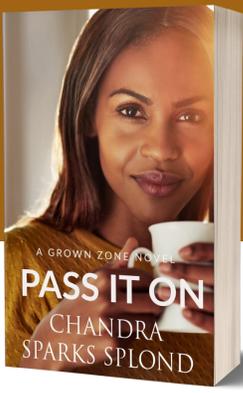


CHANDRA SPARKS SPLOND

PASS IT ON

A GROWN ZONE NOVEL



CHAPTER ONE

I FELT AS THOUGH I was suffocating.

Despite the air conditioner in my Toyota Corolla keeping the humid July heat at bay, I rolled down the window, allowing the air to bathe my tears. It had been a long day—actually a long few years. After witnessing my best friend, Vanessa Johnson, exchange vows with the love of her life, Jacob Winston, over the weekend, I realized that’s the kind of love I wanted one day, and there was no way I would ever get that if I stayed in my current situation.

Right after Vanessa’s reception, I had a long talk with myself: *Reese Williams, you’re better than this situation. Why are you waiting on some man to kick you out? You don’t have to live like this.*

I don’t know how many times I repeated those words to myself. Each time, they seemed to give me a little more power.

By Monday morning, I had made up my mind to leave. Marlon had been threatening to put me out for months. I had spent the day while he was at work stuffing my car with everything I thought I would need to start over.

The question was where exactly would I go.

I snorted as I changed lanes on I-20 in Birmingham, heading to Ensley to a house I had sworn I would never return to after one of Momma’s friends crept into my room one night. When I had told her about it, she had made it real clear either I could accept it or get out.

“Mommy, I’m hungry,” my four-year-old daughter, Ava, complained from the backseat where she was surrounded by the pieces of our life I had packed into my Toyota Camry before I picked her up from pre-K.

“Okay, baby,” I said, trying to remember if there was a McDonald’s near my mother’s house as I mentally calculated how much cash I had. I had taken the maximum amount the ATM allowed from the bank account where Marlon deposited money for me each month to take care of bills and groceries. He monitored the account, so it wasn’t like I had been sneaking money from it for years. I was regretting not going into a bank branch and taking it all.

Knowing Marlon, the account would be closed the following morning when he realized I was gone.

I remembered there was a McDonald’s in Five Points West and signaled to change lanes so I could get off the 20th Street exit. I thought about going to the drive-thru, but I needed to get myself together before facing Momma, so I helped Ava out of the car, being careful as I opened the back door to keep our

hastily packed items from spilling out.

I looked at my baby. Even though she was only four, she was really tall for her age—she got her height from her daddy—and she was definitely my mini-me. It was hard to believe four years had already gone by.

“Do you want a cheeseburger or McNuggets?” I asked as I grabbed Ava’s hand.

She looked thoughtful for a moment. “McNuggets,” she finally decided. “I can get the big kid’s toy, right?”

I laughed. Since she had started pre-K, Ava was fascinated with all kinds of big-kid things. “Yes, baby, you can get the big kid’s toy.”

I spotted an ATM and decided to get more cash just to be on the safe side. To my disappointment, the machine was out of order, which wasn’t surprising, considering the neighborhood. I made a mental note to stop by the bank as soon as it opened the next morning. Maybe I could beat Marlon to the money.

I placed our order, getting only a cheeseburger and a cup of water for myself. As we ate, I half listened as Ava chattered away about all she’d done at school that day.

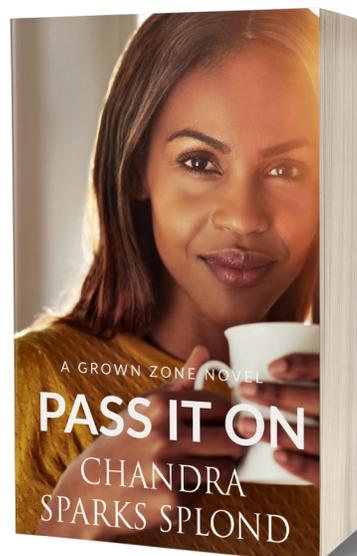
I thought about Marlon and our last conversation where I had finally confronted him about cheating on me. It wasn’t like I hadn’t heard the rumors before. I had even seen evidence of it, but his behavior this time was different. He had been arrested for not paying child support. He had a whole kid I didn’t know about. I guess I really shouldn’t be as surprised as I was. There was a lot about Marlon I didn’t know.

I had moved in with Marlon the same night I had left my momma’s house all those years ago. Even though he was fifteen years older than me, Marlon and I had known each other for a couple of years—ever since I had interned at the television station where he used to work as general manager. He had been demoted after all his drama came to light. I think folks were hoping he would quit. No such luck. When we first met, Marlon was always nice to me and had made me promise to keep in touch after my internship ended. It wasn’t until after I moved in that I saw a different side of him.

He beat me.

Not just with his words, but with his fists, and every day it took a little more out of me. I tried to deal with it as best I could, especially after Ava was born since I had to take care of my baby. Things had definitely gotten better once Vanessa moved back to town. We hadn’t really known each other in high school at all since she was older, but now we were as thick as thieves—pretty much joined at the hip—and definitely girls for life.

Despite going through the fire, Vanessa had helped me see I could do better than my current situation and that I didn’t have to tolerate Mar-



lon's mess. Thanks to her, I was about to really start college, and I was determined to graduate. Back in high school, I had dreams—real dreams—of doing something with my life. Back then, I wanted to be a television reporter, which was how I ended up interning at the news station with Marlon. That's not what I wanted to do anymore. I knew I was going to do something with kids. I just wasn't sure what. Vanessa had helped me to see that being a teenage mom didn't mean my life was over. I had to set a good example for my baby girl. I wanted to pass on the gift of a good life to her.

I looked out the McDonald's window, and it took me a minute to realize the woman I thought I was seeing outside was actually me. When had I gained so much weight and let myself go? I swiped at my hair, trying to get the strands to lay down, but it didn't help. I was only twenty-three, but the image staring back at me looked at least ten years older.

"Mommy, are you listening to me?"

I shook my head, trying to clear my mind of all that had happened that day and focused on my baby girl.

"Could you say it again, please? Mommy didn't hear you," I said, picking up my now-cold burger and taking a small bite. I tried to chew it, but it tasted like leather, so I spit it out.

"I said can we go to the park?" Ava asked, playing with her Happy Meal toy.

"Not today, baby. There's not one near here. Maybe we can go tomorrow once we get settled, okay?"

Ava nodded. I glanced at her food and noticed she was finished. "You ready to go?" I asked.

She answered by grabbing her toy and sliding out of the booth. "How long are we going to be at Grandma's house?"

Her words threw me. I don't think I'd ever heard her call my mother Grandma or anything else for that matter.

"Not long," I said as I collected the remnants of our meal and threw them away as we headed out the door. "Mommy's going to find us somewhere new to stay."

"Can I get a dog?" she asked, climbing over the mountain of stuff in the car to settle into her booster seat.

That was one of the big-kid requests Ava had been making for the last few months. I loved the idea of getting a dog, but Marlon wasn't having it. Whenever Ava brought up the subject, I tried to distract her, but today I decided to indulge her.

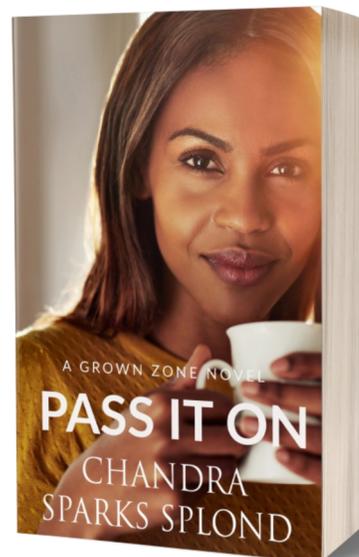
"And what kind of dog would you like to get?"

"A black one," Ava said, like she had given it a lot of thought.

"Oh, really?" I said.

"Or a brown one." She bit her lip.

"We'll see," I said, no longer ready to commit. I had heard having a



dog was like having another child. I wasn't sure how I was going to take care of one child, let alone two.

"Yay," Ava said, since in her mind "we'll see" meant yes.

For the first time since I had left that afternoon, doubt started creeping in. I had no job and really no money. Marlon had always taken care of us. Without him, what was I supposed to do?

IT WAS ALMOST DARK BY the time I finally pulled up to my childhood home. I had driven around for a while, and even made it halfway back to the house I shared in Hoover with Marlon before turning back around. Leaving him wasn't ever going to get any easier, and I was sick of waiting for him to make good on his threat to kick me out. I would just have to figure things out as I went.

Momma's phone was disconnected, so I had no way of letting her know I was coming.

I gathered Ava from her booster seat as best I could and tried to sling her sleeping form over my shoulder, clutching my purse in my other hand.

I knocked timidly at the door before finally pounding. Just as I was about to head back to the car, the flimsy front door was flung open, and I found myself peering into the dimly lit room at the woman whose eyes reminded me so much of my own.

"Hey, Momma," I said, looking at her then at the ground, not believing my life had come to this.

She just stared at me for a moment, like she was trying to remember who I was.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, the smell of alcohol and stale cigarettes slapping me in the face. I had heard she was in a twelve-step alcohol recovery program. Clearly, I'd heard wrong.

I shifted Ava before saying, "I needed to get away for a while."

"Let me guess: You want to stay with me," she said, twisting her lips in disapproval as she took in me and my sleeping baby girl.

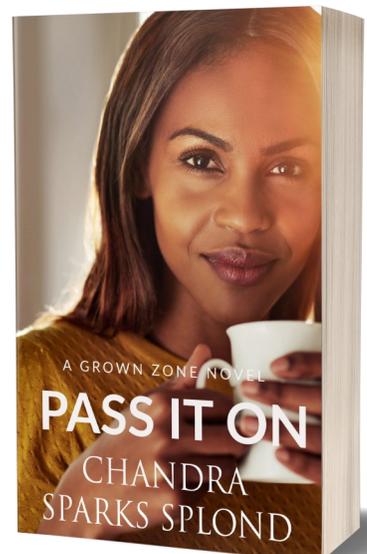
I looked at the ground, not believing my life had come to this. I was back at the very place I'd vowed to never return.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, looking at the paint-chipped floorboards.

"I knew you'd be back," she said. She turned around and walked away without saying another word.

I sighed as I walked into the house, which I hadn't been inside in five years. It was a lot smaller and grungier than I remembered.

I headed down the hallway to my old bedroom, dodging stacks of yellowed newspapers and magazines along the way. I didn't even realize people still had print subscriptions. When I pushed open the door to the room, I had to think twice about whether to put Ava in there. It looked like it hadn't been cleaned since I left. If nothing else, I could say that I tried to provide a good life for my daughter, and even though Marlon in-



sisted I keep the house clean, I was also doing it because I wanted to.

I set my phone alarm so I could get up early. There was no way Ava and I were going to endure more than one night at the house with my mother. I had to find another place for us to stay, even if it was a motel.

I wondered if Marlon had even realized we were gone. The Birmingham Black Journalists Alliance was having its annual awards program that evening, and if the past years were any indication, he would attend the after party until the wee hours of the morning—if he came home at all.

It reminded me there had been only one occasion when I had confronted him about staying out all night.

Marlon had punched me the minute I questioned him on his whereabouts, not caring Ava was in the next room.

As I lay on the floor, Marlon had walked past me, yelling I'd better not ever question him again. He had stayed gone for four days after emptying all the food from the house, taking my car and closing my bank account. Luckily, the water was still on so I was able to stay hydrated and breastfeed Ava. Even though I wasn't big on God, I had spent the first day praying, and to my surprise, our neighbor showed up at the door with her two boys.

"You okay, baby?" Mrs. Norma had asked, looking concerned when I answered the door.

Norma Abernathy was married to the principal of Grover High, Mr. Trevor Abernathy. She had opened a café a few years ago, and when she wasn't there or spending time with Principal Abernathy and their kids—they also had two daughters who were grown and gone—and grandkids, she was volunteering at her church, Damascus Baptist. She had witnessed too many occasions where I had been sporting a black eye or overheard Marlon when he was in one of his rages.

"Yes, ma'am. We're fine," I'd said, wrapping my sweater around me, more for protection than warmth, and smiling at her sons who were staring at me with curious eyes.

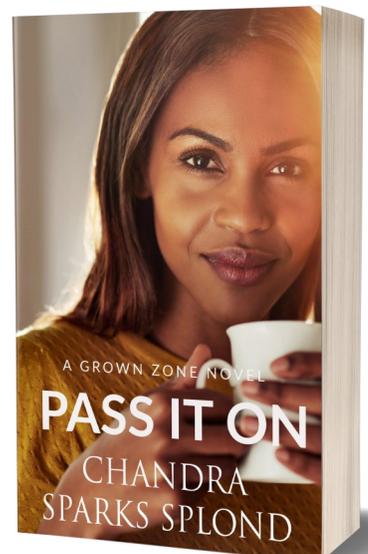
"I was stopping to see if you wanted some of the stuff from my garden. It's overflowing this year. The boys helped me pick some things this morning." She'd thrust a bag at me.

I looked inside, and in addition to the fresh vegetables, there was also meat and containers filled with some of her homemade desserts.

My eyes had filled with tears. "Thank you," I said.

She gave me a gentle smile and patted my hand. "I'm praying for you, baby. I'm right next door if you need me."

I couldn't help but smile at the memory. Mrs. Norma was always so kind to me. She was more of a mother to me than Momma had ever been. On occasion, she would watch Ava, and she'd even invited me to her



church, which I had planned to visit, but Marlon had shot down the idea.

Ava's tossing and turning drew me back to the present, and I rubbed her back, trying to soothe her. I leaned down and placed a kiss on her forehead and watched in amusement as she wiped it off. Even in her sleep, she was trying to be a big girl.

After making sure Ava was settled, I cleaned up the room as best I could, shuddering at the thick layers of dust and cobwebs covering a couple of sagging boxes in the corner with my name scrawled in thick, black marker. There were a few mouse droppings in the corner, and I hoped they were old and that no mice were in the house, although based on all the clutter, I was pretty sure there were.

Too wound up to sleep, I went in search of Momma who was sitting in the crowded living room watching television.

"How've you been, Momma?" I asked.

She didn't bother to respond.

I sighed. "Thank you for letting us stay here tonight."

"If it's any longer than tonight, you need to pay rent. Don't nobody stay for free," Momma said, scratching her ashy leg.

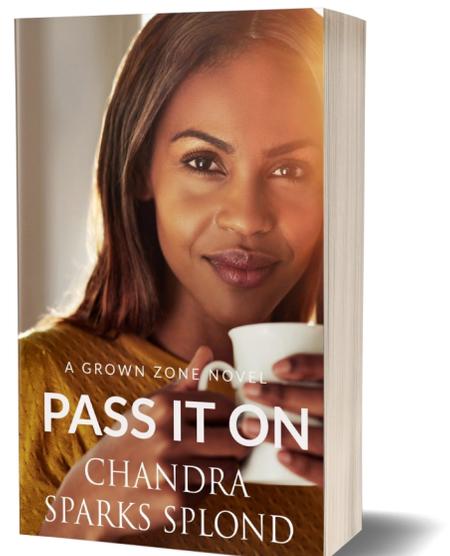
"How much?" I asked, curious what she'd say.

"Five hundred a month, plus utilities, and you need to buy your own groceries," she said, without blinking.

I stared at her. It wasn't a lot of money for rent, but the house was paid for, and Momma knew I had to be having a hard time to show up on her doorstep. "That's more than you pay," I said.

"Take it or leave it," Momma said. "I can tell you right now you ain't gon' find a better deal."

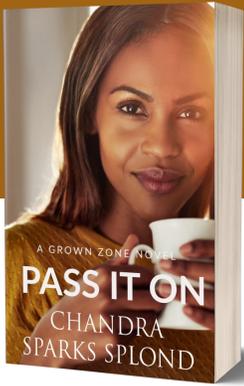
"I guess we'll just have to see about that," I said.



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ABOUT THE BOOK

In the third book of the Grown Zone series, it's been a long time since Reese Williams can remember things being good. After getting pregnant her senior year of high school, Reese abandoned her dreams of going to college in order to take care of her baby. Now, years later, she's starting to wonder if life has more to offer. After making a difficult decision, Reese finds herself at rock bottom and considers doing things she

never thought she'd do—like returning to her trifling ex. What's a single momma to do when she wants to pass on the gift of a great life to her daughter?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chandra Sparks Splond is an editor, speaker and award-winning author and blogger. She is the owner of West End Publishing, LLC., and was the consulting editor for Arabesque romance at Kensington Publishing. She has also edited for Random House, Moody Publishers, Kimani Press, and Hyperion, as well as several *New York Times*, *USA Today* and *Essence* bestselling authors. She was a copy editor for *Good Housekeeping*, *Newsday* and *The Morning Call*, and has written for *Black and Married with Kids*, *Brides Noir*, *Weddingpages*, and *Romantic Times*.

ALSO BY CHANDRA SPARKS SPLOND



Phone: 205-440-2934

Email: books@chandrasparkssplond.com

Website: www.chandrasparkssplond.com