

MADE LIKE THE MOON

A DUOLOGY: BOOK ONE

REDEMPTION & RUIN

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Grace

The gaze of the Hotel Waya concierge lingers on the messy coil of bright pink hair bobbing on top of my head. If her poor brows grow any closer, they'll overlap, and when her eyes fall on the half sleeve of tattoos covering my left bicep, I'm afraid the deep lines in her forehead might become permanent if she doesn't relax her face.

She stammers, "You're a...a..."

"Full-time missionary," I finish for her when it's clear she can't reconcile my appearance with my answer to her question of what I do when I'm not on vacation. "Well, almost full-time. I plan to keep a few shifts at the club when I'm stateside."

I almost clarify that I clean the offices of the fitness club down the street from my apartment, but a part of me, a little trouble-making part, lives for the "does not compute" look I often draw. I love not computing.

She sputters before shaking her head, giving me what I assume is her "professional smile," and handing me a fancy silicon wristband. "This lets you come and go on our section of the beach. As part of

your package, you can also order whatever you'd like from the cafe or bar."

She stops short on her last word, her cheeks growing red as she offers an apologetic smile. I'm used to it. There's a distinct 180 in the way people speak to me before they know my chosen lifestyle and after, even with my little "club" joke.

I laugh, though, putting her at ease. "I don't drink myself, but I'm not offended by piña coladas or beachside beers."

Guilt over my earlier deception, however slight, tugs at my throat, and I also explain about the "club," which pulls a soft giggle from the woman's red lips.

"And I'm not in a cult or anything. I just feel passionately about telling people about Jesus, so I go on all the short-term trips I can manage. Medical missions, mostly, where we help people with physical needs and share the gospel for their spiritual needs. I just...um, feel like I should clarify," I explain with a wince and flaming cheeks, but her shoulders have dropped. She even leans one elbow on the counter. "Don't let the ink fool you," I twist my bare arm, bringing attention to the art permanently drawn on my skin. "I love naps and books and would have a hundred cats if I could. I'm actually pretty boring."

"For some reason, I sincerely doubt that, Miss Goodwin." She relaxes even more, and her smile turns genuine.

I tug at my bun, tightening it up. There's a perfect amount of flop I like in my messy buns. I spent the last half of my twenty-four years perfecting it, and the long, sweaty bus ride from the airport to the resort has thrown off the balance significantly.

Concierge lady—Sylvia, by her name tag—allows no flop in her style. Her bun is nearly perfect; one coiled section hangs loose, curving around her face like a caress. Maybe she was going for the perfectly imperfect look—in which case, Sylvia nailed it.

"Please call me Grace."

She cuts her eyes to the stiff-looking man who hovers near the sliding glass doors, his arms crossed and navy suit crisp. He levels a

disapproving glare at the hard-working porters. Leaning in, she tucks that loose strand behind her ear. "Wish I could."

"Gotcha." I match her conspiratorial smirk. "He gave me that same look when I rolled in a few minutes ago. I mean, not that I blame him; I do have the vagabond-chic look going."

Her narrowed eyes land on her boss as I pat the desk twice and gaze longingly at the doors that will lead me to the warm sun and soft sand.

"Looks like we have a last-minute cancellation in one of our beach view rooms with a balcony. It's not quite ready, but if you want, you can go on to the beach, and I'll have your bags brought up for you." One of Sylvia's brows quirks. "No extra charge, of course."

"You...beach view? Really?" I stammer.

"Really." She winks. "Would you like the upgrade, and do you need an extra key card?"

"Yes, I'd love it, and no." I frown at the memory of my fight with my probably soon-to-be-ex boyfriend. "I most definitely do not need a second key."

"That bad, huh?" Sylvia asks, a compassionate look settling over her perfectly made-up face.

I nod, remembering how dumbfounded Bryan-with-a-y looked when I told him we wouldn't be sharing a room. I'd booked this vacation a month before I met him, so it's not like I was planning on having a love interest at the time. And it wasn't like I banned him from coming; I just said he'd have to get his own room. I even offered to pay for it. He looked at me like I was...a club-working missionary with a half sleeve of tats, a slight obsession with felines, and pink hair.

I tell Sylvia this, and she tries to cover a very unprofessional snort.

"Then he says," I continue, "'I thought you were trying to save money.' And before I can even respond, he hits me with, 'It's obvious you don't want me to go. It's fine. Have fun.' Then he walks off."

"What a jerk." Sylvia blows out a soft whistle. I like her; she's an instant ride or die.

“He even tried to get me to leave him a key to my apartment, Sylvia. To water my plants. We’ve been together for six months, and he doesn’t know the plants in my apartment are fake.”

I frown. I did leave Bryan a key; I even begged him to take it. How did that happen?

“The audacity.” She seems to truly share my ire.

“Right!” I open my hands. Sylvia gets it. “I’m twenty-four. I shouldn’t have to put up with this level of immaturity. And he’s thirty-one!”

Sylvia scoffs while clicking her perfect manicure over her keyboard, and I scowl at Memory-Bryan. At the foolish idea that, because he was older, he’d be sensible and grounded. And especially at the text he sent later that started with an apology that wasn’t actually an apology and ended with, *You’ve just been gone so much lately, I was jumping at the chance for some quality time, but we will make it a priority when you get back. I do hope you have fun, Lu. You deserve it.*

Was he gaslighting me? Because it feels like a gaslight. I’ll ask my email pen pal later. He seems like the kind of person who would know.

My scowl evaporates thinking about my pen pal. What started as an inquiry into a possible mission opportunity turned into replies that never stopped. At the time, Dad had been gone for two years and Mom for six months. I was desperate to start traveling again, and maybe I needed to talk to someone who didn’t know anything about my loss and wouldn’t speak in a gentle I’m-so-sorry-your-life-is-falling-apart way. Someone I could be Grace with—but not Grace, because I never used my name and neither did he. I tried out a lot of nicknames for him before I settled on Gelato. Because he was Italian. And sweet.

Maybe he needed the same, because he also kept replying. I haven’t corresponded with him as much since I started dating Bryan, and I feel guilty each time I answer him with a short, half-hearted response.

Penpal isn’t the right word for who Gelato was to me—is to me. Because he wasn’t standing in front of me, because I had time to

think about my words, I took the time to say what was in my heart. Worries and dreams I never admitted even to myself.

So far on this trip, he's the one I've wanted to send pictures of the beautiful scenery to and tell about these new experiences. Not Captain Passive-Aggressive-Let-Me-Water-Your-Silk- Plants.

Should I feel guilty about wanting to talk to someone I've never met in person more than I want to talk to my for-right-now boyfriend?

Ugh. See! Bryan's even coming between me and the few friends I have with his *"We need to settle into the love bubble, Lu. Just me and you. Solidify our relationship and shore up the walls to protect this precious, fragile thing we're building."*

Gag me.

Also, I should never have told him my middle name is Luna. He said he loved that it sounded so unique and whimsical. Gag me again.

"I know it seems weird to people nowadays," I say to Sylvia with a shrug, remembering we were having a conversation about Bryan and his push to cohabitate. "But I believe what I believe. And I want a man who respects that."

"Good for you." Sylvia leans against the counter, folding her arms and giving me a nod of solidarity. "You know, this really makes me want to tell my current situation to take a hike."

"If he's pushing you to do things you don't want to, I'll be there with my baseball bat. You just give me an address. His kneecaps are toast."

Sylvia tips her head back and releases an unprofessional cackle, drawing a warning glare from suit-guy by the doors. Coming to the defense of my new friend, I distract him by twisting my foot so my neon green flip-flop squeaks on the polished floors. The tiny unicorn kitty charms dangling from the plastic straps catch the light, forcing a disgusted curl from suit-guy's thin upper lip. He scowls, and I scowl back. I paid full price for those little metal cuties, buddy; they weren't even on sale.

"I'm not kidding, Sylvia." I turn back to her. "I don't play when it comes to pushy men."

"I believe you." She tries to rein in her laughter and dabs at her eyes with a delicate pinky. "And I really appreciate the offer, but I can handle Ames myself."

"Ames?" I feel the grimace before I can stop it.

"Unfortunately," she sighs. "He's not even French...just the son of very pretentious parents who taught him he's always right."

I reach out and take Sylvia's hand. "My condolences."

"Boring is definitely the last word I would use to describe you, Miss Goodwin." She laughs again and hands me the key card to my shiny new beach-front-balcony-included room. "Enjoy the rest of your day. Your room should be ready in an hour. Let me know if you need anything at all."

I stuff the key into the front zipper pocket of the crossbody backpack—the last gift my mom gave me, which also contains all my valuables. The little pink bag goes back into place once I've used the lobby bathroom to change into the bathing suit and cover-up I fished out of my suitcase. After I shove my clothes into the suitcase that Sylvia has put behind the desk, I give her a little wave. "Thank you, Sylvia."

She leans forward and whispers, "You're welcome, Grace."

A mild breeze lifts the wispy pink strands away from my face as I wander the path from the resort's lobby to the beach. While still connected to the resort's Wi-Fi, I fire off an email to the Italian friend I ditched for Bryan's stupid love bubble and watch until the sent notification comes up.

As I scroll back through our communications, I'm hit with a wave of deep loss. Did I make the wrong choice with Bryan because he was physically there in front of me? He seemed to say all the right things, and he was so invested so quickly. He said we were meant to be. Reason had said to take hold of the certainty, but maybe I was too close to the situation to see it clearly.

I stare at my phone, wondering if Gelato even checks this account anymore. He'd said it was his cousin who usually handled the inquiries, and mine just happened to get routed to his inbox. *Dumb luck*, I'd said. *Maybe fate*, he'd replied.

Fingers moving of their own accord, I open my photos to the album with the collection from Italy. Photos he sent because I begged for pictures of his food.

We said no specifics, he'd written.

This is different. I'd argued. If I can't go there and eat the food myself, at least let me dream about it. What's for lunch?

It really should bother me more that I can't seem to say no to you.

His answer had come with an image of a dish of perfectly arranged arancini, which he described as deep-fried balls of leftover risotto rice stuffed with meat sauce, peas, and mozzarella. I keep swiping through the magazine-worthy pictures, my mouth watering and stomach growling in response. I end at the shot of the most delicious-looking pasta. I wonder if he'll send more photos now that I've started communicating again. My obsession with food didn't drive him away before, but paired with this recent bout of no-context ghosting, I worry that one vaguely worded apology isn't enough.

I sigh. Once again, I seem incapable of keeping friends. It's a rare thing for me to find someone who doesn't immediately block me when I expose the quirkiest parts of my personality. I think I'm a lot for people. Maybe that's why I grabbed at the chance for a relationship with Bryan. Because he didn't jump ship after the first date like most guys.

I still didn't think it was that serious after a few months, but Bryan seemed shocked when I made plans without him one weekend, like I'd somehow cheated. Slowly, friends, coworkers, extra things at church—even mission trips—took a back seat to Bryan.

Frowning at my phone, I wonder how I could have gotten so wrapped up in my boyfriend these last six months that I alienated everyone else in my life. Bryan is...confusing.

But he's not here. I am. And Vacation Grace is going to enjoy this time away to get her head cleared up. I sigh, continue down the path to the beach, and search for the resort's set of lockers. After stowing my crossbody in one of the little metal lockers, I leave my flip-flops by a chosen chair and tiptoe over burning sand to dip my toes into the crystal clear ocean.

All afternoon, I stare at a cloudless blue sky, sip ice cold lemonade, and stretch out on the most luxurious towel on a curved wicker beach chair that's nothing like those cheap plastic ones from the community pool.

I can't believe I'm here. Colombia is a seven-hour flight from my home near D.C. I'm no stranger to long flights, but I'm usually traveling with a group of other missionaries. This is my first solo trip, and I'm quite proud of myself. I only had three meltdowns on the way here and, personally, think I was quite successful in hiding most of them.

The serene beauty of this place erases all the memories of stressful travel and Bryan-with-a-y's uncertainty when he called the morning before my flight.

You sure you can do this, Lu? I mean, you've never really gone anywhere by yourself.

In a smug answer to most-definitely-going-to-be-ex Bryan, I raise my glass in a mock salute.

"I guess this shows you, Bry-not-my-guy. I even Ubered myself to the airport." After our argument, I wasn't asking him for any favors regarding this trip.

With a sigh, I resolve not to give what's-his-name another thought and instead focus on the stunning view stretched endlessly before me.

Thank you, Lord, and Mom and Dad. I smile fondly at the sky as I kick back my third glass of lemonade from under the protective shade of a red-and-white striped beach umbrella.

It's been long enough since my parents passed that I can finally think about them without bursting into tears. Sometimes.

Okay, rarely.

Losing them both in less than two years is still hard for me to make sense of. As little sense as the day two weeks after mom's funeral when I was called into a stuffy wood-paneled office and handed a thin white envelope by a rotund lawyer named Robert Whitecastle. He had a comb over and, from the way he wheezed just

walking to the filing cabinet, was in desperate need of a visit to a cardiologist.

I look at my hand, remembering the feel of that tiny envelope. It only contained one sheet of crisp white paper but held the weight of my past and future.

When Dad didn't return from a work trip three years ago, the only answer Mom and I had came from a pair of polite and compassionate-sounding men in black suits who said words like "We regret to inform you," "unfortunate accident," and "classified information." I guess it was the classified part that kept us from receiving any of his personal effects and forced us to put an empty casket in the ground. Mom said we needed closure, so we went through the motions. We even had a memorial service. Mom's friends from church came, since Mom and Dad didn't have any family left. It rained the day we buried that shiny gray box. Now, every time it rains, I hide under the covers and eat a whole lot of chocolate until I can function again.

No chance of that here, though. La Guajira was the top result in my internet search for "Caribbean beach resorts" and "no rain." Now that I've met my new bestie, Sylvia, I'm confident it was the right choice despite Ex-Bryan's insistence I'd fall victim to the cartel.

No. Nope. He-who-shall-not-be-named has been uninvited on this trip, even in my mind. It's me and Sylvia and all the new happy memories I'm going to make. Ones I can now freely share with my well-fed Italian.

I suck a little too hard on my straw and nearly choke to death on an inhaled lemon seed.

"Another, miss?" A shadow temporarily blocks the glare of the sun.

A young man dressed in a spotless red and white striped polo bearing the hotel's logo and crisp white shorts watches me expectantly. He nods to the glass in my hand as if to make sure I understand his heavily accented English.

"Why not? And you have to tell me what kind of magical trees these lemons come from, because this is the best lemonade I've ever had." I hand him my empty glass, not realizing I've answered in

Spanish until his dark eyes widen and he gives me an appreciative grin.

“You speak Spanish?” Surprise brightens his young face.

“Enough to get by.” I’m suddenly insecure and afraid I’m butchering his language, and my words come slowly. I pick at the hem of my coverup and raise a shoulder. “Is it okay if I practice with you?”

“Of course.” He beams, adjusts the collar of his shirt, and taps his nametag. “My name is Jorge, and I’ll be right back with your drink.”

I’m so grateful Sylvia reminded me that the package I bought for the resort includes all the drinks and snacks I want. As Jorge walks away, I call out for him to bring another plate of shrimp nachos.

Even before I lost Mom and Dad, I worked no less than two jobs at a time to afford my trips around the world. Most of the time, it wasn’t work anyone would choose for a career, but it was the kind of employment where I could take off for two weeks, and they’d just put me back on the schedule when I returned.

I’m not too good to wash dishes for Jesus. It’s a phrase mom always used, and I adopted it for myself.

Before Mr. Whitecastle and his little envelope, every extra penny went into my mission trip fund. It started with local service projects and literal pennies in a blue plastic canister labeled with crooked puff paint letters when I was fourteen, which I still have on my kitchen counter at home. Mom and Dad helped, but they encouraged me to make sacrifices for the things I felt were important, and I’m glad they did. I learned to do hard things, learned the cost of evangelism, and took ownership of my passions. Which is why I stayed on at the club even with the payout from my parents’ surprise life insurance policy Mr. Whitecastle had deposited in my bank account.

I don’t regret a moment of dishpan hands or the sore back from cleaning offices after hours, and I never have. I’ve gotten to see the world and share the gospel. It’s my dream come true, except I don’t have my parents to go home to and gush about my trips to anymore.

“Ugh,” I groan, pushing my hand against the deep ache in my heart. I hate those first few seconds of utter destruction each time I

remember that the next time I'll talk to Dad or hold Mom will be in Heaven. It's like experiencing that pain for the first time all over again.

Rubbing a tear from my cheek with the heel of my palm, I draw in a deep breath of salty air and tug at the silver necklace that's always around my neck.

Along with tiny pendants in the shape of all the countries I've visited is a little silver moon. The one mom gave me the day she shared the doctor's news. Stage 4. Inoperable.

"You're made like the moon, Grace. Made to reflect the sun, even on the darkest of nights." Mom cried when I cried, and she held me even though she was the one who was sick. *"You have to promise me never to stop being a light in dark places. Never stop reflecting the sun."*

I pinch that little crescent between my fingers and draw it to my lips.

I sigh as the sun lowers on the horizon, its blinding white easing into a brilliant golden orange. The color leaks from the sky and bleeds across the rippling turquoise water.

"Ah, Momma," I whisper, the sting of tears pricking my eyes for the second time today. "I wish you could see this. I guess this view can't compare to what you're seeing now. I just miss you. So much."

Jorge returns then, mercifully tempting me away from a full-blown emotional meltdown with a steaming, overly cheesy plate of nachos and an ice-cold lemonade in a frosted glass. He pauses when I look up at him, doubtless noticing the mottled redness that always spreads across my pale, freckled cheeks when I'm upset.

He sets his entire tray on the little wicker beach table next to my lounge chair and drops to sit on his heels. "Are you alright?"

"Yes." I feel my cheeks flush, with embarrassment this time instead of grief. "I was just wishing someone was here with me."

Jorge's brows dip, and I wonder what wrong words I've said.

"My mom died eighteen months ago," I clarify.

He's young, probably just a teenager, but his expression turns soft. His brown eyes fill with compassion.

"I'm sorry. I know the pain," he says softly.

“Oh, Jorge,” I touch his tanned arm, giving in to the moment of shared grief. “How long?”

“A few months.”

“I wish I could tell you it gets easier. But I can tell you, you’re not alone.”

“Thank you.” His lips pull back into a gentle smile before he slides a portion of tres leches off his tray onto my table. “I brought you another one of these.”

“This is my favorite. How did you know?” I abandon the nachos for the dessert and shove a healthy spoonful into my mouth, giving him a mumbled, “Thank you, I really needed this. It works better than chocolate.”

I’m certain he doesn’t understand that strange comment, but he smiles anyway. “I figured you were due for another since you ordered two today already, and it’s been a while.” His eyes dance a little when he laughs.

I groan and slap my hand against my forehead. “Am I that easy to read?”

“A little.” He pushes himself upright, tucks his round serving tray under his arm and folds his hands in front of him. “Let me know if you need anything else at all, *señorita*.”

“Ooh, fancy,” I joke at the way he gives me a little bow and the roll of his hand. “My name is Grace, and it’s lovely to meet you. Thanks for letting me practice my Spanish and not making fun of my mistakes.”

He didn’t mention any, but I know I slaughtered the conjugation of my verbs and used the wrong articles for the nouns. I have to think of things as boy plate and girl money to remember if they’re “el” or “la.”

“It was perfect,” he lies with another smile. “Enjoy your stay, Miss Grace. I’m sure your *mama* would want you to be happy here.”

Sheila Louise would have loved every minute of this trip. But Jorge is right. Mom would have wanted me to be happy, so I plan to do just that. Because she would have sat here next to me, looking

more like my twin sister than my mom, naming off everything she was thankful for, I'll do the same.

I'll soak up every ray of sunshine and embrace every salty sea breeze. I'll embrace every furry, fluffy snuggle from a kitty cat. Wait. Was that a meow?

I lean over almost upside down in my chair, searching beneath the rows for the owner of that tiny cry I know I just heard.

"Ps-ps-ps," I whisper, dangling a shrimp as bait between my fingers. "Here, kitty kitty."

Then I repeat it in Spanish just in case that *gato* doesn't speak English. A flash of orange has me on my knees in the hot sand, crawling between the chairs.

There is no shame in my search. I came to terms with my strange obsession long ago. The thing about me is, if there's a stray cat, I'm going to *ps-ps-ps, here, kitty kitty* and follow that feline.

What if it's starving?

What if it's lonely?

What if she's trolling the beach because her babies are in danger and she needs me to come save them?

Travel warnings of human trafficking rings and drug cartels forgotten, I set off to follow that mama cat and snuggle some kitties.

