

## Kingsport

### Chapter 1

My mother was seriously ill, so I made another of my daily 43-mile trip from Columbia northwest to the Medical Center in Newberry to see her in early August 2003. She had been there for three weeks already and wasn't likely to leave alive. That's something I still would not accept. My regular routine seemed to ensure she continued to breathe. As long as I trekked to the hospital, I was convinced she would be there. There was something very reassuring in that, as though I was holding back death.

I didn't bother stopping at the front desk; the receptionist recognized me anyway. There was no point in her looking up the name: Kendra Stevens. I knew where Momma's room was. I took the elevator to the third floor along with three strangers holding flowers and balloons. Their sister had just given birth, one of them explained enthusiastically. Their faces paled when I got off. They could see the same sign that always chilled me: "Cancer Ward."

The floor was usually quiet as though the nurses tiptoed around rather than disturb anyone. The loudspeaker occasional crackled to life, but even that intrusion seemed muted. The off-white walls swallowed shadows and sounds simultaneously, further muffling the mood. Some nondescript music eased through the wide hallways. Momma probably would have liked to have heard something familiar, but the Medical Center was into low-key Muzak. She loved to sing Country and Gospel tunes around the house. I couldn't even sing along, since I don't know the music. I still sing Gospel and Country tunes in my own house and church, and even thought of trying to make a career of singing once, but Momma always discouraged me. She had the same attitude with my older sister, Winona, who has a really nice voice.

When Momma first entered the hospital, I gave her an Ipod filled with music she enjoyed, but she never did get the hang of using it. Nevertheless, I am sure fiddling with it filled her empty hours when her soap operas ended.

Momma shared a room and was in a bed closest to the door. Three metal chairs for visitors were lined up by the bed: two on one side; one on the other. Winona and my Aunt Geraldine were already sitting down. I sat across from them. Aunt Geraldine, a rock-solid, formidable woman, nodded at me. Winona gave me a wan smile. A nurse was bending over Momma when I came in. My aunt was keeping a close eye on the nurse, who was washing Momma's face with a damp cloth.

In a way, that was ironic. For 40 years, my mother had cleaned other people's dirty clothes. Now, someone was cleaning her. Somehow, via laundry, she paid the bills and raised three children. She sent my older brother Darren to school to become a teacher, gave me a boost when I was trying to open my own small printing business and keep Winona out of trouble. Without knowing that, you'd have thought her biggest secret had to be the best way to get a blueberry stain from a tablecloth. We were proud of her, recognizing how hard she worked.

The world went on changing constantly; she stayed the same, a broad-shouldered woman who sang at church and labored from sun up deep into the night six days a week.

Momma had her eyes closed. She always had dark, soft skin. For many years, her face had been smooth, and, for a long time, seemingly untouched by the passing time. That was until she was diagnosed with cancer. I don't know how long she suffered before finally going with Aunt Geraldine to see a doctor. The check-up had been far too late. My mother had a fierce, stoic nature. She was not going to admit pain. I always admired that part of her character. Unfortunately, she had been willing to endure too much.

"Not good," Winona mouthed.

I nodded. I could see that. I didn't want to admit it, but Momma looked so sick. Her skin was slack, and her color was ashy. At one time, she was a sturdy woman with glossy skin and bright, intelligent eyes. She was invariably optimistic and happy. Now, she really seemed to have faded into the bed, shrinking and aging more each time I saw her. She was only 62, but seemed so shriveled that she could have been 100. One time, when I must have been 11 or 12, she had gotten a very bad virus and lay in bed. I had looked in on her and started crying because of how ill she looked. This was worse.

The nurse finally took her bowl of water and towel, and left. She was young and stiff, trying to appear professional. Her attitude had a cooling effect on an already somber room. She was also white. I couldn't help but notice her skin. I wondered how my mother felt having a white woman tend to her.

Momma had grown up through the 1940s and 1950s in the rural South, where "white only" signs still populated restaurants and a black person was expected to show deference or face vicious assaults. Her great-grandparents had lived on an area farm, called Kingsport, as slaves. Her grandparents had been freed, but become tenant farmers. That's what many ex-slaves did after being emancipated. They had no education and limited skills. Subsistence farming typically was their only choice. Some continued the household chores they performed as slaves: cooking, taking in laundry. Their old masters became their employers. The only difference was the pittance they were paid. It never was much. It guaranteed they stayed poor, but it brought in some money. As far as we knew, my mother followed that same pattern begun by her grandparents.

Winona never mentioned the racial difference between Momma and the nurses. Maybe she didn't even think about it. Winona, 41, was born at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and I was born near the tail end. I was 35 when my mother entered the hospital in 2003. That meant I was born in 1968, the year Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed. I was a baby when riots scarred Detroit and Los Angeles. I was just starting school when black actors and actresses began to make inroads into movies and advertising. I did recall the black athletes of the 1980s, like Michael Jordan and Doug Williams, but my sister and I enjoyed a time when

attitudes were changing. Racism was not gone – I doubt it ever will disappear completely – but that occasional slights I suffered were nothing compared to what mother must have endured.

She did not complain. She did not intrude. Her docile behavior, hardened in the fiery hatred of her youth, shielded her from abuse. It did not matter that a black man sat on the Supreme Court while others legitimately dreamed of becoming president. (At this writing, one is in the White House.) My mother remained beyond the reach of such aspirations. Racism remained a real, tangible and frightening reality, one that she could never escape. I suspect other members of her generation felt the same way. I doubt she would have wanted a white woman, even a nurse, touching her.

My sister and I chatted a moment about how Momma was this day while Aunt Geraldine sat silently in some kind of pensive daze. We really didn't care if Momma heard. We didn't know if she could hear or do anything else. She had not spoken much in days. Once in awhile, I saw some bubbles form on her lips as if she were trying to force words out, but not a sound emerged. The doctor said there was nothing wrong with her throat, but felt the chemotherapy and radiation had drained her so much. I don't think in the last week that she had said more than a couple of words, if that. Since she loved to sing, the silence was as heartbreaking as her appearance.

Then, Momma's eyes shifted to look at me. I thought I saw her smile. I smiled back at her, hoping to encourage her. I walked closer to the bed and took her limp left hand. Her long fingers were still so strong from all the laundry she had picked up, folded and carried. Her head turned toward me.

"Geraldine," she said. It really wasn't a statement, but, strangely, more of a command. For a moment, I thought she simply didn't recognize me anymore, but her eyes seemed clear. She was looking right at me.

"Kendra," Aunt Geraldine said, "do you need something to help you sleep?"

Momma slowly shook her head. Her hair rustled on the soft pillow. "Geraldine," she managed with less emphasis.

I looked over at my aunt. Suddenly, her face was as wan as my mother's. Any hint of life had vanished from her face. If anything, she seemed overwhelmingly upset. "I'll get the nurse," she finally said.

"Geraldine," Momma wheezed one more time. The effort clearly was exhausting her.

Her sister darted out of the room. Aunt Geraldine was older and much heftier than my mother, especially now that breast cancer had gnawed away at Momma's body. However, my aunt could move pretty fast when she wanted to.

I held my mother's hand, trying to understand why she was calling me by my aunt's name. I glanced at my sister, who shrugged. Winona was little help most of the time, and never less than this day. To be fair, she wasn't as close to Momma as I was, and I didn't understand the cryptic comment.

Momma was not ready to give up. I could see her take a deep breath, trying to marshal what little strength she could. I was so happy to see her talk. At least that showed she still had some life in her. I know the doctors were doing all they could to help, but she was beyond their assistance. Any spark had to come from within. The sound of her voice, although strained and weak, was powerful evidence she had not surrendered yet.

Finally, she managed to say one more word, a name I had not heard often before: "Rasheed," she said. That's what I think I heard. I mouthed it to Winona, who nodded. She heard it, too. I knew a Rasheed. He was married to Momma's friend, Suelee. She played the piano at church, often accompanying Momma. That's all I really knew about her. We hardly ever saw Rasheed. They still lived near Kingsport and maybe had visited us once or twice a year. For friends, Suelee and Momma seemed very cool toward each other. Yet, every once in awhile, Rasheed and Suelee would knock on the front door and spend an afternoon with us.

I couldn't imagine why Momma would devote what little energy she had left to saying Rasheed's name. Did she want to see him? Why? Was Rasheed in some way connected to Aunt Geraldine?

Aunt Geraldine came back with a nurse who was carrying a syringe. "She's in too much pain," Aunt Geraldine said. "I thought the nurse should check to see if she needs a dose of morphine." The nurse nodded and walked to the side of the bed where the IV and other equipment were attached to Momma.

I leaned over my mother. She wasn't wincing or anything. Her face wasn't crinkled in pain. "Do you hurt?" I asked her.

"Of course, she does," Aunt Geraldine said brusquely. She marched up to the end of the bed. "Kendra, I'm just trying to help."

"I'm not so sure about that," I said fiercely. I could see what she was doing. My aunt wanted my mother to be quiet. I didn't know why. She had only muttered a couple of words. What was she trying to stop Momma from talking? Maybe she had said all she could. Her eyes were closed. She seemed to have fallen back asleep.

The nurse was standing by Momma's IV to inject morphine into it. I had been there enough to know that terminal patients could get almost as much of that powerful drug as they wanted. What difference did it make? The dose wouldn't be lethal, but would ease the suffering.

"Wait before you put that in her," I said. "Let me see if she'll wake up."

My sister jumped in to help. "If she wakes up and says she's in pain" she suggested, "then you can give it to her. Momma, are you comfortable? Are you in pain?"

"Yes, she is," Aunt Geraldine insisted. She was glaring at both of us, hands on her ample hips. She didn't like having her authority questioned. We usually were respectful toward her. My aunt loved to order people around, and we routinely obeyed. She was four years older than Momma, who also dutifully followed Aunt Geraldine's directions whenever my aunt visited. After Aunt Geraldine would leave, Momma would teasingly call her "Geraldine the dictator."

"Momma?" I tried.

Her head rolled slowly toward me. She was smiling weakly. "Rasheed," she said again. The word barely slipped between her tired lips.

"Kendra," Aunt Geraldine said sharply. Her reaction was so strong, even the nurse looked at her.

My mother stared at her sister. Their eyes met. For a long moment, there was only silence broken by the sound of padded shoes on the outside corridor as nurses went by, the brief stirring of the curtained woman in the bed in the other half of Momma's room and the annoying audible ticking of the wall clock.

Aunt Geraldine surrendered first. She looked at the floor. "I can't," she said. Momma continued to stare at her with an unwavering, powerful glance that belied her physical condition.

"Aunt Geraldine," I tried. "Maybe she could get something milder, like Demerol. That would take away any pain, but keep her awake."

Her reaction was swift. "Are you a doctor now?"

"No, I'm her daughter."

"I'm her oldest sister and your aunt," Aunt Geraldine seethed loudly.

"Ma'am," the nurse interrupted. "You will need to keep your voice down. We have other patients."

My aunt drew herself up to her full height. Her face was hard; her chin thrust forward. "You two can do whatever you want. Just call me when it's over," she almost hissed at me.

My sister and I looked at each other, stunned, as our aunt turned around and click-clacked out of the room. Her heels drummed against the hard tile flooring. Only Momma seemed