biggest eyes.

“Richard, I..” Grace couldn’t speak nor comprehend what was going on.

Slowly, Richard reached over the table and took the glass from her hand. He poured the remaining wine into the ice bucket before dumping the princess cut diamond ring from the glass.

He dried it off, then motioned for her hand.

“Grace, these last six months have been amazing. I can’t think of my life without you, gorgeous. I wake up to your smile every morning, and it lets me know my day is already blessed. You give me happiness when I’m upset and comfort when I feel like I can’t go on. You make my world spin, and if I ever lost you, I’d fall off my axis. Grace Marie Mitchell, will you marry me and make me the happiest man on earth?” Richard got out of his seat and stepped over to Grace, getting on one knee.

“I,” Grace took a deep breath, her mind spinning.

Richard...was proposing to her.

Right now, with this ring.

This couldn’t be real!

“I-I-I,” she tried again, and the same thing happened. She was truly at a loss for words.

“C’mon, gorgeous, I can’t stay down here that long. I’m approaching 40 soon, and my knees know it,” Richard tried to tease to break the tension.

“Girl, say yes!” Someone on the lower level yelled up at them, making the restaurant break into laughter.

Tears pierced her eyes, and after a second or two, she nodded.

“Yes...Yes, Richard, I’ll marry you!” She cried out.

Richard hopped up so quick it made Grace question that knee joke. He slipped the ring on her finger and pulled her up into his arms. He kissed her deeply as the restaurant cheered them on. Grace released his lips and hugged him tight.

She deserved this.

All of this.

While the restaurant hooted and hollered for them, there was one lone patron sitting in the very back with his eyes dead set on Grace.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Grace clacked at the keys of her keyboard as she worked, still feeling giddy from this weekend's proposal. She couldn't believe she'd soon be Mrs. Richard Dixon... She was elated. Over the moon. Joyous. Every single synonym for happy, Grace embodied.

She was finally happy.

A smile lit her face at the thought as she worked. The unit door opened, and Grace heard the sound of running. She knew exactly who that was.

"Aye! Ms. G, look at your hair, girl." Thad entered her doorway with a surprised face.

"You like?" she touched her messy natural bun.

"I can't believe you took your twists out," Thad pouted as he marched over to her with an attitude.

"I wanted to, honey. I rocked those twists for almost half a year, so now it's time to let my hair breathe." Grace explained, but Thad still gave her the stank eye.

"I still like the twists," he murmured as he crashed on a chair opposite her desk.

“Yea, yea, yea. You’ll get used to it. How was therapy with Ms. Lynn?” She closed her work screen and gazed at Thad.

This was their little alone time where they could talk about whatever was on his mind.

“It was straight; Ms. Lynn gave me a lollipop afterwards.” He shrugged.

“What did y’all talk about?” Grace raised a brow.

Thad sucked his teeth and bounced his shoulders once more.

“Thad,” Grace gave him a look of concern.

“Ahh, c’mon now, Ms. G. Don’t look at me like that, like you scared.” Thad frowned.

He hated it when she looked like that.

It reminded him of when Mr. Tim grabbed her at the picnic a few months ago.

“I’m not scared, Thad, just worried. You shut down when certain things bother you. Did you and Ms. Lynn talk about something that upset you?” Grace switched up her approach.

Thad poked his mouth out as if he were thinking. “We was talkin about my momma,” he finally exposed.

“And what about her?” Grace rolled around her desk to get closer to him.

“How everything made me feel. Ya know, with... Rick.” Thad said his stepfather’s name slowly.

Ms. Lyn had told him a while back that when you talked about things that bothered you openly, they started to hurt a little less.

And...she was right.

He could finally say Rick’s name without getting mad or... thinking he was gay. He remembered when Mr. Montgomery first started working at St John’s, Thad would have never guessed he was gay. He saw him kissing his husband one night in the parking lot, some lil Asian man.

At first, it made him mad.

He didn’t want no fag watching over him, it could ‘rub’ off on him like Rick once said years ago, but after talking with Mr. Montgomery, Thad realized he was cool as heck.

He liked Mr. Montgomery.

He knew a lot about science and the Earth, and that intrigued Thad because he had always had a thing for science.

“And how does it make you feel, sweetie?” Grace raised a brow, reaching out to run his back.

“I... At first, I used to be real mad, Ms. G. Like, realllll mad. I wanted to fight, break stuff, talk back. But now,” Thad paused.

“And now?” Grace gauged.

“I don’t know? I guess it don’t bother me like it used to; I just be wanting to play and stuff now. I mean, I still be thinking about it but not as much, ya know?” Thad leaned into her arm with a yawn.

“Would you say you’ve come to terms with it now?” Grace wrapped her arms around him.

“Nah, I’ll never be alright with that shi- I mean, that stuff. I just don’t want to be angry no more, Ms. G. It takes a lot of energy to be mad.” Thad closed his eyes. Grace smiled.

That’s exactly what she wanted to hear.

“Do you want me to take you to the back so you can lay down?” Grace suggested.

“No, cause all they gonna do is check on me every 15 minutes, and that’s gon’ mess with my sleep.” Thad snuggled

in her arm.

“Then I guess you’re staying here?” Grace rubbed his hair that was cut into a low fade.

“Uh-huh,” Thad mumbled. Grace didn’t reply this time; just let him get comfortable and enjoy the soft sounds of his snores.

Thad slept a good 30 minutes before he woke up, gave her a hug then headed to the back for headcount. As she was waving goodbye, he noticed her ring and asked about it. When Grace told him Richard had proposed, he ran back to hug and congratulated her. Once he finally left, she went back to work. She peeked over at her cell as it lit up with Richard’s name. She hurriedly grabbed it and answered.

“Hi, gorgeous. How’s your day going?” He instantly greeted when she answered.

“It’s been good; Thad just left.” She relayed gently.

“How’s he?” Richard asked with interest.

“He’s doing a lot better, babe. I’m so proud of him.” Grace expressed fondly.

“Hey, don’t count me out. I’m proud of the little guy too, Mrs. Dixon. What’d you have for lunch? Is your stomach still bothering you?” Richard inquired, making Grace roll her eyes.

Yesterday, they went out for ice cream, and for some odd reason, she couldn't stand the taste of buttered pecan ice cream, even though it had been her favorite since she was a young girl. When they made it back home, her stomach was so upset she threw up everything she had eaten. Richard had wanted her to stay home today, but she refused, opting to come in to work.

“Nothing,” she rushed out, hoping he didn't catch it.

“You didn't take a break for lunch? Do you want me to bring you something before I clock back in?” Richard asked with concern.

“No, babe, I'm fine. I'll eat when I get home.” Grace reassured.

“... okay. I love you.” Her heart started thumping a mile a minute.

“I love you too, Richard. I'll see you at home.” Grace ended the call before getting back to work.

About 20 minutes passed before she paused and stretched. The sound of the unit door opening caught her attention. Footsteps echoed up the hall, growing closer with each step. Lamont appeared with a bouquet of gorgeous roses, stopping right in the middle of her doorway.

“It seems you've gotten a little something sent to you, Ms. G.” He held up the roses before walking fully into the

room.

Grace furrowed a brow before her expression morphed into a smile.

Oh, Richard...

“They’re from my fiance,” Grace stood and rounded her desk.

“Aww, the engagement phase is wonderful. Can never get enough of each other, but that all changes once you officially put a ring on it.” Lamont joked, causing Grace to cackle as she neared.

She accepted the roses and searched around for the note. Once she found it, she tore the tiny envelope open and slid the card out.

“What does it say?” Lamont lifted a curious brow.

“It says, congratulations on your engagement, Grace-Tim...” Grace froze, the card slipping from her hands.

“Grace, Grace, Grace!?” Lamont called in worry.

Grace quickly composed herself and bent down to retrieve the note.

“I, uh, have to go speak with Ms. Hoover.” She rushed off, leaving Lamont gazing after her with furrowed brows.

She raced to Mrs. Hoover’s office and knocked hurriedly.

“Come in,” Grace grabbed the doorknob and pushed it open.

“Grace, hey. What’s wrong?” Liliana sat up straight when she noticed Grace.

“This, this is what’s wrong. He’s sending flowers here.” Grace stepped forward and sat the cards on her desk.

Liliana picked it up and read it. She peered at Grace with big eyes.

“I can halt all deliveries from this flower company and make sure security is keeping a lookout of the faculty grounds. If he even thinks about stepping foot on St John’s, he’ll be hauled off to jail so fast, It’ll make his head spin. Teddy and I will not let him terrorize you, Grace.” Liliana said with determination.

Grace balled her lips in and nodded.

She crossed her arms in frustration and peeked down at her engagement ring. This was supposed to be a happy time, but as usual, Tim just had to ruin her peace. Uncrossing her arms, she smoothed down the front of her black A line dress as thoughts of Richard hit her. She could not let him know that

Tim was messing with her at work again. They were in such a good place, she didn't want to taint it. Grace couldn't tell him about this.

Any of this...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Grace kept telling herself she wouldn't tell Richard about Tim, but as soon as she made it home that night, he instantly knew. He could just tell by the sadness on her face. Fed up, he called a friend at the police department and had a restraining order written up. Now all they needed was a judge to sign off on it, and if they were going to achieve that, Grace had to tell the judge everything Tim had ever done.

And she did...

Grace told them everything, from the flowers he had delivered to her the day before, to him putting his hands on her in the hall of the outpatient unit. When the judge approved her petition, Grace was so relieved.

But she feared how Tim would react when served...

Flies floated around Tim's apartment as he sat on the floor near Denise's rotting body, polishing a pistol he had just bought from the gun store. When he was satisfied with his cleaning job, he switched the pistol for the AK that lay nearby. He was going to have his revenge and more. He knew Duran got someone to replace him and Sally, and that pissed him off more.

15 years!

He had given that place 15 years of his life, and they thought they could just get rid of him over some bitch!? Tim closed his eyes and let out a shaky sigh at his thoughts. Grace just didn't know the hell she had unleashed by playing with his feelings...

His career!

His anger caused his hands to tremble as he polished the AK.

"Calm down, shooty. You'll get your revenge in due to time," he looked down at Denise's still face as her voice echoed in her head.

"Shut the fuck up, Denise." He grumbled down at her.

"Tsk, tsk, didn't we already discussed this, lover boy? I'm not Denise but your conscience. You can't get rid of me, nor will I shut up, Tim. Now, finish polishing the guns so we

can hop online and search for some grenades.” His conscience chuckled.

Tim clenched his jaw, then began polishing his AK roughly. He jumped when a loud knock hit his door.

“Tim Sutton?” The knocking sounded again.

“Tim Sutton?” Tim held his AK close until the knocking stopped.

“Ugh, the fuck is that smell. I gotta get the hell out of here.” The process server said on the other end of the door as he covered his mouth with his shirt.

He bent down and slid the files through the crack under the door before straightening and rushing off. Tim eyes the files next to his hand with a raised brow. Slowly, he reached for them, reading what was printed across the top.

“Notice of stalking violence injunction,” his face went blank as he realized what he was holding.

It was a restraining order.

Grace had put out a restraining order on him? A low rumble fell from his lips, increasing as he kept replaying the thought. Grace had filed a fucking restraining order on him as if some piece of paper could keep them apart.

Oh, no...

She could and would never get away from him that easily. Angie was lucky; that bitch hopped to another state in the middle of the night as if he hadn't been watching her every move when she ran. But Grace wouldn't get a chance to disappear.

That is...if he wasn't the one making her disappear.

Tim spent days stockpiling guns and ammo, the restraining order only fueling his fire. Once the voice inside his head became too much to bear, he wrapped Denise's remains within a blanket and hid her under his bed.

He was tired of smelling her.

After a whole two weeks in the house, he finally went out into the world to see what Grace and her beef head were up to. Tim sat across the street from her house, watching intently as Grace and Richard carried groceries inside. When the door shut completely, Tim slid from his car, sharp knife in his hand. He rushed up to Grace's Saturn and stabbed all four tires before making his way back to his car. Just as he was getting out, Grace came back outside with a look of confusion on her face.

She journeyed to her car, opening the door in search of something.

When she couldn't find it, she shut the door and was about to turn when she noticed her flattened tires. A look of fear crossed her face, and Tim smiled in satisfaction.

“Richard!” She yelled.

“What!?” Richard ran outside with his hand on his gun holster.

“My tires,” Grace covered her mouth as she pointed.

Richard went over to the car and surveyed the damage, running his fingers along the lacerations. Tim took this moment as his advantage, cranking up his car and revving his engine loudly. He hit the gas and screeched down the empty street. Richard jumped up frantically as he sped past him. Tim smirked at Richard’s angry expression through his rearview mirror. When Tim made it back home, he unlocked his door and stepped inside, the scent of Denise’s decaying body hitting him. He scrunched up his face as he closed the door, then walked to his sofa and plopped down.

He reached for the remote and cut the television on, then kicked his legs up and got comfortable.

Grace knew it was Tim who flattened her tires the other day.

The event had left the house filled with tension, especially on Richard’s end. He had bought a new security alarm for her house and also moved them to his condo as an extra safety precaution. That way, if Tim did happen to break in one day, Grace would not be there and he wouldn’t know her whereabouts. All this crap involving Tim also had her feeling ill. Grace didn’t know if it were stress or being absolutely sick of going through this, but she knew she needed

to see a doctor. Every day she got up for work, she felt more exhausted than the day before. It was like she was constantly drained, and not even a red bull could help.

She finally made an appointment to come in today, and Richard was right by her side.

“Mitchell,” Grace stood quickly when the nurse called her name.

She and Richard stood, walking over to her. Richard rubbed Grace’s neck as the nurse guided them into the back. He had a hunch what was going on with her, but he wanted to be sure. He needed to be sure. Because if it was as he thought, he’d need to keep Grace and their child safe from that creep Sutton. But what Richard didn’t know was that he couldn’t keep Grace safe while she was at work.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Grace couldn't believe it.

She was... pregnant.

Two months to be exact. She and Richard got the news yesterday after her doctor's visit, and she was still processing the information.

Pregnant?

She was creating a whole little person inside her body. She truly was excited. When she was told, of course she worried about Tim finding out. The man was evidently unstable, and now everyone at St John's knew, plus the police and the courts. He wouldn't be as stupid as to still mess with her, would he? Grace tapped at her keyboard as she tried to bury the thought. She'd never give Tim the satisfaction of being able to hurt her child.

Ever!

He'd better stay away from her because Richard was dying to put two hot ones in his ass. Checking her clock, she saw that it was 12:04. She grabbed the lunch she had prepared in her brand new insulated lunch box before signing out. She stood and walked over and out of her open doorway.

“Heading to lunch?” Amber lifted a brow.

“Yea, you wanna join?” Grace asked as she stepped over to the door.

“Yes! I hate eating by myself.” She rushed up and followed Grace out.

The women journeyed to the cafe, where Bobby, Susan, and Lynn were waiting.

“I’m going to grab a plate, and I’ll be at the table in a sec,” Amber relayed, pulling out two crumpled five-dollar bills.

Grace nodded, and the young woman walked off toward the lunch line. Grace went over to the table and sat down.

“Hey, you guys. What’s going on?” She greeted as she unzipped her lunch bag.

“Nothing much, we just got here.” Lynn joked.

“How’s your day been going?” Susan asked as she took a bite of her yogurt.

“It’s been alright, can’t complain.” Grace conveyed as she took out her salad, water, and peach.

“Please don’t tell me you’re dieting like Sue boo over here,” Lynn nudged Susan playfully.

“No, just decided to bring my own lunch today since my stomach has been bothering me,” Grace relayed with a shrug.

“Hmm, interesting. Tell me more.” Lynn leaned forward.

“Oh, stop it, Lynn!” Grace waved her off.

“Listen, I remember when I had to start bringing my own lunch. I was pregnant with my twin boys.” Lynn threw Grace an ‘Mhmm’ face.

“Grace!” Susan gasped.

“Are you...are you, ya know?” Susan made a fake baby bump with her hands and pretended to waddle.

Grace burst out laughing.

“Susan, really?” Grace cackled.

“What!? I mean, now that Lynn mentioned it, your face is fuller.” The redhead exposed.

Grace furrowed a brow. Picking up her phone, she peered at her reflection. Susan was a little correct. Her cheeks had gotten bigger.

“Mmm,” Grace simply hummed, sitting the phone back down.

“Yep, she’s preggers. I see the good cop planted a little deputy, congrats.” Lynn cheered thoughtfully.

“Lynn! Shush!” Grace widened her eyes before looking around.

Good, nobody heard.

The last thing she needed was for her pregnancy to get out and around St John’s. Who knows who Tim still had connections with here.

“Um, Miss ma’am, you said you weren’t pregnant,” Lynn whispered in excitement.

“Um, Miss nosey, she never said she wasn’t.” Susan chimed in.

Lynn jerked her neck back, and Susan eyed her teasingly. “Okay, Sue. I see you’ve been working on your comebacks.” She laughed.

“I mean,” Susan huffed against her nails before rubbing them on her silver and black button-down.

Grace cackled at the two as she shook her head.

“Hi,” Amber reappeared at the table, and Grace waved her over to her end.

“Ladies, this is Amber, the new receptionist down at outpatient youth.” She introduced her.

Lynn and Susan made their greetings, then Amber sat. Grace peered at her tray, seeing that their meals were almost identical, except Amber chose an orange.

“So, Amber, how do you like it down at OP youth?” Lynn raised a brow.

“Oh, I love it, especially since I get to see the kids every day. They’re really sweet little people. I hate that they have to be here, though. No offense, if you know what I mean.” Amber put her hands up quickly.

“Girl, chill out, we get it. And trust us, we feel the same.” Lynn waved her off.

” How old are you, Amber?” Susan jumped in.

“24,” Amber smiled.

“Oh, wow. You’re young. What are you doing in a stuffy, boring place like this?” Susan chuckled.

“They were hiring,” Amber said seriously, causing the table to break down in laughter.

“Yo!” The women peeked behind themselves and saw Thad entering the cafe.

“Hey, Ms. G!” He walked over and hugged her around the next.

“Hey, sweetie. What have you been up to, and why isn’t an adult with you?” Grace questioned with a furrowed brow as she turned to face him.

“I was with Lamont, but he started tripping.” Thad poked his lips out.

“Tripping how?” Grace gave him a look.

“Man, calm down, Ms. G. Nothing like that. He just got in his feelings when I was joking with him.” Thad put a hand up.

“And what was the joke, boy? Ms. Lynn interjected.

Thad sucked his teeth.

“Thad, we’re waiting.” Susan raised a brow.

“All I asked was, ‘how’s the weather up’, and he started spazzing, saying I play too much,” Thad confessed.

Lynn balled her lips, trying her hardest not to laugh. Grace just stared at him blankly while Susan howled. Amber snorted in amusement then stuffed her mouth with salad.

What were they going to do with him?

“Have you eaten?” Grace asked, getting ready to reach into her pocket.

“Yea, Lamont bought me a happy meal earlier,” he nodded.

“Did you tell him thanks?” Ms. Lynn inquired with crossed arms.

“Yes, Ms. Lynn. I practiced my thanks and salutations, and all that good stuff.” Thad pursed his lips.

Okay, that made Grace laugh.

Long and hard.

“Thaddeus, what have I told you?” Lynn gave him the ‘look’.

“I’m sorry,” Thad plopped down on the opposite side of Grace.

“You’re forgiven. Now, how has your day been?” Lynn reached over and rubbed his head.

“Aight,” Thad bounced his shoulders a little.

“Boy, I pray for your future wife, cause Lord!” Lynn touched her face.

The table started laughing, including Thad. Their chortles died when what sounded like metal hitting metal erupted. The cafe chatter died down as the sound repeated itself.

Once.

Twice.

A third time...

The sound kept going off. Thad froze as he recognized the sounds.

That sounded like...a gun.

“Ms. G, I think that’s a gun,” he whispered in fear.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“What!?” Grace looked at him.

“That’s a gun,” tears built in his eyes. Grace looked from him to Lynn, who was gazing at them wide-eyed.

Susan couldn’t even comprehend what was said while Amber had a hand on her chest.

“Grace,” she uttered as her hands shook.

“Amber, what’s wrong?” She touched the young woman’s shoulder.

“He’s right... I-I-I’ve been in a school shooting before, and that sounds just like a pistol.” Amber described, and Grace began to feel absolutely sick.

“We have to get out of here and call the cops!” Grace jumped up, grabbing Thad’s hand.

“Somebody shooting, y’all!” Thad yelled, causing chatter to erupt again.

The sounds started growing closer, and that’s when everyone knew he wasn’t lying. People started running and bumping into each other as they tried to clear the cafe.

“No! No!” Grace yelled, putting her hand up.

Everyone halted and looked at her.

“I need everyone to listen to me. If the shooter is who I think he is, he’s coming for me. Just me. What I need you guys to do is stay calm, okay. I’m going to leave,” Grace started to explain, and Lynn and Susan looked at her as if she were crazy.

“Are you crazy!? You’re pregnant!” Lynn hollered.

Thad peered up at Grace in surprise.

Ms. G was pregnant?

She and Richard were going to have a baby?

When he first met Richard, he was a little sour. Ms. G was his. But as he got to know the guy, he found out he was pretty cool. Plus, the fact that he treated Grace like a queen was a bonus.

He liked him for her...

“Lynn, let me finish! I’m going to leave, and I need you guys to barricade the door with tables and chairs. I also need each and every one of you to call the police. I will too. Do you got it?” The whole cafe gazed at her in bewilderment.

“Am I understood!?” She yelled. People started shaking their heads and saying yes.

Dropping down, she grabbed Thad’s face.

“I need you to be a big boy and help block the doors. Once all the doors are blocked, you and the other kids hide behind the lunch counter, understand?” Thad could barely see for the fat tears running down his face.

Man, she couldn’t go out there alone!

There was no telling what Tim had on him.

“Grace, no! You gotta stay in here with us!” Grace huffed sadly when he used her full name.

He was scared for her, and she could tell because he never called her Grace.

“I’ll be fine; do exactly as I say. Ahh!” Grace jumped when an AK-47 went off.

Hopping up, she made her way to the back of the cafe and out the emergency exit. The gunshots grew faint as she started walking toward her iffy. She dialed 911 and waited as it rang.

“911, what’s your emergency?” The operator requested.

“Someone just opened fire at my job. I believe it’s my former supervisor.” Grace felt tears flowing down her face.

“What’s the location, ma’am. Do you know how many weapons he has?” The operator gauged.

“St john’s mental health center. Uh, I think two, pistol and an AK.” Grace made it to her office and rushed in.

Running to her office, she locked the door and slid up under her desk. “Okay, I’ve dispatched units to your location.

Would you mind staying on the line with me?” The operator asked.

“I don’t, I don’t. I, uh, I want to ask something, and if you can’t do it, I completely understand, but I need you to notify detective Dixon for me. He’s my fiance.

“Richard Fry Dixon?” The operator questioned in surprise.

“Yes, that Dixon.” Grace was trembling terribly.

“No problem! I’ll have someone call him now,” Grace sighed with relief. She halted when her doorknob jiggled.

“Grace!” She heard Thad’s voice and almost lost it.

She zoomed from under the table and opened the door, snatching him inside.

“What are you doing here!? Didn’t I tell you to stay in the cafe!” Grace fumed.

“I’m not about to let you get hurt, Grace.” Thad hugged her right thigh.

She was about to wrap her arms around him when the AK grew close.

“C’mon, get under the desk.” Grace ushered.

The huddled under the wooden desk as the shots grew closer and closer. Grace could hear people being hit, their bodies falling in the concrete. It was utter madness! She heard footsteps down the opposite end of the hall, coming from where the inpatient kids were housed.

“What’s... what’s going on?” She and Thad heard Lamont.

“Lamo-,” she was about to call when everything went silent.

The shots paused, and just like clockwork...the unit door opened.

“What the hell!?” Lamont yelled, then they heard running before a barrage of bullets.

A thump hit the ground, and Grace covered her mouth to conceal her scream.

“Grace,” her blood ran cold as Tim called to her.

“Where are you, Grace?” Tim inched over Lamont’s body and down the hall to her old office.

It was so fucking easy getting back into St John’s. All he had to do was off the fat slobs that acted as security, and everything was a piece of cake from then on. Once he got inside, he headed right toward the director’s office, after

killing the receptionist, and saw Duran's wife and gifted her with one clean shot to the chest. After that, he placed two in the new HR manager.

Now it was Grace's turn....

"Come out, come out, wherever you are." He backed out of her empty office.

Heading back up the hall, he paused when he came to the first office. Unlike all the other open doors, this one was closed. Aiming at the lock, he fired five shots within one second. The knob evaporated, and he kicked the door in. Grace and Thad screamed as he entered, causing him to sneer. Tim had on a regular dress shirt and slacks, but there was a bulletproof covering his chest and another AK strapped to his back.

"There you are!" He stomped over to her and pulled her from under her desk by her hair.

Grace cried out in pain, trying to free herself from his grip. He flung her into the floor, and Thad ran up, kicking him in the knee. Tim bent over in pain before straightening and placing his hand on the trigger.

"No!" Grace hopped up, throwing herself in the way of the bullets.

Thad's face went completely empty as he saw Grace laying before him, blood staining the pretty pink dress she had worn to work.

No... no!

“Grace!” He dropped down and grabbed her hand.

No, this couldn't happen!

She couldn't be hurt. She just couldn't. She and Richard were going to have a baby...

“Grace, please!” he started to shake her roughly, but she didn't budge. “

Look what you did, you little punk!” Tim roared, advancing on him.

That didn't even move as Tim kicked him. That kick barely phased him. He had been through worse.

“I wanted a little playtime before I offed her, and look at what the hell you did!” Tim kicked him again. When he saw it wasn't doing a damn thing, he scowled.

“You've always been a tough guy, huh? Well, let's s-,” Tim was about to aim his AK at Thad when the 911 operator stopped him.

“Sir, law enforcement is on their way, and everything is being recorded.” Walking over to the cracked iPhone, he scooped it up and placed it to his ear.

“By the time they come, all three of us will be dead.”
He ended the call and threw the phone at the wall, breaking the screen completely.

Thad noticed Grace’s fingers jerk at the sound of the breaking phone and he knew...she was still there. Her eyes fluttered, causing him to grow scared. Hurriedly, he threw himself over her face and pretended to cry.

“I fucking knew it, under that tough guy act was a little shit eater.” Tim cackled as he pulled out a pack of smokes and a lighter.

He placed a cigarette between his lips and lit it. Propping himself up against the door, he inhaled on his nicotine stick.

“Tha-” Grace wheezed lowly, hoping Tim couldn’t hear her.

“My...my purse.” She struggled to get out.

Thad swallowed and nodded.

He sat up and peered at Tim, who was still smoking, eyes scanning Grace’s new office in disdain.

“I can’t believe they gave her this fucking office when I had begged for it for months!” He ranted.

Thad turned and peered under the desk, seeing Grace's purse wide open. He observed a hot pink Arun gun poking out, and a purple bottle of pepper spray disguised as lipstick. He knew it was pepper spray because his momma used to have one just like it. If he could just get to it without Tim blowing his face off, maybe he could...lure him away from Grace.

"Mr. Tim?" Thad called to the maniac.

"What?" Tim raised a brow.

"Can I, can I get Ms. G's sweater and cover her with it? I don't want to look at her like this," Thad frowned.

Tim eyes him before looking at Grace spiraled out on her side, blood seeping from under her. If only that bitch would have given him a chance, she'd still be alive.

"Fine, but no funny stuff, Thad. I'll blow your ass to Timbuktu if you play with me." Tim scowled.

Thad nodded before he got up and went over Grace's belongings on the floor. He scooped up her sweater and started to walk off but pretended to drop it. It fell over Grace's purse, and Thad slipped up her pepper spray. He made his way back over to Grace, sitting by her side. He covered her quickly, disguising her fluttering eyes, then tucked the pepper spray by Grace's thigh. A few seconds of silence passed, and Thad began to put his plan into action.

"Aye, Mr. Tim," he glanced at Tim.

“What punk?’ Tim flicked the butt of his cigarette.

“Why...why you killing everybody?” Thad questioned apprehensively.

“Because, when you become a man and find out how it feels to get passed over for men not as equally good as you, you’ll see then, kid. If, and that’s a big if, I let you live.” Tim smirked.

“So wait,” Thad held up a hand.

“You’re doing this because Grace didn’t want you?” he asked with a confused look on his face.

“What did you say, you little punk?” Tim pushed off the wall and walked over to Thad, who clutched the pepper spray he had hidden.

Tim went to aim, and Thad quickly shot him with the spray. He took off out the room, knowing Tim would follow him. Tim screamed in agony as the spray burned his blue eyes. “That’s it! I’ve been dying to blow your ass away since you came to St John’s!” He roared as he opened his now red eyes. Tim chased him out of the room and out of the unit exit.

“Freeze!” Tim froze when he came face to face with the Atlanta PD SWAT team.

They had their snipers right on his head. He noticed Richard making his way through the herd of cops, his gun also aimed at him.

“Drop your weapon and get on the ground, place your hands behind your head,” Richard ordered.

Tim slowly got on his knees with a smirk.

“She’s already dead, lover boy.” he boasted, causing Richard to walk up to him and smash the butt of his gun into his face.

Blood flew everywhere, and Tim laughed maniacally.

“I get the last laugh,” he chuckled out of control.

“No, I do.” Thad and Richard turned to see Grace leaned against the door frame of the unit, holding her bloody arm.

Tim’s laughter ceased immediately as he saw her standing there.

“Grace!” Thad and Richard ran over to her.

“You’re not dead!” Thad hugged her right. Grace patted his back.

“You were so brave, Thad. I’m so proud of you.” Grace relayed tiredly.

When she jumped in the way of the bullets, they had thankfully hit her arm and not her midsection. She just played it off like she was hurt badly to get Tim to back off.

“Grace, I... I was so fucking worried.” Richard engulfed the both of them.

When he got the call from dispatch, he drove over himself and saw the chaos that was happening. Luckily, Atlanta PDs SWAT team had already arrived. “I know... I love you, Richard.” Grace huffed.

“Ditto, kid. C’mon, let’s get you two checked out and handed.” Richard pulled back and kissed her forehead.

“No! No! I killed you!” Tim ranted as he was arrested. Grace gave him a glare as she passed. “I killed you!” His yells floated after. He tried to kill her but failed by the Grace of God.

THE END



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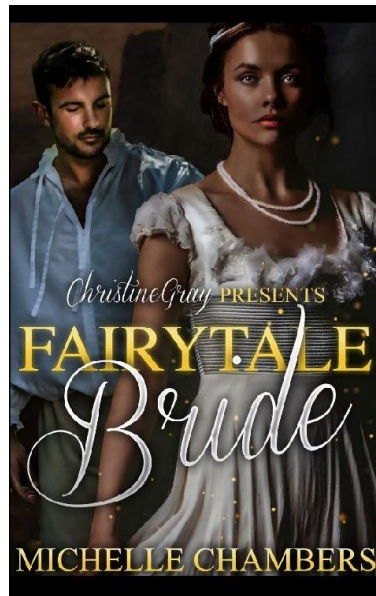
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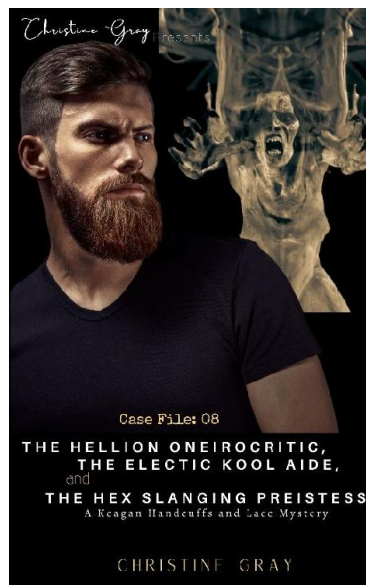
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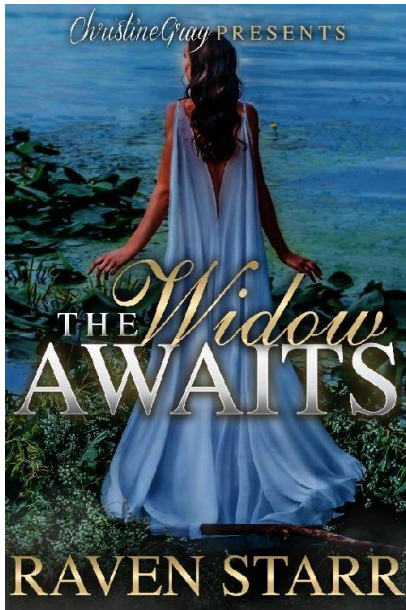
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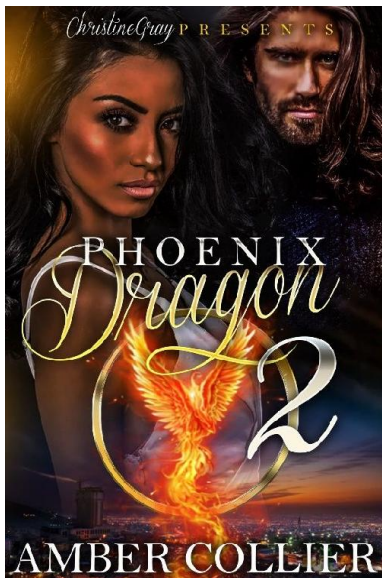
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