

A Time To Love

Lynn Emery

Copyright © 1999 Margaret Emery Hubbard

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 0983335761

ISBN-13: 978-0-9833357-6-4

A TIME TO LOVE was first published in 1999. The characters, settings and events are purely fictional.

Chapter 1

Neva opened the door and entered Bill Hanson's drugstore. She had always enjoyed coming in here as a little girl. Mr. Hanson was the fourth generation to own the business. His great-grandfather's store had been more of the old fashion all purpose dry goods establishment over a hundred years ago. Yet here stood the original building. Old fashioned jars of candy sat on a counter and rows of spices on shelves filled walls. She breathed in the smell of old wood, lemon polish and cinnamon jelly beans. Neva smiled when she saw the four cane bottom chairs around the black wood burning stove. For a few moments, she expected to hear her grandfather boom "Howdo, Mr. Bill. Got somethin' sweet for my baby gal?" Papa Dub always made her feel safe. But the voice she actually heard was female.

"Yeah, Neva Ross is back in town, child. Been livin' in New Orleans with the rest of them hoodoo people. Tell me she was--" When another customer cleared her throat loudly, the woman broke off and faced Neva with a smile stretched across her plump face. "Mornin', Neva. Welcome home."

"Hello, Bessie. Hi Sharon, Lorita." Neva nodded to Bessie's companions.

She gazed at the three women intently for several seconds without speaking, scanning them as though her eyes were capable of seeing straight to the bone like an x-ray device. Neva wore a half-smile as she look at each in turn. She let the silence lengthen until they exchanged nervous glances.

"Heard you takin' care of your grandmama. That's nice," Lorita said finally. She blinked from behind her eyeglasses.

"Yes," Neva said, drawing out the word in a slow drawl. She continued looking at the women.

"Ahem, she's got a nice little cottage. Didn't your cousin Desiree keep it fixed up?" Bessie, always bold, was the first to recover.

"Yes... she did that," was Neva's only reply.

Just like Bessie to try and probe for gossip. Neva remembered this too, the claustrophobic nature of living in a small, rural community. After all these years, little had changed. Bessie was still the same. Solitude was essentially the same. Yet Neva was different. At least she hoped so. Seeing no more information was forthcoming, Bessie gave up. For now at least. "Hmm, well I got go take this medicine to Miz Olive down the way. Poor thing suffers so with her arthritis these days. Be seein' ya around."

"Me, too. Gotta get over to the nursing home for my shift." Pam, wearing a white uniform typical of nursing assistants, bustled to the cashier to pay for her purchases leaving Lorita alone with Neva.

"I, uh, well..." Lorita seemed at a loss to come up with a reason to escape. "You look good."

"Thank you. So do you."

"Go on. With this hair and these thick glasses." Lorita flushed with pleasure all the same as she touched her thick dark red hair pulled back in a twist.

"Jerry never had a problem with you. Y'all still together? He's such a sweet man." Neva always liked Lorita. Shy but with a kind heart, she was one of the few girls who had been

friendly in grade school.

Lorita smiled prettily at the mention of her long time beau. "We're getting married."

"Humph." Bessie had her back turned but still made her meaning clear.

"We got the date all set for right after Easter," Lorita said in a defensive voice. "Talked to Reverend Lollis and everything."

"He's a good man and lucky to have you." Neva meant what she said.

"Thank you," Lorita said softly. She seemed about to say more when Bessie and Pam came back.

"Guess we'll see you at church Sunday. Right, Neva?" Bessie shoved a gaudy flowered wallet back into her large purse.

Neva tilted her head to the side and smiled. Then she let the smile fade a bit. "Could be you'll see me before then, Bessie."

A look of alarm skittered across Bessie's broad face as she took a step back. "Come on here, Lorita and Pam. Y'all supposed to drop me off."

The three women went out of the drugstore and got into Pam's late model Oldsmobile. Neva watched with a mixture of annoyance and amusement, with them and herself. Why did she feed into Bessie's foolishness? Not home a full week and all ready she was breaking her vow to make her second life in Solitude different.

"Sure is nice to see you back." Mr. Bill interrupted her thoughts with a cheerful greeting that was genuine.

"Hi, Mr. Bill. You look well." Neva had always been fond of him.

Even forty years ago when race relations were distant at best in the parish, Papa Dub had considered Mr. Bill a friend. Mr. Bill always treated black folks with respect according to her grandfather. Even when it made him socially unpopular.

"Other than less hair and more waistline, I'm doing fine, thank you." Mr. Bill grinned as he patted his wispy brown hair.

"How's Miz Velma?" Neva thought of the dour faced wife that seemed the opposite of her husband.

"Baking up a storm, getting in the mood for the holidays. She loves treating the grandkids." Mr. Hanson made Velma sound much more light-hearted than she was in truth.

"She makes some tasty cookies and pies," Neva replied truthfully. Velma Hanson made chocolate chip and pecan oatmeal cookies that Neva loved as a child.

"Miss Carmel begged Velma to make a bunch of pies and pastries for the Fall Festival. It's going to be great. West Feliciana Parish is getting to be a big tourist area these days."

"So I notice." Neva pointed outside where a shuttle van was depositing tourists. "But I'm just like everyone else. Starting with Halloween, this is my favorite time of the year."

"Here you go." Mr. Hanson handed her a plastic bag with the toiletries she'd picked up. "Come back tomorrow and I'll have a treat for you." He winked at her the same way he had when she was six years old.

"All right, Mr. Bill," Neva laughed. She gave his hand a squeeze then left.

Neva got into her Plymouth Neon and enjoyed the short drive from St. Francisville to Solitude seven miles away. Fall leaves of brown, gold and red swirled on the trees and drifted down to the ground. October brought cooler temperatures with low humidity, a rarity in South Louisiana. The smell of burning wood from fireplaces made Neva think of a happy childhood

with her grandmother. Josephine Sterling, tall and proud, always said having a fireplace made a plain old stack of wood a real house. Since her mother had left when Neva was only a baby, her grandmother was the only mother she'd ever known. So she called her Mama Jo, never grandmama. Mama Jo always welcomed the first cool night because it meant she could light a fire. Now Neva had to be the strong one since Mama was so ill.

Neva turned off Highway 61 at the small green sign that announced Solitude was just ahead. Trees lined up close on either side, many still with green leaves mixed in with the fall colors. Neva rolled down the window to catch the cool breeze. How could she have stayed away so long? A tree lined two-lane road led to home, her only real home in truth. The white six room cottage with a big fireplace was located on Sterling land. Land that had been in their family since antebellum time.

"Hey, missy. You musta drove to New Orleans to pick up my things," Mama Jo called out as Neva came in the front door. She sat in her favorite rocking chair in front of the fireplace.

Neva gave her a peck on the forehead before heading into the kitchen. "Nonsense," Neva called back over her shoulder in a mild tone. She was used to Mama Jo's way to speaking her mind. "You warm enough? I worried leaving you alone when that home health aide didn't show up on time."

"I can still take care of myself," Mama Jo shot back. "I got my wrap and put another log on the fire."

"You're not supposed to be doing anything but rest. Don't be hard-headed, Mama." Neva marched back through the dining room to the living room. She put her hands on both hips.

"Musta forgot who you talkin' to, missy," Mama Jo muttered. "I wiped your nose and your bottom, don't forget who's who in this house."

Neva brushed a stray tendril of her grandmother's gray hair. "I know it's hard not being able to do all the things you used to. But the doctor said--"

"Him! Always pokin' folks in places he got no business." Mama Jo patted her hair in place.

"You love Doctor Dixon. You giggle like a school girl when he's talking to you." Neva took off her jacket and put it in a hall closet just off the dining room.

"Don't do no such thing!" Mama Jo jerked her on the front of her sweater.

"Do too." Neva shook her head. They sounded like two eight year olds arguing. She went to the kitchen to unload the bags of groceries and other items she'd picked up. Mama Jo, using slow careful steps, followed her and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Here, I'll fix you another cup of hot herbal tea." Neva put water in a kettle.

"I want coffee." Mama Jo scanned the kitchen with a critical eye. "Put that pitcher back on the top shelf."

Neva suppressed a sigh. "You can't have coffee, for the one hundredth time." She moved the offending pitcher back to its proper place.

"Dadgum doctors don't know what's what. Good strong coffee don't give nobody a stroke." Mama Jo had always said breakfast was not complete without a cup of Louisiana dark roast with chicory.

"You are not going to get coffee, so get used to it."

"At my age, ain't much left to enjoy. Gonna die soon anyway, might as well have what I want." Mama Jo was looking out the window to the woods that sloped down to a hollow.

Neva dropped the bag of fresh green beans she was about to put in the refrigerator. "Don't

say that," she said in a hoarse voice.

"Come here, baby girl. Sit down." Mama Jo tapped the chair next to her.

"I'm not to listen to talk about death." Neva hung back. "No."

"Now who's being stubborn and childish? I didn't raise you to be no wimp, girl. You got to face it. I'm near eighty years old and my health ain't too good. We got to talk." Mama Jo beckoned to her. "Don't let me down. This here is too important."

"Mama, I never thought of being in a world without you until...." Neva said in a voice close to a whisper.

"Dyin' is part of livin'. Best I can do is make you strong so you can take care of yourself. Now I'm gonna put you in charge of the store but Desiree is gonna own part of it. Got my will made out." Mama Jo pulled a long envelope out of the pocket of her sweater.

Neva opened it and read the legal document dated a little over a year before. It formalized Mama Jo's wishes. "Desiree is still hopping mad."

After Mama Jo's light stroke, her two surviving children and six grandchildren had gathered to discuss the family businesses. None of Neva's other four cousins wanted to be saddled with the Fish Shack. They all lived far away with busy lives of their own. Apparently Mama knew this, so she gave them property instead. Uncle Roy got the small auto shop as expected. He'd run the business for years after Papa Dub bought it from the widow of the man who had owned it. But she would leave Neva and Desiree The Fish Shack. Neva knew Mama Jo hoped that this would somehow mend the rift between them. It had the opposite effect. Desiree immediately began making plans to sell the store and the surrounding property to the Bellows family. She assumed Neva would agree since price offered was a good one. Neva said no, and the argument that resulted had been explosive.

"Desiree ain't never satisfied if she ain't gettin' everything. Green hearted little rascal. Just like her snooty mama."

"Getting the store straight will take a lot of work," Neva murmured. Mama had made it clear that Desiree was to be a silent partner. Her cousin was not used to being silent, especially when it came to her own economic interests.

"You can do it. The question is, do you want to?" Mama Jo fixed her with a long look of scrutiny. "I ain't gonna force it on you."

Neva thought about how good it felt to be home. Her life in New Orleans had been okay. A much needed distance after Nathan's death. But eventually she would have returned to Solitude. She'd known it in the back of her mind. Grandpapa Dub had faced much hardship as a black man starting a business back in the late thirties. She could not let him down.

"Yes, I do," Neva said. She squeezed Mama Jo's hand.

"Good. Don't let nobody push you around. That goes for your cousin Desiree." Mama Jo wagged a finger at her nose.

"Yes, ma'am." Neva gave her a mock salute.

"Don't get smart-alecky. Now see, that wasn't so bad." Mama Jo's expression softened. "Your grandpapa and me always wanted to make sure you was taken care of. After your mama..." Even after twenty-five years, she could not refer to Neva's mother without feeling pain.

"I know." Neva put both arms around her. "And you did take care of me. You and Papa Dub were the best grandparents in the world."

Mama Jo dabbed at her eyes with a blue handkerchief. "Go on now. I wasn't perfect by a long ways but I tried." She stared ahead.

Neva wondered at the sadness in her voice. "What is it, Mama?"

"Oh just an old woman thinkin' 'bout her past and what she coulda done different." Mama Jo patted her hand and smiled. "Am I ever gonna get that cup of tea?"

"Coming right up, ma'am." Neva smiled back. But she wanted to know the source of her distress. "What would you have done differently?"

"For one thing, not let Desiree take over the store," Mama Jo said. She was back to her usual blunt, take charge tone.

"She did make some bad calls."

"Run my business in the ground is what she did. Hiring that fool to work there. Probably one of shady boyfriends."

Neva could not deny it. As always, somehow Mama knew anyway in spite of being ill. "Yes, I had to let him go first thing. Desiree threw a fit."

"I set her straight when she called here whinin' 'bout it to me." Mama Jo gave a short laugh. "Told her what was what in hot minute. She didn't pull no stuff with me, you best believe."

"Now that's too much even for her!" Neva said with heat. "She ought to know better than to worry you with problems at the store." Her cousin seldom considered anyone else when she wanted to get her way.

"I handled her. Told her to shut up cause with the way she was actin', I might just decide you would get everything." Mama Jo chuckled. "Shoulda heard her tryin' to play up to me then."

"Shame on you scaring her. You know how Desiree is about inheriting the family business, not to mention land." Neva tried to put admonishment in her tone. Yet she was glad to see the old feisty Josephine.

"Just givin' that rascal something to think on. Oughta make her leave you alone for a while." Mama Jo sipped from her cup and made a face. "Colored water is what this is."

"It's apple cinnamon and good for you." Neva gave her a tea cake to go with the tea. "And don't count on Desiree backing off for long."

"You can handle her." Mama Jo gave a satisfied sigh as she munched on the cookie.

"Good you got Lainie helping you. Now she got sense."

"I better call to let her know I need to stay here longer." Neva dialed the phone.

"You go on and quit makin' such a fuss. The agency called and said Tranice would be here any minute. Sounds like she drivin' up now." Mama Jo stood up and started for the back door. She opened before the young woman was out of her car.

"Hey Miss Jo. You been behavin'?" Tranice bounced in with typical twenty-two year old enthusiasm.

"What I told you 'bout talkin' to me like I'm a child? I changed your mama's diapers, smarty pants." Mama Jo allowed Tranice to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Which means you've been bad," Tranice said without a trace of hesitation.

"Not too." Mama Jo had a twinkle in her dark brown eyes. She noticed that Neva was talking on the phone. "Let's have some coffee in a bit," she said low.

"No coffee," Tranice said in a loud voice.

Neva put down the receiver. "I heard her trying to be sneaky."

"Smart aleck young folks," Mama Jo griped.

Tranice laughed. "Nice try, Miss Jo. Come on, it's time for our favorite Perry Mason re-runs on television."

Mama Jo and Tranice put a plate of tea cakes and two cups of herbal tea on a tray. They went into Mama Jo's large bedroom to get settled in the two chairs in front of her television. Neva followed them after putting on her jacket again.

"I'll call you later to see how it's going. I should be home by six thirty at the latest," Neva said.

"Okay, okay," Mama Jo waved at her distractedly, her eyes on the screen.

"We'll be fine. My husband is working a double shift, so I'd just as soon be over here as home by myself. Don't worry." Tranice gave her a thumbs up sign.

Neva headed straight for store to relieve Elaine, her best friend and cousin. Papa Dub and his brother, Luther, had opened the Fish Shack in nineteen forty-seven. They sold fresh caught from lakes and streams nearby. As tourism grew, they added fishing supplies such as bait, fishing reels and other items visiting sportsmen might need.

"Sorry I took so long, Lainie." Neva took off her sweater and fanned herself.

"No problem. Kids not gonna be home from school for hours yet. Thank the Lord," Lainie said with a chuckle.

"Come on. Just a month ago you were crying about how your babies are going to be grown soon." Neva waved a hand in the air. "So don't give me that."

"Yeah, well I do miss Moesha since she went off to college." Lainie had a wistful look. "But dealing with two teenagers fighting all the time has cured me of dreading the empty nest."

"Jeroyd and Shenetta? I can't believe it."

"Humph! You should be there when they're trying to kill each other over the phone. Having a sixteen year old boy and thirteen year old girl under the same roof is murder I tell ya."

"One day you'll look back at these days and laugh." Neva took arranged a row of fishing lures on the shelf.

"Sure I will. I'll be in a mental hospital laughing about everything until they give me another pill!" Lainie quipped.

"You are too much." Neva giggled as she scanned the store. "Thanks for helping me get this place together. Those snack foods are selling really well."

"Yes, that new campground down from Thompson's Creek is bringing in lots of customers." Lainie grew serious. "I'm glad you stepped in and opened the place back up after Mama Jo got so sick. Desiree was drooling over the prospect of selling out to the Bellows."

Neva sighed. "Yes, but the one thing I didn't need was another fight with Desi."

"Tough. She'll just have to get over it," Lainie said with characteristic bluntness.

"You're always too hard on Desiree. She had it tough with kids making fun of her when she was little. Of course she's blossomed like a butterfly coming out a cocoon."

Neva thought of how Desiree suffered because she was chubby and had an overbite. But with braces and a change in eating habits, Desiree became a lithe beauty by the age of fifteen.

"More like a snake shedding its old skin I'd say," Lainie said with a grunt of distaste. "And she's gotten her revenge in the last ten years. You heard about her and Ivory?"

"Lainie, you're going to gossip about your own cousin?" Neva tried to look stern.

“She’s was sneaking around with Ivory LaMotte for the last four years.” Lainie seemed not to notice Neva’s admonition. “Honey, his wife tried to knock her brains out with a can of green beans down at Boudreaux’s Food Mart last year and--”

“I can’t believe it.” Neva tried not to look interested. Proper Christiana Williams Tate getting violent? Now that was something she’d pay to see! “You know how things get exaggerated each time someone else tells the tale.”

“Miss Cora Lee saw it.” Lainie nodded when Neva looked at her with wide eyes. Miss Cora Lee Jones was a pillar of the small insular black community of Solitude. Everyone knew she did not lie.

“Oh goodness.” Neva shook her head and forgot to pretend she did not approve of gossip.

“In fact, folks say if she hadn’t stepped in, Desiree would be walking around with a permanent dent in her head.” Lainie gave a wicked cackle.

“So what happened? I mean, Chrissy must have left Ivory.” Neva was hooked. She had to know it all.

Lainie leaned against the counter with an eager expression. “Not at first. But they separated about three months later. Ivory has always had a thing for Desiree, almost an obsession. Anyway, you won’t believe the latest, child.

“What?”

“I heard Ivory been cutting up cause he suspects Desiree is cheating on him. Nobody knows who it is.” Lainie wore a look of pure satisfaction at the effect of her prize tidbit.

“That’s some trick. Around here, if you break a glass in the morning everybody knows by lunch time.” Neva wondered what hapless man was Desiree’s latest conquest. Then she felt a twinge of guilt. “Desiree isn’t so bad.”

“Stop making excuses for her.” Lainie threw up both hands in exasperation. “She stole the woman’s husband.”

“Oh like Ivory didn’t have a choice.” Neva shook her head.

“You know what they say, she put one a strong mojo on the man, just like....” Lainie’s voice trailed off.

“Say it, like Mama Jo and like me.” Neva gave a soft laugh. “Sounds like even you believe it.”

“Mama Jo was the seventh daughter of a seventh son. And she was born with a veil over her face.” Lainie shrugged. “She does seem to know stuff before it happens.”

“At least folks oughta get the superstition right. It’s the seventh son of a seventh son. And Mama Jo always said she was just reading people, not tea leaves or signs.” Neva put more change in the cash register. She glanced out to see a couple of customers, men dressed in hunting camouflage, striding across the gravel parking lot.

“I know it’s silly.” Lainie stopped when the bell over the door jingled as the burly men came in. “But you gotta admit, Mama Jo has a knack for knowing stuff before it happens,” she said in a whisper. “Can I help y’all?”

Neva smiled to herself as Lainie prepared to sell the men crickets before they headed off to fish. Mama was not psychic. She was just very perceptive.

“I’m telling you, Mama Jo is no ordinary woman,” Lainie continued once the men were out the door.

“That’s true. But don’t you start with the hoodoo talk, okay? Now come on and help me do

inventory.” Neva wanted to change the subject.

“Okay. I’m sorry, Neva.” Lainie put an arm around Neva’s shoulder. “I’m so glad you came back home.”

“Me, too. I missed your mess, girl,” Neva said with a laugh. “Sure you don’t want to work part-time regularly? I need the help.”

“We-ll... The kids are pretty grown now. And the extra money would help.” Lainie followed her into the office. “I mean money of my own.”

“Charles has always been generous.” Neva thought of the good-humored man who made a healthy salary as an engineer for the local utility company.

“Yeah, but I didn’t work even after Moesha was born. I’d still like to earn my own money.”

“Then join the exciting world of retail sales,” Neva exclaimed gesturing wildly like a used car salesman on a television commercial. “You’ll have flexible hours, a great boss and all the bait you want!”

“Ooo, unlimited bait? Who needs a pension plan!” Lainie wore a look of mock glee.

“I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist.” Neva grew solemn. “Really, Lainie, I prefer family. You most of all.”

“Been rough, eh?” Lainie perched on the edge of the desk.

“Desiree has been fighting me all the way. The guy she had managing the place was pilfering merchandise, I’m sure of it. It’s a mess.” Neva bit her bottom lip. “I need someone I can trust. Jeroyd would make a great stock clerk, too.”

“Hey, hey, you ain’t gotta beg.” Lainie gave her a hug. “It’s a deal, boss lady.”

“Thank you, Lord!” Neva gave a long sigh of relief. “Now that you’ve agreed, look at this.”

“What the--” Lainie examined the sloppy bookkeeping for several minutes. “It’s going to take us weeks to sort this out!”

“He was cooking the books. Just lucky my talented, brilliant Cousin Lainie was a top bookkeeper in another life.” Neva beamed at her then ducked a pencil Lainie threw at her head.

“You sneak!” Lainie gave a squeal of dismay.

“Remember Sister Sledge,” Neva called out as she dashed for the store room. She sang the seventies pop tune about family sticking together.

“Hey you!”

Neva stuck her head back in the door cautiously. “Yes?”

Lainie’s fierce expression softened. “Did I tell you how good it is to have you back?”

“At least once, but more won’t hurt.” Neva gave her an affectionate grin. “Or get you off the hook. You pro-mised, so get to work,” she wheedled shaking a finger at her before dodging a shower of paper clips.

They both laughed hard until tears flowed for the rest of the day. Still untangling the muddle made to cover poor management was a daunting task. It took them another four days of long hours just to sort it all out. Then they began setting up a new system of accounting, inventory and payroll on the small computer Neva bought. Between getting settled at the cottage and working at the store, Neva had little time for much else.

After two weeks, she was finally able to take a day for herself. The store was closed on Sundays and Mondays. She woke up on Monday to a beautiful cool day of sunshine. Neva chafed under the yoke of routine running the store imposed. She’d always been a free spirit,

allowed to roam the woods and daydream. Feeling stifled from three weeks of living and breathing The Fish Shack, Neva set off along a footpath leading through the woods behind her home. She breathed in the scent of wood. Birds chattered away as though passing on forest gossip. Green still crowded all around her like a pretty cloak Mother Nature wore when visiting down south. Never had she felt this buoyancy even walking along St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans. It was only a good twenty minute walk away from Thompson's creek and another twenty minutes to the bluffs overlooking the mighty Mississippi. Neva savored every blade of grass, every tree that greeted her. This had always been, would always be her favorite place.

"You waited for me!" Neva found the oak tree with her initials carved, faint after twenty-two years but still visible. At the base was the hollow where she and Lainie had hid their treasures while pretending to be pirates.

"But didn't we have great adventures?" Neva said with a laugh.

A whisper of leaves stirred by a fall breeze was the old oak tree's only reply. Then an unexpected stab of loneliness pierced her. This was a day to walk with someone special through such an enchanted kingdom. Neva had never found that someone. She'd settled once for a marriage that promised emotional security. Nathan had been a good man. He had deserved better. After his death, Neva had felt guilty. Nathan gave her everything she wanted. Moonlight and roses was another of her foolish, fairy tale dreams. Ah, but what lovely dreams. Neva reached the edge of the woods near the bluffs over the river. How she had imagined a prince riding through the forest frantically searching for his one true love, her. Her mind drifted as she gazed ahead into a land peopled with wizards and kings. She smiled when a fine horse emerged from the woods opposite her. There he is. What? Neva blinked but the horse and rider was still there. A tall, darkly handsome man guided the large chestnut animal along the bluffs away from Neva. Horse and man were powerfully built. Both seemed sure of themselves. The man wore a dark red shirt open at the neck, maybe flannel, and jeans with cowboy boots. With a kick, he urged the horse to a trot. Soon they were swallowed up in the woods almost a mile away.

"Ah come on, girl. That was probably old Mr. Sims and your imagination made him into a black prince from a story book," Neva said aloud. "Maybe it's time for eyeglasses."

He had gone in the direction of the Sims family farm. Most certainly no man around Solitude looked like that. Neva laughed at herself and headed home. She would have to stick to her vow. It was time to grow up. Living the life of a dreamer had to end. Especially if she was going to start hallucinating!

"So you're now Miss-In-Charge." Desiree stood in the middle of the store. She turned around in a full circle. "All ready changed things around."

Desiree, her black hair up in a swirl, wore a power suit of royal blue. The skirt was just about the knee. Her long shapely legs were wide apart as she swept a critical eye over the shelves. Neva looked at her attractive cousin. The last thing she wanted was another battle. At least Desiree had chosen to show up near closing time. Neva glanced at her watch. It was four fifteen.

"I won't take up too much of your precious time," Desiree said. "I just want to know."

"Know what?"

Desiree walked up close to her until their faces were only inches apart. "I want to know exactly what lie you told Mama Jo about me."

Neva took a step back from her. "I didn't have to tell a lie. Mama Jo is able to make her own decisions."

"With a little help from you." Desiree jabbed a forefinger in the air between them. "Didn't waste time gathering evidence against me."

"And just why was there so much evidence, Desiree?" Neva's voice rose despite her best efforts not to be baited.

"You manufactured it, that's why. Sales were on the verge of taking a jump. My marketing strategies could have put this place on the map." Desiree flung her arms out.

"We both want the same thing, to make all of the family businesses grow. Maybe we don't always agree with Mama Jo's decisions but—"

"Every decision she's ever made was in your favor. Papa Dub and Mama Jo made it clear you were their favorite!" Desiree swallowed hard.

"Mama Jo wants the best for you, too." Neva once again was able to forget the sting of Desiree's anger. She could see the hurt little girl who needed desperately to be the center of attention.

"Sure she does," Desiree said. She turned her back to Neva.

"Yes, she does." Neva put a hand on her shoulder. "But Mama Jo is a practical woman when it comes to business. She knows you worked hard."

"Yes, I did." Desiree turned and shook off Neva's hand. "So maybe I made a few mistakes. She didn't ask Lainie to help me." Her voice trembled a bit.

"Mama Jo tried to meet with you more than once and you didn't show." Neva remembered how Mama Jo recounted her frustration in dealing with her headstrong granddaughter. "She was too sick for a long time and then you—"

Desiree glared at her. "Fine. Who needs the aggravation!" She cut off any discussion of her behavior. "Take the damn store if you want it."

"Desi, there's really no reason for us to be on bad terms. We're family." Neva reached out to put a hand on her arm again.

Desiree pulled away with one sharp movement. "You just keep this in mind, I'm not going anywhere. So don't think I'll let you have it all."

"Desi—"

"Don't call me that! I'm not a kid you can push around anymore." Desiree wore a bitter smile. "I'm not down and out by a long shot." She stomped out of the store and let the door bang shut behind her.

Neva followed her out to porch but Desiree was in her car within seconds. She watched the black Honda Accord shoot out of the parking lot as though Desiree had no thought for on-coming traffic. Goodness! Since they were little girls they'd been at odds. Yet Neva could never understand why or change it. With a shake of her head, Neva went back inside. The good feelings of being home kept being assailed by all the bad things that had driven her to New Orleans. As she gazed around the store, she wondered if she was up to it.

"That child dropped right into a nest of vipers when she come back here." Patsy peered at Mama Jo over her glasses.

"Ain't that bad." Mama Jo increased the pace of her oak rocker. She pursed her lips at her best friend. They sat in Mama Jo's living room.

"I'm telling you what I know." Patsy chewed a last bit of tea cake before going on. "Bessie and Lorita was messin' with her in town the other day I heard."

"Them two ain't got a whole brain between 'em." Mama Jo gave a grunt.

"May be, but they gonna get folks stirred up an' talkin'." Patsy arranged her sweater around her shoulders. "You know how these folks love to gossip."

"Sugar, don't nobody half-way listen to Bessie." Mama Jo squinted so she had the fierce look that froze grown men twice her size. "If they do, they know better than to let me find out about it."

"True and true again." Patsy chuckled. After a few moments, she grew serious again. "Still Desiree is something else entirely."

Mama Jo stopped the motion of her chair. "Yep. But Neva ain't no doormat. Lots of folks take her kindness for weakness. She got a tough streak."

"I dunno, Jo." Patsy looked skeptical.

"Desiree got mean ways, but I can keep her in line even if her daddy can't." Mama Jo started the rocker again.

Patsy picked up another tea cake from the decorative tin canister on the table between them. "Humph, guess you oughta know." She took a bite out of the cookie.

"Neva's gonna be just fine. She's got more of me in her than most folks think." Mama Jo clasped her gnarled hands together tightly in her lap. "I did better by her than I did for her mama."

"That ain't true, Jo," Patsy said in a quiet but firm voice. "I ain't gonna let you talk that way. Sometimes you gotta accept that a child chooses bad even after you teach 'em good."

Mama Jo closed her eyes. "Maybe you're right. Lord knows I've gone over it in my mind a thousand times seems like."

"We both know Rose was grown enough to make her own life what she wanted it to be." Patsy seemed to have lost her taste for the sweet treat. She put it down on her napkin. "Why you an' Dub was raising Neva even before...." She let the rest remain unspoken.

"Yeah." Mama Jo rocked slowly as though it helped her massage an ache. She was silent for several minutes. "Which is why I know that child's got a lot of strength in her."

"Enough to take all what comes with bein' a Sterling?" Patsy gazed at her.

"More than enough," Mama Jo answered without hesitation. "I thank the Lord for sparing this old woman a few more breaths." She looked at Patsy with an expression of determination.

"Neva is gonna make it. I'll see to that."