

## *Prologue*

*Alabama, Five Years Ago*

CeCe stood alone on the back porch of the house where she'd grown up. The late November evening was cool, and she rubbed her hands up and down her arms to ward off the chill she felt. "It's all going to work out," she murmured to herself. "He'll come around. He loves me, after all. I know he does."

"CeCe?"

She turned around at the sound of the masculine voice she'd come to love. A voice whose very timbre caressed her skin like a kiss. It had been a long time since she'd felt the loving caress of his voice. Their last meeting had been anything but loving. He'd told her that he was still in love with his old girlfriend and planned to marry her, and she'd told him that their past relationship was soon to bear fruit. "Eric?"

"It's me," he said, coming around the house and up the steps. She moved back and sat on their old green glider, hoping he would join her as he often had in the past. He chose, instead, to remain standing. "Have you thought about what we talked about last time?" he asked.

The strident tone of his voice made her skin crawl. Why was he so distant? Why didn't he hold her? He used to hold her. Why didn't he hold her now, when she so needed to be held? She turned away from him and focused her attention on the bare muscadine

vine. Her fondest childhood memories were of sneaking out with her father on warm August nights to pick the first berries of the season. Those had been such good, happy times. Not like tonight. She rubbed her hands on her arms again. *I should have worn a sweater*, she thought. Instead, she had chosen a light sheath that had been one of Eric's favorites. But what had been the point? He no longer loved her, and he couldn't care less what she wore or how she looked.

"CeCe," came the strident tone again.

"I can't do it, Eric. I won't do it."

He grabbed her by her shoulders and turned her around to face him. The emptiness she saw in his brown eyes confirmed that he had no feelings left for her. There was no trace of love in the dark eyes now condemning her. She wondered if there ever had been. "We have to be mature about this, CeCe." His voice calmed. "Look, we have our whole lives ahead of us. What about your plans to go to law school?"

She pulled herself away from him. "You mean *your* plans to get married, don't you?" She and Eric had spent many nights together talking about their future. He'd go to med school at Howard, and she'd join him there for law school next year. When she graduated, they'd get married. But that was before. She knew he and Yolanda were planning to get married at Christmas. Apparently they were so *in love* they couldn't wait until they graduated.

"I'm doing the best I can here, CeCe." He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his light wool pants and rocked back on the heels of his loafers. "I don't know what you want from me."

*I want you to love me the way you said you did*, she thought, but she couldn't bring herself to say the words aloud. She'd given up everything she believed in because of some girlish notion that she and Eric were soul mates, but she wouldn't give up the last vestiges of her pride. "Does Yolanda know?"

He flinched and she was glad. Bull's-eye!

"This doesn't concern her."

CeCe had known he wouldn't tell Yolanda. She didn't think Miss Perfect Yolanda would go for marrying a guy who had gotten some other girl pregnant. "Maybe Yolanda needs to make that decision."

"This is between you and me, CeCe. Yolanda's not a part of it."

CeCe heard the fear in his voice, and the sound made her feel more in control of her life than she'd felt since learning she was pregnant. She shook her head and dropped her hands to her side. She was no longer cold. She hadn't wanted it to come to this, but what choice did she have? She was twenty-one years old, pregnant, and a senior in college. What real choice did she have? "I'd say it's between you, me, Yolanda, and our baby."

His eyes flashed anger, and he moved closer to her. "Leave Yolanda out of this."

CeCe wondered if he wanted to hurt her as much as she wanted to hurt him. She would have laughed if her tears weren't so close to the surface. Didn't he know there was no way he could hurt her more than he already had?

"Did you hear me, CeCe? I said to leave Yolanda out of this."

CeCe looked at him—really looked at him. How she'd loved this man! The dreams she'd had of life with him still burned in her heart, and she guessed the baby inside her guaranteed that the embers would always flicker. But she had more than her feelings for him—or his lack of feelings for her—to consider. She had to think about her unborn child. Placing her hands across her stomach in a protective gesture, she told Eric exactly how things were going to be. "I'm going to have this baby, Eric, whether you want me to or not. If my telling Yolanda is the only way to make you accept your responsibilities, then so be it. I'll do whatever it takes to protect my—no, our child."

## **One**

*Atlanta; The Present*

Cecelia "CeCe" Williams clicked her left mouse button with fervor. She still couldn't believe she had to do one hundred and fifty hours of community service. One hundred and fifty hours! That crazy judge. Why hadn't he just let her pay the fine and be done with it? After all, it was only a few measly parking tickets.

As she finished running the numbers for her client's monthly audit report, CeCe considered how she could repay the esteemed judge for his Solomon-esque wisdom. She ought to send a letter to the mayor. And the governor. Murderers and drug dealers were getting off scot-free. Embezzlers and swindlers did no time. And here she was, getting one hundred and fifty hours of community service for a few measly parking tickets!

*How many parking tickets, CeCe?* came the voice of conscience she sometimes wished she could silence.

"OK, OK," she muttered aloud. "Maybe it was more than a few."

"Talking to yourself, CeCe? Now I don't know why you're doing that, when the two of us could be lunching in a quiet booth someplace making plans for our next date."

CeCe didn't have to turn around to know the words came from Larry Meadows, God's gift to women—or so he thought. "I'm busy,

Larry," she said, her eyes fixed on her computer monitor. The Excel spreadsheet displayed before her held more interest than her unexpected and uninvited guest.

"But you've got to have lunch sometime," Larry said in the exaggerated drawl that he turned on and off at will. "How about having it with me today? We can go to the Ritz."

CeCe turned to look at the tall, lean, brown-skinned guy standing in the doorway of the cubicle that was her home for at least eight hours of each day. He was handsome, she had to admit. Most of the women in the office considered his aristocratic profile and boyish charm a lethal combination. Too bad they only served to remind her of someone she'd much rather forget. "That's not a good idea, Larry."

Larry looked over his shoulder as if to see whether anyone else was around. He turned back to her. "Look, CeCe," he said, his voice tight and minus the drawl now, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his tan slacks. "I've apologized a thousand times for that first date. I just got carried away. I promise you I'm not that kind of guy. I really would like to take you out again."

CeCe actually believed he was sincere. "I'm sorry, Larry, but I don't think so."

"Why not? Do you think you're too good for me?"

CeCe shook her head. A child in a man's body. She bet David, her four-year-old son, was more mature than this thirty-something man. "I don't want to go out with you again. Can't we just leave it at that?"

"Look, I'm not used to begging women to go out with me. I just thought I'd give you a second chance to see what you were missing. I guess you've lost out, though, because I'm not giving you any more chances."

CeCe stared after him as he stalked away. A few years ago, if someone had told her that most men were variations of Eric, she wouldn't have believed them. But she knew the truth now from experience. She seemed to attract two types of men: those who wanted nothing to do with a woman with a child, and those who expected a single mother to be sexually available. The first kind

she understood, so she always made it clear up front that she had a son.

The second kind were still a mystery to her. They came in all shapes and sizes, and they had assorted modes of operation. Some, like Larry, went at you on the first date, assuming you were open for anything. Others were more subtle. They were willing to cultivate the relationship a little, but with the expectation that once it was established, sex would become a regular part of it. Even Christian, or so-called Christian, men seemed to have this expectation. She'd quickly grown tired of it and made her celibacy part of the initial conversations. Better they knew that up front, too.

*Enough*, she chided herself. She didn't need to think about men today. No, she'd made a pact with herself, and she refused to allow men to worry her. She'd been in love once, and once was definitely enough to last a lifetime. Besides, she had more important things on her mind. Like a four-year-old son who was more a little man than a little boy. Like a full-time accounting job that paid part-time wages. Like a part-time job selling real estate that seemed to need full-time hours to be profitable. Like an overzealous judge and a hundred and fifty hours of community service time.

She glanced up at the Mickey Mouse clock on the wall of her cubicle. As always, looking at David's contribution to making her office feel more homey caused a warmth to settle around her heart. She could still remember him standing on her upholstered guest chair, trying valiantly to help her position his gift in just the right spot.

This time, though, she couldn't luxuriate in the good feelings the memory evoked. It was quarter to twelve, and she knew she was going to be late for her noon community service appointment at Genesis House. The drive from her Buckhead office to Genesis House's downtown location would take a minimum of twenty minutes, and finding a legal parking space nearby would take an additional fifteen, if she was lucky. She took a bit of pleasure at the thought of Nathaniel Richardson waiting for *her* this time, though.

It would serve him right for standing her up on Saturday after she'd canceled two promising appointments to show houses. Selling even one of those properties would have put her three thousand dollars closer to paying off the debts that hung over her head like a dark cloud threatening to break into a ferocious thunderstorm at any moment. If she missed another appointment because of Nathaniel Richardson's inability to keep to his schedule, the two of them were going to have serious problems working together.

"CeCe, do you want to go to lunch? We're going to Mick's."

Pushing thoughts of her debts to the back of her mind for the time being, CeCe looked around and saw two members of her work group, Debra and Cathy, standing at the entrance to her cube. "Not today," she told them. "I've got an appointment, but I'll walk out with you." CeCe grabbed her purse and followed her co-workers out of the building.

Twenty-five minutes later, after circling a two-block radius surrounding Genesis House four times, praying all the while for a surface parking space to open, CeCe pulled her blue, four-year-old-but-new-to-her Maxima into the first open space in a parking deck about four blocks away. If Nathaniel Richardson missed this meeting, she decided as she got out of her car, she'd have to go back to Judge Solomon and see what kind of sentence his wisdom would mete out for the guilty Mr. Richardson.

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Thirty-three-year-old Nathaniel "Nate" Richardson stood in front of the paint-splattered windows of his Genesis House office and looked out on downtown Atlanta without really seeing it. He thought about Cecelia Williams, or more specifically, he thought about the Saturday appointment with her that he'd had to cancel. In his eighteen months as director of Genesis House, Saturday had been the first time he'd allowed his personal problems to interfere with his work. And he didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit. He was a man who believed in commitments, and he prided himself on keeping the ones he made.