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Red Stream
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FFTT creative project

GRACE

(Continuation from the last page)

Grace gathers her courage, finds her voice.

“Milly?” she says.

Peach looks up.

She sees Grace.

And she smiles.

And it breaks Grace’s heart.

Over and over and over again. Ripped out of her chest and stomped on by a beautiful smile. A smile that could have been hers but she gave it away. No matter who’s blood is in Peach, she isn’t Grace’s. And she never will be. She will forever be Catalina’s and Daniel’s. The perfect baby for the perfect family.

That’s why keeping Peach was never an option. She was perfect. Perfect hair, perfect lips, perfect legs, and perfect tiny little toes. And Grace was anything but perfect. Peach deserved so much more. More than Grace. More than always having to know that your father left because of you. More than being made fun of because your mom had you when she was only 16.

She deserved the universe, and Grace was just a measly little star.

So dim in the brightest blanket of black.

16 Years Later

MILLY

Milly had always had the option to reach out to Grace. Her mom and dad had always told her, always made sure she knew that Grace was always an option. She could always call or email her. If *she* wanted to. It had always been up to Milly.

Her mom and dad had always made it known that Grace did not abandon her. Just that she didn't want to impose, or make it seem like she was trying to take Milly away from Catalina and Daniel. But she *didn't* abandon her. That was clear. Because Grace loved Milly. She sent her birthday cards, and Christmas cards with a picture of Grace, Rafe (her fiance), and Melissa (their incredibly cute German shepherd, although Milly had always found the name odd). Because Grace loved Milly. She truly did and Milly knew it.

It didn't necessarily surprise Daniel and Catalina when Milly told them that she wanted to reach out to Grace. Actually, reach out. Meet her, touch her, look at her and think "Huh, we have the same lips", to know Grace, to see if hugging her felt any different than hugging Catalina.

And so they helped. Just like they always said they would. It's easy though because they already know where Grace lives. It has been one of the only addresses in their address book for years. Daniel came back from his office and handed Milly the book. She took it and ran to her room. When she flips open the book, the street name and house number stand so bold against the rest. The page smooth from the countless times Milly has rubbed her fingers against it. And she smiles. Because she is finally ready to hug Grace.

And see someone who looks like her.

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Grace and Rafe look so happy together. At least from what Milly can tell, glancing in through their window. Sitting together on the couch, laughing. Milly wondered if someone would ever look at her the way Rafe was looking at Grace. She wondered what Grace had gone through to *get* someone to look at her like that. But Rafe wasn't Milly's dad, she knew that much. Milly wasn't Mexican. But deep down there was no denying the fact that Milly felt something for this little family. She felt something for a woman, man, and dog she had never met, but she liked the way she felt. She felt energized and excited. She felt like she could take on the world and the world would welcome it.

But at the same time, she felt like her worst fears were coming true. The world was falling down all around her and she wasn't strong enough to hold it up. What if when she knocked on the door all the joy and warmth in the house got cut short? Like it wasn't meant to be experienced with Milly. Just because Grace didn't "abandon" her, who's to say her life isn't better off without her?

Worst of all Milly was all alone. She had no other siblings to be strong with her. To be weak with her. She didn't want Daniel and Catalina to come with her because then she wouldn't actually be able to *meet* Grace. Only talk to her.

What if Grace didn't even invite Milly inside?

Milly gathered her courage, went up to the front porch. Her hand in a fist inches away from the door, ready to knock, when the door opened.

It was Grace, and she invited Milly inside.

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Grace and Rafe were effortlessly nice. Talking to them felt like talking to family friends. They were patient and kind. And willing to answer every question that had been living in Milly's head for the past 10 years or so. They even let Milly eat dinner with them (although it would be odd if they ate dinner while Milly just sat there in silence, watching them).

Their house was very warm and welcoming. Pictures of Rafe and Grace on the fireplace mantel and walls. But one picture caught Milly's eye. It was a little boy and a pregnant woman. They were both smiling, and Milly could see some of Grace's features in the Lady.

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After dinner, Rafe left the two of them to sit in the living room and talk.

Milly kind of wanted to punch him after that.

But Grace was calm and gentle. She understood, after all, she was also adopted.

"Milly, you do know that if I could have kept you, I would have, right?"

Milly nods.

"I absolutely would have kept you."

Milly opens her mouth, then closes it.

"What is it, Milly?"

"Can you just- can you just tell me everything?"

And so Grace did. She started from the beginning when Milly was trying to shove her way out of Grace's body, while her dad, Max, was at homecoming. She told her about the nickname Peach. She told Milly how after she went home with Catalina and Daniel, Grace would lock herself in her room. She told Milly how she thought everything over once Milly was gone. She told her about reaching out to Joaquin and Maya (her siblings). She told Milly how scared she was that Milly would think of Grace the same way Joaquin and Maya thought of Melissa (their biological mother, now Milly didn't find the name odd for their German Shepard anymore). She told her about meeting Rafe after she had fought this kid at school. She told her about Maya's mom's accident. She told her about going to Melissa's house and finding out she died. The pictures in the safe deposit box. She told Milly how Rafe had become a light sleeper because Grace would wake up from nightmares about Milly hating her.

And by the end of it, they were both crying. Milly felt bad for causing Grace so much pain, and the countless times she doubted herself and her actions. She felt bad that Grace could probably see parts of Max in Milly. She felt bad that Grace thought she would be angry with her. Milly understood why Grace had given her up. She would have done the same thing. Sure Milly felt bad now, but she would have felt worse if Grace didn't give Milly up for adoption. Because then what would have happened to Grace? She wouldn't have met Rafe, she might not have reached out to Maya and Joaquin. And Milly didn't want that on her conscience.

Milly wasn't Grace's. But she wasn't really Catalina and Daniels. In 2 years she would be her own person entirely. An adult. Ready to make her own mistakes.

Before Milly left, Grace pulled her into a hug. And it felt as if they had been trying to hug for 16 years, only reaching each other now.

And it did feel different than Catalina's hugs.