

Maybe, With Conditions

By

Mariella Starr

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Published by Blushing Books®,

a subsidiary of

ABCD Graphics and Design

977 Seminole Trail #233

Charlottesville, VA 22901

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Starr, Mariella

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-575-6

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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Chapter One

Washington, D.C., early March

It was a dreary day. It had rained at dawn and then cleared. Now the sky was overcast and promising more rain. There was a heavy, cold dampness in the air. It wasn't raining yet, but it wouldn't be long before it started, again. It was a typical spring for the District of Columbia. The day before, the temperature had risen to seventy-eight degrees, overnight it had plunged back into the low thirties. The Cherry Blossom Parade was this weekend. However, if the rains didn't stop, the delicate blooms would all wash away before the tourists descended on the city.

This type of day encouraged people to stay indoors and Nicole Bennett looked forward to going home. She wanted to be in front of a crackling fire, with a hot bowl of soup, and a good book. She also wondered if she would ever earn enough to get out of the city.

Nicole shivered as she stepped out of the cab at the Georgetown residence matching the address on her cell phone. It was a large beautiful Federal-style house with plenty of original architectural details. She had done her homework. In this neighborhood, a house built in 1797 by the relative of a founding father would have a price tag in a seven to nine million-dollar range.

She was impressed because it was a beautiful home, but she wondered if the occupants would impress her. She was used to dealing with *wealthy entitled* people. It was a necessary evil since they paid her bills. She was firmly planted in her reality of middle class.

Nicole wore a charcoal gray pantsuit, designer labeled and expensive, although she had purchased it at her favorite consignment shop. She knew the shop owner who called Nicole whenever something came in on consignment in her size five and was *fabulous*—her friend's description—not hers. Nicole had purchased a limited designer wardrobe without spending a fortune, or going into debt. She required such a wardrobe for client meetings. She gravitated to the sleek and sophisticated, so business suits met her needs. She considered them a uniform, part of the image she wanted to project. She didn't aspire to be chic or stylish, but she couldn't afford to make a wrong first impression, either. At twenty-three, she was still carded. Her youthful appearance was often a negative since many of her clients were older. They recognized her talent and her reputation, but upon meeting her face-to-face, they sometimes became skeptical. The

initial meeting with a potential patron was crucial in determining if she would get the commission.

Nicole sighed and rummaged through her large tote for a comb. She gave her hair a quick run through and with a flick of her wrist twisted her long impossibly curly copper-red hair into a bun at the nape of her neck. She wore very little makeup, a smear of smoky gray on her eyelids and a little mascara to highlight her teal green eyes. Someone had once described her eyes as 'come hither' sexy. Maybe they were, but her gaze was that of a no-nonsense professional. She was here with only one goal in mind. Get the job.

She was barely five foot two inches in height, and slight. People who didn't know her thought she was frail. Those who knew her—knew better. She was strong, capable and possessed a temper, which she tried to keep under rigid control.

Nicole Bennett was a survivor. She had fought to build a reputation in the art world and to have her talent recognized. She was her art, or her art was her, she had never decided how it had evolved. Her mouth curved at the corners over her musings as she squared her shoulders. It was time to get on with it. She had bills to pay. She painted for wealthy patrons in the Washington, D.C., area and her rates and steady commissions placed her in a category of comfortable living. She did what it took to survive in an expensive city.

She could have worked harder to earn more, but she learned a long time ago, wealth was not the key to her happiness. Time was more important to her. She wanted more time for her family and for her personal art. Portraits, human or animal, paid the bills, but they were not her true calling. However, pleasing wealthy clients was important to her livelihood. The bottom line was, they paid well.

With a light step, Nicole rang the bell at the ornate front door entrance and waited. Suddenly, her hand dove into a raincoat pocket for tissues. She sneezed five times in succession and leaned against one of the pillars at the brick entryway.

Perhaps for the hundredth time since she had left her bed, she wished she had been able to postpone this interview. Nothing was worse than having a person's first impression disrupted by a series of sneezes and symptoms of a head cold. She had been sneezing and coughing all morning, as she had the day before. More symptoms of her spring cold were now in evidence. Her eyes were watering and her headache was worsening. She dreaded a disastrous runny nose.

"Of course," she thought, "I had to wait until this appointment to come down with a cold." Mrs. Windgate was leaving for England within the week, and the interview could not be postponed. Mr. Windgate was the British Ambassador. If Nicole got this commission, the portrait of Mrs. Penelope Windgate would give her entry into a whole new class of wealthy, *political* clients.

She sneezed again as she picked up her large bag containing folders of references and reviews, along with her portfolio and camera. As composed as she could be under the circumstances, she rang the bell, again.

She was shown into a library by a maid and left alone. She settled herself in a comfortable chair and waited for Mrs. Windgate to appear. In her experience, wealthy clients always wanted to make an appearance rather than greeting their guests at the door as normal people did. After about five minutes, the library door opened and an elegant, almost regal woman entered followed by a younger man.

Nicole rose to her feet to greet the woman and after the introduction was made, she was motioned to sit again. She was glad to sit because her knees were a bit wobbly. The man was Dalton.

She tried not to look at him, but she couldn't stop herself. He hadn't changed much. He was six foot two inches of gorgeous male. He still had the same trim, masculine profile. They used to laugh about him being a full foot taller than her. He was probably still ripped under the conservative suit. She remembered everything about him. She realized he was prematurely gray at the temples. *He shouldn't have gray hair*, she thought wildly. *Dalton is only thirty*.

"Hello, Nicole,"

At his greeting, she stiffened her spine and snapped out of the past. She made a short, clipped response trying to ignore him as she turned her attention to her client.

He was also a bastard!

Dalton Calloway did not participate in the interview. He barely noticed what was being said. Making the trip to Washington, D.C., had not been his idea. He hated leaving his work and he was not one for taking time off. His grandparents had been particularly insistent about him accompanying them for this visit before his aunt left for England, again. He didn't know great-aunt Penelope very well as she had lived in Europe most of his life. She was the older sister of his grandfather, and he had been pressured into taking the trip with his grandparents. Then, at the

last moment, his grandfather, Roy Mac had canceled. He had claimed he wasn't feeling well enough to make the journey, so Dalton had made the trip with his gran. A week in Washington, D.C., was Dalton's idea of Hell.

His gran had flown home this morning for undisclosed reasons. He would leave tomorrow as the airline had not been able to book him a ticket on the same flight. His gran had sworn her leaving ahead of schedule was not a medically related emergency concerning his grandfather. It was the only reason Dalton had not chartered a private plane. His itinerary for the next couple of days had been set until he walked into this library.

The sight of Nicole stunned him. She had been his college sweetheart, but he had not heard from her in six years. She had grown even more beautiful with a flawless complexion except for a sprinkle of freckles across her nose. Her eyes were the same, those striking teal green eyes. He took in every detail from the ridiculous high-heeled boots she wore, to her bright copper red hair hidden in an ugly knot at the back of her head. He remembered her hair spread out over a pillow, as he plunged himself deeply and satisfyingly into her.

Dalton gave a start, got to his feet. He stood in front of a window with his back to her. He wasn't looking out the window. He was looking at her reflection in the mirror on the opposite wall. He wasn't surprised where his thoughts had gone instantly. He was a man and men reacted to physical memories. He turned slightly to adjust his pants covering the erection he was unable to stop. She had not changed much since he had seen her last and neither had his reaction to her.

"Dalton?"

"Yes, Aunt Penny," he replied shaking his head to clear his thoughts.

"Ms. Madison says she doesn't present a contract until later in the process."

"Why not?" he asked with a jolt as he realized her last name was different. His gut twisted at the discovery she must have married.

Nicole glanced in Dalton's direction but she did not look at him directly. She focused somewhere over his shoulder before returning her attention to her potential client.

"I don't need a contract for the preliminary stages of the work, Mrs. Windgate. I paint my portraits from an array of photographs I take in the initial stage. Most of my contact with you will be done through online communications. I will do a preliminary pastel drawing, photograph it, and submit it for your approval. If we agree and you are satisfied with my approach to the work, then I will provide a contract for digital signature. At that point, I must know if I am

meeting your expectations before proceeding. You will be able to suggest any changes you think are necessary and I will incorporate them into a second pastel."

"It's a lot of work on your part. What if your client changes their mind? You have a loss of time spent on the preliminary drawings and the client might decide to keep what you send them," Dalton said.

"I'm not concerned about time loss. I'm concerned with rendering a portrait which pleases my client," Nicole disagreed. "Besides, a digital photograph of a pastel drawing with 'Proof' stamped over it would not be suitable for framing. Someone would have to be an expert in digital photo processing to remove the markings."

"I saw Mrs. John Rainer's portrait and was quite impressed. Your work is remarkably good," Mrs. Windgate said. "However, if you'll excuse me for saying so, I didn't expect someone so young. I also thought there would be sittings."

"Sitting for a portrait is a very time-consuming process, Mrs. Windgate, and most people don't have the time. They also find it uncomfortable sitting for the many hours it would require. Then there is the issue of juggling both of our schedules. I believe you are due to travel to England within the next few days. If sittings or face-to-face meetings were required, this would cause us quite a problem.

"Instead, I will take a series of photographs today, which will take approximately thirty minutes. I will pose you, talk to you, and tell you what expressions I want. I will take a lot of photographs. From those, I will determine what I believe is the best combination of features and poses, and present you with preliminary sketches. When we both agree on the final pose and expression, I will proceed with a pastel portrait, which I will send you for approval, along with the contract. After I receive your feedback and the signed contract, I will begin painting. I will make you aware of my progress through photographs of the different stages of the portrait until its completion."

"Why don't we have coffee or tea while I make up my mind?" Mrs. Windgate suggested. She rose to her feet and excused herself.

Nicole grabbed for a tissue out of her pocket and sneezed four times before laying her head back against the chair and shutting her eyes.

"You sound terrible," Dalton commented.

"It's only a spring cold."

"What have you been doing with yourself since we last met?" Dalton asked.

"Making a name for myself in the art world," Nicole said deliberately. She wished he would go away. Dalton Calloway had left a permanent mark on her life and her soul.

Mrs. Windgate was gone for a long time, but there was no further conversation between Nicole and Dalton. She was not in the mood for casual chitchat. Her host finally returned followed by a maid carrying a tray. Twenty minutes later, Mrs. Windgate agreed to allow Nicole to take photographs of her.

Nicole did this expertly, taking shots of the woman from every angle and every change of light in the room. When she was finished, Mrs. Windgate excused herself again, after asking her nephew to see the young woman to the door.

"I can see myself out, thank you," Nicole said bluntly packing her gear.

"Why are you so hostile?" Dalton asked. "You were the one who left. You were the one who disappeared."

Nicole shot him a fierce look and shook her head. "Really? It's amazing. I remember our parting quite differently. You rejected me. You flat out told me you didn't want anything more to do with me. I was not good enough for you. If I remember correctly, you cited my immaturity and lack of focus," Nicole said bitterly.

"I thought we were both too young to be so intensely involved," Dalton disagreed. "We were too young to jump into a committed relationship. At least, I was. I was at a turning point in my life! I did not reject you. I said we should cool it for a while and reevaluate what we both wanted. The next thing I knew, you were gone."

Nicole snorted. "You made yourself perfectly clear. You wanted to have sex with me, but as far as you were concerned, it was all fun and games. We couldn't get serious. It didn't take long for you to change your mind, did it? Exactly two months!"

"Some complicated things were going on in my life. I can explain, Nicole, if you would listen," Dalton said laying a hand on her arm.

She shrugged him off angrily shaking her head. She heaved the massive tote bag over her shoulder. "I don't think so. I got it the first time. I was the fling with no strings attached. Barbara was the one you married."

"Barbara was a mistake."

"Poor, poor, pitiful you. Don't tell me your problems,"

"We were married less than six months!"

"Congratulations or condolences, whichever is appropriate," Nicole snapped. She jerked the front door open only to stand for a moment in dismay as she observed a winter mix of ice, snow, and rain. You could hear sleet pinging against everything.

"Let me take you home," Dalton offered.

"I have transportation," Nicole snapped.

"Well, at least, let me cover you with an umbrella until you can get to your car. Where is your car parked?"

"In the shop," she said clearly aggravated. "I took a cab." She dug into her bag and pulled out her phone. "I'll wait outside."

Dalton looked at her as his mouth tightened firmly. "You will not stand outside in the freezing rain. Christ, with a head cold, you would be inviting pneumonia. I'll borrow one of my aunt's vehicles and take you home."

"I came by cab, Dalton, and I can go home by cab," Nicole said, stubbornly rummaging in her tote. "Millions of people survive without cars in Washington. I have an umbrella."

"No," Dalton disagreed. "I won't allow you out in this weather when you are sick. I'm taking you home."

Nicole recognized the intractable tone in his voice. Dalton meant what he said and he would stop her from leaving. He always had an overload of testosterone and thought he had a right to tell her and everyone else what to do.

His attitude angered her, it always had. She also knew, short of calling the police, she wouldn't change his mind. She sighed and nodded in agreement following him through the house into a large garage. Once situated inside the vehicle, Nicole gave him the address of a Deli on the corner of her street and watched him enter it into his GPS.

She sat quietly while he drove slowly through the city traffic. She was not as indifferent to him as she pretended. She had many memories of the time they had spent together. Even though their break-up was incredibly painful, she had no regrets. Her time with Dalton was unquestionably some of the best months of her life. Still, there was no way she wanted him to know exactly where she lived.

They had met over a vending machine in the college cafeteria when both of them wanted the very last Snickers bar. Something had clicked between them, a meeting of the minds and

spirit. The immediate attraction was mutual. She was an innocent second-year student. He was an experienced older man at twenty-five, at the end of his schooling for a degree to become a veterinarian.

They had fallen into bed together less than four hours later and had become inseparable. Every minute they were not in class, they were together. Their bodies became one, desiring, craving, and starving constant contact. She loved him. It never occurred to her he might not feel the same. In her love, she had believed in the happy ever after. She had been so young and had never doubted him for a single moment. She didn't find out *happy ever after* was an illusion until he nearly destroyed her.

Dalton was older than most of the students she knew, older, wiser, and more experienced. As it turned out, he had a life plan. It did not include becoming permanently involved with a girl at college.

When she accused him of promising to love her, he didn't deny it. However, he also said he wanted them to be free, to have a no-strings-attached relationship. He said they were having fun and fun did not always have to get serious. Unfortunately, they were too busy having sex at every opportunity for him to mention his theories until after they were dating and sleeping together in his single bed for six months.

Nicole was hurt, but the brutal facts stood for themselves. Dalton wanted the fun of sex, not the responsibility of love. She had hurled accusations at him, accused him of using her. He volleyed back, claiming she was trying to trap him.

With her heart broken, Nicole had fled his apartment and returned to her dorm room. She had refused to take his phone calls and walked away whenever he approached her. She finished her exams, packed her bags, and left. She returned to her father's home disillusioned and broken.

Nicole had been devastated, but she had tried to pick up the pieces of her life. She began researching a transfer to another college to complete her degree. Then, with the sudden death of her father two months later, reality set in with a vengeance. She had expected Dalton to at least call, to make some contact, but there was no attempt on his part.

She found out why two weeks after her father's funeral. Dalton Calloway had been on his honeymoon. He had married a recent graduate, Barbara Ruiz. Nicole had always known the senior co-ed was interested in Dalton. Barbara hadn't hidden it. Dalton, however, had pretended indifference to Barbara.

Obviously, he had lied. Nicole's source of campus information relayed the facts to her. Dalton married Barbara Ruiz because she was pregnant. While claiming he wanted only Nicole, he had been sleeping with Barbara.

Reality really does bite you in the ass sometimes. Nicole grew up fast when she realized she was on her own. She turned to the only stability she had ever known in her life and moved on. She built a life based on a belief in her talents and had built a reputation in the art world. Calloway would have to make himself scarce. She had no interest in revisiting the past. She had more important things in her life than dealing with a lying, cheating, ex-boyfriend.

Dalton Calloway wasn't really surprised by Nicole's anger. She had a vicious temper, and would strike first and apologize later. He needed to take this chance meeting and talk to her. He needed to explain himself and his actions. The circumstances of their breakup were entirely his fault and he knew it. She had valid reasons to be angry. He was the one who had behaved irresponsibly.

Dalton had not entered Virginia Tech until he was twenty-one. His late enrollment had been necessary. On the eve of his initial departure for college, a fatal car accident had claimed the lives of both his parents and disabled his grandfather. The following three years, along with dealing with his family tragedies and responsibilities, had made him an outcast among the students. For the most part, they appeared to him as young and immature.

He had grown up fast in a time when farmers and ranchers were losing their land to large corporate enterprises. He had been forced to take over the reins of the ranch held by his family for generations. He had held their land against the combined enemies of taxes, corporate developers, and low beef prices. It took three years before Roy Mac, his grandfather, was well enough to resume control of the day-to-day operations of the Double C Ranch.

At twenty-one, Dalton was free to pursue his dream. He'd entered Virginia Tech, a driven young man. He had already completed as many credits as possible through local community colleges, and online and online credited courses. After transferring those credits to the university, he only needed two semesters to complete the prerequisite requirements for his B.A. in Animal Science. His next goal was to finish his DVM, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, in three years, not four. He had been hell bent on becoming a veterinarian and nothing was going to stand in his way.

His goals were attainable before he met Nicole. When he fell in love with her, he realized their relationship could derail his plans. She consumed his every thought. She was a distraction he could not control. She came between him and the realization of his dream.

In an argument quickly spiraling out of control, things were said that could not be withdrawn, and she had walked out. He knew he had hurt her, but he was in the middle of his final exams. He would not and could not take the time to find her and explain. He could not risk losing sight of crossing the finish line of his goal. With the arrogance of youth, he assumed he would win her back after finals were over.

Unfortunately, when his finals were completed and he had gone to find her, she wasn't there. He realized then the magnitude of what he had lost. Nicole was gone and she had covered her tracks well. Although she had spoken to him of her home life, she had never given any specifics such as a town or state. He hadn't noticed until it was too late. Most of the dorms were emptying out as students returned home for summer break. A few of her friends remained on campus, but they wouldn't talk to him. He couldn't get anyone to help him find her, and her college records were off limits.

It was true; he had been a fool, an idiot, and an imbecile. He had called himself every name in the book for being so stupid. Then, he married Barbara Ruiz. It had been a crazy time. He often thought part of his brain or his IQ left him at the same time Nicole did. He went temporarily insane. Marrying the beauty queen on campus turned out to be a costly mistake he would always regret.

Dalton tried to glance at Nicole when he dared to take his eyes off the crazy D.C. drivers. She had grown more beautiful. She had lost some of the childish straightness he had teased her about. In its place were rounded edges and curves. She was very much a woman. Her hair was different. Six years earlier, it had been cut short in corkscrew curls. It appeared to be longer, but it was hard to tell since it was tied in a knot at the nape of her neck. The dampness from the inclement wet weather was causing tendrils to pull loose and curl.

"You've let your hair grow," he said trying to start a conversation.

Nicole didn't even look in his direction. "Yes, I did."

It was an abrupt ending to his attempt at small talk.

The rest of the drive was silent. He turned on the correct avenue and Nicole pointed to a curb.

"You can let me out here," she said as he pulled into a recently vacated space. When she reached for the door handle, the door locks activated at his fingertips. He had parked the car in front of a delicatessen. Unless she lived above it, she was trying to give him the bum's rush.

Nicole turned quickly demanding, "Unlock the doors. I thank you for the lift. Please tell Mrs. Windgate, I will be in contact with her."

"I'm coming in," Dalton said.

"No," Nicole said firmly. "We don't have anything to say to each other."

"The hell we don't."

Dalton didn't wait. He got out of the car, put up his umbrella, and walked around to open her door. She had already opened it but was simply sitting there. She wasn't moving and she was getting drenched. Ice crystals were collecting on her, but she seemed distracted. He moved closer pushing the umbrella over the open door gap to cover her, but she still didn't move. Exasperated, he took her bag and with a firm grip on her arm pulled her to her feet. She was decidedly holding back as if trying to find an excuse to get rid of him.

"Dalton," Nicole said looking up at him. "We really don't have anything to discuss. I don't want to be rude, but you need to go."

"After I deliver you to your door."

Nicole's mind frantically searched for some way to ditch him. Other than having a nasty throwdown argument in public, she was coming up blank. Dalton waited impatiently with a firm grip on her arm and her bag over his shoulder, sheltering her from the freezing rain. She finally moved forward walking past the Deli and continuing for another block before entering a modern high-rise.

Walking across the lobby, Dalton glanced at the business listings mounted on the wall and realized the building was commercial on the lower floors and residential from the fifth floor and above. He stepped into the residential elevator, and she activated a code that would allow the elevator to go beyond the fifth floor. She touched the eighth-floor button.

Dalton didn't give her a chance to refuse him entry into her apartment. When she pulled out her keys with shaking hands, he took them, opened the door, and walked in ahead of her. The apartment was large with an open living/dining room combination. He could see part of the kitchen and assumed bedrooms were further down the hallway. It was nicely furnished with an eclectic mix of antiques and contemporary pieces, and some he did not recognize as any

particular style, but they were interesting. The walls were crowded with paintings, large ones, small ones, a cornucopia of styles and colors, but somehow it worked. He assumed she was the artist.

"Hello, dearie, are you after gettin the commission?" A woman in her late sixties asked from the doorway of the kitchen.

"Yes," Nicole answered.

The woman gave Nicole a questioning look of impatience.

Rolling her eyes, Nicole said. "Dalton this is..."

"You don't have to tell me, Mrs. Deirdre O'Cleary. Your fairy godmother, allied with you against your evil stepmother. How could I miss the accent?"

Mrs. O'Cleary smiled happily. She was proud of her Irish roots and prouder still how after twenty years in America she had held onto her brogue.

"Right, you would be a friend of Nicole's from a while back, I'm guessing. Glad to make your acquaintance. I'm always telling her to go out, but she will have none of it. In my opinion, which no one ever asks, twenty-three is too young to bury herself under a pile of canvases."

"Twenty-three," Dalton exclaimed involuntarily.

"Aye, that she is, but sometimes you would think she was as old as meself. I'm off love. There are things I need from the pharmacy, providin I don't drown or freeze before gettin there. March in Washington is as damp as me own Dún Laoghaire, and a sight colder." The older woman pulled a raincoat and umbrella from the hall closet and stuffed her feet into old-fashioned rain boots.

Nicole nodded and took the towel the woman handed her. She was soaked to the skin. As soon as Mrs. O'Cleary closed the door, Dalton turned on her.

"Twenty-three? No wonder you still look like a teenager! You would have been what—seventeen or eighteen when I knew you?"

"What difference does it make?"

"A hell of a lot! You lied to me. Dear, God! I seduced a teenager. You told me you were twenty-one along with a lot of bullshit about the women in your family always looking younger than their age!"

The front door reopened and Mrs. O'Cleary stuck in her head. "If the phone rings, it will probably be Dr. Myers. The lad had a bit of trouble with the asthma today. It's probably the weather, but we can't be taking chances." She shut the door behind her again.

Dalton paced the room angrily, conjuring an image of a caged tiger. "You have a lot of nerve, having a go at me about Barbara. Where is your husband?"

Nicole stared daggers at him. "It's none of your business."

"Then who..." Dalton stopped as a small boy raced into the room and hugged Nicole around the waist.

"Who's he, Mommy?" the boy asked.

"Someone I knew a long time ago, Matty," Nicole answered, putting the palm of her hand on his forehead. "Dee Dee said you weren't feeling well. Have you been using your inhaler?"

The boy nodded yes. "I'm hungry. Can I have a snack?"

"A small apple," Nicole agreed as he ran across the room to the kitchen. "I'm playing Ninja War."

"Who's winning?" Nicole asked putting a smile on her face for her child.

"Me," the boy bragged and dashed down the hall.

Nicole turned back to Dalton, and if looks could kill—she would not be on this earth much longer.

"You had my child," Dalton exclaimed in shock. "Where in the hell is your husband? Does he know he is raising my son?"

"My son," Nicole corrected evenly. "His name is Matthew Mackenzie. Do not make a big deal out of it. I was young, stupid, and still idealistic when he was born. There is no husband. Madison is my middle name, which I use to sign my work.

"Does he know he has a father living?" queried Dalton.

"No. He only turned five a few days ago. He knows he is named after a grandfather and a great-grandfather. A lot of his friends at daycare are children of divorce or are being raised by single mothers. It is commonplace in his class for kids to have a single parent. He doesn't think it's unusual not to have a father around."

"He has a father! How dare you keep the existence of my son from me!" Dalton shouted.

"Keep your voice down!" Nicole snarled her temper flashing. "You made your choice. What exactly was I supposed to tell the guy who dumped me, 'Hey, guess what, Bucko, I'm

pregnant! Surprise! The same guy who was screwing around with another girl behind my back? The guy who impregnated her, too! You turned out to be a real prince, Dalton. I may have been stupid for a while, but I cut my losses and accepted my responsibilities. You married Barbara two months after you dumped me. Contacting you wasn't happening in my world!"

"Nic, you're twisting things," Dalton said.

"Bullshit," Nicole snapped. "Barbara wanted in your pants and apparently you were willing. You have your own kid, stay away from mine!"

"I don't have a child by Barbara." Dalton ran his fingers through his hair roughly. "She wanted a rich husband and she thought I fit the bill. I was the guy she suckered into marrying her. I might have slept with her once while we were at school right after you and I broke up, but I'm not sure. We had our big fight and you disappeared. I went a little crazy for a while when I couldn't find you and went to some frat parties. I was unhappy and drinking too much. Frankly, I don't remember much from those last few weeks on campus, and what I didn't know then was that Barbara is a pathological liar.

"Several weeks later, Barbara came crying to me saying she was pregnant. She claimed we had slept together, showed me a pregnancy test strip, said it was my baby... insisted it was my baby. I did what I thought was the right thing and married her. She wasn't pregnant. It was a lie—the first of a million lies and deceptions. During our divorce proceedings, I found out she had never divorced a previous husband before marrying me. Our marriage wasn't even legal."

"Jesus, you were an idiot, but it's still not my problem!"

"Stop being a smart ass," Dalton ordered. "I want an answer. Why didn't you tell me you were pregnant?"

"Maybe it had something to do with the fact that you dumped me! You didn't want me, remember?"

"A man has a right to know he has fathered a child. I would have married you if I had known."

"Oh, really? That's just what every woman wants to know. That the man who couldn't dump her fast enough... would have done her the favor of marrying her... if he had known she was pregnant. That is so big of you!

"When I last checked... YOU WERE ALREADY MARRIED!" Nicole's voice rose to a shout and then lowered ominously. "You ditched me, Dalton, or don't you remember that part

either? It was all fun and games while you got a lot of sex on the side. Only, you didn't tell me I was someone to play around with until you finished your degree. We were together six months and you never said a Goddamn word! Then, all of a sudden, you didn't want to be in a serious relationship. It was all fun and games to you. You were a bastard and I was the idiot who fell for it. I was played."

With a loss of any words that could possibly deny those words, he fell on his only possible defense. "I didn't play you. You have a part of me. He's right there in the bedroom. He looks exactly like me at the same age. My God, Nicole, you kept my child from me! Don't you realize how wrong that was?"

"It wasn't wrong. I was protecting him from you. I was responsible," Nicole answered in a deliberately calm voice. "You didn't want to be trapped. You were not ready to settle down. You had a *life plan* and getting married was not part of it. Those were your words. Well, guess what? You got what you wanted, so you can't bitch about it, now."

Her words rang true. He had said those things. Now, she was using them to slap him down.

"Will you stop swearing!"

"No, I won't. I'm not an inexperienced kid anymore! You can't tell me what to do. I can say anything and do anything I damn well, please! What I do or don't do has nothing to do with you. It's none of your business. You made your choice, Dalton. You have to live with it."

"It was not my choice. I didn't know about him," Dalton said dangerously. "He is my child, my son, I have rights to him. I don't deny I made mistakes. Most people do. I've probably made more than my fair share and I admit it. Breaking up with you was a mistake—you weren't. The thing about mistakes, it's never too late to make amends and try to right a wrong. We had something special."

"Maybe we did, but it's in the past," Nicole retorted. "You need to go away. We are doing great on our own. We don't need you."

Dalton shook his head. "I can't wrap my mind around this. Your whole attitude is crazy. You are willing to deny my child his heritage. How did your parents let you make these decisions? Why didn't they stop you?"

"My father never knew. He died before I knew I was pregnant," Nicole said.

"What about your stepmother?"

She laughed, but it was a harsh sound. "Oh, my beloved stepmother, Claire, lasted another month. When Matty began to make his appearance known, she suddenly went holier than thou. What would the neighbors say? What would her country club set think? She tried to convince me to have an abortion. When that idea failed, she wanted me to give him up for adoption. When I vetoed all of her so-called *helpful* ideas, she took what capital Dad left, sold the business, the house, and split.

"As far as I know she's in Miami with a third husband, living a privileged, selfish life. Claire didn't mind being a young stepmother as long as the job meant being the wife of a man who indulged her every whim. She wasn't sticking around for a stepdaughter she didn't want in the first place. She wasn't going to be called Grandma. It was too much for her."

"Call me crazy, but I did try to contact you. Do you know what I found out? You were already married to Barbara. I realized the truth, then. You had been two-timing me. Do you have any idea what that means to a woman? I naively thought we were in love while all along you were a horn dog sticking it in every bitch that offered it to you."

"I wasn't..."

"Bullshit. Mrs. O'Cleary is the hero of this story, not you. She was there for us. Mrs. O'Cleary was our housekeeper from the time my mother died until I left for Virginia Tech. Dee Dee has always been there for me and she came to my rescue. She stepped back into my life, became a mother to me and a grandmother to Matty. It had been her hope and dream to be a grandmother for years. We are a family and you have no part in it.

"If there has ever been anyone on my side, it has always been Dee Dee. She has always loved me. Her son, Phillip, is a real estate investor, who had completed the renovations on this building. He leased us adjoining apartments and connected them. The arrangement works for us. She is the mother and grandmother I never had rolled up into one very remarkable person. I make a good living, Dalton. We don't need you or any help from you."

"Where does my son fit into your career?" Dalton demanded.

Nicole's eyes flashed with fury as she ground her teeth together. "*My son comes first.*"

"Where do I fit in? I loved you, Nicole. I may not have realized it at the time, but I did. There was a lot of stuff going on for a long time while I tried to keep the ranch afloat after my parents died. I didn't take what you and I had seriously. It was my mistake, and one I have

regretted for a long time. That boy is my son. I have missed five years of his life already. I will not walk away and pretend he doesn't exist. We can get married."

"Hell, no!" She recoiled at his words and moved halfway across the room with her arms tightly crossed over her chest.

"Why not?"

Nicole threw her hands up in the air in frustration. "You are a total asshole! Do you seriously think you can waltz in here and expect me to feel the same way I did six years ago? You cannot come into my life now and start making demands!"

"I needed you. I trusted you with all my heart, but you screwed me over royally. I'm not opening myself up to that again. Not with you, not with anyone. I have built a life. I don't need your help and I don't want it."

"This isn't you, Nicole," Dalton said troubled by the hurt and hardness in her voice. "If I did this to you, I'm sorry. I will fix it."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Nicole demanded.

"There is a hardness to you that wasn't there before. You've changed. Where is the girl who was so full of life? Where is the girl who laughed, and dared to do anything? Where is the girl who danced naked in the moonlight on the beach? Have you forgotten you are still young and vital?"

"I grew up, Dalton. I didn't have a choice," Nicole hissed. "Maybe you had time to go running naked on beaches, but I grew up. Don't tell me who or what I am. You don't know me. I don't want you in my life or my son's life. I want you to go away. Go back from wherever you came and leave us alone."

"No," Dalton said bluntly. "I will not forget about my son. I intend to be part of my child's life, so get used to the idea. I'm not ready to get out of your life, either." He yanked her to him and kissed her forcefully even as she struggled.

Nicole fought the kiss and as soon as Dalton let her go, she slapped him across the face. He pulled her to him and kissed her, again, before spinning her around and landing a hard whack on her backside and pushing her away.

"Get used to it, brat. I'm back!"