

Kiss Lonely Goodbye

Chapter 1

"We shall all greatly miss our dear brother. He left behind loving family and a host of friends."

"You're at the wrong funeral, Rev," Nicole muttered. She slid to the left and avoided a jab of her mother's elbow.

She gazed at her least favorite great-uncle, the late Hosea Summers. Dressed in a thousand dollar black pinstriped suit, he lay in a fancy slate gunmetal gray coffin with real brass trim.

In accordance with his wishes, the family had brought Uncle Hosea home for his final rest to Lafayette Parish. Nicole's mother and father had arranged the services at Sacred Heart Catholic Church. Uncle Hosea had always said he didn't want to be buried in Houston, Texas. He mostly got what he wanted. Great Uncle Hosea's pet name for Nicole had been "That smart mouthed rug rat". He'd rattle off the words in that gruff steel pad voice that made her want to kick his shins. Which she did regularly from age three to fifteen. Enough was enough. She caught Reverend Paine's eye then tapped her wristwatch.

Reverend Paine stammered then rumbled on a few seconds longer and ended with a prayer. The organist did her job with a mournful version of Nearer My God To Thee. The large extended Summers family filed by to pay their last respects with dutiful serious expressions.

At six feet two, Stanton Summers was still a commanding physical presence despite his sixty years. Nicole had inherited his stature and her mother's temperament. Nicole's father was the only mourner who seemed genuinely touched. He stood at the casket longer while the rest filed by with only cursory glances. Nicole joined him. She tried to work up some bit of sentimentality, failed and gave a mental shrug.

"Come on, daddy." Nicole tugged at his arm.

"Unc was a pain in the ass most of the time, but he was hell of a businessman, He would have been pleased with the turnout," Stanton said as he looked around.

"Yeah, he could insult everyone at once," Nicole joked. She followed his gaze at their colorful assortment of relatives. "Maybe I should carry on his legacy. I know exactly what he'd say about Aunt Cora's latest husband. Then there's Cousin Elton. He—"

"Behave, Nikki," Stanton broke in with a frown.

"Anyway, Uncle Hosea lived and died the way he wanted.

"Slumped over a thick financial report. The king was in his counting house, counting out his money," Nicole said, repeating an old nursery rhyme her great-grandfather sang to her as toddler.

"Hell of a businessman," Stanton repeated, missing the sarcasm of Nicole's response.

A couple came up to offer condolences just then. While they talked to her father Nicole's attention wandered. Slowly the large room had filled with people from the service. Many had come in late only to make an appearance. A tall man with wide shoulders walked in a side door behind a woman with twin five year old boys. His steel gray suit molded to his well-developed body like only fine silk-blend fabric could. The newcomer had skin the color of mink, expressive cocoa brown eyes and a full mouth that could inspire hot fantasies. He wore a solemn expression in keeping with the occasion and still looked absolutely drop dead sexy.

"All the good ones are taken," Nicole said low.

"What?" Stanton stopped talking to the couple and glanced at her.

"Who is that?" Nicole nodded toward the man.

"Emelda Ourso and her boys," Stanton replied.

"Jeff must be parking the car." He turned back and resumed his conversation.

Nicole tugged at his arm to get his attention. "Isn't the guy standing there her husband?"

Her father followed her gaze. "No. You remember Jeff. He went to school with your sister."

"Please tell me he's not my cousin."

"Jeff?" Stanton blinked at her.

"No, him." Nicole jerked her head again at the handsome man.

"He looks familiar, but he's not a relative."

Stanton's attention was diverted when two more people came up and started talking to him.

"Hmm, now there's good news," she said.

Nicole stole glances at the man from time to time. He moved with the grace of a trained athlete. She watched him sign the guest book provided by Robertson's Funeral Directors. His broad nose gave him a royal look, like Nicole's notion of a Nubian prince. While she mused at her own girlhood dream, he lifted his fine face and gazed straight at her. After a formal, polite smile her prince moved on.

"Thanks for coming." Stanton shook hands with the two men and accepted a peck on the cheek from a woman. When they left, he turned back to Nicole. "How are you holding up, sugar?"

"Better now," she murmured still watching the man.

Her prince walked through the door leading back into the sanctuary of the church. She was considering following him when her father's voice brought her up short.

"Life goes on. Uncle Hosea really cared about the family."

"Okay, I'll take your word for it."

"His own children were a big disappointment." Stanton bit off further comment when the subjects of his assessment walked in.

"Maybe they won't notice us." Nicole took an intense interest in the tips of her shoes. Her cousins Jolene and Russell Summers marched toward them.

"Hello, Uncle Stanton," Russell said. "Terrible day."

"Yes, I'll miss Daddy so much." His sister gave a delicate sniff.

"Hmm." Nicole eyed them both. Her father put a warning hand on her arm.

"If there's anything I can do to help with the company, let me know," Stanton said in earnest tone.

"Thanks, Uncle Stanton. I'll call you if necessary. Of course, I know the business inside out."

Nicole pursed her lips to suppress a wisecrack. Jolene and Russell would probably drink a toast with expensive champagne to celebrate later on. They'd clashed with their irascible father for years over money. Russell had wanted

control of the business, something Uncle Hosea said would happen over his dead body. Well, Russell's wish had come true finally. The pretense around Nicole was wearing thin. Nicole glanced around for her prince. He provided the only source of pleasant distraction yet seemed to have vanished. Her brother Terrell strolled up. At thirty-seven, he was a handsome copy of her father.

"These little meatballs are tasty." Terrell polished off three speared on a long toothpick. He patted his mouth with a napkin.

"Glad somebody is having a good time," Nicole said with a sour expression.

Terrell smiled as he finished chewing. He took a drink from his glass of ginger ale. "Might as well. Uncle Hosea wasn't sentimental. He'd appreciate us having only the best food at his funeral."

Nicole's grandmother and Stanton's mother, Lillian Mayveaux Summers wore a dark blue suit with gold tone buttons. A matching hat with a half veil along the front and soft feathers wrapped around rim completed the ensemble. At seventy-six she walked slowly but without faltering.

"What in heaven's name is going on? Francine is rolling out a large television. This is hardly the time to watch soap operas." Mother Lillian huffed in irritation.

Francine, one of seven lawyers in the family, wore a tight-lipped expression. She directed one of her three teenage sons pushing a thirty-two inch set into the room. Nicole went to her.

"What's up?" she asked her older cousin.

"You heard the expression about stuff hitting the fan?" Francine whispered. "Well, stand back 'cause you're about to get a big splatter."

"Me?"

"You better believe it. Excuse me everyone." Francine waited until the murmur of voices died down. "Uncle Hosea left instructions with an attorney, Phil Waserstein, to deliver this tape to me along with his last will. Naturally the latter is only to be shared with family affected. He did want this tape played now."

"Now?" This is disgraceful!" Mother Lillian frowned at her great-niece. "Francine, I should think you'd know better."

"Grandmother, as a lawyer it's my legal and ethical duty to comply with legal instructions." Francine pressed a button on the remote.

Russell pushed his way through a knot of people. "I have his will."

"Another will? That's impossible," Jolene spluttered, her eyes glittering with outrage.

"I think the tape will explain everything. Here we go," Francine muttered aside to Nicole.

The tape came on with music from a vintage Miles Davis recording the music faded away. Uncle Hosea sat in his favorite leather chair. He was in his library at home. Wearing a relaxed expression, Uncle Hosea nodded once and crossed his legs. Every silver hair in place, he was dressed in one of his favorite thousand dollar black silk suits.

"Hello, there. I hope you're eating well and enjoying my funeral. Isn't technology wonderful? I feel like we're right in the same room. Well, maybe we are. I could be standing right next to you, Lillian."

Mother Lillian jumped but recovered quickly. "I never liked my brother-in-law's sense of humor."

"Still can't take a joke, I see." Uncle Hosea gave a gruff laugh. His expression turned serious. "Now to business. I won't bore you with the details of my last will and testament. That I preferred putting on paper, all nice and iron-clad, Russell and Jolene."

"This is humiliating." Jolene bristled when Francine waved at her to be quiet.

Uncle Hosea folded his hands in his lap. "For my dear children and business competitors the good news is I'm dead. I left a hefty estate behind. I sold off my insurance

agency, most of the real estate holdings and a few other odds and ends for a healthy profit." Uncle Hosea grinned widely.

"The bad news is my children won't get as much as they hoped for and my competitors won't get off so easy. Don't worry Russell and Jolene. You'll be very comfortable. No doubt you still won't be satisfied. Tough! Thank God I won't be around to hear your whining. As for my security firm, I'm leaving it in the hands of someone with as much guts and killer instinct as I have, or had I should say. Go get 'em, Nicole. Have fun, kids."

Uncle Hosea lifted a heavy tumbler of amber liquid and drank deeply. After a sigh, he reached over and picked up a long cigar. He lit it and puffed smoke rings.

"Ain't this the life?" He laughed heartily. "Goodbye, everyone. It's been a real pleasure getting on your nerves all these years."

He gave a jaunty wave as the picture faded and the tape ended. There was stunned silence for several minutes. Mother Lillian spoke first.

"He wasn't supposed to drink or smoke." She scowled at the screen. Several relatives giggled then stopped when she glared at them.

"Uncle Hosea was a proud man who had always been active. He couldn't stand the thought of ending his days

feeble and dependent on others," Stanton put in. "That's why he traveled and enjoyed himself in the last two years."

"You mean he made a fool of himself with women half his age," Mother Lillian put in. "Disgusting!"

Uncle Hosea has always preferred much younger women. Jolene and Russell were in their late thirties. Their mother, one of Uncle Hosea's three ex-wives, had been thirty years younger than him when they married.

"Mother, please. This isn't the place for such talk." Stanton shot a look of censure at her. His mother puckered her lips in annoyance but said nothing more. "Uncle Hosea chose the way he wanted to live."

"We all know how much he liked control," Nicole said. She crossed her arms. "What's this got to do with me?"

"Nothing. Russell and I are his only legal heirs," Jolene said in brisk voice.

"Not according to the last will," Francine replied.

"Are you saying he's leaving money to Nicole?" Russell's eyes narrowed to slits.

"We'll meet later, but Nicole is now an heir." Francine wore a frown that said she fervently wanted to be anywhere else.

"How much?" Jolene said, cutting to the chase.

"Not here—" Francine raised a hand.

"How much?" Jolene repeated with a glare.

Francine sighed deeply. "I don't think we should talk about it now." She glanced around.

Nicole leaned close to her. "Obviously the old—" "Ahem!" Reverend Paine's brows drew together as he gazed at her.

She started over. "Obviously Uncle Hosea meant for us to discuss it now. He wouldn't have sent this little bombshell from the great beyond otherwise."

"Let's go somewhere a little more private." Francine looked at the minister.

"This way." Reverend Paine led them to smaller rooms used for Bible study and Sunday school classes.

Jolene and Russell marched ahead of them all. Terrell followed with Stanton, Analine and Mother Lillian. No one sat down in the blue folding chairs arranged in a circle. For several minutes there was only a lot of angry staring and tense silence. Francine finally joined them.

"Sorry, I had to make sure I got the tape. Reverend Paine and our Cousin Darcus will take care of greeting people."

"Fine, fine." Russell waved at her with impatience. "What is going on?"

"The bottom line is your dad left the Summers Security LLC to..." Francine took a deep breath and squared her shoulders as though bracing for a strong wind. "Nicole."

"What!" Stanton and Terrell yelled in unison.

"That's ridiculous!" Nicole's mother sat down hard and fanned her face.

"No way. I'm not taking over a group of crossing guards! Forget it." Nicole shook her head until her shoulder length hair bounced.

"You sure can forget it!" Russell said. "My father isn't going to get away with this. I put up with his bad temper and disrespect for years. I poured my blood into that company."

"He included provisions that exclude almost all of your inheritance if you fight the will," Francine replied.

"We're his children!" Jolene snapped.

"He executed the will in Louisiana. A parent has the right to leave his assets to whomever he chooses," Francine said. "I've explained it to you at least five times already. So will his attorney Sid Wasserstein."

"Russ, do something!" Jolene shouted in frustration.

"There's no point talking to them. They're going to gang up on us. Let's get out of here."

Stanton blocked the door. "Wait, Russ. Be reasonable. We can work something out."

"Uh, Uncle Stanton, we're talking over a business with net sales of over ten million last year," Francine said.

"Yeah, and twenty full-time employees, thirty more contract and part-time workers and a lot of headaches," Terrell added.

Nicole shook her head again. "No thanks. I've got my own career."

"Oh please!" Analine burst out. "I wouldn't call strolling into your father's office whenever you please a career."

"You're right of course, Nikki. It's unreasonable to think you could run a company," Stanton added.

Nicole ground her back teeth. "I didn't say I couldn't do it, just that I didn't want to."

"There must be a way out of the will." Terrell turned to Francine. "Nicole doesn't have management skills."

"Russell will need help, too," Stanton said to his son. "Ahem, Uncle Hosea mentioned a few problems."

"I know." Terrell nodded and glanced at Russell.

"I did not poorly manage Summers Security. This is something you people set up!" Russell shouted as he waved his hands in the air.

"I don't care about Uncle Hosea's will. I don't want to run a security business. It's boring." Nicole crossed her arms.

Francine put a hand on her shoulder. "You have to take over for at least a year."

"Impossible," Stanton said promptly.

"No way," her older brother agreed.

Nicole tapped the toe of her Ann Klein black leather pump. "Listen you two, I'm not exactly an idiot."

"But you know as well as we do that becoming CEO is out of the question," he father replied with a firm shake of his head.

"Hosea must have been senile," her mother said.

"Which means the will is invalid," Jolene said, leaping on her comment with eyes ablaze.

"There is a doctor's statement included that your father was mentally sound despite his poor physical health." Francine pursed her lips when Jolene scowled at her.

"I inherited it legally," Nicole tossed back. "Not that I want it." She looked at Francine. "I'll talk to that lawyer and find a way out."

"Summers Security will sold and people will lose jobs if you refuse to become the CEO," she answered.

"Over my dead body she will." Jolene flung open the door and stomped out of the room. Russell gave them one last hostile frown before he followed her.

"That alone might make me change my mind," Nicole retorted. She looked at Francine. "You're serious? I have to take over Summers Security?"

"If you don't it will be broken up into units and sold off piece by piece." Francine sat down with a weary sigh.

"God, this has been a day."

"Help me find a way out of this mess." Nicole sank into a chair next to her.

"In a year you can sell it off if you like. Apparently Uncle Hosea wanted you to try it for at least that long. Francine took a long envelope with the company logo on it from the pocket of her suit jacket. "He left you this. You're to get with his vice president and read it."

Nicole pulled back as though Francine was trying to hand her a snake. She stared at the envelope with a grimace. "The only meeting I'm going to have is with a consultant who'll tell me how to unload this thing."

"Don't be hasty," Stanton said. "We should discuss the ramifications Francine has pointed out."

"There might be a bright side to this situation." Analine wore a thoughtful expression.

"She means you'll meet eligible men," Terrell mumbled aside to Nicole.

Analine raised an eyebrow at them both. "And what's wrong with marriage?"

"A two for one bonus, sis. You get a new career and more chances find a husband." Terrell winked at her.

"Very funny." Nicole jabbed him with an elbow. She turned to Francine. "Frannie, help!"

"Excuse me." A deep voice came from the open doorway.

Nicole looked up at six feet four inches of delicious man. Up close he was more than handsome. Tight dark curls the color of deep coffee covered his head like loops of soft wool. He had the neck and shoulders of a linebacker and the slim waistline of a runner. She backed up to get a better look. Head to toe he was one sweet package.

"I think you're my new boss." He stuck out a hand with long fingers. "Marcus Reed. I'm vice president and operations manager at Summers Security."

She took his hand and felt a shock of heat when it closed around hers. A slow smile spread across her face. Finally some good news that was genuinely good.

"Nicole Summers Benoit, proud owner of a new business," she purred.