

PEACE OF MIND

By Abigail Miller

He's going to kill her.

That's Grace's first thought as she stares at Camilla's shoulders, exposed by the cutouts of her blouse. Once pale and flawless skin now freckled by dark yellow, red and purple welts. Camilla winces as Grace's fingertips graze over the blemishes that mar her neck and upper arms.

Grace chokes back a fierce rage, mouth tight as she wills herself to be still. To avoid reacting until she has a chance to process what she's seeing. But Grace's eyes don't listen – they begin to sob on behalf of her heavy tongue. Warm drops fall in silence, tumbling down cold, expressionless cheeks. For a moment, Grace allows her fingers to glide from bruise to bruise, keeping her touch feather-light and counting the violations as she goes.

Seven...eight...nine.

"Cammy – what happened?" Grace asks, her voice barely a whisper as she fights to control something ugly stirring deep inside, low in her stomach. But Camilla's silence distracts Grace from that stirring. Grace tries once more to catch her younger sister's eye, but Camilla won't look at her. Instead, she's fixed on the dancing flame of the lit candle on the coffee table as she sits on the edge of the sofa.

"I like this scent, Gracie," she says, a gentle smile resting on the corner of her lip. But Grace can't find that smile anywhere else on her face. It's not hiding in her eyes the way it used to, nor resting on her cheeks. It isn't right.

"Cammy, focus," Grace pleads. "I need you to tell me what happened."

"It's nicer than your last one," Camilla sighs. "Not as musky."

Grace's jaw tenses as the candle's melting wax fills her small, one-bedroom apartment with comforting notes of windflower and foxglove. "Cam – please," Grace begs once more.

But Camilla is fixated on the tiny flame as it leaps and tumbles on its wick. "Did you know that you can put out a candle with your fingers? It won't burn as long as you do it quickly," she sings, never looking away from its glow. "But you can't hesitate. If you're afraid, it'll hurt you," she warns, tone darkening.

"Cam," Grace sighs, raising a gentle hand to her sister's cheek. Camilla flinches, earning a frown from Grace. But that one movement answers her question before she even needs to ask. "Cammy," Grace questions anyway. "Did he hit you?" Camilla sits still as stone, concentrated on the candle. "I need you to tell me. Did Travis hit you?" Grace begs. At the mention of her fiancée's name, Grace sees a small flare of Camilla's nostril and a tiny flex of the muscle in her cheek. Confirmation.

"No."

Grace's lips part in protest. How could Camilla lie so easily? To *her*, of all people?

"Oh God, Cam," Grace shudders, exhaling sharply. "How many times?" Camilla's gaze glazes over as crystalline beads roll down her face. They catch in the light of the candle, glittering like gems on a broken chandelier. "I'm calling Jackson," Grace says, standing from the second-hand sofa. But she doesn't make it far before Camilla's cold fingers wrap around her wrist, tugging like a child clinging desperately to her mother's hem. Grace glances down to find grey eyes pleading with her.

"No," she whispers, her voice hoarse. Broken. "It was an accident, Gracie. Really, he...he didn't mean to." Grace stares open-mouthed at her sister, whose guilty gaze drops to her own hands. "He apologized."

That stir in Grace's stomach lifts its head once more, slowly unfurling and clawing its way into her chest where it settles in her lungs. It fills her with a rage burning so intensely she imagines tendrils of smoke must be curling from her nose as flames leak from her lips.

"Cammy," Grace hisses. "This wasn't an accident. People don't...they don't do *this* on accident," she says, placing a soft hand on Camilla's shoulder over the largest of the bruises. "Not to people they love."

Camilla recoils – Grace's words hitting harder than Travis ever had. Following a moment of thick and uncomfortable silence, Camilla gathers her purse from the coffee table. She glances once more at the dancing candle flame before slipping her dandelion-yellow sweater on over her head, despite the summer heat.

"You don't understand, Gracie," Camilla says quietly, heading towards the door. "He's an amazing man. He's smart and successful at work – everyone loves him! I'm *lucky* to be with him. And I...I love him." Grace stares at her sister at a loss for words as she shrinks into her yellow sweater, crossing her arms tightly across her chest. "Besides, it was my fault anyway," Camilla says in a broken mumble, glancing at her feet. "I was stupid. I set him off."

Camilla's words slide down Grace's body, leaving behind an ominous chill. "You can't possibly believe that's true, Cammy," Grace challenges, furrowing her brow as she takes a step toward her sister. "You should stay here tonight. We can talk about it in the—"

"I have to go, Gracie."

"No, Cammy, wait," Grace pleads as Camilla turns her back to her sister, headed for the door. "Stop!" she pleads. But Grace is helpless - powerless to stop her sister from walking out. But she's desperate to get Camilla to stay in the little one-bedroom apartment. To stay near the candle, where it's safe. Chasing her towards the front door, Grace stumbles over the ugly orange rug with

the faded green tassels and follows Camilla out into the apartment hallway - her voice echoing down the corridor as it bounces from door to door. "If you leave, I'm calling Jackson!" Grace shouts.

Camilla freezes from three doors down.

"Gracie," Camilla keeps her back to her sister as she speaks - her voice clear, albeit weak. "I trusted you by coming here. You need to leave this alone. *Please*. Promise me?"

"W-what?" Grace stammers. "No, Cam, I don't promise! How can you expect me to keep a promise like that?"

Camilla turns her swollen cheek only enough to meet Grace's gaze over her shoulder. Grace's heart stops at sight of the grey eyes that find hers. They've changed. They no longer plead; they demand. And they're scared.

"I expect you to keep it because you're my sister," Camilla says. "And because I asked."

Any remaining breath leaves Grace's lungs, plucked from her chest by the spindly fingers of Camilla's words. The sensation leaves her weak - powerless to stop her sister as she turns and dashes down the stairs, out of sight. Left alone in the empty hall, Grace realizes why she hasn't seen her sister in almost six months. And every step back to her apartment grows heavier as bitter regret spreads across her tongue. She slams the door behind her the moment her bare feet cross the threshold. Rage, guilt, and confusion dance in harmony within her mind, waltzing together in beautiful discord. *One, two, three. One, two, three.* Pacing back and forth across the mauve carpet, nausea gnaws at her as she pictures her sister going home to that monster with the hard hands. The clock beside the reading chair chimes, and Grace huffs when the little hand shows that it's already past midnight. She frowns, bringing cold, shaky fingers to her throbbing temple as she tries to chase away the ache beneath. Maybe she'll be able to think more clearly in the morning.

"Did you know that you can put out a candle with your fingers?"

Grace's eyes flit to that tiny flame on the coffee table. Pulled to its glow, Grace hesitantly reaches for the flame. Her thumb and forefinger draw close, heat building as they form a tighter noose around its neck. But she isn't fast enough. The flame dips in its dance and licks her thumb. Grace hisses, pulling back her hand at the sear of its cool heat. As the candle flickers in mocking victory, Grace frowns, confused. Camilla said it wouldn't burn. Disappointed, Grace leans in close and whispers unto the candle of windflower and foxglove, extinguishing the flame and leaving a small tendril of grey smoke behind as she retreats to her bedroom. As she sinks into her twin bed, Grace wills the comfort of her satin sheets to still her mind. But the moon's angry glare filtering through the bedroom curtains burns through her closed eyelids and reminds her of those welts upon her sister's skin. She tosses and turns, unable to get comfortable.

"I expect you to keep it because you're my sister. And because I asked."

Grace scowls as Cam's voice rattles around inside her head like a pair of trick dice.

"Put her on the phone, Travis."

"She's busy, Grace. I'll have her call you later."

Bile rises to the back of her throat as Grace chokes back her loathing. The creature that woke upon Camilla's visit once more stirs, crawling from her stomach to her chest as she struggles to censor the vitriol that drips from her words. Travis can't know she knows. She has to hate him the same amount as she always has. No more, no less.

The same amount.

"She's my *little sister*, Travis. Put her on the goddamn phone!"

Travis scoffs. "And she's *my fiancé*, Grace. I'll have her call you back later."

"I haven't seen her since August, you ass!" Grace snaps. "I haven't even talked to her in weeks. And why did you pick up this call anyway? You shouldn't be answering *her* cellphone!" Grace hisses. Travis simply laughs, and Grace can taste his condescension.

"She'll call you back."

Click

Staring at the dead line in her hand, Grace frowns. She's had enough. Her fingers travel of their own accord, dialing the first three digits in Jackson's number. He might be their older brother, but he's always been more like a dad. Grace knows if even a single word of this gets back to him, he'll be on the next flight and Travis won't be a problem anymore.

"You need to leave this alone. Please. Promise me?"

The ghost of Cammy's desperate voice is once more inside her head. That same, frightened voice from the hallway in her apartment over a month ago. Ever since she disappeared down the stairwell, Camilla's voice has taken up residency in Grace's mind. Staring down at the phone in her hand, Grace finds herself torn. She knows she can't protect her sister without violating the trust Camilla had shown her by knocking on her door that night.

"You need to leave this alone."

Throwing her phone angrily across the room, Grace dashes to her bathroom, throwing the door aside and gripping the rim of the sink. Knuckles white and cheeks flushed, she wills air into her lungs. The creature in her chest once more begins to move, trying to claw its way out of her chest.

Stop. Get back.

Grace splashes a few handfuls of cold water onto her face. Yet heat still rises in her cheeks as her breath breaks into battalions of shaky, brittle gasps. Her heart thrums, her temples

pound. Suddenly, from somewhere nearby, a chorus of demented, broken laughter rings out in the silence. Glancing up into the mirror only Grace stares back. But it's not her. Not quite. The eyes aren't right. It's a Grace she doesn't recognize – and *she* is the one laughing.

Get it together, Grace.

Frightened by her own reflection, Grace starts counting her breathing, trying to slow that steady thrum in her chest.

One...two...three...

But the girl in the mirror is hysterical. She's far past calming. Grace can feel her fighting – she's in her head. Grace knows she can't stop the laughing.

Four...five...six...

The laughter completely takes over. Grace's sides begin to ache, and her eyes start to water. The creature has clawed its way fully into her mind now, where it sits wide awake.

Seven...eight...nine.

The girl in the mirror is right. Grace has no choice. It's her sister.

"Did you know that you can put out a candle with your fingers? It won't burn as long as you do it quickly."

She hadn't done it quick enough. That was Grace's mistake. She won't make it again. Glancing into the mirror, Grace lets out a final, small giggle and wipes the tears away, looking down at the little scar on her thumb. It had been *Grace's* fault all along. *Grace* hadn't been fast enough. She should have been quicker. Should have listened to her sister.

Heading back to the living room, Grace spots her keys on the table and picks up the phone from the floor, hitting re-dial. Her sister's number. Two rings. Voicemail.

"I know, you son of a bitch," Grace hisses. She doesn't need to say what it is she knows out loud. The threat in her voice is enough. "County Reserve – campsite 134, trailhead 13B. The waterfall. One hour or I'm calling Jackson." Grace cuts the line. It might be her sister's number, but she knows who will be the one to listen to the voicemail.

Heading out to her hatchback, Grace gets comfortable. It's a 40-minute drive to the reserve. Pulling out of the apartment complex, it takes only a few minutes to merge onto the highway. And her mind is quiet now. The girl in the mirror hasn't followed - she hadn't needed to. And Camilla's voice in her head has also quieted. It helps the drive go by.

As Grace pulls into her family's favorite old campsite, she reaches into her glovebox before starting down trailhead 13B. It's a tricky one – not for the faint of heart. The first mile is deceptively easy, with a few slippery rocks and some irregular footing. But nearly a mile down the trail the unwary hiker reaches the first of many steep cliff heads. Grace had mastered all seventeen miles of the path when she was a young teen, but Camilla has never made it past the first.

Stepping over fallen logs, Grace navigates the thick tree roots, swollen and gnarled and uneven, as they bisect the path ahead. Her legs ache with effort, and the weight in her vest pocket doesn't help. Heavy, hurting, a reminder that she hadn't been quick enough. She has to be quicker. But that weight in her pocket is an equalizer. Peace of mind. And it helps her move faster. She pushes on. Her pulse quickens as the low hum of rushing water in the distance bleeds out from between the trees, washing over the forest and drowning out the rustling of leaves and scabbling of nearby animals. The afterglow of sunset paints the leaves and vines of the giant oaks and feeds the growing shadows in their hunger as the air hangs still in anticipation.

A half-mile in, Grace spies the waterfall ahead, several meters off the trail. Making her way there, she wipes away the delicate beads of summer sweat on her forehead and climbs atop a large stone. The water's roar silences all else.

She sits. And waits.

Dusk chases away the sunset's smolder as the sky soon vanishes, replaced by a dark canvas. Grace begins to wonder if he's coming.

"Promise me?"

She's back.

Camilla's voice inside Grace's head starts to threaten her resolve, but Grace hears a low chuckle in her own chest rumbling once more. The girl in the mirror had come after all. Silencing her sister, Grace allows the girl in the mirror to continue her laughter, drowning out the memory of Camilla's voice. If betrayal is the price for Camilla's safety, Grace will pay it.

"What's so funny, Gracie?"

The girl in the mirror quiets, and Grace looks up as Travis steps out from the trees. Shadows hide in the hollows of his high cheek bones, and drip down his chiseled jaw. He wears a snarl as he advances, staring down his slightly crooked nose as he runs a thick hand through his wavy black locks.

"Why am I here in the middle of the night? I should be sleeping, Grace," he growls, a sick snarl on his face. "I'm a very busy man."

Grace chokes back the bile that rises in her throat at his smirk, watching him closely as he takes another step closer. "I think you know why we're here, Travis," she calls out.

His blue eyes narrow and his lip curls as he lets out a patronizing laugh. "If you have something to say to me, woman, say it. Otherwise, I'm going home," he taunts, turning his back to

Grace and heading back toward the trees. But he stops at the tree line, tossing a perverted grin over his broad shoulder. "Can't be gone too long, you know. Cammy misses me."

Grace slides her hand in her pocket with a scowl. "You know, you're a real piece of work," Grace goads, calling after him from her seat atop the massive rock. Travis scoffs, bringing his hands to his hips as he shakes his head and slowly turns towards Grace, a demented grin spread across his face.

"I'll take that as a compliment, Gracie-kins," he mocks, sliding a hand down his chest. "I work hard on this body. And Cammy seems to like it just fine," he smiles darkly.

"Does it make you feel strong?" Grace spits, teeth bared. "When you hit her, Travis? Does it make you feel like a man?"

That sick grin disappears. Grace is met with flared nostrils and a set of perfect white teeth that peek out from behind curled lips, bared like a rabid dog. That stirring in Grace's mind grows angry, spreading down into her shoulders as Travis takes a few steps closer, slowly circling the rock.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he spits back.

"Do you hit her because it *arouses* you?" Grace sneers in disdain, her hand still in her vest pocket. Fingers tingling, tapping, twitching. She has to be fast this time. So it won't hurt. So it won't burn.

"You better watch your mouth, bitch," Travis sneers through grit teeth, taking an intimidating step towards Grace.

"You know, I saw that on TV once," Grace hisses. "Cops said some guy beat his wife because it was the only way he could get it up."

Travis's face contorts in shades of rage as he lets out a deafening roar and raises his fist. He lunges.

"It won't burn as long as you do it quick."

Grace's fingers curl. She pulls. She fires.

Quick.

Fast.

Travis stumbles.

He brings his hand to his chest, eyes wide in bewilderment. All that rage faded, flushed away as confusion takes its place. Sticky red paint coats his fingers. With a grunt, he falls to his knees and glances up at Grace in shock and she simply watches him fall, head tilted in fascination. Rushing water and rustling leaves the only sound. It's quieter than she expected. Slipping from her seat atop the rock, the beast on Grace's shoulder purrs as it slips away, slinking back through her chest and down into her stomach. It curls up tightly as it nestles back into its sleeping place. Placated. Tired. Grace takes several steps towards Travis, basking in the fear hidden beneath the dying light of bravado in his gaze.

"Wh-what did you do?" he stammers breathily.

"Shh," Grace hushes, kneeling before him eye to eye and placing a gentle hand upon his face, tenderly wiping away the single, frightened tear that rolls down his cheek. "You can go to sleep now, Travis. I'm sorry for keeping you up so late."

"Gracie, can we run to the store and pick up a few things? I think we're out of butter. And cinnamon."

Grace glances over at Camilla, who pads around the tiny apartment barefoot in her new Autumn sweater dress. Grace notes how the off-the-shoulder, grey-knit neckline beautifully accentuates her sister's flawless skin.

"Sure, Cam. Let me grab my keys and we'll go. I'll meet you at the car."

Camilla smiles, taking several light steps towards the welcome mat, slipping on her boots and grabbing her bag. But her hand hovers over the doorknob.

"Gracie?" she calls out hesitantly, quietly.

Her tone catches Grace off guard. She hasn't heard this particular hesitation in a long time.

"Yeah?"

"Can we...well, do you think we should call the station again?" Camilla asks quietly, her tone turning almost nervous. "It's been six weeks. Shouldn't they know something by now?"

Grace grits her teeth. Even free, Camilla still feels bound to help. To serve. But Grace knows she'll never have to help him again. "They said they'd call, Cammy," Grace answers gently, swiping her keys from the counter as she moves to the closet, sorting through jackets. "But if it would make you feel better, you can check in. See if they have anything new."

Grace tosses a glance over her shoulder toward her sister as she pulls out a jacket, and watches as Camilla sucks her bottom lip between her teeth, brow furrowed, thinking.

"No I...I'll just wait, I think."

Grace turns away, pulling the jacket over her arms as a hidden smile tugs at her lips. "Okay, Cam," Grace says, buttoning her coat. "Go on out. I'll meet you at the car."

"Okay. Oh, and Gracie don't forget to put your candle out," Camilla calls as she leaves, door clicking shut behind her.

Finishing up the buttons of her coat, Grace glances over at the candle of windflower and foxglove on the coffee table. Arching a brow, Grace licks the tip of her thumb and smirks, reaching in and quickly snuffing the wick.