

***Bayou Midnight* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

Chapter One

The late-afternoon sunshine oozing through the window was a punishment. Antoinette Deveraux winced and squeezed her eyelids shut, wishing for a second eyelid—like that of some lucky amphibians—to screen out every ray of light in the room. The involuntary facial contortions sent more pain radiating through her body. There was no hope for it. Her headache wasn't going away. The aspirin she had taken wasn't doing its job; three cups of coffee and the attendant caffeine hadn't made a dent in it. There was only one cure for the misery that was sucking the marrow from her bones and the breath from her body.

A cigarette.

Antoinette opened her eyes and focused them on the deceptively innocent pack lying on her desk. It was crumpled; the cellophane encasing it was tattered as if someone had nervously poked a finger beneath it and traced a circle around and around the shiny red-and-white package.

Someone had. That someone had been her. The package of cigarettes had been in and out of her desk drawer for a week. She had fondled it like a mother with her infant, toyed with it like a cat with a mouse, railed at it with the venom of a jilted lover. The only thing she hadn't done was take out one of the cigarettes, put it in her mouth and light it. And of course that was the thing she wanted most to do.

Now her hand hovered over the desk and then over the cigarettes. One finger dipped down to crackle the cellophane. Even the sound was nostalgic. How much more nostalgic would be the smell of tobacco, the inhalation of smoke, the comfort of a long-loved habit.

“That habit's killing you!”

Her hand landed back in her lap with a thud. Now she was talking to herself. It had come to that. She prided herself on her rational outlook on life; there were people all over the city who depended on her to radiate serenity and analytical good sense. And here she was, Dr. Antoinette Deveraux, talking to herself like the craziest of her clients.

Antoinette looked at her watch and then, once more, at the pack of cigarettes. She had time to succumb. She could fill her nicotine-starved body with the familiar acrid smoke and count the seconds until her headache disappeared. She would be a nice person if she did, a credit to the human community. She could consider this experiment a failure and remember it when she

sometimes got impatient with people who refused to give up a habit that was damaging them.

Antoinette watched her hand take flight. It was amazing what the unconscious could do. Her hand was reaching for the pack before she had even given it permission. Obviously she had come to a crossroads. Either she was going to have to give in or give herself a dose of her own therapy. Which was it going to be?

The hand hovering over the desk punched the button on her office intercom. "Rosy?"

Antoinette waited for the reassuring sound of her secretary's voice. Rosy was an anchor. On her sloping shoulders rested the business affairs and, more often than not, the personal affairs of the five psychologists who shared the second floor of the converted Uptown mansion in the heart of New Orleans.

Rosemarie Madison was a psychologist's psychologist. She knew when to nod, when to shake her head and when to murmur, "Yes, dahlin', of course you had to." She hadn't gone through years of graduate school. She had gotten her GED after four children and two husbands, and Rosy's education in the school of hard knocks had given her a wisdom the psychologists she worked for envied.

Now Rosy's voice held the sympathy she'd been openly expressing to Antoinette all week. "Doing all right?"

Antoinette smiled, sending new shivers of pain to pierce her brain. Valiantly she ignored it. "Worst day yet," she admitted.

"Always is. My Harry always said the seventh day was the worst. Every time he quit smoking he said the same thing."

Antoinette couldn't keep from asking the obvious. "How many times did he quit?"

"Six. He never made it through the seventh day. Good thing you're stronger than Harry, may he sleep with the angels."

"Good thing," Antoinette murmured. "Listen, Rosy, I've got a five-thirty appointment. A Sam Long. If he gets here before you go, buzz me. If he's not here, just leave the front door unlocked. I'll make sure my door's open so I can hear him come in."

"It's not safe to leave that front door unlocked," Rosy scolded. "You know that. Besides, should you be alone in the building with a patient, dahlin'?"

Antoinette could almost see the worried frown that would be fighting the other lines in Rosy's weathered face. "Don't worry. He's a policeman. Detective Sergeant Sam Long."

“A cop? That’s worse. A cop gone crazy is the worst kind of psycho. I’m not setting foot out of this office!”

“He’s not crazy, Rosy. He’s coming about a case he needs help with. Go on home.”

There was silence when Rosy decided if she was going to obey her favorite boss. Then, “Okay, but you have any problems and you call my oldest boy, Deke. He just lives over on Birch Street. He could be here in seconds.”

“I’ll do that,” Antoinette said solemnly. She flicked off the intercom and stood, moving restlessly around the room. She propped her door open with a volume of Jung’s *Man and his Symbols*, and then she took care of the sunshine by pulling the heavy drapes across the large picture window that looked out on Carrollton Avenue. The window was usually a source of delight. She had fought for this particular office just so that she could enjoy the sunshine and the view of the bustling avenue, complete with old-fashioned green streetcars rolling up and down the median strip, or neutral ground as it was called in New Orleans. Today the view, the noise and the indecently bright winter sunshine only added to the pounding in her head.

Settled once more at her desk, she faced the pack of cigarettes, turning them so that they were in front of the chair at the side of her desk. She took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly, drawing another breath, only to exhale again. After the third she began.

“I don’t understand the hold you have on me,” she told the cigarettes. “I’m a twenty-eight-year-old psychologist who’s well established in the community. I’ve got a good head on my shoulders and no other bad habits. You’re the only thing standing between me and real maturity.”

She sat quietly, staring at the pack, and then after a minute got up and moved to the chair at the side of her desk. She put her hand on the cigarettes and shut her eyes. “Well, I’m just a lowly piece of tobacco,” she answered herself with a whine, “but if I had to make a guess, I’d say maybe you’re just not quite ready to be perfect.”

Sam Long undid the top button of his plaid shirt while he waited for someone to answer his knock. He checked his watch. He was only a few minutes late. Maybe this woman was one of those ultraprofessional types who never took anything into account except her own schedule. Maybe she’d gone home when he didn’t show up at the stroke of five-thirty. He lifted his hand and impatiently knocked once more on the door with the brass sign that read Psychologist

Associates.

The door leading into the downstairs hallway had been open. But there were other offices in the building, upstairs and down; there was no guarantee it had been left open for him. He tried the knob, and when it turned, he stepped into the waiting room.

It was empty of people but filled with contemporary prints, thriving plants and plush upholstered furniture. The magazine rack had a larger selection than the public library; the fish swimming in a twenty-gallon tank were exotic enough to stock a South Sea lagoon. Obviously, Psychologist Associates was making money.

So where was the receptionist? Where were the patients who couldn't come during normal office hours? Where was Dr. Antoinette Deveraux?

It only took him seconds to begin to search. Sam Long was not a patient man. It was his impatience that had paid off time and time again as he combed the New Orleans streets looking for people who got their kicks putting bullets in their fellow citizens. Oh, he could wait when he had to. He could wait with every muscle of his body tensed to unleash the deadly energy that made him such a successful cop. But he never wasted time waiting for anyone less important than a murder suspect.

The reception area was flanked on either side by narrow hallways. The house had been cleverly renovated to retain the appearance of a graceful Victorian mansion on the outside and the efficiency of an office building on the inside. Sam admired the effect as he turned to the left and examined nameplates on doors.

It was only when he abandoned the hallway and crossed the waiting area again that he heard the murmur of a woman's voice. He followed it to the end of the opposite hall, pausing in front of a door that was ajar. He read the sign Dr. Deveraux as he listened to the soft, lilting voice.

"You keep bringing this back to perfection, but I have no desire in the world to be perfect. Only healthy. And if you don't stop your stranglehold on me, you'll kill me."

Sam frowned, wondering just what he'd be interrupting if he knocked. He heard the scrape of a chair and then a voice that sounded like the first voice but with a whining quality that set his teeth on edge.

"You've been using me for years to flaunt your independence in your parents' face. I won't let you give me up! I'm the one big symbol that shows the world you're not a pretty little robot!"

The screech of wood against wood was followed by, "What do you mean you won't let me

give you up! I'm a grown woman. I will not be ruled by you! Damn it! I'm going to get rid of you once and for all."

"You've been trying that for a week now," the second voice whined. "You need me. You're obsessed with me. You don't have the courage to be finished with me once and for all."

"No? Watch this. You're going out the window!"

Sam pushed the door open and stepped across the threshold. The woman with her back turned to the desk didn't even notice. She stalked across the room and furiously jerked open a set of heavy drapes. With the same angry motion she opened the window and hurled a small object to the street below. Then she stood with her hands on her hips and cheered as a truck roared by. "That'll teach you to threaten me!"

Antoinette pulled her head back in and slammed the window shut, relishing the blast of winter air. She felt all-powerful. She felt as if she could take on the world and still have energy left over.

Her triumph was temporary.

"That was quite a show. Just what did you litter the street with?"

Antoinette continued to face the window. She wiped her palms on the skirt of her raspberry-colored suit and succeeded in pulling herself back to reality. It was obviously later than she had thought. Time had a habit of getting away from her when she was in a session, especially if the session was with herself. She had no doubt whom the voice behind her belonged to. "Cigarettes," she said calmly.

"Talking cigarettes?"

"In a manner of speaking." She turned slowly and faced the blond man lounging in her doorway. "Don't policemen knock, or is that one of those things you don't have to do if you wear a badge?"

"I never knock when I think someone's about to commit a murder."

She wondered how he could deliver that ridiculous, detective-novel line with a straight face. She kept her expression blank, too. "I rarely throw people out of my window. I usually finish them off outside the office. Messy business, murder."

Sam examined the woman standing with stoic resignation in front of him. They'd met before, although at the time he'd been so involved in his job that he'd paid little attention to her. Now he wondered how he could have been so preoccupied. She was stunning, even without a

smile brightening her face. Taller than average with a willowy figure, Antoinette Deveraux's greatest attraction was her coloring. The hair hanging straight and shining down to her shoulder blades was the black of many Creole beauties, but her skin was milk and roses and her eyes an incredible blue that looked like the southern Louisiana sky at midday.

There was nothing wrong with her features, either. Sam imagined an artist trying to assemble the perfection of Antoinette's face on canvas. Even Rembrandt would fail. If Sam hadn't just witnessed her bizarre temper tantrum, he still knew he would never have been able to take her seriously. She was much too beautiful. There was a place for beautiful women, but it wasn't in the middle of a police investigation. He wished he hadn't wasted his time.

"Well, aren't you going to call the men with the straitjack-ets?" Antoinette tilted her head to signify that Sam had her full attention. The movement was unintentional, but it always inspired confidence in her clients. When Sam didn't answer, she motioned to the chair beside her desk. Without looking to see if he would seat himself, she pulled out her desk chair and sat down.

"I won't take any more of your time."

Antoinette realized that Sam was standing exactly where she'd left him. Her lips tried to manage a tiny smile. "Sergeant Long, I'm really not crazy. I've just given up smoking, and I've had a killing headache all afternoon. I was using a perfectly reputable therapeutic technique to see if I could figure out why."

Despite himself, he was intrigued. "Did you?"

The attempt at a smile disappeared. "It was helpful. My headache felt better until I realized you'd been watching me."

"And now?"

"It's roaring like a freight train trying to get back on schedule." She put her hands to her temples in emphasis. "Please sit down."

Sam moved around the desk and sat in the proffered chair. It wasn't Antoinette's words that convinced him but the nagging realization that he couldn't tell their mutual friend Joshua Martane that he'd left without discussing his reason for coming. Joshua would accuse him of arrogance, and Joshua would probably be right.

"So," Antoinette began again, "Joshua says you're looking for a therapist to work with a little girl."

"He spoke very highly of you."

Through the pounding in her head Antoinette examined the man lounging beside her desk. Detective Sergeant Sam Long belonged on a television cop show. He was much too beautiful to be out on the streets looking for trouble. And beautiful was the correct term. Handsome was unimaginative, good-looking much too tame. He was beautiful in an entirely masculine sense, with a straight aquiline nose and perfectly drawn lips that had yet to turn up in anything resembling a smile. His hair was policeman short and sun-streaked gold, his eyes a color not quite green or brown but a compromise. The cleft in his chin was an emphatic exclamation point. He was wearing a plaid shirt and well-tailored jeans, but Antoinette imagined that in a uniform Sergeant Sam Long caused his own fair share of traffic accidents.

“We’ve met before,” Antoinette said, remembering the day with renewed clarity.

“The day Maggie gave her statement about the kidnapping.”

“Two and a half years ago.” Maggie, now Maggie Martane, Joshua’s wife, had been one of Antoinette’s clients. She had suffered from a hysterical amnesia that prevented her from remembering any details of her past. She had also been the victim of an attempted murder. Sam had been one of the policemen assigned to her case.

Antoinette wondered if Sam was absolutely averse to smiling, or if he would return one of hers if she gave it her full power. She decided to accept the risk and the increased pain. “Tell me,” she asked, “do many of your cases end that happily?”

Sam’s expression didn’t change. “Rarely.”

“Then it must make you glad to see Maggie and Joshua and to know that at least once in your career something turned out right.”

“How many happy endings do you have in here?” Sam asked with a spare gesture that encompassed the room.

“I don’t work miracles. I just see improvements.”

“I’m looking for a miracle.”

Antoinette nodded. “Have you decided I’m sane enough to explain your case to yet?”

A faint smile lit Sam’s eyes. Antoinette was encouraged.

“What kind of therapy had you talking to a cigarette package?” he asked.

She recognized his change of subject for what it was. Sam Long didn’t trust her. Antoinette guessed his trust would be difficult to win under the best of circumstances. She wasn’t sure she had the energy to keep trying or even that she cared to, but she answered his question.

“Gestalt. And I wasn’t talking to the cigarette package. Not exactly, anyway. I was talking to the part of me that wants to keep smoking. The package was a symbol.”

“And now that you’ve thrown it out the window, you’ll never smoke again?”

“If you weren’t sitting there, I’d probably be running downstairs this very minute to scrape the tobacco off the street,” Antoinette admitted.

“So it didn’t work.”

“Everything involving the human mind takes time. If it were that easy to quit smoking, the economy of the Carolinas would do a double back flip.”

Sam let his gaze drift around the room as they talked. He’d learned to judge people by their environment. There was a lot the little office could tell him about Antoinette Deveraux. The furniture hadn’t come out of the local warehouse showroom. Her desk was an antique. He wasn’t an expert, but he recognized the sheen of cherry and the elegant lines of something from the nineteenth century. In the corner was a thoroughly modern sofa accented by the same rich cherry, and in front of it was an elaborate Oriental rug. She’d chosen rose and bronze and faint traces of turquoise for her color scheme. There was nothing in the room that drew attention to itself. It was a room designed to harmonize and give comfort. He wondered how many poor souls had lain on the couch and spilled their guts while she nodded and looked sympathetic.

“I quit smoking when I was twenty-four,” Sam said, his gaze flicking back to Antoinette.

“And you survived?” she asked with a sigh.

“I haven’t touched one in ten years.”

“Did you chew gum? Suck ice? Scream at your loved ones?”

His lips turned up a little. “I just quit. No fanfare.”

Antoinette’s eyes narrowed fractionally. “And now you’re going to tell me it didn’t bother you particularly.” When he neither confirmed nor denied her statement, she slumped in her chair. “Tell me about your case.”

She looked so discouraged that Sam wished he could dredge up a horror story for her about his own withdrawal from nicotine. If there was one, though, it hadn’t been worth remembering. He turned to the business at hand, still not sure if he wanted her to be involved.

“You’ve heard about the case if you read the papers. Somebody’s trying to destroy Omega Oil. They’ve been sabotaging drilling equipment and pieces of the company fleet. And they’ve been setting fires.”

“But that’s down along the Gulf, isn’t it? Why are the local police involved?”

“The Omega Oil office is here in the city.” Sam could see Antoinette begin to put the information together.

“The fire down on Canal Street a couple of weeks ago,” she said finally.

“That’s right. It wasn’t an accident. Someone set it. The top three stories of the building were destroyed.”

Antoinette frowned. “Wasn’t a man killed?”

“One of the vice presidents. He wasn’t supposed to be there, but he’d had a fight with his wife. He’d gone in late that night to sleep in his office.”

“So it’s not just arson. It’s murder.”

Sam leaned back in his chair and nodded.

“And that’s why you’re here,” she continued. “I remember now. You work in homicide. That’s why you were on Maggie’s case.” She paused as Sam nodded again. “Joshua said you wanted me to work with a child.”

Sam shifted in his seat. “One of the women who cleans the building brought her daughter with her the night of the fire. Laurie’s seven years old. Her mom’s divorced and barely makes enough to support them. She can’t afford child care, so she usually takes Laurie with her when she’s working. That night the cleaning staff started on the top floor, like they always do. Mrs. Fischer put Laurie on one of the couches in the president’s suite, and when she came back to get her, Laurie was sound asleep.”

“I don’t remember reading about a little girl.”

“You wouldn’t have. We kept it out of the papers. Anyway, Mrs. Fischer didn’t want to disturb Laurie, so she went down to the next floor and then the next, going back up to check on her every once in a while to make sure she was all right. Evidently, once Laurie goes to sleep, there’s no waking her.” Sam brushed a nonexistent speck of lint off his jeans, then he clenched his hand into a fist. “When the cleaning staff were down on the second floor, they heard an explosion.”

Antoinette was surprised by Sam’s gesture. She suspected that the clenched fist was as much emotion as he ever showed, and she was surprised that he’d allowed it to slip through his tight control. Her eye was trained to detect feelings, no matter how they were manifested, but she wondered how many other people understood that Sam Long wasn’t completely emotionless

about his work.

“Mrs. Fischer ran up the stairs, but by the time she got to the fifth floor, the smoke was so thick she couldn’t go any farther. The firemen got there a few minutes later and found her half-dead on the steps.”

“Is she all right?”

“It was touch and go, but it looks like she’s going to be fine.”

Antoinette wasn’t sure she wanted to hear the answer to the next question. “And Laurie?”

“Laurie was found on Canal Street, sitting on the sidewalk crying her eyes out.”

“Unhurt?”

“She’d inhaled some smoke, and she was hospitalized overnight, but she’s fine now. She’s in a foster home until her mother’s released from the hospital.”

“How on earth did she find her way to the street?”

“She can’t remember. She remembers going to sleep on the sofa, and she remembers a policeman finding her on the sidewalk. Everything in between’s a blank.”

Antoinette propped her elbows on her desk and rested her head in her hands. The pounding headache had been kept at bay by sheer willpower during Sam’s story, but now it was back twofold. It even hurt to think. She forced herself to speak. “It’s not unusual for the mind to shut out a trauma like that. Look at what happened to Maggie.”

“Joshua says one of the reasons Maggie’s memory returned was because of the work you did with her.”

“It would have returned anyway. I just helped her get ready for it.” When Sam didn’t answer, Antoinette lifted her head. He was no longer sitting in the chair beside her desk. He had moved from it, making no noise at all. She wondered if they had taught him that silent, economical use of his body at the police academy.

“Don’t turn around.” Sam’s voice came from behind her. “Put your head back down.”

Antoinette did as she was told simply because it was the easiest thing to do. She jumped at the feel of his fingers on the back of her head. She could feel him tunnel through her hair until his thumbs were pressing against the base of her skull. “What are you doing?”

“I’m taking away your headache.”

“I appreciate the thought, but...”

“You have to be receptive for this to work.” Sam stroked his thumbs up and down the taut

skin of her neck and scalp. Finally, he settled on two spots, letting his fingers rest on the top of her head. Then he began to squeeze until his thumbs were digging into the sensitive flesh and his fingers were holding her head captive. “Shut your eyes and concentrate on breathing slowly in and out.”

“That’s my line,” she murmured, her eyelids fluttering shut even as she said the words. She began to pay attention to the rhythm of her own breath, deepening it and drawing it out. In a matter of seconds all she could feel was the touch of Sam’s hands and a burgeoning sense of peace.

“The headache’s not from lack of nicotine. You’re as tense as a guilty man on the witness stand.”

“That tension’s the only thing that keeps me from falling into a million pieces. You have no idea how much I want a cigarette.”

Sam tried to remember wanting anything that badly. Standing with his hands buried in Antoinette’s hair and her subtly exotic perfume tantalizing his senses, the only thing he could remember ever wanting with that kind of energy was a woman.

“You smell like a New Orleans spring.”

Antoinette was surprised by the personal observation. She was also surprised that she was sitting in her office with a stranger massaging her headache away. But the surprise in no way detracted from the fact that whatever Sam Long was doing was working.

“There are actually people in the world who don’t know what sweet olive is,” she murmured.

“And you pity them.”

“I’m a dyed-in-the-wool New Orleanian.”

Sam drew a deep breath and confirmed his impressions of her. “You buy your perfume in the French Quarter, your antiques on Magazine Street, your groceries at Langenstein’s and your clothes over in the Riverbend.”

“Guilty as charged.” Antoinette began to rotate her head in rhythm to the pulsing of Sam’s fingers. She found herself hoping that he’d never stop.

“You were born in the Garden District, went to school at either Sacred Heart or McGehee’s. You went away to college for one year and came home to make your debut during carnival season, when you were the queen of one of the old-line krewes. You haven’t lived out of town

since.”

“You forgot to mention the year I took the grand tour and visited French relatives outside Paris,” Antoinette said with a laugh. “Are you always so good at ferreting out the facts?”

“Always.”

“Then have you also figured out that I graduated from Tu-lane with honors, established my practice without the help of my wealthy parents, made a name for myself in the community by the sweat of my perfectly formed brow and learned enough about people to make me a damned good psychologist?”

Sam’s thumbs missed a beat. “No.”

“Then you have something to learn about getting information,” she said sweetly. “How could you have wallowed in your prejudices and missed the obvious?”

Sam let his fingers slide the length of her hair. It was fine and soft, as shiny as polished jet. But it was the spirit of the woman beneath it that intrigued him more. As soon as he withdrew his hands, he missed touching her.

Antoinette moved her head from side to side. Her headache was gone.

She waited for it to return, but even when Sam was once again sitting beside her desk, the headache was still a thing of the past. Antoinette opened her eyes and smiled at him. “Don’t tell me that was part of your training?”

“I’m supposed to take care of anything that gets in the way of getting my job done.”

“Where did you learn to do that?”

“From a Cajun *traiteur*. A folk healer.”

Her smile widened. “Joshua said you were a man of many talents. He was right. Thank you.”

She *was* too beautiful, but Sam realized that time was running out. His choices were limited. Antoinette Deveraux would have to do, even if he still had reservations about her.

He nodded for his own benefit. The decision had been made. “We need somebody to work with Laurie. Specifically, we need a woman, and one who’s been trained in hypnosis. The police psychologist thinks that we might be able to get some information from her that her conscious mind is blocking.”

“What kind of information?”

“Laurie didn’t get down to the sidewalk by herself. It’s obvious that somebody helped her.

We want to find out who.”

Antoinette stretched, amazed at the well-being that filled her body. “Why is that so important?”

Sam leaned forward, and Antoinette stopped stretching to meet his eyes.

“It’s important,” he said, “because the person who helped her may very well have been the person who set fire to the building.”