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**Tamar's Secret**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Nadine McInnis-Bridgeman**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

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in

**Creative Writing and Literature**

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Abstract of the Thesis

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“As a middle aged woman struggles to keep her marriage to a sadistic husband, the price she pays is a life riddled with separation, isolation, and deprivation. Tamar’s awakening arrives while she is in prison reconstructing her previously diminished self-worth. Tamar’s Secret is based on the little known details of an abused woman. The characters are fictional, but the story is real.”

## **Dedication Page**

This novella is dedicated to the Lord of my life and my daughter Adrianna Bridgeman. I love you with all my heart.

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## Chapter One

Slam—

“Ladies, get ready for lights out,” the guard yelled down the hallway.

She had one place to sit and five thousand four hundred seventy five days to think about him, without being interrupted, the three grey walls looked different, now cluttered with pictures.

Sitting near the bottom of the metal frame, she could study him without being obvious. One picture held a moment, ten years earlier, of her writing class; students and teacher included.

Another picture showed off her award in writing. Here, she stood with the warden and her writing teacher, Ted. He was more appealing and the ten years of separation intensified her need to touch, during his twenties his eyes held a magnetic pledge of blessed nights; in his thirties that pledge had been realized.

Tamar’s eyes searched each inch of her wall as she took mental notes of each picture, this was only the 219,000th minute of her tenth year, of the twenty-five-year sentence, but she was already well into the areas she wanted to cover before the final call just before lights out, she didn’t want to dwell too long on her past, but she used the pictures as a reminder of where she never wanted to go ever again, the dark, hateful place, the pictures enthralled her mind, some good, and most bad, she still remembered the picture Tina took of that first hit. One hit left a swollen eye in its wake. Tamar and Sampson had been hanging out with Tina all around New York City. The smoky grey Maxima bucked and sputtered along Northern Boulevard, any speed above forty confusing the shifting of gears and resulting in pandemonium before the car sputtered and spat and shut down, restarting the ignition and finding a gear became common practice while driving. They passed row upon row of elevated concrete buildings—gray soldiers



standing at attention. She felt herself doing the same with shoulders pulled back, heels together and toes pointed out, fists balled and arms by her sides, face forward, chin level with the floor, eyes gazing straight ahead. They slowed in front a building on 47th street and saw a tall brown man dressed in tan chinos and a plaid shirt, leaned against the glass door jamb of the metal building.

He was swinging a bundle of keys on his forefinger. She could hear the metallic click when they collided with his thigh. Sampson jumped out of the car. When he reached the glass door, he snatched the keys from the man, opened the door, without a glance in Tamar's direction and with no word to the man. Taking the man's arm, Sampson, pushed him inside the edifice, and dropped the keys as he rushed on. The detail work on the building's façade grabbed Tamar's eye, each section of the ornate malleable molding, enhanced the pewter style building. Tina's sigh shook Tamar from her thoughts, drawing her attention to the keys Sampson left behind; she picked up the keys and followed Sampson into the building.

She heard sounds above her, recognizing the bass of Sampson voice she moved higher, straining to hear, she moved closer to the voices, unsure if she should go, feeling urgency, she quickened her steps approaching the fourth floor she found Sampson in an embrace with a man at the door, lips inches apart, she screamed at Sampson in hopes of deterring the outcome she hoped wouldn't occur, a grunt escaped the lips of the man in Sampson's arms as he was pushed back against the wall behind them, Tamar turned to run towards the exit, confused by what she'd seen, she hesitated.

“Ok, that's it ladies,” the guard yelled, “Lights out.” Tamar laid her head on the pillow and waited for sleep that wouldn't appear. The darkness drew her back to her musing. In her

hesitating, Sampson reached out to stop her, his finger tips grazing her back, knowing his chance to explain was disappearing, he stood on the step above her, his knees bent, his fists on his sides and his chin pointed toward her, he yelled her name with so much anger that even the man behind him, who had just pulled himself off the wall, let himself fall back into the wall.

Residents from two of the six apartments, on the floor opened doors, to see the source of the commotion, closing off access on contact with Sampson's evil glares. Startled still for a second, before the fighting began, she dropped the keys on the steps behind her, the powerful and frantic penetration of her name, "Ta-mar," pulling out each one of the syllables, as he said her name, the sound was one she'd heard before, one that seemed enticing but treacherous, she knew that something horrible was about to happen, yet she was touched by the loveliness of his crazed shout.

In the moments after the yell as everyone stood still, Tamar regained her composure and understanding awakened as she put the final pieces together in her mind, she continued descending the stairs. In the lobby, Tamar strained against the heavy door, realizing the door had been slammed shut, she look down at the latch and pressed on the brass lever and pulled the door toward her, when she opened the front door, Tina was on the other side, frightened and unsure of what was happening. The street was lined with a variety of cars all different makes and models, as Tamar jumped in her car, motioning for Tina to get in too, she restarted the car and began driving away, two car lengths away she saw Sampson running beside her car, holding on to the side mirror, she tried to drive forward without pinning Sampson between the cars, she pushed down on the clutch to shift gears, sensing he was about to lose her, he reached into the car and punched Tamar in the eye. On the street, a blue Mitsubishi blasted smoke from the engine, a grey blur in the developing darkness of her swelling eye, in front of the disabled car a man stood

bowed forward under the hood, behind him a few cars forward a family sat in a black Probe, motor growling and the head of a young child bobbing up and down as she danced to the loud music pounding out the car. Sampson had already pulled Tamar out the driver's seat and put her in the back, by the time she turned her head to observe the dancing child, he sped off turning right on Astoria Blvd., she sat crouched on the seat rocking back and forth saying, "This is not happening. This is not happening," the smell of smoke lingered as they merged onto Grand Central Parkway. "Tamar are you ok, Tamar can you hear me, why won't you answer me, what's wrong with you, Sampson?" Tina asked as she turned back from watching Tamar.

"Where am I taking you?"

"Long Beach", Tamar please answer me, I'm getting scared, stop the car Sampson, I need to see if Tamar is alright," Tina yelled. Tamar doubled over crying, she was leaning forward, her backside sliding on the seat as the car drove off the Van Wyck Expressway, and she reached forward and started hitting Sampson in the head, Sampson swatted his left hand behind him, while keeping his right hand on the wheel, Tina unsnapped her seatbelt and spun around pressing her knees into the seat and pulled Tamar to the right side of the car, "I know you're upset but you're going to get us killed that way, wait till we stop."

"Stay out of this it's between Tamar and me and can you put your seatbelt back on before we get pulled over by the cops." Sampson said, he seemed frustrated by the traffic on the Belt Parkway and continued talking to Tina, "I need to stop at the supermarket and get some meat."

"You just hit my best friend and you want to stop for meat?" Tina asked

"The meat is not for me, it's for Tamar's eye, where am I taking you?" Sampson laughed as he made a slight left onto Conduit Ave.

“Tamar was dropping me off at Amed’s house, do you want me to stay with you Tamar?” Tina said as she watched Sampson out the corner of her eye, confused by his laughter.

“I’m fine Tina, let Sampson drop you off, please don’t tell Amed, I don’t want any trouble” Tamar whispered, the car remained silent for the rest of the ride.

They arrived a few minutes later, two cars a Lexus and BMW or Bob Marley Wagon as they were called were sitting on the left side of the driveway, the Maxima moved closer to the magnificent house surrounded by rose bushes and a brick fence, Amed was in the front of the house, looking out to see if Tina was in the approaching car, he stood waiting for them, trying not to seem anxious, as they pulled up to the house, his arms were folded across his chest and Tina watched as his muscles tensed and relaxed under his brown linen shirt, blowing in the wind, she jumped out the car running into his arms.

“Hey there, what’s wrong, Amed looked down into Tina’s eyes.

“I’m so happy to see you, can Tamar have some ice, Sampson lost his mind and hit her in the eye. Don’t make a fuss, Tamar begged me to keep quiet,” Tina spoke with rapid mixed emotions, hugging him close.

“What, where is he, tell him to come and fight with me,” Amed looked over at the Maxima in the driveway.

“Please Amed,” Tina reached up to touch Amed’s face.

“Ok Tina, but he better be thankful to you, because if you weren’t here, I’d beat him silly,

a real man keeps his hands to himself and never hits a woman, I don't care how angry he gets, bring Tamar inside." Amed about-faced and walked into the house. Tina walked back to the car and opened Tamar's door, "Come inside I'll get you some ice," linking arms with Tamar the two women walked toward the house, with Sampson behind.

"Don't think cause your at your man's house, you can leave me out here, I'm coming inside too," Sampson stepped in front of the women and opened the door, Tina brushed past him to walk into the kitchen.

"Hello Amed, we missed you today, you should have hung out with us." Sampson greeted Amed.

"I had to work all day, here's some ice," Amed looked Sampson up and down from head to toe waiting for a misstep. "Do you have any steak?" Sampson asked Amed

"What do you need steak for? Amed stepped closer to Sampson waiting for a response.

"To put on Tamar's eye, she had an acc...."Amed moved his face into Sampson's cutting off his sentence, "You better get it through your head, the only reason I'm not beating you down is because of Tina, don't think you can just lie about what happened. Amed opened the fridge and pulled out a steak. "Here, Tamar do you need anything else," Amed turned to look at Tamar.

"Let me help you with that," Sampson opened the steak and covered Tamar's eye, looking sideways at Amed.

"No thank you, I'm good," she left the conversation at that because she didn't want to see Amed and Sampson get into a confrontation, Tina grabbed her hand walking her to a bedroom closing the door behind them. "Tamar sit down we need to talk." Tina sat down on the bed patting the

area beside her. “Tina I know what you’re going to say, I should forget about Sampson and move on to someone else,” Tamar looked at Tina beside her as she spoke.

“I was going to ask you how long you plan on sitting around with that meat on your face, I have plans with Amed,” The two friends laughed and hugged, “Tamar you know I love you and I can’t make you do anything, please stay safe. I couldn’t stand to see anything happen to you, let’s take a picture, place your meat on the floor.” Tina picked up a camera off the dresser and placed it at arms length in front of them, snapping a picture, Tina hugged her tighter and rose off the bed. She put the camera down and turned around, “Now, take your meat and get out, I have plans, big ones,” Tina walked Tamar back to the kitchen.

“Sampson it’s time to go now, thanks Amed, see you soon.” Tamar reached up to kiss Amed on the cheek.

“Thanks man for the meat, see you soon,” Sampson patted Amed on the back.

“I hope not” Amed spoke into Tina’s ear as they all walked to the door, watching as Tamar and Sampson drove away. The picture of Tina and Tamar at Amed’s house was the first picture on the top row of the wall, Tamar scanned each picture, she knew if she had walked away from Sampson that day, she wouldn’t have been in her present situation, as much as she wanted to blame Sampson for her pain, she’d contributed to the abuse too, Tina was a true friend and as much as she hated her interfering in her relationship, she loved that she cared, but she knew the abuse would never end.

Four rapid gulps finished the red liquid in her cup, the activities of the day involved Tamar fiddling with correcting artful, crafted writing assignments, line ups and vouchers, she then

renovated the book distribution site, created out of a partition screen, tables and storage boxes, on the underside of one box she made a secret bottom out of papier-mâché, to hide valuables, done in a ten hour rush, resulting in a day without food. The last challenges included getting approval from the authorities during this month's assessment meetings for the hiring of a new English teacher and helping the doctors and counselor see the value of inmates attending the daily programming, once she finished preparing there would no time for rehearsing her speech, the group of women she helped, at times frightening, in other instances depressed, the psychologists and doctors encouraged each woman to tell her story in group therapy, the spirit of the problem the counselors said could be found in the heart of each person. The job of the English teacher was to help bolster the skills necessary to express this, in the written form. The ardent determination of the women, to find fulfillment in a place designed to exact punishment, for poor life choices, aided each woman's attempt to counteract impetuosity through writing. Deserted by family and friends and everyone in between the feeling of hopelessness over came them, but in time they regained a sense of pride, with the new skills learned, life presented them a second chance in the form of a gift to be used in the future, much of that future imprisoned, in fact Tamar felt it her destiny to work with the needy women, this life work led to her own healing, this second chance at life, becoming the biggest reward and true reconciliation. At the edge of her bed, Tamar reread the writing assignments the inmates had written.

She had brought back the pages to her cubicle cell, to give each lady ideas on improving her work, as she read she kept her warm grey wool blanket around her shoulders the entire time, during class she felt the eyes of the women as each one studied her face for every trace of shifting emotion as she read and Tamar accommodated them with expressions of fear, laughter and when she reached the conclusion, she gave each one a smile and words of affirmation, she

put her hand on the shoulder of her classmates remembering the months and weeks prior when not one felt comfortable sharing her writing.

Tamar wrote before her entry into prison, journals lined the shelves of her room. The need to write did not have a foundation in attention or praise, Tamar did not allow anyone to interfere with her writing, her ex-husband felt obligated to be insulting and demeaning of her sophomore attempts at writing, the only person willing to listen was her mother who felt all of her stories deserved publication, she shielded her from the condescending ways of her husband, her family inside the prison supported her and accepted the worlds she could create in four pages or less. Four themes repeated in her writing: the first her husband having a change of heart and buckling in grief, sorry for all the loneliness and despair Tamar lived each day. In the second theme she is at a cocktail party being honored with a Pulitzer Prize, surrounded by powerful city officials, to her left she overhears the mayor boasting to a group of friends: “That is Tamar the writer, allow me the honor of making the introductions. The third theme surrounds her rape. In a fourth theme, she is standing on a stage, waiting for the curtain to fall in front her, as she concludes a reading of her newest book, she punches the air in exultation as the final sections of the curtains close. “Didn’t I tell you to leave my shit alone,” the screams of the prison cell overhead reminding her, there is no curtain, there is no possibility of seeing a curtain for many years to come.

Her fellow inmates supported her attempts at writing, the mistakes she made with using new words out of context, words she had seen in books, dictionaries or thesaurus entries became



an ingredient in her learning vessel, Tamar encouraged each woman to read more stories in group meetings in order to learn concepts like making eye contact being expressive with the audience, this bolstered confidence and the ability to perform.

At the age of twenty Tamar revealed her first story, a crazy romance, copied from the pages of a book she found in the library, presenting the story as her own, caused her fear of discovery of her fraudulent behavior that could lead to exposure and rejection from the writing community, she later understood the concept of plagiarism, and the strength in using personal experiences to enhance her stories, she learned that her mind held a bountiful supply of secret treasures waiting to be exposed to a world ready to listen. She wrote from the heart.

A blanket of thesaurus pages covered the recliner and floor, the floor furthest from my seat was littered with the once rectangular squares of the resource book, now oval, surrounding the garbage pail, I leaned against three pillows propped behind my back, house phone beside me as I waited for him to call, I continued to tear pages, I kept the words I could connect with and crumpled unrelated ones, the carpet padded Tina and Nate's soles and absorbed parts of the sound of their toes as they walked down the hall to my room. I stopped ripping and whispered, "I know you're both coming, the floorboards are creaking. Stop tiptoeing." No clue that this man would take my virtue had been given, he presented a captivating façade, appearing compassionate all through our phone conversations and evenings on the town, that I'd believed we had a future, a few weeks before, He stated to his family that I was his new beau, which meant after waiting for Mr. Wright, I'd met him, with ingenious grace I was soothed into a relaxed sensation of closeness. I lifted and looked at the page in my hand, the words agree, decide, settle, arrange, fix and grant, were listed under consensual.

“I thought you wouldn’t hear us, you’re so absorbed in what you’re doing.” Tina said.

Nate stopped as he neared the chair, “You look terrible, what’s up with this mess?” pointing at the growing mass of paper. Tina grabbed Nate’s hand and said, “That’s messed up, you could’ve told her a little nicer, by the way didn’t you know, that book, holds the power behind all the words we can never understand.” My mind jumped back to a letter Tina wrote in elementary school, Dear Tamar, you need to stop using so many big words, I don’t understand what you’re saying. From Tina, I laughed out loud as I motioned for them both to sit on the bed, they chose the floor and I joined them. I’d just stopped crying before they came, the tears started the night before after I returned home from Sampson’s house, the Annie Lennox song playing while it happened had etched a permanent pathway on my brain, “walking on broken glass,” I’d wrestled all night with my newfound identity, calling for sleep to replace my thoughts of death.

A few hours into the night, I woke up with an urge to move, but the boundaries between sleepfulness and wakefulness couldn’t be broken. My face, neck, arms and legs refused to heed my command, the night became day and I was forced to face life, I ripped the pages of the thesaurus, hoping to connect with a word strong enough to engulf all memories of the previous night.

“You might as well accept the facts.”

“He didn’t even enter me all the way, his penis just...”

“Get over it, you’re one of us now, more experienced.”

“I wanted to wait, I never said yes, he just pushed himself inside me.”

“Tamar, you’re old enough, accept the truth, you needed to catch up; we started years ago.”

“I thought our first time would’ve been on our wedding night.”

The three of us sat in a semi-circle, I longed for the times in Tina’s room, when I listened to their stories not having one to share, her dad’s old bar, now Tina’s room, was a spacious retreat for everyone, with her Mom working long hours we talked uninterrupted, in Tina’s room we hung out on the side of the room engulfed by a wide brown paneled bar and stereo system, close to the sliding glass doors leading to the driveway. We’d put together a medley of our favorite songs on tape, Jodeci, R. Kelly, Mary J. Blige, Boyz II Men and Tevin Campbell that played loud while we talked and hung out. Now in the clutter of my pink room, I felt air being pulled from my lungs as I tried to tell my childhood friends what I felt.

“We were kissing heavy and he asked if he could just rub it on me.”

“Rub what on you,” Tina said? Over the years Tina told me intimate details of every sexual act she performed, unnecessary information added color to her stories of encounters with too many men. Her need to expose every second spent, bothered me, but I never stopped her. I felt uncomfortable hearing about what she did when she thought no one was looking. Now she wanted details the way she’d given them to me. “His penis Tina, you knew what I was saying, but you wanted more right?”

“Would it kill you to say dick, Tamar, you always have to be Ms. Proper.”

My lack of creativity gave her power and an upper hand while talking about sex, a new kind of smile radiated from Tina’s lips, an inner joy pushed from Tina’s eyes that I’d never seen before, each time she spoke a glimmer reflected back at me, almost a laugh and instead of supporting me through the experience, she harassed me, making me regret having told her, leaving me feeling

violated and alone again. Unable to find words that could give meaning to this situation on a conscious level, I felt frustrated, “Tamar, don’t listen to Tina, are you ok,” Nate said?

“I’m just trying to understand why,” I said.

“You let a man rub his dick on your clit and don’t expect to get fucked,” Tina said

“Just leave now, I don’t want to talk anymore, I can’t wait to leave you behind, when I go to college.” I felt the tears building and I didn’t want Tina to see how upset I’d become. I looked for the phone and spotted it on the recliner, I walked back to the chair to hide.

“That’s funny, you’ll be waiting for the rest of your life, you’ll never go to college, see ya,” Tina pulled Nate’s arm and started to leave, amazed at her friend’s cold attitude, wondering what had caused the change in Tina.

“When you need me, I listen to you for hours and when I need you this is how you treat me, now you’re leaving without listening, you’ll see, you’ll all see, one day.”

“Look Ms. Perfect, you’ve treated me like a slut for years and now you’re just like the rest of us, get over yourself and grow up, now you’ve truly earned the right to be a part of TNT.”

“Tina you’re such a bitch, I don’t know why I’ve got to have you as a friend.”

“Because God made it that way.”

“Just leave me alone.”

I watched Nate torn by wanting to stay and knowing he had to go, Tina could make his life miserable when she didn’t get her way, I turned my head as they left and let the tears wet the synonyms for the word Rape on the page in front of me.

Tamar had trouble understanding how powerful her story had been, this story was not the apex of her achievement, and the story was a stepping stone leading her closer to satisfaction, in the dark, as the lights went out, when all heads were supposed to be against a pillow, the women felt twinges of frustration, anguish, hope and yearning in hearts begging for release, many of the fantasies lay exposed, under canopies of hope, riddled with puncture wounds. Tamar's work had no definition, it was for discovery, to celebrate life, provoke thought, admiration, and to lead her away from her careless succession of mistakes, toward the right form of living, the kind that would persuade her to return to her original love for life, the life that included a true relationship with God. All this she shared with her teacher, Ted.

## Chapter Two

The writing courses were held in one of the oldest buildings known to mankind, its' climbing steel fences with whirling stems grew out the ground, the crumbling walls of the prison served as a poignant reminder that the writing class was located in a prison located in Riverhead, New York, not an esteemed university, the stark white walls of the building, its clean grey linoleum floors, asbestos filled ceilings, and silent hallways advocated it as a staid atmosphere that appealed to the writing students. The writing instructor, Ted Blackman, was bolstered by the desk in the front of the classroom, the desk was made out of steel painted mint green, the twenty years of teachers propped against it had proved its endurance and ability to survive.

Just like the man, Tamar thought. Mr. Blackman was as muscular and solid as he had been when she had last seen him, ten years before, the women in the prison, and many of the guards had trembled in expectancy as he played on the prison staff basketball team against the inmates, flaunting blue knee length basketball trunks and a tee shirt top, Ted Blackman had left each of the women of Riverhead Prison breathless, Tamar included, the Ten years had only enhanced his developed body to a man's posture and fortitude.

The stylish hair was now interlaced with strings of grey and black, to the attentive eye it was obvious how much time was taken in the past and at present to style, the administrative body created strict rules against hair below the ear lobe and the handsome young writing teacher had been one of the most frequent violators, Tamar could remember the day she'd first heard of Ted Blackman.

"Tamar, Tamar, wait till you see the dreamy new writing teacher," it was enrollment day after inmate visitation, her friend's face was flushed with excitement as she ran up to greet Tamar

with the news, “We have him at two o’clock and he’s the hottest man alive, and he knows that when you talk about Long Island you’re not talking about a city in New York, he’s young, writing is going to be a blast,” the woman squawked running off to inform someone else of their good fortune, “Oh, and his name is Mr. Blackman,” she had called over her shoulder.

Tamar took note and listened to the deep timbre of his voice as he responded to a question from his student, but his thorough answer didn’t register any more than had the question asked him, Tamar was concentrating only on his voice, leaning over her desk and closing her eyes, she remembered the first time she had heard the base in his low, well-tempered tones.

“Wright, Tamar? Are you here?” Her heart had pounded in her chest and sunk to her feet, none of the students desired to be noticed on the very first day of class, thirty pair of inquisitive eyes were trained on her, she raised a shuddering hand. “Yes, sir.”

“Miss Wright, you’ve already lost your pants, you many pick them up in the guard station, Miss Virtue sent a note.”

The class order disintegrated and there were several catcalls and whistles, she mumbled gratitude to the new teacher, her cheeks burning, he’d think she had no sense or that she was an idiot, amusing how his opinion had meant more to her than had that of her peers. As she walked out of class that day he had waited for her at the door, “I’m sorry if I embarrassed you,” he said in apology, her fellow inmates were standing by, wide-eyed and envious. “That’s all right,” Tamar said.

“No, it’s not, you get five grace points on the first writing exercise.”

She had never needed the five extra points because she made a perfect score on the first writing assignment and on most of them after that, writing was her favorite subject that term.

“Are you talking about how we know if a sentence needs a comma,” Mr. Blackman was asking the student who had inquired about the rules of commas. Tamar shifted back to the present, he’d never remember “Tamar” and her lost pants, she doubted if he’d remember at all those four brief months he’d taught at Riverhead Prison before, not after all he’d been through, one didn’t climb up through the ranks of writing to become a valuable author by being sentimental, one didn’t survive the public attention Ted Blackman had survived by dwelling on incidents that had happened years earlier in a small prison community that played such an insignificant role in his multihued life. She wondered if that was why he seemed so untouched to her, she had watched him on the television screen often when fact finding reporters were still pounding him for a statement on the scandal that had rocked the Riverhead society, she had studied the pictures of him accompanying the newspapers’ headline accounts, unappealing as newspaper pictures were, she could see no decline in the face that had extolled itself on her mind and refused, even after ten years, to be put out of her mind. Tamar was certain he wouldn’t remember her, at twenty four she had been as slender as a giraffe’s neck, no less sylphlike now, she was softer, rounder, and fuller in a very feminine way, left behind were her brown eyes, surrounded by a high unique cheek bone structure that arose out of the plump youthful face of yester year. She no longer sported her long bangs that had distinguished her childish hairstyle, now her hair was short, wept back behind her ear to show her fine arched brows and her heart-shaped hairline, she was blessed with textured hair that fell over her shoulders like dark wine with sunlight shimmering through it. Gone was the rounded-cheeked young woman in booster team pants. Gone also was the virtue, the strong sense of romanticism, she was all too aware of the world and its selfishness and



injustice, Ted Blackman understood that too, they weren't the same people they had been ten years before. And she asked herself for the thousandth time why she had signed up for his class.

“Consider the poem; is a poem dead or alive? He was saying.

Tamar looked over at the clock, in the ten minutes that remained she wondered how she would add to the three lines of notes, she needed to be mindful of the fact that if she weren't careful, she wouldn't excel in this class as she had in the writing class that first year of her prison term.

She summoned up her memory of a cold windy day after that season's first snow storm.

“Would you consider helping me grade papers a few afternoons a week?” he had asked. She was wearing her current cellmate's overalls and her hands were balled into fists inside the deep pockets, Mr. Blackman had stopped her in the courtyard between the gym and the classroom building, his collar-length hair, a shade too long to meet the warden's code, was winding around his head, wearing only his sport coat, he was turned against the north wind. “Of course if you'd rather not, just tell—“

“No, no,” she rushed to say and licked her lips, hoping they weren't chapped and dry looking, yes I'd like to, if you think I can.”

“You're my champion student that was a super piece you did on the joyous world of the Haiku.”

“Thank you,” he was flustered and wondered why her heart was pounding so. He was just a teacher, well, not just a teacher.

“If you can grade the objectives parts of the tests, I'll read the essays, it'll save me hours of time in the evenings.” She had wondered then what he did in the evenings, did he see a woman? That

had been the topic of speculation at many meals with the other inmates, she hadn't heard him talk about anyone.

One night when she and the other prisoner were having a movie night, eating popcorn and watching a movie, he had showed up there. Alone. When he'd spoken to her, she almost died. She stumbled through introductions to her friends and he'd stood up to shake hands with her cellmate. After they were seated her cellmate had spilled her milk and she could have strangled her. When she hazarded a glance toward Mr. Blackman's table, he had left.

"Okay. What days?" he squinted his eye against the sunlight, which was bright in spite of the cold. She could never quite decide if his eyes were gray or green or somewhere in between, but she liked the way his dark lashes curled up when his eyes were narrowed that way. "You tell me," he laughed.

"Well, I have booster team practice on Thursday because of the games on Fridays, stupid! He knows when the games are. I take music lessons on Tuesday." What does he care, Tamar?" I guess Monday and Wednesday would be best."

"That'll be fine," he said, "Whew it's cold, let's get inside." She had almost tripped over her own stumbling feet when he took her elbow and escorted her to the door of the building. By the time the metal door clanged shut behind them, she thought she might very well faint because he'd touched her. She never told any of the other inmates about that. At that time, it was too precious a secret to tell.

The afternoons spent in his classroom became the pivot around which the rest of her life revolved. She agonized on the days she didn't go, and she agonized on the days she did until the

last bell of the day rang. She tried not to rush through the empty halls to his classroom, but was often breathless when she arrived. Sometimes he wasn't there, but he left her a stack of papers with instructions. She went about grading her classmates' work with a diligence she'd never applied to anything else in her life. Often when he joined her, he'd bring her a soda. One day she sat checking the papers with the red pencil he'd given her, she stood up from his desk, where he was reading through an indecipherable composition. He peeled the V-neck sweater he wore over his head. "I think they've got the heat too high in here. This prison isn't doing its part to conserve energy."

At the time, she couldn't even admire his biological conscientiousness, for she was too dazzled by him. He linked his fingers, turned his hands outward and stretched his arms high over his head, arching his back. She was spellbound by the play of his muscles under his soft cotton shirt. He released his breath in a healthy sigh as he lowered his arms and rolled his shoulders in an effort to relax them.

Tamar dropped the red pencil, her fingers useless. Had her skin not been holding her together, she thought she would have melted over the desk. She became aware of a stifling heat that had nothing to do with the thermostat on the wall. She left his classroom that day bewildered. Much as she wanted to be near him, she felt compelled to escape. But there was no escaping this assault on her emotions because the tumult was within her. It was new and different and nothing in her dating experience or her marriage had prepared her for it. She couldn't identify it then. Later, when she was older, was she able to define what she had felt that afternoon: desire.

During those days of late fall, he never treated her with anything but open friendliness. When her cellmate picked her up after her work detail to walk her back to her cell, Mr. Blackman

called, "Have fun," to them as they left. "Before next session you might want to read the first three chapters of the textbook. It's boring as hell, but it will give you good background information."

Tamar was yanked out of her trance by his words, he had one hip hitched over the edge of the desk, a posture that declared his sex, Tamar doubted that any woman in the room was immune to is overwhelming sexuality, a woman would have to be blind or lesbian not to be affected, and glancing around, Tamar was not sure who fit that description.

Rather she saw that the female members of the class were all in their late teens or early twenties. High firm breasts jutted braless under t-shirts, and well-shaped athletic thighs were encased in coverall pants. There were heads of hair in varying shades of brown, auburn, and black. She felt old and dowdy by comparison.

As you are, Tamar, she reminded herself. She was wearing a coverall. Orange in color, and she wore a bra beneath it. In her past, her sweaters matched her textured hose and complemented her favorite mid-calf-length gray wool skirt. At least she knew how to dress in vogue, even though she was now relegated to the polyester.

At her age, she was second oldest in the class. A serious gray-haired woman was seated in the front row. She had taken copious notes while the young woman in the head scarf sitting next to Tamar had napped undisturbed during the entire hour.

"Goodbye," Mr. Blackman said when the bell rang.

"Oh yes, would Ms. Davidson please stop by the desk?" History was repeating itself. Tamar all but dropped the armload of books she was gathering up when he made his request. Less

interested than her other classmates from the past had been the forty or so other inmates filed out of the classroom, most of them intent on reaching the gym before lights out. Head down, she concentrated on weaving her way through the maze of desks, less ordered than the rows in his classroom ten years ago. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the last student leave the room, Slam—the door closed behind her. Tamar stifled the insane impulse to ask her to please leave it open.

When she was a few feet away from his desk, when she had run out of excuses not to look at him, she lifted the screen of dark lashes from her eyes and met Ted Blackman's gaze for the first time in ten years.

“Hello Tamar.” She gasped. Or at least she felt the soft gasp rise to her throat and hoped later that she had caught it in time. “Hello, Mr. Blackman.” A chuckle formed in his throat, but he too, stopped it before it made a sound. His wide, sensual molded lips smiled, but his eyes were busy taking an inventory of her face. They took note of her hair, the vulnerable eyes, the slender elegance of her nose, her lips. He studied her lips for a long time, and when her tongue came out to moisten them, she cursed it for doing so.

There was a dangerous stillness in the room. He had come away from the desk to stand in front of her. He had always seemed tall. Not frightening, but protective.

“I...I didn't think you'd remember me.”

“I knew you the first day you came into class.” Standing close like this, his voice sounded huskier. When he projected it during one of his lectures, it lost the intimate pitch that was now wreaking havoc on her equilibrium.

“I was starting to wonder if you were going to go through the entire semester without even saying hello.” Ten years of maturity were swept away by his gentle teasing and she felt as young and callow as the first day she met him.

“I didn’t want to embarrass you by speaking and having you struggle to remember me. That would have put you in an awkward position.”

“I appreciate your concern, but it was unnecessary. I remember you well.” He continued to peruse her face and she wondered if he thought the years had embellished or detracted from her features. She herself didn’t feel that she had become less attractive or more so; she knew she was different from the woman who had graded his papers with arduous effort. Had he known about her infatuation for him? Had he discussed it with a lady friend?

“You should see her, sitting there so prim and proper, her hands perspiring. Every time I move, she jumps like a scared rabbit.” She imagined him shaking his head with rue and laughing.

“Tamar?”

He routed her out of her unpleasant musing by speaking her name as though he’d had to repeat it several times.

“Yes?” she asked unable to catch her breath, why was oxygen so scarce?

“I asked how long you’ve been Ms. Davidson.”

“Oh, uh, let’s not discuss that.”

His brows, which were a trifle shaggy and masculine, lifted in silent query.

“It’s a long boring story.” She glanced down at the toe of her flat-heeled cordovan shoe.

“Sampson Wright and I parted company one year ago. That’s when I decided to get the official divorce and to go back to school.” “But this is an undergraduate course.” Had any other man worn jeans and boots with a sport coat he would have looked as though he were imitating a film star, but Ted Blackman looked awesome. Did it have to do with the open throat of his plaid cotton shirt, which revealed a dark wedge of chest hair?

She forced her eyes away from it to answer him.

“That’s what I am. An undergraduate, I mean.” She had no idea how delectable her mouth looked when she smiled. For the last few years smiles hadn’t come with ease. But when they did, the weariness that had been etched on her face by unhappiness was relieved and her lips tilted at the corners and were punctuated with shallow dimples.

Ted Blackman seemed intrigued by those indentations at either side of her mouth. It took him a long time to reply. “I would have thought that since you were such a good student, you would have continued on to college right away.”

“I tried, but my Mom didn’t have the money to pay for my tuition and the government stopped giving inmates a free ride.” She glanced away as she remembered her first hit in the eye from Sampson and how forgiving had changed the course of her life. “Things happened,” she finished.

“How’s that friend of yours Tina?” “She hasn’t visited me for a while. God, it’s been ten years, since we’ve seen each other,” she supplied with quickness and then wanted to bite her tongue.

She sounded like a good little girl giving her teacher the correct answer. “Something like that,” she added with deliberate casualness.

“Yes, because I went elsewhere after leaving Riverhead. I left before the year was up.” In self-defense she averted her eyes. The next hour of afternoon activities must have begun. A few inmates drifted by on the concrete outside the multi panel windows. She couldn’t talk about his leaving. He wouldn’t remember, and she had tried for ten years to forget. “Things in Riverhead never change. I waited for visits from my Mom; she’s the one that visits me on a regular basis. She still lives out here. She’s teaching math and coaching cheerleaders at the junior high.”

“No kidding!” He laughed.

“Yes. She’s re-married and has two children.” She adjusted her armload of heavy books into a more comfortable position against her breasts. When he saw the gesture, he leaned forward to take them from her and set them on the desk behind him. That left her without anything to do with her hand, so she folded them across her waist, hoping he wouldn’t guess how exposed she felt.

“Do you live here now?”

“Yes. Since I’m teaching here full-time, I rented a small house.”

“An older one?”

“How did you know? There are a lot of them here. It’s a very quaint little town. It reminds me of Georgetown. I lived there the last few years I was in Washington.”

“Oh.” She felt uncoordinated, he had rubbed shoulders with the beautiful, the powerful.



How unsophisticated she must seem to him. She made a move to retrieve her books. “I don’t want to keep you—“

“You’re not. I’m finished for the day. As a matter of fact, I was going to get a cup of coffee from the cafeteria. Would you join me?” Her heart pounded, “No, than you, Mr. Blackman, I—

His laughter stymied her objection. “Really Tamar, I think you can call me by my first name. you’re not a new inmate anymore.”

“No, but you’re still my teacher,” she reminded him, perturbed that he had laughed at her.

“And I’m delighted to be. You decorate my classroom, now more than ever.” She wished he had kept laughing. That was easier to handle than his intent scrutiny of her features.

“But please, don’t categorize me as a professor. The word ‘professor’ conjures up a picture of an absentminded old man with a heefer of wild white hair searching through the pockets of his baggy tweed coat for the eyeglasses perched on top of his head.” She laughed, “Maybe you should try teaching creative writing, that was a very graphic word picture you painted.”

“Then you get my point. Make it Ted, please.”

“I’ll try,” was all she would promise.

“Try it out.”

She felt like a three-year old about to recite “Mary Had a Little Lamb” for the first time.

“Really, I—“

“Try it,” he insisted. “Very well.” She sighed. “Ted” The name came to her tongue quicker than she imagined. In all her fantasies over the past ten years, had she called him by his first name?”

“Ted, Ted,” she repeated.

“See? See how much better that is? Now, how about coffee? You don’t have another class do you? Even if you do, you’re late so…”

Still she hesitated. “I don’t—“

“Unless you’d rather not be seen with me,” his change of tone brought her eyes flying up to his, the quiet words spoken, with a trace of bitterness, just below the surface. She caught his meaning right away, “You mean because of what happened in Washington,” when he answered by piercing her with those gray-green eyes, she shook her head.

“No, no, of course not, Mr....Ted, that has nothing to do with it.” She was touched that his relief was so apparent. “Good,” He raked strong, lean fingers through his hair.

“Let’s go for coffee.”

Had the look in his eyes and that vulnerable gesture not compelled her to go with him, the urgency behind his words would have. “All right,” she heard herself say before a conscious decision was made. He smiled, turned to pick up her stack of books and his own folder of notes, and propelled her toward the door. When they reached it, he leaned across her back to switch off the lights. She was aware of his arm resting on her back for a fleeting moment and held her breath. For an instant, his hand closed around the base of her neck before sliding to the middle of her back. Though the gesture was nothing more than common courtesy, she was

aware of his hand through the jumpsuit as they walked across the campus. The cafeteria, the pulse of the prison community, was noisy and crowded. Hot 97 was blasting from the speaker embedded in the ceiling. Guards with grey armbands on their blue sleeves were carrying guns on their hips as they walked between the chaotic tables. Inmates of every description, from prostitutes and house wives to thinkers and muscled gang members were muddled together in mayhem.

Ted took her arm and steered her to a private table in the dim far corner of the cafeteria.

Having secured them their seats, he leaned across the table and said in a stage whisper, "I hope I don't have to show my I.D." At her puzzled frown he explained, "I don't think teachers as old as me are welcomed in here." Then, at her laughing expression, he clapped his hand to his forehead, "By God, are you even thirty yet? Why do I feel more and more like our white-haired, doddering professor?"

When the guard came whizzing by, Ted slowed him long enough to call. "How's it going Tom?"

"Great Ted, what are you doing in here?" the retreating guard asked over his shoulder.

"Schoolwork?" Ted asked her. She nodded.

"Schoolwork," he shouted to the guard. "You know I have so much work, can't a teacher get some extra help?" he laughed. Not listening to his question, she shook her head. She was having a hard time keeping herself from staring at him. His hair was attractive and windblown. The open "V" of his shirt continued to bemuse her. Sampson Wright had thought himself the epitome of masculinity, yet his chest had had a sprinkling of hair in the center, while this was an authentic jungle growing from tanned skin. An urge to reach out and touch it with her fingertips

as so powerful, she looked away. One glance around the room confirmed what she had suspected. Inmates were eyeing Ted with the unconcealed sexual interest of the modern woman. She was the subject of their cool appraisal. Ted Blackman was a celebrity in a notorious, dangerous way, with the kind of reputation no woman could resist being curious about. Tamar had tried to ignore the ripple of attention that their arrival had created, but the bold stares being directed toward them now were most disconcerting.

“You get used to it,” he said in a low voice after a moment.

“Do you?”

“No, you don’t get used to it, you just learn to live with it and ignore it if you can.” He twirled a cup on the glazed tabletop. “That’s one consequence of having your face in the news every day for several months. Whether you’re the good guy or the bad guy, the culprit or the victim, guilty or innocent, notoriety shadows you. Nothing you do is private anymore.”

“I know that from firsthand experience with my trial and prosecution.” She didn’t say anything until after the harried guard passed them. Tamar swirled her cup and said in a low voice, “they’ll get accustomed to seeing you around. News that you’d be rejoining the faculty this fall spread through the prison like wildfire. Once you’re here for a while, the excitement will die down.”

“My classes filled up fast. I don’t find that flattering. I realize most of the students who registered for them did so out of curiosity. I saw the head tie girl sitting next to you sleeping today.”

She smiled, glad that he didn’t have that intense, guarded expression on his face any longer. “I don’t think she appreciated the finer points of your lecture.” Ted returned her smile and then gazed at her, searching the depth of her eyes with an intensity that made her quail. “Why did

you take my class, Tamar?” She looked down into her drink; then thinking that silence would incriminate her, she said, “Because I needed the credit.” He ignored her attempted levity. “Were you a curiosity seeker, too? Did you want to see if I’d grown horns and a long tail since you’d seen me?”

“No,” she cried, “Of course not, Never.”

“Did you want to see if I’d remember you?” He was leaning forward now, his forearm propped against the edge of the table. The distance between them was decreased, but rather than shrinking from him, she felt an irresistible urge to move closer still.

“I...I guess I did. I didn’t think you would remember. It’s been so long and—“

“Did you want to see if I remembered the night we kissed?”

### Chapter Three

Tamar remembered the day; the warm air blew through the room on them. Tamar reveled in the feeling of the sun hugging her trembling body tight. She trembled because she needed to be touched by the man she was growing to like, Ted. They sat back talking about life and all the challenges they faced while maneuvering about.

Ted looked into Tamar's eyes and spoke from his heart about his dreams and aspirations. Tamar didn't trust that the joy would last long; she knew that soon the meetings would end.

"My mom is woman of faith and she taught me all about faith in God. She always trusts that all our needs will be provided for by God, when we went through tough times, had no money for food, my mom always told me have faith. Money hadn't always been a problem, there had been happy times. My mom, Lorraine, always created ways to make our house a home. We lived in a one-story concrete building."

"How about drinking some water?"

"OK, where was I? Between my mother's desire for new furniture, and the fact that she had no money to fund this desire, led her to take the clear plastic off her furniture, a few years ago. She calls the furniture, "brand new, second hand." She bragged of her plastic removal to my family when everyone kept asking if her furniture was new. The yellow velvet was shining bright as I made contact with the fabric for the first time."

"Do you need more water? Ted spoke to Tamar who hadn't paused.

"I ran my hands over the carved wood frame, I expected to hear from the kitchen, "Tamar what are you doing?" my mom always seemed to know when I was about to get into mischief. Isn't it

funny how easy it is to slip back into roles. When I left home to live with Sampson because I'd gotten pregnant, the chairs were still covered and when I returned I was a married woman, the plastic removed, I realized it wasn't necessary to sneak, I could touch the forbidden couch, no one to yell at me anymore, at least I didn't think they would."

"Here you go two glasses of water." Ted placed the glasses on the table.

"The intricate wood carvings on the arms and legs swirled and looped back like my memories of our happy family gatherings, at home. Throughout the year friends and family have come to spend a weekend, a bunch of them are at her house now. My mom was the one that had a house large enough to hold the family. Even though we were poor, the festive mood could be found anywhere in the house, but in the living room on the yellow velvet couch with the clear plastic, was where the action took place. Each group taking turns enjoying the couch, "can I get you anything to eat," Ted spoke as Tamar seemed to pause? "No, I don't feel like eating." Tamar responded without hesitation. "First the men would gather on the couch, with glasses filled to the rim with white rum and orange juice. Secret sips were shared with deserving children upon request. This is where I wanted to hang out! The jokes though not always appropriate were funny and linked me to a way of life I'd never experienced. It was during these moments of sheer delight, when the men, fell silent, would tell jokes about a place called "back a yard." I remember the happy expression on my father's face as he told his guests of his many adventures on his island home. A place where black monkeys bought white powder when they got rich, where six and one half dozen or the other was used as a measurement. A place where mixed instructions were given to children, like, "sit down and stand up properly," instead of sit up straight. After too many drinks someone would spill a drink on the couch, the women would

come to clean up and send the men outside to continue their jokes. As the men moved outside the women moved in on the couch.”

“Do you need anything else,” Ted asked? When he didn’t get a response he continued listening. “The women could be heard laughing and talking on the couch. Preparations could be smelled throughout the house, the ox tail, curry goat, calaloo, rice and peas. Some part of the meal was always being tested, just to make sure it was alright. The women would gossip about relatives not present and catch each other up on the latest news. Aunt Pam was the one that heard all the good stories; she was the pulse of the family. If anything went down, she was the first to hear and the first to tell. I would try to listen in, but my mom would always catch me and send me back to play with the other kids. Then while testing the goat, one of my aunts would drop some on the couch, after a rapid clean up, to avoid the curry from staining the plastic, my mom would send the women back into the kitchen to finish dinner. “I’m getting hungry with all this talk of food.” Ted looked around the room.

“When the women returned to cooking, the children would sneak to take over, the velveteen keeper of conversations. Each child would dare the other to complete an impossible task, each trying to outdo the other. I remember one dare was to see who would be brave enough to jump from the window. A secondary plan was constructed that included sheets being tied together and then being tied to the leg of the couch. Each of us was to scale the house with the sheet to assist us. Midway, our plan was foiled, some injustice had been dealt one of my cousins and she decided to rat the rest of us out. After being punished,(corporal punishment was used back then) we were banished from touching the couch and we went on to our next adventure, one not as visible, you kids sure knew how to create fun,” Ted laughed. “Over the years the couch developed scars from use. The frame began to crack and every time guest came they were



directed to arm chairs, not the couch. My mom and dad knew how to ease onto the couch with hopes that this wouldn't be the day that the frame would give up fighting for life and snap. The cracking and creaking gave us hints that the expiration date was nearing. That day did come. My brother had forgotten how delicate the couch had become and directed his wife to sit with him. The cracking started right away after the two full figured adults sat simultaneously on either end of the yellow velvet. As I looked at their faces the reaction was no match for the mortified look on my mother's face when she realized that the new formed bond with her daughter-in-law was at risk again. Her bragging came to an end when she realized that even though the couch was, "brand new second hand," it was too many years old and need some TLC. "Oh my goodness, I've been talking for almost an hour, I'm so sorry, this is what happens when I feel so relaxed, I ramble for hours, and my friends know how to shut me up..." Ted leaned forward and placed his index finger on Tamar's lips, "Like this?" "Yes that's right, I'll shut up now." Tamar leaned back and folded her arms across her chest. "Please don't stop talking, you have such a soothing voice, and I love the way your face lights up when you're talking about our family. You have such vivid memories. I wish I could say the same." Then Ted leaned back in his seat and watched Tamar. "I didn't let you speak, what've you been up to, I've told you more about my life than my soon to be ex-husband knows." Tamar laughed at her comment and realized she brought up the subject she was trying to avoid. "I know this isn't any of my business, but I've heard you say more than once, soon to be ex, are you getting divorced, have you filed papers yet? You don't have to answer that. I've been teaching for many years and I try not to pry...I guess I need to take that idea with me when I go to Washington..."

“Ted I’m sorry for prying into your business now, but what do you mean, when you go to Washington?” She sat and stared at the man looking at her. She didn’t know how long they sat looking at each other.

“Can you excuse me for a minute Ted? I need the ladies room, can you walk me to the guard down the hall.” She grabbed her bag and walked with him to the door.

There were four stalls, two stall facing the other two, a short row of sinks with no mirrors in the bathroom and about twenty women waiting. Tamar didn’t think she could hold her urine if she waited in line. She debated about sneaking in the guard’s bathroom. The guards didn’t waste time with all the primping and poking around with hair. She was in serious jeopardy of losing control of her bladder and shifting her weight from one leg to another to prevent an accident, when a person closer in line gave her the next spot.

“I think you better go before the poor cleaning woman has an extra mess to clean.” She laughed and told the woman, “thank you.”

Inside the stall was clean, no mess, like many of the bathrooms near the cells, that had urine all over, from the uncaring inmates missing the mark. She had forgotten to check for tissue and saw that the roll against the wall was empty, she rummaged through her bag for a napkin, and she found one stuck in the corner under a dried piece of gum. Cool water touched her skin as she washed her hands. She tried to contrive a plan that didn't include bumping into anyone. The women in the prison looked for an excuse to fight. Tamar didn’t want to end up in isolation. She rehearsed the reasons for her thoughts of adultery in her head. I want to make love to Ted because... I need to feel loved. No, I’ll make love to Ted because... I feel powerful in his arms.

Ted makes me feel... sexy, ferocious, wild, carefree, all the emotions I bottled inside.

"Are you alright in there?" The guard said.

"Yeah, I'm coming out now." She spent too much time in her head. She walked past the other women waiting in line and out the door, avoiding stepping on any toes.

"What took you so long, I thought you fell in?" the Ted asked as they walked down the hallway.

Ted walked to the guard down the hall. "I'll take her back."

"Ok, Mr. Blackman, lights out in a few, get her back to her cell soon," the guard warned.

"Yes, sir, I will have her back in time for lights out. Well, I'll take you to your cell now," Ted said.

Was she just dismissed? Did he just give her a subtle hint to leave? She guessed he had. She walked back into the classroom and gathered her bags and made sure she hadn't left anything behind. She cringed at the thought of leaving a personal item behind. She wasn't sure who was watching Ted.

"Are you taking me back to my cell or do I need to walk with the guard?"

"Of course I'm taking you to your cell, didn't I say I would?"

Ted walked to the back of the classroom and looked up into the ceiling tiles avoiding Tamar's eyes.

"What's wrong, why do you look so distant all of a sudden?" Tamar asked

"I'm trying to get you out of here before I do something we both will regret."

"Who says I'll regret anything?"

A deep groan escaped Ted's lips as he struggled to decide what to do. He paced the length of the classroom and looked at Tamar each time he passed.

"I don't feel comfortable doing things this way, but I want you so bad." Ted reached out for Tamar and pulled her close in a tight embrace, his lips reaching hers in seconds, the kiss ended as soon as it had began. A gentle kiss on her forehead was her parting gift. Amazement filled her at the joy she felt inside, when his lips caressed her soul. A touch always spoke volumes to her heart. Her heart needed to be loved today, the conversation conveyed his like.

Her body lived on without sex. She hated the way Sampson groped her body, the feeling of hands exploring her exterior, not knowing the contents behind her skull. Ted talked to her with passion, some of the things he said sounded rough other things sounded gentle, but they talked. "Let's go Tamar." Ted pushed Tamar out the door. He walked with speed to the hallway of her cell.

"See you tomorrow Tamar, have a good night."

"Thanks Ted see you..."

Ted turned and walked away before she could finish her sentence. When she walked down the hall, she glanced around the corner to see the guard on duty, she didn't one in the booth. The hall was crowded; it was hard to move forward. She didn't see him anywhere so she decided to walk as fast as she could to her cell, before any of the trouble makers noticed her. It wasn't that she didn't want to talk to anyone. It was that she didn't want any trouble, if anyone thought she was getting preferential treatment, they could tell the warden and problems would start. She knew that her face was flushed and she didn't want anyone to see her that way, she feared hearing them tease her about being the teacher's pet. Unsure of an outcome, she decided to just

head to her cell, and get some much needed rest, the next day she would spend time working on letter to her mother. It was cool in her cell and the cold air helped her to regain her consciousness. She was walking to her bed and searching for her notebook in her bag when she heard an unfamiliar voice from behind her.

“Hello there, why are you getting back to the cell block so late, out having fun?”

Tamar was too scared to respond. She turned around and a new guard was standing against a pole, looking at her from the side.

“Hello, I’m Tamar, are you new here?”

“I saw you with that teacher, and then when you came down the hall and I watched you walk/run back to your cell, I didn’t know it was possible for anyone to walk as fast as you did through the crowd, in such a short time.”

He started walking toward her, it dawned on her again how much trouble he could make for her. She knew that her time with Ted could cause trouble for them both and wanted to avoid any confrontations. All any guard had to do was mention the closeness between her and Ted and solitary would be her new home.

“I didn’t think anyone noticed me.”

“Of course I saw you, with that beautiful smile of yours, those lips are so beautiful. What will you do with them will you acknowledge me, or ignore me.”

“Oh, I would never ignore you, Sir.” There she was sounding fake and insincere.

“Do you help all the staff or are you particular about who gets to use your services? You seem to be a pro at this,” he waited for an answer.

“Very funny, I just came back from helping Mr. Blackman. He needed help with grading some papers. He hates grading the papers solo.”

I spent most of my day working on short stories and poems. Mr. Blackman and I work close together, he’s the reason...He’s always around when I need him and even when I don’t...I just needed to get ready for bed it’s been a long day.”

She felt like she was being reprimanded after one of her many misadventures. This man felt like a master of interrogation. Even though he hadn’t asked her all the info, she felt obligated to talk, sneaking out of her parent’s house without telling anyone hadn’t bothered her as much as talking to this man, she rambled on and on.

“Why don’t you get ready for lights out, my story isn’t too short and what we do will be very poetic, I’ll work close together with you so you don’t have to do the job solo. I can help you survive in this prison.” He led her to her bed.

Tamar tried to begin talking once again.

“My mom...

“Shut up Tamar and take off your clothes?”

“No.”

“No? Are you sure that what you want to say to me?”

“Yes, I mean no, I mean leave me alone.”

“Ok, Tamar, but remember this....”

“I know I better watch my back, right?”

“You know that’s right.” The guard walked out looking Tamar over with each step away from her cell. The look reminded Tamar of Sampson and his wicked ways. She sat down on her bed and remembered her times with Sampson. Why had she made so many poor choices? If only he... Tamar bit her nail, contemplating whether to call her boss Ronald or take a chance and ignore the urgent his text messages about the upcoming meeting. Before she could finish her thought, an explosion of sirens sounded in front of her apartment. Tamar heard the door in the entryway slam and the sound of someone running up the steps. She listened to the sound of tires screeching and more sirens whirling. Sampson used his keys to open both locks and swung the door open, breaking the security chain. As he closed the door, the force rattled the frame.

“Tamar, I’m going to kill you and that nosy friend of yours.” Sampson boomed from the front door. “Didn’t I tell you to keep our business private?”

Tamar ran toward the bathroom, screaming on her way, “Please Sampson, don’t hurt me again, all I told her was...”

“Don’t say another word,” Sampson grabbed her, began shoving Tamar into the wall and knocking her into a table. “Since speaking to you doesn’t mean anything, actions will speak louder than words.”

Tamar’s eyes bulged as she glowered at Sampson, “Go ahead hit me, does that make you feel like a man?”

Sampson leaped forward and grabbed both sides of Tamar's face, "You wanna talk big because you know the cops are looking for me?"

"What are you talking about?" Tamar questioned, wondering how she'd tuned out the sound of all the sirens.

"While I was drinking and hanging with Vincent, Tina rolls up and starts screaming on me and that wench called the police." Sampson blurted, rolling his tan eyes and loosening his grip on Tamar's face.

Tamar pulled back and looked at Sampson. "I didn't call them so why are you coming after me?"

"Tamar, I promise you, if you say one more word, I'm going to make you wish for death."

Sampson yelled at her, grabbing her arm, restricting the flow of blood.

"Let go of me," Tamar pleaded, pulling her arm back. "You're the one who wanted to blab about what happens in our home, so why don't I call that boss of yours and tell him about your lack of integrity."

"What are you talking about?" Tamar demanded. Before Sampson could answer her, she decided to end the conversation. "I've got nothing more to say to you, do what you want. Why don't I open the door and help the police."

"Why don't I help you a little?" Sampson grabbed Tamar's neck and started to squeeze. As the air escaped her lungs she felt herself drifting, she couldn't take the pain in her neck and in her head, she felt like going to sleep. Her body touching the ground, turning her head she saw a mist clearing and a view of her church widening. She was floating down in front the inferno-red, indigo vapor and grass-green church billboard, as it burnished vibrant through the descending



fog. It was evening, the cars floated above the road and the church gleamed. All she needed was a little more air. The air around her was filled with Ruby Red Paint and dancing Rough Red Carpet. The gentle touch of the air on her moist skin was no comfort to her lungs, as the goose bumps raised in protest to the air from the open window. The lukewarm mix of hot and cold aggravated her closing throat as she gasped for air, each inhalation inspired hope for resolution of the attack in motion. She stood akimbo on the brown, pine needle floor amidst the large dense growth of trees high over head, her chin jutted forward, her hair laying on her chest, and she tried to catch the air as it pushed into the tops of the pine trees, teasing her. She heard the periodic murmur of the trees as the air rustled and swayed the trees creating a melody in search of harmony. The air wrapped around the green bundle of needles and hid behind the spiraling grey scales of the cones jutting out the brown branches, of the massive pines, surrounding the perimeter of the church, the shape of the needles looked like green dandelion wishing weeds. She breathed in rapid succession trying to capture the air that evaded her lungs. A crowd gathered around the air, as if the air needed to be observed and as she reached within the circle, the crowd pushed her inside the doors of the church, she struggled to get around the crowd to the air, the distance widened. All she needed was a little more air. The crowd pushed her down the isle following the air, past the gold banister leading within. The air bounced along the entryway inside the church that was lined with new red carpet, a split separated the middle of a walkway leading to the air on center stage, circular seating enclosing the stage. Someone shoved her and she stumbled into a seat, she rose to reach for the air and beg for help, she bumped into something and turned to apologize, no one was there, the lights dimmed and the show began more air.

A microphone stand and the air sitting on a brown cloth covered stool, looked like they had grown from the floor, standing straight up together center stage, like mountains. They shot up. She looked onto the stage ahead as the air sat alone, she heard a single voice humming, tracking the sound, she traveled the ten feet of scarlet carpet with her eyes, every inch of the space held memories gathered from years of membership and with her elbow leaning on the bench, she turned and surveyed the area, encountering the air as it fluttered above the pages of an open Bible. She screamed for help and began to disembark with reality into different corners of the church. She was at the top, not centered but, slightly off to the right, one more breath. A parade of her life rose before her all performed by the illusive air up front. She sat below the air gazing up at each scene, a deep laughter rising within her. Her mouth widened and closed, calling to the air, until her body felt exhausted. She was part of a show, center stage, caught up in the contagious laughing alone. The show soon came to an end, as quick as the cacophony started, the end came and she felt stillness. As she took her last bit of air, the church became God's domain.

She heard voices from within the miasma, teasing and calling her name, whispering alternate endings, this had to be different, and the air was finally hers. She moved her head in each direction, sucking up air with thirst, the thick darkness reached around into Tamar's eyes like paper around a gift. Within minutes scattered orange light filled her coffin home, the sound of a steady tick from the wall mounted clock, sent mini explosions of sound through her head, each tock igniting pain, she had air.

The putrid smell of vomit inched out her mouth with drool onto the coarse cotton blanket caressing her placid skin. She tried to hold on to the remnants of her dream. One, two, three,

four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, one, two, three...each breath of air reminding her of the years she'd spent creating her ersatz family.

Slam—

His bald brown head stood above the other officers that surrounded him, his head glistening iridescent purple. The throng of blue blurred into brown then back to blue.

“My arms hurt, you bastard’s keep pulling and pushing on me.”

“You have the nerve to call me a bastard after what you did to that woman.”

“You’re wrong for slamming me into the ground, face first, I didn’t do anything to her, she has diabetes...”

The police officer moved back past Sampson and looked over at Tamar regaining consciousness.

“Are you ok, is that true? Someone named Tina called...?” The officer said.

“Yes, I’m fine, I’ll follow up with my doctor, and I may need new medication.” Tamar removed the coarse blanket, touching hands with the officer as he pulled her off the floor; she rose into a soft embrace. The officer looked at the patch of dried blood on Tamar’s head and the red skin around her neck.

“Are you sure you’re ok?” The officer pleaded

“Are you going to screw him too, now?” Sampson snapped

“Shut up.” Tamar protested.

She was transfixed by his smile, he was an officer of the law and she knew that he was just being helpful, but he had the kindest smile she'd ever seen. He was about 6' 5' muscular build. He wasn't gorgeous but pleasant for her sore eyes.

"If you're not going to press charges then, I've done all I can do, a domestic violence counselor will call you in a few days."

The officer handed Sampson an orange and white paper. "Sign here."

"Have a nice day, Miss, maybe a visit to the ER is warranted." The police officer exited the apartment, taking a final look at Tamar.

"Thank you, you too, I'm good, I have everything I need right here," Tamar said as she did a mental tally of the medical bills in her head, about \$2,000, emergency room visit, x-rays, stitches and medicine, money she didn't have. She closed the bedroom door behind her. She knew makeup sex was foremost on Sampson's mind.

"I'm so sorry baby; I didn't mean to hurt you, get yourself ready till I come back, I left something in the car." Sampson said.

"Whatever," She whispered.

Tired and alone, she sat at the edge of the bed. She and Sampson had shared the room for many years. She wanted to move her belonging out the room, she was sick of listening to Sampson's apologies after his abuse. She enjoyed the minutes of privacy and peace to think. Should she stay or leave? Would this be the last time? How soon till the next time? Tamar took off her clothes, picked up her camera and climbed back on the bed. She reached both hands in front her body, with the camera between her fingers and snapped shots. When she reached her face, she

took three pictures. She started to slip her night gown over her body and her head but stopped, she reached over to turn off the lamp, contemplating her day, an explosion of thoughts raced through her mind, she decided against turning off the lamp, she laid her head on the pillow and waited. Once again she'd cheated death.

Sampson pushed the door, slid into the bed with her, he opened her legs and kneeled in front her, pushing her night dress up over her hips, he lifted her hips onto a pillow and pulled her legs around his back, while she straddled him, he rubbed her head and neck, placing soft kisses on all the places he hurt.

“I love you so much, I'm so sorry. I bought something for you, open it and see.” Sampson smiled proud of his present.

“What is this?” Tamar opened the envelop and found a piece of paper inside.

“We're taking a trip to the Pocono's, to work on that baby.”

“I'm not sure I want to go, can we even afford this?” Tamar rolled over and sat up against the metal headboard. Sampson turned to face Tamar, angry that she was against the trip. “I wouldn't want to be seen with your fat ass anyway, forget it then, I can go with someone much sexier than you, as a matter of fact I'll call now.”

“Sampson it's been a long day, why don't you just leave.” Tamar walked to the door and opened it wide. “I'm very tired and I can't fight anymore.”

“Whatever.” Sampson walked out the door to the couch and picked up the phone and dialed a number, looking in Tamar's direction he whispered into the phone, “Hello...”

Tamar closed the door on Sampson's conversation and lay down in the bed. One hour later Sampson was back at the door.

Knock Knock—

“Yes?”

“Can I come in? I shouldn't have done that.”

“No, not right now, I need some time alone.” Tamar wanted to say something smart, but thought better of it. She didn't want to fight with Sampson again.

“But I need to talk to you.”

Tamar sighed, “I understand, but I need some time alone.”

Knock Knock

“Stop knocking.”

## Chapter Four

The sound of the guard jarred Tamar back into reality. “Lights out ladies, tomorrow is another day.” The alarm sounded and the doors locked, ending another day. She wondered what the next day held for her and Ted.

Tamar had spent many years reviewing the kiss she shared with Ted. The memory was encased in the quiet place of her mind that no human could touch. She had been secretive with her memory thinking of the kiss when she was alone. She didn’t want to talk to Ted about the kiss, ponder on what could have been, had she not been in jail, she needed the security of her fantasy, she was not ready to discuss the kiss with Ted.

She slowly prepared for class the next day and listened as Ted talked about the next novel for the reading group. As class ended Tamar grabbed her belongings and tried to escape through the door.

“It was after we talked about your family,” he was being unrelenting. “Do you recall that day?”

“Yes, I was so scared,” she said, forgetting she was trying to escape any conversation.

“We both were scared,” Ted said as he walked to his seat. Tamar looked at Ted confused by his statement.

“Can you imagine the scandal in Riverhead Prison if anyone had seen me kissing one of my students? A quick death would be my reprieve. I’m so happy no one saw us that day, for your sake more than mine, I could leave the prison. You couldn’t for twenty five years.”

“I never saw you again after that, one of the guards knew and tried to make my life a living hell. He lasted one week. He messed around with the wrong lesbian and almost died on the spot.”

“Tamar, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know. Did he hurt you?” Ted reached out for Tamar’s hand and changed his mind before she could respond.

“I was fine, you didn’t know....”

“I went to my friends in Washington and pestered them until one of them lined me up a job. I couldn’t work in the prison.”

“Why?”

Ted looked at her with sad eyes, his voice low and strong as he spoke. “You may have been clueless back then, but you are a grown woman now. You can understand now why I had to leave. There was nothing fatherly about that kiss. I didn’t plan on kissing you. I hadn’t sat around plotting when to strike, please understand that fact. But once our lips touched, something happened, you became a woman to me and I couldn’t ever look at you as one of my students.” She walked toward his chair and stood in front of him, she lowered her head to his face, careful not to touch him. “I was a married woman when I arrived in this prison, nothing about me was clueless. Thanks for the apology, but it would have been better if you left all this unsaid.”

“Why because you’re still in jail and we still don’t have the luxury of developing our attraction.”

“Yes, you got that right.”

“Well remember one thing, I don’t need a scandal in my life any more than you do. Even though I have much more power than I did years ago, I still don’t believe in tempting fate.”

“That’s why we shouldn’t spend so much time together after class.”



Her position at the prison was shaky; she had rallied, lobbied and begged for the return of an English professor after the death of the prior one. Now she was in jeopardy of getting him fired and ending up alone and afraid. The way Sampson made her feel when he abused her.

Slam—

Sampson Wright was in a trance from punching his fist into the bathroom door and yelling at Tamar. He felt she had someone else, but he didn't know who. He was determined to find out, he saw the changes in Tamar and needed answers. Tamar saw when Sampson walked into the kitchen, wearing a pair of black cotton basketball shorts, a green tank, and high top sneakers. He leaned on the counter, smiled at Tamar, and grabbed a chunk of her buttocks. When she didn't respond, he plucked the peak of her left breast. Her right hand swatted at him, as she turned to face the stove, knocking all her red color swatches to the floor. He spun her around, at her waist, pulling her hips to his. She bumped into his happiness.

“Why don't you hang up that phone and come with me down the hall,” Sampson pouted his lips and taunted. When he got no response from his wife, he frowned at the phone cradled on her shoulder, she was hunching to her right scribbling on a notepad and picking up the scattered mess. He was sad when he realized she was too engrossed in her conversation with Ronald to pay attention to his advances. “Tamar, you're not coming down the hall with me?”

“Ronald just called to finalize a meeting,” she whispered moving the phone from her mouth.

“I'll be down in a minute, why don't you get in the bed and wait for me, while I finish up here.”

“Hell no, you just left work Tamar, you mean to tell me, you can't spend a little time with me, now?”

“Hold on Ronald,” Tamar pressed the mute button and placed the phone on top the notepad with her pen.

“This meeting is taking place tomorrow and this is the only way for me to keep my job that pays our bills, I have to blow the reps away with my presentation, I know you’ve been drinking and I’m pretty sure you’re drunk by now, so slow down on the happy juice and give me a few minutes.” Tamar picked up the phone, walked to the bathroom, secured the door, sat on the toilet, pressed the mute button and resumed speaking to Ronald.

“Ronald, I have all the info I need to finish up, I’ll see you in the morning, ok, bye.” she pressed the end button and sucked her teeth.

"How many of the reps to you have to blow, do you hear me Tamar?" Sampson banged on the door. You lying whore, are you cheating on me again, with another man, with Ronald? Open the door now, or I’ll break it down.”

Tamar started crying. Sampson did have a valid point. She was guilty of cheating with another man in her mind, but her relationship with Ronald was professional. There was nothing she wanted more than to move on with her life.

“Where’d you go for lunch today?”

“We had lunch in the lunch room.”

Sampson pounded on the door. “Who were you with?”

“As far as I know, it’s a free country and I can eat lunch with anyone I please.”

He reached for the door and started twisting the knob. “Don’t get smart with me. Did you please Ronald today, is that why you didn’t answer my calls?”

“I told you, I forgot to call you at lunchtime and I missed all your calls because I was in the lunch room eating.”

“I checked your cell phone, why do you have Ronald’s home number?”

“In case I need to call him before work.”

“Why would you need his home number, you have his cell number?”

“To call in sick if I can’t reach him on his cell.”

“Why would he give you his home number, does anyone else have his home number. I thought you said you loved me?”

Tamar put her head in her hands and leaned forward to her lap, her head almost touching the rose colored tiles circling the walls and floor of the bathroom, his doubt of her love and then his defeated tone broke her heart, but he was letting the alcohol take control of his emotions. The rose colored tiles littering the bathroom seemed out of place in her metropolitan studio. She’d hoped to replace the pink tile months prior with a red mosaic design, the eye sore stayed, like so many other invaders in her life.

“I love you baby, why didn’t you call me.” Sampson’s voice cracked as he spoke, the slurring of his words more evident.

“I just wanted to have my lunch.”

Slam—

“Lunch, lunch, you just wanted to have lunch, is that all you can think about, food?”

Slam—

Tamar opened the bathroom door and Sampson put his arms around her shoulders, pulling her to him. “I know you understand how much I love you?” He traced the edges of her forehead with his finger tips and kissed her on her cheek, the rapid succession of hits and blows startled Tamar throwing her off balance. Unable to keep upright her head slammed against the floor, her blood filling the spaces between the cracks of the tile.

“Have this mess cleaned up by the time I get back.” Sampson walked out the apartment and closed the front door.

Tamar rose off the floor and walked out the front door. She peered into the dim lit hallway. She walked forward to the railing and looked down the steps onto the lower landing.

“You better not come back because the police will be waiting for you.” Tamar yelled down the empty steps.

“You’re so lucky I have somewhere to go, or I’d show you how to keep your mouth shut.”

Sampson whispered as he slipped up behind Tamar, running his fingers down the hollow of her back to her hips and pressing his pelvis against the two fleshy mounds above her legs. Turning fast Tamar jumped at Sampson’s touch. Plowing past him she slammed double locked and chained the door.

Tamar headed back into the bathroom. She plopped down on the toilet in front of her blood, the color close to one of the reds in the mosaic she picked as part of her renovation. She reached down to open the cabinet door and took out a washcloth. She turned on the sink and ran cold

water over the white rag. She placed the rag over the gash on her head. Tamar sat forward on the edge of the seat and turned her face to look into the mirror. The damage could be covered for her meeting the next day. Tamar got up and cleaned her blood off the floor. She walked to the bedroom and picked up the phone to call Tina.

“Hey girl, how are you?” Tamar said as she added pep to her voice.

“I’m good, what’s the matter, you sound funny.” Tina glanced at the phone for a second, and then waited in silence for a reply.

“Well...” Tamar began with hesitation, trying to think of something to say, “Sampson and I had another fight.”

Tina jumped in then. “Not again, did he hurt you, he’s probably on his way to Vincent.”

“Yeah, I guess your right, I don’t care where he is, did you call the police.”

“You know, I’m sick of this crap.” Tina yelled. “Every time I turn around, Sampson is hurting you, and every time you think about doing something. Don’t think, call the police, and let him be accountable for his actions.”

Tamar opened the window and went into the kitchen to find her cell phone while Tina rambled on about Sampson.

“I’m not saying Sampson doesn’t have some good qualities about him, but enough already, you’ve been around the world and back again, why do you stay? Tamar pressed the screen on her cell phone and saw a text message from Ronald to call him ASAP.

“I mean, he calls you at work all day, drinks everyday, doesn’t want you hanging out with your friends, hates your family and every time he does something wrong he buys an elaborate gift, does that make sense to you, are you even listening?”

“Yes, I’m listening, I got a text from my boss and I need to call him back, give me a few minutes and we can finish talking.” Tamar didn’t wait for Tina to respond she ended the call and volleyed the idea of returning Ronald’s text or giving him a call. Tamar was about to call Ronald but caught herself, if she called Ronald and Sampson returned he would start another fight, but if she ignored the text, she could jeopardize her job.

Ronald had done plenty to keep her working at Steady Foot Reports, when she took the job at Steady Foot Reports she gained a life free from debt. Later, working became a resource, for information on Sampson. She hoped to gain another type of freedom, one not connected to debt, but personal space. She decided to send Ronald a text, “what’s up?”

Background investigations’ is what Steady Foot Reports did and she planned to get the most out of her employment. Her once consistent husband had become a liar and she needed to know why. Their life started with love and had grown into mutual hate. Within seconds Ronald responded, “We need to talk.”

Tamar’s love for her job was undeniable. She gazed at the phone resting in her hands and thought about what to do. Fiddling with the phone, she thought back to her first day at work. As she stepped onto the elevator, she watched the doors close, she felt proud to have, "a real job." Sampson worked as prep cook in a steakhouse, he hadn’t finished high school. Sampson's efforts to find a job that paid more than hers had become an obsession, his hopes dwindling with each rejection. The elevator doors opened on her floor and she straightened her back, as she

walked toward Sally at the reception desk. It seemed so long ago, her first day as a working woman.

Seven windows surrounded her in the ivory colored Office. Two white pillars with a black wrought iron bench between, sat centered in the room. Green pillows flooded the coach on the back wall. Brown lint embedded in the cream carpet, the fuzz refused to lift with the help of a broom. She went to the closet for the vacuum.

“Steady Foot Reports, Tamar speaking, how may I help you?” The words spilled from her tongue like the water of Dunn’s River Falls in Jamaica, her mother’s island home.

"Tamar, Hello, Tamar," Sampson spoke in muted tones.

"Hello Sampson, why are you whispering?"

"I-I-I just woke up, i-i-i-it's late why didn't you wake me?" Sampson used his accusatory voice.

"I got up at dawn Sampson, you yelled at me last week for waking you up too soon, make up your mind. I knew you stayed up late on the computer 'looking for jobs'." Her real reason for not waking him was he might want "his needs" taken care of before she left.

"Tamar, I like seeing you off in the morning, I like to say goodbye."

"I'm very busy now, can I call you later?"

"Ok, but make sure you call me back, I need to talk to you." Sampson spoke with venom in his voice.

"Sampson, I have to go now. She heard his stutter beginning, a telltale sign he was about to lie.

"A-A-Also, I-I-I-I won't be available for d-d-d-dinner Saturday night. I have a l-l-l-late dinner i-

i-i-interview with the principal of P-P-P-Pentana High School." Sampson spewed out the words like he was under duress.

"How did you meet a principal?"

"Tamar, why must you c-c-c-complicate, everything?"

"I'm not trying to be difficult, but we made these plans a week ago, I was looking forward to spending time with you."

"Tamar, make sure you call me before lunch. You're not coming home right?"

"I'm not sure. I'll call you when I'm going to lunch. Sampson, I have a few minutes, my meeting is about to start, bye."

Truth be told, she was a junior member of the team, but she knew this would change very soon. She believed in working hard until she made progress. She didn't have much work experience but she was determined to figure out what was needed to get ahead. When she was hired she was terrified that her manager would discover how new she was to working. She embellished her work experience. She figured no one checked the information on applications. She was wrong. "I'm lying for sorry on my application. I mean I'm sorry for lying on my application." She stumbled over her words, during her interview, not knowing what to say.

"Tamar, just know that I've never done this before." Ronald looked into her eyes and turned his head to the side. "I'm giving you the job, but on a probationary basis, do you understand? He leaned forward and put his hands on his knees. "In three month, we will have a review, Okay?" His absolution made her grateful to him forever.



Every morning she was greeted by Ronald's smiling face; he was a gentle man with a calm demeanor. He was considerate of his employees. When she started spending more time on researching Sampson than on Steady Foot work, she felt guilty for her ulterior motives. Ronald had taken a chance hiring her. Intermingled with her work files were records of Sampson's activities. She had bank records, cell phone records, and copies of credit card receipts, all thanks to modern technology. She felt powerful and in charge.

Every time Sampson would call to "check in" with her, she laughed. Sampson didn't want to be held responsible for his actions. He wanted to gallivant all around town, during the day, but have the security of a caring wife waiting for him at home. He would call all day long, to change plans, clueing her to the fact that something was wrong. He was living a double life that Tamar was learning about.

As a new manager at Steady Foot Reports, Ronald felt obligated to help Tamar find her niche. Tamar influenced his team with her positive spirit and with her presence in the office. He wanted to return the favor with his patience while she learned about office politics. Ronald wanted Tamar to understand. He looked at the caked white fan blades in the back of the gym. The circular cage enclosed the gritty whirling air cutting blades. He knew some fans provided comfort in the heat. This fan circulated the stagnant air among the dweller in search of a breeze. The four buttons on the stand controlled the speed of the blades. He pressed the buttons to gain comfort and control, hot air rewarded his efforts. Four months separated Ronald from a time of confusion to his present state of clarity and focus. Tamar served as a catalyst for change, thwarting all his efforts to remain in ignorant bliss.

"Tamar today is Mr. Peterson's birthday, we had a party earlier, and I left a ham sandwich from the sub for you in the fridge with a piece of cake," Ronald said. "No, thank you, I don't eat ham, but I'll take that piece of cake," Tamar said.

"You, don't eat ham, why not," He said?

"I follow what I'm told in the bible about clean and unclean meat, Ronald, ham happens to be one of those unclean meats," Tamar said.

"Clean and unclean meats? What are you talking about? I'm sure they washed the meat off good before cooking," Ronald said.

"I'm not talking about the physical meat. I'm talking about a spiritual matter," Tamar said.

"Well, I don't believe in all that spirit stuff, so leave me out of all that. Your cake is in the fridge." Ronald said as he walked toward his office.

"Maybe we can talk about this another time?" Tamar asked.

"No, Tamar I'm not interested." Ronald said. Tamar didn't believe in pressuring anyone, he chose to leave the matter alone and watched Ronald walk toward the mailroom clerk to retrieve his mail. Tamar used life experience as her guide, she didn't believe in preaching sermons to her coworkers and friends. Showing instead of telling worked best.

"Who made the cake? The frosting is sweet and the cake is moist," said Tamar.

"Did you have a sandwich?" said Mr. Peterson.

"I don't eat ham Sir, but thanks for sharing." Tamar said as she walked toward the garbage basket.

"Oh yeah, Tamar I forgot." Mr. Peterson said.

"Did you enjoy your birthday party today?" Tamar asked.

"Of course I did. When don't I have fun at a party, especially one in my honor?" Mr. Peterson said as he walked out the kitchen.

Tamar picked up the sponge and wet the yellow nooks and crannies with soap and water. The walls of the cafeteria reminded her of her childhood paint set, a dissonant collage of color. The fresh coats of paint proved ineffective in covering the shoddy workmanship. The pictures on the walls spoke of happier times birthdays, retirements, christenings, and Bas Mitzvahs, still photos of life. Tamar could see the warmth of the captured moments. She felt the warm sun touching her skin, the bright light shone through the grimy window.

As she cleaned off the table, her thoughts ran toward the upcoming meetings. Each executive sent instructions on the review process, the competition seemed tight, and Ronald had stated his expectations, the best from his most productive worker, the tension grew in her chest.

"Are ready for the meeting?" Ronald asked Tamar.

"No, but I'm working on it, I'm trying not to get too stressed out. She said.

"Why would you be stressed?" He said.

"I told you yesterday, I'm new to all this work stuff, and I'm scared the executives will see how much of a novice I am." Tamar said.

"Well you wouldn't have a chance to sit in front of them if they didn't think it was worth their time, those guys see dollar signs and your work produces serious revenue for this company," Ronald said. "We're all going to the pub across the street do you want to hang out for a while before you head home?"

"No, I'll just go home. Sampson will be waiting for me, Tamar said.

Ronald grabbed a sandwich and a drink and sat at the table.

"Don't make a mess someone just cleaned that table." Tamar said.

"Then you shouldn't have a problem cleaning it when I'm done." Ronald said.

Ronald pulled his chair closer to the table. He looked at his hands and wondered if he would become the general manager he desired to be one day. Tamar watched Ronald who seemed to be enjoying his food, Tamar knew at some point she needed to discuss her past with him, he trusted her and he deserved to know the truth. Tamar resisted the urge.

"Did you see Jeanne drive up in that new BMW? How's it possible that her kids wear those raggedy clothes that haven't been washed and she's in a Beemer. Ronald asked.

"I don't know, but that car is hot." Tamar said

"She's not so bad herself." Pete said

"You better stop talking about her before she hurts you. You saw what happened when Livingston made a comment about her being beautiful." Tamar said

"I thought Livingston was just trying to be nice, but Jeanne didn't appreciate the..."

Her lunchroom conversation was interrupted by the intercom, "Tamar, pick up on line nine." She answered the phone, "Hi Sally, you paged me?"

"Hi, Tamar, Sampson called four times in the last twenty minutes. I tried calling your desk, but I couldn't reach you."

"I'm in the lunch room."

"I'll put the call through." Sally sounded annoyed.

"Sorry, Sally Thanks." She waited for the call to be transferred.

"Sampson, what's wrong with you, why do you keep calling me." She knew the lunchroom was small; she tried to be discreet.

"T-T-T-Tamar, the principal cancelled our d-d-d-dinner date, I can meet you after all." Sampson sounded as if he was doing her a favor.

She looked at the picture of the island scene against the eggshell colored wall for a distraction.

The picture reminded her of an easier time.

"Now, we're on for dinner, what's up?" She switched the phone to the other ear.

"Didn't you promise to call me before you left for lunch? I wasn't sure if you were coming home." Sampson was trying to change the subject.

"I promise to call you next time before I leave my desk for lunch, but that's not what we're talking about."

"I have to go now. I'll talk to you later." Sampson rushed her off the phone.

When she hung up the phone the people in the lunchroom tried to pretend that watching food being heated was electrifying. Lunch was almost over and she needed to eat.

"Steady Foot Reports, Tamar speaking, how may I help you? The line went dead.

She hadn't done much to prepare for her meeting. She started entering information into the computer, when she saw Ronald start toward her and turned around. At various times during the day, she could see that Ronald wanted to talk to her. He would make his way toward her and then retreat back into his office. She smiled at him when she saw him coming her way. This must have deterred him more, because he doubled back. Close to the end of the day, he made his way to her desk.

"I don't mean to interfere in your personal life, our office is small and it's hard not to overhear your conversations. You are a wonderful woman. Keep standing up to those that can't recognize your worth." She was taken back by his statement.

"Thanks Ronald."

Vincent Hall was the name she kept finding on the top of the emails. By accident she looked over Sampson's shoulder at the screen. The apartment was small and the desk for the computer was next to the kitchen. Most times, she worked back to back with Sampson, Sampson on the computer and her cooking. Sampson dropped the stapler and startled them both. She turned and looked over and saw some of the most graphic words. She was intrigued that Sampson could use those words on the computer and never once with her.

She set out to find more information. While Sampson was at one of his "interviews" on Sunday morning, she started fiddling with the computer. She opened his mailbox and found hundreds of emails to and from Vincent. After six years of marriage, she felt betrayed by Sampson.

Ronald stuck his head into the cubicle and broke into her thoughts with a whisper.

"Can I talk to you in private?" She stared at Ronald with fear-filled eyes, and walked towards his office door. Inside, he touched her shoulder, "I know you're under a lot of pressure at home, but you need to stop worrying about Sampson and start taking better care of you. You're like a luxury car to me, a Porsche or a Benz that has dings and dents, valuable, but worthy of better care. I know that if you were my...anyway take some time to think about what I said." Her stare at Ronald's hand prompted him to remove it.

"This is a laid back office, but the phone calls from your husband are getting out of hand. Also you're spending too much time on matters not related to work. Does Vincent Hall, ring a bell," Ronald's voice had an authoritative tone to it. He switched feet and re-adjusted his arms. "I hate to tell you this, but if things don't change, problems could arise. You're an excellent worker, but..." She moved closer to him.

"I'm sorry Ronald for the calls and all my research." She reached for his arm, "please don't fire me, I need this job." She could see that Ronald had become uncomfortable with her pleading, "I didn't say you're fired, I just said that if things don't change, problems could arise." Ronald's voice was dismissive. She walked back to her office.

The rest of the day was blurred. Sampson called several more times, but she didn't respond when she heard his voice, fearing someone would overhear her. His agitation increased as the afternoon progressed. She feared going home as the daylight receded. The drive home was as

tense as the drive to work, yet there was no traffic. She entered the door to the apartment startled by black eyes boring into her. Sampson looked frantic, wearing the best outfit in his closet. He was clean shaven and the waves in his hair were perfect. Even when he was angry, he looked so much like the Sampson she had fallen in love with, years ago.

At one time they expressed endearing words of love more than others, but this wasn't love, she recognized love shouldn't hurt this much.

“Hi, baby, how was your day?”

“Good, how was yours?”

“Great.”

“What's for dinner?”

“Chicken and rice”

“What're you going to eat?”

“I don't know.”

“Why do you always do this, you cook my food and don't cook any veggie food. I'll make you something.”

“No, I'm fine; I'll just nuke a veggie patty and eat the rice.”

“Real healthy.”

“What ever Sampson.”

“I love you baby.”



“Yeah, I love you too.”

“My name is not too.”

“What?”

“My name is not too, it’s Sampson.”

“Aren’t you the funny man? I love you Sampson.”

“I love you too baby.”

"Why didn't you answer me when I called?" Sampson filled the space between them, hovering over her face. The threat of a slap became real to her in that moment.

"I'm not allowed to receive personal phone calls at work anymore."

"Then you have to quit that job and find another one. You cannot work anywhere that I can't reach you. Besides if you don't quit I'll tell your boss friend Ronald about your last job."

She became sullen and withdrawn, she knew what she needed to do, but old fears began to surface. Sampson promised not to be physically abusive, but anytime he became angry, the danger became real. He stopped hitting her after their last fallout, when she prepared to leave, instead of threatening to leave. She walked toward the phone to call Ronald. She needed her job more than she needed Sampson, she didn't want to end her employment at Steady Foot, but she didn't want Sampson to cause any problems with her company. She picked up the phone from the cradle and dialed Ronald's office number.

"Steady Foot Reports. Ronald speaking, how may I help you?" She didn't respond, but answered when she felt Sampson's stare. "Hello, Ronald, this is Tamar."

Ronald used the pause as an opportunity. "I'm just finishing up some reports. How can I help you?" Gaining courage she spoke again, "I'm calling to let you know that I can't work for Steady Foot anymore."

She walked to the bathroom, locked the door and cried in silence.

Ronald sighed, "I'm sorry to hear that, Tamar. You're an excellent worker. I don't want to lose you... at Steady Foot, I mean. Is this something we can talk about or have you already made up your mind." She bowed her head, "Yes, I've already made up my mind. Thanks for letting me work for you, Goodbye Ronald."

She felt the door close on her life one more time. She knew the fact of her past, but what the future held for her was unsure. How many women stay after the abuse? How many leave after the first hit? She felt loyal to the one that hurt her the most.

Knock Knock

"What type of relationship do you two have?" Sampson said as she opened the door. Her face not revealing her tears as she walked to the kitchen.

"What are you talking about? I have a work relationship with Ronald."

She never intended to marry anyone, but somehow marriage happened. She was alone for many years then wham, she was walking down the aisle. The walk down the aisle had many meanings for her.

"I know there's more and you're not listening to what I'm saying."

"I love you and I want to make our relationship work."

She felt legitimate in the eyes of her church community and her family, she no longer felt like a slut or whore for living with Sampson unmarried. She performed the duties of a wife, sometimes she cooked, cleaned and cared for her husband, her main priority being work and even that was being taken from her. She did everything that a “good wife” was supposed to do.

“I need you to hear me this time.” He said

She thought she would end up alone, a single woman with an organized life. She saw herself working in Manhattan, with a job paying upwards of \$60,000. That salary stuck out in her mind because so many people made a decent living off of that figure.

“I’m listening, speak.”

They lived off of \$30,000 per year and had to make believe that they were happy. Every year the salary increased with their standard of living. They never saved money, they had every intention, but the idea never became a reality. She wondered how people could save with so many temptations in the world. Every year new reasons were created as excuses of why they couldn’t buy a house. She got tired of playing the game.

“I need to know that you hear me, are you list....” He said

“Don’t talk to me like I’m stupid, I can hear you.”

The passion felt in the beginning was no where in sight and now she struggled to make sense of what had become her reality.

“I’m not talking to you like you’re stupid. I just wanted to make sure you were listening.”

“I am, now speak.”

They covered the distance between them with raised voices and feigned interest in TV shows like reruns of A Different World and What's Happening. But the gap widened with each new day.

“Last week, when you told me that you love and need me and can't imagine life without me? Do you remember that?” He said

“Yes”

“Well, I can't do this anymore.”

“Do what?” Tamar said.

“This”

“This what?”

“The way we talk without talking and live without living.”

“What are you talking about? You're not making sense.”

“I'm tired.”

“Well, so am I but at least I'm making sense.”

“I'm tired of us, this....everything.”

The words flowed in her head but she couldn't make sense of what he wanted to say.

“What are you talking about? I don't understand.”

“I want out.”

“Out of what?”

“Us.....you and me, I want to be alone.”

“I can leave the kitchen, if you need me to.”

“NO, I need you to leave, I need you to leave me alone forever.” He said

“I can’t just leave without a reason, why do you want me to leave?”

“This isn’t working.”

“Not working, for whom?”

“This isn’t working for me. I need more and you refuse to give me what I need.”

“If you tell me what you need, then I’ll do it.”

“Why do I have to tell you, if I have to tell you then it won’t be natural, you’ll just be doing it for me?”

“I’m not a mind reader, if you don’t tell me what you want, then how can I make you happy?”

“I want you to do what is natural for you.”

“But that’s what I’ve been doing for years and I can never seem to do enough.”

“I want you to treat me with respect and love all the time, not just when you feel like it.”

“But that goes both ways. If you want me to treat you with respect and love then you have to treat me with respect and love too.”

“This isn’t about me; it’s about you, why do you always point out my faults, when we are discussing you.”

“We aren’t discussing you, we are discussing us.”

“Whatever.”

“Whatever what?”

“Just, whatever.”

“Whatever meaning the conversation is over or whatever meaning you just don’t care anymore.”

“Whatever.”

“I hate when you do that.”

“Do what?”

“That, you know how you do, we could be in the middle of a deep conversation and when you’ve had enough you just walk away and that’s why nothing ever gets settled.” Tamar said.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“What do you mean you don’t want to talk about this anymore, you initiated the conversation and now you think you can just stop it when you feel like it?”

“Yeah”

“Well this is not your world, we live on earth together and you wanted to talk so let’s talk.”

“I have nothing to say.”

“You had plenty to say a minute ago, and now you have nothing to say. I don’t get you.”

“This conversation is over.”

“What do you want for dinner Sampson?” She chopped the onions and peppers as if nothing had happened.

"Tamar I've grown tired of your disrespect. I work hard everyday to find a better job to support our family. I ask you simple questions, yet you can't answer them."

He walked closer to her, "I've found a better job and I'm leaving with... without you, you don't satisfy my needs, the way... the way I need them satisfied, so I am leaving."

He backed away and looked at her from a distance.

"I have decided that this relationship won't work for me." Sampson spoke with a smug look on his face. Tamar wanted to hit him with the heavy cast iron pot, in her hand she continued to clean and season the meat.

"Did you hear me, Tamar? I said I am leaving!" She wanted to cry, but she refused. She realized how stupid she'd been to have given Sampson total control of her life. Now he says he's leaving her. She didn't even get the chance to break up with him!

Sampson looked at her in disgust. He put one hand on his hip and with his other hand he pointed his index finger in her face. "You make me sick, Tamar. You're spineless, show some real emotion. Get angry, show me that you love me, maybe even need me. Fight with me."

She looked Sampson in the eye with vengeance. She wanted him gone, but she didn't want to be alone.

"I'm tired of your abuse! Sampson, I know about you and Vincent and I've accepted it. Our relationship is over, but this marriage will not be ended by you." She looked away and turned on the burner with the curry goat.

"I'm going to call Ronald back and tell him I made a mistake. I'll go back to work, live my life, and you will live yours. Agreed? We both need our freedom. Why don't you go online and talk to Vincent? I have a phone call to make and you're invading my personal space." She looked at him as the realization sunk in.

"You know?" Disbelieving, he walked away, moved the mouse and began surfing the net, waiting for Vincent to come on-line and dinner to be ready.



## Chapter Five

After the last student left the room, Tamar sat still at her desk remembering. The whole relationship fiasco had become more complicated with each passing day Tamar knew that in Ted's eyes she felt safe, she didn't need to dwell on the fear she felt at the hands of her ex-husband Sampson. Tamar walked to the door and looked at Ted as she grabbed hold of the knob. "I need your friendship Tamar." His simple request was honest and heartfelt. He could have anyone as a friend and he had chosen her, a prisoner.

"Ok, Ted, we can be friends. She turned the knob and opened the door and walked to the guard that would take her back to her cell. The guard was preparing a new inmate for entry into Tamar's cell block.

Tamar should have seen the white shirt crossing the street, but she didn't. She was too fascinated with the transmitter. She couldn't get the station to stay tuned. Her Ipod was the peace finder in her reoccurring days of distress. All she had now was pictures of the past and three grey walls.

Five knocks on the door alerted Nate to her arrival different from the one knock of all his other guests. Her childhood friend would expect a great evening and she couldn't let her anger and fears interrupt.

Throughout the entire accentuated bash, the bright lights, flashy evening gowns and dark three piece suits, the loud hypnotic sounds of drum music pounded a steady rhythm into the hearts of attendees, like the Cherry Bomb game-the adrenaline rusher. The music filled summer night with the stars, though just a few shone.

She had a purpose that night, even her mother didn't agree. She proceeded ahead alone passing the glamorous, an oversight on her part, not dressing for the occasion. It was hard fitting into Nate's world, but she needed his help, this required human hands, her computer couldn't help her, though she spent more time with the computer than any person.

She'd entered the site a million times since the surgery. Her entire day filled with restarting the mind consuming games. Double click the Game Center icon on the desktop, tap play on the 2780 Games XP championship section of the screen, "to have countless hours of pleasure" the box read, tap on Puzzle and Board icon, connect to Block Drop, hit Start two times, enlarge the screen and let the fun begin. Ronald had promised to keep her job available after recovery and he had, he expected her to start working and all she did all day was play arcade games.

"I need help Nate the burden is too intense for me to handle. Please can you ask one of your doctor friends to write me a prescription? Even better no one has to write anything, all they have to do is connect to the pharmacy virtually and send the prescription to Rite Aid for me. I just need to make sure that Ronald doesn't find out, he thinks I'm ready to start working and I can't return to work if I'm still taking medicine. He can monitor my computer virtually by using the VSN and I don't want any problems." She pleaded her case to the one person she thought would listen.

"This isn't the time or the place." Nate whispered into her ear as the bodies around them swayed in unison to the beat. She stood taller and pushed her chest out as she looked up at the one friend she thought cared, understood her.

Left arrow, left arrow, right arrow, down arrow, adjusting the position of the shapes to unite into a straight line across the screen causing the lines to disappear, proved hard, wrong positioning caused shapes to pile high and the game ended as quick as starting.

“When’ll the time be right, tomorrow at the Zimmerman party or Thursday morning at the country club after you finish the eighteenth hole. You’re such a sell out.” The curiosity of the other guests increased as her voice rose.

“Why’re you embarrassing me like this, in front of my friends, I’d never just show up...” Nate exploded.

“Embarrassing you, in front of your friends, if it wasn’t for me, none of these people would’ve given your sorry behind a second glance. It’s my connections that got you in.”

She waited for an apology that never came. Nate turned away from her. She’d been dismissed, the outsider trying to fit in. She brushed past him alone, in clogs and a sundress, through a curious, lonesome, widening path of people, she soon reached, as the cool night air brushed her skin, the dismal seat of her Maxima. “The Eyesore,” the appointed name her mother used for her car.

The games provided a much needed distraction after the procedure. She wasn’t sure how this happened, but catching a preview of childhood fun with Nate and Tina, a feeling of unspeakable cheer invaded her space. Unspeakable because the feeling was intensified by the history of each click and tap, drawing her closer to the memories her mind concealed. She looked on the vast array in front of her, at the simple pleasures and the overwhelming features of the games.

Speeding away from a friend that should have been in her future, the beautiful people, the fancy finger food, abundant resources, even when money was scarce, she looked at the million dollar

homes, the fancy landscapes, the tree-lined streets, the dazzling window seats, used to observe, people like her retreating. The sound echoed in her ears as the gears shifted out of turn, her clutch suffered from the abuse. She'd missed the chance to convince Nate to give her the prescription, he didn't her anymore she'd introduced him to wealthy, he must have felt fulfilled, and all she needed was a renewal of her prescription, her life lacked the resilience she once knew.

The games replaced the sadness when absolute depression of her mind, body and spirit set in, she woke up after surgery to find out Doc gave her a total hysterectomy. She would never have any children. This was like seeing an assortment of fanciful delicacies with a long line attached and just as you reach the front of the line and decide to taste one, an outstretched hand captures the last delight, placing it into the mouth of his beloved, unaware of the interception. What followed was the complete sadness of no longer having Percocet to comfort her through her distress. The prescriptions ran out and real life stepped in, the truth, she was alone again with her games. Her anger led her to Vincent's house that night, if she kept the good memories in the forefront of her mind, maybe she could find clarity, she couldn't remember any good memories.

The two friends stood shoulder to shoulder on a stoop of a strip mall, in Williamsburg, Virginia, looking into the store front a few feet away, just waiting. The men still wore the remnants of the theme clothes, brown kaki pants and colorful flag shirts, their hats removed.

"What am I doing here again, Sampson?" Vincent ran his manicured hands through a cropped cut hair.

"Edible Arrangements?" Sampson's hands rested in the back pockets of his pants, his neck craned to the left as he looked ahead, confused by the sign overhead. A temporary plastic sign

attached to the top of the store held up by two ropes hugging opposite edges of the building. Some of the surrounding stores had permanent signs with bright neon welcoming flashes. The Monticello Avenue shops buzzed with increasing evening traffic. A few feet away from the men, patrons of the ice cream shop lined up for treats. Snippets of conversations of tourists flooded the walkway. Year round people flocked to reunite with history. The door in front of the friends opened, two women of medium build walked out the store with shouts coming from behind, directions of sorts from an owner who seemed angry.

“Where the hell are you going, we’re not done here, get back here, now.” The owner’s voice could be heard through the closing door. The store scheduled to open in a few days was behind with renovations. The man expected Tamar to create an action plan and she didn’t care, vacation time had started.

Tamar didn’t appear worried about the man’s wrath as they walked with ease toward the car. Behind her Vincent and Sampson fell in line, exchanging glances, unsure of the consequences, Tina soon joined the lineup.

“Let’s go to our spot?” Tina said as she stared into her compact in front her inch thick makeup mask. The four jumped in the car and eased into the traffic. The strip mall ran adjacent to the trees lining both sides of the curving road, houses appeared herded together, then stretches of thick bush followed in turn. No doubt friends and family lived on this once deserted patch of highway, but as the speed built on the speedometer, the rush of the wind blowing pushed the foursome toward other types of edible stuff.

Vincent tried to never to speak directly to a woman, he was always at odds. From the day he first saw Tamar and Tina outside his Astoria apartment, he tried to tolerate the women whenever necessary.

“Vincent, why do you hang out with a loser, like Sampson?” Tina said

At the beginning of the vacation the trips to Ruby Tuesday’s were fun and eventful, the restaurant held countless hours of pleasure. Mama’s Country Fried Steaks was no match for the deceptive salad bar with never ending refills; even Mama’s had a limit. The mirrored wall tricked patrons every time, the choices looked endless.

“Lionel Ritchie’s, “Stuck on you,” droned on. Country Music Television just featured Lionel and Kenny a few nights before, the two friends filled the car with an off key rendition. “Why do you let Tina talk to me like that, I didn’t do anything to make her treat me so bad?” Sampson whined.

“Let’s just get through this evening without you two fighting again, ok? I’m sick of the battles, I talk enough all day, let’s have some peace tonight, I’m already in enough trouble.” Vincent’s voice tapered off as he looked up to see Tina studying him.

“I’m famished.” Sampson said.

“Are you reading the dictionary again smart guy?” Tina teased

“I-I-I knowed, I mean I knew that word from when I was little.” Sampson stuttered

“I guess that was recent, you haven’t grown much since High School.” Tina replied

Construction filled the widening road, new buildings popping up in sporadic locations around town to meet the needs of the growing population. The five minute drive became twenty as work traffic increased the number of cars on the road. The conversation ended as the four piled into Ruby Tuesday's.

"Let's have our second wedding here." Tamar said as she looped her arm into Sampson's.

"If I live to see tomorrow, the owner of that store may have a hit on my head, said Tamar.

"Hey gang," Ming the greeter spoke in a sing song yodel, walking the foursome to their usual table in the back corner.

"That man's not the one you need to worry about." Tina cut her eyes at Vincent.

The dim lights, soft tones graced the wall and music from the past filled the ear waves, a peaceful place to have dinner.

"Just put in our usual order, we don't have time to waste." Sampson barked at Ming. Ming sneaked another glance at Vincent, winking and shaking his hips hard to gain attention.

"I'm not your waiter you'll have to wait for Alex." Ming rolled his eyes at Sampson, as he rubbed Vincent's shoulder walking away.

"You little b-- ." Sampson reached to swat Ming's hand away from Vincent's shoulder.

"Don't start again Sampson." Vincent begged.

Alexis scurried toward the group of four; he knew the results proved fatal if Sampson and Ming spent too much time fighting.

“What’ll it be guys, the usual?” Alex put an extra helping of spunky in his voice.

“Yep, get us the usual.” Sampson sighed

Tina took out her mirror and looked for a while; Tina looked over the compact at Tamar trying to read her mind, the friends though opposite in personality, tried to stick close, “Why’re you so angry with Ming, again?” Tamar asked

“What’re you asking me that for, ask lover boy Vincent,” Sampson’s face contorted into a grimace. Confused by the statement Tamar turned toward Vincent.

“Vincent, something you want to say?” Tamar asked

“Nope” Vincent answered.

“Sampson, will you tell me?” Tamar asked

“Let’s just say Vincent and Ming made some edible arrangements.” Sampson chuckled.

Tamar’s memories were confused and as she tried hard to remember something positive all she could find were horrid moments of pain.

Ted’s first question startled Tamar back to the present. She sat in wonder as she left her memories to be absorbed by his interrogation.

“Would you mind if I asked you how you ended up in jail. I heard so much about all the abuse you endured, but I never understood why you did what you did?”

“Ted, please.”



“I’m not trying to interfere in your life, I just feel that any man that can’t appreciate you for the wonderful woman God created you to be is a complete and total idiot.

“Nothing matters anymore, I made my mistakes and now, I’m paying for them. I let my temper control me and now I have to live with that decision for the rest of my life. One second of anger has resulted in twenty-five years behind bars.”

Tamar felt the anger building inside. Tamar’s thinking went haywire when she thought of all the deceit she witnessed in regard to Vincent Hall. He was the worst type man concealing his true intention for personal gain. As the bank manager he stole from disadvantaged customers. The value of every dollar decreased, causing havoc all over the county, many families were in jeopardy of losing homes.

“Vincent convinced many of these families to refinance their homes. Vincent would present himself as a savior rescuing people from homelessness. Vincent knew the customers wouldn’t be able to keep up with the payments and the bank would repossess the property. He would then sell the land to investors working in the construction industry.”

Tamar learned that Vincent was stealing from his clients, through all the emails between him and Sampson. She promised herself that she would stay with Sampson long enough to gather information to catch Vincent.

“Instead, I fell in love with being married and Sampson convinced me that no man would want me since I couldn’t have children, I needed to feel loved and even though Sampson was abusive I felt needed by him.”

She observed Vincent through her job at Steady Foot Reports. Realizing she was as wrong for not notifying the authorities. Tamar attempted to correct what she had done by talking to Vincent.

“When Vincent realized what I knew, he threatened to blame everything on Sampson and me. Vincent had a paper trail that led everything to us. Not wanting to spend time in jail, we agreed to do whatever Vincent wanted. The more we tried to get out of the clutches of Vincent the tighter his hold became. We needed to get out of the torturous cycle and decided that I had a better chance for being believed by the jury than Sampson, so we built a case around that premise.” Her breathing had become labored and she needed to take a break.

Tamar found herself running away from her all she knew. Refuge would prove difficult for Tamar since she had no where to go. She could try her luck in another country, but she felt that she would be found. People loved to talk, Vincent was very wealthy and her chances of being discovered were very high.

“That’s when you got involved with Nate, that shady doctor guy, I read about, right?”

“I thought of him as an old friend practicing medicine, I thought finding him was advantageous for me. He revealed a fool proof plan for getting out of our mess. This meant we would leave my mother, friends and family behind and the possibility was great that we wouldn’t see any of them for a long time.

Nate had told her what needed to be said and how it should be presented to the law team. The team of lawyers looked intimidating. Fear gripped Tamar with each step that brought her closer to entering the courtroom. Thoughts of all the worst scenarios filled her mind. She could see the judge sending her off to jail for a long time.

“I kept wondering if anyone knew about the lies I was telling. Had anyone noticed the inconsistencies in what I had said? What if the authorities had already been alerted that I was lying? I didn’t know if Nate could be trusted.”

Tamar knew that he had been in serious money problems, but he had assured her he was past the worst. The two had spent hours talking about all the greed that existed in the world. Nate had dated over the years, but found it hard to trust women. Tamar began to think that this could be his payback to her for rejecting his advances when they were younger.

She wanted to leave and go back to her home, where her Mom would make her favorite meal of ackee and salt fish, with rice and peas and vegetables. Lorraine would comfort her and tell her that everything would be alright. But her fear of involving her mother had prompted her to leave without telling anyone. She didn’t want her mother or any of the family to have to fib to cover another one of her many lies. The less everyone knew the better the situation would turn out, Tamar felt.

“It bothered me to leave without notice. I had grown closer to my mother in my moments of extreme discontent.” Lorraine had taught Tamar what faith in God entailed. She trusted that all their needs would be proved for by God. When the Beatings began and no money could be found for doctors or hospitals, both of them knew it was time to trust in God because unset bones were harder to heal. Food was brought to the door, by friends in passing. Money arrived in unmarked envelopes.

“Once I sat down with the lawyers, I felt confident. In the days I would go to the lawyer’s offices and review my case. I studied all the proper answers. I would rehearse what to say and how to say each line. I would go to the law offices at night and just read every section of the

case; I would tell the jury in time, what they needed to hear. I couldn't spend any time with Tina anymore she knew when I was telling a lie and I didn't want to go through the drama with her. I stopped inviting her over for my authentic Caribbean meals.”

“I know she must be angry with you, she may be waiting for you to talk to her about what happened, the two of you were too close to end a friendship over nonsense.” Ted stood next to Tamar waiting for a response.

“I thought that if I was honest with her, she would feel obligated to lie for me, I didn't want anyone to call her as a witness and she end up perjuring herself and ending up in jail for wrong doings I agreed to.”

Tamar knew that not everyone that wanted to help her was her friend, but her friend list was getting shorter. She would say to herself that he/she wants to help and find excuses for any negative behavior.

“I think you put your trust in the wrong people, I think that's why the prosecution painted the picture of you as a drug addict. Pictures kept surfacing showing you in different states of disarray. The lawyers were supposed to be helping you and all they did was hurt your case. Nate was not a friend and Sampson was out for self. I'm so sorry Tamar you had to endure all this suffering.”

“All I thought I had to do was follow the plan. Sampson assured me that I would be free from the repercussions of Vincent's actions. I thought that I would escape the sentence that would have been placed on me. I thought that I would escape having to serve time in prison for the crimes Vincent committed. Where the plan went askew.....but my current location was not part

of the plan, it took me hours to gain enough courage to call for help. I should've just told the truth.

She thought of all the letters Sampson had written to Vincent.

“Tamar, tell me everything.”

“Vincent Hall was the name I saw at the top of each email. I didn't want to see his name but as I looked over Sampson's shoulder at the screen, I saw words I'd never seen in print. Our apartment was small and the desk for the computer was next to the kitchen. Most evenings, the two of us worked back to back, Sampson on the computer and me cooking. Sampson dropped the stapler one day and startled us both.”

Tamar put her head down on the desk and tried to push the flowing thoughts away. Ted walked over to her and looked at her dark hair swirling over each side of the wooden structure.

“Keep talking Tamar.”

“I turned and looked over and saw some of the most graphic words. It intrigued me that Sampson could use those words so free on the computer and never once with me. I set out to find more information. While Sampson was at one of his "interviews" on Sunday morning, I started fiddling with the computer. I opened his mailbox and found hundreds of emails to and from Vincent. After so many years of marriage, I felt betrayed by Sampson.” The words of the emails still etched in her brain as she staggered away from Ted towards another desk, she wanted to be in her cell reaching for her blanket and laying down. The man she'd spend so much time honoring was just a drum of the persistent rhythm that pounded lyrics into her head.

“In the days that passed I have spent so much time wishing and desiring your touch. Each passing moment puts me one step closer to your soon return. How many ways can I say that I need you? Do you think of me? At times I think you don’t even care about me, and then you do something that surprises me. I care about you, but how do you feel about me? The look in your eyes says, passion, but I see no love. I just see lust. Where is the love you feel for me? Is it deep in the recesses of your psyche or do you feel it everyday?”

The words were as clear as her reading them from a book.

“I see the way you look at other men, the passion in your eyes. You love sex and it is written all over your being. You surround yourself with people that share your secret love. You choose people that know how to keep your actions under wraps. I have grown tired of the mental games men play. All I want is someone to love me for who I am, not for what I can do. I don’t want my self-worth to be measured by how well I perform. I don’t want anyone to see me as dispensable. I need to be valued. I need to be treated with respect. How can you see me as valuable when you have no respect for me?”

Tamar stood by a window and looked into the courtyard. “The raw way Sampson expressed himself was a harsh reality for me. His words were layered and he didn’t care what anyone thought of him.”

“You give love to your wife and three kids, but for me it is almost non-existent. How do you sleep at night knowing what you know? Perfidy is present all around you. You supplanted yourself in situations that could never be real. You pretend that no one notices you, when in reality everyone is aware of you. How can you say you have no friends, when in reality you know everyone?”

The pain was too deep for Tamar to let go now, she had to see herself through all the stages of grief, in her time of loss. Acceptance played with Tamar's consciousness as she found that she could live without Sampson.

"Tamar keep talking through this, I need to hear you say what you're feeling."

She sat down on the window sill and felt slumber running into her as she willed herself towards death. She opened her eyes hoping that God would take pity on her and change her situation. All she wanted was peace from the multitude of thoughts that invaded her brain. She thought about Sampson all the time, about what he's doing and who he's doing it with. Here she was spending time with a caring man and painful memories of Sampson crowded her mind.

"Who loves you more than me? Could you find happiness in someone else's arms? I believe that happiness can come to you in anyone that crosses your path. I found some happiness with Tamar. You must make a conscience decision about the person you want to spend the rest of your life with. I know that my perception of you is distorted. It has been perverted by the mishaps of my life that skew my sense of reason. I imagine scenarios not associated with reality. I know you would never feel as I do about life."

The letters flowed from Tamar's memory like mighty water falls. She had no control of stopping them at this point; she just went with the flow of words.

"I think the last letter I read was what sent me over the edge, I wanted to stop Sampson from killing himself, and I wanted to annihilate the monster that had destroyed our lives." She remembered the last letter, the final straw.

“People see me all the time and assume that I have it all together; I am confused and not able to see my future. I could sit and sulk about the past or make a future for myself. I wish I could have lived the life I pretended to have with Tamar, at this moment I would change everything. I would be more active in the church community and help those around me that need help and not spend so much energy thinking about you. This is why I’m sending this letter to you, by the time you get it, my life will be over.”

“Please don’t ask me to tell you anymore; what I did was so ugly.”

“I read the charge of "vehicular homicide," the judge said you killed a father of three with your car, a family man outside picking up the garbage from a broken trash bag. The report said you didn’t remember seeing the white shirt, because you were trying to find a station to run the Ipod through.”

“I looked up and saw nothing; I looked down and saw the cause of my problem, the transmitter was on the wrong station. One second on a Sunday afternoon changed my life forever. Days of peace were replaced by nights of torture. The lack of sunshine blinded my grieving soul. All that filled my mind was thoughts of how Sampson left me alone in a scary world filled with pain. I trusted Sampson with my heart and he trampled on it with his size twelve's. Our relationship was troubled from the start. Moments of bliss were mingled with hours of battle. Sampson was determined to make me into the cover wife. I was determined to keep my identity.”

Tamar sprang up started to gather her belongings; Ted reached her before she could flee the room.

“Tamar you have to finish this.”



She placed her bag on the desk, and looked Ted in the eyes.

“After Sampson had used my body and beat me senseless, he even took all that was left of my self-esteem. He was about to take the easy way out and kill himself, treating my life as if I had no value, as if he could walk away like I never existed. The pain and sorrow were what I was trying to be rid of and I gained twenty-five years behind bars. The lawyer told me the white shirt had a name, it was Vincent Hall.”

“Tamar, I know this is hard for you, but you’re doing great, do you remember anything else?”

“I remember turning to the lawyer and saying out loud” ‘amazing, that’s the name of Sampson’s lover. The charge vehicular homicide fit, maybe this wasn’t an accident.’ That was all the jury needed to count what I said as a confession.”

Tamar let the tears flow as she banged the desk with her hands, Ted stopped her before a guard heard, and he wiped her face with tissues and waited for her to make a move.

“Can you take me back now?”

“Sure, let’s go.” She fell in line behind him as he walked out the classroom door. Ted walked to the guard station monitoring her every move. He struggled with leaving her, but knew that during this part of her journey she needed to be alone.

Tamar laid her bag on the floor and reached for her Bible on the edge of her bed. She turned her Bible to her favorite text. She laid her weary body on the cold sheets that lay on top the metal frame with the squeaky sway.

Tamar was surrounded by the women she had grown to admire in her prison home. Each one had hidden scars that created a variety of personalities. The adhesive that bonded the women

together was the abuse that all had suffered, at the hands of men and women that claimed to love them.

Tamar heard a weeping woman. She walked across to the new woman's cell adjacent to her and pulled the grey blanket over her shoulders. The prison could get cold at night. She walked back to her cell and wrapped herself in the rough government issued blanket, hanging onto the edge, just how each of the women had clung to life, throughout her most devastating time of need. She slouched down in the bed in order to allow her feet to touch the silver frame and rocked as she read the passage.

“Love is patient and kind, love doesn't envy or boast. Love is not puffed up with its own importance. Love is never rude or behaves disorder. Love is not interested in itself. Love does not become angry and keep record of wrongs. Love doesn't enjoy evil, but is always happy with truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, love will not fail.”

Tamar accepted the realization that Ted was her soul mate had life been different. She took a life and new one was given to her by powers stronger than her. She knew what she was doing, she made a decision in a moment of anger, and she had to accept she'd murdered Vincent Hall. She was alone with herself, a long way from her true love from long ago.

“Lights out ladies”

Slam—