

***Soul Matters* by Yolonda Tonette Sanders**

Chapter One: The Perfect Package

It was ten minutes to three, and Wendy was eager to get out of work on time. “Start cleaning up now,” she said to her first-grade class. They had crayons, markers, and books all over the place. “Be sure to put everything back where it belongs. After you’re finished, line up at the door and wait there until the bell rings.”

Much to Wendy’s surprise, her instructions were followed with little resistance. A few students mumbled about not being able to finish what they were doing, but even they cooperated without her having to say anything else. Maybe they could sense that something was different about her. Toward the end of each day the children usually had exploratory time and were allowed to choose among various activities such as reading, coloring, playing educational games, or anything else Wendy deemed appropriate. She normally walked around the classroom and interacted with several students during that time. However, this entire week she had sat at her desk like a watchdog, responding only when needed.

“*Just a few more days . . .*” Wendy murmured to herself. Next Wednesday the school would be closed for Christmas break, and as much as she hated to admit it, she was looking forward to having some time off. Although she was only seven weeks pregnant, she was beginning to feel the effects this pregnancy was having on her body. She used to have the vitality of a three-year-old, but lately she felt like she would lose in a race against Methuselah. She was convinced that the term *morning sickness* was deceptive. If the feelings of nausea, vomiting, heartburn, and headaches were confined

only to a few hours of the day, it would make the first trimester of her pregnancy much more bearable. Instead, she was liable to experience *morning* sickness at any given moment of the day.

While the children were cleaning up, Wendy was on the edge of her seat as she waited for the bell to ring. *Thank God it's Friday*. She didn't think she would be able to make it another day. She was going straight home after work. She would not leave the house until it was time to go to church Sunday morning. After service, Wendy would then go over to her parents' house to celebrate her father's birthday. Wendy hoped to feel better by next Friday, when she and her husband, Kevin, were scheduled to go to Philadelphia and visit his family for the holidays. The Ohio native would rather spend her Christmas vacation recuperating from her ailments in the comfort of her own home, but there was no way she could back out of the trip now. Her mother-in-law was ecstatic about the pregnancy and could not wait until they got to Philly so she could show Wendy some of the things she had already bought for the baby.

"Keep your hands to yourselves," Wendy said to two young boys who were shoving each other.

"He started it!" David stated, pointing to Jeffrey.

"Nuh-uh, he did!" Jeffrey pointed back at him.

"It doesn't matter who started it – both of you knock it off," Wendy replied sternly. Secretly she knew that David probably was at fault, but she didn't feel like investigating the issue. David was bigger than the other first-graders in both height and weight. Jeffrey was one of those children who looked like he had been born premature, and his small size made him an easy target for David. Even though David was sometimes

a bully, Wendy had taken a great liking to him; probably because he reminded her of herself.

Wendy had never been a bully, but she had been heavy and tall as a child. She used to feel awkward standing next to other children in her class. It irritated her when adults would ask how old she was and then say, “You look like you should be older than that.” It wasn’t until the summer before her freshman year of high school that she began to thin out. All of her adult years, Wendy managed to remain a size eight, but she had to work hard at it, contrary to her younger sister, Kim, who naturally wore a six.

When the bell rang, it was music to her ears. “Okay, let’s go.” Wendy jumped up and escorted her class to the pickup area. Once they were there, another staff member would stay with them until their bus or a parent came to get them. When they reached their destination, Wendy said good-bye to her students and headed back to her classroom.

“Attention, all teachers and staff: Mrs. Phillips, please come to the office. Wendy Phillips to the front office, please,” she heard Donna Burchett, the office secretary, announce over the PA system.

For what? Maybe I should go ahead and leave. No one would be able to say for sure that I was in the building during the announcement. Wendy was only a few doors away from her classroom, so all she had to do was grab her stuff and head home. However, she reluctantly turned around and walked toward the office at a medium pace. Her shoulder-length hair often bounced as she walked. Today it was pulled back in a ponytail. Wendy actually hated ponytails and only wore her hair in that style when she worked out. However, since she had been experiencing morning sickness she devoted

less time to her appearance. She even had her glasses on, and Wendy normally wouldn't be caught dead in a pair of glasses.

"Wendy Phillips, please come to the office," Ms. Burchett repeated.

Coming! she wanted to yell. *I hope it is something simple like a signature needed on some paperwork I filed.* She dreaded the possibility that a parent would be waiting to speak with her about his or her child's behavior.

"Hi, you paged me?" Wendy inquired as she burst through the door into the administrative office.

"Yes, dear. You had a telephone call," Ms. Burchett replied, exposing the gap between teeth stained from years of smoking.

"A telephone call? From who?" Wendy asked, scrunching her eyebrows. *No one ever calls me at work.* Her friends and family knew that she taught and was unavailable during the day. "It must be from a parent. I'll take the message, but I'm not calling anyone back until Monday."

"No, honey. It wasn't from a parent. Someone called from a Dr. Korva's office."

"Oh," she said nervously, trying hard to keep her composure and not panic.

"I wrote down the number." Ms. Burchett handed Wendy a piece of paper and pointed to the phone on her desk. "You can call from here if you'd like." She carefully studied Wendy's response.

"That's okay. I'll wait and call later since I'm getting ready to leave anyhow."

"The lady didn't tell me why she was calling, but it sounded important."

Wendy could tell that Ms. Burchett was fishing for information. Odds were, she had already tried to gather as much as she could from the person who called. Wendy

hadn't told anyone at the school about her pregnancy yet, and now was not the time to make that announcement. "Thanks so much, Ms. Burchett, but I'm sort of in a hurry so I'll just call back from my cell phone on my way home."

"Okay. I just hope everything is fine," she said with her narrow, bluish green eyes peering from the top of her glasses. "Are you sick, honey?"

"No ma'am," Wendy said honestly. Her mind was so boggled with getting to a phone to return Dr. Korva's call that the feelings of morning sickness had been temporarily suppressed.

"Then why would someone from a doctor's office call you?"

As much as Wendy wanted to tell Ms. Burchett to mind her own business, she couldn't. The woman was at least in her late fifties or early sixties and Wendy couldn't strike up the nerve to tell her off. *If only I was a little more like Kim*, she thought. Her sister would not have wasted any time getting Ms. Burchett out of her business. Wendy and Kim did have similar characteristics, with their dark brown hair, brown eyes, and dimples. However, Wendy's complexion was just a little lighter than Kim's, and she was also a few inches taller than her younger sibling. Both ladies favored their mother, but it was Kim who had been blessed not only with the high metabolism but also with the ability to speak her mind audaciously. Although Wendy generally liked Ms. Burchett, this interrogation was testing her patience. "I'm not sure, but I better run so I can find out, huh? You have a good weekend, Ms. Burchett," she said, backing toward the door.

"Okay, you too – and I'll talk to you on Monday."

Not if I can avoid it you won't! Wendy walked out of the office and raced back to her classroom. She was so disturbed by the call that she rushed by several of her co-

workers without speaking. *Why did Dr. Korva call me at work?* Wendy was desperate to find out.

When Wendy returned to her classroom, she grabbed the cell phone out of her purse only to discover that there was a message waiting. That was nothing unusual because her phone stayed on vibrate during the day. A lot of times Kim called her from the hair salon where she worked and left messages when she was between clients.

“Hi, Wendy, this is Susan, Dr. Korva’s nurse. She would like you to come into the office today, if possible, to discuss your test results. She’s leaving around four today. If you can’t make it before she leaves, then you definitely need to try and come sometime early next week. Please call the office and let the receptionist know what’ll work best for you. The number here is 555-3794. We hope to see you soon.”

Wendy’s heart sank. *Dr. Korva told me that they take blood and vaginal swabs to run tests on all expectant mothers. The only reason they would call was if something came back abnormal.*

She looked at her watch. The time was now three-fifteen. It would be a stretch to make it in time from the southeast side of Columbus to the northern suburb where her gynecologist’s office was located. Such a trip would take forty minutes this time of day, at the very least. Still, she tried to call the doctor’s office anyway, hoping that, with any luck, they would squeeze her in.

Shaking and short of breath, Wendy wiped her sweaty palms on her clothing and dialed the number. “Hi, this is Wendy Phillips,” she said, trying to hold back tears. “I’m returning a call to Dr. Korva. Will she be able to see me today? I can be there in about a half hour?” She altered her traveling time, expecting to increase her chance of being seen.

“Oh,” she said solemnly when the receptionist stated that Dr. Korva was running behind schedule. Wendy couldn’t be seen until Monday morning. “Well, can you tell her I’m on the line? Maybe she can just tell me the results over the phone.” She crossed her fingers, praying that she would be transferred to the doctor. No such luck. Dr. Korva preferred to talk in person. “Okay, I’ll be there at nine on Monday,” she said, confirming the time of her appointment, and hung up the phone in despair.

How am I going to make it make it until then? She dreaded going back to the office and arranging for a substitute through Ms. Burchett. *Forget it. I’ll just call in,* she opted. Sure, not submitting a request for a substitute beforehand was inconsiderate and very unprofessional, but she didn’t care at this point. Her main concern was finding some way to make it through the weekend without losing her mind.

Wendy got her stuff and headed for the car. She tried to talk herself into remaining calm, but it wasn’t working. She felt light-headed. *What if my baby is retarded? What if it’s deformed or has some kind of genetic defect?* She tormented herself. She was afraid of what the doctor would say. She knew it was bad news. Her fear turned into anger toward Kevin. *I told him his smoking could cause damage to the child, but he didn’t believe me.* If Kevin just smoked cigarettes, she could probably deal with it a little better, but he sometimes smoked marijuana, and Wendy couldn’t stand that.

Whenever she complained about his recreational activities, Kevin got upset. He would tell her that he was not doing anything she hadn’t been aware of before they got married. True, Wendy had known about his smoking when they were dating, but it was different then. She was attracted to his street-but-sweet personality. She had never dated anyone so successful yet a little rough around the edges. Plus, he was very pleasing to the

eye. He reminded her of a Denzel Washington wrapped up in a Barry White voice. He was the perfect package: sexy, successful, and single.

Kevin's accomplishments intrigued her most of all. He worked hard for everything he owned and had built his real estate business from the ground up. He was very successful and made well over six figures a year. He didn't have parents who could afford to pay for his education. He'd paid for it himself. He hadn't grown up in the suburbs of some major city, but had lived in various ghettos of Philadelphia. His father left home when Kevin was only three, and his mother raised him, his older brother, and his sister with money she received from the federal government. He hadn't let his life's circumstances prevent him from making something of himself, and Wendy respected that.

Foolishly, she had convinced herself that Kevin would change the things she didn't like about him once they married, but he hadn't. Now, nearly six months into the marriage, the honeymoon was well over and reality had settled in. *If something is wrong with the baby, I know it'll be all his fault*, Wendy told herself.