

ELLORA'S CAVE *Sophisticate*



BEAUTIFUL
Stranger

KATALINA LEON

Beautiful Stranger

Katalina Leon

Lily Fontaine is a newscaster and former beauty queen, but those roles don't suit her anymore. She's healing from divorce and ready to make big changes in her life, but first she needs her sexual confidence back.

She wants a lover without the risk of heartbreak and considers hiring a male escort as a special treat. Her best friend offers a provocative solution to her request. On her birthday, Lily returns to New Orleans, the place of her birth, to meet a special man. She plans to fly in and fly out for a three-day weekend of cool music, great food and hot sex, with no emotional attachment and no further contact with her "escort". She wants to pay to play – what can go wrong?

David is perfect—even if he *is* eleven years her junior. He's strapping hot, intelligent and knows how to take charge. The attraction is instantaneous. With just the clothes on her back, Lily sheds her old life and follows a beautiful stranger into bayou country for the adventure of a lifetime.

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Beautiful Stranger

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Edited by Mary Moran

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Dedication

I give great thanks and gratitude to my hard-working editor Mary Moran for befriending a *Beautiful Stranger*.

—Katalina Leon.

Chapter One

"This is Lily Fontaine signing off for the late, late edition of Channel Three News. Good night and have a beautiful tomorrow."

The red light on the television camera dimmed. She was off the air and tomorrow was already here. It was two a.m. and technically she was two hours into her forty-third year. She was so eager to leave the television station she bolted from her chair and yanked the microphone off her jacket. It instantly tangled in her dark curls and tugged against her scalp. An exasperated breath rattled out of her. She was trapped. This was yet another small irritation meant to slow her escape. She plopped back into the chair. Her fingers fumbled to remove the mic from her hair as her gaze swept across the cavernous studio with its cold concrete floors. Her heart sank as the mic tangled further. She couldn't imagine a more pleasureless way to spend her birthday. In a perfect world, right now she would be wrapping her thighs around a gorgeous man and enjoying a bit of fun-spirited, hot-blooded sexual recreation. That's how she really wanted to spend her birthday. It was going to happen. She would make it happen. The fact she didn't have a man in her life wasn't going to stop her from realizing her birthday ambitions. She had a plan. She just needed to get out of here and get on with it.

The tangled mic wouldn't give. A ridiculous infomercial, featuring overenthusiastic people began. She turned away from the monitors. Where did they find these easily excitable people? It was too late at night to watch that level of peppiness. The studio was uncomfortably chilly. A shiver passed through her. She drew a deep breath and let her thoughts wander.

Lying skin to skin, pinned beneath a warm, muscular body, sounded heavenly right now. She imagined how wonderful it would feel to have a man's hands wrapped around her wrists, holding her firmly against the mattress as his strong body pressed between her thighs, demanding a hard, fast fuck. Her breath caught. *Yes, please.* She couldn't wait for it to happen. She wondered, would it be more fun to surrender to a dominating and demanding lover, or would it be better to take charge and treat the man as if he were a love slave eager to fulfill her every desire? *Every selfish desire.*

She had so many untested desires. Where would she start? Part of her craved the power of being in control and setting the pace, but another equally strong part of her soul longed for the bittersweet taste of submission. Which one was for her? What did her heart truly want? Her mind blanked. Her lips parted as she stared into space. It was a hard question to answer. They both sounded good. She would be delighted to explore either scenario. Her head spun from the possibilities. She actually hadn't tried it either way and really didn't know which she would end up preferring, but she would find out soon enough. *Sex purely for fun.* Experimentation and adventure were the new marching

orders. Now that her libido had finally kicked into high gear, where would exploration start in the mysterious and uncharted realm of sexual freedom?

Her fingers tried to untangle the mic from a different angle but it didn't work, she was thoroughly ensnared. She could hardly wait to get out of here and enjoy a little male attention, ending a long, sad, self-imposed sexual drought. She knew guilt-free sex for pleasure's sake would be the perfect birthday present. No decorative wrapping or bows necessary. She'd take her birthday gift in his birthday suit, thank you. Her mind was made up. All she needed now was one interesting man who could keep a secret.

She closed her tired eyes to give them a moment's rest. Her fingers fumbled blindly with the mic. The knot got worse. She tried to be patient as she reminded herself fun and freedom were just hours away. A slight smile crossed her lips as she mentally patted herself on the back for being decisive and allowing herself a forbidden taste of carnal indulgence. It had taken weeks to work up the nerve to go through with it. The hardest part had been granting herself permission to even consider it. The last crucial step was mustering the courage to make the call, and today she was more than ready to call.

"Is there a problem, Miss Fontaine?" A technician stepped forward to help her.

Lily waved them off, wanting to be alone with her fantasies. "Thank you, I can manage." She couldn't. The mic knotted further. Was she ever going to get out of here? It had been far too long since she had enjoyed a man. She woke during the night, craving a man's touch the way the thirsty need water. It had become a thirst that wouldn't be quenched. It went far beyond any physical need she could satisfy herself. She needed a man's touch. She needed to see him, hear him and touch him. She needed to see the ecstatic look on his face when he went over the edge with her. Life just couldn't go on without it. She knew deep in her heart that regaining her sexual confidence and sense of self were essential in taking the next step in life. Her deepest desire was to move forward with confidence. Confidence was the Holy Grail of self-esteem, and the confident, feminine, sexual side of her being had taken an emotional bruising during her divorce. It was time to allow that part of herself to heal. That was the real issue. She was broken and needed to be fixed. Her heart was convinced a little life-affirming, selfishly pleasurable sex was the medicine she most needed to mend her heart.

The mic was now hopelessly tangled in her hair. Her spine stiffened as her frustration rose. She just wanted to leave. "Marion, can you bring me a pair of scissors?" she called out to her friend, who was also the show's producer.

"Can you be trusted with a sharp object?" A sleepy-looking lady walked toward her and started to untangle Lily's hair from the mic with her fingertips. "You don't even need to say it. I can tell by the look on your face exactly what you're thinking. You don't like the silly news stories you're forced to report. 'Everything on the news is either trite or tragedy.' Lily, you say the same thing every night." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Take a hint, it's time to move on. We both need to move on. There's no challenge here."

She glanced at Marion's exhausted expression and froze. That wasn't what she had been thinking, but Marion spoke the truth. Marion was absolutely right. There was no challenge here. "Marion, I know it's over. I just don't know what to do next. Channel Three keeps scheduling my segment later and later at night. I used to be so proud of my prime-time news slot. If they schedule me any later at night—I'll be doing the morning show."

Marion's lip curled. "Honey, don't kid yourself, this *is* the morning show. You know things aren't going to get better here. Have you given my ideas any thought?"

Her shoulders tensed. "I have. It's just so hard to let go of the familiar even though the familiar is letting go of me," she huffed.

Marion nodded her head. "Lily, how much longer are we going to hang around here? We could be doing so much more. You have so many unused talents. Do you have to be tricked out of this dead-end or forcibly dragged away?"

Lily pushed away from her desk and rubbed her tired eyes. "Once upon a time, I was a trail-blazer. I had confidence in my career and my sexuality. I was ready for any challenge. I let my ex rob me of that and I want it back." The breath hissed out of her. "Damn Jimmy for making a fool of me. I'm not going to let another pleasureless day go by. I'm jumping back in. I'm ready to live again."

Marion smiled. "I've known you since college and I've been waiting three years to hear your spirit return. Please let me fix you up with one of Stephen's friends. A couple have been begging to meet you."

Lily shook her head. "No way. No blind dates."

"What Jimmy did to you was terrible, but you can't give every man the evil eye for the rest of your life."

"Have I been giving men the evil eye?" She was genuinely surprised to hear it.

"You have. Lily, you give them the evil eye and then you interrogate them."

"Only that one guy, Frank, and I'm so glad I did. I found out right away he was exactly the sort of man I need to avoid. No more Jimmys for me. I can't face the prospect of getting attached to a casual lover then being betrayed. You'll be happy to hear, I think I've found a way around my problem." Her fingers stroked Marion's sleeve. "You've always been my kindest supporter and dear friend. I promise you from today forward you can expect a new and improved Lily. I have a plan to jump-start this new phase in my life." Her brows dipped in distraction as her hands patted Marion's excessively broad shoulder pads. "Why do you wear these? You're as padded as a linebacker."

Marion frowned. "I know they're dated but they make my hips look slimmer."

"Sweetie, there's nothing wrong with your hips. A woman's hips are supposed to be padded." Lily's voice dropped to a whisper. "Soon, shoulder pads and Channel Three will be part of our past." She walked away from her façade reporting desk, which looked elegant from the front but had splintered plywood on the back. "I'm not blind. I know we're being pushed out to make way for infomercials and college girls reporting

blog news.” Her voice lapsed into the deep Southern roots she spent years learning to suppress. “Make way for HD television. HD stands for highly demeaning, heinous defamation, horribly dejected—Jimmy made me feel dejected and things are going to change. Do want to hear my plan?”

Marion sighed. “Of course I do, but make it quick, I’m ready to fall asleep standing.”

Lily’s eyes lit gleefully. “You’ll wake up for this,” she laughed. “I’m ready to take risks. I hate this shift. It’s a slap in the face. I’ve gotten better at my job. I’ve become more professional and this is my reward? I’ve been thinking a lot about this. I need my mojo back so I can start a new venture. I can’t do that feeling broken and dejected. I want to feel like a woman again. I want to be in charge. Once that happens, I know I can move forward with the rest of my life and it starts today.”

Marion yawned. “How are you going to accomplish this miracle of reinvention? Are you finally going to trust yourself and start that production company we’ve been talking about for years?” Marion laughed and steered Lily toward the back of the studio. “There’s something waiting for you on the back table.”

Lily saw a glowing birthday cake flickering in a dim corner of the studio and walked toward it. “I’m going to do something I normally wouldn’t dream of. For once I just want to have uncomplicated, screaming-hot sex with a man without falling in love, meeting his parents or worrying about the future. I haven’t had a man inside me for so long I’ll probably lose my mind when it finally happens.” She closed her eyes as a vivid image formed. “I want to feel a man’s weight pressing down on me. I want to smell that hot, musky scent on his skin. I need to get laid and hear a man moan. Is it a crime to fuck a gorgeous stranger just because I want to?”

“Happy birthday!” The camera crew from the night shift stepped from behind a movable wall and shouted a cheerful greeting.

Lily gasped when she realized others were standing so close and listening. Her hand clamped over her mouth.

The lighting director blushed bright pink and struggled not to burst out laughing. The crew sensed Lily’s mortification and immediately backed away.

The lighting director muttered, “I have to get an extension cord. I’ll be right back.” The crew followed close behind him.

Lily struggled to compose herself. Her fingers nervously plucked at a button on her jacket. She called out to the crew, “Thank you, everyone, I really appreciate the cake.” *Dear god, how embarrassing.* She sheepishly bent down, hovering over the rising heat that forty-three blazing candles radiated.

Marion leaned close and patted her back consolingly. “Don’t forget to make a wish.”

Lily’s face reddened. “I wish I’d kept my mouth shut,” she whispered.

Marion waved Lily's comment away. "I swear I didn't know the crew was standing there. Don't be embarrassed. We're all happy you're ready to get over Jimmy and start dating again."

Her eyes flashed. "Who said anything about dating?" She gulped a deep breath and blew the candles out.

Marion looked disappointed. "For a moment there, I thought the new Lily was in charge and I liked it. You're all talk. I knew it was too good to be true. When are you going to do something good for yourself? It's a three-day weekend. How are you going to celebrate your birthday? If you won't go on a date, we could make martinis, get crazy and brainstorm about actually starting our own production company, or are we just going to talk about it forever?"

Lily's eyes darted across the studio. Her voice lowered. "Actually, I was thinking of something crazier—I'm expecting a gentleman caller."

Marion balked. "What do you mean 'gentleman caller'? Are you a hundred and six years old? I realize you've been single for a while but gentleman callers went out of style with the telegraph wire and rumble seats in the back of motor buggies."

Lily laughed as she glanced around the studio to see if the crewmembers were eavesdropping. No one seemed to be working. They were circling aimlessly at a safe distance, waiting for a piece of cake or a bit of gossip. Her voice dropped to a cautious whisper. "Gentleman Callers is a male escort service." She leaned closer to Marion's ear. "I'm considering hiring an escort and enjoying fever-hot sex with a talented professional who will go away when we're finished. That's all I want. I'm not ready for a real relationship or the pressures of dating."

"Oh..." Marion nodded her head knowingly. "You're serious? I thought you were joking. Are you really serious? You won't go on a date but you'd pay a stranger to..."

"Yup." She kept her speech brief. A nosy technician stood just beyond earshot, staring impatiently at the cake.

Marion whispered, "Have you thought about the ethics? You're a familiar face in a million households. Honey, I know you have a terrible fear of being taken advantage of. This just seems like you're asking for trouble."

Lily dipped her fingertip in a fluffy daub of frosting. "Do we have any forks?"

Marion pulled a box of plastic spoons from behind the table. "Are you sure you can trust a stranger?"

"I'm not too worried about being recognized. I'll pay cash and I won't use my real name. Anyone watching me on the news is already half-asleep. Nobody remembers me. I'm going to dry up and blow away if I don't do something about it soon." Her voiced lowered. "I've been without a man for nearly three years and I'm tired of waiting around. I need something to get me started. I just want sex. I miss it so much. I don't want to get involved, fall in love and get hurt. I need an easy way to break the ice and this is the only practical plan I could think of. If I pay the man, I stay in control."

Marion's brow drooped. "Lily, I had no idea you were so lonely you'd seriously consider hiring an escort. I hope it works out for you. You deserve to be happy."

Lily frowned. "You don't sound very convinced I'll be happy doing this."

"Honestly, in your case, I think it's a terrible idea. It might be fine for someone else, but I can't see it working out well for you. I don't want to watch you set yourself up for disaster. You're a beautiful woman with a good heart. You should expect more. Are you really going to do this?"

"I'm looking forward to it. All I have to do is call, enjoy myself and pay. I don't have to worry about what the man wants. He's there for me. The relationship is clear from the beginning. There's no intimidation. No complications. I get what I want and he walks away."

Marion took a deep breath and sliced into the cake. She said nothing for an awkward length of time. Her tense expression appeared lost in thought. She handed Lily a piece of cake on a paper napkin. Her troubled gaze lingered on Lily's face. "Have you already made the call?"

She licked a few lemony cake crumbs from her fingertips. "No."

"Good, because I'm having an epiphany." Marion grabbed Lily's elbow and steered her into a private cubicle. "I think I know someone who would be perfect for this."

Lily's tongue flicked a bit of sticky frosting from her lips. "Are you trying to set me up with one of Stephen's friends? Please don't. I don't want attachments, companionship or even friendship. I'm not ready to go on dates and you know that. I just want sex straight up," she laughed. "I'm sorry about that, you know I love a bad pun."

Marion shook her head. "After all these years, do you think I don't know you? This guy's special. I would have mentioned him sooner, but let's face it, you were in no mood for real adventure but now you are."

She tried to sound brave. "Hell yes, I'm ready for adventure." She licked her lips. "This is really good cake." Her head nodded approvingly.

"I'm glad you're enjoying it. Keep in mind the fact I chose the cake." Marion's hand brushed Lily's sleeve. "As your friend, I want you to trust me and let me set you up with someone you will absolutely adore. You'll get everything you need from him. I promise."

Lily leaned closer. "You know a male escort?" Her eyes widened. "I don't believe that."

"He's not exactly an escort, but I know he'd be more than willing to meet you and meet your needs."

"No way, Marion, I don't want entanglements or problems. I'm looking for a discreet man with a professional attitude to match mine. I just want to have a good time, pay the gentleman and send him away. I don't want to run into him again around town or worse, have people pointing at me and saying that desperate woman paid for

sex. I know it's a new age and a woman shouldn't be ashamed but that would just kill me."

"He doesn't live in Los Angeles. He lives in New Orleans."

A part of her heart perked up at the mention of New Orleans. "Really? A home boy?"

"I knew that would interest you. He's not a boy, he's thirty-two."

"I would feel safer if this took place in another city. Let me think about this —"

Marion persisted. "He's a graduate of our alma mater. He's tall, athletic and plays on a water polo team. He's got coppery skin, black wavy hair and gorgeous green eyes. Need I say more?"

Lily fanned her face with her hand. "Coppery skin? Green eyes? It just gets better and better. You're a happily married woman, how do you know this guy?"

"I met him through our university's mentorship program—the same program you refused to attend last summer."

"What makes you think you he's available for this kind of thing?"

A guilty look crossed Marion's face. She stalled for a moment before answering. "We worked together on a side project. He made a strong impression. He's very intelligent. We stayed in touch."

"What kind of side project? Sounds like you should have an affair with him."

Marion laughed. "No way, I love Stephen."

"It sounds like he's got a busy life. What makes you think this guy works as an escort? Did he tell you so?"

"No, he never told me anything like that. I just know he's very attractive, just your type and, quite frankly, I know he could use the money. As your friend, I would rather see you having a good time with David this weekend than some odd and possibly untrustworthy 'gentleman caller'."

Lily crossed her arms over her chest. "His name's David? That's a nice name." Her fingertip stroked her chin. "I don't know about this. I want a professional I don't have to see again. I don't want to get involved with a friend of a friend."

"Lily, he lives on the other side of the country. I thought you wanted to have a carefree good time?"

"I do."

"Then why don't you let me help you? I know you won't be disappointed with David, but if it doesn't work out, come home."

"It's a long flight home."

"So what? You told me you were ready to take risks, so start taking risks. Do you always have to be coerced into doing anything worthwhile?"

"I'll admit you might be right. It would be better to leave town. I don't think anyone in New Orleans even remembers me." She paused. "If there are no strings

attached to him and he understands what the deal is, I might consider this. Is he really as good-looking as you say?"

Marion squeezed her hand. "I don't even have to exaggerate how wonderful he is. You'll see."

"Marion, are you absolutely sure about this? I want a healthy, professional, discreet man. Do you think he'll really be okay with this?" Her heart raced and her hopes were already soaring. Marion's suggestions often came out of left field but they were also weirdly logical. A weekend of adventure in New Orleans certainly sounded good. David sounded great, exactly her type. Hell, she was going to call a service and have a stranger sent to her home. At least this way she knew exactly what to expect physically. She knew if Marion said he was attractive, he was. Some of the other details she would have to judge for herself, but they probably wouldn't matter. David was just a weekend playmate. It wasn't as if she had to fall in love with him or change her life for him. All she had to do was enjoy his beautiful body, pay him, kiss him goodbye and fly home.

"Lily, I can see the gears spinning inside your head. I want you to be open-minded and let something good happen to you. You might be pleasantly surprised. I'm gonna call David and see if he's free this weekend."

Laughter bubbled out. "All right! You win. You always win. Make the call."

Marion winked. "Trust me. I know what's good for you."

* * * * *

It had been that simple—the most diabolical plans always sound simple. Marion made the call. Plans were made. Later that morning, Lily found herself fidgeting nervously in a plane seat in coach. She had chosen the first available flight over comfort and ended up sharing an armrest with a sleeping woman, but she was too excited to care. It was part of her disguise, to ride coach wearing no makeup. Who would recognize her on her way to a little discreet fun? Hopefully no one. The *Fasten your seat belt* sign flashed but she couldn't reach the clasp of her seat buckle. The woman next to her had slumped across the armrest and fallen unconscious. The woman's intermittent snorts were the only signs of life.

Her fingers searched vainly between the seats for the clasp. It wasn't there. At least not anywhere she could find it. The woman beside her snored softly into a tiny pillow pressed against the side of her arm and she didn't even mind the intrusion. Her thoughts were elsewhere. Her adventure was underway and that was all that mattered. She tried to nap during the flight but it was useless. She was too excited to sleep. Butterflies swooped in her belly every time she thought of David. She couldn't remember being this edgy with anticipation, ever. She hoped Marion knew what she was talking about. She was so keyed up. Disappointment just wasn't an option.

Thoughts of David thoroughly preoccupied her during the flight. What would he actually be like? Would she feel an attraction? She could hardly wait to find out. She got caught up in dozens of highly detailed, drawn-out fantasies, imagining his lean, athletic

body satisfying her every whim. She indulged in continuous daydreams of David's skillful hands gently caressing her skin and slowly coaxing her out of her clothing as he kissed the side of her throat. Heated fantasies consumed her, even as the lady beside her snored softly near her ear.

If David was even half as good as she hoped, she was prepared to be very generous with him. She refused to be cheap with a lover willing to bring her joy and break the ice for her. On her last trip to the bank, she requested the teller give her a stack of crisp hundred dollar bills with an impressively elegant thousand-dollar debit gift card to top it all off, like a cherry on a sundae. Those items lay hidden in a secret compartment within the makeup bag under her seat. Her heel gave the bag a gentle nudge just to make sure it was still there. It was. She smiled. *Naughty, naughty*. She had only to think of an appropriate presentation.

She glanced at her watch for the thousandth time this flight. They were close to arrival. It was really happening. Her heart raced as her fingers toyed idly with her collar. Her restless fingertips were worrying the fabric ragged. She caught herself and released the tortured collar. Her fidgety hands brushed down her thighs, imagining David's strong hands grasping her hips and effortlessly lifting her on top of him for a slow, hard ride with lots of firm thrusts and deep penetration. *That would be nice*. She could certainly use it.

She sighed as she glanced out the window at the blinding bright panorama of clouds. She wondered, was there even a word for the masculine form of *mistress*? She would have to look into that. A kept man might be a fun, emotionally painless way to have a love life without the hurtful complications of love. This could become a habit. If David was as satisfying as hoped, she might do it again with somebody new next weekend. Someone closer to home she could casually drop in on when needed. It sounded so practical. Why had she gone without for so long? She even considered the possibility of permanently keeping a man at her command, ready to satisfy her every desire, and why not? Who was stopping her? *No one*. She was free to do as she pleased. Everything would be fine just as long as the man was well compensated and understood the deal.

She closed her eyes and ignored the sleeping woman leaning against her. She couldn't wait to experience the sensory overload of a hard cock gliding inside her. She smiled. What a wonderful birthday present this was, wrapped up in an uncomplicated, guilt-free bow. Pay to play. This was a great idea. Truly one of her best. Why didn't she think of it sooner? She hoped David had a sculpted, muscular butt, something powerful to hang on to. He probably did. How could she possibly have forgotten to ask Marion about such an important detail? A twinge of worry entered her mind. There had not been enough time to really talk about any of the important stuff in detail. She actually knew very little about David. She swallowed hard and glanced again at her watch. Fantasy was about to become reality. The butterflies in her belly walked their tiny, ticklish little feet up to her tense throat and fluttered there. The harsh reality that a few hours from now she was going to have sex with a complete stranger truly sunk in. She

blanched. Perhaps she should have asked more questions? She reminded herself to be patient. Marion was on her side. All would be revealed soon enough. She squirmed on the worn seat cushion. The *Fasten your seat belt* sign pinged sharply. She gently nudged the sleeping woman over.

The woman awoke with a startled snort. Her eyes opened wide. "Now I know why you look familiar. You used to be the Fresh Face Foundation girl. Fresh face, my ass. The makeup was crap but that's not your fault," she bellowed. "What's your name? Lily Fontaine! Have you come back to town to kick that bastard's ass?" her voice ricocheted through the cabin.

Several curious aisle mates looked her way. Her cheeks burned. "We're descending." Her fingers nervously clutched the single armrest. "We better buckle up." She reached for the other half of her seat belt and stared out the window. She could feel her aisle mates staring at her. Okay, she could live with one little embarrassment. It wasn't going to kill her.

She squinted out the window. The cloud cover parted and the Mississippi appeared. The Big Muddy looked especially muddy today. They were minutes away from flying into New Orleans, NOLA, the Big Easy, the Proud Lady. There were so many names for this unique city and she was almost there.

New Orleans was her birthplace. Her parents had moved to Pensacola years ago, but she still had plenty of friends and memories in the New Orleans-Metairie area. However, she would be seeing none of those friends and family members on this visit. She hoped to keep her entire trip, especially the purpose of the visit, a secret. No one expected to see her here anyway. Except for the woman next to her and a few people sprinkled up and down the aisle. After her humiliating divorce from a popular NOLA sportscaster, Jimmy Fontaine, everyone knew this town was poison for her. This was her first trip to New Orleans since Katrina had struck and her bicoastal marriage had imploded. Many friends had warned her in the first weeks following Katrina's undiscerning destruction. "If you come back, it will break your heart..." But her heart was already broken so she stayed away. Deep inside, she had always known the siren song of New Orleans would lure to her back and today was that day.

At the airport she climbed into a taxi that took a twisting route across town. The taxi whisked her past a vacant lot that had once been a joyous place where one could get a Cuban-style steak or a fried oyster po'boy. She remembered somewhere near here a clever old lady had once run a dress shop out of her clapboard home. "Miss Ruby" had concocted the frothy white gown she wore the night she was crowned Miss Creole Carnival. She was nineteen when she won the title. Her beauty pageant days seemed like another lifetime.

The taxi driver was a gray-haired gentleman with a silver front tooth. He turned around to speak to her through an open partition. "I loved his sports report, but in my opinion, Mr. Fontaine treated you poorly and you're better off without him."

"Thank you." She sank against the sticky vinyl seat, realizing that even though she was no longer a local media personality, she was a victim of scandal and folks remember a scandal.

The taxi drove across town to Jackson Square in the French Quarter. On the way, she was relieved to see the familiar splendor of Gallier Hall. Her wedding reception had been held there a long, long time ago. Her eyes lovingly scanned the Square. She couldn't help thinking about Jimmy and the many good times she had spent with him in the French Quarter. Once upon a time, he had been the love of her life and the only man in her world. What if she wasn't over Jimmy? A shiver of doubt settled over her that left her feeling vulnerable. Even with all its mystery and beauty, the city of New Orleans was also an emotionally loaded gun pointed straight at her heart. Mixed emotions she had successfully drowned out until now threatened to swim to the surface. She had come here for a hedonistic good time but she was starting to feel slightly uneasy in the Big Easy.

The taxi stopped in front of the elegant Hotel Toulouse. The carefully preserved hotel occupied a time warp where the vitality of the 1800s still thrived. The dapper, black-and-white exterior of the hotel perpetuated the illusion the twenty-first century had yet to arrive. Wrought iron balconies over hung Royal Street. A white horse and carriage festooned with white bows stood ready at the curb, awaiting a bride and groom. Two loving souls were getting married today. She silently wished them well.

She paid the taxi driver and walked into the courtyard, rolling her suitcase behind her. The air was muggy but the true heat of the day had yet to peak. She walked into the gracious cream-colored reception area. A male concierge, wearing a brocade vest greeted her.

"I have a reservation, my name is Marion Galway." She lied and used the name of the mastermind of this plot.

"Yes, Miss Galway, your room is ready." The concierge handed her a key card. "Follow me please."

They walked past a bubbling black fountain and up a white wooden staircase. Her room was tucked in a quiet corner of the hotel, beside a flowering jasmine. The concierge opened the door. The soothing room had exposed brick walls and a massive bed with an iron frame. The bathroom had an old-fashioned claw-foot tub and a jewel toned, stained-glass transom. A fragrant jasmine vine had invaded the window sash and crept toward the sink.

A bath sounded good. As soon as the concierge left, she filled the tub and eased herself into the refreshing water. Her skin always felt so dry after a flight. This would help. She added some honeysuckle bath oil to the water and sank into it. She inhaled the heavenly fragrance and let her worries and doubts float away. She'd come here for pleasure and pleasure she would have. Aside from being filled with her past, New Orleans was a pleasure city and new adventures, and new pleasures beckoned. She had only to relax and let it happen. The new Lily would meet the new New Orleans. Everything was going to be just fine.

The bath oil made her skin incredibly slick and silky. Sunlight poured through the stained-glass transom, reflecting sparkling colors on the surface of the bath. Her hands skimmed in lazy circles across the surface of the water, scattering the colorful flecks of sapphire and emerald green. This was such a lovely room. She closed her eyes and drank it in. Her fingertips gently stroked her breasts. She slowly teased herself into arousal as her thoughts wandered toward David. She wondered what he was really like. Marion's description certainly sounded good. Perfect actually. She hoped he was half as great as Marion boasted. She also hoped he had a pleasing voice. She forgot to ask about that important detail. A man's voice could be a secret weapon of seduction or a deal breaker. If David had a confident, assertive personality and a calming, masculine voice, she'd have him back in this room in a flash. She grinned. She'd turn off the lights, wrap her arms around his neck and listen to him whisper sweet things in her ear until her heart raced. There was something so thrilling about a man's deep voice and warm breath near one's ear. Just the thought of it made the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand straight. She might let him stop whispering long enough to kiss his beautiful mouth and run her fingers through his wavy hair. A man's kiss said so much about his ability and interest as a lover. Dear god, she missed kissing. Kissing was going to come first. She couldn't wait to straddle David's lap and indulge in as much slow, soulful kissing as her heart could take. While she was kissing him, she could run her hands over his beautiful body and get a feel for what she was paying for. If she got her way this weekend, and of course she would, he would be doing a lot of whispering and kissing. She smiled.

She sank lower in the tub. Her nipples hovered just above the waterline. She loved her lush curves. She simply didn't look good skinny. She splashed the scented bathwater against her skin. Her fingers gave a nipple a slow, firm tug. A warm tingle shot through her. The glossy, wet nipple ached softly. She was instantly filled with a longing her own touch could excite but not satisfy. She wanted to feel a man's searching lips and warm breath covering her breasts with kisses. Her hands cupped her slick breasts and gently pressed them together. There was nothing like the loving adoration of a man's mouth and the stroke of a wet tongue across a hard nipple. She longed to feel the sharp thrill that came the first moment a man took a peaked nipple between his lips and gently tugged it against the heat of his mouth. It brought the feeling of molten pleasure spreading through her limbs and even tingling the soles of her feet. It was one of the most exquisitely intimate sensations in the world. It was often the first moment between lovers that conveyed the sentiment. *I'm undressed, I'm unhurried and I'm here purely for pleasure.* Her pulse quickened. She could spend hours enjoying kissing, whispering, breast play and soft touching of any kind. Just make it soon.

She wondered what it would feel like to make love to a fit man who could last as long as she could. That would be a wonderful challenge to take on. Maybe David would surprise her and introduce her to some wonderful pleasure she had never tried? *Worth every penny.* She couldn't wait to put that elegant iron bed to the test and maybe the bathtub too...

Her hand strayed between her thighs to stroke her fingertips across her clit. She was so excited it almost hurt to touch herself. She let the tension build but didn't allow herself to come, not yet. She'd let David take care of that vital detail, later. She squeezed her thighs together under the warm water, enjoying the tease. *Happy birthday to me.*

She closed her eyes and nearly fell asleep in the bathtub. What a long day. She had driven herself straight home to hurriedly pack a weekend bag. Then dashed to the airport to catch a six a.m. flight to New Orleans. After the bath, she planned to treat herself to a real breakfast. Then she was going to get a couple hours of sleep. As excited as she was, she still needed all the energy she could get to keep up with David.

Reluctantly she pulled her sleepy, pleasure-drenched body from the tub and wrapped a plush towel around her. It was already far too warm to even consider wearing a bathrobe. She called room service, hoping to have her dream breakfast delivered to her. "Hello, this is Miss Galway in room 333. Is it too late to order breakfast?"

The voice on the other end was incredibly polite. "It's never too late, Miss Galway. What can we bring to you?"

She was in New Orleans, better do it right. It would be crazy to ask for juice and yogurt. "I would like scrambled eggs, scrambled in butter please, Andouille sausage and grits." She paused. "Do you have cheese grits?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. I would like coffee also." She hung up and waited for her breakfast. Her tired body stretched across the bed. She nearly fell asleep before her breakfast arrived. By the time it came she was only able to finish a small portion of the delicious food before dozing off.

She awoke disoriented to the sound of a ringing phone. It was still light outside, the air was heavy. In her sleep, she had kicked the sheets to the foot of the bed. The phone beside her rang shrilly. She picked up the receiver. "Hello."

"Miss Galway, it's six o'clock." The concierge sounded guiltless about waking her from a sound sleep.

She struggled to wake up. Her body had adapted to the most ungodly schedule but a change of time zones added extra punishment.

"A Mr. Bowie was here. He said he will meet you at Charlene's bar on Decatur Street at six thirty."

"Thank you." She hung up the phone. She was wide-awake now. Mr. Bowie? As in David Bowie or Bowie knife? She felt a twinge of anger. They weren't supposed to be using their last names and she was supposed to contact him, not the other way around. She realized Marion must be responsible for this. She loved Marion, but she could be a real meddler. Marion probably feared she would arrive here, eat breakfast and flee. Marion was going to get a talkin' to...

She realized David had already come and gone from the hotel. He had been here in the flesh and was indeed a real person. That solid realization kicked her anxiety into high gear. Her nonchalant attitude about meeting a stranger instantly evaporated. The butterflies in her stomach stirred. Was she really going to have paid sex with a stranger? Her mouth went dry. Could she really do that? Was she ready for this? *No*. Her body shivered. *Get your mind right, you want this.*

She took a deep breath to calm herself. She needed to get organized. She reminded herself an organized sense of control was the key to success in any situation. She simply needed to be organized and be in control. It was simple so why didn't it feel simple? She opened her suitcase and sighed as she stared at the meager selection of clothing she had brought. There was an art to carefully dressing to be undressed. Getting undressed with a man for the first time was a big deal and nothing to take casually. Where was her lingerie? She frantically dug to the bottom of her suitcase. For a horrible moment she thought she forgot to pack it. She glanced at the bedside clock and saw proof she had less than half an hour to get her body and mind out the door. She needed more time. Her heart pounded. How was she going to accomplish all this in less than thirty minutes? Her hands trembled on the suitcase as she started to panic.

She decided to take a cool shower before she even attempted to dress. Her fingers fumbled with the faucet. What if she and "Mr. Bowie" met and didn't like each other? Chemistry was such an unpredictable thing. She gulped a deep breath. She shouldn't worry. Marion's taste in men was impeccable. Marion's husband Stephen was a prince, but this was so personal. Had she asked enough questions about David? Not really. Maybe she should worry? She wondered if it was too late to back out. Her spine stiffened. No way would she back out. That was the old Lily talking. She refused to cheat herself of a great experience by chickening out before she even met the man.

She stepped into the shower and let the cool water rinse over her. She had only gone on several disappointing dates in past years, just enough to prove to herself she wasn't ready to go on dates. Her divorce had left her cagey and unwilling to forgive the smallest character flaws. Her healing came slowly. She was learning to trust again and be discerning and suddenly, she was forty-three and terrified to jump back into life or trust her judgment about men. At least she had been brave enough to take this all-important first step and get reacquainted with her sexually. That decision had taken much thought and courage. She gave herself credit for that.

She got out of the shower and put on scented body powder, thoroughly buffing her body with a fluffy, pink puff. The powder had a slight coppery sheen that flattered her skin. She brought her favorite silk lingerie for this adventure. She had been saving it for something special. Emerald green had been irresistible to her. She loved the rich, cool color. It felt like new life. She had brought an emerald green blouse, a silk slip, a lace bra and panty. Even if she and Mr. Bowie didn't like each other, she knew she would look elegant as she walked away.

She was sparing with the makeup. She wore far too much at work. It was relief to let her skin go naked. She dusted translucent powder over her face. She didn't have

anything to hide. She should be proud that experience and wisdom showed on her face. She looked in the mirror. She realized she was looking too wise and experienced, especially after the flight. She immediately reached for the concealer, blush and lipstick. What if this guy was as hot as Marion promised? Better safe than sorry. She struggled to sharpen a crumbling eye pencil. She looked at her glamorous reflection. That was better, smoky eye makeup always worked in New Orleans.

She slipped into a charcoal gray tulip skirt and sling-back sandals. She looked feminine and pulled together but not too dressed up. She didn't want to look as if she were trying too hard. Technically speaking, she didn't have to try at all. This was her day, her dollar. Maybe she should wear jeans? No. Too hot and too late, she needed to leave now if she was going to be on time. She realized her fashion choices didn't matter one bit. After all, she was paying the man to take these clothes off. What the hell was she worried about?

Before she left the room, she tidied up the bed and set some grapefruit-scented candles and a few condoms on the nightstand. She also stuffed a few condoms in her purse. She didn't want to fuss with any details once she had David back in the room, so she filled an envelope with ten one-hundred dollar bills and tucked it under the candles. If she liked him and kept him until Monday morning, she would double that amount along with the gift card. Money was power and power was freedom. *David set me free*. She still felt incredibly nervous but she was ready now.

She walked past the concierge. Was she imagining things or did he give her an odd look?

"Excuse me." The concierge leaned over the counter.

She braced herself, dreading to hear Mr. Bowie had called to cancel their appointment.

"Didn't you used to be the Bayou Babe beer girl?"

She exhaled with relief. "Yes, a long time ago." So much for her disguised identity.

"I thought so. My daddy had the biggest crush on you. Ma'am, could I bother you for your autograph?" he whispered. "My daddy will be so thrilled."

She felt exposed and couldn't help but wonder what this cheerful young man's daddy would think of her weekend plans. She quickly signed her real name on hotel stationary. "Can I arrange to have an iced bottle of champagne brought to my room?"

"Of course, Miss Fontaine." The concierge beamed. "I'll bring it myself."

Chapter Two

Charlene's bar was several blocks away. As she walked, she took deep, calming breaths and reminded herself not to walk too fast. She was already a few minutes beyond when they were supposed to meet, but she wanted to be fashionably late. A bossy voice chattered in her head, *Hold your stomach in, pull your shoulders back and walk with your chin up. Smile. Don't fiddle with your hair – you'll ruin the curls. Be pleasant. Don't act cold or desperate...*

She confronted the little voice in her head. There was nothing to worry about and no need to act desperate. She was completely in control of the situation and she was determined things would go well. No surprises. No being thrown for loops. No drama. What could possibly go wrong? She was a paying customer and the customer is king. Change that to the customer is *queen* and the queen certainly deserves a little fun on her birthday weekend. She would boldly ask for what she wanted and it would be delivered, no questions asked. This was going to be great. She was so proud of herself for going through with this.

She turned on Decatur Street. The French doors to Charlene's were opened to the street. She walked self-consciously inside the landmark bar. A large crowd had gathered after work on this three-day weekend. She looked around. There were lots of dark-haired men here. A few were very good-looking. Her spirits rose. She got several interested looks but no one approached her. She pushed her way through the crowd to reach the long cypress bar. Charlene's had no barstools so the clientele were forced to lean against the bar, the walls or each other.

She needed a drink to calm her fluttering nerves. She pressed against the man who stood in front of her and called to the bartender. "Merlot, please."

A dark-haired man in front of her turned to the side. He looked her over with appraising green eyes. "Hello, darlin'. Aren't you pretty?" He flashed a crooked smile. "I watched your reflection in the mirror as you walked in. I willed you to walk toward me and it worked like magic."

She glanced at a massive eighteenth-century Parisian mirror that dominated the wall behind the bar. The mirror was lovely but she was a bit put off by the man's smug expression reflected in it. Her breath caught. Here he was. The man had thick, wavy black-hair and green eyes. She stood frozen not knowing how to introduce herself.

The man grabbed her hand and delivered a light nip to the inside of her wrist, which seemed overly forward. "You do look familiar."

She smiled nervously and impulsively pulled her hand back.

He shouted in a harsh voice to the bartender. "The lady wants a glass of merlot – get it for her!" He took hold of her arm and maneuvered her toward the far end of the

bar. He stood close, almost brushing his body against her. "What's your name, darlin'? You're so beautiful you don't even have to tell me your real name." He laughed.

Her nerves fluttered. This man certainly came on strong. She wasn't at all sure she liked it. A stab of disappointment shot through her. She had been expecting a polite, deferential lover. This man was neither. Her doubts resurfaced. She wanted to maintain a comfortable distance between them just in case she had to gracefully walk away. Too bad he already knew where she was staying. Damn Marion. Her first impression was that this stranger should remain a stranger. She could feel her excitement turning to anxiety. "Let's find out if we like each other. If we don't have some sort of chemistry this just isn't going to work for me. I'm sure you understand."

"That's fine with me." The man winked at her. "I've been waiting to meet you forever."

What a line. She looked him over. He wasn't nearly as tall or stunning as Marion's description.

Her glass of merlot arrived. She wanted to down it in a single gulp but knew that would look bad. She decided to be brave and sip. "Let's find out what we like about each other."

He smiled at her but his eyes briefly darted toward another attractive woman across the room before returning to her. "I can already tell I like you."

She wasn't sold on him. He wasn't as impressive as Marion had promised. This man looked slightly dissipated, as if he lived in a bar, and he looked much older than thirty-two. He certainly didn't look as if he were in good enough shape to play a strenuous sport like water polo, but perhaps he had other redeeming merits. Marion had said he was a very resourceful man who spent a lot of time helping others.

She shouldn't be so judgmental. She had traveled a long way and she should at least give this man a chance. After all, this wasn't a legal trial, they were strangers meeting for a drink. She was so nervous she forgot herself and swallowed her wine in one gulp. "I should probably tell you a little about me. I'm forty-three," she sheepishly confessed. "I know I'm getting back into this game a little late but better now than never. I'm healthy. I take good care of myself. I work odd hours and that doesn't help my social life. It's so hard to meet people."

The man glanced distractedly over the bar, trying to get the bartender's attention. "So true."

"This place is home to me."

"Charlene's bar?" he squinted. "I've never seen you here before."

"I meant New Orleans is home. I was born here." She wondered how much, if anything Marion had mentioned to this man? She realized that perhaps it was better to stick to small talk. "I guess I'm a typical jambalaya mix of French, Spanish and African-American. My grandfather came to New Orleans from Cuba. It feels good to be here this weekend. This city truly lends itself to adventure."

He nodded approvingly. "I like adventurous women." He called out to the bartender and clicked his fingers in a demanding manner. "Can I get another merlot and whiskey over here, now!"

The man's gesture rubbed her the wrong way. She immediately pegged him as an impatient and selfish lover. He didn't seem to be genuinely interested in her and she wondered if her expectations had been too high. The man had an interesting face but Marion had wildly exaggerated his looks. His demeanor was the big disappointment. She couldn't picture herself relaxing with this man and turning herself over to his questionably capable hands. Her stomach knotted as the fantasy of a carefree, lust-filled weekend faded away. She realized there was no way she could go through with this. Not with this man. What had led her to believe she could sleep with a man sight unseen without any personal chemistry or common ground? She felt crushed all her hopes for a joyful, sexually fulfilling birthday weekend in New Orleans instantly poofed out of existence. Now she would have to go home in defeat. The wine rushed to her head. Another mistake. She shouldn't have gulped it down so fast. She felt lightheaded. She realized she had come all this way for nothing. "I want to make this right. I'll make this up to you. I need to tell you right now, I don't think I can do this. I want you to know how difficult this was for me. Believe it or not I'm very shy." She leaned closer and spoke softer. "It was Marion who encouraged me to come here. I just never thought I would find myself in this situation."

The man stopped her. "What situation?"

She whispered, "I'm sure this has happened before. I can't be the only woman who got cold feet."

He cupped his hand behind his ear. "Honey, it's loud in here, can you speak up?"

Her voice rose. "It's not you," she lied. "But now that I'm actually here, standing face-to-face with a stranger, I'm not sure it's a good idea."

He thrust his jaw forward, looking perturbed. "We're just sharin' a drink. What's not a good idea?"

Her voice trembled. "You know – paying a stranger for sex."

The man's eyes lit with surprise. His hand lightly swatted her thigh. "You don't have to pay me for sex. First one's on the house, baby. Hell, I'll do you for free. My pleasure!" Nervous laughter exploded out of his mouth.

She gasped and pulled away from him.

"Excuse me," a deep, male voice interrupted.

She was mortified someone had overheard her last comment. She turned around to see who was hovering so close behind. When she turned, she bumped into a broad chest. She looked up to see the man's face. The man was stunning. He had black, wavy hair and green eyes that glowed in the low evening light. He was holding a bouquet of fragrant Stargazer Lilies. He handed the lilies to her as the horrible realization dawned she had made a complete fool of herself. "Mr. Bowie?"

The man smiled at her. "I'm David. I'm sorry I'm late. I left to get you some lilies but I had a hard time finding them."

She backed away from the dark-haired man at the bar, wishing the earth would swallow her whole. Her face burned crimson.

The dark-haired man downed his whisky and growled. "Go away, buddy. The lady and I are talking."

David wrapped his arm around her and pulled her to his side. The gesture was swift and possessive. "There's been a misunderstanding—the lady's with me."

The dark-haired man thoroughly looked David over and blurted out, "Are you the man she's paying for sex?" He scoffed, "Are you the gigolo? Good luck, buddy, she's lost her appetite for strangers."

The bar became silent. Everyone stopped what they were doing to listen. She wanted to die. She wiggled free of David's grasp and bolted toward the door.

David hurried after her.

The dark-haired man called after her, "Shop competitively! Remember, I'm willing to work for free."

The people in the bar didn't understand all that was going on but they recognized an embarrassed face when they saw one. A few patrons chuckled at her predicament as she rushed onto Decatur Street.

Her heels clicked down the sidewalk. She wanted to throw herself in the river.

David followed close behind. "Slow down, Lily! It's all right." His voice was calm.

It wasn't all right. She felt humiliated to have asked such an intimate favor of the wrong stranger. Now everyone knew. A woman should never have to feel this desperate or this lonely. This had been a terrible idea. She turned on him. "Did Marion tell you every embarrassing detail about me?"

He caught up to her. "She told me enough to pique my interest." He reached for her arm. "I remember when you were the Channel Five newsgirl. I thought you were the most beautiful thing."

She shuddered. "Dear god, you must have been in high school."

"Forget it. We're both adults now."

She felt emotionally raw. A misplaced sense of resentment toward David hovered over her. "You were late." She came to a halt and glared accusingly. "This was supposed to be a discreet, professional meeting."

"I apologize for that." He smiled at her. He had a devastating smile that made his eyes sparkle. "You gotta see the humor in it."

At that moment, she didn't. She felt ridiculous. She was now in a humorless, self-pitying mood. She felt like a fool. She studied David's handsome face as he stood patiently beside her. She silently admitted he was everything Marion had promised and more. He was exactly her type. He was solidly built and gorgeous to look at. His physical perfection mocked her. He would have been absolutely perfect for a weekend

fling. Too bad her sense of adventure had just been knocked unconscious. Her knees trembled. She took a deep breath. "I realized in the bar that I'm not ready for this. I thought I was but I'm not. I don't want to waste your time. I'll pay you something. I think that's only fair." She wanted to melt into the pavement or run.

He looked confused. "Pay me for what? The flowers? That's completely unnecessary."

Her jaw dropped. She glanced around. "Are you playin' dumb with me?"

He shifted his feet. "No, ma'am."

Embarrassment raged inside her. "Please don't call me 'ma'am'. What did you think this meeting was about?"

His eyes narrowed. "What did you think this meeting was about?"

She held her ground. "I asked you first."

His expression was guileless. "Marion told me it was your birthday and you were coming to New Orleans on business. She wanted me to meet you and show you a good time. She'd said it would be good for both of us. To be honest, I've been hoping to meet you for a long while. Marion and Stephen bring your name up all the time. Marion warned me not to say so but I thought this was a date."

Her stomach clenched. "A date? You honestly thought this was a date?" Damn Marion, she was so sneaky. "Marion didn't mention to you that I was expecting..." She couldn't bear any further embarrassment and fell silent.

A look of utter disappointment crossed his face. "Did I misunderstand?"

"Oh *cher*, you seem like a lovely person. It's not you. Marion's playing tricks on us."

His gaze leveled. "I think I'm missing something here. Why did that man in the bar call me a 'gigolo'?"

Her head spun. She felt sick. "Never mind." She fought the impulse to run and hide. Lying low until Monday might be the best idea. She could spend the weekend reading in her hotel room or she could visit elderly relatives who no longer remembered her or confused her with her older cousins. Wouldn't that be fun? She could even spend a day at the zoo looking at the cute baby animals. Who needed to barter sex with a gorgeous man and risk looking like a colossal fool? "I think I should say good night now and go back to my hotel."

He smiled. "Are you sure you want to spend your birthday alone? I made plans for tonight. After Marion called me, I was thrilled at the prospect of being your escort around town."

She winced when he innocently used the word "escort". His entire demeanor was decent and innocent. He was such a handsome man. At least Marion had been honest about that but, dear lord, she felt awkward. David looked smart and interesting too, which was almost a shame considering her crumbled attitude. She wished she were in a better state of mind to just enjoy his company as a human being. Why did he have call this a date and ruin things? Just the word "date" put her in panic mode. How could she

be expected to relax with a perfectly sexy and handsome man after he announced this was a pressure-filled date? How had things gotten out of control so quickly? This was horrible. She honestly didn't know what to do. She stared at the toes of her shoes, afraid to look up and see the attractive man standing before her who deserved a better explanation than the one he got.

He noticed her hesitation. He reached out and brushed his fingertips across her arm. "I don't understand all that's going on, but I can see you're terribly upset. Please don't walk away."

His hands were warm. The edges of his long fingers were roughened. She guessed he was involved in manual labor. His touch sent a pleasant tingle across her skin. "I'm sorry, David. I don't mean to be so rude. I don't know what I'm doing here." She swayed on her heels.

He gently took hold of her and made her stand still. His broad hands covered her shoulders. He seemed to have no problem taking charge of her. "Lily, relax and go to dinner with me. Don't leave upset. I've already made reservations." He gently steered her toward Brentano's on Royal Street.

He was being so nice about this. A tiny, long-sealed corner of her heart opened. Was there any harm in going to dinner? Of course not. Returning to the hotel alone suddenly sounded cowardly. She was better than that. Flustered or not, she knew she should be polite to this gracious man and welcome his company. None of this was his fault. It was Marion's. "Dinner would be lovely. Thank you," she smiled.

His eyes lit with joy as he took her hand. "That's better."

She wrapped her fingers around his. He had a warm, comfortable grip that was easy to relax with. She felt herself drifting to his side. It was so easy to go with David. Too easy. She had better be careful. She walked slowly, allowing him to lead. Somehow it seemed natural he take charge. She felt odd, off-kilter. She couldn't describe how strange she felt. She wasn't in control at all. In a flash, the tables had turned. Why had Marion tricked her? Now it was time to release all fantasies, hopes and expectations. They simply weren't going to happen. It was time to behave herself. She felt vulnerable. This was a far cry from what she had imagined. She was on a plain old, run-of-the-mill date, which would most likely end on an emotionally awkward note. There would be no kissing, whispering or sharing carnal indulges with an exchange of cash and a brief goodbye. She was out with a significantly younger friend of a friend. This couldn't end well for her. Why the hell did this have to be a date? Why did she listen to Marion? She was terribly disappointed. Why didn't she just go with an escort from Gentleman Callers as she originally planned? This situation felt akin to a bait-and-switch scam. David was so attractive. He was just what she wanted. It only made matters worse. This was like showing a hungry she-wolf a filet mignon and snatching it away. This was heartless. Come Monday, Marion would feel her wrath.

David smiled at her. His eyes glittered. "I'm happy you came to town this weekend."

"So am I." She smiled back. Perhaps something could be salvaged from this situation after all? David seemed so nice. Going to dinner with him was certainly no hardship. Maybe she could sway this to her advantage but that could only happen if she were in control. Why was she letting him take charge of her? She was the seasoned professional. She was supposed to be in control of this sensitive situation, not him. "I'm paying for dinner." She stubbornly asserted her authority.

"We can discuss that later."

The resistance in his voice told her he was firmly against the idea.

"Brentano's is pricey. I should pay." She would be happy to do anything that would give her back a sense of control.

"On your birthday? I don't think so." His tone was resolute.

Her frustration rose. David was temptation set beyond reach. He was exactly the sort of man she could easily fall for. This was dangerous. This was feeling too much like a date with painful consequences. Her humiliation at the bar had left her spoiling for a fight. She fought with her ex-husband this way over little things. Her ex always struggled to get the upper hand with her. He never gave her credit for her intellect or professionalism; he simply overrode her viewpoints, using the vain excuse that "he was the man". She had vowed never again to subject herself to the macho attitude. For too many years she had allowed herself to be repressed by a man with big, capped teeth who introduced himself to everyone from priests to presidents with the same bone-crushing handshake. *Hi! I'm Jimmy Fontaine, damn glad to meet ya!*

"Why are you pouting?" He looked concerned.

"It's not you. I haven't been home in several years and New Orleans is triggering all sorts of emotions in me." For god's sake, David was the best part of this bargain. He didn't deserve to be pulled into her problems. At least she was out with a handsome man on her birthday, that alone was a big improvement. She felt a magnetic attraction toward him. Her body gave David a big "yes". She truly regretted he wasn't a professional escort. It would have been fun.

He glanced at her sideways. "Are you feeling nervous? Edgy? I was horribly edgy on the way here."

The words poured out of her mouth. "Yes, I'm edgy." It felt good to admit it.

"So, we're both nervous, we've got that in common," he laughed.

She took a calming breath. He certainly didn't look nervous. He came across as pure confidence. "I've been avoiding intimate social situations for a while, if you know what I mean." She felt exposed and instantly regretted saying it.

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I think I do know what you mean. Your comments to that man at the bar were meant for me, weren't they?" He looked at her with compassionate eyes. "I want you to know I have absolutely no judgment against you. You're a beautiful, smart woman and you shouldn't be asking favors from strangers. You have options. You should be asking yourself, 'what would make me happy?' What would make you happy, Lily?"

Her heart sank. Dear god, he knew. She couldn't possibly feel any more exposed or embarrassed. A lump rose in her throat. She hesitated to answer. "To be honest, there isn't a single part of my life that doesn't need to change and I'm trying to work on that."

"I'm in the same boat as you. There's no shame in that." He stood over her, looking very confident. "I think I know what would make you happy. Want me to tell you what you really want?"

Her eyes dipped. "Tell me."

"You don't want to have sex with a stranger. You want to really care about someone and you want them to care about you. You want to wait until you feel better about this." A brilliant smile burst across his face. "You want one of those beautiful aged steaks from Brentano's, sizzling in butter with some oysters and bananas Foster for dessert. You want to go to dinner with me. We'll talk and you'll feel better. I'll treat you to dinner because that's what a gentleman does. We'll sit beneath the crystal chandelier and get to know each other. You came a long way, let's have a good time." He gallantly offered his elbow. "Are you with me on this?"

It was a huge relief to have it out in the open. *He knew*. The worst had happened and it wasn't that bad. She felt her shoulders relaxing. She'd made a fool of herself in public, been exposed, and now she was on a much-dreaded date, but with David even that was a good thing. His confidence was winning; his words were appealing. She took a deep breath and threaded her arm through his. "I'm with you."

"My name's David La Beau but everybody calls me 'Bowie'."

David Bowie. The pun made her smile. This "Bowie" was tall, dark and muscular. She only came up to his shoulder.

He glanced at her as they walked. "I've been very curious to meet you."

"What exactly did Marion tell you about me?"

"That you're independent, intelligent and picky."

At least Marion hadn't painted her as sexually starved and desperate.

He clasped his hand over hers. "I want you to know I never let friends set me up on dates." A look of genuine discomfort crossed his face. "Last summer, I foolishly told Marion I had a teenage crush on you when she mentioned the two of you worked together. She knew I'd jump at the chance to meet you." He smiled.

"I'm flattered." She leaned against his arm as they walked. She noticed he smelled good, soapy-clean with a hint of crisp-scented aftershave. "You do know Marion is a busybody? She told me one thing and you another to get us to meet."

"Is that a bad thing?" He squeezed her hand. "Let's pretend we just met. A good friend just introduced us. We don't know anything about each other. We have no agenda. We are going to get to know each other – effortlessly."

"My goodness you're charming." She wasn't sure about the "effortless" part. She was almost afraid to know him any better. She had just met him and he was already winning her over and tempting her to break her own safety rules. Opening up to him

could easily lead to emotional attachment, complications and future hurt. Was she ready to face all that? She studied the clean lines of his profile as they walked down Royal Street. Maybe.

He spoke softly. "What did Marion tell you about me?"

She felt a wave of discomfort. Marion had played up David's physical attributes and she had encouraged it as if she had been shopping for a thoroughbred. There had been little time to ask any real questions. She had fallen in lust with David's physical description and ran straight to the airport. Now she had to deal with a real, living man and not a fantasy object. "Marion mentioned you were from our alma mater and you worked together on a project. She also said you were very handsome, which is absolutely true." She smiled to hide her rising sense of anxiety. How the hell did this turn into a date? What did she think would happen?

He tipped his chin up. "I'm grateful she didn't describe me as unfocused and broke, which I have been accused of."

Her heel caught on a crack in the pavement. She stumbled forward a brief, lurching step but caught herself. "Not at all. Marion thinks very highly of you."

He caught her arm. "Are you okay there? How do women walk in those things? I'll admit you look good." His eyes openly swept over her shapely legs, lingering on her rounded calves.

She wiggled her foot back into her shoe and laughed. "Are you objectifying me?"

He shot her a very sexy sideways glance. "Just a little bit. I love shapely legs."

She stole a glance at his beautifully shaped mouth with its full bottom lip. His lushly padded lips softened the sharper angles on his face. His eyes had sweeping black lashes. Nature had certainly blessed this man with more than his share of thick, long eyelashes. It wasn't fair. He had a straight nose and the coppery complexion she loved. He was David the beautiful. He was everything she idealized about a man in a single package. She couldn't stop looking at him. And his voice was nice too. Maybe Marion knew what she was doing after all?

He felt her staring at him and gave her a sly smile. "Are you objectifying me?" he laughed.

"Just a little bit." She smiled. How often had she been the object of male fantasy? She strolled beside David, feeling calmer. He was worth pursuing. Who knows, maybe they could work something out that would be beneficial to both of them? A wave of hope buoyed her mood. He did just admit he was broke. She was determined to make this work. He was too good to let slip away. She just had to figure out a way to present matters without offending him. She wondered if the concierge had remembered to bring champagne to her room. A little thrill raced through her. *Share some sugar with me, cher.* Maybe this weekend would work out after all. She distracted herself by pretending to sniff her Stargazers. The flowers had a rich, pungent scent and powdery, cinnamon-colored stamens. When she lifted her face, he laughed.

He reached over and rubbed his thumb against her nose. "You had lily pollen on your nose."

There was an easy familiarity about David's touch that encouraged her to relax her guard. The feeling he was equally interested in her provided further encouragement.

They entered the restaurant. She hadn't been in Brentano's in several years, but the restaurant was as understated and reassuring as she remembered. She had always found its creamy-yellow walls and tall, arched windows so inviting. Its twelve connecting dining rooms were set at confounding angles that created many private spaces. She'd heard the building had once been an elegant horse stable for very spoiled purebreds. The crystal chandeliers had been installed for them. "It's still warm. Perhaps we can sit on the patio?" she suggested.

They were shown to a table on a garden terrace. An elderly waiter approached. She recognized the waiter at once. "Hello, Burnel." She greeted the waiter who had served her steaks every Friday night for many years of her married life. She reached for his hand. "I'm happy to see a familiar face."

"Mrs. Fontaine?" Burnel squinted his eyes. "How ya doin', pretty girl?"

"I'm here for a short visit, there's no Mr. Fontaine anymore. We're divorced."

He gave an approving nod. Clearly he already knew about the divorce and thought little of Jimmy. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Mint daiquiri, please."

"I'll have a scotch." David opened the menu.

Burnel left the table to get the drinks.

She turned toward David. "What do you do?"

"I don't know how much Marion has already told you about me." He smiled sheepishly. "I have one of those slightly awkward round-about stories. I've done a little bit of everything and a lot of nothing. I graduated years ago as a history major and then I changed my mind about what I wanted to do. I don't think anyone misses me. I never hear a panicked voice in public call out, 'Is there a history major in the house? We need one now!'" He laughed. "I also became sidetracked financially. I had to take a lot of odd and unpaying jobs to help out after Katrina, but now I work as a roofer. For a while there, my family really needed me, but I'm hoping to make up for lost time. I've been taking communication classes, studying film editing. I'd like to make documentaries. Marion mentioned you might be funding a similar venture. I would certainly love to be part of it."

"Documentaries?" Her breath caught. Suspicion bloomed in her mind. Apparently Marion's matchmaking scheme was self-serving. She suddenly understood what this meeting was really about. David was politely asking for project funding. Marion had obviously intended to sweep her out Channel Three's door, and David was the broom. This wasn't a date after all. It was a business meeting. Her mind raced to shift gears. Most likely, David was an innocent bystander in Marion's plan. He was perhaps the first of many young filmmakers they would work with. She smiled. She couldn't even

be angry with Marion. Arguing with Marion was futile. Marion always saw the bigger picture. Poor Marion heard her daily career complaints and had finally taken matters into her own hands by throwing her feet first into a new role. Who knows, it might be fun to play producer? She decided to listen to David with an open mind and take the ride. *Lily Fontaine, producer*. She liked the sound of that title.

David spoke softly. "I'm also a musician. I play guitar, piano and the accordion. I'm involved with a nonprofit group devoted to getting musical instruments back into artist hands. New Orleans' heart beats to music."

She glanced at David's elegant hands as he spoke and thought, *Those are artistic hands not laboring hands*. What would it feel like to be touched with the slightly calloused hands of a musician? Her thoughts wandered. Dear lord, why did this have to be a business meeting? She shifted uneasily in her chair.

"I started a documentary last year about the musical roots of New Orleans but I ran out of money. So that was the end of that, at least for now. Marion mentioned you have a background in sociology and journalism." He paused. "Lily, what kind of documentaries are you interested in?"

Her lips parted in silence. Good question. What kind of documentaries was she interested in? It was actually an exciting thought. The possibilities were vast and almost overwhelming. What would she want to be creatively involved in? She loved music and used to sing quite often. David's project sounded interesting. He seemed to be focused on what he wanted. He needed money but at least he was asking nicely. This might be the career change, godsend she was looking for? A rogue thought flickered in her mind. It was inevitable she leave Channel Three, if only to save her pride. Maybe she should look ahead and take that first shaky step toward independence right this minute. Becoming David's producer might be a good place to start. Maybe some of his confidence would rub off on her? If his request was reasonable, she decided she would consider funding him. Who knows, one thing might seamlessly lead to another? He was such an attractive and charming man, the temptation to take all sorts of risks was there. The little red devil on her shoulder poked her hard and reminded her that men used money and power to get what they wanted from women all the time. It was practically an institution. Why couldn't she do it? If it wasn't too crass she could start with the money on the nightstand... "How much money do you need?"

His eyes widened. "A lot!"

Alarm bells rang in her head. Asking for *a lot* of money seemed like a very unprofessional response from someone who was looking for project funding. Why had Marion set her up with a cash-strapped man who called a business meeting a date? Memories of Jimmy helping himself to her life's saving loomed large in her mind. "How did you meet Marion?"

"I met Marion through the university's mentorship program. Marion was kind enough to allow me the use of some stock footage she owned for free. It really helped. I've been applying for grants, trying to get enough money to travel to Africa and document the direct correlation between traditional African musical styles, jazz and

zydeco. I have some new ideas about how to show this correlation but the travel costs are huge, so my plans have taken a backseat.”

Burnel returned to their table with the mint daiquiri and the scotch. “What would you folks like for supper?”

She hadn’t thought about it at all. The words “Shrimp etouffee” popped out of her mouth. David ordered a steak smothered in oysters.

When they were alone again, she asked, “Why do you need to travel to Africa to make a documentary about the music of New Orleans?”

“Music is the voice of the human spirit. I want to trace New Orleans’ musical roots back to the source. Africa is so visually rich, I’d love to shoot my own HD footage and record traditional music. Honestly, I just want an excuse to travel. I haven’t really been anywhere and I’m dying to see more of the world.” His eyes glittered with excitement.

She found herself nodding in agreement. Good answer. He sounded like the kind of man who might be avoiding attachments. Good for her. This might work out great. She noticed the intense spark in David’s eyes as he spoke. How long had it been since a subject had fired her interest that much? She envied his enthusiasm.

The restaurant began to fill with diners. The setting sun cast a soft yellow glow over the patio wall. She leaned back in her chair, feeling good about being here. She liked David. She focused on his articulate hands as he spoke. He spoke slowly with self-assurance. His voice had a certain quality about it she seldom heard on the West Coast. He lacked the frantic, striving tones of a coastal urbanite. She realized how much she missed Southern charm.

David certainly had his strong points. He was well worth bargaining for. He asked for a lot of money because he was confident and bold. No doubt he was worth every penny. As the party in power it was up to her to set reasonable limits. She needed to set a firm price in her mind and steer him toward it. “It sounds like a wonderful goal. I’m very interested in your documentary. I am in a position to help you, but you must be specific about your financial needs. In turn, I will be specific about my needs and expectations as a producer.” She tried to sound flirty but her proposal sounded awkward.

“How’s your daiquiri?” He smiled.

Was he deliberately being evasive? Did he need money or not? She took a sip of her mint daiquiri and pulled away. The bartender had mixed it extra strong and sweet. She put it aside, deciding it might be wise to stay sharp and forego the alcohol tonight. She’d always wanted to branch into documentary journalism. Lately she had thought about it often. It just seemed like such a huge risk to switch careers and put up her own money for outside projects. She wished she had half of David’s calm. If she had been asking a stranger for seed money, she would have been a nervous, blundering wreck. “Exactly how much is ‘a lot’ of money?”

“Lily, I don’t want to talk about money issues, that’s not why I came on this date. I wanted to meet you.” A warm smile lit his face.

Wasn't funding why he was really here? "I don't mind talkin' about money. In fact, it would be a relief to get money out of the way." She stressed the word *money*. "I like your ideas. I'd like to pinpoint what your financial needs are and see if we can't work something out. I'm getting a very good feeling about you. I'd be happy to discuss funding your project. Perhaps we can have a successful partnership on several levels." She glanced at his thick eyelashes. *Take a hint, handsome.*

He looked directly at her and changed the subject again. "Have you ever thought about coming back to New Orleans?"

She exhaled an agitated breath. So this was how the other half lived? Pure frustration. She realized she was being as pushy and obnoxious as a sex-starved man on the prowl. She had better cut it out or she'd make herself repulsive and scare David off. "Of course, I always knew New Orleans would win me back." She smiled.

He leaned toward her. His fingertips brushed her palm. "There's someplace I'd like to take you later." He tensed slightly. "I have something very personal to ask."

Her lips slowly curled upward. "Where are we going? What do you want to ask?"

He shook his head. "I'm not telling. It's a surprise." His eyes lit. "Lily, I'm very interested in partnering with you and I want to take you someplace where I can show you exactly what I'm taking about."

Her heart leapt. Finally, that was more like it. "My room at the Toulouse is lovely. After dinner, we could go there and talk." Her eyes swept across his surprised face.

He exhaled nervously. "I would love that." His fingers wrapped around hers and gently stroked her hand. "But can we do my errand first?"

"Of course. Whatever you want." She spoke softly. *Hooray!* She was going to get her way. Kissing, whispering and a slow, hard fuck were within reach.

A couple walked toward their table. The woman was very young, certainly no older than twenty-two. The curvaceous young woman took tiny, mincing steps in towering heels as she wiggled across the room in a tight red dress. The gentleman she was with wore a loud print shirt with a chunky wristwatch. The watch caught her eye. It looked familiar. Dear god, it was Jimmy. Her eyes closed on the horrific vision. She turned away and hid her face behind her hand to avoid being noticed.

David saw her face blanch as she turned away. "Lily, what's wrong?"

"Well, this is awkward." Jimmy's voice boomed across the restaurant as he walked directly toward their table. He surveyed David with suspicion. "Burnel said you were here. I can't believe it. We flew in from Houston for the holiday weekend. I haven't been back to NOLA in—" He realized his blunder and suddenly looked cornered. "Ages."

She hadn't laid eyes on Jimmy in three years. A friend had mentioned he was living in Houston. She cursed her bad luck for being in New Orleans the same weekend as him.

Jimmy spoke in his loudest, sportscaster voice. "Everything's changed!"

Her eyes bulged. That was an understatement. Jimmy had put on a thick paunch, which flowed over his waistband. He looked ten years older, tired and dissipated, as if he was drinking heavily—again. Katrina couldn't be blamed for his devastation. Obviously alcohol and lifestyle choices figured into the equation. She and Jimmy had suffered through a very public divorce. She had caught him cheating on her and spending her money on his girlfriends. Jimmy had been paying a girl's bills, who was also involved with several big-name and very-married athletes. When the girl was caught, the scandal exploded. Everybody got their picture in the papers. All respect and trust had been destroyed. The new girlfriend standing at Jimmy's side was typical of the girls he chose. They looked great from across the room but hardened and coarse up-close. Lilly was grateful to be done with him. It was painful to remember she had cried her eyes out when it had all gone wrong, but now she saw it was for the best. Fate had freed her from the wrong man.

"Who's your friend?" Jimmy loomed over their table.

"David La Beau." David innocently offered his hand.

She winced.

Jimmy latched on to David's hand and squeezed it with all his might. "Hi. I'm Jimmy Fontaine, damn glad to meet ya!"

When he saw his bones were being deliberately pulverized, David defended himself. He crunched Jimmy's hand in his iron grip.

Jimmy paled and quickly pulled his hand back. "Well, it's been nice seein' ya. Leticia and I better get going—she's thirsty. We're staying at the Hotel Toulouse if you want to check in with us later." Jimmy and Leticia walked away.

Leticia pawed at Jimmy's hair weave as they walked toward a table in the next dining room.

Her heart sank. Jimmy was staying at the Toulouse also. Now she would have to switch hotels.

David saw the anguish on her face. "I know somewhere you can stay."

"Where?"

"Chateau La Beau." he smiled. "You can stay with me." His fingertips brushed the side of her cheek. "You can have a private room or not. You can have whatever you want. I'll go along with whatever you say." He gently pressed his lips to her ear and whispered softly, "Lily, I'll be blunt. I want you. I knew it the moment I saw you. I'm as interested in you as you are in me." His mouth gently nuzzled against her ear. "I've heard you hinting around for a paid lover and I want you to know I'll have none of it. That's not how it's going to be. I have my own expectations about 'partnership', which I will share with you later."

The confident, commanding tone of his voice made her shiver. She looked into his eyes to see if he meant it. He did.

"Spend the weekend with me, Lily. Be my lover. Say yes."

She felt breathless. "Yes." As she spoke, it felt as if she were dreaming. Everything she wished for and everything she feared was happening at the same moment. It was almost too much. Her eyes furtively followed Jimmy into the adjacent dining room. He was loud. She could hear his voice from here. He was making a big entrance and enjoying having everyone look at his flashy girlfriend. He was a heartache long before she caught him cheating. He drank too much, and he was rude to her friends and colleagues without even meaning to be. He wasn't interested in art, culture or the world beyond sports. That had been a sore point. She stared at him and tried to see him as he truly was, minus the anger and hurt. They were so different. There had been a big spark between them when they were young, but their differences had become insurmountable. They had little common ground and that was the true reason their marriage failed. It was time to let go. She turned toward David. Her heart opened at the sight of him. "I'll be your lover. We are going to have a wonderful time." She leaned forward and gently kissed the side of his cheek.

His fingers stroked her hand. "You're not doing this to make Jimmy jealous?"

She felt a little shiver of electricity pass between. "I'm doing this one hundred-percent for me." Her heart raced.

The lazy, sexy look of a big cat crossed David's face. His hand dropped below the table and brushed against her thigh. "I think you made the right choice," he whispered.

Her body shivered as David's fingertips grazed the hem of her skirt. Her skin warmed from his slightest touch. Her heart raced. It already felt as if they were lovers.

Burnel stood over their table. She glanced up in guilty surprise. Their food had arrived. Burnel set the dishes down with a smile and a polite nod and quietly left.

She picked up a fork and tasted her shrimp etouffee. The sauce on the tender shrimp was buttery rich and perfectly seasoned. David's steak was rare with a beautiful brown crust on the edges. Brentano's food was excellent as always, but she couldn't fully enjoy it. She heard Jimmy's braying laughter echoing in the other dining room. It made her horribly uncomfortable. She would have preferred to be alone with David so she could properly savor the food.

Jimmy's gale of laughter ended in a loud snort.

She leaned toward David and whispered, "I don't want to seem ungrateful for a lovely meal but the sooner we get out of here the better."

"I understand." David's eyes narrowed on the next room. "Pardon me if this sounds rude but I can't even imagine a woman like you with that man."

"Neither can I." She quickly ate her shrimp etouffee, anxious to escape the view of Jimmy and Leticia horsing around at their table. Jimmy's hands were all over Leticia. Leticia handfed Jimmy and licked away the tiny bits of food that fell on his chin. They knew she was watching. She suspected their antics were purely for show. Round after round of drinks appeared at their table. They seemed to be in a big hurry to get inebriated.

She scooted closer to David and touched his hand whenever she set her fork down.

He leaned toward her and whispered, "How long has it been since you've seen him?"

She stared into the next dining room, "I'm done with him." She glanced up at David and repositioned her chair so she faced away from Jimmy.

David's fingertips gently brushed the side of her cheek. "I'm glad you're with me. I almost feel sorry for him." He moved closer to her and casually draped an arm around her shoulder. He pulled her closer and whispered in her ear, "I think he's a complete fool."

"Me too. I'm glad we agree on that." She smiled when she realized David was acting a bit territorial toward her and she liked it. "You arranged a beautiful dinner and I'm sorry Jimmy showed up. I'm not going to let him spoil our evening. He's not important anymore, let's just ignore him." She looked into David's eyes. Warmth and understanding brimmed in his eyes. Her body wanted to lean toward him and be close. His attitude was so relaxed she hoped it would rub off on her. He was the perfect man to run away with for the weekend.

He leaned over and casually kissed her as if they were well-acquainted lovers.

At first touch his full lips barely brushed against hers. His touch was light but the kiss sent an electric tingle through her that rocked her body backward against the seat. Her breath caught. His actions were restrained but the desire behind them was immense and unbounded. Heat radiated off the surface of his skin. The temperature between them rose. She was almost startled when her senses snapped to attention and took notice of every detail. Her blood rushed. Dear god, he felt good. How did he convey so much longing into one tiny kiss? Butterflies fluttered in her chest.

He didn't pull away. He stayed close.

She was acutely aware he was only a hairbreadth away. He waited for her to come to him. She leaned forward and tentatively returned a single soft kiss. It felt so right. She wanted more. Without thinking, her hands reached out and gently caressed the sides of his face. Her fingers tangled in his hair. She felt his warm breath on her cheek. Her lips parted and gently glided against his. She pressed her lips against his soft mouth. His full lips begged to be nipped. She gently dragged her teeth across the cushioned softness. David felt so good. He took her breath away. Had she ever enjoyed a first kiss this much? He had such a beautiful mouth, what would it feel like to have David's soft kisses stray between her thighs? Her throat tensed. She crossed her legs and squeezed her thighs together beneath the table. A sharp thrill zipped through her. She wanted to wrap her legs around him and cover his face in kisses. This could get out of hand fast. It felt so natural to kiss David. He was so good to be near. She wanted to go on kissing him but reminded herself they were in a restaurant and the tablecloth couldn't hide everything that was going on. She breathlessly broke the kiss and slowly pulled back.

David was dreamy-eyed.

It was conspicuously quiet in the adjoining dinning room. The braying laughter had inexplicably stopped. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Jimmy and Leticia frowning at her. Jimmy had actually set his drink down. He looked upset. Too bad for him. She whispered to David, "Shall we skip the bananas Foster and move straight to the real dessert?" She didn't want to be here a moment longer than necessary.

David immediately asked Burnel for the check.

She didn't fight for the check. She let David pay for dinner. She was here for adventure. Jimmy had moved on with his life and she was free to move on with hers. David was with her and she should make the most of it. This was a pivotal moment in her life and she knew it. What she did today would color the coming years. She could sulk and blame Jimmy for poisoning her heart. She could rail against fate, feeling like a hapless victim, or she could take charge of her destiny, taking complete responsibility for her heart and actions and move forward.

She wrapped her arm around David, feeling Jimmy's glowering eyes on her as they walked from the patio toward the front door. She quietly said, "Goodbye, Jimmy," as they passed through the dining room.

Jimmy and Leticia stopped their silliness long enough to wave goodbye.

She stepped forward. How had she ever lived her life as Jimmy's wife? How was that ever possible? They had nothing in common except a physical attraction and that had faded years ago. They were practically strangers now. She had changed and he had changed. One door closed in her heart as another opened. She had her dignity and she had David, at least for moment. This chance meeting with Jimmy had proved very telling. She had sailed farther away from her past than she realized. She was a different person now and practically a stranger to herself. Anything was possible now. She was glad she had run into Jimmy. She felt clearer. Her resolve strengthened. Her old life was finished. What she feared were raw wounds didn't even sting anymore. She squeezed David's hand as they walked away.

When they reached the street, David winced and let go of her hand. "My hand is still aching from that killer handshake."

"I'm sorry." She looked up at his handsome face. "I didn't have a chance to warn you about Jimmy. He thinks he's making a strong impression."

"He certainly did. He added a nasty little finger twist too." He gently massaged his knuckles.

She realized her Stargazers were still sitting on the table. "Oh no, I walked away without my flowers."

"Lily, I'll get you some more. Let's not go back."

She felt a stab of regret. She wanted those flowers. She had not received flowers from a special man who stirred her blood in a very long time. She seriously considered dashing back into Brentano's to retrieve them but stopped herself. It wasn't worth walking past Jimmy again. "David, I know we started off under a cloud of weirdness

but you've been such a gentleman. I truly appreciated the flowers and the beautiful meal." She laughed. "You're a good sport. Why did you agree to meet a stranger?"

He gaze warmed. "You don't feel like a stranger. You're certainly a familiar face and a familiar voice. I love your speaking voice, Lily. It has such a pleasant quality about it. I'd like to talk to you about that a little later..." He smiled. "If truth be told, you're exactly my type."

She glanced up at him. "What's your type?" She held her breath.

"Smart, beautiful, sophisticated."

It was wonderful to hear but she was quick to add, "I'm eleven years older than you."

"That doesn't make a bit of difference to me."

"Really?"

"Really."

She felt lighter. She had spoken her last fear aloud and it didn't seem to matter. David was looking more and more like the best thing going. "Let's get some coffee." There was no way she was going to let herself fall asleep tonight.

They walked toward the river. A lively mix of music poured out every open door they passed. She leaned against David's arm just because it felt good. A cargo ship passed, its billowing smokestacks visible above the levee. That was something startling one could only expect to see in New Orleans—ships floating above street level.

They crossed Jackson Square. School and tourist buses were parked in front of Café Creole. The shuttered doors of Café Creole were locked only one day each year, on Christmas. The café was full of smiling adolescents dressed in formal wear. The girls wore colorful satin dresses and the boys wore coat and tie. It was obviously an after-dance outing. A chance to acculturate the youth of New Orleans and teach them an appreciation of French Quarter nightlife. The kids struggled unsuccessfully to sit still and be sophisticated, but they filled the café with ear-piercing squeals and shouts.

It had been ages since she had a café au lait with real chicory and a sugary beignet. David tried to steer her toward a quiet table. She protested that she didn't mind the noise. It felt good to be part of life and not a spectator. She had been a spectator for too long. With the help of "Channel Three's exclusive footage", she reported the events of life with a neutral voice and an unbiased expression. For too long she had worked weird hours and held the world at arm's length. That was going to end.

They got their coffee in the cafeteria-type queue and found an uncluttered table and sat down. She studied David's face when he turned to the side. He was masculine, balanced and strong. She loved his voice and his charming personality. He seemed to be sensitive and understanding. So far, Marion had been absolutely right. She was almost afraid to continue talking with him and risk being disillusioned. David was a top-of-the-line, sexy man. She couldn't wait to take him for a test drive.

David opened a carton of chocolate milk and handed it to her. She poured the chocolate milk into her coffee. She hadn't done that in a long time. It was delicious. She picked up a warm beignet. The powdered sugar covered her fingers. There was no dainty way to eat a beignet. They made a mess. She turned away from David to blow a bit of the sugar away.

He blew a puff of sugar in her direction. She dodged away from it but some landed on her blouse. He lightly brushed the sugar off the crest of her breast. "I can't believe you didn't see that coming. You've been out of town too long." He laughed at the look of pleased surprise on her face.

She laughed and blew a full puff of powdery sugar his face. "Revenge is sweet." A light dusting of powdered sugar settled on his eyelashes and nose. "You didn't even try to move away." She had been certain he would duck. She reached for a napkin to wipe the sugar off. When she leaned closer, he held her tight and kissed her. The warm kiss caught her off guard. The kiss was purely for them and she loved it.

The kiss lingered. His mouth was warm and sugary. She wanted another kiss. His fingers slid across the silk of her blouse. His hand slightly grazed the side of her breast, making her wish for more contact. He slowly pulled back to look in her eyes and gauge her reaction, which only made her want more. His eyes darkened. He looked languid, turned-on. She smiled at him as her heart raced. This man was a total turn-on. She couldn't resist teasing him a bit more and leaned forward to kiss him again. "The buttons on this blouse are so tricky. Sometimes they just come undone on their own." Her fingers grasped the front of her blouse. "Whoops." She pretended her blouse had opened in public but it hadn't.

His eyes immediately dropped to her blouse. When he realized it was a joke, he sighed and pulled her close, exploring her lips with the very tip of his tongue. "You have a little bit of sugar here and a little bit of sugar there," he whispered.

Her hands drifted over his shoulders and across his solid chest.

His muscles tensed slightly beneath the shirt.

She leaned forward and kissed him again, letting her lips glide softly against his. The kiss was featherlight but stunning. She patted his chest and smiled. He felt solid and strong. For certain, this man was in great shape. His breathing quickened. There was the feeling of a racehorse held back at the gate. Touching David was pure physicality and pleasure. She had almost forgotten how good it felt to kiss a man and be turned-on. She sighed softly against his lips, half afraid she could lose control in public.

His fingertips lightly stroked her thigh beneath the table. His hand gently nudged the hem of her skirt higher.

Her breath caught. She was tempted to part her thighs and allow him to discover how wet she was, but she resolutely pressed her knees together. They were in public. School kids might be watching. Yet she allowed his fingers to slip beneath her skirt and trace along her thigh. She closed her eyes to savor the feeling of being touched in secret by warm, roughened hands. Her breath caught. She was jolted by the strength of her

reaction. David was pure temptation. Her fantasies went wild. If he dragged her to the back of the café, pulled her behind a shadowy partition and demanded she lift her skirt and part her thighs for him – she would do it. A soft moan slipped past her lips.

She slowly opened her eyes and saw the sour face of a school chaperone staring back at her. She had been caught. The chaperone gave her a shaming look for carrying on in public. She should have felt embarrassed but she didn't. Her heart pounded with excitement. She looked at David. He was just as excited. The Hotel Toulouse was just around the corner. She could see the top of its sign from here, tempting her. That beautiful iron bed and the iced champagne were waiting, almost within reach. Surly Jimmy was still drinking and blundering at the restaurant? If they darted away now they could lock themselves safely in her room without being noticed. "Maybe we should risk going back to my room?" she whispered. "It's right over there."

His long lashes swept downward. "Are you sure?"

She looked into his eyes and nodded yes, feeling as certain about this as she had ever felt about anything in her life. She was a stone's throw away from bliss. "Let's go."

They left the unfinished coffee on the table. She stood and straightened her skirt. The school chaperone looked relieved they were taking their bad example elsewhere.

She smiled inwardly, feeling defiant. Shame wasn't going to stop her. She was a reborn and shameless woman. Shame reared its head whenever someone broke from the pack. Shame was meant to bring the overly adventurous to heel. Shame was a reliable method of keeping women under control. Shame could only punish those who bowed to it. No one else knew her heart. No one else would have to live with her decisions. No one else would have to shoulder her regrets for the life she didn't taste. In this moment, she was completely free. Fate had sent David.

She and David walked toward the hotel. She leaned against him as they strolled. Her hands absently roved over his muscular arms. She couldn't wait to feel those arms wrapped tightly around her. She barely knew him, yet he felt so right, so familiar. How long had it been since she had felt this way, completely in her body and entirely in the moment? She wanted him to hold her tight and ride her hard.

He smiled at her. "What are thinking?"

"Nothing." She enjoyed looking at him.

He gently stroked her hand. "Lily, before we go back to your room, I should mention a favor I'd like to ask of you."

Drunken laughter rang through the street. A woman's coarse voice shrieked.

She looked up and saw Jimmy and Leticia staggering toward the Hotel Toulouse. Leticia clung to Jimmy's arm to keep from falling down. Jimmy wove aimlessly down the sidewalk. Leticia's ankle buckled, she fell off her high heel and crumpled to the ground.

"Whoops!" Jimmy laughed but he couldn't lift Leticia off the sidewalk.

Leticia howled obscenities and slapped at Jimmy with a flailing hand. She grabbed his shirt and yanked him down to the pavement with her. They both struggled to get up and walk toward the hotel but they kept falling down. They only made it as far the courtyard before they gave up and plopped down on the front steps, laughing and swearing loudly.

Her heart dropped. Those fools were blocking the front door. She couldn't even go inside to get her things.

David watched the entire ordeal with his arm locked securely around her waist. "I don't want to keep running into those two clowns. How do you feel about leaving the city?"

"Yes, please. I'll go anywhere. I just want to enjoy your company without having to hear a couple of drunken fools outside our window." She sighed with relief as David led her away from the hotel.

They slipped into the shadows. She was doubtful Jimmy or Leticia ever noticed them.

"I know somewhere out of town where we can be alone." David led her around the corner to where his car was parked. He opened the door of a beautifully restored 1964 sedan and encouraged her to climb in.

She sat down on the buttery-soft leather seats. She was eager to be alone with David and hoped they didn't have to drive far. "Where are we going?" She gently rested her hand on his thigh.

He started the car and drove toward the highway. "Someplace private, but I have to make arrangements first to make sure it remains private." He looked at her from the corner of his eye and slowly smiled.

The heated look on his face gave her shivers. She couldn't wait to be somewhere private with him. This was going to be good. She scooted closer.

He drove with one hand and gently stroked her thigh with the other. The calloused edges of his long fingers traveled in lazy circles against her skin. He continually turned his face to the side to look at her or smile.

They shared easy conversation as they drove north. She tried to guess where they were going. She hoped it was somewhere romantic like one of the charming plantation bed and breakfasts. She was confused when he exited the highway and pulled into the parking lot of a bowling alley. Its hot-pink neon sign blazed *Rock n' Roll Bowl*. A large crowd had gathered in front. Live zydeco music poured out the front door. Couples danced in the front parking lot where a slight breeze cooled the air.

"What are we doing here?" She was flummoxed. This didn't appear to be a good place to be alone. This was a wild crowd.

He parked the car in a secluded corner of the parking lot far from the crowd. "I have to tell my folks I need the cabin this weekend. I don't want any surprise visitors. Come on, you'll enjoy this." He offered his hand.

She was sure she wouldn't. Her heart was set on a soft mattress and a private room. "Folks? Bowling?"

"Actually we might have to do a little dancing, but I promise you we'll leave as soon as we can."

She looked at the raucous crowd. "Can I wait in the car?"

He grabbed her hand. "Absolutely not. I want to show you off."

She took hold of his hand and dutifully followed David into the brightly lit bowling alley. There was a lot going on inside. People were dancing, bowling and enjoying the music.

A stunningly beautiful older woman waved at David from across the lanes, trying to catch his eye. "Hi, sweetie!"

David waved back and smiled.

Though the woman was very attractive, it was obvious she was at least twenty years older than David. Perhaps he had spoken the truth and older women were his type. She felt possessive. David was her prize tonight. She curled her arm around his as the woman walked toward them.

"Are you going to play tonight, *cher*?" The woman enveloped David in warm hug. Apparently they were well-acquainted.

"I didn't bring my accordion."

"Your brother's got one in the trunk." The woman turned her green eyes toward Lily to deliver a keen inspection.

David introduced her. "Mama, this is Lily Fontaine."

The woman turned toward her. "Of course I remember. You were in those Jambalaya Jazz seasonings commercials. I still hum that tune." David's mother grabbed her hand and gave it a warm squeeze. "Do you still sing? Why not join us tonight?"

She hadn't performed in public in years. It was a daunting idea. "I'm not sure—"

A handsome gentleman who looked like an older version of David stepped forward. "Come on, girl, you can do it."

David introduced her to the couple. "Lily, this is my mother and father, June and Alex La Beau."

Alex pointed at the mob in the bowling alley. "This place is full of La Beaus. We got another son and daughter somewhere in here and a whole bunch of cousins."

June turned toward David. "By the way, your friend Brewster has been looking for you. He seemed pretty excited about telling you something."

"Thanks, Mama, I'll call him on Monday." David pulled his father aside. "Would you ask Bernard not to bring the family to the cabin this weekend?" His eyes darted toward Lily.

"Sure." Alex nodded his head. His eyes scanned Lily up and down in a single blurred sweep.

She couldn't tell what Alex was thinking and she was afraid to know. She reached out to shake his hand. "So nice to meet you." Dear god. She had gotten more than she bargained for. She had been pulled into a family reunion.

June addressed her with awed respect. "Are you helping David narrate his documentary? He mentioned you might."

Her breath caught. She didn't know to answer. "We haven't talked about that."

"Mama, we just met. Don't scare Lily away." David took Lilly's hand and twirled her onto a makeshift dance floor behind the bowling lanes. His actions were so quick and deliberate it was as if he had picked her up and carried her away. The music had a brisk tempo. He swung her in a wide circle, pulling her close to his chest.

She looked up at him. "Are you trying to distract me from what your mother just said?"

"Lily, I know it's too early to be asking a personal favor—you have a beautiful, professional voice and you're still a local celebrity—but would you consider narrating the documentary I'm putting together?"

Suspicion dawned. "You and Marion have already talked about this, haven't you?"

An innocent smile lit his face. "We sure did. We've been talking about it for months. I was happy you came to town this weekend so I could ask you in person and show you what I'm working on. I wanted you to know firsthand what you're getting involved with."

"Am I the last one to hear all this?" She laughed. "I told you Marion was a busybody. Some days I don't know if I should strangle her or send her a dozen roses." She glanced up at David beaming face. His expression was so optimistic and hopeful as she blurted out, "I would love to look over your documentary. If it's a project where I feel I can be an asset, I'd be honored to narrate it."

He pulled her against him. His broad hand caressed the small of her back. "I'm not just using you for your beautiful voice. I wanted to meet you for other reasons." He looked down at her with sparkling eyes. "I have a good feeling about this. We could be good for each other."

"You mean professionally?"

He leaned close to her ear. His breath warmed her skin. "I mean personally."

His voice was so reassuring. For a moment, her thoughts simply floated on his softly spoken words. She surrendered to his will as he danced her in quick, wide circles. Dear lord, things were moving fast in unpredictable directions. She had just agreed to collaborate with him on his project without hesitation, but was it wise to mix business and pleasure on her dime? The golden rule at work was, *Don't get your honey where you make your money*. Many a man had learned that lesson the hard way. "I came here looking for a little fun this weekend." She tried to sound nonchalant.

He gently drew her against him, firmly wrapping his arm around her waist. "Maybe you should be looking for more." He gently kissed the top of her forehead.

His tender gesture melted her defenses. She had only known David a couple of hours and she was already tempted to abandon all plans to hold him at bay. This could be dangerous.

The music stopped. June grabbed the microphone. "We have a special friend here tonight – Miss Lily Fontaine! If we ask real nice, maybe she'll sing for us."

She shuddered. Everyone in the bowling alley looked at her. Nervous laughter bubbled out of her throat. To think, she had hoped to sneak anonymously into town for a weekend of carefree sex with a stranger and leave unnoticed. Her face warmed.

He saw her reaction. "Don't worry, I'll go up there with you."

She balked. "I'm a little nasally from the flight."

"This is Cajun music, nasal's good." He took her arm and pulled her forward. "Do you know *John Paul*?"

"Sure." It was a standard. If one could rhyme "more" with "floor" and "door" and not use "whore" anyone could sing John Paul.

A dark-haired young man, who looked like a cousin, handed David a guitar.

David grabbed the guitar and sat on a bench between two other musicians. He immediately began to tune the guitar and fiddle with the strings. His brow took on a serious look of concentration. "Bernard never gets it right," he muttered to himself.

She was hustled over to the other side of the makeshift stage with the singers. June crowded beside her. The band started playing. She was petrified. In the last few years there had been little singing in her life, little socializing and no family gatherings. Her heart hammered against her ribs. This was almost too much.

June whispered in her ear, "I think it's so wonderful you're helping David. David's so good-hearted about helping everyone else."

June's words were so warm and filled with gratitude. They left her paralyzed. She wondered what June would think if she knew there was an envelope filled with hundred-dollar bills sitting on her hotel nightstand, waiting to be handed to David as if he were a casual purchase, something she could put a price on and say "I want that".

Her thoughts stumbled into a dark place. What would June think of her treating her son as a purchase? Her original scheme, which sounded so sensible this morning, just didn't feel right anymore. Paying David off and holding him at arm's length now sounded cowardly.

That sinking feeling swept over her. Her eyes scanned the crowded bowling alley. What the hell was she doing here anyway? She was attracted to David and she liked his family, but how had plans swerved so far off course? Where was her carefree, unattached weekend? Who was in control here? It certainly didn't feel like her. David had quickly drifted beyond the boundaries of being a mysterious fantasy man, to become a business proposition on a date, to then become a real person with a family and a life she could fall for big-time. This couldn't possibly end well. Her throat tensed. She couldn't sing a note.

June sang first to fill the empty space. "John Paul... John Paul, why don't you love me no more? John Paul... John Paul, why did you head for the door?"

She found the courage to join in. It wasn't as horrible as she had thought. Everyone was smiling. A few couples started to dance. She looked out at a sea of dark hair. The La Beau men were tall with broad backs and wide shoulders. She tried to imagine what their common ancestor looked like. Obviously he had been a handsome man. This gathering was proof that generations ago, some indestructible Acadian man had been thrown into the swamp and not only survived but thrived.

David was perched on the edge of the bench with his long legs folded beneath him. His fingers picked away at the guitar strings. He glanced up and smiled at her.

She smiled back. He had such a kind expression on his face. The warmth of his personality drew her in. She wished she were standing closer to him, basking in his private attention. Her focus moved to his articulate hands. He played with precision and skill. It was a pleasure to watch a real musician who was enjoying what he was doing. It was difficult to look away. She became mesmerized watching him play.

She realized how much she missed singing and being around family and this wasn't even her family. She almost laughed. This felt like a real life. It was so unlike her routine in Los Angeles, where she slept most of the day and spent her nights at the studio. Her stomach knotted. That routine suddenly sounded so empty and meaningless. She wondered how she had endured it for so long. This was more to her liking. This was the culture she loved. Maybe she should consider buying a little apartment in the French Quarter? That might be nice way to start a new life. Her heart warmed to that idea. Every time she glanced at David, he was already looking at her.

He slightly raised a dark brow, subtly motioning her to stand next to him.

The focused look of interest in his eyes made her breath catch. How long had it been since a man looked at her that way and she had been able to return the look? He made her heart race. He could summon her with a single raised brow. He didn't need to do anything more than that. She stepped to his side and glanced down at his hands as they played guitar. They sang together. It sounded good. Her voice blended seamlessly with his. It felt as if she belonged here beside him.

The thought frightened her. She knew she had no business thinking it. Shame on her for letting her feelings get so out of control. She reminded herself this was a relationship with limits and that's how it should stay. At least for now. They were still virtually strangers. She needed to behave as if she were the professional in charge. If she was going to enjoy him physically, and she certainly planned to, she had better get her mind right and shield her heart. It was completely foolish to do otherwise.

"John Paul... John Paul, you made my heart soar—why don't you love me no more?"

She looked around her. Her mind wandered. Everyone else belonged here. Everyone in the room belonged to someone. They all knew and loved each other. It

would be nice to be part of something like this. Maybe she should be asking herself if she was ready for more?

"John Paul... John Paul..."

Before the song even finished a pretty girl sidled in front of David and waved. "Hi, Bowie!" She interrupted the singers, struggling to get his attention, making flirty eyes and wiggling like a puppy.

Lily felt a little jolt of jealousy. She should have known there would be plenty of competition for a man like David. She knew she was interested and wanted him as a lover. Why not stake a claim on him right now before that girl came an inch closer? Her fingertips brushed the side of his face. She mouthed the words, *We should go*.

David's eyes sparked. He slightly nodded his head in agreement.

When the song came to an end, the girl leapt forward onto the stage and wrapped her arms around David's neck. "Bowie, where've you been hidein'?"

He disentangled himself from the girl. The girl wouldn't take a hint. She pawed at him and tried to climb onto his lap.

June whispered in Lily's ear, "Poor Lynette's been chasing David for years. That simple girl ain't ever gonna catch him."

"Come on, Bowie, dance with me." Lynette yanked on his wrist and tried to pull him off the stage.

Lily stepped forward and claimed David's hand. "David is my date."

Lynette glared at her. "Where did you come from?"

"I'm a local, sweetie." She gently pulled David away from Lynette and led him off the stage onto the dance floor. Her heart pounded as she swung him in a wide circle, feeling her confidence rise.

A spirited accordion player took the stage. The musician looked like a young boy but it may have been a girl. She couldn't tell. The voice was gender neutral.

"Lily, I'm sorry about Lynette, she's got the wrong idea." He pulled her against his chest and whispered in her ear, "You did beautifully. Thank you for letting me show-off a little. I certainly enjoyed it."

Her body brushed against David's. He felt so good. She couldn't wait to be alone with him. She looked into his eyes. Her fingertips lightly brushed the rough skin of his jaw and traveled upward to touch his cheek. She nuzzled close to his ear. "Will anyone miss us if we slip away?"

"No." A bright smile burst across his face. He pulled her close and twirled her backward, brushing his thigh between hers. He twirled her out the front door. They waved good night to June and Alex as they left. Lynette gave her a dirty look.

Chapter Three

David held her hand tightly. His fingers interlaced with hers. They laughed as they ran to the car.

She felt as if she were running away from her common sense and she didn't care. The situation had gotten way beyond her control and she was ready to accept it for what it was. Where lust and attraction were concerned, there was no such thing as common sense. She should have known. She laughed. She knew now it was adventure and daring she needed all along and here it was. Spontaneity was what she had dreamed of for so long. All she had to do was give in and enjoy it. Why not turn up the volume and take the ride? This weekend was special. David was special. Whatever happened was meant to happen. *Brave words.*

The car was parked in a dark corner of the lot far from overhead lights and other people. As soon as they reached David's sedan, she leaned against the warm hood of the car, pulled him against her and kissed him.

He pressed his body against her and eagerly returned her soft kiss.

Her hands gently stroked the sides of his face. "You'll have to think for both of us. I'm officially turning my brain off and my body on." She would be an idiot not to make love to this man as soon as possible.

He smiled. "Then we're in trouble. I'm not thinking clearly." His body pressed between her thighs as he kissed her.

Her lips parted for him. The tip of her tongue teased his. Their warm breath mingled. Her hands slid into his back pockets and cupped his muscular butt. Her fingertips did a little exploring through the cloth. She was pleased to discover he had the exact type of solid, sculpted butt she loved. She pressed her hips against him to savor his solidness. His hardness brushed against her thigh. Her breath caught as she felt an instant rush of heat at the thought of thick, slick penetration. She couldn't wait to feel him moving inside her. "How far away is your 'someplace private'?" she whispered.

"It's a bit of a drive deep into bayou country," he answered breathlessly.

Her heart sank. That was bad news. She wanted him right now. Her eyes skimmed across the backseat of the old sedan. "What do you think?"

His eyes flashed. "You want to get caught, don't you?"

"Maybe." She felt daring. This part of the parking lot was secluded, so why not take advantage? The thought of making love to him in the backseat was irresistible. Her heart pounded.

He pressed his body against her and kissed her while struggling to unlock the car door with one hand. His hand fumbled to insert the key without looking but he finally got the door open.

She slipped into the back of the sedan and pulled him beside her. Her fingers sank into the luxurious leather. She leaned across the seats and inhaled the crisp scent of upholstery cream. Her eyes fell to half-mast. There was such a strong sensuality associated with this scent. Roomy, bench seats upholstered in buttery leather practically begged lovers to take advantage of them. Her hand patted the polished leather approvingly. "Nice ride, David."

"Thanks. I rebuilt a man's roof and he reupholstered my car. I'm glad you didn't see it before." He laughed as he slid across the seat and pulled her onto his lap.

She hiked her skirt up and straddled his lap, facing him, being careful not to crush the impressive bulge rising in his trousers. Her hands cupped the sides of his face.

He tipped his face upward to gaze at her. His eyes glistened. "Sit down, girl. That's exactly where I want you. I do wish we were somewhere private. I want to take my time with you."

"This is perfect." She gently rubbed the very tip of her nose against his while breathing in the clean scent of his skin.

His fingertips gently brushed a fallen strand of hair from her brow. An enraptured expression lit his face. "I used to dream about you," he whispered. "I can't believe you're really here."

She couldn't believe it either. She was in the backseat of a beautiful old car parked beside a bowling alley, and she was in heaven. It was an unexpected but wonderful turn of events. She smiled. This was where the new Lily would begin. The neon-pink *Rock'n Roll Bowl* sign cast a faint rosy glow into the car. Her fingertips glided across his jaw. "I'm really enjoying my visit to New Orleans."

A mischievous look shone in his eyes. "Are you enjoying anything in particular?" His weight shifted beneath her as his hips tilted upward. The fabric of his trousers strained.

She gently ran her thumb across his full bottom lip. She kissed his softly cushioned lips and traced her fingertips across his chest. "I always enjoy the food." Her voice fell to a faint murmur.

"Reason enough," he unsnapped the top of his trousers, "to move back."

"David, I have to go home on Monday," she whispered.

His gaze locked on to hers. He looked directly into her eyes as he stroked her hips and pushed his hardness against her. "Then promise to stay with me 'til Monday."

"I can only promise tonight." Just saying it made her heart ache for more. Her thighs parted as she slid deeper onto his lap. Her weight gently settled downward. She felt his body brushing against her silk panties. Her pulse quickened. She glanced at his face. He was as turned-on as she was. He had such a candid face. Every emotion was

clearly displayed. It was hard for her to believe she had not known his handsome face until this evening. He already seemed so familiar, as if she had always known him. The moment was so perfect she was afraid it might vanish. "David, did you bring a condom?" Her fingers reached for his zipper.

He nodded. "Are you sure?" He covered her hand in his. "Someone might walk by."

Her lips nuzzled the side of his throat. "Damn 'em for being nosy." She took hold of his hand and guided it beneath her skirt.

His eyes gleamed as his fingers stroked her warm inner thigh and slowly crept toward her panties.

She pushed the edge of the panty aside and let him feel how wet she was. She knew once he understood how much she wanted this, all resistance would fade.

His breath hitched as his hand gently grazed her, registering her heat and wetness. "Dear god, Lily." His eyes flashed with excitement.

Her body shivered at his first gentle touch. She lifted her skirt a little higher.

His thumb roved in slow, careful circles over her clit. "I just don't know about this parking lot." He glanced worriedly out the side window.

She closed her eyes and gently rocked against his hand. She felt his cock straining against his trousers. She wanted to rip the fabric off him and feel him moving inside her so badly she ached. "Please." She kissed his lips. *Please don't deny me.* Her kisses became more demanding. Her skin tingled as her body brushed gently against his. "Please..."

His eyes widened. He spoke breathlessly. "Lily, everyone I know is a hundred yards away."

The idea of danger appealed to her. She blew a faint kiss across his lips. "We'll stay dressed and quiet—everyone will think we're just talking in the car."

He smiled nervously and shook his head. "No one will believe we are just talkin'."

Her hands reached for his trousers.

He looked directly into her eyes. His eyes narrowed but made no move to stop her. "You're playing with fire."

She wanted to burn. She unzipped his trousers and carefully parted the zipper teeth. His cock pushed forward. She held her breath as she pulled him free. He was thick, beautifully made and perfect for her. His smooth flesh warmed her palm. Her lip curled slightly upward. "I'm impressed," she whispered.

His throat tensed as he tipped his head against the back of the seat. He shifted his weight beneath her as if offering himself. His eyes closed in ecstasy. "Touch me, Lily."

Her hand grasped him and stroked the tight skin of the shaft. Her fingers formed a snug glove of compression that traveled slowly down the shaft, delivering a gentle squeeze at the base. A faint moan escaped his lips. The shaft thickened and pressed against her palm. His hips gently thrust upward. His skin flushed a deeper hue as she stroked him. Heat rolled off his skin. The backseat quickly heated. She rubbed her

thumb in slow circles across the wet crown. The head glistened. She wondered what he would taste like on her lips. She was tempted to kneel on the floor and take him between her lips, to tease him and taste him as he sat with legs splayed ecstatically on the car seat. "Lift up." She took hold of his trousers and pulled them farther down his lean hips so she could reach all of him.

His hips arched off the seat as she tugged the trousers away, exposing his balls. She cupped their warm weight in her palm and gave them a gentle squeeze as he hovered slightly above the seat.

He groaned softly and pressed himself against her hand. He covered her hand with his so she couldn't pull away. A slightly pleading look crossed his face.

She wondered if he was the type of man who liked to have his balls fondled and adored. Her fingers gave his balls a gentle but firm tug. His eyes fluttered shut. A bead of fluid bloomed at the crown. He liked it. She was more than willing to adore him. How easy was that? She fondled him slowly. Her fingertips brushed across the pleasingly fuzzy surface. They looked as if they would be wonderful to tease with the tip of her tongue, gently suck or simply warm them against her lips. She leaned across the seat and blew a stream of warm breath against him. "Do you like to be sucked?" she whispered.

His lashes flickered. "Yes." His voice was a hollow whisper. His gaze darted nervously across the parking lot.

She saw he was nervous about getting caught and it only excited her more. For once she was the bold partner in charge. She spoke softly, "Do you know what I like about your balls?"

His lips parted but he didn't speak.

"I like everything." She held their warm weight in her palm. "I like how heavy they feel in my hand. I like their size." Her thumb gently stroked across the ruched seam that separated them. "I like the feeling of power I get just from holding them. They're beautiful." She kissed her fingertips and lightly touched the kiss to his skin. "What should I do?" she asked gently. "We're in a parking lot."

"Take me." He groaned as he lifted his hips a little higher off the seat and pressed himself toward her mouth.

She lowered her head and brushed her lips against the base of his shaft, inhaling his rich, earthy scent. Her lips gently kissed the smooth base of the shaft and strayed lower toward the crisp, curly hair below. She pressed her mouth against him and gently sucked the skin against her lips. The tip of her tongue slowly stroked his sensitive sac in tiny circles as she sucked.

He groaned softly and shifted on the seat. His hips tilted upward.

Her lips closed around him, feeling the firm core in the center of his balls. She closed her eyes and gently tugged him deeper into her mouth. Her lips pulsed softly around him.

His hands slowly stroked her hair as he pressed upward, encouraging her. His head lolled from side to side on the seat back. "More," he pleaded softly. His eyes closed. He seemed to be drifting far away as his body slid lower on the seat.

A car door slammed shut on the far side of the parking lot.

His body jolted in surprise. His eyes flew open.

Her face lifted. Her heart hammered in her chest. The sound had startled her too.

His cock was so hard it curved toward his belly. "Look in my pocket," he rasped.

Her fingers dug through the pockets of his trousers until they felt the sharp edge of a square packet. She pulled it from his pocket. The foil glittered in the dim light. She held the single find in front of his face. "You better have more than one." She smiled as she tore the foil open with her teeth.

He smiled. "Don't worry about that. I thought ahead."

She hurried to remove the slippery condom from its packet. She knew if she waited, someone or something might come along and ruin this for her. The moment was perfect now. She wanted to own it. This sort of spontaneity was something the old Lily would never have allowed.

His hands reached for her face. He kissed her lips. "Put it on me."

"In a moment." She locked eyes with him and watched his heated expression as she stroked the head of his cock with her hand. His expression looked lost, as if adrift in pleasure. She wet her finger on the tip of her tongue and swirled the wet fingertip over the head. A bead of glistening fluid welled on the crown. She dipped her finger against the crown and stole the glossy bead. She brought her fingertip to her lips to taste him. Her gaze lowered as she slowly licked the tip of her finger. His taste was faintly bittersweet. Her heart pounded. She looked him in the eye as she licked her finger. This was exactly what she came to New Orleans for—a bittersweet encounter with a beautiful stranger.

His eyes fell to half-mast when she tasted him. The glossy, wet head of his cock thrust upward. "Hurry, Lily."

She deftly rolled the condom down the shaft. She managed to do it gracefully with one hand and even added a few flourishes. She was proud of herself. At least she hadn't forgotten how to do everything.

He looked at her. His hands locked firmly around her hips. He pressed against her. She was trapped astride him. His eyes lit with a fierce intensity. "Put me inside you—before someone comes along."

She gathered her skirt to her hips and settled into his lap. Her thighs tensed from spreading so far but it felt wonderful to feel the evening air on bare skin. Her hands brushed across his broad shoulders. He felt so solid everywhere she touched. She let her hands rove over his chest. Her thumbs rested at the base of his throat and felt his pulse racing.

His hands slid across her bare thighs. His brow tensed. "Please," he whispered.

His soft plea was music to her ears. His eyes looked so beautiful and gentle as he pleaded. She took of the thick shaft and guided him beneath her skirt. She rubbed him slowly against her inner thigh. His solid body and hardness were exquisite. Her teeth sank into her bottom lip to silence a moan. She leaned toward his ear to whisper, "I'm going to keep my panties on." She tugged her panties aside and rubbed the head of his cock slowly against her clit. Her clit bloomed with sensation. A soft moan floated from her lips. Her pulse raced. Dear god, he felt good. She wanted this moment branded in her memory. She took one last furtive glance over her shoulder to make sure they were truly alone. Thankfully, no one was near. She sighed with relief as she stroked the head against her clit, teasing herself with the slightest moment of penetration. It felt wonderful. She gasped and pulled back. The feeling was so intense it thrilled her. She was so wet he could easily slide inside, but she used him to tease her sensitized clit instead.

"Lily," he groaned, thrusting his hips upward. "Don't tease me."

She pressed her clit harder against him, rolling her hips slowly. Her hand wrapped tighter around the shaft and squeezed him. Her excitement built. The feeling was stunning. She rubbed the head of his sheathed cock against her clit, making pleasure spiral through her entire body. Even the soles of her feet tingled. Her actions became more aggressive as her hips rocked faster against the smooth head. Another few seconds of this and she would come for sure. God, she was close. *Maybe I should come first?*

His fingertips grazed the crest of her breast.

Her nipples pressed painfully against the lace cups of her bra.

He reached up to unbutton her blouse.

She took hold of his wrists and stopped him.

He groaned in frustration.

"We'd better stay dressed," she whispered.

He pulled her against him and nuzzled his face against the silky fabric. His hands cupped her breasts. "I can't wait to undress you. Just let me have a look." His eyes pleaded.

"Not here." She leaned forward and allowed him to bury his face in the soft curves between her breasts. His warm breath passed easily through the thin blouse, thrilling her skin. Her blouse was so light she even felt the slight stubble on his chin gently scratch the soft skin of her breasts. The edge of his teeth gently grazed her nipples through the silk, making her nipples hard and sensitive. The tips poked against the lacy bra. She ached to open her blouse and let him touch her any way he pleased, but she knew they couldn't, at least not here, not now in this semipublic parking lot.

She was done toying with him. She couldn't wait a moment longer. Her body was ablaze. She firmly took hold of him and guided him past her panties. Her hips sank down on him in a single, graceful stroke. Her breath caught as he entered. She was incredibly wet but he was thick. The heated stretch of his first thrust was achingly

exquisite. Her nerves sang. The first moment of real penetration was as good as she imagined. Her body held him tightly in its warm grip. Her lips parted in bliss. Her crooked finger held her panties aside so he could slide deeper inside, unencumbered by the silky fabric.

He pressed upward, allowing his cock to completely fill her. His lips parted. His body tensed. "Oh god..." His soft words faded but the sound of his labored breathing filled the backseat.

She was so slick he slid easily inside, setting her body on fire. Her knees dug into the cushiony leather seat as her hips slowly rocked back and forth, feeling a desperate sense of tension build along her arching spine. Her hands anchored on his shoulders. Her body curled forward as she shamelessly stroked herself against him, striving for maximum contact.

His hands cupped her round ass and pushed down on her. "Go slow, baby."

She slowed her movements and squeezed her thighs together, feeling the blood rush. She rose up and sank down on him with a soft moan, pressing her clit hard against him. The slow friction created a devilish tease she wished could go on forever. She rocked her hips against him. "I'm so close," she whispered.

His throat tensed. His eyes closed and his head leaned back. His hands slowly stroked her waist. He couldn't answer.

She gripped his broad shoulders and melted against him. His big frame made her feel small. "Move with me," she whispered as she rubbed her face against his hair. Her hips sank down on him.

His hands locked around her hips. He shifted his weight and slid farther down the seat, carefully thrusting higher inside her.

The feeling of pressure and contact was intense. Her body swayed slowly on his lap, loving the slight change of angle.

He held himself still inside her as if savoring the feeling and pulled her closer to kiss her breasts through the thin blouse.

Her skin pebbled as his warm, moist breath passed through the silk. She felt every nuance of sensation. Her nipples pushed against the delicate lace of her bra. She wished she could feel his warm mouth on her bare skin. She didn't dare risk undressing from the waist up though she longed to open her blouse and offer a soft breast to his lips.

"Put your arms above your head." He looked up at her with gleaming eyes.

She let go of his shoulders. Her arms rose gracefully above her head. She braced her palms against the upholstered ceiling of the sedan. Her back arched and her breasts thrust upward. She closed her eyes as her hips rocked faster on his lap. Her breasts swayed slightly beneath the silk.

His hands gently stroked her hips, encouraging her to move faster.

Her hips rocked faster. Her knees wedged against the back of the seat. As he thrust inside her, her breasts bounced gently beneath the blouse. She watched the look of

rapture on his face as he focused on the slow, rhythmic sway of her breasts gently moving beneath the silk. It was almost hypnotic.

He panted for breath. His face tensed. His hands clamped down on her hips, holding her perfectly still. "Don't move." His jaw clenched.

For a moment she held still on his lap, but tension pooled in her body, tempting her to wriggle. She pressed against him. Her breasts rubbed against the stretchy lace of her bra until they ached. Her fingers brushed across his creased brow. She couldn't wait to watch him come. It had been ages since she had a man come inside her and it was unbearably exciting to see David struggling to restrain himself. It was too much. She was so close. She wanted to move, but he wouldn't allow it. His hands clamped on to her and held her perfectly still. He carefully plunged deeper and very slowly pulled out. He was teasing her to death. She wished he would just let go and fuck her. She bit down on her lip with a soft whimper.

A low groan rumbled out of his throat. His body tensed and rose off the seat, taking her with him. His back arched as his hips pumped harder against her.

Her breath caught. His distinct strokes targeted her clit. It was perfect. She leaned into the stroke. It caused a sweeping, hot contraction to wash over her followed by another and another. She closed her eyes and floated on the blissful sensation fearful it would stop but her body continued to grip him at the epicenter of her pleasure. She rode a series of fluttering ripples that felt so intense it shocked her. She slowed her movements, wanting to simply savor the sensations and tried not to slide off his lap. She gulped a deep breath. She felt his slight movements inside her and marveled she had come so hard. The teasing tension returned. Her hips pressed against him. Her thighs tensed. She was almost ready to come again. Her body glowed from the wonderful feeling. Once just wasn't going to do it. She couldn't wait to do it again as she felt the blood rush between her thighs. She gasped, "Did you feel that?"

He faintly nodded. His hips thrust upward and held perfectly still inside her. He didn't dare move. His eyes opened a slit and glanced up at her. His breath came in short gasps. "I want this to last." He was holding out. He hadn't come yet.

She couldn't wait to see the look on his face when he did. Her fingers slipped under her blouse and gently readjusted her fallen bra strap. Her nipples stood out against the light silk.

He reached up for her and pulled her toward him. He rubbed his face against her breasts, gently kissing her through the silk. His teeth gently nipped at a button. "You feel wonderful. Show me," he whispered. "Open your blouse."

She glanced out the window. No one was around so she took the risk of unbuttoning the top of her blouse. She carefully pulled the silk aside, exposing a swath of mocha skin and a bit of emerald green bra. She tenderly cupped one breast, teasing a fingertip across the top of her bra. She tugged the bra down an inch, barely enough to allow a sliver of dark nipple to show. "I've got beautiful chocolate brown nipples that

love to be sucked. I wish I could show them to you. Maybe another time." She quickly rebuttoned her blouse.

"No." He pressed deeper inside her. His face looked anguished.

She reached between his legs and fondled his balls.

"Dear god!" He sounded desperate.

His balls filled her hands. Her fingers slid possessively around his warm weight. She toyed with him, gently tugging on them until his skin pulled taut. "Do you like to be played with, gently sucked, lightly slapped?"

"Lily—" he gasped.

It thrilled her to hear so much anguished lust in a man's voice. "Part your legs and let me play with you."

He shook his head "no". His lips sealed tight.

"No? I'm going to be extra hard on you." She smiled as she braced her hands against the car seat and thrust her hips down on him. She rubbed her breasts in his face. Her hips thrust down on him, brutally. He gasped. It felt good to ride him at her own pace. She was in control. This time she rose up and let her weight slowly slide down the shaft. Every muscle tensed in ecstasy.

His pelvis rocked faster beneath her. He gritted his teeth, pounding his hips against her. His movements were deep and fast.

She was ready to come again. There was no way to stop it. The release swept through her with a rush. The words *Fuck me* ran through her mind, but she didn't actually say them. She squeezed her thighs against him. Her body rode him toward a beautiful and surprisingly strong climax that left her breathless.

His hands gripped her hips. He looked up at her and shuddered. His body tensed and arched off the seat. A low roar escaped his lips as he pumped harder. He came with a slow, bucking movement as he emptied himself inside her. Her eyes closed in ecstasy.

He looked so beautiful when he came. The tension and the pleasure that lit his face were breathtaking. It felt as if she were watching a violent storm sweep down on paradise. Her fingertips gently brushed the sides of his face. She rocked slowly on his lap, focusing on every detail, her racing heart, his labored breath and the warm scent of his skin. She paid attention to everything. It was thrilling. Everything was important. She slowed her movements and simply allowed him to linger inside her while he struggled to catch his breath. She brushed a lock of hair from his forehead and smiled.

He managed to smile back before closing his eyes and sitting perfectly still for a minute.

They remained locked together, unwilling and unable to move. It was so easy to be with him in the backseat of a car. As far as she was concerned, they could stay like this all night. She closed her eyes and tried to memorize the blissful feelings as she gently rocked her body top of him. She was careful not to move too much and have him slide free. She wanted him to stay inside her as long as possible. She loved sitting on his lap.

She closed her eyes and breathed in his warm scent. She leaned forward, pressed her ear to his chest and listened to his heartbeat. It was so peaceful.

Across the parking lot a man stumbled out of the bowling alley and blew a harsh note on a trumpet. A loud gale of laughter followed.

The unexpected sounds startled her. She jolted upright before nervously jumping off his lap. She fell back against the leather seat, panting. She struggled to tug her skirt down and smooth her hair.

He looked over at her and smiled at her antics.

She felt so giddy, she laughed. She crossed her ankles and propped her feet on the front seat. "Do you think we got away with it?"

"I hope so. I wasn't paying attention to anything outside this car."

She looked at him, thinking he was simply wonderful and wanted more. "Take me to Chateau La Beau."

A fleeting moment of worry crossed his brow. "My family's cabin on the bayou isn't fancy. It's more of a bare-bones fishing shack."

"It sounds dreamy," she whispered.

His expression was frank. "Lily, it's not what you're used to. It's just the basics in the middle of nowhere. Are you sure about this?"

She leaned over and kissed his forehead. "I'll enjoy trying something different."

"I'm serious, Lily. It's a long drive. I don't want you to be disappointed."

"I promise not to complain."

"I'll make you a deal. I'll bring you back in the morning if that's what you want, no questions asked." His eyes smiled as he reached for her hand.

"Let's go." The thought of being swept away to parts unknown was incredibly exciting.

His lips brushed her fingertips. "If you come with me, you're mine."

"I need to pick up my clothes at the hotel."

His brow arched. "Why? You won't need them."

She studied his face for clues about his sense of humor. He looked serious. *What the hell.* This was what she came for.

He slid his long leg over the front seat and climbed behind the steering wheel. He turned the engine over. The sedan's engine had a well-maintained purr. He backed out of the parking lot, glancing at her in the backseat. "Are you going to sit back there the whole time?"

"Yes, I believe so." She was feeling too lazy to scramble over the seat wearing a skirt. She wanted to keep her feet up. Why not indulge a favorite fantasy while she was here? Why not pretend David was kidnapping her? As he drove the sedan toward the main highway, she watched his black brows in the rearview mirror. "Are you absconding with me?"

His eyes studied her face in the mirror. He smiled and nodded his head. "Yep."

"How far away is the cabin?"

"Remember, it's more of a shack. It's about forty-five minutes away."

"That long? I don't think I can wait." She arched a brow dramatically. "I might start without you."

His eyes watched her intently in the rearview mirror as she slowly unbuttoned her blouse and made sure he could see her bra. She parted the blouse and slid a silk strap down her smooth shoulder. Her breast swelled over the crest of the lacy cup. She gave her fingertip a flirty kiss and delivered it to tip of her breast. She tugged the lace down until a dark nipple was barely visible and gave it a firm pinch. She sighed softly as a shot of fire leapt through her.

Intense interest glittered in his eyes. The sedan swerved sharply on the lonely road. "Lily, you're distracting me."

She laughed. "Keep your eyes on the road, driver. There's nothing to see back here." She tugged the cups of her bra lower. It was wonderful teasing an interested man. She smiled. By now, poor old Jimmy would have turned his attention to a sports broadcast. She wiggled out of her panties and tossed them onto the steering wheel.

David grabbed the panties, shook them in his teeth as if he were a feral dog and then tossed them in glove compartment. "I'm keeping those." His eyes sparkled.

She laughed. She had almost forgotten sex could be so playful and fun. Her hands idly stroked her thighs. She tugged her skirt higher, exposing a length of shapely leg.

His eyes flickered between the road and the rearview mirror, watching everything she did with utter fascination. "How're you doing back there?"

"I'm fine, honey, just keep your eyes on the road." A lazy smile crossed her lips. There was such sweetness about David. He made it so easy to relax and let go. The warm leather seat caressed her bare legs. She loved the feeling. She closed her eyes and slowly stroked her thighs. The hard-working, good girl in her had finally worn out her welcome. Tonight she was a wanton, demanding pleasure. Her fingers dipped between her thighs and parted her folds. The backseat was too dark for him to actually see much of anything but she pretended he could. Certainly he could see her enraptured face and that would be telling enough. "Don't you dare look back here."

"Like hell I won't."

She knew asking him not to look guaranteed his full attention. She had an audience now. Her fingertips slowly stroked her wet clit. "Oh that's nice," she whispered. "I prefer to feel your hard body moving inside me, but I'm happy to do this until we get to the damn cabin. My slick fingertips feel so good but I'd rather have you taking me to the edge." She leaned against the seat and gave into the rising sensations. "I can't wait for you to come inside me again. I loved it. You wouldn't believe how hot and wet I feel right now." She paused. "How hard are your balls?"

The sedan served onto the gravel shoulder. David jerked the wheel back onto the road. The sedan roared back onto the pavement. The squealing tires threw gravel into the air and landed with a harsh *ping, ping, ping* onto the sedan's glossy paint job. "You're a danger, Lily!" he laughed.

Danger. It sounded good. Meeting David had been a great idea. She was finished playing it safe. She was ready to mix fantasy, reality, dreams and danger. This was what she wanted. It was exciting to feel how drenched she was just from thinking it. This was what her mind and heart needed. Her body certainly wanted it too. She gently stroked herself with a lazy fingertip, letting the excitement build slowly. Her eyelashes fluttered shut as her thoughts drifted toward a favorite fantasy. *A stranger has kidnapped me. I don't know where he's taking me. All I know is he wants to fuck me senseless and I'll have to submit to whatever he wants...*

She glanced at David's reflection in the mirror. "Hi, sweetie."

He smiled. "What are you doing back there? What's that sly smile about?"

The warm expression in his eyes engaged her. Her finger stroked her clit as she drifted back to her fantasy. *He's definitely a rogue. He looks dangerous. He's probably the leader. He certainly looks like the ringleader. He could take me captive in his shack and there's absolutely nothing I can do about it. I could remain his obedient sex slave for weeks, maybe months; many hard, hard months... I'll have to willingly surrender to his heated demands as he uses my body again and again for his selfish pleasure. I might have to endure long days and even longer nights of slavish devotion to ecstatic pleasure. I can't even imagine being pinned beneath his big body and fucked hard, knowing I can't escape and he may never get enough of me. A man like this probably needs to fuck often. He could demand I kneel, tangle his fingers in my hair, and force me to suck him off and fondle his balls for hours. If he asked me to worship him I'd have to do it or he might spank my ass 'til it burns. He might even decide to proudly display my naked body and share me with a few of his handsome friends as a sexual prize. Damn, that sounds good. How could I endure being tied to a bed and taken again and again by David and his muscular, sexually-skilled, well-hung friends until I lose my mind...* Laughter burst out of her.

David turned around with a smile on his face. "Sweetie, what's all the giggling about?"

"Nothing." Her face burned. She didn't dare confess. She watched his eyes in the rearview mirror. A slight smile curled the edge of her lip. That was a damn good fantasy. It left her heart pounding. She parted her thighs further. Her fingertips brushed back and froth across her clit. She was so sensitive it almost hurt to touch it but she did anyway and moaned softly so David could hear.

He tried to keep his eyes on the road. His nostrils flared and she realized he could smell the faint musk of her aroused scent and it was too distracting. He squinted as he readjusted the rearview mirror so he could see everything she was doing. "When we get to the cabin, you watch out, girl. I'm not going to waste a minute. You have a lot of nerve to think you can tease me like that and not pay the price." He smiled.

She smiled back. *Please make me pay the price. Please...* She tapped her toe gently against his shoulder just to have a moment of physical contact with him. She could

hardly wait to feel him inside her again. Why did the damn cabin have to be so far away? Her fingertips toyed between her thighs. Her flesh was on fire. She knew she could come again with no effort but she wanted to enjoy the slow torment. She slid a slick finger inside her and slowly stroked in and out while he looked on with fiery eyes.

"That's it. I can't take it anymore." He pulled over to the side of the road and parked the sedan alongside some brush. He turned the engine off and jumped from the driver's side to the backseat. He toppled her onto the leather upholstery and climbed on top of her. His tall frame filled the backseat.

"Lily, you're not safe to drive with." He kissed her mouth as he hunted through his back pockets for another condom. He found one and tore it open. "Put it on me." He looked down at her with lustrous eyes.

She slowly unzipped his pants and pushed them down his narrow hips. His cock jutted in the air between them. She wanted to tease him. "Come and get it." She slipped the condom into her mouth and held it in her lips. He eagerly moved closer. She leaned forward to kiss the crown. Her lips and tongue worked in tight, slippery circles to sheath the condom over the head. Her lips closed around him forming a tight ring and delivered a single, suctioning squeeze. Her lips pushed the condom down the shaft. His body tensed and his hips pressed against her mouth, clearly he loved it. For a moment she simply held him in the heat of her mouth, listening to his breath quicken.

He groaned impatiently so she swallowed him in a deep kiss. He pressed farther into mouth, seeking more contact. His hands gently stroked her hair. His body heat radiated through the thin condom. Her fingers finished unfurling the condom to the base of the shaft. Her palm cupped his balls and gently lifted their weight upward. He felt warm and heavy in her palm. Her fingertip traced a faint line between his tight sac.

His answering groan was an incoherent grumble. She questioned how much teasing he could take and released him from the wet heat of her mouth. His body shuddered. She lay back on the seat and pulled him closer. She wrapped her legs around his hips. For some reason she still had one shoe on. Her high heel scraped against the sedan's ceiling. She had always been too refined, too ladylike for a fuck by roadside. She realized how foolish she had been. She kissed his mouth, thinking that he was made for kissing and she was born to be fucked on the backseat. His eyes sparkled in the dim light. His beautiful mouth had a generous swell that just begged to be gently sucked or bitten. "Come closer." A hint of urgency crept into her voice.

He leaned closer. His lips parted.

Her mouth slid across his and gently tugged his bottom lip between her teeth and sucked. She gently but firmly bit down on his cushioned lip. "Fuck me," she whispered.

He let her take the aggressive lead.

She buried her face against his chest and thrust her hips upward. The warm, humid air played up the tangy scent of his skin. Her nose led her down a wanton path. David smelled good, he smelled right. It was so essential a man smell right. She inhaled his scent deeply, hoping to commit his unique scent to memory. It was an odd feeling to be

this comfortable, this free with someone she had just met. Maybe she was crazy? She looked up at him. He smiled at her. No she wasn't crazy. He really was wonderful. She noticed his trousers were bunched around his thighs and she couldn't see his long legs. "Take those pants off." She yanked impatiently at the obscuring material.

He leaned against the seat and struggled to slide his pants down his legs while she unbuttoned his shirt, exposing a smooth, muscular chest. She ran her fingernails across his hard, pointy nipples.

He shivered at her touch.

"Do you like that?" She was curious to see how sensitive he was. She circled her fingernails around the stiffened tips.

His skin pebbled and he closed his eyes in ecstasy, allowing her be slightly rough with him as she tugged on his nipples.

She teasingly scratched her fingernails against the outer edge of his nipples. He made several soft, pleased sounds she had never heard coming from a man. He was so much fun to play with. She wanted to see more of him. She pushed his shirt from his shoulders and ran her hands across the warm expanse of skin on his broad back. As she expected, he was an athletic wedge of muscle, shaped by strenuous sport. Her fingertips brushed across his wide rib cage and explored his rippled abdomen. Her eyes widened. Male beauty was such a stunning thing and she really couldn't imagine it getting better than this.

He kicked his pants off, laughing. He looked as if he couldn't have been any more proud of himself.

She smiled at him thinking, *Go ahead, show off. Shake your antlers, strut your stuff. You're beautiful and I'd be a fool to pass you by.*

"I want to lie skin to skin." His fingers reached for her blouse and started to slowly undress her.

She immediately felt vulnerable. Anyone could see into the car. "What if the parish police drive by?"

"Nobody drives this way at night."

His rich voice was reassuring but slightly tinged with doubt. She wondered if this was such a good idea.

He finished unbuttoning her blouse and pushed the silk aside. His throat tensed as he looked at her. "I have to tell you that you're just about the best thing that's ever happened to me. I can't believe my dream girl is stretched out on the backseat of my car." He gazed down at her. His head dipped to kiss the ticklish curve of her arm that swept toward her breast.

Her breath caught as his warm mouth brushed against her skin and her thoughts raced. At that moment she could easily say he was the best thing to ever happen to her. *God help her.*

The edge of his teeth gently grazed her shoulder, giving her goose flesh. She surrendered beneath him. He gently lifted her torso off the seat, unsnapped her bra and pulled it over her arms, freeing her breasts. The look on his face made her heart pound.

He stared down at her with darkened eyes. "You're so beautiful." His hands cupped her breasts and gently squeezed them together, making her full breasts sit high on her rib cage. His thumbs stroked the dark tips until they stood even higher. He leaned forward and kissed her breasts with soft, wet kisses, circling her nipples with the tip of his tongue. He sucked a sensitive nipple into his mouth and slowly swirled his tongue over the tip. He gently tugged on it, causing the nipple to ache in a sweet way. She shifted on the leather seat beneath him as he covered her breasts in wet kisses. The moment his lips released one nipple, he immediately reached for the other. He dreamily took each nipple between his lips and slowly sucked on it. His gentle touch made her breasts feel full and the skin, tight. She pressed her thighs against him and rocked her hips beneath him feeling as if she could come from this soft stimulation alone. She watched his dark head lovingly nuzzle against her and the sight opened her heart. He seemed lost in the pleasure of what he was doing. He was unhurried. A sweetly slow eternity was passing in the backseat. The wet tips of her breasts glistened in the shadows.

A nipple popped free of his lips. "Am I hurting you?"

"No." She brushed her fingers against the sides of his face.

His lips traveled from her breasts to her mouth.

She pulled him on top of her, sinking into his kiss. He slid the length of her body. His cock brushed against her inner thigh, exposing how hard he was.

He lifted her ankle over his shoulder. It gave him a bit more room to move in the back of the sedan but she felt completely exposed in a naughty, exciting way. His hands cupped her bottom and pulled her across the seat. He drew her toward him, looking at her face the entire while. He held himself posed in front of her and lightly rubbed the head of his cock against her wet entrance, waiting. His eyes pleaded.

She took hold of him and guided him inside her. She was so wet he glided into her without resistance. The sensation was stunning. She could definitely get addicted to this. Her body hugged him. She arched her back against the warm leather, wanting to feel all of him as he slowly penetrated her to the hilt. Her breath caught when she felt his balls gently bumped against the back of her thighs. She glanced up at him.

He loomed above her. His body went still as if he were afraid to move. "Wait," he gasped. His gaze focused on her in an almost unsettling way. He looked at her as if he was truly seeing her.

She looked into his eyes, becoming mesmerized by the variety of subtle emotions passing through. Her gaze locked onto his and she quickly discovered she could not bear to look away. She never kept her eyes open during sex. She always felt shy and looked away, often drifting off into fantasy, but this time she refused to do that and it was a great mistake.

The backseat of a sedan seemed like an inappropriate place for an ecstatic experience, but one happened anyway. She couldn't stop herself from looking into David's eyes and being pulled into his emotions. What she felt was so strong it shocked her. She casually gazed into his eyes but found she couldn't look away. David's gaze locked on to hers and refused to let go. An unsettling feeling of utter recognition passed between them. Each saw the other clearly. For a moment there were no secrets. She was almost sorry she looked. She discovered the hard way, if she kept her eyes open during such intimate moments she would see everything. She might see the soul of the other. She might see flaws as well as beauty. She might see the other is a vulnerable, finite being just like her, and it was heartbreaking. She realized this feeling couldn't last and it would never come again. An experience this perfect could never be repeated and she might never get enough of it. She would have her memories but those fade. That was the bittersweet human condition. Perfect moments were brief and few. A part of heart recognized the once she fell into David's gaze, part of her would always belong there and it would be difficult to walk away, even painful. Her throat ached from the sad discovery. She reminded herself this weekend was just for fun, but this experience went far beyond fun. This was too terrifying to call a simple bit of fun. He was perfect but he had his own contracts and appointments with fate to fulfill. She had to be prepared to let him go. *He's not for keeps.* She closed her eyes, wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and tried to dismiss what she saw.

He pushed slowly inside her. His breathing was fast and ragged. He took long strokes, sinking deep inside her and pulling out slowly. "Look at me," he whispered.

Her heart pounded. She couldn't do it. She buried her face in the crook of his arm and inhaled the essence of David. Her body tensed against the leather seat. She wanted him to speed up and really fuck her. This was more than she bargained for. She couldn't bear another moment of intense intimacy.

A large pickup drove up behind them. Its headlights flooded the cab of the sedan.

David froze. He threw his shirt over her.

A man's voice boomed like a megaphone. "Get out of the car with your hands up!"

She cringed beneath him.

David stuck his head out the window. "Damn it, Brewster! That's not funny. You're frightening the lady."

Brewster got out of the truck and slammed the door shut. He walked toward the sedan. "Sorry about that. I thought you were alone and broken down by the roadside." His fingers brushed against the gravel battered trunk of the sedan. "What happened to the paint?"

David shouted, "Stay where you are. Give us a moment."

She tugged her skirt down and quickly buttoned her blouse, feeling ridiculous and extremely frustrated.

Brewster ignored David's request for privacy and continued to walk toward them. "You ran away from the bowling alley before I could tell you the good news."

She ducked down on the seat, wishing she could climb into the trunk and hide.

Brewster ambled right up to the car and stared in. He deliberately tried to sneak a peek at her. "Bowie, we got our grant. I hope your passport's up-to-date? Can you be ready to leave in six days? On top of the grant, a sponsor donated two tickets to South Africa and airfare within the continent. I already applied for the permits and travel visas, so we have to act fast."

David whooped. "Good lord! Brewster, that's great news, but your timing's real bad." He winced as he tucked himself back into his pants.

"I'm sorry about that, but you're going to need every hour to get ready for this trip. I gotta work an extra shift this week. We need to get the shooting schedule ironed out, check all the camera equipment, load the laptops, read over the permits, get everything packed and ready go."

David waved Brewster away from the sedan. "Brewster, I'll call ya Monday. We'll go over all the details then."

"Better get on it, Bowie." Brewster walked back to his truck.

David turned toward her. Excitement burned in his eyes. His hands framed her face. He leaned forward and kissed her mouth. "I got my funding! Now I can film the African segment of my documentary." He beamed. "This is my lucky day."

An odd mix of emotions washed over her. He no longer needed her help or money and he was leaving. *He didn't really need her for anything.* For certain this was a weekend fling. She was anxious, relieved and sad. Actually, she was stunned. "I'm happy for you." She hesitated to ask, "How long will you be traveling?"

"I don't know yet. I suppose we'll keep filming until the money runs out."

She studied his smiling face. This was a hidden blessing. She had to look at it that way. This should make it easier to slip away and return to Los Angeles with her dignity intact, but at the moment, it felt crushing. She was getting way ahead of herself during this first flight of freedom. It was her first sexual outing in years and she should let it be just that, a practice flight. It was a beautiful experience but it was only that. She felt a sharp stab of regret as she thought it and was no longer sure what she wanted. She knew with certainty she didn't have to worry about him getting attached to her or, more realistically, she didn't need to worry about getting attached to him. He was leaving the country for an indefinite amount of time. His future was taking off. Now there was no immediate chance of entanglement. She should have been relieved but she felt empty.

He wrapped his arms around her and rocked her against his chest. "Girl, you're my good luck charm." He smiled at her. "Let's get to the cabin. I don't want any more interruptions." He climbed out of the backseat and got behind the wheel. He drove onto the highway and rode quietly for several miles. She watched his face in the rearview mirror. He was deep in thought. He drove off the highway and turned the sedan down a brushy road bordered on either side by murky ditches.

She tried to compose herself in the backseat. "David, if you need to be getting ready for your trip you can take me back to the hotel tonight."

His eyes flew to the rearview mirror. "No way. Your mine all night."

She suddenly felt out of place. Would he be distracted wishing he had the time to prepare for a demanding trip? "Are you sure?"

"I won't give up a minute with you."

"I would understand."

"I was ready to leave on this trip six months ago but our funding fell through. Hell, my bags are still packed." He looked at her crestfallen expression. "Lily, I won't give up my chance to be with you. Everything else can wait."

She rebuttoned the top button of her blouse and sat quietly in the backseat, watching the moonrise.

Every few seconds he glanced at her in the rearview mirror as if he feared she might evaporate like a dream. "We're almost there."

Chapter Four

The sedan bounced slowly along a raised crushed-shell road. The brushy shrubs lining the road gave way to mossy cypress trees. Moonlight glittered on the bayou. A Cajun-style shack, built on piers, loomed in the darkness. A floating dock jutted into the swamp. An egret balanced on one slender leg on top of the shack's roof. The entire scene was idyllic but triggered a disorienting moment of *déjà vu*. A chill passed over her skin.

He parked the sedan and turned the engine off. Except for the moonlight, everything beneath the cypress was utterly black. He reached for a flashlight in the glove compartment and turned it on. He got out of the sedan. His shoes crunched across the gravel toward the passenger side of the car. He opened the car door for her.

She stepped out. The slender heels of her shoes immediately sank deep into the crushed-shell gravel. The only sounds surrounding them were their footsteps crunching against gravely shells, the screech of owls, loons and the fastidious splashing of a raccoon washing off a tasty morsel in the shadows.

She clutched her handbag against her chest as if it were a shield. She was one-hundred-percent city girl with only a bit of camping experience as a child. "Are there snakes out here?" She knew there were. She moved closer to the flashlight's comforting glow.

"Hell yes. Jumping spiders and gators too, virtually everything swims."

She winced. It almost sounded as if he were bragging. For a moment, she wanted to get back in the car and leave. She glanced longingly over her shoulder at the sedan.

"Too late." He grabbed her hand and led her onto the screened porch that ran the perimeter of the shack.

He located a key hidden under a coffee can propped beside the door, which she thought was a dangerously unoriginal place to hide a house key.

He wedged the key into the lock and carefully pushed the front door open.

She crowded behind him, almost bumping against his back, afraid to be out of the flashlight's protective circle of light. As the flashlight swept through the shack's interior, a pair of yellow eyes glittered in the darkness. An alligator's gaping mouth confronted them. She screamed, jumped backward and ran toward the car.

"It's all right, Lily!" He tried to calm her. "That's ol' Rupert. He got shot and stuffed back in 1972."

She heard him but she didn't care. She raced toward the sedan. Her heels wobbled over the clamshells. Her knees shook from fright. She grabbed the sedan's door handle, shook it and discovered the door was locked. She immediately leapt onto the hood of

the car, which was scorching hot. "Ouch!" she howled, and quickly rolled off, darting onto the floating dock.

"Honey, it's a family joke." He hurried after her to rescue her from herself before she got hurt. "The last person out of the shack leaves Rupert to guard the front door." He laughed. "Rupert's the real security. The key's just a formality."

"A warning would have been nice." She trembled on the dock.

"Rupert's not always there." He tried to coax her toward him but she didn't budge from the end of the dock. "It's my brother's sense of humor." He looked positively amused. Obviously it was his sense of humor as well. He tried to calm her. "I'm going to start the generator and get some lights on."

She was rooted to the place she was standing, and unwilling to venture into a dark shack on the bayou. "I'll wait right here."

He shined the flashlight into the murky water beyond the dock. Several pairs of yellow-green eyes glowed at the water line. "Be careful. A couple of those big fellas have learned to snatch dogs off the end of the dock."

She ran back to the shore and huddled on the porch until she heard the generator humming. A colorful string of Christmas lights lit up the porch. She squinted. The cheerful lights seemed oppressively bright in the swamp's smooth darkness but she welcomed their comforting glow. She looked across the swamp and saw a cloud of insects heading toward the lights. Within moments the insects arrived. The mob of insects buzzed like warriors on the attack.

She slipped into the shack and quickly shut the screen door before a flurry of moths threw themselves at the windows and battered their wings against the screen. She glanced up and saw the attraction, a few bare lightbulbs shone in the steeply angled rafters overhead. She looked around the room. The furniture was simple and sparse. This Cajun shack was laid out shotgun style. One room flowed seamlessly into the next.

She noticed he had set Rupert in a rocking chair. The stuffed, snaggletoothed animal stared back at her with glassy eyes. Apparently this was part of an old joke between brothers. Rupert's scaly claws were now poised above the handle of a hand-cranked emergency radio. She had to admit it was weird but funny.

She took a deep breath and looked around, feeling pleasantly surprised by what she saw in the rest of the shack. The interior was rustic but clean. There were gray-green cypress shutters on the doors and windows. The kitchen had a small propane stove and tiny refrigerator. She nearly tripped over a box of children's toys someone had wedged behind the kitchen door. She peeked into one of the bedrooms and saw an old-fashioned wrought iron bedframe with a mosquito net swirled overhead but no mattress on the bed.

David walked in the back door, holding two citronella candles. Their strong, astringent fragrance quickly filled the air. The generator buzzed. The refrigerator buzzed. The overhead lights buzzed. The insects flocking around the exterior of the shack buzzed. Suddenly the bayou was a clatter of buzzing noise.

She nervously knotted her fingers together, wondering if this was such a good idea, but then she remembered her beautiful hotel room was an hour away. This was a family vacation home, a fishing camp. She felt like an incredible interloper just by being here. She didn't belong.

David looked at her with a beaming face. "I'm so happy you're here. I hope you'll like it."

Her heart fluttered at his sweet words. She found herself smiling back at him. Her shoulders relaxed. She realized she had seen the interior of the shack and there was nothing to fear. *Maybe this would work out after all.* Insects or not, this was preferable to sharing the same hotel as Jimmy and Leticia. She flipped the light switch off. The string of Christmas lights and the overhead bulbs went dark. They stood in the soothing candlelight. It was much quieter and nicer.

"Thank you." His face glowed in the candlelight. He set the candles on a tabletop and retrieved an inflatable bed from a closet. He used an air pump to fill the mattress. His foot stomped up and down on the pump. "This mattress is a lot more comfortable than it looks."

She eyed the ballooning air mattress with suspicion.

He set the inflated mattress on the bedframe and tucked some well-worn but clean ivory-colored sheets onto the mattress. He worked fast, keeping an eye on her the entire time. "We won't need blankets."

She felt a glimmer of nervousness. He was acting so natural, as if this were nothing out of the ordinary. This was far from ordinary for her. She credited herself with breaking the sex barrier, but what about the sleep barrier? Sleep was a terribly intimate thing. She hadn't actually slept beside a man in ages. When she agreed to this weekend fling, for some reason, this vital fact had not even entered her mind until now. She had assumed she would be sleeping alone in a luxurious bed at the Hotel Toulouse. *What an incredible oversight.*

"You can sleep in this." He handed her an oversized plaid work-shirt and a towel before picking up one of the candles. "Let me show you the sumptuous bath facilities." He led her to the far end of the shack toward a wood slatted bathroom. The bathroom windows were open screens that breathed out onto the bayou. Moonlight streamed through the wooden slats. It was semiprivate and almost like being outdoors, except the bugs were excluded from the party.

He turned on an overhead shower that looked as if it had been improvised from a watering can. A trickle of scalding water poured out. "The water heats in a tank on the roof. Be careful, sometimes it gets too hot." He added some cool water. "Get undressed." He invited her into the shower. "I'll scrub your back."

He casually stripped his clothing away. He had glossy olive skin and a beautifully formed muscular butt. She took a long appreciative look at him when he turned his back.

He turned around and caught her staring. "Aren't you gonna join me?"

She kicked her shoes aside but got no further.

"What's wrong?" He noticed her hesitation. "Would you rather have the shower to yourself?"

She thought about it, feeling a bit self-conscious. She was out in the bayou with a man she just met and it already felt as if they were sharing a comfortable domestic situation. This was crazy. She reminded herself. *This is a limited-time offer. Don't get too comfortable with him and don't let him get too comfortable with you. He has people to meet, places to go and things to do, so live in the moment.*

She unzipped the back of her skirt before she could ruin this for herself by overthinking things. She quickly removed her clothing and leapt into the shower beside him. The warm water trickled down her back. She wrapped her arms around his waist and brushed her body against him. She figured if she was standing close in a moonlit shower he couldn't stand back and get a critical look at her. She pressed herself against his strong body and looked up at his handsome face. "Hello, sir, does this shower belong to you?" She smiled to hide her quaking nerves.

"Hi." He smiled back and wrapped his arms around her. He bent down to gently kiss the top of her head. He held her close. Their wet bodies glided against each other. He felt solid. She felt soft. His hand gently stroked her back. How natural this felt surprised her. He was so easy to be with. He was gentle and good-humored, talented and handsome and she loved his long, long legs. *Enjoy yourself but remember he's not for keeps.*

He gently lifted her chin with his fingertip and kissed her lips. His lips were warm. His hands were slippery against her skin. "Doesn't this feel right?" he whispered.

She was too unsettled to comment. She evaded his question. "I like the feel of this solid body." She was clueless about how to handle the person inside it. She rubbed her wet skin against his. "I hope we don't have any more interruptions, friendly visitors or alligator attacks."

He pulled her closer. "Nobody is gonna bother us out here." He opened a plastic bottle of liquid soap. The dark amber liquid had a faint lavender scent, reminiscent of her childhood. The slightest whiff immediately brought her back to being a Wilderness Scout at summer camp. Those had been fun days. She wished she had more experience being close to nature or even roughing it. Maybe she should try that next? She wondered if she might even like it.

He moved behind her. His soapy hands slowly glided across her shoulders and down her breasts before sliding over her hips. "I love this curve." His hand stroked the soft flair of her hip. His hands worked the soap into a lather. She closed her eyes and let him explore her with slippery hands. He had such a natural way with her. He knew how to touch. She happily surrendered to his exploring hands.

His soapy fingers slid between her thighs and teased her. Her skin tingled everywhere he touched. His fingers approached close to but did not touch her clit. Instead, they made lazy circles against the tender skin of her inner thighs. Her breath

caught in anticipation. She closed her eyes and thought about how good he felt in the backseat of the sedan. She thought about the intense look on his face when he came. She still couldn't believe she had demanded to have sex outside a bowling alley – and loved it. That was so unlike her, correction the old her.

His lips grazed her throat and dropped lower to cover her shoulders with kisses. His sudsy hands cupped her bottom and pulled her tightly against him.

Her head tipped back to savor to the feeling of his warm breath on her skin. His gentle touch was so exciting. She stared up the wooden beams of the shower and let her thoughts wander. *Why had she waited so long to do this?*

His soapy hands traveled slowly across her body.

The shower was a mere trickle of warm water on her back. She leaned under it and let it soak her hair.

His fingertips teased the tiny dimples on her lower back and strayed lower to embrace to smooth roundness of her ass. A faint growl rumbled deep his throat. He rubbed his hard cock against her.

Her skin pebbled when he growled. His throaty sounds near her ear excited her. Her wet, skin buzzed with sensation until it felt electrified. Touching another loving soul was wonderful, far better than any fantasy. She sighed. It felt good to be desired again and give so much pleasure to another. Perhaps the feeling of shared desire was the best part? He seemed to want her as much she wanted him. They were perfectly matched in that way if not in others. She knew coming here was the right decision. She needed this. This screened shower was a greater paradise than any luxurious hotel could ever be.

He looked down at her. His gaze locked to her face. The slightest smile curled the edge of his lips.

Her fingertips brushed the side of his face. She summoned the courage to simply look him in the eye. His beautiful eyes gleamed in the soft darkness. She returned his gaze. Her heart raced. There was no substitute for the exhilaration of meeting another at their boundary and being invited past that boundary. A rising sense of heat flooded across her skin. This weekend was a damn good idea. *Thank you, Marion.* The blood rushed between her thighs. She was looking forward to more.

"It's my turn." She wanted to touch his skin. She took hold of the bottle of soap, trickled a little into her palm and lathered him. She spread the suds across his smooth chest and slowly toyed with his tiny nipples, tugging them to sharp points.

His eyes darkened. He wriggled under her touch. His cock lifted upward and pointed at her.

He was so responsive and so much fun to tease. She pressed her slick breasts against him and gently slid back and forth against his broad chest. The feeling of her nipples sliding across his wet skin made her tingle. The sensation was so achingly sweet it made her throat tight. She realized for too many years she had been touch starved,

love starved, and David was a feast. The sensation of his soapy wet skin gliding against hers was scintillating.

He pressed against her. His hard cock grazed the curve of her belly. She rubbed her soft curves against him, making him stand even higher. Her hands slid over his butt, enjoying how firm and solid he felt. His cock pressed between them, begging for attention.

She teased him by not touching it as he expected. She refused to be rushed. She lovingly touched him everywhere but there. Her fingernails stroked the back of his thighs and made him shiver. Her hands traveled in soapy circles over the sculpted cleft of his gorgeous ass. Dark thoughts entered her mind. *Male slave or Dominant Master?* Which role would suit David? Either would be fun. She wondered if he was the kind of man who might enjoy a bit of rough play? She wondered if she was kind of woman who might also enjoy a bit of rough play? Her fantasies certainly drifted in that direction. There was only one way to find out. She stopped herself mid-thought. No way was she ready to ask. It was a foolish thing to bring up with someone she had just met. The physical and emotional risks were huge. That question would have to wait for later, but what if there was no later? The possibility that this moment might be all they would ever share caused a pinch of anxiety. Her eyes lingered on the swooping curve of his back. David would be absolutely perfect to... She dare not think it. There was so much in her heart she had yet to explore. She didn't even know exactly what she wanted. She just knew she wanted more than she had in the past. Her high-profile youth had provided little chance to explore much of anything. Jimmy was enthusiastic but, god help him, he was no explorer. Damn her for living such a dull and decent life.

Her sudsy hands glided over David's hard curves as she admired every inch of him. Impulsively she cupped her palm, poised her hand high in the air and gave his butt a hard smack. She couldn't stop herself and she didn't hold back. The sound of the smack ricocheted around the shower. The lather on her hands flew into the air. She knew the smack was hard enough to sting because his butt bore a pink handprint.

He jumped. His eyes blazed. "That was a real smack. I'll remember that." A slightly crooked smile lit his face. "You know what happens to bad girls, don't ya?" He playfully grabbed her hand and placed it around his shaft. "No more teasing. Stroke me." His eyes narrowed as he firmly held her hand on his cock and demanded to be touched. "Do it."

She smiled. *It's safe to say he's not a male slave. He certainly jumped right into the Master's role.* That suited her fine. Her soapy fingers curled around the shaft and stroked him until the head of his cock colored a deeper hue. The shaft thickened in her hand and his skin felt unbearably tight. Her fingers slid down the shaft and cupped his tight sac. She gently cradled him in her soapy palm, giving his balls a playful squeeze. She loved the warm weight in her hands.

His hips gently thrust against her palm, loving the attention. "That feels good." His calm words were filled with implication. "I might ask for more — a lot more."

His gaze was so intense it pinned her to the spot. Her heart leapt. She knew exactly what he meant and hurried to fill her cupped hands under the meager trickle of the showerhead. She splashed the warm water over him, rinsing the last of the soapy lather from his skin.

He offered no assistance at all. He stood perfectly still with his arms crossed over his chest, allowing her to do everything.

She finished rinsing him and stole a moment to admire his stunning body in the moonlight.

He studied her expression. His lip curled upward. "Show me your adoration. I love it." He picked her up and lifted her toward the shower's smoothly worn, wooden wall. He pinned her against the wall and pressed his body against her.

She felt the warm, wet wall at her back and his heavy chest pressing against her. Her breath caught. His hard cock jutted between her thighs, tempting her to spread her thighs and wrap her legs around his hips.

He hovered in front of her. Her eyes widened. His face was calm and his expression neutral. He seemed to be completely in control but she couldn't tell what he was thinking. She knew he was being playful but had she gone too far? She felt his warm breath on her cheek. His eyes glittered in the darkness. She wondered how far he would take this? How badly did he need to be the Master? She noticed his pulse pounding erratically at the base of his throat and knew his thoughts were neither calm nor neutral.

He placed his hands against the wall on either side of her head and looked intensely into her eyes. "I'm waiting." He spoke calmly.

Her fingertips brushed his chest as her back slowly slid down the wall. She let her body sink in the steamy shower until her face was level with his hard cock.

"Kneel." He tossed a folded towel to the floor for her to rest her knees on.

She kneeled, adjusted her position on the soft towel and looked up at him.

He took hold of his cock and lifted it higher, exposing his balls. "If you want this," he stated softly, "come and get it."

She faintly nodded her head and reached for him. She felt extremely vulnerable and exhilarated to be kneeling naked in a shower in front of him. Her pulse quickened. She leaned forward and gently kissed his balls, feeling their warmth and heavy texture against her lips. Her face nuzzled against him.

He moaned softly and stroked her hair. "I like that," he whispered. "Now you're being a good girl and I'm going to be very good to you." He gently pressed his body closer to her mouth.

She covered him in kisses, slowly exploring him with soft lips and the tip of her tongue. He pressed against her lips, seemingly anxious for more, so she sucked his balls against her lips and held him in the heat of her mouth until he groaned. His hips rocked

toward her. Her tongue traveled in slow circles over his skin as his sac rose and tightened. Her fingers gently took hold of him and tugged down.

His breath hissed. The head of his cock glistened. "Take it." He held it to her lips.

She took hold of the shaft and guided the head into her eager mouth. Her tongue licked the milky drop of fluid from the crown. This time, she thought he tasted slightly milder or perhaps she was getting used to him. He pressed against her mouth and slid past her lips with a firm thrust. He filled her mouth. She found herself having to tip her head back to take all of him.

The moment he saw her gasp he pulled back. "Beautiful girl." His fingertips gently stroked the side of her face. "I'm going to make love to you all night."

Her knees trembled. A thrill raced through her. She guided him back to her lips, swirled her tongue around him and sucked. Her mouth caressed him with slow, tugging strokes.

His hips slightly pulsed against her mouth. "Suck."

She pulled him deeper into her mouth, running her tongue lovingly around the rim and sucked harder. She couldn't wait to see the agonizingly beautiful look on his face when he came. She wanted to hear him moan. She couldn't wait for him to fuck her. What a great reward that would be. She sucked harder, wanting him to flood her mouth so she could have his taste on her tongue. Her face rocked gently from side to side, pulling him deeper. She was so turned-on at this moment she knew she would do anything he asked. She wanted to please him so badly she scared herself at how easily she had fallen into the role of slave wanting to please. She was acting as if she belonged to him and it felt right. The injured part of her heart shouted to use caution. It protested the vulnerable role she was enjoying. *Dear god, I'm the one with a brittle heart. He's a younger man. I'm the one who's going to get hurt. Even a fool can see that coming.* Her lips slid across the shaft, feeling the rising heat. She glanced up at his hooded eyes. His handsome face stood on the brink of ecstasy. He was perfect for her, yet he would never be hers. Life was going to take him away from her. She felt a stab of envy against the world. She pulled back and blurted out, "Is this a good place to bring girls?"

His eyes opened wide in surprise. He was quick to answer. "I never bring girls here."

She sat back on her heels. Her hands slid down his strong thighs. She wanted to dismiss his comment but it clung to her thoughts. She found herself wishing it were true but fearful she was just one of many.

He groaned with frustration when she abandoned him. He sensed she was dismissing him and he would not be treated casually. His tone was slowly paced and patient. "Lily, I helped my granddaddy build this cabin. I fish here with my family and I come here to be alone. I do not bring girls here. Doesn't your family have someplace special they can share?"

They didn't, and she didn't want to talk about it. Her family was a group of introverts, incapable of reaching out to each other. Her childhood had been privileged

but lonely. Her adult life had been more of the same. Her heart hammered from a sudden sense of shame. She didn't answer, she couldn't.

They both held still in the shower, looking at one another, trying to gage the other's thoughts. Moonlight filtered through the wooden slats. Stripes of pale light sliced across their bodies.

She felt terrible about saying such a jealous and hurtful thing. Her shoulders tensed. She wished she could take it back. She was already showing him her worst side and they had just met. He didn't deserve that comment. Maybe she didn't deserve to be happy and there truly was no hope for her?

He sensed her dejected mood. "I think I know what this is about and it's not really about me, is it?" A look of understanding crossed his face. He offered his hand and helped her stand. She struggled to straighten her knees. He pulled her under the trickle of warm water to rinse the last of the soap from her skin. He stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He hugged her wet body against him and whispered, "I know things are moving fast, but I want you to know this place is very special to me and you are special. Please don't think I do this all the time because I don't." He held her close.

She heard his soft words, felt his warm breath near her ear and became disoriented by the sudden sense of intimacy. He was listening to her and understanding her and she was overwhelmed. She wanted to believe him with all her heart. She had only come to New Orleans and said yes to sex because she was counting on him to stay a stranger, but now she realized a man like David couldn't remain a stranger for long. That just wasn't possible. He had effortlessly slipped past yet another emotional security gate and she wasn't sure how she felt about it. She'd lost her bearings on uncharted waters. She couldn't tell if things were things going well or going to hell? With David, she had little or no control. *Is that a bad thing?* Control was such an illusion. She had no control over her television career and she certainly had no control over Jimmy's behavior. *Lord knows, I've tried my best to control it.* She listened to the startling sounds of night birds screeching in the cypress trees beyond. Their harsh cries echoed across the bayou.

He kissed her shoulder and rubbed his wet body against her slick skin. "You're scared, aren't you, because things have gone sour in the past? That's why you wouldn't look at me in eye in the backseat, isn't it? Did you think I didn't notice?" His breath hitched.

She absently reached for his hand. Her fingers wrapped around his. She was shocked to realize her private moment of epiphany had not been private at all. David had witnessed and felt the other half of the experience. Her heart lurched. What did that mean? What would happen now? "I'm enjoying your company so much. I apologize for bringing my old baggage with me."

His lips gently brushed her shoulder. He laughed softly. "I thought we left your old baggage sitting tippy in front of Hotel Toulouse."

She smiled. "Jimmy's the bulk of the old baggage, but I'm afraid a little bit followed us up the bayou. Don't worry, I'm determined to get rid of it." Thank god, she didn't sound as confused and lost as she felt.

"Good idea." His hands roamed over her rounded hips. He brushed her damp hair aside and pressed a warm kiss against her nape. "Can you be mine tonight?" he asked softly. "Can I have you all to myself? I don't want to share you with the past. Does that sound selfish?"

Her heart lightened. She glanced over her shoulder and looked into his face. "It doesn't sound selfish and, yes, you can have me for tonight." Her words had trailed off to an incoherent whisper. It sounded as if she were handing herself over, body and soul, and she longed to do it. *Do it. Don't worry about it. Don't judge. Don't stop.* She realized she'd be a fool not to give in and enjoy her night with David.

He turned her body toward him. His hands cupped her face. "Lily, I want you to know there's absolutely no room in this shower for Jimmy or the past." A slight smile crossed his lips. "I want your full attention so I can show you just how special you are."

Her heart warmed to his sincere persistence. "Show me." She leaned forward and kissed his soft lips. Time was limited. He was leaving. Her life was in transition. It was all good. She truly wanted to believe that life could offer her more than her narrow expectations allowed. A little of the best was still the best. She knew if she could just relax this could be the most amazing weekend of her life. Even if she and David didn't last a lifetime, at least this special moment could. David was right, time together was brief and there was no room in this shower for the past. This was the adventure she had come for and it wasn't for cowards. She had better get her mind right. She watched as he reached toward the bench where he had set his pants. He dug through his pockets and pulled out a condom.

He held the glittering foil packet up and smiled "Come here." He handed it to her.

Her heart pounded. He had seen a glimpse of her insecure, petty side and he still wanted to fuck her. Good for her, but now her mind and heart were in a precarious place. This weekend had been planned as a special treat for her body not her mind or heart. She wished her mind and heart would stand down and allow her body to have a good time. Her hands moved as if working on autopilot as her mind spun. She clumsily tore the condom open with her fingernails and rolled it down the shaft. His warm thickness filled her hand. The translucent, sheathed head pressed against her palm. She gently stroked him.

A stripe of moonlight lit half his face, leaving the other half in shadow. Looking straight on at his divided face created a beautiful but slightly unsettling effect. He picked her up with ease, lifting her to his hips. He backed her into a corner of the shower. His solid body pressed her to the wall. Her back settled against the damp wooden slats. She wrapped her legs around his waist. Her hands gripped his shoulders.

His broad hands cupped her bottom and lifted her higher. The head of his cock pushed against her. "I don't want to hurt you," he whispered.

The thought of letting him go already hurt. She sat poised above his up-curved cock. A single thrust would impale her, but she wondered if his comment meant something more. Tonight was supposed to be uncomplicated and easy but it wasn't. The moment she decided to relax and let go, things got complicated again. Did she have to let him go? Could this work? Was there a place in her life for David?

He leaned toward her. Her lips parted for his kiss. His kiss was fierce. He gave her bottom lip a sharp nip, which left her lip buzzing. His weight crushed her to the wall in a possessive hold. His tongue teased hers with a warm, gliding motion that left her breathless. She opened and surrendered to his kiss. His lips moved to her throat. She shivered when she felt the edges of his teeth travel downward. He kissed her throat gently, dragging the edge of his teeth across her skin, causing goose flesh. Her head lolled back, exposing her throat to his possessive bite. He delivered a single, harsh, sucking bite to her throat that left her skin burning. She held her breath as her pulse throbbed in her throat.

He pressed his body longingly against her. "I want to finish what we started." His voice was a gravely plea.

He pressed so close she felt his heart beating against her chest. The head of his cock rocked impatiently between her thighs, waiting for permission to enter. His breathing deepened. His eyes focused intently on her, alert for clues to her mood.

She saw he was going to lose it if he had to wait a second longer. "I want it," she whispered. "Don't be gentle."

His body shuddered.

Her hands blindly sought something to anchor to. She braced herself between two wooden slats. Her hips sank down on him. The liquid soap was slightly astringent, the first thrust burned.

He slowly but persistently pushed inside her, gritting his teeth and making soft, determined sounds.

Her teeth sank against her bottom lip. She drew a deep breath and held still. She dared not interrupt him. Once the he was inside her, he felt wonderful, but that first harsh stroke reminded her to respect his size.

Once he was deep inside her, a satisfied groan escaped his lips. He moved slowly and carefully. His weight drove her to the wall. He became slick inside her, thrusting in and out with slow, deliberate strokes. His hands wrapped around her hips, trapping her against him. His entire body tensed from the effort of holding back. Clearly he wanted to let go and fuck.

She arched her back, intensifying his thrusts. Her hands inched upward and sought an overhead beam for support. Her fingers clung to the edge of it. She glanced down at his slim hips moving between her thighs. She watched his thick length disappear inside her and reemerge shining wet. At this angle she felt the harsher side of his stroke. She watched in fascination as he disappeared in her.

His lip curled with pride when he noticed what she was watching. He too looked down and watched himself disappear in her. He pressed her firmly against the wall. She surrendered to his tempo, which quickened. His movements were uninhibited as he lifted her hips higher and thrust faster. Her breasts leapt from the abrupt movement. He seemed to love it. He thrust again just to see her breasts sway she was sure.

His hips pumped against her. Her body moved with him, clutching him tighter with each stroke. She doubted he could take too much of this. He buried his face against her shoulder. His breath rasped near her ear. He muttered something unintelligible. His words sounded like a strangled sob. She couldn't figure out what he said. She wondered if he was worried he was hurting her? Far from it. He felt wonderful. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed the side of his cheek to reassure him all was well and took the full force of his thrusts.

His fingers gripped her flesh. He came with a rasping howl. His legs shook as he pumped himself into her. His body felt burning hot as he curled forward in exhaustion.

Her hands immediately flew to the wooden slats for security in case he dropped her.

He didn't. He held tightly to her, gasping for breath. He almost sounded injured. His knees trembled. His eyelids hovered at half-mast. He brushed her tangled hair aside. "That was good but now we need another shower." He smiled.

She laughed at him as he pulled them back under the trickle of now-cool water and reached for more soap. She was so sensitive she could hardly bear to have her sex touched by the lavender soap. He noticed she was pulling from his touch. "You haven't come yet?" He rinsed her quickly, his eyes gleaming. "I'll take care of that."

"I need to slow down a bit." She wanted more—but now she wanted it slower and gentler.

His eyes shone. He wasn't too exhausted to pick her up and carry her toward the bedroom.

She gasped as he easily hoisted her into his arms and held her against damp chest. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tight, knowing she could easily get used to being carried around by a handsome man. It could be habit-forming. Her feet might never again touch the ground. She laughed.

"What are you laughing about?" He kissed her cheek before gently tossing her on the bed.

The air mattress made a terrible squashing sound but didn't explode or deflate as she feared it might.

He bounced down on the mattress beside her. His hand reached up to unfurl the mosquito net above their heads before a swarm of night fliers located them. The net swirled down on them as if it were the petals of a giant trumpet flower and they were two small creatures trapped inside. The translucent netting was ghostly white and cast a faint, bluish glow across the bed. Suddenly, the world beyond the mosquito net

ceased to exist. It was as if they occupied their own secret space, a kingdom the size of a mattress. Their new secret world felt small. There was absolutely nowhere to hide.

He crept toward her on his elbows. His eyes sparkled. "Lily, I haven't had a woman in my life for a long time. I feel like I'm dreaming. Just let me know what you want and it's yours."

Had he been lonely too? Her chest tensed. His words caused a flutter of emotion to race through her. She wondered if he meant it and hoped that he did. It was a bit hard to believe, but she wanted to trust it. She studied his face. He looked sincere. She felt bolder, took a deep breath and arched across the mattress, drawing one knee gracefully toward her. Her fingertips slid between her thighs and parted the pink lips of her pussy.

He stared between the framed vee of her fingers. His breath caught.

She felt his focused gaze scorch her. Her pulse quickened. "Kiss me," she whispered.

His eyes lit. He reached out to stroke his fingertips along her thigh. He took hold of her hips and pulled her toward him in a single, swift swoop. His hands gently coaxed her thighs apart.

She slowly parted her thighs, feeling breathless. His dark head dipped between her thighs to deliver a warm, intimate kiss. She shuddered from the heat of his soft mouth pressed against her. Despite the warm night, his damp hair made the tender skin of her inner thighs shiver. His lips brushed against her sex. The wet tip of his tongue slowly stroked her heated flesh and made her gasp. Her hips strained upward. Her sensitive clit was already on fire and lightest touch made her body jolt. His slight chin stubble tickled her inner thigh and left her squirming to part her thighs farther to escape the rasp.

He lifted his face. "Do you want me to run a razor across this?" His hand stroked his jaw.

"No." She melted against the mattress, not wanting him to leave for even a minute. She placed her hand on his head and gently pushed. "Go down on me."

He lowered his head. His breath warmed her skin. His face slowly rocked from side to side as he made soft, pleased sounds. His wet tongue stroked across her stiffened clit, making her spine arch with tension. She thrust her hips forward, wanting his mouth to embrace all of her. He dragged the flat of his tongue across the length of her, from front to back and all the sensitive places in between. She moaned beneath him. It was unbearably intimate and she was eager to give in to it.

He teased her clit with a quick, flicking motion. "I like your spicy scent," he whispered before returning his lips to her sex.

She stared up at the swirl of the mosquito net overhead. Her hips rocked gently against his mouth. His touch, the heat and pressure were exactly right. Her lips parted with a sigh. Her excitement built. He gently kissed her, teasing her aching clit with his tongue. Heat rose between them. His warm mouth glided over her, getting her even

wetter. She arched against the mattress in ecstasy. Her fingers tangled in his hair and held his face captive against her for fear he might stop what he was doing. It was perfect. She squeezed her thighs together, gently trapping him. His swirled his tongue against her until she uttered a volley of soft, little sounds. Her body gently rocked against his mouth, reveling in the sensation of his soft, warm lips pressed against her. This was too perfect. He seemed to know exactly what she needed before she knew. His lips sucked lightly on her wet flesh until it was almost unbearable. She could hardly hold still as he pressed his mouth against her. His lips traveled to the hypersensitive spot where her ass curved toward her thigh. She held her breath wishing he wouldn't. It was almost too intimate, the sensations too much.

His hands cupped her round hips and tugged her closer. His tongue stroked the lush cleft of her ass. He briefly glanced up. "This is my curve." His fingertip traced an invisible line up the back of her thigh until it reached the under curve of her ass. "I claim this spot as mine." He gently dragged his teeth across the sensitive area, making her squirm wildly. His hands gripped her thighs and held her firmly. He buried his face against her and moaned with pleasure.

She got goose flesh as he kissed this ticklish spot with intense devotion. His warm breath on her skin was exciting. It was almost too much when his mouth strayed to a forbidden place and tormented it with teasing kisses. She couldn't be still. The sensations were softly infuriating and left her craving more. His tongue swept across the cleft of her ass, making her body hum with pleasure. Her hips rose off the mattress and thrust against him. She pressed her eager pussy against his face, making the blood rush. Her ankles locked around his shoulders and rocked him gently between her thighs. His mouth purred against her with a low, rumbling growl that sent shivers through her. She was so close to coming she could hardly stand it. She collapsed against the bed and stretched her arms overhead. Her fingers wound around the iron bars of the headboard and clung, holding on for dear life. She lifted her hips openly, offering every forbidden part of herself. She wanted to feel the wet heat of his mouth taking all of her.

His thumb slid across her clit. She moaned as her body buckled forward. She rocked against his thumb, craving the feeling of friction and penetration. She carefully impaled herself on his thumb, loving the penetration but hating the tease. It just made her want more. His lips gently sucked her clit as she slid back and forth against his thumb. She became so desperate to come she was almost frantic. Her hips rocked faster. His thumb slowly circled inside her, rubbing against that extra-sensitive, fiery spot buried inside. She felt an incredible climax looming. Her abdomen clenched. His mouth plunged down on her in a possessive kiss that left her writhing off the mattress. She hovered on the brink, needing a little more friction, a little more penetration, just a little more... Her fingers clawed at his shoulders in a vain attempt to drag him on top of her. "Finish me," she pleaded.

His hands firmly held her. His weight pressed down on her. She couldn't move. He held her captive as his mouth rocked gently from side to side. He teased her lightly

with only the tip of his tongue. He pulled back and barely touched her. His kiss was barely more than a whisper-light brush of his lips against her clit, and surprisingly, it was enough.

Her body arched off the mattress as an intense rush of pleasure washed through her. The heat spread to her scalp. Her fingers curled tighter around the iron headboard and hung on. A sobbing moan escaped her lips. She came against his lips from the lightest of touches. Her body convulsed beneath him in gentle waves. It was so freeing and so beautiful to melt beneath him. She was so grateful. His hands struggled to hold her still as her hips gently rocked against his mouth. Her thighs squeezed tightly against the sides of his face. She felt the slight grit of his, beard stubble rubbing against the tender skin but didn't care. It now felt heavenly. She loved it. She hadn't come that hard in ages. She floated on the feeling. A beautiful sensation of complete peace washed over her. Her body went limp as a rag doll and her mind went blank.

While she lay in a stupor, he firmly took hold of her hips, flipped her onto her belly and pulled her toward him. He lifted her hips high into the air. "My turn," he announced with gusto before smacking her bottom with an open palm. The smack was light but it stung in an oddly warming way.

Her eyes flew open in surprise. Her body leapt back to awareness. At first she was startled to have her private revelry interrupted, but it thrilled her to have him take charge so decisively.

She looked over her shoulder and saw he was already hard. *What the hell? He just came fifteen minutes ago in the shower.* She wasn't used to this. When they were younger, she and Jimmy might manage twice on a Saturday night, but she had to jump through hoops to keep him hard. She always blamed herself and suspected she wasn't that exciting. She never pointed the finger at Jimmy and his emotional detachment, heavy drinking and bad habits. Her lip curled. It was sad how eager she had been to blame herself. David was different.

He reached under the mosquito net and grabbed a condom off a side table. He tore it open and rolled it onto himself. He moved closer and positioned himself behind her, prepared to thrust inside.

She turned her face away to hide her secret smile. The condom count was rising hourly beyond all expectations. Good for her, she needed this. She almost laughed for joy, but she knew laughter at that moment would be misunderstood and unwelcome. She needed to concentrate on enjoying her newly found sexual freedom while not falling too hard for David. Who was she kidding? She was already falling for him. How could she resist? He was wonderful. She silently reminded herself. *There are limitations. He has places to go, just enjoy it for what it is.*

She heard his deep breathing behind her and looked up.

He seemed to be waiting until he had her complete attention.

She knelt on the mattress before him, with her hips thrust high in the air, wantonly offering herself. Her body was so sensitized her nerves whirled in confusion.

With David so close, she couldn't tell if her skin felt hot or cool. His big body radiated so much heat in contrast. She glanced over her shoulder at him, feeling extremely vulnerable in this position and very excited. She waited breathlessly for the moment of penetration. Nothing happened. His body weight shifted behind her. The mattress dipped. His cock hovered in the air between them, almost touching her raised ass. She took an anxious breath, waiting. He didn't move. When was the fun going to start? She tensed.

His open palm spanked the meatiest part of her butt. She lurched forward onto a pillow. Her flesh stung. The contact of his cupped palm made a shockingly loud sound. She jolted more from surprise than from actual pain. Her skin instantly prickled and warmed. A moment of utter confusion hijacked her. Pleasure and pain sang together. How dare he do that? *Whoops, I was the one who brought this up in the first place...*

She gulped a deep breath. In a weird way, the mixed sensation was stunning, almost on the brink of unbearable but not quite. Her skin flushed with heat. Now it actually felt good. She sighed. Just as she decided everything was fine, he spanked her again, harder. It burned. His broad hand covered her lushly padded butt with another loud smack. This time the heat spread faster. The feeling consumed her and the heat didn't die down. Her skin tingled as if she were on fire. Her fingers gripped the sheets.

His weight shifted. One broad hand anchored firmly against her lower back as he spanked the other cheek and made it burn too. She groaned, but didn't struggle. She closed her eyes, focusing only on the heated sensations the spanking brought. Her fingers tangled in the sheets as he smacked her bottom faster. Her hips slowly wagged from side to side to release tension. The slight rocking motion was calming. The swats came harder and faster but surprisingly she could take it. The blood rushed to her buttocks, heating her skin. Her pussy was wet and burning hot. She panted beneath him. She began to really enjoy it but worried it might get out of hand. Her teeth gritted. She shouldn't be enjoying this but she was. *What the hell.* She finally stopped questioning herself and simply gave in to the intense sensation. There was something profoundly cathartic about submission. She had to submit. She needed this. Her body and heart had been cold, lonely and neglected too long. She needed to be shaken awake. David's strength, beauty and compassion demanded she wake up. Her body trembled under his hand. A closed off corner of her heart opened and long pent-up emotions poured out. Her lips silently parted but not the slightest sound surfaced. She was shocked when cleansing tears welled in her eyes and slid down her cheeks. She tasted the warm, salty tears trickling past her lips and hid her face in the sheets to stifle a gasping sob.

"You have a beautiful ass. I can't help myself." He spanked her harder. "Gorgeous. I want to spank your ass and ride it."

She whimpered softly, silently admitting it sounded good. She raised her face to look at him.

He saw the tears on her cheeks. His body froze. He looked worried. "Are you okay? Was I too rough?" His hand gently stroked the side of her hip.

His sudden switch to tenderness left her emotions reeling. She managed to smile. "I liked it. It just surprised me."

He looked mortified. "Sweetheart, I thought you were trying to tell me in shower this was what you wanted."

She gulped a deep breath as her body shuddered. "I think that's exactly what I was trying to tell you. I just didn't know how to ask," she whispered. She rolled on her knees and faced him. The flesh of her ass burned. She took hold of his hand and gave his fingers a gentle squeeze. "A lot of this is new to me but I like it."

A relieved smile crossed his face. "Lily, I just want to please you. A lot of this is new to me too."

Her fingertips gently framed the sides of his face. She gazed at the soft expression in his eyes. "David, I love it when you take charge. I give you permission to please us both." Her heart raced as she spoke the impulsive words. Now it was official.

His eyes lit with understanding. "Are you sure?"

She slowly nodded her head. Fresh tears welled in her eyes.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. "Don't cry, *cher*."

She pressed her damp cheek against his chest and listened to his heart pounding. She wondered if her tears had scared him? "I needed to cry," she whispered.

He pulled back just far enough to look at her. His eyes studied her face for clues to her deeper mood. "You're okay?"

She nodded her head but couldn't speak.

"Do you want to stop and talk about it?"

The level of caring in his voice made her heart ache. "No, I just want to give myself to you."

He smiled. "Okay."

A faint smile lifted the edge of her lips. "I'm yours tonight. You know what I want."

He gently kissed the top of her head and slowly rocked her against his chest.

She wrapped her arms tightly around his waist. Her fingers brushed against his solid back. He felt so loving and trustworthy, but should she trust a virtual stranger with her body and her heart?

He leaned down to kiss her lips and softly whispered, "Turn around and kneel on the bed."

His softly spoken command sent a shiver down her spine. Her heart raced. She obediently turned and stretched forward on the mattress. Her breasts pressed against the crisp, lavender-scented sheets.

"Lift your hips higher." His tone was firm. "Show me your reddened ass. Is it still burning?"

"Yes," she whispered. She would probably still be feeling the burn tomorrow. Her face felt hot as well. She closed her eyes and lifted her hips higher, wondering if he was

going to spank her again. Her ass throbbed with heat and she wasn't sure she could take more. Her arms strained forward to reach the iron headboard to brace herself. Her fingers wrapped securely around the filigreed bars and hung on. Her breath caught.

"Don't move." He slid closer and kneeled behind her.

Her skin shivered in anticipation. She raised her ass higher and parted her thighs wider.

His hands closed around her waist. His sheathed cock bumped against the back of her leg. His hand slowly slid along her spine until it rested on her nape. His fingertips gently stroked her nape until the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood straight. Her body tensed in keen anticipation.

He pressed her shoulder to the mattress and gently held her in that position, facedown. "What do you want, Lily?" His voice was a husky whisper.

She gulped a deep breath before answering, "I want you to fuck me."

His voice was tender. "Gentle or rough?"

She bit her lip. "I want a rough fuck." She held her breath. *Am I going to regret this?*

"I'm going to rough fuck this beautiful pussy. What do you say to that?"

"Yes," rattled out of her throat. His hand applied barely any pressure to the back of her neck yet she felt thoroughly pinned to the spot.

"I'm going to fuck you as hard and as fast as I want. My balls are going to slap against you and you're going to take it. Agreed?"

Her head slightly nodded in agreement. She buried her face against the sheets with a faint whimper. Her fingers gripped the iron headboard.

He took hold of her hips and rubbed the head of cock against her ass. "I should give myself a treat and just take your ass."

Her body tensed. "No!" She bolted upright. A startling thrill raced through her.

"Don't worry about it. I want pussy." His palm firmly but gently pushed her shoulders back down on the mattress. His body pressed against her.

Her heart pounded on high alert. She was so excited she felt as if she could jump out of her skin. She lifted her hips for him and waited.

He reached between her thighs. His fingertips lazily stroked her clit. "Nice and wet." He groaned approvingly. "You like to be spanked and mastered. Don't you?"

She lay beneath him with her face half hidden in the sheets. The slow, steady stroke of his fingertips hijacked her thoughts. Her thoughts floated on the pleasure of simply surrendering to another. Submission in this arena required a great deal of respect and trust. Why had she never surrendered like this to Jimmy? *Not once.* She had loved him yet she had never even shared any of these secret desires with him. How easily she handed herself to David... She was a completely different person with him.

His hand stilled as he loomed behind her.

She realized he expected an answer, and at this moment, she was incapable of giving one. She didn't want to speak. She wanted to quietly sink into the pleasures of submission. She gave him a tiny groan as an answer.

"I'm going to assume that's a 'yes' because I'm ready to fuck." His fingers parted the lips of her pussy. His cock slid easily inside.

She rubbed her cheek against the sheets and moaned softly so he would know she was relishing it.

He took a slow, deep stroke. The breath hissed out of him. "You're a furnace."

Her hips swayed as he entered. Her ass burned from contact with him. Her forehead pressed to the mattress as her body gripped him. The spanking had brought so much warm blood to the area, she felt as if she could come just from pressing her thighs together. She played with that feeling by clenching her thigh muscles and feeling the blood rush. Her excitement built.

"Oh," he moaned when she squeezed him in her tight grip. His hips rocked.

She glanced over her shoulder to watch the show. His eyes were closed and his head tilted back. His hands gripped the small of her back as he slowly plunged in and out of her. He was being very gentle and careful. This wasn't a rough fuck at all. She was about to remind him.

He sensed her watching. His eyes opened a slit.

She saw a glimmer of cool green looking down at her.

He smiled slightly as he sank to his balls inside her. His hand swatted her ass. "Now you're going to get it."

Her body leapt. The heat of the swat spread across her skin. She turned around, covered her face in the sheets and swallowed her protests.

His hands tightly gripped her hips. He penetrated her with a fast burst of short, shallow strokes. The head of his cock pushed in and pulled out in a rising rhythm. "Fucking beautiful." His hand smacked her ass.

She gritted her teeth. Her throat ached to moan. This submission was sweet. Her flesh burned. She thrust her hips upward, wishing the head of his cock would drag across her clit.

His hand spanked her ass hard as he thrust faster.

The loud vibration of his swat rippled through her. She involuntarily groaned. It stung in an exciting way, but it didn't do anything close to injury. It just provided intense stimulation. She felt a heated blush cross her face. She tensed her thigh and glute muscles, becoming acutely aware of his every move. Her clit burned as if it were a hard, little ember waiting to be stroked into flames. She rolled her hips against his harsh strokes and rubbed her face in the sheets. This was a rough fuck and it was good. The corners of her lips curled upward.

His hips plunged faster. His balls thumped against her with their own building rhythm. "Is this what you need?" he panted.

That's what she wanted. She thrust her hips back and took it. She tuned everything out but him. He was all that existed in the world. She heard only his labored breathing and felt the heat rolling off his skin. The mosquito net trapped all their body heat. The room was too warm. The humidity made their bodies slick with perspiration. His hands slid from her waist to her hips. He curled over her back and plunged deeper, struggling to hold on to her slick hips. His balls bounced against the back of her thighs. Sex in a swamp; there was something so primal about it.

His hands reached for her breasts and gently cupped them. With each stroke he took, her breasts bounced lightly against his palm. His body felt scorching-hot pressed against her back, almost unbearably warm to be near. He was a heady blend of fierceness and caring. She felt herself relaxing with him on a deeper level. Maybe they could have a friendship? Maybe she should keep him as a lover? Was it a mistake to want more? A moment of anxiety passed over her. Suddenly, she felt trapped beneath the steamy weight of his body.

He lifted her hips and pumped harder. "Oh Lily." He groaned. His body shuddered violently and went still as he poured himself inside her. "This is good." His hands gently stroked her hips as his cock sank deep inside her. He grasped her hips tightly. If she moved the slightest bit he gasped as if he were in pain. His hands held her perfectly still while he finished coming. It seemed to take forever.

She closed her eyes and drew it all in. His scent. His sounds. The light scratch of the tiny hairs on his thighs. Every detail was important. She wanted to remember all of it.

He finally slid out and threw himself onto his back, panting. "My knees are shaking. What have you done to me?" He laughed as he apologized for falling down in exhaustion. He sprawled across the bed, taking up most of the room. "God, it's hot." He seemed to notice the temperature for the first time in spite of the fact he had generated a good deal of the heat. His hands gently motioned to her. "Come closer, sweetheart, I want to hold you."

He looks so beautiful. This is perfect. Don't think that. She took a deep breath and tried to compose herself. Her body still buzzed with tension and craved release. Her legs trembled. She rolled onto her side and pulled the sheet around her.

He looked at her as if she were crazy. "How can you bear to have that sheet next to your skin?"

She needed something to hide behind. A worn sheet wasn't enough to cover her vulnerable feelings.

"Come here and talk to me," he coaxed her closer, and looked disappointed when she didn't lie beside him.

She looked at his long body stretched across the bed. What had she been thinking to choose a perfect man for a perfect weekend of perfect sex and then cast him away without regret? She admitted she wasn't suited to this. Her heart wasn't detached enough to live in the moment and not look ahead. She reminded herself that she actually knew little about him. He was still a stranger, an intimate stranger but a

stranger nonetheless. Maybe it should stay that way? Things would be less painful, later. Intimacy and friendship would certainly hamper her exit strategy and his. She remembered she had agreed to narrate his documentary, which meant future meetings. Was that a mistake? Would those meetings be awkward and bittersweet? Would they fill her with longing for something that wasn't meant to be? She felt greedy for wanting more. A piece of her heart cried out. *I want David all to myself.* She also wanted to fly home on Monday with her heart and dignity intact and it was looking more and more as if that may not happen. She wished she were back at her hotel so she could distract him with a night stroll through the city or a drink.

He lifted his head. His brow creased. "What's wrong? You're frowning."

"So are you."

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No. I need some water."

He rolled off the bed and went to the kitchen. "I'll get you some water, but I don't think it will wash that frown off your face."

She lay on the bed, wondering what she should do. She certainly didn't know what to feel. This was so unlike her, to have completely uninhibited sex with a man she didn't really know. She'd had so few lovers in her life. Every man she had slept with had undergone an extensive vetting process. She dated them and paraded them past her friends and asked everyone's opinion. In fact, others had been doing the choosing for most of her life. Her mother had chosen Jimmy. That fact alone should have alarmed her. Marion had chosen David. At least Marion had been on target, but why was Marion making important decisions for her? Why was anyone making personal decisions for her? The facts were inescapable. She invited them to, that was why. The truth flooded her mind. She had been dishonest with herself and it was high time to make her own decisions.

He padded across the floor, holding two plastic bottles of water. He climbed under the mosquito net. "I'm sorry, the water's not cold yet." He twisted the cap off one bottle and handed it to her.

She was incredibly thirsty and drank half a bottle in a single gulp.

He twisted the cap off his and tapped his water bottle against hers. "Cheers." His face was dour. He studied her serious expression. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

He stretched out on the bed beside her, completely comfortable with his nudity.

She looked at his beautiful long legs and lean body. He certainly had nothing to feel self-conscious about.

He held his arm out. He coaxed her to lie beside him in the crook of his arm. "Please."

She stretched out beside him and pressed against his warm skin. The night was too muggy to be lying in contact with another but she did it anyway because she sensed he needed it. Her face rested against his chest as it gently rose and fell.

He affectionately kissed the top of her head and lay silent for many moments. "I was thinking about what that man said to me back at Charlene's."

She groaned. "I wish we could forget about that."

"I wish I could too." He turned on his side to look directly at her. "I'm not sure what you came to New Orleans expecting, but I do wish you would be more open to what is."

She pulled away from him. "I'm so sorry. I never do this sort of thing." Her eyes dipped sheepishly. "If you only knew me—"

He spoke over her. "That's the point, Lily. I do want to know you. You invite me close and then you push me back like I've done something terrible. I'm getting a little scared that you're going to pull back and not take the time to get to know me."

She bit her lip. "Maybe we should slow down a little bit."

"Maybe." He flopped onto his back. The mattress hissed under his falling weight.

They didn't talk. The mosquito net cast a cloudy haze over the night. They quietly stared out the bedroom window. The moon had sunk in the night sky and now shone directly through the window. It made the mosquito net glow bluish-white. The bayou grew quieter. An occasional birdcall or watery splash were the only disruptions. Neither of them spoke. After what felt like a long while, he fell asleep beside her. She felt his chest slowly rising and falling.

She lay listlessly on her side, unable to sleep. She got tired of looking at the moon and glanced at his sleeping face. Her more-tender feelings began to ache. He was no longer a fantasy to savor and dismiss. He was a real person who came with his own feelings and expectations. He came with risks. She studied his face. His profile was so pure. His lips slightly parted. His thick black eyelashes cast curved shadows on his cheeks. His lashes fluttered erratically every few minutes. Obviously he was lost in REM sleep. She wondered what he was dreaming about. A sleeping face was a very different entity from a waking one. The ego was absent. There was something very sweet and innocent about a sleeping person. She wondered how he could fall asleep so easily beside a stranger? She watched him doze, feeling slightly like an intruder.

She was wide-awake. Her internal clock was still on West Coast time. The midnight hours were her working hours. These were the hours she reported the ills and the inanities of the world to her fellow insomniacs. What kind of a news header would she write for tonight? *Lost soul turns her heart over to a handsome stranger and stupidly hopes it will all work out in her favor. Or, frightened, foolish woman pushes perfect man away.* She felt the truths that only come to visit at two or three a.m. *Life will leave scars. You will get lost. You should take more risks. You will get hurt but it's worth it. It doesn't matter who you are—no one is guaranteed safe passage to the other side, so stop asking for guarantees.*

She quietly slipped out from beneath the mosquito net and walked onto the screened porch. She took the top sheet with her, leaving David sprawled naked across the bed, sound asleep.

The moonlight was so bright she didn't need a candle. A line of knobby cypress trees made tortured silhouettes against the moon. The moss-covered tree limbs looked as if they were melting. The bayou was a dangerous but beautiful place. Simply calling it a "swamp" didn't come anywhere near describing its elegance. Night brought out the splendor of the bayou. Everything around her was alive. The dark was full of secrets. The cypress groves were filled with ghosts. The insects quickly found her on the porch and buzzed beyond the screen. She pulled the sheet protectively around her.

She quietly wondered why had she wasted so much time with Jimmy? She had acted as if he were the only man in the world. It was true he had fostered that illusion. If he said "No", then the answer was no. It didn't matter what she thought. Her lip curled in a crooked smile. Jimmy's style of domination was literal and never fun. How had she not seen that before? She remembered their first argument about children. It had never occurred to her that he wasn't interested. He was one of nine siblings. She was an only child. They had very different views of what a family should be. Jimmy shunned the hardships and crowding he experienced as a child. She idealized the utopia of love and company of family. He had put her off children for years saying, "Next year would be better." But no year was. She finally realized he was frightened of being robbed of his adult childhood. She got the idea in her head that men didn't want to be burdened with responsibilities. She couldn't see it was Jimmy's immaturity. She realized it was her fault as well. She knew she had used Jimmy as an excuse to put her career first, and she also knew she was ready for more. Lately, she had been warming to the idea of adopting a child and enjoying a more stable and fulfilling life. She just needed the confidence to work out the details.

While meditating on the future, she swatted a lone mosquito off her ankle. It was high time to make positive changes in her life. She had arrived on the bayou with only her purse and the clothes on her back, yet loads of old baggage had snuck along for the ride. Her thoughts were filled with Jimmy this and Jimmy that. This was the perfect moment to unload the baggage. She didn't need it anymore. Jimmy was Jimmy and he had no place in her future. She thought about all the good things Jimmy had done for her. He had once been outgoing and fun. He had helped her break out of her shyness. He had given her the courage to disagree with her chilly family and pursue her dreams. He was a clown unafraid of censor and he had made her laugh and be less serious. Poor man, he believed he could talk to anybody. He was a wonderful cook. Their kitchen door had been open to anyone who needed sympathetic company and a home-cooked meal. They had shared some very good times together. She knew deep in her heart that he had been very proud of her yet very intimidated. What a shame it had ended in disrespect. "Goodbye, Jimmy." She whispered his name as she pictured her old life with Jimmy sinking into the swamp, knowing the bayou would reclaim the wreckage and recycle it into something fresh and worthwhile.

Chapter Five

In the blue shadows of predawn, David appeared on the porch, wearing only his cotton boxer shorts. "Come back to bed." He offered an outstretched hand.

She turned around when she heard his footsteps creaking on the planks. His tall frame filled the doorway. His dark hair was beautifully rumpled. "Did I wake you? I'm sorry. I'm used to being awake at night."

He sat down beside her. His brow bore a tense expression. "I'm just curious, how much does a film editor get paid in Los Angeles?"

Her breath caught. The question made her nervous. Why was he asking? She knew the amounts sounded high until the realization of how much it cost to live in Los Angeles arrived. "It varies. An experienced film editor is paid very differently from a novice television editor. I can't really answer that question." Was she ready to have a man follow her home to Los Angeles? The last thing she wanted to do was encourage yet another idealistic person to come to LA.

"If you can't sleep, can I show you what I've got on my laptop?" His eyes looked at her hopefully.

She nodded her head. "Sure."

He hobbled barefoot over the crushed clamshell driveway and retrieved the laptop from the trunk of the sedan. He returned and set the computer on her lap. His smooth chest gently brushed against her arm as he leaned closer to open a file and turn up the volume.

The glowing screen of the laptop lit the porch. She watched as amazing images poured forth. David had beautifully documented eccentric and obscure musicians of the New Orleans area. She saw marching bands at funerals, Mardi Gras parades, old blues men in nursing homes, children's trios singing perfect a cappella harmony on street corners, gospel choirs and little girls singing while playing hopscotch. It was a catalog of the glorious noise humanity made when it opened its mouth. The image of a purple-robed gospel choir, singing beside the rubble of what had once been their church was especially moving. Everyone's face was beaming as if devastation had never touched them.

The footage changed. David had carefully cut and edited the individual performances so it appeared everyone was singing together at the same time as a unified group. Watching the images and listening to the music made her feel as if she were being let in on some beautiful secret. Amongst the chaos and between the competing rhythms, humanity was singing the same song.

He pointed to the screen. "Each of these musical styles has its roots in traditional African music. I want to film them both and put them side by side. Now that our grant came through I can do that."

"I'm impressed." She glanced at his proud face, thinking he was a wonderful ambassador to represent America in foreign lands. He was intelligent, handsome and respectful of others. She hoped he would be safe during his travels.

"I'm so happy to be getting this opportunity. Other people have come first for a long while now. It's finally my turn. I've never traveled outside the South. This will be my first time on an airplane. Can you believe that? I haven't really gone anywhere exotic, but I feel like my life is going to get rolling now. I'll bet you get to travel all the time."

She shook her head. "Not that much anymore, but I do like it."

"I think I'm going to love it. Wouldn't it be nice to have the freedom to go wherever you want and stay as long as you please? Take a good look at the rest of the world and see how other people live."

She smiled a relieved but faintly sad smile when she heard his plans. "I think it's wonderful and you should do it."

"Bold words." A nervous smile flickered across his lips. "We'll see what happens. I'm pretty close to my family and I haven't even left home yet."

She watched closely as the images on the laptop looped again. "Pause it."

He paused the images.

She pointed at the image of a young girl skipping rope. "Look at the girl's face compared to the old woman in the previous clip. Look at the smiles and the eyes on those two. It's almost the same face, decades removed. I would superimpose these two images together."

He studied the two images of the girl and the old woman. "I see that now. You're right."

The loop replayed. She pointed at the screen. The image was of a mother draped in Mardi Gras beads holding an infant wrapped in a lavender blanket. "Look at the lavender baby blanket compared to the clip of the funeral procession with everyone dressed in lavender. If you put those two images together they'll start to make a strong visual narrative, if only on a subliminal level."

"Lily, that's a good idea. I'm going to reedit this loop." His hand clasped hers. "You seem to have an excellent eye for editing and creating a narrative."

A feeling of creative confidence returned. She really hadn't done anything creative in a long while. Her life had been on autopilot. She realized how much she longed for a challenge. "If I knew how to edit I'd grab that marching band footage and really have fun with it."

He glanced sideways at her. "As a producer you should get a little experience editing. I could teach you." His face was earnest.

She laughed, "I think I should stick to what I know."

He smiled. "And I think you should learn new skills. It all works together and makes sense."

He was right. He seemed to be always right. *Shades of Marion*. Damn. She nodded her head. "You're right."

They sat on the porch, discussing how to best edit his documentary. As they spoke, they drifted closer together. She saw their ideas were in key with each other. The journalist in her had strong opinions, but he was confident enough to hold his ground about what he thought was essential. He defended his ideas beautifully. They talked until the horizon turned pink.

He yawned, closed his laptop and set it aside. He stood and loomed over her without saying a word. He didn't need to. She knew what he was asking and her heart opened to it. When he offered his hand, she took it and followed him back to the bedroom.

He held the mosquito net up for her while she climbed underneath. She arched across the bed. He stretched out on top of her. His faintly musky scent floated on the humid morning air. She sank beneath his weight as his long legs entangled with hers. He pressed himself against her. The thin cotton of his boxer shorts did little to separate them. His body strained toward her. His lips brushed her cheek. Her excitement rose. It felt wonderful to have a man desire her so strongly. He gently nudged her thighs apart with his knee. Her body shifted beneath his warm weight and longingly pressed against him. The head of his cock prodded her through the soft cotton. She sighed, feeling instantly slick at the thought of him sliding inside and giving them both pleasure. His hands stroked her hips and pulled her closer. She savored the feeling of being clasped beneath him and breathing in the warm scent of his skin.

He kissed her mouth. His warm breath mingled with hers. His fingers tangled with hers. He stretched her arms above her head and firmly pinned her wrists to the mattress. Her breath caught. A timeless, dreamy feeling swept over her, as if this moment wasn't quite real. His lips lovingly covered hers. Her lips softly parted for him. She tasted a slight trace of stingy, spearmint toothpaste on his lips. His kisses were slow and sweetly lazy. He wanted her but he was also sleepy and in no hurry. His lips grazed the sides of her throat. His teeth gently nipped the soft skin of her throat, making her shiver. His soft lips slowly traveled toward her breasts. She felt his warm breath on her skin. He gently tugged a nipple between his lips and sucked it to a peak. She ached to have her nipple held in the heat of his mouth. Her back arched against the mattress. His face nuzzled against her soft breast. She sighed softly as a feeling of shared pleasure passed between them. She wanted him to know how good it felt. Her fingers gently stroked his hair. The heat of his mouth against her breast spread through her entire body. He sucked the nipple deeper and held it possessively. The tip of his tongue swirled against her skin. She moaned. Her eyes closed as her body melted beneath him, completely surrendering to his gentle touch. Her limbs went soft.

He raised his head and gazed at her with adoring eyes.

She slowly opened her languid eyes when she sensed him looking at her. Her breath caught. For a moment, she was afraid he might speak and say something so personal and binding that she would completely fall for him. It was already frightening enough to know how easy he was to be with or how much her heart wanted him. She quickly reminded herself he was single for a reason. He wanted to meet the world and no doubt the world wanted to meet him. She didn't want to know any more good things about him or bad. She just wanted to enjoy him for what this was and live in the moment.

Her fingers wiggled free of his grasp. She tugged his shorts down, feeling the smooth head of his cock rising between her thighs. She pulled him tightly against her, stroking her hands across the hard contours of his muscular butt. He was so beautiful, well-built and strong. He stood at a crossroad in his life. He was in his prime and open to the world, and it was her privilege to witness this perfect moment in his life, which would pass so quickly.

He reached toward the nightstand and used his free hand to grab a condom. He tore the foil with his teeth and quickly sheathed himself.

"There's no rush," she whispered as she took hold of him and gently guided him inside her. She wanted this to last, but he seemed eager to be inside and unwilling to wait. Her breath caught from his first slow thrust.

His hands wrapped around her shoulders to brace himself. A slight whimper crossed his lips as he entered. He gently rubbed the side of his face against hers. "You feel so good." His voice was husky whisper.

His morning beard stubble slightly rasped her skin but she welcomed the sharp sensation. The abrasion acted as a gentle reminder that even this slowly shared moment was painfully fleeting. She arched against him and focused on the lush feeling of his thickness stretching her and sliding easily inside. The breathtaking sensation was gorgeous. Her eyes shut and her head slowly rocked from side to side, luxuriating in the intense feeling. His hands slid up her arms and firmly gripped her wrists, pinning them to the mattress. The sensation of gentle compression on her wrists was soothing. It grounded her wilder, more-chaotic feelings and made it possible to simply be.

"This is so beautiful, Lily." He moved slowly inside her.

The sweet tone of his softly murmured, ecstatic sounds nearly broke her heart.

He pushed deeper and held himself there, panting softly. His face brushed against her hair. He barely moved, daring only to take the tiniest strokes. His muscles felt like a coiled spring.

Her fingertips gently smoothed the waves of his hair. Her legs wrapped around his hips as he moved slowly inside her. She let him press deeper and occupy her. Her body gently caressed him with every restrained movement he made. The breath hissed out of him from struggling to hold back.

"This is good," she whispered. He deserved encouragement and reward. She tilted her hips upward and stroked her body against him. He bumped against that tricky spot

inside her that made her crazy. She bit down on her lower lip and concentrated on feeling only that as he slowly slid against her. The movement was so gentle and restrained, her heart pounded. Part of her wanted to unleash herself and frantically grind against him to feel the pleasure-pain of thrusting against his cock, but he pinned her beneath him and insisted on moving slowly and tenderly. It was his will the tension and sensations build slowly. He seemed to be exactly in the same place she was. He too was caught on the edge of abandonment. The feelings became so intense they had to be tempered. She felt light-headed and realized she was holding her breath. He thrust slowly against her clit. She gasped. She'd never had a lover like David. *Don't open your eyes*, she quickly reminded herself. *Don't look at his face*.

His shoulders rounded. His muscles tightened. His body covered her in a tense arch. His mouth lowered to hers. He kissed her mouth, leaving her breathless. He plunged his tongue between her lips at the exact moment he pushed deeper inside her as far he could reach. She gasped from being so filled. Her body fluttered erratically, wanting to come at that moment. He held still, giving in to only the smallest movements. She sensed his body wanted to thrust wildly and come, but he held back.

She felt blissfully consumed and squeezed her thighs tightly around him, holding him captive in her grasp. Her body slowly rocked from side to side against him, making her blood rush. Pure excitement tinged with an edge of hypersensitivity built to an almost unbearable pitch.

He prodded that lushly padded spot deep inside that craved firm contact. He took short, shallow strokes, searching for it. The head of his cock gently bumped against her, making her squirm beneath him.

Sharp sensations rose inside her. He knew exactly what he was doing. He thrust slowly, sliding inside her and leaving her aware of only him. Her hips rolled upward, hoping to ride his momentum. The wetness, the friction, the feeling of being taken by a larger, stronger body was too much. She started to slip over the edge. She couldn't hold back. Her body coiled beneath him, ready to come in one easy rush.

"Open your eyes," he demanded.

She panted beneath him, ignoring his request for full contact with her. She kept her eyes closed. Her body spiraled beyond her control. Another squeezing thrust and she could come.

He straightened his arms and pulled out of her, leaving her empty.

She gasped. Her eyes flew open in rage. Her body clutched at him as he pulled away. This was utterly cruel. Why was he doing this to her?

His hand reached for her chin. His hand slightly trembled. He stared down at her forcing her to look at him.

She looked him directly in the eye. Her breath caught under the collapsing weight of her heart. She couldn't look away from his unusual shade of earthy green eyes that tilted slightly upward at the corners. He made her look at him, commit him to memory — as if she could ever forget him.

His body lunged forward. He sank deep inside her with a low groan.

She braced her hands against his back as his hips pumped furiously against her.

The word "Fuck!" roared out of his mouth. He pressed inside her, coming in a violent rush that made his entire body shake.

She pressed herself against him and stroked as hard and as fast as she could. Her body tensed and arched off the mattress. For an agonizing moment, she feared her climax would slip away from her but then a final deliberate thrust threw her over the edge. Her body curled forward and a relieved sob rattled out of her mouth. She wanted to smack him for pulling out of her and confronting her at that crucial moment but she wrapped her arms around him instead and held him tightly against her until he stopped shaking. "Damn you." Her hand lightly smacked his ass. "David, why did you do that?"

He rolled onto his side. He pulled the sheets around them. He lay quietly for a couple of moments, as if weighting his thoughts. His expression was a bit sheepish. "Can I ask you something personal?"

She sensed what he wanted to ask. She held a quieting finger to his lips. "It would be better if you didn't." He wasn't playing fair. He had a ticket to leave. The intensity of shared emotion was unsettling. They had just met and somehow fallen into mutual insanity. She turned away from him.

He moved closer. His warm body spooned her from the back. He pulled her against him and held her to his chest.

She felt his heart pounding. It was much too warm for close contact. "David, I'm flying home on Monday."

"I know." His arms locked around her. His face nuzzled against the back of her neck. He didn't say anything more. The air was still. It had not cooled much during the night and now the morning sun was busy reheating it. It was uncomfortable to lie skin to skin with a big, warm body, but he refused to let go of her. After half an hour, she felt his hands relax and she knew he had fallen asleep. She carefully moved away from him and stretched out on her back. She found a cool spot in the sheets and fell asleep.

* * * * *

She awoke to the smell of frying ham. It was the very familiar scent of salty, canned ham, which she hadn't smelled since she had lived at home with her parents. Periodically her mother would cycle the emergency canned goods. Tiny rectangular cans of juicy, pink ham were a staple during hurricane season. Almost anything salty and fried was delicious, but canned ham had a dubious place in her heart. During the most threatening storms, after tragedy had passed, after the power went out, long after the food in the refrigerator was beyond safe consideration—canned ham was there to comfort the soul and save the day.

She blinked the grit from her eyes. Her eyes simply did not want to open. The sun was high in the afternoon sky. The day was hot. She felt the steamy air flowing through the screened windows and shifted her weight uneasily on the mattress. She heard heavy footsteps creaking on the kitchen floor. For a moment she wished she were back in her hotel room, alone.

She kicked the rumpled sheets aside and grabbed the plaid work-shirt that had been left next to the bed. She wrapped the shirt around her and darted toward the shower. She saw David had broken into an emergency kit and left toothpaste, a new toothbrush and a few other toiletries on the edge of the sink. The water in the shower was scalding hot. It had to be diluted with lots of cool water. She stood under the trickle of water, washing the sand from her eyes. The shower was refreshing and sobering. She needed to pull herself together and keep her wits about her. Her time with David was getting too uncomfortably...comfortable. She decided that if he asked her to stay, she would politely decline and ask to be taken back to her hotel.

That seemed to be the only plan that made sense. She had gone temporarily insane with a stranger and now she had to gracefully back away from him before anyone got hurt. When she got out of the shower, she brushed her teeth and tried to run a comb through her hair. The humidity had sent it spiraling into dense ringlets.

His deep voice echoed from the kitchen. "Lily, are you up?"

"I'm awake," she shouted around the corner as she buttoned the plaid shirt nearly to the collar. "I need to get back to my hotel."

"I'll gladly take you, but I was hoping you could stay and let me show you a bit of the bayou." His voice sounded so hopeful.

Her heart leapt. He wanted her and she silently admitted to wanting a little more of him, though she knew it was dangerous to think this way. She wondered if it was more foolish to leave or stay? Maybe she should stay? Who was it hurting? *Probably herself.*

He called her into kitchen. "Sit down and have breakfast with me."

She walked toward the kitchen. She would have to be firm and hold her ground. This was never meant to be more than a casual meeting for mutual benefit. It would be hard enough to trust any man with her heart, let alone a younger, gorgeous man who was ready to travel the world. David was the ultimate recipe for heartbreak.

He was busy frying perfectly rectangular pieces of ham in a black iron pan when she walked into the kitchen. He stood next to the stove, wearing only a ragged pair of jeans. He looked up at her with sparkling eyes. His smile was broad and radiated warmth. A lock of dark hair fell in front of his eyes, making him look slightly roguish. He brushed it aside. His face glowed in the kitchen sunlight.

She silently stared. *Love enters through the eyes. It pours into one's vision like a single inescapable thought. The eyes describe to the brain what it is seeing. The brain is slow to believe it. It hurries to inform the heart of its carelessness. The heart says, "No, that can't be. We've made a mistake, that's not what we're looking for. We're fragile and we can't afford any more*

mistakes – please look again. The eyes look again and see he is still glowing, happy and smiling. He's everything we've ever wished for in a man. It's too late...

He leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Good morning, beautiful."

Her breath caught. She was so stunned she couldn't speak. Her heart raced. *How had this happened?* She slowly sat down at the tiny kitchen table. He had already poured coffee for her. A dish filled with canned peaches and a tin of evaporated milk sat in the middle of the table. She stared longingly at the coffee, wondering if she dared to pick up the mug, would her trembling hands slosh it all over the table? She knew she needed coffee to cope with this unplanned crisis and cautiously reached for the mug with both hands.

He carried a pan of fried ham to the table. "My mama calls fried ham and canned peaches a 'disaster breakfast'."

She took a deep breath and slightly nodded her head. This was a certified disaster. She had come to New Orleans for one thing and gotten another. Damn Marion and her clever solutions. She couldn't stop watching his beautiful hands as he divided the peaches between two plates. She slowly poured a trickle of evaporated milk into her coffee with the calculated movements of a robot.

He put a slice of ham on her plate. "What's waiting for you back in Los Angeles?"

She had nothing waiting for her but her job, and she had no idea how much longer that would last. If they fired her she would thank them. There were few friends, no lovers, not even a pet. After the divorce, she had pared her life down to the bare necessities. "I have a few important things going on."

"I'm really grateful to have that ticket to Africa but now I wish I wasn't leaving."

She speared a peach halve with her fork. "You should go – stay as long as you can. See as much as you can. This is your opportunity to leave home and do something special. When you take me back to the hotel, I'd like to pay you something. Use it toward your trip."

He set his fork down and scowled. "Lily, I don't need money from you."

"You might." Her voice sounded thin as if it might crack, "Take the money."

He stood his ground. "Lily, I know what you're up to. I'm not going to let you dismiss me."

Whoops! She was caught.

He leaned forward on his elbows. "I said yes to Marion because I wanted to meet you. I thought it would be fun. I couldn't resist the idea of getting time alone with you and getting your ear on the business. I wanted to ask you to narrate my documentary because any professional name attached to a project is better than none. And yes, I did want to show you off to my friends, brag a little bit and fuck you senseless. If you had known all that in advance, would you have gotten on a plane and flown across the country to meet me?"

She shook her head "no".

"I didn't think so. At least we're being honest now. Marion certainly believes in you, but her description didn't do you justice. With all her cautions about what I shouldn't mention in front of you I was expecting a withdrawn, self-centered woman who didn't know what she wanted. You're so much more complicated and capable than that. Frankly, I'm pleasantly surprised. We have such a short time together, don't you think it would be more constructive to talk about what's possible?"

She didn't want to talk about it. He was scaring her. This risk was way more than she bargained for. She pretended to be fascinated by her slice of ham as she bit into it. "This is so good."

He glowered. "You really like ham?"

"I love ham." She glanced at the steaming coffee mug.

"Do you have feelings for me? Do you care about what's starting to happen between us?"

"What's happening between us?" She couldn't bear to look at his face and see the uncomfortable truth. Without intending to do it, their lives had tangled. Her attention remained focused on the mug. She knew if she looked at him he would see everything in her eyes. He would see her confusion and worry. "David, I came to NOLA to let the good times roll! You gotta get your mind right. You're leaving on a long trip and I'm goin' home on Monday."

He dug into his pile of ham. "I know. You keep saying it." He paused with his loaded fork poised in the air. "After breakfast, I'm gonna take you back to your hotel."

The tension rose between them. She exhaled. "Do you want to stay with me tonight at the Hotel Toulouse?"

"No."

"What do you mean 'no'?" Her brow arched.

"I mean no. I won't hang around, waiting for you to push me away."

"Honey, I haven't even known you twenty-four hours. You're just being ridiculous." Her heart hammered in her chest. She was the one who was ridiculous. "David, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. Last night we talked about slowing down a bit and I think it's a good idea."

He put his fork down. His eyes burned with hurt. He stood and stepped away from the table. "Finish eating and I'll drive you back to the hotel."

After he left the kitchen, she felt an immense sense of emptiness wash over her. She didn't want to eat. She gulped her coffee. If a man had treated her the way she had just treated David she would think he was a selfish jerk. She had enjoyed every minute with him and even caught a glimpse of love. Now she wanted to pretend it hadn't happened because she wasn't in control and she was looking out for her own fragile feelings. She was a total coward. The least she could do was clean up the kitchen. She scraped the uneaten peaches into a compost bucket. The golden peaches appeared sunny and

happy. It seemed like such a waste. She took her time washing and drying the dishes before walking onto the screened porch where he sat, brooding.

He glanced up from beneath heavy black brows.

She sat beside him and looked out on the bayou. In daylight, it didn't appear to be so forbidding or as magical. A mysterious chevron-shaped ripple traveled across the smooth surface of the water. The source of the disturbance remained unseen.

She gently set her hand on his thigh.

He ignored her hand for a moment before relenting and twining his fingers through hers. He gave her hand a light squeeze. They sat quietly on the porch, holding hands.

She turned toward him. "David, you've got a big project ahead of you. You'll have to give it your full attention to bring it to life. You're going to be traveling for months, maybe longer and that's a wonderful thing for someone who's eager to see the world. Just enjoy it. You don't know where your future will take you. You need your freedom. I promised to work with you on your documentary and I will. I meant it when I offered to help you financially. Let me honor that promise. I want to be your producer. I believe in your project. You're going to be broke. Why don't you let me help you?"

He stared toward the bayou. His gaze squinted in the bright sunlight. "I laid awake last night, feeling ashamed that I don't have anything to offer a woman like you."

"That's not true."

"I've got some fire. I've got some pride. I'm not going to be broke forever."

She recognized the attitude. It mirrored her own. She knew how it felt to be dismissed by others. She had fought it for years. Everyone was eager to see a former beauty queen fail. She had been the butt of many harsh jokes. She picked up his hand, brought his fingertips to her lips and gently kissed them. "I'm sure you'll do well. Everything could change tomorrow. I don't want to get hurt. You don't want to get hurt. We don't know what's coming so let's forget about tomorrow."

His chin dipped to his chest. "I've been way out of line, haven't I?" He shifted uneasily on the bench.

She felt guilty. He hadn't been out of line at all to ask where he stood with her, especially after the depth of emotion ricocheting between them. Her heart felt lost and she wished something decisive would happen that would give her a clue about which way to turn. She wondered if David could possibly be feeling all the same things she was? The thought was frightening. Can love happen that fast? What if it's not love? In their case, would love be a blessing or a curse? How could this work? Lives would change. Her heart had opened to him and she was desperately trying to talk herself out of it. How dishonest was that? She had seen a glimpse of his splendor and she was treating him casually because he was talented, sexy and smart, and she knew he wasn't for keeps. Every hour she spent with him made her want him more and every hour they spent together moved them closer to the big goodbye. Was she being a coward to not take this as far as it could go? Would she always wonder what it would have been like

had she stayed the last day? "I don't really want to go back to the hotel alone. I'd rather spend the day with you."

Before she could finish saying the words, his arms flew around her, trapping her against his chest. He rocked her gently against him, squeezing her shoulders. He seemed so eager to hang on to her. His actions told her everything she needed to know. She needed to be very careful with his feelings. He wasn't nearly as guarded as she was. On him, everything was raw and open for display.

She let him hold her. She closed her eyes and savored the feeling. How long had it been since she had simply held on to another for the joy of it? It had been a long time. Her fingers cautiously crept across his back and held on to him.

His hand affectionately smoothed her hair. He gazed into her eyes. "Would it be selfish to ask for all of today? Can this be my day?"

She looked at his slightly sad expression. Was she mad to even consider depriving herself of his company? "This can be your day." She kissed his lips.

His face lit. His every thought and emotion readily crossed his expressive face. There was little guesswork on her part to ascertain his true feelings or mood. All was evident.

His brows sank. "Lily..."

"What?"

"When do you have to be at the airport tomorrow?"

"About two o'clock."

He faintly whistled. "That's not much time."

"Think quality." She climbed onto his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. It was a disorienting perspective. His muscular body felt solid and safe, but his manner was steeped in innocence. His face tilted upward, completely surrendering to her. She knew he would willingly allow her to pass sentence on him. How brave he was. She kissed his mouth, wanting to forget about how short their time was. Today was his day. Her fingers brushed the dark waves of hair from his forehead. His lips were warm and soft. She could hurt him, lie to him, dismiss him or take him to heart. *Dear god, I want him. Can I please keep him?*

She leaned forward. The tips of her lashes lightly grazed his with a butterfly kiss. His eyelids fluttered from the unexpected touch. He did have incredible lashes—thick, black awnings shading smoldering eyes. His eyes certainly didn't look innocent.

She wanted to distract herself. She didn't want to think about tomorrow and parting ways. She reached for the steel snap on his jeans. The metallic snap popped open. Her fingernail scraped at his zipper. She should make love to him and live in the moment. The moment was all that was offered.

He glanced up at her with a wide-open look that clearly communicated he was at her disposal. If she wanted to use him or love him, he was willingly available. His legs parted as she tugged the zipper down.

He helped her with the zipper. He pulled himself free of his pants. He rose above his rumpled jeans, long and thick. His lip curled at the edge. His eyes had completely lost any look of innocence and now glittered with the lustful gaze of a satyr.

She slid from his lap and settled between his knees. She knelt in front of him and wrapped her hand around the smooth shaft.

He looked at her, poised in front of him. His old plaid shirt hung from her shoulders. He tugged it a lower and rubbed his palm across her bare arm. His fingers brushed against her hair and tucked a stray ringlet behind her ear. "I want to watch your face," he whispered. He acted as if his dream girl were kneeling in front of him and he didn't want to miss a single detail.

She pulled her hair back and twisted the curls in a loose knot. She leaned forward and kissed the smooth head of his cock. His skin felt hot against her lips. She stroked the flat underside of his cock with her thumb and gazed up at him.

His body shifted on the bench. His hips thrust upward and his flesh darkened and filled. He was so sensitive, so beautifully formed. His sort of maleness was made for adoration. She pressed closer, drawing her tongue from base to tip in one long, slow stroke.

His hips shifted as he moaned softly.

She lovingly kissed the head exploring him with soft, wet lips. Her mouth registered his warm, silky texture. Her tongue teased the tiny dent at the crown. A drop of saltiness was offered. He pressed upward and slid past the tight ring of her lips. Her lips delivered a hot, hugging squeeze. The shaft warmed and filled between her lips. He was almost too thick to comfortably hold. She wrapped her hand around the base of the shaft to give him more of the gripping friction he needed. She drew him deeper into her mouth and sucked hard, flicking her tongue back and forth against him as her face gently rocked from side to side.

He closed his eyes and leaned against the wall.

She wanted to get as close as possible. He felt so good and smelled so enticing she couldn't get close enough. She loved his excited, tangy scent. Her body wedged between his legs. Her breasts brushed against his thighs. Her face sank downward and deeply inhaled his dark scent. A man's scent was so decisive. The wrong scent was the wrong man. His scent was clear and distinct. Scent was like an unspoken secret passed between lovers and she would long remember this shared secret.

Her fingernails gently stroked the back of his thighs. His skin pebbled from her wispy touch. She drew him deeper into her mouth. Her tongue swirled around the head, teasing him with wet kisses while he gently squeezed her body between his knees.

He leaned forward to slide his jeans all the way down his legs and kicked them aside. His thighs splayed wide. Now she could reach all of him. His back arched, his hips lifted and his cock jutted into the air. His gesture openly begged her to take him.

The thought crossed her mind—time is short, make him happy. He made her happy. He was a dream. There was nothing missing from this man. He was forthright in his actions and words, and she was a sneaky thief. She had come to steal a piece of him and build up her confidence. She had wanted to use him, pay him and disappear. She intended to hold him at arm's length, steal the gift and run away. This was exactly the kind of behavior she despised in men. *Am I really that much of a coward?*

His hands gently stroked the sides of her face and pushed deeper into her mouth. He took a couple of tentative strokes within the tight ring of her lips.

She let him slide to the back of her throat. She wanted to do it for him. He completely filled her. For a moment she felt as if she couldn't breathe. Her eyes teared. Her lips closed around him in a tight, wet caress. Her hands lovingly massaged his balls in her palm. His hips rocked. Another drop of salty liquid crossed her tongue.

"Lily, you look so beautiful." His words faltered as he tipped his head back.

Her lips caressed him. She couldn't help but think of his tongue stroking her, he had been so eager to please her. Her hand slid up and down the shaft as her tongue swirled around the crown. He was slick in her hands. She glanced up at him, envying his unself-conscious attitude and his trust.

He sensed she was watching him. His eyes opened slightly, looking a bit unfocused and dreamy, completely lost in the moment.

Could she trust him? How honest could she be with him? She wanted to go with him to that same place of trust. She wanted to forget past disappointments and rewrite fresh rules. She could choose to be trusting. She could choose to be happy that choice was allowed.

She let him slip from her lips with a wet kiss. His slick shaft glistened in front of her.

He groaned from the sudden loss of contact.

She gracefully rose and climbed onto his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. His eyes were wide with expectation. She squeezed the sides of his waist between her thighs. The hard wooden bench punished her knees but she didn't care. She settled across his lap, which gave her a front-row seat to the smoky expression in his eyes. She brushed her lips against mouth.

He sighed. His gaze smoldered. His hands reached down to cup her bottom and pull her securely against him.

Her hands stroked her thighs and tugged the shirt higher exposing more smooth leg. She wore nothing beneath the shirt. The humid air made her skin slightly slick. She rubbed her body against him, craving contact. She wanted to blur the boundary between them. She needed him inside her and she wasn't willing to wait. She closed her eyes and thought about him fucking her. It was the only thought her body understood. She lowered her body onto the head of his cock and let it part the wet lips of her pussy. She poised her hips above him, ready to thrust downward.

"Stop." His hands gently pushed her back.

Her eyes flew open in surprise. She froze. What was she doing? What was she thinking? Was she insane?

"I don't have one with me," he whispered. "I'll get one off the nightstand." He started to lift her off his lap.

Her heart pounded. Why had she done that? What was wrong with her? She was playing with fire. "Not yet." She took hold of his hands and guided them inside the shirt. His hands felt rough and very warm beneath the borrowed shirt.

"This plaid shirt never looked so good." His eyes lit. His hands skimmed across her naked curves and emerged to unbutton the shirt and push the fabric aside. He stared at the soft swell of her breasts. His hands glided across her breasts and gently pressed them together. He leaned forward to lovingly kiss them both.

His breath against her skin thrilled her. She gently lifted a breast and offered a dark nipple to his lips. He took it. She melted against the gentle pressure of a tugging kiss. His tongue swirled around her nipple and teased the tip. His head moved to her other breast and lovingly kissed that one. His warm mouth traveled back and forth between her nipples, sucking on both until her breasts felt tight and full. She looked down at his mouth pressed to her breast. The sight was heartrending. Softer feelings flooded to the surface. An alarm bell rang in her heart. Fucking was okay but not softer exchanges. Soft gestures brought out the truth. She wanted to ride him rough with her eyes closed and forget about tomorrow. She would even have welcomed a moment of teasing pain. She couldn't bear to look at David the beautiful, David the beloved and think of losing him. She straddled his naked cock and almost allowed the head to slide inside.

His jaw tensed. His eyes flew open. He pushed back. "Be careful. I don't have any protection on."

"Sorry." She leapt off his lap. "I wasn't thinking." She sounded completely unconvincing. *Damn, I've tried to do it twice.*

He eyed her slyly. "Feeling daring?" He rose from the bench and kicked his jeans across the porch. His impressive cock jutted forward. "Okay dare-devil, walk over to the porch railing and wait there."

She scoffed at the mock scolding but obediently walked over to the rail with her heart pounding. Deep down, she knew she needed to be called on her nonsense and put in her place.

"Keep your hands on the rail and do not button that damn shirt. Stand perfectly still. I'll be back in minute." He turned around and walked indoors.

Her lips curled. She needed this. She enjoyed watching his muscular butt as he walked away. Another rough fuck would be nice. It certainly suited her mood. She leaned across the wooden railing and squinted into the bright afternoon light reflecting off the water. She felt guilty, thrilled and confused all at the same time.

He reemerged a minute later, holding a bottle of lubricant and a handful of condoms.

A nervous smile burst across her face. "Feeling ambitious?" She tried to sound flirty but she just sounded scared.

His eyes leveled at her. "Today is my day, isn't it?"

Her throat tensed. "Yes."

"I can't think of anything nicer than taking your beautiful ass in the sunlight."

She gasped.

His wicked grin broadened. "I love your ass. I'll hate myself if your ass goes home unfucked." He pointed the bottle of lubricant at her. "I think I'll bend your ass over the rail and give you a hard, fast fuck."

"Whoa!" Nervous laughter bubbled out her mouth. *The man was a mind reader.*

His expression gentled. "Are you okay with that? You do like it, don't you?"

"Of course," she lied. She'd had anal before but she didn't enjoy it at all. Jimmy was clumsy, what had been meant to be a special treat always became a prolonged ordeal.

"I can see by your expression that I'm going to have to win hearts and minds over to anal."

She wrapped the plaid shirt protectively around her.

"No, no, no," he gently admonished her for clutching the shirt closed. "The shirt stays open or off, and your hands stay on the railing."

His confident command made her shiver. She faced him as she braced her hands against the railing and let the shirt fall open.

"Better." He nodded. "Now turn around, face the bayou and lean over the rail."

The breath whistled out of her as she turned around and pressed her hips against the railing. She felt giddy with excitement and fear. What the hell had she agreed to?

He stood behind her and stripped the shirt from her back. He tossed the shirt on the planks. He stood so close, the hair on his legs prickled the back of her thighs.

The heat of the afternoon sun washed over her bare skin. She was naked and exposed to the world. Her heart raced. Her eyes glanced longingly at the crumpled shirt near her feet.

"Forget it." His foot kicked the shirt beyond reach.

She clutched onto the porch rail, slightly trembling. She looked out on the water. The bayou looked deceptively peaceful except for something large splashing beneath the dock. What the hell was splashing under the dock? Whatever it was, it was big and she hoped it stayed down there.

He took hold of her hips, lifting them higher. "Look."

She glanced over her shoulder to see what he wanted her to look at.

His fist rolled the condom down the length of his shaft. The head of his cock had flushed a deep plum and hovered high in the air between them. He snapped open the plastic cap of the lubricant bottle and drizzled what looked like an excessive amount into his palm. He drenched his cock with it all the way to his balls. He glistened in the

sunlight. He generously oiled his thumb and stroked it between the cleft of her ass. He pressed it against her, slowly circling the slick tip around the tight ring. His touch was gentle but firm. His breathing deepened. "I'm really going to enjoy this." His husky whisper was seemingly directed at no one but himself.

Her body shuddered and leaned over the railing. The feeling of an oiled thumb circling her ass was exquisitely intimate and more exciting than she imagined. His thumb traveled in unhurried circles that made nerve endings tingle in the soles of her feet. Her thoughts wandered toward the night before when his mouth had intimately explored her and left her thrilled. She had thought it was an exciting accident when his mouth had brushed against her soapy-clean ass and his tongue had teased her but now she wondered...

"I could play with your beautiful ass all day. Push out." His voice was stern. "This is the fun part."

She took a deep breath and pushed out.

His thumb slowly but steadily sank into her. At the first breach, the stretch burned intensely. She fought the impulse to pull away.

He placed a calming hand on her shoulder. "Relax, let me take you." His thumb sank into her all the way. "Trust me. Those same nerve endings will be singing a different song in a minute." His thumb pumped slowly inside her. "I wish you could feel how hot you are inside. It's unbelievable."

She gulped a deep breath. Hotter than the sun beating down on this porch? Hotter than the burn in her ass? Her face blushed hot. She hung her head and moaned. The first burning moment of stretching gave way to an aching but easily bearable throb. She whimpered, too afraid to move and have the situation change.

He arched over her. He was so much taller. She strained upward on tiptoes, trying to rise to groin level and accommodate him. For a moment she feared she might topple over the rail.

"I've got you," he whispered gently. His hands clasped her hips. He rubbed his cock against her bare ass, stroking himself across her skin. Low, pleased sounds rose from deep in his chest. His fingers spread across her hips, clutching her against him. He aimed the slippery head of his cock at her tight ring of muscle. He firmly nudged the head against her opening, pressing downward.

She panted nervously.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Push against me."

She took a deep breath and pushed against him so firmly he sank halfway inside her on the first thrust. "Oh!" She gasped more from surprise than pain but it did ache in a searing, high-pitched way.

His entire body tensed and went still. "Good girl," he panted. "That's the hardest part."

She leaned against the railing, taking short, shallow breaths. The burning was incredible. It started slow and traveled up her spine in an intense crescendo. For a moment, she wanted to bolt away from him and end the discomfort, but she forced herself to stay with it. She whimpered softly, hoping he'd show mercy or even change his mind. She gulped a deep breath and a moment later her muscles relaxed and accepted him.

"The first stroke hurts," he spoke softly, and gently patted the sides of her hips. "It gets better."

She gripped the railing and spread her feet farther apart. She had to will herself to breathe.

He rose on his toes and slowly plunged downward. The second stroke took him all the way in.

The burn returned. She gasped. Her fingernails dug into wooden railing.

"Baby, you feel so good." He slowly pulled out and stroked downward. "You have such a hot, tight ass."

Her arms braced against the railing as he took the next deep stroke. He was precise in his movements and careful not to go too fast. He slowly slid inside her until he sank up to his balls. They gently bounced against her. She rose on tiptoe. At this angle, it felt as if his body were plastered against her. The contact was complete. She now understood why he had oiled everything. The feeling was one of extreme intimacy. She relaxed against his slow stroke, realizing how much her body wanted this. All feelings of pain fled. His stroke now warmed and excited her. She thrust her hips back, wanting to feel all of him sliding against her. Her hips rocked gently as she moaned softly.

He wrapped his arms around her. "Shush," he calmed her. "Slow down." He froze, refusing to move too fast and risk hurting her. He held her still beneath him. "Let me take my time."

She held her breath and waited.

He pulled all the way out just so he could have the pleasure of sinking all the way back in. The breath rushed out of him as he pushed the head past her opening and slowly pulsed in and out.

The penetration was welcome. An excited heat built inside her. Her hands rested on the railing. Her eyes fluttered closed. She was ready for a harsher stroke and ready to feel him move freely. This was good.

He took her with firm, slow thrusts with a distinct emphasis on the down stroke. It was as if he were saying with his actions, *I'm the man and your ass is mine*. She responded to this silent but unmistakable signal on a primal level. He teased her with a couple of short strokes that did not deliver the same voluptuous impact of a full, deep stroke with a ball slap at the end. She found herself craving the deeper strokes for the intense stimulation they provided. "More," she pleaded.

He took her harder and faster. She was more than ready for it. She balanced on her tiptoes, holding on tightly to the rail. Her breasts bounced with each thrust. She glanced over her shoulder at his enraptured face. "Fuck me," she encouraged him.

He pulled her toward him and sank into her. His hips made contact with her ass. The railing creaked from the impact. His hands clamped on to her hips so he wouldn't lose his aim. He stayed inside her, not daring to pull out all the way at this speed. He held her close as his hips pumped faster. His breath came in short, rapid gulps.

She simply surrendered to his pleasure. Today she belonged to him. This was his day. The thought thrilled her. She knew he could be as tender or as fierce as he pleased. He was masterful with both and she was open to all options.

He arched over her, wrapping his arms around her waist. He kissed her shoulder and whispered, "Touch yourself."

She exhaled a nervous breath. This was doubly naughty. He was asking her to get herself off while he fucked her ass outdoors in the wide open. She couldn't believe she was actually doing it but she was. Her fingertips dipped between her thighs, stroking her clit in slippery circles as his body pushed deep inside her. Her body hummed from the intense stimulation, front and back. Her slick fingers glided back and forth against her clit, exciting her to a desperate pitch. In an uncharacteristically uninhibited moment, she rubbed her knuckle against her clit and started to come. A tremor passed through her body. Her hips rose higher in the air. She gritted her teeth, shocked at the intense rush of sensation that flooded through her. Her thighs shook as the blood rushed to her clit. She panted for breath and doubled forward onto the railing as he pounded behind her. The release came in waves of pleasure that shut down her thinking. She felt as if she could float over the railing. Her lips silently parted. She literally couldn't think, let alone speak, or she would have warned him she was about to fall down. Her calves trembled from standing on tiptoe. She let herself collapse onto the porch rail. *Wow, that was good.*

She knew he watched her melt over the rail and braced his hands against her. "Hold on," he rasped. His voice told her he needed to take her hard. He pulled her trembling body toward him and unleashed himself. He came with a loud, anguished groan. His cock pushed deep inside her and held still. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her hips. His legs shook and he took a long time coming.

She closed her eyes as his hands released her hips and gently stroked her skin. She wanted him to stay inside her for a moment and not rush away. She pushed back against him and slightly wagged her hips as a silent invitation to stay. Her body continued to clench him in fitful flutters, trying to eke out every last ripple of pleasure. Her skin was slick with perspiration. The sun beat down on her back. A strand of hair clung to her damp forehead.

His chest heaved as he struggled to catch his breath. For a minute, he simply leaned against her, panting. His hands roved over her back, gently stroking her skin. He too seemed incapable of speech. He finally pulled free, leaving her empty. He picked up the shirt and handed it back to her.

She slipped her arms into the shirtsleeves. She smoothed the rumpled shirt with her palm.

He wrapped his arms around her in a crushing hug, cradling her against his chest. She felt clothed and protected from the world by his strong arms. His lips gently kissed the top of her head. His every action was steeped in affection. She wondered how had she survived for so long without physical love?

He smiled down on her. "Let's go inside and rinse off before someone comes along."

Her breath caught. The shack felt so remote, so removed from the world, she had ignored the real possibility someone else might enter their private Eden. It was Sunday afternoon and they risked being seen by anglers, bird watchers or family members dropping by to say hello. She was immensely grateful the thought had not occurred to her earlier. She grabbed his hand and hurried inside the shack.

Chapter Six

The interior of the shack seemed cool and dark in contrast to the sunlit porch. They quickly showered the lubricant and salt from their skin.

He pulled his jeans over damp skin and strolled toward the kitchen. He called to her over his shoulder. "I'm hungry. Was there anything left over from breakfast?"

She sat on the edge of the bed, wrapped in a towel. The air mattress squeaked under her shifting weight. "I scraped everything away since I thought we were leaving."

He turned around to look at her. "Do you still want to stay?"

She smiled at him. "Yes."

A proud grin lit his face. "Good. I want to keep you a little longer. Why don't we run out and pick up something for supper?"

She nodded her head. Something to eat sounded good but she didn't want to get dressed and risk embarrassing looks or conversation at a country store. "I'll wait here."

He paused. "Are you afraid to be seen with me?" He smiled as he spoke but his eyes were intensely direct.

"No. I'm just feeling lazy." She drew her knees protectively toward her chest.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with me being a poor boy who drives an old car? I'm sure you're used to much better."

"I like your car and that's all I have to say on the matter." She hugged her knees tightly against her chest and slightly rocked side to side to comfort herself.

His gaze hardened. He looked worried. He finished dressing and gave her a kiss before heading out the door. "Any requests?"

"Whatever you find will be fine." She wasn't interested in food at that moment. She desperately wanted to be alone and think.

He quietly left the shack. The sedan crunched down the shell driveway.

After he drove away, she felt utterly alone. She walked into the living room and sat across from Rupert. The old, stuffed gator looked as if he were smiling at her, perhaps even mocking her. Her eyes glanced around the room. What should she do with herself? She rifled through some musty books on a shelf. There was nothing interesting to read. This wasn't her home, though it certainly felt homey. She focused on the hand-crank radio that lay trapped beneath Rupert's scaly feet. She walked over to the radio and carefully slid the radio free of Rupert's grasp. She cranked the handle for thirty seconds and searched for a clear radio station. She stopped when she heard a lustrous and familiar male voice singing a beautiful song that was deeply entrenched in her

childhood. Hearing this song brought long forgotten memories flooding back. It made her think of hot, lazy summers in New Orleans. Millions of other people had heard and loved this song, yet it was uniquely hers. It anchored her heart to a well-kept suburban home with sprinklers on the front lawn and a girlish pink bedroom with a canopy bed full of stuffed animals. At the time, she had named and loved every one of those stuffed toys and she knew she could recite each of those names now if she had to.

She continued to snoop around the shack. How else did the La Beau family entertain themselves? She found decks of cards, board games and bongos. She currently wasn't in the mood to avail herself on any of these entertainments.

She strolled back into the bedroom and stared at the mosquito net wound above the bed. The room looked so unassuming in daylight. It had been such a hot spot of mixed emotions a few hours ago. She wondered what would happen after she spent a second night in this bed, would she become anchored to the spot and unwilling to leave? It was a frightening prospect. David was such a good man. Was there a way to make him part of her life without robbing him of his future? She wondered.

She hunted for her purse and checked her phone messages. She flipped the phone open. There were five messages from Marion. She listened to them all.

"Lily, this is Marion. Call me when you get in."

"Lily, it's Marion. I'm just checking in with you."

"Lily, it's Marion. Call me and let me know if everything's okay."

"Lily, it's Marion. Where are you? The hotel said you never came back from your date. I'm worried. Don't leave me hanging."

"Lily, are you all right? It's been almost twenty-four hours. You are officially a missing person. If I don't hear from you soon, I'm calling the New Orleans's police department."

She quickly called Marion.

Marion picked up the phone. "I was getting worried about you. Is everything all right?"

She could hear Marion's kids squealing in the background. "Everything's fine, how are you?"

"It's horrible!" Marion hissed. "The kids are out of control." She shouted at her oldest son, "Michael don't wipe pudding on the seat cushions!"

Lily held the phone away from her ear. "Should I call back later? You sound busy."

Marion huffed. "I don't even want to deal with it. This was supposed to be a fun-filled three-day weekend for me too and I don't see that happening. I'm going to let Stephen clean up after these kids. Did you meet David?"

She whispered even though she was alone. "I did, thank you. You were right."

"Lucky girl. I told you so. Isn't he dreamy? Do you see why I had to trick you into meeting him?"

"Marion, I wasn't too happy about that. That was damn awkward for me and David."

"Lily, I had complete faith that you could gracefully glide past your wrong idea and move forward to the next logical step."

She scoffed, "It wasn't graceful. I can assure you."

"But you met and connected with David, right?"

She drew a deep breath. "Yes, he's perfect."

"Am I forgiven?"

She laughed, "You're forgiven."

"Where are you?"

"I'm not at the hotel. I'm somewhere on bayou La Fourche, in David's cabin."

"Dear lord, why are you wasting your time talking to me. Hang up the phone."

"He's not here. David stepped out to get some groceries so he can cook supper."

"That gorgeous man is going to cook for you? I'm so envious I can't stand it. Stephen! Get some wet wipes and clean up your son!"

"Marion, I better let you go. I'll call tomorrow. I just wanted you to know everything's fine. Don't worry about me, worry about your seat cushions. You're a schemer but I love you, girl."

"Wait, Lily. I want to tell you first. I'm quitting Channel Three. I hate the schedule. I want to see my family during normal hours. My kids are growing up without me and when I'm home, I'm so tired or else I don't know where I fit in. I need a change. It's time for someone else to work the night shift."

She felt as if she had been kicked in the chest. "Marion, it's absolutely the right thing for you to do."

"We'll talk about this when you go back. Bye, sweetie." Marion hurried off the phone to cope with her kids.

She closed her phone just as she heard the sedan rolling up the driveway. He was back. A shiver ran up her spine. What was she doing with him?

"Lily!" he called from the porch. "Come out here."

She hurried onto the porch to see what he wanted.

He pointed above the treetops to a chevron of birds descending onto the bayou. "The pelicans are back. They're good luck." He smiled when he saw that she was still wearing his old work-shirt and nothing else. "Lazy girl. I'm glad you didn't waste your time getting dressed."

She hadn't even considered it. "It's too hot for clothes."

"I agree." The humidity made his wavy hair almost curly. He set the grocery bags down on the porch and stripped off his shirt. "If you don't have to get dressed, I shouldn't have to wear clothes either."

She grinned as she stepped behind him. Now she could enjoy looking at his muscular wedge of a back. She hoped the grocery bags were heavy so she could watch his muscles tense and ripple when he picked them up. "Can I give you a hand?" She half-heartedly offered her help.

He gallantly waved her away. "I'll get those bags, they weigh a ton." He stooped down to pick up the bags.

She watched enthusiastically as he lifted. She heard canned goods shift. Her lips twisted in a suppressed smile. The bags were nice and heavy. She took an appreciative look at him. She noticed his perfect skin, with its smooth, deep coloring. His torso was lean but there was not a bone showing. His back muscles flexed when he picked up a bag filled with bottled waters. He carried the bags into the kitchen. She followed behind him, gleefully watching the show.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "I thought we'd have a crawfish boil. I'll bet you can't get that in Los Angeles."

No, she couldn't. She silently admitted there was a lot here she couldn't get in Los Angeles.

He started to put the groceries away. He replaced the bottled water, canned ham, canned peaches, coffee and the evaporated milk they had used. The cupboards were refilled and ready for a future "disaster breakfast".

He unloaded a large bag of crawfish wrapped in newspaper. The pile of crawfish looked mountainous on the tiny kitchen table. "I've gotta sort through them. Some of those fellas have already checked out." He put a six-pack of beer in the refrigerator. "This isn't even close to being cold."

He sorted a few cans into a separate bag. "I need to run these groceries over to an elderly neighbor of ours. Do you want come with me? It will just take a few minutes."

"Sure." She said yes without thinking. It looked as if she would be getting dressed after all. She walked into the bedroom to look for her skirt and blouse. She didn't want to put them on but she dressed anyway. The clothes clung to her in the afternoon heat. The silky emerald-green blouse looked overly dressy for a casual bayou visit.

"We won't be long," he shouted from the kitchen. "Somebody's got to check up on Old Muddy. He's ninety-four years old, lives alone. He's half blind."

Her lip curled. *Sounds wonderful.* What had she gotten herself into?

"Muddy claims he's been married six times. I don't know if he outlived his wives or just forgot where they lived and married new ones along the way." He carried Muddy's groceries out to the car.

She followed cautiously behind him. Her sling-back high heels sank into the crushed clamshells.

He opened both car doors for her. "Do you want to ride in the front or the back?" His eyes glittered with mischief.

"I'll ride in front." She slid into the passenger's side of the sedan. The upholstery was hot to the touch.

He closed the car door for her. "That's a shame. I loved the backseat show. By the way, do you need a chauffeur in Los Angeles?" He jumped into the car and got behind the wheel.

Her smile was tense. "No, but you sure look good behind the wheel of this classic car."

He put his arm around her and pulled her close. "Sit beside me."

They drove slowly beneath the cypress, down a raised lane. She watched his big hand palm the steering wheel. Her father drove that way. The seats were pushed all the way back to accommodate his long legs. He started humming. She heard the low rumble of his voice above the crunching sound of crushed clamshells. He hummed the same song she had heard on the radio.

She watched his elegant profile. "Do you like that song?"

"I love it. They played it earlier today when I driving to the market." He reached for the radio dial. "Would you rather hear some real music?"

She stopped his hand from turning on the radio. "I want to hear you."

He smiled. "Now I'm self-conscious." He went on humming anyway, before outright singing a few lines in a rich, deep voice.

Muddy's cottage was on the next inlet. The little house had once been painted a glaring lemon yellow but most of the paint had chipped away. Perhaps wife number two or three had chosen this color back in the 1960s. The cottage had certainly not been painted since then. They parked the sedan in front of a chicken coop. The birds flew into fits of hysteria.

"Muddy," David called into the cottage. "Are you home?"

"Don't startle my hens." An old gentleman shuffled onto the front steps, which had been boarded over to make a ramp. He squinted at the sedan. "Bowie?"

"It's me. I brought a few things for you."

"Come on up." Muddy squinted at her. "Who's the angel in green?"

David placed his hand on her shoulder. "This is my friend Lily."

Muddy's eyes strained in her direction. "Lucky you."

She instantly felt a connection to the old man. His dim eyes had a bright magnetism.

David grasped her hand and led her up the makeshift ramp. He leaned close to her ear. "I'll have to keep an eye on you. Old Muddy is a notorious lady's man. He's a musician, and you know what they're like."

Muddy laughed. "That's right, honey, someday this could all be yours."

David went back to the car to retrieve the groceries from the trunk.

Muddy leaned over the ramp. "I hope that's not all wholesome stuff."

David walked up the ramp. "Don't worry. I brought you some tobacco and whisky too."

"Good. Those church ladies just don't understand. I spent a lifetime honing my bad habits and it would be a shame to abandon them now."

David took the groceries inside the cottage "How've you been feeling?"

Muddy waved the question off. "Surprisingly good."

She quietly followed the men into the cottage. They walked straight into a small kitchen. She took a brief detour, peeked in a main room and saw the room was uncluttered and unornamented in any way. There wasn't a single purely decorative item anywhere. She thought it odd to see sunlight pouring through a gaping hole in the roof. She darted toward the kitchen.

David set the groceries down on a weathered, wooden chopping block in the tiny kitchen. "Muddy, you're not gonna be seeing me for a while."

Muddy laughed. His fingertips gently glided along the wall as he felt his way across the kitchen. "I can't see much of you when you're here."

David pulled the canned goods out of the grocery bag. "I got my ticket to Africa. Me and Brewster leave next week. We're going to fly into South Africa first and make arrangements from there. I got real lucky."

"That's cuz you're a good guy—you help everybody. It's your turn to have a little good luck." Muddy whispered to David, "Where'd you find the satin doll?"

"She found me." David handed Muddy a carton of cigarettes. "I'm gonna put these groceries away."

Muddy thrust his lower lip out. "Do you remember how I do it?"

David smiled. "Of course I remember your eccentric way of organizing your cupboard. Canned vegetables lay on their side. Canned meats get their labels torn an inch down the seam. Canned beans stand upright. Is that right?"

"I'm impressed." Muddy shuffled toward his central room. "Bowie, while I got you here, can I ask a favor?"

"Whatcha need, Muddy?"

"A fat raccoon took a stroll on my roof and fell through. I had to chase the snarling creature out the front door with a broom. Now I got a skylight."

"I'll take a look at it." David disappeared into living room. "I can put some plastic up today but I won't be able to fix it until Tuesday."

"Do what you can," Muddy muttered.

She felt a splinter of guilt. She was monopolizing David when others needed him and he desperately needed to prepare for his trip.

"I'll fix the roof but it's gonna cost you." David strode toward the sedan and got his laptop from the trunk. He walked up to Muddy. "I want you to play me a song I haven't recorded yet. I want to hear your masterpiece, and don't hold back."

Muddy's face looked scandalized. "My masterpiece in exchange for some plastic sheeting?" His face lit up for the challenge.

David looked up at the sky. "It could rain. It might even rain tonight."

"This is a devil's bargain." Muddy feigned indignity. "My best song for a roof patch? I've been saving that song."

David grinned. "I know you have and I've been patiently waiting for years to hear it. So, let's hear it now."

Muddy acted evasive. "Is there really whisky in that grocery bag?"

David rooted through the bag and handed Muddy the bottle of whisky. "Do you need help opening the bottle?"

Muddy reached for the whiskey. "Good lord, no. I can still open a bottle." He twisted the bottle open and took a long swig. Then he tore open the carton and lit one of the cigarettes. He made David wait until he smoked it down to the filter. Then he announced he was ready to record but he made no move to get organized or even pick up a musical instrument.

David set the laptop in front of Muddy. The slender laptop had a camera and microphone built in. Once that was done, he cautiously backed away from it as if he had set a tiger trap for an unwitting beast.

Muddy shuffled into a back room to get his slide guitar. He changed guitar strings and took forever to tune it. His arthritic fingers clutched the frets. He lit another cigarette and smoked it down to a stub.

She began to wonder if Muddy was stalling for time. Perhaps there was no "masterpiece".

Muddy took another long drink of whisky and called out to David, "There's some plastic tarps in the shed."

David walked to the shed to get the tarps. He climbed a rickety ladder onto the cottage's roof and unfurled the plastic tarps over the hole the raccoon had caused. "I need something to weigh the tarps down with."

"There're some bricks stacked behind the chicken coop." Muddy slipped what looked like a piece of sawed-off steel pipe onto his index finger and tapped it nervously against the guitar as if he was getting ready to play, but he didn't. He lit another cigarette instead.

She sighed with resignation. They were never going to get out of here.

David walked around the cottage, tidying up.

The moment David walked away, Muddy tossed the lit cigarette aside and began to play.

Muddy's playing was surprisingly strong. His gnarled fingers could still play chords. He didn't seem to mind that she watched while he played. His voice was ground down to an almost inaudible rasp but it was full of emotion. Sad but beautiful

music poured out of him. She wondered, was this what ninety-four years of unapologetic mistakes sounded like when put to music?

Every now and then, Muddy would remember she was there, glance up at her and smile.

Once Muddy started playing, he didn't want to stop. He kept playing long after the hole in his roof was covered. He paused only to take quick sips from the bottle or light cigarettes, which he let dangle from his bottom lip while he sang. He seemed to be lost in the music and rambled.

Her stomach quietly growled. She clamped her arm around her waist as if that action could silence it. She shifted on the porch, wishing now that she had eaten her breakfast.

Abruptly, Muddy stopped playing and looked directly at her. "This song is called *Josephine*. Josephine was a young slave who died trying to escape to freedom. She's a ghost now. She's real. I've seen her. She floats through the bayou wearing a long muslin gown. If someone gets lost out here and can't find their way Josephine comes and points them in the right direction."

David chuckled. "I've been coming here my whole life. I've never seen Josephine."

"Good for you." Muddy pouted. "May be you've never been lost. I've been lost in more ways than one. I've seen Josephine. That's why I wrote this song for her." He paused and started playing an amazingly pure piece of music.

Chills ran up her spine. It moved her so much more than she had expected. This was something very special. She turned toward David. "You are recording this?" she whispered.

David silently nodded his head and sat quietly beside her. His hand covered hers. They listened to Muddy's masterpiece together.

When Muddy was done, he was done. He simply finished his masterful performance by setting his guitar down. He looked exhausted.

David leaned close and whispered in her ear, "We should get going." He stood up and shut the laptop down. He walked over to Muddy and gently put his hand on his shoulder. "I do appreciate the song but we have to go, my friend."

Muddy reached for the whiskey. "I appreciate the visit. Bring your pretty friend back anytime."

David grasped Muddy's hand. "I'll come by Tuesday to fix the roof."

Muddy nodded his head and lit another cigarette.

They left Muddy and drove back to the shack. The sun was setting and the evening air was warm. The shadows came and the bayou took on its magical cloak.

David drove with one hand firmly planted in the middle of the steering wheel. She smiled. That kind of overly relaxed driving would get a person killed in Los Angeles. She was used to clutching the wheel at the two and ten positions and always driving on the defense. He drove as if driving were fun. She smiled.

He put his arm around her and pulled her close, as if she belonged to him. "I'm sorry we stayed so long." He kissed the top of her head.

"I enjoyed it." It felt too comfortable, too perfect sitting beside him.

"I'm starving."

She was hungry too. And a beer sounded good.

The sedan pulled up in front of the porch. He bounded up the front steps. "I'm gonna start supper." He walked into the kitchen and took two cans of beer from the fridge. He opened one can and handed it to her. The cold beer was welcome. The kitchen was close to the generator, which hummed loudly.

She watched him fill a tall five-gallon pot with water and lift it onto the stove. He scrubbed and quartered a pile of potatoes, shucked some corn and cut up some carrots. They sipped cold beer, sorted crawfish and talked about Muddy while the massive amount of water came to a boil. He tossed all the fresh crawfish and vegetables into a steamer basket and checked to see if the water was boiling. It was, so he opened a large box of Jambalaya Jazz crawfish seasoning and poured the entire box of peppery seasoning into the water.

She gasped. A box that size of JJ's seasoning lasted in her mother's household for many crawfish boils. "Are you making supper or tear gas? Good lord, I hope we can eat it."

He laughed. "I like it spicy."

A steamy cloud of peppery fumes filled the kitchen. Her eyes stung. She escaped onto the porch.

"Would you light the citronella?" he called out to her.

She looked around for the candles and lit them before the evening insects arrived in earnest. She turned on the string of Christmas lights as well. The lights added a carnival atmosphere to the evening. She sat on the porch, watching the sky turn purple.

He walked onto the porch, carrying the little kitchen table with an enamel top. "Let's eat out here. It's cooler." He spread layers of newspaper across the table.

She watched as he set up a dining table with a beautiful view of the bayou. "David, why don't you have a girlfriend?"

He glanced up at her with a faint smile on his lips. "I thought you were trying to avoid personal conversation?"

"I'm just curious."

"I've had girlfriends. I prefer women friends. I want someone with a broader worldview and a little sophistication. The girls around here dream of living in the same subdivision as their mother and they expect me to get a job alongside their fathers at the power plant. There's nothing wrong with that, but when I tell them my dreams, they get nervous about the insecurity of it all. I want to take some chances and do a little traveling before I get tied down."

For some reason she took his comment the wrong way. His comment stabbed her in the heart. "You're wise to explore these things while you're young."

His eye sparkled. "You're still young."

"That's debatable."

"If you weren't a Los Angeles anchorwoman, what would you be doing?"

"I haven't really thought that far ahead." It was a lie. She thought it about constantly. "I suppose I'd be doing some other form of journalism. I'd like to be doing something more interesting and more important."

"I hear ya!" He tapped his beer can against hers.

She glanced at him. His gaze was focused on some far-off thing. He seemed detached. "When's supper going to be ready?"

"I think it's ready now." He got up to check on the crawfish boil. He returned holding the dripping steamer. "Watch out."

She moved aside as he lifted the steamer basket onto the tabletop. The boiling liquid trickled over the porch. Scarlet crawfish were dumped atop a mound of steamed potatoes, corn and carrots. A wave of pepper wafted in her face.

"Do you mind eatin' with your fingers?" He went back to the kitchen to get two more beers.

She tried to pick up a crawfish but it was scalding hot and she dropped it. The sharp tip of its shell pricked her finger. The pepper made the cut sting.

He returned, holding the beers. "How much does a house in your neighborhood cost?"

"Is it my turn for a personal question?"

"I'm just asking."

Her eyes narrowed. She knew where this was going. She hated this question. It was an emotional booby trap. She had always out earned Jimmy and it had been the source of much friction. "With all the improvements I've made, my little house in the hills is worth just under a million."

"Whoa!" Beer sputtered over his lips. "A million dollars for a little house? You're joking."

"Nope." She toyed with a second crawfish.

"It must be wonderful."

It wasn't. She used the house like a bedroom. She slept there all day and avoided going home after work because it felt lonely and sad to go to bed just as the sun was coming up. The narrow, winding lane she lived on was lined with tall compound walls. She seldom saw her neighbors come or go. The police had recently arrested one neighbor for illegally producing and distributing pornography. A double homicide had been committed down the street and she didn't even recognize her neighbor's faces

when she saw their pictures on the news. "I have a beautiful view of Los Angeles. On clear days I can see Catalina Island."

"This place must look pretty ragtag to you?"

It didn't. She carefully picked up a steaming chunk of carrot. "Thank you for supper." It was nice not to eat alone, standing over the kitchen sink. The pepper was strong. It burned her lips but it was delicious. Thankfully the potatoes had absorbed the brunt of the burn, but she reminded herself not to touch her fingertips anywhere near her eyes.

They ate quietly. No more personal questions were asked. What had appeared to be a huge pile of crawfish boil quickly disappeared.

He smiled when they were finished. "Wash your hands, wash a pot, hose the porch off and we're done. It doesn't get easier than that."

It was completely dark. The bayou was doing its thing. Every shadow buzzed or croaked. The Christmas lights created a cheerful oasis of light. David stretched his long arms over his head. "I feel sticky, sweaty, salty and dirty. I wish someone would scrub my back in the shower."

She smiled. "Do you want me to fetch old Muddy? He owes you a favor. Maybe he'll scrub your back?"

He grabbed her around the waist. "I have a brilliant idea, why don't you do it?" He kissed the side of her neck and herded her toward the shower. He mixed the hot water with the cool. It felt good to rinse the heat of the day away.

She crowded beside him to stand under the trickle of water. She smiled when she saw his cock was already rising. It pointed longingly toward her. She soaped her hands. "Better turn around if you want me to scrub your back."

He turned his back to her. Her soapy hands slid across his broad shoulders. She had no intention of rushing through this pleasant task. "This might take awhile. You're such a dirty dog, I don't know where to start."

"Start at the top and work down. Take your time."

She soaped his strong back and let her hands drift down his hips. "You're so beautiful." He was easily the most beautiful man she had ever made love to.

He glanced over his shoulder and smiled. "I'm glad you think so. You look very beautiful to me."

By the time her soapy hands reached between his thighs, his cock curved toward his belly. She stroked the length of him. Her hands cupped his balls. He felt warm in her hands. The shower wasn't cooling him off at all.

He turned around and handed her the bottle of liquid soap. "I want to watch you."

She stood in front of him, frozen. His expression was frank. His black brows leveled. He clearly expected her to put on a show for him. She self-consciously squeezed a trickle of soap into her palms and let her hands glide over her breasts. Her hands immediately slid to her thighs.

"Slow down," he commanded. "Play with your nipples."

His demanding tone sent a shiver of excitement through her. She was thrilled to have him take charge of her.

He took a step back to better view her actions. His eyes simmered in the shadows. The moon had not yet risen. The only source of light was the string of Christmas lights ringing the porch. Their gaudy colors reflected crazily against wet skin.

"Touch yourself," he encouraged her. "I want to watch your face."

Her sudsy fingertips stroked her nipples. The tips darkened. The soap made her skin slick. Her nipples grew hard and pointy in her hands. She ran a wet finger in circles around them, feeling the slightly bumpy texture rise against the slick pads of her fingertips. She gently tugged on them while looking him directly in the eye. A little spark of heat flared between her thighs.

"That's better." His hand grasped his shaft and squeezed it while he watched her toy with her nipples. His fist slowly stroked the shaft. A translucent bead of liquid glistened on the tip. "Push them together and give them a kiss."

She did as she was told. Her lips grazed the top of her breast.

"I love your body, Lily. You look so soft and curvy. You're such a lady." His smooth voice was velvety and convincing. "Now slide your finger into your pussy and show me how you like to fuck."

His demanding tone made her shiver. Her fingers slid between her thighs and parted the folds. She knew the moment she started stroking her clit, her eyes would close and she wanted to keep them open and watch his reaction. She stroked her finger across her inner thigh but was careful not to touch her clit. She longed to press her thighs together, stroke harder and fan the flames. The wet friction of her gliding fingertips was stunning. She moaned softly, instantly growing slick.

His attention seemed riveted to the graceful motion of her fingers.

Her hand strayed closer. She slowly stroked lazy circles around her clit, feeling the sparks fly and keeping an eye on him the entire time.

His throat tensed. "Lily, I hope you're not cheating. I want to watch you get off with a real finger-fuck. I want to know what you do when you're alone—I want to remember it. All of it." His face bore a fierce expression. "This is what I'll be doing when I think of you."

She watched as he held himself in a brutal grip, mercilessly squeezing the shaft. His fist stroked faster. She would never dream of being that rough with an organ so sensitive but it didn't seem to bother him at all.

"After I watch you get off," he panted. "I'm going to fuck you. How do you want to be fucked, Lily?"

Her fingers grazed her clit. A jolt of intense pleasure surged through her. How gentlemanly. He was offering her a choice. Umm... How did she want to be fucked?

"Well?"

She took a deep breath and took a big chance. "Be loving. I want to feel loved."

His brow creased. "Come here." His voice was a harsh whisper. His hands reached for the sides of her face. His eyes held a look of uncertainty. "I'll do as you say. You can treat me anyway you like, but please don't forget me."

Her breath caught. How could she ever forget him? She kissed his soft mouth beneath the trickle of warm water. His arms wrapped around her. The suds ran through the slats in the floor. He refused to let her go. They staggered out of the shower, dripping wet, holding on to each other.

He threw himself onto the bed before pulling her on top of him. The air mattress hissed under their falling weight. "I want you above me where I can see you." He grabbed a condom off the nightstand and tore it open with his teeth. He quickly rolled it on.

She straddled his hips and luxuriously stretched her arms above her head. Her wet hair clung to her shoulders. She had never felt a moment this perfect or this free before.

He stared up at her. His fingers glided across the under-curve of her breasts. His eyes glittered in the darkness as he waited to slide inside her.

She arched back and slowly rubbed herself against him, letting her wet pussy tease him. She braced her hands against his shoulders and sighed softly as she slowly sank down on him.

He closed his eyes and thrust upward. "Go slowly," he begged. "Take your time with me." His hands locked on to her hips.

She moved slowly on top of him, committing every detail to memory. She wanted to remember how he felt and moved. The tiny sounds he made. The slow, sexy tone of his voice. She closed her eyes and took it all in.

His languid eyes opened a slit. He gazed up at her. He took hold of her hand and tenderly kissed the tips of her fingers. "Is this working?" he asked softly. "Do you feel loved?"

"Hush." She barely nodded her head and held a silencing finger to her lips as she stroked her body against him, taking him deep inside.

They moved slowly together. She realized at this time tomorrow night she would be back in her lonely house. The thought was depressing. She glanced down at David as he stretched beneath her. This was a beautiful moment. She wanted to stay in this moment. His eyes remained barely open. He watched her through a fringe of black lashes. His chest labored. His hips arched upward. He looked lost in deep passion. Her hands stroked his chest as she moved on top of him. He was special. She could never forget him. Too bad she had to let him go. He had his own future to write. She had no right to distract him. Her throat ached. She wanted cry. She realized she was holding her breath. She felt lightheaded, something was happening. An odd sensation that was more than sexual thrilled through her. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood straight. A haze of pale light drifted past her peripheral vision. The air carried a rush of unexpected coolness. Her skin pebbled as a chill raced up her spine. It happened so

quickly she barely had time to realize there was a ghost in the room with them. A figure in white loomed beyond the mosquito net. She blinked and it did not leave. The graceful figure floated past the bed and walked straight through the window. The apparition hovered outside on the porch for a moment and then pointed toward the bayou. The spirit drifted toward the dock and vanished. She gasped and looked down at him.

His eyes were wide open. He'd seen it too.

"Josephine?" she whispered.

He nodded his head. "Maybe someone's lost."

She should have been alarmed but she wasn't. The world felt as if it were a dream of oddly layered realities. The bayou was a haunted place, rich with life and death. It seemed only natural a few of its ghosts would wander inside for a visit. Josephine felt beneficent not menacing. Her visit came and went gracefully. It almost felt like a blessing.

He rolled her beneath him, pinning her to the bed. "She felt peaceful, didn't she? I wouldn't worry about it."

She looked into his calm face. Why should she be afraid if he wasn't? She wrapped her legs around his waist. In this position, he completely filled her.

His hips moved slowly on top of her. His fingers entangled with hers. He took his time, allowing the sensations to build to an almost unbearable pitch.

Josephine was here. What did that mean? She wished she could forget about it. She buried her face against the crook of his shoulder.

He softly groaned as an answer.

She whispered in his ear, "Don't fall asleep tonight. Stay awake with me." She wanted every single moment with him she could steal. Her hands wiggled free of his grip. She stroked her fingertips across the sweeping length of his smooth back. Her fingers traveled downward to grab his solid butt and clasped him hard against her. She couldn't get close enough. She drove her hips against him, hoping for a sharper sensation to match her strange mood. Her blood rushed. Her body strained upward as he hit just the right spot. He straightened his arms and allowed her to move freely. She stroked hard against him, loving what was happening. The sensations wound tighter. Her hips lifted off the bed. She squeezed her thighs together, hard. Her body stilled as a ripple of pleasure passed through her that felt as if her entire body was blushing, even her nipples swelled. Wispy little sounds floated passed her lips as she pumped her hips against him trying to get the maximum rush. Her orgasm unfurled in slow, steady waves, one following after another. For a moment, she felt as if she could will them to go on forever, but of course they didn't. A feeling of tingling warmth passed over her. She was left stunned and panting.

He moved slowly on top of her. His entire body taut as steel. He pushed deep inside her with low groan that rumbled near her ear. He gently kissed the side of her throat before allowing himself to come, hard. He shuddered violently.

Chapter Seven

She awoke early the next morning with her skin feeling hot and sticky. They had both finally fallen asleep, but they hadn't slept well. For hours, she had lain awake, acutely aware these were the last hours together. She had also expected and would have welcomed a second visit from Josephine, but her gracious spirit had not reappeared.

During the night, David awoke and made love to her again. She joined him in a lazy, greedy fashion, wanting to hold on to as much of David and as many memories as possible.

Afterward, they talked about Josephine. Then he inadvertently confirmed all her worst fears by wanting to discuss his upcoming trip to Africa and beyond. He had plans on top of plans that literally included the rest of the world. He wanted to live in foreign lands and experience new cultures. He wanted to roam, or so he said. She listened intently while her heart tried fervently to dislodge him.

She stared up at the mosquito net. It looked worn and slightly dingy by daylight. David had been right about the air mattress. It had been surprisingly comfortable. She rolled onto her side and glanced at him. He slept soundly beside her. His big body sprawled across the bed. She took a long look at him while he slept, knowing this might be her last chance to do so.

A truck drove down the shell driveway. Its tires crunched alongside the porch. She bolted upright when she heard the truck's door slam shut. Heavy footsteps bounded up the front steps.

A hammering fist frantically rapped against the screen door. An agitated male voice called out, "Bowie! Bowie, I see your car, I know you're here!" The man opened the screen door and let himself in. "Bowie?" The man peered into the bedroom.

She grabbed the top sheet and clutched it around her, leaving David nearly naked on the bed.

David's limbs stirred. He rose slowly looking bleary-eyed. "Brewster? I have a guest. What do you want?" He swung his feet off the bed and reached for his jeans. He pulled his pants on and hurriedly walked Brewster to the porch.

She wrapped the sheet tightly around herself, jumped off the bed and hid beside the bedroom window. She peeked onto the porch to eavesdrop.

Brewster's voice boomed above David's. "I gotta make this fast, I'm on my way to work. I'm a little rattled. Bowie, Muddy's dead. I found the old guy this morning."

"What?" David looked shocked. "He was fine last night."

"I found him sitin' in his chair, holding his guitar. It must have been peaceful. Look, I have to ask a favor. I'm late for work, would you run down to the coroner's office and

report it? I don't even know Muddy's real name or how to get a hold of any family he might have."

David looked stricken. "I've got Lily here."

"I'm sorry about that, but I can't miss another day of work or else I won't get a paycheck before we leave on the trip."

David's shoulders drooped. "I'll take care of it."

Brewster walked toward his truck. "Bowie, you're a good guy. I knew I could count on you."

David ran his palm across his chaotic, morning hair. "I'm a sap!"

Brewster waved and drove away.

She was already zipping her skirt when David returned to the bedroom. A look of gloom clouded his eyes. It only took a moment for her to commit his compelling face to memory. "I can call a cab or you can just drop me off at my hotel, whatever's easiest."

He stood over her. "Wait here. I'll be back in an hour and we'll pick up your things at the hotel. We'll still have plenty of time to get you to the airport." He held his hand out. "Hand me your phone."

She assumed he needed to call the coroner and reached for her purse. She opened it and handed him the phone. "I'm sorry about your friend Muddy. I'm glad we spent yesterday with him."

"So am I." His face was somber. He took the phone from her hand and opened it. He punched a number in, closed the phone and handed it back. "Would you make us some breakfast? I'll be back soon." He quickly dressed and hurriedly left.

She heard the sedan driving across the crunchy shells. She sat alone on the bed feeling completely confused.

* * * * *

They ate a quiet breakfast and quickly cleaned up the cabin.

Her final act before leaving was to place Rupert behind the front door in a threatening pose for the next unsuspecting person to discover.

On the flight home, she sat crowded between two large gentlemen. There was no armrest for her. The plane was full and there were no other seats available, so she kept her elbows tucked tightly to her sides. So much for impulsive ticket purchases. She smiled. Who cared about little things like this? Her weekend had been nothing like what she expected and it had all been worth it. Everything.

It had been difficult saying goodbye to David. She physically didn't want to let him go. Her hand stroked his arm or the side of his thigh the entire drive back to New Orleans. He continually touched or looked at her as much as the road would allow. They tried to be cheerful and make light conversation but long moments of silence overtook them. Neither wanted to make the other sad or say the wrong thing but it was

impossible to ignore the emotional undertow. He insisted on taking her to the hotel and driving her to the airport even though she knew he was needed elsewhere.

He clung to her outside the airport only allowing her to enter at the last minute. She almost missed her flight. His soulful glances and sad kisses made it even harder to say goodbye. She didn't know what to say to him. She couldn't make any promises. The only real promise she made was she did promise to be in touch and narrate his documentary. That was the least she could do. How was it possible to say thank-you to someone who completely changed her outlook on life? She owed David. He had healed an entire part of her heart while innocently adding a fresh wound. He had changed her perspective about what was possible and how rich life could be. Her life could expand now.

She made him promise to take full advantage of his trip to Africa. She made him swear to put his project first. She even slipped the money she had set aside for the weekend into his jacket pocket and he didn't even notice. He thought she was hugging him and holding him close to her heart. She hoped he wouldn't feel insulted when he found it.

When the plane landed in Los Angeles, she opened her purse and checked her phone messages. She noticed David had programmed his number into her phone. Seeing his number in front of her was extremely tempting. She nearly called it but called Marion instead.

Marion answered. "Hi, Lily, are you calling to tell me I was right? By the way, I prefer white roses if you would like to send a thank-you gift."

Lily laughed. "I admit it. You were right about everything. I wanted to tell you first; I've given it a lot of thought and I think it's time to roll out the proud lady."

Marion paused. "I think I know what you mean but I want to hear you say it."

"I'm quitting Channel Three. If you're leaving it doesn't make sense for me to stay. I want to start doing the projects that we've been talking about for years. I'm finally ready for a challenge."

"Hooray!" Marion shouted.

She held the phone away from her ear. "I want to call our production company The Proud Lady with a big, white riverboat for our logo." She paused. "Or Josephine Productions with a cypress tree, or something like that," she laughed.

Marion voice was filled with delight. "Who's Josephine? I hope we don't already have a third partner?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell about Josephine later." Her voice cracked. "Would a third partner be such a bad thing?" *David would make an excellent creative partner.*

"No, Lily, I was just surprised. Call the production company whatever you like. Bring in a third partner. As long it works, I don't care. This is wonderful. We both need this change."

"I want to talk to you about this later. I got to find a taxi at the airport during rush hour at the end of a three-day weekend. Wish me luck. I'll see you tonight at the station." She ended the call but continued to stare at the phone. Impulsively, she called David.

David picked up on the third ring. "Lily?" He sounded breathless.

Her breath caught she didn't know why she had called or what she might say. She had simply needed to hear his voice. She froze. An empty taxi zipped past and she made no attempt to hail it.

"Lily? Why aren't you speaking?" He sounded worried.

"David..." She had so much to say she didn't know where to start. Her knees trembled.

"I found the money. I don't appreciate it." He sounded hurt. "I'm sending it to Marion."

"Don't," she whispered. "I want you to call me during your trip. I want to hear about everything." She paused and struggled to get her rising emotions under control. "I want to hear your voice every day, and when you come home, I want you to buy a ticket to Los Angeles." Her heart pounded. She didn't trust herself to speak another word.

He paused a long while. His voice was rough with emotion. "Good. I thought I was going to have to argue with you about the money."

"David, it was a lonely flight home."

"It felt pretty lonely here after you left."

"I've been thinking..."

"Have you been thinking that perhaps you need to see a little of Africa?"

She laughed. "I think I need to see more of you." Her chest felt tight. It felt good to admit it. There was no way she could cut him out of her heart.

"Lily, you're a free woman. You can do whatever you want with your life, so why don't you come with me?"

Her heart jumped. "What would Brewster think of me tagging along?"

"Brewster would respect you as a professional, but I want to be the one sharing your bed."

He sounded so sincere. It sounded so possible, even logical. Was this the direction her new life was taking? Her throat tightened so much it ached. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. An empty taxi whizzed past. She ignored it. She realized that at this moment in her life she needed love more than she needed ironclad guarantees. She realized she just wasn't that fragile or as frightened anymore. David was younger than her but he was perfect for her. "David," she spoke softly. "I will seriously consider it."

"I'm happy to hear that." His voice filled with hope.

"Lacka drom."

"What does that mean, *cher*?"

"It means safe return journey – we'll meet again soon. Can I call you later? I'm still in the airport."

His voice soared. "Call me later, sweetheart. I don't care how late, just call me."

"I promise I will, sweetheart," she whispered as she closed the phone. She hadn't ended a phone call as somebody's "sweetheart" in a long while. The possibility of a new future opened. It felt wonderful. Tears of joy welled in her eyes. She hadn't cried tears of joy in a very long time. She stood frozen on the passenger curb as the airport shuttles and buses roared past. The acrid scent of diesel exhaust stung her nose. A few stray tears trickled down her cheeks. She didn't bother to wipe them away. They felt cleansing and fresh and she didn't care who saw them. A wide smile burst across her face. She turned around and walked back into the air terminal rolling her tiny piece of weekend luggage behind her. She lifted her chin high and headed straight toward the Air Africa ticket kiosk.

About the Author

Writing is a new love of mine. I recently arrived at Ellora's Cave after feeling inspired to share my overblown vision of reality with my friends. I started my life as a fine art painter and illustrator but became frustrated that I couldn't crowd everything I wanted to say onto a canvas. I was forced to put down the paintbrush and pick up the pen to explain myself in greater detail. I've been fortunate to live an adventurous life with the love of my life, and fellow artist, at my side. We share our lives with a wonderful son and a very sweet border collie.

Ps: I still paint. Just because I have a new love doesn't mean I'm ready to abandon an old one. One can never collect enough old "loves" or have enough joy in life.

Katalina welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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