

## *Chapter One*

Shivering as cool November air kissed her exposed skin, Angelle Prejean quickened her pace across the Magnolia Springs Banquet Hall parking lot. The rhythmic *click* of her toe-pinching heels sounded amplified in the dark, but it did jack squat to drown out her Mama's voice still ringing in her ears. What Angelle needed was a distraction, and an event planned by her crazy roommate was sure to deliver. Digging through her beaded black handbag, Angie fished out her advanced ticket and flashed it at the entrance, then stepped inside the toasty warm lobby with a hopeful smile. It promptly froze and withered on her face.

*What the...?*

Looming directly across from her in the crowded vestibule stood an almost life-sized poster of three faceless, shirtless men. The words *For Your Holiday Pleasure* were written in elegant, swirling letters along the bottom.

For her *stupefaction* was more like it.

Angie glanced at her ticket, confirming she had the date and location right, and promptly returned her gaze to the glorious sight before her. Her breath escaped in a rush. Heat crept up her neck. But a herd of wild horses couldn't tear her gaze away. And from the excited whirr of murmurs and giggles filling the entryway, she wasn't the only one enjoying the man-tastic view.

Together, the half-nude beefcake trio in the poster was devastating, each man impossibly gorgeous. But for Angelle it was one man in particular, the one in the center, who had butterflies doing the cha-cha in her belly and her limbs gushing with warmth.

*Cane.*

It didn't matter that the image stopped at his throat. She didn't need to see his face to recognize the rugged bartender. The confidence in the man's stance, the ink on his skin, and the way her entire body shook with desire *and* trepidation gave his identity away. Thanks to the class they took together at Northshore Combatives, Angie had seen Cane Robicheaux in various stages of undress. But despite the overwhelming temptation, she never allowed herself the luxury of a thorough examination. In fact, she did everything she could to avoid eye contact of any kind, not an easy feat in a town as small as Magnolia Springs. Or an attraction as fierce as hers. But now, alone with a bazillion other women doing the same, Angie let her eyes drink their fill.

Her gaze caressed the width of his broad shoulders. Traced the lines of his flat, rippled abdomen. And feasted on the artwork adorning his skin. A koi fish swam up one side of his smooth ribs, flames licked up a thick, muscular arm, and a cross with angel wings and his mom's name peeked from inside the other. An intricate yin-yang of a tiger and dragon covered the left side of his bulging chest, and she knew from prior, covert inspection that a fleur de lis marked his toned calf. The sound of her erratic pulse eclipsed all other sound in the room, but if Angelle were a betting woman, she'd put even money that a hum of feminine swooning was breaking around her. Cane Robicheaux exuded sex—sex and danger. And in spite of her many, many, *many* attempts to pretend otherwise, she was every bit as susceptible to that potent combination as the rest of the female population.

"Just ask my parents," she whispered with a disgusted snort.

A long shadow fell over the trio, breaking Angelle's lust-dazed trance. She blinked her eyes and shifted her attention to a statuesque brunette wearing a bright red evening gown and an amused smirk. "Sure puts you in the holiday spirit, doesn't it?"

“Uh, yeah.” Angelle averted her gaze back to the poster as the heat of a blush extended to her cheeks. “That it does.”

The annual Bachelor Auction was the town’s official kick-off to the holidays and *usually* involved tuxedo-clad gentlemen and endless glasses of champagne. Of course, that was before her roommate and Cane’s spunky youngest sister Sherry Robicheaux took control of the reins.

The brunette tapped a painted nail over Cane’s chest. “Puts me in the mood to do a little early Christmas shopping.”

Irrational jealousy flared in Angelle’s stomach. *Cane’s not really mine*, she reminded herself. *Despite what I’ve told my parents. This chick’s free to bid on him if she wants.* But as the woman’s lips tipped up in a cougar-like grin, that irrational flare grew into a blazing inferno of possession.

Chuckling to herself, the woman glanced at the elevated stage and catwalk centered in the room. “Good luck in there tonight. And may the auction gods be in *both* our favors, huh?”

Angelle nodded, forcing a brittle smile as the brunette sauntered away, hips swaying beneath the skin-tight fabric of her dress. Then, exhaling a frustrated breath, she began scouting for the bar. Normally, Angie wasn’t much of a drinker; but if Cane was a bachelor up for bid—which she should’ve assumed considering he was *Cane* after all—then she was gonna need the mental fuzziness. Otherwise, she’d likely do something to embarrass herself.

Such as win the man and then ask him for an *incredibly* crazy favor.

Looking past the image of forbidden flesh, her eyes slid over the long silent auction table boasting lingerie, jewelry, and highly questionable novelty items. Lining the floor beyond that were cramped cocktail tables decorated with what appeared to be *whips* and bright feather boas. A jolly, holiday appropriate, yet completely incongruous Christmas tree was off in the far corner,

holding ornaments she was sure would shock the country out of her if they were visible. To say Angie was out of her comfort zone would be an understatement of massive proportions. She was so far outside the zone she may as well be in a different zip code.

Why on earth had she thought an event by Sherry Robicheaux would be tame?

This is what Angelle got for not asking questions. She'd been too slammed between working shifts at the stables and volunteering at the firehouse to push for details, and her roommate hadn't exactly been forthcoming. Now she understood why. Sherry knew Angelle wasn't brazen like the brunette, or a flirty vixen like herself. Nope, she turned five freaking shades of red simply ogling a damn poster.

Shaking her head with a grunt, Angelle turned to leave, her well-worn flannel pajamas and the Hallmark channel calling her name...and locked eyes with Colby.

So much for her escape plan.

Colby was Angelle's former rival-turned friend. She was also Sherry's sister, and together the two women had taken her under their wings, practically making her an honorary Robicheaux. Now that Colby had spotted her, there was no way Angelle could get out of staying. At least not without admitting her considerable *non-sisterly* feelings for big brother Cane. Which she'd never do. The two women would be like dogs with a bone if they ever caught wind of her feelings, matchmaking and plotting, hankering for a love match. She loved her friends, but despite her town newbie status, there was one thing Angelle knew as well as any native...

Commitment, in Cane Robicheaux's eyes, was a four-letter word.

Colby waved her over with a wide smile, indicating the empty chairs at her reserved table. A table located dead center facing the catwalk, giving them front-row seats to the debauchery beginning any minute.

*Oh goodie.*

“This is for charity,” she reminded herself, propelling her feet forward. Her continued presence and the tightness in her belly had *nothing* to do with Cane being a bachelor. Or the fantasy of bidding on him. Nope, even her overactive imagination knew that was never gonna happen.

Audacious she wasn’t. But oh, how she wished she were.

When she’d left her small hometown of Bon Terre, Angelle had vowed to reinvent herself. To leave the timid mouse behind in Cajun country, honor her sister’s memory, and carve her *own* destiny for once. But nine months later, Angelle was still Angelle, just in a different town.

Her plans for taking on the big bad city of New Orleans had changed the moment she stumbled upon sleepy, sheltered Magnolia Springs. A suburb a mere thirty miles shy of her intended destination, and a town, while certainly different, was only marginally larger than the one she’d fled.

Her wish to be daring *did* lead her to become a local volunteer firefighter, a dream she’d held since she was nine years old and rescued by the everyday courageous heroes. But it also only took three months of flinching at every creak of the floorboard and whistle of the wind to kiss her dream of living alone goodbye and move into a cramped apartment with Sherry.

And finally—and perhaps the most distressing—it was Angelle’s overwhelming desire for more than a string of Cracklin Queen titles and a life of inactivity that had landed her in the biggest pickle of her existence.

The reminder of her ginormous lie, followed by the crazy promise she’d made her Mama just an hour ago made her groan aloud. “At least when I make a mess, I make sure it’s a good

one.” Angie cut to the right as Colby lifted two glasses high in the air. Either her friend was double fisting for the night or she’d miraculously read Angelle’s mind. She hastened her steps, the bright red drink calling to her like a beacon—then pitched forward abruptly when her heel snagged on the carpet.

Without thinking, she snapped her arms out to stop her momentum.

And *whacked* an elderly woman upside her head with her purse.

Time stopped. Then it fast-forwarded as Angie’s eyes widened in dawning horror. Wincing, she raised her head and saw Colby sitting a mere two table-lengths away, mouth twitching with laughter. Sadly, it wasn’t twitching with surprise for this sort of thing was par for the course and, unfortunately, how Angie rolled: ungraceful and clumsy, with an added dash of socially awkward.

Bracing herself, Angelle turned to the poor blindsided woman who smiled as warmly as she’d expected, for that was how residents of her new hometown rolled: forever kind and forgiving, even when randomly assaulted. “Oh, Mrs. Thibodeaux, I’m *so*, so sorry.” She smoothed her hands along the beaded sleeves of the elderly salon owner’s gown, wishing the ground would swallow her whole. “I didn’t see you. I didn’t—”

The gray-haired woman tisked, brushing her hands away. “Girl, that carpet’s older than me, which means it’s older than dirt. Your pretty shoes getting caught ain’t your fault.” She palmed Angelle’s flushed face and gave it a not so gentle tap. “Now stop all this fussing over an old broad and go grab yourself a drink. It’s almost time to win you a gentleman.”

Angelle placed a hand over the woman’s wrinkled one, grateful for the understanding. Of course, there wasn’t a chance in Hades she’d win anything—or *anyone*. But that drink was sounding better and better.

After escorting Mrs. Thibodeaux to her table of friends, Angie finally made it to Colby's table. With a poorly disguised chuckle, her friend held out a tall glass. "You look as though you could use this."

"What gave me away?" she asked, making grabby hands for the drink. "My elegant stroll across the room, or my cheeks flashing as red as my hair at your sister's welcome poster?" She took a long pull off the straw and made a yummy noise of contentment—*hurricanes, nectar of the gods*.

Colby laughed. "And here I thought that rosy flush was my brother's doing." Angie squirmed in her seat, and her friend winked knowingly. "As for the poster, I admit the majority of Sherry's schemes are questionable at best, but in this case I think she's onto something. Adding the *Best Abs* contest almost doubled advanced ticket sales. Higher attendance means more money for Project Nicholas."

Angelle nodded, agreeing that anything that made the local charity, which provided a Christmas for kids who didn't expect one, more money was indeed awesome. But then the rest of Colby's words sank in, and she choked on her drink.

Colby patted her back as Angelle slapped her chest. "Did you just say *Best Abs*?"

*That* explained the poster in the entryway.

Colby sat back with a frown. "Sherry didn't tell you anything about tonight, did she?"

She shook her head as lovely air made its way back through her windpipe. "That would be a gigantic nope. And I'm beginning to think that was intentional."

"You're probably right about that." A chorus of hoots erupted from the table behind them and Colby rolled her eyes, leaning in. "Well then, let's get you up to speed. The *Best Abs* contest kicks off the night. Instead of tuxes, I'm guessing the guys will be strutting around shirtless—

most likely in Santa hats, if I know my sister. We'll vote for the bachelor with the most delicious six-pack, and then it's on to bidding on them like cattle." She grinned as she looked at the rock on her finger. "Well, *I* won't be bidding. But the rest of you will."

An image of a shirtless Cane live and in living hot color leapt into her mind, and Angelle's tummy fluttered. "I'm not bidding, either." Colby wrinkled her nose, and she clarified. "I'm making a donation, but I'm only here to support the guys Sherry roped into this thing."

Colby shot her a look of disbelief, but a woman with purple-streaked hair and a bright red getup a la Mrs. Clause chose that precise moment to walk out on stage. Angelle watched as Sherry surveyed the amassed crowd with a wide, maniacal grin, then waved enthusiastically when she spotted the two of them front and center.

"That girl has no shame," Angelle muttered. She pointed her finger with narrowed eyes, indicating her feelings on being bamboozled into coming, but Sherry merely sent her a dramatic air-kiss and Angie couldn't help but laugh. It was dang near impossible to stay annoyed at her quirky friend.

"Absolutely none," Colby agreed. "But to her credit, she offered to make tonight equal opportunity and let the women take part. Fortunately, no one thought *Best Boobs* on an event poster for charity would go over too well." They shared a look and broke into laughter. Only Sherry would suggest something like that with the genuine intention of being fair.

Magnolia Springs may not be the adventure Angelle had set out to find, but she was ever grateful for the detour.

Women began taking their seats, alerting Angie that the auction was about to begin. Her heart beat a strange rhythm against her breastbone and, removing her straw, she tipped her glass back and drained the remaining content with one big gulp.



Colby gave the empty glass a pointed look. “So you’re really not bidding tonight? Not even on an overbearing, good-hearted, bartender-slash-restaurant owner?”

“*Especially* not on him,” she answered emphatically, even as a voice whispered that doing so would solve her problem. Realizing that may sound harsh to the man’s sister she explained, “Not that there’s anything wrong with Cane. Your brother’s great. He’s just not my type.”

Colby snorted. Judging by that and the arch of her perfectly defined eyebrow, the talented chef wasn’t buying the disinterest line of bull at all. Unfortunately, fate cursed Angelle with a face that wore her every thought and feeling for the world to see. And Colby had eagle eyes. She’d witnessed enough of her squeaks, blushes, and stutters whenever Cane flashed his dimples or showed her extra attention to call her bluff. But Angie planned on pleading the fifth to the grave.

The truth was that other than a passing, embarrassing interest in Jason (the fire captain who was now Colby’s fiancé), Cane was the only man in town who’d even sparked Angie’s interest. And he put the miniscule flicker of attraction she’d once felt for Jason to shame. That’s probably because it hadn’t even been *Jason* Angie had wanted. More like the idea of him. Her ill-advised crush had been back at the start of the summer, when her parents had first started hounding her.

Before her lies snowballed. And she became short one fake fiancé.

“Then sweetie, enlighten me,” Colby said, resting her chin on her hand. “What *is* your type? Because as long as we’ve been friends, I don’t think you’ve gone on a single date.”

Angelle motorboated her lips as she flagged a passing waitress with her empty glass. It was always fun when *that* depressing truth made its way into a conversation. “To be honest, I

don't know," she admitted. "I haven't been on a first date since I was seventeen." Colby's jaw gaped, and she shrugged. "I didn't really date much before then, either. Brady, my ex, was a family friend, and we actually dated until right before I came here."

*Right after he proposed in front of God and everyone.*

Angelle wasn't proud of how it went down, or that she'd broken her best friend's heart. But they hadn't been right for each other. They'd had no passion, no excitement. And other than having to tell him no in front of a packed auditorium, she had no regrets.

Shifting her gaze to her wrist, she touched the word she'd branded over her old childhood scar the very next day when she'd decided to leave home. It was a reminder of what she was searching for, what she was hoping to find, and now that she'd gotten herself into such a crazy scrape, perhaps even a suggestion on how she could get herself out of it.

*Chance.*

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*How in the hell do I get talked into this shit?*

Taking in his reflection in the men's room mirror, Cane Robicheaux wondered if he was being punked. Sherry had pulled some crazy stunts in the past, but this went beyond even for her. He prided himself on always being there for his sisters, helping them with anything they asked. But after tonight, maybe it was about time he started telling them *no*.

The bathroom door opened, letting in the high-pitched squeals from the main room. *Awesome*. Just what he wanted—inebriated, horny, most likely middle-aged and over women. Never mind that was normal barfly material. At least when he tended bar he wasn't dressed like a male stripper. A familiar face appeared in the mirror behind him, mouth pinched in a pathetic attempt to contain a laugh as he said, "Ho-ho-ho."

Cane flipped Jason off, but it only made him laugh harder. “Your ass should be doing this shit with me,” he muttered, slapping the damn Santa hat on his head.

His best friend for over thirty years leaned his shoulder against the door jam and grinned. “Ah, but see a perk of being engaged is getting out of the annoying crap your future sister-in-law asks of you.” Cane narrowed his eyes, and Jason punched him on the shoulder. “Having a smoking hot fiancée doesn’t suck either.”

Cane grunted. Five months together and it was still awkward as hell hearing Jason call his little sister *hot*. And whenever Colby went there, Cane just tuned her out. He had no problems with their relationship—marriage wasn’t for him, but if they were happy, he was happy. He just didn’t want to hear the gory details.

The door opened again, and this time his youngest sister stuck her head into the room. “Five minutes, Santa-man.”

Jason tugged a strand of her dyed-purple hair. “Sherry, you realize this is the men’s room, right?”

“Please,” she scoffed. “Ain’t nothing I haven’t seen before. Besides, have you gotten a look at the hotties in this group? If I ‘accidently’ caught a peek at their bits, I certainly wouldn’t cry.”

Cane grimaced, and Sherry flashed him a grin, flicking the white puffball dangling off the side of his face. He plucked the hat off his head and raked his fingers through his hair. “You owe me for this.”

“Brother of mine, tell me, how is this different than any other weekend at the restaurant?” she asked. “You know good and well women line up the moment you step behind the bar, all on

the off chance you'll shoot those magical dimples at them, and we rake in the profits. The only difference tonight is you're being ogled for charity."

Cane didn't give a shit about being ogled; Sherry was right, women did it all the time, and if admitting that made him a dick, so be it. But prancing around like a jackass wasn't his thing. Auction organizers had hounded him for years to be involved and he'd declined them every time. But when his baby sister did the asking, the sucker in him couldn't say no. Of course, she'd waited until after he'd reluctantly agreed to mention he'd be a *shirtless* jackass, in bright red drawstring pants and a Santa hat.

He shook his head in disgust at his reflection. He looked like a damn pansy.

"Oh, cheer up, you grump," Sherry teased. "Buzz on the street is you're gonna raise Project Nicholas a crap-ton of money." Pushing to her toes, she kissed his cheek, wiped her thumb over the red lipstick mark, and grinned. "Besides, it'll be fun. I promise."

*Fun* was a Friday night behind the bar. It was strumming the guitar after a long ass day, grabbing a beer with Jason, or even watching a stupid teen movie with his godchild because it made Emma smile. It was balancing the restaurant's budget because he was screwed up in the head and enjoyed that kind of shit. He doubted any part of tonight would be *fun*.

As if playing the devil's advocate, his mind brought forth the image of a jittery woman with haunting green eyes and a killer rack. Now if *she* were in the audience, it would be a different story.

Sherry sent him another dazzling smile. "I'm off to gather the rest of the cattle—I mean guys together. See your cute bootie out there." She blew him a kiss as she backed out the door, letting in another wave of horny female buzzing.

Jason chuckled under his breath, and Cane turned with a scowl. “Why are you here again?”

“To help Sherry with the sound equipment,” he replied unfazed. Grabbing Cane’s hat from the sink, he held it out with a smirk. “Besides, you didn’t think I’d miss seeing this, did you?” The gleam in his eyes promised he’d never let Cane live this down.

Yanking on the damn hat, Cane strode from the men’s room. The line of half-naked bachelors extended down the hall, and with a shake of his head, he took his place at the back. Together they looked like a deranged elf’s wet dream. Or a Christmas card for Playgirl. Jason slid him another smirk on his way to the sound equipment, confirming they looked as stupid as he felt, and a minute later, Michael Buble’s *Holly Jolly Christmas* faded.

It was show time.

“What’s up, Magnolia Springs?”

The response to Sherry’s animated question was a wave of *whoops*, and Cane rolled his eyes.

“Do I have a treat in store for y’all!” his sister continued. “Sixteen of the hottest guys in the area are here tonight: musicians, business owners, and local heroes, all eager to become your l-*ove* slaves.”

The audience exploded again and Cane muttered, “I’m eager to get the hell out of this outfit.” The guy in front of him turned and gave a look of agreement.

“First up is the highly anticipated *Best Abs* contest!” Sherry shouted, and Cane could picture her gleeful smile. “One at a time, the men will strut their stuff on the stage, and it’s your job to clap, squeal, and stomp your feet for the bachelor with the most toe-tingling, tummy-

twirling, sinfully-sexy washboard abs. And ladies, I got a sneak peek at the goods backstage and let's just say I know the temperature's cool outside, but it's about to get *hot* up in here!"

Another round of girlish cheers went up as the very *un*-holiday beginning of Right Said Fred's *I'm Too Sexy* rolled through the speakers. In unison, the line of guys' heads in front of him drooped. If he weren't so pissed, Cane would've laughed. Apparently, he wasn't the only one dreading this.

It just went to show how formidable his little sister's powers of persuasion were.

"Our first bachelor, Michael LeBlanc, is the newest member of the Magnolia Springs Police Department..."

As Sherry called out names and read each guy's stats, she'd pause for the women to show their approval. The whole thing was ridiculous. The dude in front of him took the stage, and Cane lifted his eyes to the clock mounted on the wall. Seven-fifteen. In forty-five minutes, the auction should be over. Less than an hour of torture, doing his time with whoever *won* him, and then he could change back into normal clothes and get the hell out.

"Last but obviously not least, we have my brother Cane Robicheaux. He manages *Robicheaux's*, the best Cajun restaurant not only on the north shore, but in the entire New Orleans area, in my ever-so-humble opinion."

At his sister's corny joke, the crowd laughed and Cane exhaled. Here went nothing. He stepped out from behind the curtain and the previous wall of laughter morphed into one of sharp whistles and innuendos. A woman in red near the front licked her lips.

Cane averted his eyes to Sherry, conveying again how much she owed him for this, then began walking across the long stage, eyes focused on the wall ahead.

“As most of you know, you can also find Cane behind the bar on the weekends serving up your favorite drinks, and if you’re lucky, you may just catch him on our small stage serenading the masses with his soulful voice and guitar. Cane’s thirty-three years old, six-foot-two, and the three words he’d use to best describe himself are tenacious, ambitious, and focused.”

Cane swung his head around, and Sherry shrugged.

She hadn’t asked him any questions.

“The three things he can’t live without,” she continued, “are his family, his guitar, and Colby’s beignets. His biggest pet peeve is dishonesty. And his idea of the perfect first date involves a bottle of wine, a quiet dinner, good music, and a *great* goodnight kiss.”

Up until that last part, he’d actually been impressed. As Cane turned to walk back across the stage, he mumbled for her ears only, “Better get used to the morning shift, little sister.”

The agreement had been that she’d take all the opening shifts for the next two weeks in exchange for Cane doing the auction. After that little stunt, she’d extended her sentence to a month.

Sherry grinned. “As my big beast of a brother takes his mark, let’s hear who thinks Cane Robicheaux has the *Best Abs* of the night!”

The applause was deafening. Before he knew what was happening, his sister placed a bright red sash over his head, declaring him King of Abs. And he’d thought he looked like a pansy before.

Cane grasped Sherry’s elbow, ready to inform her she was on permanent opening duty, when he lowered his gaze to the crowd and spotted *her* front and center. The one woman he wouldn’t mind shouting innuendos at him. And the only one who currently wasn’t.

Angelle's head lifted from her drink as if she could feel his stare. The spark of attraction she always tried to hide flared within her deep-set, vibrant green eyes—eyes Cane couldn't forget. He'd first seen them five months ago, shortly after the sexy redhead tripped over her own two feet and then apologized. He'd been hooked ever since.

Angelle Prejean was a mystery. Guileless wide eyes, an aura of innocence, a voice like whiskey, and the word *Chance* inked on her wrist, she was the first woman ever to get under Cane's skin...and the first and only to appear ready to hurl whenever she saw him. Strangely enough, it only made him want her more.

Women didn't tell Cane no. If anything, they acted like the vapid red dress in the front.

But Angelle was too close. Near the danger zone. She was friends with his sisters, worked with Jason, and gave riding lessons to Emma. She ate at the kitchen table he shared with Colby more often than he did, which *should* make her off limits. But against every instinct and belief he had, Cane wanted her.

For months, he'd fought it. Tried ignoring the attraction, tried losing himself in other women. But in every face he looked into, he saw *her* eyes. Eyes so open and honest they gave her every thought away. Heard her sexy, roughened tone instead of the soft, feminine voices that used to turn him on. Nothing he'd done had gotten her out of his system, and he was starting to think the only thing that *would* was the woman herself. He needed to satisfy his curiosity for her, get his carefree, no attachment, no commitment life back on track where it belonged. And tonight was as good a night as any.

Usually, women chased him, but for Angelle, Cane was happy to play the hunter. He actually looked forward to it. Settling his determined gaze on hers, his lips tipped up into a smile as a slow flush rose in her cheeks.



## *Chapter Two*

*Holy Molasses.* The heat in Cane's stare could melt Angelle's panties. And the way it made her twitch in her seat, she almost wondered if it had. Never had a look of such intensity been directed at her before—not by the man in question, and certainly not by her ex. Brady had been many things, but *passionate* hadn't been one of them. She'd lost track of the nights she had spent lying in bed, fantasizing about what it would feel like to experience *real* desire. To be on the receiving end of such a burning look, knowing *she'd* been the one to inspire it.

Now that she knew, Angie could declare with all certainty that passion scared the ever-loving crap out of her.

Cane was a flirt. Not to mention a man-whore who was charming to boot. From the tattoos covering his skin to the cuts and bruises he often sported courtesy of the gym to the unruly and sexy-as-hell hair, the man was simply out of her league. And way, way, *way* over her head. Sure, he let her know he was interested, and she'd vowed to take more chances in her life—but not that *much* of one. There was taking chances and then there was duct taping her heart to a target and loading Cupid with the equivalent of a turbo missile. She wouldn't have a prayer's chance of recovering from a round with someone like him.

*But that didn't stop you from putting your gigantic foot in your mouth, now did it?*

Cringing, Angelle broke eye contact with the embodiment of sex—and the answer to her sticky engagement predicament—and ran head long into his sister's smirk.

"But Cane's not your type, right?"

Knowing full well Colby had caught her undressing the man with her eyes—well, what was left to undress; seriously, he was practically naked up there—Angie chose to remain quiet.

Colby covered her mouth with a delicate hand, which did absolutely nothing to hide her snort of laughter, and said, “Oh my, this is going to be fun.”

“Happy to amuse you as always,” Angelle muttered. She redirected her attention to Sherry, who was surprisingly announcing the first bachelor as sold for one hundred dollars. She hadn’t even realized the auction had begun. Such was the power of Cane Robicheaux. The first bachelor, a cute kid who barely looked twenty-one, walked down the steps and joined his middle-aged winner, who promptly wrapped him up in her generous arms and did a happy shimmy.

*Yep, I’m out of my element here.*

Breathing through the heated stare she could still feel on her skin, and the deep desire she had to meet it, Angelle picked up her drink and chugged.

The next half hour or so passed in much the same way, which is to say a blur of skin, sexy stares, exciting shivers, and her trying her best to ignore it all. With each new name Sherry called, the line of bachelors dwindled. And with each drop of alcohol consumed, the room’s collective purse strings loosened. The winning bids grew. Several of the guys from the firehouse raked in over two hundred dollars each, and with three empty hurricane glasses to her name, Angelle could even admit she was having a good time. Lovely warmth buzzed her veins, a fascinating sensation since she rarely drank more than a glass or two at one time. Sherry was cracking her up with her antics and over the top commentary, the bachelors were laidback (and let’s face it, yummy eye candy), and the winning women were hilariously enthusiastic. Angie was having *such* a good time in fact that she almost lost track of the lineup.

But when the second-to-last bachelor placed his Santa Hat on old Mrs. Thibodeaux’s head and bowed to kiss her weathered cheek, every hair on Angie’s body stood on end.

Cane was next.

Of its own accord, her slightly blurred gaze snapped to the stage, not surprised to find his already locked on her. A tingle ran down her arms, one that had nothing to do with the alcohol. Reaching for her freshly refilled glass, she held his gaze as she took another long, tart sip, and listened to the sound of her heart pounding in her ears.

“And last, but certainly not least, our very own King of Abs!”

At Sherry’s gleeful giggle, Cane shook his head and closed his eyes. With their contact broken, Angelle stole a breath.

The entire room surged with energy. Energy and *hormones*. Women bounced in their seats. Purses opened. Tongues lolled. Sherry scanned the eager crowd and grinned as she said, “Let’s say we start the bidding for our final bachelor at—”

“Two hundred and fifty dollars!”

A few tables over, the woman in red from earlier thrust a wad of cash in the air, and Sherry’s eyes bulged. Every other bachelor had begun with a respectable bid of fifty dollars—but it appeared the brunette had come to play. Play and win. Resentment roiled in Angelle’s gut.

“All right then,” Sherry said, elbowing her brother in the ribs. “I told this man he’d be a money maker. So, our *opening* bid is two hundred and fifty dollars. Anyone want to take it to two seventy-five?”

Conversations broke out among the tables. Cash was counted, cellphones pulled out, and then a voice called, “Three hundred!”

Angelle turned to the willowy blonde who’d just appeared behind her. She was dressed in a festive green gown that left very little to the imagination. Diamonds draped her neck and hung from her ears, but her eyes flashed brighter than the bling. The woman looked haughty. She

looked determined. She looked...not quite right. Her eyes were wide—almost wild—and they were fixated on Cane in a way that went beyond focus and into straight up territorial.

After only a moment's hesitation, the brunette sprang into action, upping her bid to three twenty-five, and thus began a bidding war. Excitement and mayhem ensued. Angelle tossed back the rest of her drink. Her skin prickled, her legs twitched, and when she glanced down, the nails of her left hand had embedded into the soft leather of her purse. It must be the hurricanes because otherwise her reaction made no sense. Any time the two of them ended up alone together, she'd always pushed Cane away. She knew he was no good for her. But the thought of watching him walk off into the sunset with another woman made her stomach turn.

Especially if he walked off with the vixen in red.

Or the crazy-eyed chica in green.

When the latest bid upped it to four hundred, Colby made a low noise and stabbed her drink with her straw. Angelle wrinkled her nose. And here she'd thought *her* reaction was baffling. Then she caught the weird look Colby exchanged with her brother and asked, "Okay, what am I missing?"

Colby lifted her chin toward the blonde. "That's Becca. An ex with daddy's money to burn and a scary obsession with my brother. She stalks the restaurant, shows up at his shows. Apparently, they went out a couple times last year, but Cane said that was enough to know the girl was total Looney Tunes. He broke it off, but home-girl refuses to get the memo." Colby wriggled her shoulders. "I'm telling ya, Angie, the chick gives me the heebie-jeebies. You remember that woman in *Fatal Attraction*?" Angelle nodded and Colby pointed at the woman creeping closer toward the stage. "Glenn Close has nothing on Becca."

As if on cue, the blonde called out, "Eight hundred!"

A loud gasp pierced the air. At Colby's nod of agreement, Angelle realized the sound came from her own throat, but seriously, the woman *was* nuts. She'd just doubled the bid—a bid she'd made herself!

The brunette gaped, blinked, and then frantically began digging through her purse. Becca cackled in triumph.

Swinging her gaze back to Cane, Angelle noticed him send their table a pleading look.

Colby lifted empty hands. "Sorry," she mouthed before turning to Angelle. "With the wedding in a few months, I can't be throwing that kind of money around." She checked her purse anyway, her lips pressing into a thin line. "No one in this town can. And Becca *knows* it."

Angelle bit her lip. See, that wasn't exactly true. What Cane's creepy stalker *didn't* know—what no one in Magnolia Springs knew—was that Angelle had money, too. Family money. Her grandparents had it in sugarcane, her parents had in rice fields, but Angie's bank account was padded. Padded beyond what she deserved, and padded enough to rival whatever Becca thought she had. Angie just never went around flaunting it. She drove a used pick-up truck, shopped sales, and lived in her worn out cowboy boots. It was how she was raised. Where she came from, money in the bank meant you had security, but it didn't define you. It didn't change the person you were.

But in times like this, it sure did come in handy.

The brunette dejectedly lifted her head from her emptied purse. She shook it, and for the first time that night, Sherry's smile dimmed.

A loud *clap* rent the air as Becca began walking toward the stage to claim her *prize*, and the resentment in Angelle's stomach morphed into red-hot anger.

"Uh, going once," Sherry said slowly, dragging out the words.

*Well, I did plan to donate to Project Nicholas anyway...*

Sherry sent her brother an apologetic glance and called out, "Going...twice."

*And if I do this, Cane would owe me...*

Angelle rocked in her seat, knowing this could be the answer to her fiancé problem. She watched Sherry anxiously meet every eye in the crowd then hold a silent conversation with her sister. Colby lifted a slender shoulder as Becca reached the bottom of the stairs, cash in hand. Angelle squinted, positive she could see devil horns sprouting on the woman's head.

Displeasure radiated off Cane in waves as he shifted on his feet and raised his eyes to hers. Angelle's heart went out to him. This was bigger than her anxiety. Bigger even than her pickle. He needed help, and she was in a position to give it.

Sherry heaved a sigh into the microphone, the joy that had poured from her all night replaced with regret as she said, "If there are no other takers..." She paused to give the room a final, hopeful glance, then squeezed Cane's enormous bicep. "Sol—" Angelle clamored to her feet. "Fifteen hundred dollars!"

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