

Chapter 1

“How was your first day at work?” Ruthie set her book aside and smiled hopefully at Penny Sue, who scuffed down the hall of my condo. I followed, careful to keep my distance. Penny Sue was in a foul mood.

“My feet are killing me!” Penny Sue kicked off her red-soled Christian Louboutin pumps and headed to my refrigerator. “Leigh, do you have any Chardonnay?” she asked, butt up, rummaging through the lower compartment. A moment later she was on her knees, stretching to the back of the bottom shelf.

“No, but there’s some Sauvignon Blanc in the door.”

Penny Sue swiveled with a loud grunt, grasped the edge of the counter, and hauled herself to her feet, cradling the bottle of wine. Without so much as a “thank you,” she pulled the cork out of the bottle with her teeth and filled a juice glass she found in the cabinet. She took a long swig. “Not Chardonnay, but okay,” she heaved, finishing the wine and pouring another. “This stuff isn’t half bad. Have any more?” Penny Sue asked as she held up the empty bottle.

“Are you willing to share it with Ruthie and me?”

She raised her chin regally. “Of course! I was just a little stressed. Please forgive my rudeness.”

“There’s a case in the utility room.”

Penny Sue’s eyes sparkled as she brushed past me to the hall. I could almost hear her thoughts, *“A case! Party hearty!”*

I shook my head. As a proper Southern woman raised in Roswell, Georgia, Penny Sue's mother, bless her heart, was no doubt having a conniption as she stared down from Heaven at her only daughter. I could almost hear her snap, "Penny Sue, I taught you better than that! Only heathens drink straight from a bottle! And where is your napkin?"

Things change, and Momma hadn't been around for a long time to keep an eye on her impetuous daughter. Penny Sue's father, Judge Warren Parker, who we affectionately called "Judge Daddy," thought raising children was a woman's job, so he didn't keep close tabs on his daughter after his dear wife passed away. Basically, the Judge only got involved when Penny Sue did something completely outrageous, which had happened far too frequently in recent years. The downhill slide in Penny Sue's behavior accelerated when her hormones started to go haywire at about age 45. Lord knows what would happen when she turned 50, an age that Ruthie Nichols, Penny Sue Parker and I, Leigh Stratton, were approaching fast.

Sorority sisters at the University of Georgia, we drifted apart after graduation, what with the marriages, children, and divorces, but reunited when I canned my slime ball husband who was having an affair with a stripper our daughter's age. That's when I was initiated into the DAFFODILS (Divorced And Finally Free Of Deceitful, Insensitive, Licentious Scum®), and Penny Sue and Ruthie tried to cheer me up with a vacation in New Smyrna Beach. As the Fates (Ruthie's word) would have it, I stumbled over a dead body, which wasn't particularly cheery but did take my mind off my sorrows.

That initial event set a precedent. Since then, I'd moved to New Smyrna Beach and was living in a condo next door to Judge Parker's unit, but every time Ruthie and Penny Sue came to visit, we invariably encountered one or more dead people. Understand, it was never our fault, but unnerving, to say the least.

Back in college, Penny Sue always said we were women cut from the same cloth. Same cloth, ha! It had to be a patchwork quilt! Although most of my sorority sisters were pampered southern belles, my family was a hundred percent middle class. And our looks were just as diverse. Penny Sue was tall, pudgy, with streaked brown hair and decided kewpie doll tendencies in makeup and dress. Expensive, almost haute couture, yet kewpie doll, nonetheless. In college she had an hourglass figure that attracted men like ants to honey, but she had put on a few pounds over the years so the bottom of the hourglass was now larger than the slightly drooping top.

Ruthie hadn't changed a bit. She was shorter than we were, about five six, and disgustingly slim. A typical strawberry blonde, fair and freckled, she favored clothes with tailored, simple lines—the ones that were so minimal they shouted, “mega-bucks!”

On the other hand I was middle-of-the-road. I was tall like Penny Sue, though a little slimmer, and my shoulder-length brown hair was darker than hers by a couple of shades. I bought my clothes on sale at Dillards and Talbots favoring elastic waists and comfort whenever possible. When I did dress up, I opted for tailored suits and dresses that didn't shout anything. Rather, they spoke in a normal voice.

I glanced at Penny Sue as she popped the cork on the bottle of wine. The way she was slugging down wine, you'd think she'd been through a horrible ordeal. I loved working at the library and was very grateful to land a position there after budget cuts eliminated my job at the Marine Conservation Center. The people were nice, and I would be eligible for health insurance and a retirement plan.

One day volunteering at the library and Penny Sue was already complaining. Heck, she'd spent most of the day in training. Thank the Lord I didn't have to train her. Guthrie Fribble, our neighbor and library volunteer, was given that honor. Being spacey most of the time, Guthrie was probably the only person

on the planet who could stand eight straight hours of Penny Sue. As a newly hired Library Aid assigned to checkout and shelving books, I caught sight of them several times during the day. Penny Sue's expression was extreme boredom; Guthrie's was full of enthusiasm and glee. Glee for sorting books, you wonder? Well, you have to know him. An old hippie in his fifties, Guthrie's sunny disposition could have something to do with overindulging in herbs and pharmaceuticals in his Woodstock days. Even his name, Guthrie, was a moniker that stuck from his love for Arlo Guthrie and the movie *Alice's Restaurant*.

Penny Sue's day actually was a big deal, because it was the longest she'd ever worked in her life. Until recently she'd been a very wealthy woman, mostly due to the settlement she received from Sydney, her second husband, who turned out to be bisexual. Judge Parker took Sydney's aberrant (the Judge's word) sexual preference as a personal affront and went for the jugular. Poor Sydney paid dearly for that parting. Sadly, Penny Sue ignored her father's investment advice about diversification and not putting all of one's eggs in the same basket. Like other wealthy people, she fell for the Madoff scam, investing and losing most of her fortune. She was dumb and trusting, just like I was with my divorce settlement. My ex-husband, Zack, was a partner at Parker, Hanson and Swindal, the Judge's prestigious Atlanta law firm. Swindal, the name fit Zack to a tee. I'd be living in a tent if Judge Daddy hadn't stepped in to help. And Madoff's name, pronounced made-off, should have been a clue to that sleazeball's intentions. Maybe there *was* something to karma, vibrations, and the Law of Attraction as Ruthie, our New Age expert, claimed.

Back to Penny Sue's plight. Fed up with her three marriages and numerous escapades, Judge Parker finally had enough. He refused to help her unless she sold her stately Roswell, Georgia home that overlooked a lake, and turned over a new leaf. He offered to let her live in his New Smyrna Beach condo rent-free,

provided she went to work. Getting a job in the middle of a recession presented a problem for a woman whose only skill was throwing parties, and she had contracted most of those out.

Guthrie and I convinced her to volunteer at the library, with the hope it might work into a paying job with benefits one day. At least it would give her something other than marriages, divorces, and parties to put on her resumé. So, Penny Sue was living in the other half of our beachfront duplex and working with me at the library. Whoopee! Don't get me wrong, I love Penny Sue, but her presence invariably means trouble.

"Who wants wine?" Penny Sue called. "It's warm, so you'll have to use some ice."

Ruthie and I signaled that we did. One more glass of wine would, hopefully, give Penny Sue time to process her day, and she'd go home to her side of the duplex where her houseguest, Cousin Kevin, likely waited.

I pulled out real wine glasses that Penny Sue stuffed with ice. Ruthie sauntered to the counter that partitioned the kitchen off from the dining area and great room. "So you had a bad day?" she asked Penny Sue.

Penny Sue filled her glass, took a sip, then poured ours and passed them around. "Remind me never to wear heels to work again."

I rolled my eyes. "Penny Sue, why would you wear \$800 pumps to work? Didn't you know you'd be on your feet all day?"

"I wanted to make a good impression. You know Daddy says I have to get a real job."

I shook my head. "This is the beach; people dress casually. The Dior suit with those fancy shoes made you stick out like a peacock in a flock of crows."

"Hey, there were some other well-dressed women in the library."

"That was the New Smyrna Ladies' Investment Club. They meet at the library every week. They're all skinny and dressed to kill, but you outdid them."

“And I was wearing an old outfit.” Penny Sue arched a brow and grinned smugly. “Guthrie loved it.”

“Of course,” I said. “Guthrie’s gay. He appreciates quality and probably wished he had your shoes. I think his feet are about your size.” I backed up out of her poke range and did my best to keep a straight face.

“Tacky! You are just tacky. Besides, you know Guthrie prefers jeans and tee shirts.” Penny Sue tossed her hair that was down to only two colors now that she was pinching pennies. No more \$300 multi-color highlight jobs. “He said I really classed up the place.”

I glanced down at my black slacks and tailored cotton shirt. Perhaps I should spiff up a little if I wanted a promotion.

“In fact,” Penny Sue went on, “a man reading magazines couldn’t take his eyes off me.”

“The man with curly brown hair and a navy striped shirt?” I asked.

“Yes.” Her bottom lip inched forward, a sure sign Penny Sue was peeved by my question. “Why do you ask? Do you know him?”

“He comes to the library all the time. We suspect he’s homeless, a pedophile, or a man on the prowl the way he gawks at the investment club ladies. He was probably surprised to see someone dressed better than the other women. Or, he could have been watching Guthrie.”

Penny Sue’s eyes narrowed and her lips pursed to a full pout. Thankfully Ruthie, our resident peacemaker, interrupted. “Shouldn’t we invite Kevin to join us? He worked all day on his debate and is probably ready for a break. I spoke with him earlier and he seemed upset. Maybe his presentation isn’t going well.”

“Sure, give him a call.” I winked at Penny Sue.

Ruthie had been staying with me for the last several months since her elderly father passed away. He left her millions, not counting the mansion in the elite Buckhead section of Atlanta.

Alone and grieving, Ruthie moved in with me. She was massively depressed for weeks but she perked up with the arrival of Kevin Harrington, Penny Sue's first cousin. Kevin was in town for the New Smyrna Beach Founders' Day celebration, which included a scholarly debate at the library on whether New Smyrna Beach or St. Augustine was the oldest city in North America. In sharp contrast to his rambunctious cousin, Kevin was a soft-spoken, serious historian on sabbatical from Columbia University. He was also exactly the right person to draw Ruthie out of mourning. Penny Sue and I were thrilled to see Ruthie smile after his arrival, a first since her father's death. She'd even begun venturing out of the condo alone.

"They'd be a perfect—" Penny Sue stopped suddenly as Ruthie returned with a wide grin.

"He'll be over directly. Guthrie's with him."

"No-o," Penny Sue moaned as she thumped her forehead on the kitchen cabinet. "How did he get into this? Eight hours of Guthrie is all I can take."

"There was something about a female acquaintance from Kevin's days at Yale—" Ruthie started but didn't have time to finish. Guthrie came barreling down the hall with Kevin trailing behind.

"Man, do we need a drink. Glad you called so we could get rid of her. That lady was a real bitch! Snappy doesn't begin to describe her. Maybe it's because she's quitting smoking; I saw one of those patches on her shoulder. Whatever it was, she makes my crazy Aunt Harriet look good." Guthrie hopped on a stool in his usual place at the corner of the L-shaped counter. "Got a scotch?"

"Sure. What can I get you?" I asked Kevin.

"Man, he probably wants a gun," Guthrie said. "Hide the weapons and ammunition."

Kevin answered quietly, "Wine would be fine."

As I fixed the drinks and pulled out some cheese and crackers, Penny Sue went for the details. “What woman? What’s going on?”

“Her name’s Abby and she’s, like, a witch—”

Ruthie turned on Guthrie with uncharacteristic forcefulness. “Hush! Let Kevin tell the story.”

Kevin sighed and took a sip of his drink, eyes downcast. “The woman is Dr. Abigail Johnston. She dropped by to inform me that she’s representing St. Augustine in the debate tomorrow night at the library.”

“I thought you were debating your old friend Dr. Willows, who teaches at Deland University. He’s the one who wrote a book about Central Florida,” Penny Sue said.

Kevin stared in his glass uncomfortably. “I thought that too. It seems Willows changed his mind and invited Abby to take his place. Willows is going to moderate.”

“Why is that a problem?” Ruthie asked.

Kevin took a seat at the counter, eyes still lowered.

“Because the lady’s a bitchy witch,” Guthrie blurted. “She had this, like, evil smirk when she told Kevin she was taking Willows’ place. And she sneered that she looked forward to,” Guthrie rolled his eyes, “taking Kevin to task.” Guthrie gulped his scotch. “I think she’s been stalking us.” He turned to Penny Sue. “Remember the lady in the Books For Sale room? The one with blonde hair and a black outfit? That’s her! She was in there for hours. Man, like, who would spend hours in a used book room? I’ll bet she was watching us. She most likely knew you were Kevin’s cousin. I think she’s a black widow,” Guthrie exclaimed with full drama. “You know, the kind of woman who lures men in, then slits their throats.”

Penny Sue scowled at Guthrie. “Your imagination is running wild. But, I do remember her. She was wearing a good looking pants suit that caught my eye.”

“Wait.” I held up my hands. “She purchased a book from me, a really old book about the history of Florida. In fact, I thought

it might be one from the rare books section that accidentally wound up in the sale room. I consulted a reference librarian before I sold it. Turns out it was donated to the library and not part of our collection. Abby only paid five dollars.”

“Ha! She probably, like, ripped off the spine label and penciled in a price on the book. I’ll bet it’s a limited edition, million dollar book, and she got it for five bucks!”

“Guthrie, you’re getting ahead of yourself,” Kevin objected.

“What’s new?” Penny Sue muttered as she stuffed a cracker in her mouth.

“Forget the book. Abby and I used to live together,” Kevin said.

Our mouths dropped as one, except Penny Sue, who sputtered her cracker. “Sorry,” she mumbled, snatching a sponge and wiping crumbs from the counter. “You lived together? When?”

“In graduate school at Yale. That’s how Willows, Abby, and I know each other. We were all working on our Ph.D.’s at the same time. Abby and I fell in love, or so I thought, when we were researching Spanish Florida and Ponce de Leon. Shortly after we received our degrees, she up and left, taking our research with her.”

“Man, I knew she was a black widow.”

Ruthie poked Guthrie’s arm. “Shh, let Kevin finish.”

“Wait a minute.” Penny Sue stared at Ruthie. “And don’t poke me! He’s my cousin and I’m allowed to ask a question.” Then to Kevin, “She stole your research? Why didn’t you sue or something? Your mother would faint if she knew you took that lying down.”

Kevin shrugged. “Mom knew and wanted me to sue. But I was young and truly loved Abby. At first I was in shock and deep depression. By the time I snapped out of it, she’d published her Register Award-winning history of St. Augustine, which incorporated much of our work. If I had said anything then, it would have looked like sour grapes and possibly damaged my career.”

“She stole it from you!” Ruthie said.

“Yes, but proving it would be hard. We did the research together. It was a joint effort. Separating out who did what would be close to impossible, so I decided to let it slide.”

Guthrie drained his glass and plunked it down on the counter. “Good for you, man. Like Hugh Prather says, ‘Peace of mind is more important than diarrhea.’”

Penny Sue gave Guthrie a sour look. “I’ve had a tiresome day. Can we please stay away from bowel movements? My head is full of library and Dewey decimals; I can’t take New Age philosophy right now.”

“Did Willows know the details of your split with Abby?” I asked. For Dr. Willows to spring something like this on Kevin at the last minute seemed awfully convenient, or rather inconvenient, to me. In fact, it was downright hateful. I thought he and Willows were friends, yet this was not the way a man would treat his buddy.

“Yes, Willows knew. The three of us socialized quite a bit.” Kevin raked his fingers through his thick salt and pepper hair. “In fact, I’ve often wondered if Willows had something to do with Abby walking out on me. I suspected Willows had a crush on Abby, considering the way he seemed to show up wherever we went.”

“Jealousy. Maybe he’s harbored a grudge about your relationship with Abby all of these years and is trying to get even,” Ruthie said.

Kevin went back to studying his wine with a hangdog look. “Or discredit me because I interviewed for the Chairmanship of Deland University’s History Department. I’m sure Willows is my major competitor for the position, and there’s no one who knows my findings on New Smyrna’s history better than Abby. If Willows wanted to make me look like a fool, Abby’s the best person to enlist.”

“That’s why she came over here acting so high and mighty,” Guthrie said. “She’s in cahoots with Willows and trying to psyche you out!”

Kevin stared at Guthrie for several beats. “You might be right.”

Chapter 2

An extensive schedule of Founders' Day Celebrations preceded the library debate over which city was discovered first, New Smyrna or St. Augustine. The historical consensus said St. Augustine was first, founded by the Spanish in 1565. New Smyrna's founding was attributed to a Brit—actually a Scotsman—Dr. Andrew Turnbull, in 1768.

Leading the single largest attempt by the British to establish a colony in the New World, Turnbull recruited some fifteen hundred indentured servants from the Mediterranean isle of Minorca to make the voyage to Florida. Unfortunately, Turnbull and his thug overseers were mean, rotten managers. That, plus Indian attacks and a food shortage, eventually led the workers to revolt and march seventy miles north to St. Augustine, where they sought refuge.

Although the national flag that flew over St. Augustine changed from Spanish to British, to Spanish, to the United States, to the Confederacy, and finally back to the United States, the true paradox of the whole mess was that the descendants of the Minorcans, a large portion of Turnbull's New Smyrna colony, made up the venerable families of St. Augustine today. Therefore, as television and newspaper reporters often pointed out, in a sense, New Smyrna was the backbone of present day St. Augustine. Naturally, that notion fueled the competition

and newspapers in both cities were flooded with editorials criticizing the scholars and the debate. Dissension even erupted between the Minorcans and other factions within St. Augustine.

The debate was a good idea gone bad. A genteel, scholarly discourse had the potential of turning into a slugfest. The police and press established a presence in the library's parking lot hours before the event was scheduled to begin. Word of the satellite trucks and cameras spread like wildfire, meaning additional people from all camps suddenly decided to attend with the hopes of getting on TV.

I worked at the library that day, but planned to take off early in order to change clothes for the event. Like many modern libraries, the building was a sprawling, one story structure. The main entrance faced the parking lot and was comprised of automatic, sliding glass doors that opened onto a foyer and hallway leading to the auditorium and lavatories. The library proper was behind another set of glass doors that could be locked and were flanked by metal detectors. The layout was designed to allow meetings in the auditorium after regular library hours. Considering the crowd massing in the parking lot, it was a good thing the library could be locked down, at least providing the participants a quiet place to wait for the big show. The plan was to bring Kevin and the others into the main library through a side door hidden by a high plastic fence. The fence enclosed a picnic table used by the staff for breaks and lunches on pleasant days.

As the day wore on and the parking lot continued to fill, the Branch Librarian, Terry, told me to go home before lunch. When I showed up at the condo about noon, my news about the TV satellite trucks sent Penny Sue and Ruthie into a clothes frenzy. Actually, I was in a slight panic myself. The drab cotton slacks and tailored blouse were no longer appropriate. We decided not to say anything to Kevin or Guthrie about all of the hoopla, figuring Kevin might get nervous and Guthrie would surely tell Kevin.

We drove two cars to the library. Penny Sue and Kevin went in Ruthie's Jaguar while Guthrie rode with me. We parked in a gymnasium parking lot next door, at the direction of police, and Ruthie and I spirited Kevin to the side door of the library where I punched in the security code.

Guthrie and Penny Sue went in the front door, since they were scheduled to staff the library's entrance, passing out programs and directing guests to the auditorium that had been expanded to its full capacity. The anticipated crowd of scholars and government officials did turn out, especially groups from St. Augustine. The mere suggestion that New Smyrna was founded before St. Augustine caused blood pressures to soar and fingernails to curve into claws. Big bucks were at stake since an entire tourist industry was built on the premise that St. Augustine was the Ancient City.

Not to be outdone, the New Smyrna Chamber of Commerce, Ladies' Investment Club, and Association of Realtors organized a sizeable contingency of their own. This was economic war, and New Smyrna was not going to be outdone by a bunch of over-advertised promoters and a city with half its population, who barely counted as Floridians given their close proximity to the Georgia state line! Substantial bets had been placed on the outcome of the debate fueled by all the news coverage, giving the affair the feel of a horse race.

Everyone was dressed in their finest for the benefit of local TV. Penny Sue wore a three-year-old (unbelievable by her previous standards) jersey Chanel dress with a front slit up to her hoo-ha. The outfit would have been obscene except that she had the good sense to wear opaque tights. That was the extent of the Derby ambiance at the front door. Guthrie was dressed in his usual evening attire—an ancient madras shirt, wrinkled khaki slacks, and a skinny striped tie that may have served as a bungee cord from time to time. Penny Sue could barely contain her disdain

for his outfit, giving him disgusted looks between her Southern sugary greetings.

In truth, Guthrie's outfit didn't really matter, since few guests even noticed it. To a person, they snatched a program, immediately flipped to Kevin's and Abigail's biographies, and studied their credentials like a racing form. Many additional bets were placed before attendees reached the auditorium.

Inside the library proper, Ruthie and I were also dressed in our best. Ruthie wore a classic Dolce & Gabbana square-necked shift with a pale pink shawl. My finest was a black pants suit I'd purchased at Talbots for half price. Ruthie tagged along to give Kevin moral support. We made small talk for several minutes, wondering if Willows and Abby were going to show up, when Guthrie banged on the glass doors that separated the main library from the packed foyer. Willows, Abby, and a tall, distinguished gray-haired man were squeezing through the horde behind Guthrie. The tall gentleman had his arm firmly around Abby's back and shoulder as he cleared a path; otherwise, the petite lady would have been crushed. I raced to the glass doors and punched the button to open them. Willows and Abby slid through.

"What a mob!" Abby said breathlessly as she smoothed her sleeveless silk sheath.

"It sure is." Willows was grinning from ear to ear.

"Didn't you get the message about entering through the side door?" I asked.

"Yes, but I ran into my old friend Peter O'Brien in the parking lot, so we accompanied him to the front door," Willows replied. "I wasn't expecting such a big crowd."

"Well, no harm done." I led them to a table next to the children's department that had been set up for their use before the debate. Each scholar lugged a laptop as well as assorted books and notes that they gladly dumped on the table. They took

seats in upholstered chairs that had a good view of the front door. Willows stretched out lazily with a satisfied grin, watching the incoming crowd. Kevin had already powered up his computer and was reviewing his notes. Abby frantically dug in her purse and finally came up with a small leather-clad flask. She smiled.

“My throat is parched,” she said hoarsely. “I could use a nip to settle my nerves. Is there a water fountain with cups around here?”

“There’s one around the corner,” I replied, hooking my thumb toward the children’s area.

“I’ll get you a cup,” Kevin said with a chuckle. “I see you still need a little Jack Black courage before a performance.”

Abby smiled wryly as she half-filled the small paper cup Kevin retrieved. She chugged the liquor. “Thank you. Would you like some?” She tipped the flask toward us. Everyone declined. “Come on, Kevin. You don’t want a sip for old times sake?” Abby cooed.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I’ve gone beyond those days.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out a small container of breath strips. “Maybe you should take one of these, Abby. That stuff reeks to high heaven.”

She ran her fingertips down his forearm before sliding two strips from the container. “God, Kevin, you’ve really stiffened up with age.”

“No, I grew up,” he countered, and stuffed the small plastic container in his pocket.

Ruthie was clearly not happy with Abby’s flirtation. Normally filled with peace and love, Ruthie’s lips drew tighter and tighter until they all but disappeared. Uh oh, a fight was in the making. The liquor sure hit Abby fast! Or maybe she’d had a drink earlier, I thought. Whatever the reason, Abby’s antics had certainly rubbed Ruthie the wrong way. I needed to do something to diffuse the situation. “How rude of me,” I blurted. “Can I get the

rest of you something to drink before the debate starts? We have sodas and bottled water.” Willows wanted a Coke while Kevin asked for bottled water and directions to the men’s room.

I sent Kevin to the children’s department bathroom so he could avoid the crowd in the hall. “I could use a soda myself. Ruthie, would you help me carry the drinks?” I asked, anxious to put some distance between the two women.

“Sure,” Ruthie snapped, giving Abby a stern look.

We weren’t gone very long but when we returned, Kevin was standing alone perusing the new books display.

“What happened to your colleagues?” I asked.

He nodded in the direction of the stacks to his left. “Seems they’ve found something interesting over there.”

Willows and Abby were literally nose-to-nose in deep discussion. In fact, their noses would have touched if not for the books Abby clasped tightly to her chest. She was clearly telling Willows something he didn’t want to hear. A moment later, she turned on her heel and started to walk away. Willows, one hand in his pocket until then, reached out, grabbed her upper arm and swung her around to face him. It was then that he noticed us watching them. He flashed a weak grin, said something to Abby, perhaps an apology, and strode towards us. I glanced at the table and realized Abby had left her computer behind, but was carrying all of her books. Strange. Was she afraid one of us would steal them? Abby started after Willows but she caught her toe on the carpet and dropped several books. Willows kept walking and didn’t look back. Abby gathered her literary cargo, then rushed to catch up.

“Coke, just what I need,” Willows said, pointedly avoiding my eyes and focusing on the horde milling in the foyer. “We have quite a crowd,” he said with a wide grin. “It’s not often that historians draw such an audience.”

“It’s not often that so much money rides on historical facts,” I retorted.

Kevin's face twisted with confusion. "What do you mean, Leigh?"

"If you're right about New Smyrna pre-dating St. Augustine, a lot of tourist money is at stake."

"You're saying this quaint town could turn into a hectic tourist haven?" Kevin asked.

Willows chuckled. "Of course. What did you think this was about?"

"History!" Kevin said.

At that moment Terry stuck her head through the back door of the auditorium. "Show time! The place is packed, standing room only."

Kevin picked up his paraphernalia and clutched it tightly. He wore the expression of a man who suddenly realized he had no idea what he'd gotten into.

Predictably, the debate was heated. Abby claimed Ponce de Leon landed in St. Augustine in 1513, pointedly referring to her research with Kevin at Yale. Kevin did his best to maintain scholarly decorum over hoots and murmurs from the St. Augustine contingent. He questioned the generally accepted idea that New Smyrna's famous ruins called the Sugar Mill had been used for industrial purposes. Why did the structure have the design of a Spanish mission, and how to explain the religious artifacts found nearby? Kevin also pointed out that noted archeologists speculated the mission was constructed on Columbus' second voyage.

There was also the mystery of New Smyrna's Old Fort, covered by a mound of debris for most of its history. A restoration during the Depression unearthed the date 1513 carved on one of its massive coquina blocks. Who built it? Certainly not Ponce de Leon, even though the date coincided with his voyage. By all accounts, he didn't stay anywhere long enough to build such a substantial structure. Considering the style of its construction, Europeans had been in New Smyrna long before Ponce

arrived. Who could it be? Columbus was a possibility, but the most likely explanation was Castilian slave traders who'd sailed northward from the Caribbean islands.

"That's a bunch of hooley!" A shout came from a bald man wearing a shirt embroidered with the logo of a St. Augustine real estate firm.

Kevin wiped his brow. "Actually, slave traders regularly raided the Bahamas as early as 1494. Considering the size of the islands, the native population could not have been very large. It's likely that able-bodied workers were quickly captured, forcing slave traders to sail north."

"Yeah? Prove it!" the realtor yelled back.

"Las Casas' *History* tells us that slave traders sailed northward from today's Dominican Republic in early 1511," Kevin responded. "New Smyrna could certainly have been their landfall, and that was probably not their only journey. It's possible traders first arrived much earlier and constructed the fort to store provisions and imprison the unwitting natives they captured. It doesn't take much imagination to see that the cubicles of what remains of the fort could have been holding cells. And, when one considers that newly quarried coquina must harden for one to three years before it can be used in construction, that puts landfall in 1511 or earlier."

"Screw you and Las Casas!" The bald realtor flashed a rude hand gesture and the TV cameras turned in his direction. "That document could have been forged!" Peter O'Brien, the distinguished man who'd ushered Abby through the crowd, grabbed Baldy's arm and ushered him to the side of the room. Peter was obviously delivering a stern reprimand, but Baldy kept his mouth shut.

The cameras swung back to the panel as Kevin delivered his most damaging evidence to rebut Abby's St. Augustine thesis—the fact that her various reconstructions of Ponce's voyage and landfall in St. Augustine did not account for Gulf Stream currents and recent discoveries about shifts in the magnetic North

Pole. When that information was factored into readings from Ponce's voyage logs, it put old Ponce's actual stops in the area between Ormond Beach and New Smyrna.

Abby viciously attacked the credentials of every study and academic Kevin quoted. At times she was so agitated, Abby slurred her words and mopped perspiration from her face. Willows did his best to provoke the controversy by lobbing sarcastic zingers, most of them aimed at Kevin, while mugging for the TV cameras. As the debate waged on, the audience's hoots, boos, and shouted questions ramped up.

Unable to contain himself any longer, the bald realtor took a swing at O'Brien who'd tried to restrain him earlier and decked a New Smyrna commissioner in the process. That's when the Branch Librarian, who'd stationed herself by the door to the main library, sensed danger and called the Sheriff's Department on her cell phone. Two burly male officers and a tall female I recognized as Deputy Heather Brooks appeared within minutes.

They didn't arrive a moment too soon. An older woman with tight, pink curls had just swung her purse and whacked a young lady sporting a large *New Smyrna Beach First!* button upside the head. *New Smyrna First!* retaliated with a roundhouse blow from her oversized handbag that knocked the old lady on her keester. The old lady's nose-pierced daughter lunged at her mother's assailant, grabbing *New Smyrna First!* by the hair and slinging her into an elderly group in the next row. An aristocratic woman was floored.

The cameras rotated for a closeup.

"Grab patience and might!" Mrs. Aristocrat shouted as her husband helped her up.

"Grab my ass! Might this!" Nose-Ring screeched, and snatched Aristocrat by her perfectly styled hair. The perfect style came off in Nose-Ring's hand. Flabbergasted, Nose-Ring flung the wig over her shoulder as if it were a dead rat. The hairpiece

came flying back, skimmed the top of Nose-Ring's head and landed in Mr. Aristocrat's chair. The TV cameras focused in on a closeup as Mrs. Aristocrat dropped to her knees, hastily trying to reposition the wig. Then Mr. Aristocrat completely lost it and smacked Nose-Ring in the gut with his cane. Yet the crowning blow, literally, came when someone lobbed an open water bottle that hit Kevin squarely in the face. The plastic bottle splashed on a cameraman who shielded his recorder and made a hasty retreat.

That's when the deputies rushed in to separate the trouble-makers. Terry, the Branch Librarian, was fortunately very nimble. She dodged a soda can, announced that the debate was over, and thanked everyone for their enthusiastic participation. She then ducked and ran out the back door.

Penny Sue, eyes blazing with her kung fu don't-mess-with-me expression, raced to the panel and ushered Kevin out of the auditorium. Hunched low in case there were other projectiles, Ruthie and I herded Abby and Willows out of the room, with Guthrie close on our heels.

"Kevin, are you all right?" Guthrie asked. "Man, those people are vicious! They should be, like, shot or put in jail!"

"You're going to have a big bruise," Penny Sue said, ignoring Guthrie and stroking Kevin's forehead tenderly.

"I'm so sorry," Terry said. "I never expected a historical debate to inspire such rage."

"Money," I replied. "There's big money at stake with tourism and real estate values."

"Yes, but this is a library!"

"Money trumps everything," I said, turning my attention to Willows and Abby. Willows didn't appear to be overly troubled by the brawl except for the fact that his comb-over hairdo was askew, but Abby was sweating like a whore in church.

"That bottle may have been intended for you," Ruthie told Abby. "You're lucky you didn't get popped in the face, the way

Willows was stirring up the crowd. After all, most of the audience was probably from New Smyrna.”

Abby regarded Willows suspiciously and stepped aside.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” Willows retorted with a palms up. “I was merely trying to spur the debate.”

“You certainly did that,” Penny Sue said. “You incited a riot.” She stepped within inches of his face. Given her height in three-inch heels, she looked down her nose at his thinning hair. “Do you have investments in St. Augustine or something? Your moderating sure didn’t seem impartial to me.” Willows backed up. Penny Sue’s kung fu mode was very intimidating.

“I’m horrified you’d suggest such a thing,” Willows objected. “I was absolutely impartial. I had nothing to do with that *mêlée*.”

“Yeah, right,” Penny Sue said, eyes narrowed.

Abby, looking flushed, asked directions to a bathroom.

“Here, I’ll take you.” Terry grasped Abby’s elbow. They headed to the children’s department since attendees were still being ushered out of the building under Deputy Heather’s watchful eye.

Terry returned shortly. “I believe Abby is more upset than she let on. She was rubbing her chest and breathing heavily when she went into the bathroom. I suspect she’s having an anxiety attack and needs some alone time to collect herself.”

Collect herself or sneak a swig of Jack Black? I thought.

Terry turned to Penny Sue, Guthrie, and me. “I anticipated the debate would go late, so I gave the cleaning crew the night off. I sure didn’t expect the audience to start throwing things! There’s a needlepoint meeting scheduled first thing tomorrow morning. Could you meet me here at eight-thirty to pick up the trash? I hate to impose, but don’t want to call the regular staff this late at night. I don’t know about you, but I’m too tired to deal with it now.”

“Of course, we’d be happy to help,” Penny Sue answered in the gushy drawl she usually reserved for wealthy men.

“Thanks, I really appreciate it. I have to close up the back office now. When the audience clears, you’re all free to leave. I’ll turn off the lights and lock up.”

“They can’t clear out fast enough for me,” Penny Sue said after Terry left. “I need a great big glass of Chardonnay.”

Chapter 3

It was unusually cold for Florida and New Smyrna Beach—mid-40s. Such temperatures were virtually unheard of in October, a once-in-a-decade occurrence. Guthrie, Penny Sue, and I arrived at the library simultaneously and parked our vehicles side by side waiting for Terry to show up. Guthrie was in his Lemon Aid VW bus that was outfitted to fix old (lemon) computers, while Penny Sue and I were in my new VW Beetle. Both vehicles' heaters were running full blast since none of us had wardrobes for such chilly weather.

Guthrie opened his window and motioned at Penny Sue. She cracked her window enough to hear him.

"How long is this weather going to last?" Guthrie asked.

Penny Sue zipped her sweater to her throat and answered through the small space at the top of the glass. "Ruthie says it should pass in a day or two." Ruthie was our news junkie and Weather Channel expert who put her heartless cardiologist ex-husband through med school while working as a librarian. I suppose that's where she developed a passion for information. Given half a chance, Ruthie would watch cable news shows and read newspapers all day long. "One must be informed," was one of her favorite adages. Yet, deep down, I wondered if her obsession with staying on top of everything didn't come from being blindsided by her cheating husband.

“Bummer!” Guthrie rolled up his window.

Penny Sue hit the window’s switch and shut hers, too. “Bummer is right. It never gets this cold in Florida. Our power went off last night. Did yours? I thought I’d freeze my butt off. I almost had a heart attack when I took a shower. The water was frigid!” She pulled down the visor and checked her lipstick. “I didn’t bring clothes for this kind of weather. Did you?”

“I thought I was finished with winter, so I gave most of my warm clothes away when I moved down from Atlanta. I have two jackets—the one I have on and one I lent to Ruthie. Sorry.”

“Never mind, I’ll go shopping later. Your jackets wouldn’t fit me, anyway.” God’s truth. If Penny Sue could get her arm in the sleeve, she surely couldn’t button my jacket over her boobs. She’d always been buxom, but her perimenopausal weight gain added a few inches everywhere. Penny Sue flashed a smile at Guthrie, who was blowing on his hands. His old bus’ heater was obviously not in tune with the times or temperature. “This being poor is awful!” Penny Sue grouched. “I would normally call my housekeeper and have my cashmere coats shipped down. But I don’t have a housekeeper anymore and, God willing, won’t have a house either. I can’t believe Daddy is putting me through this. He said I was muleheaded. Can you believe that? Muleheaded!”

I clamped my lips shut. Tar Baby was not going to say a word. I was not going to mention all of Penny Sue’s husbands, messy divorces, excesses, and escapades that pushed Daddy to the brink. Penny Sue’s investment and loss to Madoff was merely the icing on the cake. Judge Daddy told her not to do it, and she did it anyway. He was majorly annoyed. Fortunately, Terry pulled up beside us, giving me an excuse to ignore Penny Sue’s question. I buttoned my jacket, hooked my pocketbook on my arm, and got out of the car. Penny Sue raced for the front door, beating Terry. Guthrie followed, hopping and flapping his arms like a spastic chicken. I arrived at the moment the doors slid apart and rushed into the foyer. Balancing a donut box in one hand, Terry

was already keying in another alarm code and unlocking the glass doors to the library proper. Glorious heat bathed us as the doors opened.

Terry checked her watch. "We don't have much time," she said, putting the box on the counter and shrugging out of her coat. "Let's stage the auditorium for the needlepoint group. Then we'll make a pot of coffee and have a donut."

"Excellent plan," Guthrie replied, eyeing the box.

Whether spurred on by the donuts, a sense of duty, or need to warm up, we all rushed through the children's department to the auditorium. To say the room was a mess was an understatement. The initially neat rows of chairs were in complete disarray, with some overturned, attesting to the quick departure of patrons once the fights broke out and the law arrived. As if that wasn't enough, soda bottles, cans, crumpled programs and candy wrappers were strewn everywhere.

"Man, these people were, like, old-time Woodstock slobs!"

Terry and I stared at Guthrie. Little did he know what we routinely discovered in the book return bin! A few cans and wrappers were nothing in comparison to the baby poop, upchuck, and dead animals that sometimes accompanied book returns, particularly the ones that were long overdue and subject to hefty fines. Guthrie didn't know about that mess, because assigning a volunteer to book return duty invariably meant one less volunteer. Only paid employees with health insurance and retirement benefits at stake would put up with that horror.

"A donut's calling my name," Penny Sue said. "Let's get to work."

The motivational power of donuts is amazing. In less than 30 minutes we'd clamped shut the partition between the two halves of the auditorium, rearranged the chairs, and disposed of the garbage. The peace loving needlepoint club would never know there'd been a brawl the night before, unless they'd been there.

Terry went ahead to start the coffee. We quickstepped to the donuts, congratulating ourselves on our amazing coordination and industriousness. Guthrie reached the box first and opened the lid. His eyes went wide and his lips formed, “wow.”

“Well, what’s in there?” Penny Sue said. “Any Boston cream puffs?”

Guthrie’s eyes went wider still, and he pointed a shaky finger across the open box top.

“Don’t point at me. That’s rude,” Penny Sue admonished and grabbed at the box. He didn’t let go. “Quit being selfish,” she snapped. “Let me see.”

“Bo-bo-bod,” Guthrie stammered.

“Look, if there’s only one Boston cream, I have dibs on it. I asked first,” Penny Sue said.

He shook his tousled hair, still pointing. “Bod-dy,” he finally managed.

Penny Sue was the first to follow his finger. “Oh, shit!” she screamed and ran down an aisle toward a pile of books. Guthrie ditched the donuts on the counter, and we followed Penny Sue into the stacks. Penny Sue was tossing books off of a woman’s body, a couple of hardbacks almost nailing Guthrie and me.

“Heavens, it’s Abby!” Penny Sue screeched. “Call 9-1-1.”

Guthrie froze in place and screamed like a girl. I dashed to the checkout counter and snatched the cell phone from my purse. As I called 9-1-1, Penny Sue cleared the books from Abby, stretched her out on the floor, and began administering CPR.

“What in the world?” Terry started, then quickly assessing the situation, hotfooted back to her office. She returned with paddles and a portable heart defibrillator. Terry nudged Penny Sue aside and flipped the switch to the machine. “Clear,” she shouted, slapping the flat paddles on Abby’s chest. Abby’s body arched upward as the current surged. Guthrie swung around and threw up.

Great, another Ruthie, I thought, remembering she had the same reaction to all of the bodies we'd encountered in the past. It wasn't that many, only four or five, but Ruthie threw up almost every time.

"Clear," Terry screeched again, adjusting a dial. Abby's body jumped even higher this time, but she didn't start breathing and her fingertips were blue. "Mouth-to-mouth," Terry screamed, bending forward.

"My technique is better," Penny Sue hollered, shoving Terry aside. Penny Sue began pressing Abby's chest. "1-2-3," she counted. "... 20-21-22," she continued. As Penny Sue pumped furiously, I assured Terry that Penny Sue knew what she was doing. She'd taken terrorist avoidance classes on account of Judge Daddy's constant threats from all of the nefarious characters he'd locked up. Meanwhile, the regular staff arrived and formed a circle around us, careful to avoid the pool of Guthrie's breakfast.

I forced myself to inspect the body. I'd done a stint as a candy striper in high school, back when I wanted to be a doctor, and had picked up a few things in the process. The bluish hue of Abby's fingertips was a sure sign that she was beyond help. Her right hand was clenched tightly as if she'd been holding something. Weird. I thought rigor mortis progressed from the head down.

"Out of the way!" Guthrie shrieked like a demon when the EMT squad arrived. Pushing people aside, he cleared a path for the paramedics and gurney.

Penny Sue was oblivious to it all. She kept pumping. "80-81-82."

"Penny Sue, it's time to stop. She's gone. Abby's hands are blue," I said

A medic knelt beside Penny Sue and tried to take command. She elbowed him in the stomach, tears coursing down her cheeks. "No! I'm not losing another one!"

Another one! Penny Sue was reliving her efforts to revive our neighbor during the 2004 hurricanes when Charlie, Frances,

and Jeanne cut a path through Florida. All of her recent traumas had apparently fused into this one moment. The medic attempted to take over again, and Penny Sue belted him in the face. I grabbed her arm before she could deliver a karate chop. “Penny Sue, this is not your fault. This is not Clyde Holden.”

She collapsed in my arms and bawled like a baby. “I tried,” she wailed. “Tell Daddy I tried.”

I inched her away so the medics could do their thing. Guthrie snuggled against us and cried, too. Geez, two of them! As the paramedics huddled around Abby, I kept moving backward, dragging Penny Sue and Guthrie into the haphazard mound of books. Finally, we were up against the stacks and could move no further, but it gave the EMTs enough room. It didn’t take long. The first EMT on the scene stood and shook his head. “Call for a medical examiner,” he instructed his partner, who manned the gurney.

As I clutched Penny Sue and Guthrie on each side, both sobbing at the mention of the medical examiner, Terry’s face appeared within inches of mine.

“I thought Abby left with your group!”

I shook my head meekly. “No, we went before she came back from the bathroom. We debated checking on Abby, but we thought it might upset her even more if she was really having an anxiety attack. We felt sure she’d be out before you closed up. We left as soon as the crowd did.”

Terry dropped to her knees. “It’s my fault. I locked her in!”

“No, it’s not your fault. Abby wasn’t feeling well when you escorted her to the bathroom. You saw her rub her chest. She must have noticed when you turned off the lights and started to close up.”

Terry rocked back on her heels. “The lights in the bathroom would have gone off. Only the night lights and exit signs would have been on.”

“So, she had time to call out, right?”

Terry paused, thinking. “Yes, I would have heard her shout.”

“And Abby wasn’t incapacitated, because she made it from the bathroom to this place.”

Terry perked up slightly. “That’s right. It’s a fair trek from the children’s department to this stack. She couldn’t have been deathly ill, at least not at that point.”

Guthrie swiped at his eyes. “She had a cell phone, I saw her use it when she came in from the parking lot. Why didn’t she call for help? There’s not a scrambler in this building, is there?”

Terry shook her head. “No. Besides, she could have used the landline telephones. They were all working.”

Penny Sue brushed tears from her cheeks. “Then why did she stay in the library and come here?”

Terry had just given Penny Sue, Guthrie, and me permission to take the rest of the day off when Robert “Woody” Woodhead, the local prosecutor, or persecutor as we called him, strode down the aisle flanked by a uniformed police officer and a suit—a New York detective transplant we’d encountered on an earlier visit. The paramedic shook his head at Woody, who turned to the crowd and announced loudly, “We need to clear the building. Please take your belongings and proceed to the front door.” Woody signaled the uniformed officer, who stationed himself at the exit and inspected each person’s belongings as they filed out. I assumed he was trying to ensure that no one made off with evidence. Meanwhile, Terry and the detective started a room-by-room search.

Guthrie, Penny Sue, and I struggled to our feet. I gave Woody a feeble smile. He just stared at us, shaking his head. It was hard to tell if his expression was one of disgust or disbelief. I hoped it was disbelief, because I thought we’d mended our fences and finally gotten Woody off our backs when we agreed not to press assault charges against his demented mother for pelting us with eggs. Woody the Worm had even brought us flowers as a peace offering. Yet the expression on his face told me the flowers had been an empty gesture.

Penny Sue, Woody, and I went back to college days, when Penny Sue dated him a few times during a visit some of our sorority sisters made to her father's beach condo. Everything was fine until my ex-husband Zack, then Penny Sue's boyfriend, showed up unexpectedly. Woody and Zack had words that escalated into a fistfight. Because of the *unpleasant situation*, Penny Sue dumped them both and eventually took up with her first husband, Andy Walters, who was the amiable, if dumb, captain of the football team. Because of a grudge over the *unpleasantness* and some other stuff, Woody had made our lives a living hell on two of our last three visits. The third visit, during the 2004 hurricanes, wasn't much better initially, but ended on a positive note. Heck, I hadn't seen Woody since then, and judging from the look on his face, I wasn't thrilled to see him now.

"I can't believe it," Woody led off. "A death, and you're involved."

Penny Sue's eyes shot darts. "We are not involved! We merely found Abby and tried to revive her."

"Abby? So you know the lady?"

"She was an acquaintance, a scholar from last night's debate here at the library. Dr. Abigail Johnston. We found her buried in these books when we arrived this morning." I swept my arm in a wide arc at the scattered volumes. "That's the extent of our knowledge and involvement."

"I'll need statements."

"No problem," I said, edging toward the door with Penny Sue and Guthrie in tow. "You know where we live."

No sooner had the words left my mouth than a scream came from the back workroom. We raced toward the shriek and found Terry standing on a chair next to the open door of the book return room. She was stuttering and blubbering and pointing at a trashcan. "Snake! A snake came out of the books. I think it's a rattler!"

We stopped dead in our tracks. Woody pulled a small pistol from his ankle holster and aimed at the wastebasket. A moment

later, the detective arrived. Woody quickly explained the problem. The detective snatched a larger garbage can from a corner of the room, dumped its contents and held it upside down. "Cover me," he instructed Woody.

From the sweat beading on Woody's forehead, I thought Penny Sue probably would do a better job, but I wasn't getting involved. I held my breath as the detective tiptoed over to the wastebasket, gave it a swift kick, and slammed the other can over the snake. I give the guy credit—he had terrific reflexes. From what I could tell from my brief glimpse, the snake was about two feet long and did indeed have the color and markings of a rattler. We could hear the snake thrashing around inside the can. Woody was not going to give the vicious viper a chance to escape. He quickly yanked the plug of an industrial quality paper shredder from the wall and plunked it down on top of the can. "That should hold him," Woody said with a satisfied grin, as if he alone had saved the day. No one smiled back. Even the detective gave Woody a disgusted glance as he strode to the return room.

"Do you suppose the snake bit Abby?" Penny Sue ventured.

Terry hopped down from the chair. "No, the book room door was closed. The snake came out when I peeked inside. A dumb kid probably put it down the return chute as a prank. Well, this prank isn't funny. Someone could have been killed!"

"Looks like someone was," the detective said, pointing at an arm protruding from a mound of books that had spilled from the two overturned book bins under the slots. The only thing visible was a hand and navy striped shirt cuff.

"Get a medic over here," Woody called.

The detective knelt and felt for a pulse. He shook his head and began clearing books from the body. Within minutes, the person's head was exposed. It was a man with curly brown hair. The officer felt his neck for a pulse and shook his head again.

Standing on tiptoes, Penny Sue gazed across Woody's shoulder. "Oh my gawd, it's the weird man who hangs out in the

magazine section, and I think he's dead!"

Terry turned white as if she might faint. "Two?! Not two! How could this happen?"

Penny Sue and I were in a daze when we arrived at the condos. The sky was crystal clear and the sun had just peeked above the roof of our duplex. Normally, it promised to be an idyllic day. But things were hardly normal. The shock of finding two bodies had overloaded our circuits. We didn't speak the whole way home. I suppose we were both trying to make sense of the tragedy. Guthrie's VW Bus was already there when we arrived, and the door to my condo was ajar, which told me he was already filling Ruthie in on the details of the morning.

"Woody is a jerk," Penny Sue said. "Did you notice the way he looked at us? He assumed we were responsible or somehow mixed up in Abby's death. That whole forgiveness thing over his mother was a big crock. We should have pressed charges against the old biddy. Now it's too late."

I took the key from the ignition and opened my car door. "I'm afraid you're right. It doesn't seem like anything has changed with Woody. But the second body clearly didn't have anything to do with us. He can't possibly think we were mixed up in that death."

Penny Sue stared pensively. "Or the snake! I hate to be crass, but the other body probably saved us a lot of hassle."

"This is really bizarre," I said. "Under ordinary circumstances, I'd think the weird man killed Abby, but he was buried in books, too. What was he doing in the library after hours?"

"It was cold last night. He's probably homeless and hid in the book return room to stay warm. Then a snot-nosed kid pulled a prank with the snake, and the snake bit him. He tipped over the book bins when he struggled to avoid the snake and buried himself alive."

"That makes sense." I cringed. "A horrible way to go. Snakes give me the creeps."

“Me, too, but right now I’m worried about breaking the news about Abby to Kevin,” Penny Sue said.

“Yeah,” I mumbled, staring absently at her car and wishing I could forget the events of the morning. I canted my head at her big yellow Mercedes parked on the side of the driveway. “What’s wrong with the Benz? You usually insist on driving since you hate my little VW.”

“Something’s wrong with the damned transmission, so I’m driving it as little as possible. It will cost a couple thousand to fix.” Her jaw flexed. “Daddy has me on such a tight allowance until I sell my house, I’m really pinching pennies. I can’t afford to get it fixed right now.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. For a person who typically didn’t give money a second thought and was used to buying designer clothes and spending like there was no tomorrow, being strapped for cash was traumatic. Throw in a couple of dead bodies, plus Woody’s hassle, and you had the ingredients for a nervous breakdown. As wacky and outrageous as she could be, Penny Sue was a kind, generous person. I hated to see her go through so much embarrassment and pain over her investment loss.

“I’m sure Ruthie would lend you the money. After all, you’ll get a lot from the sale of your house, it’s being on a lake and everything.”

“Not as much as you’d think. The real estate market is in the tank.” Penny Sue sucked in air through her nose and let it out through her mouth. A yoga thing, I supposed. “I know Ruthie would lend me money, but I’m not going to ask. I’m bound and determined to prove to Daddy that I can stand on my own two feet. He thinks I’m a dizzy blonde, even if I’m not a real blonde. I’m going to prove him wrong.” She squared her shoulders. “I’m going to show Daddy that I can make it on my own. I realize I haven’t always behaved responsibly, but those days are over.”

I had a hard time believing that, but decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. “You helped me after my divorce when I was down; I’m here for you. I’m sure Ruthie is, too.”

Penny Sue nodded slightly. “I know you are, Leigh, and I really appreciate it. Right now I need your help to break the news to Kevin. Even though he and Abby split up ages ago, I sense he still has feelings for her.”

I agreed. “First, let’s consult Ruthie and Guthrie; then we’ll all tell Kevin together.”

Well, things didn’t go exactly as planned. We headed inside my condo to formulate a strategy, only to find all three of them sitting on my sofa. It seems big mouth Guthrie had already spilled the beans. Ruthie got involved trying to calm both of them down. By the time we arrived, they were about cried out and fairly calm or exhausted.

Penny Sue knelt before Kevin and took his hands. “I tried to save her, Kevin. She was already gone.”

A tear streaked down Kevin’s face. “I know. Guthrie told me what you did.”

Penny Sue squeezed his hands. “Can I do anything for you?”

Kevin swallowed hard. “Yes, call Mom. She and Abby’s mother were friends. Mom will know how to get in touch with her. I think it’s best that Mrs. Johnston hears the news from Mom rather than a strange policeman knocking on her door.”

Penny Sue dropped his hands and backed away. “Sure, I’ll do it right now.” She all but ran out of the condo. I followed, sensing something was wrong. I caught Penny Sue as she angrily jerked open the screen door to her unit.

“What’s wrong?”

“He wants me to call his mother!” she said through tight lips.

My hands went up in a *big deal* motion. “So?”

“So?!” Penny Sue screeched. “His mother is the Queen of Shit!”

“Penny Sue! How can you talk that way about Kevin’s mother?”

“I didn’t give her the name Queen of Shit, she gave it to herself! Aunt Alice was the Director of a Sewer Department in New Jersey. She *was* the Queen of New Jersey shit.”

“Hold on,” I said, grabbing her arm. “What’s the big deal?”

Penny Sue stared at me as if I were an idiot. “Aunt Alice is the black sheep of the family, Momma’s older sister. She ran away after high school and married a Yankee from New Jersey, no less. No one spoke to her for years until she had Kevin; then a truce was called.”

“What’s so bad about New Jersey?” I asked.

“New Jersey—gangs, Italian mafia, Russian mob! To succeed in that environment a person has to be tough. For a woman to succeed, they have to be doubly tough. Let’s just say that Aunt Alice, in spite of her upbringing, doesn’t cotton to Southern ways. She’s going to yell at me no matter what I say.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.” Penny Sue opened the screen door that emitted its telltale rusty twang.

I tagged along and waited on the couch while she found her aunt’s phone number and dialed. The conversation was stilted, Penny Sue giving Alice minimal details. Just when I thought Penny Sue had pulled it off, the doorbell rang and a voice sounded from the doorway. “Penny Sue? Is Kevin Harrington here? I need to speak with him.” It was Woody’s voice.

Penny Sue cupped her hand around the phone and motioned for me to deal with Woody. “No, Alice. Everything is okay.”

Woody had started down the hall by the time I reached him. “Penny Sue’s on the phone,” I whispered, hoping he’d take the hint. The dumbbell didn’t get it.

“I just need to speak with Dr. Kevin Harrington. I was told he’s Penny Sue’s cousin and is staying here,” Woody said loudly.

No amount of hand cupping could block Woody's statement, and Aunt Alice apparently had ears like a cat. "Who's that in the background?" Alice demanded so loudly I could hear her in the hall.

Penny Sue held the phone away from her ear and grimaced. "It's nothing important. The police are just going through the usual hoops for an unexplained death. You know, they're tracing Abby's activities for the last day or so."

"What do they want with Kevin? For that matter, what the hell was Abby doing down there?"

Penny Sue giggled nervously. "Abby and Kevin had a debate at the library last night."

"What?" Alice thundered. Woody and I both heard that word. "Why was that worthless bitch involved? I thought Kevin was debating his swishy old schoolmate, Wallow, or something."

"There was a last minute change. Abby took Willows' place."

"Hmph," then a long pause as Aunt Alice digested the last piece of information. "I'll go over to see Abby's mother right away. I have nothing against *her*. Then I'm packing the Caddy and coming down. Expect me tomorrow evening," Alice said in a steely voice. "I assume you can put me up."

"Yes ma'am, no problem." Penny Sue was ashen.

Alice continued. "You tell whoever was yelling in the background that I'm coming and I have connections. You know what I mean? You tell that guy to lighten up on Kevin, or he'll be sorry."

Penny Sue hung up the phone, visibly shaken. "Crap! Alice is coming."

Ignoring Penny Sue's obvious distress, Woody rattled on like the insensitive jerk that he was. "Where is Dr. Harrington?" he demanded again.

Penny Sue swung around and wagged her finger in Woody's face. "You have no idea what you just did. Unless you have a search warrant, you are trespassing, and the person on the phone

was my Aunt Alice, Kevin's mother, who's from New Jersey. Got that? New Jersey!"

Woody shuffled uncomfortably but finally managed, "New Jersey. Is that supposed to be a threat of some kind?"

Penny Sue clenched her jaw. "No, that's a fact."

Chapter 4

While Woody interviewed Kevin in Penny Sue's condo, the rest of us brainstormed in mine. Penny Sue was fit to be tied that Woody had waltzed into her condo uninvited and overheard Aunt Alice refer to Abby as a worthless bitch. The fact that Alice would arrive the next day and planned to stay at Penny Sue's place didn't do much for her humor, either.

"I need a drink. Any scotch left?" Penny Sue asked, brushing past Ruthie and heading for my kitchen. Guthrie raised his hand like a first-grader. "I could use a drink, too. I have some at my place if you're out."

I gave them both a disapproving look, but headed for the kitchen. Who was I to judge? Alice wasn't my aunt, and they'd both had quite a shock that morning. I reached into the cabinet and retrieved the bottle of liquor. As I handed it to Penny Sue who was already shoveling ice into highball glasses, I realized I'd had a bad morning, too. Scotch was a little strong for me, but I surely deserved a glass of wine. While Penny Sue and Guthrie sat at the counter sipping their drinks, I poured wine for Ruthie and me. We sat on stools beside them.

"Since this is my condo, I'll lead off," I said.

"Okay," Penny Sue agreed. "But there is one thing I must ask first. Leigh, may I please stay with you? I'd have to move into the guestroom with Aunt Alice and let Kevin use the master.