



## *Chapter Three*

Luke walked inside, tossed his hat onto the hall tree then wiped the perspiration from his brow. They needed rain for the recently planted cotton, and he needed a cool glass of water straight from the well. This particular Tuesday was much too warm for late April.

“My apologies to you both.” A strange man’s voice drifted from the parlor. “The letter I sent before we departed must not have arrived.”

“Of course, she’s welcome to stay, but I wish someone had given us notice first.” Luke couldn’t mistake his father’s irritated tone.

Father wasn’t in good enough health to be perplexed by anyone or anything. Luke marched into the parlor. He halted just inside the doorway. A well-dressed older man sat on the gold chair closest to the couch where his mother sat. A young woman clothed in black perched next to Mother.

“Oh, Luke.” Mother smiled through tears as she gestured toward the stranger sitting beside her. “This young lady is your cousin, Angelique.”

“My cousin?” He’d never heard of any relative by such a

name. Who were these people who agitated his father and made his mother cry?

“Yes, the only child of my dear sister, Elaine. She’s come to us from New Orleans, along with the DuBois family attorney, Mr. Chirac.” Mother’s face glowed as she stared at Angelique.

“I see.” But he didn’t see. How could Mother know who these strangers really were? What proof had they offered to their identity? He’d discover the answers soon. Before leaving college, he’d read enough law to know he needed to proceed carefully.

Mother scowled at him as if she’d guessed his thoughts.

“Forgive my poor manners. I wasn’t expecting a visit from my long-lost cousin. Welcome to Oakridge.” Luke forced a smile as he made a slight bow toward Angelique, or whoever she was. No one on either side of their family had flaming red hair like hers.

“Thank you.” Angelique peered up at him with brown eyes almost identical to his mother’s. “I’ve longed to meet my Tennessee family since I discovered you.”

“I wish I’d known about you sooner.” Mother’s voice quivered. She dabbed at her misty eyes with her handkerchief. “Your father wrote me of my sister’s death during childbirth but never mentioned you survived.”

Luke’s “cousin” bit her trembling lip. Was her emotion real or pretend?

The clock on the fireplace mantel struck three times. Mother jumped. “Oh, dear. Where are my manners? I’m sure both of you would like to rest and change into clothes not choked with road dust. Angelique, dear, I’ll show you upstairs, then send our daughters’ former maid up to help you. You’re welcome to choose either of our daughters’ old rooms.”

Mother rose to usher Angelique into the hall. She gaped at the attorney as if she’d forgotten him. “Mr. Chirac, I assume

you'll spend the night before returning to New Orleans. I'd be happy to show you to a room."

"Yes, thank you, *Madame* Williams." Mr. Chirac pulled his cane toward him and leaned on the ornate gold handle to rise from his chair.

Mother took Angelique's arm and guided her into the hall, leaving Mr. Chirac to follow behind.

"Do you need to rest?" Luke studied his father's pale features. He looked more like sixty instead of almost fifty. If this incident caused Father's heart more problems, Luke would see this "cousin" found another place to stay. Soon.

"I assume you'd like an explanation for all of this first." Father's sky-blue eyes twinkled. "I well know that look of confusion you're wearing."

"Yes, sir." Luke took the chair closest to his father.

"I'm certain Angelique is your cousin." Father picked up a framed miniature and a packet of old letters from the end table next to his chair.

Luke reached to take the painting his father held out. He didn't need to study the two smiling young women standing with their brothers. The identical full-size portrait of his mother and her siblings hung in the hall by the stairs.

"Angelique brought this and your mother's letters to Elaine with her. She discovered them after her father's death." Father thrust the yellowed pages toward Luke.

He recognized Mother's flowing handwriting as soon as he scanned the outside of the first folded letter. "Why is she here now?"

Father mopped his damp forehead with his handkerchief. "She literally has nowhere else to go. Quite unfortunate circumstances for a girl of almost eighteen."

"I'd like to know those circumstances before you decide for sure to allow her to stay." Hard-hearted or not, his parents'

well-being came first. Luke wished for even a slight breeze to ease the heat, but the lace window curtains hung limp and still.

A look of consternation washed over his father's face. "Must you always be the practical attorney?"

Yes, he'd very much like to be an attorney today—and the rest of his life. Luke shifted in his chair. But he couldn't voice such thoughts to the ailing father who had never understood his son's yearnings. "I'd feel better if I had the facts, please."

"Mr. Chirac spoke to me in my office out of the ladies' hearing while your mother got to know Angelique."

He waited for his father to settle against the back of his chair and get comfortable. Father didn't look up to this long talk, no matter how necessary it was.

"Your cousin's father was killed by a jealous husband in a scandalous duel. The attorney says Jacques so mismanaged the DuBois fortune that Angelique is almost penniless. As the only legitimate heir, she'll barely have enough for a small dowry and a meager allowance if Mr. Chirac can manage to sell the family home and a few other assets for enough to settle debts."

"Legitimate heir? What do you mean?" Luke cringed at the possibility of other unknown people of questionable character showing up at their door, claiming who knew what, especially if any money might be left over after the debts were paid.

Father pointed a thin finger at him. "Exactly what you think I mean. Jacques didn't marry again after Elaine's death, but he never lacked for female companionship."

"Oh."

"Yes. *Oh*. Mr. Chirac has been the DuBois family attorney since Jacques was a boy. He brought Angelique here to give her a new start away from the scandal her father created in New Orleans."

"So, you and Mother are willing to take in Angelique."

“Of course.”

“But what of your fragile health?” Luke leaned toward his father and peered into his eyes.

Father worked to take a deep breath. “The girl has no one and nowhere else to turn.”

“A seventeen-year-old is no girl. Have you forgotten how chaotic our house could be when Rachel and Beth were still home? How frenzied our lives were with Beth’s wedding only a little over a year ago?”

“Luke Andrew, what has happened to your heart?” Father shook his gray head.

*Everything.* God, who was supposed to be love, hadn’t answered a single prayer for Luke in months. Because of love for his parents, he’d given up his dream of being an attorney and returned home from college to run the family’s plantation he little cared about. The woman he’d loved had spurned him and chosen a common laborer instead. The cost of love had destroyed his heart.

“My heart is fine. I only want to be sure you and Mother are able to manage another young lady coming of age.”

Father’s wry smile lit up his haggard face. “We learned from your sisters and should do even better this time.”

Luke shrugged. His parents could do as they pleased in their own home.

“Since I’ve satisfied your curiosity, I’ll go upstairs and try to nap in this heat.”

“And I should get out of these dusty clothes.” Luke matched Father’s slow pace as he walked upstairs with him.

He took his time changing into clean clothes then enjoyed the quiet and solitude while everyone else rested. After living with two sisters, such tranquil times would be rare unless Angelique was more reserved than any seventeen-year-old female he’d ever met. He could almost hear and see the endless

parade of people coming to their house once his cousin was no longer in mourning. So much for avoiding social functions when his parents could be the hosts sooner than he'd like.

Rather than dwell on things he couldn't wish away, Luke spent the rest of the afternoon in the library reading a law book his father wouldn't understand. He had no idea when he'd have another quiet afternoon to himself. Voices in the hallway urged him to slide open the pocket door.

His parents and Mr. Chirac walked toward the dining room. Father appeared to be rested and refreshed. How long would that last with his cousin in the house now?

Mother smiled. "I told Angelique we eat at five. She should be down soon."

Father took Mother's elbow and escorted her to her chair. The clock in the parlor struck five as Luke and Mr. Chirac seated themselves. The servants finished bringing in the food and setting the dishes on the sideboard.

"We should wait for Angelique." Mother unfolded her napkin and placed it in her lap. Her thin smile didn't completely disguise the agitation Luke could see in her eyes. Angelique had no idea how much his mother valued promptness. She'd soon learn to appease her aunt, if she valued any kind of peace.

"I do wish the weather wasn't so warm today." Mother ran her hand over her silverware as she glanced toward the dining room door.

Mr. Chirac smiled at her. "Anyone from New Orleans is accustomed to heat. Today is fine."

The day wouldn't be fine much longer if Angelique didn't make her appearance soon. Luke lost count of how many times Mother glanced at the door while trying to make polite conversation with their guest.

Footsteps sounded on the wood floor in the hall. Angelique

breezed into the dining room wearing a golden yellow dress bright enough to be mistaken for an entire forest of fall-colored leaves. Mother gasped and covered her open mouth. Father's face lost its color once again.

"Good evening." Angelique beamed as the butler seated her.

"Good evening." Luke returned her greeting since his parents were too stunned to speak.

"I detest a cold supper." Father bowed his head and said a short prayer of thanks for the food.

As soon as Father finished saying grace, Amos served the food the way he'd done most of Luke's life. His cousin wasted no time putting a fork full of carrots in her mouth.

"Are all your proper clothes dirty from your long trip, dear?" Mother's fork still lay next to her plate.

Angelique shook her head. "If you're referring to my black dresses, no, ma'am. I refuse to live a lie any longer."

"What do you mean?" Mother gripped her water goblet.

"My father had precious little time for me. I see no need to endure three more months pretending to mourn a man I barely knew—one who never cared for his only child."

Mother's eyes widened.

"I dislike hypocrites even more than cold food." Father smiled.

Angelique's grin revealed her dimples and emphasized her impish expression. "Then shall we plan some sort of party to introduce me to your neighbors? I haven't been to a dance in so long."

Luke took a bite of his ham and watched conflicting emotions play across Mother's face. No matter how much she despised Angelique's father, not observing an appropriate time of mourning was something his proper mother couldn't fathom.

“Well, there is the Parkers’ ball next week.” Mother’s disdain for Jacques must have won out over her need for propriety.

“How perfectly lovely.” Angelique attacked her food with a gusto unbecoming a young lady.

How perfectly awful. Luke couldn’t think of anywhere he’d rather not be more than the Parker home. He slathered a piece of bread with butter, then popped a piece in his mouth. The fluffy morsel tasted at least a month old.

“I’m sure your cousin will be happy to introduce you to the other young people there.” Mother grinned at him.

He gulped down his water to keep from choking on the bread. Angelique’s expressive brown eyes twinkled in his direction. Introducing this beautiful cousin might cause him more kinds of trouble than he cared to think about much less deal with.

He couldn’t think of a worse place to introduce her than at the Parkers’ ball.