

Chapter 1

The dimly lit French Quarter bar smelled like mildew, cheap perfume and unwashed bodies. One anemic air conditioner wheezed from a window looking out on a brick wall, but the air was still heavily dewed with heat and humidity. A box radio screeched heavy metal profanity from a shelf behind the bartender, its decibel level guaranteeing only the most perfunctory conversation. Most of the bar's patrons didn't notice the noise. No one except Jess Cantrell was at Tallulah's to converse.

At the moment Jess wasn't sure whether that was his goal, either. Without wasting words he wanted to drag the teenager sitting across from him to a shower, a doctor and a convent, in that order. He wanted to lock her up until she was twenty-one with a regiment of social workers and bodyguards and, best of all, two forgiving parents who could help her find the innocence and hope she had lost sometime in her fourteen or fifteen years.

Fourteen or fifteen years. He'd had nothing stronger than club soda to drink all night, but his stomach turned inside out. He felt sick and dispirited, far from the hard-bitten investigative reporter that his reading public believed him to be. He was a man who had never fathered a child, but the child sitting across from him could be his. She could be anyone's beloved daughter. Right now, however, she wanted to be someone's lover. For money.

"It's what's inside your head that interests me, not what you can do with your body," he said, gently, wearily, in answer to a suggestion she had just made. "It's who you are, and why, that I care about."

The girl pondered his words and cracked a wad of bubble gum. It never ceased to amaze Jess that the kids he'd met on the streets could look so deceptively young as they hustled him. He knew the truth, though. They were older than he would ever be. Teenage octogenarians.

"Wanda told me you don't like girls." Bubble gum popped in emphasis. "I know this boy—"

Jess cut her off before she could finish. "I don't like boys, either, Sally. I don't like children in my bed."

"I'm not a child. I'm eighteen."

“In about three years.” Jess sighed. There was an excellent chance that he was losing his objectivity. There was an excellent chance he hadn't had any when he started this project. “Look, I like you, though. But just for talking.”

“I don't get paid for talking.”

“I know. Are you going to stay and talk to me anyway? Or will you get in trouble?”

“I made my nut tonight already. Convention's in town.”

Sally's “nut” was the amount she had to bring back to her pimp or risk getting beaten that night. The amount varied from girl to girl, pimp to pimp. In Sally's case Jess made an educated guess that it was probably several hundred dollars. If he pictured her without her heavy, poorly applied makeup and tawdry clothes, she was pretty. She had strawberry-blond hair and wide green eyes that had seen it all. He made note of the small mole on the side of her snub nose. He wasn't there to find runaways, but he'd seen so many missing children flyers since he'd begun his research. Maybe Sally's parents were looking for her. Maybe he could spark a reunion.

He knew that the odds had been infinitely higher that Stanley would find Livingstone in the midst of the African jungle.

“Then you'll stay and talk?” he asked, steeling himself to hear yet one more horror story.

“Got nuthin' to say.” Sally stood. “Thanks for the Coke, but next time make it a beer.”

Jess didn't flinch. Sally, like most of the runaways on U.S. city streets, just wanted something to deaden the aches of loneliness and despair. She hadn't yet learned that nothing could. Out of long habit he stood. A gentleman always stood when a lady did. Despite Sally's clothes and profession, in Jess's mind she was still a young lady. “If you ever change your mind, I'm here almost every night.”

For just a moment she seemed to hesitate. Then she laughed and cracked her gum one final time before she turned and slowly sauntered out the door to be swallowed by the night.

Something—Jess's stomach, his soul, his whole damned being—turned inside out again, propelled by anger and a sense of futility that was growing daily. Only conviction that the world had to know what was happening on the streets of its cities made him sit down again instead of seeking the relative normalcy of his hotel room.

“She'll come back. Sally's been out on the streets awhile. She don't trust no one.”

Jess turned at the sound of the woman's voice. "I'm not sure I'm ready to hear what she has to say, anyhow." He sat down as the woman, Wanda, flopped into the chair Sally had just vacated.

"Got enough dirt?" Wanda asked.

"Enough sadness?" he corrected. "There's enough sadness here to make the Mona Lisa weep."

He watched Wanda examine him. She was in her mid-forties, but she looked twenty years older. She'd told him once that her hair had been gray for a decade. He guessed the lines around her eyes were a road map leading back to the days when she, like Sally, had cruised bars for a likely john.

"There's sadness, all right," she said, after seconds had stretched into minutes, "but maybe your book can make it go away a little, at least for a kid or two."

"I hope."

Wanda stood. She no longer cruised bars to feed herself. She worked behind the counter of a local T-shirt shop that specialized in raunchy New Orleans souvenirs. She liked to joke that her customers were pretty much the same for either job, and that their minds were definitely in the same place, even if other parts of their anatomies weren't. "I've gotta get back. Maybe someone else'll talk to you tonight." She surveyed the room, as if looking for possibilities. "You ever talk to Crystal?"

Jess followed Wanda's gaze to the shapely blonde standing in the doorway. Light from a street lamp turned her long, pale hair into a bright halo—which was a strange image, Jess thought, considering what Crystal did for a living. She was tall—although at least three inches were due to the heels on her boots—and curiously regal.

Jess had seen her before, and every time he had, something had nagged at him. "I tried to talk to her once," he told Wanda, "but she brushed me off."

"There's a story there."

"There's a story everywhere. Is hers that much different?"

"I don't know. She don't talk much. But the other girls like her."

Jess knew that was unusual. The other "girls" rarely liked anyone who represented the kind of competition that Crystal did. Particularly if they had a pimp to account to.

“Is she a runaway?” he asked. Wanda would know Crystal's status if anyone did. Wanda kept her finger on the pulse of the French Quarter. The streets were her territory, and in an odd way, the girls were her kids. She counseled them, fed them when she could, and hid them from the law or the pimps, whichever was menacing them at the time. Wanda's apartment was as close to a safe house as some of the kids would ever see. Jess didn't necessarily approve of Wanda's interference with the law, but he approved of the big, bleeding heart that inspired it. Wanda cared. And on the streets, those who admitted they cared were candidates for sainthood—or the state mental hospital.

Wanda waved at Crystal and beckoned her to the table, talking as they waited. “Crystal says she ran away a couple of years ago. Says she's eighteen now. What do you think?”

Jess hadn't thought much about Crystal's age. On the one occasion he'd been close enough to talk to her, he'd spent the time wondering how anyone with such purity of form and feature had ended up on the streets.

Now, as she slowly crossed the room, he wondered the same thing again. She was a Scandinavian beauty, and he suspected that when she'd run away, it had been from a farm or small town in the Dakotas or Minnesota. In the course of his research he'd learned just how common that was. New York City had even dubbed one of its infamous streets the Minnesota Strip after the young women of the northern plains states who haunted it, plying their trade.

Crystal belonged in a field of ripening grain, at a Lutheran church covered dish supper, on a Ferris wheel at the Iowa State Fair. She did not belong in a filthy New Orleans bar surrounded by dirty old men. But, of course, none of the other girls who wandered in and out of the bar did, either. No matter where they had come from, inner city neighborhood or mansion, they did not belong here.

Crystal stopped, just out of reach, almost as if she expected payment before coming any closer. “Wanda.” She nodded stiffly to Jess.

“You know Jess Cantrell?” Wanda inclined her head. “He's looking for company. But he just wants to talk.”

Crystal stared coolly at him, as if now she had heard everything.

Wanda laughed. “Honey, Jess here's a reporter. He's checking out the life, you know?”

Jess interrupted. “Actually, I'm talking to all the kids on the street, and I'm not repeating anything they tell me to the cops. I'm writing a book about what happens when kids run away.”

Crystal's eyes were a deep, Great Lakes blue; they shimmered with intelligence and questions. Jess went on, convinced he had interested her. "I don't like what happens to kids out here," he said, lowering his voice to draw her closer. "I think they deserve better."

Crystal stood her ground. "I can't help you," she said, her words low and musical. She turned and started toward the bar. Disappointed, Jess watched her go, but he didn't try to stop her.

Crystal's tight skirt skimmed her thighs, just below her shapely bottom. Her spangled T-shirt hugged her slender waist, and when she'd been facing him, he hadn't failed to notice that it had hugged her ample breasts, too. She was dressed to walk the streets, but as she moved away from him, Jess noticed one thing, one perplexing, heartbreaking thing.

Crystal walked the streets, but she hadn't yet learned *the* walk, the hips-thrust-forward, rolling stroll that proclaimed her profession. Crystal, corn-fed, Midwestern fallen daughter, still walked like a high school homecoming queen. Even in cheap, imitation alligator boots.

"I saw you talking to Jess Cantrell." Perry, the bartender, handed Crystal a drink before she could even ask.

"You saw me telling Jess Cantrell I didn't *want* to talk to him." Crystal swallowed her drink in one long gulp. She'd had no reason to sip. Perry knew her tastes. The drink was plain club soda, gone flat at that. She fished the sliver of lemon from the bottom and sucked on it for something to do. She couldn't exit the bar right away. If she did, it would look peculiar, and she didn't want Jess Cantrell, of all people, to get suspicious.

A reporter, particularly one of Cantrell's abilities, was the last thing Crystal needed in her life. If he continued to camp out at Tallulah's, she would have to stay away.

She stifled the urge to turn and see if he was watching her. Even without looking at him again, she could still envision the rugged man with dark wavy hair and darker eyes. A reporter's eyes. Eyes that saw everything.

Perry came back from serving another customer, picking up the conversation right where they'd left it. "So Cantrell ain't your type?"

Crystal shrugged. "My *type* pays for my time."

"There's a guy in the corner who might be your type, then."

Back still turned to Jess, Crystal swiveled just far enough to see the guy that Perry pointed out. He was at least a hundred pounds overweight, and even from a distance she could see that his clothes were drenched with sweat. He leered at her suggestively from under the brim of a ten-gallon Stetson. She forced herself to suppress a shudder as she faced the bartender again. "Sorry, Perry, but I'm done for the night."

"Then you pay for that drink."

Crystal slipped her hand inside the silver purse hanging from a thin chain over her shoulder. She pushed a bill across the bar. "There's enough for both of us here. Join me."

Perry raised one bushy eyebrow. "A good night?"

"You could say that."

"I just wondered. Ain't the way I heard it."

"No?"

"One of your johns came back after you left with him. Said you scared him off."

"Some guys scare easy, Perry." Crystal dropped the lemon rind into her glass and pushed it toward Perry for a refill. She wasn't surprised that the john in question had come back to Tallulah's to blubber. She was more surprised that he was the only one so far who had.

Perry continued. "Said you told him he'd have to protect himself because you had *a problem.*"

Crystal forced a laugh. "That's what I tell them all when I change my mind. I got the feeling he was the type who likes to slap his ladies around."

"If you were one of Chaz's wives, he'd stomp all over you for an excuse like that."

"That's why I don't have a pimp. I don't let myself in for trouble, and I keep the money I make."

"How'd a kid like you get so smart?"

Crystal took the new club soda and raised it to her lips. She wondered what Perry would think if she told him the truth. She'd been considering it for days. Tallulah's was a lodestone for all the runaways passing through New Orleans. Perry knew everyone and everything. If there was one person in New Orleans who could help her, it was him. But he was also in the pay of most of the slimeballs hawking their wares up and down Bourbon Street, two blocks away. Unless she could pay him more than they could, Perry couldn't be trusted. Which was a shame.

Just one more rotten shame to add to a list one year long and wide.

“Let's just say I've got street smarts.” Crystal placed her empty glass on the counter. “I got them without having to spend a day in school.”

“You and the rest of the kids that come in here.” Perry walked off to serve another customer, but Crystal wasn't alone long.

“You've got pretty blond hair. I like blond hair,” a voice drawled behind her.

Crystal smelled the man at the same time she felt the damp heat of his body. When he touched her hair the fear and revulsion inside her fought and tied for a nauseating first place. “Then buy a wig,” she snapped to cover the clatter of her heart, “and leave my hair alone.”

“Now that's not being very friendly.” The man sat down on the stool beside hers.

Crystal had already guessed that her would-be customer was the man who had leered at her from the corner. She was right. “I don't have to be friendly,” she said, in her most discouraging voice.

The man laid a fifty dollar bill on the bar, just to Crystal's right. “Make you friendlier, little lady?”

She wanted to run, but she knew what that would do to her credibility. “Not a whole lot, Tex,” she said acidly. “Shades are drawn, and the door's bolted for the night. I don't open for business again 'til tomorrow.” She stood up, flinging her purse over her shoulder.

“How about this?” The man held up a hundred dollar bill, then laid it beside the fifty. “Won't this buy me a key?”

Crystal looked up to see that Perry was watching them, his small, rodent eyes gleaming with avarice. She sighed audibly. “You going to take a cut?” she asked the bartender. “You didn't even introduce us?”

“If you wanna walk through this door again I am,” he said with a grin that revealed the space where three teeth had perched before a wintertime brawl temporarily closed Tallulah's.

“Thirty,” Crystal said, reaching inside her purse.

“Fifty,” Perry countered.

Crystal was already counting out four tens. “Not a penny more.”

Perry took the money with a grumble.

“You pay first,” Crystal told the Texan, holding out her hand.

“I pay first,” the man agreed, handing her the fifty. “But only some of it. You get the rest after.”

Crystal slid off the stool. She didn't really care what arrangements she and the man made. Whatever was decided would change drastically in the next five minutes, anyway. "You got a room, honey?" she asked, careful not to touch him. "Or do you want me to rent one for us?"

"Oh, not mine," he said, horror washing over his face. "My wife's there."

Crystal choked down something. She wasn't sure if it was laughter or tears or nausea. She knew that, whatever it was, it was mixed with a strong dose of regret that her life had come down to negotiating tricks in a sweltering, hellhole bar. And the worst part was that she deserved it. Whatever came her way now, she deserved it.

She was halfway across the room before she caught Jess Cantrell's eye. He sat alone at his table, watching her. His clean, strong features and broad-shouldered frame contrasted so sharply with his sordid surroundings that for a moment she wanted to run to him, to touch someone decent again, to be reminded that the world was a better place than it seemed right now.

Instead she managed a brief smile, not even aware as she did how sad, how profoundly sad, the smile was.

It was Crystal's smile that brought Jess to his feet in recognition. He had sat quietly nursing his club soda for a minute after she left the bar. As he had sipped and stared at the table, something had nagged at him again, the same flash of awareness that he had felt the first time he'd seen her. Then he had realized what it was. Crystal wasn't a stranger. Sometime, somewhere, before he had come to New Orleans, he had spoken to her. Sometime, somewhere, he had seen that same, sad smile and been touched by it.

But he couldn't remember when or where. The awareness, the recognition, was there, but the memory was an elusive one. Something blocked it from surfacing.

Along with the conviction that he had spoken to her once before was the buzz a good reporter feels when he knows he's on the track of a story. Jess didn't know why his instincts were rattling to the driving beat of the radio behind the bar. They were, though, and the exhaustion he had felt earlier was gone. It was almost three a.m., but his stride as he left the bar was that of a man who'd just awakened from a refreshing night's sleep.

Outside, the April air condensed on his skin in a clammy mist that did nothing to cool him. The streets were still crowded with people, although the throngs streaming off Bourbon Street had changed subtly. Gone were most of the tourists, the conventioners who had come for one

night of gawking, drinking and souvenir hunting before returning home to tell their friends what they'd seen in the wicked city.

Some of those who had hung on were true patrons of the legitimate jazz establishments that peppered the famous strip, pouring the musical soul of New Orleans into the streets. Those who didn't care about the music were a tougher, more aggressive group, dedicated to a night of hard drinking or panting over the myriad diversions that money and a strong stomach could buy.

Still others were the flotsam and jetsam of city life, the barkers who stood outside the live sex shows and described what was happening inside, the female impersonators who paraded the sidewalks in hopes of attracting patrons for the strip shows, the proprietors of the peep shows and adult book stores, the gun-toting troublemakers.

And some were the kids, kids who weren't kids anymore and might never have had the chance to be, anyway. Kids who were kids only by virtue of the dates on their birth certificates.

Jess saw them all, but he didn't pay attention to any of them. He was looking for Crystal. There were places where girls like Crystal took their johns, places that rented space by the hour and asked no questions if you didn't have luggage. He was headed in that general direction now, watching carefully for red spangles and a bright splash of blond hair.

The streets were narrow, the buildings lining them historic. He passed under awnings and balconies, increasingly aware as one block became another that he had missed her. Right now she was probably inside some grimy rented room giving the man she had left with the thrill of his lifetime.

The thought sickened Jess. Despite everything, there was a quality about Crystal that contrasted sharply with the life she had chosen. Not quite innocence, not quite arrogance, Jess could only call it breeding. There was pride and poise in the way she held herself, intelligence in her eyes, and education in her voice.

Of course, he might be wrong. He'd been on the streets for six months talking to parents, runaways and the people who had dedicated their lives to helping them. He had lost his heart to the kids, along with his objectivity, objectivity that had stood inviolate beside him on Capitol Hill for a decade and was now in serious jeopardy. Jess knew he had begun to see heroes and villains everywhere he looked, that frequent nightmares reflected the depth of his concern, that more and more often he had to fight himself not to step in and help instead of relentlessly squeezing these pathetic, anguished children until each one was reduced to ink on a page.

Jess stopped, thrusting his hands in his pockets. The meager contents of his wallet might just get him a cab back to his hotel. And that was exactly where he ought to be. He was a big man, but he wasn't a fool. French Quarter streets were no place to spend the early hours of the morning. Apparently Crystal had reached that conclusion, too, and his search was futile.

He had turned and was halfway down the block he had just traveled when he saw Crystal and the man from the bar standing on the opposite corner. Once again lamplight made a halo of her hair, a beacon in a relentlessly dark night.

Jess stepped into the shadows. He didn't know what he was looking for; he didn't even know why he had followed her. He had watched the man pick her up in the bar, and he knew what happened next. Something still nagged at him, though. Something reminded him that things weren't always what they seemed.

Nothing that happened in the next few minutes proved him wrong.