



Nobody's
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*To Joe — my husband —
thanks for giving me the time to write.*

*To Eric — my son —
my perfect model for Jake.*

*To Ellen — my sister —
a fantastic copy editor!
Thanks for making me look good.*

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Chapter 1

Nella pulled the door closed behind her, stopping on the patio long enough to replace a cushion that had blown from a lounge chair before heading down the long flight of steps that led from the back patio of her home down to the sandy beach. As soon as her feet touched the sand, she turned and looked back at the house that had been her home all of her life.

Even though the bricks on the house were fading from the salty breezes that constantly blew against them, and the occasional harsh storms that came ashore, her father had always kept the shutters and trim work painted a startling white. Tears blurred her vision as she turned and continued down the beach toward the water. She could do her best thinking just sitting and listening to the waves lap against the shore.

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She had only taken a few steps when she heard a child crying. Looking around, she discovered a small boy walking toward her. She immediately scanned the beach for an adult, but could see no one.

The only house in the direction from which the little boy had come was approximately a half mile away, but it was empty, unless someone had recently bought it.

“Hi,” she said, as she reached the child. His face was covered with sand where he’d been crying and wiping the tears with grimy hands. When he looked up at her, she was startled at how beautiful he was. He had eyes the color of blue glass, and the sun reflecting off his hair turned it to the color of glistening gold.

“I want my daddy,” he said, between sobs.

“Where’s your daddy?” Nella asked, hoping he could remember what direction he needed to go.

“I — don’t — know,” he sobbed. Nella had to get him calmed down so she could understand what he was saying.

“Which way should we go to find him?” she tried again. The little boy could have come from any direction.

“To my car,” he answered. Apparently his father had driven to the beach, but that didn’t help, as there were several places accessible for vehicles to drive down to the ocean.

What was she going to do? If she started in one direction looking for the father, he might come from the other direction and miss them. Well, there was only one thing to do: Wait. Sooner or later the child’s father would come looking for him — wouldn’t he?

Surely this child hadn’t been abandoned! NO! She wouldn’t even consider that possibility. Letting a child this small get lost on the beach was bad enough. He couldn’t be over three years old.

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But she couldn't wait long. She was expecting a call from the real estate lady.

Again, she turned and scanned the beach. She thought she caught movement beside a sand dune, but as she looked closer she could see nothing. The beach curved in the opposite direction from which the child had been coming. Maybe that's where the car was parked. Should she try that? No. She decided to stick with her first plan. Wait.

She glanced at her watch. She had thirty minutes before the real estate lady was supposed to call her and set an appointment to show her house tomorrow. She had to think of something fast.

"What's your name?" Nella asked the child, who now seemed content to let her take charge of finding his father

"Jake," he answered. His crying had stopped altogether.

"Jake, where's your father?" she mumbled, mostly to herself, again searching the beach for any sign of human movement, but seeing nothing.

"I told you, I don't know!" The small, impatient voice took Nella by surprise. She looked quickly back at the child, who stood with his hands stretched out in front of him with the palms turned upward as if to emphasize his statement.

Laughter burst from Nella, and the small boy unexpectedly giggled.

He was darling, but Nella couldn't stand here on the beach and wait for the moron who had lost this child. Suddenly, she had an idea.

"Jake, would you like to come up to my house? I'll give you some lemonade, and we can wait for your daddy there. Would you like that?"

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“Uh-huh!” he agreed readily.

Nella looked around until she found a piece of driftwood she could write in the sand with, then took the child by the hand and walked back to the steps leading up to her home. She stopped and wrote “Jake” in the sand as large as she could make the letters. Anyone would be able to see the writing from a good distance away. Then she drew an arrow that went from the name to the bottom of the steps that led up to her patio.

She talked to Jake as she worked. “This is your name,” she explained. “Your daddy will come looking for you, and he’ll see your name and the arrow pointing to my house and he’ll come find you.”

“Yeah!” The child was confident now that his father would soon find him.

“Who are you, and what are you doing with my son?”

Startled, Nella’s eyes flew open from the relaxed nap she had drifted into. She became aware of the sleeping child lying on her stomach and breast, and the tall, angry man towering above her. The sun reflected off his shiny dark hair and picked up the golden flecks in his unusual, light brown eyes, almost giving Nella the sensation some large eagle had swooped down upon her.

Just as she reached to wake the sleeping child, he raised his head slowly and looked at her. His blue eyes were huge and beautiful from the sleep he’d just left. He smiled and patted her face, then saw the man above them.

“Daddy, Daddy,” his small voice was excited. “I’ve found us a new friend! She gave me some lemonade and it made me feel much better. Then we waited for you to find me.”

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The stranger reached down and lifted the little boy in his arms, but never took his eyes off Nella as she slowly sat up.

“Well, do you intend to answer my question?” The unusual golden brown eyes held heavy sarcasm, and so did the deep voice.

Nella glanced at her watch and realized that a solid thirty minutes had passed while she dozed. Jake had tired quickly after drinking the cold lemonade, and had soon fallen asleep on her lap. Her eyes had grown weary of searching the beach from her vantage point, so she had lain back in the lounge chair just to rest her eyes, but she, too, had soon dozed off.

Suddenly, she was the one who felt sarcasm creep into her voice.

“Mister, your child can't be over three years old. How long did it take you to realize he was missing? Don't you know what can happen to a child on the beach?” Just thinking of the possibilities horrified Nella, and as she talked she became angrier.

“But he's not on the beach. He's here at a complete stranger's house, and I've been searching frantically for him. What are you doing with him?”

Nella resented the accusing sound of his voice, but tried to hold her temper. “Did you find my message?” she asked calmly.

“Yes, such as it was.” His tone was condescending.

“Did it lead you up here?”

“Yes.”

“Then it must have been sufficient to help you find your son.”

“But it would have been better if you'd waited on the beach with him instead of bringing him up to your home. That's almost like kidnapping.” The accusing tone was back.

“That's the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard!” Nella's voice had started to rise. “If I were trying to kidnap him, would I have

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gone to the trouble of leaving you a message how to find him? I think ‘neglect’ is the word we’re looking for here, not ‘kidnapping.’”

“Look,” he interrupted. “I didn’t mean to be so abrupt, but it was a surprise to find my son at a stranger’s house, and asleep on top of her, at that. And, yes, it’s been too long without my knowing where he was, but I just got him back from his grandparents today, and I’m not used to having to keep up with an active child. Even so, I don’t believe I need a total stranger to tell me how to care for him. Thank you for keeping him until I got here.” He picked the small child up and went briskly down the steps.

Nella watched as he disappeared down the beach. She couldn’t believe what had just taken place. She thought about the two briefly, then forgot them as she stared at the lapping waves that rolled onto the shore below her.

Two months ago, she had been visiting a friend in Dallas, Texas when she received a phone call that her father had suffered a massive heart attack and was dead. She immediately flew back home to South Carolina, and the following weeks were a nightmare.

She had loved her father dearly and losing him was devastating, but she was also informed that he had accumulated many debts, and the house she had grown up in and loved so much would have to be sold to settle the estate.

Nella had no brothers and sisters, and her mother had died giving birth to her, so all she had was her father and her home.

Now they both would soon be gone.

Nella had been out of college for six months. Her father had suggested she just relax and enjoy life for a little while before trying to get settled into a job. She could just hear him saying, “Once you start working, you’ll have to do it the rest of your life.” Her father

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knew she'd have to leave home again and search for work in a larger city. She smiled sadly, knowing he was just trying to keep her close to him as long as possible.

Nella knew she could move into Charleston and get a job there. She always enjoyed going to Charleston to shop. That's where the people in her small community went when they wanted to get a touch of "city life." She loved Charleston, with its old homes, streets, and parks that still had the flavor of the days when the city was the social, political, and economic hub of the royal province of Carolina, with the many features that attracted tourists each year. She especially loved the azaleas in the spring. But she just didn't want to live and work there. At this point, though, it didn't seem as if she had a choice.

She went inside and wandered around the house for a long time, touching the beloved walls that had sheltered her from so many storms, looking out the windows at the scenic views, and remembering her childhood and all the happy days she'd spent playing on the beach. Finally she went to bed to cry herself to sleep. The real estate lady would be here at ten o'clock in the morning with a prospective buyer for her home.

At nine fifty-nine, the doorbell rang. Nella went to answer the door with a mixture of dismay and curiosity. Although she dreaded the ordeal before her, she was anxious to see who'd want to purchase her beloved home.

Nothing could have prepared her for the man and child who stood before her with the real estate lady.

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“Look, Daddy, our new friend.” The blue eyes sparkled up at Nella as the child promptly stepped through the doorway and took her hand.

“Jake! You’re supposed to wait until you’re invited in.” The stern voice caused the little boy to quickly jump back beside his father and stare wide-eyed at Nella.

In spite of her sadness, Nella couldn’t restrain a little smile as she said, “Please, do come in.”

“Miss Covington,” the tall, thin real estate lady spoke first. “This is Samuel L. du Cannon, and his son Jake. They’ve just recently decided to relocate to our community, and Mr. du Cannon would like to look at your house. Mr. du Cannon, this is Nella Covington.”

The man looked different standing in her home. He was tall. Probably an inch or two over six feet. His hair was very dark, maybe even black, with a peppering of gray in the temples. Again, she was keenly aware of the golden brown eyes. One shade lighter and they’d be yellow! Uncanny, she thought. A dark, neatly trimmed mustache covered his top lip. His lips were well shaped, as if a sculptor had chiseled them to perfection. Not too thin, yet not too thick. He was, she mused resentfully to herself, a very handsome man.

She made no attempt to shake hands with him or to even acknowledge the introduction. She knew she was being rude, but, after all, she owed him one from yesterday.

“Did you know you were coming here today when we talked yesterday?” Now her voice was accusing.

“No. I knew Miss James was going to show me a house today, but I had no idea where it was.” He hoped his answer sounded genuine.

The real estate lady was surprised they’d already met, and was about to ask a question when Nella shrugged and said, “Show Mr. du

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Cannon around. I'll be on the patio when you're finished." And she turned and left them. There was no way she could follow two strangers around as they analyzed the good and bad points of her beloved home.

She sank slowly into a patio chair and closed her eyes.

"Oh, Daddy, how could you have allowed this to happen to me?" She would have felt bitterness toward her father had she not loved him so much.

She wished she knew what problems he'd encountered to allow things to get this far out of hand. He hadn't had any health problems that she was aware of. In fact, the heart attack had been sudden, with no warning signals. Even the family accountant hadn't been able to give her any answers as to why the finances had been in such bad shape. It wasn't her college expenditures, as she had gone to college on a full scholarship, and had earned spending money by typing papers for other students while she was in college.

She should have spent more time discussing business matters with her father. That brought a smile to her lips, for she knew full well he would never have "burdened" her with financial problems. He was of the old school that men should take care of the household and the "women folk."

Nella felt a tear run down her cheek as she remembered the tenderness he always showed her. Now she had no one. She would have had Nick, but they'd broken off their engagement months ago. Their goals had become farther and farther apart until they both realized they didn't have a future together.

"Now, today, you cry." The small voice showed great concern.

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Nella opened her tear-filled eyes to see the angelic face close to hers. The blond hair, which curled softly, glistened in the morning sunlight. Again, Nella was in awe of the rich golden color.

“Yesterday, I cry. Today, you cry. Want me to sit on your yap and make you feel better?”

Nella smiled, and the smile she received in return was mixed with a giggle. She felt her heart fill with warmth.

“Yes, Jake, I would love for you to sit on my lap and make me feel better.”

After settling in to his satisfaction, the small face turned up to Nella.

“Why are you sad?” he asked, as he held her thumb in his hand and plucked at her thumbnail with his finger, his eyes never leaving hers.

“I’m sad because I miss my father and because I have to sell my home.” Nella answered the child honestly.

“I miss my mama. Daddy says she went to Heaven, and she can’t come back, but she’s with me whenever I think about her, my daddy says. Hey, I know what!” As quickly as the sadness had come, it was replaced with his new idea. “If my daddy buys your house, you can come and live with us! You and me can be fwends for never and never!”

Nella was surprised at how well this small boy could talk and put his thoughts into words. Someone had spent a lot of time with him. He was very intelligent.

She was about to explain why she couldn’t do what he suggested when she looked up into a pair of golden brown eyes.

“Is that his idea, or yours?” There was no mistaking the accusation in the voice.

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Nella was instantly angry. Slowly and very gently she stood the child down from her lap and rose from the chair. Stretching to her tallest five-foot-seven-inch height, she stared daggers into the arrogant man's eyes. "Sir, you are quite despicable!"

At that moment the real estate lady came through the door, not noticing the tension in the air.

"Okay, Miss Covington. Mr. du Cannon has decided to take the house, so we're going over to my office to draw up the contract. He'll present his offer and the three of us can go over it. Will two o'clock Friday be okay with you?"

"Yes, yes, that's fine," Nella agreed quickly. She just wanted these people to be gone.

As the car drove away, Jake waved from the back window until the car was out of sight. How could such a loathsome man father such an adorable child, Nella wondered?

She turned back inside and looked around miserably. She knew she should start packing, but she just couldn't bring herself to do it yet. Instead, she went to the phone and called her best friend, Julie.

"Julie, can I come over and bring a cheap bottle of wine? I need to unwind and talk."

"Nella? It's only eleven forty-five in the morning."

"I know, but I do need to talk. I'm signing the closing contract on the house Friday."

Now the voice on the line was full of concern. "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry! You come on over, and don't bother about bringing wine. I've got some real expensive stuff here. We'll have lunch and drink wine until you feel a lot better!"

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Friday came much too soon. Nella reluctantly parked her car and walked slowly toward the real estate office.

As she entered the plush office a small, familiar figure ran toward her. “Hi Nel — uh, Miss Cubington! Daddy said I shouldn’t call you Nella. I must call you Miss Cubington.”

“Jake! Please come sit down!” Sam du Cannon tried not to sound too impatient with the child.

As Nella settled into a chair, she smiled at the boy. He was such a darling child. Too bad he’d probably grow up to be unbearable like his father.

As she watched him he quietly slipped away from his father, who was in deep discussion with the real estate lady, and came to her. In a conspiratorial whisper, he asked, “Can I sit on your yap?”

Just as quietly, Nella lifted him and settled him on her lap. He snuggled back against her and became instantly quiet and content.

When the other two people finished their conversation, Sam du Cannon looked up and spotted Jake on Nella’s lap. She saw a flash of emotion in those strange-colored eyes. It wasn’t anger, but she didn’t try to analyze it. She imagined those eyes could wreak havoc on a woman if he decided to turn on the charm. She could almost imagine how warmly they’d glow if he were speaking soft words of love. She mentally shook herself off that disturbing train of thought.

He seemed about to speak to the boy, then changed his mind as the real estate lady started discussing the closing of the contract on the property that was once her haven, her escape, her home.

Nella barely listened to the drone of voices as they went on and on. She knew the seemingly efficient Mr. Du Cannon would see to it that everything was in proper order.

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“Miss Covington? Miss Covington?” She was brought out of her deep concentration by the real estate lady’s persistent voice. “You need to sign where I’ve made the Xs.”

As Nella leaned forward to sign the stack of papers in front of her, she realized that her lap burden had sat very quietly through the long, boring transaction. But now, his father stood and lifted him from her lap. His hand brushed hers as he lifted the child. She was aware of, and irritated with, the bolt of electricity his touch sent coursing up her hand and arm.

They all shook hands and said the appropriate things. Nella headed for her car. Her hand was on the car door handle when a voice from behind stopped her.

“Miss Covington?”

She turned to face the man, wondering what he could possibly want now. She didn’t have time to hide the tears rolling down her cheeks.

This time there was surprise in his eyes, then something a lot like compassion, which was the last thing she wanted to see. She wanted to shout “what do you want?” but the lump in her throat kept her from uttering a sound.

“Miss Covington, there’s a small restaurant around the corner. Will you come and have lunch with Jake and me? There’s — ” here he paused, as if uncertain whether to go on or not, then continued, “there’s something I want to discuss with you.” As he talked, he’d taken a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the tears from her face. She tried to turn her face away, but he firmly held her chin and gently wiped all the tear stains away.

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She was about to decline the lunch invitation when a small hand tucked inside hers and a pleading little voice said, “Please come, Miss Cubington — please.”

Nella smiled at the upturned face, then looked at the man in front of her. “I don’t know what you could possibly want to discuss with me, but okay, I’ll have lunch with you.”

Settled in a booth in the restaurant, Nella smiled behind her menu as the little boy beside her studied his menu and pretended to be reading it.

“I want a hambooger and fryers,” he stated in a matter-of-fact voice.

“Don’t you think you need some vegetables?” his father asked.

“I don’t want any vegbables, Daddy.” His pleading eyes and face would have been hard for the toughest heart to resist.

“Okay.” His father smiled and agreed reluctantly, “but next time we’d better have vegetables.”

It was the first time Nella had seen the man smile, and she was dumbfounded at the change it made in him. His facial features softened, and if Nella had thought him handsome earlier, he was surely breathtaking now. To keep from staring at him she went swiftly back to studying her menu.

After the waitress had taken the orders, Sam looked directly at Nella for the first time since they’d sat down. “Miss Covington, I have a proposition I want to discuss with you. Now, please hear me out before you object. When I’m finished we can discuss any questions or objections that you might have.

“Jake’s mother died one year ago. She and I had grown apart prior to that, but for Jake’s sake we’d remained together longer than we should have. Her parents have never approved of me and they

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were constantly encouraging her to break up the marriage. They never thought I was good enough for Vanessa. Last year, when I was out of town on one of my business trips, Vanessa was involved in a car accident and she was dead on arrival at the hospital. Naturally her parents believed that if I'd been home like a good husband, she would never have been out in *that* car, at *that* time of night, with *that* man. In their minds, the wreck and the fact that they lost their daughter was entirely my fault. They could never believe any wrong of their little girl.

“They’re determined to take custody of Jake. They don’t believe I’ll be a good father because I travel a lot with my business, and they don’t want their grandson to be raised by nannies and strangers.

“I can see their point of view to a certain degree, but a lot of children have been raised by a loving nanny.

“At any rate, they have the best lawyer they can find on the case. He’s good, too. I know him by reputation, and he’ll turn over every stone for some small piece of dirt to hang on me. So far he’s found nothing, but if I should ever slip up, or if he can make it look like I’ve slipped up, then I’ll lose my son forever, and I just can’t take that chance.

“I’ve had an idea in the back of my head now for some time, and I think you’ve furnished the missing piece. You see, I don’t ever intend on becoming involved with another woman on a long-term basis. Sure, I’m a normal man, but with a good bit of precaution, a man can lead a normal life and find someone occasionally to relieve his tensions.”

Nella could not believe how cold and hard this man must be. He spoke as if he had no heart at all. The only time she saw a hint of softness and compassion was when he talked to his son.

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“Anyway,” he continued, “Jake does need a woman’s touch. He needs a mother, if you will, and surely not that bitch of a grandmother. I quiver to think of him being raised and influenced by her.”

Nella was dumbfounded that he was talking like this in front of Jake. Maybe his in-laws had a point. But she listened as he continued.

“So, for some time, now, I’ve been thinking about what kind of woman I need to fill the bill of a mother for Jake — and Miss Covington, I think you’re the one. Especially since Jake seems so taken with you.”

Nella started to speak, but he raised his hands to stop her.

“No, hear me out. You see, if you marry me, you’ll be able to stay in your beloved home. Of course, we won’t share the same bedroom, as this is strictly a business deal. So we’ll all be winners here. You’ll get to keep your home, Jake gets a mother, and I won’t have to ever worry about being attracted to you.”

Nella stared at the man in silence until he raised his eyebrows in a questioning gesture.

“Oh, may I speak now?”

He only nodded.

“What do you mean about never being attracted to me?”

His chuckle was genuine.

“Well, I never have been, nor will I ever be, attracted to a large woman. Oh, I like women with a good, healthy looking body, but not too much body.”

Nella could only stare at the man in stunned silence. She had been a chubby child who had grown into a plus-sized woman. But she had been raised to be proud of herself, to be as healthy as possible, to look her best, and, most of all, to be proud of her heritage — part of which was a plus-sized mother and grandmother. All the family

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pictures her father had kept through the years had shown a family history of plus-sized women, and she never questioned the fact that she had inherited the genes they all carried and handed down to her.

Nella had been told on numerous occasions that she was a beautiful woman. She had turned many heads with her long auburn hair, her smoky blue eyes, and her hourglass body. Although she was large, she'd always been proud of her body, and had always taken care of herself. She wasn't about to let this man's misguided opinion upset her. Even though he was trying to be discreet in his wording, she could sense what he was actually saying.

She was about to tell him in no uncertain terms what she felt for him when two small arms circled her neck. She glanced around at the beautiful little boy standing on the seat beside her. His face was close to hers, and suddenly he kissed her on the lips.

"Well, are you gonna marry us? I'll be so happy if you do. I don't want to live with my 'nother grandmother. She makes me go to bed-out with my goodnight milk when I'm bad. And sometimes I can't help but be bad when I'm with her."

Nella knew she was a fool, but what did she have to lose? Her father was dead. Her engagement was off. And she didn't have a home or a job. She had nowhere to go, and no one to turn to. If she went with this plan, she could stay in her home, at least until she decided she couldn't stand to be in the presence of this man anymore, and she would surely be appreciated and loved by Jake. Hopefully Sam would stay gone most of the time on business trips and she wouldn't have to see him except on his occasional trip home. Then his time would be taken up with Jake, so she still wouldn't have to see him that much. Undoubtedly she could stand him on that basis. Especially when she thought of all the other benefits.

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She thought her heart would pound out of her chest as she made her decision. She looked up at the man who sat patiently waiting as if he knew what her answer would be. Then she looked at the little boy who still had his arms around her neck.

“I’ll consider it, but I have to have at least until this time tomorrow to give you an answer.” Her voice shook as she spoke.

“What does that mean, Daddy? Is she or not?”

“She will.”

Nella wanted to reach across the table and slap his arrogant, handsome face, but she kept still, knowing he was probably correct. But she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of agreeing on the spot.

The child gave a shriek of joy and said at the top of his voice, “Hey eberybody, Miss Cubington’s gonna marry us!”

And as if on cue, the people in the surrounding area applauded and cheered. That made Jake even happier. As they left the restaurant, he was jumping about and giggling with joy.

As they reached the cars parked side by side, Sam du Cannon spoke. “We’ll just go back to our respective dwellings for the night. I’ll contact you tomorrow and you can tell me what your decision is. I think it’ll be a major advantage to all of us if you do agree to this.”

He was already in charge of her life. Nella could not believe she was actually contemplating this stupid undertaking.

“Oh, and Miss Covington, I noticed that you ordered the lite plate at lunch. Please don’t feel like you have to eat cottage cheese and fruit when you’re with me. Just continue to be yourself.”

Angrier than she had been in a long time, Nella’s voice trembled with emotion when she answered him.

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“Mr. du Cannon, I have never, nor shall I ever change my lifestyle to try to impress you or anyone else, no matter how pumped up you are with your own importance! You are, without a doubt, the most pompous, arrogant bigot I have ever run across in all of my twenty-five years. Why I’m agreeing to even consider spending one more second with you is beyond me. I truly must be out of my mind.”

And with that, she slid into her little red Volkswagen and ground the gears out of the parking lot.

Sam du Cannon stood for a few moments beside his black late-model Rolls Royce and pondered her temper tantrum.

He had first seen Nella in the grocery store a couple of weeks ago. She’d been talking to a young woman with a small child, and Sam had been drawn to her by the expression on her face as she talked to the baby. Her eyes had held a soft glow as she talked, and the baby was obviously responding to her as it cooed and smiled back at her. Sam felt at once that she would make a good mother, so he waited until she went through the checkout line, then asked the lady checking groceries if she knew Nella. The woman assured Sam that Nella was single.

But before asking Nella to marry him, he’d talked with several of the leading people in the community concerning her quality of character and her morals. Everyone had praised her. Everyone knew her and her father, and spoke very highly of them. He’d even set her up yesterday, when he deliberately let her think he’d lost track of Jake. He’d been watching them all along from behind a sand dune. He wanted to see how she’d handle a sticky situation, and she had handled it quite impressively. Who would have thought about leaving

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a message in the sand like that? And Jake had obviously taken to her instantly.

That's why he'd thought he'd found the perfect solution for his son's life. A small community to grow up in and a good, solid woman to raise and influence him.

He really hadn't meant any harm by the statements he'd made about her size. In fact, for Jake's sake, that was a good thing. He'd always heard people like her were easy-going and jolly.

But this temper thing — he shook his head in concern as he got into his car. He'd have to speak with her about that.

When Nella stopped her car she realized she was in front of Julie's apartment. She almost never stopped by Julie's without calling first. She was careful to never take advantage of her friendship, but she was too angry at this point to consider anything except talking with someone who really cared how she felt.

"He *nbaaat*?" Julie couldn't believe what Nella was telling her.

"You heard me. He wants me to marry him so he can have a mother for his son. His in-laws are trying to prove he's an unfit parent, and he thinks if he has a wife it'll be harder for them to find something against him. Oh, and get this. He made it very clear that he won't have a problem being attracted to me because he doesn't like large women."

"No! He didn't say that! What a jerk! Well, obviously you said no, didn't you?"

"I told him I'd think about it."

"Nella! Are you crazy? You'd have to be out of your mind to agree to his proposal. You can just get that out of your head right

Nobody's Perfect

now. As your best friend, I won't sit by and let you make that kind of mistake." Julie was adamant with disgust.

"But Julie, listen to me. I could keep my house. I wouldn't have to worry about moving into Charleston and finding work that I'd probably hate. I'd just be a glorified nanny to Jake. And Julie, that is the most precious child I've ever seen. I think I already love him."

"It sounds like you already have your mind made up." Julie's voice was filled with disbelief.

"No, I haven't decided yet, but there are some good points to think about. If I don't have to be around this Sam person much, it won't be a bad arrangement at all. He travels with his work, so he'll be gone most of the time. It would just be Jake and me at home, and that would be wonderful."

"Nella, if you're really considering this, at least call Sheriff Dansby and see if he'll run a profile check on this man. For all you know he could be some kind of criminal." Julie's voice was so full of concern that Nella agreed to let her call the sheriff.

Luckily the department was having a slow day, so the deputy took the information and did the check while Julie waited on the phone. It only took a few minutes before the deputy came back on the line. Nella watched Julie's face change expression.

"No!" she said in disbelief. "Really? *WOW!*"

Now Nella was concerned. Maybe Sam du Cannon was a ruthless killer. What a mistake it'd be to get involved with someone like that! She was glad Julie had made the call. Just before Nella was convinced the stranger needed to go straight to jail, Julie hung up the phone.

"You are not going to believe who this man is!"

"What? What? Is he a criminal? Is he an escaped convict? What?" Nella's impatience made her jumble her words.

Pat Ballard

“He’s probably the wealthiest man in Charleston. He’s the owner of one of the largest seafood chains in the nation. If you marry that man, you’ll be one wealthy woman. And I’ve changed my mind totally. I say go for it! You deserve all the happiness you can find.”

“But Julie,” Nella reminded her, “this won’t be ‘happiness’ if I decide to do this. It’ll only be ‘security.’”

“So how much different are the two? You know, really?” Julie had always been more materialistic than Nella.

“For me there’s a lot of difference,” Nella assured her. “I’d rather be happy with someone I love and not have anything, than own millions of dollars and not be with someone I really love.”

“So what are you going to do in the meantime, while you wait for this special person to love? Where are you going to live? What are you going to do for a living?” On any other occasion, Julie’s total change of attitude would have been humorous.

“I don’t know yet. I don’t know what I should do.” Nella felt her head would explode from unmade decisions. She said good-bye and left her friend’s house.

As she pulled her car into the driveway of her beloved home, the sun was setting. The scattered clouds reflected beautiful purple and blue hues, with streaks of red mingled in here and there. All blended with the ocean, turning the view into her own gorgeous oil painting.

She knew instantly what her decision would be. She would keep her home, at whatever cost, for as long as she could.

About the Author

Pat Ballard lives in Nashville, TN. She writes motivational romance novels with Big Beautiful Heroines to show that plus-size women can be just as sexy, romantic, and exciting as their slim sisters.

Visit Pat at www.patballard.com.

Check out other books by Pat — and more — at the Pearlsong Press website at www.pearlsong.com.

Nella Covington can't believe she's agreed to marry the arrogant Samuel L. du Cannon, even if it is only a marriage of convenience. He needs a mother for his small son, and she needs to keep her beloved childhood home. Will she be able to stand his egotistical attitude? His domineering manner?

A novel by the
*Queen of
Rubenesque
Romances*
Pat Ballard

But Jake is such a darling little boy, and he's already captured her heart. What does she have to lose? If Sam's work keeps him on the road enough, she won't have to deal with him much at all. Maybe, just maybe, this might work.

All Sam du Cannon wants is a good mom for his son. He's had it with women. Doesn't ever plan to get involved with another woman again. That makes Nella perfect for him. He's never been attracted to plus-size women, so if Nella agrees to marry him, he won't have to worry about being tempted to have a relationship with her.

At least, that's what he keeps telling himself.

What fans have to say about Pat &

Nobody's Perfect

... once I started reading it I couldn't put it down! I loved it! It's so nice to read about a woman who isn't a "perfect size six, and on the slender side" like so many of the other books I've read, or have her be a little heavy at the beginning of the book only to lose the "excess" weight once she finds a man. Being a full-figured woman myself, I love the way (Pat has) the character of this book being happy and self-assured.

—A new fan, Emma

A Plus Sized Heroine! Yeah! Well, first off I must say a big thanks to Pat Ballard for giving us a heroine who is plus-sized and loves herself. It's not often we see one, so it was refreshing to see one in this book... I really enjoyed this story. The author makes it quite clear that being a plus-sized person doesn't mean that you are unhealthy, stupid, or unlovable—it just makes you human.

—A reader from Albuquerque, N.M.

... the idea that a large woman can be a heroine is long overdue, much like the idea that they are smart, witty, loving, healthy, sexy, passionate, and adventurous is long overdue!

—Jeffrey S. McCalla from Houston, TX

Thank God, someone has the strength to be sane, and let a woman "just be." Someone can look the societal ideal in the eye and say "no thanks, I'm valuable as I am." Women are tired and overstressed from doing it all. The lengths we go to in order to "fit the ideal body image" are undervalued. We need a collective "enough already," and to send out the message that who we are as individuals is worth enough. Thanks.

—Jana Leonardo

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