

Worst Decision

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Grace

When I wake up the next morning, Tristin is already gone. There is no trace of him left in my apartment, other than his lingering cologne.

For some reason, it makes me sad. He could have stayed to say goodbye, or at least left a note but there is nothing.

I sulk in the shower, in the kitchen as I prepare my coffee, and in the lounge as I flip through different channels.

It's the weekend and I don't have anything to do. Maybe, I should call Celine and see what she is doing today.

I ponder over it for a while before I pick up my phone and open the messaging app. But, my fingers freeze on my screen when I see a new message from an unknown number.

—You look beautiful when you sleep, Little Butterfly.

An unconscious smile touches my lips. An image is attached under the message.

As the picture loads, my eyes narrow into slits. Asshole! I huff.

It's me, in bed, pouting, and my hair all over the place. Does this look beautiful to Tristin?

As my fingers move across the keyboard typing an instinctive message, another message from him makes me stop.

—I took a photo and will keep it with me until we meet again. Don't curse me. I need to see you up close all the time.

My shoulders relax. What man says such cheesy things? My cheeks warm as I exit his chat and text Celine.

—Are you up?

She usually replies right away, but even after waiting for five minutes, I receive no response from her side. I don't think much of it and continue to scroll through the articles.

Tristin's PR team took down the news, but as Tristin said, people are already talking about it.

His company has given its public statement, and they have claimed that the video is fake and an attempt to tarnish the reputation of Roberto family. There is some backlash but because no one has the original copy, it can not be proved that the video is not fake.

I can see that the PR team is actively tackling the backlash too, but I know it will take some time for this scandal to die.

Or maybe, all they need is a bigger scandal and it will all be forgotten by people instantly.

As for the executives of RB, that's another case. They will use this scandal to push Tristin to his limits and blame him for the stock price drops.

Worry gnaws at my guts. I trust Tristin to deal with this problem but after seeing how he was last night...



I don't want people to bother him too much.

I open his chat again and type a simple message.

—You can keep it.

There is no reply, but he has seen it. It brings a soft smile to my lips before I return to mindlessly flip through TV channels. It's all in French and I don't understand much, but the noise makes me feel less lonely.

When I get tired, I decide to clean my apartment but stop after I receive a call from an unknown number. Without thinking much, I pick it up.

" Hello? "

Silence meets me on the other side. Instinctively, goosebumps rise on my arms and I make a move to disconnect but the voice that sounds from the speaker makes me pause.

" Grace. "

My fingers freeze, just as my heart drops in the pit of my stomach. " Mom. "

" Don't hang up. Listen to me. " She cries out desperately.

I frown, wondering how she knew I was about to hang up on her.

" How did you get this number? " My frown deepens.

" Grace, your father is sick. " She sobs on the other side.



I look at the center table, at my empty mug, and my grip tightens over my phone. "What does that have to do with me? Dad disowned me? Don't you remember?"

She snuffles, going silent for a few seconds. I decide to hang up again, but something stops me.

"You still call me Mom." She whispers quietly. "and you still call him your Dad. We are your parents, Grace. That's a bond you can never disown."

"But you did." A lump forms in my throat. "or maybe, you never considered me your daughter."

"That's not true! You have always been our daughter. Just like Lily is." Her cries grow louder at the name of her favorite daughter. "and now she is missing. We don't want to lose you too, Grace. Your Dad can not die in peace without seeing either of you."

I scoff. "don't use this emotional tactic on me. I no longer fall victim to it, Mrs. Whitlock. What do you really want? Come to the point."

Her snuffles instantly stop and the act ends. A moment of silence, and then her curt voice sounds from the speaker.

"We were destroyed because of you! Now, we are in debt and running from people that are after us. Your Dad and I are close to your apartment right now. Come meet us here and give us some money."

"What?" My breath catches in my throat.



" We raised you, fed you, gave you everything you ever wanted! Do you think everyone can afford the lifestyle you did? Do you think it was cheap?!" She hisses, her voice becoming harsher.

" So...it's about payback. You want me to pay you back the money you spent in raising me. " I like to think that my nerves have become steel now, but...it still hurts somewhere deep down in my chest.

" You have never contributed anything to our family, Grace. It's only right that you help us out now. " She states as a matter of fact.

" Well...just so you know...I don't have that kind of money to pay your debts. " I shrug. " Whitlock Corp went bankrupt and the price of my stocks plummeted. I didn't get much by selling them. "

She goes silent again. The wheels must be turning in her head.

" How did you get my number and how do you know where I live? " I ask again.

" We lost the company but not the connections. It's not hard to find you when you are going around showing your talent at your University. " She sneers hatefully.

Something tells me that she is lying, but I don't need to dwell on it. I have no reason to get involved with them again.

" If that's all— "

" Just give us something to survive here. Your Dad's assets are frozen and we can not access any of his hidden money right now. Come to Atlanta Cafe and give us money to spend for a few days. "

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She orders.

" Mrs. Whitlock— "

" Come meet us in an hour if you don't want me to make a scene at the place where you study. You don't want your friends to know that you are a cold-hearted bitch, do you? " She yells and hangs up before I can reply.

Anger burns in my veins, and I stay still for a lot of time. But when the hour is close to end, I drag myself to the Cafe without a word. 1

We need to talk. Face to face.

I need to get them off my back before they make a scene.

That choice...proves to be my worst decision. 1



Taken

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Grace

So many people have found out about me staying here somehow. It's time I change this place too and find somewhere else to go.

But then...

How far can I run before they hunt me down again?

How much time can I spend hiding only for someone to start threatening me again?

I ponder, standing on the sidewalk and staring at the Cafe in front of me. The night has fallen and the streets have turned cold.

The glass wall of the Cafe gives the perfect view of my parents sitting on the table. Like me, they are also staring back at me. The disdain in their eyes is so clear even here.

Standing on the dark side, I heave a heavy breath and narrow my eyes.

Now, how do I go about this?

If I give them money and let them know I am scared of their threats, they will continue using my weaknesses against me.

Maybe, I should use Lily as a bargaining chip. I can tell them that I know where she is and she will only be alright as long as they leave me alone.



That will bring about two results.

A—They will leave me alone which is highly unlikely

B—They will pester me even more because I know about their daughter's whereabouts which is more likely given that they are vile in nature.

I sigh and look up. The traffic light has turned red. It's time for me to make things work somehow.

I step down from the footpath and onto the silent, dark road. Just as I reach the middle of it, a car rushes forward. Its tires skid to a stop in front of me, blocking my view of my parents.

Without giving me a chance to recover, two hands shoot out and drag me inside. My heartbeat escalates, my survival instincts kick in and I start thrashing right away.

From the corner of my eyes, I look out of the other window of the old van and freeze. My parents are still watching. As our eyes meet, they stay frozen, neutral, and...unmoving.

A hand clamps around my mouth, slamming a wet cloth there. I fight harder and try to scream as panic bubbles in my chest but the hands on my body are brutal, and the force of the cloth around my mouth makes it hard to breathe.

Slowly, my heartbeat slows down. My eyes droop and my energy drains from my body, leaving me limp.

Before I lose my grip on my consciousness, I see my parent's blurred



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faces, as the van zooms past the Cafe, and leaves them behind.

I know.

They planned this.

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It feels like I keep slipping in and out of consciousness, struggling to move but restrained by large hands.

I see men but their faces are blurred.

Everything goes black.

My mind fights again, and I see myself floating.

A plane.

The cloudy sky.

Yelling voices.

Hushed whispers.

My head is spinning.

A syringe in my arm.

And my head stops spinning.

I fight once more.

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My eyes open.

My vision blurs.

I breathe, I struggle, I panic.

Another syringe.

A sting in my wrists, my ankles, the side of my face.

The desperation, the fear, the survival instincts—all in vain.

I am sleeping again.

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Cold water splashes across my face and I gasp. My limbs start thrashing as if they know that I must run and free myself. But no matter how much I twist, I can not move. 2

My hands and feet are tied to a dirty chair. My head snaps up, my hair falling around my face and covering my cheeks.

My vision takes a few minutes to restore while I struggle to make out the voices around me. A hand slams into the side of my head, and I fall onto the floor with the chair.

A sharp cry escapes my mouth. This is all it takes to get rid of the heavy sensation inside my head. I am awake—painfully aware of whatever is happening to me.

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Hands pull the chair upright, and my weight shifts onto my butt again. I gasp, pick up my head, and look around.

I am inside a dark run-down warehouse. Dirty boxes line up the surroundings, making everything appear scary.

My heart pounds inside my chest as my gaze stops at the men around me. They are dressed in black, wearing masks over their faces to cover their features.

"Can you hear me now?" One of them stands in front of me and snarls.

I jerk in my spot, nodding my head quickly.

I am going to be sick. A voice inside my head chants.

"Good." He nods, his voice loud and rough.

I try to speak, to ask what they want but my throat is too dry. My insides ache, and it feels like my limbs are broken, or just too weak with dread.

With my wide eyes, I scan my surroundings once more before finally looking down at my burning arms. Bile rises to my mouth, but nothing spills out. 1

My wrists are bleeding under the ropes. The blood has seeped into my off-white sweater, the sweater with the heart in the middle, the same that Tristin helped me wear. 1

There is so much blood. I wonder how I am conscious. I don't

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understand why I can't feel it as badly as I should.

It hurts, yes. But I feel more scared than in pain.

The man in front of me speaks something but my eyes lower to my neck. There is blood on my collar too. Where else am I bleeding from? 1

Maybe, it's my nose, or my cheek, or my lips. Or perhaps, everything is broken.

A hand grabs my hair and twists my neck back. The same masked man yells at me as our eyes meet. "Speak!"

"Ms. Whitlock?" A deep, soft voice calls from the speaker of a phone clenched between the man's hand.

I open my mouth to say something, but a metallic taste on my tongue makes me pause.

I don't recognize this voice. It's not Ethan. It's not Tristin. It's not my Dad.

"I am hoping your journey back home was comfortable." He chuckles.

My eyes widen. Am I back? How...

"Hello, Ms. Whitlock? Why are you not saying something?" His laughter dies as his voice takes on a dangerous edge.

"Did you cut her tongue, you idiot?" The man on the phone yells, startling me.

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" No, Boss. " The masked man replies.

Scared, I lift my gaze just in time for his heavy palm to land against my cheek, knocking down the chair again.

My head hits the floor so hard that my jaw rattles with the impact. I gasp for air, to subside the pain, to regain my senses but my vision is starting to blacken.

The chair is pulled straight and cold water splashes all over my face. He fists my hair and shakes my aching head around wildly, almost breaking my neck in the way.

" Speak, Bitch! " He yells angrily.

" What— " I yelp, finding my lost voice. It's scratchy, but I can speak.



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