

***SANDRA HILL***



***Saving Savannah***



## *Chapter One*

*A lady's gotta do what a lady's gotta do . . .*

"**N**o, I am not taking you into a sex shop, *chère*."

"Why? It ain't as if I'm not old enough."

"No."

"Whatcha 'fraid of, Tee-John? Us modern ladies gotta keep up with the times. If men kin go ta these places, why cain't us wimmen?" Louise Rivard, best known as Tante Lulu, put her hands on her hips and glared up at her nephew John LeDeux, a Louisiana police detective.

"No."

"It's not like it's illegal or nothin'."

"No."

"Besides, it's called the Garden of Eden. It's prob'ly a religious sex shop."

Tee-John rolled his eyes and gave her another head-to-toe survey of disapproval. "Did you have to wear that hooker outfit?" He couldn't fool her. He was hoping to change the subject.

Not a chance! She smacked him on the arm with her Richard Simmons fan. Truth to tell, if folks were staring their way, it was at Tee-John, who was once described by a TV reporter as "sex on a stick," whatever that meant. That George Clooney didn't have nothing on him.

"Thass the tenth time ya said that 'bout my 'pearance, and I doan appreciate yer sass any more'n I did the first time." Because of her petite size, she did most of her shopping in the children's section of department stores, usually Wal-Mart. "This is from the Mary-Kate and Ashley collection. An' they ain't hookers."

"They're not ninety-two years old, either," he muttered.

She gave him a dirty look.

Today she was wearing her Farrah Fawcett wig, a nod to the prettiest gal there ever was, bless her heart; a gauzy red blouse over matching red and white floral pedal pushers; and wedgie shoes with purple flowers. To her mind, she looked darned good.

"I'm still not takin' you into a sex shop."

"Ya heard of *Desperate Housewives*, boy?" She still called him boy, even though he was close to thirty now. Compared to her, Moses was a boy. "How 'bout *Desperate Nonagenarians*?"

"Nona ... what?"

"A person what's ninety-somethin'. I heard that word on that new cable TV Show. *Sex After Seventy*."

"You're makin' that up. Aren't you? Never mind! You about froze my brain with that picture. And I'm still not takin' you into a sex shop."

"Are you blushin'?" On tippy toes, she peered closer at her nephew, once the baddest boy on the bayou.

"Of course I'm blushin'. Is that why you wanted me to bring you to Nawleans t'day? Talk about!"

"No. I tol' ya. I wanna go ta The Voodoo Palace. Not that I believe in voodoo, but the shop carries some herbs I ain't been able ta find anywhere else." Tante Lulu was a traiteur, or folk healer. Had been all her life, and a good one, if she did say so herself.

"It's at the end of this block." Tee-John grabbed her by the upper arm and practically frog-marched her down the street a ways.

"Stop pushin' me. I was jist kiddin' 'bout goin' in the sex shop, fer goodness sake." Then she noticed something interesting and stopped in her tracks. "Whass that?"

Before them was a grungy looking storefront with the windows blacked out. The sign read St. Christopher's House of Refuge.

"It's a homeless shelter or soup kitchen," he said, attempting to tug her along.

She dug in her feet. St. Jude, patron of hopeless causes, was her favorite saint, but she'd like to know what St. Christopher was up to, as well. "Let's go in."

That's when Tante Lulu got a big shock. She'd lived in Southern Louisiana all her life. She knew the seedy side of the Big Easy. Even though her bayou region wasn't hit as hard as the city, she'd seen the news coverage of Hurricane Katrina and all its devastation.

What she hadn't known was that four years later, people were still suffering. Terribly.

For the next hour she and Tee-John walked around the place, both of them shaking their heads with dismay. It was a huge room, like a warehouse, with a mural of New Orleans before the Civil War adorning the walls. There was a cafeteria-style meal service to the left where folks were lined up for breakfast, it being barely nine a.m. After filling their trays, they sat down at long folding tables.

At one end were a series of ladies' and men's rooms and showers for each of the sexes. Desks had been set up at the far side where social service people were advising folks on what benefits they could get—not much—and job opportunities—very little. Racks of used clothing and blankets occupied another area, along with giant bowls filled with hotel-sized personal products, like toothpaste, soap, and shampoo.

Most of the space was filled with cots, hundreds of them, some of which were separated from their neighbors by hanging sheets. For families, Tante Lulu presumed.

The most pitiful thing was the belongings piled next to cots. Suitcases, boxes, big plastic trash bags filled with all their personal effects.

Tee John explained that the Katrina floods wiped out certain neighborhoods, including ones with low-income housing. But instead of rebuilding the units, the government chose to sell the land to developers who were constructing more upscale dwellings way beyond the means of the poor people. "That on top of recently shutting down the HUD trailers," he added.

She wiped the tears welling in her eyes with her St. Jude handkerchief. It was then that she noticed one element all these people shared: hopelessness.

"The saints must weep over this travesty," she murmured.

Tee-John was staring at a curly-haired boy, no more than five, playing with two rusty old Matchbox cars. The little mite probably reminded him of his own son, Etienne. Distressed, he snarled at her, "Where's your famous St. Jude when he's needed so badly?"

She winced. It *was* hard sometimes to understand why God allowed certain things to happen.

"Do you wanna leave?" he asked, putting an arm around her shoulders.

She shook her head. "Not yet, but I need ta get some air."

When they were standing on the back porch, which faced a small parking lot, she straightened with determination. "We gotta do somethin' ta help."

"We who?" Tee-John inquired.

Knowing her nephew, Tante Lulu figured he would probably slip the little boy's mother a fifty-dollar bill. And he would mail a check to the shelter. She would, too.

But that was the easy way.

"Me and St. Jude, thass who, ya idjet. St. Jude musta sent me here t'day. He's usin' me ta get a job done."

"Like an angel?" he teased.

"Iffen thass what ya wanna call me. All I know is God mus' wanna use me fer a higher purpose. A LeDeux family mission, I'm thinkin'."

Tee-John suspected that she'd soon be calling on him to be one of the "missionaries."



*Living on Not-So-Easy Street . . .*

Savannah Jones was a master of deceit. She'd become so, by necessity.

It was just past dawn. On the road outside Butler Park in New Orleans, she was busy polishing her red Subaru, which she'd affectionately nicknamed Betty. It was fifteen years old, but it still ran, as long as she employed that special trick in getting the wonky ignition to start.

Park police usually made their first rounds by seven a.m. She would move her vehicle before then to another location, probably the Wal-Mart parking lot. But, no, she'd used that two days ago, and the security guard was starting to eye her suspiciously. She could push her shopping cart inside only so many hours without buying anything. Maybe the Dunkin' Donuts. Or the parking lot behind St. Christopher's. Yes, that was it. The homeless shelter served breakfast on Tuesdays and wasn't so diligent about patrolling the premises. Plus, the authorities weren't as persistent about grilling folks at the meal area as they were at the sleeping quarters.

She gave Betty one last pat with her chamois. It was important that no one realize it was her home. Had been for three weeks now. Three weeks and two days. If she could survive for another two weeks, she would have enough money to move. Alaska or bust! That should be far enough away from... Never mind. She didn't need to start her day on a negative note.

"Did you get the tree sap off, honey?" she asked the little girl who was studiously rubbing the fender. At five, Katie was the sweetest little thing, not at all difficult. "Yep. An' some bird poop, too." She smiled up at her, showing the empty spaces in her mouth where she was missing two front teeth. "I'm hungry, Mommy."

"I know, sweetie. We'll have breakfast soon. After we go to the Y. Then I'll drop you off at kindergarten."

"I doan wanna go t'day," Katie whined.

"You have to, darling. You know that. Mommy has to go to work."

"Why can't I come with you?"

Oh, yeah, that would work. Crazy Hal of Crazy Hal's Strippers and Dippers would just love having her wait tables with a kid tagging along at her side. Hal's was famous for its boneless hot wings with twelve different dipping sauces, but even more famous for the twenty-four-hour-a-day strippers. It was no environment for a child.

"You can't, sweetie. But we'll do something special tonight. Maybe go to a movie." It was dollar night, kids free, at the Bijou on Tuesdays. "Okay?"

"Okay. Kin we have popcorn ... with butter?"

"Sure thing, short stuff." She ruffled Katie's black corkscrew curls, which were unlike her long, straight blond hair but just like Katie's father's. Father and daughter also shared the same mischievous dark caramel eyes. Immediately, Savannah crushed the image.

Katie yawned widely, setting down her rag.

It broke Savannah's heart to see her daughter living this way. Heck, it broke her heart to see herself living this way. When she graduated from the University of Georgia eight years ago with high honors in secondary education, she never would have guessed that she would be jobless and homeless one day. In fact, when she'd had Katie five years ago, she'd been teaching full-time and was living in a nice apartment.

Honestly, Savannah had become the poster girl for Murphy's Law. Whatever could go wrong, did, in her unfortunate case.

It started with Hurricane Katrina. Her apartment and almost all of her belongings were swept away in the flood. Then the school where she was a teacher closed and all the children were parceled out to other districts. The school never reopened. Despite her excellent credentials, she was unable to find another permanent teaching job locally.

Until recently, she was able to get by with substitute teaching, but because of government cutbacks, those assignments dried up.

In order to move to Alaska, where she heard employment opportunities abounded, she figured she needed five thousand dollars. Thus far, she had only three thousand dollars. Murphy's Law again, what with a mugging and a long bout with the flu, not to mention the dentist and pediatrician for Katie. Two steps forward and one step back.

Living in her car ended up being her only option for saving, unless she wanted to risk losing her daughter by going into a homeless shelter. Child Protective Services hovered there, like vultures. Oh, she had to give CPS credit. They did good for lots of neglected or abused kids, but they also thought nothing of taking a child away from her mother. Being homeless and working in a strip joint did not stack in her favor.

By the time she and Katie had completed their early morning swim at the Y, followed by a quick shower and change of clothes, they were both starving. Luckily, the St. Christopher shelter was still serving breakfast.

When they'd gone through the line and were about to sit down, Savannah noticed an old lady staring at her. In fact, Savannah was pretty sure the same woman had been watching her when she pulled into the parking lot a short time ago. Not a good thing. Hers and Katie's clothing were stacked to the roof of the back seat, along with clear plastic boxes holding all their belongings, including photo albums she had luckily rescued before the flood.

She led Katie to the back of the room, far from the serving area where the woman continued to stare suspiciously at her. With their backs to the cafeteria, she and Katie sat down and dug in. Scrambled eggs and toast. Pancakes and syrup. Oatmeal and dry cereal. All washed down with milk for Katie and black coffee for her. She would take several packets of crackers and a carton of orange juice with her for later.

"Hello."

Savannah jumped with surprise, almost knocking over her coffee. Katie giggled at her side.

The old lady sank down into a chair across from them. No more than five feet tall, she had to lift her arms to rest her elbows on the table.

"Are you a grandma?" never-bashful Katie blurted out. "I doan have no grandma." The little devil pouted her lips with exaggerated woe. So far no questions about a daddy, thank God. But her daughter had been on a grandmother kick for a week, ever since the grandmother of a classmate brought chocolate cupcakes to school.

"No, but I'm an auntie. My real name is Louise Rivard, but you kin call me Tante Lulu. Thass what everyone calls me. Tante means aunt."

Katie's eyes went wide. She tried the words out hesitantly. Then, with wonder, she asked, "You'll be my aunt, too?"

"Sure. And who are you, sweetheart?" The wily old witch was addressing her daughter, probably sensing that she would get no response from the mother.

"Katherine Mary Carrington."

"What a pretty name fer such a pretty little girl!"

Katie preened. "But you kin call me Katie, like my mommy does."

"Even prettier," the old lady remarked, then looked pointedly at Savannah.

Realizing that there was no avoiding the woman, she said, "Savannah Jones."

"I ain't never heard of anyone named Savannah."

At least she hadn't commented on her and Katie's different last names. Although she'd never married Katie's father, Matt Carrington, she'd given her baby his surname at birth. Big mistake, she'd learned later. Matt's parents would love to take their only grandchild away from Savannah, and her being homeless would give them all the ammunition they'd need.

"I was born in Savannah," she said before she had a chance to bite her tongue.

Just then a tall, good-looking guy in khakis, a black T-shirt, and a blazer sat down next to the old lady and smiled at her and Katie. He carried two foam cups of coffee, one of which he placed in front of Tante Lulu.

"This is my nephew John LeDeux. We call him Tee-John." To Katie, she explained, "That means Little John 'cause when he was a boy, he was the littlest LeDeux."

Katie giggled.

To Savannah, Tante Lulu added, "Tee-John is a cop up Fontaine way."

Savannah stiffened, then began to gather up the remains of their breakfast. "We have to go," she whispered to Katie.

The old lady and the man exchanged glances.

Her reaction had caused them to be suspicious. But she couldn't help herself. Every time she saw a policeman come in her direction, she figured that Matt's parents or CPS had finally found her and were about to take Katie away. For all she knew, that's exactly who this one was, though she didn't think a hired cop would bring his elderly aunt along.

"What's yer rush?" the nosy old biddy asked.

"I have to take Katie to kindergarten." She checked the wall clock. "We only have fifteen minutes."

"And Mommy has to go to work so we can earn enough money to go to Alaska. There's polar bears in Alaska. And seals. We looked on the computer at the library."

Savannah groaned inwardly at her daughter's running tongue.

"And where do you work, honey?" the old lady asked her.

Before she could drag her daughter away, Katie said, "Crazy Hal's." She giggled. What was it with her giggling today? She'd become a regular giggle machine. "Isn't that a crazy name?"

"Sure is, sweetie," Tante Lulu agreed.

But the guy gave her a knowing look. Obviously, he was familiar with Crazy Hal's.

"I'm a waitress, not a stripper." *Not that it's any of your business.*

"Strippers are ladies that take off all their clothes," her precocious daughter whispered to Tante Lulu.

The guy pulled a deck of cards out of his pocket. "Do you like magic tricks, Katie? I always carry these in my pocket because I have a little boy your age who loves card tricks."

Katie nodded enthusiastically.

He began to deal them both cards and explain some game to Katie in a low voice. It soon became obvious why. He was giving his aunt time to get Savannah in her crosshairs. "Girl . . ." Tante Lulu started to say.

At first, Savannah didn't realize she was talking to her. At twenty-nine, she couldn't remember the last time anyone had referred to her that way. And sometimes she felt so tired, she could be ninety-nine.

"Are you in trouble?" Tante Lulu continued.

"What? Why would you ask that?"

"I gotta tell ya, St. Jude, he's tappin' on my shoulder ta beat the band."



*She'd always wanted to be a private dick . . .*

"Did you get her license number?" Tante Lulu asked Tee-John as the red Subaru peeled out of the parking lot.

"Yep."

"What kin ya find out about her?"

"Pretty much everything."

"Her address?"

"Usually, except I'm thinkin' she lives in that car."

Tante Lulu gasped. "Why wouldja say that?"

"All the signs are there. Looks like everything they own is in that car. Bed rolls and pillows. Labeled plastic boxes. Toiletries. Clothes. Shoes. Toys. Stuff like that."

"Thass awful. If she has a waitress job, why wouldn't she have a place ta live, even if it ain't real nice? And if she's short of cash ta pay fer an apartment, why wouldn't she stay at the homeless shelter?"

"She's probably afraid of losing her daughter. Plus, I'd bet my left nut—I mean, my left arm that's she's on the run."

"From what?"

"Don't know, but I'll find out. Guar-an-teed."

"I gave her my bizness card, in case she's in trouble."

"You have a business card?"

"Course, I do. I need it fer my traiteur bizness. It has the St. Jude prayer printed on the back."

"That should help Savannah."

He probably didn't know that she could recognize sarcasm when it hit her in the face. What an idjet! "Yer darn tootin' it will."

Then she said a little prayer in her head. "We got us a mission, Jude."

## *Chapter Two*

*Georgia . . . and other things . . . on his mind . . .*

Captain Matthew Carrington, U.S. Army Special Forces, sat down at the desk in the temporary office assigned to him at Fort Belvoir in Virginia. He was so shocked, he felt gut-shot.

After five years of hell in an Al-Qaeda prison, after torture that would haunt him for life, after a badly tended leg wound that gave him a limp, and after six months of multiple surgeries and rehab in a D.C. hospital, he'd thought he couldn't be hurt any more. He was wrong.

He examined the creased and stained envelope in his shaking hands. It had so many forwarding addresses, it was amazing that it had actually caught up with him. From Georgia to three different Army Post Offices to five other places, it had gone, finally sitting in a dead mail box until some postal employee had given it one more shot.

He pulled the letter out and read it once again. It was dated five years ago.

*Dear Matt:*

*You've been gone for a week now, and I haven't heard from you. I know, I know, you hate letter writing, and you're probably still in transit. You need to give me your new email address, btw. Your old one isn't working.*

*First of all, I love my ring. I'm looking at it now and getting tears in my eyes. I swear it is the most beautiful engagement ring a woman has ever received.*

*There's something I need to tell you, honey. Pretend you hear a drum roll. I just can't wait any longer.*

*I'm pregnant.*

*Yeah, I know, I should have told you in person, but I didn't want to ruin our time together. You said, repeatedly, that we'd set a date to marry when you came home, and we'd have kids sometime in the future, but the future is now, sweetheart.*

*It happened, and there's nothing I can do about it. Actually, I'm ecstatic. Our baby might be unplanned, but it will be more than welcome. By me, anyhow. Please, please, please tell me that you're happy, too.*

*Gotta go now. I'm writing over my lunch break, and my one o'clock creative writing class is waiting. I'll write again tomorrow. I just wanted to get this in the mail asap.*

*Love you forever,*

*Savannah*

He could kick himself for not setting up a new email account as soon as he hit Afghanistan, but he hadn't had time. He'd been immediately engaged in briefings for an upcoming mission, which turned out to be his gateway to hell.

Ever since he'd come back to the States a month ago, he'd been trying to contact Savannah, but she seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth. All his mail had been returned Forwarding Order Expired, including the dozens of letters he'd written from the hospital. He could not find a phone number for her or a trace of her current whereabouts on the Internet. Finally, he'd given up, figuring she'd delivered to him the GI's dreaded silent shaft. It wasn't her style, but maybe she'd met someone else and didn't have the nerve to tell him in person. Shit happened.

And now, just as he was about to go on leave, his commanding officer had handed him this letter. Straightening with determination, he picked up the phone.

"Mom?"

"Matt! Darlin'!" His mother's deep Southern drawl was warm with welcome. "When will you be getting here? Your father's at the club. He'll be so disappointed to have missed your call."

His parents had visited several times while he was at Walter Reed Hospital, but this would be his first trip back home.

"I'll still arrive about seven p.m., but, Mom, I have a question for you. When you came to the hospital, I asked if you knew where Savannah was, and you said no."

There was an ominous silence before she said, "That is still true." She laughed; a fake laugh, if he ever heard one. "I don't know why you're still interested in that girl. Good Lord, she didn't even know her parents. She had no name. She was abandoned. Abandoned! I shudder to think what might be in her genes. I always said you were too good for—"

"Enough! I didn't like you talking Savannah down before, and I don't like it now." The hairs were standing up on the back of his neck. Something was fishy here. *Slow down and think*, he told himself. Sometimes a soldier needed to regroup and try a

different tactic. "Mother, did Savannah ever contact you or Dad after I was deployed five years ago?"

The silence was telling.

"Did you know she was pregnant?"

Her gasp carried through the telephone line. He could just picture her with a hand held delicately to her heart. "Yes, but—"

He said a foul word that he'd never said in his mother's presence before. "Did you see the baby?"

"Yes, but—"

"Boy or girl?"

"A girl. Her name is Katherine Mary Carrington. I told Savannah she had no right to give the baby our name, but she probably used it as a ploy to gain money from us."

*A little girl. Oh, God! I have a daughter. And she would be ... five years old already.*  
*Oh, God!*

"Did you give her money?"

"Of course not!"

"Did she ask for money?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Are they still in Savannah?"

"No. At least I don't think so."

"Savannah must have given up her teaching job. Do you know why she left?"

"I ... I have no idea. I mean, we offered to ... well, never mind."

"You offered *what*?"

"We offered to bring up the girl, if you must know. All Savannah had to do was sign the papers, but she tore them up and threw them at us. Can you imagine? You know we have much more to offer than a single mother, but she wouldn't listen. In fact, she had the gall to have a security officer escort us from the hospital."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"We didn't want to worry you."

"And when I asked where Savannah was?"

"We didn't lie. We don't know where she is. We even had a court date, and she didn't show up."

"A court date for what? No, don't tell me. A custody hearing. No wonder she disappeared."

He'd always known his parents were snobs of the highest order, but he'd mostly been amused by their exaggerated sense of self-importance. He'd never thought they could be so deliberately cruel.

"Did you threaten Savannah?"

"Of course not. We just offered to take it off her hands."

"*It? It?* Are you referring to my daughter ... to your grandchild as an 'it'? Thus far, I've heard you call her 'the girl', 'the baby' and 'it.' Don't you have a friggin' heart?" He was shouting now. He couldn't help himself.

"Matthew David Carrington! Don't you dare take that tone with—"

For the first time in his life, he hung up on his mother, and he pulled the plug on the phone when it immediately started ringing.

Two hours later, he was on a flight to Georgia. In the past, when he was happily on his way home after a long mission, that Gladys Knight song "Midnight Train to Georgia" would play in his head. This time, he for damn sure wasn't happy. He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and looked, for about the thousandth time, at the photo of himself and Savannah taken two weeks before his deployment, on the night he'd asked her to marry him. They looked so happy.

Was she happy now?

Had she built a new life for herself without him?

Where the hell did she think he'd been all this time? He'd forgotten to ask his mother.

Another unwelcome thought came to him. What if she'd married and his little girl was calling another man daddy?

"Oh, Savannah, where are you?" he whispered, pressing the picture to his lips. Tears welled in his eyes, but then he raised his head with determination. "I'm on my way, sweetheart, wherever you are."



*Some puzzles just take time to solve . . .*

"I jist cain't understand why she won't accept my help. I've asked her ta come stay here with me," Tante Lulu told Tee-John as they sat in rockers on her Bayou Black back porch. Tee-John's five-year-old son Etienne was down at the bayou stream fishing. Or more accurately, scaring away every fish, bird, and small animal within fifty feet with his wild casting technique.

"Pride is a powerful thing. Plus, I think she's afraid. Of what, I'm not sure."

"Fer two weeks, I been goin' over ta Nawleans ta talk with her. You were right, she's livin' in her car. I ain't eaten so many chicken dippers in all my life. I think I'm startin' ta cluck."

"Bet Savannah is pissed about you bird-doggin' her." Tee-John grinned.

"Ya could say that, though I wouldn't use that word. Las' night, for example, I followed her around Wal-Mart 'til she stopped and asked what I was doin' there. I tol' her there ain't no law sez I cain't shop wherever I want. 'At midnight?' she asked then. Jeesh! I did buy her little girl a Mary-Kate and Ashley sundress, though."

"I'm surprised that Savannah accepted your gift."

"She couldn't not accept. I tore off the tags and ripped up the sales receipt." She thought for a few moments. "Mebbe we should kidnap the two of 'em."

"We are not kidnapping anyone. Get that idea out of your head right now."

"You ain't helpin' much."

Tee-John shrugged. "I gave you all the info I could find. Savannah Jones, born 1980 at St. Joseph's Hospital in Savannah, Georgia. No known birth parents. Adoptive

parents, James and Ellie Jones, deceased. A graduate of the University of Georgia with high honors. Had been an English teacher at a private school in suburban Savannah. Then suddenly, she resigned and moved to New Orleans where she taught school in the lower ninth ward . . . until Hurricane Katrina. She lost her apartment and her job because of the floods, and hasn't been able to get back on her feet since then."

"There's a puzzle in there somewheres. I jist ain't figgered out what it is yet."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. A friend of mine in Georgia dug up something interesting. Turns out Savannah got engaged to a Captain Matthew Carrington in 2004, just before he shipped out for Iraq. Todd and Evelyn Carrington, his parents, are big-shot, country-club types. Carrington was a POW for several years, but he escaped about six months ago. That's all I know."

Tante Lulu smacked him on the arm. "You knew that and dint tell me. Sometimes, I swear, you got the brain of a flea."

"I was going to tell you."

"Hah! I doan suppose ya got any addresses or telephone numbers."

He pulled an index card out of his shirt pocket and grinned at her.

She grinned back.

"Be careful what you do, auntie. Savannah is runnin' from somethin' and it could very well be this guy. Maybe he was abusive. Or maybe he didn't care about being a father or a husband."

"I'll be careful. Jist you watch me. I know how ta handle people. I'm a people person."

Tee-John rolled his eyes.

She didn't care if he was skeptical. Tante Lulu had a feeling she was about to solve the puzzle. *Thank you, St. Jude.*

## *Chapter Three*

*A good soldier needs a battle plan . . .*

**M**att was at his parents' home packing up the rest of his belongings to ship to his Virginia apartment. In the meantime, he was staying at a hotel. No way was he going to live at home, not after what his parents had done.

He was now on leave, and he was meeting this afternoon with a private detective who had a good track record for finding missing persons.

The phone rang as he was carrying the last of his boxes through the hall and down the steps. He heard his mother answer in the library.

"Yes, this is the home of Matthew Carrington. Who is this?"

Glancing in the open doorway, he saw his mother bristle. "I am Evelyn Carrington, if you must know. Why do you wish to speak with my son? . . . Don't you dare call me an old biddy ... you ... you old biddy. I am going to hang up now."

That's all he needed, his mother screening his calls. Matt put down his box and stepped in the room, signaling his mother to hand him the phone.

"Hello. Matthew Carrington here."

"Thank the Lord!" an elderly sounding voice with a Southern accent exclaimed. "I'm Louise Rivard, but you kin call me Tante Lulu, like ever'one does. Are you the Matthew Carrington that was engaged to Savannah Jones?"

Matt gasped and sank down into the desk chair. "Yes. Do you know where she is? Is she okay? And my daughter ... is she with her?"

"I sure do know where Savannah and Katie are."

*Katie. Her nickname is Katie.* "Give me her address and I'll be there in ... wait a minute. Where are you calling from?"

"Loozeanna."

He laughed, giddy with relief and anticipation. "That's a big state. Where exactly are Savannah and Katie?"

"Well, thass the thing. I cain't tell ya 'til I'm sure it's safe."

He stiffened. "What do you mean? Is she with someone else?"

"She's still single, but Savannah's been on the run fer some time. How do I know it's not you she's runnin' from?"

He swore a blue streak, then demanded, "Where the hell is she?"

"Ya ain't gonna accomplish nothin' with cuss words."

"Sorry," he said, realizing he couldn't afford to antagonize his only lead to date. "What do you want me to do?"

"Come meet with me so I kin check ya out."

He resented the idea. Big time. Still he said, "Where?"

"Bayou Black. Thass outside Houma, Loozeanna. Jist ask anyone fer Tante Lulu's place."

"I'll be there." He checked his watch, saw that it was already seven p.m., and added, "Tomorrow morning."

"Okay. Oh, another thing. Savannah thinks yer dead."

"What? I was a prisoner of war, never declared dead."

"That ain't what yer mother tol' her."

He was about to confront his mother, but decided that could wait.

"Do ya got one of them dress uniforms ... like that Richard Gere wore in *An Officer and a Gentleman*?"

"I have a dress uniform," he offered hesitantly, "but Gere played a Navy officer, I think, and I'm Army. Army Special forces."

"Thass even better. We Cajuns like ta do things up right when it comes ta grand reunions. The Cajun Village People, a surprise weddin', that kinda thing. Ya gotta play this jist right, *cher*. Knock Savannah's socks off ... or her panties, as my nephew Tee-John would say. Tee-hee-hee! Wimmen melt over men in uniform. I remember the time my Phillipe come home from the war jist before D-Day." Her sigh could be heard over the telephone lines.

This woman was hundred proof crazy. Still, she might be his only link to Savannah.

"Ya might wanna say a little prayer to St. Jude, too. He's the patron saint of hopeless cases." The old lady was on a ramble again. "You got a hope chest?"

"Huh?"

But she had already hung up.

Despite his confusion, he was smiling.

Until he saw the look of fury on his mother's face.

"You're going to chase after that girl, aren't you?"

"I'm going to chase after both of my girls." He'd already tapped o for the operator and now asked for Delta Airlines. While he waited, he turned to his mother. "How could you tell Savannah that I was dead?"

Her pale face got flushed. Then she attempted to defend her actions, "You might have been."

"That's pathetic."

"Matt, we're your family. We were only doing what we thought best for you."

He shook his head. "As far as I'm concerned, the only family I have is in Louisiana."



*You could say it was a LeDeux invasion . . .*

In two more days, Savannah and Katie would be leaving for Alaska.

Her car was up for sale on one of the Internet auto sites. The plane tickets were purchased. She had reservations at a bed and breakfast in Anchorage. She'd even put in applications for teaching at several schools, and the prospects looked good.

If she hadn't used up so much of her money, she wouldn't be working these last days before departure. She was owed two weeks' salary, which she doubted she would get if she weren't here on Friday.

"Jones, get your ass out here! You have three frickin' orders up."

Savannah grimaced as Hal Frankin's voice boomed at her through the door of the ladies' room. She could procrastinate only so long. After giving herself one last look-see in the mirror, she ambled out.

Hal was leaning against the wall, arms folded over his bull-like chest, waiting for her. "What the hell is up with you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"You wanna keep this job?"

"Yes." *Hell, no!*

"Then stop bein' so—"

Just then, the chef yelled out, "Pick up 8, 9, 10. Mayday! The eggs are gettin' cold."

That was her cue. Thank God!

She rushed over to pick up her orders. As she was balancing a tray over her shoulder, she passed Celeste Arseneaux coming off the stage. Celeste was stark naked, except for five-inch clear plastic heels and a garter filled with dollar bills. A cell phone was pressed to her ear.

"I told you, Sammy. You cannot eat Sweet Fruits cereal for lunch. With that much sugar, you'll be bouncing off the walls. Tell Nana to make you a sandwich."

Hal was up on stage, revving up the crowd for the next dancer while Savannah served food to three tables. As she took two more orders over to the counter, the sound system erupted with "Mustang Sally," and Sally Anderson, a college student who needed

to supplement her scholarship money, came galloping out, to loud cheers. She wore a cowboy hat, chaps, a g-string, boots, a garter, and a little vest that barely covered her breasts. There was much hooting and yelling and whistling, especially from the men sitting at the horseshoe-shaped bar that surrounded the stripper stage. And it wasn't even the noon rush yet.

Savannah was wiping off tables when Tante Lulu came in. Honestly, she knew the interfering old busybody meant well, but she was asking way too many questions, some of which were downright painful to answer. Like yesterday. Where was Katie's father and did she love him and how come she wasn't with him? Finally, Savannah had exploded.

"Because he's dead, dammit! So no more questions."

That hadn't stopped the old lady, though. Instead, she'd urged her to come stay with her on Bayou Black, which had become a running thread in all their conversations.

Frankly, Tante Lulu and what appeared to be dozens of family members who accompanied her to the bar were the reason she had moved up the timeline for her departure. Their questions were getting too intrusive, and it made her uncomfortable that there were two lawyers, a police detective, and a newspaper reporter in the LeDeux family.

Tante Lulu, her niece Charmaine, and some hunky guy in cowboy boots who was probably Charmaine's rancher husband sat down at an empty table, and the old lady beckoned her to come over. Savannah glanced over at Hal and raised five fingers to indicate she was taking her break.

"What's the occasion?" she asked Tante Lulu, who had on a Dorothy Hamill wig. It was a wedge cut and bright red. Matching polish covered her fake fingernails and toenails, which peeked out from a pair of open-toed pumps, which were red, as well.

"Cain't a gal dress up if she wants to?"

"Mary-Kate and Ashley?" Savannah asked, looking over her jeans, chain belt, and a T-shirt that said Girl Power.

"Nope. Hannah Montana."

Savannah had learned, after "bumping into" Tante Lulu on more than one occasion at Wal-Mart, that the girls' department was her shopping venue of choice.

Charmaine chuckled. She owned a bunch of beauty salons and had once been a Miss Louisiana. Even in her early forties, she still looked good.

"You haven't met my husband yet, have you?" Charmaine glanced sideways, then gave a hard nudge to the cowboy stud, who was gaping at the stage where Sally was continuing her strip routine, now to "Pony" by Ginuine. He almost fell off his chair before he righted himself. "This is Rusty, better known as the husband-who-sleeps-on-the-couch tonight. Rusty, this is the girl I was telling you about. Savannah Jones."

He nodded at Savannah.

"Why are you here again today?" She didn't care if the old lady was offended. Her constant visits were annoying, even if she did mean well.

Tante Lulu patted her on the hand. "We was jist in the neighborhood."

*Yeah, right.* She noticed that the tables in front of them were being filled, and figured that Hal would be over any moment to order her back to work. Then she did a double take.

Holy crap! There were LeDeux family members all over the place, many of whom had accompanied Tante Lulu during the past few weeks. The lawyer Lucien LeDeux, the pilot Remy LeDeux, teacher and musician René LeDeux, and John LeDeux. Plus four women who she assumed were their wives, who had the good sense to make their men take seats with their backs to the stage.

Savannah rose to her feet, frowning with confusion. Her heart was racing, and the hairs were standing on the back of her neck.

She had no idea what was going on, but she had a bad feeling that it involved her. "What have you done?" she asked Tante Lulu.

"Jist makin' a miracle, honey. A St. Jude kinda miracle."



*The things a man will do for love . . .*

Matt's first reaction on entering Crazy Hal's was anger that Savannah had been forced to work in such a dive. Knowing the kind of person she was, he had no doubt that she'd been forced.

His second reaction was "Wow!" on seeing Savannah. She was wearing Daisy Duke shorts, an off-the-shoulder peasant blouse, and high heels. Holy frickin' wow!

He felt like an absolute dork wearing his dress blues on a hot New Orleans day. But according to the bayou matchmaker who'd orchestrated this whole scenario, the clothes were requisite for melting Savannah's heart. Tante Lulu had mentioned that something similar had worked for Remy, one of her nephews who had been a former Air Force pilot, except in that case the scenario involved a Village People routine. He figured his set-up was the lesser of two evils.

Matt took more steps inside the club, still out of Savannah's range of vision. She had just sat down at a table with the old lady, her niece Charmaine, and her husband.

He would have preferred a private reunion with Savannah—*and please, God, let there be a reunion, let her be happy to see me*—but Tante Lulu wouldn't tell him where she was unless he agreed to her plan. Other members of her family, all of whom he'd met in the past few hours, told him to just go with the flow, that their aunt was like a bulldozer when she got an idea into her head.

In fact, on the way here this morning, Lucien, the lawyer, had told him, "My aunt is noted for her matchmaking skills. In our family alone, she has finagled a surprise wedding, two Village People events, a cowboy kidnapping, and a pirate ball."

He had just stared at Luc with horror. In his ultra-conservative family, the most outrageous thing he'd ever seen was his mother's backyard picnic complete with china and crystal and silver.

Then he'd grinned. He liked the idea of a family that did outlandish things under the direction of the bayou dingbat. In fact, he liked the idea of such a family, period.

He was waiting now for a cue from said dingbat.

Some woman in pig tails came on stage, sucking on a lollipop and gyrating to Britney Spears "Oops, I Did It Again." René went up to talk with some man; Matt wasn't certain about what and wasn't sure he wanted to know, especially since it included René slipping the man a few bills. Meanwhile, the Spears wannabe left the stage, dozens of dollar bills spilling out of her g-string.

In the ensuing musical silence, Tante Lulu turned and gave him a little wave.

*Showtime!*

## Chapter Four

*He wasn't Richard Gere. He was better . . .*

Savannah was about to wait on a new table when she heard the loudspeaker blast out the Joe Crocker song "Love Lifts Us Up Where We Belong." What an odd choice for strip music.

She was just thinking that she hadn't heard it since she'd seen *An Officer and a Gentleman* years ago when, to her surprise, some military guy stepped into the room. A stripper? Since when did Hal hire male strippers? Hmmm. Maybe he was trying to attract more of a female clientele.

Oh, well. It was nothing to her. But why were all the LeDeuxs standing and clapping?

She gave the guy another glance. He removed his dress hat, exposing a "high and tight" military haircut. Wearing a serious expression on his face, he headed toward her, all the while ignoring the hoopla around him.

She blinked. Then blinked again.

Slowly, she began to recognize him.

"Matt?" she choked out. That was impossible. He was dead. Wasn't he?

*If he isn't dead, where the hell has he been all these years?*

Immediately, she tamped her temper down and rejoiced that he was still alive.

Katie's daddy was still alive!

*Oh my God! Has he come to take Katie from me?*

He didn't give her a chance to ask any questions, or turn tail and run. Tossing his hat to the side, he lifted her by the waist so her feet dangled off the floor, and hugged her so tight she could barely breathe. "Oh, God, Savannah, I have missed you so much," he whispered against her neck.

She pulled back to look at him, and smacked him on the shoulder. "I thought you were dead." She would have given him an earful, but he was kissing her like there was no tomorrow. And then she was kissing him back.

In between kisses, she said, "You never wrote to me."

And he replied, "I never got your letters."

"Your mother is a witch."

"Tell me something I don't already know."

"I'll never forgive you for leaving me all these years."

"I'll never forgive myself."

"Where have you been?"

"P.O.W."

"Oh, Matt!" she cried.

"Why aren't you teaching?"

"Lost my job. Going to Alaska."

"Not anymore."

"Your mother told me—"

"I know. Forget about her."

"Were you hurt?"

"I'm okay now."

"How did you find me?"

"I was searching for a long time, but it was Tante Lulu who found me."

Tante Lulu. She should have known.

"I love you, Savannah. I never stopped. Do you still love me?"

How could he even ask that question? "Forever."

Everyone in the restaurant was standing and cheering now, even Hal.

"We need to talk in private, sweetheart," Matt said, setting her down.

She didn't care. She just kept touching Matt's face and shoulders, as if to convince herself that he was really here.

"Mommy!"

Tante Lulu was holding Katie's hand and walking toward them.

Matt gasped and murmured, "She's beautiful."

So, he already knew. Tante Lulu again, she concluded, but she couldn't be angry. Instead, she smiled. She could see the love in Matt's eyes already.

Tante Lulu leaned down and whispered something in Katie's ear. Her eyes went wide, then she launched herself at Matt. "Daaa-ddyyy!" With her little legs wrapped around his waist and her arms locked in a death grip around his neck, Matt looked Savannah's way and mouthed, "Thank you."

Tante Lulu came up beside Savannah and squeezed her hand. "Mission accomplished."

"I owe you so much." Savannah's voice was raspy with emotion.

"Jist thank St. Jude. He's the go-to guy."