

*Meet the DAFFODILS**

*(*Divorced And Finally Free Of Deceitful, Insensitive, Licentious Scum)*

Leigh Stratton, Ruthie Nichols and Penny Sue Parker are sassy, Southern sorority sisters with very unique views ...

On Each Other:

Penny Sue was an exasperating flake, but a person would be hard-pressed to find a better friend.

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Ruthie hasn't been right since she drove off the bridge and cracked her head.

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"Always thinking, that's why Leigh was president of the sorority," Ruthie said matter-of-factly.

"That's why she's always covered in spots," Penny Sue sniggered, pointing at a splotch on my blouse.

On Men:

"Even straight men act like a pack of dogs, sniffing each other and posturing. All that butt slapping and carrying on, it's in their genes, goes back to ancient Greece where they played sports in the nude."

On Psychologists:

Penny Sue threw back her head and laughed. "Of course, dear, he's a therapist. They're all weird. You teach what you need to learn."

On Fashion:

Penny Sue chose a black leather halter top with a Harley Davidson emblem in the center, below the boobs. She wanted to buy leather shorts to match, but Ruthie convinced her otherwise.

"One continuous yeast infection," Ruthie pronounced quietly.

Those four words eclipsed all my arguments about propriety and image.

Chapter 1

Roswell, Georgia

"Damn, girl, you look like hell!"

I slid into the booth next to the window at the Admiral's Dinghy, a locals' hangout in the restored district of Roswell. Penelope Sue Parker, my long-time friend and sorority sister, was already finishing a glass of wine. From the gleam in Penny Sue's eye, it might have been her second.

"Thanks, that makes me feel real good," I said sarcastically.

Penny Sue studied me, sipping wine, sunlight bouncing off the two-carat diamond on her right hand. "You look like you haven't slept in a year. Heavens, you have dark circles under your eyes." She raised her glass, signaling the waiter. "What's wrong, honey? You still depressed?"

"I'm going to change my name," I said in a rush.

"I don't blame you. I'd get rid of that skunk Zack's name as soon as possible. I'm surprised you haven't done it sooner. As far as I'm concerned, you'll always be Becky Martin."

"Leigh," I corrected. The waiter arrived with two glasses of wine. I stared at the glass the waiter put in front of me. "What's

this, Penny Sue? You know I shouldn't drink; I've been taking antidepressants off and on for months."

"Pooh, one little glass of wine won't kill you. It'll help you relax." Penny Sue pouted, fingering the substantial emerald hanging from her neck. "What's this stuff about Leigh?"

"My middle name. I'm sick of being Becky. Good old Becky; sweet, cute Becky; dumb shit, blind Becky."

"You were just too trusting," my friend assured me.

Stupid, trusting, the label made no difference; Zachary Stratton had played me for a fool. As soon as the kids were off to college, my loving husband took up woodworking. Each night when I went to bed, he'd retire to his shop in the garage for a couple of hours. A partner in Atlanta's most prestigious law firm, Zack claimed rubbing and sanding wood relieved the stress of his hectic day.

Wood, hell—it was silicon breasts!

While I snored blissfully, Zack sneaked out to meet a strip club dancer he'd set up in a house a few blocks away. The scam worked for over a year until Ann, our younger, was picked up for DUI late one night. I rushed to the garage to tell Zack. The tools were cold, and his car was gone.

A staunch believer in a person's right to privacy, I'd never intruded on Zack's domain. I made an exception that night. In a matter of minutes, I found a carton of wooden figurines identical to the ones he claimed to have made. In a sickening flash I realized the find's implications and gagged, recalling the times I'd ooed and awed over the silly statues. Rage suppressed the tears and gave me the strength to carry the box to the center of the garage. When Zack returned home, I was waiting, feet propped up on Exhibit A.

"I'm forty-six; Becky is a child's name." I took a drink of wine and glared. "Leigh, now there's a woman's name. Momma got it from *Gone With the Wind*. You know, Scarlett, Vivien Leigh. I deserve that name, don't you think?"

“Absolutely,” Penny Sue said, raising her glass in salute, “Leigh it is. What in the world brought this on?”

“My therapist said it would help me release the past.”

“Are you still seeing that squirrely guy downtown?”

“No, I gave him up months ago. He was too strange.”

Penny Sue threw back her head and laughed. “Of course, dear, he’s a therapist. They’re all weird. You teach what you need to learn.” The New Age explanation for the purpose of life, the phrase was Penny Sue’s pat answer to everything. “Why did you drop Dr. Nerd?”

I scanned the room to see who might be listening. “The jerk crossed the line when he suggested I attend a Sufi ceremony, saying a novel experience would help my depression. It was novel, all right. By the time I arrived, everyone was naked, lying in a pile. My therapist was on the bottom.”

Penny Sue snorted with amusement. “Figures. I would have guessed as much. What about that other one? The attitude healer in Vinings? Did you ever try her?”

“Yes, lord, another dead end.”

“What happened? Ruthie said she was good.”

I sat back and folded my arms. “That’s not saying much—Ruthie hasn’t been right since she drove off the bridge and cracked her head. I signed up for the *Heal Your Mind, Heal Your Life* workshop, figuring it would give me a chance to see the therapist in action, before going for a private session. Am I glad I did; that lady’s in dire need of analysis herself.

“Waltzes in the first meeting and announces she’s a reincarnated priestess from ancient Egypt. Then, she starts in on visualizing the future we want.” I waved expansively. “Nothing wrong with that; except we can’t just imagine it, we’ve got to visualize her way. We have to cut out pictures from magazines and make paper dolls. She did it, too. All her pictures came from bridal magazines. Paper dolls? Bridal magazines? Does that tell you something? And I’m supposed to follow her advice? Yeah, right.”

Penny Sue chuckled. “That explains why Ruthie liked her. Ruthie’s always had a fetish for wedding gowns. Remember how she wore one to the Old South Ball at Kappa Alpha each year?”

“I’d forgotten about that. The gown wasn’t so bad, it was the veil—”

“With sunglasses! Wasn’t she a sight?”

“How’s Ruthie doing anyway?” I asked.

“The same. Lives with her father; works on charities and an occasional political campaign. She’s still into New Age stuff; you know, meditation and crystals. You should give her a call. She’s always going to meetings and seances. I’ve been a few times, it’s fun. Nothing else, it would get you out of the house.”

I leaned forward. I could already feel the effects of the wine. “Maybe I will.” Getting out with people was what I needed; I knew I’d become almost reclusive, dreading the thought of running into old friends and having to re-tell the story of The Big Split. Yet, the loneliness fed the depression, which made me more reclusive, and on and on until there was nothing except a dark emptiness. A great, gaping void in the center of my chest; a black hole which could not be filled by therapy or pills. “Does Ruthie ever date?”

Penny Sue said, “Heavens no, she’ll never remarry, at least as long as her father’s alive.”

Ruthie’s father was J.T. Edwards, a retired railroad executive who lived in a restored mansion in Buckhead. I blinked back tears. “Probably just as well.”

“What’s got you so down?”

I blotted my eyes with the back of my hand. “Zack moved out last week while I was visiting my folks.”

“That’s terrific news! Y’all living under the same roof while you fought over the property settlement was sick. I told Daddy so.” Penny Sue’s daddy was Judge Warren Parker, founder of Zachary’s firm. “Daddy likes you and feels bad about the

situation, but Zack's a valuable asset to the firm, because of his connections with the telephone people. They love him."

"Naturally," I said. "He takes them to strip joints whenever they come to town. That's how Zack met Ms. Thong."

"Who?"

"His little lap dancer. I found a picture of her in a silver thong bikini at the bottom of Zack's sock drawer."

Penny Sue shrugged. "Daddy promised to have a word with Zack, advise him to give you a fair shake. You know, fifty-fifty."

My cheeks flamed. "It worked," I said, trying hard to control my anger. "Mr. Fairness took half of everything in the house. Half of the pictures on the walls, half of each set of china, and half of the furniture, right down to one of Jack, Jr.'s twin beds."

"Half the Wedgwood?" Penny Sue asked. I nodded. "No wonder you're depressed."

"The Wedgwood's the least of my worries, he could have had it all. It was the spite that gets me. We're supposed to sign off on the property settlement tomorrow. I can't imagine what else he's got up his sleeve. A person who'd take half the sheets—I mean all the top sheets, no bottoms—is capable of anything."

"No doubt." Penny Sue drained her glass and clicked it down. "Girl, you need a vacation."

"Vacation? After tomorrow I may not be able to afford lunch. Besides, I have to sell the house."

"Hire a realtor; you need a change of scenery. New Smyrna Beach is beautiful in the fall, and Daddy hardly ever uses his condo anymore. Remember what a good time we had there in college? Come on, Beck—er, Leigh—it'll be relaxing, do you a world of good."

"I'll see how the settlement goes," I replied.

Thankfully, the waiter arrived to take our order, shutting Penny Sue down. I chose the Caesar salad, while she ordered quiche with a Dinghy Dong for dessert.

"A Dinghy Dong? Isn't that the extra large chocolate éclair?"

Penny Sue cut me a look. “So?”

“Comfort food? What’s wrong, did you breakup with the Atlanta Falcon?”

Penny Sue raked a hand through her meticulously streaked hair. “Honey, I’m dating a Falcon *and* a Brave, now. But, a Dinghy Dong’s something else; I always have room for one of them.”

From Parker, Hanson, and Swindal’s twenty-third floor conference room in downtown Atlanta, the people on the street looked like ants foraging for crumbs. I could sympathize, I had a bad feeling that’s what I’d be doing at the end of the day.

I should never have quit my job, I thought ruefully. Until the fateful night when I found out about Zack, I’d been a part-time bookkeeper for a local car dealership. Money wasn’t the issue, though I enjoyed having funds of my own. The job gave me a sense of purpose, something to think about other than bridge and local gossip. But I couldn’t concentrate and started making mistakes after I discovered Zack’s other life. Afraid I might do serious damage, like fouling up an IRS report, I decided to quit.

Although most of my sorority sisters were pampered Southern belles, my family was a hundred percent middle class. I was one of only two sorority pledges who had not “come out” at a debutante ball. That never bothered me, or them, for that matter. By my senior year I was president of the sorority and a regular at all the posh, hotsy-totsy balls.

Which was how I got hooked up with Zachary. A six-foot-one handsome blond from a poor, farming family, Zack was in his last year of law school when we met. He’d dated Penny Sue initially, but was dumped for her first husband, Andy Walters, the amiable, if dumb, captain of the football team.

I see now what a shameless social climber Zack was. I suppose he figured that if he couldn’t have Penny Sue, I was

an acceptable second, since I traveled in all the same circles. Second indeed. Considering Zack's lackluster grades and dirt farming roots, Parker, Hanson, and Swindal would never have given him a glance if it hadn't been for my friendship with Penny Sue.

Which was an ironic twist—I set Zack up in the firm that was about to squash me like an ant. I turned my back to the window angrily. Well, this was one bug that wasn't going to roll over and die.

I sat at the end of the conference table and fished a thick file of documents from my briefcase. Where was my attorney? Max Bennett promised to come early. He knew I didn't want to face Zack alone, especially on his own turf. How could Max be so insensitive? *Easy, he's male and a lawyer*, I answered my own question.

I had really wanted a female attorney, but decided a woman would be powerless against Zack's firm and the Atlanta good-ol'-boy network. Bradford Davis was handling Zack's case, a PH&S senior partner whose great-great-grandfather was a Confederate General who defended Atlanta in the War of Northern Aggression. I figured I needed a legal heavyweight of my own. I chose Max because his ancestors on his mother's side went back to Colonial times, and he'd handled several high profile divorces with good results. In any event, he'd seemed nice enough the few times we'd chatted at charity events and cocktail parties.

Appearances can sure be deceiving. However the day turned out, I would be happy to be rid of Max Bennett. I'd had a bellyful of his red, sweaty face; off-color jokes and patronizing remarks—not to mention the fact that he hadn't done one thing right.

The process had dragged on for nearly two years because Max couldn't or wouldn't stand up to Bradford Davis. The present meeting had been postponed four times at Bradford's request, once to accommodate a state bar golf tournament. In

fact, Max was so openly solicitous of Bradford, I'd wondered if the two had something going on the side. I voiced the theory to Penny Sue, figuring she might have some insight since her second husband had turned out to be bisexual.

"Who can tell?" Penny Sue said. "Even straight men act like a pack of dogs, sniffing each other and posturing. All that butt slapping and carrying on, it's in their genes, goes back to ancient Greece where they played sports in the nude."

The idea of Max and Bradford romping around buck-naked was too much. I laughed out loud at the very moment Max, Bradford and Zack arrived. Clearly thinking I was snickering at them, each instinctively checked his fly. Even they noticed that synchronicity, which made me laugh even harder.

Scowling, Bradford and Zack took seats at the head of the table in front of an ornately framed painting of Judge Parker. Max sat next to me at the opposite end. He nodded coldly as way of greeting.

"I believe we can dispose of this matter quickly," Max said, passing a three page document to me. "Mr. Stratton provided a list of your joint assets and their market value. He wants to be fair and proposes to divide your belongings right down the middle. Since a quick sale could depress the value of your property, Mr. Stratton has offered to buy-out your share by making monthly installments over a five year period. In that way, he can dispose of the property in an orderly fashion."

I flipped to the last page of the document. The total was \$1.1 million, including \$550,000 for the house. "This can't be everything."

Max cleared his throat. "Uh, no, it does not include household furnishings, which have already been divided, or personal items such as your cars."

The total was far too low. My rough calculation put our assets at well over two million. I scanned the list. All the values were ridiculously low, and a number of investments were missing

altogether. Zack was trying to cheat me, just as I'd feared. "These estimates are wrong," I said loudly, staring defiantly at Zack.

Bradford smirked. "You must remember, Becky dear, that the markets have been off the last few years."

"Leigh," I corrected.

"As you wish, *Leigh*," Bradford replied, putting particular emphasis on my name as if it had a bad taste. Zack snorted with amusement. "Names aside," Bradford continued pompously, "the property was evaluated by Walker & Hill, the most reputable *independent* appraiser in Atlanta. Surely, you cannot find fault with that."

Independent, hell! Zack played golf with Taylor Hill at least twice a month. I gave Max a pleading look. He patted my hand and flashed a thin, sleazy smile. I wanted to backhand him in the mouth. Luckily, Judge Parker entered the room at that moment and stood by the door, listening. I was too angry to meet his eyes.

"In our experience, it is difficult to get full value from the disposal of community property," Bradford continued. "Buyers expect bargain basement prices in the case of a divorce. It's very difficult to overcome that mind set."

"I've found the same thing in my practice," Max chimed in.

I glared at him. *Who's side are you on?* I wanted to scream. Of course, I knew the answer: he was a good-ol'-boy, a member of the *club*, and they were all going to stick together. "What about the stocks and bonds?" I demanded through tight lips.

Bradford consulted another list. "The securities were liquidated last November to take care of family debts."

November? Zack went to the Caribbean on business in November. Could he have sold the stocks and deposited the money in an off-shore bank? "What debts?" I demanded hotly. "I want to see proof."

"General household expenses." Bradford looked to Max. "We provided all of this to your attorney. There were several credit cards—"

Credit cards? “I haven’t seen any proof!” Could Zack have spent that much money on his stripper? Then, it dawned on me. Zack had opened a bunch of accounts, taken-out cash advances and deposited the money in tropical banks. What a sneaky jerk ... all our savings gone and I didn’t have a prayer of finding it.

Bradford continued, “Your attorney has reviewed these documents. We’ve also filed a copy with Judge Nugent. Of course, the judge would like a property settlement before he grants the final decree.”

I pushed the paper away. “This is not fair; Zack has hidden our assets. I won’t sign it.” I caught Judge Parker from the corner of my eye; he winked and canted his head. I wasn’t sure what that meant, and Bradford gave me no time to think about it.

He slammed his folder shut. “That is your prerogative, Mrs. Stratton,” Bradford intoned snobbishly. “However, I caution you that a court battle could be *very* long and expensive.”

The emphasis on *very* was crystal clear. While Bradford was probably handling Zack’s case for free, I had to pay my own legal fees. Max’s tab already topped \$30,000. Holding out for a trial might double or triple the bill. And, what did I stand to gain? Nothing. The good-ol’-boys would protect each other to the end. I glanced at the Judge who nodded slightly. Damn, I hated giving in! But, the deck was stacked against me, it was time to throw-in my hand. My eyes stung with tears, from frustration more than anything. I blinked them back and raised my chin resolutely; I would not give those men the satisfaction of seeing me cry.

I jabbed Max with my elbow, hard. “Give me a pen,” I spat the words. He rolled his chair back and handed me a Cross ballpoint. I signed the document with an angry flourish, pocketed the pen, and strode stiffly past Judge Parker and out of Zack’s life.

I called my therapist as soon as I got home.

“How do you feel?”

“Angry, betrayed, hurt. Those men made me so mad.” I tugged my scarf off and wrapped it around my fist, wishing it was Zack’s throat.

“No one can make you feel anything. You choose your feelings. If you’re mad, you’ve chosen to feel that way.”

Chosen to feel that way? Those scuzz balls ganged up on me. “It’s the injustice that angers me. No one—not even my own lawyer—did a thing to help me. Bradford, Max, and Zack walked in *together*. Don’t you see, it was a done deal before anything was said. I was set up!”

“So, you feel like a victim?”

“Yes, I’d like to cut off their private parts and hang them from their ears.” I unraveled the scarf and pulled it tight, like a rope.

“Violence doesn’t solve anything, does it?”

“For godssakes, I wouldn’t really do it. It’s a fantasy; a delicious fantasy at this moment.” I balled the scarf up into a tight ball.

“Lashing out is a common reaction to situations like this. Let’s talk about it. I can work you in tomorrow morning at eleven.”

“I’ll get back to you.” I slammed down the receiver. *Lashing out is a common reaction*. I hurled the scarf against the wall. Damn! Then, I drew the blinds and went to bed feeling more depressed than I’d ever felt in my life.

But, sleep did not save me. My head had hardly hit the pillow when I was awakened by the sound of a siren ... no, the doorbell. And shouting.

“LEIGH. BECK-KKY LEEE-EIGH. We know you’re in there.”

It was Penny Sue. I had on my slip and didn’t bother to find a robe. I looked through the peephole at the optically-widened images of Penny Sue and Ruthie, who was holding a gigantic

bouquet of flowers. I cracked the door; Penny Sue barged through.

“Get dressed, girl. We’re going to celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?”

“The divorce, of course. Free at last, free at last. Praise the Lord, free at last! Besides, you’re now qualified to be in the DAFFODILS.”

Ruthie thrust a vase of daffodils into my face as Penny Sue fastened a silver and gold brooch to my slip strap. Both women were wearing the same pin, a circular swirl of graceful leaves, stems and daffodils in full bloom. Penny Sue’s brooch served as the clasp for a wispy Chanel scarf; Ruthie’s accented the square neckline of her black silk chemise.

“The what?” I asked testily, eyeing the daffodils and brooch that hung limply from my slip strap.

Penny Sue replied, “DAFF-O-DILS: Divorced And Finally Free Of Deceitful, Insensitive, Licentious Scum.”

Deceitful, Insensitive, Licentious Scum. A smile tugged at my lips. I was definitely qualified, and so were Penny Sue and Ruthie.

I figured Penny Sue had probably founded the club. Her second husband, Sydney, was a television producer who’d had an affair with his male assistant. As painful as Zack’s infidelity was, at least I hadn’t been thrown over for a man. The huge settlement the Judge got for Penny Sue (Daddy took Sydney’s escapades very personally) undoubtedly helped. Her third husband, Winston, wasn’t much better; he had an eye for young secretaries.

Ruthie had also endured her share of heartache. Harold, her ex, was a cardiologist in Raleigh, North Carolina. A heartless cardiologist at that. (Maybe Penny Sue was right about teaching what you need to learn.) Ruthie worked as a librarian to put him through medical school, only to be ditched for a nurse the week after Harold finished his residency. Not one to mope, Ruthie Jo had packed up Jo Ruth, their only child,

and taken a train back to Atlanta, where she'd lived with her father ever since.

I studied the bouquet of flowers. The symbol of Spring and new beginnings, there was something intrinsically happy about a daffodil. "Where in the world did you find daffodils at this time of year?"

Penny Sue responded, "My florist in Buckhead stocks them for me."

"A lot of members in the club, huh?"

"No, I just like daffodils." Penny Sue quick-stepped a jig. "Perk up, girl, it's party time."

I ignored her antics and headed for the kitchen with the flowers, my friends following close behind. "I appreciate the offer, but it's been a terrible day. I don't feel like celebrating." I put the vase on the sideboard and filled a glass from the kitchen tap. "Want something to drink?" I asked, holding up the glass of water.

"You didn't take any pills, did ya?" Penny Sue asked, eyeing me like a mother hen.

I sat down and buried my head in my hands, the brooch clanking heavily on the tabletop. "No, nothing like that."

"Good, 'cuz we've got champagne!" Penny Sue pulled a bottle of Dom Perignon from her oversized Louis Vuitton bag as Ruthie searched the cabinets for stemmed glasses.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, accepting a glass of the fizzing liquid.

"Daddy called me," Penny Sue replied.

My spine straightened reflexively. "*Daddy?* Why didn't Daddy help me today?" I said through gritted teeth. "I was rolled, raped ... swindled. Swindled! Lord, I can't believe it took me so long to make the connection—Parker, Hanson, & SWINDAL. I never stood a chance!"

I was shouting now and it felt good. Hell with my therapist. At that moment, I chose to be mad—foot-stomping, dish-throwing mad. Mad, furious, LIVID. I gulped the sparkling wine.

“Daddy wanted to help, but he couldn’t interfere overtly. He called Judge Nugent after the meeting—they go back a long way, you know. Anyhow, he asked Albert to go ahead and grant the divorce, but to take a close look at the property settlement.”

“What does that mean?” I asked wearily.

“Monday: the marriage is history. Tuesday: Zack will have some explainin’ to do.”

“Glory, there is a God.” I stood and raised my glass. “To the DAFF-O-DILS.”

“DAFFODILS.” We clinked our glasses.

“Now, get some clothes on. We’re going to have a fancy dinner and plan our trip to the beach.”

Chapter 2

New Smyrna Beach, Florida

"We're sisters cut from the same cloth," Penny Sue chirped as we sat at the light next to the Bert Fish Medical Center.

I studied the tan medical building to keep from laughing. If we were cut from the same cloth, it was a patchwork quilt.

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. Ruthie was shorter, 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 plain and drab they shouted: mega-bucks.

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

“Who’s Bert Fish?” I asked to change the subject. New Smyrna Beach had grown a lot since we were in college. I seemed to recall a brick medical center and a much smaller hospital in the olden days.

“I just saw that,” Ruthie responded, consulting the tour book she’d been reading, much of it aloud, for the whole trip. “Here it is. Bert was a local lawyer, criminal judge, and a 32nd Degree Mason. He was the Florida campaign manager for Franklin Roosevelt ... paid back with Ambassadorships to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Portugal. Hmm-m, Portugal was not so good for Bert. He died there in 1943 under mysterious circumstances—his body was never found. In any event, he willed a big part of his estate—orange groves—to Volusia County.”

“How nice,” Penny Sue remarked with an edge of sarcasm, clearly bored by the pithy tidbits Ruthie’d peppered us with during the seven-hour trip. The light turned green, and we started up the hill to the South Causeway bridge. “We’re going to have a great time, Leigh. A week from now, you’ll be a new woman.

“Here we are,” she enthused as we rounded the top of the tall bridge that spanned the Intercoastal Waterway. “Looks just like the French Riviera, don’t you think?” Penny Sue rambled. “I feel like I’m in Europe every time I come here.”

The view was spectacular. Stucco townhouses with red tile roofs lined the inland waterway to the left, virgin wetlands to the right, and the Atlantic Ocean directly ahead. A sailboat on the horizon completed the picture of tranquillity. Likening it to the French Riviera might be overstating things a tad, I thought, but the view was beautiful. I sank back contentedly, thinking the trip might be a good move. “I didn’t know you’d been to France,” I commented.

“I haven’t,” Penny Sue replied. “This is what I imagine it to be.”

“I went with Harold. It doesn’t look anything like this,” Ruthie said from her minuscule spot in the back seat. Under

normal circumstances the bright yellow Mercedes would hold five comfortably; however, traveling with Penny Sue was never normal.

Ruthie and I each brought one large suitcase; after all, we were only planning to stay a week or two. Penny Sue showed up with provisions for an expedition. She had three enormous Hartmann suitcases, a cooler, a boom box, and God-knew-what-all-else. The bottom line being the back seat was loaded to the ceiling, leaving only a sliver of room for one of us. Though Ruthie and I switched seats each time we stopped—which proved to be often—Ruthie’s nerves were clearly beginning to fray.

“Details, details. You sure are getting crabby,” Penny Sue called over her shoulder as the car rounded the corner to South Atlantic. The luggage in the back seat shifted, sending the boom box onto Ruthie’s shoulder.

“Who wouldn’t be crabby; you drive like a maniac. Besides, I’ve got to go to the bathroom.”

“Again? Your hormones must be going.”

“My hormones are fine.”

“Have you had them checked? You’re at the age when they start dropping. Peeing a lot is one of the first symptoms.”

“I’ve had them checked. My hormones are fine.”

“You’d better look into that bladder urgency pill. Having to pee all the time isn’t normal.”

“Don’t start on that,” Ruthie warned. “I wanted to fly, remember?”

“We wouldn’t have gotten here any sooner, and this way we have my car.”

Ruthie stared out the window peevishly. “Yeah, but airplanes have big seats and bathrooms.”

“Hold on for a little while longer. There’s the Food Lion.” Penny Sue waved to the right. “The condo’s only a couple more blocks.” A few minutes later, she took a left onto a road marked Sea Dunes. A small compound of duplexes—three two-story

buildings overlooking two single-story beachfront units—the structures were carefully placed to grace each condo with an ocean view. The car bounced down the rutted sand lane which led to the Judge's unit in the single story building that overlooked the beach. Grunting and grimacing with each bump, Ruthie sighed with relief when Penny Sue finally brought the car to a stop between a van and pickup truck parked in front of the weathered, clapboard duplex.

The truck was a big red job—a true testosterone statement—with lots of chrome, spotlights mounted on the front, oversized tires, and a bumper sticker that read: *Turtles? They Make Good Soup*. The van, on the other hand, was completely nondescript except for A-1 Pest Control which was lettered neatly across the back.

“Check that out,” I said, pointing at a bumper sticker on the back of the van. “*Turn Lights Out for Turtles*. I don't suppose the guys in those trucks are good friends.”

Ruthie squirmed. “Who cares? It's their problem. Give me the key, Penny. I've got to go. Now!” She was almost shouting.

Penny Sue arched a brow haughtily. A veritable cloud of gauzy cotton, she hurried to the oceanfront condominium with Ruthie close on her heels. I trailed behind, lugging the boom box and cooler.

As Penny Sue fumbled with her key ring, Ruthie reached over her shoulder and tried the door, which proved to be unlocked. Already starting to unbutton her shorts, Ruthie pushed past Penny Sue and ducked into the first bedroom. A man with a large spray canister flew out.

Penny Sue gave him the once over with an amused grin. About six feet tall, he had blond hair, a deep tan, and nice biceps. “A-1, indeed,” she mumbled.

Oh, brother. I'd heard that tone a million times and knew where it was leading. An Atlanta Falcon and Atlanta Brave were not enough. Penny Sue was going after an exterminator.

I'd never understood her addiction to men. Though she'd packed on a few pounds over the years, as we all had (except Ruthie), Penny Sue had a lot going for her. Vivacious, connected, smart in an understated Southern-belle way, and very rich—owing to the huge settlement from her second divorce—Penny certainly didn't need a man, and could have virtually any one she wanted.

Yet, for some unfathomable reason she had a penchant for losers. Andy, her first husband was nice, but dumb. Real dumb. Last I heard, he was selling used cars in Valdosta. Her second, Sydney, had been artistic, rich and bisexual. Finally, there was Winston Brewer, an up-and-coming lawyer in Daddy's firm. Daddy had orchestrated that pairing, convinced that Penny couldn't tell a good man when she saw one. It seems, Daddy couldn't either. It was the Judge himself who caught Winston in a compromising position with a secretary on top of a copy machine.

Winston doesn't practice law in Georgia anymore.

"Excuse me." Hating to intrude on a romantic moment, not to mention that my bladder wasn't a high capacity model, either; I wedged by Penny Sue and the bug man into the bedroom that had swallowed Ruthie. I set my gear in the corner and perched on the end of the bed. Ruthie was humming, which meant I might be there a long time.

"Ruthie, you going to be long? I've got to go, too." She mumbled something that I couldn't understand. I leaned back on the bed to wait. There was no sense rushing Ruthie; she'd just get flustered and clam up, so to speak. Heck, now she was singing. Might as well get comfortable. I rolled to my side, checking out the layout of the room.

The decor was typically Florida: white-washed rattan furniture with pictures of birds and hibiscus. A pink flamingo lamp graced an imposing chest of drawers on the far wall. In any other setting, the piece would look hokey, but fit perfectly in

this room. No doubt the ceramic fixture was rare, costly and decorator-picked. Penny Sue's mother, now passed, had always had impeccable taste. It ran in the family, I supposed.

Ruthie came out of the bathroom, and I rushed in. When I finally emerged, Penny Sue was waving goodbye to the bug man, Rick. Ruthie was in the great room, gazing out an expansive window that overlooked the ocean. I dropped the cooler on the kitchen counter and joined her.

Bladders pleasantly low, we could enjoy the scene. With Ruthie's help, I opened the sliding glass doors that had obviously not been moved for a long time, and stepped out on a wooden deck perched on top of a sand dune. Sea spray hit my face, dousing all thoughts of Zack, money, houses and children. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. There is nothing like salt air to clear the mind and invigorate the spirit.

I surveyed the terrain. Storms had definitely taken their toll since my last visit. Though the beach was wide and flat as always, it was a good ten feet lower than I recalled, not to mention that an entire row of dunes were now missing. And, for a beautiful October afternoon with temperatures in the mid-eighties, the beach was surprisingly vacant except for a four-by-four square marked off by stakes and green tape at the edge of the sand dune.

"A turtle mound," Ruthie commented, pointing at the stakes below us. "The tour book said turtle season runs through the end of October. We must be careful to close the blinds and turn off all our beach-side lights after sunset. There's a strict light pollution ordinance, since bright lights disorient the hatchlings. Every year, hundreds of baby turtles are crushed by cars or die from dehydration and starvation because they are distracted by lights and never make it to the water."

Penny Sue appeared with paper cups of wine. "That's sad," she said, passing out the drinks. "You're in charge of the lights, Ruthie. We sure don't want any turtles dying on our account." Penny Sue stepped up on the low benches built into the side of

the deck and looked out over the ocean. “We’ve had some good times here, haven’t we, girls?”

Ruthie climbed up on the bench alongside her. “I’ll say. Footloose and fancy free. Though, you never stayed footloose for long; you always got hooked up with someone,” she said to Penny Sue. “Remember the guy you met the summer after our sophomore year? He had a funny name—what was it?”

Penny Sue giggled. “Woodhead. Woody Woodhead.”

Ruthie sputtered, spitting wine. “That’s right. What a name! Remember the commotion when Zack showed up. He’d come down to see Penny Sue, and was so ticked off—” Ruthie stopped abruptly, realizing what she’d said. She looked at me guiltily, apologetically ... when angry shouts from the front of the condo cut the air.

“You’re a real ass,” Rick barked.

“Stuff it,” a male voice shouted back. Then a dull, slapping sound.

Penny Sue was off the deck in a millisecond. She grabbed her purse and raced to the front door. Ruthie and I were initially too stunned to move, though finally recovered, and chased after Penny Sue. By the time we arrived, the men were rolling in the driveway, trading punches. Penny Sue was fumbling in her purse, and couples from the two-story duplex behind our unit had come out on their balconies to watch.

Rick seemed to be getting the upper hand, sitting on the stranger—the owner of the pickup truck, I presumed—until the stranger’s hand found a large chunk of concrete in the driveway. The man swung the slab toward Rick, missing his head, but catching his shoulder.

“Stop it,” Penny Sue demanded loudly. They ignored her.

“Stop it! I’m not kidding,” she shouted again, pulling a small, pearl-handled revolver from her purse.

I gasped so hard, I almost swallowed my tongue. Penny Sue’d always had a penchant for playing roles, but they usually

took the form of a femme fatale—Scarlett O’Hara, Cleopatra, Marilyn Monroe. I’d never, ever, imagined Annie Oakley was part of her repertoire.

“That’s enough, boys,” Penny Sue yelled.

Rick landed a punch on his opponent’s face.

“Stop! I’m not fooling.” Penny Sue waved the gun in their general direction.

My heart flopped over with fear. Penny Sue was excitable; how far would she go? I grabbed Ruthie’s arm and whispered, “Go call 9-1-1.” She hurried off.

“Stay out of this, bitch,” Rick shouted.

Penny Sue’s eyes narrowed. “What did you say?” She aimed the gun to the side and pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the ground with a thud. Sand billowed. An elderly couple on the balcony scurried inside. My heart did a triple flip. “Would you like to repeat that last comment?” Penny Sue asked sweetly, beaming her fake beauty-queen smile.

Rick held his hands up and rolled off his adversary. “Calm down, lady.”

“That’s better. For a moment I thought you were talking to a dog.”

Rick’s foe took the opportunity to scramble to his truck. He sped off, spewing sand.

Rick glared at Penny Sue, hands raised. “He started it.”

Penny Sue kept the gun angled to the side. “Maybe so, but that’s no call for being rude.”

“What planet are you from?” Rick asked, snickering derisively.

Penny Sue set her jaw, pointed the gun at the ground and squeezed the trigger. “Georgia.”

Chapter 3

The New Smyrna Beach police arrived minutes later. Not only had Ruthie called 9-1-1, but so had both sets of balcony owners in the duplex behind ours. Sadly, the neighbors said nothing about the fight, only that a crazy woman was brandishing a handgun. I could tell from the police officers' line of questioning that the situation was serious. Fearing Penny Sue might end up behind bars, I snuck to the bedroom and called Judge Parker—had him summoned out of a meeting. He said he'd take care of it.

I found out later the Judge called a Florida Supreme Court Justice, who called the Attorney General, who called the local prosecutor. A half hour after my conversation with Judge Daddy, the Chief of the Georgia State Police was on the horn asking to speak to the local officers in charge. The New Smyrna Beach policemen were real polite after that.

It wasn't very long before the local prosecutor arrived. His name was Robert "Woody" Woodhead. Penny Sue almost fainted when she saw her old flame. Woody didn't seem particularly thrilled to see her, either. They eyed each other though the screen door like prize fighters waiting for the match to start. I