

MIDNIGHT
ON THE
MISSISSIPPI

MARY ELLIS



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

Cover by Lucas Art and Design, Jenison, Michigan

Cover photos © Larry Mulvehill, 13/Gary Faber / Ocean / Corbis

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

MIDNIGHT ON THE MISSISSIPPI

Copyright © 2015 by Mary Ellis

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ellis, Mary,

Midnight on the Mississippi / Mary Ellis.

pages ; cm. -- (Secrets of the South mysteries ; book 1)

ISBN 978-0-7369-6169-1 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-6170-7 (eBook)

1. Women private investigators—Louisiana—New Orleans—Fiction. 2. Murder—Investigation—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3626.E36M53 2015

813'.6—dc23

2015000616

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, digital, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 / LB-JH / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*This book is dedicated to my parents,
Elizabeth and Steve.*

*Where would I be if you hadn't picked me out
from the other squalling infants?*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to my darling husband, Ken, who helped me prowl the streets and alleys of the French Quarter and travel the back roads of Cajun Country and upstate Louisiana. A better research assistant has never lived or breathed. Without you I would have driven straight into a bayou and drowned long ago.

Thanks to James at the Stonewall Range for answering my questions about firearms, and special thanks to Deputy Janise of the St. Landry's Parish Sheriff's Department for your procedural help.

Thanks to Joe Stopak, retired fire chief and arson investigator for Richfield Village, Ohio. Your patience with answering my questions was only exceeded by your expertise.

Thanks to Peggy Svoboda, who took the time to proofread a printed copy of this manuscript with her eagle eye.

Thanks to my lovely agent, Mary Sue Seymour; my fabulous editor, Kim Moore; and the wonderful staff at Harvest House Publishers. Where would I be without your hard work?

ONE

*Yacht Queen Antoinette
Somewhere on Lake Pontchartrain*

*W*hat? I still can't hear you, James!" Hunter Galen shouted into the mouthpiece. "Call me back in a few minutes. I'm going on deck. Maybe the signal will be stronger." Ending the call, he headed for the doorway of the grand dining salon. Around him, the birthday party was in full swing. He glanced across a room filled with smiling faces, assured that the party had been a great idea. His mother, still stunning at sixty years old, was dancing with the senior partner of the law firm that had represented Galen business interests for years. Was something going on between them—more than just a slow waltz between old friends? Maybe, but he wouldn't worry about it tonight. His mother and everyone else were enjoying themselves. In addition to delicious catering and plentiful libations, two bands—zydeco and swing—provided entertainment, with even a DJ between sets to keep the younger generation happy.

From the corner of his eye, Hunter spotted his girlfriend, soon-to-be fiancée, clinking champagne glasses with his sister, Chloe, and his sister-in-law, Cora. Together the three looked like

a blonde, brunette, and redhead hair color advertisement. While he watched, Ashley Menard glanced his way, her face lighting up with a Miss Louisiana smile. That's what she once had been—or, at least, first runner-up. Tall and reed slim, Ashley's cool composure stemmed from the belief that everything she touched would turn to gold. And it usually did. She lifted two fingers in a wave before refocusing on her future sisters-in-law.

“Don't even think of getting down on one knee until you ask Daddy,” Ashley had warned him. Daddy. Twenty-six years old and owner of a chain of hair salons, yet she still referred to her father with a juvenile moniker. Well, this still was the old South, after all.

When the vibration of his phone jarred his attention from the party, he saw on the screen that it was James again. Sighing, he headed up the stairs for better reception. On the promenade deck above, Hunter sucked in a lungful of humid air and leaned over the polished teak railing. “Hello, James,” he spoke into the mouthpiece.

“Hunter, we have to talk. This is important. I know you're tied up right now, but I had drinks tonight with old man Morrison at the bank. He wants to talk to us about the credit advance I requested. He refuses to extend the corporate credit line until we *both* come to his office. That tight-fisted—”

His colorful description of their banker became garbled as James's voice rose with agitation.

Shaking his head, Hunter gazed out at the dark water of Lake Pontchartrain. A nearly full moon reflected off of the glassy surface. Although the breeze on his skin felt cool, his anxiety level kicked up a notch. “Don't blame Mr. Morrison, James. Having us both present was my idea. You're getting us in pretty deep. Let's sit down tomorrow and crunch the numbers, but I think—”

Apparently James Nowak wasn't interested in either crunching numbers or the financial solvency of the firm. Hunter could

hear him shouting but fortunately couldn't discern much of what he said.

"James! You keep breaking up. Let's talk tomorrow. You know I'm on a boat in the middle of Lake Pontchartrain at my mother's birthday party—"

The line went dead. Hunter probably would have tossed the phone into the waves if his older brother hadn't crept up behind him.

"Something wrong, little brother?" Ethan Galen spoke with his smooth-as-cream accent. Funny how three siblings could be raised together, yet only one, Ethan, could speak fluent French that even a Parisian wouldn't find fault with. Hunter and Chloe must have spent too much time in front of the TV instead of talking to *Grandpère*.

"No," said Hunter. "Just business as usual in Galen-Nowak Investments. If James keeps this up, we'll have to sail the *Queen Antoinette* to Costa Rica to hide from our creditors." He laughed with little humor.

Ethan offered a halfhearted grin. "If there's any way I can help, call my office in the morning. Right now Mother is about to address her adoring fans. I didn't think you'd want to miss that." He opened the vapor lock door leading back to the party.

While Hunter had been arguing with his partner for the one-millionth time, his family and friends—everyone in the world he cared about—were waiting for him. "Go on down. I'll be right behind you."

"Right. I'll keep the party moving along." Ethan studied his brother for a moment and then ducked his head under the bulwark.

Staring at the fishing boats bobbing on the surface, Hunter took stock of what a fortunate man he was. For the moment, all family members were speaking to one another, he had a gorgeous

girlfriend, and he worked in a profession that thrilled and challenged him every day. He was no ordinary stockbroker. On behalf of his clients, he wheeled and dealt in initial public offerings, emerging markets, real estate investment trusts, aggressive sector funds, and volatile stocks that would cause the average investor to faint dead away. Fortunes were made and lost similar to a Vegas game of Texas hold 'em. His clients weren't senior citizens who lived off income generated by their portfolios. Volatility, even wild gyrations, came as no surprise to those who trusted him and invested with his firm. Hunter loved the game and always would. The buying and selling of securities made his heart pound and his blood race through his veins.

With little alternative, he shook off his argument with James and hurried back downstairs. There wasn't a business in the world that didn't run into snags every now and then. The two of them would hammer this out in the morning. Didn't they always?

In the main salon, Ethan had just finished his speech and was introducing the birthday girl. Accepting the microphone from him, Clotilde Galen looked beautiful in a peach-colored suit and high heels. She would still be a dynamo at one hundred, let alone a mere sixty. Hunter slipped into a seat at Chloe and Aaron's table.

His sister passed him a bottle of champagne and an empty glass. "You missed the toast. Try to catch up." She barely glanced in his direction, her attention directed to the center stage.

Hunter filled his flute but left it alone. The heavy fragrance of magnolia from the table arrangements was making it hard to breathe.

"I can't tell you what a lovely surprise this party is tonight." His mother's lilting voice drifted over the guests like a sentimental refrain. She spoke more musically than he could sing. "Having my friends here, along with my beloved family, my mother..." Clotilde's voice cracked as everyone's attention shifted to *Grandmère*.

Surrounded by Ethan, Cora, their young son, and her best friend, Jeanette Peteriere, the grand dame of the family smiled, the creases deepening on her gentle face. When *Grandmère's* trembling fingers lifted her champagne glass in salute, the crowd erupted with hoots and uproarious applause.

After a brief interval, Clotilde tapped the microphone with one long fingernail. "I know not everyone could see from where they sat, so I wanted to mention the thoughtful, age-appropriate gifts I received from my darling children." More hoots, more applause. "From my little girl, Chloe, who recently received her bachelor of arts degree at Tulane..." Clotilde paused, knowing her audience wouldn't pass up an opportunity to make noise. She wasn't disappointed.

Chloe stood, nodding and waving at her well-wishers while her FBI agent fiancé, Aaron, grinned with pride.

Clotilde waited before continuing. "Chloe has given me a year's worth of classes entitled 'Yoga for Senior Citizens' at the community center downtown." She waved the embossed certificate in the air. "A full year."

The crowd offered thunderous applause.

"And my son Ethan and his lovely Cora paid for my lifetime membership in *AARP*." She held aloft a second embossed document. "My entire lifetime—can you imagine?"

Apparently, the guests could imagine because many began pounding on the tabletops.

Suave and diplomatic, Ethan half stood and waved like a visiting royal monarch, while his wife beamed with pleasure. The corners of Clotilde's lips turned up into a smile as she waited for everyone to settle down again. "As much as I love my gifts, the best of all is having my children here tonight. Thank you, Ethan, Hunter, and Chloe, for inviting everyone to this lovely boat for my celebration. This was the best birthday surprise I ever received."

Clotilde's voice cracked slightly on the last word, even as her luminous green eyes filled with tears.

Kenneth Douglas, the family's attorney and friend, offered her a steadying arm as she stepped from the podium.

"Wait, Mom. Stay up there," called Hunter. He scrambled to his feet. "I haven't given you my gift yet."

Clotilde looked eager for the spotlight to shine elsewhere, but she nevertheless moved back to the dais.

"Happy birthday." He held out a brightly wrapped box.

Accepting the gift from her son, she quickly stripped off the paper. "Fixodent adhesive," she murmured. "Looks like the large, family-sized box. Thank you, dear." Clotilde lifted it high so all could see. "I'll keep this in a safe place until it's necessary. Fortunately, my teeth are all still mine." Again she tried to leave, but her younger son wouldn't allow it.

"Look inside the box, Mama," he said, relishing the moment.

Clotilde hated the endearment "Mama" and flashed him the look that said, *You're in big trouble, young man*. But like a good sport she ripped open the box. The crowd leaned forward in their chairs, with several in the last row standing so they could see.

Instead of the plastic tube everyone expected, Clotilde extracted a sheet of thick vellum festooned with fancy calligraphy, stamps, seals, and assorted vestiges of officialdom. She unrolled and scanned the document, reading aloud a word here and there.

The party guests waited. Her family waited. Even Mr. Douglas peered curiously over her shoulder.

Then her face blanched as her hand fluttered to her throat. Finally, she stopped reading and stared at her son. "What is this, Hunter? What is this paper talking about?" As the fingers holding the document started to shake, the audience grew silent.

"The yacht *Queen Antoinette*, what you referred to as a 'boat' a few moments ago, is *your* new sailing ship. Don't call her a boat

anymore or you'll make her mad." Hunter waved a hand around the elegantly appointed main cabin, where forty guests had just finished dining. "She's yours, Mama. Happy birthday. The captain and crew will be a phone call away whenever you wish to sail. They can charter her out to help defray operating expenses while you're abroad." Hunter glanced at his siblings and grinned. "Oh, by the way, Ethan and Chloe went in with me on the gift. And the missing tube of Fixodent is in my jacket pocket for whenever you need it."

The crowd erupted into bedlam and rushed toward the podium, surrounding Clotilde with noisy congratulations and best wishes. Hunter overheard several aunts already asking to use the vessel for upcoming showers and parties. Despite her heels, his mother was soon lost in a sea of people. Hunter exchanged glances with Ethan, who lifted a snifter of bourbon in salute. Cora was trying to fight her way up toward the birthday girl. Snuggled against Aaron's shoulder, Chloe grinned as the two of them whispered secrets the way engaged couples often did.

Hunter scanned the guests for Ashley but couldn't find her. Usually her height in heels made it impossible for her to hide, but she definitely was not in the room. He was about to search for her in the galley when his cell phone vibrated. In exasperation, he sprinted up the stairs to the upper deck for better reception.

Once he had answered, his business partner again pleaded, cajoled, shouted, and cursed in a staccato of fractured phrases. But no matter where Hunter went on the ship, the signal was too weak to decipher anything coherent. "Wait until tomorrow, buddy. We'll sort this out," shouted Hunter into the phone. "Take it easy. Nothing can't wait until morning."

"Hunter, this is no time for you—Get back here now and—You've no idea who just walked in—"

Then he heard only the irritating sound of static. But one thing

came through loud and clear, unlike their earlier attempt at conversation. James was begging. If not begging, then desperate—for what, Hunter had no clue. He stomped toward the ship's stern, where a row of fiberglass tenders waited to ferry late arrivals or early departures. Fortunately, a few crewmembers lounged nearby.

“Take me back to the marina as fast as you can.” He stepped down into the nearest boat and handed the crewman a hundred-dollar bill. With a roar of a powerful outboard motor, they took off without another word.

TWO

*B*ecause a lightweight speedboat spent more time above the waves than touching water, Hunter was on dry land and headed toward the city within twenty minutes.

James had better be having a heart attack or being robbed at gunpoint to take Hunter away from a party he'd been planning for months. He clenched down on his molars as he wove his way down Pontchartrain Boulevard far above the speed limit. He tried calling James's Metairie townhouse to no avail. With few other ideas, he drove to their downtown office. Nobody in their right mind would still be working after midnight on a Saturday night, but his partner often fit that description.

They had been best friends since pledging the same fraternity at Auburn College. Something about suffering hazing rituals had forged a bond during their freshman year. Later, when they shared a passion for stocks and high-flying investments, they talked about forming a partnership after graduation. James had interned and then been hired by a conservative investment house to gain experience. He had described it as Blue-Haired Boredom, Incorporated. Rebalancing portfolios twice a year to maximize returns and generate additional income didn't float his boat. As

soon as his contract expired and James felt comfortable venturing out on his own, he approached his college friend.

Hunter had gained his sea legs at big brother Ethan's insurance firm. The work was even less exciting than James's experience because Galen customers preferred conservative annuities for their financial nest eggs. In addition to that, Ethan, as CEO, oversaw every transaction Hunter made, tempering his younger brother's enthusiasm for adventurous investing. Hunter found himself playing solitaire on his computer during client phone calls to keep from falling asleep. Face-to-face meetings to discuss financial goals and risk assessment were similar to Chinese water torture. When he advised one particularly indecisive customer to "simply stash your money under the mattress where it will be safe," he knew he'd reached the end of his tenure with Galen Insurance. It was time to strike out on his own, to take a chance.

James Nowak shared the same desire to broker aggressive stocks and investments for risk-taking clients. No one liked to lose money when a market tanked or a particularly hot tip cooled off like January rain on a parade, but Galen-Nowak customers understood the risk-reward concept. No risk, no chance of high returns on your savings. Their company wasn't for the faint of heart or those who depended on interest income to supplement their Social Security checks. But just as a person shouldn't take his mortgage money to Las Vegas, Hunter tutored his clients to maintain diversified portfolios and not gamble more than they could afford to lose.

It was of no consequence that the brokerage start-up capital came from a trust fund Hunter inherited from his grandfather. James didn't have one red cent left after paying for his rehabbed condo, a new Corvette, and his steady stream of new-and-improved girlfriends. The trust fund would be paid back gradually as the business amassed clients and profits. Hunter wasn't worried about his initial investment. It was those that followed he started to question.

The parameters of their business partnership had been carefully spelled out in a contract, with everything above board. It didn't matter that James wouldn't see profits beyond his monthly paycheck for at least ten years. His salary was substantial.

Hunter forced himself to relax as he pulled into the parking lot. James's dark-green sports car gleamed even in dim light. For the second time that night, Hunter counted his blessings and tamped down an uneasy feeling in his gut. Foghorns on the river and faint sounds from the cruise ship terminal carried on the night air as he unlocked the door at the employee entrance. After a short elevator ride to the top floor, he stepped into their ultramodern office. Windows overlooked his beloved city, struggling to redefine itself after the cruel blow nature delivered the summer of 2005.

Hunter threaded his way between the secretarial desks and broker cubicles. Trash cans overflowed with almost as much debris next to them as within, while computer printouts and stacks of analyst reports cluttered every desktop. Brokerage houses looked as if they had been in a tornado's path by the end of the day. The cleaning crew apparently had not reached their office yet in their evening rotation.

Hunter felt an ominous twinge of dread as he approached the pair of executive suites spanning the back of the building. James's light was on. Equal in proportion and ambience, the two offices shared an adjoining bathroom complete with shower and double closets so that neither partner received more than the other. Hunter had even leased his own Corvette, not to be outdone in flashy horsepower. He laughed at himself, thinking how competitive young men could be.

"Hey, buddy," he called. Hunter pushed open the carved oak door. "Here I am. What is so urgent that it couldn't wait?"

His question hung unanswered in midair. Client files, usually stacked on the left, had been scattered across the floor. Coffee cups,

newspapers, mail, and desktop detritus had been swept from the surface. On the computer monitor, photos of Mardi Gras floats rotated on the screensaver. Then Hunter's blood turned cold. A body was sprawled on the floor next to the desk in an odd, frozen pose. One knee was bent to the side as though he'd tried to rise but changed his mind mid-attempt. Men didn't pass out in such poses. On the carpet a dark stain fanned from the head.

Hunter's dinner of crab ragout and lobster thermidore churned in his gut like acid. Lurching forward, he uttered a strangled, "James! What have you done?"

Watching a lifetime of horror movies and cop shows hadn't prepared him to find his best friend lying in a pool of blood. Bile rose in Hunter's throat as he stumbled back. Fighting his gag reflex, he steadied himself with the desk and blinked several times to be sure his mind hadn't concocted the terrible scene.

Nowak's brown eyes stared vacantly at the ceiling. Near his right hand, on the imported Aubusson carpet their decorator had insisted upon, rested a handgun. Hunter had never seen the gun before. Several absurd notions ran through his brain. *James doesn't own a gun. He hates hunting. He would rather get his exercise hitting golf balls into a water trap or bending his nine-iron around a tree trunk.*

Hunter reached out and grasped the cold steel of the gun. He hefted its weight and balance, the smooth finish. The anxiety that had begun in the back of his mind surged into a roar of frustration. "James, what did you do? What could have been so bad we couldn't work it out?" He dropped the gun, grabbed both lapels of James's jacket, and pulled him up. It was the same Armani suit he'd bought the day they signed their partnership papers.

James's head lolled back as Hunter half shook the dead man. Fighting down a wave of nausea and revulsion, he lowered the body back to the floor. The coppery stench of blood filled the

shadowy office. Hunter didn't hear the approaching sirens or shouts of identification as men entered the office. He heard nothing until someone spoke next to his ear along with the distinctive click of a round being chambered into place.

"Hold it right there, buddy. NOPD." Someone spoke with the slow drawl of upstate Alabama. "Show me your hands and get up real slow. Don't do anything quick-like. What's going on here? We got a call 'bout a robbery in progress, and look what we got instead."

Hunter stared up into the face of a New Orleans patrol officer, who was aiming his gun on the center of Hunter's chest. Another cop in a blue uniform entered the office from the right with a second piece of firepower.

The first officer kicked away the weapon and yanked Hunter to his feet by his jacket. After moving to the outer office, Hunter explained who he was and why he was there, but even after producing identification, one of the officers kept his eye on him.

EMTs, someone from the coroner's office, and crime scene techs flowed into the executive offices in a steady stream. Although a gurney went in, James never came out of his home-away-from-home. When Hunter failed to supply sought-after answers, he was handcuffed and taken to precinct headquarters. He was told he would be held overnight for questioning. Considering the family lawyer was dancing with his mother at her party, he refused the offer to have counsel present during his interrogation. He preferred to take his chances in county lockup rather than ruin Clotilde's birthday.

In the end, he spent the remainder of the evening in a holding cell surrounded by drunks and disorderlies. With such an assortment of companions, despite the luxurious accommodations, somehow Hunter knew he wouldn't sleep a wink that night.

THREE

Three days later
Office of Nathan Price Investigations

*M*r. Price? Someone is here to see you. The woman says she's your cousin." The assistant's tone of voice indicated she didn't believe that to be the case.

Nate pressed the intercom button. "She got a name, Maxine? Or is she just a generic cousin?" He stuffed police reports and preliminary evidence findings into his battered leather briefcase. He needed to talk to the so-called witnesses who reportedly overheard Hunter and James arguing recently. And he especially needed to talk again to Hunter. He'd been evasive about the matter, as though fighting with a partner was just business as usual. Nowak's death was being handled as a potential homicide, even though evidence that ruled out self-inflicted death wasn't in the files Nate had received.

"She says her name is Nicolette Price." Again Maxine's voice betrayed her skepticism.

Nate's mind conjured up an image of a skinny, all-elbows-and-knees tomboy who had followed him around like a spaniel at family reunions, graduations, and wedding receptions. Her pale blond hair usually needed washing and hung in a tangle around

her shoulders. He and his male cousins would invent elaborate schemes to rid themselves of the pest, including locking her up in the boat shed for hours at a time. He was assessing the windows for possible escape routes when the unstoppable Nicolette pushed open his door and marched in.

Well, she didn't exactly march. It was more along the lines of a totter on ridiculously high heels. Her jungle mane of frizzy hair at least had been tamed into normal curls, and the young woman no longer dressed in camouflage fatigues. However, her huge brown eyes contained the same persistent determination as before.

"Hello, cousin. Do you remember me? It's Nicki." She held out her hand, no longer adorned with huge rings and nail art.

Nate stared, a bit slack-jawed. Her conservative navy blue suit and starched white blouse were straight from a *Murder She Wrote* episode.

"Nicki Price," she said, her hand still hovering in the air. "Your Aunt Rose's daughter. I'm down from Natchez, Mississippi. What's the matter with you, Nate? I haven't changed that much." Her slow Delta drawl morphed into a tone of clipped impatience.

Okay, this was the cousin he remembered. He shook her hand to keep it from falling off her arm. "Hey, Nicki. How ya doin'? You here to do some sightseeing in the big city? I'm a little tied up today, but maybe I can point you in the right direction—"

"I didn't come to be a tourist. I'm here to help. And from what I read in the paper, you can use me." Without being asked, she sat down into the chair in front of his desk and adjusted her skirt hem carefully.

He tried not to sound as impatient as he felt. "What exactly do I need help with? I buy all my catfish at the grocery store these days, and I haven't bashed in anybody's mailbox in years."

A stony glare rewarded his attempt at humor. "That was a joke," he said, folding his hands on his desk.

“I’m here to help with the Nowak investigation. Based on what they reported in the *Times*, I believe Hunter Galen will be charged with murder. If you plan to keep him out of jail, I suggest we find the real killer or your best friend’s brother is on his way to Angola.”

“Nicki, how could you possibly help me?”

“I finished my courses in investigation and have taken two years of classes at Alcorn State. I’m fully trained and qualified to assist you in solving this case.”

He scratched the stubble on his jaw. “I remember my mom telling me you were at Alcorn, but that seems like a *long* time ago.” He put special emphasis on the word “long” just to needle her.

“I had to *work* to put myself through school.” She selected her own word to emphasize, sounding peevish. “It took me longer than you because I didn’t get a full ride to LSU on a football scholarship.”

“Easy, cousin. It’s not my fault women’s sports don’t command the respect or financial support they deserve.”

“Sorry.” She exhaled a sigh. “It’s been a long time since I defended volleyball as a serious team sport.”

As Nate laughed the tension in the room seemed to disappear. “Are you licensed in the state of Louisiana?”

“I read the Louisiana training manual, took their classes, and I now have my license. I applied for a concealed carry permit, but the state must finish their background check on me.” She straightened her spine against the chair.

“Will you have it soon?”

The slight flare of her nostrils betrayed he already knew the answer to that one. “After I log in a few more hours at the firing range, but I’m working on it. You know I’m a crack shot, Nate.”

“We don’t line up soda cans on the fence rail in New Orleans and shoot ’em off with a squirrel rifle, Nicki. We have really bad guys down here. Some of *them* are a crack shot too.” He spoke

slowly, his words holding a note of pity, as though consoling a not very bright child. “I don’t want to explain to Aunt Rose how her only child ended up in the hospital...or worse.” He shook his head as he rose to his feet. “Why don’t we get caught up with family gossip over supper some time?”

“I can help with your investigation, Nate, even before my permit to carry comes through. You need me, considering the way this case is going so far.” Scrambling to her feet, Nicki tugged her skirt down.

“Why exactly do I need you? I have an assistant. Maxine is all the support staff I can afford at the moment. Look around, kid. The population is nowhere near what it used to be. That means fewer missing children, fewer wayward spouses, and not as many employers spying on their employees. Business is off. I can’t afford to put you on the payroll just because you’re my favorite cousin.” He reached out to cuff her chin playfully the way he used to do.

She swatted his hand away. “I’m not asking for charity. I’m asking for a chance to prove myself. This is a high-profile case. Every little dribble of information lands on the front page or the six o’clock news. You’re just one man. And apparently you’re not great with media damage control. Just think how many clients may find a way to your door if you help this Galen guy beat the rap.”

Nate’s good humor vanished. “Hunter Galen didn’t kill his partner, Nicki. I’m not trying to help him get away with murder.”

“Whatever. I’ve gone through the training and I *can* be an asset. I’m just asking for a break. You owe me after tormenting me for years.”

Nate felt a twinge tighten his gut. “Did you really think I was that rotten?” he asked, trying to sound astonished. “I thought we got along pretty good.”

She shook her head, her hair floating around her shoulders

like a mane. “More like a cat playing with a mouse—real nice at first, but then the cat chomps off the little mouse’s head once it gets bored.”

“I never once chomped off your head.” He scrubbed his face with his hands. “Look, even if I were willing to give you your first big break, where would you live? Cheap places to stay are non-existent. And I’m not good with roommates. My advice is to go home. Get some experience in Mississippi. Cut your teeth in a small town before you come down to the big leagues.”

“How many paying customers do you think I can find in Natchez? Oh, except for our next-door neighbor, who hired me to find her missing cat. She insisted I take a ten-spot, which I donated to the animal shelter. I’ve already given up the lease on my apartment, and I have a place to stay. I didn’t plan to mooch off you.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Where, Nicolette? Where are you staying?”

She hesitated as though reluctant to divulge too many details. “In a trailer park in Chalmette with an old friend of mine. It’s a short commute down St. Claude and I have a car.”

“In an old FEMA trailer?” His brow furrowed with concern. “That’s no place to live. Those little communities are dangerous, *ma petite*. You tell your friend to get out of there too. It’s not safe for single women.” He glanced at his watch. “I gotta go, but give me your number. I’ll call you and we can talk more later. I’m supposed to meet the dangerous *murderer* in ten minutes.”