

Chapter One

When the bright red and white *Taste the Heat* banner fluttered in an abrupt and unseasonable gust of wind, then collapsed onto her head in an undignified heap, Colby Robicheaux figured it had to be an omen. Of what, she didn't really know. But considering the subject matter of both the banner *and* the multi-colored sign she had tripped over on her way up from the parking lot, she had a hunch it was a cosmic premonition of something.

“Lady Irony, you have a wicked, wicked sense of humor,” she muttered, plucking the banner for the St. Tammany Parish Firefighters’ Cajun Cook-off from her head. She glanced back at the aforementioned sign she’d tripped over, now standing askew in its staked position in the ground. It boasted the event’s connection to the world famous New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival beginning the following week.

Food, music, and heritage—the trifecta so many people born and raised near New Orleans held dear. And the very things Colby had fled from twelve years ago. Lifting her eyes into the late May sun, she squinted and said, “Well played, Big Guy. Well played.”

A passing snort from an event-goer made her wince. *Right*. So maybe talking to herself in public wasn't the best approach for her to prove that their family restaurant, Robicheaux's, was still in capable, non-crazy hands.

Forcing a casual, *sane* smile onto her face, she set the offending banner on the ground near the entrance of LeBeaux State Park and willed her feet to step through the gate. They refused to budge. Families and couples strolled past on their way inside, deep in conversation, hands waving dramatically as their thick accents proclaimed *dawlin'* and *yea, you right*. Others broke out in spontaneous, carefree dance to the lively Zydeco tune carried on the wind.

A memory of a similar beat hit Colby with the power of a hurricane-force wind. Suddenly she was no longer outside the park but back in her childhood kitchen, stirring a pot of gumbo as her parents danced around the butcher-block island. Her father twirled her mother in a multi-step move, and Mom's infectious laughter echoed off the oak cabinets.

Not now, please not now.

Coming home was always a tug and pull—warm memories warring with apprehension. Since she left her Las Vegas restaurant three weeks ago, Colby had yet to venture anywhere outside their small suburban town of Magnolia Springs, population 1,100. She hadn't even seen anyone beyond the restaurant staff and her siblings. In hindsight, taking a few baby steps would've been a much smarter move.

Colby gave herself a mental shake and firmly placed the ghosts of her past in the locked trunk of her memory. Back where they belonged. She straightened her shoulders, smoothed her clammy hands along the sides of her crisp linen pants, and told herself she could do this. She *owned* this.

She took a deep breath, then another for good measure, and lifted her head and marched herself through the wooded arch. Immediately, the sights, sounds, and smells of her childhood engulfed her. A large stage dominated one half of the open field with the promised Zydeco band. A woman in a brightly checkered dress sawed an accordion in and out, and a young man in crawfish-patterned suspenders sat near the edge playing a washboard. To the side, a mile-long line stretched before a photo booth with an old pirogue, crab net, and fake alligator set in front of a backdrop of the swamp. And surrounding her, encompassing the rest of the large field in a wide semi-circle, were countless booths filled with fragrant food, each representing a different St. Tammany parish firehouse.

Reading the menus posted beside the closest ones, it appeared as though they all sold jambalaya and gumbo by the Styrofoam bowlful, along with each fire station's own unique Taste the Heat twist, such as *fiery* fried jalapeno peppers, habanero nachos, and at least a dozen different forms of chili, each declaring their own to be the parish's absolute best.

The punch of spicy cayenne and fried okra assaulted Colby's senses, and the fresh onslaught was simply too much. She clamped her stinging eyes shut. She couldn't tell if the turbulent sensations rolling through her stomach were from anxiety, regret, or extreme nausea—but there was a very good chance she was about to be sick.

Oh, please God, don't let me puke in public.

She could just hear the news report now. *Big city chef returns home and tosses her cookies at local heroes' feet. Full report at ten.*

She bet that would get customers filling their tables.

"Colby Robicheaux?"

At the soft inquiry, Colby's eyes snapped open. "Ah, yes?"

The older woman standing in front of her nodded, causing her thick bob of salt-and-pepper hair to swing around her shoulders. "Thought so," she said, offering her hand in greeting. "I'm Mary Lemoine, co-organizer of today's event."

"Oh, yes. Pleased to meet you, Ms. Lemoine." She took the woman's cool hand in her own, grateful for the diversion from the emotional roller coaster, and discreetly compared her pressed linen suit with Mary's dark jeans and event T-shirt combo. She was starting to get the impression she was a tad overdressed. "Was it my Yankee attire that gave me away?"

Mary laughed, a free and open sound that instantly put her at ease. "Not at all. When your brother said you'd be stepping in as judge, I looked you up on the Internet," she confided. "Quite

the impressive resume you have there. But I'd have recognized you even if I hadn't seen your picture on that fancy restaurant website of yours. You're just the spitting image of your daddy, aren't ya?"

A vision of a man beaming with pride as she created recipes beside him, while other girls her age were off playing with Barbies, flashed in her mind. It used to be that hearing people say that very thing delighted Colby like nothing else.

But those days came to an abrupt end twelve years ago.

"Here, let me show you to the judge's table." Mary gave her a sympathetic smile and motioned toward the open field, and Colby fell in step beside her. As they walked, she willed away the hurt and anger roiling inside. She knew Mary meant well, but she probably assumed Colby was upset over her father's recent passing and had no idea the real reason Colby was upset. No one did, not even her own siblings. And Colby intended to keep it that way.

As they cut a path through the sizable turnout, Mary filled her in on the details of the new venture. Colby had to admit she was impressed. All the proceeds from today's ticket and food sales went toward the St. Tammany Parish Adopt-a-Family program, an initiative co-sponsored by the local fire stations that helped people in need of clothing and basic necessities.

To help raise the needed money, event organizers had pulled out all the stops. A slew of bands were scheduled to entertain the crowd. There was face painting, a bounce house, a huge inflatable slide, and what appeared to be a wildly popular Dunk-a-Fireman booth. But the true highlight of the day, the reason she was there, was the Taste the Heat cook-off featuring three of the area's self-declared best culinary captains.

Colby listened to Mary go on about all the wonderful things the firefighters were doing for the local community, and found herself looking forward to the dishes the captains had

created. Not so much tasting them, but rewarding them for their efforts. Moreover, she was thrilled to discover the painful thoughts of her past diminishing as the minutes ticked by.

Hell, she even caught herself nodding her head in time with the band's familiar beat.

Maybe today wouldn't suck so badly after all. And if today went well, then maybe everything would go well. Maybe it would be sooner, rather than later, that she'd get the family restaurant running smoothly, her siblings on solid footing, and herself back to her own life in Vegas.

With the table in view, Mary left to attend to a last-minute microphone issue and Colby made her way solo across the uneven ground. Watching her step, and not the path ahead of her, she was jolted when a preteen ball of hair plowed into her.

"Whoa, you okay there?" she asked, grasping the girl by the shoulders to steady them both.

"Yeah." The young girl flipped her blond ponytail, revealing an adorable face and bright smile. "Sorry about that. We're playing Kiss and Catch," she explained, eyes leaving Colby's to focus on the crowd around them. "Well, the girls are playing Kiss and Catch. The boys are just running."

Colby laughed aloud. Some things never changed. When *she* was a preteen, the kissing variation of tag was more popular with the girls, too. A wide smile broke across her face as she remembered chasing her brother's best friend Jason across this very park during a particular crawfish festival. And the one time he let her catch him.

The young girl spied and then took off toward a young boy with marked intensity, tossing a smile over her shoulder. Taking her seat behind the judge's table, Colby watched the next

generation of crushes, her smile growing wistful at the boy's halfhearted attempts at escape. Perhaps for the young girl, her crush wouldn't be as unrequited as Colby's had been.

Good food and even better people. Those were only two of the reasons Captain Jason Landry loved living in New Orleans, but they happened to be his favorite. And on days like today when the hellish humidity wasn't killing you, the beer was flowing and plentiful, and the sound of music and laughter surrounded him, he couldn't think of any place else he'd rather live.

“Now see, *that's* a woman for you.”

He screwed the cap back on his half-empty water bottle and shook his head with a grin. So far, in just the few short hours they'd been at Taste the Heat today, his fellow captain Gavin Morris had made similar comments about at least a dozen different women—although he had to admit, the man did have impeccable taste.

Once upon a time, Jason had been right in the thick of it with him. Carving his way through the dating scene and leaving a trail of satisfied women in his wake. But those days were long gone. Lately, any free time he had that wasn't spent working at the station or teaching classes at the gym he owned was filled with reading books about prepubescent hormones, shaving legs, and PMS. Not that he was complaining. Not really. He loved Emma, and he wouldn't trade the experience of raising his daughter for anything in the world. But being a single dad didn't exactly leave a lot of time for enjoying beautiful women.

And that was a damn shame.

On stage, the band ended their set and Mary Lemoine grabbed the microphone to announce that the cook-off would begin in a few short minutes. Good thing, too, because the warming trays they'd set up to keep their dishes hot weren't doing that great of a job.

“Yeah, she’s super fine,” Gavin said, still eyeing the woman in question.

The hungry crowd surged toward their end of the open field and Jason leaned forward to give his prize-winning crawfish etouffee a stir. “Oh yeah? And what’s so special about this one?”

Gavin elbowed him in the side. “Why don’t you take a look for yourself.”

Jason re-covered the pot and glanced in the direction his friend lifted his chin toward. It took a moment for the crowd to settle and his view of Gavin’s future conquest to clear, but when it did, only two words came to mind. “Hot damn.”

Gavin chuckled under his breath. “My thoughts exactly.” He rested his hip against the table and said, “And I’ve got just what she’s looking for.”

Jason chuckled. “She’s way out of your league.”

Looking back at the brunette stunner, Jason admitted she was out of his league, too. The woman was five-alarm gorgeous. Her long dark hair hung loose around her shoulders, and her pouty lips were lifted in a contemplative smile. She bit the edge of a polished fingernail, lost in thought, and the effect was like a punch to his gut.

When was the last time he’d had such a visceral reaction to the simple sight of a woman? His fingers actually itched with the desire to wrap her hair around his palm. He bit his lip, wondering if her mouth tasted half as good as it looked.

He’d definitely been out of the scene too long.

Jason cleared his throat. “She’s sitting in the judge’s seat.”

“And your point is?”

“My point is that if she’s turned on by food, then you’re shit out of luck.” Pulling his attention away from the hot judge, he shot his friend a smirk. “Because my dish is gonna kick your ass.”

Gavin scoffed. “In your dreams, fire boy.” He pointed at the pot before him. “It so happens that my crab bisque is known for melting the panties off women.” Then he grinned and gave the judge’s table a pointed look. “But today, I’ll settle for it working its magic on one in particular.”

Jason’s eyes snapped back to the brunette. That was all the prompting his imagination needed to fire up a vision of the kind of panties the woman had on—silk black thong, if he had to guess—and all the creative ways he’d like to remove them. With his teeth.

Yep, definitely been too long.

“Captains, are you ready?”

Mary’s animated inquiry burst through the portable microphone, knocking the image out of his head. He quickly shifted his attention to the crowd, skin hot, knowing his eleven-year-old daughter was somewhere watching. A familiar whistle came from the far edge of the crowd and Jason followed the sound, smiling when he found Emma. Blond hair up in its trademark ponytail, legs folded like a pretzel in his black and gold lawn chair, she held a handmade sign declaring ÉTOUFFÉE ROCKS...AND SO DOES MY DAD. Laughing, he sent her a thumbs up.

“Our three brave captains, willing to let their culinary prowess speak for itself, come from all over St. Tammany parish,” Mary told the crowd. “Captain Eric Dufrene has brought his Cajun Shrimp and Grits all the way from Mandeville.”

“I’m amazed I didn’t get lost,” Eric joked, referring to the ten-mile drive from his station to the park. Eric accepted an apron from her hands and slipped it over his head.

“And Captain Gavin Morris has brought us Crab Bisque from Covington,” Mary continued, handing Gavin a black apron. Par for the course, his friend hammed it up for the crowd, flexing his muscles and smack talking as he tied it around his waist.

Jason cracked his knuckles. During all of this, the beautiful judge's eyes had followed Mary down the row. She'd offered Eric a warm smile, and laughed when Gavin bowed his head in mock-adoration. He was next. And as juvenile as it was to admit, Jason was eager for that same attention. Would she smile at him? Lower her lashes? Run her tongue along those lips?

Mary grabbed a third apron and walked toward him. The brunette glanced at her phone. Jason ground his teeth.

"And finally, our last contestant from right here in Magnolia Springs."

At that, the woman's head snapped up. Her gaze locked on him for the first time and her eyes widened as if in recognition. Her lips parted.

"But don't worry, folks," Mary continued. "There are no favorites here today. Everyone enters this contest on equal footing, including Captain Jason Landry and his Crawfish Etouffee."

Emma let out another sharp whistle, and Mary thrust out the apron. As Jason took the garment from her fingers, his mind churned.

They couldn't have met before. He might not have lived like a monk in the years since his wife died, but he was sure he'd remember a woman like her. He rubbed his chin, trying to recall if Mary had mentioned the judge's name when he agreed to participate, and drew a blank. Things were crazy at the station and he was dealing with Emma's newfound obsession with boys. But why hadn't he thought to ask Mary who the judge would be?

"Here's how this is gonna work." Mary nodded at a group of volunteers waiting to the side, and they came forward. "Each of our captains made enough of his dishes for everyone to have a sample, along with the tasting plate for the judge. Our volunteers will hand you a small cup of each dish and a comment card. After you've tried them all, please rank them in order of preference. Don't worry; your vote will be completely anonymous. We will tally the results and,

with the judge's selection for Best Bite, the captain with the most votes will be announced the People's Choice. Make sense?"

The crowd rumbled their assent. As the volunteers handed out small plastic containers of his etouffee, Jason began prepping his tasting plate for the mysterious brunette.

Who was she? He scooped a mound of steaming white rice on the plate. On the off chance he *had* slept with her, or had met her in some other way in the past, he didn't think he should ask for her name. Women tended to prefer you remembering that sort of thing.

Was it okay to flirt with her? The woman was beautiful; regardless of how or *if* they'd met in the past, there was nothing wrong with a little harmless flirting, was there? He dipped the ladle into his etouffee and caught her smoky gaze. *As if I could help myself anyway.*

After wiping the edges of his plate clean, and adding a slice of bread and sprig of parsley for presentation, Jason made his way toward the judge's table.

"So, Captain Landry." Was it his imagination, or did her voice lilt in amusement at his title? "Can you tell me about your dish?"

"Well, ma'am," Jason began, wincing as unfamiliar discomfort prompted his ingrained Southern manners. No sexy woman wants to be ma'amed, which she proved when her cute nose wrinkled. Forging ahead, he put his and Emma's countless *Chopped* program viewing to use and said, "Today I prepared for you Crawfish Etouffee, served over jasmine rice, with a slice of warm garlic French bread." He smiled at his aspiring chef daughter and added, "Bon appétit."

Colby turned to glance at the dozens of women hanging on Jason's every word, curious as to which one of them was the lucky recipient of his sexy smile. When they were growing up, she used to dream about him flashing it at *her* one day. But not in the friendly, *how-ya-doing-squirt*,

or the *I'm-your-brother's-best-friend* way he did back then. And not even the respectful *you're-the-judge-so-I-want-to-impress-you* way he did today. But in an *I-find-you-extremely-sexy* sort of way. An *I-actually-see-you-as-a-woman* way.

An *I-wanna-get-you-naked* way.

Colby choked on the peppery bite she'd just placed in her mouth.

Where in the heck had that thought come from?

Jason sprang into action, like the knight in hero's armor he'd always been, rushing to hand her a bottle of water. Colby uncapped it and quickly downed half its contents. Sure, the man—or rather, the boy he once was—had filled the pages of her childhood diary, and not all of her whimsical fantasies had been PG-rated. But the last time she'd even come close to getting naked with a man was more than three years ago. A very *long* three years ago.

Colby looked up into Jason's concerned brown eyes, glanced at the scar slashing his left eyebrow, and took another long gulp.

"Are you all right?" He squatted down beside her chair, the fabric of his dark blue uniform pants stretching taut over his thighs. The Louisiana heat skyrocketed.

She nodded, and with a self-deprecating laugh he asked, "Was it my cooking?"

"No, it was my fault," she answered, searching his handsome face for any sign that he knew who she was. "It just went down the wrong way."

He lifted his hand and then hesitated, hovering it in mid-air until finally placing it over hers in an obvious gesture of comfort. Colby swallowed against the energy zinging up her arm. Tall and dark with piercing eyes and an easy smile, young Jason had set more than just her heart fluttering back in the day. But the man he'd grown into was simply devastating.

Strong, work-roughened fingers encircled her slender wrist. Her eyelids flickered. This small, innocent touch was the most action she'd gotten in a while. Then the thick pad of Jason's thumb grazed across her skin moments before his nail rasped the tender flesh near her pulse. Her insides clenched. Looking up, she saw unmistakable attraction flash in his toffee-colored eyes. And then his hand was gone.

"Good," he finally said, pushing to his feet. "I'd hate to be the one responsible for poisoning the judge." He slid her one of his signature sexy, lopsided grins and headed back to his side of the table.

Colby couldn't believe it. He actually didn't recognize her. She knew it had been almost eight years since she'd last seen him at her mother's funeral, when she'd looked like the living dead, but she hadn't changed *that* much since they were kids. At least she didn't think she had.

He certainly hadn't.

Under the tailored MSFD uniform shirt, Jason's back muscles flexed as he walked away. Yeah, he was older. His shoulders were broader, his waist trimmer. His backside filled out his uniform pants in a way that had her wanting to squeeze it. But he was still Jason. She remembered when he'd gotten that slash above his eyebrow. She was there when he broke his nose in her driveway. Well, being a girl and three years younger, she had observed most of it from the window seat in her bedroom, but she was *there*.

From a few feet over, Mary discreetly cleared her throat, reminding Colby of where she was. With reluctance, she slid her eyes away from Jason's delectable ass and glanced at the large crowd seemingly hanging on their every exchanged word. It wasn't that their banter so far had been overtly flirtatious, but for some reason it *felt* like it was.

This is why I stay in the kitchen, she thought, picking up her fork and spearing a plump crawfish tail. *In public, it's only a matter of time until I make an idiot of myself...or drool all over hot firemen.*

“This is quite delicious,” she told the smoldering firefighter before her, taking another small bite.

And really, objectionably she knew that it was, although that's where the real irony of today came into play. The local fare may've been a staple of her diet growing up, and as a chef, Colby could still appreciate the cuisine's signature spicy burst of flavor, but she hadn't personally touched the stuff since she was eighteen. And nothing even remotely Cajun was on her restaurant menu back in Vegas.

It wasn't that the food wouldn't sell—she knew it would. Hell, people asked her about it whenever they heard where she was from. But Colby could never handle the sting of memories that preparing it conjured. The rush of emotion that came with the distinct aroma. Yet here she was, *temporary* acting head chef at an established Cajun restaurant in the metropolitan area she'd vowed never to return to, and judging a festival celebrating the very cuisine she'd left behind.

Her big brother *so* owed her.

But the flavors Jason created were perfectly balanced, with a nice burst of peppery goodness at the end. It brought her right back to the days in her father's kitchen, and it was obvious he had a skillful hand.

“You cooked your roux down perfectly.” She licked a dollop of sauce off her top lip. “You made your own stock from the shells, didn't you?”

His intent stare, which had been glued to her mouth as she ate, lifted at her question. “Yeah, I did,” he said, obviously taken aback. “That’s impressive. Although, I guess it’s your job to know that kind of thing, right?”

She set down her fork and wiped her mouth with a napkin. “It is, but there’s also an undeniable difference between etouffee prepared with homemade stock, and etouffee without it.” She smiled. “It’s a whole lot quicker to leave it out, or to go with the stuff you can buy in a store. But in my experience, it’s always better to take your time and do it right.”

Jason’s ready grin widened into a wicked smile and she could feel herself blushing at the potential double meaning of her words. It was almost surreal. She was flirting with the man who’d starred in every childhood fantasy she ever had—in public no less. And *he* was flirting right back. Had someone told her preteen or even teenage self that there would be a day Jason Landry came on to her, Colby never would’ve believed it. A few minutes ago, her adult self would’ve said it didn’t matter because she’d sworn off men when she was eighteen. But the reality of it happening, even if he didn’t know who she was—or maybe *because* he didn’t—was just too tempting to ignore.

Any minute now, he’d figure it out. Cane had promised he’d stop by, and if seeing his best friend there didn’t clue Jason in, she was sure Mary would announce her name eventually. But until then, Colby figured she might as well have a little fun...for her young self’s sake, of course.

“Well done, Captain Landry,” she said, instinctively lowering her voice to a more obvious coquettish tone. Inwardly, she cringed at the pathetic attempt at flirting. *It really has been too long.* Jason took a step forward and she looked up at him through her lashes, her brain apparently embracing the pathetic. “Obviously this isn’t your first rodeo.”

Jason's firm mouth twitched. "I know my way around a kitchen."

She had no doubt there were several rooms the man knew his way around.

Clicking the button on the top of her ballpoint pen, she bit back a smile. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind. Thank you, Captain."

Jason bowed his head and slowly backed away from the table, brown eyes never leaving hers. The giddy rush of feminine power running through her veins, along with a heady dose of sexual attraction, was unlike anything she'd felt in years. It really was too bad it would all end the moment he discovered who she was.

Reluctantly, Colby broke the toe-tingling eye contact. She jotted down a few notes about the dish, as if she'd ever forget, and Mary called Captain Morris to the table. But as much as the good-looking man tried flirting with her, and as appealing as his dish was, her gaze kept transferring back to Jason.

At the end of the competition, after all the crowd's votes had been tallied, Captain Dufrene had been announced as the People's Choice. Eric lifted his award plaque high in the air, and then everyone quieted to hear which dish would be crowned Best Bite.

As Mary accepted the slip of paper she'd written the winner's name on, Colby caught sight of her brother weaving through the crowd. Cane always did have impeccable timing.

The woman silently read the result, then smiled at the crowd. "All of our contestants today should be proud. Not only did they do a fabulous job representing their districts, and help raise money for a very important program, but their food was tasted by one of our country's leading female chefs—and a Magnolia Springs native."

The crowd murmured as Cane plopped into an empty chair beside her. "Looks like I got here just in time," he whispered, leaning close to her ear. "Who did you pick?"

Colby didn't answer. She was too busy watching Jason mentally put the puzzle pieces together. His befuddled gaze moved from her to her brother and to Mary, then back again. His eyes narrowed...and then widened. *Bingo.*

"That's right," Mary continued, as if talking directly to Colby's childhood crush. "Our own Colby Robicheaux left her fancy Vegas digs and can now be found back where she belongs. Right here, at a certain local family restaurant we all know and love."

Beside her, Cane reached out and squeezed Colby's shoulder. Jason pressed a fisted hand to his mouth, shaking his head in apparent disbelief.

"And for today's Best Bite, Colby has chosen...drum roll, if you please." The crowd quickly granted her request and after a few moments of simulated beats, Mary proclaimed, "Magnolia Springs Captain Jason Landry and his delicious etouffee! Congratulations, Captain. Come and collect your prize!"

