

Prologue

“No!” she screamed, as she sat up in her bed, heart racing, in a cold sweat. She sat for a moment to get her bearings, as she massaged her temples trying to get the smell of gunpowder and blood out of her nostrils.

“It was only a dream...it was only a dream,” she murmured over and over again until she finally started to believe it.

Going back to sleep was out of the question, so she just sat on her bed and rocked herself softly, trying to forget about the sound of the gunshot and the brain matter splattering all over the wall.

“I’m not crazy, just a bad dream...she’ll be here in the morning, and then it’ll be alright,” she reassured herself. “She’ll make them understand.”

The reporter who wrote the story on Marion Hayes was coming to see her tomorrow, and she couldn’t wait. There had been too many sleepless nights. She knew that once she was able to tell her story, then she too would be able to find peace. Maybe.

“She’ll make them understand,” she whispered, as she looked at the star filled sky through the bars on her window.

Vanessa

As I turned my car down that all too familiar stretch of road that led to the Wayne County Women's Correctional Facility, I had a strange sense of dread. It had been a little over a year since my last visit when I found out that my friend, or someone I considered a friend, Marion Hayes had committed suicide.

I had pledged to become the voice of emotionally troubled women who were imprisoned. After a lot of investigation, I found that many of the women in prison had stories that were much deeper than what would ever be told in the newspaper or shown on the news.

Many of these women had horrible childhoods, were victims of abuse, or had simply been victims of very unfortunate circumstances. After I did the story on Marion Hayes, I became determined to be a voice for women who couldn't find a voice of their own.

Today I was on my way to interview Timberlynn Crawford, a woman who was imprisoned for murdering her lover's wife. The case file said that she had shot the woman in the head in cold blood, but when I studied the woman in the picture, her eyes told a whole different story. I had seen that look before and up to this point my gut had never been wrong.

I made my way down the cold concrete hallway that led to the guard station and patiently waited for the guard to check my I.D.

“Long time no see,” she said smiling.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Who you here to see this time?” She asked.

“Timberlynn Crawford,” I responded as she buzzed me in.

I was left alone in the visitor’s cell to wait for Ms. Crawford, so while I waited I set up my recorder and got my note pad ready. No sooner had I set my bag on the floor, then the guard was ushering in a petite young woman with handcuffs and shackles on her feet.

As she shuffled to the table, she kept her head down so that her long hair covered her face. I shifted in my seat to catch a glimpse of her features, but she kept her eyes to the ground even after the guard finished securing her restraints.

After a long moment of silence, I finally said, “Hello, Ms. Crawford, my name is Vanessa Jackson and I am here from the Women’s Lib Magazine to interview you.”

She slowly lifted her eyes and turned toward me. I was shocked to see that this woman appeared to be barely more than a girl. She had caramel brown skin and black hair that hung past her shoulders. Her soft brown eyes held a meekness that belied her age. Her face told me that she couldn’t be more than nineteen or twenty years old.

“You can call me Timber,” she whispered.

“Ok, Timber, would you like to begin with the interview?” I asked softly.

“Yes...I’ve been waiting a long time for this, Ms. Jackson. Thank you so much for picking me. I read the story you did on Marion Hayes and it was really nice,” she said, as she fumbled with her hands.

“Thank you,” I replied watching her with uncertainty, “I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Ok...I just have one question before we begin,” she said.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Will you make them understand?”

I looked her in the eye and said, “I’ll try.”

Chapter 1

Ever since I was a little girl back in Grand Rapids, all I ever wanted was for someone to love me—my mother, my father, my sister, anyone. But, it always seemed like I couldn't ever do anything right. No matter how good my grades were in school, how good I danced at my recitals, or how well I cooked dinner, nothing was ever good enough.

My parents would always make a big fuss over my sister and just pat me on the head and say, "Alright now, Timber." What they really meant was, "Get lost, Timberlynn so we can concentrate on the one we love."

I couldn't really blame them though. Skye was perfect. She was beautiful, smart, and talented. There wasn't anything she couldn't do—perfectly. She would walk into a room and all eyes would immediately focus on her. Her hazel eyes were her best feature and her long black hair was always perfectly styled. She always wore the nicest clothes and shoes. Part of me was in awe of her and the other part of me was so jealous that it made me physically sick at times.

I tried so hard to be like her, but she would just laugh at me and tell me I was silly.

"Timber, why don't you just be yourself?" she'd ask.

"Because nobody likes me," I'd say.

“Then maybe you should just disappear! Poof, be gone!” she’d say and then laugh at me when I ran to my room and cried.

She told me that so many times that by the time I was fourteen, I eventually started telling myself that I should just disappear. I began to try to fade into the background. I stopped trying to please my parents or anyone else. I even stopped bathing, I stopped combing my hair, and going to school on a regular basis. After three weeks of that, I smelled so bad that my mother forced me into the tub and scrubbed my body with a scrub brush. Then she chopped my hair off, because she felt that if I wasn’t going to take care of it then I didn’t need it. After that, she left me in a crying heap in the middle of the bathroom floor. My sister just stood by and shook her head silently with sadness and pity in her eyes.

That evening I went to my daddy and tried to make him understand.

“Daddy, look at me,” I cried, “don’t you care about me at all? Look what she did to me! Look what she did to my hair! I look like a boy!” Then I fell to his feet sobbing.

“Timberlynn, get up! You bring this stuff on yourself. What was your mother supposed to do? You haven’t bathed yourself in three weeks! Do you know what an embarrassment that is to us? And what about your sister? She has to listen to the other kids snicker behind her back because her younger sister wants to be filthy for attention. Now you want someone to sit here

and feel sorry for you? Timber, you've got to grow up!"

"Yes, Daddy," I said, as I picked myself up off the floor.

After that, I skated through life in a bleak existence until I was sixteen. I didn't speak unless spoken to, barely ate, and rarely left the house for anything other than school unless I was forced. Then one day I decided that I wanted to feel again, so I started cutting myself.

The cutting let me feel something other than emotional pain. It gave me a sense of being. Before long, I had to cut deeper and deeper to get a rush from it. I thought it was pretty therapeutic until my mother found me passed out on the bathroom floor from losing too much blood.

That's when the therapy started and I found out that my parents did love me a little bit. My mother cried bitterly through the sessions, as I expressed my feelings of detachment and feeling unloved. My father just stared blankly into space as my therapist told them that I had a serious problem and they would need to start paying a little more attention to me. They tried really hard to make an improvement, but old habits die hard. After six months, they were tired of trying and so was I.

Two things came out of that experience; I decided it was time for me to leave home and I started stealing. One night I took all the cash I could grab

while my parents were sleeping, and then I hit the road.

Chapter 2

So there I was... on a bus headed to Detroit with three hundred and fifty dollars in my pocket. I had no idea what I was going to do when I got there, but I was sure it couldn't be worse than living in a home where nobody cared if I lived or died. So when the bus pulled into the Greyhound station, I slowly exited and stared at the people walking by.

The people here were a lot different from the people I had grown up around in Grand Rapids. They moved faster and didn't give anyone else a second glance. That was just fine by me, because I didn't want to be noticed anyway. I just wanted to find a place to lay my head and figure out what I was going to do next.

Somehow I managed to find an inexpensive motel to crash in for a few days, but from the looks of it, I didn't think I would want to be there for too long. There were hookers and crack heads all over the place. I figured with the clientele that was hanging out in the parking lot, the caretaker wasn't going to make a big deal about my age as long as I had the cash.

I walked into the front office and nervously eyed the lady behind the counter who was busy watching a small television. She was a hefty woman, with salt and pepper hair that framed her face with big roller curls, and smooth dark skin. I knew that she'd heard me come in since the bell chimed, but she still

didn't turn around. So, I just stood patiently at the counter and waited. Finally, a commercial came on and she turned off the television and turned her attention to me.

"Can I help you?" she asked curtly.

"I need to rent a room for the week," I replied timidly.

"That'll be sixty-five for the week. You'll be in room 265," she said.

I slid the money over the counter, took the key, and hurried out as fast as I could. On my way to the room, I had to walk past a group of hookers, who looked at me and snickered.

"A little young to be out this late aren't ya, honey?" one of them asked. I just kept my head down and clutched my bag to my chest as I hurried by.

When I finally made it in to room 265, I stood in the dark with my back against the door breathing heavily. I tried to will my heart to slow down but it wouldn't because I was so scared. I had never been away from home before and I had never encountered people like this.

"Calm down, you big baby," I told myself, "You're on your own now. You can't show fear. No fear."

I took a deep breath and turned on the light. The room was like a throw back to the seventies with green shag carpet and plaid wallpaper. It was tacky but clean, and it would have to do for now. After I

bolted the door with all the locks, I sat down on the bed deep in thought.

As I sat staring off into space, my eyes fell on my bag and before I knew it I had a gleaming new razor in my hand.

“Where did you come from?” I said to the razor as I examined it closely.

I sat there for the longest time staring at that razor, as the urge to cut myself just a little bit raged in my mind.

“No!” I told myself putting the razor back in my bag, “You will be for protection only.”

With that battle out of the way, I fell exhausted on to the bed and went straight to sleep. It had been a long night and I had a big day ahead of me.

Chapter 3

I woke up the next morning and sat in bed trying to figure out what I was going to do next. I knew that I had to find a job fast because three hundred dollars wasn't going to last very long. The problem was I was only seventeen and I didn't know how to do anything. I had never had a job before and had no idea where to start. After a few more minutes of procrastination, I finally got dressed and went over to the front desk to see if maybe they were hiring.

"Excuse me," I said to the lady I checked in with the night before.

"Yeah?" she said

"Are you hiring?" I asked timidly.

The lady smiled and said, "Not at this time, honey. How old are you anyway?"

"Eighteen," I lied nervously.

"Oh," she replied eyeing me suspiciously, "eighteen, huh?"

"If you're not hiring then I'll just go..." I stammered afraid that she was on to me.

"Wait a minute! Calm down. Here, take this... it's the wanted section from the paper. There're plenty of places downtown that are hiring."

"Thank you," I said gratefully, as I took the paper. "How do I get downtown?"

“The bus stop right out front will drop you off right smack in the middle of town and you can get a good start from there,” she said.

I smiled thankfully and turned to go.

“Hey...,” she called out, “you be careful out there.”

“I will,” I promised as I walked out.

I followed her directions to downtown and began to make my way through the classified list. By late that afternoon, I had applied for five jobs and was turned down on the spot for all of them because I didn’t have any experience. I couldn’t understand how anyone expected me to get any experience if no one would give me a chance.

By now I was starving, so I looked around for somewhere to eat and didn’t see any fast food restaurants around. A little further down Jefferson, I spotted a CVS and opted to grab a bag of chips and a pop, so that I could get back to my mission of finding a job.

As I made my way to the store, I just happened to glance to my right before crossing the street, and in the window was a sign that read “now hiring”. I looked up at the building and saw that it was a Powerhouse Gym. I stood there on the curb for what seemed like forever trying to convince myself to go in there and apply for a job. Not just apply for the job but to go in there and get a job. I couldn’t afford to let this one slip through my fingers because the money in

my pocket would only last me another two weeks... if I was careful.

“Just go in there and talk like you have some sense!” I told myself, as I inhaled and walked through the door.

“Look straight ahead and not at the floor,” I grumbled under my breath, as I marched up to the front desk with a cake-eating grin on my face. My confidence was quickly fading as I stood there waiting for the receptionist to hang up the phone. I was so nervous that I’m pretty sure I held my breath the entire time.

Smiling pleasantly, she looked up at me and asked, “Can I help you?”

“Yes, I’m here about the position you have posted in the window?”

“Ok,” she replied and handed me a clipboard with an application attached to it.

“Fill this out and bring it back when you are done, ok?”

“Ok,” I replied.

As I sat there staring blankly at the page in front of me I began to panic. I could feel my mouth go dry and my heart begin to hammer in my chest. What if I fill this out and they see that I don’t have any experience and they send me away like everyone else did? More rejection...I couldn’t stand any more rejection. I needed to relieve some of the pressure that was building up inside of me, I needed my razor so

that I could let the blood flow and make it all go away. I needed this job and I couldn't leave without it!

"Calm down, Timber," I told myself, "just calm down. No cutting today...just confidence. This job is yours, all you have to do is go get it."

As I began to fill out my application, I found myself making up all kinds of interesting lies to build up my resume. I made up things based on what I had seen on TV and heard about from other people. I hoped it sounded convincing because I wasn't about to go up to that desk and ask that girl for another form.

My breathing went back to normal and I completed my application. When I was finished, I went back to the girl at the front desk and laid the clipboard on the counter.

"Thank you," she said, as she reached for my application.

"Is the manager in?" I asked.

"Yes he is," she replied pleasantly.

"Could I speak with him please?"

"Well, ma'am, I would be happy to take your application and if we are interested, someone will call you back for an interview," she said.

"If it's all the same to you, I would like to hear the manager tell me that. Thank you," I shot back with a false smile plastered to my face.

"Ok then, have a seat," she said sucking her teeth and rolling her eyes.

As I walked over to the chair to sit down, I had to inhale deeply because I realized that I had been

holding my breath again. I couldn't believe that I just had a moment of boldness! I heard the girl page the manager on the loud speaker and my palms started to sweat. What was wrong with me?

Before I could start another argument with myself, a clean-shaven white man with brown hair appeared before me with an award-winning smile on his face.

"Hello, I am Dan Griffin, the general manager. How can I help you today, ma'am?" he asked politely.

I took a deep breath and said, "Sir, I am here for the position that you have posted in the window. I just wanted to meet you face to face and tell you that you can go ahead and take that sign down, because I am the only one you need to see. I am a good worker and I will always be here on time!"

"Is that so?" he smirked with a twinkle in his eye. "Do you even know what position it is that we are hiring for?"

"Sir, it doesn't matter. I need a job and I am willing to do anything," I gushed.

He stood there and looked thoughtfully at me for a moment and then said, "Step into my office."

I moved so fast that I don't even remember leaving the lobby or entering his office. The next thing I knew...I was looking at family portraits placed behind a massive oak desk with a high back chair. He looked over my application and after a long moment he laid it down on his desk and eyed me suspiciously. I immediately began to squirm in my seat.

“This is very interesting,” he began, “you have five years experience as a dietician?”

“Yes,” I replied nervously.

“And you graduated from Michigan State University just last year?” he asked with one eyebrow raised.

“Uh...,” I laughed nervously.

“So you’re twenty-one, huh?” he inquired.

“Yes, sir...I mean no sir. I’m only seventeen, but I will be eighteen real soon,” I stammered.

“So why did you lie on your application?” he pressed looking me square in the eye.

“I’m sorry, but I really need this job. I’ve been to so many different places today and they all turned me away because I don’t have any work experience and...” I babbled, as tears sprang up in my eyes.

“Stop...just stop right there. Look, I don’t know what your story is but let me give you a little piece of advice... you can’t lie worth shit. Your eyes are a dead give away. And another thing...,” he continued, “I don’t like liars...”

“I’m sorry I wasted your time, sir,” I said embarrassed, as I moved toward the door.

“So...if you ever lie to me again, you’ll be fired on the spot,” he finished, still looking me dead in the face.

I stopped in my tracks and turned around in disbelief. I thought my ears were playing tricks on me so I asked, “Are you giving me a job?”

He smiled and said, “On one condition... you never lie to me again.”

I nodded my head in agreement because there was a lump in my throat and I didn’t want to sit in this stranger’s office and cry like a baby.

“I am going to give you a chance, Ms. Crawford- is that your real name?”

I shook my head.

“I am going to give you a chance because you remind me of my daughter and something tells me that you need this job more than even you know. Now, I am going to start you out in janitorial full-time. Can you handle that?”

“Yes, sir,” I whispered in disbelief.

“Ok, you be here tomorrow at nine ‘o clock sharp. Don’t disappoint me, Ms. Crawford,” he said sticking his hand out for me to shake.

“I won’t let you down,” I promised.

That evening, as I walked back to the motel from the bus stop, I tried to remember the last time I felt this happy. In the grand scheme of things, I didn’t really have much to be happy about. I mean after all I was pretty much unloved, unwanted, and almost homeless. But somehow, I was proud of myself.

This was the first thing I had ever done right by myself. Skye had never had a job, so that gave me an automatic one up on her. That thought alone was enough to make me smile to myself. I had a job.

Walking past the front office to go to my room, I saw the woman who gave me the paper sitting at the table reading a book.

I stuck my head in and said, “Thank you for the paper.”

“No problem,” she replied not looking up from her book.

As I started to walk away she looked up and said, “So...did you find anything?”

I smiled and replied, “Yes...I did. Start tomorrow.”

“Good for you. Name’s Wanda, in case you were wonderin’. You get on inside now. Don’t you be hangin’ outside wit them hoes. You ain’t like them, so you stay clear, you hear?”

“Yes ma’am,” I replied and went straight to my room.

As I sat on the bed, I starred at the phone with a sudden urge to hear my mother’s voice. Before I could stop myself, the phone was in my hand and I was dialing the number. Before I could will my finger to hit the final digit, I hung up.

“They don’t even know I’m gone,” I told myself suddenly overwhelmed with sadness. Then I laid down and cried myself to sleep.