

Excerpt from *The Promise Box...*

As the book opens, Bernadette Windsor is fearful and confused over an anonymous letter telling her that her sister was murdered. It's been 15 years since her sister died of pneumonia, or so Bernadette's been led to believe, and not sure what to make of the news, she decides to leave San Diego and go home to Baltimore to find the truth from her sister. Her sister, wrapped up in the love of a new boyfriend, just having had a new baby, wants to leave the past alone. But soon Bernadette starts to believe the boyfriend knows something about the murder, or about the letter. When Bernadette picks up the fear in her 9-year-old niece, Toukie, she knows for sure that something is terribly wrong. She decides to visit her niece in school...

Bernadette had been sitting in the school office, making notes for at least 10 minutes. She glanced at her watch. Where was Toukie? Was she even in school today? She got up to approach the secretary, but at that moment, the woman said, "Oh, there you are. Your aunt's been sitting here waiting for you."

Bernadette turned and stared at a slender young black woman with shoulder length black hair who stood looking at her, then the young girl beside her who bent to pick up a pencil, then stood smiling widely. Bernadette blinked. Was this Toukie? Bernadette's eyes zoomed to Toukie's head. Her hair! What had happened to all that thick long hair she once had? It was cut so close to her head, in such an uneven fashion, Bernadette could see the scalp showing through in two bald spots. Almost like two eyes in the back of her head. Was she going bald? No wonder Toukie kept her head wrapped in a tight scarf yesterday.

She grabbed her niece in a tight hug. "Dang, they let you come here to see me?" Toukie said with a little laugh. "I got special permission," Bernadette said and hugged her again thinking, 'Oh God. What was happening to Toukie?' She pulled Toukie over to the bench to talk, noticing the skin tight black jeans she wore that hugged her behind way too much, and the dirty, runover white tennis shoes. She looked like a street urchin.

The woman with Toukie followed them to the bench, then introduced herself as Toukie's teacher, Ms. Alston. "I wondered if I could just talk to you a moment," the teacher said. "I've never gotten a response from the letters I sent to Anissa's mother." Bernadette had to remind herself that Anissa was Toukie's given name. Ms. Alston ushered them into a back room, then with the door closed, engaged Bernadette in a litany of problems she was having with Toukie's attendance, and wondered aloud if someone could address this early, and give the girl a chance. There were some other problems, which Ms. Alston said could indicate some 'domestic issues', like "how tired she always is. It's almost like she has an evening job," the teacher said with a frown. "And then there are the lies. I don't know if Toukie would know the truth if it hit her. Yet, she is still one of the brightest students in my class."

When Ms Alston left them, Bernadette looked at her niece wondering where to start. She had come home to solve a murder, but clearly something new was going on with her sister and her family here. She stared at the ill-fitting clothes, and opened her duffel bag, pulling out a wallet and revealing a new pack of cigarettes.

“Oooooooo cigarettes. Can I have one? I won’t smoke it until I get out of school.”

“No, you can’t, and I hope you’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

“Look Toukie, I’m going to give you \$40.” She handed the child two twenties. “Buy yourself some new jeans and a CD or something. You deserve something.”

“Dang! Thank you Aunt Bern,” Toukie said with a wide, pretty smile.

“And this is just the beginning. We have a lot of catching up to do. First of all, what is this about being tired in class?”

“Ms. Alston is boring. Everybody is tired in her class.”

“Toukie, this is not a game. Why are you late everyday and absent so often?”

“That’s not my fault. I have to do my chores in the morning and the night, and Witt won’t let me go to school until I finish.” Witt again, Bernadette thought picturing the muscle bound boyfriend living with her sister, and the permanent scowl across his face.

“What chores?”

Toukie sighed, reached in the pocket of her tight jeans and pulled out a piece of notebook paper. “Here, I had to write them down.” Bernadette stared at the childish script, read it over quickly, then frowned. “I’m sure you didn’t mean to give me this note.” She handed it back to her niece who looked at it and covered her mouth laughing. “Sorry, that was from my boyfriend. He want me to ‘do it’ and I don’t know if I like him like that yet.”

Bernadette’s mouth fell open. “Do what?”

“You know what, Aunt Bern. Dang, don’t be acting like you don’t think I know. I’m almost 10.” Bernadette leaned back. “Surely you’re not having sex?”

“Not the real sex. You know, the other kind, the ain’t no way I can get pregnant kind.”

Before Bernadette could say another word, Toukie snatched back the note and gave her aunt the right paper, which read:

Mornings: make bed, put up my books and clothes, wash up, put baby’s clothes in washer, change and clean baby, clean dishes, pick up market note and money.

Evenings: do homework, help Mom fix dinner, watch baby, do dishes, clean kitchen, wash baby clothes, iron my jeans, read my books from Witt..

“Who gave you all these chores?” “Witt. He want me to do everything and know everything so I can help the baby when he gets bigger.”

“And your homework for school?”

“I don’t get in trouble if I don’t do school homework. But I do if I don’t read stuff Witt gives to me.”

“What kind of stuff does he give to you?”

“You know, encyclopedia stuff. Stuff about famous people.”

“And what kind of trouble do you get into when you don’t read?”

“No telephone. No music. No dinner. No television. I can’t even talk to my mother, and she can’t talk to me. No school. And then he stands up in the bathroom with me while I’m trying to take a bath, fussing me out till I go to bed.”

“Mmhmm. And what does your mother say about this?”

“She tells me to listen to Witt.”

Bernadette could feel her blood boiling. “Toukie, you should not have all those chores. That is not your baby, nor your responsibility. Look, I’m going to talk to your mother. We have to make you happy again.”

“I am.”

“Well, maybe you think so. I see your mother lets you do whatever you want with your hair. That’s a pretty radical hair cut you have there.”

“Cut? I didn’t cut this. It just fell out. My mother said the same thing happened to her when her sister died.”

“Fell out?”

“Yeah. It’s growing back now. See?”

This time when Bernadette hugged Toukie, she found herself fighting back tears. Was Toukie being poisoned? Something was terribly wrong here, and this letter was a warning she had to find out what it was before it happened again.