

Rage Factor

PROLOGUE

February 14

Cold.

Bone-piercing cold needled Sissy's muscles.

A vile stench invaded her nose. The back of her head throbbed, each pulsating beat ringing like steel on an anvil. Her mind, muggy with something deeper than sleep, faltered at the rustling near her face.

Somewhere, a motor whined.

Were her eyes open? Darkness wrapped her so completely she couldn't be sure. She tightened them, opened—

Ohh! One eye stayed shut, hurt when she tried to force it. The other opened only halfway. She reached to touch her face—

Pain ripped through her arm into her chest. She couldn't breathe—

Ah...there, subsiding now. She swallowed carefully, barely moving, didn't want the pain again...then sipped a shallow, tentative breath—

And gasped! Pain knifed through her lungs.

Sweat dampened her upper lip. Clammy. She shuddered.

Sissy's cheek rested on her knees, knees drawn tight against her chest. Trapped.

He must have locked her in the metal storage room again, among the dusty boxes of keepsakes and lumpy plastic bags of old clothes. The plastic felt chill and smooth against her fingers.

Dear Lord, what was that stench? Like something rotten, decaying, making her want to vomit. A rat must have crawled into the storage room and died—

The rustling—? There could be more rats! Oohhh, God. Her stomach knotted in dry heaves. How could she hurt so much and still be alive?

She recalled the blows now, her husband's merciless fist pounding her, snakeskin boot with its nickel-plated toe swinging again and again, aiming for her stomach—striking whatever got in its way.

It was her own fault. She had forgotten to take out the garbage, so busy making supper. Lean pork chops, browned just right. Stewed apples, julienne carrots, fresh bread. It was Valentine's Day, and Sissy wanted everything perfect. He looked so handsome—he always looked handsome, but tonight he wore a brown tweed jacket and a yellow shirt that made his blond hair brighten like spun gold. Sissy wore one of her college skirts, the waist taken in. She looked all right.

He liked her cooking. Everything would have been fine, *just fine*, if only she had remembered the garbage. It was her own fault he had complained through the meal, not even noticing his food.

“What the hell's wrong with you, you can't remember one simple thing? Now I'll have to haul the freakin bags to a Dumpster somewhere.” Their own town house had room for only two cans in the redwood caddy beside the garage. He hated seeing the cans overflow, bags stacked alongside.

“Maybe I could take them—”

“Oh, wouldn’t that look great, my wife hauling trash all hours of the night? You’d have to walk. You don’t even have a goddamn driver’s license.”

When her renewal notice came, he’d said they didn’t need two drivers in the family. Where the hell did she ever go without him? he’d said.

“I’ll have to clean the car after stinking up the trunk with those goddamn bags. You like that, don’t you, me doing grub work? Don’t know why I ever married such a worthless dumb shit.”

He was drunk, had come home already half-drunk after stopping with his friends from work. He mixed a Stoli martini before supper, then another to bring to the table, and another. He ranted on throughout the meal, saying the hateful things he always said, only this time his black rage came on faster than usual.

“I’m not one of those pissy-faced candyasses you went to law school with. My daddy practically owns this goddamn town and you better not forget it.”

Law school. Sometimes Sissy wondered where she would be if she’d stuck it out, gotten her law degree—

“You better learn to bygod do you part. It’s not like I ask a hell of a lot, is it? Keep the freaking house clean, cook a decent meal. Spread your goddamn legs a few times a week. AND TAKE OUT THE GODDAMN GARBAGE.”

His huge fist had struck fast, closing that eye. Then he reached for the tennis racket he kept in the hall closet, clamped in its thick wood frame, handy for Saturday morning matches.

Sissy saw the rage like sparks of blood in his brown eyes. She turned to run. “Help me, Jesus,” she whispered.

He hit her spine, knocked her into a chair, and she stumbled. Once she was down, he kept hitting her, his rage darker than ever before, and didn’t stop even when he heard her collarbone crack. A satisfied glee, had leapt into his eyes as he raised the racket one more time.

Sissy shuddered, trying to remember what happened later, him carrying her to the storage room and dumping her. But nothing came. She must have passed out.

Dear Lord, she hurt everywhere, pain like a hundred ice picks jabbing her. And she was so cramped, couldn’t even raise her head off her knees.

A truck rumbled nearby—loud, as if right outside the garage—and there was that whine again. Familiar.

Risking the pain she knew would come, Sissy reached out to explore the limits of her confinement.... Plastic.

All around, plastic. A long rip—

Jesus help her! He’d stuffed her in a plastic bag. And dear God, she knew that whine, knew it.

Knew it.

The Dumpster truck.

A thin mewling leaked from Sissy’s lips. She wasn’t in the closet at all, but in a plastic garbage bag inside a Dumpster.

Saliva snaked from her lip down her bare leg and she felt ashamed of her terror. Her mind begged to close down, to reject what she knew was happening. She tried to pray.

Did he think he’d killed her?

No.

No! He was just teaching her a lesson, that's all. A lesson. That's all there was to it. When the truck whined on by, he would come back to get her, tell her to clean herself up, make him some breakfast. Not to even think about seeing a doctor. There would be fresh flowers in the crystal vase. He always gave her flowers after one of their...spats.

All right.

All right, as God was her savior, she would learn something valuable from this. She would learn to make lists every day of what needed to be done so that never again, *ever*, would she forget anything important.

Holding very still, Sissy whispered the Lord's prayer as she listened to the truck rumble closer.

Metal clanged.

The Dumpster shifted. The steel jaws had clamped on to it.

Pain exploded in Sissy's shoulder as the truck jostled her skyward and fed her into its gaping maw. She tumbled with a crush of garbage, fear shattering her prayer, her screams swallowed in the motor's whine.

CHAPTER 1

January 14, ten years later

The Parrot Lounge, like a pulse point in a sleeping giant, nestles in a low corner of a three-star vintage hotel in downtown Houston. The hotel's ads, aimed at attracting traveling businesswomen, do their job well. Any happy hour, Monday through Friday, at least a dozen solitary women enjoy a predinner cocktail at the Parrot while listening to the tinkling chords of sexy piano music and wishing for a more exciting evening than they'll find on cable TV.

Dixie Flannigan, feeling conspicuous in her jeans and sweatshirt, fingercombed her short brown hair and scanned the sleekly professional clientele as she sauntered to a rear table. The skip she'd spent the afternoon locating sat at the piano bar. His Armani suit brushed the silk skirt of a trim brunette, who smiled up at him all lips and eyelashes. As Dixie ordered a club soda with a twist, the brunette laughed vivaciously, apparently at some witticism the skip had whispered in her ear.

Lawrence Riley Coombs, Dixie recalled from his file sheet, was known to be a charmer. Tall, rich, handsome, and politically connected, Coombs personified the exact opposite of men she usually hauled back to justice. Treat him gently, the bondsman had told her.

When the waiter, sweeping a disdainful glance over Dixie's attire, minced away to fetch her drink, she rang up the bonding office number on her cell phone.

"I have a fix on Coombs. You want to notify HPD, or should I?"

"We'll do it." The crisp female voice belonged to an undergraduate enrolled in the Criminal Justice program. The girl nurtured visions of single-handedly curtailing world crime and worked the bonding office night desk to pay her tuition.

"If you get a unit dispatched right away," Dixie suggested, "maybe I'll arrive home tonight before my friend feeds my dinner to the dog."

“I’ll get right on it. Uh...you don’t want to bring Coombs in yourself?”

Not if I can avoid it. He stood six-one, 190 pounds, according to his arrest sheet—and Dixie could see plenty of muscle filling out his fancy suit.

“I think your boss wants this one handled by Houston’s finest,” she hedged, watching Coombs lean close to the brunette, his hand resting on her thigh. The woman glanced at another woman beside her and appeared to be blushing.

Everybody had been shocked, the bondsman claimed, when Coombs missed his trial date that morning. His family was old money and, while Coombs was a laze-about, dividing his time among gambling, small game hunting, and women, he’d never been in any real trouble with the law before. Dixie, a former Assistant District Attorney, had followed the case closely in the newspapers. Lawrence Coombs was accused of having raped Regan Salles, a thirty-five-year-old hairdresser at one of the city’s upscale salons. Date rape, the newspapers called it. But Dixie knew the ADA on the case and had seen photographs of Salles after it happened—two ribs broken, bruises blackening her entire pelvic region—damage that wouldn’t show in ordinary street clothes. Dixie wondered if the vivacious brunette at the piano bar was practiced in self-defense.

Assured that the bonding agent would “get somebody out there pronto,” Dixie thumbed the phone’s disconnect button and relaxed for the wait. Her part of the job was finished.

She watched Coombs speak to the piano player, slip a few folded bills into the musician’s tip jar, and return his attention to the blushing brunette. When the music instantly segued into the opening chords of “Some Enchanted Evening,” Coombs took the woman’s hand and led her to a postage-stamp dance floor near Dixie’s table. Whatever else the man was, he was drop-dead handsome and silver-spoon elegant.

In a resonant baritone, Coombs began to sing, intimately, as if the words were meant only for the woman in his arms, yet loud enough for others to hear.

“Some enchanted evening...”

Conversation quieted. The man was worth a listen. His voice was full, warm, and smooth. He moved with a sexy, graceful ease, holding the woman as if she were fine crystal.

Was she special? Dixie wondered. Or had Regan Salles also received such ardent attention from Coombs before their “date” turned ugly?

When a club soda appeared at Dixie’s elbow, she paid rather than run a tab. The minute Coombs was in custody, she intended to split. For the first time ever—and Dixie was fast approaching forty—she was in a relationship that mattered to her. She didn’t want to screw it up. Yet five nights this week work had kept her out late, and her excuses were beginning to sound lame even to her own ears.

She watched the handsome couple whirl about the floor, totally into themselves, as if everyone else in the room had ceased to exist. When they brushed past, Coombs still crooning softly, Dixie read raw desire in the woman’s flushed face. The skip certainly had a knack for cozing up fast.

Two other couples had joined Coombs and his partner on the dance floor, but everyone else in the room was either alone, as Dixie was, or with a group. Did all these women have as tough a time as she did making a relationship work?

Dixie jabbed her swizzle stick at the lemon twist in her glass. Why did life have to be so damn complicated? She wanted closeness. Companionship. At the same time she

wanted freedom and solitude. How could she expect a man to understand such a dilemma when she didn't understand it herself?

As her eyes slid past the bar, they locked on someone she knew, someone she did *not* want to talk with tonight.

Too late. Casey James, stringer for the sort of tabloids that feature alien sightings and virgin births, was already off her bar stool and beelining for Dixie's table.

"Counselor! I knew that was you sitting there!" Casey waved a fat cigar in one hand, a drink in the other, as she pushed toward Dixie between tables, a camera swinging from one shoulder. "I haven't seen you since our interview after that murder case you cracked!"

She stopped short of the table, slapped the cigar hand over her mouth, and looked hastily from side to side.

"Oh, Judas Priest, are you on a case now?"

Dixie had already darted a glance at Coombs. He seemed absorbed in stroking the brunette's silken hip and serenading her ear. Whether or not he'd heard, the worst was done. No point now in being rude.

"Hello, Casey. What brings you to the Parrot?"

Casey set her drink on Dixie's table and dropped her squatty body into an empty chair.

"Oh, honey, it's absolutely the best place for picking up stories. Buy a woman a drink, she'll tell the wickedest tales you ever heard—truth! Clients stealing from other clients, secretaries setting their bosses up for divorce or blackmail, or both, couriers delivering anonymous packages containing live snakes, spiders. Every one of those stories I learned from buying a woman a drink." She paused to draw on the cigar, piggish black eyes ogling Dixie. "May I buy *you* a drink, honey?"

Dixie couldn't help grinning at Casey's gall.

But when she looked back at the dance floor, and the piano bar beyond it, Coombs and the brunette were nowhere in sight.

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