

Talk of the Town

*Garrett had ached for this moment
since he first laid eyes on her. He had to taste her ...
feel her ... have her ... now!*

Laughing softly, Garrett lowered his face to hers and began nibbling lightly on her ear. “I want you, Samantha,” he moaned huskily, “and I can see it in your eyes that you want me—”

Samantha stopped his words by jerking her head to the side. Using all her strength, she tried to writhe free from his iron grasp, but he tightened his hold on her wrist and secured her to the cushions with his weight.

“Let go of me!” she protested, fighting now like a lioness. But his body was on hers like a cement block, pressing harder with each move she made. When she could fight no longer, he released her wrist and urged her face to meet his smoldering gaze.

“It’s no use, my love, we can’t deny our feelings for each other, so stop fighting it.”

There was a wicked glint in his eyes, a warning that he was not a man to be reckoned with. He was used to having his own way. After all, he was a king. He ruled the airwaves late at night, sitting on his leather throne, his staff, a cruel and biting tongue that had the ability to reduce men of power to blubbering fools. What chance did she have against this multi-faceted, self-proclaimed monarch named Tony Garrett?

Talk of the Town



by

Lucille Naroian

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~Author Acknowledgement~

To John and Ray,
for obvious reasons

~Coming Soon~

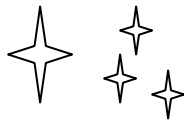
Unforgettable

and

Dark Crescendo

Read short previews at the end of this book!

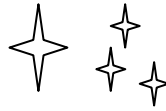
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CHAPTER ONE

Tony Garrett walked out under the hot arc lights of Studio 12B to the sound of thunderous applause. The familiar fiery ovation never failed to give him a rush, and he acknowledged the enthusiastic greeting by giving a slight nod of his head, while his eyes quickly scanned the cheering audience. He knew why they were here...what they were expecting ... and he was ready.

The atmosphere continued to crackle with excitement and anticipation as the handsome, controversial, *king* of late night television stopped in center stage and took a deep, long, appreciative bow. It had taken Garrett less than a year to earn the reputation of being the arrogant, hard-hitting, deep-probing, star of the late night news telecast, *One on One*. He had earned it by being unique and ruthless. For it was his direct and incisive style of interviewing that compelled thirty million viewers across the country to tune in faithfully each night at midnight to watch in awe as he interrogated with utter relentlessness the guest who sat opposite him in the 'hot seat.'

Whether it was a campaigning politician or a Supreme Court Justice, Garrett showed no mercy. So it was hard to believe that anyone in his right mind would agree to come on his show and subject himself to Garrett's brutal badgering. Strangely enough, they came in droves.

When the members of the audience finally settled

themselves comfortably into their seats, Garrett moved towards one of the two easy chairs behind him. He clipped the tiny microphone onto his navy-striped tie, then eased his six-foot-two-inch frame into the soft leather of his seat. Just as he reached for his notes, a short, balding man in shirt sleeves darted out from the side entrance, frantically waving a clipboard. Instinctively, Garrett knew something was wrong.

“Schedule’s been changed, Tony!” mumbled the show’s producer, Louie Polcheck, as he chewed nervously on his unlit cigar. “Sheffield’s a no-show. No word. Nothing.”

With fire in his eyes, Garrett glared at the man. “For Chrissake, Louis! What the hell am I supposed to do now? Tap dance for the next sixty minutes? I checked the schedule. You didn’t book a back-up just in case. Why not?”

The producer ignored his question, mainly because there was no time for an explanation. He planked his short, stubby hand on his star’s taut arm, lowered his head and spoke in a low tone. “Take it easy, will ya? I found a fill-in. Just don’t go ballistic on me when you hear what this person does for a living.”

The apologetic look on Louie’s face gave him away, and Garrett knew by the knot in his gut what Louie was going to say. He tried to control his anger by sucking in a deep, unsteady breath. “I don’t give a damn if the guy twirls batons. Just don’t tell me it’s another one of your Stephen King wannabes.”

Louie jerked back his hand and shrugged his round shoulders. “Look, I’m sorry. It was the best I could do under the circumstances. Nobody on the list was immediately available.”

Garrett gritted his teeth. “Dammit. Just what I need...another boring flash-in-the-pan hack writer who thinks I’m gonna make him a star.” He gave a wry chuckle. “I’ll make him a star all right. By tomorrow morning nobody’s going to remember his name, especially me.”

He shook his head in irritation while automatically reaching into his breast pocket for his ever-present cigarettes, only to find the pocket empty. Since smoking had been banned in the studio, as in all public buildings, he had decided to quit cold turkey. That had been a month ago. Since then he’d become unbearable to everyone, including himself. God, he needed a smoke, he admitted silently. He’d never get through this night without one.

Eying Louie’s unlit cigar with envy, he declared tightly, “You know how I—”

”Put a lid on it!” Louie snapped, tossing his star a sheet of paper. “You got a job to do. Here are the vital stats. Wing it!”

Garrett had no time to argue. The flashing red light on camera three signaling thirty seconds to air time blinked on. With the last chords of his theme song fading away, the camera moved in, and the slow familiar half-smile shaped his lips. In the intimate low voice that was his trademark, Tony Garrett greeted his audience.

“Ladies and gentlemen, last night I announced that our guest tonight would be Paul Sheffield, the sports columnist for *The Daily Times*. Unfortunately, I’ve just been informed that the gentleman, and I use the term lightly, is nowhere to be found.” The camera zoomed in closer, and Garrett continued sarcastically. “I read his review of last night’s fight in this morning’s paper, and I’m not surprised. It was a biased, shabby, totally unprofessional piece of

work. If I had written it, I'd be hiding, too."

The audience let out a string of boos, but Garrett ignored them. He raised a dark eyebrow in distaste, then lowered his eyes to the paper. "Lucky for us, my crack staff has come up with a sleeper. Ever heard of Sam McCall?" he asked rhetorically. "Well, neither have I. But we're all stuck with him for the next fifty-six minutes." He raised his cool blue eyes to the camera. "According to this note, McCall has just published his first whodunit. Sorry, but I don't have a copy here to show you. Anyway, the book is entitled, *Murder in Paradise*, and after this short break we'll be right back to find out who did it." The words were practically stuck in his throat. "I can hardly wait. Can you?" He averted his gaze from the camera to the studio audience then back to the camera again, shrugging his broad shoulders. "On the other hand, who cares?" he mocked indifferently. "It's probably a drugged-out chimp with a bag of loaded coconuts."

A conspiratorial wink at the audience was the last the home viewers saw before a three minute string of commercials.

* * * * *

Behind the green satin curtain, Sam McCall seethed. "Who in the hell does this clown think he is?" the author sputtered to no one in particular. For the last five minutes the young writer had been witness to a despicable show of manners, been ridiculed, and made a national joke. "All right, Big Mouth," the writer enunciated on a hiss, "you got your shots in. Now, it's my turn." Adrenaline pumping wildly, the writer began pacing behind the curtain like a

caged animal until finally, it was show time.

Garrett was straightening his tie when the camera light blinked on. Without bothering to look towards the curtain, he unenthusiastically announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Sam McCall."

In place of the usual polite applause afforded an unknown, the audience set up a howl of laughter. Perplexed, Garrett shifted in his seat as a wisp of a girl emerged from the shadows. He rose to his feet, and his athletic frame towered above the five-foot-nothing loveliness that was Sam McCall. Completely taken aback, Garrett gave an appreciative smile to the petite, auburn-haired girl. He automatically extended his large tanned hand and offered, "This is indeed a pleasant surprise."

Ignoring his outstretched hand, she looked directly into his startled gaze and ever so sweetly replied, "I'm glad you feel that way, Mr. Garrett, because I've got another one for you." Without a warning, she raised her right hand and smashed her fragile fingers into the side of his powerful jaw. Feeling exuberant, she turned on her heels, squared her shoulders, and strutted off the stage.

Momentarily stunned, the audience did not react. And then, as if on cue, row after row came to its feet in a burst of deafening applause.

Totally unaware of the havoc she had created with her impetuous show of temperament, Samantha snatched up her coat and purse and fled through the double doors that led to a bank of elevators. Angrily pressing the down button with her still tingling fingers, she was struck suddenly by the full realization of what she had just done. Like a frightened rabbit, she dashed into the elevator as soon as the doors parted. Once outside the mammoth complex,

Samantha ran to the nearest taxi. Wrenching the door open, she nearly stumbled in her haste to escape. In a calm voice that belied her quaking state, she gave the driver the name of her hotel. Immediately, the taxi veered into the flowing traffic.

Her breathing began coming in spasms, so she wedged her trembling body against the door in an effort to calm herself. Unfortunately, the harder she tried, the more anxious she became. She buried her face in her hands and began berating herself out loud, completely ignoring the driver and the fact that he could hear every word.

“Mother of God, Samantha,” she groaned, “You’ve done some pretty outrageous things in your life, but you’ve never pulled a classic like this, and on television, yet. Tomorrow morning it’ll be splashed across every newspaper in the country. Regis and Kelly will have a good howl for themselves along with the girls on *The View*. There goes your career right down the toilet before it even got off the ground.” She flicked away an angry tear that threatened to spill. “Why did you have to make a spectacle of yourself by hitting him? You’re not an irrational person. Better you had just split, leaving him sitting on his royal throne with egg on his face. But no, not you. You had to play the avenging angel out to slay the evil dragon. Well, be prepared for this evil dragon to strike back.” Panic rose within her and she muttered out loud, “Cause now he’s gonna get you!”

“Who’s gonna get me, lady?” the driver asked nervously.

Flaming with embarrassment, Samantha was saved an explanation as the cab came to a halt before the lighted entrance to the hotel. She quickly passed the driver a twenty dollar bill and bolted from the taxi without waiting for her

change.

Once inside the ornate lobby she approached the desk clerk and asked for her key. The man gave her an odd smile as he handed it to her. Snatching the key from his scrawny fingers, she noticed a tiny television set next to his computer. So *that* was the reason for his dumb grin, she reasoned. He had seen the show. The nightmare was beginning all ready.

Once inside her room, she dropped to the edge of her bed. Her heart pounded like a marathon runner, but she was safe, at least for the time being. Maybe if she crawled under the bed covers and went to sleep, she would wake in the morning to find it had just been a horrible dream. Maybe...

The ringing of the telephone on the night stand beside her brought Samantha out of her musings. Who could be calling, she wondered, her heart skipping a beat. Perhaps it was a member of Garrett's staff informing her of a law suit. On the chance her instincts were on target, she decided not to answer it. She needed time to think ... to finagle a way out of this mess.

Under ordinary circumstances that wouldn't have been such a monumental task, if she weren't so exhausted. After all, extricating oneself from sticky situations was her stock-in-trade. Her characters were pros at it. But at this moment, all she could do was simply grab her camel-haired jacket and toss it over a nearby chair.

She was just about to kick off her shoes when she was startled by a frantic pounding on the door. "What now?" she cried in a strangled voice.

Before she could decide whether or not to answer it, the door flew open, and a short, bespectacled man rushed in flailing an angry fist in the air. Feeling she was about to

incur the same fate as Tony Garrett, she quickly shielded her face by crossing both arms in front of it.

“Don’t worry,” the man snarled, “I’m not going to hit you, even though the urge to do it is overwhelming!”

Samantha lowered her arms. “You saw it, didn’t you,” she said anxiously.

“The whole bloody world saw it, *Rocky!*” he bellowed, turning from her in a huff. Then he whirled back around and faced her again, his dark eyes blazing behind round silver-framed glasses. “Whatever possessed you to do it?”

“He insulted me!” she exclaimed, exasperated.

“So you whacked him? Knowing you were on live television?” he roared. “Don’t you know how powerful this guy really is? He can make or break you with a phone call. And my guess is that by tomorrow morning, you’ll be on a plane back to Florida.”

Samantha became indignant. “Now just one minute, Adam. I’m the injured party here, not that pompous ass who thinks he’s God’s gift to the media! Truth is, he’s the host from Hell, and I’ll bet my laptop there isn’t a viewer who doesn’t agree with me!” Her tawny green eyes narrowed with her fury and she began to march toward him.

The short, slightly-built man extended his palms out as if to hold her at bay while hastening backwards, matching her quick-paced steps, only to be halted by the cedar wood door behind him.

The color that now stained her cheeks matched her long auburn tresses, and her small sensuous mouth tightened, accentuating her gorgeous dimples.

Adam Pearce braced himself for the explosion, and it came with full force. “Just before air time, that peacock had

the unmitigated gall to refer to me as a flash-in-the-pan, boring *hack* writer whom no one would remember tomorrow morning! Well, after tonight I doubt that the name Sam McCall will be so easily forgotten. In fact, it will probably become a household word!”

“I don’t doubt it,” Adam returned, clamping both his hands on her upper arms. “But it would be for the wrong reason.”

“I can’t help that now,” she retorted regretfully. “What’s done is done and can’t be changed.” She pulled herself free, then walked back to the bed, her fury spent. “Look,” she said, sighing as she glanced at the clock on her night stand, “it’s late and I’m beat. I don’t want to talk about this incident anymore, so let’s just call it a night.”

Adam Pearce backed off, but only for a moment. “We have to talk about it, Samantha.” His tone was stern. “This *incident* is not a closed matter. Not by a long shot.” He pushed his hand deep into his jacket pocket, removed a wrinkled slip of paper, and tossed it to her. “That’s Garrett’s private number at the studio. He’s still there. I suggest—”

“Where did you get this?” she asked, staring at the number.

Adam cleared his throat. He knew he was in for round two. “From Garrett himself.”

Her eyes widened with disbelief. “You actually went to the studio to see him?”

“I had to do something to save your butt!” he practically screeched. “The guy was fit to kill. You should have seen his face. It was the color of a frozen veal chop. Now, give him a call and apologize, because if you don’t, then you can kiss your career goodbye.”

For a moment, Samantha considered Adam’s

demand, then crumpled the paper into a ball and tossed it back to him. “You know what you can do with this.”

Adam gave her a hard look. “You’re making a big mistake if you don’t play ball with this guy. He’s not a man to be reckoned with ... if you get my drift.”

His *drift* was disgustingly clear. But Samantha was her own person who didn’t crumble under threats of any kind. “I hear you,” she said, trying to keep her voice light. “But I’m *not* going to call him, and that’s *my* final answer! Now go! I still have things to do. I’m scheduled to be at Barnes and Noble tomorrow morning at eleven for a book signing session, or have you forgotten?”

“Hardly,” he said, forcing a smile. “That’s the reason why you’re here.”

Samantha suffered a moment of apprehension. “You will be there, won’t you?”

“Rocky,” I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

He was about to close the door behind him when he stopped and said curtly, “Keep this door locked! This is New York City, not Home Sweet Home.”

As soon as he left, she locked the door, removed her clothes, then tossed them on the chair beside the television. Deciding on a quick shower in place of a hot bath, after which she slipped into her flannel nightgown, she gave a long stretch and a yawn, then crawled beneath the warm covers, thoroughly exhausted. She had expected sleep to come instantly, but her mind kept racing back over the events of the day ... events that would leave indelible marks on her memory forever.

* * * * *

She had arrived in New York City late that afternoon after a smooth flight from Tampa, Florida, the sun-bathed city where she and her parents vacationed every winter. Her purpose in coming was to promote the sale of her novel, *Murder in Paradise*. Not a story for the squeamish, the book boasted a plot rich in violence and gore – a guaranteed page-turner for those with a strong stomach. Surprisingly enough, the book was not Samantha’s first, as Garrett had so rudely pointed out, but was her third. And although the previously two had been published, they literally went nowhere. It was her new agent, Adam Pearce, who had spotted what *he* considered might be the problem.

“I know there are lots of women who are writing some great mysteries,” he had said over the telephone one gray and rainy morning. “But if I were in the market for a spine-tingler where the killer was a psycho with an ax collection, I wouldn’t reach for a book written by a girl named Samantha. The name is too soft, too—”

”That’s a sexist thing to say, especially in this day and age!” she had blurted out before he had a chance to finish.

“I knew you’d feel that way, and you’re right. It is. But I’m in the business of selling books to one of the biggest publishers in New York. The point to remember is that your genre is hard-core murder mysteries, and by using your given name, I feel you’ve put yourself at a disadvantage. To give you a perfectly good example, I personally know two guys that write romance novels that would curl your toes. After I talked to them they realized that romance junkies would never accept the fact that two men named Leon and Nunzio could relate to the way a woman thinks and feels, so they write under female

pseudonyms and everybody's happy. Then along comes this Waller guy who writes a soul-wrenching tear-jerker called *The Bridges of Madison County* under his own name and shoots the hell out of that theory. Go figure. All I know is that from where I sit, he's the exception, not the rule."

Samantha was becoming bored with his ramblings. It was time to make her point. "Agatha Christie made it, along with Mary Higgins Clark and countless others, and they all used their own names."

"Correct," he had agreed. "But again, your stories aren't the run of the mill whodunits, they're ... they're..." He struggled for the right word and found it. "Macabre. But don't listen to me. You just keep your killers hacking away, and some day, if you're lucky—"

"All right, Adam, I give up. What do you suggest?" she had asked with a sigh, mentally visualizing herself living in a cold-water flat, collecting Social Security checks, while pounding away on her computer, determined to achieve recognition before the wretched Angel of Death rapped on her door shouting, "Enough all ready!"

Laughter punctuated Adam's reply. "It's so simple! Just shorten Samantha to Sam!"

When she had failed to respond immediately to his suggestion, he jumped back in. "Yes. That's it. Sam McCall. I like it. Don't you?"

Samantha finally found her voice. "No, I don't. People will think I'm a man. But you're the expert, so I'd better agree."

In the months following that conversation, Samantha penned several short stories using her new name. To her amazement, they had all been accepted by detective magazines. That little taste of success was like an

aphrodisiac. Soon, Samantha decided to try the novel route once again. She submitted *Murder in Paradise* to her present publisher, and within six months the book had shown promise ... real promise. Adam Pearce had been right.

On this particular morning, Samantha was relaxing over coffee when Adam called. Samantha could barely decipher his words with all the excitement in his voice. "Pack a suitcase and catch the first flight out to New York City. I've just spoken to your publisher and he's arranged book signing sessions at several of the major book stores. He's even managed a guest appearance on *Good Morning America* the day after tomorrow."

"But—"

"No butts about it, young lady." His voice was stern and uncompromising. "You need all the publicity you can get."

Samantha's heart began pounding rapidly, and her knees went weak. "But Adam, I've never been to New York City. I wouldn't know my way around. And except for a one-liner in my high school play, I've never spoken before a group of people. I'd freeze at the sight of a television camera."

"Not to worry," he had assured her. "I've booked a room for you at the Sheraton New York. When you get off the plane, take a taxi to 7th Avenue and 52nd Street. Call me as soon as you get in." Without waiting for an answer, he had said goodbye and hung up. There had been no chance for a rebuttal, no chance to voice the suffusion of doubt and apprehension that had taken hold of her.

She was still gripping the receiver when her father entered the study. Upon hearing the light tapping of his cane

on the polished hardwood floor, she turned and raised anxious eyes to meet his puzzled stare. "Trouble?" he had asked with parental concern.

"Just the opposite, Dad," she had replied, placing the receiver back on its cradle. "That was my agent. He wants me to go to New York immediately for a promotional tour for my book."

"So why the frown?" he had asked, slowly lowering his arthritic-frame into the seat beside her. "This is the day you've been dreaming about. Your mother and I are so proud of you."

Samantha's eyes brimmed with tears. "I love you both for having so much faith in me. I don't ever want to be a disappointment to you." She paused and took a deep breath. It's just ... for some unexplained reason, I'm scared."

Jerome McCall had laughed heartily. "You? Scared? You've never been afraid of anything in your life." He raised the cane slightly and tapped it against her shoe. "Now go and pack some warm clothes. I'll call the airport. I have a few connections there. Maybe I can get one of them to pull a string or two and get you on the next flight out to New York."

Upstairs in her room, Samantha had packed the warmest outfits she had, remembering as she closed the lid to include the notes for her new book. Due to be on her publisher's desk on January second, the book was not yet completed, leaving only three weeks to reach the deadline. She made a mental note of the date as she pushed her laptop computer into the suitcase, grabbed her purse, then hurried down the stairs and into the car where her parents were waiting.

She didn't have long to wait at the airport. As soon

as her flight was called, Samantha threw her arms around the beaming couple. “Wish me luck,” she had said, smothering them with kisses. After her mother had given her one last embrace, her father cupped her chin. “Opportunity is knocking, honey. Now get on that plane and when you get to New York I want you to knock ‘em dead.”

* * * * *

Knock them dead? She groaned into her pillow, remembering the startled gaze on Tony Garrett’s face. Good God, she had almost knocked him out!

Recalling that impetuous act, Samantha bolted upright in her bed. Suppose her father had seen the broadcast and it was *he* who had telephoned earlier to express his shame and disappointment in her. That was a distinct possibility. On the other hand, it was most unlikely. She was to be a fill-in, so her appearance on the show had not been publicized. Not only that, the show was a live telecast and not taped at an earlier time like the rest of the talk shows. She sighed in relief. He couldn’t have been the caller. It must have been Adam.

Samantha dropped her aching head back onto the pillow and relived, in full detail, the moments that had led up to that disastrous encounter with Tony Garrett.

* * * * *

As soon as she had checked into the hotel and unpacked her suitcase, she had called Adam as he had instructed. It seemed only moments had passed before he was rapping enthusiastically on her door. His greeting had

been warm and exciting.

“Welcome to the Big Apple!” he had exclaimed, and as though he were welcoming royalty, he placed a dozen American Beauty roses in her arms. She breathed in their sweet, delicate aroma. “Is this how you treat all your clients?”

“No,” he drawled, “just the redheaded *girls* named Sam. I’ve never given flowers to a man. Although, I remember the time a guy sent me a potted palm with an invitation to a dinner dance.”

Samantha couldn’t tell if he was serious or not. “What did you do?”

“I went, silly,” he said, grinning like an elf. “A man has to eat. But I refused to dance with him. I do have my standards.”

Samantha giggled. “You’re putting me on.”

“About the dinner dance, yes. The plant, no. Some writers will do anything to get published. Little do they realize that I only present their manuscripts to publishers. I guarantee nothing.”

He clasped his hands together. “You must be starved. How about dinner? It’s on me.”

After a delightful afternoon of stimulating conversation, sumptuous food, and several glasses of the smoothest French wine she had ever tasted, Samantha was deposited at the front door of her hotel by an apologetic Adam. Explaining his need to attend a meeting, Adam had assured Samantha that he would be with her in the morning to lend her moral support.

After taking a long, relaxing bubble bath, she had just settled down to work on her manuscript when the telephone rang. It was Adam, and he was exuberant. “You’ll

never believe the break you're about to get!" he exclaimed. "You, lucky girl, are going to be the only guest tonight on the Tony Garrett show."

Samantha went cold. "Oh, no I'm not!" she protested vehemently. "I've never seen him but I've heard about him. He's got a wicked reputation for being brutal to his guests. He'd make minced meat out of me."

There was a moment of silence, then Adam declared, "One look at you and he'll be eating out of your hands. Now put your glad rags on and get over to the studio as fast as you can!" After giving her the address, he reassured her that although he couldn't be there, all would go well. She was a pro. He had complete faith in her.

Ironically, his parting comment had been the same as her father's. *Knock 'em dead.*