



BETWEEN
THE
LINES



KD WILLIAMSON

CHAPTER 1

“You heard this story how many times now? Ain’t you tired of it?”

Instead of responding, Dr. Tonya Preston smiled softly. The leather chair groaned as she leaned back and continued to observe her client.

She and Oleta always started out this way. There would be a few more questions, a few more attempts at hedging the issue before they got to the meat of the situation. Oleta refused to look at her. Her gaze was frozen on some invisible point on the floor. Her hands trembled, and she tried to hide it by wringing them.

“You not fixin’ me. What kind of doctor are you? That medicine don’t work. Yah heard me?”

“Oleta, look at me.” It was Tonya’s turn to lead the dance.

Reluctantly, Oleta raised her head. Her eyes were red-rimmed and accusatory. “I know what you gone say.”

“Tell me.” Tonya’s tone was firm but coaxing.

Oleta pursed her lips, making the lines around her mouth more prominent. She looked all of her sixty-seven years plus a few extra. “It’s gone work when I’m ready fo it to.”

Tonya nodded.

“But I’m fine e’ry other day...e’ry other month. Don’t need ’em then.” Oleta looked away, as if trying to outrun the lie. “It’s been three years since I been back...seven since it happened. I ain’t weak.”

“No, nowhere near it,” Tonya agreed. But, as July rolled in, Oleta stopped sleeping. Then she stopped eating. It was a potent combination and marked the beginning of a depressive episode.

Oleta yanked the left leg of her pajamas up and pulled the tube sock up as far as it would go. Her fingers were gnarled, dry, and a little swollen, hinting at arthritis. She repeated the process, as if fortifying her armor before battle.

Tonya watched patiently and hoped that one day Oleta would realize that they weren't on opposite sides and that the war she envisioned was within herself.

"Yes, indeed. Look atcha. Some pretty mixed girl all rich and shit. You could pass fo white if you wanted. Whatchu know 'bout it? Whatchu know 'bout sufferin' at all?"

Tonya didn't take offense at the anger or the terseness in Oleta's voice. "I only know what you've told me, but no, our experiences were not the same. I didn't lose my home, and I had the ability to leave," Tonya repeated for the third time in as many years.

Oleta started wringing her hands again, and the tremor increased. "I ain't neva known my street to be quiet like it was that day. I was used to that stupid music and all kinds of racket."

She glanced away, hands fisted, and when she looked back, there were tears in her eyes. Tonya took a deep breath and listened. She wondered how far they would get this time. This year.

"That water...roared like some kinda monster. It ate my baby and came for me. The devil is a liar and so is God." Oleta's chest started to heave, and her breathing hitched. "I was done livin'. She just started. Don't make no sense." She shook her head, and her tears fell in earnest. "Don't make no damn sense."

Oleta whispered the words over and over. She rediscovered that spot on the floor.

Tonya looked on for a little while longer, knowing that they'd hit a wall. Previously, Oleta had refused to give her granddaughter a name and avoided terms of endearment. That wasn't the case anymore, so they'd made some progress. Tonya reached forward to touch Oleta's knee. In turn, Oleta covered her hand and squeezed tightly.

It was only the second week of July, and there had already been several intakes. By the time the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina came around, there would be more.

She took her hand away and stood. "I'll get Stephanie."

Oleta didn't acknowledge Tonya as she looked toward the door. The mental health tech stationed outside finally turned and peered through the

glass. Tonya nodded. A few seconds later, he entered, and a woman in scrubs stepped in behind him. The nurse, Stephanie Chambers, smiled at Tonya. She gave a slight tilt of her head in return.

Stephanie glared, rolled her eyes, and gave her attention to their patient instead. “We ready to go, Mrs. Oleta?”

Tonya almost smiled. It was strange that after almost a year, Stephanie still got irritated by what she termed Tonya’s *shield of professionalism*. Yes, they were friends, but within these walls they functioned more as supervisor/supervisee, with well-defined boundaries. With three psychiatric nurses, four mental health techs, a social worker, twelve adult beds, and Tonya herself, they were in very close quarters during their shift, even though they had their own wing at Universal Hospital.

Oleta didn’t say anything, but she stood.

The mental health tech didn’t look at Tonya at all. He didn’t speak either. His demeanor was a direct result of the behavior she exhibited daily. Tonya’d heard the rumors about herself, thanks to Stephanie. Most thought she was uppity and unable to mix with the common, less educated folk. They were all dead wrong, of course. Still, everyone worked together to do their jobs and treated each patient with respect. That was the most important thing.

Tonya went back to her desk and unlocked the bottom drawer. She pulled out her handbag and headed into her private bathroom. With a critical eye, she gave herself the once-over. Soft pink lipstick complemented her lighter skin tone and accentuated the full curve of her lips. Oleta was right. She could pass for a tanned white person at first glance, not that she would ever try. That just wasn’t her thing. Tonya pushed the thought away. She’d always thought her nose was way too small for her face, especially with her glasses, which she rarely wore.

Unfortunately, today the glasses had been necessary as she was waiting on new contacts. Tonya wrinkled her nose in irritation, exposing a hint of dimples. She pulled the square black frames from her face and set them on the sink. She blinked and leaned closer to the mirror as she fiddled with her mass of professionally styled curls, natural just like her mother’s. Tonya’s appearance

was immaculate, cool and unruffled. Her clothing was an important part of the façade.

Tonya's purse vibrated, which was unusual.

Call me when u get this.

She stared at the message for a couple seconds. Tracy didn't usually text her while she was working, so there had to be something going on. "Here we go. Should be interesting."

Her sister's phone rang twice.

"Okay. Three things. Men suck. I'm bored because some of my classes are dry as hell no matter how the professors try to spin them, and I have some good news!" Tracy's voice went up a couple of octaves.

Tonya blinked. "I'm going to ignore the first statement because you say that all the time."

"Well, maybe I keep hoping that your comeback will be that women are the same. Give me some hope that the struggle is real, even for you."

For a few seconds, Tonya was quiet, simply because she didn't know what to say. Her sexuality wasn't a secret from her family, but by unspoken agreement, it was something they didn't discuss. Her father had never said the word lesbian. It didn't feel right to even broach the topic with Tracy. Instead, Tonya side-stepped the subject. "What do you mean...even for me?"

Tracy scoffed, and Tonya could practically hear her eyes roll.

"Please, you're hot, even in those yesteryear glasses, and just because you don't talk about it, somebody has to be taking care of home base. It can't stay dusty."

Tonya's mouth fell open. "What did you just say?"

Tracy groaned. "Jesus, thirty-six isn't that damn old. Forget it. I know you know what I mean, so I'm letting it go."

"I'm fine with that. Getting back on topic..." Tonya hesitated. "As far as I know, no one ever said getting a Master's in Education was sexy, and should I be sitting down for the third thing?"

"Very cute and a little sloppy. I did say I was letting it go. Anyway, it's way sexier than psychiatry. Easier to spell and not as messy."

Tonya smiled slightly, thankful to escape further awkwardness. “I like my mess.” Besides, everyone else’s lives were a lot easier to deal with and a lot more interesting than her own.

“Yes, I know, and no, you don’t need to sit down. I pretty much got offered a job. If I want to teach, LSU will keep me on.”

That would be great if Tracy actually knew what she wanted to do. She’d gone from interest in the business world to school administration and now teaching. She was graduating in December, and she was still going back and forth. Tracy’s indecisiveness was frustrating, especially since Tonya was footing the bill for her tuition.

While Tonya had achieved career and financial success, Tracy had the type of wealth she truly coveted: personal freedom. Tonya couldn’t even fathom what that must feel like, and there were times when she really wanted to. A surge of jealousy uncoiled in her chest, but she swallowed it down. She didn’t want to antagonize her younger sister or seem unsupportive. Tonya chose her words carefully. “That was nice of them. You’ve obviously made an impression. Did you tell Daddy yet?”

“I tried, but he didn’t answer the phone. And you know he doesn’t text, so I’ll catch him later. But...what I just told you? It’s a good thing, right?” Tracy didn’t sound so sure.

“It is if you want it to be.”

“That’s not really an answer.”

Tonya choked back a sigh. “Just think about it. Visualize yourself in that profession and weigh your pros and cons.”

Tracy sighed loud enough for both of them. “That’s a Dr. Preston answer. I want to hear from Tonya.”

“I’m me. I don’t know what you mean.” Tonya did know exactly what she meant, but sometimes faux obliviousness was easier.

“Fine,” Tracy said in an exasperated huff. “I’m going to celebrate my ass off no matter what.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Tonya’s voice sounded wooden to her own ears. “As long as somebody’s having fun,” she mumbled under her breath.

“What did you just say?” Tracy asked.

“I said it sounds like a plan.”

“Noooo, the second thing.”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it.”

Tracy grumbled. “Fine. I’ll talk to you later.”

Tonya didn’t get the chance to say good-bye. She tossed her cell back into her purse, glanced at herself in the mirror, and sighed. “Okay, I know I shouldn’t have said that.”

As she walked out of the bathroom, trying to push the conversation to the back of her mind, there was a knock at her office door. She slid into her chair and put her purse where it belonged, finally able to focus. The shield of professionalism slid firmly into place as the tech brought her next patient in.

CHAPTER 2

Haley filled her mouth with Captain Crunch. She stared at the TV as she watched the final few cut scenes in *Mass Effect 3*. She stopped mid-chew and leaned forward. Her eyes, dry from staring at the screen for so long, widened nonetheless. Haley's heart did a little flip in her chest.

Commander Jordan Shepard was dead. This was FemShep. *Her* FemShep. Renegade all the way, and the ultimate goddamned badass. She'd built her over the span of three games, forging unforgettable friendships with her crew. Then there was Liara, Shep's partner and lover throughout. She'd stayed faithful despite other romance possibilities, and *this* was her reward?

"What? Noo!" Haley's voice was shrill and loud enough to wake the neighbors even though the central wall separating the double shotgun house was several inches thick.

She tossed the controller onto the coffee table kind of violently, not giving a damn if the thing shattered into a million pieces—the controller, not the table. All these months of waiting and hiding from spoilers got her *here*? If she'd known it was going to end this way, Haley could have saved thirty-nine bucks. She stared in disbelief and disgust as the way-too-upbeat music continued to play and the credits rolled. What the actual hell? Without thinking about the time, Haley reached for her cell phone. It was almost dead, but it had just enough juice in it to get by.

Nate Danvers's name was right at the top of her most recent call list. He picked up at the beginning of the fifth ring.

"You...okay? Ever...everythin' okay?" he slurred.

"Hell, no. I just finished it."

"Wha? Finished...wha?"

"The game!" Haley was getting a little impatient. She didn't mean to snap at him, but given the circumstances... "Wake up." Haley heard the rustle of covers and a murmured voice.

“Jesus Christ! I just looked at the time. What is *wrong* with you?”

At least he sounded more alert. “I just finished *Mass Effect 3*. She dies! I can’t fuckin’ believe it!”

“Did you...did you just drop an f-bomb over this?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Let me get this straight. It is 3:27 a.m. You’re not bleedin’, and no one is dead?” Nate was starting to sound a little teed off.

“Shep is.” Haley cleared her throat. Yeah, so maybe calling him hadn’t been such a good idea.

“A real person, Haley! This is what you did your *whole* day off?”

Well, when he said it like that, it sounded dysfunctional. “Yeah, so?”

Nate grumbled something, but it was muffled, as though he had turned away from the phone. “Jen wants to talk to you.”

Haley rolled her eyes. “No, tell her to go back to sleep.”

“Well, that’s kinda hard since you’re the one responsible for wakin’ us up.”

“I was upset.”

“Yeah, I gathered.” Jen’s tone was sarcastic. “You need to stop givin’ me the brush-off. Let me fix you up. There’s this one girl that would be right up—”

“No, you know I don’t do that relationship crap anymore.”

“But you do the video game *crap*?”

“Yes, no drama.”

“You don’t think callin’ us at 3:00 a.m. is drama? You need someone to help you join the real world, and who said anythin’ about a relationship? Just add her to your list of fuckbuddies. Maybe she’ll end up first in line.”

Haley groaned. “I can take care of that myself, thank you. Whenever I want it.”

“Whenever I want it,” Jen repeated teasingly. “So the toned biceps and baby blues make *you* the cure for vaginal dryness.”

Haley chuckled. “I didn’t say it. You did.”

“You’re so sweet, but this gamin’ thing? We need to find you another hobby.”

“Your husband was into them too, back at Ole Miss, remember? Before you *changed* him,” Haley emphasized gleefully. She smiled, waiting.

“You mean...when he became an adult?”

Haley could almost see the smirk on Jen’s face.

“Is that what it’s called?”

“Uh-huh, yes, adulting.” Jen yawned. “Anyway. You warmin’ up to your partner yet?”

Haley switched gears. “Meh, he’s an offensive asshole who talks to me like I’m five.”

“It’s three thirty. Are you really havin’ a whole conversation? This can’t wait until the sun actually comes up?”

Jen sighed. “Did you hear him?”

“Yasss.”

“You okay now? Or are you goin’ to sit there in your underwear and cry into your cereal?”

“How did you—” It was a stupid question, but it came out anyway. “Yes, to both those things.” The world was just better without pants.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“Why are you still talkin’?” Nate asked.

Haley laughed.

“Lunch later?” Jen asked.

“Hell no, I’ll probably be asleep. Did you forget I’ve been up since yesterday? I’m startin’ the night shift tonight for the next month.”

“Mmm, fun.”

“Yeah, really.”

“Nate will call you later.”

“Okay, goodnight.”

“Uh-huh. If I can’t get back to sleep, I’m callin’ you.”

“I’ll probably be up for a while findin’ solace in fix-it fic. I’m sure there’s plenty.”

“Well, you do that then. Bye.” Jen hung up.

Haley’s phone beeped at her and she threw it on the couch. For the first time in hours, she noticed the stifling heat. The wifebeater she wore was damp, and her boi shorts were sticking in some uncomfortable places. She reached out with her foot and kicked at the box fan to angle it closer to her, but it was

just recirculating hot air. The wall unit in the living room was barely spitting out anything at all. She really needed to call the landlord about that. The ceiling fans twirled fast and hard with the occasional squeak. Still, in here was a lot better than the bedroom, where the heat and humidity made her feel like somebody was breathing all over her.

She stood and opened a window, hoping for a semi-cool breeze. Instead, she was hit by a wave of warmth and the smell of recent rain, which made things even more unpleasant. Everyone suffered in New Orleans in July. Sweat gathered at the back of her neck. A cold shower would probably relax her enough to fall asleep, fix-it fic be damned, but she didn't move from the window. She peered outside. Working streetlights were few and far between on St. Roch, which was smack-dab in the Seventh Ward, but that didn't keep the few stragglers away.

Forget New York, for Haley, this was the city that never slept—a large chunk of it, anyway. She had been coming here since she was a child. It had been her second home, and now it was her primary one. New Orleans wasn't the same city it was pre-Katrina. Crime rates were soaring, but Haley refused to let that hold her back. After seventeen weeks of training, she was now one of the officers in charge of protecting this city. The whole process would have been harder if Nate and Jen hadn't been there to anchor her.

Was she going to save the world by becoming a police officer? Or at least New Orleans? Hell. No. Haley was a realist. She was no super cop, and after a month on the force, she knew she wasn't even a super rookie. But it was the little things that were most important to her. In time, by dragging away the deadweight that kept this city down, she had the chance to give the community back to the people who deserved it most, to the families struggling for a decent existence. She wanted to help people, especially the community she'd fallen in love with so long ago.

Haley groaned. Thinking about work brought up her partner. Was he an ass for real or was he just acting the part? Using her arm to wipe away the sweat about to dribble down her face, she decided on that cold shower after all. Haley stepped back from the window and closed it. There was no point letting in more stagnant air. She glanced over her shoulder. The game had switched

to the main title screen. She scoffed at it and moved back toward the couch, then reached for the Xbox controller and turned the whole system off. Game time was over for now. Well, maybe. Haley picked up her phone and plugged it into the wall charger. Sure, it was late. She scrolled through her contacts and picked one anyway. Somebody would answer her call. Haley wouldn't mind getting dirty again after her shower.

CHAPTER 3

Tonya turned up the volume on the radio as she started over the Causeway. For the next twenty-three miles, the waters of Lake Ponchartrain surrounded her on all sides. At first glance, it looked kind of scary with only two narrow bridges in the middle of an expansive lake. For Tonya, it was like being the only person on an island. Even though other cars were beside, behind, and in front of her, they were all strangers she couldn't touch or speak to. Solitude turned to loneliness at times, but she was used to feeling that way, even around those who cared for her.

Several miles in front of her, a humidity-induced haze hung over the Northshore, the most convenient entrance into St. Tammany Parish. The outline of Mandeville was distinctive. It lacked the jutting, harsh landscape created by the high-rises that were prevalent in the Orleans Parish skyline. Farther on, past Mandeville into Covington, there were simply trees, the highway, and the occasional business, before she'd hit the more residential areas. Just the way she liked it.

It was quite the daily commute since it usually turned into an hour or more, but she enjoyed the peace the drive brought her. As her BMW 328i ate up the miles, she shed her professional persona, allowing for deeper personal introspection. Tonya wasn't naïve enough to think she could mask "the doctor" completely, but she had definitely learned, through the years, to dial things back. She had a tendency to scare people if she didn't. Tonya smiled. There was some part of her that enjoyed the look on peoples' faces, whether it was in the black or white community, when she revealed that she was a shrink. She couldn't believe there were people who still thought of her profession in a negative light.

The truth of the matter was, she didn't go around analyzing, diagnosing, and dispensing advice. Well, she tried not to, since it was entirely too much work. The little voice in her head derided Tonya, reminding her that she

didn't have much of a life outside of the hospital anyway, so she might as well hone her skills and utilize her education around the clock. "Shut up." Tonya slammed the door on those thoughts and turned the radio up even louder. She started to sing along, rather badly, to a Justin Timberlake tune, but the volume of the music automatically lowered as a call came through. Tonya answered it immediately.

"What are you doing?" Stephanie asked.

"Driving."

"How far away are you?"

"At least ten minutes onto the Causeway. Why?"

"You should turn around and meet me for drinks. I'm bored, and do you really just want to go home? Don't you need a break in the monotony? If I'm bored, hell, you have to be comatose. We can even go somewhere lesbian-friendly. Let's do Good Friends. Old queens and show tunes? I'm in."

The request was tempting for all of ten seconds. "It's a work night. You know how I feel about that." Tonya cringed, realizing she'd just fed into Stephanie's argument.

"See. That's what I mean. It doesn't have to be the weekend for us to go out together. I'm a grown-ass woman. Nobody's gonna tell on me. Nobody's gonna tell on you either."

Tonya switched lanes. Stephanie sounded truly irritated. There had to be more to this.

"None of your other friends were free." Tonya's tone was playful and a little accusatory.

Stephanie paused. Then she chuckled. "Shut up. I hate you."

"Yes, you've completely changed my mind now. I'll be there in thirty," Tonya deadpanned.

For a few seconds, Stephanie didn't say a word. "You're not being serious, are you?"

"No!"

"Don't yell at me. I was just checking. Can't tell with you sometimes, especially over the phone."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

Stephanie laughed. “You’re dry like a fine wine?”

Tonya chuckled. “Good save.”

“I thought so. Tsk, sometimes I really don’t understand why we get along so well. I mean, we’re total opposites.”

“I would think it’s obvious by now,” Tonya said.

“What? You keep me from getting pissy drunk and phenomenally stupid, and I make you laugh?” Stephanie asked.

Tonya smiled. “That’s an interesting way to put it, but more or less, yes.”

“It’s good that you can let go a little sometimes, but that doesn’t keep me from worrying about you.”

Tonya resisted the sudden urge to make up an incoming call. She’d just gotten out of her own head. She had no intention of going back in, even for a friend. “Steph—”

“I know. Just bear with me. In our field, you and I both know that it’s good to have a sounding board. You’re definitely that for me. I know. I *know* you like to keep things professional at work, and trust me when I say I understand that. But we’ve known each other for almost a year, and sometimes I really do feel like I’m just that crazy bitch you have drinks with.”

For a moment, Tonya was speechless. Stephanie meant a lot to her. When Stephanie first started at the hospital, she’d instantly treated Tonya with respect as her boss, but she’d seen the person too. Tonya had gravitated toward that both on the job and off. “You’re more than that. You have to know that by now. Why are you questioning it?”

Stephanie sighed. “Look, I’m sorry for laying all this on you right now, but I guess it’s as good a time as any. Maybe I should have waited and said this face-to-face, but... You don’t ever feel like things are one-sided?”

“No. Why? Where is all this coming from?”

“It’s just that I come to you for just about everything, and you just,” Stephanie paused. “You don’t talk to me.”

“Yes, I do.” Tonya didn’t want to take this sudden heaviness across the water with her. Instead, she pulled over into one of the turnarounds.

“Well, you did tell me you were a lesbian, but I have the feeling that was easy information for you to offer. You’re settled into it, but as far as your love life goes—”

“I don’t have a love life.” Tonya sighed and closed her eyes. “It’s complicated.”

It really wasn’t, but at this moment in time, she was fine with that. Although, she did miss sex. There had been times when at least that part had ranged from pretty decent to good. For her, though, relationships had been few and far between, and it wasn’t just because most of the women she’d dated were lukewarm to begin with. In addition to the lack of sparks between them, they hadn’t cared to be her dirty little secret. Tonya let her father wear blinders, and because she had a responsibility to her family, she didn’t rock the boat. The Prestons were a small microcosm of don’t ask, don’t tell.

“Anyway, let’s not forget the way you talk *at* me about your sister and your daddy. You talk about them like you’re on the outside looking in or something. I don’t think I really started to notice until your mom died. Tonya, I didn’t even know she was sick.”

The subject of her mother was a sensitive one. It felt like yesterday instead of eight months ago. “That’s because there was a chance the experimental drugs were going to work. There was no point—”

“Jesus, sweetie. Do you hear yourself? Everything is so clinical. You can’t be the doctor—”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know you felt this way.” Tonya cut her off, hoping the statement was personalized enough for her. Stephanie’s words were way too similar to her sister’s comment about *Dr. Preston*. Her whole body stiffened, and she sat ramrod-straight, despite the comfort of the leather seats behind her.

“I’m sorry too. I feel like I threw my emotions up all over you. I wasn’t trying to sound shitty or ungrateful for what we do have. I just want to make sure I’m doing right by you. This isn’t a movie. I don’t want to be the sassy, one-dimensional black friend.”

A warmth settled over Tonya, making her feel cozy and comfortable. A big part of her was grateful for Stephanie’s emoting. A smaller part of her wondered if she had it in her to give what Stephanie was asking for. At the end of the day, it was easy to listen and laugh, but it was a whole different category of things to give of herself. “I’ll try, and I’ll trust you to let me know how I’m doing?”

“Yeah, deal.” The smile came through in Stephanie’s voice.

“And one more thing,” Tonya said.

“Yeah?”

“You’re not black. Not even a little bit.” In fact, she was blond, perky, and looked like a cheerleader.

“True, but that’s such a minor thing,” Stephanie said airily.

“Is it?” Tonya laughed, relaxed, and put the car in Reverse. As she waited to get back into traffic, Tonya looked out at Lake Ponchartrain. The water, greenish-brown in hue, was barely moving at all. It was serene, relaxing.

“Yes, it is in the scheme of things. I’m letting you go, but Good Friends on Friday?”

Tonya didn’t hesitate. “Good Friends on Friday.”

“And maybe you’ll go with me again to torture myself at Oz? I love making it rain even if most of the guys are gay.”

“We’ll see.”

“Uh-huh. See you in the morning.”



Thirty minutes later, Tonya pulled her vehicle into her attached, two-car garage, which was one of the reasons she’d bought the house. The other was the wraparound porch. As she got out, a barrage of delectable smells hit her; her father was cooking. It was a passion of his, and now that he was home daily, he flexed his culinary muscles all the time. For a man in his mid sixties, he was very spry. The house was always clean, and the yard meticulous. It was his way of contributing and showing that he cared. Maybe it was even his way of atoning. He didn’t have to. Wasn’t it a child’s job to look after her parents as they aged? Though in Tonya’s case, her role had always been to take care of everyone, whether she wanted to or not.

Tonya opened the door that led directly to the kitchen and pasted a smile on her face. Her father looked up from the huge pot on the stove. Other than that, the kitchen was spotless like she’d known it would be. Dark granite countertops gleamed, as did all the stainless-steel appliances.

He smiled right back and lifted a spoon toward her with his hand underneath as a guard to keep it from spilling. “Hey, my baby. Here, taste this. I think it’s the best barbecue shrimp I’ve ever made.”

All that butter was going to require some additional time at the gym in the morning. Tonya moved forward, blew on the broth, and sipped. Her taste buds did a little dance. "Oh God."

"See. Told you. I added a little extra butter, garlic, and some tarragon, along with the regular stuff." Robert Preston's brown eyes sparkled with pride, adding to already handsome features complemented by dimples and an always bright smile.

Her father refilled the spoon and brought it to his own lips. He spilled some down his chin onto his goatee and wiped it away with the back of his hand. "Just call me the black Emeril, baby girl." He winked.

Tonya chuckled and patted him on the shoulder as she moved away, even though it felt awkward to do so.

"Fix me a cold drink."

Without a word, she pulled a glass from the cabinet and got a can of Sprite from the refrigerator.

"I was gone do crawfish, but the shrimp at Rouses looked too nice to pass up."

"A crawfish boil during the week?" Tonya asked.

"Talked to your sister. We're celebrating her job offer. I got some nice wine, and the French bread is soft. She can be here in spirit."

"Oh."

The word hung in the air.

Robert turned and gazed at her as he reached for his drink. Tonya gave it to him.

"You don't sound too excited. I thought you'd be proud of her."

"I am. I spoke to her this morning." Tonya swallowed down the hundred other things she could have said about Tracy and her chronic indecisiveness, knowing she had to pick her battles. Better yet, pretend like those battles weren't even there. It was her family's superpower, after all. She gave him a wide smile because that seemed to always work.

"Good. She wants to do right by you 'specially since it's on your dime." He grinned, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

Tonya's stomach roiled. She hated when he talked like that. It seemed passive aggressive. Yes, she'd paid her sister's way through college. Yes, she

was in the process of taking care of her mother's leftover medical bills. Thank goodness for wise investments and her ability to save. She'd bought this house when she got her first real job. Shortly after that, her parents had lost everything. She took care of them when her father could not. It used to rankle her, but Tonya had come to grips with that reality a long time ago.

Tonya stood there staring at the back of his shiny, bald head. Sometimes his mere presence made her uncomfortable. She didn't like feeling that way in her own home, but Tonya knew being tethered to her family could be a somewhat positive experience one minute and a negative one the next. Maybe some good stuff was right around the corner. If so, why did she suddenly wish she had turned around to have that drink with Stephanie?



Brenda closed the distance between them. "Don't chu wanna know what it feels like?"

Tonya couldn't breathe. "What if somebody sees us?" She looked behind them cautiously, then glanced over her shoulder. There was nobody there, but still.

"They won't," Brenda promised.

They stood in the space between Brenda's home and the neighbor's, which was an odd place to be. But Brenda's brother was a pain, and her backyard was too open. The narrow strip of dirt was just wide enough to fit them comfortably and close enough to offer some privacy, especially toward the middle. Tonya had always thought it was strange that the houses were so close together, but today, she didn't question it. She was just thankful. Plus, it was a minor miracle that she'd been able to get out of the house.

Brenda pressed her against the siding; it was warm and smooth against Tonya's shoulders. Tonya's stomach knotted, and she felt hot all over. She closed her eyes. The first brush of Brenda's lips was soft and tentative.

Tonya whimpered. She didn't know what she had been expecting, but it wasn't for her body to catch fire in a mess of teenage hormones.

Brenda ended the kiss. Tonya opened her eyes. Brenda looked surprised. "Boys...don't feel like dis."

Tonya nodded. She had nothing to compare their encounter to.

Brenda put some distance between them, and before Tonya knew what was happening, Brenda palmed her breast. She arched forward, and this time when their lips met, it was sloppy and wet.

"Ohhh, what y'all doin! I'm tellin' Mama!"

They jumped apart. Tonya was breathing hard, and Brenda was as well. Before she could speak, Brenda ran toward the front of her house to her brother, who was laughing loudly.

This wasn't funny.

She stood there, frozen. Time dragged. When Brenda finally came back, her chest was heaving, and tears were streaming down her face.

Tonya gasped as an icy bolt of fear plunged into her stomach.

“You have to go. He told Mama!”

It was then that Tonya saw the red handprint on the side of Brenda’s face. She reached out, but Brenda batted her hands away. “Go! I think she’s gonna call your daddy.”

Those words shredded her completely. Tonya sobbed. Each intake of breath hurt like nothing she’d ever experienced.

“I’ll see you on da bus in the morning.” Brenda kissed her again, hard and quick. Then she was gone.

Tonya wiped her face and slowly began to move toward the front of the house. She had no idea what was in store for her, but there was no getting around it. In the short walk home, she went from crying hysterically to grudging acceptance and back again. By the time she actually got there, her eyes were gritty and burning.

She opened the door. No one was in the living room. Tonya trudged forward slowly. When she got to the kitchen, her father’s back was to her. Her little sister peered at her over his shoulder.

“You take care of your own. I take care of mine!” he shouted.

Tonya jumped at the volume of his voice. She jumped again when he slammed the phone down.

He turned then. His expression was blank, save the anger in his eyes.

“Why don’t you go play in your room for Daddy, baby girl?” He sat Tracy on the floor, and off she ran without a word.

Tonya stared at him, but she still didn’t see the slap coming. Her face burned where his palm connected.

She cried out. “I’m sorry!”

Then there was a clap of leather, followed closely by stinging pain on her arms, back, and legs. Tonya covered her head and squatted to the floor as blow after blow rained down on her. She did her best to stay quiet, yet she couldn’t. She just couldn’t. In between her own cries, Tonya heard him yelling.

“Fuckin’ embarrassment!”

“I didn’t raise you to be like that!”

“Not in my goddamned house! Yah heard me? You not bringing that shit in my fuckin’ house!”

His words started to blend together, and pretty soon all she could hear was the thundering of her own heart.

Tonya reared up in her bed, gasping. She wiped sweat from her face, along with the tears. “God!” Tonya took deep, fortifying breaths and reminded herself that it was all in the past. She leaned toward the nightstand and grabbed her glasses. After turning on the lamp, she opened the top drawer and took out her journal. Unclipping the pen from the side, she scribbled the date on a page that was nearly full and simply wrote, “Brenda dream.” Tonya set the journal aside and scooted back against the headboard, breathing through the residual anger and fear and filling her head with mundane things until she was able to relax. Eventually, Tonya eased back down in bed and let sleep reclaim her.

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BY KD WILLIAMSON

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