



Haleigh drove slowly out of the cemetery and headed across town. Flowering shrubs and trees bloomed in yards and along the street. With her window open, she breathed in the scent of lilacs, apple blossoms, and freshly mowed lawns. Vegetable gardens and flower beds displayed careful grooming.

The grade school, middle school, and high school hadn't changed much. As she passed the Senior Home, she wondered if Mr. Evans still cared for the grounds. Several new shops had opened beside old, familiar ones, along with Willie's place, Floral Creations.

Reaching the outskirts of town, she turned left on a dirt road. The Sousas' log home was the only house on the right. Two other houses stood on the left side, and a yellow bungalow claimed the lot at the edge of the woods.

Haleigh unlocked the door and stepped inside. The house smelled fresh and lemony-clean, and the woodwork gleamed. She couldn't find even a cobweb. It didn't take long to bring her belongings in from the car.

She called her parents to let them know she arrived safely and had a job.

A little later, she shopped for groceries at the store near the mall. She watched for familiar faces but saw only strangers.

After putting away the groceries and eating, Haleigh walked to the end of the road, where it stopped at the edge of the woods. A young boy rolled on the lawn of the bungalow, playing with a black dog, still a puppy. The dog pranced on gangly legs. The boy laughed and the dog barked. Haleigh paused to watch them. Tears filled her eyes.

The boy stood up and brushed off his jeans. "Hi." His fingers curled around the collar of the dog, whose tail wagged furiously. He managed to keep the dog beside him.

"Hello," Haleigh said. "You have a nice dog. He looks like my dog."

"Do you have a black dog? What's its name?"

Grief spearing her chest, Haleigh shook her head. "I did, but not anymore." With a quick wave, she turned and hurried back to the log home. Closing the door behind her, she leaned against it, sobs shaking her body, her heart broken again.

Her tears spent, she took a deep breath and found some tissues. She had work to do.

The small bedroom with the lacy white curtains at the window and handmade throw rugs on the hardwood floor had a warm, homey feeling. Perfect! She unpacked her belongings, put away her clothes, and made the bed, covering it with her own green and white comforter.

From her purse, Haleigh pulled the *to do* and *to get* lists her mother had given her and laid them on the dresser. She had plenty of time to get ready for her family's arrival for the wedding next week.

After showering, she sat on the bed, wrapped in a fluffy, multi-colored robe. Surrounded by quietness, she heard the floor creak, and something tapped on the roof. Living alone felt ... spooky.

Picking up her journal from the bedside table and leaning back against the pillows, Haleigh began to write about her return

to Greenlawn. She often journaled about her experiences with Sunshine and the people she met and their response to her dog. Her journal included her heartbreak when the vet informed her of Sunshine's tumor, and she saw her beloved dog's obvious pain.

Three framed photos sat propped on the dresser where she had placed them. In the first one, Gram wore her favorite dress, the black one with bright pink flowers, and smiled at her from a wheelchair. The second, taken at Jason's wedding, included Mom, Dad, Jason with his arm around Carmella, Jeremy, and Haleigh. The next family photo would include Aubrey as Jeremy's wife. In the third photo, she crouched next to Sunshine, her arm around the dog, smiles on both their faces.

"You always wanted to make people happy, didn't you, girl? It didn't matter if they were senior citizens or kids, you had a smile for everyone. Their faces glowed when they saw you. And without you ..." Tears filled her eyes. "You gave my life purpose when I had nearly given up. How I miss you, dear friend."

She tried to swallow the lump in her throat. The decision to put Sunshine to sleep, even though necessary, made a deep wound that had not yet healed. She might get another dog one day, but not until the pain of Sunshine's death lessened. To lose someone else she cared about was too much to think about right now. She wiped tears from her cheeks with her fingers.

"Nothing remains the same," she muttered. "Circumstances change, people change. We can never go back." However, some things about her past she'd redo if she could.

Setting her journal on the bedside stand, Haleigh rose. She padded to the dresser and pulled a small jewelry box from the top drawer. She opened the box and lifted a necklace, a gold chain with a pendant, and laid it gently over her palm. She ran her fingers across the words 'Best Friends Forever' inscribed on the gold pendant.

*Best Friends Forever.* Shopping at the mall outside Greenlawn had been one of the favorite pastimes of the Three Sisters. Their last trip to the mall together sometimes seemed like only

yesterday, not ten years ago. She still had the jeans and T-shirt she bought that day, although they were ragged and too small. Did Aubrey and Katie still have theirs?

Back then, she'd thought their friendship would never end. Her brothers had nicknamed them Goldie, Red, and Beanie. Her nickname, Beanie, faded away rapidly when she expressed adamant disapproval.

'Best Friends Forever' had been their motto. But when Aubrey and Katie found new friends and new interests, Haleigh had felt left out in the cold. Had she been wrong to give up on them?

That night, her dreams became a jumble of people and memories, jolting her awake several times.



AWAKING BEFORE SUNRISE, Haleigh contemplated the unfamiliar ceiling in the dim light. A gentle breeze moved the shade and curtain at the window. Her own green comforter lay over her. She sat up. Oh, yes, she'd returned to Greenlawn yesterday.

Her fuzzy brain needed more sleep. Lying back down, she dozed on and off until her eyes refused to remain closed. She chose to wear jeans and a forest green blouse. Her breakfast included a cup of green tea with honey that cleared away the brain fuzz.

The beautiful day invited her to walk, but she decided to drive in case she needed her car later. She parked in one of the spaces in front of Floral Creations. After she checked her hair in the rearview mirror and examined her nails for dirt, she took a deep breath. She'd procrastinated long enough. She got out of her car.

"Hey, Willie," she called out as she pushed open the door of Floral Creations. The bell attached to the door jingled. Haleigh breathed in the floral scents. "Hmmm. It smells good in here."

Willie turned from the counter, where he stood talking to the young woman at the cash register. “Good morning, Halo ... uh, Haleigh.” Willie grinned. His eyes welcomed her.

Glancing at his hands, Haleigh raised her eyebrows. “I see your hands are clean.”

“Well, I wash them for special occasions, like seeing you.” He winked at her.

Her cheeks grew warm. She cleared her throat and turned toward the young woman watching them. “Hi, I’m Haleigh.” She held out her hand.

The young woman didn’t smile. Her black hair was cut short with bangs, and her brown eyes looked large in her thin face. “I remember you.”

Did she remember Haleigh from yesterday or from before?

Willie took over introductions. “Haleigh Abbott, this is Tia Merino. Tia is running the cash register for the summer. She just finished her first year at the community college.” He reached across the counter to answer the telephone.

“I guess we’ll be working together.” Haleigh tried to think of a way to ease the tension emanating from Tia. She didn’t know what she’d done to offend her.

“Looks that way.” Tia fiddled with the cash drawer and checked her nails.

Taken aback by Tia’s cold reception, Haleigh didn’t know what else to say to her. She gazed around as she waited for Willie to finish the phone call.

He hung up the receiver and turned to her with a grin.

Tia observed them curiously then shifted her gaze when Haleigh smiled at her.

“Well, Willie, I’m here to fill out the application.”

With a bow, he gestured toward his office. “This way.”

The small, neat room impressed Haleigh. Large windows allowed Willie to see into the shop and watch the cash register from his desk. The knotty pine paneling, the file cabinet, and the desk that held a laptop computer, were stained with a light

finish. A photograph of Willie's family, probably taken several years ago, stood on one corner of the desk. Haleigh identified Jim and Annette White, Mike, Aubrey, Willie, and Jesse.

"After you finish the application, I'll show you around the greenhouse and the rest of the shop, and I'll teach you how to fill out orders."

He indicated for her to sit in one of the two chairs in front of his desk and pulled a paper from his file.

"If I'm not here, you or Tia will open in the morning and lock up at night. Tia will take care of the cash register and the money. She's worked for me before and knows how to do that. You can assist customers, make arrangements, and take orders. Now, fill out this application." He handed the paper and a pen to her. "Please."

Haleigh hesitated. "Do you really think I can do this?"

"Sure, you can." His grin reassured her.

After a glance back at Tia, who straightened displays and brushed dirt from display areas, she leaned toward Willie. "Who is Tia?"

He looked at Tia, then back at Haleigh. He couldn't have missed the tense interplay between the two of them. "Tia's best friend is Cheryl Nelson."

"Nelson. Cheryl. Hmmm. Leanna had a sister named Cheryl."

Willie nodded. "One and the same."

"Oh, no wonder Tia doesn't like me." Leanna hadn't liked her and had probably told Cheryl, who told Tia. Haleigh laid the application on the desk and began to fill it out.

"I don't think you'll have any problems with Tia. She's a good worker." Willie opened a file drawer. "Don't you think it's time you put the past away?"

His question caught her unprepared. "What?" Haleigh looked up, pen poised to write.

"You didn't cause the accident, Haleigh. Don't you think it's

time you forgave yourself for whatever it is you think you did? Everyone makes mistakes.”

“I’m not here for a therapy session, Willie, just a job.” Haleigh shifted uneasily. He came too close to the truth, and she didn’t want to discuss it with him. At least not yet.

He persisted. “Aubrey’s my sister. I know how much your friendship meant to her, but after the accident you hardly ever saw her or talked to her.”

The pressure of tears built up behind her eyes, and she bit her lip. She bent over the application to hide her face from Willie.

“Don’t you think God had something to say about the accident? Wasn’t the drunk driver at fault?” The sharpness of his tone made her wince, but she knew he was sincere, trying to help. “And why do you think you were the only one who could talk to Leanna? Aubrey did, although we don’t believe Leanna became a Christian.”

Haleigh continued to write, hoping he would drop the counseling session. In her peripheral vision, she saw him shake his head as he sat at his desk.

“Did you ask for God’s forgiveness?”

Haleigh nodded and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “Of course.” She didn’t look up.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. Let go of your guilt. And talk to Aubrey.”

Haleigh finished the application. She took a deep breath and handed it to her new employer. “Here’s my application, Mr. White. I hope it’s satisfactory.”

“I’m sure it will be, because I know you.” His intense gaze gave her butterflies. He took the paper from her without looking it over.

She broke eye contact. “How can you be so sure? It’s been six years.” She gestured toward the application. “I’ve included references.”

“I’ll check the references, if it will make you feel better, but

I'm sure everything will be fine. Our families did keep in touch, although you tried to be invisible. You've grown up, but you haven't changed. You're ..."

Stubborn? Aggravating? She held her breath, but he didn't finish.

He cleared his throat and looked away. "Today I'll show you what you'll be doing. You shadow me. Tomorrow, I'll let you start doing things on your own. My first landscaping project starts later this week."

Ashamed of her attitude, Haleigh rested her hand on his arm. "Did anyone ever tell you what a good friend you are?" Willie had always been perceptive where she was concerned.

"Not for about six years." He laid his hand over hers.

Warmth spread through her. Tia watched them from the cash register. Haleigh pulled her hand free.

The bell jingled. Willie rubbed his arm and stepped back.

"I heard the door open, so there must be a customer. Shall we get started?"

Haleigh nodded. When Willie turned away, she blew out a breath and rubbed her fingers together before following him out.

Obviously, he'd chosen the right career and enjoyed his work. Her confidence increased under his patient teaching about running the business, caring for the plants and flowers, and assisting customers. She could do this.

He showed her how to use the cash register. "This is Tia's job, but it will be good for you to know how, just in case."

The frown on Tia's face disappeared at his words.

During a pause in business, Willie walked into the greenhouse, where Haleigh deadheaded a basket of petunias. He leaned against a post with his arms folded.

"Jesse sometimes comes in to help me. He's going to work on landscaping with me this summer."

"What's he up to?" The fun-loving youngest White had often made a pest of himself when they were kids.

"He'll want to tell you himself. I don't want to spoil his fun."



Willie pushed himself away from the post and stepped nearer. "By the way, Mom wants me to bring you home for dinner tonight. Do you have other plans?" He pulled off a few dead petunia blossoms.

"I only intended to look over the lists my mother gave me and relax. I probably won't do much to get ready for the family until next week. I'd love to have dinner with your family. I appreciate the invitation."

"Good. Why don't you drive home after work, and I'll pick you up on my way."

"I can drive myself. I know where you live. You don't have to go out of the way for me."

"It's not out of my way. I'll be glad to do it."

A customer came in. Willie walked out of the greenhouse into the shop and greeted her.

Haleigh wiped her hands on her jeans. She didn't know why she was being so stubborn, except to prove her independence. Tia's stare shot daggers at her. She turned her attention back to her job.

Near closing time, Haleigh walked through the greenhouse, once again admiring the flowers. "Maybe working here won't be so bad," she murmured to herself. If she could get along with Tia.

"What's that? Have you taken up talking to yourself?" Willie called out from the front counter, where he'd been talking to Tia.

All the way from there, he heard her? She wished she had water to splash on her hot cheeks. Willie used to tease her about blushing.

She stepped back into the shop. "Just admiring your flowers."

"Thanks." He grinned at her then turned toward Tia. "Tia, why don't you show Haleigh how you take care of the money before you leave. That way, she'll know what to do if you're not here."

"That won't be necessary. I never miss a day."

Willie's body tensed slightly, and he frowned. "True, you

haven't yet. Your work record is perfect." The frown smoothed out. "But you never know. Do it just in case."

Willie returned to his office and sat at his desk. Haleigh watched him for a moment. Tia's defiant tone had ruffled his usually even temper. She turned back to Tia, who was also watching him.

"Have you been working long for Willie?" Haleigh asked the younger woman, who obviously had a crush on her boss.

"Huh? Oh, I worked last summer and then during school vacations." She examined her nails again. "Sometimes I came in during school, especially near holidays when there was extra business. Will is one of the nicest guys I know. Good-looking too." Tia blushed. She opened the cash register drawer.

Haleigh said nothing, but her heart agreed with Tia's assessment of their employer.

"I don't know why I have to show you this," Tia muttered.

Silently, Haleigh watched as Tia counted the money, recorded the tally, and removed the cash register tape. She placed everything in a green zippered bag with the words "Greenlawn National Bank" printed on it in large white letters. Haleigh followed her to Willie's office, where she placed it in the safe. She felt Willie's eyes on her as she watched Tia from the doorway.

"If Will's not here, I lock the safe," Tia nodded at Willie and left the office.

Haleigh glanced at Willie. He smiled at her and winked. Her stomach turned a somersault.

Not quite understanding her own reaction to Willie, she followed Tia back to the employee break room, where they retrieved their purses from small lockers and returned to the front of the shop.

She had to make things right with her co-worker before they left for the day. Haleigh touched Tia's arm. "Tia, since we'll be working together, I'd like to be friends. I have the feeling you're

not comfortable with me, and I thought it might have something to do with Leanna.”

“Leanna Nelson?” Tia shouldered her purse strap. “Cheryl said Leanna didn’t like you much.” Tia shook her head. “But that has nothing to do with you and me.”

“Then what?”

“I should oversee the shop, not you.” Her eyes narrowed. “I’ve been here longer. And things were going fine between Will and me.”

Haleigh’s mouth dropped open. She hadn’t noticed anything special in his treatment of Tia. “You mean you and Will ...?”

“Yeah, that’s the way it is.” Tia whirled and flounced out the door.

Willie came out of his office. “What was that all about?”

“It was just—” Haleigh shook her head. Nothing seemed to escape his notice. “—girl talk. I’d better get going if you’re mom’s expecting me for dinner.”

He stared at the door for a moment, as if he wanted to say more about Tia’s exit. “Okay, Halo, I’ll see you in a few minutes. Dress is casual, as usual.”

“Make that thirty minutes,” Haleigh said over her shoulder as she closed the shop door behind her.



THROUGH THE FRONT WINDOW, Willie watched Haleigh get into her car and drive away. What had gone on between Haleigh and Tia that caused the latter’s dramatic exit from the shop?

The tension evident between his two employees puzzled him. Tia, a good worker, had never given him a problem until today, when she challenged him about taking care of the money. Why she’d left in a huff, he didn’t know.

Most of the day had gone well. He’d made the right decision to hire Haleigh. She knew flowers, she handled herself well with customers, and she tried to be friendly to Tia. The problem was,

how would he keep everything on a friendship basis when he had to work with her every day?

As he cleared his desk, he found Haleigh's application. He'd check out her references ... tomorrow. He read over the application to be sure she filled in all the necessary information before locking it in the file.

He'd drop the money in the night deposit box at the bank before picking Haleigh up.

Why did he insist on giving Haleigh a ride? Because he wanted to. He liked having her close by.

If only she'd tell him what still haunted her from the past. She'd resented Leanna, but the feeling had been mutual. To help her, he had to break through her protective wall first. Should he try?

He shook his head. Perhaps it would be better to let it go and enjoy her friendship while she remained in Greenlawn.