

Chapter One

An elderly lady dressed all in black, with wild, gray hair flowing about her face walked up to Detective Nathan Thibodaux as he watched Cheryl Zeringue walking to the front of a small crowd. The younger woman was dressed in a white, silk dress and matching high heels. The awkward way she moved told onlookers she was not accustomed to walking in heels. The cop tried to hide his grin, not wanting to make Cheryl anymore embarrassed about losing their bet. He had told her it was only a matter of time before her brother Gene Zeringue asked his lady love to be his wife. Cheryl had insisted Lenore Royal, the now famous Psychic of the River Parishes, would dump her bossy brother. Boy, had she been wrong. The terms of Nathan and her bet were hardly finalized before her brother put his ring on Lenore's finger. Had she won, Nathan would be standing in front of a bar at one of the more famous gay nightclubs in New Orleans, dressed in tight jeans and a form fitting shirt. Cheryl decided her winning would be two fold. She could bring the arrogant police officer down a few notches while horny people gawked at his magnificent body. She would also get to enjoy watching his muscles play across the tight shirt she had wanted him to wear.

But she had not won their little wager. Now she had to dress up in fancy clothes and pretend to be comfortable walking around in damn, high heels. To make matters worse, the new editor of the River Parishes' Herald had to go shopping just to purchase tonight's outfit. She had not taken the effort to dress up like this since high school. The strawberry blonde beauty tried to convince herself that was why she felt so uneasy tonight. Just slipping into the dress had her all but hyperventilating. Ordering herself to get control, Cheryl took a deep breath as she stood in front of a few dozen family and friends of Lenore and Gene, offering up a toast to the happy couple.

"I'd like to welcome Lenore into our family. It took a psychic to see the potential in my dear, older brother, Gene. I've always wanted a sister, but my parents decided to stop after my birth, probably because they had already reached perfection in a child, namely me. I was lucky though. They managed to learn from their mistakes with Gene." As the reporter got into her speech, she started relaxing. Now she had the crowd eating out of her hand. There was something charismatic about the new editor of the local newspaper.

Cheryl continued, "Now I have a new sister, one with a heart of gold, who fights for those in need. We all know she helped save a few lives in recent years." At that mention, Adrienne and Chance Breaux gave Lenore a knowing look. The psychic had helped the couple deal with some of the first spirits of River Oaks, a plantation home they owned and rented to Lenore.

The lady editor continued her toast, as she recalled the most recent spirits the psychic had helped. Cheryl had been the one to discover the killer's real identity and almost ended up being one of his last victims. Officer Thibodaux had showed up just in the nick of time to save the day. How the editor wished it could have been anybody, but him, to do it. The damn man was already arrogant enough. The last thing she needed to be was beholden to him for rescuing her.

"Not many people know it, but Gene would never have met his beautiful future wife if it had not been for me. Lenore and I went to school together. Always a protector, she watched out for me when other kids tried to boss me around." The reporter shot Nathan Thibodaux a pointed

look as she spoke. "Some people see me as being on the short side. Lenore became my champion the day some football jock yanked on my bra strap. The guy was a linebacker for the high school team, and Lenore was just as petite as I was back then. That did not stop her from taking on my tormentor. If my high handed big brother had not shown up and saved his friend, I am sure Lenore would have clobbered the jerk for me. That's the kind of person she is. She's kind and caring, even helping others who sometimes judge her harshly because she has a talent we all don't understand. The only thing she's lacked until now is a protector, someone to watch over her and make sure she's safe, loved and protected. My brother has finally found his true role in life. He's stepped down from the newspaper to become not only Lenore's husband, but her new business manager. Oh, and he's also become her hero. Mine, too."

She raised a champagne glass high in the air as everyone clapped. She shot Nathan a telling glare at the mention of her brother being the hero. Gene had put himself in danger to save Lenore and her, so bossy Nathan needed to remember putting an end to the killings was a team effort. The spirits of River Oaks, Lenore and Gene's home, had tried to tell them the killer's name was Leland. Everyone had a hard time believing elderly, widower Leland Duhe could ever actually kill anyone, much less murder four different friends of his wife and his.

Nobody connected that his son, nicknamed Sonny, was sneaking back into his childhood parish to kill and rob friends of his parents. Cheryl had figured it out and sent Nathan Thibodaux out of the area so she could gather her evidence before he swooped in and took over the facts she had uncovered. He had been hotter than hell when he'd gotten word of her part in sending him away, threatening bodily harm to imprisonment. Since he had been preparing to run for the position of sheriff soon, Cheryl had doubted he wanted to smear his image by tackling her head on. She'd shown up tonight to make good on her promise to dress up fancy and toast the newly engaged couple. Now that she had done that, she saw little reason to ever have to deal with the overconfident cop again.

Across the room, the cop could not take his eyes off of the beauty sipping champagne. She was a tiny little thing, probably no taller than five foot two, at best. Even in heels, she only came up to his shoulders. But she was feisty, he knew. Lenore had used her psychic talents to warn him Cheryl would be the one to discover the River Parishes' Killer's identity. His gut feelings told him the psychic was right, and he followed the beauty around for weeks, waiting for his first real break in ending the killer's reign of terror on the River Parishes region. Unfortunately, being around the little lady had an unexpected side effect. She was wild, brash, cursed too freely, and did not have a lick of sense where her own safety was concerned. She needed someone to take her in hand before she ended up getting herself killed. He still broke out in a cold sweat when he remembered walking into her home a few months before. A mad man had a pistol pointed at her and was lunging toward her as if to use her as a human shield. Nathan barely got a shot off before the killer could harm her.

"She's worth it," the elderly woman confided, taking Nathan by surprise. As a police officer, he was not used to someone managing to sneak up on him undetected. He generally was better aware of his surroundings. Of course, seeing how sexy the little lady reporter looked tonight would throw any man off his game, the cop assured himself. His life was finally back to normal, now that the River Parishes' Killer reign of terror was over. What was he going to do about the sassy editor, though? He still needed to address her serious offense of sending him away when the people in the region needed him the most. That was one offense he would not let go unanswered, either.

Nathan looked at the old lady standing beside him now. He wondered if he might possibly be talking to an actual ghost. After everything he had been through lately, he did not doubt the possibility. This lady sure looked paranormal. She had an impressive rack for a woman of her advanced years. She looked a bit familiar, but he was sure he had never meant her before tonight. "Pardon me, ma'am?" he asked. "Who's worth it?"

"The pretty little woman you can't keep your eyes off of," the older lady laughed. "You're concerned pursuing her might cost you your bid of being sheriff one day." The woman told him, reaching over to take his large hands in her smaller ones. Closing her gray eyes, a smile etched across her wrinkled face. "Oh, my, you will have your hands full with that one, young man. She'll definitely keep you on your toes." Another grin followed and she opened her eyes. "And you'll have her hopping on her toes, too. I would not make the mistake of taking her across your knee. She bites, dear. It's probably best to lean her over the table when you take her in hand, at least until you tame her a bit."

"Granny Royal!" Lenore called out from across the room. She pulled Gene with her to greet her grandmother. "We didn't know you were coming tonight. We're so glad you could make it."

"So this is the River Parishes famous psychic," Gene said. He started to reach over to shake the older woman's hand, but she grabbed him in a tight hug instead.

She corrected him. "Madame Lenore is the current River Parishes' psychic, young man. But you'd be knowing all about that, wouldn't you? I hear you're her new manager. She says you gave up some important job as editor of a newspaper so you could keep a closer eye on her. Smart move, young man. Lenore has a big heart, but she sometimes forgets to think things through before acting. There's a rumor you are even writing a book about the paranormal."

Gene took a chance and asked, "What are the chances I could get you to sit for an interview? I think it's time someone told the story about how you predicted the death of two famous residents before their untimely death seventy-five years ago. Lenore has tried to fill me in on the details, but I'd rather get a firsthand account."

"Come talk to me after the wedding, young man. Once you're an official part of the family, I'd be happy to talk to you about the Royal family's talents." The older woman announced, "Oh, look. I see my son and his delightful wife. He'd never forgive me if I didn't go over there and tell them hello, especially since all of his friends are here to help celebrate your engagement. He'll want to introduce me to them, you know." Everyone knew Lenore's parents were embarrassed to be associated with anything paranormal. The only reason they probably showed up tonight was because they were excited to finally see their only daughter married off to a respected young man.

"Shame on you for fibbing, Granny Royal." Lenore scolded. "Go ahead. Try not to make my poor parents suffer too much, though."

"Dear, I know just how far to push my son," the elderly Royal assured Lenore before walking away.

"If you'll excuse me," Nathan announced. "I want to go congratulate your sister on giving such a wonderful toast to celebrate your engagement."

"No you don't," Gene chuckled. "You want to gloat. Be careful, Thibodaux. Cheryl does not admit defeat easily. I warned you before, she does not play fair."

Nathan straightened his tie and adjusted his jacket. "And she bites..." he muttered, more to himself than anyone else as he strolled in her direction.

During his time with the lovely editor, Nathan had learned she enjoyed drinking a bit too often. Though she rarely hit the hard stuff, she often drank several glasses of wine in his presence. He might not have been as concerned had she allowed him to drive her here tonight. But the contrary woman always refused to take him up on his offers to chauffeur her around. Nor did she take his less than subtle hints that he could always ride along with her. The woman had a real issue with driving anyone but herself around. There had to be a reason behind such a hard and fast rule. He was determined to solve the mystery.

Cheryl saw her nemesis striding in her direction and tensed. Damn the guy, was he really going to come over and gloat? Taking a gulp of her red wine, she braced herself, swearing she would not thank him for saving her life all those nights ago. She did not need him hanging around, butting into her personal life, commenting on her poor choices and rash actions. She shifted her position; those damn heels making her feel off balanced. To think she wasted money on a dress she would never wear again, much less shoes that pinched her toes, galled her.

"You look beautiful tonight," Nathan announced.

"I look ridiculous, but that's what you wanted when you came up with the terms of our little bet." She tried not to notice how sexy he looked in his dress clothes. He looked comfortable no matter what he wore. Not her, she realized. Putting on fancy clothes had bothered her since starting college. It had not always been that way, she admitted to herself. Once she had been so concerned with wearing the latest fashion, she had bullied her mother into taking her shopping downtown at the more exclusive dress shops. As a teenager, she had been preoccupied with looking her best. The last dress she had nagged her mother to purchase was for her high school graduation. It had cost hundreds of dollars and her mother had been appalled that she wanted to spend so much money on a dress she would likely wear only once. The uneasiness she felt tripled when tragic memories of that particular dress came to mind.

A waiter passing by was carrying a tray with wine glasses filled with red liquid. She snagged one of the long stemmed cups. Drinking in public helped her dull her anxiety a bit. Tonight had been more nerve racking than most. She was out of her element here, dressed in clothes that she had no desire to wear, pretending she was some polished, innocent society lady. Snorting with disgust, she raised the glass to her lips. A large hand reached out to still her efforts.

"You really ought to consider pacing yourself," Nathan suggested. "It would be one thing if you had allowed me to drive you here, but you will be getting behind the wheel of a car in about an hour. I noticed you did not eat your meal, either. On an empty stomach, wine can be just as potent as the hard stuff, you know."

"Fuck off," she told him, surprising even herself with her bold vocabulary. Generally she stuck to hell, damn, and shit because her family cringed at her cursing. It was not lady like, they advised her, like she was some innocent social butterfly who needed to protect her image.

"Give me your keys, and I'll be happy to let you drink to your heart's content. Apparently losing a bet with grace is not part of your charm. Promise to let me drive you home so you arrive safe and sound, and I'll let you get as drunk and vulgar as you wish." The tall cop with the copper hair and emerald eyes did not raise his voice. If anything, he lowered it and sent chills down the editor's spine.

Using her free hand, she pried his hand away from her wrist. Cheryl lifted the liquid to her lips and savored the taste as she took a long gulp. Sure, she was feeling a bit light headed now, but it beat letting her mind linger on thoughts better left in the past. "I don't ride with anyone else in a car. Ever! I told you that before, Thibodaux. piss off and let me enjoy the rest of this party. You collected your winnings. I'm dressed like a brainless airhead. I stood up and gave

a fucking touching toast. Now let me salvage the rest of this night. I want to remember as little of it as possible."

With a salute of her wine glass, she started to walk away. The moment she lifted it up, he took advantage of her unsteady movements and removed the glass from her hand. Now she let out a string of curses, the likes of which would embarrass some of the hardened criminals he had dealt with in his years on the police force. Her parents, publishers of the River Parishes' Herald, looked up and saw the commotion. The newly engaged couple stopped dancing and turned to see the spectacle, as did most of their guests. The only person oblivious to the awkward situation was Cheryl Zeringue. Nathan decided he needed to put a stop to her actions before she did something to mar the entire celebration. He deposited the wine glass at a nearby table and pulled the strawberry blonde out onto the dance floor. The detective was much stronger than she, and he managed to overcome her awkward attempts to escape.

She would have belted him one, but he had her hands locked under his strong arms. The bastard twirled her around the dance floor, causing her to get lightheaded and lose all thoughts of fighting back. It took all her concentration not to fall down. Maybe she did have too much to drink tonight, she chided herself. What the hell was wrong with her? She felt as if her life was spiraling out of control. Was she really such an ungracious loser, that having to pay off a bet to dress up and offer a stupid toast would make her this nasty? Yeah, pretend it's the bet that makes you such a loser, Cheryl mocked herself. If that were true, tomorrow she could wake up and pretend this night never happened. Forgetting a night, about nine years before, would be a bit harder to accomplish. Everyone could overlook her current lack of poor choices. What about an act from the past, which cost another person his life? Even if everyone else was pretending to forget all about that night, she couldn't. She would never be able to put it behind her.

Nathan rubbed the small of the back of the beautiful woman he held. He doubted she realized her head was resting against his chest. All the aggressive energy was fading from her small frame. He pulled her tighter in his arms, supporting her until she felt more in control. The woman had fascinated him for months now, ever since she came bursting into her brother's home and complaining about the way he was handling the most critical investigation in his entire career. At the time, he was trying to bring a serial killer to justice. Everything else in his life had taken a back seat, including his plans to run for sheriff in the coming election year. He had promised himself life would be normal once the killer was brought to justice. Then Cheryl Zeringue barged into his life, and he knew his future was even murkier than before.

It was hard to believe losing a bet to him could account for her emotional rage tonight. The woman he followed around for over a month was confident, ready to face any challenge, including a serial killer, without second guessing. He would address such dangerous actions with her one day soon, but for now, she seemed to need his strength and understanding. Training to be a police officer prepared people to realize when their talents called for de-escalating a volatile situation. He whispered calming words in her ear, promising everything would be all right. The music ended, but he kept swaying, using the beat of his steady heart rate to lull her into relaxing.

"Don't think about it," Cheryl ordered herself. "Think about anything else, but don't think about that night." She inhaled deeply, letting the masculine scent of the hot cop holding her fill her lungs. The lingering hint of gasoline plaguing her thoughts whenever she thought about the night of her accident suddenly vanished. Letting all thoughts of driving fade away, she closed her eyes and tried to live in the present. Nothing else mattered at this moment. She could face reality again tomorrow. Didn't she deserve at least one night of peace, free from guilt and shame?

"You don't live too far from here, honey. Let me walk you home. The fresh air will help calm your nerves. Everything is going to be all right. I won't let anything happen to you. Trust me to keep you safe." Nathan moved her toward the doorway, keeping his voice low. Could she be having a flashback to the serial killer who almost executed her? He knew a lot about Post Traumatic Stress. He had learned the hard way that trying to ignore a distressing event only made the after affects worse. It was critical to face such events head on. He could help her do that if she allowed it. Why did it seem so important to him to help her? All his protective instincts came out around this woman. She desperately needed someone to take her in hand before she hurt herself or someone else.

Lenore's gift for premonition came in handy again. The River Parishes' Psychic handed him Cheryl's purse without the lady in question even noticing. If everything worked out in his favor, he would have her outside away from the crowd before she had a chance to start arguing again. Things were not working his way, Nathan decided, when the waiter from earlier, passed between the couple and the exit. The younger man was not paying attention, and his tray of wine glasses toppled. Most of the drinks were empty, but a little red liquid splattered across the white dress Cheryl wore. Nathan steadied himself for the explosion he was sure was going to follow. The cop prepared to haul the little lady outside if she started cursing like a sailor again.

Everything going on around Cheryl dimmed and the room took a surreal feeling. The editor of the newspaper looked down at the splattering of red stains on her dress as she heard the all too familiar ringing in her ears. A dreadful, eerie feeling crept across her skin, as the sounds and sights of the room around her disappeared. Echoes of sirens from the past started pounding in her ears. Then the smell of gasoline filled her with terror. She had to escape. Run! Break free before there was an explosion. But she was trapped. No matter how hard she struggled, she was pinned in place. In her mind, she was sandwiched between a steering wheel and a crumpled seat, the stench of gas making her feel nauseous. In real time, Nathan tightened his arms around her, concerned she would do something rash. Trapped in her own personal nightmare, Cheryl crumpled; she would have hit the floor, save for the strong arms of detective Nathan Thibodaux. He cradled her to his massive chest and briskly walked her outside into the cool air.

"I'm going to need all of you to take a few steps back." The take charge tone of Detective Thibodaux had the small crowd huddled around him shuffling away. Concern etched his face as he looked down at the beautiful lady he cradled tightly in his arms. Leaning back against his dark SUV, he waited for her to stir. A gentle breeze blew around them, lifting a few strands of her silky hair about. Her face leaned into his chest as she started to come around.

"My poor baby," her mother cooed from her position a few feet away. Her husband, an attractive man with the same hair color of the lady Nathan supported, put a reassuring hand around her shoulder. Tammy Zeringue let her husband comfort her. He would make sure everything was all right. Eugene Sr. always took care of his family.

"Maybe I should call for an ambulance?" Cheryl's father and publisher of the River Parishes' Herald suggested. "Did the tray hit her head or something?" The last comment was posed to Nathan.

Instead of taking comfort in her father's words, his voice seemed to agitate Cheryl. She started shaking her head back and forth. Nathan lifted her up higher in his arms and whispered for her to shush. "You're all right, honey. Everything is going to be fine. Just take in a few deep breaths." Remarkably, the generally stubborn woman took his advice. A collective sigh of relief filled the onlookers.

"I think it's best if we all go back inside. This young man seems to have everything under control." The senior Zeringue turned to use his arms to usher his wife, son and future daughter-in-law away.

"But what if she needs us?" his wife asked, looking over at her daughter. She seemed so small in the large man's arms. Their son had introduced them to the detective earlier in the night. He seemed to be a friend, but did this make him qualified to minister to their only daughter?

"I'm sure someone will send for us if they need anything." Her husband insisted and pulled her along with him.

Cheryl kept her eyes closed tightly, a mixture of confusion and embarrassment nearly paralyzing her from the moment she came to after passing out. The walls of protection she had built around her heart were temporarily down. Maybe it was the comforting scent of the man holding her as if she were an innocent child, protecting her from all evil. Then again, it could be the public setting of her humiliation. Up to now, her panic attacks had rarely been noticed by others. When they had overwhelmed her in the past, she had found a way to escape to a secluded place where she could gain control without showing her vulnerability. What must people think about her now?

The deep voice of the man holding her brought Cheryl's eyes open. "You're safe now, babe. Take a few deep breaths." The steady beat of his heart made her snuggle even closer to his chest. She willed herself to concentrate on taking long, deep breaths, before exhaling slowly through her mouth. The ringing in her ears was gone now, replaced by his voice and heartbeat.

His tone was soothing now, encouraging instead of mocking. "That's it, little lady. Now open your eyes a bit wider and look around. We're in the parking lot at the hall. See your little car parked on the side of us." The lady editor slowly opened her lids. Though it was dark, nothing about this place resembled her nightmare. Recognition of familiar sights helped ground her now, washing away the need to run.

Their eyes met for a second. Maybe it was because her defenses were down, but she found herself getting lost in the honest look of concern there. There was no judgment, or worse, pity. For a moment she felt as if this man would help her sort through her issues. He would never rush to cover them up and encourage her to forget them. No, this determined man was the type who would insist a person face her actions, learn from them, and even pay the punishment they warranted. Absolution? If only all sins could be washed away with such a determined approach.

"I'm going to put you down, but don't worry. I won't let you fall. I've got you, honey. Trust me?" His eyes locked with hers again, and he waited for her acknowledgement. Then he eased her down until her shoes touched the pavement. Waiting for her to gain her balance, he bent down and helped slip off her high heels so she could have a more steady footing. The shoes sat on the hood of his vehicle now, next to her purse.

"Thank you... I should have eaten earlier." She tried to give off a nonchalant smile but failed. "I must have gotten a bit light headed from all the excitement. You go back inside. I better head home now. I probably need a good night's sleep. I'm okay now. Really."

"I could drive you home," he offered but the fear in her eyes changed his mind. Damn, he had forgotten her paranoia about riding with others in a vehicle. He rebounded quickly. "I feel a bit light headed myself. Why don't you let me walk you home? Not many people get a personal police escort. You should be honored."

"How much would it cost me?" Cheryl was shocked the words came out. Why hadn't she turned down his offer instead of trying to act coy? She started to say something about not needing any help when he put a long, tan finger up to her lips.

With a mocking smile, he shook his head to halt her words. Instead he handed her the purse Lenore had given him earlier. "It only costs you a few moments of your time, honey. Why don't you call your mom and tell her everything is okay, and I'm seeing you home? Better yet, call your dad. He seems more inclined not to ask a bunch of questions you might not be ready to field at the moment."

The detective was perceptive, she gave him that much. Her father answered on the first ring and agreed with her plans to walk home with the officer. He promised to check on her the next morning. Between him and her brother Gene, they offered to get her car back to her place.

Nathan extended his arm out as if to escort her down the aisle of a wedding. Giggling freely for the first time all night, Cheryl pointed down to her bare feet. "Walking home is going to be a bit difficult without those darn heels, detective. I should probably put them back on, though my feet won't be thrilled with the idea."

The giant tucked her heels in his pockets. Before she could protest, he leaned back on his SUV and pulled off one of his shoes. Unrolling his sock, he took it off and placed it on the hood before putting the shoe back on, sans the sock. Then he repeated the process. Cheryl watched with fascination, not sure what he was hoping to accomplish. It became all too clear when he lifted her by the waist and set her on the SUV hood. He tenderly rolled the socks on her tiny feet, chuckling at the way they reached to her thighs. Both pretended not to notice the electrical shock each felt as his hands connected with her sensitive skin. Setting her down carefully, he looked at her with a sexy grin.

"Lady Editor, only you could pull off a look like this. You are sexy in just about anything I see you in." His eyes took in the beautiful curves hugging her white dress. The light from the parking lot made the wine stains nearly impossible to see. The black socks disappearing under the hem of the silk material almost looked like thigh high boots. For a moment, Nathan allowed himself to ponder the sight before him. Sexy, thigh high boots that a man could slowly unzip and ease down a woman's legs, licking the exposed skin, tasting the perfection. Damn, he needed to adjust himself before she realized how turned on he was right now. She would never let him walk her home if she realized how much he wanted her. Feeling foolish in her dress and men's socks, she wondered why he would even want to be seen in public with her. Before he could change his mind, she tucked her arm into his and headed for the path leading to her home. "By the time we get to my place, your poor socks will be a lost cause, you know?"

Nathan did not mention it, but his socks were not the only lost cause. This little lady was nothing but trouble, and it was best to keep his distance. But he doubted he could. Even the old psychic hinted there was a chance of a relationship between them. He smiled remembering her warnings. They had echoed his friend Gene's. Cheryl was strong willed and did not fight fair and was prone to bite. He could live with the first flaw, having suffered from the same affliction himself. He was open to biting, in a controlled situation. But that flaw of fighting unfairly was something he would not let pass. Should he fill her in on what he learned about Domestic Discipline ahead of time, before they developed any hope of a relationship? Nah, she would likely balk at the idea. She was very intelligent, though. After he set her ass on fire a few dozen times, she'd likely pick up on the pattern of which behaviors were considered unacceptable. Besides, she was such a tiny little thing. He would have to concentrate on making sure he was not too harsh when he took her in hand. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her. Such a fragile little frame might bruise, even with the lightest of spanks.

Chapter Two

Explaining his black eye to the other officers at the River Parishes' Sheriff's department was difficult. Nathan prided himself on being brutally honest at all times, but no way in hell was he going to explain a tiny woman barely five foot in stocking feet, his damn socks at that, had decked him. The little miss had yet to pay for her slight. Not that he had not tried after the altercation. She used her damn purse to slug him in the eye and locked herself inside her house before he could even react. Breaking down the door or smashing open a window was out of the question unless he wanted to draw attention from the elderly neighbors who lived all around Cheryl's home. The locks on the place were strong and steady. This was yet another fault on his part, damn it. After the serial killer broke in a few months ago, Nathan and Gene, Cheryl's brother, showed up and reinforced every entrance to the place, making sure getting in would be nearly impossible without a key.

Nathan slapped his palm against his forehead, inadvertently hitting the corner of his black eye. Wincing in pain, he found his first smile of the last twelve hours. Gene had a key to the little lady's place. The former editor actually owned the house, renting it out to his baby sister at their mother's insistence. For the rest of his shift, he planned how he would address Cheryl's little insult. Both Cheryl's brother and an elderly psychic had warned him Cheryl was a biter and fought dirty. When the occasion called for it, he could fight dirty, too.

Soaking in her grandmother's walk in tub, Cheryl laid her head against the high back ledge. After her brother Gene purchased their grandmother's old place, he renovated the kitchen and guest bath. He never got around to the master bath, though, something the little lady editor appreciated a lot. Nothing beat soaking in a huge tub of steaming water. It took a long time just to fill up the deep space, but she did not mind the wait. It gave her time to let the droning sound of the water drown out the problems of the day. Her neck was especially stiff after craning it to watch her back, anticipating a very angry detective sneaking up behind her at any minute.

Using her feet to twist the handles, Cheryl turned off the water and slouched down until most of her chest disappeared into the bubbly suds. Stretching her neck side to side, she exhaled, letting today's stress ease from her. She did not notice a shadow lurking by the bedroom door. Her eyes were closed, breathing steady, and defenses down.

Pocketing the key Gene Zeringue gave him, Nathan could not help but drink in the breathtaking sight before him. Rosy nipples peaked slightly above the sudsy surface of the water. It was hard to see much more, as the tub seemed to be one of those walk in varieties favored by the elderly who were prone to fall risk. How he longed to walk closer, take in every delicious curve and exposed bit of skin. Hell, the damn tub was big enough to accompany them both. What kind of reception would he get if he stripped off his jeans and pullover shirt and ordered her to make room for his large frame?

The image of an irate Cheryl screaming until the neighbors called 911 stopped him. Gene had made him swear not to do anything rash when he handed Nathan the key to get in. Nathan smirked, remembering Lenore's warning that entering the place was not very wise, and he could end up in a very embarrassing mess if he was not professional. Here he was, weeks away from

announcing his bid to become the new sheriff of the River Parish Region, and he was acting like a damn pecking tom, watching an unsuspecting woman lift her slender leg and rub a soap lathered washcloth across the silky surface. Taking a few steps back, he decided to wait in the bedroom. A leather chair occupied one corner of the room. The bathroom door blocked his view, but he could still hear every sigh of contentment and splash of water coming from the open entrance. He prayed her bath did not last long, then again, he needed her to stop tantalizing him with her little moans or he might need to borrow the bathroom to clean himself up.

Last night's encounter replayed in both of their minds for the next few minutes. Just as the detective predicted, the fresh air helped the little editor regain her composure. By the time they reached her front door, she was back to being the feral wildcat he met all those months ago at Gene and Lenore's place. Back was the scrappy lady determined to prove she did not need anyone or anything to help her in any way, form or fashion. After all the effort he put into helping her feel safe and protected, Nathan had not been too thrilled with her attitude. Okay, he might have mentioned something about a certain sassy lady needing someone to teach her some manners, but in his defense, he did not realize the words left his lips until she yanked her arm away from his in a snit. His macho side came out then; he forced her to give him the keys so he could unlock the door. Handing them back to her, he remembered mentioning something about making sure it was safe for her to go inside.

Cheryl had felt her neck muscles stiffen as she thought about him ordering her to wait outside of her own home the night before. "Your track record with walking blindly into dangerous situations isn't very reassuring, little girl." The big bully had mocked her. "Do you really want me to bring up the mess you got yourself into with the River Parishes' serial killer?"

Both of them had tensed at the mention of that topic. It seemed to bring out strong emotions which had left them both lost in their own personal issues. Last night, Nathan had still felt the need to punish her for sending him away at a time when she would need his protection the most. She almost got herself killed and did not seem to have gleaned any common sense from the experience. Cheryl fumed that someone was trying to control her life again, protecting her from her own mistakes. When he reached to take her by the elbow, she reacted without thinking. The handbag in her hand smacked against the side of his face. Taking advantage of his momentary shock, she rushed inside and locked the door. He pounded on it, even walking around the perimeter looking for a way inside.

Still in a rage, she remembered following him around, spying on him through the windows. Cheryl found herself feeling bad about sticking her tongue out at him last night, generally mocking his wasted efforts to get inside. It had been childish, she realized by the time he left, but last night she could not seem to gain any control over her own behavior. Something about the detective pushed her buttons. He did not shy away from her bossy behavior. Hell, he seemed intrigued by it, as if waiting to see what she would do or say next. Having the sexy guy hang around so much might not bother her as much, if he did not have the nasty habit of making sexist comments about someone needing to take her in hand.

Stepping out the tub, she wrapped a thick cotton towel around her body and used another to dry her hair. Her nipples were hard and pressing against the plush material. It was just because of the cold air in the bathroom, she reassured herself, though steam filled the room making such an idea ridiculous. Her body's reaction had nothing whatsoever to do with the image of Nathan Thibodaux which popped in her head, frowning down at her, those passionate eyes clouded with lust and reproach. Grabbing a comb, she went to work on the knots in her hair, trying to think of anything but the moody detective. Was he still pissed at her, she wondered?

The man she was desperately trying to forget sat a few feet away, willing himself to look away from the shadows cast from the bathroom. Groaning silently, he forced himself to look away from that area. His eyes settled on the king size bed that dominated the bedroom. Crap, he groaned again, images of things he liked to do to the feisty brat playing across his mind. First and foremost, he'd like to temper some of her sass with a few well-placed slaps across her creamy ass. How long would it take him to color it a nice, bright pink? The sight of his dark socks lying over the footboard startled him at first. For a second, the possibility that they belonged to another man had him fighting mad. Why the hell, he was not sure. He certainly did not have any claim on this woman. But if he did, she would soon learn to control her impulsive, dangerous inclinations. It might take a few sessions over his knees, but eventually she would get the message that her life was too precious to risk.

'She bites' warned her brother, Gene, months ago. The memory of a big busted old woman popped in his brain then. Hadn't the old psychic cautioned him about the same thing? His eyes settled on those socks again. Reaching up to touch his black eye, Nathan reminded himself of Cheryl's tendency to act without thinking. No way was he going to let her get away with decking a man twice her size. The little brat was just lucky she tried to pick a fight with someone who played fair. Another man might have taken exception to her assault and seriously hurt her.

A gasp of alarm jolted Nathan out of his thoughts. Cheryl had just strolled in from the bathroom, only a thick towel covering her damp, slender frame. "What the hell are you doing here?" Recognition of who he was stopped her from panicking too much. Then she recalled the way they parted company last night and worried he was planning on exacting his revenge today. Cheryl started to rush back to the bathroom, but the cop was faster. He slammed the door to that exit and used his huge frame to box her in from the only other door. Normally she prided herself on standing up to bullies, but every impulse in her body warned the editor to run. Without hesitation, she all but leapt over the king size bed, almost getting tangled up in the silky sheets. She really should get into the habit of making her bed every morning, Cheryl decided as an afterthought. In the past, it just seemed like a waste of time, but now she almost got caught by an irate man because of the tangled mess.

Taking in Nathan's appearance, she noted two important facts right away. He looked very determined and quite pissed off. The handsome guy also had one hell of a shiner. Oh, shit! Had she done that? Crap! Was he here to arrest her for assault? Where the hell was that business card for the lawyer the newspaper had on retainer? Damn, Cheryl suddenly remembered the last time she had pulled it out. She had tossed it at this same detective after he started bitching at her about butting into his police investigation. He had not been intimidated then, so she doubted he would be impressed with the lawyer's card now.

"I believe we have some unfinished business to address, young lady." Nathan glared at her from the other side of the bed. Both doors which offered escape were strategically placed behind him now. Cornering suspects had been one of his stronger suits during police academy training.

Before tonight, Cheryl had always thought the king size bed Gene left in this bedroom was a bit much for such a little room. She had actually considered asking him to help her move it into the spare bedroom. Now she wished the frame was twice as long. The man's long legs could easily scale the distance before she could escape. Hell, his arms almost seemed long enough to reach across the mattress and snag her. Pretending not to be overly scared, she went on the offensive. "How did you get inside my home?"

He reached in his jean pocket and pulled out a key ring. "Your brother lent me an extra set of keys. Gene asked me to convey his disappointment in your brutal attack on an officer of the law. He claims he knew you were destined to push the wrong person one day. Lenore thinks he might be a bit psychic, too. Lenore said to warn you it would go better if you faced your punishment without too much of a fuss. She foresaw it was a useless bit of advice, but still asked me to pass it on."

"Bullshit!" Cheryl clutched the towel tightly, feeling very vulnerable. Her family would never throw her to the wolves. They were consistently overprotective and intrusive. Besides this was her home, damn it, even if she lived here rent free... and Gene's name was on the title. Don't let this bossy detective come in here and start ordering you around, she thought to herself. "How did you really get that key?"

Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out his cell phone and tossed it in her direction. Without thinking, she grabbed for it and almost lost her hold on the towel. "Call your brother if you don't believe me."

Since high school she had begged her family to let her live her own life, make her own mistakes, face her own consequences. Why the hell would they suddenly decide to honor her request when she needed them the most? Pulling herself together, Cheryl's back stiffened. What was the worst thing this giant could do to her? Arrest her? Though the possibility did give her pause, she decided to look at the bright side of the situation. If she went to jail, she could get an inside view of the local penitentiary situation, possibly even do an expo on the entire experience. With the election coming up in a few months, Nathan would regret ever considering messing with her.

Straightening her shoulders, she resolved to face this matter head on. "I assume you're here to complain about me inadvertently hitting you last night?"

"You slugged me with your purse, little lady, on purpose." He had almost felt sorry for her a second before. When she scurried across the bed, she looked so small and positively terrified. He wanted her respect, not fear. Now her smart mouth was working, and he was back to feeling determined again. No way was she escaping justice this time. "Do you plan on running away again, honey? Save yourself the wasted effort. You are about to pay for your little temper tantrum last night. Consider it a down payment on all the nasty little things you've gotten away with since we met."

"Fine," she announced with far more conviction than she felt. "Go wait in the living room while I put my clothes on. Then you can exact your little revenge. Can I bring my camera along for the booking process, detective? I want to take a few pictures to go with the article I plan on running in the paper. I can see the headline on the Herald now. 'Tiny Woman Gives Policeman a Black Eye'... I bet it will do wonders for your election efforts. Don't worry, though. Remember the old adage, 'any press is good press when you're running for office'. This is certainly a good way to get your name in print for all the citizens to see."

He had looked less offended when she had slugged him the night before. If anything, the tall man looked capable of doing her physical harm now. She backed away slowly when he advanced toward her side of the room. "No need to change, little lady. In fact, you are a bit over dressed for the business we are about to handle." With that startling proclamation, he grabbed her bare arm and yanked her to the foot of the bed frame. The bastard used the socks she wore last night to tie her arms behind her back.

His handcuffs would have worked just as well, but unfortunately, he did not have the foresight to bring them along, Nathan thought to himself. With professional precision, he leaned her over the bed frame until her belly hit the mattress, and used his foot to spread her legs open.

"What the fuck?!" Cheryl could not believe what was happening. Never in a million years did she think this man would actually hurt her. Yeah, she pushed him, but he was supposed to be the good guy. He was supposed to be above reproach, more in control of his actions than rash people like her. The cool air caught her nether regions, and she felt a brief moment of true terror. Then she reminded herself who she was dealing with. This stubborn man had followed her around for months now, putting up with her pushing his buttons, and he never lost control. He was just trying to scare her now, she promised herself; force her to admit how vulnerable she felt. "Going to frisk me for concealed weapons, officer? Shouldn't you read me my rights first?"

"You have the right to remain silent, but I doubt you have the good sense to do so. Just remember that everything you say and do will be used against you, or more specifically, your ass." Pushing the back edge of the towel up, Nathan exposed her backside. He forced himself not to concentrate on the private treasure peeking between her legs. Instead he studied his intended target and started aiming a few loud smacks across the beautiful globes of her ass.

The sound of his hand connecting with her flesh startled her. The pain seemed a secondary concern at first. Her numb brain tried to wrap itself around this entire, surreal situation. Was this huge detective actually spanking her... as if she was a bratty, disobedient woman from the fifties... as if he had every right in the world to correct her like she were his own? "What the fuck do you think you are doing, you big asshole?"

He suddenly put a little more force behind each smack, and she found herself bouncing up and down on her toes. Embarrassment mingled with pain, then gave way to mortification. Was she getting damp from this macho man's sadistic actions? Something was very, very wrong with this whole, freaking scene. Biting her lip, she refused to give him the satisfaction of crying out, even as the pain doubled. Her ass felt as if it was on fire. God, she prayed he did not notice the moisture dripping from between her legs.

"Now about your rights, little lady," Nathan announced in a low, steady voice. "You seem to have a problem distinguishing between rights and unreasonable actions. You have the right to report on a current event story for your newspaper. You do not, on the other hand, have the right to put yourself in danger trying to flush a serial killer out in the open with yourself as a target."

The sheer number of times his hand connected with her ass had Cheryl struggling to climb out of reach. One solid hand on the small of her back halted her progress. Nathan continued after he felt she was finally paying attention to his words. "You have the right to tell me I am not welcome in your home, but you do not have the right to slug a police officer for trying to protect you."

It was impossible to keep her discomfort inaudible. Between yelps and curses, she fought to hold on to the last vestige of her dignity. She would not let this jerk make her cry. Cheryl Zeringue did not shed tears. Not even when she wanted to, like the day her grandmother passed away. The last time she actually allowed herself to cry was years ago, the night her perfect life and image changed. No amount of tears could undo her actions that night. She had damned up all her emotions, hoping to numb the constant feeling of guilt and remorse which haunted her. Most of the time, she succeeded. Only on rare occasions like seeing the red wine splashed across her white dress did she lose control. But even then, she never cried. Crying might have helped her release some of the guilt, but it was impossible.

"You have the right to be loved, protected and reined in when you put yourself in danger." Her numb brain realized Nathan was still lecturing her. His words filtered slowly through her mind. Being loved was not her problem. People who loved her were all around her, all the time, stepping in to fix her mistakes, covering them up, protecting her from herself. She did not need love, Cheryl moaned into the wadded up sheets. She needed absolution. Punishment. That was what she needed. Suddenly she found herself embracing the impact of the detective's heavy hand. As the burn grew, she let it wash across her body, accepting responsibility for something for the first time in years, no one there to hide her dirty secrets from the world.

The dam holding back years of memories, which haunted her, broke wide open. She did not even realize the wetness touching her cheeks came from the pooling of her own tears. Suddenly, her arms were freed and Nathan lifted her into his strong arms. He walked over to the leather chair and sat down, holding her tightly in his strong, warm embrace. She wanted to pull away from the comfort he offered, demand he go back to forcing her to feel something, even pain, over the self-loathing doubt that raged inside her.

Nathan's training as a police officer had kicked in during the spanking, and he knew the moment the little woman he held went from accepting her punishment for her recent bad choices, to thinking of another more ominous time in her life. Unknowingly he had pushed her to a point she had not expected to go. Before, she needed his strength to help ground her in controlling her impulsive actions. Now she needed his strength to help deal with some unknown demon which seemed to be haunting her. If he chose to stay and offer that assistance, he needed to be prepared to see this relationship through to the end. Was he ready for such a commitment? Being in a relationship with a hot-tempered, feisty editor was one thing. Planning a life with a woman who harbored a traumatic past she needed to face and learn to accept could mean giving up his dreams of running for sheriff. He would need to be available for Cheryl whenever she needed. If push came to shove, would he be able to put his own agenda aside to help her?

Looking down into the innocent, sweet face of the little lady he held, Nathan had his answer. She had cried herself into an exhausted sleep. There was no going back now. Somewhere between meeting this lady and busting her sexy ass, he had fallen in love. If he had to drop out of the sheriff's race, there was always another possible bid down the road. Laying his own head back against the leather chair, he closed his eyes, dreaming about the sneak peak of her private secrets when she was spread across the bed. He could almost taste her.