

The Wild Rose Press

www.thewildrosepress.com

Copyright ©2009

First published in 2010

NOTICE: This eBook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This eBook cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This eBook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.

CONTENTS

Dedication

Praise for Elaine Hopper

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

About the Author

* * * *

"So this is how the worldly Breanna behaves in her offduty hours?" Troy righted Breanna, his hands lingering on her arms.

She stepped back, quelling the desire to rub away his prints. She chafed that Sierra was getting a big head start and she was left alone with Troy. "What are you doing in my house? Daddy's not home."

"Is that how you greet your boss? Or your old flame?"

Fire smoldered in Troy's eyes as mischief danced in his voice. Knowing Sierra was way ahead, she sighed. "What do you want? More memos copied? Someone to pour you a coffee?" she said with saccharine sweetness, vowing to return to college and upgrade her career.

"I stop by periodically to make sure everything's okay. This is my last stop of the day." He didn't move to leave.

"Everything okay here?"

Was he daring her to make him leave? She scowled. "Only if you call having a crazed sister okay. Or having my boss intrude on my personal space."

He didn't blink, just advanced a step. "Is being around me really that bad? You didn't used to think so."

Before she realized his intentions, Troy backed her against the wall and crushed close. He captured her lips in a searing kiss that left her weak-kneed and breathless. Soft hands cupped her face, stilling her head. His hips pinned her to the wall so she couldn't do more than squirm against his solid frame.

How long they kissed in the hall, she didn't know. She was powerless to break the kiss—as if she'd been starved for it for years. Shirt balled in her hands, she molded her body to his.

He drew back a short distance. "You can kiss me like that and still say you hate me?"

ALWAYS A BRIDESMAID

by

Elaine Hopper

* * * *

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

ALWAYS A BRIDESMAID

COPYRIGHT (C) 2009 by Elaine Hopper

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or The Wild Rose Press except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by Kim Mendoza

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 708

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History

First Sweetheart Rose Edition, 2010

* * * *

Published in the United States of America

* * * *

Dedication

To my cousins whom I don't sometimes see for years, but whom I love very much: Debbie, Charlie, Suzie, Jerry, Jan, Marty, and all their kids, especially Daniel and his new bride Jen. I wish I could see them more often. Like the heroine in this story, I need to visit home and family much more.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Praise for Elaine Hopper

* * * *

This story earned Second Place in the Lories contest, From the Heart (FTH) RWA Chapter

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter One

"Well, well...Hell finally froze over," Troy Youngwolf drawled as he blocked Breanna's way.

An emotion that was almost relief washed over Breanna Parker, chasing away a flutter of panic as her ex-fiance's shadow mingled with hers. Tendrils of unwelcome awareness skimmed down her spine.

By sheer force, she willed her body to relax but couldn't stop the smile that painfully stretched her lips. From the moment her older sister Sierra commanded her to return home to Coconut Springs to be her maid of honor, Breanna had dreaded running into this man. Now after eight long years the moment was here, and the dread could finally end. In a perverse way, she rejoiced.

Pivoting on her heel, she came face to face with the dream of her youth who had turned into the nightmare of her adulthood. Troy Youngwolf was the only man she had ever truly loved—or truly hated.

Early evening sun glinted off his blue-black hair, no longer long and flowing about his shoulders or caught at his nape with a leather thong like his Native American ancestors, but cut in a short, neat military style. A black muscle shirt strained over his strong chest, tapering into tight black jeans that gloved even more powerful thighs. Despite his new hairstyle, danger still radiated from his tensed muscles and flared nostrils.

Had the town bad boy grown up into a career criminal? She was glad she wouldn't be sticking around long enough to find out. She had given up dangerous men when she'd left town and gone to work for the Fort Lauderdale Police Department. Still, the weeks ahead loomed like an eternity and she cursed her stupidity for returning, even for her sister's wedding.

What had Sierra gotten her into?

Determined not to reveal the depth of her dismay at seeing him again, she hoped her smile dazzled like the sun. She had a lot of practice presenting a happy front when she was dying inside, mostly because of him. She turned up the wattage of her smile before aiming her dart. "Youngwolf? I didn't think you'd still be here. Daddy and Sierra never mention you."

Troy's sharp gaze cut into her as he hooked his thumbs through the empty belt loops of his jeans. A smile tugged at the corner of his chiseled lips. "Why didn't you come home for Meg's funeral?"

Meg's name stole the breath from her lungs, paralyzing her, almost as much as his disapproving smile. She had loved Meg. She had hated her...almost as much as she had loved and hated the man who married her. Troy deserved the most blame for breaking her heart, however, much more than Meg. He had been her fiance before marrying her ex-best friend.

She gazed down at her toes, anywhere but into his eyes, unable to meet his accusing gaze. "I couldn't," she mumbled around the lump in her throat and squeezed back fresh tears stinging her eyes.

"She apologized. She missed you." Troy cupped her elbow. And what about her needs?

He escorted her from the center of the sidewalk as if to avoid the curious gazes that seemed to be boring into their backs.

Her temper threatened to escape its tightly leashed bounds but she struggled to keep it checked. She couldn't let him find out her secret. She just couldn't.

His fingers burned through the thin material of her cotton sleeve, shooting frissons of awareness up her arm. When they bit into her flesh, she shook him from her body but could not erase the haunting memories. He had no right to touch her.

Her smile dissipated as cold and out of breath, she chortled mirthlessly. "Apologies can't fix everything. Some things should be left alone and forgotten." Lord knew she'd done her best to forget how her ex-fiance and ex-best friend had destroyed her life. The last few years she had almost succeeded—until Meg died in a horrible car wreck, dredging up awful memories. Oh, she had forgiven them but forget? No...She wished.

"You're a hard-hearted woman." His cheeks tightened and his shoulders slumped ever so slightly.

She wondered if her imagination was playing tricks and she punished her tender palms with her sharp fingernails. Then she tilted her head to look directly into his black eyes. "Matter of fact," she said dryly, "I forgave Meg long ago. You, too."

"Then why all the years of silence?" He rocked back and forth on worn boot heels.

Much to her chagrin, the movement was reflected in the mirror-like glass behind him, accentuating his sexy backside. Broad shoulders, lean hips, and rippling strength mocked her in that reflection. Not even Tim, her ex-boyfriend, the very macho FLPD lieutenant was built this well, and he was buff.

She wished Troy Youngwolf was a stranger. Unfortunately, his familiar woodsy scent filled her nostrils and his words pounded inside her head. "Just because I've forgiven you doesn't mean I've forgotten. You're a stranger. I don't know the man you've become." The man she had loved with every molecule of her heart and soul died the same night as their baby. Still, the anguish pooling in Troy's eyes tugged at her heart. Shadows flickered over the gold flecks that had once lit them with mischief.

"If it counts for anything, I'm sorry, Bree. Talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about." Talking couldn't bring back their baby. Talking couldn't change the fact he had abandoned her when she'd needed him most. Talking couldn't fix anything. She was clueless how she could spend even a week in town, much less a month, with him breathing down her neck and not go crazy.

"I can only say I'm sorry so many times." Frustration warbled in his voice. With that he spun on his heel and strode off, his footsteps hammering the sun-baked asphalt.

She couldn't help watching him walk away from her anymore than she could stop her head from spinning at the unfortunate meeting.

On autopilot, Troy ended up in his office, muttering under his breath about the woman who still haunted his dreams.

What had he done to tick off the spirits lately? He'd done a lot to make amends for breaking Bree's heart, not that she'd ever believe it.

"What're you doing here, Sheriff? There a problem?" Patsy Kelly, one of Coconut Spring's deputies, eyed him as she poured a mug of steaming hot coffee.

Reed thin, barely topping five feet tall, and pixyish with a cropped, flaming orange mop-top, his deputy reminded him of a hyperactive carrot. Dark freckles dusted most of her face and arms. She was so slight of build criminals often made the mistake of thinking she was weak. She was anything but.

Her lips quirked into a crooked grin. "You look like someone dropped a piano on you. Get called out in the middle of the night again last night?"

"Yeah. I mean no. Nothing's wrong." There was no problem Kelly or any of the rest of his staff needed to worry about. Behind him, the door slammed rattling the walls and causing one of his certificates to crash to the floor.

He swore under his breath, picked up the cracked frame and shoved it in his desk drawer for repair later. Flopping into his big leather chair, he leaned back, kicked up his feet on the desk, and linked his hands behind his head. A picture of his daughter and deceased wife caught his attention so he leaned forward to scoop it up.

Almost in a trance, he stared for a long time at the picture of happier days. The woman in the picture should have been Breanna. But then he wouldn't have Xan and he would never wish that. "We caused one helluva mess, didn't we? You, me, and Bree." Would Meg still be alive if events had played out

differently? Would Breanna be the one with his ancestors now if he'd married her as planned?

He didn't like the turn of his thoughts and scowled. He was just about to swear aloud when Patsy entered his sanctuary without invitation and pushed a mug of steaming black coffee at him.

"Why so pensive? You're not normally broody." Patsy perched on his desk and stared him straight in the eye.

How much, if anything, should he reveal? He set the picture on his desk. Patsy had moved to town after the Breanna episode and didn't know about their romantic past. At least not from him.

He decided not to bring his problems into the office even should the town's gossip mill grind out the dirt. Surely Breanna would hightail it out of town soon as she could. That was her normal pattern. Then the gossips would die down again.

Yet his breath hitched in his throat. When he could spit out the words without choking on them, he mumbled, "Just ran into an old acquaintance is all." He picked up the football standing on his desk and tossed it aimlessly into the air several times. A keepsake of his high-school days. Another damned reminder of Bree.

This time he let himself swear under his breath. Everything reminded him of Bree, Why hadn't her family warned him she'd be swooping into town? Of course, she'd come home for her own sister's wedding. The very wedding that was turning his quiet, no-problem little town into a three-ring circus.

Patsy smirked. "Would that be of the female or male variety?"

He scowled at the nosy officer and punched the pigskin. "Does it have to have gender?"

Merriment danced in Patsy's hazel eyes and she nodded, even as she stared at the bouncing football. "Female. I thought so. It's past time you got yourself another wife and settle down for your little girl's sake. She needs a mama. And you need someone for company in that big old bed of yours to keep you from getting so grumpy."

His scowl deepened as his fingers drummed the arms of his chair. He could figure out for himself Xan needed a mother. He would decide if and when he wanted someone to share his bed. He could also figure out that Breanna Parker was the last person who would apply for the job. "You make a damn fine deputy. But butt out of my personal life."

The crinkly lines around Patsy's eyes smoothed and she stood and waltzed to the door. She waved her hands in the air as she spoke. "I can see I hit a nerve. I'm here if you wanna spill your guts. It helps sometimes."

He wasn't comfortable discussing his feelings. He'd dealt with Bree's desertion. But why did she look at him with so much hate? The mystery was one he didn't want to ponder but couldn't seem to stop thinking about. "Thanks."

A few minutes later, Patsy barged into his office, breathless, tugging her hat onto her head. "Got problems downtown. A couple of Sierra's wedding guests are loaded and tearing up Riley's. I may need backup and Biff's on another call."

Swearing loudly, he shoved his chair away from his desk. Rising, he gathered himself to his full height. He raked his fingers through his hair and mumbled, "Why can't Sierra elope?" Why couldn't either of the Parker women do things easily? Both were a pain in his backside. He shrugged into his holster, checked his pistol and put on the safety. In four long strides, he was across his office, muttering. "Let's break it up."

"Yes, sir!" Glee echoed in Patsy's gravelly contralto. She glowed and her eyes flashed fire.

He suspected she enjoyed all the excitement. She should've been a big city cop. He could easily envision her on one of those cop TV shows hamming it up.

Big city... He wondered what Bree had been doing down in Ft. Lauderdale all these years. Knowing Breanna as he did, she hadn't pined away alone. Seeing how gorgeous she had grown up to be, he didn't doubt there would be a flock of men after her. Was it possible for a beautiful woman to be alone in a place like Ft. Lauderdale?

He on the other hand longed for a peaceful vacation. He would need it the second Sierra's wedding shenanigans ended. His aunt and uncle kept inviting him and Xan for a visit to New Mexico. It was about time Xan became acquainted with her family and her heritage.

Coconut Springs wasn't even a speck on the map compared to Ft. Lauderdale. In less than five minutes they witnessed two men diving through Riley's front bay window and the shower of glass that followed.

Patsy jumped out of the cruiser before it finished rolling to a stop. She ran over to the troublemakers, flashed her badge and yelled, "Break it up."

Troy followed, shaking his head as he examined the men to make sure they hadn't killed one another. These shenanigans were going to stop. Sierra and her friends didn't run his town. When Rayford, the bar's proprietor, stepped over a chunk of his wall, Troy turned to look at him.

"You'll be paying for all the damage you caused here tonight." Rayford shook a fist in the air. His face was puffy and red around the snowy white bandage stretching across his recently broken nose. Thin white hair stood out in clumps about his skull, as if he'd been pulling it out in frustration. "You set foot in my place again, I'll press charges and have the sheriff here lock you up."

Troy nodded to Patsy. Wasn't it bad enough that Sierra's wedding had lured Breanna back? He swallowed the sigh tickling his chest. "Read them their rights. Then register them in the station *hotel*." Even though Rayford wasn't pressing charges they had broken at least a couple laws.

Back at the station Patsy booked the prisoners.

"...we're staying at the Parker Ranch," one of the prisoners said.

War drums pounded in Troy's aching forehead. It figured. Why did Breanna's sister have to be a clown? The damned things gave him nightmares.

"I'll take it from here." Anxious to end this torture, he stabbed Sierra's number into the phone.

In a chipper voice, Breanna answered, "Parker Ranch."

His heart raced and he cursed. Is this how it was going to be? He'd run into Bree every time he turned around? The only thing that made him smile was knowing she wouldn't like it any better than he.

"Put Sierra on," When his voice came out gruffer than he'd intended, he winced. At this rate, the woman would know she was getting to him.

Background noise threatened to drown out her words. He thought he heard a modem beep as if she was signing online. Carrie Underwood's country twang sang in the background, and he recognized it as one of the new songs that Patsy had been playing at her desk over and over. "She's in bed with a migraine. I'll tell her to give you a ring tomorrow," Bree said coldly.

Chills coursed through him but he tamped them down.
"I'm sorry she's got a headache but tell her it's official police business. This can't wait."

"Police?" Disbelief wavered in Breanna's voice. "You?"

He suppressed a growl and massaged the back of his neck. He tried to keep his voice steady. "I'm Sheriff." Breanna's laughter tinkled in his ears.

"I really did die and go to hell."

Insulted, he grunted. "No one told you?"

The music ended and there was a long silence. Finally, she said, "My family knows better."

Her words were said so lowly he almost didn't catch them. His stomach clenched. Had he really hurt her that badly? As badly as he was hurting?

"I just arrested two of her houseguests. Tell her to come down first thing in the morning so we can release them into her custody." His voice grated on his own ears and he wondered what it sounded like to her. He paced the floor in front of the snoring prisoners and glanced at his watch. Ten 'til midnight.

"Sure thing, Sheriff." The phone connection died.

He glared at the silent instrument still in his hand. She hadn't even wished him a good night. Sheriff? Not even Troy or Youngwolf? Muttering under his breath, he slammed it down. If Bree's coldness was any indication what life with her would be like, he'd been lucky to miss it. If only he truly felt that way, he could get on with his life and stop catching his breath every time the phone rang.

"Trouble in paradise?" Patsy said in a singsong voice, her brow arching, faux innocence shining from too-wide eyes.

He wasn't fooled. Of course she'd been listening despite pretending to be doing paperwork and minding her own business. Too exhausted to call her on it or deal with anything else, he muttered, "Tell Biff not to release those two to anyone before I get in tomorrow." He had a couple things to say to Sierra Parker.

"I'm glad I'm not Sierra," Patsy said, avoiding eye contact.

One of the prisoners opened his eyes, blew him a kiss and winked. "Goodnight, Sheriff Dearest. Sweet dreams."

"Give the lady any trouble and you'll deal with me," he growled, eager to escape the troublemakers. Patsy's chuckles followed him into the muggy night where a full moon glistened overhead. What a damn waste that full moon was as

he had no one to share it with. Breanna Parker sure wasn't reapplying for the job. He cursed himself and kicked at a big rock in his path, sending it skittering at his car.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Two

"The Sheriff summoned me. Where are they?" Sierra Parker ordered as she barged into the police station early the next morning. Her tee-shirt, a sloppy grey sleeveless thing, hung half off one shoulder, and her sports bra strap boldly stood out. Unlike her sister, she wore her hair short and sassy.

"The prisoners?" Patsy's voice almost crumbled to dust it was so dry.

Breanna almost trampled her sister when Sierra stopped dead in front of her to glare at the deputy then planted both hands on her lean blue-jeaned hips. Her full lips quivered between mirth and anger. Sparks of sunlight glinted off the bronze hair that fell to the curve of her waist as she pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head.

Troy's caffeine buzz wasn't totally in effect yet. He pretended not to notice Breanna, even though his pulse throbbed and his blood simmered. Dead men didn't have these kinds of reactions, but one particular part of his anatomy didn't get the message. He turned down the picture of Meg on his desk then busied himself with paperwork, squared his shoulders and sat tall in his chair, resisting the urge to straighten his shirt. Then a shadow fell over him.

"I never pegged you for the law enforcement type. I always thought you'd wind up on the other side."

Breanna's honeyed tones held a very large dose of saccharine. She'd always been a flirt but he didn't recall her

being cynical. He wondered again that the pain had festered so much it turned her this bitter. Annoyed by her low opinion, he wasn't about to acknowledge her statement. Then his glance slid up, glided along her length, from her sexy polished toenails, to the figure-hugging blue-jeans. Tight, worn blue jeans should be outlawed, especially on dangerously erotic curves like Breanna's.

"Ahem," she cleared her throat, folding arms across her chest.

If she was trying to hide her breasts, she failed miserably. All she succeeded in doing was pushing them higher, closer together and accentuating the deep cleavage. She was a field of landmines. Every move she made caused him discomfort in one form or another, and he squirmed in his chair.

He wheeled to the desk to hide his too-obvious discomfort from her view, trying his darnedest to ignore those luscious breasts. He didn't want her to see what she still did to him when she so obviously detested him. It was a struggle, but he forced his mind back to the subject.

Then his gaze dropped to her bare ring finger. What did it mean? Had she never married...or had she divorced? For all he knew, she had a tribe of children or a warrant for her arrest. He vowed to investigate her activities during the past eight years. In the next second, he was angry at himself for having any interest in this woman who obviously didn't reciprocate the feeling.

"It's an honest living and supports my family sufficiently. How do you make yours?" When pain pooled around her irises at the mention of supporting his family, he wanted to kick

himself. As hurt and angry as he was, he didn't want to inflict pain. He wondered that he could, and the significance of that. Perhaps he wasn't dead to her. Angry at himself he filed away the thought for later consumption. For now, he needed to be on red alert and on his guard for as long as she was here.

One side of her lips tugged upward as she explored his office, trailed her fingers across his walls then his desk. "Actually, we're *comprades*. I'm in law enforcement myself."

Caught off guard, he tilted his head to the side and regarded her with surprise. He let the thought marinade for several moments, imagining her in a blue uniform, tackling criminals. Quite an intriguing picture. "So Breanna Parker's a cop, too? I rather pegged you for a model or a beach bunny down in Ft. Lauderdale." He stuck his hands under the table, as the traitors longed to reach for her and drag her into his arms. He marveled how the two of them used to have everything so figured out. Now, they could barely speak a civil word.

Her shoulders squared and she thrust out her chin. "I work for the FLPD."

The irony didn't skip him. They'd both wound up on the same side, some place he was sure she no longer wished to be.

Before he realized what she was up to, she perched on his desk and turned up the photograph. She froze, stared at it in mid air for several antagonizing moments then looked from the picture to him and back.

Sucker-punched, he snatched the photograph from her hands and secured it inside his desk. Why hadn't he done that to begin with?

Without moving her lips, and without a trace of emotion, Breanna said stiffly, "Your daughter's beautiful. She doesn't look a thing like Meg. She has your coloring. How old is she? Seven?" Breanna pushed off his desk with her foot and waltzed away.

A knot formed in his stomach. Meg had been dead and buried for four years, and Xan's birth had been eight years before, so why was Breanna still so touchy?

"She'll be eight next month. She looks like my mother when she was a girl. Her name's Alexandra. We call her Xan." Love and pride made his voice strong. No matter the circumstance of her birth, or the pain it had caused so many, he adored his child. He could not, would not, apologize for her existence as his father had done.

Breanna digested this piece of news like she hadn't known even that much. She twisted a strand of bronzed hair around a finger and her eyes glazed over, as if she peered into the past. "Meg always loved the name Alexandra." *Me too*, he thought he heard her add under her breath but he couldn't be sure.

As if she'd forgotten his presence, she waxed on, "We used to name all our dolls Alexandra when we were little."

His heart lurched. He wanted to punch something. No matter what he did or said, he hurt this woman. She sounded more nostalgic and sad by his wife's passing than he ever had. So she wasn't as impervious to Megan as she pretended.

Just how immune was she to him? Eight years was a long time so he wondered that the pain still seemed so raw. There had to be something else sticking in her craw, but he had no clue what it might be.

Commotion broke out as Patsy led the prisoners out of confinement.

Sighing, he hitched up his pants legs and sauntered over to his charges. "Silence! This isn't a big top." He faced off against Sierra, treating her to his sternest look.

Without warning as if he'd conjured her up, his family waltzed into the office and Xan barreled into him, his mother close behind. Her dark raven head hit him in his chest. "Daddy! Gramma Sookie and I came to take you out to brunch."

His daughter was dressed in a riding outfit, her tiny feet in cowboy boots. Her long blue black hair, so like his, was braided neatly behind her. As he had told Breanna only moments before, she was a tiny replica of his mother. At least for Bree's sake, she didn't resemble Meg. That should ameliorate some of the pain.

His mother, Sookie Youngwolf, watched the scene covertly, her expression unfathomable. She looked youthful for her fifty something years, only a few strands of silver piercing her cloud of long black hair. Someone who didn't know her would take her for a thirty-five-year-old and Xan's mother.

He swung the child up into his arms. Love exploded through his heart when she fiercely hugged him and laid her cheek against his. He couldn't resist dropping a kiss on the top of her head and showing the world how much she meant

to him. "Little Wolf," he called the girl by her pet name, "I want you to meet someone. Ma, remember Breanna Parker?"

But when he turned to where Breanna had been standing, she was gone. Frowning, he spun in time to see the door slam on her backside, only dust mites floating in the air.

Sookie arched her brows in the same direction, but didn't utter a word.

His mother had always held her tongue about the Breanna-Meg situation, but he'd sensed her disapproval and disappointment in his choice of wife and why he'd made it. Not that she wasn't a doting grandmother to Xan. She was the best and if not for her, he couldn't have kept both his job and his child, not to mention his sanity.

Musing over Breanna's sudden flight, he scratched his chin. Had she high-tailed it out because of his daughter? Did she hold a grudge against his innocent child? It wasn't as if Xan looked like Meg so what was her problem?

Pain squeezed Breanna's chest so hard she couldn't breathe. Her lungs were so tight she thought they'd explode. She'd never seen Troy's little girl and she hadn't been prepared to do so now. Seeing the girl, so much like her sire, reminded her of the child she'd lost. Troy's baby—a child he never knew existed. Would their child have looked like her or its father? Would it have looked like its sister?

She had been going to tell him of her pregnancy when he interrupted to tell her he eloped with her best friend who was pregnant with his child. The betrayal gutted her. The only comfort she took in the entire situation was being spared the embarrassment and pity of voicing her revelation.

So her sacred secret remained sacrosanct. She blamed herself and Troy for the miscarriage—Troy for upsetting her so, and herself for allowing him to. The doctor attempted to alleviate her guilt by assuring her that stress couldn't cause spontaneous abortion, but she knew deep in her heart that emotional upset over Troy was the cause.

After that, she couldn't stay in town witnessing Troy playing the loving father and doting husband to her ex-best friend. She desperately needed his love and support during her grief. Yet the thing she needed most was denied her—not only because he belonged to Meg, but because he obviously hadn't wanted her or cared for her as he'd led her to believe.

She thought that enough time had gone by that she could deal with the pain, that it was shelved away. Judging by her knee jerk reaction to the sight of the smallest Youngwolf, there might never be enough time to get over this kind of pain.

Daughter...

She'd been three months into her pregnancy when she'd miscarried, too soon to know whether the baby was a boy or girl. Luckily, no one except Coconut Springs' doctor, his nurse, and her family, knew she was pregnant and they were sworn to secrecy.

How would she survive weeks in town with Youngwolf and his little girl? The uncertainty of never knowing when she'd run into the child, or how she'd react, would make her a nervous wreck. She'd not handled it well this time, fleeing without a word. But tears burned the backs of her eyes and

she was choked up and couldn't afford to let anyone see her in such a state, especially not Troy or his mother.

"Get in the car!" Sierra scowled as she coasted alongside Breanna in her Mercedes.

Breanna eyed her sister, noted the angry gleam in her eyes, and sighed. That look told Breanna a lecture was on the way and she wasn't in the mood. If not for her sister she wouldn't be in this position so she was the last person who should chastise her. Well, after Troy.

Sierra's friend hopped out of the vehicle the moment it stopped and held the door wide as she reluctantly climbed in and took the back seat with his cohort.

"My wedding's less than a month away, and I need your help. Instead, I'm chasing you around and saving you from making a fool of yourself over Youngwolf. What's going on, Bree? Is there something I should know? You two striking sparks again?" Sierra shot her a knowing glance.

Breanna snorted and folded her arms across her chest. "After everything that happened? Hardly."

"Well, you know if you keep running off like that, people might think you've still got it bad for him. Rumors'll fly." Scowling, Sierra gave the wheel a hard jerk left.

"Who cares what people think? I'm only here for your wedding, and then I'm gone." Breanna gazed out the window at the strangely familiar, yet half-forgotten town. Amazing how much she'd pushed to the back of her mind. Simultaneously, she found it familiar, yet dreamlike.

The Methodist Church still stood tall and proud but sported a shiny new steeple. Riley's had managed to stay the same

except for a boarded-up window. The old gazebo still stood in the middle of Town Centre near the old courthouse. But the old library was now a fitness spa, and a Starbucks Coffee had taken over the frozen yogurt parlor. The old mall was now the new library. It stood three stories high and was attached to the new middle school. Woozy, she felt as if she'd stepped out of a time machine.

"Okay, so Troy will think you've still got the hots for him." Sierra clicked her tongue. "True or not, you don't want him believing that, do you?"

"No." Pouting, Breanna reminded herself and her sister, "But he wouldn't care anyway." It wasn't as if she'd been in deep hiding. She was a member of the high school's Facebook group. Easy enough to send a message through that if he'd been concerned or even just curious about her.

"You might be surprised." A dreamy, romantic look crept into Sierra's amber eyes.

"What do you know? You're about to get married so you think everybody's in love and will live happily ever after." Her sister was positively sickening sweet and she couldn't wait to get away. Breanna expelled a long, pent-up breath when the Mercedes pulled into their driveway so she could escape the inquisition and unsolicited sisterly advice. Although she'd missed being close to her sister in many ways, she'd grown to appreciate her independence and her own apartment. Living back on the ranch was like living in a fish bowl.

Needing solitude, Breanna escaped to her room left untouched since her self-imposed exile. Frilly peach curtains danced in the spring breeze. A quilted bedspread with layers

of peach and white ruffles adorned her bed. Pin ups of Brad Pitt, The Back Street Boys, and Orlando Bloom graced her walls. Florida U and Florida Hurricanes bumper stickers clung to her vanity mirror. Partially used perfume bottles and her collection of cat figurines dotted the vanity top. The place was a shrine to her memory. Of course, the ranch house was large, with five other guest bedrooms so they didn't need her room.

Deep sighs attacked her and she stared long and hard at Orlando, as she drowned in her memories. She'd talked for hours to Troy on that phone that now sat abandoned on the nightstand. She'd taken the fateful pregnancy test in this room.

Something smacked the side of the house and startled, she spun. She gulped and her hand flew to her throat. What the...? Then she remembered that sound and, relieved, slumped against the wall. The old trellis. How had she forgotten?

Many nights she'd sneaked out that window and down the trellis for clandestine meetings with Troy. She couldn't help herself. Needing to take a look, she leaned out her window to see that trellis now wildly overgrown with creeping myrtle. And to her chagrin, she vividly recalled the last time she'd climbed down and nearly killed herself when she'd fallen and landed on her backside.

Other memories invaded. All the nights in Troy's arms, nights she'd lost her mind, heart, and soul. Nights she thought then were the most fantastic in the history of mankind.

Snorts burst from her lips and she lowered herself to the window seat where she'd spent many hours day dreaming. She drew her knees to her chest and held them close as she rocked back and forth. The past sideswiped her and the mists of time swirled around her. Time had stood still when she'd been in Troy's arms. She'd loved him so very much there'd been no thoughts to consequences and no fear of the future—she'd been sure their future together was secure.

"I love you, babe, forever and ever," Troy had muttered in her ear as he sucked her lobe into his mouth and his hands reverently worshipped her.

She'd never felt so womanly, so intensely aware of her femininity. Squirming, her heart swelling, she yearned to be with him forever. There'd been no doubts, no fears, no premonitions of the heartbreak to come.

Breanna ran her hands over his rippling muscles, and curled her fingers around his arms. "Prove it," she huskily murmured against his lips, unable to think of anything else except him...and them.

With a roguish grin, he'd ignited a raging inferno.

"Anything you want is yours. Your wish is my command."

She'd giggled at the corniness, but quickly, she'd sobered, losing herself in the passion. "My only wish is to be with you forever."

"You have it. I'm all yours," he'd promised and sealed it with a kiss, drinking deeply of her lips.

She'd believed him, had never once doubted him, and she'd given herself to him and their souls united—so she'd naively thought.

Pounding on her door yanked her into the present and she jolted.

"Baby girl, can your old man come in?"

"It's unlocked," she called out, her arms squeezing her knees tighter. The past faded, and the wedding gazebo being constructed came back into focus. Workmen banged their hammers and gardeners planted trees to transform the yard into a fantasy wedding, as she watched with detachment. In a couple weeks when they strung twinkle lights and added magnolias the place would be breathtaking. As breath-taking as this one promised to be, weddings left a bad taste in her mouth, and she couldn't wait for this one to be over so she could get back to the real world. "The garden's going to be beautiful."

"Nothing's too good for my girls." Jack lowered himself beside her and followed her gaze. "I always thought you'd beat Sierra down that aisle, with all her talk of wantin' to stay single and the evils of marriage."

Breanna sighed and massaged her aching neck. Now she was the one who thought marriage evil. "You know she loves kids. How else could she put up with birthday parties full of them, yelling and screaming?" Then she grew more pensive. "Guess I'm just not meant to have marriage or babies. Tim turned out to be somebody else's soul mate, and..." Although she'd gotten Tim's name out without a glitch, she couldn't say Troy's. The word couldn't get past the giant knot suddenly clogging her throat. Rapidly she blinked back the tears threatening to spill then veiled her gaze from her old man.

"So did the sheriff," her father finished for her, veins popping out on his beefy throat and arms. When he stroked her hair, his navy tattoos bulged.

She shook her head and swallowed hard. "He's ancient history, Daddy. I don't want to talk about him."

"Not so ancient if he still makes you crazy. Sierra told me what happened today." Jack rubbed the shiny spot on his head. "You can't run and hide forever."

"Why not?" She hugged her teddy bear of a dad and let him comfort her. How she'd missed him.

"He's widowed now. Meg's been gone for almost five years. And from what your sister told me, the sparks are flying hotter than ever between the two of you."

Breanna jerked away, shocked her own father would dare make such a suggestion or that her own sister would tattle so. "He betrayed me! He abandoned me when I needed him most!"

Compassion and sternness battled in the old man's steely grey gaze. "He didn't know about your baby. He..."

Breanna jumped to her feet and paced the floor, wringing her hands in front of her. "How was I supposed to tell the man who was married, that I was pregnant with his child? Or that I lost the baby? What good would it have done by then? You think he would have left them for me? You think I still even wanted him after what he did? He was my fiance and he got my best friend pregnant and eloped with her."

Jack pursed his lips and drew his heavy brows together for awhile before speaking. Then in measured tones, he finally said, "You were both in a helluva position back then. But

things are different now. Meg's gone. You've had time to heal and grow up."

Was he implying she was acting immaturely? She shook with fury and her fists clenched. "He should never have put us in that position! He swore he loved me. But he couldn't have loved me very much, could he? Or else..." Unable to go on, the lump in her throat about to choke her, she flopped on her bed and stared at the ceiling, her arms so tightly crossed over her chest she struggled for breath.

Her father cleared his throat as if he wanted to say something, but silence stretched out.

"He thought I should understand and forgive him because he was drunk. He blamed me that he drank too much because we'd just had a big fight! He said he didn't know what he was doing when he got Meg pregnant." Her blood boiled and she dug her fingernails into her palms. "Getting drunk is no excuse! He shouldn't have drunk himself into a stupor."

"He's human like the rest of us, baby girl. Think about that. A lot of years have come and gone. It's time to forgive and forget." He rose and rolled his shoulders one at a time.

Seething, she glared at her dad. How dare he sound as if he was on the enemy's side. "You honestly think I should forgive him and take him back?" Mind boggling! She'd never understand men as long as she lived, including her own dad.

"Only if you still love him." Jack ambled to the door.

She tried to say, "No way!" but the words stuck in her throat. The truth was, Troy still spiked her blood pressure and she still went weak-kneed in his presence. She'd never erased

him from her mind much less her heart, even when she'd considered marriage to Tim.

"Besides," she said, "As you stated, Meg died over four years ago. He's not exactly beaten down my door since."

"Maybe he didn't know where you were."

She snorted at her father's naivete and shook her head. "He's a sheriff, Daddy, with all the tracking powers of a law enforcement office at his disposal. Working in another police department, I've not exactly been in deep hiding. He could've found me like that if he'd wanted to." She snapped her fingers.

New hurt heaped upon the old. Policeman or not, the Internet provided everyone with a way to track people easily. All he'd needed was charge \$9.95 for a super spy to find her. She wondered if she'd put herself on Facebook, in the high school group of all places, in the hopes he'd find her? Or at least drool over her? Miss what he'd given up? Wasn't everybody on Facebook nowadays? She knew every time someone from the old crowd sneezed.

"Well, you just chew on what I said for a spell. Your friends Tim and Jana just arrived, so why don't you make them welcome. Your other friend Leann called to say the baby's sick so she doesn't know if she'll make it. But she'll try to get here in time for the wedding, even if her husband has to stay home with the baby."

Elation at having her friends here for support warred with her concern for baby Abigail and Leann. "Oh no! What's wrong with the baby?"

"Leann said not to worry. There's a little stomach virus going around, but she doesn't want to infect all of the wedding guests or put Jana in jeopardy."

Relief flooded her that her goddaughter wasn't deathly ill, and she permitted the joy to flow into her heart that Tim and his wife were here. At least, she'd have a couple allies. "I can't wait to see Timmy. Where is he?"

Her father slid a sly glance at her. "Is this the same Tim you were trying to get to marry you a couple years ago? The one who's about to be a daddy?"

She sensed a trap, stood taller and squared her shoulders. Still she fell several inches shorter than her 6'4" father. "Tim and I are just good friends."

"As I recall, you had your sights set pretty high on him."

Breanna rolled onto her side and propped herself up on her elbow to get a better look at her dad. "I won't lie to you. Tim would've been a good catch. I wanted marriage and babies, but I never really loved him. And he never took me seriously as anything but a second baseman and a friend."

"So you're not bothered he got another woman pregnant and married her instead?" Her father blocked the doorway with his body and his gaze pierced her.

She should have seen this coming, and she cringed. She dug her elbow deeper into the mattress and wished she could crawl inside. "Like I said, we weren't in love. We were never engaged. And I was never pregnant with his baby. It's an entirely different situation. I was one of their bridesmaids and I'll be a godmother to their baby. He's the big brother I never had. Does that sound like I hold any grudges?"

"But you won't forgive the sheriff?"

She didn't like the sound of that. His statement made her sound unchristian, even inhuman. Her nerves jumping, she sat up and pushed off the bed then briskly rubbed her arms. "I'm not going through this again. You know what Youngwolf did and what happened. Because of him I lost my baby, and I might not be able to have any more."

The party mood deserted her but she pushed past her father to seek out her friends. They'd also befriended Sierra during her visits to Ft. Lauderdale and so her sister had invited the gang to her wedding.

Glowing with maternal health and joy, Jana was her usual pink and golden self. She hugged Breanna as if she'd never let go. After several moments, she finally let go, stepped back and let her gaze roam awestruck over the yard "Wow! I love your ranch. If this were my home, I wouldn't have left it for the big city."

As if Breanna were his little sister like she'd said, Tim swept her into his embrace. "Not too shabby, Parker. You got any horses on this ranch?"

Laughter bubbling up on her lips, Breanna grinned.
"What's a ranch without horses? You want to go for a ride?"

Jana pouted and patted her very swollen stomach. "I can't right now. You take Tim out. I need to rest after that long ride. I tire out easily of late."

Rolling his eyes, Tim said, "Spare me. Now you'll try to tell me you're too worn out to go to the bridal shower?"

Glee bubbled up in Jana's voice and was matched by the glint in her eyes. "Of course not. I wouldn't miss that for the world. That's why I have to catch my second wind."

Breanna clucked her tongue, enjoying this marital exchange. "We'll make sure she gets plenty of rest first and after."

Tim tossed her a mock glare. "Just don't have any men jump out of cakes at the shower. If you need police protection, I'm available."

"Of course not, darling," Jana drawled. "I think there's a bachelor party for Sierra's fiance. You go to that and make sure you don't get too rowdy. We'll be just fine."

Tim's gaze pierced Breanna and he leaned over to stare in her face. "Knowing Breanna, I imagine your party is the place to be."

Breanna bit her tongue, and then qualified her promise, "We won't have any naked men jump out of the cake. We won't corrupt your wife so stop worrying."

Jana guffawed. "Like I'm so innocent and sheltered and never saw the seedier side of life. I can handle a little bachelorette party."

"Guess she told you." Breanna needed a night out with the girls and she wanted to send her sister into marriage with a bang. She didn't want Tim to get jealous and protective of his bride and ruin their fun. Like he was innocent. She knew so much better.

Breanna showed Jana to their rooms and then shoved her friend toward the stables.

As much fun as she anticipated, she was always going to bridal showers and weddings for everyone else. She'd been a bridesmaid first for Leann, then Jana, then a few other friends. Ironic that this one was Sierra's. This fiance of hers must be something extra special. Breanna couldn't wait to meet him and was miffed that she hadn't yet. She was beginning to wonder if the man was avoiding her or if there was something wrong with him her sister wanted to hide.

"Is the daddy-to-be ready?" Breanna asked as they rode companionably side by side as she showed off her ranch. The gently rolling hills were dotted with palm trees and lakes, and long stretches of grassy meadows. Cows roamed a long stretch of range.

"Ready as can be. Why didn't you ever bring me up here when we dated? Didn't you want your family to meet me?"

Breanna leaned forward and stroked her horse's velvety neck. She had to bite back a laugh and no way would she admit even now, especially now, that she hadn't wanted to run into Youngwolf. At least not out loud and not to Tim who would stick his nose where it didn't belong. "You weren't ready to meet them. Any mention of marriage that I made, and you ran the other direction."

Tim had the grace to blush. "Guess I wasn't ready for marriage then."

"Guess you weren't ready for marriage to me."

"Sorry, Bree, no offence. I just didn't love you in that way."

Troy's face flashed in her mind and she shoved it away. But the image kept coming back, superimposing itself across

her path. "None taken. Much as I thought I was ready, I don't think I truly was either. Maybe I never will be."

"I'm sure the right guy's out there. You're gorgeous and fun, and if all else fails, it looks like you're rich if this ranch is anything to go by." Tim's gaze roamed the grounds. "Maybe if you'd told me how wealthy your daddy is..."

Breanna would have laughed uproariously at Tim's joke if not for the fact he'd mentioned the right guy. Her knight in shining armor had ridden off into the sunset with a different maid in waiting and left her to deal with the dragons. At least, she couldn't accuse the sheriff of marrying her for her family fortune. Somehow, she didn't take comfort in the fact that Youngwolf wasn't a gold digger.

"Maybe if I could've bought your way into the major leagues, you'd have wanted to marry me." A dry chuckle escaped her lips after all. "But then, I don't want a man my daddy has to buy for me. Call me funny that way but I'm not that desperate yet."

Sun stars glinted off something shiny back at the ranch. Breanna squinted, wondering what it was. When she recognized the sheriff's car, her stomach clenched at the thought of facing him. Not wishing to see him, she stopped.

"Something wrong?" Tim pulled in his reins and turned his horse so that he faced her.

She couldn't help glaring at the burst of light, wishing Troy away. She wanted him to stop torturing her and disappear. Was he getting his kicks out of sticking his face in hers every other hour? "It's just the sheriff. I wonder what he wants now."

"Legal problems?" Tim's horse snorted, pranced, and chomped on its bit. He wrapped the reins more tightly around his hands to control the antsy animal.

She wasn't about to tell one ex about the other. Hopefully, the sheriff would leave before they returned so Troy and Tim would never meet. "Something like that."

But the sheriff didn't leave. As if he awaited her, Troy sat perched on the corral railing near the barn. His black gaze burned into Tim and the men stared as if sizing up the other.

His "Hi Breanna," sounded deceptively mild.

"Hi." She didn't offer to introduce the men. Instead, she pretended to pay the sheriff no heed although she watched him through her peripheral vision as he assessed the blond cop.

Tim dismounted, tied his mount to the railing and then his hands spanned her waist as he lifted her off the horse. Then he let his hand rest companionably on her shoulder.

Troy's nostrils flared.

A reaction that wasn't lost on her, but she didn't feel any sorrier for him than he'd felt for her when he married her best friend. Besides, he had no reason to be jealous on any level.

"Are you going to introduce me to your friend?" Troy leapt lithely off the fence and held his hand out in greeting to Tim.

She shrugged as she led her horse Skylah to her stall and started unbridling her. "No."

Tim thrust out his hand, took the sheriff's and pumped it hard. "Tim Harper, Breanna's friend."

"Troy Youngwolf."

"He's the sheriff around these parts." Breanna hung up the bridle and then began unbridling Spock, the horse Tim had been riding, pointedly ignoring the intruder.

"And an old family friend," Troy added.

"How old?" Tim asked.

Tim's question annoyed her. A big sister was more than enough. Now she wished he'd stop acting like her big brother. His over protectiveness toward her wasn't fair to Jana, and she didn't want any trouble with her friend.

"Very old," Troy added.

"We went to high school together." Bristling at the sheriff's hint of possessiveness, that's all Breanna cared to admit. She didn't want her friends to know her past with this man or her other, more sacred, secret. She'd not even divulged it to Leann, her best friend since Meg. The more people who knew, the greater the possibility they would let slip to Troy and that thought was untenable. Besides, she couldn't deal with their pity, couldn't stand to talk about it and she'd done a good job of forgetting about it—until now.

"Breanna never talks about her hometown or family. Not even to me," Tim said.

She groaned inwardly at Tim's insinuation of their closeness. Just as she didn't want her friends to know about her past, she didn't want Troy to know about her present. "It's none of your business, that's why," she snapped, wishing she could wiggle her nose and make all this go away.

"Well, you'd think as well as we know each other, you'd trust me by now," Tim murmured.

Fuming at the note of pathos in his voice, she spun, and glared up at her friend. She mouthed, "Not now." But he had the devilish glint in his eyes she knew meant trouble. Youngwolf had piqued his cop's curiosity and he wasn't going to drop this.

"Just how well do you know each other?" Troy asked, shoulders squared and dark eyes intense.

"Why do you care?" she shot at Troy.

Tim said, "Bree and I dated for a couple of years down in Ft. Lauderdale. We work together—daily."

"Dated?" Troy's lips thinned and he tensed.

She glared at Tim and shook her head. "That's ancient history."

Tim held up his right hand and wiggled his fingers. A proud glint flickered in his eyes. "Yep, I'm a married man now. You know one plus one equals three."

Breanna spied Jana wobbling towards them. A slight breeze whipped the other woman's white blonde hair across her eyes and she moved away from Tim, not wishing to make her friend jealous. Even though she knew Tim was just having fun at her expense and there were no torrid undertones.

"Here comes your blushing bride now."

Both men turned to look at Jana. Tim's face lit with joy but shock flittered across Troy's eyes for a brief moment before he shuttered his expression.

The look Troy turned on her was full of accusation and confusion.

Instead of addressing her, he nodded to Jana, "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Harper. I'm Troy Youngwolf, Sheriff of Coconut Springs."

Jana gazed upon Troy with feminine appreciation as all women were wont to do. "Nice to meet you. You must be a friend of our Breanna?"

"Our Breanna?" Troy moved closer to Breanna and murmured in her ear. His gaze, however, stayed glued to Jana's protruding belly. "My, aren't we chummy with the ex's wife. Not exactly your style, Parker."

"Bite me," she gritted out through her clenched teeth and wondered why everyone seemed to find her friend's pregnancy so fascinating. She hoped he wouldn't start extrapolating. "Do you have a reason to be here? Don't you have some law enforcement to attend to? Is life that dull out here in the country that you have time to harass the innocent?"

Troy's gaze bounced back to Breanna. "The town was nice and quiet until Sierra's wedding preparations. I came to see Big Jack about the bachelor party."

Breanna looked around with wide, too innocent eyes. She shrugged and held out her hands, palms up. "Daddy's not out here. Try the house."

"I already spoke to him." Troy turned to Tim, facing off to the shorter man. "You're staying here at the ranch?"

"Of course."

Jana left her husband and crooked her arm through Breanna's. "Come on. We have a lot to catch up on. This'll be

the first time Tim's let me out of his sight in months. I don't want him changing his mind."

A hint of mischief lit Troy's eyes as he looked to Tim. "Are you coming to the bachelor party?"

"Wouldn't miss it. If the ladies get to have fun, so should we." Tim slashed his lips across his wife's in an affectionate kiss.

Breanna bristled to finish this awkward conversation. She could use a shower. That's all she needed was to smell like horse the rest of the day. "You can see yourself off the ranch, Sheriff?" She tossed over her shoulder as she strolled to the house without a backward glance.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Three

Monday morning, Patsy called in sick. Death sounded healthier than her deep coughs and raw voice. The temp agency in the next town had no one to send in her place. Thea, their secretary, couldn't return to work early as she had no one to watch her new baby. Troy was in a bind and wracked his brain.

"Call Breanna," Patsy had suggested on a death rattle, almost choking on the words.

"When Hell freezes over" No way did he want to be beholden or let himself in for more of her special brand of pain. He wasn't into masochism.

Hell froze over as the morning wore on. He couldn't find any paperwork. The phones rang off the hook. He couldn't answer them in the office and go out in the field to take care of matters.

Desperate and furious at himself for being anxious, he called the Parker Ranch. His finger jabbed each number hard enough to break the phone. He paced the floor 'til the other end came alive with Big Jack's booming voice.

"Yo! Parker Ranch."

"Hey, Jack, put Breanna on the line." Frazzled, he cursed at the other ringing lines, praying Breanna would show compassion for a brother in blue. He had nowhere else to turn.

"Let me see if she's around. She and Sierra were talking about bridal fittings today. I don't know if they skeedaddled

yet." Jack nearly burst Troy's eardrum when he bellowed, "Bree! Phone call, Missy!"

Troy tossed the phone in the air, and nearly didn't catch it. "Dang, Jack! I heard you all the way here without a phone."

Jack chuckled heartily. "Just caught her. Here she is."

Impatience bludgeoned Troy and he turned away from the glaring sun streaming in through the high windows. He hated having to ask Bree for a favor, especially one of this magnitude.

"This is Breanna."

Sunshine brighter than the morning outside showered in Breanna's voice. Muted chatter and mooing cattle filled in the background. "Troy here. I need you..." Damn! He hadn't meant to use those precise words. He scowled then blundered on, "This is an emergency."

"Uh huh." Her flat tone barely cascaded through the wire.
"What type of emergency now? Sierra can't be in jail as she's here with me. Another rabid clown get loose in your fair town, Sheriff? That's Sierra's department so you'd best take it up with her."

"No!" He hadn't meant to raise his voice. "It's not the blasted clowns this time. I need your help. And my name's Troy. You remember."

"How could I possibly help? You keep reminding me."

Dread mixed with curiosity in her silky voice. He hated that she'd become so wary, as if she expected him to hurt her at every turn. Funny. Shouldn't it be the other way around? "Can you come work for me right away? All my office staff is gone and I can't man the station by myself." After a long

pause, he swallowed hard. "Please, Bree. I'll owe you big time. I can't do it alone. I really need you." Another long pause almost killed him.

"I don't know. We were just on our way to a fitting. I'm here to help Sierra with her wedding. We still have a lot of things to get done."

"Tell him you can. Last time I checked. I'm a big girl. Go!" Sierra's voice drifted to him and he couldn't help but crack a grin. Then he heard Breanna snap, "Traitor!"

"I wouldn't ask if I weren't desperate." The minute the words were out, he groaned inwardly. Again he'd said the wrong thing. Breanna would either think he hated her or that he couldn't live without her. Neither would settle well. And neither was true, but pigheaded as she was, he'd never convince her otherwise.

"How long?"

Clipped but professional, her words surprised him. Rays of hope penetrated his heart. He didn't feel as frantic as he had a moment ago. He shoveled his fingers through his hair and stared at his cyclone of an office. "I was hoping for a couple weeks, until Thea returns."

"Weeks!?"

Breanna's disbelief, and was it fear, washed over him.

"Sorry, Sheriff, I can't. I have a ton of stuff to do for this wedding. I have my own job to get back to."

He lowered his voice and inserted a groveling tone.

"Please. Soon as Patsy returns, I'll give you time off whenever you need for the wedding. I can't be in two places at once."

"And I'm the only one in town who can help?"

Her nails drummed the phone, driving him to the edge of sanity.

"Tell the dude he owes me big time. No more clown jokes for starters!" Sierra chuckled heartily. "Have mercy on the town. The poor man's probably tearing out his hair. You know men can't run an office."

"I ran the best dang office in the fleet!" Jack bellowed, slamming down something heavy. "Two-hundred men obeyed my every order, unlike you two impertinent girls."

"Well, Troy isn't you, Daddy," Breanna drawled.

Eager for a few words in private Troy gnashed his teeth. Her high opinion of him endeared her even more. No female in history had gotten on his nerves like Breanna Parker. Not even close.

"Hush!" Breanna hissed. "This isn't your business."

"It became my business when he hurt you so badly, you ran away..."

"Sierra!"

Breanna's warning spewed venom enough to make Troy wonder again if more had happened than he'd been led to believe. His cop's instincts kicked in and he needed her close more than ever to unravel the mystery. A chill spread through him.

"Well, if you're that desperate, I suppose it'd only be neighborly to help 'til Patsy gets back. I make no promises beyond that..."

"Thank you." Gruffness born of male pride and unnamed, unwelcome emotions, punctuated his reply. "Can you come

right over? These blasted phones won't stop ringing. They're giving me a headache."

"Yes, boss. Oh, my pay rate for 'desperate' is one and a half times my normal rate. I am supposed to be on vacation..."

"I'll pay it. Just come now," he said through gritted teeth. He'd have paid the wheeler-dealer double. She was something else. How he was going to live with her daily, he didn't know. How he'd lived without her eight long years, he didn't know either.

"I can't believe you pushed me into this," Breanna hissed at her sister as Sierra practically shoved her from the car half an hour later. The police station loomed before her like a nightmare, casting long gothic shadows onto the road.

"It's past time to get over it. Working together will be therapeutic. Either you'll exorcise him from your system...or you'll live happily ever after."

"I'm not Cinderella," Breanna drawled, rolling her eyes.

Sierra smiled beatifically and fluttered her fingers. "Ta ta. I'll pick you up at five."

Bree shook her head. Her sister was too cosmopolitan to be a clown.

"And I'm not Prince Charming," a very deep masculine, very familiar voice drawled behind her.

And Prince Charming sucked! Hers anyway.

Breathless, she whirled, chastising her sarcasm. Troy loomed large and sexy as sin, if a bit frazzled, not two feet from her. Hands behind his back, he stood at parade rest. A five o'clock shadow covered his lean cheeks and shadows

bruised his intensely dark eyes as if he'd not slept all night. Sympathy welled in her, making her want to fill him with hot chicken soup and tuck him into bed. Loathe to let him see her concern lest he think she was softening, she muttered, "Not my Prince Charming. Meg's."

She forced herself not to cringe when he scowled, pivoted on his heel and bounded inside. If he couldn't handle the truth, that was his problem. Why the truth should bother him, she didn't know. He'd made the choice all those years ago.

Determined not to let his bad mood ruin her day, she followed at a leisurely pace. Once inside, she asked, "Where do you want me?"

His dark brooding gaze consumed her. Too late, she realized the unintended double entendre of her question. She'd have to censor everything out of her lips and the thought alone exhausted her. She prayed for Patsy's quick recovery. "To sit."

"Thea's desk. The one closest to my office."

"Wonderful." Not. Siberia would be too close for comfort. She claimed Thea's chair, uncomfortable in someone else's private domain. She was not one to snoop. Sickening sweet musty smells permeated the desk, making her almost gag. She'd have no choice after all but to search for the source and dispose of the source if she was to work here. "Can I move a few of her things?"

He shook his head. "Go for it. Just don't throw out anything."

In the right middle drawer, she found a rotten banana. The overly sweet odor almost overwhelmed her. "Where's your dumpster?"

"I'll take it." Troy tossed it out the back door and then rejoined her, hovering, his shadow overwhelming.

"I need you to field incoming calls. See if you can make sense out of these papers. Think you can handle it?" He showed her his office and squad car lines and those of his deputies.

"No problemo, Sheriff." She tapped long nails on the desk, anxious for him to leave. Maybe her stomach would loosen if he put distance between them.

"Remember I asked you to cut the Sheriff crap. Call me Troy."

She mastered her most professional smile and favored him with it. "No can do. You're the boss."

If he wasn't so desperate he'd tell her to get lost. "What do you call your boss in Ft. Lauderdale?"

Irreverence got the better of her and she snorted. "You don't want to know."

"Tell me!" he roared.

He reminded her of her father and looked adorable in his rage. Almost..."Old Crow." She swallowed a smile but didn't quite hide it. "Do you want me to call you that, too?"

"To his face?" Incredulity flooded his words even as he ignored her question.

"Only when he makes me mad. We call him Captain to his face. Or Captain Crow! Guess I should call you 'Sheriff Youngwolf'."

"Troy..."

"Sheriff..." She put her flat palms on the desk and rose, staring him down.

"Parker."

Ah... So he was going to call her Parker if she called him Sheriff? So be it. Formal therefore less dangerous. "Fine with me."

The phone rang, breaking their standoff. She grabbed it and sat, scribbling the pertinent details.

After a couple of minutes listening, Troy grunted and stalked away to his office, relieved, yet tense. He tried not to look at her yet caught himself sneaking covert glances her way every few minutes. Her long wavy hair, cascading around her pixie face, beckoned. He yearned to bury himself in it. Memories of how he'd done just that on many occasions taunted him. How silkily it had caressed every inch of his body. Did she know how her hair affected him?

As far as he could tell, if not for her obvious resentment and distaste, she acted as if she barely remembered him. Eight years wasn't that long, was it? She acted like it was a lifetime. It was Xan's lifetime...

Oh oh. Xan...she had softball at 5:30. He glanced at the clock then called home. "Mom. Can you have Xan fed, dressed, and ready to go for her practice this evening? And if I get stuck here late, can you take her? I'll meet you there soon as I can."

Soft footsteps alerted him to Breanna's presence a second before her whispery scent of lilac wrapped around him. When he glanced up to see her lean in the door, holding out a note,

he gulped. Her hair draped over her shoulder, cascaded over her breasts and down to emphasize her slim waist. "Thanks, Mom. I'll let you know. Give Xan a kiss from me."

Breanna's expression shuttered as she strolled to his desk and slid the note across. "LeRoy Yantze's bull is stampeding down Main Street. Thought you might like to know."

"Damn!" He jumped to his feet, grabbed for his pistol and banged his knee on the underside of his desk.

"Emergency. I'll call you back." He tossed the phone on the desk without hanging up then limped to the door as quickly as he could manage.

Maria Gonzalez, Breanna's kindergarten teacher, blustered through the front door, breathless, tripping over her feet. In the passing years since Breanna had last seen her, the retired teacher's body seemed to have shriveled and her back was slightly hunched over. "Where's the sheriff? Gh-ghosts are in my-my attic!"

Breanna rushed out from behind her desk to steady the woman. She noted the poor dear's mismatched high heels, one blue, one green, one squat heeled, one spiky heeled. This explained why Miss Gonzalez stumbled and catapulted into Breanna's arms, knocking her into Patsy's desk.

Miss Gonzalez' fly-away, dyed red hair didn't hide the fact she was balding. Her voice quavered when she said, "Please tell the sheriff I need him now, wherever he is."

"Please sit down while I radio him. How about a cup of hot coffee while you wait?" Breanna held Miss Gonzalez's knobby elbow as she guided her to a wooden, rail back chair. She was afraid to hold too tightly, not wanting to tear the woman's

rice papery thin flesh where a network of dark veins popped out.

"Oh no no no, dear heart. Those ghosts have me ready to jump out of my skin as it is. Caffeine would send me over the edge, make me so jittery I couldn't stand it."

Breanna patted her old teacher's wobbling hand. "I'll find the sheriff for you. I'm sure he'll be able to help." Breanna didn't believe in ghosts, except to suspend her basic disbelief long enough to read the occasional paranormal romance. But real ghosts in Maria Gonzalez's attic? In Florida? She had to bite her tongue to keep from chuckling as she called Troy.

"Yeah, what you got?" Troy answered his radio.

"Maria Gonzalez needs you at the station ASAP, Sheriff. What's your twenty?" The hard rock music he liked so well softened in the background. If she wasn't mistaken, the song was Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*, one of Troy's long-time favorites. God, she wished she'd stop remembering intimate things about him. It wasn't at all easy being in such close proximity, hearing his voice all the time.

"I'm in the middle of lunch at Riley's with a friend. What's the nature of the problem?"

Breanna swiveled in her chair away from Miss Gonzalez and lowered her voice. She cupped her hand around the mouthpiece to mute her words, as she wondered who Troy's *friend* might be and why he was reluctant to leave this person. Then she wanted to kick herself for wondering. Why should she care? "There are ghosts in her attic. She wants you to chase them out. She won't leave until you do."

Troy burst out laughing. "Tell her to call the 'Ghost Whisperer'."

"Sheriff! What if some real live criminal's hiding out up there?" Bree asked. On the other end of the phone, she heard metal clatter against china and a chair scraped linoleum unmercifully.

"All right. I'll look in on it. But if she's right, I don't have a plasma gun."

Her patience gone, she sighed, ready to strangle him. "Just get your butt over there and check it out."

"That's no way to talk to your boss."

"So fire me." As far back as she could recall, no one in Ft. Lauderdale had claimed to see ghosts. Vampires maybe. Sharks definitely. But no ghosts. She hung up and shook her head.

Miss Gonzalez mumbled to herself and wrung her hands together 'til the sheriff swaggered through the door thirty minutes later. She jumped to her feet with amazing agility for a woman of her age. "How many poltergeists did you count, Sheriff?"

Troy pointedly ignored Breanna as he strolled by her, and stopped two feet in front of the woman. "No ghosts, but a whole passel of possums are nesting up there. You heard their scampering and scratching. You'll need to call an exterminator."

Miss Gonzalez shuddered. "I hate those nasty creatures. There's a rabies outbreak, you know. Be careful on your calls."

Breanna shivered, too. Possums were nasty critters. Unfortunately, Miss Gonzalez wasn't mistaken. Several rabid ones had been caught in Ft. Lauderdale, prompting bulletins to pet owners to make sure their animals were inoculated for rabies.

"Right away, Sheriff. At least it isn't those pesky ghosts again, trying to scare me out of my house. I keep telling them I hold the deed now, and they should shoo back to their own dimension." The old school teacher patted Troy's hand as if he were a child. Perhaps to her elderly eyes, he was a youngster.

Breanna held her mirth in check 'til Miss Gonzalez had safely departed and then burst out laughing. "I see my teacher's still a trip."

"I could fire you for insubordination..."

"Be my guest." Breanna gathered her purse, clicked off the computer and stood tall. "You need me a whole lot more than I need you. I have a bachelorette party to plan, male dancers to interview..."

Troy scowled. She was right. He seemed to be a lot more interested in her than she was in him. "But I won't," he continued, facing off against her, blocking her retreat, "because that's exactly what you want. I don't know how your boss puts up with you."

She held up her hands in a *pax* gesture, widening her eyes innocently. "Little old me? I'm an angel at my real job but I get cranky when I have to work on my vacation. Lighten up. All I did was laugh. You used to enjoy a joke."

He'd enjoyed it too much before, causing trouble everywhere. That was before his life had become such a mess, before he'd lost Bree.

"Ditto, sweetheart." He flicked her chin and narrowed his eyes. "Look in the mirror. I'm not the only one taking life too seriously."

Her face darkened. Without a word, she flicked her hair behind her shoulders, switched off her computer, and walked away without a backward glance.

He pivoted on his heel then stomped to his office.

"The wedding's in four days and we're not ready!" Sierra paced a rut in the family room floor.

"We're fine. Everything's under con..." Breanna started to say but was drowned out by her sister's panic.

"My gown doesn't fit right. They sent your dress in lavender, instead of yellow. Purple's for crazy people. I can't have a purple wedding! One of Jelly Bean's four-year-olds broke her nose so she can't make it which means I'm praying Patsy's well in time to stand in her place. I'm doomed." Sierra shook her fist at the ceiling. "Doomed, doomed, doomed!"

"Sit! Inhale!" Breanna propelled Sierra to the couch and pushed her down then stood over her and planted hands on her hips. She coached her sister in the art of breathing to stop her from hyperventilating. If this is what weddings did to people, maybe she was glad she'd never gone through this and had no prospect of doing so. As she recalled, her friend Leann had been a similar wreck this close to her wedding.

Panic chased across Sierra's face and she rose. "I don't know what I'm thinking, getting married. This is a mistake. I've got to call it off."

Breanna caught her hand. "Precious, you're just suffering from pre-wedding jitters. All my friends went through this. You wouldn't be normal if you weren't scared."

Sierra hesitated and sank back into the overstuffed cushions. "You think?" She moaned, her shoulders sagging. "If only. It's not just the wedding. I can't live with Anthony's overbearing mother."

Breanna hadn't liked this idea from the moment she'd first heard about it. Every bride should have their own fairytale castle, except her sister would only be a squatter in a prunefaced woman's house who detested her.

"You've got to talk Anthony out of this. Can't you afford a place of your own?"

"The rich live in estates, not houses. Anthony won't move until he can build a bigger, better estate. It could take years. I'm doomed. Doomed, doomed! I don't know how I ever agreed to this." Sierra buried her face in her hands and stomped her feet.

Not knowing what else to say except to run for the hills which she didn't think would help, Breanna sat beside Sierra as helplessly as her sister had sat next to her when she'd lost the baby. "Talk to Anthony again. Meanwhile, remember you're going to be the most beautiful bride in the universe."

Sierra smiled wanly, her eyes watery. "And you'll be the most beautiful bridesmaid. I wish Mama were alive to see us."

Sorrow squeezed Breanna's heart, radiating down to her fingertips. She missed their mother so very much and hoped she looked down from heaven to be with them on Sierra's special day. "Me, too," she said, her voice barely a croak as she swiped at a pesky tear.

As maid of honor, and how she hated the term maid, her duty was to snap her sister back into the beautiful, joyful bride she was supposed to be. A delicious idea hit her, making her smile. She tugged on Sierra's hand, wincing when her sister's gaudy diamond engagement ring dug into her tender palm. "Let's go for a ride. I'll race you!"

The normal devilish glint in Sierra's eyes, and the engaging dimple in her cheek, returned in a flash as she dashed ahead of Breanna. "Last one to reach LeRoy's meadow's a rotten egg."

Breanna winced when she ran into a wall of muscle.

"So this is how the worldly Breanna behaves in her offduty hours?" Troy righted Breanna, his hands lingering on her arms longer than necessary.

She stepped back, quelling the desire to rub away his prints. She was vexed that Sierra was getting a big head start almost as much as she chafed at the knowledge that she'd been left alone with Troy. "What are you doing in my house? Daddy's not home if you're looking for him."

"Is that how you greet your boss? Or your old flame?"
Fire smoldered in Troy's eyes as mischief danced in his voice. Knowing Sierra was way ahead by now, she sighed.
"What do you want? More memos copied? Someone to pour you a coffee?" she said with saccharine sweetness, vowing to

go back to college and upgrade her career. She was tired of being a secretary and fetching coffee. Even clowning like her sister did would be a step up. At least she would be her own boss and clowns didn't earn a half bad income.

"I like to stop by to make sure everything's okay. This is my last stop of the day." He didn't make a move to leave. "Everything okay here?"

Was he daring her to make him leave? She scowled up at him. "Only if you call having a crazed sister okay. Or having my temporary boss intrude on my personal space."

He didn't blink, just advanced a step. "Is it really that bad being around me? You didn't used to think so."

Before she realized his intentions, Troy backed her against the wall and crushed against her. He captured her lips in a searing kiss that left her weak-kneed and breathless. Soft hands cupped her face and she couldn't move her head. At the same instant, his hips pinned her to the wall so she couldn't do more than squirm against his solid frame.

How long they kissed in the hall, she didn't know, just that she was powerless to move away or break the kiss—as if she'd been starved for it for years. She balled his shirt in her hands and molded her body to his. When he drew back a short distance, a cool draft struck her in the face.

"You can kiss me like that and still say you hate me?"

His sultry voice stole her breath. Heat flooded her cheeks and she knew she should move away and run as far as she could, but her traitorous body wouldn't budge. "I don't hate you or anyone. You-you surprised me is all."

His arms lowered, circling her so her loose hair wrapped around them. "So, you'd kiss anyone like that who surprised you? Maybe we should try this again."

Fear and fire warred inside her, the fire winning as his lips lowered slowly to hers. "I don't think that's a very good idea," she murmured against him, their breath mingling.

"I've missed kissing you. Your kisses set me on fire."

"Troy...don't."

"Don't remind you? Or don't kiss you?"

Neither! But her lips wouldn't cooperate, instead lingering on his that tasted better than chocolate.

He teased her lips with his, nibbling on the lower one. Passion pooled in his gaze. And longing.

She didn't want to yearn for him, didn't want to feel this way in his arms. A whimper escaped before she knew it, sounding as if she were begging for his kisses and caresses. Maybe that's exactly what her traitorous body was doing. It wanted him even if her mind said otherwise. High time to go back home to her life and forget this interlude ever happened.

His hands grew bolder, moving slowly up to her ribcage until they grazed the ultra-sensitive area beneath her breasts, causing her to shiver. "Why'd you leave?"

That snapped her out of his spell. Incredulity flooded her, giving her the strength to break away. She backed slowly, as if not to spook a wild animal. How could he ask why? Of course he didn't know about the baby, but he must know she wouldn't cavort with a married man, no matter her feelings. Although how he could think she'd feel anything but loathing

for the man who jilted her so cruelly, she couldn't fathom. "Why?"

Puzzlement spread across his swarthy face. "Why'd you run and not come back...'til now?"

She paused at the doorway, leaning against it, fingers curled around the molding. "Not because of you, if that's what you're thinking," she lied.

He stared but didn't make a move. "I don't believe you. You left almost immediately after I told you I had married Meg."

Breanna bit back a snort. "And you think you destroyed me so much I left town and died? Or that I was pining so much all those years that I would run back and beg for your attention the minute I heard the woman you left me for was out of the picture?"

"I didn't mean it like that..."

Trying to get her wayward emotions in order, she folded her arms across her chest and lifted her chin, How could she melt at his first touch like that? What was wrong with her? "Then how did you mean it? I don't know how else to take it."

The front door slammed, and boot heels clicked loudly on the wood floor. Sierra appeared around the bend, her face flushed as if she'd ridden hard. "There you are! I was afraid you'd fallen off your horse and lay dying somewhere when you didn't show up. Oh... I thought you'd come to visit Daddy," she said when her gaze alighted on Troy.

"The sheriff is just leaving. He came to check up on us. Guess he wanted to make sure your evil clowns were all accounted for." Breanna pushed off from the wall with her

foot and moseyed over to her sister. "I think I'll take my ride now." She breezed out of the room, her curls flouncing behind her. She had never needed the thrill of a ride more than today. She wanted to gallop 'til her mind and body were too tired to do anything but sleep. She didn't want to remember the past eight years or the past twenty minutes. She didn't want to think about Troy or how he made her feel. She only wanted to escape.

"Did you have a good ride?" Troy murmured in Breanna's ear, his body coming instantly alive at the sight of her in a sunny yellow sundress that bared her back and hugged her luscious contours before flaring out at her hips. Her flowery scent hypnotized him and he didn't want to move away. He wanted more of what they'd shared yesterday before he spooked her with his question.

Damn but she was skittish if not totally immune.

Her kisses blew his mind more now than they had eight years ago. Or maybe he'd been without the pleasures of a woman too long. Breanna was as a drug to his system. He needed another fix.

"Wonderful," she said flatly, as she carried her coffee to her desk and settled in. "I've missed Skylah and forgotten how much I loved to ride her."

He followed her and perched on the edge of her desk. "Ever think of moving home? You could ride Skylah every day. Big Jack and Sierra would love to have you back."

With the force of rifle fire, she jabbed her poor keyboard. "And what am I supposed to do to make my living in this one-horse town?"

He was ready for her question. "Work here. For me."

She gazed up, her eyes frosty as ice chips. "What about the person who has this job?"

"We're getting busy enough to employ two people. You already know the ropes."

"Well, I'm tired of the ropes. I want something more challenging that will be a real career." Her chin lifted. "I'm going back to college. I filled out the paperwork and emailed it last night."

His hopes dashed. The closest college was an hour away. She must mean she'd enrolled down in Ft. Lauderdale or Miami. "What school?"

"Florida Atlantic."

He wasn't surprised. The school was just north of Ft. Lauderdale, in Boca Raton. "What made you decide this?" He also wanted to ask why now? Why had she waited so many years?

"I need a change. I want more respect, and I want something with upward mobility and a better pay check."

So she was going to leave again His heart froze and his throat constricted. All he could mutter was, "Good luck. I hope you get what you want." Unable to look at her another moment he turned and left the room.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Four

Because Breanna hadn't come home to plan the bachelorette party, she'd had to work long distance with two of Sierra's friends. Like her sister, they worked as children's birthday party clowns, and like her sister, they seemed normal enough.

The banquet room they'd rented was large and brightly lit by chandeliers. Brocade curtains covered several windows. Three long tables pushed together were covered with white cloths and piled high with brightly wrapped shower gifts.

At least thirty women milled about the room, sipping punch and champagne. Some Breanna remembered as her mother's friends. A few were her sister's high school pals. She didn't recognize at least half of the faces.

When a giant cake was wheeled out into the center of the hotel's banquet floor and an almost-nude young stud jumped out and started gyrating his hips in front of Sierra, Breanna gasped.

A completely red-faced Jana leaned toward her and yelled, "Did you plan this?"

"And have your husband kill me? No way!" On one hand, she was mortified how the women whistled and grabbed for the buff man. On the other, she couldn't stop staring in shocked admiration as he proceeded to strip off his loin cloth. Not many men possessed a better physique and the only one she knew was a certain sheriff she was having trouble forgetting.

Sierra cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled at Breanna, "I'm going to get you for this!"

Breanna waved her hands, and crossed her heart. Great! Although she did have a strong mischievous streak, and she was responsible for many wild parties, she was not at fault for this one. This made her definition of wild look like a child's games in comparison. "I didn't do this," she yelled back. She was going to get Sierra's friends for not letting her in on this part of the preparations.

"The bride must dance with me," the stud implored, grasping Sierra's hands and pulling her out to the middle of the dance floor.

He held onto her hands as he moved in ways Breanna had seen no man move before.

Sierra's friends whooped and hollered, cheering them on. "When do we get our turn?"

The score of *Space Odyssey 2001* blasted from the speakers as the lights dimmed. Mist rolled out from the stage.

Everyone hushed, mesmerized as the curtain pulled up, especially Breanna. Shocked awe was more like it. Back in Ft. Lauderdale she could relax and get into this, but not here in Youngwolf's jurisdiction, or with Tim's very pregnant wife in tow. Silently, she cursed the terrible timing.

A fireman, in full working garb, swaggered onto the stage.

"Take it off!" one of Sierra's friends yelled. "Show your stuff!"

"I don't believe this," Breanna murmured to Jana. "I didn't have clue one they were doing this."

Jana whispered in an aside to Breanna, "Tim's going to kill me if he finds out."

"And me." She didn't think her friend had been joking when he'd told her to watch out for his wife. She prayed they didn't get too wild, and that Troy or Tim didn't get wind of this.

As the young extremely buff fireman peeled off his uniform jacket to reveal only a G-string beneath, the women's cheers got louder.

A silver spaceman with a space helmet sauntered onto the stage, swiveling his hips. Then another fireman. Three women scrambled onstage and danced with the men.

"We're in major trouble," Breanna groaned, covering her eyes. Now that she worked for the local Sheriff's office, did she have an obligation to stop this? "I've got to break this up before the situation totally disintegrates. Stay put and keep low."

"Is that possible?" Jana's expression was a study of morbid fascination. "My party was a Sunday afternoon social compared to this."

Afraid this was fast becoming an orgy, Breanna took the stage stairs two at a time. She reached for the microphone to announce that the party was over and everyone should get dressed and go home when another woman snatched it from her and smashed it on the floor. Startled, her heart pounding loudly in her ears, she jumped. Before she could get off stage, another dancer in a policeman's uniform grabbed her.

He licked his lips seductively and tried to coax her out of her clothes and dance with him. When he wouldn't take no for an answer, she shoved him away.

The man tumbled backwards, crashing into the wedding gifts piled high on the banquet table, scattering them across the room.

A tall, burly woman clad in a mini skirt and a lacy bra lifted a chair and aimed at Breanna's head.

Breanna rolled and ducked so that the chair splintered against the stage floor.

Rage engorged the inebriated woman's mottled face as she jumped high and caught the chandelier. She swung on it and kicked at Breanna's face. The light fixture groaned ominously, and then crashed to the floor. Glass and mortar shattered mere inches from the would-be attacker, their shards reflecting like a thousand diamonds.

An exploding bomb couldn't have been louder. The women in all manner of undress screamed and pushed out the doors.

The assistant hotel manager barged into the room, and skidded to a stop in the midst of the destruction, eyes wide and a hand covering her mouth. "What have you done to my hotel? We'll sue! We've called the police."

The women and male strippers stampeded through the door as they haphazardly threw on any clothes they could find. A woman now wore the spacesuit and the stripper who had worn it earlier draped a skirt around his hips.

Worried about Jana in her delicate condition, Breanna sought safety. She wouldn't escape paying for the damages as she had signed for the room but she hoped to avoid arrest.

If she could get Jana out undetected, maybe they could convince Tim that she'd not been in the middle of all this. Most of all, however, she feared Troy's wrath.

"Everybody freeze! You're under arrest. All exits are blocked," Troy's deep baritone ordered.

"Great!" Not! Breanna's heart fell to her knees and her breath hissed from her lips. "Crawl under that table and hide. Maybe they won't find us." As soon as Jana scrambled beneath the only banquet table left standing, Breanna dropped to her knees and followed. Several other women and one of the exotic male dancers also sought refuge there. So many tried that not all would fit, leaving limbs and rumps hanging out.

Breanna's heart sank and she bit her lower lip. Think, girl! She got a brainstorm. "Everybody, listen up! On my count of three, lift the table and slide it back next to the wall. If we go very slowly, maybe they won't notice us."

"You're brilliant!" Jana whispered in her ear. "Have you done this before?"

"You're the one that deliberately throws wild parties. Not me."

"Round them up and put them in the truck," Troy said.

Breanna winced at the sound of the Sheriff's voice, deep and overflowing with irritation.

Sierra's annoyed voice boomed through the room, much like Big Jack's. "You can't arrest me, Youngwolf. I'm the bride!"

"Watch me! You should have thought about that before you allowed your friends to tear up the joint."

When she didn't hear anything for several moments, Breanna breathed a sigh of relief. Then the table cloth lifted and Troy, kneeling, grinned at her, his ultra-white smile unmercifully blinding her.

"Thought I'd find you here, Parker." He also smiled at Jana. "You, too, Mrs. Harper."

Breanna exchanged glances with her friend as several of the others fled, just to be caught by Troy's deputies. "Guess we're under arrest, too?" she said dryly, as she crawled out and then offered a helping hand to the pregnant woman and tugged hard. Amusement danced in the sheriff's eyes, as if he gleaned great joy from her predicament.

"What do you think?"

"That I need to call my father to bail me out." She held out her arms to be cuffed. "Do your thing, Sheriff."

His expression darkened. "You don't want to call your favorite ex?"

"Not unless you want to be an accessory to murder." She grinned tightly, shivering at his mention of Tim. She didn't know which was worse—Tim's wrath when he found out Jana was in trouble or Troy's.

Troy snatched her hand and snapped a hand cuff on her right arm and the other to his left wrist.

Her blood pumping she gaped in disbelief. "Why do I merit being cuffed to you?" she said low enough so that only he could hear.

"Because you're my prisoner." Troy tugged on her arm and marched across the room, forcing her to keep up.

"Why me? What about everyone else? Why not handcuff them?"

"Because you're the ring leader. Because I'm not about to let you out of my sight. Knowing your habits, you're liable to flee down to Ft. Lauderdale."

Seething, her blood pumped fast, and she vowed revenge for this humiliation. He was probably loving every minute of this, even if his stoic face didn't give away one iota of his thoughts. But she knew him well enough to know he was getting immense enjoyment out of her predicament.

After Troy and his deputies rounded up the rest of the bachelorette party, he uncuffed himself and put her in the back of his car, behind the bars, and he crawled into the front seat. "You planned this party? Strippers included?"

She caught his smirk in the rear view mirror and tossed back a big innocent smile. "I helped plan the party, but not the male dancers. Sierra's friends snuck them in on me. Believe me, I was in shock when they popped out."

His lips tilted in a crooked grin. "Ouch! You should be locked up for that bad joke alone. You'll never get out of my jail if you keep racking up crimes."

Wriggling her toes, she muttered, "What crimes? This is bogus and you know it, Sheriff."

His gaze caught hers. "Drop the Sheriff. You know my name. Talk to me."

The intensity of his words stole her breath "On or off the record? Anything can be used against me in a court of law. You've been keeping track of the counts against me,

remember? I should wait for my attorney before I say another word."

"I truly want justice, Bree."

Something, a catch in his voice maybe, made Breanna freeze. His words threw her into a whirlwind. Justice? What was fitting justice for what he'd done to her? To their baby? Her hand stretched over her long-time flat, empty belly in the darkness, down where he couldn't see.

"Breanna?"

"Huh?" She shook the cobwebby memories from her mind and moved her hand to her knee. "Do I get to call my dad when I get to the station?" She'd lost all urge to argue. When he'd reminded her of justice, the dangerous undercurrent of teasing sexuality had evaporated. How could she joke or have fun with him ever again?

"What just happened? Is this about Meg?" He pulled off to the side of the road parallel to a wide canal, killed the engine, and turned in his seat to face her. "God, Bree, I'm sorry it happened. But I've apologized to Kingdom Come. There's nothing I can do to change it. What more do you want me to do? Give away my child?"

Willing back tears that stung the backs of her eyes, she stared out the window into the starless, cloudy night, unable to tell him what troubled her even more than Meg and their betrayal. He'd lost the right to know and his chance to comfort her and grieve with her. The problem was, long ago he had thrown away one of his children—their child.

"For God's sake, look at me!"

She met his dark gaze for a split second, and then turned away when she wondered if their baby would have looked like him. A useless thought since she'd never know. Still, it cut to her core and immense pain sliced her. "I should never have come back," she muttered under her breath, her voice shaky. She could hardly breathe. "Book me if you have to, but just get this over with."

"I don't want to book you."

His voice broke and she almost felt sorry for him. "Do your job. Just please stop torturing me."

"Don't you think this is torture for me, too? You're not the only one who's hurting."

She looked at him, freezing her heart. If, and it was a big if, he was hurting, the feeling was nothing compared to the holocaust he'd inflicted on her heart. Fallout still radiated her soul, eating at her from the inside out. "Actually, no, I don't."

"You haven't forgiven me." He punched the seat, swore loudly and burned rubber so that she smelled oily smoke. Then the rear end fish-tailed as the cruiser sped away. He didn't speak again 'til he yanked open the car door in front of the station. "Patsy'll give you your one call and book you." Troy stormed into his office and slammed his door so hard his wall shook.

Patsy winced. "Tarnation, your sister and her friends sure have him riled up. Sierra can't get hitched soon enough so things can get back to normal."

"Amen and hallelujah!" Breanna rubbed her chafed wrist where the cuffs had bit into it. She eyed the plain black phone on the deputy's cluttered desk. "Can I make my call now?"

Patsy nodded. "You can use the phone on your desk. I have to book everybody over here."

Oy! She should be sitting behind her desk helping Patsy, on the right side of the law, not on the wrong side of it, using it to call her attorney. Breanna shut out the melee behind her by cupping her hand around the receiver and covering her ear with the other.

"Daddy? Do you have a few minutes to talk?" Breanna asked later that night after Big Jack had bailed her out and taken her home. She leaned against the frame of her dad's door as she stared at his back. She chewed her bottom lip uncertainly and dug her toes into the sculpted carpet on the floor.

He swiveled in his computer chair and squinted over his thick glasses. "I always have time for my little girl. Hunker down on the bunk and unload your mind."

She closed the door and locked it, noting her father's arched brow. Then she climbed on the bed and crossed her legs. She stared at her newly painted, bright red toenail polish for several moments before she got up the gumption to ask her question. "Daddy, did I betray you and the family by leaving?"

Jack leaned forward in his chair and clamped his hands together in his lap. "What makes you think that?"

"Sierra. She feels that I've abandoned her, even betrayed her by leaving."

"You could have visited more often." Jack leveled his stern stare on her. "I can see how she could misconstrue your actions that way."

Needles stabbed her heart and moaning, she pitched over on the bed. "I never meant to betray anyone. I just wanted the pain to stop." Her dad's shrewd look enveloped her.

"Did the pain go away because you left everyone and everything you loved?"

She searched her heart. "No," she whispered. "But you stretched your wings and left the nest when you went into the Navy. You were gone a lot when we were little."

"So I was. But I came back whenever I was in port." Jack reached up and rubbed his polished head. His gaze never left her.

"I'm here now." She counted the years between her last visit and now and felt ashamed. "Was it so wrong of me to want to strike out on my own?"

"Not if that was your real reason for leaving. We all know it wasn't or you'd have come back for visits." He covered her hand with his huge, work-honed one. "Tell me, daughter, do you still love him?"

She evaded his gaze and played dumb. "You mean Tim?" She'd told her family she had dated Tim, had even hoped to marry him. He was a nice, attractive guy that would make a good father. He made a decent living and he made her laugh. He just wasn't Troy.

Jack scowled. "You know who I mean."

"Yeah, I still love him, but I wish I didn't." She swallowed hard and veiled her eyes. "I can't trust him. I don't think I can ever live through that kind of betrayal again."

Jack squeezed her hand and his eyes glazed over as if he was looking into the past. "Chew on this. We're not happy

that you left or stayed away so long, but we still love you and always will. We'd rather you come home, but if you don't, we'll manage. Maybe that'll help you get a better handle on your feelings for Troy."

Salt scattered in her still-open wounds and she winced. "Troy didn't merely leave me. He cheated on me with my best friend. They made a baby together. He married her. He gave me up."

"I told him to marry her." Jack rose to his feet and crossed to the window. He stood at parade rest staring out the window for a long time, silent.

Betrayal slammed into her chest again and she turned icy cold. Replaying his words in her mind, she gaped. Finally, she found her voice and joined him at the window that overlooked the lake behind their property. "What do you mean that 'you told him to marry her'?" Pain laced her thick words.

Jack peered at a spot far away, and his fingers linked and unlinked. When he finally spoke, his words came out measured. "Troy came to me for my opinion. He told me a very sad, heart-wrenching tale about how he was desperately in love with one woman but had gotten drunk one night, slept with her best friend, and impregnated her. He didn't know what to do. He felt as if he would betray both women and the baby no matter what he did. I think he wanted to marry the one he loved."

Thoughts and theories spun in her mind, crowding for top billing. She couldn't grasp this and so dumbly repeated, "You told him to marry the mother of his child."

"That's what I thought was right at the time. Not easy, mind you. But the right, respectable thing to do."

"Right and respectable. I see." Did she really? She sank onto the window ledge and leaned her cheek against the cool glass. Tidal waves of pain flooded her anew. Would the pain never end? How could she end it?

"Yes. But we're not in the Navy and you're my daughter, not a seaman. I may have given him wrong advice. At the time, I didn't know about your baby. But the point is, he was trying to do the right thing." Ghosts haunted his eyes. "I thought you'd get over each other, that it was infatuation, especially since he'd betrayed you. But neither of you have moved on. You're both wounded and won't be happy until you find a way to overcome this impasse and be together."

"How can I trust him again? What if he gets drunk again? Is infidelity okay just because he has too much to drink? I can't live that way." She pressed fingers to her aching temples, trying to stop the pain, the over-thinking. Why couldn't she have a switch to turn off unwanted emotion?

"If he had a drinking problem, I'd agree. But it was a onetime deal. He's grown up."

Still stunned, she stared at her father as he led her to the bed.

"I have a confession to make that I only ever made to your dear departed mother. Not even your sister knows."

Her heart stopped and she couldn't breathe. Her nerves shaky, she waited for him to continue as she sat beside him, leaning against his shoulder, wondering what he would tell her.

"Marriage isn't easy. It takes a lot of forgiving and forgetting and compromise if you want to be happy. You won't be happy all the time. In fact, you'll be downright unhappy sometimes and white-hot furious others." Jack patted her hand. "The truth is, I was missing your mother like crazy one night when I was on shore leave. We'd had a big argument and I drank too much. I woke up beside a woman I'd never laid eyes on before. The in-between is all hazy. Obviously, the night didn't mean a thing to me, but it damn well nearly cost me my marriage and my family."

"Was she preg-pregnant?" Riveted on her father's story, she pulled back and stared. Did she have a sibling she'd never met? Reality sucker punched her, and she felt a little bit dizzy from the magnitude of her father's stunning revelation.

"I got luckier than Troy, thank God. I don't know that your mother would have forgiven me if that had happened. As it was, she almost left me. She was all packed up and had you and Sierra bundled up in the van ready to go."

"You told her? What did she say?"

Big Jack closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. When he opened his eyes, pain overflowed. "She wasn't happy, that was for sure. I groveled for a long time to get back in her good graces. I made it my business to prove my love every day for the rest of her life."

She blinked several times, unable to believe her ears. Breanna sniffed back burning tears. "Oh, Daddy! I had no idea. Your marriage seemed so idyllic. I always wanted one

just like it until..." She couldn't voice Troy's name as choked up as she was.

"Our marriage was idyllic again, after a lot of effort and time on both our parts. We made it." He tilted her chin with his finger to make her look up at him. "Don't you think you can give the poor man a chance?"

"Troy never groveled, Daddy." She spoke past her burning throat and blinked back tears. "He didn't profess undying love. I don't know what that man wants from me. He's downright frustrating!"

"Have you told him you still love him?"

"Not on your life!" She jerked upright. "He left me. Not the other way around. He broke my heart."

"From the looks of him, I'd say his heart got pretty bruised and battered, too."

"Losing Meg is what hurt him." Conflicted, she bounded off the bed. She had a lot to sort out and the only person who could provide answers wasn't talking. At least not what she needed to hear.

"That's not what hurt him most."

She leaned over and gave her father a peck on the cheek. "That certainly gives me something to think about, but he hasn't proven anything to me."

"Just think about what I said." Jack pushed himself off the bed, his knees creaking, and he ambled back to his computer.

"How can I forget?" She was still reeling.

After she'd spent most of the night mulling over her father's astounding revelation and with an extra helping of determination, Breanna strolled into the station the next

morning. This was Troy's last chance. If he blew it, she was going back to Ft. Lauderdale and write him off—for good this time. Never mind that she said that the last time she left.

Originally, she'd planned to pull a Bridget Jones seduction scene and wear her most scandalous mini skirt and seethrough blouse with a black bra, but then did a complete one-eighty turn-around. Instead, she wore faded blue jeans, a baggy tee-shirt, white sneakers, and pulled her hair into a high pony tail. For good measure, she scrubbed her face clean of all make-up.

She brought goodies for the office, too. Instead of tastetempting, heavenly cookies, she deliberately substituted salt for sugar. Troy wouldn't know what hit him when she was through with him. She bit back a mischievous grin lest she alert the sheriff to her scheming.

"Rough night, Bree?" Patsy asked, snatching a cookie as she passed by the desk.

Breanna thought about warning the deputy to steer clear of her treats in case she'd get indigestion. When she spied Troy sauntering in behind her, she kept her counsel and busied herself typing a document. "It could've been better." Much better.

"Sierra wound as tight as a spark plug?"

"Wouldn't you be?" Troy said lowly behind his deputy.

When he grabbed for a cookie, Patsy dove for his wrist, grabbing it. "Uh, Boss, it's a little early to hit the snacks, don't you think? Besides these are loaded with calories, which are the last things you need." Patsy stuck her finger down her throat behind Troy's back and she scowled at Breanna. She

slam dunked the larger portion of her cookie into the nearest trash receptacle.

"Are you trying to tell me I'm getting fat?" Troy patted his washboard-flat stomach and scowled over his shoulder at his deputy, almost catching her in the act.

Breanna adopted an innocently sweet expression and held out the basket to Troy. "You fat, Sheriff? One little one won't hurt. Promise."

Patsy rolled her eyes as she poured a cup of water for herself from the water cooler and downed it in one big gulp. Then she went back for more and murmured with her mouth full of water, "I wouldn't do it, Boss. Trust me."

"Are you afraid to eat my cooking?" Breanna challenged, smiling up at him. "Pax. I made these as a peace offering. Surely you won't refuse."

Troy took a big bite of cookie, started chewing, and then stopped just as suddenly. He caught her rapt gaze, and swallowed forcefully. A strained smile creased his face.

She bit her lip to keep from chuckling when his eyes bugged out and he swallowed hard. Clapping her hands together, she asked, "Do you love them? I made them especially for you." She had, but not so he could enjoy them. All part of her master plan.

"Delicious."

His obvious lie made her chortle. Everything was on schedule.

Patsy regarded him as if he'd lost his mind. "You all right, Sheriff?"

"Never better." He stuffed the rest of the cookie in his mouth and he talked through the mouthful. "Funny, I don't remember you being such a good cook."

Breanna rested her elbows on the table as she twiddled with her pony tail, miffed at the insult. Still, she kept up the charade. "I've been practicing."

A scowl marred his brow. "On somebody in particular?" "That's top secret..." she said in a sing-song voice.

He confiscated the rest of the cookies and stomped to his office without another word.

"What's wrong with him?" Patsy wiped her mouth with a napkin, poured a steaming cup of coffee and carried it to her desk.

"Nothing's wrong. Everything's perfect." She felt like crowing. She was driving Troy crazy, she could read it in his eyes. Although not her intent, the reaction was a bonus she hadn't counted on.

"If you say so." Patsy shook her head as she settled into her chair and turned on her computer. The machine hummed and then bells and whistles sounded at odd intervals.

A scant two hours later, Breanna's friend Danielle, gorgeous and dressed like a fashion model, sidled into Troy's office under her veiled but watchful gaze. She couldn't have missed the clicking of high heels on the hard linoleum if she'd had on headphones.

"Uh, your friend's here." Patsy's curious gaze followed Danielle's progress from the front entrance to her sexy, seductive perch on the edge of the sheriff's desk.

"Hmmm?" Breanna feigned disinterest. She glanced up with a neutral expression and then turned away with a shrug. "Guess she's not here to see me."

"Don't you care?" Patsy drummed nails on her desk, her gaze ping-ponging from one friend to the other and back. "She's flirting with your man."

Breanna screwed up her face and offered up a wide-eyed stare. "He's not 'my man'. He's free to do what he wants." She didn't add that she'd aimed this particular missile at the sheriff, and she was indeed very interested in his reaction. He'd passed Section A of test number one, the awful cooking test, but would he pass test number two, the femme fatale?

She pretended to work on the stack of files littering her desk so she could watch her friend work. Danielle, always the flirt, was a pro. She wouldn't let a little thing like Troy not being her type get in the way of a little fun, or helping her friend, Breanna. Today, she was in top notch form. She'd opted for the leather mini skirt, see-through blouse, and was made up to the hilt in vivid contrast to Breanna's plain-Jane style.

Danielle whispered something in Troy's ear as she massaged his shoulders.

He blushed, slid a startled glance in Breanna's direction and then jumped up, shoving his chair away from his desk. Shoveling hair away from his eyes, he strode out of his office. "Uh...it was very nice to see you, Danielle. I'm afraid I won't be able to help you."

Danielle sashayed out of Troy's office, winking at Breanna behind his back and giving her the thumbs up. Deviltry danced in her slate blue eyes. "Your loss."

Breanna heard her sultry voice and wanted to slug her for overplaying her role. She waved to her friend, biting her inner lip. "Bye, Dani. Lunch later?"

Danielle slid a sly glance at Troy and licked her lips. "Give me a rain check. Japanese buffet tomorrow?"

Troy wiped perspiration from his brow and sent a worried look at Breanna. "Something up I should know about?"

Breanna ignored him until he sat on her desk and repeated his question louder. "You say something, boss?" She pretended ignorance but she wished she'd thought to bring sunglasses to shade her eyes. She'd have to get them from the car to make it through the rest of the day.

Troy leaned forward and tapped her on the chin. "Why are you being so nice today? Since when do you bake me cookies?" He scanned her frumpy attire and girl-next-door face, his brows pinched. "Or dress so...casual?"

She splayed her hands in front of her and shrugged. Darn. She noted that her finger nail polish was chipping which definitely wasn't her real self. She couldn't stand chipped polish. "Hadn't noticed. And the cookies were for everyone, not just for you, Mr. Vain. I didn't tell you to hijack the whole kit and kaboodle. That was your idea."

Color crawled up his neck. "I must've misunderstood," he said, grumbling, pivoting on his heel and marching back to his office.

Just before five o'clock, Sarah, another of Breanna's friends, wandered in, sweetly dressed in a sun dress and sandals, carrying a basketful of aromatic pastries. She swung the basket back and forth as she slipped into Troy's private domain.

Again, Breanna watched covertly, her stomach tied into knots.

"Your friends are awfully social today." Patsy rocked back in her chair and linked her hands behind her head as her gaze darted to Troy, Sarah, and then back to Breanna with a hundred unasked questions.

"I'm not their keeper. Maybe they wanted to check up on me. After all, they all saw me get handcuffed and stuffed into the back of the Sheriff's car." Breanna yawned and patted her mouth. She stretched and whined like a cat. "They want to make sure I'm being treated well. That's all."

"Aren't you going home? You're usually a streak out the door by 5:01. You wouldn't be worried about your friends flirting with your man, would you?" Patsy asked.

"If I had a man, I'm sure I wouldn't have to worry about my friends. As I don't have one, I really don't have anything to worry about, do I?" She stretched, feeling like strafing her claws across Patsy's back. She had to strangle back a snarl that desperately longed to escape in response to Patsy's cattiness.

She wanted to stay and see Sarah's progress with Troy but she didn't want to give Patsy any more ammunition for her theory. So far, other than appealing to Troy's ravenous appetite if his wolfing down the contents of the basket

Sarah'd brought him was anything to go by, Troy wouldn't let her get to first base. Just in case he was cognizant of her presence, Breanna turned off her computer, tidied her desk, and then sauntered into the ladies room. She lingered for a few minutes, hoping Patsy had grown bored and left her alone to stake out her suspect, then exited and rounded the corner.

Troy pushed off against the wall beside her desk with his booted foot. "Whatcha doin' tonight?"

She jumped and clutched her throat. "Depends." She scolded her nerve endings for jumping around like a hyperactive kid and slowed her movements to a nonchalant pace as she gathered her purse. Boy how she wished she'd remembered to bring those sunglasses inside as she'd promised herself earlier so she could hide her expression from the man.

He stalked her, closing her escape hatch so that she was pinned inside the U of her desk. His warm breath fanned the back of her neck as he tugged her pony tail.

"I have a date." She felt him bristle behind her and his hands dropped from her hair.

"A date?" Suspicion clouded his voice. "With whom?"

She couldn't help herself. "Roger." She omitted that Tim and Jana, Roger's wife, Leann and probably half Sierra's clown friends were also going. "We're going to Riley's."

"Oh." He backed off, thrusting his hands deep into his pants pockets. But his gaze became black chips of ice freezing her. "Who's Roger?"

"One of the policemen I work with in Ft. Lauderdale who's come up for Sierra's wedding."

"Another good friend?" He peered hard as he rocked back and forth on his worn heels.

Late afternoon sun danced on his hair, making her long to run her fingers through it. She squelched the desire, unsure whether or not her action would be welcome. She paused to ponder her answer and wrinkled her nose. "Just a friend."

She was dying to know what Troy had planned to ask but wouldn't give him the satisfaction of asking him.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Five

"I'm starving here! What took you so long, woman?" Tim pounced on her as she strolled in the door at the family home.

Jana rolled her eyes as she patted her rounded tummy. "You'd think he was the one eating for two starved as he always is."

"Just in sympathy, darlin'." Tim swept his wife into his arms, love shining in his eyes. "I'm an expectant daddy. I see how Roger's baby keeps him hopping, so I gotta keep up my strength."

"Give me a chance to get spiffed up. I can't go out looking like this." Breanna grabbed an apple from the table and sank her teeth into it.

Everyone laughed, even Sierra who thumbed through a clowning magazine. She was hanging out with them since her fiance was out with his mother.

Breanna wondered how her sister could smile when she'd been deserted. Did Sierra really want to marry the man? She made a mental note to talk to her later about this, in private. She had too many doubts about Sierra's upcoming wedding, and she didn't like them any more than she liked her doubts regarding Troy.

"You sure you don't mind babysitting?" Leann asked Jack, worry creasing her forehead. "You got my cell phone number, right? Call me if you have any problems. The baby just ate so she shouldn't be hungry for at least two hours. But there's

two bottles in the fridge just in case. Don't put them in the microwave as that leaves hot spots..."

Roger dragged Leann outside, sending an apologetic smile at Breanna's dad. "He raised two girls. I'm sure he can handle one kid for one evening. Stop worrying. The baby will be fine."

"We're ship shape and we'll be A-okay, won't we, Baby Abby?" Jack hoisted the tiny giggling girl into his arms and set her on his shoulders. "You'd best get going. Tim's afraid all Riley's good grub'll be gone before you get there."

Breanna didn't take long to change but her friends were revving the car's engine as they waited by the front door. She crowded into the backseat and gave herself up to having a good time.

When they arrived, Riley's bar and grill was smoky and loud. Steaks sizzled on the grill, their rich aroma mingling with that of yeasty beer and sharp nicotine.

"I see happy hour's alive and well." Not that it could rival a beach-side bistro in Ft. Lauderdale, but for a small community like this, the joint enjoyed good business. She lowered herself into a chair in a darkened corner where she had a decent view of the room. Leann and Sierra flanked her. Tim sat straight across from her, his wife at his side. Roger had an errand to run so he would meet them later.

Steepling her hands on the table, Breanna wondered why the sight of Tim and his wife didn't cause her even a flicker of pain or remorse. The only emotion they elicited was happiness and joy. At most, she longed for what they had

found, but she had no pangs of regret that Tim had married someone else or that they were having a baby.

Then she spied Troy across the room, dark and brooding. He nursed a dark brown bottle, his expression morose. "Daddy's wrong," she muttered under her breath.

"Hmm?" Leann shifted closer. "Something wrong?"

"Nothing," Breanna lied, shredding her napkin. Had Troy followed her? Or did he hang out at this bar often?

Leann followed her gaze. "That's a whole lot of hunky nothing. Maybe you should sidle on over there and see if the two of you can work things out."

When Troy twisted around, Breanna scooted back, placing her friend in his line of vision so he wouldn't see her. An idea began to formulate in her mind. "I don't know that I could ever trust him again." Although she'd hoped her tests earlier in the day would help, they hadn't totally set her mind at ease. He'd not professed undying love or swept her off her feet.

"I don't know how to help you there. Trust's a hard one." Leann tapped her foot to the rhythm of the country-western song pulsing around them.

"Well, I have an idea," Breanna spoke in a low tone so that only Leann could hear. "Could you ask him to dance?"

"What?" Leann yelped, alarm flashing in her blue, quartersized eyes.

"Shhhh!" Breanna motioned under the table for her friend to pipe down. "Don't attract his attention over here."

"I thought that's what you wanted me to do." Confusion twisted Leann's mouth.

"She's testing him," Sierra said to Leann, resting an elbow on the table. "She talked some of her other friends into trying to torpedo him with their down-home cooking this afternoon."

"Whatever for?" Tim butted in, scowling, sympathy and rebuke in his eyes.

"She wants to make sure he won't cheat on her again. So far, so good. Obviously, she's not convinced he's true blue." Sierra smiled up at the waiter who brought their drinks and took a long sip of hers.

Breanna's grimace turned to a scowl. "Do you mind not talking about me as if I'm not here? Maybe, he's just smart enough not to go for my long-time friends. But if he doesn't know the decoy..." She turned her gaze on Leann, cataloguing her chic outfit and dynamite figure.

Horror sparked in her friend's eyes. "Oh no, no, no. I learned my lesson about tricking men. If Roger caught me, there'd be hell to pay."

Breanna cosied up to her idea as she watched Troy covertly. "Roger will never have to know," she purred.

"Unless his best friend tells him." Tim grinned, his gaze sparkling. He drummed his fingers menacingly on the table.

With such mixed signals, she wasn't sure how to read him.

"Tell me, should I be relieved or insulted that you didn't try these femme fatale tricks on me? Should I be copasetic that you're trying to trick a brother in blue?"

"I only asked Leann to dance with the man. And if you weren't happily married to a wonderful woman, I'd say you should be pining away for me and very upset I didn't pull any tricks. But you are married and you're very happy, so I won't

say it." She turned and squeezed Leann's hand as she adopted her best puppy-dog-eyed look. "Please!"

"Put me down as voting against this little insane charade." Tim wrinkled his nose then leaned back in his chair and draped a casual arm around his wife's shoulders.

"Like you never pulled a charade in your life?" Jana said sotto voce.

Everyone at the table broke into fits of laughter, remembering Tim's many outlandish escapades.

"No one could top your shenanigans."

Breanna nodded vehemently. When it came to pulling off pretence, Tim was the king. "Who asked you to vote? This isn't a democracy." She turned back to Leann. "Please! My future rides on you."

Leann glared in silence for several moments, then delved in her purse for her cherry red lipstick and began applying it. "If I go down, I'm taking you with me. *Capice*?"

"I'll post a lookout at the door," Jana offered. "If I see Roger, I'll signal you."

"Now you're even taking my wife on your insanity trip."

Tim folded his arms across his chest and lowered his chair with a bang. "Why can't women be honest and stop playing games?"

Jana batted her lashes at her husband and punched him playfully in the arm. "Really? I was always honest with you. You were the one playing games with me."

Tim had the grace to look sheepish. "That's different. I was deep undercover."

"Under feather boas and tons of mascara," Jana said, laughing so hard she held her belly.

"Okay, go be the lookout. But I'm disavowing any knowledge of this crazy scheme. Just don't be too rough on the poor guy."

"Be happy, hubby, that you're not the target of our evil machinations." Jana sat on her husband's lap, and kissed him soundly on the lips.

"Go," Breanna hissed, "Before Troy leaves and we lose our chance."

"You seem awfully anxious for someone who claims not to be interested in the man," Tim drawled, tenting a blonde brow.

Breanna wadded up a napkin and threw it at him. "Stuff it, Harper."

"You gonna let her talk that way to me?" Tim asked his wife.

Jana chuckled and lumbered to her feet. As she waddled away, she tossed over her shoulder, "You're capable of defending yourself."

"I hope my brother in blue is, too." Tim tipped his bottle to his lips and gulped down a swig.

Breanna hunkered down to watch, her nerve endings twitching. She pushed back the cuticles from her nails one by one, her gaze never leaving Troy. Her little voice nagged incessantly. Could this be love if she had to keep testing him?

More conflicted than ever, she didn't know how to respond. She only knew that the next few minutes could make or break her future.

Sierra tossed money on the table. "My bet's on Troy."

Breanna's jaw dropped and she spun to face her Benedict

Arnold sister. "You're betting on my love life?"

Tim held up his hands. "Uh uh. Not that I'm not a betting man, but you can find another sucker."

"I can't believe you'd do this." Breanna drew her knees up in front of her, hugging them tightly to her breasts. "Shush! There she goes," she said in a stage whisper, her eyes wide with glee and excitement.

"You won't hear them back here with all this racket."

"We could if I'd wired Jana for sound." Tim rubbed his chin.

Breanna rolled her eyes. "You got surveillance equipment with you?"

"No. Just saying 'if'."

"It would've helped. Maybe you can mosey up there and listen. Then you can report back."

"And mess up Leann's little seduction?" Tim shook his head, picking up his beer again. "I'm closer than I want to be to this already. I remember when Leann twisted poor Roger around her little finger. That was nothing compared to what you're putting this guy through. If he survives this, he deserves a purple heart."

Was she really that horrible? Heat rushed into her cheeks, and she wanted to sink into the floor. "If you don't feel comfortable, don't. It was a silly idea."

Leann nodded and patted her hand. "It's just a dance. I remember feeling this way before Roger and I got engaged. It'll be fine. You'll see." She sidled up to Troy, leaned against the bar and flipped her hair behind her shoulders. It glowed

almost white gold in the smoky, dark room. Her pheromones fairly reeked all the way to the back of the establishment, making the hair on Breanna's neck bristle.

Breanna resumed ruining her cuticles, and chewing the lipstick off her bottom lip.

Tim rounded the table and perched beside her. "I've never seen a guy get to you like this before. I didn't think it could be done. You didn't bat an eyelash when I told you I was engaged to marry Jana."

"I was heartbroken," Breanna said with as much pathos as she could summon, sensitive to her friend's feelings. "I was also cheering that you finally met your match, even if it wasn't me. I thought I'd never see the day you'd settle down with just one woman."

Sierra downed a long drink, wiped off her mouth, and giggled. "Not that you aren't downright gorgeous, Timothy, but she's been hopelessly in love with the sheriff since she was in middle school. One glance at him on the football field, and blam, she was a goner."

Breanna grimaced. "That's your story, big mouth."

Troy turned at Leann's prodding. He bent his head close, a lopsided grin spanning his face. He laughed at something she said and the tension in his shoulders visibly relaxed. Soon, they were on the dance floor, laughing together.

Breanna fidgeted in her chair. Did he like dancing with Leann? Or was her friend divulging her secrets? She'd give anything to hear what the pair said.

At that moment, Roger swaggered through the door, smiling through his whistling.

Breanna's heart dropped and she gasped. Roger wasn't supposed to be here yet. "Oh no!"

Jana waved for their help too late, panic on her crimson face. She loped behind him tugging on his hand, trying to get his attention.

The signal shot across Breanna's nerves, making her jump up. Her chair fell to the ground with a loud crash. "This isn't good. We have to distract him."

Before anyone could intervene, storm clouds thundered across Roger's already dark-as-night eyes as they alighted on his wife and the sheriff. His lips pursed so tightly only a thin line remained visible, he marched toward his spouse. He didn't notice Jana tugging at his hand and increased his stride, pulling her behind him.

"Great. Just great." Tim bounded out of his chair and arrowed to his wife's side. "Doesn't Jana know when to fall back?"

Breanna's heart was ripped from her chest as her gaze slashed to Troy and Leann.

Still dancing, Leann hadn't yet spied her husband.

Bree wanted to sink into the floor and disappear. She couldn't believe this mess. She jumped up and followed Tim.

At that moment, Jana slumped into a chair, moaning. Writhing, she held her stomach. "Take me to the hospital. I think it's time."

Breanna's stomach churned and her hands grew clammy. "Wh-what? But the baby's not due for at least another three weeks."

Jana raised her solemn, worried gaze. "Tell the baby. I ignored some twinges earlier but the pains are coming every three minutes."

The words broke Breanna's heart and set off alarms. "They can't be." She moved over to her friend's side and glanced at her watch. She stroked Jana's downy fine hair away from her perspiring forehead. "This can't be happening," she murmured under her breath. This was all her fault.

The blonde woman panted and coiled into a fetal position. "Maybe they're not. I think this one was only four minutes since the last. Get me to the hospital. I don't want to lose my baby."

Even as Jana's nightmarish words reverberated in her mind, Breanna almost swallowed her tongue, ran to Troy, and clutched at his hand. "We're having a baby in here. We need to get my friend to the hospital. Now."

Commotion broke out in the bar. "Baby?" Several voices echoed in various degrees of disbelief and excitement.

"Now?" Leann gulped and then paled when her husband towered over them, his expression thunderous. She wavered and her eyes widened. "Roger."

"So you remember my name. Who's he?" Roger jerked a thumb at Troy.

"Not now, Rog," Breanna put herself in front of Troy lest Roger decided to play the jealous husband. "I'll explain this later. Jana's in labor. We have to get her to the hospital."

Tim burst between them. "Are we just going to chit chat while my baby's born in the middle of a bar? Or are you

helping me get her to the hospital? Or do you have experience birthing babies?"

Troy's gaze bounced between them, his brow furrowed. Then his dark gaze landed on Breanna. He squared his shoulders and spoke to Tim, "Where is she? Help me get her in my cruiser." To Breanna, Troy murmured, "You're coming with us. You have a lot of explaining to do."

Bree gulped and, already feeling crucified, fell into step. Nothing would keep her from Jana's side but she didn't know where to begin with an explanation.

Troy lifted Jana into Tim's arms and helped them into his car. Then he fumbled with the key ring, his complexion ashen. "Don't worry," he said to Jana. "We'll get you right over to Coconut General."

Tim cradled his wife on the back seat and murmured in her ear, "Hold on, baby. We'll be there shortly."

Jana slung arms around her husband's neck and leaned her head against his chest. "I'm scared, Tim. The baby's only thirty-six weeks along."

Breanna didn't remember getting into the car but found herself sitting beside Troy, gripping the edge of her seat. She was catapulted into the past when she was being rushed to the hospital, losing her baby. She struggled to breathe. Her pulse hammered her wrist so hard she felt faint. Her fingers worried the material of her slacks. She chewed her lip. She prayed to God the outcome would be better for her friends. She couldn't go through this a second time.

The sheriff radioed ahead to alert the hospital they were on the way. Breanna couldn't help but think he should have

done the same for her and their baby. His voice echoed in her ears. Knives stabbed her abdomen as if she'd slid into the past, and she was the one being rushed to the hospital with labor pains. Although her pregnancy had not reached this point, her stomach had contracted much like this as her fetus aborted.

Troy slid her a confused, concerned glance, but didn't address her. Instead he ground the gears, propelling the vehicle forward. "How's she doing?"

Troy's voice grated on her ears almost as much as the gears. She wanted to put her fingers in her ears to drown him out but she managed, just barely, to keep her poise.

"I've got to push." Jana's voice sounded simultaneously weak and determined.

Breanna unbuckled her seat beat and swiveled in her seat. "Grit your teeth and hold on, sweetie. We're almost there." If her memory served right, the hospital should be around the next bend, just past the grove of coconut trees that lined the still canal. That's if it hadn't moved in the past eight years, as had most everything else in town.

"D-don't know if I can." Profuse perspiration dripped from Jana's face as she huffed and puffed.

Tim held his wife as if she were the most precious being on Earth.

Conflicting emotions warred inside Breanna. Warmth flooded her at the tenderness Tim displayed toward his wife. Yet, the emergency room lights reminded her of the night she lost her baby, of how Meg had probably been brought here after her fatal accident.

A moment later, the bright lights of the medical center blinded her, making her squint and shade her eyes from the glare.

Several medical personnel huddled around the emergency room entrance to wheel away Jana. "Family only," they told her when she followed Tim deeper into the hospital.

When the swinging doors closed behind the stretcher and Tim and Jana disappeared deep within the belly of the hospital, Troy took her aside. The sheriff's heavy hands fell to Breanna's shoulders, imprisoning her before him. He stared deeply into her eyes. "You look as if you need medical attention yourself. Should I get a doctor?"

As she reined in her ragged emotions, she inhaled twice deeply to cleanse her lungs. She reminded herself this wasn't her personal trauma and that Jana and the baby were going to be okay now that they were here in doctors' hands. But the memories of being in this emergency room many years before haunted her.

Troy touched her hand. "Bree? Are you okay? Should I get a nurse?"

The sheriff's voice penetrated the fog clouding her brain. "No. No, I'm fine." She yanked away from him and licked her dry lips. Then she shook herself inwardly to restore her equilibrium.

Troy led her to a plastic chair and bade her to sit. He lowered himself beside her, leaning over his legs as he observed her keenly. "Are you worried for your friend or for your boyfriend's baby?"

Unable to believe her ears, she violently recoiled as a hiss whistled through her clenched teeth. "Tim's married to Jana and he hasn't been my boyfriend for a very long time. I can't believe what you're insinuating."

Confusion flickered in Troy's black eyes. He raked long fingers through his hair. "I don't get it. How can you still hold a grudge against Meg but like Jana?"

Breanna's heart started to bleed again and she gasped. How could he ask that? Especially now? She wrung her hands in her lap and rocked back and forth." This isn't the time to get into this. I'm very worried about the baby." Of all the times for him to ask, this wasn't it. She didn't know what she would do if anything happened to her godchild. They might be the only children she was destined to have, and she would never wish the pain of loss and devastation she'd suffered on anyone, especially not her special friends.

Troy lumbered to his feet. "I could use a black coffee. Want one?"

She nodded, welcoming a bit of caffeine to revive her system.

When he returned with it a moment later, she gladly accepted the dark brew. She wasn't surprised that he remembered she liked hers with plenty of sugar and cream, so that it was almost white. Troy seemed to remember a lot about her. Superficial things that didn't matter a bit while he didn't have a clue about the most important event in her life. She chortled at her runaway thoughts.

"You know, I'm usually pretty good at figuring things out, but I can't figure you." Troy's narrow gaze dissected her.

Uneasy under his intense consideration, pretending to be fascinated by the other emergency room patrons, she looked away. Her finger traced the rim of her wax coffee cup as steam warmed it. "There's nothing to figure out," she murmured, wishing he would leave her be with her private thoughts.

He took a slow, deliberate sip of his black coffee. "There's something eating at you. I just can't figure out if it's me marrying Meg or if there's something more."

She almost choked on her coffee and spluttered it all over herself. Cursing silently, she found a tissue in her purse and dabbed at the stain spreading on her ruined blouse. He couldn't know about the baby, could he? Was she so transparent? Or had someone been talking out of turn? "What do you mean?"

Troy took the coffee from her hands without her permission, his fingers grazing hers sending chills through her, and set it on the end table beside him. "Maybe guilt at the way you treated Meg? I mean I can't get how you can forgive Tim for doing the same thing I did, but you won't forgive me."

Her heart stopped. He knew she'd dated Tim? That she'd hoped to marry him before he'd fallen head over heels for Jana? How? Amazed at both his perception and his gall, she stared. Guilt? He thought she should feel guilty? She and her child were the injured parties in this situation. Yet, deep loss crept into her bones. Much as she hated to admit it, she missed Meg and the close friendship they'd shared for so many years. But was it regret or guilt she felt? Maybe both?

She leaned forward, elbows digging into her legs, and stared at a spot on the floor as if it was infinitely fascinating. Meg's face floated before her eyes. Only it kept shifting, starting with the Megan she'd met as a young child, to the preteen Meg, to the teenage best friend, to the last time she'd seen her alive. Could Troy be right? Did she feel guilty for the way she'd ignored Meg? Up to and including turning her back on Meg's funeral? How could Meg have been helped if she had attended her funeral? Meg had been dead and gone by then, past accepting apologies and making up.

If she had been in love with Tim like she'd been in love with Troy, could she befriend Jana the way she had? What if Leann had betrayed her the way Meg had? Could she forgive her? In the eight years since she'd left town, she had grown up a lot. She didn't hold grudges the way she once had. Wasn't Tim a case in point? They'd managed to remain the best of friends despite their history, despite how hurt she'd felt when she'd found out he'd fallen in love with Jana and would marry her.

"This is where Meg died." Sadness warbled in Troy's voice.

Breanna's thoughts pulled up short and she let her gaze roam around the room full of sick and worried people. "What? Right here?"

Troy sucked in a sharp breath. "This is where she was brought after the accident. She didn't make it into surgery. She died on the way in."

Such pain sluiced Troy's voice that the grief cut her in two, catching her off guard. Sympathy welled in her heart for the man who had once meant more to her than any other,

surprising her that he could still engage her empathy.

Reaching out, she covered the top of his hand with hers. "I'm sorry. I know you must have loved her very much."

Troy leaned back in his chair, staring vacantly at the ceiling. "God help me. Not as much as she deserved."

A stab of hope hit her. Had he still loved her? She felt as if she spied on Troy's most intimate thoughts and deemed herself unworthy. "I'm sorry," she said simply, feeling her words were inadequate.

Troy turned and turned his hand over, grasping hers. He gazed deeply into her eyes, as if he could see into her soul, hypnotizing her. "I still loved someone else. Breanna, I'm so..."

Her breath stuck in her throat and her pulse fluttered erratically. She couldn't tear her gaze from his, fearing what he would reveal. And more, how she would react hearing it aloud?

"Breanna Parker?" An Amazon of a woman in a stark white tunic and slacks with a stethoscope dangling around her neck towered over them. Her shadow eclipsed them, dimming the stark hospital lighting.

Breanna's attention riveted on the nurse and she stood unsteadily, pulling away from Troy and whatever he had been going to say. "I'm Breanna. How's my friend?"

Guarded sadness floated across the woman's grey eyes and her glance wavered toward the back of the hospital. "Mrs. Harper will be fine. But the baby came early..."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Six

"The baby? Is he..." Breanna's voice cracked and she couldn't complete her sentence. Her knees wobbled. She didn't pull away when Troy put a strong arm around her waist and leant his strength.

"He's alive, but very weak. His lungs are not fully developed and he's in an incubator on a respirator. Mrs. Harper's asking for you."

Breanna didn't know whether to thank or curse God. She decided to thank him and plead for the baby's life so she did so in silent prayer. "Please take me to her."

"I'd like to go, too," Troy said, grasping Breanna's elbow.

The nurse shook her head. "Sorry, she's only allowed two visitors at a time, Sheriff. Unless you need to see her in an official capacity."

Troy pursed his lips and then said, "No. I'll wait."

"No need. I'll get a cab home or call Daddy." Half in shock, Breanna followed the nurse and barely heard Troy's answer that he'd wait.

Tim crushed her close. "Did you hear? We had a little boy..."

Breanna ducked out of Tim's rib-crushing hug and gave Jana a kiss on her cheek. Then she stood and squeezed their hands as her heart went out to them. Under the circumstances, she didn't know whether to give her congratulations or comfort. When she pulled back, she averted her gaze from his, guilt dragging at her thoughts.

"I'm so sorry, about what happened at the bar. I never thought..."

"No, you didn't..." Tim's voice broke. His shoulders slumped and his ashen complexion worried her almost as much as his flashing eyes scared her.

"Just what was going on at the bar?"

Troy's ragged baritone made Breanna jump as he stepped between herself and the lieutenant. Her nerves about to break, she turned to the intruder and noted his nostrils were flared and the muscles in his arms were corded. Tension rolled off him in waves as if he was spoiling for a fight. "I thought the nurse wouldn't allow you up here?"

Troy's black glance slid over her. "I thought you might need me. Besides, I wanted to see if I could do anything to help."

"I'll be fine." At least better than having to face him in his dangerous mood plus deal with Tim. She didn't know how much more she could take, especially when she glanced at Tim to see that his eyes looked suspiciously watery.

Tim glanced at his wife and took them aside. "Let's take a walk. Perhaps we can see the baby." Without awaiting their reply, he ushered them down the hall.

Getting his drift and not wanting to upset Jana any more than she already was, Breanna followed him out. Besides, she was dying to see the newborn, if they were allowed a glimpse. "Have you picked out a name?" Maybe small talk could diffuse the tension.

Tim rounded on her. "Damn it anyway, Bree. I told you not to play your dangerous games. Why'd you have to drag Jana

into them? If you'd listened, we might not be here right now. The baby wouldn't be in danger..." His words choked off.

Breanna wilted. Feeling horrible, wishing she could get a do-over, she mumbled, "I never dreamed... I mean, do you think I wanted anything to happen to Jana or to your innocent child? I couldn't live with myself if I let another baby die..." Horrified, she realized her deadly slip and bit her tongue. But the damning words were out and couldn't be bitten back. Against her will, her eyes widened so large in her face that her cheeks ached from the strain.

Both men froze, their gazes glued to her. "Another baby died?" Troy echoed, a haunted quality to his voice, questions pooling in his eyes.

Almost simultaneously, Tim asked, "What baby?"

Breanna froze and tried to smile but when Troy's expression turned black, she backed away, knowing her mistake was fatal. At least she was in a hospital if Troy tried to kill her.

"That's what I'd like to know. And whose baby? When?" Troy turned his massive body so that he blocked her only exit.

His eyes were stormier than any hurricane she'd ever seen. "I-I..." Her heart stopped beating. She couldn't tell him. If she did, she'd choke on the words. He couldn't know now or ever. Wiping unbidden tears from her cheeks, she pushed past him.

Troy's heavy hand dropped on Breanna's right shoulder, feeling more like steel than flesh, turning her blood to ice.

Bile rose in her throat and she closed her eyes. But instead of helping, vertigo overtook her.

The nurse came for Tim and he made mumbled excuses and followed her back to the baby.

That left her alone with Troy, the last person she wanted to be alone with, especially now. But he wasn't giving her a choice. He marched her down the hall before she could say a proper farewell. He didn't speak until they were alone in his police cruiser and the air crackled with expectation.

"What baby, Bree? Whose baby?"

He gazed into her soul, delving for answers she was loathe to give. She folded her arms securely over her chest and stared at the moon, knowing the cataclysm that would befall her when she answered him. Lush and full, the orb was tinged with red. Blood on the moon. Why wasn't she surprised?

"Breanna?" His voice gentled a notch which only tied her stomach into a tighter knot.

She steeled herself for the moment of impact when he discovered that her sorrow was also his, but she feared nothing could shield her from such fall out. Despite the fact Troy had been such a bastard, the child had been his, too. She'd seen for herself that he adored his little girl and was a loving and devoted father, thus she had no doubt he would mourn the loss of the child he hadn't known existed—until now.

She inhaled deeply then half turned in her seat and pierced him with her most potent stare, fury and sorrow lashing out. "Whose baby do you think it was? What do you think happened? Take a wild guess."

His brows knit together and deep lines etched his forehead. "Your baby died? Who was the father?"

"My baby. I miscarried my baby." Her hand covered her aching heart and she swallowed hard. Blood pounded in her ears. "Are you happy dredging up my most painful memories? Do you like to twist me inside out and see my soul bleed?"

He cursed mildly under his breath. "You never make things easy."

She glared back at him, her soul in absolute agony. "Neither do you."

"Who was the father?" His shoulders stiffened and he regarded her with a hawk-eyed expression.

Knowing he suspected the truth and wouldn't let her rest until she confessed, she squirmed. If she didn't, he'd wear her down with his questions. Still, she couldn't bring herself to just come out and admit it in spite of the tendril of pity that her anger hadn't smothered. "Can't you guess? Have you never wondered?"

"Oh, God." Troy's hand dropped limply to the seat and his shoulders slumped.

As his face was in shadow, the moon behind him, she couldn't fathom his expression. The defeat in his voice sliced her, however, and she wished with all her heart that she'd never come home.

Had everyone in town known but him? That he had fathered two children and that his fiancee had lost the baby she carried?

His gut knotted and twisted so badly he wanted to throw up. How could he have been so blind? The thought had never

once occurred that Breanna could also be in a motherly way. Meg had so screwed with his head that he'd been lost in his own miserable world. Although he'd known his actions would hurt Breanna, he hadn't dreamed how much.

How could Breanna keep his child a secret? Why hadn't she told him? If he'd known, he'd have married her. She'd been the woman of his dreams, not Meg.

"How could you keep this from me?" he finally choked out, his voice raspy, his heart shattering. "How could you be so cruel?"

Breanna's eyes widened, incredulity shining from them. "Me cruel? You abandoned me and our child."

"That's unfair. I didn't know about the child."

She scooted further away from him as if he were abhorrent. He wasn't so sure he didn't feel the same.

She let down her hair and raked her hands through it making it messier than it was already. "Oh, so that made it okay? You knew I existed. You knew I wore your engagement ring. Or did the alcohol destroy those brain cells?"

"The child was mine, too. As its father I had every right to know. You..."

Fury blazed from her eyes and shaking, she rubbed her hands up and down her legs.

He'd never seen her so enraged. He'd never felt so bereft and furious himself.

"You had no rights. You forfeited those rights when you married Meg without even the decency to warn me first." She gulped in huge breaths of air and impatiently swept stray strands of long hair out of her eyes. "Do you know how I felt,

wondering if the entire town guessed my shame? Of feeling the fool? Of wondering how I'd raise my baby..."

"Our baby." His teeth gritted until he thought they would break. His heart hammered against his ribs and it was a miracle they didn't crack.

"How I'd raise my baby alone without a father or husband, in a town that would always whisper behind my back."

"I deserved to know. I would have helped." Who gave a rat's ass about what anyone else would think? No one else mattered except them and the child they'd lost. He glanced at her and sucked in a breath. Her eyes were almost feral, as if he had a rabid animal cornered.

She snorted and held her hand to her chest. "I'm sure your wife would have liked that. Believe it or not, I didn't want to wreck your marriage."

"What would you have done had I told you? Left your wife and legal child? Given me money to quietly disappear? To abort the baby maybe?"

Her low opinion shocked him. Abortion? "How could you think such a thing? You obviously didn't know me if you could think that. And all this time, I thought I married the wrong woman." Unable to be near her another moment, he shoved open the car door, got out, and slammed the door.

She unfolded herself from his cruiser, glared, and turned her back.

He'd never seen it so straight and rigid, not even the first day she'd come back to town.

"I'm so glad I helped you make that major breakthrough. Consider this my resignation. I'm leaving town as soon as the wedding's over."

So soon? He needed to know more before she left and the wedding was this weekend As she hiked away, he caught up with her, grabbed her elbow and swung her around to face him. "Where's the baby? Was it a boy or girl? What name did you give it?"

She shook her arm free, but she didn't back up.

In fact, her breathing scorched him.

"I miscarried too early to know if it was a boy or girl. Too early to have anything to bury. So I never got the chance to name him or her."

"You still should have told me. As the father..."

"Father?"

A word had never sounded so scathing, nor had laughter sounded so devoid of humor.

"A father is someone who cares. Who's there. Like my dad. Like you are to your daughter." Her hand rose and she pointed. "You were nothing more than a sperm donor to my child."

Her vehemence left him wordless. She really saw him as a cold murdering bastard? Any hopes he'd cherished of her and a reconciliation died. So all he was to her was a sperm donor, that there was nothing to build on and all desire to do so disappeared in a flash, he glared back. "Make sure you leave everything on Thea's desk the way you found it."

He didn't ask how she'd get home. In fact, he felt sorry for anyone who tangled with the she-devil. Banging into his black

and white, he burned rubber in the opposite direction from her, determined never to see the woman again.

Sperm donor...

Breanna couldn't believe she'd spoken the words that had erupted from her lips. As she walked through the dark town, she wrapped both arms around her aching stomach. Troy had been much more than a sperm donor. He'd been her world. Then he'd brought her world crashing down around her.

She never wanted to feel about a man that way again. She never wanted to need a man like that again. Or be that same vulnerable girl. It was a relief that Troy finally knew, that she didn't have to watch every word out of her mouth.

She considered proving it by staying in town and showing him she was not content working low-paying jobs or being supported by any man, not even him.

Her life, her job, her urban family was back in Ft. Lauderdale. Her future lay in the schooling she'd signed up for. She had to stop living in the past. From now on, she would put one foot in front of the other and start living. Not just the admirable show of it she'd been putting on all these years. But for real.

Even if she couldn't have a child of her own, she could have a life. Maybe even a husband. Maybe adopt children. Maybe a career, a real career, would be enough.

Wrapped up in her thoughts, she was amazed when she saw the Parker Ranch right in front of her. She was glad to see the kitchen lights on, meaning either her father or sister were awake. She didn't want to wait 'til the morning to tell them she was leaving as soon as Sierra was hitched, nor

would she sneak away. They deserved more than that. She loved them and she didn't want them to ever doubt that as she feared they had for the past eight years.

Her feet aching after the long walk, she kicked off her shoes, and walked barefoot into the kitchen. She was relieved and sad that both Big Jack and Sierra were there. Were they waiting up for her? Eager to hear the gossip about the reunion or just about Troy?

She sank onto a chair, dropped her strappy heels in a heap beside her, and massaged her aching feet. Not able to couch her statement in flowery words, she stated, "I'm going home. Right after the nuptials."

Her father and Sierra exchanged questioning looks as they put their drinks down on the kitchen table. "What about Troy?" Sierra asked.

"He knows everything." Well, almost all the things that could possibly concern him. She had withheld the part that she might never conceive or carry another child. That was no one's business but hers and her future husband's.

"And?" Sierra almost dropped her coffee cup, letting it clang on the saucer.

Big Jack stroked his jaw as his gaze narrowed.

"And he told me to make sure my desk is put back in order before I leave." That said it all, didn't it? He didn't want her around. He probably hated her.

"Anything else?" Sierra's mouth gaped open. "No apologies. No comfort?"

Miserable but determined to survive, Breanna shook her head. She cursed the loss of her rubber band. She must have

dropped it in Troy's vehicle so she coiled her long heavy hair into a twist to get it off her neck. Hot and perspiring, she angled her exposed neck toward the ceiling fan for a bit of cooling. She bit back as much bitterness as she could. "He demanded apologies from me. He's livid I didn't tell him about the baby."

"It was his child, too." To her amazement and chagrin, her father's words nearly echoed Troy's.

When Sierra nodded, Breanna clenched her fingers into a fist. "I can't believe you're both on his side."

Sierra bounded to her feet and put a comforting arm around Breanna's shoulders and laid her cheek against Breanna's. "It's not that, sweetie. Would you prefer him to be a callous jerk and not care?"

That statement made Breanna pause and search deep in her soul. Some of the tension drained away and she leaned against her sister. "Of course, I want him to care. But it's too late for the baby. And that's all he cares about."

"You're dead wrong there." Big Jack sipped his coffee and then took a bite of his scrambled eggs as if nothing profound were taking place.

"How so?" Breanna massaged her sore neck, willing the rest of the tension to ease. "He's had plenty of time to tell me he cares and he hasn't. Not even now that I'm back, much less seek me out for a private conversation. That tells me everything I need to know."

"So now you're just running away again?" Sierra asked.

"Let me go on record opposing this," Big Jack said, crossing his legs. "Running away didn't solve your problems the first time. They won't solve them this time."

"I'm not running away." She tossed her head. "I'm simply returning to my life and my job."

"We're your life, too." Sierra turned to face off against Breanna. "I miss my sister."

How hypocritical! Breanna's blood pumped faster at the mention of her shortcomings. How was it okay for her sister to leave but not her? "You work, too. You travel. You're getting married and moving away from the ranch."

"True. But I'll come back more than once every five years. I don't abandon Daddy," Sierra spat vehemently.

Stunned and hurt at the force of the accusation, Breanna reeled. The first time Sierra had mentioned this, she'd thought her sister was teasing. Not now.

She turned her gaze to her father who merely shook his head. So he agreed with Sierra's assessment of the situation. "You also think I abandoned you?"

"What else would you call it?" Angry red infused her sister's cheeks as her body tensed. "When someone walks away and doesn't come back, that's usually called abandonment. You say the sheriff abandoned you, but you're just as guilty for abandoning us."

Her knees going weak, Breanna pulled up the nearest chair and sank onto it. She clutched the wooden arms of her seat, her knuckles whitening. She felt a tiny bit faint and everything blurred. "I called. I emailed. You visited me."

"That's not the same and you know it. This is your second visit in eight years. You'd think you'd moved to the moon, not merely two hours away. Daddy's not getting any younger." Sierra's chest rose and fell too quickly. Her eyes sparkled ominously.

If they were younger, that would signal an oncoming sisterly wrestling match. What had she done? She was guilty of precisely the same sin as Youngwolf. Well, not quite precisely, but too near for her liking.

She looked from her sister to her father, her heart breaking. How much time had she wasted? How much heartache had she caused? Tears stung the backs of her eyes. "What would you have me do? Quit my job? Give up..."

"A job you really don't want? A career you don't consider a career?" Sierra's words were spoken softly, almost whispered.

Just the same, they pierced Breanna's heart with the force of their truth. "But I'm starting school soon. I'll have a new career. The college is down in Boca." Breanna's mind reeled almost as much as her heart. Possibilities spun in a dizzying vortex.

"So visit during your school breaks. Christmas. The sheriff won't have to know you're here." Sierra poured her cold coffee into the sink and rinsed out her cup.

When her father opened his arms wide, she took the invitation, burrowing against his teddy bear-like warmth. How could she have been so blind and selfish? Her father was getting older. Seventy was fast approaching and although he was still strong, he wouldn't be forever. "I'm so sorry, Daddy. No matter what happened, I always loved you and Sierra. I

just couldn't handle staying here and being the object of everyone's pity and speculation. I had to move on with my life, and I couldn't do it, knowing I could run into Troy or his family without warning."

The big man stroked her hair tenderly and crooned. "I know, baby girl. I know. That's why we gave you your space. But Sierra's right. Eight years is more than enough time. We want you back in our fold. We need you."

"And I need you." The truth overwhelmed her. She may have lost her child and maybe any chance of having more children, but she still had a loving family who needed her. In her grief, she had almost thrown them away. The enormity of the revelation almost crushed her. All this time, she'd thought she was being strong and independent, but she'd been myopic in her own need.

"Stay," Sierra implored, moving behind their father and dropping her hands to his shoulders, massaging them gently.

The message in the depths of her eyes spoke far beyond the single word. It reminded Breanna just how much her sister meant to her. "Don't run off again. You wouldn't be the first person to live in the same town as an old flame and his family. Not even the first in our town."

Breanna inhaled deeply, knowing she couldn't stay, at least not right away. How much she wanted to, though. And how much she wanted to leave. Why did life have to be so complex? Couldn't it be black and white like before? There had been no shades of grey when she'd been nineteen and she'd just lost the baby. Now everything was cloudy and there were no right answers. "My boss expects me back at work. I

have an apartment. But I won't be a stranger anymore. I'll visit on weekends and vacations." Maybe, one day, she'd move back for good. Just not today. She didn't have a real job here and she was not the type to hang out at the ranch all day living off her father's welfare.

"Well, that's a start." Sierra smiled and enveloped both Breanna and their father in a big hug.

Breanna hugged them back, cocooning herself in her family's love. How she'd missed this warmth and belonging without even realizing it. She felt as if she was caught in a time vortex—as if she'd left only a month ago, not eight years. Everything was so familiar, so emblazoned on her heart and mind, and yet, she had another lifetime of alternate memories with her urban family in Ft. Lauderdale that seemed superimposed over her life here. No matter what choice she made now, she'd feel simultaneously sad and happy.

"What about your friends? You're just going to leave after I say "I do" and not tell them you're going back?"

As usual, Sierra was too logical to be in her line of work. She was the least silly person Breanna knew. How had she forgotten about her friends? "Shoot! No, I can't do that. Guess I'll tell them in the morning and we can convoy back together."

"Maybe I'll even come with you. I could use a vacation, and my schedule's clear for the next couple of weeks." Big Jack cracked a half smile.

"That would be wonderful, Daddy!" She'd love the company and wouldn't feel so lonely.

"Good, that's settled." Jack beamed. "I'll go lie out on the beach and have some fun. Maybe I'll meet a couple pretty ladies. Besides it's been too dang noisy for my likes the past month. Felt like I was in a big top. I'll need the break after all this."

"Stop that!" Sierra chuckled as she punched him playfully in the shoulder. "Weddings are supposed to be crazy."

Breanna couldn't cork her words or her grin, the first one in hours. "Well, there's crazy and there's crazy. Your clown friends rival anything I've seen down in Ft. Lauderdale." And she'd seen a lot in her tenure at the police department.

Some alone time with her dad would allow her to work on their relationship. She welcomed his visit. Separating herself from her father, she linked her arm through Sierra's and tugged. She clicked the door shut on her past and opened a new one to the future. Lifting her chin high, she said, "Come on. Help me pack."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Seven

The big day finally arrived. Breanna was so overpowered by the profusion of magnolias blossoming in the garden and overwhelmed by the enormity of Sierra's wedding, she had to take a deep breath or keel over. Silently she repeated to herself, "This isn't about me. Hold it together a little longer. This is Sierra's day." Still her nerves zinged and her legs wobbled. She wasn't sure if she was happy or sad that this signaled the end of her time with Troy.

She scowled. Of course she was happy! It was past time she got back to her life and end this epilogue. It never should have been. She'd been crazy to work for him, to put herself within a thousand feet of him. Feeling faint, she stuffed a morsel of food into her mouth and sipped her juice. Then she sought out her sister upstairs to help her dress.

Sierra was a vision in their mother's wedding gown, a gown Breanna no longer entertained any expectation to wear. She was happy one of them was honoring their mother by using it and one day, maybe her niece would wear it as well.

She pecked her sister on the cheek. "You're lovely as Mom was. This will make Dad very happy."

Sierra caught a tear escaping down Breanna's cheek and poised it on the pad of her thumb. "Then why are you crying?"

One side of Breanna's lips curved and she backhanded the rest of her tears. "These are happy tears. And maybe a little bit sad. I wish Mom was here."

Sierra hugged her and clung for several long moments. Then she pulled away and smiled dreamily into the mirror as she made the long skirt swish back and forth around her ankles. "Me, too."

Breanna blinked back another round of tears. "I'm sure Mom's watching from Heaven and that she's very happy."

Sierra nodded then bit her lip. "You think so? You know Dad hates Anthony. He doesn't like Anthony's mother, either."

Worry swelled in Bree's breast for she wholeheartedly agreed with her father's assessment of the duo. Anthony didn't treat her sister with love or respect. His mother was worse than the Wicked Witch of the West. She wouldn't wish the woman on her worst enemy. Bree waffled and finally diplomacy won out. "He'll think you as lovely as Mom."

Sierra turned to face her. In a stern voice she said, "I know you don't like them, either. Do you think I'm making a mistake?"

Bree hardly knew the man. To be honest, she'd been repelled by the way he spoke down to all of them as if they were beneath his contempt. She didn't want her sister to blame her forever more if she swayed Sierra to do something she'd regret later. She thought long and hard before replying. Finally she said, "I don't know them well. I don't like the way they speak to you. It's not respectful. You deserve better."

Sierra lowered her eyes as she twisted her engagement ring around her finger. "Anthony's not like that when his mother's not around. He can be sweet and kind. His kisses make me melt."

Breanna had trouble picturing the staid and stern Anthony melting anyone's bones but held her tongue. Then again she didn't understand her reaction to the man who'd broken her heart, either.

Words demanded to be said however. "Shouldn't a man who loves you always treat you well? Shouldn't he stand up for you to his mother?"

Sierra buried her face in her hands. After a moment she looked up and peeked out the window at the gathering guests. "It's not that bad. She was irritating him so he had an edge to his voice."

Bree pursed her lips and dragged in a deep breath. She prayed her sister was right. To give herself something to do besides fret, she checked her makeup. As her tears had ravaged her mascara, she washed her face and reapplied everything then added a touch of gloss over her lipstick. Then she rubbed a dab of lightly-scented lotion into her hands.

A couple moments later, the organist began to play signaling the ceremony was about to begin.

Bree stole a glance out the window and froze when she spied Troy spiffed up in his Sunday clothes sitting between his mother and daughter with the rest of the guests. Her heart dipped and she rounded on her sister. "Did you invite the sheriff? Why didn't you at least warn me?"

Sierra's gaze slid away and she fiddled with her hair. "Of course. Your feud isn't mine. I told you."

No she hadn't. That Bree wouldn't forget. But it wouldn't do any good to say anything now.

But anger simmered and she was overly aware of Troy's presence while she held her sister's train out of harm's way. She had to carefully pick her way down the steep stairs in her spindly heels.

The sickening sweet smell of the magnolias did nothing to alleviate her burgeoning headache. Nor did the broiling chicken and too-sweet pastries being prepared for the reception make her feel better. She could use a stiff drink about now except she already felt shaky. The idea of weddings and Troy mixed about as well as alcohol and narcotics.

"Guys, the wedding march is about to begin." Jack came up behind them and carefully folded his older daughter in his arms as if afraid to muss her dress. He dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose then held her at arm's length and gazed upon her with tears in his eyes. He sniffled and dabbed his eyes with a proper handkerchief. "Your mother should be here. You look just like her."

Sierra's smile lit her face and she looked like an angel. Tenderly she wiped away his tears. "I do, too, Daddy. But I'm happy you and Bree are here."

Breanna felt ashamed that she had ever considered bowing out of this day when her sister obviously needed her so badly. Her own smile trembled as she made it into a group hug.

Nearby a woman's screaming blistered Bree's ears and she winced. Then men's voices lifted in increasingly angry tones. Something, perhaps chairs crashed against the ground.

She twisted her neck but wasn't able to see anything. But the ruckus grew louder, angrier.

Jack swore under his breath and extricated himself. "Stay here. I'll see what's going on."

Bree's heart fell but she imagined it was nothing compared to what her sister felt. She looked at her sister who was ghostly white and wringing her shaking hands. Her mouth moved but no sound came out.

Breanna couldn't read the bride's lips. Never good at taking orders she hitched up her dress and followed her father. When she saw her sister's clown friends beating up Anthony while Troy tried to pull them apart, she stopped dead. The earth quaked beneath her and she murmured, "God, no. Why?"

Anthony's mother was in the middle of the melee, her normally coiffed hair sticking out in comical tufts. Her sequined dark blue gown was irreparably ripped and beads littered the floor around her.

Sookie Youngwolf hastily escorted Xan and several other young children away from the danger zone as Jack rushed in, his movements large and blustery.

Bree couldn't hear the conversation but her father's face grew beat red when Anthony said something to him. When Jack drew back his fist and punched her sister's future husband in the nose, she gasped.

As she put her first foot forward Sierra rushed past yelling, "Stop! You're ruining my wedding."

"What wedding?" Anthony's mother asked scathingly as she blocked Sierra's way. "This is just a glorified big top. Couldn't you leash your horrible friends for today? I knew you people would be trouble."

"You people?" Sierra repeated so quietly Breanna wondered if she'd heard right. "Exactly who are you putting down? Me, my family, or my friends?"

Anthony's mother got up in her face and narrowed her eyes. She waved her arm in a wide arc. "All of you. None of you are good enough for my son. Maybe now he'll see the truth of what I've been telling him."

Troy walked up to Jack and whispered in his ear then they pushed through the crowd.

Breanna itched to follow them. Afraid to leave her sister alone, however, she moved to Sierra's side and laced their fingers together. She hoped Anthony would defend Sierra to his mother and pinned her gaze on his face. When his gaze scorched her with scorn then slid away, her heart dropped.

To Breanna's relief, Sierra didn't respond to the hateful woman.

Sierra, too, looked to Anthony. After several moments she finally said, "Well? Aren't you going to defend me? Are you going to stand there and let her insult me on the day of our wedding?" When Anthony's lips glued together and he glared, Sierra added, "At least say something."

Breanna knew it wouldn't be good and longed to spare her sister and her family further humiliation. She tugged at Sierra's arm as she whispered in her ear, "Let's remove ourselves before this deteriorates any further."

But Sierra froze and refused to budge. She planted her hands on her hips and glared back at her groom. "Fine! I'll save you the trouble. I don't want to marry a Momma's boy

or anyone who treats me so poorly. Remove yourself and your mother now."

Breanna wanted to cheer but clamped her mouth. Still, she couldn't hold back her smile or the sigh of relief pushing to get out. When Anthony started to close the gap between himself and Sierra, her friends circled him and wouldn't let him pass.

Troy reappeared on the other edge of the crowd and ordered, "Let them go." The sheriff moved closer and said to the ex-groom and his mother, "Come with me. I'll give you escort off the property."

Breanna held up her slumping sister and mouthed to him, "Thank you."

Troy gave her a slight nod and held out his hand to the nolonger-welcome twosome. "This way."

Anthony's mother tossed a superior look at them and huffed. "My son can do much better than your kind. I'm relieved he saw what you were before it was too late."

Breanna held back her sister when Sierra's hands fisted at her sides. She whispered in her ear, "That woman's crazy. You're the one who can do much better."

Sierra's guests cheered as Anthony and his guests exited the property. But Breanna barely heard them over the rushing sound in her ears. She helped her father walk Sierra to the sanctuary of her room. Like Jack and Sierra, she remained quiet until the door was firmly closed and locked.

Breanna's heart went out to Sierra. Wishing she knew the perfect thing to say and coming up empty, she perched on

the mattress beside her sister and rubbed her back. "I'm sorry."

A tremulous smile dawned on her sister's face. "I'm glad that happened."

"Glad?" Breanna couldn't dam the word from breaking through her lips. Or her brows from tenting. Puzzled, she asked, "Why do you say that?"

"You're right. Anthony never treated me right. I deserve better and I'm glad I didn't have the chance to make the biggest mistake of my life." Sierra rested her head on Bree's shoulder. She whispered, "We both deserve much better than we got." Then Sierra began to quietly sob.

Breanna twisted around and held her sister while she cried. Her gaze met her father's over Sierra's head. They were full of questions she had no desire to answer so she quickly veiled her eyes. Right now she could only deal with one broken heart. She girded her own and refused to think about herself or Troy. She'd extend her trip a couple days until she made sure Sierra was okay but then she was getting back to her life, far away from destructive clowns and heart-breaking men.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Eight

Several months later, Breanna returned to town for her tenth high school reunion. The week Big Jack stayed with Breanna following Sierra's failed wedding had been cathartic to both father and daughter. Their relationship was stronger than ever. Breanna cherished the memories and vowed to spend more time at home and with her family. Over the next few months, she managed to slip into town several times without running into Troy. She made it a point to stay on the ranch, away from town.

Miserable, Breanna wondered why she'd come into town tonight for this shindig. Although she sat only a few tables away from Troy who had a spot in the back of the ballroom, she felt a million miles distant. She thought about going over and talking to him, but the sight of Marcy, Meg's younger sister who claimed Troy's hand, kept her away. All but her friend Danielle crowded around Troy and Marcy. Although several members of the group peeled off to visit Breanna, they didn't stay long, choosing to go back to Troy's group.

"You left town awfully sudden like again after the wedding. We heard you'd taken a job in town and were moving back," Danielle said, her gaze wide on Breanna.

She swirled her drink, feeling as mixed up as the whirlpool in the middle of her glass, glad to be with her friends and family, uptight being anywhere near Troy. She tried to amuse herself seeing who looked like their Facebook photos and who didn't, who had paired up with whom, and which guys looked

better than Troy. Unfortunately, no one looked better than the sheriff.

She sneaked another glance at him from beneath veiled lashes. "I was only here for Sierra's wedding. I never intended to move back. Actually, I stayed away from my job longer than I should've."

"You okay over here?" Dee and Lori asked in unison as they rejoined her table. Dee was a bottled redhead with a too-heavily made-up face and a portly figure while Lori was an exotic brunette with a slightly Asiatic look. They had all been friends in the high school chorus. Now Dee worked for the florist and Lori ran a consignment boutique in town. "It's disgusting how Marcy's making a play for her own sister's husband. You're smart to stay over here," Lori said.

"Yeah, gag me," Dee echoed.

But within just a few minutes, they returned to that group, leaving her with only Danielle.

Gregg Asaro joined her and handed her a glass of punch. He'd been sweet on her in high school but she'd only had eyes for Troy. Foolish, foolish eyes! Gregg was so much kinder and loyal, why couldn't she fall for him? He was one of the few football players that had retained his athletic figure over the years. So many of the others hadn't aged half as well. She was surprised some lucky woman hadn't snagged Gregg long ago.

When Marcy pulled Troy onto the dance floor and snuggled into his arms, Breanna's heart lurched. She had to do something. Ogling the couple only made her heart break all over. Marcy looked so much like Meg that Breanna ached.

She did the only thing that came to mind, stood and held out her hand to the man beside her. "Dance with me?"

Gregg didn't need any coaxing. His eyes shining, he stood immediately and let her lead him to the floor. He pulled her into his arms as soon as they reached the dance floor. Although she was the right height to fit against him perfectly, she missed the sparks she longed to feel with such a virile, accommodating man.

Was it always going to be this way? Would she always compare every man she met to Youngwolf? She'd even done so with Tim. To concentrate on the music and the dance, she blanked her mind of all emotion. But seeing Troy and Marcy together made that an impossible task. The reunion only flooded her with the rampaging memories that threatened to overwhelm her again.

So she closed her eyes to block out Troy's existence. She reminded herself how good being in a man's arms felt, to be dancing, and how she enjoyed being in the bosom of her long-time friends.

When Gregg dipped his head and dropped a feathery kiss on her lips, she didn't object. She kissed him back, willing herself to feel something for this nice, handsome man. But that's all the kiss was. Nice. Not earth-shattering like Troy's kisses. Not fun and playful like Tim's. This man's gesture left her cold and emotionless. Would her insides always feel like a black hole?

Yet, because she spied Marcy sidling up to Troy out of the corner of her eye, hanging on him in a disgusting fashion that turned her stomach, she allowed Gregg to deepen the kiss

and pretended to enjoy it, winding her fingers through the thick hair at the nape of his neck. She leaned into him, still hoping to feel a spark of something, anything.

But nothing happened.

She heard the menacing growl, and lifted her head. She saw a man's shadow before she saw him.

Troy clapped his hand on Gregg's shoulder then spoke in a low but lethal tone, "I'm cutting in."

Marcy stood off to the side, arms pinned across her chest, her gaze sharp as daggers, her expression deadly.

Gregg, drowsy from the kiss, looked up in askance at the taller, more powerful man.

The arm still encircling Breanna tightened its hold a fraction and his fingers bit into her waist.

"We're busy here, Sheriff."

"I asked you nicely. Now I'll ask Bree. I'd like to dance with you. We need to talk," Troy said.

His clipped words were not at all inviting. Rather, they were imperious and commanding. She stiffened. "This isn't your jurisdiction any more." Breanna tilted her head at Marcy who had spun on her heel and now flounced away. "Your jurisdiction is leaving."

"I'm serious, Breanna."

Recognizing the dangerous glint in Troy's eyes, Breanna put her arm on Gregg's and squeezed reassuringly. "It's okay, Gregg. Really. I'll dance with the sheriff if that makes him happy. I'll catch up to you in a bit."

"You sure? Looks like you might need protection from the law tonight." Gregg backed away slowly.

"I'll be fine. I can handle the sheriff." If only that was true! No one could handle Youngwolf. He was a law unto himself. Fortunately for the rest of society, he chose to be on the same side as the law or heaven help them. For her, they were destined to be sworn enemies.

Her curiosity pushed her to ask him what he wanted to talk about. They had closed the books on their business. But she wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Rigid, she held herself aloof from him.

Troy tented his brow. "Was that show for me?"

The gall of the man! Show? "Be careful, sheriff. Your vanity is showing again. I kiss whom I please, when I please, without thought to you or anyone else."

"Since when do you and the quarterback have a thing going?"

She lifted her brow and cocked her chin. "That's none of your business." For a moment, she was proud of the way she sounded detached, until she blurted out, "So you and Marcy have a thing going?"

A small smile played around his chiseled lips. "What if we do?"

She back peddled. "It'd be none of my business, Sheriff. I never had claim to you."

"Yes, you did."

He spoke the surprising words with such intensity, she stopped dead. Her parched lips were about to turn to dust so she ran the tip of her tongue over the bottom one. Looking everywhere but at him, noting to her horror that they were

the center of attention, she spoke low so that only he could hear her. "You had the strangest way of showing it."

"Then that makes two of us."

Visions of being video taped for posterity and watching the rerun at their twentieth reunion tortured her, so she hissed through clenched teeth, "We're attracting attention. Besides, we've already held this discussion."

"An unfinished discussion." Without warning, he grasped her elbow and propelled her across the dance floor, pushing his way through the stilled dancers and out the door into the sultry Florida night.

His husky voice raked across her nerve endings.

"I thought you said you were never coming back."

"Obviously not. I'm back...again. This is my home. No one will keep me away, not even you. I don't know why you think you should. You don't have a deed to the town. I'll come back if and when I want to. I just might stay forever and there's nothing you can do about it." Every few words, she shook her head as if to punctuate her rights.

Shadows flitted over his dark eyes. "I never wanted you to stay away."

"Right...you really wanted me here in your life. Getting my best friend preg...." She cut off her speech, wanting to move past the old hurts. Still, she had to turn away before he saw the sheen of tears in her eyes. Moonlight couldn't hide everything. In fact, it highlighted some things such as his strong jaw line, the darkness of his raven locks, his hulking form. Unfortunately, the light did nothing to reveal his expression since it silhouetted his head.

"You're wrong. I wanted you here very badly." His voice caught.

If she didn't know him to be a very good actor, she might think he meant it. "You had me convinced. Especially how hard you searched for me in the past five years since Meg's death." She laughed without mirth and shook her head. Her throat constricted on so much sarcasm.

"Something's puzzling me."

She wasn't going to rise to the bait. As the night breeze wafted over her, she waited for him to voice his question. The air was cooler here than in Fort Lauderdale, perhaps without skyscrapers the sea breeze could blow unimpeded over the land. Yet her cheeks burned. She hoped he couldn't see her blush in the dark.

"How can you still be friends with Tim when he got another woman pregnant and married her? How can you befriend his wife and turn your back on your best friend from childhood?"

The same questions. Her heart was still raw with the scars from their last confrontation. It beat heavily and she feared old wounds would start bleeding if they hashed through this again. "We've been through this. I lost our baby..."

"Our baby." He jumped on her admission. "It was my baby, too. Don't you think it cuts me as much as you?"

She bristled and thrust up her jaw. Her shoulders squared and her fists balled at her side. With great force of will, she calmed her hands. Would they argue about this every time they came face to face? "Yes, if you'd been there at the time. You were gone, physically and emotionally. It's a lot different

eight years after the fact than feeling the child moving inside you, going through the labor pains..."

He towered over her, eclipsing the moonlight. The shadows made him appear to be the wolf she'd always known him to be. If she believed in the paranormal, she'd expect him to shape shift into his animal form, start baying at the full moon and unsheathing his long claws. "I still feel it as deeply. You should have come to me."

Unbelieving, her eyes widened so much her cheeks ached. "How could I tell a married man, or his wife, that I was carrying his child? Or that I had lost his baby? What good would that have done either one of us?" Her body tensed and she shook her head. "All I had left was my pride."

He faced her and spat on the ground beside her feet. Ebony orbs glowed where his eyes had been. "Christ, Breanna! Is this all about your pride?"

Was it? No! How could he believe that's all he'd meant to her? All their relationship had meant to her? His words infuriated her more. "You should be happy that I was protecting your marriage, being considerate of your family. What would Meg have done if she learned I was pregnant with your child or thought I was trying to steal you back? Not that you seemed particularly worried about my heart or my wellbeing, were you? When a woman loses a baby, she loses her heart and soul. When she loses the ability to have an..."

She recoiled. She hadn't meant to divulge the last tiny vestige of her secret, but it had very nearly slipped out. He didn't need to know everything and make her humiliation complete. Divulging it wouldn't do either of them any good.

His eyes softened, and some of the tension ebbed out of his stance. "You lost what ability?"

"It's nothing." She teetered and clutched her throat. She didn't want to add seeking pity to the list of her sins. "Forget I said it." She backed away, more from the very real probability that she could be barren than from him. She who wanted children so badly she ached all over. When she held little Abigail and now little Timothy Junior, her spirits soared and she exulted in the baby soft touches and scents, the coos and the gurgles—all the delightful things that made up a child.

He seemed to be looking inward, searching his soul, as he advanced slowly, backing her into a corner. "You lost your child and you lost the ability to have another? Is that what you were going to say?"

Her tongue swelled in her mouth and she was speechless so she just stared, open mouthed.

He inched closer and his eyes darkened. "Are you sure? Has a doctor examined you?"

Her womb felt empty and she wished he'd stop reminding her of all that she had lost. She nodded, her throat scratchy and dry, and mumbled, "Yes. Infection settled in after the D and C. I was quite ill for a long time. The doctors told me the prognosis is very slim for having more children."

"But they weren't one hundred percent positive?"

Heat rose in her throat and she was glad the moon hid behind the clouds. Still, she shuttered her eyes with her lashes, unable to look at him and utter the next words. Intense yearning and fear made her want to lean on him. She

ached for his understanding. But she didn't hold her breath. "I can't be one hundred percent positive until I try to have another child. Maybe there's been some medical breakthroughs since then that could help me. I don't know."

He reached out a hand as if she was a small child. Not close enough to touch, but for her to examine it and accept it at her leisure.

She stared at that hand, wondering what it meant. If it was a peace sign. Or comfort. Or what?

After several long moments of silence, he moved closer and cupped her cheek. His palm was warm and soothing against her flesh. Against her will, she tingled. The burning sensation radiated from her cheek, spreading throughout her body to her extremities.

"And you haven't tried? Not with Tim?"

His hand slid silkily down her searing flesh until his finger rested beneath her chin. He applied pressure and tilted her chin up so that she was forced to gaze into his eyes.

Flame shot out from the spot he touched her and wildfire licked through her veins. She cursed the fact that the worst man in the world for her was the only one that could make her feel so alive. "I'm not foolish enough to chance getting pregnant again without a husband. Fiances can't always be trusted to stick around when the going gets tough. I don't have the strength to go through that again if he didn't." Bitterness laced her low tones, its tentacles squeezing her stomach 'til she ached. Immediately, she regretted her words. She had to take some of the responsibility for getting pregnant. "That was uncalled for. I'm sorry."

All color drained from his face. He dropped his hand and his shoulders slumped almost imperceptibly. His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. "If you'd told me..."

She thrust out her chin. "If you'd known, you'd have left your wife and other child?" The disbelief in her voice echoed that in her heart.

"I was in a helluva situation..."

"Of your own making." She couldn't work up a lot of sympathy for the man. His own actions had caused his downfall. For the millionth time, she asked herself why had he slept with her best friend?

"When I married Meg, you weren't talking to me. Being a couple is impossible when you can't even exchange a civil word."

"Fine. So you're absolved. And you have your answer. You weren't obligated to tell me you were getting married, and so I wasn't obligated to tell you I was pregnant..."

Fire flashed from the depths of his eyes. "A pregnancy isn't the same thing. No matter what we were or weren't to each other, I was that child's father..."

"It takes more than biology to be a father."

Troy's heavy hands fell onto Breanna's shoulders, imprisoning her. Before she could protest, he pulled her back against him and murmured in her ear. "Exactly and you didn't give me that chance." His hot breath tickled her throat, torturing her. "I was trying to be responsible and I went with the only knowledge I had. I'm not a mind reader and I wasn't then, either. I would have moved heaven and earth to be a good father to our child. And who knows?"

Breanna's pulses raced. She realized what had really bothered her all these years was that he had chosen Meg over her. She couldn't stop murmuring under her breath. "I thought you loved me, really loved me. But you loved her more. Maybe you never loved me. Maybe I was wrapped up in my own warped fantasy."

He fiddled with his shirt collar, slid the top button out of its hole and gave himself more space to breathe. "That's not fair. It wasn't about love..."

"Oh no? Answer my question, please. If I had told you, what would you have done? Say you're sorry? Hold my hand? Leave Meg?" She shook her head, sure of the answer. "I don't think so. So where would that have left me? There was no point telling you so you could be as miserable as me all these years over something you could do nothing about."

"So now your motives are altruistic?" His words were practically a growl. "Mine were, too. I did the best I could at the time."

Her shoulders slumped. They finally agreed on something. "Ditto. So did I."

"The real question is, where do we go from here?" he asked.

Not wanting to make a horrible mistake again, she looked deep inside herself.

But before she could voice her feelings, storm clouds chased across his features as his muscles tensed. "A guy has a right to dream, but dreams can't last forever." He pivoted on his heel and marched back to the reunion hall.

Stunned at his abrupt departure just when she thought they were gaining ground, she turned in the opposite direction, intent on finding her car. She'd had more than enough reminiscing for one night. But she couldn't leave Danielle and Gregg wondering where she was and if she was safe or not, so she reversed direction and sought them out.

Her heart lurched when she spied Troy leading Marcy to the dance floor. Pain seared through her to see him with another woman. She scooped up her purse and slipped out the back door. "So his dreams of me didn't last very long at all."

Despite his out-of-control anger, Troy walked softly into his house. Xan would be sleeping and he didn't want to wake her.

He found his mother in the kitchen sipping a steaming mug of cocoa. He straddled one of the kitchen chairs backward and rested his chin on his folded hands as he stared at her.

"How was your reunion? Has everybody changed a lot?" A beautiful smile lit her face.

For the thousandth time, he wondered how his father hadn't been enough in love with her to stick around. Or did he know the whole story? Could his father have been in a sticky situation, too? Someday he'd question his mother more indepth, but right now, he was too raw to handle more revelations. So he stuck to small talk as he poured a glass of water and took a drink. "It's only been ten years. A few have married, had families, like me."

"Did Breanna attend?" Sookie's nonchalant attitude didn't mask the anxious tone in her voice. "Have you worked anything out?"

His heart lurched as always at Breanna's name and he grumbled, "Ancient history."

Her brows arched. Her cup clanged on its saucer and some of the hot chocolate sloshed over the side. "Not so ancient from what I've witnessed. The two of you need to talk about what happened, come to terms with the past. Move on."

Ugly suspicions flooded his mind. He snorted and stared into space, reliving his fruitless conversation with Breanna Parker, his blood still simmering. "Come to terms with what? My marriage to Meg? She has no intention of forgiving me for that event."

"There is more to her reasoning than that."

Her words rang with a wisdom that confirmed his suspicions. His chest tightened. He swore under his breath and punched the table. "You knew Breanna Parker miscarried my child? And you didn't tell me? How long have you known?"

His mother stirred her drink several moments, staring into its depths. No flicker of surprise registered on her face. "I suspected as much. I'm surprised at your powers of observation."

His blood boiled again and he felt impotent. "Was it that obvious? Was I that blind?"

"Not to everyone, but to the intuitive, and to those who loved her it should have been." She rose and crossed to the sink. Her mug clattered against another dish.

Troy rubbed his aching neck, feeling a fool for not being the first to realize, instead of the last. "Which category do you fall into?"

"One all my own. I view the world with a mother's eyes. I observe my only son and those who matter to him." She brushed stray hair out of his eyes with a loving hand.

Fury engulfed him. He jumped up, knocking over the chair. "You knew she carried my child and you let me marry Meg?"

"I permitted nothing. You eloped with Meg without my consent. And she also carried my grand child. Only after did Breanna's actions make me suspect and then, it was too late."

"You sound like an echo. That's what she said." His jaw clenched. "It was too late."

"Would you have divorced one of the mothers' of your children for the other one? How would you have felt having to choose between them?"

He honestly didn't know. He was so very mixed up, but he said the first thing that spilled from his lips, "Not like the murderer I do now."

"Did she accuse you of murdering her child?"

"Not in so many words. But my actions hurt her so much, she lost the baby she carried—my baby."

"She was also responsible, but like you, she was just a child." His mother sighed deeply as she stared down at him. "Babies having babies. Perhaps I am the one that failed you and that child. One could say that you acted irresponsibly because I didn't teach you well enough."

His fury exploded into a fireball. "No! You can't absolve me of this. Breanna's right. I was her fiance. I didn't take care of her. I betrayed her."

"You're a man now, with a man's eyes and a man's heart and wisdom. Now you're old enough to deal with this. You weren't when it happened. Give yourself, and Breanna, a break. Even most people my age could not deal with heartache of this magnitude." Sadness played around Sookie's beautiful lips.

He brushed a hand down his face feeling as if he'd aged twenty years tonight. "Why is life so hard? Why is it so easy to screw up and so damned difficult to fix?"

"Each choice we make affects the rest of our lives. Some decisions carry higher consequences than others. Others are dictated by fate." She pointed toward Xan's bedroom. "That beautiful child in there was destined to be born."

"And the other wasn't?" The child he had made with the woman he loved more than life? Something was screwed up in the universe. Why did fate have to be so cruel?

His mother looked thoughtful. "Perhaps you should focus on what to do now and not on the past so much. The past is behind you."

Troy paced the floor, scowling. "I don't have a clue. I don't even know what I want anymore. I only know that Breanna says she's through with me."

Sookie joined him at the table and sank into a chair across from him. "You don't sound as if you are through with her. You should search your heart. Perhaps she does not know her own so well as she believes, either."

"That's all I've been doing since Breanna came back to town." He couldn't bring himself to say he'd been doing that since the day he'd found out she'd left. Perhaps a small part of him had thought he wouldn't make it with Meg and that Breanna would wait. He would have taken care of his responsibility to Meg and to their baby then be reunited with the woman of his dreams. Only Breanna had left then Meg had died, leaving him feeling too guilty to pursue Breanna. He'd let down the mother of his child and he'd been in an excruciating limbo until Breanna's return.

"Perhaps you should embrace the old ways. You have vacation due."

His mother tilted her head in her charming way. Her gaze pierced him as it had done for as long as he could remember. "About two months' worth. You think I should get away? Do you think Patsy can handle the office in my absence?"

"You hired her. What do you think? You have to take vacation sometime. You need to trust your assistant, give her room to grow."

"You think I should go after Breanna?" An enigmatic smile hovered on his mother's lips, and he had no doubt why his father had found her so enchanting. He often saw that same smile on his daughter's lips and knew she'd grow up to be a heartbreaker.

His mother stood and took their glasses to the sink then turned and folded her arms. "Not at all. I think you need to go on a vision quest. Alexandra can stay with me."

His mother couldn't have shocked him more if she had informed him she was getting married and he blinked. "A

vision quest?" He had studied about them, even listened intently at his mother's knee when she'd told fantastic stories, but he had never seriously considered taking one since he'd become an adult. Only the old timers like his grandparents did that. "I wouldn't know where to start."

"Then my brother, Hugh Youngwolf, will instruct you. Go to New Mexico where he is and learn from him. It is past time that you become acquainted with more of your heritage. Perhaps I erred in raising you in your father's world instead of mine. Perhaps I should have raised you in the tribal ways."

The longing in her voice told Troy that she wished to be in the midst of her family. But he didn't need to ask her why she didn't return. She wouldn't leave him and especially her young granddaughter—at least not until Xan had a new mother, a prospect that didn't look bright anytime soon.

The burning in his chest told him that his mother was right about getting to know himself. When had she not been? Perhaps a vision quest would bring him peace.

The burden on his shoulders eased now that his decision was made, and he cracked a grin. "I'll go, but it's our secret. I won't have the town delving into something so personal. I think you and Xan should accompany me. School's out in a month and you can visit with Hugh and his family for the summer."

A slow smile dawned over his mother's beautiful face. "I'll call Hugh and confirm our arrival."

Confirm? He shot her a stare. He'd played into her hands. "It's a good thing you're on my side."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Nine

Breanna didn't know who she missed more—Patsy from the Coconut Springs office or Leann from this one. The FLPD hadn't been the same since Leann resigned to be a full time wife and mother. The woman who had taken Leann's position was nice enough, but was more of a motherly figure than a friend.

But being without a close female friend or sister, or a man worthy of flirting with, gave Breanna time to ponder her life. She'd come to the conclusion that she'd never grieved properly or dealt with her problems head on. Perhaps if her mother were alive, she would have. Perhaps if she'd stayed in Coconut Springs and not run away from her family.

Confronting Troy had not been the cleansing step in her recovery she had hoped it would be. Upon the advice of the station psychologist in whom she'd confided since returning to work, she joined a support group for mothers who had miscarried children. From there, she was in training to be a peer counselor. Many of her evenings were spent in this training, which would be a surprise to most people who thought they knew her. Perhaps she was finally growing up.

"You've changed since coming back," Tim drawled late one afternoon as she delivered a packet of evidence to his desk.

Intrigued against her will, she paused in front of his desk that had become a shrine to his wife and new son. Shrugging, she gazed into his eyes, wondering if he was perceptive enough to glean how the change had manifested. She was

curious to see if he thought she was pining away for the Sheriff, which of course she wasn't. "How so?"

Her friend leaned back in his chair and squinted. "You've matured. You're becoming quite a woman."

"How nice of you to notice after marrying someone else," she joked, although she was secretly pleased at the compliment.

"Did he hurt you that badly?" he asked.

His protective brotherly tone of voice warmed her. Neither one of them had to voice Troy's name to know to whom Tim referred. "Only because I let him. I'm not giving him that kind of power anymore. I'm taking back my life and moving forward."

"Hallelejuah. Not that the sheriff's a bad sort."

"Whose side are you on?" Breanna pretended to glower at the lieutenant and wondered if he was up to no good. "It had better be mine." She was teasing—well, halfway anyway.

"Of course, I'm on your side. Don't forget the game tonight. Field three at the Pond at seven sharp."

Breanna shook her head. "Can't make it tonight, Captain."

Tim turned a sickly shade of green. "But we might have to forfeit without you. Our best second baseman can't desert us."

"No can do. I can't miss my first night of class."
Excitement tingled through her. Even though she hated to miss the ball game, she was even more anxious to move ahead with her new career.

"What class? You're not taking up woodworking at night school to meet guys, are you?"

He had the old Breanna pegged, but not the new one. "I'm taking psychology. I'm studying to become a grief counselor."

"Doctor Breanna? Who'd have thunk?"

"Thought," she corrected him, showering him with a sunny smile. "Yes, me. Why not me? I finally figured out what I want to be when I grow up. Don't worry. The course takes several years to complete, especially at night school, so I'm not abandoning you for a long time." She backed away a couple of steps before adding, "I'll just miss a few games if they fall on class nights."

Tim closely regarded her as he tapped his chin with his pencil. "If it takes so long in night school, why not go to college full time during the days?"

The idea appealed but how would she support herself? Grants and scholarships only paid a portion of the cost, even for community college. "How would I live?"

"Your family doesn't exactly strike me as paupers. Maybe Big Jack would put you through school. Or you could live at home and get a part-time night job."

"Perhaps..." This situation had a lot to think about. She wouldn't ask her father to pay for her college. But he and Sierra had begged her to come home so she knew they would welcome her back. Maybe now was a good time to prove Coconut Springs was still her home. Her new dream superseded her need to avoid the Sheriff. As long as she wasn't working for him, she wouldn't see him that often. She'd have her nose stuck in textbooks most of the time and her mind and heart into school.

"I'll think about it." Indeed, she would investigate the colleges within driving distance of the Parker Ranch. She turned to resume her deliveries, feeling wonderful about her decision. Who would have thought that she, Breanna Parker, would become a counselor? Practically no one who knew her. She'd show them all.

"Breanna," Tim called.

Hearing his urgent tone, she twisted around, halfway down the aisle. "Yeah?"

"Doctors still play baseball. Don't forget your friends."

At that moment Roger returned to his desk beside Tim. "Doctor? You sick?"

Tim shook his head, frowning. "I'll fill you in later."

She flashed a huge, joyful grin at Leann's husband. "I'm better than I've been in a long, long time."

And she was. Joy danced through her and she couldn't stop smiling.

That night, Breanna's dream was so powerful, she wasn't sure if she was wide wake or caught on another plane.

In the middle of the night, Troy gathered her into his arms and cradled her close. His bare chest was warm. His heart beat reassuringly against her ear. His rough hewn hands smoothed her hair over her shoulders.

He resembled his ancestors more than ever. More selfassured. Wiser. At peace with himself. He even seemed darker, as if he'd spent a lot of time communing with nature.

"Breanna," he murmured against her ear as he nibbled it, sending glorious sensations throughout her soul.

She snuggled closer against his warmth, allowing her palms to splay over his broad chest. She turned her head and dropped feathery kisses on it, delighting in his shivers. "Darling?"

Darling? Where was that coming from?

"I can't undo what I did no matter how much I wish. But I don't wish my daughter away."

"I don't, either. How could I love or respect a man who could give away his own child." Beyond that she wasn't sure what she wished for, except to forever lay inside the circle of his arms, to feel his heart beat against hers, to unite their lives. "Is there no answer?"

"There has to be, if we want it badly enough."

"Do you honestly want to work this out?" She bit her lower lip and held her breath. As she awaited his reply, she counted his powerful heart beats.

"More than you can imagine. So why don't we? What's stopping us?"

She quivered and wondered if this was a sign she wanted to work things out with Troy? If only he would keep kissing her then they wouldn't have time to dwell on the past. They could hold onto each other. "I don't know."

She parted her lips and lifted them for his soul-shattering kisses. Even in her dream, she realized her support group helped her come to the conclusion that she could forgive him, that they could work this out.

Instead, he dropped a light kiss on the end of her nose. "You're more tempting than the call of the night and more ethereal than the mist."

Captivated, she huskily murmured, "Since when did you become so poetic?" Not that she was complaining. He reminded her of the old Troy, before the sheriff had taken over his body.

"Since my quest."

Her brows furrowed and she searched her memory for any prior mention of a quest. "Your quest? Quest for what?" Enshrouded in a hazy mist, the night loomed other worldly.

Rather than answer her question, he lowered his head and captured her lips.

At that moment, she realized his hair was long and silky again as it had been when they were engaged. It grazed her cheeks and tickled her bare shoulders. Tears stung her eyes and she pulled back. She yearned for so much more. "I must be dreaming."

"Perhaps."

Strange paint marked his face and primitive jewelry adorned him. "What's going on? Why is this so real?" Her dreams weren't normally so linear. Disjointed, nonsensical images usually populated them. Nor did they evoke such feelings of warmth and sorrow.

"Time for me to go." He slashed his warm lips across hers and set her gently aside. Then he rose regally and towered over her in his naked glory, the most beautiful man she could ever imagine, more beautiful than he'd been eight years ago.

Loathe to let him go, she grasped his hand. Couldn't he at least love her in her dreams? Was that too much to ask? She felt happier and more alive in this dream than she had any time since their separation. "Stay."

"I have much to do..."

"Please." If he left, she feared she'd permanently turn to ice. Her heart welling, she stroked his beloved cheek, and his heat fanned flames in her core.

"My quest is not finished," he muttered, but his eyes were saying the opposite as they adored her.

"Your quest can wait—for a little while. I need you."
Ashamed how she had just bared her soul, scared he would not reciprocate her deepest feelings, she veiled her eyes lest he saw the naked desire breaking in them. Could she take having her soul shattered twice by this man? She was tired of being a shell of her former self. She longed to live and love again.

He slid his finger under her chin and forced her to meet his gaze. "Perhaps it can. I've missed you."

As she drowned in his passionate gaze, she sucked in a ragged breath. Squirming, she moved closer. She wondered if they really could leave the past behind and pick up a future from here? She prayed it wasn't too late, that forgiveness could heal the rift. Had the time come to stop lying flat on the floor and hiding? Had the storms finally subsided?

She felt his hesitation and the wave of his desire. Unable to tear her gaze from the intensity of his gaze, she knew she'd feel the power he exuded over her as long as she lived.

Burrowing herself deeper into her pillow, she held out her arms in invitation. "I've missed you, too. Is one night too much to ask?"

"No. It's not too much." He lowered himself beside her, depressing the mattress so that she rolled against him.

Their arms curled about one another and she snuggled into his embrace, feeling at home for the first time in more years than she cared to remember.

She wanted to be one with him forever. She wanted to make up for all the pain and anger of the past eight years. She longed to be happy, something she'd not been in a very long time, something she'd wonder if she'd ever be again.

He was not only what she wanted, but what she needed with every fiber of her being. God help her, but he completed her. No one else would do.

Playfully, she nibbled his salty flesh. Unable to get enough of his taste, she murmured against his lips, "I never stopped loving you." She feared she never would and prayed he felt the same.

"You don't know how much I longed to hear you say that." He plundered her lips "Or kiss you..." He drew her closer. "Or make love to you."

She concurred a thousand times over. "Don't ever stop touching me." She feared she'd die without his kisses, that she'd wither without his touch.

He moaned against her lips.

When he rubbed his nose against hers and smiled down into her eyes, her heart sighed. "Don't leave."

"Once I complete my quest, perhaps I can stay."

Perhaps? His words shattered her and she shivered with the sudden cold. Her muscles tensed and she pulled out of his arms.

His essence shimmered for several seconds before he was no more. And she was cold and barren.

Breathless and blinking, she awoke with a start. Rubbing her eyes, she gazed around the moonlit room. The shadows were back and darker than before and her heart tumbled. "It was just a dream," she muttered as a tear rolled down her cheek. "Just a lousy dream."

Bugged by the dream that wouldn't quit nagging her throughout the day, she gave in and analyzed everything that had happened over the past eight years—the heartache, the loneliness, her reactions to Troy then and now.

She swiped the liquid from her face and admitted she wasn't over him. She was more in love with him now than then. That had been little more than a girlish crush.

The following morning at work, she checked online for information about dreams and bought a book to be mailed to her. During the day, her curiosity grew and she Googled every article she could find online. She printed out several to read at home. When she found an expert on vision quests, she shot off an email for more information. She also felt compelled to stop at the library and borrowed an armload on the subject. Fascinated by her discoveries, she read late into the night.

A book dealing with astral projection interested her in particular. Could the sheriff be visiting her in her dreams? Was it possible? According to the guide, some Native Americans had the gift during vision quests.

"I wonder..." she mumbled aloud, and picked up the phone to dial Troy's mother. Not that she had stayed in close touch with the woman, but Sookie was the only one who might hold the answers she sought other than Youngwolf himself. When

the answering machine picked up instead of a live person, she felt disappointment weigh on her hopes.

Rather than leaving a message in case the wrong person listened, nor comfortable posing such an awkward question to a machine, she hung up. Inhaling deeply, she dialed Troy's office.

"Lieutenant Kelly here." Patsy's voice sounded distracted.

"It's me, Patsy. The sheriff around?" Breanna knew that the likelihood of Troy being around this late in the evening was slim, but not impossible.

"You've not heard?"

"Heard what?" Apprehension coiled in Breanna's stomach. Had something happened to Troy? She squelched the panic that rose in her throat like bile. Law enforcement was a dangerous profession, even in sleepy little towns like Coconut Springs. "Is he all right?"

"I thought you wouldn't care?"

"That's not fair. I thought you and I were friends. You know I'm not heartless, that I wish no harm on the sheriff." Patsy still hadn't answered her question and frustration made her hand shake. Normally friendly, sunny Patsy would only turn on her if something was really wrong. "Is Troy okay?" she pressed. Maybe he had resigned his position. That would anger the police lieutenant.

"He's fine."

The clipped answer eased Breanna's fears but didn't answer all her questions. She suppressed the sigh rising in her throat. "Where is he then? Will he be in tomorrow?"

"I'm in charge. He's on leave of absence, getting back to his roots in New Mexico."

New Mexico? Getting back to his roots? So she wasn't the only one finding herself and maybe her theory wasn't so far fetched. "When's he due back? Do you know how I can get in touch with him?"

"Is it life and death?"

"Noooo." Not exactly. Just extremely important to her peace of mind to know.

"I'm under strict orders not to disturb him except for lifeand-death emergencies."

Breanna gritted her teeth and forced her voice to sound natural. "Then let me. Can you give me his number?"

"No can do. I'm under strict..."

"...orders not to disturb him," Breanna finished the sentence, her voice drier than dust. New Mexico was a big place to try to find someone. But how many reservations could there be? How many Youngwolfs? Was a dream—or a paranormal visit—enough of a reason to hire a private detective, or to leave her job and schooling and go out there herself? And why would she want to? Youngwolf was ancient history.

But he wasn't. Lightning flashed in her mind and thunder clapped in her chest. She still loved Youngwolf. No matter what, she would always love him. For better or worse, he was part of her.

"If you talk to him, please ask him to call me." She provided her home and cell numbers.

"I don't think he will."

"Call you? Or call me?" Patsy's silence spoke volumes. "Well, thanks. Take care."

Deflated, Breanna turned back to the book in hand, the one about astral projection. She flipped through it. Maybe there was another way to find him without having to take a long journey. Or maybe, if this book was to be believed, she'd be taking the longest journey of her life. She set out to learn everything she could about the subject, her mind soaking in the very new, strange information.

In shock and relief, Troy listened to Patsy's message. He hit the rewind message and listened a second time. Breanna wanted to talk to him, now.

He'd searched his heart and his mind on the vision quest. He was meant to be with Breanna. Nothing would stop him. If his very vivid dream was anything to go by, she was ready to listen, to give them a second chance.

Unable to wait a minute longer, he called Tim at the FLPD and made sure Bree was in Ft. Lauderdale. Leaving Xan with his mother, he caught the first flight where Tim met him and escorted him to the police station. He wasn't giving her a chance to disappear all night or all weekend by waiting to see her at home.

He followed Tim into the building and felt instantly at home, if a bit overwhelmed at the enormity of the police force. Ft. Lauderdale seemed an even bigger monstrosity than he'd imagined, especially coming straight from the wilds of his uncle's place in rural New Mexico. But he really didn't care about any of these superficial things. His mind and his heart were with Bree and convincing her they had to be together.

That he couldn't live another day without her. That he would rip out his heart for another chance to make her happy.

After they'd wound through several hallways and stood on the brink of a large room filled with desks, Tim clapped him on the back. He pointed to Breanna busily working across the room at a desk piled high with folders, and said on a laugh, "There she is. Go for it."

Now that the time was here, Troy gulped. He prayed she'd be as amenable as in his dreams, that she wouldn't reject him—again. He didn't think he could take it. "Has she been talking about me?"

Tim shook his head and exchanged a commiserative smile. Then he gave him a gentle nudge. "Trust me, she loves you. She's been pining for you, even if she'd rather cut off her hand than admit it. Good luck."

Troy sucked in a deep breath and girded his loins. He couldn't continue on this way without her. At least, he had to try or he'd never forgive himself. He'd been kicking himself for letting the past three years pass doing nothing.

He stole up behind her, intensely aware that all gazes in the room seemed to be on him except the one pair he longed to gaze into most. The buzz of conversations died and the room became silent, except for the hum of computers and the shrill of a telephone. He gazed upon her with all the love brimming over in his heart and was anxious to sweep her into his arms and carry her home.

A frown marred her face when she lifted her head. "Why's everyone so quiet? Why are you all staring at me?"

When he stepped closer, his shadow fell over her. "Breanna, can I have a word with you in private?" he murmured huskily.

She gasped, clutched her throat and whirled around in her chair. Her mouth gaped and her eyes widened. Her mouth worked a few times before she said, "What are you doing here? I only asked for you to call me."

His heart pounded so loudly he was sure everyone must hear it. He captured her hands and pulled her up beside him. "I'd rather see you in person." Uneasy being the center of attention, he cleared his throat. "Is there somewhere we can go in private?"

A happy smile tugged the corners of her mouth, and she blinked back sudden tears. She traced her finger down the line of his jaw and seductively murmured, "If this is what I think and hope it is, I've always dreamed of being swept into my hero's arms and carried out of the room. Like in the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman*."

His heart leapt for joy and he let out a war whoop, gaining him even more worried looks from her neighbors. Savoring the moment, he licked his lips, longing to take her in his arms and make her his forever. He'd let nothing and no one get in the way this time. "I guess you can read my mind."

She laughed lightly, and tapped his chest. "Or your heart. Finally."

He could see himself reflected in her alluring eyes, eyes that were giddy and overflowing with joy. He leaned close. "What changed your mind? You still didn't want to talk at the reunion."

"A lot of soul searching." She tilted her head and stared at the sky. "I'm counseling women like myself and I'm getting new perspectives." Her voice lowered as she lowered her gaze to him. "And you've been the star of my very naughty dreams. My dream book says they could happen because of something called a vision quest..."

Hypnotized by her lips, by her questioning eyes, he murmured, "Guilty. Does this mean we finally forgive each other and you'll marry me?"

"Marry you?" she squealed and burrowed into his arms, against his heart.

Her friends and co-workers started clapping and yelling. Tim and Roger let out several cat calls.

Breanna hadn't been so giddy, so supremely happy in more than a decade. Maybe never. Troy had finally come for her. Better late than never...

"Well?" he murmured against her ear.

Before she could answer, Captain Crow sauntered in, his expression surly like usual. "What's all the commotion? Why are people screaming in here?"

Everyone pointed at them so she called out, "We're getting married."

Troy whirled her around in his arms and then plundered her lips so she couldn't expand on her statement.

The captain snarled. "I guess this means you'll be leaving us."

When she could breathe again, she smiled and fervently nodded. Then, uncertainty grabbed her chest and she looked to her new fiance. "I guess so, right?"

Troy smiled down at her, and his eyes twinkled. "The sooner the better."

As much as she longed to be with him, and couldn't stand the thought of being parted again, she had to honor her responsibilities. "I have to give a minimum of two weeks' notice, maybe longer, to train my replacement."

Troy kissed her again and held her close. "I could stand to hang out in Ft. Lauderdale for a couple weeks." He whispered low enough for only her to hear, "Make love in the ocean, under the moonlight."

"Um..." She was quickly becoming a quivering mass of jelly, eager to make him her world. "I've only got a one bedroom, one bed apartment..."

"Perfect."

Captain Crowe marched over to them. "You're disrupting the station. Take the rest of the day off, Parker. You're not going to be any good to me the rest of today anyway. Let me know tomorrow what your plans are."

Breanna shot him a grateful smile. He was so right. All she could think about was kissing her man. She nodded and said, "Thanks." Then she linked her fingers through Troy's. "Let's get outta here."

Troy swept her into his arms and cradled her against his heart. "I thought you wanted a big seduction scene." He marched out of the room to the chorus of more laughter, sighs and clapping.

"I'll take you any way I can get, but I'll never forget this." She was surprised to see Tim with a video camera, but smiled in his direction anyway.

Troy's dark gaze searched her face. "Or me."

Her heart swelling, her soul ecstatic, she murmured against his intoxicating lips, "Ditto." Finally, she wouldn't be a mere bridesmaid in the wedding. Since she couldn't stand to wait a minute longer than necessary to become Mrs. Troy Youngwolf, she suspected there would be no big, fancy ceremony to hold out for anyway. But she didn't care. All that mattered was that she and Troy had found their way back to one another.

[Back to Table of Contents]

About the Author

When Elaine Hopper was 16, she made a wish to live in the paradise known as South Florida. She got her wish and for the past twenty years has lived her dream with fun in the sun.

She's held many jobs besides romance diva, including accountant, customer service manager, and waitress, but the most notable is her stint in the US Air Force. Thus, this story, like several of her others, features sexy law enforcement heroes and heroines, living the adventure she knows and loves. Her only regret is that she can't meet the real life Captain Kirk and travel through space with him, thus she has created her own sexy space captain with whom to romp and love through the universe.

She invites you to visit her blog and enter her contests at: www.elainehopper.com and to stop by her website to get the scoop on all her upcoming releases and new books at:

www.elainehopper.com

Email: Chinara@aol.com

ELAINE HOPPER loves to hear from readers.

elainehopper.com

www.sweethearts.blogspot.com

chinara@aol.com

* * * *

[Back to Table of Contents]

Thank you for purchasing this Wild Rose Press publication. For other wonderful stories of romance, please visit our on-line bookstore at www.thewildrosepress.com.

For questions or more information contact us at info@thewildrosepress.com.

The Wild Rose Press

www.TheWildRosePress.com