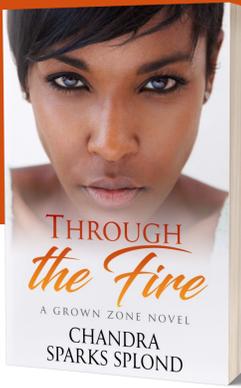


CHANDRA SPARKS SPLOND

THROUGH THE FIRE

A GROWN ZONE NOVEL



CHAPTER ONE

NERVOUS ENERGY PULSED THROUGH ME as I tried to ignore the body bag that had led me to the bustling crime scene. I stared into the eye of the television camera and tried my best to

school my face into a mask of professionalism, waiting for my cue to start the hardest and saddest interview of my broadcast journalism career.

When I received the signal from my producer, I launched into my introduction with practiced ease, thanks to my four years of classes at New York University and almost three years on the job.

“Good evening. I’m here speaking exclusively with Martina Richmond, the mother of twelve-year-old Marshall Richmond who was allegedly murdered...”

I watched out of the corner of my eye as Martina broke down in tears, and I willed myself not to follow suit. I was almost twenty-five, and I didn’t have kids, but her pain was palpable, and my heart went out to her. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what she was going through.

I took a calming breath.

“Marshall is the latest in a string of police shootings of unarmed African-American young men. According to witnesses, he was at a friend’s end-of-summer pool party when a neighbor called 911 to say he heard screaming. Police allegedly shot Marshall mid-air while he was squirting a water gun while jumping off a diving board.”

I turned to Martina, knowing my cameraman Jose Padilla was going in for a close-up of her tear-stained face. My reporting job at WTSU 7 in Atlanta, Georgia, was my second one out of college, and I’d been there almost two years. I had seen other reporters doing these kinds of tragic stories, and honestly, I hated them. The thought of interviewing someone at the height of grief bothered me, but it was my job. I was determined to give a name to these victims who so often went unnoticed by mainstream media. My producer hadn’t wanted to give Martina’s story much airtime after Martina called me and I told him about it. The biggest hook for the station was Martina was giving me the exclusive since she knew me from church.

“How are you feeling?” I asked and inwardly cringed when Martina hesitated.

I couldn’t believe I had asked the one question I had vowed I would never ask. How could anyone who was grieving feel, especially after losing a child?

I took another calming breath. *Get it together, Vanessa*, I thought, willing myself to make these minutes on the air matter. “What would you like for viewers to know about Marshall?”

“He was a good kid,” Martina said, her mocha-colored eyes lighting up at memories of her son. “He was a straight-A student and an athlete. God blessed me with an amazing kid.” She sniffed back a tear like it had just hit her she was talking in past tense.

“Have you been able to talk to any witnesses?”

Martina nodded, then continued speaking as though she hadn’t heard my question.

“I won’t pretend to understand why this is happening, but I’m trusting God...”

Her voice broke, and before I could stop myself, I threw away professional decorum and grabbed Martina who seemed to hold on to me for dear life. I didn’t know her well, but it was clear she needed someone to lean on.

“It’s going to be okay,” I whispered, not sure from where the words were coming.

Martina sniffed again and nodded.

I composed myself as best I could before turning back to the camera, dread filling me when I heard my producer in the studio whispering through my earpiece that I needed to stretch the story to fill extra air time. I fin-

ished the interview as best I could and breathed a sigh of relief when I was told I could sign off.

“We’ll update you about this story on the six o’clock news. This is Vanessa Johnson reporting live. Back to you in the studio, Aaron.”

I had barely gotten the signal we were clear before I turned back to Martina, once again wrapping the petite woman in a tight embrace.

“I’m praying for you. Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked.

She smiled through watery eyes. “You’ve already done more than you realize,” she said. “Thank you for sharing Marshall’s story. I’ve been a fan since you came to Atlanta. I really appreciate that you’re professional but also approachable.”

I couldn’t help but smile. Sometimes I wondered if my work was making a difference. Every now and then it was good to get confirmation it was—even in moments like this.

Martina and I spoke for a few more minutes before I interviewed a few people who had witnessed the shooting, biting back the bit of disappointment I hadn’t at least caught a glimpse of the shooter. Witnesses said officers had closed ranks and hustled him from the scene. Once I was done, I headed back to the news van, mentally playing out how I was going to discuss the story once I was live again at six. WTSU wasn’t the biggest of the three stations in Atlanta, but I felt it was the best. We were small enough that I got opportunities I wouldn’t get at larger stations.

Case in point: I had recently been promoted to weekend anchor. During the week I still did stories in the field, even though I was hoping that wouldn’t be true for much longer. My five-year plan was to make it to the top anchor spot at WTSU, stay there for a couple of years, then head back to New York City where my best friends and college roommates Jasmine Richardson Adams and Maya Davis lived.

“You okay?” my cameraman Jose asked, and I realized I had sighed.

I nodded, suddenly too overcome by emotions to answer. I chided myself for letting my feelings get the best of me. The older I got, the more of a waterhead I seemed to become. NYU had taught me as a journalist to be impartial to the news, but Martina’s story had touched me, and at the end of the day, I was still human and black.

My best friend Jasmine’s brother had been murdered when he was sixteen, and she said for the longest time she was just numb.

I sympathized when she told me, but I got it now.

I had only seen Marshall a few times at church, and seeing his lifeless body after they pulled him from the pool wasn’t something I’d ever forget. It seemed black boys were dying every day at the hands of pathetic police. I saw it on the news just like everyone else, but this was the first time it had ever hit close to home—literally in more ways than one. The name of the police officer involved hadn’t been released yet, but it was quite possible I knew him. Atlanta was big, but everyone seemed to know everyone, so if I didn’t know him, I probably knew someone who did.

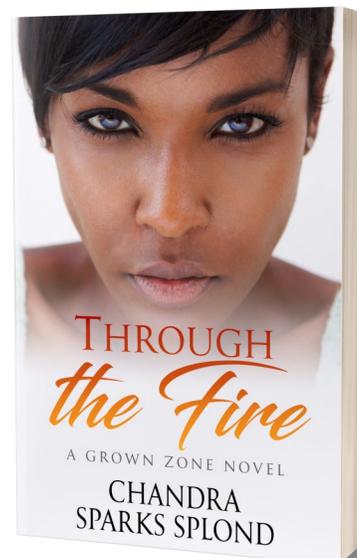
I smiled my thanks as Jose pressed a tissue into my hand, then busied myself fixing my makeup. One thing I had learned was if I stayed camera ready, I didn’t have to get camera ready.

We were just about to pull out of the parking lot of the apartment complex where Marshall had been shot when there was a knock on the news van window. I gave a watery grin to the face staring back at me.

“Hey, girl,” Kelly Henderson said after I rolled down the window.

“Hey,” I said, giving a little wave.

Kelly and I had gone to high school together in my hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. We hadn’t hung out back then, but we had connected when we both landed jobs in Atlanta. Although we worked for competing stations, we usually ended up on the same assignments and often shared quotes and



other information pertaining to our stories.

“What did I miss?” she asked.

I gave her the rundown, leaving out the fact that I had gotten an exclusive interview with Marshall’s mother since Kelly probably already knew that—or she would know soon enough.

“How come you weren’t at the BJA convention?” Kelly asked, looking up at me as she finished jotting down some notes.

The Black Journalists Alliance convention was held in a different city each year, and I had been going since my freshman year at NYU. Normally I was one of the first to register, but this year, I had been so busy with work, I had missed the early registration deadline. I had thought about registering onsite in Las Vegas when the weekend finally came around last month, but I had gone to visit Jasmine and her husband, Kyle, who had eloped and were now expecting a baby.

“I decided to skip the convention this year,” I said, leaving it at that. “How was it?”

Kelly nodded. “It was good,” she said. If the tonsil-showing grin was any indication, she had met a man, which wasn’t surprising. Kelly was rarely without a man. “I made some contacts that look promising. I met one of your sorors.”

I had pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., my sophomore year of college, but I hadn’t been active since I graduated. Once an AKA, always an AKA though. I definitely planned to get active again at some point.

“Oh, really? Anyone I know?”

“Maybe. I think her name was Miranda. She works at a station in San Diego. I sent her the link to my reel. Maybe I’ll land an interview. I wouldn’t mind moving to San Diego. It will put me more on the radar of the folks in Los Angeles.”

It was no secret that Kelly had her sights set on bigger and better just like me. She wanted to be one of the first black female anchors for a nightly news show. Between you and me, she had the looks, but I thought her delivery was kind of flat. The camera seemed to love her though. I had to admit she did look great on screen.

“Vanessa, we need to go,” Jose reminded me.

I glanced at my phone, knowing I needed to get back to work for our staff meeting.

“Good catching up,” I said, waving at Kelly.

“You want to get together for lunch soon?” she asked.

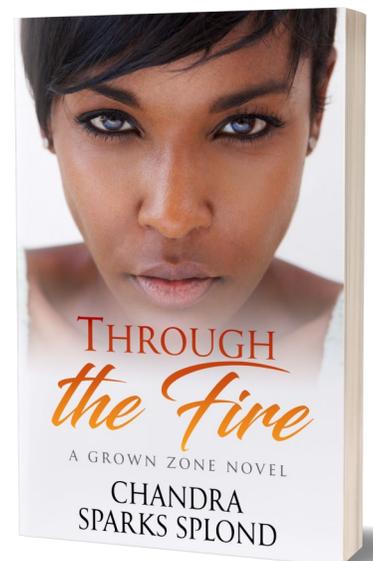
“Sounds good. Just text me, and we’ll set something up.”

Kelly reached through the window and gave me an awkward hug before scurrying off to complete her interviews.

I pretended to focus on my phone the entire ride back to the studio. I couldn’t get Martina Richmond or the sight of Marshall’s lifeless body out of my mind. What was that woman going through? Three months ago, Martina had lost her husband in some freak military accident, and now to lose her only child too? Both were just senseless and so tragic. The whole situation seemed unfair.

I tried to remind myself that even in this, God was in control. That’s one of the things my momma would tell me all the time growing up. If I called her and told her what had happened, the first thing out of her mouth would be all things would work together for Martina’s good. That’s one of the reasons I didn’t call her. I couldn’t see how losing her son and husband was going to work out for Martina’s good.

I thought about ignoring my cell phone when it rang, thinking it was my momma, until I remembered she was out of town and had pretty bad reception. It wasn’t unusual for her to call when she was on my mind. The number and face that popped up on my phone made me smile, and I jabbed the button to accept the call.



“Hey, baby,” I said, ignoring Jose who grinned at my sexy whisper.

“Hey, beautiful. Happy anniversary again,” my boo Jacob Winston said, his voice sending chills down my spine, just like it had every day since we had met two years ago.

Jacob was twenty-eight, three-and-a-half years older than me. He was a producer for Kelly’s network, WARC 12, which was ranked number one in Atlanta. We had actually met when I’d interviewed for Kelly’s position. After my interview, Jacob and I had run into each other at a few industry events around town and kept up with each other via social media.

I thought he was cute, but I was in career advancement mode. I told him as much when he invited me out to dinner one night. As much as I tried, I couldn’t get him out of my head, and he wore me down until I had finally agreed to a date.

It was one of the best decisions I’d made in my life.

Jacob and I had only dated a few weeks before deciding we were too old to play games, and we’d been in a committed relationship ever since. The last two years had been amazing.

Jacob just got me. His drive and ambition matched mine, he loved me for me, spoiled me as much if not more than my daddy, and he made me laugh like no one ever had.

Lately, there had been talk about us getting married and eventually starting a family—something I wasn’t planning to do for at least five more years. I had never felt the way about anyone I felt about Jacob. There had been a couple of knuckleheads in high school and college who I thought I loved and who had shown interest in me, but this was different, and there was no doubt in my mind Jacob felt the same way. I couldn’t wait for the day I would become Mrs. Jacob Winston, which Jacob assured me would be very soon. Since it was our anniversary, I was hoping a proposal would happen tonight.

“How are you doing?” Jacob asked, the concern etched in his voice drawing me from my thoughts.

Without him saying it, I knew he had seen my interview with Martina Richmond. “I’ll be fine,” I said, trying to convince myself more than him.

“Babe, this is me you’re talking to. You’re not fine.”

“No, but I will be. I have to be,” I insisted.

He sighed. “Okay.”

“How’s your day going? The roses you sent are beautiful, by the way. Thank you.”

He played along with my change of subject. “You’re welcome. Things are busy as usual, but I’ll be done in time for our date. I’ll be there at eight, Nessa. Be ready to go. We’ve got a tight schedule.”

“What have you got planned?” I asked, gripping the phone.

He gave this deep, sexy laugh. “Trust me. It will be a night you’ll never forget,” he promised.

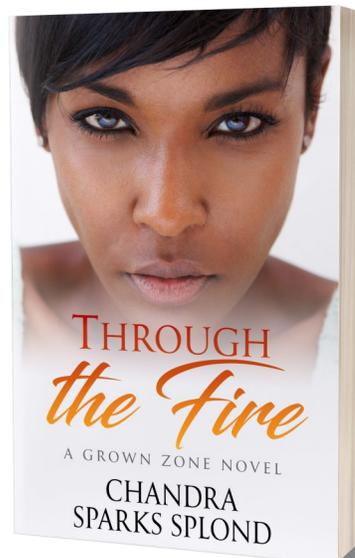
His words caused my heart to flutter. “Jacob...” I pleaded.

“Nessa...” he mocked, and we both laughed. “Hang on.” He started talking to what I assumed was someone in the newsroom. “I’ve got to go. I’ll see you tonight. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I said.

I COULDN’T FOCUS DURING MY meeting, my mind swinging between thoughts of Martina Richmond and my upcoming evening with Jacob.

I rushed home after work, knowing I had only about thirty minutes to get ready before Jacob arrived. I took a quick shower, but it still wasn’t enough to wash away the residue of my interview with Martina and visions of Marshall’s body. I got dressed, relieved I’d laid out my red halter dress before I’d left for work that morning. With a few minutes to spare, I stuffed my feet into black four-inch strappy sandals as I went through my task list to see if there was anything else I needed to do before Jacob ar-



rived. I nodded in satisfaction at my reflection in the mirror, grinning that not only did I look good, but I had also checked everything off my list. I glanced around my two-bedroom apartment, plumped a couple of pillows then finger-combed a few strands of my pixie cut before finally plopping down on the sofa and turning on the television.

Just as quickly, I was back up pacing, wondering what the night had in store. The peal of my cell phone startled me, and I laughed at how nervous I was as I hurried over to where I'd left it on the coffee table.

"Hello," I said.

"Hey, baby."

"Hey, Momma. Is everything okay?" I asked, frowning.

My parents had gone on a church trip to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and there was no reason for Momma to be calling me—unless something was wrong. I was surprised she even had reception.

"Everything's fine," she said. "Girl, guess who your daddy and I ran into on the trip."

"Who?" I asked, relaxing when I realized she just wanted to gossip.

"You remember Reese Williams? She went to high school with you. I think she was a year or two behind you."

I bit my lip, trying to remember. "The name Reese sounds vaguely familiar," I said. Between high school, college, the sorority and BJA, I knew so many people that it was becoming hard to keep track of names and how I knew them. Plus, if I'd gone to high school with her, there was the chance her last name wasn't Williams back then.

"Well, she's here. Sister Abernathy invited her. Girl, she's married with a daughter. She asked about you, and I told her you were a big-time TV reporter in Atlanta. I gave her your number."

"Momma, why would you give that woman my number?" I whined. It seemed no matter how old I got, I always reverted to being a kid around Momma. "I haven't spoken to her, probably since we were at Grover. What could we possibly have to talk about? Please don't give out my number."

"What's the point of having a phone if you don't want folks to call you?" she sassed.

I just shook my head. I had told Momma repeatedly not to give out my personal information, which she should have known since daddy worked in television too, although he had been behind the scenes working as a producer. Since I was on TV, people felt like they knew me and had a right to be a part of my life—personally and professionally.

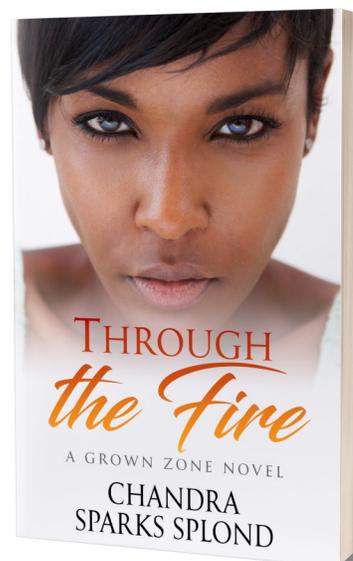
Although it was common practice at work that no personal information was to be given out about reporters, the last three years had taught me people at work weren't the problem. It was Momma, who was more than happy to divulge any and everything about my private life, especially when people even hinted at knowing me. I knew she didn't mean any harm, but still it annoyed me, which was why I had recently gotten a cell phone I hadn't told Momma anything about. Only Jacob and a few close friends like Jasmine and Maya had the number, and I gave it to my daddy, knowing he would only use it if necessary.

"So what time is Jacob coming over?" Momma asked as I rolled my eyes and glanced at the clock. Momma got on my nerves sometimes, but I wouldn't trade her for anything. "Well?" she prompted, and I realized I had zoned out. I mentally replayed our conversation.

"How did you know he was coming over tonight?" I asked.

"It's y'all's anniversary, right? Most folks celebrate on their anniversary."

Although Momma and I were close and talked about almost everything, I didn't remember mentioning my anniversary. "We talked about that?" I asked absently as I glanced at the clock again and realized Jacob was already ten minutes late.



“Jacob told me—”

I glanced at the phone, laser focused on what Momma was saying. “Jacob told you...” I started dancing around the room. “Momma, is Jacob going to propose tonight?” I squealed.

“Chile, yes. He came to visit us a couple of months ago. I promised him and your daddy I wouldn’t tell you, but I didn’t since you guessed.” Her accent was as sweet and thick as Alaga syrup. I could imagine her slapping her knee and cackling, and I smiled at the image. When the reality of what Momma said set in, I had to sit down and take a deep breath.

Tonight was the night.

Jacob was going to propose.

“I’ll call you back, Momma,” I said, needing a minute to get myself together before Jacob arrived.

“You better. I want all the details,” Momma said.

I walked by the full-length mirror in my entryway, and suddenly my red dress seemed all wrong. Did I really want to get engaged in red? I giggled, not believing what was about to happen. Fifteen minutes later, I had changed clothes three times, and Jacob still hadn’t arrived. I grabbed the phone to call him, telling myself to sound as casual as possible when he answered. The phone rang four times then went to voice mail.

“Hey, baby. I just wanted to make sure everything is okay. You’re almost twenty minutes late, which isn’t like you at all. Call me when you get this message.”

I set the phone down then checked it again to make sure the ringer was on.

When the phone rang a few minutes later, I jumped ten feet then snatched it up. “Jacob?” I asked. Even though I didn’t recognize the number, I thought maybe his phone had died and he had borrowed someone else’s.

“May I speak with Vanessa Johnson?” a woman said.

I didn’t even bother to hide my annoyance. “Yes. Who’s this?” I asked, wondering briefly if it was my Grover classmate Momma had given my number to.

“This is Deborah McKenzie. I’m the news director from WQTP 22 in New Jersey.”

I frowned, not recognizing the woman’s name and wondering why she was calling me so late.

“I started here a few weeks ago,” she explained. “I believe you had been in touch with our former news director, Patricia Worthington.”

“Yes,” I said, the other name ringing a bell. I had met Patricia at the BJA convention last year, and she had urged me to send reel links in case any openings came up at the station, which had had the top ratings in New Jersey for the last five years. It wasn’t New York, but it was close enough to put me on the radar of New York producers.

“We’ve had a weekend anchor position to open, and I was calling to see if you’d be interested in interviewing. Do you have an agent I need to contact?”

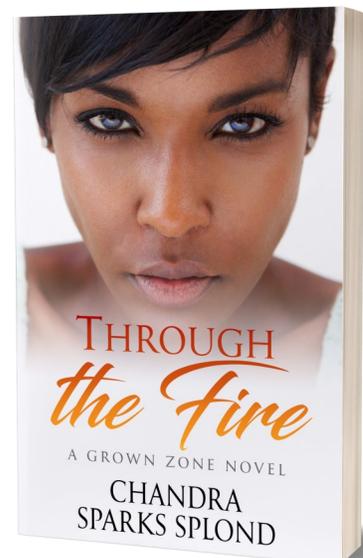
Without my permission, I went mute.

When I’d submitted my links, moving to New Jersey was what I wanted to do, but now I wasn’t so sure. I glanced down at my left hand, envisioning an engagement ring there, and suddenly things didn’t seem so simple. Atlanta was a great market and close to my parents in Birmingham. Plus, Jacob was born and raised in Georgia, and although he knew and supported my dream of moving back to New York, he didn’t share it. He was happy being home.

“Can I think about it?” I asked, not believing the words coming out of my mouth.

She grew silent, and I could only imagine what she was thinking. Most reporters would jump at the chance to interview in a much bigger market, especially for a weekend anchor position so close to New York.

“N–No, I don’t have an agent. I’m interested in the job,” I said, not



sure if that were true, “but I have some personal things going on right now. Can I call you in a couple of days?”

“I guess that will be okay,” she said slowly. “I have a few other people I want to interview. I’ll be honest with you: Just based on what I’ve seen, you’re my first choice. You have a way of connecting with viewers, and I believe you would be a great addition to our team. I need to fill this position quickly though.”

“Thank you. I understand,” I said. “I appreciate the opportunity. I promise I’m not wasting your time. I’ll give you a call in a couple of days.”

I hung up, wondering if I should have at least agreed to an interview. Jacob and I weren’t engaged—yet. As much as I loved him, did I really want to pass up this opportunity without a ring? I reached for my phone to call Deborah McKenzie back. The call hadn’t even connected when my doorbell rang, and my heart dropped to my toes. I glanced through the peephole and smiled, pushing Deborah McKenzie’s call from my mind.

“Hey, baby,” I said, letting Jacob in. “How come you didn’t use your key?”

“I wasn’t thinking,” he said, leaving my upturned lips waiting as he brushed by me and headed to the sofa. He sat down then popped right back up and began pacing the narrow space between the sofa and the coffee table.

I watched him, drinking in the sight of him. He was fine, and he was all mine. His dark chocolate skin had been the first thing I’d noticed about him the first time we’d met. The way his suit fit his six-foot frame tonight was pure perfection. There was no doubt in my mind God had made Jacob Winston just for me. I stared at his feet heating the hardwood, and suddenly I knew. Although Momma had told me Jacob was going to propose, I had tried to tell myself not to get my hopes up too high, but watching him move like a caged tiger, I knew I was about to experience the moment I hadn’t realized I wanted until I’d met Jacob.

I walked over to the sofa and placed my hand on his arm. “Baby, is everything okay? I called you a couple of times,” I said, throwing on my professional mask, even though my heart was thudding so hard I was surprised he couldn’t see it through my dress.

“I had a meeting,” he rasped, plopping onto the sofa and dropping his head in his hands. “We need to talk.”

I bit my lip to hold in my smile, inwardly cracking up at how well Jacob was playing the role of being upset. I had always told him I wanted to be proposed to when I least expected it without any bells and whistles. Since I spent my life in the spotlight, I wanted to keep my personal life simple—and private.

“Sounds serious,” I said, running my hand over his low-cut hair.

When he flung my hand away and hopped up again, I frowned. He had never rebuked my touch.

“Please don’t make this any more difficult than it already is,” he said, not even looking at me.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, grabbing his hand so he’d stop pacing. “Baby, you’re scaring me. Make what difficult?”

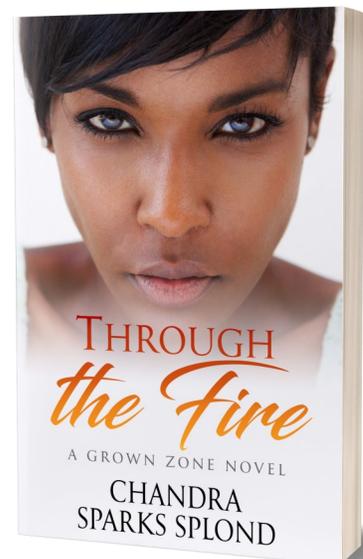
He blew out a breath then looked at me. Or should I say through me. Even though he was staring directly at me, it was like he wasn’t seeing me.

“I was planning on coming over here tonight to propose.” He gave a dry laugh, reached into his pants pocket and removed a black velvet ring box, which he placed on the edge of the coffee table.

I stared at the box, ignoring the flush that filled my face and the heat that enveloped me. This was the moment I had dreamed about since we’d met, but it felt all wrong.

“While I was at the BJA convention, something happened,” he said. “I’m not sure how it happened. All I remember is inviting a few people to my suite and us having a couple of drinks. She was lying on the sofa asleep by the time everyone left, so I covered her up and went to bed. When I woke up, she was in my bed...”

“She?” I looked at him, knowing I couldn’t be hearing what I thought I was. “You’re joking, right. You...” I gulped, trying to force the words out of my mouth. “You slept...you slept with someone else?”



Jacob and I had only slept together once. As much as I loved him, my momma had drilled into my head sex was for marriage. We had slipped up one night, and I had felt so guilty that it had never happened again. Not because I didn't love Jacob, but because I felt like I had disappointed my momma and God.

I looked at Jacob, then glanced around the room, thinking I had to be on an episode of that old show *Punk'd*. I barked out a laugh then fell silent when he didn't laugh too.

"There's more," he said when I started to wonder if the silence would ever end. "She's pregnant."

"Wait...what?"

I think I blacked out for a second because when I came to, I was collapsed on the sofa. "Pregnant?" I whispered, waves of sickness washing over me.

"Nessa, I love you, and I want to spend my life with you, but I've got to figure this out. I think..." He took a breath then forged ahead. "I'm going to marry her. I have to do what I feel is right. I grew up without my father, and I've always promised myself I would never do that to my child."

"And you think making an emotional decision to marry some random skank you screwed is the answer?" I snapped, glaring at him.

He opened his mouth like he was going to say something then closed it.

I stared at the ring box, my breath growing shallow as the reality of what he was saying slowly slapped me. I had thought this was all a joke, but the truth was, the joke was on me. I snatched the box from the table and stared at the ring inside. The one-carat stone seemed to mock me. The red-hot heat that overcame me was quickly cooled by the flailing of my arms as I dove at Jacob, pummeling him with my fists.

"Who is she?" I screamed, growing angrier when he just stood there, allowing me to vent my anger. "Who is she?"

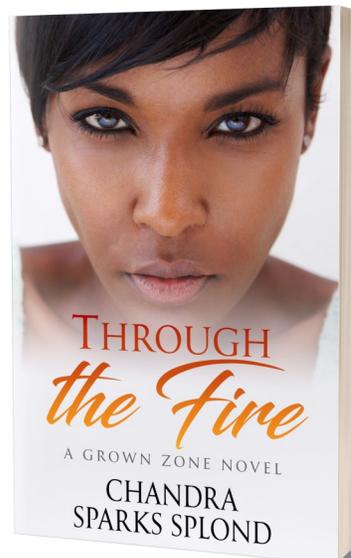
I came out of my haze long enough to focus on his lips, telling myself even as the name formed that I couldn't be hearing him right. I walked over to the mirror, which I had checked seconds before letting him in, and I looked a hot mess. The green dress I'd changed into was wrinkled, my pixie cut was tangled, mascara formed tear-stained rivers down my cheeks, and my eyes were starting to swell. Behind me, Jacob stood watching, looking as though he had lost his best friend.

"What did you say?" I asked again, knowing I had heard wrong.

He ran a hand over his head, then caught my gaze in the mirror.

"Kelly."

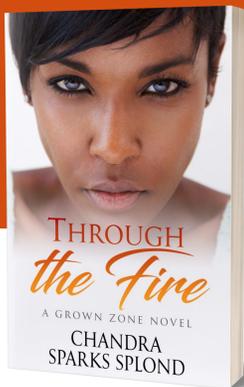
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www.chandrasparkssplond.com.**



CHANDRA SPARKS SPLOND

THROUGH THE FIRE

A GROWN ZONE NOVEL



ABOUT THE BOOK

News reporter Vanessa Johnson has spent her entire professional career in the public eye, so the last thing she wants is for her private life to be televised for the entire world to see. After dealing with a heartbreaking devastation unlike anything she's experienced in her twenty-four years, Vanessa takes a job in her hometown where everybody and their momma know her business—and have her back. As the hits keep coming, can she make it through the fire and get back to the life she once loved?

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