

2nd Place Winner – Glenda Faye Mathes – Splintered Image

Chapter 1 – Tamara

A crack of thunder startled Tamara awake. She bolted upright, her heart thumping. Another clap rattled the windows before it reverberated through the valley and faded.

Her husband's breathing remained even. Jonathan could sleep through a train wreck. Rain drummed on the roof and gurgled through the downspouts.

The alarm clock's amber numerals read 5:48. Too tense to lie quietly, Tamara slipped out of bed and picked up her cell phone from the nightstand. She headed down the hall, pausing to listen at the children's open doors before going down to her basement office.

She felt through the familiar musty darkness until she touched the desk's edge. Then she slid her hand up the lamp's spindle and clicked its peg. In the bulb's soft glow, she opened the journal she'd vowed to keep daily. She sat and wrote:

Memory is a curious thing. It meanders the paths of the past as a mountain brook croons through an alpine meadow. Or it splits the present with the sudden violence of a thunder clap. A freshly baked cookie's warm aroma and melting chips trigger it as quickly as a diesel engine's throaty rumble and distinctive exhaust. Memory can be a magician that conjures reality into a surreal dream or mysteriously makes it utterly vanish.

Tamara rubbed her eyes. As usual, the words failed to convey what she wanted them to say. She stared at the open journal, lying in the lamp's circle of warm light. Her pen tapped the glaring page, like a moth bumping a lit window pane.

Finally she straightened and checked her phone. Only a few more minutes of solitude. Jonathan would wake soon, and when he'd finished in the bathroom, she'd have to wake Emma and Eli and get them to their elementary school on time.

She closed the journal and turned on the computer to check her email. As she deleted some messages and sorted others according to priority, she became aware of the shower's rhythm and water surging through the pipes hidden by ceiling tiles. She stood, turned off the light, and stretched. Taking a deep breath, she ascended the stairs like a Christian entering the arena.

The children squabbled as they flitted up and down the hall, finally alighting on kitchen chairs. Sparrows. That's what they reminded her of. Squawking sparrows.

"Cold cereal again?" Eli gave a thumbs-down. "That's the third day in a row."

Tamara checked herself from slamming the milk jug on the table. "I'll make a hot breakfast as soon as you two can get ready for school without quarreling."

"It's not my fault." He poured milk in an unsteady stream that splashed drops on the table. "Emma's so crabby in the mornings."

“I am not.” Emma flounced her long hair. “Younger brothers are so annoying.”

“What about older sisters?” Eli made a face. “Miss Priss camps out in the bathroom, working on her hair with that stupid curling iron she leaves on the counter.”

“I can’t put it away when it’s hot.”

“And when it’s hot it can burn my hand or—or start my towel on fire.”

“Time out.” Tamara gestured the referee sign. “That’s enough. Both of you be quiet and eat.” She glanced at the clock on the stove. “We’re leaving in exactly twenty-eight minutes. And we don’t have time for this nonsense.”

Jonathan walked into the kitchen, knotting a subdued striped tie around the neck of his crisp white shirt. “I hear we’re all our usual cheery selves.”

Eli spoke with a mouthful of slushy Honey Nut Cheerios. “It’s not my fault.”

“It never is, Eli, my man.” Jonathan rubbed the boy’s short hair, then sat down and clasped his hands together. “Let’s pray together as a family to start our day.”

Tamara sank onto the chair beside him. “Good idea.”

When Jonathan asked for a blessing on the food, Eli grunted. When he added a request to help family members get along with each other, Emma sighed.

After his prayer, Jonathan ate quickly. He periodically checked his Smartphone. “Slow market start today.”

“Good.” Tamara poured herself a glass of orange juice. “That means things shouldn’t be too crazy at the office.”

Jonathan nodded. “Which will give Lisa time to work on estates while I handle my full day of appointments with clients.” He stood and pushed in his chair. “Remember, Tamara, I’m starting workouts at Anytime Fitness during my lunch hour today, so I won’t be home.” He slipped on his suit jacket. “Have a great day at school, kids.” He leaned over Eli and Emma, kissing each on the forehead. When Tamara turned her face upward, he put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her on the lips. Eli groaned. Jonathan dashed out the door.

Tamara rounded up papers, books, and backpacks. She urged the children into the minivan. After she turned on the ignition, she waited to back out of the garage until they buckled in. During the twenty-minute drive, she quizzed Eli on spelling words and Emma on science vocabulary. The van slowed to a crawl a block from the Fillmore Christian Academy campus. They’d arrived at prime time. Finally they stopped at a section of sidewalk leading to the elementary entrance. Tamara pushed the overhead button to open the side door. “Eli, go out Emma’s side, so you’re not on the street.”

“I know, Mom, I know. You don’t have to tell me every time.”

“Bye, kids,” Tamara called over the grinding motor of the van’s door as it shut. “Have a good day!” The two children raced up the sidewalk.

The door closed with a click. Tamara took a deep breath in the silence. Seeing a red Toyota pull onto Pine Ridge Parkway in the line ahead of her, she speed-dialed Misty. She grinned as she imagined the faint strains of a Casting Crowns song gradually growing louder in the cavernous depths of Misty’s huge red tote. When Misty’s voice mail picked up, Tamara ended the call and waited with the phone in her hand. She didn’t even check the caller when it began “Song of Freedom” by Hillsong. “Misty, is that your swagger wagon turning south on Pine Ridge?”

“Sure is. Takes one to know one. I missed your call?”

“Of course you did. Why don’t you put your phone in an outside pocket so you can get to it on time?”

“I never think of it when I’m corralling the kiddos out the door. What’s up?”

“Post-school-drop-off-syndrome. You have time for latte at Java Joes?”

“Oh, I can’t.” Misty groaned. “I’m on my way to the dentist.”

“Fun, fun.”

“Yeah. Having my teeth cleaned is right up there with a visit to the gynecologist.”

“At least it’s not a filling.”

“Thank goodness. But I scheduled the appointment early because Trent is taking me to lunch at that new little sandwich shop.”

Only one more vehicle ahead of Tamara’s. “I haven’t been there yet, but I hear their food’s good.”

“And they have great coffee. I plan to shoot my daily caffeine quota. Sorry I can’t do the latte thing now.”

“No problem. I’ll try another time.”

“Do that. See you.”

Tamara slid the phone into the side pocket of the brown Elite Metro Retro bag she bought at Miriam’s Thirty-One party. Miriam. Maybe she was home today. Tamara pulled the phone back out and asked Siri to call her.

“Hey, Tamara. Good to speak to you in person.”

“I’m on the road so I’m not texting. You busy?”

“On the road, too. On my way to Des Moines to visit my grandmother in Mercy hospital.”

“Oh, sorry. Is it serious?”

“She had a pacemaker put in yesterday, but she had a good night. I’m driving my mom up today.”

“Okay. I won’t keep you. Talk to you later.”

“Anything important?”

“No, nothing. I just dropped off the kids and thought I’d see if you were free for a cup of coffee.”

“I wish. It’s been a while.”

“It has. I’ll try again soon.”

Tamara put away her phone. On a whim, she headed north, toward the reservoir locally known as Dalen Lake. The only signs of the morning’s storm were puddles in the gravel shoulder beside the road. She drove beside the lake. Its placid water, reflecting green bluffs and blue sky, seemed as static as a glass painting. A fish’s splash disturbed the still surface, widening into expanding concentric ripples. A flock of Canadian geese soared in such perfect formation it looked like computer-generated animation. Their wings flashed white against the background of deep green hills. As they crossed above Tamara’s windshield, a single honk sounded.

She turned onto a long drive leading up a hill and winding between gnarled old oaks. At the top, a weathered shelter overlooked the lake. The view from it would be lovely. She pulled the keys and hopped out, locking the van. As soon as she closed the door, she realized she wasn’t alone. A throaty rumble growled from the far side of the lot. A blue pickup, partially obscured by bushes, was parked there with its engine running.

Time collapsed, and memory overpowered her.

She gulped for air and grabbed the door handle. It wouldn’t open. She pawed in her bag, searching for the keys. Her heart hammered. Blood pulsed in her neck, and heat flared over her face. She pounded on the door. “Let me go! Let me go!”

She gasped. Leaned her face against the cool van window. Forced herself to speak quietly. “You are here, Tamara. You are here in this moment.”

Keys. I need my keys. Where did I put them?

Her trembling hands felt angular shapes in her jeans pocket. Thrusting her fingers between the taut layers, she grasped a key and pulled out the ring. She finally found the unlock button and pressed it. She jerked open the door and climbed into the driver’s seat, immediately shutting the door and locking the van. The

key wouldn't slide into the ignition. She bent her head to look at the slot, then she shoved in the key and turned it. She placed her shaking hands on the steering wheel and paused.

She'd forgotten how to drive.

Tamara crossed her arms on the wheel and buried her face in them. She closed her eyes and breathed in: one, two, three, four. She breathed out: one, two, three, four.

I am safe. I am a grown woman. I am in my own van. It is locked.

She glanced out her window. No one. She lifted her head and forced herself to look farther and farther, all the way to the blue pickup behind the bushes. Gone.

She swiveled to look behind the van. The pickup was driving down the hill. She gripped the steering wheel and listened. The throaty rumble faded. A gull shrieked. Cars drove across the dam. Her heart resumed its regular pace.

She would wait. Wait until the present became real. Wait until she no longer heard the memory.