

Chapter 1

“Duck—a bombing run!”

Penny Sue’s screech pierced me like a dagger. I yelped and bolted from my chair, sloshing coffee down the front of my robe.

“Cover your drink!”

I turned slowly to face Penny Sue, my terry cloth robe steaming in the cool morning air. She stood in the doorway of the beachfront condo, staring up at a V-formation of pelicans flying south from their feeding grounds at Ponce Inlet. Locals dubbed the birds B-52s for their annoying habit of gorging on fish parts at northern marinas, then lazily sailing down the coast ... relieving themselves willy-nilly. No doubt, the birds were the inspiration for the Predator drones the CIA used to hone in on terrorists with missiles and smart bombs. Nothing was safe from the pelicans’ foul, fishy projectiles. Penny Sue discovered as much back in college. A group from the sorority was on the deck, where I now stood dripping coffee, when pelicans passed overhead. Bamm! A big splat on Penny

Sue's head that slopped into her wine; hence, the dictum: "Cover your drink!"

Dabbing at the Colombian droplet on my chin, I stared at Penny Sue. "Cover my drink?" I motioned to the stain on my robe. "It's a little late for that. Geez, Penny Sue, I was meditating. You scared me to death."

She pursed her lips. "I know that. You had your head tilted back and your eyes closed. Why do you think I said something? If I hadn't been here, you might have gotten a nasty load right in the face."

"What in the world is going on?" Ruthie, wearing nothing but a bath towel and a look of fright, appeared in the doorway.

"A bombing run," Penny Sue replied over her shoulder. "If I hadn't said something, Leigh would have gotten it right in the kisser." She brushed past Ruthie to the kitchen and returned with a roll of paper towels. She handed me a wad and ripped off a long strip that she dropped on the deck and patted with her toes. "You didn't burn yourself, did you?" she asked sheepishly.

My ire dissolved. It was hard to stay mad at a slightly chubby, middle-aged woman dressed in a pink silk kimono, whose hair looked like it had been chewed by a dog. "No harm done; the robe will wash. You startled me—that's all."

Besides, the condo belonged to Penny Sue's father, Judge Warren Parker, who'd graciously allowed me to use it after my house in Roswell, Georgia sold as a part of my divorce settlement. I'd been in Florida for a little over four months, gathering my wits and will to start life anew. New Smyrna Beach had turned out to be the perfect prescription

for a trampled ego and broken heart. Of course, the stay got off to a rousing start when Penny Sue, Ruthie, and I were stalked, threatened, and kidnapped by an assortment of undesirables. Something like that puts your life in perspective. A two-timing husband seems trivial when you're stumbling over dead bodies.

Though I'd made new friends and found a part time job at the Marine Conservation Center, I was delighted to see my sorority sisters again. There's a certain comfort in being with old friends. You don't have to explain, sugar coat, or make excuses because you've been through most of the bad times together and love each other in spite of warts and blemishes. Not that any of us had real warts—a few zits, maybe, but certainly no crusty, virus laden skin eruptions.

Like the old joke about *menstruation* and *menopause*, most of our troubles over the years involved men. Besides being college sorority sisters, Penny Sue Parker, Ruthie Nichols, and I—Rebecca Leigh Stratton—had one thing in common—we were all divorced. I was the newest member of our small, but growing, group called the DAFFODILS (Divorced And Finally Free Of Deceitful, Insensitive, Licentious Scum).

Ruthie's split came early—her ex was a two-timing, heartless cardiologist. Penny Sue'd been around the altar three times. Her first husband, Andy, was the well built, but dumb, captain of the football team. Her second, Sydney, was rich, artistic, and bisexual. The bisexual part didn't sit well with Judge Parker, who took that divorce very personally. Penny Sue is quite wealthy today as a result of the huge settlement she got from that parting. Her last, Winston, was

the judge's choice. Daddy orchestrated that pairing, convinced Penny Sue didn't know a good man when she saw one. Apparently, Judge Daddy didn't, either. It was the judge himself who caught Winston in a compromising position with a legal assistant. Winston doesn't practice law in Georgia any more.

Despite her dismal track record, Penny Sue was always on the prowl for her *soul mate*, one of the reasons my friends had driven down from Atlanta two days earlier. Though Ruthie was in town to celebrate her birthday as well as attend a conference on Ayurveda, an ancient healing system from India, Penny Sue's motives, aside from the birthday, were romantic. Her newest love, Richard Wheeler, was a motorcycle enthusiast who'd come for Bike Week. He was staying at the Riverview Hotel, an ironic twist—and long story—considering our last visit. Naturally, Penny Sue had recommended the Riverview to Rich because it was close to our condo. After our last visit, she could also drive there blindfolded.

I had to say that this man looked promising. Recently widowed—his wife passed from cancer—Rich was a good-looking, gentle guy who seemed to genuinely care about Penny Sue. He also appeared fairly normal, in stark contrast to Penny Sue's prior loves, which is why I gave this relationship a chance. Though Penny Sue usually equated normal to average, emphatically insisting, "*I am not normal!*" (God's truth), an ordinary person was actually what she needed. According to Ruthie, our metaphysical expert, Penny Sue's Leo penchant for drama and the limelight meant stormy relationships with men whose egos were similarly inclined—the exact type she usually went after. A challenge thing, I

suppose. But, this romance did, indeed, appear to be a match made in heaven. Penny Sue and Rich had been inseparable for the last two days, when she'd left early and come home late with smudged lipstick and a smile so wide her gums showed.

"Let me buy you another cup of coffee," Penny Sue said, a clear peace offering. Grinning, she nudged me with her elbow. "Watch this." She squinched her toes and lifted the paper towels she'd use to blot up the coffee spill. "Prehensile toes," she said smugly.

Like a monkey, I thought wryly. "I'll bet your blood is Rh positive."

Penny Sue wadded the paper into a ball. "Yeah. What does that have to do with anything?"

I motioned to her toes. "Rh stands for rhesus monkey."

Still standing in the doorway half-naked, Ruthie choked down a chortle.

Penny Sue curled her lip at me and huffed inside, stopping abruptly when she reached our friend. "What in the world is that smell?" She looked Ruthie up and down.

Ruthie backed away, pulling her bath towel tighter. "Sesame seed oil. Massaging with sesame oil is one of the best ways to balance the humors—you know, Pita, Vatta, and Kapha."

Penny Sue leaned forward and took another whiff. "Honey, I think your pita patta's outa whack-a."

"Not pita patta. Pita, Vatta. Come on, Penny Sue, this is serious. Ayurveda is an ancient science that dates back over 6000 years. Almost everyone would benefit from a

sesame oil massage. The modern lifestyle, with fast travel, television, junk food, and computers all tend to cause a Vatta imbalance.”

Penny Sue made a face. “If everyone smelled like that, we’d all have bad humors.” She dashed behind the kitchen counter to avoid a swipe from Ruthie.

“You wash it off, silly. Which, I would have done, if you hadn’t caused such a ruckus. I almost had a heart attack. The last time I heard Leigh scream like that, she’d tripped over a body.”

Penny Sue hung her head with mock contrition. “You’re right; I’d forgotten about that. Anyway, I was only kidding. Deepak Chopra recommends sesame oil massages, and you know how much I like him. Take your shower, and I’ll make bagels with cream cheese and Jalapeño jelly. How’s that?” A devilish grin stretched her lips. “Or, I could squeegee you off and do a stir fry.”

It took everything I had to keep a straight face.

Ruthie shook her finger at Penny Sue. “You’re awful. See if I help when you get sick. I won’t lift a finger.” She turned on her heel and headed for the shower.

I went to the bedroom to change out of my soggy robe. When I returned, I found a steaming cup of coffee and bagel waiting for me on the kitchen counter. I hopped on the stool and sipped the brew, watching Penny Sue smear cream cheese on more bagels. “What time did you get in?” I asked casually.

“Late,” she said without looking up. I couldn’t help but notice her chest heave in a satisfied sigh.

“I take it that things are going well with Rich?”

Penny Sue stopped what she was doing and smiled broadly. "He's the one, Leigh." Ruthie joined us at that moment. Penny Sue gave her a cup of coffee and set the plate of bagels on the counter. "Three husbands, lots of boy-friends, yet I've never met a man quite like Rich. He's kind and gentle and strong, but vulnerable."

Vulnerable. Penny Sue'd always had a weak spot for the underdog. In college she was constantly bringing stray cats, injured dogs, and troubled men back to the sorority house.

"How did you meet him?" I asked.

"Ruthie was with me the first time. We were having dinner at that new restaurant on Roswell Square. Rich was sitting alone at a table by the wall. He seemed so troubled, I couldn't take my eyes off him."

The fact that Rich was handsome in a rugged way, no doubt helped. He was about six feet tall, brown hair, with very green eyes. I'm sure Penny Sue's radar locked on him instantly.

She canted her head at Ruthie. "Our waitress told us he'd recently lost his wife and ate there a lot, always alone." She tittered. "Naturally, I started having dinner there more often. We eventually struck up a conversation and a friendship developed. Rich really loved his wife. Her death was quite a blow."

"How long has it been?" Ruthie asked.

"Over a year, I gather."

"What does he do for a living?"

"I'm not sure. He may have been with law enforcement or the courts in some fashion. He doesn't talk much about his past. Too painful, I suppose. I know he quit his job to

take care of his wife. She went through a living hell of surgeries and chemotherapy. The experience tore him up—she was in a lot of pain. Even with painkillers, she suffered tremendously.” Penny Sue shuddered. “Gives me the creeps to think about it. Anyway, he’s come into some money—maybe from his wife’s life insurance—and is looking to start a new life. He wants to invest in a motorcycle dealership in Georgia. He’s down here to talk to people and do market research.”

“Is that what y’all have been doing to the wee hours of the morning?”

“Basically, we’ve been sitting on the deck at the Riverview Hotel, rocking, and talking.”

“About ...”

“Our childhoods, my husbands, philosophy, Harley-Davidsons—which reminds me, my new bike is going to be delivered today.”

“Your what?” Ruthie and I said in unison.

“My new Harley.” She lifted her chin regally. “It’s being delivered to the New Smyrna dealership. It came in yesterday, but they had to prep it. I bought one of the Centennial bikes, a white pearl Fat Boy.”

I gritted my teeth for control. A white pearl *Fat Boy!* Though we’d packed on a few pounds over the years (all except Ruthie, who was still disgustingly slim), Penny Sue had gained the most, much of it in her posterior. In college, she’d been a buxom beauty with slim hips; now she was buxom with hips to match—an hour glass figure with a slightly larger bottom than top, which made the thought of her riding

a Fat Boy ironic or—to be kind—synchronistic, as Ruthie might say. “Penny Sue, motorcycles are dangerous. Do you know how to ride one?”

She rolled her eyes. “Please, give me and Harley-Davidson some credit. They have a rider education course. I took it at the dealership in Marietta.” She sipped her coffee with a smirk. “I finished at the top of my class.”

I should have guessed. The last time we were together at New Smyrna Beach, Ruthie and I discovered that Penny Sue had taken a terrorist avoidance driving course. We also learned she carried a gun and could shoot the wings off a fly (her words). So, why did a motorcycle surprise me? Especially since Penny Sue had money to burn and her new soul mate was a Harley devotee.

“I bought some really cool biker clothes. Want to see them?”

Ruthie and I nodded tentatively. “Can our hearts take it?”

“Of course. Don’t be silly.”

We followed Penny Sue into her bedroom where she pulled one of her largest Hartmann suitcases from the closet. Who knew what the thing cost—had to be over a thousand—it was big enough to hold a body.

“I was going to spring this on y’all later, after I got the bike. But ...” Penny Sue swung the suitcase onto the queen-sized bed.

Though I’d lived in the condo for over four months and been instructed to “use it like it was my own,” I’d never had the nerve to move into the master bedroom. I’d chosen the second bedroom, with twin beds, the one that Ruthie and I shared on our first visit, and shared now. Somehow, the master

suite had Penny Sue's name all over it. Not to mention, she was such a sloppy, disorganized person, no one—especially Ruthie—could stand sharing a room with her.

“Now, turn your heads,” Penny Sue instructed before opening the suitcase, a sure sign something sexy or devilish was about to appear.

Ruthie and I did as instructed. We could hear her rustling stuff in the background. A minute passed—geez, how much was there?—then two.

Finally, Penny Sue sang, “Ta da!”

Ruthie and I turned around and gasped. White leather covered the bed. At the bottom, closest to us, lay a pair of white, leather, thong underwear. (I shuddered at the thought of a slim leather strap bisecting my butt. These biker people must be a lot tougher than me.) Directly above it was a white, strapless bustier—a throwback to saloons in the Wild West—complete with lacing up the front. A pair of fingerless gloves, a white leather jacket, and a red, white, and blue leather vest with Harley-Davidson emblazoned on the chest. Centered above it all was a black and silver open face helmet with a Harley emblem on the front.

Awestruck by all the white, Ruthie and I couldn't speak.

“What do you think?” Penny Sue finally asked.

“There are no slacks or shorts,” I observed.

“It's all white,” Ruthie said incredulously. “You're going to wear white before Memorial Day?”

Penny Sue folded her arms defiantly. “That tradition is strictly passé. The old stuff about wearing dark clothes in the winter and light clothes in the summer made sense in the olden

days. People needed dark clothes to absorb sunlight in order to stay warm in the winter, and light clothes to reflect the heat in summer. But, this is Florida. It's warm year round, so light clothes work any time."

My jaw sagged. That this lecture passed through the lips of Penelope Sue Parker, a fourth generation Georgian who'd been *presented* by The Atlanta Debutante Club, was beyond belief. This was the woman who'd endlessly chided me for wearing patent leather shoes after five, carrying a straw purse in the fall, wearing white after Labor Day, and on and on *ad nauseam*.

In fact, the whole spiel didn't make sense—the answer was too pat. Though an intelligent woman, there was no way Penny Sue would spout off about the reflection and absorption of light. She'd obviously given this matter a lot of thought.

"Come on, what's with the white, really?" I asked.

She pulled her shoulder length hair to the side and began twirling it with her finger, a nervous gesture I'd seen before. "I want to be different. I figure all the other women will be wearing black. In white, I'll stand out from the crowd."

The twirling intensified. There was something else. "And?"

Penny Sue twittered, her finger hopelessly tangled in her hair. "It's from the wedding collection."

Ruthie and I did a double take. "Wedding collection?"

Penny Sue reared back. "An affirmation. Rich is the one, I know it. Like you say, Ruthie, 'You have to own it before you can have it.'"

The phrase was one of Ruthie's favorite New Age adages, and Penny Sue was using it to justify what she already intended to do.

"The wedding collection. You truly believe Rich is number four?"

Penny Sue stood up straight with a serious expression, and said, "I do." It came out the way one might say at a wedding ceremony. At that moment, I decided to help her with Rich—not get, like a possession, but facilitate their relationship. Penny Sue was outrageous and full of herself, but a nicer, kinder person one would never find. Although, I'd only met Rich briefly at dinner the other night, he struck me the same way. For once, it seemed like Penny Sue had found a soul mate, and I would do anything to help her in the quest. DAFFODILS, notwithstanding.

The doorbell rang before I could voice my support. Penny Sue, anxious to escape from our questioning, ran to the door and threw it open expectantly. There was an audible gasp, then an uncharacteristically weak, "Leigh, it's for you."

Chapter 2

As I entered the hall, Penny Sue whispered, “It’s a monster!”

I scoffed at the dramatics and brushed by her to the front door. One glance and I broke out laughing. It *was* a monster, of sorts. “Come on in.” I pushed the screen door, its rusty spring stretched with a loud twang.

A hulking man entered. He had flowing black hair attached to a ridged prosthesis with bushy eyebrows that covered his forehead. He wore black padded pants, knee high boots with spikes on the toes, and a metallic sash draped across his chest. A large squirt gun-like weapon hung from his shoulder. He was also holding a manila folder.

Speechless for once, Penny Sue peered from the bedroom doorway, her eyes and mouth in the shape of big O’s.

“Ruthie, Penny Sue, meet Carl, Fran’s son. He’s a Klingon.”

The big man struck his chest with his fist and growled, “tlhIngan jIH!”

Penny Sue drew back, her face twisted with confusion. “Huh?”

“I said, I am Klingon.” Carl grinned mischievously and extended his hand. She gingerly took it.

“Sorry, I don’t speak Klingon.” She looked at me. “I thought you said your friend, Fran, was Italian.”

“Carlo Annina by birth; Klag, son of K’tal, defender of the Klingon Empire by choice,” Carl boomed.

Penny Sue’s brow furrowed with confusion. “Klingon? Is that one of those former Soviet republics?”

We all howled. “*Star Trek*, Penny Sue.” Ruthie said. “You must have heard of *Star Trek*.”

Clearly piqued, she squared her shoulders. “Of course, the space show.” Penny Sue waved expansively. “I just didn’t recognize this particular alien. I was always partial to Mork, the spaceman played by Robin Williams.”

Ruthie twittered. “Mork? You’re thinking of *Mork and Mindy*; that’s old as the hills and a completely different program.”

“Old as the hills” got her. Leos pride themselves for being on the cutting edge. To even hint that a Leo may be out of the loop, or God forbid, wrong, is sure to draw a leonine roar.

“Well, which show is it?” Penny Sue demanded tersely.

“The one with Captain Jean Luc Picard.”

“Jean Luc. The sexy, bald guy?”

I nodded.

“I remember now.” She turned to Carl, smiling smugly. “You’re pretending to be Woof.”

“Worf,” I corrected.

She cut me a look. “Whatever. So, you’re on your way to a masquerade party?”

“In a manner of speaking. My buddies and I do role-playing games down at the Canaveral Seashore and Merritt Island Refuge. Today we’re fighting the Romulans. This time we’re going to win the Battle of Khitomer. We’ve devised a brilliant battle plan. We’re going to surprise them by going in from the water. Kayaks. In a hundred simulations, we triumphed every time.”

“Carl is an expert in computers,” I explained.

Penny Sue stared past him to the black Harley motorcycle he’d arrived on. “Kayak? Where’s your boat?”

“I’m meeting the team at the shopping center.”

“Oh,” she said, still suspicious of Carl and his getup. “Is that a stun gun?” She pointed to the contraption hanging from his shoulder.

“Paintball. Harmless, washes off.” Carl handed me the manila folder. “Mom asked me to drop this off. She has a doctor’s appointment and won’t get to the center until this afternoon. She said you needed these receipts for the monthly reports.” He clicked his heels together. “Got to run—the battle starts at nine. We like to fight before it gets hot.” He struck his fist to his chest again. “Qaplá! See you around.”

“I hope not,” Penny Sue muttered as she closed the door. “That guy is weird. I sure wouldn’t want to meet him in a dark alley.” She ran her fingers through her hair. “I need a Bloody Mary. He scared me half to death.”

“Wait,” I said. “Aren’t you picking up your new Harley today?”

“Right, I’d better stick to coffee. I have to stay sharp.”

Penny Sue compromised with a Virgin Mary, swearing her nerves were fried after all the commotion. Actually, my

nerves were pretty frayed, too. I was used to living alone. Though I loved seeing my friends, I found Penny Sue's histrionics were already wearing thin. I actually thought of having a real Bloody Mary, but didn't want to be responsible for getting Penny Sue started. Penny Sue on a bike was a scary thought when she was cold sober—regardless of her claim that she'd passed the Harley rider's course. As far as I could tell, she had a good helmet, gloves, jacket, but no slacks! Lord knows what a real Bloody Mary would bring out in that situation.

Penny Sue nibbled on a bagel. "Isn't Carl a little old for such foolishness? What does his mother think? If my child went around dressed like that, I'd have him committed."

I sighed with exasperation. "He doesn't dress like that all the time, for goshsakes. He's a renowned software engineer. Carl had a hand in the development of global positioning systems—you know, GPS—that they put in cars. It's a game, Penny Sue. A lot of kids, especially science fiction fans, do role playing."

"That big guy's hardly a kid. How old is he, anyway?"

"I believe he just turned thirty."

"Thirty? I'd been married and divorced twice by then."

"Imagine how much heartache you'd have avoided if you had pretended to be a Klingon." I took a bite of my bagel. Ruthie swallowed hard and buried her face in the newspaper.

Penny Sue regarded me with narrowed eyes. I glared back, chewing.

Carl was a nice young man, and I wasn't about to let her make fun of him. Over the last few months, when I'd

been in Florida alone, he and Fran had helped me more times than I could count. Whenever there was something heavy to carry or furniture to move, Fran and Carl were there. Never a complaint or expectation of anything in return. They were good people.

Penny Sue—with no children—simply didn't realize that the new generation was different. They didn't feel the pressure to be paired off and get married by the time they were out of high school or college. In fact, they were almost androgynous by olden standards. They pursued other interests and took their time in making commitments. A lot healthier, if you ask me.

Which made me think of my own children. Ann, my younger, was an intern at the American Embassy in London. As far as I could tell, marriage was the farthest thing from her mind. Zack, Jr. was in Vail trying to figure out what to do with a degree in philosophy. Though his girlfriend from Vanderbilt had recently moved in with him, neither seemed in a hurry to tie the knot.

I wondered if a similar attitude would have been better for Penny Sue. Then again, she wouldn't be such a wealthy woman today. One thing for sure, rehashing the past was a road to nowhere. "There are no accidents," as Ruthie always said.

I finished the bagel and winked at Penny Sue, who was still giving me the evil eye. She stuck out her tongue, but eventually softened enough to resume eating.

"You referred to Carl's mother as Fran," Penny Sue said suddenly. "I thought her name was Frannie May."

“It is, Frances May Annina. Her mother gave each daughter a middle name that’s a month. There’s an April, May, and a June.”

“No December, I hope. Or August. Wouldn’t that be terrible? People would call you Auggie. Isn’t that a type of bull?”

Ruthie looked up from her newspaper. “You’re thinking of Aggie, slang for an agricultural school. Texas A & M’s football team is called the Aggies.”

“Same thing,” Penny Sue ran on without missing a beat. “Do people call her Fran or Frannie May?”

“Both. The Frannie May thing began as a joke. When I first started at the Marine Conservation Center, some of the volunteers kidded me about my Southern accent. Then, you called that time before Christmas and left a message for Becky Leigh to call Penny Sue. That really got the gang going. They kidded me unmercifully until the next day when Fran came in. At the first snicker, Fran reared back, announced her name was Frannie May, that she came from the South, and would anyone like to make something of it? That shut them up. I never heard another snicker. Since then, she’s called herself Frannie May at work.

“Fran isn’t very tall, but has a formidable presence. If you get her riled, she gives you this absolutely frigid stare.” I shuddered. “Whew, I’ve seen her cower big men with the *look*.”

“My grandfather had a look like that. Where’s she from?” Penny Sue asked.

“South Boston.”

“Virginia? That’s pretty country.”

“No, the South Shore of Boston, Massachusetts.”

Penny Sue chuckled. “That’s a twist.” She raised her glass. “To Frannie May, defender of Southern honor.”

“And her son, Klag, champion of the Klingon Empire.”

We didn’t linger over breakfast. Ruthie was attending the final session of her Ayurveda seminar, Penny Sue was scheduled to pick up her motorcycle, and I had to go to work. Since Ruthie was using Penny Sue’s Mercedes and running late, I offered to take Penny Sue to the Harley dealership on my way to work.

A good thing, too. If Ruthie had waited for Penny Sue, she’d have missed most of the morning lecture. I’d been dressed for close to forty minutes before Her Highness emerged from her boudoir. Thank goodness she had on some slacks! While the outfit was outrageous by Atlanta standards, it was fairly conservative for Bike Week. She wore white jeans, white boots, and the strapless leather bustier. Her leather jacket was artfully draped over one shoulder, while a white leather rucksack hung from the other. She carried the silver helmet.

She twirled around so I could get the full effect. “What do you think?” she asked breathlessly.

“Pulling out all the stops, eh? Since you’re wearing the wedding ensemble, I assume you’re going to drop in on Rich after you pick up your bike.”

She giggled. “Naturally. Bike Week officially starts tomorrow. I intend to make my impression before the competition arrives. In less than twenty-four hours, the whole area will be crawling with hot babes on hot bikes. I plan to have Rich’s full attention before then.”

The comment stunned me. Under normal circumstances, Ms. Flirt of the South would be itching to mingle with the hot men on hot bikes. Engagements and marriages hadn't stopped her in the past. While she was completely faithful to all of her husbands, she naturally slipped into a Scarlett O'Hara persona whenever a good-looking man came into view. I'd thought it was an inborn trait, something she couldn't control like flat feet or schizophrenia. Now, it seemed I'd been wrong. Her need to be the center of attention could be satisfied by the right man. Perhaps Rich *was* her soul mate.

We piled—wedged, in Penny Sue's case—into my new, yellow VW Beetle convertible. For years I'd driven a four-door BMW, obligatory before SUVs for wives of up-and-coming executives and lawyers. Considered a symbol of wealth, stature, and good taste, I traded my Beemer in on my yellow toy the minute I arrived in Florida. I even got some money back on the deal.

“Lord, this thing is tiny,” Penny Sue grouched as she struggled to arrange the rucksack, helmet, and jacket in her lap. “Put the top down,” she ordered, fanning herself. “I'm either having a hot flash or panic attack.”

“It's a hot flash,” I said, thinking it was actually asphyxiation. The new leather odor combined with her heavy-handed application of Joy cologne was overwhelming. I flipped the lock and pressed the button to lower the roof. Thankfully, a fish-scented sea breeze blew through—a welcome relief from the perfumed, wet dog smell.

“What's your schedule today?” I asked as we started the eight-mile drive from Sea Dunes to the dealership.

“I’m picking up the bike, then taking it by to show Rich. From there, who knows ...” her voice trailed off into an impish grin. “Don’t expect me for dinner. What about you—any plans?”

“Ted offered to take Ruthie and me to dinner. You, too, if you want to come. He’ll be working double time for the next ten days.”

“Ted?!” She gave me a saucy wink. “As in *Deputy* Ted Moore? I’ve been here two whole days, and this is the first I’ve heard of it?”

“You haven’t, exactly, been around.”

“This is important! I’d have made time for this story. What gives?”

Ted Moore, a deputy with the Volusia County sheriff’s office, was one of the few sympathetic policemen we’d encountered on our last visit. Though the ink was barely dry on my divorce decree then, I was drawn to him in a platonic way. As it turned out, Ted was recently separated, too, and not interested in anything more than a friend and occasional meal companion, which suited me fine. “There’s not much to tell. He’s divorced, and we’ve had lunch and dinner a few times. We’re friends; that’s it.”

Penny Sue traced the outline of the Harley emblem on the helmet with her index finger. “Try to stay open and give him a chance.”

I stopped at the light on Mission Road. The dealership was in the next block. “Look—friendship is all he wants. His life is complicated; he has two teenaged sons.”

Penny Sue shrugged. “They’ll grow up eventually. Never say never.”

Bike Week preparations were in high gear at the dealership. A temporary chain link fence had been erected around the parking lot for the dealership and Pub. Vendors' orange tents were already in place and a crowd of people were unloading merchandise and stocking the booths' shelves. As far as I could tell, most of it was leather, Harley paraphernalia, and hoogie fixings.

I pulled into an empty space directly in front of the dealership. A young woman—probably mid-twenties—straddled a Harley Sportster in the next space. Penny Sue and I both gaped. She had on short-shorts that barely covered her butt and thigh high boots. Her shirt stopped shy of covering her boobs, which had obviously been enhanced, judging by their incredible size and upswept pertness.

“Hmph,” Penny Sue muttered, scrutinizing her competition. “That’s an old bike,” she said dryly.

“I doubt people will notice her bike.”

Penny Sue ignored my comment. “Look!” She pointed at a gleaming white Fat Boy parked in front of the dealership’s entrance.

“Isn’t it pretty,” Penny Sue gushed, juggling her belongings. “Help me—I’m stuck,” she said suddenly. Clutching her prodigious load of stuff, she pushed the door open with her foot. I cringed—footprints on my brand new car. “This damn thing is too low. Gawd, how do you get out?” she griped.

I reached in, grabbed her folded forearms and pulled. She made it halfway up, but fell back. The hot honey next to us in the thigh-high boots snickered and rode away. I braced myself for another try. This time Penny Sue made it. “I guess

I should have gotten an ejector seat for the passenger side, too,” I said, puffing.

“Your side has one of those lift chairs like you see on television? The ones that hoist up old people? Neat-o.”

I shut the door. “I was joking.”

“Very funny.”

Fortunately, a tall man strode out of the dealership at that moment. Penny Sue inclined her head toward the white bike. “I think that’s mine.”

“It is if you’re Penelope Sue Parker.”

“The same.”

“I have some papers for you to sign.”

Penny Sue handed me her helmet and jacket. “Would you hold this, Leigh? I’ll only be a minute.”

I hoped so—I was already late for work. I put her things on the passenger seat, pulled out my cell phone, and called the office, informing them—as if they hadn’t already noticed—that I would be late. Sandra, the director, answered and assured me there was no problem as long as the billing was completed by the end of the day. Compared to the workload at my last job, a car dealership, the center’s books were a snap and the people a lot more fun. There was also the satisfaction of working for a worthy cause.

The Marine Conservation Center was a nonprofit organization dedicated to education and the preservation of the Indian River Lagoon, North America’s most diverse estuary. I have to admit that I didn’t have a clue what estuary meant when I started work, but soon learned the word referred to the part of a river where it met the ocean, which in New Smyrna’s case was the inland waterway. Initially, I visited

the center because of an interest in sea turtles developed on our earlier visit. Fortunately for me, a part-time job opening was posted on the very day I arrived to take a tour. My inner voice said, “Grab it,” and I did. Except for the kidding episode, I’d never had a doubt about the decision. It’s hard to complain about living in paradise and working at the perfect job. A year ago, I was in the pits of depression over my divorce. Although I was not completely over it, things had turned out better than I’d ever imagined.

Ruthie said that stresses like divorces are the times for the greatest spiritual advancement. “Unfortunately, we all get set in our ways. Sometimes it takes a big jolt to catapult us to the next level.”

I’d been catapulted, all right. Shot from a cannon, or so it felt. But, four months after October and the Big Split, I had to admit that I was a lot better off. I’d come to realize it was the fear of change that plagued me all those months. I’d become comfortable with my BMW, big house, social standing, and perfect kids (okay, they weren’t completely perfect; but damn good by most standards.) Truth be told, I *had* stopped growing or evolving as Ruthie would say. I was in a comfortable rut to nowhere—a bored stupor of luxurious existence. A darn shame it took a skinny stripper with silicon breasts to blow me out of the rut.

Penny Sue emerged from the dealership with the salesman.

“Remember,” the dealer said as he handed her the key, “don’t go over sixty for the break-in period. And, be sure to alternate your speeds.”

Penny Sue nodded obediently.

“Check the maintenance schedule in the owner’s manual.”

She nodded again.

“I know you took the riding course, so you can handle the bike. Is there anything you’d like to ask?”

“Yes,” she said with a glint in her eye. “You’ve been very nice. Are you married? I have some single friends.”

If he hadn’t been standing there, I would have kicked her. The nerve!

He glanced at me and chuckled. “I appreciate the compliment, but I’m taken. Four kids.”

Penny Sue gave him the up and down. “Too bad,” she said, straddling the white and chrome bike. I retrieved her helmet and jacket from my car. An instant later, the bike came to life with a deep rumble.

I waved as she maneuvered the Harley into the parking lot and headed for Route 44. I couldn’t help but notice that all heads turned as she roared by. Decked out in white leather, riding a slick new bike, Penny Sue was not as slim as the woman in the skimpy outfit, but she was still a traffic stopper. I glanced down at my cotton capri set and suddenly felt very frumpy. I got in my car and started the cute little Beetle. Next to the roar of Penny Sue’s Fat Boy, my car sounded like the little bug it was.

Darn, I was totally out of sync with bikers and Bike Week. There wasn’t anything I could do about the car, but I could at least buy some biker-friendly garb. I resolved to swing by the shops on Flagler after work to look for some cool duds. In any event, The Wicker Basket had received a shipment of swimsuits that I wanted to check out before they were picked over.

The Wildlife Nature Cruise had left by the time I arrived at the center, which meant I had a good two hours of uninterrupted work. As part-time bookkeeper, my primary duty was to tally and reconcile receipts from donors and the various cruises. I had all but finished the weekly reports when Bobby Barnes, our pontoon boat captain, ambled in. A retired Navy Seal with bulging biceps, he was the perfect person to lead the cruises. While most of our patrons were responsible adults and families, sometimes a vacationer arrived who'd had one Mimosa over the line. Bobby's commanding presence at the helm inevitably kept them in line. A light-hearted comment about one of his Navy adventures was all it usually took to keep the sobriety-challenged patron seated and quiet.

"Sandra said you stopped by the Harley shop on your way to work. Did you spring for a Harley Sportster?"

"No, your old Seal buddy, Saul's mopeds are more my speed. But, Penny Sue bought a Fat Boy."

Bobby let out a low whistle. "Not bad. Good for Penny Sue. Are you and your friends going to hit the biker hot spots this weekend?"

"Penny Sue definitely is. She has her eye on a biker for husband number four. I don't know if Ruthie and I will go. I'm not sure we'd fit in."

Bobby sat on the edge of the desk. "At least, you have to go to the Pub. Half the people there aren't real bikers. They drive their cars and park across the street at the shopping center. It's fun, a big party. There are bands, lots of food, and a hoard of geezers like us pretending they're young.

It's an experience—something you'll talk about for years. You shouldn't miss it."

I'd had that thought. Next to stock car racing, Bike Week was the area's main claim to fame. A Daytona Beach tradition dating back to 1937, it started small with a handful of bikers racing a three-mile route, half of which was on the beach. Since then, Bike Week festivities had spread out to the adjacent communities like New Smyrna Beach and evolved into a ten-day festival of bikes, beer, and scantily clad babes. People attended from all over the world, so shouldn't I at least sample the experience since it was right in my backyard?

An image of Penny Sue and her white leather getup popped into my mind. "What do people wear?"

Bobby frowned at my beige capri set. "Jeans and a tee shirt, preferably one with Harley-Davidson on it. You could have picked one up at the dealership or Pub 44 next door."

Easy enough. Maybe Ruthie and I should go after all. I'd run it by her at dinner.

Bobby chatted for a few more minutes, then left for lunch. I buried my nose in the books, determined to finish early so I could do my shopping before Ruthie got home at three. I'd entered the last number into the computer when Frannie May arrived. "Go," she insisted. "I'll hold down the fort."

She didn't have to offer twice. First, I went to the Pub and picked up two black tee shirts for Ruthie and me. Tight fitting, sexy jobs with a zipper down the front, I chuckled at Ruthie's anticipated reaction. She was a conservative dresser,

to say the least, and the shirt had to be a first for her. Actually, it was a first for me, since I usually bought my clothes from beach boutiques or Dillard's Better Sportswear department.

Shirts in hand, I drove back across the North Causeway drawbridge to Flagler Avenue, the beachside commercial district. Luckily, tourists were still on the beach or taking a siesta, so I didn't have to fight a crowd at The Wicker Basket. With the proprietor's help, I'd tried on four swimsuits, made my decision, and was headed back to the condo by 2:50 p.m.

Not bad, even for a person who hated shopping, having acquired a bad attitude about retailing from selling children's shoes during college.

I took a left onto the unpaved, sand driveway for Sea Dunes and rounded the corner to our oceanfront unit. I expected to see Penny Sue's yellow Mercedes. Instead, I found the new, white Harley with her expensive leather jacket hanging from the handlebar. I pulled into a space on the far side of the bike and quickly gathered my packages. Something was wrong, very wrong.

Chapter 3

The one and only time I could remember seeing Penny Sue cry was when her mother passed away—that is, until now. She sat on the loveseat in the living room, dressed in her kimono, swigging wine. Her eyes were red and puffy with mascara streaked down her cheeks. Half-hearted attempts to brush away the tears had only succeeded in smearing her makeup. I dropped my purse, package, and her jacket on a stool at the kitchen counter and rushed to her side.

“Are you all right, honey?” I asked, wedging beside her on the loveseat and putting my arm around her shoulder. “You didn’t hurt yourself, did you?” I held her at arm’s length to check for blood and bruises.

“No, no,” she said, sniffing. “Rich dumped me.” She stared into the wineglass.

“Dumped you?” I repeated stupidly, as if she needed a reminder.

Tears sprouted like a sprinkler system. “He said things were going too fast, and we shouldn’t see each other for a while.”