

The background of the entire cover is a romantic scene featuring a man and a woman in a close embrace. The man is on the left, his face partially visible in profile, looking down at the woman. The woman is on the right, her face in profile looking upwards with a soft smile. They are positioned in front of a street in New Orleans, characterized by its iconic wrought-iron balconies and street lamps. The scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. In the foreground, a decorative wrought-iron fence with heart-shaped patterns is visible, adding to the romantic theme.

M.

Nowhere to hide...

RITA HERRON

SAY YOU
Love Me

Rita Herron

Say You Love Me

«HarperCollins»

Herron R.

Say You Love Me / R. Herron — «HarperCollins»,

A columnist for the Big Easy's hottest erotic magazine, Britta Berger has heard her share of wild, hidden desires. But beneath her sophisticated facade, Britta is running from much darker secrets - including the terrifying night she barely survived. Now someone from her past has returned to play a merciless game. And only one man can help her. Detective Jean-Paul Dubois knows instinctively that Britta is the key to ending the string of vicious ritualistic murders that plague his city. But still haunted by his past, he must resist the dangerous attraction between them. For lurking deep in the shadows of the bayou, a killer waits to end her life - and their future - with one devastating final strike.

Содержание

CONTENTS	6
PROLOGUE	7
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	14
CHAPTER THREE	19
CHAPTER FOUR	26
CHAPTER FIVE	33
CHAPTER SIX	41
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	44

RITA HERRON

To all those who lost and suffered during the hurricanes. New Orleans is a beautiful place. I hope you find love and happiness in your future!

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE
CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
CHAPTER SIXTEEN
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
CHAPTER NINETEEN
CHAPTER TWENTY
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PROLOGUE

Black Bayou

THE BAYOU KILLED.

But it also gave life. And it was home.

As was the covens.

They thrived in the swampland, creating their black magic just as they would tonight as he began his own private kingdom.

The magic circle had been formed. The mandrake root had been pulled, a task that had put him at risk for death. But he had withstood the maddening shriek as he'd confiscated the plant, knowing the importance of it for his ritual.

At sixteen, he was finally a man.

He studied the thirteen-year-old girls as they were brought before him, the flames from the open fire illuminating their pale, frightened faces. They stood shivering in thin white virginal dresses, their heads bowed in fear, yet sublimation. Symbolic, yes. But the translucent cotton also offered a reprieve from the vicious heat of the bayou and teased him with a peek at the supple bodies that lay beneath. Two blond girls studied him as if he had not earned the right to be a man.

But he had.

Just as the full moon glowed—hypnotic, beckoning the animals to prowl, the wild to hunt, the men to mate. Just as the drums of Mardi Gras pounded out the ancient voodoo-priestess spells.

It was time for the passage.

And he could choose among the girls offered.

Automatically one stood out. He'd watched her for ages. Known he wanted her. Her eyes haunted him.

Adrianna Small.

Her hair flamed as red as the sunset on the deep murky Mississippi River. Her temper matched it.

She was a bad girl. Defiant. Adversarial. A fighter.

One who needed to be broken.

He met her gaze and held it, uncertainty gnawing at him like the mosquitoes clawing at his bare legs. He could never please his father. Wasn't tough enough. Big enough. Enough of a fighter. The other boys laughed at his artwork. Called him a sissy and other vile names.

Would he be man enough for Adrianna?

Yes. He had spread the mandrake root oil on his body, inhaled the intoxicating aroma, grateful the aphrodisiac would entice Adrianna to succumb to his wishes. She just had to get near him....

A frog croaked from the depths of the backwoods. An alligator lay stone-still, searching for his own prey. Waiting, watching, ready to pounce. The mysteries of the wild surrounded him, the scent of jasmine, marshy land, danger. Spanish moss draped the cypress trees along the swampland with gnarled witchlike fingers, hiding its secrets, ready to snatch another lost soul to the tangled wild vines and brush of the backwoods. Yet honeysuckle and verbena sweetened the air.

"Now, son." His father, tall and commanding, placed his hand on his shoulder. "You have chosen the first, the one to begin your kingdom?"

"Adrianna," he said, his palms sweating. Drums pounded as the masked musicians and the clan danced around the fire. The witchdoctor screeched his secret chant. Sobek had to be pacified tonight.

"Ahh, the feisty one. The one with the witch's eyes." An odd expression replaced his smile. "She would be the perfect sacrifice to the Crocodilian gods."

He trembled at the thought. "No, father. I want to keep her for myself."

"No, son. She has the evil in her just like her mother."

His father gestured toward Mrs. Small, a frail woman who'd been drugged since her arrival. His father had found her on Bourbon Street and brought her and her daughter to safety with the clan. The tenth woman his father had added to his own kingdom.

Now he knew his father's true reason.

Adrianna's mother brushed her daughter's hair from her cheek in a loving gesture, then suddenly pushed her forward. Did she know the extent of her offering?

His father jerked her up beside him and the voodoo priestess doused her with oil and whispered a spell of love and fertility.

Adrianna's icy look chilled his blood as if she had silently cast a death spell upon him. Maybe she was a secret member of one of the covens, a witch who had enticed him for her own sick motives. Or maybe she was born of the swamp devil himself. After all, no one knew her father's identity.

The clan surrounded them, chanting and clapping to the beat of the drums, urging them to start the celebration into adulthood. Snakes hissed and spewed venom from the depths of the fiery pit. The crude carvings of the crocodile surrounded them. The battle between good and evil.

He reached for Adrianna, the special necklace he'd crafted for her dangling in his other hand. His gift—the serpent swallowing its tail—symbolized the great work of alchemy: the transformation into a higher form already inherent within it. That was his present for Adrianna. If evil possessed her, he would cure her of it. Then he could save her.

But she screamed in protest, then threw the necklace into the dirt and spit at him. His father slapped her and she wrenched free, grabbed a rifle near the fire, raised it and a gunshot blasted the air. The bullet slammed into his father's chest and sent his body flying back. Shouts and cries erupted. He went numb at the sight of the blood spilling from his father's crumpled body. Like a scarlet river, it ran down his father's white shirt and splattered onto the ground.

"I could never love you," Adrianna screamed at him. "You can't make me."

Then she turned and ran into the bowels of the bayou. Like predators ready to swallow her, the weeping willows and gnarled branches of the oaks and cypress trees captured her in the black abyss.

Chaos erupted. The witchdoctor knelt to tend to his father. His father's wives surrounded him, as did the rest of the clan.

"He's dying," someone whispered frantically.

The still waters of the bayou that had lain eerily quiet mere seconds ago, churned to life. The gators' yellow eyes pierced the blackness, searching for prey. One crocodile shot forward, his teeth gnashing. Adrianna had crossed into the unknown part of the swampland—where danger awaited.

The bayou took lives. The animals, the plants, the heat—it was relentless. She didn't even have water. And the snakes and alligators lay waiting for their next meal. Then there was the fabled swamp devil who met at Devil's Corner. He would eat her alive.

There was no way she would survive the night.

He knotted his hands into fists. After what she'd done, she didn't deserve to live. She deserved to be punished. To suffer the bayou.

One of the men shouted that they had to find the girl murderer. He ran for a pirogue to take on the river to search for her.

Although if the swamp devil or the gators got her first, there would be nothing left to bury, nothing but mutilated flesh, bones and tissue....

No, he'd find her first. Then he'd make her pay for killing his father.

CHAPTER ONE

New Orleans—thirteen years later

One week before Mardi Gras

“I KNOW YOUR secrets. And you know mine.”

The hairs on the nape of Britta Berger’s neck stood on end as the note slipped from her hand to the wrought-iron table. She’d already sifted through a half dozen letters for her Secret Confessions column at the magazine she worked for, Naked Desires. All erotic. Some titillating, others romantic as they described various private confessions and sexual fantasies. Some bordered on S and M. And others were plain vulgar and revealed the debauchery of the South’s sin city.

But this note felt personal.

An odd odor wafted from the envelope, a scent she vaguely recalled. One that made her skin crawl.

Powdery sugar from her morning beignet settled like snowflakes on the charcoal-gray paper as she glanced around the crowded outdoor café to see if someone was watching her. A drop of sweat trickled into her bra, a side effect of the record high temperatures for January.

Or maybe it was nerves.

The French Quarter always seemed steeped in noise, but today excitement buzzed through the air like mosquitoes on a frenzy. The twelve days of partying and parades leading up to Mardi Gras had already brought hordes of masked creatures, artisans, musicians, voodoo priestesses, witchdoctors, tourists—and crime. Bourbon Street fed the nightlife and drew the tourists with its infamous souvenir shops, voodoo paraphernalia, palm readers, street musicians, strip clubs, jazz and blues clubs and seedy all-night bars. And then the hookers...

The massive crowd closed around her as the sidewalk seemed to move with them. Any one of them could be the enemy. Any one of them could have sent her the note.

Battling panic, she reread the words. I know your secrets. And you know mine.

Yes, she’d done things she wasn’t proud of. Things no one else must ever know. They would say she was a bad girl. But she had done what she had to do in order to survive.

The very reason she was the perfect editor for the Secret Confessions column. She wanted her privacy. Understood that the written word could be evocative. But the fantasies deserved to be kept anonymous.

Just as she tried to do with her identity. Always changing her name. Running.

And what better place for her to hide than in the heart of New Orleans, so near to where it had all happened? Working for this magazine was the perfect cover, the perfect way for her to blend with the masses.

But how could the person who’d written the note know about her past? The horror. The shame. The lies.

They couldn’t. It was impossible. She’d never told a soul.

Furious, she stuffed the note inside the envelope. It was probably just a prank from some sex-starved fan who wanted to win her attention—like the pervert with the fetish for penis rings who’d exposed himself to her in Jackson Square last week.

Just because she printed sexually explicit material, some people thought that she understood their individual desires. Condoned their behavior. And that she wanted them personally.

Shivering at the thought, she tried to shake off her anxiety. No one knew the real Britta Berger. And no one ever would.

She took a deep drink of water to swallow the remnants of the beignet which had lodged in her throat. In the background, the singer drifted into a slow tune, crooning out his heartache blues. A tall man, around forty with a goatee and wire-rimmed glasses, strode by and stared at her. She

froze. Was he going to stop? Tell her he had sent the note? That he'd been following her? Waiting to watch her reaction?

Oddly, though, he winked at her and strode down the crowded sidewalk toward the Business District. She breathed out a sigh but forced herself to take a mental snapshot of the man in case she saw him again.

Time to let old ghosts die. Move on.

Shaking off her paranoia, she started to close the envelope but a photo fell into her lap. A picture of a dead woman or some kind of sick joke?

Her heart pounding, she examined the picture more closely to see if it was real.

A naked woman had been tied to a four-poster bed. The bedding appeared rumpled and stained with blood. The woman's eyes were wide-open in terror, outlined in crudely painted-on black makeup, her slender young face contorted in agony. Ruby-red lipstick covered her mouth, and was smeared as if she'd hastily applied it. The remainder of her makeup was grotesque, overdone to the point of making her look like a whore. And the bloodred color of the lipstick matched the crimson red teddy that had been ripped and lay at her bare feet.

Where had the photo been taken? She scanned the room for details. An alligator's head hung on the scarred wall in the dilapidated shanty. A snake was coiled by the bed.

A lancet pierced her heart.

Inhaling sharply, Britta zeroed in on the necklace dangling around her bruised throat. The black stone was shaped like a serpent swallowing its tail.

Britta had seen that same necklace before. Years ago....

The man had tried to make her wear one, but she'd thrown it into the dirt and run.

The scene moved in slow motion in her mind. The scents of rotten vegetation, blood, mutilated animals. The marsh rose from the depths of her darkest hours to haunt her. Like quicksand the muddy soil tried to suck her underground. Alligators and snakes nibbled at her heels, begging for dinner. Bones crunched where one had found his feast.

She closed her eyes. Banished the images and sounds. Visualized herself escaping. Slowly, her breathing steadied and the panic eased in her chest. She was overreacting.

The picture was probably fake.

But the yellowish-blue tint to the woman's skin and the blood looked real. And Britta's gut instincts told her that the woman had been murdered.

DUSK DARKENED THE SKY around the backwoods, blurring the lines between day and night as the murky Mississippi churned and slapped against the dilapidated shanty.

Detective Jean-Paul Dubois stared at the crime scene in disgust. The woman had been viciously murdered. Blood covered her bare chest and had dried onto the stained sheets of the bed. A scarlet teddy lay at her feet, which were bound to the footboard with thick ropes, and her hands were tied to the headboard. Whoever had killed her had defiled her body—left her naked, bound, posed, her heart literally ripped apart with some kind of ancient spear.

His gaze fell to the serpent necklace and he recognized the symbolic meaning. Good fighting evil.

Apparently the evil had won this time.

The CSI team arrived but he held up his hand for them to wait, then bowed his head for a moment, silently offering a prayer of reverence before he allowed them to move forward. With two sisters of his own and the never-ending guilt of his wife's death on his conscience, seeing any female hurt and stripped of her dignity grated on his soul. At least Lucinda had not suffered rape or this humiliation. But still her death had cut him to the bone.

He had to put her out of his mind. Had to work, keep busy, pay penance for his mistakes by saving others.

The Dubois men were cut from Cajun cloth. Had shady characters in their own ancestry. But today's Dubois men spelled law. All three of them. Himself, Damon and Antwaun. He'd do his job and find out who had made this woman suffer.

He mentally cataloged the crime scene while his partner Detective Carson Graves searched the exterior. The room reeked of raunchy sex. Her face was painted with makeup in a grotesque style. Especially her eyes.

Then her heart had been brutally slashed. The killer had intentionally left her vulnerable and exposed as if to shame her. Worse, he'd left her deep in the bayou where the vermin might eat her before her body could be discovered.

It appeared ritualistic. Had he murdered before?

Or had this sicko just come to New Orleans?

Bourbon Street, Mardi Gras...as much as Jean-Paul loved his home in the bayou, something untamed in the land and climate drew the crazies like flies to sweet maple syrup. And with the pre-Mardi Gras celebrations, crime would only escalate.

Still, he did things by the book. No man was above the law. He had to make sure the investigators did everything right.

Flies and mosquitoes swarmed inside. The sounds of the woods croaked and buzzed around him while the muddy river carried vines, broken tree limbs and God knows what else upstream. Shadows hugged every corner, offering a hiding place for predators.

The stench of death from the victim assaulted him, along with another strange odor that he didn't quite recognize. The female CSI officer paused, stepped outside for air, then returned a few seconds later, looking pale but determined.

Judging from rigor and her body's decay, she had been here at least a couple of days. In fact they might never have found her had a local fisherman not noticed a faint light from an old bulb shining in the darkness and decided to check it out.

"At least he left her inside the cabin," Skeeter Jones, the head CSI officer, murmured.

Yeah, or the gators would have fed on her already. Then no one would ever have found her.

The medical examiner, Dr. Leland Charles, leaned over to examine the body. "The chest wound looks bad. A wide blade, lots of bruising. Looks as if he twisted it. He wanted her to suffer. Her coloring is pale with a yellowish tint."

"We'll check and track down where he got the lancet." Jean-Paul stooped to study the spear. "They sell them in the gift shops in town."

"Hell, a man could have his pick of murder weapons from the street vendors," Charles muttered.

"So, what was the cause of death?" Jean-Paul asked.

"There are no ligature marks on her neck so I'd rule out asphyxiation. She might have bled out from the chest wound, but I want to check the tox screens." Charles noted more bruises on her body—her ribs, abdomen, thighs. "She did fight back," he murmured, "as much as she could in her position."

Jean-Paul wondered if she had agreed to the bondage, then changed her mind later. Or she could have been unconscious when the perp tied her up. "I want the cause of death as soon as you finish with her. And make sure to send me the result of the full tox screen and rape kit. We need to determine if the sex was consensual."

Charles nodded, then dabbed a Q-tip across the woman's abdomen and bagged it. "It looks like he rubbed some kind of oil on her body. Maybe one of those love potions or sensual oils they sell in the market."

Jean-Paul scanned the room for a bottle. "So our guy uses massage oil as if he wants the woman to enjoy sex, then kills her? I don't get it. Maybe he was conflicted?"

Charles muttered a curse. "Figure out what makes this one tick and you'll catch him."

"Maybe the night started out with romance, then things got rough."

"And something she said or did triggered the man to snap and he killed her," Charles added.

Jean-Paul shook his head, not buying it. The scene seemed too posed. Too planned. “No. The serpent necklace and lancet indicate he came prepared.” And what the hell did the mask of that crocodile head mean?

A tech motioned toward the medical examiner and Jean-Paul narrowed his eyes. “Did you find something?”

She shrugged. “Boombox is still warm. Found a CD in it called ‘Heartache Blues.’”

“Symbolic or what?” Dr. Charles commented.

“She ripped out his heart, so he did the same to her.” Jean-Paul made a sound with his mouth. “Could be his motivation.”

“Check out the artist,” the tech said. “Some newbie named Randy Swain. I saw a write-up about him in the paper. He’s here for the music festival.”

Along with a thousand others. All strangers, which made their investigation more difficult. “Of course.” Jean-Paul made a note to question the singer Randy Swain. And to question a couple of guys who made masks and sold them in the market.

The woman bagged the CD, dusted the boombox, then tagged both items for evidence.

“Anyone find the girl’s identification?” he asked.

One of the CSI techs shook his head. “Not so far.”

“Where are her clothes?”

“We didn’t find them, either,” the CSI tech replied. “No clothes. No condom. Nothing personal. Not a toothbrush, comb or even a pair of underwear.”

“This guy knows what he’s doing,” Jean-Paul said. “He’s meticulous. He cleaned up. Didn’t leave any trace evidence.”

“There’s usually something—a hair fiber, an errant button, thread off a jacket,” the female crime scene investigator said. “If there is, we’ll find it.”

Jean-Paul nodded and studied the victim’s face again. Woman? Hell, she looked so damn young. Like someone’s daughter or little sister. Except for the grotesque makeup.

Had she been a hooker or had the killer only painted her to resemble the girls in the red-light district?

His cell phone trilled and he checked the number. His superior, Lieutenant Phelps. He connected the call, his gaze catching sight of his partner combing the wooden dock.

“Lieutenant, what is it?” Jean-Paul asked.

“We just got a call I need you to check out.”

“Do we have a lead already?”

“Maybe. You know that erotica magazine, *Naked Desires*?”

He grimaced. His sisters had mentioned it at one of their family gatherings. Apparently they thought some of the letters were titillating. “I don’t exactly subscribe to it.”

Phelps chuckled. “I wouldn’t expect my pride-and-joy officer to.”

Jean-Paul grimaced. He hated all the hype he’d received after the hurricane. Just because he’d stuck to his post, done his job and saved a few people, he’d received a damn commendation. Big deal. He’d lost his wife....

“So what is it?” he asked.

“Britta Berger, the editor of the *Secret Confessions* column called and said she had something we needed to see.”

“Now?” Jean-Paul tapped his boot impatiently. “What is it, some letter that freaked her out?”

“Apparently it’s a photograph, not a letter,” Phelps said in a serious tone.

“But doesn’t this case take priority?” Jean-Paul asked.

“It is about this case,” Phelps said, deadpan. “According to her description, she received a photograph of a crime.”

“What crime?”

“A murder,” Phelps said. “One that sounds suspiciously like the one you’re investigating.”

HE STOOD OUTSIDE the door to Naked Desires, the urge to go in making him shake with need. The moment he’d seen her photograph in that magazine, he’d recognized her.

His Adrianna.

How ironic to finally have found her here in the city. So close to where he had first met her. So close to where everything had gone wrong.

What was she doing now? Studying the photograph he’d sent her? Staring in horror at the woman’s vile, bloodless eyes? Wondering why he had sent her the message?

Adrenaline churned through his blood, heating his body.

He had to see her. Touch her. Watch the realization dawn in her eyes....

No. Not yet.

He’d waited years for this moment. Had searched in every face and town he’d visited. Had combed the edges of the bayou—hunting, hoping, yearning, praying she had survived.

So he could kill her.

Laughter bubbled in his chest. And now the moment was so near, his vengeance almost within reach. Yet he had to draw it out. Earn his redemption. Save the other sinners. Make them pay.

And make Adrianna watch them suffer.

With each one, she would feel him breathing down her neck. Coming closer. Know the pain of having death upon her conscience.

Just as he lived with his father’s death upon his.

God made the world in seven days and nights. Seven days and nights he had been tortured after she took his father’s life.

Seven more days until Mardi Gras.

Each day until then, a celebration.

Each day until then, a time to torture.

And on the seventh day, when Mardi Gras reached its grand finale, he would find salvation. He couldn’t wait to see the shock in her eyes when she realized that she had never escaped at all. That she had to pay for her sins.

And that she had to die because he loved her.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DEAD WOMAN'S eyes haunted Britta.

She tried to tamp her nerves as the publisher of Naked Desires, R. J. Justice, paced his office. He'd been cursing ever since she'd shown him the photo. Of course her insides were knotted. The last thing she wanted to do was talk to the cops.

In fact, she had held on to the picture all day hoping to convince herself the note and picture had been a joke, but finally her conscience had worn her down. She hadn't been able to justify not showing R.J. the photograph.

Not even to save her own skin.

Hopefully, it wouldn't come down to that. This was an isolated incident. The police would investigate.

And she wouldn't have to be involved or divulge her secrets.

"I know you're shaken, Britta," R.J. muttered.

"I'll be fine. After all, this is probably a false alarm. We aren't positive the woman is really dead. The photographer could have staged the scene to look like a murder. For shock value."

"True. But he had to know we'd check it out before we printed it."

Britta shrugged and rubbed at her temple, appalled that R.J. would consider showcasing such violence in their magazine. "Who knows what drives people. Maybe he's a photographer and wants to impress us so he can land a job here." Or maybe he meant for her to call the police because he wanted public recognition.

R.J. stopped pacing, his tall lanky frame silhouetted in the window, his laser eyes piercing her as if contemplating the possibility. Outside, gray clouds cast shadows across the office, making the room seem even smaller and more claustrophobic. Zydeco music pounded the air, the shouts of partiers from the street below echoed through the dirt-streaked window. Crowds of tourists still cheered and talked about the parade. Although it was early evening, tourists had already dipped into the happy-hour specials with tequila and pitchers of beer and were filing into the strip joints for their first peep show of the night.

"I have to meet with our legal team. Do you think you can handle the police?" R.J. asked.

Britta clenched her hands together. "Sure."

For a moment, R.J. reached for her. Twice when they'd discussed her column, debating over which submissions to print and which ones were too graphic, R.J. had hinted at wanting a personal relationship with her. Hinted that he'd like to share his secret sexual fantasies with her.

She backed toward the door. R.J. was barely thirty, only a few years older than her and was well-dressed in his Armani suits. Attractive. Single. Sexy. Mysterious.

But dangerous.

The collection of gargoyles on his bookshelf made her uneasy. And he had dozens of nude sketchings on his walls—all macabre with scenes of violence—along with an S and M calendar and bronze sculptures of mutant creatures—part human, part animal.

Some men had dark sides. R.J. was one of them. She'd witnessed his charm and ability to seduce a woman. Then his volatile temper.

His fantasies teetered on the narcissistic side.

And she didn't want to be any part of them.

THE HEAT FROM the New Orleans air simmered with sexuality and smelled of raw body sweat that only heightened R.J.'s lustful thoughts. The magic of Mardi Gras fed his addiction to the night life and celebration of man's greatest pleasure—the physical coupling of man and woman.

He wanted Britta. He had wanted her for a long damn time.

But she wasn't ready—yet.

In fact, if she knew the gritty cravings in his mind, she would run a million miles away.

She might even suspect that he'd sent that lurid photograph.

A soft laugh escaped him. But she couldn't run forever. One day she'd see that the two of them were meant to be together. That he had built this magazine with her in mind. That each day as he walked the streets of the French Quarter, he imagined seducing her in his office, ripping off her clothes and taking her on his desk. Each night he fell asleep with fantasies of her on top of him, her legs spread wide on his bed, taking his aching length into her warm body. With her tied to the post, the black leather squeaking as she shifted, the whip in his hand, passionate cries floating from her lips. And then vice versa.

His cock swelled, throbbing like hell. He intended to unleash Britta's darkest desires. And she had desires...even though she refused to admit them.

Her terror over the photo might be his ticket to win her trust. She needed comfort. Protection. And he'd open his arms and watch her fall right into them.

DESPERATE TO ESCAPE R.J., Britta raced away, but her breath caught at the sight of the hulking man in her office. Neon lights twirled and blinked intermittently, painting a kaleidoscope of colors across his angular face as he stared out the window overlooking Bourbon Street. A mixture of blues, jazz and gospel music engulfed her, its pounding mirroring her beating heart.

Who was he? The man who'd sent her the picture?

As if he sensed her presence without even facing her, he murmured her name. "Miss Berger?"

He knew she'd been watching him. "Yes?"

He slowly turned toward her, his intimidating stance personified by his huge masculine body. "Detective Jean-Paul Dubois."

She inhaled sharply as recognition dawned. His picture had been plastered all over the paper. That reporter Mazie Burgess had written a half-dozen hero-worshipping pieces on him. Apparently, Jean-Paul Dubois had risked his life to save hundreds after the latest hurricane disaster.

He was also a hard-ass when it came to the law.

Fear tightened her chest as she scrutinized him for signs that he wouldn't pry too deeply into her life. That he'd accept what she gave him and ask for nothing else.

But the steely expression in his eyes told her not to count on it. His masculine body screamed Cajun and his raw sexuality hit her in the pit of her stomach. He was rugged, much bigger than he'd looked in the newspaper, probably at least six-four. Tough. Not afraid to fight. His hands were broad, scarred, as if he'd wrestled alligators in the swamp and survived.

If he'd grown up in the bayou, then he probably had.

His razor-sharp eyes looked almost black in the dim light. A five o'clock shadow already grazed his angular jaw and his masculine scent triggered wicked fantasies of her own. Naked, he would look like an ancient Roman god.

"You phoned?" he asked in a deep baritone.

She nodded, searching for her voice and professional manner.

He glanced at the current magazine cover on her bulletin board, a half-nude couple donning elaborate Mardi Gras masks with black and red feather boas as their only clothing. She silently reminded herself she didn't have to be ashamed of her job or her affiliation with the magazine, either. Besides, it was a cover. "Yes, Detective. Please sit down."

His gaze slid over her, then lingered a moment too long on her breasts and a disapproving flicker followed. She cleared her throat, irritated at herself for letting it bother her. What did she care if the man found her sexually lacking? She'd never indulge her fantasies or pursue a relationship with a cop.

Recovering quickly, she claimed her office chair and waited until he settled into the wingback opposite her. "I don't know if this is important or not. It may be a prank, someone wanting to shock me. We...get some of those." God, she didn't want to do this. What if he asked too many questions?

Questions she didn't want to answer.

She'd lied all her life about who she was, what she was, where she'd come from. Sometimes she barely remembered the truth herself.

"I imagine you do." A suspicious smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "You like reading people's secret fantasies?"

How could she answer that without sounding perverted herself? "There's nothing wrong with sexual fantasies, Detective Dubois."

"Ever include your own?"

Her chest tightened at the smoldering insinuation in his husky voice. The music outside intensified its beat, drawing her into its seductive lair. The odd love chant of New Orleans rippled through the paper-thin walls from the bar next door. "If ever I cease to love, may cows lay eggs and fish grow legs. If ever I cease to love..."

"No." She wouldn't openly reveal her private thoughts. Or her fears. And good heavens, she wished they'd stop that song. She didn't believe in love.

"This isn't about me," she said, struggling to redirect the conversation. "I phoned the police because I received something disturbing in the mail today."

His jaw tightened. "Yes, of course."

She handed him the envelope and their hands brushed, sending a shiver up her spine. She drew her hand back quickly. She couldn't allow this man to charm her. He was a pro.

He might extract information from her without her even realizing it.

Information she would take with her to her grave.

JEAN-PAUL DUBOIS SIGHED in disgust. What the hell was wrong with him? Granted he was a sucker for a woman in trouble but usually he handled his reaction better. But something about the challenge, the wariness, the spark of sexual attraction between him and Britta Berger had him on edge.

Not a good idea. He needed to get back to the crime scene. This visit was probably a waste of time.

Still she was intriguing. Her camisole top, coupled with that long whimsical skirt and sandals gave her a live-and-let-live look, yet he sensed she wore a disguise. She wasn't laissez-faire at all but as uptight as a wild animal in a cage.

And those dynamite full lips conjured up images of sultry kisses. Plus her fiery short, red hair triggered fantasies of wild, tawdry sex.

But her brown eyes skated over him as if he were the scum of the earth. He reminded himself he was here on business. He didn't care what she thought about him. A woman was dead, for God's sake, and he was the lead investigator.

"He left a note with the photo," she said in a strained voice. For a brief second, tension ruled her slender face, then she inhaled sharply, making her top stretch across her breasts and offering a glimpse of her tantalizing cleavage.

Shit.

He dropped his gaze to the desk while she slid a manila envelope toward him. "Who delivered it?"

"I have no idea. It was on my desk with the other mail when I arrived at work."

"You lock your door when you leave your office at night?"

"Yes."

"Who else has access to your office?"

“Just R.J., the head of the magazine.” She ran a hand through her hair. “And Ralphie, the young college kid we hired to sort mail.”

“I’ll need to talk to both of them.”

Britta frowned. “Trust me, Detective, Ralphie had nothing to do with this. He’s just a kid.”

“He has male chromosomes, Miss Berger. Trust me, I know what young men are like.”

Her face paled and he ground his teeth, hating to frighten her, but she shouldn’t trust anyone. Especially with all the crazies in town. “How about your boss?”

A nervous look flickered in her eyes. “R.J. is hard-working, innovative and knows how to make money. We have a business relationship, that’s all.”

Jean-Paul arched an eyebrow, wondering why she’d offered that tidbit, then removed the contents from the envelope. Damn it to hell and back.

The picture was of his crime scene.

The auburn-haired woman was tied to the bed, her face contorted in agony, her chest pierced with the lancet. The torn red teddy, the mask of the part crocodile, part human head on the wall, the CD player, the obscene makeup—the details were identical to the murder scene he’d just processed.

Even more alarming, the victim faintly resembled Britta Berger. Not as good-looking or striking, but her hair color and complexion were similar.

“Did anyone touch the photo besides you?”

“Just my boss. I showed it to him to ask his advice.”

“You weren’t going to call the police?”

“I wasn’t sure it was real, that...the woman was really dead.”

He contemplated her answer, then nodded. “You have no idea who sent this?”

“No.”

“Have you ever received anything like this before?”

“No. Most of the photographs are sent directly to our photography department. Our legal department handles any contacts with submissions.”

He made a disgusted sound but she continued.

“Our magazine doesn’t support murder or violence, Detective Dubois, just healthy sexual fantasies.”

His gaze met hers, emotions flaring in her exotic brown eyes, but also defiance.

“Still, some of those fantasies border on the sadistic side,” he argued. “They come from perverts, sickos, deranged individuals.”

“Everyone has their own tastes,” she admitted quietly.

And his lay toward sweet, simple, quiet, more domestic family-type women like Lucinda. Not with spooky redheads with fire in their eyes. Ones who looked as untamed as a hot July New Orleans night. This one, he imagined, had seen the seedy side of life and not cowered from it. A vixen in disguise.

One who had secrets.

“Did you know this woman?”

“No, I’ve never seen her before.” She bit down on her lip. “Why, Detective? Is it real?”

He met her gaze head-on. “Yes. I just came from the crime scene. I’m afraid this woman was murdered.”

A faint gasp escaped her. “Oh God, no.” A heartbeat of silence stretched between them, taut, filled with unanswered questions. “Who was she?” she finally asked.

“We’re still working on identifying her.” He cleared his throat, lowering his voice. “I’d like for you to keep this confidential. No press. No publication of this picture. Don’t tell anyone else that you received it. Understood?”

Britta nodded. “Of course. We’ll help any way we can.”

Her mouth twitched slightly as if she wanted to say more, but she clamped her teeth over her lower lip instead.

He shifted and tapped the envelope with one finger. "Has this man written you before?"

"You mean for the column?"

"Yes."

She massaged two fingers to her temple. "I...don't know. But I'll review our prior issues and see if I find anything that appears connected."

"I'd also like to take copies of the magazine with me. And don't forget the letters you didn't print."

Alarm shot through her eyes. "There must be hundreds."

"Bring them to the station. My partner and I will help sort through them."

Wariness pulled at her features but she agreed.

"You also mentioned a note?" He held out his hand. "Let me see it."

She handed him the sheet of charcoal-gray paper, and he read the message silently.

I know your secrets.

And you know mine.

His gaze rose again to meet hers. "What does he mean by that? He knows your secrets?"

She remained so still that he didn't think she was going to answer. But fear momentarily settled in her eyes. "I assume he's referring to the magazine," she said in a low voice. "My column is called Secret Confessions."

Liar. "It sounds more personal." He closed the distance between them. "I think you know more than you're telling. You may even know the killer. At least, he knows you."

She lifted her chin a notch. "A lot of people who write into the magazine think they know me."

"You're hiding something, Miss Berger." He leaned across the desk, so close his face was only a breath away. So close he inhaled the hypnotic scent of her perfume.

So close he felt the tension vibrate in her lean muscles.

"But secrets have a way of coming out. And before this investigation is over, I will find out exactly what you're keeping from me."

CHAPTER THREE

“I WILL FIND OUT exactly what you’re keeping from me.”

Detective Dubois’s warning echoed in Britta’s head as she searched her memory for any confession letters that might have hinted at violence or murder.

What if the killer had written to her in advance and she had ignored the warning or completely missed it? Maybe she could have saved this woman if she’d paid more attention....

Disturbed by the thought, she bagged the last two months’ submissions to carry to the police station the next day. For now, she had to take a walk. Clear her head.

The stench of beer, alcohol, smoke, sweat, urine and garbage permeated Bourbon Street. The raucous laughter and horny, groping drunken strangers were a dreaded experience.

But living on the streets had taught her how to deal with them. The thought of holing up in her apartment above the office with back copies of the magazine—alone with her own demons—was something she couldn’t face yet.

She’d walk to the Market, lose herself in the local musicians and artists, grab a bite of supper. Her stomach growled, reminding her she’d missed lunch. The possibility of a nice crisp crab salad or bowl of seafood gumbo made her mouth water.

She checked over her shoulder for the hundredth time to make certain no one was following her as she wound through the chaotic crowd. A man wearing a patch over his right eye whispered an invitation for her to join him in the pub next door, but she rushed past, aware the man tracked her as she disappeared into the throng. Next door, another club offered half-priced drinks along with pole-dancing, featuring the mammoth-breasted Moaning Mona. Two dregs wearing ratty T-shirts that read “I fuck like a Mack Truck,” grunted an invitation for drinks and a threesome. And a group of bikers boasting tattoos of snakes and tribal symbols huddled around an outdoor table, guzzling beer and making catcalls to the girls flashing their boobs for free drinks and beads.

She plunged through the tawdry mob, south toward Jackson Square and the French Market where the less seedy side congregated in the outdoor cafés, finer restaurants, the open market and shops that comprised the Vieux Carre. Although street musicians and artisans normally flocked to the area, now an open-air festival had been set up with artisans showcasing their creations, demonstrating techniques, offering sketches for the tourists and squabbling over prices for their treasures.

A clown created balloon animals for the children in one corner, a mime entertained in another and a long-haired hippie rasped out music on a washboard for pocket change. Down the street, the famous jazz music of Louis Armstrong flowed from a restaurant while blues tunes paying homage to Fats Domino waivered into the steamy sultry air. Patio gardens and flowerboxes from the delicately carved balconies added color and a sweet fragrance. This was the N’Awlins she loved.

She seated herself at her favorite outdoor café, ordered a glass of pinot grigio and a crab salad, then studied the crowd as she sipped the wine.

But the hair on the back of her neck bristled. Someone was watching her.

She scanned the streets again. Oblivious to her unease, the air buzzed with activity and excitement, celebrating life and the renewal of the city. A mime plucked a coin from behind a little girl’s ear, while puppeteers drew the small kids in droves. Families littered the streets, carrying tired children with painted faces, cotton candy and tacky souvenirs, tugging at heart-strings she tried to ignore.

She banished them quickly. She was not a family kind of girl.

Instead her past mocked her. And the whisper of danger echoed in her ear....

I know your secrets. And you know mine.

No. It was impossible. She’d never told anyone about her childhood. Especially about that night.

And her mother.... Surely she wouldn't have confessed to anyone. That is, if she'd survived herself.

Then again, her mother had done other unspeakable things.

The washboard player took a break and an earthy-looking saxophone player claimed his spot, adding his own jazz flavor to old favorites. She glanced behind him, toward the edge of the street, and noticed a tall, bald man holding a camera. Her fork clattered to the table. Was he photographing her?

She craned her neck to see more clearly and he lowered the camera. Shadows from the silvery Spanish moss shrouded his face as if he'd been cocooned in a giant spiderweb. Then he lifted his right hand and waved. Her breath caught in her chest.

A series of flashes flickered like fireflies against the growing darkness. Once. Twice. A dozen times. She blinked and threw her hand over her forehead, spots dancing before her eyes.

He was watching her. Taking pictures....

For what reason?

Panic and anger mushroomed inside her and she stepped forward to go confront him, but the waiter appeared with her check and blocked her path.

"Chere? You pay before you leave us? Qui?"

She sighed, removed her wallet and paid. But when she glanced across the street, the man had completely disappeared, lost in the darkness and the sins waging the city.

HOWARD KEITH STOOD nursing a Jax, a locally brewed beer, across the street, shielded by the exuberance of the Mardi Gras festivities. Britta Berger had actually noticed him.

Of course he was at a distance and she couldn't see his face.

Howard's right hand went to his prosthetic eyeball and he blinked, feeling it slip out of place. He popped it out, dusted it off, then slipped it back inside his eye pocket, blinking to create enough moisture to force the fake eye to settle.

Of course, he tried not to handle the ocular prosthetic in public, at least not in front of women. They tended to balk at the empty eye socket.

Although even with his eye in place, they were put off by his appearance. They never knew quite where to look, where to focus, so they averted their gazes and studied his feet, his stomach, his hands, anything but his face. And within seconds they rushed away, dismissing him as if he was a freak.

He would show them. Prove them wrong.

His fingers tightened on the camera. Even his interest in photography had garnered laughter and disbelief. How could he truly be an artist when he had no peripheral vision? No depth perception?

The camera compensated. Its powerful lens enabled him to capture the planes and angles, the light and shadows, the depth he wanted, and record it in vivid detail. And New Orleans certainly provided enough colorful characters, scenery and entertainment to feed his camera-frenzied mind.

Then he could do with it as he wished. Create masterpieces with his sketches, mold the faces into sculptures if he chose. Give the subjects life forever. Paint the eyes.

The eyes were the windows to the soul.

Did Britta Berger have any idea that he had seen into hers? That he had been watching her for months? That he knew her schedule. The food she chose for breakfast. The way she liked her coffee. The fact that she enjoyed a glass of wine on her patio at night before she retired. That she brushed her short red hair at least a hundred times before she crawled beneath the sheets.

That she slept without underwear.

That he'd seen her naked in the shower, her own hands stroking over sensitive private places that he ached to touch.

Yet, the seductress that he saw thrived on privacy. She was an enigma. He'd discovered that in his research. In her own way, she was hiding from life itself.

The vulnerability in her eyes had drawn him. She wanted someone to reach out and make the pain of her past dissipate. But she was afraid. After all, underneath her physical beauty lay lies, weaknesses, false promises. Evil.

Yes, a bad girl lurked inside Britta Berger and he would show the world her true self, just as he would with his other subjects. If it hurt them, then so be it.

His own pain had brought him to this point. He used it. Thrived upon it. It had inspired the theme for his work, which would hopefully gain him acclaim.

Then the beautifuls would be erased, their ugliness exposed forever.

IRRITATION KNOTTED Jean-Paul Dubois's shoulders as he drummed his knuckles on R.J. Justice's desk. Dammit. Time was critical. He had a murder to investigate and the magazine owner had kept him waiting for half an hour.

Long enough for him to decide he didn't like the man. That he was weird. His office collections indicated an interest in S and M, witchcraft, bestiality and photographs that bordered on porn.

Justice finally loped in, tugging at his tie. "Sorry about that. My meeting ran over."

Jean-Paul ignored the feigned apology and studied the man's features, sizing him up. The women might call him handsome but a cold hardness that Jean-Paul had detected in other suspects hinted that he was ruthless and calculating. He would do whatever he had to do to protect Naked Desires. And to get what he wanted in his personal life.

"You met with Britta already?" Justice asked as he settled into his desk chair.

Jean-Paul nodded. "She was very helpful." Britta had claimed she and Justice were simply business partners. Just how did Justice feel about her?

"She was upset," Justice said. "Were her fears justified?"

"I'm afraid so."

Justice ran a hand over his sleek desk. "Damn. So the crime scene was real?"

Jean-Paul nodded. "We found the woman in the photo murdered earlier." He leaned forward, his gaze penetrating. "You don't seem surprised."

Justice shrugged. "I realize our magazine caters to the...adventuresome side, so we get some odd mail. But we certainly don't condone murder."

Jean-Paul narrowed his eyes. "I asked Miss Berger to bring all the mail she's received in the past month to the station. It's possible this guy wrote in before."

Justice hesitated. "I suppose that sounds fair, although I would like to keep our magazine out of the investigation when you talk to the press."

"You don't want the publicity?"

Justice shrugged. "I can stand it, but I was thinking about Britta's safety."

"Of course." Jean-Paul cleared his throat, not certain he believed the man. What if Justice had killed the woman, then sent the photo to Britta anonymously to stir publicity?

"Do you keep a record of the submissions with the sender's name and address?"

"Yes. In a secure file."

"Who sent this photo?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," Justice said matter-of-factly. "I checked and the envelope wasn't logged in. Ralphie must have found it in the overnight-mail slot and put it on Britta's desk."

"Then I need to speak to him."

Justice punched a button on the intercom and ordered the boy to come to his office.

Jean-Paul stood. "Mr. Justice, can you tell me anything that might help us find the killer? Did you know the victim? Had you ever seen her before?"

Justice steepled his fingers as if in thought. "No. Should I know her?"

"Not necessarily, but I have to ask."

"What was her name?"

“We haven’t identified her yet.” Jean-Paul paused. “How about the cabin? Did you recognize it?”

Justice scoffed. “That shanty could be any one of a hundred tucked in the bayou.”

Jean-Paul pushed on, “Have you received any calls or letters yourself that might be related?”

“I would have reported it if I had, Detective.”

“Can you think of any reason the killer targeted Miss Berger with the photograph?”

Justice raised a brow. “She’s a beautiful woman. Maybe the killer saw her photo in the magazine and wanted to get her attention.”

“You’re probably right,” Jean-Paul admitted, although his gut instinct hinted there was more. And that Justice was holding back. Maybe he was the one fixated on her. Maybe he’d killed a replica of her to frighten her into his arms.

“How long have you known Miss Berger?” Jean-Paul asked.

Justice’s hands tightened by his side. A telltale sign that the question stirred his anxiety. “A few months.”

“And your relationship is...?”

“Strictly business,” Justice said with a predatory gleam flashing in his eyes.

“Has she been involved with anyone recently? Someone who might want to hurt her?”

“Not that I know of,” Justice said in a curt tone.

“You haven’t noticed any strange men hanging around? Maybe outside?”

“No.” Justice cleared his throat. “Well, except for that Reverend Cortain and his religious group. They’re harassing us.”

“By protesting the publication of *Naked Desires*?”

Justice heaved a sigh. “Yes. That idiot reverend is leading the madness. If you ask me, he’s a psycho himself. Maybe you should check into him.”

Jean-Paul made a note to do so. “Has he threatened you or Miss Berger?”

“He sent fliers to Britta about his protest rallies, touting some religious bunk about us leading others into sin,” Justice admitted with a scowl. “And if this murder gets out, he’ll probably accuse our magazine of triggering sexually related crimes.”

“Where were you two nights ago, say around midnight?”

Justice snapped his head up, his eyes seething. “You can’t possibly think that I had something to do with this. For God’s sake, I encouraged Britta to report the incident. And like I just said, this crime will only be fodder for Cortain’s nonsense.”

“I have to ask so I can eliminate you as a suspect.”

Justice shuffled his day planner. “I...was with a woman. I can give you her name if you want. She’ll vouch for me.”

Jean-Paul indicated a pad on the desk. “I’d appreciate that.”

Justice’s lips thinned into a straight line, but he tore off the sheet of paper and shoved it toward Jean-Paul.

A knock rapped on the door and a skinny, blond kid appeared. “Mr. Justice? You wanted to see me?”

“Yes, Ralphie. Come in. Detective Dubois from the New Orleans Police Department needs to ask you a question.”

Jean-Paul gave him a once-over. Young. Naive. Khakis and a designer shirt with Italian loafers. Green under the collar.

Not a murderer.

The boy paled. “Did I do something wrong?”

Jean-Paul explained about the photo and Ralphie collapsed into a chair. “I...I thought Miss Berger seemed upset when she asked me about the mail earlier, but she didn’t tell me about the picture.”

“What did she say?” Jean-Paul asked.

“She wanted to know if I’d seen the person who’d delivered the envelope.”

“And did you?”

“No.” He crossed his feet at his ankles, rocking sideways. “It was under the door this morning when I arrived.”

Jean-Paul nodded. “So you put it on her desk? But you didn’t open it first?”

“No. It was addressed to her.” Embarrassment colored his face. “Miss Berger doesn’t like me to read the mail. Says I’m too young.”

“How did you get those scratches on your hand?”

“My dog.” He stared at his knuckles. “I just got a boxer puppy. I’m trying to train him but, man, he chews on everything in sight.”

Jean-Paul frowned. The kid obviously knew nothing. “Have you noticed anyone lurking around, maybe watching Miss Berger?”

“No one specifically. Although men always look at her.”

Yes, they would. Although Britta could probably take care of herself, a sliver of worry tickled his spine, arousing protective instincts born of years on the job.

His reaction certainly couldn’t be personal. Britta Berger was definitely not his type.

But the killer had chosen her for a reason.

Jean-Paul intended to find out exactly what it was.

And why his victim had resembled her, as well.

A GUST OF WIND from the impending storm rattled the trees and sent leaves swirling around Britta’s feet as she rushed through the mob on Bourbon Street to her apartment. The storm clouds grew darker; the sounds of feet pounding the pavement became more ominous as the night swelled with the hordes of tourists. She glanced over her shoulder, repeatedly searching for the photographer, but a fog of drunken tourists obliterated any individual from standing out.

Still, someone was out there.

She sensed him watching her, felt his beady eyes on her skin. Studying her. Waiting.

Was it the photographer she’d spotted during dinner? The killer who’d sent her the photo?

Were they the same man?

She considered calling the cops but what could she tell them? She had an odd feeling? They’d think she was crazy.

A beer can rolled across the pavement, clanging into a metal garbage can and she shrieked, pausing as a beefy hand reached down to grab it. “Sorry about that, ma’am.”

She tensed at the lascivious look in his liquor-glazed eyes, and pushed past him, shouldering her way around more groping hands until she reached Naked Desires. Neon lights dotted the street with color, highlighting the painted print and logo on the door window. Several lurid males drooled, their faces pressed against the fog-coated glass as they tried to peek inside.

Ignoring their pleas for a sneak preview of the upcoming magazine and offers to share their fantasies with her, she maneuvered her way inside, slammed the door shut and locked it. But she froze at the sight of the darkened stairwell leading to the upstairs apartment. She tried the light, but it didn’t work. Had someone messed with it or had the bulb simply burned out?

You’re being paranoid. How many times last month had it done the same thing and she hadn’t thought it suspicious?

Choking back fear, she clenched her keys, ready to use them as a weapon. Outside, the wind howled like an animal. She unlocked the door and hurried inside. With only three rooms to the tiny apartment, she raced through them all, finally muttering a silent thank-you to find them empty.

Still, she paused in her bedroom, the hairs on the nape of her neck prickling. The top bureau drawer which held her underwear was open slightly. Hadn’t she shut it this morning when she’d left

for work? Normally, she kept her garments neat, her bras on the left side, her favorite frilly underwear on the right. In the drawer below, she stored her teddies. Now, her underwear was jumbled as if someone had pawed through it. Frantic, she jerked the second drawer open and gasped. Her teddies had also been moved around as if someone had touched them.

Then she saw it—a red crotchless teddy lay in the center of her bed.

A low sob caught in her throat. It was just like the one the dead woman had worn in the photograph. She glanced up in horror and noticed the note stuck to the mirror.

“I always have one eye on you. You can’t run forever.”

Shaking with fear and disgust, she rushed to the bathroom and splashed water on her face to stem the nausea. What should she do? Could that photographer somehow have gotten into her place? Or the killer who’d sent her the photograph of the murdered woman?

Hands shaking, she reached for a towel, patted her face dry, then glanced in the mirror, expecting to see a madman staring at her. But only her terrified eyes were reflected back. That and images of a long-ago time she’d thought she’d forgotten. Of a terrified little girl and a man she refused to speak of....

She spun around, ran into the bedroom to grab her purse and retrieved Detective Dubois’s card. She had to report the break-in. Show him the red teddy.

But if she did, he’d ask more questions. Want to know more about her and why this psycho had decided to stalk her.

She’d thought today’s note had to do with the magazine. But what if it had something to do with her past?

D-day—the day she’d died and started a new life.

No, it was impossible.

Maybe she should just pick up and run again. She could start over. Find another job. A new name. A new city.

But the face of the young woman who’d died rose to haunt her. She was so young. Hadn’t deserved to be left in the bayou for the mosquitoes, snakes and gators to feast upon.

Memories of the night she’d fled into the bayou rushed back. She’d been dirty, hungry, terrified and so thirsty she’d hallucinated. She’d seen the devil and other wild, mysterious creatures in the marshy swampland.

And now, thirteen years later, another one roamed the streets....

She couldn’t run this time.

Not with the dead girl’s face etched in her mind permanently. It would stay with her no matter where she went. And so would her guilt and the memory of her sins.

The only way to escape them was to pay her penance.

Maybe by helping to find this woman’s killer, she could finally receive forgiveness.

LOUP GAROU—the swamp devil.

Jean-Paul grimaced. The local PD had already dubbed their newest killer with the name. The fabled creature lived on in the minds of the Cajuns as real as the day the legend started.

Only a devil could leave a woman the way this sicko had—helpless, dead, exposed in the heart of the untamed bayou.

Even though it was late evening, Jean-Paul met his captain and partner at the ME’s office. When he showed the photograph to his partner, Carson, and his lieutenant, Phelps, cursed.

“I’m sending it to forensics, although I doubt we’ll find prints,” Jean-Paul said. “Maybe they can trace the photocopy paper.”

Phelps frowned. “The son of a bitch is bragging about the murder.”

“Did he really expect that magazine to print this?” Carson asked.

Jean-Paul shrugged. "I don't know. But for some reason, he wanted Britta Berger to see his handiwork."

"Because of her column?" Phelps asked.

"Maybe. Or maybe there's a personal connection." Jean-Paul recalled her reaction to the photo. She'd definitely been shaken. And he sensed she didn't like cops.

He'd run a background check on her to find out the reason.

"Maybe he knows her," Phelps suggested.

"Or wants to," Carson added.

Phelps nodded. "That's possible. If so, Britta Berger might be in danger."

A frisson of unease rippled through Dubois, heating his blood. He'd arrived at the same conclusion on the way back to the precinct. What if this psycho didn't stop at one victim? The symbols he'd left reeked of a ritualistic killing.

The ME, Dr. Charles, appeared in his office and waved them back to the crypt. "Have you identified our Jane Doe yet?"

Phelps snorted. "No, we're searching all the national databases but so far, no hits."

"We're checking the universities and clubs, too," Carson added.

Jean-Paul sighed, already tired and the investigation was only getting started. If the vic was an out-of-towner who'd come for Mardi Gras or to cash in on the heightened prostitute business during the festival, the identification process would be more difficult.

Phelps cut to the chase. "What did you find, Dr. Charles? Anything that might help us?"

"Nothing conclusive yet. Except that the girl didn't die from the chest wounds. I suspect she might have been poisoned."

"What kind of poison?" Jean-Paul asked.

"I don't know. I'm still running tests." Charles indicated one of the containers from his handiwork. "So far, her stomach contents don't reveal traces of a poison so she didn't ingest one. I didn't find any injection marks on her body, either."

"Keep looking," Phelps said.

"Any evidence of rape or a date rape drug?" Carson asked.

Charles shook his head. "Not so far."

"Which meant she agreed to have sex, then things got out of hand," Jean-Paul surmised. "Once we ID her, we'll start with her boyfriends, lovers. All her male acquaintances."

Jean-Paul's cell phone trilled and he unpocketed it and hit the connect button. "Detective Dubois."

"Detective...this is Britta Berger."

Alarm shot through him. Her voice sounded shaky, frightened. Had the killer contacted her again? "What is it, Miss Berger?"

"Someone broke into my place tonight," she blurted. "I...think it might have been the man who killed that woman."

Jean-Paul's fingers tightened around the phone. "Keep the door locked and don't open it for anyone." His pulse kicked up a notch. "I'll be right there."

CHAPTER FOUR

BRITTA TWISTED HER fingers into the thin fabric of her skirt.

Stay calm, she reminded herself. You don't have to tell him about the past. This killer has nothing to do with that. It's impossible.

Still, she paced to the window and searched the busy street below. Was her intruder out there, watching?

Chilled by the thought, she wrapped a small throw around her shoulders. Then she poured herself a glass of wine and sipped it, trying to settle her nerves. But every whistle of the wind and every screech from the streets below alarmed her. Every man...posed a danger.

Dammit. She thought she'd left her fears behind. That she could finally look toward a future. But now this psycho wanted to take her peace of mind from her.

Why? What had she done to him?

She dragged in a breath and reminded herself she was being paranoid. She had her cell phone. And she knew how to fight.

Logic kicked in, along with the guts that had kept her alive. Even if this madman knew where she worked, he didn't necessarily know where she lived. She'd been meticulous about not listing her number or including her home address on any paperwork.

Anyone experienced with a computer could find her, though. And if he'd watched her office, he could have easily seen her climb the stairs to her apartment.

She could almost hear the killer taunting her in a sing-songy voice. See him sinking the spear into her heart. Feel the cold sharp blade puncture her insides. Then see the blood oozing out. Her nightmares rose again with icy fingers from the grave clawing at her. The years fell away as if it were yesterday. As if she was there again. Except this time she was even younger.

She was five years old. So small, so tiny that if she tried hard enough, she could make herself disappear. Then no one could find her.

And the monsters couldn't hurt her anymore.

Footsteps sounded outside. Loud voices. A man's dark booming laughter.

No!!!!!! Not again.

She crawled beneath the bed, closed her eyes and folded one bony arm beneath the other. Then she slid her hands into her armpits, hunched her knees up to her belly and curled into a ball.

Like a fleck of dust that no one could see, she'd stay there for hours. If she didn't make a sound, they'd think she'd gone. Then she'd be safe.

Free from the man. Free from the hideous monsters in the bayou.

The door screeched open. The scent of whiskey floated toward her. Thunder rumbled. She caught her breath. Tried to hold it.

Don't move. Don't make a sound. Be invisible and they'll go away. But the floor creaked. The wooden boards splintered. And she felt his hand on her arm.

He had her....

Britta heaved for air, sweating, disoriented. This memory was only one of many. The beginning. So many more afterward....

She had to banish them.

She stood, trembling, then moved to stare out the window into the starless night. It wasn't possible that this killer knew her. Or knew what had happened years ago. How she'd escaped. How she'd survived. How she'd lived on the streets like an animal.

No one knew but her.

More panic yanked at her and she rushed back to her bedroom and dug under the mattress for her journal. Inside it, she wrote all her private thoughts. Her own secret desires and confessions.

Her fingers finally connected with the thick velvet binding, and she tugged it out, flipping through the pages to make certain it was intact. She nearly collapsed on the bed when she realized nothing was missing. Her thoughts were still private.

A voice sounded through the intercom. "Britta? Are you in there?"

Jean-Paul Dubois. He was the last person she'd tell. He'd show her no mercy. He'd take her to jail, lock her up and throw away the key. No, he could never know her secret desires or get near her heart.

She'd die before she'd let that happen.

THERE HAD ALREADY been one woman's body found today. Jean-Paul held his breath as he waited on Britta to answer the intercom at her door. He hoped to hell there wasn't going to be another.

Dammit, why wasn't she answering? He'd raced over after her call. St. Charles Street had been unusually calm for Mardi Gras season. Various flags of kings and queens of Carnival waved from the palatial mansions, all symbols of the royalty: the professional businessmen and politicians who resided in the city, ones who funded the celebrations, rebuilt the city and revitalized the traditions in the Big Easy after the last hurricane. Although some businesses and people had given up and moved on, others had rallied to resurrect the historical district and the culture.

But here on Bourbon Street, the decorations boasted of sex, voodoo, black magic and the live-and-let-live attitude of the tourists seeking a good time, a stiff drink and a good lay—anonymously of course. Which only added to the crime.

Anger mounted inside him. Bon Dieu. Why the hell had Britta Berger chosen to live on Bourbon Street? Why not in one of the sleek condos on Decatur? Just working at the raunchy magazine set her up for trouble. But to live in the heart of it...She might as well hang a damn sign on her body flagging her as an open target.

Did she enjoy living on the edge?

He didn't. He wanted the town back to normal, back to the New Orleans he loved.

The image of her tied to a bed, naked, with a lancet embedded in her heart, flashed in his head and he grimaced as he punched the buzzer again.

"If you don't answer, Miss Berger, I'm going to break down this damn door."

"I'm sorry," she finally said in a trembling voice. "Come on up."

A click sounded and he opened the wrought-iron gate in front of the door, then entered. Her office lay to the right, a dark staircase ahead. He took the steps two at a time. When he reached Britta's apartment door, he gave three quick raps. Seconds later, she opened the door, the chain still intact.

He arched a brow. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, just shaken." She unlocked the door and stepped back, clutching a long robe to her throat.

"You said someone broke in?" He examined the door, but didn't notice any damage. "I don't see evidence of forced entry."

"He was here." She folded her arms across her waist, the movement making her look shaken and vulnerable. "In my bedroom."

He scanned the living room. Simple furnishings. Contemporary. A butter-yellow leather sofa accessorized by a few red and green throw pillows. A TV. Desk. Her laptop.

Perhaps the man climbed to her balcony and sneaked in through the patio window or the French doors. "Did he disturb anything?"

She inhaled, fiddling with her hands. "The bedroom. He went through my drawers. Then he left me something."

He followed her to her bedroom. Although the paint had faded in the hall, colorful artwork from the locals decorated the wall: scenes of a historic church, the bayou at sunset, the river. A collection

of macabre Mardi Gras masks shaped like alligators and sea monsters occupied a decorative shelf, while gris-gris and beads she'd probably bought from the market dangled from hooks to create an eye-catching corner. Oddly, there were no personal photos in sight.

The bedroom appeared the same. A contemporary iron bed. A dark crimson comforter. A gray velvet lounging chair that looked decadent by the window. A few copies of *Naked Desires* were displayed on a bookshelf along with some self-help books. *Slaying Personal Demons*. *Overcoming Phobias and Fears*. *Black Magic*. *The Crocodile Myths*.

Another collection of Mardi Gras masks covered the walls. Some were beautiful, exotic, while others displayed the dark side of New Orleans—the voodoo priestess, the devil, a swamp creature.

It was almost as if everything in her apartment had been purchased in the city. As if she'd left any hint of a past behind. Or did the collection of masks symbolize her life? Was she a woman in disguise? Perhaps she had an assortment of wigs in her closet to change her appearance.

"He pawed through my lingerie," she said.

Jean-Paul spied the opened drawers, the sheer fabrics—all sexy, risqué. A pair of black and red thongs hung from one corner while a hot-pink camisole dangled from the edge of the dresser.

She walked over to the bed and leaned against the corner. "And he left me this."

A crimson red lace teddy lay in the center of her bed. His pulse clamored. It was almost identical to the one left at the murder scene that morning.

She recognized the similarity, too.

"This one didn't belong to you?" he asked.

She shook her head no.

Jesus. She had a right to be rattled. Leaving a note at work raised a red flag, but invading her home and leaving the same type of underwear he'd left with his victim was way more personal.

"He also left me this note." Her hand trembled as she lifted it toward him.

He read it in silence. I always have one eye on you. You can't run forever.

Instincts warned him Britta Berger was in danger. And that they might be dealing with a serial killer who was only getting started. "Did you notice anyone watching you today? A stranger who seemed suspicious?"

She hesitated, then cleared her throat. "While I was eating dinner at a café in the Market, I noticed a man with a camera taking pictures of me from the square."

His fingers tightened on the note. "Did you recognize him?"

"No, I've never seen him before."

"You're sure he was photographing you?"

"Yes. He paused when I caught him and waved to me. But his smile seemed sinister." She hesitated.

"Sinister?"

She glanced at the mask of the monster on her wall. "I suppose that sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

He shook his head. "You should trust your instincts. Especially after a day like today."

She nodded and he continued. "Can you describe the photographer?"

"He was tall." She swept her eyes over him, and their gazes locked. "But not as tall as you. Maybe five-ten. Thin, sort of wiry."

"Dark hair or light?"

"Bald. I got up to run after him," she added in a low voice. "But he disappeared in the crowd."

Christ. "Chasing a potential stalker is dangerous, Miss Berger. You should have called the police then."

"Are you serious?" Nerves made her voice high-pitched. "The cops would have thought I was being paranoid. Artists are always taking pictures, drawing sketches, painting the scenery and people in the streets."

True. But under the circumstances...

"I'll have forensics examine the note and lingerie. Maybe we can find out where he purchased the teddy." He cleared his throat. "And we should dust your place for prints."

She nodded, although turmoil filled her dark brown eyes. Eyes that bled with distrust. Eyes that were so hypnotic, the need to hold her tugged at his chest.

But he ignored the pressure. It was his nature, his job, to protect the innocent. And the only way he could protect her was to find the maniac threatening her.

To do that, he needed a clear head. Not one complicated by images of her wearing a teddy for him or whispering her secret confessions into his ear while he took her to bed.

Which only planted more doubts and questions in his mind. "Miss Berger, have you considered the fact that the killer might be someone you know?" She paled, but he forged ahead. "Maybe an old boyfriend? A lover?"

"No...that's not possible."

He ignored her protest. She was a heartbreaker if he'd ever seen one. "Are you sure? Do you have a current boyfriend? Or maybe someone you just broke up with?"

"No, Detective, I'm not dating anyone." Her voice dropped a decibel. "I haven't in a long time."

"How about an acquaintance? Maybe a man who asked you out? One you turned down?"

A faraway look settled in her eyes, but she shook her head. "No one that I can think of. Like everyone else after the hurricane, I've been trying to survive the past year and a half. There hasn't been time for personal relationships."

He nodded, unable to argue that point, yet something about her tone indicated that her lack of a social life was more of a preference, not a result of time restraints. And that she'd lied about no one asking.

"Not even since you started at Naked Desires?" he asked. "Your boss?"

"No." She shifted as if she'd lost her patience. "Now, I'm really tired, Detective. You can see your way out."

He was right—she was hiding something. But would she hide a killer?

"I'm not leaving now. Not until a crime-scene unit arrives to process your place. In fact, you shouldn't stay here tonight," he said. "Do you have a friend you can call? A family member?"

She shook her head. "No. No family."

"I hope you didn't lose them in the hurricane?"

She averted her gaze, picked at an invisible piece of dust on the end table. "No. It was a long time ago."

A note of sadness tinged her voice. "Where were you living before you came here?"

Panic slashed across her face. "In one of the small towns that got wiped out. I had nothing there and decided to move on."

"Have you always worked in journalism?"

Irritation flared on her face. "You certainly ask a lot of questions, Detective."

"I'm a cop. That's my job." He leaned forward again, this time so close he inhaled her citrusy scent. "What did you do before you came to work for Naked Desires?"

"Odd jobs," she said, meeting his gaze head-on. "Now, I'm tired of this inquisition. You're supposed to be trying to find this madman, not dissecting my life."

He'd pushed enough for the night. She looked exhausted and had had a harrowing day. "Let me drive you to a hotel. We'll get your locks changed in the morning and add a deadbolt."

"With Mardi Gras in town, there won't be any empty hotel rooms," she said, pointing out the obvious. "And if this man wants to kill me, another lock won't keep him out."

"Maybe not, but we sure as hell aren't going to make it easy for him." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "If you're afraid to stay alone, I'll arrange for a guard tonight."

Wariness flashed in her expression, but she jutted up her chin. "No, I'm not afraid. New locks will do just fine."

Why did the mere thought of having the police around frighten her so? And why would having the police dust for prints bother her? Unless she didn't want them to pick up her own prints.... Which meant she might have a record.

Was she more afraid of the cops than a ruthless cold-blooded killer?

BRITTA STRUGGLED to maintain her composure while Detective Dubois conferred with the CSI team. He'd also called a friend who did locksmith work for the police department to change her locks and add a deadbolt.

"Come with me while they finish up," Detective Dubois suggested.

"I'm all right here."

"It'll do you good to get out for a while. Besides, I haven't had dinner and there's a quaint Cajun café near here. We can discuss the magazine."

"I've already told you everything I know," she said defiantly. "And I've eaten dinner."

Detective Dubois touched her arm gently. "Come on. They have great desserts at this restaurant. You can have coffee and tell me more about yourself."

Exactly what she didn't want to do.

"I don't need a babysitter, Detective. I'll be fine alone."

He angled his head toward her. "What's wrong? You aren't afraid of me, are you, Britta?"

She stiffened. "No, don't be ridiculous." Hadn't she learned long ago not to draw attention to herself?

His dark eyes pierced her, probing.

Unnerved, she nodded, knowing the only way to quiet his suspicions was to appease him. He couldn't seduce information out of her—not if she didn't let him. "All right. But I intended to search those letters tonight to see if this guy might have written to me before."

"You can review the letters tomorrow." His voice softened. "It's been a long day already."

He instructed the others that he would return within an hour and pressed a hand to her waist, guiding her outside. The gesture triggered another round of nerves. He was so strong that she felt safe by his side, yet not safe at all. She couldn't allow herself to depend on any man, much less Jean-Paul Dubois. He might stir desires and hungers that could never be sated. Might awaken a sexual beast within her....

Not something she could allow to happen with a cop.

The sultry evening air aroused another longing inside her, one that conjured images of a real date, of strolling hand in hand with a lover, listening to the sexy blues and jazz music wafting around them while the Mississippi lapped softly against the bank.

"We're here." He stopped at a small café that had cropped up after the hurricane and gestured for her to enter. Dubois Diner. Wonderful heady odors wafted toward them. Hot, spicy Cajun sausages and gumbo, jambalaya, shrimp po'boys....

"Do you own this?"

"No, my father does. It's a family business."

A tall, broad-shouldered, older man with wavy, gray hair and a slight limp met them at the door. One glance into his eyes and she recognized him as a Dubois.

He clapped Jean-Paul on the shoulders. "Ahh, Jean-Paul, so good to see you tonight, son. And here, you've brought a beautiful woman on your arm. Finally! Welcome, chere."

Britta froze, aware the detective shifted uncomfortably. "Papa, this is Miss Britta Berger. She's helping me with a case."

His father pinched his fingers together and slapped them to his forehead, then lapsed into a round of French Cajun dialogue. Detective Dubois's mouth tightened but he didn't argue.

Finally he angled his head her way. "My papa and maman think I work too much. But my job is my life."

“Those who do not take time to love will never find it,” Mr. Dubois spouted. “Take heed of what the song of New Orleans says.”

Britta smiled, remembering the strange verse. Then a pudgy woman with a bun swooped toward them.

“Maybe this was a bad idea. Maman is great, just very old-fashioned.” Dubois shot her an apologetic look just before his mother pulled him into a bear hug.

A sharp pang slammed into Britta’s gut as her own mother’s face materialized in her mind. It had been so long since she’d seen her that her image was foggy. Her mother had never hugged her like that. She’d been too doped up. Her eyes hollow, not laughing. Her smile strained, her face gaunt.

And then Britta had lost her forever.

THE MOON BEAMED bright and full above the swampland as he made his way to his father’s grave in Black Bayou. Only the land had shifted since the last big hurricane and the patch of dirt he recognized was no longer there. His father’s remains had been swept into the tidal wave of the hurricane disaster, lost forever like so many others.

Just as his father had been lost to him the day Adrianna had destroyed him. Behind him, miles away, stood the city. New Orleans—the Big Easy. The town of sinners.

The city of the dead.

There the graves remained, at least the ones that stood above ground. An ominous reminder that the city could be lost again in a second.

No wonder Britta Berger had decided to hide in town. After all, technically, she was dead. Her new name stolen from one of those very graves just as he’d stolen a new name for himself.

Muttering a prayer to his father, he renewed his vow for vengeance as he made his way through the backwoods to the new meeting place of his people. As he approached the circle of light created by the bonfire, the dark memories dragged him back to his childhood and the reason he’d returned.

Yet, here he stood as an adult, trembling from fear, knowing he didn’t belong—that he’d never earned his manhood in the clan’s eyes. Hidden away among the backwater folks who worshipped Sobek, who feared the devil’s wrath, who still believed in the ancient ways, they fought the battle between good and evil.

God would punish the sinners. But the devil was always working. Sometimes he walked among them, stealing souls and casting spells on innocents to convert them to do his service.

The clan had to pull together. Pray. Offer the gods a sacrifice so they could live among the bayou safe from the crocodiles and vermin the devil used as traps for the weaker.

The low hum of gospel singing echoed in the air, beginning the ceremony. The passage of boy to man, girl to woman.

One was always taken.

Adrianna’s face remained etched in his mind as the young girls dressed in virginal white stepped before the altar. Their mothers shivered with fear, knowing that any one of their daughters might be the chosen one.

Only the girls knew nothing.

But Adrianna had known. The devil must have whispered in her ear. And she had chosen him.

Then the clan had cast him aside as if he was a leper.

He fisted his hands at his sides. He had to destroy all those wicked women who defied their religion. The cheap whores. Satan’s messengers. Then the curse would be removed from him and he could once again walk among his people.

Fury twisted his insides as time spun backward.

He was back in Black Bayou on that fatal day.

Blood soaked his hands, his face, his clothing where he leaned over his daddy's body. Shouts and screams of terror and shock rocked through the clan. Suddenly someone yelled for them to hunt Adrianna.

Torches were lit, tempers fired and men dispersed. He had gone with them. Hours had dragged as they'd relentlessly fought through the bayou. Crocodiles had threatened. Attacked. Another brother had fallen prey to the swamp, his limbs ripped away one by one by a gator's sharp teeth.

Then one had shot out of the water toward him. His stomach rolled as he recalled the gator's teeth ruthlessly sinking into his arm, his torso, his ear. Fear had nearly crippled him.

But Satan had decided to let him live that night. Death would have been too easy.

Finally at daybreak they'd returned to the camp. Exhausted. He was half-dead.

They hadn't found Adrianna.

Then his next realm of punishments had begun. He'd bowed his head before the snake pit, the blinding pain swirling him into a vortex of eternal darkness. The clan chanted and prayed for the demons to be exorcised from his body. They'd thought him weak. A traitor. That he had warned Adrianna....

In their eyes, he was a failure. An outcast. He had not survived the trial by ordeal without looking guilty.

Then they had banned him from their presence forever.

Thunder clapped above, drawing him back to the present. He stood on the edge of another clan now, the work of the great Ezra Cortain in progress. The pounding drums echoed around him and the chants began, praising Sobek. Although forced to remain on the periphery, he clasped his hands and silently joined their prayer.

Adrianna might be able to run, but she couldn't hide.

And she had changed her name, but he knew it, as well as her real one. The Christian one her mother had given her.

The one he would call her when he finally offered her to the spirits.

CHAPTER FIVE

JEAN-PAUL SILENTLY CURSED his decision to bring Britta Berger to his family's restaurant. He should have called it a night. Left her at her apartment. Gone back to the precinct.

But once he'd ignored his family's welfare for his job and his wife had died. He'd never forgive himself. Lucinda's family hadn't forgiven him, either.

He had to warn his sisters and mother now that there was a killer preying on women.

A low jazz tune wailed in the background of the diner, wrapping tendrils of nostalgia around him—and a longing for what he'd lost. The comfort of a companion. The feel of a woman's touch.

Only Lucinda had never been a comfort about his job. She'd hated it and begged him to leave police work.

God, why was he thinking about her tonight?

Because another woman had died and you couldn't stop it.

"This is the rest of our family!" His maman gestured toward the wall of family photographs above the table, forcing Jean-Paul back to the present as she rattled on. "Jean-Paul is the oldest and of course, always the responsible one, taking care of everyone."

"Mother—" he growled.

"It's true." His mother batted her hand at him, then continued, oblivious to the fact that she was embarrassing him. "See all the pictures of him after the hurricane? He worked day and night, saved women and children. My boy is a local hero."

Jean-Paul gritted his teeth as she waved past the photo of him and Lucinda. Britta narrowed her eyes, obviously curious about the woman, but she didn't ask and he didn't offer the information.

How many times had he questioned his decision? Some men had lost their jobs because they'd left their posts to save their families. He'd saved strangers, kept his job, but lost his wife.

"And here's Damon, my next-to-the-oldest son," his mother continued. "Damon works for the FBI. Always the serious one, tough like Jean-Paul, but reserved, a methodical thinker." Her face beamed with pride. "And this is Antwaun, my youngest boy. He's hot-headed, temperamental like his papa, unpredictable." She pressed her hand to her heart. "He's too quick to jump into things sometimes, but ahh, a good boy at heart, he is."

"You have a beautiful family," Britta said quietly.

Her tone sounded so sad that Jean-Paul squeezed her hand beneath the table. A gesture of silent thanks for being so tolerant? The realization that he was sorry for whoever had hurt her?

"Now please, Britta, try some of my famous white-bread pudding." His mother pushed a dish toward Britta and she accepted it graciously.

"It's delicious." Britta sipped her latte. "In fact, everything looks wonderful. And the smells... I'm sure customers are drawn in from the streets because of the tantalizing aromas."

"Oh, thank you," his mother gushed. "You must come by for lunch. I work so hard to get the freshest ingredients and Catherine here, Jean-Paul's youngest sister, she helps me create the desserts."

"My daughter, Chrissy, likes to bake, too," Catherine said with a grin. "I think she might grow up to be a pastry chef herself."

"Yeah, but she usually wears more flour than goes into the dough." Jean-Paul ruffled his five-year-old niece's hair and smiled as she popped part of an éclair into her mouth and the cream oozed down her chin.

"So how long have you known my big brother?" Catherine asked.

Britta squirmed in her seat. "Actually we just met."

Stephanie, his dark-haired sister and the bookkeeper for the café, raised a brow. "Papa said you're helping Jean-Paul with a case?"

Britta nodded, but refrained from elaborating.

“What is it you do?” Catherine asked. “Are you a detective?”

“Or one of those psychic investigators?” Stephanie asked.

Jean-Paul rolled his eyes. “The festival has everyone’s imagination running on overload, doesn’t it?”

Stephanie shrugged. “I know you don’t believe in anything supernatural, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.”

Catherine cleared her throat. “That’s right. Just like love. Just because it’s not a tangible thing, doesn’t mean it’s not real.”

Jean-Paul glared at them to stop the matchmaking. They both knew he’d vowed never to marry again, that he had no desire to get involved with another woman.

Britta cleared her throat. “Actually, I’m not gifted or a detective. I’m an editor for a magazine.”

Stephanie’s dark eyes lit up as recognition dawned. “Britta Berger. That’s right. You edit that Secret Confessions column, don’t you?” She stirred sweetener into her coffee. “I love that column. It’s exciting to see the diversity of confessions. Do you have a difficult time choosing which ones to print?”

Britta shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“I met the owner, R.J. Justice,” Stephanie continued. “He’s handsome. I bet he’s interesting to work for.”

Jean-Paul frowned at his sister as he finished his last bite of gumbo. He didn’t want Stephanie anywhere near Justice, but if he told her so, she’d probably make it a point to see the man.

“The magazine, that’s one reason we stopped by,” Jean-Paul said. “We had a murder-rape case today, and the killer sent Britta a photograph of the crime.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s horrible,” Catherine whispered.

“Why did he send it to you?” Stephanie asked.

“I think he wanted me to print it.”

“But we’re not playing his game,” Jean-Paul declared.

His maman looked appalled. “Who did this awful thing?”

“We have no idea who the killer is yet. That means you all have to be careful.” Jean-Paul fixed his sisters with a look that had intimidated cut-throat killers but didn’t faze them. “Absolutely no going out alone at night. Hell, not even during the day.”

“Have you talked to your brothers?” his mother asked.

“Not yet, but I will.”

Catherine tapped her nails on her chin. “We can take care of ourselves, Jean-Paul.”

Stephanie slicked her long dark hair behind one ear and angled her head toward Britta in a conspiratorial tone. “Honestly, our brothers can be so protective it’s nauseating.”

His maman waved a napkin, swatting at her daughters. “You girls listen to Jean-Paul. He knows the streets and works hard to keep us safe.” She turned to Britta. “Your family would say the same thing to you, wouldn’t they?”

Britta nearly choked on her coffee.

His mother patted her on the back. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Fine, thank you.” Her eyes caught Jean-Paul’s for a moment, and he detected a wariness that made him more curious about her past and what she wasn’t saying.

He lowered his voice, aware of the restaurant patrons. “Don’t take this lightly, ladies. Trust me, this guy is one sicko. You don’t want to wind up like the young woman we found.” A shudder nearly tore through him at the very thought.

Catherine and Stephanie exchanged a silent sisterly look as if they were preparing to gang up on him. He didn’t give a damn. Better they be mad at him and alive than the contrary. Tonight, he’d call Catherine’s husband, explain the situation. Not that he’d have to force the man to protect her. In

spite of Cat's protests, Shawn guarded her and their daughter like a watchdog. And he'd sic his other brothers on Miss Independent Stephanie. At least Steph carried a gun.

"Tell us more," Stephanie said over the rattle of silverware and dishes at the neighboring table. "The only thing the news reported was that a woman had been killed in the bayou."

"We haven't identified her yet or released any information, so I can't talk about it." Jean-Paul threw some money on the table, then did the usual dance with his mother about not paying.

"Maman, we've been over this before. I won't eat here free."

She huffed but kissed her pinched fingers, then placed her fingers on his cheek. "We will go to church Sunday and pray for the girl and her family, oui?"

"I'll try to make it, Maman."

"Bring Britta, too." She slanted Britta a sideways wink. "We always have room for one more at our table."

Britta shook her head. "Thank you so much, Mrs. Dubois, but I couldn't impose."

"Impose?" His maman waved the napkin again, this time at Jean-Paul. "You tell her she could never impose. We love company. Now, you bring her, Jean-Paul."

"We'll see," he said softly. He lay his hand over his maman's for a moment and squeezed, his gaze catching the odd look on Britta's face. Did she think it was strange that he and his family showed their affection in public? Or did the family scene make her uncomfortable?

Why did he care what she thought? When the hurricane had stolen his parents' home and business, they'd banded together to rebuild their lives.

The tragedies had taught him about what was most important. Material things could be replaced, but loved ones couldn't. But he didn't want his family getting the wrong idea about their relationship.

Besides, a madman might be after Britta. He'd protect her with his life but he refused to lead the killer back to his own family's door.

His cell phone jangled and he pressed the phone to his ear to hear over the din of laughter and voices. "Detective Dubois."

"Dubois, it's Carson. Listen, there's a bartender down here at the House of Love who recognizes our victim."

A break they needed. "I'll be right there." He stood and gestured toward Britta. "We need to go."

"Always working," his mother hissed.

Stephanie punched his arm. "Stay safe, brother."

Catherine hugged him. "Yeah, watch your back. You're not invincible either, you know."

He nodded, then slid his hand to Britta's waist as they left the restaurant. It was out of the way to walk her home, but the House of Love was a divey bar with nasty floors, cheap strippers and raunchy patrons.

"What's wrong?" she asked as they stepped into the cloying humidity.

"My partner found someone who recognizes our victim. I'll take you home, then I'll go talk to him."

She lifted her hair off her neck to cool herself, drawing his gaze to a tiny scar beneath her right earlobe. "That's right around the corner."

"I know, but it's not the kind of place I usually take a woman."

Emotions flickered in her eyes...relief, surprise. Then she shrugged nonchalantly. "I've seen worse," she said. "Besides I'm not the sweet, domestic type like your little sisters. This is about the case. It's not personal."

He shook his head, but his body hardened at the way her eyes darkened in the moonlight. "No, not personal at all."

And he would keep reminding himself of that, even if she decided to turn her seductive powers on him.

After all, she wasn't shy or the wholesome girl next door like his sisters. She didn't seem to like the family scene, either. And she had refused his mother's invitation to dinner as if a homey gathering would bore her.

Worse, she printed erotic confessions in a magazine. Watching a performer take money for stripping probably wouldn't even faze her.

THE NIGHT FELT as if it would never end.

Britta entered the wall-to-wall packed House of Love, fighting the memories that rose from the depths of the forgotten to haunt her. Thick smoke, sweat, beer and the stench of tawdry sex filled the air; the hint of drunken lust added a layer of tension over the sea of anonymous faces.

Nausea filled her. She'd grown up in places just like this. Had watched her mother entertain night after night. Then seen her duck into the curtained-off areas to perform private lap dances....

"It's not a bad way to make a living," her mother had told her one night when she'd caught Britta staring through the curtain. "It's just sex, nothing more."

No emotions. Just the simple exchange of bodily fluids and money.

Disgust gnawed at Britta's throat as she banished the images. She'd hated seeing her mother degrade herself. Hated even more the strange men's grunts and groans at night, watching her mother delve into booze and drugs, knowing filthy hands touched her....

"Come on," Jean-Paul mumbled, "I see the bartender over there."

The strobe light blinked to the beat of the contemporary rock music, the center stage occupied with two busty half-naked women gyrating and dancing around poles. A slender black girl tossed off her spangled top and double-Ds swayed as she rode the pole, tassels of silver and bright yellow twirling as she bounced her breasts. Beside her a brunette with three-inch red nails—and red stilettos to match—tossed her gold top into the groping milieu of men. Catcalls erupted as her pasties followed. Playing to the audience's excitement, she crawled across the stage on hands and knees, slithering her ass upward. The black girl shimmied, then began to slowly peel away her G-string, inch by inch, teasing the men thrusting dollar bills toward her.

Jean-Paul coaxed Britta through the crowd toward the opposite end of the bar, casting only a quick glance at the stage. "It's a damn shame girls turn to that kind of lifestyle. Didn't their mothers teach them any better?"

The censure in his voice raised her defenses. "Not every girl comes from a Cosby home like yours, Detective Dubois."

He slanted a frown over his shoulder. "Not everyone who has problems turns to drugs, alcohol or hooking, either."

The jab hit home and Britta clamped her mouth shut, humiliation heating her face. How could he possibly know what drove some people to make the choices they did? She'd never understood her mother, but she claimed she'd worked at the bars for Britta, so they could survive.

"You're a bad girl, Britta. Just like your mama."

The words echoed in her ear, reminding her of her roots and the vast difference between her and this cop. She wondered about his personal life, about the woman in the photo at his parents' restaurant. His girlfriend? Lover? Wife? Where was she now?

He wasn't wearing a ring. And his family would have mentioned if he was married. And the woman...she'd looked so sweet, delicate. Nothing like Britta.

Jean-Paul Dubois would not understand her childhood. Or what she had done later that had marked her for life.

He flicked his hand toward a man at the door. "That's my partner, Carson Graves."

She nodded, not bothering to try to speak above the noise. Jean-Paul shouldered his way through the mob, then up to the counter. A beefy man reached out and pinched her ass, and she flipped around and nearly swung at him. "Keep your hands off, buddy," Britta snapped.

Jean-Paul gave the man a lethal look, then slipped his arm around her waist, keeping her pressed close to him as they sidled up to the counter. Heat emanated from his hands and broad chest, and they were so close his breath brushed her neck. His protective gesture was subtle yet comforting, but after his comment Britta refused to allow herself to enjoy the feel of his hard chest against her back. She could stand on her own. She always had and always would.

He introduced her to his partner, who seemed to assess her the way the drunks in the room had when she'd entered. He was shorter than Jean-Paul, but still close to six feet, and handsome with short dark brown hair. When he shook her hand, she noticed an odd tattoo.

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Berger. And that—" He indicated the three-ringed marking on his hand. "Was a gang tattoo," he explained without seeming offended. "I came up through the trenches but I finally got my head on straight."

She felt an immediate connection with him personally.

"Britta," she said automatically.

"I heard you've had a rough day, Britta," he said in a Southern drawl.

She shrugged. "Not as rough as the poor girl in that picture."

He conceded with a nod. Jean-Paul cleared his throat, his voice gruff when he spoke. "You have information on our victim?"

Carson pivoted toward Jean-Paul. "Yeah, this bartender says he's seen her. His name's Moe Leery."

Carson waved the thin, thirtysomething bartender over and Moe leaned across the bar and wiped the counter.

"What can you tell us about this woman?" Jean-Paul flashed the picture again.

The guy winced and pushed the photo away. "Her real name is Elvira Erickson. But she went by Pooky."

"She was a stripper?" Jean-Paul asked.

"Yeah, but she'd only been working here a couple of weeks. Told me she needed tuition money for school. Said she was planning to go to Tulane."

A muscle ticked in Jean-Paul's jaw and Britta saw the wheels turning in his mind. He was thinking about his sisters.

"Do you have an address?"

Moe scribbled on a napkin. "I think she lived in an apartment near the university."

"We'll check it out," Carson said. "Did she have a boyfriend?"

Moe smirked and grabbed two mugs to fill an order. "If she did, she sure as hell didn't bring him in here. Wouldn't be good for business or her tips."

Jean-Paul gave him a clipped nod. "Did you notice any guy hanging with her? Say two nights ago?"

Moe shook his head. "Naw, man. The girls come and go. I try to keep my head down. I don't want their pimps' wrath on me."

"How about any strange men who might have been watching her?" Jean-Paul asked. "A stalker maybe?"

Moe indicated the crowd. "Half the guys in here fit in that category."

Jean-Paul grimaced and Britta searched the mob of lust-starved, dollar-holding men, remembering similar scenes with her mother. More than once, a customer had jumped on stage and tried to drag her off with him.

Across the room, a man in a gray suit and wire-rims caught her attention. He seemed familiar, so she tilted her head to study him, then remembered that she'd seen him in the market. She'd thought he was watching her.

Always looking for ghosts from her past. In New Orleans, they were all around her....

He flashed some money at the black dancer, then spotted her and his eyes widened as if he was a deer trapped in a set of headlights.

Britta tapped Jean-Paul on the shoulder to get his attention, but by the time he turned around the man had disappeared back into the crowd again as if he'd never existed.

JEAN-PAUL INCHED CLOSER to her. "What's wrong?"

"I thought I recognized a man in the crowd," she said in a shaky voice.

Jean-Paul immediately scanned the smoky room. "Who? What does he look like?"

"He's gone now. But I saw him in the market earlier." A strand of her red hair fell across her cheek. "I guess it was nothing."

"Was it that photographer?"

"No, another man. It's probably my imagination."

"You're smart to stay alert," he said, itching to touch her hair and tuck it back into place. "We don't know that he wasn't the man who broke into your place. Or the killer."

"If he was after me, why not just approach me?"

Jean-Paul lifted an eyebrow. "In a crowded bar? No way." He stroked her arm gently, and a small tremor rippled through his body, stirring protective instincts. Dammit, the Dubois men were always suckers for a woman in trouble. "If he made me for a cop, he'd definitely run."

His logic made sense but only heightened her anxiety level.

"Come on," Jean-Paul said. "I'll take you home, then I need to see what information I can dig up on Elvira Erickson."

"You have to locate her family and tell them, don't you?" Britta asked.

Detective Dubois's jaw tightened. "Yeah, I might as well get it over with."

"I'll meet you at the station," his partner said. "Nice to meet you, Britta."

Jean-Paul glared at his partner. Carson was notorious for flirting and he seemed intrigued by Britta.

He shook off the disturbing thought as he took her home, instead concentrating on the call he needed to make to Elvira's parents. He hated like hell to tell them the details of her death, especially when he had no suspect or leads in the case to offer them.

His gaze shot to Britta. Was there a connection in her past that she hadn't told him about?

If there was and she'd been lying, he'd damn well make her confess her secrets.

A FEELING OF TREPIDATION overcame Britta as the detective walked her back to her apartment. The tension between them had been palpable since they'd left the bar.

He scowled at a wino lying near the garbage can next to her building, then at the poster of the magazine cover on the front window as she unlocked the door.

"You don't approve of the magazine I work for, do you?"

His dark eyes met hers as they entered the hallway, climbed the steps and stopped at her door. But he didn't reply until the locksmith left and they'd stepped inside.

"No." The short word was filled with disapproval. "You seem like a smart woman, but you live on Bourbon Street and you work with sickos. You put yourself in danger."

Her temper flared and she folded her arms across her chest. "I suppose you think that the way women dress invites rapists, so it's the victim's fault if she's attacked."

He leaned closer and braced his arm on the wall behind her. "That's not what I said."

"You didn't have to. It's obvious that you want your woman in an apron—tied to the kitchen, waiting with a martini in one hand and your slippers in the other when you arrive home."

His look darkened. "Tied to the kitchen?" A ghost of a smile played on his mouth. "Only if she's naked beneath the apron." His husky voice sent a tingle through her. "And I prefer a beer over a martini."

She lifted her brow at that remark. “One of your fantasies, Detective Dubois?”

“Jean-Paul.”

His masculine odor made her dizzy. And that smile...his killer smile, mixed with that sexy rumbling voice was about to hack through her defenses. Dare she call him by his first name or was that too personal?

“Now tell me one of your fantasies, Britta?”

She wet her parched lips with her tongue. For him to kiss her.

“I...We weren’t talking about me,” she stammered, struggling for control. “We were talking about you not liking my job.”

He lowered his hand, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m simply pointing out the obvious about your safety. That’s my job.”

Yes, he thought she put herself in danger by way of her work and her apartment. What would he think if he saw her on the streets at night?

Emotions crowded her chest. “You can’t always play it safe, Detective. And you can’t protect everyone.”

Pain flared in his eyes, then a shuttered look fell across his face. She instantly regretted her comment, but she couldn’t discuss fantasies with this man and not want him to touch her.

And touching her would be too dangerous. She might lose control....

Then the demons that chased her would finally win.

“I can take care of myself, I always have.” She ducked under his arm to escape his closeness and gestured toward the door. “You can go now.”

He straightened, heat pouring off his body in waves. “You can’t run forever, chere. Sooner or later, I will figure you out.”

His words mimicked the killer’s. A cocky smile tilted his mouth as he turned and walked away.

She closed the door, then faced her desk, trembling. A copy of the latest *Naked Desires* magazine lay open to the spread on her *Secret Confessions* column, mocking her. Other people might bare their souls for all to read, but her fantasies were private.

Yet the killer claimed to know them. And there might be another letter from him in the pile. She had to find it before Jean-Paul Dubois did, just in case the letter revealed too much.

She couldn’t let him get near, close to her in any way. If he did and discovered the truth, he would destroy her.

DISGUISED BY HIS homeless man’s attire, he hid amongst the shadows of the party-seekers and noise along Bourbon Street, so close to Britta Berger’s apartment he could see the light as she switched it off.

It had taken him a long time to find his Adrianna. In fact, for a while he had given up. Had assumed she was dead. As dead as he had felt inside.

But he’d searched for her in every woman he’d met since that day. Hoping, yearning, dying to discover that she was still out there. That he could still have her.

And make her pay for the pain she had caused him.

Then one day he’d picked up a copy of *Naked Desires* and had seen the small photograph of her in the editorial section. She was so beautiful she looked like a hand-painted porcelain doll.

One look into those witchlike eyes, though, and he’d recognized her instantly. His Adrianna.

She had been so close all along. So near Black Bayou where they had met, where they had almost been joined together.

Running had only brought Adrianna back full circle. There was no escape for the sins that lived within her. But passing the trial by ordeal, the fact that she’d walked across the gator-infested waters and survived, did not mean she was innocent. Only that she had performed some black magic spell to keep the snapping gators at bay. That she was no ’tite ange.

That she had been spawned by the devil.

The reason he had to destroy her. She was here now spreading her wickedness, enticing depraved men with her looks, casting a spell over the weak ones with her bewitching eyes—just as she had him, years ago. Through her column, she'd found the perfect venue to reach the masses.

He wanted to complete the ritual sacrifice. But he was a man and just as the crocodiles did during mating season, he had to mate with numerous partners.

Tonight he'd choose another.

He fell into the shadows and changed his clothing. Another disguise, this time one that would entice a woman. A white shirt and tie. A pair of dress slacks. An air of authority.

A wad of money.

And a mask over his face.

Another redhead, although her wavy hair was dyed an unnatural shade, tapped her foot at the corner of the House of Love, wearing a black micro-mini skirt, thigh-high boots and a flashy green top that looked like a bra. Her cleavage spilled over and through the mesh netting, her dark nipples stood turgid.

She twisted her head one way, then the other. Her nose jutted in the air as she took a drag from a menthol cigarette and flicked ashes on the grimy pavement. Finally aware he was watching her, she dropped the cigarette to the concrete, crushed it with her boot, then curled a finger toward him, beckoning him to join her. She looked impatient, primed, ready.

In need of some cash. Probably for drugs.

He had those in his pocket, as well. One that would give her the high of a lifetime.

He smiled, then smoothed his jet-black hair into place and strode toward her. Tonight, the whore would pleasure him. He might even draw out the fun a day or two if she was good, play with her, test her resistance.

Make her beg.

Then he'd force her to confess her sins before he killed her and added her to his kingdom.

CHAPTER SIX

Six days before Mardi Gras

RATTLED BY DETECTIVE DUBOIS and by the cozy family dinner they'd shared the night before, Britta settled in her bed the next evening with a cup of tea and more letters. The sooner she figured out who'd sent her the letter and photograph, the sooner the police could catch the murderer and put him behind bars.

Then she would have no need to see Jean-Paul Dubois again. Or be taunted by his sexuality.

And more importantly, she wouldn't have to worry about watching her back for fear he'd discover the truth about her past.

Determined to block out the sound of the partying below, she put in her favorite Harry Connick Jr. CD and allowed his seductive voice to soothe her as she read.

My secret confession:

I've fantasized about sex since I was a teenager and have just found the love of my life.

In my fantasy, we've just gotten married and my husband whisks me away to the honeymoon suite. Flowers fill the plush room, and a dozen candles shimmer with soft light across the heart-shaped bed. As he reaches for the champagne, a knock sounds at the door and his two groomsmen appear, still dressed in their black tuxes. My husband invites them in. At first, I'm confused, then one of them, a guy named Jim, smiles and says they are there to pleasure me.

A shiver goes up my spine as I realize he is talking about all three of them.

I've always dreamed of having multiple partners and the idea of the man I love and his two best friends all going down on me at the same time ignites a fire in my stomach.

"I don't know if I can take so much pleasure," I say.

My husband laughs, then presses a kiss to my hand. "It's your wedding night, love, I wanted it to be special."

He peels off my wedding dress, slowly unfastening each of the tiny pearl buttons down the back, drawing out the seduction with kisses and tongue licks along my spine, while Jim plucks the pins from my hair and runs his fingers through it. Chad, the other groomsman, kneels and removes my white satin shoes, while my husband plays his tongue along my lips. Soon, they lay me down, prop me up on pillows and caress my entire body. I tingle with need and hunger. Just as Chad tugs my nipple into his mouth, Jim slides his hand up my thigh and strokes my clit. Chad sucks my breasts then my husband enters me. Soon the three of us become a tangle of naked, throbbing bodies, frenzied, panting and sweating, rocking our bodies together until we finally climax all at once....

Heat rushed up Britta's neck, and she forced herself to skim the remainder of the letter for hints of violence, then placed it in the stack of possibilities for publication. Remembering her mission was to search for possible notes from the killer, she quickly skimmed the first paragraph of the next few letters, looking for details of S and M, violent tendencies or indications that the man hated women.

A blue envelope caught her eye and she opened it; the first line made her pause.

My secret confession:

I have an odd attraction to animals, especially golden retrievers. The guy next door is really hot—big with blond hair and gorgeous blue eyes. Every night when I see him walking his big dog, I start dreaming about what it would be like...

Britta slid the letter back into the envelope. Bestiality held no appeal to her, but it didn't mean the person was a killer. Besides, it was written by a woman.

The killer was male.

Using that logic, she sorted the letters by sex, so she could focus on male submissions.

In the next letter, the woman fantasized about bondage. Hmm. A perfect target for the killer.

A disturbing thought struck her. What if the killer chose his victims from her letters?

But how would the killer know who had submitted the letter or how to find the woman? He'd have to tap into their computer base....

Tomorrow, she'd verify that Elvira Erickson hadn't written to her. If she had, she'd alert R.J. And Detective Jean-Paul Dubois.

The phone rang and Britta jumped, the last strains of Harry Connick's voice dying as the song ended. She stared at the caller ID, half expecting to see the detective's number, but the display read as an unknown listing. She must be crazy. Just because she'd thought of Jean-Paul Dubois, didn't mean he was telepathic. Or that he was thinking about her.

"Hello."

Heavy breathing rattled over the line. "Did you like the picture I sent you?"

Britta's breath caught in her throat. "Who is this?"

"The man who knows your secrets."

A bead of sweat rolled down Britta's neck. She started to slam down the phone, but hanging up on him would do nothing to help the woman he'd murdered. "Why don't you tell me your name?"

Laughter, low and sinister, rumbled from him. "One day I will. But I must build my kingdom first."

A frisson of alarm rang through her. His kingdom, meaning he was just getting started. Detective Dubois was right; her column had drawn sexual deviants like sweet molasses drew flies. "You're a coward," Britta whispered.

His voice held a threatening edge. "No, Britta, I'm the one in control now. You feel it, don't you?"

He'd never control her. No man would. "Then why hide behind the phone? Behind the notes?"

"Because my work has only begun." Another laugh, even more sinister, filled the silence.

"I must save those women, make them repent for their sins. Just as you must." Agitation made his voice raspy. "You run from town to town—changing your name, your hair—until you don't even know who you are anymore. You're as dead as the people whose names you steal. I can see it in your eyes." He lowered his voice. "Your fear controls you."

She twirled the phone cord around and around her fingers, winding it into a knot. He was right. But how did he know so much about her? How long had he been following her?

"Please leave me alone. I don't want any part of your twisted games."

Again she started to hang up, but his next words stopped her cold.

"You don't want to know who I have now?"

Britta clenched her hands into fists. "Let her go," Britta whispered. "Please don't hurt anyone else."

"I can't, Britta. Not yet. Not until she learns her lesson and pays for her sins."

The phone clicked, then went dead in her hand.

A vision of the woman begging for her life taunted her. Then the crude mask of Sobek and an image of this man offering the woman as a sacrifice to the half crocodile, half man.

Time swirled backward. The smell of death, blood and the marsh assaulted her. Then the hiss and snapping of the gators as they churned the muddy water, anxious for their meal....

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS since they'd found Elvira Erickson. Jean-Paul Dubois sighed, loosening his collar in the smothering heat as he exited the precinct. Another long, frustrating day. And no headway on the case. He'd questioned the two mask-makers in town for the festival and neither of them made or sold one like they'd found at the scene. Both men had alibis, too.

The necklaces, however, were a dime a dozen.

Several reporters suddenly rushed him, jamming microphones in his face. A camera flash nearly blinded him and he threw up his hands to block another.

"Tell us about the woman murdered in Black Bayou!" a reporter shouted.

“Is it true she was stabbed with a lancet?”

“Did the gators get to her?”

“He raped her before he killed her or after?”

“Do we have a serial-killer case?”

Jean-Paul had to make some kind of statement. But what could he tell them? That so far they had no evidence, no name, no one to arrest? He spotted Mazie Burgess and headed toward her. She was a friend of sorts; had written stories on the hurricane and was fair. She'd also asked him out, but he hadn't been ready or interested in dating. She smiled and met him halfway and he took the mike.

“We did find a woman murdered yesterday,” he said matter-of-factly. “At this time we have no suspects in custody, but the police are doing everything possible to find the woman's killer. Now, get out of the way so I can do my job.”

Mazie thanked him. But instead of backing up, the mob moved in, surrounding him. He shouldered his way through, shrugging off a skinny guy who chased him to his car. “Come on, Detective, you have to give us more than that. Someone said that the killer contacted the editor of the *Naked Desires* magazine.”

Bon Dieu! If they caught wind of the picture Britta Berger had seen, there would be widespread panic. “No comment,” Jean-Paul barked. The last thing he wanted was the press hounding Britta. They might even scare off this guy from sending her information.

And he refused to give the swamp devil the pleasure of seeing a big write-up in the paper.

He tried to pry the man's fingers off his car door but the reporter resisted. “If you don't move out of the way, I'm going to arrest you for interfering with a police investigation and charge you with assault.”

“I didn't assault you!” the man screeched, but he did back away. Jean-Paul hit the accelerator and bolted.

Next on his agenda—he had to check R.J. Justice's alibi. He drove to the pricey new lofts near the edge of town and met Carson. Debbie Waller, the woman with whom Justice claimed he'd spent the night, supposedly lived in one of the units. The inside of the building consisted of chrome and cement and showcased exposed beams and concrete walls. Apparently the artsy, rich twenties and thirties crowd had flocked to buy the units.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.