



before
I
called
you
mine

a novel

NICOLE DEESE

before
I
called
you
mine

NICOLE DEESE



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2020 by Nicole Deese

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Deese, Nicole, author.

Title: Before I called you mine / Nicole Deese.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, [2020] |

Identifiers: LCCN 2019040906 | ISBN 9780764234958 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780764235580 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493422685 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Single mothers—Fiction. | Man-woman relationships—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3604.E299 B44 2020 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019040906>

Epigraph Scripture quotation is from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Author's Note Scripture quotation is from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Emojis are from the open-source library OpenMoji (<https://openmoji.org/>) under the Creative Commons license CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>)

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

Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Author represented by Kirkland Media Management

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my brave warrior princess, Lucy Mei:

I am not the same daughter, wife, mother, friend,
or child of God that I was before you joined our
family. You have reshaped every crevice of my heart,
stretched the boundaries of my faith, and transformed
my once far-too-limited understanding of love.

I am exceedingly blessed to be your forever mama, and
I pray you will always remember that your heavenly
Father called you His before I called you mine.

I love you.

God places the lonely in families. . . .

Psalm 68:6

An invisible red thread connects those destined to meet, regardless of time, place, or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break.

—Ancient Chinese Proverb

chapter one



If Obsessive Email Checking Disorder were a disease, I was likely already in the final stages: trigger thumb, mindless refreshing, aimless scrolling, and, of course, an inability to focus on anything else in the entire world.

For what had to be the twentieth time in as many minutes, I paused the anxious cleaning spree of my classroom and unlocked my iPhone to check the digital envelope at the bottom of my home screen. Still nothing.

“Stop it, Lauren. You’re gonna make yourself crazy.” Because talking to yourself in the third person was totally rational behavior.

I stuffed the phone into the shadowy abyss of my top desk drawer and slammed it shut, cringing as broken crayons collided with last week’s confiscated toys. Too bad I couldn’t lock my poor self-control up in there, too. In a matter of an hour, I’d gone from promising myself I’d wait to check my phone until after school was dismissed, to caving to temptation’s call at the first sight of my purse like a back-alley addict.

I stepped away from my incarcerated device and re-armed myself with lemon-scented antibacterial wipes, searching for a surface left to sanitize before my first graders arrived and

happily distracted me from my spiraling restraint. I'd already fluffed the beanbag chairs in Red Rover's Reading Corner, tacked this week's favorite art projects to the craft wall, and wiped every hard-to-reach smudge off Frog and Toad's aquarium glass—all to keep my mind from wandering too far down the rabbit hole of unanswered questions.

I ran a damp wipe across the wooden date blocks displayed at the edge of my desk, pausing to update the archaic calendar system. Proclaimed there, in unapologetically red stencil paint, was last Friday's date: *November 15*. But with just three clunky turns of the last block, I fast-forwarded time.

If only I could do the same in my personal life—skip all the wait times between job interviews, blind dates, medical appointments . . . and life-changing emails. Oh, how I envied my students' ability to make the most of every moment, even the ones that seemed to last an eternity.

Or in my case, fourteen months, one week, and three days.

Not that I was keeping track.

The vibration of a door closing down the hallway, followed by the rhythmic *tap-slide-tap* of heels caused me to glance up from my clean-a-thon. I'd know those footsteps anywhere. Just like I knew exactly where they were headed.

Jenna Rosewood, my closest colleague and friend, halted in my open doorway not thirty seconds later, fisting two morning lattes wrapped in insulated sleeves. "Hey, they were all out of those blueberry muffins you like, so . . ." Her statement slid to a stop. If a pause could be considered judgey, this one had pounded the gavel and called the courtroom to attention. "Lauren," she began on a sigh, "why are you sanitizing your classroom *again* when you already did your whole deep-cleaning ritual thing before we left on Friday?"

I worked to wipe all traces of guilt from my face, but my best friend could sniff out pathetic coping mechanisms better than an AA sponsor. "There were a couple areas I missed." A lie so

unconvincing not even my most gullible first grader would have believed it.

With enviable ease, Jenna wove her slender hips through my classroom's narrow rows, careful not to bump the yoga balls and balance boards tucked beneath my students' desks—four-legged chairs were overrated. Her distressed designer jeans and flouncy-tiered blouse were a perfect blend of earth tones against her Mediterranean skin. This, I knew from experience, was considered Jenna's "dressed-down" look. Seriously, the woman didn't own a single pair of elastic-waist pants, a glaring contrast in nearly every photo we took together, as *my* favorite wardrobe piece was a yoga pant that had yet to fraternize with a gym mat. But the plain truth was that no matter what Jenna wore on her svelte frame, she would always look more like a Calvin Klein mannequin come to life than a third-grade teacher in a working-class school district.

"Or perhaps," she said, assessing me as she pushed my ladybug tape dispenser aside and perched on the edge of my desk, "you sent out another email inquiry, and now you're overanalyzing life as we know it. Again."

So yeah, my best friend had both beauty and brains. Not to mention a husband who saved impossibly sick children for a living at Boise's most reputable pediatric hospital.

I paused a beat before scrubbing at a pretend ink spot near the edge of my conference table. "Maybe."

"I thought we agreed you were gonna let all this go for a while. Take a breather. Live your life and enjoy the season you're in right now. I swear you were present for that conversation, because it happened less than a week ago. In your living room." Her eyes softened to a sympathetic plea. "You have to stop trying to make it happen. You'll hear something when you're meant to."

I grabbed her caffeine offering and tried, once again, to accept her advice like a tear-off daily proverb. Immediately an

image of King Solomon wearing Prada ankle boots and sipping on a skinny Americano materialized in my mind.

Jenna blew at the steam swirling out of the tiny spout in her latte lid. “Speaking of living your life, how did the recital go Saturday night with your sister? I nearly died at that pic you sent of little Iris! She had to be the prettiest ballerina on that stage.”

I smiled at the memory of my niece in her pale pink tutu and tight auburn bun, fully aware of Jenna’s tried-and-true diversion tactic. Bring up my niece, and I melt faster than butter on a toaster waffle. “She really was. She’s making plans to spend the night at my place soon so she can have a dance-off with Skye and me again—only she made sure to tell me she won’t be wearing her nice tights to my house *ever again*, since last time Skye’s nails snagged them during their twirling routine.”

My cocker spaniel had been named by the democracy system of my first-grade class last fall, a debate that had lasted nearly two weeks. My students had divided themselves into three potential name categories—Shopkins, PAW Patrol, and, of course, Marvel superheroes. But in the end, Skye from PAW Patrol had beaten out Black Panther and Twinky Winks. A victory as far as I was concerned. Even the most confident of women would falter at scolding a Twinky Winks in a public setting.

“S-e-r-i-o-u-s-l-y.” Jenna drew out the word with all the dramatics currently available to a thirty-two-year-old. “That kid is so adorable. I can’t believe she’ll be in kindergarten next year.”

My heart lurched to my throat as I brought the latte to my lips for the first time. “I know. She’s growing up so quickly.” How did that happen? Hadn’t I only been rocking her in that swanky delivery room less than a year ago? Because five years seemed like a mathematical impossibility.

I didn’t miss the way Jenna’s eyes brewed with questions as she watched me take another careful sip of my coffee. “So . . . did you get a moment to talk to your sister after the performance like you’d hoped?”

Instantly, my sentimental bubble deflated. “If by *talking* you mean Lisa pointing out every available—or nearly available—man at the recital to me.” I shook my head and set my cup down, fighting the urge to pace. “She does this horrible flirty thing with her voice when she does it, too, like she’s talking through a cloud of helium.” It was the voice she used every time she slapped on her self-appointed matchmaker badge in my presence. “I’m not joking when I say she must have introduced me to six different men over the course of two hours. And she *knows* I’ve taken a break from the dating scene. We’ve discussed it numerous times, but like usual, my sister only hears what she wants to hear.”

I reached to tug another wipe from the dispenser just in time for Jenna to slide off the desk and snatch it out of my hand.

“Stop with the scrubbing already. I’m pretty sure my husband could perform surgery on your conference table.”

I huffed a sigh and plopped down on little Amelia Lakier’s desk, touching the scuffed toe of my navy Converse to the linoleum floor like a pointe ballerina. Ballet had been my sister’s hobby, however, never mine. Just one of a thousand ways the two of us were nothing alike.

Jenna didn’t need to state the obvious conclusion she’d drawn from my tirade about my sister. I could practically hear her brain connecting the dots. “*So it was your frustration over Lisa that prompted you to send out another email asking for an update. . . .*” And her assumption wouldn’t be all wrong, either. Lisa might be the younger sister in our sibling duo, but she was by far the more dominant, which often left me grasping for some semblance of control whenever we parted ways.

I glanced at the clock above my door and stood to erase Friday’s letter blends on the board, yet from the corner of my eye I couldn’t ignore Jenna’s wine-colored nail tapping her cup. “When you say you’ve ‘taken a break from dating,’ you don’t mean permanently.” This was how my best friend tested the waters, asking a question without actually asking it at all, though

we both knew what side of the fence she leaned on when it came to the subject of my romantic life—the same side as my sister. Only Jenna’s motives were honorable. I couldn’t say the same about Lisa’s.

I numbered the activities of the day into six parts on the left side of the whiteboard: writing, music, math, reading, STEM play, and, my personal favorite, library . . . and then turned to face my most loyal of friends.

I gave her the truest answer I could. “Possibly, yes.”

She actually flinched at my words. “But, Lauren . . . it could be months and months still. Maybe even *another year* before you get the reply you’re waiting for. I don’t think you should limit yourself when you’re not even sure what’s gonna happen yet.” She paused and dialed down her volume. “You know I support your decision, I just . . . I don’t want you to close your heart off to the possibility of meeting someone in the meantime.”

I took a breath before I spoke, not wanting to dismiss the heart behind her words. Jenna loved me. And Jenna also loved her husband. It was only natural for her to want me to experience the same kind of marital bliss she shared with Brian. Only I happened to be convinced she’d married the only Prince Charming not written into a children’s storybook. “I know you support me, and I need you to trust that I’ve thought a lot about this. For me to even entertain the idea of a romantic relationship in this season of life doesn’t make sense.” Because the truth was, it wasn’t my singleness that kept me awake at night. It was a yearning much, much stronger. One ingrained into the fibers of my being. “I’ve put myself out there, Jen. For years. I’m pretty sure I’ve gone out with every type of man this city has to offer, and I promise you, I’m good with being single. *Happy*, even. Truly.” I gave Jenna the sincerest smile I could muster on this overly discussed topic. Between my sister, my students’ parents, and the retired women at my church, I’d been on enough first dates to

make a city of two hundred thousand feel like a neighborhood pond, not an ocean.

Some people had the gift of keeping their emotions in check, of not showing the world everything going on inside their head. Jenna was not one of those people. But thankfully, even though I could read every word she wasn't saying in those large, chestnut-brown eyes of hers, she had the restraint not to speak them aloud.

The morning bell chimed a familiar tune, and Jenna hooked her arm through mine as we slipped out my door. "I love you, Lauren."

"And I you, Jen."

We strode into the hall that would soon be filled with pattering feet, swishing backpacks, and excited voices, but my gaze caught on the darkened room across the hallway. Strange. Why were Mrs. Walker's lights off? She was usually here before the rooster crowed.

Jenna's eyes followed mine. "Oh — didn't you hear what happened to Mrs. Walker?"

"No?" My pulse spiked. "I didn't hear anything."

"She fell in her garage last Friday night — broke her hip in two places."

"Oh my gosh, that's horrible!" I stopped and glanced back at her locked door. "Is she okay?" As challenging as Mrs. Walker could be at times, injuries at her age could have lasting complications. She'd started as a first-grade teacher at Brighton nearly twenty-five years ago and taught for ten years before that at a school in Oregon. "Is she in the hospital now?"

"Yeah, I overheard Diana confirming her long-term sub this morning. If it's a break like my grandma had a few years ago, she'll likely need a couple surgeries and will probably be out of commission for a while."

Mrs. Walker rarely missed a day of teaching, but when she did, her short list of approved subs was well-known within the district.

“Wow . . .” An uncomfortable feeling of regret settled low in my belly. It was shameful to admit it, but I’d been avoiding Mrs. Walker for weeks, maybe even longer. It seemed no matter what idea I suggested for combining our efforts as the school’s only two first-grade teachers, she always found a way to complain about something I wasn’t doing right. I was either too hands-on, too unconventional, too energetic, or too lenient. Normally, I could weather her specific breed of negativity without taking it to heart; I’d had a lot of practice with her personality type over the years. But in recent months, as her rants had increased, my grace for them—and for her—had thinned considerably. Guilt wove itself around my rib cage at the thought of her awaiting surgery in the hospital. “Maybe I could organize some get well cards to send to her hospital room?”

Jenna clapped her hands together in a quick pattern of three as she approached her line leader waiting with a parent volunteer at the corner of our hallway. Seconds later her classroom answered back with a similar clap before they marched back down the hallway. “The cards are a great idea, Miss Bailey,” Jenna replied over her shoulder in her most authoritative-sounding voice. “Let me know what my class can do to help.”

“Hi, Miss Bailey!” Tabitha Connelly, my chosen line leader for the week, whisper-yelled at the sight of me. She held up our laminated first-grade sign as the rest of my class followed her to the corner, stopped, and waited for my clap like they’d been taught.

There was little in the world better than this moment right here—twenty-four optimistic faces, all ready to tackle a new week with contagious gusto. Not even the most mundane of Mondays could bring down this lively crowd.

I smiled at my happy crew. “Good morning, class. Let’s walk.”

At this point in the year, my “firsties” knew what was expected of them upon entering our classroom. The mad dash of hanging up backpacks and storing lunch boxes had calmed considerably

since the start of school in September. Their voices remained in hushed tones as they took out their morning folders, set them on their desks, said the Pledge of Allegiance, and waited for me to give the go-ahead to begin their morning word scramble with their weekly partners.

Fifty minutes later, a knock on the door alerted me to the fifth-grade buddy sent to pick up my students for music class. Everyone filed into a semi-quiet line and waved good-bye. I blew them a kiss and told them we'd be working on a surprise project when they returned. That got a few fist pumps and booty shakes.

Minutes after they left, I placed a sheet of construction paper on each of their desks, preparing the guilt cards—er, get well cards—for the kids' return. Luckily, I had more than enough art supplies to share with the sub across the hall, too. I hadn't a clue where Mrs. Walker stored her own art supplies, and I wasn't about to be the one blamed for messing up her *system* whenever she did return.

Gathering up a few pairs of funky scissors, hole punchers, markers, and stickers to share, I checked the clock above my door. The sub would be releasing Walker's class for music in just a few minutes. With the exception of library, we swapped all other electives throughout the week.

Armed with the necessary supplies, I carried the art box into the hall and immediately jerked back a step at the sound of . . . a bleating animal? I glanced toward the lunchroom and then in the direction of the library. Strange. There was no sound coming from either end of the hallway. I located the alarm system above the computer lab. No flashing light to signal an emergency.

And then it happened again.

The most off-putting, ear-splitting . . . *roar*? A boisterous cheer broke out an instant later, coming from inside Mrs. Walker's classroom. I quickened my steps to cross the linoleum sea between our two rooms.

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't dare open her door

without knocking, but instinct had me cranking the handle and throwing it open wide. And then, just like that, my feet were frozen to the floor, my jaw hanging slack at a sight that flipped my mundane Monday completely upside down.

Whoever was currently roaring at a class of six-year-olds . . . he most certainly *was not* on Mrs. Walker's approved sub list.