

Chapter 1

August 12

Our car crested the hill, and the headlights caught the outline of a man directly ahead.

“Who the hell is that?” Penny Sue screeched. She slammed on brakes and the Mercedes slid sideways, narrowly missing a hunched man pulling a wheeled cart. Lucky for him, she was driving slowly over the rutted sand driveway. Illuminated by the headlights, he nodded slightly and kept walking toward the path that ran under the elevated beach access.

I tensed, fearing Penny Sue might lose her cool and respond with a rude hand gesture or profanity. “I think he lives in the next complex. I’ve seen him a lot lately on the beach in front of our place. I asked him once if he was catching anything. He laughed and said the spot was a mother lode. Apparently, there’s a trough out there where fish like to hang out.”

“Fishing in the middle of the night?” Penny Sue asked skeptically. “And, what’s that thing he’s pulling?”

“He calls it his fishing machine,” I answered. “It holds his poles and other gear.”

“Well, he scared the fool out of me and almost became fish food himself.”

I bit my lip. I doubted anything could scare the fool out of Penny Sue. She wasn't a complete dingbat, just—how to say it?—impetuous. And, that was putting it kindly.

She parked in the front of our condo, snatched the CD from its player, and got out in a huff. “We were having such a good time, too.”

“No harm done. Put it out of your mind,” Ruthie, our peacemaker, advised.

“You're right. I'm not going to let a crazy, old coot ruin my birthday.” Penny Sue jammed the key into the weathered lock and bumped her hip against the door. The warped wood gave with a loud pop. She stomped down the hallway, security alarm screeching its armed-state, as a robotic voice demanded, “Halt! Who goes there?” Penny Sue keyed in the code to the alarm with one hand and elbowed a button on top of Lu Nee 2's head—our robotic security guard and maid (massive exaggeration). “Boy, that was a good show. Y'all couldn't have given me a better birthday present.” She flipped on lights and headed for the kitchen. “I laughed until my face hurt. The person who wrote that play had to be a woman.”

The play in question was *Midlife Crisis*, a fitting birthday gift because Penny Sue had just turned forty-seven and experienced much of the play's subject matter—whether she admitted it or not. The *y'all*s who couldn't have given Penny Sue Parker a better gift were Ruthie Jo Nichols, and me, Rebecca Leigh Stratton, her old-time college sorority sisters and new-time cohorts in the DAFFODILS (Divorced And Finally Free Of Deceitful, Insensitive, Licentious Scum).

Virtually The Three Musketeers at the University of Georgia, we'd grown apart over the years, what with all our marriages, kids, and whatnot. It was my divorce that brought us back

together and to New Smyrna Beach. I'd been living in Penny Sue's daddy's condo since my house in Roswell, Georgia sold last year. The condo was intended to be a stopgap move to tide me over until my property settlement was finalized. But, I'd grown attached to the place and made little effort to move, even though my share of the settlement had finally come through.

The complex was a rare find that I couldn't duplicate elsewhere, because it was built on an incline and arranged so each condo had an ocean view. Our unit was in the single story oceanfront building. Up the hill a short distance, two-story duplexes flanked our building—their back balconies overlooking our parking lot and the Atlantic Ocean. Finally, a three-story duplex rounded out the cluster. Centered behind the two-story buildings, the tall duplex's balconies had a great view over our roof.

I cruised the sand driveways of each cluster daily, searching for sale signs, desperately hoping to get a jump on the competition. And, there was a lot of competition for property on this quarter-mile stretch of wide, car-free beach. Yep, that's car-free, not carefree, though it's that, too.

New Smyrna and Daytona Beaches are two of the last ocean resorts that allow beach driving. The famous Daytona Beach races were originally run on the hard-packed sand, establishing a tradition that most old-timers considered an inalienable right, in the same class with free speech and the right to bear arms. Yet, times change, and sea turtles—facing extinction—were no match for the cars and campers that cruised the ocean's edge. So, a deal was struck between the county and Federal environmentalists, where half of the beach permitted driving and half didn't. That way, sea turtles had a place to nest where they wouldn't have to dodge cars, and locals had a place to park, picnic, and swim for the day.

A side benefit of the compromise was a massive increase in real estate values for beachfront property in the non-driving section. Predictably, tourists with young children clamored to buy or rent apartments in the “safe” zone, sending real estate values through the roof. It’s the “through the roof” part that worried me. I wanted to buy a beachfront unit like Judge Parker’s. At current prices, I could just afford it on my divorce settlement. The way the market was moving, beachfront would be out of range within a few months. To call it a seller’s market was an understatement. A couple of B-units—the two story duplexes in the middle of each cluster—came on the market and were sold before I could get the owner on the telephone. And I was calling from their driveway on my cell phone! In each case, I’d waited until eight-thirty AM to phone, judging that a respectable hour. Both times I was told the owner had just accepted an offer. The buyers, whoever they were, could not have been Southerners, or least not mannerly ones. Calling before nine was pushing the envelope of civility, calling before eight-thirty was downright barbaric. After that, I decided I’d better cruise the development twice a day.

“Which will it be?” Penny Sue asked, holding up a bottle of Bailey’s Irish Cream in one hand and a coffee pot in the other. “A cordial or decaf?”

Ruthie was oblivious to the question, preoccupied with tuning the television to the Weather Channel. An insatiable news junkie who read newspapers and watched cable news every chance she got—“One must be informed”—Ruthie had been fretting about two tropical storms, Bonnie and Charley, which had formed in the Caribbean. Thankfully, Bonnie had moved into the Gulf of Mexico and out of our range, while the jury was still out on Charley.

Penny Sue curled her lip peevishly. “Well, what will it be?” she snapped.

“Both,” I said quickly. “How about decaf with a little Bailey’s in it?”

“That would be great,” Ruthie said distractedly, eyes glued to Dr. Steve, the Weather Channel’s hurricane expert.

I took the coffee pot from Penny Sue. “Sit down, birthday girl. This is your day.” I looked at the clock. Eleven PM. “Only one more hour to enjoy.”

Penny Sue hopped—hefted might be more accurate—onto the stool at the end of the L-shaped bar separating the kitchen from the great room and dining area. The focal point of the condominium, the spacious area had a vaulted ceiling and two walls with sliding glass doors that overlooked the Atlantic Ocean to the east and natural vegetation on the south.

With the moon overhead a mere sliver and the No Outside Light Ordinance in effect for turtle nesting season, the natural beauty was invisible. Still, you knew it was there and could feel the energy of the ocean, plants, and wildlife all around, which is what I loved about the place. Although New Smyrna had the foresight to pass a high-rise ordinance that limited complexes to nine stories, the new condos, for all their glitz and glamour, could not match the majestic—almost spiritual—atmosphere of this low rise, natural community. Geez, I hoped I’d get to buy one. After living in the Judge’s place, I didn’t think anything else would be the same.

I dumped water into Mr. Coffee and flipped the switch. The water started to drip, sending a pleasant hazelnut scent though the room.

Penny Sue swiveled her stool to face Ruthie, perched on the edge of the sofa and listening intently to Dr. Steve.

“Another hurricane, wouldn’t you know it?” Penny Sue moaned.

On our first visit—the Let’s-Cheer-Up-Leigh-After-Her-Rotten-Divorce trip—there’d been a hurricane. That storm

turned out to be the least of our worries. I tripped over a body on the second day, which unleashed absolute hell. None of it was our doing, mind you. Pure and simply a matter of being in the wrong place, at the wrong time. Still, for all the torment, the trip was a success since it *did* take my mind off my divorce and my two-timing, asset-hiding ex-husband, Zack. It also convinced me to leave Atlanta and move to New Smyrna Beach.

“What does Dr. Steve have to say?” Penny Sue called to Ruthie.

“Bonnie’s safely into the Gulf and about to make landfall in the Panhandle,” Ruthie replied without shifting her eyes from the television. “Charley’s south of Cuba, headed for the Gulf, but may take a northerly turn.” She looked up grimly as I handed her a cup of Bailey’s coffee. “I sure hope it follows Bonnie’s path. After our first trip, I don’t relish the thought of going back into that owner’s closet.”

The owner’s closet is a large storage room found in most resort condos. Designed to keep personal items away from renters’ prying eyes and sticky fingers, the closet turned into a prison on our first stay, thanks to some mobsters who thought we had something we didn’t. Which brought me to the other reason for our reunion in Florida, besides Penny Sue’s birthday. We’d been notified that we might be called next week to give depositions for the trial of the head honcho of a drug smuggling ring.

Judge Parker, Penny Sue’s daddy, said we probably wouldn’t have to appear—the government had a mountain of evidence from undercover operations—still, we had to be available, and it was a good excuse to get together.

Penny Sue hopped down from her stool and strode our way. “Have you put up a hurricane box?” she asked me.

I stared into my mug, as if looking for bugs or other foreign matter. “No.” I squirmed under her scrutiny. “I’ve been busy with the property settlement, Ann (my daughter—a long story

I'll explain later), and I do have a job, you know. Besides, New Smyrna Beach has never taken a direct hit from a hurricane."

Penny Sue sipped her coffee thoughtfully. I marveled that smoke didn't billow from her ears, the wheels in her head were whirling so fast.

"Better safe than sorry. That's our first priority tomorrow. You have the day off, don't you, Leigh?"

"I took the whole week off in case we have to go to Orlando for the depositions."

"Good," she said emphatically. "A box of supplies won't take much effort, and we really should do it before a storm heads this way. If we wait, grocery shelves will be bare. It may already be too late. Stores sell out of water, bread, and toilet paper first thing."

Water and bread I could understand. Toilet paper? The stress of the storms gave everyone the runs? Possible, I suppose. In any event, I wasn't going to argue with Penny Sue. She'd morphed into her take-charge, schoolteacher persona. There was no reasoning with that one.

Understand, Penny Sue is not a multiple personality. She's simply a Leo, who has to be on top and in charge. God forbid something should happen that she wasn't prepared for. Yet, a kinder person you'd never find. "You've never been loved until you've been loved by a Leo," Ruthie had said repeatedly. "They're generous to a fault." But, like the lion in the *Wizard of Oz*, you'd better acknowledge a Leo's generosity and importance or that big ego was shattered. She didn't cry like Dorothy's hairy friend in Oz—a pout was more Penny Sue's style. You could tell her feelings were hurt when her lower lip protruded.

Of course, with the silicon lip injections Hollywood stars got nowadays, it was hard to tell when they were sulking. To me, most movie stars looked like they were pouting or, worse, had recently been backhanded in the mouth.

“I don’t want to stay in that closet again. If Charley heads this way, we should evacuate, don’t you think?” Ruthie said nervously.

Penny Sue ran her fingers through her meticulously streaked hair—four colors, she’d informed us, a three hundred dollar job. “There’s no need to run if it’s only a Category 1 storm that’s moving fast. Heck, those things only last a few hours. A little champagne and caviar and you won’t even notice it.”

Ruthie looked doubtful. “Don’t you remember how hot the room got the last time?”

I snatched a coaster and put my mug on the coffee table. “Guess what? There’s a vent at the back of the closet. I found it when I packed away my linens and discovered it was closed.”

“All that sweating for nothing?” Penny Sue went to the closet and peeked in. She reeled backward, bumping Lu Nee 2, which unleashed a torrent of “Whoops!, Watch outs!, Take me to your leader.”

“Lord,” she grumbled, smacking the button on Lu Nee’s head. “Where did all this stuff come from?”

I cleared my throat. “Well,” I started sheepishly, “I had to move out of my house fast and didn’t have time to sort through everything. So I brought it with me.”

Penny Sue stared, pointing at the closet. “Don’t tell me these are the linens Zack took half of? Like these are all bottom sheets, no tops?”

Yep, the rat took all the tops, no bottoms. One of each pair of pillowcases. I smiled weakly, hating to admit my foolishness.

“Well, it’s got to go. We need room for a cooler and some chairs.” Penny Sue screwed her nose up. “Why do you want that stuff? It’s no good—you don’t have a complete set of anything. Bad memories, it’s nothing but bad memories. Put the past behind you. Throw them away.”

She was right; I didn't have a whole set of anything, thanks to my sleazy ex-husband. The worm took half of everything in our house. Half the pictures on the wall, half the furniture, and half of each set of china and crystal, and we had a lot—several generations of china from both our families. As the old joke goes, if Jesus came back to feed the ten thousand, a Southern woman would have a place setting for everyone.

The sneaky beast had waited until I went to visit my parents then swooped in like a vulture. The hatefulness stunned me, considering he was responsible for the divorce. Mr. Big Shot Attorney found himself a young stripper while he entertained clients. And the sleazebag had the gall to rent a house for his mistress in our neighborhood. Every night I went to bed thinking he was sanding wood in his garage workshop. Hell, he was stroking silicon breasts!

His scam worked for over a year, until our daughter, Ann, was picked up for DUI late one night. I went to the garage to tell Zack. His car was gone.

“Why are you glaring at me?” Penny Sue asked, her bottom lip inching forward. “Keep the linens, if you want. It was only a suggestion.”

“Sorry,” I said, shaking off the rotten memories. “I was thinking of Zack.”

Penny Sue nodded sympathetically. A person who'd been around the altar three times, she had her own regrets—the worst being Sydney, her second husband, who turned out to be bisexual. It's one thing to be dumped for a woman, and quite another to be dumped for a man. That was a real slap in the face for her, as well as for Judge Parker. Yep, her daddy took Sydney's shenanigans very personally. Penny Sue is quite wealthy as a result of that parting.

“Sorry, Leigh, I didn't mean to drag up dirty linen.” She smirked, pleased with her witticism.

I rolled my eyes.

“What if it’s a Category 2 storm?” Ruthie asked, anxiously, having missed the whole conversation about Zack. “We won’t stay then, will we? There would probably be storm surge; we could be flooded.”

Penny Sue huffed. “There are two big dunes between us and the beach, for crissakes. If it makes you feel better, we’ll evacuate for a Category 2. Of course, that means we’ll have to go to a school and sit in a hallway with a bunch of screaming kids.”

“School?” Ruthie repeated, biting her fingernail. “I figured we’d go to one of the hotels in Orlando or St. Augustine.”

“*If* we can get a room. This is tourist season—everything’s already booked.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Ruthie replied.

Our sensitive friend was working herself into a tizzy. Ruthie had run her hands through her hair so many times her bangs were standing straight up. I patted her knee reassuringly. “Don’t worry—the storm won’t hit us. It’s south of Cuba and headed for the Gulf. We’ll lay in supplies as a precaution. New Smyrna has never taken a direct hit.”

“Everyone keeps saying that. Did you ever think that we might be overdue? Besides, a glancing blow from a Category 2 storm is nothing to sneeze at. Winds can be as high as 110 mph.” Her voice was up an octave. “Imagine driving a car at 110 mph and sticking your arm out of the window. Think how that would feel!”

Ouch! I’d never thought in those terms. My stomach suddenly knotted. “Maybe we should try to find a hotel.”

“Y’all are worrywarts,” Penny Sue said, eyeing the clock. “Only a few minutes left of my birthday, and you’re whining about something that may never happen.” She sashayed to the

kitchen and poured herself a Bailey's on the rocks. "Come on, let's party!" She held her drink up.

Ruthie and I shook our heads. One liquor-laced coffee was enough.

"I know what you need." Penny Sue pushed the CD for *Midlife Crisis* into the boom box and turned the volume to high. The musical's spoof of "Heat Wave" bounced from the vaulted ceiling.

Glass held high, Penny Sue twirled to the driving rhythm. Suddenly, she planted her feet. Snapping her fingers like the dance scene in *West Side Story*, she gyrated toward us, stopped within inches of our faces and crooned, "It's a hot flash burning up my spine. ... A hot flash that makes my forehead shine." She snapped her fingers. "Come on," she chided, "don't be sticks in the mud."

The energy was infectious. I glanced at Ruthie, who shrugged and giggled. "What the hell?"

Next thing I knew, Ruthie and I were gulping wine, shaking our booties, and singing three-part harmony.

The heck with Charley! Tomorrow was another day. Now, we were going to party for the last few minutes of Penny Sue's birthday.

Chapter 2

August 13

Rinn-ng, rinn-ng. BAM, BAM, BAM. “Halt, who goes there?”
Lu Nee 2’s mechanical voice squawked.

I rolled to my side and checked the clock. Eight AM. What dimwit would come calling at eight in the morning? Then I realized it was Friday the thirteenth. Fitting. I hoped this wasn’t an omen for the rest of the day. I snatched my robe from the end of the bed and headed down the hall followed by Ruthie. Penny Sue was already at the door, eye pressed against the peephole, hands holding her head. It looked like she’d slightly over-celebrated with the Bailey’s Irish Cream.

Penny Sue was a sight, as my mother says, with her hair standing on end and mascara streaking her cheeks. The only saving grace was a spiffy, pink print kimono.

“It’s a tall, skinny guy with salt and pepper hair,” she whispered.

I nudged her aside and took a look. “That’s Guthrie.”

Penny Sue regarded me like I'd dropped in from outer space. "Guthrie? Who the heck," she paused to massage her temples, "is Guthrie? What kind of name is that?"

"He's staying in the two-story unit on the far left. His name is Guthrie Fribble."

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "Guthrie Fribble? You've got to be kidding." She turned on her heel. "It's barely light, for godsakes! I'm not in the mood for Fribble's dribble." She stomped past me to the master suite and slammed the door.

BAM, BAM, BAM. Whether Guthrie heard Penny Sue's comment, I don't know, but he was not giving up. "Leigh, it's me, Guthrie. Something's happened! Something bad," he shouted.

Penny Sue must have been listening from her bedroom. The "something bad" apparently got her attention. She barreled from her room and opened the front door.

The three of us must have been an eye full, because Guthrie went mute.

"What happened?" Penny Sue demanded.

Guthrie, barefooted and dressed in baggy jeans with a very faded Arlo Guthrie tee shirt, backed away.

I patted the air soothingly. "Sorry, you woke us up." Guthrie was an old hippie—about 50, I guessed—who might have done a few too many drugs in his youth. Still, he was a neighbor who'd been staying in his aunt and uncle's place for the last few months. My intuition said he was gay, though it really didn't make any difference. He'd always been nice to me and was a good guy as far as I could tell. "What happened?"

"Little Mrs. King's in the hospital. Someone tried to break into her condo, and she had a heart attack."

My hand went to my mouth. I had no idea who he was talking about. "Mrs. King?" I asked sheepishly.