

Chapter One

Jackson Duval reviewed the applications for hostess for the hundredth time. He had managed to narrow the candidates down to two. While the choice should have been clear-cut, he still struggled with the final call. The obvious winner, due to experience, was the twenty something year old lady who recently moved from New York to the Big Easy. She had high recommendations from the last restaurant she worked, a famous eatery in the Big Apple. The lady was young, energetic, and raring to start working the moment she got the job offer. Then there was the forty something year old Creole beauty. The woman was a hard worker, having multiple letters from past employers who could not say enough about her dedication and work ethic. Unfortunately, the dark-skinned beauty had no actual experience in the restaurant business, aside from her time as manager at a local Wendy's. It would take a lot of effort to train her for the job, but she was more apt to stay around for the long haul. The first candidate seemed flighty to Jackson. His wife Jenny was no help in picking whom to hire. She did not care, so long as he got someone fast. Jenny was tired of having to play hostess when all she really wanted to do was work in the kitchen.

Her presence upset his business partner and head chef of Katrina's Aftermath, a restaurant opened shortly after the disastrous hurricane hit the region. Many people predicted the New Orleans area would never make a comeback. Jackson and his college buddy James Boudreaux took a chance and purchased a prime spot to open their first business venture, a Cajun restaurant. The cost for the property was a steal, but it was risky to invest so much time and money into a region that could be dying out. Yet they felt the opportunity was worth the chance, and their hunch proved right on the money. More than a decade later, their business was a local favorite, and they were looking into expanding.

Jenny was a great cook, but Chef James could barely stand to have her in his kitchen. Considering she was his baby sister, Jackson often told his partner he should be more willing to share cooking duties. But his lectures fell on deaf ears, literally. James had been deaf since childhood and was the master at avoiding conversations he did not feel like putting up with. He feigned ignorance when someone tried to get his attention. When challenged on it, the chef just signed back he had a hearing problem and could not be blamed.

James put in more hours at the business than he did, so Jackson wanted to pair him up with someone who would complement his gruff exterior and run the front of the restaurant efficiently enough for the chef to stay in his kitchen. Darn it, making a decision was impossible. He ought to put James in charge of the final choice since it was the chef who would be working closely with the new hire. In his gut, Jackson knew the choice should be clear-cut. The younger woman was the better option, but something held him back from hiring her.

Motioning for James to join him in the cluttered office near the back of the restaurant, Jackson decided to leave the matter in his partner's hands. At first the chef pretended he did not notice Jackson waving his way. "It's not about your sister, James. Get over here," Jackson mouthed. Giving him a suspicious look, his partner demanded a promise Jenny's desire to work in the kitchen would not be mentioned. "Stop stalling. I need your help hiring someone for the hostess position."

“Jenny is working out quite nicely as hostess,” James announced, giving in and walking into the room. The subtle slur of his words hinted at his handicap, but Jackson easily understood his partner's words. Besides signing, James often talked aloud. Taking a seat in front of the wooden desk there, the thirty-four-year-old chef adjusted his fedora hat on his head. The chef had taken to wearing the darn hat when they first opened the restaurant. Since then, Jackson had never seen his partner without it on him. The look played into some female fantasy as far as the business manager could figure out. Ladies like the silent, moody type, in Jackson's opinion. James could have his pick of the beauties that frequented the place. But the chef was married to his job and rarely dated much, preferring to spend all his time in the kitchen. Now Jackson's wife and James' sister Jenny was a hot-tempered loveable mess. She had told off more customers this week alone than the last five hostesses combined. How two such opposite people came from the same family, Jackson would never know.

Just under six feet, James' Cajun heritage showed in his tan features and bone structure. Salt and pepper hair peaked beneath the fedora on his head. His body was made for the hard life of shrimping people, a business his family specialized in for over two hundred years. The muscles in his thick legs and arms bore witness to years of hard labor pulling in full shrimp nets and hauling in loads of seafood. While most of his family still resided in Golden Meadow, Louisiana, James found preparing food more enjoyable than catching it. “I am the chef here, Jackson. I don't care if your wife can cook. I already agreed to let her cover Monday and Tuesday nights. She can keep her bossy ass out of my kitchen the rest of the week.”

“She's your sister, buddy. You tell her what she is and is not allowed to do in your kitchen. But she is not going to act as hostess beyond next week. It's hell trying to find a decent baby sitter to watch after our son, Raymond. We need to hire someone soon.”

“So, hire someone,” James insisted. Jackson had no trouble understanding his partner's angry speech, having years of communication with him. Others sometimes struggled with learning to decipher his words, another complication in deciding whom to hire.

“Here are the finalists.” He laid two files open in front of his partner. “Ellen Clark has five years' experience working in the field. She was the head hostess for a fancy restaurant in New York until her boyfriend moved down here, and she followed him.”

“Call her up and offer her the position. I need to get back to my kitchen.”

Jackson stilled his partner's movement with a frustrated look. “The second applicant is Glenda Harris. She comes highly recommended from all her past jobs. She's more mature at forty something but hard working.”

“So, hire her,” James was quickly losing his patience.

“But she has no hosting experience... besides fast food, that is.”

James gave him an angry glare. “Fast food? No experience? Why the hell are you even considering her? Oh, I get it. She's some hard luck case, eh? You feel sorry for her. This is business, Jackson. Get your head out of your ass and make the best decision for the damn restaurant. Fast food! What the hell are you thinking? Do you want me to tell this Glenda woman we decided to go with someone more experienced? Call her up and put me on the phone, and I'll take care of it. Any objections she has will fall on deaf ears. Besides, you worry too much about what other people think, buddy. It's a flaw that will cost you in the long run.”

“I don't need to call her. She stops by every afternoon around this time to see if I've made a decision.” Jackson stiffened at the charge of being overly emotional. He was never overly emotional, dammit. He waited ten years to even make his intentions known for making

Jenny his wife. He considered himself logical, slow to anger and damn calm. It was James who was temperamental, high strung and the hotheaded half of the partnership.

James started laughing. "This Glenda lady has your number, buddy. She knows how to make you feel pressured into hiring her. Don't worry. When she shows up, I'll handle everything."

Jenny Duval knocked on the door, giving her husband a sexy wink before sticking her tongue out at her older brother. Looking a lot like her brother, she was a younger, more feminine version of the chef. While at Katrina's Aftermath she tried to hide her natural accent, but around her husband and brother she was less conscientious. "Glenda Harris is here. Mais, cher, she was wondering if she could sit a spell and talk to ya, Jackson."

James stood up and strode confidently to the door. "You hide in the office, Jackson. I'll take care of sending her packing."

"James Boudreaux, don't you go hurting that poor woman's feelings. She is a decent, hardworking lady. Let her down easy if you ain't going to hire her," Jenny mouthed at her brother as he tried to push past her.

Walking into the elegant dining room, James' chocolate eyes moved around the small crowd of people there. This middle-aged woman should be easy to spot. Telling her she did not get the job would not bother him in the least. He just wanted to get it over and done with so he could get back to his kitchen. The dinner crowd would be coming in a few hours and he had loads of things to do before then. An exotic beauty sitting by the bar caught his eye. Her skin was a flawless shade of coffee-au-lait, and he longed to taste those heart shaped lips. She was breathtaking. Damn, she had a body that would tempt the pope himself. Maybe he would wander over there after he sent the Harris woman on her way. James had not been on a date in ages. That mighty fine piece of work leaning against the bar fascinated him. Did she come with someone else? She seemed to be looking around for someone.

Resolving to handle dismissing the hostess want-to-be, James hoped it did not turn ugly. The Creole lady he wanted to impress might be turned off if she witnessed him making a middle age woman dissolve into tears. "Glenda Harris," he called out, hoping to find the woman and deal with Jackson's mess so he could approach the dark-skinned beauty.

The brown soulful eyes of the lady at the bar met his, and James felt his heart jerk. Their eyes locked for a moment. Was there such a thing as love at first sight? He gave her a sexy grin before turning to find Glenda Harris again. The lady at the bar got up and walked his way. Was she as attracted to him as he was to her? To hell with dealing with Jackson's hiring issues. His partner was the business side of the restaurant. James did not have time to handle this role and work as chef, too. He needed to get back to his kitchen. Well, first he needed to get the Creole beauty's number, maybe set up a date.

"Excuse me." The woman touched his arm, and James felt a jolt of electricity pass through him. His imagination filled in the blanks of what she might sound like. She probably had a deep, lusty tone to match her looks. It would be husky, the kind that made a man think of all sorts of provocative things. "Did you call my name? I'm Glenda Harris."

"You're Glenda Harris?" Maybe he read her lips wrong. This could not possibly be Jackson's lady. "You aren't middle..." He stopped talking abruptly. Looking back toward the office, he saw Jackson and Jenny standing there, watching him. Jackson mouthed for his partner to be strong and handle the situation like a logical man. Jackson could be a jackass sometimes.

"I am sorry. I didn't make out what you said. Oh, you're deaf, aren't you?" The woman looked flustered suddenly. "That was rude of me... Oh, shit, can you even understand what I'm

saying? Nobody mentioned the chef was deaf. I don't know sign language at all. Will that matter too much if I get the job? Why am I asking you? You probably can't even tell I'm babbling like a jackass."

James lifted his finger to silence the woman's lips. They were beautiful lips, too. Full and red, just begging to be claimed, he thought. "Could you stop talking for a minute, please?" What the hell was he supposed to do now?

"I'll just go," Glenda Harris turned bright red in the face and started to pull away.

Grabbing her arm, James felt another jolt of passion and felt the need to adjust himself, but fought it. "Welcome to Katrina's Aftermath, Glenda Harris. We're happy you decided to work for us."

"I got the job?" the Creole asked, her perfect lips driving him crazy. She started jumping up and down and his eyes fell to her chest. There was no way in hell those were the breasts of a forty something year old woman. They were plump, perky and begging to be caressed.

"Of course, you have the job. When can you start?" James forced himself to stop gawking at her sexy body. Jackson would never let him live this down. Taking a quick peek at the luscious curves of the lady before him, James decided it was worth it.

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"Right this way, ladies," Glenda made a production of addressing her three new best friends formally, showing off her polished skills as hostess. When she first met this motley crew of women, she wanted nothing to do with them. The lot of them were troublemakers who kept their poor husbands on their toes worrying about what mess they would create next. Since Jenny was the wife of one of her new bosses and sister to the sexy chef, it was hard to avoid the Cajun charmer. She was rarely without her gal pals Mary Elizabeth and Claire. The latter two were cousins but looked so much alike, they often passed as twins. A librarian by trade, Elizabeth dressed more discretely than Claire. Then again, Claire was a fashion editor for a newspaper so she always looked over dressed.

Looking down at her own plain black attire, standard color of clothing for staff at Katrina's Aftermath, Glenda tried to distance herself from that particular lady so she would not suffer from comparisons. The girls were in their late twenties, maybe early thirties, if her math was correct. No forty-one-year-old woman stood a chance of catching a guy's attention so long as they were around. Not that she was looking to catch anyone's eyes, the hostess reminded herself, setting the menus down on the table of the ladies' favorite booth. The last thing Glenda needed was a man to complicate her life right now. She had a personal mission and no time for distractions.

Jenny corralled the newest employee of the restaurant into the booth. "Mais, yeah. We're the last people on the list tonight, girl. Sit yourself down and tell us what ya' been up to."

"Your husband will fire me if I don't return to work, Jenny. I can't afford to lose this job." Glenda protested as she found herself seated and blocked from exiting.

The hotheaded Cajun put her fingers in her mouth and whistled toward the direction of her husband Jackson. "Cover Glenda's spot, cher. I need to talk to her about Monday's menu."

Refusing to scream across the restaurant, Jackson slowly made his way toward the booth nodding at paying customers as he passed. "Scream at me here ever again, young lady, and you and I will be paying a long visit to the back office," he told his wife in a dark tone. "And never whistle like that again. You are a mother, chef and wife, not a teenager without manners." He took a deep, calming breath before addressing his hostess. "Do you need me to save you, Glenda?"

Glenda wondered about Jackson's threat to take Jenny in the office. It was a rare occurrence, but a few times since coming to work at Katrina's Aftermath, she had witnessed the stout man pulling his reluctant wife toward the office. No one could hear what was going on since the moment the door closed because someone switched on a CD of loud, lively Zydeco music drowning out everything else. All the hostess knew for sure was she never wanted to be hauled into the office. Chef James often took employees back there to lecture them for careless mistakes. He did not realize his voice traveled, since he was deaf, and therefore did not try to cover up the events with loud music. Glenda never wanted to be a victim of his tongue-lashing. Well, not a verbal tongue lashing, she told herself.

"I'm fine, really." She announced, trying to push Jenny out of her way so she could go back to her receptionist area. The last thing she wanted was her boss to think she could not handle his sassy wife.

"If you are sure you're okay," Jackson told her, before asking a huge favor. "Could you baby sit the girls tonight? Their husbands," he nodded toward Mary Elizabeth and Claire, "are watching all the kids tonight. I'm supposed to supervise the brats, but I have a few loose ends to take care of before closing. Your meal is on the house, and I'll pay you double time for the next hour."

Settling back in her seat, Glenda happily complied. Jackson did not know she had become good friends with the girls lately. She rather enjoyed their company, marveling at the situations they found themselves in. The three even ran a popular sex blog. Oh, they used aliases, but they were quite proud of their work and often discussed topics while meeting once a month for a meal at the restaurant. Last month Glenda walked up on their discussions of the topic of threesomes and ended up getting dragged into the subject. She had given all three a piece of her mind, appalled they would even think about being unfaithful to their wonderful husbands. Only after she had taken a seat to confront them did she find out the true focus of their musing. They were doing a post on how using a sex toy could simulate being taken by two men at once. Not one of the ladies had thoughts of bringing another alpha male into her marriage. Each of the women realized how lucky they were to land the perfect man for them; they were just a lusty group who enjoyed a bit of kink. How much trouble could they get into sitting in a booth with Jackson and James nearby, Glenda thought? "I'll try to contain them," the Creole grinned.

An hour later, the front doors were locked, but the ladies continued visiting in their cozy booth. They did not seem intent on debating a new topic for the blog, but seemed quite interested in learning more about the newest employee of the restaurant. Somehow, they had gotten Glenda to open up about her past. The bottle of red wine they shared probably did the trick. She rarely, if ever drank, mostly because her pastor father espoused the evils of any type of alcohol. But keeping up with the ladies' lively personalities would drive anyone to drink. Anyway, the hostess started talking about her life and all the mistakes she made early on in her teenage years. "I got pregnant when I was barely thirteen. My baby's name was Glen, and he was my pride and joy."

"Was?" Mary Elizabeth noticed the sadness in the older woman's eyes. Of the three women, she seemed least likely to be involved in the kinky blog. The woman was a librarian by trade, and she worked at a local Catholic high school.

"He was killed some years back." Taking another sip of her drink, Glenda talked about herself to someone for the first time in a long time. In her family, people did not wallow in self-pity. They faced challenges head on, never giving in to the personal struggles involved. These women were the closest to friends she had allowed herself in decades. Glen's father had died a long time before. Left alone to raise a son, she worked countless jobs to provide a decent future

for her son. In the end, it had not saved him. The tragedy left the normally happy Creole bitter and driven to seek revenge.

“Killed as in murdered?” Claire asked gently. Looking like a model, though a bit short for such a career, this red head was a fashion editor and unspoken leader of the group. Glenda could not help but identify closely with her. Though Claire seemed to have the perfect life, there were ghosts of unhappy times in her past. She appeared as if she was constantly looking for approval from the others, but afraid to show any sign of weakness.

“The official police stance is, he died in a freak car accident, but the driver was a privileged daughter of one of the big wheels in my home parish. Money has a way of keeping things quiet, if you know what I mean. I have been trying to get the police report of what happened the night my son died...” Rarely did Glenda allow herself to share this much of her past. Talking about her late son seemed therapeutic; she still had trouble talking about him being dead. Don’t deal on the negative, she often ordered herself. “He was set to start college at LSU the following fall. He had a full scholarship.” In an effort to hide the sob threatening to escape her lips, Glenda raised her wine glass and took a huge swallow. The action had her choking, and Chef James appeared out of nowhere to pull her out of the booth so he could make sure she was all right. In the process, he knocked his younger sister, Jackson’s wife, on her ample backside. She had been between him and the hostess, and Jenny had discovered of late that was never a good place to be. Anyone could tell her brother was smitten with the new hostess. Well, anyone but Glenda, Jenny realized.

“What the hell are you doing at this table?” James roared. Most of the time in the main part of the business, he spoke in an even tone, but when riled, he did not realize he tended to shout.

“Back off, big brother. Jackson told her she could visit with us.” Jenny tried to guide the hostess back into the booth, but her brother was not letting go.

“Just because she works for you,” Claire stood up and joined the tug of war, “doesn’t give you the right to boss her around!” Somehow between last month’s threesome topic and tonight’s discussion of losing her son, Glenda had become a full-fledged member of the brat club. Their motto seemed to be, mess with one of us, the entire group will unite to destroy you.

Reading Claire’s lips, James gave her a daunting look. “I don’t know what the rules are like at your families’ newspaper, but being owner here gives me the right to tell all of my employees what to do.”

Mary Elizabeth started to join the group standing in front of the booth, but caught sight of her husband, daughter, Jenny’s son and Claire’s family coming in through a back door of the restaurant. She coughed a few times to warn the others of the new arrivals, but everyone was too worked up to listen. Trouble was heading their way, and she was helpless to save her friends. Luckily Jenny’s husband was talking to a couple a few seats over. “Jackson, we need your presence here, please.” Normally a whisperer, it shocked her when she hollered across the restaurant.

Jackson beat the others to the scene. He grabbed Jenny, and dislodged her hold on the hostess. Glenda heard him mutter something about not being able to leave her unattended for any length of time. They appeared to be planning a visit to the back office. Within seconds, Cajun music filled the air. Claire’s son, Simon Peter, ran toward his mommy. Dressed like a little model, he had stained his seersucker shirt and torn his designer jeans. Calling his mother’s name, he launched himself at her. Unfortunately, the chocolate ice cream he had for supper still covered his chubby four-year-old hands and was reaching for his mother’s expensive dress. Concerned

her son might hit his head on the booth if she did not catch him, Claire abruptly released Glenda, who lost her balance and fell into James' strong arms. Already light headed from the wine, she found it hard to maintain her balance.

Being close to the sexy chef always made the hostess nervous. His masculine smell invaded her nostrils against her will. The intoxicating scent always followed her around for hours if she got too close. Chefs were known to be passionate, and her boss was no different. She could not afford to piss him off and lose this job, though. Hell, if she could just stop dreaming about him doing all kinds of naughty things to her, standing this close to him might not affect her so much. Her body had a mind of its own. When she was a teenager, she fell for Glen's father hard, and ended up losing her childhood because of it. Since his passing, she had managed to stay completely away from men, hiding her desires with determination to do what was best for her boy. After his death, she channeled her emotions on making his killer pay. Rarely, her primal urges managed to break through. When the urge got too hard to ignore, she took a nice, long bath with her detachable showerhead. These days, even that could not sate her lust. If she did not need this job to make enough money to hire a lawyer and file court papers, she would give in to the desire and try to seduce James Boudreaux. He was so dang hot.

Not that it was likely to work, Glenda admitted to herself. The man was sexy, rich and the total opposite of her in every way possible. While some might consider him tan because of his bayou heritage, he was downright pale next to her dark complexion. Then there was the age difference, she admitted to herself. He was younger, at least six years, probably more. If she tried to seduce him, he'd probably laugh in her face.

"Watch the kids for me," Jeremy, Claire's husband said, depositing Mary Elizabeth's daughter, Alexa, in the booth, followed by Jenny and Jackson's son, Raymond. Simon Peter was settled in next before the handsome man grabbed his wife by the arm and headed toward the parking lot.

Mary Elizabeth's husband Everett gave his wife a suspicious look, but could not appear to think of a valid reason to take her to task. As far as he knew, she had been sitting innocently while Jenny and Claire tried to pull poor Glenda in half. She gave him a smile, thanking her lucky stars she saw him coming before she jumped on James' back in an effort to get him to let Glenda go. Everett had some ridiculous aversion to her straddling other men's waists. "Did everyone have fun tonight?" she asked the children.

Alexa pulled out a pad of sticky notes and started flipping through them. "I took notes, Momma." All of five years old, the child was a miniature version of her father in looks and mannerisms.

Simon Peter grabbed her notes and tried to play keep away. For a four-year-old, he was a rascal and liked to get a rise out of his older, too serious cousin. Raymond watched the other children cautiously; hoping one of the adults would intervene before someone got hurt. Uncle Everett was too busy giving Aunt Mary Elizabeth mean eyes to even notice Alexa was about to start crying. He hated when Alexa cried. He punched Simon Peter in the stomach and took the notes back when the other boy wailed. Alexa was happy, now that she had her sticky notes back and she started posting them all over the table, detailing everything the group did that night.

After James righted his hostess, he took her hand to guide her to the kitchen area. Glenda feared he would fire her on the spot because Jackson had not shared his part in having her eat with the girls. Would the other man hire her back if the chef canned her? Hell, the hotheaded chef would likely block Jackson from doing so. Crap, she really needed this job. If she were fired, all her self-denial from seducing the sexy chef would be for naught. She would have to

waste precious time looking for a new job and never save up enough money to put a lawyer on retainer.

“I can explain, sir.” She had never addressed him with that title before, and it kind of startled them both.

“Stay away from those three! Do you hear me?”

Cringing, she grabbed her ears after his words left them ringing. “The whole damn restaurant heard you.” She screamed back. Lot of good it did her, she realized. She could use a megaphone to yell directly in his ear and it would not faze him.

“Furthermore,” James continued, still talking much too loud. Glenda figured he was going to fire her now. She braced herself to handle the scene with dignity. “The last thing I need, er, you need is to spend any time with those wild girls. I have enough to worry about without rushing out to check and make sure you are okay every night. Apparently, you have too much free time on your hands. From now on, after the doors are locked, you need to get your little ass in here and help close out the kitchen.”

“The kitchen?” Glenda gulped. No one was allowed in Chef-Boudreaux’s kitchen. He barely tolerated the waiters coming in to pick up orders from his domain. Relieved to still have a job, she felt it was going to be pure hell being in close quarters with the chef day after day, and still manage to stop dreaming of sleeping with him.

“Problem?” he demanded.

“No, sir,” she shouted back. Hell yeah, she swallowed her worry.