

SECOND SEASON

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CHAPTER ONE

Ugh.” Tully Gaston Badeaux studied herself in the large mirror in the master bathroom, wondering where her trim waistline had gone. “Wherever the hell it is, it’s there sunning itself with the hair that used to be dark.”

“Did you say something? You’re mumbling again. Are you practicing another closing argument?”

Tully could barely hear Jessica Badeaux’s questions through the closed door, since her lover was getting dressed in the adjoining walk-in closet.

“No.” Tully sucked in her stomach, raised her arms, and flexed her biceps. She was beginning to be depressed. “Forty sucked when it finally rolled around, and adding another couple of years didn’t help.”

“Now I *know* you said something. I can hear you talking.” Jessica opened the bathroom door to finish her makeup and hair before she pulled on silk underwear and a white blouse, figuring her partner was done since she rarely if ever bothered with makeup.

In fact, it bothered Jessica how Tully had given in to her graying hair and expanding waistline. She liked that her own hair was still as dark as when they met, her weight hadn’t fluctuated much even after each pregnancy, and her face still didn’t show signs of her forty years. It didn’t matter that some of those secrets were between her and her hairdresser and dermatologist.

Tully’s gray eyes were slightly bloodshot, but Jessica noticed they still softened when she smiled and said, “Can I tell you, you’re the best-looking girl who’s wandered in here all morning?”

Tully pressed up against her and tried to kiss her, but Jessica moved away and put her hands up. "I've got rounds this morning."

"I didn't realize a good-morning kiss chewed up so much of your valuable time." Tully's tone, no longer teasing, now held an icy edge usually reserved for her adversaries.

Before this rebuff escalated into another argument, Tully walked away. She wasn't in the mood for another of Jessica's lame excuses.

Tully didn't have to be in court that day and she hadn't scheduled any clients, so she chose a casual blue seersucker suit. She was dressed and down the hall before Jessica finished in the bathroom.

The room at the other end of the hallway was closed, but Tully could easily hear the stereo blaring from the other side. She had to knock for three minutes before the teenaged inhabitant decided to grace her with an audience. After a few screaming matches, she and Jessica had learned it was a small price to pay to knock and wait instead of just walking in.

"What?"

"And good morning to you, sunshine," Tully went on as if the kid was happy to see her. "Are you almost ready?"

"Why?"

"I thought you might like a ride to school, and I have time this morning."

"Why?"

"Why what?" She detested these conversations, but figured eventually the pod people who'd stolen the cute little girl who once enjoyed bedtime stories would bring her back and retrieve the surly replacement model that had shown up the year before.

"Why would you want to?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

Bailey Badeaux continued to chew her gum, adding a few pops. "We'll see," she answered before closing the door.

Aware that the immediate increase in the stereo volume masked the sound, Tully banged her head softly against the wall a few times. Talking to Bailey often left her in that mood.

The last hope of restoring her faith in the reasons she'd decided to settle down and have a family rested behind the door in the middle of the hall. It opened before she could knock, and Ralph Badeaux looked up at her and smiled.

"Morning, Ralph. You ready, buddy?"

His smile widened, his face displaying the dimples that appeared when he was happy. Seeing them reminded her again of the wonders of genetics and the sense of immortality that ensued if you decided to venture into the uncertain world of parenting. The other blessing in her life was that her two brothers looked so much like her.

As Tully gazed at Ralph, she thought about how both of her children, with their height, dark hair and skin, and light gray eyes, resembled her Cajun family. They also shared her intellect, though only Ralph showed an inkling of her drive. He was also the only one who enjoyed going back to her hometown to spend time with her parents.

She'd been born in Montegut, Louisiana, to Gaston and Alma Badeaux, who both had spent a lifetime working so that Tully's mental gifts wouldn't go to waste. They had also expected their only daughter to pull her share of the workload on Gaston's fishing boat, and she had, working there every summer until after she completed medical school. Then, having decided that she wanted to become a trial lawyer specializing in medical lawsuits, she completed a law degree. Mastering both disciplines had helped make her a successful civil attorney.

However, it was aboard her father's trawler the *Alma Mae* that Tully had learned the value of a day's work and the devastation when people, through no fault of their own, were injured and couldn't put in that day's work to feed their families. Being able to convey the impact of such tragedies to a jury while wearing a suit that cost more than most of them made in two months made her even more successful. "A hometown girl who'd hit the big time" was the way her father liked to put it whenever he had the opportunity.

"Are you taking us today?" Ralph adjusted the book bag on his back and walked quickly after her.

"Sure, unless, like your sister, you'd rather wait for your mother."

"No, we hardly ever get to see you in the morning, so that'd be cool."

He picked up his pace, and Tully could read his mind: he knew that if they were out of the kitchen before Jessica made it downstairs, he'd get to have Pop-Tarts for breakfast instead of whatever nutritious meal she wanted them to have.

"Chocolate or blueberry?" asked Tully, holding up two boxes.

"One of each."

As the silver packages of sugar-coated breakfast treats slid across

the counter Bailey entered the room and headed for the refrigerator. Tully could read her mind also: she wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to start her day with a Coke instead of orange juice and scrambled eggs.

"Chocolate or blueberry?" Tully asked again.

"Strawberry," Bailey answered just to be contrary, but chuckled anyway when Tully handed over a package from another box she'd taken out of the pantry. "Let's go, shrimp, before we get busted for something," Bailey told Ralph.



On any normal day Tully would've been listening to her secretary on the speakerphone, but now the phone in her Discovery SUV was silent, though she couldn't say the same of the CD player. After hearing the word "bitch" for the tenth time in a one-block span, she raised an eyebrow.

"Do you actually listen to what these people are saying?"

Bailey took a deep breath as if searching for patience. "Don't start, okay?"

"Look, Bailey, as much as you'd like to believe I'm the enemy, I'm not. I don't want to start anything. I'm asking you a civil question and would appreciate a mature answer that shows some respect. In turn I'll treat you with respect. If you don't want to answer, fine, but I'd really appreciate it if you could lower the hostility a few notches."

Bailey glared at her for a long moment, though her brother cleared his throat in warning from the backseat. "You know what your problem is?"

"Perhaps, but I'm willing to bet you're going to tell me."

"You think giving us a few minutes of your time makes up for all the times you're not with us. If you want me to respect you, then treat me like I'm as important as your precious career."

For one so young, her argument was clear and to the point. What upset Tully was that she had nothing to counter it with. The truth, she figured, didn't always set you free; it only put more bars on the cage you carefully constructed for yourself with the choices you made.

Silence prevailed in the SUV as the private academy that Bailey and Ralph attended loomed in front of them. Tully turned into the main drive, stopped, looked at her daughter in the front seat, and could

think of nothing to say, quite a feat for someone paid for her ability to articulately string words together.

“Have a good day.” It was lame, but the best she could do.

“Thanks, Mom, you too. I have baseball practice tonight. Can you remember to tell Mama when you talk to her?” Ralph was trying to smooth things over from the backseat, a job he was taking on more and more.

“Thanks, buddy. You have a good day too, and I’ll see you both tonight.”

Tully drove away slowly, watching Bailey trudge into the building like she was entering a death chamber as Ralph patted her on the back as if trying to make her feel better. Being unable to talk to her daughter was starting to bother Tully in ways she couldn’t explain even to herself.