“Molly! That’s your name, right—Molly?” Sean Jordan called, waving a finger insistently in the air, alerting the goth-inspired bartender he was ready for the check. Her clothes ranged in color from charcoal to black, her cheeks lined with metal forming hearts intertwined. Upside down crosses hung from both ears and a voodoo doll medallion dangled about her neck. Sean admired her style and personal expression, laughing *with-her* rather than *at-her* in a respectful sort of way.

He’d heard locals sing the praises of Shannon ‘N Molly’s since arriving in New Orleans two years before. They were the same people who taught him to properly pronounce the names of the streets that anchored the pub: Conti with a long *i*, and Burgundy with the accent on *gun*. He hadn’t spent a minute in the bric-a-brac littered establishment before spotting an Illinois license plate hanging on the wall beneath a photo of Elwood Blues and Joliet Jake.

Ignoring his gesture, Molly refilled his drink, breasts straining to break free from her sheer lacy bodice.

Sean thought about his wife, Laurie, and four-year-old daughter, Ren, and the classes he had to be prepared for in the morning. Still, he decided to linger a bit longer.

“You always wear black hats with long green feathers?”

“Always,” Molly answered, licking her lips sensuously. “S’pose *next* you’re gonna ask if I’m *the* Molly.”

“I just assumed—”

“Well, you assumed wrong!” she said, cocking her head, feather bolting upright. “I’m merely the latest in a long line of Mollys. And no, there’s no Shannon—never was.” She reached across the bar to tousle his thick brown hair cascading in curls toward long silky lashes. “Gorgeous,” she proclaimed, as if wishing he were hers, “though I’d lose the vest with Santa’s eight reindeer.” Sliding the drink in the twenty-eight-year-old’s direction, she studied his face. “I think it’s your eyes.”

“They’re cobalt blue,” the man next to Sean said. “Take a good look. You’ll never find another pair like them.”

“How do you know?” Molly purred . . . “I see a lot of eyes.”

“For years I sought a woman with eyes the color of his. Since she doesn’t exist, I settle for him.” He extended his hand. “I’m Doug—*his* best friend.”

“But I *like* reindeer,” Sean said, playing along.

“For his birthday, I got him a subscription to *GQ*.”

“It came free when he re-upped his *Tiger Beat!*”

Molly laughed and shook Doug’s hand. “You have nice eyes too.”

“Too late,” Doug said, head snapping back. “It’s clear how you feel. You made your choice.”

Sean rolled his eyes at the mock play for sympathy, knowing few others were as secure in themselves as Doug. At six foot one, he beat Sean by two inches, boasting a hearty face, square jaw, and eyes that opened with invitation. The tattoo of a parrot on his sinewy left shoulder appeared to move its beak whenever he flexed his muscle.

“Everyone chooses him over me,” Doug went on. “I thought about therapy, but *he’s my therapist!*”

“No I’m not. We’re friends.”

“You’re talking to the once youngest psychologist in the world. On a single day in seventh grade, he led a seminar on bullying, saved a teacher’s marriage, and talked the janitor down off the roof!”

Molly reached forward, sweeping a curl from Sean’s eye. “I’m a psychologist too. All the crazies come in here—the wife beaters, the beaten wives, the derelicts, and the desperados. Had a guy threaten suicide the other day. Whined on and on about it. I finally told him to go fuck himself. How would you have handled it?”

Though he wasn’t a psychologist, Sean felt compelled to answer. “I suppose I might have asked him if he had a method in mind.”

*“I didn’t care!”* Molly exclaimed.

Glancing at each other, Sean and Doug shrugged, repeating in unison: “She didn’t care.”

Doug’s grin segued to a serious expression—the one Sean remembered from years before when Doug broke from the crowd on Jennings Street to comfort a boy he’d never met. From that day forward, the two were inseparable, joining forces to discover the ways of the world. To their discoveries, they could now add Molly.

Molly opened a storeroom at the end of the bar, inadvertently freeing a Jack Russell terrier. The dog raced to the bar and bounded into Sean’s lap—barked his arrival and licked his face lavishly.

“Who are *you*?” Sean asked, nuzzling the dog’s face.

“Satan! Get down from there!” Molly growled.

The terrier barked one more time as if to say *no* before coating Sean’s face with a second round.

“Strange, he never goes near customers,” Molly noted.

“Actually,” Doug said, “he’s an *animal* psychologist. Great with pets. It’s people who confound him.”

Molly scooped Satan into her arms, rubbing noses on their way back to the storeroom. “If it’s meant to be, you’ll find each other again someday.”

“I’ll send you a text!” Sean called to Satan.

“He likes the ones best with naked pictures.”

Sean turned to Doug. “Listen, I have to go.”

“But we just got here. Relax.”

Guilt stalked Sean like a road rage warrior, charging from the rear, braking in front, circling in an effort to fill him with dread. Leave or stay, he’d disappoint someone.

“Laurie’s waiting. Lately, things have been rocky.”

Molly returned with a frozen Irish Coffee, swirling coffee beans on top with the tip of her tongue. “So whatcha celebratin’?”

The image of a tarot card reader popped in Sean’s head, like those dressed as gypsies in front of the Cabildo. “What makes you think we’re celebrating?”

Molly tipped back her hat and feather. “Like I said, I see a lot of eyes. Yours were troubled when you first walked in—blue slits with dark bags underneath. Soon as I saw them I knew it was a celebration.”

“Because I looked troubled, you knew it was a celebration . . .”

Molly leaned forward, bringing her lips to Sean’s ear. “In New Awlins . . . the two go hand-in-hand.”