

M O N I C A W A L T E R S

YOU'RE ALWAYS ON

*my mind*

You're Always On My Mind

By

Monica Walters

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This is a work of fiction. Any references or similarities to actual events, real people, living or deceased, or to the real locals are intended to give the novel a sense of reality. Any references or similarities in other real-life events or persons are completely coincidental.

Dedicated to Rose Zeno and  
Rose Ukoh...

# Hello, Readers!

Thank you for purchasing and/or downloading this book. This work of art contains EXPLICIT LANGUAGE and LEWD SEX SCENES. It also contains moments of depression and anxiety due to a health crisis. These scenes are quite heavy and took me longer than usual to write. Please consider this before reading, especially if you've experienced a health crisis yourself.

If any of the previously mentioned offend you or serve as triggers for unpleasant times, please do NOT read.

This book is a spin-off of *Who Can I Run To*. It's not necessary to read it before this one, but to understand where this story originated from, it would be best to read it first since it picks up exactly where that one leaves off.

Also, please remember that your reality isn't everyone's reality. What may seem unrealistic to you could be very real for someone else. But also keep in mind that despite the previous statement, this is a fictional story.

If you are okay with the previously mentioned warnings, I hope that you enjoy the story of Audrey Leonard and Kenneth Gentry.

Monica

# Chapter 1

*Audrey*

“Seeing O pop the question made me wanna do that same shit too.”

I slightly rolled my eyes, but not where Kenneth could see me. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt his feelings, but we were nowhere near where Chantice and Orion had gotten to. We weren’t even really a couple. We’d been talking for a little over a year, but he was always so busy, we barely got to spend time together.

In the beginning, it seemed that he was totally committed to spending all his free time with me. But when I started feeling bad from the medication I was on, it was like he got used to not seeing me as much. I wasn’t the typical person that liked to be all over someone when I was sick. I didn’t like being touched... like, just leave me alone. Check on me but move round after that.

I supposed that was because I wasn’t the most affectionate person. Touch wasn’t one of my love languages. I liked being touched, but not all the time. While I tried to sacrifice a bit when Kenneth was around and make a conscious effort to be more affectionate, it just didn’t feel authentic. Faking the funk wasn’t an attribute of mine. The only thing I faked was pretending to feel well when I didn’t.

While my cancer was in remission, I was starting to believe that my doctors had overlooked something. Most days I felt like shit. By the time I got off work and had helped Keeli with her homework, I was tired. It was a struggle to cook most days. My parents had begun noticing, and I knew it was time to tell them what all I had been through. No one knew... just Orion. While he didn’t know all the details, he knew the important parts. Thankfully, he’d kept my secret.

Kenneth grabbed my hand, and I glanced at him as I unlocked my car. “You don’t have nothing to say in response to that?”

“No.”

“Audrey... hol’on. Look, I know we don’t get to spend much time together, but I’m working on some things. It’s gonna free up a lot of my time. I really care for you and as soon as I can wrap up this business, I’m coming for you. I want you to be mine. I’ve *been* wanting you to be mine, but you barely crawling in that direction. Tell me you don’t want the same things I do, and I’ll let go.”

Lowering my head, I closed my eyes as I thought about what I knew I needed to reveal to him. Being involved with someone meant it was my duty to reveal certain things to him so he could make a decision... an *informed* decision about our future. “I do, but there’s some things you need to know about me. Then you can tell me if you feel the same way.”

He lifted his brows and brought his hand to my cheek. “Damn. That serious? I mean... what? You used to be a man or some shit?”

I rolled my eyes and huffed. He was always playing, and I was trying to be serious. I reached for the handle to my car door. Just that quickly, I was irritated. My mood had been all over the place. I could be happy one minute and have a huge chip on my shoulder the next. Quickly grabbing my arm, he said, “My bad. I’m just clowning around. But obviously, this is serious. What is it?”

He moved in closer to me, backing me against my car. There was nowhere to go. Staring into his eyes, I said, “Only one person knows this about me.” After taking a deep breath and dropping my gaze for a moment, I stared into his eyes. “I can’t have any more children. I had a hysterectomy last year, because I was diagnosed with cervical cancer.”

His lips parted and he took a step backward. My heart sank. Even though I wasn’t affectionate, that step back meant

that what I said was too much for him to process at that moment. *Just as I knew it would be.* I rolled my eyes and got in my car. The moment I did, he seemed to snap out of it. Knocking on my window, he said, “Audrey, wait. You aren’t gonna give me a chance to respond? Baby, don’t leave.”

His first reaction said everything he didn’t say, and the last thing I wanted was to be a burden to anyone. I didn’t need his sympathy either. That was the main reason no one knew what I was going through. I didn’t feel sorry for myself, and I didn’t need anyone feeling sorry for me either. My mama was extremely sensitive, and I knew this news would take her low.

However, I would tell them once I got a second opinion. If I was indeed in remission, I would tell them what all I’d gone through. I also knew that if I wasn’t and the cancer had spread, I would still be forced to tell them. That would mean chemo and possible radiation. The main person on my mind was Keeli. My seven-year-old deserved to have a mother in good health. Her dad was there for her and had always been, but I knew she looked up to me. I didn’t want her to see me at my worse.

Glancing out the window at Kenneth still standing there, I put my car in gear and drove away, heading back to Beaumont. My phone rang as soon as I took off and I refused to answer it. I no longer felt like talking. My feelings were on my sleeve and my wall had been erected. I was just happy Keeli was staying with Kirsten and Aunt Stephanie tonight. She would ride back to Beaumont with Aunt Steph, since Chantrice and Kirsten now lived in Houston with Orion.

I was so happy for my cousin. Kenneth’s younger brother, Orion, had proposed to her, and she was four months pregnant with his baby. Seeing the love they shared in such a short amount of time, had given me hope that there was someone out there for me too, despite my previous stance on the subject.

When I met Kenneth at Kirsten’s birthday party last year, I thought things would be magical. My body got in the way of



that. But now, he was talking about moving our relationship to the next level, and I wasn't sure if he would be able to handle it.

There was nothing tying us to one another. I cared about him, but we hadn't even had sex yet. I was afraid to even try. That was how I knew something wasn't right with my body in the first place. Sex was painful... like no pain I had ever experienced. Having Takelia was like a walk in the park compared to that. As I made it to IH-10, my phone started ringing again. When I saw Kenneth's name show up on the screen, I silenced it and cranked up my music.

Maybe I should have just concentrated on my health without bringing a man into the equation. I practically stared his clothes off him at the party. That was why he approached me. I was almost sure he wouldn't have otherwise. We'd only been talking for a couple of weeks when my body started to go crazy on me. The doctors told me that I had an ulcer. They treated me with medication, and I was okay for a while, only for me to get sick again.

I just wanted to be well to enjoy life with my daughter. If that meant I had to be single for the rest of my life, I would gladly take that deal. As my phone rang again and I saw Chan's number, I still decided to let it go to voicemail. I wanted to tell her what was going on with me, but Chan would smother me half to death if I did. I had a doctor's appointment next week and I would have to pass it off as a meeting for work.

I worked for Merrill Lynch as an executive assistant, and they'd been so understanding. I hadn't gone into detail of what was wrong with me, but they knew I had a hysterectomy last year. It was the only way I would get paid. But now that I was having complications again, I didn't know how this would fair out.

Merrill Lynch paid well, and I'd been able to save quite a bit over the years. Keeli's dad, Vincent, also did his part where she was concerned. He gave more than what was required, and

I appreciated him for that. Although we didn't work out, we still got along. So, if I ended up having to quit my job, I felt like I would be okay financially. My parents and Vincent would make sure of it.

When I got home, I sent Chan a text, letting her know that I'd made it and that I would call her tomorrow. I just hoped Kenneth didn't go back in their house running his mouth. If he had, hopefully Orion had put a stop to it. I was sure to tell him that no one knew, so he wouldn't tell them. My phone chimed with a text from Chan. *Okay. Love you.*

I sent a final response. *Kiss my baby for me.*

After taking a shower, I went to my bedroom and stared at the ceiling, hoping that Thursday next week would come quick. I was anxious to meet my new team of doctors at Methodist Hospital. Maybe they would be able to give me insight as to what was going on with my body. And just maybe, I would be okay.

# Chapter 2

*Kenneth*

Not being able to say anything to anybody about what Audrey had told me was going to drive me crazy. I should have asked her who that one person was. Orion would have to listen and promise not to tell Chan, because I was stunned and didn't know what to say. When I stepped away from her, it was more out of shock. It felt like she'd gut punched me. I wasn't expecting her to say no shit like that. While I wasn't exactly sure *what* I expected, I knew it wasn't that. *Cancer... fuck!*

She was fighting a battle that had defeated millions all on her own. That shit couldn't be healthy. Everybody needed support... needed somebody to be there. I'd been calling her for the past four days and she'd refused to answer. It was Thursday evening, and I was at our gym, trying to occupy my time and tire myself out so I could sleep tonight. I'd been so worried about Audrey. I was lucky if I got three hours of sleep a night.

After our first conversation a little over a year ago, I knew she was the woman I wanted. However, when the opportunity presented itself to invest in a restaurant chain that would service southeast Texas and southwest Louisiana, I hopped on it. That had kept me extremely busy though, and it cut into the time I was able to spend with her. When she wasn't feeling well, she was standoffish. She didn't really want me around her. So I figured there wasn't any time lost. I still called quite often because I cared for her... a lot. Still did.

Audrey Leonard was intelligent, independent, kind, and sexy as hell. She was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen. *But cancer?* She could no longer have children. I

wanted a family. Keeli was a sweetheart, but I wanted my own children one day. That *did* put me in a tough predicament. I was falling for Audrey. Could I just walk away, simply because she was pushing me away?

Getting off the weight machine, I headed to the locker room to get my shit so I could head home. I hadn't talked to my brother all day, and I knew before long, he would be calling. I'd been in my head all day, trying to figure out what I should do. *Was Audrey worth so much to me that I would be able to sacrifice my hopes of having children one day?* I didn't know at this moment. It was probably best that she didn't answer my calls since I was unsure about our future.

Looking at the time, I saw it was already eight o'clock. I'd been here since five. Using my towel to wipe the sweat from my face, I headed to my car. By the time I got to it, my phone was ringing. I figured it was Orion. I'd call him back once I got inside and got situated. I threw my duffle bag in back, then got in and checked my phone. It was Audrey. I quickly called back, hoping that she would answer. After three rings, she did. "Hello?" she answered in a soft voice.

"Audrey? Hey. You good? I've been trying to call you."

"I know. Can I come over?"

"Yeah. Of course. I'm on my way home now. I should be there in fifteen minutes. How far are you away?"

"About twenty or thirty minutes."

"I hate the way you sound, baby."

The way her voice quivered told me that something was truly wrong. I'd never seen Audrey cry... besides the happy tears she cried when O proposed to Chantrice. She was always so strong and in control. I didn't know how to handle this soft side. She remained quiet, besides the occasional sniff. "I'll be waiting for you, Audrey."

She ended the call without a response. That was different too. She always said bye and hated if I didn't say it back. I was worried. I didn't know how to take it. She never came to me

because she needed me. It was just usually because she wanted to see me or to hang out... nothing serious. I hadn't kissed her lips in at least a couple of months, and I hated that shit. She had the softest lips, but whenever I tried to kiss her, she would give me her cheek. *What was she doing in Houston anyway?*

When I finally got home and had gotten inside, I took a really quick shower. I couldn't have her smelling me all funky. By the time I slid on some shorts and a wife beater, she was ringing the doorbell. Once I slid on my socks, I went to the door. When I opened it, I was frozen at the sight before me. Audrey's eyes were red and puffy and when she saw me, more tears fell. I gently grabbed her hand and pulled her inside.

Once I locked the door, I led her to the couch. I didn't know what to say, so I remained quiet. Pulling her to me, she laid in my arms for the first time in a while. When she slid her arms around me, she exhaled, then stared up at me. "I'm sorry for not answering your calls. I was so in my feelings. That was a bomb I dropped on you, and I didn't give you time to adjust. It just felt like you didn't want to proceed with me at that moment. I took your reaction the wrong way."

"It's okay, baby. You're here now and that's all that matters to me."

I kissed her head, knowing that she was about to drop another bomb. Audrey didn't show her emotions like this. I was usually the one to initiate snuggling or holding her this way. She closed her eyes for a moment. "The cancer is back. I have colon cancer."

She broke out in tears, and it took everything in me not to cry with her. I held her tightly as she sobbed and rubbed her back. Kissing her repeatedly seemed to be the only thing I could do at the moment. I was trying to console her and be her leaning tower, but that shit was hard. I wanted to break right along with her. *God... hasn't she been through enough?* She quickly sat up and dried her tears. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. I'm sorry, baby, but I'm glad you chose to tell me. Come back here. Let me hold you."

Please? We can be strong later.”

She smiled tightly, then laid in my arms and kicked her shoes off. I kissed her head and asked, “Am I the only person you’ve told?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you plan to tell your family?”

“Yeah. I don’t have a choice. I have to go through chemotherapy. I’m in stage 3A. All this time, the doctors kept telling me I was clear and treating me for ulcers and shit. I’m going to have to have surgery and go through chemotherapy. It’s not in any lymph nodes, but it’s awful close. It has spread to tissue around the colon. This could have been treated a long time ago!”

Audrey rarely cursed, but I could definitely feel her pain in this moment. She’d been misdiagnosed. How could they not see cancer? She had cervical cancer. They should have been checking her every three months. I didn’t say anything in response to what she said... just continued to love on her. “You staying with me tonight?”

She shook her head and sat up. “I can’t. I don’t want to impose. I just sprang up on you...”

I halted her rambling by placing a soft kiss on her lips. “Audrey, please stay with me tonight.”

More tears fell from her eyes and her facial expression softened. Her muscles seemed to relax instantly. She nodded, then laid back in my arms. “So, what’s the game plan? When is surgery?”

She started to sob again, and I couldn’t stop the tears that fell from my eyes. I was glad that she didn’t cry often, because seeing her this way was eating me alive. However, I didn’t dare try to shush her. I wanted her to be sensitive and vulnerable with me because she rarely was. “Three weeks... surgery is in three weeks. Ken...”

She looked away for a moment and I knew it was because she was about to say something to me that was totally out of character for her. I patiently waited as she gathered her composure. She turned to me and stared in my eyes. I was starting to get nervous because I didn't know what the hell she was about to say. "Can you make love to me?"

My eyebrows lifted, and she immediately lowered her head. I sat up on the couch and completely turned to her. After lifting her head by her chin, I stared into her eyes as I caressed her cheek with my thumb. "I would love to make love to you, baby. But why do you want that suddenly?"

"I'm trying to be optimistic, but in reality, I don't know how this will go and I want to experience you before I can't."

I stood from the couch, allowing her mental status to stay just where it was. Sometimes you just needed time to be... to be weak, vulnerable, and somewhat down. I wouldn't let her stay in that mindset, but she'd just been given this news today. Gently pulling her to me, I stooped and picked her up, cradling her in my arms. Once I kissed her lips, I slowly headed to my bedroom. I was going to cherish this moment and take my time with her, because who knew if I would get this opportunity again. I just prayed that she wouldn't regret it.

# Chapter 3

*Audrey*

I didn't know why my car wanted to drive to Kenneth's, but it seemed as if I didn't have a choice in the matter. Deep down inside, I knew he cared for me, but this situation I found myself in was tough. I'd dated quite a bit, unbeknownst to my family. However, when I revealed that I was a cancer survivor or that I could no longer have children, those things were deal breakers. But here Kenneth was, carrying me to his bedroom like I was his most prized possession. I'd even seen him shed a couple of tears with me.

My mind was wearing me out though, wondering if I was being selfish in this moment. I slid my arms around his neck and rested my head against his cheek, allowing his beard to tickle my face. Kenneth, besides his lack of availability, was so perfect. *Did I want to really take up his time with my problems?* He had so much going for him. I would only be a hindrance. But even with those thoughts... I didn't stop him.

When we got to his room, he gently laid me in the bed, then climbed in with me. I thought he would want to get right to it, but instead, he spooned me, holding me in his arms as he kissed my shoulder repeatedly. *Cancer again.* I wasn't sure how I was going to battle this demon all over again. It was hard as hell the first time and they'd caught it early enough to where I didn't need chemo. This beast would be totally different.

It was hard sharing this with Kenneth. Thankfully, he gave me just what I needed. He didn't constantly try to give me a bunch of words or try to make me feel better. He was just here, allowing me to be me. That made me want to share life with him even more. I sat up in the bed, leaving his embrace, and



stood to my feet. When I turned to him, he'd sat up, his eyes on me. Closing my eyes, I began undressing.

I slowly pulled my shirt over my head, then unbuttoned my pants. Before I could reopen my eyes, I could feel his presence right in front of me. When he slid his hands over my stomach, I tensed a bit, then opened my eyes and relaxed immediately when my eyes met his. He softly kissed my stomach and brought his hands down to my pants. I was nervous as hell, but I knew that if anybody deserved to breach my love, it was Kenneth.

Under different circumstances, he would be the man I would want to spend forever with. Closing my eyes, I swallowed hard and thought about what I was doing. As I did, I felt Kenneth's hand against my cheek. He stood and kissed my forehead. "Audrey, why don't we wait? I can tell that you're nervous. I'm going to be here regardless. I don't want to do anything you aren't sure about. When I make love to you, I don't want there to be a regretful bone in your body. I want you to know without a shadow of a doubt that I'm the man you want to share your precious gift with. Okay?"

I opened my eyes and nodded. He kissed my lips, then glanced at my breasts. "You're so beautiful."

He'd never seen me without a shirt. We'd gotten hot and heavy a few times, but as soon as his hand had slid under my shirt and touched my skin, I would stop him. I was scared that sex would hurt. I thought I was willing to find out tonight, but my thoughts betrayed me. They showed their insecurities and reservations throughout my body, producing the nerves that Kenneth noticed.

He picked up my shirt from the floor and handed it to me. I laid it across his dresser, then got back in bed with him. He smiled tightly, then pulled his shirt off and pulled me close. I exhaled slowly and whispered, "I'm sorry. I haven't had sex in a long time. I'm so scared that my body may not be as ready as I think it is."

"Is that why you never wanted to go there with me?"

“Yeah. Before my diagnosis, sex had gotten to be so painful. That was how I knew something was wrong. I really care for you Kenneth, but disappointing you sexually is the last thing I want to do.”

He gently turned my body to him, then kissed me so passionately I couldn't help but moan into his mouth. As his hands caressed my skin, I slid my hand over his and moved it further south, giving him permission to touch me wherever he wanted to. He loved my ass, and I knew that because I always saw him looking at it. When he gripped it, I couldn't help but break our kiss and allow my head to fall back. “Oh shit,” I whispered.

The way he touched me caused my entire body to go up in flames. His previous words acknowledging my nerves had gone out of the window for me. Just that quickly, I needed him beyond my reservations, insecurities, and nerves. I needed him to touch me more and make me feel like a woman. I needed to feel wanted, desired, and cherished... all the sensitive, vulnerable shit that I never wanted to expose.

His lips moved their way to my neck and after teasing me there for a while, they began traveling down my chest to my cleavage. Grabbing his bald head in my hands, I knew I would be in for something special if I just let him please me. His tongue was longer than most, and I had a strong feeling that he knew just what to do with it. He wasn't the forty-year-old virgin by any means. Kenneth was much more experienced than me in the sex department, but I was willing to allow him to teach me all sorts of lessons at this point.

Slightly pulling away from him, I sat up and unclasped my bra, setting my double D-cups free. Even in the dark, I could see his eyes widen slightly. When his eyes met mine, it was still like he was in disbelief that I was doing this. *I suppose so after a year of stringing him along.* Keeli's dad was the last man I'd had sex with, and it wasn't enjoyable because of the pain from the cervical cancer. I could only pray that I wouldn't have the same experience this time.

Lying on my back as Kenneth watched me, I eased my pants over my hips, taking my bikini-styled underwear with them. He stood from the bed and undressed and as I looked over his body, I swallowed hard. His medium chocolate complexion and thick but defined six-foot-two-inch frame was everything to me. That powerful tool that hung freely in front of him was the center of attraction though. *Good Lord*. It was like God's glory was all over that thing... rays of light emitting from it and everything. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

I allowed my pants and underwear to slide to the floor as Kenneth walked to the foot of the bed. He stood there just staring at me. Just before I could tense up, he said, "Scoot back to the head of the bed, Audrey. Prop your head against the headboard."

I did as he asked, feeling a little tense and nervous as to why he asked me to do this. He walked to the side of the bed and knelt in it, his dick within my grasp. As I stared at it, I felt him pulling my bun loose, my hair falling to my shoulders. He combed his fingers through it as I grabbed his dick. I couldn't help it. It was so beautiful... thick, black, veiny, and smooth looking. I'd never seen one that looked so damn delicious. *Gawd*.

Gently removing my hand, he stood from the bed and grabbed his phone. I really tensed up and began biting my bottom lip. When he got to the foot of the bed once again, he asked, "You trust me, Audrey?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "Then relax."

He took a picture... no flash. I wasn't sure how it would come out in the dark, but maybe he was making art. There was light shining through his window from a streetlight, so maybe he was using that. He was a tattoo artist, so I knew photography couldn't be far from his reach. After licking his lips and allowing a soft moan to leave his lips, he turned on a lamp in the corner of the room and made his way back to his previous position.

He started some soft music on his phone, and I immediately recognized it as “Been on My Mind” by Robert Glasper and Terrace Martin. That pink album cover had been in the background of my life. It relaxed me and he knew that. Kenneth’s eyes met mine, and I couldn’t help but relax as he’d said to do. “Put your feet flat on the bed and spread your legs.”

The authoritative tone in his voice turned me on and apparently, he noticed. When I spread my legs, I lowered my head and stared up at him. He snapped a picture, then looked at it and bit his bottom lip. “Fuuuck. You so sexy, baby.”

His words only further turned me on and made me feel feminine as hell. I brought my hand to my hair and tilted my head back, closing my eyes as I slid my fingers through it. When I reopened them, Kenneth was just staring at me, stroking his dick. He must have sat his phone down because it was no longer in his hand. Joining me in bed, he eased between my legs. This moment seemed so unreal. I’d imagined it so many times, but I never thought we would get here any time soon. “I can’t wait to show you the pictures of how this pussy leaking for me.”

I shuddered at his words and as I prepared to slide down to lay flat, he stopped me. “Naw. Don’t move. I want you to see every stroke my tongue makes in this gorgeous ass pussy. I want you to see your cum on my lips.”

My clit was tingling at his words as he lowered his face between my legs. The moment his tongue touched me I closed my eyes. He squeezed my legs slightly, then said, “Watch me, Audrey. Fuck, you taste good.”

I opened my eyes and stared down at him as he began again. Seeing him indulge in my goodness almost made the moment unbearable. I was so sensitive. My legs were already trembling as his tongue circled my clit. He looked up at me as he flattened his long tongue and licked me from my asshole to my clit. Taking in a sharp breath, it seemed I couldn’t breathe afterward... not until I came, and I was on the verge just that quickly.

He concentrated on my clit with his tongue, flicking it back and forth as he slowly slid his finger inside of me. I couldn't help but release my breath to moan at just how good it felt. "Mmm... Kenneth. Yeeeeessss."

My eyes were starting to roll to the back of my head, but doing my best to stop them, I lifted my head and forced myself to stare at him. I supposed choosing to put me out of my misery, he began sucking my clit and the trembling sensations took over my body. "I'm... about to cum... Oh God!"

He sucked harder and I erupted. I stared at him until I noticed the white cream on the tip of his nose. It seemed seeing it made my orgasm even more intense, and I could no longer control my eyelids. My head fell against the headboard... hard. I didn't even care. Grabbing my nipples, I tweaked them as he continued to indulge. The sensations had practically become unbearable when he stopped. Looking up at me, he grabbed his dick with one hand and wiped his hand down his face and beard with the other.

I wanted to suck his dick, but I was so spent, I couldn't move. That was my first orgasm in a while, and my body had to be in shock that I didn't achieve it on my own. It was the first time a man had made me cum in almost two years. Not bothering to sheath himself, he slid the head of his dick between my folds without entering me. He did that a few times and I was at the point of begging for it. When he slid it over my entry, I bucked my hips forward, causing the head of his dick to slide inside of me.

The look he gave me afterward caused my body to tremble. Had I not revealed to him my medical condition, I believed he would have torn me to shreds at that moment. Instead, he bit his bottom lip and gave me more. "You not gon' rush me, Audrey. But I couldn't dare pull back out of this tight shit."

Maintaining eye contact, he eased more into me, then pulled out to the tip. I wanted to explode. He was moving excruciatingly slow, and I felt like I was about to go insane.

Before I could even voice my thoughts, he slid back into me, giving me more and I came without warning. My body seized and my goodness wrapped him even tighter as I looked down at the action. When he slid out, I could see the creamy excretions covering him. “Oh fuck...”

Kenneth looked up at me and gave me more of himself, causing me to wince a bit. It didn't hurt like something was wrong... just that 'I hadn't had dick in a while' hurt. “You okay?” he asked then leaned over to suck my nipple.

“Yes. I'm better than okay.”

Again meeting my eyes, he gave me more and after I adjusted, even more. He remained still for a moment, then he began stroking me and taking my body places it hadn't been in a while. “Oooh... yes, Ken. Yes...”

He stroked me a little stronger and all I felt was pleasure. I was so happy that I wasn't in pain and because I wasn't, I tried readjusting so I could give it back to him. He licked his lips and said, “Oh, you wanna fuck me back?”

Sliding his arm around my waist, he pulled me down, his dick never leaving my walls' confines. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he groaned, then began dicking me down so good, I couldn't control the sounds that left me. My pants were loud, and my moans sounded like screams. “Ken-neth?”

“Mmm hmm...”

“Fuck me, baby.”

“You sure you want that?”

“Hell yeah.”

His stroke became stronger, and my head bumped the headboard. In one fluid movement, he moved us down further in the bed. He was so powerful he'd give me a concussion before it was all said and done. I knew it had been hard for him to restrain himself. “Shit, Audrey. This pussy so good, baby.”

He leaned over and bit into my shoulder as he squeezed my breast. I would never hold out again... not from him. I was sprung already, and I knew I would never get enough. Without warning, he lifted my leg and turned me to my side, never breaking stride. He took it slow, because he was even deeper than before. "Damn... I'm gon' want this shit as much as possible baby."

"Me tooooo," I moaned.

I just prayed I'd be able to give it to him often. Once he quickened his pace, I came all over him. It was more intense than before and apparently, he noticed because he yelled, "Shit!"

He hit the headboard as he thrust deep inside of me, tearing down my defenses with every jab and building my confidence at the same time. His hand eased to my neck as he rested some of his weight on me, giving me slower, powerful strokes. The kisses to my ear and neck caused me to turn to look at him. He kissed my lips slowly and sloppily and I loved every minute of it.

When he pulled away, he began fucking me with a renewed sense of purpose it seemed, and before he came, I had another orgasm, which was what brought him over the edge. He rested his forehead against mine as he panted, his hand still around my neck. "You good, baby?"

"Absolutely," I moaned. "Better than I've ever been."

# Chapter 4

*Kenneth*

If the Lord had told me that Audrey and I would share this moment, I would have sinned and questioned His words. That was just how sure I was of Audrey. She didn't deviate from whatever she said. Her word was bond. You could take that shit to the bank. When she undressed, I heard angels singing and shit. Her body was banging with clothes on, but man... shit. I was speechless and I knew I had to capture that work of art on camera.

Audrey had missed her calling. She could have been a model. Those curves, her golden-brown complexion, thick-ass lips, and long, beautiful hair had a nigga straight fiending. But that crack between her legs already had me strung out. No wonder she was holding that shit so tight. The last nigga probably killed himself when he couldn't get in that pussy no more.

As I stared at her sleeping peacefully on my chest, I couldn't help but gently stroke her cheek. Last night was un-fucking-believable. After our first session, we'd gone again, and I was on the verge of telling her I loved her.

Truth was... I did. I refused to tell her though because she wasn't willing to give us a chance. Although, I didn't have a clue of where we were going in our relationship now. I wasn't sure whether she was just using me to feel the love that I had for her because she thought she was dying or if she really wanted me to be a permanent fixture in her life. I would be here either way now, but I'd have to keep my feelings to myself until I knew for sure.

I didn't care about her illness. My love for her would conquer all. As hard as it may be, if I couldn't have sex with



her ever again, I would still be here. That was how much I loved her... how much I cared about her. So I supposed my decision had been made. I kissed her forehead and she stirred, then moaned in her sleep. That shit was so sexy. Her eyes opened slowly, and her long lashes brushed against my chest. She moaned again. She needed to stop that shit before we were at it again this morning.

After she stretched, she looked right at me. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Audrey.”

She looked around, then turned back to me as she held the sheet up over her breasts, like I hadn't seen them already. I smiled slightly. “I know women that if they had a body like yours, they'd walk around butt naked.”

Her face reddened some as she gently nudged me. I got up from the bed... still naked as well and got one of my t-shirts for her to put on. My morning wood was greeting her, and I noticed she'd glanced at it. I decided to fuck with her and make him jump just to see how she would react. Her eyes dipped right to him, and the sheet slipped from her hand. Doing my best to keep a straight face, I walked to her side of the bed and held out my hand for her. “I've seen you already, baby. Let me give you something for the road.”

Her eyes traveled up my body to my eyes, then she slowly got out of bed and stood in front of me. I threw the t-shirt to the bed, then stooped and picked her up. She wrapped her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck as I slowly lowered her on my dick. “Ooooh,” she moaned.

Walking to the nearest wall, I rested her against it, then adjusted my arms under her legs and began stroking her. I couldn't help but close my eyes for a moment. This pussy was gon' give my ass a heart attack. I could vividly see an overdose in my near future. When I felt her nails digging into the skin on my shoulders, I opened my eyes and lifted my head to stare at her. Her eyes were closed, and she was biting her bottom lip. “You okay, baby?”

“Yeeeeesss. Please don’t stop, Kenneth.”

Her body had begun trembling, but I could also tell that she wasn’t as into it as she was last night. “Hey.”

She opened her eyes and stared at me as I thrust deeply into her. “Come out of your head and enjoy the moment. Give it everything you got. Let this pussy soak me, baby.”

She nodded as her head fell back to the wall. My thrust went a little deeper and I applied more force as I felt her juices on my balls. “Fuuuck.”

She had me forgetting all about the shit I had to do today. All I wanted to do was live within her walls. “Kenneth... damn, baby. I’m cumming!”

Stepping away from the wall, I fucked her like I would never get the chance to again. Bending my knees, I dug into her shit, causing my dick to throb inside of her. He was ready to erupt, but there was one position I needed to see in the daytime. Going to the bed, I released her to it, then turned her over. “Get on all fours for me.”

She did as I asked, laying her head on the bed and tooting that ass up. Her ass was so fucking soft. As I approached, I couldn’t help but notice her gem glistening between her legs. Before I could push my dick inside of her, I licked her slit. After that taste, I had to allow my tongue to dive all the way in. One taste wouldn’t be enough. I began sucking her clit from the back as I palmed her ass cheeks. She was leaking all over my face, and I was still begging for more. It was like her shit had me hypnotized.

*I love this woman.* She had to be the one. I just wished she could see it too. I knew she had to feel it. There was no way she could be talking to me for an entire year and not feel how much I cared for her. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be here. Standing to my feet, I slid my dick along her entry, watching the white shit attach to the head and form streamers from her pussy. *Man... this shit right here...*

The minute I breached her opening again, she orgasmed. The way her pussy squeezed my dick should have been a fucking crime. It took everything in me to not shoot the club up. As her ass bounced on my shit, I grabbed it... caressed it while she screamed out her satisfaction. "Kenneth! Damn, baby! Shit!"

I loved her mouth while we were having sex. She was so expressive about what she was feeling... the total opposite of how she was normally. As her ass jiggled, I popped one cheek, then the other as she screamed expletives. Getting carried away, I gripped her hips and slammed into her repeatedly until I damn near blacked out. "Fuuuuuck!" I yelled as my nut finally came, giving me the relief I needed.

However, the moment after I nudded, I realized she was completely quiet. "Audrey, you okay, baby?"

She shook her head, and it caused me to go into a panic. I quickly pulled out of her, scared to death as she just laid there. Leaning over next to her, I could see the tears that had went across the bridge of her nose. Gently pushing her to her side, I could see just how red she was. "I'm so sorry, baby. I... I thought everything was cool. Shit!"

I fucked up and got carried away with just how good she felt. I'd fucked her something serious last night and we didn't have any problems. She still hadn't said a word and that had me nervous as hell. I kissed her head repeatedly. "What can I do, Audrey? Tell me what to do to alleviate your pain."

"Can you run me a hot bath?" she whispered.

"Absolutely."

"No fragrances or bubble bath. Just plain, hot water."

"Okay."

I practically ran to the bathroom and started the water. The minute it was hot, I stopped up the tub and added a little cold water to it. My hot water was next to boiling and she could literally burn herself. When I went back to the bedroom, she

was still in the same spot in the fetal position. Getting in bed next to her, I asked, “What’s hurting, baby?”

“My stomach. Feels like my organs are fighting each other.”

“After your bath, you want me to take you to the hospital?”

“Depends on how I feel afterward.”

I laid beside her and gently rubbed her side. I felt like shit, and I knew that I could never free fall in that pussy again. Seeing her in so much pain was breaking me, and I knew they hadn’t given her pain medication just with her diagnosis. *Or did they?* There was only one way to find out. “Did they give you pain meds?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to take them unless I truly have to. I’m somewhat of a lightweight when it comes to pain medication. It doesn’t necessarily take all the pain away, but it makes me drowsy.”

“Okay. Is there anything else I can do? I have some tea bags. You want me to make you a cup?”

“Please.”

“Okay. Let me prep it.”

I pulled the blanket over her and kissed her forehead. Before I could pull away, she put her hand to my cheek and stared into my eyes. “This isn’t your fault. It’s nobody’s fault. Okay?”

I gave her a tight smile, then kissed her lips. “Okay.”

Going to the bathroom to check her water, I saw that it could use quite a bit more water before I turned it off, so I headed to the kitchen. As I placed a coffee cup on the Keurig for hot water, I thought about what I could have done differently. I should have made love to her slowly and passionately instead of going apeshit in the pussy. Her shit took me to another stratosphere, and I lost control.

Running my hand over my face, I exhaled hard. She was the first woman I had been with in almost a year and my dick was excited as hell. I was dedicated to her although she hadn't voiced that she was dedicated to me. The moment I entered her I knew that she hadn't been with anyone else. So that was a good thing. Taking the cup from the Keurig, I put a tea bag in it and covered it with a saucer, then went back to the room to check on her.

She wasn't in the bed, so I made my way to the bathroom to see her easing down in the water. "I was coming back to help you, baby."

I quickly made my way to her and helped her ease down in the water. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me, Audrey. I just want to be here for you, baby. If you want, I can go to Beaumont with you to be your support when you tell your family."

When she looked up at me, I could see the longing in her eyes, like she wanted me to go with her, but then she said, "No. Thank you, but I can handle it."

I didn't want to push, but I knew if I allowed her to, she would push me right out of her life. "I'm going with you. Your eyes gave me all the confirmation I needed."

I turned to the linen closet and got her some towels, then handed her a washcloth and a bar of Dove soap. She didn't respond to what I said. Instead, she closed her eyes and laid back in the air tub. I went to the room and got her band for her hair, then came back to the bathroom and pulled her hair up. She stared into my eyes but remained quiet. I couldn't help but kiss her thick, pink lips. Her slanted, brown eyes still remained on me until I left to get her tea.

Everything in her gaze said she loved me too, but for some reason, I knew it would be a while before she said so... if at all. That didn't matter right now though. I canceled my day as I prepared her tea, then prepared my mind to deal with her stubbornness and comfort her at the same time.

# Chapter 5

*Audrey*

As I drove to Beaumont, I couldn't help but cry my eyes out. My diagnosis had invaded my mind like a typhoon. Trying to muster up the strength I had the first go round was a struggle. It seemed I'd just gotten over the fact that I had cancer and that I wouldn't be able to have children again, then this hit me like a two-ton weight. Kenneth was the distraction I needed... or so I thought. He was so much more than a distraction. Begging him to stay in Houston had fallen on deaf ears, because he was following behind me.

I didn't want him to witness this discussion. My parents were going to be so angry that I'd kept them out of the loop all this time. However, the one person that could pull every emotion known to man out of me was my daughter. Keeli would be there and seeing her heart crushed was the last thing *I* wanted to witness. She was only seven years old, and I knew she wouldn't fully understand what was going on with me.

Kenneth refused to listen to me because he said my eyes were saying something different. I knew that he was right about what he saw. My heart wanted him to be there, but my mind was at war with it. Maybe my parents wouldn't be as vocal with Kenneth there. "This is not a death sentence, Audrey."

I repeated that over and over. I also knew that I needed to tell Takelia's father. Vincent had always been there for me, and I knew now would be no different. He still wanted me back, but I knew this revelation of my health would give him pause. Besides my parents, I knew Vincent best. He wasn't the greatest under pressure. When I got pregnant with Keeli, he

was having severe anxiety, trying to figure out how he would provide for us.

He was working a dead-end job that didn't pay as well as he liked. At the time he was only making eleven dollars an hour. We had started arguing quite a bit, and I knew the environment wasn't healthy, especially not to raise a child in. I broke up with him, but that didn't stop him from being there for me or Keeli. I was grateful for that. My cousin, Chantrice, didn't suffer the same fate. Her child's father had disappeared and had just shown back up a year ago.

Vincent had been amazing. He took Keeli for half the summer and got her whenever he could... which was usually more than the every-two-week period the courts had setup. We'd argued about going through the courts because he didn't see the need to. But I needed security and something to fall back on if he didn't do what he said he would. He saw it my way after a while. If he was going to do what he said he would, then the court orders shouldn't have bothered him. That was precautionary measures I took for my daughter.

After that, we had a friendly relationship with the occasional romp in the sheets. He saw it as a way in, but after a few months of that, he realized that I was firm in my decision not to embark on a relationship with him again. As long as he wasn't in a relationship, he agreed to 'tighten me up' whenever I needed it. Until almost two years ago, that worked for us. When I stopped asking for it, he eventually asked me what was up. He knew I was in pain that last time and had asked what was going on. I'd made up an excuse and said that I needed to stop screwing him because I was seeing someone. He'd reluctantly accepted that excuse, although, I didn't think he believed me.

When Kenneth came along and Keeli had mentioned him in conversation with Vincent, he congratulated me on my new love interest. I didn't tell him any different. Ken and I weren't a couple, but I supposed we were now. He'd pretty much told me that I was his and he wasn't accepting no for an answer. I'd remained quiet after that, knowing that it was pointless to

argue with him. I was starting to see that he could be just as stubborn as I was.

When I turned into my parents' driveway, my nerves were getting the best of me, and I could feel my stomach pain coming back. The hot water and hot tea had helped tremendously, but I knew that I would have to take a pill tonight in order to sleep. I'd overdone it. But Kenneth's dick... *Jesus*. I couldn't get enough, and I knew he felt the same way I did. His dick was so damn powerful, thick, long, and beautiful. I didn't know beautiful dicks existed until I saw his. For the moment, I'd forgotten all about the cancer that had invaded my body and that I would have to go through chemo.

His loving was like a magic eraser, taking all my worries, pain, and heartache and throwing them into a sea of forgetfulness. However, when morning came, the pain was back, but it was mild. But I couldn't tell Ken no. His dick was calling for me and even though I wasn't feeling the best, I had to succumb to its power. I wasn't expecting the session I got this morning though. It felt so good. I came three times although I was in pain. That last orgasm though...

Immediately after it started, the pain I felt was crippling. I couldn't move a muscle. It felt like if I did, everything would fall out of me, organs, blood, and all. Every thrust Kenneth made after that felt like a knife stabbing me. Although there were only about three after that moment, I thought I was dying in the name of letting him get his nut. He wouldn't have been angry had I stopped him, but I wanted him to be satisfied. Plus, I knew he was right there... on the verge of euphoria.

As I reached for the door handle to get out of the car, Kenneth was there opening the door for me. Checking the time, I knew that Keeli was here from school. I'd laid in Kenneth's bed longer than I had realized after my bath. He'd even given me a heating pad, and I'd taken a short nap. Bringing my mind back to Keeli, the nerves kicked back up. It was the weekend, and she would be going to meet Vincent. So, I debated on whether I would say anything in front of her.



Taking a deep breath, I propelled myself forward and got out of the car as Kenneth assisted me. I was moving slowly, because I didn't want to aggravate the pain any more than I already was by walking. When we got to the porch, I knocked on the door, then walked in with Kenneth right behind me, holding me at my waist. When Keeli saw me, she ran to me and collapse against me, nearly sending me crashing to the floor. If it weren't for Kenneth supporting me, I would have. "Oh no, Mommy! Are you okay? I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

I shook my head, unable to verbalize what I wanted to say at the moment. She was always excited to see me, and she did that every time I came to pick her up from my parents' house. Kenneth helped me to the couch as my mom came out of the kitchen. She had a smile on her face until she saw me. Her eyes widened and she rushed to me. "Hi, Kenneth."

"Hi, Mrs. Leonard."

"Audrey, what's going on?"

As I closed my eyes, trying to get my pain under control, Kenneth sat next to me. He was gently rubbing my back in a soothing motion until I rested against the couch cushions. "I ran into her and hurt her."

I quickly shook my head no. I didn't want her blaming herself for my pain. "Where's Dad?"

"He's in the backyard. Do I need to get him?"

"Yes."

I took another deep breath, then opened my eyes and stared at my baby girl. "Come here, sweetheart."

She slowly made her way to me, sadness taking over her demeanor. Her shoulders were slumped, and her lips were turned up like she was about to cry. "Sit on my lap. Easy though."

She eased her way onto my lap and the pain seemed to almost double as she leaned against me. "You didn't hurt me, baby. I was already in pain when I got here."

I kissed her head as my parents came running inside. “Audrey, baby. What’s going on?” my dad questioned as soon as he entered the room.

The concern on his face for their only daughter was evident. “Y’all sit.”

When they did as I requested, Keeli went to my mother’s lap. Kenneth grabbed my hand and held it between his, caressing it softly. “I’ve kept my medical condition from y’all and for that I’m so sorry. Last year, I was diagnosed with cervical cancer.”

It sounded like someone had knocked the wind out of my mother with the way she gasped. “Oh my God, Audrey. Why didn’t you say something?”

“We’d just lost Uncle Russell, and I didn’t want y’all to worry about me. They caught it early and when I told y’all I was going on vacation, I had a hysterectomy. They got all the cancer without me having to go through chemo... or so they said.”

My mama was crying, and my dad was holding her as Kenneth wrapped his arm around me and kissed my cheek. My baby was staring at everyone with a frown on her face, seemingly confused as to what was going on. “Yesterday, I had a doctor’s appointment in Houston. I have colon cancer, and it’s at stage 3A. I have to have surgery in three weeks. They will remove part or all of my colon, depending on their findings once they’re inside. He said the surgery is routine for colon cancer patients, and I should be back on my feet in a day or two. If they have to remove the entire colon, it could be a little longer. Then I’ll have to go through chemo.”

My mama cried audibly, and it made my baby start crying. “Come here, sweetheart.”

She walked over to me slowly and asked, “Are you sick, Mommy?”

“Yes. But with the help of God and the doctors, I will get better. It’s just a lot to process. My illness is very serious and

most times, I won't feel well. So, please pray for me. Okay?"

"Okay," she said sadly. "Will you be here, Mr. Kenneth?"

"As much as I can be, Kee."

She went to him, and he picked her up. When she hugged him around his neck and began crying, that was the moment I broke. Seeing my baby so hurt broke the dam I'd built last night. Ken pulled me close as well until I could get my emotions settled. When I sat up, my daddy came sat on the other side of me. "We gon' help you get through this." He kissed my cheek, then shook Ken's hand. "Thank you for helping her through this."

"I'll be here for her always. She just told me last night. Her first bout was before me, so I just learned of that last night too."

"Absolutely no one knew, Audrey?"

I shook my head, then thought about Orion. I'd told him last year. "When Aunt Stephanie wanted us to go with her to meet Orion, I didn't go because I didn't want to be emotional around him. His posts and Instagram lives got me through a lot of hard days. I told him about that at Kirsten's birthday party last year and swore him to secrecy. But while I was going through it, no one knew. I'm sorry, Daddy."

"Okay, baby. But you've told us now and I'm glad you didn't choose to go through this alone again. Does Vincent know? He may have to step up a little more to help with Keeli."

"Not yet. I'm going to tell him when he comes to get her."

I looked at my watch and saw that it was getting close to that time. "We need to get home so I can get her things together for when he gets there to get her."

"We're coming with you," my mama said.

I took a deep breath. I was grateful for their concern and help, but I knew I would be suffocated now. Ken stood to his feet with Keeli still in his arms, then helped me up as well. I

clung to him, but I wasn't feeling nearly as bad as I was when we got here. I just wanted to be close to him... the total opposite of how I used to be with him. It was like I craved his touch now. Sex with him had me wide open, and I was already hating that he would have to go back to Houston.

Before we could make it outside, my mama said, "I'll get Keeli's backpack. See you in a few minutes, baby."

I inhaled deeply then exhaled. Virginia Leonard was the most overdramatic person I knew. On top of that, I knew my business would be all over the family before I could get home. Not to mention, she'd probably over exaggerate it. My condition was bad enough, but she'd find a way to make it sound worse. "Baby, you wanna leave your car here? We can come back and get it when you're feeling better."

"I'll just ask my mama to drive it."

"Well, let's get your purse and keys and I'll get you settled in my car."

I nodded, feeling overwhelmed with everything and just ready for this to be over before it started.

# Chapter 6

*Kenneth*

“Damn, Audrey. I’m so sorry. Shit.”

I watched Audrey’s baby daddy sympathize with her about her diagnosis. He seemed pretty cool, and their relationship seemed... different. Like they were best friends or something. I supposed that was a good thing. It was just rare that I saw anything like that. As they talked, my phone started ringing, so I stood to leave the room to answer it. Audrey immediately grabbed my hand. I showed her my phone and she smiled softly.

As soon as I left the room, I answered. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.”

“What?”

“About Audrey. She showed up at my place last night. Her cancer has resurfaced in her colon.”

“Damn. I’m sorry to hear that. How’s she holding up?”

“Orion don’t act like you didn’t hear what I said to you. Why didn’t you tell me? I would’ve understood that I couldn’t say anything to her about it.”

“I didn’t want to have to put you in a situation like that. What if it would have somehow slipped out when she wasn’t feeling well, and she was pushing you away? I promised her that I wouldn’t say a word. I would have felt like shit if something like that would have happened.”

“Whatever. She told me last week about her past and I’d been meaning to talk to you about it, but we’ve both been so busy, it kept slipping my mind. When she showed up

yesterday evening, I was in shock. She was so broken, man. I've never seen her that way."

"I hate that. I wonder if Chantrice knows yet. She and Audrey are close, and she's gonna be hurt that Audrey never told her."

"She's so independent and hates the sympathy and attention. But I think she's finally given in to me. I told her she's mine and she didn't fight me on it."

"Aww shit. Y'all finally had sex, didn't y'all?"

"Nigga, where that came from? That's not what I said."

"Because you're my brother and I know yo' ass. She let'chu *all* the way in."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah. We did. She wanted to before she couldn't. She's gonna have to have surgery in three weeks and then she'll have to go through chemo. Sex with her was the best shit I ever experienced in my life... in all of my forty years. I hope she prepared for forever, because she's gonna beat this. I'ma be right there when she does. So... I need you to check on things for me tomorrow. I have my laptop, and I've already canceled my day at the tattoo shop."

"Don't worry, bruh. I got'chu. I'm on my way home and I'm almost sure Chantrice is going to want to go to Beaumont. I'm gonna make some calls and get Joe to oversee the shop. Don't worry about anything, man."

"I appreciate you. I'll probably see you tomorrow then."

"Yep."

"A'ight."

I ended the call and headed back inside to see Vincent and Keeli about to leave. He shook my hand, then looked back at Audrey with a solemn expression on his face. It seemed the news had gut checked everyone. After hugging Keeli and promising to see her soon, I glanced back up at Vincent to find his eyes still on Audrey. She wasn't paying him the least bit attention though. Her eyes were on Takelia. Once they left, I

made my way to the couch. When I sat next to her, she leaned against me. “What time are you heading back?”

“I’m staying, if that’s cool with you.”

She lifted her head and stared at me for a moment. “Kenneth... I don’t want you canceling appointments and rearranging your schedule. I’m going to be battling this for a while.”

“Tell me you don’t need me and I’ll go back to Houston. You are my main priority, Audrey.”

She looked away, then laid on my shoulder. I kissed her head and wrapped my arm around her. “I told you that you were mine. I take care of everything that belongs to me. I plan to be here until Sunday evening, but I will be checking on you every hour once I leave. You mean everything to me, and I promise to show you that... even if you say you don’t want me neglecting other things. I’m a businessman, but it doesn’t require me to be in Houston every minute of the day. So, don’t question my presence. I’ve got everything worked out.”

I kissed her head as Mr. Leonard sat across from us. In my peripheral, I could see him staring at us. “Kenneth, can I speak to you for a moment?”

“Yes, sir.” Turning my attention to Audrey, I said, “Give me a minute, baby, and I’ll be back. If you need anything, your mom is in the kitchen.”

“Okay,” she said softly as she lifted her body from mine.

I stood and followed Mr. Leonard outside. Once out there, he said, “I appreciate you for being there for my daughter. Just promise me that you will keep us in the loop because she won’t. She kept an entire ordeal away from us, and I hate that. It makes me feel like my only daughter doesn’t trust us to have her best interest at heart. She’s so private and reserved. If you can, please just be with her every step of the way. I know you have businesses to see after, but if you need me to, I’ll see after whatever you need me to. Watching her with you... it’s...

I just haven't seen her that way with anybody in a long time. Not since Vincent."

I nodded, knowing that if Audrey asked me not to say anything, I would honor her wishes first. However, I understood her father's concern, and I would do my best to convince her otherwise if she was choosing to leave them in the dark about something. "Yes, sir. You have my word."

He shook my hand. "For her to allow you to be so close to her, she loves you. My daughter doesn't trust many people, but she trusts you. So again, thank you, and if you need my help with anything, I'm here."

"I appreciate that more than you know."

After that, we headed back inside. Audrey was drinking water. When I sat next to her, she winced. "You okay?"

"I just took a pain pill."

"What do they have you on?"

"Dilaudid."

"That's pretty strong." I stood from my seat, prepared to help her to the bed. "You wanna go get in the bed? Have you eaten?"

As soon as I asked the question, her mom came from the kitchen with a sandwich. I smiled, then sat back down. "Kenneth, you want a sandwich, or are you gonna wait for the pork chops?"

Those pork chops were smelling good as hell too. "I'll wait. Thanks."

Audrey glanced at me. "You can't resist, huh?"

"No. They smell good. But I'm gonna go lay with you until you fall asleep."

"You don't have to do that, Ken."

"Audrey..."

"I know, I know. I'm glad you're here."



“That’s better. Get used to it because I’m going to be here more often than not.”

She smiled softly, and I could see that her pain pill was already starting to affect her. Her eyes were starting to get low, and her body wasn’t as tense. As she ate her sandwich, I sent out a few text messages. “Chan will be here tomorrow, Audrey,” her mother said from the kitchen.

“Okay,” she said and slightly rolled her eyes.

I wondered what that was about. There was more to her relationship with her mother than she was saying, but I was sure that the longer I was around, the more I would find out. Once she was done eating, she was nearly falling over. I couldn’t help but smile at how high she looked. Moving the plate to the coffee table, I lifted her from the couch and brought her to her room. I’d only been in there once and that was to help her bring bags in there after she’d been shopping.

After laying her in the bed, I closed the door, then helped her out of her clothes. “Is there anything in particular you want to put on to sleep in?”

“Just a t-shirt. They’re in the second drawer of my chest.”

“Okay.”

Once I’d gotten the shirt and turned back to her, she was knocked the hell out. I chuckled. She’d said she couldn’t function after taking pain medication. She wasn’t lying. I eased the shirt over her head, then unfastened her bra. I was more than sure she didn’t want to sleep with it on. I didn’t know many women who did. After pulling it off, I slid her arms in the sleeves. Lifting her legs, I slid the covers from beneath her and waited for her to get situated.

In the meantime, I pulled my shirt over my head and got in bed with her. I kept my basketball shorts on since her parents were still here. If I fell asleep, her mom would probably come in the room to let us know when they were leaving. Hopefully, I didn’t fall asleep, because my mind and tastebuds were

prepared to eat that smothered pork chop, with the rice and beans she'd cooked.

After getting close to Audrey, I held her in my arms, wishing I could take her pain away. One person shouldn't have to experience so much, but I was used to being the pillar. My brother had gone through a lot in his journey to his heart transplant as well. Although he didn't really talk about it, there were days where he felt like giving up. It was my job to encourage him, pray for him, and take care of him. I took that job seriously, just as I would now. Audrey would get that same treatment plus some.

# Chapter 7

*Audrey*

“When is the surgery?”

“It’s Wednesday, but I’m going to Houston Tuesday. Kenneth is gonna come pick me up.”

“Okay. I’m praying that all goes well. Don’t worry about Takelia. I’ll pick her up from school Tuesday, and we’ll see you Sunday evening.”

Vincent leaned over and kissed my cheek. It had been a little over two weeks since I’d told everyone of my diagnosis. It was his time with Keeli again, and he had brought her home. Kenneth had already left to get ready for his day tomorrow. It had been a long day because I had been in and out the whole time. Whenever I had to take something for pain, I would sleep for hours. The pain had been off the charts today. I just hoped that the surgery would eliminate some of that.

When Vincent grabbed my hand, I stared up at him, wondering what he would say next. I could see the emotion in his eyes. Despite our past, we were really close and good friends. We used to talk about everything. However, when I met Kenneth, our talks slowed down and were almost nonexistent. As he rubbed my hand between his, he said, “Let’s pray.”

I nodded. He was always spiritual, and it was one his best qualities. I bowed my head as he began. “Father, we come to You first to say thank you. Thank you for being God and knowing just what’s best for us. Thank you for giving us life and purpose. We know that You give the toughest battles to Your toughest soldiers, so we won’t question why You allowed this to happen to Audrey. She’s strong. But Father, even the

strongest soldiers get weak. So I'm asking that You would build her up where she feels torn down... strengthen her where she's weak... comfort her where she's in turmoil. We ask that You guide the doctors on Wednesday and that You put Audrey's mind at peace with it all. In Your son's name, amen."

I wiped the tears streaming down my cheeks with the back of my hand as Vincent continued to hold my other hand. When my eyes met his again, I said, "Thank you. I really appreciate your prayers."

He kissed the back of my hand and held it close to his heart. I knew he was having a hard time with this. Just by the way he was staring at me, I could tell he was worried. Just in the past couple of weeks, I'd lost ten pounds. My appetite was down to practically nothing. "If you need anything, let me know."

"Thank you. Kenneth has been great about seeing about me and I have my family. Chan has been here, seeing about me and you know my parents are never far."

He nodded, then let my hand go. "I love you, Audrey. I always will. Get some rest."

I stood from my seat so I could walk him out. He glanced at my shirt as it fell off my shoulder. His face turned completely red as he turned away and walked out of the door. Once I closed it, I made my way back to the couch. It was where I felt the most comfortable for some reason. I was here alone after Kenneth left. My parents had left about an hour before him. It was in my quiet times alone that I really thought about my condition.

Kenneth had been wonderful. He sent things to me all the time through Door Dash and Instacart when he couldn't be here. I'd also gotten bouquets of flowers on those days. I didn't know how he found the time, but he was here four days a week. He'd spend Wednesday through Friday morning here with me and came back on Saturday evening and stayed until Monday morning. He left today though since he was coming back Tuesday morning to get me.

Although I wanted his attention and support, I still felt bad about him taking so much time away from his businesses. He'd resorted to zoom meetings with a couple of his investors and potential clients, and he didn't schedule tattoo appointments on the days he knew he would be with me. I honestly thought that I should have stayed single and depended solely on my family. This situation would be a lot for any significant other, but especially for someone who just decided to embark on a relationship.

As I rubbed my hand down my face, Keeli came back to the front room. "Did Mr. Ken leave already?"

"Yes. He left about an hour before you got here. He ought to be home in a little bit. Why?"

"He left me a present on my bed," she said as she held up a chain with a cross on it. "I asked him for it so I could kiss the cross after I prayed for you, and he promised me he would get it. I wanted to tell him thank you."

"That was sweet of him. Here," I said, extending my phone. "He's saved under Ken Bae."

She smiled at me, then called him on speaker phone. "Hey, baby. You good? I'm just walking in the door."

"Hey! It's Kee! I wanted to say thank you for the chain. It's beautiful."

"Hey, princess! You're welcome. I'm glad you like it."

"Will I get to see you Tuesday morning before I go to school?"

"That's the plan. I'm supposed to be there by seven, so I won't miss you."

"Okay."

"A'ight. Let your gorgeous mother know that I'll call her back as soon as I take a shower."

"Okay. Bye."

She handed me the phone and kissed my cheek, then the cross on her necklace as I smiled at her. Being away from her for so long was going to be the hardest. It was hard when I'd had my hysterectomy... not seeing her smiling face for over a week. This time I would only be gone until Saturday hopefully, but I wouldn't see her until Sunday. That would be tough, but we'd be able to facetime until we could see one another in person. As I lay on the couch, I stared at the ceiling, praying that all would be okay. My nerves were getting the best of me. While I believed everything Vincent prayed about, the unknown frightened me.

I wanted God's will to be done, but what if His will was to take me to be with Him?

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By the time I'd dried up my tears, we were in Houston. Chan and Orion were at Kenneth's place awaiting our arrival. Leaving my baby girl and seeing her tears only made this trip that much harder. The worry etched across Vincent's face didn't help. I didn't know how he would be able to comfort her if he needed comforting himself. My parents would be coming to Houston tomorrow morning to be there for the surgery and if all went well, they would go home once I was situated in a room.

Ken squeezed my hand, then released it as he turned in the driveway of his home off of Hwy 6. His house was about thirty minutes from Methodist Hospital, so we had to be sure to leave early. I had to be there by six in the morning. That was a good thing because we'd be ahead of the morning traffic. Thankfully, my pain was at a minimum, so I was able to walk unassisted. However, Ken was always right there just in case the pain hit me out of nowhere. That was what he'd said as an excuse to be near me while I walked. I'd only smiled at him and accepted his help.

As he grabbed my bag from the back, I opened the door and stood. I knew better than to take off without him though. After I closed the door, I leaned against the car and waited

until he came to me. Sliding his arm around my waist, he kissed my head and assisted me to the front door.

Before we could get there, Orion was standing in the doorway, holding the door open. I kissed his cheek, then hugged Chan and Kirsten. Ken led me to his bedroom and my mind was filled with images of how he'd made love to me the last time I was here. Turning to him, I asked, "One last time before surgery?"

His eyebrows lifted as he put my bag down. "Last time for what?"

I only stared at him as realization of what I was talking about shown on his face. "You think you can handle that?"

I walked closer to him and rubbed my hands up his chest. "I need to feel you. Please... the gentler version of you."

I smiled up at him, and he leaned over and kissed the tip of my nose. "I'll give you whatever you want, Audrey. You know that."

He leaned over again and kissed my lips, taking me part of the way to ecstasy. I didn't know what tomorrow held for me and I wanted to feel Kenneth at least once more, even if it was painful. It was the connection I craved. If God decided to take me, I would leave with our connection fresh on my mind. Plus... it had become one of my favorite pleasures in life. We hadn't had sex since the first time because I'd been in pain. But pain or not, I needed to feel his love. I knew he loved me, because I loved him too. He had to love me with all that he was doing for me.

I couldn't help but moan into his mouth. He was being so gentle and that was just what I needed. His hands slid down my body slowly, setting my soul on fire. When he got to my ass, he caressed it and loved on it, then dipped to my neck and placed sweet, tender kisses there. Although Orion and Chan were here, Kenneth was my only concern at the moment. Life was short and I needed what I needed when I needed it.

Slowly pulling away from me, he closed the door and locked it, then pulled his shirt off. As I stared at his physique, I couldn't help but appreciate his wide, toned frame. I loved a big man, and Kenneth was thick as hell. He wasn't sloppy... he just had that extra weight that gave a lil cushion for the pushing. I wasn't a skinny woman... well, it seemed I was becoming one. But I was thick as well... but in all the right places. I needed a man that was bigger than me, that could hold me and make me feel safe and protected. Kenneth was that man.

I pulled my shirt off then my bra as he made his way back to me. When he got to me, he grabbed my hands and stared into my eyes. "Let me make this moment everything you've ever desired. I want to be the man you've always wanted, Audrey. I love you."

He leaned his forehead against mine as the tears streamed down my cheeks. He'd admitted what I knew all along. I hated that it took this diagnosis to really see how much I loved him and how much he meant to me. "I love you too, Kenneth... so much. I hate that I've been stubborn all this time."

"Shh... let's just focus on our admissions. I've been in love with you for a while, but to know you feel the same way brings me to the next level."

He brought his hands to my neck and slowly scanned my body like he was memorizing every detail about it. "You're so beautiful, Audrey. Let me show you how I take care of beautiful things."

He slid his hands inside of my sweats and underwear, easing them down my legs. My body shivered in response, especially when he kissed and licked his way up my leg. Once he lifted my leg, I assisted him by stepping out of my clothing that was pooled at my feet. His gaze had penetrated my heart, and I craved him even more in this moment. *Kenneth deserves so much more than what you can give. Set him free.* I didn't know where the thoughts came from, but it made sense. How would I be responding to him if I weren't sick?



Before my diagnosis, I'd shut him out, knowing how I felt for him. *But you did that to protect him from this.* "Audrey..."

Looking up at him, the tears fell from my eyes. He placed his palms on both sides of my head and said, "Stop thinking so much. I'm about to give you all of me... something no one has ever gotten. I'm forty years old and you're the only woman that I've even wanted to give all of me to. Your illness doesn't matter to me, especially since you gon' beat this shit. This is about giving you something we know you won't be able to get for a while. But you will eventually experience it again. This dick ain't going nowhere and neither are you. So relax for me. Let me gently take this body to places unheard of. Let me love this pain away, baby."

As he continued making love to me with his words, he'd eased me back to the bed. I didn't even realize I was backpedaling until the backs of my legs touched the mattress. I sat in the bed and watched him continue disrobing. My God, he was so damn sexy... like one of the fucking Greek gods. His dick sprang out of his boxers, ready for action. As he approached me, I reached out to grab it. He was so much taller than me. His dick was nearly at my lips.

Lowering my head, I licked the tip as he seemed to hold his breath. After staring up at him, I began a slow rhythm on the head of his dick. He moaned softly as he stroked my hair. The more I sucked, the more my mouth watered. Allowing the saliva to leave my mouth, I watched it roll down his shaft to his balls. Like Jhené Aiko said, his dick made me proud. The shit was just majestic, and I wanted to bow to its excellence every time I saw it.

Taking my time, I slowly slid my mouth over as much of him as possible, feeling the head of his dick gagging me. He moaned again, and I felt myself gush. "Audrey... fuck. You gon' make me cum down yo' throat. That's what you want? These vitamins might be good for you, baby."

I hummed on him, wanting every drop he had to offer. This position was one of power and I loved every minute of it. It

was power and one of service. Him relinquishing his power for me to serve him in one of the only ways that I could made me feel confident and strong. I began bobbing on him faster, taking more of him than before. My gag reflexes were working overtime, because I swallowed him in every stroke, letting him grace the walls of my throat. “Audrey! Fuck!” he whispered loudly.

When I felt the warmth of his seed hit my throat, I slowed down, being sure to milk him of every drop. He shivered in response to my suction, then eased out of my mouth. “Damn,” he whispered as he stared into my eyes. “Scoot back to the middle of the bed, baby. I don’t wanna hurt you by moving you myself.”

I did as he asked, then he made his way between my legs. “Now let me serve you, queen, ’cause I’m in desperate need of this water. I’m dehydrated as hell and this pussy is hypnotizing.”

He slowly licked me, being sure his tongue wasn’t stiff. Every movement he made was soft... gentle... tender. He handled me as if I would break, like I was an expensive Egyptian artifact. When he wrapped his arms around my thighs, it felt like he was wrapping me in silk. Everything he did made my body feel like it was being cared for in the most amazing way. It comforted me and eased the tension that remained.

While he was being gentle, I could feel my orgasm rising and I was scared that once I orgasmed, I would be in pain, so I stopped him. “Kenneth... I’m about to cum. Please stop.”

He lifted his eyes to mine, holding his position. He frowned slightly, then asked, “Why? Are you hurting?”

I shook my head. Just as he was about to continue, I said, “I’m scared that once I orgasm, I will be. I want to feel you inside of me before the pain comes. Your dick is going to get me there just as quickly, but at least I’ll be able to feel you before that moment comes.”

Sensitivity filled his gaze as he stared at me. “Okay.”

He slowly kissed his way up my body, and I was grateful for that, because it gave the sensations I was feeling in my clit to calm down some. His tongue stroked my skin like a paint brush, laying on a coat of love and adoration that I’d never known. Decorating this canvas to his liking, he went to his knees and stared at my body, like he was trying to decide which part of it he would show attention to next. When he descended on my nipples, I could have levitated. “Keeeeeennn... oh God.”

He moaned softly, producing vibrations throughout my breast, and I couldn’t help but scratch his bald head with my nails. When I felt his dick moving between my legs, my anticipation seemed to triple. I got so wet I could barely contain myself. Lifting his head, Ken stared into my eyes, then slowly pushed his dick inside of me. As my eyelids fluttered, he whispered, “Don’t close your eyes yet, baby. Let me see what I do to you. I can feel it, but I want to see the passion in your eyes.”

As I stared into his eyes, he began stroking me slowly. My breathing had gone shallow, and my pussy was on pour as he gave it the TLC it needed. The tears fell from my eyes, and he wiped every one of them, then lowered his head to kiss where they fell. I took that opportunity to close my eyes and deal with the slight pain that I felt. If he knew I was in pain, he would want to stop. But I needed him to make love to me one last time.

If I lived through this, I knew I had a long road ahead. This could very well be the last time we ever made love and the thought of that alone, had me crying uncontrollable tears. When he lifted his head, he stared into my eyes. “You okay, baby?”

I nodded, then bit my bottom lip as he caressed my cheek with his thumb. My orgasm was making its presence known as my legs trembled and goosebumps appeared on my skin. Sliding my arms around his neck, I pulled him to me tightly as

he kissed my neck. Lowering one of my hands to his ass, I scratched him, then brought my arm to his back and curled one leg around his waist. "I love you, Kenneth," I cried as my orgasm tore through me, aggravating my entire existence.

The buildup felt amazing, but the contracting of my muscles produced a pain that I could barely tolerate. I bit into his shoulder to keep from screaming. Instead of dropping my leg, I wrapped it tighter around him and brought my other leg up to do the same. Although I was weak, I mustered every bit of strength I had left to give him all the love I had inside of me. Kenneth deserved so much more, and I knew I would have to let him go. Making him leave would be a task within itself.

He lifted his head and stared at me as he stroked through my pain. Kenneth understood me and knew how important this moment was to me. I could tell that he knew I was in pain, but he didn't stop. "Tell me when it's unbearable."

"I want you to cum, Kenneth. Please be pleased with me. Please..."

He bit his bottom lip and closed his eyes as a tear fell from one. "I'm completely pleased with you, baby. I just won't be able to nut knowing this is killing you. Please let me stop. I don't want to make your pain worse, Audrey."

I could feel his dick losing steam as he spoke. He couldn't stay hard. "Am I still desirable to you?" I asked, hearing the tremble in my voice.

He opened his eyes. "You are as desirable to me as you were the day we met, and I was thinking about bending you over one of Chan's sofas."

For that moment, I was able to smile as the tears continued to fall. Bringing my hand to his cheek, I said, "It's okay. You can stop. Just please... hold me."

He slid from me and stood to get one of my pain pills from my bag. That had become a common occurrence and I couldn't wait for it to all be over... in whatever way God

chose to heal me. Whether on this earthly side or in heaven...  
I'd be healed.

# Chapter 8

*Kenneth*

My emotions were getting harder and harder to bottle up. But I didn't want to show fear in front of Audrey. The woman I loved looked so fragile in this moment, and there was nothing I could do to remedy it. After our session last night and I'd given her a pain pill, I laid with her until she fell asleep, then went to the bathroom and cried my eyes out. Her mindset was killing me. Although I knew she was being strong and accepting whatever her fate would be, I wanted her to be strong in the belief that God would spare her and heal her.

I wanted to see many more days with her and Kee. At this moment, having my own children was trivial at best. Seeing her slowly deteriorate before my eyes was a hard pill to swallow. When I'd left the bathroom, I'd walked out to find Orion, Chan, and Kirsten outside. Orion was ready to light into me for what they probably heard in the beginning, but when he saw my face, he became serious. Chan ran inside to Audrey and had laid in the bed with her. Thankfully, I'd dressed her before I left the room.

Later when she'd awakened, she'd spoken to Keeli and her parents through Facetime. Vincent had even joined the conversation with Kee and prayed for her. He'd even asked the Lord to give me strength. He was a solid brother, and I appreciated his words of encouragement for her and me. While I knew he still loved her, he respected our relationship and wished us the best. And for that, he had my respect as well. Before the time came where Audrey couldn't eat, I fed her some soup, then gave her another pain pill so she could sleep as soundly as possible.

As we sat waiting for them to come get her to get her prepped for surgery, I held her trembling hand. Bringing it to my mouth, I kissed it then her cheek. She slowly turned to me, and I could see the fear in her eyes. “Listen. You’re going to be fine, baby. This surgery is going to go well, and you will start your journey to healing. When this is all done, you’ll be stronger than ever and you, Kee, and I will be a family. I love you so much, but I need you to remain positive and confident in coming out of this. Okay?”

She nodded, but I could see the hesitancy, so I continued. “I’ve been trying to let you be, Audrey, because I know you are a strong woman and that you know the importance of maintaining your peace and positivity at times like this, but when I look into your eyes, I’m not seeing that, baby. I’m seeing defeat. Remember what Vincent prayed for. You will not be defeated. You will live through this, and your testimony will help others. You believe that?”

She put her trembling hands to my face and swallowed hard. “I believe that, Kenneth. My baby needs me, and I want to believe that you need me too. This is step one to making me better.”

It was like a switch had turned on, and in her eyes, I saw hope. After kissing her lips, I saw her parents coming to join us. They quickly made their way to Audrey when they noticed us. Her mother sat next to her and hugged and kissed her. I scooted over so her dad could sit next to her as well. He shook my hand and said, “I just want to hug and kiss her. You can take your spot back.”

I gave him a tight smile, then watched him hug and kiss her, then go and sit next to his wife. When I reclaimed my seat, Audrey grabbed my hand. Her phone began ringing as Chan and Orion made their way to us. Kirsten hugged her as she spoke to Keeli on the phone. It was still so early, but everyone was concerned and wanted to offer her all the support and encouragement as humanly possible.

“Hey, bruh,” Orion said as we sat farther down from them.

“What’s up?”

“We had to come and show our support. I’ll have to leave and bring K Baby to school, but Chan will be here until she comes out.”

“A’ight. I appreciate that.”

“How you holding up? I know you’re trying to remain positive, but I also know that this is different from when I underwent the heart transplant. Not saying that you don’t love me, but a brother’s love is much different than this. She’s the woman you love, and I know you gotta be scared. If it were Chan, I don’t know how I would be handling it.”

“I’m maintaining as best I can. Once she goes back for the surgery, that may change. So I’m grateful for the company.”

“Audrey Leonard?”

I looked up to see a nurse standing there with a wheelchair. Quickly standing, I made my way to Audrey and helped her to her feet. She was so weak. After last night, her pain didn’t really subside. I’d helped her bathe, then laid with her, holding her all night. We slowly made our way to the nurse and once I helped her sit, the nurse said, “As soon as I get her situated, we’ll allow a couple of you at a time to visit before we take her into surgery.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Audrey smiled softly, then kissed my hand before I could pull away. I leaned over and kissed her lips. “See you in a little bit.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

I watched them wheel her away and I couldn’t stop the tears that made their way down my cheeks. I quickly wiped them and went back to my seat. Bringing my hands to my face, I could feel someone put their arm around my shoulders. This shit was hard. My baby was going through so much, and it was hard trying to bear the weight of it all. However, I would bear all that shit for her if I could.



When I moved my hands and opened my eyes, Chan was on one side of me, and Mrs. Leonard was on the other side. I lifted my arms and put them around them. They were crying quite a bit. It was like everyone was trying to be strong in front of Audrey, but the moment she was gone, they all let loose. Even Kirsten had her arms wrapped around Orion's neck. Mrs. Leonard left my arm and went to Mr. Leonard. After a moment, Chan lifted her head from my chest and said, "I'm sorry. It's just so hard trying to hold in my emotions in front of her."

"That's okay. I know it is."

Her phone began vibrating in my hand, so I pulled it out to see her brother's name. He lived out of town... somewhere in Florida. She had two brothers and they both lived pretty far away. They'd gone into business together and moved. She didn't seem as close to them, and I wasn't sure why. We never really talked about them. I gave the phone to her mother so she could update him and anyone else who may have called her phone. I felt like she would most likely know anyone that called.

She answered the call as I went back to the thoughts living rent-free in my mind. Never once had I thought of her not making it though. I refused to entertain that foolishness. I was believing that she would pull through and defeat this beast as she had before. However, I knew it wouldn't be without pain and tears. She hadn't shed a tear today, and I knew inwardly she was preparing for battle. But I also knew there would be moments where I would have to encourage her and talk her through the pain.

My worry was about all she would have to endure, physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. I was confident in her healing. That was one thing that I knew would come, but the journey to it... that would be a beast within itself. As I stood to go fix me a cup of coffee, Orion stood with me as Kirsten went to Chan and rubbed her belly. She was five... almost six months pregnant and the journey for her had

been tough as well. Hopefully she would be okay with sitting up here for hours. The surgery would take about three hours.

We made our coffee in silence. I suppose he was allowing me time to work through my thoughts... my fears and worries. Once he was done making his coffee, he turned to me and gave me a tight smile. When we headed back to our seats, I remained silent, wondering how Audrey was feeling in this moment. I closed my eyes and prayed within my spirit for her. God couldn't forsake me now.

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Everyone had gone to the back to see her. I wanted to be last. Orion and Kirsten had gone first so he could get her to school. Then Chan went back for a few minutes. Her parents had just come out, and I was making my way in. The nurse had told them that they would probably be coming to get her in the next ten minutes. I'd been praying the entire time we were in the waiting area. God would be tired of me before the day was over with.

When I walked around the curtain and saw my baby lying there with her surgical bonnet on, I smiled at her. She smiled back, but I could clearly see she was shivering. "Are you cold?"

She shook her head. I walked to her bedside and grabbed her hand. Feeling it tremble was almost too much for me. Lifting my eyebrows, I said, "So, what we eating after this surgery, because I refuse to eat while you can't. I'm standing in solidarity with you. I'm gon' be hungry as hell. You know I like to eat."

She smiled slightly. "I have never seen a person eat as much as you. And you have no shame, Kenneth. I remember watching you at Kirsten's party last year and you ate three times! Where does all of that food go? You should be five hundred pounds."

I chuckled as I continued to hold her hand. "Listen. I think I have a tapeworm, because once that shit digests, it's gone.

I'm on E all over again. My mama used to tell me all the time that I was gonna eat her out of house and home."

She chuckled and I was glad to hear it. She hadn't laughed in a while, and I missed the way it sounded. Keeping her spirits up had been a difficult job, especially when mine were in the dumps too. I lifted her hand and kissed it. "You still ain't answered my question though."

"If I can have it when I come out of surgery, I want some wings. But I want them from Timmy Chan's."

"Girl, what'chu know about Timmy Chan's? What kind of wings?"

"I know all about Timmy Chan's, thank you. Just regular fried wings with fried rice. I'm sure by your excitement, you used to be a regular customer."

"Hell yeah. I stayed at Timmy Chan's when I was in high school. But you on the other hand... you didn't live out here."

"I had a friend in school that was from Houston and that was all she used to talk about. So, whenever we came to shop, we ate there."

"Okay, okay. Maybe you know a lil something. Don't worry, I got'chu. Soon as they say you can eat, it's on. How long will the surgery be?"

"Anywhere from two to four hours. It depends on what they see once they're inside. How are my parents?"

Damn that was a long time. I asked the question to make sure nothing had changed since the last time the doctor spoke with us. "They seem to be okay. I didn't really take time to ask before I came in here. They said we didn't have much time, so I wanted to get in here as quickly as possible to see you. Everyone is truly optimistic though, and we're all standing in agreement that all will go well. You have an army ready to go to battle with you."

She smiled slightly. She pulled me closer and brought my hand to her chest and closed her eyes as she took in a shaky

breath. I could tell she was extremely nervous, but the nurse had assured me that this was a routine surgery for Audrey's doctor. He was very experienced and had specialized particularly in colon cancer for over twenty years. He had an entire team of doctors that he would be working with, and they would make sure Audrey was given the best care.

Having the nurse's assurance eased my nerves a bit, but not completely. I didn't trust people, but I was so glad that Audrey decided to get a second opinion. From some of the shit I heard about some Beaumont doctors, they'd mess around and kill somebody. If they hadn't already. She stared up at me and asked, "What are you thinking?"

"About how much I love you and how beautiful you are."

She rolled her eyes. "I look a hot mess."

"You don't, but if you did, you would be my hot mess."

She smiled softly, then her face became serious. "Listen. If something happens to me, I want you to remain in Keeli's life. She loves you so much."

"Naw, we ain't finna do this, because you gon' make it through surgery just fine."

"Kenneth, please. I'm asking God for His will to be done, but I don't know what His will is. Please... just hear me out. Okay?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat as she continued. "Make sure that Vincent keeps you in the loop of what's going on with her. Let my baby know how much I love her and that she was all I could think about before this surgery."

The tears fell from her eyes as I swiped them. She was making it so hard to be strong. I knew her pain levels probably had her thinking the worst, but I truly believed that she was saying all of this for nothing. "Kenneth... I love you. The way you have been here for me means everything to me. You've taken great care of me over the past three weeks. Knowing just how much you love me is overwhelming. The fact that you

stayed after I revealed my condition to you is beyond admirable.”

“I expect a steak dinner to show your appreciation when this is all said and done and you’re up and moving around. I love you more. Honestly, you just wasting your breath, because you’ll be back out in a few hours, wishing you would have just relaxed.”

“Ms. Leonard? Are you ready to get this show on the road? I’m your anesthesiologist, Dr. Carl. What’s your birthday?”

We both turned to the doctor that had walked around the curtain as Audrey responded to him. “November fifth, nineteen-eighty-four. I’m ready.”

“Alright. We will see you in a couple of hours, sir,” he said to me with a smile.

I leaned over to kiss her lips, and she brought her hands to my face. “I love you so much. See you later.”

“Okay, baby. I love you too.”

After kissing her lips again, I watched them wheel her out to begin restoring her body. *Day one of her journey to healing.*

# Chapter 9

*Audrey*

The light was blinding, but when I focused, I saw a man standing over me. *Jesus was definitely black.* Had I died? I turned my head to see him holding what looked to be a syringe. *Whew!* I was still here. “Well, hello. Welcome back,” he said. “I’m getting ahead of your pain and giving you something to control it. The surgery went well, but you decided to sleep a little longer afterward. You were extremely worked up, so it took a lot to put you under.”

When I tried to talk, I began coughing something fierce. “Nothing’s wrong. Keep coughing until it’s clear.”

He must have seen the alarm on my face. It felt like I was dying. My stomach was killing me as I coughed. Maybe that was why he was giving me the pain meds. He knew it was coming. When I finally calmed down, I whispered, “How long have I been asleep?”

He laid his hand on my shoulder and said, “Surgery was over three hours ago. Your family has been anxiously waiting to see you. As soon as your room is ready, we’ll be transporting you. But if you’d like, we can allow two at a time to come back and see you.”

“Okay. How did the surgery go? Did they get most of it?”

“Now that... your doctor will explain once he comes in. He came earlier to explain everything to you, but you were still out. He’s already spoken to your family. Most likely, he’ll be back later.” After glancing around, he said in a lower voice, “To give you a clue though, it went extremely well. Most of it was removed and they got the polyps as well. You will have to go through chemo, but I’m sure you’re aware of that much.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief. “Yes. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Relax and don’t hesitate to hit your call button so we can keep the pain under control.”

“Okay.”

He smiled and I swore he looked like an angel. Not in an attractive way, but just his aura. It was like he was bright and shiny, like a new penny. He wore scrubs and everything like a normal nurse, but I just wasn’t completely sold on that. “I’m gonna go get your family.”

I smiled slightly as he gave my hand a squeeze, then left my bedside. I was silently rejoicing for the news report he gave me. God had spared my life through this surgery and allowed it to be successful. As I stared at the curtain, quietly reflecting, a nurse came in. “Oh, you’re awake! I never heard your coughing. How are you feeling?”

I frowned slightly. I damn near coughed up a lung. How did she *not* hear me? “I feel okay.”

“How’s your pain?” she asked with a syringe in her hand.

“It’s okay. I just got something for pain a little while ago.”

She frowned, then went back to her computer. As she moved her mouse and squinted, she glanced back at me. “Did the nurse that gave you meds give you a name, or did you see a name badge?”

“No ma’am.”

“There’s nothing in the computer showing that anyone came to see you.”

My eyebrows lifted slightly. *Maybe it really was an angel.* My heartrate increased a bit, wondering about the possibilities. To know that I was that special to God that He would send me an angel and allow me to actually see him was a bit overwhelming. She came back to my side and asked, “Was it a man or woman and what did they look like?”

“It was a black man. He seemed to be fairly tall, broad shoulders, and clean shaven... not even a mustache. He was medium brown complexioned... a shade or so darker than me. He wore green scrubs. He said he was going to get my family.”

She frowned slightly again, then said, “Okay. I’ll be right back.”

I lay in my bed, feeling slightly uncomfortable, but then a peace seemed to blow over me and I began getting drowsy. Before I could completely doze off, my parents appeared at my side. My mama had a worried expression on her face, and I wasn’t sure why. After the news I’d gotten, I thought she would be smiling. “Hey, y’all.”

“Hey, baby. How are you feeling?”

“I feel good. A little drowsy, but I’m not in pain for now. Did the doctor talk to y’all already?”

Her expression brightened some and she said, “Yes. He said everything went well. I’m just a little concerned about your mental state. They watched you cough and everything on camera, then stare at something and talk. But there was no one else on the camera.”

*It WAS an angel.* “I was probably dreaming, Mama. The nurse looked confused when I described what I remembered.”

“Maybe so. She said there’s not a black, male nurse in this unit.”

*Thank you, Lord, for your special attention.* “Well, let’s not focus on that. I have great news that needs to be celebrated, right?”

“Absolutely, baby,” my dad added.

There was no sense in telling them what I knew to be true. They would think I was losing my mind. However, Kenneth would believe me. Vincent would believe too. “Have y’all talked to Vincent, so he can update my baby?”

“I did. At the time, you were still asleep.”



I nodded. My parents remained quiet and just stood there staring at me as my mom rubbed my hair and my dad held my hand. It seemed as if something more was going on that they weren't saying. However, I couldn't let that worry me. My mom's constant consolation lulled me right to sleep.

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When I felt lips pressed to my forehead, my eyes fluttered open. Seeing Kenneth's handsome face made me smile, but that smile soon faded. *Pain*. My body was aching something fierce and apparently, he could see it in my eyes and facial expression. He hit the call button immediately, then stroked my cheek. "I'm here, baby."

He then responded to the nurse over the intercom and kissed me again. He smiled slightly, seeming to be completely calm. *Why were my parents acting like something serious was going on?* Staring into his eyes brought a calmness over me, but I was still wondering about what had happened. "What's going on? What aren't they telling me?"

Before he could respond to me, the doctor came in along with the nurse. Neither of them seemed alarmed. They gave me something for pain and the doctor smiled softly at me. "Well, Ms. Leonard, the surgery was successful and there's only a small amount that we couldn't get that chemo should get rid of. The only problem is that we believe you're suffering a side effect of the anesthesia. You seem to be hallucinating. You've been talking in your sleep and seeing things that aren't there. This should pass today though. Other than that, we're on a road to recovery my dear."

I nodded. I wasn't hallucinating. I knew what I saw and heard. As I turned to look at Kenneth, he smiled at me. "They are going to be moving you to a room soon."

I smiled softly at him as the nurse gave me some joy juice in my IV. She said, "They should be here in any moment to move you, Ms. Leonard."

"Thank you."

As soon as she left, I stared at Kenneth. Curling my finger, I summoned him closer to me. When he was within reach, I ran my fingers through his beard as he bit his bottom lip. “You’re so beautiful, Audrey. I can’t wait until you’re out of here so I can hold you in my arms.”

“Me too. Ken?”

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t realize it right away, but I honestly believe the nurse I saw that they are saying I hallucinated about was an angel. He was a black man, but he seemed bright and shiny. He never did say what he was giving me for pain. Just that he was giving me something. His presence brought a peace over me that I’ve never felt in my life. I refuse to believe that I’m hallucinating about that.”

He smiled at me. “I believe you, baby. Something similar happened to my mama. You don’t have to try to convince me. As much as I’ve been praying, I wouldn’t be surprised if you said you saw Jesus.”

I smiled at Kenneth and relaxed in what I knew to be true. “As soon as they put me in a room, you can get in bed with me and hold me for as long as you want.”

Pulling him to me by his beard, I kissed his cheek, not knowing how my breath was. “Quit tripping and give me them lips, beautiful.”

When I hesitated, then cupped my hand over my mouth, he chuckled, then moved my hand and laid his lips on mine as he slid his hand over my cheek. I closed my eyes and relished in what I was feeling... love.

# Chapter 10

*Kenneth*

“You good, baby? You need anything?”

“No. Thank you.”

I kissed Audrey’s head and went back to the kitchen to clean up a bit. I’d just brought her a sandwich and a cup of soup. She couldn’t seem to eat much, and I knew it was because she was having trouble having a bowel movement. Her stomach was hurting badly. The constipation was probably because of all the pain meds she was on as well as the effects of the colectomy. The doctor had said that it could take as long as four weeks for her to feel like herself.

Audrey had stayed in the hospital for six days so they could monitor her and make sure she was doing okay. She thought she would be going home a lot sooner, but she was obviously thinking she wouldn’t have to have a full colectomy. Vincent had brought Keeli to the hospital to see her over the weekend. The minute they left, Audrey stopped talking. I knew she was depressed. I didn’t know how she thought she would be home by the weekend. She was at my house because she couldn’t take the trip back to Beaumont. The thirty-minute ride to my house was hard enough on her.

She’d been here for three days, and Mr. and Mrs. Leonard had promised to bring Keeli when they came tomorrow. They’d been Facetiming every day, but it seemed that was only making Audrey more depressed. She didn’t want me sleeping with her because she was in so much pain. I understood her dilemma. The only comfortable position for her to lay in was on her back for now. I realized that the Audrey I knew before the diagnosis had made her way back.

When she didn't feel well, she didn't like being touched too much. She wasn't as affectionate as she had been, but I was okay with that too. I knew what I had signed up for and I knew who I was dealing with. As I cleaned the kitchen, I thought about the moments where she had allowed me to be in her space, and I realized it was because she was scared, thinking her time had run out. Despite her withdrawing, I knew she didn't say things that she didn't mean. She didn't stroke egos. She'd said she loved me, and I still believed that was true.

Once I finished cleaning the kitchen and was making my way to the room to check on Audrey, my phone rang. Chantrice and Orion had been calling every day to check on her. Chan trusted my honest observations of how Audrey was doing. Whenever she would ask Audrey, she would only say she was doing okay without going into much detail. This was what Mr. Leonard meant when he asked me to keep them updated. If anyone knew Audrey, it was her family. They were depending on me to not only take care of Audrey but to keep them in the loop. I'd been doing my best to do that.

When I got to it, it had already stopped ringing. I noticed it was Chan. I'd call her back as soon as I checked on Audrey and made sure she was good. I didn't eat dinner because I didn't have much of an appetite tonight. I was tired as hell. Audrey's nurse would start taking care of her on Monday when she went back home. I really wanted her to stay with me longer, but I knew it would be like fighting a sumo wrestler trying to get her to stay.

After entering the bedroom, I sat another bottle of water on the nightstand for her, then kissed her head. "I'm trying not to smother you, but I just want to be sure that you're okay and that you don't need anything."

She smiled softly. "Why don't you sit with me for a while?"

I smiled back and eased my way into the bed with her. Scooting closer to her, being careful not to make the bed move

too much, I kissed her cheek. She smiled, then took a bite of her sandwich. “I want to thank you for being with me. I’m not being unappreciative or anything like that. I just miss my baby. If I stay here, I won’t be able to see her as much. Being away from her this long has been torture. It was torture the first time I did it. She’s my everything.”

A tear trickled down her cheek and I swiped it away. “You don’t have to explain anything to me, Audrey. I believe I know you well. One thing I know for sure is how much you love your daughter. I also know that deep down inside, you’re afraid of letting me see all of you, because you think you’re a burden to me. That couldn’t be further from the truth. I love you. I don’t want you going home because you think you’re doing me a favor. But I will be in Beaumont as much as possible. I promise.”

She avoided my gaze, and I knew I’d hit the nail on the head. When she turned to me, I expected her to either deny what she was feeling or accept that was exactly how she felt. However, she had something different on her mind. “I want you to start seeing other women. I can’t give you what you need, and I don’t know when I’ll be able to. You are so passionate, Ken, and I feel like that passion is going to waste on someone like me.”

“Audrey—”

“No. Listen. I’m on the downside of life. I crossed the mountaintop a long time ago. I just don’t feel like I have a whole lot of time left. I need you to be with someone who has just as much to offer as you do.”

It felt like I’d been stabbed in my heart. I never expected this from her. “I’m not leaving you, baby.”

“I didn’t say you had to completely leave me. We can be friends, Kenneth. That’s all I can offer. You have my heart, but I don’t want you putting your life on hold for me. You can’t even handle business like you normally do because of me. It’s been over a month now and you’ve spent more time in Beaumont than in Houston. When Keeli and my parents come,

I'm going to leave with them on Saturday. Please understand, baby. I love you so much but hanging on to you just isn't fair to you."

"What isn't fair to me is you pushing me away when you know how I feel about you. I don't give a shit about anything else. I love you, Audrey, and it's like you're asking me to turn that off. Friends? Just friends? You know I won't be satisfied with that. Why can't you see how much I love you? I love you beyond cancer... beyond all your health issues. I love your heart, your determination, and the way you love your daughter. Your strength is beyond admirable."

I looked away and took a deep breath, trying to prepare my heart for what she was doing to it. "I can't force myself into your life or heart. That's what's draining as fuck. Being somewhere where I'm not wanted is what isn't fair. I'm here for you because I want to be, but if you don't want me to be, who am I to argue with your decision? Think about what you want, Audrey. Think on it until Saturday. If you feel the same way, I won't have a choice but to respect it."

I slid from the bed and took her empty plate and bowl and left the room. After putting the dishes in the dishwasher and starting it, I went outside and sat on the patio. Grabbing a cigar from the box next to my chair, I lit up and puffed my damn feelings away. My phone chimed, indicating I had a text message, so I picked it up to see it was from Audrey. *I'm sorry, but I don't need to think about it. I love you too much to feel like I'm holding you captive. I can't allow you to pause your progress for me. Please understand where I'm coming from.*

I slid my hand over my face and responded. *If I were the one sick, would you leave me if I told you to? If I had cancer, would you allow me to say the things you've said to me?*

I dropped my phone to the table and picked my cigar back up before the fire went out on it. I knew Audrey was stubborn, but after expressing my feelings to her, I never saw this coming. After I finished my cigar, I went back inside to take a

shower. She never responded to my text, and I didn't know whether that was a good thing or a bad thing... whether she was thinking about what I'd said or if she was ignoring me.

Once I'd showered and put on some shorts, I checked my phone again to see she still hadn't responded to me. *She was ignoring me.* That wasn't gon' fly though, not when I had access to her. After putting on some socks, I headed to my room to confront her. The bed was bigger, and the mattress was better than the ones in the guestrooms. I wanted her to be comfortable. When I walked in, I saw that she was asleep. Going to her, I checked to see if she had enough water. She liked her water room temperature.

She was just about done with the last bottle, so I went to the kitchen to get her another bottle and also some nuts for her to snack on. She liked almonds. Grabbing the can, I smiled slightly. This woman would never leave my heart. Just in spending time with her, I'd grown to love everything about her. Everything I was doing business-wise was for her and Keeli. I wanted them to have the best life possible. I was comfortable with what I had, and I wasn't trying to overwork myself at forty. I was past that point. When Audrey fully gave in to me, I wanted that to be an upgrade for her financially.

It wasn't that I didn't want better for myself. I knew my limits and my plate was full. When Orion was in the hospital, I took on a lot of responsibility. After his heart transplant, I took care of him along with a nurse. I just wanted to relax now. That damn near four-year journey was hard, but I wouldn't change a thing. My brother was my best friend, and there was no way I wouldn't be there for him. I felt the same way for Audrey, but I couldn't do that if she was pushing me away.

When I reentered the room, she was awake and staring at her phone. She was making a nigga wanna boss up on her, but I didn't wanna come in here with that kind of energy... not with her feeling the way she did. That would only push her away anyway. Some of these movies and shit gave a false sense of reality. Not all these women liked that shit. Audrey

was one of those women. During sex... maybe. Any other time, that wouldn't work out.

As I sat the nuts, water, and chips on the nightstand, I stared at her as she texted someone. She better hadn't been texting me when she could just say what she had to say to me now. Eavesdropping a little more, I saw she was texting Vincent about bringing Keeli to her parents. However, I also noticed the thread was rather long. I didn't want to jump to conclusions, but it felt like she had more to say to him than to the nigga practically begging her to take care of her.

She sat her phone next to her on the bed, then stared up at me. "If you had cancer and you told me to leave and why you couldn't embark on a relationship with me, I would respect your wishes. Ken, why can't you see that I'm doing this out of love?"

"Because it doesn't feel like love, Audrey! Why can't *you* see that? I'm a grown ass man. I don't need a woman to dictate shit I do. If I don't want to do something, I won't do it! This is bullshit."

"It's not bullshit! I feel like you're only doing all this because you feel sorry for me! I hate that!"

"I'm doing this because I love you! I didn't just say that because of your situation. I said I love you because I actually do! I've *been* in love with you!"

I was fuming. Audrey had me so pissed at her. I wanted to grab her shoulders and shake her ass. But when she fell over in the bed, holding her stomach, I felt like shit for yelling at her. "Fuck!" I yelled as I climbed in the bed with her. "I'm so sorry, baby."

Scooting close to her, I held her in my arms for a moment, repeatedly kissing her head. I lost my temper and caused her to lose hers. Now she was in pain. Her grunts and whimpers touched my soul. I eased my hand over her stomach and gently rubbed it. "Ken, please..."

"What do you need, baby? I'm here."



“A pain pill.”

I didn't know when the last time she'd had one, since they were right there on the nightstand, but I was hoping it wasn't recently. However, I didn't want to see her in so much pain. Some pain was expected, but I knew I had aggravated her. Leaving the bed, I did what she asked. As I watched her swallow it down with some water, I waited to see if she needed anything else. As she did her best to get comfortable again, she asked, “Can you leave me by myself for a while?”

I swallowed hard and nodded, giving her the time alone she needed.

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My heart was aching. All I could see was Audrey leaving my life forever. I had a feeling that she would distance herself from me completely. I carried her to her parents' car. All her things had already been packed. My heart felt like it was at my feet. When I got her in the front seat, she allowed a few tears to leave her eyes, then she looked up at me. “Thank you for everything, Ken.”

I nodded, but I refused to say a word. She was leaving, and there didn't seem to be a thing I could say to her to make her change her mind. When her parents and Keeli got here yesterday, it was like she'd began blocking me from her mind, totally focusing on Keeli. We barely said more than a few words to one another since they'd been here.

After closing the door and watching her mother and Keeli get in the back seat, I walked over to her dad and shook his hand. “I need to ask a favor of you now. She thinks she's a burden to me. That couldn't be further from the truth, and I'm not sure why she's seeing things that way. I've never even slightly insinuated that. Please keep me updated about her progress. Not having contact with her is gonna kill me, but not knowing how she's doing is gonna get me there a lot faster.”

“You have my word. I'm gonna do my best to talk her into keeping in contact with you. You're perfect for her and she

knows it, but she's stubborn like her old man. Thank you, Kenneth, for taking great care of her. You're welcome to come to our house and visit. She can't tell me who's allowed at my house since she'll be staying with us for a while."

He smirked and I gave him a soft smile as well. Before he could get in the car, Orion and Chan drove up. They were supposed to spend the night with us. There was no need now since Audrey was leaving. Chan got out of the car as quickly as physically possible, and Kirsten hopped out along with her as Orion walked over to me. "What happened? Where's she going?"

"She's going to her parents' house and honestly, I don't wanna talk about the shit."

I stared at Audrey for a minute as Chan talked to her, then turned to head back to the house. There was no sense in me standing outside to watch her leave my life. While I wanted to force my way in, I knew Audrey would make us both miserable if I did. When I walked in the house, I slammed the door, trying to contain my anger. Going to my bedroom, I saw that she did her best to make the bed. As I went to the side of the bed, I saw a note on the nightstand. Slightly rolling my eyes, I sat on the bed as I picked it up and opened it.

*Kenneth,*

*Thank you for everything you've done for me. Thank you for the way you've loved me for the past month. This really does hurt, but I feel like it's necessary. I pray that you find an all-consuming love, one that gives as much as you do. I'm sorry for the pain you feel, but it will only be temporary. I love you so much and I wish you well.*

*Audrey*

After reading, I swiped at the shit still on the nightstand, knocking it all to the floor and against the wall. "Ken..."

I turned to see Orion in the doorway watching me. This shit with Audrey was gonna kill me if I let it. I lowered my head, then rubbed my hands down my face and stood from the

bed. I balled the note up and dropped it to the floor. I couldn't even be in my own room. Walking past him, I went to the kitchen, throwing all her leftover shit in the trash. As long as she was here, I wouldn't throw any of it out just in case she wanted to eat it. But now... there was no need for it since I wasn't going to eat it. "Ken, what happened?"

"She told me to move on. She didn't have anything to give in a relationship with me. I deserved more. Audrey left me, and it feels like I walked right out of heaven straight into the mouth of hell."

# Chapter 11

*Audrey*

Things had been hard. After staying with my parents for two weeks, I felt well enough to go home. I'd been here for two weeks. I wasn't completely back to normal just yet, but I knew it would be a long time before I would be. I would be starting chemo in two weeks, two days before my birthday. Leaving Kenneth had been the hardest thing I'd ever done. He didn't understand my reasoning, but he would in time. My body was so fragile. I didn't want him to witness the trauma I would go through. Chemo could possibly eat me alive.

Being a proud independent woman could be my downfall at times, but I had a heart that always considered others. I didn't want Kenneth to give up his life for me. If I didn't fully recover, he would end up with a shell of a woman. I loved him too much to have him suffering with me. We'd been texting back and forth though. I couldn't just cease all communication with him. We didn't talk every day, but at least once every three days.

He used to call every day, but I couldn't answer his calls. I would always text in return. He was upset with me, but it seemed he'd calmed down about it now. I had been away from him for four weeks now, and I missed him something fierce. However, I would continue missing him before I let him settle for a woman he would have to take care of... possibly for the rest of my life. I was stupid to think I would be able to handle allowing him to be my all when I couldn't be that for him in return.

As I made my way to the front room, the doorbell rang. It was probably Vincent bringing Keeli home. It had been a long weekend without my baby. I'd been alone since yesterday,

because I didn't feel like entertaining anybody or welcoming them into my house to entertain me. When I got to the door, just as I thought, it was Vincent and Keeli. I opened it with a smile and welcomed Keeli back home. She hugged me tightly, then made her way to her room as Vincent closed the door.

Once I made it to the couch, he sat next to me. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel okay. Thanks. How was the weekend?"

"It was cool as it always is. We went skating last night and did a brunch at Suga's this morning. We settled for Popeye's a couple of hours ago. Did you get some rest?"

"Yeah. A lot actually."

He scooted closer to me and put his arm around me. "I can tell that you're lying, but you know I'm here if you need me. You're good at pushing people away, knowing that you need the support... encouragement that everything will be just fine. Is that what you did to Kenneth?"

I lowered my head, not wanting to answer him, but at the same time knowing that I needed to. The last thing I wanted anyone doing was making negative assumptions about Kenneth. "He deserves better, Vincent. He shouldn't have to take care of me. If we were married already, then that would be one thing. He can shower all his love on someone that can give him as much as he gives them."

He slowly shook his head. "Audrey... he loves you, and I can see that every time he looks at you. I'm almost sure that his heart is broken. Just like mine was when we split up. You are going to have to let go. He's a grown man, completely capable of making his own decisions. If he couldn't handle being with you, he wouldn't have been pursuing you. He wouldn't have taken care of you while you were in Houston. Baby, stop being stubborn and let that man love you."

Doing my best to hold back my emotions, I only nodded. I stood from the couch and asked, "You want anything to drink?"

“No. I’m about to go. Call that man. I’m sure he’s miserable without you... just like you’re miserable without him.”

He stood from his seat and approached me as I stared at him. My chest felt like it was caving, and I desperately needed to be alone. After kissing my forehead, he pulled me in his arms. “You can make loving you so damn difficult. You’re a good woman, Audrey, but you must like being alone. That’s what your actions show. Don’t continue breaking that man’s heart.”

I wanted to break down at that moment. As I pulled away from him, he lifted my head by grabbing my chin, forcing me to look at him. “Quit being stubborn and quit overthinking. Let him be here. You need somebody here. He wants to be with you, so whatever he does to do just that are conscious decisions that he’s made in the name of love. He made you a priority and you took that away from him. That’s not right.”

I turned away from him as the tears fell. I couldn’t hold them back any longer and suddenly, my knees felt weak. When they buckled, Vincent immediately scooped me up before I could hit the floor and brought me to the couch. “I’m sorry if I’m stressing you out, but we’ve always been able to talk, and I felt like you needed to hear what I had to say. Forgive me. Maybe my timing was wrong.”

“It’s okay.”

“You okay?”

I nodded as I wiped my cheeks. He was right, but I didn’t know if I could do what he was suggesting. He waited until I looked into his eyes before he backed away. “I love you, Audrey, and I want what’s best for you. I want you to be happy. You deserve that... no matter how you see it. Focus on your strengths instead of your weaknesses. I have your back for always. We have a beautiful daughter in there to raise, and she needs the best version of you... mentally. You need that too. I’ll see you later, but I’ll call and check on you tomorrow. Okay?”

“Thank you, Vincent,” I said as I broke down.

He’d read me so well, and I couldn’t hold it back any longer. He immediately went to his knees and pulled me in his arms, comforting me in a way I hadn’t felt since I’d left Kenneth. “Just go, Vincent. I’ll be okay. Thank you.”

He let me go and stood just as Keeli walked back up front. “Mommy, are you okay?”

“I’m okay, baby. Why don’t you go take a shower and get your things ready for school tomorrow and maybe we can watch a movie before you go to bed.”

“Yay! Okay. Bye, Daddy!”

“See you later, sweet cheeks. Have a great week at school.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Once he left, Keeli sat beside me and grabbed my hand. “Are you hurting, Mommy? Do you need a pain pill?”

“I’m hurting a little bit, but I don’t need a pill. I love you, baby.”

“I love you too. I’m gonna go take my shower.”

“Okay. I’ll be right here waiting for you to come back.”

When she left, I grabbed my phone and stared at the screen for a moment, debating what I would do. It had been two days since I last texted Kenneth. Closing my eyes for a moment, I took a deep breath and sent him a text. *Hey, Kenneth. I’m sorry for everything. Call me when you have time.*

When he didn’t respond within a few minutes, I knew that I was no longer his priority, and that shit hurt more than anything.

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As I stared at the wall, I could feel it rising. Leaning over the bed, I threw up in the wastebasket my mama had put there

before she left to go to the store. I'd had my first round of chemo yesterday, and I felt like shit. My body was extremely weak, and I couldn't seem to keep much down. My bowels seemed to be locked because I hadn't had a movement since the other day. I knew that was one of the normal side effects of chemo, but I wasn't ready for this. Never in a million years did I imagine it would be this hard.

Yesterday was filled with dreams of being healthy and running and playing with Keeli, but today was filled with nightmares of death and suffering. I was just glad that she wasn't here yet to see me this way. The last thing I wanted was for my daughter to feel the way I did. She was so young and didn't deserve this. She deserved to be a kid and only worry about kid things... not losing her mom.

As I lay here, thinking over things, I couldn't help but think about Kenneth. He'd never responded to my text from two weeks ago. I'd pushed him away, and maybe he'd moved on like I asked him to. The pain my heart was in was almost unbearable, but I knew that was what was best. He deserved a family and a woman that could give him his heart's desires. I supposed in the back of my mind, I expected him to at least want to make sure I was okay.

That would be the best of both worlds, and I needed to be okay with him distancing himself the way he had. Maybe he couldn't handle being in contact with me without having the relationship he wanted... I wanted. Closing my eyes, I allowed the tears to flow from them, praying that God would help me bear it all.

After wiping my tears away and doing my best to suck it up, my phone rang. The process of getting my phone from my nightstand made me realize just how bad off I was. The pain that resonated through my body made me appreciate the small things I used to be able to do. When I got it, the call had ended. It was Chantrice, and I was sure she was just checking on me. I sniffed and cleared my throat, then called back. "Hello?"



“Hey. Sorry, I missed your call.”

“Hey, Audrey. How are you? Aunt Virginia said you weren’t feeling so well.”

“It’s the typical side effects of chemo... weakness, nausea, and slight depression from it all. But I’ll be okay in a day or so.”

“Audrey... you don’t have to fake the funk for me. I wanna come see you this weekend. Is that okay?”

I took a deep breath. I really didn’t want her to see me this way, but I knew I would be this way for a while. “Yeah. It’s okay.”

“Well, you’re turning thirty-seven tomorrow. Is Auntie cooking you anything special?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t really been able to keep anything down. Hopefully, that’ll change tomorrow, because I could truly go for a juicy steak right now.”

She chuckled softly as did I. When I heard the door open, I knew my mama was back. I could hear her talking, but I wasn’t sure if she was on the phone or if someone was here. Keeli was still in school. “Chan, let me call you back. It sounds like someone is here with Mama.”

“Okay. If you don’t, I’ll just call you tomorrow. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I ended the call, and I could hear the hushed voices get closer. I really didn’t want guests, but my mama didn’t care about that. She disregarded my wishes quite often, especially when it would garner attention from others. Me being sick gave her the attention and conversation she loved. I rolled my eyes at the thought. There was no telling what all she was telling people that called to check on me.

There was a soft knock on the door, then she entered. Right after, my boss from Merrill Lynch, Sondra, came in behind her. I’d had to take a leave of absence because of my

illness. I knew there was no way I could work right now. Thanks to FMLA, I was still getting a small paycheck. I closed my eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. “Hi, Audrey,” she said softly.

She held a card in her hand that she extended to me when she got close. “Hi. Thank you.”

I knew she was in shock as she stared at me. I’d lost at least thirty pounds since I left work. While I was a thick girl, thirty pounds had me nearly looking skeletal. My parents had bought me a couple of outfits that would fit me better for when I needed to leave the house, but I mostly wore house robes and other lounging clothes.

After receiving the card from her, I did my best to sit up in the bed. “How are things going at work?”

“Work is work. I just needed to lay eyes on you. I miss you. There wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t look forward to seeing your beautiful smile. I didn’t realize how much until you weren’t there. We all miss you, even Richard.”

She chuckled as I rolled my eyes. Richard was a tight-ass that rarely saw the good in anything. He was always complaining about something. He’d taken off work one Halloween and I’d done my best portrayal of him for an entire hour at work that day. That was the longest I could stomach it. We’d all had a good laugh at his expense. “What did he say?”

“He hasn’t said a word, but I can tell by the way he stares into your office when he passes by it. We’re all praying for you, and we believe you will beat this. How’s Takelia?”

“I miss you guys too. Hopefully I can be back soon. Keeli is doing well. She’s a trooper and thinks she has to take care of me every moment of the day that she’s here. So, I’m trying to maintain as much normalcy as I can for her.”

She nodded in understanding. “Well, I’m not going to keep you. I just wanted to check in and let you know you are in all of our thoughts and prayers. Plus, I have to get back before anyone misses me.”

“Thank you for coming, Sondra. I appreciate it.”

She hugged me, then my mama escorted her out. Grabbing the card, I opened the envelope and pulled the card from it. When I opened it, hundreds of dollars fell from it, and everyone had signed it. The tears fell from my eyes. To know they cared about me that much made me so emotional. I wasn't used to needing anybody, but I supposed I had better get used to it sooner rather than later.

# Chapter 12

*Kenneth*

Looking at myself in the mirror as I straightened my blazer over the green self-love shirt I wore, I took a deep breath and exhaled my nerves. Today was Audrey's birthday, and I was planning to go get my woman back. I'd been making some business moves and had hired someone I could trust to keep things in line for me. That way I could give more time to Audrey.

I'd been keeping in touch with her mother, and she had me nervous about Audrey's condition yesterday. However, today she said she seemed to be in better spirits. Audrey didn't know it yet, but she would be mine whether she wanted to be or not. Her stance on where we stood had crushed me. I would never be okay with just being her friend. I loved her too much for that shit, and she knew it.

As I grabbed my bag with Audrey's birthday presents in it, my wallet, phone, and keys, I said a short prayer. *Lord let her be receptive or at least let her eventually give in.* It would be a true miracle if she didn't fight against this. I didn't want the Lord to change her, because in most situations, I liked that about her. However, in this situation, she wasn't just fighting me. She was fighting what she really wanted as well. I could tell by the way she looked at me that her heart longed for me.

Her mother told me that she would be washing her hair for her today. So there would be no excuse, other than her being in too much pain, that she wouldn't be able to leave with me and enjoy her birthday. I'd bought her a dress and some stylish, flat shoes. Mrs. Virginia had given me her sizes. The pictures she'd sent me showed me just how much weight she'd lost in the past month and a half I'd been away from her. At least I

wouldn't be looking all sympathetic when I saw her. She hated that shit.

As I made my way to IH-10 east, I thought about all the ways this could go. She could argue with me but eventually concede as I had prayed for, or for some ungodly reason, she could make this trip to Beaumont a nightmare. Audrey was the most independent woman I knew, but I planned to wear her down and help her see that it was okay to depend on me. I would never let her down. That bullshit she'd concocted in her head was just that... bullshit. She and Kee were my family, and I was good with us not having kids. That's what they made adoption for.

There were plenty of babies in the system and private entities that were looking for parents. If she didn't want that, then I would be okay with that too. I just needed her. She'd been on my mind constantly and no matter what I did, I couldn't get her off it. When I looked at her, I didn't imagine the possibilities of building a family. I thought of a future with just the three of us. While I would love to have a kid, that wasn't nearly as important as having her.

I had even kept in touch with Vincent. We talked about Kee and what she was doing in school, and he filled me in on Audrey... the things her mother wasn't saying. I knew he and Audrey were close, despite their past, and I respected that. He was a good guy and I trusted that he had Audrey's best interest at heart. He told me that he constantly brought me up in conversation, which was why she'd texted me two weeks ago. I knew if she thought I was done, she would be more tenderhearted and receptive... or at least that was what I was hoping for. It was hard as hell to ignore her though.

As I drove, my phone rang. I knew it was my brother, because he knew how nervous I was about this. He knew of all the work I'd put in during the past month and a half to make my business flow more smoothly without so much involvement from me. I'd even started a clothing line, selling custom made t-shirts, hoodies, and other types of shirts

promoting self-love and healing. I designed one for cancer awareness that I'd included in Audrey's gift.

Pressing my phone icon on my steering wheel, I answered the call. "Hello?"

"What's up, bruh? You left yet?"

"Yeah. I've been on the road about thirty minutes or so. What's up?"

"Chan just got off the phone with Audrey to tell her happy birthday. She sounded so happy. Her mom did her hair and makeup and made her a cake. So, I believe she's in the right frame of mind to receive you."

"I hope you're right. I can't function without her any longer," I said as I glanced at the flowers in the passenger seat.

"I'm not saying it won't be a battle. Just from what I've learned about her... she's stubborn as hell, but at least she's in a good mood."

I rubbed my bald head, then slid my hand down my face. "I know, but I'm gon' wear her ass down, because I ain't leaving until she give in to me. Period."

"A'ight, nigga. Don't get your feelings hurt. Audrey can crush a nigga soul. Don't forget... I saw yo' ass when she left Houston."

"Shut up, O. I couldn't stop her from leaving, but where she gon' run to now if she's at home where she think she needs to be?"

"True. I'm just gon' stay positive in this situation and pray all goes well."

"Thank you. You could have kept all that other shit to yourself. My nerves already on ten."

He chuckled. "My bad, bruh. Go get your woman."

"Hell yeah. I'll let you know how shit goes."

"A'ight, bet."

I ended the call and I completely focused on making Audrey mine again, no matter the cost, because despite what she thought, she was the ultimate prize.

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I took a deep breath, then rang the doorbell. I'd been to Audrey's house countless times, but I'd never been as unsure about being here as I was at this moment. I could hear laughter coming from inside, and I knew it was her mother's. That was a good sign. When the door opened, Mrs. Virginia smiled at me and invited me inside. "Hello, Kenneth. She's in the kitchen."

"Thank you."

I nervously continued to the kitchen, flowers in one hand, duffle bag over my shoulder, and a gift bag in my other hand. Audrey's back was to me, and she was eating a piece of cake. "Who was at the door?"

I didn't respond to her. Her mother walked in front of her and smiled, then said, "Why don't you turn around and see."

She turned in her seat and when she saw me, her eyes widened, and her eyebrows lifted significantly. She couldn't hide her shock in that moment if she tried. "Hey, Audrey."

When I saw the tear fall from her eye, I quickly stepped closer to her and handed her the flowers. "Happy birthday, beautiful."

She accepted the flowers as she wiped her tears. "Thank you, Kenneth. What are you doing here?"

"Isn't it your birthday? That's one of the most important days of the year. I'm sorry that I went silent for a while, but —"

"It's okay. I understand," she said, cutting me off.

I didn't know what she thought she understood, but I wasn't going to just let her do that. "What exactly do you understand, Audrey?"

She lowered her head as I sat in the chair next to her. Mrs. Virginia smiled at me, then left us alone in the kitchen. When she looked back up at me, she put her hand to my face like she was in disbelief that I was really here. “I understand that it was difficult for you to just be my friend. You needed that distance.”

“That’s not it... well, that’s not all. I never agreed to be your friend. I never agreed to not be your man either. So whether you like it or not, agree with me or not, you’re still mine and I’m still yours. I had to get some business squared away and managed correctly to where I can devote more of my time to you and Keeli. Things are running smoothly now and will continue to do so without it consuming so much of my time.”

She lowered her hand, then lowered her head too. “I can’t allow you to do that, Kenneth. This isn’t fair to you. You shouldn’t have to turn your life upside down to appease me.”

“My life isn’t turned upside down. I’ve made adjustments that benefit me and my businesses. I want to be here for you. This frees up so much of my time.”

“Why are you doing this for me? This isn’t right, Kenneth.”

Now she was fucking with my mental. I knew she was stubborn, but she was taking this shit to an all-new level. I refused to back down though. “Why don’t you think you deserve to be loved? You constantly fight against what we feel for each other, and that shit is frustrating.”

“I don’t deserve to be loved by YOU! You deserve a woman that can give you the world... give you a family... kids of your own. All things that I can’t do.”

“But I feel like I have the world when I’m with you. When Kee is around, I feel like we’re a family. Vincent talks to me as if I’m her dad too. That means a lot to me. I deserve to have you and you deserve me. Quit fighting that shit, thinking you’re doing what’s best for me, Audrey. I’m a grown-ass man



that's perfectly capable of making my own decisions. I want you... end of discussion."

I sat her gift bag on the table as she stared at me, but remained quiet. I took that opportunity to continue. "You won't be in control of this. Love doesn't need that kind of delegation. This decision I made benefits me as well. Why can't you see that I'm not whole without you? And as much as you're fighting it, I know you aren't whole without me. Let me love you, Audrey. Feel free to love me completely. Trust me, it will be a lot easier than you fighting me. I'm not leaving without you saying that I'm yours and you giving in to me."

She looked away from me for a moment, then began digging in the bag. It was just full of some of her favorites. When she pulled out the cans of nuts, she smiled and kept digging. While she hadn't responded to what I'd said, I knew she was thinking about it. She continued pulling items out until she got to the t-shirt. When she saw the pink and the name, *Audrey's Chest*, at the bottom, she burst into tears. I quickly embraced her as she buried her face in my shirt. I'd named my clothing line after her.

I gently rubbed the top of her head, then kissed it as she released. When she pulled herself together, she looked up at me. "I'm sorry. I just can't believe you've done all this."

"I did this for your birthday and because I love you. You are the most important person in my life and without you it feels like I've thrown my life away." I softly kissed her lips. "Please tell me you're mine, Audrey, because I will always be yours, baby."

Her eyes held so much emotion. She brought her hands to my face and pulled it to her. When she slid her tongue in my mouth it was like she'd resurrected me from the dead. She was conceding and that shit felt amazing. When she pulled away, she closed her eyes and said, "You're mine, Kenneth. I love you. The past month and a half has been so hard without you."

I knew she'd closed her eyes because it was hard for her to express her feelings. Eventually, being with me would have

her comfortable enough to look into my eyes and bare her hopes and dreams to me. “Hard ain’t the word, baby. I love you so much. Look at me.”

She opened her eyes and stared into mine. “I need you to get dressed. I want to take you to dinner... that’s if you feel up to it.”

She smiled slightly, then said, “I don’t have anything to wear. I’ve lost so much weight.”

“I got’chu covered, baby. I got your size from your mama. Just because I haven’t been talking to you doesn’t mean that I haven’t been checking up on you. Your mom and I talk almost every day, and Vincent and I talk at least once a week.”

She looked shocked at first, but then she wrapped her arms around me and rested her head on mine. “You love me that much, huh?”

“Absolutely. Now, let’s get you out the house to have a good time.”

She smiled, then kissed my lips. I stood from my seat and helped her from hers, then led her into her bedroom. She’d lost what looked to be at least twenty pounds since I’d last seen her. I hated that she was going through this. The way her cheeks were starting to sink in bothered my soul. There was no way I could be away from her. It wasn’t that I was thinking that she was dying, but cancer could take so many turns. I just prayed that the doctors were efficient and checked her thoroughly.

When we got to the room, she sat on the bed as I pulled the dress from my bag. It was long and flowing. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be too long for her with her wearing flat shoes. She smiled at the dress, then said, “It’s beautiful, Kenneth. Thank you.”

I leaned over and kissed her lips again, then prepared to exit and wait for her up front until she stopped me. “Can... umm... never mind.”

She turned her head as her face reddened. Just as she was letting her guard down, she put it back up again. I sat next to her and grabbed her hand. “Can I what, baby? Never hesitate to ask anything of me. What do you need?” I asked as I swept her hair from her face.

It was so beautiful. Her mom had done an amazing job on her hair. The big curls in it were gorgeous. Her makeup was beautiful too until she cried most of it off onto my shirt. “Can you help me get dressed?”

I softly kissed her lips and said, “It will be my pleasure.”

I stood from the bed and slowly pulled her shirt over her head, being sure not to mess up her hair, then she stood so I could take off her pants. Her body seemed so fragile to me, and I treated it as such, making sure all of my movements and touches were soft, gentle, and easy. Her gaze stayed on me. Even when I wasn't looking at her, I could see her staring at me in my peripheral. Glancing at her white toenails and fingernails, I said, “Oh, you doing it big for your birthday, huh? Got a mani/pedi too? That's what's up.”

She giggled as she wrapped her arms around my waist and rested her head against my chest. “I'm so sorry about your shirt. Come to the bathroom so we can get it cleaned and put in the dryer.”

“You don't have to keep apologizing.”

When she turned to walk away, I glanced down at her ass. It was still shapely... just not as big as before. “You'll also have to excuse my under garments. It's all about comfort right now.”

“You hear me complaining? None of this shit changes who you are... the woman I fell in love with. All this shit is superficial. It's your soul I'm concerned with. The way your heart speaks to mine is the same. Now, let's get this poppin' so we can go eat. I'm starving.”

She fought back a smile, so I said, “Just say that shit, Audrey.”

“You always starving, Ken. I swear you’re a bottomless pit.”

“Damn. You tryna call me hell on the cool?”

She laughed loudly, then coughed a couple of times.  
“You’re a mess.”

As I gently rubbed her back, she looked up at me and I stared into her eyes. Gently caressing her cheek with my thumb, I responded, “You love this mess though.”

“Absolutely.”

# Chapter 13

*Audrey*

Kenneth helped me out of his car and escorted me inside one of my favorite restaurants in Beaumont... Crazy Cajun. I was ready for some boudin balls. I loved them from here. They were always delicious. My favorite dish was the Catfish Atchafalaya. It was fried catfish over rice with an etouffee sauce over it. I was just praying that my stomach could take it. The dish was known to be somewhat spicy.

I was still in disbelief that Kenneth was even here. The way in which I pushed him away, I wouldn't have blamed him if he was gone forever. True love wouldn't let him do that though and at this moment, I felt like I could conquer the world with him by my side. I was still a little weak, but I was so happy. My thirty-seventh birthday was off to a great start. I couldn't wait to get back home so my baby could see how cute I looked.

Before we left, my mama helped me touch up my makeup. I couldn't help but hug her tightly. Although she got on my nerves at times with her exaggerations, I knew she loved me and wanted what was best for me. Her keeping Kenneth in the loop with what was going on with me was her not following my wishes, but this one time, I was glad that she didn't listen to me. My soul felt better with him around, and as much as I hated to admit it, I liked him taking charge and not giving me a choice.

By the time we got to the door, I was already feeling weak. He was going to drop me off at the door, but I insisted that I could walk the distance. Truth was, I didn't want to be away from him for a minute. My heart and body had reattached to him in the worst way, and I didn't have the slightest clue what

I would do when it was time for him to go back to Houston.  
“You okay, baby?”

“Yeah. I’m good.”

He stared at me a little longer, probably knowing that I wasn’t really okay. It didn’t matter to me. Being with him made everything better, and I was such a fool to deny us both. Although I thought I was looking out for his future, it was destroying me emotionally. I leaned against him as we stood waiting for the hostess to seat us. “Is upstairs okay?”

“No ma’am. We need downstairs’ seating.”

“Ooooh. There’s going to be a thirty-minute wait on downstairs accommodations.”

“Kenneth, we can go upstairs. I just have to take it slow.”

He turned to look at me, and I rubbed his arm as the young lady stared at us. Turning back to her, he said, “Okay. We’ll take it.”

As I mentally prepared myself to climb the stairs, Kenneth stopped walking and turned to me. When he scooped me up like it was nothing and began climbing the stairs, I wanted to cry. The love he was showing me was unfathomable. I laid my head on his shoulder, trying to get my emotions in check. I didn’t want to mess up my makeup again, but if he kept doing things like this, I would look like a clown in a minute.

Once we reached the top, he lowered me to my feet as I noticed the hostess smiling at us. Pulling his face to mine, I kissed his lips softly, being sure not to smear my lipstick, then gently wiped his lips with my thumb. As he helped me to my seat, the hostess said, “When I think of love, this is what I imagine it looking like. Enjoy your meal.”

“Thank you,” I responded as Kenneth nodded.

When he sat next to me, I grabbed his hand and rubbed it between mine. I was somewhat cold. There weren’t a lot of people upstairs, which was a good thing. I didn’t need to be around a lot of people anyway. Chemotherapy could weaken

my immune system. There were so many things I should avoid while on chemo, I couldn't remember them all. Thinking I would never really be going anywhere was how I remembered the one about crowds.

I'd also remembered to keep my hands clean and get plenty of rest. The fatigue was wearing me out and so was the nausea. Thankfully, the nausea had been mild today. My appetite wasn't quite where it used to be, but whatever I couldn't eat, I would bring home. I supposed my body was handling the treatment well compared to what they told me. I was expecting to feel like shit until my next session next week. After that, I would have a two-week break.

Kenneth slowly pulled his hand from mine, then scooted me closer to him. "Do you know what you want to order? I don't want to keep you out too long. I know you should probably be away from all these people to lower the risk of infection."

"Sounds like you've been reading and researching."

"I have. I need to know what's going on with you. Although, I have so much more to read."

I smiled slightly, feeling a sense of gratitude. The Lord knew that despite my stubbornness, I needed someone other than my parents and Vincent to be there for me. My brothers and Chantrice had been calling, but I would never tell them the pain I was truly in. I didn't want them to be worried about me. "I know I want boudin balls. I'm going to attempt to eat the Atchafalaya too, although my appetite has been nonexistent these days."

"Mmm. That sounds good. How many boudin balls come in an order?"

"There will be plenty for you to sample. I think either six or eight. I probably won't eat more than two or three."

"A'ight, cool," he said, rubbing his hands together.

I slowly shook my head at his greedy ass as he stared at the menu, trying to figure out what else he was going to order.

“The duck is really good. I mean... most of their dishes are good except for that crawfish macaroni and cheese. I thought the crawfish were fried or breaded when I attempted to try them. When I saw that etouffee on it, it threw me off. The taste threw me off even more.”

He scrunched his face up. “That don’t even sound right to *me*. I’ll eat almost anything.”

I chuckled slightly as the waitress came and took our orders. This felt good to my soul and now that I was finally allowing him to be here for me, I hoped nothing caused him not to be.

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I heaved violently, but nothing was coming up anymore. Everything I’d eaten had come up and the inside of my mouth felt raw. At first, I thought it was from me throwing up so much, but when I checked my list of things to avoid, I realized hard, acidic, and spicy foods all made the list. Everything I’d consumed this afternoon was spicy. Kenneth gently rubbed my back as I heaved and cried. Normally my mama was the only one that saw this. “It’s gon’ be okay, baby. I’m here to help you through it.”

After handing me a wet towel to wipe my mouth and hands, he helped me from the floor and flushed the toilet. He led me to the sink, and I rinsed my mouth out. My mama had brought some salt water in the bathroom, but I knew that would have my mouth on fire. The chemo had caused my mouth and throat to be extremely sensitive, which could lead to mouth sores. The spicy food had only irritated it more.

Once I was done rinsing my mouth and had washed my hands, Kenneth washed his, then led me back to the bed. I was so drained I didn’t know how I would stay awake after this. “Once you rest a bit, I’ll help you take a shower. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry. I had no clue about the spicy food.”



“It’s not your fault, Ken. I should have paid closer attention to the pamphlets they gave me. I was just so happy to see you I didn’t think to take a look at it when you told me where we would be going for dinner.”

“Can I get you anything, baby?”

“Just some room temperature water, please.”

“Okay. Is it okay if Keeli comes in now?”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

He kissed my forehead and left the room. My eyes were weak as hell, but I wanted to spend more time with my baby. When we’d gotten here, I had only sat for ten or fifteen minutes before I had to throw up. That was only long enough for me to find out how her day had gone and to watch her excitement when she saw Kenneth. She was so happy, but now, she would be worried about me.

When she walked in, her eyebrows were raised and lightly scrunched, indicating a look of concern. I patted the bed for her to join me. She’d learned to slide in bed instead of hopping in it like she used to do. “Mommy, are you okay?”

“I am, baby. This is just a necessary evil that I have to go through before I can be myself again. Please don’t worry. Okay?”

“I can’t help it. I love you and I don’t like to see you sick. When will you start feeling better?”

I closed my eyes briefly, knowing that I would be enduring at least another four or five more sessions of chemo treatments. “I don’t know for sure, baby. I still have more treatments to get. But once this is all over, we will go on a vacation to wherever you want to go.”

She still looked sad but gave me a slight smile. “Okay. I’d go to school all year long if that would help you to feel better.”

I couldn’t stop the tear from rolling down my cheek. I extended my arm so she could lay in my arms. She allowed the tears to fall down her cheeks as I wrapped my arms around

her. This was the hardest part of what I was going through. Seeing my baby in pain from watching me in mine was heartbreaking. I knew she didn't fully understand because I was a grown woman and didn't fully understand. I could only pray that God would hold her in His arms and comfort her through this.

When Kenneth came back to the room with my water, he stopped in the doorway and just watched us for a moment. After I nodded the okay for him to continue inside, he brought my water to my nightstand. Keeli sat up and said, "I'm glad you're back, Mr. Ken. I missed you."

"I'm glad I'm back too because I missed both of you."

She smiled as he walked back to the other side of the bed and sat. "Why don't we have a movie day tomorrow, Mommy?"

"Sounds good to me, baby girl."

She kissed my forehead and left the room. Once she did, I broke out in tears. "Hey, what's wrong?" Kenneth asked as he scooted closer to me in bed.

"Seeing her sad and in emotional pain is killing me. It's bad enough it's affecting me. I didn't want this burden on her too. She's so young. She needs to be enjoying just being a kid, not wondering if her mommy will live or die."

After kicking off his shoes, he pulled his feet in the bed and embraced me. "Kids are resilient, baby. She will be fine. Vincent and I will make sure of it." He kissed my head, then continued. "Let me go make sure she's okay and talk to her about what's going on in her head, and I'll be right back."

"You're staying tonight?"

"I'm here until I feel like going home to check on things, then I'll be back. As long as you are going through this, I'm going to be here as often as I can. If it weren't for Kee being in school, y'all would be staying in Houston with me, especially since that's where your doctors are."

I smiled slightly as he kissed my head again and got up to go check on my baby. When he left, I wiped my tears and turned on the television, mainly for mindless noise. I grabbed my bottle of water and took a pain pill, then laid in bed, hoping that tomorrow would be easier.

# Chapter 14

*Kenneth*

“Talk to me, Kee. I know it’s hard seeing your mother that way. It’s hard for all of us.”

“She’s lost so much weight. Is she going to die?”

“No, baby girl. Sometimes we have to go through tough things in order to get better. The medicine they’re giving your mom to make her better is hard on her body, but it’s going to make her better in the long run. It’s kind of like when you fall and skin your knee. We have to clean it and that doesn’t feel so good. But in order for it to heal properly, we have to do that. You understand?”

“I think so.”

“Your mom’s illness is the same way. It’s just a longer process. It takes longer to kill the sickness in her body.”

Takelia stood from her seat and hugged me tightly. We’d had a good day until we got back to Audrey’s house. I wished I would have done better research when it came to what she ate. When I saw that spicy foods could affect her, I felt like shit about it. I should have known better. Although, I knew that she should have been aware of that as well, it was my idea to go to Crazy Cajun. Once Kee released her grip on me, she took off for the kitchen to meet her grandfather, Mr. Louis.

Besides Orion, he’d been helping me quite a bit with my businesses. Although most of it was done by phone, he saved me a lot of time by supervising and checking on things when I was submerged in getting my clothing line up and running. He constantly checked in with the restaurant owners and saw to the Airbnb reservations, reminding Orion of what was scheduled.

I stood from the couch to head back to the bedroom with Audrey. Once she'd rested a bit more, I'd help her get showered. When I opened the door, her mom was in bed with her, holding her and singing softly to her. That moment was so beautiful to me. I took out my phone and recorded for my own benefit.

After I'd gotten a few seconds of it, I ended the recording and walked into the room where they could see me. Audrey smiled slightly as she tried to sit up. "Baby, I don't want to interrupt. Enjoy time with your mom. I'm gonna make a few calls to check on things and check in with O to see how things are going at the tattoo shop. Once I'm done, I'll help you bathe."

Mrs. Leonard smiled softly at me as Audrey said in a soft voice, "Okay."

I left out of the room and just took a moment to breathe. Everything in me wanted to be able to take this pain from her. After sliding my hand down my face, I headed outside to make my calls, but before I could do so, Vincent turned in the driveway. I wasn't expecting him today, but I supposed since it was Audrey's birthday, I should have expected him to drop by. He got out of his car with a small bouquet of roses and a card.

My insides wanted me to feel a certain type of way about it, but I had to calm myself down. He was Takelia's father, he once had a serious relationship with Audrey, and I was sure that he still loved her. However, I knew Audrey was no longer in love with him. They were friends now and he was just concerned about her, just as everyone else was. When he got closer to me, he smiled and extended his hand. "It's good to see you, Ken. I'm glad you're here. Audrey needs you."

"Good to see you too. She's in her room with her mother. She wasn't feeling well after dinner."

I saw a slight wave of sadness come over him, then he smiled tightly. "Okay. I hate what she's going through. She's always been so strong and independent. It's devastating to see her so weak and fragile."

I nodded. “Well, I plan to be here as often as possible. She finally saw things my way and is going to allow me to be what she needs.”

“That’s great. I’m happy for the both of you.”

I nodded once again as he patted my shoulder and headed inside. As I was calling Orion, I heard Kee’s excitement from seeing her dad. I couldn’t help but admire him as a father. I’d never seen a look of disdain on Audrey’s face concerning him. While she wasn’t always forthcoming with anything, she couldn’t hide her facial expressions most times. I could clearly tell when she was feeling a way about something or someone.

It wouldn’t be easy being here for her and maintaining my businesses in Houston, but I couldn’t *not* be here. I had to convince her that it would be doable, and it would be if I could relax and trust that everything would be fine in someone else’s hands. I was naturally a person that liked to be in control and mentally, this having to trust other people was tougher than ever. It wasn’t so hard to trust my brother, but I knew he had other shit to tend to, not to mention his very pregnant wife.

As long as Audrey needed me, I would be here. I couldn’t sacrifice that any longer, whether she wanted me to or not. Vincent didn’t have to tell me that she needed me. I knew that already. That was why she was fighting so hard against it. I loved Audrey, and when it came to her, business would have to be on the back burner, because she was way more important.

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“I got’chu, baby. Don’t worry.”

I kissed Audrey’s forehead as I carried her inside. We’d just left her chemo session and she could barely stand. It was taking such a toll on her, but it was a necessary evil that she had to go through. This was her fourth treatment and her hair had completely fallen out. She often wore something on her head so Keeli wouldn’t see it, but I knew she’d already seen it from our talks.

As Audrey rested her head against my shoulder, I kissed her again, then laid her in bed. We were at my house in Houston, because I just didn't believe she could take the drive back to Beaumont today. She only had two more treatments left and I couldn't wait until it was done. We were praying for favorable results... to be cancer-free. So far, according to the PET scans, she wasn't quite there yet.

Grabbing the blanket, I pulled it over her to her chest as she stared at me. She'd lost more weight and she looked skeletal. The shit was eating me alive. Many times, I'd have to leave her side to go cry and pray. Being strong for her was so taxing, but I knew that she was worth it. I didn't want her to be so burdened with how I was feeling. She had enough on her plate just trying to remain positive. She'd been watching Orion's posts every day, and he'd send her a personal one as well just to keep her spirits up. Chan called every day also.

They wanted to come over today to see her since we were staying in Houston, but I hadn't mentioned it to her yet because I knew she was tired. Her eyelids looked extremely heavy. I kissed each one, then said, "Get some rest, baby. I'll have you some soup to eat when you wake up."

"But you need rest too, Kenneth. Lay with me," she said softly. "Take off your clothes and allow me to give you the comfort you always give me."

As sick and weak as she felt, she was always trying to make sure I was okay. "Baby, I'm okay. I'll lay with you though, because holding you in my arms gives me comfort in ways you wouldn't imagine."

She smiled slightly and I knew she didn't believe me. I was scared... scared to lose her. I was trying to find all the positivity and faith within me and every day, that shit was getting harder to accomplish. It seemed I was watching her wear away, and I hated the way that felt. Trying to keep her and Keeli's faith strong was a task when mine was fading as well. Vincent had been a huge help with protecting Keeli's mindset. He'd been keeping her encouraged as well.

Despite how we felt, we were all rooting for her. I could see her changing within too. She wasn't as worried about her appearance anymore. She didn't care who saw her in the state she was in. She just seemed glad to see people that cared for and loved her. A few people from her job had come to see her in the past few weeks. The moment they would leave her room, they would exhale and sometimes drop a few tears.

When I got in bed with her, she smiled and lifted her body slightly to lay on my shoulder. I rubbed her back as I held her close. When I felt her tremble, I knew she was about to break down and at this moment, I didn't think I was strong enough to not break down with her. "Kenneth, I think I'm dying. Inside, I just don't feel like I can take much more."

"Baby, whatever you do, just don't give up. Please." The dam broke and she began crying. I couldn't help but shed tears with her. "I love you, Audrey. I'm doing my best to keep the faith... that God will heal you. I have to admit that mentally, I'm weak today."

"Me too," she said, regaining her composure. "Just promise me that if God chooses to take me, that you will always remain in Keeli's life. She loves you so much. I love you too. I hate that I wasted so much time pushing you away."

This was the second time she'd requested this of me and this time I took her seriously. "What's important is that I'm here now. That's all that matters."

She wiped her cheek, then wrapped her frail arm around me. I couldn't help but close my eyes and pray silently. The holidays had been tough, but we'd done our best to enjoy them and be grateful that she was still here to share them with us. What I hated the most was that my dick still had the audacity to get hard whenever I laid next to her. It had been over three months since I'd last had her and while I wasn't dwelling on or even thinking about sex, it seemed he was on a different wavelength. "Ken?"

"Yes, baby?"



“I wouldn’t be angry if you satisfied him by being with someone else. You have needs and I know—”

“Audrey, dead that shit. The only woman I want is you. Period. If I can’t have you, then I won’t have nobody.” Turning to her, I lifted her head and stared into her weak eyes. “You hear me? It’s me and you. Forever.”

Her tears fell from her eyes as I softly kissed her lips, allowing them to linger. As I was pulling away, she put her hands to my face and deepened the kiss. Kissing her this way would have to suffice until she started feeling better. She just had to get better. Sliding my hand down her body, I rested it on her ass. She moaned, then separated our kiss. “I’m going to get better. I can’t miss out on the wonderful future we can share... the beautiful family we would have. I refuse to give up, Kenneth.”

I didn’t know where she found the strength from suddenly, but I was grateful. I was struggling something serious. “I believe that, baby, with my whole heart,” I said against her lips.

We didn’t kiss, just rested our faces against each other’s. I was inhaling her exhale and there was no other place I would rather be than soaking up all that she had to offer, even if that was only her simply breathing. Going through the trials she was facing, breathing was life. It was faith, love, determination, and will power. She was struggling but maintained the mindset that life was worth living. She was choosing to push through the storm to see the rainbow.

I slid my hand over her bald head, and she smiled, then did the same to mine. She was still my beautiful, strong woman, and I was glad to be here with her in this moment. “We’re twins now,” she said.

“Mmm hmm. Some sexy ass twins.” She giggled a bit, then winced, causing me to sit up a bit. “You good?”

“Yeah. Maybe after I sleep, I’ll feel better.”

“Well, let’s get to it. Don’t be snoring all in my ear.”

She smiled, then chuckled carefully, being sure not to cause herself more pain. “I don’t snore, buzzard. That’s yo’ ass.”

I laughed at her playful demeanor, then kissed her lips. “A nigga be tired.”

“Naw. That’s all that food you eat that’s pushing that air out so forcefully.”

“Oh, you just full of jokes, huh? Wait till you start feeling better. I owe you a severe tickling. I mean damn near hyperventilating from laughing so much. Keeli gon’ help me.”

She smiled big as her weary eyes stayed on mine. “I can’t wait, Ken. I love you.”

“I love you more, baby.”

She relaxed against me as I held her close to me. I needed to feel her breathing to soothe my worries. After kissing her head, I joined her in la-la land.

# Chapter 15

*Audrey*

“I know I’m not Ken, but I can soothe your hurts if you let me. Quit being stubborn.”

“Chan, I’m not comfortable with you being here. You could decide to drop that baby at any moment. I would have been fine until he got back.”

I broke into a coughing fit, and it felt like someone was repeatedly stabbing me. We’d just gotten back to Houston for my final chemo session. Just as they were about to get me situated, Ken had to run to check on the tattoo shop. There was some kind of altercation or accident or something. I barely heard what he said happened before he got out of the room. He’d called Chan to come sit with me, but she needed to be somewhere with her feet up.

She’d had complications early on and had been placed on light duty for the duration of her pregnancy. It was even more critical now that she followed the doctor’s instructions. She was almost eight months pregnant. After gently rubbing my back and handing me the cup of water from the stand next to my chair, she said, “Audrey, stop being stubborn. I’m fine sitting here with you. It’s not like I’m doing anything strenuous. Let me be here for you for a change. You have always been there for me, helping with Kirsten whenever I needed you to, not knowing that you were battling your own demons. So, chill out.”

I slightly rolled my eyes as she mumbled, “You can roll yo’ eyes all you want. You better scratch yo’ ass and get glad.”

I couldn’t help but laugh and pray that I didn’t start coughing again. Her dad used to say that all the time when we

were kids. Why would scratching our asses make us glad? Uncle Russell was a trip. “I miss him, so I know you do as well.”

She nodded. “But I find consolation in laughing and remembering the good times. It’s been almost two years now. I still find myself staring at Orion’s chest sometimes and just smiling.”

She grabbed my hand as a nurse approached us to check on me. Once I assured her that I was okay, I looked over at Chan. “When I start feeling better, we have to go to lunch, dinner, or something. Hopefully that’s before you go into labor.”

“Absolutely.”

My last chemo session had gone better than the previous one. Probably because my body had a longer rest between treatments. I had been claiming that this would be my last session, but I knew if the PET scan didn’t go well, chemo would be resumed. I chose to manifest good vibes though. Hopefully it wouldn’t take me as long to recover from this session like it took my second and fourth. I believed because they were only eight days after the previous one, it didn’t give my body enough time to fully recover.

Before the odd numbered sessions, I’d have a two-week break. After my fourth session, it took me an entire week to feel some relief. Ken had come close to taking me to the emergency room. He’d called the doctor’s office to seek advice a couple of times. I ended up staying in Houston for almost a week, because I didn’t think my body could handle the trip. I missed my baby something fierce and cried more often than not. I’d gotten close to telling the Lord to just take me.

Orion had been keeping me uplifted and reminded me of my upbringing. Letting me know that my words had power. I’d learned that much in church. However, he took it a step further and said that my thoughts had power as well. Sometimes, I thought if I didn’t say anything, I would be okay, but my thoughts were bringing me down just as much as if I

would have verbalized them. I appreciated his daily calls, as did Kenneth. He had a way with words that made people *want* to listen.

After my four-hour session, Kenneth still hadn't returned. I felt weak, but I wasn't feeling too bad. Hopefully things would stay that way. Chan helped me from the wheelchair to the passenger seat in her car as the nurse put my bag in the back seat. As I watched her waddle around to the driver's seat, my phone rang. When I saw Ken's number, I quickly answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, baby. I'm sorry I couldn't make it back. I'm still at the tattoo shop. Tell Chan to bring you here though. I should be done by the time y'all get here."

"What happened?"

"Two of the guys started fighting. Tore up a bunch of shit. How you feeling though?"

"I feel good so far. I believe it's because I'm claiming this as my last session. I'm glad to be done."

"I know that's right. I'm claiming it too. I'll see you when y'all get here. You're only about fifteen minutes away."

"Okay. I love you."

"Love you more, Audrey."

Chan smiled at me and said, "Now to getting better and being better than normal."

"Absolutely. I just wanna get back to my baby."

"How's Kee handling everything?"

"She's doing great... better than I thought she would. Kenneth, Vincent, and my parents have done an amazing job keeping her informed, encouraged, and calm. I even let her massage my head the other day. For the longest, I didn't want her to see my bald head."

"I'm so proud of you, Audrey. I know this has been a trying time for you, but I've watched you get stronger and

stronger with every hurdle that came your way. Last month, I prayed so hard. I thought you were going to give up. That was how disgusted and in pain you looked. But somehow, you pulled through it.”

“Prayer and your husband. God is using that man for a mighty work. And I surely can’t forget Kenneth. He’s been here every step of the way, putting me before his businesses and giving me all the time I need from him. Today was the first time he actually left me to tend to his business. He’s been with me for almost three months, and I can only remember him making a couple of trips to Houston to check on things. He’s amazing.”

“I’m so happy that you’re happy. Kenneth is amazing and the two of you deserve one another. I’m just glad that you finally saw how much the two of you needed each other. Y’all were miserable.”

I nodded as I reflected on how stupid I had been. I was just grateful to have him. Had he not come back for me, there was no telling where I would have been. The possibilities had crossed my mind a few times... struggling mentally with my diagnosis... losing my mind... dead. None of the possibilities were favorable for me. “Hey... Where did you go? You okay?”

“Huh?”

“You look like you’d zoned out. You feeling okay?”

“I’m okay. I was just thinking.”

“Care to share?”

I took a deep breath and smiled slightly. My feelings for Kenneth in this moment were so deeply rooted, I didn’t think I would be able to verbalize them. “I want to marry him.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened. I had pretty much denounced getting married after Vincent and I broke up. I was so bitter... thinking all men were trash and that they were only good for sex. Kenneth had proved me wrong on so many levels. “Chan, Kenneth means so much to me. I just

don't know what I would have done without him. I don't ever want to be without him."

"Wow," she said as a tear dropped from her eye.

This pregnancy had her emotional as hell. I knew that I had never been this open with anyone, but she was taking it overboard. I couldn't help but chuckle. "You don't have to make it seem miraculous that I'm telling you this."

"But it is! Audrey! I don't think I ever remember you being so vulnerable, sharing your deepest desires with me. God, I'm so happy for you."

As we sat at the traffic light across from the tattoo shop, I saw Kenneth walk out. I immediately smiled until I saw a woman come out behind him. My smile slowly fell from my lips as I observed him hug her tightly, like they were familiar with one another. There was no space between them. She kissed his cheek, then put her hand to it. It was so endearing. He kissed her cheek in return, then grabbed her hand.

I swallowed hard as I looked away. I couldn't be upset. I'd given him permission to be with someone else sexually... to give him what he needed. That didn't stop it from hurting though. *Did he have to leave me at chemo to do that though?* Couldn't he have been with her once I was at home? When I gave him permission to be with someone else, I didn't mean that I wanted to actually see him with another woman. I expected him to be discreet about it. Chan glanced at me as I took a deep breath, but she didn't say a word. She probably didn't know what to say.

When she drove in the parking lot, Kenneth smiled big and walked to the car, immediately opening the passenger door. "Hey, baby. I'm sorry I couldn't make it back in time."

I nodded and accepted his help to get out of the car. As he was about to lift me in his arms, I said, "I have it. You don't have to carry me."

He frowned slightly, then said, "Well, chemo must have gone really well. You're normally weak as hell."

I swallowed hard again, trying to keep my emotions in check, then went to the back seat to get my bag. “Audrey, I got that. Don’t I always carry your things?”

I nodded and tried to check my attitude. *You welcomed this, fool. You told him to go get satisfied since you couldn’t do it. Suck that shit up, and deal with the monster you created.* Despite my pep talk to myself, I still felt sick inside. Maybe I was overreacting. Kenneth said he only wanted me. I should believe him, but I couldn’t ignore what I saw.

Once he got my things, he grabbed my hand to lead me to his car. I peeked inside the car to tell Chan bye. “See you later. Thank you for being with me today.”

My voice had cracked and before I could stop it, the tear slid down my cheek. Chan gave me a look of sympathy. That alone made me think I wasn’t overreacting. *Was it a look of sympathy?* “Anytime. I love you, Audrey. Go home and get some rest.”

“I love you too.”

“Thanks, Chan!” Ken said.

“You’re welcome, brother-in-law.”

She drove away as we walked to his car. I remained quiet as he rambled about the shop and what had happened, but I wasn’t interested. I needed to know who that woman was, but at the same time, I didn’t want to know. I really wished I hadn’t seen a thing. When he opened the door for me, he asked, “You sure you okay, baby? You look down about something. They didn’t give you bad news, did they?”

“No. I’m okay. I’m just tired.”

“Okay. Well, let’s get home.”

*Your home.* We weren’t going back to Beaumont until Sunday since Keeli would be with Vincent. That meant I had tonight, tomorrow night, and Saturday night to be in my feelings. At least at home I could be occupied with something else or distracted by other people. As I sat, stewing in my



feelings, I supposed Ken took the hint. He'd stopped talking and had just grabbed my hand, probably confused as hell as to what was going on with me.

I wanted to ask him about what I saw, but that wasn't my style. I didn't want to seem insecure because under normal circumstances I wasn't. It was this disease... the way it barged in my life and took my health, body, and fucking soul and did with it as it pleased. I looked like a washed-up drug addict on their last leg. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I hated what I saw. From the bald head to the sunken in cheeks and dark circles around my eyes to the sagging, wrinkly skin... all of it made me feel undesirable.

The crazy thing about it was that the things I felt about myself, I'd never felt about another person battling cancer. I was hard on myself, constantly. Maybe that was my problem... not Kenneth. I was my own worst critic, and I was heading down a path of self-destruction just from the slightest thing. Only thirty minutes ago, I was feeling better than I ever had after a chemo session and now I was feeling like my world was crumbling.

When we'd gotten to his house, he kissed my hand then gently slid his fingertips down my face. "I love you beyond words, Audrey. I wish you could comprehend that."

I turned away from him. *Did he know what I was thinking?* "I love you too," I whispered, then opened my door and got out of the car.

# Chapter 16

*Kenneth*

I purposely remained silent about Audrey's slight attitude with me. I knew what she'd seen. Chan had let me know about it. All day yesterday, she stayed to herself, only talking to me when I asked a question. She was in her feelings big time. At first, I didn't know what was going on with her. My first thought was that she'd gotten bad news that she didn't want to share with me. Her reverting back to who she'd always been didn't surprise me. Cancer had made her vulnerable... made her express her true feelings more often. I attributed it to the assumption that she thought she was dying.

This morning, I'd fixed her a breakfast of eggs, pancakes, and turkey bacon. She'd only told me good morning and thank you. I wanted her to think that her assumptions were valid. Bianca and I were *not* a thing. She was a good friend from high school who I found out a few years ago at a family reunion, was my cousin on my dad's side. She'd come to the tattoo shop to get a piercing and to look at the place for the plans I had.

I wanted Audrey to ask me about her, but I supposed her ego was hurt. Her mind had probably gone to the day where she told me that I could sleep with someone else. Everything in me wanted to tell her that she was wrong, but my ego wouldn't allow me to do so. While I knew her thoughts were probably wearing her thin, I needed her to trust me when I said she was the only woman I wanted. Despite what she was going through, she was still the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

We were in the tub, and she was resting against my chest as I gently massaged her head. That always seemed to soothe her. I knew when she wrapped her arm around me, she had

come to accept whatever she thought had happened.  
“Audrey?”

“Yeah?”

“When are you gonna trust me, baby?”

She lifted her head slightly to stare into my eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Something is up with you. Tell me what you’re thinking. What’s going on?”

She shook her head. “It’s stupid. I’m overthinking and I just want to live in this moment. I love you, Ken.”

“I love you too. But you can talk to me about anything. You know that, right?”

I was doing my best to get her to express herself, but she was determined to keep her thoughts and inner turmoil to herself. That shit was probably stressing her the hell out and had her anxiety levels off the charts. “I know, but it’s nothing. Okay?”

Knowing that she didn’t like to be pushed, I left it alone.  
“Okay.”

I began washing her, gently rubbing the loofah over her skin. When I kissed her neck, she turned to look at me. Bringing her hands to my face, she said, “Kenneth Gentry, I love you so much. Thank you for being here for me for this entire ordeal. You’re such a good man. I wouldn’t have made it through without you.” She glanced away from me then lowered her head. “Was that a lady you’re seeing?” she asked softly.

I lifted her head by putting my fingertips under her chin.  
“The only lady I’m seeing is you. Who are you talking about?”

Her eyes watered and she broke out in tears and shook her head, quickly laying her back against me. She didn’t believe me because of what she saw. “Baby, please talk to me.”

She shook her head again as she cried. I dropped her loofah in the water and wrapped my arms around her. The way I understood her was beyond me, and the patience I had concerning her was surprising to even me. I wasn't naturally a patient person, but with Audrey, I would be whatever she needed me to be. Which was why I could no longer watch her suffer. I knew she needed clarity.

Since she wouldn't ask for it, I folded and gave it to her. The way her thoughts were tormenting her was tormenting me. Watching her break down over what she thought was going on was killing me. "The woman you saw at the tattoo shop the other day is my cousin. She asked how I was doing and when I told her how the journey has been for us but how we were making it through in spite of, she hugged me and kissed my cheek. Is that what you were thinking? Me seeing another woman?"

Audrey only cried more, burying her head against me. "Look at me."

When she finally did, she said, "I know I don't look the way I did when you met me, and that I'm not as desirable as I once was because of the pain I'm constantly in. I didn't want to lay all my insecurities on you. I'm so sorry, Ken. I know I said you could get what you needed, but seeing you... what I thought was being tender with another woman nearly took me out."

"I told you I only want you. I meant that shit, baby... with my whole soul. You're the most beautiful woman in the world to me. You got me forever. Don't ever doubt that again. Okay?"

She gazed up at me with her weary eyes and gave me a slight smile. "Okay."

"A'ight. Now let me get you bathed so we can get out of here."

She licked her lips, then kissed me. I couldn't help but close my eyes and thank God that she didn't ask me to explain

further.

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“Why are we wearing these if we’re going out?”

“Don’t worry about all that. Just put it on, baby.”

I’d gotten us pink, long-sleeved shirts made with the words, *I understood the assignment*, etched across the chest area with the signature pink ribbon in the background. Audrey looked so beautiful with her pink and beige, silk wrap on her head and pink lipstick. She wore khaki-colored pants with hers and I wore the same. It was kind of chilly outside and the last thing I wanted was for her to get cold. She tended to hurt more when that happened.

Although, she seemed to be in minimal pain, and I was completely happy about that. She was still fighting some of the side effects of the chemo, but it wasn’t nearly as severe as it was a month ago. I was grateful that she was no longer throwing up. Hopefully, she’d be able to gain a bigger appetite so she could start gaining her weight back. Week after next, we’d be going for the PET scan to see if all the cancer was indeed gone.

I watched her finish getting dressed, then we made our way out to my car. Excitement was surging through me, knowing that we could enjoy ourselves this evening. Once I opened her car door, I practically skipped to my side and got in. I turned to her and smiled, and she smiled back. “You still haven’t said exactly where we were going.”

“And I’m not going to say. You’ll see when we get there.” I grabbed the blindfold from my console and handed it to her. “You need to put this on though.”

“A blindfold? Are you serious?”

“Yep.”

She wiggled in her seat with a huge smile on her face as she slid it over her eyes. Audrey loved surprises... at least she did now. Not so much when we were first started talking. I

backed out of the driveway and headed to the tattoo shop. She would have given me so much grief about why we were at the tattoo shop when we were supposed to be going out. Just in case she didn't want to wear the blindfold, everyone was instructed to park across the street.

The moment we got there, and I'd turned the engine off, she was rushing me out of the car. "Kenneth, hurry! What are you waiting for?"

I laughed. "Damn! Can I take my seatbelt off first?"

Seeing her so excited had done my heart good. It was moments like this that I often thought of before she gave herself to me. These were times I imagined us having as a couple. She giggled and screamed, "I'm about to explode!"

I laughed as I got out of the car and walked around to help her out. Before I could even get to her, she was already getting out. "Audrey! Calm yo' ass down. I'm supposed to open your door, woman!"

I quickly texted Orion letting him know we were here, then grabbed her hand as she laughed and carefully led her to the entrance. "It's too quiet. Where are we?"

"Girl, we about to walk in."

As I quietly opened the door, she said, "I done had my last chemo session but you about to kill me."

There were some soft giggles and it caused Audrey to freeze. "I heard something," she whispered to me as I pulled her blindfold down.

Everyone yelled surprise and nearly gave her a heart attack. She put her hand to her chest but smiled big at the same time. The tattoo shop had been turned into a venue to celebrate her last chemo session and hopefully her cancer-free status. "Kenneth!"

She burst into tears and fell against me. "This is really what you and your cousin were talking about, isn't it? That's why you left me the other day."

“Yeah, baby. I wanted to surprise you. I was telling Bianca how strong you were, and I was getting emotional. But now, you finally get to meet some of my family. You’ve already met my dad, but no one else. Now, come on so you can have a seat. We have a special place for you.”

I led her to a super plush, oversized chair that also had an ottoman for her to put her feet up. I didn’t want her to tire out. Chantrice wobbled her way over to us and sat a crown on Audrey’s head. “You knew about this, didn’t you? That was why you didn’t say anything when I saw what I saw!”

“I couldn’t ruin the surprise!” Chan said while laughing.

When I got Audrey to the chair, she turned to look at me. “This is wonderful, baby. How did you get people from my job to come?”

“Have you met you? Everyone loves you, woman.”

“Mommy!” Kee yelled from behind me.

When Audrey saw Kee, she immediately hugged her. Vincent approached and shook my hand. “This is nice, man. I’m gonna have to get my next tatt done here if you can do it for me.”

“You know I got’chu. Thank you for keeping me in the loop when she was being stubborn. I appreciate you, man. You a real one.”

“Thank you for being a good man for her and my daughter.”

We shook hands again as Audrey and Keeli sat in the oversized chair. The music kicked up a notch and everyone was standing in line to greet Audrey. However, when she saw her brothers, who I had the pleasure of meeting yesterday, she nearly lost her mind. I couldn’t help but smile as I gave them space and went over to Orion and my dad and shook their hands. “Wow. She’s lost a lot of weight.”

I side-eyed my dad, and he lifted his hands in surrender. “I was just making an observation, son. I hadn’t seen her since

Orion proposed to Chan.”

My dad and I had a love-hate relationship. I didn’t hesitate to tell him exactly what I thought of him. Orion was the one who tried to keep the peace until Chan came along and Pop disrespected her. I tried to relax but the nigga in me was dying to come out. “Be careful, man. I’ll bust yo’ ass over that woman.”

He looked offended for a minute, but he could leave for all I cared. Harley joined us and shook hands with everyone. He was Chan’s baby daddy. Although the start was rocky, he was good people now. I brought my attention back to my baby and seeing the excitement on her face was enough for me. Making my way to the food table, I fixed Audrey and Keeli some wings, meatballs, and pasta. These were some of Audrey’s favorite foods that she could still stomach. The last time I air fried some wings, she nearly ate her weight’s worth.

When I brought her plate and bottled water to her, her eyes brightened, and she smiled. This was probably the happiest she’d been since her birthday, after her first chemo treatment. “Thank you, baby. Now go eat. I know you’re starving.”

“How’d you know?” I asked sarcastically.

She laughed and I couldn’t help but laugh with her. I made my way to the table and Bianca stood next to me. “She looks so happy. You did good, cuz.”

“Thank you. You did an amazing job decorating the place. It’s so elegant. I wasn’t expecting this much. Especially the canopy around her chair. It looks like a throne. You did your thing.”

“Thanks! I’m gonna go introduce myself so you can eat.”

“A’ight.”

I watched Bianca walk over to Audrey and introduce herself as Audrey glanced at me. I winked at her, and she smiled. Today had been perfect, and I could only wish for days as perfect as this in the future.



# Chapter 17

*Audrey*

My entire body was trembling as we sat in the waiting area. It had been two weeks since my last chemo session, and we were waiting to get the PET scan done. I had to have confirmation that I was free from the destructive forces of cancer. My body was starting to feel so much better. I even had a little peach fuzz growing on my head. I had just started to get my appetite back. It seemed I was always hungry now. I'd even gained five pounds.

Kenneth rubbed my hand between his, doing his best to keep me calm. After kissing my forehead, he whispered, "By His stripes, we are healed. You believe that, Audrey?"

"Absolutely."

He only nodded and continued rubbing my hand. It was soothing me for sure, maybe a little too much, because I let out a yawn. I laid my head on his shoulder, hoping we didn't have to wait too long. After the scan, we would leave while we waited for the results and didn't have to come back until one this afternoon. While we were both trying to keep the faith, I could tell he was just as nervous as I was. It wasn't that I was doubting God. I knew He was able, but if I prayed that His will be done, how did I know if it was His will for me to be healed right now? I supposed that was what I was nervous about.

I trusted that He knew what was best, but it would take a lot out of me if they saw something in that scan. We all prayed together the other night that God would shine His healing power on me, and I believed that He would. Taking a deep breath, I thought about what my baby said to me last night. *In a couple of weeks, we'll be able to play games together*

*without you getting sick.* She was so happy about that. I was too. I was even happy about returning to work if all checked out alright.

“Ms. Leonard?”

I looked up and saw the nurse was calling me to the back. Kenneth stood and helped me up as well, then we made our way to her. She smiled brightly, then said, “And how are y’all today?”

“I’m doing well,” I responded as we walked past her and through the door.

She led us to the scale so she could weigh me, then she led me into a room to check my blood pressure and temperature. “We are hoping you’re ringing that bell when you walk out of here today.”

“I will be,” I said, manifesting my victory.

“Amen, baby,” Kenneth said as he squeezed my hand.

Once they came in to take blood, we were ready to be transported to get the scan. I looked at Kenneth and he smiled at me. After leaning over to kiss my head, he said, “Here’s to new beginnings. I love you.”

“I love you too. You’re amazing.”

“So are you.”

When she wheeled me out of the room, I couldn’t help but think about the wonderful party Kenneth had thrown for me two weeks ago. I was so excited and surprised I didn’t feel the exhaustion until we got home that night. To see all the people there to offer their love and show their support was overwhelming. I dropped tears a few times. All of my coworkers were there, and my brothers had come from Florida.

The moment I saw them, I erupted into a joyful jubilation. It had been almost a year since I’d seen either of them and at least a couple of months since I’d heard their voices. I supposed since they were younger than me, they didn’t have

time for their big sister. They were in business together and they stayed busy, so I was beyond excited that they made time to come celebrate with me.

This was my third PET scan since my colectomy. The other two still showed cancer cells, but the last one showed significantly less than the one before it. I'd had two more treatments since then. When we got to where the scan would be done, the nurse said, "Okay. Let's get the confirmation you need, sweetie."

"Amen."

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The day had been long, and I was beyond tired, but ready to get to Beaumont to see my baby. I hated being away from her, but it had become a necessary evil since my doctors were in Houston. I was convinced had I stayed in Beaumont for treatment, I would have been dead by now. So sacrificing that time I would have spent with her was worth it.

Kenneth grabbed my hand and asked, "You good? You're really quiet."

"I'm good, baby. Just anxious to get to Keeli."

"That's understandable. I miss her too."

He gently caressed the top of my hand with his thumb as we rode to Beaumont. The music was playing softly, and I began humming along with SWV, occasionally glancing at Kenneth. He was looking straight ahead with a small smile on his face. My phone had been ringing practically nonstop, so I'd put it on vibrate.

I wanted to give my parents my test results in person. They'd even started calling Ken. It was killing him not to answer because he was a people pleaser when it came to my family. So I finally told him to text them and let them know that I wanted to give them the results in person.

After that, they stopped calling him and continued to repeatedly call me, knowing how stubborn I could be. Kenneth

was never really one to try to talk me out of my decisions until it came to us and our relationship. We had a beautiful, fairy-tale love affair... well, maybe a PG-13 love affair. Other than that, he let me work things out in my mind and respected whatever decision I came up with. I loved how much he trusted and respected me.

When he turned into my driveway, Keeli was the first one on the porch, hopping around in excitement. My parents joined her and anxiously stood there, waiting to know. My mom was literally biting her nails. Kenneth offered me a tight smile, then got out of the car and walked around to my side and helped me out.

As he escorted me to the porch, Keeli ran to us and gently hugged me around my waist. She didn't ask for the results, so I wondered if she even knew that I had them. "Hey, Mommy. I missed you."

"Hey, baby. I missed you too," I said as I leaned over and kissed her head.

Once she released me from her embrace, I grabbed her hand and continued to the porch. My parents seemed to be waiting on bated breath for my revelation... whether I was cancer-free or would have to continue chemotherapy. When I got close, I lowered my head because I couldn't bear seeing the expressions on their faces. They looked to be bracing themselves for bad news. "Hey, y'all. Let's go inside."

My dad quickly opened the door, allowing us to go inside. "Audrey, come on. This is ridiculous the way you have us waiting and sweating. Just say it. Whatever we need to do afterward, can be handled, but you gon' give me a heart attack before I even know what's going on," my mom said.

It took everything in me not to laugh at her theatrics. "Well... they didn't want to get my hopes up because I will have to have these scans once every three months for a year and then every six months after that, but as of now, I am cancer-free."

My mom nearly collapsed on the floor when she exhaled. Kee began screaming as she hopped up and down. Ken and I laughed at their reactions. It took everything in me not to share the good news by phone. This was the moment I had been living for. I wanted to see their reactions to my news. My dad sat next to me, allowing the tears to fall from his eyes.

“Baby, this is the moment I was living for, but for a little while, I thought I was going to lose my only daughter. Watching your body practically deteriorate right before my eyes was hard to watch, but I’m so happy this is done. Thank you, Jesus.”

Pulling me into his arms, he held me tightly, caressing my back as he kissed my head repeatedly. When my mama sat on the other side of me, she pulled me from his arms to hers and said, “Now I ought to kill you for making us wait!”

We laughed through our happy tears. After she released me, I called my daughter to me. She immediately fell on my lap and wrapped her arms around my waist. “Mommy, I’m so happy.”

“Me too, baby.”

“Can I call my dad and give him the news?”

“Absolutely.”

She left my arms to call Vincent and my gaze went to Kenneth’s. He was standing there quietly, watching my family celebrate with me. Standing from my seat, I walked over to him and wrapped my arms around him. Although he and I had celebrated at the doctor’s office in Houston and rang the bell together, I needed him to feel a part of the celebration here. His presence played a huge role in my outcome, and I knew that I would be indebted to him forever. It was a good thing that I had no plans of ever leaving him anyway.

He kissed my head and said, “Let me answer my phone. Orion has been calling back to back. If I don’t put him and Chan out of there misery, they might come find us.”

I giggled and nodded as he answered the call. I could hear Chan's mouth without him taking the phone from his ear. It sounded like she was giving him a good cussing for not answering their calls. He could barely get a word in. My mama grabbed my hand, stealing my attention from Kenneth and gently stroked my cheek.

"I know you think I'm overdramatic, but Audrey, I felt almost every emotion known to man in a matter of minutes. I'm so thankful though, that God chose to bless you and give you a way out for a second time. You are so strong, and I don't think I could ever endure half as much as you have. They say that God gives the toughest battles to his strongest soldiers and you, no doubt, are one of the strongest."

"Mama, there were times where I just wanted to give up, but that man right there... he kept me focused on pushing through it to get my reward. He helped me remain positive and constantly reminded me of my baby girl needing me. But through all this, I learned just how stubborn I was. I'd convinced myself that because of my diagnosis, no one needed to be bothered with me... that it wouldn't be fair for someone to come to my life to have to take care of me. Thankfully, Kenneth didn't give up on me. He's going to be my husband one day."

When he glanced at me, I knew he'd heard every word I'd said, and my face heated up uncontrollably. He was still on the phone, and I didn't think he was paying attention to our conversation.

"Well, life is short. You should make that happen sooner rather than later," my mama said in response then winked.

Bringing my gaze to hers, I knew she was right. Cancer could have taken me out of here, and I wouldn't have had the opportunity to know what it would feel like to be Audrey Gentry. Now that I was an overcomer once again, I was more determined than ever to seize the day.

# Chapter 18

*Kenneth*

I didn't know what Audrey was up to, but I was hoping that it didn't conflict with the plans I was making. I'd been on a high since we'd left the doctor's office a month ago. When he walked in with her chart in his hand, we were anxiously sitting there holding hands and praying. That was familiar territory for me due to all of the medical issues my brother, Orion, had. After watching us for a moment and waiting for our prayer to end, the doctor's smile lit up the room. We started celebrating before he could even verbalize what we knew.

Since that day, Audrey had been determined to live every day like it would be her last. She was eating like crazy and exercising, working to get her body as close to her normal weight as possible. I admired her strength. To hear her acknowledgement of the role I played in her journey warmed my heart, but when I heard her say that she wanted to marry me, I knew I had to get the ball rolling a lot quicker than I anticipated.

It had been in my mind a while. Audrey was the woman I loved and had wanted from day one. As I imagined the way she'd looked at me at Chantrice's daughter's party nearly two years ago, I couldn't help but chuckle. Just like I wanted to bend her over at first glance, she looked like she wanted to do some damage too. Now that I knew everything she'd been enduring on her own and how her mind worked, I could understand why she made the decisions she made regarding us.

However, I refused to be without her, and I was grateful that she was receptive to my efforts. It was tough watching her

endure the storm, but the rainbow was shining brightly now. I was ready to make her my wife yesterday. Now that I knew just how ready she was, I would make that happen as soon as possible.

Orion and I had gone ring shopping a couple of days ago and we'd talked a lot about Audrey's journey and how she was the woman for me. She made me stronger, and I was able to make her feel like a woman. My presence allowed her to be soft and vulnerable, and I loved how she let the wall down to do just that.

I'd just gotten back to Beaumont and would be spending the weekend with her. I had an entire evening planned for us for Saturday night and that was when I planned to offer her forever with me. While I knew she would say yes, I still wanted it to be special and memorable.

When I turned in her driveway, I noticed the house looked dark. It was only seven and her house usually looked a little livelier at this time. Her parents had still been spending a lot of time here, and it was Vincent's weekend to have Keeli, but he didn't usually pick her up until around this time. No cars were in the driveway to indicate anyone was home. I got out and quickly made my way to the door. I didn't know why I'd gotten nervous, but I had.

After ringing the doorbell, I took a step back and waited for her to open it. Instead, I heard her yell, "It's open!"

I frowned slightly, then proceeded to open the door. That was unusual for Audrey. Someone on the inside always came to the door, because she didn't believe in being in her house without locking the door. She said people were crazy and she didn't put shit past nobody. They would have to break in to get to her. She refused to make it easy for them. I slowly shook my head at the thought and made my way inside.

I could hear her moving around in the kitchen, so I closed the door and locked it, then followed the sounds of Jhené Aiko. When I turned the corner and walked inside, Audrey was standing there in a black, lace lingerie set. My dick stood



at attention immediately. I didn't expect this at all. My eyes widened as I scanned her body. She'd gained a few more pounds and they were filling in in all the right places.

I couldn't focus on anything I wanted to say. All I could do was grab my dick. That nigga was excited as hell. She smiled and allowed the sheer robe to fall from her shoulders as she walked to me. I seemed to be frozen in place, because I couldn't move a muscle, except the obvious one in my hand. When she got to me, she went up on her tippy toes and pulled me to her by placing her hand at the back of my neck. She kissed me and her tongue immediately found its way inside my mouth, exploring the possibilities.

I wasted no time allowing my hands to roam her body and squeeze it in the places I missed. While I'd only indulged in her this way a couple of times before she got sick, I made love to her every day in my mind. Lifting her from her feet, I walked her to the countertop and sat her on it. When I tried to pull away from her, she wrapped her legs around my waist, refusing to let me get too far away from her. I gently put my hand to her neck and slid it down her chest.

She was still at least thirty pounds lighter than what she was when I met her, but shit, if she still wasn't fine as hell. "You're so beautiful, Audrey."

Her cheeks turned rosy as she stared at me. "And you're so handsome. Hey, baby."

"Hey," I responded as I slid my hand between her legs.

I knew I would have to be gentle with her. Just because she was cancer-free didn't mean I could handle her roughly. I didn't know whether she was still having some pains here and there from the effects of the chemotherapy. Her eyelids fluttered, and she bit her bottom lip as my fingers bypassed her G-string and stroked her wetness.

When I withdrew them and brought them to my lips, she opened her eyes to stare at me. After licking them clean and licking my lips, I took my phone from my pocket. It seemed

she already knew what the deal was, because she brought one of her feet to the countertop and posed for me. “Mmm... look at that shit,” I said in a low voice as I stared at her pussy.

It was eating the material of her panties and I wanted to do some eating my-damn-self. Switching my camera to video, I stepped closer to her and zoomed in on her wetness. As I brought the camera to her breasts, she grabbed my dick, forcing me to get closer. “Kenneth... I’m fiending for you, baby. Please don’t make me wait.”

She knew I could never deny her requests, especially when she gave me that under-eyed, parted-lip stare. She was so fucking sexy. I continued to video her as I lowered my head and teased her nipple through the fabric. “Tell me where you want me to start then.”

“You’re in the right place, just keep going... please.”

I finally put my phone down and pulled my shirt over my head, then went back to her erect nipples. As I teased them with one hand, I pulled her straps down with the other, exposing her skin. When I took her nipple into my mouth, she gasped, then wrapped her legs around me again. “Oh, Keeeennn, right there.”

I continued sucking her nipple and swirling my tongue around it as I once again slid my fingers inside of her. Feeling her rolling her hips against them, I knew we needed to get our first orgasms out of the way and quickly before we ate each other alive. After releasing her nipple, I pushed her legs further apart and lowered my head to tease her pearl with my tongue. I began stroking her faster as she bucked against me, but this position wasn’t working.

Quickly scooping her and my phone up from the countertop, I brought her to the bedroom and saw that she had candles lit. I lowered her to the bed and finished undressing, then pulled off her G-string. I purposely left the fabric of her top wrapped around her waist then went back to the task at hand. Her taste was slightly different now and I knew it would

be. However, it had been longer than six weeks since her last chemo session, so I should be good.

As I slowly sucked her flesh, indulging in the shit that would be mine forever, she unleashed on me. Her nails lightly scratched my head as she pulled me in deeper to fully experience her waters. After a moment, she quickly released me and whispered, “Shit, I’m sorry.”

I kept my eyes closed as I savored her taste, refusing to even hear her apology. She had nothing to apologize for. Everything about this woman felt right and I would die to please her... literally. Going to my knees, I stared into her eyes as I hovered over her. I slid my fingertips down her cheek, then her shoulder, then kissed her thick lips. “You don’t have to apologize for needing me in no capacity, even if it’s to kill this pussy. I want you to love me without restrictions. I know how to tap out if I need to.”

She smirked, then bit her lip as I slowly entered her. Just as her eyes fluttered closed, I said, “Look at me, Audrey. Let me see your soul, baby.”

When her eyes opened, I watched the tears fall from them. I froze until she brought her hands to my cheeks. “I’m okay, baby. I’m just so overwhelmed right now. For a while I thought I would never feel you again.”

Using my thumbs, I wiped the tears from her cheeks, then kissed her lips. I honestly had felt the same way at one point, but I was willing to endure because I’d never known love like this. If I never got to feel her insides again, I chose to be okay with that. “I love you, Audrey. Damn.”

I stroked her slowly and gently, enjoying the feel of her wetness on my dick and doing my best not to get carried away. She wrapped her legs around my waist and said, “Kenneth, you can give me more. I won’t break, baby. Give me what you gave me the day I came here after my diagnosis. I can handle it.”

“You sure?”

“Mmm. Hell yeah.”

I began stroking her with more force while I tried to contain my excitement. Cumming too fast would be the death of me, but her pussy took no prisoners. It annihilated my dick the last time and it was on course to do that shit again. However, this time, Audrey was moaning in ecstasy, and I wasn't wondering if I was hurting her or not. When her nails dug into my back and she released her orgasm, it was my undoing.

I fell victim to the grip her walls had on me, and I knew that I would take a TKO every time.

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“You promise this won't take long? We have reservations, baby.”

“I'm positive. My lil cousin is just a little over the top and she has to have a big party for every birthday.”

I slid my hand over my bald head as Audrey and I headed to a hall on the west end of town. Our reservations were for eight and it was already seven. Her ring was resting in the pocket of my suit coat, and I was starting to get nervous about whether I could even provide for a family or not. My businesses had been doing well, but the tattoo shop had taken a huge hit by me not being there. We'd lost a lot of customers that I would have to somehow get back.

When I turned into the parking lot of the venue, it took me nearly five minutes to find a parking spot. Audrey played on her phone for a bit. “My parents are already inside.”

“Okay.”

Once I parked, I walked around the car and helped her out. As we walked toward the entrance, I could hear the music. I just hoped that Audrey would be mindful of the time. The minute we walked inside, the crowd went crazy. My eyes widened and I realized she'd thrown a whole party in my honor. *Shit*. When I saw Orion heading my way, I chuckled.

He was the only person that knew of what I planned and had made the reservations for me... supposedly.

I lowered my head and chuckled, then pulled Audrey to me. "So this is what you've been up to, huh?"

She put her hands to my face. "I owe you my life, Kenneth. I would have died without you, and I know I've said that before, but I can't stress just how important you are to me... how much you mean to me."

I kissed her lips until she pushed me away. "Greet your guests, baby. We have plenty of time to taste one another."

When she said that, I couldn't help but think about our session last night. We made love off and on for a couple of hours, until her body tapped out. Thankfully it wasn't because she was in pain. We were both worn out. It had already been a long day for me.

Orion approached me with Keeli and Kirsten as his sidekicks. After hugging them and watching them walk away, I brought my attention back to my brother. "I ought to knock you out for keeping this from me," I said playfully.

"Hey, what was I supposed to tell your woman? She wanted to pay tribute to the man she loved. Besides, you can do what you wanted to do here."

"Naw. Not in front of all these people. You know how I feel about crowds."

"Look out back. There's a nice setup out there. Although it's a little chilly, you can get the privacy you want. Did you even ask Mr. Leonard?"

"Shit! No. I didn't."

"Well, you don't have to wait much longer, because he's heading this way."

"Fuck. I don't know how I didn't think to ask him for his blessing."

“Because our father wasn’t really around, and I didn’t have a father to ask. So it wasn’t fresh on your mind.”

“Hey, son. You looked pretty surprised,” Mr. Leonard said.

I turned to him and smiled at the fact that he called me son. This wouldn’t be as difficult as I thought. “I am. I can’t believe Audrey did all this... planned all this. And I smell some amazing food I’m about to get at in a minute. But I need to speak to you first.”

He frowned slightly and said, “Yeah, sure. What’s up?”

I led him to a quieter area near one of the exits, then looked to see where Audrey was. I met eyes with Orion, and he winked as he led Audrey to the other side of the venue. Turning back to Mr. Leonard, I pulled the ring from my coat and handed it to him. “With your blessing, I want to marry Audrey. I’m sorry I didn’t come to you sooner. It didn’t even dawn on me that I hadn’t, and I apologize.”

He waved me off. “Man, after everything we’ve been through? I already consider you my son. I wouldn’t have been offended. You are the best thing that has happened to her, besides Takelia. You’ve changed her for the better. I don’t know if you see it, but she’s softer and shows her emotions more. So, you have my blessing, but you didn’t need it. You’re perfect for her and you’re everything I could want for my only daughter. I’m proud to call you son.”

He had me standing here getting all emotional and shit. To me, he was the epitome of what it meant to have an involved father. The way he accepted me into their lives meant everything to me. He’s always treated me with the utmost respect and made me feel like family from the beginning... long before Audrey did. I nodded and smiled tightly. “Thank you... Pop.”

He smiled big, then shook my hand and pulled me in for a hug. It was sad that I felt closer to this man than my own father... but whatever. After he looked at and complimented the ring, he gave it back and I walked away from him in search

of Audrey. I couldn't wait another minute, especially since I knew she'd been waiting for this moment.

When I got to her, I grabbed her by the hand and pulled her away and out of the door. She didn't seem surprised or confused as to what was going on. It was like her spirit was receptive of everything concerning me and I loved that. "Baby, I'm sorry to pull you away, but I couldn't wait another minute."

I went to my knee but what surprised me was when she went to her knee too. I frowned slightly but continued. "You are everything I've ever wanted in a woman. I've been in love with you for a long time and when you opened up to me, it was like you swallowed me whole. I have no shame in saying that you have me at your disposal. Whatever you need, I want to be the one to provide it. I want to spend the rest of my life with you... making you and Kee happy for the rest of my life. So... will you be my wife?"

I pulled the ring from my pocket and opened the box. She stared at it as tears flowed from her eyes. After a few seconds, she looked back up at me. "I've told you how much you mean to me. Because of you, I feel more comfortable expressing my desires and fears unapologetically and without hesitancy. I love you so much, Kenneth. Will you be my husband?"

She pulled a damn ring out of her bra, and my mouth fell open. I closed my eyes as a smile spread across my face. I pulled the ring from the box and slid it on her finger, then stood and helped her stand. "I can't believe you were going to propose to me."

I chuckled slightly as did she. She grabbed my hand and pushed the ring on my ring finger. "Not that I was rushing you, but I didn't want to wait. I wanted to show you how serious I was about being yours. I'll never push you away again, Kenneth. I know it isn't traditional, but I thought you were taking your time until I was fully back to myself. I've already put in for a transfer to a branch near your house and checked into the school for Keeli. I'm all in, baby."

I pulled her in my arms as I heard applause. Turning to the building, I saw everyone gathered at the windows. I chuckled and slowly shook my head. “Damn, Audrey. This moment has always been on my mind, and I’m glad we were in sync on it. Our spirits have intertwined and because of it, I know that our marriage will be blessed by God.”

I kissed her lips and it felt as if we were levitating. My heart felt light, and I felt the happiest I’d ever been. We would finally be a family.



# Epilogue

*Audrey*

## **One year later...**

“Calm down, baby boy. Let me get your pamper on,” I said as I fought trying to hold Mason still.

Chan and Orion’s baby boy was eleven months old, and he was a handful. It was always a battle trying to change his pamper. He didn’t want to be still. She’d gone into labor two days after Ken and I had gotten engaged. Chan was laughing at me as I struggled with him. She was in the rocking chair, rocking Amir. Two months ago, Kenneth and I adopted a newborn.

He was the sweetest baby and he practically looked like he could have been ours. He had my eyes and Kenneth’s lips. It was like God created him just for us. He only cried at the typical times babies cried... when he was hungry or wet. No one could tell me that I didn’t birth him myself. That was how much I loved him and how attached I’d gotten. He was such a beautiful baby.

Kenneth and I had an intimate wedding ceremony two months after we proposed to one another, and Keeli and I moved to be with him during her spring break. She’d adjusted well at her new school, not to mention she was there with Kirsten, her cousin and best friend. I’d also adjusted well at my new location and had gotten comfortable. Kenneth had gotten me involved in his many business ventures as well. My man was a hustler, and he was extremely talented.

He’d begun painting and he had a few pieces that had auctioned well. I was extremely proud of him. He’d done a

painting of Keeli and Amir that brought tears to my eyes. As amazing of a tattoo artist that he was, I should have known that he could draw. He'd given me my first tattoo near my ankle of the pink cancer ribbon. That shit hurt like hell, but if I could endure and beat cancer twice, I could handle anything.

All my scans had been good, so now, I wouldn't have to have another one for six months. I was beyond grateful to be healthy again. I'd gained all my weight back, plus a few pounds. Kenneth stayed squeezing my ass, saying, *look at all this cake*. I would giggle then jiggle it for him. If I could get pregnant, I would have, because we'd been insatiable ever since we started back. Making love to Kenneth was like communion with God. However, fucking Kenneth was like being inhabited by demons.

He took my body places I couldn't describe... places it had never seen, and I had absolutely no control of how it reacted. When Keeli would go to her dad's house, it was like the entire house was our playground. I believed I'd slid up and down every wall and been spread eagle on nearly every surface. The pictures to prove it were in Kenneth's vault app on his phone. We could probably make millions off all the footage he had.

After I finally got Mason's pamper on, I sat him on the floor to crawl around and got Amir from Chan. "You're more my speed, munchkin. Mason is way too advanced for me right now."

Chan giggled as she went to get Mason and put him in his playpen. He was already meddling in stuff he had no business in. Orion and Kenneth walked inside, and Kenneth came straight to us and snapped a picture with his cell, then kissed my forehead. They'd just come back from showing a bed and breakfast to a potential customer and they'd also shown another property to a group of women. Chan and I had joked about going along for that one, but quickly declined when they agreed to take us with them.

"How has Daddy's lil man been? Mommy taking care of you?"

I smiled at how affectionate he was. When we got Amir, he'd shed tears and it pained me so much. I really wished I could have had his children. He immediately lifted me spiritually and reminded me of how much he loved me despite the fact I couldn't have his children. I often wished I had met him sooner... just maybe I could have. However, I learned to have no regrets. Life was meant to be lived just the way I'd lived it. Every situation, obstacle, and triumph molded me into who I was today, and I was beyond proud to be in this moment in my life as Audrey Gentry.

## The End

If you did not read the author's note at the beginning, please go back and do so before leaving a review. ❓❓

# From the Author...

This story took me through it emotionally. While Audrey was extremely stubborn, I felt so sorry for her. A lot of times, we as women believe that we don't deserve certain things because of our position or current circumstance, not realizing that we can be blessed in spite of or during our moments of difficulty. When Audrey finally accepted the fact that Kenneth wanted to love her through her stubbornness and struggles, it made her so much better.

Kenneth... what can I say? He was perfect. He was everything Audrey needed him to be... even through her pushing him away. Unconditional love was what he showed her and that was what won her over... his persistence to love her and take care of her through her battle with colon cancer.

In 2020, my husband lost an aunt, who was a breast cancer survivor, to colon cancer and a month later, I lost an aunt to cervical cancer. They were always asking about one another through their suffering and both of their names were Rose. So this story hit home in so many ways, and I struggled a little getting it written. But I wanted to honor them and their struggles that they endured for years through this story of love and triumph.

I hope you enjoyed this read. Whether you did or didn't, please take the time to leave a review on Amazon and Goodreads.

There's also an amazing playlist on Apple Music and Spotify for this book under the same title that includes some great R&B and rap tracks to tickle your fancy.

Please keep up with me on Facebook (@authormonicawalters), Instagram (@authormonicawalters), Twitter (@monlwalters), Clubhouse (@monicawalters), and TikTok (@authormonicawalters). You can also visit my

Amazon author page at [www.amazon.com/author/monica.walters](http://www.amazon.com/author/monica.walters) to view my releases.

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