

**Chaos At
Crescent City
Medical Center**

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**Chaos At
Crescent City
Medical Center**

**A NOVEL BY
JUDITH LUCCI**

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Chapter 1

The pungent smell of Cajun spices permeated the February New Orleans air. With only one week before Carnival, the French Quarter was blazing with activity. Ornate iron balconies bowed under the weight of dozens of people, pressed together tightly for a better look at the street below. Being "up" on a balcony during Mardi Gras was prestigious, giving one an immense sense of power and control over the crowd below. You could get people in the streets to do just about anything for a Mardi Gras throw – a string of plastic beads or an aluminum doubloon.

Raoul Dupree, a waiter at Tujague's Restaurant, was smoking outside the door of the European-styled bistro. His eyes riveted on a gorgeous man hanging over a balcony a few doors down. The man was teasing a lovely, but drunken young woman in the street. The man fingered a string of cheap gold beads in front of her and repeated, "show your tits" continuously. The crowd repeated the chant, until it became deafening.

The young woman kept reaching for the gold beads, just to have them snatched from her

grasp each time. She looked around and smiled drunkenly at the large crowds gathered nearby and above on the balconies.

The man was smiling at her, taunting her and luring her to the beads. The chant was loud and frenzied. Crowds on the street were wildly excited and hollered, clapped, and stamped their feet.

Finally, in the flick of an instant, the young woman pulled up her white T-shirt exposing her young breasts. The crowd went wild, clapping, and shouting with approval. The woman grabbed her beads held them up for the crowd and quickly disappeared into an alley.

Raoul smiled and shook his head. Mardi Gras still amazed him. After a lifetime of Carnival seasons, he still wasn't used to the heavy partying, drunken and lewd behavior so common during the season. People would do anything for a Mardi Gras trinket. He shrugged his frail shoulders as his eyes again found the handsome man just as a hand reached out and roughly grabbed Raoul's blond hair. Startled, Raoul looked around

quickly and saw the flushed face of the frowning Tujague's maître d' come bouncer.

"Your boys in the private booth are getting anxious, Raoul. Better get your skinny ass up there and keep 'em happy. We don't want any of those thugs on our bad side," said the burly maître d', gesturing toward the door.

Raoul stamped out his cigarette butt, grimaced, and ran up two flights of stairs to a private dining room where three men sat smoking after a long lunch. Tujague's, the oldest restaurant in the French Quarter, had a reputation for privacy and discretion, and was a meeting place for prominent New Orleanians engaged in all sorts of legal and illegal business. Privacy, good food, and service made the restaurant a favorite.

The men were talking quietly as Raoul waited outside the dining room. One glance at the group convinced him not to interrupt. He recognized one man, but he'd never seen the others and wondered how they were connected. From what he'd observed, he didn't think they knew each other and doubted they'd ever been together before. They didn't

mix well. After cocktails and several bottles of wine, their conversation had moved from strained politeness to menacing anger. Each time he'd entered the private dining room, conversation stopped.

The man Raoul recognized was Frederico Petrelli, reputedly a mob boss from Chicago, who'd recently moved to New Orleans to oversee the Dixie Mafia's activities in the Riverboat and land gambling operations. Raoul knew Rico because he often dined at Tujague's and had his special waiter, Matthew. Unfortunately, Matthew was off today due to illness.

Raoul kept his distance as he eyed the group and decided he never wanted to run up against Frederico. He was in his mid-fifties, balding, and at least forty pounds overweight. He had a long irregular scar on his right forearm, and dark beady eyes. He glared at his companions with distrust and impatience. His thick-pursed lips moved back and forth over a wet cigar in his mouth. Frederico was a classic picture of a vicious Chicago mafia boss.

The second man was distinctive differently than the gangster. This man was tall, with a swarthy complexion and dark oiled hair, pulled back into a ponytail. His face was long and he had an aquiline nose. His thin lips curled in a permanent smirk. His eyes were strange, the color a blackish-yellow, and they gave the man a sinister appearance. It was impossible to tell his age. He could be anywhere between thirty and sixty. His body was big, well proportioned, and in perfect shape.

Raoul was sure about this because he spent most of his time visually undressing men and he could easily imagine the man's six-pack abs. His clothes were expensive, as was the gold medallion hanging around his neck. He wore dark trousers and a custom-designed dark shirt opened at the neck. He caressed a leather strap in his lap as if it were his lover as he alternately tapped his well-manicured nails against the hand-rubbed walnut table. His dark eyes moved side to side as he followed the conversation between the other two men. His eyes were unreadable and gave him a menacing and evil appearance.

The leather strap in the ponytailed man's lap captured Raoul's attention. The man stroked the strap constantly. The ponytailed stranger said little, instead following the conversation between Frederico and the third man. He gave Raoul the creeps, and Raoul rubbed away the chill bumps that had appeared on his arms. Raoul shuddered, thinking the man looked like the devil with those yellow-black eyes and dubbed him "the evil one."

The third man was not distinctive. Raoul wouldn't have paid much attention to him had his companions not been so macabre. The third man was about forty years old with brown hair and an honest face. He spoke with a Midwest accent and seemed ordinary. The ordinary man was speaking when Frederico called Raoul into the dining room. Frederico rudely interrupted him.

"Give us sambukas and a pot of coffee and get the hell outta here," Frederico barked at Raoul.

Raoul left quickly but overheard something that made him freeze.

The ordinary man said, "Don't care what you do. I want Robert Bonnet ruined and dead. I don't know what your interests are in the Bonnets and the medical center, but I want the man dead. He killed my wife and baby three years ago. Kill him."

Raoul's ears picked up at the mention of Robert Bonnet. He knew Dr. Bonnet from the medical center where he worked as a volunteer on the AIDS floor. Dr. Bonnet had operated on his lover last year when other surgeons had declined. Dr. Bonnet hadn't cared that Josh had AIDS and would probably die anyway. He'd pulled strings to give Josh a chance to get a new liver and live longer and given Josh comfort before he died. Hearing threats against Dr. Bonnet encouraged Raoul to take a risk, and he paused for a moment longer, eavesdropping outside the room.

Frederico glared at the third man with a bored expression and said harshly, "Shut up, choir boy. No time for emotions. They get in the way of business and cause mistakes. No mistakes, you hear?" The gangster's voice had become low and threatening as he glared at the

ordinary man. "You make a mistake, you pay."

The ordinary man, frantic, stared at him.

The evil one with the ponytail simply nodded his head and said, "Salute," and raised his cup in a toast.

Rico continued to glare at the ordinary man and said, "Get it, choir boy, no mistakes. You know what to do."

The ordinary man nodded.

Raoul returned to the serving area, his heart thudding heavily in his chest.

~ End Of Sample ~