

Ex Convict 3

Chapter 3

“Are you hungry?”

His dark eyes studied her and he tilted his head. “What?”

When he still didn’t reply, she wrung her hands together. “I’ll get you something to eat.”

Grace moved to the tiny stove and threw some noodles and eggs into the pot to make a simple bowl of noodles for him. She didn’t have any meat, but she chopped what vegetables she had and added them too.

She set the tiny table and poured them both a glass of water from the sink. He moved cautiously to take a seat when she set the bowls down.

“Eat, but don’t eat too fast. It’s quite hot,” she said.

She didn’t mean to treat him like a child, but his presence made her nervous even as there was something incredibly calming about him.

He lowered his head and ate his noodles quietly. Grace also stared at him in silence.

Normally, she’d come home and hate the feeling of being alone, confined in a tiny space. For some reason, the loneliness that she’d usually feel seemed to have disappeared. Could it be due to the presence of another person in the room?

After he had finished eating, Grace cleaned up the plates. “I usually sleep with the lights on. I hope you don’t mind,” she said. Ever since she was released from prison, she had gotten into the habit.

“That’s fine.”

Grace took her pajamas into the bathroom and shut the door to brush her teeth and change. Was it weird having a man alone beside where she’d sleep? Yeah. Probably.

But she didn’t feel triggered by his presence of fearful.

If he’d wanted to hurt her, he wouldn’t have defended her on the street.

When she exited and lay down on the bed, he took his position on the floor.

The room was silent save for the sound of the heater. If she listened hard enough, she could hear each breath he took.

It was a steady rhythm, peaceful even.

Grace closed her eyes and focused on sleeping. This was her routine every night because it was almost impossible for her to relax. Even being out of jail, at night she would always dream of her time in prison.

She would be beaten, shamed, and abused... and every finger would burn with the pain of being broken and the nails being torn off...

She'd wake up screaming, fingers curled, terrified, and heart pounding.

However, oddly, that didn't happen tonight.

She slept until sunrise and was not visited by her usual nightmares.

As she awakened, she rolled over to look at the figure lying on the ground beside her bed.

Still here.

Was it because of him? Because she was no longer alone in this room?

Before she even knew it, she had gotten out of bed, squatted down, and placed her hand on his cheek. Her hand felt warm.

He was real, and not something from her imagination.

Last night, she really had taken a strange man into her apartment.

When she came to herself, she found that he was already awake. His beautiful eyes were fixed on her.

"Sorry." Her face heated with embarrassment. "I... I just... that... If you don't have anywhere to go, you can also live here."

She spoke in a hurry, but after she had said it, she felt relieved.

His eyes widened with a trace of surprise.

"If you don't want to, just pretend I didn't say anything," she added, biting her lip.

His mouth finally opened and he spoke quietly. "Do you want me?"

If this had been said by some other man, it would've sounded like they were flirting with her.

But when the words came from him, it was like he was just asking a simple question of "want" or "don't want" and she assumed he meant it to mean his presence here. She didn't read any ambiguity into his words, even if there had been, she realized her answer would be the same. Grace pursed her lips. "Yes, I do."

He stared at her, and a smile slowly formed on his lips. "Good."

This was the first time she had seen him smile. Although it was very light... it looked extremely beautiful to her.

Jason remained at the tiny table while Grace got ready to go back to work. When she left money on the table for him to buy himself some food, he sat staring at the twenty-dollar bill for a long time.

With her gone, the room was eerily still.

None of her light vanilla scent or somewhat nervous energy filled the space. He rolled up the quilt that he'd slept on and then washed out the coffee cup he'd used.

Normally he'd be tempted to look around, maybe snoop a bit. But he didn't want to intrude on her space.

When he finally left the apartment, there were already people waiting for him outside.

After seeing him come out, they respectfully greeted him, "Mr. Reed."

"Let's go," Jason responded faintly.

A black Bentley was parked in front of him. Jason got into it and looked at the twenty-dollar bill in his hand. It had been many years since someone had given him money like this. On the contrary, for as long as he could remember, people only wanted to take money from him.

Terrence met his gaze in the rearview mirror. "The woman who was with you last night is a contract worker of the Sanitation Service Center. She started renting her current residence here a month ago, and was just released from prison two months prior."

"Prison?"

“Yes, her name is Grace Cummins. She’s the ex-girlfriend of Sean of the Stevens family. She was convicted of reckless driving and killing Jennifer Atkinson. She was sentenced to three years of

imprisonment and had her lawyer’s license revoked,” Terrence said as he carefully observed Jason’s reaction.

Jason kept his expression bland. “Grace...” he whispered. “Well, this is interesting.”

Back then, considering how Jennifer Atkinson had been set on marrying him and that she was also a good political marriage candidate, he thought that if he had to marry someone, then she wouldn’t be that bad of an option.

However, who would’ve thought that Jennifer would end up dying in a car accident?

If Grace knew about his past relationship with Jennifer, how would she react?

He considered that twenty-dollar bill again.

When had someone cared for him? Taken his hand, brought him into her home, and said she’d wanted him—just for him.

“Terrence. I want all the information you can find on Grace Cummins on my desk today.”

“Yes sir.” Then... “Sir, are you interested in this woman?”

When she got off work, Grace got a call from her father asking her to go home. He said that since she had been released from prison, she should go home to pay her respects to her mother.

Grace’s mother died when she was three.

Dad had remarried only a few months after mom died, and her stepmother gave birth to another daughter, Evelyn.

It was always clear that Grace’s father favored his “new” family, which led to her being sent to live with her maternal grandmother in the countryside. Grace’s grandmother cared for her until third grade, but had to leave her. Fortunately, her paternal grandfather stepped in and kept her by his side.

As she'd been in college and at the top of her class, her father finally warmed to her. He eventually started to show off to others that he had a smart daughter.

When she and Sean started dating, her home life became the best it had ever been. Her father regarded her as an honor, and her stepmother cared about her well-being, even if only out of pretense. Even her half sister tried to get on her good side—something that had never happened before. From the moment Evelyn was born, she'd taken the role of the favorite child, and she'd scarcely bothered to even acknowledge Grace.

Dating Sean had been the one act that had finally made her worthy of love in her family's eyes. She knew it was only because he was the heir of the Stevens Corporation. However, at that time, she still couldn't help but long for familial affection. She'd just wanted to be accepted by them.

To be loved.

After the car accident, she realized that everything was just her wishful thinking.

Coming home, she stepped into her father's house.

The decor was mostly the same. Pictures of the three of them. Not a single photo of her in sight.

Same couches and tables.

The living room had been painted a bright red, and the kitchen was redone with all-white cabinets with stainless steel appliances.

Grace joined her "family" in the kitchen.

Her stepmother, Melinda Riley, smiled at her. That was something, she supposed.

But no hugs or kisses or welcome's home, around here.

She listened patiently as her father and stepmother made small talk. Evelyn sipped her tea and remained silent.

After a few minutes, the conversation turned toward Evelyn's career.

"It's not easy for your sister to get roles these days," her stepmother said.

Grace took a sip of tea. "Oh?"

Truthfully, she'd had more important things to think about these last three years—like surviving and

-serving out her time, and staying sane while she'd been wrongfully prosecuted, imprisoned, and beaten.

"It hasn't been easy to re-enter the entertainment industry in the wake of ... things," her stepmother continued. "And it's vital that your sister only accept good roles."

"Hmm," Grace replied absently.

"You know that our family isn't very rich, but your sister just happens to need money right now. How about... you lend some money to us first, and when your sister becomes a big star in the future, we will return it to you after she makes a lot of money?"

The real reason for being summoned home presented itself... "I don't have any money," Grace answered succinctly.

Her stepmother's expression turned stiff, but then she smiled slightly and said, "You don't have money, but Sean does. You dated him before, but as soon as you had an accident, he broke up with you. Shouldn't he make it up to you somehow?"

Were they really expecting her to beg the man who'd deserted her for scraps of money? She couldn't believe their audacity. Grace pushed back from the table. "I'm sorry, didn't you, Father, and my sister pretend like you didn't know me back then and avoid me the entire time I needed my family?"

Her father said angrily from the side, "So what? Are you here to get even with me? If you hadn't killed someone back then, your sister would have already been cast as a main actress a long time ago and would've already become a big star by now!"

Grace smiled sarcastically. Back then, when Evelyn had been chosen as the leading actress in a television drama, it was because the Stevens Corporation had been one of the investors in the TV series, and Sean had specifically asked for Evelyn to be the leading actress.

Later, after Sean broke up with her, Evelyn's role naturally went up in smoke.

"Sis, are you still resentful that we didn't do anything for you when you were in jail?" Evelyn asked quietly.

Her features were perfect, her skin smooth. Her long manicured fingers tapped on the table.

"Because I think that's very selfish of you. Your actions damaged our family's reputation. The Stevens family. The Reed family. The Atkinsons, Epsteins, Changs. Even the Westons. Every prominent family in this city wanted your blood for what you'd done. What could our family even do? If back then, we had really stood by your side and helped you file a lawsuit, our whole family would've also offended them."

Because powerful, wealthy families were above the law and enabled to abuse whoever they wanted on a whim? To hell with justice and the entire judiciary system.

Grace shook her head. She wouldn't waste her words or even attempt to make these people see how their actions had pained her.

In their eyes, she was the villain, not the victim.

"How could an ordinary family like ours withstand their retaliation?" Evelyn asked.

"You're right," Grace said coldly.

She was nothing to them. A means to an end. They cared nothing for her pain, her suffering. Her heartbreak. It wasn't just her trial and sentencing to prison. This disconnect had been there from the moment her mother left this earth. She was through with trying to please them. She'd never strive for their love again because they didn't have it to give. Not to her, anyway.

Her eyes burned, and she had only to squeeze her fingers for the pain of her assault to give her strength.

Grace rose from the table and smiled gently. She looked straight at her sister. "Since you couldn't stand by me when I was at my lowest, why should I bother helping to make you rich?"