

The Unmasking by Emilie Richards
Excerpt

Chapter One

Dreary and bleak weren't words that were normally used to describe the New Orleans French Quarter, but on this morning the Quarter was the personification of the weather that threatened the sleeping city. Gray skies filled with rain clouds melted into distant concrete-and-glass buildings, and like the charcoal-colored streets below them, slate and shingle roofs were shiny with the previous night's storm. No renegade shafts of sunlight lit the historic stores surrounding the French market, and the flea market, usually a lively, mass of color and humanity, was strangely subdued.

In the early-morning quiet, vendors were setting up tables. Those who had reserved stalls under the covered walkway were noticeably cheerier than those setting up spaces in the parking lot. A proliferation of beach umbrellas and makeshift canvas shelters testified to the pessimism of the latter. A rainy day could spell disaster for vendors who ignored the warning signs and allowed their displays of leather goods, watches, paperback books, or countless other items to face ruin.

Under the covered walkway two brilliant spots of color shone like beacons in the gloom. Hot-pink and scarlet ostrich feathers rode on top of the swirling dark hair of a young woman setting up one of the stalls. Next to her, a bright-eyed little imp wearing a woven satin headband of emerald-green and peacock plumes danced impatiently.

"I want to do it. I'm big enough!"

While most young children in the city were probably watching Saturday-morning cartoons, four-year-old Abby Walker was trying to help her mother unpack fragile feather masks and headpieces from a wooden crate. With studied self-control Bethany Walker didn't interfere as her daughter carefully unwrapped an intricate mask of Lady Amherst pheasant and laid it reverently on the black velvet spread draping the folding table.

Hopping on one foot, then the other, the little girl finally arranged the mask to suit her taste. "Right there." Bethany bent to land a quick kiss on her daughter's cheek as Abby tried to brush her away. "That tickles!"

Straightening Abby's tiny headdress, Bethany apologized. "Tickling's the main problem with feathers."

"I can tickle, too." Abby lowered her head, flicking her mother's waistline. "See?"

"You win." Bethany threw her hands above her head in mock defeat. "If you tickle me anymore, I won't be able to sell a single mask today."

Selling masks at the French market wasn't the way Bethany and Abby ordinarily spent Saturdays. Never a day of leisure, Saturday was always hectic and filled with work, but usually it was done in the little Royal Street shop, Life's Illusions, that Bethany owned with her friend Madeline Conroy. For the past six Saturdays, however, Bethany had chosen to display choice pieces at the flea market in hopes that the added exposure would bring potential customers to the shop.

Bethany adjusted the mirror she had hung over her display so potential customers could view themselves in the masks she would try to sell that day. The one she was wearing was one of her favorites and her own creation. In addition to the graceful, curled ostrich plumes that swept down over her hair to brush against her shoulder, there was an arc of smaller dyed feathers, curving in a solid sheet over one eye. Only an almond-shaped peephole allowed her to see from that side at all.

Although one-third of her face was hidden, no one who knew Bethany could be fooled. The mask failed to hide enough of the pale skin, the large gray-blue eyes and the oval face with its decidedly pointed chin to keep her identity a secret. And secrecy had never been the point, anyway. Bethany never felt comfortable withholding anything from the world. Open and direct, she liked the scarlet-and-pink mask because she could give the illusion of disguise without really hiding at all.

"I think that's it." After adjusting the mirror to her satisfaction, Bethany finished putting the last masks inside the display case that held her most expensive creations. From the bottom of the packing crate she removed a small box of business cards and inserted a sign into a Lucite holder, taking a step back to measure the effect.

"Done," she said.

Abby had managed to exercise all her patience, but now that she knew her mother was finished, she tugged at her arm. "I'm hungry."

Bethany pulled a chair up behind the table, and with Abby on her lap, she opened a paper bag. "*Beignets*, kiddo, and I've got a cup of hot chocolate for you."

The *beignets*, still warm and puffy from the nearby *Café du Monde* deep fryer, were a thank-you gift for Abby's cooperation. The two quickly devoured them, taking care not to cover

the black velvet spread with powdered sugar.

"I think you just gained a pound." Bethany lifted the little girl onto the ground, and they both dusted their hands over the sidewalk behind them.

"I like the flea market. I wish we could come every day."

"Sorry to say this is the last Saturday for a long time. Business at the shop'll be picking up now that Mardi Gras's getting closer, and we won't need the extra exposure."

Abby, ignoring her mother's explanation, crossed the aisle to admire a nearby table full of brightly painted wooden toys.

The flea market was beginning to come to life. Although it was only 8:00 a.m. and not all the spaces were filled, a few customers had begun to wander through the path between the tables. As she finished her *café au lait*, Bethany exchanged pleasantries with Elvira Hastings, an old woman who was setting up handmade Raggedy Ann dolls at the table next to hers. Although Bethany wasn't a regular vendor, she had sold there often enough to know most of the others. On the shelf next to Abby's bed at home was a three-foot Raggedy Ann Bethany had traded several weeks ago with Mrs. Hastings for a black-and-white ceramic mask of a clown.

"That baby's getting more grown-up and prettier every day, darlin'." Mrs. Hastings had a Brooklynesque accent with a Southern twang, as unique as New Orleans itself. "She's gonna break some man's heart before ya know it."

Bethany watched Abby investigate the tables of the other vendors. The little girl was happily trying on cloisonné bracelets at a stall down the row, and that vendor was laughing and pushing more at her. "Do you believe that? I've seen him yell at potential customers just because they moved one of those bracelets an inch out of line."

"Everybody loves your little girl. Your husband must be a proud man."

It was a natural mistake, and Mrs. Hastings wasn't the first to make it. "I'm not married," Bethany said. "We live alone, but I'm proud enough of Abby to make up for anything."

There was no surprise in the old woman's voice when she responded. "I'm sure it hasn't been easy, darlin', but the world wouldn't be as bright a place to live in if Abby Walker weren't in it. Not nearly as bright."

The old woman's words made Bethany smile. "My world certainly wouldn't be as bright. Abby makes my life worth living."

The little girl *was* a bright flame, infusing everything around her with life and warmth.

Watching her daughter flutter from booth to booth, Bethany could almost forget that once, years before, pregnant and alone, she had been sure life would never be worth living again.

Justin Dumontier sat nursing the drink he'd bought an hour earlier to have with his breakfast. His mimosa had gone flat, but Justin couldn't have cared less. The morning had gone flat, too. Wining and dining the major clients in his father's firm was one of a hundred things he disliked about the private practice of law.

Unconsciously he allowed his feelings to cross his face in an uncharacteristic display of emotion, but the man sitting across the breakfast table didn't even notice. *His* mimosas hadn't gone flat—they hadn't had time to.

Another lawyer in the firm, Paul Edwards, leaned over to murmur in Justin's direction, "I think we need some fresh air."

Privately Justin thought his entire life needed fresh air, but he only nodded. "Let's go." Together the two men helped their client to his feet. "Mr. Perkins, we thought we'd show you the sights."

"I just wanna see Bourbon Street."

Visualizing a scenario of stops at every bar up and down the famous thoroughfare, Justin shook his head decisively. "Not now. Maybe a little later. Let's stroll around Jackson Square."

"I wanna see..."

Justin helped the older man with his coat. "We'll just walk this fine breakfast off for a little while, Mr. Perkins. Let's go."

With each lawyer gripping one of the inebriated man's elbows they made their way out of the elegant restaurant and began to walk carefully down the sidewalk. Turning at the corner, they headed toward the square. Paul began a rambling history lesson, pointing to the quaint old buildings and expounding on the Spanish origins of the iron filigreed balconies overhanging the sidewalks. Justin, tuning him out, felt the onslaught of a depression that rivaled the gloomy weather.

In the distance he could see the familiar spires of St. Louis Cathedral. It had been years since he had been to Jackson Square on a weekend, but he knew from experience how little changed in New Orleans. He was sure when they got to the park he would hear the clamor of tourists exclaiming over the artists who had set up their stands, complete with paintings or charcoal

drawings of celebrities to advertise their skills. He was equally sure at least one embarrassed teenage girl would have succumbed to the temptation to sit for a portrait. There would be flocks of pigeons, tour guides and cameras.

Jackson Square would be a festive place, and Justin felt anything but festive. In fact, in another moment of insight, he realized it had been a long time since he had felt anything of the sort. During his years in the federal attorney's office in Chicago he had felt busy and productive. He had felt excitement and occasionally doubt, but he had never felt lighthearted or ready for merrymaking. In exchange he had rarely allowed himself to feel depressed.

He pushed back his hair and revealed the angular lines of his face. Thick brows, eyes nearly as dark as his black hair, and an olive complexion all testified to his Creole heritage. At Harvard his classmates had teased him about being well suited for the role of a wealthy planter with nothing to do than sit on the veranda of his antebellum mansion and sip mint juleps. Tall and slender with an athletic, muscular body, Justin Dumontier had been created to dance at a thousand balls, gamble on luxurious riverboats, or ride like the wind through fields of sugarcane or cotton—or whatever it was folks grew in that far-from-Harvard place called Louisiana.

Justin had taken the teasing good-naturedly and quietly gone on to graduate with honors, making a name for himself at the Harvard Law School. He had chosen Chicago as his home, turning his back on his native New Orleans and the law firm of his father. Now he was home again, but he was counting the days until he could leave.

Once before he had felt empty, incomplete, drained of joy. Then he had been able to plunge himself into the work that gave him solace. Now there was nothing to help.

"Don't you think so, Justin?" Paul's was clearly making a supreme effort to keep up the chatter.

With a noncommittal nod, Justin helped guide Mr. Perkins over the curb and into the square. A quick glance told him that nothing had changed in all the years he had been away. Only Justin Dumontier was not the same.

"I know you're tired of sitting, honey. I wish I could take you to the square, but I've got to stay here until dinner. Then Madeline will come and take over the stall for us." Bethany watched her daughter make horrible faces and wished she could capture them in papier-mâché. They would be perfect for Halloween.

The morning was wearing on and wearing thin for Abby. She had visited all the vendors, rearranged masks and eaten the last of the *beignets*. She had exclaimed over a six-inch rag doll given to her by Mrs. Hastings and taken the doll on fantasy trips everywhere a four-year-old could imagine. Usually a good-tempered little girl, even Abby had her limits. Sitting quietly at the flea market all day was one of them.

"You're always working, Mommy."

The statement was true, but there was food to buy, rent to pay, supplies for the shop that Bethany had to purchase. And there was a hospital bill with Abby's name on it from the year before. Bethany was paying it off a little at a time.

"It must feel like that sometimes," Bethany said.

The conversation was interrupted by a booming voice rich with the lilting cadences of South Louisiana. "Sell me a mask, pretty lady?" The man standing above them was huge. Well over six foot, with a girth almost half as wide, the overall effect was softened by a broad grin barely visible beneath a straggly brown beard.

"Where would you put it, Lamar? Your face is almost covered, anyway."

"Say the word, *chère*, and I'll shave it off." He pulled the beard with one hand, as if to be done with it.

"Don't make Lamar shave off his beard, Mommy. I like it." Abby crawled under the table to jump into the crouching Lamar's arms. She buried her face in his neck.

"A loyal fan. I guess we'll just have to dot the beard with sequins for Mardi Gras and forget the mask."

A native of the bayou country of southern Louisiana and a descendant of the Acadian—Cajun—exiles who'd emigrated from Nova Scotia two centuries earlier, Lamar Robicheaux had arrived in New Orleans with a small band of Cajun musicians to start a nightclub in the French Quarter. Luckily for Bethany they had located around the corner from her shop and apartment.

Abby, who lived primarily in a woman's world, had taken to Lamar immediately. No one could play the fiddle like Lamar; no one could tell such outrageous tales of voodoo and pirates or tell them with a Cajun accent straight out of the nineteenth century; no one else let her ride on his shoulders as if she were completely weightless. Lamar, lonely for his family, had adopted Abby, and Bethany with her.

"What really brings you here?" Bethany asked.

"Money. Me, I need a little child labor." He tickled Abby, evoking loud giggles. "I'm going over to Jackson Square to fiddle, and I thought this *p'tit zozo* might like to come pass the hat. Madeline told me where you were."

Bethany inspected her daughter. In addition to her headdress, the little girl was dressed in a bright-blue running suit decorated with green beads she had caught the year before at a carnival parade. With her dark hair and darker eyes, Abby would be appealing to the crowds. Nevertheless Bethany knew that Lamar had really made the offer to give the little girl a break.

"It's a terrific idea. You'll have to watch her carefully, Lamar." She flashed a bright smile at his scowl. "Yes, I know you will.

"*Quoiy'a?* You think I'm going to let her run out in the street or dive off Andrew Jackson's statue?" Lamar was pretending to be offended, but Bethany knew it was an act. The big man was almost impossible to ruffle.

"Cajun men are very sensitive to children," he continued in the same offended tone, his accent thickening. "There was always plenty of little ones to practice on at home on the bayou." The way Lamar said it, "there" became "der," "the" became "de" and "bayou" became "bye."

"Teaching them to ride alligators bareback is not the same as watching them in crowds of people."

"Me, I feel safer with the gators. I'll be careful."

"I know you will." She leaned forward to plant a kiss on his cheek.

"I'll take care of *p'tit zozo* here and you take care of yourself. Maman Robicheaux would say you've been working too hard." Effortlessly Lamar swung Abby around to ride piggyback on his broad shoulders.

"Thanks. Abby will have a better time with you than she would here." She watched them as they began to disappear into the crowd.

"Lamar!" He stopped to look back over the heads of the people surrounding him. "If it rains..."

"I'll take her back to the shop."

"She hasn't eaten any lunch yet."

"I'll buy her a po'boy." Turning, they were gone.

The crowds in the flea market had picked up considerably since early morning, and as the day wore on Bethany found she was busy enough for two. Tangles of humanity wove in and out of the walkway, chatting, asking questions, tentatively trying on masks. In a few weeks the trying-on stage would almost always be followed by a sale. But Mardi Gras was five weeks away, and browsers today knew they still had time to make up their minds.

The dark clouds continued to hover, threatening but withholding rain. A young couple approached her stall to admire the colorful display. As Bethany watched they chose matching masks made from a simple form covered with sequins and silk flowers. She remembered a time in her own life when she, like the young girl in front of her, had used every opportunity to touch the man she adored. Watching the lovers, she stood rigid with longing, wishing her own fingers were tracing the lines of the delicate mask, dipping to linger on the cheeks and the earlobes below the mask's boundaries.

Their absorption in each other was not uncommon. New Orleans was nothing if not a city for lovers. The sultry days and nights seemed to hold desire suspended like droplets of water in the heavy air. It was a difficult city to be alone in, to be unloved in. In her four years of residence, Bethany usually kept herself too busy to think about her own enforced isolation. But today even hard work couldn't make her forget, and watching the young couple, loneliness weighed on her with the smothering pressure of the air.

A clap of thunder brought her back to reality, and she silently wrapped the masks in tissue paper, made change and presented the man and woman with their purchases. "Happy Mardi Gras," she said, as they walked away, oblivious to anything except each other.

The rain followed the thunder by minutes. Vendors in the parking lot consolidated merchandise under their shelters, and some scurried to cars and vans. Those customers who had been in the lot descended on the covered areas, and by the time the rain let up, Bethany had sold three more masks.

As the crowd thinned out again, she sank into her folding chair, grateful for the respite. A small box of masks she hadn't had room to display lay under the table, and she searched through it to decide which ones she should put out to replace those she had sold.

Perhaps if she had been on her feet and alert to the sights and sounds around her, she would have known that the man walking toward her stall was out-of-control. As it was, the only inkling something was wrong was the loud thump, then a crack above her.

Pulling her head from under the table, she moved too quickly, slamming her forehead into the sharp metal edge when she struggled to stand. As she blinked to stop her head from swimming, she took in the sight of an old man lying face down across the table, passed out cold. The worst news was that he had chosen to pass out on top of her most expensive mask. Crushed underneath his limp body was the creation of black and white Lady Amherst pheasant feathers that Abby had displayed so lovingly.

"Get off there this minute," she said loudly to no one in particular, because the man was obviously past understanding and obeying. Helplessly she looked around, cold fury vanquishing common sense. "Get off of there!"

"Wait a minute, please. I'll get him." A pleasant-looking man in a brown suit stepped over to her table. "Justin," he called, "come here, we've got a problem."

Too upset to pay attention Bethany took the heels of both hands and pushed the old man's shoulders, trying with all the force of her one-hundred-three-pound body to shove him off the table. The man was obviously drunk, and that fact alone was enough to enrage her.

"Just a minute, lady. I promise, we'll have him off there in just one minute. Justin!"

Justin looked up from a table where he had been examining calculators. Following Paul's voice, he pushed through the gathering crowd. With a curse he took in the sight of Mr. Perkins, sprawled and unconscious on a table filled with delicate feather masks.

"Damn, I told you he was too drunk to walk through here." Silently he cursed the rain that had forced them inside a Decatur Street bar, giving Mr. Perkins yet another excuse to down additional drinks.

Bending over the limp body, he missed the soft gasp of the young woman standing behind the table. The two lawyers lifted the dead weight that was Mr. Perkins and heaved him off the devastated mask. Miraculously the movement jarred the old man awake, and he stared bleary-eyed around him as if to ask what the fuss was about.

"Get him walking again, and for God's sake, get him out of here. I'll catch up with you in a minute," Justin said.

For the first time since the beginning of the brief encounter, Justin looked directly at the woman whose merchandise his client had destroyed. His eyes widened as he took in the pink-and-scarlet headdress, its slash of feathers partially covering one side of the heart-shaped face. But the feathers weren't responsible for the pounding of blood through his veins. It was the sight of the

once-familiar features: the rich dark hair, shorter now; the fragile bone structure that still gave form and substance to the skin stretched tightly over it; the generous mouth that he had once felt under his.

"Bethany?"

As he watched, the dusky-rose cheeks drained of color. Enormous blue eyes stared back at him, and lips, seemingly unable to form a greeting, lay softly parted. He saw her tongue flicker across their surface as though to moisten and offer encouragement. Reaching across the table, he carefully lifted the flamboyant headdress off the shining hair, to assure himself he was correct. He watched her fingers, spread wide apart, as she ran her hand slowly through the strands. The gesture was familiar and it, more than anything else, tore at his heart.

"Justin," she finally managed. "It's been a long time."

"Yes." There must be something more that could be said. His mind ran through the possibilities. Idle chatter wasn't a skill he had cultivated; pouring his heart out in front of the curious vendors and milling customers was unthinkable. He waited for her to take charge.

"Five years." Bethany examined him carefully while she chastised herself for wanting to. The years had been good to Justin. He was still slim. The coal-black hair was not yet touched with gray, and the olive skin was creased with only a few lines that gave his face a new and pleasing maturity. The taupe suit and crisp shirt gave him the appearance of a competent, powerful professional. But more about Justin than his physical appearance cried out to be examined. The expression on his face revealed nothing except surprise, and she found herself searching for some clue to his feelings. It was a game she had played many times in the past and never won. She saw that today would be no different.

Their silent investigations were interrupted by Paul's voice somewhere in the crowd beyond them. "Justin!"

"I have to go." He picked up the shattered mask and watched as the feathers drifted to the table below. "This should have been under your display case."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to sue." She wasn't surprised she sounded bitter, but for her own sake, she was sorry.

A flicker of response shone in the nearly impenetrable eyes. "We'll pay for it, of course." He reached in his pocket and withdrew a kidskin wallet. "Here's my card. Assess the damages, and send us the bill." He waited for her to answer, until it was apparent she wasn't going to. Paul's

summons echoed through the crowd again. "Be sure you include everything."

Bethany watched him lose himself in the multitudes. Convulsively she clenched and unclenched her fingers around his business card, molding it like papier-mâché until the moment when she balled it into a wad no larger than a teardrop. Palm down, she moved her thumb a fraction of an inch, and the card fell neatly into the box of trash beside her table. Then she felt carefully for the arms of her chair, collapsing backward as she felt the seat beneath her.

"Beth—" she heard Mrs. Hastings's voice "—put your head down, darlin'. You look like you've seen a ghost."

Obedying the other woman, Bethany rested her head on her hands as Mrs. Hastings clucked over her, cleaning up the remains of the mask. She felt the woman's hand stroking her hair, and in a few minutes she had recovered enough to sit up again. "I must have hit my head harder than I thought," she said by way of apology.

A frown carved new wrinkles in the older woman's face. "I'm sorry, but I don't think so." She waited a second, as if deciding whether to mind her own business. Finally she sighed. "It was more likely seein' your old friend. Surprises can do that."

Bethany's hair tickled the back of her neck as she shook her head. "That man is *not* my friend," she said.

Mrs. Hastings patted her hand softly. "I'm sorry he's not," she said sadly. "Because it is apparent, darlin', what else he is to you."

Bethany lifted her eyes. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Mrs. Hastings nodded. "If you didn't think anyone could tell, I'm sorry to disappoint you. But that man is obviously your baby's father. They're as alike as any two people I've ever seen." She continued at Bethany's slight shake of denial. "And I'm sorry, but there's no way you'll ever be able to hide it. No way in the world."

Bethany knew better than to protest. "Right now, Mrs. Hastings, you and I are the only two people in the world who are aware of that fact." She paused, as if the next sentence was too exhausting to utter. Finally she continued so softly that Mrs. Hastings probably only saw her lips move. "And I intend to be sure it stays that way."