

One

"Let's get one thing straight right now, Adrienne."

Chance Breaux glanced down at his gold watch and let out an annoyed stream of air. Why was he wasting so much time with this maddening woman? He had dozens of lawyers who could handle this situation. Lord knew he had more important things to do, Chance groaned to himself. Studying the stubborn raven-haired woman standing before him, his loins answered his question. He reached down discreetly to adjust himself.

Adrienne Claireborne was not a classic beauty, but her French heritage was evident in her strong bone features and dark coloring. His gray eyes lingered over the subtle curves of the statuesque woman. Ever since he met her, his hormones had reverted to their teenage years. Just watching her now, standing in front of a long line of school buses, a dark walkie-talkie in one hand and a clipboard in the other, he found himself getting hard. Before he could indulge in fantasies of seducing her, Chance reminded himself there was the small problem of River Oaks to handle. It had to be eliminated. "It's only..."

The slender hand holding the walkie-talkie raised to cut him off. Pressing the button, she called out a list of bus numbers for the secretaries in the front office to announce. Soon dozens of small children started pouring out of the three different buildings of the school. Various adults lined the path leading to the buses, reminding students to walk. "Janet, once these buses are loaded, have the drivers pull up before you call the next group. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Handing off the walkie-talkie and clipboard, she motioned for Chance to walk a few feet away from the students loading up on the yellow buses. "You don't need to go into your long winded tirade again, Mr. Breaux. I've got it memorized by now." Adrienne made a production of lowering her voice to imitate his rich, masculine tone. "It's only a matter of time before you sell me River Oaks, babe, so stop stalling."

Janet cupped her hands together and called over to Principal Claireborne. "We have a runner."

"Great," Adrienne muttered, scanning the fenced in area. "Excuse me," she told Chance before sprinting to a side gate. An adorable young boy, who looked no more than five, was scaling the seven-foot fence there. Adrienne waited for him on the outside of the fence as other teachers tried to talk him into climbing back down on the other side.

"Donny, you need to get back down now before you hurt yourself." She bit back a grin. The Down syndrome child loved to make mischief. This being the last day of school before summer break, he was keeping everyone on their toes. They had managed to contain him all year and were not going to ruin their record this close to the finish line. His school last year had managed to let him escape several times.

"Don't run!" The cherub-faced child scolded her. "Donny go home now."

"Donny is going home on the bus," she told him, reaching up to catch him if he fell as he swung one chubby leg over. Not quite tall enough to reach to steady him, Adrienne worried the child could hurt himself. As his other leg inched over, Donny lost his footing. Large arms reached over to grab him before his principal could do so.

Adrienne saw Chance Breaux cradling the small boy in his strong arms. Lucky child, she thought then forced herself to stop daydreaming. "Thank you," she told him. She grabbed Donny's hand in a tight grip as Chance lowered him to his feet.

"Big man!" Donny's blue eyes widen as he looked up at his savior. "Walk to bus with big man!" He grabbed Chance's hand with his free one and pulled both adults in his wake as he walked to his bus.

Though Adrienne was doing her best to hide the fact, Chance Breaux's presence always made her uneasy. There was something very disturbing about the tall man. He was too big, too sure of himself, and too damn sexy to her way of thinking.

The May sun shone overhead as they made their way, both dressed in suits. They looked like parents walking their child. Chance smiled when he heard the distinct click of Adrienne's high heel boots. Every time he met with her, rain or shine, cold or hot, she wore boots.

The woman was a boot freak by all indications. Maybe he ought to wear a pair of his work boots to get her attention. He doubted his steel toe, size fourteen boots would turn her on. Adrienne did not seem the least impressed with his expensive attire, so his usual jeans and pullover shirts weren't likely to electrify her.

This woman was too damn cocky, Chance decided. Just because she ran a little school in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, she acted like everyone should jump to do her bidding. Someone ought to take her down a peg or two. They deposited Donny into his seat, and Adrienne fastened the seat belt herself.

"Don't run!" The small boy warned her as she reminded him to behave. They exited the bus and waved at the adorable boy through the window as his bus drove away.

Lots of people were watching the scene, but one look from Principal Claireborne and the audience scattered. Her nearly six-foot height alone seemed to command respect. Chance was six-foot, six inches in stocking feet. Adrienne's height did not intimidate him one bit. Few things fazed the oilman, except, of course, a challenge. Few things challenged Chance Breaux, and even fewer people were stupid enough to even try.

Ten years ago, the former owner of River Oaks, Stanislaus Hymel refused to cooperate with him. Chance had spent countless hours working to rectify that challenge. They both knew it was only a matter of time before Chance won. He always did. But then the former owner of River Oaks managed to prolong the dispute. He died. In death, Stanislaus had found a way to deny Chance the opportunity to possess River Oaks a bit longer. The old man had left the property to a distant relative who had turned out to be even more aggravating than himself.

Adrienne led the way back to her office, stopping to make sure Chance signed in and got a nametag. She turned to her secretary. "I'll be in a meeting for a few minutes. Hold my calls." She motioned for Chance to precede her in her tiny office before closing the door. Taking a seat behind her large, oak desk, she indicated he should settle in one of the chairs on the other side.

"How long have we been playing this cat and mouse game, Adrienne?" Chance demanded.

He was determined to get the sale of River Oaks over so he could concentrate on more important matters. In the back of his mind, the tall man visualized what the attractive principal might look like in his bed, minus her modest suit and sexy boots. Would she be as passionate about love making as she was about shoes?

"Let's see. I inherited River Oaks a little over a year ago. The lawyer contacted me in June. You showed up soon afterwards, insisting I had no rightful claim to the property."

Adrienne remembered the day very clearly. The towering giant had showed up at her apartment door bright and early, unannounced. She had just finished closing up the school for the

summer, and was exhausted from long days of reviewing report cards, meeting with parents who disagreed with their child's placement for the next year, and giving directions on what the custodians should address in the summer cleaning spree.

Chance had given the appearance of being the devil himself. His dark features and demanding personality fed into the assumption. His only fair features were his smoky gray eyes. Adrienne imagined the devil had a similar set of eyes to lead the righteous astray. The dark locks on top of his head had only a hint of gray at the temples, giving him a look of authority. For a huge man, Chance Breaux was actually very fit. There was a definite hint of muscles under the coat of his expensive suit.

Even now, in another tailored suit, he looked devilish. Despite having been outside in the hot Louisiana heat, he looked cool and in control. She felt sweaty, but not even a hint of moisture was visible on his strong brow. The devil was obviously immune to the fires of hell.

"What I disputed was your relationship with the former owner." Chance qualified. "You have to admit it was very suspicious. Why would Stanislaus leave you, of all people, over a hundred acres of land and a broken down old house?"

"Why wouldn't he leave me River Oaks? I was his great-niece by marriage. My great-aunt Wynona was married to Stanislaus."

Stop looking at his mouth, Adrienne ordered herself. There was something sensual about the way his mouth moved as he spoke. What would those thin lips feel like against hers? Shaking her head slightly, the principal tried to shake off the image floating in her mind. Why did this man affect her so much? Adrienne realized he was only interested in getting her inheritance. The man made no secret of that fact, either.

But her heart wondered what might have been if River Oaks had not been a part of the picture. That was simple, Adrienne's logical side asserted. If it weren't for River Oaks, Chance Breaux would never have entered her life. He certainly would not have stayed there all this time. A small part of her wondered if that was why she held off making any final decisions about the property.

Crossing her arms subconsciously, she tried to gain control of herself. "Their marriage license is on file at the parish court house. We both got a copy of it when you petitioned the court to verify my claim to the property."

"Don't take it too personally, babe. I've been after that property years before you even knew you had a great-aunt Wynona."

Adrienne could not deny it. Though she did not bother telling Chance, until the lawyer contacted her about the land, no one in her family had ever mentioned a great-aunt Wynona. Apparently the woman had died very young, shortly after her marriage to Stanislaus. Adrienne's mother vaguely remembered hearing about an aunt who died in a boating accident, but that was the extent of anyone's knowledge of the mysterious Wynona.

"Oh, but I do take it personally, Mr. Breaux, very personally. You barge into my life like an oversized bully, demanding I sell my inheritance. Every month or so I have to put up with your badgering, despite the fact that I've told you repeatedly I am not ready to make any decisions about River Oaks. For goodness sake, I have not even seen the place yet. All I know is it's buried somewhere on the west bank of the Mississippi."

Leaning forward in his chair, Chance nodded his head faintly. "Which goes to show why you should sell River Oaks to me. It means nothing to you. It never has, either. On the other hand, it means a lot to me."

"Why?" Adrienne demanded, leaning forward herself. "You keep insisting the land is nothing but useless swamp and the house is falling apart. Why are you so desperate to get River Oaks?"

"Determined, babe," Chance Breaux's low tone got even deeper when he was aggravated. She recognized the trend because she generally was the one aggravating him. He looked like he wanted to shake her. "I am never desperate, just very determined."

"Okay, so you are determined. Why?"

"I have my own reasons, Adrienne. They are no concern of yours. Besides, I am not exaggerating about the condition of the property. The majority of it is dense swamp, useless for development. The house has been vacant for over a year now. Hell, even though old Stan lived there for close to a hundred years himself, he let the place fall down around him. You have to trust me, babe. Selling River Oaks is the best thing you can do. It's the only thing you can do really. No one else is likely to offer to take it off your hands, certainly not at the price I have."

Adrienne started to mention another offer that came through the mail yesterday. Remembering the contents of the letter, the principal felt a small shiver creep down her spine. The letter came complete with an unusual twist. The writer was a self-proclaimed psychic who

took the liberty of predicting Adrienne's immediate future. According to Madame Lenore, the other party interested in River Oaks, Adrienne was preparing to face a very critical crossroad in her life. There was a dark figure looming over her, threatening her safety. Looking at the man before her, the principal could not help but think Chance was the looming threat.

Madame Lenore also warned about someone from the past reaching out to seek Adrienne's help, calling her to help right a wrong and free a lost soul. Now, as a professional, educated woman, Adrienne did not put much stock in predictions. But it might not be a bad idea to meet this psychic before she made any final decisions. The woman who wrote the letter sounded like a real character. She could meet with her for strictly entertainment value, if nothing else.

Chance Breaux was taking up more than his fair share of the small office, Adrienne decided, when she noticed how stuffy the room had become. She reached over and turned on a small fan near the window. "Don't you have an oil company to run, Mr. Breaux? Surely an important businessman like yourself has better things to do than badger me about buying my land."

"It's my land, Adrienne. You just happen to hold the deed to it at the moment. Since we've known each other for about a year now, do you think you might manage to call me something besides Mr. Breaux? My first name is Chance. Take a chance and use it."

"Chance," his name rolled off her lips way too easily. Adrienne enjoyed the feeling of saying it out loud for a change. "Your persistence might end up costing you in the long run. Aren't you afraid your eagerness might drive up the price?"

Chance considered her words carefully, seeming to debate his reaction to them. "Aren't you afraid your stalling over the sale might drive up the stakes of this little game we're playing?"

Without thought, Adrienne pushed back in her chair. Good, Chance smiled. He had her attention. Maybe they could get somewhere now. Then the principal forced herself to lean forward again, squaring her slender shoulders. "Just how are the stakes going up, Chance?"

"I was hoping to get this small matter of River Oaks out of the way before I took you to bed." Chance watched as Adrienne's mouth fell open. She was adorable when she was speechless, he decided, and a lot easier to manage, too. "Since you are intent on being so stubborn about the property, it looks like we'll have to deal with both issues at the same time now."

Abruptly, a cool breeze filled the office, turning the sweat on Adrienne's olive skin to ice. A strange odor whipped up over the room. Adrienne recognized the smell immediately, and stood up to open a window. The same odor had plagued her apartment for the past few months.

She had investigated, trying to figure out where the stench was coming from without success. The best Adrienne could figure was the odor seemed to be some type of burning metal. At least that was what she assumed the smell could be. She had to admit she had never encountered a smell like it before.

She better have the school's maintenance crew look into it. Hopefully, they would have better luck than the men she called in at her apartment. The electricians had come up empty handed. With the smell, came the eerie feeling of being watched. Adrienne slowly looked out the window, then around the office, trying to catch whoever was spying on her. Her hazel eyes came up empty. The only person in the room, besides her, was Chance Breaux. He was not only watching her; the arrogant man was studying her every move, unnerving her even more.

"Do you smell that?" she demanded.

He reached over and turned off the fan. "The wiring on this thing might be bad." He walked over to where she stood. His gray eyes locked onto her full lips, watching them tremble slightly with the cool breeze. He bet he could warm her up. If only he could be certain she didn't bite. What the hell? Maybe biting might make the encounter more interesting.

"You're avoiding the issues again, Adrienne. Let's get the sale of River Oaks over with so we can concentrate on one another."

He was standing too close, Adrienne realized, but refused to back away. "First you try intimidating me into selling. Now you're switching to sweet-talking? You are full of contradictions, Chance. You insist the back taxes on the property will bankrupt me. Then you explain it is worthless, and you would be doing me a favor to take it off my hands. Is seduction your latest ploy? Why do I get the feeling once you own River Oaks, the only thing you'll be concentrating on is getting the hell out of my life?"

"Is that what you are worried about, babe?" If possible, he inched even closer. "You think I only want you because of River Oaks?" Adrienne found herself backed up against the window, trapped by Chance's unyielding form. "Maybe this will convince you how sincere I am."

Adrienne knew the kiss was coming before Chance even started to lower his warm mouth. At night, alone in her quiet, lonely apartment, she had dreamed about what it might feel

like if he kissed her. His embrace was more gentle than she had imagine, more promising, more dangerous. The fluttering in the pit of her stomach surprised her, too. Her mind spun in a million different directions. Their lips seemed to melt together so perfectly. Even the chill in the air seemed to have faded.

Her thoughts whirled out of control, something Adrienne was not comfortable with at all. Instead of allowing herself to relax and enjoy the moment, she attempted to deal with all the implications. If the truth be known, she wanted nothing more than to start a relationship with this handsome man. He might be a determined, stubborn man, but he was also devastatingly appealing and exciting. Yet, she was not about to let herself be used by any man, no matter what her emotions led her to dream about.

So why was she allowing this man to kiss her? Adrienne wondered, enjoying the union of their lips a bit longer. Exhaustion, she decided. Years of working to prove herself as a successful leader in the school system had finally taken its toll. She really needed to take advantage of the coming summer break. Should she consider taking a vacation away from the area so she could de-stress?

Without notice, cold air filled the tiny office and seemed to attack Adrienne again. Her numb mind could think of no warmer place than Chance's strong arms. Still, she forced herself to pull away, allowing the cold air to consume her completely. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Turning around, she was certain someone was spying on her. It had her feeling edgy.

"What if I sell River Oaks to someone else?" She challenged, attempting to hide the effect his kiss had on her already rattled nerves.

"You'll never get a better offer than I've made."

"Money is not a deciding factor in this decision, Chance. Principals might not make as much as people who run oil companies, but we do manage to live a comfortable lifestyle."

"Have you had any other offers for the place, Adrienne?" Chance demanded. Something in his tone warned he would not let up until he got an answer.

"As a matter of fact, I have heard from someone else who is interested. Strange, the way you talk about River Oaks, you would think no one in her right mind would want the place."

"Who?"

It was useless to try to change the subject now. Adrienne told herself she should have kept the information to herself as she first thought. Chance Breaux was singled minded when it came to the topic of River Oaks. The frustrating man saw the place as his and deeply seemed to resent anything or anyone standing in his way. Adrienne just wished she wasn't the major obstacle he faced now.

"I believe her name is Madame Lenore."

Chance laughed, obviously relieved to discover who his competition was. "Madame Lenore? That quack?" His chuckling made her stiffen.

"She sounded like a very interesting woman," Adrienne defended.

"The crazy woman claims she has visions of dead people. Don't tell me you would seriously ever really consider any offers from a quack. What's she going to pay you with? Séances?"

Now Adrienne was compelled to wipe off the arrogant grin on his face. What a handsome face Chance Breaux had, too. His features looked to be chiseled out of granite. Even when he was smiling, he looked unyielding. "Like I said, money will not be a major deciding factor if I decide to give up my rights to the property. Explain your real reasons with wanting the place. You claim you want to begin a relationship with me, but... "

"Get this through your hard head, woman. Our relationship is separate from River Oaks. From this point on, I'm going to be in your life for a long time to come. You better start getting used to that fact, because it will be one hell of a life if you make the mistake of selling River Oaks to anyone but me."

Something in Adrienne snapped at his tone. No one told her what to do, especially this man. "Be careful Chance. That sounded like a threat. I don't respond well to intimidation. If you really plan on sticking around, you had better learn that about me."

Instead of backing way, the stubborn man moved even closer. "I don't make threats, babe. Never have to. I'm just a man who is determined to get what he wants. River Oaks will be mine one day. Make no mistake about that fact. It doesn't matter who I have to get the deed from or how. The result will be the same. But after ten years of waiting, my patience has started to grow thin. Frankly, it would not be prudent to be the person responsible for making me wait any longer."

If that wasn't a threat, Adrienne thought, what the hell was it? She took a step back without thinking. A knock at her office door caused her to startle, and the principal almost fell through the open window. Chance reached over to straighten her before she could hurt herself. His touch felt like a jolt of electricity, and he gave her a sexy grin.

Pulling away quickly, she walked behind her desk again and cleared her throat. "Come in."

The door busted open. "Don't run!" Donny's father called after the small boy who rushed around the desk to hug his principal. Unfortunately, the child was holding a planted cactus, and both he and Adrienne ended up with tiny prickles on their clothes. "Donny, no. I am so sorry," the boy's father tried to pull the boy away. "I knew I should have bought the ivy arrangement instead."

"For you," Donny held up the now damaged plant. "Donny loves you."

Smiling like she had just received a plaque for Principal of the Year, Adrienne bent down to kiss Donny's chubby little cheek. "I love you, too." She looked around the room for a place to display her new gift. A crystal vase was moved to another location and the plant replaced it as the dominant piece on a bookcase. "How does it look here?"

"Don't touch," Donny proudly warned his principal. "Ouch!"

"My wife wanted to thank you for taking care of our prickly little sweetheart this year. I thought a clinging ivy was more appropriate, but Donny agreed with his mother, so a cactus it is." The boy's father smiled at his son.

Donny turned and saw Chance Breaux and jumped on the desk to rush for him. "Big man! Hold Donny!" Adrienne was glad 'big man' had excellent reflexes. He caught the child in mid leap. "Donny loves you." The delightful boy gave his hero a wet kiss on the cheek. Why did the sight of the tall man holding a small child warm Adrienne's heart? It was not like she was in the market for someone to father her children, even if her childbearing years were ticking away.

Donny's father looked embarrassed as he reached to take his son out of the other man's arms. "I am so sorry. We didn't realize you were in a meeting, Ms. Claireborne. I just had to stop by before you left for summer break. There is no way we can thank you enough for helping Donny learn so much this year."

"Are you kidding? His oral reading scores helped raise our achievement percentiles two points. Next year we'll work on those comprehension skills, right Donny?"

The two visitors left, and Adrienne couldn't stop herself from smiling, even if Chance Breaux was still irritating her about River Oaks. Maybe she should call his bluff about wanting her aside from the property. She really needed to stop putting off dealing with River Oaks. First things first, she needed to at least visit the place.

"Chance, how would you like to show me River Oaks first hand? You can point out all the reasons why I should sell it to you then."

"It would be a waste of time, babe. You don't want to visit the place. Most of the land is thick, bug-infested swamp, accessible only by airboat, helicopter, or horseback. The house is falling apart. The roof leaks in several places and the gutters are rusty."

"Didn't you hear Donny's father? I'm on summer vacation after today so I have lots of free time. Besides, it would be interesting to see how accurate your descriptions are about the place. Not that you'd stoop to fibbing about the matter to convince me to sell..."

"Do they still use the paddle on sassy people in schools these days?"

Adrienne could not help but laugh at the image that popped up in her head. Chance Breaux was leaning over her desk and she was swinging a large, wood paddle across his tight ass. The wood would probably splinter before it did any real damage, she decided. "Feeling guilty about exaggerating the truth?"

He smiled back at her. "Not at all. I was just wondering if you had something I could use to help me adjust your sassy little attitude."

Adrienne's expression went red, then dark. "Corporal punishment has no place in this day and age."

He laughed at the mere suggestion. "Applied properly, it sure as hell can modify certain, dangerous behaviors." Chance's pants got a bit tighter in front. To hell with a paddle, he would love the opportunity to lay into this lady's sexy ass with his own hand.

"Do you have any paper I can use to draw you a map to River Oaks?"

Putting his implied threat aside, Adrienne got a sheet of clean paper from the tray of her printer. Suddenly she felt a bit anxious to explore her inheritance. She had always loved touring plantations in the south. What kind of historical treasures might she uncover? The slender woman leaned over to watch him sketch a map. "When can we go see it?"

His gaze lifted and he saw the excitement in her beautiful hazel eyes. "You are really getting into this, huh? Let's hope you are not too disappointed when you see the place. Just remember I warned you about the condition when we get there. "

"Tomorrow's Saturday. Could you meet me at River Oaks in the morning?" Was she thrilled about seeing the property or spending time with Chance Breaux? Who cared? This summer might not be as boring as the last few.

"Once you drive over the Hale Boggs Bridge in St. Charles Parish, you are only a few minutes away from the property."

"How close do you live from there?" Suddenly realizing how eager she sounded, Adrienne added a qualifier. "Just so I'll know how long it will take you to get there. I wouldn't want you to have to sit around waiting for me to come... get there." She studied the drawing, trying to look in control.

"Cute. I see you even included an alligator swamp and a broken down blue house. I've never really seen a rabid pelican before. Was that the look you were going for, or is drawing a skill you haven't perfected yet?" Darn it, had she said that out loud? Adrienne tended to get sarcastic when she was nervous or excited. Being around Chance made her both.

The tall man looked around the small office with a frown. "Are you sure there isn't a paddle or ruler I can borrow?"

Her backside tensed, Adrienne took the map and started to walk Chance to the door before he noticed any objects that might fit the bill of his request. "Thanks for the directions, Mr. Breaux," she stated, as she opened the door. "I'll be stopping by River Oaks at about nine tomorrow morning. If you care to join me, I'll meet you there. If not, I'm sure I can show myself around."