

Kenny was working hard at the proposals in front of his face. His attention turned from the computer, to the pile of papers neatly stacked on his desk. He and Brian had been working on a program for Ford Fargo Wealth Management. It was a deal that would land them a handsome bonus and recognition in the computer and technical industry. It had taken William Oberly, the owner of Oberly Communications, two years to get a meeting with Truman Ford, the CEO of Ford Fargo.

William immediately assigned the account to Brian and Kenny. They had to assimilate an operative program that enabled each department to work efficiently, productively, and securely. Ford Fargo had three thousand employees with multi-security levels within the company. Truman gave them six months to complete the work. Writing the access programs, bypass systems, and technical instructions was Brian's forte. Kenny designed the screen programs and function capabilities, and wrote some access programs as well while William overlooked the expense proposals. Kenny and Brian had been working on nothing but the Ford Fargo's account since the meeting. They had been working eight-to-eighteen-hour days for the last three and a half months. At times, they worked from home.

They were now in the failure stage of the project. This was a good sign. First, they had to make sure that no one could infiltrate the systems. This was no easy job. Creating and correcting problematic system failures was the only way to make sure that it wouldn't crash later. Completing the job ahead of schedule was the thrill of it all. Kenny and Brian worked well together, so well that they had already thought of and prepared to design a system for a large company such as Ford Fargo. Truman Ford had called ahead of schedule to see how far they had progressed. He was surprised to learn that they were basically done and ready to show off their skills and ingenuity. Truman was amazed. He invited them to join him in Grand Cayman. It was his annual vacation spot, and he didn't mind mixing business with pleasure.

"Mr. Brown, Tyre is on line one," Kendra said over the intercom. "Shall I transfer him?"

"Yes. Thank you, Ms. Wellington," Kenny answered. In the next breath, excited and worried, he asked, "Son, to what do I owe the honor of

this phone call from you in the middle of the day? Is everything alright? Do you need something?"

"Dad, slow down," Tyre laughed. "I'm fine. I was calling to tell you I'm coming home tomorrow, and I may have a friend with me. I wanted to ask your permission first. We are out on break for two weeks, and I thought it would be nice to come home."

"Sure, you can bring a friend. I'll call Esmerelda and tell her to tidy up the guest room! I'll see you tomorrow, son."

"Thanks, Dad. I love you."

"Love you, too," Kenny said. He hung up and called Kendra into the office.

"Call Esmerelda. Tyre is coming home tomorrow. Please tell her to prepare the guest room. Oh! Tell her not to worry about my dinner tonight because Brian and I are eating out."

"Yes, Sir." Kendra replied, waiting. She thought he looked as though he was forgetting something. "Anything else?" she asked.

"Is Brian still at Convergys working on their system?"

"Yes, as far as I know. He left me a message that he would be in as soon as he was done." Kendra paused. "Anything else?" she asked again.

"Umm, do you have next week's itinerary complete yet?"

"The hotel that you wanted is booked solid. I'm checking other hotels and will have that information for you tomorrow."

"Good enough. Thanks. And, I'd appreciate it if you would hold all my calls." Kenny sat back in his chair and smiled.

Kendra Wellington had been working for Oberly Communications, under the supervision of Kenny and Brian, for eight years. She enjoyed working for them because they were the best to work for, and to have as friends. In her opinion, the both of them were great fathers and wonderful husbands. Brian had his own sorrows of a failed marriage to Lolita, but Kendra grew fond of Kenny because of his faithfulness and dedication to his wife Carol through a fatal illness. She watched him day in day out as he tried to be strong when most men would have crumbled under the stress. He was by his wife's side as she took her last breath. She was the love of his life and the inspiration for his poetry. He kept her picture on his desk, even though she was gone and he was ready to move on.

Kendra noticed Kenny had that look in his eyes as she walked out of the office. The slightest thing triggered that stare, the look he got when his mind wandered into the past. Thinking about the times he spent with his wife, he used to cry, but now he smiles. After twenty-three years of loving the same woman, it would be hard to forget any one moment in time with that person. Carol was his world and his son Tyre, who is attending college to become a pediatrician, is his pride and joy. They have a wonderful father-son relationship that Kendra wishes her son and ex-husband had when they were together.

Carol and Kendra's friendship developed shortly after she started working for Oberly Communications. Their relationship began when Carol was to have lunch with her husband, but an unexpected emergency came up, and Kenny had to oversee a system malfunction. Carol didn't want to eat lunch alone that day, and Kendra was encumbered with grief because she and Javon had fought constantly during that week. Carol could see how sad she was, so she offered to take Kendra out for lunch. From that day on, they were like sisters. Kendra and Carol would take the boys to the amusement park and any other place that would occupy their time as they shared girl talk. Kendra was invited to family gatherings and outings although Javon would never accompany her. There were times that Javon would accuse Kendra and Kenny of having an affair. This was his way of creating an argument so that he would have an excuse for leaving the house and not returning until the next day. Kendra instinctively knew that there was nothing out there to keep him from home except another woman, or maybe several other women. Javon had a beastly nature for young girls and loose women. He referred to Kendra as too reserved, boring, and not spontaneous enough, saying she didn't possess the wild nature he desired. It was only a matter of time before she served him with divorce papers. Javon's abuse and infidelity had taken its toll. Kendra didn't let his abuse break her spirit completely because she had her son Javon Jr. to look after. She tolerated the physical abuse for as long as she could and in the end, had him arrested. Kendra took every legal action needed to ensure that Javon stayed away.

When Carol learned that her cancer returned without mercy, she was more worried about Kenny than about herself. He took the news harder than Carol. When Kendra learned that Carol was ill, she felt as though she

was going to lose the only sister she ever had. Carol was the one person who she could tell her secrets to, and who gave her a shoulder to cry on when she needed it most, which was often. Kendra was devastated. Although Carol had cancer long before she told Kendra, she didn't make a public announcement about it. They had become such great friends that Carol knew Kenny would need someone to talk to other than his sister. Kenny's brother Maurice had issues of his own, but he was there for Kenny. Carol felt secure in knowing Kendra would be there to help Kenny with Tyre.

Four years after Carol's death, Kenny finally started to date. He continued to write his poetry and post it on BPM, a dating site he joined in hopes of finding someone to make him feel the way his wife had; someone he could relate to, and who would understand his passion. He wasn't looking for another Carol, but he wanted to feel that love, that joy he once had. He met plenty of women and they melted at his words. It was there that he met Nichelle. She was different from the other women by the way she clearly expressed what his poetry did to her emotions and need to have that kind of love. It wasn't long before they started sharing and writing poetry with each other. Kenny thought she was very bold in her writing and she was the only one who truly understood his passion. He liked her style of writing because she had a way of bringing out emotions in him. They had that 'certain' in words. When time permitted, they often talked on the phone. However, planning to meet was never discussed in detail. Unfortunately they didn't connect in any other way because during the course of conversing through poetry, he met Charlene, who possessed all the physical characteristics that he desired.

Kenny turned his chair around and then stared out of the window. There wasn't much of a view except into an atrium filled with artificial plants and shrubs. His imagination took the artificial area to heights that only his mind could capture. He sometimes reminisced about how he would meet Carol at his favorite café, The Grand Lux. They would act as though they were strangers. He knew the men there would see her walk in and stop everything just to watch the way she walked. Her beauty would stop them with just one glance. Every time he looked at her picture, he looked up at the poem he had written just for her, which was titled, Breeze. He'd recite to her word for word. He read it to her as she took her last

breath. He loved it so much that he had the hand-written version framed and hung on the wall in his office. He was deep in thought about Carol when William Oberly knocked on the corner of his desk.

“Kendra and I have been calling you. You must be dreaming of your next erotic poem,” William said, laughing. “Make sure I get a copy,” he added.

Kenny gave a bashful chuckle. “I’m sorry, Bill. I drifted off for a minute, but I wasn’t dreaming of an erotic poem, either.”

William glanced over at Kenny’s computer, then at the pile of papers on his desk. “It must be those figures that have your attention. Maybe it’s the zeros you’ll be counting on your check when you close this deal.” William raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, that’s it. This has been one hell of journey,” Kenny explained.

William patted him on the shoulder. “You will do fine. You and Brian can pull this off with your eyes closed. You two are the best at what you do, and I trust you. That’s why I pay you two the big bucks.”

“I’ll agree with you on that, Sir.” Kenny replied.

“Maybe while you are away, you can get some rest. After you close the deal, you and Brian should take a few days to relax. Don’t worry about rushing back here.”

“Thank you. I just may do that. I’m sure Brian and I can find something to keep us busy.”

“Or, someone!” A subtle perverse smile crept across William’s face. “Call me as soon as the deal is done. I’ll see you when you get back.” William looked at his watch. “Rachel is getting married, again, so I’m getting ready to catch a flight. I’ll be back on Wednesday.”

“Congratulations!” Kenny said. He stood up with a wide smile.

“Congratulations, my ass!” William retorted, unhappily. “She goes through men faster than she goes through money. If she weren’t my only child, I’d cut her off. I’d let one of those sorry ass bums support her. They don’t realize that the only money she has is what I give her. I don’t know for the life of me where she goes to find these losers. I told her this asshole had to sign a prenuptial agreement or there would be no wedding. I swear, Kenny, this is the last wedding I’m paying for.”

“Bill, she’s your only child.”

“And you say that to mean what?” he asked.

Kenny burst out laughing.

William said, “I didn’t build this company for her to give it away to some knucklehead who couldn’t tell his dick from his thumb.” He turned to walk out, but stopped at the door. “I’ll give this company to charity before I let my daughter piss everything away.”

“She wouldn’t do that. Have a little faith in her.”

“I have faith in you and Brian.” William smiled.

“Well, try to have some fun at the wedding.”

“You need to follow your own advice.” William smirked. He tapped his fingertips against the wall. “Enjoy your trip, Kenny. Remember to get some rest and no Kung-Fu stuff. I don’t want you going Bruce Lee on anyone.”

“Yes, sir. Give Rachel my love.”

After William left, Kenny sat down and focused his attention back to his work. He had turned his phone on silent and was clicking away when Kendra’s voice came over the intercom thirty minutes later.

“Kenny, I know you said to hold all your calls, but Brian is on the phone.”

“Okay,” Kenny grunted. “What’s up man?” He asked Brian.

“Are we still meeting up tonight?”

“Yeah, why? What’s up?” Kenny asked, concerned.

“Can you run a systems check for me on the Convergys account? I have to get over to the school and pick up Chyra.”

“I thought Lolita was supposed to pick her up?”

“She was. She must’ve forgot. The principal just called. Chyra is still there.” Brian sounded uptight.

“Are you going to make it back to the office?”

“No. By the time I pick her up and get through traffic, I’ll have just enough time to cook her dinner if I plan on meeting you tonight.”

“That’s cool. I’ll run the check. I’ll see you tonight about nine-thirty. I can give you an update then.”

“Thanks, man.”

Kendra took it upon herself to call Brian when she noticed that he and Kenny had concluded their conversation. She didn’t like the sound in Brian’s voice. There was only one woman who got him so upset, and that

was Lolita. Every since their divorce became final, she had neglected their daughter, and Brian always had to pick up the pieces.

“Hey! Are you okay?” Kendra asked the moment Brian answered.

“You know me. I’ll survive,” he replied.

“I know. Remember, if you need a babysitter, I’m here.”

“Thanks for the offer, Auntie Kendra.” Brian said and then laughed.

“Well, I have nothing else to do. If you need me next week, I’ll make sure she gets to and from school.”

Brian sat silently for a minute. “No. That’s her mother’s job.”

Kendra could feel his rage through the phone. “The offer still stands,” she said and then hung up. She let out a deep, sympathetic breath for Brian.

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Nichelle noticed that her day went by smoothly. Everything she planned to have done by the end of the day was complete except she hadn’t found the perfect yellow dress. It was important for her to have one. Her ideal, imaginary scene, walking hand in hand with Kenny up and down the beach, in her perfect yellow dress, had to come into fruition. “No need to worry, ‘Chelle. You’ll be there tomorrow, everything you imagined will become reality,” Nichelle said aloud to herself. She knew that she remained sane as long as she didn’t answer her own question, or hold a deep conversation with herself. Traffic was so backed up that she had to keep herself amused with pleasant thoughts. Stop. Go. Stop. Go. Her pleasant thoughts almost turned into road rage. “Happy thoughts!” she mumbled over and over. “Think of Kenny,” she said, as she crept through traffic. She took her mind to a different place and time. She thought of meeting Kenny for lunch or possibly having a romantic dinner and then making love in front of a fireplace. She was doing great until traffic came to a complete stop.

*Wait! What are you thinking, Nichelle?* She asked herself silently. She looked in the rearview mirror, and thought about the fact that Kenny hadn’t invited her to California. So what if they wrote poems together, sent endless emails, and talked on the phone? That wasn’t an invitation. Two things were certain; Kenny never asked her to come to California nor did he mention anything about traveling to Florida to meet her. She remembered making mention about visiting California and he didn’t have

any objections. Kenny admitted that dating scared him because he didn't know what to expect, but that wasn't a warning to not visit him.

Luckily, her phone beeped. Nichelle felt it was a sign. She was letting her nerves get the best of her. Traffic remained at a standstill as she read the message Shaniqua sent her: "New stuff in, come check it out!" Nichelle laughed. It was what she needed to keep from cussing and fussing all the way to the store. It took Nichelle nearly thirty minutes to make it there, but she finally arrived with some religion still left intact. She had at least two hours to shop before they closed.

"Hey girl," Shaniqua yelled as soon as she saw Nichelle walk in. She pointed towards the wall and the far-end racks. She yelled, "Check it out." Shaniqua didn't care anything about the customers who were standing at the counter. She yelled as though no one else was in the store.

*That girl is so ghetto*, Nichelle thought to herself. She nodded her head to let Shaniqua know she heard her loud and clear.

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Meanwhile, back in California, Kenny looked at his watch and saw that he was behind schedule. He turned on his favorite jazz CD and went back to work. Kendra knocked on his door around five-thirty. Kenny started printing the first set of configurations when she told him goodnight and walked out. Kenny was finished for the night by seven. On his way out, he placed the pile of papers on Kendra's desk with a note. His cell phone rang after he exited the elevator.

"Hi, baby! How are you doing?" Charlene asked.

"I'm fine, but I'm in a hurry. I have to meet Brian."

"Where? Do you want me to meet you?"

"At the Grand Lux. He and I will be talking business, mostly."

Kenny replied.

Charlene sucked her teeth. "Does that mean, no?"

"It means that he and I are having a business meeting."

"Can you come over after you're done? We can have a nightcap," Charlene offered.

"Okay. Talk to you later," he agreed, smiling.

Kenny slid behind the steering wheel of his black Escalade hoping traffic wasn't too backed up. He entertained himself as he crept through traffic. He noticed the way female drivers and passengers smiled at they

passed. Analyzing the way he usually met women, he didn't need a pickup line. Women came to him with some form of compliment. Whenever he performed at the café, someone would approach him about his poetry. Usually, he took it from there if he was interested. As he drove, he thought about all the women he had met over the last six months on the dating site. He recalled lunch dates, dinner dates, the women he would never date, and even the one he would date if she met his physical requirements. he immediately thought of Nichelle. She had all the qualities he wanted in a woman, but he'd never considered a plus-size woman. He liked thick, curvy, and voluptuous women. Nevertheless, his bachelor days were over with when he met Charlene. Her voluptuous breasts and small waist captured his attention. She was a perfect size ten. He liked that. She wasn't too skinny and she wasn't too fat. He figured that over time, she would feel passionate about his poetry like Nichelle, and develop the same qualities. The thought of Charlene being everything he needed in a woman made him smile and his nature rise. He eyed his watch the moment he stepped foot into the front door. There was no time to enjoy the massaging streams of water that poured from the four showerheads. He scrubbed the pertinent parts and got out. His phone rang as began to brush his teeth.

"Hi, baby, I was in the neighborhood and thought I would stop in to see you on my way home," Charlene said.

"Hold on, Charlene." Kenny laid the phone down on the counter, then picked it up when he finished brushing his teeth. "I'm trying to get dressed and I don't have any time to spare."

Kenny bolted out of the bathroom to his closet. He stared into the closet as though something was going to jump out and say, "Wear me!" In his ear, Charlene's voice was sounding like an irritating mosquito buzzing. Kenny knew that no matter what he said, she would still try to make him find some time for her. Finally, he raised his voice over hers and said, "CJ, I have to go now. I'll call you later, baby." Kenny knew she wanted more of something he didn't have at the moment, time. He felt bad that the Ford Fargo project consumed the majority of his time, but it was a contract worth sacrificing all of his spare time. When it was all said and done, his plan was to surprise Charlene by taking her up to the cabin, which he and his brother owned in the Colorado Mountains,. He just hadn't told her yet.

She made it harder and harder to keep his plans a surprise. He knew they could spend some quality time together.

Kenny put on a pair of faded jeans, a beige turtleneck sweater, a brown sports jacket, and his favorite boots. He accented his apparel with a brown suede hat and headed out the door. It was nine-fifteen. He could make the café by nine-thirty if there was no traffic. Making a right onto Stocker Street, he noticed a dark sedan with tinted windows very close behind him. He didn't remember seeing it in his neighborhood when he drove in. Then he made a right onto Crenshaw and the mysterious car behind him turned left. Kenny laughed to himself for being paranoid.

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Nichelle wasn't laughing about anything at this point. She was sitting in the back of a police car trying to remember everything that happened in a matter of minutes. The last thing she could recollect was a young girl waiting in line behind her. What the young girl said caused a domino of events. Nichelle squeezed her eyes shut. Her head was pounding as she envisioned Shaniqua coming from around the counter. Nichelle paused with that memory. She rewound the scene. "Go back. Go back, Chelle," she whispered, then she let out a deep breath. "Oh, Lord. What did I do?"

Nichelle looked out the back window and saw the police officers talking to some of the customers who were in the store. She wished she could read lips as she moaned in frustration. She wondered what could the girl have said to her that triggered her to have a blinding black-light moment. She hated those moments. It was when she lost all consciousness of what took place before she came back to her senses. Normally, someone got hurt in those episodes. The first time it happened was shortly after she left her husband, Ossie. When she came to, there was blood everywhere. If her life had depended on her remembering, she would've been dead and buried. It wasn't until the jail bars closed shut when the flashbacks invaded her mind like a strobe light. She'd nearly killed him. It was her neighbor's testimony that got her off on the attempted murder charge.

She laid her head back. Then, suddenly, she remembered what the young girl had said. The conversation between them played back vividly. She was standing at the counter chatting with Shaniqua when the young

girl said, “Are you two going to stand here giggling all night or can ya’ll wait til afta’ I leave?”

Nichelle talked to herself. “I looked at her and gave her a smile. I said to her, young lady, I’m old enough to be your mother. I’m sure you don’t disrespect your mother.” Nichelle saw the girl hands go up in the air like she had no control over her reflexes. “That lil’ heffa’ called me a bitch,” Nichelle blurted to herself. “She told me I ain’t her fuckin’ mamma!”

*Lord, I’ve lost my mind*, she thought, realizing that she was having a conversation with herself. Just thinking about what the young girl said made her want to jump out of the car. Being handcuffed and locked inside a police car was going to make that impossible to do at the moment. Since she could remember how it all began, she was ready to beat the child like she was her mother.

Maybe that’s why she was sitting there in the car, she thought silently. Maybe she did beat her. Nichelle was missing something. Words had never caused a blinding black-light moment before. Someone must’ve hit her, hard; but who? Flashes of Shaniqua coming from around the counter after the young girl blinded her. Nichelle moved from side to side in the back seat, visualizing Shaniqua preparing to deliver the black woman’s national anthem. Her head was rolling on her neck like a bobble-head doll. Shaniqua did the sign language for the death, removed her earrings, and kicked off her heels in one quick motion. She was cursing and screaming as she slid her bangle bracelets up her arm. She switched her rings to one hand, then all hell broke loose. Nichelle remembered stepping in front of the young girl to protect her, knowing very well there was no stopping Shaniqua. After that, Nichelle felt someone pull her hair and everything went black.

Nichelle opened her eyes when she heard the car door open. The officer removed the handcuffs and told Nichelle she was free to go. She didn’t ask any questions. She was ready to get home. Shaniqua was standing a few feet away, waiting eagerly. She handed Nichelle her purse then walked her to her car.

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At the café, Kenny pulled into the valet parking lane and handed his keys over to the young man who was waiting. As he turned to walk inside, he caught a glimpse of the dark sedan from the corner of his eye. It was parked across the street. Inside the café, Kenny sat at the right side of the stage, three tables back. It was his favorite seat. In his single days, if a woman caught his eye, he could look at her without her noticing him staring. Wednesday was '2-4-1' night at the cafe. For Kenny, it was the best night of the week. The locals came out to enjoy the Spoken Word showcase. Amateur poets would read their poetry while an artist painted or drew. All this had to be done in five minutes or less. Poets and artists would pair up beforehand, or be called at random. The band would compliment each artist with something jazzy or sensual to set a mood that invited the audience to capture each word and each stroke. At the end of the night, the best portrait would be put up on display and the poet would win a gift basket.

Kenny liked that the café wasn't an establishment that attracted young thugs or the ghetto hoochies. There were definitely a few gold diggers inside, but that was to be expected because the customers were mostly middle-and upper-class business executives, along with a few local celebrities. If anyone was a part of the lower socio economic statue, it didn't show.

"What can I get you sir?" asked the hostess.

Kenny ordered white wine and he asked her to run a tab.

Brian came in a few minutes later.

"What's up, man?" Kenny asked.

"Everything is cool. I'm just a little frustrated and tired," Brian said.

"Lolita again?"

"Yeah, man. If I can't get her to pick up her own child, how am I going to get her to keep Chyra while I'm away next week?" Brian asked, rhetorically. "I think my mother is going to end up keeping Chyra. Something in my gut says Lolita is going to let me down."

"Maybe you should listen to your gut and not your heart." Kenny signaled to the hostess. "What you drinking?" he asked Brian.

"Give me Cognac on rocks." Brian sighed. "Man, everytime I look at Chyra I can't help but see her mother's beauty. I thought I could get over that woman, but I can't. I can't get her out of my head, let alone my heart."

“Brian, she has sent you to hell and back. And, you still love her?”

The hostess returned with Brian’s drink, and he took a long, deep swallow of his cognac. “I don’t know what it’s going to take to help me get past this. I know I should move on, and I’ve tried,” he said in one breath. “I did the dating thing. It never seems to work out. The women that I’ve met act like I owe them something because they went out with me.”

“Hell, you probably talked about Lolita all night. That’s worth some sort of pay,” Kenny said and then laughed at himself.

“You got jokes,” Brian said laughing, then, he got serious for a minute. “How did the system check go?”

“Fine. It took a minute, but everything is good,” Kenny answered. He returned to their previous conversation, saying, “About this gratitude you owe.” He laughed, again.

Not so amused, Brian took another swallow of his drink. He said, “It seems like women nowadays have a hidden agenda or some other sort of secret. Some look at my car and immediately start talking about their finances.”

Kenny nodded. “Cha-ching!” He hummed.

Brian laughed. “No-thing,” he rhymed. “Some women are very bitter and angry.”

“True, but men are, too. It’s a dog eat dog world out there.”

“I agree! Hell, some of them have more baggage than I do. I may be a little over-cautious, but I have to keep my guard up. Don’t think I could stand another heartbreak.”

“I know the feeling, man,” Kenny said. “After Carol died, it was hard for me to even think about loving another woman. I felt so lost without her. You know I started having those crazy mood swings.”

Brian pointed his finger at Kenny. “Bro, I remember. I thought I was going to have to punch your head into a circuit board. You were a pain in the ass, especially every time you went off on Kendra, for a mistake you made! If I were Kendra, I would’ve slapped you across the face with a keyboard.”

“I made some foolish mistakes. Kendra stuck it out with me,” Kenny said, shaking his head. “I don’t know why, but she did. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her get mad.”

“Oh, she’s gotten mad. You used to work on her nerves. But she didn’t make it known to you.”

Kenny sipped his wine. “If I’ve made her mad, then why hasn’t she said anything to me?”

Brian shrugged. “I guess that’s the beautiful side of her nature. Don’t undermine the fact that she’s a good woman and is like a second mother to Tyre.”

“I won’t argue with you on that truth. It’s too bad she has a jerk for an ex-husband.”

“Where is that fool anyway?” Brian asked, taking another sip of his drink.

“I don’t know. I’m sure he’s up to something.” Kenny took a long swallow of his drink. “You know, it’s men like Javon that make women bitter and angry. He makes it hard for men like us.”

“I know.” Brian agreed. They sat in silence for a few minutes, listening to the band play jazz. Brian turned to Kenny and asked, “Why don’t you consider dating Kendra?”

The question caught Kenny off guard. “I can’t do that. She was Carol’s best friend. It wouldn’t seem right. Don’t women live by a code about dating one’s ex?”

“I’m sure that code doesn’t apply in this case,” Brian stated.

“Kendra don’t even look at me like that! She is strictly business, except, when it comes to Tyre.” Kenny threw his head back. “I’ll be the first to admit that she is a beautiful woman, but I’ve never looked at her in any way other than a friend.”

Brian turned and looked in the direction of Kenny’s eyes. “If that is the case, then why are you staring at her now?” Brian laughed. “I’m going to the big-boy’s room.” Still laughing, he got up and walked past Kendra, who was standing nearby. “Hey Kendra, how are you doing?” Brian asked.

She smiled. “Brian! I’m fine. How are you?”

“I’m in bit of a rush to go and pay my water bill. Kenny is over there in the corner. Go say hello.”

“Would you go find us a table?” Kendra asked the woman with her. “That’s my boss over there. I’ll be right back.”

Charlene walked inside as Kendra made her way over to Kenny. They both were in their own private thoughts as they greeted each and

therefore, never noticing Charlene standing by the entrance. Kenny stood up to greet Kendra with a warm smile and outstretched hand, offering her a seat.

Kendra declined his offer. "I can't stay. I have my girlfriend waiting for me. I just came over to say hello."

Brian came out of the restroom and noticed Kendra's friend sitting at a table alone. "Hi! Remember me? I'm Brian," he said. "Come join us for a drink."

"Sure, but I don't want to intrude on you and your friend," the woman responded as if she really meant it.

"You won't be intruding. Trust me," Brian retorted pleadingly. He gently took her by the arm and walked her over to where he and Kenny were sitting.

Charlene's mind was racing as she watched them. Kenny and Kendra were laughing like they were catching up on old times and she became infuriated. Kenny's business meeting didn't appear much like a business meeting, and for a split second, she thought about confronting them. She couldn't. She wouldn't show Kenny that side of her. It would ruin everything.

"Business meeting my ass! That liar," she snarled angrily. With that, she jumped up and stormed out the door. "Good thing I did follow him," she said to herself, sliding into the seat of her dark blue Lexus. She fumbled through her purse for her phone and called Lolita. "Girl, I'm on my way over. I need to tell you something."

Inside the café, the hostess brought fresh drinks for everyone at Kenny's table. After they watched the first contestants, Kendra asked Kenny, "Are you going on tonight?"

"No, I'm not. Brian and I were supposed to be talking business, but it looks like that has been put on hold."

Brian offered the women something to eat, but they declined. Kenny gave Brian a death-defying stare and was annoyed when Brian ignored him. Kenny knew what Brian was trying to do and it wasn't going to work.

Kendra turned to her friend and said, "Mr. Brown writes beautiful poetry. Sometimes he gets up on the stage and pour his heart out into the microphone."

Kenny held up a hand. “Kendra, please call me Kenny,” he said. “We are not at the office and she is not a client.”

Kendra gave him a sharp look, then turned back to her friend. “Well, anyway,” she continued, “Mr. Kenny, is always writing something or another, like love poems, short stories, and all types of things.”

“Okay, enough about me,” Kenny interrupted her. Kenny felt as though Kendra was playing matchmaker.

Brian nudged Kendra’s friend and said, “Kenny is kind of shy.” He and Kendra laughed. The young woman let out a soft giggle.

On the stage, the emcee said, “Now, coming to the stage is Los Angeles’s own, Deanna and Michael.” The audience clapped and whistled. Deanna was known for explicit poetry, and Michael’s artistic gift was working with charcoal. He created portraits that gave sensuality and sexuality a different perspective. The images he drew depict the beauty of love between a man and a woman.

“Listen and watch the way she makes him feel every word in each stroke he makes,” Kenny whispered. “Look at how she teases him as he draws.”

On the stage, Deanna stood behind Michael. She reached around him and placed one hand in the mid-section of his chest as she held the microphone in the other. The band played Marvin Gaye’s Sexual Healing. Kenny was watching Kendra as Brian kept one eye on the stage and the other on Kenny. On stage, Deanna was reciting her poem.

“Touch Me  
In a place that makes me smile;  
Take your time let it be worthwhile.  
Touch Me,  
From the inside out, from head to toe,  
Give me all of you so I never let go.  
Touch Me,  
When the moon sets in the sky,  
Make love to me ‘til the sun, rises high.  
Touch Me,  
With the most intimate part of you,  
Taste me; feel me as no one else can do.

Touch Me,  
Until my body shivers in ultimate delight,  
Satisfying every inch of me within your sight,  
Just touch me.”

When Michael held up his finished drawing, everyone saw an image of a naked woman standing in front of her man; her hands wrapped tightly around him, while one of his arms covered her breast and the other hand concealed her private area. At the end of the night, Deanna and Michael were declared the winners.

At eleven-thirty, Kendra stood and said, “It’s time for me to go. I’m at my limit for drinks.”

Brian suggested they all have coffee before driving home, so she sat back down. An hour later, Kendra stood again. She said, “I really must go. I don’t want my boss to fire me for being late.”

They all laughed. Kenny and Brian stood up as the ladies left the table, then the the two of them sat back down. Brian turned to Kenny. Before he opened his mouth, Kenny said, “Don’t go there! I told Charlene that I was meeting you to discuss business. You made me out to be a liar.”

“No I didn’t. We did discuss business. You told me the system check went well.” Brian laughed. “What do you feel so guilty about?” Brian didn’t understand the sudden attitude.

“This. Tonight. I sat here entertaining two women when I told my woman she couldn’t join us. What if Charlene had seen me here with them?”

“So.” Brian shrugged his shoulders. “This was innocent. Why are you feeling guilty?” Brian stared hard at the unexplainable, confused look displayed on Kenny’s his face. Brian added, “Not unless seeing Kendra look so beautiful makes you wonder.” He smiled.

“Look, Brian. Kendra is a good woman, a great mother, and I love her for the friend she is, but that is as far as it goes.”

Brian held up his hands. “I just think she’s good enough for you.”

“Oh, Charlene isn’t?” Kenny snapped slightly offended.

Brian frowned. “Honestly, I don’t trust her. I’m sure she’s good for something. She’s good at whatever she does; whatever that is.”

“Charlene brings out the passion in me,” Kenny hissed.

“No. Carol brought out the passion in you. Charlene brings out the freak in you.” Brian laughed to ease the tension.

Kenny softened. “I know it was innocent, but Charlene already thinks I’m neglecting her. This deal will be sweet if we get the contracts. I know if I decide to take my relationship with Charlene to the next level, I’ll need some more change in my pocket to pay for a platinum ceremony.”

Brian looked at him in surprise. “Damn, man, you’re serious, aren’t you?”

“I think so,” Kenny replied. “Charlene has good taste. She’s somewhat high-maintenance, but she loves me for me and deserves the best.”

Brian rolled his eyes as they stood up to leave.

“What was that look about?” Kenny demanded.

“Man, you and I are like brothers. I hope you don’t switch out on me. You know us when a woman comes into our lives. We lose our damn minds. If she makes you happy, then go for it. I’ll stand behind you no matter what you decide.”

Kenny smiled. “You know Charlene has other great qualities that I love.”

“You’ve only been dating the woman for a few months. How do you fall in love so fast?”

“You can’t put a timeline on love.” They stepped out of the café and handed the young man their valet tickets. “When it happens, it happens,” Kenny added.

Brian laughed. “I’m still trying to get over the first love train that struck me down. I doubt if I’ll ever find anyone who makes me feel better than Lolita.”

“It’ll happen when you least expect it,” Kenny said, assured. “Remember my words. It’ll happen.”

Brian remembered the way it happened for Kenny and Carol. He remembered the way it happened for him and Lolita. He couldn’t see it happening with Charlene. Something in his gut told him that she was a sneaky one. She was like a wolf disguised as a sheep. Brian’s silent thoughts were broken when he heard Kendra laugh.

“I thought you two had left,” Kenny said, eyeing Kendra.

“It’s a good thing Mr Oberly pays you for thinking.”

Brian laughed.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be out of your way shortly,” Kendra added, smiling.

“I didn’t know you had a sense of humor,” Kenny replied.

Kendra smiled sarcastically. “It’s a lot of things you don’t know about me, Mr. Brown.”

Brian’s car came around. He gave Kendra a light kiss on the cheek and shook her friend’s hand. “I’ll see you two in the morning.” Brian got in his car and drove off.

Kenny and Kendra’s cars came around one after the other. Kenny shook the woman’s hand, then leaned in and kissed Kendra on the cheek. They stared at each other in surprise. Kenny didn’t know where that came from. It was almost like second nature to end his evening with a kiss. At first it was an awkward moment, but they brushed it off and got into their cars. Kenny had forgotten about the dark-colored sedan he had seen earlier. Little did he know that the car was parked in the crowded lot across the street. He looked at the time. It was after one.

Charlene turned to her passengers. “What did I tell you two?,” she asked, rhetorically. “There’s something more than a work relationship going on there between them. Looks like Brian and Kenny hooked up for a double-date.”

“I thought you two had those pussys wrapped around your fingers?” Javon asked. He laughed out loud. “Looks as though I’m going to need to step in.”

“And what are you going to do?” Charlene asked, frowning.

“I’m going to make sure you get Kenny, Lolita keeps Brian, and I get my share of the pot,” he replied. “Hurry up and drop me off. I got something to do.”

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Nichelle dragged herself out of bed when the alarm sounded at three. She showered to wake herself up completely. Carrie called thirty minutes later to make sure Nichelle was ready. Nichelle hurried to double-check her bags. She checked her purse for her money, passport, and identification. She was tired, but she was ready when Carrie rang the doorbell. When she opened the door, Nichelle managed a tired, hello.

Carrie asked, “What’s wrong with you? I’m the one who should be dragging my feet at four-thirty in the morning. You should be all excited and perky about going on your first vacation.”

Giving Carrie a half smile, Nichelle said, “I am, but it has already started out on a bad note.”

“What happened?”

Nichelle dropped her chin into her chest while shaking her head from left to right in a slow, disheartening manner. “Carrie, you won’t believe it if I told you.”

Carrie tried to hold back her laughter but it was hard. In all the years that they had been friends, Nichelle had done some crazy things, and Carrie had been a witness to the majority of them. Carrie was the one who helped Nichelle get back on her feet after she’d lost custody of her children. That is where their friendship began.

The look on Carrie’s face showed that she was eager to know what took place. Nichelle offered to tell her everything after they loaded the luggage in the car. Carrie quickly packed the trunk. “Damn, girl, you think you packed enough clothes? Are you sure you’re coming back?”

“One suitcase is filled with shoes,” Nichelle said, as she walked back towards the house. “I need to kiss the kids one more time before I leave.”

She walked into Kebo’s room first. He was sprawled out in the bed. When she turned on the light, he had his thumb in his mouth. She remembered that he had been sucking his thumb since he was in her womb, and getting him to stop would take a miracle. He woke up.

“What now, Mom?” he asked, squinting his eyes.

“I just came to get another kiss.”

“Mom you got more kisses last night than I’ve gotten from all my girlfriends combined.”

Nichelle gave him a sharp look. “And what are you saying?”

“Umm, I’m saying you’re my best girl, so you can get all you want!” He laughed. “Have fun and send a postcard. I love you.”

“I love you too, Bo! Don’t get into any trouble while I’m gone.” She closed his door and walked into the next room where Jauquisha was sitting up and waiting.

“I knew you would come back in here,” Jauquisha said. they both laughed.

“I just came for another kiss. I’m going to miss you while I’m gone.”

“I’ll miss you too, Mom. Remember to have fun! No sex until marriage, and make sure to call and check in with me.”

“Umm, I think you have our roles confused,” Nichelle smirked jovially.

Jauquisha laughed and grabbed her mother’s face with both hands, pushing her cheeks together, making her lips pucker like a fish. She gave her a big smooch. Both their eyes filled with tears. Nichelle turned to walk out. “Bye! Have fun! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t. Love you!” ‘Quisha said, smiling.

“Love you more! Tell your sister I’ll call her later,” Nichelle said.

She locked the front door behind her then jogged to the car. Carrie had tissue waiting for her when she got in the car. “I knew you would be bawling,” Carrie said, laughing.

“So! I feel so guilty going away without them,” Nichelle cried.

“Crack cocaine took them away from you years ago. You stayed gone, for a short time, for the wrong reasons. You did what a lot of drug-addicted mothers don’t do; you came back! You worked hard all these years to give them everything they needed. I’ve seen you work sixteen-hour days and seven days a week to provide for them. You deserve a vacation. You’re a great mom, and those kids of yours know it. Now, stop all that crying and tell me what happened yesterday.”

Nichelle dried her tears. She turned to face Carrie and asked, “You remember Shaniqua?”

“The girl with six children right?” Carrie asked.

“The one and only,” Nichelle said, smiling. “The most Ghetto-centric girl I know, and not ashamed of it, either. I’m going to pray for her, though. After last night, she needs it.” Nichelle laughed as she thought about the events. “Let me tell you the story the same way Shaniqua told me.”

“Damn, start already,” Carrie demanded.

“I have to first tell you when it all started. Shaniqua sent me a text message saying that some new stuff came in and she thought I should check it out. I went there after I left the bank. Everything was going fine until the store was ready to close and everyone was going up to the counter. My turn came, and Shaniqua and I were chatting about one thing

or another, as she rang up my items. I guess the young girl behind me was a little impatient.”

“Okay. What happened?”

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Kenny decided to take Charlene’s offer for a nightcap but he needed to change clothes. He could smell Kendra’s perfume on him. They had sat close at the café and hugging her only added her scent. He knew he couldn’t explain it to Charlene. He was greeted by his hungry dogs the moment he entered his home then remembered he hadn’t fed them. He had forgotten to eat something, too. *Damn Brian!* he thought. After feeding the dogs, he changed and then called Charlene as he walked out the door.

“Hey, Charlene, what are you doing?” he asked, cheerfully.

“Just sitting outside in the back,” she said, although she was actually trying to hurry home.

“Is the offer still on for that nightcap?”

Charlene hesitated. “Sure.”

“I’ll be over in a bit.” He hung up.

Kenny wondered if he should tell Charlene about his evening. *Nah! It was an innocent evening*, he told himself. *Kendra just happened to be there. She enjoyed ‘2-4-1’ night at the café as well*, he thought as he began to pull out of the driveway. Kenny slammed on brakes when he saw Javon walking toward his vehicle. “What are you doing here?”

Javon tossed a large manila envelope through the car’s open window. “I came to give you this,” he said, angrily. “You haven’t heard the last from me. I told you once before, stay away from my wife.” Javon spoke as though he and Kendra were still married.

Kenny put the car in park and reached to open the door. *One good punch to the throat was all he needed to put Javon out of his misery*, he thought.

Javon pushed his hand up against the car door. He said, “Before you try any of that kung-fu shit, maybe you should take a look at what is in the envelope.” He ran back to his car and then sped off.

Kenny didn’t know if he should watch the tape before going to Charlene’s. He knew if it were something Javon had to do with, it wasn’t worth wasting his time. He looked at his watch, thinking he didn’t want to

give Charlene another excuse for not spending time with her, so he tossed the envelope onto the console. “I don’t know what Javon is up to, but I know it’s not good,” he said aloud, as he backed out of the driveway.

Twenty minutes later, Charlene greeted him at the door. She was wearing a black see-through negligee.

“Wow!” Kenny said. “I’m in store for one hell of a nightcap.”

She grabbed him by the hand and guided him through the foyer into the living room, where a bottle of white wine was chilling. While he took off his jacket and boots, she poured each of them a glass of wine. Kenny sat on the couch, putting one foot up and keeping his other foot on the floor. She sat down between his legs, and lay back gently on his chest. He let the side of his face brush against her hair as he let out a deep sigh.

“What’s wrong baby?” she asked in a soft voice.

Kenny’s mind was on the envelope and Javon’s sudden appearance at his home. He tried his best not to appear preoccupied, but his best wasn’t good enough. Charlene noticed. He kissed her on the top of her head. She turned slightly to face him.

Kenny answered. “I was just thinking about you and me; about how I have been neglecting you. After I come back from this trip, I’m going to take a week off and spend it with you at the cabin.” He took her hand in his. “This is a very important deal that Brian and I have been working on. It involves the most prestigious company in L.A, and it could benefit us both. It will definitely be great for our future.”

“It must be important. You and I haven’t spent any quality time together since you started,” Charlene said, hoping she could make him feel guilty.

“I know, baby. I’m sorry. I needed to stay focused. If you were around me in something as sexy as this negligee, I wouldn’t have gotten any work done.”

Charlene laughed. “Where are you going?”

“To the Caymans.”

“Why the Caymans? Why not here?”

“That’s where the client chose, and that’s where we go,” Kenny explained.

“Why can’t I go with you? I’ll only distract you after your meeting.”

Kenny let out a deep laugh. “Because I plan on returning the next day, if possible. My itinerary isn’t complete yet. They have some type of festivals going on and hotels are booked solid. Brian and I might end up sharing a room,” Kenny laughed at the thought. He leaned forward and gave her a light kiss. “You just be ready for me when I come back.”

“Are you sure you’re coming back the next day?”

“I’m waiting for Kendra to finalize the details about the hotel room. If need be, I’ll return right after the meeting if a flight is available.” He felt Charlene’s body stiffen at the mention of Kendra’s name.

“Oh! Kendra, again,” she said, dryly.

“Kendra is my secretary. She’s my right hand at the office. There is nothing more to it.”

*That’s not what I saw*, she thought. “Is she going with you?” Charlene asked.

“No. Why would you think that?”

“She’s your right hand! I just thought she’ll be with you. Besides, you two are awfully friendly.”

“That’s true. She and Carol were best friends, and she is my secretary. She is a valuable asset to me. But, she doesn’t have to go where I go, when it comes to business.”

“Well, I’m jealous because she gets to see you more than I do.”

“That’s true, too, but she doesn’t get what I give you,” he said smiling.

“What’s that?” Charlene asked, pouting.

“This!” Kenny replied giving her a passionate kiss. He started kissing her on her neck and shoulders until she finally gave in to him there on the couch.