

*Excerpt from*  
**Any Way You Want it**

by Kathy Love

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"Where are we going?" Maggie asked, doubling her steps to catch them.

"Bourbon Street," both her friends said in unison, then they dissolved into tipsy laughter.

Maggie smiled too, but then she shook her head. "Why don't you two go on? I'm kind of tired." Which wasn't untrue. Their flight had left Dulles Airport at 6 am, and they had only dropped off their luggage at the hotel and went right into tourist mode. Not to mention, they were staying right off Bourbon Street. She'd be fine to walk back to their room alone. But she suspected Erika and Jo weren't going to let that happen.

But she really did need to rest. Even now, this newly-sensed energy was swirling around her, making the air thick and her head a little woozy. The wine wasn't helping, but she didn't really believe it was the alcohol—not solely.

"No way," Jo said, catching Maggie's elbow, pulling her along. "You are not sneaking off to read or listen to classical music or whatever boring thing you normally do."

"Right," Erika agreed.

Maggie laughed, but she did try to get her arm out of Jo's grasp. Jo wasn't letting go—not without a fight, it appeared.

"Those things aren't boring," Maggie argued. After all, Jo read twice as much as Maggie did. And she had a healthy knowledge of classical music. They'd attended many symphonies together.

"Okay, they aren't," Jo agreed. "But they aren't what you do on vacation. Especially a vacation in New Orleans. Hotel rooms are for sleeping only."

"Well," Erika said, slowly, "and other things."

Jo thought about that, then nodded. "Right, but that usually ends in sleeping."

Maggie frowned for a moment, losing track of what they were talking about—briefly, then she understood.

She shook her head. "I don't remember you two being quite so sex obsessed."

"And you aren't sex obsessed enough," Jo informed her. "Now come on, you can't come to New Orleans and miss Bourbon Street."

"I'm here for ten days," Maggie pointed out. "We could wait a

night. I am honestly tired."

"No," Erika and Jo said—speaking again at the same time. A habit that was actually getting a little irritating, Maggie decided as Erika caught her other elbow, and both of her friends pulled her down the sidewalk. Although she did give in, allowing them to lead the way.

"Erika and I are only here for five nights. And we need them all," Jo said.

Maggie sighed. That was true. Her friends were leaving her early. A fact she was not happy about. What would she do in a city like this alone? She'd already noted this was a place filled with couples and groups.

She supposed she'd better take advantage of having both her pals here. Her pace picked up.

Even unfamiliar with the layout of the city and muzzy from the wine, Maggie didn't need to be told when they reached Bourbon Street. She blinked around her. The flashing lights, the loud slightly distorted bass of bands singing party favorites, the distinct smell of trash, beer and...

Was that vomit?

Add to that neon signs with words like "live sex acts" and "full nudity." Holy cow.

"This is...something," she managed, peering around, not sure where to look at next.

Even Jo and Erika, who were definitely worldlier when it came to bars and partying, gawked around themselves in awe.

"This is pretty amazing," Erika finally said, after they'd all stood mesmerized by a pair of female mannequin legs in black stilettos, kicking in and out of a club's windows.

"You definitely don't see that every day, do you?" Jo said.

Maggie almost added that she'd never seen that before, period, when her attention was seized by a distinct strain of music, somehow reaching out to her over the warring chords of *Jessie's Girl*, *Living On A Prayer* and *Summer of '69*.

Without thinking, she took a step toward the sound. Then another—until she'd zigzagged through the crowds of revelers to a bar on the corner of Bourbon and some cross street.

She stopped on the sidewalk, staring at the building. The place was shabby, paint peeling from the wood, the sidewalk around it crumbling and layered in filthy. But from her spot on the street, she could see the stage through huge opened windows where a band was setting up. And she could clearly hear that distinct melody. Piano notes swirling through the air, a sound as out of place in this world as she felt.

Again, her feet moved until she found herself in the bar, standing in front of the stage, peering up at the person playing the music. Music that no one else should know.

Well, no one but her and possibly a few other authenticators. And the person who wrote it, of course. But that person was long since dead.

"Wow," Jo said from beside her, dragging Maggie's attention away from the music. "Good eye. That guy's pretty darn hot."

Maggie blinked back at the stage, for the first time noticing the man actually playing the music. He was tall with long hair in a shade somewhere between chestnut brown and dark mahogany, cascading over his broad shoulders.

He was looking down at the keyboards, his hair falling forward, shrouding most of his features, so that Maggie wondered how Jo could tell whether he was hot or not.

Then the thought quickly vanished as she watched his long fingers travel over the keys, playing a particularly difficult combination of chords. That combination was exactly what she'd been studying so closely before she'd left. A fusion of notes that seemed to be a signature of sorts.

If Maggie's belief was correct, a signature of a composer that she was willing to bet this man playing— a guy in a cover band on Bourbon street no less— had never even heard of. Much less could play.

Yet, here he was, playing it. Playing a piece that no one knew. An undiscovered composition probably by a lesser known composer.

Then two things happened at once. The beautiful, haunting tune abruptly switched into the intro to the classic 80's rock ballad, *Sister Christian*, and Maggie realized that the musician was staring directly at her. And she was staring back.

"Ah, man, he has a lazy eye," Erika said with a disappointed sigh.

Maggie heard her friend's words and regret, but somehow they didn't seem to quite reach her as if they echoed from a distance or through a somnolent haze. She just kept staring at the man, unable to look away, even though everything in her told her to do just that.

"There is something up with his eye, but I don't think it's lazy." Maggie heard Jo say.

Maggie wanted to speak, to say there wasn't anything wrong with his eyes, but the words in her head couldn't fumble their way her lips.

All she could manage was to focus on him. On the eyes in question. Eyes that seemed to match the music he'd been playing, complicated, intense, haunted. And just as the music held her entranced, so did his gaze.

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