

A photograph of a person swinging happily on a swing set in a park. The person is wearing a green shirt and dark pants, and their arms are raised holding the swing chains. The background is a blurred green landscape with other people in the distance.

Back to  
*Blue*

Dillon Watson

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by

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2013

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Some of the locations in this book are actual places, but the characters and story are fiction.

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# CHAPTER ONE

“You can do it this time,” Summer Baxby muttered, coming to a stop in front of the bike racks. The mini-pep talk did nothing to still the shaking of her hands as she threaded the bike lock through the spokes. The thought of entering the twenty-story office building in downtown Seneca, Georgia, had her pressing a hand against the major skirmish occurring inside her stomach. She tried not to give into the uneasy thought she wasn’t ready to function in an office environment. Tried to slough off the guilt that she didn’t deserve the job she’d only gotten as a favor to her dad. But most of all, she struggled against giving in to the siren’s song coming from the safe haven that was her parents’ home.

Thinking of what her parents, especially her mother, had gone through to get her to this point, she stiffened her resolve. She’d made it this far, and this time she’d damn well make it upstairs and report for the first day on the job. But the throng of workers crowding the area in front of the bank of elevators shot her nerves through the roof and put a big dent in her resolve. Reciting the multiplication table to herself, Summer detoured past the bank of elevators and into the lobby bathroom.

Once inside, she made it to fifteen times fifteen before remembering the deep breathing technique she'd practiced with her shrink. It took a while, but gradually it worked. When her nerves and her stomach settled enough for her to think she could get on one of those elevators and go to work, she mentally added another item to the growing list of things she owed to Dr. Veraat.

After sluicing her face with cold water, she looked at the reflection of the woman who was slowly becoming less of a stranger. Aside from helmet hair, she looked like any normal person nervous about returning to the workforce after three years. "This is for you, Mom." With a quick fluffing of her short, dark brown hair with the contrasting white streak on the left side, she made her way to the elevators.

Summer arrived seconds behind a sharply dressed guy who she placed in his late twenties. He was muttering under his breath about the parentage of people who couldn't be bothered to hold a damn elevator. When he stabbed the Up button repeatedly, she decided a smartass remark was not called for.

"Four elevators. You'd think one would come." He turned and gave a start as if he'd just realized he wasn't alone. "Hey," he said with an obviously practiced smile. "I don't think I've seen you around here before. You must be new."

"First day," she admitted with the barest hint of a smile, then quickly looked away from unwanted scrutiny. She was sure he'd see a woman too pale and skinny to be attractive and lose interest. She was wrong.

"Thought so." He sidled closer and threw back his shoulders. "You I would have noticed."

She gave a mental sigh. First day and she'd run into Mr. "Thinks-He's-a-God."

"Are the elevators always this slow?" She stepped around him and drilled the Up button.

"They are this time of day. But for some reason I don't mind today. Care to guess why?"

The doors to elevator number three slid open, saving Summer from having to respond. As she entered the elevator,

her only regret was that no one had dashed up at the last minute to save her from being beleaguered by God's Gift. When he pushed the button for the eighth floor, she wondered if the gods were laughing their fat asses off.

"What floor for you?"

"Eight's good."

"What a sweet coincidence. Looks like we'll be seeing each other regularly." He leaned back against the wall in a pose Summer was sure he practiced regularly along with the smile that accompanied it.

"How great is that?" If he worked at Tathum, Inc., she was going to have to find another job.

"I'm Rich—" He broke off and yelped as the elevator jerked to a stop.

Summer splayed herself against the wall behind her and began to recite the multiplication tables again. She hadn't gotten to five times five when the lights flickered and the elevator dropped. After everything she'd lived through it came to this? The faulty elevator was going to do what not wearing a seat belt three years ago hadn't? In a small way, it was a relief to close her eyes and wait for impact while listening to Rich's unmanly scream. No more trying so hard to get back to the woman she once had been. No more being out of step with the world around her.

Her knees turned to jelly as the elevator came to a grinding stop. She swallowed hard against the bile threatening to break free, slid down, dropped her head between her knees and prayed. Maybe she wasn't as ready to leave this life as she thought. Rocking back and forth, she went back to the security of reciting the multiplication table.

"You still with me?"

To Summer his voice sounded as rough as tree bark with an undercurrent of fear. "Uh, yeah." She rubbed her arms, trying to still the shakes. "Please don't tell me this is a regular thing."

"No. No," he repeated more firmly. "It's gonna start up any minute." The emergency light came on as if to back up his claim. "The building is only three years old. It's gonna start. It *has* to

start.” Now there was desperation added to the roughness, the fear. He sounded like a frightened child.

Summer darted a glance at him and he looked the way he sounded. “You’re right,” she said quickly. “Still, maybe one of us should push the Emergency button as backup.” She made it onto her knees before the elevator gave another gut-dropping jerk and the lights blinked out, leaving them in total darkness. Giving a quick prayer this wasn’t an omen of what her new job was going to be like, she pushed to her feet.

“What are you doing?” Rich whispered.

“Looking for the Emergency button. You have a better idea?”

“There’s supposed to be a light. There’s always supposed to be a light.”

“Obviously there isn’t,” she snapped back, frustrated as much with the childish whine in his voice as her inability to find the right button. God’s Gift obviously had a marshmallow center.

“I don’t like the dark,” he said softly, breathing hard. “Make it go away or he’ll come back.”

She opened her mouth to tell him to get a good, hard grip—and suddenly she wasn’t in the elevator. She was in a darkened closet, her mouth covered by her mother’s hand, clutching a bedraggled teddy bear. Summer could hear what sounded like a rabid animal screaming for the whore to show herself. She flinched at the sound of fist meeting wall and the ensuing howl. Could feel her heart stop when the door to the closet was yanked open. Feel it start up and beat rapidly as madness spread across the face of her father smiling down at them. When a fist slammed into her mother’s face, she could smell the urine permeating the stuffy air, the warm dampness spreading in the crotch of her worn jeans...

As suddenly as it began, the vision ended. She was back in the elevator, the darkness punctuated by the loudness of Rich’s breathing. Putting her hands to the throbbing beat at her temples, she squeezed. What the hell had just happened? She leaned her forehead against the coolness of the wall, afraid her grip on sanity was more tenuous than she’d thought. Why else would she be hallucinating? And about some kid she didn’t know of all things?

She zipped through to twenty times twenty before her panic subsided. So what if she'd had an out-of-body experience? She'd come out of it whole and without the ritual probing the people in the movies always talked about. That counted for something. Something had to count for something or else what was the point of counting?

It was the sound of ragged weeping that made the connection for her, that drove her to renew her efforts to find the alarm. The kid was Rich. It had to have been Rich, stuck in the dark and waiting for a monster to strike. Once she found the panel, she settled on the button that stuck out more and pushed, then pulled until the alarm sounded. She almost cried herself when a distorted voice echoed over the sound of the alarm.

"We're stuck," she yelled. "With no lights." She thought the garbled response said something about working on the problem. Not that it mattered what had been said. She was going to choose to believe a solution was being found.

With the memory of Rich's possible—*no, probable*—trauma fresh in her mind, she felt her way to him, slid down and, without a word, threw an arm around his shoulders. She almost laughed at the thought that she, with all of her issues, was capable of providing comfort to someone else.

Summer wasn't sure how much time had passed when the lights flickered two times and then came on full force. She was sure her ass had fallen asleep on the unforgiving floor. Rich stiffened, his embarrassment filling the elevator. Without looking at him, she dropped her arm, scooted to the opposite side of the elevator and stood to massage her sore behind.

Taking stock, she gave herself credit not for being alive, but for not falling apart. Best of all, she'd known what to do. Dr. Veraat would be proud. Especially if she left out the part about...Well, the part that she wasn't sure had happened.

"Thanks," Rich said softly. "I...Just thanks."

"We all need help sometimes. Usually it's me." She finally thought to look at the watch she was getting used to wearing. They'd been stuck for over two hours. "I'm really late. Wonder if I can get the elevator person to write me an excuse?"



“I’d do it, but not sure it would count for much. Low man on the pyramid and all. I’m Rich Slator.”

The practiced smile was back, but now she glimpsed the frightened child underneath as well. It made him easier to take. “Summer Baxby. I think I have a job at Tatham, Inc.”

“I work on the other end of the floor at Abstracts. We’re in project management.”

They looked at each other in concern as the elevator jerked, then made a grinding noise before beginning a slow descent.

“Maybe you should, you know, sit down,” Rich suggested.

“Good idea.” Summer wrapped her arms around her legs and worked to keep her breathing even. When the elevator finally came to a stop at the lobby level, she exhaled. Scrambling to her feet, she waited, not so patiently, for the doors to open. To her dismay, they stayed closed. Hearing Rich’s heightened breathing, she repeatedly hit the Open Door button.

“There’s no basement, so we can’t fall,” Rich offered, his voice thin and reedy.

“Some comfort,” she muttered. Before she could pull the Emergency button again, the doors were forced apart.

“Everyone okay?” the older of the two technicians asked.

“I’ll let you know,” Summer said, hurrying away from Rich as much as the faulty elevator and heading up the stairs to the eighth floor.

Ten minutes later she could only wish to be back in the elevator. Even going through the multiplication table wasn’t enough to block the tsunami-strength waves of disapproval pouring off of her supervisor, Marcia Meachem.

Sure, she should have used her cell phone to call and explain she was held up. And maybe she would have if the damn thing wasn’t so new to her. She’d only had it for a couple of weeks and using it wasn’t something that came natural. Not that much felt natural to her.

“You’re right,” she said when Marcia paused to take a breath. “I should have called when I realized we would be stuck for a while. I apologize again.”

“Fine. Next time show a little more courtesy.” Marcia pursed her thin, blood red-lips and drew herself up to her full height.

She looked to be about five feet six inches, thanks to four-inch heels, but she was still two inches shorter than Summer. “Have a seat. I’ll see if Mr. Knowelton can fit you into his busy schedule.”

Summer didn’t exhale until Marcia was out of sight. Being stuck on an elevator was not a good way to start a job. Having her supervisor hate her guts for no apparent reason trumped that. But she’d fix that. Tomorrow she would come early and take the stairs again. Problem solved.

Feeling better, she wondered if the caked-on makeup the other woman wore hid a skin condition. If so, Marcia was wasting her money and time. Her generously sized breasts, encased as they were in a tight, low-cut sweater probably did a better job of distracting from any facial blemishes than buckets of makeup. At least with men. And some women.

“He’ll see you now.”

Summer decided she detected a good bit of disappointment in Marcia’s voice. She allowed herself a smile as she followed the other woman. They walked down a long hall past occupied offices. Summer imagined she’d have to do an introductory round later, and her smile faltered as she considered that her other co-workers might have Marcia’s unwelcoming attitude. The smile on Garland Knowelton’s face said otherwise.

“Welcome, Summer,” he said, holding out a hand that was large like the rest of him. “I hope you won’t let faulty elevators run you off.”

“No. It’s not your fault. I’m grateful for the opportunity to work here.”

“Good deal. I’ll handle it from here, Marcia.”

Marcia looked as if she wanted to protest, then gave him a blinding smile and retreated.

“Have a seat.” He motioned toward the chairs facing a desk laden with sports memorabilia. “As I’m sure you know, Kevin’s out of town. But even if he weren’t, as your boss, I’d still be having this conversation with you. I’d like to start off with your special situation and our expectations.”

She swallowed hard. Expectations did not sound good to her. Not before she’d had a chance to screw things up. “Of course.” She focused her gaze on some point over his left shoulder. It

wasn't that he was hard to look at. The opposite was true. With his handsome square face, sky-blue eyes and dazzling smile, lots of women must look at him all the time. Not her, though. Even if she'd been straight she wouldn't dare. There was no room in her life, in her recovery, really, for a relationship. She forced herself to pay attention; her heartbeat slowed eventually as Gar detailed her job duties. She was going to be a "gofer" and that was something she thought she could handle. She stood when he did, gave him an appreciative smile and returned to Marcia's glassed-in office, located behind the reception area. Given the situation between them, she knocked on the open door and waited for Marcia to acknowledge her presence before speaking. "Gar said I should report back to you."

"Yes. By all means let's find something you can do." Marcia pushed back her chair, acting as if she was about to make a sacrifice of Biblical proportions. "You do read, right? I mean, I heard you suffer from brain damage." Marcia made it sound like a lobotomy.

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"I do read," Summer said. She added very slowly, "As long as the words aren't too big. I can recite the multiplication table too." She wanted to laugh at the look on Marcia's face. A look that said she wasn't sure if Summer were joking or not. Marcia probably had her categorized as somewhere between moron and smartass. She could live with that.

"Good for you. Filing then, I think." Marcia led the way once again, not bothering to stop at any of the eight offices they passed.

The filing room seemed amazingly large to Summer. She could easily imagine getting lost in the maze of legal-sized cabinets. The walls were sterile beige and there weren't any windows. Fluorescent lights kept the room bright.

"I must remind you that you signed a nondisclosure agreement, so any information you see is to be kept strictly confidential." Marcia stopped in front of a file-laden desk. More files were stacked on the floor. "Do you understand?"

From the tone, Summer figured she'd been placed in the moron column. She furrowed her brow. "You mean like I have to say it's good?"

"Not 'complimentary.'" Marcia pursed her lips and looked at Summer through narrowed eyes. "Confidential. That means you can't tell anyone what you see in these files. Not that you should be reading them anyway."

The words "you moron" seemed to fly through the air and slap Summer in the face. She nodded. "It's a secret. Sorry. Big words still confuse me sometimes. What do I do?" She almost felt sorry for the look of doubt on Marcia's face—almost.

"Obviously, you need to put these folders that are on the desk and on the floor into the filing cabinets. All of the folders are marked with a name and number. You match the number with the number on the file drawer and then place the folder in alphabetical order within it. I hope that wasn't too hard to understand. I tried not to use big words."

"Like a match game. Got it." Summer hoped her smile was idiot-savantish.

Marcia glanced at the slim watch on her left wrist. "I'll be back to check on you in thirty minutes. If it's too challenging, that is, too hard, you come find me before then. I can probably come up with something to match your intellect."

Summer pulled a face once Marcia left trailing perfume behind her like a crop duster trailing pesticide. Playing the idiot was surprisingly fun. Very different from the times she'd felt like an idiot. Thankfully those times were becoming more of a memory than a frustration. Dr. Veraat said she had to move past that time and that the only way to do that was to stay in the present.

Of course that was easy for Dr. Veraat to say. She hadn't woken up three years ago dumb as a rock. Summer grabbed a stack of folders, pleased to find they were mostly sorted. She spent the next thirty minutes reducing the stacks, finding the repetitive motions soothing. The numbers helped keep her in the present. Keep her thoughts focused.

"How's it going?"

Summer gave a start and dropped the stack of folders she was holding. Putting a hand to her galloping heart, she studied the attractive brunette who'd managed to catch her unawares. Nothing like Marcia, she had an athletic build that was tastefully covered in a gray suit, and though there was a look of concern on her face, it wasn't overlaying a sneer.

"Sorry I startled you. I'm Liz Fears."

"Summer Baxby." She shook the proffered hand. "Not your fault. I was caught up in the world of numbers." She stooped to pick up the files. "I'll never get this stuff back in the right place."

"Let me give you a hand. Some of those are bound to belong to me." Liz looked at the top folder. "Yup, this one is mine." Within minutes, she had all the pieces of correspondence back in their respective folders.

"Thanks. You saved my life."

"If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem, right? Oh, wait, I *was* part of the problem." Liz gave an infectious laugh.

"I still appreciate it." Her smile disappeared as she heard the rapidly approaching footsteps.

Marcia burst into the room. "What is going...Oh. I didn't realize you were in here, Liz. I hope Summer's not keeping you from your work."

"Not at all. I just dropped by to welcome a new employee. I'm surprised you didn't take the time to introduce her around."

"Well... It's just..." Marcia raised her chin. "I know everyone is busy this time of month. I didn't see the need to disturb you." She folded her hands over her chest and glared at Summer. "I have work to do myself. I thought it was enough that I have to take time to check up on her."

Summer chewed on her lip and recited the multiplication table while wishing herself away from the sharp animosity filling the room. What had she stepped into?

"Fine." Liz's smile was anything but friendly. "I'll take care of introducing her around. I can spare the few minutes it'll take to do it."

"I don't need you doing my job," Marcia said heatedly.

“So you do realize it’s part of your job? Imagine that.” Liz turned her attention to Summer. “Since Marcia has graciously agreed to introduce you around, I’d like to be the first to invite you to lunch. Is twelve thirty okay?”

Summer shot a quick glance to Marcia before nodding.

“Good. My office is the second on the left. See you then.” Liz brushed past Marcia.

“I hope going to lunch is okay?” Summer said.

“What do I care?” Marcia flipped her platinum blonde hair over her shoulder. “What have you done so far?”

Summer thought she caught a flicker of surprise on Marcia’s face when she saw how much work had been accomplished. A closer inspection showed she’d been wrong. Marcia had the “I’m so much better than you” sneer firmly in place.

“You seem to have caught on. Which is good. I have more important work to do than babysit you. Keep at it and report to me at the end of the day.” Marcia was gone in a click of heels and another cloud of perfume.

*Any more compliments like that, Summer thought, opening a file cabinet, and I’ll get a big head.*