

VALERIE FRASER LUESSE

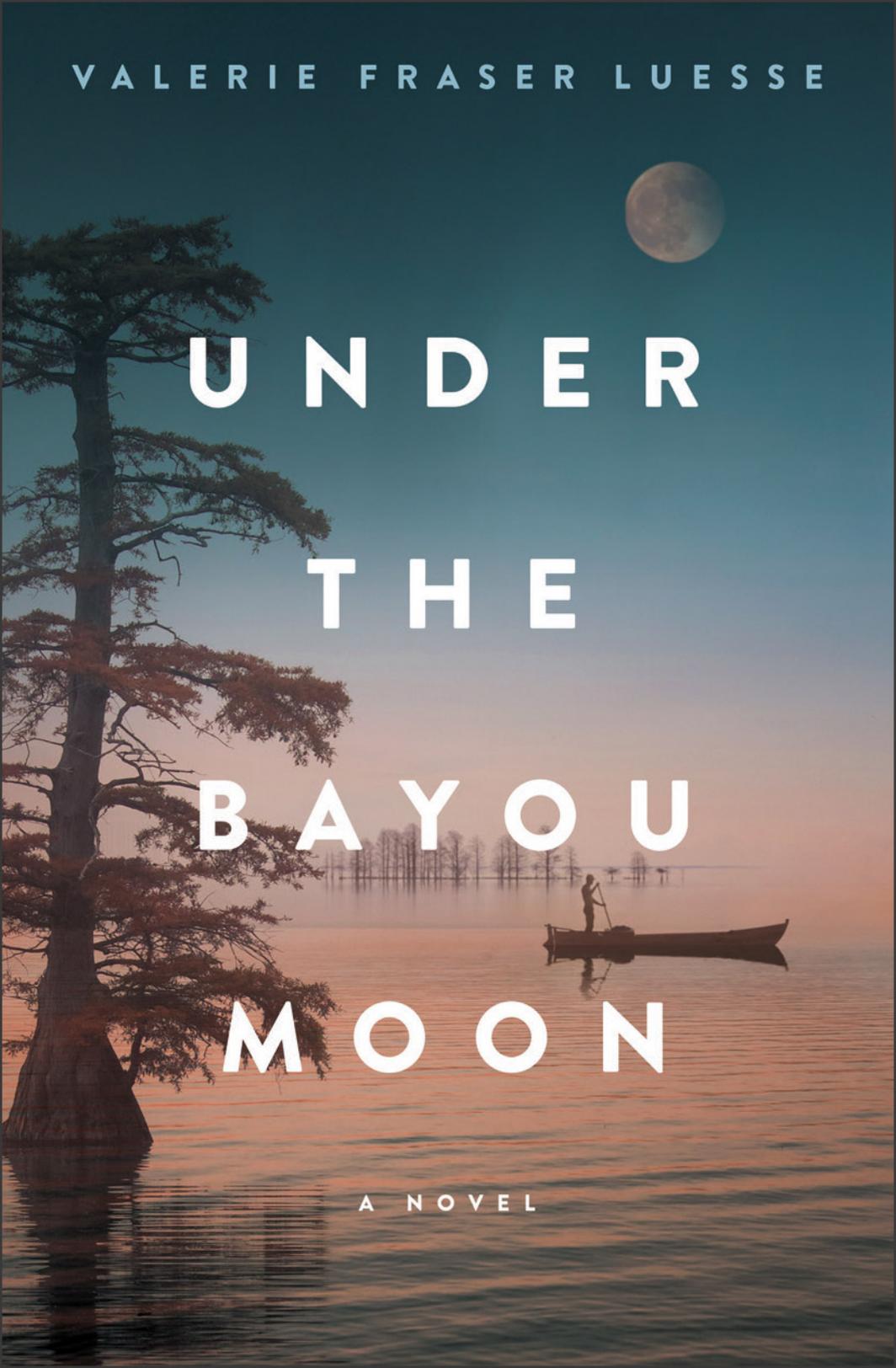
U N D E R

T H E

B A Y O U

M O O N

A N O V E L



“I can’t say enough good things about this story! I was transported to the 1949 Louisiana bayou, where I fell in love with the characters and setting. Teacher Ellie Fields seeks to find herself while helping the people she’s quickly coming to care about—especially one special little boy and his handsome uncle. Valerie spins a tale full of depth, detail, and humor, in which you can smell the bayou, feel the juice from the po’boy drip down your chin, and so much more. Come spend a few hours in Bernadette, Louisiana. You might find you don’t want to leave! I know I didn’t.”

Lynette Eason, bestselling, award-winning  
author of the *Danger Never Sleeps* series

“There’s just something about a novel by Valerie Fraser Luesse that feels like coming home. Reading *Under the Bayou Moon* felt like an invitation to sit with Valerie in her story shack so she could spin a yarn that made me fall in love with a place I’ve never been and care deeply for characters I’ve never met. This is the magic of good fiction, isn’t it? And Valerie performs her enchantments with a lyrical Southern style that took my breath away. This is a book to be savored.”

Susie Finkbeiner, author of *The Nature of Small Birds* and *Stories That Bind Us*

“With atmosphere dripping from every page like Spanish moss on a cypress tree, Valerie Fraser Luesse brings the Louisiana bayou to vivid life in this story of one woman stepping out in faith to pursue her purpose. This memorable tale of love—love for self, love for others, and love for the land—will

expand in your heart just as the ripples from a boat's passage touch every secret corner of the bayou.”

**Erin Bartels**, award-winning author of  
*We Hope for Better Things*

“Steeped in the rich culture of the Louisiana bayou, Valerie Fraser Luesse’s tale takes us to a place where love and community matter and an almost magical alligator enchants!”

**Nancy Dorman-Hickson**, coauthor of the award-winning  
*Diplomacy and Diamonds* and a former editor for  
*Progressive Farmer* and *Southern Living* magazines

“This compelling novel has a bit of everything: self-exploration, a sense of adventure, and fascinating characters. Valerie Fraser Luesse brings the beauty and mystery of the bayou to life as Ellie finds her home in more ways than one.”

**Krissy Tiglias**, executive editor  
of *Southern Living* magazine



# UNDER THE BAYOU MOON

Books by Valerie Fraser Luesse

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*Missing Isaac*

*Almost Home*

*The Key to Everything*

*Under the Bayou Moon*

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**VALERIE FRASER LUESSE**



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Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*For all the teachers,  
with loving memories  
of a truly gifted one,  
Patricia Donahoo McCranie,  
“Aunt Patsy”*

# Prologue

**1947**

**RAPHE BROUSSARD WAS JUST A BOY** when he first saw it—glimpsed it, at least. Mostly hidden in the saw grass and canes, it had temporarily left the tip of its long alabaster tail exposed in the sunlight—a rare mistake. The streak of white offered only a hint of what lay hidden, the promise of what might be revealed. Raphe had watched silently, reverently almost, as the tail thrashed back and forth just once before disappearing into the green, leaving him to wonder if he had truly seen it at all. He told no one.

Over the years, Raphe would return to that secluded spot whenever his mind was troubled, as it was now. He had a choice to make, and it was weighing on him that day as he paddled deep into the bayou, gliding across remote but familiar waters where the pines and cypress trees towered above. They cast this solitary pool in perpetual shade as if a veil had been tossed over the sun, not blocking its hot rays entirely but reducing them to a warm softness. The water was glassy, carpeted around the edges with water hyacinth and duckweed. Floating here on still waters, in a pirogue carved out of a cypress tree by his grandfather, Raphe could

quiet his mind and think. He could come to a decision about a thing.

Should he give up his freedom and become a father to his orphaned nephew, or listen to that preacher? Most of the evangelicals who had come into the Atchafalaya Basin seemed well-meaning enough, but there was a particularly strident one, Brother Lester, who had somehow gotten wind of Raphe's plight and urged him to give Remy, his blood kin, to a "good Christian family"—strangers. The child needed a mother and father, the preacher said. A single young man like Raphe—Cajun, Catholic, and therefore prone to drink—would surely be a bad influence.

Raphe imagined himself as a young father with no wife, limiting his own possibilities while praying he didn't make some horrible mistake that ruined his nephew's life. And then he pictured a choice he found completely unbearable—trying to live with the expression on Remy's face, the one that would haunt Raphe forever if he let strangers take the boy away.

That heartbreaking image—of a child realizing he had been abandoned by the one person he trusted most—was burning Raphe's brain when the alligator appeared. It came out of the cattails at the water's edge and silently glided in. What a sight! The alligator had to be twelve feet long and pure white except for a single swirl of pigment trailing down its back like curled ribbon. It passed so fearlessly close to Raphe that he could see the piercing sparkle of its blue eyes. On the far bank, it climbed onto a fallen tree in dappled light, taking in as much sun as its pale skin could tolerate.

Raphe had never put much stock in the swamp legends that the old-timers recounted again and again around camp-

fires. He loved the tales about the white alligator, but they were just entertainment, nothing more. Still, he was comforted by the notion that this enigmatic denizen of the bayou was keeping watch while he wrestled with Remy's fate and his own conscience.

As he sat silently in his pirogue, the massive white head slowly turned, almost in his direction but not quite. In the filtered light, Raphe could see one side of the alligator's face, one of those sapphire eyes. Only a few seconds passed before it turned back, gliding slowly across the tree and silently disappearing into the canes.

Fishermen and hunters along the river called the alligator *L'esprit Blanc*, French for what the Indians had named it—"The White Spirit." It was strange—all of them knew about *L'esprit Blanc*, repeating stories they had heard for years, but all those who claimed to have actually seen it were taken by the storm. All except Raphe. While his neighbors speculated about the high price such a rare hide would fetch—if it truly existed—Rape found it impossible to believe that anyone who laid eyes on something so extraordinary could bring himself to kill it. Still, he kept his sightings to himself.

Rape looked up at a darkening sky. Rain was coming. He sat in his boat, listening to the wind stir the trees overhead and watching ripples begin to roll across the mirrored surface of the water. His choice was clear.

He would never tell a soul where to hunt the white alligator. And he would never send Remy away. Some things belonged right where they were.

# ONE

**Fall 1949**

**ELLIE FIELDS SAT IN A BUSTLING MARINA CAFE** in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, watching a train make its crossing and wondering what it would be like to ride two rails suspended in air, the water below, the sky above.

“That be all for you, hon?”

Ellie smiled up at the waitress standing next to her table, holding a pot of coffee. She was wearing a pink uniform with a white apron and a name tag shaped like a dolphin. Her hair was strawberry blonde, teased and pinned into a French twist in the back. She looked about forty.

“That’s all, thanks,” Ellie said. “Hey, I like your name. I don’t think I’ve ever met a woman named Geri before.”

The waitress rolled her eyes. “It’s short for Gertrude! Can you believe my mama hung that on me? It was her grandmother’s name.”

“You’re definitely more of a Geri. I’m Ellie—short for Juliet. My little brother couldn’t pronounce the *j* or the *l*, so he renamed me. I was ‘Eh-we’ till he got the hang of the *l*.”

Geri put her hand on her hip. “It’s not fair that your family gets to label you for life, is it?”

“No, it’s not.”

“I’ll be right back with your ticket, hon,” Geri said, pointing another customer to a booth on her way back to the counter.

Ellie looked out the window next to her table. The engine of the train had long since passed the trestle over the bay, while the caboose was still some distance away—one had yet to see what was already a memory for the other, yet they were part of the same machine.

She reached into her purse and pulled out a letter she had folded and unfolded, read and reread countless times since it arrived in her parents’ mailbox in March. She spread it out on the table in front of her. Something about the letter gave her courage, which she needed right now. One more read couldn’t hurt.

*March 1, 1949*

*Dear Miss Fields,*

*We have never met, but I am the town physician in Bernadette, Louisiana, where it is my understanding that you have been offered a teaching position. While I have little influence with the school board, I do have one friend remaining among its members. He was struck by your application and thought I might be as well, so he forwarded a copy to my office. I was especially drawn to the way you answered, “Why do you want this position?” I believe I heard great sincerity in your answer: “I want to serve where I am most needed and to use whatever gifts God has given*

*me to make the world a better place, especially for children.”*

*Miss Fields, you will find no children in greater need of a gifted teacher than those in Bernadette, nor will you ever find another place where your efforts will be more appreciated. Should you decide to accept the position and join our little community, my wife and I will offer you our wholehearted support and will be happy to provide housing, free of charge. It might not be luxurious, but it will be safe and comfortable.*

*Sincerely,  
Arthur Talbert, MD*

“Here ya go, hon,” Geri said as she laid a ticket on the table, drawing Ellie’s attention away from the letter and back to the journey at hand.

“Could you tell me how far I am from New Orleans, Geri?”

“Gonna do a little partyin’?” Geri gave her a smile and a wink.

Ellie pictured herself embracing with abandon the revelry on Bourbon Street and shook her head. “I’m afraid a Birmingham ballroom on New Year’s Eve is about as wild as I get. I just took a teaching job in a little town called Bernadette, Louisiana. It’s supposed to be about eighty miles or so from New Orleans. Thought I’d stop over and see the city on my way.”

“Well, congrats on the new job, hon! You’re not too far. Just keep followin’ 90 and you’ll be there in about an hour. Some people call Bay St. Louis ‘Little New Orleans’ on accounta we

get so many summer people from over there. You from here in Mississippi?”

“No, I’m from a tiny little town you never heard of—Maribelle, Alabama.”

“And here I thought you was headed to the backwoods, but Bernadette might be a step up for you.” Geri laughed and winked at her again.

Ellie remembered how a couple of Atlanta girls who lived down the hall at her college dorm always gave her grief about coming from a town that “didn’t even get a dot” on the state map. “If Bernadette has more than one traffic light,” she told Geri, “it’ll be a step up, alright.”

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with that,” the waitress assured her. “No shame in bein’ a small-town girl. But now, you watch yourself on the road—specially in New Orleans. All them one-ways in the Quarter’s just murder to figure out your first time around. And you’re gonna wind your way through some bayou country before you get there. I know we’re supposed to be all modern and everything now that the war’s over and done with, but there’s some deserted drivin’ between here and there. Make sure you fill up before you leave, okay?”

“I will—thanks, Geri.”

The waitress stared down at Ellie and shook her head. “You got a face like an angel, you know that? You any kin to that woman in *Casablanca*?”

“No.” Ellie smiled. “But thank you.”

“You need to get you one of them hats that dips down over your eye like she wore. I bet that’d look real good on you.”

“Maybe I’ll find one in the French Quarter.”

“You be *careful* in the Quarter, you hear?”

“I will,” Ellie said, holding up her right hand. “Word of honor. Thanks for looking out for me.”

Geri gave her another wink and a wave before hurrying to grab a water pitcher from the counter and greet a new customer. Ellie left a tip and then paid her check at the register.

She filled up at a local Pan-Am and got back on the highway, relieved to know she would make it to New Orleans in plenty of time to find her hotel before dark. Even though she had only a week to get settled before school started, Ellie had decided to allow herself one night in the fabled city, which she had never seen.

She had spent her first night on the road with her mother’s sister in Ocean Springs, a pretty little town with cottagey storefronts and shady streets sheltered from the coastal sun by the craggy, arched branches of live oak trees. Her parents had insisted that she make a stop there and let her uncle give the old Ford a good going-over before she went on to Louisiana. She had bought the used 1939 Deluxe, which she named Mabel, with the salary from her first year of teaching. The old girl had been rolling for ten years now and was showing her age, but she still had some miles left in her. Ellie’s aunt insisted on introducing her to just about everybody in town before she left, so she and Mabel had gotten a late start.

Her whole family thought she was crazy for accepting a teaching job in rural Louisiana when there were, as her mother put it, “perfectly good schools from Mobile to Muscle Shoals and enough bachelor vets in Alabama to marry every girl in ten states.” But Ellie could no longer bear the burden of invisibility. That’s how she felt—as if her truest self were invisible to everyone around her and had been for so long that it was now banging on her chest from the inside

out, demanding to be seen and heard. If she could just go through the motions, everything would be so much easier, but that would be a lie of a life. And what Ellie yearned for—what she had come to demand for herself—was authenticity.

She had shown, more to herself than anyone else, that she was willing to walk away from anything, including marriage, if it demanded that she be satisfied with anything less than what she was meant for—whatever that might be. And now she felt it would be unkind to continue dating war vets who had been so homesick overseas that they never wanted to leave Alabama again. When they looked at her on a dance floor or took her hand in a movie theater, she couldn't shake the feeling that they were picturing her hanging diapers on the line or sliding a pan of biscuits into the oven before she poured their morning coffee and kissed them off to work. Even the one she had believed to be different turned out not to be.

All those soldiers had seen horrible things, Ellie knew, and she was ashamed to admit, even to herself, that she was jealous of them. They had left as boys and come home as men. They had *done* something. Ellie had gone from high school to college and back home again. Was that it—her circle complete, her story told?

Her mother insisted that Ellie just needed a little change of scenery and would “come home lickety-split” as soon as she got the wanderlust out of her system. But Ellie knew that wasn't true. What she longed for was not change but transformation. Just like the tall stands of pine trees and oaks that dissolved into water and sky as she crossed the Pearl River into Louisiana, Ellie hoped her old self would dissipate, releasing something new and interesting, something with purpose.

The highway sounded different as she drove onto the bridge that would carry her across Lake Pontchartrain and into New Orleans. Though Highway 90 spanned a narrow channel between marshlands, she could look to the northwest and see the vast, unknowable waters that stretched far beyond the tenuous safety of the bridge. Mabel's tires bumped along as they made it across, only to thread more water, with Pontchartrain on one side of the highway and Lake Saint Catherine on the other.

Ellie found herself surrounded by simple wooden houses on stilts—most with some kind of boat on a trailer parked in the yard—separated by the occasional bait-and-tackle shop or small grocery store. The landscape was flat and stark, the sky a brilliant sunny blue. Now and again, Ellie would glimpse a woman watering her flower beds or a man loading fishing rods into his boat.

As Mabel carried them through a string of small towns, they passed lakes and crossed bayous, sometimes on bridges so rickety that Ellie held her breath from one side to the other. She imagined Mabel doing the same. Though she had seen the bayous around Mobile and Biloxi, Louisiana was a different kettle of fish. Bayous here were boundless and dense, lit with shades of green—from deep ivy to bright chartreuse—as algae, lily pads, and water hyacinth spread over them. They were dotted with ancient cypress trees, their Spanish moss hanging like the lace-gloved fingers of a Louisiana debutante, reaching down to stir ripples on the water.

Ellie began to encounter more traffic and bigger houses as she drew nearer to New Orleans, guiding the old Ford along a now busy Highway 90 until she made it into the city and caught her first glimpse of the road sign she had been waiting

for: Vieux Carré—the French Quarter. She followed Esplanade to Royal Street and almost wrecked Mabel as she marveled at the plaster walls in shades of yellow, burnt orange, red, and forest green, with weathered old shutters hanging just enough askew to show they'd lived a life. Scrolled black wrought iron framed upper balconies where hanging baskets bursting with ferns, begonias, and periwinkle spilled sweet potato vine all the way down to the sidewalk. Mysterious garden gates, tucked into alleyways, conjured notions of romantic assignations in the hidden courtyards that lay beyond. Ellie wondered what the gas streetlamps would look like once they began to flicker in the darkness. New Orleans was everything she had imagined and then some.

Careful to dodge bicycles, taxicabs, and street vendors, she slowly made her way to a hotel she had heard about from a fellow schoolteacher who moved to rural Alabama from Birmingham. Adele had grown up in New Orleans and gave Ellie a well-marked street map, circling all the things she “absolutely *must* see.” Ellie had memorized every street name, landmark, and critical turn as best she could but still kept the map spread out on the seat next to her, stealing a glance whenever she came to a stop sign or traffic light.

At last she spotted it—the Hotel Monteleone—and sighed with relief. After parking Mabel, she made her way to the main entrance, a blue overnight case in hand, and tried not to look like a hayseed as she took in the palatial lobby with its grand pillars and gorgeous chandeliers. The Monteleone looked like something out of a movie, and Ellie imagined herself not in the cotton dress she wore but decked out in a sequined evening gown, an air of mystery about her. The

thought of it made her giggle out loud—Ellie Fields gussied up like Ingrid Bergman.

“Now that’s what we like to see at the Monteleone—a happy guest,” said a voice behind her. She turned to see a smiling bellman in a crisp gray jacket and black pants. He tipped his hat to her.

“Between you and me, I’m not a guest yet,” Ellie confessed. “I’m hoping they’ll rent a room to an Alabama girl who has no idea what she’s doing.”

The bellman raised his eyebrows. “First time in New Orleans?”

“First time ever,” Ellie said.

“Aw, you’re in for a *treat!*” the bellman said. “My name’s Theodore. I’ve lived here all my life. You have any trouble, you send for me.” He gestured toward a long, ornate front desk. “It would be my pleasure to escort you to reception.”

“Thank you so much.” Ellie fell into step with him. “I’m Ellie—Ellie Fields.”

“I’m honored to meet you, Miss Fields.” Theodore led Ellie to the front desk and introduced her to a hotel clerk, who looked to be about her father’s age. Then he took the overnight case from her. “This’ll be waitin’ for you in your room.”

“Thank you again.” Ellie was about to turn back to the clerk when she remembered Adele’s instructions: *Don’t forget to tip in New Orleans!* “Oh, wait, Theodore!” She caught up with him, slipped a quarter into his palm, and whispered, “Did I do that right?”

Theodore gave her a slight bow. “Perfect. And I thank you, Miss Fields.”

Ellie hurried back to the front desk and checked in, then

caught the elevator to her floor and wandered several long corridors until she found her room. There, on a luggage stand just inside the door, was her overnight case as Theodore promised. She kicked off her shoes, removed her hat and gloves, and carried her friend's map over to the tall windows, where she set about getting her bearings.

The Monteleone faced Royal Street. With an upper-level room on the front of the hotel, Ellie could look across the block and see what had to be Bourbon Street, already lit up like a carnival even in the afternoon sun. She had heard tales of its debauchery but also of its music, which she intended to hear. With any luck, the serious sin wouldn't start until later in the evening. She could hear some jazz and retreat to the safety of the Monteleone before then.

The hotel bathroom was the fanciest Ellie had ever seen, all white tile and marble, with a gilded mirror, plush towels, and hand soaps that smelled like gardenias. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. Geri said she had a face like an angel, but Ellie couldn't see it. Her maternal grandmother, Mama Jean, would often say to her with great pride, "Your name might be Fields, but *you* are a Galloway!" Then she would trace Ellie's cheekbones with her fingertip. "You did not get those doe eyes and these fine Scottish features from *their* side!" she would proclaim.

Ellie splashed a little cool water on her face and patted it dry with a fluffy hand towel. She ran a brush through her hair, which she had always considered an indecisive brown. It looked like it couldn't make up its mind whether to be dark or light, so it had settled on deep brown streaked with a lighter shade here and there. Once, she had driven to the salon at Loveman's in Birmingham to get it colored, but

the stylist flatly refused, saying, “Do you have any idea how much women in this city would pay to get what you’re asking me to cover up?” Ellie had reluctantly agreed to a shoulder-length cut, which the stylist promised would still be long enough for her comfort yet short enough to ensure that she didn’t look juvenile. It had a natural wave to it, so at least it was easy to curl. That was something, she guessed.

Her overnight case had room for only one outfit, and she would need that tomorrow. New Orleans would have to take her as she came—wearing a deep-rose cotton dress with a full skirt, cap sleeves, and a sweetheart neckline. She would wear her wide-brimmed hat to keep the sun off her face but forgo the formality of gloves. On this, her first trip to New Orleans, Ellie would embrace the storied city bare-handed.