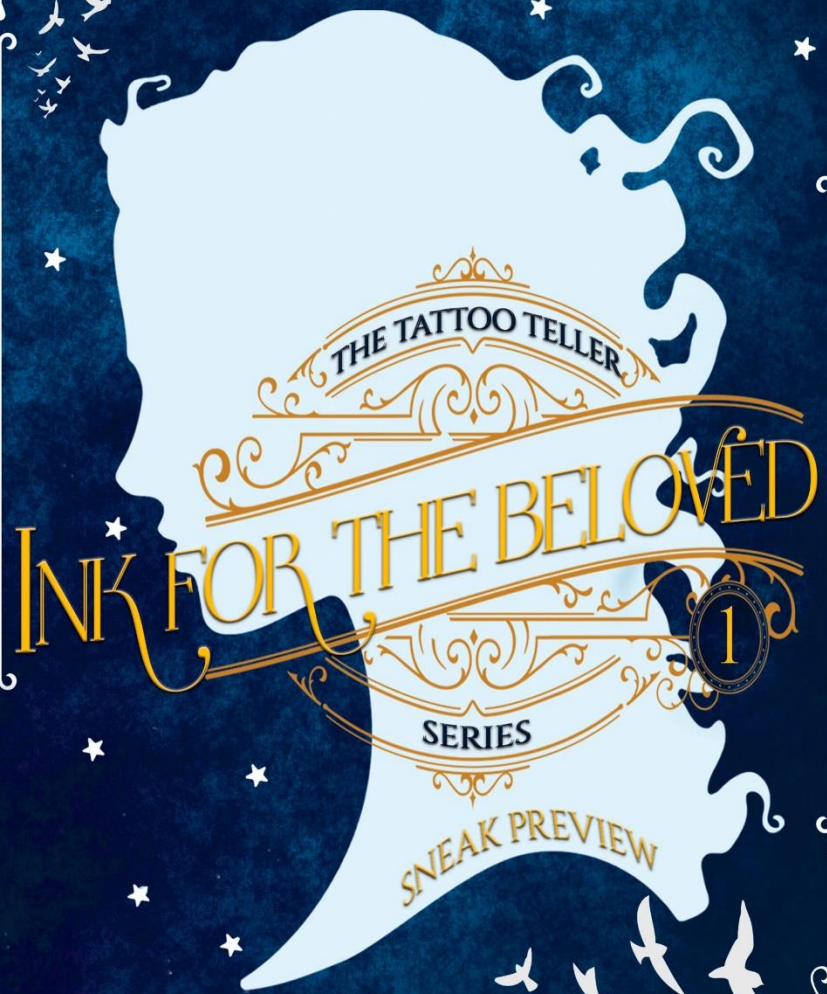


R.C. BARNES 



THE TATTOO TELLER

INK FOR THE BELOVED

SERIES

SNEAK PREVIEW

1

“When did the trouble start, Elizabeth?”

The woman sitting across from me was wearing a neat brown suit cinched in all the right places. She was attractive with her hair pulled high into a messy bun. I got the impression she had quickly whipped it up, tied it back, and then slid the tortoiseshell glasses down her nose so she would appear as if she were ready for anything. Her lovely suit was not bought off the rack. It was the calculated outfit of a young woman, freshly out of law school, who has shed the sloppy sweatpants for clothes to get her noticed. She was ambitious. She wanted me to talk. I had the information they needed to wrap up the case.

“When did the trouble start, Elizabeth?”

“Bess,” I said. “Call me, Bess.” I looked her square in the eye to force my point.

“Okay, Bess.” She smiled to diffuse the tension. This woman thought she was making headway with me, gaining points by using the name I was comfortable with. I had no idea what I was going to say or where I should even begin, so I just smiled back. It was an awkward smile.

The sterile grey room was still as we sat across from one another. I imagined I could hear the clock on the wall ticking. I glanced up at it and saw there were bars over the face of the clock so the glass couldn't be broken. The woman across the table kept her face focused on her papers. I could see she had decided to wait me out. Behind me, Detective Kline cleared his throat to fill the silence. It was the type of sound people used to nudge others into speaking.

I ignored Kline's unsubtle prodding. I hadn't decided if I was going to talk to her. I don't like authoritative people – especially legal or administrative types. I might be uncooperative and not grace her with any information at all. She was too put together, and the tailored outfit was starting to annoy me. I needed to feel a connection, and I wasn't getting it from her...I had already forgotten her name.

I picked up the business card that lay on the gunmetal table in front of me. “Tamara Blount, Assistant District Attorney” is what it said. Tamara. I bet she was Tammy to

her friends. She just wasn't Tammy to me. She was brusque and dismissive and refusing to look me directly in the eye. She concentrated on her notepad with the pen, hovering, waiting for me to talk so she could jot down my jewels of knowledge. I understood the severity of the situation, but this was going to be a long night, and I was already dog tired.

I looked over my shoulder at the policeman who had brought me in - Detective Kline. He held that ruffled look of comfort I connected with. He had held me in his arms, tight and secure, when he hauled me out of the fire a week ago. He smelled like cinnamon. I liked cinnamon. He had been kind to a sixteen-year-old black girl whose world had come crashing to a halt. Detective Kline knew the outer shell of the story, but he didn't know the details. They needed the details - a man was dead.

If I told them everything, would the nightmares and horrors softly dissolve away into nothing? Or perhaps they would float out to sea the way the tide pulls items from the sand. Would I be absolved of the guilt I felt? Would the doors to the past lock themselves shut, causing my pain to be snuffed out like a flame with no air? Will telling the police and the district attorney allow me the opportunity to forget? Do I want to forget? Should I get that choice?

Detective Kline caught my eye when I turned around. "Are you thirsty, Bess? Did you need a soda or something?"

Something. I need something. "Could I get some coffee, please?" I asked. "Lots of cream and lots of sugar."

"Right away, sport," he said and hopped up and out the metal door, blocking me from the outside world. I wondered if Luther was waiting for me outside there. If not Luther, then I wanted Dusty. I hoped it was Dusty and Luther with Echo. I really wanted to hold Echo, tweak her nose, and see the shy smile emerge under her crazy red hair. I worried about my sister a lot.

I was thirsty and exhausted, and I had only been there half an hour. My eyes felt heavy. The bright lighting in the room was not helping. In the back of my head, I could feel one hell of a headache threatening to make itself known. After weeks of being wound up tighter than a rattlesnake

in the grass, this was my body's way of crashing. It was saying it's over now, Bess. It's over. You can rest now. You can close your eyes and not worry about the shadow images, the symbols, the threats, the sharp tang of ink, and the sparrows – especially the sparrows.

Assistant District Attorney, Tamara Blount was looking at me expectantly. She was so patient. I could see she was trying to be kind. I could see that. But what could I tell her? I didn't know where to begin. Wasn't it enough that it was over? Dealing with family court and with the police in the past had soured me on everything legal. It was so easy to manipulate the system, to get people to believe things which weren't the truth. Look at my mother. She was a mistress at deception.

“When did the troubles start?” the ADA prompted. Again.

When did they start? I cocked my head as if I were in contemplation. That's a good question, Assistant District Attorney, Tamara Blount. How far back should I go? Trouble and my family are like kin. We are as tight as thieves. Look up our thick file in family court. That's Wynters with a “y,” not an “i.”

The metal door groaned open as Detective Kline reentered with a cheap Styrofoam cup of coffee. In his grasp, he balanced a handful of creams and sugars. The creams were the good kind, not the crappy powder stuff. There was a red plastic stirrer for me to complete my drink. I looked at the assortment of items in front of me and started to add them to the cup. Detective Kline had poured in just the right amount of coffee, so adding the three creams didn't create an overflow. Three creams and three packs of sugar. White and sweet. I looked at the finished drink, and suddenly, hot tears splashed down on the table. I don't know where they came from. They just poured out of my eyes like a spigot. Detective Kline rested his hand on my shoulder. He glanced at Tamara Blount, Assistant District Attorney, and they exchanged a look.

“Bess, can you talk?” Detective Kline squeezed my shoulder. He leaned down and said the words softly in my ear. It felt too personal and intimate, but I didn't care. After

all, the man had carried me out of a burning building, and he smelled like cinnamon.

I nodded my head and tried to staunch the falling tears with swipes at my eyes. But I continued to stare at the coffee on the table. White and sweet. Just the way my mother liked it. This was my mother's coffee. Not mine.

Tamara Blount, Assistant District Attorney, had a concerned expression on her face. Her arm was extended out as if she had thought about comforting me as the tears splashed down. Her palm was open and facing up. It was then I noticed it. The ink was peeking out from under her wine-colored silk blouse sitting low on her wrist. It was hidden, but now I could see it.

"What is that?" I asked her. I sat straight up and gestured towards her arm.

She looked down and saw I was pointing where her shirt sleeve had pulled back, revealing the small design past her wrist bone. She subconsciously pulled on her cuff to cover it back up.

"Could I see it, please?" I asked. Tamara Blount, Assistant District Attorney, shot a puzzled glance at Detective Kline.

"Her mother ran a tattoo parlor," he explained.

"I ran the tattoo parlor," I muttered under my breath. I reached out towards Tamara Blount, Assistant District Attorney. "Can I see it, please?" I was dying to touch her arm. Suddenly, I knew how to make things right. I had to power myself up and tell the story that needed telling.

She hesitated, looking about her as if there were eyes in the conference room and we were being observed. Perhaps we were. She made the decision and pulled the sleeve up from her wrist, revealing a small cavalcade of stars. It was a simple design showing multiple dark tiny stars, splattered as if a paintbrush had been flicked over her arm. Off to the side was a giant star with more detail and finesse to its creation. I had an idea as to what it meant, but I asked her anyway.

She stammered before telling me. I could see she was embarrassed by it. "I got it while I was in law school. I had

it done right before I took the state bar. It's for courage. It means I'm a star." She said the last part with a whisper.

I thought it probably means you are a *superstar*. "Can I touch it?" I asked. Tamara Blount, Assistant District Attorney, nodded her head in agreement. I reached over and touched the tiny stars on her wrist. I ran my fingers over the more significant star with the defined points and shooting flares as if it was speaking to me. I doubt Tamara Blount, Assistant District Attorney, was aware of this but the tattoo was – speaking to me.

They all do.

That's when I saw her. I saw Tammy. I saw the girl who studied diligently through law school. The girl who raised her hand in the large lecture halls and was ignored by the professors and other students. I saw the girl who knew she was better than how she was perceived. I saw the girl who bristled inside when she saw injustice and believed in staying true to those she represented. I saw the girl who, a week before she took the bar, marched into a tattoo parlor, and sketched out this tattoo to the artist at the desk. She was a superstar amongst the stars. This was what her tattoo was about. Having it on her wrist allowed her to glance at it periodically to draw inner strength. This tattoo gave her the extra bounce when she began to falter. I decided I could talk to Tammy.

I pulled back, satisfied, and placed my hands in front of me on the table. I stared again at the coffee drink I had created and pushed it away. "I'm sorry," I said to Detective Kline. "I don't really want this. I'm ready to talk now, but can you do me a favor?"

"Sure, sport," he responded.

"I really really want some packets of hot sauce. That's what I want." Whenever I made my request, I'd see raised eyebrows communicating a combination of surprise and what the hell? Detective Kline did not disappoint.

"I know how it sounds. I just want some hot sauce. Not a bottle or anything, but the packets they give out over the counter."

“There’s a taco stand two or three blocks down. It’s on the other side of the parking lot.” Tamara Blount offered

I bolted up in my chair. “That’s perfect. Tell AJ to give you the extra spicy ones. He knows me. Say it’s for Bess.”

Detective Kline shrugged and left the conference room again. Right when he went out, I could hear him murmuring to folks outside. There were many voices, and I couldn’t pick out anyone in particular. But the voices didn’t sound like there were only police officers or lawyers out there. I didn’t believe I warranted that much attention, but I was hoping there was someone out there waiting for me.

Tammy, (yes, now she was Tammy in the sloppy sweatpants) was relaxed and smiling. She had removed her glasses as if she had decided since we shared a secret, she could let her hair down and be herself. We weren’t besties or anything, but she sensed something positive had passed between us when I touched the constellation ink on her wrist.

“Is it okay if I tape this?” she asked.

I nodded. “That’s fine.”

She reached down and brought out a recorder. It was one of those old-fashioned numbers with manual buttons which you pushed down. “I like to have it here on the table,” she explained. “It’s better than signaling to someone outside the room. I also think it will help you if you see me listening rather than taking notes.”

“Okay,” I said. I felt myself warming up to her. I liked Tammy.

“However, I will jot things down from time to time. I will do it to remind myself to follow up with questions and clarify something. I don’t wish to interrupt you once you get started.”

“Okay. Where’s the microphone?”

“You don’t have to worry about that. But it’s right here.” She pointed to an area that was facing me already. “Can we begin now? Or do we need to wait for Detective Kline to return?”

“We can start now,” I said.

“Okay. I’ll begin.” She pressed down the button on her tape machine and began talking. Her voice was precise and authoritative. “This is Assistant District Attorney, Tamara Blount, and I am speaking with Elizabeth Delilah Wynters, a minor, age sixteen. Elizabeth, also known as Bess, is here to make a statement regarding the fire in the Fruitvale district in Oakland, California and the events leading up to it.” She looked at me, signaling I now had the floor. “Bess, when did the trouble start?”

There was that question, again. When did it start? When did the warnings of trouble penetrate our household? Was it when Terry threw Luther out? Or was it when Annika began her solo work? Did the trouble go back to when Spiderwand disappeared? Or was it when Malcolm died? I realized I was going farther and farther back in time, looking for the thing which ignited it all. When the trouble started was not a question I could answer, because there had always been trouble.

But, in my mind, it started with Todd. Todd was why we were here.

I looked at Tammy and began talking.