
Chapter 1

The unusually cold winter that hit in the Deep South this year would be her downfall, Eve knew the moment she watched Raymond Becnel striding in her direction. In fact, cities across Louisiana had closed down for a few days when freezing ice plagued the region. While Lake Charles was familiar with a few snowflakes, New Orleans had been ill prepared for the effects.

He could not dare to think she would even consider dating him after their last encounter. The smug look on his face suggested otherwise. The other people at her booth soon noticed the attractive, six-foot-tall man as Eve tried to blend into the background.

“Ooh la la. I think I am in lust,” Eve’s baby sister Lilly Marie announced. All seven Deaux siblings had red hair, but the youngest had more blonde highlights, thanks to a recent visit to a beauty salon. “Left hand ring finger bare. I think he feels the instant attraction, too. He’s heading this way. Everyone, push over. I’m going to invite him to join us.” Eve refused to budge, even if her sister-in-law Camille and co-worker Jayne inched over in their booth.

“Hello ladies,” Raymond smiled as he reached them. “Genevieve, I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for weeks now. When I saw the news about it snowing in New Orleans, it reminded me you and I haven’t had a chance to reschedule our dinner plans.”

“Wait a minute.” Lilly Marie suddenly realized she knew the man. “Are you that dreamy, tall guy who used to run around with my older brothers?”

“Shortcake, what happened to the pigtails you used to sport way back when?” Raymond smiled.

“I’m all grown up now, but we can set up a play date anytime you like,” she smiled boldly up at him.

“Introduce me to your friends,” Raymond said, staring straight at Eve.

Unless she wanted to go into a long explanation, Eve had no choice. “Raymond Becnel, meet Camille, she’s Jean’s wife, Jayne, my friend from work and you already know Lilly.”

“Ladies, may I borrow Genevieve for a moment? She and I have unfinished business to discuss.”

“You and I don’t do business together, remember?” Eve hoped her voice did not sound as strained as she felt.

“Still sensitive about that?” He raised one dark eyebrow and Eve had to stop herself from noticing how attractive he was. “I will be in town for a few weeks. It’ll be easier to just go out to dinner with me than trying to avoid me for that long.”

“I’ll go out to dinner with you,” Lilly Marie winked at him.

Raymond laughed, his perfect smile doing something to the pit of Eve’s stomach. She was over him, she told herself. He was a jerk. He only saw her as a child, a weak female, someone he could push around. Then again, if she were the type of woman who went for that alpha male scene, Raymond would be the man she would pick to lead her around.

“I have lots of cases I am handling for Deaux Consultants

right now,” she said coolly. “Even if I wanted to go out to dinner with you, I am booked solid.”

Jayne, the receptionist for the business chimed in, “Eve’s schedule is quite tight right now. Aside from the wedding reception tonight, I don’t think she has a night off for at least a month.”

“Wedding reception?” Something in his eyes lit up and Eve silently groaned as her body responded to him of its own accord. “Ladies,” he nodded before turning to walk away.

“He has one hot ass,” Lilly Marie cooed. “Camille, you are awfully quiet.”

“Why did I let you talk me into getting my hair cut? Jean is going to be pissed off.” The brown hair beauty snapped, her fingers pulling on her locks as if willing them to grow out.

The two women fussed back and forth with peacemaker Jayne trying desperately to change the subject. Eve just kept staring off into space. Raymond Becnel did have a great ass. She often dreamed of digging her nails into it as they made wild passionate love. Too bad they didn’t suit. He was too bossy and controlling for an independent woman like her.

Later that night at the wedding reception, Eve noticed Raymond hanging by the bar, watching her every move. His eyes seemed to be undressing her as she moved around the dance floor. Maybe he didn’t see her as a small child? Might there be a chance to see his impressive ass in action? Grabbing a drink from a waiter passing by, she started debating her next move.

She had not really given him a chance to talk about their falling out. Maybe he came to Lake Charles to apologize for his rude behavior. He could have realized his mistake and be looking for a chance to make amends. One meal out with him wouldn’t be too horrible to withstand. Here, they would be on her turf. She would be the one in control. If he really wanted to take her out, he would have to accept she was no longer a compliant little

girl, begging to do his bidding just to see his sexy smile or earn a bit of praise.

Eve found the gumption to head his way when a blonde swooped in and started flirting outrageously with him. She recognized her brother, Paul's former girlfriend immediately. Before Jayne came to work at the family business, Paul had dated this brash woman. He dumped her after falling for Jayne's beauty and innocence. Just the other day, Eve had been forced to kick the other woman out of her brother's office. He had not been there. Erica Summers, the blonde throwing herself at Raymond, had let herself into Paul's office, no doubt hoping to start trouble. Eve did not suspect the other woman was hurt because she still had feelings for her brother. No, Erica was the one used to breaking up with someone. It did not sit well to be pushed aside by one of her lovers.

The logical part of Eve knew the bitch was probably trying to pay her back for tossing her out of Deaux Consultants by flirting with Raymond. Eve's emotional side fumed that he wasn't putting up much of a fight. Damn, she realized suddenly that if Erica was trying to humiliate her, the other woman had to know Eve had the hots for Raymond. How many people knew about her secret crush? She scanned the area, sure everyone around was watching to see her reaction.

Holding herself tall, she lifted her glass high toward the couple at the bar, pretending as if nothing about the situation concerned her. Then Eve forced herself to take a sip of champagne before slipping away to lick her wounds.

One of the benefits for working as an investigator was knowing the layout of most businesses she had frequented. Most women might run to hide in the ladies' room, but Eve made her way to a storage room near the back of the club house where the wedding reception was being held. She let the tears fall as she sat there in the darkness, willing herself to forget about her childhood fantasy of living happily ever after with Raymond Becnel.

Those were childish dreams. She was a grown woman, dammit. Yet the feelings she had for him were far from innocent childhood daydreams these days. Something about him called to her on a deeper, more intimate level. All day long, she worked on untangling one sinister plot after another. It would be nice to come home to a man who could make her forget the evils of the world. Was it too much to ask to find a man who could take care of her, remind her of what it was like to be loved and protected?

A knock at the door startled her, but it was Paul's voice that called out, "Can I come in?"

Wiping her face to rid it of the tears, she kept the light off as she opened the door. "I noticed the ladies' room was running dangerously low on toilet paper," she offered by way of explanation for her current location. "This is where they keep the supplies."

"Want me to punch him for you?" Paul walked inside and closed the door.

A chuckle filled the room as Eve considered it. "It depends. Did he already pay the bill for the job you had to take over for me at the warehouse? You added that asshole penalty charge, right? You promised you would when you convinced me to let you take my case because Raymond Becnel is an ass." It still irked her that the man had ignored all the hard work she put into solving his problems, only to have him kick her off the case. The spanking he gave her for pulling a knife still made her fume, too.

"I called it a nuisance penalty because bookkeeping didn't know how to record the asshole clause," her brother said.

Eve hated remembering the warehouse case Raymond pulled her off of. It was too hard to separate his rejection from the details she gathered. "Did the company end up prosecuting the warehouse manager?"

"The company decided to let him go quietly instead of taking a hit with the bad press a trial might cause."

Even in the dark, she could imagine her older brother

shaking his head with disapproval. She said what he was thinking, "I guess the company didn't care who was behind the whole scheme. Eliminating the baitfish won't stop the shark from hunting. I told him firing me was going to end up biting his ass. I ought to let you deck him."

The door opened, flooding the room with light from the hallway. "Deck who? Is this a private party or can anyone join in?"

"You aren't invited," Eve insisted as she placed the voice of the new arrival long before he switched on the light in the room.

"You weren't invited when the guys and I went off to the bike trail or fishing, but you tagged along anyway. Think of this as payback." Raymond's solid frame filled the doorway.

Paul regarded the two people facing off with amusement. "Still want me to deck him for you?" he asked Eve.

Raymond merely smiled at the suggestion. "Jean isn't here to hold me down, buddy, but, by all means, give it your best shot."

Her brother shrugged. "Give me a minute. I'll go hunt down Jean. Don't let him out of this closet until I get back."

"Instead of hunting down your twin, you ought to go find your woman. She might be little, but she just tore a chunk of my ass off just now at the bar. She blamed me for Erica Summer's ridiculous behavior earlier."

Paul was out of the closet and heading away before Eve could stop him. "I told her to wait with the family," he muttered as he disappeared.

A firm hand reached to pull her back into the small room and the door closed. She was trapped in a closed space with the one man who she longed to avoid. Grabbing a roll of toilet paper, she tried to escape with what dignity she could muster. "The ladies room is running low. If you will excuse me..."

His lips dropped to hers, and he pulled her in tight against his hard body. The toilet tissue dug into her stomach until she had found the good sense to let it go. Then her arms wound around Raymond's thick neck and she returned his kiss.