

DRAMA FACTOR

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PROLOGUE

January 1999

Rachel stood outside the prison walls waiting on salvation to swiftly come to her. She had been inside for the past three years of her five-year sentence. Today she was stepping out with a bus ticket and one hundred dollars to her name. She couldn't even begin to describe her disgust for the place that held her captive for so many days. Her mind, body, and spirit were all drained of the zest she once had.

Rachel paced up and down the length of the street, stopping only to look across the field and down the road to where her savior would come and rescue her from this place. Her clothes stank of it. She reached up and scratched the tattoo, a dull sketch of a coiled snake, at the base of her neck. She pulled on her flimsy gray shirt, tightening it against her body to shield her from the cold. Rachel wiggled her body in a true 5-year-old's tantrum style and turned to face her past and future, for it would never leave her.

The prison house loomed over her as if to beckon her back inside of its walls for a visit with the twisted women she left behind. Rachel couldn't think of one person she would miss, not one of them. There were all types of women trapped in those prison walls, some from their own device and others not.

She turned away from the prison gates and shivered with complete disgust for the establishment with its cold brick and mortar and nothing but lost hope running wild inside. "God, where's my sister?" she asked, looking anxiously down at her watch.

Rachel reflected that she was in jail because of her man. A lot of the women she met in her three-year tour of the female prison were in jail because their significant other, somehow, got them involved in some illegal, destined-to-jail activity. The women were either willing participants or caught up in a scheme to their complete displeasure but couldn't bring themselves to trade his name for their freedom. She wasn't part of that group. Rachel was part of the crew that got themselves thrown in jail because they couldn't control their temper or their men. She overreacted when she found her live-in boyfriend cheating on her and was

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left with the consequences. For the rest of her life, she would bear the consequences of not only being foolish but of also being branded a convicted felon.

“Dammit!” Rachel exclaimed. She had given up hope on her sister and started walking. At least she could stay warm.

Before she took three steps, Rachel saw the gates opening up, and a car moving through them, approaching slowly. She bounced back and forth as she waited impatiently for the vehicle, a white 1999 Dodge Neon rental, to stop in front of her. She felt the tears build up in her eyes at the sight of her sister.

“Hey,” Grace said as she reached over from the driver’s side to push the car door open.

“Hey,” Rachel strained to reply.

“Where have you been for the past few years?” Grace asked as her sister settled herself in the car.

Rachel didn’t say anything. Her mind was racing with the agitated experience of living behind those walls. She had spent so much time trying to figure out everyone’s motives that she didn’t know how to be herself anymore. That’s what one does around criminals. After all, no matter what the case, they were all branded criminals to be locked up. But the person next to her wasn’t a criminal. No, it was her beautiful sister who was whisking her away, saving her. Rachel burst out crying.

“Oh, my. I didn’t mean to make you cry. I was trying to be funny. You know, I’m not even funny.”

Rachel nodded her head. “It’s not you,” she said still sobbing. “It’s just that I’m so happy to be out of that fucking place.”

It was a rare moment—Rachel’s tears showing sore vulnerability, neither of them knew what to do. Grace said nothing. She put the car in drive and left the den of dead dreams behind.

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Chapter One

April 2000

Xavier felt Angela's hands slip down his pants as they both fumbled over the stairs in a rush to get up to her small apartment. He was taken aback by the homely place because Angela had portrayed herself to be a high-class, self-sufficient female. He hesitated for a second and looked at her. He thought about all the other times they had sex and quickly dismissed any anxiety regarding her honesty. If she hadn't been straight up, it wouldn't be the first time a woman had lied to him. Consequently, he'd treat her like he treated all the other treasure-chasing women he came across in his life. The bottom line was, Angela was fine and knew how to make him feel exceptionally good.

She was a short brunette with the most curvaceous body he had ever laid eyes on. Her Hispanic descent lightly colored her skin with a tint of caramel. Staring at its smooth, creamy texture, he couldn't wait to get up the stairs to consume her. His hand landed on her firm, rounded bottom with a soft smack as he pushed her up the stairs.

She stopped in mid-step, turned ever so coyly and threw him a provocative smile before uttering, "Come and get me." She quickly pushed her tight rear into his groin, pushing him a couple of steps down the stairs, then ran up to her room.

Xavier chuckled at the challenge and chased her up to her bedroom, nestled in the back of the apartment with a window facing the street. He watched while she stripped down to nothing with maddening speed and savored the view as she sprawled herself on the full-size bed.

He threw the bed a skeptical glance and said, "Na, na, na. You better come on over here if you don't want a broken bed." He pulled her naked body up toward a chair by the window.

"Ah, come on. Stop wasting time. I'm horny as hell," Angela said as she quickly moved from the bed to the chair.

She took the chair and turned it away from the window. The glow from the streetlight struck her breast and caressed her body as she placed Xavier over the chair and started to work on getting his pants off. She dropped them down to his ankles and dropped to her knees. He closed his

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eyes tightly, squinting delightfully as Angela's tongue swirled around his sensitive jewel.

Angela licked her way up and around his body until she got to his face and said, "Yeah, you like that?"

Xavier nodded. His hands roamed up and down her naked back as he kissed the crook of her neck. He nibbled on her ear as she sat him down on the chair. He felt her slipping a condom on him. After which, she promptly crawled on top of him and, in Spanish, whispered how much she loved feeling him inside of her. Xavier kissed her mouth until she screamed into his. His smile of conquest paled into a satisfying smirk. She stayed on top of him with his head lying on her breasts.

"Oh shit!" Angela breathed out.

"I know," Xavier said with misplaced confidence. "Just hang on a sec and we can really get going." He smiled into her breast. He let his tongue slip over her stiff nipple, following the gesture with a mischievous bite.

"No, no, no. You gotta go, man. Shit!" She reached over him, shut the window, and pulled down the blinds.

Angela, still naked, ran all over the small room with bouncing breasts, grabbing the clothes she had haphazardly flung around.

"What the hell? What are you doing?"

"Look, you gotta go, baby. Come on, come on, get your ass moving." She pulled a robe from the bedpost and slipped it on before moving toward Xavier.

"Shit, get off me. I can pull my pants up myself. What the fuck is up?" He bent down toward his pants and worked them back up. He hated looking foolish, but he hated feeling foolish even more.

Loud footsteps at the stairs propelled Angela into furious motion. She moved behind Xavier and started, without success, shoving him toward the window.

"Look, that's my husband coming up the stairs and if he sees you..."

"What the...?" Xavier stilled. Over the years he had become a professional at weeding out married women and couldn't believe one got past his radar.

"Shit!" Angela whispered fiercely.

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“Hey, Babe, are you there?” A deep voice, heavy with slurs called from behind the closed door.

Xavier didn't have time to think or curse. He was willingly being shoved out the window just as the bedroom door opened. He was fairly confident that he could take the guy on and easily win, but the last thing he needed was to fight some drunken dude who would probably sue him before the dawning of a new day. Besides, he was screwing the guy's wife.

The cool rain hit his body, and the wind wrestled with his balance as he ran down the fire escape. At the last level, he pushed down the fire escape ladder. As he climbed down, he felt himself losing the battle; his feet slipped from under him and he fell off the ladder, back first with a loud thud against the pavement. He quickly got up, shrugged the pain off, and looked back toward Angela's window.

It was open, and her not-so-small husband was growling down at him. Xavier didn't wait to see if he moved from the window. He took off running. The rain beat down on him harder, making his clothes too heavy to run with. He wanted to strip down to nothing and run forever in the rain. He wanted to take advantage of the soul washing, to enjoy its cleansing, but he couldn't.

Xavier didn't like running away from anything and definitely not anyone. However, there were a lot of things that had changed in his life in the last seven years. Since becoming a multimillion-dollar football star for the Atlanta Falcons, sticking around for a good fight wasn't an option for him anymore. There were too many factors swirling around, too many risks, too many people involved, and definitely too much money.

He didn't know where he was going, but the X-factor was running. Unfortunately, he couldn't run far enough.

Grace turned her face away from her date for the fourth time in forty-five minutes. She swore to herself that if he blew his hot, vile breath in her face one more time, she would forget the solemn promise she made to her mother and end the date right there in the middle of the restaurant. He was a tacky fellow anyway, who had the gall to suggest that she needed to loosen up.

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Grace knew the date was off to a bad start when she had to go pick him up from The Grand Hyatt. His excuse for not being a gentleman and picking her up himself was clear evidence of his narcissistic affliction. He flat out told her that he didn't want to leave his posh hotel to waste time getting a car and figured that she would love to pick him up. Grace replayed his reasoning over and over again in her head and summed it up to being tacky, inconsiderate, arrogant, and cheap. To make the evening even more intolerable, his breath was so bad that she was afraid if he spoke toward the candles an uncontrollable flame would emerge and singe his continuous eyebrow.

His only saving grace was that he somehow managed to get them into Justin's, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs' restaurant, on a Friday night without any waiting. He probably wore his M.D. card on his forehead and put on his I'm-very-important voice. As long as he didn't get too close to anyone's nose, she was sure he could get what he wanted. He was obviously persuasive enough to get a blind date set up by Grace's mother.

His name was Charles, and he was her mother's cardiologist in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Her mother figured that he and Grace could get together while he was visiting Atlanta for a conference. She promised Grace that he was a handsome catch whom every single woman in her church wanted to snag. Grace grimaced at the thought. He was far from what she thought was handsome with his oversized belly and fleshy chest. Worst of all, his self-absorbed attitude was bordering on intolerable.

As he spoke more about himself and his many accomplishments, Grace wondered how anyone so immersed in the medical field could have breath so bad. She pushed the thought aside and remembered her other M.D. experience. She sighed and thought to herself, that the power given to doctors can create demons instead of healers.

Charles leaned closer to her; Grace leaned back even farther away. He asked her, "How come you're not eating? This is good food."

She looked down at her curry chicken and sweet plantains. It looked delicious but there was no possible way she could eat with that putrid smell circling her food. Not to mention, her date oozed cheap out of every pore. The whole affair made her sick to her stomach.

"I'm just not as hungry as I thought," she said demurely, hiding behind a smile her dislike for the man sitting close to her. Her mother

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must have been psychotic with absolute boredom when she said yes to this man.

Once again, Grace turned her head away from Charles. She pretended to look at the people coming into the restaurant. Justin's was one of her favorite places to eat because of the soothing atmosphere. The lighting was dim, which accentuated the earthy tones. The servers were polite and discreet. It was big enough not to be crowded but just the right size and atmosphere to be quaint. It was the perfect place to get lost in. Grace typically went there to hide in its shadows and eat dinner with a peace of mind. She gazed past Charles as he talked.

The tablecloth shifted, jolting Grace out of her musings. She turned to find Charles' face inches from hers.

He smiled at her. "Grace?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. What was that?" she asked, trying to inch her chair back.

He answered her and continued talking again, barely stopping to take a breath. His overwhelming closeness reminded her of just how lonely she really was. Ironically, her life was filled with activity. Grace was the owner of a thriving business, president of her local sorority chapter, personal mentor to at least four teenage girls, blue belt in Judo, and an active member of several community boards. She kept herself so busy that she didn't have any time to think about her mounting loneliness. Unfortunately, with one horrible blind date too many, she couldn't help but feel like she was suffocating in her self-inflicted solitary lifestyle.

"Tell me, what do you do for fun, Dr. Watson?" Charles asked after throwing his napkin over his empty dish. He leaned back into his chair, giving his stomach room to expand.

Grace masked her surprise with a smile. He actually inquired about her for a change. "The doctor really isn't necessary, Charles."

He was pompous as he was cheap, she thought. It was as if he wanted everyone within earshot to know who he was out with. She couldn't stand being called doctor. Grace had thrown that title away a long time ago. She thought of herself as just a person trying to help another.

"I stay active, working out and practicing Judo. I go out sometimes, but my practice keeps me pretty busy. I still manage to stay

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active in the community. I especially love working with kids whenever I get the chance. They tend to take my mind off my own stuff. You know?” Grace became animated with the opportunity to participate in the conversation.

Charles, on the other hand, looked bored and distracted.

“Excuse me.” He completely stopped paying attention to Grace and motioned at the waiter passing by their table. “Can you get us some more wine? Thank you. Oh, go ahead now. Continue.”

Grace squeezed the napkin in her lap and plastered a tight smile on her face as he waited for her to go on. She was definitely going to give her mother a blistering phone call when she got home. For now, she held the smile on her face and said, “Oh, I just relax at home for the most part. What about you? What do you do to unwind from your very stressful time at the hospital?”

Grace would have preferred that he not talk at all. Instead of paying attention, she kept the tight smile on her face, nodding her head when he paused for a breath. She threw in an occasional, “mmm-hmmm” for effect while mentally planning out the rest of her weekend. After fifteen minutes of dry, one-sided conversation, Grace decided that it was time for the date to come to an end.

She dramatically looked down at her watch and said, “Whew, if we don’t get going, I’ll never get enough sleep. Saturdays are always busy for me.” She smiled as sweetly as she possibly could while holding back the urge to choke at the closeness of his face to hers.

Charles smiled an impish smirk and signaled for the waiter. Grace looked on as he made a big show of pulling out his platinum American Express Card. It took all of her tested willpower not to roll her eyes at his obnoxiousness and yell, “No one cares you little toad!”

“Hey, you aren’t going to take that?” He pointed to her barely-touched food as they stood up.

“Uh, no.”

“Hey,” he grabbed the waiter before he left their table, “let me get a box for that.”

They sat back down to wait while the waiter took the dish. He returned with a small bag and handed it to Charles. He took it, got up, and moved toward the door without waiting for Grace.

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She cringed. As she watched him waddle to the parking lot, she wondered if he knew how pathetically unattractive he was. She shrugged the thought off and tried to pay attention to what he was saying. Blessedly, the ride back to his hotel was only a couple of miles. The nightlife traffic had yet to take over the Atlanta streets, so Grace was able to weave in and out of traffic.

“Grace, your mother gave me something for you. I forgot to bring it down with me,” he said as she pulled her car in front of the hotel.

She exhaled the breath she was holding while he talked to say, “Really?”

“You can park the car. I don’t want to have to come back down.”

Instead of responding, Grace, utterly baffled by his denseness, found herself staring at him.

“Just come on up and get the thing. It won’t take but a minute,” Charles pressed.

She slightly nodded and plastered a tight smile on her face. It was all she could do not to toss him out of her car. As she parked the car, he told her how much he had enjoyed the time they spent together.

“I had a good time too,” she said smoothly. She cringed at the seemingly bashful smile Charles was trying to throw her way.

He actually tried to make small talk as they made their way to his hotel suite. Grace wanted to tell him it was too little, too late, but chewed on her lip and continued to smile and nod instead.

Inside his suite, he motioned at the sofa. “Sit and just relax. I’ll be right back.” He stripped out of his jacket then walked to a second room Grace assumed to be the sleeping area.

She looked over to the sofa situated against the far wall, away from the door, and decided against sitting. She stood in the middle of the sitting room, waiting for him to appear from the dark.

Charles met her with his shirt unbuttoned and untucked, carrying two glasses full of red wine. An uncomfortable rumble moved in Grace’s stomach. He handed her a glass and she took it without saying a word.

“Hey, come on, girl. Take a seat. Have a drink with me before you go.” He moved her to the sofa and gently pushed her down. She fell into the seat.

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He gulped down the wine and set the glass aside. He waited for Grace to do the same. She took a moment to assess what was going on. She placed her glass on the plush, green carpet and moved farther away from Charles' closeness.

"Charles, where is the item?" she asked.

"Relax, girl. I'll get the letter for you."

"Get it, now," she said with an added edge to her voice.

He disappeared into the other room and came back with a sealed greeting card in his hand. Grace pushed herself off the sofa and reached for the envelope. Just as her hand was about to touch it, he pulled it away. Grace grasped at air. Keeping her brimming anger at bay, she reached for the envelope again. Charles wanted to play games. He pulled the envelope out of her reach and grabbed her hand, pulling her up to collide with his semi-muscular chest. Holding her in a tight bear hug, he looked down at her face. The putrid breath, mixed with alcohol, inflamed Grace's nostrils. She thought she was going to faint.

"Give me a kiss, then you can have your letter," he said as if she was obligated to trade favors with him.

Grace did not say or do anything as she mentally controlled a rising sense of familiar dread. She didn't want to hurt the man, but he was being too presumptuous and was begging her to offend him. After a few seconds, Grace, without much effort, broke free from his grasp and pushed him away from her with a forceful blow to the chest. A look of shock then rage flashed across Charles' face before he lunged toward her. Grace's agility and expertise in Judo allowed her to avoid the attack with fierce swiftness. Charles was only hurting himself.

He fell hard to the ground as Grace looked on with open disgust. The man was a complete idiot. As she reached down to snatch the fallen card, he quickly regained his senses and pushed himself off the ground to give her a swift blow to her face. Grace staggered back and watched as the demented man charged toward her. She moved to the side and kicked him into the wall. The sound of Charles' head hitting the wall was like a gun going off in Grace's mind. She snapped into motion.

She didn't wait for him to hit the ground before she started running. She could have cared less what happened to him. The throbbing on the side of her face clouded her mind as she ran through the hotel.

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Grace stopped outside of the hotel in a pouring rain, frantically looking from right to left. Afraid that Charles would come after her, she turned to the parking garage. She clutched her mother's greeting card and ran to her car.

She sat in her car for a few minutes to clear her head. Grace knew that she couldn't go home and face her sister right away. Rachel would ask too many questions that Grace had yet to figure out how she was going to answer. She started her car, turned the heater on, and made her way up the road to the closest Waffle House she knew. She still had some time before the streets filled up with cars and people leaving the nightclubs.

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Chapter Two

Waffle House was bright and already packed with people. Friday night was a bad night to be out in Atlanta. The clubs had yet to close, but people were still all over the place. The hustle and bustle of the busy city put Grace on edge. She couldn't help chewing on her lip as she waited for a seat.

"Can I help you?" a waitress asked. She had a maroon ponytail that Grace was sure could touch the heavens. Her name tag read Melissa. She looked over Grace's drenched body from head to toe as if Waffle House was too classy for Grace's wet body.

"Can I have nonsmoking please?" Grace ignored the nasty look because all she wanted to do was sit down to gather her thoughts. Besides, her jaw was starting to painfully throb.

Melissa rolled her eyes and led Grace to a booth next to the entrance. "Be right back."

Grace leaned back into the booth, resting her hand against her left cheek. The blow had caught her by surprise. It struck her like a personal blow to her self-worth and her spirit. The idiotic, bad-smelling-breath man had pimp slapped her. Grace thought about the many dates she'd been on in the past few years and laughed to herself at the large number. Was she pimping herself, waiting for the right guy to pay the right price?

She opened up the greeting card. It had separated into two pieces in her hands. She read her mother's words and didn't know whether to burst into tears or laugh herself silly. Grace did both while ignoring the patrons' stares.

Her mother was celebrating a new beginning for her. She was sure that this time she had outdone herself in finding Grace the perfect date. Grace glumly thought that all her mother had succeeded in finding was the perfect date to ensure that she would give up dating all together. Through angry tears, Grace vowed against men and the whole dating scene. She wasn't even sure why she was going on dates to begin with. She knew nothing would come out of them. Grace wasn't going to put herself on display anymore. She leaned her elbows on the table and hung her head low. In the next instant, she felt feet kick her as a man rushed into her booth.

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She looked up into a startling pair of soft, dark-brown eyes encased in a cocoa-brown face. His jaw was strong and stuck out just a little but not too far. He had very defined features that were uncommonly soft and inviting.

Her gaze locked with his for only an instant before he closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the booth. He stayed there with no words of apology. It was as if he hadn't seen Grace at all. Her sweet disposition was being tested to a point where she was sure it wouldn't hold up. She took a deep breath and let it out.

"Excuse me," she called. He didn't flinch a single muscle, muscles that she couldn't keep her eyes away from. He obviously took great care of his body. Grace pulled her gaze away from his sculpted arm. She waited for some type of acknowledgment but got none. Grace took a deep breath again and counted to ten.

After ten, she kicked him under the table as hard as she could. "Excuse me," she called again.

"Damn! What the hell?" His eyes popped open and fixed on her. Their softness were replaced with a hard edge that looked more worn than fierce.

"I'm sitting here," Grace proclaimed.

Xavier squinted his eyes and leaned over the table. "Yeah, I notice that, now."

She waited for him to say more, but he leaned back against the booth, closed his eyes and rested his head. She couldn't understand how he could say he *just* noticed her after he had looked right at her when he first entered her booth with his rudeness. She shook her leg in agitation as she watched him continue to ignore her.

"You should leave then!" Grace practically yelled.

Xavier ignored her raised voice. Keeping his head back and eyes closed, he asked, "Should I?"

"Yes. I was here first. I waited, and now I'm here. So go, wait and get your own damn seat." She knew she sounded like a child but couldn't keep the irritation out of her voice.

He opened his eyes and took a nervous glance toward the restaurant entrance. "Can't do that."

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“Look, I’m not trying to be rude or anything, but I just don’t want company right now.” She was going to try and play nice. Something had to work to get him away from her. “Please, find another seat.”

She sensed his restlessness and couldn’t help feeling a little curious and, surprisingly, worried about him. He kept on looking at the entrance as if he was expecting someone to burst into the restaurant.

Before he could respond to her, the waitress came by the table and virtually fell to the ground, she was so excited. Her ponytail swayed back and forth until it settled, a little lopsided. She whipped out her order pad and slammed it onto the table. “Hey, I saw you last week. You were on Oprah, talking about how hard it is to find a girl and all. You looked really good. Can you sign that for me? My name is Melissa, and I wouldn’t mind giving you my phone number . . . you know. I mean, this...”

Melissa went on rambling so fluidly that Grace didn’t think the girl was going to stop for a breath. Grace cleared her throat loud enough for the patrons to turn and look at her but still Melissa ignored her. She watched how he talked to her. This was business. What he did for a living, she had no idea, but Grace knew someone working when she saw it. As soon as Melissa walked up to the table and recognized him, Xavier’s lips widened into a fatigued smile that never quite touched his eyes. He entertained her. Maybe he was an entertainer.

Grace winced at a pang of hunger. Her appetite bailed him out. “Excuse me,” she called. “Can I get a drink or something?”

Melissa turned her full attitude on Grace and asked, “What do you want, ma’am?”

Grace bristled. She was young and vivacious, definitely nobody’s ma’am. “Listen, Babygirl, just go and get me some hot tea,” Grace patronized in the best condescending tone she could muster. She wasn’t going to let some little girl with a clown’s hairdo offend her.

Melissa stopped as if she wanted to get ugly and say something in response. Grace, completely out of character, almost wished she would. Running in the cool rain didn’t cool half of her anger. Fortunately, Grace’s aggression was not aimed at the waitress. Besides, Melissa grabbed her autograph and headed back to work.

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Grace turned from Melissa's retreating direction and focused on the man in front of her. She felt like kicking him again, harder this time, just for satisfaction's sake. Instead, she said, "I saved you."

"What?"

"You heard me. You owe me now. So, why don't you leave, and we'll say it's even. I'm sure Melissa-the-clown wouldn't mind sitting you somewhere else. Maybe after she punches out, she can do a few tricks for you too." Grace couldn't help herself. She chuckled at her own little joke.

"Melissa what?" Xavier asked. He wasn't laughing.

"Nothing. Anyway, you should repay me the favor."

"How you figure?"

"Come on, you didn't want to talk to her. You were suffering, and I saved you." Grace studied his face. The lines of his features were remarkably soft, almost gentle, yet he had a bold face that was more defined by his eyes than anything else. He was more than handsome. He had the look that girls dreamed about—a soft sexiness and hard-core rebel rolled into one. He sure didn't look like the kind of guy that allowed himself to owe anybody anything.

Xavier chuckled. "Thank you. It's even." His gaze flickered to the door and back to Grace's face.

Grace knew she wasn't beautiful or even pretty, but it didn't matter. Her face was inviting, and her asset was in her sex appeal. She oozed sex appeal. Her eyes were soft and shaped like almonds with one eye almost unnoticeably wider than the other. The invitation to her world was made with those critical eyes. It was as if she was inviting people to try to get to her heart, and men in her pants. Her mouth was set apart with pronounced full lips that she loved to slide her tongue over or chew on. Age blessed her looks even more by increasing her sexual appeal as she grew into womanhood. Her charm was encased in an oval face, shapely body, and smooth skin the color of cream and coffee. He smiled at her.

"Well, if you're not going to leave you should order some hot chocolate or hot tea or something," Grace snapped, too irritated to continue arguing when it was getting her nowhere.

"Why?"

"Cause, you're wet. I'm freezing."

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“Because I’m wet, and you’re freezing?”

Grace didn’t want to smile but staring into his quizzical face made her lips quirk upwards. She wasn’t certain whether she should take his nervous confidence seriously or as some kind of sympathy-chasing ploy.

“What happened to your face?” His voice turned hard and strong.

“What!” Irritation and his annoying stubbornness had caused Grace to completely forget about the pain. “I ... none of your business really.”

“If you let me kick his ass, we’ll really be even.”

Grace scoffed. “Thanks, but I think I took care of that.”

Melissa came back with her hot tea, a couple of menus, and a couple of friends. Grace saw the tired smile again. She stopped the girls before they had a chance to start.

“Thanks. Can you get him a hot chocolate?” She was candy sweet as she continued, “If you bug him, I will tell your manager that you can’t handle important people coming in here. We were sort of trying to avoid all this.” Grace gestured toward the other two giggling and gawking girls. “I’m sure that he can leave an autograph for them too.”

Melissa placed Grace’s cup on the table and said, “Who the hell are you?”

“A paying customer and you’re the waitress, right? Maybe you should remember that. Thanks.” Grace turned away from her in dismissal.

Melissa moved closer to Grace but was pulled back by the now mute followers. They shoved her toward the kitchen. Grace sipped her hot tea as if the incident never happened. She looked back at his smiling face.

She shrugged her shoulders and answered the unasked question. “I’m not usually that mean. I just ... anyway, what is it that you do?”

“You don’t know? You live in Atlanta and you don’t know?” He was skeptical.

“I don’t live in ATL. I just work here. Besides, I wouldn’t ask if I knew. You must be very popular though for them to act like that, and you’ve been on Oprah. Wow. I’m impressed.” She cupped her tea to warm her hands and took a sip, waiting for him to respond.

DRAMA FACTOR

“Don’t be. It’s nothing to be impressed about. What happened?”
He gestured at her face.

Grace noted that his voice rang with an unsettling concern. She stared at him for a moment before speaking. “My date, a doctor, instead of healing me, wanted to hurt me.” She needed to talk to someone impartial—someone who didn’t know her, someone she felt like talking to. She felt like talking to him. She would keep her identity a secret and talk to him. No harm in that. She’d unload on him and never see him again.

Xavier looked toward the door again and back to Grace’s curious face. He smiled. “I don’t too much care for doctors either or anyone in the health field actually.”

Interest peaked. She asked, “Oh? Why’s that? Bad experience?”

“Let’s just say, I have to deal with them a lot, too much for me, but that’s my life.”

“You know, there’s a chance that when people make numerous doctor visits that they’re just being patched up. You’re not being healed. They are just piecing you back together.”

He shifted anxiously again. “Yeah, what do you do?” he asked.

Grace smiled, licked her lips and lowered her voice. “I make people feel good.”

“Yeah, how’s that?”

“Many ways.” The smile hurt her jaw. Grace couldn’t even flirt like she wanted to.

“It hurts? You should put some ice on it,” Xavier recommended.

Grace snapped, “I know that.” She shook her head as if to regain some balance. She wasn’t even sure why she was trying to flirt with this guy.

“Okay.” Xavier looked toward the door.

“Are you expecting someone?” Grace turned toward the door and saw a young couple walk in. Their wet bodies were huddled closely together.

“Nah.” Xavier shifted as if what she asked made the room overly stuffy. “You’re going to get a pretty bad bruise on your face. You are too light skinned.”

WANDA TOBY

“Is that a problem? My skin color?” Grace felt a twinge of familiar angst at his remark. She used to be picked on unmercifully in school because she was so fair-skinned. She put her hand to her temple and shifted her body. Everything about the night compounded on her nerves and most disturbingly her self-conscious as a professional and a woman.

“You gonna bruise bad, that’s all.” He shrugged his shoulders, looked at the door then pretended to look for the waitress. “I’m hungry now. What are you doing?”

He watched as she peeled off her jacket, tossed it to the corner of the booth, and pulled her damp hair into a low ponytail, fastening it with a white scrunchie. The tail of it brushed the back of her neck causing her to shiver. She hugged herself and rubbed her arms.

“I was freezing in that thing. Tell me, who are you running from?”

Startled, he looked into her eyes and told her what seemed to be the most profound truth that he dared to reveal to anyone. “My life.”

Grace wasn’t sure what made him keep going, but it was as if he needed to express himself to her. She stared, riveted to his lips as he spoke.

“I guess, people think it is so great to be me and for the most part it is. Sometimes though, it’s just too damn busy, and I don’t get time to myself.” He paused and smiled at her again. She smiled back but didn’t know what to say.

He continued, “It’s funny though . . . I’ve been doing it for so long, now that I actually have some free time, I’m not sure what to do with myself. I think I’ve forgotten who I was before all of the craziness.”

Grace fell back against the booth. Jarringly, she knew exactly what he meant. A few years earlier, she was feeling the same way—caught up in too much drama and confused about who she was. “Not knowing yourself and being a little afraid to find out about yourself can be very lonely.”

His smile faded, leaving her with only a nod in response.

Grace smiled and signaled for the waitress. Melissa wasn’t serving them anymore. Grace ordered a breakfast big enough for two and turned to Xavier. “What are you getting?”

DRAMA FACTOR

He widened his eyes, laughed and placed a more conservative order. The waitress winked at him and sashayed away.

Grace turned a speculative gaze on him and asked, “Does that happen often?”

He looked down the aisle at the waitress and laughed, tilting his head back. “Yeah, that right there is some of the problem.”

“We could trade places. I know myself way too well right about now. I’ve spent too much of the past few years with myself, so I just do a lot of different things to get away from it all.” Grace shrugged. “Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn’t.”

Xavier’s first intention was to finish what he had started at Angela’s place with the striking stranger, but that sincere face overwhelmed him with her honesty. She made him honest. It seemed like she could see right to his heart or maybe he just wanted her to. He didn’t know her name and, for the moment, he didn’t want to know it because he wanted to stay anonymous. The X-factor was afraid of her. The truths he held back flowed to her too freely, almost without his consent. Talking to her bordered on painful, but he couldn’t help wanting to tell her all of his hidden thoughts and more. After all, who could it hurt if he didn’t get involved with her?

They ate and talked for hours without revealing who they were, both comfortable with taking an anonymous peek into each other’s souls. Xavier didn’t want to let her go. He didn’t want to let that moment go.

“Um, it was nice talking to you. I was so angry; I wanted to cut the balls right off of every man I saw. I was even preparing for nunnery, but now I’ll just cut off the whole dating thing. Thanks.” She pushed her empty plates away and stood up.

Xavier looked up to a sexy 5 foot 11 inch form and heard himself ask, “You sure you want to leave?”

“Definitely. I don’t even want to lose this feeling. If I stay and mess around with you, it would be out the window along with my panties.” She grinned. “Good luck with your life.”

Xavier watched as she walked to the cash register to pay for her food and leave. Suddenly, he panicked at the thought of never seeing her again. He pulled out a couple of twenties, signed one, and tossed them on the table.

WANDA TOBY

“Hey.” He caught up with her in the parking lot. “Let me take you home. I can call a cab or something. It’s two in the morning, come on.”

“That’s okay. I’ve got my car,” she replied. Xavier hesitated, and she turned his face with her soft, cool hands. “Please, don’t ruin this for me.”

He let her walk away; yet, with every step she took farther away from him, Xavier felt more and more like a fraud. He couldn’t spend the night like an imposter. It felt too cold, too isolated. He tried one last time.

He ran up to her and turned her around. “Let me walk with you. If you don’t mind, I could use a ride. Besides, I wouldn’t feel right letting you walk by yourself.”

She laughed. “I’m in the parking lot.”

“So, I can’t walk with you?”

She smiled at his bashful request and nodded. She looped her arm through his with a casual acquaintance that circled itself around his heart and pulled him along.

“Put your arms around me, and let’s walk.” She reached around his waist, pulling him closer to her body.

She walked up to a new E-class Mercedes-Benz and slid her key into the door. Xavier watched as she started the car and turned the heater on. She got back out and faced him with the door still open.

“This is you?” Xavier asked. He was surprised.

“Yes.” She laughed. “It’s a bit much with the crazy rims and all, but my sister is ghetto fab, so she talked me into ‘hooking it up’ with dubs.” She laughed at herself again.

The only women who chased Xavier down were straight gold diggers or gold diggers with husbands, who were fat in the pocket but lacking in the crucial life preserving areas. Nothing was ever theirs. He stepped back and asked, “You bought this yourself?”

“Yes. I bought it. So? Shit. Forget you.” She pushed him away. “Are you getting in?”

Xavier was too enthralled to notice that her hot annoyance had resurfaced. He moved closer to her and pulled her into a kiss. His lips touched hers, but before the kiss could go any further, she shoved him off of her.

DRAMA FACTOR

They stared at each other, both surprised, before she said, “Damn, I said don’t ruin this for me.”

To his amazement, she was angry. Xavier wasn’t accustomed to rejection or having to apologize for a kiss. It took him a few moments of staring before he spoke. “I ... I’m sorry.”

She nodded her head but didn’t move into her car. At that moment, she looked as if she wanted to leave but couldn’t. She shook her head and said, “Right. Look, I can’t take you home.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I shouldn’t want to, but I do. This is crazy. I just need to go home. Sorry, I can’t give you a ride.” She shook her head, lightly touched his chest and eased herself into the car.

“You’re about to leave me out here stranded?” Xavier knew she would.

She rolled down the window and laughed. “You will never be stranded. Thank you. Bye.”

She pulled out of the parking spot and drove away. Xavier watched with a small grin playing on his lips as his ride home got farther and farther away from him.

WANDA TOBY

Chapter 3

The next morning, Grace sat at her kitchen table staring into a bowl of soggy cereal. She tried to make some sense out of the events from her failed date only to find herself utterly confused. To make matters even more mind-boggling, in the haze of her confusion was the stranger's face and eyes. Grace could almost feel his brief kiss on her now even more swollen lips.

"Good morning." A deep voice penetrated her thinking.

"Hello?"

He looked over her questioning face and said, "I was just leaving."

"Really?"

"Yeah, um, bye." He grabbed a few stray belongings that were strewn across her sofa and dipped out of the door. She hadn't even noticed that her living room was in complete disarray. Grace waited.

"Good morning. Oh, nope, good afternoon. Did you meet Mark?"

Grace pulled her curious eyes away from the door. Her sister was dressed in boxer shorts and a faded sorority T-shirt. She looked as if she had just woken up from a night filled with satisfaction and deep slumber.

"Who's Mark, and what happened to Richard?"

Her sister floated over to the table, looked at Grace's bowl of cereal, and grimaced. "Ewe, what are you planning to do with this? Anyway, he was just paying me back for the massage I gave him.

"Really? I didn't know you gave out free massages?"

Rachel was a practiced massage therapist who hated giving anyone massages outside of work. She smiled and said, "I had a big incentive. Mark is more my type."

"You have a type?"

"Funny. You've never seen Richard come out of my bedroom, have you? Girl, please, he bores me. I just roll with him because I can. What's up with all the questions? I should be grilling you."

At 27, Grace's sister was four years younger than her but the amount of activity she had in her life sometimes made Grace feel like the younger one of the two. She wanted to escape the drama, while Rachel seemed to live for it. It never seemed to Grace that Rachel wanted to slow her life down, and that was where the sisters differed the most.

DRAMA FACTOR

Grace turned away from her sister in an attempt to hide her bruise. “I was just asking. I’ve never even seen this Mark character. Never mind.” Grace stopped herself before Rachel could start in on her about her own love life. That was always the direction Rachel wound up taking their conversations. “What are you doing today?”

“I have to go see that bitch ass parole officer around three today. He is starting to get on my nerves. I could almost swear he only calls me in to check me out.”

Rachel pushed her way past Grace’s chair and plopped herself in front of the television with a plateful of leftover Chinese food. She changed the channel from Lifetime to the middle of Maad Sports on BET, and then leaned into her dish. “I plan to just chill before that. Had something in mind?”

Grace gently shook her head, throbbing with pain and thoughts of the night before, in an attempt to discourage anymore questions from her sister. Rachel was tenacious and unmerciful at everything she put her mind to and it was only a matter of time before that unwavering investigation got directed at Grace. She knew it was coming. Rachel would bug every detail about the date right out of Grace. In most instances, Grace would have happily satisfied her curiosity. They’d laugh at the meaningless blurbs Grace would tell her dates and then feel bad about how poorly the dates went.

She scraped her chair against the hardwood flooring as she pushed it back to get up and throw out her half-eaten, mushy breakfast. She tried to leave the room before Rachel could trap her.

Rachel pulled her eyes away from the television set and said, “Hey, Grace, come on now. Come over here and tell me how last night went. Was it the date to end all dates?”

Grace kept her pace toward her bedroom steady, and mumbled, “Later. I got to ...”

She stopped before she could get out of the family room and turned toward the smooth, caressing voice coming from the 53” television. With conscious care not to let her sister see the bruise, Grace walked to the cream leather sectional and sat down as if the voice coming from the television commanded her to, then he was gone.

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Rachel scooted off the floor, sat next to Grace, and gently turned her face toward her. She looked over her sister's face and asked, "What's wrong with you?"

"Who was that?"

"What the hell happened to your face, girl?"

"Huh, what?"

"Your face, it's all jacked up."

Grace winced at the harsh sound of Rachel's worried and alarmed voice. Rachel was too much of a hothead. The last thing Grace wanted was to worry about how her sister would react to how she got the bruise on her face. Unfortunately, unless her life depended on it, Grace wasn't an accomplished storyteller so she blurted out the truth before she could think of something clever to say.

Rachel leaned back into the couch with her arms crossed under her chest. It always scared Grace when her sister said nothing. "Rachel, don't look like that. I took care of it. All we have to do is find Mom another hobby or ship her off to Dad in Haiti." Grace tried to joke about it and smile, but the pain in her jaw reminded her that it was not a joke.

"Are you crazy?" Rachel burst out. "He deserves a lot worse than that bullshit ass whuppin' he got. Look at your face. Hell no, Gracious. You need to press charges against that motherfucker."

Grace turned her head away from her sister, toward the television set, where she found herself staring into a distracted pair of familiar eyes. "Who is that?" she asked without taking her eyes away from the set.

Rachel flicked her gaze toward the image and back to Grace's face. "Oh, so now you're interested in sports again? All of a sudden, you want to know who's who and what's what. Don't be trying to change the subject on me. I want to ..."

"I think I met him last night," Grace said in such a low voice that it was as if she really didn't want her little secret to get out.

Rachel's eyes volleyed back and forth between the face on the television and her sister's swollen one. Her mouth dropped open into a silent O before she shut it. "His name is Xavier Jean Françoise. They call him the X-Factor."

Rachel slumped back into the couch as if all of her energy had been drained from her. "I don't understand how you, of all people, always

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get into these prime situations. Why can't I meet someone like that? Damn!"

Rachel spent the better part of her life emulating and trying to understand her older sister, but finally gave up on the task when she realized her sister was too complex to even attempt to understand. The two were nothing alike, making the undertaking painfully unbearable for Rachel. She was hotheaded, hot-blooded, impatient, unpredictable, and a risk taker. Grace, on the other hand, was mild tempered, sweet as apple pie, patient to no end, and careful about everything she did in her life. Grace was practically perfect. Rachel often found herself baffled with Grace's inconsistencies and annoying quirks of defiance.

"What does he do?"

"He's a linebacker for the Atlanta Falcons. He plays good-ass ball, and he is paid for days. Endorsements like a motherfucker," Rachel said.

"Oh, that's a shame."

"That's a shame? Only you would say that."

"Why do they call him the X-factor?"

"Because no one ever knows what he's gonna do on the field. He's like a secret weapon. His skills are so versatile that they use him in a lot of different plays, both defensive and offensive. That's what they say. How did you even meet him?" Rachel asked with her disbelief raising the pitch of her voice.

During commercial breaks, Grace told the story of their inadvertent meeting with the slightest attention paid to her sister's periodic gasps of surprise, particularly when she told her about the kissing attempt. Grace's eyes remained fixed on the television set until Mr. Françoise was gone. She turned a quizzical frown toward her sister and asked, "Why have we never tried to tap into that market?"

"What? What are you talking about?" Rachel asked.

"Athletes, people who play sports. We don't market our services to them at all. They can be a great source of income."

"Hold up. You just met one of the hottest brothers in football—I'm talking about hot on the field, hot in the pocket, and fine as fuck—and you want to talk craziness about business? What's wrong with you? You got hit too hard."

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Grace shrugged her shoulders. She was not particularly interested in any man's money and definitely not his fame. She was not going to pursue someone with a career so significant that it consumed all of his time and attention like her mother did. She wasn't planning to go through her days with baited breath while she waited around for a precious phone call from someone who was thousands of miles away in a land so removed from her own that she wouldn't recognize herself in it. The last thing she needed in her life was some famous jock. The last thing she needed was all that attention that followed him.

"Hey, he's not coming back on," Rachel said.

"Yes, so why don't we?"

"I don't know. You hate athletes, remember. I guess we never really gave it much thought. Anyway, why are you asking me?"

"You're my manager and my partner," Grace answered.

"I don't deserve to be," Rachel said as she slumped back into the couch.

Grace looked over to her sister's depressed face. She didn't have to ask where the sullen mood came from. Ever since Rachel was released from jail, she occasionally experienced instances of extreme remorse over her jail time mixed with gratitude to her sister for providing a haven. Grace initially confused Rachel's comments as satirical jabs at her 'boring life,' but as time went on, she recognized that they were painfully sincere.

"You want me to go with you today? We can talk more about business on the way."

Rachel shrugged her shoulders and said, "I'm tired of talking to that bastard motherfucker."

"It's only for nine more months. You can hold on. After that it'll be all over."

Rachel moved closer to Grace and whispered, "It will never be over, Gracie. I will always have a record. I might as well be back in jail. It makes no difference." Rachel wiped away a teardrop that dangled at the corner of her eye with the back of her hand. "Fuck it. You gonna charge this guy or what because if you don't, I will get myself into trouble. You know I'm serious, too." She moved to the kitchen with her dishes.

Grace's nod was barely visible. The weight of the forced decision made her head and neck ache; however, showing Rachel her pain would

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only make matters worse. Grace chewed on her lip in an effort to hold back her frustration. She had worked hard and diligently at establishing and maintaining a low key, drama-free life. In one night, all of her comfortable peace was being threatened. Grace held her temples in an attempt to keep her brewing headache at bay.

“You see, that bastard should pay for all that pain. Look at you. And stop staring at the damn television. The show is over, besides he doesn’t date black girls.”

Grace’s head, not that she wanted to be so obvious, whipped toward her sister. She stopped herself before she could yell out why. “Please, how would you know?”

“Oh, so you’re interested now? That’s right, sister. I still keep up with football even if you don’t.” Rachel’s flip-flops, pink with little roses across the top, seemed to clatter on the wooden floor. Grace dropped her head into the palm of her hand to escape the noise. Rachel’s pointing-out-the-facts remarks continued to ring in her head.

“The darkest he goes is tan, you know, those Spanish chicks. Shit, you actually pretty close, but brother can’t hang with a sister,” Rachel said.

Grace wanted to shake her head in denial but knew it would cause her too much pain. She shrugged her shoulders and moved for the remote control instead, too weary to argue with her sister. She changed the channel to the soothing sounds of the Home Shopping Network and fell into the couch. Grace rested her cheek against the cool leather and closed her eyes only to fitfully wrestle against memories of another life. She woke to the sound of her sister’s voice calling out her name.

“Grace! So, are you coming with me?” She heard Rachel call from behind her.

“Yeah, let me get dressed. I need to stop by the Underground and then the office anyway.” Grace moved slowly to her room, closed the door behind her, and leaned against the wall with her eyes closed.

She forced herself to forget the bad memories and move on, but when she did, her mind fell to Rachel’s words. She told herself that she wasn’t annoyed with the commentary about Mr. Françoise. She couldn’t care less what kind of women the man was interested in, and she, most definitely, was not interested in some famous football player. It wouldn’t

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matter if she was because Grace was not planning to meet with him ever again. She couldn't afford it.

With those reassuring thoughts, she opened her eyes to her sunlit room and walked into her bathroom, stripping off her robe and underwear as she neared the shower. As the water fell over her body, she cleared her head of silly thoughts. Grace had to concentrate on how she was going to get Rachel to lay off her back about Charles. There was no way she was going to go through the ordeal of trying to file charges against someone who didn't even live in the same state. She was more than confident that she had extinguished his interest; Charles wouldn't be a problem for her. She was certain.

She stepped out of the shower with a clear plan in her mind, deciding that it would be best if she told her sister what she wanted to hear.

"Gracious!" She heard her sister yell from the other side of the door. "Come on. I can't be late with this bastard."

"Coming, just give me ten more minutes!" Grace yelled back.

Rachel rolled her eyes at the door and walked to the living room. Grace's 10 minutes was more like 30 minutes, but she would never notice the time ticking away. She was always so immersed in her own head that Rachel wondered how she was ever able to get through four years of medical school.

Rachel leaned against the back of the sectional sofa, flipping through a magazine. She looked down at her watch and figured that she was going to get loads of bullshit philosophy about promptness for being five minutes late.

"I'm ready." Grace popped out of her room dressed in a white tank top and taupe capris with a matching sweater. She looked crisp in contrast to Rachel who wore jeans and a faded T-shirt with a light leather jacket over her.

Rachel ignored the triumphant smile on Grace's face. Looking down at her watch, she mumbled, "So, it still took your ass 20 minutes instead of 10, and I'm still late. Come on."

The first few minutes in the car were filled with thoughtful silence until Rachel burst out, "Hey, asshole! What happened to a turn signal?"

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She slammed down on the car horn and swerved on the six-lane highway toward her exit. “Bastard.”

“Try not to crash my car, okay,” Grace said as she rearranged herself in the seat.

“You know your idea won’t work,” Rachel threw at her.

“What?”

“About getting business from the ball players. They have everything they need at their fingertips. If you want to meet him, you should just say that, but don’t bring business into it.”

“Rachel, I wasn’t even talking about him or big-shot ball players. I was talking about athletes in general. You’re the one who needs to ...”

“All right, whatever. We’re here. Come on.”

It was fifteen minutes after three and Rachel didn’t want to waste any more time arguing with her sister about her motives. She rushed into the quiet building, pulling Grace along as she twisted and turned into a maze of offices until she found herself in the farthest left corner of the building. Rachel sat Grace down on a dirty love seat outside of the office.

“I’ll be right back.” She took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

“Yes,” Richard Frost called.

Rachel pushed the door open and stepped into the poorly lit room. She waited while Mr. Frost finished writing his notes.

He looked up from his paperwork and gestured at a worn chair in front of his desk. “Take a seat. Don’t be shy.”

Rachel sat down.

Frost was a thin man who always had a tan even in the middle of winter. He wore cheap, thin shirts and thick eyeglasses. He smiled at Rachel. She didn’t smile back.

“Why am I here?”

“I think you know why.”

“I have my ideas.”

Frost looked at her for a moment and said, “Rachel, I can send you back to finish your time off if you’re not complying with the terms. You understand?” He ended with a smile.

WANDA TOBY

Rachel dug her nails into the side of her thighs over his pseudo concern. With gritted teeth, she answered, “Yeah, I know that. Why am I here?”

“Do you want to go back to jail to serve the rest of your sentence or more?”

“No.”

“You have less than a year to go but it seems like you’re trying your best to sabotage that. Three years is a long time. I would think you wouldn’t want to add on to that.”

Rachel looked up at him, confused about what he was trying to say. “I haven’t been in any trouble Frost, and I’m not sabotaging anything. I just do what I gotta do to survive.”

Frost nodded. “Whatever the cost? Beating your boyfriend up with a bat was for survival?”

Rachel shrugged her shoulders.

Frost took off his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose before continuing, “You’re still reacting first and worrying about the consequences later, which is all the more reason for you not to skip your sessions.”

“That’s what you called me in here for? Don’t you have a life? It’s Saturday.” Rachel got up to leave. She wasn’t going to stay and listen to his lecture about how important the counseling sessions were.

“Sit down, Rachel. Whatever you may think, I’m just doing my job. I don’t want to see you go back to jail. You don’t think the sessions are worth it, fine. Bottom line, it’s a condition of your parole. You’ve got less than a year to go. I don’t want to have to start calling you every other day again. Go to the sessions. Since you missed so much, it will have to be twice a week until you’re done.”

Rachel, still standing, looked down at Frost and wondered if he really cared. In her first year on parole, she thought he was a control freak. As time went on, she hated him for always keeping tabs on her like she was a child. Then one day it just stopped, and she felt a little freedom from her ex-convict status. So she lived free, trying to bury any reminder of the three years she spent in prison. She just wanted to be normal again.

“Rachel?”

“Fine. Whatever you want. I’ll go twice a week. We done?”

DRAMA FACTOR

“That’s all. I’ll touch base with ...”

Rachel left the room without waiting for Frost to finish. She walked out to her sister and pulled her off the love seat. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Grace winced at the firm grasp Rachel had on her wrist. She felt Rachel’s raw rage vibrate through her. It was her sister’s raw anger that put fear in Grace’s heart about confiding in her. Rachel’s lack of control and hot temper got her butt sentenced to five years of jail time. There were times when it was hard for Grace to believe that Rachel was the loving and caring sister who wanted to help her in any way she could. Nonetheless, Grace decided long ago that there was no way she would let Rachel know her business. The last thing she wanted in her life was Rachel marching around and fighting her battles. Rachel couldn’t even straighten out long enough to handle her own problems.

Grace, after being dragged unmercifully through the office building, stopped abruptly, and pulled her almost bruised wrist out of Rachel’s grasp. “Girl, stop.”

She pushed past Rachel, grabbed her car keys from her and walked toward the parking lot. “What the hell was that all about?”

“He found out I’ve missed some of my anger management sessions—skinny ass, sloppy, out-of-date bastard! Now, for the duration of my parole, he’s mandated that I go twice a week. I don’t need that bullshit, not once or twice!” Rachel’s voice rose with each added syllable until she was yelling at Grace. She rubbed her palms on her jeans over and over again and took a couple of deep breaths before sitting down in the car.

“Why are you yelling?” Grace commented, not at all expecting an answer.

“Because this is bullshit!” She slammed her hands against the dashboard. Grace flinched. “I give a motherfucker exactly what he deserves, and I’m the one punished for the rest of my life.” Rachel’s voice strained against the urge to cry.

As she drove, Grace tried to think about the right thing to say to Rachel without setting her off. She pulled into the parking garage at the Underground, Atlanta’s premiere tourist stop for shopping, eating, and entertainment. Cutting the engine off, she placed concerned eyes on her

WANDA TOBY

sister's face. "Hey, this isn't forever. It's just the next nine months. No big deal, right?"

Rachel unleashed on her sister's well-meaning comment. "Grace, get your head out of the fuckin' sky. God! Sometimes I wonder about you. This shit is forever! I am an ex-con forever. Does that shit sound harsh? Well, it is. I wasn't too cute to get my ass thrown in jail, and that will stay with me forever. Nothing will change that."

She was unshaken by Rachel's defensive words and moved to lay a comforting arm on her shoulders. "Hey, it's ..."

Rachel, disgusted by Grace's patronizing attempts, recoiled from her touch. "No, don't. Look, I don't want to be here. Take me home."

A flare of indignation rose in Grace's chest. She hid it with her usual placid expression, the one she acquired in the past few years to make everyone believe she and her life were as dull as she portrayed and wanted desperately for it to be. She said nothing to her sister, in effect, keeping her words of encouragement and perseverance to herself. Rachel wouldn't give credence to what she said in any case. After all, Grace was the boring woman who led a most boring and uneventful life. What she did was filled with logic and calculation, and she knew Rachel would never believe words that did not come from experience. Grace left it alone and drove her sister home.

At nightfall, Rachel was back to being her usual off-the-wall self. Mr. Frost was set in the back of her mind, and she was going out to the club. "Come on, Gracie, have a little fun. Come out with me tonight!" Rachel said.

"No. I really don't want to. I have work to do and there is a chapter meeting tomorrow. I have to get my report ready."

Rachel burst out with annoyance at her sister's compulsive discipline. "Fuck a chapter meeting, and let's go. You can't keep working for everything and everyone else all the time."

"No! You shouldn't be going out either. What if Frost calls?"

"That bastard won't call. His lazy ass is asleep by now. Come out with me!"

"I said, no."

DRAMA FACTOR

Turning away from Grace, Rachel, with all the attitude of a city school girl, sucked her teeth, rolled her eyes, gave her sister the stop sign and said, “Whatever.”

Grace watched her sister walk out the door without a care for all of the problems in her life. Rachel was better at letting go of worry than Grace. That was why Grace decided to stay home most of the time. Driving into the city of Hotlanta, where drama was lurking around every corner ready to jump on your back, was too disconcerting for her. Grace had spent the last few years of her life running away from drama, and she didn’t want to upset the peaceful balance she had created. So, she stayed home, as always.

She actually spent a majority of the time charging up her credit card, the only frivolous spending she did, with needless workout inventions, kitchen appliances, costume jewelry, and special music albums that were only offered once. Shopping channels, infomercials and late night commercials had become her escape from the countless, boring hours in the night when she was sometimes too afraid to sleep in an empty house by herself. Grace, at the beginning of her drama-free life, thought she was pathetic, but she accepted it as a necessary consequence and became accustomed.

As she lay on her couch in the middle of the night, flipping through channel after channel, a disquieting feeling came over her followed by an even more disturbing thought—danger was lurking right around the corner.