

# One

"You've got to hide me, Mary Elizabeth."

A heavily pregnant redhead allowed her friend Jennifer Boudreaux inside her home, concern etched on her face. "What on earth is going on, Jenny? Is someone chasing you or something? You're all out of breath."

"It's Jackson!" Jenny peeked out the front window of her friend's home. With dark hair and a rich tan, she looked every bit the bayou native she was. She had been working hard to eliminate the Cajun drawl she was cursed with by birth. Jenny did not consider herself a great beauty, but men seem to find her attractive enough. At the moment, the coast was clear, but eventually her boyfriend would come looking for her here.

"I am pretty sure Jackson promised he would track me down today so he could beat me."

"Jackson would never beat you. You will survive a small spanking. I'm living proof." Mary Elizabeth sighed, relieved her friend was not in any real danger, at least not the lasting kind. She understood the dread Jennifer was going through, but hiding would never solve her problems. It was better to face Jackson than to aggravate him even more. "I thought he spanked you last night, after the wedding."

Hands on her full hips, Jenny looked stunned. "You knew he was planning to beat me when he hauled me out of there last night? A little warning might have been nice!"

"Lower your voice." Motioning for her friend to join her in the kitchen, Mary Elizabeth put on a cup of coffee. The baby she carried was very active today. He had been kicking and punching her all night long. The clock on the oven showed it was not even six a.m. yet. After a long night at her cousin's wedding, she and her husband Everett planned to sleep late today.

Later in the week she was scheduled to be induced, so it would be the last time she got to sleep late in a long while. Luckily she had just gotten up, yet again, to go to the bathroom when Jenny started knocking. Everett had not heard her friend's arrival and was still sound asleep. He probably would be angry if he knew Mary Elizabeth let Jenny inside, especially if her friend was hiding from Jackson.

"Claire and I tried to wrestle you free from him last night, remember? We weren't protecting your virtue, you know. It was your butt we were worried about."

Jenny sunk into a hard chair at a big oak table and started rubbing her sore temples. "Last night is kind of fuzzy right now. I might have over done the drinking a bit." Dressed in jeans and an old Tulane University button down shirt, she looked much younger than her twenty-two years. This hangover she was suffering with had her confused and hurting.

"So he didn't spank your ass last night?" Mary Elizabeth asked, rushing around the kitchen. Her long white nightgown was pulled tight across her full belly. Every once in a while, her whole stomach seemed to tense up, causing her to grimace.

Looking back at Jenny, she scooped a few teaspoons into a cup of black coffee. Lucky girl, Mary Elizabeth thought, having escaped her punishment for so long. When Everett decided she needed a dose of 'behavior modification', he only waited as long as it took him to regain his temper. There was no time to even contemplate hiding.

"I'm not sure about the order of things last night, really." Jenny gave her friend a half smile as she accepted the cup of coffee. "It might have been a nightmare, but I remember being

caught in some sort of net in a tug of war between Daddy's shrimp boat and a mess of catfish. It sounds like a bad dream, but when I woke up this morning, my arms felt kind of sore, almost as if I really was almost pulled in half. Now that I think about it, I believe at one point of the nightmare I was almost pitched overboard the boat, but Jackson caught me. I was trying to thank him, and he got all pissed off."

Shaking her head, the small Cajun tried to put some order to the events. "I think he was fussing me about going fishing without a life jacket... something stupid like that. The last thing I remember was him waving a boat paddle at me and swearing he'd be back the next day to slap me with it." What had been a dream and what had really happened? It was so hard to figure out right now. But she knew for sure one thing had not been a dream. When she woke up this morning, the sun's glare making her eyes burn, there was a wooden paddle laying on her nightstand.

Okay, it was not exactly a boat paddle. It was more of a cooking utensil whose purpose only her brother, the chef, would know. There was a note scribbled beside the wooden paddle. Either Jackson was quoting an old Arnold Schwarzenegger's movie or leaving her a threat, 'I'll be back.'

"Help me figure out what's going on, Mary Elizabeth. I am so confused right now."

Grimacing after another baby kick, her friend sat down beside her. She sipped on a glass of milk, trying to decide where to start. "The tug of war part I am pretty sure I can explain. Claire and I recognized the look in Jackson's eyes when he started for you last night. You must have had too many Long Island Ice Teas by that point, because instead of noticing his bad mood, you started kissing him and calling him your handsome, big procrastinator." Jenny gulped at the news, and Mary Elizabeth decided to offer a bit of advice. "For future reference, I don't think he likes that nickname. He got all red in the face when you called him that."

"Crap," Jenny's mind started to clear a bit. Her friend Claire had just married the man of her dreams. No matter how much her flighty friend had tried to put off the wedding, her groom refused to let her escape. Claire even cut her long, red hair in an effort to aggravate her man into slowing down. It had not worked. Jeremy just busted her ass and threatened to do the same to Jenny when she tried to intervene.

It was kind of romantic, Jenny decided at the time, and it gave her crazy ideas about her own budding relationship with Jackson. Hell, she had known Jackson for a decade now, but he only just admitted he was interested in pursuing her. Jenny did remember wanting to speed up Jackson where their relationship was concerned. She might have indulged in a few alcoholic beverages to help boost her courage, but that was his fault entirely.

The two of them had been seeing each other for a few months now, but all she got was a few good night kisses. "What happened next?" She vaguely remembered wanting to light a fire under his fine ass.

"We heard him tell you he was bringing you someplace private," Mary Elizabeth looked down at her glass of milk, embarrassed just remembering the scene that followed. "I think you might have misunderstood his reasons, though. You sort of yelled out, 'It's about damn time, sha. I was beginning to think you were gay!'"

Jenny's face blanched at this news. Mary Elizabeth moaned, a combination of her baby pressing hard on her side and remorse for her friend. "He seemed to hate that part even more than the nickname. Claire tried to get you to understand what was going on. She warned you he looked like he was ready to beat your ass. It didn't seem to faze you. You laughed out loud at the notion and kept taunting Jackson, saying he was so slow, even if he wanted to beat you, you'd be

able to run all the way back to Golden Meadow before he even got up the gumption to come after you."

Her head was pounding now. Jenny finished what she knew was coming.

"Let me guess. He didn't like that, either."

Nodding with sympathy, her friend agreed. "No, he didn't. But it did make him want to prove he could move fast when he wanted to... He grabbed your arm and started pulling you toward the exit. Claire demanded we try to save you, so we grabbed your other arm, trying to delay him a little so he could get his temper under control. My Everett never spansks me when he's angry, and Jackson looked fit to be tied. I just wanted him to calm down some, but our interference seemed to make him even madder. That might explain why your arms are a bit achy. Sorry if we hurt you," Mary Elizabeth offered, turning a bit red in the cheeks.

"Thanks for having my back. At least I know I have friends looking out for me when I'm too drunk to do it myself. I'm guessing Jackson must have won the tug of war?"

"Only by default. Everett and his brother, Jeremy, came over and insisted we let you go. They looked all testy about us getting involved 'in other people's private matters'. The guys barked at us to release you. Both of them sounded really angry. Watch out when a guy lowers his voice. It means trouble is ahead if you don't change course quick. Needless to say, Claire and I listened, but we might have done so a bit hastily because you sort of flew across the dance floor. Luckily Jackson was prepared, because he caught you before you could get hurt. I don't think you understood he was still pissed off. You called him your hero and tried to thank him, he told you to hold your thanks until he was finished with you. I'm not really sure what happened after that, though. He hauled you away, and I spent the rest of the night hearing what would happen if I ever interfered between a man and his woman again."

Jenny sorted through all the new clues she got from her friend. It led to one conclusion. A very pissed off Jackson would come looking for her today. What would he do when he found her? How bad did it feel to get your butt busted? Surely, she could survive one small spanking. Hell, Jackson was so slow, she should probably worry more about falling asleep in between slaps.

"Why are you wincing, Mary Elizabeth?" she demanded. "I'm the one who is going to catch hell."

Mary Elizabeth started breathing heavily. "Jenny," she moaned in between breaths. "Go get Everett. I am pretty sure my water just broke. This baby is sure going to piss off his daddy. Everett has not even reviewed the procedure for labor and delivery yet. We were supposed to go over that tonight."

Everett, a dark haired engineer who worked for several of the local chemical plants, drove them to the hospital while Jenny sat in the back seat with Mary Elizabeth. The two women practiced breathing through the contractions as if they were highly trained Lamaze partners.

Jenny encouraged her friend as best as she could. "That's right, sha. You got this. Just keep on breathing with me."

In the front seat, Mary Elizabeth's husband practiced breathing as well. The interior of the small car was full of deep intakes of air, followed by loud exhaling. The expectant mother did as Jenny ordered right up until they rolled her into Labor and Delivery. Then she started demanding pain medication and threatening to disembowel her husband.

"Make them give me drugs, now!" she raged at Everett.

Mary Elizabeth labored for several long hours with no success. No amount of pushing seemed to help. Her blood pressure started rising, and the baby began showing signs of stress.

Their Cajun friend stayed with the couple until the doctor announced they needed to do an emergency C-section.

When they separated Everett from his wife for a few minutes, Jenny feared he would lose his control. He paced the hallway, raking his hand through his dark hair so hard, several strands pulled loose. Everett's dread of losing the two most important people in his life had him almost doubled over in fear.

Grabbing his shaking hands, Jenny bowed her head and did the only thing she could think of to help. "Dear Lord, Mary Elizabeth is fixin' to have her baby now. Let your strong arms guide the doctor's hands. Bless Everett so he can remain calm and so he can help his wife ease through this process. Help him believe he will be holding his beautiful child and wife tonight, both happy and healthy. I ask this in Thee Name. Amen."

A blonde haired man stood a few feet away, watching his little Cajun give strength to his friend Everett. The expectant father's composure seemed to change with her words. He went from a panic state to almost serene. A nurse called Everett's name to take him to scrub up before he joined Mary Elizabeth in the operating room.

Before he went, Everett reached down and kissed her cheek. "Could you call my mother and Father Haggarty for us? Mary Elizabeth will want them here after she has our baby." Both of his wife's parents had passed away, but she did have cousins in the area. "I'd like to hold off on calling the Langois clan just yet. Claire and Jeremy already left for their honeymoon, so there is no use to alarm them. We can call the others afterwards."

Watching her dear friends face a real life or death situation helped Jenny sort her pitiful concerns out more logically now. Here she was, hiding from a punishment she all but begged for, and Mary Elizabeth and Everett were facing a real challenge.

The petite Cajun made up her mind. As soon as this was over, and she was sure Mary Elizabeth and the baby were okay, she would go to Jackson and apologize. If he thought she earned a spanking, she would not put up a fight.

As she turned to walk to the waiting room, Jenny saw Jackson watching her. The stress of everything hit her and tears started pouring down her cheeks. The tall, stout man, once a linebacker for his college football team, opened his arms wide. She walked into them and took comfort in his presence. She always felt safe in this man's strong arms.

Mary Elizabeth and Everett's baby proved planning could only prepare a couple for so much. Weighing an astonishing nine pounds even, Alexa, who was supposed to be an Alex according to an early ultrasound, had not stopped screaming since the nurses separated her from her mother. Finally, nestled at her mother's breast, the infant settled down to nursing.

"Huh, I told you not to go rushing around painting everything blue." Everett's mother laughed. Much like Jenny, the older woman had a thick accent. "Them there ultrasounds ain't fool proof, ya know."

If he was disappointed in not having a son, it was hard to tell. Everett looked down at his wife and new daughter, realizing he was happier than any man had a right to be. "She's perfect. Ten fingers and ten toes. Did I mention she was nine pounds? Nine! She measured twenty-two inches long, too."

Jenny sat on Jackson's lap nearby on a small couch. Maybe one day, she told herself, they would have a beautiful baby, too. "I bet she's so plump because of the special diet you made Mary Elizabeth stay on." Her poor friend had a strict list of healthy, brain development promoting foods to eat, along with a lengthy list of forbidden items. "Next time, let the poor woman enjoy some good junk food so y'all can have a normal size kid for a change."

Mary Elizabeth looked at her husband and nodded with her head toward her friend. "Go ahead. Ask her."

"Right now?" Everett balked at her hint. A planner by nature, the new father had not had a chance to figure out how to approach the request he had for Jennifer. "Why don't we wait until after we get out of the hospital? We can invite her over and talk to her privately."

Mary Elizabeth smiled tenderly at her husband. Generally, she allowed him to indulge in this habit of over analyzing things, but not today. "You don't get to hold your daughter until you ask her."

"The baby is finished nursing?" Everett asked eagerly, waiting only for his wife to nod yes. He turned to Jenny without hesitation. "Would you consider being Alexa's godmother? I think it's safe to say God sent you to help us through this chaotic day. Mary Elizabeth and I think you would make a perfect godmother."

"I'd be honored," she stammered, surprised by the honor.

"So would we. Now give me my daughter, woman." Everett reached over to take the small bundle of pink blankets away from his smiling wife. He laid his tiny daughter on the bed for a moment, carefully readjusting the way she was swaddled. His folds were crisp and achieved with military precision. Soon the baby was cradled in her father's strong arms and expelling a loud burp.

"Just as sassy as her momma," he grinned.