

Brittany Justice

“Anywhere But Here”

Grade 11

1,968 words

Slowly at first, then with a crashing realization that she had fallen asleep, Tammy Black came to consciousness. The small motel alarm clock read 1:37 a.m. With a sick feeling working its way up her throat, Tammy checked her purse. Nothing was missing. She clicked on the lamp and looked around. Nothing. Her last trick of the night had tricked her.

He hadn't taken anything she had already earned. That was something. Right?

Tammy slid off the bed and left, walking in the bright lights of Paradise Road. Several trucks drove by, windows rolled down, but Tammy kept walking. Her head high, yellow heels clacking the pavement, she walked until she reached the Strip.

Her head was spinning, anticipating the moment when she told Brent she had been gyped. Her back displayed overlapping scars left from her last mishap—running away—when Brent had beaten her with a radio antenna. He left her lying bloodied on the bed with one last reassurance: “You’re gonna be my best girl from now on. Right, babydoll?”

“Yes,” she hissed, raw rhythmic waves of pain washing over her.

He slapped her back, and she couldn't keep from screeching. “What did you say?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

She hated Brent, the man who vended her every day to feed his drug habit. Brent's other girls used cocaine and heroin to cope, but to Tammy, drugs just meant more shame, more degradation. She'd had enough of *that*.

Tammy had come to Las Vegas from a small Ohio town of a thousand people and one stoplight. She worked in a casino, earning nine dollars an hour, barely surviving in a small, sordid apartment. One evening, as she was drowning her sorrows in a small tavern, a man slid into the booth with her.

His voice was that of an angel, his body that of a god. He told Tammy about the money she could make, the clothes, the adoration. His name was Brent.

Tammy's rent was due, so she agreed. Brent arranged for her to meet an "associate" of his. A clean cut, blue-collar man with a red tie and a wife at home. He slipped her money in the pocket of her discarded jeans, promised that he would see her again shortly. He walked away pleased. She shook with revulsion.

Tammy told Brent that she didn't want to work for him. The godlike man had given her a sardonic smile and said, "But you're mine, baby."

The years that followed were difficult, filled with indignity and reluctant submission. Her body wasn't her own. Her life wasn't her own. Brent controlled her with words, slaps, boots, and anything else at his disposal.

Tammy felt sick. At twenty-four years old, she didn't have a single possession to her name. Everything was a "gift" from Brent, paid for with her earnings.

Tammy ducked into the doorway of the dark house. She held her shoes in her left hand, her purse in the right. Baby steps, seventeen of them. She counted in her head. *One, two, three, four—*

A hand snaked out and caught her mass of curling brown hair. Tammy managed to turn a yelp of pain into a gasp of surprise. The light clicked on.

Brent stood behind her, his hand twisting her hair. A sweet scent wrapped around Tammy's head. Her heart hammered so loudly she knew he could hear it.

Where is it?"

Tammy fumbled in her purse, pulling out a wad of bills held together with a hairband. Brent released her and quickly flipped through the bills. "Where's the rest of it?"

"That's all there is," Tammy said, trying to put force into her voice to cover the tremor. "That last john ducked out on me." She didn't see the fist coming until it crashed into her face. She brought her hands up and felt blood pouring from her nose. She fell to her knees on the linoleum.

Brent loomed over her, his face contorted with rage. "How could you let this happen?" She looked up at him balefully. He laughed, sending a wad of spit down. "Get up."

Tammy stood, slowly wiping the spit from her face. Her hands were filled with blood. She didn't make a sound.

"Answer me!"

She stood to her full height, chin held high. "I fell asleep. I wouldn't have if you didn't work me so hard."

Brent's brown eyes narrowed, boring into her green ones. "Well, guess what, babydoll—you're gonna go back out there and get my money."

Tammy quaked. His money? Why did he deserve anything for selling her? She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. He again thrust his fist forward, bringing it straight at her eye, and shoved her out the door. “You better have my money when you get back.” He slammed the door, leaving her in the alley that ran behind the house.

Tammy stood, legs shaking, and searched for her shoes in the dark. She wiped her hands across her nose, then on the ground. Sighing, she headed out into the light.

Walking down the Strip, Tammy felt stares plastering themselves to her face. Blood still seeped from her nose. She held her head high, blinking back the tears before they fell. In front of her she saw another call girl—a girl about sixteen years old, looking frightened. She wore a short skirt and tall heels. She gaped at Tammy’s face.

Tammy had never felt a tug on her heart before—she thought it was too cliché. But looking at this girl was like looking at herself when she first arrived on the Strip. The girl was still staring at her. “What do you want?”

“What’s your name?” She blurted before she could stop herself.

“Kate,” the girl said hesitantly.

“Who do you work for?”

Kate just stared. “Damien,” she said after a long silence. She glanced at her feet.

Tammy winced. Damien bought his girls from men who kidnapped them. Where had this girl come from?

A red car slid to a stop next to them. The driver rolled down the window. Kate looked at Tammy, frightened, then replaced the look with a cool demeanor as she leaned down. “What are you lookin’ for?”

“What’s your name, pretty gal?”

“Kate,” she answered, but quickly changed her answer. “Whatever you want to call me is fine.”

Tammy felt sick inside. Kate was obviously a child. She felt her knees begin knocking together. Kate opened the door and slid inside. She glanced up at Tammy, eyes wide. *No*, Tammy wanted to say. She knew the man. She knew what he would do. The man slid his hand up Kate’s pale leg and sped away.

Tammy made her way to an alley. She leaned back against the wall, retching until nothing more came up. She wiped her mouth and looked up at the night sky. She hated life. She reviled Brent. She loathed the men. She despised herself.

Stretching her face muscles, Tammy sighed. The dried blood cracked, but at least her nose wasn’t broken; she could feel that. She straightened her skirt and continued walking.

A small black car slid up behind her. Tammy turned. The man inside rolled down the window and her stomach lurched. She grabbed the hood of the car.

Her old neighbor gaped at her. “*Tammy?*”

Tammy gasped, hand flying to her face. “What do you want?”

Jason Dalloway shifted in his seat. “Working?”

Tammy nodded, nauseated. She looked at him defiantly.

Jason studied her intently. Tammy could hide her nose, not her eye. "Get in the car."

"What?"

"You heard me," he said. "Come on."

Tammy gawked at him, eyes wild. What was he thinking? *It's quick money*, she thought. One more and she could go home. Tammy slid into the passenger seat as Jason drove away.

"So." She put her game face on. "What's your pleasure?"

Jason looked at her with unbelieving eyes. "I'm not taking you to a motel."

"Then where?"

"Anywhere but here." He slowed the car, looking at her seriously. "Tammy. I know you hate this. I know you want to leave."

She squirmed. "Look, Dalloway. I need to get back."

"So you can work more?"

She caught the sarcasm in his voice. "I got tricked earlier. I owe Brent another two hundred." As soon as she said it, she regretted it.

"Did you really sell your soul for some nice things?"

Tammy felt the dam burst, and she couldn't have held back if she tried. Five years of misery came rushing forward. "Don't you think I would leave if I could?" She felt the rant coming on. "Listen, mister, I've been robbed, raped, tied up, beat up, punched and kicked more

times than I can count.” She leaned forward and flipped up the back of her shirt, revealing the still-healing scars from her recent beating. “I don’t own a thing. I don’t own *me*. I’m a grown woman, controlled by a god with Satan’s temper.”

All she heard was her own breathing. She barely reigned in her tears.

Jason heard his heart break for her. He looked at his old friend and saw a woman, broken and battered, picking up the pieces just to have them knocked away again. “Walk away.”

Tammy laughed, near hysteria. “Don’t you think I would if I could?”

“Why can’t you?”

“I have nowhere to go,” Tammy answered softly. She wrung her hands in her lap.

He looked at her, his old friend. “What if I give you a place?”

*“Are you serious? You can’t be serious.”*

“Completely,” Jason smiled softly. “I live in a house about an hour from lake Havasu. Stay as long as you need. I can get you a job in my wife’s real estate business.” He looked at her, eyes boring in. “It’s safe. It’s a life.”

Tammy’s eyes widened in wonder. She couldn’t believe it. “Why would you do that? Do you know who I am?”

“Yes,” he said forcefully, “I do. You’re a broken woman who’s looking for any chance of a different lifestyle.”

Tears sprang to Tammy’s eyes. “I could never pay you back, Dalloway.”

He smiled, placing a hand lightly on her arm. "I don't expect you to." He wondered what his wife would think. She would undoubtedly take Tammy under her wing like a sister. "Do you want to leave? No looking back?"

Tammy took a deep breath. "Yes." Her voice broke, and the tears she had held back for years finally fell. She was free. Just like that.

Tammy knew there were going to be struggles in the weeks and months ahead. She had once been so driven by material things she steered herself into Brent's arms. She was starting over with nothing, but she had never felt better. The lights of Las Vegas began to dwindle when Tammy looked to her right. "Stop the car," she said hurriedly, opening the door. She jumped out and stood face to face with Kate. The girl's shirt was tattered. She had bruises mottling her arms and legs. Her lip quivered, her chin hovered in the air. "What are you doing here?" She looked at Tammy, eyes stormy.

Tammy stared for a moment, then tentatively wrapped her arms around Kate. She felt the tension leave the girl's body. "Don't be scared anymore," she whispered, and she felt sobs wrack the teenager's body. She pulled away. "You hate this."

Kate nodded, tears and mascara streaking her face. Tammy peered into the car. "I'm not going without her."

"Where?" Kate interrupted. Tammy looked into the car, imploring Jason, and he nodded. "Kate, get in the car."

"Why?" Kate asked even as she slid into the backseat. "What's happening? Where are we going?"

Tammy sighed, leaning back. The neon lights were fading in the distance. “Anywhere but here.”