



# DRAWING THE LINE



**KD WILLIAMSON**

# CHAPTER 1

DANI'S EYES FLUTTERED OPEN. IT took her a minute to adjust to the darkness of her bedroom. God, she loved those blackout curtains. Best invention ever. She yawned noisily and stretched, lifting her arms toward the ceiling and pointing her toes toward the far wall. Dani was still tired, but there was no fog weighing her down. The term well rested didn't apply to her, but she had learned to savor the days when she got to be in her own bed and sleep for more than a few hours.

Something brushed against her. She gasped and recoiled. A soft hand, a woman's hand, snaked its way up Dani's torso.

"Well, last night must not have been all that memorable. You forgot I was here?"

Dani chuckled. "Yeah, sorry." It should have been hard to forget that a woman like Sandra was in her bed. She was all pouty lips, bedroom eyes, and blatant innuendo. Had it really been that long? "If it's any consolation, I slept like a rock."

"Mmm. What time is it? I picked up an extra shift. The regular charge nurse had to go to a wedding. Have to be at the hospital by eight thirty." Sandra pressed against her from behind, bringing a sudden combination of hot skin, curves, and hard nipples with her.

Dani shivered and gasped for a whole different reason. She squinted at the clock on her nightstand. 6:03, maybe? She couldn't be sure without her glasses. She patted around the area near the clock until her fingers hit pay dirt and slid her glasses on. It was 7:13 a.m. She'd been way off. "It's a little after seven."

"Damn it." Sandra sighed. "But maybe it's enough time to leave a lasting impression." She slipped an open palm over Dani's breast, dragging it across her nipple. Dani sucked in a breath and arched into the touch.

Sandra's fingertips plucked at aroused flesh as her teeth sank into Dani's shoulder. Her body drank it all in as if she'd been close to dehydration. It really had been *way* too long.

Less than an hour later, Dani was laughing and pushing Sandra out of her bedroom. "You're gonna be late."

"Well, it'll be your fault. All you have to do is answer me." Sandra grinned. There was a glint in her eyes making them bluer than usual.

Dani crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine. Yes, maybe we can do this again, but I don't know when. I'm always—"

"Busy. I know. You're in residency, but don't be surprised if I drag you into one of the on-call rooms sometime soon."

"Ahem."

Sandra turned.

Dani blinked at her roommate and best friend. His hairy, deeply bronzed chest and legs were on full display. The rest of him was tucked into a grey pair of Jockey boxer briefs. The stool he sat on, in front of the built-in breakfast nook, creaked as he leaned forward and lifted the bowl in his lap higher. He brought the spoon to his mouth and chewed the contents quietly.

"Oh, hey, Rick."

Rick tilted his head and smiled slowly. "Mornin', Sandra." He practically sang the words.

Dani glared at his obvious teasing.

In return, Rick's brows rose, making his forehead wrinkle.

Sandra pressed a quick kiss to Dani's lips and was out the door.

Dani didn't say a word as she slid on the stool beside Rick. He turned toward her slightly and continued to eat his breakfast.

"Is that my Raisin Nut Bran?" she asked finally.

Rick scowled but it changed to a grin. "Damn right, it is. I could eat a whole bowl of those raisins by themselves."

She reached for the bowl. "The box was almost empty."

He snatched it away. "Well, it's completely empty now."

Dani was a step away from being hangry. Rick's life could very well be in danger. "You could at least share."

He sighed. "Fine, but go get your own spoon. I know where your mouth has been."

Dani groaned. “You just couldn’t let it go, could you?”

“No, I could not. I’m just glad somebody knocked the dust off it.”

Her face heated and there was no way to hide it. Sometimes she hated being so pale. Despite his encouragement to get her own utensil, Dani took his spoon and the bowl back and dug in. “Shut up,” she mumbled around a mouthful of cereal.

“I bet bats flew out when you spread your legs. Did they squeak?”

Dani bumped him with her shoulder, hard.

Rick laughed. It was deep, warm, and hard to resist. Dani leaned against him and joined in.

A few minutes later, she finished off the bowl of cereal and glanced up to find Rick staring at her. He pressed his lips together and rubbed a hand over his bald head.

“What?”

“Uh, maybe I should let you digest your food a little first.”

“Oh my God, what?” Dani set the bowl on the counter. “Just spit it out.”

Rick huffed. “Okay, just promise me it won’t keep you from doin’ your thing.”

“My thing?”

“With Sandra, if it’s goin’ there. You know? A little ass when you need it.” Rick held up his thumb and forefinger. They were barely a centimeter apart.

“Whatever. I don’t do the flavor-of-the-week club. I don’t have the time or the interest.”

“You don’t do any kind of club...short or long term. I’m just glad you settled for somewhere in the middle.” Rick’s eyes were soft as he looked at her.

Dani shrugged. “No matter how many times or ways we have this conversation, I’m not capable of giving someone that much focus and attention, not with the hours I work. At least I’ve learned to take care of myself better.”

“If you say so.”

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?” Dani glared.

“You really want me to answer that?”

No, she really didn't. Instead, Dani changed the subject. "Anyway, I don't know where you get the energy to chase women."

"Me neither sometimes, but that's so not the point."

"What is then?" Dani put her elbows on the counter.

"I know you don't have anythin' against it, but you know Sandra's bi, right?"

"Yeah, so? What does that have—" Realization crept up the back of her throat and left a weird taste there. "No... You didn't. Here? In our apartment?"

Rick threw his hands up. "I did. It's been a couple months. We kinda had a regular thing until it fizzled out. Every once in a while here, but mostly at the hospital."

So, Sandra had a thing for on-call rooms. "Oh, ew. Was her mouth all on your..." Dani looked down at his crotch.

So did Rick. He smiled.

Dani cringed. "God, it's like I gave you a blow job by proxy." They'd stumbled into a similar situation before, but Rebecca stood out as a special case for them both. She pushed thoughts of Rebecca away with only a small amount of difficulty and met Rick's gaze, giving him her full attention.

"That's way *too* incest-y." Rick scrunched his nose.

"I know, right?"

"I just wanted you to hear it from me in case she brought it up. Now, I wish—"

"Not another word." Dani pointed at him.

"Yeah, for real."

"Wait. One more thing. Did you guys use protection?" Dani had to ask.

Rick's eyes widened. "I get tested regularly. I don't have anythin', but hell yes! Did you?"

"Definitely."

He stood. "Good. Now, I've gotta go."

"Where are you going? It's early. We hardly ever have the same day off anymore, and it's Saturday too."

Rick turned and met her gaze. He smiled. "Aww, you miss me."

"I do. Besides a few nurses, you're the only one I—"

"Uh-huh, and whose fault is that?"

Hers. It was all hers, but Dani was doing what she thought she had to in order to get through her last year of residency, even though she had an additional three years ahead for her fellowship in pediatric oncology. “Yes, well.”

“The other residents really aren’t all that bad long as you don’t get sucked into drama.”

Dani shrugged. “I don’t have—”

“You don’t have it in you for socializin’. I mighta heard that a few times even moreso in the past couple minutes,” Rick finished for her. “May not seem like it, but you’re still liked despite the cold shoulder you give almost everybody. They remember how you used to be.”

She shrugged, not caring either way.

“With everythin’ that happened, sometimes I really think it would have been better for you to transfer to another residency program and start fresh.”

Leaving was never an option. She only had a few more months left in her residency, and it was way too late to apply for a fellowship somewhere else. Besides, her demons would probably follow. This conversation was taking her to a somber place, and she didn’t want to be there. Humor was the better way to go. “You say that now, but what would you do without me?”

“Sandra, again?” Taking the bait, Rick wiggled his eyebrows, showcasing his ability to be funny and douchey at the same time.

“Oh, God. Stop.” Dani covered her face. This was going to be hard to live down. She had no business dipping into the company ink anyway. Driven by her career goals, Dani was still human, and all the flirting Sandra had been shooting her way had finally hit its mark. She didn’t think of giving in as weakness. It was more of a biological imperative and a matter of convenience after a long dry spell.

Rick pulled her hands away. “You’ll get over it.”

“So, where’re you going?” Her voice tilted upward at the end as curiosity took hold.

“Meetin’ a friend. I should only be a few of hours.”

“Who?”

Rick looked away. “No one you’d know.”

Interesting. “Maybe I can come too?”

“It’s a funeral.”

“Oh.” She was pretty sure it would be rude to crash a funeral.

“Yeah, I’m the moral support, so I might be a while. But I’m all yours when I get back. Promise. Maybe I’ll cook and we can put a dent in the DVR. It was at ninety-five percent capacity last time I checked.”

“Wait. You’re choosing me over your afternoon pick-up game with the guys?”

Rick shrugged. “They’ll do fine without me. I’m sure.”

“Well, your team might actually win anyway.” Dani couldn’t resist teasing him. “I know you at least turn heads running around shirtless, so that has to be a bonus.”

“Whatever.” He huffed and waved her comment away. “The rest of the guys aren’t that good either.

“True. So, will you make that chicken dish, then?”

“Which one?” Rick asked.

“The one with those little green salty things?”

“Capers?”

“If you say so.”

“Okay, you’ll go get what I need if I leave you a list?”

Dani sagged in her chair and groaned, “You’re already gonna be out.”

“Well, shit. You want me to clean your room too? I got just about everythin’ else covered.”

“No, we’re good.” She smiled.

Rick gave her a hard stare and turned away, walking toward his bedroom.

Damn. Well, she could always read for a few hours to pass the time. Maybe something not medicine related. At this point in her career, her head was full to bursting, but regardless, she had to find room to learn even more. She’d get back on that train tomorrow. Even she had to come up for air every once in a while.

“Hey?”

Dani looked up as Rick poked his head out of the bedroom door.

“How does that thing Sandra does with her tongue translate to girl parts?” Rick smiled so hard his eyes crinkled.

“Shut up!”

He threw his head back and laughed.

Dani looked around for something to toss at him.

## CHAPTER 2

THE WIND, BLUSTERY AND LOUD, blew through the collection of skeleton-like trees that filled the graveyard. Empty branches groaned and clacked against each other, nearly drowning out the sound of the preacher's voice. Rebecca could have focused more, but she didn't want to. She'd already said her good-byes three days prior. While expected, Aunt Felicia's death still had to have been a welcome relief for her after so much suffering.

The funeral itself was a technicality at this point. It didn't seem like much, but it was all Rebecca could afford even with the money her great aunt had saved. She could have gone with cremation, but the thought of Aunt Felicia being forever on her mantle or the coffee table didn't sit well. A graveside service was a thousand dollars less than the pomp and circumstance of a church. Her aunt had never been religious: Rebecca didn't remember dressing up for church on Sundays. Christmas, for some reason, was a different story. So, the preacher was a stranger and part of the funeral home's package.

Only a smattering of people gathered around the plain pine casket, hovering over the opening of its freshly dug, permanent home. Rebecca was very familiar with three of them, including the live-in home-health nurse who'd been taking care of Aunt Felicia since her diagnosis the year prior, but the others not so much. They were family friends who'd come out of the woodwork. Thankfully, no relatives had bothered. They hadn't had anything to do with her years ago, and there was no point now.

Rebecca stood away from everyone, near the knee-high mound of dirt, blanketed with a green tarp. She wasn't sure what the point of that covering was. Hiding it didn't shatter the finality of the situation.

She scanned the faces of everyone around her. None of them were crying, and Rebecca remained stoic as well.



Aunt Felicia would've wanted it that way.

One snuffle and she'd probably rise up out of that satin-lined box and yell at them all.

Rebecca almost smiled. Instead, the wind took her away again. She glanced up at the sky. The sun made a valiant attempt to burst through a section of clouds, making them brighter, almost white compared to the grayish tinge of the rest of the sky. It didn't matter if the sun broke through completely. Nothing would change. Mid-September was shaping up to be unseasonably cool. Even though it was in the high forties, it was still too cold for her taste.

Her eyes started to burn as grief seeped in. Aunt Felicia had been a hard woman, never affectionate or overly kind. Rebecca was grateful, even though growing up with her hadn't been easy. At times, it was downright barren. Her aunt was strict and believed in being blunt with the truth as she saw it, which included her view on Rebecca's sexuality. They'd only spoken about it once when she was in high school and got caught grinding on her girlfriend. Though "speaking" implied a conversation was had. There'd been more yelling than anything else. After that, Rebecca knew exactly where she stood, and she did all her grinding away from her aunt's. She refused to stop living her life.

The sun lost its battle and disappeared. Rebecca adjusted the collar of her leather jacket to cover her neck. She should have worn something thicker, but the black mid-length coat went better with her pantsuit and the corresponding situation. She shoved her hands in her pockets and scolded herself for not wearing gloves as well.

Someone eased up beside her. Instinctively, Rebecca stepped to the side. The person's hand pressed against the small of her back, bringing with it a familiar warmth and distinctive cologne. She turned slightly and looked up at Rick. His eyes were dark, his expression gentle. Rebecca relaxed against him. She hadn't really expected him to come. Grateful that he had, she hooked her arm around his and squeezed.

"Sorry, got caught up behind a wreck," he whispered, and kissed the top of her head.

Rebecca nodded and sank into him even more.

Long minutes later, the preacher came up to shake her hand. "Ms. Wells, I wanted to reiterate that I'm sorry for your loss."

“Thank you,” Rebecca said in return. Then, one by one, everyone else came to her, offering condolences. Those who were known to her attempted additional contact, a hug, but she stiffened her body and rebuffed them without a word.

When they were alone, Rick stepped closer again. “You okay?”

Rebecca glanced at him and nodded. She moved forward, grabbed a handful of dirt, and sprinkled it on top of the now lowered coffin.

“I need to hear you say it.”

She clapped her hands together to get rid of excess soil. “Yeah.” Her voice was thick, hoarse from disuse. Rebecca cleared her throat. “Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

Rick tilted his head and eyed her for a few more seconds. “Okay. Good. Now, I know you haven’t eaten. Let me treat you to breakfast.”

Rebecca walked toward her car. The older, dark-blue Toyota Camry stood out next to the nicer cars pulling away. “You paid last time I was here, and I make more than you.”

Falling in step beside her, Rick snorted. “That won’t be forever.”

She grunted.

“Home Grown?”

Rebecca actually started to salivate. No true Southerner could turn down homemade biscuits, especially with gravy slathered all over them. “Mm-hm.”

“I’ll meet you there and save a spot if I get there before you. Counter or table?”

“Table,” she answered.

“Got it.”

\* \* \*

Trying to find somewhere to park, Rebecca circled the block. Just as a spot opened up, the car in front of her zoomed into it. “Fuckin’ asshole!” She slowed down and glared at the guy getting out of the car. He paid her no attention whatsoever. That just made her grumble more.

Her phone dinged. When she stopped at a red light, she picked it up.

*Just got here. Got a booth. It’s in my name.*

Rebecca responded to Rick's text. *K*.

She found a space farther up the street. Rebecca got out and typed her license plate number into the Park Mobile app on her cell, paying for at least a couple hours of parking. Then she walked quickly toward the restaurant. When she entered Home Grown, the hostess smiled.

"I'm with Rick Turner?"

The hostess looked down at the table diagram in front of her and then peered back up at her blankly.

"Really tall, bald, a couple shades darker than me, and good lookin'?"

The hostess turned around and looked at the sitting customers. She glanced back at Rebecca and raised a brow.

Rebecca's lips twitched. She'd just described over half of the people present.

A man walked up behind the hostess. "Thanks, Jaime."

The woman nodded. "Kevin might know who you're talking about. I can't read his handwriting."

Rebecca scanned the room again as Kevin took the seating chart from her. The place was packed. The sounds of laughter, various conversations, and the smell of fried food made it welcoming. The lobby held quite a few people as well. Rick must have flirted or bribed somebody to get a table so quickly

"Can I help you?" Kevin asked.

"Rick Turner?"

Kevin beamed.

So, possibly flirted *and* bribed. The man had no shame.

"Jaime, can you stay for another minute?"

She nodded.

Kevin waved at Rebecca to follow.

Once she was seated, Kevin turned his focus toward Rick.

"Can I get you anything else?" His smile was big, bright.

Rick shook his head. "Nope, but thank you for doin' this."

Kevin's smile dimmed. "You're very welcome."

Rebecca watched the whole exchange in silence. She pressed her lips together to keep from laughing.

As Kevin walked away, Rick looked at her and smirked. "So, what took you so long?"

Rebecca snatched up a menu even though she knew what she wanted. “Someone stole the parkin’ spot I was about to pull into.”

He chuckled. “You didn’t shoot anybody, did you? Or tell ’em off? For somebody so tiny, you can be scary as hell. That road rage problem you have is so unlady-like.”

She glared. “I’m not tiny, Bigfoot, and I don’t carry a gun off duty.”

He snorted. “I got that look enough this mornin’ from Dani. I don’t need it from you too. Thank you.”

Dani. Hearing that name caused a corresponding twinge in the bottom of Rebecca’s stomach. The feeling used to be closer to a gut punch. It had taken a long time to become something tolerable. “She’s mad at you?”

“Naw, not really.”

“Mm.” Rebecca bit the inside of her cheek to keep from asking more. “How is she?” The words slipped out anyway.

Rick picked up his glass of water and drank from it. Several seconds passed. “I like the new haircut. Fits you. What made you go short?”

Feeling hot, Rebecca unbuttoned her jacket, shrugged it off, and left it dangling on the back of her chair. She knew what he was doing, trying to divert and protect her. She practically had to pry information out of him at times, even though Dani was really none of her business. Rebecca played along with his subterfuge. “I needed a change.” She brushed her hand across her bangs and then over the back of her neck. She was still getting used to having nothing there. Her remaining hair was soft and close to her scalp in the back and on the sides. “I was tempted to go even shorter and completely natural.”

“Like Lupita Nyong’o when she started out?”

“Yeah.”

He studied her. “Nah. You shoulda lightened the color though. Make those hazel eyes pop. Dani’s had the same hairstyle forever. I think she would look good with shorter hair and maybe go blonde, but she’s still happy with puttin’ it in a ponytail when she needs to.”

Rebecca smiled. Some things never changed. She had a picture of Dani in her head, and she didn’t want the image of dark, messy, shoulder-length hair and soulful brown eyes to be disturbed. “Maybe you’re in the wrong profession.”

“I pride myself on knowin’ these things.”

She wasn't going to agree or disagree. "Rick?" Rebecca swallowed.

"Hmm?"

The waiter showed up. "Good morning, I'm Andy. Can I start you guys off with something to drink?"

"Coke with extra ice, and I'll have the biscuits. Heavy on the sausage gravy."

"Orange juice, no pulp, and the chicken biscuit with home fries." Rick smiled at the waiter.

Orange juice would have been better for her, but she needed a fix. Besides, Coke went with everything. When they were alone again, Rebecca continued. "So, she's with somebody? It's been four years. I'm not gonna go all to pieces if she is." Rebecca had been far from celibate, herself.

Rick leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Then why do you ask? I was just tryin'—"

"I know and it was sweet at first, but—"

He held up a hand. "Okay, I get it. She's doin' okay. Still spreadin' herself too thin."

"Mmm." He didn't answer her directly, but even that was telling.

Rick had been Switzerland after the break up and still vacationed there when necessary. No way their friendship would have survived otherwise.

"She hasn't changed all that much. You, on the other hand..." Rick didn't finish. He didn't have to.

"That's a good thing." The sudden dryness in her throat made her reach for his water and take a sip. Apparently, Andy had forgotten to bring hers. "I know you didn't tell her about Aunt Felicia, but you'd think she'd have seen it on Facebook or something." She was fishing. Not the smartest thing to do, but she couldn't take it back now.

"Dani's not into all that. She doesn't even have a Facebook account." He took his glass back. "Just keepin' it real. She wouldn't have come anyway. She didn't really know her, and even after all this time, I can't see her wantin' to be around you."

The waiter set their drinks in front of them. Rebecca unwrapped her straw and stuck it into the tall glass of Coke. She probably deserved everything he said. Only the ass end of the bait she was trying to hook him with remained, and the twinge in her stomach returned. "Yeah."

Rick didn't say anything for several minutes, and for that Rebecca was grateful. Needing the jolt of caffeine, she sucked up every drop of her Coke while he played on his phone.

Finally, he looked up. "So, how long are you stayin'?"

She sucked in a breath. "She left me the house. Such as it is. Since she refused treatment, there aren't a lot of bills."

"Still, you gonna sell it?"

Their waiter made another appearance, easing plates in front of them.

Rick didn't look down at his. He kept his gaze on her.

Rebecca picked up the pepper and shook out as much as possible on top of the gravy-laden biscuits. She glanced up and set the shaker back on the table. "No, I'm stayin'."

His eyes widened, and a slow smile took over his face. "You're lyin'."

"I didn't wanna say anythin' until I knew I had a job. Earlier this week, I interviewed for a spot in the Juvenile Missing Persons Unit at the Atlanta Police Department. My captain heard from on high that it's pretty much a done deal. I should get a call by next week."

"Well, goddamn!" Rick continued to grin.

"I know, right? Lucky."

"What made you wanna come back?"

His question had so many answers, big ones and small ones. Maybe big was the way to go. "Once I figured out that bein' a cop was what I wanted, I went after it. I kept my head down, and did everythin' I was supposed to. Havin' that kind of focus got me places at the police academy and afterwards. I was willin' to do and go wherever they wanted me. When I got my detective shield, the only openin' was in the Missin' Persons Unit. I haven't been doin' it long, but it turns out that it's really my thing. I wanna keep doin' it. My unit...they're good people for the most part. I guess." Rebecca looked down at her plate. "But it's not home. I know I don't have much here anymore—"

"Stop."

Their eyes met.

"You've got plenty." Rick slid his hand across the table. Palm up.

Rebecca took it.

"You just said way more words than usual. You tired?" He smiled crookedly.

Rebecca bent his fingers backward.

“Ow! All right. Al—” He started to laugh. “I’m sorry. Bad joke and bad timin’.”

“Mmm.”

“I’m serious.” He squeezed her hand.

“Sometimes, I can’t believe I ever found you attractive.”

Rick cringed. “I still remember that party. Didn’t have a chance to go to a lot of them durin’ med school, but it was lit. I’m so glad I was too drunk to hook up with you.”

“Me too.” When he’d had the time, they started to hang out instead, and finally Rick introduced her to his best friend.

“But for real. I’m glad you’re stayin’.” He licked his lips. “But you know you bein’ here isn’t gonna go down well, right?”

“You said she hasn’t asked about me in a while.” It did something to her to know that Dani was possibly still affected by her after all this time. Rebecca reveled in the warmth that wound its way inside.

“She hasn’t, but it was easier to be a friend to both of you when you were in Savannah, four hours away.” Rick rubbed a hand over the top of his head. “She knows we talk, but I’m not sure why I’ve lied to her all this time about visitin’ you there or us hangin’ out when you were in town.”

“I think you just answered your own question. Because it was easy.”

“Maybe. Atlanta might be big, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to keep hidin’ stuff from her, especially this.” Rick wagged his finger between them.

“Yeah, I agree. Since I’m movin’ back, it might be best to get everythin’ out in the open.”

He exhaled, making his shoulders sag a bit. “I should probably tell her.”

Rick didn’t sound all that enthusiastic about it, but given his position, Rebecca couldn’t blame him. The temptation to put the whole situation in his hands was almost irresistible.

She shook her head. “No, I’ll do it when I’m ready.” A cold trickle of trepidation slipped its way down Rebecca’s spine at the prospect. “She’s gonna be pissed enough at you as it is.”

“I know.” Rick looked down at his plate. He picked up the fork and pushed the food around.

“She’ll forgive you though,” Rebecca said. “It’s gonna take a minute or two, but you have to know that she will.” However, Dani would probably

just hate her more. Maybe Rebecca was flattering herself. At this point, she wouldn't blame Dani for not giving a damn about her. All the warmth she'd rolled in a minute ago disappeared in the face of a more plausible reality.

Rick didn't say anything. He didn't look at her either.

The guilt that stabbed Rebecca came from a dulled blade, which made it hurt worse. She had been complicit in all of this and more.

She covered Rick's hand with her own. He squeezed her fingers in return. Rebecca didn't want to lose him as a friend, but she didn't want to move back home to live in the dark either.

Rebecca pulled away and dug into her food. Everything was still warm, but it might as well have been ashes in her mouth.

Rick's silverware clattered against his plate. "No, Becca."

She met his gaze. He was the only one to use the shortened version of her name in the past four years. He had been the only one allowed to. "No, what?"

He sat up straighter in his chair. "Look, I'm not tryin' to be wishy washy, but you just showin' up out of the blue? That really sound right to you?"

"She probably won't see me otherwise."

"Probably." Rick shrugged. "But can you blame her? I need to come clean with her anyway. Might as well tell her everythin' and deal with the fallout."

Rebecca stared at him for a few seconds, trying to adjust to the sudden bout of mental whiplash that left part of her relieved. Fear clung to her as well. She tried to swallow down the lump in her throat with little success. What could she do? This was out of her hands now.

She nodded.

As if he'd been holding his breath, he deflated and nodded too.

Maybe none of this was as bad as it seemed. Maybe Dani really had moved on from everything that happened between them. Maybe they could even be friends.

There were a whole lot of maybes. At least one of them had to work out.

Maybe.



## CHAPTER 3

WITH HER ATTENTION FOCUSED ON the tablet in her hand, Dani rounded the corner. She flicked to a new page and mumbled to herself. The patient's labs were old. She had no way to make a comparison and gauge improvement. Other hospital personnel whipped past her. Dani heard her name several times, and she made sure to look up and at least nod in an attempt to be courteous.

She shouldered the door to Pediatrics open and entered a whole new world. Gone were the boring white walls typical of the rest of Amery University Hospital. In Pediatrics, color existed. Each separate segment of the surrounding walls was unique. She liked it that way. The images reminded her that each child was unique and individual as well.

A large tree with long twisting branches covered one section, but it wasn't alone. Butterflies, bees, and hummingbirds filled the empty space around it. A family of squirrels lived midway up the tree and watched them all. Dani saw herself as one of them, a guardian of sorts. Other walls had depictions of princesses, firemen, monster trucks, and SpongeBob, just to name a few. She passed them all to get to the nurses station.

Dani ignored the small group of doctors standing to the side. "Betty?"

The nurse in question glanced her way and held up a finger as she continued to speak on the phone.

Dani nodded and waited. Someone bumped into her, nearly sending the tablet in her hand flying. She turned to see who it was. Dani knew the face, but his name just wouldn't come. Her gaze dropped to his name tag.

"Sorry, Dr. Russell."

Dani forced a smile. "Don't worry about it, Dr. Norman."

He stood tall and chubby. His gaze darted around anxiously.

"I hate this rotation. I'd rather be in Ortho than here."

“Uhm, okay.” Dani took a small step back from him. He seemed a little off kilter, but didn’t all interns? “Well, this isn’t the place for you, then.”

He shrugged. “My medical school education needs to be well rounded.” His tone lacked luster, as if he were reading from an extremely boring brochure.

“You don’t like kids?” Dani shifted a little more to the side.

“God no,” he whispered.

At least he had the sense to lower his voice.

“And they don’t like me either,” Dr. Norman hissed.

They could probably smell his fear. Dani bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling. Mostly, she didn’t want him to think they were going to be friends. Yet it didn’t cost her anything to give him free advice. “Then it’s best you let your advisor or someone know.”

He nodded.

“Did you need somethin’, Dr. Russell?”

For today, at least, Betty had impeccable timing. Dani offered Norman a tight smile and turned to Betty. “Yes, the results of Mark’s new blood work aren’t in his medical record. I thought I put a rush on it.”

Betty glanced in Dr. Norman’s direction, and so did Dani. “He was supposed to stay in the lab and try to butter them up.”

Dr. Norman’s face reddened. He sputtered. “I’m sorry. I, uh, misunderstood. I did tell them you—”

Dani interrupted. “Think of it as your chance to escape for a little while.”

“I can do that. Thank you.” He’d barely finished speaking before turning away.

Betty rolled her eyes. “Well, bless his heart. Maybe he’ll do better if they stick him in research.”

“That’s not nice.” Dani chuckled.

“No, but you know it was funny.”

“No comment.”

“Good response. Gotta keep that reputation intact.” Betty cocked a brow.

Dani pressed the tablet to her chest. “What are they saying now?”

“Apparently, the new crop of residents still thinks you believe you’re better than everybody else, but someone had the bright idea that it’s because you have money.”

“I wish. How do they come up with this stuff?” Dani didn’t care what the students and other residents thought of her. Not anymore, but the crap they came up with often left her scratching her head.

Betty shrugged. “You’re a woman of mystery.”

“No, I’m not. I talk to people.”

Betty stared.

“Well, some people. Kids, parents, nurses, and Rick should count for something.” The fact that she’d barely seen or spoken to Rick all week came to the forefront.

“You’d think. Speakin’ of which, Austin’s been lookin’ for you all mornin’.”

“Has one of the other doctors from his treatment team been in to see him?” Dani asked.

“Yes. He’s havin’ trouble understandin’ that you’re not gonna be around as much anymore.”

“I know. I’d rather for him to be confused than be back in PICU or oncology. Where is he?” Dani sighed. Getting attached seemed to be an issue for children and parents alike. She didn’t mind one little bit, especially if it helped them during a crisis.

“Over by the Avengers last time I checked.”

A few seconds later, she walked up beside Austin. Dani brushed his arm but didn’t say a thing. They both stood and stared at the mural.

“Why doesn’t somebody tell ’em that the Hulk isn’t ’posed to be that kinda green so they can fix it?” Austin turned his brown eyes on her. They were clear and bright, a stark contrast to being glazed over in pain, which was the expression Dani’d become used to.

Dani studied the mural. She didn’t know anything about comics or superheroes, but she’d lost count of the number of kids who told her the Hulk wasn’t supposed to be neon green. “I’m not sure.”

“And he’s smilin’. The Hulk don’t smile. Why’s his teeth so big?”

Dani wondered that too. He looked like he was poised to do a toothpaste commercial. “These are questions I don’t have the answers to.”

Austin continued to look at her. He reached up to scratch the top of his bald head. “Why can’t you be my doctor no more? I can teach you ’bout the Hulk if you want.”

“Because when Dr. Meda operated, all the bad stuff was taken out so you don’t need me anymore. But I’m willing to learn whatever you want to teach me about the Hulk.”

“The really, really sick kids are the ones who get to see you the most, right?”

“Right. I make sure they get the right medicine to help them get better.” Dani nodded and made sure to maintain eye contact.

Suddenly, Austin wrapped his arms around Dani. She smiled and enjoyed the warmth along with a surge of affection as she rubbed a hand down his back.

“I don’t like not seein’ you.” He sniffled and pressed his face against her chest.

“I know you don’t, but you get to go home soon. You can see your dog and play outside. Don’t you want that?”

He looked up at her and nodded. “I don’t wanna be sick like that again.”

“I don’t want that for you either.”

Austin stepped back, but he continued to lean against her. “Thor’s not right neither. He ’posed to have a hammer, not a sword.”

She chuckled. “I’ve heard that too.” Dani eased her arm over his shoulders. “C’mon, I’ll walk you back to your room.

“Okay.” Austin allowed himself to be guided. “Dr. Russell?”

“Hmm?” They passed the monster trucks.

“If I can get my mom to bring it, will you watch *The Avengers* with me? Or maybe YouTube it? The Hulk has the best scenes. I want you to see.” Austin looked up at her. His eyes were wide and earnest.

“Well, I have a few minutes and a smartphone. So, let’s YouTube away.”

Ten minutes later, Dani exited Austin’s room with a smile firmly in place. These little moments made her sometimes grueling residency bearable. Saving lives and meeting amazing kids completed the other parts of the magic equation. There was nothing else like it.

\* \* \*

Dani sent Rick a text, but fifteen minutes later, he still hadn't answered. She checked the residents' lounge and had been brave enough to pop her head into a few on-call rooms with no success. All she wanted was to have lunch with him. They had been like ships passing in the night the past few days. Typical. The part that hadn't been so typical? Rick's abruptness and avoidance. They usually sought each other out even if it was only for a few minutes.

He wasn't in surgery. Dani had checked the board. When she got to the end of the hallway, Dani pressed the button for the elevator. She hadn't looked in the cafeteria. They needed to talk—reconnect or something.

The elevator opened. Dani spotted Sandra. She quickly brought her cell phone up to her ear and laughed uproariously. She waved in Sandra's direction as Sandra got off the elevator and Dani entered. Yes, she was doing her own avoidance thing, but she had reasons. She had no desire to swim in rivers Rick had dipped into. Nothing against Sandra. That night and morning was still fresh on her mind.

The doors opened a couple times before getting to her stop. Dani let others file out ahead of her. She scanned the hallway; sure enough, Rick was leaning against the wall on the other side as he talked on the phone. He started to pace and gesticulate wildly before wiping a hand over his head. His face was pinched, as though he smelled something sour, and that expression was enough to give her pause. However, his wild eyes said the most, making him look just as anxious as Dr. Norman had been.

In return, Dani's heart rate doubled out of concern and empathetic distress. She walked toward him. Rick looked up. His mouth opened and closed several times..

"Uh, yeah we're good. I'll catch up with you later." He shoved his phone into his scrubs pocket. "Hey." Rick greeted her but barely held her gaze.

She'd had enough. The lack of eye contact was new and alarming. "What's going on? Do I need to make a list of all the weirdness or are you just gonna save me the trouble and acknowledge it?"

Rick glanced away again. He exhaled slowly. His shoulders hunched by the time he was done. "Dani, I..." He shook his head. "I need to get my shit together. What's wrong with me?" Rick looked at her. "Hey, I'm sorry. I thought I'd have more time to—"

"Time? More time for what? What is going on with you?" None of this helped her heart rate, which had yet to slow.

“Becca.”

That name used to have such an impact in her world. Now, it conjured up a tiny flutter in her chest laced with old pain and anger. “Becca?” Her breath left her. Being a cop was a dangerous profession. Almost every muscle in her body hardened, leaving her frozen. “Is she—”

Rick grabbed her shoulders and squeezed. “No, it’s nothin’ like that.”

Dani relaxed, but her heart continued to ram against her chest. “Then what?”

Rick’s hands trailed down her arms and laced their fingers together, which weirded her out even more. “I’m a coward. I shoulda told you right away. It’s only been a week, but still.” He shook his head. “That funeral that I went to? It was her aunt’s. She left her the house. Becca’s comin’ back to Atlanta.” He tightened his hold on her. “That was her on the phone askin’ me to help her move this weekend.”

Dani looked down at their joined hands then back to Rick’s face. His eyes were glassy, hopeful, and his lips were slightly parted as if he had lots more to say.

Stillness. It went on for several seconds until memories uncurled and tumbled through her. Four years. It had been four years. Apparently, that wasn’t enough time to wash herself clean of the whole thing. She’d stored so much away and that hadn’t been easy. Now, memories danced around her like shadows. Dani waited for the barrage of feelings to come. They were there, locked away. The pain, the anger; the sense of failure, helplessness, and abandonment. She’d gone through them all during the last legs of their relationship, the end, and beyond.

“Dani? Say somethin’. You haven’t brought her up in a long time, but this still has to hurt.”

Yes, she should feel something, but a blanket of numbness found its way around her, wrapping her tight. Dani held on to it. This wasn’t the time or the place, but those weren’t the only reasons. She just didn’t want to go any deeper. She squeezed his hands before pulling away.

“Dani?”

She shook her head. “I can’t. I have to go.” Moving on autopilot, Dani stood in front of the elevator. She stabbed at the button, willing the doors to open, and when they did, the relief that shot through her was almost overpowering.

TO CONTINUE READING,  
PLEASE PURCHASE

# DRAWING THE LINE

BY KD WILLIAMSON

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.  
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.  
Ylva Publishing | [www.ylva-publishing.com](http://www.ylva-publishing.com)