

Lucky's Lady

TAMI HOAG



Chapter One

"You want to do what, *chère*?"

Serena Sheridan took a deep breath and tried again. "I need to hire a guide to take me into the swamp."

Old Lawrence Gauthier laughed as if at the punch line of some grand joke. His voice rang out through the shop, drowning out the Cajun music coming from the radio on the cluttered shelf behind him as well as the noises of the all-star professional wrestling emanating from the black and white television that sat on the counter. Lawrence sat on a stool behind the counter, his slender legs crossed at the knees, slouching in a posture reminiscent of an egret on a perch—thin shoulders hunched, head low between them. His face was narrow with a prominent nose and eyes like jet beads. His skin was tanned dark and lined like old leather.

His laughter ended in a fit of coughing. He reached for his cigarette makings and shook his head. "What for you

wanna do dat, *chère*? You goin' after dem crawfish, you?" He laughed again, trying to shake his head and lick the edge of his cigarette paper at the same time.

Serena smoothed her hands down the front of the immaculate oyster-colored linen blazer she wore over a matching pencil-slim skirt. She supposed she hardly looked dressed to walk into such a place, much less make the request she had. "No, I'm not interested in fishing."

She looked around the store, hoping to spot someone else who might be able to help her. It was the middle of the day and Lawrence appeared to be the only person tending the dingy, dimly lit sporting goods store, though some banging noises were coming from behind him, from a room Serena knew to be an even dingier workshop where men fussed with their boats, drank beer, swapped outrageous tales, and passed girlie magazines around.

She knew because she had once snuck in there as a girl. A headstrong child, she had taken exception to being denied the chance to go in with her grandfather and had stowed away inside his bass boat under a canvas tarp. Her vocabulary had gained a number of choice words that day that their housekeeper had later attempted to wash out of her mouth with soap.

"I need to find my grandfather, Mr. Gauthier," she said. "Apparently he's gone out to his fish camp. I need someone to take me to him."

Lawrence looked at her, narrowing his eyes. Finally he shook a gnarled finger at her. "Hey, you dat Sheridan girl what left to be a doctor, no?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, yeah! *Mais yeah!*" He chuckled, tickled with his powers of recollection. "You lookin' for Big Giff."

"Yes, but I need someone to take me. I need a guide."

He shook his head, still smiling at her as if she were a dear but infinitely dimwitted child. "*Non, chérie*, all what fishin' guides we got 'round here is gone busy now till

Monday. Lotta sports coming down to fish these days. 'Sides, ain't nobody crazy 'nough go out to Giff's. Go out there, get their head shot off, them!"

He sucked on his little cigarette, holding it between thumb and forefinger in an unconsciously European fashion. Half of it was gone before he exhaled. He reached out with his free hand and patted Serena's cheek. "Ah, *ma jolie fille*, ain't nobody crazy 'nough to go out to Big Giff's."

As he said it, a loud bang sounded in the shop behind him, followed by a virulent French oath. Lawrence went still with his hand halfway to a tin ashtray on the counter, an unholy light coming into his eyes, a little smile tugging at a corner of his mouth. "Well, mebbe there's somebody. Jes' how bad you wanna go, *chère*?"

Serena swallowed the knot of apprehension in her throat, clasping her hands together in front of her like a schoolgirl. Now was not the time for a faint heart. "It's imperative. I have to go."

He bent his head a little to one side and gave a Gallic shrug, then shouted over his shoulder. "*Étienne! Viens là!*"

What Serena had braced herself for she wasn't sure, but it certainly wasn't the man who filled the doorway. The impact of his sudden presence had the same effect as being hit with the shock wave of an explosion, jolting her chest with a hollow thud and literally making her knees go weak—a phenomenon she had heretofore not believed in.

Her first impression was of raw power. Broad shoulders, bulging biceps. His chest, bare and gleaming with a sheen of sweat, was massive, wide, and thick, slabs of hard muscle beneath taut, tanned skin. The strong V of his torso narrowed to a slender waist, a stomach corrugated with muscle and dusted with black hair that disappeared beneath the low-riding waistband of faded green fatigue pants. Serena was certain she could live to be a hundred and never find a more prime example of the male animal.

She raised her eyes to his face and felt a strange shiver

pass over her from head to toe, making her scalp tighten and her fingers tingle. He stared at her from under sleepy lids with large, unblinking amber eyes, eyes like a panther's. His brow was heavy and straight, his nose bold and slightly aquiline. His mouth did the most damage to her nervous system, however. It was wide, with lips so masterfully carved, so incredibly sensuous they would have looked perfect on a high-priced call girl. The effect of that mouth on a face so masculine—all lean planes and hard angles and five-o'clock shadow—was blatantly sexual.

He regarded her with a subtle disdain that suggested he didn't much care for women other than to bed them—something he appeared to be capable of doing on a more than regular basis. Pulling a cigarette from behind his ear, he planted it in the corner of his mouth, lit it, and said something to Lawrence Gauthier in rapid Cajun French, a patois no Parisian could begin to understand. The dialect had nearly been eradicated by the Louisiana school system decades before. And although it was making a comeback of sorts due to the latest craze for all things Cajun, it was still not widely spoken. This man spoke it as if it were his primary language.

Having grown up in Louisiana's French Triangle, Serena had picked up the odd word and phrase, but he spoke too quickly for her to understand anything more than the implication. That was clear enough by Gauthier's reaction—another laughing and coughing fit and a slap on the shoulder for his barbarian friend.

Serena felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment as the man sauntered to the end of the counter and leaned a hip against it, all the while assessing her blatantly with those lazy amber eyes. She could feel his gaze like a tangible caress, drifting insolently over her breasts, the curve of her waist, the flare of her hip, the long length of her legs. She had never imagined it possible to feel so naked while dressed in a business suit.

He took a leisurely drag on his cigarette, exhaled, and delivered another line to keep Gauthier in stitches. Serena gave him her coolest glare, defending herself with hauteur. "Excuse me, but I was raised to believe it is extremely rude to carry on conversations not all those around you can understand."

One black brow sketched upward sardonically and the corner of that remarkable mouth curled ever so slightly. He looked like her idea of the devil on steroids. When he spoke to her his tone was a low, throaty purr that stroked her senses like velvet. "I told him you don' look like you're sellin' it or givin' it away," he said, the words rolling out of his mouth with an accent as rich as Cajun gumbo. "So what could I possibly want with you? I have no interest in *américaine ladies*."

He drawled the last word with stinging contempt. Serena tugged at the lapels of her blazer, straightening the uniform of her station. Her chin went up another notch above the prim collar of her fuchsia silk blouse. "I can assure you I have no interest in you either."

He pushed himself away from the counter and moved toward her with the arrogant grace of a born athlete. Serena stubbornly stood her ground as he stepped near enough for her to feel the heat of his big body. Her heart fluttered in her throat as he stared down at her and raised a hand to smooth it back over her hair.

"That's not what your eyes are tellin' me, *chère catin*."

Serena dragged in a ragged breath and held it, feeling as if she were going to explode from sheer fury. She slapped his hand away and took a step back from him. "I didn't come here to be insulted or manhandled. I came here to hire a guide, Mister—"

"Doucet," he supplied. "Étienne Doucet. Folks call me Lucky."

Serena vaguely remembered a Lucky Doucet from high school. He'd been several classes ahead of her, an athlete, a

loner with a reputation as a bad boy. The girls whose main interest in school had been guys had swooned at the mere mention of his name. Serena's interests had lain elsewhere.

She looked at him now and thought whatever reputation he had sown back then he had certainly cultivated since. He looked like the incarnation of the word *trouble*. She had to be half mad to even consider hiring him. But then she thought of Gifford. She had to see him, had to do what she could to find out what had made him leave Chanson du Terre, had to do her best to try to convince him to come home. As tough as Gifford Sheridan liked to pretend he was, he was still a seventy-eight-year-old man with a heart condition.

"I'm Serena Sheridan," she said in her most businesslike tone.

Lucky Doucet blinked at her. A muscle tensed, then loosened in his jaw. "I know who you are," he said, an oddly defensive note in his voice. Serena dismissed it as unimportant.

"I came here to hire a guide, Mr. Doucet. Gifford Sheridan is my grandfather. I need someone to take me out to his cabin. Mr. Gauthier has informed me that all the more reputable guides are booked up for the weekend, which apparently leaves you. Are you interested in the job or not?"

Lucky moved back to lean negligently against the counter again. Behind him, Lawrence had switched off his wrestling program in favor of live entertainment. In the background Iry Lejeune sang "La Jolie Blonde" in crackling French over the radio. *The pretty blonde*. How apropos. He took a deep pull on his cigarette, sucking the smoke into the very corners of his lungs, as if it might purge the feelings shaking loose and stirring inside him.

When he had stepped from the back room and seen her he had felt as if he'd taken a vicious blow to the solar plexus. *Shelby*. The shock had dredged up memories and emotions like mud and dead vines churning up from the

bayou in the wake of an outboard motor—pain, hate, fear all swirling furiously inside him. The pain and hate were old companions. The fear was for the control he felt slipping, sliding through his grasp like a wet rope. The feelings assaulted him still, even though he told himself this wasn't the woman from his past, but her sister, someone he had never had any contact with. Nor did he want to. They were twins, after all, maybe not perfectly identical, but cut from the same cloth.

He stared at the woman before him, trying to set all personal feelings aside to concentrate on only the physical aspects of her. It shouldn't have been difficult to do; she was beautiful. From the immaculate state of her honey-colored hair in its smooth French twist to the tips of her beige pumps, she radiated class. There wasn't anything about her that shouldn't have been carved in alabaster and put in a museum. His gaze roamed over her face, an angel's face, with its delicate bone structure and liquid dark eyes—eyes that were presently flashing fire at him—and desire twisted inside him.

He swore, throwing his cigarette to the battered wood floor and grinding it out with the toe of his boot. Without looking, he reached behind the counter and pulled out a bottle of Jack Daniel's, helping himself to a generous swig. Lawrence said nothing, but frowned and glanced away, tilting his head in silent reproof. Resenting the twinge of guilt pinching him somewhere in the vicinity of where his conscience had once resided, Lucky put the bottle back.

Damn. He damned Gifford Sheridan for having granddaughters that looked like heaven on earth. He damned women in general and himself in particular. If he had a lick of sense he would send Miss Serena packing. He would go about his own business and let the Sheridans do what they would.

That was the kind of life he had chosen to live, solitary, and yet other lives kept drifting into his. He didn't want to

be touched. He didn't need the trouble he knew was brewing on the Sheridan plantation, Chanson du Terre, didn't need the reminder of past pain. But Giff had dragged him into it to a certain extent already and there was too much riding on the situation for him to decline playing so slight a role in the drama.

He cursed himself for caring. He had thought himself beyond it, thought the capacity to care had been burned out of him by the acidic quality of his experiences. But it was still there, which meant he had to find the strength to deal with it. God help him.

Serena gave him one last scathing glare and turned on her slim, expensive heel, heading for the street entrance of the store. Lucky swore under his breath and went after her, catching her by the arm.

"Where you goin', sugar? I never said I wouldn't take you."

She looked pointedly at the big dirty hand circling her upper arm, then turned that defiant gaze up to his face. "Maybe I won't take you, Mr. Doucet."

"The way I see it, you don't have much of a choice. Ain't nobody else gonna take you out to Giff's." He laughed without humor. "Ain't nobody else crazy enough."

"But you are?"

He smiled like a crocodile and leaned down toward her until his mouth hovered only a few inches above the sweet temptation of her lips. "That's right," he whispered. "I'm over the edge. I might do anything. Ask anyone 'round this town here. They'll all tell you the same thing—*il n'a pas rien il va pas faire*. There's nothing he won't do. That Lucky Doucet, he's one bad crazy son, him."

"Well, I'm a psychologist," she said with a saccharine-sweet smile. "So we ought to get along just peachy, shouldn't we?"

He let go of her arm as if she had just told him she had leprosy. The expression of smug male arrogance abruptly

disappeared, and his face became blank and unreadable. He turned and strode for a side door that stood open and led directly onto a dock.

Serena stood a moment, trying to gather some strength, her gaze on Lucky Doucet's broad bare back as he walked away. Her limbs felt like jelly and her stomach was quivering inside. She could feel old Lawrence staring at her, but she didn't move. She'd never had such a . . . primal reaction to a man. She was a sophisticated, educated woman, a woman who prided herself on her ability to maintain control in every situation. But that foundation of control was trembling in the wake of Lucky Doucet, and she didn't like it. He was rude and arrogant and . . . The other words that came to mind were far too flattering. What difference did it make what he looked like? He was a Neanderthal.

He was also her only hope of reaching Giff. And she had to reach him. Someone had to find out what was going on. Shelby claimed she hadn't a clue as to why Gifford had suddenly deserted the plantation in favor of living out in the swamp. It might have been nothing more than a matter of Giff getting fed up with having Shelby and her family underfoot while their new house was under construction, but it might have been something more. It wasn't like him to leave during a busy time of year, simply turning the reins of the sugarcane plantation over to his manager.

Shelby had peevishly suggested Gifford was getting senile. Serena couldn't imagine her grandfather as anything other than sharp as a tack, but then, she hadn't actually seen him in a while. Her practice in Charleston kept her too busy for many visits home. She had been looking forward to this one, looking forward to simply enjoying her ancestral home in all its springtime glory. Then Shelby had greeted her at the door with news of Gifford's defection to the swamp.

He'd been out there two weeks. Two weeks with no

word, and Shelby had done nothing about it except complain.

"What did you expect me to do?" she had asked. "Go out there after him? I have two children to raise and a real estate business to manage and a husband, and I'm the chairperson of the Junior League drive for canned goods for the starving peasants of Guatemala. I have responsibilities, Serena! I can't just jump in a boat and go out there! Not that he would ever listen to a word I have to say anyway. And you can't expect Mason to go out there. You know how beastly Gifford is to him. I'm just at my wit's end trying to deal with him. You're the psychologist. You go out there and talk some sense into that hard head of his."

Go out there. Into the swamp. Serena's blood had run cold at the suggestion. It ran cold now at the thought. But she was just angry enough and stubborn enough to get past her fear for the moment. She had stormed from the house to go in search of a guide without even bothering to change her clothes. She wouldn't allow herself to dwell on her fear. She had to see her grandfather and there was only one way to do that. She had to go out into the one place she thought of as hell on earth, and the only man available to take her had just walked away.

Serena rushed after Lucky Doucet, struggling to hurry in her narrow skirt and shoes that had not been intended for walking on rough planking. The midday sun was blinding as she stepped out onto the dock. The stench of dirty water and gasoline hung in the thick, still air. Lucky stood at the open door to the workshop.

"We haven't discussed your fee," Serena said, ignoring the possibility that he had changed his mind about taking her. She struggled for an even breath as she faced his chest. Even up close he looked as if he were cast in bronze rather than flesh and bone.

He looked down his nose at her with an expression that

suggested she had just insulted his mother. "I have no need of your money," he said contemptuously.

Serena rolled her eyes and lifted her hands in a gesture of exasperated surrender. "Pardon me for thinking you might like an honest wage for an honest job. How bourgeois of me."

He ignored her, bending to pick up a heavy cardboard box full of oily black motor parts. He lifted it as though it weighed no more than a kitten and set it on a workbench to sort through it. His attitude was one of dismissal and irritating in the extreme.

"Why are you making this so difficult?" Serena asked.

He turned his head and gave her a nasty, sardonic smile. "Because I'm a difficult kind of guy. I thought you might have figured that out by now. You're an intelligent woman."

"Frankly, I'm amazed you would credit a woman with having a brain. You strike me as the sort of man who sees women as being useful for only one purpose."

"I said you were intelligent, not useful. I won't know how useful you are until I have you naked beneath me."

Heat flared through Serena like a flash fire. She attributed it to anger. Certainly it had nothing to do with the sudden image of lying tangled in the sheets with this barbarian. She crossed her arms in front of her defensively and made a show of looking all around them before returning her belligerent gaze to Lucky. "Pardon me, I was just checking to see if I had somehow been transported back into the Stone Age. Are you proposing to hit me over the head with a dinosaur bone and drag me back to your cave, Conan?"

He raised a warning finger, his brows drawing together ominously over glittering eyes. "You got a mouth on you, *chère*."

He shuffled toward her, backing her up against the door frame. Serena managed to swallow her first gasp, but couldn't help the second one as his spread thighs brushed the outsides of hers. He braced his forearms on the wood

above her head and leaned down close. His breath was warm against her cheek and scented with the smoky taint of tobacco and whiskey.

"I have *never* forced a woman," Lucky said, his voice low and soft, the molten gold of his eyes burning into Serena's. "I never have to."

He stared at her mouth with rapt fascination. It was rose and soft-looking and he wanted badly to taste it, but he denied himself the luxury. She was a spoiled society bitch and he wanted nothing to do with her. He'd been burned badly enough to know better. *Dieu*, he'd learned his first lesson at the hands of her twin! To get that close again was to give in entirely to the demons of insanity.

Still, desire ribboned through him, as warm as a fever in his blood. The subtle, expensive scent of her perfume lured him closer. He dropped his head down near the curve of her shoulder and battled the urge to nuzzle the tender spot just below her ear and above the prim stand-up collar of her dark pink blouse. He could feel his sex growing warm and heavy.

"I'm hiring you as a guide," she said through her teeth, her voice trembling with rage or desire or both. "Not for stud service."

Lucky mentally thanked her for breaking the spell. He stepped back, cocking one hip and hooking a thumb in the waistband of his pants. He gave her a devilish grin. "Why not, angel? I'd give you the ride of your life."

She glared at him in utter disgust and walked away to stand at the edge of the dock, her slender back rigid. He had no doubt irreparably offended her ladylike sensibilities, he thought. Fine. That was exactly what he wanted. The more emotional distance he put between himself and a woman like Serena Sheridan, the better. His mother would have peeled the hide off him for talking that way to a woman, but this was more than just a matter of manners, it was a matter of survival.

He scooped up the box of motor parts and started down the pier with it, calling over his shoulder as he went. "So, you comin', *chère*, or what? I don't have all day."

Serena turned and stared in disbelief as he headed down the worn dock. She noticed for the first time that his hair was nearly as long as hers, tied in a short queue at the back of his thick neck with a length of leather boot lace. A pirate. That was what he reminded her of—in looks *and* attitude.

"You're leaving *now*?" she said, once again rushing to catch up with him.

He didn't answer her. It was perfectly obvious he meant to leave. Serena cursed Lucky Doucet and spike heels in the same breath as she picked up her pace. Talk about your grade-A bastards, this guy took the prize. And she wanted to be the one to personally pin the medal on him, preferably directly onto that bare boilerplate chest of his. If they were in Charleston, never in a million years would she have put up with being treated the way he was treating her. She had too much sense and self-respect to fall for that tame-the-rogue-male syndrome, no matter how overwhelmingly sexy the rogue happened to be. But they weren't in Charleston. They were in South Louisiana, at the edge of the Atchafalaya Swamp, some of the wildest, most remote swampland in the United States. And Lucky Doucet wasn't some button-down executive or construction worker she could bring to heel with a cool look. He was a breed unto himself and only marginally more civilized than the bayou country around them.

Abruptly, the heel of one of her pumps caught between planks in the dock and gave way, nearly pitching Serena headfirst off the pier and into the oily water. She swore aloud as she stumbled awkwardly, hampered by the narrow skirt around her knees, just managing to catch her balance before it was too late.

Lucky stopped and turned toward her with a look of

mock affront. "Why, Miz Serena, such language! What will the ladies at the Junior League think?"

She narrowed her eyes and snarled at him as she hopped on her ruined shoe and pulled the other one off. The instant she put her foot down, she ran a sliver into it, but she refused to cry out or even acknowledge the pain. She limped up to Lucky, struggling to maintain some semblance of dignity.

"I'm not prepared to leave just now, Mr. Doucet," she said primly. "I was thinking more along the lines of tomorrow morning."

He shrugged without the least show of concern. A brilliant white grin split his features. "Well, that's too bad, sugar, 'cause if you're leavin' with me, you're leavin' now."