

# *Broken Together*

A NOVEL

(EXCERPT)

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# *Broken Together (Excerpt)*

EYES AND MOUTH DRY, Tracey slumped in her chair. Her fingers trembled as she clicked off the computer. She'd scanned Brian's phone call list for over an hour. Now she sat dazed. silent and unmoving.

*All right. Okay.*

She took a deep breath. She'd seen it—two months full of calls and texts. So many entries from Brian to Lisette and vice-versa left Tracey officially in shock. Oh yes, she had remembered the number in the information for the "Troy" she saw listed on his phone the night before. There was no mistaking the calls she'd scanned were definitely back and forth between Brian and Lisette. The communication between them after midnight on some nights really gave Tracey a Floyd Mayweather-strength punch to the gut. Those must have happened while she slept, dead to the world, ignorant of her husband's actions.

A knock on the office door made her jump.

"Hey Mom, you okay?"

Tyler.

"Yeah . . . uh, yes. I'm okay." A big fat lie. But no way was she ready to start jabbering to her son about the discoveries she'd uncovered.

"I shut off the games and TV downstairs."

"Yeah, thanks."

Tyler pulled himself away from the PlayStation? What time was it? She glanced at the wall clock. Five minutes after ten.

Tracey put her hands on her knees and looked around. Too darn quiet in the house. Her body hummed with nervous energy. She needed something. A distraction.

Tracey lunged up, left the office, zipped around the upstairs and shuffled through the bathrooms collecting hampers of soiled clothing, towels, and bedding. She shut off her brain and dragged four heavy baskets down into the basement laundry room. She cruised on auto pilot as she moved into the cold, far corner of the basement. As she pulled the chain above her head, the harsh light of the naked bulb illuminated the gray concrete space. This would work. She had to concentrate on a job containing no emotion. No trust or questions. Dirty laundry didn't get angry, lie, or make excuses. It only lay in soft lumpy piles waiting to get clean.

She was pouring detergent into the washer when she heard the back door open.

Showtime.

"Tracey!"

She heard Brian call out from the kitchen. She tracked the sound of his footsteps over her head as he walked to the open basement door.

"You down there?" He called.

"I'm here!" she hollered, up to her elbows in hot water. She jerked her wet hands out of the washer and stopped fishing for the blue plastic cap she'd dropped the second the back door opened.

"Where've you been?" Tracey demanded when Brian appeared in the doorway.

He leaned against the door frame. His muddy, snow-smudged boots left brown wet marks on the concrete floor behind him. "The gym," he said.

"Uh-huh." She kept sorting laundry, forcefully throwing dark clothes into one pile, and bright colors into another.

"How are you?" Brian asked.

Tracey sighed. "I've been better."

He cleared his throat. "Today you said you wanted to talk? Something important?"

"Yep." She stepped back to the washer, found the cap, fished it out, and twisted it back on the big bottle of Tide. She shook the bottle. Nothing left in it. Anger urged her to hurl the empty plastic bottle right at Brian's head. She gripped it tight for a moment then dismissed the thought, tossing the bottle into the battered green recycling bin next to the dryer instead.

"You want to talk now?" He asked.

She wiped away smears of water and blue laundry soap from the top of the washer then threw a tattered yellow rag on top. She faced him. "I had asked you to be here as soon as you could."

He rubbed a hand over his face. "Well, I'm here now."

The sound of the wash cycle starting filled Tracey's ears. She wrapped her arms around her body and shivered. She could start with what she heard from Ruthie. The nickname. The embrace. Or she could mention all the phone calls. The texts. She opened her mouth. Nothing came out. Sound bites of what her mother had said earlier flooded Tracey's brain. She actually heard her mother's raspy, nicotine-coated voice: *You go around digging for garbage, you'll find some.*

Tracey's nerve loosened. She gazed at the thick solid muscles in Brian's arms and shoulders pressing against the fabric of his navy blue sweatshirt. Shoulders strong enough to carry an entire family. Firm shoulders that captured her heart the first time she'd hugged him. She wanted to wind her arms tight around him and beg him to tell her things were all right between the two of them.

And he probably would.

And that would be a lie.

"This friendship you have with Lisette. Um, you had more interaction with her than you told me about last night." Tracey said.

"What makes you think so?"

She stopped. She didn't feel comfortable saying she'd talked to Ruthie yet. That could mean trouble for Ruthie at the practice. So now Tracey was dancing with deception. Bad enough she'd been polling his employee for information, now she was tempted to lie about where she'd gotten it. She could try a different approach.

"Let me backtrack for a second," she smiled. "Did you have a good day?"

Brian returned a half-smile. "It was okay."

"Let me give you the rundown on my day." No smile. "I saw Ma for a minute then talked to Monica for a bit this afternoon. Then I guess you could say I spent my time out and about thinking about what you told me yesterday."

Brian's jaw went slack. "Uh-huh."

She kept rattling things off. "So I came home. Made dinner. Spent time with the kids. Put Brianna to bed. Called your office. Called your cell. Left messages. Rested for a minute. Got back up. Read through your cell phone records and saw two months-worth of calls between you and Lisette. Started doing laundry. Now here I am and I need more Tide."

Brian opened his eyes so wide it surprised Tracey that his eyeballs didn't pop out and fall on the floor. "Back up for a second."

"No." She kicked aside a pile of clothes to clear the pathway before she stalked over and stood in front of him. "Now where do you want to start?"

"First of all, it's freezing down here. We should have this discussion someplace else." The washer's rattling sound accentuated the troubled look on his face.

Tracey glanced around at the concrete walls of the unfinished cellar. Kind of a *Silence of the Lambs* effect. Cold enough to see her breath. She'd been so heated with anger when she first came down lugging the laundry she hadn't noticed how chilly the basement was.

"Well, since you don't want to start with the good stuff, let's go backwards. We can go to Walgreens. I told you, I need some Tide."

Brian's deep voice bounced off the walls. "Walgreens? Now?"

Tracey brushed past him and started climbing the stairs two at a time. "Yes. Let's go."

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—from *Broken Together: A Novel* by K.L. Gilchrist.

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