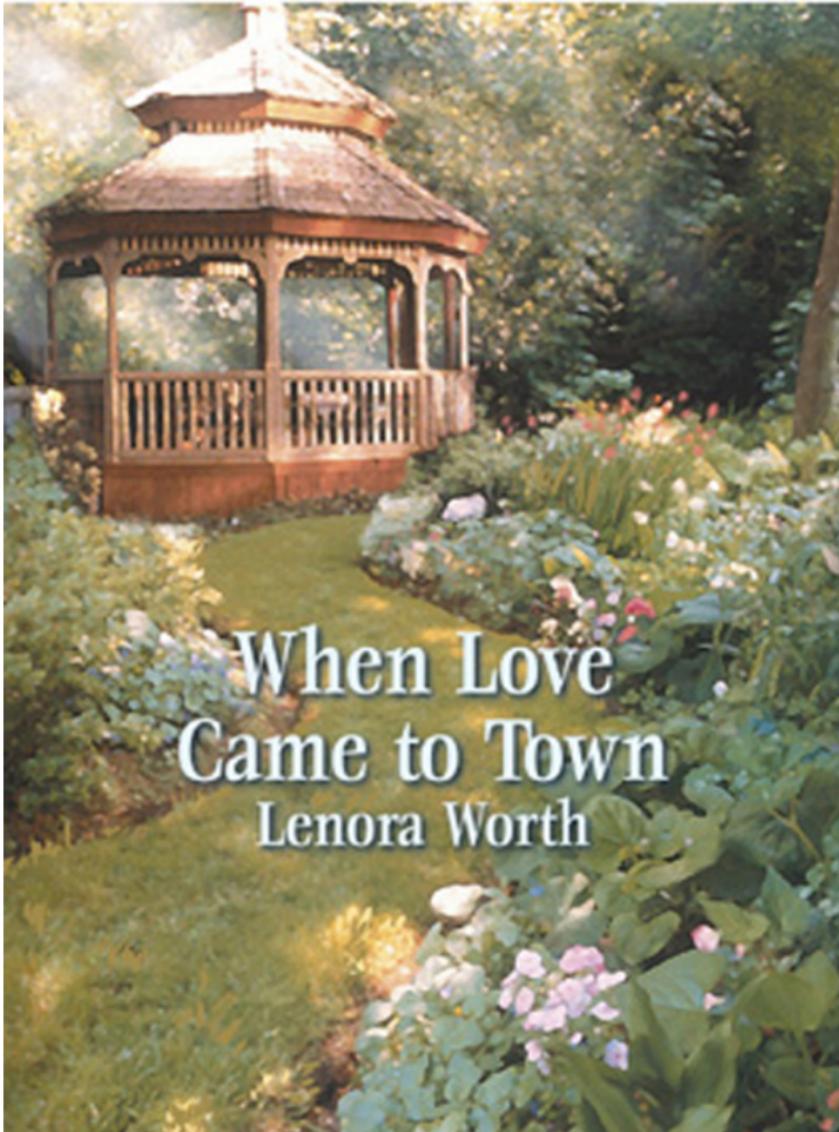




Love Inspired®

July 2001
87149-X

Heartwarming Inspirational Romance



When Love
Came to Town
Lenora Worth

Lenora Worth

When Love Came to Town

Аннотация

TO THE RESCUEAs far as Mick Love was concerned, the tornado that had devastated tiny Jardin, Louisiana, had nothing on the tempestuous, wildly beautiful Lorna Dorsette. Mick had come all the way from Mississippi to help restore her aunt' s ruined plantation—not for a whirlwind romance with a fiery, Bible-quoting blue blood who had more secrets than the murky bayou....After praying for help in the wake of the storm, Lorna was convinced Mick' s tree service was heaven-sent. As for her rugged rescuer, she had every intention of restoring his faith and resisting his charms....

Содержание

“This is happening too fast, Mick.	5
LENORA WORTH	6
When Love Came to Town	7
Contents	8
Chapter One	9
Chapter Two	25
Chapter Three	39
Chapter Four	56
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	60

**“This is happening too fast, Mick.
Can’t you see that?
Can’t you see that I’ve never—”**

Lorna paused, turned away again.

“Never what? Felt like this before?” Mick said, right on her heels. “Cause that’s the way I’m feeling. Like I’ve been hit by lightning.”

“Or lived through a storm,” she said, almost to herself. That’s exactly what it felt like, being with him, being in his arms—as if she was reliving the storm all over again....

LENORA WORTH

grew up in a small Georgia town and decided in the fourth grade that she wanted to be a writer. But first she married her high school sweetheart, then moved to Atlanta, Georgia. Taking care of their baby daughter at home while her husband worked at night, Lenora discovered the world of romance novels and knew that's what she wanted to write. And so she began.

A few years later, the family settled in Shreveport, Louisiana, where Lenora continued to write while working as a marketing assistant. After the birth of her second child, a boy, she decided to pursue her dream full-time. In 1993 Lenora's hard work and determination finally paid off with that first sale.

"I never gave up, and I believe my faith in God helped get me through the rough times when I doubted myself," Lenora says. "Each time I start a new book, I say a prayer, asking God to give me the strength and direction to put the words to paper. That's why I'm so thrilled to be a part of Steeple Hill's Love Inspired line, where I can combine my faith in God with my love of romance. It's the best combination."

When Love Came to Town

Lenora Worth



www.millsandboon.co.uk

You shall hide them in the secret place of Your presence, from the plots of man; You shall keep them secretly in a pavilion....

—Psalms 31:20

To my niece Rhonda, with love

And...to all the Hildas of the world

Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Epilogue

Letter to Reader

Chapter One

“Boys, we’ve got ourselves one big mess here.”

Mick Love looked around at the devastation and destruction, wondering how anyone had survived the predawn tornado that had hit the small town of Jardin, Louisiana, more than twenty-four hours ago. He understood why his friend at the power company had called him and his crew to come to the rescue.

Due to a nasty storm churning in the Gulf of Mexico, a series of powerful thunderstorms had rolled through most of Louisiana, leaving enough damage to tie up the local power companies for days to come. Both the governor and the president had declared the state a disaster area, so utilities workers from Texas and Mississippi had been called in to help.

Apparently, Jardin had been one of the worst-hit spots this side of the Mississippi River. Trees were down all across the tight-knit rural community, causing power outages and damage to many homes and businesses. This particular spot had suffered some of the worst damage Mick had seen. Just two days ago, the vast acreage had been breathtakingly beautiful, an historical showplace that attracted hundreds of tourists during the spring and summer when its gardens were in full bloom.

But not today. Today, the fertile, riotous gardens looked as if they’d been trampled and smashed by a giant’s foot, the tender pink-and salmon-colored azalea blooms and crushed bloodred

rose petals dropped across the green grass like torn bits of old lace. Heavy magnolia branches and limbs from the live oaks, some of them hundreds of years old, lay bent and twisted, exposed, across the lush, flat lawn. And everywhere, broken blossoms and hurled bushes lay crushed and bruised amid the split, shattered oaks of Bayou le Jardin.

Bayou le Jardin. The Garden in the Bayou, as some of the locals liked to call this place. Mick glanced back up at the house that stood towering over him like something out of a period movie set. Right now, the white-columned, pink-walled stucco mansion with its wraparound galleries and green-shuttered French doors looked as if Sherman himself had marched right through it. Shutters and roof tiles dangled amid the rubble of tree limbs and broken flower blossoms. A fat brown-black tree limb had just clipped one of the dormer windows on the third floor, taking part of the roof with it.

And yet, the house had somehow survived the wrath of the storm. Mick had to wonder just what else this centuries-old house had survived.

No time for daydreaming about that now though. He had work to do. Lots of work.

“Okay, let’s get this show on the road,” he called, issuing orders as he pulled his yellow hard hat low on his brow, his heavy leather work gloves clutched in one hand. “This won’t be easy, but we’ve got to get these trees off those lines and out of this yard and driveway.”

Soon, his crew was hard at work, cutting and removing some of the smaller limbs. These great oaks shot up to well over forty-feet high, and some of the limbs measured wider than a man's waist. Luckily, though, only a few of the thirty or so huge oaks had suffered damage. And most of those were in the back gardens.

Deciding things were well under control here, Mick headed around the front of the huge house. He wanted to see what needed to be done with the few broken limbs along the great alley of oaks that lined the driveway up to the house from the Old River Road that followed the Mississippi River.

In the back gardens, people were buzzing around here and there. Utility workers, concerned tourists and employees of the popular bed-and-breakfast—all hurried and hustled, some of them underfoot, some of them offering to help out where they could.

But now, as Mick came around the corner and into the long, wide front yard, he looked up to see one lone figure standing a few feet away, underneath the canopy of the double row of towering oaks.

Right underneath a broken limb that was hanging by mere splinters from a massive tree.

Mick squinted, then waved a hand as he ran toward the person—who looked like a teenager, decked out in jeans and a big T-shirt, an oversized baseball cap covering his head. That cap wouldn't help if the limb fell on him.

Which is why Mick waved and shouted. “Hey, little fellow, be careful out there. Watch for those limbs—”

The wind picked up. The hanging limb moved precariously, then with a shudder began to let go of the branch to which it had clung.

Mick didn’t even think. He just dived for the tiny figure in front of him, knocking the boy and himself to the wet ground as the limb crashed to the very spot where the teenager had been standing.

Winded and angry, Mick turned from the still-shaking leafy limb, tickling and teasing just inches from his feet, to the body crushed underneath his, fully prepared to tell this interloper to save himself and everyone else some grief by getting out of the way.

And looked down to find another surprise.

This was no boy. No teenager, either. The cap had fallen off in the scuffle, only to reveal layers of long, thick red-blond hair. And incredible eyes.

Green. A pure and clean green like freshly mowed grass—and they looked every bit as angry as Mick felt. Maybe even more angry.

“I’m not a ‘little fellow,’” she said in a voice that moved between southern sultry and cultured classy. “And I’d really appreciate it if you’d get off me. Now.”

Mick rolled away as if he’d been burned by a dancing electrical wire. “Sorry, ma’am,” he said, his Mississippi drawl making the

words sound too slow to his own ears.

Then he glanced over at her, watching as she sat up and lifted that veil of hair off her shoulders. It rippled and fell in soft strawberry blond-colored waves and curls down her back.

Regaining some of his anger, he said, "Well, you should have enough sense not to stand underneath a broken limb like that, little fellow or not."

Blowing red-gold bangs out of her mad green eyes, the woman got up and brushed off her bottom, then grabbed her bright purple-and-yellow LSU baseball cap, her eyes flashing like a lightning bolt. With a long sigh, she tried with little success to pull all that hair up into a haphazard ball so she could put her hat back on. Finally giving up, she let her hair drop back down her back, then plopped the hat against her leg in frustration. "I was surveying my property. And just who are you, anyway?"

Her property. Mick gave her the once-over again, then grinned. "Don't tell me you're Aunt Hilda? Hilda Dorsette?"

"Hardly," she replied in a haughty tone, still flapping her hat against her damp jeans. An expression bordering on arrogant moved across her delicately freckled face. "I'm Lorna Dorsette, her niece. And I believe I asked you first."

"So you did," he said, still grinning, his heart still beating hard after that near collision with the limb. Or maybe because of the beautiful, petite woman standing in front of him. Extending his muddy hand, he said, "Mick Love."

She ignored his hand, then glanced at his hard hat, which had

landed on the ground a few feet away, her neck craned as she read the bold black lettering stamped across the front. “Love’s Tree Service?”

“That’s me. Claude Juneau called us yesterday. Said you had some major tree problems out here.”

She relaxed a bit, then nodded. “Claude and his crew took care of the worst of the power lines, so we do have electricity now, at least. But they had too much to handle to bother with the tree limbs. He said he’d have to call in reinforcements from Mississippi.”

“That’d be me,” Mick said, extending his hand again in what he hoped would be forgiveness. “I’m sorry I knocked you down, Miz Dorsette.”

“It’s Lorna,” she said, returning his handshake with a firm, non-nonsense grip. “And I appreciate your concern.” Glancing over at the jumbled mass of branches and leaves behind him, she added, “I didn’t realize the limb was so badly broken.”

“Could have been worse,” Mick replied, as they turned to head back toward the mansion. “The backyard sure is bad off. It’s gonna take us a few days to get it cleared up.”

Lorna nodded again. “When I heard your trucks pulling up, I threw on some clothes and came out to supervise.” She stopped walking, then looked up at the house. “But the sight just made me so sick to my stomach. I had to find a quiet spot.”

To compose herself, Mick reasoned. Lorna Dorsette didn’t strike him as the type to burst into tears, but he reckoned from

the flash of anger he'd seen in her eyes earlier, she'd gladly throw a fit or two. Yeah, she'd probably just grit her teeth and keep on going, telling everyone exactly what she thought. Even through a disaster such as this. What, besides being a glorious redhead, had made her so strong-minded? he wondered.

"I understand," he said. "These spring storms can really do some damage, and this one was a doozy. It's hard to look at, when it's your own place."

She turned back to him then, her face composed and calm, shimmering from the building early morning humidity. "Yes, but we're blessed that no one got hurt or killed—some did in other parts of the state. We've mostly got property damage. That, at least, can be repaired."

Mick didn't miss the darkness in her eyes. Or the way she'd almost whispered that last statement. Curious, and against his better judgment, he asked, "What exactly were you doing out there underneath those big old trees?"

Lorna put both hands on her hips, then gave him a direct look. "Praying, Mr. Love. Just praying."

That floored him. The intense honesty in her eyes left no room for doubt. And made Mick feel foolish. Most of the women he knew rarely prayed. This woman was as serious as the big trees shading them from the sun. And apparently, just as rooted. A provincial country girl. Quaint and pretty. And toting religion. Double trouble.

Which only made Mick, the wanderer, the unsettled bachelor,

doubly intrigued.

When he didn't speak, she lifted her head a notch. "Do you pray, Mr. Love?"

"Call me Mick," he said, all of a sudden too hot and uncomfortable to be reasonable. "Does it matter if I do or don't? I'll still get the job done."

Her smile made him edgy and immediately put him on alert. "Yes, it matters. Aunt Hilda will have you out in the garden in a heartbeat, reciting the 'Lord's Prayer' if she finds out you don't pray."

"Oh, I see." He laughed, relieved to see that she had a sense of humor right along with her sense of piety. "So you pray to impress your aunt?"

"No, I pray to remain close to God," Lorna explained, slowly and in that voice that poured like soft rain over Mick's nerve endings. "We have a tradition here at Bayou le Jardin. We take our troubles to the garden. And there we walk and talk with God. It's based on my aunt's favorite hymn."

Okay, so he'd just stumbled on a praying, hymn-singing, petite redhead with eyes that looked like green pastures. But Mick couldn't help being cynical. "Well, that's nice, but what did God tell you to do about these broken limbs and destroyed property?"

She smiled at him then, and brought his heart hammering to his feet. "He told me He'd send you."

Floored, dazed, winded, Mick couldn't think of a snappy reply. Until he remembered he'd saved her butt from that limb.

That gave him some much-needed confidence.

Glancing up at the gaping open space where the limb had once hung, he said, "And just in the nick of time, I do believe."

Lorna only smiled and stared. "That remains to be seen, but yes, I guess you did come to my rescue back there."

"And don't you forget it," he retorted, glad to be back on a human level of understanding. All this business about walking and talking with God made him jumpy.

"Oh, I won't." She marched ahead of him around the corner, her faded navy tennis shoes and frayed jeans making a nice melody of sounds as she walked.

The nice melody ended on the next beat, however, when she groaned and whirled to glare up at Mick. "Just what in blazes are your men doing to my beautiful gardens, Mr. Love?"

"Lorna's out there pitching a fit," her older sister Lacey said as she watched from the open dining room doors. "Think I should go play referee?"

Hilda Dorsette reached for her silver-etched walking cane, then slowly made her way to the French doors leading out onto the flat stone gallery. Without a word, she watched as her great-niece went nose to nose with the handsome man named Mick Love. Then she chuckled. "Good thing he's wearing that hard hat. He'll need protection from Lorna. She sets such high store in those live oaks."

Lacey shrugged, her floral sundress rippling as she moved away from the window. "He'll need more than a hard hat if he

damages those gardens. I'll be right there with Lorna, fighting him."

Hilda gave Lacey a fierce stare. "The man came here to do a job, dear. The gardens are already damaged beyond repair from the storm. What more can he possibly do? He's trying to clear things up."

Lacey heard her sister's raised voice coming through loud and clear from the many open doors and windows. "But you know Lorna thinks she has to be the one in charge. She's obviously upset because his crew with all that big equipment has just about mashed what little garden we have left."

"The garden will grow again," Hilda replied. "It always does."

Lacey turned back from checking the urn of strong coffee Hilda had suggested they brew for the workers and few remaining guests. "Lorna needs to get in here and see to breakfast. They'll all be hungry."

"Rosie Lee has breakfast well under control," Hilda reminded her over her shoulder. Even as she said the words, they could hear dishes rattling in the large industrial-sized kitchen located off the main dining room. "Lacey, calm down. We're all going to make it through this."

"I'm calm," Lacey retorted, then rubbed her forehead to ward off the headache clamoring for attention. "I'm calm, Aunt Hilda."

But she knew in her heart that she wasn't calm. How could any of them be calm after surviving the intensity of that storm? No wonder Lorna was taking out her anger on the very man

who'd come to help them. It was Lorna's way of dealing with the situation, of finding some sort of control over the chaos. Because they both knew only too well that, in the end, they had no control over either joy or tragedy.

When her baby sister's heated words turned from English to French, however, Lacey knew it was time to take the matter into her own hands. "I'm going out there," she told Hilda as she brushed past her. "I'll drag her in here by her hair if I have to."

Hilda stood leaning on her cane, her chuckle echoing after Lacey. "Maybe our Lorna has finally met her match."

Lacey didn't find that so amusing, but it would serve Lorna right if this Mick Love brought her down a peg or two. Lorna loved to boss people around, and she loved being the center of attention. Lacey was used to reining in her firebrand little sister, and, truth be told, she was getting mighty tired of it. How their brother Lucas could just take off and paddle away in his pirogue, heading out into the swamps and leaving Lacey to cover things, was beyond her. But then, she was the oldest and used to handling things.

"Lorna, we can hear you all the way to the river," she said now as she made her way through branches and bramble.

Lorna turned to find her big sister standing with her hands on her hips, that disapproving look on her lovely face. Lacey, looking so cool and collected in her sundress and upswept hair, only added to Lorna's aggravation. "Well, I don't care who can hear me. This man and his big machines! Look what they're

doing to the garden, Lacey. Je voudrais—”

Mick held up a hand. “Don’t start that French again. If I’m being told off, I’d like it in plain English, please.”

Lorna ground her teeth and dug her sneakers in for a good fight. Deep down, she knew she was making a scene. Deep down, she realized she was still in shock from the storm and the tremendous damage it had left in its wake. Deep down, in the spot where she’d buried her most horrific memories, in a place she refused to visit, in the dark place she denied with each waking breath, her emotions boiled and threatened to spill forth like a volcano about to erupt. And the storm and Mick Love had both provoked that hidden spot, bringing some of her angst right to the surface. It didn’t help that she’d purposely gone out underneath the trees to find some semblance of peace, only to be broadsided by both a limb and a handsome stranger. It didn’t help that she hadn’t even had her coffee yet.

She let out a long-suffering sigh, then returned to English. “I would like...” She stopped, took time to relax, find control. “I would like for the past day or so to go away. I want my trees back, I want my garden intact again.”

She couldn’t stand the sympathy she saw in Mick Love’s deep blue eyes. So she ignored it. And the way the memory of his hands on her, his body falling across hers to protect her, kept coming back to bother her when she only wanted to take out her anger on someone. Anyone. Him.

“I can’t fix your garden until we get these trees out of here,”

Mick told her, his hands held out palm down, his head bent as if he were trying to deal with a child.

“I understand that,” Lorna said, trying to be reasonable. “But do you have to stomp and shove everything that is still intact. Look at that big truck over there. They pulled it right up on top of that camellia bush. That bush has been there for over a hundred years, Mr. Love.”

“And if you let me do my job, I guarantee it will be there for a hundred more years, at least,” he told her, all traces of sympathy gone now. “How can you expect us to clean this up, if we don’t get right in there on top of those trees and limbs?”

“It’s a reasonable request, Lorna,” Lacey said from behind her, a firm grip on her shoulder. “Come inside and get something to eat.”

“I’m not hungry,” Lorna huffed back. Her sister, always the mother hen. “But I could use a cup of coffee.”

“Then let’s find you one. And you, too, Mr. Love,” Lacey said, her voice so cultured and cool that Lorna wanted to throw up. Whereas Lorna pretended to be calm and in control, her sister’s serene countenance was no act. Lacey had it down pat. She never wavered. She never threw fits.

Lorna tossed her scorn back in Mick Love’s face, daring him to make nice. She had only just begun to make a scene.

He didn’t seem willing to take that dare. Eyeing Lorna with those arresting blue eyes, he said, “I don’t think—”

“I insist,” Lacey said, shooting Lorna a warning glare. “Come

onto the gallery so we can talk. I want you to meet our aunt Hilda, anyway. You can explain to all of us exactly how you plan on clearing away all this debris.”

“Would that calm her down?” he asked, glaring at Lorna.

Lorna didn't flinch, but that heated blue-velvet gaze did make a delicate shudder move down her spine.

“I think the coffee would help immensely,” Lacey stated, pinching Lorna to make her behave. “And some kind of explanation would certainly put all of us at ease. This has been so traumatic—we thought surely we were going to be blown into the swamp. I think we're all still in shock.”

“Obviously,” Mick replied, his gaze shifting from Lorna to Lacey.

Lorna watched as Mick listened to her sister. Oh, he'd probably fall for Lacey's charms, bait and hook. Lacey did have a way of nurturing even the most savage of beasts. And Lorna had a way of sending men running. No, she didn't send them running, she just sent them away. Period.

Oh, she didn't need this right now. The bed-and-breakfast mansion was booked solid for the spring season, and the Garden Restaurant located out back was always busy. But what choice did she have? They had to get things cleared up.

Feeling contrite, Lorna turned back to Mick. “I'm sorry. I'm at a loss as to what to do next, and I took it out on you. We do appreciate your help.”

Mick's expression seemed to relax then. He had a little-boy

face, tanned and energetic, playful and challenging. Mischievous, as Aunt Hilda would say.

And tempting. Very tempting. Like a rich pastry, or a fine piece of ripe forbidden fruit.

“Apology accepted,” he said. “And coffee would be most welcome.”

“Then come on inside,” Lacey told him, giving Lorna a nudge toward the gallery.

“Let me just talk to my men a minute,” Mick replied. “I’ll be right back.”

Lorna watched as Mick instructed one of the men, his hard hat in his hand. He had thick, curly ash-brown hair, sunny in spots and as rich as tree bark in others.

“Don’t break a stitch staring at him,” Lacey warned.

“Don’t pop a button telling me what to do,” Lorna retorted.

Then she gasped in surprise. The man Mick had been talking to headed to one of the big white equipment-laden trucks they’d pulled into the backyard—the truck parked over the camellia bush.

“He’s moving the truck,” Lacey whispered. “Lorna, do you see?”

“I have eyes,” Lorna stated, her hands on her hips, her brow lifted. Her heart picking up its tempo.

She looked from the groaning, grinding truck to Mick Love’s gentle, gracious eyes. And felt as if the storm was still raging around her.

She had eyes, all right. But she could see right through Mick Love's kind gesture. Kindness always came with a price, didn't it?

And Lorna had to wonder just what Mick Love expected in return for this kindness.

Chapter Two

He had expected the strong coffee. Louisiana was famous for that. And he had expected the house to be big, cool and gracious. It had once been a plantation house and now served as an historical bed-and-breakfast vacation spot. But what Mick hadn't expected was the fierce intelligence and remarkable strength of the three women sitting out on the gallery having breakfast with him.

Nor had he expected to be extremely smitten by the very one who'd chewed him out in two different languages not an hour ago.

But then, Mick was beginning to expect the unexpected at Bayou le Jardin.

“Have your men had enough to eat, Mr. Love?”

He glanced over at Hilda Dorsette. The breakfast of French toast, biscuits, ham, grits and eggs, and fresh fruit had been more than enough. “Yes, ma'am, I think they've eaten their fill. And we sure appreciate your giving us breakfast. We cranked up in the middle of the night to get here by daylight.”

“Well, we appreciate your willingness to help out,” the older woman replied as she watched several of the workers going about their jobs.

Mick gave a slight nod while keeping a watchful eye on the bucket trucks. As he watched the rookie named David spike a tree so he could climb it, he added, “Claude Juneau and I go way

back. I didn't mind helping him out one bit. Just sorry for the noise and clutter.”

“What noise? What clutter?” The teasing light in her eyes made Mick relax, even as another chain saw cranked up and went to work on cutting up a big limb.

Mick figured the noisy wenchers, stomp cutters and wood chippers would frazzle anybody's nerves. But Hilda Dorsette sat sipping her coffee as if she had heavy equipment in her fragile garden every day of the week.

Mick liked Aunt Hilda. She was plumb, petite and no-nonsense. And she was the mayor of the nearby town of Jardin—another unexpected revelation. Dressed in a bright salmon-colored casual top and a sturdy khaki flared skirt, she looked ready to take on the day. With her coiffured silver-gray hair and bright blue eyes, she was a charmer. And shrewd, too.

“I'm glad you took the time to explain the work you're doing,” she told him. “I've heard of tree services and tree surgeons, of course. We've had a local tree expert watching over our great oaks for years now. But I never knew utility companies rely on companies such as yours to help them out of tight spots.”

With that statement, she finished the last of her coffee, then set the delicate china cup down on its matching saucer. “Since we seem to be in your capable hands, I'm going to leave the girls in charge while I let Tobbie drive me into the village to see what else needs to be done there. I'm sure the Mayor's Office will be hopping with activity again this morning, and my

assistant Kathryn is already there waiting on me. We have to coordinate the Red Cross efforts and make sure everyone is fed and sheltered. So many people lost everything.” She shook her head, then rose from the white wrought-iron chair. “I am so very thankful that Bayou le Jardin only lost trees and some of the storage buildings. It could have been much, much worse.”

Mick got up as she did, helping her with her chair. “I understand, Miz Dorsette. You’ve got your work cut out for you.”

“And so do you, son.” She glanced at Lorna when she said this, then turned to give Mick a knowing look.

He didn’t miss the implications. Hilda Dorsette figured he’d get the job done, if he could just convince her niece to stay out of the way.

He sat back down, hoping to do just that. Glancing from Lacey to Lorna, he said, “So, do you two ladies have any more questions or concerns?”

Lacey smiled over at him. “I don’t. I’m sure you know what you’re doing. I think the best thing we can do is leave you to your work.”

She got up, too, and again Mick did the gentlemanly thing by helping her with her chair. Lacey seemed a tad more centered and serene than her younger sister. Her smile was politeness itself.

“I have to walk down to the shop and make sure what little damage we received falls under the insurance policy.”

“What kind of shop do you run?” Mick asked, once again

amazed at the Dorsette women. Except for Lorna. He wasn't sure what she did around here, except pray and tell people off in French.

"Antiques," Lacey explained. "The Antique Garden, to be exact. You passed it when you came in through the gate. It used to be the overseer's cottage. We get a lot of business during the tourist season."

"I don't know a thing about antiques," Mick said. "I move around way too much to set up housekeeping."

He didn't miss the way Lorna's eyebrows lifted, or the little smirk of disdain on her pert face. He guessed someone as countrified and dour as Miss Lorna Dorsette didn't cotton to a traveling man too much.

"That's a shame," Lacey replied, her skirts swishing as she went about cleaning the table. "I love old things. They keep me rooted and remind me of where I came from."

Mick didn't need anything around to remind him of where he'd come from. That's why he kept on moving. But these lovely ladies didn't need to hear that particular revelation. He sat silent, well aware that he should just get back to work and forget about trying to impress the Dorsette sisters.

Lacey bid them good morning, and that left...Lorna.

He didn't have to look at her to know she was impatiently tapping a foot underneath the round wrought-iron table. Too much caffeine, he reasoned. And he couldn't resist the grin or the sideways look. "Uh...and what do you do? How do you stay

occupied?”

Lorna tossed her long flaming hair over her shoulder, still staring daggers after her ethereal sister. “Oh, not much,” she stated as she waved a hand in the air. “I guess you could say I’m the chief cook and bottle washer.”

Another surprise. “But I thought Rosie Lee was the cook. And a mighty fine one, at that.”

Mick had first met the robust Cajun woman when the trucks had rolled up over two hours ago. Apparently, she and her equally robust husband, Tobbie, helped out around the place. While Rosie Lee had introduced Mick to Emily, their teenage daughter and Tobias, or Little Tobbie, the youngest of the six Babineaux children, Big Tobbie immediately began assisting Mick’s crew in setting up. Then Rosie Lee and Emily had given everyone coffee to get them started, while Little Tobbie had badgered Mick with questions about all the big equipment.

“What’s that do?” the black-haired eight-year-old had asked, pointing with a jelly-covered finger to one of the bucket trucks.

“That, my friend, lifts my men up high, so they can get to the trees,” Mick had explained.

“Can I have a ride?”

“Hush up,” Rosie Lee had told her youngest son. “That little imp will drive you crazy, Mr. Love.”

Rosie Lee had jet-black hair which she wore in a long braid down her back, and a jolly personality, which caused her to chuckle over her words. At least she was cheerful and down-to-

earth. Rosie Lee had given him extra French toast loaded with fresh strawberries. They had bonded instantly.

But Lorna now only gave him a sweet smile that clearly told him he was way out of his league. “Rosie Lee works for me. And she is a very good cook. She and Tobbie, and their entire family for that matter, have been working for us for more than twenty years now. But I do most of the cooking for our guests, and I run the restaurant out back. It was once the carriage house and stables.” She stopped, took a sip of coffee. “We had to shut it down, though. The storm damaged part of the roof, and we’ve got a major leak in one of the dining rooms.”

Mick turned to squint into the trees. “Just how many places of business do y’all have around here?”

She actually almost smiled. “The house, the restaurant and the antique shop. Oh, and our brother Lucas has his own business on the side.”

“What side would that be?”

She shrugged, causing her hair to move like a golden waterfall at sunset back around her shoulders. “You never know with Lucas. He does a little trapping here, a little singing and saxophone playing there, and a little crop dusting whenever someone calls him, but mostly, he does whatever he pleases, whenever the mood strikes him.”

“A trapping, singing, crop-dusting Cajun?” Mick had to laugh. “I’m getting a good picture of your family, Lorna. You pray and stomp. Lacey smiles and flutters. And you just explained Lucas

—he likes to play. And I guess Aunt Hilda is the sensible glue that holds all of you together, huh?”

He'd been teasing, but the serious look in her eyes stopped the joke. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” she replied, shaking her head. “You hit the nail right on the head, especially about Lacey and Lucas, and even me, I guess—although I don't always stomp around. Aunt Hilda is the backbone of this family, this entire town. You see, we've lived with her since we were children. After...after our parents died, she took us in.”

Mick wasn't grinning anymore. “That's tough, about your parents. I didn't mean to make fun—”

Lorna held up a dainty hand. “It's all right, really.”

But he could see that darkness in her eyes, a darkness that took them from bright green to a deep rich shade of sad. And he could also see shards of fear and doubt centered there, too, as if it wasn't really all right at all.

Wanting to say something to replace the foot he'd just extracted from his big mouth, Mick said, “Well, Hilda Dorsette seems like a good woman. And this is certainly a beautiful place.”

“Yes, to both,” Lorna replied, drumming her fingers on the table again. “Which is why I overreacted earlier. I just hate to see any part of Bayou le Jardin destroyed, and I guess I felt helpless. So I took it all out on you and your men. But, hey, we can't change an act of God, can we.”

“No, Mother Nature doesn't discriminate.”

“And God always has His reasons, I suppose. Aunt Hilda says we should never question God.”

Mick watched as she jumped up—didn’t even give him a chance to help her out of her chair. Did she resent God, then, for taking her parents? No, she’d said she prayed to Him. But... maybe even though she believed in God, she still had some harsh thoughts holed up in that pretty head of hers. And since she couldn’t take everything out on God, Mick Love would probably come in handy.

He was getting the picture, all right.

And he’d have to tread lightly in order to avoid this cute little woman’s wrath. Or he’d have to flirt with her to take her mind off her troubles.

Either way, his time at Bayou le Jardin surely wouldn’t be boring. Not one little bit.

“We’ve still got a little bit of cleaning up to do in the rear gardens,” Mick told Lorna hours later, as they stood beneath the remaining live oaks in the backyard. “Then tomorrow we can start on that big one by the back gallery. I’m afraid there’s not much to do for that one but cut it down and break up as much of that massive stump as possible. Even your expert landscaper Mr. Hayes agrees with me there.”

Lorna placed her hands on her hips, then looked over at the tree that had clipped part of the roof during the storm. The tree looked as if someone had taken its trunk and twisted it around until it had reached the breaking point. “Yes, I suppose if you did

try to salvage what's left, it would only be misshapen and mainly a stump with twigs sprouting from it." She shook her head. "That tree has been there for centuries."

"I know," Mick said, taking her by the arm to guide her around broken limbs and torn roof tiles. "I've always loved trees."

Lorna glanced over at him. He was filthy dirty from stomping around in mud and bushes all day, but he still had an air of authority about him that dirt and sweat couldn't mask. He'd worked side by side with the ten or so men on his crew, issuing orders in a clear, precise way without ever raising his voice or exerting power. She certainly couldn't fault him—he'd done a good job of clearing up the debris.

But he sure could use a shower.

Glad she'd had one herself and even more glad she'd changed into a flowing denim skirt and printed cotton scoop-neck T-shirt, Lorna told herself to stop being silly. It had been a very long time since she'd taken time to dress for a man. She wasn't about to start now. But she had washed her hair, just in case.

Just in case of what?

Wanting to get her mind off Mick Love and back on business, she asked, "Is that why you became a forester, because you like trees?"

Mick shook the dust and dirt out of his tousled hair, then smiled over at her. "Yeah, I guess so. I grew up in rural Mississippi—nothing but trees and kudzu. I used to climb way up high in this great big live oak out in the woods behind our

house and pretend I was Tarzan.”

Lorna laughed out loud. “Did you swing through the kudzu vines and yell like Tarzan?”

He actually blushed, just a faint tinge of pink against tanned skin and dirt smudges. “Yeah, and I beat my chest, too.” Then he demonstrated, his fist hitting his broad chest as he made a strange and rather loud call.

“Hey, boss, stop trying to impress that pretty woman and tell us it’s time to call it a day, please.”

Mick and Lorna turned to find Josh Simmons, Mick’s assistant and crew foreman, laughing at them from the corner of the house.

Josh stepped forward, his hard hat in his hands, a big grin on his chocolate-colored face. “Miz Dorsette, that’s the only way he knows how to attract females.”

Mick groaned. “Yeah, and sometimes it only brings out the wrong kind.”

Lorna could understand that. Even pretending to be a savage, Mick Love made her shudder and wonder. He was definitely all male, and every bit as tempting as any Tarzan she’d ever seen at the movies. And he was as tanned and muscular as any outdoorsman she’d ever been around.

Stop it, Lorna, she told herself. Then to bring her simmering heart back under control, she asked, “Where are you and your crew staying?”

Mick looked surprised. “Hadn’t really thought about that. Is there a hotel around here?”

Lorna scoffed, then waved a hand. “We are a bed-and-breakfast, Mick. Why don’t you stay here?” And wondered immediately why she’d just invited the man to stay at her home.

“But that would be way too much trouble,” Mick replied, his blue eyes skimming over her face, her hair. “I don’t want to be a bother.”

“Nonsense,” Lorna exclaimed. “Most of our guests have checked out because of the storm, anyway.” Trying to hide the fact that his eyes moving over her made her feel like a delicate flower lifting to find the sun, she turned to Josh, instead. “We have several guest cottages around the bend in the lane. The storm missed them—just some minor repairs. They sleep six to a cottage, so you and your men can take the first two. They’re clean and waiting, and they have bathrooms and everything you need to be comfortable. Breakfast is at the main house, and the restaurant should be open again in a day or so. We’ll furnish all of your other meals there, free of charge. And if we can’t open up again, don’t worry. Rosie Lee and I will see to it that you’re fed properly.”

“We couldn’t—”

“Mick, you drove for hours to come here and help us—I insist.”

They stood there, staring at each other. Lorna knew she’d just issued more than an invitation for a place to stay. And so did Mick Love. At least, the expectant look in his eyes gave her that impression.

“Well, what’s it gonna be, boss?” Josh said, a questioning gaze widening his face. “These fellows are dirty and hungry and about to fall asleep in their boots.”

Mick looked back at the trucks, where the men sat gathered and waiting for his next order. Then he turned back to Lorna. “Are you sure?”

“Very sure,” she told him, wishing that were true. Having Mick Love underfoot day and night meant having a big complication in her life. And she didn’t need any complications right now. As far as men were concerned, anyway. She’d had enough of those to last a lifetime. But then, she couldn’t send the man away. Not after the hard work he’d put in cleaning up the gardens. And there was still lots of work ahead.

“It just makes sense,” she said aloud, but more to convince herself than Mick. “How long do you think you’ll be here?”

Mick wrinkled his nose, which made him only look more adorable. “At least a couple of days, maybe all week.”

“Then it’s settled. I’ll have Rosie Lee get the keys and some fresh towels, and Tobbie can show you to the cottages.”

“Okay,” Mick said. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. We owe you our own thanks.”

After finding Rosie Lee and telling her what needed to be done, Lorna watched as Mick and his men followed Tobbie to the cottages. She could handle this. She could handle having him around for a couple of days. Soon, this mess would be cleaned up, and he’d be gone, and life would return to normal.

Then Lucas came strolling up, a lopsided grin on his handsome face. “Chère, you look tired. Long day?”

Lorna nodded her head, then frowned up at him. “Yes, long day. And where have you been?”

Her brother shrugged, tipped his black curly haired head. “Never you mind. I had things to see about.”

Lorna knew she wouldn't get anything more from Lucas. He was either playful or moody, depending on which way the tide was flowing.

She hurried ahead of him. “I want to survey the damage once more before dusk. Since you didn't take the time this morning to see for yourself, you can come with me or not. It doesn't matter to me.”

“Little sister isn't pleased with Lucas,” he said, his long fingers, touching her on her chin, trying to tickle a smile out of her.

Lorna refused to give in to her brother's charms. She was furious with him for staying away all day. Just like Lucas to slink off and hide from his responsibilities. Or maybe he just couldn't face the natural disaster that had almost destroyed his beloved Bayou le Jardin. He'd been up before any of the rest of them, and gone by sunrise.

Lucas was always full of surprises, so she wouldn't put it past him to have been off helping someone else get through the devastation of the storm, rather than face his own close brush with mortality. Lucas laughed at death, had stood out on the

gallery in the wee hours, daring the storm to pass over Bayou le Jardin. And had probably been just as scared and worried as any of them. But he'd never come out and admit that, of course.

Well, this storm had rattled all of them. Lorna offered a prayer for peace and calm. She just wanted things fixed and back to normal. After everything she'd been through leading up to her return to Bayou le Jardin, she now liked "normal."

But then Lucas grabbed her by the hand, his next words really taking her by surprise. "Oh, by the way, I just ran into Mick Love. Seems like a nice enough fellow. I invited him up to the house for supper."

And that's when Lorna Dorsette realized her life might never return to normal again.

Chapter Three

“I can’t believe Lucas asked the man up here for supper. I was fully prepared to send something down to Mick and the rest of his crew.”

Lorna flounced around in the big kitchen, worrying over the thick, dark shrimp-and-sausage gumbo she and Rosie Lee had been preparing all afternoon. After stirring the gumbo yet again, she opened the door of one of the two industrial-sized ovens to make sure her French bread was browning to perfection.

“Will you relax,” Lacey told her from her spot across the kitchen. “Lucas probably heard about the ruckus between Mr. Love and you this morning, that’s all. Knowing Lucas, he deliberately invited Mick here just to get on your nerves.”

Lorna whirled to glare at her sister. Why did Lacey always look so pulled together, when Lorna felt like a limp, overcooked noodle? In spite of the cool night, the spring humidity and the heat from the ovens was making her sweat like a sugar-cane farmer, while it only made her older sister glisten like a lady.

Blowing hair off her face, she said, “Well, you’re all getting on my nerves. You with your smirks and teasing remarks, Lucas with his shenanigans—and now I’ve got to sit through supper with Mick Love hovering around. I just want to curl up with a good book and then sleep for twelve hours, but I’ve got the restaurant

repairs to worry about and a million other things to keep me awake.” Never mind Mick Love, she thought to herself.

Lacey finished putting ice in the tall goblets Rosie Lee had lined up on a serving cart, then turned to her sister. “Well, you can prove Lucas wrong, you know. He just likes to shake things up, then sit back and watch the fireworks. So, don’t give him anything to watch.”

Lorna lifted her chin a notch. “You might be right there. If I act like a perfect lady, using the impeccable manners Aunt Hilda instilled in all of us, then Lucas will be sorely disappointed and Mick Love will be put in his place.”

“And just what is his place?” Lacey said, lifting her perfectly arched brows. “I think Lucas is right, if he did figure this out. I think Mick Love gets to you.”

“Don’t be a dolt,” Lorna retorted. “I simply meant that Mick Love is here to do a job, and that should be that.”

“You’d think.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“If the man has no effect on you, why are you so nervous? You’re jumping around like a barn cat.”

“I’m perfectly fine,” Lorna retorted again. “And if everyone around here would just mind their own business—”

“Have we ever?” Lacey shot her a tranquil smile, then took the tea tray. Pushing through the swinging door from the kitchen to the formal dining room, she called over her shoulder. “Better take a deep breath, sister. Mr. Love just walked in the back door.”

“Easy for you to say,” Lorna mumbled, after her sister was well out of earshot. “Nothing ever ruffles your feathers. Smooth as glass, calm as a backwater bayou. That’s our Lacey.”

She’d often wondered how her sister got away with it. Lacey held it all together, no matter what. She was the oldest, had witnessed the death of their parents. Lacey had saved Lucas and Lorna from a similar fate by hiding them away, but none of them ever talked about that. Ever.

Especially Lacey. She kept it all inside, hidden beneath that calm countenance. And she’d done the same thing when she’d become a widow at an early age, and through all the other tragedies in her life since. She’d even remained calm during the thrashing of the storm, never once moaning or whining or worrying.

Lacey had herded the few terrified guests—an older couple staying in the downstairs blue bedroom and a set of newlyweds staying in the honeymoon suite on the second floor—down into the kitchen root cellar along with the family, soothing them with soft words all the while, telling them not to worry.

Lorna had done enough of that for all of them, she supposed. But she hadn’t whined aloud. She’d pleaded and prayed with God to spare her home and guests, to spare her town, from any death or destruction brought on by the wailing tornado bearing down on them.

Even now, she could hear the wind moaning, grinding around the house.... Wind that only reminded her of that other night so

long ago.

“Hey, need any help here?”

Lorna pivoted so fast, she knocked a wooden spoon off the counter. She turned to find Mick standing there in clean jeans and a faded red polo shirt, a lopsided smile on his interesting, little-boy face.

He pushed still-wet hair off his forehead. “Guess I shoulda knocked.”

Lorna held up a hand, willing it not to shake. “It’s okay. You just startled me. I was thinking about the storm and remembering —”

He was across the spacious room in three long strides. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Anger at her brother for putting her in the position of polite hostess, and a need to find control, brought Lorna out of her stupor. “I’m fine. It was just...so scary. I was concerned for our guests, of course. I’m not really afraid of the weather—they say the weather in Louisiana changes every thirty minutes and that does hold some truth—but this storm was different. It was so powerful, so all-consuming. And I just keep remembering—”

She just kept remembering another night, another dark, storm-tossed night long ago. A night she had buried in that secret place in her mind and soul. Was she confusing the two?

“I just can’t get it out of my mind,” she said, completely unaware that she’d spoken.

Until Mick took her trembling hand in his. “You survived

a major catastrophe, Lorna. It's understandable that you might have some sort of post-traumatic reaction."

She had to laugh at that. Placing a hand over her mouth, she tried to stifle the giggles. Sometimes, she thought her whole life since her parents' death had been one big post-traumatic reaction.

Mick looked down at her as if she'd lost her senses. And she supposed she did look quite mad laughing at his very serious observation. "I'm sorry," she said, sobering and becoming quiet. And becoming so very aware of the man standing in front of her. He sure cleaned up nicely. And smelled like a fresh forest after a gentle rain.

To make amends for acting like an idiot, she said, "It's just been a rather long day, and I'm exhausted. We've had to cancel guest reservations for the weekend and send others away. None of us has had any rest since the storm hit, and it's only going to continue until we get this place cleaned up and open to the public again."

He guided her to a nearby high-backed chair, gently pushing her down on the thickly hewn straw bottom. "And it's understandable if you don't feel up to having company for dinner."

He rose to leave, but Lorna's hand on his arm stopped him. "No, stay." Then she jumped up, rushing past him to check on the bread. "I mean, we've set a place for you and Aunt Hilda is looking forward to talking with you. You can't leave now."

He leaned on the long wooden counter in the middle of the

room, then looked at her in a way that left her senses reeling, in a way that made her think he could easily read her deepest secrets. Then he smiled again. “I guess that would be rude.”

“Yes, it would. Just ignore me. I’m all right, really.” Pushing at his arm, she said, “Why don’t you go into the front parlor with Aunt Hilda and Lacey. I think my brother Lucas is there, too. I’ll be out just as soon as I cut the bread.”

“And you’ll be okay?”

Lorna ignored the little spot in her heart that longed to shout for help, for someone to soothe all the pain and make her feel better. She didn’t need, didn’t want, pity or sympathy. And she couldn’t bring herself to ask for comfort.

“I’m a big girl, Mick. I think I can manage through supper.” She pointed a finger toward the swinging door. “But if you could tell Rosie Lee I’m ready to serve now...”

“Sure,” Mick said, backing toward the door. “I saw her and Tobbie in the dining room. I’ll get her for you.”

“Thank you.” Lorna watched him leave, then turned to the stove, letting out a long breath that she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding.

She didn’t understand why being around Mick seemed to turn her into a bubbling, blathering mess. She’d been in charge of her senses early this morning, even when he’d landed smack on top of her. Even when he’d saved her from that tree limb.

Saved her.

Lorna saw her distorted reflection in one of the wide, paned

kitchen windows, and knew instantly what was the matter with her.

Mick had saved her life, or had, at least, thrown himself between her and danger. These strange, erratic stirrings deep inside her were only gut reactions to what he'd done. She felt gratitude toward him, and she didn't know how to express that gratitude.

"That's all it is," she told herself. "The man protected me from that giant oak limb." And I didn't even bother to thank him.

A voice rang as clear as a dinner bell inside her head. And maybe...Mick Love saved you from yourself.

It had been a long, long time since Lorna had allowed anyone else to be her protector. She'd never accepted that she needed rescuing, had never allowed anyone other than her immediate family close enough to see her fear. But because of what could have been a freak accident, because she'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time, Mick had gotten way too close.

Had he seen her fear? Was that why he seemed so solicitous of her? Was that why she felt so vulnerable around him?

"Leave it to me to do a foolish thing like stand underneath a broken limb." But then, she reminded herself, she always somehow managed to be in the wrong place when things turned from bad to worse.

Or maybe she'd been in the right place at the right time. Aunt Hilda always said God put people in certain circumstances to get them where they needed to be.

And Lorna had been in that place at that time, praying for something, someone to help her understand. She'd told Mick that God had answered her prayers by sending him. That much was the truth, at least. He'd come along exactly when she needed him.

That was a debt Lorna wasn't ready to accept or repay. Yet somehow, she knew she'd have to find a way to do just that.

Mick found Rosie Lee and Tobbie Babineaux busily setting up the dining room, little Tobias at their feet playing with a handheld computer game. Mick watched as the couple laughed and worked together, side by side. He envied their easy banter and loving closeness. They were married with six children, yet the radiant smiles on their faces showed how much they enjoyed being together.

"Hello," he said as he strolled toward them, then touched a hand to Little Tobbie's arm in greeting. "You folks need any help?"

"Mr. Love," Rosie Lee said, laughing so hard her whole belly shook, "you the guest. We the workers."

Mick shrugged and laughed right along with her. He liked her strong Cajun accent. "Sorry. I'm just used to earning my keep."

Tobias immediately jumped up. "I saw you up in a tree. Don't you get scared, being way up high like that?"

"Nope," Mick replied, leaning over to ruffle the boy's shining black hair. "I'm so used to it, I don't even think about it."

Tobias's black eyes burned with questions. "I can climb way up high, too. Maybe I can be a tree man one day."

His mother groaned, then turned to her son. “You stay out of Mr. Love’s way, you hear? Don’t go climbing any more trees, either. You almost got stuck the other day, remember?”

“I need me one of them buckets like Mr. Mick uses, I guess.” Tobias grinned, then scooted away before his mother could grab him.

“I’m going out back to play,” he called, already running out the open door.

“Don’t bother Mr. Love’s equipment,” his father warned.

Mick grinned, then turned to Tobbie. “I bet he’s a handful.”

“Yep. And his older brothers just make it worse by teaching him their bad ways, too. Our house is always full of fightin’ boys.”

“And a couple of quiet girls,” his wife said with a grin and a nod.

Mick glanced around the beautiful room. “Sure is quiet around here tonight.”

Tobbie winked at him. “All the other guests gone and checked out. Storm got to ’em. So we gonna treat you like royalty—you and your men, that is.”

“Nah, now,” Mick replied, holding up a hand. “I’m just a regular joe—no prince. But I have to admit, I could get used to this. This place is amazing.”

Just like the women who run it, he thought to himself. Especially the woman now alone in the kitchen. The woman who didn’t want him to see that she was still frightened as a result of the tornado.

But what else was scaring Lorna? He thought about asking Tobbie what had happened to Lorna's parents, but footsteps from the front of the house halted him.

"Hey, man, c'mon up here to the parlor," Lucas called from the wide central hallway, his cowboy boots clicking on the hardwood floors as he walked toward Mick.

"Coming," Mick said, lifting a hand to Rosie Lee and Tobbie. "Oh, Lorna's ready to serve now," he remembered to tell them.

Lucas had an accent similar to theirs, but a bit more cultured. Yet he seemed every bit as Cajun as the Babineaux, while his sisters seemed more refined and pure Southern. But then, this family was as mysterious and full of contrasts as the swamp down below the back gardens.

Maybe if he made small talk with her family, Mick would be able to get a handle on Lorna. He didn't yet understand why she brought out all his protective instincts, or why she fought so hard to hide behind that wall of control. He reckoned it had something to do with him falling headlong into her out there beneath the great oaks this morning.

Saving someone from near death did have a dramatic effect on a person. Didn't that mean he had to protect her for life now? Or was that the other way around? Did she now owe him something in return? That option was certainly worth exploring.

"How ya doing?" Lucas asked, as Mick approached him. "Want some mint iced tea or a cup of coffee? We've even got some kind of fancy mineral water—Lorna insists on keeping it

for our guests.”

“I’m fine,” Mick replied, his gaze sweeping across the winding marble staircase. “Hey, this house is unbelievable.”

“Nearly as old as the dirt it’s sitting upon,” Lucas replied, his grin showing a row of gleaming white teeth, his dark eyes shifting to a deep rich brown as the light hit them. “Been here for well over a hundred and fifty years, at least.” He shrugged. “My sisters are the experts on the history of this old house. Me, I prefer hanging out in the swamps where the real history is found.”

That statement intrigued Mick. “I bet you’ve seen some stuff out there.”

Lucas nodded, then, with a sweeping gesture, announced Mick to his aunt and sister. “Mr. Mick Love, ladies.” Then he turned back to Mick. “The swamp holds all of her secrets close, but I’ve seen a few of her treasures and a few of her dangers, yeah.”

Mick thought that best described Lucas’s sister, too. Lorna obviously held her secrets close. But Mick had seen something deep and dark and mysterious there in her green eyes. Something he wanted to explore and expose, bring out into the open. Which might prove to be dangerous, too. He worked too many long hours to even think about getting involved with a redheaded woman.

Glancing around the long parlor, he was once again assaulted by the opulence and old-world elegance of Bayou le Jardin. His gaze swept the fireplace, then settled on a small portrait of a

dark-haired man and a beautiful woman with strawberry-blond hair, centered over the mantel.

“Our parents,” Lucas told him in a low voice, his black eyes as unreadable as a moonless night. “They died when we were children.”

Mick wanted to ask Lucas what had happened, but on seeing the look on the other man’s face he decided that might not be such a good idea. Mick had lots of questions, for lots of reasons he couldn’t even begin to understand or explain.

Right now, though, he had to remember his manners and make polite conversation with the Dorsette bunch. And wonder all the while why he was so attracted to Lorna.

“That was one of the best meals I’ve had in a very long time,” Mick told Lorna later, as they all sat around the long mahogany dining table. “I don’t get much home cooking.”

“Oh, and why is that?” Aunt Hilda asked. She sat, stirring rich cream into her coffee, a bowl of bread pudding on her dessert plate. “And while we’re talking, where did you grow up? Who’s your family?”

Mick glanced around the table. Everything about Bayou le Jardin was elegant and cultured, down to the silverware and lace-edged linen napkins. And he was sure the lineage went back centuries, too. Aunt Hilda’s question was typical of blue-blooded rich people. They didn’t really care about you; they just wanted to make sure you came from good Southern stock. He didn’t begrudge her the question, but he did find it pointed and obvious,

and amusing. She wanted to know if she could trust him, count on him to do what was right.

Did he really want to tell these people that he'd grown up in a trailer park deep in the Mississippi Delta with an abusive father? Or should he just tell them that after his old man had drunk himself to death, his mother had changed from a weak, submissive wife into a strong, determined woman who wanted the best for her only son? Should he tell them she'd worked two jobs just to make sure Mick finished school and learned a trade? Or that she had died from a heart attack before she could enjoy his success? Should he tell them that he had no one to go home to, now that she was dead? And that the woman he'd planned on marrying had dumped him for someone else? That he'd left the Delta and had never looked back?

Mick looked at Lorna, saw the questioning lift of her arched brows, and knew he wasn't nearly good enough to be sitting at this table. So he simply said, "I was born and raised in Mississippi, and I still have a home there right outside of Vicksburg—that is, when I can ever get back to it."

"So you travel around a lot." This statement came from Lorna. She'd obviously already summed him up.

Mick glanced over at her without bothering to defend himself. She sat there, bathed in golden light from the multifaceted chandelier hanging over the table, her hands in her lap, her hair falling in ringlets of satin fire around her face and down her back. She was beautiful in a different kind of way. Not classic, but fiery

and defiant. Mick couldn't explain it, but he could certainly see that beauty. And feel it. It washed over him like a golden rain, leaving him unsteady and unsure.

Wanting to give her a good answer, he went for the truth this time. "Yeah, we stay on the road a lot. We travel all over the state, and on rare occasions, such as this, we travel out of state. Do a lot of work in Alabama and Georgia, too. I reckon you could say we go wherever the work takes us."

"You probably keep steady," Lucas said, before taking a long swig of his tea. "There's always trees around."

"If you have your way, that is," Lacey interjected. "Lucas is a naturalist—the protector of the bayou." She grinned, but Mick didn't miss the pride in her eyes.

"Among my many other talents," Lucas said, his dark eyes twinkling with merriment.

"Yes, and if we could just pinpoint what exactly you are good at and make you stick with it, we might all be able to retire with a nice nest egg," Lorna stated, her attention now on her brother.

Lucas pumped up his chest. "Now, suga', you know I'm good at whatever I set my mind to."

His sisters and aunt all laughed, then shook their heads. Soon, they were all talking at once, each giving pointed suggestions as to what Lucas needed to do with his sorry life.

Mick was just glad the conversation had switched away from him. Even if Lorna's gaze did drift back to him now and again.

Then Lucas made an intriguing remark. "Well, sister, you're

a fine one to ask Mr. Love about traveling.” He grinned toward Mick. “Lorna took off a few years back, traveled all over the world, settled in Paris for a while.”

“I went to cooking school,” Lorna snapped as she stared hard at her brother.

“And now she runs a French restaurant out back and cooks good old Cajun, Creole and American food for the houseguests,” Lacey explained with pride.

“She’s a bona fide chef,” Lucas replied with a wink.

Mick raised his tea goblet toward her in a salute. So she wasn’t just a country bumpkin, all tucked away here on the bayou. He wondered why he’d even thought that. Lorna was as sophisticated as any French woman, and she could definitely speak the language—very colorfully. Lifting his glass high, he said, “And I thought all the great chefs were men.”

“No, men just like to believe that,” she replied, her expression smug.

Mick decided there was probably much more to her travels, but he didn’t press for the details. Yet.

When they’d finished their dessert, Lorna, Lacey and Lucas all helped with the dishes, while Aunt Hilda went up to bed on the third floor where their living quarters were located. Rosie Lee and Tobbie had eaten in the kitchen with Emily and Tobias. Emily also worked at Bayou le Jardin, but now they all chipped in to get the work done. Mick was amazed at the sense of family here, and the way the Dorsettes seemed to think of the Babineaux

family as part of their own, even down to Little Tobbie running and playing throughout the vast mansion.

He'd never had that. He'd always been an outsider.

And soon, he'd be gone from Bayou le Jardin. Gone from the mystery and secrets of the swamp. Gone from the scent of azalea blossoms and wisteria sprigs on the night wind. Gone from the green-velvet gaze of a red-haired woman with a heart full of fire and a soul full of secrets.

Mick liked traveling around, liked being on the road. Liked running, always running from his past. But tonight, tonight, he felt a stirring that was as unfamiliar to him as crystal goblets and crisp linen napkins, as unfamiliar to him as polished wood and freshly cut flowers.

For the first time since he'd left that trailer park, Mick Love wanted to stay right where he was. Just for a little while.

Just long enough to find out all the secrets Lorna Dorsette kept hidden so well behind all that feminine fire.

He waited until everyone else had bid him goodnight, then he turned to Lorna. They stood on the back gallery, where the moonlight played hide-and-seek with the Spanish moss in the great oaks, where the wisteria blossoms entwined around the stout gallery columns, showering them with delicate purple rain every time the wind lifted.

He didn't want to be away from her just yet.

"Show me the river," he said, reaching out a hand to her as he stepped out into the shadows of the damaged garden.

He watched as moonbeams hit her face, watched as tiny violet-colored wisteria flowers caught and held to her long hair. And again, he saw that distant, disturbing fear in her eyes.

But she took his hand and followed him.

Chapter Four

The big trees cast mushroom-shaped shadows in the moonlight. Lorna walked with Mick through the long front gardens, following the path she'd taken so many times over the years. The dirt and gravel lane was now littered with broken branches and split tree limbs. Thank goodness the storm hadn't taken any of the ancient oak trees completely down. With Mick's help, and their own landscaper, they should be able to reshape those that had been damaged.

Lorna shuddered in spite of the mild spring night. She should have gone in to get her flashlight. Or better yet, she should have stayed inside tidying up the kitchen, making sure everything was set for breakfast. But then, she reminded herself, all the guests had checked out due to the storm, and she was turning away any reservations until things were back in tiptop shape. It was going to be a long week.

"You okay?" Mick asked. His words echoed over the silent countryside.

Lorna wouldn't tell him that she never came out here at night. That she never walked around the grounds alone at night, or that she always, always carried her powerful flashlight, even when someone was with her.

She took a deep breath. "Fine. Just tired. We're almost there."

The river was across the narrow country road, behind a dirt-

and-grass levee that cows grazed on now and then. At this time of year, red clover bloomed profusely along the levee. Lorna could see the clover dancing in the moonlight. It looked like a flowing red scarf winding around the river.

Not wanting Mick to see her apprehension, she held tightly to his hand as he guided her over the cluttered pathway. She managed to let him go long enough to open the black wrought-iron gate that kept uninvited curiosity seekers away from the secluded mansion.

“Looks like the storm clouds are all gone,” Mick said, as their footfalls sounded on the paved road.

“Yes, but the levee will be muddy still. So watch your step.”

With a spurt of determination, Lorna pushed up the soft loam of the levee to distance herself from Mick, then stood on the crest to stare down at the black, swirling waters of the Mississippi River. “Maybe the spring rains will hold off for a while now. The river is just about overflowing as it is.”

Lorna had never realized how beautiful the river was at night. The soft gurgling sound of the tide sang a timeless song, while the buzz of mosquitoes hummed in perfect harmony. She could see fireflies lifting all around them, their flickering iridescent greenish glows like tiny lanterns in the dark.

Which only reminded her that she did not have her own lantern. But she held the panic at bay, determined not to show Mick her humiliating weakness.

Instead, she watched gladly as he trudged up the small incline,

right behind her. He stood there a minute with his hands on his hips, then lifted his head to the sky. His silhouette was highlighted by grayish-blue moonlight, casting him in a dreamlike state.

Maybe she was dreaming. She still couldn't understand why she'd taken Mick's hand and allowed him to guide her out into the darkness. She'd only met this man early this morning, under the strangest circumstances, and now she'd walked through the moonlight with him. It had been a while since she'd been alone with a man. And she'd never brought anyone other than family out here to the river—and even then only in broad daylight. Usually their guests wandered around on their own, leaving Lorna to do her work.

What's wrong with me? she wondered now as she watched Mick through the veil of moonlight and shadows.

Her emotions were raw from the storm, her nerves were like stretched, tangled wires curling tightly through her body, and yet, for some obscure reason, she almost felt safe with Mick Love.

Even in the dark.

“Listen to the water,” he said, his head down. “All that undercurrent, all that power. I've always been fascinated by nature.”

“Is that why you decided to become a tree expert?”

“Probably. As I told you earlier, I loved getting lost in the woods when I was a child. There wasn't much else to do around the house, so I'd take off for hours on end, just roaming around,

exploring, playing make-believe.”

Lorna could understand that. “When we first came here, I did the same thing. Lacey and I would wander around the house, pretending we were princesses lost in a castle. When I saw this house and the land surrounding it, I thought I’d found a secret garden. It looked like something out of a fairy tale.”

Mick turned then, to look back at the big house looming in the distance. “It’s a beautiful spot.”

“A safe haven,” she replied without thinking.

The image of the great house glowing with yellow lights beckoned her, reminding her that she was safe here. It was an image that caused motorists to slow down and stop, inspired artists to keep painting, enticed photographers to take one more picture. From the narrow road, the house came into view around a winding curve, always catching admirers by surprise.

Lorna still slowed down herself to glance over at the panoramic view of the square, pink-walled house with the massive white columns sitting back behind the oak-lined driveway. And it still took her breath away.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.