

# Full Bloom

## Chapter One

Destiny Moultrie's long black hair hung like a silk curtain on either side of her face as she gazed down at the dainty palm she held, studying each line and crease carefully. "You're going to meet a tall, dark, and handsome man... "

Annie Fortenberry snatched her hand away. "Oh, no, you don't. You're not saddling me with a ... a man!"

Destiny arched one brow. "You don't like men? They come in handy on cold winter mornings."

The petite woman sitting across the antique Pennsylvania farm table, which seated twelve, nodded and a thick strand of copper hair fell across her forehead. She raked it back, and it disappeared into the tousled mop that barely grazed her shoulders and gave her a girlish look, even at thirty. "You're right," she said. "On cold winter mornings when you don't want to leave your warm bed and haul the trash to the street. That's the only thing a man is good for."

"Then I probably shouldn't tell you the rest. The really good stuff."

"Good stuff?" Annie's green eyes registered interest. She could use some really good stuff in her life. She offered her hand once again.

"It says the sex will be dy-nuh-mite!"

Annie reclaimed her palm and looked at it. "Where does it say that? You made that up."

"The Devine Love Goddess never makes up stuff."

Annie glanced up and noted the serious expression on Destiny's face. Despite the early hour, the woman's makeup had been artfully applied, emphasizing deep set indigo eyes and high cheekbones. Annie wondered how long it took her to achieve that look. Her own makeup regimen took all of three minutes, beginning with a light foundation to tone down her freckles and ending with a quick swipe of her mascara wand. "Hmm," she said, taking care to hide the doubt in her voice, even though her friend Jamie Swift had claimed Destiny was the real thing. "Very interesting."

Destiny suddenly sneezed. "Uh-oh, I can tell I'm close. I always start sneezing when I'm on to something."

"Good sex, huh?" Annie said. "Jeez, I might have to reconsider. As long as I'm not stuck with him for the rest of my life," she added, wishing she were really more sophisticated and open to casual sex. Instead she followed Dear Abby's advice that couples should be in love before

crawling between the sheets together. Abby obviously didn't have this hormonal thing going on that made Annie think about sex a lot.

Destiny sneezed again. "Wow that was a big one. Either I'm right on target or I've got a cold. There was a draft in my bedroom last night."

Annie stood and hurried to the kitchen counter where she kept a box of tissues. She plucked several and handed them to Destiny who dabbed her nose. "I'm sorry you became chilled last night," she said. "It has been so warm this winter that I haven't bothered to turn on the heat."

Which was true. Beaumont was experiencing record-high temperatures for February, and it wouldn't be long before everything would be in full bloom. New shoots had already begun pushing their way up through the dirt, and Annie had spied teeny buds on the large peach tree out front. But the old antebellum mansion-turned-B&B nestled between massive, centuries-old live oaks permitted little sunlight. That, combined with the West Indian coral stones from which the house had been built, kept it a good ten degrees cooler inside.

Destiny propped her elbows on the table. In the next chair, an aging overweight tabby cat named Peaches uncurled and stretched before dropping to the floor with a thud. She walked over to her empty food dish, stared for a moment, and then turned to Annie as if to say, "What's with this?"

"The, um, draft in my room last night had nothing to do with the temperature," Destiny said. "There's a spirit in this house."

"Oh yeah?" Annie cocked one eyebrow.

"A ghost." Destiny said. "A dead person; in this case a woman, who for some reason is still hanging around."

Annie didn't know how to respond so she said nothing.

Destiny shrugged. "It happens to me all the time. Dead people latch on to me like flies to molasses."

Peaches made a guttural sound deep in her throat, and gave Annie what she referred to as the evil eye. She raised her paw and whacked the plastic dish hard. It skidded across the floor and hit the wall.

"Your cat is hungry," Destiny said.

"She has already eaten," Annie replied. "Just ignore her."

"You've never seen the spirit?" Destiny asked.

"I don't believe in ghosts."

"I'll bet you've felt her presence. A sudden drop in temperature or a feeling of being watched?"

Annie's look was noncommittal, but she remembered instances, a brush of cool air against her arms or the back of her neck, guests complaining of missing items that usually showed up in unexpected places at a later date, plus sounds in the night. "I think you have to be open to that sort of thing," she said. "I'm not."

Destiny didn't look convinced, but she didn't push. "So, do you want me to finish your reading? Find out if you're going to enjoy the Big O anytime soon? Or multiples thereof," she added.

"Multiples?"

"I don't like to brag, but my own personal record is five."

"Holy crap!"

"He was young and good looking, and we had this chemical thing going. Not to mention the fact he was slow-handed, and pushed all the right buttons if you get my drift."

"Sounds like a keeper to me." Annie hadn't had her buttons pushed in a long time.

"Which is why I married him." Destiny sighed. "It didn't work out."

Annie knew Destiny had been married five times but was presently single. Until a couple of months ago, the woman had enjoyed a hot-and-heavy romance with a hunk named Sam, but she'd pulled back when he began using the M word. Destiny had no desire to marry anytime soon.

"So why did you divorce this guy if he was so good in the sack?"

"You still have to be able to talk to a man at the breakfast table, and he wasn't very bright. As time went on my passion dwindled."

Annie hadn't felt passionate about anything since Jiffy Peanut Butter came out with a low fat brand. "That's too bad," she said.

Peaches began swatting the cabinet door where her food was stored. "That's it," Annie said, getting up from the table. She picked up the cat and lugged all twenty-two pounds of feline and fur to the back door. Peaches hissed. "Go catch a mouse," Annie said and put her out. "That cat has one goal in her life, and it's to drive me crazy."

"She's uneasy because of the spirit. Cats sense these things."

Annie shook her head. "She's always been snooty and difficult, but my grandmother adored her. Unfortunately, the cat has never liked me."

"She needs to meet a nice tomcat."

"Too late. She's been spade."

"That explains her sour moods. A good roll in the hay with the right man works wonders."

"Well, the only male I'm looking for at the moment is my worthless handyman, Erdle Thorney," Annie said, "but I don't have to be psychic to know that he's laid up drunk somewhere. Wait till I get my hands on him. I'm going to hog-tie him and kick butt."

"Some people like being tied up," Destiny said, studying her nails, "or so I've heard."

Annie grinned. "I don't think we're talking about the same thing." She couldn't help but like the quick-witted, free-spirited woman who had become something of a celebrity since starting her column in the Beaumont Gazette less than a year ago. Destiny used her psychic powers to give people, mostly the lonely-hearted, guidance and direction. She stood out in a crowd in her outrageous clothes, which included leather, fake fur in an assortment of colors, and plunging necklines that emphasized perfect over-sized breasts. Annie would have given her grandmother's sterling silver to know if they were the product of good genes or a boob job.

"If this Erdle person isn't doing his work why do you keep him?"

"I sort of inherited him, as well as that crazy cat, after my grandmother died. He lives in the carriage house out back. He's supposed to do the yard work and repairs around here in exchange for free room and board. I hate to fire him because he's worked here since I was a kid. He knows there is going to be a big wedding here in two weeks, and that I want everything to be perfect."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Destiny said. "Jamie says your parties and weddings are beautiful. I think it's amazing you're able to provide all that and run a bed and breakfast."

Annie smiled at the compliment. "I do a lot of juggling, but I enjoy it. This wedding will be special to me since I've known Jamie for so long. We met shortly after she took over the Gazette. After her father died," she added, remembering how Jamie had struggled for years to keep it afloat before taking on a silent partner. That partner had been none other than multi-millionaire investor, technological genius and philanthropist, Max Holt. In less than a year they had turned the Beaumont Gazette into a top-notch newspaper and watched subscriptions triple.

In their spare time they had cleaned up town corruption, avoided being killed by hit men, a crazed swamp dweller, and they'd brought down two top Mafioso.

Despite it all, Max and Jamie had fallen in love and had chosen Annie's home in which to be married. They preferred small and simple to the pomp and fuss of a celebrity wedding that would create a media circus. Which is why the wedding was hush-hush, even the guests had been sworn to secrecy. Annie hoped they were able to pull it off. She was determined to give Max and Jamie a wedding they would remember for the rest of their lives.

Only...

A storm had passed through several nights before, littering the yard with leaves and branches, and Erdle was AWOL.

The rain had seeped through the ballroom windows where Max and Jamie's wedding dinner was to be held, damaging the wood floors and drawing attention to the fact they desperately needed sanding.

And Annie had little spare time on her hands, what with cleaning and cooking three meals a day for her full-time tenants and preparing for a luncheon, a baby shower, and a dinner party all scheduled for that week. Not that she was complaining; that's what kept her bills paid.

Annie's tenant, Theenie Gaither, came down the back stairs. She wore a simple blue housedress, ankle socks, and white sneakers. Her short blue-gray hair, which she had washed and styled once a week at Susie Q's Cut and Curl; had been sprayed so heavily that tornado winds would have snatched her head off her shoulders before mussing her hairdo. "Good morning," she said in a light, fruity-textured voice. She glanced at Destiny, and her smile faltered briefly as she took in her breasts. "Do we have a new guest?"

Annie introduced the women. "Destiny will be staying with us for a while," she said. "There was a fire in her apartment building late last night, and the residents were forced to evacuate until a building inspector checks it out."

"They think it was faulty wiring," Destiny said. "My landlord is so cheap he won't do anything to the building unless he's forced."

"Oh, my," Theenie said looking at Annie. "Is the wiring okay here?"

"Yes, Theenie," Annie said, knowing the woman tended to fret over every little thing. "Guess what?" she said, hoping to redirect Theenie's thoughts before she found something else to worry about. "Destiny works for the Beaumont Gazette. She's the Divine Love Goddess Advisor."

Theenie looked impressed. "I thought I recognized your name. I read your column every day." She headed toward the automatic coffee maker where Annie had already set out her favorite mug. "I assume Destiny knows about you-know-what," she said glancing at Annie who nodded in response.

"I think it's very romantic that Max and Jamie are going to be married on Valentine's Day," Destiny said.

Theenie gave a shiver of delight. "We're all so excited! I can't wait until I'm able to tell my friends at the beauty parlor. They will be so envious. And Jamie is going to be a beautiful bride."

"Jamie's the one who told me about this place," Destiny said, "and I'm glad she did. It's so... " Destiny paused as if trying to come up with the right word. "Unique," she finally said.

Annie laughed. "Outlandish would better describe it," she said, "but it was my grandmother's dying wish that I not sell it or make cosmetic changes." She gave an eye roll.

"I wouldn't change it either," Destiny said. "I think it's quaint."

"It grows on you after a while," Theenie said. She carried her mug to the table and sat next to Destiny. "No offense, but are you really psychic? I mean, there are a lot of phonies out there."

"I'm the real enchilada," Destiny proudly stated.

"Oh, my! Wait until Lovelle finds out. She lives here too, but she's in New York City visiting her daughter." She leaned closer. "But then you probably already know that," she said in a hushed voice. "I'll bet you even know what street her daughter lives on." She didn't give Destiny a chance to reply. "Tell me, do you sense anything strange going on in this house?"

Destiny opened her mouth to respond, but was cut off when Annie bolted from her chair. "I just heard a car pull into the driveway," she said. "I'll bet it's Erdle." She raced to the window. "Yep! Boy is he in trouble!" She opened a drawer and pulled out a large rolling pin.

"Uh-oh," Theenie said.

Annie threw open the door. "Wait till I get my hands on that man!"

Theenie jumped from her chair with the agility of a woman half her age. "Now, hold on, Annie," she said. "Let's not do anything rash."

But Annie was already gone.

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Wes Bridges parked his Harley in front of the massive three-story antebellum mansion and stared at it for a full minute before he thought to cut his engine. "Damn!" he said, climbing from his bike. "Now that's something you don't see every day."

He took in the four-column portico; each fluted column adorned with plump gold cherubs. Lavishly carved dentil molding ran beneath the eaves, and wrought-iron balconies sprouted from every window, designed in curly-cues and rosettes. The look was repeated in the fanlight of what appeared to be an extra room or attic gable that made up a partial fourth floor. Gray moss clung to the live oaks and shuddered in the breeze, and a large tree, presently bare; stood to one side. An elaborate fountain dominated the front yard, spilling water onto yet more cherubs, all naked, some performing what appeared to be sexual acts.

"Interesting," he said, noting a sign out front that read: The Peachtree Bed and Breakfast. Vacancy.

"Perfect," he said. Wes pulled off his helmet and took the walkway toward the house, admiring the expansive piazza, which looked as if it could accommodate at least one hundred guests. Antique wicker settees and rockers with fat floral cushions offered seating and a great view of the marsh and the bay beyond. Pots of pink and white geraniums softened the look of the coral stone exterior.

Wes paused at an ornate door and studied the solid brass knocker of a naked man and woman embracing. One side of Wes' mouth turned up. Beside the door, an iron plaque dated the house back to 1850. Instead of using the knocker, he rapped on the door and waited. He was about to knock again when he suddenly heard a man cry out several times. It seemed to be coming from the back of the house.

Wes cleared the front steps, rounded the house and raced up the driveway, following the sounds of loud, anxious voices. He paused at a waist high wrought-iron gate and stared as an attractive redhead in jeans and a long cotton shirt chased a disheveled, middle-aged man across the yard, a rolling pin poised in her hand.

"Run, you lazy, good-for-nothing drunk!" the woman yelled.

The man ducked behind one of several oaks shading the back yard. "Put that thing down, Miss Annie!" he cried. "You're liable to hurt somebody."

"Damn right!" she said.

"Please don't hit him," a gray-haired woman pleaded from the back steps of the house. Beside her, a woman with long black hair and large breasts cheered her on.

"Give him what for, Annie," she said laughingly.

The redhead chased the frightened man around the tree several times. She slammed the rolling pin against the bark twice, missing the man by a good twelve inches. Nevertheless, he continued to duck and run. "Help!" he cried. "Somebody save me!"

"Oh, for the love of... " Wes leaped the fence and ran toward the two. "Lady, stop!" he shouted.

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Annie darted around the tree once more as Erdle tried to maintain a safe distance, all the while crying out for help. He ran pretty fast for someone who'd just come home from a three-day drunk, she thought. She could see the fear in his eyes as she smacked the tree again with her rolling pin. She had no intention of actually hitting Erdle, but she wasn't about to let him know. She was so intent on her chase that she paid no heed to the chorus of voices behind her.

She was only vaguely aware of movement beside her as she raised the rolling pin high in the air and aimed once more for the tree. A disembodied hand shot into her line of vision, and her aim faltered. There was a loud resounding "thwack," and Theenie screamed. Annie heard a dull thud,

spun around and froze when she spied a brown-haired man sprawled across the ground. She screamed and dropped the rolling pin, then let out another squeal when it fell and bounced off the man's forehead.

"Now look what you've gone and done!" Erdle said, pointing.

Annie's eyes flew open in horror as she stared down at the handsome, unshaved man in worn jeans, t-shirt, black denim jacket, and biker boots. "Where on earth did he come from?" she cried.

Theenie and Destiny raced down the steps and across the back yard, as the stranger lay there unmoving.

Theenie gaped in horror. "You killed him!"

"Dang right she killed him," Erdle said. "If the first blow didn't do it the second one surely did."

The man groaned and pushed himself into a sitting position. He rubbed the back of his head and winced. "What the hell?"

Annie knelt beside him. His hair was the color of Brazil nuts, thick and slightly wavy, falling just past his collar. He wasn't a local; she would have remembered him. "I'm so sorry," she said. "Are you hurt? Here, let me help you up."

Menacing brown eyes locked with hers. "Don't touch me, lady. What are you, crazy?"

"That's exactly what she is," Erdle said. "Mean and crazy."

Annie glared at Erdle. "Don't give me any lip, mister. I'm not finished with you."

"If you come near me I'm calling the cops," Erdle said. "I'm going to get me some of that hot pepper spray or maybe one of those stun guns. Or maybe I'll get me a big Doberman or a pit bull... "

"Shut up, Erdle or I'll snatch you baldheaded!" Theenie shouted, causing the group to pause in surprise. She sniffed, folded her hands properly and gave the stranger a saccharine sweet smile. "Excuse me, sir," she said ever so politely, "but I used to be a nurse's aide, and I think I'd better have a look at your head. Would you mind very much?"

Wes looked at her. "Are you armed?"

"I don't believe in keeping weapons. You're safe with me."

After a moment, he shrugged.

While the others watched, Theenie carefully parted his hair. "Oh, my," she said. "You've already got a nasty lump. I need to put ice on it."

"What about my forehead?" Wes said, wincing when he touched it.

"It's not so bad. Erdle, help this gentleman to his feet. We need to get him inside."

"I can manage," Wes answered gruffly. He stood, towering over the rest of the group. He jabbed a finger toward Annie. "Stay away from me, you got that?"

Annie drew herself up to her full height, but at five-foot-two she was a good twelve inches shorter than the man. His shoulders were wide, at least twice the width of hers. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I said I was sorry."

"Sorry doesn't get it," he said. "The only thing I need from you is the name of your lawyer."

Annie gawked at him. Lawyer! He planned to sue her! She would lose everything, her home and the business she'd worked night and day for the past three years to build. She would have to try and get her old bookkeeping job back at Bates' Furniture.

"Oh, dear," Theenie said. "You can't sue Annie. She doesn't have any money."

"That's right," Erdle said. "Her grandma invested all her money on one of them Viagra-like drugs, but it was yanked off the market when men started having embarrassing and prolonged erections."

Annie closed her eyes and wished she could crawl beneath something and never come out. She could feel the man's eyes on her, but she was determined to remain cool. She would deal with Erdle later. Right now she needed to try and dissuade this angry stranger from taking legal action. "Excuse me, but you were trespassing on my property, and I didn't even see you come up behind me."

Wes opened his mouth to reply, but Theenie interrupted.

"Now, now, let's not fuss," she said. "We need to see to this young man's head. Come this way, Mister... "

"Bridges," he said. "Wes."

"And I'm Theenie," she replied, motioning for him to follow her to the house.

Wes glanced in Annie's direction once more before doing as he was told. The others fell into line behind him. Annie tried not to notice how nicely the man's jeans molded to his backside, but Wes Bridges was a definite ten in the rear-end department. Oh, Lord, what was she thinking? The poor man could be seriously hurt, he would probably sue her from here to Timbuktu, and she was staring at his behind. She shouldn't have spent the morning hearing about Destiny's sex life. Annie could almost smell the testosterone oozing from his pores. And she wasn't the only one looking; Destiny was eyeballing him as well.

Once inside, Theenie pointed to one of the ladder back chairs. "Have a seat, Wes, and I'll get an ice pack."

He did as he was told, but the dark scowl on his face told Annie he was not a happy man.

"That could be me sitting there," Erdle said, standing just inside the door, holding the screen open as though preparing to bolt. "You could have knocked my brains out, Miss Annie!"

She turned to him. "I've never so much as laid a hand on you, Erdle Thorney. I was just trying to scare some sense into you. Some handyman you are. The yard is a mess! Have you forgotten we have an important wedding here in two weeks?"

"Somebody is actually going to marry you?" Wes asked in disbelief.

"She's already married," Theenie said, "but her husband left her three years ago."

"You're looking at one dangerous woman," Erdle said.

Annie pointed. "Out!" she ordered him. "Go pack your bags. I'm evicting you."

Erdle gaped. "But Miss Annie, you can't just throw me out. Your dear grandmother, God rest her soul, was perfectly happy with my work."

"That's before you began spending all your time in the bars."

"I'll get started on the yard work right away," Erdle said. "You just make me a list of what you want done." He hurried out the door before she could reply.

"This is a crazy house," Wes told Theenie as she placed the ice pack on his head.

Destiny gave a snort. "You don't know the half of it."

Annie noticed Wes giving Destiny the once-over, which was no surprise. Any woman who had breasts out to there was bound to draw attention, and the come-hither look Destiny returned obviously did not go unnoticed because one side of his lip turned up slightly. Annie wished she'd hit him harder. "This is not a crazy house," she said. "You just happened to show up at a bad time."

"Annie's under a lot of stress," Theenie said, "and with good reason."

Annie clenched her teeth. "I am not stressed."

"You look stressed to me," Destiny said. "It doesn't take a psychic to figure that out."

"We have a famous person getting married here in two weeks," Theenie told Wes. "We're not allowed to say who because we don't want the media to find out, but he's more famous than Donald Trump. That's why our Annie is pulled tighter than a rubber band."

"I am not stressed," Annie repeated loudly.

Theenie lifted the ice pack and checked Wes' head. "Oh, my, this doesn't look good. Not good at all."

"Let me see," Annie said.

Wes held up one hand as though to stop her. "Look, but don't touch."

Annie sighed and stepped closer, grimacing at the nasty looking lump. The one on his forehead was beginning to swell as well. "I should probably take him to the emergency room."

"Good idea," Wes said. "I'll be able to file a police report for assault and battery."

"I don't think she really meant to hit you," Destiny said.

Annie felt herself nod in agreement, although she suspected it wouldn't hold much water with the man. He might be the best looking thing she'd seen in a long time, but he was bound and determined to make her pay. Instead of trying to offer him another apology, which she knew he wouldn't accept, she hitched her chin high. "Perhaps you'll think twice before getting involved in other people's business."

He frowned but didn't reply.

"I think we should call Doc Holden," Theenie said. "He'll know what to do. He's just next door," she told Wes. "Won't take but a jiffy."

Annie made the call despite Wes' objections that he didn't need a doctor.

Five minutes later the back door was thrown open by an elderly white haired man carrying a black doctor's bag. He glanced about the room until his gaze fell on Wes. "You must be the patient."

"I prefer to use the word victim," Wes said, darting a look in Annie's direction.

"What'd you say?"

"Doc, you might want to turn up your hearing aid," Annie said.

He shot her a disgruntled look as he fiddled with the flesh-colored object in one ear. "You're going to be old one day, young lady." He adjusted his glasses and lifted the ice pack from Wes' head. "Oh boy, that's a nasty looking lump. What happened?"

"Some deranged woman hit me over the head with a rolling pin."

"That would be Annie," Doc replied.

"It was an accident, Doc," Annie said.

Theenie nodded. "She meant to clobber Erdle."

"What's this bump on your forehead?"

"Another accident," Annie said.

Doc sighed and looked at Annie. "How many times have I warned you about that temper of yours?"

"I wasn't trying to clobber anyone."

Doc suddenly noticed Destiny. "Don't I know you?"

She introduced herself. "I write a column for the newspaper. You've probably seen my picture."

"She's the Divine Love Goddess Advisor," Theenie said. "She's psychic."

Wes sighed. "Now I know I'm in a crazy house."

Destiny folded her arms across her chest, which was no easy task. "Excuse me, but that was a very rude thing to say."

Doc patted Wes' shoulder. "I know it looks a little kooky around here, son, but Annie can be quite pleasant when she isn't trying to do a person bodily harm."

Annie threw up her hands. "Jeez Louise! I give up."

"Now, then," Doc began, "you do have quite a knot back there, but that's good." When Wes arched a brow in question, the old doctor went "on. It means the swelling is probably confined to the outside, and that lessens the risk of brain injury." He pulled a pen-like gadget from his bag, flicked on a light and shined it in Wes' eyes. "How's your vision? Any blurring?"

Wes looked about the cheery kitchen with its tall white cabinets, partially wainscoted walls, and green and white-checked wallpaper. "I'm fine."

"How bad is the pain?"

Wes grunted. "Feels like I've been hit over the head by a two-by-four. A couple of aspirin might help."

"You don't think I should take him to the ER?" Annie asked Doc.

"Not unless you plan on hitting him again." He reached into his bag and pulled out a small white envelope. "These tablets will help with the pain. You can take one every four to six hours."

Wes shook one of the large white tablets into his palm as Theenie went for water. "I need to escape this madhouse while I'm still able," he said.

Doc shook his head. "I don't recommend that you drive right now. Not with a head injury," he added. "And don't go to sleep either. You don't appear to have a concussion, but we don't want to take any chances."

"What the hell am I supposed to do in the meantime?" Wes asked.

Doc shrugged. "Make Annie cook you breakfast. It's the least she can do after trying to kill you."

Annie gaped. "Hellooo," she said, waving her hands in the air. "Has anybody heard a word I've said? I was not trying to kill him!" She flung her hands to her side when nobody paid attention.

Theenie handed Wes a glass of water. He gave a huge sigh and popped the pill into his mouth, but it was so large he had to swallow several times to get it down. He reached into his back pocket for his wallet. "What do I owe you, Doctor?"

Doc chuckled as he snapped his black bag closed. "Not a thing," he said. "I stopped practicing veterinary medicine a long time ago."

Wes looked up in disbelief. "You're a veterinarian?" He turned to Annie. "You called an animal doctor to treat me?"

"He was close by," she said defensively.

A clatter sounded from the top of the stairs leading into the kitchen. Wes looked up. "What was that?" he asked.

"I didn't hear anything," Annie said quickly.

"This house is haunted," Destiny said, drawing a gasp from Theenie.

Wes just looked at her.

Doc shook his head. "Well, I'd better get back to what I was doing," he said. He started for the door with Annie on his heels. He paused suddenly. "Wish I could remember what I was doing." He shrugged. "Oh, well, it'll come to me eventually."

"Don't forget your bag," Theenie said.

"Oopsie-daisy can't leave that behind." Doc took the bag. "It's tough getting old," he told Wes. "My mind isn't as sharp as it used to be. Take care of that head now. I don't want to have to put you down." He chuckled as he walked out.

Annie watched him go. In the back yard, Erdle was picking up branches. She gave a hopeful sigh.

"I hope I'm not as forgetful as Doc when I get old," Theenie said.

"You are old," Destiny blurted, and then covered her mouth when the woman looked hurt. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to say that. I didn't sleep well last night, what with that spirit on the loose."

"You're beginning to scare me," Theenie said.

Wes turned to Annie. "You let a crazy, senile veterinarian treat me?"

"He's not really senile," she said. "He's, um, forgetful. I don't think he's crazy either. He was just kidding about putting you to sleep."

"That's good to know."

She offered him a tight smile. "Well, now, it looks like you're stuck with us for a while. At least until we're sure you're going to be okay. How about I cook you something to eat like Doc suggested?"

Wes shook his head. "No thanks."

"Then I'll make a fresh pot of coffee," Annie offered. "Like Doc said, you don't want to go to sleep."

He gave a grunt. "Lady, I wouldn't think of closing my eyes in this house."