

Excerpt from
Soulful Strut

By
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Chapter 1

Monette gazed at the scenery as the Lexus cruised along. Hardly a bump penetrated the luxury ride. What a contrast between how she arrived to start her prison stay almost fifteen years before and how she was leaving. The whisper quiet air conditioner pushed the scent of leather mixed with fresh cut grass from outside. Nothing like the earthy smells of the prison bus she'd ridden to the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women. Not to mention what she'd endured during her stay there. Warden Yvonda Taylor's sour expression had made Monette's day even brighter. Warden Taylor had never believed her story or supported her applications for parole.

“See ya later,” Warden Taylor had drawled as she stood watching Monette leave.

“Hold your breath and wait.” Monette started to give her a final wave goodbye with only one finger extended but Lucy caught her arm.

Though her lawyer scowled Monette merely shrugged. She'd shown restraint in her view. What she really wanted to say involved several colorful expletives. They had managed to elude the three reporters hovering outside the prison gate. With Jim on her right and his law clerk Lucy Chen on the left, he made sure they marched lock step to the car giving Monette no more chances to comment. Now miles away he seemed to relax. At every highway marker Monette glanced back. Each mile away from LCIW was that

much sweeter. Jim drove straight to the NBC affiliate television station in Baton Rouge to give an exclusive first interview. Ten minutes later Monette was on her way to her new life in the world, the real world.

“God bless America,” she murmured.

“What was that?” Jim asked, turning his head for a second before looking ahead at traffic again.

“She’s glad to be out,” his law clerk Lucy Chen commented from the back seat with a wide smile. The twenty-five year old looked crisp in her white cotton shirt and blood red skirt.

“Amen, sistah. To think last night I was in a prison cell. This morning I’m smiling into a television camera talking Katie Couric on national TV.” Monette laughed and gave Jim a playful swat on the shoulder. “The warden probably spit out her coffee when she saw me.”

Jim didn’t join in their laughter. “The director of New Beginnings probably isn’t amused one darn bit. We’re over an hour late for your admission.”

“It will be alright,” Monette said.

“Let’s hope so. We need her on our side when we go before the Pardon Board,” Jim replied. His dark brows pulled together. He gazed at Monette hard.

“I’m going to be on my best behavior, follow the rules and be so full of ‘Yes, ma’am’, ‘No, ma’am’ and ‘How high you want me to jump, ma’am?’ that y’all won’t recognize me,” Monette answered with a nod.

“You got that right,” Lucy quipped. She merely smirked when Monette darted a glare at her over one shoulder.

“I mean it, Jim. I’m not going to mess up so don’t worry. I’m sure Ms. Sherman will understand. Just relax.” Monette gave him a reassuring smile this time. When Jim smiled back he seemed to loosen up.

Monette did not want to betray his trust in her. After all, Jim Rand and The Justice Project was the biggest reason she’d gotten out at all. He’d put in long hours building the case for her parole, giving media interviews and taking a lot of heat on her behalf. Monette only hoped his reputation and career hadn’t been irreparably harmed because of her.

“Here we are.” Jim shifted into park but didn’t turn off the engine.

Monette looked at the neighborhood. In the distance she saw the modest skyline of downtown Baton Rouge. The houses were old-fashioned wooden structures built back in the thirties, forties and fifties. Most had wide front porches. This area had obviously been more prosperous once. Although some were neatly kept, most of the homes showed their age in a bad way. A few of the houses were downright shabby with trash strewn in the scrubby front yards.

“You would think they could choose a better part of town for a halfway house,” Lucy said. She glanced around as though unwilling to leave the car. She put a hand on her small fashionable handbag.

“I know that part of L.A. you came from. What about those Asian girl gangbangers?” Monette said.

“Which is why I don’t live there anymore, thank you very much.”

“So now you’re all refined. Don’t act like you so scared. Anybody look at that tiny purse too hard and you’d put some of that ancient Chinese butt kickin’ on ‘em,” Monette wisecracked. Lucy started to laugh then stopped.

“Wouldn’t try it with them.” Lucy nodded as she looked through the car window.

Monette followed her gaze. She eyed a group of swaggering teenagers. One of them puckered his lips and made a kissing sound at Lucy as they walked by. “You’ve got a point. Jim, maybe this isn’t such a good deal after all.”

“I checked. The crime statistics for this area show few serious police calls,” Jim replied with a calm expression. He did not bother to glance at the boys. He turned to Monette. “New Beginnings is around the corner. I wanted us to have one last talk.”

“No more lectures. For the tenth time- I will blend in and not get involved in any controversy. Now let’s go,” Monette said firmly, struggling to be patient with her jumpy attorney.

“I just wanted to suggest that we make this entrance as low key as possible,” Jim replied just as firmly.

“Then we’d better go. Like you said I’m already over an hour past the time I was supposed report,” Monette shot back.

“Right.” Jim frowned as he faced forward again and shifted into drive. They turned onto Louisiana Avenue. Three blocks down they stopped in front of a large two story house with a wide stone porch.

“Oh-oh,” Lucy pointed to a van and two cars with television station logos on their sides. Reporters were already on the sidewalk in front of New Beginnings along with camera people.

“The welcome committee, huh? Bring it on.” Monette flipped down the visor and checked her look in the lighted mirror.

“Damn,” Jim muttered as he hit the button to release his seat belt. He got out of the car and approached the reporters.

“Maybe you should just smile and keep quiet,” Lucy advised. She lifted one perfectly arched black eyebrow. She let out a hiss when Monette fluffed her hair.

“Why should I duck and hide? I was wrongly convicted by a system that persecuted me for being Black and female. I— ”

“I know, I know. Just thought it was worth a try.” Lucy unbuckled her seat belt.

“Hey, I signed a parole agreement to seek employment. I’m a writer and I’ve got books to sell.” Monette got out of the car and walked over to stand beside Jim with her held high.

“The Parole Board and the governor recognized that an injustice had been done. Ms. Victor deserves to be pardoned. However, that application is still pending,” Jim said with a grave expression.

“Is it likely that the FBI will investigate Winn Barron as a result of this case?” A blonde female reporter asked.

“Ms. Victor’s civil rights were violated. She was deprived of her freedom because of illegal actions. Anyone who examines the evidence will conclude that she was framed. Mr. Barron misused his position a district attorney of Pointe Coupee Parish to falsify evidence and pressure her co-defendants into committing perjury.”

“Ms. Victor, how does it feel to be free after almost fifteen years?” A pretty African-American reporter said with abroad smile. A second woman with her carried a compact digital video camera.

“Wonderful. I’m eager to build my life. Notice I didn’t say I’d rebuild my life. I’ve got to start from scratch. And I should because my life before this injustice wasn’t great. I made a lot of bad choices. Now I’m moving forward with my book and more.” Monette wore a sober yet hopeful expression, her head tilted to one side.

“Is it true you may be offered your own radio talk show?” A newspaper reporter held up a tiny recorder.

“Anything is possible. That’s the fabulous thing about freedom.” Monette was prepared to say more but Jim put a hand on her arm.

“Thank you. Now please excuse us,” he said.

The two television reporters went in opposite directions to record their individual wrap up comments. Monette lingered to watch them so she could pick up tips as Jim gave more comments to a newspaper reporter. Her agent and publicist had done a great job. She did indeed have tentative offers to host her own talk show from one radio network and a local access channel. Nothing big, but it was a good start.

“You may recall that Winn Barron was forced to resign as Attorney General of this state under a cloud. Before he was elected to that office he was the District Attorney of Pointe Coupee Parish. Barron personally prosecuted Monette Victor. Ten years later his then chief investigator came forward to support her allegations against Barron. Ms. Victor had for years claimed that Barron framed her for shunning his advances.” The male reporter went on to succinctly describe the scandal that led to Monette’s release.

“We really better go inside,” Lucy said to Monette. She gave a slight nod toward the halfway house “Trudy Sherman is staring at us and she doesn’t look happy.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand that this is my first day of work. Well sort of,” Monette added when Lucy gave her an incredulous look.

Jim joined them and all three walked up the stone steps. Before he could knock a second time the door opened quickly. A woman wearing a curious expression looked at them briefly and then at the reporters.

“Trudy is expectin’ y’all. Come on in. Her office is the third door down that hall,” she said pointing deeper into the house.

“Thanks,” Monette said with a smile.

“You’re welcome, Ms. Victor. I saw you on television. I think it’s great how you kicked the system in the a— ”

“Thank you, Tyeisha.” A stern looking white woman emerged from the third door. She wore her dark hair cut very short. “I’m Trudy Sherman, the director of New Beginnings. You’re Monette Victor.”

“Guilty, well not as it turned out. Right?” Monette laughed as she extended her hand.

Trudy Sherman did not return the smile. She gave Monette a brief handshake. She turned to Jim and Lucy. Her expression demanded an explanation. “Good morning.”

“Jim Rand, Ms. Victor’s attorney. This is Lucy Chen.” Jim and Lucy took their turn shaking hands with Trudy Sherman.

“Come into my office. We generally don’t need an attorney to help new residents check in.” Trudy Sherman did a neat pivoted and led the way. Once they were all in she shut the door firmly.

“We provided Ms. Victor with a ride here since her family couldn’t make it.”

“I see.” Trudy didn't appear to be really listening.

Monette felt a small pain in her chest at Jim’s charitable explanation of why he and Lucy had picked her up at the prison. Her mother was probably too drunk to drive and Monette’s two sisters kept busy with their own troubled families. Monette’s children didn’t owe her anything either. She shoved that mental door shut to block out more pain then shifted her focus back to Trudy Sherman.

The director’s five foot four inch frame in no way diminished her imposing presence. She wore a pale pink sweater twin set and brown tweed skirt. Her makeup was minimalist and her only jewelry was pearl stud earrings. Age lines fanned out from the corners of her eyes and around her thin lips. Monette judged her to be around fifty. At

forty-three Monette figured she still had a decade more street experience. Still she didn't think Trudy could be easily played.

“Have a seat, please.”

“I'm sorry we got here so late, Ms. Sherman. What with the traffic and— “
Monette started to go on when the director broke in.

“Not to mention your media interviews.” The director opened a folder on her desk then looked at Monette.

“I really should have insisted on an earlier taping instead of agreeing to the live interview. My fault,” Lucy said quickly.

“Being on time and sticking to the house rules aren't negotiable.” Trudy Sherman spoke to Monette.

“I won't disrupt the routine or break the rules again. I'm sorry,” Monette said without hesitation.

“Of course your situation is unique to say the least.”

“That's a good way of putting it, Ms. Sherman,” Monette replied.

“We'll talk about that later. We need to get several admission procedures out of the way.”

For the next forty minutes Trudy Sherman meticulously went through the admissions procedure. Monette signed several forms, one of which confirmed that she agreed to abide by the house rules. Even as she listened and wrote her signature, Monette took in the office. Two degrees with the director's name, one a Masters of Social Work, hung on one wall. Framed prints of flowers and birds were on the other walls. A large window faced south and onto the street in front of the house.

“Any questions?”

“Not right now.” Monette made a neat stack of the copies she was to keep.

“You can have this folder. Welcome to New Beginnings, Monette.” Trudy Sherman wore a restrained smile.

“Thanks, Ms. Sherman.”

“We’re not formal around here. Just call me Trudy. Now about your job. We’ve dealt with a few high profile residents, but usually the interest fades over time. That won’t happen with you, right?” Trudy gazed from Monette to Jim and back again.

“I’ll be doing book signings, giving speeches and I might be on the radio. People are gonna talk and that’s the idea.” Monette shrugged. “I don’t see any way around it.”

“What with the pardon application and the FBI involved reporters will most certainly show up on your doorstep,” Jim added.

“We don’t have a lot of space and even if we did I don’t want cameras in here. We have to protect the privacy of the other residents. Several ladies have already expressed concern and others may feel the same. Interviews will be done on the porch or in the courtyard. Last resort you can use either my office or the other small office on this floor.” Trudy’s tone clearly said there would be no negotiation on the issue.

“Fine with me.” Monette gave an inward sigh of relief. Trudy conceded more than she’d expected.

“But no late nights outside the house, no more phone calls than anyone else, no cell phones and no other special accommodations will be made. You have to make it fit, not the other way around.” Trudy stopped, clearly waiting to hear Monette agree.

“Gotcha. I’m not tryin’ to be a diva around here. I want to do my time and get along.” Monette had no illusions about her situation. She was still in the custody of the Louisiana Department of Corrections. Until she was pardoned or finished out her parole in eighteen months she could get sent right back to prison.

Trudy nodded. “Good. Being free after so many years won’t be easy.”

“Yeah, but hard out here is a hell of a lot easier than hard behind bars.” Monette looked out of the window.

Trudy’s expression softened just a little. “Prison is a rough world, especially if you didn’t commit the crime. I can only imagine how you must have felt. I hope we can ease your transition and help you put those days behind you.”

“I’m afraid that won’t happen, but I want to rebuild my life to make it better than it was before. Thanks for giving me this chance.” Monette stood and so did Jim and Lucy.

“Nice meeting you, Ms. Sherman. I’ve heard good things about New Beginnings.” Jim nodded to her.

Trudy wore a pleased expression. “Thank you. I’m proud of our work here. For seven years New Beginnings has helped a lot of women. Of course I’ve only been here for the last two years, but in that time we’ve made changes that have improved on a solid foundation.”

“Of course. I’ll get your bags from the trunk, Monette,” Jim said.

He touched Monette’s arm as he went out. Trudy’s eyebrows twitched up for a few seconds at the gesture. She glanced at Monette but said nothing. Monette wore a mild expression as she returned her gaze.

“Congratulations, girl. You’re on your way.” Lucy gave Monette a hug.

“I hope so,” Monette murmured in her ear before they drew apart again.

“I’ll get one of the ladies to show you around.” Trudy left them alone.

Lucy checked the hallway then turned to Monette again. “What do you really think?”

Monette glanced around more closely at the office. She took in more clues about the woman from the way things were arranged and family photos. “I can handle this. Trudy Sherman is a little bit of a control freak, but we’ll get along okay.”

They walked out into the hallway again just as Jim set down Monette’s modest luggage, one suitcase and an overnight bag. Lucy gave Monette a goodbye peck on the cheek and went outside to wait for Jim on the porch. Jim put one hand on Monette’s elbow to guide her to the empty communal living room. Two large sofas and one smaller one were arranged to face a big screen television. Other homey touches made the room attractive in a generic way. Jim cleared his throat as he glanced around.

“Pretty nice place. Not what I expected. But then I didn’t know what to expect.” Jim smiled and lifted a shoulder.

“Yeah, nice. I’ll just have to get used to tight butt Trudy and her band of forty thieves,” Monette whispered with a grin.

Jim squinted at her. His lanky six foot three frame seemed to lean toward her like a disapproving school principal. “That is not the right attitude to start out with, Monette. Make this stay uneventful, even boring. Think you can do that?”

“You know me, Jim. I’ve never been able to do boring. Stop worrying cause I’m gonna be just fine. Don’t I always manage to land on my feet? With a little help from my friends of course.” Monette grinned at him.

His smiled. “Getting you released from prison has been one of the most rewarding things I’ve done professionally. Helping you get a full pardon would be even better.”

“I won’t screw up all your hard work. There is no way I can repay you, Jim,” Monette said. She put a hand on his forearm.

Jim placed his large hand on top of hers. “I don’t expect or want anything from you. Just make the best of your life.”

“Thanks.” Monette’s eyes filled with tears.

Only a few people in her life had given freely without expecting something from back from her. None of the men she’d known had been so generous. She swallowed hard and looked away. Monette wasn’t accustomed to tender moments.

“Call me if you need anything,” he said quietly.

“No news is good news.” Monette recovered her composure. She gave him a playful grin as she extricated her hand from his. “I’m gonna breeze through the next eighteen months. In fact, in six months my parole officer might even approve me getting my own place.”

Jim nodded. “I hope so.”

“And the way you helped me fill out that pardon application maybe I won’t even have to finish parole at all. Either way I’m sitting pretty.”

“Behave.” Jim gave her a quick paternal hug.

“Tyeisha is going to show you to your bedroom so you can unpack,” Trudy said from the wide doorway. Though her face was blank, her blues eyes sparkled with displeasure. She pressed her lips into a thin pale pink line as she gazed at Jim.

Tyeisha blinked wide-eyed just over Trudy’s shoulder. “Uh, I took your bags up already so you could keep talkin’ to your lawyer.”

“Thanks, girl. Guess it’s time for me to get settled in.” Monette moved from Jim’s embrace. Still Jim kept one hand on the center of Monette’s back.

“I’ll get going. Lucy must be pacing out there. You know how it is with these impatient hot shot young lawyers,” Jim said.

“Better not keep her waiting any longer then. Goodbye,” Trudy said and pressed her lips together again.

Jim seemed unaffected by her terse reply. He smiled at Monette. "I'll be in touch if I hear anything."

"Okay," Monette replied. She watched him leave then looked at the two women. "I'm all yours."

Trudy spun around and walked away clearly expecting them to follow. They complied by following her to the stairway and up the steps to the second floor. "You'll earn privileges based on your conduct and length of stay. You'll share a bedroom with three other women. We have three single bedrooms for ladies with the best record of compliance and who will be leaving soon."

"I remember from reading the rules." Monette looked into the open doors of three bedrooms. Only one was occupied. A Latino woman nodded to Monette as they went by.

"Everybody else is at work. Lenore and me have the day off," Tyeisha said.

They arrived at the largest of the three bedrooms. Two sets of bunk beds were pushed against opposite walls. Monette's bags sat at the foot of one bottom bunk. She stepped inside and made a turn taking in the room. The same bedspread in different colors neatly covered all of the beds. Soft medium blue floral curtains framed two sets of windows. Pictures of children and adults, obviously family members of the women, were scattered on the walls in frames.

"Tyeisha will show you the rest of the house. We'll have a house meeting this evening when everyone is home. I have a part-time social worker, Sherrial Jones. She'll be here tonight as well. Please make out a schedule of your activities since your 'career' is so different." Trudy rolled out the orders like a Marine sergeant.

"Yes, ma'am." Monette reverted back to her prison habit of obedience.

“We’ll meet in the big living room downstairs at six thirty. Look forward to helping you get back into society,” Trudy clipped. She took three paces around the room taking in every detail then left.

Tyeisha watched her leave. She didn’t speak until the sound of Trudy’s footsteps retreated down the stairs. “Trudy can be a pain in the ass sometimes, but she generally leaves us alone. Just don’t get on her crap list. Anyway this is your bed. Sorry you have to take the lumpy mattress. Kristen is leaving in a few days though, so you can have a better bed.” She patted one of the top beds with a lavender coverlet.

“I’ve slept in much worse places,” Monette quipped. She lifted the larger of her two bags onto the bed and started unpacking.

“Me, too.” Tyeisha sat on a lower bed and folded her legs under her. “Saw you on television. That was somethin’ about the DA jackin’ you up. Ain’t that the way though? He’s livin’ large in a fancy condo in Florida while you go through hell. Men are real bastards.”

“Not all of ‘em, sugar. We just have a habit of pickin’ out the bad from the good.” Monette took a large cosmetics bag out and went to one to the small dresser closest to her bed. The drawers were empty. “Guess this one is mine?”

“Yeah. Your lawyer looks like a pretty decent guy. They all want somethin’ from you sooner rather than later. Trust me, I know.” Tyeisha’s young voice sounded raspy from experiences, most of them unpleasant.

Monette realized the older home had little closet space. She put her underwear in the second drawer. Next she unpacked the rest of her clothes. All she owned was three skirts, two pairs of jeans, four blouses and one pair of sneakers. Still she had a lot compared to most people who left prison.

“What are you, twenty?” Monette said over her shoulder.

“Twenty-three,” Tyeisha replied.

“Baby, everybody wants something. Now when you meet a guy don’t you want something from him?”

“What do you mean?” Tyeisha cocked her head to one side. Her long dreadlocks cascaded over one shoulder.

“Whether it’s love, sex, money, or security. We all want something. The question is what are you willing to give in return.” Monette kicked off her navy blue pumps and unbuttoned the crop jacket that matched her skirt. The skirt came off next. In minutes she’d slipped into a pair of blue jeans. She took money and her phone card from her small purse and stuffed them in her jeans pocket.

“Deep. What’s your lawyer want outta helpin’ you?” Tyeisha asked.

Monette grabbed one of her T-shirts. She pulled it over her head before answering. Tyeisha was obviously curious about Monette’s relationship with Jim. The young woman leaned forward in anticipation. “The reward of fighting for the underdog.”

“Yeah, right,” Tyeisha said with a crooked grin. “I’m glad you’re here. Hey, I write poetry. Just started on a short story. Maybe you can help me.”

“I’m still learning myself. Maybe we can help each other. This place got a computer and internet access?” Monette sat down on her bed across from Tyeisha.

“Yeah. Trudy put a block on the real interestin’ porno sites though damn it all.” Tyeisha let out a raucous laugh.

“Nothing we both haven’t seen,” Monette teased back.

“I was hopin’ to make that my new career. Build my own web cam site. It’s perfectly legal.” Tyeisha stood. She twirled then did a bump and grind.

“I’m guessing that ain’t what the good folks at New Beginnings mean when they say get a job.” Monette laughed harder than she had in a long time at the young woman’s antics.

Tyeisha stopped her performance and gave a melodramatic sigh. “Oh well, bein’ a cashier at the Dollar O’Rama will have do for now. Hey, I’m supposed to be givin’ you a tour. C’mon.”

The Latino woman still lay across her bed reading a book. She seemed gripped by whatever was printed on the pages. Monette tapped on the doorframe. “Just wanted to say hello. I’m Monette Victor.”

“She just moved in. This is Lenore Ruiz.” Tyeisha seemed not to notice the woman’s guarded expression. “Lenore has written some kick ass stories. And talk about blowin’ when it comes to poetry slams. I keep tellin’ the girl she oughta enter some competitions.”

Lenore smiled at Tyeisha. She gave Monette a brief nod. “Hi.”

“Lenore shares a room with me and Rachelle.”

“Nice meeting you.” Monette tugged on Tyeisha’s hand to signal they should leave.

“Lenore is sweet, but she sorta keeps to herself most times. We’re lucky enough to have two bathrooms up here on either end of the hallway. This used to be some rich family’s house back in the day.”

Monette glanced at two small paintings of country scenes in the hallway. The other bedroom had a lovely wool rug in deep purple, green and blue. One bathroom was decorated in mint green, the other soft blue and mint green.

“Nice touches. Not bad for a halfway house,” Monette said.

“We decorated it all ourselves,” Tyeisha said proudly. She pointed to a smaller narrow stairway leading up. “There’s an attic up there. It’s big enough to be another small bedroom, but we use it for storage. We’ll take your bags up there later.”

They went downstairs. Monette followed her taking in all the details. The large foyer had a beautiful hardwood floor covered by a wool runner that matched carpet in the living room. On the opposite side of the foyer was another room. Tyeisha led the way into it. Books filled the built in shelves.

“We have group counseling in here. You can entertain visitors here, too. That way everybody else don’t have to leave the living room when one of us has visitors, like our parole officer.”

“Can’t wait to meet her,” Monette replied. She liked the room. A bay window looked faced east.

“Who do you have?” Tyeisha kept going through the library and out another door.

“Gwen Anderson. Haven’t talked to her yet.” Monette followed. She glanced in at a half bath across from the director’s office.

“Yeah. A couple of the others are assigned to her, too. They pop up whenever to check on us. That’s Sherrial’s office. Used to be a pantry.” Tyeisha laughed as she pointed to a closed door.

“She can barely turn around in there I’ll bet.”

“Sherrial ain’t the most organized woman either. Here’s the kitchen and dining room. Nice, huh?”

Monette let out a whistle. “This house is huge.”

“Actually we got three floors. You probably couldn’t tell from the front, but this place is set on a hill. Two more bedrooms are downstairs. That’s the laundry room through there. Used to be a side porch, but they closed it in. Twelve women stay here

when we're full. Thirteen if the admission committee decides to take in somebody on emergency, but that don't happen often." Tyeisha led her through another small room.

"Hey, Elaine. You met Monette?"

The woman stood up and shook Monette's hand. She appeared to be in her mid-thirties. Her short hair was dyed a striking red. Freckles sprinkled across her nose. "I'm the part-time secretary and sometime volunteer cook."

"Elaine can really work it in the kitchen. Her spaghetti sauce makes you wanna holler." Tyeisha smacked her lips.

"Don't even start, Ty. My husband is working the day shift for a change so I'm not staying late to cook." Elaine arched her eyebrows at her.

"They're trying to get pregnant," Tyeisha said in a stage whisper.

"We want a girl this time. We already have two boys, eleven and nine." Elaine pointed to an array of photos. Her husband wore a fire captain's uniform. The boys posed in sports uniforms, one with a soccer ball and the other in a football uniform.

"Good luck." Monette smiled at her.

"Thanks," Elaine replied. She was about to go on but the phone on her desk rang. "New Beginnings. How may I help you?"

"Let's go," Tyeisha said quietly and tugged on Monette's arm. "Elaine stays pretty busy, but she still finds time to take an interest in us. You'll meet the other staff later. We have what they call night counselors. Just one person on duty from eleven until seven in the morning. That's about it."

"Thanks for showing me around." Monette yawned and blinked hard.

"Take a nap. You've had a long day. They won't mind on your first day." Tyeisha smiled at Monette warmly.

"Thanks, girl. A nap is a great idea."

Monette went upstairs feeling the pull of exhaustion on her limbs as she climbed the steps. Yet after ten minutes of staring at the walls Monette was still awake. She glanced around at the family photos of children. The smiling faces opened up a familiar hollow feeling in her chest. Closing her eyes to force sleep didn't help. Instead she kept thinking of her own family. After twenty minutes she gave up and went downstairs again to the living room. Daytime television had never held much interest for her, so she flipped through a women's magazine.

"I just spoke to your parole officer. She expects to hear from you soon." Trudy came in.

"Okay. I want to call my family anyway if that's okay. I have a calling card." Monette put the magazine back on the long cocktail table.

"You've come with more than most of the women. A career in the spotlight, new clothes and money." Trudy wore a tight smile.

"Yeah, but I still belong to the Louisiana Department of Corrections," Monette quipped. She heard the message beneath Trudy's words.

Trudy merely nodded at her comment and motioned for her to follow. "Long distance calls are blocked. Call the operator and she can walk you through it."

"Incoming calls, too?" Monette followed her to an alcove that had been a hall closet. A beige phone sat on a small table inside with a chair next to it.

"If they're collect. We had ladies accepting collect calls from their boyfriends in prison. See you later this evening." Trudy went to her office.

Monette waited until the Trudy closed her office door then dialed her mother's number in Rougon. A scratchy answering machine recording came on. "Hey, mama. Just calling to let you know I'm out and to see how you're doing. Tell everybody I said hello. Y'all can call me here."

She hung up knowing they wouldn't call. Not unless they thought there was something in it for them. Monette knew her oldest son Karl was at work so she would call him later. She toyed with calling Talia at work in Washington D. C., but changed her mind. Talia might not welcome a reminder that Monette was her mother after the drama that surrounded her release from prison. Not that Monette could blame her. She stared at the phone as though it would ring and supply answers about how she could fix her family problems.

"You okay?" Tyeisha balanced a laundry basket on one hip.

"Sure." Monette put the phone card away and stood. "Let me help with some chores. I'm used to staying busy anyway."

For the rest of the afternoon Monette helped Tyeisha and Lenore do household tasks. The women were grateful since they finished quickly. Then the three of them watched two court television shows laughing at the trivial cases. They especially enjoyed Divorce Court.

"Man, those two are messed up. Shoulda never been married." Tyeisha shook her head and laughed during a commercial break.

"Those women don't have no problems. That last lady should have to put up with my man Ramone." Lenore said in a softly accented voice. She waved a hand dismissing the feuding couples and muttered something in Spanish. "

"Let's look at CNN. Maybe they'll surprise us and report some good news," Tyeisha joked as she tapped the remote buttons.

The front door opened and closed. Minutes later a voice boomed from the doorway. "Damn, they let anybody in here."

Monette glanced up to find her former cellmate Candi Lockhart grinning at her. Candi had both hands on her hips. She wore a blue plaid shirt and jeans. "Hey, girl. You

looking old and all used up. You should have stayed inside if this what the free world does to you.”

“I can still whip your ass used up or not,” Candi tossed back.

“You know better than to try, too.” Monette went to her. They hugged each other tightly. Candi’s clothes smelled faintly of onions and fried food. “How’re you doing?”

“Been on my feet for ten hours cooking and making my boss rich. Otherwise I’m wonderful.” Candi let go of Monette. She went to a chair and fell down into it. “Lord have mercy I’m glad this day is over.”

“I’m getting hungry just smelling you. Now get in the kitchen and fix me something to eat.” Monette slapped Candi’s shoulder as she passed by and sat in another chair across from her.

“You can forget that. Somebody else is going to feed me tonight. It’s not my turn.” Candi propped a foot on the coffee table. “Missed your interview this morning.”

“I taped it,” Lenore said with a shy smile. “Some of the other ladies asked me to since this was my day off. We got us a celebrity.”

“Don’t get her started. I remember back when Monette first told me she’d been framed. I laughed in her face and said ‘Honey, look around. Ain’t nobody in here guilty to let them tell it.’ You know this witch tried to beat me down?” Candi’s deep contralto laugh bounced off the walls.

“You lucky that guard stopped me.” Monette pointed a finger at her.

“Y’all been like sisters ever since, right?” Tyeisha sat crossed leg on the floor like a kid listening to her parents tell stories.

“We had a few more spirited discussions before that. Candi played tough girl. Well, she wasn’t playing.” Monette looked at her friend with affection.

“Damn right. Had to get more than a few of those witches straight before the word got around. Then I grew up and just did my time.” Candi looked Monette up and down, a gentle expression on her face. “You look good, Monette.”

“So do you,” Monette replied.

“Psssh. I packed on fifteen pounds and look at all this gray in my hair. One good thing about LCIW, we had the best hairdressers around in there. Didn’t we?”

Monette laughed. “Remember Glorine? She’s working in a shop in New Orleans.”

“She could style some hair. You know they want fifty dollars to touch up a perm out here? I got to get me a raise.” Candi let out a hiss of disgust. Then she nodded at Monette. “Miss Rich and Famous don’t have that problem. I ain’t mad at her though.”

Monette felt uncomfortable when the women all gazed at her. “Not so famous or rich, so don’t get too jealous.”

“Hey everybody.” A tall woman with her reddish hair in cornrows stood out in the hallway looking through mail in her hand.

“Hi, Yarva. This is Monette. You know my friend I told you about. She finally got here,” Candi called out.

“Right. Pardon me for not hangin’ out, but I’m gonna get out of these work clothes.” Yarva nodded at Monette and headed for the stairs. The name of a janitorial service was stamped on the pocket of her gray work shirt.

Candi waved at two other women who arrived. Introductions were made all around. Within the next hour ten of the other residents arrived. Most came from work. Two of the women worked weekends only and did community service during the week. One by one they all went to their rooms. Tyeisha and Candi stayed behind with Monette. Tyeisha bobbed her head to music coming from the television. Monette smiled at the younger woman who became engrossed in a music video.

Candi nodded for Monette to join her in a seating area across the room. “You called any of your people yet?”

“Mama wasn’t home. I’ll talk to them later.” Monette gave a shrug that Candi understood. She wanted to change the subject from family. “Look at you working as head chef at some fancy restaurant.”

“Girl, please,” Candi said with a snort. “I’m a short order cook at a greasy hole in the wall. Them fancy folks at the fancy restaurant wasn’t comfortable with my dirty history. Fine with me. They wasn’t payin’ what I was worth.”

“That’s messed up, Candi.” Monette saw past her attempt to brush off losing the job.

“Whatever. Now you’re the one with a dream gig. On national TV, got a book deal. That’s what I’m talkin’ ‘bout.” Candi snapped her fingers.

“I earned it with almost fifteen years out of my life. That’s the downside to all this fame. Still I’m blessed. Could still be in the prison laundry room.” Monette did not want to sound ungrateful, especially with the hardships Candi and others faced.

“I hear ya. Which is why I ain’t sweatin’ one job. I’m so glad to see you, girl.” Candi hugged Monette again.

“Me, too.” Monette patted her friend’s cheek when they pulled apart.

“Phew. I stink of fried chicken fingers. I’m gonna take a warm shower if I can get in one of the bathrooms. Y’all better not be using up all the hot water,” Candi shouted as she went into the hallway.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Yarva yelled back. “Who told you to stay down there runnin’ your mouth?”

Eventually the living room emptied of everyone but Monette. She listened to the women’s voices as they exchanged chatter. For the next hour Monette watched the news

though she hardly paid attention as the reporters droned on. Despite what Candi and Tyeisha might think, Monette felt unsure about her future. All the glamour did not translate into an instant life in the free world. Monette still had unfinished business with her adult children and the rest of her family. A book deal and talk show would not solve all her problems. Trudy came in and straightened magazines on the table.

“You’ve met the ladies already,” she said as she continued to fuss with objects in the room.

Monette expected her to take out a white glove, slip it on one hand and swipe down the surfaces. “Yeah. Nice group from what I can tell.”

“We’ve been careful in selecting our participants. The board felt you would be an asset.” Trudy checked the room temperature displayed on the thermostat before she turned to face Monette.

“I appreciate them for accepting me.” Monette returned her gaze with an impassive expression. She crossed her legs.

“Several of them feel that you can bring positive media attention to New Beginnings. I hope that’s true. Helping you adjust and start your new life is what we’re most concerned about.”

“I won’t do anything to embarrass New Beginnings or make the board regret their decision.” Monette never lost her relaxed pose. She continued to stare at the director.

“I’m sure you’ll do your best,” Trudy replied. When Candi, Tyeisha and Yarva came in Trudy smiled at them. “Don’t forget the special house meeting tonight. We won’t take long since everyone has met Monette anyway. The twelve step meeting will be after dinner.”

“Okay, Trudy,” Yarva said with a smile back at her. They watched Trudy leave.

“Okay, Trudy,” Candi mimicked Yarva with a snicker as she tossed an apple into the air and caught it. “I thought your nose had gotten so brown from being out in the sun. Now I know better.”

Tyeisha laughed and fell into a chair. “Candi is so crazy.”

“Damn right. She talks to my parole officer every week. I’m gonna be sweet as my grandmama’s lemon ice box pie when Trudy is in the room.” Yarva flipped her fingers to show she didn’t care about Candi’s joke.

“If you hadn’t been such a bad ass maybe your parole officer wouldn’t be riding your butt,” Candi tossed back as she left the room.

“I’ve seen the error of my wicked ways. Okay?” Yarva sat down in a chair and looked at Monette. “So you’re the famous author and talk show darlin’. Nice work if you can get it.”

“Which obviously you can’t.” Candi flopped down on the sofa next to Monette. She bit into the apple then crunched the crisp chunk.

“I didn’t get pimped by the right rich white dude,” Yarva replied with a shrug. She grinned as though being friendly. When Candi and Tyeisha frowned at her she raised both hands. “What?”

“That wasn’t funny,” Candi snapped.

“Geez, we tease each other all the time. Guess your old cell mate is off limits.” Yarva rolled her eyes. She stood and walked out.

“It’s okay, Candi.” Monette put a hand on Candi’s arm to keep her from following Yarva.

“I don’t know what’s up with her. She’s not usually a hater.” Candi gazed after Yarva for a second then turned back to Monette.

Monette thought about the challenges of building a new life. Staying sober and following rules was easy in prison. The question was could she do it with no locks between her and the street? She would try again to reach out to her family, but so far they hadn't reached back.

“One jealous ex-con is the least of my worries,” Monette said.