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The Division

“**A** deathbed shouldn't be the peacemaker in this family.” Pa-Pa preached that to us like it was a promise we had to keep. He said, “It'll be too late for y'all to wait 'til you're dying, before you show love for one another. I don't want to see this family go through that . . . never again.”

I didn't understand what he meant—just took it as old folks talk. I wished I had asked more questions, especially when I started seeing tension between my two older cousins. I would have never thought skin color would cause a division between us. It was too late for Pa-Pa to explain his teachings—he was gone.



My stomach had a nervous twitch, as I stood at Grandma's kitchen window. Pat dashed across the yard. She wore her favorite sweatshirt, displaying Africa in a raised leather design of red, black, and green. The word *MOTHERLAND* was written in gold glitter and stretched across her broad shoulders.

She rushed in, with a gush of cool air following her.

“Good morning,” she said in unison with the *bang* of the screen door.

“Morning, baby,” Grandma replied. “What did I tell you 'bout letting my door slam like that? Close it easy, child.”

“Sorry, Grandma, but that was the wind.”

“It's that strong out there?”

“Yes, ma'am, it looks like a storm's coming.”

Pat dropped her backpack by the door and joined me at the window, just in time to see Cherie strutting across the yard. She was walking toward the end of the path where we caught the bus. She never turned in our direction—just stood outside, with her arms folded and her back to us.

“With all that *brain*, you'd think she'd have more common sense,” Pat said. “Supposed to be setting an example.”

“I'm telling you,” I agreed. “Can't she tell a storm's coming?”

“Maybe it'll blow her away,” Pat said, bumping me on the arm.

“Yeah, and bring back the old Cherie,” I added.

We both burst into sly giggles.

Grandma was busy humming, until she heard us snickering. “You girls are mighty tickled this morning for some reason.” Her eyes shifted to the clock on the wall; she frowned. “Where's Cherie? She should've been here by now. Is she sick today?”

“Yes, ma'am, she's sick all right,” Pat started, “sick in that high-minded head of hers.”

“What are you talking 'bout, child?”

“She's outside, Grandma,” Pat continued. “She probably didn't come in to speak to you because you're fixing salmon and eggs.”

Grandma's back stiffened.

“The last time you fixed it, she complained about her clothes smelling fishy,” Pat said. “You know, uppity folks eat bacon and eggs for breakfast, not fish and eggs.”

Grandma slowly crossed her arms into a tight fold, the corners of her lips dipped downward, and her nostrils flared to their full width to finalize the peak of her aggravation. “You mean to tell me she'd rather stand outside, 'cause of what I'm cooking? Humph, foolish thing. Tell that child to get in here.”

Pat rushed out the door. She was on a mission. I followed her onto the porch—just in case I was needed.

She stood in front of Cherie with her hands on her hips. Her head swayed from side to side, like a waddling duck. “I don't know why you're standing out here like somebody crazy.”

“There's a lot you don't know. And furthermore, what I do is *my* business.”

“I could care less about what you do,” Pat said, dropping her hands to her side.

“Then why are you antagonizing me?”

“There you go with your big words—probably don't even know what it means.”

“Small words are for small brains,” Cherie said.

“Girl, please. Your fancy talk doesn't change where you came from,” Pat said, clenching her fists tight.

“Get out of my—”

“Grandma said come in the house!” I shouted.

They turned toward me. I knew I had to distract them before something worse happened. It seemed like they were always fussing. I didn't like Cherie's new attitude either, but I tried to ignore it—Pat challenged it in every way possible.

Cherie sucked her teeth, rolled her eyes, and took one last look down the road. When she didn't see any sign of the bus, she threw her head in the air and swirled around like a top. It seemed to me that she wanted her backpack to *whack* Pat right in those poked-out lips of hers. Then she stormed right past me like I wasn't even there.

She jerked when she opened the kitchen door. *Did the smell smack her that hard?* If so, I couldn't half blame her. That salmon sure is a strong smelling fish, especially when pan-fried

with onions. I guess I never thought too much about it, not until Cherie started cutting up.

We were right on her heels—she hesitated—eased her head into the kitchen, without exposing her clothes.

“Yes, Grandma, did you summon me?”

“Summon? I ain't got time for your proper talk, child. You ain't got no business out there, with a storm coming.”

“I thought I heard the bus.”

“You ain't heard no bus,” Grandma said. “Get in this house before you catch your death.”

Cherie slowly pulled herself inside. Pat bumped past her with a victory stride. I followed.

I felt sorry for Cherie, but I couldn't help but giggle when I noticed how close she stood in front of the screen door. My only thought was that she was trying to let the draft air out the strong smells that were seeping steadily into her clothes.

Grandma seemed completely satisfied. She went back to humming and pulled her golden biscuits out of the oven. The air had a mixture of salmon, onions, and butter all blended so richly; my stomach started rumbling.

“Y'all ready for something to eat?” Grandma said, with pure delight glowing from her face. “You need a hearty breakfast to get your lessons out good.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Pat and I answered together.

“No thanks,” Cherie said, rotating in the draft. “I ate before I left home.”

Pat gave her a disgusted look. “You're too good to eat at Grandma's now?”

“I said I ate before I left home. Obviously, I'm not hungry,” Cherie said.

“No, what's obvious is your snobby attitude,” Pat said.

“You're one to talk about attitude.”

“Y'all stop,” Grandma said. “She ain't got to eat here if she don't want to.”

Pat and I sat down at the table and went to work. I didn't understand what was going on with Cherie. She knew Grandma looked forward to feeding us on school mornings. We had always met there, ever since elementary school.

Grandma's house was in the middle, and ours formed a semi-circle around hers. Her house was the meeting place for the whole family: to gather, eat, discuss our problems, or just socialize. Things didn't seem so natural anymore.

Oh well, Grandma didn't seem a bit bothered by Cherie's funny ways. I tried to make up for them by starting little unnecessary conversations.

“Grandma, may I take some of your biscuits on the bus? I love it when everybody begs for them.”

Grandma's face shone with pride, but it seemed like she tried to be humble. “Say what? Them chil'ren want some of my biscuits? Um, um, um.”

She shook her head, as if in disbelief, but I noticed her eagerly bagging biscuits.

It wasn't long before we heard the bus' horn blow at Cynthia's house—only one stop from us. Cherie was the first one out the door.

“Bye, Grandma,” she said, as she ran to the edge of the path.

Pat and I grabbed our books and thanked Grandma for the breakfast. I took a handful of napkins and the bag of biscuits.

As I stepped on the bus, I handed our driver, Tyrone, a few. He squealed. “Thank you, Renee. I just love your grandmama's cookin'. Don't allow no eating on the bus, but this here is an exception.”

When we were seated, that ole trouble-making Anthony Parker started teasing. “Fresh

fish, fresh fish. Come and get your fish from the Steele's Fish Market.”

All the kids burst out laughing. I never knew what to do in situations like that, so I just laughed, too. I noticed Cherie sitting as straight as an arrow, with her nose stuck in the air. It seemed like her Steele pride had her hypnotized into an intense gaze.

On the other hand, Pat, always the one with the mouth, spoke out on our behalf. “You're one to talk, Anthony. Smells like you had chit'lins for breakfast.”

I knew Pat would stop his mouth, but I didn't know she would make it drop—low *ooohs* swept across the bus.

I just looked down at my bag, hoping no trouble would break out. I sure didn't feel like fighting that morning. Pa-Pa always said that we Steeles had to stick together—no matter what.

Tyrone must have felt the same way I did. “Ant, Pat, y'all cut it out before somebody starts passing licks,” he said, with biscuit crumbs flying from his mouth.

Everything quieted down. I could still feel tension in the air. I wouldn't dare look up; I didn't want to meet those angry eyes of Anthony.

Somebody started a conversation in the back of the bus. Boy, was I relieved.

The warm, buttery smell drifted out of my bag and reminded me of my purpose for having it. It wasn't long before a backseat voice inquired, “Renee, you got any more of those biscuits?”



It was hard to concentrate in my classes. I kept meditating on what had happened at Grandma's. I wished there was something I could do to make things right between Cherie and Pat. Their clashing attitudes were tearing my world apart.

I was glad to hear the bell for lunch. I fused with the students filling the halls with commotion. I ignored the bumps and pushes of the people rushing past me. Their conversations were at a distance, as I walked in a daze.

I felt a sharp tap on my shoulder. It was Pat. “Hey, girl, glad I caught up with you. Didn't you hear me call you?”

“No, I guess my mind was on other things.”

“Oh, you had me worried there for a minute—didn't know if you were turning into another Cherie,” she joked. “Listen, do you have any extra money? I forgot my wallet.”

We stopped in the commons area, outside the cafeteria. I checked my purse. “I don't think I have enough.”

Pat spotted Cherie walking toward the cafeteria with her friends. “She really gets to me,” she said, sucking her teeth.

It grieved me to see Cherie laughing, talking, and falling into her friends—her new family. I longed to be with her, too.

“Let's go ask Cherie,” I said. “I'm pretty sure she has enough money.”

One look at Pat told me how dumb I sounded.

“I don't want to ask her for nothing,” she said. “I'll starve first.”

“Well, I'll go.”

I ran into the cafeteria. Cherie and her friends clustered at the end of the line. Her back was to me.

“Cherie!”

She turned in my direction.

“I need to talk to you. It's real important,” I said, motioning for her to come over.

She turned back to her friends; I felt invisible.

“Cherie!” I said, pleading.

She never turned around again. I felt sick. I ran past Pat and headed for the bathroom. In seconds, Pat burst through the door.

“What's wrong with you, Renee?”

I splashed cold water on my face to soothe the stinging in my eyes. I couldn't answer because of the lump in my throat.

“It's Cherie isn't it? I don't know why you even try.”

“She's so different,” I said, choking back the tears.

“She's forgetting who she is. Don't worry about her.”

“I'm not hungry,” I said, drying my face with a paper towel. “Just take my money and get yourself some lunch.”

“If you don't eat, I don't eat,” Pat said. “Some of us Steeles have to stick together.”

Pat hugged me tight. I was swallowed up by soft fleece, as my face pressed against the warm leather on her sweatshirt. I cried on the *motherland*.



On Fridays, we always waited at Grandma's house until the rest of the family got home from work. It seemed like that school day was never going to end.

Pat and Cherie had nothing to say to one another on the ride home. I didn't see how those girls could hold grudges for so long. One was just as stubborn as the other.

Cherie, being the oldest at seventeen, acted as if we should've looked up to her. She was going to be the first grandchild to graduate. I guess that's why she tried to set a good example with her elaborate speech and college dreams. Delicate features accented her soft yellow complexion: naturally arched eyebrows, slender nose, and heart-shaped lips all influenced the prim and properness she displayed. Regardless of her small build, she had a strong Steele determination.

Pat, on the other hand, *wasn't gonna be second to nobody*, and had to have the last word. Her chocolate colored complexion blended with the boldness of her personality. Thick eyebrows, high cheekbones, and full lips added richness to her African features. She flaunted her broad build with little intimidation to anybody or anything. She was determined to leave an impression of her heritage wherever she went.

I looked up to both of them, even though I was still trying to find myself and the statement I needed to make. My caramel colored skin was just another reminder of how I was torn between the two of them. Our differences never seemed to matter before. That's why I had to think of some way to fix the problems between them . . . *but how? That was another issue to discuss at Grandma's. She always knew how to handle things.*

“Renee, you plan to stay on the bus the whole weekend?” Tyrone yelled, breaking my thoughts. “Go ahead and get off, so you can bring me some more of them biscuits on Monday.”

I grabbed my backpack and ran to the front of the bus. “Sorry, Tyrone, lost in thought.”

“That's all right. Don't forget to thank your grandmama for me.”



The stress rolled off my shoulders, as the coziness of Grandma's house greeted me.

Her home was nothing extravagant, having a radio as its only medium to the outside world. Even that was limited solely to retrieving the time, temperature or listening to her pastor on Sunday mornings. Except for us, Grandma completely separated herself from the world and the things of the world, as she would say.

Regardless of the quaintness of her home, it held the same peacefulness she possessed. The well-kept, antique furniture must have been over a hundred years old. Grandma always made sure it was shiny enough to see herself in it; I never seen a speck of dust around. The knotty pine walls grasped the rustic look, and their coat of shellac, applied by our daddies, complemented the immaculate glow of the house.

I believed Grandma cherished her home because Pa-Pa built it for her back in the early sixties. I could tell he had her in mind when he built it, not holding back on the nooks and crannies she adored.

Precious memories of him swept through every corner of the house. A warm sense of security embraced me whenever I entered.

It seemed like Pat felt the same relief Grandma's house offered.

"I hate having to do homework over the weekend. It just interferes with my plans," she said, dropping her backpack to the floor with a loud, *thud*.

"Proper application of yourself would allow you to have more recreational time," Cherie sarcastically remarked.

"Oh, Miss Proper got all the answers," Pat replied with a British accent.

"Perhaps if you pursued more answers, you may increase your slim chances of going to college," Cherie said.

"I'm sick of your—"

"Girls, I ain't gonna have this carrying on morning and evening," Grandma said, frowning. "If you ain't got nothing good to say, then don't say nothing."

I tried to ease the tension. "What are you doing, Grandma?"

"Chopping slaw, baby," she said, as her face softened. "You know I always cook fish on Fridays. It won't seem right without the slaw."

I nodded, as I had known that for years.

"Your Uncle Leroy caught these here spots and croakers back during the spring, at that James River Pier," Grandma continued. "I decided to take 'em out of the freezer and fry 'em."

She paused in her chopping. "I just put a pineapple scratch cake in the oven, too. The fambly ought to really enjoy themselves tonight."

"Cherie might want to stand outside once you start frying 'em, seeing that the house will smell like fish and all," Pat said.

Cherie ignored her and went to the buffet, where Grandma kept the family's mail.

"Grandma, have you seen anything for me? I sent away for some information from North Carolina State University."

"Naw, baby, I ain't seen nothing yet. Where's that school at?"

"It's in Raleigh, only about two hours from Greenville. They have a strong engineering program."

"Yeah, and it's a predominately white school," Pat added.

"So what? That's completely irrelevant. I have an academic interest and do not concern myself with the ratio of students who attend," Cherie said, looking up from her mail shuffling. "Besides, according to my research, their reputation excels other schools in North Carolina."

"Yeah, right," Pat said. "Did your research include the reputation of Shaw or A and T?"

You know, *black* schools.”

Grandma seemed to have reached her limit with both girls. “Listen here, girls, y'all are first cousins and you're acting like irritated sitting hens. Ever since y'all started that high school, y'all been pulled apart. What ails you?”

“Well, Grandma,” Pat started, in a more humble tone, “Cherie used to be all right until she started those honor classes and hanging with her *light-skinned* friends.”

“Grandma, I'm preparing myself for higher education,” Cherie said. “I don't want to stay in the country all my life. I associate with people who are more like me.”

Grandma gave Cherie a grave look. “What do you mean *like* you?”

“W-Well . . . I-I mean . . . you know . . . people with the same interests.”

“So you mean to tell me that only your friends have the same interests as you?”

“Of course not. It's just that we all have the same classes and—”

“Cherie, you pick and choose who you want to hang with and you know it,” Pat said. “You hang with Nicole and Monica and they repeated tenth grade—they're in two of my classes.”

“Well . . . um,” Cherie began, “I've known them awhile.”

“You've known us all your life, and you disown me and Renee. I guess we ain't light enough for you, huh?”

Grandma looked completely shocked. “What do you mean she disowns you and Renee?”

“When she's with her friends, who are all light-skinned like her, she turns her head when she sees us,” Pat said. “She did it today and had Renee crying.”

I felt the heat rise to my cheeks. *Why did Pat have to tell that?*

Grandma searched my face. “Is that right, Renee?”

I hated to be torn in the middle, but I couldn't lie to Grandma. I couldn't bring myself to speak; I nodded.

Grandma propped her hands on her hips and her face transformed completely: eyebrows unevenly cocked and cheeks slightly puffed, pushing her lips into a pouting fashion.

“What kind of foolishness is this—you got a problem with color, child?”

“No, ma'am—”

“Yes she does, Grandma,” Pat began, “I don't think she has any dark-skinned friends. The darker my friends are the better I like 'em.”

“Well, you ain't no wise better, Pat,” Grandma said, casting a mean eye at her. “Matter of fact, you're just as bad.”

Pat dropped her head at Grandma's surprising statement. Grandma shot a dreadful look from Pat to Cherie and back again. None of my unnecessary conversations could penetrate through the tension.

Finally, her voice sliced through, “What's the cause of you treating your cousins like that, Cherie?”

“W-Well . . . I hardly see them . . . and . . . I-I'm trying to make friends with . . . with good connections . . . you know . . . when in Rome, you do as the Romans do.”

“Child, let me tell you something. You ain't in no Rome—you're in Greenville, North Carolina, born in the country, just like the rest of us.”

Grandma slowly shook her head from side to side, in a way as meaningful as a rattlesnake giving warning—she seemed as mad as one, as her eyes targeted Cherie.

“I think it's 'bout time I told y'all something I didn't share with you when your Pa-Pa was alive, out of due respect to him. But seeing what y'all done start doing, time is come for y'all to

know some things, before y'all tear this fambly apart.”

The impact of Grandma's words stirred a fearful curiosity.

“Y'all go in the den and wait for me. I got to finish chopping this slaw and put it in the Kelvinator, so it'll be ready by six o'clock. And I don't want to hear no more fussing, understand?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Cherie and Pat answered in unison.

My voice finally returned to me. “Grandma, is there something I can help you do?”

“Naw, baby, I don't need no young hands in my old recipes. Just go sit with your cousins and try to keep peace like you always do.”

When I entered the den, I noticed Cherie and Pat sat on opposite sides of the room, looking at their hands. They reminded me of students waiting for the principal.

I started one of my unnecessary conversations. “Grandma's got a lot of old stories. I can't imagine what she's been keeping from us all these years.”

“Yeah, but there's a reason she kept this one,” Cherie replied.

“Yeah, I know. That's what so scary,” Pat said. “I hate making Grandma mad. I feel like God is gonna do something to me.”

Cherie and I burst out laughing.

“Pat, as tough as you act sometimes, you ain't nothing but a big puff of wind,” I said, chuckling.

“Don't try to put it all on me,” Pat said, joining us in the giggling. “Y'all know y'all feel the same way.”

“Yep,” Cherie and I replied.

We filled the room with a pleasant laughter, something we hadn't heard between the three of us in a long time.

“Now, that's what I like to hear—fambly laughing and talking with each other,” Grandma yelled from the kitchen. “I'll be there in just a minute.”

Finally, we heard the refrigerator door open and close. Grandma walked into the den and sat down in her old rocker by the fireplace. She cupped her hands in the folds of her flour-dusted apron, and told us to gather around her.

Cherie and Pat must have forgotten about being mad at each other. They pulled their chairs beside one another, and left a tiny space for me to squeeze between them. We all looked at Grandma like baby birds waiting for whatever was about to drop out of her mouth.

Grandma looked at each one of us, as if she was searching our thoughts. She began speaking as softly as a mother reading a bedtime story. “Girls, y'all know that your Pa-Pa always wanted this fambly to stick together. He said ain't nobody gonna do for you like your fambly will.”

We all nodded in agreement.

“But he won't raised that-a-way, and neither were his brothers or sisters. But 'cause of the tests and trials I had to go through with his fambly, that's something he learned. In turn, he wanted to teach it to y'all.”

A sudden astonishment grasped my heart and made it sink into my stomach. *What did Grandma mean—Pa-Pa wasn't raised the way he had taught us all these years?* It seemed like Grandma heard my thoughts.

“There's a lot of hist'ry behind this here fambly, and a lot of hardships. I won't born a Steele, but I came to live up to that name. I was a Dupree, I was poor, and worst of all, my skin color was too dark. Them three things won't no good combination for your great-grandpa

Steele.”

Cherie, Pat, and I shot glances at each other.

“Nevertheless, whether he liked it or not, I became a Steele just the same,” Grandma continued. “And with the help of God, I survived to tell about it. It all started a long time ago, when my oldest sister, Lena, started courting.”

As Grandma began her narrative, my mind opened to a time unknown to me, yet my curiosity welcomed it. I wasn't sure if I was ready for all that was in store—it was a challenge I was willing to take.