
NICOLE WINTERS
FREE EDITION · THE OPENING CHAPTERS
The Garden
of Eve
A STORY OF DESIRE, MONEY AND BECOMING

The Garden of Eve

A story of desire, money and becoming



NICOLE WINTERS

Free edition: the prologue and the first two chapters



PROLOGUE

The night I said no

The pen was heavier than I expected. Black lacquer, a gold nib, the kind of pen that exists only to sign things that change your life.

I was forty-one years old, standing on the twenty-ninth floor of a hotel in a black silk dress I had bought that same afternoon, because I wanted to remember exactly what I was wearing on the night the company I started at my kitchen table became worth more money than my mother earned in her whole life. The city lay below the glass like a spilled jewelry box. Someone had opened champagne. Someone else was laughing a little too loudly. And across the table, watching me read the last page, was Julian Hale.

You will hear a great deal more about Julian. For now, you only need to know three things. He was the investor who wanted to buy a large share of my company. He was the most persuasive man I had ever sat across a table from. And for four months he had made it clear, in a hundred small and perfectly deniable ways, that my company was not the only thing he wanted.

> **You do not get to buy the rest of my life.**

He was not handsome the way men in advertisements are handsome. He was handsome the way weather is. Grey at the temples, a voice that never hurried, a way of holding your eyes one second longer than was

polite and then smiling as if you had both agreed to something. Powerful men had flirted with me before. Julian did not flirt. He waited. He let you feel him waiting.

I signed. The lawyers applauded, which lawyers almost never do. I shook hands with everyone in the room, and then Julian came around the table and took my hand in both of his and held it a moment longer than any handshake needs.

> *"Congratulations, Nicole," he said. Then, lower, so that only I could hear: "Stay for one drink. Not with them. With me."*

He turned my hand over, very gently, and I felt something flat and cool against my palm. A key card. The top floor.

> *"There is a second offer I would like to discuss," he said. "It is not in the contract."*

I am going to be honest with you in this book, including about the parts that make me blush, so let me be honest now. I felt it. The heat climbed from my wrist to my throat. I was a woman who had just won the biggest negotiation of her life, a little drunk on champagne and a great deal drunk on success, and a beautiful, dangerous man was standing close enough that I could smell his cologne, cedar and something darker. For one long breath, I let myself imagine it. The elevator. The door. The view from the top floor. I am a woman, not a statue.

Then I thought about who I would be when the elevator came back down.

I closed his fingers around the card and pushed it softly back into his hand. I did not raise my voice. I never do.

"Julian," I said, "you have just bought a piece of the best thing I ever built. You do not get to buy the rest of my life."

I kissed him once on the cheek, the way you kiss a friend's husband at a wedding, and I said good night to the room, and I walked to the elevator without looking back. I did not need to look back. I could feel him watching me the whole way, and I let him.

In the parking garage, I took off my heels and threw them on the passenger seat of my car. It is blue and fast and far too beautiful, and I drove it home barefoot with the windows down and the radio loud, laughing out loud at red lights like a girl in a film. I had just made more money in one evening than I had made in the first thirty years of my life. And I had just said no to the most tempting thing anyone had ever offered me. I honestly could not tell you which one felt better.

The kitchen light was on when I got home. Daniel was leaning against the counter in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, two glasses waiting, pretending he had not been watching the driveway.

"Well?" he said.

"We did it."

He did not say anything clever. He crossed the kitchen and took my face in his hands and kissed me the way he kissed me the first night we met, as if he had been thinking about it all day. Then his fingers found the zip

at the back of my black silk dress, slowly, the way he has found it a thousand times, as if it were the first time.

I will tell you more about that night later in this book, or at least as much as a lady can tell. For now I will say only that the champagne went warm on the counter, and neither of us noticed.

Much later, lying awake with his arm heavy across my waist and the city glowing faintly beyond the window, I thought about the girl I used to be. Twenty-five years earlier I had nothing. No father, no money, no one who could open a single door for me. Everything I have, I first had to learn to want, and then learn how to get. And the hardest lesson of all was learning what not to take, even when it is offered to you on a gold key card on a black silk night.

This is the story of that girl, and of the woman she became. It is about money, because I have made a great deal of it, and lost some, and learned what it is for. It is about desire, because I have felt a great deal of it, and I am not ashamed. It is about love and marriage and three children, about my body and my faith, about my mistakes and the people who carried me when I could not carry myself.

If you want the version where everything was easy, you can close the book now. If you want the true one, come with me. It starts with a girl who wanted everything.



1

CHAPTER 1

The girl who wanted everything

My father died when I was eight. His heart stopped on an ordinary Tuesday. In the morning he kissed the top of my head and called me "my clever one," the way he always did. In the evening he did not come home. That is all I will say about that day, because the rest of it belongs to my mother, and to my little brother Eli, who was only four.

I do not want to write a sad book. My childhood was hard, but it was not sad, because Mama would not allow it to be. What I want to tell you about is not the grief. It is the hunger that grew in its place.

After Papa died, Mama worked two jobs. In the mornings she cleaned offices before the people who worked in them arrived. In the evenings she sewed in a small workshop, altering trousers and repairing other people's coats. She came home with thread on her sleeves and pins in her collar, and she sang while she cooked, badly and loudly, and made a game out of everything. When the electricity was cut off for three days, she told us we were living in a castle and we ate dinner by candlelight. Eli still talks about the castle. He does not remember that we could not pay the bill.

> **This is for work. You worked.**

Mama had rules. We did not complain about what we did not have. We did not take what was not ours. We were polite to everyone, especially to people who were not polite to us. And we never, ever raised our voices in

anger. "Anyone can shout," she used to say. "It takes a strong woman to speak softly when she is angry." I have built my whole life on that sentence.

Eli was my responsibility after school. I walked him home, made him a snack, checked his homework and made sure he did not open the door to anyone. I was a child looking after a child. It made me the calm one in every room I have walked into since.

And on the walk home, every afternoon, we passed the hotel.

It was the most beautiful building in our part of the city, all brass and glass and a doorman in a long grey coat. In winter, women came out of it wrapped in camel cashmere, smelling of perfume I could follow for half a block. They laughed with their heads back. They stepped into cars without looking to see whether anyone would open the door, because someone always did. I used to slow down so that Eli would complain, just so I could watch them a little longer.

I did not envy them, exactly. Envy is sour, and this was something sweeter and more dangerous. I wanted to know what they knew. I wanted to walk the way they walked, as if the street belonged to them. And one grey afternoon, holding my brother's sticky hand outside that hotel, I made a decision I did not yet have words for. I decided that one day I would come out of a door like that, and I would have paid for my own coat.

The first money I ever earned came from Mrs. Halpern, who lived on the floor below us. She was old and her knees were bad, and one day I offered to carry her shopping up the stairs. At the top she pressed a coin

into my hand. I tried to refuse it, because Mama had taught us not to take money for kindness. Mrs. Halpern closed my fingers over it. "This is not for kindness," she said. "This is for work. You worked."

She had been a bookkeeper for fifty years, and her apartment smelled of lemons and old ledgers. The next week she invited me in for a glass of tea and told me the only secret about money she said she had ever needed.

"It is not how much you earn," she said. "It is whether you pay yourself first. From every ten coins that come to you, one belongs to the woman you will become. Put it away before you buy anything at all. Even bread. Especially bread, because bread will always find a way to eat the coin."

I told her we were poor, and every coin was already needed.

> *"Then you will be poor with one coin saved," she said, "instead of poor with nothing. And one coin grows. Nothing never does."*

I found an empty jam jar and put her coin inside it. That was the beginning of everything.

After that, I looked for work everywhere. I carried Mrs. Halpern's shopping every week. I swept the stairs of our building for the man who managed it. I looked after a neighbor's twins on Saturday mornings. And I learned to make bracelets out of colored thread, which I sold to the girls at school, two for the price of one if they were for a sister. I sold more bracelets in one month than I had expected to sell in a year, and I learned my first real lesson about business. Nobody buys a bracelet. They buy the feeling of wearing something pretty that their best friend also wears.

Every night I counted the jar, the way I had seen Mama count her coins at the kitchen table, and every night it was a little more. By the winter I was twelve, there was more in my jar than Mama had in the bank.

I did not spend it on myself. I took it to a shop near the hotel and bought my mother a coat. Camel colored, soft, the kind I had watched those women wear. The woman in the shop counted my coins with me slowly, one by one, as if it were the most important sale of her day.

When I gave it to Mama, she sat down at the kitchen table and cried. I thought I had done something wrong. Now that I am a mother, I understand. She was proud of me, and she was heartbroken that I had needed to do it. Both at once. That is what being a mother feels like most of the time.

She wore that coat for eleven years. And I learned, at twelve, that money is not the goal. Money is what lets you give someone you love the thing they would never buy for themselves.

What I know now

From every ten coins that come to you, one belongs to the woman you will become.

A question for you

Ask yourself what you are truly hungry for, and what your first coin toward it could be.



2

CHAPTER 2

Rosa's window

At sixteen, I got my first real job in a clothing shop two streets from the hotel. I worked on Saturdays and two evenings a week, folding sweaters and arranging the window, and the money went into the jar, which had become a bank account by then, and part of it went to Mama, whether she wanted it or not.

I thought I was being paid to fold sweaters. I was really being paid to learn the most valuable lesson of my career.

The shop belonged to Rosa, who had dressed half the women in our neighborhood for thirty years. She wore red lipstick at eight in the morning and reading glasses on a gold chain, and she could tell a woman's size, her mood and her budget before the door had closed behind her. One Saturday she watched me rearrange a table of blouses and asked why I had put the blue one at the front. I said I did not know. It just looked right.

"Then let us find out if you are right," she said.

That day, the blue blouses sold twice as fast as the others. The next week, she let me dress the window by myself. I put the colors together the way I would want to see them if I were walking past on a grey afternoon, tired, with no particular reason to stop. People stopped.

Rosa taught me that a shop is a conversation. The window speaks first. It says, "We understand you. Come in." The way you greet a woman says, "You are welcome here, even if you buy nothing." And she is far more likely to buy, Rosa said, precisely because she believes you when you say she does not have to. Everything I later earned from marketing, I learned first in that window.

Rosa taught me something else, too, and I have never told anyone this part.

The summer I turned seventeen, something changed. I grew a little taller, and my body changed the way bodies do, and suddenly men noticed me. On the bus, in the street, in the shop. A delivery man who suddenly needed three trips instead of one. A customer's husband who lingered by the window and asked my opinion of a scarf for his wife. I did not know what to do with it. Part of me was frightened. Part of me, I am not ashamed to say, liked it very much.

Rosa saw everything, of course. One evening, after closing, she sat me down on the little velvet stool in the fitting room and looked at me over her gold-chained glasses.

"You have discovered that you are beautiful," she said. "Good. Now listen to me. Being looked at is not power. Every pretty girl is looked at. Power is choosing. Who you look back at. What you say yes to. What you walk away from. The woman who chooses is the one who owns the room."

I have thought about that conversation more than almost anything anyone has ever said to me. It is why I could push a key card back across a table at forty-one. I learned it on a velvet stool at seventeen.

That same summer I had my first kiss. His name was Tomas, he delivered bolts of fabric to the shop, and he had the darkest eyes I had ever seen. It was raining. We were standing under the narrow awning at the back door, too close, because the awning was very small, and he asked me, very seriously, whether he could kiss me. Nobody had ever asked me for anything so politely. I said yes. My heart beat so hard that I was sure he could hear it over the rain.

It did not last; first loves almost never do. But I learned two things under that awning. That desire is a beautiful thing, not a shameful one. And that it belongs to the woman who feels it. I chose him. That is why I remember it with a smile.

I finished school with the best marks in my class and studied marketing and the social sciences in the evenings, working the whole time. I slept less than I should have. But I understood what I was studying in a way some of my classmates did not, because I had watched real women stop at a real window.

At twenty-one, I walked into my first job at an advertising agency, in a borrowed blazer and my one good pair of heels. I had my degree, my jar and Rosa's voice in my head.

Within a few years I would meet two men who would change my life. One of them would take every cent I had ever saved. The other would take my breath away in a friend's kitchen, and he is still waiting up for me with two glasses on the counter.

I met the wrong one first.

What I know now

Being looked at is not power. Choosing is.

A question for you

Ask yourself what you are saying yes to only because it was offered, and what you would choose if the choice were truly yours.

COMING IN THE FULL BOOK

A taste of chapter five

It had started to rain, a warm spring rain, and he had no umbrella, and neither did I, and by the time we reached my door we were both soaked through and laughing. I stood on the step with my key in my hand, and he stood one step below me, which made us exactly the same height, and neither of us said anything for a long moment.

"I have been wanting to do this since the kitchen," he said.

He kissed me slowly, the way a man does when he has decided he has all the time in the world. His hand was warm on the small of my back through my wet dress. The rain ran down my neck and I did not feel it. When he finally pulled away, I could not remember which key opened my own front door. He found it for me.

I will not tell you everything about that night. Some things belong only to the two people who were there. But I will tell you that I had never been touched like that before: as if I were something precious and something wild at the same time. He was in no hurry. He paid attention, the same way he had paid attention in the kitchen, the same way he paid attention to everything. He wanted to know what I liked, and he asked, and that was the most exciting thing of all. When the sky started turning grey outside my window, we were still talking, my head on his chest, his heartbeat slow and steady under my ear.

• • •

THE STORY CONTINUES

She met the *wrong one first.*

The charming man who took every cent she had

The kitchen where she met the love of her life

A red dress, a hotel by the sea and the night she got herself back

Four months with Julian Hale, and the deal of her life

Money, desire, faith, three children, and what success really looks like

READ THE COMPLETE BOOK

nicole-winters.pages.dev

Copyright © 2026 Nicole Winters. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holder, except brief quotations for review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, people and events are imagined, and any resemblance to real persons is coincidental. Nicole Winters is AI generated.