



SARAH WINN

FOR OLD
TIMES' SAKE

For Old Time's Sake
by Sarah Winn

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Published by Phaze Books
Also by Sarah Winn

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a novel of sensual romance by

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A Phaze Production

Phaze Books

6470A Glenway Avenue, #109

Cincinnati, OH 45211-5222

Phaze is an imprint of Mundania Press, LLC.

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Cover art © 2007 Kendra Egert, Scrapfairy Designs

Edited by Michelle Dowdey

eBook ISBN-13: 978-1-59426-849-6

eBook ISBN-10: 1-59426-849-5

First Edition—February, 2008

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Chapter One

The roar of a gasoline engine drew Linda's attention from the crossword puzzle. She glanced through the french doors of the breakfast room, and her mouth gaped in disbelief. Was that Wade Preston driving a riding mower across the emerald green sea of her father's back lawn?

How long had it been since she'd stared out this very window at the boy all the girls at Harperville High had a crush on? Seven years? Eight?

Sensing movement behind her, she turned and saw Mrs. Mills picking up the luncheon dishes.

"Why is Wade Preston mowing our lawn?" Linda asked.

The housekeeper stopped on her way back to the kitchen and looked out the french doors. "Don't know. A Mexican man usually does it."

"Surely, after all these years, Wade's doing something besides cutting grass?"

"Calls himself a landscaper and does yards all over town. Got other men working for him."

"Well, at least he's expanded since he was in high school."

Mrs. Mills shrugged and continued on her way to the kitchen.

The steady drone of the mower's engine lured Linda to step over to the window for a closer look. In the heat of early afternoon, Wade had removed his shirt, and his sweaty pecs glistened in the sunlight. As he slowly passed in front of her, he removed his billed cap and wiped his forehead with the

back of his arm. His bicep flexed. Manual labor did a lot for a man's physique.

He reached the far side of the lawn and turned the steering wheel of the mower. For a moment, all she could see was his broad back and more rippling muscles. God. He'd really filled out since their summer together. Had being in the Marine Corps done that? He completed his turn and came toward her, his straight nose and strong chin outlined by the sunshine.

Not wanting him to see her, she stepped away from the window. It wouldn't do for the lawn-service guy to think B.J. Harper's daughter still had the hots for him, especially not after the way he'd dumped her. She couldn't help feeling satisfaction over the fact he'd ended up back in Harperville, still mowing lawns.

When they were dating, he'd been full of plans to leave this town and make something of himself. Apparently, Mr. Hot Shot wasn't as hot as he'd thought he was.

As Linda stared into the shady interior of the breakfast room, a flood of memories about the summer after they'd graduated from Harperville High came back to her. Then Wade had been hot enough to tempt her into dating him. Knowing her father wouldn't approve, she'd kept their meetings secret and slipped away at every opportunity to see Wade. He'd been her first love, her first lover. No passion since had burned so brightly.

But people remember the first anything as being special. What she and Wade had shared hadn't been real love. They'd just been a couple of teenagers swept away on a sea of

hormones. So why did the fact he'd turned his back on her still rankle?

She moved back to the window. For a moment, the mower disappeared behind the pump house and trellis that flanked the swimming pool. When it reappeared, Linda compared the man to the boy she had known. While he'd been well built as a high school football player, the muscles that now formed his shoulders and chest were larger and harder. His back was straighter; his jaw had a more determined line.

What else had changed about him? Had failure to make it outside Harperville humbled or embittered him? Had he married? She doubted it. Meredith, the one friend she still had in town, knew about her past relationship with Wade. She would have passed on any wedding news. But why hadn't she mentioned Wade was back in town?

So many questions and only one way to get quick answers. She pulled off the scrunchie that held her hair off her neck. Watching her reflection in one of the glass panes in the door, she ran her fingers through her hair until it flipped up around her shoulders.

Her hand hesitated on the latch, and a smile tugged at her lips. She was looking forward to letting Wade know she was well on her way to achieving her goals in life. He'd walked away from her because she wasn't willing to be his sex toy. Now she was a law school graduate, and he was still cutting grass.

The green John Deere chugged past the french doors again, and she stepped out onto the stone patio bordering the

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back of the house. The scent of freshly cut grass enhanced her feeling of déjà vu.

* * * *

As the mower approached the pine grove that edged the yard, Wade caught sight of movement on the patio. A woman. A blonde. Linda. He'd seen a sporty little BMW in the driveway and wondered if it might be hers. Then he remembered the pine trees and snapped his attention back to the mower in time to avoid hitting one. Linda still rattled his cage.

Once he'd safely turned the mower, he checked her out as he drove toward the patio. She stood with one hand on her hip, obviously waiting to speak to him. She'd lost the coltish look of a teenager. Her honey-colored hair fell against her shoulders instead of the middle of her back as it once had. But even in shorts and a T-shirt, she still managed to look like the richest girl in town.

As he approached, she inspected him as openly as he did her. Her direct gaze, the forward thrust of her hips and her sly smile told him she was a woman on the prowl. The rich girl must be bored. He ought to snub her just for the hell of it. But he couldn't resist seeing what kind of woman she'd grown into.

He brought the mower to a stop at the edge of the terrace and cut off the engine. Tipping his billed cap, he said, "Howdy, Miss Linda. I didn't know you had returned to the old plantation."

She smirked, obviously remembering the jokes he used to make about her father's house looking like an old Southern plantation. "Just here for a little vacation after taking the bar exam," she said in a snooty voice.

"So you're a lawyer now. Congratulations."

She looked a little miffed by his good wishes. "Not quite. I have to wait for the exam results."

"I'm sure you passed."

"Really? Why?"

He was getting mixed messages. Was she coming on to him or looking for a fight? "You were the smartest one in our class."

Linda shrugged. "That's not saying much."

That was definitely meant as a cut. Wade clutched his chest as if in pain. "Ouch."

She lost a bit of her snootiness. "I—I meant Harperville High was a small-town school, not noted for its educational excellence."

He nodded. "Yeah, I always wondered why your old man didn't send you to some fancy private school."

"He suggested it, but I talked him out of it."

"Since you're so fond of Harperville, are you going to live here now that you've finished school?"

The question seemed to surprise her. "Of course not. I've accepted a position from a very prestigious firm in Raleigh. But first I'm taking a month off for a little R&R."

Was that an invitation to join her? He deliberately checked out her long legs. The thighs were fuller than he remembered, but shockingly white. She'd been in the

schoolroom too long and needed to come out into the sunshine. But he'd be a damn fool to get mixed up with Linda Harper again.

The memory of that long-ago summer, when they'd been lovers, still haunted him. Could they recreate the sexual skyrockets they once had? Why not give it a shot? He was no longer a teenager with his heart on his sleeve. She couldn't hurt him now.

He gave her his warmest smile. "After all the studying you've done, you deserve a little fun. Let me get the ball rolling by taking you to dinner tonight."

She seemed stunned by the invitation. Had he mistaken her intentions or was he moving too fast? "Well ... I ... have plans for dinner." She glanced nervously back at the house.

Suddenly he understood and felt his smile slide into a smirk. "Oh, is *Daddy* still calling the shots? I thought maybe you'd grown up by now."

She frowned at him. "Since this is my first night home, my father and I are having dinner together."

Of course, Daddy always came first with her. Without altering his smirk, he nodded. "Sure, I understand." He reached for the mower's ignition.

He was going to leave. Linda felt a moment of panic. There was so much left unsaid between them. "I'll probably be free later," she added hurriedly.

His hand released the switch, and he leaned forward, bracing one arm across the mower's steering wheel. His eyelids lowered slightly as he stared at her. "Then how about drinks at my place? We can talk over old times."

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Linda felt her lips twitch with indecision. Could two people who'd once had an incredibly hot sexual relationship get together in an apartment late at night and just talk? And what did she want to talk about? Would she tell him no one had ever rung her bell like he had? Finally, she asked, "Where do you live?"

He smiled. "In those brick apartments on Monroe Street, across from the fire station. My door is at the far end of the building. Very private. You can come down the driveway and park next to the red pickup. What time?"

He sounded entirely too sure of himself. "I haven't said I'd come, yet."

"You wouldn't be asking directions if you weren't considering it. I'm just trying to close the deal."

"You make it sound like a business appointment."

He shook his head. "Oh, no, I'm just offering you a little fun on your vacation."

"Linda?" The sound of her father's voice coming from inside the house made Linda blanch. Had he heard what she and Wade were talking about? What difference did it make? She was no longer a teenager who needed his approval of her dates.

B.J. Harper stepped onto the patio wearing softly tailored slacks and a subdued sport shirt, the picture of an urbane gentleman relaxing at home. His startled expression on seeing Wade told her he had not overheard them. "Oh, hello, Preston. Having to do the mowing yourself these days?"

"One of my crew's sick," Wade replied.

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With a uninterested nod, her father turned back to Linda. "Can we have dinner an hour earlier tonight? A councilman is insisting on talking with me before tomorrow's meeting. I told him I could meet him at my office by nine."

Linda felt a sting of irritation. Although semi-retired, her father still could not find time just for her. Well, she didn't have to spend the evening alone. Looking over his shoulder and into Wade's eyes, she said, "That's fine with me. I'm sure you can be there by nine."

Wade's brief nod showed he'd gotten her message. "If you folks will excuse me, I have to get back to work." The mower started with a roar, stopping all conversation until it moved away.

Linda instantly regretted her decision. Wade would undoubtedly expect more than talk if she went to his apartment tonight. Did she want to risk having another fight with him, or worse yet, risk stirring the coals of their long-ago love affair?

What if they did have sex? She'd only be here for a month, and she was no longer an inexperienced girl. Surely she could have a fling with the yard man and then walk away unscathed.

Besides, she'd never forgotten those sweaty trysts they'd had in the back seat of his mother's old Chevy. The sex couldn't have been as good as she remembered. This might be the perfect opportunity to put those old memories to rest.

"A shame about Preston," her father muttered.

"What?" Linda asked.

"He was such a promising athlete when you two were in high school together, and now look at him."

Seeing the lazy smile on Wade's face as he made another pass across the lawn, Linda shrugged and said, "He seems happy with his lot in life."

She and her father went back into the house. After closing the door against the summer heat, he said, "I've got an errand to run this afternoon, but I'll be home by six."

She nodded, and after he left, she picked up the placemats still on the dining table. She carried them into the kitchen to prove to Mrs. Mills she intended to help while she was at home. "Where do you want these?"

Mrs. Mills pointed to a counter top. "Just put 'em there."

"Did Dad tell you we'd want dinner early?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Mills no longer worked the long hours she once had, and Linda didn't want to be a burden while here. "If you want to leave early, I'll clean up after the meal."

"Just load the dishwasher," Mrs. Mills said, without a trace of gratitude. Then she looked at Linda as she had when lecturing a teenager. "You better leave that man alone."

"What?"

"I saw you out there talking to him. He's no good for you."

How dare the woman tell her what to do or who to talk to? She was an adult. She wasn't about to be lectured by the housekeeper. "For pity's sake, he's just an old friend from high school. Why shouldn't I talk to him?"

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"I know something went on between you two the summer after you graduated. Your daddy woulda had a fit if he'd known."

For a moment, all Linda could do was stare openmouthed. Mrs. Mills had been a leader in the black community in Harperville until her husband had died of a sudden heart attack and left her with two teenaged children to support. She had come to work as the housekeeper at Wisteria Hill a few months before Linda's mother died and had stayed on to supervise Linda's activities during her father's many absences. But she had never been the loving mammy type. Instead, she'd nagged Linda about everything from her homework to how much makeup she wore.

Linda didn't believe Mrs. Mills had known the full extent of her involvement with Wade or she would have made trouble. No, she'd just seen two teenagers flirting and had disapproved because Mrs. Mills's status depended on the status of the Harper family, and she hadn't wanted Linda to do anything that would detract from it.

Hoping her superior height would help make her point, Linda stood very straight and looked down at the woman. "Mrs. Mills, I'm twenty-five years old. I assure you I can manage my own social relationships."

Mrs. Mills shook her head as though she pitied Linda. "Don't be so sure. People say Wade Preston's been under a lot of skirts in this town."

Oh, great. Wade had become the town Casanova, and she'd just agreed to go to his apartment tonight. Of course, she didn't have to go, but she had this nagging feeling the

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door between them had never closed completely. She was about to start the most important phase of her life and needed to be free of any doubts that might distract her.

* * * *

The barracks-like building sat with one apartment facing the street. Four other doors opened onto the driveway and parking lot that ran along the side of the building. The door to a sixth apartment was hidden behind overgrown shrubbery jutting out from the rear corner. As Linda drove toward the ligustrum, she wondered how a man who made his living by trimming other people's shrubbery could stand to live with those unkempt bushes.

She maneuvered into the parking area in front of the end apartment and stopped beside Wade's mud-spattered pickup. Her BMW was completely hidden from neighbors or passersby. Mrs. Mills had said Wade was a womanizer. Did he need all this privacy to hide a parade of women?

She shouldn't be surprised Wade had turned out to be the Don Juan of Harperville. Hadn't he showed such tendencies with her? Perhaps she could puncture his ego a bit by proving to be immune to his charm tonight. Of course, if she did, she wouldn't put her lingering sexual fantasies of him to rest.

As she got out of her car, his door opened, and he stood silhouetted against the light. Tight jeans and a fitted polo shirt showed his physique off to great advantage. Her pulse rate went up. Whoa! She'd better slow down. At least wait until they were inside before jumping him.

"Hello," his deep voice called out. "I see you didn't have any trouble finding the place."

The thought of being sexually aggressive caused her to smile a little more broadly than she had intended. "No. I used to come down Monroe Street all the time to go shopping."

He stepped aside so she could enter. "Back in the old days when there were stores downtown," he said.

"Ah, well, Harperville's gone to the suburbs like everywhere else."

"And thank heaven it has. I make a living off all those suburbanites."

She paused and glanced around the room, surprised by a wall honeycombed with a built-in plasma TV, stereo equipment, and shelves filled with tapes and disks. "That's some home entertainment center."

"After working all day, I like to come home and relax." He gestured toward the overstuffed, leather sofa that faced the TV and nearly filled the room. "Sit down. I'll get you a drink."

She accepted his invitation to sit, and the crinkling as she sank into the cushions told her the covering was vinyl, not real leather. Bookshelves against the wall and a low table in front of the couch were the only other pieces of furniture in the room.

"I've got beer and white wine. What can I get you?" Wade asked.

"The wine, thanks."

He smiled as though pleased by her choice and headed for an open archway on the far side of the room. She settled back on the couch, glad she'd worn slacks so her legs

wouldn't stick to the vinyl. He returned, carrying a stemmed glass in one hand and a beer can in the other. After handing her the glass, he popped the top on the can.

She felt ill at ease, not knowing how to start the conversation. She took a sip of the wine and nodded at him. "This chardonnay is good."

He sat on the far end of the couch and took a long swallow of his beer. Then he held the can up and said, "So's this."

"Since you obviously prefer beer, I hope you didn't buy wine just for me."

"Some women don't like beer, so I keep wine on hand."

Before taking another sip of her wine, she said, "Oh, yes, I've heard you know a lot about what women like."

He looked puzzled. "You've heard about me?"

She chuckled. "Someone told me just today that you're quite the womanizer."

He shrugged. "That shows you how little the people here have to talk about." Turning more fully toward her, he leaned against the arm of the sofa and waited for the next jab of their sparring match.

Linda didn't know exactly why she was here, but it certainly wasn't to fight. "I'm just kidding around, Wade. Don't get your nose out of joint."

He continued to frown at her. "Is that why you came here tonight, to kid around?"

"Well, like you said, to talk over old times. We used to be good friends, and we haven't seen each other in a long time."

"Friends? Is that all we were?"

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She sat her wine glass on the coffee table with a sharp clink. "We became lovers, but we were friends first."

He grinned lopsidedly. "Well, I guess that old saying is true. Love ruins friendship."

He almost sounded like he regretted their breakup. "Can't we still be friends?"

"Can we? You're on your way to becoming a big-time lawyer, and I'm just the lawn guy."

"We still have a lot in common. We both grew up in Harperville and went to the same high school. Of course, in school you were the star running back on the football team, and I was so shy that I barely spoke to you."

"Shy? I thought you were stuck up." His teasing grin softened his meaning. "But that was the first summer I worked for your dad. As I recall, you were a lot friendlier the second."

She reached for her wine glass and took another sip to cover the jolt of excitement his reference to their summer of love caused her. "I had to be after all my friends found out you were working at our place and started showing up every week. They said they wanted to use the pool, but they really wanted to flirt with you."

Wade hung his head in an unsuccessful attempt to look modest. "Those girls embarrassed me."

"Huh! You loved it. Never missed a chance to pull your shirt off to make them drool even more."

"That was hot work and also dangerous. It was hard to keep my mind on mowing grass while the best-looking girls in

town jiggled around the pool in bikinis. I'm lucky I didn't cut my foot off that summer."

They both laughed. Then Linda grew serious and asked, "With all those girls to choose from, why did you only date me?"

"You were the classiest chick in the flock."

Was that just another line or did he mean it? "You liked my class?"

"That, too, but remember, I was a teenager. You held your own in the bikini department."

He was flirting with her. But he was good at it, and she wanted the game to go on. "Thanks for not saying you picked me because I was so eager."

"Were you? I couldn't tell. Asking you out was one of the scariest things I ever did."

His remark surprised her. "Why? Wasn't it obvious that we girls were all crazy about you?"

"I always felt the girls from your side of town liked to look but didn't want me to look back."

"Such thinking cut you out of a lot of action that summer."

"I had all the action I wanted," he said, as he stared into her eyes like he really meant it.

She stared back, trying to gauge his honesty. His expression and his manner seemed open and up front, but she reminded herself he'd fooled her with phony sincerity when he was a lot younger and less experienced than he was now. She needed to take everything he said with a grain of salt. "We had some wild times. I can't believe the chances we took."

"I'll say!" He shook his head as if in disbelief. "I'm lucky as hell your old man never figured out what was going on between us."

She drained her wine glass. "One of the advantages of having a captain of industry for a father. He was hardly ever at home."

"That damn housekeeper was. A couple of times I got splinters shimmying down the tree next to your bedroom window."

They both laughed, and then Wade sprang to his feet. "Let me get you more wine."

Before she could decline, he was back bearing the wine bottle and a bag of chips. "I forgot about these," he said, as he sat the bag in front of her. "As you can see, I'm a host who spares no expense." He sat beside her, near enough to refill her wine glass and make her aware of the muscular arm he casually draped over the back of the sofa. "Now where were we?"

"Talking about what wild and crazy kids we were."

He stared into her eyes. "I figured you'd have forgotten those days."

She chuckled as she shook her head. "How could I? Every time I hear John Cougar sing 'Jack and Diane,' I think of us."

"For me, it's Bob Seger's 'Night Moves'."

"You're kidding."

His hand lightly fell on her shoulder. "Why do women think they're the only ones who have sentimental memories?"

He was trying to sound like what had happened between them had been important to him. She couldn't let him get

away with that. "You were my first. That made you a lot more memorable to me."

He leaned so close that his breath caressed her ear. "You were my first love."

She couldn't think of quip to throw back at him. Had he really loved her even for a little while? What difference did it make now? She shrugged. "We were just teenagers experimenting."

His hand began to massage the back of her neck. "Those were some pretty hot experiments." Moving gently but relentlessly, his hand sent warm surges into her body.

Nobody ever turned her on this quickly. Was it his technique or her memories? He slipped an arm around her and pulled her shoulder against his hard chest. The spicy scent of his aftershave diverted her attempts to think rationally.

She did manage to turn her face away from his as she said, "That happened a long time ago."

"How about a stroll down memory lane?" His tongue lightly toyed with her earlobe.

A shiver ran down Linda's spine. The sensible side of her brain whispered warnings, but the sensual side held a ticker-tape parade. This was Wade, the boy who had made her a woman, the boy she'd never forgotten. Down through the years, she'd told herself her memories of him were exaggerated. He hadn't been so much better than the men who came after him. Their youthful exuberance had just made it seem so. Well, here was a chance to settle the question once and for all.

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She turned her face toward his. He placed his hand against her cheek and stared into her eyes, just stared, until Linda couldn't stand the suspense any longer and gave him a light kiss of invitation. When he didn't respond, she whispered, "Remember when we used to drive up to Ridge Road and park?" She kissed him with more force and then traced his lips with her tongue.

His arms went around her and pulled her chest against his. His voice dropped to a near whisper as he said, "Remember the night a car pulled up behind us when we were both naked?"

She started laughing so hard that she had to rest her head against his chest. Finally, she managed to say, "I can still see your bare butt in the headlights as you dived back into the front seat."

Their bodies rubbed together as they both laughed. "You didn't think it was funny then," he said. "You were screaming, 'Get us out of here! Get us out of here!'"

"I was afraid it was some killer coming after us."

"I was afraid it was your old man."

As the laughter between them dwindled, Linda realized Wade had leaned back into a horizontal position on the couch and she was on top of him. He had one foot resting on the floor and his legs wide apart. She could feel a familiar bulge pressing against her thigh. If she was going to stop, she had to do it now. But the exhilarating combination of familiarity and excitement coursing through her body convinced her she didn't want to stop.

She pulled herself up until she could look down at him. "We're consenting adults now. We don't have to be afraid of anyone."

"Are you consenting?"

"Yes."

His hand cupped the back of her head, and he pulled her into a kiss that quickly developed into a battle of their tongues. His other hand moved to her butt, pulling her more tightly against him. She deliberately squirmed against his arousal, and he growled, his sound waves vibrating in her mouth.

She didn't know what happened then—maybe Wade tried to get on top—but they slid on the vinyl and off the couch, bumping into the coffee table so hard that her nearly full glass of wine tipped over and splashed them. Linda squealed, and Wade shouted an expletive.

She started laughing again, trapping him under her in the narrow space between the couch and the coffee table. When she finally crawled back onto the couch, making it possible for him to get up, he said. "I do have a bedroom."

Between giggles, she replied, "Thank goodness."

She jumped to her feet, expecting to head for the bedroom, but he was staring down at his wine-sodden knit shirt. Then he pulled the thing over his head. As he stripped it off his arms, he said, "I better clean up first."

Linda took the shirt from his hands and dropped it onto the wine that had puddled on the coffee table. "Let me help you."

She leaned over and licked his chest. Air hissed through his lips. She tasted the wine, and beneath it the salty flavor of

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Wade. He gripped her upper arms and pushed her away. Surprised, she frowned at him. "I thought you wanted to—"

"Oh, I do. But let's slow down a bit."

"Slow down? You?"

He smirked. "I've learned a few things since I was a teenager, and I want to show off. Humor me."

He turned her and pushed her toward the doorway leading to the bedroom. When they were inside the spartanly furnished room, he left her and went through another doorway, returning almost immediately with a towel. He wiped his chest as he approached her. "Did the wine get on you too?"

"Just—" She twitched her shoulder to show the damp spot.

Throwing the towel over his shoulder, he moved his hands down to the bottom of her shirt. "Well, let's get you out of this wet thing."

Chapter Two

Linda's eagerness pleased Wade, but he didn't want her to take the lead tonight. He lifted her shirt but left her arms and head trapped within the knit material.

"A blue lace bra," he said in a voice loaded with enthusiasm. "Did you wear this for me?" Then he traced his finger along the scallops formed by the lace covering her breasts.

With her arms pinned above her head, Linda could only submit to his touch. Her face was hidden, but he could tell by the way she arched her back that she wanted more. He kneaded one breast through the lace and reached for her waist with the other hand. Nimble unbuttoning her slacks and sliding the zipper down, he pushed them over her hips and down to the floor.

"Matching panties, too. You really went all out, sweetheart." She moved to bring her arms down so she could free herself from the shirt, but he easily blocked her with one hand while he felt around the top of her hip-hugging panties. When he reached the middle of her back, he said, "But no thong. I really like those."

"Well, I hate them," Linda said, now really struggling to get hold of her shirt so she could pull it off.

"Why? Don't you like anything rubbing you here?" He placed the side of his hand against the crease between her buttocks and pushed, shoving her panties and his finger firmly against the area he knew would be sensitive.

"Oh!" Linda cried out, but not in pain. He massaged the area slowly, and she stopped struggling with her shirt. But she moved her legs, and he realized she was trying to step out of the slacks still tangled around her feet. A fold of material must have gotten caught on her sandal, for she jerked her foot, lost her balance and crashed against Wade's chest.

He might have steadied them both, but with the bed so near, he allowed himself to fall, taking Linda with him. With her arms trapped in her shirt, she had no way to catch herself and squealed in fright. They hit the bed so hard the headboard banged against the wall.

Wade pulled her shirt up far enough to expose her face and playfully said, "There you are." He kissed her soundly, letting his tongue glide back and forth over hers. When he finally raised his head, she blinked a few times as if to regain her senses.

She started pulling at the shirt still around her elbows, and he again blocked her with one hand. "Please, keep your arms up."

"Why?"

"I like you stretched out like this. Open to me."

He saw uncertainty cloud her eyes, as if she might be a little afraid, and then a look of determination firmed her chin. Good. A little fear might add spice, too much would douse the fire.

She relaxed her arms, and he kissed her neck, losing himself in the light floral scent she wore. As he worked his way down, making quick work of the front clasp of her bra, he

became aware of another scent, a familiar one. Linda. Was that possible?

In her reclining position, her breasts were rounder, less firm. He circled his hands around them, squeezing until her nipples stuck up in sharp points. Then working back and forth, he licked both nipples. The pebbles became rocks, and their owner groaned with delight.

He slid one hand down, past her belly button and beneath her panties. Finding her clit with his index finger, he rubbed and tantalized it until she writhed and whispered, "I'm ready. Take off your pants."

He stopped sucking her breast long enough to whisper, "Not yet." Then he clamped his mouth around the nipple again, while pressing the heel of his hand into her lower abdomen and increasing the tempo of his finger on her sensitive nubbin. He might not be able to impress her with flash and cash like the guys in her uppity world, but he knew how to please a woman in his bed and was determined to rock her world tonight.

Until now, Linda had thought the clitoris overrated, but Wade treated hers with a rhythmic pressure that electrified her entire nervous system. Her abdominal muscles contracted, and her hips pushed up to receive more of his wonderful massage. She uttered a series of low groans as her bones turned to butter.

Astounding. No guy had ever made her come with just his finger. Before she could regain her breath, Wade rose and yanked at her panties. She raised her hips to help him, knowing he must be anxious to find his own release. As she

expected, he quickly tossed the lace and nylon garment aside and knelt between her legs. But he lowered his head.

When his tongue touched her super-sensitized clit, Linda jerked and cried out, "No!"

He clamped his hands around her hips to stop her from writhing away from him and continued to work his tongue. A yearning for more—much more—shot through her.

She caught hold of the shirt, still tangled around her arms, and yanked it away. Then she reached down. His hair was short, but there was enough on top of his head to catch between fingers.

"Ouch," he called out, as she yanked his head up so she could glare into his eyes.

"Enough foreplay," she said. "I want you. Now."

He grinned, his chin shiny with her juices. "Okay. Let go."

She did, and he stood. Making quick work of the fastenings of his jeans, he revealed an erection that looked as eager as she felt. Still stripping his pants down his legs with one hand, he reached with the other into the bedside table and pulled out a foil packet. Holding it between two fingers, he used his teeth to tear the packet open, even as he kicked away jeans and briefs. He moved back between her open legs and slipped the condom over his very erect penis with one hand.

"Smooth," Linda said.

"Don't worry, lady. I know what I'm doing." And he proved his words by sliding into her.

In her high state of sexual excitement, his hot, hard presence sent her into spasms of pleasure. She lurched up to meet his steady thrusts, her cries of ecstasy blending with the

steady thumping of the headboard. His tempo increased until she thought she'd surely burst into flames from the friction. Then brilliant skyrocketed exploded behind her tightly closed eyelids. As the lights faded, she floated in a smoky haze where she was only vaguely aware of Wade's final thrusts and his own groans of relief.

They lay side by side, breathing heavily. As her heart rate slowed and her brain began to function again, Linda grappled with the incredible fact that Wade wasn't as hot as she remembered; he was hotter. How was that possible? She'd thought they'd been good together before because she'd been in love with him. Now he was just—what? A one-night stand? Was sex all a matter of technique?

Finally, she said, "You've improved."

His chuckle made the bed shake. "So have you."

Was he implying she'd slept around as much as he had? Oh, well, considering how easy she'd been tonight, she could see where he might get that idea. "Look, despite appearances, I don't have much experience with casual sex. What am I supposed to do now?"

"We could take a little nap and then go again."

She looked at him in astonishment. Did he really think she'd take a chance on drifting off to sleep? She had to get out of here before morning. "Why don't we talk?"

"What about?"

"Old times."

"Haven't we already done that?"

"We haven't talked about what's happened since we knew each other."

He sighed. "Okay. How do you like being a lawyer?"

"I haven't really been a lawyer yet, just a clerk, but I guess I'll like it."

"You guess? Why would you go to school so long to do something you aren't sure you like?"

"I hadn't planned to go with a big firm so quickly, but my father used his influence and got me an opportunity with Falk and Wilkins, one of the most important firms in the state. That's a little daunting."

"Aw, you'll do fine in court. I remember you on the debating team at school, you could out-argue anybody."

She smiled at his simplistic view. "Falk and Wilkins practices corporate law. They don't actually take many cases to court, and they certainly don't allow associates to try them."

"So you don't want to do trials and that sort of thing?"

"Criminal law might be more exciting, but corporate law is where the money is."

He rolled on his side and propped his head in his hand so he could look into her eyes. "Is that all that matters? Money?"

Feeling strangely irritated by his third degree, she snapped, "Isn't that why people work? I'm sure you don't do yard work for the fun of it."

He looked startled by her remark and then shrugged. "I'll admit I drifted into the business, but now I like it."

Surprised by his answer, she sat up and turned toward him. "You do?"

"Sure. I like being outdoors and working with machinery. I'm my own boss, and I'm making the best money I've ever made."

She couldn't stop a sneer from twisting her lips. "Come on, Wade. You don't have to lie to impress me."

He flopped down on his back and glared up at her. "What makes you think I want to impress you?"

Realizing she'd made him angry, she looked away, noticed her bra gaping on either side of her bare breasts and self-consciously refastened it. Finally, she met his glare again. Gesturing at the room that contained absolutely nothing but his bed and the bedside table, she said, "I assumed that you weren't doing too well."

"I had all my business records in here until a couple of weeks ago when I moved them into my new office. Haven't gotten around to home decorating yet."

"You have an office?"

The deep lines at the corner of his mouth showed she had irritated him further. "I built it into the corner of the warehouse where I store my equipment."

"Warehouse?" She couldn't comprehend this new version of Wade.

He huffed before saying, "My company does more than mow lawns, Linda. We do grading and plantings, and build patios and walls. I'm a full-service landscaper."

"When I got out of the Corps, I went back to mowing lawns until I could find a real job, but the yuppies filling the new suburbs started asking me to do other things. For a while I rented heavy equipment and hired day-laborers, but one

thing led to another, and I found myself in a full-blown business."

"I had no idea. Congratulations."

He didn't take her congratulations graciously but continued to frown at her. "I'm surprised you came here, thinking I didn't do anything but mow lawns for a living."

"Oh, I knew you had your own company. Mrs. Mills told me. I just didn't know you were doing so well."

"Did you think I was working out of the back of my truck?"

Why was he angry? She had no way of knowing the state of his business. Then she remembered how sensitive he used to be about their respective financial backgrounds. Perhaps he still was.

She didn't want him to think she was a snob, so she leaned toward him and placed her hand on his chest. As her fingers idly moved through the coarse hair, she said, "I'm not at all surprised by your success. You always were ambitious."

One corner of his mouth twitched. "And you always were a charmer." His arm went across her back, and he pulled her chest closer to his.

She grinned at him. "I thought you were sleepy."

"You touch me, and I'm suddenly wide awake."

"Oh, really?" With a few wiggles, she positioned her body completely on top of his and lightly kissed his chin, cheeks, and nose. He placed one hand on the back of her head and launched a teasing assault on her mouth.

The touch of his lips and tongue, the warmth of his hard body under her, and the caresses of his hands all worked to set her humming with desire. Amazing, after what they'd

shared moments before. Linda placed her hands on the sides of his head and ran her fingers into his hair, holding him steady so she could increase the pressure of their kiss. Was it possible to come while kissing?

Three sharp knocks distracted her. She pulled back enough to look into Wade's eyes. "Are you expecting someone?"

Even as he shook his head, the knocks sounded again, the sound much sharper than what would have been made by a human hand striking a wooden door. Wade rolled her onto her back and crawled over her and off the bed. Grabbing his jeans, he hopped about as he yanked them on. Then he gestured for her to stay where she was. "I'll get rid of whoever it is and be right back." Barefoot, he left the bedroom, pulling the door closed behind him.

Linda scrambled under the sheet and waited. She heard the door open and Wade say, "What are you guys doing here?"

A harsh male voice replied, "We've had a report of a woman screaming in this apartment."

"Oh, shit!" Wade exclaimed.

Was that the police?

"Carl, you've known me all my life. You know I don't beat up women."

Was that Carl Vinson? He'd been a teammate of Wade's on the Harperville High football team.

"I'm sorry, Wade, but when we get a report, we have to investigate."

"It must be that old biddy who lives next door. She has nothing to do but spy on her neighbors."

The harsh voice said, "Never mind who called. Is there a woman here or not?"

"Who the hell are you?" Wade said with obvious heat.

The last thing Linda wanted was to get caught wearing nothing but a blue lace bra in Wade Preston's bed that reeked of sexy musk. She got up and looked for her panties.

"This is Ken Dickson. He joined the force last month," Carl said, as if trying to excuse Ken's behavior.

"Well, you better tell *Dick*-son to stop waving that nightstick in my face."

Were they going to fight? She found her linen slacks in a puddle of wrinkles.

"Calm down, Wade." At least Carl still sounded reasonable. "If you have a lady friend here, just let us check and see she's all right, and we'll get out of your way."

Oh God! They wanted to see her. She knew how things worked in this town. A story about the mayor's daughter being found in Wade Preston's bed would be too good to keep.

"I never said there's a woman here," Wade said.

"Is that your pocketbook on the coffee table?" that bastard Dickson asked.

She found her shirt and hurriedly pulled it over her head. Her elbows had stretched unsightly bulges in it. One of them fell between her breasts, making her look like she had a third, saggy one.

"Look, guys, I do have a friend visiting, and we may have made a little more noise than usual, but I assure you she was

not screaming in pain." Finally, Wade was trying to use his charm.

"Don't expect us to take your word for something like this, Preston. It would look damn bad for us if we did and later a woman's body turned up." Officer Dickson wasn't buying it.

"Jeez," Wade exclaimed. "Where did you get this clown?"

"Don't call me names, fella. Everybody knows you're the town hound. You've probably got a married woman back there. That's why you won't bring her out."

Linda gave the window on the far side of the bedroom a longing look. How much trouble would Wade be in if she took the easy way out? In a last ditch effort to save herself, she opened the door just a crack and called, "I'm all right. Perfectly fine."

"If she's a married woman, she could be beat half to death and not tell us," Dickson said.

Wade displayed his brilliance by saying, "Linda, you don't have to come out here."

"Linda?" Carl asked in an amazed voice. "Are you two back together?"

"Just talking over old times," Wade said.

"Linda who?" Dickson asked.

"Harper," Carl helpfully supplied.

"Is she related to the mayor?"

Oh, hell. Knowing she looked like she'd just crawled out of a dirty clothes hamper, Linda opened the door and entered the living room. "Hi, Carl, how's it going?"

Carl's eyes bugged, and he muttered an unintelligible response.

Linda turned to the slack-jawed man beside him. "I am the mayor's daughter, Officer Dickson, but I'm not married. I hope that alleviates your moral outrage."

Officer Dickson was not amused, but Carl gave her the same lopsided grin he'd had as a teenager. "Looks like everything's okay here. We'll be on our way," he said, as his grin broadened into a full smile, "and let you folks get back to whatever you were doing."

He herded Dickson out the door, and Linda and Wade stood silently, until the red light stopped flashing and the police car slowly pulled away. Then she signed deeply and said, "This is the worst thing that could possibly have happened."

"I'm sorry, Linda. Mrs. Jones has complained from time to time, but she's never called the cops before. Nobody else will find out about this."

She rolled her eyes at his stupidity.

He raised his shoulders defensively. "People will know the cops came to my place, but they won't know you were here."

"Oh, please, the next issue of the *Harperville Weekly* will have the headline, Town Hound Trees Mayor's Daughter."

He laughed.

"This is not funny. Don't you know how embarrassed my father will be?"

He sobered up. "Why? We're not married to others, and we're both over twenty-one. We haven't broken any laws, or we'd have been arrested."

"The Harpers have a reputation to maintain in this town. Something you don't have to worry about."

His jaw tightened. "Get off it, Linda. The only reason I have the title of Town Hound, is because everyone's afraid to give it to the man who rightly deserves it: B.J. Harper."

She stared at him, thinking she must have heard wrong. Then fury set in. "You lying son of a bitch. Don't try to absolve your own sleazy behavior by slandering a man like my father."

"Wow! From yard boy to lying son of a bitch. I didn't think I could come down in your estimation, but apparently I have. Good thing I've got a stiff dick, or you'd have no use for me at all."

She slapped his face with all her might. He stood motionless and stared at her as the red imprint of her hand grew on his cheek. Horrified at her actions and his ugly words, she grabbed her purse and dashed to her car before he could see the tears building in her eyes.

Wade listened to the motor of her car purr to life and then roar up his driveway. Damn! He shouldn't have made that remark about her father. B.J. Harper no longer owned the only bank in town, but he still had plenty of connections and could cause Wade trouble.

Hell, he shouldn't have invited Linda over here in the first place. He wasn't a teenager planning to get out of Harperville as soon as possible. He had a business to protect. Why had he done such a stupid thing?

Because Linda still drove common sense out of his head. If this night didn't come back to bite him in the ass, he promised himself he'd keep as far away from her as possible.

Chapter Three

B.J. sat in the living room of the double-wide, listening to the soft buzz of voices coming from Benjy's bedroom as Dixie settled the boy down for the night. B.J. felt disgruntled with both of them. He'd made a special effort to come here tonight because it was Benjy's birthday, but neither of them had acted glad to see him.

He heard Dixie Ray call, "Sleep tight, baby," and close Benjy's door. She sauntered toward the living room, smoothing her hair with one hand. She'd recently had the color touched up in the brighter auburn shade he liked and was wearing it in the loose style he often requested, but at the moment she seemed totally dissatisfied with it. Or was she dissatisfied with something else?

She stooped to gather up discarded wrapping paper, her capri pants stretching over her lean hips and thighs. The woman was thirty-six and a mother, but she still had the rear end of a teenager. Patting the sofa cushion beside him, B.J. said, "Leave that, Sweet Pea, and let's talk a little before I have to go."

Her head snapped up at the word "go," and she loudly crumpled the paper into a ball and carried it to the garbage container in the kitchen. When she came back, she sat beside him, but she curled her legs beneath her and wrapped her arms around her chest, tying herself into an unyielding knot.

B.J. knew he had to approach her carefully when she was in one of her moods. "Do you think Benjy liked his bicycle? He didn't seem too excited."

"He was sleepy," she said in a snippy voice. "I had to keep him up way past his bedtime waiting for you."

Now he knew what she was angry about. "I'm sorry I got here so late, but I couldn't let Linda have dinner alone on her first night home."

She frowned at him. "Oh, yes, that would certainly be more important than your son's fifth birthday. Benjy and I should be grateful you came at all."

He placed one hand at the base of her neck and gave a gentle squeeze. "Don't be like this, Sweet Pea. You know I have other responsibilities."

She shot him an angry glare, but the anger quickly faded when he began massaging the base of her neck. He knew she liked to be touched there.

In a softer voice, she said, "I know, Ben, but now that Benjy's getting older, it's harder to answer his questions."

Since she'd innocently opened the door to a subject he needed to discuss with her, he decided to step through it. "I know what you mean. I can hardly believe he's due to start kindergarten this fall. Have you done anything about registering him?"

She looked surprised. "No. What am I supposed to do?"

"I'm not sure. We can call the school office and find out, but I've been thinking it might be better if Benjy went to a private school."

Lines appeared between her eyes. "Private school?"

"Yes, there's a church-sponsored school over in Willow Creek that's supposed to be very good. They have excellent student-teacher ratios, so Benjy will get more individual attention. Being away from his mother for the first time is going to be difficult for him. I want to make the transition as easy as possible."

Dixie's face grew pale, and her voice was whiny as she asked, "Is it a boarding school?"

"No, no." He slipped her arm around her shoulder and moved his body closer to hers. "You'll have to take him and pick him up. I know that will be inconvenient. You two will have to get up earlier in the morning, but you'd have to do that anyway to get him on the school bus."

Dixie's stomach knotted as she looked up at his smiling face and realized what this was really about—keeping Benjy out of the school in Harperville. She should have seen this coming, but she'd been like an ostrich with her head in the sand.

B.J.'s words continued to flow. Now he was saying something about how good it would be for Benjy to learn to get along with other children, since he rarely had playmates.

She almost asked whose fault that was, but she didn't because she knew the real answer was that it was hers. She had agreed to live like this, to raise their son in near isolation.

"You look worried, Sweet Pea. What is it? Your car? I think it'll be good for all the extra driving, it's only three years old, but if you're worried about it, I'll look into getting you a new model. What do you think?" When she didn't immediately answer him, he gave her shoulder a gentle shake.

She knew if she asked, he'd buy her a brand new car, even though her Saturn was almost like new. He was generous to a fault with money. It was his love he rationed out, especially to his son who was, whether Ben would admit it or not, just as damn good as his precious daughter.

Unable to swallow her anger, she softly asked, "What are we gonna tell Benjy to say when people ask him who his daddy is?"

Ben's smile instantly disappeared. "His birth certificate has your former husband's name on it, doesn't it?"

"But Benjy calls you Daddy and always has."

"You'll just have to explain to him that while I'm like a father to him, a man named Yost was his real daddy."

She shook her head. "I can't look my son in the eye and tell him a lie like that."

He let go of her shoulder. "All right, I'll tell him."

She should have known he wouldn't hesitate to lie. After all, he was a politician and a banker. "I can't believe you'd give a drunken sot like Ted Yost the credit for being your only son's daddy."

Ben pulled away from her and leaned over so he could prop his elbows on his thighs. "You're being silly, Dixie Ray. This is all just words until Benjy gets old enough to understand how things are."

"Well, when he is old enough, you better plan to do that explaining too, because I sure as hell can't."

Ben got to his feet. "There's no point in talking to you when you're like this."

* * * *

The next morning, Linda hurried to the breakfast room, hoping her father wouldn't mention her late return last night. After a perfunctory good morning, his attention went back to his newspaper. Noticing the dark circles under his eyes and the way he was downing coffee, she wondered if he'd been out late too. What could be so important in the running of a town the size of Harperville to require late-night meetings?

Business had often kept him from home when she was younger, but he should have more leisure time now that he only served on the bank's board of directors. "How did your meeting go last night?" she asked as she poured milk over her cereal.

"Hm?" He looked up from his paper. "Oh, it was nothing serious. Someone's always brewing a tempest in a teapot." He rattled the newspaper he was holding. "Just like this foolish letter to the editor in the *Harperville Weekly*. Damn fools are complaining about progress."

Linda smeared jam on a piece of toast. "You know the old saying. You can't please all the people all the time."

"There are people in this town I can't please any of the time."

"So why don't you quit trying? This is your third term as mayor, aren't you tired of the irritation?"

He set the paper aside. "Harpers founded the town. We've always been responsible for it. I hate to step aside and let someone like that fool Otis Williams undermine all the progress we've made."

"The pharmacist?"

"Yes. His business has suffered since the chain drugstore opened at the mall, so he's joined the idiots who want to keep Harperville small and backward. I think he's trying to set himself up to run against me."

"I wouldn't worry about it. Nobody would vote for that little man."

"More than you might think. The older residents are unhappy with the problems the new people have brought, and the new people don't take part in local politics. I don't have the voter base I once had."

She smiled at him. "You've just had it too easy, Dad. Nobody ran against you in the last two elections. Do some serious campaigning and you'll win in a landslide."

The lines between his eyes lessened. "Thanks, honey. It's nice to have someone around who has confidence in me."

"What are you going to do today? I'll be tied up in the council meeting all afternoon."

"Thought I might refill the pool, so I can swim while I'm here. I could use the exercise and the sunshine."

"Why not go to the beach?"

"It wouldn't be any fun going to the beach by myself."

"Don't you have friends you can call?"

"I'm not a schoolgirl anymore, Dad. My friends are busy."

"What about Meredith Conway? She's off for the summer."

"She probably can't leave her mother, and I certainly wouldn't want Mrs. Conway coming with us."

He paused as if in deep thought. Finally, he said, "When are you going to start looking for an apartment in Raleigh?"

"There's no rush. It's only a thirty-minute drive from here. I can commute for a while."

He looked alarmed by that suggestion. "If you going to make a good impression at Falk and Wilkins, you'll need to work extra hours. I don't want you making that long drive late at night."

Was he worried about her or trying to get rid of her? "Well, I don't think it will take long to find a place in Raleigh. There are lots of apartments there."

"You can't move in just anywhere, Linda. You'll need a good address and a place where you can do some entertaining. In the business world, what happens out of the office is often as important as what happens in it. I know a good real estate agent there, but you'll need to work with him to find something really suitable."

"Okay, give me his number, and I'll call him today. Then I can go see what he's recommending in a few days."

He began to toy with his coffee spoon, almost as if he were nervous, very uncharacteristic for her father. "Is there anyone you might have dinner with tonight? I have a previous engagement that I can't cancel."

By God, he is trying to get rid of me. "I haven't called Meredith yet. We always get together when I'm home."

He looked relieved. "Do that, dear, and we'll go to brunch at the club on Sunday. You'll probably meet a lot of old friends there." He drained his coffee cup and stood. "I have to go, or I'll be late for the meeting. You relax and enjoy yourself. You've worked hard. You deserve a rest."

For Old Time's Sake
by Sarah Winn

She watched him walk away with astonishment. He'd never had much time for her, but she'd always known, as his only child, she was important to him. She'd expected him to be grateful she'd chosen to use her vacation time to visit him. But unless she'd totally misinterpreted their last conversation, he didn't want her here. Why not? He was alone in this big house, but why wasn't he lonely?

The words "town hound" echoed through her mind. No, not her dignified, pillar-of-the-community father. She couldn't let Wade's nasty attempt to hurt her sully her father's image. And why had Wade turned on her so violently? She'd had every right to be upset about last night's debacle. And it wasn't over. Stories about her might be spreading at this very moment. She shuddered at the thought of her father hearing those stories. Maybe it would be a good idea to find an apartment in Raleigh as soon as possible.

* * * *

Linda finally skimmed the last piece of dried leaf from the surface of the water. After returning the net to the pump house, she paused under the shade of the trellis and admired her work. It had taken her all morning to clean and refill the pool and to adjust the chemicals, but now the aqua-colored water shimmered in the bright sunlight.

She pushed a strand of hair off her sweaty forehead and was tempted to dive into the water for a short swim, but the sting of sunburn on her cheeks told her she'd had all the sun she could take for one day. Thankfully, the wisteria vines that covered the trellis shaded the lounge area beside the pool. In

the spring. the vines were covered in bunches of dangling, lavender flowers, but now it was all green leaves with just a few of the new, velvety seedpods beginning to show.

She'd always been proud of this pool. It was the first private one built in the county, and with its brightly cushioned lounge furniture beside it, it was a favorite place for summer parties. Linda suspected it was responsible for a large part of her popularity in high school.

Now the cushions were faded and the pool surrounded by an ugly chain link fence. The lawyer in her knew that liability issues brought on by the new subdivision nearby made the fence a necessity, but she missed the sweeping view that had once existed.

Oh, well, things changed. The flowerbeds that used to border the patio and the pool had become a continuation of the lawn. Mrs. Mills was their only full-time servant; a cleaning service came in once a week. And her father preferred to spend his time chasing women rather than staying in the home he once loved.

Linda told herself not to jump to conclusions. She had no reason to believe Wade. He was just being vindictive. And what if her father did have lady friends? Her mother had been gone for twelve years, and since the Harperville Bank merged with National Trust and he'd sold the land Harper Heights stood on, he had lots of money and time on his hands. It was natural for him to look for female companionship and small-minded of others to gossip about it. But why did he refrain from mentioning his new friends to her?

She went inside and had a shower and then a light lunch.

For Old Time's Sake
by Sarah Winn

When she told Mrs. Mills that she and her father would not be home for dinner, the woman sniffed and said, "Thought he'd be staying home more with you here."

As she went to call Meredith, hoping she'd be free tonight, Linda wondered where her father ate these days and with whom.

Meredith opened their conversation with a high-pitched, "Are you all right?"

"Well, of course, I'm all right. Why do you ask?"

"Mama just got back from getting her hair fixed, and she said Maybelle Jones said Wade Preston beat you up last night."

Linda groaned. "Oh, that's ridiculous. Wade didn't beat me."

"But you were the woman at his apartment?"

"Well, yes. But we just talked about old times."

"Then why were the police called?"

Noting the accusing tone of Meredith's voice, Linda asked herself why she maintained their friendship. Since Meredith had returned to Harperville to teach in the elementary school and moved back in with her mother, she'd become more and more like her mother, the town's biggest gossip. "That crabby Mrs. Jones called them just ... just because we made a little noise."

Meredith continued in the same pious tone. "I'm really surprised at you, Linda. How can you risk getting involved with Wade again? I remember how you moped around after you two broke up."

Linda was sorely tempted to tell Meredith to shove it, but convincing her nothing had happened between Wade and herself might squelch the gossip about them. "He was cutting Dad's lawn, and we started talking about school days and wanted to continue the conversation. It was just a case of two old friends getting together. I have no intention of getting *involved* with him."

"Good. He's not the boy you once knew. There's a lot of gossip about him. When he put 'Full-Service Landscaper' on the side of his trucks, people joked about what kind of services he was giving those housewives up on Harper Heights."

Linda was about to lecture Meredith about the dangers of repeating groundless rumors when it occurred to her that the Conways would surely know if her father had a secret life. After taking a deep breath, she softly asked, "Do people also make jokes about my father?"

"Your father? He's the mayor."

"He's also a man—a rich one. People may tolerate misbehavior from rich men, but they still talk about them."

Losing some of her hesitancy, Meredith said, "Well, I have heard remarks, but I never believed them."

"What kind of remarks?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Tell me, Meredith. What have you heard?"

Unable to resist the chance to gossip, Meredith said, "Well, there's a double-wide trailer out on Wheeler Road, and your father's car is often seen there."

"Who lives in the trailer?"

"A woman named Dixie Yost and her child."

"Child?"

"Now don't get upset, Linda, no one knows who the child's father is."

"Are you saying my father may have an illegitimate child?"

"I don't know. But people have seen him out in the yard playing catch with the boy."

"The child is a boy?" Linda's hand shook so badly that the receiver pounded against her ear.

"Oh, you are upset. I'll come over and be with you."

"No! I need to be alone right now. Goodbye, Meredith." Linda hung up the phone and leaned against the wall. She didn't know what upset her more, the possibility that her father had the son he'd always wanted, or that the child's mother was trailer trash.

She considered going up to her room and having a good cry or going back to the pool and swimming off some of her emotional turmoil. But mostly she wanted to get away from her father's house, so she grabbed up her purse and went to her car.

She roared down the driveway but had to stop between the brick pillars and wait for traffic to pass. Even after she'd swung into the street, she had to quell her desire to stomp on the accelerator as she passed rows of houses in Harperville's new suburbs.

When she was a kid, this had all been farming country, tobacco mostly. Her house had been outside of town, and the land surrounding it had been in the Harper family for generations. When the press of nearby cities had increased

the demand for housing, her father had seized the opportunity to double the size of Harperville and make a small fortune for himself.

That was progress, and she knew progress was good, but right now she needed to roar through the countryside with the air conditioning off and the windows down, letting the wind blow in her face. Perhaps that would clear her head enough so she could accept the fact that her father, the most morally upright man she'd ever known, was involved in a sleazy affair with a woman who lived in a trailer.

Finally, she reached the highway, but the traffic in and out of the strip malls there still penned her in. She turned onto a county road, hoping to find some open space. At first there were more houses, but at last fields and strips of woodland appeared. Before she'd gained any real speed, however, she found herself stuck behind a row of cars inching along behind a farm tractor.

She felt like pounding on her horn and screaming curses. Instead she kept the air conditioning running full blast and told herself to calm down and be reasonable. The farmer had the right to use the road just as her father had the right to ... what?

He'd had lady friends before, and Linda hadn't gotten bent out of shape about them. But those women had all been respectable widows or friends of friends, not some unknown woman with a small boy that her father played ball with.

Perhaps the child was the attraction. She knew her father was disappointed that she had not been a boy; especially since her mother's long illness had prevented them from

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having other children. By dating a widow with a son, B.J. was getting an opportunity to do some of the boy things he hadn't been able to do with her.

That line of reasoning made her realize the child couldn't possibly be B.J.'s. He would not deny the son he'd always wanted, but would he go so far as to marry the woman and adopt the child in an effort to get someone to carry on the Harper name? What would Linda do if he did? Could she accept such people as family?

The tractor turned off the road, and the cars ahead pulled away from her, but by now Linda felt a little sick and had no desire to speed along this winding road. Coming to a crossroads, she followed an arrow pointing toward Harperville. Still lost in thought, she approached a side of town she wasn't familiar with. She passed a junkyard littered with rusting automobiles and a lumberyard filled with neat stacks of boards. Then she saw a corrugated metal building surrounded by a chain-link fence. Near an opening in the fence, a sign said, "Wade Preston, Full-Service Landscaper."

Ah, she thought. An oasis.

Chapter Four

Standing near the back of the truck his men had just unloaded, Wade explained tomorrow's work schedule to them. He directed his words primarily to Manuel, knowing his English was better and that once he understood, he'd translate to the others.

When everyone was nodding, he said goodnight and watched as they got into Manuel's car. Wade turned as the car drove away and saw the sporty little roadster sitting across the street.

Damn, what's she doing here? He watched Linda's car wheel into his parking lot, spraying gravel as it stopped beside him. She looked up at him through her open window. "I owe you an apology."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah?"

"You didn't deserve to be slapped for speaking the truth about my father."

She must have had it out with her old man. Wade would catch hell getting a loan from National Trust if he was on B.J. Harper's shit list. He relaxed his rigid stance and rubbed the back of his neck. "Did your father admit it?"

"I didn't talk to him, but I got confirmation of what you said from Meredith Conway."

Relieved, Wade nevertheless forced his eyebrows up and tried to look skeptical. "Now there's a reliable source."

"Yes, she is. Her mother has made collecting gossip about the people in this town her life's work."

"Gossip, not facts." He hoped he could still work his way out of this mess.

"You're right, and I need to know the truth." She opened the car door and stretched her long, bare legs toward him. "Will you help me?"

As she got out of the car, he stepped back, wanting to scream no. Instead he said, "Why me?"

She looked down and pushed a piece of gravel with the sole of her sandal. Her toenails were painted the color of cotton candy. Finally, she said, "I've just discovered something that sets my vision of the world on its ear, and you're the only person in this town I dare talk to about it."

He could see she was upset and felt somewhat responsible, but if even her toes looked good to him, he definitely needed to stay away from her. "Why don't you just move to Raleigh and forget about this?"

She looked up at him with shocked eyes. "How can I forget about my father having a secret life—one he's obviously ashamed of?"

She was going to spill the beans, sure as hell, unless he talked her out of it. "Look, I've been working all day. Let me go home and get cleaned up. I'll meet you at the pizza place on Dillard Street in about an hour."

"Why don't I pick up a pizza and bring it to your place?"

He did not need to be alone with this woman. "My neighbors are sure to recognize your car."

"What difference does my reputation make now?" Her face crinkled, and her voice cracked. "Besides I don't want to start crying in a public place."

Oh, hell, tears. If she was going to get hysterical on him, they couldn't have a quiet little talk in a booth at the pizza joint. "Okay, you can come to my place, but you still have to give me time to get cleaned up."

She sniffed away the tears, and looked at her watch. "Will 6:30 be okay?"

Wade nodded, hoping she'd use the time to go home and put on something other than those short shorts. "I like pepperoni on my pizza, and get a cold six-pack from the mini-market." Maybe he could drink away his desire for her while he tried to talk her out of saying anything to her father.

* * * *

Wade had just redressed when he heard an engine purring to a stop outside. He opened the door. Linda was leaning into her car prominently displaying her shapely butt, encased in clingy slacks. His mouth went dry.

She evidently heard him, for she turned and handed him a grocery bag. "You take the drinks, and I'll bring the pizza." She sounded steadier than when they last spoke, almost happy.

Had she really come here to talk about her father? He led her toward the kitchen.

She placed the pizza box on the small dining table and raised the lid. "Mmm, this smells so good. I didn't think I was hungry until I picked it up, but as soon as I got it in the car my mouth started to water."

Then she looked at him with a puzzled expression, and he realized he was standing and staring at her. He busied himself

unloading a bottle of Chianti and a six-pack from the grocery bag. "I guess we'll need plates and forks."

She waved her fingers at him. "No need to dirty dishes. Let's eat out of the box. But I could use a glass."

He told himself to stop ogling Linda and get his mind back on what was important here, protecting his future from the wrath of B.J. Harper. He got a glass out of the cabinet and tore a handful of paper towels from the roll on the counter.

As they were sitting down, she said, "By the way, Meredith had heard about the police coming here last night. Someone at the beauty parlor told her mother you beat me."

He groaned in disgust. "Now you see how I've gotten my reputation."

Linda had to swallow her first bite of pizza before asking, "You mean it's all just gossip?"

"Oh, I've dated most of the single women in this town, but when you consider that most of the women here either marry right out of high school or leave town, there isn't much of a dating pool." He bit the point off his slice of pizza, and they both ate in silence for a moment.

Finally, she said, "What about the married women in Harper Heights?"

He took a long swallow of beer, trying to cool his temper. "Some bored housewives like to flirt, and it's good for my business to flirt back. But it would be damn bad for business to get caught boinking a customer's wife."

"Does that mean you don't do it, or you don't get caught?"

He sat his beer can down so forcefully that a dollop of liquid flew out of the hole and puddled on the table. "Did you come here to talk about your father or to insult me?"

She looked down at her food. "I'm sorry. I—I'm almost afraid to talk about Dad."

"Actually, what's there to talk about? It's your father's life, after all."

"Do you know the woman?"

Wade found it hard to out-and-out lie to Linda while she looked at him so earnestly. "I've done some work out there."

She looked shocked by that admission. "Can she afford lawn care?"

Maybe telling her how closely her father was involved with Dixie would convince Linda to stay out of it. "Don't be dumb. Your father hired me to grade the lot before the trailer was put in. It's his place. He pays the bills."

She leaned forward; her eyes grew wide. "Could the child be his?"

Was she afraid of losing her inheritance? "Your dad and Dixie got together and the kid was born before I came back to town. So I don't know which came first. I heard she used to live in Steeple's Crossing. Apparently, he wanted her closer."

"Surely, if the child were his, he would have married the woman."

Wade tipped his head to one side as he selected his words carefully. "Dixie's a nice woman, but she wouldn't fit in with the country-club set."

Linda wrinkled her nose as if smelling something unpleasant. "Is she common?"

Wade's temperature jumped. "What do you mean by common? She used to work as a waitress in a truck stop on the interstate."

Linda's lip curled in distaste. "A waitress?"

Having just picked up a fresh slice of pizza, he pointed it at her to emphasize his words. "Watch what you say. My mother was a waitress."

"Oh, I don't have anything against waitresses, I just can't imagine my father being interested in one. How is your mother, by the way?"

"She passed away over a year ago."

Linda gasped. "I'm sorry. No one told me."

Of course not, he thought. "I guess Mom wasn't important enough to be included in the Conways' gossip."

"Was her passing sudden?" Now she was trying to smooth over her blunder by pretending to give a damn.

"No, she had a bad heart. That's why I got out of the Corps and came back to Harperville."

She looked as if she couldn't quite comprehend what he'd said.

For reasons he didn't understand, Wade felt compelled to explain further. "I hadn't planned to come back here, but Mom needed help, and by the time she died, my business was going so well I hated to give it up."

She still stared at him, apparently surprised that he was the kind of guy who gave a damn about his mother. How in the hell could she be any kind of lawyer when she was such a poor judge of people?

"Look, Linda. There's no need to make a big deal out of your dad's ... affairs. Go to Raleigh and get on with your career."

"How can I do that? All my life I've been trying to live up to my father's standards, and now I find he doesn't have any."

If there was one thing Wade couldn't stand, it was a hypocrite. "What kind of standards were you living up to last night, when you came here to have a fun-fuck with the yard man? I'd say you and your father are about equal."

She dropped a partially eaten piece of pizza onto the table with a plop. "What a terrible thing to say. I didn't come ... you and I ... things just got out of control here last night."

"Maybe the same thing happened to your father. All men like to get laid once in a while. Maybe he was doing that and accidentally fell in love with the wrong woman."

"Love? If he loves her, why doesn't he marry her?"

"Maybe he's afraid you won't accept Dixie the Waitress as your stepmom."

She glared at him indignantly. "If he really loves her, how I feel about it shouldn't matter."

Jeez! Now she was claiming she believed in love. He widened his eyes, pretending to be struck by a great revelation. "Well then, she must be a hell of a lay, and he set her up in the double-wide for convenience's sake."

His talking dirty about dear Daddy evidently hit a nerve, for she jumped up and stormed away, shouting, "Gross! Gross! You are so gross."

Congratulating himself on how easily he'd gotten rid of her, he grabbed a fresh beer and tipped back in his chair. At the hiss of the pop-top, Linda froze at the front door she'd just opened. She slammed it shut and marched back toward him. He could almost see the smoke streaming from her ears.

He casually took a long swallow of beer, which apparently added to her agitation. She dropped her purse on the table as though throwing down a gauntlet. "How can you be so damn cold? Didn't last night mean anything to you?"

He crashed the front legs of the chair back down on the floor. How could she be so damn dense? "What did you expect it to mean to me?"

"Well, something more than just another notch on your bedpost."

"Why?"

"Have you forgotten what we once meant to each other?"

He stood up and started around the table. "I haven't forgotten how you dumped me."

She puffed up indignantly. "Me? Dump you? You're the one who never called me again."

He felt his fingernails digging into his palms. "The hell you say. I came home on my first leave, and your shoulders were so damn cold I got frostbite. It was plain to see you'd made new friends at the University and were through with me."

She began to back away from him but still spoke as if she'd been the wronged party. "I said no one time, and you never called me again. How do you think that made me feel?"

Was she blaming him? She had more guts than sense. He backed her into the living room and against the end of the

couch. Hovering over her, he practically yelled into her face. "You swore to love me forever, but after three months—three lousy months—you wouldn't let me touch you."

Her voice rose to a near hysterical pitch. "You had changed. You weren't the boy I'd known."

"I'd just been through basic training where the Corps turns boys into Marines by putting 'em through hell. Thoughts of you kept me going, kept me from deliberately fucking up so I'd be thrown out. I thought if I was good enough to be a Marine, I'd be good enough for you."

Her voice softened to a near whine, and he realized she was truly afraid of him. "You started pawing me, and I said, 'Stop,' and you got mad and stalked away."

He recalled how he'd come out of Parris Island pumped up like a pit bull on steroids and thinking about nothing but seeing Linda and having sex with her. Had he frightened her then as he was doing now?

The tension ran out of his shoulders, and he stepped back, giving her room to scoot around the end of the couch, closer to the door. "If you're scared of me, why did you come here last night?"

She shrugged and raised one hand, palm up. "That was a long time ago, and I remembered how it had been between us, and wondered if it could still be that way."

"How what had been—the sex?"

She moved in front of the couch, and as the distance between them grew, he saw her back and her chin stiffen. Finally, she glared up at him. "What else?"

He fought a sudden urge to smile. He liked her feisty much better than frightened. "You women complain about men using you for sex, but you never hesitate to go the other way, do you?"

Drawing herself into a self-righteous pose, she said, "If you don't want to be used, stop inviting women to your apartment for casual sex."

He decided to see how far he could bait her. "Actually, it wasn't casual sex. It was get-even sex."

Her mouth gaped. "How were you getting even by giving me great sex?"

"I wanted you to know what you've been missing all these years."

She must have noticed the corners of his mouth twitching, for her eyes began to twinkle. Placing her hands on her hips, she gave him a smoldering look and spoke in a breathy voice. "Well, you did that."

He tried to match her sexy gaze. "I did, huh?"

"Oh, yeah."

He started around the couch, taking slow, deliberate steps, giving her plenty of time to evade him. But she didn't move. He stopped just inches from her and lightly stroked one of her upper arms. "Well, I don't like to brag, but people say I'm quite a womanizer."

She giggled and then swallowed her laughter with a look of mock seriousness. "A reputation you rightly deserve."

He put his arms around her, cradling her against his chest. "I must admit, however, there seems to be a special chemistry between us."

Linda looked up at him, the blue of her eyes growing darker. "Oh, really? You mean what happened between us last night wasn't all due to your skill as a lover?"

He caressed her back. "With you, my skills rose to new heights."

She hugged him and leaned fully against his body. "As I recall, something else rose pretty high, too."

A red light bounced off the walls of his living room. "Oh, crap!"

Linda tensed in his arms. Apparently, she'd seen the light too. "Not again," she groaned.

Wade walked over to the door, yanked it open and demanded, "Don't you guys have anything else to do?"

Officer Dickson, who had been about to rap on the door with his nightstick, seemed a bit embarrassed as he said, "We had a report of a man and woman fighting."

Linda evidently hoped to make a joke out of the situation, for she held her arms out and turned in a circle. "Once again, there's not a mark on me."

Carl stepped into the room, with an apologetic smile on his face. "Sorry, folks, but the old lady is Chief Carter's aunt, so we can't ignore her when she calls."

"And she did say you two were making a lot of noise," Dickson added.

"It's not even nine o'clock," Wade said, thoroughly disgusted.

Carl shrugged. "Yeah, I'm sorry we had to interrupt, but for our sakes as well as your own, will you try to keep the noise down?"

"We were just talking," Linda insisted.

Carl gave them a mock salute, Officer Dickson glowered, and the two policemen left. When the door closed behind them, Wade huffed and said, "I gotta find another place to live. That old lady is crazy."

Then he recalled the direction he and Linda had been moving in before the cops arrived and realized Mrs. Jones had done him a favor. Getting in any deeper with Linda would surely cause him trouble. So he continued to stand near the doorway, hoping she'd take the hint and leave.

She looked at him uncertainly and finally said, "I guess I should go before she complains again."

He tried to look apologetic. "I guess so."

She headed toward her purse on the kitchen table. While she was picking it up, he said, "Don't forget your wine."

"You keep it." Her voice grew snippy. "Put it with the rest of your seduction supplies."

He didn't want to make her angry again. "Looks like I won't have any need for those. At least, not until I find another place to live."

That seemed to amuse her, so he decided to take another stab at preventing her from causing a stink with her old man. "Have you decided what you're going to do about your father?"

She paused a few feet from him. "You think I shouldn't say anything to him, right?"

"In reality, what can you say? Daddy, I want you to get rid of the woman you're shacking up with?"

She looked shocked by his blunt language. "I certainly wouldn't say anything like that."

"So what would you say?"

She thought for a moment and finally murmured, "I don't know."

"If your father really cares about the woman and child, he'll eventually tell you about them. If they don't mean anything special to him, and you force the issue, you're going to come across like a meddling, perhaps jealous, daughter."

That seemed to catch her attention. "It would be better if he told me about this himself."

"He might have been waiting until you finished up with the bar exam."

She nodded and seemed relieved. "I think you're right. We've been apart a lot in the past couple of years. Perhaps during my visit, we'll get some of our closeness back. I certainly don't want to do anything to jeopardize that possibility."

"Sure, and don't jump to conclusions. The child may not be his. Dixie could have had it before she got involved with your father. In that case, he may feel there's no need to tell you anything."

Her nods clearly indicated she was buying his argument. She stepped closer and lightly touched his hand. "Thank you for speaking so frankly to me. I got a little hysterical this afternoon. I guess I'd built my father into a paragon."

Wade tried to hide the guilt he felt over his self-centered deception by smiling warmly. "That's only natural. B.J. Harper

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is a remarkable man." He escaped the warm feel of her hand on his by reaching to open the door.

She stepped toward the opening and then stopped and stared at him expectantly, so he said those three little words men often use to get past awkward goodbyes. "I'll call you."

Chapter Five

Dixie sat on the steps of the porch in front of the double-wide and watched B.J. giving Benjy another lesson on his bike. Benjy was doing well with the pedaling part, but didn't know how to stop, and when it came time to turn, he would have tipped over every time, if it hadn't been for the training wheels and his father's hovering attention.

Ben had brought Chinese food for supper and hadn't mentioned their last fight, and that was fine with Dixie. She wanted to smooth things over too. She'd spent half of last night stewing over her situation.

B.J. had told her from the beginning he wouldn't marry her, and she'd accepted his request to move to Harperville anyway. She told herself she did it because she loved B.J. and wanted to stay home with Benjy while he was a baby, but financial security had been a big part of her decision.

She hadn't known how she could give Benjy a decent life on a waitress's pay. Maybe if she'd moved to town and got a better job in one of those fancy restaurants where the tips were bigger, she could have managed, but she'd lived in Steeple Crossing all her life, and the thought of going to a new place and making her way among strangers had frightened her. B.J. had been so strong and generous that staying with him had been the easiest thing to do.

Maybe she'd even dreamed he would someday change his mind. But that dream had died last night. She'd always known she wasn't good enough for B.J. Harper, but now she

knew her son wasn't either. If she stayed here and let B.J. care for them, Benjy would grow up just as she had—an outsider.

She couldn't stand to see the joy crushed out of him because of his parents' sins. Somehow she had to get him away from the wagging tongues in Harperville. And how long would it be before talk followed him to Willow Creek? Those uppity Baptists who ran the school there might even throw him out if gossip reached their ears. She needed to get Benjy out of Rudolph County at least.

But all the problems of making such a move were still hanging over her head. How could she just pick up and leave? Where would she live? How would she get by until she found a job? What would she do about childcare?

She wished she'd been thrifty and saved some of the money B.J. gave her, but foolishly, she hadn't planned for the future. She'd even been concerned about spending so much of B.J.'s money that he'd find them a burden. Now she could see no way to get Benjy away from here without his father's help.

Somehow she had to convince B.J. that moving would be for the best. But she wasn't good with words. The only thing she had going for her was her body. That's why she'd put on a low-cut shirt and skin-tight capris and was propping her elbows on the step above her, so her boobs would stick out, and letting the edge of the step cut into her back, so she could twist her hips and display her legs seductively.

And her plan was working. B.J. glanced her way so often that Benjy finally crashed his bike into a bush. The boy

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shrieked in pain over a scratch on one of his hands and looked at his father accusingly. B.J. scooped him off the bike, crooning apologies, and Dixie hurried over to them. After examining the boo-boo, she promised her son a big bandage after he'd taken his bath.

* * * *

B.J. waited impatiently while Dixie tucked Benjy into bed. He hadn't known what to expect from her tonight, but she seemed her old self. In fact, she even seemed anxious to patch things up between them.

When she back came into the room, she said, "Thanks for dinner. You know how I love Chinese." She joined him on the couch, sitting close enough that he could easily loop his arm around her shoulder.

He leaned closer and softly said, "What else do you love?"

She turned her head so their noses almost touched. Her dark eyes seemed to twinkle with amusement. "Do you mean what or who?"

He smiled. "Well, after last night, I didn't know how I'd be welcomed tonight."

She leaned her head back on his arm. "I'm sorry I was so cross. The idea of Benjy going to school somewhere else took me by surprise, but after thinking about it, I can see you're right."

B.J. lightly kissed her cheek. "I knew you'd come around once you thought about it."

"In fact," she continued, "I'm thinking that Willow Creek might not be far enough away."

"Huh?"

"Talk travels, and you're mighty well known. Benjy's connection to you is likely to come up just about anywhere in the county."

B.J. pulled his head back so he could fully see her expression. "What are you suggesting?"

"If he and I lived in Raleigh or Durham, nobody would know anything about us. It would make things easier."

B.J. was shocked and a little frightened. "You want to move?"

"It's not so much want to as need to. We have to think of what's best for Benjy."

"Where would you live?"

"Couldn't you move the double-wide? Then there'd be plenty of room when you came to see us."

She reached up and cupped his cheek and looked longingly into his eyes, and he knew she was playing him. She wanted to leave him, just as he'd always known she someday would, and she wanted him to pay for it. "Do you have any idea how much it costs to move a structure of this size?"

"No, honey, I don't. But if it's too much, we can just get a little apartment, and after Benjy's in school, I can get a job to help with expenses."

He pulled his arm away from the back of the sofa so quickly that her head bobbed. "Where do you think you can get a job that'll let you work only during school hours?"

She straightened her back, apparently through playing the coquette. "A lot of mothers work. They put their children in daycare."

He drew a corner of his mouth into a sneer. "Do you think you can earn enough money to afford that?"

She kept the volume of her voice down, but its intensity increased. "You don't want to send Benjy to school in Harperville because you're worried gossip about us will affect you. Think how it'll affect him. My daddy ran off and left my mama with four kids. We were the poorest white family around. The ladies from the church used to bring us old clothes. My sisters and me had to wear 'em to school, and the girls would recognize something that used to be theirs and make snotty remarks. That was bad, but it would have been a hell of a lot worse if they'd been calling my mama a whore."

Now she was playing the sympathy card. "No one would ever call you such a thing."

"People know I'm not married and that your Cadillac is parked out front a lot. They probably know you own the trailer and the land it stands on. Those fancy ladies in Harperville might not use a word like whore, but they damn sure think I'm one."

He tried to put his arms around her, but she shook him off. "You're making too much of this, Dixie. We've chosen a non-traditional lifestyle, and that's nobody's business but ours."

"So why don't you want Benjy to go to school in Harperville?"

He huffed in frustration. "Fine. You want him to go to school at Harperville Elementary, register him there. I'll even take him on the first day."

She sneered. "Don't make me laugh. You won't even tell your daughter she has a half-brother. You sure as hell ain't gonna tell the whole town. Admit it, you're ashamed of us."

"I'll admit I'm ashamed of the way you use profanity and poor grammar, and if you continue doing so in front of Benjy, he will too." He knew it embarrassed her when he criticized the way she talked. Maybe he could use this to make her back down. "If you're truly concerned about his welfare, try not to sound like a redneck."

Dixie felt as if she were choking and put her hand to her throat. This was what she feared most, B.J. becoming disgusted with her common ways. After taking a deep breath to steady herself, she realized she'd lost her temper and let their conversation go in the wrong direction. She needed to lead him back to sweet talk. "If fancy talking is all you want, why do you come sniffing around my skirt tails?"

His expression went from belligerent to pained. "Sniff is all the hell I've been able to do lately."

She turned up one corner of her mouth. "Now who's cussing?"

He sighed. "You'd cause a saint to curse."

Dixie moved closer, pressing one breast against his chest. "You're certainly no saint."

"And aren't you glad?"

She slipped her arm around his shoulders and nuzzled the side of his neck. "Uh-huh."

"Does this mean I can do more than sniff tonight?"

"Have I been neglecting my baby?" She stood and held her hands out. "Come with me, and I'll make it up to you."

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B.J. grinned as he rose and let her lead him toward the bedroom. After closing the door behind them, Dixie flicked the lock just in case Benjy woke up and came looking for her. When she turned back to B.J., he'd already unbuckled and unzipped. She took his trousers and carefully draped them over the back of a chair, knowing how he hated wrinkles.

Then she removed her blouse but left her lace bra on, thinking her boobs looked better with the support. B.J. sat on the side of the bed and slipped off his loafers. He left his socks on. That meant he wouldn't be spending the night.

She started to kneel in front of him, but he caught her upper arms and held her up. "Take everything off, Sweet Pea. I want to see that pretty body of yours."

Dixie obeyed, trying to look sexy but feeling uncomfortable. Even though B.J. had sworn it wasn't, she was pretty sure her butt had started to sag, so she didn't want to parade it around in front of him.

When she was completely naked, she held her arms out, smiled seductively and walked slowly toward him. B.J. had removed his boxers. He was only partially erect, but Dixie knew she could soon fix that.

He moved back onto the bed. She crawled after him, intending to kneel by his side. But he grabbed her and pulled her hips toward his head. "Let's do this together, Sweet Pea."

She'd wanted to make this all about him tonight, but she didn't argue. B.J. hadn't liked to touch her with his mouth when they'd first gotten together, but after she'd shown him the little bump that could drive her wild, he'd started doing it

whenever he was trying hard to please her. She didn't want to do anything that might jar him out of that frame of mind.

As soon as her knees were on either side of his head, he started flicking his tongue over her sensitive spot. She had to stretch out over his body to reach his dick. As soon as her hand surrounded it, she felt him lengthen. She tried to concentrate on licking and sucking him, but his persistent touching distracted her.

He clamped his hands around her hips, holding her almost stationary, thwarting her growing desire to pump her torso. She clamped her lips around his dick and let her growing passion drive her tempo there. Then she tasted the first hint of his salty cream, and the need to feel all of him inside her overcame all other desires.

With a cry of urgency, she pulled away from him and scrambled to straddle his body and sink down over his erection, groaning in pleasure as he filled her. As she pumped up and down, he captured her bouncing boobs and massaged them. She felt his growing response and let herself go completely. When she slumped in relief, he quickly flipped her over and pumped to his own finish.

Dixie lay in the sweet afterglow of complete sexual satisfaction and once again told herself how lucky she was to have a man who always sought to pleasure her. But a little worm of doubt gnawed its way into her thoughts. Was this just another way he controlled her?

She fought against the beckoning sleep and waited to see if he intended to creep away without settling the question of

For Old Time's Sake
by Sarah Winn

where Benjy would go to school. After long moments, B.J. began to stir.

When he swung his legs over the side of the bed, she raised herself and leaned against his back. After brushing a kiss against his shoulder, she asked, "Got to go, hon?"

"Afraid so. Don't get up. Go back to sleep."

She slipped her arm around him to keep him with her a little longer. "Will you look into moving us?"

He reached back and patted the side of her body. "Sure. But it'll take time to find a place to put a double-wide and schedule the movers. Maybe you ought to register Benjy at Willow Creek in case we don't get everything set up before school starts."

She knew then he was just stringing her along to prevent another argument. He had no intentions of helping her move. But this was only the first round in a fight that was too important to lose—the fight for Benjy's future.

* * * *

The next morning, Linda lazed in bed because she didn't want to face her father over the breakfast table. How could she look at him as she always had, now that she knew about his secret life? Only it wasn't much of a secret, not in Harperville.

Hunger finally drove her out of bed a little before ten. Mrs. Mills was in the kitchen and offered to brew a fresh pot of coffee. Linda decided to toast a bagel while she waited. As she was taking it out of the package, Mrs. Mills said, "Don't

spoil your lunch. Your father's asked me to fix chicken salad the way you like it."

"You mean he didn't go out this morning?"

"No. Guess he's got his ducks in a row so he can spend time with you."

The bagel popped up in the toaster, and Linda fished it out and spread cream cheese on it. She munched absentmindedly as Mrs. Mills filled a mug with coffee.

Her father strode into the room. "So you're finally up. Are you feeling well?"

She forced herself to look him in the eye. "Sure. Just catching up on some of the sleep I missed while I was studying for the bar exam."

He stood across from her, staring as if he were inspecting her for signs of some contagious disease. When he was apparently satisfied, he nodded and said, "Join me in the study when you're finished."

Recognizing an order when she heard it, Linda made quick work of the bagel and then poured herself a fresh cup of coffee. She'd need it if he'd decided to come clean.

In the study, he sat behind his large mahogany desk, tapping a pencil eraser against the wood. Her father didn't conduct business in this room, so there was no chair in front of the desk for visitors. She had no intention of standing like an errant child before the principal, so she left her coffee mug on the desk while she dragged a chair over from the corner. Once she was seated, she took a sip of her coffee.

Finally, she said. "What do you want to talk about?"

He stared at her for a moment with a stern expression. "I had a disturbing phone call this morning from my friend, Chief Carter. He thought I should be warned that my daughter seems to be involved in an abusive relationship with Wade Preston."

Linda blew a stream of air through her teeth before saying, "News travels fast in this town. If it slowed down a bit, maybe people would get their stories straight."

"Are you saying you weren't at Preston's apartment for the last two nights when the police came to investigate disturbances?"

"I was there, but Wade certainly wasn't abusing me. The chief's aunt lives in the same building and apparently complains every time someone sneezes."

"What were you doing there? Surely you aren't becoming involved with him."

"Dad, we were friends in high school." She shrugged. "We were just ... talking over old times."

"You're no longer in high school. You're an adult and about to embark on an important career. You should realize a relationship with Wade Preston would be a liability."

"There's nothing wrong with Wade."

"I didn't say there was, but he's not the kind of man who can comfortably go where you're going. You have a brilliant future, Linda. Don't hamstring yourself by getting mixed up with someone beneath you."

Where in the hell did he get off lecturing her? "I can't believe you have the gall to say this to me while you're playing house with some waitress."

His eyes bugged, and then his face grew red, but she knew the color was coming from anger rather than embarrassment. "Who told you—is that how Preston wormed his way into your confidence? Well, by God, I've thrown a lot of business his way, and I can damn sure see he loses some of it."

Realizing her father could indeed harm Wade's business, Linda hurriedly said, "Actually, I got most of my information from Meredith Conway."

His mouth sagged open.

"That's right, Dad. The Conways know all about your little love nest out on Wheeler Road. And if they know, everybody in town knows."

"I—I'm entitled to a life of my own."

"How about me?"

"Your situation is entirely different. You're just starting out in life. You have to be careful not to take a misstep."

She sat her coffee mug on his desk so forcefully that liquid sloshed out on the polished mahogany. She was so angry that it didn't occur to her to mop it up. "When do I get a life of my own? You decided which schools I should go to, what I should study, even where I should work. Did it ever occur to you that maybe I don't want the same life you want for me?"

He looked surprised by her outburst, even as he hastily pushed a blotter over to soak up the spilled coffee. "You never objected to any of my suggestions."

"Maybe because I knew you wouldn't listen."

"You're being petulant because you found out I'm not living like a monk. Dixie Ray and I are good for each other, and we're hurting no one."

"How about the child?"

"You needn't worry about Benjy. He's a happy little boy."

"Benjy? Is that short for Benjamin?" Linda felt a sudden shortness of breath. "So he is your son."

Her father winced. "You didn't know?"

"The Conways weren't sure about that. My God! How could you give the child your first name and not your last?"

"Things are different these days. People don't pay much attention to this sort of thing."

"They do when a Harper's involved."

"Don't scream at me, young lady."

She lurched to her feet. "All my life I've felt guilty for not being a son, and now you have one and deny him. What kind of man are you?"

He stood and glared at her. "One who placed my daughter's welfare before all others."

"No, Dad, you placed your desires above all else." She staggered out of the room. Everything she'd believed about her father now seemed a sham.

B.J. slumped back into his chair. Linda had never spoken to him in such a manner. Of course, he'd expected she would be upset if she learned about his other family. That's why he'd kept it from her. But she said she'd been harboring feelings of rejection because she was female. That was ridiculous. Wasn't it?

He had made jokes about being the last of the Harpers when Martha was still living and they'd been planning on having other children. Had Linda, as a small child, heard and

understood? There was no other explanation, for he'd certainly never said anything directly to her.

And he didn't think he'd ever been unduly critical of her. Of course, he had little to be critical of. Linda had been an obedient, cooperative child, always the first in her class. Had guilt over not being a boy been the motivating force shaping her personality? Why did women have to be such complex creatures?

Dixie Ray had been easily pleased until petty jealousy over his daughter, of all things, had made her completely unreasonable. Of course, she claimed it was for Benjy's benefit.

And what would Benjy's life be, growing up in Harperville as the son of B.J. Harper's mistress? B.J. hadn't considered the name problem either. It would be difficult to tell the boy he wasn't his real father. Perhaps he could just tell him it was a little white lie for convenience's sake. But what kind of precedent would that establish in the mind of a five-year-old boy?

All these problems set his stomach acids boiling. He reached for the antacids he always carried. Suppose it wasn't just heartburn? He was no longer a young man. If something happened to him, what would become to his son?

He heard the back door slam. Had Linda left the house? He carried her half-full coffee cup back to the kitchen. Through the window over the sink, he saw her in a swimsuit striding toward the pool. Once inside the fence, she dived out of his line of vision, but spurts of water splashing above the rim of the pool told him she was swimming furiously.

He'd seen her swim like that many times when she was a teenager. Then he'd credited it to her desire for physical fitness, all part of her natural inclination to excel, but had it also been her way to alleviate her anger at him? Had he failed her, just as he was failing Benjy?

What failure? Under his influence, Linda had blossomed into the smartest Harper yet. She could go far, and B.J. had pulled strings to get her into a law firm that had important clients all over the state. He just had to make sure some good-looking doofus didn't tie her down to dirty dishes and diapers.

He better patch up this little argument, or her independent streak might cause her to do something foolish. He guessed the best way to do it was come clean about his situation with Dixie. It wouldn't hurt him to eat a little crow. He might even ask for Linda's advice. That always pleased a woman.

Involving Linda might help him placate Dixie Ray. He could turn this into a win-win situation.

* * * *

Coming up for air, Linda caught sight of her father looking down at her. She slowed her strokes and swam toward him. Bracing her arms on the tile rim of the pool, she looked at him and asked, "Is there something else you want to say to me?"

"A number of things, actually."

She wished she'd had more time to swim before having to face him again. After a sigh of resignation, she swam to the end of the pool where she'd left her towel. What was B.J. up

to now? Probably determined to make her apologize for criticizing him. Fat chance.

Hoisting herself onto the deck, she patted water from her hair, and then she wrapped her towel around her hips and walked over to him.

He sat in one of the lounge chairs, and she perched on the chair beside him. He cleared his throat. "Linda, I never resented the fact you weren't a boy."

She winced at a sharp pain in her chest.

"In fact, I was prouder of your achievements because you were a girl. You will always be my first child, and I'll always love you in a special way because of that."

She felt her face crumpling and turned away from him. How foolish to react so emotionally to a simple declaration of love from her own father. Perhaps his words cut her because she didn't quite believe them.

After swallowing her tears, she said, "But wouldn't you like to have a son to carry on the Harper name?"

When he didn't reply, she glanced at him. He stared across the lawn as if trying to see into the future. Finally, he said, "Apparently, that wasn't meant to be."

She couldn't let it go. "But you do have a son now."

"His last name is Yost."

"There are ways to change names on birth certificates."

His head snapped toward her, and the deepening wrinkles around his eyes told her she'd awakened his interest. Damn. Why hadn't she resisted the temptation to show off her legal knowledge and kept her mouth shut?

"How?"

"I think you just have to present proof to the state registrar that you're the father."

"But wouldn't that brand Benjy a bastard?"

"What is he now?"

"His mother is divorced. People who don't know her well assume her ex-husband is the father."

Strangely, it annoyed her that he was willing to let another man have credit for one of his own. "Then all your problems are solved, aren't they?"

Her father shook his head. "I've done nothing to ensure Benjy's future."

"If you're asking my permission to mention him in your will, sure, do it. You've given me a good education. I can take care of myself."

"I can't just leave him money."

She stomach clenched. "You want to leave him the house?" She'd never thought of living out her life in her father's house, but the idea of the house her mother had so elegantly furnished going to people from a trailer park disturbed her.

"What I mean is I can't simply leave a large sum of money in Dixie's keeping. The way she dotes on the boy, she might squander it all on him before he's fully grown and educated."

"Why not set up a trust fund? Have the bank administer it. Then she'd have to account for her spending."

"I've thought of that, but I hate to put a portion of my estate under the control of others while there are still chances to make good investments."

His lack of knowledge about trusts surprised Linda. "Name yourself the trustee, then you can go on managing the money. You can also name a successor trustee in case something happens to you."

He cleared his throat. "That's the problem. I hate to think of Benjy's future being in the hands of an uncaring stranger. Now that you're a lawyer, I'm wondering if you—"

She held up her hand to stop him. "That's asking a lot, Dad. I don't know the boy's mother. She may resent any interference from me. Such a setup could get nasty."

"If you'd meet her, you'd soon see Dixie Ray is basically a good woman, but she's had little experience managing money. I think she'd truly welcome your help."

"That could be wishful thinking on your part."

"At least allow me to introduce you to her. Then you can see for yourself how easygoing she is."

Linda hesitated. "Are you sure she'll want to meet me?"

"Actually, she's been rather hurt that I've never told you about Benjy. I think she'd be happy to meet you."

Damn. Now she was getting sucked into helping her father with his shady little romance. What next?

Chapter Six

Sitting in his office, Wade stared at the phone. All during the day, as he'd shuttled back and forth between his crews, his cell phone had burned his hip, and now the bigger model on his desk nagged at him. He didn't have to call Linda. Women knew guys often didn't mean it when they said, "I'll call you."

Still, he couldn't forget what she'd said last night about their long-ago breakup. Had he really been the one who caused it? Being so far beneath her, he'd always expected her to dump him, so when she'd held back, he'd jumped to the conclusion his worst fear had come true.

But things were different now. He'd made something of himself. He had his own business, and he and Linda were so hot together. That had to mean something. But she was still in the country-club set, while a country bar was more his speed. No point in going after her and getting his heart kicked around again.

The phone rang. Wade felt a tingle on the back of his neck when he heard Linda's voice. "Wade?"

"Hey, babe. What's up?"

He crashed back to the real world as she said, "I thought I should let you know. I had a stormy session with my father this morning."

He'd forgotten about her father. "Oh?"

"His buddy, Chief Carter, ratted on us."

Wade's premonitions of doom returned. "Let me guess, Daddy doesn't think I'm a suitable playmate for you."

"Well, the Chief made it sound like we were into something dark, and I got mad at Dad for believing him, and one thing led to another, until I asked where he got off criticizing me when he was involved in the biggest scandal in town."

"Uh-oh, now he's really pissed at me."

"I told him I got most of my information from Meredith Conway, but he did make a threat about hurting your business. He can't actually do that, can he?"

Wade was silent for so long that she again said, "Wade?"

"Ah—I've applied for a loan from National Trust of Harperville, but there are other banks in the state."

"Are you having financial difficulties?"

"I need money for expansion."

"I'm sorry if I've caused you problems." She sounded truly distressed for him.

"Don't blame yourself. If I'd kept my mouth shut in the first place, none of this would have happened."

"If the Conways knew, I'd have found out sooner or later, so don't blame yourself."

"Okay," he said, "let's blame the Conways."

She chuckled. "I like that idea. And Dad was so shocked to find out they knew about the double-wide he may have forgotten about you."

"Just as long as I stay away from his darling daughter, huh?"

"I told him I was an adult and could see anyone I pleased." Had she stood up to her father for his sake? "You did?"

"Well, sort of. Actually the conversation got so far away from you that it never got back to you."

"That's unflattering."

"The worst thing is the boy is Dad's. He thought I already knew and let it slip out." All the good humor had gone out of her voice.

Trying to think of something to say to cheer her up, Wade said, "Well, congratulations."

"What?"

"You now have a little brother. Didn't you ever want a kid brother? I know I did."

The lengthy silence on the other end of the phone made him fear he'd once again said the wrong thing.

Finally, she said, "Yes, he is my brother. What should I do about it?"

Wade decided he was getting in too deep here. "You don't have to do anything if you don't want to."

"But how can I ignore him? He's family."

Damn, he couldn't seem to say anything but the wrong thing. "Don't come unglued about this, Linda. Everything works out in time."

"I wish there was some place we could meet privately. I really need to talk to someone."

"We don't want to cause more gossip."

"You're right."

The tone of defeat in her voice grabbed him by the throat. She probably thought he was rejecting her again. The only way Wade could keep B.J. Harper from messing up his business plans was to stay away from Linda, but she needed

somebody to talk to, and he wanted to be that somebody.
"You could come to the shop. Everyone's out of here by seven, and if you park around back, no one can see your car."

"Can I come later—like nine?"

"That'll be good."

"Thanks, Wade. You are a true friend."

He hung up the phone and looked at the stiff wooden chair across from his desk. His cramped little office offered few comforts. Then he remembered the Turners' new patio furniture, which Pedro had unpacked that afternoon. No reason he couldn't break it in a little before delivery.

* * * *

A little after nine, Linda arrived at the building housing Wade's business and parked in the back like he'd told her to.

Security lighting showed his pickup, a battered dump truck, and a front-end loader. The back entrance was unlocked. She entered and called out, "Wade?"

"Up here," he yelled. "Watch your step."

She edged her way through mowers and tillers and other machinery she didn't recognize as she approached the area near the closed double doors in the front of the building. Some evergreen bushes, their roots still wrapped in balls of burlap, formed a semicircle around a pristine set of lawn furniture. A chair and chaise lounge, fashioned from vines of wrought iron, and covered with gaily flowered cushions, sat on either side of a glass topped table. Several little tin buckets with candles burning in them were scattered about,

but the main light came from the open doorway of a little room built into the corner of the large building.

"What's this?" She gestured toward the cozy little scene surrounding her as Wade stepped into the lighted doorway.

"The office is so small I decided we'd be more comfortable out here. This is some patio furniture for a customer that I haven't delivered yet."

"But candles?" Linda asked.

He shrugged. "They contain citronella. I have to leave some of the windows open so the fans will work and being eaten by mosquitoes can spoil conversation."

"You shouldn't have gone to so much trouble," she said, but she was touched by his efforts.

He shrugged. "I'm just trying to save my reputation as the village stud. It wouldn't do if word got out I don't have any place to entertain a lady."

Of course, he was joking, but this setting did look a bit overstated if it was just intended for two old friends to talk over their troubles. Did Wade have something more in mind? She could only hope.

He led her to the chaise. "On the phone, you sounded really upset. Sit here and relax. I have the bottle of wine you brought last night chilling. Let me get it, and then we can talk."

Even though the cushions of the customer's new furniture were covered in plastic, Linda slipped off her sandals before pulling her feet onto the chaise. While he went for the wine, she tried to make herself comfortable. She was wearing a halter dress with a tight, rather short skirt. Sitting upright

with her legs stretched out flat wasn't comfortable, but when she bent her knees, her skirt rode up toward indecency. She finally twisted onto one hip so she could bend her knees while resting her legs against the chaise. This position also left her facing the chair Wade would sit in.

As she made sure her skirt covered her tush, he returned, carrying the bottle and two of those disposable plastic wine glasses. He really had gone all out.

After sitting in the chair beside her, he turned it so he faced her more fully. He poured the wine and said, "Have you decided what to do about your recently discovered brother?"

She accepted a glass from him. "I'm going to meet him and his mother."

Wade choked on his wine. "Does your father know about that?"

"He's the one who suggested it. He's gotten the idea I can help him work out the legalities of securing Benjy's future."

"Guess he wants to get a little return on all the money he's spent on your education." His grin told her he was trying to bring humor into the conversation, but she didn't smile back.

"More like he's trying to hide his little secret from anyone outside the family. He's a bit worried about next year's mayoral election. He might actually have some opposition for the first time in years. Anyway, he called the woman and invited her to go out to lunch with us on Sunday, but she insisted we come to her place."

"A private meeting will probably be more comfortable for everyone."

"Actually, I'd have preferred to meet her on neutral ground."

"Give her a chance. Dixie's a good woman."

"That's what my father said about her. But how can she be so good and have an illegitimate child?"

"Damn, Linda, when did you become so self-righteous?"

"I'm worried about my father. Haven't you ever heard of a younger woman taking an older rich man for all he's worth?"

Wade shook his head at her. "If all she wanted was his money, why be content to live in an isolated trailer on the edge of a Podunk town? A paternity suit would have given her money and left her free to live where she pleased."

Linda had no answer for that, so she took a long sip of her wine. Finally, she said, "Having somebody to talk over problems with makes me realize how I've cut myself off from people in the last couple of years."

"Why?"

"Just so wrapped up in getting my law degree, I guess." She was revealing too much about herself and needed to change the subject. "Enough about me. What's this business expansion you mentioned earlier?"

His eyes brightened. "I've got a chance to get a dealership for Irrigation Systems of America. I'd sell and install all their systems in central North Carolina."

"I thought the farmers around here depended on rain."

"This isn't for farmers. Lots of commercial buildings are installing systems to keep up their landscaping, and private homes are beginning to install them too. People who spend

thousands on decorative plants don't want to see them burn up during a summer drought."

"So this could be a big deal?"

"If I can prove I've got the capital to handle it. You know the old saying. It takes money to make money."

"So my dad could really mess you up?"

He shrugged. "With all his current problems, maybe he'll forget about me."

She stared at him in amazement. "You should have explained this to me earlier. I certainly don't want to cause you any financial problems."

"I never thought two old friends getting together would generate so much talk."

"But it has." She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the chaise. "You shouldn't have let me come here tonight. Suppose we get caught again?"

He gestured out at the cavernous building. "That's not likely to happen here. Besides, shouldn't old friends be willing to take a little risk for each other?"

She felt a rush of anger at his impracticality. "We haven't seen each other in years. Our friendship certainly isn't worth risking your financial future."

"I had another reason for wanting to see you again."

"Oh?"

"What you said about our breakup years ago made me think I owe you an apology. I did come out of Parris Island like a horn dog. And I did stomp off without giving you a chance to explain your feelings. I'm sorry I was so ... so dumb."

Unable to bear his look of contrition, she jumped to her feet and took several steps until a shrub blocked her path. Pinching off a little twig of greenery, she said, "Well, in fact, I had intended to suggest a change in our relationship that night."

"What?" He moved behind her so close that his breath exploded against her hair. "You *were* dumping me?"

She sidestepped so she could turn and face him. "No, no, not dumping you, I just wanted us to date others. I was only eighteen and in college, and I wanted to do things the other girls were doing, like go to parties."

His angry glare caused her to hastily add, "You were in the Marines. Do you think you could have been true to me for four years?"

He propped his fists on his hips. "So it's still all my fault."

This argument over a misunderstanding that had happened years ago suddenly struck her as ludicrous. "Yes, but you've already apologized, so let's forget about it?"

He blinked at her a couple of times and then his hands relaxed. A small grin tugged at his lips.

Wanting to be sure his good humor had returned, she added, "We were just a couple of foolish teenagers. We're adults now."

He reached out and lightly stroked her upper arms. "But I still behave foolishly where you're concerned."

She raised her hand, intending to brush his touch away, but her fingertips fell on his bicep. Without thinking, she gripped his strength, his warmth. His fingers closed around her arms, and they stood and stared into each other's eyes.

As they moved toward each other in minute increments, she murmured, "We shouldn't."

He whispered, "No, we shouldn't," just before his lips lightly touched hers. Linda let her body settle against his, making slight adjustments until she found the perfect fit. It was like coming home.

His arms encircled her, but his embrace was as light as his kiss until his tongue pressed against the seam of her lips and she sucked him into her mouth and pulled him closer. When breathlessness finally forced them to pull a little apart, she stared up at him in a daze.

"Foolish or not, I want you, babe," he murmured.

Desire warred with her innate practicality. "We can't. There's no place..."

With one arm around her waist, he pulled her toward the chaise. "Where there's a will..."

He sat down, extended his legs, and looked up at her with an unspoken invitation. She hesitated for a moment and then slipped off her panties and straddled him. After opening his jeans, she waited for him to pull a condom from his pocket and then maneuvered his pants past his hips and her knees.

When he extended the foil packet to her, she hesitated, never having performed this very personal act before. But realizing it could be a great way to tease him, she took the packet, gripped one edge with her teeth and slowly tore it open. After examining the latex circle to determine which way to unroll it, she placed it on the tip of his erect penis, making several attempts to place it exactly in the middle. Then she

began to spread it down onto the shaft with fluttery hand movements.

Wade's smirk of appreciation for her efforts gave way to the twisted frown of sexual pleasure. By the time she had him fully covered and was positioning him at her opening, he was making a chorus of low moans. She slowly lowered her body until she had fully encased him.

"Wait a minute, babe," he crooned and reached up to the back of her neck. With the dexterity of a Braille reader, he undid the single button that fastened the straps of her halter dress and then reached for the zipper below it. The top of her dress fell, exposing her breast.

"Sorry," Linda said breathlessly, "no lace bra tonight. In fact, no bra at all."

He smiled as he cupped both breasts. "I'm not complaining." She moved her hips up and down as he kneaded her breasts. When he gripped her hips to increase her movements, she leaned forward and rubbed her nipples against the roughness of his knit shirt. She felt dominating and dominated, all at the same time.

Her movements grew more frantic until she crested over a peak of delight and collapsed against him. She gasped for breath and savored the smell of their bodies, the aroma of the citronella candles, even the tang of gasoline from the machinery. It was a bouquet she knew she'd never forget.

The sound of a car engine and the crunch of tires on gravel caused her to jerk her head up in alarm. Muttering curses, Wade lifted her off him and onto the floor. She clutched her

dress over her breasts with one hand and scooped up her panties with the other.

Excited voices sounded from outside, and then the sharp sound of metal rattling against metal told her someone was trying to get into the building.

Wade ran toward the office loudly calling, "Who is it? What do you want?"

After a short pause, a voice replied, "Mis-tar Wade?"

"Yeah, who is it?"

"It's Manuel. Paco and me saw lights. You got fire?"

"It's candles, Paco. Mosquito candles. No fire."

She heard a buzz of Spanish and male laughter. Then Paco called back. "Okay. We go."

"Thanks for checking. I'll see you guys tomorrow."

"See ya."

Linda looked about and sighed in relief on seeing that all the windows in the storage facility were set in the upper portions of the walls. As she struggled with the fastenings of her dress, Wade came up behind her and helped.

"What are they doing around here at this time of night?" she asked.

"I forgot there's a bar down the road where they go after work."

"So someone else might drop by at any moment?" She started putting on her panties. "We have to stop this. My nerves can't take any more."

"You're right."

She looked over at him, disappointed that he'd so readily agreed with her, and saw his chin firm with resolve. "We're

unencumbered adults. We don't have to hide from anybody. Tomorrow night, I'm taking you out to dinner where the whole county can see us."

"But what about my father? Your loan?

"If I can't find a bank in this state willing to make me a business loan, then I'm not ready to expand."

She considered arguing with Wade because he had so much at risk, but her father really had no right to dictate her behavior when his own had been so remiss, and she hated the thought of giving up the best sex she had in years. If Wade was willing to take a chance, why shouldn't she?

Apparently, Wade misinterpreted her silence for he said, "Unless you're ashamed to be seen in public with me."

"Certainly not."

"Then we have a date."

Chapter Seven

The next afternoon, when Linda told her father she was going out for dinner, he quirked an eyebrow and asked, "Preston?"

She looked him squarely in the eye, hoping he would see she had no intention of arguing about the matter, and said, "Yes, Preston."

He shook his head. "I hope you know what you're doing."

She braced herself for another lecture, but it didn't come. Did that mean he decided to trust her judgment?

Later, when she heard him leaving the house, she realized he was probably relieved to be free of her so he could spend the evening with his trailer park honey.

After showering, Linda took extra pains with her hair, using a round brush and the dryer to give it more fluff. Thankfully, she'd had it trimmed just before she came home, because she'd known there wasn't a hairdresser in Harperville who could layer it properly.

As she stood in front of her closet, trying to select a dress, she realized she had no idea where Wade was taking her this evening. He had said dinner where everyone could see them, but that could be a roadside tavern or a barbeque joint. Maybe she should call and ask. No. She didn't want to reveal her insecurity.

Why did she feel insecure? She had better sense than to think her relationship with Wade could be anything more than a fling. He was a nice guy, one who had overcome a sketchy

background to make something of himself. But in his own unsophisticated way, he was a playboy who had no interest in settling down. And that was perfect for her, wasn't it?

She went through the dresses she had bothered to unpack from all the stuff she'd brought from her old apartment. Falling back on her theory that it was better to be overdressed than underdressed, she selected a sleeveless, A-line, black dress. She tried her mother's pearls but they were too formal, so she chose a silver chain spotted with crystals. Matching, dangling earrings added another touch of informality.

As she surveyed herself in a full-length mirror, she realized how concerned she was about looking right for this evening with Wade. Not too many years ago, she'd sworn to never speak to him again. Now she was having sex and going out to dinner with him. And somehow the dinner seemed like more of a commitment than the sex. Maybe because they were dining in public.

But why hide their relationship? So what if everyone knew, or guessed, they were more than friends. Casual sex was a social norm these days. Look at her father. No, he was a bad example. He'd gotten himself into such a mess that he'd probably end up in civil court.

But she wasn't going to make the mistakes he had, no getting involved in a long-term relationship. This was just fun and games with a handsome hunk while on vacation. Then she'd be ready to give 100 percent to building her career as a high-powered corporate attorney.

* * * *

Wade let up on the accelerator as he neared the Harper driveway. He suddenly wished he hadn't sunk all his money back into the business and had bought himself a decent car instead. What would B.J. Harper think of his daughter being picked up in a pickup? But he'd offered to meet her elsewhere, and she'd insisted he come to the house. Had she gotten her father's approval on their dating, or was she using Wade to announce her independence?

As he pulled in front of the house, he spotted Linda sitting in a wicker chair on the porch. Before he could cut off the engine and get out, she bounded toward the truck, so he leaned across and opened the door. As she climbed into the cab, he asked, "Do we need to make a fast getaway?"

She looked at him with a confused frown. "What?"

"Is your dad about to come after me with a shotgun?"

"He's not at home."

"Oh, is that why it was okay for me to pick you up here?"

"I didn't know he wouldn't be home when I told you to come here. Really, Wade, we're adults now. We don't need anyone's permission to see each other."

He put the truck into gear and started toward the main road. "But a couple of nights ago you were pretty upset about being seen with me."

"Yeah, well, things have changed a lot since then."

"How so?"

"You know. All the things I've found out about Dad."

"Learning he's not a saint makes it okay to date me?"

A glance showed her staring at him as she tried to formulate an answer. Finally, she said, "Learning that things aren't as I thought they were is causing me to rethink some of my previous convictions."

"Wow." He chuckled. "You really sound like a lawyer. I have no idea what you mean."

"I'm just beginning to realize I've lived my life according to other people's expectations. It's time I ask myself what I want."

Wade slowed the truck as they approached the junction to the interstate. "Have you gotten any answers yet?"

As he stopped the truck at the stop sign, Linda said, "Tonight I want to have a pleasant dinner with an old friend."

He grinned over at her. "I hope I'm the friend."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

The car behind them honked, so he looked back at the road, eased into the flow of traffic, and picked up speed. "Let me know if you think of anything else you'd like me to do for you."

She laid her hand on his shoulder. "I'll give it some serious thought."

Wade felt a strange twinge deep in his chest. Was it hope?

He turned onto the appropriate off-ramp and into the parking lot of a nearby Holiday Inn. Linda stared out the window for a moment before turning to him with raised eyebrows. "You could have asked, at least."

He realized she thought he'd brought her here to get a room and held his hands up in self-defense. "Whoa. I asked you to dinner, and they have a nice restaurant." Did she

really think he could be so crude? Why not? So far, he'd jumped her bones every chance he got. Tonight, he'd have to show her he could be a classy guy.

He rushed around to help her out of the truck and noticed a little smile flickering at the corner of her lips. Had she been teasing him? Maybe she wanted to get a room. Well, she was in for a surprise. He wanted to take their relationship to a higher level.

Sure, he'd have sex with her, but only after she proved she wasn't ashamed to be seen with him. Women were always demanding respect, why couldn't a guy?

* * * *

The restaurant had a separate entrance from the motel. Once they were inside, Linda realized it was an upscale supper club. After being ushered into the bar to wait for a table, she became aware of the other patrons.

They were well dressed, but in a hipper way than she expected to see in or near Harperville. Her little black dress was in no way too elegant. Then she noticed—really noticed—Wade's clothing. He was wearing slacks and a sports coat, a white shirt and a striped tie. Most surprisingly, he seemed at ease in such clothing and fit in well with the other men arrayed along the bar.

Why did that surprise her? What had she expected from him, nothing but blue jeans and beer joints? If she'd changed in the last eight years, so had he. She needed to stop making assumptions and start getting to know him all over again.

He seated her at a small round table and asked, "What would you like to drink?"

"White wine, please."

Rather than wait for the harried waitress, Wade went to the bar to place the order. Several men nodded to him, one shook his hand and engaged him in a conversation Linda couldn't hear. A woman sitting on a barstool in such a way that she fully displayed long, shapely legs reached over and lightly touched Wade's arm. He leaned closer as he spoke to her, and Linda felt a stab of jealousy.

Who were these people? She didn't recognize anyone, but they couldn't be tourists passing through, or Wade wouldn't know them. A voice with a decidedly Northern twang barked out a drink order, and she realized they must be the "new people," the outsiders who filled the suburbs around Harperville. The ones the older residents blamed for spoiling their quiet little town. The ones whose property taxes had built the new sewage facilities state regulations required.

Wade returned to their table carrying a wine glass and a frosted beer mug. Smiling and relaxed, he placed the glasses on the table and sat down, "Should have known the place would be packed on a Saturday night."

He was comfortable here in a way he could not have been if she'd taken him to her father's club, because these people accepted him for what he was, a rising businessman. How small-minded and snobbish the long-time residents of Harperville were. But hadn't she been just like them in assuming Wade was some sort of small-town hick?

He touched her hand. "Hey! Where have you gone?"

She looked at him, at his clean good looks and the concern showing in his eyes, and smiled. "I was just getting my bearings in your world."

He looked puzzled by her statement. "I don't come here that often."

"Where do you go? I've suddenly realized how little I know about you."

He enclosed her hand with his and raised his mug, waiting for her to do the same with her wine glass. "Here's to getting to know each other."

She clinked her glass against his and then sipped her wine, keeping her eyes locked with his. This silly ritual seemed to portend a new beginning for them.

"Hey, pal, are you two into a quiet dinner, or would you care to join us?"

Linda glanced up to see the woman with the shapely legs and her handsome companion smiling down at them. Wade quickly introduced Hal and Mandi Donovan, and he looked at Linda with raised eyebrows that asked if she wanted to join them. She didn't like the idea of putting Wade into Mandi's clutches, but with the couple both staring at her, she found it impossible to say no.

The Donovans' table was ready, so they all trailed into the dining room, taking their drinks with them. After the waiter had taken their orders, Mandi turned to Linda and said, "Are you from around here?"

"I grew up in Harperville, but I've lived in Durham for the last few years. I'm visiting my father right now."

Hal grinned as he said, "You aren't one of the Harpers the town's named after, are you?"

"My great-grandfather started the farm supply store the town grew up around."

Hal gaped at her. "B.J. Harper is your father?"

When Linda nodded, Hal gave Wade a way-to-go smirk.

Mandi said, "Is he the one who lives in that big, white house called Wisteria Hill?" After her husband nodded, she continued, "I think naming a house is so cool. I asked Hal why we didn't name ours."

He grinned at his wife. "I told you we could call it Mortgaged-to-the-Hilt Manor."

The two men chuckled over his lame joke, and Linda gave Mandi a commiserating eye roll.

Not at all discouraged by her husband's disparagement, Mandi continued, "But why is the place named Wisteria Hill? I didn't see any of those flowers up there this spring."

"When my grandfather built the original house, in the thirties, wisteria grew in the trees surrounding it. By the time my father modernized the place, the vines had gone wild and were killing some of the trees so he had it all removed, except for some that covers the trellis beside the swimming pool."

Mandi looked even more impressed. "Oh, you have a pool. We had one in the apartment we lived in when we were first married. I miss not having one now."

"And how would you keep the rugrats out of it?" Hal asked her.

That comment introduced the Donovans' three small children into the conversation, and as Mandi went on about them, the two men drifted into a separate discussion of baseball.

Mandi suddenly changed the subject by asking, "So how long have you known Wade?"

"We went to school together."

"High school or college?"

"High school."

"Did you date then?"

"Some."

"And you've just gotten back together?"

All these questions were making Linda uncomfortable.

"Well, we're just, you know, old friends."

Mandi laughed and reached over to pat Linda's hand. "Sorry about the third degree. Wade's a source of great interest to the housewives on the Heights. We all want to see him settle down."

Her husband interrupted their conversation. "Yeah, they hate to see a single guy enjoying himself."

Mandi made a face at him. "We don't want any of the married men to start envying him."

Linda laughed and relaxed and decided to enjoy an evening with the Donovans. The food came. It was good. A combo began to play, and people started dancing on the small dance floor. Some stopped by their table. Linda was introduced to all of them.

After dinner, she and Mandi went to the ladies' room to freshen their makeup. As they leaned toward the large mirror

over the dressing table, Mandi said, "You're lucky to be dating a guy like Wade. All the women up on the Heights adore him. He's a real Southern gentleman."

Linda looked at her in the mirror, and Mandi added, "But coming from here, maybe you're used to guys like him."

Linda shook her head. "No, Wade's special." And she meant it.

When they got back to the table, Wade asked Linda to dance. He led her onto the floor, and took her into a near embrace, with one hand resting lightly on her back and the other holding her hand against his chest. He moved her in perfect time with the music, a far cry from his board-stiff dancing in high school.

"You're a smoother dancer than I remember," she said.

With his mouth close to her ear, he replied, "I'm smoother at a lot of things than I was at eighteen."

She ignored his innuendo. "Did the Marine Corps give dancing lessons?"

"No, but we had social opportunities when we left the base."

"Like what?"

"Do you really want to hear what young men a long way from home and eager to prove their manhood do in their spare time?"

She chuckled. "No."

When the song ended, everyone politely clapped for the combo. Hal suggested they exchange partners. He flirted shamelessly with Linda, and she saw Mandi doing the same with Wade, but Linda didn't take offense. In the short time

she'd known them, she'd learned they were just having fun, and she went along with the game, smiling and batting her lashes at Hal.

After that dance, the Donovans said they'd promised the babysitter to make a short night of it, and Wade and Linda decided to leave too. They all walked out into the parking lot together, coming to the Donovans' SUV first and standing beside it to say how much they'd enjoyed the evening and how they should get together again.

Then Wade and Linda walked on toward the pickup. As the lights for the Donovans' car left the parking lot, Linda slowed, expecting Wade to say something about going back to the motel, but he opened the cab door and helped her inside.

"Where are we going now?" she asked.

"I'm taking you home."

"Straight home?"

"Where else can we go?" He walked around to his side of the cab and got in.

Linda decided she had every right to make her desires known. "What about here?"

He turned toward her with a shocked expression. "Why, Miss Linda, are you suggesting we get a room in a motel?"

"Why not?"

"Unfortunately, Bill Fuquay is the night clerk here."

"Bill who?"

"You remember Mona Fuquay who was in our class, don't you? Bill's her younger brother. I've heard he keeps his sister up to date on local people who check in the motel."

Linda muttered a curse under her breath.

"What?" Wade asked as he backed out of the parking space.

"Here we are, all grown up and no place to even talk privately."

The truck picked up speed as it merged back into interstate traffic. "As I recall we used to *talk* a lot in my mom's old Chevy." Wade said with a smirk.

Linda smirked back. "I'm a graduate of Duke Law School now, that sort of thing is beneath me."

"Like I was beneath you last night?"

Remembering last night gave her a warm feeling in her lower abdomen. She leaned toward him and draped her arm around his shoulders, letting one breast press into his upper arm. "I don't want to go home. Why don't we just drive to the beach for the rest of the weekend?"

"It's ten o'clock on Saturday night, and I have to be at work first thing Monday morning. That would have to be a quick trip."

She leaned back against her side of the seat. "How times have changed. I used to be the practical one."

"You've burned your brain out with all that education," he said as he wheeled the truck onto the off-ramp that led to Harperville.

Seeing that he was heading unerringly for her father's house, Linda sighed loudly. "I guess I hate to return to the soap opera that's become my life."

"You've forgotten one of our favorite *talking* spots, haven't you?" As the truck approached the brick pillars on either side of the drive, Wade clicked off the headlights and slowly

turned into the driveway and then cut sharply onto the narrow access road that ran around to the back of the property.

He crept through the darkness until he reached the grove of pine trees and found a place where pine needles had inhibited the ground cover and left a parking space large enough for the truck. Leaving the engine running for the air conditioning, he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her against the side of his body. "Now what do you want to talk about?"

She nestled her head against his neck and draped one arm across his chest. "Let's just commune spiritually."

His chest bobbed with laughter. "I thought you wanted to do the nasty."

She gave him a light slap on the chest. "We can't do anything out in the open. Suppose someone came down the road?"

"It's a private drive. Who would possibly come down it?"

"My father, who's already overloaded with problems."

"Did it ever occur to you or him that he could solve a lot of his problems by marrying Dixie?"

She pushed away from his chest so she could look up at him. "He couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

His features were barely discernable in the darkness, so she couldn't be sure if he was serious. "Really, Wade, she'd never fit into Dad's world."

"What damn world is that? He lives in Harperville just like the rest of us."

He stopped embracing her by pushing his arm up onto the back to the seat. She felt she had no choice but to slide away from him. "You know what I mean. He has social duties as mayor and as a director of the bank. Dixie's not the kind of woman my father needs."

"So why has he stayed with a woman for more than five years who's nothing to him but a sexual convenience? And what the hell's wrong with Dixie anyway? Dress her up, and she's a damn fine-looking woman."

She couldn't believe he could be so obtuse. "If looks are all that matter about a woman, maybe you should marry her."

He pulled his arm down for the seat and reached for the gearshift. "Maybe I should, since she and I are both a couple of low-class rednecks."

Linda tried to think of some way to explain what she meant, but he turned the truck in a flurry of pine needles and sped her back to the front of the house in such a reckless manner that she became thoroughly annoyed with him.

When it became obvious he didn't intend to walk around and open her door, she got out on her own. After muttering, "Thanks for dinner," she slammed the truck door and stalked into the house.

Linda didn't sleep well that night. At first, she was angry with Wade for spoiling what had been a wonderful evening. But as she tossed and turned, the things he'd said kept running through her mind.

Why had her father been content for so long with a woman who was his social inferior? If Dixie were a shallow gold digger, why was she willing to live in an isolated trailer? And

For Old Time's Sake
by Sarah Winn

why would her father deny himself the son he'd always wanted?

She pounded her pillow and sought a more comfortable position. Tomorrow she'd meet the woman and child in question. Perhaps then she'd get some answers.

Chapter Eight

Linda was surprised. The double-wide stood alone on a shady lot off a graveled county road. It looked more like a country cottage than a trailer. The vinyl siding imitated wooden clapboards, there were shutters at the windows, and low shrubbery concealed the foundations—or lack thereof. A covered porch of natural timber had been built around the front door.

The door opened before they had a chance to knock, and her father ushered her into the much darker interior. She found the gloom and the steady hum of air conditioning disconcerting.

Her father said, "Dixie Ray, Benjy, this is Linda, my daughter."

She whipped off her sunglasses and glanced back and forth at the two people in front of her. The woman was tall and slim and had a slightly slouching posture. The boy, of course, was much shorter, but his build mirrored his mother's. After nodding at the woman, Linda leaned toward the towheaded boy and extended her hand.

He looked startled, almost afraid.

Dixie Ray said, "Shake the lady's hand, Benjy."

Belatedly, Linda realized five-year-olds probably didn't shake hands often, but the boy hesitantly placed his hand in hers and gave it a small squeeze. His hand felt sweaty and, as he pulled it away, slightly sticky.

Linda fought the impulse to wipe her hand on her skirt. She straightened and looked at the woman. "Thanks for inviting us to lunch. I hope you didn't do a lot of cooking on a hot day like this."

The woman forced a smile. She had nice teeth, almost too perfect. Had Linda's father paid for that dental work? "Oh, I like to cook and the air conditioning keeps the place cool."

Linda looked at the frilly apron Dixie wore over tight cropped pants and had to fight a smile. She definitely didn't look like a woman who spent a lot of time in the kitchen.

Dixie gestured and said, "Y'all have a seat. Dinner will be on the table in a jiffy. Benjy, you talk to your daddy and your—Linda."

By now, Linda's eyes had adjusted to the dimness, and she could see that the end of the trailer Dixie had pointed to served as the living room. It was filled with overstuffed furniture, all covered in gold-colored tapestry. The back of the sofa and an oversized armchair bristled with fringe-trimmed pillows. A coffee and end tables of dark wood all had inset glass tops. Everything matched perfectly except for a big leather chair that looked very much like the one her father had at home in the den. B.J. went directly to it. Benjy perched on a footstool beside the chair. Linda sat across from them.

"How's the bicycle riding coming?" her father asked the boy.

"Okay. But them little wheels gets in my way."

"I'll see about them after lunch," B.J. replied.

Wanting to take part in the conversation, Linda asked, "Do you have a new bike, Benjy?"

He nodded. "Daddy gave it to me for my birthday."

"How nice." All she ever got for her birthdays were checks.

Looking at her with a solemn face, parts of which reminded her of her father, the boy said, "What's your last name?"

She and her father exchanged alarmed looks. Then B.J. said, "Why do you ask that, son?"

"Mama says I'm not supposed to call grown-ups by their first name, but I don't know her other name."

Linda smiled in relief. "I'm your half-sister, Benjy, so I think it's okay for us to be on a first-name basis."

He looked up at his father. "What's a half-sister?"

Dixie came out of the kitchen and into the dinning area that adjoined the living room. Apparently, she had heard Benjy's question and was interested in B.J.'s answer, for she placed a bowl on the table and then stepped closer so she could see his face. B.J. looked up at her for a moment, and Linda had the feeling a silent conversation passed between them. Then B.J. said to Benjy, "You and Linda have the same father but different mothers. Linda's mother died a number of years ago."

Dixie sighed as if relieved and went back into the kitchen. Linda had the distinct feeling something important had just happened, but she had no idea what.

Benjy looked back at Linda. "Do you live in my daddy's other house?"

"No—well, I used to, but then I went away to school. I've finished school now, so I've come for a visit."

"But you're gonna leave?"

Was the little squirt jealous of her? "I'll be getting a place of my own soon in Raleigh."

"I been to Raleigh. Went to the fair."

She glanced at her father, wondering if he'd gone too, but B.J.'s expression told her nothing. "Did you have a good time?" she asked the boy.

"Yeah, but Mama wouldn't let me get on the big rides, just the ones for little kids."

Surely, the mother had taken the boy by herself. Linda couldn't imagine her father trudging through the fairground crowds, clinging to a little hand that was most likely smeared with cotton candy. She couldn't recall him ever doing such a thing with her.

Carrying a large platter of golden brown chicken, Dixie again emerged from the kitchen. "Y'all come to the table now."

Linda rose and followed her father and Benjy to the dining set made from dark wood with richly carved legs and arms. A glass-fronted hutch stood against the far wall. Linda sat on that side of the table and had to be cautious with her chair so she didn't bump against the hutch.

"Did you wash your hands, Benjy?" Dixie asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Benjy replied.

Remembering the sticky hand she had touched, Linda wondered how long it had been since he washed but said nothing.

* * * *

"You can go outside with your father and Benjy if you want to. I'm just gonna load up the dishwasher," Dixie said. B.J. had gone out to examine Benjy's bike, and Dixie was a little uneasy at being alone with his daughter who had not only gone to college, but to law school, too.

"Actually, I'd rather stay in the air conditioning," Linda replied, and gathered a few dishes from the table like she really intended to help. "The dinner was very good," she added.

With her hands full of dirty dishes, Dixie led Linda into her little kitchen. "Probably not what you're used to, but I'm trying to keep the fat down for Ben's sake."

Linda stared at her with raised eyebrows. "With fried chicken and gravy?"

"The chicken was baked, and I made the gravy with fat-free broth."

"Really? It's good that way."

Ha! She knew something the college girl didn't. "Since Ben got us cable, I've found all kinds of programs on cooking. They have lots of recipes for low-fat dishes."

Linda frowned as if searching for something to say. Finally, she said, "I didn't have a lot of time to watch TV while I was in school."

Dixie guessed that was Linda's way of telling her smart people didn't watch TV. She started rinsing dishes, and since Linda was standing in her way, she handed them to her to place in the dishwasher.

Ben's daughter undoubtedly thought Dixie was a stupid hick and had every reason to resent her, but maybe Dixie

could use that to her advantage. Linda would most likely be delighted to see Dixie leave Harperville. Why not get her help in putting pressure on Ben? "Guess I'll have to get out of the habit of watching TV too, if I go back to work."

"Are you considering going back?"

"I'll probably have to when I leave here. Your dad's generous with Benjy, but I can't expect him to go on supporting me."

Linda put silverware into the basket and then turned to fully face Dixie. "Where are you going?"

"I'm not sure. Ben's gonna look into it for me. I think it'll be better if we're living in a bigger town when Benjy starts to school. Not so much talk, if you know what I mean."

Linda nodded as if she knew exactly what Dixie meant. "Is Dad agreeable with this?"

Dixie led her back into the dining area to clear the last few dishes off the table. She had to be careful not to tell a lie that Ben might contradict. "We talked it over the other night, and he said he'd look into it. He understands the problem and wants to do what's best for Benjy."

As they returned to the kitchen, Linda startled Dixie by asking, "Is the trailer in your name?"

Obviously, she was worried about losing some of her father's money. Well, Dixie could put her mind to rest about that. "Of course not. Although I have suggested moving it so Benjy and I'll have a nice place to live for the time being."

"How long have you and Dad lived together?"

Dixie felt her neck getting hot. "Why, we've never lived together. But I moved here about four years ago, if that's

what you want to know. Ben didn't want to have to drive so far to see Benjy."

Linda stared at her as if she were trying to figure out a problem. "But you've spent the last five or so years in a monogamous relationship with him?"

Dixie paused on her way back to the kitchen. "What kind of relationship?"

"He's been the only man in your life?"

Dixie slapped the dishes she was carrying down on the counter so hard that a cup tipped over and spilled a bit of coffee onto the counter. "He certainly has. I'm not some floozy who hops from man to man."

Linda's eyes widened, and she waved her hands as if trying to erase something. "I didn't mean to imply that you were, I was just wondering what you have to show for your years of faithfulness to him?"

Dixie just stood and glared at her.

Linda smiled as if she were embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I guess my questions were too personal. I've been studying law so intensely that I tend to think about the legal aspects of everything. I just naturally wondered what can you legally take with you if you leave?"

She was definitely worried about losing her daddy's money. Dixie stood very straight as she said, "Don't worry. Nothing here is mine except our clothes and the car. Ben gave me that red car out front."

Linda shook her head. "I'm thinking about you and Benjy. It's nice that you trust Dad to do right by you, but he's not a

young man. Have you considered what a precarious position you'd be in if something suddenly happened to him?"

Dixie stared at her with growing horror. "Do you know something I don't? What's wrong with Ben? Is it his heart?"

Even as Linda shook her head and murmured, "No, no," Dixie turned toward the glass storm door.

Opening it, she called, "Come in here, Ben. It's too hot out here." Seeing his gleaming face as he ran behind Benjy's bike, she called more loudly, "Stop pushing that bike and come in here right this minute!"

She shut the storm door but stood in the doorway, looking out to make sure he obeyed. Linda stepped toward her. "Listen, Dixie, as far as I know there's nothing wrong with Dad. I was just speaking hypothetically."

Her father opened the door and came inside. "What's wrong, Dixie Ray?" Seeing her obvious agitation, he turned suspicious eyes on Linda. "What's been going on in here?"

"I was just talking about safeguarding Benjy's future," Linda said.

He glared at her. "Did you come here to cause trouble?"

Dixie felt a second of satisfaction on seeing Ben take her side against his own daughter. But then she thought about what Linda had said. The girl was smart. Quick as a flash, she'd seen Dixie's "precarious position." If something happened to Ben, or even if he just got tired of her, she and Benjy would be on the street with nothing. Here she was worrying about Benjy getting his feelings hurt, when she should have been worried about where his next meal would come from.

"Is the car in my name?" she asked in a tight voice.

B.J. turned to her with a startled expression. "What?"

"Is my name on the title to the car you gave me?" She tried to keep her voice calm, but the words came out jerkily.

After an impatient huff, he said, "Of course the car's yours, but it was easier to arrange the insurance with the title in my name."

"So, I don't own anything here, and you're just stringing me along with that talk about making it easy for me to leave, aren't you?"

He turned back to Linda. "What on earth have you told her?"

"I didn't tell her anything. I just asked a few questions."

"What's wrong, Mama?" A high-pitched voice made her aware that Benjy had followed his father into the house.

Dixie stared at her son and told herself to shut up. She shouldn't upset Benjy. For that matter, she better not upset Ben either. But everyone was watching her, waiting for her to speak.

Ben stepped to her side and lightly touched her back. "Are you all right, Dixie Ray?"

"Are you all right? Linda said something that made me think you might be sick."

He moved his arm around her waist. "I'm fine, Sweet Pea. I had a physical back in May. Don't you remember me telling you the doctor gave me a clean bill of health?"

Linda interrupted the tension. "Why don't you show me your bike, Benjy?"

Benjy glanced at Linda and then back at his parents, obviously torn between worry for them and the desire to show off his bike. Then he looked back at Linda. "You wanna see me ride it?"

"Yes, I'd like that." After an apologetic look at her father, Linda followed Benjy outside.

Ben nuzzled the side of Dixie's face. "Don't worry about me. I'm as healthy as a horse. But I'm making plans to safeguard Benjy's future. I've already spoken to Linda about it. No doubt that's why she started asking you questions."

Dixie looked up at him with gratitude. Ben was a good man. She should have known he'd take care of his son. "What are you gonna do?"

"I haven't worked out all the particulars yet, but I'm going to establish a trust fund for Benjy. That way if something should happen to me, there'll be money to take care of him."

Dixie puzzled over what B.J. meant. He intended to leave money to take care of Benjy, but only in case B.J. died. As long as he was alive, he had no intention of publicly acknowledging his son. She forced a smile to her lips and said, "Thanks, honey."

* * * *

The sun had shifted enough so the front yard was now shaded, but it was still a hot, muggy day. Linda tried to look enthusiastic as she sat on the steps of the porch and watched Benjy ride back and forth across the yard. The bike wobbled dangerously, but the training wheels kept it from tipping over.

He came to a stop in front of her. "I could go faster without them little wheels, but Daddy won't take 'em off."

"You're doing very well. I'm sure he'll remove the training wheels soon."

He carefully put down the kickstand. Then he came over and sat beside her. "If you're my sister, how come I never heard of you before?"

"I was away at school for a long time."

"While you were away, did you know about me?"

"No, not until just recently."

He stared up at her, rocking his body back and forth. "Leroy Wilson lives down the road. He's got a grown-up sister, and she comes to see him all the time."

"They probably have the same mother and father. You and I had different mothers, and I'm a lot older than you, so our lives have been separate until now."

"What's gonna happen now?"

She reached over and patted his knobby knee. "I hope we can become friends."

"What did you say to make my mama mad?"

Linda realized Benjy wasn't making idle conversation. He'd overheard enough of the grownups' talk to be upset by it. She wanted to reassure the boy, but she didn't want her father to think she was intruding further into his personal life. "She misunderstood something I said, that's all."

"Is she mad at my daddy?"

"Not mad, she was worried about him doing too much in the heat."

He shot her a challenging look. "Leroy Wilson's mama and daddy live together all the time."

"Some people do, and some don't." Linda wanted to put an end to this conversation. "That's something you should ask your parents about."

"I asked Mama and she won't say nothin'. I'm afraid to ask Daddy."

"Why?"

"He might get mad and not come back to see me."

"I don't think he'd do that," she said without conviction. Benjy's relationship with his father was insecure, and his child's instinct for survival recognized this, even if he understood none of the reasons for it. She didn't want to give him advice that might cause him harm. "It may be better not to ask your father."

He nodded as if her words confirmed his suspicions.

"What else did you get for your birthday?" Thankfully, the question led to the display of a bat and ball and an impromptu game of Linda pitching to Benjy and both of them running a great deal to retrieve missed balls. She was panting and sweaty by the time her father and Dixie came onto the porch, but glad to be doing anything other than answering Benjy's loaded questions.

"We better get back to town," her father said.

He still had an arm around Dixie, and she seemed composed, but there was a wary look in her eyes that made Linda think all was not well between them. She thanked Dixie for the meal and got a curt nod in return.

B.J. extended a hand toward Benjy. "Come give your daddy a goodbye hug, son."

Benjy willingly complied. After the talk she'd just had with the boy, Linda found the display of obvious affection between father and son touching.

When she was in her father's Cadillac, soaking up the air conditioning, Linda said, "I'm sorry if I caused an argument between you and Dixie, but when she said she was going to leave Harperville, I started asking lawyer-like questions. I guess I've been so submerged in studying law that I think along those lines about everything."

He continued to concentrate on his driving.

"Do you want her to go away?"

The car swerved slightly as he glared over at her. "Of course not."

"Why did you say you'd help her then?"

"Stop cross-examining me, Linda."

"Oh, sorry."

The big car hummed along the county road, going faster than Linda thought it should. Her father finally said, "You're trying to come between Dixie and me, aren't you?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Dad. I've just discovered I have a little brother, and I'm trying to come to terms with it, but I am shocked at how you've shirked your responsibilities to the child."

"I've provided well for Benjy."

"Really? What will happen to him if you wreck this car and kill the both of us?"

He hunched over the steering wheel but let up on the gas pedal. Finally, he muttered, "This is a complicated matter."

"There's nothing complicated about setting up a trust fund."

"Does that mean you're willing to be the trustee?"

"Get Arthur Wilkins to do it. He's been your lawyer for years. Surely you trust his judgment."

"Arthur's older than I am. What if something happens to him?"

"The courts will oversee it."

As they came onto the paved streets leading into town, he silently concentrated on his driving. But as they turned into their driveway, he said, "Your concern for Benjy's welfare doesn't go very far, does it?"

"Dixie and I didn't exactly become fast friends today. I can foresee a lot of conflict if I'm controlling her money."

"Isn't handling conflict what lawyers are supposed to do?"

"Wait a minute, Dad. This is your problem; it's not fair to stick me with it."

Rather than heading for the garage, he brought the car to a jerky stop in front of the house. "Now it's my problem, after you've stuck your nose in it and caused trouble."

He hadn't spoken to her in that tone for years, and it stirred up her old insecurities about him. "Give me more time to think about it, will you?"

After glaring at her for a moment, he said, "You have another date tonight?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

For Old Time's Sake
by Sarah Winn

"I don't know if there's anything for dinner. Shall I get some carryout?"

"I'm not terribly hungry after that big lunch. If you want to go back to Dixie's, I'll understand." She got out of the car.

"I don't spend all my time there," he said, still hunched over the steering wheel.

She leaned down so she could see him. "Are you coming in?"

"Think I'll run over to the club for a while."

"Well, don't drink too much." When he looked up with an indignant scowl, she hastily added, "I'm saying that as your lawyer. I don't want you to have an accident before you've secured Benjy's future."

He shifted the car into drive and roared away from her.

For a moment, Linda stared up at the white columns that supported the portico over the front of the silent house. She used to think they gave the place elegance, but now they seemed like an attempt to hang on to a dead past. Facing a long evening alone, she sighed in resignation and went inside.

This was turning into a lousy vacation.

Chapter Nine

On Monday morning, B.J. sat at the breakfast room table, nursing a headache with black coffee and dry toast. He couldn't have a few drinks with friends anymore without waking up the next day with a raging headache. Getting old was hell.

Linda came into the room and smiled brightly, a little too brightly. "Is that all you're having for breakfast?"

"Yes, but Mrs. Mills is here. I'm sure she'll fix you something else."

"No need to bother her." She went into the kitchen and returned moments later with a cup of coffee and a bowl of cereal.

"Want some of the paper?" He gestured to the newspaper still folded beside him.

"Maybe later," she said, spooning cereal into her mouth.

His anger toward her for interfering in his relationship with Dixie now seemed a bit silly. For a long time, she had been his only child, and before she'd gone away to school, they'd had a close relationship. It was only natural for her to be concerned about this new facet of his life, and churlish of him to ask for her help and then complain when she attempted to give it.

He tried to think of some way to break the ice that now stretched between them. "I forgot to ask how your date went on Saturday night?"

"Fine." She sounded a bit defensive, probably expecting him to attack Preston again.

B.J. forced a smile and said, "No more trouble with the police?"

She obviously didn't see any humor in that remark. "We went to the Starlight Room, had dinner and even danced."

The Starlight Room? He'd passed that place out on the highway, but had never gone in. "You had dinner at a motel?"

"The restaurant is separate from the motel. The food is really good."

The idea of Wade Preston taking his daughter to a motel for the world to see revived his anger. Had they only gone to the restaurant? He'd stayed at Dixie's quite late on Saturday so he had no idea what time Linda had gotten home. Anyway, she was too old to have nighttime curfews. Still, as her father, he had the right to object to her behavior if it would reflect badly on him. But he was living in a glass house at the moment, so he remained silent.

After waiting for him to respond, she said, "It seems to be a favorite spot for people from the Heights. You should take Dixie some time and do a little politicking."

"Dixie Ray prefers to stay at home with Benjy. And I'm sure any votes I might win from the new people would be cancelled out by the ones I'd lose from by regular constituents."

"Why would you lose votes?"

"Don't be naïve, Linda. The older citizens of Harperville are quite conservative. They'd never approve of a mayor who flaunted his ... his relationship with an unsuitable woman."

Linda's back stiffened, and her expression grew wooden. "But they will vote for you as long as you keep your tramp and her bastard hidden?"

He dropped the piece of toast he was holding. It pinged against the plate. "How dare you speak of Dixie like that?"

She huffed as if she were angry with him. "You're the one who called her 'an unsuitable woman.' What does that mean, anyway? She's suitable to sleep with and have a child with, but not to marry?"

B.J. took several deep breaths to calm himself. Could he ever say the right thing to the women in his life? Maybe he'd offended Linda's belief in women's liberation. He needed to make her understand she couldn't apply the same standards to Dixie as she did to herself. "Dixie Ray is a fine woman. In many respects a very moral one. But she comes from a humble background. She didn't even graduate from high school, and for a number of years, she supported herself as a waitress."

Linda stared at him for a moment as if she were carefully weighing her words. "From what little I've seen, she's devoted to you, and you've been happy with her for at least five years. Isn't that more important than whether she went to the right schools?"

The full implications of her words sank in on him. "Surely you're not suggesting I marry Dixie? Can you see her fitting into this house that your mother so lovingly furnished? Remember, your mother was a Wallace, and they were one of the first families of Virginia."

"But your grandfather built this house, or the first version of it, and your father told me he started out with nothing but two mules and a plow."

It pained him to hear his daughter repeat that ridiculous saying of his father's. "We've come a long way since then."

"Sure, thanks to a hardworking man who wore overalls all his life and whose only vice was dipping snuff."

He shook his head angrily. "Your grandfather gave you a jaundiced picture of his father. The man worked hard all his life, and he expected his son to do the same. That caused a certain amount of friction between them."

"I'm not criticizing my great-grandfather, I'm just pointing out our origins aren't all that elevated, so who are we to look down on Dixie?"

B.J. released some of his anger by raising his voice. "Did I say I look down on her? I don't. I certainly don't. But Dixie wouldn't fit into my life, and I don't want to humiliate her by trying to force her into it."

Linda gaped at him for a moment. "Does she know you feel this way?"

"When I asked her to move to Harperville, I told her marriage between us would be impossible, and she agreed with me. Quite frankly, I think the only reason she came here was so she could stay with Benjy while he was a baby. Now he's approaching school age, so she wants to leave. I think that clearly speaks to her feelings for me."

Linda looked stricken. "Oh, Dad. I'm sorry. When I heard you were involved with a much younger woman, I was afraid

she might be taking advantage of you, but then I met Dixie and got the impression she sincerely cares for you."

B.J. belatedly realized his attempt to get Linda off his back had gone a bit further than he'd intended. Now she thought he was stupid enough to let himself be taken in by a gold digger, but at least she'd stopped promoting marriage. "Ah, well, I'm nearly twenty years older than Dixie Ray. It's understandable that she wouldn't want to tie herself to me."

Linda shook her head. "She doesn't seem like that kind of woman."

He absentmindedly reached for his antacids. "You hardly know her."

"Is your stomach bothering you?" Linda asked.

"Probably too much coffee. I've definitely decided to set up a trust fund for Benjy, and I should do it soon. Have you thought any more about being the trustee?"

Linda grimaced. "Considering the type of woman Dixie is, I don't think that would work out."

B.J. squeezed his eyes shut as his frustration threatened to erupt. Why was Linda being so difficult? "I didn't mean to imply that Dixie is hard to get along with or even that she's avaricious. She's just an unsophisticated woman who is unable to manage a large amount of money. I'm sure she'd welcome your help."

"Oh, please, you saw what happened yesterday. We weren't alone for five minutes before she blew her top."

"Yesterday was hardly a fair test. You were both under a lot of pressure because it was your first meeting. If you two would get together casually, maybe when I'm not around,

you'd soon see how easygoing she is. I'll be in Raleigh on Wednesday. Maybe you could visit her then."

Linda frowned at him for a moment before saying, "Well, I would like to help the kid. Why don't I ask Dixie and Benjy to come here for a swim?"

Dixie had never been to the house. At first, he'd feared seeing it might make her dissatisfied with the double-wide. Lately, he dreaded the questions Benjy would surely ask. And then there was the housekeeper. "What would Mrs. Mills say about them coming here?"

"My God, Dad. She's your employee."

"But you know how she is."

"Yeah, and it's time she got over it."

If anyone in the world had ever intimidated Linda, it was Mrs. Mills. B.J. couldn't help being proud of the woman his daughter had become. She had gained the self-confidence to face old dragons and fight for what she thought was right. While her readiness to fight him was unsettling, it was exactly the quality he'd hoped she would develop.

So perhaps the time had come to follow new paths. "Okay, let's do it."

"I'll give Dixie a call and invite them." Linda said. "But I won't be surprised if she refuses to come."

"If I deliver the invitation in front of Benjy, he'll be so eager to come, Dixie won't be able to refuse."

She grinned at him. "I hope I've inherited your craftiness. It will be a big help in the practice of law."

* * * *

The next morning, B.J. said Dixie had accepted Linda's invitation in the face of Benjy's enthusiastic pleading. Linda acted pleased by the news, but in truth, she realized she wasn't any more eager to be in Dixie's company than Dixie apparently was to be in hers. She should have waited until her father could also be there to act as a buffer between them. Was there someone else she could invite?

It was three days since her last date with Wade. Was he still angry? He was so touchy. He'd probably applied the things she'd said about Dixie not being good enough for her dad to himself. She guessed, from his point of view, she could have sounded a bit ... snobby. Which she wasn't.

If she called and told him she'd changed her mind about her father marrying Dixie and had even mentioned it to him, Wade would see how wrong he'd been. Maybe they'd patch things up between them, and he might even agree to attend her little pool party.

But this would be the second time she'd called when he failed to call her. Would that make her look overeager? Didn't guys like women coming on to them? Maybe Wade was old-fashioned about things like that. But she hated to see things between them end on a sour note. She reached for the phone and quickly tapped out his number.

* * * *

Wade was inspecting the Watersons' new patio wall when his cell phone rang. He answered with a crisp, "Preston Landscaping, Wade Preston speaking."

"Hi, this is Linda. How are you?"

"I'm on a job right now. Is this important?" The time had come to stop this woman from upsetting his life.

"Oh, is someone with you?"

"I'm inspecting work at a customer's house."

"Are they with you?"

"What do you want?"

"I want you to know that after thinking about our talk on Saturday night, I decided it might be for the best if Dad and Dixie married, but when I mentioned the idea to him, he told me they'd talked it over and were both against it."

Did she expect him to be bowled over because she'd decided her old man ought to marry the mother of his bastard child? "Well, that settles that, doesn't it?"

"Not entirely. Dad wants me to be the trustee of a trust fund for Benjy, and I'd like to help, but Dixie and I didn't get on well at our first meeting."

Had Linda gone to Dixie's house and been rude to her? "What happened?"

"I tried to give her some legal advice, and she got very defensive, and then she and Dad got into a tiff, and Dad blamed me for it."

Wade had always thought Linda was pretty smart, but she was acting like a ditz in this situation. "*You* tried to give *her* legal advice? Isn't that a conflict of interest or something?"

"I didn't try to represent her, but she was talking about leaving Harperville, and I asked a few questions about her property rights."

Wade couldn't stifle a chuckle. "I see why your old man didn't like that. So tell him no on the trust fund deal and be done with it."

"I did, but he insisted I get to know Dixie better, so I've invited her and Benjy to come to the house on Wednesday to use the pool."

"If she doesn't like you, why did she accept?"

"Well, Benjy's all excited about using the pool. Otherwise I doubt she would have. I'm afraid things will be very strained between us. I wish someone else could be here. Sort of take the pressure off, if you know what I mean?"

"Wish I could help you, but I'm a working man."

"Isn't Dad's lawn due to be cut again?"

"My crew's all back now. They'll do it."

"But couldn't you come too and go for a swim? You are the boss."

"Linda, I don't want to get involved."

"Why? Has my father caused you any trouble?"

"Not yet, but I don't want to give him any more reasons to."

"I understand. If you're afraid of him, I certain—"

"I'm not afraid of him."

"You have every right to be. I'm not criticiz—"

He ground his teeth before saying, "Okay, I can send Pedro to another job and come myself. Will that make you happy?"

"Oh, that would be great, Wade. I'm sure having you here will make things a lot more comfortable between Dixie and me."

Wade asked what time Dixie and Benjy would be there and hung up. He pulled out the appointment book he always carried in his back pocket and made a few adjustments to tomorrow's schedule. As he wrote her name, he wondered how in the hell Linda had managed to suck him into her messy family problems once again. He felt sorry for Dixie and little Benjy. Old Man Harper would undoubtedly give them the shaft eventually, but there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Damn, he hoped Linda hadn't told Harper the marriage idea came from him. That would really set her old man against him. Still he was surprised she'd even consider her precious father marrying someone like Dixie. Apparently Linda had given Wade's opinion some thought and then changed her mind. Had he misjudged her again? Maybe she wasn't as stuck-up as he'd thought.

* * * *

Linda had one more detail to take care of before her party: Mrs. Mills. She found her in the pantry, preparing a grocery list. "Are you going shopping today?"

"I'm seeing if I need to."

"I'm having a few guests over to use the pool tomorrow afternoon."

"Want me to fix snacks?"

"I was thinking a big pitcher of iced tea would be nice for the adults, but I need something for a child to drink."

"A child?"

"Yes, a five-year-old boy."

The whites of Mrs. Mills's eyes grew larger. "Whose boy?"

"Dixie Yost's."

The whites of her eyes almost disappeared as her brow gathered into a frown. "Does your daddy know that woman is coming into this house?"

Linda returned her glare. "Yes, he does. Not that it matters. I'm free to invite anyone I choose to my home."

Mrs. Mills stared at her as though trying to read her mind. "But why are you inviting those two?"

"Because I want to get to know them better. Oh, and Wade Preston will be joining us when he gets through with the grass."

Mrs. Mills shook her head sorrowfully. "What are folks gonna say?"

Linda made her voice firm. "If you can't pick up beverages and perhaps some cookies, just say so, and I'll get them myself."

A bit of Mrs. Mills's belligerence returned. "We don't serve store-bought cookies in this house."

"If I have to provide them, we will."

"I'll see to it."

"Thank you. If you don't want to do the serving, I'll take care of it."

Mrs. Mills blanched, but then her neck stiffened. "I always serve the guests in this house."

Accepting victory gracefully, Linda said, "Of course you do. I don't know why I even mentioned it."

* * * *

Dixie cautiously nosed her car between the large stone columns that stood on either side of B.J.'s driveway. She'd driven past many times, but this was the first time she'd actually turned in and approached the white house standing on top of a gentle slope.

She moved up the drive at a crawl, studying the house. As she passed trees that had previously interfered with her view, her awe grew. The tall columns that held up the front porch made it look like that house in *Gone with the Wind*. The two dark-skinned men industriously using a weed-eater and a leaf-blower completed the impression of an old plantation despite their noisy, gas-powered tools.

Four high-backed rocking chairs, two on either end of the red-tiled front porch, looked as if they were waiting for Southern ladies to sit and gossip. On either side of the few steps leading to the front door were large cement urns containing bushes that had been trimmed to look like giant corkscrews. The place was way too fancy for Dixie or any of her kin.

Glancing into the rearview mirror, she saw Benjy straining against the seat belt to look out at his father's "other house."

While she knew she'd never fit in such a fancy place, she wanted her son to feel comfortable in one. Wasn't that his birthright?

Dixie paused as she reached a place where the driveway split, part of it going in front of the house, the other toward the side. She didn't know which way to go. Then Linda stepped out the front door and waved for her to come that way.

After Dixie stopped the car, Linda came toward it, waving and smiling at Benjy. Dixie didn't trust Linda's friendliness. As B.J.'s oldest child, she had every right to resent Benjy.

Linda helped Benjy out of the car before Dixie could get to him. After retrieving the canvas carryall she'd packed swimsuits and towels in, Dixie followed them into the house. A compact black woman waited in the hallway with her arms crossed over her midsection. She had to be Mrs. Mills, the woman who took such good care of B.J.'s house.

"Welcome to Wisteria Hill," Linda said and then introduced Dixie and Benjy to Mrs. Mills.

The woman gave them a stiff smile. Dixie could feel her hostility. That she trusted.

Benjy, with his wide eyes fixed on the shining hardwood floor, said, "I betcha I could slide good on this floor."

Dixie placed her hand on his shoulder, making sure he didn't try it. "No, son, you'd leave marks."

Mrs. Mills nodded her agreement.

"Would you like to look around the house before we go out?" Linda asked.

"I wanna see that pool," Benjy said.

Dixie continued to hold his shoulder. "We need to change."

"Sure. Let's go upstairs." Linda led them up carpeted stairs to a somberly decorated bedroom. As she showed them the adjoining bathroom, Benjy asked, "Whose room is this?"

"It's just a guest room," Linda replied.

"Y'all have lots of guests?" Had all the doors leading from the upstairs hallway made him wonder why his father didn't have room for him? Dixie shouldn't have brought him here.

Linda looked a bit alarmed by his question, so Dixie distracted him by unbuckling his sandals.

"I'll be downstairs when you're ready," Linda said and left the room. Dixie realized Linda already had her swimsuit on under a tentlike cover-up that reached her thighs, and wished she'd changed beforehand, too. Then it wouldn't have been necessary for them to come upstairs and see all those bedroom doors.

When they were dressed, Dixie held Benjy's hand as they walked down the stairs. Linda waited for them, wearing an overly friendly smile.

With a gesture toward a nearby archway, she said, "This is the formal living room. We seldom use it, but it was my mother's pride and joy. She inherited a couple of genuine pieces of Queen Anne's furniture from her mother and set out to decorate this room around them. Of course, she had to buy some reproductions."

The idea that some of this spindly legged furniture once belonged to a queen caused Dixie to tighten her grip on Benjy's hand. Linda apparently saw Dixie wasn't interested on examining the room further, and led them to another doorway that opened into a formal dining room.

"This is all done in Chippendale." Linda paused and then added, "I really can't tell you much more about it. My mother talked about her antiques a lot, but I was young and didn't pay much attention."

"I've never been much interested in old furniture either," Dixie said.

Dixie relaxed her lock on Benjy's hand when they reached the back of the house and a room filled with overstuffed furniture covered in brightly patterned upholstery.

"Of course, this is where we spend most of our time, and Dad got the final say on this furniture," Linda said.

Dixie let her hand trail across the back of a leather recliner, and smiled. The one in her house was newer.

Linda smiled back. "Yes, that's Dad's chair. He insists on his comfort."

Then she led them into another dining room with plain, boxy furniture. "This is the breakfast room, but actually we eat most of our meals here, unless we have company." She pointed through another archway. "And this, of course, is the kitchen."

Dixie's mouth dropped open as she looked at the granite-topped island in the center of the room, the racks of copper-bottomed pots hanging over it and the surrounding cabinets and stainless steel appliances. "It's so big," she said, and the first true twinge of envy laced through her. What meals she could cook in a kitchen like this!

Mrs. Mills was at the island loading a tray. She smiled at Benjy and said, "I'll be bringing y'all some chocolate chip cookies in a while."

"Don't go to any trouble for us," Dixie said.

"No trouble," Mrs. Mills replied. "With everyone in this house on diets, I don't get to do much baking, and I miss it."

As they moved on and out the glass-paned doors in the breakfast room, Linda chuckled and said, "That's the first time I've heard her complain about *not* baking."

While Linda removed the padlock from the gate, Benjy impatiently hopped from one foot to the other, but once they were inside the fence, he looked at the pool with a worried frown. "It's big." He took a step closer to the edge. "And deep."

Linda led them to the area under the trellis. Dixie placed her canvas bag on one of the chairs and started digging into to it. "That's why I got you this." She pulled out a brightly colored flotation vest.

After he was buckled into it, Linda removed her cover-up and hopped into the shallow end of the pool. She held her hands up to Benjy. "Jump, I'll catch you."

He shook his head. She couldn't believe he'd been so eager to get to the pool just moments before and was now afraid of it. Dixie calmly removed her shirt and went to the metal ladder. "We can get in here, Benjy. You won't go under the water with the vest on." She held a hand out to him. "Let me show you."

He reluctantly followed his mother. She took one step down the ladder and then waited for him to get between her arms.

Linda caught herself staring at Dixie. Her swimsuit was one piece but cut high over the thighs and low over the breasts. She was one of those lucky women who had a lean body and large breasts. Although she was at least ten years older, she made Linda feel a bit inadequate in her two-piece suit.

The gate squeaked, and she looked up to see Wade striding into the pool area. He must have donned his trunks in his truck.

"Hey, Mr. Preston," Benjy called out.

"Hey, yourself. That water looks mighty inviting. Can I join you folks?"

Dixie and Benjy looked at Linda. She smiled at them. "I invited Wade to join us when I learned he was going to be here today."

Without waiting for an answer to his question, he walked to the showerhead under the trellis and rinsed off the sweat from his recent exertion. Linda couldn't stop watching him. He had on baggy trunks that came halfway down his thighs, but his bronzed torso was an impressive sight. When he raised his arms to sluice water from his hair, his biceps filled out, and his lats rippled.

Dixie murmured, "Wade is a well-built man."

Seeing Dixie's sly smile, Linda realized she'd been caught staring at Wade. There was nothing she could do but grin lamely.

He joined them in the pool and succeeded in persuading Benjy to let go of the ladder. They all splashed about for a few moments, but Dixie said she didn't want to get her hair wet, so Linda suggested they move to the lounge chairs and let the boys play freely.

Chapter Ten

Dixie had been afraid the pool chemicals might mess up her hair color, but once she and Linda were settled on the lounge chairs under the trellis, she realized she'd made a mistake by getting out of the pool. Now she and Linda would have to talk, and Dixie didn't know what to talk about.

The way Linda kept repositioning her legs told Dixie she was uncomfortable too. Finally Linda said, "I suppose Dad's spoken to you about setting up a trust fund for Benjy?"

Dixie was surprised Linda had brought up such a touchy subject but wanted to know her feelings on the matter. "He said something about it."

"What do you think about the idea?"

After a long pause, she turned to face Linda. "I don't want to take anything away from you."

"I'm not concerned about that. I want to safeguard Benjy's future."

"Why should you care?" She realized a hostile edge had crept into her voice.

"I've gotten a lot of benefits from being B.J. Harper's child. I think Benjy deserves his share. Don't you want to be sure he'll get a college education?"

"Yes, but I don't like to think of something happening to Ben."

"He's a very healthy fifty-five, but he'll be near seventy by the time Benjy's ready for college. Anything might happen."

"I've never been good at planning for the future."

"Do you know Dad's suggested I be the successor trustee of the fund?"

Dixie shook her head. "What does that mean?"

Linda swung her legs off the lounge chair and turned so she could face Dixie. "A trust is money put in a bank and held for the benefit of, in this case, an underage child. The money will come to the child when it reaches a specified age. Until that time, money may be withdrawn from the account for the child's benefit, but only with the approval of the trustee. If I became the trustee, I'd have a great deal of say over what you could or could not do for Benjy. How would you feel about that?"

Dixie stared at her in shock. She didn't like the idea of this smart college girl, who had every reason to hate her and Benjy, having control over their lives. "What did you tell B.J. when he asked?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I suppose for some of the same reasons that are going through your head right now. You and I would have to like and trust each other for such an arrangement to work amicably. But I'd be legally bound to consider Benjy's long-term welfare and conserve the money. You'd very likely resent my preventing you from spending as you wanted to and think I had a personal agenda. I told Dad it would be far better to turn the matter over to a banker or lawyer who would deal with it impersonally, but he seems to think it would be better to entrust Benjy's welfare to someone with a personal interest."

Dixie hadn't understood a lot of what Linda was talking about. She'd thought B.J. was just promising to leave Benjy something. This sounded a whole lot more complicated. "How much money are we talking about?"

"We didn't discuss actual amounts, but considering Dad's overall wealth, I'd guess it would be at least a million."

"Dollars?" Dixie stared at Linda in disbelief. She knew B.J. was wealthy, but had never thought about it in terms of actual amounts. "I—I wouldn't know what to do with that much money, and I sure wouldn't want Benjy to get it all at once. That could ruin a young man."

Linda sat with her lips pursed for a moment before saying, "Actually, when you consider the cost of a college education these days, that's not a great deal of money. Duke's tuition is over forty thousand a year now. Who knows what it will be by the time Benjy's ready to go to school? I'm sure any banker administering the fund would strongly suggest keeping the principal intact and using only the interest until Benjy reaches college age. That would mean you two living on a budget even though you had a lot of money in the bank."

Dixie felt like she was sinking into a swamp. "Well, none of this makes any difference unless something happens to B.J., does it?"

"The fund needs to be set up now to protect Benjy's future. I know you two agreed that you didn't want to marry, but without marriage, you have no claim on Dad's estate. In fact, if you two separate, you'd have to file a paternity suit to get anything Dad didn't want to give you."

"Who told you we didn't want to marry?"

"Dad. Isn't that the case?"

Wade had taught Benjy to leap off the side of the pool and into his arms, creating great splashes of water and loud squeals of delight. Dixie stared at them for a moment. She owed her son so much and now that she knew how much was a stake, she felt unqualified to meet her responsibilities.

She looked back at Linda who stared at her earnestly, as though she honestly wanted to help. Dixie still didn't know if she could trust Linda, but she wanted—needed another woman to talk to.

"I was married to Bob Yost for seven years and never got pregnant. By the time I threw his sorry ass out, I was convinced I couldn't have children, so I was careless with your father. When I told him I was pregnant, he got mad, said I'd done it on purpose to trap him into marriage."

Dixie paused, looking up at a puffy cloud in the blue sky. B.J. wouldn't approve of her telling this to his daughter, but she wanted Linda to understand why she'd gotten herself and her son into this fix.

"He offered me money to get an abortion. After all those years of wanting a baby, there was no way I was gonna get rid of one, so I took his money and told him to get out, that I never wanted to see him again."

Linda's eyes had opened wide with shock, but it was too late for Dixie to stop. "It's hard to keep secrets in this country. B.J. heard about me having a baby and came looking for us. Right away he started in on the money, about how he'd support the child, if I didn't take him to court. I stood and listened, and when he finally stopped talking, I put Benjy

in his arms. While he looked down at his son, I told him I'd never take my child into court so everybody would make fun of him."

Linda looked like she might start crying, so Dixie patted her hand. "Don't think hard of your daddy. He's a rich man, so he's got reason not to trust people. He's kept his word and taken good care of Benjy and me ever since.

"When he suggested I move to Harperville, he told me again he couldn't marry me, and I accepted that because I loved B.J. and wanted to be with him. But now Benjy's getting older, and I gotta do what's best for him. Having everybody in town know his mama is a kept woman ain't it. I don't want to hurt B.J., but things can't go on the way they are now. What do you think I should do, Linda?"

Linda stared at her as she considered what advice to give. Finally, she said, "Hire your own attorney. Someone who has no connections to the Harper family."

"Could someone give me a hand?" Mrs. Mills' call distracted Linda from her jumbled thoughts. The housekeeper was carrying a loaded tray and needed help with the gate. In a state of shock over what she'd just heard about her father, Linda didn't move, so Dixie jumped to her feet and went to open it. Wade heaved Benjy and himself out of the pool and relieved Mrs. Mills of her burden.

He brought the tray to the table in the lounge area, leaving a trail of wet splotches on the concrete. Dixie grabbed a towel from her bag and dried Benjy's hands before allowing him to reach for a cookie. Mrs. Mills poured tea for the grownups and

something red for Benjy, while Linda continued to sit and marvel over what a messy business love was.

Wade called her name rather loudly, and Linda snapped to attention and accepted a glass of tea Mrs. Mills was holding out for her. He gave her a questioning look. She pasted a smile on her face and asked Benjy how he liked the pool.

A high-pitched "Hellooo" drifted toward them. Linda looked for its origin and saw Meredith Conway tripping across the lawn in her pumps. With a helmet-styled hairdo and a short-sleeved dress with a flared skirt, she looked like something out of the sixties. Where in the hell did she get her clothes?

Mrs. Mills moaned, "Oh, Lord."

Wade made a hissing sound.

Meredith reached the fence. "I rang the bell, but no one came, and then I thought I heard voices ... oh ... are you having a party?" On her way across the lawn, she couldn't have seen exactly who was gathered under the trellis, but now her gaze flicked from face to face, and her eyes grew larger.

After taking a steadying breath, Linda said, "Would you care for a glass of tea, Meredith?"

She came toward them. "I just stopped by to see how you were, Linda. I hadn't heard from you in so long I was beginning to worry."

"I've been busy," Linda replied.

"So I see." Her gaze fastened on Wade.

He said, "How you doing, Meredith?"

"Just fine, thank you." She turned toward Dixie. "I don't believe we've met."

"This is Mrs. Yost and her son," Linda said.

Meredith nodded at Dixie. "I believe I've heard of you. You live out on Wheeler Road, don't you?"

Dixie nodded.

Then Meredith gave Benjy an overly sweet smile. "And what's your name, little man?"

He hung his head but distinctly said, "Benjamin."

Meredith audibly gasped.

Mrs. Mills handed her a glass of tea.

Linda had a terrifying premonition Meredith's next comment would embarrass them all, so she sought to distract her. "How's your mother doing these days, Meredith?"

She continued to stare at Benjy but managed to say, "Fine, thank you."

"How's her back?" Wade asked.

Meredith finally looked away from Benjy. "Her back?"

"She complained of back pain the day we went to the craft fair. Don't you remember? We left early because of it."

Linda sat up straighter. "You two went to a craft fair together?"

Meredith's cheeks reddened. "Well ... yes. I met Wade in the pharmacy one day while I was reading a flyer about the Spring Creek Craft Fair, and he said he sometimes found interesting lawn ornaments made by local craftsmen, so we decided to go together."

Wade smiled with artificial sweetness. "And then her mother decided to go with us, but the poor lady wasn't up to all the walking, so we didn't get to see everything."

"No lawn ornaments?" Linda asked, fighting to keep a straight face.

Wade shook his head as though with deep regret.

"Since we were both going, we rode over together." Meredith was definitely on the defensive now.

Linda didn't want to give her a chance to recover. "You rode in Wade's truck?"

"Well, no. After Mother decided to go we took her car."

"Does she still have the black Buick?" Linda asked, knowing Meredith was embarrassed over the fact that her mother drove a car that was at least fifteen years old.

"Yes. It was Daddy's, so she can't bear to give it up."

"But she let me drive it to the craft fair," Wade said, as though honored by the opportunity. "She even sat up front and gave me instructions."

While Linda struggled to contain her laughter, Dixie said, "I can see why your mother would want to keep a car that had special memories." Was she defending Meredith?

The stricken look on Meredith's face made Linda realize the trip to the craft fair had been, in Meredith's eyes, a first date, one her mother had ruthlessly spoiled. The fun went out of razzing her. "Why don't you have one of Mrs. Mills's cookies? They're delicious."

Meredith shook her head. "No, thank you. I have other errands to run." Her voice had a slight tremor. She sat her tea on the table and turned toward the gate, but she remembered her manners and managed to say, "Nice to met you, Mrs. Yost," before hurrying back across the lawn.

"Uh, uh, uh." Mrs. Mills shook her head as she eyed Linda and Wade. "You two always were a mess when you got together."

"We were a little hard on her," Linda admitted.

"Aw, she'll be all right as soon as she gets a cell phone in her hand," Wade said.

Wearing a confused frown, Dixie asked, "Is she the girl you roomed with in college?"

"Yes," Linda replied, while looking steadily at Wade. "But I had no idea she and Wade had dated."

He shrugged. "I told you the dating pool in this town was shallow."

"Can we go back in the pool?" Benjy asked.

After Dixie warned him they would have to leave soon, and Mrs. Mills gave him a napkin and orders to wipe away cookie crumbs, he and Wade went into the water. Mrs. Mills left for the house.

When Linda and Dixie were again alone under the trellis, Linda said, "I don't want you to think we were being mean to Meredith, but she's ... her mother's ... they're both terrible gossips, and she was obviously on a snooping expedition this afternoon."

"Well, she came at a good time, didn't she?"

"You mean to collect gossip?"

Dixie nodded. "I thought she'd swallow her tongue when Benjy said his full name. More proof that I need to get out of this town."

Linda didn't know what to say. People like the Conways could make growing up in Harperville difficult for a young boy.

"Theoretically, we should be able to live our lives however we choose, ignoring the opinions of small-minded people, but that isn't always practical."

"Then you think we should leave, too?"

Linda shrugged.

"Will you help me convince your father? It'll be mighty hard for me to leave without his help."

"Oh, Dixie, Dad wouldn't welcome my interfering in this."

"Looks like he's involved you by asking you to help with Benjy's fund. If you'll help with this, I'll know I can trust you, and I'll take any advice you give about the money. Lord knows I ain't got the smarts to manage a million dollars."

Realizing how neatly Dixie had boxed her in, Linda smiled and said, "Seems to me you have plenty of smarts. I'll speak to Dad about it, but don't expect miracles."

Dixie smiled briefly. "I'll be grateful for anything you can do to protect Benjy's future." Then she reached for her canvas bag and called to Benjy.

As Dixie removed the vest and dried the boy off, Wade and Linda stared at each other awkwardly. She asked him if he'd like to come to the house to change, he declined, saying his clothes were in the truck. Linda offered him her towel, because she was almost dry.

Dixie told Linda to take her time saying goodbye because she and Benjy could find their way back to the house. The sly smile she flashed clearly said she thought they wanted time alone.

As Dixie and Benjy walked toward the house, Wade took the towel and rubbed it over his head. "Looks like you and Dixie patched up your differences."

Linda sighed. "First Dad asked for my help, and now she has. I just keep getting drawn deeper and deeper into his problems."

"I know the feeling."

"What do you mean—oh, I see. I keep drawing you into it too. I'm sorry if I've been a burden."

He handed her the towel. "What are friends for?"

"Are we friends, Wade?"

"Do you want to be?"

"Yes, very much."

"Are you having dinner with your father tonight?"

"On meeting days, he always has dinner in Raleigh with some of the board members."

"So would you like some company?"

"Where would we go?"

"How about Myrtle's Place?"

"Is that still open?"

"It's the finest dining in downtown Harperville."

"And I suppose Myrtle still fries everything?"

"I'm happy to say she's fighting to preserve our Southern heritage."

"What about your loan? If we go to Myrtle's, we'll certainly be the talk of the town."

"I'm willing to thumb my nose at the gossips if you are."

"Maybe showing them we don't care is the only way to stop them."

"Shall I pick you up around seven?"

"No need for you to drive back out here. I'll meet you there. Now I really have to get back to the house and say goodbye to Dixie and Benjy."

"Okay, see you at seven."

After he left, she donned her cover-up, replaced the padlock at the gate and headed back to the house.

What was she going to do about Dixie and her father? Benjy would be better off living somewhere other than Harperville. For that matter, considering how badly her dad had treated Dixie, she'd probably be better off too. But what about her father? It seemed to Linda he would be the big loser if they left.

Dixie and Benjy were coming down the stairs as Linda reached the front hallway. Dixie gave Benjy's arm a little shake. "Don't you have something to say?"

"Thank you for inviting us to go swimming, Linda."

"You're welcome, Benjy, and I hope you come again."

"When?" he asked.

Dixie sighed at him, but Linda chuckled, knowing it was her fault from not phrasing her remark more carefully. "I don't know. I'll have to work that out with your mother."

Once Benjy was buckled into the backseat, Dixie turned toward Linda and softly said, "Any help you can give me, I'll appreciate, but don't tell your daddy what I told you about him and me. Okay?"

"No, of course not," Linda assured her. She stood and watched the car move down the driveway, wondering just what she would say to her father.

For Old Time's Sake
by Sarah Winn

* * * *

Wade hopped out of his truck as soon as he saw Linda's roadster turn into the parking lot. He reached her car as she was turning off the ignition and opened her door.

She smiled at him and said, "I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

"No, you're right on time." He didn't tell her he'd made a point of arriving early so she wouldn't have to wait alone. He took her arm and led her out of the parking lot.

The plate glass window in the front of Myrtle's Place was a glowing beacon on Main Street. The merchants in the strip malls on the edge of town might stay open until 10 p.m., but the few remaining shops here closed at 6:30, just as they always had.

Inside the restaurant, Claude was sitting behind the cash register near the front door, his double chin a recommendation for his wife's cooking. "Have a table for you in a minute, Wade."

Linda and Wade waited near the front of the restaurant, giving the other customers plenty of opportunity to check them out. He nodded and smiled at people he recognized at the nearest tables.

A middle-aged couple approached on their way to the cash register. The man looked familiar, but Wade couldn't place him. Then the man broke into a smile and moved toward them, extending his hand to Linda. She said, "Mr. Blaine, how nice to see you."

He shook her hand warmly. "How are you, Linda? All finished with law school?"

"Yes, I'm just waiting for the results of my bar exam."

"Are you looking for a job? We have an opening"

"Thanks but I've already accepted an offer with a firm in Raleigh."

"Should have expected that. Everyone wants to go into the private sector these days. Have you met my wife?"

After he introduced his wife to Linda, she introduced Wade to the Blaines. If she was embarrassed to have to introduce him to the county's district attorney, she hid it well. After a few pleasantries, the Blaines turned to the cashier, and Wade led Linda to a newly cleaned booth.

As she slid onto the seat, Linda said, "This brings back memories. My dad and I used to come here a lot after Mom died."

"If this place makes you sad, you should have told me. We could have found somewhere else."

"I was always proud to be out with Dad. People treated him with such respect."

He grinned lopsidedly. "Being here with me must be a come-down then."

"Oh, stop denigrating yourself. Everybody in here seems to know and like you."

"The district attorney didn't know me."

"Well, that speaks in your favor. Now I know you haven't been arrested recently."

Verna brought water and asked, "Y'all ready to order?"

Since they hadn't looked at their menus, Wade said, "Give us a minute, Verna."

They studied the menus. He recommended the country-fried steak. Linda looked skeptical but finally agreed. After a nod from Wade, Verna came back to take their order. Linda blanched in disapproval when Wade asked to substitute french fries for the mashed potatoes that came with the dinner. Then she negotiated to change the cole slaw for squash. He didn't try to tell her that any squash Myrtle fixed probably had as much fat in it as the slaw.

Her easy interplay with the waitress made him see how different she was from the girl he'd once loved. As a teenager, she'd struggled to hide her insecurity. Now she was as confident as someone with her education and money should be, except, he reminded himself, when confronted with her father's messy domestic problem. Had she learned to handle everything in life except emotions?

Verna left, and Linda brought him back to the here and now by asking, "What are you thinking about?"

He wanted to know what was going on behind her searching blue eyes. "You seemed upset by what Dixie Ray told you this afternoon. Is there something you'd like to talk about?"

"I promised her I wouldn't repeat what she said, so all I can say is I discovered my father isn't the man I thought he was."

"That doesn't surprise me."

She stiffened. "You had the benefit of prior knowledge."

"That's not what I meant. As a kid, your father was your hero. Discovering he's flesh and blood like everybody else has to be a disappointment."

"It's not so much that he's had an affair, or even that I think the woman is inappropriate, but he's treated her with a callousness I find shocking."

"He couldn't have treated her too badly, or she wouldn't have stuck with him."

"I wish I'd listened to you and stayed out of it."

He opened his eyes widely. "Now I'm shocked."

"About what?"

Verna arrived, carrying two plates heaped with food. As she placed one of them in front of Linda, Wade said, "Verna, the lady just said I was right about something. Can you believe that?"

The waitress gave Linda a wink before turning back to Wade. "Everybody's right sometime, shug. You want catsup with these potatoes?"

"Does a skunk stink?" Wade replied.

"Only when he's mad at somebody." Verna grabbed a bottle of catsup from a nearby table, plopped it on theirs and hurried off.

"She's a friendly waitress." Linda said.

"She worked with my mother."

"That's right. Your mother used to work here."

"Yeah. This place has a lot of good memories for both of us."

She covered his hand with hers, and they stared into each other's eyes for a long moment. He had to look away first,

staring down at his plate to hide the strange dampness he felt in his eyes.

After she pulled her hand away, he cut a bite-sized piece from his gravy-smothered steak, jabbed it with his fork, and then left it sitting on his plate as realization flooded through him. He'd convinced himself Linda was a cold-hearted rich girl who cared for nothing but herself. But she cared about his feelings for his mother, she cared about a half-brother she'd didn't know existed until a few days ago, and she even cared about the feelings of her father's mistress.

He'd wanted to think bad things about her to convince himself he no longer loved her, but now he knew that wasn't true. No other woman ever had or would hold the place in his heart she held. But how did she feel about him? Caring wasn't the same as loving.

"Hey," she said, "you talked me into ordering this smothered steak, and now you're not eating yours."

He forced himself to look across at her, to smile, and to raise the fork toward his lips. "I thought about all the cholesterol in it and lost my nerve for a minute." He plopped the steak in his mouth and chewed vigorously.

She grinned at him. "Do you have your nerve back now?"

"Yeah. I had to remember what we always said in the Corps. No guts, no glory." He cut another piece of steak with resolve. If he was willing to risk his heart to the ravages of fatty foods, he ought to have the guts to risk getting it stomped on again in an attempt to win the woman he'd been in love with for so long.

Chapter Eleven

They dawdled over pie and coffee until Verna reminded them the restaurant closed at nine-thirty. Then they walked to the parking lot holding hands. Linda stopped beside her car and looked up at Wade, hoping he'd suggest they go somewhere else, somewhere private.

He looked at her with the same sappy smile he'd started earlier in the evening, as if he knew some terrific secret and wasn't going to share it.

"Thanks for reacquainting me with Myrtle's," she said.

"You're welcome."

"Is there somewhere else you'd like to go tonight?"

"Remember, I'm a working stiff."

Was that a double entendre? "It's only a little after nine."

"I can't invite you to my place." He softly stroked her cheek. "And I respect you too much to ask you to check into a motel for a couple of hours."

Respect? Where had that come from? "Couldn't we drive somewhere? How about Ridge Road?"

"They've built houses there. Remember?"

"Where do the teenagers go to neck now?"

"I don't know. If I meet any, I'll ask." He kissed her lightly. Too lightly.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her body against his until he met her need for a heart-jarring kiss. Then he broke away. "Somebody might see us."

While the parking lot wasn't well lit, it opened onto Main Street in full view of any passing traffic. Linda stepped back with a sigh of resignation.

He chuckled. "Don't look so disappointed. There are more important things in life than sex."

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Like what?"

That silly, sweet grin crept over his face as he opened her car door. "How about love?"

She froze. "Are you kidding?"

His smile dimmed. "You're so concerned about your Dad's love life. How about your own?"

She shook her head vigorously. "I'm just starting my career. Things will be very competitive at Falk and Wilkins. I have to prove I'm something more than the daughter of a rich client."

He frowned at her. "How long will it take you to prove this?"

Had Wade thought their little fling was something more? She didn't want him to think she was rejecting him, but this was not the time for a serious relationship. "That's not easy to judge."

"But what if you fall in love with someone?"

"I can't let myself do that. I have to wait."

His jaw muscles tensed. "So what's been going on between us meant nothing to you?"

She lightly touched his arm, hoping to soften the blow. "Of course it meant something. You're a dear friend, and thanks to our history we've been able to have incredible sex, and who knows what might develop—in time. But right now I can't

get involved in anything that will distract me from my career."

He stepped away from her touch. "So if some poor sap is stupid enough to fall for you, that's just his tough luck?"

"Oh, Wade, I've been back in town for less than two weeks. You can't have developed serious feelings for me in such a short time."

He stared at her for a long moment. "Of course not. Just checking to be sure you hadn't gotten any wrong ideas."

"Wade..."

He turned and, with his back rigidly erect, got into his truck. After he started the engine, he just sat there, not moving, not looking at her. She guessed he was waiting for her to leave the parking lot first.

Should she go to him and try to explain further? But what could she explain? This simply was not the right time for her to get involved with him or anyone else. Perhaps it was best to end their little fling here and now.

She got into her car and backed out of her parking space. As she paused to check the flow of traffic before turning onto the street, she glanced in her rearview mirror and saw him still sitting motionless in his truck.

* * * *

As her car left the parking lot, Wade beat his fist against his steering wheel and cursed through gritted teeth. Damn if she hadn't done it to him again, made him care about her and then thrown it back in his face. All that crap about her career coming first was a dodge—he wasn't good enough for her.

Why in the hell had he been stupid enough to use the L-word? He'd known from the start all she wanted from him was sex. Or at least he should have known.

But maybe it was a good thing he said that damn word and gotten slapped upside the head with the truth. Now he could forget about her and start concentrating on his business like he ought to. He should hear from the bank by the first of next week, and if his loan was approved, he would have a lot to do before he could begin installations. He'd take a page from Linda's book and make business his number one priority in life. And one day he'd be so damn successful that she'd...

No, he wasn't going there anymore. Whatever he did, he would do for himself, for his own future, and the future of a woman he'd yet to meet. One who'd love him for himself. To hell with Linda Harper. He'd forget about her, just like he'd done before.

But if he hadn't really forgotten in eight years, how could he do it now?

* * * *

B.J. got home a little after ten. His stomach was feeling unsettled from the rich food he'd had for dinner, so he went to the kitchen for a glass of milk. The rumble of the TV drew him, glass in hand, to the family room.

He found Linda curled up on the sofa with a half-empty plate of cookies resting in her lap. All day, he'd been worrying about how she and Dixie Ray were getting along. Maybe that was the real reason his stomach was upset. When she glanced up at him, he asked, "How did it go today?"

"Fine."

"Did Dixie Ray and Benjy enjoy themselves?"

"They seemed to. Benjy loved the pool and wants to come back."

He should have known that would happen. "What did Dixie say about the house?"

"Nothing in particular. She warned Benjy not to scuff the floors."

He sat across from her. "So how did you two get along?"

"Pretty well. I think Dixie and I could work together if I were the trustee of Benjy's trust fund."

He leaned back in his chair and issued a sigh of relief. "I'm glad you and Dixie Ray got along. She is easygoing most of the time." He'd feel much better knowing Benjy's future was in Linda's hands and not some stranger's.

"But I shouldn't draw up the trust agreement," she said. "I'm not experienced enough. Besides, I could be accused having a conflict of interest."

He nodded in agreement. "No reason why Arthur shouldn't earn his retainer."

Linda placed the cookie plate on the coffee table and then leaned toward him. "But something unfortunate did happen today. Meredith Conway dropped by while we were all down by the pool."

B.J. flinched. "What did she say?"

"Just that she'd stopped by to see me. But when I introduced Dixie, Meredith asked if she lived on Wheeler Road. Then she asked Benjy what his name was and got a shell-shocked look when the kid said Benjamin."

B.J. closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the chair. What else could go wrong?

"I'm sorry, Dad. I had no idea she'd come by without calling first."

"She can't know anything just from hearing his first name."

"You know the Conways. They don't have to know something to talk about it."

It was one thing for people to think he was "dating" a divorcee, quite another for them to know he had an illegitimate child with the woman. "If Audrey Conway and her daughter start spreading gossip about this, it will surely encourage Otis Wilson to enter the mayor's race."

"Dixie also talked about moving away for Benjy's sake. That might help your political situation."

B.J. bristled at his daughter. "I don't think that will be necessary."

"Dixie is honestly concerned for Benjy's welfare. In fact her concern is what convinced me we could work together. If they move up to Raleigh, it will be an inconvenience for you, but aren't you willing to do more driving to safeguard your child's future?"

He couldn't believe he was being lectured by his own daughter. "There's a lot about this situation you don't understand, Linda."

"Such as?"

"Well, for one thing, I'm nearly twenty years older than Dixie."

"Do you think she's tired of you?"

Although it cut him deeply to admit, B.J. stiffly said, "I think it's possible."

Linda took a deep breath before saying, "You can't hold on to her if she's determined to leave."

He let out some of his anger with a loud huff. "But I don't have to spend a fortune setting her up to hunt for my replacement."

Linda gave him a pitying look. "I thought you two had a better relationship. If you don't trust Dixie any more than this, you'll be better off to let her go."

B.J. stood. "I didn't know going to law school made someone an expert on personal relationships." He sneered at her and stalked from the room.

"Women, women, women," he muttered softly as he entered his study. Why did they always want to change things? He'd wanted Linda to help him handle Dixie, but instead she'd become Dixie's champion. And now he had Audrey Conway to contend with.

The woman had always been a pain in the butt. What made her think she knew how things should be run? She'd never been anything but a housewife, and her husband had been nothing more than a glorified insurance salesman. If he hadn't left her a big policy, she'd probably be on welfare by now.

He sat at his desk and began to doodle on a pad he kept there for that purpose. He did some of his best thinking while doodling. With a ballpoint pen, he sketched a woman's head with glasses perched on her nose and her mouth wide open.

He put a little hat on top of her head and added a huge flower to it.

Smirking at his artistic achievement, it suddenly occurred to him that what Audrey wanted more than anything else was to tell the rest of the world what to do. Why not make her think her dream was coming true by asking for her help in planning the future of Harperville? Make her think he'd take her advice, and after the election, he could do whatever he wanted to.

He could even form a re-election committee and ask Audrey Conway to be on it. She wouldn't spread gossip about the candidate she was trying to get elected.

He made a list of people he could ask to be on the committee. He wouldn't call it a re-election committee at first. He'd just say he was formulating a plan for the future development of Harperville. That would certainly hook old Audrey.

He'd invite them all to lunch and pour on the Harper charm. But he had to act quickly before she started spreading gossip all over town.

* * * *

Two days later, Linda opened the newspaper to the rental section and spread it out on the breakfast table. She'd spent a good part of the previous day in Raleigh, with the real estate agent her father had recommended. It had soon become apparent that the agent only wanted to talk her into buying a condo rather than help her find a reasonably priced apartment.

Of course, her father would advance her the down payment for one, but she wanted to become independent. So she'd told the agent she'd get back to him. Now she was thinking she should start her own search without pressure from a guy eager to earn a larger commission. But she hated the thought of wandering alone through unfamiliar parts of the city and tried to think of someone she could ask to go with her.

No way in hell she'd subject herself to one of Meredith's interrogations. Dixie might go, but Linda couldn't expect Benjy to behave himself through such a boring day. And Wade was off limits. Maybe her father would have the time, but he'd been short with her ever since she'd talked to him about Dixie leaving Harperville. He'd left the house this morning without saying where he was going or when he'd be back.

Of course, if her dad heard about the agent's suggestion to buy a condo, he'd undoubtedly push for that. Linda didn't understand why she was so adverse to the idea. It just seemed too permanent.

Surely there was someone else she could call. Hadn't some of her classmates taken jobs in Raleigh? Perhaps she could meet one of them for lunch and discuss the housing situation there. But she'd been so intent on getting her degree and taking the bar exam that she'd paid little attention to anyone else's plans. When had she become so self-absorbed?

She tried to shake off her morose thoughts. She was just going through the transition everyone went through when

they moved from one phase of life to another. She'd make new friends once she started working.

After opening a notebook small enough to fit into her purse, she started copying likely addresses from the paper. No reason why she couldn't start her search this afternoon. She had plenty of time. All she needed was a map of Raleigh.

The phone rang, but it was most likely for her father, so she let Mrs. Mills answer. In a few seconds, Mrs. Mills rushed from the kitchen extending a cordless phone toward Linda. "Something's wrong."

Linda grabbed the phone and said, "Hello."

Words gushed from the earpiece accompanied by shrill wails in the background. "Benjy's hurt. He fell off his bike. His wrist is swelling. It's all red."

"Calm down, Dixie. Have you called the doctor?"

"He says I should bring him to his office, but my car battery is dead, and I can't find B.J."

"Okay, I'll come right away."

Linda jumped up from the table and handed Mrs. Mills the phone.

"You goin' to get 'em?" Mrs. Mills asked.

Linda nodded.

"Better take your Daddy's SUV. Can't get a hurt child in that little car of yours."

"Do you know where the keys are?"

On her way, Linda told herself not to speed. Kids got hurt all the time. Benjy probably just had a sprain, and Dixie was overreacting. Then she pulled into the driveway at the

double-wide and saw Benjy's pitiful little figure huddled on the front steps, and her heart did a flip-flop.

She jumped out of the SUV and ran toward him. He sheltered his injured arm within the cave of his hunched-over body and looked up at her with watery eyes. He sniffled so strongly that a shudder ran through his thin shoulders.

"Where's your mother?" Linda asked.

Dixie came out of the front door, closing and locking it behind her. "I was just getting more ice in case we have to wait long at the doctor's office." She held up a plastic bag filled with ice cubes, and Linda realized that the lumpy towel wrapped around Benjy's wrist held more.

"Shouldn't we take him straight to a hospital?" Linda asked.

"They can X-ray it at the clinic. If it's just a simple break, the doctor can take care of it there. It'll be quicker that way."

Linda wanted to point out that if it wasn't a simple break they'd then have to take the child somewhere else and just prolong his agony, but a quick glance at Benjy's pain-pinched face stifled her words. But B.J. would surely want Benjy to go to a specialist in Raleigh. "Did you ever reach Dad?"

"No, his cell phone must be off."

Linda had no choice but to go along with Dixie's plans. She danced around the base of the porch steps with uncertainty. "Shall I carry him to the car?"

Dixie directed her words to the boy. "It'll probably hurt your arm less if you walk."

He looked up at his mother with fresh tears brimming in his eyes. Linda noticed a slight tremor pass through the bag

of ice Dixie held and realized she wasn't as calm as she appeared. So Linda stepped to one side of the steps and placed a hand on Benjy's back. "You can do it. Hold your hurt arm with the good one, and I'll help you."

Slowly and with a series of high-pitched moans, Benjy got to his feet. Linda kept one hand in the middle of his back and grasped his shoulder on his uninjured side with the other as she guided him down the steps and toward the car. Dixie hovered on the other side of him. When they reached the side of the SUV, she and Dixie both stared at it for a moment as if unable to figure out how to get the boy inside.

Dixie finally opened the side door and said. "He has to ride in the back. So I'll ride with him."

Linda couldn't imagine the hunched-over figure climbing into the car by himself. "Why don't you get in first, and I'll hand him to you."

Dixie obeyed the suggestion, as if she had more confidence in Linda than in herself. As Linda faced the somewhat daunting task of lifting the child without jostling his arm, she hoped Dixie was right.

After Dixie was seated and reaching for him, Linda scooped her arm under Benjy's legs. His sharp intake of breath almost unnerved her, but then he relaxed in her arms, showing he trusted her not to hurt him and new strength flowed through her. She lifted him into the SUV. After a few more pitiful moans from Benjy, they fastened the seat belt around him.

Linda got into the driver's seat, telling Benjy not to worry about a thing, that she'd drive very carefully, and that in this big car they'd hardly feel any bumps at all. She realized she

was talking to reassure herself as much as the kid and had to wait for the trembling in her legs to stop before she dared depress the accelerator.

Being told over the phone that a child was hurt was a far different matter than being faced with a crying, cringing child. As she eased out of the driveway and down the road, Linda realized she'd never had to care for an injured child before and it was an important responsibility. She had to prove she was equal to the task.

Dixie directed her to the Family Medical Clinic located a block off Main Street in downtown Harperville. It was in a new two-story brick building surrounded by its own parking lot in a neighborhood that had once been all residential. When Linda was a kid, Dr. Perkins, a G.P., had been the only doctor in town. Any serious illnesses or emergencies had necessitated frantic trips to the county seat or a city farther away.

She dropped Dixie and Benjy at the entrance and then parked the SUV. By the time Linda got into the central waiting room, Dixie and Benjy were not to be seen. The receptionist said they'd already gone to X-ray and pointed down a hallway. Linda decided to wait in the lobby, but the wail of a frightened child sent her rushing toward the sound.

Dixie was standing in front of a closed door with her arms tightly wound around her chest. Linda instinctively threw a supporting arm around her as she asked, "Where's Benjy?"

Dixie pointed at a closed door. From inside the room, Linda heard a woman's voice saying, "There, that wasn't so bad, was it? Now we need to turn your arm and take another picture."

"No, no, no," Benjy tearfully pleaded.

Without thinking, Linda moved toward the door, but Dixie grabbed her arm and said, "They have to do it."

"I know," Linda murmured as she wondered what had gotten into her. Of course, she couldn't barge into the room where they were taking X-rays.

After what seemed like a long time, but was really only a few minutes, the X-ray tech opened the door. "Mrs. Yost, will you keep Benjy company while the doctor checks his film?"

Dixie moved into the room, dragging Linda with her. Benjy, lying on a narrow table with his arm surrounded by gray sponges of various shapes, looked up at them with accusing eyes. After the tech hustled out of the room, he said, "That woman hurt me."

"She was taking pictures of your bone," Linda said. "That's the only way the doctor can see what's wrong."

He didn't look at all appeased by her comments, so Linda added, "You're being a very brave boy."

His chin firmed a bit.

In a few minutes, the technician and a nurse came into the room, saying the X-rays had turned out well and the doctor wanted to transfer Benjy to a treatment room. The nurse had brought a rolling chair, which Benjy was obviously eager to ride in. As they passed through the lobby on the way to another wing of the building, Linda told Dixie she didn't want to get in the way and would wait here.

Finding a comfortable chair, she searched through a stack of magazines until she found an old issue of *People*. After flipping through a few pages, she realized she was more

interested in the people in the waiting room. She looked for someone familiar, but everyone was a stranger.

The clinic's doctors evidently had different specialties, for there were patients of dissimilar ages and both sexes. Linda had heard her father talking about getting this clinic for Harperville. He'd worked to attract the doctors and arrange the financing. She guessed the mayor of a small town did have important work to do.

After a lengthy wait, Dixie and Benjy returned to the waiting room. Benjy was a changed boy, seemingly in no pain and delighted by the bright blue bandage that stretched from his fingertips almost to his elbow. "See my cast? The doctor said I had to be careful or I could knock somebody out with it."

"He said if you tried to hit anything with it, you'd hurt yourself," Dixie warned him. Then she turned back to Linda. "I need to stop at a pharmacy to get a prescription for pain pills filled."

"Sure," Linda said, as they started toward the outer doors. "Then we'll see about getting your battery fixed."

"I'm hungry," Benjy said.

Linda looked at her watch. "I guess you are. It's almost 1:30. There's a place near the pharmacy where we can eat."

"We usually go to places out on the highway," Dixie said.

Was she hesitant to go to a restaurant here in town? Linda wanted her to know she didn't mind being seen with them. "It's well past the noon hour. The place I'm thinking of is probably empty by now, and they have great pie *a la mode*. How does that sound, Benjy?"

"What's a-la-mode?"

* * * *

The luncheon, or at least the discussion after lunch, wasn't going well. B.J. had expected Audrey Conway to be flattered to even be included in this group, but the old hen was taking over the discussion. "I think a moratorium on any new building permits should be declared while plans for the future of Harperville are debated."

"That's stupid," Roger Cunningham, one of the principal developers in the county, said. "People will just go on building outside of town, and we'll have no say on what's done."

Audrey's nostrils flared in Roger's direction. "Of course, we need to seek the county commissioners' cooperation."

Roger looked like he was about to choke. "Lady, the commissioners in this county are some of the biggest landowners. If you think they're going to stop building you must be smok—"

"Roger," B.J. hastily interrupted, "we're just here to discuss possibilities. There are great differences of opinion within my constituency, and I'm looking for ideas that will help me find a path to bring us all together."

Audrey grimaced and shook her head. "There's no way you're going to bring the greedy land developers and the citizens who want to preserve our dear little town together."

Since B.J. had sold a large piece of land for development, he was in an awkward position on this issue. He looked at the others gathered around the table. Sam Ramsey, the bank

manager, and Tom Carter, the police chief, both owed their jobs to him and everybody knew it.

He'd invited Mrs. Mason, the preacher's wife, so Audrey Conway wouldn't be the only woman here, but also because her husband's church couldn't make its yearly budget without B.J.'s contributions. Looking at her, he said, "Do you have any suggestions, Mrs. Mason?"

She twitched as though embarrassed to have everyone's attention focused on her. "Suggestions? No. But we have grown very rapidly in the last few years."

"Hasn't that growth been good for the church?" B.J. asked.

"Philip says our parking facilities are overextended. Some of the neighbors are complaining about street parking."

"Yeah." Chief Carter spoke up. "I've received some complaints."

B.J. glared at the chief. Had he turned against B.J. too?

Sam Ramsey finally spoke up. "We should all remember what Harperville was like before the influx of new people. A town that isn't growing is dying."

Audrey Conway's head snapped back. "I remember a lovely little town, peaceful and serene, with only one stop light on Main Street."

"As a banker," Sam said, "I remember foreclosing on friends' loans and all the young people having to leave town to find jobs."

Roger nodded in eager agreement.

Beginning to feel he could control the situation, B.J. smiled warmly. "As we can see, there are good points on both sides of this argument. I'd like to have definite plans to present to

the voters in the coming mayoral campaign to show them I intend to preserve the small-town atmosphere of Harperville, but still allow for economic growth. I'm hoping I can count on your help to formulate this plan."

For the first time, Audrey looked indecisive. She must be tempted by the idea of having real influence in the planning the future of the town. B.J. felt encouraged.

Activity at the front door of the restaurant distracted him. He glanced that way, and his mouth dropped open in amazement. Linda, Dixie Ray, and Benjy had just entered and were looking about at the many empty tables. As though propelled by a homing device, Benjy's gaze swung his way. He held up some sort of bright blue toy. His high-pitched voice rang out, "Look what I got, Daddy."

B.J. was stunned. He didn't know what to do. He turned his head away from Benjy, hoping Dixie would do something to silence the boy and looked directly into the searing gaze of Audrey Conway. *Oh, shit.*

He heard the front door opening and turned back to see Dixie hurrying Benjy out, while the boy plaintively asked, "What about my pie?"

Linda stared at B.J. as though he'd suddenly grown horns. Then she followed Dixie out of the restaurant.

A long moment of strained silence stretched around the table. Finally Audrey, her voice sounding more nasal than usual, said, "B.J., you have more serious impediments to your political future than city planning, and I can't help you overcome them."

Her lips disappeared into a tight scowl as she threw her napkin over her dessert plate, grabbed her purse up from the floor and stood. A lady no matter what, she muttered, "Thank you for lunch," to B.J. and gave a curt nod to acknowledge the others. Then she stalked out of the restaurant, her nose so far up in the air B.J. expected her to stumble over the threshold. Unfortunately, she didn't.

Mrs. Mason weakly cleared her throat. "Considering my husband's position, I think it would be better if I didn't involve myself in anything of a political nature." She was soon scurrying after Audrey.

When she was gone, Sam Ramsey softly said, "Mrs. Conway is right about you having a problem, B.J."

Roger Cunningham chuckled, "Is that your kid, B.J.? I damn near had a heart attack when he looked this way and hollered, 'Daddy.'"

B.J. glared at him, hoping they would all see he didn't appreciate humor at his expense.

Chief Carter avoided making eye contact as he said, "Why in the world did you invite that Conway woman? She's the biggest gossip in town."

"Because she *is* such a gossip. She has a good deal of influence on my core voters."

Sam Ramsey used the calm voice he assumed when trying to play the role of peacemaker, "If you're still intending to run for mayor, you're going to need a new core."

If? B.J. shifted his gaze around the table looking into the eyes of each of the men he had expected wholehearted support from. All he saw was doubt.

For Old Time's Sake
by Sarah Winn

Why had Dixie chosen today of all days to come into Harperville? She'd never done anything like that before. But things had started going wrong between them ever since Linda had come home. Was Dixie acting up because she was jealous of Linda, or was it the other way around? By God, he intended to find out and set the both of them straight.

Without worrying about niceties, B.J. grabbed the check and stalked to the cash register. He grudgingly handed Claude his credit card, knowing this luncheon had been a total waste of money.

Chapter Twelve

Linda had not known what to say when she returned to the SUV. Rather than interrupt Dixie's soft-spoken explanation to Benjy that his father was too busy to talk to them, she silently pulled out of the parking lot. As she approached the highway, she asked Benjy which fast-food restaurant was his favorite and headed for it.

Benjy insisted they go inside rather than ordering from the window. Once they had their food, he discovered what an inconvenience his bright blue cast was, and the last vestiges of his good spirits disappeared. He became a cranky little boy, dropping food all over himself and the table.

Linda tried to help him with his food and to cajole him into better spirits, to little avail. She found it difficult to look Dixie in the eye, but when she did, Dixie instantly looked away. B.J.'s rejection had made her equally uncomfortable.

Linda had often been irritated or even angry with her father, but she had never been ashamed of him. Should she apologize to Dixie for her father's behavior or remain silent? Dixie's firmly set jaw and evasive eyes indicated she had no desire to discuss the matter. So Linda continued to center her attention on Benjy.

But nothing, not even a swirled cone of ice cream, could revive his spirits. Dixie finally asked him if his wrist was hurting, and with a quivering chin, he nodded. They left the restaurant and hurried back to the double-wide, where Dixie gave him a pain pill and put him to bed.

For Old Time's Sake
by Sarah Winn

She stayed with the kid for such a long time that Linda wondered if she should leave. Then she remembered the dead battery and knew Dixie might need additional help so she continued to wait.

* * * *

Dixie sat on the edge of the bed and watched her son gradually sink into a deep sleep. He'd been so worked up, that even after taking the pill, he'd been twitchy when she put him down. This must have been a terrible day for Benjy. His favorite toy had caused him great pain, and his father had turned his back on him for the first time.

But it wasn't the first time really. B.J. had never wanted the child. What had she been hoping for? That someday he'd love them enough to overlook all her failings? That just showed how stupid she was. B.J. would always be ashamed of her and of Benjy. Oh, he'd support him but never introduce him to his snobby friends in Harperville as "my son."

The time had come for her to wake up and smell the manure pile. It was easy living here and letting Ben take care of them, but in the end, Benjy would pay too great a price for her comfort. He'd grow up thinking he was worthless, just as she had.

Oh, well, she'd known this was coming. Maybe that's why she agreed to go in that restaurant today. Or maybe she was tired of being B.J.'s dirty little secret. Or maybe she didn't want Linda to think she was not good enough to go anywhere anybody else did.

All things considered, Linda had been damn nice to her, but there was no way a smart woman like Linda could understand why Dixie let herself be treated like a doormat. The time had come for her to get up off her tush and take responsibility for herself and her kid. It would be hard, but where had she gotten the idea that her life was supposed to be easy?

She took a deep breath and then let it out and continued to sit and stare at her beautiful boy. She wanted so badly to do right by him, but at this moment, she didn't have the nerve to go back into the living room and face Linda. She didn't know what to say to her. Linda might be embarrassed about how B.J. had behaved today, but he was still the father she loved.

But avoiding Linda might make her think Dixie was blaming her for B.J.'s actions. She took another breath and got to her feet. Time to start being her new self. Leaving Benjy's door open so she could hear him if he became restless, she walked back into the living room. "Sorry I took so long. I waited for Benjy to go to sleep and then I just watched him breathe for a while."

"What are you going to do about your car?"

Dixie grinned sheepishly. "I'd clean forgot about it. I'll call Al's Garage. B.J. arranged for me to get all my work done there." The mention of B.J.'s name caused her throat muscles to tighten.

"Dixie, I swear to you I didn't know Dad would be in that restaurant today. I wouldn't have gone there if I'd had any idea..."

Her words startled Dixie. "I never thought you did."

"Well, Dad seems to think I'm out to cause trouble between you two. But that's not true."

"Today was the first time Benjy's been hurt with anything worse than a skin't knee, and I don't mind saying I was kinda rattled by it. If you hadn't come the way you did, I don't know what I would have done. As for your daddy..." She shrugged.

Linda looked embarrassed as she silently nodded. Not wanting to make her choose sides, Dixie excused herself and went to the phone in the kitchen. After talking to Al at the garage, she decided to start a pot of coffee.

Iced tea or a cold soda might have been better on a hot day like this, but nothing soothed Dixie in times of deep trouble like hot coffee. Besides, she needed a strong shot of caffeine before facing B.J. As if she had summoned him by her thoughts, his white Caddy emerged from a cloud of road dust and turned into the driveway.

* * * *

B.J. sat in this car telling himself to calm down before he went inside. But why in the hell should he? He stomped to the front door, opened it without knocking and barged into the room. "Will you kindly tell me what in the hell is going on with you two women?"

Linda stared at him with her mouth agape, but Dixie ran out of the kitchen area and down the hallway. What was wrong with her? Did she expect him to hit her or something?

Linda stepped in front of him as if to keep him from following Dixie. "Keep your voice down. Benjy is asleep."

He tried to lower his voice, but his anger made that hard to do. "Why did you come to Myrtle's Place?" he asked in a hissing whisper.

Linda gave him a look that he could only describe as belligerent. "I wanted to buy Benjy a piece of pie."

"I knew it had to be your idea. Dixie knows better than to come into town."

Linda's head popped back, and fire shot from her eyes. "Knows better? What did you do, give her a list of places where she can and can not go?"

"Don't you speak to me in that tone. You deliberately brought them there to embarrass me. I wouldn't be surprised to learn you also invited Meredith Conway to the house."

Dixie hurried back into the room. Apparently she'd closed Benjy's door for she said, "Keep your voices down," in something more than a whisper.

Linda lowered her voice, but she didn't lighten her intensity as she leaned toward her father. "I didn't know you'd be at Myrtle's today. You've had little to say to me for the last couple of days, remember?"

He dismissed her with a shrug and turned to Dixie. "You never come into town like that. Why, in God's name, did you pick today to do it?"

"I took Benjy to the clinic. You told me to take him there," Dixie said.

"The clinic? Didn't he just have a checkup?"

Linda regained his attention by making a noise that sounded very much like a growl. "Come on, Dad, you saw the cast. Benjy had just been through a frightening and painful experience and you turned your back on him."

What was she talking about? "Cast? The blue thing was a cast?"

"Yes. He fell off his bike and broke his wrist."

"Oh, God." B.J. felt the blood draining from his head. He staggered to the nearest chair by the dining table and plopped into it. "I took the training wheels off too soon. I knew he wasn't ready, but he kept begging me to."

"Are you trying to say you didn't know he'd been hurt?" Linda asked.

B.J. ignored her and looked at Dixie. "You had it set at the clinic? But they don't have an orthopedic specialist there."

"Dr. Adams said it was a simple break. He fixes them all the time."

Some of B.J.'s indignation returned. "You should have taken Benjy to a specialist."

"I'm satisfied with Dr. Adams's care, but if you want him to see a specialist, you make the appointment, and you take him."

He became aware of the coldness of Dixie's voice and the steadiness of her stare and realized she was furious with him. Linda must have become aware of this too, for she picked up her purse. "Okay, you two have to work this out between yourselves. I'm leaving."

Dixie held her hand out to Linda. "Thanks for your help today. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

Linda caught the hand and gave it a squeeze. "I was glad to do it. Give me a call if you need anything else."

B.J. watched the two women parting as if they were lifelong friends and wondered how all this had come about. After Linda left, he petulantly asked, "Why didn't you call me?"

Dixie stared at him with obvious fury. "I tried, but your cell phone didn't answer, and you weren't at home, and my car battery was dead. So I asked Linda for help. If you don't like that, I don't give a damn."

B.J. rested one elbow on the table and plopped his forehead in his hand. Could the situation get worse? Then he looked up at her, hoping his face showed his contriteness. "Sweet Pea, I'm so sorry this happened. I turned my cell off because of that blasted meeting. If I'd known Benjy was hurt, I'd have cancelled the meeting. I'd do anything for you and Benjy, you know that."

Dixie moved closer so that she towered over him. "Anything but acknowledge your son in front of your fancy friends. But what happened today was my fault as much as yours. I knew it would happen, I even told you it would. I just didn't expect it so soon. Well, now I know time's up. I can't keep on trustin' you to do the right thing."

He felt sick to his stomach. "It was blue. I had no idea the boy was hurt."

"Would it have been all right to turn your back on him if he wasn't?"

"I was so surprised to see you there. I only turned away for a moment. When I turned back, you were gone."

"What would you have done if we'd stayed?"

He'd never heard her use such a harsh tone of voice. "It was only because Audrey Conway and Mrs. Mason were there. The men would have understood."

Her sour expression told him that comment hadn't helped his cause. He reached out, hoping to pull her onto his lap, but she stepped back, crossing her arms under her breasts.

"Okay," he said, "I'll find a place to move the double-wide as fast as I can. I'm not sure I can do it before school star—"

"It's too late for that, B.J. I've finally realized how hopeless our situation is. Me and Benjy will move to my sister's tomorrow."

"But she doesn't have room for you."

"She's kin. She'll make room 'til I can find a place of my own."

"For God's sake, you don't mean to live at Steeple's Crossing, do you? The schools there are terrible, and everyone knows Benjy was born a couple of years after your divorce."

"I'll live wherever I can find work."

"Think how hard it will be to work a waitress's hours and raise a kid."

She took a deep breath that seemed to fill her with resolve. "Stop it. You're just like all the rest, telling me I'm not good enough. My daddy did it when he run off. My ex did it when he slapped me around. And you did it when you refused to claim the son I gave you. Well, I'm not going to listen to that kind of talk anymore."

For Old Time's Sake
by Sarah Winn

"I said I was leaving for Benjy's sake, but the truth is I'm doing it for me, too. If I ain't good enough to marry, then I ain't good enough for you to sleep with any time you feel like it. I told myself marriage don't matter, but you not wantin' me has hurt, Ben, it's hurt every damn day.

"Well, no more. If you're any kind of man at all, you'll support your son whether I'm living under your thumb or not. But if you don't, I'll make do, so my son can grow up and be proud of his mama and hisself." By the time she finished, tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Please, Dixie. You've had a bad day, seeing Benjy hurt and having to deal with the emergency by yourself, but don't let your emotional state blind you to the benefits you and Benjy get from living here. If you want more money, I'll give you an allowance, cash of your own."

"Can't you understand I want more from you than money?"

"I understand that you had a hard life before you met me and that makes money important to you."

She wiped at her tears with her hands. "Looks like the only way to prove I love you is to leave you. So that's another reason I'll be outta here in the morning. Go home, Ben." She turned and walked toward her bedroom, her usual fluid grace replaced with jerky steps.

B.J. put both elbows on the table and buried his head in his hands. He felt the moisture of his own tears and had to stifle a sob. How could she claim she loved him and yet leave him? Whatever the strange workings of her mind, it was clear

he'd lost her. If he didn't want to lose Benjy, too, he better go along with her decision.

He sat there until he'd gotten control of himself and then slowly walked back to the bedroom they'd shared through so many wonderful nights. The door was closed. He tapped lightly on it. When she didn't respond, he said, "I'll come back in the morning with the SUV. You can't get all of Benjy's stuff in your car. We'll talk about money then."

* * * *

When Linda got home, Mrs. Mills was waiting in the kitchen. "What took you so long? I been worried to death."

"Benjy's wrist was broken, but the doctor said it will heal nicely."

"Well, what in the world was wrong with your daddy? He came in here screaming for you. When I told him you were with Mrs. Yost, he ran out before I could even tell him about the boy getting hurt."

"After we left the doctor's office, I took Benjy and Dixie to Myrtle's for lunch. Dad and some of his friends were there. Benjy called him Daddy and embarrassed him."

Mrs. Mills pressed one hand against the side of her face. "My land. Was the restaurant full of people?"

"Give me a little credit. It was after the lunch hour, but the chief of police, the biggest builder in the county, the preacher's wife, and Mrs. Conway were with him. Apparently it was some political thingy."

Mrs. Mills's hand came around to cover her mouth, and much to Linda's surprise, laughter bubbled through her fingers. "The cat's outta the bag now, ain't it?"

Linda found her joy annoying. "Not necessarily. Dad turned his back on Benjy."

"Oh," Mrs. Mills's hand came down, and her laughing stopped. "Was the boy's feelin's hurt?"

"I don't think he understood what happened. Dixie hustled him out of there and told him his father was too busy to talk to him, but she was furious. I imagine she's reamed Dad a new one by now."

"Your father went to her house?"

"Yeah, he arrived before I left."

"Well, the Bible says, 'Sow the wind and reap the whirlwind.' I guess your daddy's whirlwind has come home to roost."

Linda shook her head at Mrs. Mills's mixed metaphor and her lack of understanding of the seriousness of the incident. "If you'd seen Benjy's face light up when he saw his father and then crash with disappointment when his father turned away from him and his mother whisked him out the door with orders to be quiet, you'd know this was about more than Dad getting his just desserts."

Mrs. Mills frowned. "Your daddy is an important man, and it's not up to me to pass judgment on him, but it don't seem right to treat that boy the way he has. Are you sure Benjy is his?"

"Dad said he is."

"Well, this ain't all his fault. That woman had a hand in it too."

"And she's been paying for it by being stuck out on the edge of nowhere with no friends. Now it's his turn to pay."

"What do you think she's gonna do?"

"She was already talking about leaving Harperville before this happened. Today ought to really push her into going." Linda got a glass and went over to the kitchen sink. As water gushed from the spigot, Mrs. Mills said, "We got plenty of bottled water in the refrigerator. You daddy won't drink nothin' else."

"I'm not as particular as my dad." She took a long swallow from a dripping glass.

"I don't know why you're taking this so personal. Maybe your Daddy should have been more careful with hisself, but there's no reason this has to affect your life any."

"My life? He chose the schools I went to, what I studied and even where I'm going to work. What's mine?"

With her mouth agape, Mrs. Mills stared at Linda. Finally she said, "I never heard you say you didn't want to do any of them things."

"Of course not. I was too eager to please my perfect father."

"Well ... if you don't want the life he's planned for you, now's the time to say so." She turned her back on Linda and gathered dirty utensils from the counter top. "I fixed some potato salad. You and your daddy can eat off it over the weekend."

The way Mrs. Mills stopped an argument by jumping to a totally unrelated topic had always irritated Linda. She decided she'd start proclaiming her independence here and now by refusing to be shut down. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to go against my father's wishes?"

Mrs. Mills stopped running water into the sink and turned to look Linda in the eye. "Ain't I been working for him for fifteen years?"

"Yeah, but you get to go home at night and have your own life."

"Your daddy's having trouble seeing you as a grown-up 'cause that's just the way parents are. Their children are always children to them. You want him to treat you like a grown-up, you gotta act like one. Course, he's still your daddy, so you gotta respect him too." She turned back to the sink.

"How can I respect him when he's hurting a small child?"

Mrs. Mills shook her head as she squirted dish detergent into the sink. "Is all this about how he treats that boy? Seems like you already had a mess of anger waitin' for an excuse to pop out."

Could she be right? Linda opened a cabinet door. "Are there any cookies?"

"In the pantry."

Linda returned from the pantry with a napkin loaded with sugar cookies and sat on one of the stools beside the island. Mrs. Mills was busy washing dishes, so Linda addressed her back. "You've always considered it part of your job to criticize me, haven't you?"

Mrs. Mills looked over her shoulder and after a moment of somber reflection, smiled crookedly at Linda. "Why, yes, I guess I have." She turned back to her work but kept talking. "When I came to work here your mama was having her second set of treatments for the cancer. Whenever she felt like it, she'd talk to me 'bout what I was supposed to do, mostly how you or your daddy liked things. I realized she was worried 'bout not being here to do for y'all."

It had been a long time since anyone had talked to Linda about their memories of her mother. She had difficulty swallowing the bite of cookie she'd taken.

"That wasn't too long after my husband had died, and I was still pretty mad about losing him. But seeing how much your mama didn't want her passing to be a burden for her loved ones, I knew Leon wouldn't have wanted me to carry around so much anger, so I started lookin' for a new purpose in my life.

"I tried to ease your mama's worries by telling her I'd do things just like you and your daddy liked 'em, but one day she said your daddy loved you so much she feared he wouldn't be able to give you the discipline a young girl needs. I guess I took it on myself to fill that need. But you're a grown woman now, so you don't need me nippin' at your heels anymore."

The thought of her mother during her last illness, worrying about what would become of her made Linda's eyes water and her nose run. She dumped the cookies on the counter top and used the paper napkin to blow her nose. After a deep

sigh, Linda said, "Family must have been very important to my mother."

"Family's important to every woman," Mrs. Mills replied.

"You once told me you wanted to be a teacher but you quit school to have a family. Did you ever regret that?"

Mrs. Mills rinsed a knife and dropped it in the drainer before answering. "Sometimes I regret not being a teacher, but I've never regretted marrying Leon Mills or having his children."

"You may not have had a lot of students, Mrs. Mills, but you did become a teacher."

Mrs. Mills turned toward Linda with an expression that seemed to reflect affection, until she scowled and said, "Look at the mess you've made on my counter top."

Linda burst into laughter. "What happened to no more nipping at my heels?" she asked and hurriedly brushed the broken cookie crumbs into her cupped hand.

"Can't teach an old dog new tricks, I guess. By the way, an official-looking letter came in the mail for you."

"What?" Linda jumped up, letting crumbs go where they would and raced to the hallway table where the mail was always put. She instantly spotted the envelope from the North Carolina Board of Law Examiners and tore the letter open. A small yelp escaped her lips as she saw the words, "We are happy to inform you," and knew she had passed. She rushed back to the kitchen waving the letter. "I passed the bar, Mrs. Mills."

The housekeeper continued to wipe the counter top as she said, "That's nice."

For Old Time's Sake
by Sarah Winn

Linda felt a flash of irritation at the woman's casual acceptance of such news. Of course, Mrs. Mills wouldn't understand how important it was, but her father would be thrilled. She'd call him. Then she remembered where she'd last seen him and decided he had his hands full at the moment.

Darn it. There must be someone she could call. Wade knew how anxiously she'd been waiting for this news. Maybe she'd call him. No, she'd decided to break it off with him. All her excitement drained away. So she'd passed the bar. Big deal.

Maybe she'd go for a swim.

Chapter Thirteen

By seven that evening, Linda decided her father wasn't coming home for dinner and wandered down to the kitchen to fix something for herself. Was it possible that Dad had persuaded Dixie to forgive him? She'd thought Dixie far too angry to be easily persuaded.

After warming a plate of food in the microwave, Linda carried it into the family room and turned on the TV. She had no idea what programs played on Friday nights, so she roamed through the channels with the remote, not finding anything that appealed to her. Maybe she'd read a book. How long had it been since she'd read something just for the fun of it?

She finished her meal, carried the dish back to the kitchen, and decided to make a pot of coffee. While it was brewing, she stared out at the backyard. The shadows of deep twilight blotted out any sign of their new neighbors, making the expanse of lawn and the shrubbery and trees that surrounded it look like a deserted world.

What was the matter with her? Was she lonely? Normally, she didn't let that sort of thing bother her, but keeping busy was her antidote. Now she was on vacation and had nothing to do. Nonsense, she had preparations to make for her move to Raleigh and beginning her career.

Her career? The dissatisfaction she'd poured out during her conversation with Mrs. Mills haunted her. Had she meant all those things? Was she really so unhappy with the life her

father had arranged for her? Mrs. Mills had said if she wanted to change, now was the time to do it.

What sort of changes did she want to make? After pouring herself a cup of coffee, she looked again at the empty backyard. Somehow, it reminded her of the practice of corporate law, of sitting in musty offices and drafting contracts, of stuffy business negotiations. She wanted to do something that would involve people, lots of people. Like maybe being a prosecuting attorney, and appearing in court, and gaining the respect of the people in her community, a small community where everybody knew her, and she knew them.

If that's what she really wanted, it could probably be hers just for the asking. Did she have the guts to ask?

She heard a car pulling into the garage. The kitchen door opened and heavy footsteps sounded. Her father was home, but Linda dreaded facing him. He entered the kitchen and blinked at her, seeming a bit unsteady on his feet.

With a silly grin, he pointed at her cup. "That looks good. Got any more?"

Linda had never seen her father noticeably drunk. She got another cup from the cabinet, poured the coffee and led him to a stool by the island. He slurped from the cup and grunted. "Too hot."

"Do you want me to put some cold water in it?"

"I can wait," he muttered and hung his head.

Linda knew he'd behaved badly, but she couldn't help feeling sorry for him. She placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Guess it was bad with Dixie, huh?"

He looked up at her. "She's leaving. Going to her sister's in the morning."

"I know you're disappointed, but it'll be better for Benjy, in the long run. There's no way he could go on living here and not be hurt."

He shook his head. "She's not doing it just for Benjy. Says she's leaving to prove she loves me. How can she leave me if she loves me?"

"Did you try to get her to stay?"

He nodded.

"How?"

"Said I'd give her an allowance."

Linda jerked her hand away from his shoulder. "How could you be so dumb? She thinks you think she only wants you for your money, and you offer her money, proving she's right."

He drew his head back and straightened his shoulders. "Don't call me dumb, young lady. I know more about what's between Dixie and me than you do. She's a pretty young woman, and I'm an old man. Of course she's after my money."

With a huff of disgust, Linda walked to the other side of the island and stared across at her father. "I'll tell you what I know about Dixie. She wears discount store clothes, and lives in a trailer, a nice trailer, but nevertheless a trailer, on the outskirts of nowhere, and watches cooking shows on TV to find recipes for dishes that will be healthier for you. Those are not the actions of a gold digger."

He took a deep breath, and as he exhaled, his shoulders slumped, and his head dropped toward the coffee cup. For a

second, Linda feared his nose would plunge into it until he wrapped his hands around the cup and brought it up to his mouth. After a cautious sip, he took a long swallow. Then he looked at her with such a mournful expression that she feared he was about to cry. "She wants to get married, has always wanted it. I don't know what to do."

Linda stared at him for a long moment. Finally she said, "You have to decide what will mean the most to you, having a wife and son who adore you or being B.J. Harper of Harperville."

He stared back at her for so long that she thought he might be too drunk to form a sensible reply. Then he blinked, and a look of determination filled his eyes. "You're right. I have been dumb." He stood up, his movements surer, and started toward the hall. At the doorway, he paused and looked back at her. "I may be out of town for a few days. I'll call you when I know for sure." Then he continued toward his den.

Could he have made up his mind that quickly? Perhaps Linda should take her own advice and decide what mattered the most to her.

* * * *

The next morning, Dixie packed Benjy's clothes into a suitcase sitting on his bed while he stood across from her, frowning. "Why we gonna go to Aunt Sissy's?"

"We just are." Knowing she'd soon have to face B.J., Dixie didn't want to get into a pointless argument with Benjy.

"Well, I don't wanna go. Bobby and Teddy pick on me."

"If they do, hit 'em with your cast." As soon as the words were out of her mouth she regretted them, but Benjy seemed delighted with the idea and got off her back while he took a few practice swipes with his bandaged arm.

"Of course, if you hit 'em too hard, your arm will hurt more."

He frowned again, so she headed off more complaints by suggesting he go out on the front porch and wait for his dad. When he left the room, she sighed with a mixture of relief and pain. She knew leaving was the right thing to do, but going to Sissy's would be hard. Her sister had three kids and a husband who worked twelve hours a day to support them. Roger wouldn't be happy having Dixie and Benjy crowd in on him.

Dixie would have to ask B.J. for money this morning, so she could offer Roger something. Damn, she should have been putting money back, but B.J. never gave her much actual cash, just credit cards. How soon would he cancel those? A wave of helplessness swept over her, and she sank onto the side of the bed with a pair of Benjy's shorts in her hand.

If it was only her, she could go anywhere and do anything, but having Benjy made everything different. He had to have a decent roof over his head, food to eat, even visits to the doctor. And Lord, what would she do about starting him to school this fall?

The crunch of gravel told her a car had turned into the driveway. She jumped to her feet and quickly finished packing the suitcase. This was no time to turn chicken.

* * * *

B.J. got out of the SUV slowly. Benjy, rather than rushing to meet him as he usually did, continued to sit on the front steps and hang his head. Was he angry at his father for turning his back on him yesterday? He had every right to be.

B.J. stopped at the bottom of the steps. "Let me see that cast, son."

Benjy hesitantly held his injured arm up.

B.J. made a production out of examining the arm. "When I was a boy, all casts were white and a lot heavier than this. I didn't even realize yesterday what it was."

"The doctor had four different colors, and he let me pick the one I wanted." Finally, Benjy looked directly into his father's eyes. "Are you mad at me for falling off my bicycle?"

Realizing the boy was blaming himself for what had happened yesterday, B.J. had to fight back tears. "Certainly not. I'm sorry you got hurt and that I wasn't there for you." He sat beside Benjy and put his arm around his shoulders.

"I didn't hardly cry at all. Linda said I was a brave boy."

"I'm sure you were. I'm very proud of you." B.J. hugged his son.

The noise of a door opening alerted him to Dixie's presence. He turned and saw her standing in the doorway and staring down at them. When he noticed the suitcase she held, he jumped to his feet. "Let me take that for you."

She pointed with her free hand. "There's a bigger one in here. If you take it, I can manage this one."

Their bodies came very close as he tried to go in while she came out. He smelled her spicy perfume, felt her body heat and had to fight the impulse to reach for her. The next few moments would determine if he'd ever be truly happy again, and he didn't want to do something rash that would spoil his chances.

She had already opened the back of the SUV and placed her bag in it before he got there. She pointed at the large leather carryall propped across from her luggage. "Did you bring that for us to use? I don't think we'll need it. Since Sissy has so little room, I'm just taking what we'll need for the time being."

"My clothes are in it."

"What?" She looked up with wide but disapproving eyes.

"I'm coming with you. There's no need for you to move to your sister's. We can stay in a hotel in Raleigh while you find an apartment, a job, or whatever. I can help you look or stay with Benjy while you're out."

She shook her head. "I don't think that a good idea."

"Your sister's boys are rowdy. Benjy's arm might get damaged while roughhousing with them. It's my duty to take care of him, and I haven't done a very good job of that lately. Please let me come with you. We can have separate rooms if you like."

Apparently, Benjy heard their conversation, for he rushed over to them. "Yeah, Mama, let's go with Daddy. I don't wanna go to Aunt Sissy's."

Dixie looked rattled as she turned to the boy. "You go into the house. Let me and your daddy talk this over."

"I don't wanna leave my daddy," Benjy called out in a teary voice.

B.J. scooped him into his arms and patted his back. "There now, son. Don't cry. We'll work this out."

"Why do we gotta go?" Benjy asked, far from being pacified.

"Well, your mother doesn't think she should live here anymore unless we're married." B.J. looked over Benjy's head and into Dixie's eyes. "So I came here this morning to ask her to marry me."

The look of fury that came over her face dashed B.J.'s hopes of an easy victory. "Oh, no, no, no." With a shake of her fists she marched back into the house.

B.J. followed her, with Benjy still in his arms. He knew it was cowardly to pit Benjy against his mother, but he wanted all the help he could get. "Now, Sweet Pea..."

"What would gettin' married mean?" Benjy interrupted.

"Your father has made it very clear in the past that he doesn't want to marry me," Dixie said loudly.

"Benjy, I was stupid when I said that. Now I realize the error of my ways and want nothing more than to have your mother for my wife and you for my son."

"Would we live in your big house?" Benjy asked.

"Yes, and your last name would become Harper, the same as mine."

With her fists planted on her hips, Dixie said, "I don't intend to live in a town where I'm looked down on and talked about."

"All right," B.J. said. "Where would you like to live? Raleigh? The beach? Florida? You name it, and we'll go there."

That took some of the wind out of her sails. She stared at him openmouthed for a couple of seconds. "You'd never leave this town," she muttered.

He set Benjy on his feet. "Stay here a minute, son, while I talk to your mother."

B.J. took two steps toward Dixie, but he stopped when she stepped back. "I know I've hurt you, and I'm sorry. I'll do whatever it takes to make it up to you."

"Your granddaddy founded this town. You'd always blame me for taking you away from it."

"If you want to live here, we'll live here, just so you'll be my wife."

"What about you being mayor? The people of Harperville will never accept me as their mayor's wife."

"I don't have to run for mayor again. But who says the people here won't accept you? You won Linda over. She's volunteered to be the trustee for Benjy's fund. Some of the old crows in town may snub you, but why let them ruin our future?"

"You say that now, but after a while, you'd blame me for messing up your life."

He looked at her for a long moment before softly asking, "Is that what's really worrying you, or is it my age?"

The corners of her mouth turned down as she glared at him. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"I am twenty years older than you."

She took a step toward him. "For heaven's sake, that's never mattered to me."

"It would be natural for you to want someone your own age."

She stepped closer and hooked one arm around his neck. "You're the only man I've ever been with who puts my pleasure before your own."

He caught her free hand and pulled it up to his lips. "We have a good thing going here, honey. Let's not lose it."

Looking at him wonderingly, she asked, "Do you really want to tie yourself to a woman like me?"

He pulled her against his chest. "Sweet Pea, I can't bear the thought of living without you. If you leave here, I'll follow you. The only way I'll stay in Harperville is if you stay with me."

"Oh, Ben." She kissed his cheek, and he quickly maneuvered his head so their lips met.

In the midst of a binding kiss, a high-pitched voice said, "So are we going to Aunt Sissy's or not?"

B.J. pulled back from Dixie just long enough to say, "Not."

* * * *

Linda was going through the boxes of hastily packed belongings she had brought from her old apartment when her father called and invited her to lunch at the double-wide. She was glad for an excuse to get away from the boring work and terribly curious to know what was going on between Dixie and her father. So she hurriedly changed her clothes and drove the now familiar route.

As she entered the double-wide, Benjy rushed up to her and said, "My mama and daddy are gonna get married."

Linda stared at him for a moment and then looked up at B.J. who stood with a broad smile and one arm around Dixie.

"Well ... well," she muttered, too shocked to think. Then she saw the intent way Dixie was watching and waiting for her reaction, and she forced a grin to her lips. "That's good news, but pretty surprising, considering the climate when I last saw you two."

Her father's smile grew even broader before he said, "We talked everything out. Things are going to be fine now, just fine."

"We're gonna live in the big house. Are you gonna live with us?" Benjy asked.

Linda didn't know how to answer. Newlyweds wouldn't want a grown daughter hanging around. Instinctively, she looked at Dixie who said, "Linda will always have a home there any time she wants it."

Benjy threw his good arm around her thigh and hugged it. "You'll really be my big sister now."

When Benjy let go, Linda moved to hug her father and then Dixie. A new family was being formed, and she was surprised at how much being included meant to her.

Lunch was casual, with bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches and iced tea. Knowing Dixie no longer felt the need to impress her with a big meal made Linda feel even more included. B.J. smiled almost constantly, and he hugged or just touched Dixie whenever possible, and Linda had no

doubt the marriage would be as good for him as it would be for Dixie and Benjy.

Everyone needs love.

The first sign of a cloud on the horizon occurred when Linda asked when they were getting married.

"I want to do it as soon as possible," B.J. said. "I've suggested we go somewhere, maybe Myrtle Beach."

"I'd like to have some of my family present, my mama and sisters, anyway." Dixie looked at Linda. "And you'll want to be there, wouldn't you?"

Linda nodded. "And Aunt Ida would be upset if her baby brother got married without inviting her."

"Well, we can always do it in the church, but then I'd have to invite some of my friends here," B.J. said.

Dixie began to pinch the crust from her sandwich. "Let's don't do anything real big."

Linda laughed. "If Dad invites all his friends, the church won't be big enough."

"That's what I mean," Dixie nodded in agreement. "I can't put on no big do for all his friends."

B.J. smiled indulgently. "You won't have to do a thing, Sweet Pea. We'd have it catered."

Dixie didn't look reassured.

Linda tried to come to her rescue. "Even with caterers, a big wedding would take time to set up. How about an intimate wedding at the house with just family?"

Dixie brightened. "That sounds better."

"Where would we hold the ceremony?" B.J. asked.

"In the formal living room. Move some of the furniture out, and you could easily get twenty folding chairs in it with room for more people to stand. Then we could have a catered buffet lunch for everyone."

B.J. shook his head. "I don't know. Even with a caterer, that would be a lot on Dixie Ray and Mrs. Mills."

"I'll be glad to help out," Linda offered.

Her father frowned at her. "You'll be so busy with your new job, you won't have time."

"Yeah, well, I might have more time. I've been rethinking that job with Falk and Wilkins."

B.J. stared at her with his mouth agape. "What's there to rethink?"

While Linda was beginning to think of Dixie and Benjy as family, she wasn't ready to let them see B.J. chew her out. "Let's talk about it later, okay?"

He would not be deterred. "If something is wrong, I want to know about it now. Don't you realize working at Falk and Wilkins is the opportunity of a lifetime?"

Seeing she had no choice, she filled her lungs with air and jumped into the deep end of the pool. "I ran into District Attorney Blaine the other night, and he told me there's a position for an assistant open in the county D.A.'s office. I'm thinking about applying for it."

He glared at her for a moment and then loudly asked, "Have you lost your mind?"

"I hope not."

He shook his head with impatience. "You're not thinking clearly. As an assistant district attorney, you'll have to deal

with scum, be poorly paid and have little in the way of future prospects. Surely you can see the advantages of corporate law."

"I find criminal law more interesting."

He sneered as he asked, "Is it criminal law you're interested in or Wade Preston?"

Dixie touched his hand. "Now, B.J.—"

He caught hold of Dixie's fingers but kept his eyes fixed on Linda. The conversation had swung in a direction she didn't want to go. "This is supposed to be a celebration of your engagement. Can't we talk about this later?"

"I have to know if you're foolish enough to throw away a great career over a silly infatuation with a man you barely know."

Oh, boy, he really knew how to push her buttons. "In the first place I've known Wade most of my life. In the second, the few dates I've had with him since I've been home have nothing to do with my decision. Wait, that's not true. Wade did play a role, but not in the way you think. Being with him has made me realize how few friends I have and how I've cut myself off from life to pursue a career. I want more."

"You'll have more time for a social life now that you've taken the bar exam."

"Not if I go to Falk and Wilkins. You yourself told me I'd have to put in long hours to prove myself there."

"Just at first. I put a good deal of pressure on Arthur Wilkins to get this job for you. How will I explain to him that you don't want it?"

"That's my problem. I'll take care of it. Actually, I haven't spoken to Mr. Blaine yet. This may all be premature."

"If you're set on doing this, I could call Charles. I'm sure a few words—"

"No, thank you. If I get this job, I want to get it on my own."

He looked a bit startled by her refusal. "There's nothing wrong with using my influence to get a leg up in the world."

"I'm sure being your daughter makes me a more attractive prospect to Charles Blaine, but the time has come to let me row my own boat, Dad."

His shoulders slumped. "I just don't want you to row into dangerous waters."

She decided he was truly concerned about her welfare and sought to reassure him. "Seeing how much you needed someone to love has made me see the same need in myself. I want a career, but I want a home and family, too, and I want it sooner rather than later."

"I think you're being wise, Linda." Dixie's voice reminded Linda that she and her father weren't alone. "We should always follow our hearts."

B.J. looked at his bride-to-be and a smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. "Guess I'm in no position to say nay to that."

Linda glanced at Benjy to see if he'd been upset by their argument. Looking at her with large solemn eyes, he said, "He fusses at me sometimes, too."

She laughed. "Get used to it, kid. Mrs. Mills told me just yesterday that parents never see their children as grown-ups."

Linda turned back to her father. "By the way, I passed the bar. The notice came yesterday."

Her father smiled. "Passed on the first try. I knew you could. Just as you could show those boys at Falk and Wilkins a thing or two."

Linda smiled back at him. "Maybe I'll show the good old boys at the county courthouse. Who knows, I may be the next Harper to go into politics."

B.J. stopped smiling. "Dixie wants me to run for mayor again, but with Audrey Conway leading a gossip campaign against me, I don't think I have much a chance to get re-elected. What do you think?"

Linda glanced at Dixie, knowing this must be a touchy subject between her and B.J. "Well, Mrs. Conway will definitely hurt your chances with the older residents of Harperville, so if you run, you'll have to look to the new people for support."

"So you don't think I should run?"

"Gee, Dad, I don't know. How do you feel about it? What would be easier for you, to run and face the possibility of losing or not to run at all?"

"So you definitely think I'll lose?"

"I don't think it's definite, but you'll have to campaign differently than you've done in the past. You can't just sit in Myrtle's and chat with your old friends. You'll have to get out and make new ones."

"The new people haven't shown much interest in local affairs."

"So you'll have to spark their interest. If the older residents want to roll back the clock, what do the newer ones want? You'll need to find out and play to their interests."

"How can I do that?"

"Get to know some of them. Wade introduced me to a nice couple the night we went to the Starlight Room. He knows a lot of people who live in the Heights. Maybe he could arrange some introductions."

"Hmm. Maybe I should put Wade on my re-election committee."

"At least talk to him. He could suggest people to contact."

"And what does he think about you staying in town?"

"I haven't seen him for the last few days."

"Is there a problem between you two?"

"No problem. But we're just friends. The decision to take the job here really has nothing to do with him."

B.J. and Dixie exchanged glances that seemed to say neither one of them believed her.

Chapter Fourteen

At five after nine on Monday morning, Linda called District Attorney Blaine's office. She told the secretary who she was and what she wanted to see Mr. Blaine about. After a brief wait, the secretary asked if Linda could meet the D.A. for lunch at a popular restaurant in the county seat. By 1:30 that afternoon, Linda had accepted a job as an assistant district attorney.

She decided the only adult way to tender her resignation at Falk and Wilkins was in person, so as soon as she was back in her car, she used her cell phone to call that office. After explaining she needed a brief appointment with one of the partners she was told Arthur Wilkins could see her at 4:30 that afternoon. He didn't seem at all disappointed when she told him she'd changed her mind about working for them, confirming her suspicion that they'd offered her a job primarily because she was B.J. Harper's daughter.

She was ravenously hungry when she left Falk and Wilkins, probably because she'd eaten very little at lunch, so she decided to stop at one of the restaurants in Glenwood South. This older section of the downtown area had been reinvented into a collection of smart restaurants and shops where young professionals tended to stop after work for drinks and dinner.

It was still early in the evening, so Linda didn't have to wait for a table. As she sipped a glass of wine and ate a plate of pasta, she watched sharply dressed men and women gathering around the bar to greet old friends or make new

ones. If she'd taken the job at Falk and Wilkins, she would, in all probability, have joined this scene, but she felt no regrets.

Some people might be driven to conquer new worlds, but she wanted to go home and make a place for herself in her old world, to truly become a Harper of Harperville.

It was nearly seven when she left the restaurant. She'd called her dad earlier so she had no reason to hurry home. The closer she got to Harperville, the more she wondered how Wade would react to her change of plans.

He'd been so angry after their dinner at Myrtle's last Wednesday night, she wondered if he'd ever call her again. What would he think when he heard she was taking a job in Harperville? Would he care? Would he jump to the conclusion she'd done it because she wanted to be close to him?

She certainly hoped not. Didn't she?

Wade had made her see some things differently, and he'd been the best sex she had since ... ever, but that didn't mean they were meant for each other in a long-term relationship. Of course, if Wade remained convinced she thought he wasn't good enough for her, there was no possibility of a future for them.

She needed to tell him that wasn't the case, and what better time to do it than now? She had so much to tell him, her new job, Dad and Dixie, even Benjy's broken wrist. And after she told him all of that, she would casually suggest they keep seeing each other to see what might develop between them.

A casual suggestion wouldn't do it. Wade had his nose so far out of joint she'd have to tell him the truth. Which was?

As she turned off the highway and on to the quiet streets of Harperville, she asked herself how she honestly felt about him. She liked him. She cared about him. But did she love him? Well, she'd just changed her life's plan around because of her little fling with him. That had to make him pretty important to her.

Linda passed the drive to Wisteria Hill and headed for Monroe Street. At this moment, nothing was more important to her than talking to Wade and discovering if they had a chance for the future.

She turned her car into the driveway at Wade's apartment. As she rolled toward the back of the building her headlights raked over a gray-haired woman sitting in a folding chair beside the doorway of the apartment next to Wade's.

Damn. That had to be Mrs. Jones. The last thing Linda wanted was to have the police barge in on them again. Maybe she could reassure the old lady with a little Harper charm. She pulled the car into one of the diagonal parking spaces that fronted the apartments.

Linda smiled as she approached the woman. "Hello. You must be Mrs. Jones. I'm Linda Harper. I don't believe we've met before, but I'm B.J. Harper's daughter."

Mrs. Jones did not return her smile. "I know who you are."

"I just wanted to apologize for disturbing you when I was visiting Mr. Preston before."

"Sounded like you were the one disturbed."

Linda didn't let the woman's crabby attitude stop her. "Wade and I were in school together. We like to kid around

with each other. But there's no need for you to worry about my safety while I'm visiting him."

The old woman squinted through her bifocals. "I hope you're not planning to visit now."

Linda dropped the smile and spoke firmly. "Yes, I am. That's why I stopped to speak with you. There'll be no need for you to call the police this time."

Mrs. Jones's lips twisted into a malicious smirk. "There might be, since he's got another woman with him."

"What?" Linda stepped back as if she'd been struck.

"She walked by me not fifteen minutes ago. One of them Hiss-panics. Bold as brass."

As Linda reeled from the possibility that Wade had moved on so quickly, a door slammed from the back of the building.

Horried over the possibility of having to face him and his newest conquest, she jumped into her car. Afraid to take the time to turn, she simply backed out of the parking space and up the driveway.

Headlights came around the corner of the building. Wade's truck. He must have recognized her car for he gave two short beeps of his horn, but she saw the silhouette of a woman in the seat beside him and stomped down on the gas pedal.

She pulled into the street without stopping and saw headlights coming straight at her. As the other driver's horn blared a warning and his brakes squealed, Linda kept accelerating to get out of his way. She had to turn the wheel sharply and slam on her brakes to keep from hitting a car parked across the street. Miraculously, she avoided calamity.

The other driver's angry expression as he drove past made her wince. Before she could collect her wits and drive on, Wade pulled his truck in front of her car. He jumped out and ran over to her. "What in the hell are you doing? You almost got yourself killed."

She stared straight ahead, refusing to look at him. "I was trying to get out of your way."

He leaned down to get a better look at her. "Didn't you hear me honking?"

"I thought you wanted me to get out of your way."

"I wanted to talk with you. I need some legal advice. You are a lawyer, aren't you?"

She finally looked at him. "Legal advice?"

"One of my men has been arrested. That's his wife in the truck. She's asked me to help."

"Oh." If she hadn't felt like a class A fool, she would have laughed in relief. "What's he charged with?"

"Maria says he was in a bar fight, so I guess it's drunk and disorderly."

Linda took a couple of deep breaths while she gathered her thoughts. "Follow me to the jail. As long as no one was seriously injured, we ought to be able to get him out."

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Wade got back into his truck and pulled out of Linda's way, but he waited for her to drive around him and lead the way to the police station. After the fool stunt she'd just pulled coming out of his driveway, he wanted to be sure she was able to drive safely. What was wrong with her, anyway? She'd

obviously been coming to his place, but then she had raced away from him.

He recalled seeing Mrs. Jones on guard duty as he had driven by. Had Linda stopped to speak to her? He glanced over at Maria. She was a short woman, somewhat stocky, but she had black hair that curled around her shoulders and she really filled out her knit shirt. Had Mrs. Jones seen Maria going to his apartment and told Linda about her?

A smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. Had Linda been so upset by the idea of him being with another woman that she'd nearly killed herself running away from the fact? She'd have to be damn jealous to act like that, and a woman didn't get jealous unless she cared. He chuckled over the possibility of Miss Career-Is-All-I-Care-About having a conflict of interests.

Then he reminded himself of exactly what she was interested in, casual sex with the village idiot. Well, even an idiot wised up eventually. Once she got to Raleigh, she'd meet plenty of professionals like herself. Any relationship with her would only be setting himself up for another kick in the heart.

The jail was located on Main Street in the same building as the police department. By the time they had parked in the lot next to the building, Linda was all business. She approached Maria with a pad and pen to take down Paco's name and be sure she had the spelling right.

Wade had bailed out guys before, so he knew the procedure, but he let her strut her stuff to make sure she'd stick around until he could find out why she'd come to his place tonight. He followed her instructions and waited with

Maria in front of a bench in the lobby, while Linda approached the booking desk.

Hearing his name called, Wade turned and saw Carl Vinson approaching. "Hey, buddy, did you come to pick up your Mexican?"

Wade nodded. "Did you arrest him?"

"Yeah, nothing serious, just a little beer bust-up at La Cantina."

"I figured," Wade said. "He hadn't been off work long enough to get dangerous."

Carl chuckled. "You want me to bring him out for you?"

After nodding toward the booking desk, Wade said, "I'm letting Linda play lawyer."

Carl turned his head as if noticing her for the first time and then grinned broadly. "Is she your *personal* attorney now?"

Wade shook his head. "Not hardly."

Carl patted him on the back. "Well, keep trying, old buddy, and make all us poor boys proud."

"Don't hold your breath," Wade said.

The officer behind the booking desk called Carl, and after giving Wade a small commiserating salute, he went over to the desk. Maria looked up at Wade with somber brown eyes. "He your friend?"

Wade nodded, and she seemed pleased to know he had friends in high places.

Linda bustled over to them and spoke in a businesslike manner to Maria. "Your husband is charged with disorderly conduct. They'll release him on his own recognizance if he signs a pledge to appear in court. Will he do that?"

After a moment's hesitation, Maria said, "Yes."

Pretty sure she hadn't understood much of what Linda said, Wade added, "Paco will be out pronto, Maria."

To prove his words, Carl led a meek Paco Rodriguez into the room and over to the booking desk. Linda turned to Wade, "It'll probably be better if I don't appear to be representing him. So could you go over and be sure he understands what he's signing?"

He was tempted to ask if she was too high and mighty to represent a Hispanic laborer, but this was hardly the place to start an argument, so he nodded and walked over to the desk.

The desk sergeant had already turned a form toward Paco and offered him a pen. Wade pointed to the court date on the paper and loudly said, "You go to court this day. August 24, 10:00 a.m. *Comprende?*"

Paco nodded, signed the paper and got his personal effects, and they all left. In the parking lot, Wade arranged for Maria to ride with Linda and Paco with him as they went back to the bar to get the Rodriguezes' car. He could have gotten the couple into the front seat of the truck, but he didn't want to give Linda a chance to escape.

In the parking lot of La Cantina, the timid Maria snatched the car keys from her husband's hand and became a fountain of volatile Spanish as she and he got into their car.

When they were gone, Wade braced his hands on the open window frame on the driver's side of Linda's car. Glaring down at her, he said, "Why'd you act like a nut at my apartment?"

She wouldn't look at him. "I was just-I had some things to discuss with you, and I stopped to talk to Mrs. Jones, hoping to keep her from calling the police, and she told me you already had company. So I thought I wouldn't bother you."

He wasn't going to let her get away with some lame excuse. "You ran away, Linda. Or rather you backed your car away like some hopped-up teenager. Why?"

"I realized it was rude to drop by without calling first. I guess I was embarrassed."

He opened her car door. "Let's sit in the truck so I don't have to break my back trying to see you."

She hesitated, but he kept a firm grip on the door, figuring she wouldn't try to drive away with it open. With a sigh, she removed the key from the ignition and swung her legs out of the car. He took her arm and led her toward the truck. The beat of salsa music filtered out of the bar.

When they were sitting in the truck, he turned toward her, propping one elbow on the back of the seat. "So what did you want to tell me?"

"Dad and Dixie are getting married."

"I hope you haven't changed your mind about wanting them to marry."

"No. I think it's a good thing, especially for Benjy. If Dad can talk Dixie into it, we're going to have the wedding at the house. It'll be a small one, mostly relatives."

"Yours or hers?"

"Both, of course."

"This is interesting, but I don't see how it affects me."

"Dad's still going to run for mayor, but now he'll need to get votes from the new people. I told him you know a lot of them and could advise him, possibly arrange a few introductions."

"He doesn't want to start on that tonight, does he?"

"No."

He slid his arm along the back of the seat so he could lean toward her. "So why were you in such a hurry to talk to me that you didn't take the time to call before coming over?"

"I made some big decisions in my life today."

"Do they concern me?"

"Possibly."

"What are they?"

"Today I accepted an assistant district attorney position in the Harperville office. I won't be moving to Raleigh."

She'd be under his nose everyday. How would he ever forget her? He struggled to sound uninterested as he asked, "Why did you do that?"

"Well, I decided I like criminal law better than civil, and I wanted more in my life than just a career."

"Well, good luck, but how does this concern me?"

She reached up and placed her hand on top of his. "You made me realize how empty my life has become. Now that I'm staying in town, I hope we can spend more time together."

She looked at him imploringly, her blue eyes full of innocent hope. More likely full of crap. "Look, Linda, I really don't want to be your boy toy until something better comes along."

She blanched, as if his words had hurt her. "What makes you so sure something better will come along?"

"Everybody in town knows I'm not good enough for B.J. Harper's daughter."

She jerked her hand away from his. "I don't know it. You're the one who makes a big issue out of our differences. I'm beginning to think you enjoy feeling sorry for yourself because of your deprived childhood."

Wade had promised himself he'd keep his cool while talking to Linda, but he damn sure wasn't going to let her throw off on his background. "My mother did the best she could raising me."

Linda threw up her hands and made a face. "And she did a good job because look at what you've become. This isn't about you being good enough, or me trying to use you. I have strong feelings for you, but I've been back in town for two weeks. We've only had a few dates. I'm not ready to make a lifetime commitment. How about you?"

He stared at her, wanting desperately to believe what she'd just said. And then the full meaning of what she'd said registered. She had actually spoken of a lifetime commitment to him. But she was quite right in thinking they needed more time together before making such an important decision. He was acting like he had as a teenager when he'd gotten his feelings hurt and jumped to the conclusion she didn't think he was good enough for her. When was he going to grow up?

Finally, he said, "I got my loan approved today."

A delighted smile broke across her face. "You did? That's wonderful." She moved as if she intended to embrace him, but caught herself and pulled back.

Maybe he could grow up now and treat this relationship like a precious plant that needed time, space, and care. "I'm gonna be real busy for the next few months getting the new business up and running, so like you, I'm in no position to make personal commitments. But I'm sure I'll have time for an occasional date."

She nodded. "Sure, we'll both be busy, but we should have some free time on the weekends."

His arm came down from the back of the seat and encircled her shoulders. As she moved closer, he said, "This time we won't rush. Maybe we'll just be friends for awhile."

"Friends?"

He nuzzled her ear. "Really good friends."

She giggled. "How good?"

"As good as you want it, babe." He placed his hand on the side of her face and turned her head so his lips could brush against hers. She melted against him, and he deepened the kiss.

A sudden thump, thump, thump rocked the truck. A slurred voice called out, "*Que pasa, hombre?*"

Wade pulled away from Linda, muttering a curse. Two short men were standing near the back of the truck. Even though the parking lot wasn't well lit, Wade could see they were both grinning and swaying slightly. They must have come out of the bar, seen his and Linda's heads silhouetted in

the truck's rear window and decided to have a little fun. He better put a stop to this before they scared Linda.

As he reached for the door handle, she grabbed his arm. "Don't go out there."

"Don't worry, I'll handle it."

"They're drunk," she whispered. "You might get in a fight, like Paco."

"I just need to talk to them. Lock the doors after I get out." He easily shook her off and got out of the truck.

As he rose to his full height, one of the men said, "Huh, gringo." The other replied in swift Spanish Wade didn't understand.

He took a step toward the men. "Hey, amigos, me and my lady friend are having a little talk. How about cutting us some slack?"

He took another step toward them. With a flurry of movement, one man darted behind Wade, and the other came straight at him and slammed into his chest with both hands. Wade staggered back, bumped against something and fell to the ground.

He was so startled that it took him a moment to realize one of the men had knelt behind him. He couldn't believe they'd pulled that old schoolyard trick on him. Now they stood above him, laughing and pointing.

They jerked around, however, when Linda came from the far side of the truck, screeching, "Stop it! Stop it! Leave him alone." Her face was screwed into a grimace, and she was jabbing the index fingers of both hands as if they were a

couple of six guns. "I'm an assistant district attorney of Rudolph County. You hurt that man, and I'll put you in jail."

Now it was Wade's turn to laugh. He couldn't believe the proper Miss Linda Harper was ready and willing to engage in a parking lot brawl to protect him.

His laughter quickly died when he saw two more men running toward them. Jumping to his feet, he called, "Get back in the truck, Linda."

She apparently became aware of the danger she was now in and froze. Wade balled his fists, hoping he could make quick work of the first two men before the other two reached him. Then a familiar voice called, "Mistah Wade? Why was you on the ground?"

Wade relaxed as Manuel and Juan, two of his workers, skidded to a stop. A conversation of very rapid Spanish ensued in which his men apparently explained to the others that they might someday want to ask the man they'd been harassing for employment. After that, he received nervous nods and apologies. He shook hands with both men and slapped them on the back. They smiled shyly and left.

When they were gone, Manuel said, "You get Paco out of jail?"

"Yeah," Wade said. "Judging from that mark on your face, you were in the same fight. Why didn't you get arrested?"

Manuel laughed. "I go out the back door faster. But I call Paco's wife and tell her to get you."

Wade realized Linda was still standing near the back of the truck, staring at them as if she couldn't quite grasp what had

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happened. "It's okay, honey," he called to her. "These two guys work for me."

Gesturing with his thumb toward Linda, Juan said, "Is this your woman, Mistah Wade?"

Watching for her reaction, Wade said, "Yeah. This is my woman."

She smiled.

Epilogue

Linda watched the caterer's truck start down the driveway before she locked the connecting door to the garage and turned back to the kitchen. Wade stood near the center island, waiting for her.

"They're gone. Do you know what that means?" she asked.

"The wedding is over?"

"No. You fool. We're alone in this house. For the rest of today and all day tomorrow and every night next week, we can do anything we want to."

He pressed a hand against his chest and gaped at her with a horror-stricken expression. "Why, Miss Linda, what is it you want to do?"

Since the bridesmaid's dress Dixie had chosen for her looked like something a vamp in a movie from the thirties might wear, Linda propped one hand on her hip and made her voice low and sultry. "I want us to get naked and make all the noise we want to."

He laughed. "Miss Linda, you have designs on my body."

She walked toward him making the most of the bias-cut, skin-tight dress by exaggerating the swish of her hips. "You're absolutely right, big boy."

His eyes fastened on her twisting torso, and a smirk pulled at his lips. "Did I tell you I got a hard-on watching you walk down the aisle?"

She pressed her chest into his, pushing even more cleavage into her plunging neckline. "Then having to diet for a month so I wouldn't bulge in the wrong places was worth it."

"For you maybe, but think how embarrassed I was to be in that condition in church."

"Don't blame me for the church. I wanted to hold the ceremony here, but Rev. Mason wouldn't hear of it. I guess he thought after all the money Dad had donated, he deserved a church wedding."

"It's a good thing it was in the church, considering all the people who came."

"I should have known Dad couldn't have a small wedding. We wouldn't have been able to have the reception here, if you hadn't come up with the idea of putting a tent in the backyard."

"The weather was so nice you could have gotten by without it."

She reached up and began to trace one of his ears with her fingertips. "Quit changing the subject. Between work and planning this wedding, we've had little time together. I've been looking forward to Dad's honeymoon as much as he and Dixie have."

"Haven't you enjoyed our moments of stolen bliss?"

"There comes a time when moments just aren't enough." She came up on her toes so she could press light kisses against his lips.

His arms encircled her and the increasing pressure of his kisses told her he was as eager as she. They caressed each other with hands, bodies and tongues.

His roaming hands paused on her buttocks but continued to massage her flesh. "You aren't wearing any panties, are you?"

"They'd show under a dress like this."

"Good thing I didn't know that when you were walking down the aisle or I would have really embarrassed myself." He tried to press his leg between hers, but the tight skirt blocked him. With a quick dip, he grabbed some of the flared material around her ankles and pulled the skirt up past her hips. Then he tightened his embrace and hoisted her up onto the top of the island.

Linda squealed in shock as her bare bottom touched the counter top.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"This granite is cold."

He nuzzled her ear. "I'll warm it up."

"The granite?"

His hands moved to the insides of her thighs. "More like you'll warm the granite after I get you hot."

As he touched the already moist flesh between her legs, Linda groaned and wrapped her arms more tightly around his neck.

The jarring sound of a slammed car door caused them to pull apart and stare at each other in surprise. "Who the hell is that?" Wade asked.

The click of a key in a lock sent Linda, with Wade's help, leaping from the counter top. She was still smoothing her skirt down when Mrs. Mills entered the kitchen.

"Why are you two still wearing your fancy clothes?" she asked. "There's cleaning to do."

"The caterers took care of that," Linda replied.

"Huh, they just took away the food stuff. People have dripped and dropped all over this house, and the quicker we get it up, the better."

Linda stared at her and the three women coming in after her, in amazement. "Now? You're going to clean now?" She glanced at her watch. "It's four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon. Surely you don't want to start now."

Mrs. Mills glared at her. "Tomorrow's Sunday. Can't work on a Sunday, and these women have regular jobs to go to on Monday. Won't take us but three or four hours."

Linda sighed so audibly that it sounded like a groan of pain.

Mrs. Mills looked at her curiously. "I'm not expecting you to help."

Wade slipped his arm around Linda's waist and led her toward the hallway. "Let's get out of these ladies' way, babe."

When they reached the foyer near the front of the house, Linda muttered, "I can't believe this. It's like the whole town is plotting to keep us apart. I'd so looked forward to—"

He leaned closer so he could speak softly. "Why don't you go upstairs and get into some comfortable clothing? I'll go home and do the same thing." He held up a small chain with a key hanging from it. "Then meet me at the double-wide."

Her eyes opened in amazement. "How did you get that?"

"Your dad gave it to me. Wants me to move some of Dixie's things here."

"She's not bringing all that gold furniture here, is she?"

"He said to bring boxes packed with her personal belongings. I think he's planning to rent the place furnished."

"How do you know all this?"

"I asked him about it."

"You?"

"I need another place, and there aren't many rentals around here."

Linda didn't know what appalled her the most, the idea of clandestinely meeting her lover in the same bed her father had shared with his mistress, or the possibility of someday having to live in a trailer.

Apparently, Wade read her mind. "It would be temporary. You said you weren't ready to make a final decision about us. When you are, we'll have to think about getting a home of our own. Until then, it's a very private place for us to meet."

He was right, still ... "It's a little creepy to follow in my father's footsteps."

A vacuum cleaner roared from the family room. "Okay," he said in a reasonable voice. "We'll just wait until tomorrow to get together."

He started to turn away her, but she grabbed his arm. "No! I don't want to wait."

He grinned and leaned toward her lips, but a throat being cleared nearby checked him.

Mrs. Mills and one of the other women came down the hallway carrying cleaning supplies. "I was just telling Milly about your father taking a five-year-old boy with him on his honeymoon. She said she'd never heard of such a thing."

Wade chuckled. "Since they're going on a tour of amusement parks in Florida, I think they see this more as a family vacation than a honeymoon."

Mrs. Mills wasn't convinced. "Seems a shame to me. We could have taken care of that little boy for 'em."

"We who?" Linda asked. "I'm working every day."

"He goes to school in the morning. I coulda kept him in the afternoon and you at night."

Was Mrs. Mills looking forward to having a youngster in the house again? "Don't worry, you'll get plenty of opportunity to babysit when they return."

"Huh," she said. She tried to look indignant, but didn't quite succeed. "Y'all gonna stand in this hallway all day? Nan'll be vacuuming up here soon."

"No, indeed. Wade is leaving now, and I'll be gone as soon as I change clothes." Before he could move away, and knowing Mrs. Mills was watching them, Linda impishly planted a kiss in his cheek. Wade left with a spring in his step, and Linda hurried up the stairs, pausing just long enough to smirk at the housekeeper.

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Wearing shorts and a T-shirt, Linda arrived at the mobile home first and lounged on the steps of the small front porch waiting for Wade. The sun was low in the sky, and shadows from the surrounding pine forest stretched across the front lawn. Aside from the shrill songs of a nearby mockingbird, it was incredibly quiet. Almost too quiet. She wondered if Dixie

hadn't found living out here a bit frightening, especially at night.

The throaty rumble of Wade's truck was a welcome interruption. He whipped into the driveway with a spray of gravel and got out of the truck carrying a grocery bag. She pointed at the bag. "Surely you aren't hungry already."

"I'm not planning on leaving here anytime soon. Are you?"

He unlocked the door, and they went inside. The air was stale and hot. Wade immediately turned on the air conditioning. Then he pulled aside drapes on the back wall of the living room and revealed the rustic deck, furnished with padded outdoor furniture and surrounded by trees and solitude. "Why don't we wait out here until it cools off?"

He rolled the glass door open, and she stepped out into the humid air that was a bit cooler than the inside of the trailer and a lot fresher. She put her hands over her head and stretched as a giant yawn escaped her. "This place is relaxing." She flipped off her sandals and sat on a lounge chair, lifting her bare legs up and leaning against the inclined back.

Wade came onto the deck. "Hey, what happened to the hot bridesmaid who couldn't wait to get me alone?"

"This is the first chance I've had to relax in the last week. Weddings are a lot of work, you know."

He stood over her holding a can of frosty beer. Linda pointed at it and asked, "Can I have a sip?"

"Ha! I knew I'd convert you." He made her scoot over so he could sit on the edge of the lounge chair and held the can up to her mouth.

After taking several sips she deepened her voice, trying to sound like a good old boy, and said, "Nothing like a cold beer on a hot day."

He sat the can down and leaned over her. "What I like is mingling beer breaths." His mouth came down over hers, but it was a teasing kiss, his lips skimming over hers and then out to her earlobe. He caught that between his teeth and flicked it with his tongue.

The top of her shorts and the bottom of her shirt barely met, so Wade had no trouble slipping his hand under the shirt and moving it up to knead one of her breasts. She sighed in contentment until he tried to pull the shirt up. Then she said, "Hey, let's not shock the squirrels."

He murmured in her ear. "Haven't you ever had any doing-it-outdoors fantasies?"

She looked at the woods. There were a lot of trees, but also a lot of open spaces. It looked deserted, but she knew people lived up and down this road. Hunters undoubtedly came though these woods. She wouldn't be comfortable doing the nasty with the possibility of being seen by strangers.

"Sorry, big boy. Al fresco isn't my bag. What about you? What's your fantasy?"

He shrugged.

"Surely there's something you've always dreamed of doing?"

He thought a moment and then said, "Yeah, but where are we gonna get a second woman this late in the day?"

She pounded her fist into his upper arm and cried, "Oh, you!"

Wade burst into a raucous laugh as he caught her hand before she could hit him again. "Okay, I told you mine, now you tell me yours."

She grew serious. What had she dreamed of in the sex department? Doing Wade again, but she wouldn't feed his ego by telling him that. "Guess I'm not much into fantasizing."

"Oh, come on. You must have dreamed of doing it with Don Juan or Brad Pitt or somebody."

"Actually, I've always thought Tarzan was the perfect fantasy lover."

"Jeez." He made a face. "I never imagined you'd be turned on by an almost nude guy swinging through trees."

"What's wrong with almost nude? Besides, he has to be in great shape to swing through trees, he's the king of his own jungle, has a neat house, and is totally devoted to one woman. That sounds like the perfect man to me."

"Since you put it that way, I see what you mean." He stood. "Wait here, and I'll try to make your dreams come true."

She slapped her leg. "Mosquitoes are starting to bite."

"Okay, come in the living room. But wait for me there."

She followed him into the trailer and watched him disappear down the hallway, becoming more intrigued as she heard him bumbling around in the bedroom and then the bathroom. What could he be doing? She sat on the sofa, got bored with waiting, considered turning on the TV but decided that would be a mood killer.

The bathroom door burst open. A nearly nude Wade ran toward her. He stopped beside the dining table, pounded on

his bare chest with his fists and emitted an ear-shattering scream that sounded like a Swiss yodeler being castrated. Linda covered her mouth with her hand to smother her laughter. Then she realized he'd made a loincloth out of two washrags tied together with shoelaces and rolled against the sofa laughing.

He glared and walked toward her with a swaggering gait. With his chest puffed up, she had to admit he made a damn good-looking wild man. Standing over her, he planted his fists on his hips, and in a rumbling voice, he said, "Me Tarzan. Who you?"

Determined to help him play this game, she forced herself to stop laughing, raised her hands in a defensive posture, and in a high-pitched voice, said, "I'm Jane."

He grabbed her forearm and pulled her to her feet. "Tarzan take Jane to tree house."

"Oh, what will we do there?"

"Tarzan show Jane his monkey."

She had to rest her head against his chest for of moment as she fought away another burst of laughter. Finally, she said, "What does your monkey do?"

"He play hide in the hole."

That was too much. She leaned against him as laughter sapped her strength. He swept her up in his arms and held her firmly against his chest. "Woman no laugh at man."

Through her chuckles, she managed to say, "I'm sorry, Tarzan. Please don't hurt me."

"Not hurt. Take you to my jungle lair."

"Will we swing through the trees?"

"Not this time." He carried her toward the bedroom. One hand came from around her back and patted her breast.

"What this? Girl gorillas not have this."

"Girl gorillas? Yeeeck."

"Why you think they call me 'Man of the Apes?'"

He threw her onto the king-sized bed. "Show me strange bumps on chest."

Linda rose to her knees, peeled off her T-shirt and quickly disposed of her bra. She arched her back to display her breasts more prominently. "What do you think of these, jungle boy?"

"Mmmm. Look like ripe melons. I want to taste."

She shook her finger at him. "No, no. You can lick, but you cannot bite. But let me show you the rest of the package first." She took off her shorts and panties and then posed for him, with her hands on her hips and her knees apart.

The gleam in Wade's eyes as he stared at her was not part of his role-playing. Proof of that was the peak in the front of his loincloth. She pointed at it. "Is that your monkey, or are you just glad to see me naked?"

He flipped up the cloth, showing his fully extended penis. Then he grunted and said, "Monkey see, monkey do," and crawled onto the bed.

Linda turned away from him, intent on making room for them in the middle of the bed, but Wade grabbed her hips, and she felt his erection probing against her backside. "What are you doing?" she squealed.

"Monkey style."

"Just be sure the monkey finds the right hole."

He found the proper portal, but entrance wasn't easy in this position. Wade pushed down on her back until the side of Linda's face was pressing into the mattress. Then he coaxed himself inside her. Linda moaned a few times against the tight fit, and Wade held himself still, waiting for her juices to collect and ease his way. Then he started slow thrusts.

As his thrusts grew more forceful, Linda had to brace with her arms to keep her head from being pounded into the mattress. The way he held her hips kept her from responding in any way except to cry out as his body slammed into hers. Her excitement built to an agonizing level, but the release she sought would not come. She felt Wade lengthening and feared he would explode and leave her dangling over a pit of unresolved need.

"Turn me over," she called out. "Turn me over."

He had to withdraw completely to do so, and they both groaned at the separation. In her frantic efforts to turn, she kicked the side of his body, but at last he fell on top of her and buried himself fully to the spot she so desperately needed him to touch. She wrapped her legs tightly around his hips and pounded on his back with her fists, and they both screamed out their pleasure as the rigor of simultaneous climaxes hit them.

Afterward, it took Linda a long time to catch her breath. When she looked over at Wade, he had one arm slung over his eyes. "That was wonderful," she said.

"Yeah."

"I love you."

"Ditto."

For Old Time's Sake
by Sarah Winn

"Can't you at least say the words?"

He moved his arm so he could look at her. "Never doubt the love of the man who dressed in a loincloth made from washrags to please you."

She stroked his chest. "You looked magnificent in it. But I'm wondering if I can't buy some of that fake suede material and make you a better-looking one."

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Oh, God. What have I started?"

About the Author

Sarah Winn was born in Kansas. She resided for a time in both Hawaii and California but is now firmly settled in her adopted native state of North Carolina. After a thirty-year career in scientific research, she became a full-time writer of romance fiction.

To date, she has published three historical novels, one of which won the EPPIE as the best historical romance of 2003. Another published romance is a time-travel with a contemporary setting. In the midst of doing research for historicals, it dawned on her that she could take advantage of her education and working experience in the sciences by writing a science fiction romance. Of course, there's a lot of difference between food science and space travel, so she still had to research.

Sarah found that combining science fiction and romance provides unique opportunities for exploring the development of loving relationships. By creating new worlds, she could change human characteristics in ways that emphasize the adjustments needed when two people fall in love and seek to combine their lives.

She also found other fun things to do in science fiction, such as calling on her food science background to create unique food for the inhabitants of her fictional planet.

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