

TINA KNOWLES



MATRIARCH

A MEMOIR

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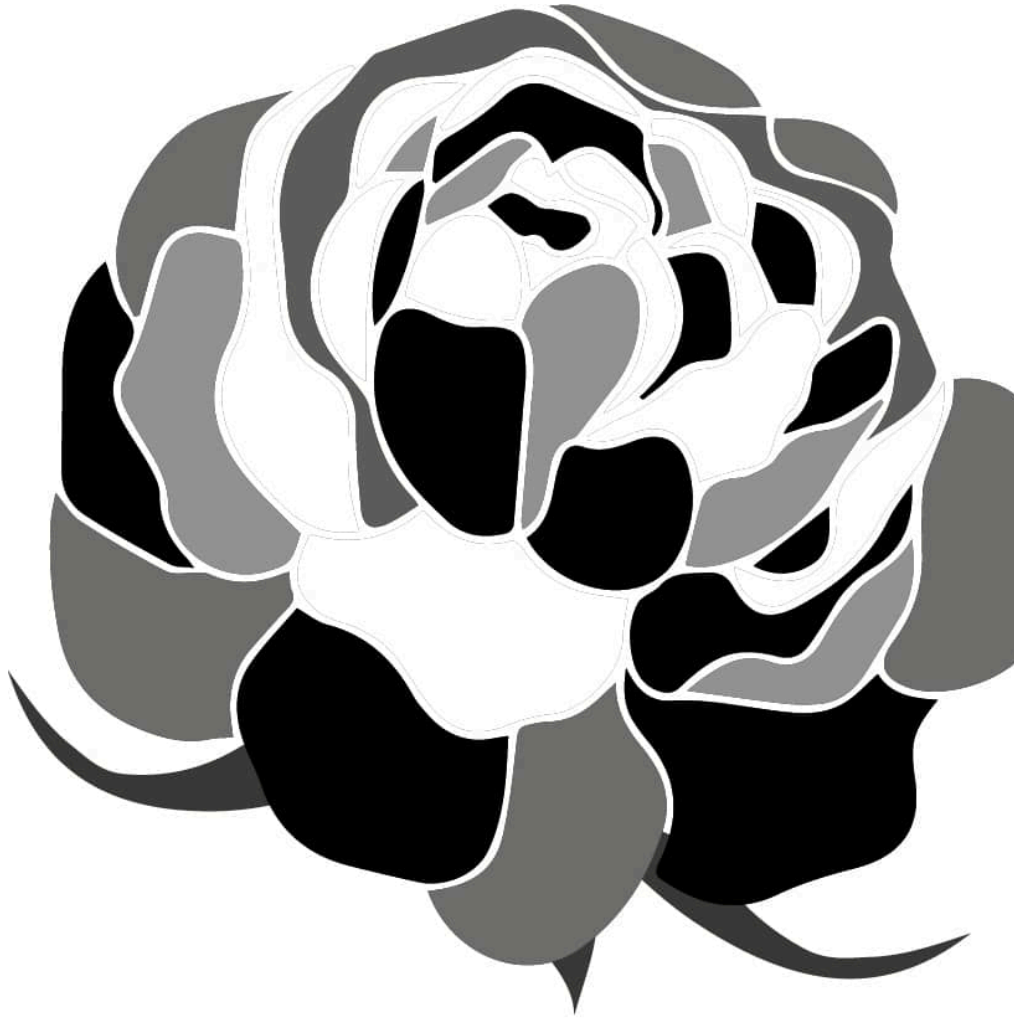
*To my mother,
Agnes Derouen Buyince,
who taught me by example.
The very best parts of me came from you.*

*To my daughters,
who became my friends:
Solange, Beyoncé, Kelly, Angie—
you are my crew, my tribe, my ride-or-dies.
What would I do without you?
To all the women out there
who are the Matriarchs of their families.*

I am the mother of the world. All these children are mine. Anybody let me love 'em, they're mine. Those that don't let me love 'em, then I love 'em anyhow.

—Willie Mae Ford Smith (the mother of gospel music), *I Dream a World*

PRELUDE



UNDER THE PECAN TREE

December 1958

LATER, A DAUGHTER will miss the sound of her mother calling her name.

You can't convince her of this when she is young. Not while that voice is so plentiful in the air. She hears her mother say her name over and over, whether as a command to pay attention or a plea to know her worth; a sigh of maternal love or a warning to be cautious.

She cannot understand in those moments what she would someday trade to hear that voice again.

—
“TENIE.”

I was four years old and in a dream. The kind where the sequins my mama had sewn onto a Sunday dress became diamonds to be plucked and passed out to only the best friends. Or one where we discovered the Pleasure Pier amusement park on Galveston Beach was running free rides with all the five-cent sodas we could drink. That kind of dream. And now, here was my mama, calling me home just as it was getting good.

“*Teenie*.” She said my name louder now, the accent of my mother’s childhood Creole smoothed out but still there. Agnes Derouen Buyince had polished her soft voice to a pleasing shine on her way to the sixth grade, as far as school went for a Black girl back where she grew up in Louisiana.

Before I opened my eyes, the first thing I noticed was that our house was warm. In Galveston—well, in any poor house—when you went to bed in winter all the heat was shut off. Old houses like ours didn’t have heating anyway, just a space heater. Even here on the island off the Gulf Coast of Texas, the nights could get down to freezing.

A warm house in the morning meant my mama was well. Ever since she had me, the last of her seven babies at age forty-four, my mother had been sickly. She would go into John Sealy, a charity hospital in Galveston, at least twice a year with heart ailments that seemed tied to her constant worrying. Her health problems weren’t made up or exaggerated, rather something scary that lurked in the background like a phantom, waiting. I was always fearful of when they would come back. When my mother was home, she would get up before everybody else in the family, around five in the morning, to light the heater. If she was staying in the hospital, my father or one of us kids would have to get up to coax the heater to life. We never did it early enough like her, and the rest of the day it would feel like we were catching up to the chill that stayed two steps ahead. But this day, I knew she was fine, and we were warm.

We had this little two-bedroom home with seven people living in it: My three older brothers, Larry, Butch, and Skip, slept in one bedroom, and my mom and dad built a partition wall in their bedroom to give my older sister Flo her own space. My bed was kind of floating out in the middle of that room.

In that bed, too cozy to move, I heard my mother in the kitchen fixing breakfast. My parents were big on us all eating together. I could smell the homemade bread toasting in the stove, her pecan pancakes on the griddle, and the sausages my three brothers would wolf down before school.

I closed that one eye again, then remembered it was now December. Each morning I woke up one day closer to Christmas, which also meant one day closer to my fifth birthday in

January. That got me off the bed, the padded feet of my all-in-one pajamas hitting the floor. I slid on those footy pajamas, pretending I was an ice skater on the worn wood floor to the kitchen. Everyone was already at the table, of course. Everyone always got up before me. My big sister Flo was fourteen and all business getting ready for school—I was born on her tenth birthday, and her party was canceled when my mom went to the hospital to have me. “She came into the world screwing my life up,” Flo would say. Butch was twelve, his good looks and gift of gab causing a stir wherever he went, boys already hating him as much as girls loved him. Quiet, brilliant Larry was ten, reading the newspaper that my mother also read front to back. Skip was making some corny joke to try to get our father laughing, a nine-year-old who had already mastered dad jokes. It was tough to get a laugh out of my daddy—Lumis Buyince was so handsome that he had worked hard to seem gruff. I would always sit on his lap and try to hug on him. He might let you hug him a couple of times and then you’d hear in his thick Creole accent, “*Okay!* That’s enough. Get goin’. Go on now.” We would giggle at how uncomfortable our affection made him.

Sounds like a lot of people, but our house was quiet. My parents were older, closing in on fifty years old and already grandparents whose two oldest kids had moved out long before I showed up. They were tired, and I *was* tiring. I’m pretty sure I had ADHD, but people didn’t know what that was. So they just called you *bad*. My nickname at first was Dennis the Menace, after the little comic about a mischievous boy that ran in the *Galveston Daily News*. But the name that stuck was Badass Tenie B.

Tenie was short for Celestine Ann, which didn’t suit me because people didn’t say it right. You say it like “Celeste-een,” but I would get “Sell-isteen” or worse, “Sulluh-steen.” The *B* was for my last name, Beyoncé, and the Badass was for everything I did. I never hurt anyone, I just moved quicker than I could think. God had given my mother, the most cautious woman I would ever know, a girl without fear. Or, my mom might have said, any kind of sense. So Badass Tenie B was a good fit.

My sister and brothers didn’t want to be bothered with a hyper four-year-old, and their real lives happened out of sight with their friends at school. When they left for the school day and my dad drove to work at the docks, it was only my mother and me. By the time they all were out the door, she had already been to the seven o’clock mass that she went to every single day at Holy Rosary Catholic Church across the street. Then she’d start her seamstress work. Sewing. That was her profession, and her mother was a seamstress before her.

My mother had a gift for making the most beautiful masterpieces from remnants. When you went to the fabric store in Galveston, remnants were the ends of the expensive bolts of fabric. If it had once cost something outlandish, maybe six dollars a yard, now it could be yours for fifty cents. There might have been a half of a yard left, certainly enough for a little girl’s dress, and they would durn near just give the fabric to you. Mama was a beader, taking tiny seed pearls and meticulously sewing each millimeter bead into a dress or jacket, one by one, to make a work of art.

But before any of that work started in those early winter days like this one, we picked pecans. This was the harvest time for the pecan tree in our backyard, when my mother would go out every morning after breakfast to fill a bag. She would make pecan pralines, or press them into the pastries of pies, or hand them to the boys to crack and eat fresh to keep them busy and fed. We always had pecans, and I don't know when I realized it was because they were free.

"Come on, Tenie," my mama said, grabbing the large brown burlap bag to head out to the yard. I followed in my pajamas outside, attempting cartwheels behind her.

The pecan tree was huge, beautiful with a rounded canopy of branches. I skipped around its scaly gray-brown trunk, pretending to have a ribbon as I stretched out the opening lines of "Maybe" by the Chantels. "Maybe, if I cry every night, you'll come back to me...." Whirling, I looked up at the tree's sturdy branches, strong enough to hold even the bigger boys. My brother Larry had built a bench high in the branches, and that plank of wood was my throne, the yard my kingdom, and my mother our queenly matriarch.

My mama saw me looking up, and she knew I was about to climb. But she needed me on the ground, where the pecans were. Earlier in the season, she might need to send the boys out with a stick to shake the tree for an avalanche of pecans to collect, but now they fell freely. You just had to beat the birds to them.

To keep me grounded, she told me stories from our family history. "Now, Tenie," she would say, lassoing my focus before launching into some tale about my grandmother, or a story from early in her marriage to my daddy.

As she talked, I picked up pecans. All the while, I did somersaults and cartwheels, or spun in place until I fell back, holding on to the earth that might throw me off. But I *listened*. I listened to every single word my mother told me. These people, my people—my ancestors and my parents when they were young—were characters in a long drama that I was now a part of. Their struggles were not mine, but their lessons could be. This was my inheritance, these stories that people had done their best to erase or degrade to keep us from passing them down. So that we wouldn't know our history and ourselves.

Just like she did in her work as a seamstress, my mother could take the stories of lives that might have been discarded or lost, some precious scrap of information, and weave it into the tapestry of her storytelling as something precious and unique. Sometimes all we had were names, but even names held multitudes, and mother to daughter, each had kept a word going. We would not be lost.

I could ask my mother anything under the pecan tree. And that December morning I did have a question. The night before, I'd sat at the kitchen table next to Larry as he wrote his name at the top of his homework. I said I wanted to practice my own name, so he let me borrow his pencil and said each letter for me. When we got to my last name, Larry thought for a second. "Yours is different, Tenie," he said. He reminded me that all of us kids had different spellings of our parents' last name, Buyince. There was Beyincé, Boyance, and mine, Beyoncé.

Now in the yard, I placed my hands on the ground and tried to do a handstand, leaning against the tree as I formed the question. “Mama, our names...” I said, looking at her upside down, as she bent to the grass. “You know, it’s all those different spellings.”

I talked as if maybe she had never noticed. As if she’d gone to the store and carelessly brought home a mismatched set of last names.

“That’s what they put on your birth certificate,” my mother said, focusing on the pecans.

I tumbled over, kicking my feet in the air as if that would slow my fall. “Why didn’t you make them fix it?” I asked, sitting up again. “Fight and say it’s not right?”

“I did one time,” my mama said, not looking at me. “The first time.”

“So what happened?” I pressed, stern now. I picked up a pecan and wasn’t sure I even wanted to give it to her to put in the bag.

“I was told, ‘Be happy that you’re getting a birth certificate.’ Because, at one time, Black people didn’t even get birth certificates.”

There was a hurt in my mother’s voice, and she picked up pecans quicker, as if they might run off. “What’s a birth...” I’d already forgotten the word.

“*Certificate*, Tenie,” she said. “It says what your name is.”

“Well, I want to change my name,” I said. I held that pecan tight between my thumb and forefinger.

“You can’t change your name,” she said. “Your name is beautiful. Celestine Ann Beyoncé.”

It was music when my mother said it, but I wouldn’t budge. “I hate this name,” I said. “Nobody can say Celestine.” I mimicked the ugly zombie-voice pronunciation I often heard: “Sulluh-steen.”

She laughed, coming closer to me with the bag, still keeping a hand low to the ground for pecans. “What would you rather your name be?”

“Something easy,” I said, finally dropping the pecan in the bag. “Plain. Linda Smith.”

“You are Celestine,” she said, smiling. She squatted to push the hair off my face and pull leaves off my pajama legs. “Like my sister and my grandmother.”

My mother’s sister had died as a baby, and she was named for her grandmother—my great-grandmother—Célestine Joséphine Lacy, who had lived to be almost a hundred. Gone long before my mother gave me their name. “She was very pretty,” my mother said, “like you.” She caught herself and stood up as she added her usual line: “But pretty is as pretty does, Tenie.”

And there under the pecan tree, as she did countless times, that day my mother told me stories of the mothers and daughters that went before me. The house of Derouen, her maiden name, a matrilineal line as worthy of memorization as the bloodlines of the mythological Greek gods I would learn later. I am the daughter of Agnes, who was Odilia’s daughter, who was Célestine’s, who was Rosalie’s. My mom did not have the details found in the records of modern historians and genealogists. She had what had been passed down to her, which was, above all, the knowledge that these mothers held on to their daughters against all odds.

Rosalie, born around 1800, had been enslaved all her life in Louisiana when she had her daughter Célestine on a June day in 1826. My mother told me her great-grandmother Rosalie called her Célestine “Tine,” pronouncing her nickname just like mine. At a time when Black families were considered property and routinely ripped apart, they managed to stay together. There was a close call, when the newly widowed woman who enslaved the mother and daughter in Louisiana said she was scaling down and only needed six out of the twenty-nine people she held in captivity and forced labor. The rest would be farmed out for her relatives, their fates unknown. But Rosalie held on to her Tine, and they were part of that six that stayed.

Célestine became a mother herself as a teenager, giving birth to two sons. Her children’s biological father was the widow’s white grandson, Éloi René Broussard, who was about two years older than Célestine. And then, in 1853, the widow who had enslaved them died, and all of her “property” was presented for public auction. Three generations of my family—Rosalie, Célestine, and her two children—were placed on a block to be sold individually.

I type those words, say them aloud, and I feel that fear and rage in my blood, the trauma passed down through my DNA.

Éloi René Broussard came forward at the auction. A receipt shows he paid \$1705 in cash for Célestine and her two children. *His* children. A relative of the widow put down money for Rosalie’s life, and she was taken from her daughter and grandchildren. I don’t know if they ever saw each other again.

Célestine and the children moved into Éloi’s house, where he had a white wife and his three daughters. He and Célestine would have ten more children, and she would live in his house for fifty years. She named her first daughter Rosalie after the mother taken from her, and then she had Odilia, my mother’s mother.

Éloi was my great-grandfather. With all its awful complexity, that is who he was. Éloi acknowledged paternity of all of his children with Célestine and donated a small bit of land and livestock to her before his death in 1904. The way it’s been presented to me, Éloi acknowledging that he was the father of her children gave Tine some degree of security, even before the Civil War. There was a portrait commissioned of her at some point, which I’m told speaks to her standing. I know it shows her beauty.

But under the pecan tree, what mattered was this: Célestine was enslaved, and she became *free*. And she got her kids free. They stayed together.

These stories under the pecan tree nourished my soul, and part of that was my mother making sure that I knew what an honor it was to be Black. Once I was wearing a T-shirt that read “100% BLACK” while I was out buying groceries.

“You better take that off,” a Black man I was walking by said, peppering the insult with a certain familiarity to soften the blow. “You’re no hundred percent.” I knew this was about my skin being light.

Stopping in my tracks, I turned to him. “Brother,” I said, “I’m the Blackest woman you’ll ever meet.”

From my first breath, I was told, shown, and embraced into knowing that it is an honor to be a Black person. My mother saw to that, making sure I carry all these mothers with me. Rosalie, who had Célestine, who had Odilia, who had Agnes, who had me, who had Beyoncé and Solange. This is not simply about a bloodline. I watched my mama mother children who were not hers by birth. I have mothered children, like my daughters Kelly and Angie, who are as much my daughters as if I carried them. We all have this power to be matriarchs, to be women of the sacred practice of nurturing, guiding, protecting—foreseeing and remembering. The matriarch's wisdom is ancient, for she is filled with the most enduring, ferocious love.

When my oldest daughter was born, my mother had just died, and it was inconceivable to me that she would not be there to show *me* how to be a mother. I wanted my mother to be the one to tell my daughter these stories of all the mothers that overcame incredible odds to be with each other. My firstborn daughter looks so much like my mom, more like her than me. But that is genetics—how would I pass on our *spirit*? That unspoken knowing? The pride of our history?

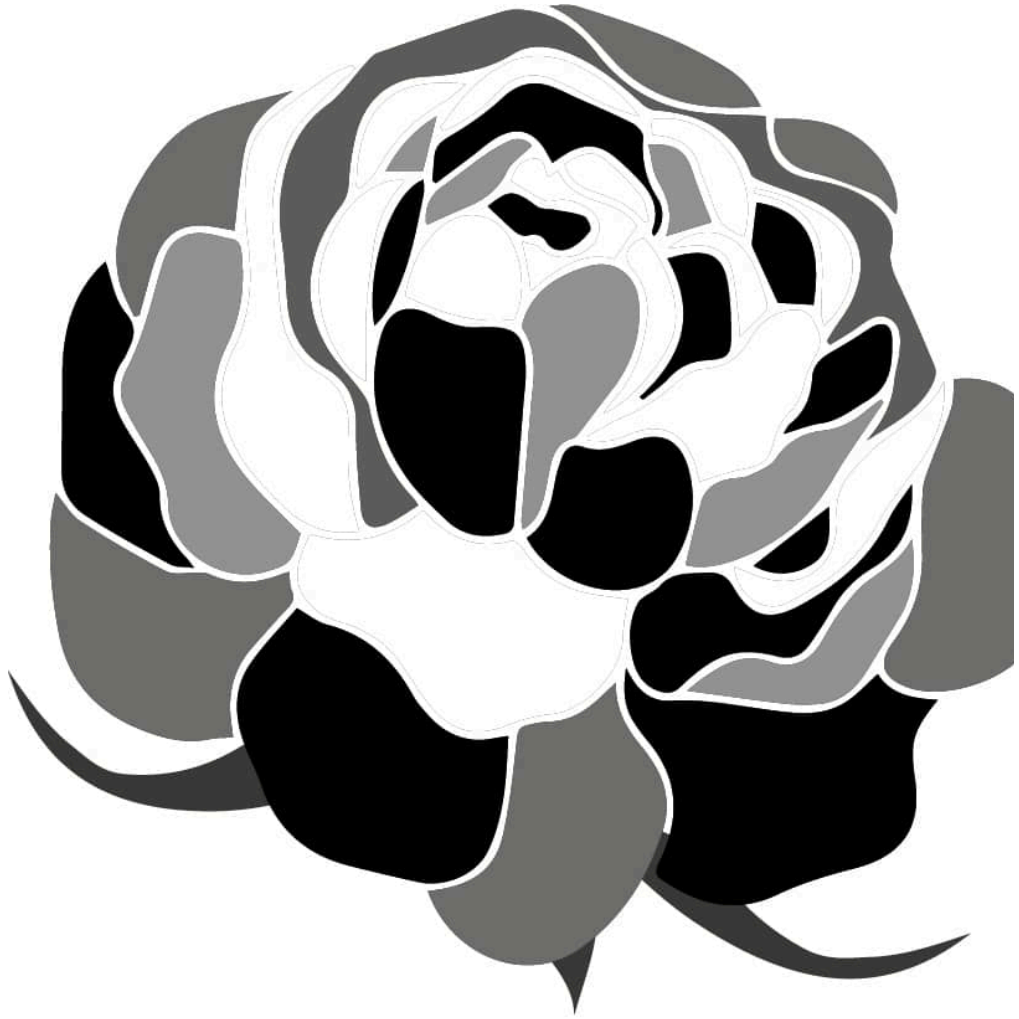
So my first gift to my daughter would be my name, Beyoncé. It didn't matter how it was spelled when it was given to me, it was our name. Our history. The most valuable possession I had, and it was now mine to give. I've kept a word going.

ACT ONE



A Daughter

CHAPTER 1



BADASS TENIE B

June 1959

I WAS THREE STEPS out the door by the time my mama realized I'd pulled my disappearing act again. She'd turned her head in the kitchen, and I was running out the house to my sister Selena's.

"You need to let me comb your hair," my mother called from the door. "And brush your teeth!"

“Okay, Mama,” I said, aiming to fall between pleasing and pleading as I kept my pace. I could not stop. A perfect summer day—like this one at age five—could last you forever if you started it early enough.

“Or else I’m not gonna let you go over there, Tenie,” she said, her voice farther from me now. She would not get louder than that, I knew. She had what people on the island called a “sweet demeaneh” and I could outrun the sound of her disapproval even if it followed me on the breeze off the water behind me.

In Galveston, the wind off the Gulf is a constant reminder that you are on an island. The city is a skinny strip of beach town two miles off the coast of Texas. Now the wind was at my back, and the gray pavement of the lane was already warmed by the morning Texas sun. I was barefoot, which was the only way to live in June. Wearing shoes just meant keeping track of them when you took them off at Galveston Beach or climbed a tree. And Selena’s house wasn’t more than a slim eighth of a block around the corner. Otherwise, my overprotective, fearful mother would never have let me go on my own.

When you’re little, you don’t know how small your world is. Mine was contained in my neighborhood, and the four points of my compass were set: There was the east and west daily back-and-forth between my house and Selena’s. Then Holy Rosary Catholic Church to the north, so close we could see into my siblings’ Catholic school directly from our front door. And just a few blocks south was the small strip of segregated beach that we were allowed onto. They took thirty miles of coastline and only allowed us access to three blocks’ worth of sand and water between 29th Street and 32nd Street. As kids on the tiny island of Galveston, our lives centered around that bit of beach—but I still loved being at Selena’s house best of all.

My oldest sister, Selena, was twenty-seven years old when I was born, and she and her husband, John, had eight kids by the time she was thirty. My nieces and nephews were closer in age to me than my siblings, and they were my very best friends.

I ran faster in the lane, racing with myself as I passed the little houses tucked tight next to each other. I spotted a yellow buttercup in the grass I had not seen yesterday, but by the time I had decided to stop to pick it, my legs had kept moving until I found myself at the steps to the little porch of Selena’s duplex without the flower. This happened all the time—my body moving and my brain catching up.

Now I could finally stand still, and my heart beat so fast from the run, like a tiny bird fluttering in my skinny chest. Not fluttering, more like hurling itself against the cage of my ribs, trying to escape. Sometimes that heart felt like it was leading me, making me run faster, outrunning boys with my long legs. And me, always following it, never going as fast as it wanted. A heart threatening to burst out and fly away from any tether—me, my family, Galveston.

I gave myself a second to calm down outside Selena’s house. It looked big, but they only lived in the downstairs of the duplex and had no yard to really speak of. Suddenly, I moved, trying to jump the first two steps of her porch like the big kids did. A high jump in my mind, a

prize I was always chasing as the baby of the family. I felt just short, having to do the stutter-step compromise of taking two steps like a normal five-year-old. *Next time*, I told myself, marching through the open door to my sister's house, a finish line into the living room.

Immediately the music of all that life in Selena's house enveloped me, excited me, held me. The sounds of her three sons and five daughters: Deanne, Linda, Leslie, Elouise, and Elena, Tommie, and of course Ronnie and Johnny. Don't try to keep track of all of them—even Selena couldn't.

And there she was, my big sister, turning to see me as she exhaled the smoke of a cigarette. The way Selena Mae Rittenhouse smoked her Salem Menthols was something out of a movie, the two manicured fingers holding the cigarette, rolling the smoke around her tongue and then blowing it out as a glamorous verdict on any situation. You could not meet my sister and not think of the word "spitfire"—a spark taking the trim shape of a woman who swore by the power of dark red lipstick and wearing a girdle and sleeping in a bra to stay tight through having all those kids.

Selena, who her kids called M'dear, kept her house as streamlined, occasionally doling out a "get your stuff together because we don't have time for that," to keep everyone in line. Her husband was a trucker, often doing long drives as she did her seamstress work while looking after the kids. You can't be so tender when you have eight stair-step kids—it would be hard to be soft and still keep ahold of things, so she was no-nonsense in a sisterly way. I was starting to realize that everyone in the neighborhood saw her as the big sister they wished they had, and as I put my arm around her waist as a greeting, I had the sense to be grateful that this beautiful, funny woman was mine.

Deanne—Denie—turned the radio up and grabbed Elouise to twirl a circle around me. They were dancing to Jackie Wilson, "Mr. Excitement," singing "Lonely Teardrops." Galveston was a radio town. I did a quick dip with them as the beat dropped on Jackie's second "say you will," but then I kept walking through the house.

I was looking, of course, for Johnny.

I homed in on him standing outside on the side staircase, the sunlight falling on his face. Johnny's head was slightly bowed, always looking like he was listening to—or for—something only he could hear. My nephew Johnny was nine, four years older than me, and he was my very best friend. If you ask me what my earliest memory is of him, you might as well ask me about how I knew I needed air to breathe or water to drink. Johnny was just *there*. My mother put our inseparable closeness less delicately: "When Johnny farts, you gotta be there to catch it."

Now we smiled at each other, best friends reunited, and I was at the door to him when his brother Ronnie jumped into the doorway to scare me. I jumped back just as fast.

"I got you!" Ronnie yelled. "I got you, Tenie. I saw you coming. Didn't I, Johnny? And I said, 'Oh, I'm gonna get her.' Right?"

I rolled my eyes in the way my mother said might freeze someday and moved to stand on the balls of my feet. At five I was already taller than seven-year-old Ronnie—but back then I was

taller than everybody. I knew Ronnie could not *stand* that I was taller because he was such a competitive athlete about everything. I raised my chin to look down my nose at him.

"You didn't *get* me," I said.

"I did scare you, Tenie," Ronnie said. "Your face!"

I pulled back a hand, ready for another of our knock-down, drag-out fights. Once a week Ronnie and I would have to have at least one—real fistfights, always squaring off. But Johnny cut in.

"It *was* funny, Tenie," said Johnny, his soft voice conspiratorial, trying to get me to see the humor. And maybe it was funny, I thought, but only because Johnny said so. I unclenched my fist to push my hair behind my ear, then faked going left to do a twirl to the right around Ronnie, a half-turn pirouette to stand next to Johnny. So close to him that my left foot almost stepped on his right one.

Ronnie reached down to pick up a ball, pretending I hadn't just fooled him. "We're gonna play kickball in the lane."

"I think we should go to the beach," I said.

"Naw, kickball," Ronnie said. But that's how it was with me and Ronnie. I would say the sky was blue and he would say the sky is *not blue*. The sky would be anything *but* blue.

I shrugged a no and Ronnie got on his tiptoes. "Tenie, why do you have to try to be a boss?"

"I'm not *trying* to be a boss," I said. "I am the boss."

Johnny laughed. Ronnie didn't. "We'll decide on the way," Johnny said, and that meant we would end up doing whatever he wanted to do. Because, really, *Johnny* was the boss, and we all knew it. Even at nine years old, he ran everything. Now he walked from the back steps into the house, stopping only to give a wiggle with the girls to the end of "Little Bitty Pretty One." Without a word, our whole crew, almost all my nieces and nephews, walked in step with Johnny out the front door.

Outside we moved the singular way children do, crisscrossing and meandering. Some of us marched backwards if we had to, just to keep a conversation, falling and laughing. I saw the buttercup flower again and stopped now to pick it. I breathed in the flower's scent and resisted the urge to smear the yellow on someone's face or chin. Instead, I tucked it over Johnny's ear, and we smiled at each other.

Johnny's presence could calm me and that careless heart that always led me into trouble before I really knew what I was doing. The heart that made adults call me "bad." Badass Tenie B wasn't ever mean—I tended to be the victim of every wrong impulse I said yes to. I would literally play with fire, drawn to it because its unpredictable nature seemed to temporarily drown out mine. Seeing a small flame, beautiful as it glowed, made me feel calm.

In houses like mine, you would have to light your stove with a match. When my dad was at work and my mom left me with my older siblings, I would sometimes go in the kitchen and turn the gas on, then wait a few seconds to put the match on it so the fire would go *whoosh*. A fireball that disappeared as fast as it came, as pretty as anything I'd ever seen.