

Introduction

In life, everybody sees your public acclaim. But only a few have access to your private pain. Everybody sees your success. But only a few have seen your scars. In life, everybody thinks you can take on the world. But you know that you are one step away from giving up and throwing in the towel. What do you do when life throws you a curve ball that you weren't expecting? How do you maneuver life when your family is under attack and bad things keep happening? This is a story about a family who seemingly had it all. They had fortune. They had fame. They had money. They had status. They had a picture-perfect faith family in the public, but behind the veil, they were trapped mentally and spiritually.

It is true what the Scripture says—*to whom much is given, much is required*. In this interwoven story of betrayal, addiction, and suffering, we see a successful woman trapped by the image of success. We see a strong man battling his own demons in private. Marriage won't heal what they refuse to reveal. Love won't fix what lust broke. They have it all. But the more they have, the more that is required of them. Have you ever had to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders? Have you ever had a gift that caused others around you to lean on you for everything? In those instances, what does the strong person do when he gets weak? Who does the wealthy woman turn to when she hits a rough patch in life? How do you keep your sanity and your spirituality when everybody assumes you are in a better position than you really are?

If you're not careful, you'll start living two lives; you'll start moving further and further away from your vows, and closer and closer toward distraction...and that's what happens in this book. What husband and wife don't fix ends up seeping into their children. What they refuse to deal with...only magnifies into a bigger struggle and problem. And when children go through pain, they go through deeper struggles and greater addictions; because they were looking to you as their consolation.

Whoever you are reading this book, I pray that by the end of the journey, you will gain strength to conquer life's struggles. Struggles will come, but never allow them to break you. No matter how much power, fame, or acclaim you have, remember that your title will not exempt you from being human. Allow the characters in this book to help you to confront your personal demons, and be willing to enter into a journey of honesty and transparency. Be willing to learn who you are again, so that you can see life through the right set of lenses. Your marriage may be on life support, but it doesn't have to be over. Your children may be in a difficult situation right now, but with God's help, you can come out of this stronger than you've ever been before. Nothing is as it appears. Life and love are challenging for different reasons and during different seasons. But if you learn from this family of four, you will be able to thrive and recover.

Welcome to the beginning of your best chapter. Open your eyes and come behind the veil.

Honeymoon

I now pronounce you husband and wife – you may kiss the bride! Everything was perfect. It was a dream wedding. We only spent about \$75,000 on the reception—so we were under budget enough for him to buy me a new Mercedes Truck as my wedding gift. And I surprised him with a summer townhouse in Miami—his favorite place to go and retreat. Money was never an issue. Achievement was never a problem. He was driven and so was I. He had goals and so did I. When people saw us, they didn't just see an attractive “Will and Jada” couple; they saw power. They saw two souls colliding. They saw a picture-perfect marriage, and aspired to be like us when they grew up.

It was a dream life. When Darrel Spenser kissed me on our wedding day, he wiped the pain away. He wiped away the memories of neglect, abuse, and pain that I lived as a teenager. When Darrel kissed me, I knew he would be the only man that I would ever love for the rest of my life. My parents had divorced. My grandparents had divorced. My siblings were divorced. But I... Stacy Jones-Spenser, I was staying. I had the perfect man. The perfect life. And I was determined to be the perfect wife.

I was 20 years old when I laid eyes on this gorgeous, muscular genius. He walked up to me and my daughter, Monica, in the Louis Vuitton store and said to my personal assistant, “whatever she wants in this store, it's on me.” He winked at me on the way out, and I didn't even know he had purchased my things until I reached into my bag to pay and the manager said, “Oh no! It's already been taken care of.” On the receipt was his number, and a dinner invitation at the Charleston, an upscale restaurant near the Baltimore Harbor. I was flattered by his offer, but I had a business meeting that night, so I called him to decline. What I didn't know was that was Darrel's greatest turn-on about me. The fact that I was financially stable, independent, forward-thinking and a go-getter before he met me, said to him “she doesn't need me.” And he's right I didn't. I had been through my share of ups and downs with relationships. I didn't have time for games. I knew what I wanted and I went after it. I was always the girl to land the deal. Even when I was making money in the strip club, I knew how to get whatever I wanted from my pimp daddy's. By the end of the night, they thought I was in love. To me, it was strictly business. And I walked away each night raking in at least \$2000 per night. From there, I began to invest in real estate, and soon enough, I became the go-to person for entrepreneurship and upward mobility.

By the time I turned 20, I was making \$250,000/year. I didn't plan to get pregnant from one of my pimp daddy's, but I was so well off, I didn't even bother to tell him. I had Monica on my own, and I determined to give her the kind of life I never had. I wanted to provide for her in such a way that she never had to go through what I went through. So I was on my grind. Darrel was an accessory. But he was a fine-looking accessory. And his conversation with me was unparalleled. He knew that the way to my heart was not through things, but through quality time, so I remember, in the beginning, he spent so much time with me. We would go to the

park. He would pull up in a limo outside my home, and we would just ride around for hours, talking about a little bit of everything and a whole lot of nothing. He told me about his childhood, and how he grew up in a religious family. He told me that even though his father was a wonderful pastor to his congregation, that he felt abandoned by his own family. We shared about our mutual abandonment issues, my generational cycle of divorce, and before I knew it, we were planning to get married.

It all happened so fast. But we knew it was the right thing to do. Within the first few years of our marriage, we bought a new home, built from the ground. My real estate connections helped me to land a pretty good deal, so the 8-bedroom, 5 bathroom, four-door garage home sold at a little under \$750,000—of which we paid off in cash. We didn't believe in debt. Darrel loved his Porche's and Maserati's, but I didn't have debt when he met me, so I made sure he didn't have debt after he met me. He was a little less responsible with his money but he had enough of it to blow. So he did. He took me to fine restaurants. He bought me antique jewelry. His suits were tailored by the same man who cut suits for the President in D.C. And when he took his dad's church three years after we got married, the membership grew from 1500 to 7,000 members in less than two years. Without a doubt, we had it all. We had a beautiful daughter, Monica, whom he loved like she was his own. We had the largest-growing ministry in the DMV, and most importantly, we had love and happiness.

One day, our assistant drove us from the church to a business mixer. I told Darrel that I wasn't feeling up to going. I just didn't feel well. So he had me dropped off at our beach home (it was closer than our downtown estate), and I called my girl Natalie to keep me company. Natalie was my ride-or-die. She and I went to high school together, and there was nothing we didn't go through together. *No matter how successful you become, you always have to have that one friend who knew you before you made it.* Natalie kept me humble. She kept me honest. And she always knew how to have a good time.

The moment Natalie arrived at our beach home, she looked at me and said,

“Girl!”

I said, “What girl?”

She said, “Girl you glowing like you were glowing when you had Monica.”

I laughed right in her face, and told her to pour me a glass of wine. “It ain't that! I'm just in love with the sexiest man in the world—the Mr. Darrel Spenser. And maybe you see stress on my face. I tell you, those church ladies took me through it today!” I complained.

“What happened?” Natalie inquired.

“Well, you know we're planning our yearly women's retreat in Jamaica, and five or six ladies couldn't afford the flight. So I told Andrea to put their flights on my personal credit card, and before I knew it, 15 other ladies were walking up to me with their sad stories.”

“Andrea is doing a lot at the church now, huh?” Natalie responded.

“Yeah, she is but she is an answer to our prayer, girl. Darrel needed a fresh, new receptionist to manage our personal schedules, business meetings, and the church itinerary—and as much as we love Mother Harriet, she couldn’t even open email, girl!” I laughed.

“I hear you, girl. So don’t tell me you paid for all 15 flights,” Natalie said.

“No, girl. I will probably pay for them next week after we land these two properties that Darrel and I have been looking at, but they don’t need to know that. I’m thinking about calling a few investors, and setting up a conference at the church so the women can be empowered. That way, we can stop this cycle of co-dependence. You know one thing I cannot stand, is a co-dependent woman,” I laughed.

“Don’t I know it,” Natalie laughed as she grabbed my wine glass. “But, trust me, in about six months, you are going to be depending on Darrel for everything because, girl....you pregnant.”

“No I’m not!”

“Yes you are!”

“Girl, no I’m not!”

“Stacy, yes you are!”

Natalie was right. She was always right about everything. I was two months pregnant and I didn’t know it. When I found out, Darrel was ecstatic. Especially when he found it I was having a boy, he quickly turned my pregnancy into his pregnancy. He became more aggressive about it than me. He painted the room the way he wanted it. He told the church before I told them. He had Andrea to schedule an announcement party, and they did all of the planning without me. I walked in and I was just as surprised as the congregation. I mean, he was really excited! He told me he would name our child, which I didn’t necessarily have a problem with, but he didn’t even consult me on it. One day, he just woke up and said, “I’ve been praying about it, and in the Bible, the men always named their sons. So our son’s name will be Jamal.”

I liked it, I really did, but I wanted our son’s name to start with an “M” like our daughter, Monica.

“Why can’t we name him Michael or Marc, babe?” I asked with a little flirtatious tone (that usually got me what I wanted).

And then he said something that stung me to my core. It was my first memory of pain since we said “I do.”

“Woman, Monica ain’t my child. *This* is my child and I want him to be able to tell other people, *my dad named me Jamal.*”

He said it so fast I don’t think he heard himself. It was the first time I felt the tension of a blended family. I was having a child by Darrel. This child was legitimately ours together, but it didn’t dawn on me that, all this time, in his mind, Monica was “my child” not our child. He took care of her, but in his mind, she came with the

package. He never took her out to have daddy-daughter time. Whenever we went out, it was time spent as a collective family. I never realized it until he said “my child,” but all of a sudden, I heard his excitement with new ears. Everything he was asking for, he put the word “me” or “mine” in front of it instead of “we” and “ours.” This was “his house” not our house. This was “his car” not ours. Maybe that’s why he bought me my own stuff because he didn’t want to share anything with me. Come to think of it, at lunch today, he said “My son is going to take over the church just like I took over my dad’s church. He’s going to grow it to 20,000 members after I show him the ropes.” He didn’t bother to ask me what I thought about our son. What if Jamal didn’t like church? What if I wanted J to be a real estate broker like his mom, or a Supreme Court Justice?

I was bugging.

I was reading into it.

I was overthinking it. I always do that. It wasn’t that serious, I just needed to be happy. I certainly don’t want to sabotage what we have worked so hard to maintain. Besides, we were having our first son together, and that is what I needed to focus on.

When Jamal was born, the church threw a huge baby shower for me. Thank God for Natalie and Andrea. Natalie stayed with me and Monica at the house while Andrea and Darrel worked at the church. Some nights, Darrel wouldn’t get home until 3am, but when I saw what they had done, boy did that work pay off! When I walked into the church reception hall, it looked like a scene from a magazine. Everything I dreamed of, my favorite color patterns, the food, the music, the 12-string symphonic orchestra, the special guests they flew in from London, everything was there. My church was the best. They really respected me and Darrel. It was a blessing to have the help we needed, the church that supported us, and a loving little family to call my own. This was the life, and I was beyond excited to make new memories with my four-member family.