

MAGNOLIA MOONLIGHT

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although Natchez is home to several Baptist churches, Calvary Baptist and the events which took place there are purely fictional.

*The river told its mind to me without reserve,
delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it
uttered them with a voice.*

MARK TWAIN



*The river was doing what it liked to do,
just as a mule will work for you for ten years for
the privilege of kicking you once.*

WILLIAM FAULKNER

ONE

Nate Price sat down to breakfast that morning a happy man. What was there not to like about life? The sun was shining. He'd just run four miles along the levee in his best time yet. There were fresh blueberries and candied pecans in his bowl of cereal. And he had married the prettiest girl ever to graduate from their high school. Lifting the spoon to his mouth, he crunched into his whole grains and soy milk with contentment.

"Could you pour that into a to-go cup, honey? I need a ride to work today." Isabelle entered their tiny kitchen on stiletto heels in a faint mist of sweet perfume. In her silk dress with her long hair coiled into a knot, she looked like an investment banker or college professor.

Nate peered over his coffee mug. "It's cereal with milk, not a breakfast shake. What's with the snazzy getup? I thought Realty World agents were required to wear their lime green blazer at all times. And why do you need a ride when you own a perfectly good Prius?"

"There should be a limit on the number of questions before nine a.m." Leaning over for a kiss, Isabelle grabbed his bowl of cereal and dumped it into a plastic tub. "Take your spoon. You can eat while I drive." She filled her travel mug with coffee.

Nate crossed his arms and made no effort to move.

“Okay, you win.” Isabelle held up her index finger. “First of all, my blazer isn’t lime. That particular shade of green is called ‘kelly.’ Second, Mr. Randall told his agents to wear their Sunday best, no blazers today. We’re attending a symposium on mortgage finance at the Grand Hotel. Me? I’m going for the free lunch.” She winked a magnificent green eye.

“You usually fill up with a side salad and breadstick.” Nate snapped a lid on his mug and reached for his keys. “And now for the million-dollar question—what’s wrong with your car?”

“Remember that little knock in my engine? The mechanic said I would need a new transmission soon, and that was four thousand miles ago. Yesterday I could barely hear the radio over the knocking.” She shrugged.

Nate halted midway through the doorway. “You should have told me sooner, Izzy. What if you had broken down coming home from an open house? Those country roads don’t have streetlights.”

She slipped an arm around his waist as they walked toward the car. “We’re saving for our honeymoon and to buy a house. Our budget can’t stretch any thinner.”

“Two working people need two vehicles. With two hundred thousand miles on that car, I’d say you got your money’s worth. Nothing lasts forever.” Nate opened the driver’s door for her.

“Well, finances are just a bit tight. You know I loved moving from Germantown to slower-paced Natchez, but fewer people mean fewer sales, and less expensive real estate means smaller commission checks.” She climbed into his SUV and tugged down her skirt.

“It’s nobody’s fault. It’s just life, my sweet bride,” Nate said around a mouthful of mushy cereal.

Isabelle backed down the narrow driveway between the neighbor’s picket fence and her row of azaleas. “How can I still be a bride when our second anniversary is in two weeks? I’m just another old married woman.”

“Not to me you’re not.” Nate kissed her cheek. “New rule. You stay a bride until after the honeymoon, even if we’re in our forties.”

She laughed, a sound that never failed to warm his soul. “Maybe we should forget our dreams and go to New Orleans for a few days. We could stay at Nicki and Hunter’s apartment while they’re in Europe. They have offered the place more than once.”

Nate tipped his bowl to drink the milk. “Nope. I’m not honeymooning in the French Quarter. I lived there for years, remember? Let’s buy a used car with what I squirreled away for the trip and use your next commission check for a honeymoon. Saving for a new house will remain on track.”

“Good idea. We’ll qualify for a senior citizen discount by then.” Isabelle accelerated on an open stretch of road. “Maybe we should put a bid on the place we rent. How much could the landlord want for a nine-hundred-square-foot, one-bedroom house?”

Nate slid the empty bowl under the seat. “You have illuminated the fly in your ointment—*one* bedroom. Call me crazy, but someday I hope we’re surrounded by dozens of mini Nathaniel and Isabelle look-alikes. We’ll need lots of bedrooms so when they cry at night my dutiful wife can hurry down the hall while I get my beauty sleep.”

Isabelle shot him an evil glare. “There are so many things wrong with that mental picture that I don’t even know where to start. But because we’re almost at work, we’ll continue this discussion at supper. Whose turn is it to cook?”

“Definitely yours. I’m hoping for a nice steak grilled to perfection over hardwood briquettes, and maybe fresh asparagus with a tangy hollandaise.” He leaned back and closed his eyes.

“Nope, it’s your turn. So I’ll expect my usual burger, charred to a crisp, with baked beans and bag salad.” Isabelle turned into Realty World’s parking lot, the largest real estate brokerage firm in Natchez. “Good grief, look at the cars already! Let’s hope these are all eager buyers with excellent credit scores.”

Nate jumped out and jogged to the driver's side. He had only enough time to wrap his arms around his wife when Izzy's boss interrupted them.

"Good morning, Mr. Price. I'm glad you dropped Isabelle off today." Mr. Randall, looking professional in his charcoal-gray suit, approached from the back entrance. *No lime green blazer for the big shot.* "Could you step inside for a few minutes? I need another man's opinion on something. You know how these women love to gang up on me."

"Sure, I can spare a few minutes. In fact, I have all the time in the world."

Nate had finished his recent missing person investigation by locating the twenty-year-old woman in Las Vegas. The girl had agreed to call her parents but refused to come home. She was making too much money dealing blackjack to go back to selling cosmetics at the mall. And a suspected philandering spouse turned out to be someone moonlighting at a second job. The husband had planned to surprise his wife with an anniversary cruise down the Danube River. Nate felt so sorry for the guy that he had cut his usual fee in half. The agency had a corporate fraud case in New Orleans, and the suspected misuse of a power of attorney case in Vicksburg, but no new Natchez cases. He needed some more work soon, or he would be twiddling his thumbs.

"Good. I love having you around." Isabelle beamed as she reached for his hand. "Be sure to compliment Mary Jo on her new hairdo," she whispered. "Chopping off that ponytail was quite traumatic."

However, once they entered the building, Nate had no opportunity to assess Mary Jo's coiffure or do much of anything else.

"Surprise!" Shouts from at least three dozen people nearly blew the roof off the one-story building.

Dumbfounded, Nate and Isabelle gazed around a sea of familiar faces. Not only had every real estate agent beaten Isabelle to work, but Nate's new employees and his assistant were part of the crowd, along with his partner from New Orleans, her husband, and most

of their friends. “Good grief,” he muttered. “There’s my Aunt Rose. What’s going on?”

Isabelle’s astonishment rivaled his. “My aunt and uncle from Clarksdale are here. I haven’t seen them in two years.”

In a flurry of backslapping, handshaking, and cheek-kissing, Mr. Randall herded Nate and Isabelle toward the conference table. But instead of scratch pads, pens, and printouts of recent listings, it was covered with pink paper, confetti, and bright streamers. A weighted cluster of helium balloons offered sentiments of “Best Wishes,” “Congratulations,” and “Bon Voyage.”

“Bon voyage?” Nate asked no one in particular. “The only place I’m going is my office.” He tightened his arm around Isabelle as though they were surrounded by dangerous people instead of their closest friends and relatives.

“We’ll just see about that.” Michael Preston, his newest employee at the agency, clamped a hand on his shoulder.

Then his partner, Nicki Galen, stepped front and center. “You’re not really setting sail, but I needed a short phrase for taking a trip.” She rocked on her heels, snickering. “They put me in charge of the balloons.”

Nate narrowed his gaze at her. “What are you doing in Natchez? I thought you and Hunter were vacationing in France or Switzerland, someplace hoity-toity.”

“Nobody says hoity-toity anymore, cousin. Anyway, we flew back early when we heard about the party. Pretty nice balloons, no?” Nicki winked mischievously.

“Check out the cakes,” a voice called. The crowd shuffled them toward the table, where decorated cupcakes spelled out *Happy Anniversary*. In the center one giant cake had been emblazoned with *Have fun, Nate and Izzy*. A small white envelope protruded from the frosting.

“What is going on?” demanded Isabelle, as though beset with the same sense of peril. She leaned into his side as the crowd shouted several commands:

“Open the card!”

“Pack your bags!”

“Stop looking so scared!”

Nate plucked the sugar-coated envelope from the frosting. “Fine, but I have one question. Don’t *any* of you people have work to do?”

Receiving only laughter in response, he ripped open the envelope, licked his fingers, and scanned the single sheet. Then he handed it to Isabelle, his mouth agape.

“What is it?” She read key phrases aloud. “Three weeks in a luxurious beachfront mansion in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Breakfast served on the porch each morning, afternoon refreshments on the lawn, true Southern hospitality. Walking distance to shops, restaurants, and the marina. Porch swing, free use of bicycles, Wi-Fi, and two bedrooms.”

“*Two* bedrooms?” Michael scratched his head. “Is someone planning to join them on their honeymoon?”

“That’s in case they have a lover’s quarrel.” A disembodied voice floated from the back of the room.

Nate recognized the voice of his Vicksburg based PI, Elizabeth Kirby. “You’re here too?” He feigned annoyance. “Doesn’t *anyone* put in an honest day’s work anymore?”

“Not when we needed to take matters into our own hands.” Mr. Randall squeezed in between Nate and Isabelle. “When it became clear you two were never going to take a honeymoon, your fellow agents and Nate’s employees took up a collection. Then your cousin shook down your friends and relatives and fattened the purse.” Randall drew a second envelope from his pocket and handed it to Isabelle. “We were able to upgrade you to a suite, and there’s enough spending money for lunch, dinner, dolphin-watching excursions, and several bottles of suntan lotion.”

Isabelle looked ready to faint. “I-I don’t know what to say other than thank you from the bottom of my...our hearts.” Teary-eyed, she turned to her husband.

Clearing his throat, Nate had his own lump of emotion to swallow. “We were just discussing a honeymoon this morning. Your generosity and thoughtfulness are overwhelming. As soon as we get a break in our schedules—”

“Oh, no,” interrupted Michael. “That’s not how this works. Read the fine print. We have prepaid three weeks during prime season on the gorgeous Mississippi coast. Clear your calendars because your honeymoon begins on Sunday.”

“*This* Sunday?” Isabelle clutched her throat as though choking on a fish bone.

“Yep. You two lovebirds leave in three days.” Nicki picked up a cupcake and took a bite. “I would start packing if I were you.”

“But we need to look for a used car for me.” Isabelle sounded more like a child than a woman in her thirties.

Marie, Realty World’s assistant, took hold of Isabelle’s hand. “You’ll only need one vehicle while you’re at the beach, and there will still be plenty of used cars here when you get back. I’ll make sure your open houses or house showings are covered by other agents. I’ll bet they’ll even pass any commissions on to you.” She scanned the room, honing in on Isabelle’s fellow agents.

“Oh, no,” Isabelle protested. “I could never let anyone—”

“Nonsense,” said Marie. “You can return the favor sometime down the line. And when this party’s over, you and I are going to Victoria’s Secret and Bath and Body Works, my treat. Now let’s have something to eat.” Marie grabbed two cupcakes and handed one to Isabelle.

For the next thirty minutes, Nate ate sweets, drank bad coffee, and listened to advice from well-intentioned friends. He heard about every Gulf Coast landmark, restaurants worth the money, which fishing charters knew the best spots, and how to avoid sand fleas. His Aunt Rose provided tips on foot massage that made him blush. Nicki snapped a picture each time he took a bite of cupcake. And his cousin assured him she would watch the paper for great deals on used cars.

Finally, his two employees approached from the sidelines. “I hate to break this party up, but shouldn’t we be getting to the office?” Michael took Nate’s empty coffee cup and plate of cake crumbs. “We have a pile of cases to sort through.”

Nate smiled with gratitude at the ruse. Michael was the last person one would expect with aspirations of becoming a PI, but if sheer determination and willpower were indicators of future success, someday he would be one of the best. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t be any day soon.

Michael had spent his high school and college years with his nose in a book or staring at a computer screen. Nerd. Geek. Egg-head. The terms for studious types might change from generation to generation, but the personality remained the same. These men didn’t hunt, fish, pump iron, or race custom-built cars on dirt tracks. Instead, they made their fortunes with Internet start-up companies, investment banking, or, unfortunately, cybercrime. Michael might be an untrained PI, but in this day and age, he already possessed skills Price Investigations needed.

“Let me just say goodbye to our host,” Nate murmured to the pair. He walked over to a little group of people by the window. “Thanks for organizing this party, Mr. Randall. Isabelle and I will never forget everyone’s generosity as long as we live.” He extended his hand to the distinguished broker.

“We all cherish Isabelle at Realty World and were happy to help.”

Elizabeth stepped forward. “We’re glad you included us. I don’t know what we’ll do while Nate and his wife are basking in the sun.”

“Don’t believe a word of it,” he said to Randall. “These two won’t even know I’m gone.” Then Nate turned to address the crowd. “Thanks, everyone, for the incredible gift. Be prepared for tons of pictures when we get back.” After more handshaking, Nate finally shrugged into his sport coat, waved at his wife, and headed for the door. Across the room, Isabelle was surrounded by women, all talking at the same time.

Outside in the parking lot, Nate sucked in a deep breath. “Wow, I sure didn’t see that coming.”

“Having lots of friends comes in handy.” Michael was still staring at the back door in amazement.

“Yeah, but what goes around comes around.” Elizabeth clucked her tongue. “You and Isabelle will be invited to every graduation, bar mitzvah, baptism, and retirement party for years. Not to mention forced to buy raffle tickets and Girl Scout cookies until you drop over dead.”

Nate laughed. “You two sure have different perspectives on group fund-raising. Thanks for getting me out the door. Not that I’m not grateful, but that kind of party can last for hours.”

“There’s only so much smiling one face can handle,” said Elizabeth.

Michael shook his head. “On that note, I’ll take my leave. I have a class on Mississippi gun laws starting in twenty minutes.”

Nate watched him putter away in his fuel-efficient car before turning to his other employee. “Beth, why aren’t you in Vicksburg? Don’t tell me you drove here for a going-away party. You could have sent your ten bucks through the mail.”

She chuckled. “For your information, boss, I chipped in twenty-five. But your cupcake send-off isn’t the sole reason I’m in Natchez.” She stared at the road even though Michael was long gone. “My mother asked me to come home for Pastor Dean’s funeral. She’s worried there won’t be enough mourners.”

Nate slicked a hand through his hair. “Yeah, I heard about that. But considering the number of Baptists in town, there should be a good turnout. Isabelle and I will be there because she attended Calvary while growing up. Now we go to the nondenominational by the freeway.”

Beth shrugged. “We’ll see how many folks show up. Some members might boycott because the preacher offed himself.”

“*What?*” Nate was shocked by her insensitivity.

“Sorry, that was crude. I meant to say some might hold it against Reverend Dean because he committed suicide. A man of God isn’t supposed to take his own life.”

“What are you talking about? The paper said he had a heart condition, so I assumed that was the cause of death.”

Beth hiked her purse up her shoulder. “Not unless a bad ticker made him climb a stool with a rope around his neck.”

Nate shuddered. “That is just awful, especially for whoever found him.”

“My mom said it was his wife. Alice Dean was always nice to me. I used to babysit for their little girl.” Despite her earlier detachment, Beth’s eyes filled with tears.

“Well, for sure Izzy and I will be there tomorrow. Thank goodness we don’t leave until Sunday.”

“I sure am a downer today. When you’re about to leave on the best vacation of your life, I’m talking suicide and people’s fondness for being judgmental.” Beth swiped at her tears. “Go to the office and clean off your desk. Tell Maxine to clear your calendar and hold your calls. Don’t worry about me and Wonder Boy. We’ll hold down the fort while you and Isabelle have fun in the sun.”

“You do have a way with words, Ms. Kirby.” Nate climbed into his SUV and lowered the window. “Will I see you at the office later?”

“I don’t know. I left Vicksburg at four this morning and drove straight to the party. I haven’t been home yet. Can’t wait to see what else Mom has in store for me. My bedroom is probably exactly how I left it.”

“You’ll always be her little girl. So you’re willing to stay in town while I’m gone? Michael isn’t ready to be on his own.”

Beth looked everywhere but at him. “If that’s what you want, Nate, but I would prefer to go to the funeral, eat a chicken salad sandwich, and get out of Natchez as fast as I can.”

He started the engine. “Your case in Vicksburg should be wrapping up by now. I thought you had plenty of evidence to present to the DA.”

“True, but I’m following a lead for new work. I’d love to stay where I am. That town has grown on me.” She started to back away.

“Any new cases had better come with a fat retainer. I know you’re living as cheaply as you can, but I can’t afford to set up a Vicksburg office.”

“Maybe if I—”

“No, Beth, I need you in Natchez. We can talk about this when I come back, but right now I need to find a Panama hat and new flip-flops. The beach and my lovely bride are calling. Isabelle and I will see you tomorrow at the funeral.” He drove away to end the argument.

Beth Kirby was a great PI, but at times she could be like a dog with a bone.

TWO

Beth awoke with a crick in her neck and a bad taste in her mouth. The neck pain was caused by sleeping on a worn-out mattress that should have been put to the curb years ago. And the bad taste? Too much Diet Coke, fried food, and local gossip she would have preferred not to have heard. Didn't her mother know about baking or grilling skinless chicken breasts? Couldn't she steam some broccoli or at least make baked potatoes instead of French fries? And why would she care which of her ex-friends had been dumped by their husbands?

A better question would be: *Why did I come home?* Beth stood under the shower long after the soap and hair conditioner were gone. It had been years since she attended Calvary Baptist, and the less time she sat around her mother's kitchen table, the better. Rita never failed to remind her only daughter that she had made a mess of her life. Would she never live down a past mistake? She'd moved on to a new career, while the other party continued his life without a hitch. Surely the gossips in town had found tastier tidbits by now.

Ten minutes later, dressed in navy slacks with a matching jacket, she marched into the kitchen ready to face the music.

"Slacks, Betsy? Didn't you bring a dress with you?" The furrows in her mother's forehead deepened.

"First, Mom, please call me Beth. I'm no longer ten years old.

Second, I don't have any dresses unless you count that red strapless number I wore to the prom. That's probably still in the closet."

"Don't be disrespectful. I thought you liked Reverend and Alice Dean." Rita filled two mugs with coffee.

"I did... I do. That's why I'm here wearing the most appropriate outfit I own." Beth rummaged through the cupboard. "Don't you have Special K or Total?"

"Sit. There's a ham and cheese omelet warming in the oven, along with hash browns. Who knows how long the funeral will last? It could be hours before we eat lunch." Rita carried enough food for six teenage boys to the table.

Beth noticed the stiffness in her mother's gait and deep creases around her mouth and eyes. *I'm gone for less than eighteen months, and Mom ages ten years?* "Are your hips bothering you?" she asked, taking a small portion of eggs and potatoes. "You should see a doctor."

"Why should I pay some quack sixty dollars to hear I have arthritis? I'm old. Everybody gets it if they live long enough." Rita scooped twice as large a portion onto her plate.

"A doctor might prescribe exercises to improve mobility. The copay would be my treat."

"Save your money. Without a husband to take care of you, you'll need it for the future." Rita patted her hand, her brows lifting in anticipation. "Will I ever meet your new boss? Is this Nate Price nice looking?"

"He's *very* nice looking in a rugged sort of way—tall, blond, and wait for it... married, for almost two years. They're finally going on a honeymoon."

"What a shame!" Rita swallowed a mouthful of coffee.

"For Nate or his bride?" Beth teased.

"For you, of course." Her mom topped off their mugs. "I'm surprised Nate found another case in Vicksburg. Doesn't that town have their own PIs? And why would you enjoy living where you don't know a soul?"

“You hit the nail on the head. Nobody knows me either.” Beth ate three more forkfuls of eggs and drained her coffee. “I’ll wait for you on the porch. I have surveillance tapes to review on my laptop, but I’m ready to go whenever you are.” Halfway to the door, she remembered her manners. “Thanks for breakfast, Mom. It was delicious.”

“You’re welcome. You don’t want to get too skinny. Most men like a little meat on a gal’s bones.”

Gal? What century does my mother inhabit?

Thirty minutes later Rita emerged from the house wearing black from head to toe.

“Let’s take my car since you seldom have more than a quarter of a tank in yours,” said Beth.

“I believe your father filled it up for me, but that’s fine.” Rita climbed in and remained lost in thought for several minutes. Then she swiveled to face her daughter. “Do you think Reverend Dean is in heaven?”

Beth kept her focus on the road. “Why wouldn’t he be? He preached his faith and lived a good life.”

Rita rubbed her knuckles. “Some of the ladies think suicide is an unforgivable sin, especially when committed by a pastor. He of all people should know better.”

“Why would Reverend Dean have an easier row to hoe than the rest of us? Knowing Scripture doesn’t guarantee anyone a bed of roses.”

“What could have been so terrible? He had a pretty wife, their daughter got good grades in school, and their house was paid for.”

Beth applied the brakes at the stop sign and then turned to look at her mother. “How on earth would you know all of that?”

Rita replied without hesitation. “Carol Ann works in the school office, and Pam Henderson handles mortgages at the bank they use. And the prettiness of Alice Dean is obvious.”

“Have none of your cronies heard of federal privacy laws? Those

women should be fired, and you shouldn't pass along private information."

Following the reprimand, both Kirby women remained silent for the rest of the drive. When they reached the church, mourners were already milling on the steps, allowing Rita to join her loose-lipped friends. Beth spotted Nate and Isabelle near the door, along with Michael, the overly enthusiastic but underachieving new PI. Nothing galled her more than when Nate referred to them as "his new hires." With her years of experience, how could Nate lump her with an unskilled wannabe?

"Good morning, Nate, Isabelle," she greeted. "Hi, Michael."

"Good morning," murmured Isabelle. "I understand Reverend Dean was your pastor, Beth. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, but it's been a number of years." Beth suppressed an uncharacteristic twinge of jealousy for Isabelle's chic dress and high heels.

With a clang of church bells, Nate herded them all inside, where they sat through two readings, three hymns, one off-key solo, and several eulogies about the pastor's zeal and humanitarian nature. The fact he chose to end his life stood like the proverbial elephant in the sanctuary. Throughout the service, Alice Dean sat with her young daughter in the front row, dabbing her eyes. Odd that no one else had joined her in the pew. Didn't she have siblings or close friends she could lean on? It would be a question for Beth's know-all, tell-all mother that evening. After the closing prayer, the assistant minister directed everyone to the cemetery and then invited mourners back to the social hall for lunch.

Outside in the bright sunshine, Beth wandered through a sea of polyester dresses and straw hats trying to find her mother. Unfortunately, Michael found her first.

"Hey, Elizabeth." He stepped from behind a white column. "Mind if I ride to Natchez City Cemetery with y'all?"

He always used her formal name. Beth considered correcting

him but decided she rather liked it. At least he didn't call her Betsy, a nickname that refused to die. "My mom is with me today," she said, shading her eyes as she peered up at him. "Can't you ride with Nate and Isabelle?"

"Nate's cousin from New Orleans and her husband will be in the backseat. That would mean squeezing five into an Escape."

Beth refrained from suggesting the cargo area because Michael was at least half a foot taller than her. "Sure, but let Mom sit up front because she gets motion sick." Beth spotted Rita's plumed hat in a cluster of busybodies and marched in that direction.

Michael remained on her heels. "Thanks. Having grown up in Brookhaven, you would think I would know my way around Natchez. But I'm still discovering what this city has to offer."

"Yep. We have ourselves a booming metropolis here. Paris, Rome, and New York must be losing sleep."

Her sarcasm only increased Michael's glibness. He chattered all the way to the historic cemetery. Even Rita couldn't get a word in edgewise. He didn't stop talking until they parked between rows of blooming crepe myrtle trees, the heavy fragrance overwhelming the senses.

Climbing out, Michael offered her mother his arm. "Would you like to hang on to me, Mrs. Kirby? There's some uneven ground ahead."

"Thank you, young man." Hooking her arm through his, Rita peppered Michael with questions about *his people* until they reached the gravesite. Then she dropped his arm and latched on to a friend, doubtlessly another gossip.

Beth sighed as Michael joined her side. "I hope my mother didn't get too personal," she said. "She feels any question is fair game."

"Not a problem. She's really very friendly."

Beth frowned without looking at her coworker.

For the next ten minutes, the stand-in pastor delivered a final homily and then invited mourners to say their goodbyes. One by

one, they stepped forward to place a yellow rose atop the casket. Beth and Michael took their turn and then stood at the back of the group waiting for her mother.

“Know anything about that?” Michael asked, pointing at a stone monument in the distance. “I’ll bet there’s a story.”

“Of course there is. This is Natchez,” she said. “That’s the Fallen Angel, but everybody calls it the Turning Angel. A drug company blew up a hundred years ago, killing most of its employees. The owner bought the plot and the monument to commemorate them.” Beth gazed at the fast-growing kudzu barely kept at bay in the cemetery.

“Why did the name change?”

“Because like most places, Natchez has its share of nutcases who swear the angel turns whenever a car drives by. Needless to say, it has to be at night and your headlights must be aimed just right.” Beth offered him an exaggerated eye roll.

“Are you usually cynical or only at funerals?” Michael squinted into the sun.

“I’m always like this, even when nobody cashes in their chips.” The words had barely left her mouth when Beth heard a gasp. She pivoted around to face Alice Dean. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Mrs. Dean. I meant no disrespect. Your husband was always nice to me.”

Alice’s pale and pinched features softened. “I know you liked Paul, Beth, and he was fond of you. That’s why I wanted to speak to you before the luncheon.”

Michael shuffled his size twelve shoes in the grass. “I’ll wait for you by the car, Elizabeth, and keep your mom company.”

“If you work with Beth, maybe you should hear this too.” Mrs. Dean shifted her weight in the long grass. “Paul didn’t cash in his chips, or choose the easy way out, or any of the other euphemisms for suicide.”

“Please forgive my—”

Alice waved away Beth’s apology. “What I meant was Paul didn’t take his own life. He would never do such a thing. He loved me

and our daughter besides the fact his faith wouldn't condone such an act."

Beth glanced at Michael, who was studying the widow like a bug under a magnifying glass. "Was there a note or any kind of explanation?" she asked.

"The police found a note, but Paul never talked that way. He wouldn't have used those phrases. Either he didn't write it, or he was coerced into writing it."

Beth reached for Mrs. Dean's hand. Probably less than a decade separated the two women in age, but vastly different backgrounds and experiences provided little common ground. "I can't imagine how awful this must be for you and little Katie, but I'm sure the police will investigate your husband's death thoroughly."

She pulled her hand back. "Are you really that naive? You of all people should know judgments are made based on appearances that may have nothing to do with the truth." The woman's amber eyes filled with tears. "Please help me, Beth. I heard you became a private investigator, and I don't know where else to turn."

Now it was her turn to shuffle her shoe leather through the grass. "I am a PI, but I work for Price Investigations. Right now I'm working a case in Vicksburg—a caregiver has been misusing her power of attorney to pilfer money from an elderly woman's account."

Mrs. Dean lifted her chin. "As tragic as that sounds, I assure you the dreadful allegations levied against my husband make this case no less worthy of your time."

Michael took a step forward. "What Miss Kirby is trying to say is we're not at liberty to accept new work. Those decisions are made by Nate Price, our boss."

"Yes, that's correct, and, unfortunately, Mr. and Mrs. Price will be leaving on their honeymoon Sunday morning."

Alice consulted her watch. "I must get to the luncheon or people will talk more than they already are. Could you set up a meeting with Mr. Price? Shall we say tomorrow morning?"

Beth opened her mouth to speak, but Michael beat her to the

punch. "I'm sure Nate will be happy to meet you, Mrs. Dean. Why don't you come by his office on Jefferson Street at nine o'clock?" He held out a business card.

"I'll be there. Thank you." Alice plucked the card from Michael's fingers and walked away.

Beth held her tongue until the woman was beyond earshot. Then, "Have you lost your mind, Michael? Nate's not going to be the least bit happy. He has plenty to do before a three-week vacation."

"I think you're overreacting because you knew the deceased personally. The agency is looking for new cases, so why don't we wait to see what Nate has to say?" Michael stuck out his elbow. "Care to hang on to me on the walk back to the car?"

"You seem to have mistaken me for my mother. That's not something you should do if you're hoping for a long life." Beth marched toward the row of parked cars, annoyed with him for some reason.

Michael trailed at her heels, reminding Beth of a puppy she once owned. However, he was nowhere near as cute or lovable.

THREE

Nate didn't mind stopping at the office on a Saturday. After all, he and Isabelle had done most of their packing the day before after the funeral. Today they would stop at a discount store for new swimsuits, sandals, and inflatable rafts and then stock up on powdered tea, snacks, and fresh fruit at the grocery store to avoid high prices at the beach. They canceled the newspaper, asked the post office to hold their mail, and arranged for a neighbor to feed Isabelle's cat. Today Isabelle planned to water the plants, clean out the fridge, and place their home on Neighborhood Watch for the next three weeks. Not that they owned much that would interest thieves, but nobody wanted to return to a ransacked mess. Following his appointment with the widow, Nate would have the Escape's oil changed and tires rotated, and then they would be ready to leave early the next morning.

He was a little curious about the appointment. He'd watched the aloof Mrs. Dean at the service, the graveside burial, and the poorly attended luncheon. Judging from the number of sandwiches, apparently twice as many people had been anticipated. Alice Dean had barely said six words to any particular mourner. Grief was one thing, but the woman looked angry instead of sad, distrustful rather than despondent. So when Michael and Elizabeth told him about the meeting, Nate's interest piqued.

His two employees had very different perspectives on the case. Michael felt the new widow was hiding something and wished Price Investigations to help her finish whatever her husband started. Beth thought the woman was delusional due to grief, or the victim of a common misconception that good people deserved a happily-ever-after ending to their lives. So Nate wasn't surprised to find all three waiting in his outer office at ten minutes to nine.

"Hey, Nate," chimed Beth and Michael simultaneously.

"Good morning, Mr. Price. I'm Alice Dean." The expensively dressed woman extended a hand. "I don't believe I thanked you yesterday for coming to the funeral."

"How do you do, ma'am. My deepest sympathies on your loss." They shook hands, their fingers barely touching. "Michael, Beth, please wait out here for a few minutes. I would like to speak with Mrs. Dean privately." Michael looked crestfallen, while Beth seemed miffed, but Nate saw no need to air the widow's laundry before others if he decided not to take the case.

Once seated, Mrs. Dean launched into several reasons why her husband of fifteen years wouldn't have killed himself—not one of which refuted the stark reality that Paul Dean had been found in their garage, hanging from a rafter with a noose around his neck. A note begging her forgiveness had been left on the workbench.

After a respectful pause, Nate provided her with a logical progression of questions: Was the note in Paul's handwriting? Had there been anything troubling your husband lately? Was anyone seen near your home around the time of death? Were the rope, stool, paper, and pen items your family owned? Did the police promptly respond to the 9-1-1 call and thoroughly inspect the garage area?

Not one of her answers pointed to anything other than suicide. For several moments Nate stared at a small rip in the drapes before delivering his inevitable conclusion. "If the police found no evidence to suggest otherwise—in other words, no signs of foul play—then I'm not sure what you want us to do. You have no case, ma'am, but you do have this office's sincerest sympathy."

“I don’t want your pity, Mr. Price. I need someone to believe me.” Mrs. Dean tightened the grip on her purse. “The police didn’t look very hard. Rumors had been swirling for days that Paul had stolen money from the church. Some of those *investigating* cops go to Calvary Baptist.”

“Isabelle and I spoke to several church members during the luncheon. Everyone spoke highly of Reverend Dean.”

The widow’s upper lip twitched imperceptibly. “Your wife left the congregation years ago. Since moving back, you have attended the evangelical church on Main Street. No one really knows you and Isabelle, and people don’t gossip with strangers.”

Nate hesitated, contemplating her response. “You believe someone murdered your husband and staged his death?”

“Correct, and I wish to hire your firm to find out the truth. Paul wasn’t a thief, and he didn’t take his own life.” Her composure started to crack as a tear slipped down her cheek. “Find out who else had access to church funds and who had a grudge against my husband.” She drew a blank check from her purse and scribbled quickly. “I understand from Beth that you’re leaving tomorrow. Here is an advance to get your team started in your absence. I’ll pay whatever is the going rate, plus expenses.”

Temporarily befuddled, Nate stared at a one followed by four zeros. *Ten thousand dollars?* “I need to consult my associates before agreeing. Michael Preston was a forensic accountant at his previous job, so he has the necessary background there. However, he’s not a fully trained PI yet. It’s true that Beth has investigative experience, but she’s still finishing a case in Vicksburg.”

Mrs. Dean’s intense gaze practically bored a hole through Nate’s forehead. “If money is the issue, I’ll add another ten thousand to the retainer. I have my own resources from a trust fund from my father in case you’re afraid our jointly held accounts might be called into question down the road.”

“No, ma’am. That’s not why I’m hesitant.” Nate took only thirty seconds to ponder the matter. The firm needed a new case, one that

paid well. None of his missing persons, or philandering spouses, or caregiver pilferers had generated enough to pay three salaries, plus their assistant. Fortunately, his New Orleans partner received free office space courtesy of her rich husband. “Very well. We’ll accept the case. You can expect a full report in one week’s time. At that point, I’ll decide whether to return the remaining advance or continue our investigation. I will not continue to take a client’s money without just cause.”

Mrs. Dean rose to an impressive height, courtesy of four-inch heels. “You’re a rare man if you possess the integrity you imply. I can be reached at these numbers.” She laid a card on his desk. “Now, if you would ask your protégés to stop by my home in a few hours, say twelve o’clock, I won’t detain you longer.” Halfway to the door, she halted. “Please forgive my bad manners. Lately I haven’t been able to think about anyone but myself. I wish both you and your bride a relaxing and restorative honeymoon.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I’ll be in touch.”

When she opened the door, Nate’s protégés practically fell into his office. Mrs. Dean nodded at them stiffly and then left as quickly as possible.

“Were you two eavesdropping?” Nate demanded the moment she was gone. “If I’d wanted you to hear the conversation, I would have invited you inside.”

Beth strode toward the more comfortable of his two upholstered chairs. “How else can we help you decide if the case has merit?”

Michael slunk past him rather sheepishly and headed for the windows. “I thought eavesdropping was a valuable surveillance tool. I was merely honing my skills.”

Nate gritted his teeth. “I’ll let you know when it’s time for a spy cam, Mike. And because you’re a local, Beth, I didn’t want to publicly air Mrs. Dean’s dirty laundry.”

Beth’s blue eyes flashed. “I understand the concept of professional confidentiality. I wouldn’t talk about Alice Dean’s suspicions

whether or not you took the case.” Her focus landed on the check in the center of his desk blotter. “And I see that you are. Ten grand is hard to pass up.”

Michael’s opinion was also immediately apparent. “That’s great news! I can’t wait to dig into the family’s financial records.”

“Hold your horses, cyber sleuth,” said Beth. “We need signed contracts and Alice’s permission to snoop into her personal affairs, or the agency could be sued for invasion of privacy.”

Nate clenched down on his molars while counting to five. “You both need to settle down and remember which one of us is the boss.”

“That would be you,” Michael answered without hesitation.

“I apologize if I overstepped.” Beth’s tone contained more indignation than remorse. “I was trying to sort this out in my head and don’t see much of a case here. My old preacher got caught with his hand in the cookie jar and couldn’t live with the shame. End of story. Stealing is a biggie in the Christian rule book.”

“‘You must not steal’ is the eighth commandment,” added Michael helpfully.

Nate mustered his most imperious demeanor. “It’s *far* from the end of the story. So while I head for fun in the sun, you two will decide if Reverend Dean took his own life. Plenty of murders have been disguised as suicides before. Look at their personal and joint accounts along with church finances. Find out what their marriage was like, and see who had something to gain by his death. Michael, I know you’re already good at following a money trail, and you should be able to learn plenty from a seasoned veteran like Beth. Any questions?” Nate looked from one to the other.

“Nope,” said Michael, with an expression of someone about to board the world’s tallest roller coaster.

Beth, however, remained silent with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Is something wrong, Miss Kirby?”

“No, sir. I’m here to do exactly what I’m told.”

“Good,” Nate said, more forcefully than necessary. “As you and

Michael overheard, you will visit Mrs. Dean at her home this afternoon. Gather all the information you can. Record the conversation if she gives you permission. Otherwise, take notes.”

Beth’s lips drew into a thin line.

“Michael, I would like a few minutes alone with Beth. Why don’t you go to the funeral home and ask for a copy of Pastor Dean’s guest book? That might come in handy down the line. Then you could meet Beth at 782 Bennett Avenue at noon. If you set your GPS, you should have no trouble.”

“I’m on it!” Michael pushed away from the windowsill and crossed the room in three strides. He pumped Nate’s hand like a handle. “You won’t be sorry you left us in charge. We’ll make you proud.”

After Michael left the office with more enthusiasm than ten average men, Nate locked gazes with Beth, his spunky and talented former police officer. “Care to tell me what’s really on your mind?”