

# Prologue

## **N**icole Neatherly-Edwards

I sat up in the bed instantly as if I had forgotten something. My heart is pounding in my chest, screaming to be released. I don't know what it is about today that's making me so uneasy, but I am. I blinked my eyes in an attempt to focus. I turned to Jason's side of the bed, but he wasn't here. Letting out an exasperated sigh, I squinted to see the clock. It's three in the morning and Jason's side of the bed is cold. Anger began to swell as I sat here all alone in our king sized sleigh bed. The satin covers were warming my body, wrapped around me in every way I wanted Jason's arms enveloping me. Kendra and Cory were keeping Jaden so that Jason and I could have quality time together. We had the entire week to spend with each other and he had started it by not coming home.

I moved myself out of the bed to look for my cell phone. My fingers trembled as I pressed the buttons. The phone rang once and went to voicemail and I immediately knew he had ignored the call. I walked to the kitchen and surveyed my home. It was beautiful to me. This two-story home was furnished with nothing but the best. From the imported area rugs that covered the mahogany hard wood floors, to the Italian silk upholstery that covered my sofas, my home was immaculate, even extraordinary. I paused to look at the large 16X20-wall portrait of my family. Everyone seemed excited and happy. On the surface everything was calm, but I knew underneath a storm was brewing. Jason and I had come a long way in five years. I found it amusing the way things have worked out.

The garage door opening interrupted my thoughts. Total darkness surrounded me as I waited for Jason to walk through the door.

"It's nice of you to join me at home. You do remember what that is, don't you?" I stood up and walked towards Jason. I could smell the stench of alcohol on his breath and the scent of perfume lingered on his shirt. It was a fragrance unknown to me.

"Cole, look, I'm not trying to hear that now. It's late and the only thing I want to do now is curl up in our bed and go to sleep. Kill the drama." He started to walk away from me. Even

through my anger, I was desperate for his love. What I really wanted this man to do was take me in his arms and hold me like he really cared for me.

“Jason, stop walking away from me.” My voice was barely audible. I found myself pleading with Jason like I have so many times before. My mind said he loved me; I at least know that he cares, but I also know that he never meant to settle down. He never meant to be married to me or any body else for that matter.

Jason and I still worked in the same center, in different departments. I saw how the women flirted with him and just wanted to be near him, and I tried not to let it bother me. I refuse to pretend that it's not hard to watch women lust over him. It was more than hard; it was extremely difficult. Remembering the first time I saw Jason brought a smile to my face. I thought he was the most gorgeous man I had ever laid eyes on. Instantly I knew I wanted to be with him and I was willing to go through anything to be his woman.

I sat down on the sofa and curled my feet up under me. The thought of my bed was inviting but I knew I couldn't go to sleep now. Our marriage was not one built on trust, or love for that matter. I loved Jason, but he didn't fall hopelessly in love with me. I thought about all the secrets and lies told to convince him to be with me. The saddest thing about that was even though I had him on paper and the rock on my finger to prove it; I understood I didn't completely have Jason at all. In some way, he was still that man I met all those years ago. He was still the man that thought he would never settle down. He never thought he would be exclusive to anyone. At least that's the way I felt he wanted to be. I pondered the thought of Jason not wanting to be with me and it hurt like hell. The idea of my life without Jason was foreign to me. My heart ached at the thought of losing him. All I ever wanted from him was to return the love. My emotions were running amuck and I knew they were coming. The tears are beginning to stream down my cheeks. He's the only man that can make me happy and the only one that can make me cry.

## **C** armell Devereaux

“I love you too.” I said to my fiancé as I ended my call. It had been five long years ago when Dr. Alejandro Escalante entered into my life. My life has some major changes since that day. I smiled to myself. Alex was everything that a woman could want. He was gorgeous, successful, and very well off. As if that wasn’t enough, he was filled with patience and kindness. Any woman would be happy to be in my shoes.

I walked towards my new Mercedes, another gift from my husband to be. He was like that; he wanted to give me the world and a whole lot more. So why did I have a nagging feeling? I couldn’t put my finger on it, but there was something bothering me. I shook my head; no good ever came of lying to yourself. My wedding was a month away and I couldn’t get an old flame out of my mind. I had convinced myself I was through with him. I thought I didn’t want anything to do with him, but that was another lie. After telling myself repeatedly I hated him, I started to believe it, but the older I got the more I realized that my hatred was just to cloak the love I felt.

I pushed thoughts of him out my head because he was the last thing I needed to be thinking of. I had a man; a successful man that would spoil me and love me unconditionally.

I pulled my car into PF Chang’s to get dinner for Alex and me. When I walked through the door, my heart dropped along with my face. I didn’t believe I was seeing them. After the fiasco with them, my life was left in ruins. It was hard not to hate people who went out of their way to be cruel to you. If I had learned anything from Alex, it was forgiveness. I’m unsure how I managed to stand still and not revert to my old ways as pain flooded my heart. Seeing them here brought back memories, memories I wasn’t prepared to deal with. Attempting to hide, I slid behind a pole. He was the very man I had just pushed out of my mind, she was the woman he had dated, and then married, while I thought he was my man.

I stood here in a trance thinking of how I had been so foolish. I was willing to do anything and everything for that man and when I tried to prove it to him I found out the joke was on me. I remember feeling used and betrayed. Nothing has changed; I still harbor the same feelings.

I ordered my food and waited. It was weird. I couldn’t take my eyes off them. I couldn’t stop watching them. It was like watching a wreck on the highway, even though you wanted to look away it commanded your attention and you couldn’t turn away for fear of missing something. I was a little envious even though I knew I shouldn’t be. I had the better man. I had

come out on top. I was the one who had risen even though that couple did everything to hold me down. I knew all those things but I couldn't understand why I felt this way.

I exhaled.

"No use worrying about that now", I thought to myself. It was old news, happened many years ago, but the pain, the pain was still fresh.

## **N**atina Mayes

She thought I hadn't seen her. I laughed to myself, she wasn't my sworn enemy anymore but she wasn't on my list of favorite people. She had actually been a very good friend to me at one time, until it all went down south. My husband was here with me. This was just another one of the many steps that we had taken to get back together. After seeing her, my mind flooded with memories. I still worked at the same place that we met. Even though she worked for the same company, she had taken a position with our marketing department in a completely different building. I haven't seen her in almost five years.

I started to mention to Louis that she was here but decided against it. I wasn't prepared to start down that road again. After her, our relationship went to hell and back. I had even left him, but being away from him was torture. We're meant for each other and he knew it just as well as I did. So we were here working on being together again. This time we were guaranteed to make it work. I knew no other way. When I walked out the door I thought I would never come back to him but it was inevitable. I would always return to him and him to me.

I looked towards the front of the restaurant and saw she was watching us. I watched her even though I pretended not to see her. I remember the days when I thought of nothing but her, then I thought of nothing but ruining her. When it came to her I had done many evil things. After everything was said and done I went through hell and I couldn't help but think it was because I had wronged her. After all the things I had to endure I knew that I had paid for my misdeeds. I'm not going to sit and pretend she was innocent in it all, because she wasn't, but after five years it all seemed senseless, maybe even worthless.

I stood up, my bulging belly hitting the table as I attempted to stand. Having a baby inside of you was a true miracle but learning to maneuver with the extra weight was torture. I was on a path to the restroom and it was leading me straight to her. As I moved closer she noticed me and we made unavoidable eye contact, and that's when I saw the look on her face. I looked deep in her eyes and they spoke an undeniable truth. She was still hurting. What we had done still haunted her.

## **K**endra Dubois

Damn. I all but cursed aloud when I heard my cell phone begin to ring. I don't know why I had left it in the bedroom. I shook my head as I dressed my godson, Jaden. He looked more and more like his father every day. I smiled at him. He was almost five and he brought so much joy into our lives.

I didn't know who that was that was calling me but I do know that I didn't want him, him being my husband, to have my phone. She would be calling me soon and I was hoping that she wasn't calling me early.

"Kendra, your phone is ringing." Cory said that as if I couldn't hear it. Then I heard him answer it. My heart began to beat fast, uncontrollably fast. I slowed my breathing. If it was her she knew to block her number before she called me and if he answered she better just pretend to be a bill collector. Still it made me nervous. I knew that she was off limits and even though we had somehow maintained a platonic relationship with one another, my husband would not approve. I walked into the room where he stood.

"We're about to go to Chuck E. Cheese's, baby. I walked over, kissed him on the forehead, and took my phone from him. "Who was it?" I asked.

"I don't know they hung up. Bring me some pizza back please." I kissed my husband again then we left.

I got into my car and drove off. I was almost certain that was her calling me. I was running late, we should have been at the pizza place but I was always late and she should be used to it. She was back in town. It seemed she was always in town and she always wanted to see me whenever she came back.

When we arrived I parked the car and immediately spotted her. It was amazing to me that even after all these years seeing her still stopped my heart. I tried extremely hard not to fall into our old ways but I couldn't let her go. I had tried but she called out to me. She was one of the rare people who got me, who understood me.

Years ago she had gone toe to toe with my husband and even though she didn't win she has kept on fighting. I tell her that we shouldn't see each other and she ignores my words. She finds them to be meaningless and they probably are. I know what I should do. I also know what I tried to do five years ago when my world came tumbling down, but I still hadn't found the courage to walk away from her.

I know I am greedy. I wanted it all, my husband and her. It wasn't fair for me to have two and force people to share my love. When I was with my husband he was the only thing that mattered, and when I was with her I rarely thought of him. Could you love two people? They

say no but why did I feel so strongly about her? Having her had caused a whirlwind of events in my life that could have very easily cost me everything. I loved my husband and I know she knows that. I also know, she knows, when it comes down to it, I always choose him. I looked at her and wondered if this would be the time, could this be the place where I tell her I won't see her any longer and truly mean it.