

Silent Teardrops by Jennifer N. SHANNON

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Second Edition

Dedication

Understanding, caring, supportive, encouraging, fearless, faithful, strong, intelligent, and LoVinG... Where would I be if not for your guidance, protection, friendship and LoVe! Mom, thanks and I love you much more than letters can express!

Before I was born, my being was defined by you. Even my name has you etched in each letter. Although I didn't get to know you, I feel your presence.

R.I.P. Nicole Latoya Shannon

Note to the Reader

Silent Teardrops is my baby! I breathed life into this book. Writing it was like freedom. It was a stress reliever that simultaneously left me overwhelmed. I love each of these characters, these men and women who floated around in my imagination until I was brave enough to allow them to roam freely on paper.

But in the years since I wrote the novel, and in umpteen re-readings of it, I found myself dissatisfied with some of the choices I made. I came to understand, for example, the way that James was shaped by his life experience, and I wanted to do a better job of showing how people like him have lost pieces of themselves and unfortunately can't put those fragments back together again. I wanted to do a better job with Ruthie, who is searching to find herself and hold on to love, in the midst of discovering that what she'd believed all her life was a lie.

And I've been influenced by your feedback—both words of encouragement and suggestions for improvement. I finally realized I could take what is, in my opinion, a great debut novel to the next level.

So, although there are substantial revisions to the work, much of the content and storyline have remained the same. Significant changes were made to some of the characters' actions and the timeline is more accurate. As a writer, I was deliberate in growing and illuminating these four characters: James, Sheila, John, and Ruthie.

Revising *Silent Teardrops* has proven to be an eye-opener for me. It has given me more confidence and sharpened my skills as a writer. Mostly, it has given me the opportunity to truly connect to these characters I was creating.

Now, I welcome each of you to travel on an enthralling journey from the first page to the last. These unforgettable spirits will make you cry and laugh. You will cheer their successes and mourn their losses. You will hope for them, identify with them, and most importantly, fall in love with them, flaws and all.

Silent Teardrops is about much more than struggle and how to overcome it, it's about life, maturity, choices, and love. We see through the eyes of people who have proof how unfair life is, but who keep moving—even when those steps sometimes aren't in line with what's best—regardless of time or circumstance. My grandmother always says “Just

keep on living.” For me, this phrase exemplifies what *Silent Teardrops* is about. Just keep on living. Your faith will be tested, you will change, and you will believe differently after life has cut you to the bone. But you will still be upright, shoulders back: STANDING!!!

Silent Teardrops is back, in fine form, and I’m presenting it to the world. AGAIN!

Always,

Silent Teardrops

Part 1

James

DAMN I OUGHT to fix that screen door. I can see it from the car, just hanging there, waiting on one of us to slam it too hard or pull it the wrong way and it'll fall off. I don't know why I let the door sit on its hinges like that. Must be laziness 'cause I coulda been fixed it. Would only take a few minutes for me to get the screwdriver and tighten the bolts that are holding it together. Shit, I'm probably the one who broke it in the first place. But I know one thing. If it break before I get to fixing it, Sheila gon' have another reason to be mad at me, besides the one she already got.

I been gone the last few days. It's been 'bout a week now. I don't even have a reason why. I just couldn't stay in that house no more. Shelia ain't done nothing to me, but I go through this shit at least once a month. At least once a month I go off somewhere and get drunk. Most of the time,

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I'm at my buddy Charlie's juke joint. It's called Lucky's but it ain't really lucky for me. He gives me free drinks and we laugh and tell stories about our lives. Charlie's my best friend and I love him like a brother. We let each other borrow money without questions and without begging for it back. We the type of friends that, if his woman put him out, he can come stay with me and my woman 'til he make it back in his own house. I grin to myself at that thought 'cause it's been plenty of times when Charlie done had to lay on my couch. Hell, seems like he was just over here a couple of weeks ago.

As I open the long door of the 1970 Buick placing one foot at a time onto the ground, I wonder why I haven't seen my ol' drinking buddy lately. For some reason he ain't been at the spot and normally there ain't one thing that can keep him from Lucky's. But even with Charlie being gone, I still been drinking. The other bartender, Randy, been hooking me up. I'm drinking something a little lighter than normal. I been settling for gin, something that won't make me throw it back up. Besides, I don't need no dark liquor 'cause it always have me depressed and acting off the wall. Funny, but usually that's all I drink.

I only had two shots of the white stuff tonight. I kinda wish I had stayed and at least had two or three more, so I could sort of be numb when I get in this house. Numb like

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when you getting a cavity filled, after they stick you wit' that long-ass needle that hurt at first, but after the initial pinch wear off you can't feel nothing else. I need to feel like that. I need to be numb when Sheila start that cussing and screaming 'cause she 'bout fed up with me and the bullshit I keep putting her through.

I know I'm wrong. I know I shouldn't be making her go through this shit but I feel so helpless. Almost like God done gave me hands but I can't use 'em or like if I wanted to touch something that was right in front of my face, I can't reach it.

That's how I been feeling over these last two years. Can't help it. My mind messing wit' me. Taking me back to places I wish to God I could forget. One minute I be in the house, laying next to Sheila, and the next I wake up sweaty and hot standing in the jungle—watching my friend step on a mine, then half his leg landing right on my damn foot.

Maybe if things hadn't been going so bad for me and Sheila those thoughts wouldn't crept into my dreams so much. There was nothing I could do. But it still feels bad when a man can't do what a man 'posed to, which is protect his family. If I coulda just saved Sheila then maybe I wouldn't feel so worthless. She done got so sad now. I look in her face and her eyes look dreary, like she carrying

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the world on her back. She seems like a piece of her body gone. Like she walking round without one of the limbs she used to having. I feel sorry for her but I guess I feel more sorry for myself, since I ain't doing no better. Hopefully she won't kick me out for good tonight. But if she do, I deserve it.

I start walking up the concrete steps but collapse down on the second-to-last one. Not yet. I stick my hand in my shirt pocket and pull out a crumpled plastic bag and put it on the step beside me. I reach back in my shirt pocket, get the TOP cigarette paper, tear a piece out, and lay it in my lap. Then I pick up the bag and open it. With my index finger and thumb I pinch a little bit of the grassy stuff and sit it on the paper. I rub it wit' my finger so as to spread it across the center of the thin sheet. After I spread it out, I pick up the white paper wit' the marijuana on it and lick one side. I start twisting it around while I wrap the paper on top of itself. Once I'm done, I hold the joint up in the air and admire it. Yeah, I done rolled a nice one this time.

Now, where's my lighter? I pat my hand against my thigh and feel it scrape my leg. I pull out the blue plastic canister and start flicking the red switch. Come on now baby, light for daddy. After I shake the fluid inside the lighter and hold my hand around the top, when I click it again, something on the inside must ignite 'cause a flame

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comes bursting out the tiny hole. I quickly put the joint between my lips while at the same time letting the fire hit its tip. I take one long pull so it'll catch. Nice. Real nice.

The sweet tingly taste and smell invades my mouth and nose. As I take the joint out my mouth, I hold what smoke I have in it and slowly let it out through my nose. I do this for the next 10 minutes. It's kinda windy so it keeps getting blowed out, so I just light it again and keep on smoking. I smoke until it gets down to a real small piece.

I was never interested in smoking 'til I went to Vietnam. I was young, scared, nervous. Didn't know nothing about life yet and here I was every damn day scared of losing it. Cigarettes became a routine when I first got there but as soon as reality really set in, reffa' was next. Some men took to other drugs to cope but somehow during my time I served, I managed to stay away from it. That don't mean I wasn't curious. It just meant I didn't get hooked. Hell, whenever we could, we smoked. I'm pretty sure smoking marijuana was the only thing I brought back home wit' me. I left my sanity, nerves, heart, soul, and everything else right there in Vietnam. In that war.

I 'member standing in the jungle, up along the Cambodian border, my helmet pushing down onto my scalp, a hand-sized green copy of the New Testament tucked in the pocket of my vest, both hands on my M-16. I

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‘member it like it was five minutes ago. Military training didn’t prepare me, or most of us, for what came next. The killings, the near-death experiences. I hate thinking ‘bout it, but most times that’s all I do. That jungle, the villagers, my brothers. The smell of cordite and gun oil and rotting leaves. Rotting bodies. And I wonder why I smoke and drink. Can’t help it.

Damn, I should roll me up another one before I go in this house. I should but I don’t. I drop the roach in my shirt pocket and put all of the other stuff in my pocket as well. I grab hold the black wobbly railing to help me up, something else I need to fix. After I brush myself off and stand up completely, I do an ‘bout-face as if I’ve just been dismissed from duty and look towards the house.

I slowly walk up the rest of the steps and gently pull the door up and then out so it won’t make much noise. I place the key in the lock, wiggle, turn, then I hear a click and that’s when I know I can twist the knob. But before I even open the door the light flashes on.

“Damn, Sheila.”

“James where you been?”

“Can I at least get in the house first before you start interrogating me?”

“No. Where you been? I been worried sick ‘bout you.”

“I’m sorry Sheila. For real. It won’t happen no more.”

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“And you said that how many other times before?” she says as she walks into the bedroom. I follow her.

“I know, I done said it plenty times before, but this time I’m serious. You know I love you.”

Before I know it she turns around and slaps the shit out of me. She ain’t never hit me before, so she really must be mad. I can’t look at her ‘cause either I’m scared she gone hit me again or that I’m a flip out and hit her back.

“I’m sorry, James. I didn’t mean to hit you. But stop lying to me and treating me like a child.”

She inhales deeply, then speaks quietly under her breath. “I’m so tired. I’m just tired, James.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t. ‘Cause you still putting me through the same thing. If you knew or cared that my body and mind feel like they both gon’ shut down any day now you wouldn’t keep doing this to me.”

I don’t say nothing ‘cause I know she right. I know she having a hard time dealing wit’ everything but what can I do? I’m in my own pain, so how can I help her wit’ hers? I want to reach out and touch her but she seems so distant right now. Like more on her mind than just this.

“Listen James, I love you but I don’t know how much more of you I can take.”

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My head automatically motions up and down in total agreement.

I turn my head and get ready to walk back down the hall. But before my body is completely turned Sheila touches my face. And not just any touch, but a soft gentle caress. In the exact same place she hit me. I turn back around to face her. She keeps touching me, soft and sensual-like. It's been a long time since she did that. A long time since I didn't have to beg to get some affection from her. Her fingertips trace my face, neck, arms, chest. She keeps touching me slower and gentler than the time before while looking deep in my eyes.

Sheila has a way that just turns me on. Something in the way she's walking up on me and pressing her body against mine. Sex is my stress reliever but wit' her it's not just that. I automatically calm down when she kisses me. I allow my mind to relax once her hands start stroking my body. I can fuck any woman but her presence turns me on. She pretty. Her face is dark and smooth, like melted chocolate. The thing that really gets me is them eyes. Her eyes are big and brown. Eyelashes are long and full and accent the rest of her face. When she looks at me wit' them eyes and them full-ass lips, I just be 'bout to pass out right there.

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And then she tall, thick, and got a big ass. Got thighs that's just right too. Not too big not too small. Right in the middle. Her tits are kinda little but not too small for me. She in a C-cup but I'm a tittie man so when I see the D's and on up that's what gets me excited. But overall she got just what I want and need.

“What you doing Sheila?”

“Shhh.”

I continue looking at her as she brings her lips to mine and slides her tongue in my mouth. At first I just stand, feeling myself get all excited. Then I join her. I kiss her back and she likes it. Somehow we standing here but moving backward at the same time. We finally get to where we at the dresser and can't go no more. Wit' one swipe of the hand every perfume bottle and lotion bottle and anything else that was up there is now on the floor.

I lift Sheila up on the dresser and feel underneath her satin nightgown. That nightgown is one of the gifts I bought her for our wedding. Back then I loved the feel of it but now it's been washed so much and worn so much that it's old looking. It don't even feel like no good satin no more. It feels more like fine cotton. I try to ignore the thoughts of the old nightgown, which isn't hard to do 'cause Sheila's kissing my neck. Now she know how much I can't resist no wet feeling on my neck so now I just go on

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and tear them panties off. I take time to unzip my pants without catching myself in the zipper. It's hard to get these tight underwear down but I manage okay and finally here I am.

I ease inside her after I pull her body close to edge of the dresser. Damn, Sheila don't usually feel like this. I can't really describe it but she sure feels good, a little different from most other times. I'm moving now and I got my hand pressed on the wall so I can hold myself up. And we got this rhythm where we're both in the same motion. Sorta like we're part of one another. I can't stand it no more 'cause Lord knows I feel like I'm bought to bust wide open. Just before I do let myself go I open my eyes long enough to see that Sheila's crying.

Her face is wet maybe like she's been crying the whole time. I want to wipe her eyes and ask her what's wrong—'cause at first I thought she was enjoying me the way she seemed to rock her body wit' mine—but I can't. I ain't strong enough. So I close my eyes again and release myself without much regard to whether or not Sheila's still shedding tears. Once I'm done I open my eyes again. My legs are weak and I feel like I'm gonna fall but I stand there and try to be strong.

Sheila musta already wiped her eyes 'cause they red but there ain't no more tears. I guess she didn't want me to

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catch her crying so she done cleared the evidence of her wet cheeks and now she kisses me again. Maybe this time to reassure me that ain't nothing wrong, so me being the type of man I am or maybe just a man in the first place, ignore what I just seen and grip my baby just a little tighter. I still feel weak and tired but I hold on to her a little longer. Her arms wrap around my shoulders and she embraces me a little tighter too.

* * *

I feel like I just had the best sleep in the world 'cause I can't move. No nightmares, no waking up in foreign lands. Just a peaceful rest.

Sheila done cooked breakfast and now I hear her walking down the hall. Damn that woman got some heavy feet 'cause it sounds like she stomping. When she comes in our bedroom, she sits down on the bed and then I feel her hand on me. I turn my head until sheets surround my face. Sheila changed the bed while I was gone. Now that I'm woke and my nose has sunk deep into the pillow, I notice the pillowcase smells fresh. A mild light scent.

Shelia always been a clean freak. She the type of woman who pick up right after it's already been done. It can't be no later than 9 o'clock on a Saturday morning and she already done put the stuff back on the dresser. I heard her earlier but quickly dozed back off. She probably even

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dusted it and I know that kitchen look like somebody cooking on a spotless, new stove. Like nobody even s'pose to cook on a stove that clean. That's just the way she is.

Now she's caressing me and I know what that means—she emotional. Most of the time I like it when she rubs my body, but not today. Any day but today. She won't stop. I guess she thinking 'bout me and what we been through and how we gon' get through.

I got to pee so I shift my leg. This time Sheila must think she 'bout to wake me up 'cause she gets up and walks out the room. I hear her stop in front of the guest room. How long she gone do this?

I finally get the strength to get up. I lightly tap my feet on the carpeted floor. I slowly stand and tip towards our bedroom door. I watch Sheila play wit' the idea of going in the room. She reaches her hand for the knob but immediately jerks it back. As she gets up the nerve and her fingertips actually reach the knob, I walk up behind her and gently touch her on the shoulders.

“James you scared me. I thought you was sleep.”

“Sheila don't keep doing this. Don't make yourself sick 'cause you want to go back down memory lane.”

“James I just wanted to go in there and see if I needed to clean up. You know I haven't been in there in almost a year and I think it's time.”

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She finally turns to face me and I watch her blink back tears. Not now Sheila, please. Before I can say anything she runs in the bathroom and shuts the door. I turn around and stand in front of the bathroom. I'm still weak. I can't even get up the courage to knock. I just let my arm fall down next to my leg while I walk into the bedroom and slip on my pants from last night. I go back towards the bathroom, even face it as if I'm going to check on Shelia, but quickly force my body in the direction of the kitchen.

I look around, grab the plate Shelia put on the counter for me and use the spoon on the stove to dip out piping hot grits. They buttery and creamy-looking so I know they good. I grab 'bout four pieces of bacon and scoop eggs onto the porcelain dish. I usually put more butter in my grits but since they look like they got enough in there already I grab the salt and pepper and aimlessly shake the small containers over my food. I always put salt and pepper in my food even before I taste it to see if I need any. While I was in Vietnam the food was good enough to survive on but that's 'bout it. Didn't have no taste. So now I won't eat nothing unless it has plenty of salt and pepper. It's a habit.

I grab a piece of white bread and take the plate to the table. When I sit down I realize I'm not in the mood to eat. Today is an anniversary. We been waiting on celebrating this a whole year now. This is the day our baby boy was

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born dead. That's why I feel nauseated right now and salty water is dripping from my eyes into this plate of food. And I know that's why Sheila in the bathroom, shedding tears for what seems like the millionth time.

Ain't nothing harder than laying to rest your own child. It was the most unbearable thing I ever had to do. I wouldn't even wish it on my worst enemy 'cause I felt like somebody took my heart out and still expected me to live. Maybe that's why I can't seem to come home and stay. I definitely ain't been able to go in that room. I can't even stand the thought of going in there but I need to get that stuff out 'cause if I don't Sheila gon' go crazy. Hell I might go crazy too. We both done been through hell and back but now it's time to move on.

I finally decide to go check on Sheila but before I can stand up, I hear screaming. I sprint to the bathroom and open the door. I'm scared to death at what I see. Stop it, I want to say but I can't. My mouth's wide open but no words come out. I'm standing, watching my wife scratch her face. I don't mean just scratch. Her face is bleeding and she's crying and shaking her head. Without thinking, I grab her from behind and wrap my arms around her body so I can control her arms and kinda settle her down.

But she's flinging her arms from side to side, and we fall. Now we both on the floor and she's head-butting me in

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my mouth. After 'bout 15 minutes of us sitting on the floor struggling wit' each other, she passes out. Her mind finally done shut down. I know mine done went in and out of reality a couple of times since I walked in this bathroom. I sit and rock her back and forth. I feel like she's my child. We stay here in this position for another 15 or 20 minutes. Finally, I lay her on the floor. Then I ease my legs from underneath her body, slide the rest of me to the side, and stand on my feet.

I'm in speed mode now 'cause I run in the room and do everything in a fast motion. I slip on a shirt and shoes and then I run back to the bathroom. Once I see Sheila I tone down and revert back to slow motion.

I carefully watch her head when I pick her up. It seems like she's gone. Knocked out worse than anybody I ever seen. I look at her and notice the blood is now dried and matted on her face. Her lips are brittle and her eyes—I can tell even though they closed—are red beneath her lids. I don't wipe her face. I just look down at that nightgown and wish I could tear it off. I hate those pajamas. I don't change her clothes I just go to the closet and pull out my old trench coat and drape it across her body. I take Sheila to the car, go back in the house, grab the keys off the counter, run back outside, get in the car and back out the driveway.

