

Paving a Life

by sunny33

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Dennis Featherston reached for his packet of cigarettes and hauled himself out of the recliner. Groaning with the effort, he mentally promised for the umpteenth time to take his doctor's advice and cut back on the beer and snacks. But not until the World Cup was over. His wife's disapproving expression met with indifference as he belched then padded in his socks outside for a smoke. To hell with her — she wasn't his boss.

Opening the door, he stepped outside to examine his driveway, freshly asphalted that afternoon while he watched the rugby. The wide expanse of sophisticated black soothed his temper all too briefly until his eyes screeched to a halt at the perfectly straight, flawless edging strip. The pink, perfectly straight, otherwise flawless edging strip. Pink! What self-respecting property developer would be seen with a pink border on his driveway?

Ignoring the tightness developing in his chest, no doubt from the beer and chips, he stomped around the edge of the still-soft driveway, punching numbers into his cellphone. As he reached the climax of his tirade to the unfortunate paving contractor's receptionist, Dennis' face paled, pure fear distorting his features as he clutched his chest. The phone dropped to the ground unheeded, the profuse apologies of the woman heard only by the startled next-door cat.

Nick hesitated before the ostentatious front door. Conscience dictated his presence, but he knew he would be poorly received. Running nervous hands through his ever unruly shock of brown hair and applying a serious expression to his face, he knocked.

He'd never met Mrs Featherston, although he had an image in his mind of the sort of woman the hard to please, aggressive builder would have married: plain, docile, proper. The warmth of the smile which greeted him as the door opened drove all the carefully rehearsed words from his mind.

"Oh... I'm sorry. Has Mrs Featherston moved away?" he managed after a moment's hesitation.

The slender woman in her early thirties shook her head, drawing Nick's attention to the rich silkiness of her auburn hair. "I'm Michelle Featherston. How can I help you?" she asked.

Dragging his eyes back to her face, the disconcerted contractor swallowed hard. "*You're* Mrs Featherston? But—"

"Yes. I know. I get that a lot. Dennis was seventeen years older. Now, Mr...?"

"Carter. Nick Carter. My firm asphalted your driveway." At her nod, he plunged on. "I wish to express my personal condolences on your loss and offer an apology."

"An apology? For what, Mr Carter?"

"It appears your husband was on the phone with a complaint about the driveway border when he... you know..." Grinding to a halt, Nick's eyes dropped to the toes of his

boots. "He said it was pink."

"Well, that doesn't surprise me, Mr Carter. Dennis used to complain about anything and everything." Noticing his shuffling feet, she suddenly understood. "You think his heart attack was caused by his dissatisfaction with the driveway, don't you?" Her words were gentle as she led him into the house.

Nick nodded, unable to speak in the face of her unexpected kindness.

"I suspect years of drinking, smoking, and eating the wrong foods had a lot more to do with his death than a supposedly pink edging strip," she commented with a wry smile.

He looked up, perplexed at her blasé attitude.

"You don't sound—"

"Like a devastated widow? Mr Carter, my husband's faults were not obvious to me at seventeen. Back then, he was a charming rogue whose flattery and gifts turned a foolish young girl's head. Before I knew it, I was pregnant and forced to marry. Our youngest has just turned fifteen. I have planned for years to divorce him as soon as she finished school."

Bitterness laced her words as she continued. "Why did I stay with him so long? Because I had no way of supporting myself and two children. He never allowed me to study for any qualifications, and my parents disowned me when I became pregnant. For better or for worse, I had to endure.

"Don't get me wrong, I feel for the girls. They loved their father despite everything, and it saddens me to see any life cut off short, but personally, I can only feel somewhat relieved," she finished.

Nick watched her composed façade crack and fail before a complete stranger. Her expression hinted at unsaid words, best left that way. Uncertainly, he reached out and placed an awkward hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?" he asked, surprising himself with the genuine wish to comfort the woman before him.

"Stay for a few minutes. Have a drink. The girls are staying with their grandparents, and Dennis's friends... well, let's say we never got on." She turned at his nod and reached for two glasses.

"And your friends?"

"Never stayed long when Dennis was around. Maintaining friendships just became too difficult, Mr Carter."

"Nick. Call me Nick," he offered.

"Thank you... Nick. It's a nice name." She smiled and added. "And I'm Michelle. Just Michelle."

Lucy and Hannah rolled their eyes and smirked the morning they caught Nick furtively sneaking from their mother's bedroom. "About time," they teased, and with that, a new family was born.

A year later, Nick slipped from the warmth of his new wife's embrace and swiftly dressed. The rain pounded its springtime beat on the roof as, heedless of his bare feet, he opened the front door and walked out onto the driveway. Gathering a handful of rose petals from the bush the girls had planted in memory of their father, he made his way over to the man-shaped, shallow depression in the asphalt at the side of the driveway. The petals scattered over the surface of the puddle of rainwater as he allowed them to slip from his fingers, whispering, "Thanks, Dennis."

Slender arms surrounded Nick from behind as Michelle joined him. Together, they watched the rose petals swoop and swirl in the breeze as more rain fell, to be channelled away to the gutter on the street by the pale green edging strip.

Colourblindness had always been Dennis's biggest weakness.

A/N: Blame Geoff. It's his plot. I just wrote the story. Thanks to quaffswinegaily for checking this over.