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BEAUTIFUL
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ONE YEAR LATER . . .

VIRTUAL REALITY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For Christine, the editor of dreams.
"We are ready to transmit."

THE ISLE OF AMBERLY



HAPPILY MARRIED



If all we need is love, why do we always want more?

I dial her number. Again. Finally, she answers.

“I’m on my way, almost there,” my wife says without me having to ask. I can hear that she is driving, so she *is* heading home, but *almost there* sounds like a lie. She has a habit of stretching the truth into something more agreeable these days.

“You said you would be here,” I reply, sounding like a petulant child instead of a grown man. “This is important to me.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I’ll be there soon, promise. I’ve picked up fish-and-chips.”

Fish-and-chips is how we have celebrated almost every major milestone. It’s what we ate on our first date, when we got engaged, the day I got an agent, and when we bought our dream house. I’m a little in love with this old thatched cottage on the south coast, just over an hour from London but a million miles from the city. Our only neighbors these days are sheep. Tonight, fish-and-chips was how I hoped we might celebrate my first *New York Times* bestseller, washed down with a bottle of champagne I’ve been saving for five years. My editor in America said she would call if it was good news, but it’s nearly 9:00 P.M. (4:00 P.M. in New York) and she hasn’t been in touch. Nobody has.

“Heard anything?” Abby asks. I hear her turn on the windscreen wipers, and I picture the rain streaming down the glass like tears.

“Not yet.”

“Well, get off the phone or they won’t be able to get through,” she says and hangs up.

Abby was supposed to be by my side when I got the call, but she’s late home. Again. She loves what she does—working as an investigative journalist and finding good stories about bad people. Men, mostly. My

wife's whole life has been mapped out by her moral compass and an insatiable desire to expose wrongdoing, but I worry about her upsetting someone she shouldn't. Abby has been receiving anonymous threats sent to the newspaper where she works. She's become so paranoid that she's started recording all of her incoming calls, but she still won't quit.

My wife tells stories that matter, trying to save the world from itself.

I tell stories that matter to me.

My books have always been a place to hide myself inside myself when the real world gets too loud.

Marriage is made of a million beautiful and ugly moments stitched together into a shared tapestry of memories, all of which are viewed and remembered slightly differently, like two people staring at the same painting from opposite ends of a room. I didn't believe in love when I was younger. There wasn't enough love to go around in our house when I was growing up, so I spent my childhood hiding inside books and dreaming of writing my own. Based on my parents' relationship *happily married* was an oxymoron, so marriage was something else I didn't believe in. Until I met Abby. She changed the way I looked at the world and she changed my mind about love. She made me feel things I didn't know I was capable of feeling, and I could never love anyone the way I love my wife.

When we first got together, we couldn't keep our hands off each other. If I close my eyes and concentrate, I can still remember the first time she let me touch her. Her perfect face, the softness of her skin, the delicate floral scent of her shiny dark hair, the taste of her mouth, the way she gasped when I pushed myself inside her. We used to stay up all night, sometimes just to talk, to tell each other our stories. Keeping the spark alive when you've been married as long as we have isn't easy. I try, but what's important changes as we grow older. At least, I think it does. It has for me. What we have now is all I ever wanted.

Columbo wanders into the room, wagging his tail as though he hasn't seen me for days, even though it has been less than five minutes since he fell asleep in the kitchen. He sits by my side and stares at the phone in my hand as though he is waiting for it to ring too. I prefer dogs to humans. *Dogs* are loyal. My wife bought Columbo for me as a surprise when he was a puppy. She said she thought I needed companionship, and we've been inseparable since. Abby worries about how much time I spend on my own

and doesn't seem to understand that I prefer solitude. I need quiet to write, and if I can't write it feels like I can't breathe. Besides, I have my characters for company and I prefer them to real people too. My characters don't lie—at least, not to me—but before Abby, there wasn't anyone I could trust. People rarely do what they say they will or what they should. The only thing I don't like about being alone is the amount of time it forces me to spend with myself.

My path to becoming a bestselling author has been bumpy to say the least. I am the overnight success story that was ten years in the making, and for a long time I felt like the understudy in my own life. There were years of obscurity, shitty reviews, disappointing sales, and being dropped by multiple publishers. I was on the verge of giving up, but then I met my wife and she introduced me to my dream agent. Everything changed after that, so you could say I owe her everything. Writing books is the only thing that makes me truly happy. I know Abby's job is important, and that I just make things up for a living, but I so badly wanted her to be by my side tonight. If my latest book really is a *New York Times* bestseller she might be proud of me again. Look at me the way she used to.

My mobile buzzes, and my editor's name lights up on the screen.

My fingers are trembling as I answer the call.

"Grady, it's me," Elizabeth says. I can't tell from her neutral tone whether the news is good. "We're all here, the entire publishing team. Kitty is on the line too."

"Hi, Grady!" The glee in my agent's voice ends the suspense, and I surprise myself when I start to cry. Big, fat tears roll down my cheeks, and I'm relieved nobody—except a large black Labrador—can see me. The dog looks up as though concerned.

My editor continues, no longer able to disguise her excitement. "So, as you know, there's been a lot of buzz around this book and we're all so happy to have worked on it. We love you, and we love your books, which makes it even more wonderful to be able to tell you that . . . you are a *New York Times* bestseller."

There is cheering and screaming on the other end of the line. My legs seem to give way, and I find myself folding down toward the floor until I sit cross-legged, like the child who dreamed of being an author all those years ago. Columbo wags his tail and licks my face, and though I appreciate his

unlimited affection, I wish my wife was here. My success still seems unreal to me and I don't recognize my own life in this moment. It feels too good to be true. Which makes me worry that maybe it isn't.

"Is this real?" I whisper.

"Yes!" my agent yells.

"I can't believe it," I say, unable to hide the wobble in my voice. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. This means so much to me, I . . ."

I can't seem to speak. I am filled with gratitude and astonishment.

"Are you still there, Grady?" my agent asks.

"Yes. I'm just so . . ." It takes me a while to find the right word. "*Happy*," I say eventually, trying on this unfamiliar emotion to see if it still fits. I think I might have to grow into it. "Thank you. All of you. I'm completely overwhelmed and so grateful."

I think this might be the best day of my life, and I wanted to share it with *her*.

Instead, it's just me and the dog, and he's already gone back to sleep.

I do my best to properly thank all the people who made this dream come true: my amazing agent, my wonderful editor, brilliant publicist, the fantastic sales and marketing teams. Then the call I've waited forever for ends, and suddenly everything is quiet. Too quiet. I am alone again. I pour myself a little glass of whiskey from one of the good bottles, then sit in silence, letting the news sink in. I want to treasure this special moment and hold on to it for as long as I can. When I have composed myself, I call my wife. I want to surprise her. I can picture Abby's mobile attached to the dashboard of her car, displaying her journey on a moving map just like always. The phone barely rings before she answers.

"Well?" she asks, her voice oozing expectation. I wish I could see her face.

"You are speaking to the author of a *New York Times* bestseller."

She screams. "Oh my god! I knew it. I'm so proud of you!" I can hear genuine emotion in her voice and think my wife, who never cries, might be crying. "I love you," she says. I can't remember when we last said that we loved each other. We used to say it every day. I like the sound of her words and how they make me feel. Like when you hear an old song you haven't heard for years on the radio, one you used to love.

“I’m almost home,” she says, interrupting my mess of nostalgic thoughts. “Take the champagne out and—”

I hear the sound of screeching brakes, then silence.

“What’s happened?” I ask. “Are you okay? Can you hear me?”

The silence continues, but then I hear her voice again. “I’m fine, but . . . there’s a woman lying in the road.”

“What? Did you hit her?”

“No! Of course not. She was already there, that’s why I stopped,” Abby says.

“Where are you now?”

“I’m on the cliff road. I’m going to get out and see if—”

“No!” I shout.

“What do you mean, *no*? I can’t leave her lying in the lane, she might be hurt.”

“Then call the police. You’re almost home. Do not get out of the car.”

“If you’re worried about the fish-and-chips getting cold—”

“I’m worried about *you*.”

She sighs and I hear the faint *click* as she releases her seat belt. “I think you’ve read too many Stephen King books—”

I think doing the right thing isn’t always the right thing to do.

“Please *don’t* get out of the car,” I say.

“What if it were me in the road? Wouldn’t you want someone to stop and help?”

“Wait, don’t hang up!”

“Fine, if it makes you feel better.” It has never been possible to change my wife’s mind about anything. The more you urge her not to do something, the more determined she is to do it. Abby opens the car door. “I love you,” she says again. By the time I think to say it back it’s too late. She must have left her phone attached to the dashboard because all I can hear is the sound of her footsteps as she walks away.

One minute goes by, then another.

I can still hear the indicator and the windscreen wipers.

Five minutes later the call is still connected, but I can’t hear Abby.

Have you ever known something terrible was about to happen before it did?

Or felt an overwhelming, inexplicable fear that someone you loved was in danger?

I am holding the phone pressed to my ear and have started pacing.

“Can you hear me?” I ask, but she doesn’t answer.

Then I hear footsteps again.

It sounds as though Abby might be getting back into the car, but she still doesn’t reply.

The only thing I can hear is the sound of someone breathing.

It does not sound like my wife.

A moment ago, I was happier than I had ever been. Now I am paralyzed with fear.

This is the worst best day of my life.

I know the stretch of road she is on. It leads directly to the coast, and is not far from the house. The nearest building is a mile away, there is nobody close by I can call for help. I start walking. Then I run. I’m still holding the phone to my ear with one hand, breathless but calling her name. She doesn’t answer.

The night is too dark, too cold, too wet. There are no streetlights in the countryside, only shadows. All I can see is an anthracite sky speckled with stars, a silhouette of fields on one side of the road, and a moon-stained sea on the other. All I can hear are the waves slamming into the cliff, and my own labored breaths. I see her car parked on the verge, and I slow down, taking in the scene. The headlights are still on, the indicators are flashing, and the driver’s door is open.

But Abby isn’t here.

There is no sign of a person lying in the road either. No signs of life at all.

I spin around, squinting into the darkness at the empty lanes and rolling hills. I shout her name and hear my voice echo on the phone attached to the dashboard. She is still on the call to me. Except that she isn’t. The fish-and-chips are still on the passenger seat, along with Abby’s handbag. I look inside it, but nothing appears to have been stolen. The only unfamiliar thing in the car is a white gift box. I open the lid and see a creepy-looking antique doll with shiny dark hair and dressed in a red coat. Her big blue glass eyes seem to stare right at me, and her mouth has been sewn shut.

I take another look around, but everything is still and silent and black.

“Where are you?” I shout.
But Abby doesn’t answer.
My wife has disappeared.



ONE YEAR LATER . . .



GOOD GRIEF



You look bloody terrible. Good grief, I barely recognize you,” my agent says as I enter her office. It seems like such an odd expression. Can grief ever be good?

“It’s nice to see you too,” I tell her.

“I’m not insulting you; I’m describing you.”

Kitty Goldman never sugarcoats her words. She gives me a hug, then sits back down behind her desk where she has always looked most at home. I see that a few more wrinkles have dared to decorate her face since the last time we met, and I like that she doesn’t try to hide her age. What you see is what you get, but not everyone sees her the way I do. Not many people get this close. I’ve never known exactly how old Kitty is—it’s one of many questions I daren’t ask—but if I had to guess, I’d say early seventies. She’s wearing a pink tweed skirt suit and smells of perfume. Chanel, I think. She peers over her designer glasses.

“And I see you brought Columbo with you?” she says, staring down at the black Labrador making himself comfortable on her expensive-looking rug.

“Yes. Sorry. I hope that’s okay. I don’t have anyone who can keep an eye on him, and I can’t leave him alone in the hotel during the day.”

And there it is—the head tilt of sympathy. The pity I’ve become so familiar with makes itself at home on her face and I have to look away. It’s been a year since my wife disappeared. Everyone who knows what happened looks at me this way now, and I can’t bear it. I’ve grown weary of people saying, “I’m sorry for your loss.” I’m sure they are sorry, for a while, until they forget all about it and continue with their lives. And why shouldn’t they? They didn’t lose their reason for living. That would be me.

I stare down at my shoes, unpolished and badly worn at the heel. Kitty speed-dials her latest assistant—sitting right outside the office—and asks

her to get us some tea and biscuits. Since Abby disappeared I often forget to eat. I can't write either and I find it difficult to sleep. My nightmares are always the same, and it feels like I can't breathe when I wake up. I didn't just lose my wife. I had everything I ever wanted and I lost it all.

I still don't know what happened to Abby.

I don't even know if she's alive.

It's that, more than anything, the *not* knowing, that keeps me awake at night.

I glance around the beautifully decorated office, anything to avoid Kitty's stare and the questions I know are coming. It doesn't *look* like an office. It's far more stylish, like a mini library or something you might find in a boutique hotel, designed by someone with expensive taste. I take in all the bespoke wooden bookcases crammed full of her clients' books—including mine. I was Kitty's biggest client for a while. She has newer, younger, hungrier, frankly better writers on her list these days. Ones who can still write.

My eyes wander until they find the framed picture of Abby on Kitty's desk. I wondered if it would still be here or if she might have hidden it in a drawer. Some people think hiding their grief will make it go away, but in my experience it only makes it hurt more. Grief is only ever yours; it's not something you can share, but at least there is someone else who thinks about Abby as often as I do. Kitty is my wife's godmother, and I sometimes think I only have an agent because Abby begged her to represent me.

Kitty Goldman is one of the biggest literary agents in the country. She took me on ten years ago when I was still a youngish author. My career was going nowhere except a series of dead ends, but she saw something in my writing that nobody else had and took a chance on me. The result was five bestsellers in the UK and several awards. Kitty sold the translation rights to my books in forty countries, then last year I had my first *New York Times* bestseller in America. It all feels like it might have been a dream now. Being unable to write for so long, and with all my belongings in storage, it is surreal to see a book with the name Grady Green on the cover again. I wonder if there will ever be another. The problem with reaching the top is that there is only one direction left to go: down.

"How are you?" Kitty asks, snapping me out of my self-pity. It's a simple question but I'm unsure how to answer.

The police gave up looking for Abby a few weeks after her car was found abandoned, despite finding the red coat she had been wearing. A dog walker discovered it half a mile along the coast the day after she vanished. It was soaking wet and badly torn. My wife has been “missing” for over a year but—according to the law—she cannot be presumed dead until seven years have passed. When other people lose a loved one there is a funeral or a service of some kind. But not for me. And not for Abby. The disappeared are not the same as the departed. People tell me I need to move on, but how can I? Without some form of closure I am trapped inside a sad and lonely limbo, desperate to know the truth but terrified of what it might be.

I’ve never been good with finances—Abby always took care of that side of things—and when I checked our joint account after she disappeared there was a large amount of money missing. According to the statements I’d never bothered to look at before, she’d made several big withdrawals in the months before she vanished. We’d overstretched ourselves when we bought the house, and I couldn’t afford to pay the mortgage on my own. With no new publishing deals, I was forced to sell it for far less than it was worth at a time when the housing market was crashing. Meaning I *still* owed the bank money. I sold most of our furniture too in an attempt to make ends meet, then rented a flat in London for a few months, paying a frankly extortionate amount to a landlord who knew I was desperate. I thought a change of scenery might help, but it didn’t. Instead, it just drained away what little money I had left. Now I’m living in a one-star hotel, surviving on royalties from my previous books, unable to write another. Unable to do anything much at all except obsess over what happened that night. My life has been unraveling ever since.

“I’m okay,” I lie, attempting a weak smile and sparing us both the truth. The smiling version of myself I used to present to the rest of the world is someone I don’t recognize or remember. Pretending is harder than it used to be. “How are you?” I ask.

Kitty raises an eyebrow as though she sees the real me, despite my best efforts to be someone better. She has played the role of parent in my life more than once, especially in the days after what happened. I didn’t have anyone else I could turn to, and as my wife’s godmother, Kitty was just as devastated by Abby’s disappearance. Agenting is a funny business and far more complex than most people imagine. It requires one person to perform

many roles: first reader, editor, manager, therapist, surrogate parent, boss, and friend.

My agent is the only person I still trust.

“You don’t look okay,” she says.

I try to see myself through her eyes; it isn’t a pretty picture.

I shrug, partly in apology, partly in despair. “I’ve been having trouble sleeping since—”

“I can see that. The dark circles beneath your eyes and the vacant expression are a bit of a giveaway. And you’ve lost weight. I’m worried about you, Grady.”

I’d be worried about me too if I wasn’t so goddamn tired. Months of insomnia has turned me into my shadow and I exist in a cloud of foggy slow motion. I don’t remember what it feels like not to be exhausted, confused, lost. I’m in urgent need of a haircut, and my clothes all look like they belong in a charity shop. As if on cue, my jacket button falls off and lands on Kitty’s desk with a sad *plink*. It’s as though my clothes are trying to say what I can’t: I’m broken. Kitty stares at the button, and her face says what she doesn’t. Then her assistant taps on the glass door before bringing in a tray with some tea.

“I invited you in today because we need to talk,” Kitty says when we are alone again.

We need to talk is never a good start to any conversation.

I think she’s going to drop me from her client list.

I don’t blame her. When she thinks about me she must think of her missing goddaughter, and that can’t be easy. Plus, if I’m not making any money, then she isn’t either. Fifteen percent of nothing is nothing. If I were her, I’d want to cut all ties with me too: A writer who can’t write is one of the saddest creatures in the world.

I clear my throat like a nervous schoolboy. “I know I haven’t written anything you can sell for a while but—”

“Your publisher wants their advance back,” Kitty interrupts. “It was a two-book deal and since we’ve never delivered a second novel—”

“I can’t pay them back. I don’t have anything left.”

“I guessed that much, so I told them to fuck off, but I do think we need to come up with a plan,” she says, and I’m relieved to hear she’s still on my side. Still fighting in my corner. The only one who ever has.

“It’s not easy to write in the worst hotel in the city. I’m kept awake most nights by drunk people walking past my window, and during the day all I can hear is traffic and building works. The walls are paper thin, and there are constant interruptions and noise,” I say, feeling as pathetic as I sound. I have never understood authors who choose to write in cafés or anywhere with other people or distractions. I need quiet.

“What happened to the flat?”

I shrug again. “I couldn’t pay the rent anymore.”

Her forehead folds into a worried frown. “Why didn’t you tell me? I’m scared to ask, but how *is* the new book coming along?”

I’ve only written one chapter, and I’ve rewritten it at least one hundred times.

“It’s . . . coming along,” I lie.

“Is there anything you could share with me?”

I only have one thousand words. According to my contract, I need ninety-nine thousand more.

I nod. “Soon, I think.”

“Or even a proposal or synopsis if you have one?”

I have no idea what happens beyond the first chapter, and I think I probably need to delete that and start again.

“Sure,” I say.

Kitty’s mobile rings, and she stares at it as though it has offended her.

“Sorry, I have to take this.”

“No problem.”

She composes her face into one of pure displeasure, then picks up the phone. “If that’s your best offer, then let’s not waste any more of my time. I’m seriously jealous of all the people who have never met you. Six figures or fuck off,” she says, then hangs up. Kitty likes telling people to fuck off. I’ve always been scared she might say it to me one day. “Where were we?” she asks, her voice composed and friendly again. She gently nudges the side of her glasses as though they aren’t straight. They are. “Oh, yes. You were pretending that the novel is *coming along*, while I suspect you haven’t written a word since the last time we spoke.” I try not to smile. Or cry. Someone knowing me so well is still uncomfortable for me. “I think we might require something stronger than tea today,” Kitty says, taking out a bottle of expensive-looking scotch and pouring two glasses. “We’ve been

working together for a long time, and I've always tried to do what I believe is best for you, for your books and your career." This is it. Here it comes. The goodbye speech. She's given up on me and how can I blame her when I've given up on myself. Kitty has a reputation for being ruthless and for dumping authors as soon as they stop being successful, as though she fears failure might be contagious and infect the rest of her client list. That said, she's never been anything but kind to me. Until now. Kitty reaches inside her desk drawer, and I wonder whether she is about to tear up my contract in front of me.

"I've given this a lot of thought over the last few weeks and months—"

"I know I can write another book." I blurt out the words and they sound almost true.

"So do I," she says. "And I want to help you." Kitty puts a Polaroid photo on the desk. It's of an old log cabin surrounded by tall trees. "When a client of mine died a few years ago, he left me this in his will," she says, tapping the photo with a manicured nail. Pink to match the tweed suit. "It was his writing shed in the Scottish Highlands."

I fear the correct response is eluding me. "Lucky you?"

"I've not had a chance to visit it myself since he left it to me. Scotland is a bit of a trek and I haven't had a holiday for five years, but I'm told the cabin has beautiful views, and Charlie certainly found it to be a productive place." I frown. "Charles *Whittaker*," she says, as though I might not know who that is when the whole world knows who that is. Charles Whittaker used to be one of the biggest bestsellers in the business, but he hadn't published a new book for years. I often wondered what happened to him. "Charlie always said that his tenth novel was going to be his best, but he died before writing it, and he was a secretive soul, wouldn't even tell me the title. He wrote several bestsellers in that cabin when he was at the peak of his career, but now it's just sitting there, empty. You'd be doing me a favor, really."

I stare at her. "You want me to go to *Scotland*?"

"Not if you'd rather stay in that shit show of a hotel. And I should probably point out that this little hideaway isn't on the mainland. It's on the Isle of Amberly."

"Never heard of it."

“Which is one of many reasons why Charles was so fond of the place—it’s very much off the beaten trail. There’ll be *no* noise. *No* interruptions. *No* distractions. He needed the world to be quiet in order to write, just like you. Couldn’t write a word when life was too loud.”

“I . . . don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes. The cabin means free accommodation until you get back on your feet.”

“I might just need to think—”

“Of course. Maybe this isn’t a good idea.” She nudges her designer glasses again, peering over them at me, and I fear I might have offended her. “It’s very quiet and very peaceful—apparently—but by all accounts it is a bit isolated. And rural life is not for everyone. There aren’t many *people* on the island . . .”

“Sounds perfect. You know I need things to be quiet to write and I just haven’t been able to, with everything—”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps it was wrong of me to suggest it.” She puts the photo back in the desk drawer, slams it shut, and pops a cigarette between her lips. “You don’t mind, do you?” she asks, lighting it before I can answer. I shake my head even though I do and despite the fact smoking in offices has been illegal for several years. “I don’t want to interfere or make matters worse,” Kitty says, exhaling a cloud of smoke. “And I do worry that my other authors might feel jealous if they found out. I haven’t offered the place to anyone else, and you know how some authors can get: Jealous. Paranoid. *Crazy*.”

“I won’t tell anyone about it. I think it sounds wonderful.”

“Good. That’s settled then.” She taps the ash from the end of her cigarette into a small silver agent of the year trophy on her desk. “Take three months. Take the dog—he’ll love it up there. Rest, walk, read, *sleep* . . . and who knows, maybe you might even be able to write. I’ll tell the publishers to take a hike for now. There are plenty of other publishers out there, you write me a new book and I’ll find you one. I know you can do it.”

“I don’t know if I can write without her.”

Kitty stares at me, then at the picture of Abby on her desk.

The head tilt of sympathy returns and her voice softens.

“You’ve spent long enough grieving, Grady. As much as it breaks my heart to say this, I don’t think Abby is coming back. She’s gone and you

need to try to move on. So do I.” Her words hurt us both. I see the tears in her eyes before she blinks them away.

I do want to write another book. I just don’t know if I can after what happened. Grief is a patient thief and steals far more than people who have never known it realize. My wife once said that I was only truly happy when I was writing, and I’m starting to think that might be true because I’ve never felt as broken as I do now. Being an author was the best job in the world until it wasn’t. Maybe this is what I need to be able to write again.

I can’t find the right words so say the simplest ones.

“Thank you.”

Kitty nods then opens her desk drawer again, this time taking out a checkbook. I didn’t know those things still existed. “What are you doing?” I ask.

“What does it look like? I’m writing you a check so you can buy yourself a new coat with buttons that don’t fall off—it can get pretty chilly in the Highlands at this time of year—and I want to know that you have enough money to feed yourself and Columbo.” She signs the check and slides it across the desk. It’s for a very generous amount of her own money. “You can pay me back when we sell the next book. I’ll email you all the details for Amberly and directions on how to find the cabin. Now get out of my office,” she says with a wink.

I am forty years old, but there are tears in my eyes. “Thank you, truly.”

“Success is often the result of a series of failures. Try to remember that. You never learn anything from success, but failure can teach you everything about a person. Especially yourself. I believe in you,” Kitty says.

It makes me so happy to hear her say that.

It also makes me sad because she shouldn’t.