

### ***Prologue***

I remember a saying that I once heard my grandmother say, “time heals all wounds,” and I have to admit that particular sentiment never sat well with me. Ideally, I suppose that it made perfect sense in the grand scheme of things, but even though the wounds heal the bearer of those wounds never forgets how they got there.

After my sister died, correction, after my sister was murdered at the hands of a deranged white man, I kept hearing my grandmother’s voice in my head assuring me that time was going to heal my wounds. I tried to listen to Grandma, but eventually the darkness that was continually growing in my heart drowned her voice out- for good. It was at that point that I decided to do what I needed to do to help my own wounds mend.

It took me exactly three years, two weeks, and five days to pull it off, but I accomplished what I set out to do...I avenged the death of my sister. I methodically planned and executed the kidnapping, torture, and murder of her assailant. It was poetic justice to me, but the powers-that-be called it a crime. So, that’s why I’m here in this God forsaken hellhole that many affectionately refer to as prison, waiting for the chance to tell my story to “The Voice”- that’s what we call her in here.

“The Voice” is the reporter from the Women’s Lib Magazine that previously told the stories of two other women and allowed their voices to be heard on the outside where people are so quick to judge. And now

it's my turn. I killed a man and I have no regrets because he deserved it.

I want to be heard not because I feel the need to expunge my demons or clear my conscience, but because I just want the world to know that sometimes revenge is a sweet, sweet dish that is always best when its served cold.

**Vanessa**

“You know that you are the one to blame for all of this,” I stated matter-of-factly to the headstone in front of me. It was a cool, balmy day and I wanted to do what I came to do and get out of there before the rain began.

It had been a little over two years, since I began my work at the Wayne County Women’s Correctional Facility. My first assignment had been an interview with Marion Hayes, who was sentenced to life in prison for murdering her husband. She was the reason that I was here now. Her story was so compelling and heartbreaking that it moved me to use my position to help others hear the stories of incarcerated women. Not that I was trying to justify anything, but after hearing Marion’s story, I just felt that people are often too quick to judge the actions of others based on the surface alone.

Once a month, I made it my business to visit her gravesite to clean off the tombstone I had purchased and deliver fresh flowers. For someone that had experienced so much ugliness in her life, it made me feel good to make her resting place look as though somebody cared that she was gone. It wasn’t just for her, it was for me too because meeting her had changed my life. During our interview sessions I grew to respect her tremendously for her strength and resolve, so much so that I ended up considering her a friend.

It is because of her that I continued to push on with this assignment, or whatever you want to call it. My last interview was with a young girl named

Timberlynn Crawford, who got herself emotionally involved with a married man and ended up killing his wife. That case on top of Marion's death was so emotionally draining for me, that I actually thought about giving this up and going back to my former humdrum life of writing about politics. But then, I began receiving stacks and stacks of letters from inmates begging me to tell their stories so their minds could be put to rest. Thus, came the nickname, "The Voice", which is what they started calling me.

"I just don't know what to do with all of this," I admitted to the headstone, "I don't know how much longer I can listen to all of these people's stories and not go crazy. It's like I'm reliving these events each time they're told and it's really starting to get to me." I sat there staring blankly at the slab of stone as if I expected it to respond.

"This new case is a doozy," I went on, "The next woman I'm supposed to go see killed her sister's accused murderer. If you could have seen the pictures of what she did to that guy... it would literally make you sick! I mean, what am I supposed to do with this? I don't know if I can keep doing this..." I whispered.

"I just don't know if I can keep doing this," I reiterated to Yolanda, the editor and chief at the Women's Lib Magazine, in my office the next morning. She just sat and stared blankly at me as I continued to go on my tirade about why I couldn't continue the Prison Chronicles series.

"This is really starting to take a toll on me emotionally," I continued, pacing back and forth.

“Marion Hayes was already a difficult case for me to handle after what happened, Timberlynn Crawford’s case had me dealing with repercussions from the victim’s family on top of the emotional stress, and now this? Dawn Langston is obviously a nut-case.”

“How do you know that?” Yolanda inquired.

“How do I know? Did you see what she did to that guy?” I asked disbelievingly, “How could someone do that to another human being and have no remorse? I watched the court video, that woman showed no emotion over what she did period. How do you expect me to go in there and try to make sense of this? At least with the other two stories, they showed regret and remorse for their crimes. That’s how I was able to connect with them and tell their stories on a level where people might be able to identify with them, but this...I don’t know what to do with this.”

Yolanda said nothing as she gazed at me with a smirk on her face. After she was sure that I had finished my tantrum she stood up, handed me the dreaded Langston case file and said, “Look, I know that this is difficult for you, but do you remember why we started this series?”

“Yes, I do but...”

“But nothing, Jackson. We aren’t doing these stories to justify the crimes that these women commit, we are doing these stories to give the public insight as to what drives these women to commit the crimes they commit. That’s it. Do you know why I picked you?” she asked pointedly.

“No, actually, I don’t know why you picked me. Please enlighten me,” I replied sarcastically, as I sat down heavily and began to massage my temples.

“Because you have a heart and you wear it on your sleeve. That’s what makes you such a great writer! It’s your words that have given life to these women’s stories because you were able to identify with them and feel what they felt! You didn’t judge, you just told the stories and that’s the whole point of the project- to just tell the story. Now if you want me to take you off the project, I will. I don’t want to, but I will. Just remember this...you said yourself that ‘you never know what a man’s been through until you walk a mile in his shoes’. Now all I’m asking you to do is give this woman the same chance you gave the other two.

I know that her case seems pretty extreme to you, but if you judge her before you hear her story, aren’t you doing the same thing that you condemned the public for doing when you started this project?” She asked in a way that clearly said that she really didn’t need a response.

After that, I sat for a long while meditating on our conversation and decided that I would be a coward and a hypocrite if I didn’t follow through with what I promised I would do. No matter how disturbing the prospect of this assignment seemed, I had to see it through or I would never forgive myself.

## ***Chapter 1***

Before I knew it, I was sitting in the prison parking lot, gripping my steering wheel so tight that my knuckles had turned white. “What am I doing?” I asked myself. Obviously, Yolanda’s lecture had been more than effective, because once again I found myself sitting in the parking lot of that God forsaken facility, trying to summon enough courage to go in and do my job.

What was I afraid of? I honestly couldn’t put my finger on what it was about this case that was making me so uneasy. Finally, I shook it off and forced myself out of the car. Somehow, I made my way into the haven of madness, where my newest prospect was awaiting my arrival.

“Hey, Bert,” I said to the heavy-set security guard I had gotten to know on a first name basis.

“Ms. Jackson, you back again so soon? I think I’m going to have to make them give you an office up here pretty soon. You got a hell of a piece of work waitin’ for you this time,” she chuckled lightheartedly, as she checked me in. After completing the necessary procedures, she buzzed me in and led me down the long corridor to the visitor’s chamber.

She paused before entering the combination to open the large metal door leading to the interview room. She looked at me with a serious look on her face. “Now don’t be alarmed when you go in, Ms. Jackson,” she warned, “we had to take special precautions with this one. She’s prone to having extremely violent episodes

from time to time, so her restraints are a little different from what you're used to seeing."

I nodded to acknowledge that I understood, then she finished entering the code and pushed the door open. I took a deep breath and forced myself to walk inside. There before me sat an extremely attractive petite woman, with a dark brown complexion, and a short cropped Afro. She was securely wrapped in a straight jacket and shackled to the table. The restraint contraption was wrapped so tightly around her body that all traces of femininity, outside of her face, were hidden within its confines. I tried to mask my shock by feigning a brief coughing episode, but her piercing eyes gazed unflinchingly, as she watched my every move.

Gingerly, I pulled myself together and sat down at the table. I was unaccustomed to the interviewee being in the room before me. Normally, I would have a chance to collect my thoughts and get situated before they arrived. Nevertheless, I was determined to remain in control of the situation and obtain my interview in the same fashion that I always had. Never mind the fact that the gruesome photos of her victim kept flashing through my mind every ten seconds, and now I was sitting across a table from her. My palms were sweating profusely.

The deafening silence was broken by the slam of the door as Bert returned to her station. The two male guards that remained in the room looked expectantly at me as if to say "get on with it already".

"Hello, Ms. Langston," I croaked, in a voice that I barely recognized, "my name is Vanessa Jackson. As

you know, I'll be conducting the interview that you requested from the Women's Lib Magazine."

She smiled briefly and her eyes softened as she replied, "I know who you are Ms. Jackson, thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I'm sorry if my appearance startled you."

"Thank you. I have to admit that I wasn't expecting...this," I stated.

"Well, they seem to think that I am prone to violent episodes so this is the only way they would allow me to meet with you."

"Are you prone to violent episodes?"

"I am prone to violence only when violence is required. I believe that violence begets violence, Ms. Jackson. Are you familiar with the principle of an eye for an eye?" she asked pointedly.

"Yes," I admitted skeptically.

She sat back gingerly in her chair and looked me directly in the eye. "Do you believe in that principle?"

"I guess I believe in it in theory, but I also believe that no one has the right to take the law into their own hands."

"Is that what you feel I did?" she asked, with obvious amusement in her face.

"Yes, I do," I responded, holding her gaze defiantly.

"Well, Ms. Jackson, I really hope that by the time we finish this interview you'll be able to see it from my point of view. I don't expect you to condone what I did, but I feel that justice is in the eye of the beholder. Our legal system is set up to protect the rich and

condemn the poor. People with money rule the world, and it was unfortunate for the man that killed my sister, that the decision of the United States justice system was overturned- by me.

“Contrary to popular belief, Ms. Jackson,” she went on, “I am not crazy or insane. I planned that man’s death down to the second, executed my plan flawlessly, and then I turned myself in. If I had to go back, I would do it again. Except, if I knew then what I know now, I probably wouldn’t have turned myself in. Prison is not a fun place, but I am a woman of conviction and I accept the consequences of my actions. But make no mistake, I have no regrets about what I did.”

As I sat there taking in the depth of what she’d just said, I realized that I had probably bitten off more than I could chew with this assignment. Then I thought of Marion Hayes and the promise I had made in honor of her to help these women tell their stories and be their “Voice”. “God doesn’t put more on you than what you can handle,” I thought to myself.

I was scared to hear her story and I fully acknowledged that fact. I was afraid what hearing it might do to my character. After gathering every last bit of courage I could muster, I pressed the record button on my recorder, looked Dawn Langston straight in the eye and said, “Ready whenever you are.”

## ***Chapter 2***

Ever since I was a little girl, I have always been obsessed with martial arts and the art of combat. So as soon as I was old enough to engage in physical combat, I took part in every form of martial arts my dad would enroll me in.

I loved every minute of it and I was good, very good. When I had a competition it was very seldom that anyone could beat me and if someone did it only happened once. I was meticulous about correcting the mistakes from my losses to ensure a flawless victory the next time I met up with that opponent. Our next battle would ultimately end with that person being mercilessly pummeled, due to my over zealous and competitive nature.

One thing I learned about myself was that I had an intense blood lust, and it was through that learning that I quickly realized I had to be disciplined enough to control all aspects of my temper. So as I progressed through martial arts training, I learned to harness the viciousness that resided within me, but it was through sparring and competition that I was able to release the animal lust I had for combat.

By the time I turned seventeen, I had become a second-degree black belt in karate. Though only a second-degree by official rank, I had the knowledge, tenacity, and viciousness of some fourth-degree black belts with only formalities hindering my advancement. Eventually it got to the point where I felt that I couldn't advance any further with karate, so I began to study the

ancient art of Ninjitsu and pressure point control. I was vehemently obsessed with learning all the different ways of inflicting pain upon anyone who might decide to get on my bad side.

Carmen, my sister, thought I was a nutcase. We were only two years apart and she just couldn't understand why I would want to waste all of my free time fighting when I could be shopping. I didn't understand that either, but different as we were she was still my best friend. We did everything almost everything together when I wasn't training.

My sister was the most beautiful, kind, and sweetest person I ever knew. She would give anyone the shirt off her back if she thought they needed it. I can't tell you how many times she would make us late on various occasions because she would see a homeless person on the street and would just have to find the nearest fast food restaurant to supply a meal. There was never a time that I can remember that she wasn't doing something for someone else.

I remember when we were little, I always thought of Carmen as my very own little baby doll. I would always try to dress her up in my baby doll clothes and pretend like I was rescuing her from ninja, who were sent to kidnap her. When she was finally old enough to go to school with me, I would sneak out of my class everyday to go down to her classroom to check on her to make sure that she was happy and that nobody was picking on her. No matter how sneaky I thought I was being, somehow she could always sense my presence and would look up and wave at me. That was the bond

we had; we always looked out for each other. If she was in a fight, I was in a fight, and if I was in a fight she was trying her best to be in a fight- even though she knew that I probably had everything under control and was enjoying every second of beating the crap out of whoever was stupid enough to actually pick a fight with me.

We grew up in a loving home with the best parents a kid could ever ask for. We never wanted for anything. My father made a great living as an electrical engineer, my mother worked for the city as a legal clerk, I was in my second year of college, and Carmen was a senior in high school on her way to college with a full academic scholarship. Our house was almost like the Waltons. My mother had dinner on the table promptly at 6pm every night and there was hell to pay if the whole family wasn't sitting in their assigned seats ready to eat when the last piece of silverware hit the table. Our dad spent most of his free time doting on Carmen and me showing us how ladies were supposed to be treated. From the time that we could walk, my daddy made sure we knew that we were his princesses, thereby raising our standards and expectations for the world and any future suitors who thought they might be brave enough to step through his door and ask permission to date one of his daughters. Yes, our lives were perfect until one day my sister didn't come home. I was twenty and she was eighteen.

Carmen was nothing if not responsible, so when my mother found her bed empty and untouched the

morning after she had gone out to a birthday party with her friends, it was an immediate cause for alarm.

“Don’t panic,” I told my mom, “she probably decided to spend the night at Jasmine’s house because it got late. She probably didn’t want to wake anybody by calling the house phone. Just check the voicemail on your cell to see if she called.” I heard myself saying the words, but even as they were spilling forth from my mouth, I didn’t believe them myself. I knew my sister like the back of my hand and she would never stay out all night without calling our parents to let them know.

I had a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach that something wasn’t right. I didn’t want my mother to worry, so I continued to falsely reassure her that the occurrence was surely a brain fart on Carmen’s part and she would come bouncing through the door at any second. Slowly but surely the seconds turned to minutes and the minutes turned into hours, and still no word from Carmen.

By the time my father finally made it home, my mother was on the brink of hysteria and I was in a silent state of inner turmoil. While my parents contacted the police, I called all of Carmen’s friends but none of them had heard from her since the night of the party. Jasmine said that she wasn’t really feeling the vibe of the club so she decided to leave the party early to go home and get some rest. They said their goodbyes and that was it.

“Did anybody walk her to her car?” I yelled, vehemently into the phone.

Jasmine hesitated briefly and muttered a weak “no”. I didn’t wait for her to say another word before I

slammed the phone down and tried to keep myself from throwing up. I knew right then and there that my little sister was in trouble. My mind urged and pleaded with me to be optimistic and think only good thoughts, but the realist in me knew much better. My heart knew without a shadow of a doubt that my sister was never coming home again.

### ***Chapter 3***

Three weeks went by before my sister's grossly mutilated body was found handcuffed to a bug infested bed in the filthy basement of an abandoned building in Detroit. A production crew scouting for movie locations happened to stumble upon the building and noticed a foul smell coming from the basement, and then the police were called.

When we got the call, we all decided that it was best my mother stay at home, being that she already had to be heavily sedated at regular intervals. We didn't think she would be the best candidate for the grim task of identifying the body, so my father and I went. On the way, I silently prayed and begged God to please spare us and let this all be some sort of horrible nightmare. The coroner tried his best to prepare us before he pulled out what remained of the body, but nothing he could have said would have prepared us for the horror of what had been done to Carmen.

As the sheet was pulled back to reveal what was once the most important person in my life, my father passed out. I just stood there staring mutely at the carcass that lay on the cold slab of metal in front of me. That was not my sister. My sister was beautiful with long, thick, glistening, black hair, brown eyes, full pouty lips, and a smile that could rival the sun.

The thing that lay before me was a misshapen form that had half its face caved in, two fingers missing from the right hand, bite marks on the breasts, bruises all over the upper torso, a chunk of skin bitten out of the

inner thigh, and plugs of hair pulled out of her head. This could not be my sister.

“No,” I said shaking my head back and forth, “this is not my sister! This can’t be Carmen. There has to be some mistake...”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Langston, but we are very sure that this is your sister and we need for someone to positively ID the body so that we can proceed...”

“No!” I screamed, “That is not her! Now you get your people out there and keep looking for her!”

“Ms. Langston, please...”

By that time my ears had shut down and my mind went blank. The next thing I knew I was sitting in a chair outside in the hallway and a white police officer was kneeling in front of me, with a cup of water in his hand and a concerned look on his face.

“Here, Ms. Langston,” he said softly, as he gently took my hand and wrapped it around the cup, “try to drink some of this.” I feebly brought the cup to my lips and allowed the cold liquid to course its way down my throat. It seemed as though I could feel every molecule of water make its way through my body, slowly awakening my senses and bringing my back to the grim reality of where I was and why.

The officer sat down in front of me and waited patiently for me to catch his gaze before easing his way into asking the questions that needed to be addressed. “Ms. Langston, my name is Detective Christopher Jones. Are you alright?” he asked with genuine concern on his face. I gazed blankly into his face and said nothing as he

continued, “Your father was able to positively ID the body for us...”

“So, now what?” I choked, fighting back tears.

“Now we find the person who did this,” he replied softly, “I know this is hard for you and your family, but I have to ask you a few questions so that we can catch the perpetrator and get this thing laid to rest as soon as possible.” I nodded my head absently.

“When was the last time you saw Carmen?”

“Friday morning, that was the third, I...we had breakfast together before I went to school.”

“Where do you go to school?”

“Wayne State, the downtown campus.”

“Did you come straight home after school?”

“No, because I had to go to work after class.”

“Where do you work?”

“The Barnes & Noble bookstore on campus.”

Endlessly he went on and on, asking me questions about my whereabouts, whether or not Carmen had a boyfriend, did she have any enemies that I could think of who would want to do her harm, did she do drugs, and was she in to anything out of the ordinary that we knew of. The more questions he asked, the angrier I felt myself become.

“Let me ask you some questions Detective,” I shot back angrily, “do you have any leads yet? My sister was missing for three weeks! Three weeks! What exactly are you people doing, besides standing around scratching your heads, to actually solve this case?”

“Ms. Langston,” he began calmly, “we are doing the best we can. Believe me when I say that we are

going to find the person that did this, and that person is going to pay. Justice will be served.”

Finally, after what seemed like hours, Detective Jones ended his barrage of questions and escorted me to the lobby where my father was waiting. His face was worn and heavy with fatigue, and his eyes were red and puffy from crying. I could tell that his heart was broken as he looked hopelessly at me and tried to manage a smile.

“Are you ok, baby?” he asked.

“I’m hanging in there, daddy,” I replied, as I grabbed his hand and kissed it. “How are you holding up?”

“Well, baby, I wish I could tell you that I was doing ok, but I can’t say that. I know that God has a purpose for everything that happens in life, but no parent is prepared to deal with the death of a child. I gotta believe that whoever did this to her will pay, I gotta believe that, but even so...it still won’t bring my baby back.” Then he broke down into heaving sobs.

As I stood there helplessly watching my daddy cry, my sorrow slowly began to evolve into anger. I could feel the blood in my veins begin to boil as flashes of Carmen’s mutilated body flashed through my mind. I could almost feel her terror and pain as I imagined her begging her assailant to stop hurting her. What would make someone do something so horrible? My sister didn’t deserve to die that way. How were we supposed to get through this?

“Come on, daddy,” I whispered softly, as I gathered my father off the floor and helped him to the

car. The drive home was a silent one. I stared straight ahead as I drove and daddy stared out the window, both of us thinking the exact same thing- how were we going to tell my mother?