

U N D E R
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C A J U N
M O O N

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CLARK**



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS

EUGENE, OREGON

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UNDER THE CAJUN MOON

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Clark, Mindy Starns.

Under the Cajun moon / Mindy Starns Clark.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-7369-2624-9 (pbk.)

1. Cooks—Fiction. 2. Fathers and daughters—Fiction. 3. Cookery, Cajun—Fiction. 4. Cajuns—Fiction. 5. Louisiana—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3603.L366U63 2009

813'.6—dc22

2009019246

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Printed in the United States of America

09 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 / DP-SK / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



ONE



Slowly, I opened my eyes. As I came more fully awake, I realized that the ringing was a telephone, and that the telephone was on a bedside table next to my head. Blinking, I looked around, trying to remember where I was.

Where was I?

The ringing persisted. I fumbled for the phone with one hand but the noise stopped before I could even lift the receiver. Licking dry, cracked lips, I let go of the phone and moved a hand to my forehead, feeling for a fever. My skin seemed cool, though I did have a splitting headache.

What was wrong with me?

More important, where was I and what was I doing here?

Carefully, I raised myself onto my elbows, my head throbbing with the effort. Looking around the dark room, it didn't seem familiar. To my right, judging by a thin rectangle of light, was a window covered by heavy drapes. Was I in a hospital? There were no machines running nearby, no tubes coming from my body. Looking down, I could see that I was fully dressed. At least I recognized my own Theory suit, though the cream linen looked wrinkled in the dimness. Somehow, I had a feeling that I wasn't in a hospital but rather a hotel.

Light. I needed light to figure this out. Ignoring the thousand pounds of mush inside my head, I sat all the way up. Making sure of my balance, I stood and stepped to the shades, pulling them open.

“Agh!” I cried, covering my eyes with a hand. The glare was blinding.

Fumbling frantically, I felt my way back to the bed and sat on the edge, my heart pounding. In all of my thirty-two years, I had never had anything like this happen to me, had never once woken up in a strange place without knowing how I had gotten there. After a few seconds I lowered the hand from my eyes and gingerly opened them again, thinking that if this was a hangover, I must have had one doozy of a night. Except that I didn’t get hangovers. I rarely even drank.

Looking around, I felt sure I was in a hotel room, though it wasn’t one I recognized. The decor was bland, if a little worn, and though there were no suitcases on the floor, my purse was sitting on the dresser. Standing again, I moved to it and looked inside, but nothing seemed amiss. My wallet was there, and a quick count of the cash it held assured me that no money was missing. Glancing around for some clue as to where I was, I spotted a small vinyl notebook imprinted with a fancy logo and the words “Maison Chartres.”

My own image in the mirror above the dresser caught my eye, and I paused to study it. I looked like me—or at least a disheveled, exhausted version of me. My long ash-blond hair was a tangled mess, my blue eyes bloodshot and tired.

Where was I and how had I gotten here?

Moving again toward the window, I placed my hands on the glass and looked out. I was on the first floor, and judging by the unique architecture outside, I was in New Orleans, the city of my youth. I wasn’t familiar with this particular hotel, but given the name it was probably on Chartres Street, in the French Quarter.

The French Quarter.

Vague memories of yesterday began edging their way into my brain. My mother’s phone call. My father’s injury. My frantic flight from Chicago to New Orleans.

From the airport, at my mother’s insistence, I had driven to our family

restaurant in the French Quarter to meet with my parents' lawyer and handle some paperwork before going to the hospital to see my father. I remembered that much.

Suddenly, the phone on the bedside table began to ring again. This time, I leaped toward it and snatched it up quickly.

"Hello?"

"Yes, hello. This is the front desk," a woman's voice said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I thought I should tell you that the police are on their way to your room. They've been very persistent. Apparently, someone else in the hotel called in a complaint about noise."

"Noise? What noise?" The only noise I had heard was the ringing of the phone. I wanted to ask if the woman knew how I had gotten here, but before I could even form a coherent question in my mind, there was a pounding at the door. I quickly concluded the call and made my way toward the sound.

Rounding the corner of what I assumed was a bathroom, I realized that this wasn't just a single hotel room but, in fact, a suite. The front room was as dark as the bedroom had been, and I stumbled through it to get to the door. Once there, I swung it open, revealing two policemen standing in a sunny courtyard. Just the sight of their crisp uniforms and no-nonsense expressions flooded my soul with relief. Maybe they could help me figure out where I was and what was going on.

"Sorry to disturb you, ma'am. Is everything all right?"

I blinked, wondering where to start.

"Ma'am? Have you been a victim of domestic violence? 'Cause we can take you out of here right now and bring you somewhere safe."

"Domestic violence?" I asked, reaching a hand to my cheek, wondering if they saw something I hadn't noticed in the mirror, a cut or a bruise.

"We had a complaint of noise. They said it sounded like two people having a big fight."

I took my hand from my face, swallowed hard, and tried to think of how to reply. Before I could say another word, one of the cops stepped forward into the room, causing me to take a step back.

"You're obviously confused, ma'am. Let's take this one thing at a time."

He was speaking in the measured tones usually reserved for small children and senile adults. “Are you physically injured in any way?”

Again looking down at my wrinkled suit, nothing seemed amiss. I ran my hands over my arms and down my sides, but I didn’t feel anything painful or unusual.

“No. Physically, I think I’m fine.”

“All right. How about him? Is he okay?”

As I looked to where the policeman pointed across the room, I gasped. There, in the light that spilled from the open doorway, I could see someone sprawled out on the couch. It was a man, dressed in a dark brown suit, eyes closed and mouth open.

The second cop came inside and went over to him, shaking his shoulder and saying, “Sir? Sir?”

Watching them, I realized that the sleeping man looked familiar. Then it came to me. He was the lawyer I had met with last night at the restaurant, at the request of my mother.

“Are you under the influence of something?” the cop asked me now. “Are you on drugs?”

Drugs. That must have been it. I must have been drugged.

“It’s hard to explain. I—”

“Excuse me, ma’am,” the cop interrupted, not waiting for my answer but instead responding to a grunt from his partner, the one who was now kneeling beside the couch.

Suddenly I couldn’t wait for this guy to wake up and tell us what was going on. But then the cops both stood and turned to look at me even more strangely than before. That’s when I realized that the man on the couch wasn’t going to wake up at all.

The man on the couch was dead.