

## Chapter 1

Lillie entered Lafayette Square Park and picked her way through a patchwork of people sitting on blankets and lawn chairs and standing. She barely dodged a woman chasing her laughing toddler. Ought to call it chaos in the park instead of concert in the park. She spied a space in the crooked row of lawn chairs nearest the stage. Stepping into it, she kicked off her high heel pumps, wishing she had skipped the panty hose this morning. She wriggled her toes and let the music seep into her.

A baritone voice said, "Bonjour, would you like to sit in my chair for a while, Miss?"

She looked down at a handsome olive skinned man in the lawn chair to her right. Without waiting for her reply, he rose and motioned to the chair.

"Please." He stood there smiling and waiting for her to sit down.

She met his warm brown eyes and said, "I couldn't do that, but thanks anyway."

"It's against my raising to sit while a lady stands. I'll just stand here with you, if you don't mind."

She shrugged and tried to focus on the band, stealing a glance at him as the musicians finished their song with a flourish. She joined in the applause.

The man looked at her and said above the noise, "That's why I came early and brought my chair. I try to come every time this band plays. I'm guessing you're from Texas."

"How did you guess?"

He laughed. "I know a Texas accent when I hear one. I went to the University of Texas for my master's degree in structural engineering. Where in Texas are you from, if you don't mind my asking."

"I grew up in Dallas, but I've spent a lot of time in Austin."

"Small world." He held his hand out. "Charles Chauvet, born and raised in New Orleans. Austin is good, but I'm thankful to be back home in New Orleans with a good job."

She hesitated for a moment before taking his hand. "I'm Lillie Childress."

"Welcome to New Orleans, Miss Lillie Childress. I hope you're staying awhile."

Lillie let her hand drop and studied the man before answering. "Thanks. I hope so, too."

They both turned back toward the stage.

When the band finished the set, Charles Chauvet turned to Lillie. "That's my cue to leave. Got to take my chair back to the office and head out to my mamma's house. If it's Wednesday, she's cooking crawfish etouffee. When I was a little kid, that's how I knew it was Wednesday." He chuckled to himself.

Lillie admired his muscular build as he folded his lawn chair. He reached into his white dress shirt pocket and handed her a business card. "I office downtown. I'm thinking you do, too, considering how you just walked up in those high heels. I can't give you a lift because I'm on foot, too, but if there's ever anything I can help you with, give me a ring, Miss Childress. Anything." He held her eyes for a moment and started back toward the park entrance. Lillie turned and watched him, talking and waving to people as he made his way through the crowd. When he disappeared, she took a couple of steps to her right to see if she could see him again, but he was gone.

She looked down at the business card in her hand. Charles Chauvet, Managing Partner, Barurdson Structural Engineers. So that name Chauvet doesn't look at all like it sounded when he said it. Definitely French. No doubt, Cajun. She pulled up the downtown New Orleans map on her cell and studied it. Downtown office, all right. Two blocks north and two blocks west. Looks like we're office neighbors. She smiled. Who knows? Might see him around sometime.

The band members had returned and she turned back to the stage and lost herself in their music.

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Lillie climbed the steps of her downtown hotel and waited as a couple came through the revolving door.

As she walked through the lobby, the clerk behind the counter said, "Good evening, Miss Childress. Hope you had a good day."

"I did. Thanks for directions to the park this morning. The concert was great," she called over her shoulder as she headed to the elevator bank.

She punched 6 and watched as the car made its way down, stopping at every floor. When the door opened, couples and singles hurried out to start their evening.

Lillie stepped into the elevator.

"Will you hold it for me, Ma'am?" a man called out.

Lillie held the door and a man in Navy fatigues got in. "What floor?" she asked.

"Three please. Thank you, Ma'am."

She punched 3 and smiled to herself as she saw the sailor politely checking her out.

He stepped off the elevator. "Thanks again. Have a good evening, Ma'am."

"You, too," she called after him.

The door closed. Must be a guy from Belle Chase. So young. She sighed, remembering a guy in her high school graduating class who enlisted in the Navy the day after graduation. Wonder whatever happened to him.

She got off the elevator and hurried down the hall.

Her cell was ringing as she opened her door. She sat down on the bed and fished the cell out.

"Hey Deborah."

"Congratulations. You finished the first few days on the job. How is it?"

"I like the job. Everybody is smart and super nice to me. It's very informal. I'm going to lose the panty hose."

Deborah laughed into the phone. "Well, that's the definition of a good job."

"How about you?" Lillie asked.

"I think I'm going to like it at the hospital. There are two other social workers on staff. I never know what kind of patients I'll be helping next. Definitely not boring."

Kicking off her shoes, Lillie said. "I'm relieved to hear that. You were a little nervous about working at a hospital. Thank goodness, we've both landed in a good spot."

"Yeah. Too bad it's not in the same city. You won't get too busy to watch for social work jobs there, will you, you Lillie?"

"Of course, not. In fact, I met a guy today who seemed to know everybody in Lafayette Square Park. Born and raised in New Orleans, he said. He gave me his card and said to call if I ever need anything."

"You're not falling for that pick-up line. Not you," Deborah said.

"Strange thing. I think he really meant it in a good way. He seems like a different kind of guy."

"How's that?"

"He invited me to sit in his lawn chair. When I didn't accept he just stood up, too. Said he wasn't raised to sit when a lady was standing."

"Well, that's pretty corny. Who says a thing like that?"

"I guess, a good old boy from a Cajun family. His name is Charles Chauvet and he hurried home to have some of his mamma's crawfish etouffee."

Deborah howled into the phone. When she caught her breath, she said, "Lillie, you've been had. You're slipping."

"I don't think so. My gut tells me this guy is for real, corny or not. And, he's crazy handsome. Anyway, I promise I'll watch for social work jobs here."

"Is it Saturday that you move into your apartment?"

"Yep. And, I can hardly wait. This is a good hotel. Convenient to work and the nice park where they have the concerts, but I'm itching to get settled."

"Sorry I can't be there to help you."

"Me, too."

"Got to go now, Lillie. Talk to you soon."

"Yeah. Bye."

Lillie got up and turned on the TV, pulled back the covers of her double bed, arranged the pillows, and reached for her handbag still sitting in the middle of the bed. She pulled out a sack with a wrapped sandwich and a small bottle of water. She arranged four napkins for the sandwich and unwrapped it. She leaned back on the headboard and took a bite of her fried shrimp po-boy dressed with mayo, tomato, and onions. She sighed. Really, really good.

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Charles entered his office building and took the stairs two at a time to the third floor.

He pushed opened the glass door marked Barurdson Structural Engineers and went straight back toward his cubicle.

He paused at the cubicle next to his.

“Working late to make the rest of us feel bad, Jimmy?”

Jimmy looked up. “Working late so we won’t look like fools when we present this proposal to the city next week. How was the concert?”

“That group never disappoints me. And, there was a little bonus today.”

“What’s that?”

“I met a pretty young lady from Texas.”

“A tourist?”

“Not a tourist. I think she has an office right around here somewhere.”

“Going to track her down?”

He hesitated before answering.

“Probably not.”

Jimmy laughed. “I’ve heard that before. Maybe it’s time for you to find a good woman and settle down.”

“Not me. Not ready for the marriage scene. Wouldn’t be any good at it.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Thanks for working on the proposal. I’ll stay late and work with you tomorrow.”

“I know you can’t today. It’s Wednesday. You got to get to your mamma’s house for the crawfish etouffee.”

“You ought to come with me sometime.”

“If I’m ever invited, I’ll do just that.”

They both laughed and Charles ducked into his cubicle.

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Leaving downtown behind, Charles rolled his window down and enjoyed the cool March air as he cruised along, heading to the Broadmoor Neighborhood where he grew up. Soon be time to go to the camp house and get things in shape for summer. Do a little fishing. A little frying. Got to make sure the business never keeps me away from that.

He smiled, remembering the pretty woman from Texas with long honey-blond hair and gorgeous hazel eyes. Maybe too old for her. Maybe not. Probably *will* track her down. Can show her around town. Make her feel comfortable and have a little fun. Nothing serious. Just a little fun.

He turned onto his mamma’s street and swung into the driveway.

He picked up a small bouquet of colorful flowers on the seat beside him and started up the steps to the porch. Need to fix that bad plank.

Holding the flowers behind his back, he rang the doorbell.

The lace curtain on the door parted for a minute before a short stout woman opened the door.

He hugged her and gave her the flowers. "For you and Grand-mere. Is that crawfish etouffee I smell?"

She laughed and said, "You know good and well it is. Get in here, Charles. We're waiting for you."

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Lillie headed for the bench in front of her office building. She looked up at the leafy branches over the bench. Nice shade. From her handbag, she pulled out her paperback book, a store-bought carton of chicken salad with a plastic fork taped to it, and a bottle of water. Dipping into the chicken salad, she found her place in the book.

She kicked off her low heel sandals and wriggled her bare toes in the grass. Checking her watch now and then, she finished the chicken salad.

"Good afternoon, Miss Childress."

Startled, she looked up into the smiling face of Charles Chauvet.

"My goodness, what are you doing here?"

"My office is nearby. I couldn't stay inside on such a pretty spring day. Looks like you thought the same thing."

"Yes. I guess I did."

"Now that we happened to meet, I was just thinking you might like to go out for dinner on Saturday."

His guileless expression was disarming.

"Thank you, but I can't do that. I'm moving into my new apartment on Saturday."

"I see. Well, I better get going," he said.

"Wait. You told me you were born and raised in New Orleans and glad to be back. I was just thinking you know a lot of people, have a lot of connections. My best friend Deborah is a social worker, and we are hoping she can find a job here."

"You're right. I know a lot of people here. I'd be glad to ask around. If you'll give me your phone number, I can let you know what I find out."

Lillie hesitated before she reached into her handbag for a pad of notes and pen. She scribbled her name and cell number on the top note.

She smiled and handed it to him. "I appreciate your willingness to help."

"Sure thing. I'll be in touch."

Lillie looked at her watch. "Sorry, I've got to get back to work."

“I’ve got to get back, too.” He slipped the note into the pocket of his white dress shirt and headed off down the sidewalk, smiling.

Lillie gathered her things. When she got to the stairs of her building, she looked back and saw him disappear around the corner. Crazy handsome and very sweet.

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Lillie smiled as she came out of her office building just after 5. She noticed a man in a Texas Longhorn cap sitting on her lunch bench reading a newspaper. As she came near him on the sidewalk, she said, “Hook ‘em Horns.”

Without lowering his newspaper, he said, “Yes, Ma’am.” He raised his right hand with a Hook ‘em Horns sign.

She smiled to herself and walked on. A really nice day of surprises. Charles Chauvet at noon and a fellow Longhorn fan after work. What’s not to like about New Orleans.

