

**A personal note: Thank you to Linda, Mary, and Evelyn (my beta superwomen with capes). Kudo's to the bard village volunteers that did some critical reading for me, I'll post a ditty there soon. I hope you enjoy my offering. Send feedback to [jl Nicky@aol.com](mailto:jl Nicky@aol.com)**

## Hard As Stone

by JLNicky 2006

Theme: Through the Looking Glass –  
Past Reflections / Future Promises

### Chapter 1

The two night guards of the B-wing at Calamanco Prison leaned closer to listen to Franklin Roosevelt give his fifth fireside chat of his office term, through the static from the cathedral radio. The President's voice echoed tinny and high pitched in the concrete room.

“Recently, the most notable public questions that have concerned us all have had to do with industry and labor and with respect to these, certain developments have taken place which I consider of importance. I am happy to report that after years of uncertainty, culminating in the collapse of the spring of 1933, we are bringing order out of the old chaos with a greater certainty of the employment of labor at a reasonable wage and of more business at a fair profit.”

The smaller of the two men clapped his threadbare-gloved hands in halfhearted celebration and then began to rub them together, generating warmth. The friction was usually enough to remove the chill. The man's baton and handcuffs jingled slightly from the motion, making sounds that drifted down the huge empty hallway behind them.

“You hear that, Mr. Thomas? A reasonable wage is a-comin'.” Sammy Caldwell spoke softly, resting his warmed palms over his black leather belt to stop the equipment from rattling.

“I'll believe it when the greenbacks are in my hand, son,” replied Thomas, the obviously older guard, as he struggled with the volume knob to change the frequency from the political rally of the impending elections of 1936. The signal squealed in transit. The two men smiled when Thomas found another channel, one more welcome. The tinkling piano keys and the mellow clarinet of Benny Goodman's Moon Glow were suddenly clear.

A loud clang from a closing gate sounded in the distance as someone entered the secured wing off the main hallway to the central room. Sixty-one female inmates began to wake up, knowing that the shift change about to take place meant they would be out of their cells soon. Thomas unplugged the radio and took it back inside to the lockable cupboards in their closet of an office. He shoved bullet clips and ammo boxes aside to replace the radio. Locking the

cabinet, he glanced around the room and shook his head. The tiny office was filled to the brim with files and folders. Scattered pieces of court documents that followed the convicted women into this prison were stacked on every available space. He checked the personal stack of case files he'd created of inmates with questionable crime details. The stack seemed untouched. He ran his fingers over the top file of inmate Sara L Nolan. The two-inch file was filled with the details of her conviction.

June 12th, 1924, Sara a 21-year old nursing student at Watt's Hospital was indicted for First Degree Felony Murder and Mayhem. She was convicted of attacking and brutally killing another person with her bare hands. The report hinted at the suspicious nature of the murder victim but the judicial system had her sentenced and locked up within days of finding the crime scene. She was found cradling her younger brother's dead body, with the blood of the nearby deceased victim, Jerry Mason, on her hands and clothing. Her defense lawyer cut a deal for a life sentence when the prosecution provided a signed confession she'd given to killing Mason. The one stipulation Sara requested was for her brother to be absolved of any involvement in the entire incident. Without pause, the judge agreed. Her brother, her sole relative, questionably unmarked from any violence, was buried without her present. Upon entering Calamanco, she had never looked back.

As far as Thomas could make out, the woman known as Sara no longer existed inside this prison, if she ever did in the first place. When he came to work here five years ago her name on the file was the only detail still left to remind him Sara was ever imprisoned. She was now a strong-bodied woman with a broken soul and empty eyes. She spent her days breaking quarry rock and busting boulders and her nights living silent within Calamanco. She did what she was told and kept herself isolated from everyone with her subdued, eerily calm, persona. She lived in a hell that she'd created when she used to give a damn. The inmates had named her well. She was found to be hard, fearless and cold, nicknamed by the other sixty women as simply, the Stone.

Sammy stuck his head into the office. "Hey?"

At the impatient urging of his younger partner, Thomas tucked in his shirt, straightened his tie and grabbed his clipboard. The two men then headed down the hallway toward the rising commotion and the dayshift supervisor with his small group of day shift hounds.

As they entered the central room, Thomas and Sam paused, lifting their gazes upward to take in the multiple cell tiers climbing up the walls of the interior of the cold stone building. Thomas was struck, as always, by the immensity of the cavernous room. For the thousandth time, he murmured reverently under his breath, "Welcome to Calamanco."

Calamanco was the title given the prison by the inmates who were housed within. They took the name from the woolen Calamanco fabric of their uniforms. The material was thick, scratchy, had a checked pattern on one side, and was remarkable for its definite ugliness. In civilian life, most poor women used the material for drapes but inside the prison, Calamanco was the major dress code option. The other being the horizontal striped common prison-wear produced en masse in the USA for all inmates of any penal institute. Most found the Calamanco material to be less intrusive.

As for the true naming of the cold stone edifice, historically graced with a previous governor's title, it was The Bickett Correctional Facility. Thomas W. Bickett, considered an inspiring man, rode the political express of North Carolina from small town Mayor to Governor, building over 20 prisons in the Tar Heel State during his term in office. Unfortunately, most of his facilities were vainly named after his favorite person, himself. The facilities were not what he was truly famous for. His ingenuity for introducing hard labor work programs within the prison system was what really earned him the office of Governor. Calamanco housed a sewing facility that produced thousands of clothes for the state. Also, from the nearby quarry, the inmates cut the stones used to produce and repair roads.

"Shaddup with your bawling. You sound like a bunch of chickens!" The guard's shout dimmed the growing uproar for only a few moments. Then it started up again. Women clamored to anyone who would listen. Sam and Thomas dropped their gazes at the growling voice of the day-shift guard's condescending attitude toward the inmates. Thomas's gut burned at the animosity shared between him and the day-shift supervisor. After all, he couldn't help but remember that these were women and should be treated as such.

Cell to cell, the population of B-wing, flights B-1, B-2, and B-3, spread the news of today's supposed events; chow hall fare, birthdays, rumors and more, were spread aloft among the populace. English, Spanish and Italian languages shouted their daily scraps of news and morning visitations. The women grew louder as they began to exchange shouts from side to side and across the rails of the identical rows of cells on either side of the wing. Hands waved through the bars and faces were pressed against steel, as feminine voices housed within greeted their neighbors.

Thomas held the clipboard, which marked the sixty-one female inmates present on this wing. His grip tightened as the watch change neared its time to take place. The women were then released for daily work programs; a crew headed for the chow hall, others to get started on their personal routines. The morning release was, to Thomas, the most stressful during shift change. The energy the inmates displayed, once released from the confines of their cells, was highly intense. Many fights had broken out between women who were too excited. Thomas figured it was the daily realization they were once again prisoners after

waking up. Maybe the sweet release from their cells was sometimes a little too much freedom. God knew, he took many deep breaths of fresh clean air filled with the taste of freedom the minute he stepped outside the prison gates at the end of each day.

The guards met in the center of the first floor near the main worktables placed in the middle. He waved the clipboard at the supervisor and moved to his customary checkpoint for the release of the gates. At the west end of the wing on the ground floor, he prepared to take the morning roll call. He kept his eyes moving around the room, aware of all the women once their lock down was released. The other guards headed to their positions. A buzzer sounded for almost 15 seconds while 60 cells were opened. The women immediately stepped outside their cells, all but one.

Thomas kept an eye on the far right cell on the second flight. He watched as the single occupant inside the cell hesitated to come out until the last possible moment before roll call was concluded. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw movement.

Stone's extremely tall form dressed not in the Calamanco smock but in the simple striped britches and button down thick cotton shirt designated for male prisoners, shuffled out of the cell. She stood near six feet tall, and was dark haired with broad shoulders. Her flat stomach boasted a fit waist, and further down were long legs sporting muscular thighs and calves. Her entrance into any room made her stand out, no matter the circumstances. Dark eyebrows, full lips and high cheekbones were set in a face bronzed from being outdoors, and her blue-gray steel gaze could pin you with a glance. She was a giant beauty. The other women knew it and some hated her for it. Others followed her example of wearing the striped uniform as a subtle sign of respect. Thomas thought it was too bad she never gave the time of day to the other inmates.

Her eyes roamed the ground floor from habit. Thomas tilted his head up slightly to stare in her direction. Her review never flickered with any display of emotion as she returned to look at her hands slowly and methodically rolling up her sleeves to reveal her strong biceps. She never paused to register his avid regard as Thomas tried to, once again, catch a spark of the living within her pale eyes. He'd failed, just like yesterday, and the day before. She was truly hard as stone.

He hated the nickname given to her. Not because she had a nickname - everyone and everything had a label in here. The guards were "Boss", the blacks were "Color", and the two main job details were "Pokes" for the sewing group, and "Rubble" for the quarry detail. "B&E" stood for Breaking and Entering, while "Fiver" labeled any convicted felon by signifying the minimum felony sentence. "Short eyes" stood for a Kidnapping rap, "D&D" for dumb and dead, to point out the murderer.

Each individual in the joint had a nickname to carry and Stone was no exception. He just hated the name for the loss of humanity it signified. His gut burned with the knowledge that she could've been someone completely different. Thomas had read the report that brought her in. Even his lowly educated mind could see the gaping holes nobody had bothered to fill in. *What happened to her brother? Who was the other victim at the crime scene? What was their relationship?*

"Roll count third floor?" The dayshift guard shouted up. The women stood outside of their cells for a brief inspection. On his floor, the lifers waited their turn. He noted Becca "The Book Worm" was pale and swaying. She was due for a morning insulin shot to keep her blood sugar controlled. The 64-year-old woman was, with more frequency, requiring medical attention. Thomas noted the issue on his sheet and jotted down the 2nd floor body count as Sam shouted out his response.

Once all numbers were counted, Thomas reported to the supervisor. The main guard spat on the concrete floor. He surveyed the three floors contemptuously.

"Three more coming in today. Behave or get solitary confinement. Quarry teams report to the truck at 8 and 9. Stone and Butch make sure your teams are present." A tall willowy woman straightened from her slouching position against the wall, her short buzz cut hair glaringly obvious. The guard looked her way and then over to another black woman who was having her braids redone by her cellmate. "Sewing crews make the sewing room by 7 am. Carla is team leader." Carla nodded toward him and murmured something to her cellmate quietly as she tied off the small braided section.

"This ain't no God Damn social hour! Get your asses in gear and get showered and cleaned up. Barbara and Rebecca will be spot guards for the showers today. Give them shit and you're toast. Move it." Once again, he spat on the floor with his final command. The prisoners returned to their cells, talk and socializing once more rising. The super charged atmosphere for the women was apparent as they realized three more inmates were being moved into the wing. The guards quickly returned to the ground floor to wander around waiting on the small eight member groups to form that would be escorted through the hallways toward the showers. The male guards would then stop outside the shower area and the two women from the medical wing would take the women inside to begin their morning ablutions.

Thomas hastily handed over the clipboard to his dayshift relief as his final task for the night shift. The guard checked the board and frowned at the notation of the insulin shot for Becca. He glared at Thomas, who looked back at him blandly.

"Pete, take Book Worm to the med wing to get her shot." The supervisor yelled without turning his face from Thomas. Thomas remained calm. If he hadn't made the notation, Becca might not have received her insulin. Prisoner or not, Thomas

didn't want the elderly woman to die because of something he missed. He was dismissed with a jerk of a chin toward the gate. Thomas joined Sam as they headed to check out their gear. Another day completed another few dollars for his paycheck.

## Chapter 2

Tammy Turner watched the advancing men with complete fear etched into her blood-covered features. First, they had chased her across the field and now they were moving in from different directions. She was backed up against a tree and her tears were interfering with the remaining vision out of her bruised and beaten face. She swayed with pain and fatigue. The snow on the ground made her feet sting with pain as she sank deeper and deeper into it. The huge man on the left held out his hand promising she wouldn't get hurt but she knew that was a lie. The man on the right was quietly moving closer.

Tammy bent down and picked up a fallen tree limb. The wood was bulky but she swung it with desperation. The two men paused their advance. She brushed back her sweat-drenched hair and wiped the tears and grime from her eyes to see clearer. Just beyond the figures were two other police officers standing near a cop car, its white body with black trim shining in the night. One of the men held her two year old, Jamie, in his arms. Christopher, her other son, stood in front of the policeman, his green eyes wide, watching her, petrified. She just barely made out the silent plea of "Mommy" forming in his mouth, when the man on the right moved in too close. She swung the limb, hitting him across the jaw. He dropped like a sack of potatoes, giving the other cop the chance he needed to pounce.

Tammy barely registered his leap toward her, still intent on watching the downed man. She turned at the last minute and hit the tackling cop with the stick, busting it in half. He grunted even as he landed on her. The instant feeling of suffocation overwhelmed her and she froze with remembered fear. Her body fell into the white powder that instantly soaked her through but the chill never touched her core as she began to relive a particularly vicious memory of her husband raping her. The cop brutally pinned her frozen limbs with his weight and disarmed her from the small length of branch she still held in her hand. Sitting up, straddling the small body, the man realized the woman was in shock, from the look of her rolling eyes and pained expression. His growl of disgust was apparent as he whipped a set of cuffs off of his belt and bound her wrists together roughly. He pushed off of her and kneeled down to check on his partner a few feet away. He shouted over to the cops by the car.

"She's down. Take them to Mrs. Grainger and have her watch them for a few days. We can send them to the orphanage later. I'm taking her back to be booked."

The cops herded the children off. Christopher prayed silently for his Momma to get up. She remained lying on the ground. Jaime suddenly began to cry, wailing in terror as the two boys were driven off into the night.

Tammy was brought into the district precinct office and put into a cell, her weak, half frozen, battered body laid across a pallet. She gasped when her deep indrawn breath pressed against a fractured rib, causing her to bolt upright. The stab of pain from the sudden move almost made her faint. The guard walking past her cell looked in with a frown. Her dishevelment showed severe bruising and cuts as Tammy collapsed back onto the bed in agony. The lurch to her injuries caused her to pass out; her breathing became shallow and began to gurgle with the liquid that was filling them. The cop narrowed his eyes; he quickly walked back down the row of cells to report a possible medical problem.

The nearby hospital fixed her back up only to return her to the cell life she had been indicted into for killing her husband. Tammy's was indicted for first degree murder and sentenced to 20 years. The children were placed into the county system and she was trundled off to Calamanco Prison on a life sentence for murder in the first degree.

When she arrived at Calamanco, a nurse and two guards led her into a shower area and ordered her to strip. Her new scars in her abdomen and her cheek were red and swollen on the pale skin. The guards disregarded the notes from the medical board and sprayed her down with cold water, then tossed delousing powder onto her. The powder burned like a fire over her fresh stitches but she kept the frozen expression on her face, denying any pain existed.

Handed a Calamanco smock she was told to follow two other women marching ahead of her who were obviously used to the drill. Making her way behind the line they moved from one room to the next. Handed her bedding, more smocks, socks, shoes, and a few toiletries, she held them in her aching arms and followed the train of people quietly.

Voices from up above made her look up at a huge cavernous area. She became dizzy and swayed. Her still swollen features squinted painfully as the bright overhead hanging lights beat down into her vision. Running her gaze down from the top tier to the second she found herself looking at a tall muscular woman her forearms on the railing and a foot propped casually. The thick black stripes of her outfit paled in comparison to her jet-black hair.

Tammy felt a shiver race across her spine. She almost stopped in her tracks if not for the baton that poked into her from behind.

"Move." The guard commanded. Tammy glanced at the guard then back toward the giant woman but she was gone.

The dayshift supervisor walked up to speak to them about the house rules. Tammy stood frozen, her eyes downward in fear as he walked back and forth spouting the rules of “his” prison. If she had been able to analyze her reaction she would have said he was a clone of her dead husband. His entire demeanor and the crazed look in his eyes were filled with cruelty and crassness.

She was placed inside a cell on the ground floor; her cellmate was a “killer” too. Nobody was there at the moment and she stepped inside her new home only to move to the right of the entrance and lean back against the bars. She stayed clear from touching anything. The guards mentioned sewing details and then they moved off. She held her new belongings and felt the tears begin to fall. Her life was a disaster. She leaned her head into her pillow and clothing, muffling her sobs that steadily grew.

An hour later, her cellmate entered and looked her over. Becca, the book worm, felt her heart break at the youth before her. Under all that battered skin was a beautiful girl and that meant two things. One, she needed to harden up quick in this prison system, and two, she needed to have some friends. Becca walked over and took the bundle of belongings from the weakened grasp of her new cellmate. She set them on the lower bunk and grabbed the sheet set and began making the upper bunk. She introduced herself in a soft voice and continued talking about the prison and the details and the rules. She finished the entire task without any movement or noise from the figure behind her. Becca turned back toward Tammy and gave a huge sigh of relief to find that the younger woman’s alert green eyes were following her every movement.

“This is your new home, honey. Call me Becca and pay attention. This will be a huge education for you once you heal up and get clean. The guards here are only half the problem. The women are the other half. Let’s get you into bed and get you rested. You have two hours before dinner chow and you’re going to want to eat before lights out. The night hours are a lifetime when you’re starving and ill.”

That said, Tammy was lead to her bunk and practically pushed into it. A thick cover was spread over her reclined form and she felt the exhaustion of her life sweep over her. She closed her eyes and was out in seconds.

### Chapter 3

The nightmare played in Tammy’s head again, starting, as always, in bright sunshine on a day that would end horribly wrong.

*She was in the shack that they lived in up in the woods, enjoying the peace and serenity, with her youngest child at her feet playing with a wooden toy.*

*He had arrived home in his noisy pickup truck and picked a fight immediately. She panicked at his drunken state. Trying to escape, she told him she was taking Jamie down the path to gather strawberries. He wouldn't allow it. She set Jamie down on the living room floor and prayed her husband would calm down soon but he did not.*

*Everything got uglier. Tammy eventually ended up on the floor in front of the pot-bellied oven, her face a bloody mess from the beating he had inflicted. Her body was wracked with pain. When he screamed for the baby to shut up and stormed across the room, she found an inner reserve she didn't know she had. Pulling herself upright, she grabbed her cast iron frying skillet and charged toward him. Before he could touch Jaime, the pan hit his head like a baseball bat meeting a melon. He was dead before he touched the floor.*

*Gazing in shocked disbelief at the sight of his bloody corpse, she instinctively grabbed Jaime to shield him by holding him tightly to her breast. He stopped crying. The house became silent as a church. She grabbed some diapers and clothes and a suitcase, still holding her son close. Dropping their belongings into the pickup bed of her husband's truck, she finally placed Jaime into the cab and turned toward the house for the bitter task she needed to accomplish.*

*Rolling her dead husband over, she dug money and keys out of his pocket. She calmly faced his blank bloody visage, her heart numbed to the bone. He was dead and she didn't care. Years of betrayal and pain managed to empty her of any feelings she might have once had. Maybe in years to come she might think of this moment, but not with regret. She turned away from him and never looked back. Stepping outside, she yelled for Christopher to come home.*

*He was playfully singing his ABCs as he rounded the corner to his front porch, then, his world collapsed. His Momma was hurt. Instantly, he felt fear grow inside. The pickup was parked in the driveway but HE wasn't yelling. Even so Christopher trembled. Running up to her and clasping the hand she held out to him, he felt better as she pulled him close and gave him a hug. Christopher saw his brother in the cab of the pickup and then looked back at his Momma.*

*"We need to leave sweetheart," she said.*

*The walked hand in hand to his Daddy's truck and got inside. He sat silent and close to Jamie.*

*Checking the rearview mirror, Tammy knew they were in trouble. Her fear filled eyes stared back in shock. Her face was a mess and she had blood everywhere. Pushing the fear away, she put the truck in gear, heading to anywhere but here.*

Tammy fought the horror to wake up, her green eyes opened. Staring at the low ceiling above, she listened to the voices talking in the prison tiers. She would not sleep anymore that night.

Shift change occurred at 1900 hours. Thomas checked in on time. He made his way past Becca's cell to see the new inmate, Tammy Turner. She had stitches across her cheek and a fully bruised right side of her face. She was sitting on the lower bunk, while Becca sat on a wooden chair across from her, helping the younger woman put on her socks and shoes. Her vacant eyes made him wince. She was too pretty; he was going to have to watch out for her. His fatherly instincts kicked in and he slowly nodded his head in her direction. She never moved.

Suddenly, he felt a prickle of awareness. Turning sharply, he looked up into blue-gray eyes regarding him. Thomas was sure he read confusion on Stone's face. For a fleeting moment, he thought there was frustration too, but whatever he thought he saw was lost as Sam motioned for him to head upstairs. When he looked back, Stone was gazing across the hall toward the social tables.

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Over the next week, many women stopped by to meet and greet at Becca's cell. She managed to introduce a good portion of the wing and Tammy never had to leave her resting spot on Becca's lower bunk. Tammy kept mostly silent with a downcast face. Her emotions were stunted as she tried to deal with her new surroundings.

Becca brought her along to the sewing detail. She treated her gently and showed Tammy how to do the easier manual tasks of the wash chore. Tammy was told the process. She followed the instructions and took bundles of clothing to the huge washing area. Putting the clothing into the large water filled drums; she added the soap. A wooden paddle was used to stir the drum's contents. Removing the waterlogged clothing after twenty minutes she took the soaking garments to the clothing carts and let the drying teams take over. She began to perform the chore efficiently. After completing four loads, she was told she could rest for ten minutes.

Choosing a spot out of the way for her break, she realizing her mistake moments later as two women came near. One stood on lookout while the other moved up close and personal into her space, pressing her to the wall. Tammy was in trouble; Snow and her sister, White, were making a shakedown. The two women were not actually sisters, but their habitual work with specific drugs had given them a reputation and a nickname that fit.

"My sister bitch says you will make a good collection to our harem. It's just a matter of sexual favors we will be looking for. You're gonna be good for us, I can

tell.” For the first time in Tammy’s life, a woman physically molested her when Snow swept her hand upward to cup her breast through the smock. Tammy swallowed and, although completely out muscled, she drew her head back and then slammed it forward, bashing their skulls together. Snow fell, claspng her hands over her bloody nose.

White saw her sister writhng on the ground, and, with a fierce expression, she advanced on Tammy. “I’ll kill you, bitch!” she growled.

Tammy pushed a small bucket near a washer to spill across the floor. Its overflowing contents of soap and dirt made White slip and land on her ass. Tammy cut across the room and headed for a small group of women for safety. Her smock, slightly covered with a fine red stain, was quickly stripped from her body as she huddled among the women of the sewing circle. Becca grabbed another smock from the drying rack and pulled it down over Tammy’s head,

“Girl, you got brass balls!” One of the other women whispered in awe. The inmates all muttered over Tammy’s luck in escaping the well-known thugs. The small group heard the fierce women cursng their revenge at the back of the room but the only thing the two convicts accomplished was to call the guards’ attention. The guards came across a blood filled aisle with the two black women trying to help each other stand. A whistle alert was produced immediately throughout the sewing room. Everyone was herded back early before lunch to allow time for the room to be cleaned. Tammy heard a few comments being made in her direction but she faced forward, ignoring it all as she proceeded in the line back to her cell. Returning to her bunk, she crawled up and lay staring at the ceiling. Her chest hurt where the girl had pushed her breast in a tight squeeze. That pain was only minor to the still healing scars and bruises. She suddenly became aware of her full situation. Turning on her side, she sought out Becca.

“Tell me about all the women here?” Tammy whispered as she ran a trembling hand down the sore curve of her face. The bruises were still vivid. Becca nodded. *Yes, this one was a fighter.*

Her mission now clear, she began to give Tammy the layout of the inmates. She spoke of the women and their crimes, and finally, what she knew about them. Tammy listened well into the lunch hours. They sat across the dining table as Becca reeled off stories and facts and any pertinent information she could think of. More than once, Tammy’s eyes grew wide as she began to get the whole picture.

Becca warned Tammy of a few others that might get in the younger woman’s face if Tammy ever crossed them but by far she had already made enemies of the two most well known shakers in the place. Snow and White were notorious for bullying and forcing their unwanted attentions on those too weak to protect

themselves. By catching her alone, their combined forces seemed to be the deciding factor on attacking her. She hoped it wouldn't happen again but shook her head at that strained comment.

"You've pretty much made an enemy of those two at this point. Take care to stay out of their reach. The only option I see that you can do is join a quarry team and hit the rocks." She saw Tammy's confused expression and smiled.

"I'll talk to Butch and see what we can do. She has a soft heart sometimes. Giving her your dessert for a month won't hurt either. Everything is barter here." Tammy shrugged her agreement, happy to let Becca take control for the moment.

#### Chapter 4

Becca guided Tammy out of the cell to go upstairs. Heading upward she looked to see if the woman she had first noticed was around, but she wasn't. Becca didn't stop on that level anyway. She continued up to the third floor and took a left along the north wing. At a particular cell, Becca paused and rapped her knuckles against the bars. A voice from inside it answered her in a deep southern drawl.

"Well, well, well. Book Worm and her new cellmate. I've heard you two were having all sorts of fun today." A tall, willowy, masculine looking woman with buzz cut hair, and wearing a black striped outfit, regarded them calmly. Tammy looked her over curiously.

"See anything you like?"

Tammy blushed, and looked down. Becca tsk'd as she lightly scolded the manly woman.

"She is totally new, Butch. You're just going to confuse her."

Butch unfolded and stood up, sauntering to the cell entrance. She reached up and hung, slouching, from the bars above. Her tall frame loomed over the shorter two women. Strangely, Tammy was not intimidated and had to restrain a smile. Butch tilted her head to the side and regarded the young woman. Her brown eyes searched for some hint of the thoughts that might be running through her pretty visitor's mind.

"She sure didn't need any help with the sisters. Heard she broke Snow's nose. Gonna be hell to pay on that one."

Tammy started to speak but was stopped by a gentle touch on her wrist.

“I was wondering about that, Butch. You sure seem to be in the know. You keep tabs on the sewing group? That sounds like Carla’s area to me. Did she pass along this information or was it someone else?” Becca played a card she had known about for months on Butch’s little stool pigeon she’d planted into the sewing circle. The small bit of community threat made the tall woman stand up straight and ponder her options. Carla was well known for throwing a fit about her territory, even if it was an older group of inmates working in the poke. There wasn’t any need for Becca to spell it out.

Her friendly smile vanished. She studied Becca directly. Becca blinked and held her ground. After a moment Butch just smiled and relaxed back into her slouching position.

“What exactly did you stop by for, Bookie? I’m sure you’re just a bit tired from climbing all those stairs. Did you bring your friend here to introduce to me?” Becca and Butch traded glances and a silent deal seemed to be struck. Tammy wondered about it, until Becca spoke.

“We need a slot on the 8am team. She needs to be scarce for a week or so. Let Snow and White calm their happy asses down a notch. Think you can accommodate us?” Becca asked. Butch slowly began to nod. The members of the quarry team were selected by the team leaders and other than Stone’s group, Butch was the only other quarry connection in this joint. There were two daily teams with no more than 10 women on each.

Tammy felt Butch evaluating her and her body. She looked back directly, not feeling any fear of this woman. After a moment she thought she recognized a friendly glint of laughter in those brown eyes. Breaking her stare, she missed the glance Becca and Butch exchanged. Butch gave a small grin and shrugged.

“She’ll be fine. I’ll show her the ropes,” Butch promised grinning at Tammy. “It would be my pleasure, ma’am. Just so long as you don’t get my team in an uproar, I’ll be happy to help you out.”

The two women left, headed back downstairs. Reaching the second level, Tammy grabbed Becca by the arm and pointed toward Stone’s cell.

“Who is she?” Tammy felt an overwhelming urge to walk down there. Becca just patted the hand that was holding her arm.

“That’s Stone, dear. You’ll either meet her or not. She will be the one to make that choice.” Becca urged Tammy down because chow was in five minutes and they needed to get over to the right hallway to stand in line. Tammy made a point to remember to give Butch her dessert. Feeling a weariness sweep over her at all the rules she had to absorb, a brief flash of her sons’ faces made her tremble and close her eyes. For them she would learn, knowing she had to

fight. She fell into the food line and shuffled along desolately. Feeling a prickle of unease cross her neck she looked around. Stone was staring in her direction. Swallowing a sudden dryness in her throat, she dropped her gaze. When she glanced back up, the strong looking woman had turned away. Feeling a sense of loss rising inside her, she faced forward in the line and fought the intense urge to seek out that gaze once more.

Stone studied the latest inmate surreptitiously from her spot in the slow lunch line. The bruising looked much more intense up close. The metal tray she held in her hand creaked with strain as her grip on it tightened. Stone looked down in surprise; the edge of her tray was bent. She frowned. Reaching the food counter, she held out her tray, disregarding the flirtatious servers that acted like sluts in front of her. When she looked over to the new girl, she was walking off with Becca. Stone gathered her spoon and napkin and turned toward her own table in the back.

## Chapter 5

“So we hop on the truck and the goons take us out to the quarry. Then we start sweating like pigs. You may want to change into the prison uniform just to be able to work. Your choice, Twig,” Butch commented with a little smirk at using Tammy’s new nickname. Some of the other inmates were laughing at the story circulating about Tammy’s daring tree branch defense. Tammy practically buried her head in her tray as the few women at her table overheard the story being passed around the room. One heavier woman’s comment that Tammy was just a twig herself trying to fight off two grown men with a branch had everyone calling her ‘Twig’, or some derivative of it before the end of dinner time. Tammy didn’t even try and fight it. Twig was better than murderer anyway. She unconsciously avoided following that disastrous train of thought, which would lead to the heartbreaking loss of her children. Since she was placed into the state’s penal system, she hadn’t spoken about her sons even once.

An hour past dawn the next day, a group of ten women waited for a truck to pick them up from the prison gate to the quarry. Butch scratched the tip of a wooden match with her thumb to produce a flame that she touched to her cigarette. She offered Twig the spare desert horse she’d bummed from another inmate. Tucking the declined cig behind her ear, Butch sucked in the nicotine and checked over her small group. The view was definitely better this morning with little Miss Lollapalooza. Twig was definitely unusual, beautiful, but unusual. Butch assumed the responsibility of updating Twig on the routine. Her tiny crewmember soaked up the rules and followed the willowy woman’s lead as they boarded the truck and rode down into the quarry. The women jumped from the bed of the truck, picked up either a pickaxe or a sledgehammer each, and trudged over to the rocks to begin pounding.

The only moment of distraction came when a second group of women arrived on another truck an hour later. The entire first group, already sweating and thirsty from working in the dusty white powder of quarry rock, heard the sharp blast of a whistle, signaling a break. Twig was learning from watching the others pick and sledge the small cantaloupe sized rocks into smaller size rocks. She continued to work diligently until Butch hollered in her direction.

“Come get some water. We're going to be out here all day; you should get a drink when you can. You'll get sick if you don't drink something.”

Twig lugged the heavy pickaxe she had chosen over to a stack of tools and let it fall. The other women were sprawled out onto various boulders with tin cups of water in hand. The quarry guards stood against the far end of the canyon wall with rifles and cigarettes, watching. Someone pushed a cup into her hands. She swallowed gulps of the fresh cool water, clearing the dust from her parched throat. The other team's chatter echoed up into the walls and caught Twig's attention. She turned to look down at the long fissure they were mining. The second crew was moving down into the valley with pickaxes and sledgehammers. One figure stood tall and huge, standing out among the others. Less than 200 feet from Butch's assigned work area, Stone was overseeing her brood of quarry rats in the area she wanted to work in.

Distracted when the women around her suddenly stood up and began handing their cups down to someone who returned them to the truck bed, Twig lost sight of Stone. Grabbing their tools once again, they made their way back to the small area from before and began to pound and strike the rocks. The echo of steel scraping over unyielding surfaces filled the air. Twig moved over to a larger rock and lifted the heavy pickaxe to let it fall, and bounce off the surface. A small mark showed for her efforts. She repeated the move and around the sixth strike, the multiple marks became a tiny groove. The rock was not impervious to her attack after all. Twig ignored the sensitive pressure spots building on her palms from the grip and use of her pick.

A motion in the corner of her eye made her pause. Stone was close by, just lifting her sledgehammer up and swinging from over her shoulder. Gravity and the full-bodied swing made the downward stroke whistle a warning of power as the steel sledge cut through the air. Twig jumped at the explosive first contact on a huge rock. The impressive strength hypnotized Twig. She couldn't tear her eyes away from watching the thin cotton shirt stretch out tightly over the broad shoulders and muscles bunched beneath the clothing. She caught her breath when the boulder burst apart to become multiple rocks within three swings. Twig shivered at the sheer precision of the brutal force Stone wielded confidently.

She turned to lift her pickaxe once more to drop it onto the rock at her feet. As the steel chinked into the surface she began to find a rhythm for the task. Lift, release, strike, swing the pickaxe back into position, lift, release, and strike, over

and over she repeated the task. Fifteen minutes later, she was drenched in sweat and still hadn't broken the rock. Her arms were trembling and her legs were aching. She paused to take a breather and rest from her exertion. She lifted her gaze from the vivid scoring on the rock and found Stone standing nearby. They stared at each other for a moment.

A slight tilt of that jet-black head toward the rock Twig was fighting was a clear offer to help the fatigued woman. A momentary surge of relief, quickly followed by an equally intense surge of stubbornness ran through Twig's spirit. She frowned.

Ducking her head, for a moment she tried to figure out why she was feeling so irritated by the straightforward offer of help. While she contemplated her indecision, Stone stepped forward and lifted her sledgehammer. The abrupt downward motion of the steelhead moving through the air had Twig stepping back. The rock shook violently after it was struck. Stone hefted the sledgehammer ready. Twig looked into the unwavering steel-eyed gaze with a frightened protest forming. Stone nodded pointedly at Tammy's hands.

She realized she still held the pickaxe, its solid weight rooting her in place. She automatically lifted the tool. She took a quick glance at Stone who was waiting. Twig stepped one pace closer and emulated the other woman's moves. She gave a strong swing and the chink of the steel against stone caused a small piece of rock to fly off the surface, giving proof she'd hit her target. She blinked at Stone and was momentarily frightened as the sledgehammer rose again beside her. Stone struck the rock solidly and again paused, waiting for Twig. Twig lifted her pickaxe and let it hit again. They soon began a steady rhythm. Slowly and methodically, they began to take turns pounding at the boulder. After twenty blows the rock fell apart into three smaller hunks.

Twig lowered her pick and rolled her shoulders. She would be sore tomorrow, but inside she felt strangely euphoric. Her energy level was buoyed even as she breathed in the dust and heat. A curl at the corner of her lips was the only noticeable emotion as she stood looking down among the trio of rubble they had created.

Stone pointed to another nearby rock and then walked over to it. Twig only followed when it was obvious that Stone was waiting for her. Twig began to pound the stone, alternating with the every steady strike that Stone made. And this began her real introduction into the quarry work. As they moved together from boulder to boulder, Stone would sometimes murmur for Twig to stop and rest, or strike another area, pacing her rhythm and pausing when needed.

Butch eyed the two women curiously as they worked. She noticed their almost silent communications and the way they moved together so perfectly, unconsciously, each one in tune with the other. Running a hand over her damp

scalp, she conceded that the smaller woman was now involved with Stone, whether they knew it or not.

Oblivious to her quarry team leader's thoughts, Tammy gratefully scrambled onto her truck five hours later with Butch's team. On the journey to Calamanco, she thought about Stone and her first day in a quarry. A slight niggling remained whenever she became distracted by thoughts of the shy muscular woman but the clearest and most powerful feeling was one of accomplishment for herself, and it made her blink away a sudden rush of tears. For the first time in her life she felt strong. Her bruised and aching body was filthy but her satisfaction at a job well done overran the pain. Her heart now beat with a sense of purpose, all thanks to Stone.

## Chapter 6

The pattern continued as Tammy began a routine in the quarry, pairing up with Stone when she arrived. Other inmates noted the growing comfort between the two and passed along the information in gossip. The inmates began to see Twig in a new light and her status changed dramatically. Only a few days into the system and she was no longer referred to as the "new fish".

Becca watched Twig closely, hoping that she might want someone to confide in, but the distracted woman remained quiet.

One day, Snow stopped by their shared cell while Twig was away, the white bandage across her nose enhanced the darkness of her bruised black skin. She mumbled nasally to Becca, who moved a step closer to hear better, and was suddenly grabbed and slammed up against a wall. Becca gasped at the violent motion.

"You understand she is fresh meat for the taking?" Snow hissed. "Don't think I won't get me some of that. You make sure you let her know I have plans. I think this little bitch is going to become my Bimbo. And just so she understands, I'm gonna leave a little message for her."

With that remark, Snow released Becca and raised her clenched fist, ready to deliver it backhand to her cornered mark. Becca saw the fist and steeled herself to take the blow but it never came.

Stone appeared at her cell doorway, grabbing and holding Snow's fist in her sizable hand. Snow was spun to face the larger woman with a harsh yank on her hand. A grimace flashed across her dark features.

"Leave," was the only command Stone gave. Snow winced visibly as the larger hand tightened around her clenched fist once in warning. Her own fingernails bit into her palm. She nodded and her hand was released. She didn't even look

back at the Book Worm as she sidled around the unmoving wall of Stone's body. Stone looked over at Becca, her gaze direct. Becca blinked.

Stone held out a tube of lotion. "For her." Becca looked at the precious and highly sought after commodity and reached over taking it carefully from Stone's outstretched hand.

Holding the lotion in her still slightly trembling hands. She murmured a soft "Thank you," as she realized Stone had just saved her from some serious pain. Stone moved away, but Becca heard the reply clearly. "Welcome."

#

The whole incident was related to Twig when she returned to her cell. The lotion was given to her but she just stared at it. Becca frowned; the slowly budding relationship between the two women was going to take forever if Twig didn't wake up soon. Coming out of her daze to check Becca over more sharply, she questioned her.

"She didn't hurt you, did she?" Becca shook her head, watching as Twig clutched the tube of lotion closer to her chest.

"Would you like me to rub some of that on your back? I've heard you groan every time you get in and out of bed. It will make you feel better." Becca almost grinned as Twig squeaked, "Oh, please!"

"Lie on my bed and take off your shirt. I'll give ya a quick rub down and you can enjoy it until tomorrow's work out." Twig gave a huge sigh as she turned toward the bunk, unbuttoned her smock and pushed it to her waist. She laid face down, groaning out loud as soon as Becca began to rub the lotion in. Ten minutes later, she was fast asleep.

#

"Thank you for the lotion." Twig gave Stone a sincere look filled with gratitude. Stone nodded and clenched the handle of her sledgehammer tighter. Twig thought that might be the only response she would receive so she started to lift her pickaxe.

"It smells nice. Not like inside." Stone's soft-spoken comment surprised Twig and struck her deeply with the truth of the fact. She could still smell the clean floral scent of it on her body. A deeply indrawn breath made her feel more lighthearted than she'd been for the longest time.

"It smells clean, like my youngest son after he's had his bath and changed into a new diaper." The comment made her instantly ache with loss. The pickaxe fell

from her hands as she clutched her sides to contain the emotional agony she'd been denying. She barely felt the strong arms wrap around her and lift her up. She didn't hear the voices of Butch, Stone and two of the guards as Stone requested permission to take her back to the prison.

The next thing she knew, she was being cradled close to Stone while they rode in the rear of the truck returning them. She heard a soft song being sung and she began to cry. Stone tucked her head into her neckline, her fingers stroking Twig's hair over and over. Twig shuddered through her sobs, clutching Stone for comfort. Twig barely registered being carried to her cell or being tucked into her bunk, but she felt Stone's warmth leaving her side. She weakly captured the woman's hand.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Stone shook her head, saying, "Don't be. It's your family. They will need you when you get out. They are waiting." Stone's eyes grew haunted for a moment. Feeling a hollow ache for the raw expression she had seen, Twig squeezed the hand she still held. She realized Stone had no family on the outside.

"I'll introduce them to you when we get out of here. I promise." Stone looked down at her, lips parted in surprise. Twig willed Stone to believe her.

The two women might have stayed there staring at each other all day, if the guard standing outside hadn't chosen that moment to clear his throat. Stone reluctantly withdrew her hand but not her gaze. Twig craned her neck to follow her movements until she was out of range, before closing her eyes to sleep.

## Chapter 7

The sewing group returned from their shift and split into various cliques to socialize before chow. Becca headed to her cell to find Twig in her bed. Her arrival woke Twig and fresh tears started as the story of her lost children was revealed to the older woman. Becca sat next to Twig and rubbed her back, offering her sympathy and comfort. The younger woman eventually quieted, exhausted from her emotional outbreak.

Becca suggested, and Twig agreed, that she needed to freshen up. Twig gathered her belongings and headed over to the showers. Curious beady black eyes followed her progress as she walked across the floor and joined three other women who obviously had the same idea.

White pushed off from the leaning position she held against a back wall near the social tables to make her way upstairs to Snow's cell.

Twig cleaned up and knew Becca was correct – the shower had made her feel better. She stroked a comb through her hair, untangling its fine strands. The slight drop of water onto the collar of her clean smock went unnoticed as Twig examined the fading bruises of her cheek and jaw, grimacing at the sight. The small stitches were supposed to come out soon.

Turning to leave the small sink area, she found Snow and White lurking at the entrance. Twig swallowed fearfully and slowly backed up to the far wall. Snow attempted to grin through her bandages bunching up macabre-like. White scowled at Twig.

Twig spied a mop and bucket in the corner and grabbed the mop, holding it like a bat, with the wooden end poking outward to fend off the women who were slowly closing in.

“You need to put that down, girl. I’ve come to get my dues.” Snow grumbled as she walked within five feet of Twig. Twig swiped at her, forcing Snow to jerk backward to avoid a nasty strike.

“Now is that any way to treat your new Missus, bitch?” Snow motioned White to circle and they both moved to opposite sides. In that moment, Twig was struck with the clarity of that night when she failed to rescue her children, when the cops used the same tactics to capture her. She kicked out with her foot and tipped the bucket full of black water towards White. The motion startled the advancing women, giving Twig just enough time to gain the extreme corner of the room. With her back to the wall, she had clearance to do serious damage to anyone. Snow roared as she lunged at the little mark.

A vicious swing from Twig's mop handle left Snow to clutch her arm in agony. White took that opportunity to rush in and received an equally brutal blow to her thigh muscle. She yelped in pain. Snow was now beyond angry. She blocked the blows raining down on her from Twig, who wielded the mop like it was an extension of her body. Snow swung a fist at Twig, scoring a hit on her face that rang her ears and split her lip. Dizzy with pain, Twig still managed to jerk the mop handle free and swung upward, using a sudden lurch to strike directly between Snow’s legs. Snow dropped to her knees, her dark face pale with pain. White jumped between the stick and the wall and grabbed the smaller woman, growling victoriously. Twig was trapped tight. She began to struggle, her vision already dancing from the blow to her head.

Panicked, she did the one thing she knew had worked before. She dropped her head forward and with all her might, slammed it backward. She was released immediately as she heard and felt White’s nose crush from the blow. Twig staggered for the door.

She was almost free when she was tackled from behind. She fell down hard onto the tiled floor and was flipped onto her back, her head ringing. Snow straddled her and began to punch her face. After the third blow, Twig blacked out.

#

*Oh God. It happened again. He promised me. He always promised. Did Chris see? Are my babies all right? Oh God. What's that noise? It's a cell door closing. I'm in prison. Why can't I open my eyes? I'm moving?*

"You're going to be alright. We have you on a gurney. Just a little further to go. We are taking you to the medical wing." Twig turned her face toward the distinctive soft voice near her. She relaxed some, knowing Stone was beside her. She felt a rough hand gently grasp hers and she clutched at it with all her strength. She held tight to the one thing she knew was secure in her life, a friend.

The sound of another gate opening made Twig lift her free hand to touch her face. She couldn't see. Stone stopped her hand and whispered assuring, "The Doc bandaged your head. You struck the floor hard and your right eye is swollen. He wants to examine it in the hospital. Just hang on for a bit and he'll fix you up." Twig almost smiled at the raspiness of Stone's voice. Stone was out of practice but her concerned attempt to give some comfort made Twig feel special.

The bed stopped moving and a man's voice spoke above her. He sounded professional as he described examining her head and abrasions. He helped her to sit upright. A heated lamp was turned toward her face. Twig struggled to see but the bright light made her wince and her vision was distorted. The sharp throbbing ache in her head made her want to throw up.

Stone never let go of her hand. In a soft voice, she spoke about her brother and their youth, keeping Twig occupied with her stories as the doctor probed her bruised skull.

The doctor stepped outside for a moment with the nurse. Twig drew in a shaky breath and, although she couldn't see the woman beside her, she exclaimed her deepest fears.

"I should have let them kill me."

Stone frowned and gently rubbed her thumb over the hand gripping hers. Shaking her head, she murmured, "No". She gently stroked the strands of hair away from Twig's sweaty face, letting her fingers trail down her temple to her jaw. "You'd be missed."

Twig bowed her head, tilting her face slightly to rest in Stone's palm. Her closed eyes fill with tears. She let them fall, knowing she wouldn't be judged by this sweet woman. The doctor returned and gave her a sedative. Slowly, Twig relaxed and her hand loosened its grip. Stone sat holding the limp fingers in her own long after sleep was claimed.

The Doc, listening in on the conversation, was amazed that the little speck of a girl could get Stone to talk to her. He remained quiet, realizing for the first time that Stone had a new friend. He would inform the guards that Stone could stay to assist in Twig's recovery.

Stone sat as still as her namesake, guarding the sleeping figure intently.

"She will be better in a few days. See if you can keep her away from the motor car that ran over her." Stone never moved but he noticed her muscular frame tense beneath her uniform at his sarcastic remark. Doc knew he should probably prepare a few more beds. Whoever was behind this beating was in for one hell of an awakening when paybacks came around.

#

The next time Twig could clean herself, she was escorted to the showers not only by her cell mate but, oddly enough, Butch. For some reason the tall woman found the idea of Twig being attacked truly upsetting. She liked the girl. The trio walked slowly to accommodate Twig's sore muscles. Her eyes were less swollen and now open, but still black and blue. She looked worse than the night she'd first arrived.

Butch and Becca told Twig of the commotion Stone caused when she suddenly showed up at the sewing room. Becca's sewing circle stopped chatting when someone pointed out the quiet figure at the entrance.

Stone glanced over at Becca and nodded her head. Becca nodded back, curiosity in her eyes. Scanning the occupants in the wash and drying details, and of the water drums in the rear, she found whom she was searching for. Stone straightened with a purpose and began to head toward the inmates in the back. Becca dumped her sewing gear and quickly tried to intercept the hulking woman.

She was a good twenty feet away from the spot when Snow and White were picked up by their smocks and lifted simultaneously into the air. The entire roomful of women stopped all motion and stared at their hapless dangling figures. Stone tightened her grip ominously on the material around their necks. The two women began to struggle against the iron fist holding them aloft.

“Don’t hurt them Stone. They aren’t worth it. You can’t turn back time.” Becca pleaded for Stone to reconsider. Stone lift them higher. White was nearly unconscious. Snow was bug-eyed and weakly pounding on the arm before her.

“She wouldn’t like it, Stone,” Becca reasoned, knowing she’d struck a nerve as the one woman in the entire prison everyone said was missing a heart let a single tear escape. Stone lowered the two women from up high and pushed them away. Both women collapsed, coughing and dragging in gulps of air.

Turning to Becca, a deadly anger burned in Stone’s gaze. Becca was almost afraid until she saw another emotion etched onto the chilling features. Bitter guilt lurked in the depths of those slate eyes.

“You’re not to blame, Stone. You didn’t cause this.” Becca had a flash of insight as she realized Stone’s circumstances in being incarcerated in the first place. She reached over and touched her arm. “It’s not your fault. It was never your fault.”

Stone couldn’t explain how close Becca came to the truth. Nobody knew about her brother’s drug addiction or the terrible fight Stone had warred trying to keep her brother from overdosing. The drug dealer received her wrath when she finally found her young sibling lying dead with evidence of drugs surrounding him and the dealer telling her to dump his young body. She could still feel the angry surge from that night when she looked at the man called Mason and saw his smirk of amusement at her obvious anguish. His final statement, telling her that her brother was a lost cause, made her to snap. Killing him had been easy. Afterwards, she melted into despair. Revenge did nothing. She had still failed to save her brother and she felt the guilt of that failure deep in her bones. Now Twig had been hurt too. It broke through her defenses to see her friend in pain, but hurting the culprits would do nothing in the long run.

Stone dropped her gaze to whisper a strangled, “Thank you.”

Without a glance at the two unfortunate women who’d experienced her overpowering display of strength, Stone turned and left the room. Becca walked over to the still coughing women, leaned down, and whispered a short comment to Snow. Snow shook her head and still grasping her burning neck, she waved a weak hand at Becca to get her to leave. Those two women would never mess with Twig again.

Butch laughed and laughed as Becca repeated the comment she had made to Snow. Twig groaned and went over to the shower to remove days of grime from her aching body. Becca just chuckled.

“Sticks and Stones can sure hurt, can’t they, girls?” Becca caught the washcloth Twig threw at her.

## Chapter 8

A few weeks later, Stone was escorting the smaller woman to the shower facilities as Twig requested. Standing awkwardly facing a nearby wall, Stone waited for Twig to disrobe and shower. They both felt nervous at the situation and Twig spent only a short amount of time bathing.

Stone glanced in her friend's direction only after Twig got dressed and indicated that she was ready to walk back. Looking the taller woman over she noticed her flushed features.

"Are you alright, Stone? You look like you might be coming down with a fever."

Stone shook her head. "Heat from the shower." Her brief explanation was the most Twig could get. Sometimes stilted was enough. Stone was improving though. Every once in a while, Twig would get an entire paragraph of information stated from the reserved woman.

Returning Twig to her cell, Stone started to leave when Twig stopped her in her tracks with a breathless request.

"Would you rub some lotion on my back?" Twig handed Stone the tube and turned to lay half naked on Becca's bunk.

Stone's soft touch had both women drawing in a deep breath. Rough palms, slick with lotion, slid across the smooth expanse of Twig's back. Stone caressed and kneaded the muscles as her eyes roamed the smooth skin. Twig practically purred with delight. She did release a moan when Stone rubbed the lotion down near her lower back.

Twig turned her head to look at the larger woman and found blue-gray eyes hooded, her gaze hard to read. Squeezing more lotion on her hands, she ran them over Twig's shoulders and down her arms. Her large hands grazed the sides of her chest. Twig closed her eyes with the delicious feelings coursing through her body.

A few very silent minutes passed. Feeling weak Stone stood up from the bunk.

"I have to go. I should take a shower before showers close. I'll see you tomorrow." She choked out and quickly left.

Twig pulled the smock up and buttoned it slowly. Her body was still tingling warmly. She licked her lips, vowing to find out why.

Two months and six massages later, Twig was staring at a new tube of lotion. It was another gift Stone dropped off while she was away from her cell. Biting her

lip with the various thoughts running through her head, she recognized the excitement at the ideas she was imagining.

She was still standing near her bunk when Becca walked in with a fresh stack of books. Amazingly, Stone had quite a collection of medicinal books she had collected and maintained in her cell. One day, she brought down two and began to loan them to the true Book Worm. Becca practically devoured the new material. She began to spout terms that made Twig wince with their complexity.

“What is wrong?” Becca questioned the strange expression on Twig’s face. Twig looked up and blushed. Becca raised an eyebrow; her innocent questions were causing quite a few blushes lately. Becca sighed and walked over to her bunk to read the leather bound books she had just retrieved. Ignoring the obviously confused and anxious younger woman, she opened the first book.

“I want to kiss her. Does that make me bad?” Twig asked, a slight waver in her voice. Becca pretended to be interested in the tiny print while contemplating an answer.

“Do you feel like it would be a bad thing?” Becca finally commented, staying neutral. Twig slowly shook her head from side to side. Her movements gaining confidence as she thought of her desires.

Becca glanced at Twig. Smiling at her cellmate, she voiced her thoughts on the subject.

“I think you need to tell someone how you feel in order to know if they return the feelings. You won’t ever know until you ask. Bad is just a simple word one uses to describe that ill feeling rising up when you do something against your nature. Do you think kissing her would make you feel bad?”

Twig’s blush deepened but she met Becca’s gaze head on, her bright green eyes shining.

“I can barely breathe when I think about kissing her. I don’t think I’ll be able to feel anything but the need for air.”

Becca grinned. “You’d better tell her quick then...before you hyper-ven-til-late.” She sounded out the word she had recently learned from one of the medical books Stone loaned her. Twig frowned, puzzled, but she just shrugged. “Pass out from lack of air.” Becca clarified.

“Oh! Okay.”

Twig left her cell in a slight daze and walked up to the second floor. Before she knew it, she was at Stone’s cell. Stone was brushing her teeth inside. She wore

an undershirt with her cotton button down wrapped around her waist. Her hair was damp. Twig was looking her over when she realized Stone was regarding her through a reflective piece of foil that was spread over a piece of wood, serving as a mirror, on her wall.

“Are you busy?” Twig managed to get out as Stone spit the rest of the toothpaste into the basin. Her head shake allowed Twig to enter the cell.

“I was thinking,” Twig began to try and explain what she had been thinking earlier then froze. Her nerves balked and she suddenly jumped ship, deciding on a whole new conversation. “The guards have been discussing the upcoming Governor's election. It sounds really close.” She fumbled with her topic, feeling the butterflies dancing in her stomach. Stone frowned.

Twig moved closer to the taller woman, her gaze landing and locking onto the lips she so wanted to kiss. Her eyes darkened with arousal at the idea. Stone dropped her toothbrush at the desire evident in Twig's eyes. A lick across her instantly dry lips made Twig visibly shiver.

“Twig, we can't...” Stone began.

“I want...you.” Twig said tremulously, her eyes showed her need as she raised them from Stone's lips to stare into the kindest soul she had ever met. Stone felt her heart begin to beat triple time. She had kept her desire in check for months. With one full step toward Twig, she reached out and enveloped the smaller woman in her arms.

She pressed their bodies together and breathed warm air into her face, the fresh toothpaste scent mingling between them. “Do you have any idea how much I want you too?” Stone caressed the beautiful features so close for the taking.

Twig smiled, her first full beautiful smile graced toward Stone was breathtaking. Stone lowered her forehead to rest against Twig's.

“Kiss me, Sara,” Tammy whispered. Stone blinked at the sound of her real name. She liked the sound of it. They both leaned in to close the gap, removing the distance of two inches between their lips to none. Pressing her mouth onto those delicious lips, Sara moaned. The pure bliss of the feelings the kiss invoked smoothed the damage done to both their souls. Sara trembled at the slide of Tammy's hands as they encircled her waist. Her own hand moved down the slender form she held; the other cradling silken hair. Their kiss deepened. A tentative tongue licked over Tammy's lips, pressing inward. Tammy felt her knees go weak. She met the invading tongue with her own, as they tasted each other's passion. The heat of their arousal grew. Sara pulled Tammy closer, enjoying something she thought she would never feel for another. She released a growl of excitement when she felt Tammy wrap around her.

They're lips broke apart as they both gulped in much needed air. Their gaze never wavered from each other as they finalized a bond between them that their hearts had recognized the first time they'd laid eyes on each other.

"I won't ever hurt you, sweetheart, I promise," Sara vowed. Tammy smiled up at her hearts desire.

"I know."

#

The following year, in the early months of 1935, the United States Government passed a reform to close and redistribute the densely inhabited inmates of all Women's Penitentiaries of Hard Labor Camps. The political rally was used to show the voters' politics had a heart. Thomas spent hours and hours with the Calamanco files to bring them to the world. Calamanco became the second prison the recumbent governor of North Carolina chose to dismantle. Through the government's guidance, the Governor was authorized to appoint a Pardon and Parole Board of five members. Thomas personally brought the case files of the lives of 61 women to the board for pardon. Fifty-two women were pardoned and released based on his recommendations.

Becca, Sara and Tammy found themselves free from the confines of a prison system that had held them in limbo. The three women faced a long gravel road, one covered with the fruits of their quarry labors. Sara clenched her jaw and looked south along the dirt road.

"Let's go find your boys, my love. They need their mama." Sara smiled at Tammy, making her blink away tears. Becca nodded in agreement.

"I can't wait to meet these gentlemen, Tammy. Let's do that."

Tammy drew in a deep breath and nodded. They began walking away from Calamanco with a purpose, heading toward a new life.

EPILOGUE:

The two women spent the rest of their lives together. They shared many ups and some downs. A huge loss for them was when Becca passed away. Christopher and Jaime attended her funeral, the young men crying openly at the loss of their Grandma.

Sara and Tammy, tearless, locked arms as they stood over the grave. Their minds recalling many wonderful moments in their lives they shared with the only mother they ever recognized. They silently wished their friend and companion a safe journey.

At the service, Sara, now sixty-four, stood up to speak to everyone about her dearly departed friend. She smiled at all the people gathered there; her eyes filled with unshed tears as she spoke about the many blessings Becca had been gifted with.

Having helped raise her adopted grandsons, Christopher and Jaime Turner, Becca fulfilled a dream. Christopher was now married, had three young children, and Jaime had a son and daughter. The youngest girl was named Theresa Becca Turner, after her Great-Grandmother. Sara looked at her partner and tilted her head thinking of their beginning. She smiled as Tammy nodded for her to continue.

“Becca was a kind soul, a happy person most of her life, and a wonderful grandmother. Her bookworm tendencies will be well received in heaven. She will be missed.” Tammy wiped at her own tear filled eyes, smiling at Sara and the eulogy.

Tammy stood up to speak about her dearest friend. She told about Becca helping them build the bed and breakfast, named Ladies Lodge after the Sewing Circle. Becca, Sara and she worked together to begin the business and get the funds that helped raise her sons. Tammy thanked everyone for coming and stepped away from the podium.

Sara offered Tammy a hand and helped her to her seat. The gesture just one of many Tammy found endearing from her partner. Their sons sat handsome and distinguished down the pew from them. Tammy held onto Sara’s hand and squeezed it tightly. Leaning nearer, Sara silently supported Tammy. The two of them had accomplished everything they set out to do after leaving Calamanco. They were sharing their lives together, happily, which was the one promise they made to each other.

After the service ended, the two women moved down the aisle together, helping each other, their togetherness comfortably easy. Each step they had taken broke through barriers as they forged a life and a family. But, both women knew the fight was worth everything. Each barrier, broken down with perseverance, was used to build life back up. With love they built the strongest bonds, solid and unwavering, a thousand times as hard as stone.