

Magnolia Moonlight ~ Chapter One

by Mary Ellis

Nate Price sat down to breakfast that morning a happy man. What was there not to like about life? The sun was shining. He'd just run four miles along the levee in his best time yet. There were fresh blueberries and candied pecans in his bowl of cereal. And he had married the prettiest girl ever to graduate from their high school. Lifting the spoon to his mouth, he crunched into his whole grains and soy milk with contentment.

“Could you pour that into a to-go cup, honey? I need a ride to work today.” Isabelle entered their tiny kitchen on stiletto heels in a faint mist of sweet perfume. In her silk dress with her long hair coiled into a knot, she looked like an investment banker or college professor.

Nate peered over his coffee mug. “It’s cereal with milk, not a breakfast shake. What’s with the snazzy get-up? I thought Realty World agents were required to wear their lime green blazer at all times. And why do you need a ride when you own a perfectly good Prius?”

“There should be a limit on the number of questions before nine a.m.” Leaning over for a kiss, Isabelle grabbed his bowl of cereal and dumped it into a plastic tub. “Take your spoon. You can eat while I drive.” She filled her travel mug with coffee.

Nate crossed his arms and made no effort to move.

“Okay, you win.” Isabelle held up her index finger. “First of all, my blazer isn’t lime. That particular shade of green is called ‘kelly.’ Second, Mr. Randall told his agents to wear their Sunday best, no blazers today. We’re attending a symposium on mortgage finance at the Grand Hotel. Me? I’m going for the free lunch.” She winked a magnificent green eye.

“You usually fill up with a side salad and breadstick.” Nate snapped a lid on his mug and reached for his keys. “And now for the million-dollar question—what’s wrong with your car?”

“Remember that little knock in my engine? The mechanic said I would need a new transmission soon, and that was four thousand miles ago. Yesterday I could barely hear the radio over the knocking.” She shrugged.

Nate halted midway through the doorway. “You should have told me sooner, Izzy. What if you had broken down coming home from an open house? Those country roads don’t have streetlights.”

She slipped an arm around his waist as they walked toward the car. “We’re saving for our honeymoon and to buy a house. Our budget can’t stretch any thinner.”

“Two working people need two vehicles. With two hundred thousand miles on that car, I’d say you got your money’s worth. Nothing lasts forever.” Nate opened the driver’s door for her.

“Well, finances are just a bit tight. You know I loved moving from Germantown to slower-paced Natchez, but fewer people mean fewer sales, and less expensive real estate means smaller commission checks.” She climbed into his SUV and tugged down her skirt.

“It’s nobody’s fault. It’s just life, my sweet bride,” Nate said around a mouthful of mushy cereal.

Isabelle backed down the narrow driveway between the neighbor’s picket fence and her row of azaleas. “How can I still be a bride when our second anniversary is in two weeks? I’m just another old married woman.”

“Not to me you’re not.” Nate kissed her cheek. “New rule. You stay a bride until after the honeymoon, even if we’re in our forties.”

She laughed, a sound that never failed to warm his soul. “Maybe we should forget our dreams and go to New Orleans for a few days. We could stay at Nicki and Hunter’s apartment

while they're in Europe. They have offered the place more than once."

Nate tipped his bowl to drink the milk. "Nope. I'm not honeymooning in the French Quarter. I lived there for years, remember? Let's buy a used car with what I squirreled away for the trip and use your next commission check for a honeymoon. Saving for a new house will remain on track."

"Good idea. We'll qualify for a senior citizen discount by then." Isabelle accelerated on an open stretch of road. "Maybe we should put a bid on the place we rent. How much could the landlord want for a nine-hundred-square-foot, one-bedroom house?"

Nate slid the empty bowl under the seat. "You have illuminated the fly in your ointment—*one* bedroom. Call me crazy, but someday I hope we're surrounded by dozens of mini Nathaniel and Isabelle look-alikes. We'll need lots of bedrooms so when they cry at night my dutiful wife can hurry down the hall while I get my beauty sleep."

Isabelle shot him an evil glare. "There are so many things wrong with that mental picture that I don't even know where to start. But because we're almost at work, we'll continue this discussion at supper. Whose turn is it to cook?"

"Definitely yours. I'm hoping for a nice steak grilled to perfection over hardwood briquettes, and maybe fresh asparagus with a tangy hollandaise." He leaned back and closed his eyes.

"Nope, it's your turn. So I'll expect my usual burger, charred to a crisp, with baked beans and bag salad." Isabelle turned into Realty World's parking lot, the largest real estate brokerage firm in Natchez. "Good grief, look at the cars already! Let's hope these are all eager buyers with excellent credit scores."

Nate jumped out and jogged to the driver's side. He had only enough time to wrap his

arms around his wife when Izzy's boss interrupted them.

“Good morning, Mr. Price. I'm glad you dropped Isabelle off today.” Mr. Randall, looking professional in his charcoal-gray suit, approached from the back entrance. *No lime green blazer for the big shot.* “Could you step inside for a few minutes? I need another man's opinion on something. You know how these women love to gang up on me.”

“Sure, I can spare a few minutes. In fact, I have all the time in the world.”

Nate had finished his recent missing person investigation by locating the twenty-year-old woman in Las Vegas. The girl had agreed to call her parents but refused to come home. She was making too much money dealing blackjack to go back to selling cosmetics at the mall. And a suspected philandering spouse turned out to be someone moonlighting at a second job. The husband had planned to surprise his wife with an anniversary cruise down the Danube River. Nate felt so sorry for the guy that he had cut his usual fee in half. The agency had a corporate fraud case in New Orleans, and the suspected misuse of a power of attorney case in Vicksburg, but no new Natchez cases. He needed some more work soon, or he would be twiddling his thumbs.

“Good. I love having you around.” Isabelle beamed as she reached for his hand. “Be sure to compliment Mary Jo on her new hairdo,” she whispered. “Chopping off that ponytail was quite traumatic.”

However, once they entered the building, Nate had no opportunity to assess Mary Jo's coiffure or do much of anything else.

“Surprise!” Shouts from at least three dozen people nearly blew the roof off the one-story building.

Dumbfounded, Nate and Isabelle gazed around a sea of familiar faces. Not only had

every real estate agent beaten Isabelle to work, but Nate's new employees and his assistant were part of the crowd, along with his partner from New Orleans, her husband, and most of their friends. "Good grief," he muttered. "There's my Aunt Rose. What's going on?"

Isabelle's astonishment rivaled his. "My aunt and uncle from Clarksdale are here. I haven't seen them in two years."

In a flurry of backslapping, handshaking, and cheek-kissing, Mr. Randall herded Nate and Isabelle toward the conference table. But instead of scratch pads, pens, and printouts of recent listings, it was covered with pink paper, confetti, and bright streamers. A weighted cluster of helium balloons offered sentiments of "Best Wishes," "Congratulations," and "Bon Voyage."

"Bon voyage?" Nate asked no one in particular. "The only place I'm going is my office." He tightened his arm around Isabelle as though they were surrounded by dangerous people instead of their closest friends and relatives.

"We'll just see about that." Michael Preston, his newest employee at the agency, clamped a hand on his shoulder.

Then his partner, Nicki Galen, stepped front and center. "You're not really setting sail, but I needed a short phrase for taking a trip." She rocked on her heels, snickering. "They put me in charge of the balloons."

Nate narrowed his gaze at her. "What are you doing in Natchez? I thought you and Hunter were vacationing in France or Switzerland, someplace hoity-toity."

"Nobody says hoity-toity anymore, cousin. Anyway, we flew back early when we heard about the party. Pretty nice balloons, no?" Nicki winked mischievously.

"Check out the cakes," a voice called. The crowd shuffled them toward the table, where decorated cupcakes spelled out *Happy Anniversary*. In the center one giant cake had been

emblazoned with, *Have fun, Nate and Izzy*. A small white envelope protruded from the frosting.

“What is going on?” demanded Isabelle, as though beset with the same sense of peril. She leaned into his side as the crowd shouted several commands:

“Open the card!”

“Pack your bags!”

“Stop looking so scared!”

Nate plucked the sugar-coated envelope from the frosting. “Fine, but I have one question. Don’t *any* of you people have work to do?”

Receiving only laughter in response, he ripped open the envelope, licked his fingers, and scanned the single sheet. Then he handed it to Isabelle, his mouth agape.

“What it is?” She read key phrases aloud. “Three weeks in a luxurious beachfront mansion in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Breakfast served on the porch each morning, afternoon refreshments on the lawn, true Southern hospitality. Walking distance to shops, restaurants, and the marina. Porch swing, free use of bicycles, Wi-Fi, and two bedrooms.”

“*Two* bedrooms?” Michael scratched his head. “Is someone planning to join them on their honeymoon?”

“That’s in case they have a lover’s quarrel.” A disembodied voice floated from the back of the room.

Nate recognized the voice of his Vicksburg based PI, Elizabeth Kirby. “You’re here too?” He feigned annoyance. “Doesn’t *anyone* put in an honest day’s work anymore?”

“Not when we needed to take matters into our own hands.” Mr. Randall squeezed in between Nate and Isabelle. “When it became clear you two were never going to take a honeymoon, your fellow agents and Nate’s employees took up a collection. Then your cousin

shook down your friends and relatives and fattened the purse.” Randall drew a second envelope from his pocket and handed it to Isabelle. “We were able to upgrade you to a suite, and there’s enough spending money for lunch, dinner, dolphin-watching excursions, and several bottles of suntan lotion.”

Isabelle looked ready to faint. “I-I don’t know what to say other than thank you from the bottom of my...our hearts.” Teary-eyed, she turned to her husband.

Clearing his throat, Nate had his own lump of emotion to swallow. “We were just discussing a honeymoon this morning. Your generosity and thoughtfulness are overwhelming. As soon as we get a break in our schedules—”

“Oh, no,” interrupted Michael. “That’s not how this works. Read the fine print. We have prepaid three weeks during prime season on the gorgeous Mississippi coast. Clear your calendars because your honeymoon begins on Sunday.”

“*This* Sunday?” Isabelle clutched her throat as though choking on a fishbone.

“Yep. You two lovebirds leave in three days.” Nicki picked up a cupcake and took a bite. “I would start packing if I were you.”

“But we need to look for a used car for me.” Isabelle sounded more like a child than a woman in her thirties.

Marie, Realty World’s assistant, took hold of Isabelle’s hand. “You’ll only need one vehicle while you’re at the beach, and there will still be plenty of used cars here when you get back. I’ll make sure your open houses or house showings are covered by other agents. I’ll bet they’ll even pass any commissions on to you.” She scanned the room, honing in on Isabelle’s fellow agents.

“Oh, no,” Isabelle protested. “I could never let anyone—”

“Nonsense,” said Marie. “You can return the favor sometime down the line. And when this party’s over, you and I are going to Victoria’s Secret and Bath and Body Works, my treat. Now let’s have something to eat.” Marie grabbed two cupcakes and handed one to Isabelle.

For the next thirty minutes, Nate ate sweets, drank bad coffee, and listened to advice from well-intentioned friends. He heard about every Gulf Coast landmark, restaurants worth the money, which fishing charters knew the best spots, and how to avoid sand fleas. His Aunt Rose provided tips on foot massage that made him blush. Nicki snapped a picture each time he took a bite of cupcake. And his cousin assured him she would watch the paper for great deals on used cars.

Finally, his two employees approached from the sidelines. “I hate to break this party up, but shouldn’t we be getting to the office?” Michael took Nate’s empty coffee cup and plate of cake crumbs. “We have a pile of cases to sort through at the office.”

Nate smiled with gratitude at the ruse. Michael was the last person one would expect with aspirations of becoming a PI, but if sheer determination and willpower were indicators of future success, someday he would be one of the best. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t be any day soon.

Michael had spent his high school and college years with his nose in a book or staring at a computer screen. Nerd. Geek. Egghead. The terms for studious types might change from generation to generation, but the personality remained the same. These men didn’t hunt, fish, pump iron, or race custom-built cars on dirt tracks. Instead, they made their fortunes with Internet start-up companies, investment banking, or, unfortunately, cybercrime. Michael might be an untrained PI, but in this day and age, he already possessed skills Price Investigations needed.

“Let me just say goodbye to our host,” Nate murmured to the pair. He walked over to a

little group of people by the window. “Thanks for organizing this party, Mr. Randall. Isabelle and I will never forget everyone’s generosity as long as we live.” He extended his hand to the distinguished broker.

“We all cherish Isabelle at Realty World and were happy to help.”

Elizabeth stepped forward. “We’re glad you included us. I don’t know what we’ll do while Nate and his wife are basking in the sun.”

“Don’t believe a word of it,” he said to Randall. “These two won’t even know I’m gone.” Then Nate turned to address the crowd. “Thanks, everyone, for the incredible gift. Be prepared for tons of pictures when we get back.” After more handshaking, Nate finally shrugged into his sport coat, waved at his wife, and headed for the door. Across the room, Isabelle was surrounded by women, all talking at the same time.

Outside in the parking lot, Nate sucked in a deep breath. “Wow, I sure didn’t see that coming.”

“Having lots of friends comes in handy.” Michael was still staring at the back door in amazement.

“Yeah, but what goes around comes around.” Elizabeth clucked her tongue. “You and Isabelle will be invited to every graduation, bar mitzvah, baptism, and retirement party for years. Not to mention forced to buy raffle tickets and Girl Scout cookies until you drop over dead.”

Nate laughed. “You two sure have different perspectives on group fund-raising. Thanks for getting me out the door. Not that I’m not grateful, but that kind of party can last for hours.”

“There’s only so much smiling one face can handle,” said Elizabeth.

Michael shook his head. “On that note, I’ll take my leave. I have a class on Mississippi gun laws starting in twenty minutes.”

Nate watched him putter away in his fuel-efficient car before turning to his other employee. “Beth, why aren’t you in Vicksburg? Don’t tell me you drove here for a going-away party. You could have sent your ten bucks through the mail.”

She chuckled. “For your information, boss, I chipped in twenty-five. But your cupcake send-off isn’t the sole reason I’m in Natchez.” She stared at the road even though Michael was long gone. “My mother asked me to come home for Pastor Dean’s funeral. She’s worried there won’t be enough mourners.”

Nate slicked a hand through his hair. “Yeah, I heard about that. But considering the number of Baptists in town, there should be a good turnout. Isabelle and I will be there because she attended Calvary while growing up. Now we go to the nondenominational by the freeway.”

Beth shrugged. “We’ll see how many folks show up. Some members might boycott because the preacher offed himself.”

“*What?*” Nate was shocked by her insensitivity.

“Sorry, that was crude. I meant to say some might hold it against Reverend Dean because he committed suicide. A man of God isn’t supposed to take his own life.”

“What are you talking about? The paper said he had a heart condition, so I assumed that was the cause of death.”

Beth hiked her purse up her shoulder. “Not unless a bad ticker made him climb a stool with a rope around his neck.”

Nate shuddered. “That is just awful, especially for whoever found him.”

“My mom said it was his wife. Alice Dean was always nice to me. I used to babysit for their little girl.” Despite her earlier detachment, Beth’s eyes filled with tears.

“Well, for sure Izzy and I will be there tomorrow. Thank goodness we don’t leave until

Sunday.”

“I sure am a downer today. When you’re about to leave on the best vacation of your life, I’m talking suicide and people’s fondness for being judgmental.” Beth swiped at her tears. “Go to the office and clean off your desk. Tell Maxine to clear your calendar and hold your calls. Don’t worry about me and Wonder Boy. We’ll hold down the fort while you and Isabelle have fun in the sun.”

“You do have a way with words, Ms. Kirby.” Nate climbed into his SUV and lowered the window. “Will I see you at the office later?”

“I don’t know. I left Vicksburg at four this morning and drove straight to the party. I haven’t been home yet. Can’t wait to see what else Mom has in store for me. My bedroom is probably exactly how I left it.”

“You’ll always be her little girl. So you’re willing to stay in town while I’m gone? Michael isn’t ready to be on his own.”

Beth looked everywhere but at him. “If that’s what you want, Nate, but I would prefer to go to the funeral, eat a chicken salad sandwich, and get out of Natchez as fast as I can.”

He started the engine. “Your case in Vicksburg should be wrapping up by now. I thought you had plenty of evidence to present to the DA.”

“True, but I’m working on a lead for new work. I’d love to stay where I am. That town has grown on me.” She started to back away.

“Any new cases had better come with a fat retainer. I know you’re living as cheaply as you can, but I can’t afford to set up a Vicksburg office.”

“Maybe if I…”

“No, Beth, I need you in Natchez. We can talk about this when I come back, but right

now I need to find a Panama hat and new flip-flops. The beach and my lovely bride are calling. Isabelle and I will see you tomorrow at the funeral.” He drove away to end the argument.

Beth Kirby was a great PI, but at times she could be like a dog with a bone.