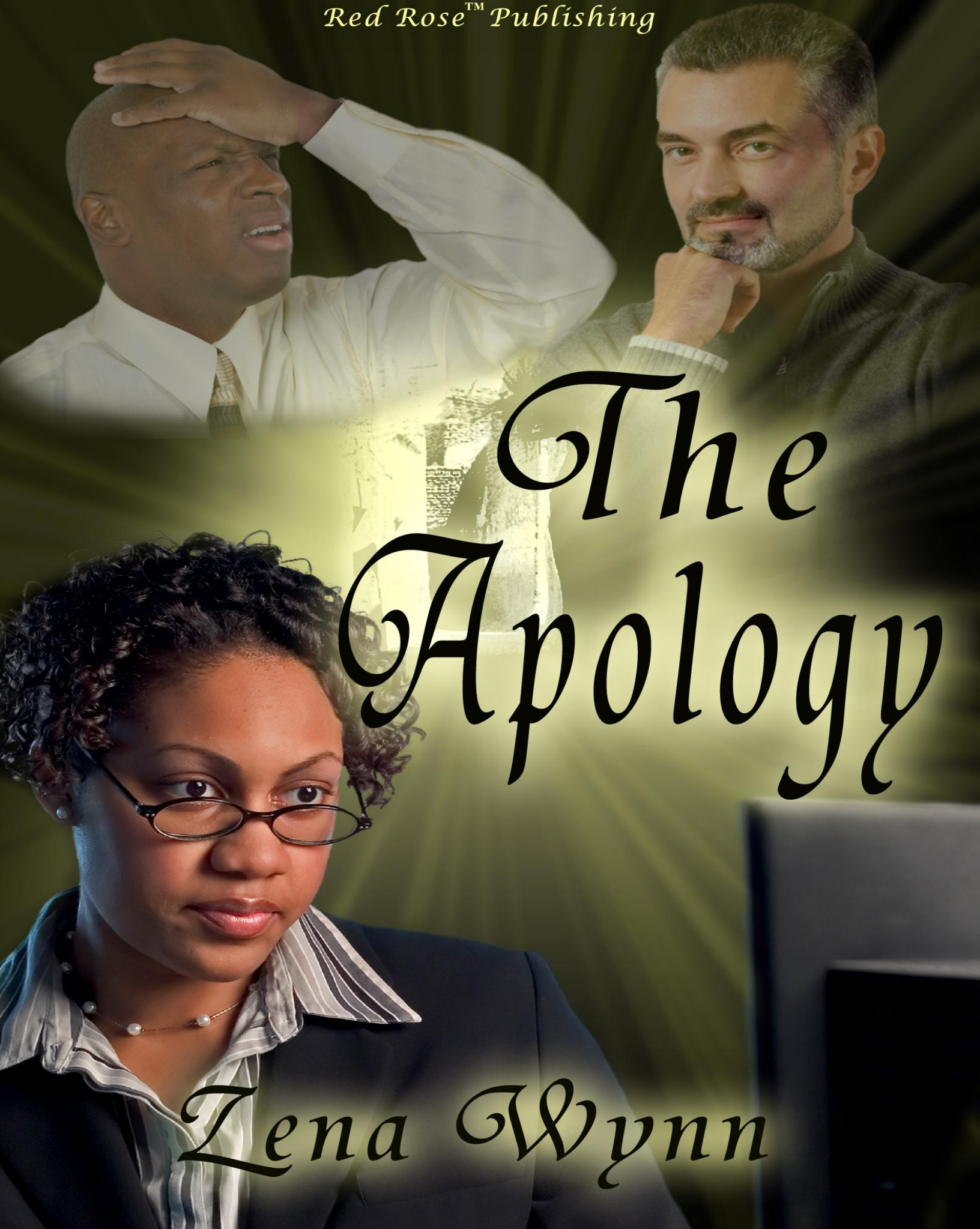


Red Rose™ Publishing



The Apology

Lena Wynn

The Apology

By

Zena Wynn

Dedication:

To all the women who've "been there and done that," managed to survive and move on, this one's for you.

Note from the author:

Sometimes, the hardest part of ending a relationship is forgiving ourselves. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, and looking back affords us the ability to see all of our errors in vivid Technicolor.

This is why it is vitally important that we learn to be merciful to ourselves. None of us are perfect and we all make mistakes. Learn to forgive and move on. Life will be so much better when you do.



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter One

It was windy and cold outside; temperatures abnormally low for January in Florida. I'd rather be home in bed but it was Friday, last day of the workweek and I had a three-day weekend to look forward to, so I dragged myself into the office, ready to plunge through eight hours of drudgery before I could return home.

I was reaching inside the car to grab my bags—purse, lunch bag, laptop—when my phone rang. I scrambled to find it in the depths of my purse before it could stop. One of these days, I'm going to get organized and actually use the compartments in my bag the way they were meant. Maybe then I won't have to go through this every time my cell phone rang.

I answered just in time. My "hello" sounded a bit breathless.

"Good morning. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"No, just took a bit to find my phone. What's up?"

"Nothing. Just making sure you're keeping warm."

I bit back a smile, touched by his thoughtfulness even though I didn't want to be. "I'm good, or I will be as soon as I get in the building."

“So, Nina...how long are you going to make me pay for what was done to you?” he asked quietly.

I was astonished by his directness. “Excuse me?”

“I can tell you’ve been hurt in the past, but I’m not him. When are you going to give me a chance?”

I was speechless. Roberto Ortega was a nice man, extremely nice. We’d met at church and over the years, served on several committees together. He worked with the youth and my kids loved him. The problem was, I no longer trusted my judgment where men are concerned. Two disastrous relationships will do that to a woman. I so didn’t want to have this conversation with him. Not here, and definitely not now.

“Roberto, can we discuss this later, when I have more time?” *God, please, please, let him let it go. I’m not ready to deal with this now.*

There was silence, then, “Okay, you have a blessed day.”

Thank you, God. “You, too. Later.”

Disconnecting the call, I walked inside and placed my purse in the desk. Once I booted the computer, I went to get my morning cup of coffee, still reflecting on my conversation with Roberto. He’d hinted in the past that he wanted to be the man in my life, but this was the first time he’d stated it right out. I’d ignored the

hints, determined to keep everything strictly on a friendship level. Seemed he was ready now to push the issue.

Two packs of sugar and three creamers later, I sat in front of my computer, opened my emails and began scanning them, my usual morning ritual. Only about twenty today. That's good. It meant no one did a dump the night before. I love my email buddies but some of them get a little outrageous sometimes.

About midway down the list, I noticed one with the subject line simply titled: Apology. The sender was Jonathan Parker, breaker of hearts and ban of my existence. He was a shining example of why most companies banned office romance. It was great while the going was good, but when it crashed and burned as most do... sheer agony. This was shaping up to be a hell of a day.

It had been four years—one marriage and a divorce for him—since our breakup. I was finally to the point where I was ready to let go of the past—the hurt, the recrimination, the why—and get on with my life. Not that I thought about him every day. No, in that sense, I *had* moved on. It was the memories that still got to me, the ones that came from out of nowhere and ambushed me. Something would happen and a memory would surface—usually not a good one—and once again I'd be mired in anger and disappointment in myself for putting up with his crap for as long as I did.

But this year was going to be different. I was letting go of the past completely. I'd already forgiven him, as much as I possibly could. This year I was forgiving myself. So I'd made a mistake. I couldn't go back and undo the past. No sense punishing myself for years on end. It was over, done. Time to move on. Once again, thoughts of Roberto crossed my mind, but I brushed them away.

I gazed at the email, sorely tempted to hit delete, but curiosity wouldn't allow me to do so. Hesitantly, I double clicked on the message to open it.

Nina, I've been dreaming about you for the last three weeks. I know I let you down. I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am for the way I treated you. I miss you and the times we spent together. I was wrong. I know we can't go back, but I really miss having you in my life. If you ever need me for anything, if there's ever anything I can do for you, just ask and it's yours.

God, this apology from him is your doing, I thought. I just knew it was. Since the New Year began, I'd been hearing sermons from preachers about letting go of the past and moving forward. Yeah, it was a popular and appropriate topic for the beginning of a new year, but this time the message really hit home.

And now this.

All of a sudden, all of those feelings I'd thought I dealt with—the anger, the betrayal, and the hurt—came rising up out of nowhere. Not prepared to deal with it, I read a few more emails, and handled some business. But still, it sat at the bottom of the screen, minimized, waiting for me to do something with it.

I had a decision to make. I could ignore it. Just hit delete and act like I'd never seen it. But, I'd forgiven him, right? Doing so would be an admission that he still had the power to affect me. Not something I was willing to show. But how to respond?

I read the email another time. I knew this man. The message was simple and straightforward, but there was another message between the lines and it asked a question: *Is there a chance we could start over? Can I fix the mistake I made by letting you go?*

My mind filled with turmoil as my thoughts traveled back to the past...



I started a job with a new company. The pay wasn't that great but the benefits were outstanding, and the company was very family friendly. Something I desperately needed since I'd recently gone through a nasty divorce and was now a single mother. My ex got his girlfriend pregnant and to "fix" things, he wanted to divorce me and marry her. Never mind that we have two children together that were barely two years of age. He was set on "doing the right thing." Yeah, right!

The right thing would have been to keep his dick where it belonged, in his pants when it wasn't in me.

Well, like I said, it was a new job and I was still learning the ropes, and the people I'd be working with. I was an accountant. The primary focus of my job was accounts payable—paying the bills—but I was also in charge of ordering supplies, so I had dealings with just about everyone in the company. If they needed something, be it as small as a pen or a large piece of office equipment, they had to see me.

I remember the day we met. One of the ladies in the office had a problem with management. He came in to see her about it. My supervisor made the introductions. “Nina Wallace, meet Jonathan Parker. Jon, this is Nina.”

I said a brief hello.

“Hi. I'm glad to see they hired you. If you have any problems, come see me.”

During my interview and testing, there'd been a whole panel of people that sat in on it. There was the supervisor I'd be working for if hired, two potential co-workers, the personnel manager and apparently, Jonathan. I didn't remember him being there, but then, I was so stressed out about the whole thing that I'd blanked a lot of it out of my mind. I really needed this job and I'd never been on that sort of interview before.

Jon was some kind of employee liaison with management. We didn't have a union. What we had was Jon and a committee made up of managers, supervisors and employees striving to build a better work environment for all. He was also the building facility's supervisor, a sort of jack-of-all-trades. If it broke, he could fix it.

I made myself a mental note that he was the 'go to' man if I had a problem, and promptly forgot him. Life was busy. I had two young kids in school and had recently purchased a house that needed a lot of repairs. The kids were in all sorts of after-school activities and I was very active in my church. I didn't have the time—or interest—for a relationship.

But Jon was persistent, and determined.

One thing you should know about me. I'm very reserved and guarded until I get to know a person. See, I have a very soft heart. I don't fall in love easily, but once I do, it takes me forever to get over it. I was still dealing with leftover emotions from my ex. By some strange twist of fate, he never married the girlfriend. She lost the baby and he decided he didn't want a divorce after all. He didn't necessarily want me, but he didn't want anyone else having me, either. So he fought the divorce. I guess he figured he'd keep me in reserve until he finished playing around and was ready to get serious, then he'd settle down and we'd be a nice little family again. Yeah, right.

When Jon started coming around trying to get my attention, my divorce had only been final for a few months. You can imagine the state of mind I was in. But like I said, he was persistent, but not pushy. I had to admire that. Pushy would have gotten him told off in no uncertain terms. Instead, he was very friendly and always present. He made his interest in me clear without being forward about it.

For instance, once I headed for the nurse's office to have my blood pressure taken and weigh in. The company had started a health initiative, encouraging employees to be more proactive in our personal health care. I'd taken the weight-loss challenge, was walking daily and having my weight recorded weekly in a serious effort to lose pounds. Jon was there when I arrived, in the chair with the blood pressure cuff on his arm.

"Go ahead and weigh in while I finish with Jon," the nurse told me.

Get on the scale with other people present? Uh, I don't think so.

"Don't let me stop you," Jon said. "I like a woman with meat on her bones."

I still waited until he left to measure my weight, but his words stuck in my mind.

After a time, I began to be more comfortable around him. Dropped a bit of my guard. Short hallway conversations became longer. He started stopping by my desk whenever he was in the area, just to speak. Then the lunch invitations began.

I turned most of them down, but I did allow him to bring his lunch to my desk and eat with me.

People got used to seeing us together and I got used to him being a part of my work life. They started including him in our department luncheons. Whenever we had a party, which was frequently, we were allowed to bring one guest from another department. It became expected that Jon would be mine.

This went on for over a year before I finally let him have my phone number. A whole year? Yes, I told you. I'm very guarded. To me it was one thing to be friendly at work. It was a whole 'nother ball game to take it outside of the office.

He would call at night once the kids were in bed. At first our discussions were stilted. He tried hard to engage me in conversation and I was being my normal awkward self. See, lunch only lasted a half an hour. I'd recently started back exercising and working out, trying to get in shape. A lot of our lunch talk revolved around weightlifting. He was a fitness nut and had the muscular body to show for it.

I wouldn't say that he was attractive—because he wasn't—but he was nice and charming. He was about five-nine, short for a man but a good height for my five-six. He was solid, thick and very muscular. He wore his black hair cropped close, to hide the gray in it I think, and had a neatly trimmed mustache and goatee. His nose had a bump in it from where it had been broken sometime in his life. It

was a good thing for him that I'd always believed a nice personality made up for a lack of physical beauty, but then I'm strange like that. My ex had been good to look at, but his personality quickly turned him ugly in my sight.

To say we didn't have much in common would be an understatement. I spent a lot of my time with my kids or at church. He rarely went to church. His daughter was grown; mine were in grade school. He drank; I didn't. He was fourteen years older than me, so there was a generation gap. Most of the music he liked was from the 60s and 70s. I was born in 1969 and didn't discover popular music until the 80s.

We finally found some common ground. I was really into do-it-yourself projects in my home. I figured why pay someone good money only to have them mess it up. If I did it myself and it was wrong, at least I had the satisfaction of knowing I'd done my best and the joy of completing the job. He was a great source of information. With the bodybuilding, that was two things we had in common, and then we discovered we liked the same type of movies. It was enough to keep things going.

Six months later, we went on our first date. I was nervous. This was a man, not a boy like my ex. I'd been out of the dating game for so long. Fortunately, it was a movie, the new Star Wars flick. On the way there, we discussed previous

Star Wars movies, debating which one was best. This was the first Prequel, the story of Darth Vader.

After the movie, we talked about our favorite scenes. Jon asked if I wanted to stop for coffee, but the movie had lasted almost three hours. I was tired and ready to go home. He dropped me off with a gentle peck on the cheek. No uncomfortable scene at the door, no asking to come in. I was impressed. So this is what dating an older man was like. Why hadn't I tried this before?

One date became two, and two became more, until we were an item. For the first time in almost ten years, I had a man. I was in a male/female romantic relationship and it was nice. We spent hours talking on the phone, went on countless dates, and I gloried in the feel of being an attractive, desirable female again. Feelings I'd lost after the fiasco with my ex. For the first time in a long time, I wasn't just a mom. I was a woman.

I was falling in love and didn't even notice. Jon was my little secret. My kids knew nothing about him, about us. I spoke with him at night after they were in bed, and we went out on the weekends when they were with their father. While I liked Jon and enjoyed being with him, I wasn't quite ready to trust him with my family.

One day after we'd been seriously dating for over a year, he asked me out to lunch. He seemed nervous, excited. He'd requested and received permission for us

to extend our lunch to an hour so he could take me to a nice, sit down restaurant. There was a seafood place not too far from the job that we both enjoyed. That day, over lunch, he told me how much he loved me, how happy he was that I was in his life and asked me to marry him. Then he pulled out this gorgeous engagement ring: a round, quarter-carat diamond solitaire with a gold band. Of course I said yes.

I was over the moon. I got back to the office and had to show all the ladies the ring he'd given me. Congratulations were expressed all around. Then came the hard part. It was time to introduce Jon to my kids and announce our engagement. They were shocked, and not in a good way. They had no idea I was seeing anyone. Their father had gone through several women by this time, but Mom had always been just theirs, or so they'd believed. I knew I was going to have to give them, and myself, time to get adjusted.

Christmas went well. It helped that Jon bought the kids gifts that they actually liked, while their father bought them nothing. Oh, he bought his girlfriend's kids plenty, but his own? Seemed he ran out of cash. The kids got used to me having a man in my life, and while not exactly happy about it, they were resigned.

Jon wanted to set a wedding date, but I didn't see the need to rush. I knew I wanted to marry him. I just didn't know when. See, I kind of liked being able to come back to my own house, alone. Then we became lovers.

He rocked my world.

Maybe it was because I'd been celibate for so long. Or maybe it was because I was in my early thirties, a time when experts say women hit their sexual peak. In the beginning, that was part of it. I realized much later that because Jon was so much older than me, to him it was a matter of pride that he be a good lover. He had to show that the old dude still had it. By this point he'd celebrated his fiftieth birthday. After we became lovers, I was no longer quite as interested in pushing off the wedding.

The first big blowup came over the decision of where to live. He assumed I'd move in with him. I was assuming he'd move in with me. My house was larger, containing four bedrooms and two baths. It would be less of a disruption for my kids for him to make the transition and he could help me fix the place up, making my house ours.

He had a three-bedroom home that he'd shared with a previous wife. One of his bedrooms was a weight room. I was not going to force my kids to share a room again. Over the age of nine, they were getting much too old for that.

We went back and forth for weeks. All talk of setting a date stopped. Finally, I bent my pride and told him I'd live with him. Then I said, "You do realize that if I move here, I'm going to make changes."

“What kind of changes?” he asked, not happy with the idea at all. I could see it on his face.

“I don’t know. But if I live here, I’m going to want to put my stamp on the place.”

He looked around. “I’ll have to think about it. I like my place the way it is.”

I told him bluntly, “Look, I’m not too happy about living in a house you shared with another woman. You’re crazy if you think I’m going to get rid of all of my stuff and just move in without changing things around. Right now, this is your house. When we’re married, it will be ours.”

That’s when I realized there was another side to Jon, one I hadn’t seen before, and it was selfish.

Chapter Two

The beginning of the end...

I began to notice more and more things about Jon that I didn't like. One was his drinking. He was what I call a social drunk. Jon never got sloppy with it or in any way appeared to be inebriated. In fact, during the week when he had to work, he didn't touch it. But on the weekends, beginning Friday night through Sunday afternoon, he was rarely without a beer in his hand. He literally went through cases of the stuff, drinking it like it was water. On long weekends, he always took an extra day off to give himself time to recover. His drinking habits explained why no matter how muscular he was elsewhere, he still had a gut.

After the argument about the house, we'd kind of cooled things somewhat. He still introduced me as his fiancé. I still went to all of his family events and supported him during times of crisis, like when his uncle died.

He avoided my family like the plague.

My family's real big on celebrating events with food. Someone having a birthday? We all go out to eat at our favorite family buffet. Got a good report card or had some praise worthy news? We were going out en masse. Jon was invited to

several of these events, but found a reason not to come each time. I finally said something to him about it.

“You know, when your family’s doing something, you expect me to drop everything and come with you.”

“You got something against my family?”

“No. What I’m saying is that I spend time with the people that are important in your life, but you won’t do the same with mine.”

He was quiet. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I’ll do better. I know I need to spend more time with your kids, and your mom is important to you, as well.”

He’d said all the right words, but nothing changed.

On another occasion, I broached the subject of his drinking.

“Your drinking concerns me. My ex drank a lot. It was one of the reasons for our split. I don’t want to go through the same thing with you and I definitely don’t want my kids exposed to it.”

He said okay, he’d work on it, but inside he was angry. Not too long afterwards, we went over to his brother’s house, who lived on the other side of the city, for a cookout. I spent an enjoyable afternoon with his family, talking to my future in-laws. Jon was drinking, as usual, but then most of the men were. When we left, I noticed he made sure to stick to the speed limit. Normally he drove a bit fast. I, stomach full and comfortable as I was, didn’t think much of it.

When we got back to his house, he laid into me. “Did you notice how carefully I drove?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, I got you here safely, didn’t I? And did you notice how much beer I drank? I drank more than normal and did it to prove to you that I can control my alcohol and myself. Don’t ever compare me to your ex again. If I want to drink, I will. You’re not my mother.”

I was shocked, then furious. “You mean to tell me you deliberately got drunk, putting my life and yours in danger, just to prove a point?”

“Nothing happened. I was in control at all times.”

I just shook my head. He was supposed to be the older, more mature one, and here he was acting as foolish as a child. I lost a great deal of respect for him that day. I went home and didn’t speak to him for a few weeks. He finally came to me and apologized, admitting what he did was stupid. He confessed that he did indeed drink too much, and his conscious had been bothering him about it. That’s why he blew up when I said something. He was going to change. Not because I asked, but because he could see the affect the alcohol was having on his drinking buddies. He didn’t want to end up like them, and he was encouraging them to make the change as well. We made up and things got better between us, for a time.

By now we'd been together for three years. I'd seen so much negative that I was no longer sure I wanted to marry the man, but I wasn't ready to let go. There were times when I could still see the sweet, charming man I'd become engaged to. Those times gave me hope that this selfish, disagreeable person I was with now was just a phase.

I started referring to him in conversation by the code name of Jekyll and Hyde. My good friend TJ called him Sybil. She really believed he was bi-polar. I no longer pushed for him to spend time with the kids. In fact, I didn't want him around them. He'd made good on his promise to give up drinking. Unfortunately, I discovered I liked him better drunk.

So why was I still with him? The sex. Great sex can overcome a world full of evils. Then he did something that not even good sex could counteract.



The end...

I'd moved past that first bloom of love where everything was possible and love conquered all. We had some serious problems. They were fixable, if we *both* were willing to admit to them and work at it. I took a good hard look at our relationship and vowed to undo the wrong I'd done.

Accordingly, I no longer dropped everything when he called and came running. Sometimes, I didn't even answer the phone. I became semi-unavailable. I remember one instance vividly.

The phone rang. I looked at it and saw it was him. I didn't really feel like being bothered. The kids were with their father and I was enjoying the peace and quiet. He kept calling until I finally answered anyway.

"Hey baby, what you doing?"

"Reading," I replied.

"You want to come over? I picked up some movies I think you'll enjoy."

"No thanks. I'll pass."

"What if I stop by there?" The question was surprising. Jon rarely came to my house. In the beginning, it was because I wouldn't let him. Then later by his choice.

"No, I don't really feel like company."

There was this long silence, then he said, "Oh, okay. I'll let you get back to your reading."

"Alright."

He lingered on the line, waiting for me to say something. I hung up. There was nothing else to say. He told my friend TJ about it the next day. For some

reason, he considered her his personal relationship counselor. She laughingly told me about it later.

“What did you say?”

“I told him sometimes girls just got stuff to do.”

She said his response was, “She’s never done that before.”

So she told him, “That’s your problem. Your ass is spoiled.”

Good, I thought. The message was getting through.

After that, he became a lot more cautious in his dealings with me, more considerate. It finally sank in that he could lose me. I went on with phase two of my plan.

Jon had this bad habit of instructing me. I don’t know if it was because I was younger than him, but I got tired of it. If I disagreed with him on an issue, especially one pertaining to our relationship, he’d say I was being childish.

I was shopping in Walmart, talking with him on my cell when he said it one time to many.

“Don’t do that again,” I told him.

“Do what?”

“Call me a child. I’m a woman. Disagreeing with you does not make me childish.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize I was doing it.”

“Well, you are, and I don’t like it.” Bit by bit, I was calling him to task on more and more things. Stuff I’d let slide in the past, I was now putting my foot down and demanding a change. To me, it was all about respect. I was tired of being taken for granted and spoken to any kind of way. Change was coming, whether he liked it or not.

We’d been talking for a few more minutes when he did it again. I promptly hung up on him. After a few minutes, he called back.

“Did you hang up on me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I told you not to call me childish.”

“I did it again?”

“Yes.”

He was silent, realizing I was serious about this. I never raised my voice, nor expressed any anger. I was totally calm, but fiercely determined. He got the point. He bit his tongue a few times, but he never did it again.

I’d told him once at the beginning of our relationship, “Jon, I put up with a lot, but don’t take my kindness for weakness. I do it because once I’m through with a relationship, I’m completely done with it. There will be no second chances. Don’t come back to me later saying you made a mistake. I’ll do all I can to make

this relationship work while I'm in it, but once it's over, I'm done. So get it right this time, 'cause that's all you have."

I guess he forgot.

The final straw came that winter. We'd bumbled through and were on another up swing in our relationship. The holidays had come and gone, and we'd had a wonderful time together.

With the New Year came new problems.

One day I came home to discover that my hot water heater no longer worked. I called the plumber. He took one look and said that the heating element had overheated and fused together. It would cost over four hundred dollars to fix it. That was money I simply didn't have.

I couldn't do without hot water, not in the wintertime with two young children. If it was summer, I might have been able to make it work until I had time to gather the money. Fortunately, I didn't need them to fix it. I had another working unit sitting in a storage shed from the renovations I'd done on my house, which was formerly a duplex. I just needed someone to pull out the old one and install the new one.

I told Jon about it the next day at work.

"You called a plumber?"

“Yeah, they said it would cost four hundred and thirty-four dollars to fix it. They’d change out the old one and install the new for two hundred. I don’t have that kind of money. If it was just me, I’d wait until I did, but I’m concerned about the kids.”

“Yeah, you need hot water for the children. I’ll come by after work and see what I can do.”

He came and switched the old one, took it to the road and installed the spare. I was so grateful. I hugged him and told him if I had any money, I’d give it to him. He said it was no big deal. He’d have done the same for anyone in need.

That weekend when I got paid, I picked up a six-pack of his favorite beer—he’d gone back to drinking, but not as heavy as before—and took it to him, thanking him again. The gesture was a huge one on my part. I still wasn’t happy about the alcohol but decided to let it be because, truth be told, he really was nicer to be around when he was drinking. On the way to my car, some church people handing out tracks on salvation stopped me. I was so embarrassed. Here I am, a professed Christian, coming out of the store with beer, visible to all.

I told my friend TJ about it the next day. She got a good laugh out of it and teased me mercilessly. At lunch, she brought it up again. By this time, my lunch group had grown to include TJ, Jon, one of his good friends Charlie, and a few others.

Jon proceeded to complain about how he'd come over, hurt his back changing my water heater and all I'd given him was a lousy six-pack of beer. He said it in a somewhat joking manner, but I could tell he was serious.

TJ covered the moment by laughingly saying, "If it had been me, I'd have met you at the door wearing a see-through negligee."

Jon laughed and stated, "That's what I'm talking about. Nina, that's how a *real* woman handles business."

I was pissed, but didn't comment. After all the crap I'd put up from him, he was giving me grief about the one lousy favor he'd done for me? I went home looking at our relationship through new eyes that finally had the blinders off. Every bad thing he'd ever done, every inequality in our relationship, all of it came back to the forefront. Things I'd forgiven and let go for the sake of peace, I remembered.

I'd supported him when his favorite uncle died. Left the kids home with a relative and went with Jon to hospice when he got the call, even though I have an issue with sitting with dead bodies, especially of people I don't know. Listened to him gripe during the funeral arrangements and even sat beside him with the family during the funeral. I spent the whole weekend with him at his place, because I knew he needed someone.

When my good friend Rose died, I came to him after stopping by the funeral home—alone—to pay my last respects to the family. I was shocked and saddened by the abrupt ending of such a good woman. Jon wanted to talk, but I didn't have much to say.

Finally he said, "See, this is why I didn't go with you, and didn't want you coming over tonight. I knew how you were going to be. You're depressing me. You need to be more like me. I don't bring my problems to you. I deal with them myself."

I quietly got up and went home.

Apparently, I'd forgiven but hadn't forgotten.

I remembered all the things I done for him, the way I went all out to express my love for him, but he rarely did the same. I went home and for the first time in a long time, prayed about this relationship that was slowly destroying me.

I pulled completely back. When he wanted me, I was unavailable.

After a week or two of the silent treatment, he asked me what was wrong. I told him in no uncertain terms. I reminded him of all the crap I'd done for him. How I'd stood by him over the years and done countless favors for him, and the one time I needed something, he harassed me because I hadn't paid him?

"Baby, I was just playing"

“Bullshit. You were serious. You’ve thrown that up in my face too often to be ‘joking.’”

I was in a rage, one that was all the more dangerous because it was that cold, quiet, deadly anger. That’s another thing about me you should know. It takes a lot to get me mad, but once you do, you’d better run. Jon had learned early in our relationship not to piss me off. He had a flash fire type of anger—quick to life and quick to die. Mine is murderous once aroused, which is why I try real hard not to let people take me there. I’ve always had a lot of pride when it came to money, or my lack of it. I’d taught my kids one hard fast rule: Don’t mess with Momma’s food or her money. I was serious about both. Probably because for too often in my life there had been little of either.

His attitude and comments had gotten to me where it hurt, and I wasn’t letting this one go.

Sex couldn’t fix this. I didn’t want him touching me. I couldn’t stand to be around him. I gave him a check for two hundred dollars. “Here’s payment for your services.”

I couldn’t afford it, but satisfying my pride was worth every penny.

He tore it up. “I don’t want your money, Nina. I told you I was just kidding.”

I just looked at him with all the disgust I was feeling on my face and walked off. I didn’t need to say the words. It was over. We both knew it, or so I thought.

Chapter Three

Over the edge...

Jon waited a few months before trying to get on my good side again. For a while, he avoided my office unless he absolutely had to be there, and then he was quiet, reserved. On my part, I ignored him. When I had to deal with him, I treated him with the professional courtesy of a stranger. The whole office could feel the chill. No one asked what happened, but they all knew something was wrong.

I was no longer wearing the ring. I'd given it back. On hindsight, I should have kept it. He owed me that much, but I wanted nothing of his. I gave my daughter the necklace he gave me, and the rest, I trashed.

When he came up for supplies, he tried making small talk. At first I short answered him. You know, gave one word responses whenever possible, and when it wasn't, was straight and to the point. He persisted and I gradually relented, losing the hostility.

After a while, I was cautiously friendly with him. For him, it was enough.

My anger lessened but the disappointment was still there. You just don't treat the woman you profess to love the way he'd treated me. For years, he'd been

saying all the right things, but his actions just hadn't measured up. I was sorry it had taken me so long to realize it.

One morning, he came into my office early before the rest of the staff arrived and asked to speak privately with me. I was over the majority of my hurt and anger, so I agreed. He apologized. "I've been thinking a lot about what you said. You're right. I was wrong, about so many things. Will you give me another chance? I promise I'll get it right this time. We'll take it slow, start over from the beginning, if you like. This time will be different."

I looked at him standing there so earnest. Yeah, I had a rule about no second chances, but I also knew something else about myself. I still loved the jerk. Was I happy about it? No, but there it was. I'd been miserable with him, but wasn't much happier without him.

I decided to take a chance. I didn't tell him I still loved him, but I accepted his apology and made our reconciliation conditional. We would take things very slow—because I still didn't trust him—and no sex. I'd see how serious he was about us.

Things got better, little by little. He called constantly, and was very attentive, interested in even the smallest details of my life. It was nice, and made a good change from how things were before. I was beginning to think that maybe this time, it would be okay. I avoided temptation by staying away from his house,

and most of our dealings were on the phone, talking, trying to work through our issues.

One day about two months later, I took the day off. Even as things in my relationship with Jon were improving, my home life was going to hell. I was having some serious financial difficulties, and in danger of losing my house. My son was acting out and it seemed like I was spending more time at his school than at work. My wisdom teeth were giving me problems. I'd been putting off having them removed since I was eighteen but couldn't delay any longer. And to top it all off, the doctor discovered my thyroid wasn't functioning properly, causing me to be exhausted all the time, bleeding profusely when my cycle was on, and gain weight. He put me on medication.

I was resting, thinking about Jon, giving serious thought to taking our relationship to the next level and possibly bringing sex back into the picture when I got a call from TJ.

“Nina, first of all, how are you feeling?”

“Much better. The medication is starting to kick in and having those teeth pulled helped a lot.”

“I'm glad. Look, I wanted to warn you before you came in. Jon's engaged. He posted a notice and picture on the bulletin board in the lunchroom this morning. I heard some of the guys talking about it. A lot of them are pissed off at him for his

treatment of you. Saying how nice of a lady you are and how stupid he was to let you get away.”

No one but TJ knew we'd renewed our relationship. Jon wanted to keep it on the 'down low,' stating that part of the problem before was that there were too many people 'in our business.' I'd agreed, for reasons of my own.

I was hurt and angry, but played it cool. TJ wasn't fooled, but she wasn't my girl for nothing. She let it go and didn't call me on it. Simply stated, “Call if you need me. You know I got your back.”

The next day when I returned to work, I had my game face on. I knew people wanted to see my reaction to the news, because for him to be announcing his engagement so soon after our “breakup,” it meant he had to have been two-timing me. My pride wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing me react. Whenever the subject came up, I wished him happiness.

Jon, smart man that he was, made himself absent.

On the way to the restroom a few days later, I took advantage of the break room being empty to get a good look at the woman he was marrying. Shock took away any anger that I was feeling. This woman looked so much like me she could have been my twin. Surely it was just my bruised ego playing tricks with my eyes, but no, she had the same round face. Her eyes were the same as mine. We had the

same light complexion and appeared to be about the same size. Even our hair was the same shoulder length.

I called TJ. “Is it just my imagination, or does Jon’s fiancé look a lot like me?”

TJ burst out laughing. She laughed so hard she started snorting, and I had to wait for her to regain her composure. “Girl, you ain’t imagining a thing. I started to tell you, but I figured it would be better for you to see it for yourself. It’s obvious to everyone but him. The guys are calling him all kinds of a fool.”

I began to feel sorry for the future Mrs. Parker and grateful it wasn’t me.



Present day...

The message sat there, staring at me accusingly, waiting for me to do something. I had to make a response. Ignoring it wouldn’t make it go away and would create this awkward tension between us. Over the years, we’d manage to settle into a somewhat stable working relationship during the times when we were forced together. At times, I even forgot there had ever been an ‘us.’ I didn’t want to go back to the stiltedness of the past.

Neither did I want to open the door to a possible future together.

I searched my heart. Despite the backlash of feelings that had surged through me upon first reading his email, I really had forgiven Jon. I wished him

well in his life, just not with me. I didn't want to be friends. I didn't want to be anything with him. As for needing him? Well, one never knew what the future held, but past experience had taught me that I did just fine on my own.

I finally settled on a response, one that there was no possible way to misconstrue. It was two, not so simple, little words: You're forgiven.

I hit send, and once it was gone, hit delete.

I was at peace. I was through blaming myself for my previously poor judgment in men. I put in my eight hours, gathered my things, and headed for the exit and freedom. As I approached, I noticed Jon standing beside the glass double doors. Coincidence, I'm sure, since I was leaving a half hour earlier than normal and he was an hour later than he should have been.

"What are you still doing here?" I asked, feeling the need to say something.

"A lot of the guys in my department called in sick. I had to stay late and cover. I think they planned it."

"Oh."

I walked out the door and headed for the parking lot. Jon was right behind me most of the way. When our paths separated, he said, "You have a good weekend."

"You, too."

When I got home, I went straight into my room and pulled out all of my old prayer journals I'd written during the time when we were together and threw them in the trash. The gesture was somehow symbolic. Then I pulled out my cell phone and made a call.

"Withers and Sons."

"Roberto, please."

"Hold one second."

"Roberto Ortega, speaking."

"Roberto, it's me. Would you like to come over to my place for dinner tonight?"

There was silence on his end, and then he hesitantly asked, "Does this mean what I think it does?"

"I'm not sure, but I think I'm finally willing to give it a try," I answered with a smile.

"Baby, that's all I ask."

The End

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Loose Id

True Mates

Nikolai's Wolf

Phaze Books

A Matter of Trust

The Contract

Illicit Attraction

Mary and the Bear