

I don't love you

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Grace

Tristin's arms tighten around me, pulling me close, his breath warm against my ear.

I try to see what has happened, who was shot, but Tristin doesn't let me.

"Stay still." He whispers. "Just stay like this."

I breathe in his masculine cologne and feel his heart beating in sync with mine.

It feels like the chaos has ended. I am safe now. Nothing more will happen.

I pant against his chest and close my eyes. The pain in my body is slowly starting to register in my head and...

It hurts like hell.

Running footsteps sound around me. I open my eyes and forcefully pull my head out of Tristin's chest.

The masked man is limping towards the other side of the warehouse, and Ethan is after him, his gun raised to aim for the man's back.

My heart drowns, as another gunshot sounds. The bullet lodges into the man's back and he drops to the ground, blood pooling around his dead body.

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In a moment when Tristin has chosen to reach for me, Ethan decided that taking his anger out on that man and killing him is more important.

Powerful men are all alike—I no longer believe in what I said before.

Where Ethan is always trying to get back at others, Tristin often tries to protect his own.

That's why, Tristin chose to come to me and Ethan chose to chase the man who held the gun to my temples.

I have no doubt that even if I was shot and dying here, Ethan would have chosen to hurt that man first before thinking about reaching me.

And, I don't hate Ethan for it.

He is just someone like that. And now, I understand that we were never compatible.

I gasp as pain erupts in my wrists. I look away from Ethan and at my hands which are now held by Tristin. He is inspecting my wounds before moving towards cutting the ropes around my ankles.

My mind spins with the intensity of pain as blood rushes to my limbs. I blink, trying to keep my eyes open.

"You will be fine." Tristin is murmuring in a trance. "I am taking you to the hospital. You will be perfectly fine. Nothing will happen to you."

He is trying to assure me, but he looks more terrified than me.

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Hurriedly, Tristin picks me up in his arms just as he is done releasing me. My face nuzzles in his neck and I let the thoughts of the world disappear from my head.

He is walking away, without caring about what mess is left behind. Suddenly, a thought strikes me.

"Tristin!" I call out, panic clear in my voice as I cling to him. "We need to get Celine out!"

My eyes meet the side of his face. Tristin's jaw tightens, a flicker of annoyance flashing across his eyes. I don't understand this sudden reaction.

"Luca!" Tristin calls out to him over his shoulder.

"Yes, Boss." Luca's voice sounds from behind us.

"Get Celine out of here." Tristin orders, a vein ticking in his jaw. "Get her to the hospital and make sure she is taken care of."

I peek around Tristin's shoulder and watch Luca approach Celine on the ground. He unties her swiftly and helps her up. My heart aches with worry but I know she will be fine with Luca.

As we make our way toward the exit, Ethan appears in our path. I gasp and watch the look of frustration on his face.

"Grace." A dark emotion passes through his eyes when his gaze switches between me and Tristin's narrowed eyes. "You need to come with me."

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I shake my head instantly.

"I am grateful to you, Ethan. Thanks for coming to save me." I whisper, my throat still hurting. My eyes lower to his hands and the blood on them makes my heart skip a beat. "but I don't want anything to do with you. I told you before. We are over. And we won't start these games again."

For the first time, I see a look of pleading in Ethan's eyes. It feels like I am staring at my past self who was always begging and pleading with him to accompany me, to listen to me, to believe me.

I turn away, disregarding his emotions not because I want revenge, but because I feel nothing for him no matter what he does.

Tristin tightens his hold around me possessively. "if you are done, get out of my way."

Ethan stands his ground, and my head keeps spinning. I don't want these two to start fighting again. I have no energy to deal with tantrums.

"We are leaving." Tristin announces, his lips curling in a smile as he looks over his shoulder. "Luca, bring Celine with us."

I don't know why he is repeating the same order, but to my surprise, Ethan's gaze follows Tristin's eyes and he steps out of our way right away.

Tristin starts walking again and carries me to the car waiting for us outside. The fresh air sends my head into a numbing trance.

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Dizziness washes over me and I find myself giving in to the pain.

Tristin places me on the seat gently and takes his spot beside me and then he is pulling me into his lap. His hands reach for my cuts and bruises, his touch soft and his eyes displaying different emotions.

"You are hurt because of me." He whispers in a daze.

"I am fine." I whisper back, finding it hard to suppress the pain now.

As the car starts, and his warmth surrounds me, I give into exhaustion.

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When I wake up, a familiar white ceiling is peering back at me. I register that I am in the hospital faster than I should have and panic almost bubbles inside my chest.

My body aches, and I feel disoriented as I slowly sit up, wincing at the pain that spreads throughout my limbs.

Tristin is sitting by my bedside, his face a mask of worry and relief. His eyes are red-rimmed, and there is a look of profound exhaustion etched into his features.

When he sees me stir, his eyes soften, and he moves closer, taking my hand in his.

This all feels so strange. Just like that night. I don't know how to

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deal with all this. A part of me knows this is wrong. I promised Alma that I would leave her son alone, but another selfish part of me wants to stay by his side a little longer and disregard the morals I always held onto.

"You are awake." His fingers brush over my bangs, slipping my hair behind my ears. His touch is warm and soothing, making me relax and continue to stare at him.

"You fell unconscious." Tristin explains even before I can ask anything. "The doctors said you are okay. You just need to eat something and rest to regain your energy."

I nod, my gaze lowering to my bandaged wrists. I run my fingers along the bandage on the right wrist and sigh.

I whisper. "Celine... is she okay?"

Tristin's eyes darken for some reason before he nods. "She is fine. Luca got her out safely. She's in another room. She is recovering."

Something about the way Tristin talks about her tells me I am missing a point. I should ask him...but not right now.

I let out a sigh, and rest back on the pillow. My mind drifts to the thoughts of my parents, and pain threatens to consume.

"They did this." I whisper in a hoarse voice as Tristin grabs a glass of water from the sidetable.

He helps me take a few sips, his face going back to the mask of emotionlessness.

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When he places the glass back, I sigh and look at the ceiling. " My parents called me to the cafe. They... "

" Carlos told them about Lily and us. They wanted to get back at you and me. That's why they did. " Tristin reveals in a rough voice.

My eyes widen and fix on him. " They... "

I don't know what to say. Sometimes, I want to get a paternity test to find out if I am their daughter or not, but inevitably, our features match so much that no such test is required.

They are my real parents.

But they never wanted me or needed me.

Tristin's expression softens again, and he leans closer, his fingers gently brushing against the back of my hand. " I was...scared. It's not common for me to feel that emotion but...I was really scared. "

I stare at him, letting myself be selfish for a little while longer. I watch as he kisses the back of my hand, then the bandage over my wrist, and closes his eyes momentarily.

When the emotions become overwhelming for me, I pull my hand to my side and lie down again. Something is twisting inside my heart.

This is wrong. 1

It's nearly a sin to fall for Tristin Roberto.

" What happened to Carlos? " I wonder, changing the topic.

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Tristin stares at his empty hand for a moment, then looks up, his eyes gleaming with darkness. "He got what he deserved like he should have a long time ago."

I don't have the heart to ask what it is. I don't want to know.

"He came after me because he thought you were my boyfriend, Tristin." I prepare myself for the inevitable.

I have indulged myself too much.

"I...I am sorry. I should have protected you better." He clenches his hands and pulls them to his side.

"No, Tristin." I blink, removing all traces of emotions from my face. "You should have simply stayed away from me from the start."

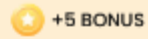
"Grace, I..." Tristin trails off, his eyes flickering towards my fisted hands. "You know now. I can not do that. I love—"

"I don't." I interrupt him. "I don't love you, Tristin. And...I don't want to be with you. I don't want you to come to me when you are having a hard time or when you are happy. I want you to...stay away even if you can't forget about me, so I can live in peace."

He doesn't say anything. I don't say anything.

He doesn't see his mother standing in the doorway behind him, but I do.

And seeing her has reminded me of what must be done.



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I admit. A little part of me likes him a lot, but there is no way we can be together. A man who can give up his position for me, who can fight his family for me, who can risk his life for me...

He can give everything.

But what can I give him?

Nothing. ²

That's a brutal truth and I will not continue to forget about it.



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