

Chapter 13

“Five years, Roth. Five long, hard years, and I’ve got a sick feeling that the next five will be even harder.”

Abigail Dupre leaned against her open door, surveying her work. Orchid-scented candles lit the steps up to her porch, all set deep inside rounded cut-glass bowls that magnified their glow. Cicada-song hummed through the massive oak trees lining St. Charles Avenue, adding to the magical atmosphere. The girls would be impressed.

Roth, her huge, shaggy black mix breed that surely had Mastiff and Newfoundland in his lineage, sat by her side, ignoring her as he intently stared at some spectacle down the street that her human eyes couldn’t see. He would have bounded out the door in delight to investigate had she not commanded him to stay put.

How she would love to say “all is well, God is in Heaven, and everything is right with the world.” But of course, it wasn’t, and at the rate things were progressing, it might never be.

It had been five years since Katrina’s mass destruction. Five years since fear and pain and death permeated her beloved city. New Orleans was still struggling to return to normal, creeping back into existence one city block at a time, one small neighborhood at a time, one person at a time. But it was coming back. The streetcars ran on the Avenue, many of the massive Live Oaks were rebounding, and the cicadas were once again singing in the warm evening air. The city was definitely healing.

But she wasn’t.

Her thoughts jack-knifed backwards to the argument she’d had with her father earlier in the day. Both had said things they didn’t mean. Both had walked away with hurt feelings and a lot of unresolved issues.

And she was slowly but surely breaking the promise she had made to her dying mother 16 years ago.

“I’m not doing such a good job of taking care of him, am I, Mom,” she whispered.

A series of deep barks from Roth snapped her out of her doldrums as an intricately groomed snow-white standard poodle sashayed by. Abby recognized the equally well-groomed woman on the other end of its leash as a neighbor from down the street.

At the sight of the poodle, Roth’s big tail thumped happily on the hard wood floor.

“Not on your life, big boy,” she whispered to Roth. She waved to her neighbor. The woman glanced nervously at Roth, waved back, then hurried past. “She’s a champion show dog, a blue-blood way out of your league. And, as my father said, you are nothing but a non-descript mutt, though I don’t see how anything on 4 legs that weighs 200 pounds and is as big as a Shetland pony can be described as non-descript.”

She scratched the top of his massive head. “Don’t let that bother you, though. There a lot to be said for being a mutt. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve wished I was one... the human version of course. This blue blood of mine is just too damned much trouble sometimes.”

With one last pat to Roth, she straightened and began taping a note to her door.

“I have to get busy, big boy. They’ll be here soon and I still have a lot of cooking to do.”

Abby smoothed out the note on her front door addressed to the girls.

The girls.

Whatever made her think of Giselle, Raven, and Suzette that way? All of them, herself included, were hardly “girls.” Girls had fun together, went shopping, had SPA days, stayed up late watching and crying over old movies, flirted with guys, talked about sex. She and her “girls” were grown women with major responsibilities and major problems to go along with them.

The memories they shared were different, powerful and sometimes heart-wrenching. Like Suzette at the bow of an ancient, leaking motorboat she had somehow managed to “borrow,” searching the flood for people that needed help. Like Giselle helping a frail old lady clutching an equally frail old poodle – the only thing she had left in the word – off the roof her of flooded house and into the boat

and speeding her toward safety. Like Raven trying to haul the massive, half-drowned Roth into the boat.

Like the four of them – damp, exhausted and in shock after six days of non-stop rescues – collapsing in her father’s abandoned St. Charles mansion, and crying together as a frightening shadow descended on the city with the rising death toll. They fended off looters with bravado and bluster, empty guns, and Roth. They supported each other as they cried over their personal losses, and for the city in general, watched over each other as they took turns sleeping outside on the upstairs porch, trying to catch just a bit of breeze.

With only candles to illuminate the black nights and nothing to abate the sweltering heat, they drank several bottles of her father’s outrageously expensive wine, toasting to each other to have survived. Toasting to the city they all loved and prayed would one day recover. Toasting to a new bond of trust and sisterhood that would never be broken.

SPA days were rare for them, they hardly had time to go shopping together, and she couldn’t even remember the last time she had flirted with a man.

They did talk about sex, thought, and they always found time for their monthly dinner parties.

The girls. Had it not been for them, she might not have made it through the last 5 years with her sanity intact.

And she sure as heck needed them now.

With the note securely taped to the front door, she closed it, chased Roth off to the den, and headed to the dining room to light the rest of the candles.

Giselle and Raven stood on the sidewalk, waiting for the newly arrived Suzette to pry herself from her tiny new electric/gas hybrid car.

“It gets fabulous mileage,” Suzette said in answer to the obvious question on their faces as she struggled out of the car, pulling the last of her long flowing skirt behind her. “That’s worth and inconvenience or two. Besides, it’s unique. A bit artsy, don’t you think?”

One of Giselle’s eyebrows peaked. “Not so much the car as that crazy design splashed all over it. Your artwork, I presume?”

Suzette laughed. “You never did have an eclectic taste in art. Speaking of taste, I’m starving, and something smells really good. Why are we just standing here?”

They looked at each other in confusion.

“Because none of us know what this is all about,” Giselle said. “Did she tell you anything about tonight?”

Raven shook her head.

Suzette shrugged. “She just said it was a very special occasion, to wear something loud and festive, arrive at 8:00, and that we all had to go in together. She absolutely insisted that I spend the night. She was so emphatic, I couldn’t say no.”

“Same here,” Raven said. “Abby is usually so stoic. I called to ask what this was about, but she only said to wait and see. Ready to begin climbing Mt. Everest?”

They started up. Like many houses on St. Charles Avenue, the first floor of the house was actually the second floor up. Each step on the long flight upwards was gaily lit with white candles in crystal globes, dancing in a light breeze that filled the air with a unique scent.

Suzette took a deep breath. “Raven, you’re the spice and extract expert. What is this fragrance?”

“I’m not sure. It’s familiar – definitely floral – but it’s so delicate. I can’t quite place it.”

They stepped onto the porch, greeted by another spectacle of dancing candlelight, bright enough to illuminate a note taped to the door.

“Ok... we have a definite theme going here. Light. Fire. Beach clothes. Ambiance. This is

not at all like Abby. Are you sure she is expecting us and not a man? Maybe there is a little romance in the air?"

"No," Giselle said, her brows slightly bowing together, "but something is going on."

Suzette lifted a candle and sniffed. "These are all scented. This is where the fragrance is coming from. She must have spent a fortune in candles,"

Raven shrugged. "She can afford it. Let's see what she's up to." Raven read the note out loud.

"To my dearest friends, my sisters, my confidants... welcome.

Today is a very special, deeply personal, and highly emotional

day for me. Tonight I invite you to share in it, to be a part of it.

Please come in and go to the dining room. Enter in love and light

and life. You are welcomed and loved."

The three women looked at each other. Deep displays of emotion were not at all common to the Abby they were used to.

Giselle grasped the door handle. "Come on. Let's go find this impostor and see what she did with the real Abigail Dupre."

The dining room was beautiful. Every shelf, every table and even the floor was dotted with flickering scented candles, illuminating a multitude of crystal bud vases. Each vase held a single orchid of a different variety, creating a stunningly beautiful yet simple arrangement.

The huge dining room table, the buffet, and even the mantle were full of photos. Their curiosity growing, they walked around the room, taking in snapshots of Abby's younger self.

The first was of Abby as a newborn, snuggled in the pink blanket, secure in her mother's arms, with her father softly smiling behind mother and child.

Raven picked up the photo. "I didn't know her father could smile like that," Raven whispered.

"Me either," Suzette said quietly.

Each photo showed Abby and her parents at a different stage of her life. Her second birthday

party, a day at the beach when she was about 7, a beaming Abby holding a soccer ball and a trophy when she was 12.

“I didn’t know she played soccer,” Suzette said. “She doesn’t seem the type.”

“Why are we whispering?” Giselle asked.

“I’m not sure,” Raven said. “It just seems like... like a shrine in here. Why is she showing us all of this stuff? She’s usually a bit closed-mouth about her past.”

Giselle pointed to a small table by the large French door, which held a single 8 x 10 photo of Abby’s smiling mother, Jean Dupre. She stood on a white-sand beach wearing a Hawaiian sundress, with a wreath of orchids on her head, posed in mid-hula. Palm trees and an immense expanse of turquoise ocean provided the backdrop.

“Her mother in Hawaii?” Raven said, “What’s this all about?”

A note was propped up on the photo. Giselle picked up the note and opened it. “It just says to meet her in the courtyard. This must have something to do with her mother. Oh God... didn’t she die when Abby was just 13, and wasn’t it in May?”

“This must be the anniversary of her death,” Suzette said. “I don’t know what to say to Abby. What do we do? Offer our condolences? Do we hug her? She’s never been much on hugging.”

“Well, she’s going to get the stuffin’ hugged out of her tonight,” Raven said.

With a shared feeling of apprehension, they opened the large French doors leading to upper deck, found the back stairs, and wound their way down to the courtyard garden, once again following a trail of candles to their waiting hostess.

Abby smiled when she saw her friends finally entering the secluded courtyard garden. The astonishment on their faces was almost comical. No doubt they had figured out that this night was in honor of her mother, and they probably thought it was in recognition of her mother’s passing.

They couldn’t be further from the truth.

She knew the garden was beautiful and festive, with the camellias in bloom, soft white lights twinkling in the bushes, tiki torches burning in strategically placed spots, and overhead lanterns flickering down on the tropical setting she had devised for their monthly dinner party. Not a piece of English china nor a single silver fork was to be seen. The rattan table, decorated in outlandishly-colored plastic plates and tiki cups, waited to be filled with the skewers of roasted pork basted in mango sauce that was slow-roasting on the outdoor fire pit, roasted fish and avocados wrapped in banana leaves that were tucked down in the coals, chilled Lilikoi fruit, and frozen Pina Coladas.

“Aloah and welcomed!” She beamed as she met them at the bottom of the steps. Abby slipped an orchid leis over each of their heads, and tucked a small orchid behind each of their ears.

“A luau? Not at all what I expected,” Giselle said. “We thought... your mother...”

“Yes, my mom died 16 years ago, tomorrow, but she was born today! We are celebrating her birthday, her life, which ironically ended the day after her birthday 16 years ago.”

Raven reached out and clasped her hand. “We’re sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks, but save that for tomorrow,” she said. “I’ll need it then. Tonight is for fun and celebration, Hawaiian style. The buffet line starts here, so grab a plate and load it up. And don’t forget the Pina Coladas.”

Giselle smiled softly as she served herself. “That’s why you wanted us to spend the night. So you won’t be alone tomorrow. But what about your father?”

“I’m having dinner with him tomorrow night. He says he has some very serious matters to talk over with me.”

“The City Council thing again?” Raven asked.

“I’m pretty sure it is. He’s ready to get my campaign going, but I haven’t even decided to go through with it yet. Running for City Council is a pretty big step.”

Suzette sat at the table and filled her cup from the picture on the table. “And he’s doing this on the anniversary of her death. Isn’t that a bit cold?”

“Not for him. He misses her just as much as me, but he doesn’t want to show it. We’ll reminisce for a while, drink to her memory, but then he’ll say we should talk of something more positive and bring up the subject of my political career, or rather, the political career he has plotted out for me.”

“Still, it seems wrong.” Raven said.

Abby filled her plate and joined them at the table. “I love my father very much, but he can seem a bit distant at times. Which is why I need all of you to help me celebrate tonight and get through tomorrow. So... please enjoy my mom’s favorite dinner with me. She loved everything Hawaiian as you may have been able to tell from that last photo. Food, music, dancing, laughter, orchids. She had a hot house built just for them.”

“That explains all the orchids.”

“They were my mother’s favorite flower, and I seem to have inherited her knack for growing them.”

“You grew them?” Suzette said

“Don’t sound so surprised. I have many hidden talents. I don’t spend 24 hours a day at my father’s office buried in boring law cases, you know.”

Giselle put down her fork and picked up her bright green tiki cup full of frozen Pina Colada. “I can’t help but to notice something, Abby. When you talk about your work, you always call it your father’s office. Not your office, not even dad’s office. How come?”

Abby shrugged. She’d known this question was coming, sooner or later. She didn’t have to be totally open with her friends for them to realize that she and her father didn’t quite get along.

“It’s because your father is such a big bully,” Suzette grumbled.

“Suzette!” the others admonished.

Suzette shook her head. “It’s true,” she said. “We all know it, and since the subject is broached, lets talk about it.”

“It’s OK. I know that sometimes you have all think me a bit weak because I let him tell me what to do.” Abby said. “I don’t know why you haven’t said anything before now.”

Raven smiled. “Don’t be silly. We don’t think you’re weak, just a bit of a daddy’s girl. All good debutants are. So what? You’re a good-hearted person and we love you no matter what.”

Of course that is what they would think. She had never given them, or anyone, cause to think anything else. It was time to set the record straight.

“No so good-hearted,” Abby said. “I resent my relationship with my father. More than you think. But he’s not a bully... he’s just very directive. It’s the way he is.”

Suzette dropped her fork onto her plate and leaned closer to Abby. “That’s no reason to let him control you. You’re 26, you have a law degree, you have a firm financial footing. Why not set your father straight about a few thing? Like stopping him from picking your boyfriends, your vacation spots, the job you are doing... didn’t you tell us you would rather be working for the ACLU than his law firm? Why not just tell him you’re quitting? Why not... ouch! Giselle!”

Abby suppressed a smile. No doubt Giselle had Suzette under the table to stop her from going to far. “There’s a lot you still don’t understand.”

She cleared the table and served the chilled fruit with strong coffee flavored with cinnamon and topped with whipped cream. Everyone sat in determined silence, watching her expectantly, waiting for her to take the next step.

Oh, blast! The dogs had a bone, and there was no way to get it away from them now. She had to finish what she had started.

“OK... here’s the whole story. My father was not always like he is now. When my mom was alive, he was... different. Warmer, more open. Our family was happy, most of the time. Father was still stuffy, but Mom kept him in check. Like the time I wanted to play soccer. He wanted me to get involved with a more sophisticated sport, like fencing, but Mom overrode him, and I played succor all during my 8th grade year. I won best player trophy on her birthday, then she had that heart attack the

very next day.”

She paused for a moment, not really wanting to continue. The confession was more painful than she had expected it to be.

“I was the last one to talk to her before she died, and do you know what she told me? She said my father was not as strong as everyone thought he was. She told me that it would be up to me to take care of him, to make sure he was not lonely, that he didn't get hopelessly depressed. I was only 13. She should never have asked that of me at that age, but she did, and I agreed.”

Abby picked at her fruit. “My father changed after she died. I took care of him the only way I knew how. I watched over him, made sure he ate right, and did what he told me to do. I was just a kid. I thought I was doing what Mom asked me to. By the time I grew up, it had become a pattern, our way of dealing with each other without Mom.”

“So,” Giselle said, sitting back in her chair, “he said to go to a certain school and get a certain degree, and you did. He said to become a partner in his defense firm, and you did. He told you to invest in this house, and you did... although I agree with that particular piece of advice. He's telling you to run for city council, and you will. He even seems determined to pick out just the right man for you. You don't quite know how to break the pattern,”

“Or what it would do to him if I did.”

Raven shook her head. “Can't you just keep the spirit of your promise while still living your own life and letting him carry on with his?”

“That's part of the problem. I am his life,” Abby explained. “The Dupres came here in 1720, when the city was little more than a settlement of palmetto huts. Now, I am the last of the Dupres. I can't abandoned him now, but at the same time, I'm starting to go crazy.”

Abby reached around to the bar behind her, grabbed the half-empty bottle of rum, and added more – a lot more – to her Pina Colada.

She took a substantial sip. “I'm going to tell you something I've never told anybody... ever! I

have these crazy fantasies, that I'm a wild and free and powerful, a warrior brandishing a sword, fighting off a band of marauders. Like Zena. I just do'em in, and bamb! I'm off to the pub for a keg of... whatever it is they drink in bawdy pubs."

"Zena had black hair," Raven teased, "although you're tall enough and your boobs are big enough to pull it off."

"And because I'm the toughest and prettiest bitch in the land," Abby continued, unable to keep her voice from sounding a tiny bit slurred, "I get to do pretty much anything I want to do, go anywhere I damned well please. I get my pick of the biggest and most handsome studs, none of whom have ever heard of cocktail parties or political parties or any other party that you can think of. They just want to do one thing... screw my eyeball out."

Suzette, a bit tipsy herself, laughed. "You'd look gross without eyeballs."

"And I would like it... not the eyeballs falling out. The screwing. Every way this stud can think to do it! Wild orgasmic sex without consequences. Without anyone judging me or criticizing me. Without it showing up in the papers in later years when I run for president, like my father wants me to do eventually. Can you believe that? He has my whole life planned. First lawyer, then city council, then mayor, the governor, then president, then... oh, I don't know, what's bigger than president?"

"The Pope," Raven giggled. "Maybe he wants you to become the Pope."

"My Mom could have been president," Abby said, "but not me. She had the balls – or should I say ovaries? – big enough to pull it off. I'm afraid I'm more like my father than like her, more's the pity."

Abby raised her tiki glass. "To my mother, Jean Dupre, the woman I admire most in this world, present company excluded, of course, since I admire and even envy the three of you. May she not be too disappointed in me, in what I've become. But, Mom, I kept my promise, and always will. Happy birthday, Mom. To Jean Dupre!"

"To Jean Dupre," they all chanted, and downed their glasses, which Abby quickly refilled from

the blender on the bar, but not before adding more rum to the mixture.

Raven propped her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her cupped hands. “You really envy us? That’s stupid. You’re beautiful, elegant, rich---”

“—and trapped.” Abby leaned back in her chair. “Just as surly as if I was bound and gagged and tied to a train track. Not a single handsome mounted Mounty in sight, either. And if one did come along and rescue me, and if we did have wild sex, it would show up in the papers the next day, and poof! There goes my father’s plans for my political career.”

Suzette hiccuped, then laughed. “Male politicians do it all the time, and they stay in office. Don’t you read the papers?”

“Yep,” Abby slurred, but they must have some magical powers in their pricks that let them get by with it. Us girl? No way. Don’t envy me. My cage may be gilded, but it’s still a cage.”

“I’m getting tipsy,” Raven giggled.

“Suzette laughed. “You’re way past the “getting” stage. You’re lit. We all are. ”

“Drink all you want,” Abby said, flinging her arms in the air.. “You only need to stay sober enough to make it up the stairs to your rooms. We’ll have breakfast at noon, which will consist of mushroom and cheese omelets, strawberries and cream, lots of strong coffee, antacids and aspirins. And no arguments. Got it?”

“Got it!” they all chanted.

She raised her glass again, and the other followed suit. “Here’s to us, not sisters in blood but sisters just the same.”

Giselle then raised her glass for a toast. “And here’s to Abigail Dupre, daughter of Jean Dupre, whom we all hope will get a chance to break free of her gilded cage.”

“Even if only for a day,” Abby added, “so I could relive that memory for the rest of my life. Maybe then I wouldn’t mind the gilded cage so much. Here’s to me.”

She slammed her empty glass on the table. “Now who’s up for raunchy round of truth or dare?”

The subject is hot sex, Giselle, since you are apparently the only one of us getting any right now, you're on the hot seat. You send us an enticing e-mail about meeting up with Dominic again, and no details! It's time we all knew more about Dom."

Abby was rewarded by a flush of color in Giselle's cheeks and a guilty smile on her lips. For a time, Abby deflected the attention to Giselle, as it should be, and reveled in her friend's happiness.

Alone in the courtyard, still quite tipsy with headache starting at the base of her skull, Abby set about cleaning up the mess. It had been one hell of a party. Wanting to be alone for a while, she'd chased the others off to bed, insisting on cleaning up herself, but now a deep loneliness began to creep over her.

"Did you mean what you said about wanting to get out of your gilded cage for a while?"

Abby dropped the tiki glass she was holding and spun around. Giselle stood at the edge of the garden in her robe.

"You scared the hell out of me. What are you doing up so late?"

"I wanted to talk to you alone, so I waited until the others were asleep. Abby, what if you could escape for a while? What if you could have any fantasy you wanted come true? Do whatever you want with whomever you want, with no consequences? Have wild, passionate sex with any man you could conjure up? Have the vacation of your life, make memories to last a lifetime? Would you do it?"

"Do anything I wanted with absolutely no consequences? Of course I would. But I don't time for a vacation right now. God knows when I will have time. And believe me, Giselle, I don't know if my sanity will hang on for much longer."

Giselle reached over and clasped Abby's hands in hers. "What if I told you that you could do it in just one minute, 60 seconds, yet your fantasy could be as detailed as you want it to be and last as long as you want it to last. Would you do it?"

"Of course I would, but this is a silly conversation. There's no way—"

“There is a way, my friend, and here it is.” Giselle reached into her robe pocket and took out a ruby-colored card with silver writing, passed it to Abby, then sat back in her chair and smiled. “I’m to pass it on to another woman, and I felt that it should be you, even before you said what you did tonight.”

Abby read the card silently

“The chain of blessings extends from woman to woman. As you stand at a threshold, this is given to you by a woman so blessed, so indulged. One chance alone shall you receive. Present this card at Maison du Fantasie any Friday night. At the between-time of midnight, step through the ruby door. Indulge your feminine heart’s most secret desire and your womanly soul’s most powerful craving. Live your deepest fantasy.”

She looked up at Giselle. “I don’t understand. I know this place. It’s a sex shop, isn’t it?”

“Well... yes, but it has a lot of other things you will never see anywhere else. Beautiful things. Magical things. Things for women only. Trust me, Abby, this is just what you need right now. You have a whole week to think about it, to decide what your fantasy will involve. Bring that card to Madame Claudine at the Mason de Fantasy next Friday. You can’t miss her. She looks just like Sophia Loren.”

“Giselle, I—“

“No arguments. Go. The magic happens exactly at midnight, but get there at about 11:30. There are some... um... things that Madame Claudine will want to tell you before the fantasy begins. And I promise you, this is a once in a lifetime, truly magical experience. You won’t regret it. I certainly didn’t.”

“You’ve done this? You actually has some kind of fantasy at this place?”

“It’s where I found Dom. I can’t tell you any more, not yet, not until you have gone through your own fantasy.”

“Come on, Giselle, this has to be some kind of weird joke.”

Giselle reached over and grasped her hands. “No joke. Do you trust me, Abby?”

“With my life,” she said without a moment’s hesitation.

“Then do this, not for me, but for yourself. Take a chance. Do something crazy. Take a risk, just this once.”

“And if I decide not to go?”

Giselle shook her head. “You’ll never get another chance. Never. But if you don’t go, please, give the card to Suzette or Raven. Don’t let it go to waste. Go. Promise me!”

“Ok already... I promise.”

Giselle stood and began sauntering back to her room. “Once your fantasy is over,” she said over her shoulder, “we can talk more freely about it. Don’t tell the others about this, not yet. They’ll each get their chance.”

Confused yet totally intrigued by the mystery of it all, Abby fingered the card. Giselle would never lie to her about something like this. Of all the people on the face of the earth, Abby trusted these three women completely. None of them would ever do anything to hurt her.

“Any fantasy I want.” And she only had a week to figure out just exactly that would be.

She rose and stumbled up to bed, carefully tucking the card into the deep pocket of her dress, an image of her fantasy man already taking shape in her mind.