

## Ex Convict 12

### Chapter 12

Back then in prison, Grace was alone. If Lina had not visited her frequently to encourage her, Grace might not have walked out of prison alive.

There were days...too many of them when she'd contemplated ending it all.

It was Lina who had been giving her support over the past three tough years.

"The life-saving straw...?" Jason's eyes glittered. Lina seemed to hold a special place in Grace's heart. Jason asked, "Don't you find it funny to treat a person as such a lifesaver? What if they abandon you, won't you feel despair?"

"Lina would not do that," Grace replied confidently, showing her absolute trust in Lina.

Jason had no idea why he felt uneasy.

Over the next few days, Grace's workload increased tremendously, as the management staff from Sanitation Service Center would be coming over for inspection. Most days, she had to work overtime.

Fortunately, when she went home, Jay would have prepared dinner and he'd be there, a steady, calming presence waiting for her, and that warmed her heart.

She had told Jay before to go ahead and eat. He shouldn't have to suffer just because she would return home late. However, he insisted on waiting for her so they could eat dinner together.

Early in the morning, after cleaning the streets that she was assigned to, Grace returned to the Sanitation Service Center. After putting away her tools, she stood on the lawn in front of the entrance.

After a while, the inspectors from the Urban Management Bureau arrived. Everyone who was in charge of sweeping the streets stood on the lawn to welcome the inspectors, making it convenient for reporting.

Grace's skinny body stood out among the group of middle-aged women.

"You're Grace!" When the inspectors reached the Sanitation Service Center, a woman of about 28 years old shouted out when she saw Grace.

Grace lifted her head. The woman in the light-blue suit had her hair up in a bun. Her face was round and her eyes narrow. She was ordinary, but her makeup made her look good.

Grace was stunned for a while before she recognized her high school classmate, Mia Jenkins.

"It's you!" Mia looked at Grace in amazement as she asked, "Why are you here? Are you now... a sanitation worker?"

"Yes, I'm working here," Grace replied. She didn't look away from Mia's gaze. After all, it was unavoidable for one to meet their old friends. No matter how embarrassing that would be, she had to face it.

"Mia, do you know each other?" her colleague who had come along with her asked.

“That’s right. Back then, Grace was the prettiest girl in the class and our valedictorian! She always topped in class. Many guys in our class liked her and but Grace was always focused on her education.” Mia deliberately praised Grace to the skies.

The more she did that, the more it showed the contrast to Grace’s current situation.

As expected, the colleague frowned, commenting, “Was she the prettiest girl in the class? You must be kidding!”

Mia smiled faintly, and Grace tensed. She wasn’t ignorant of the undercurrents here. Back then in class, a lot of students were envious of her.

“Oh yes,” Mia said. “Our Grace was quite the swan.”

Right. And the ugly duckling was now the supervisor, while the swan was sweeping the streets.

When Grace’s colleagues heard what Mia Jenkins had said, they turned to look at Grace with different expressions on their faces. Some looked surprised, some looked at her with sympathy, and some laughed.

The following day, after Grace had finished sweeping and went back to return the tools, a girl in the Supply Department asked her curiously, “Grace, everyone overheard Miss Perkins yesterday. Is it true what she said, about you being the prettiest and smartest?”

Grace didn’t reply. Farah Steele, another woman from the Sanitation Department, snorted. “What’s the use of being the prettiest girl in the class or being super smart? Obviously, that couldn’t be true—or she wouldn’t be here.”

The girl who had asked Grace the question looked at Grace with embarrassment, but Grace merely lowered her head. After she had signed her name on the logistics record book, she turned to leave.

Claire caught up with her and patted her on the shoulder. “Don’t take Farah’s words to heart. She’s venting her anger on you because she likes Chase from the fleet.”

Grace looked puzzled, as she had no idea who Claire was referring to and what Chase had to do with her.

“Chase is one of our drivers and he seems interested in you. He always greets you,” Claire explained. She was truly concerned about Grace as she said, “Chase is a nice guy, and the Center has plans for him. His parents have also bought him a house for his marriage. You may wish to consider accepting him.”

Grace shook her head as she replied, “No thanks. I have no intentions of getting into a relationship.”

“You’re already twenty-seven years old. As a woman gets older, it will become more difficult to find a partner.”

“In that case, I shall remain single,” Grace replied. After she came out of prison, she no longer harbored any hope of love or marriage.

Back then, Sean had made several promises to her.

He’d promised to love and cherish her, to protect her forever.

And she saw how well that had played out.

Her 'true love' had watched as each of her ten fingernails was ripped out. As the bones in her hands were stomped and broken.

He had been the one to order the abuse.

"No, thank you, Claire. I'm not looking for love. Or a relationship. I'm fine, but thank you for suggesting it."

Claire pursed her lips. "How is your ankle?"

"Much better," Grace replied absently.

Claire shook her head. "It could be amputated, and you'd say the same thing."

One corner of Grace's mouth tipped up. "Complaining doesn't change things."

"Hmm. You're right about that, I suppose."

Claire tugged her down a hallway. "Hey, all joking aside...give yourself a chance, Grace. The past is in the past. You have paid enough for it. You deserve happiness, more than anyone."

Grace patted her shoulder. "You're a good person."

Huh. It seemed she had a few good people in her life these days—Lina, Claire. Jay.

Her heartbeat accelerated.

Jay knew her past. Her failings.

He didn't judge her for it.

He wasn't boyfriend material, either, seeing as how they were in agreement about being the family neither of them had.

As a brother... it was enough.

But relegating him to that role did send a little pang of longing through her chest.

"I'm blessed, Claire. And happy with what I have. Wishing and hoping for more...that's the surest way to be discontent."

Claire rolled her eyes. "Fine. Fine. You win. I can't compete with all your zen sh\*t." She tightened her ponytail. "You're a disgustingly positive influence, you know that."

Grace laughed. There was a compliment in there, somewhere. "I'll take it."

On payday, Grace took Jay to the market to get a mobile phone.

"It's fine that I don't have a mobile phone," Jason said. He had not expected Grace to get him one.

"Nowadays, everyone has a phone. It will be more convenient for companies to contact you when you apply for jobs. You can't be distributing pamphlets all your life," Grace said. "Moreover, if you have a mobile phone, it will be more convenient for us to inform each other if we would be home late."

The two of them arrived at a stall in the market that sold mobile phones. There were different models, but Grace could only afford the older ones. She had checked on the Internet and selected a few models. She indicated the ones she'd researched.

"They're not as fancy as the newer ones, but they still have wifi and most of the bells and whistles, so ..."  
She blushed. "When I can earn more money, I will..."