

Whispers On The Wind

By Dana Wayne

Chapter One

You let him kill her.

The angry female voice in the pre-dawn hour jolted Cooper Delaney from a restless sleep.

Adrenalin pumping, he rolled to the right and automatically grabbed his pistol from the nightstand, fully expecting to see a stranger beside the bed.

Nothing but moonlit shadows. He swiveled his head to the left.

The room was empty.

He blinked and drew in a deep breath, trying to dispel remnants of the dream making sleep all but impossible for over a month. Always the same dream; a shadowy figure begging Coop to find her. That was it... *find me, please*. Two weeks ago, the voice changed and insisted Coop had to stop him.

Stop who? From what?

Tonight, the dream exploded into a full-blown nightmare.

He put the gun back on the table and lay down, right arm over his eyes. "Shit," he whispered as the vision replayed through his mind. *Powerful hands gripped her throat, the eerie silence punctuated by ragged gasps as she struggled for air. Blood trickled from her nose and the corner of her mouth. Dark hair wedged into a jagged cut across her forehead. Terror-filled eyes stared at the figure bent over her.*

All the while, the voice reproached...you didn't stop him.

At forty-three, Coop considered himself a straight-forward, no nonsense lawman, well known and respected as the Sheriff of Baker County, Texas. He looked at the facts, the evidence, and made logical, rational decisions. And yet, the dream was so real, he smelled the metallic odor of blood, felt the dampness of the earth around her.

“Dammit.” He lowered his arm and punched the bed. *I’m losing my fricking mind.*

It was bad enough when the voice invaded his sleep, but two days ago, he heard it at the kitchen table where he sat eating breakfast. Wide awake. This time, she warned he – whoever *he* was – would kill again.

He tossed the sheet aside and sat on the edge of the bed. Heart pounding, his breath hissed as he gulped in air. Elbows on his knees, he cradled his head in his hands. “Just a dream,” he murmured, “a bad dream.”

He stumbled to the window and shoved it open with an angry thrust, gasping when the rush of cool night air caused gooseflesh to prickle his sweat-coated body. “A dream,” he whispered, willing himself to believe. “Nobody died.” He pulled down the sash and pressed his forehead against the glass pane. “Nobody died.”

When his racing heart finally slowed, he pushed away and headed for the bathroom, stopping at the foot of the bed as he tried to remember if Miss Eva had guests tonight. A curse escaped parched lips as he grabbed his jeans from a chair. *Why in the world did she want to go into the B&B business anyway?*

Even as the thought flitted through his mind, he knew the answer. She decided he needed a wife and used the lovely Antebellum home to lure prospects. Hence, the majority of her guests were single women looking for a good time, or to change their

marital status. He lost track of the propositions, both subtle and otherwise, thrown his way in the last six months. *When had women become so forward?*

He opened the door and padded on bare feet to the bathroom he shared with his son, Jason, when he was home from college. Guests used the one across the hall.

Since sleep was out of the question at this point, he threw on a shirt and headed downstairs for coffee.

Light showing under the kitchen door stopped him cold. “Crap. Company.”

Today is the first step of starting over.

Samantha Fowler gazed out the kitchen window, transfixed by the beauty of daybreak, convinced the magnificent sunrise was a good omen. The sky, once dark and gloomy, now showcased varying degrees of orange, blue and purple. Giant oaks, pecans and pine trees, previously hidden by darkness, sprang to life, as did the beautifully landscaped yard of the bed and breakfast she would call home for the next two weeks.

Her best friend, Barbara Walker, who grew up in Bakersville, suggested Pecan Grove B&B for her much-needed sabbatical to contemplate what to do with her life. A quick perusal of their website convinced her to give it a try. Located two hours from Dallas in rural Baker County, it was a beautiful antebellum-style home re-constructed after a fire in 1920.

Everything from the graceful columns on the front, to the upper-level porch running across the back, conveyed old-world-south. The interior was painstakingly decorated and furnished like its predecessor built in 1880. Modern upgrades included air conditioning and wi-fi, but the majority of the house retained the serene elegance and charm of the time.

“Oh, Jack, you should see this.” A soft sigh of wonder arose as she took in the panoramic view. “No way could I capture this with a camera.”

Her companion, a huge crossbreed dog of indeterminate lineage laying at her feet, merely grunted.

She sipped her coffee, still rooted by the window. “Don’t be such a grouch. We’ve been up a lot earlier than this.”

The mutt didn’t bother to grunt this time.

“Ms. Benton said breakfast will be ready by the time we get back.”

A soft groan followed by the swish of his tail on the worn linoleum floor acknowledged he heard what she said.

“No exercise, no food. Time to rock and roll, old man.”

Suddenly, Jack growled low in his throat and stood in front of her, attention fixed on the kitchen door as it slowly opened.

A man, barefoot, shirt half-buttoned, sporting a severe case of bed head, strolled into the kitchen.

Every cell in Sam’s body began a happy dance.

As a doctor, she was trained to quickly assess every situation and did so now. He towered over her, at least six-three or four, dark, curly hair in need of a trim touched the collar of a half-buttoned chambray shirt, while streaks of gray edged around the temples. Ruggedly handsome, his dark beard stubble projected an explicit manly aura.

Storm-cloud eyes, sharp and focused, assessed her as well.

Feminine radar pinged. Hard.

He liked what he saw.

Her fingers tightened around the cup. She attempted to speak but nothing came out. She settled for what she hoped was a smile of welcome but feared it may look more like a grimace.

Her protector didn't appear happy at the intrusion and bared his teeth in a menacing snarl.

She fumbled for the dog's collar. "Down, Jack."

Man and woman stared at each other in silence as seconds ticked by.

She reminded herself to breathe.

He cleared his throat as he ambled over to the pot on the counter. "I didn't expect company." He glanced her way, then focused on pouring his coffee. "Guests usually aren't up this early."

His voice, deep and sensual, coupled with that just-out-of-bed look sent ripples of awareness through her.

Oh my God. Looks like sin and sounds like Sam Elliott. "Oh, yes, well, we arrived late last night."

He looked around the kitchen. "We?"

His mouth moved so she knew he must have spoken, but it took a moment for her brain to stop fixating on the mat of chest hair peeking out the top of his shirt. She blinked and gestured toward the dog. "Me. And Jack. My dog. We arrived last night."

"Don't think I've ever seen a dog like him. What is he?"

An irresistibly devastating grin accompanied the question, and her stomach lurched.

She gulped in air. "Vet said maybe a cross between Mastiff and Rottweiler but even he was stumped."

The man cleared his throat – again – and looked everywhere but at her.

Warning bells sounded.

Holy crap. He feels it, too.

“Unusual coloring,” the man offered at last. “Like someone splattered black and brown paint all over him.”

She patted Jack’s head. “Yeah. He’s so ugly he’s cute.” *Really? That’s the best you can do?*

Jack, apparently satisfied the visitor was not a danger to his mistress, lay back down with a heavy sigh.

Silence filled the room.

She set her cup on the counter. “Um, I’m Samantha Fowler. Are you a guest here, too?”

When his laser-sharp gaze fixed on her mouth, a swarm of butterflies invaded her stomach.

A muscle flexed in his jaw. “Cooper – Coop – Delaney. Guess you can say I’m a permanent guest.”

Awareness bounced off the walls like a rubber ball, charging the room with explosive energy.

She let out an audible lungful of air and moved away from the counter. “Well, I think it’s light enough to explore.”

Jack snorted.

The edges of Coop’s lips turned up. “He doesn’t seem interested.”

“Yeah, but he needs the exercise.”

“Got a route in mind?”

Every word he spoke rolled over her in a tidal wave of heat. A quick shake of her head sent her ponytail sliding to the side. “Just riding around, checking out the area. Got in too late last night to see much of anything.”

“Well,” he pushed away from the counter, “enjoy your ride” He headed for the door, stopping to speak to the dog. “Nice to meet you, Jack.”

A soft rumble and a couple of weak tail thumps indicated acceptance.

Cooper grinned and walked out.

Sam closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “No. No. No,” she commanded, “Hormones fooled me once. I won’t let it happen again.”

She nudged Jack with her toe and headed out the back door, her unhappy companion lagging behind.

What the devil is wrong with me? Sam sped down the road, tires kicking up rocks and dust. She looked straight ahead, but her mind’s eye recalled the chance meeting in sharp detail. Her body still hummed with the force of his effect on it. Lust at first sight? Is that a real thing?

“Oh my God, Jack. What must he be thinking?”

Her silent companion watched intently, head cocked to one side as though listening while she ranted.

“I ogled like a fricking school girl.” She shook her head, cheeks burning as she relived the encounter. “But at least, thank you God, I stopped short of drooling, though I’m sure I would have if he hadn’t left when he did.”

Jack’s head cocked the other way, as though silently urging her to continue.

“Okay, okay, I looked. I admit it. I couldn’t help it.” She licked her lips. “Oh my. That chest,” she murmured. “So much hair.” Her fingers arched as she imagined running them through the thick mass of dark curls. “And didn’t he sound a little like Sam Elliott to you? Kinda gravelly and raspy, and when he smiled—” She slapped her palm against her temple. “What the blue blazes is wrong with me? Did Paul not teach me anything?” She shook her head, sending her lopsided ponytail lower. “But his eyes, they were so, so, intense. Such an unusual color, too. Not grey, not blue; more, I don’t know, like the ashes of a cold campfire or the color of storm clouds rolling in. The minute I looked at them,” she paused as a light shiver rolled over her. “I swear it jolted me down to my toes.” She wagged a finger at her companion. “And I’m not some sex-starved divorcee who can’t control herself, either, though I’m sure he thought so. I stared. Fine. Not a crime. God took a lot of extra pains with him, and it would be extremely rude of me not to notice.” She focused on the road. “My *goodness* did I notice. If ever a man was built for seven kinds of sin...”

Sam gave little thought to conversing with Jack as though he understood. In fact, sincerely believed he did. She found him beside a dumpster near the hospital two years ago more dead than alive from two bullet wounds. After he healed, they were constant companions. Paul, her now ex-husband, complained constantly about him being in the house, going everywhere with her, but she ignored his rants. Their marriage was already rocky by then, and she needed the mutt as much as he needed her.

Which no doubt explained why Paul and Jack never liked each other. Or maybe Jack was a better judge of character than her.

She sped down the road, wheel gripped in her left hand, her right waving around as she poured out her thoughts. “What did he expect anyway waltzing in there half-dressed?” She inhaled deeply and rested both hands on the wheel. “I shouldn’t be surprised, though. Males in general are self-centered jerks who should be lined up and shot at sunrise.” She reached over and patted Jack’s head. “Well, except you, of course.”

A soft whine and a thump of his tail drew her gaze.

“Again? You just went.”

Another whine.

“Okay, okay.” She searched ahead for an appropriate exit. Seeing what appeared to be a lane off to the right, she slowed and signaled a turn. It was little more than a well-traveled dirt lane leading to a briskly moving stream surrounded by willows, pines and an assortment of East Texas foliage. The nearest bank held a collage of mementos from past visitors, classifying the area as a primo make-out spot. Her mind’s eye marked the location of beer cans, towels and discarded condoms even as she pulled under a towering pine. She rummaged in the glove box for tissues and finding them, opened the door and stepped out.

“Come on you big whiney-butt.”

Jack jumped out and headed for the pine tree.

Sam headed in the opposite direction and gave a sharp, “Stay,” when he turned to follow. Rounding the lone holly bush, thumbs tugging on the waistband of her pants, she saw the body.