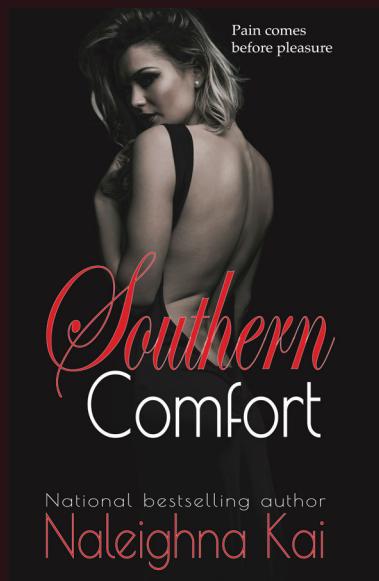
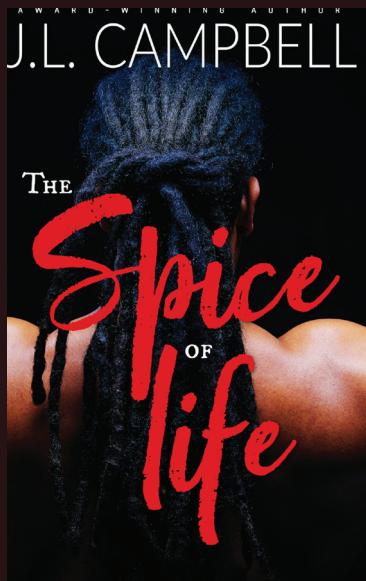
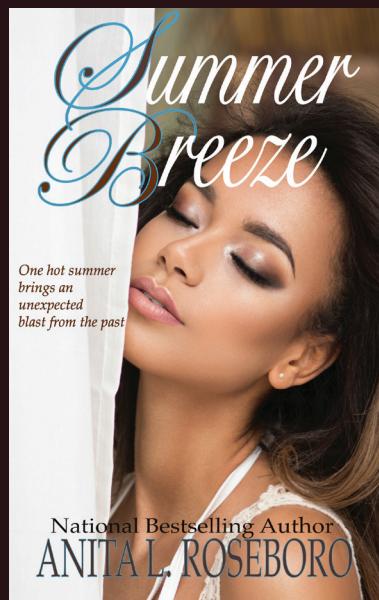
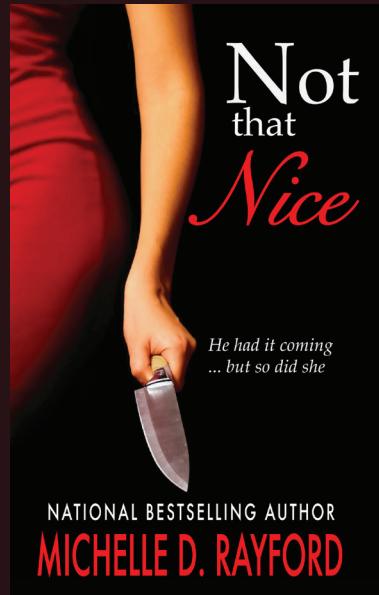
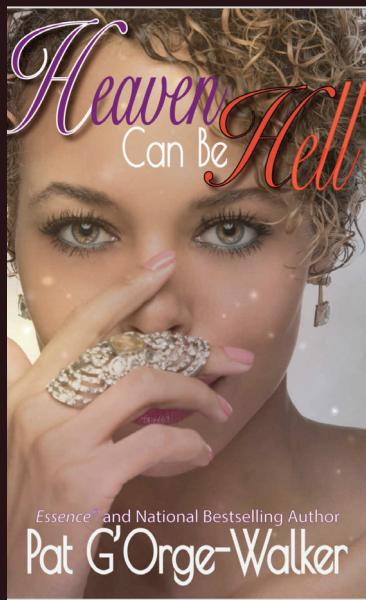
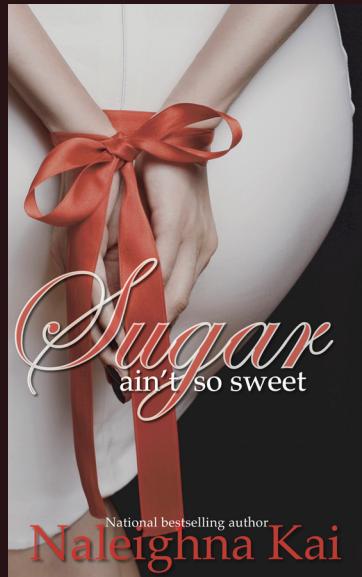
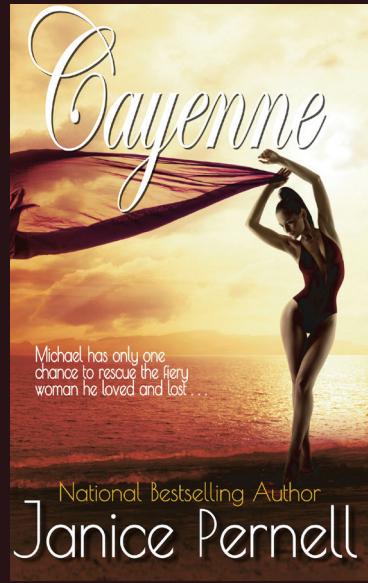


Enjoy these sample chapters of our



J. D. Mason

Dirty Diana

Diana Rigby was shaken out of a deep sleep with words she never thought she'd ever hear again.

"I'm callin' 'bout yo' momma," Aunt Lorraine said in that slow Southern drawl, laced with a kind of artificial sweetness that compelled an eye roll from Diana.

"What about her?"

Through the years as she climbed the ranks to become a Mixed Martial Arts Champion, she'd almost forgotten that she'd had a mother. That was her goal after she left Rhino, Texas not long after graduating high school. She left that same day, as a matter of fact, not bothering to tell anyone; determined to put as much space between her and the hell she'd grown up in as soon as possible.

"She ain't doin' too good, Diana," Lorraine offered, then she waited, no doubt hoping that Diana would ask the most logical question. What's wrong?

Silence hung heavy between the two for several beats before Lorraine continued. "Doctors say she ain't got much time left. Cancer got her. She stayin' here with me, until ... well."

"That's too bad," was the best Diana could muster.

Lorraine seemed disappointed in Diana's lack of emotion or any expression of sincerity in her regret. Diana offered words. That's all. She had nothing else to give her mother except empty and hollow words that meant absolutely nothing.

"She asks 'bout you. Asks Tray to look you up on the Internet to see how you doin'."

Again, Diana had no response. She left the edge of the deck and settled onto a cream colored chaise.

"I'm sure she'd like to see you, Diana. It's been so long."

Returning to Rhino had never been on her radar. She never expected to see her mother again. But apparently, the umbilical cord between a mother and child is never fully severed, and it tugged on Diana until a few days later when she drove into town in a rented car on the same road she'd ridden on in that Greyhound bus when she left.

Welcome to Rhino, Texas, the sign on the side of the road read. Population 24,353.

Story Note

This story came on the heels of some major life changes and on the eve (give or take a week or two) of a dream trip to Europe. It was important for me to reel in the chaos and focus, so I made it a point to progress through this story like an MMA fighter in training.

* * *

The woman speeding down Flint Road in the flashy red convertible was definitely not from around here. So, of course, Jake postponed going back to the station to turn around and follow her. The speed limit was thirty, and she had to have been doing at least thirty-five. Being a small town sheriff, little things like that mattered.

He flashed his siren and lights only for a moment before she pulled over to the side of the paved road. He'd probably let her get away with a warning, but if nothing else, at least he'd get to meet somebody new.

"Afternoon, Miss," he said in his best Texas Sheriff drawl.

Damn! She was lovely, even behind those big sunglasses and that headscarf.

She turned her face up to look at him. "Was I speeding?"

Those, big, pretty lips of hers caused him to subconsciously lick his own. At first glance, he took her for a white woman, but up close he could see that she was either real light-skinned, Latina, or biracial. Stylish was the word that came to mind, right after beautiful. Everything about her screamed money, and she shone in the light like a new penny.

Jake had heard things, especially since she was back. Dirty Diana. Not white enough. Not black enough. She had a reputation for being loose, for lack of a better term. Looking for love in all the wrong places because she obviously wasn't getting it from the one place she needed it most.

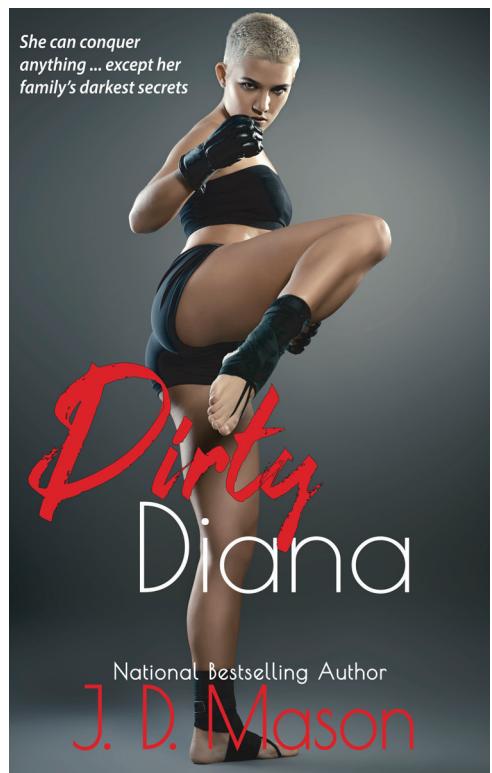
"You could always count on Dirty Diana for a good time."

Good for who, though? Certainly not for a young girl who had probably been taught from birth that she wasn't good enough or wanted. Guilt stuck in the back of his throat. If only he'd done something that first time he and the sheriff had answered the call to her house that day, maybe her life would've been different.

* * *

Jake wasn't the type to get caught up like this. Women flirted. He flirted back, but he'd always known where to draw the line when one needed to be drawn for his sake, or for the sake of someone else. Level-headed. That phrase might as well have been his middle name, because it's who he was, what he'd always been, to the point of being downright boring. She'd captivated him, somehow.

Diana Rigby had put a spell on him that he couldn't shake, and that was fine with him.



J.D. Mason is the author of more than twenty novels including *The Woman Trapped in the Dark*, *Seducing Abby Rhodes*, *The Real Mrs. Price*. A national bestselling and award-winning author, her work has been featured in USA Today, Essence, Pride Magazine in the U.K., and Today's Black Woman.
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Janice Pernell

Cayenne

Michael raised the trunk and gazed at his ex-girlfriend's unconscious body. Nia was blindfolded, her legs and ankles bloodied by the thick rope binding them. He had to play his cards right if he intended to get her out of this alive.

"You sure nobody saw you snatch her?" Michael asked Lee as the self-proclaimed pretty boy and wannabe gangster got out of his car.

"Positive." Lee leaned over to admire himself in the mirror.

Michael swore that he would make things right with Nia, make her his wife—as soon as he could free her from her captors.

"Before Angelique kills sleeping beauty," Lee said, "I'm gonna break her off some of what the women beg me for." He gave a wicked sneer that set Michael's nerves on edge.

Though his fists were aching to have a conversation with Lee's face, Michael chomped down on his anger. *Months of undercover work will go down the drain if I lose my cool.*

"You'd better get in the car and go meet up with your sister like she told you to," Michael warned. "People get antsy in this kind of deal." He glanced at his watch. "Keep them waiting, and they'll get cold feet. Then there won't be a baby to sell. Angelique will be pissed if that happens."

"Maaan, you think I'm scared of that chick?" Lee's chest was stuck out like a rooster in a cockfight, but his voice sounded more like a hen with its neck on the chopping block. "My sister don't run things. I do."

The only thing Lee ran was his mouth. None of the informants Michael had encountered in ten years of undercover work divulged as much information as Lee belched out while bragging about his power, prowess, prosperity, and plans—none of which he possessed. Angelique was the brains behind everything they did.

Michael raised his hands in mock surrender. "Since you call the shots, how about I look after her"—he nodded toward Nia—"until you get back?"

Cursing under his breath, Lee motioned for Michael to remove Nia from his black 2018 Lexus RX.

Story Note

I've always been an avid reader of fiction. I even edited the work of other authors for several years. But I get an incomparable thrill from creating my own stories that entertain readers and cause them to reflect on important issues. I hope Cayenne does both for you.

Michael gathered her slender body in his arms.

Lee slammed the trunk, gave a two-finger wave, and sped off into the night.

Nia never flinched. Her breathing remained slow and steady as the door closed, shutting her off from the outside world.

Not knowing when Lee and Angelina would return, getting Nia out of that place was a priority. But concerns about Nia being unconscious for three hours trumped that. Michael carried her to his Cadillac CTS and gently laid her across the back seat.

Her natural beauty mesmerized him. Baby-soft cocoa skin. Eyebrows that framed her brown eyes like they were works of art. Thick black hair that created a halo around her face.

He placed a feather-light kiss on her lips. In a fairy tale, she would awaken with undying gratitude. But he feared that no magic kisses or potions could ever make her regard him favorably again.

He got the smelling salts from the first aid kit in the car. Getting in the driver's seat, he turned toward her and waved the bottle several inches away from her nose.

She wrenched away from the acrid smell of ammonia. Convulsing with coughs, she thrashed around, probably hoping to free her hands, take the blindfold off, and make a run for it.

Putting a hand to her chest, he gently held her in place. The heartbeat that was faint as he held her against his chest a minute ago now pounded against his palm like a battering ram.

"Shhh," he whispered.

Her head darted around to follow his hushed tone, then to take in other sounds in the space: a dog barking nearby; the hum of the furnace in the adjoining utility room; his ragged breathing as the fear of losing her to killers subsided.

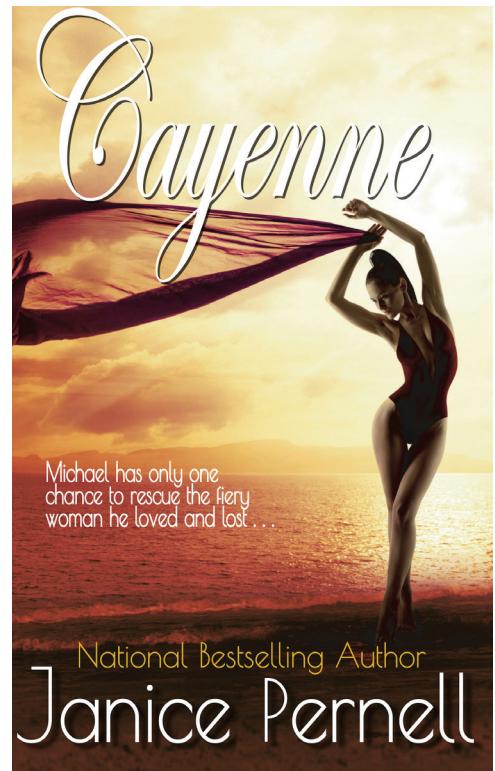
Michael braced himself, knowing that once he said something, she would recognize him. "I'm going to take off your blindfold."

She gasped, cringed, and craned her head toward the sound of his voice.

He untied the black bandana that covered her eyes and let it slip off.

Light spilling from the dome light over Nia's head made her squint, but when she fully opened her eyes, she honed in on Michael's face. Her expression transformed from bewilderment to horror, giving voice to everything she couldn't vocalize.

Why did you do this to me?!



Janice Pernell made her writing debut as a co-contributor to *Baring It All: The Ins And Outs Of Publishing* in 2014. In 2018 she released *No Right Way To Do A Wrong Thing*, her first work of fiction. She is writing another novel and two Christian inspirational books.
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Naleighna Kai

Sugar Ain't So Sweet

I will die if I stay here ...

Shannan's entire family sat at the dinner table enjoying a meal which took her three hours to prepare, while she mowed the jungle of their front yard, seething the entire time. She stopped to empty the bag, but froze when her mother-in-law's voice carried from the open pantry window, "I had to fake a damn heart attack to make this stupid heifer get with the program."

Faked a heart attack? Wait. What?

Monique Hallerin had faked that entire one-month ordeal so Shannan would take over the daunting task of shopping, preparing, cooking, then serving Sunday dinners for fifteen people every week, only to criticize nearly everything that Shannan did. Faked it so Shannan's husband, Zach, would pick up the slack on her bills. All while her brothers-in-law and most of her children parked their lazy behinds at the dining room table every Sunday and didn't lift a finger to help. Shannan was way past tired—exhausted was a better word.

"Guests don't wash dishes," her husband said when she mentioned they could pitch in with clean up. Well, to be honest, neither did he and he hadn't been a guest since they'd said, "I do."

What she should've said on the day they were married, fifteen years ago was, "I don't," then ran past his overbearing mother and four shiftless brothers then out the church doors to freedom.

"I had to fake a damn heart attack to make this stupid heifer get with the program."

Shannan, who had seven children of her own, was now responsible for duties that her mother-in-law had done for most of her non-married life; catering to those grown ass men sitting at her dining room table at this very moment while Shannan was outside doing something she had first asked her husband, then one of them, to do.

Rage hit Shannan full force.

She staggered away from the mower, rushed into the house, ran up the stairs and snatched up her tote. She halted at the threshold of her bedroom for a moment, extracting the small shoebox in the back of the closet. A set of credit cards, passport, birth certificate,

Story Note

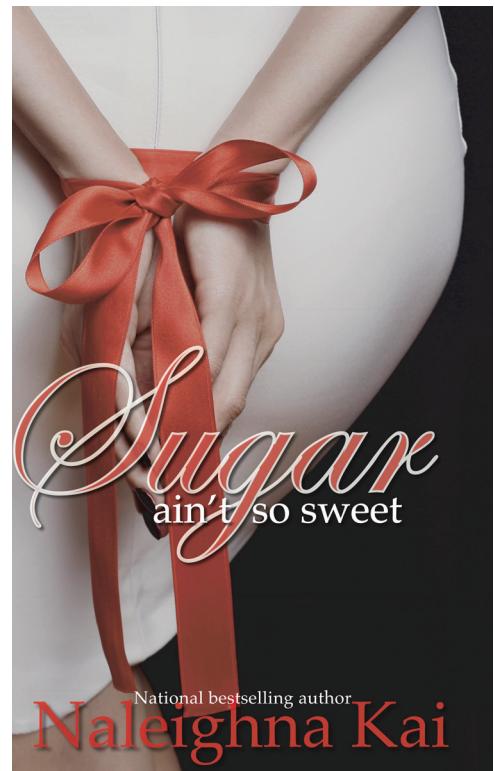
What if's. That's what drove this story. What if I was a wife who'd been surrounded by people who were taking, taking, and taking and not realizing that I'd been giving. What happens when that wife strikes out to find herself and figure out what she's willing to lose in order to find that sense of peace.

social security card, and all of the hidden cash found its way into the tote. She glanced at the summer wardrobe spilling over into Zach's side and decided there wasn't anything she wanted to take. She tipped down the rear stairway into the kitchen, snatched the keys from a hook near the door to put as much distance between herself and those people as possible.

Shannan only vaguely heard the youngest of her seven children call her name. Her heart constricted as she ignored them, tears blinding her as she slid behind the wheel of an SUV that was almost a second home. Basketball. Volleyball. Football. Gymnastics. PTA. Never any breaks between or any time for her to simply breathe.

I will die if I stay here.

Those seven words came to mind, summarizing her current status. Something that first hit her when she had the argument with Zach before his family arrived ...



"My mother raised five boys on her own and never complained about having to manage a household," he said, still keeping his focus on the circuitry in his hands.

"And she was on her own because she ran your father off," she replied. "Let's be real about that."

Zachary's face twisted into a mask of annoyance as he glared at her. "I can't talk about this with you."

"I'm done talking. I'm tired," she snapped. "There's going to come a time when I say to hell with it."

Zach paused at the end of the wooden bench, scoffing as he asked, "And where are you going to go? Who's going to be a father to seven children?"

"They have a father," she said, and the sorrow of her reality was heavy indeed. "I need a husband."

I will die if I stay here.

The moment Shannan hit the expressway, she wiped her tears with the back of a trembling hand. A startling thought hit her. She could not leave her baby girl in that house.

Naleighna Kai is the national bestselling author of several controversial novels. She's the founder of the NK Tribe Called Success, NK Literary Cafe Magazine, and the Cavalcade of Authors Literary Tour. She is an agent, developmental editor, literary consultant and marketing and promotion specialist.
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Pat G'Orge Walker

Heaven Can be Hell

Story Note

I wanted to show what could happen when a confident, carnal-minded woman works her magic to seduce a sexually inhibited reverend. She got him but now can she keep him if God wants him too, kinky-free? It answers the question ... is the bed ever defiled between a consenting husband and wife when their explorations go outside the regular "missionary" position.

"Be warned, all verified hell is about to visit you," Aunt Peaches blasted over the church's intercom.

"Okay," Averic snapped. "Send whoever she is in here. By the way, who is it?"

"Glad you finally got around to asking because she's waiting inside the sanctuary. You ain't seen that heffa in a long time."

Choosing to ignore Aunt Peaches' devilish reference to someone being a "heffa," he replied, "Well, bring her inside, please. I really wanna get out of here as soon as possible."

"Not as soon as you'll want to be," Aunt Peaches replied angrily. "Because it's your wife! I still can't figure out why her mama named that hellion Heaven."

Averic remembered how much he'd loved watching his estranged wife's topaz eyes peer out from a canvass of a heart-shaped face blessed with a flawless peaches-and-cream complexion. Her curvy frame woke his body, no matter how tired he'd felt. What on earth could she want with him?

* * *

Heaven waited in the sanctuary, aiming to work her way back into her husband's life. The fact that she'd caught him off guard would be a good thing. She perched on a pew, reflecting on the Hawaii trip where she'd first laid eyes on him.

The young preacher was everything Heaven's friend had said. A well-toned, tall and much too good looking man to be seated in any church pulpit. More suited as a feature in a hot male stripper magazine, Averic Domingo had preached the women into a frenzy. He was straight out telling them to never allow any man, husband or otherwise, to abuse or use them sexually, mentally or any other perverted method.

"Your body is God's temple," he'd told them. "Would you defile the temple of God?"

She'd found him a bit amusing because everything he'd said not to allow, she'd done with the greatest of ease and without regret. If she had her way, she would continue with a little extra mind-blowing acrobatics on the side.

When the floor was opened for discussion about his sermonic speech he asked if anyone had any questions, Heaven raised her hand.

"I'm a bit embarrassed to ask my question in front of so many people," she said in a low voice dropping her head. "I'd rather ask you in private." Raising her head briefly peeking to see if he would give her an opening.

He did as soon as he said, "I'll set aside a few minutes for consultation after, but I need to get back to the conference attendees quickly."

Sounded about right.

Heaven pretended to straighten the slit in her red cotton skirt that stopped just short of her mid-thigh. She wiped aside a pretend tear that was too small for an eagle to see while she listed all the sexual acts she'd committed, all the while sizing him up to see if there were any latent inhibitions. She'd said she was earnest in wanting answers, but wasn't sure which were abominations, or at the least, forgivable.

Thirty minutes later, a gaped-mouthed Averic was sweating profusely, but not from the hot and humid Hawaiian weather. He and Heaven were on their way to a nearby hotel, suddenly thirsty for one another and not caring where or how much it took to quench it.

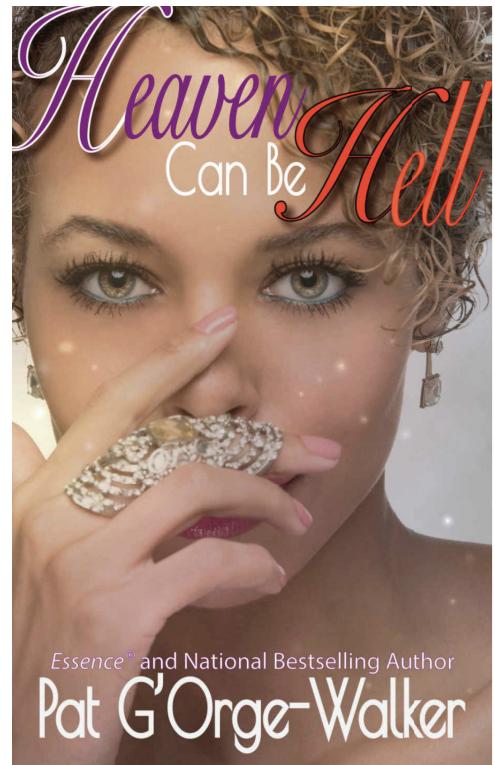
Less than an hour later, they were making love on the seventh floor balcony of the Honolulu Princess Hotel. Both had indulged in a little too much Jack Daniels. In no time, they were naked. However, Averic's protests disappeared when Heaven pulled the handcuffs from her bag.

Everything Averic had told the women at the conference not to do, they did that and more. They'd even put several new twists to some of the temple defilement list of no-nos.

Several hours later, succumbing to Heaven and Jack Daniels, Averic was beyond normal drunk; he was almost comatose. Unfortunately for Heaven, she was still naked on the other side of the balcony cuffed to the railings. He had yet to wake from his drunken stupor. Her bad luck that she wasn't released in enough time so she could use the bathroom.

Thinking about the best parts of that first time in Hawaii made Heaven tingle slightly. She closed her eyes again and collapsed slightly against the back of the pew while confessing to the large picture of Jesus hanging near the altar.

"You need Averic, but I need more," she whispered. "And, Lord, I mean to get him again."



Essence® and National Bestselling Author
Pat G'Orge-Walker

Pat G'Orge-Walker, aka Sister Betty, multi-award winning Essence and National best selling author, Christian Comedienne published by Kensington Books, a recording industry veteran, and former member of Arlene Smith & the Chantels. A recent transplant from Long Island, NY to North Carolina... www.sisterbetty.com.

Michelle D. Rayford

Not That Nice

Kelsee braced for his reprimand and anger. Both were as familiar as breathing. She knew how much Alex hated the light shining in his face. She couldn't believe she'd forgotten to close the blinds.

Everything had to be perfect. Always.

When she couldn't take the silence a moment longer, she chanced a peek and released a sigh of relief at the sight of the empty pillow beside her. Then she remembered. He wasn't there. The reason, for the moment, escaped her.

Kelsee snuggled deeper in the sheets and stretched out in the middle of the bed. She tried to relax and reclaim sleep, but her brain was already churning. She couldn't shake the feeling that she'd forgotten something.

The phone rang, and she checked the caller ID screen and groaned. She composed herself before answering, "Hello, Mariam."

Her sister-in-law skipped the usual greeting of 'As-salamu Alaykum' and asked, "Are you ready?"

Kelsee's mind froze. Ready for what?

"I can't believe I have to do this," Mariam's usually strong voice cracked.

Memories flooded in. Today was the funeral.

Two days ago, her husband left to play "golf" at the Chandler Park Course in the Five Points area in Atlanta. Kelsee made him a fruit smoothie. He downed it in silence and left without saying goodbye.

Kelsee went about her regular Saturday chores of cleaning the house, stripping the sheets, mopping and vacuuming. She was washing their dishes when the phone call came. The call that changed everything.

Her mask firmly in place, Kelsee lied, "I can't believe it either."

She closed her eyes, listening as Mariam sniffed and repeated the same rambling from yesterday. "Why would Allah take him from me so soon? My baby brother. Why?"

Kelsee didn't respond. No one in that family listened to her

Story Note

My writing process starts with a "What if?" question. What if a woman realizes she married the wrong man? The character or idea plays in my head like a movie and I try to capture their actions and emotions on the page. In a way, I reenact the story for that character. Writing this anthology presented a unique challenge for me as this is the first time I wrote a story in third person. It required me to view the story through a different lens. I hope readers enjoy the journey

anyway. Instead, she padded to the bathroom and stared at her reflection in the mirror, wincing at the fresh bruise. A final rebuke from her loving husband.

Kelsee ended the call and mentally prepared herself to play the part of the grieving widow. Make-up would camouflage the bruise. Dark shades would hide any other remnants of what had become of their marriage. Or maybe she'd display what he'd done. This was one secret he wouldn't take to the grave.

They met in the emergency room where she worked. The cop, with the chiseled features and sexy smile, had a habit of trying to coax a reaction from her. She never obliged. Kelsee had convinced herself that she didn't need the distraction.

What happened next was a blur. Kelsee remembered tending to a gunshot wound patient. She remembered a loud banging sound coming from the admitting area. She remembered the doctor turning toward the hall and screaming. All she could recall was the shape of the gun a teenager pointed at her.

Kelsee came to on a cot. For a blissful two seconds, she didn't know where she was. Her memory returned in waves. The controlled chaos of the emergency room. The smell of sulfur from the gunpowder.

And then a baritone voice said. "I knew I would get you in bed, but I didn't envision it happening this way."

Her eyes snapped open. Officer Williams' dark hooded eyes lasered into her own. Up close, she noticed a scar under his clean-shaven chin and his scent, a heady blend of musk cologne.

"What happened?" Kelsee croaked and swallowed hard. She tried to sit up but couldn't navigate the mechanics of her body.

He extended his hand. "Some punk tried to finish off your patient. My partner had to put him down."

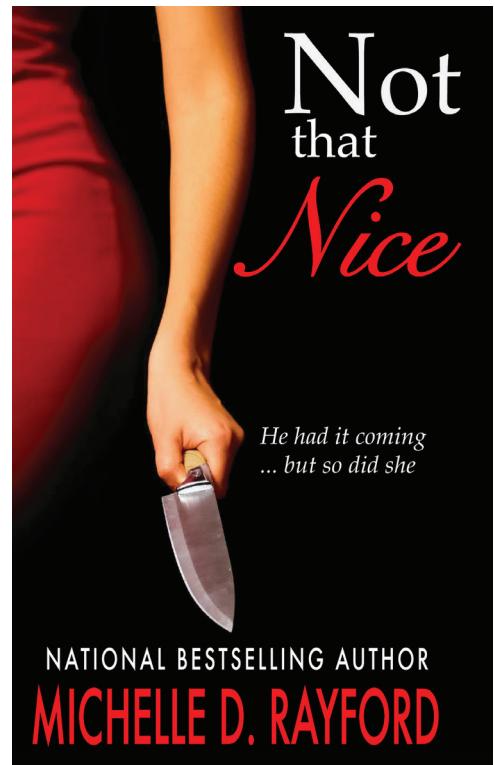
Kelsee turned to leave and winced from a jab in her side.

"You may feel that for a while," he said, "I had to tackle you."

"I didn't even get dinner first." Kelsee blinked in horror. Was she really flirting with the man right now? "I mean, I owe you a thank you."

"I'm Alex, by the way." He cleared his throat. "How about we get a coffee or something?" He tucked a stray curl behind her ear. "As you can see I'm a nice guy. You have to say yes this time."

His touch fought for space in the jumble of thoughts clouding her mind. Kelsee sighed. Maybe she should give Mr. Nice Guy a chance.



Michelle D. Rayford won a literacy contest in the fifth grade and the writing seed was planted. It only took a couple of decades for that seed to bear fruit. Even pursuing a degree in Business Administration, working a government job, getting married and having two daughters, didn't stop the stories from churning in her head and finally making it into print. She recently released her first novel, Moment of Truth.
www.michelledrayford.com

Naleighna Kai

Southern Comfort

Story Note

My first Cuddle Party was an exhilarating experience. I held onto an article in the Chicago Red Eye for a year before I got up the courage to attend. Safe, non-sexual touch. People who weren't family. No other books that I've read covered this event and with the valuable input of fellow authors Lisa Watson and J. D. Mason, I thought I would share how two people could become deeply connected even when sex wasn't on the table.

Something about him sent a delicious shiver of anticipation up Joy's spine. That shiver did a little curtsy at the base of her neck, before ending in a tingle between her thighs. The moment his intense gaze locked with hers, any misgivings she'd felt about being in this place dissipated.

Her lips parted of their own accord, as if to speak, but no sound would come. The Welcome Circle, where all the rules were laid out for the total strangers embarking on an unforgettable journey, was ending.

"Ali," he said, both snatching her attention away from one of the hosts and startling her at the same time. The smooth baritone sound was as sultry as his appearance, and that was saying something.

Joy had watched people disperse into couples, groups, or even individuals, but somehow, she'd been oblivious to Ali moving across the room and now being mere inches away. The man was stunningly handsome, had piercing brown eyes, and dark silky hair with a small shock of silver right at the widow's peak. His olive skin had been kissed by the sun, lips were the most delectable she'd ever laid eyes on. She, along with several others, couldn't help but stare.

She blinked, trying to clear her thoughts and inhaled the clean, cool scent of him. So many vibrations swirled about Ali that she had a hard time choosing one to hold onto.

"Joy," she replied, extending her hand to him.

"Permission to touch you?"

She hesitated. Oh shoot. I've forgotten already." Cuddle Party Rule ... you must ask permission and receive a verbal "Yes" before you touch anyone.

Complying with the rules meant that every touch, no matter how small, required consent. Her pulse raced as if she'd run a mile at top speed, and everything within Joy screamed that if asked, she'd give this man an absolute, "Hell yes."

"Yes," she said in a breathy whisper. "You may touch me."

Ali moved in a little closer. Slowly, he took her small hand in his. She imagined the feel of his chest against her face, the muscles

that rippled underneath his linen shirt would by comparison to his arms securing her in an embrace so wonderful that a strong need rose within her. One that had been suppressed so long that she barely realized the feeling of wanting to be connected to someone. Thanks to her family, Joy was desensitized to any real emotion. Starting from the time she'd been forced to leave home at twelve to find a safe place to live.

* * *

Ali welcomed the idea that this event did not have gray areas. Everyone played by the same set of rules. "Maybe" would be voiced as a "No." The word "no" was met with a comforting phrase, "Thank you for taking care of yourself." No quipping, no explanations, no arguments, no persuasion—a simple "No" and the participant moved on.

True power lay in the person that respected the other's boundaries. One look at Joy and he became aware that boundaries and walls were relative.

"I'm not sure what to expect ..." He'd heard her say. Neither did he, but the possibilities had become intriguing. Joy had an exotic beauty, and elegance even with the pain that was so clearly etched in her eyes. He felt an overwhelming urge to see her smile.

Ali moved forward, keeping her hand securely in his.

Wounded. Betrayed. Strong. So many vibrations swirling about the woman across the room, but he zeroed in to the two that mattered most. Survivor. Resilient.

He guided her to the empty space she'd vacated on the sofa. All around them people claimed spaces on chairs, loveseats, mattresses draped in crisp sheets, comfy-looking pallets on the floor, and some indulging the tempting treats spread out on the dining room table. The atmosphere was relaxed, but still rife with anticipation.

Ali moved closer to Joy. "May I hold you?"

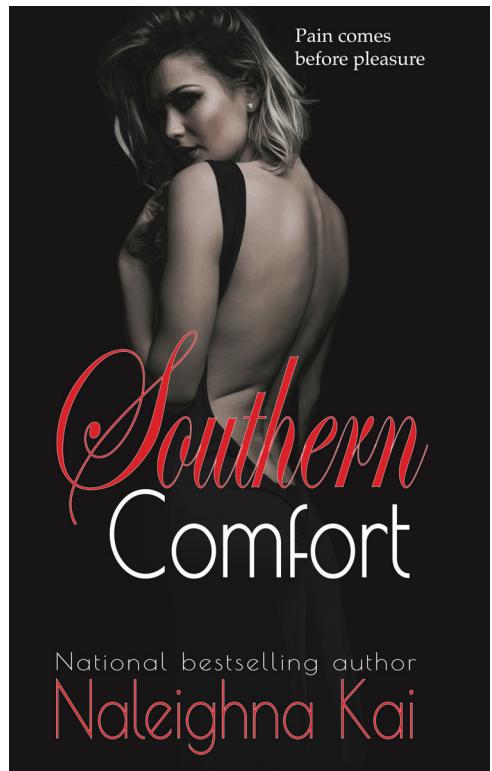
"Yes, you may."

Ali shifted so that Joy was now curled into him. He relished the feel of her lush, sensuous body relaxed in mild supplication as though the art of seduction had seeped from her pores. The timbre of her voice had softened when he introduced himself. That vibration of acceptance resonating all over her body as she said the word he'd longed to hear drip from her lips—Yes.

Ali knew then and there—Joy would be his. Completely.

"Why are you here?" she whispered.

Ali locked gazes with Joy as he confessed, "I came ... for you."



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London St. Charles

Sugarcoated Deception

Story Note

Sugarcoated Deception was a fun and easy story to write. Typically, I write in silence, but this story was written with the song, Blindspot by Huntar playing on a continuous loop in the background. The main character Cadence is faced with the dilemma of believing that her husband didn't cheat on her and father a child when all evidence says otherwise. This is a clear case of things aren't always what they seem. The unique factor is that the wife has to uncover his former girlfriend's deceit while coming to terms how recent events impact her marriage.

Four words would put an end to Cadence Goldsmith's perfect life.
"That's Mr. Goldsmith, Mommy."

She searched out the source of that small childlike screech, an unnatural occurrence in the Adali Global Reveal. The event was an exclusive affair for people who worked in the European auto market.

Cadence peered around the velvet curtain from her spot backstage of the McCormick Place Convention Center, surprised to find that her husband, Jackson, and mother, Phylicia were sitting in the front row next to a scowling Steven Bekker, her work nemesis.

"Hiiiiii, Mr. Goldsmith," a little girl with light-brown skin, blue-eyes and puffy blonde twists crooned, as she rushed to stand near her husband. "You work at my school."

Cadence grimaced. Why was a child there and why was she so interested in Jackson? Wait, was that an image of her husband on that child's shirt? She almost couldn't make it out because the girl's fist twisted the material.

"I present to you, CDO, Cadence Goldsmith."

Applause rang out as she strutted center stage with her attention on the bleached-blond woman wearing a navy dress, who grinned and winked at her before taking an empty seat next to Jackson and pulling the little girl onto her lap. Jackson glanced at Cadence, then frowned as he put his focus back on the woman. She didn't miss the panic that took over his features for a split second.

Cadence's heart surged with a bit of panic of her own. She prayed that her confidence would still show through, even though relishing the acknowledgement of being the designer of the first self-driving automobile was taking a back seat to Jackson and the unknown guests.

Jackson, who seemed occupied with the distraction that little girl had become, hadn't acknowledged Cadence at all. He and the woman were having a heated, but whispered conversation. Jackson's body language—tense and angry—screamed discomfort.

"May I have everyone's attention please," Cadence said walking to the edge of the stage, standing in front of her husband.

Jackson's brown eyes gazed into hers, but the comfort and security she usually felt was missing.

"Mommy, now," the little girl asked.

"Shhhh." The woman placed an index finger to her thin pink lips. "Not yet."

Cadence raised an eyebrow, then glanced at her husband.

The lights dimmed, and Cadence began the PowerPoint presentation of the newest addition to the Adali luxury car fleet.

Ten minutes later, every person, except for Steven and the mystery woman, were on their feet clapping.

Mike lifted a hand to settle the crowd. "Cadence Goldsmith has a bright future with Adali, and we, along with the two most important people in her life, would like to present her with the Outstanding Innovative Design Award."

"Yay, Mr. Goldsmith," the little girl squealed, slapping her hands together. Cadence's attention was drawn to the child whose eyes matched the woman she assumed to be her mother. High heels clicking across the stage accompanied by Jackson's signature fragrance snapped Cadence from the trance.

Mike handed a plaque with the Adali emblem engraved on it to Cadence.

"Thank you." She shook his hand trying to play it cool even though she wanted to shatter the surrounding windows with a high-pitched scream.

"Congratulations." Jackson beamed with cautionary excitement written all over his face as he embraced his wife.

"Who the hell is that woman," she whispered through a clenched-teeth grin as her lips brushed the side of his ear.

Jackson's dark-skin ashen. "Her name's Braelyn," he replied, planting a timid kiss on her cheek. "We'll talk later."

Her mother stepped forward. "Your father would be so proud of you."

Small feet galloping up the stairs onto the stage made everyone in the audience gasp. Cadence peered over Phylicia's shoulder at the lively little girl sprinting forward, spotting a picture of Jackson splayed on the front of her shirt.

Executive's plucked phones from their purses and suit jacket pockets.

Security rushed in. "We're going to have to ask you to get your child and leave, ma'am."

"I have a right to be here," Braelyn exclaimed, throwing a glance at Steven as she flashed the VIP badge.

After a thorough inspection, the guard said with a remorseful tone, "My apologies, Ms. Nevels." He glanced at Mike. "She has clearance."

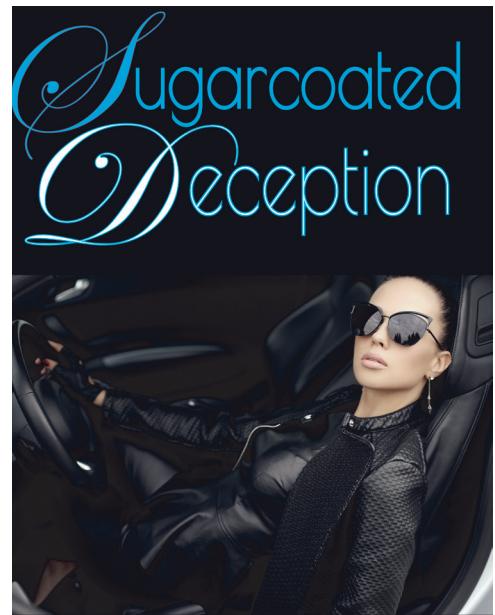
"Nevels," Cadence whispered, wondering why that name sounded so familiar.

"Show everyone your cute shirt, Jackie," Braelyn instructed, smiling at the pretty girl, before planting a menacing glare at Cadence and Jackson.

Jackie spread her arms wide, facing the audience. "Look, Mommy." She pointed jumping in place. Everybody's taking my picture." She put her hands on her hips and said, "Cheeeeese."

The lump in Cadence's throat grew larger with every word she read on the back of Jackie's shirt.

Jackson Goldsmith Is My Daddy.



National Bestselling Author
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National bestselling author, London St. Charles is a Chicago native who pens contemporary women's fiction. She wrote and published her debut novel, *The Husband We Share* in 2017 and is one of nine authors in the Sugar Anthology. She is currently working on her second novel. Visit London on the web and stay connected on social media. She loves to engage with readers.
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J. L. Campbell

Spice of Life

Nyoka's thoughts wandered to Anif as she chatted with the celebrity chef who had the next guest slot on the morning show. Days later, she was still thinking about that handsome Jamaican author who had swept in and captured her with one simple look and intriguing conversations.

As the filming progressed, she leaned against a wall watching, but her mind drifted to Anif. She breathed in hard, remembering the hint of cinnamon on his breath and the shape of his juicy lips surrounded by the stubble on his face.

The segment ended and she roused herself. The last time she'd been interested in someone, she'd gone overboard. Given her current situation, who had time for that?

He'd be a nice diversion though, as long as he doesn't get too close.

When she got to the lobby, Judith, the other makeup artist, brushed shoulders with her on the way into the building. She smiled wide, but the gleam in her eyes put Nyoka on alert. "Haven't seen you since you came back from the coffee shop the other day."

"I've been around," Nyoka said, but a boulder dropped in her stomach.

The woman had seen her with Anif.

As her mother would say, Judith was dangerous, like a snake under grass.

In the open air, Nyoka inhaled the summer. This was part of what she liked about Miami, the weather was similar to home. Minutes later, she skipped up the steps to her ground-level townhouse and instead of going next door to Aunt Gem's house, she went home. Her heart ached knowing Gabrielle was a few feet away, but it was better to visit the clinic before collecting the baby. If she stopped in, Gabrielle would fuss when she left again. The thought made her teary, but Nyoka threw her bag on the bed, then stepped in the shower. She had a thing about getting clean before going in for treatment.

While Nyoka was bathing, Sierra, her bestie, came into the apartment using her key. Her job as a flight attendant meant she kept odd hours, but she was dependable and supportive.

After her shower, Nyoka found Sierra sitting on the bed. She had slicked her naturally wavy hair away from her face and her deep-brown complexion and bright eyes glowed with health. Pointing to

Story Note

Most of my stories are outlined in my head before I sit at a keyboard. For The Spice of Life, the plot evolved from a real-life situation I came across while scrolling on Instagram. A significant amount of research ensured authenticity on the subject. The unique quality in this romance is that the main theme involves secrecy about an uncommon, life-threatening illness that has disastrous results.

the clothes on the bed, Sierra said, "You're going out for treatment?"

Nyoka nodded. "Yep, today's the day. Remember I'm doing it at home soon."

"Don't worry, I've blocked it on my calendar," Sierra confirmed.

"Great." In the mirror, Nyoka threw her a smile. "What if I told you I met a cool Jamaican guy today?"

Sierra's jaw dropped open, then she squealed. "For real?"

"Uh-huh. He's a writer who did a segment on the show this morning."

"Are you seeing more of him?"

Smiling wide, Nyoka teased Sierra. "Maybe."

"Come on, spill it."

"There's nothing to tell yet. But, if I go and mess about with him I could lose my job. The station frowns on staff and clients fraternizing. Anyway, you know how I feel about men and relationships."

Sierra sucked her teeth. "Pschaw. Don't let your experience with that bum make you miss out on a good thing."

"Honestly, after the way he used me for a leg-up with his career, it's not easy to trust anybody."

"I know, but it's been almost two years," Sierra said, "and you got a beautiful daughter out of it."

The thought of Gaby softened Nyoka's heart. "True that."

"Enjoy the ride and forget that wanna-be photographer," Sierra said, "He isn't worth your time."

"Good advice. I think I'll take it."

At the clinic, Nyoka had time to think but she hated letting DeWayne occupy space in her head and hoped he wouldn't turn out to be a problem. He'd followed her Instagram account and liked pictures of Gabrielle. The message he sent yesterday jarred her.

Can I see my daughter?

She hadn't responded and didn't plan to acknowledge him.

The door of the treatment room opened and the technician entered to check the machine and her vitals.

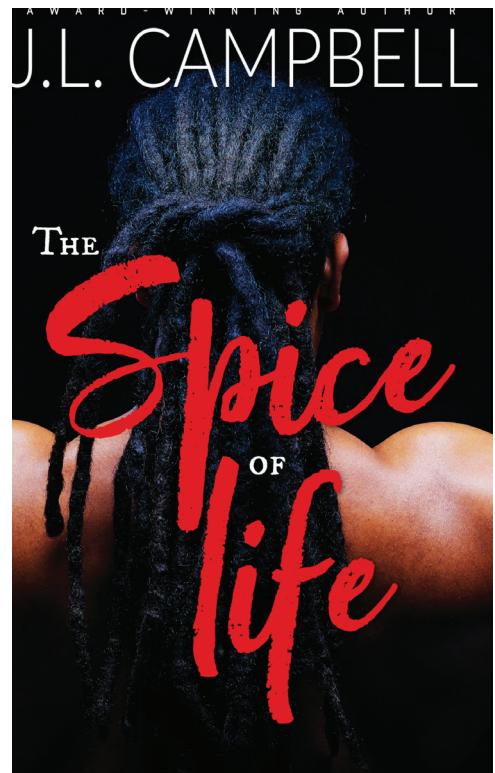
Nyoka rested against the back of the chair, swiped the screen on the Kindle, and checked her social media accounts. Two additional messages from DeWayne awaited her on Instagram.

I need to talk to you.

If you haven't changed your number, I'll call you later today.

Her heart thumped in a slow, painful rhythm.

Nothing good could come of him contacting her. After ending their relationship without a word, what reason did he have to talk to her now?



J.L. Campbell is an award-winning Jamaican author who has written over thirty books. She writes contemporary and sweet romance, romantic suspense, women's fiction, as well as new and young adult novels. Campbell, who features Jamaican culture in her stories, is fascinated with the island's flora and has hundreds of photos in her collection. She is a certified editor, and also writes non-fiction.
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Anita L. Roseboro

Sweet Summer Breeze

Summer gasped at the sound of her voice, wondering how could a dead woman be on the other end of the line?

"Summer, are you there?"

Summer was shaken. Karen Reynolds had been her best friend since middle school. They were tight as sisters and could pass as twins. They shared everything until one day Karen took it too far and thought sharing extended to Summer's boyfriend.

"What the hell do you want?" Summer said, sitting up in bed, thoroughly awakened in the middle of a good night's sleep.

"You need to know why I disappeared."

"I'm more interested in why you reappeared," she snapped. "I can give you directions to my house. I'll be here waiting."

"That's not necessary," she replied. "I made an appointment in your office for tomorrow."

Summer had checked her calendar before leaving and was sure Karen's name was not on the list, only a Charity was penciled in, a woman who'd been cagey about her reason for wanting to see Summer, but had cancelled multiple times. "Is this personal or business?"

"Personal and business." Karen's phone disconnected.

Summer rushed downstairs to the lower level of her townhouse, opened her laptop, after a few clicks and searches, brought up the article about Karen's car crash. Now she had to wonder who was in the car because Karen was somehow on this side of the grave.

Story Note

My process for this story wasn't the greatest. I started this story many years ago with different names and a different scenario. After developmental editing, the story took shape into more than I could've dreamed. Now reading the story in the final stages and growing from the input from veteran authors in the project, I've become stronger as a writer and am applying what I've learned to a work in progress.

At exactly noon, Summer's assistant escorted Charity into the office and gently closed the door upon her exit. As suspected, Charity was actually Karen, with a little cosmetic surgery and nearly fifteen years thrown in. Summer pulled the papers and slid them across her desktop. She had grown tired of this masquerade, thinking it was time to play a little of her hand. "Karen, do you want to tell me why you're really here?"

Charity was silent for a long time, then she let out a long sigh, "Here I thought I had you fooled, but all along I've been the fool."

"The voice and the mole were the dead giveaways for me. Everything else is different, but I know that trouble follows you wherever you go."

Charity's expression morphed from anger to relief. "Seemingly it does."

"Tell me the whole story? Why'd you come here?"

"Your father sent me to find you."

Summer smirked at the response. "You and I both know my father's dead."

"No, he isn't. He's in prison for the murder of the man who hurt you as a kid. Telling you that he was dead was a lie told to you to protect you."

Now that took the wind out of Summer's sails. "How can you prove any of that? I have no reason to believe you whatsoever."

Charity opened the folder she brought in with her, pulled out several pictures and spread them out in front of Summer

"Juan Carlos had them delivered to your father," she explained. "Thinking it would buy his silence and cooperation. Everything I'm telling you can be verified in the documents your mom sent you before she died. The cartel went after you to keep your father in line. Your mother had lied to protect you, Summer. I didn't know you all were in witness protection. When I tried to make up for what I'd done by finding your father, it led them right to you." Charity took in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "It's my fault your mom died."

No sooner than the words were out of her mouth, three men burst through the door. The first one Charity recognized as a man who'd she spotted at the coffee shop she frequented.

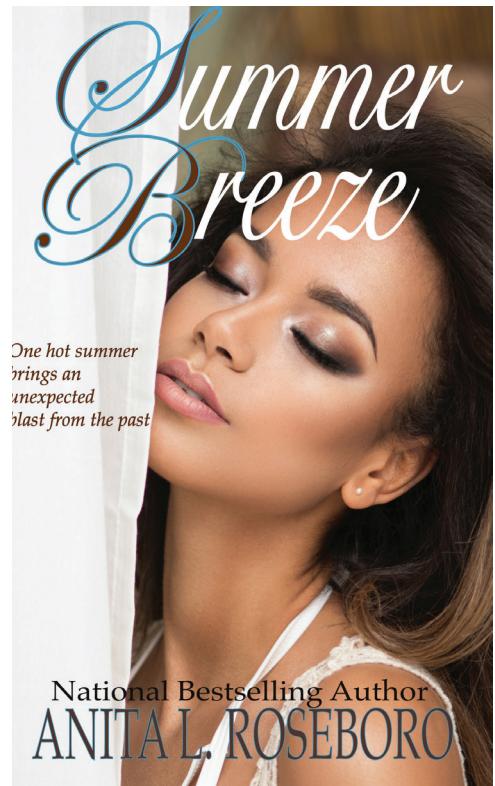
"Ladies," Juan Carlos said rubbing the tip of his gun on Summer's face.

Summer turned her face, wishing she had brought her own weapon with her today. He moved on to Charity and rubbed the gun around the baby.

"What do you want?" Summer growled.

"Oh, besides the kid? I think she already told you what I want. Didn't you, doll?" Juan Carlos kissed Charity across her lips.

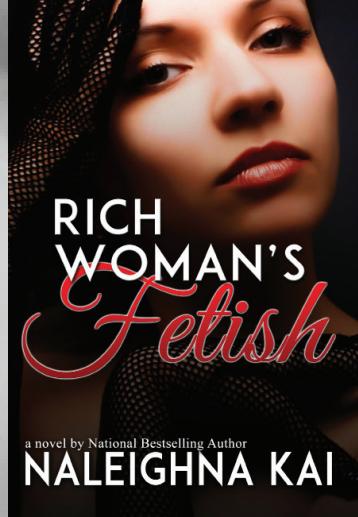
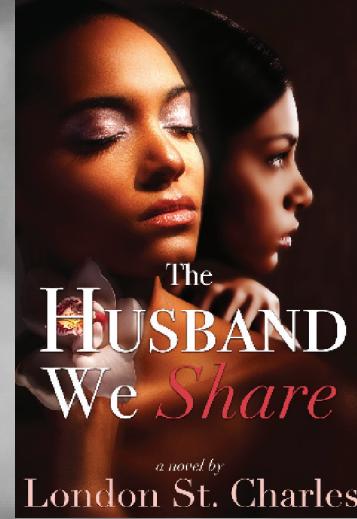
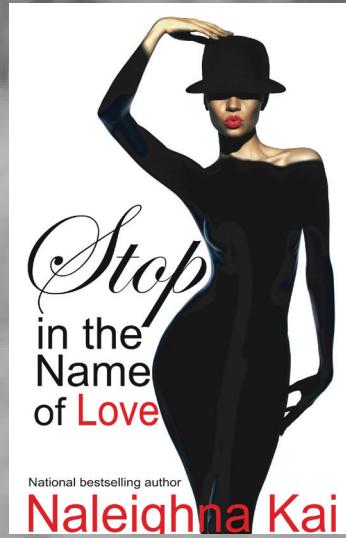
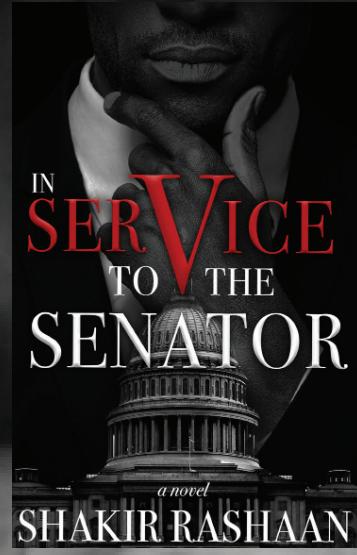
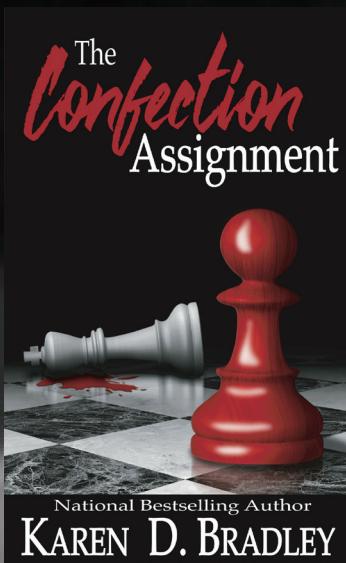
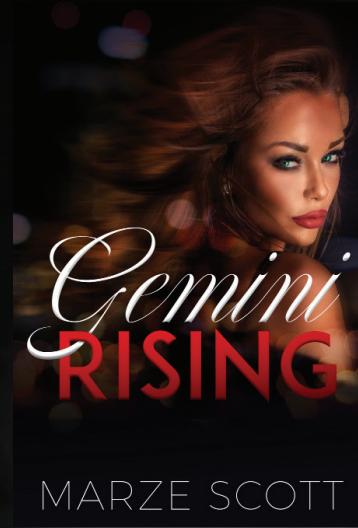
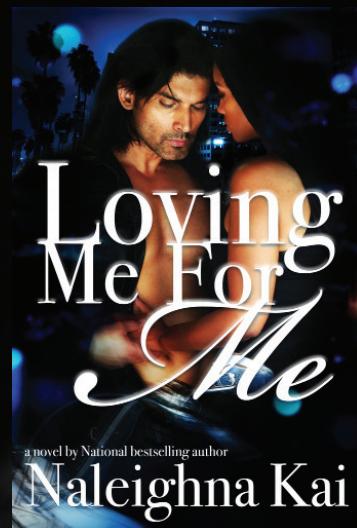
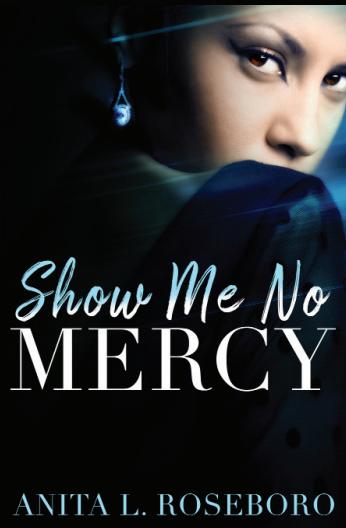
Summer tried to gauge Charity's expression but couldn't tell if she was disgusted or if the frown was because she'd been busted. "So, you've been working for him all along?"



National Bestselling Author
ANITA L. ROSEBORO

Anita L. Roseboro, a native of North Carolina. She has a B.S. degree in MIS (Management Information Systems) and a Master's in Business Administration from Gardner-Webb University and the University of Phoenix respectively. The road has finally curved to the path of her life-long dream of writing, she stands ready to take on the world as she lends her devotion and passion to her own life long motivations.
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