

One

The way Lenore Royal figured things, everything was entirely the male stripper's fault. Had he kept his gyrating hips to himself, things might not have gotten so out of hand. Not that Gene, her new boyfriend, much less Chance Breaux, would not blame her. They would probably insist that since she was Madame Lenore, psychic to the River Parishes in Louisiana, she should have foreseen the issues and canceled the bachelorette party in the first place. But how was she supposed to predict the amount of trouble a dozen primary school teachers could cause when set free in the French Quarter of New Orleans?

Adrienne Claireborne should never have asked Lenore to be her maid of honor for her upcoming wedding to oil man Chance Breaux. Lenore was ill equipped to handle such a social responsibility. Until Adrienne became her friend, Lenore had shunned social gatherings since she was a teenager. At that point in her life it was hard to ignore the fact that people considered the psychic rather odd. Rather than dwell on other people's opinions of her, Lenore set out to make her own identity. Dressed in dark, flowing clothes, she encouraged other people to see her as different. As a teenager, she learned people were not comfortable socializing with people who sensed ghosts. Although, those same people who would never consider being friends with her were more than willing to pay good money to rent Lenore's talent when they wanted to contact loved ones who passed away.

Last year all that changed. While trying to convince Adrienne to let her buy the house on River Oaks property, Lenore took a chance and tried to befriend the other woman. Adrienne, a principal in a nearby parish was quite apt at bossing people around. In one fateful shopping trip, Lenore's entire wardrobe had been revamped. Lenore's new friend maintained she needed to add color to her clothes and establish a life outside of the role of psychic. Such a drastic change forced Lenore to deal with new situations she had never faced before. She even had a boyfriend, of all things, something she had long ago given up any hope of ever finding.

After tonight's fiasco, Gene would probably be ready to dump her. Lenore was half convinced the attractive editor of the River Parishes Herald newspaper would come to his senses any minute now and tell her their relationship was a mistake. They were as different as night and day, after all. She dwelled in the world of the paranormal, gaining insight by rubbing a talisman stone and making connections with spirits trapped between this world and the next. Gene Zeringue dealt with reality; reporting on it, analyzing it, even offering opinions on it.

While Lenore had suffered a teenage crush on the man, longing to be as popular and normal as he seemed to be, Gene hardly noticed her until recently, after her drastic dressing style change. She knew his feelings were probably simply lust. Even in her dark, dumpy Madame Lenore garb, men often tried to pick her up. Dolly Parton had nothing on Lenore. Her waist and legs might be slender, but her bra cups runneth over, literally.

"Come on," one of the kindergarten teachers beckoned Lenore, trying to get her to join their second line. Lenore had planned a nice, calm, bridal gathering at one of the city's nicest restaurants. She invited all of the teachers and staff from Adrienne's school and innocently trusted everything would be simple and straightforward. These women dealt with small children all day

long. How was Lenore supposed to know they let loose when in an isolated situation where none of their school's clientele could see them?

While the dinner was demur, the bar the women insisted they visit afterwards was positively wild. Members of a bikers' gang played pool nearby. Lenore picked up the vibes of a few patrons who lost their lives from either drinking or fights that started out in this location. While those two issues might have been overlooked, Lenore was fairly certain the arrival of a male stripper, who popped out of a huge king cake, would cause nothing but trouble.

Adrienne led the second line, an umbrella of green, purple and yellow twirling above her head as she danced around the bar. The male stripper followed closely behind the principal, much too closely, in Lenore's opinion. Maybe it would not be so awkward had the man taken the time to put on a pair of pants. His g-string left little to the imagination. The man did have good muscle tone, then again, the oils that glistened on his body probably accented the abs of steel he kept flaunting.

Chance would definitely not approve of the bar or the stripper. Since he had demanded Lenore's promise to keep Adrienne out of too much trouble, he was likely to blame her if he found out about this situation. Generally, Adrienne avoided trouble, but tonight she seemed to be cutting loose and showing a whole different facet of her personality. Lenore wondered if Chance realized his future bride had a wild streak? Stupid question, the psychic decided. Of course he knew. Just a few months before, Chance had rescued Adrienne from a near fatal boating accident. The principal allowed herself to be tricked by a ghost into paddling out into the Mississippi River at midnight.

The bus monitor from Adrienne's school was not helping Lenore's bid to settle things down. The woman sashayed beside the second line of dancers circling the club, topping off their glasses of champagne. Suddenly, the stripper grabbed Adrienne, halting the second line. Lenore started to relax, deciding things were looking up. But things only went from bad to worse after that. The blushing bride was settled in a chair in the middle of the barroom. The stripper danced around her. Cheering women encouraged him on, reaching over to tuck money in his g-string. A woman who appeared to be close to sixty, slapped the man's firm ass, shoving a hundred-dollar bill into the front of the man's small covering. The man seemed to appreciate her offering, if his expanding g-string was any indication.

Adrienne looked embarrassed when the man turned his attention fully on her. Lenore started to go up and save her friend, but it was hard to break through the crowd of cheering onlookers. In the back ground, a news report played, detailing the death of a River Parish resident, the first apparent homicide in the area in more than twenty-five years. Locals were interviewed by the reporter. The entire area was in shock, and fear seemed to have gripped the immediate vicinity. People were rushing to purchase alarm systems and hand guns to protect themselves and loved ones.

As Lenore's luck would have it, two male residents from the River Parish area arrived at the bar as the news story concluded. Gene Zeringue and his friend, Chance Breaux were looking for their women. Both men were equally anxious to locate the ladies to ensure they were safe and sound after learning about the murder earlier in the night. They spotted Lenore on the outskirts of a tight knit group. Gene exhaled with relief. His petite vixen was safe. She looked so cute, bouncing on her high heel boots, trying to get a better look at the center of the crowd. He had to reach down and adjust himself as his pants got a bit tighter in front.

The blond-haired man reached over and pulled her into his arms for a brief hug. She smelled so good, like roses and incense, he smiled. Lenore melted against his chest for a second,

then stiffened. She watched as Chance scanned the area for his future wife. This is bad, she knew. Very, very bad. Her social awkwardness left her completely at a loss on how to handle this situation. Should she scream a warning to her friend or try to lure Chance away from the area?

"Where's Adrienne?" Chance called above the cat whistles and loud music.

The women facing the middle of the circle started chanting. "Adrienne! Adrienne!" Lenore's eyes widened as she saw realization dawn on the tall man's eyes. While she found it impossible to part the tight knot of women in the group, Chance was able to plow right through them. He found his blushing bride sitting on a chair, a nearly naked man giving her a lap dance. Lots of cursing erupted then, not from the future groom, but from the women deprived of their entertainment.

In Adrienne's defense, it appeared she had been leaning far back in her chair, trying to escape the man's gyrating hips. In fact, had Chance not grabbed hold of her arm, she probably would have fallen backwards, since the amount of champagne she had enjoyed that evening made balancing on two chair legs impossible. Probably from past experience, the stripper realized his presence was no longer necessary. He dashed through the other side of the circle of ladies, almost knocking over his sixty-year old fan. Adrienne raised her hand as if to calm Chance down, but it did not work. He lowered his massive shoulder and hauled her up and over it.

"Party's over, ladies," he announced, giving each one of them a dark look. His mood did not seem to improve as Adrienne announced she did not feel well and barfed down the back of his clothes.

Gene only made matters worse, in Lenore's opinion, when he demanded Chance wait for him to drape old newspapers over the backseat of his SUV before the other couple got inside. "It will only take a second, man. Give me a break. I have to drive around in this vehicle every day. It will be impossible to get that horrible smell out. These aren't leather seats. They are cloth."

The ride home was painfully quiet. Adrienne hung her head out of the window. Chance held her long, black hair back so she could breathe in the clean air. Every once in a while, she muttered an apology. While her groom seemed attentive to her needs, his anger was still obvious. Lenore sat in the front seat, chewing her fingernails. Surely they would get past this little misunderstanding. Chance and Adrienne's love was strong. Hell, they fought through disagreements about River Oaks and battled ghosts without breaking up. They would survive this, too.

What if they didn't? Lenore worried, her index finger bleeding now that the fingernail was nibbled to the skin. Gene saw her action, and reached out to grab her hand. He gave her a reassuring nod. She wondered if he would be so supportive if Chance started reminding them that Lenore was supposed to take care of Adrienne tonight. She may not have ordered the stripper, but she did not send him away when he arrived. Of course, Lenore had no idea how one went about firing a stripper? She had been so astonished to discover teachers at a primary school would even consider hiring one.

Chance carried Adrienne inside Home Place, the plantation the couple shared in the River Parishes. Lenore waited in the car as Gene removed the soiled newspapers from the back seat. He walked towards the house to dispose of them in a huge trash can there, and seemed startled by a sound coming from inside the house. He rushed up the stairway leading to the front door, looking as if he might try to force his way inside. Suddenly, he stopped. After seeming to listen a few seconds longer, he slowly backed away and returned to the car.

"What was that all about?" Lenore asked in her husky voice. "You looked as if you thought someone was in trouble or something?"

At first Gene seemed hesitant to explain. "I heard some... It sounded as if someone was in distress and I was concerned. There was a murder not too far from here tonight."

"A murder?" Lenore felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. "But nobody has been killed in this parish since... "

"Over twenty-five years," Gene nodded, backing out and pulling onto the River Road which followed the Mississippi's path. "At first, I jumped to the conclusion that what I heard might be another possible attack."

"And," Lenore demanded, wondering why he was being so evasive with details.

"It wasn't," he announced, shaking his head and trying to deal with what he discovered.

"Oh, my goodness," Lenore cried, jumping to conclusions. "They were fighting, weren't they? If they break up, it will be all my fault!"

"They aren't going to break up," Gene insisted.

"What if they can't work it out?" Lenore started chewing on the nails on her other hand. Gene reached over and pulled both of her small hands into his right one.

"They are working through the situation right now. Trust me, by tomorrow, both will be past the issue." His conclusion sounded sketchy at best.

"What aren't you telling me?" Lenore demanded.

"I just assumed I was the only local man I knew who had the same ideas about handling... relationship issues in that particular manner." Gene held onto her hands, knowing what was about to come up in discussion might frighten her at first. Apparently, whatever he saw had become a turning point in Gene's approach to his relationship with Lenore. He used to consider his natural inclinations were flawed and fought to suppress them. Now, he was not so sure he needed to do that. If Chance Breaux employed the same tactics, maybe they were not so old fashion after all. Besides, if there was a killer on the loose, he would need to up his game to keep his woman safe. He would protect her, even if he had to resort to something most women might balk at from a lover.

"Remember all those years ago, when you were over at our house visiting my sister?"

Lenore remembered all too well the visit he was alluding to and tried to pull her hands out of his. He managed to stop her efforts. "I assume you mean the night you acted like a total jerk."

"Yeah, that's the night I am referring to," he chuckled. She hissed at his reaction, doubling her efforts to get free. Delivering newspapers must help a person develop impressive hand control. She could not even free one hand. "I did not know you were there as my sister's friend, honey. You have to admit you hit puberty a bit earlier than most girls your age. When I saw you standing by a group of guys, I assumed you were someone's date. I was trying to get up the nerve to ask you out when I walked up on you trying to beat up one of my best friends."

"You were not!" Lenore argued, remembering the details quite differently. "You grabbed my hand and yanked me outside the minute your sister explained that jerk snapped her bra strap."

"I yanked you outside the minute I realized you were only in middle school and a bunch of high school jocks were trying to make moves on you, me included. Instead of listening to reason when I asked you two to stay outside, you started arguing with me and threatening to go back inside and face off with the jerk again."

"You had no right to spank me, Eugene Zeringue," Lenore used her upper body strength and the leverage of her breasts to break away from his hold. Luckily they were pulling into the driveway of River Oaks, and he did not lose control of the vehicle.

"Yes, I did. It was for your own good. You would not listen to reason and spanking you helped convince you to mind me. Which brings me back to the subject of Chance and Adrienne getting past tonight's events."

"You aren't making any sense," Lenore fumed at him, wishing he had never brought up that embarrassing memory. She would simply die if anyone knew what happened all those years ago. His sister had sworn not to ever tell anyone she witnessed her brother tanning Lenore's hide.

"I heard Adrienne pleading for someone to stop hitting her when we were at Home Place. If I am not mistaken, Chance was setting her ass on fire for putting herself in such a dangerous position tonight."

"He's beating her?" Lenore could not believe her ears. "And you just walked away without trying to help her?"

"Chance would never beat Adrienne. He was just helping her learn the consequences of her poor judgment. He was letting her know what happened tonight was unacceptable and trying to ensure she never made the same mistake again. I have to agree with his methods. All those years ago, I found applying a few well aimed swats to a stubborn lady's backside was a great deterrent. While I have never had the occasion to try such measures out with any other women I have dated, I can assure you, I won't think twice about doing so to you if necessary. Consider yourself warned."

"You have got to be kidding?" Lenore fumed. Should she grab her purse and drive back to Home Place to try and help Adrienne? Good Lord, it was bad enough that Gene had spanked her when she was a teenager. It must be humiliating for a grown woman to face such a situation. "I don't have time to sit here and reminisce with you about past acts of brutality on your part. Let's just say our good nights right now. I want to head over to Adrienne's place. You might not have a problem with Chance striking her, but I do."

"You aren't going anywhere but inside with me, Lenore," Gene switched off the engine and exited his company car. Walking around, he opened her door and indicated for her to get out. Lenore debated defying him, but decided it would be a waste of time. She needed to get rid of him so she could go help her friend.

"You'll forgive me if I don't invite you in," Lenore announced, rushing ahead to let herself into her home at River Oaks. She hoped to close and lock the door before he had a chance to talk his way inside. Gene was much faster than she anticipated though.

Grabbing her arm, he halted her progress. "We can have our conversation on the porch if you prefer, but I am not leaving until we have a discussion about what happened tonight."

Lenore did not like the way he said 'discussion.' It sounded more like he planned on giving her a lecture or worse. "I did not hire that stripper," she blurted out. "I promised Adrienne a nice, friendly dinner to celebrate her upcoming marriage. It was her wild friends who caused all the trouble."

"The elementary school teachers?" Gene asked, one of his bushy eyebrows inching upward. "You expect me to believe a dozen middle aged ladies conspired to embarrass their principal by hiring a stripper to humiliate her... Never mind, I just remembered the ladies I saw surrounding Adrienne. I could easily see them doing just that. So, do you want to explain why you were trying to barge your way into the center of attention?"

The psychic could not believe she was having to waste her time defending herself. "I was trying to save my friend."

Nodding his head, Gene seemed to accept her explanation. He pulled her into his arms and lowered his mouth to hers. His tongue parted her lips so he could deepen the connection. Strong fingers reached up to cup the underside of one of her large breasts, lifting the mass as he squeezed

ever so gently. "I am glad to hear I don't have any competition for your attention, darlin'. I don't like to share."

"Now can you leave so I can go see about Adrienne?" Lenore managed to ask after a few seconds of trying to calm her breathing. This man managed to make her melt with one kiss or touch. She did not understand why, but he did. Maybe she was still suffering from her childhood crush. Then again, he was her first real boyfriend. Maybe she was just so relieved to have one, any man could turn her on. Nope, she admitted to herself. Only Gene could make her go weak in the knees.

"You are not going to Home Place tonight, darlin'. Now invite me inside, I want to make sure everything is secure in there. We need to discuss changes you will have to make until the person responsible for the murder is captured."

"Changes I have to make?" Lenore flushed at his high-handed announcement. "Maybe you should worry about what changes you need to make, and let me figure out my own."

"Yeah, the thing is, if tonight is any indication, you aren't at your best when dealing with situations out of your control. Lucky for you, one of the major changes I plan on making is putting your safety as my top priority."

"Who died and made you the boss of me?" Lenore's hands rested on her slender hips and her shoulders straightened.

"Old Man Daigle died," he announced, taking her keys out of her hands. He unlocked the door and motioned with his arm for her to enter first. She seemed to plant her feet firmly on the porch in defiance. "The last time I had to put you over my knee it was to stop you from going inside. Am I really going to have to spank you tonight for refusing to go inside now?"

Lips pressed together in a tight line, Lenore did not doubt the big bully would do just that. She marched inside and promised herself she would at least open herself to the possibility of getting a new, less bossy boyfriend.