

A man and a woman are shown in a close, romantic embrace. The man, on the left, has dark hair and is wearing a white tank top and a wide, patterned brown belt. The woman, on the right, has long, wavy blonde hair and is wearing a white spaghetti-strap top and white pants. She has a tattoo on her left forearm. They are both looking at each other. The background is a dark, starry night sky with a large, glowing yellow crescent moon in the upper left. A small, stylized illustration of a fairy with pink wings and a wand is positioned near the moon. Several small, light-colored hearts are scattered in the upper left area. The overall mood is romantic and magical.

FAWN
LOWERY

MARDI GRAS
MAGIC

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BY

FAWN LOWERY

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Mardi Gras Magic
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CHAPTER ONE

Tia Morgan walked through the gate at the New Orleans airport and headed across the terminal to retrieve her luggage. A quick glance at her watch reaffirmed how anxious she felt at seeing Rachel Shepherd again. She and Rachel had been best friends since grade school, but they hadn't seen each other since high school graduation, almost six years ago. Rachel was planning on getting married during the Mardi Gras celebration—on the street, no less—and Tia was going to be her maid of honor. She shook her head again at the audacity of the notion.

Engrossed in contemplating why she had come to New Orleans, Tia didn't hear her friend coming up behind her until it was too late.

"Stick 'em up!" a gruff voice ordered, jabbing something into Tia's ribs.

Tia jumped and whirled around, then she saw Rachel bursting into laughter.

"Tia, darling!" Rachel exclaimed and grabbed

Tia in a tight bear hug. "I had a feeling your plane would be on time. That's a good sign, you know."

Tia returned Rachel's hug, then allowed her friend to push her to arms' length to have a look at her.

"I'm so glad you haven't cut your hair," Rachel exclaimed, her hands skimming along the loose brown curls lying atop Tia's shoulders. "Tsk, ts," Rachel continued, accessing Tia in her camel tan pantsuit. "I see you're still hiding that gorgeous figure under baggy clothing." She shook her head at Tia. "I'm going to fix that. As my maid of honor, you'll be decked out in a most revealing costume." She gave Tia a mischievous wink.

Tia tried to smile, though her lips felt tight against her teeth as her eyes lowered to stare at the pair of hip hugger jeans Rachel wore. When had she gotten her belly button pierced?

Never mind, she told herself. Don't ask.

"Come on, let's find your suitcase and get out of here. The guys are waiting."

"Guys? What guys?" Tia questioned.

"Tom and Logan. Logan is going to be Tom's best man in our wedding." Rachel replied. "You *do* remember Logan, don't you?"

A red blush colored Tia's cheeks. "I'll never forget him," she answered in a droll voice. Logan Summerfield had taken her virginity.

Rachel giggled and grabbed Tia's suitcase off

the carousel. "Let's go. My car's out front—if it hasn't gotten towed."

Tia rolled her eyes in consternation and trailed Rachel across the airport foyer to the main entrance. A lime green VW was parked with one front wheel up on the curb. Rachel headed toward it, hips swinging, breasts jiggling.

"We'll drop your bag at the hotel and then go meet the guys," Rachel said, sliding in the driver's seat.

Tia bit nervously on her bottom lip. She had been hoping that Logan Summerfield was married, or had moved out of state, or any damned thing that would prevent her from ever seeing him again.

For six years, she had been reliving the nightmare during the last day of senior week, trying to change how she felt about what happened, with no luck. She had acted like a lovesick teenager. Never mind that she was; at eighteen she hadn't known her own mind about such things as sex and falling in love—though she would have argued with the devil that she did.

She had thought herself lucky when Logan asked her to be his date for the Senior Prom. He was her dream guy—tall, muscular, with raven black hair and sparkling blue eyes. He was the captain of the football team, and every girl in high school was in love with him.

Maybe it was the fact that he chose me over all the rest. Damn. She should have majored in psychology in college, instead of economics. She pushed the unsettling thoughts aside. She hadn't figured it out in six years, why did she think she could now?

She gazed out the side window, taking in the sights of New Orleans as Rachel meandered through the traffic to the hotel. Ordinarily she would have expected to stay with Rachel, but she had moved in with Tom, her soon-to-be husband, four months ago and given up the lease on her loft apartment.

She remembered Tom Crawford from high school. He had played basketball and led the debate team.

"Jeez! There are a lot of people in this town," Rachel exclaimed, laying on the horn when the light changed and pedestrians still crowded the intersection.

Tia gripped the door handle as Rachel eased the car into the crowd. "Don't run over anybody," she said, a bit on edge.

"Aw, hell. They've already had three full minutes to cross the street," Rachel growled. "We've got places to go and guys to meet—"

Tia laughed and shook her head. "I'll be lucky if I don't end up in jail sometime during this week."

Rachel giggled and glanced at Tia. "You're still leading that sheltered life, I see."

"Safe. I lead a safe life."

"Dull, honey."

"Dull?" Tia's head whipped around to stare at Rachel. "My life isn't dull."

"Oh, yeah? When's the last time you got laid?"

An instant blush colored Tia's cheeks. "Well..." she stammered, then turned her gaze out the side window. "There's more to my life than sleeping with guys."

Rachel's giggle echoed inside the closed car. "I bet you haven't had sex since you presented your cherry to Logan Summerfield."

"Rachel!" Tia exclaimed.

"I'm right. Aren't I?" Rachel pressed, a note of humor in her tone. "Admit it."

"I'll admit to nothing," Tia stated. She lowered her gaze to the purse sitting in her lap. "Logan's married now, isn't he?"

"No. He's living in the old family home in the Garden District since his parents went to Europe to live. He and Tom are partners in the Summerfield and Crawford Law firm." She threw a carefree grin at Tia. "And I'm the office receptionist."

"So that's how you landed Tom Crawford," Tia said, a teasing smile gracing her lips.

"Naw. I hooked him with sex. I know where a

man's thoughts lie. The very first time I went out with Tom, he made it clear to me that he liked sex." She winked at Tia. "And I made it clear to him that if he expected to get between my legs, he'd have to buy me dinner first."

Tia groaned then shook her head. Knowing Rachel, the story was probably true. "If only I could be that open about sex," she mumbled.

"You've got to tear down that brick wall you've erected around yourself, Tia. Never mind what happened in your childhood. That's in the past. You have to live for today."

"No lectures, please. My parents meant well."

"Your mother was a nun."

Tia laughed in spite of herself. "It wasn't that bad."

"Yes, it was. She made you dress like a spinster and wouldn't allow you to have a boyfriend. I was totally shocked when she let you go to the Senior Prom."

"She didn't know I was going." Tia turned to look at Rachel. "And if she knew I gave myself to Logan, she'd have a super fit—even after all these years."

Rachel wheeled the VW into the main entrance of the Holiday Inn and shut off the key. "How did you manage to pull the whole thing off without my help?"

Tia shrugged and opened the car door. "I just

decided I was going, and did what was necessary to make it happen."

* * * *

"So, tell me about Logan, since it's inevitable I'm to meet up with him again," Tia said, her hands busy unpacking her suitcase. "I can hardly believe he isn't married after all these years."

"Maybe he's been waiting for you to come back to New Orleans," Rachel said.

"Yeah, right," Tia admonished with a short burst of laughter. "I'm certain I left a lasting impression on him."

"He smiled broadly when I told him you were coming back to be my maid of honor."

Tia paused and stared at Rachel. Don't get your hopes up, she told herself.

"Really. And he's asked about you every day since."

Tia's arched brows drew together in an uncertain frown. "Are you making that up?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die. It's the truth. I suppose you giving him your little cherry left an impression on him."

"He's probably had so many cherries he's lost count." Tia slammed the lid on her empty suitcase.

"I don't know," Rachel said, shaking her head. "He's a strange guy. Women fall all over

themselves just to be near him, and yet he doesn't have a steady girlfriend."

Tia took mental notes of all Rachel said, yet she refused to allow herself the least selfish thought. If Logan was along, it was by choice.

Rachel suddenly glanced at her watch and bounded off the bed. "Oh, my gosh! We have to leave right now. Tom and Logan will be at the restaurant waiting on us." She glanced at Tia, her gaze racing the length of her figure. "Change clothes."

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"You look like an old maid." Rachel raced across the room and pulled the closet door open. "Here. Put this on."

"That's a sundress—and it's too cold for evening."

"Don't argue," Rachel chided. "Show some cleavage. And wear those strappy sandals. Show some leg, Tia."

CHAPTER TWO

Mardi Gras brought out the revelers and fun-seekers, especially in the French Quarter. Clusters of people strolled leisurely along the narrow streets with plastic cups of beer and assorted drinks in hand. The very air was provocative with strains of jazz music blaring from several of the bars and restaurants.

Finally able to squeeze the car between a pickup truck and a fire hydrant, Rachel and Tia melded in with the crowd. Odors of cigarettes and liquor filled the air and Tia mentally calculated the takings for just one of the many bars opening onto the narrow little streets. She pushed the thoughts aside. Being a CPA was sometimes a drag. Her brain seemed to be always calculating one set of figures or other. Though fascinating, the ongoing thrill of working with numbers obligingly put her in the solitary category of life. CPAs were dull people as a rule, content with solitude and a

calculator. At times, Tia was finding the very premise of the profession to be just that—solitude exemplified.

Rachel pulled Tia along through the crowd by one hand until they reached The Coals, a fashionable Bourbon Street grill and bar. Though there were almost as many people packed into the restaurant as were milling about outside, Rachel hung on to Tia's hand and worked her way to the rear of the establishment. Momentarily, Tia was given a push into a red leather booth and bounced against a solid male shoulder and hip.

Coming to rest, Tia was quick to try and separate herself from the masculine contours, only to be stopped by the strong arm flung about her shoulders. A very warm male hand clasped her upper arm, preventing her from putting any distance between their bodies whatsoever. She gasped and looked at the man preventing her from moving away.

"Logan!"

"I thought you'd never get here," he said. A wide grin lit his handsome face. And Tia quickly drank in the sight of him. He didn't look a day older than when they were in high school, though she surmised he was at least twenty-three. His dark hair was neatly trimmed with that careless lock grazing his forehead, giving him a reckless appearance. His brown eyes were large and

luminous, framed in thick black lashes. They lowered appraisingly as he swept his gaze over Tia's face and brightly colored dress, then quickly raised to lock with her own.

"You're even more beautiful than I remember," he said in a low tone.

A note of unbelievable surprise shot through Tia at precisely the exact moment she felt the toe of Rachel's shoe collide with her right shin. Jerking her gaze to her friend, she spied Rachel grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

"Nice to see you again, Tia," Tom said reaching across the table to shake hands with her. "I hear you're a CPA, with your own business in Ohio."

"Boring," Rachel put in, then giggled.

Tia could smell Logan's cologne, a rich blend of spice and something akin to the outdoors. She pulled the fragrance deep into her lungs, satisfying her senses that she was really with him again—nestled so snugly against his side that she could hardly make a move without his knowing it. Senses reeling, when it was her turn to order dinner, she rattled off something so quickly that it soon left her mind and returned only when a large plate of Louisiana seafood gumbo was set before her. She blinked, startled at the size of the portion.

"You'll damage that gorgeous figure if you eat all of that," Logan said, his head tilted toward hers.

His warm breath fanned her bare collarbone and wafted lower, onto the soft round contours of her breasts. Tia felt her nipples pucker at the inference in his tone. Thank God she had convinced Rachel to let her wear the matching cotton sweater over the dress. The thought of how Logan's breath would feel fanning across her naked shoulders almost made her cream her panties. She squirmed around in her seat, trying to break the contact of her body against his.

"You're not going anywhere," Logan whispered against her ear.

His statement shot through her like a bolt of lightning. Was he aware of her nervousness at being so close to him? His arm tightened, forcing her even closer. She stole a peek in his direction and met his gaze full throttle. One corner of his full mouth pulled upward in a knowing grin.

Tia's gaze centered on his lips—and the all-consuming urge to kiss him skittered through her. Her own lips parted in dismay at her unabashed guile to dare such thoughts. What in the world was wrong with her? Had she completely lost all sense of rational?

I truly love him.

Silly girl. Never tell a man you love him before he confesses to loving you.

His hand tightened on her arm briefly, then he removed his arm and turned his attention to his

plate of food. It was then Tia noticed he had ordered the gumbo, too.

Mere coincidence, she told herself. The earlier comment Rachel had made about fate and signs came to mind, but Tia tried to push the thoughts aside. Rachel was prone to nonsense, often mixing reality with fantasy, she reminded herself.

Still, Logan's side was pressed warmly against hers. He may have moved his arm from around her shoulders and his hand from her upper arm — but he hadn't put any distance between their bodies. She picked up her fork and began eating, wondering if she should have foregone the mixed drink the waiter brought.

"A toast to our forthcoming wedding," Rachel suddenly blurted out, followed by a shrill giggle.

Tia grabbed her drink glass and clinked it against the others. Maybe the liquor would take away her inhibitions.

Liquor can only make matters worse.

The words rang out in Tia's head as though her mother was standing beside the table and had shouted. Nothing good could come out of her getting drunk, she reminded, briefly reliving the one time she had drank beer and become loose tongued. She slid her gaze to Rachel. She had unburdened her soul about Logan that night. She glanced aside at Logan, relieved to view the side of his face as he talked with Tom across the table.

Seemed business had suddenly taken their attentions away from the girls.

They lingered over drinks after the waiter cleared the dishes from the table. A small jazz combo played in one corner of the room making it necessary to lean halfway across the table to be heard when you spoke. Tia found she was content to sit and listen to the music. It had been a long time since she'd heard such good jazz.

"I'll take you back to the hotel," Logan said to Tia.

A measure of surprise filled Tia's insides at the prospect of being alone with Logan. She gave a wary glance toward Rachel, only to receive a wink from her friend.

Logan whisked Tia through the crowd at the door of the restaurant and they became immersed with the revelers in the streets until she was ushered inside the front seat of a bright red Porsche. She settled, a bit stunned, into the plush contours of the leather seat, and quickly glanced around while Logan made his way around the car to the driver's door. In some respects she felt she should pinch herself—just to prove what was happening to her was real.

Only seconds passed before Logan was joining her in the car, then he revved the motor and pulled into the flow of traffic, easing along the street. Tia couldn't take her eyes off him. For too

many years she had imagined herself being with him—and now that it was actually coming about—

He glanced at her, smiled, then returned his attention to driving. Tia felt like a million butterflies had been released in her stomach.

Don't read too much into this, a tiny little voice inside her warned. *He's only giving you a ride to the hotel.*

They arrived at the hotel much too quickly. She wasn't ready to say good night or to go to that empty hotel room alone. For a second her thoughts somersaulted.

It's all because I presented myself to him as if I was a giant prize on a silver platter, she reminded. Suddenly she wanted to be as far away from him as possible.

"Thank you for the ride," she said, turning toward him in the hotel lobby. "I can find my way from here."

"I've no doubt that you can," he replied reaching out his hand to grasp her left elbow. "But I can't leave you here in the lobby. Rachel would kick my ass."

Tia laughed suddenly at the thought of tiny Rachel raising a foot to his oh-so-sexy butt.

"And besides, I've been waiting for almost six years to talk to you," he added, ushering her into the elevator. "Which floor?"

Tia reached a hand to the instrument panel and poked the number for the seventh floor. Rachel had remarked that she was staying on a lucky floor, but Tia merely shook her head at her fated observation. She didn't believe in signs—or any of the other nonsense Rachel claimed to live by.

Tia took the room key from her purse as the elevator doors slid open only to feel Logan's warm fingers against hers as he slid it from her hand.

"Which room?"

"Seven-ten," Tia answered. Her nerves had begun to jangle. She glanced at Logan beneath the fall of her lashes as he led the way down the hall. He had been waiting six years to talk to her? Holy cow! Was she going to have to live the nightmare of Senior Prom all over again?

He opened the room and held the door for Tia to enter. Momentarily it was slamming noisily behind them. Tia strode into the room, tossing her purse on the bureau beside the portable TV, her back to Logan. A part of her dreaded turning around and facing him. He must think she was such a fool—giving herself to him and then disappearing for six years.

His hand was hot on her back then his arms spanned her waist and suddenly she found herself turned into his embrace. In the next instant he was driving his mouth down hard against hers, crushing her lips in a passionate kiss.

Pure joy sang through her veins dissolving the tension she harbored. Her arms instantly circled his neck and she pressed her breasts into the solid wall of his chest. God! How she'd dreamed of being in his arms, of kissing him, of feeling his flesh against hers. The urge to shed her clothes was almost overwhelming.

"Get your things," Logan whispered, dragging his lips from hers. "You're coming home with me."

CHAPTER THREE

The bedroom was large and spacious, dimly lit by a shaft of silvery moonlight peeking in through the gossamer curtains at the floor to ceiling windows. Tia could just make out the large four-poster bed in the center of the room as Logan led her toward it.

His hands were on her light cotton sweater, pulling it from her shoulders, then his hands searched out the zipper in the back of her dress and quickly pulled it down, urging the garment down her body.

His mouth closed over hers as he pulled her against his chest. The feel of his body leaning into hers sent her senses reeling. Even though he still remained fully dressed, there was an erotic assault on Tia's nerves just knowing that beneath the expensive fabric of his dress shirt lay warm, male flesh soon to meld with her own. She raised her hands and began opening the buttons running

down the front of his shirt. All the while, his mouth was feverishly assaulting her lips. It was hot and demanding—relaying the sexual message she had longed to hear.

He helped her finish releasing the buttons on his shirt, threw it aside, then pushed Tia down on the bed, pulling off her dress as she sank amidst the softness of a plush coverlet. Clad only in bra and panties, she peered through the dim moonlight at him as he stripped off his pants and underwear.

He came to her hot and needing, naked and oh-so-very male! A moan of total abandon leapt from Tia's throat as she wrapped her arms around his bare shoulders and welcomed his length atop her body. The unmistakable firmness of his erection pressed into her abdomen.

"I told myself that we'd be together again...one day," he whispered, pulling his mouth from her lips. He rained tiny hot kisses across her cheeks, her forehead, then onto her arched throat. "Oh, Tia. The waiting has been almost unbearable."

His words lodged in her brain. Was she dreaming that he was speaking everything she had been hoping to hear for as long as she had been in love with him? But then he hadn't confessed he loved her—yet.

His hands traveled across her breasts, releasing her bra. His mouth found her nipples and suckled

each in turn, nearly driving her wild. His lips kissed a moist path from her breasts onto her belly, then lowered to follow his hands as he pushed down her panties.

"Oh, God!" Tia murmured.

"Your body is exquisite," Logan said. He paused and pulled back, resting on one elbow. He gazed down at her shimmering silhouette in the silvery moonlight. "I can't tell you how many nights I've dreamed of having you here—in my bed."

Were her ears deceiving her?

His hands caressed the length of her body as he kissed her mouth, delving his tongue inside to taste her sweetness. His palm grazed her flesh, lightly inspecting, pressing hotly against her skin. She felt on fire, awakened once more to Logan Summerfield's power over her. His fingers found the dense mat of brown hair and began stroking her sensitive folds.

She pulled in a quick breath as his probing fingers slid inside her body, then pulled out, only to slide back in again. She lost all sense of reasoning and when she felt the urge to spread her legs, giving him full leisure to her crotch, she did so without a second's hesitation.

A guttural moan came from Logan's throat. He pulled his mouth from hers and began a heated assault on her breasts, licking, sucking and

nipping at her sensitive nipples.

Climax bore down on Tia, but she didn't want to cum by way of Logan's fingers. She wanted to feel his body joined to hers—to have him thrust her to orgasm.

"Logan, take me now," she rasped, her voice hoarse. She groped his naked flesh, urging his body atop hers. "Take me now."

He didn't hesitate, but hurried to lever himself atop her needing body. A quick stab between her legs and he slid inside her. He paused ever so briefly, as though realizing what was taking place, then he began to move, lunging in and pulling back, almost to the point of extraction then lunging in again.

A breath caught in Tia's throat. Tears gathered in her eyes. Reality had taken a beautiful turn. She hugged Logan's bare back, holding his body as tightly against hers as humanly possible. She never wanted to let him go. The wait to be with him had been too long.

She felt it then. Exquisite sensations raced along her limbs and made her heart flutter. She arched her back and panted through her mouth, so overwhelmed by climatic spasms that she quivered beneath the weight of Logan's body.

His mouth suddenly found her lips and devoured them as he reached his own climax. He thrust madly into her body, striving wildly to reap

every tingling sensation possible from the act.

“Oh, Tia! Oh, Tia!” he proclaimed, his breath hot and moist against her lips.

I love you, she wanted to say. *I’ve loved you all my life.* But she kept silent—hoping Logan would confess his love for her. A tiny tear squeezed out of her left eye and lay on her cheek when she realized he wasn’t going to speak the words she wanted so desperately to hear.

I’ve done it again, she thought. I’ve given myself to Logan again.

* * * *

Tia’s eyes flickered open. She stared at the ornate white ceiling with its elegantly carved cornices. For an instant she didn’t recognize where she was then it all came flooding back to her.

She was at Logan’s house.

In his bed.

The weight of a male arm lying across her chest became suddenly apparent. She lowered her eyes and inspected the tanned forearm with its sprinkling of dark hair, the large hand with the gently tapered fingers. Did he get manicures? She wondered, staring at his nails. She grimaced at the thought. Of course he got manicures. He was Logan Summerfield, one of New Orleans most prominent young attorneys—a trial lawyer.

Criminal suits were his specialty. And why not? He was brilliant.

Or at least brilliant enough to get her into bed.

Anger flared inside her. How could she have let it happen? How could she have let Logan between her legs again?

I'm really hard up, she chided, feeling the urge to push his arm off her chest. He was crushing her breasts. And his warmth was all too noticeable. She turned her head on the pillow to look at him. Already she felt her senses wavering—and she'd only awakened!

"Morning."

His voice was gravelly sounding, sleepy, and sexy as hell. Tia's breath caught in her throat. How long had he been awake?

His arm moved, and his hand closed around her right breast.

"What are we doing, Logan?" she asked confused by her own willingness to sleep with him.

"You've finally come home," he answered lightly.

Her body stiffened at his words. Did he mean that they had had their reunion—of sorts? She levered herself up in the bed, pulling the sheet over her naked breasts and baring the majority of Logan's body.

"Why so modest?" he remarked, a slanted grin

on his handsome face.

His dark hair was sleep-tousled and a hint of beard shone on his strong chin. And oh, that naked physique—her lower jaw suddenly dropped open and she could do little else, aside from stare at him.

“Six years ago when you were my prom date,” he began, levering himself up on one elbow and taking her left hand in his. He dipped his head and kissed her knuckles, one at a time, until Tia thought for sure he was about to take her again, this time without any participation on her part at all.

“I remember,” she managed to say. She tried to take her hand back but he refused to turn it loose.

He lifted his head and locked gazes with her. In the next instant he touched her face with his fingers, lightly caressing her cheek.

“That night with you was a life-changing experience,” he said, his eyes holding her gaze.

“Yes. It was,” Tia stated. She glanced away as anger rose inside her. Of all the stupid things to do—give herself to a high school jock—The swell of anger was so intense that she yanked her hand free of his and threw off the covers. How noble of him to bring it to her attention!

“Tia,” he exclaimed, a question in his tone.

“I should never have come here, Logan,” she said as she hurried across the floor to the

bathroom. She managed to snag her dress and underwear off the floor before her eyes became so blurry with tears that she couldn't see. "And that night was the biggest mistake of my life!" she threw at him as she slammed the bathroom door.

She threw the lock and leaned her back against the solid wood structure. How could she be so stupid? Twice in one lifetime!

After a few minutes, she dressed and washed her face, then inched the bathroom door open. There was no sign of Logan. She picked up her sweater and slipped on her shoes then turned to leave the room—only to come face to face with Logan as he stepped through the doorway.

"I'm going to talk," he informed her. "And *you're* going to listen."

CHAPTER FOUR

She wasn't quite certain she liked his authoritative manner, but she halted her feet anyway. A surge of something akin to sexual arousal wafted through her at the masculine sensuality of the man. He was dressed in a navy blue business suit with a white shirt and blue pinstripe tie. His face was clean-shaven and his dark hair neatly combed.

"I was serious when I told you that what happened between us on prom night changed my life." He stared at her, reinforcing his words. "Despite what it meant to you —"

"You took my virginity—for God's sake! What do you think it meant to me?" she railed, propping her hands atop her hips.

"I don't recall forcing you."

Tia swallowed the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat.

He smiled slightly and his gaze traveled along her length. "Do you recall the evening

differently?"

"Am I on trial here?"

"No."

"Then why the cross-examination? Do you need to practice your courtroom tactics?"

She regretted being flip the moment the words left her mouth. She raised one hand and raked her fingers through her hair, disturbed by her own reaction to his words.

"Hardly," he said. "The law firm is doing very well."

"I'm thrilled for you," she quipped. "But then, you were always good at whatever you set your mind to."

He let out a long breath. "Are we going to stand here and exchange verbal insults?"

"I'm willing if you are."

He shook his head as if to clear it. "I don't want to argue with you, honey," he said, his tone sincere.

"I'm leaving," Tia said. She strode past him, but he caught her by the wrist.

"I haven't told you what I've been waiting six years to say, Tia. Won't you give me five minutes?"

His tone nearly melted her heart. Five minutes hardly added up to a lifetime of heartbreak. She guessed she could spare him the time. But she'd be on guard. He was smart and cunning—she had

found that out—again—last night.

“For six years I wondered if I’d gotten you pregnant that night,” he began, his voice low toned. “It was very irresponsible of me to have sex with you, Tia—despite the heat of the moment.”

“And I suppose that was *my* fault,” she put in.

“No. The fault belonged to both of us.”

“You kissed me first.”

“But you enticed me with your beauty.”

Tia jerked her head around to stare at him. There was compassion in the depth of his warm brown eyes—compassion and—

“You have no idea what I was feeling that night, Tia.”

“I think I might,” she growled. “In fact, I can recall it vividly.” Her cheeks suddenly flamed at the memory of how hard and long and hot his cock was. “Remember, it was my first time.”

He moved suddenly and grasped her by both upper arms.

“I should shake some sense into you,” he spewed, anger jumping to the fore. “I’m trying to tell you how it made me feel to take your virginity!” He glared at her for a moment, then he muttered a few choice cuss words under his breath and released her. Turning on his heel, he quickly disappeared through the outer room.

Tia was left standing in the center of the room, her feet braced, staring after him. What had just

taken place? Or had she just found out how little she meant to Logan Summerfield?

Their relationship hadn't been much before he asked her to be his date to the Senior Prom. In fact, they barely had a speaking acquaintance. She wasn't included in his circle of friends, but they had most every class together since sophomore year. Tia had first become aware of him in grade school. Her parents had moved to New Orleans when she was in the fourth grade due to her father's transfer. Even then, Logan was the cutest boy in class. Her family had stayed in town until senior graduation, when her father accepted another transfer, this time to Ohio.

She felt like the weight of the world had somehow fallen on her shoulders. Well, at least now she knew there was no use pining her life away over Logan Summerfield. All she had managed to do was lose her virginity and then six years later, hand over her self-respect to him.

"I'm such a loser," she mumbled, looking round the bedroom. Where was her suitcase? Maybe Logan hadn't brought it upstairs during their heated arrival last night. She let an agonized groan slip from her throat as she headed downstairs to have a look around.

It dawned on her as she descended the winding oak staircase that since she had given up her hotel room last night, she'd probably be hard pressed to

obtain a replacement with Mardi Gras in full swing.

"Holy cow!" she exclaimed, and immediately sat down on the stairs. "Rachel's wedding is this evening." How was she going to explain things to Rachel? "If I get out of this, I'm hightailing it back to Ohio and hiding myself behind the rows of computers and calculators in the office." She took her cell phone out of her purse and punched in Rachel's private number.

"You're at Logan's house?" Rachel exclaimed. "Congratulations on an epic scale, Tia. I'm proud of you."

Tia rolled her eyes in exasperation as she listened to Rachel expound on the virtues of having sex with Logan.

"But, Rachel," Tia interrupted. "I have to leave. We had a big fight."

"About what?"

Tia thought for a moment. "I'm not sure." It sounded too petty to admit that she had wanted Logan to say he loved her and when he didn't utter the words, she got mad at herself for expecting the impossible.

"Don't go anywhere. I'll be right over."

* * * *

"This is worse than Prom night," Tia explained as

she let Rachel in the front door of Logan's house. She threw both hands into the air. "Maybe I'm just into screwing the guy – with six year intervals."

Rachel giggled. "You're making a mountain out of a molehill." She set the large tote bag she carried down in the front foyer. "This is some palace," she exclaimed, gazing around at the décor.

"Yes. It's gorgeous," Tia admitted, hardly in the mood to give Rachel a guided tour. "But I can't stay here. And since I turned in my hotel key –"

"You're shit out of luck, girl. There aren't any rooms available in this town. For God's sake. There are ten thousand tourists celebrating in the streets. You've no choice but to kiss and make up with Logan—at least until my wedding is over." She winked at Tia. "And if you do kiss and make up—maybe you won't want to leave."

Tia released a long sigh. "I don't know what I was thinking last night," she admitted, shaking her head. "But daylight brought a whole new outlook on the subject."

"Stop being so melodramatic," Rachel ordered. "I brought over your costume for the wedding." She began pulling various items from the shopping bag. "You're gonna look so sexy in this getup that Logan will want to screw you again." She giggled as she handed Tia the brightly colored items.

"What is all this?" Tia asked, somewhat amused at all the silky garments Rachel kept pulling out of the bag.

"A belly dancer's costume. And here's the mask. Isn't it just the wildest thing you've ever seen?" She held a bright purple mask festooned with peacock feathers up to Tia's face. "You'll look gorgeous!"

"I doubt it," Tia muttered, taking the mask from Rachel's hand. She walked over to a large mirror on the wall and surveyed herself in the mask. It was very festive, she admitted, gazing at herself. If only she felt as gay inside.

"Get in the spirit of Carnival, Tia. Don't you know that gaiety is infectious? And to be married at the time of Carnival is to have happiness in your life always."

"You made that up," Tia accused.

Rachel shrugged her shoulders. "So what if I did? I'm determined to marry Tom and have a happy life."

Tia couldn't help but reach out and hug Rachel. "And I hope you do," she said. Suddenly she felt almost childish for burdening Rachel with her problems. It was her wedding day, and she should do everything in her power to see that it was a wonderful time for her. "I'm sorry I unloaded on you." She pulled in a deep breath, determined to push the incident with Logan aside. "What can I

do to help you?"

"I've a ton of things to do today," Rachel confided. "I've got last-minute phone calls to make, the cake to pick up. I have to confirm our reservations on the cruise ship."

"Oh, Rachel! You're going on a cruise for your honeymoon? How exciting," Tia exclaimed, a broad smile spanning her face.

"To Cancun," Rachel continued. "And several other places I can't remember. It was Tom's idea. He's so romantic."

Tia listened to Rachel's description of Tom for the next five minutes, then Rachel insisted Tia try on her costume—just to be certain it fit.

"It's quite revealing," Tia confided. She stood before Rachel in the purple, green and gold costume. Purple silk pants covered Tia's legs, with green bands at her ankles. Gold sandals were on her feet. A metal belt of shell motifs rode low on her hips with gold colored scarves hanging from each motif. A purple silk bodice with wide silk sleeves barely concealed Tia's ample breasts. Her midriff was bare, displaying her trim waist and the rounded curve of her hips. A purple and gold scarf worn as a veil covered Tia's lower face and when the feather-adorned mask was in place across her eyes, she completely lost her identity.

Rachel gave a long low whistle as she inspected Tia in the costume. "You're one hot mama," she

exclaimed.

Tia gazed at her reflection in the mirror and felt grateful that there was an accompanying mask for the getup. *As long as I keep the mask on, no one will know who I am.*

But then she thought again of Logan, and wondered what he would think about the way she looked, or would he be too mad to notice?

"You can make these phone calls for me, if you want." Rachel pulled a slip of paper from her jeans pocket. "We're having a small reception at the Raging Fire Pit Restaurant after the ceremony. Just tell everybody to be there by ten."

"Okay." Tia bit on her bottom lip as another question surfaced in her mind. "What's Logan's costume like?"

Rachel shrugged both shoulders. "Haven't the foggiest. Tom's in charge of male costumes."

"Rachel, if I show up in this belly dancer costume and Logan ends up wearing a tux—I'm gonna be pissed."

"Tom assured me it's all taken care of. Don't worry." She narrowed her gaze on Tia. "You worry a lot, you know. Why don't you just let yourself go—you know—cut loose and live."

Easy for you to say, Tia thought, gazing at Rachel. She looked like she was celebrating Carnival most of the time. She grinned at Rachel's choice of attire—faded hip hugging jeans and a

skimpy T-shirt without a bra. 'TWIN PEAKS' was stenciled across the front of the shirt—calling attention to Rachel's plump breasts and pert nipples.

"I'll keep that in mind," Tia answered, removing the veil and mask from her head. "But in the meantime—"

"To hell with it! You're here in Logan's house—so make the most of it." Rachel gathered her purse and sunglasses and turned to the door. "Meet me on the corner of Bourbon and Canal at eight o'clock—in costume."

CHAPTER FIVE

Tia had no idea what Logan might say when he returned to his house and found her still there. She had decided she had little choice but to stay after finding Logan's study, a large room furnished with heavy mahogany furniture and sporting book lined walls, and calling every hotel in the phone book, only to learn they were booked solid.

Resigned to the matter, she pushed it aside and made the phone calls for Rachel, then she called Rachel's cell phone and updated her about her guests.

"Everyone will be there," she said.

"Great! I'm at the bakery—picking up the cake," Rachel said. "Wait 'til you see it. It's beautiful!"

She sounds so happy, Tia thought as she listened to Rachel describe her wedding cake. She wished she could say the same for herself. She

chewed on her bottom lip. If only she could envision Logan's reaction when he got home and found her still there.

She had come up with a plan of sorts. Once the wedding ceremony was over and the reception done, she'd call a taxi on her cell phone and go to the airport. Rachel and Tom would be off on their honeymoon, so it wouldn't matter what she did anyway.

She resisted the urge to explore the expansive house with its elegant furnishings and beautiful architecture. She did find the kitchen however, all totally modern with stainless steel appliances and marble countertops. She fixed herself some lunch, then went into the garden area at the back of the property and sat in the sun for several hours. She tried not to daydream—to imagine things other than what they were with Logan. Wishful thinking would only get her hopes up, and God only knew how detrimental dashed hopes were.

Logan arrived home around seven o'clock. Tia was in the living room when he came into the front foyer. He peered inside the room at her then went up the staircase to the second floor.

Tia sat on a gold brocade covered couch and tried to steady her nerves. She hoped there wouldn't be another screaming match between them. Momentarily she heard a door slam upstairs and Logan coming down the stairs. Determined to

meet him head on if he were of the arguing nature, she pinned her eyes on the wide opening to the room, and waited.

Shock coupled with surprise darted through her insides as Logan came into view.

“What does your costume look like?” he asked, his tone humorous.

Tia raised one hand and covered her smile as she rose from the couch. Logan—gorgeous Logan—stood in the open doorway, dressed as a Roman gladiator. A short white skirt rode low on his hips and leather sandals with straps lacing up his legs were on his feet. A gold mask hiding his upper face completed the outfit.

Her mouth went suddenly dry at the sight of him. He was so gorgeous—even in the Roman attire—or perhaps because of it. She could do little aside from ogle his bare chest and exposed legs. Every inch of him was muscle and smooth skin. Aside from a sprinkling of black chest hair and a froth of hair on either leg—

Her senses reeled, and her thoughts immediately turned erotic. The urge to approach him and ask for a peek beneath his little Roman skirt almost overwhelmed her.

“I must have been out of my mind to agree to this,” he continued. A chuckle punctuated his words.

Tia giggled aloud. “I’m not removing my mask

all evening," she confided.

Logan reached up and removed his mask. "I'm glad you're still here," he told her.

Tia dropped her gaze. "I'm leaving...once the wedding ceremony is over."

He stared at her, until she whisked past him to go put her costume on. Her packed suitcase sat at the foot of the stairs ready to be picked up and carted out. Tears stung the back of her eyes as she hurried up the stairs. If only she could get through this evening—she'd never have to return to New Orleans or see Logan Summerfield ever again.

* * * *

Tia sat in the passenger seat and tried not to shiver. The evenings were cold despite the warm days New Orleans was privileged with. She glanced at Logan in the Roman costume, thinking he would probably be colder than she once they were out of the car.

The streets of the French Quarter were teeming with carnival goers. Music blared from the open doorways of bars and cafes. People crowded the roadway as well as the sidewalks and bawdy language filled the air. Costumed partygoers danced in crowded groups and it wasn't unusual to see couples making out, pressed up against the walls of shops or ducking into dark alleys between

businesses.

Logan and Tia pushed their way into the crowd. Earlier that day, one of the many clubs of New Orleans had its parade and an assortment of brightly colored glass beads and trinkets lay strewn about the streets, broken and trod on from those still intent on partying.

Tia allowed Logan to tug her along through the crowd. Occasionally an inebriated partygoer made reference to her costume. One man, red-cheeked from either the cold temperatures or too much to drink, offered her a ten spot to dance for him.

"The lady only dances for me," Logan shouted in return.

Another man clutched his crotch and invited Tia to join him for some fun. "I guarantee one of us will have an orgasm," he shouted.

Tia laughed at him and clutched Logan's hand tighter. She didn't exactly feel threatened by the bawdy language or the equally racy sights, but the sooner they arrived at the corner of Bourbon and Canal Streets, the sooner the wedding festivities could be started, thus the end would be in sight.

Tia lost all track of time as Logan pushed his way then pulled her through the crowd. She only knew that once they reached the designated corner, Logan pulled her into the circle of his arms and shared his warmth with her. Due to the excessive crowd, Tia stood fast within his

embrace, leery of separating herself from him for fear she'd be swept along with the revelers.

His body was warm, pressing against her back and she soon relaxed against him, covering his hands with her own clasped around her waist. She became engrossed in watching the crowd. A number of revelers were on an upper balcony of one of the hotels along the parade route. They were partying heartily, dancing and tossing beads and other prizes to those on the street below. Occasionally a woman would lift up her T-shirt and show the passersby her bare breasts. Down on the street a raunchy remark could be heard, requesting she bare more of her body.

Uniformed police, some on horseback, wove their way amid the crowd, arresting some now and then for drunkenness or excessive lewd acts. Tia actually glimpsed one couple fucking at the edge of the crowd. The sight sent an erotic jolt racing through her, making her at once aware of the virile man pressing against her back.

After one such incident—a young man openly fondled his girlfriend's crotch and she stroked his bulging fly—Tia realized she felt moist in her own and purposely pressed her rounded butt into Logan's groin. She then wondered if she should have restrained herself when Logan raised his arms from around her waist and clasped her left breast in his big hand. His lips found her earlobe.

"Carnival has a way of enticing even the most reluctant participant," he whispered, his breath warming the side of her face.

Tia was considering a noncommittal way to reply when Rachel suddenly appeared in front of her. She blinked her eyes for a few seconds, trying to decide whether the vision in carnival colors was really her friend.

"It's us, silly," Rachel said, her tone loud to be heard over all the party noise.

Rachel was garbed as a fairy princess, with yards of flowing purple silk surrounding her small body, a tall pointed cap with a silk scarf attached to its peaked top hanging down her back and a brilliant pink mask, endowed with black ostrich feathers, covering her upper face.

Tom was a sheik. His long white flowing robes concealed everything but his head. A black mask hid his upper face.

"How come you get to wear clothes?" Logan asked Tom, a chuckle in his tone.

"Come on! Let's get this show on the road!" Rachel exclaimed. "The minister is meeting us at the restaurant." She started shouting and dancing to the jazz music filling the street, her silk skirts gathered in either hand. "Everybody follow me."

Stimulated by all the bawdy sights and the fact that she'd aroused herself by pressing against Logan's body, Tia hurried to join in the revelry,

picking up the beat to the music and dancing along behind Rachel. Tom and Logan were left to bring up the rear.

Rachel was off through the crowd with only the tip of her pointed cap visible most of the time as the others strove to keep up with her. While the whole thing seemed out of context where a marriage ceremony was concerned, Tia had to admit she was having a good time. Almost at once she had felt the excitement and gaiety the celebration exuded and became enlivened by the unadulterated pleasure of letting go, of letting her hair down and having a good time.

Tia swayed with the jazzy music, wiggling her hips and being for all the world like she imagined a belly dancer to be. She laughed out loud at her own antics and periodically joined Rachel in the middle of the street, bumping and grinding to the wild music while the crowd pulled back to give them room and cheer them on.

She was enjoying herself immensely when she realized they had reached their destination, and Rachel was greeting the minister who would perform the marriage ceremony.

The small group was forced to stand closely together in order to hear the minister's words. Tia stood to Rachel's side, directly across from Logan. His eyes were on Tia the whole time, making the pit of her stomach tremor.

It only took a few minutes for the couple to become man and wife, then Tom was kissing Rachel feverishly while he enfolded her small body within his flowing white robes. The guests had gathered around for the ceremony and now raised a boisterous round of applause, enticing those nearby to join in. Momentarily they were all pushing into the restaurant to continue the celebration.

Tia felt a warm hand on the rise of her bare hip and knew Logan was behind her. She let him maneuver her through the crowd to the long table reserved in the rear of the room for the wedding party. He held out a chair while she slid into it, and then he took the seat beside her.

It was warm inside the building and Tia's toes and fingers were near frozen, despite the fact that she felt all warmed up inside from the recent activity in the street. She didn't object when Logan snuggled against her side, encompassing her shoulders with his arm. She turned a smiling face to him and was greeted by an unusual look in his eyes.

"I've always thought there was some sort of magic about Mardi Gras," he said in a low tone. "Now I know it's true."

Was there magic in Mardi Gras? Tia wondered. She had become completely immersed in the gaiety of the event. Why, she didn't quite know,

but it had really happened. She had let loose and for the entire time she had cavorted and danced along the narrow avenues of the French Quarter, she had seemed carefree and light hearted, unburdened by the past.

"Please don't leave, Tia," Logan suddenly said. His eyes held hers in a trans-like grip that she couldn't look away from. "Do you believe it's possible for two people to fall in love then be separated for six years, only to be reunited and have that love rekindled?" He pulled her closer, so close that she could feel his heart beating in his broad chest. "I know it sounds insane —"

Were her ears deceiving her? Or had Logan just said he loved her? She gave a brief shake to her head, fanning her soft brown curls across her shoulders as she pushed her way free of his arms.

"It's Mardi Gras magic, Tia," he said, pulling her back into his embrace. "I love you, Tia. I love you. When Rachel told me you were coming back to New Orleans — I could hardly believe it."

Tia's heart nearly fluttered out of her chest.

Logan stroked her cheek with his fingertip. "I think I first loved you in sixth grade." He laughed softly. "You were the only little girl who wore pigtails."

"Oh, my gosh! Don't remind me," she stated, pulling away.

He pulled her against his chest and held her

tightly. "I loved those pigtails, Tia." He kissed her. "And I loved the way you gave yourself to me on that prom night, sweetheart."

"Logan, I just laid there on my back with my legs—"

"Don't ruin a beautiful memory for me." He kissed her; long, sensuously—a kiss that showed his feelings for her. "I've thought about that night for six years, relived it in so many ways." He pulled in a deep breath. "You taught me the meaning of love that night, Tia. You showed me what it means to love someone."

She blinked her eyes at him. She did love him—that was why she went all the way with him that night.

"Before that night, I viewed sex with a girl just as one more conquest—something to brag about in the locker room."

Her eyes grew big. "Logan, you didn't—"

"No, Tia. I never bragged about you. I didn't understand until then what it was to have a woman in love with me. And I didn't know my true feelings for you until that night. Please say you'll stay, darling. We have so much living to catch up on."

The noise in the room suddenly seeped back into their midst as Rachel and Tom joined them at the table. Tia turned toward Rachel as Logan released her. Rachel looked dewy-eyed and her

princess costume was slightly askew, but laughter bubbled from her throat and Tia thought it was the happiest she had ever seen her.

“Feel the magic, Tia?” Rachel asked. “Do you feel the magic?”

Tia wound her fingers inside Logan’s warm hand and brought his knuckles to her lips. She placed a soft kiss on his pinkie finger.

“Yes, Rachel.” She felt Logan’s hand squeeze hers. “I feel the magic.”

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I began writing freelance almost twenty years ago and eventually my short stories became longer. The characters seemed to take over and draw their stories out. I first submitted a novella length story to Extasy Books in 2003 and it was accepted. That was Captive Heart, the historical romance now on the site. I have eight titles with Extasy Books. New ideas come to mind every day and some of them find their way on the computer screen. When I'm not writing, I enjoy traveling with my husband Dave.