

WILD MAGNOLIAS
Eric Wilder

Mardi Gras rocked the French Quarter. Almost tripping over a man on his hands and knees, having apparently had too much fun during last night's festivities, reminded me as much. Now, still in costume, he looked like a slightly disheveled Captain Hook and was busy throwing up in the gutter. It didn't seem to bother the two speckled pigeons grousing over the cigarette butt he'd dropped on the sidewalk.

I had something else on my mind as I hurried down Royal Street -- a new client. The prospect of a paying client, along with the bone-chilling March wind whistling down my neck, added purpose to my steps.

A gusting wind, atypical of New Orleans, carried with it the damp odor of mold, mildew and old masonry that reminded me where I was. It also made me wish I had taken an allergy pill before leaving home.

I soon reached my destination - a corner shop named ***Wild Magnolias***, the name an allusion to an all-black marching club that dressed in garish costumes during Mardi Gras. Wild Magnolias sold books, but it was not exactly a Barnes & Noble Superstore. There wasn't a single customer in the shop. A woman behind the sales counter dropped the Times Picayune she was reading when the doorbell rang, her relieved smile indicating

she was glad to see me.

"I'm Sally. You must be Wyatt Thomas?"

"I got your message on my answering machine," I said, shaking her hand. "How can I be of service?"

"I have a job for you. Please follow me and I'll explain."

Sally Barthelemy did not know it, but her announcement was music to my ears. I followed her down the hall to a locked room in back - triple-locked. She opened the door using keys she carried on a large brass ring, painstakingly relocking all the bolts once we were safely inside. Then she sat in an overstuffed leather chair behind an antique desk.

Sally Barthelemy pointed to an empty chair in front of the desk and poured us each a glass of sherry while I made myself comfortable. Then she said, "You're familiar with my little shop, Mr. Thomas?"

"I presume you're a bookseller."

"Outside's just a façade, a few magazines and slick best sellers for the hicks from Beaumont and yokels from Little Rock. It's not where I make my real money."

"I see," I said, not even vaguely understanding what she was talking about.

Sally Barthelemy pointed at the precisely displayed racks of old books and said, "My real money is generated in this room. ***Wild Magnolias*** specializes in rare first editions, especially books with a New Orleans connection. That brings me to why I need your help."

I glanced around the room as Sally Barthelemy explained. It was quite different

from the shop in front. Here, expensive wallpaper, Persian rugs and mahogany molding dominated the decor instead of cheap movie posters and dull linoleum. Real art, not cheap lithographs, hung from the walls. I suddenly appreciated the three locks on the door.

"These volumes are very valuable," Sally Barthelemy said. "I'll give you an example. Faulkner's first novel, *The Marble Faun*, is the type of book I sell. In perfect condition and with dust jacket intact it might go for ten to twenty thousand dollars. I have such a volume. It bears a special inscription, signed in New Orleans, in the author's own handwriting. One of my collectors is ready and willing to pay fifty thousand for it."

"So what's your problem?"

"Someone took it and I'd like you to retrieve it for me."

Sally Barthelemy sipped her sherry while she waited for my answer. She did not have long to wait. "I'm a P.I., Ms. Barthelemy, not a cop."

"Precisely why I called you and not the police," she said. "The bandit is also a valued customer of mine. One of the small group of collectors I allow to enter this room."

"That's unfortunate, but you know what they say about roses."

"This rose happens to rank very highly in the City's social order, and by local definition can only be a rose. The person that took my book is Lillie Hebert."

Sally Barthelemy waited for my reaction and got a raised eyebrow for her efforts. Lillie Hebert was more than a highly ranked member of the City's social order. She was old guard, one of the elite, her family among the richest in the state, her father and

grandfathers all former Kings of Rex. Mrs. Hebert had even reigned as Queen of Comus.

Now I understood Sally's plight.

"If I accuse Lillie Hebert of this offense," she said. "I'll wind up ostracized, not her."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Get the book from her and return it to me."

"Any suggestions on how I might go about it?"

Sally topped up her glass of sherry. "Mrs. Hebert has done this before. She's old and slightly senile, as well as rich. She probably slipped the book in her purse while looking at something else and likely doesn't even remember having it."

I was being facetious when I said, "So you want me to break into her house and get it for you?"

"Certainly not, Mrs. Hebert is expecting delivery today of a book I obtained for her. You make the delivery. While she is busy serving milk and cookies, slip the ***Faun*** into your jacket and return it to me. She'll never miss it."

"Why not just do it yourself?"

Miss Barthelemy made a face and dusted her hands, as if she couldn't bother herself with such a banal task.

"My assistant usually takes care of these little problems for me, but he's on vacation. I need the book today and I'll pay you five hundred dollars to get it for me. Interested or not?"

My landlord and all my other creditors already knew the answer to Sally Barthelemy's question.

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As the streetcar rumbled through the Garden District, I ruminated on my meeting with Sally Barthelemy. The daughter of a prominent local family and graduate of Sophie Newcomb, Sally had served as a maid of court during the Rex ball, and had "come out" with a group of important debutantes. I understood why she did not want to rock the boat of local acceptance.

It was almost noon when I exited the streetcar. A crowd had already congregated along St. Charles Avenue for the long night of festivities that would conclude at midnight. This was Fat Tuesday. Mardi Gras day. Before the day ended people would celebrate, make love, fight and some even die. I was only interested in earning a much-needed five-hundred dollars.

Lillie Hebert's large house was a long walk from St. Charles and I was uncomfortable carrying the valuable copy of Faulkner's *Mosquitoes*. When I reached her house, I was out of breath and hobbling from a rock in my shoe. When Mrs. Hebert answered the door, I saw she was much older than the age suggested by her society pictures in the Picayune.

"Don't you have a car, young man?"

"No ma'am. I like public transportation but it sometimes has its disadvantages."

"Well come in and take a load off." Lillie Hebert led me down the hall. "Have a seat and I'll get you a glass of water."

Plopping down in a divan, I stared around the large sitting room as Mrs. Hebert disappeared into the kitchen. The place was gorgeous. Its trappings made it seem like

an antebellum museum. The old woman returned before I had a chance to inspect her floor-to-ceiling bookshelf.

When Mrs. Hebert returned with no water, only a confused look on her face, I understood how she might have taken Sally Barthelemy's book. And she wasn't even suspicious of me, a complete stranger.

She did finally chirp, "Who are you, young man?"

"Wyatt Thomas," I said, quickly standing. "I brought you a book from ***Wild Magnolias***."

Lillie Hebert's eyes squinted as she studied me. "James usually brings my books."

"He's on vacation this week so I came in his place."

"Oh! Well would you like a glass of water?"

"I'm fine, thank you," I said, handing her the copy of ***Mosquitoes***. "You have so many great books. Mind if I take a look?"

"You honor me," Mrs. Hebert said, beaming.

As I glanced through the volumes in the bookshelves, I thought about Lillie Hebert. She could have passed as Sally Barthelemy's mother. The resemblance was remarkable. Both were tall and both had dark eyes and olive skin. Mrs. Hebert, like Sally, wore her hair in a bun. But her's was gray instead of jet. The old lady, unlike svelte Sally Barthelemy, sported a few extra pounds that she tried in vain to hide beneath a flowered frock that had no discernible waistline.

I spent the next half-hour letting Lillie Hebert show me the love of her life - her collection of first editions. When I finally managed to pry myself out the front door, I

had Sally Barthelemy's copy of *The Marble Faun* beneath my jacket. Despite knowing the book was not the old lady's property, I still felt like a two-dollar chump. As the old green streetcar rumbled back downtown, I realized Sally Barthelemy had been wrong about one thing. Lillie Hebert had not offered me any milk and cookies.

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Culotta's is a quaint little restaurant near the river. The gumbo is good and you can watch tugboats and oil steamers heading to and from the Gulf while you eat. I was sitting by the picture window, enjoying my gumbo and watching natural gas flare on the horizon. I had just topped my gumbo with extra Tabasco when Detective Anthony Nicosia pushed through the crowded cafe and sat across the booth from me. Outside, excited sea gulls chased a trash boat down the river.

Nicosia waved down a waiter and ordered a Dixie. When it arrived, he pushed aside the frosted glass it came with and drank the beer straight from the green and white can. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his arm, plopped his chubby elbows on the table and stared across the can at me.

"Bowl of gumbo, Tony?" I said, breaking the silence.

Tony was five-eight or nine and at least forty pounds overweight. His Irish Channel accent sounded straight from the Bronx. He did not bother removing his shapeless slouch hat, but made continual swipes at any loose black hair daring to drop below the band. When he finished his beer, he waved for another, his elbows never leaving the red and white plastic Purina tablecloth.

Finally he said, "You in a lot of trouble, Cowboy."

"More than usual?"

"I ain't kidding this time. Some old lady filed charges on you downtown. Says you stole a real valuable book from her. And Cowboy, this old lady has the stroke to send you to Angola for a lengthy vacation. We already got calls from the Mayor, the DA and the Governor. Couldn't you have robbed one of them blind beggars up on Canal?"

I quickly explained the situation to Tony, telling him about Sally Barthelemy and the money still warming my wallet.

"We already contacted Miss Barthelemy and she says she never heard of you. She even invited us to search her shop if we thought she had the book, but we didn't bother cause she's a distant cousin of the Chief's."

"Figures. This is a mistake, Tony," I said, wiping hot sauce from my mouth with one of Mama Culotta's checkered napkins.

"May-be," he said, drawing out the word. "But I still got to take you in." He smirked and said, "The Chief is looking real forward to your explanation."

"You forgetting the Saints tickets I got you last fall?"

"I ain't forgetting nothing, Cowboy, but the Chief gave me orders to bring you in."

"Maybe you didn't find me."

"Maybe I'll get my short-hairs trimmed if I don't."

"Give me until noon tomorrow. I'll come in on my own, I promise."

I felt quite the fool as I walked out of Culotta's and headed toward the noise issuing from the French Quarter. Sally Barthelemy had suckered me and I had fallen for it like one of her hicks from Little Rock. Despite the frivolity of Fat Tuesday, I was not a happy

camper.

Crowds of masked revelers thickened steadily as I neared Canal Street. Mardi Gras had begun weeks ago - all the parties, festivities and gaiety. Most of the lesser carnival clubs - Krewes to the locals - had already had their balls and parades. The ones reserved for Fat Tuesday were the richest and oldest - Rex and Comus.

One giant parade was in progress and masked Krewe members aboard colorful floats were tossing beads and doubloons to the crowd. The parade was snaking toward the Municipal Auditorium where the Rex and Comus Balls would soon begin. Lowering my shoulders, I pushed into the crowd.

Suddenly, masses of temporarily insane humanity and wild explosions of kinetic energy surrounded me. Strobe bursts of laser light battled fractured neon as screaming vocal cords and flailing limbs grabbed for elusive strands of plastic beads and souvenir doubloons tossed by masked whats-its riding gaudy floats planted with fluorescent vines and cardboard palms.

A drunk college girl encircled my neck. Balancing her mask in one hand and a half-empty whiskey bottle in the other, she planted a sultry kiss full on my lips. Then, with a wanton smile, she yanked down her blouse to show me her lipstick-smearred breasts. I found the world's largest street party even livelier when I reached Bourbon Street.

Drunken revelers on the balconies were tossing dollar bills into the crowd below, causing further confusion as frenzied musketeers, scantily dressed drag queens and untimid lions fought for the floating bills. The crowds thinned when I turned off Bourbon and made my way through the relative darkness shrouding Rue Royal.

Noise on Bourbon Street continued as a distant peal when I reached Bertram Picou's little bar. Picou's was having its own celebration - a raucous affair attended by regulars, hip locals and certain lucky tourists that had stumbled on the place by accident.

I was looking for someone in particular - two of Bertram's regulars that would have information and advice I desperately needed. Before reaching their usual booth in back, I had to traverse a tenuous path through the other pack of Bertram's regulars, all of whom recognized me.

"My man," Bertram Picou said, giving me a high five from behind the bar. "I knew we'd see your homely face in here before the night was over. What can I do you for?"

Bertram's accent was straight from the bayou - canned coon-ass. Before I could answer his question, he poured me a glass of pink lemonade from a special jug he kept just for me in the ice bin.

To say the least, Picou's bar was eclectic. Panties, bras, boxer shorts, ties and other assorted unmentionables hung from the huge silvered mirror behind the bar, or the ceiling above it - mementos of lost inhibitions. Something tourists, and even locals, often misplaced in the French Quarter. I took a slug from the frosted glass and stared around the room at the throng of happy masqueraders.

"Good crowd, Bertram," I said. "Something going on I should know about?"

"If you don't already know, maybe I ought to warm your carcass over the stove in back, cause you be one cold fish," he said in his inimitable Cajun accent.

A pretty blonde in a skimpy pirate's outfit crawled over the bar, interrupting our conversation. As she wrapped her willowy arms around Picou's neck and proceeded to

hump his thigh in a very sexual manner, I took the liberty to excuse myself and push through the boisterous crowd to the booth in back. The two people I was looking for smiled and scooted over when they saw me, letting me slide in beside them.

"Wyatt, my man. How you doing?"

"Tolerable, Armand. You?"

"Smoking, man."

Armand was doing just that and the pungent odor of marijuana mingled with stale air in the bar's dark corner. No one seemed to mind. I had known Armand for twenty years and I still did not know his last name. Maybe Armand was his last name.

Armand was more than slightly eccentric. His shiny black blazer draped the black turtleneck sweater strangled around his scrawny throat. He also had slick black hair and a pointed goatee. Armand always wore black. His clothes pinned him as a throwback to the fifties - a stereotypical beatnik, if such a beast still existed. He was not alone.

Armand's companion was crowded into the booth beside him, her velvet mini riding high on thick, cafe au lait thighs. An imposing black woman, Madam Laverne Joubert was Armand's antithesis. She had coarse facial features and shoulders like a linebacker. Almost blonde, her bouffant hair pointed toward the ceiling. She was a woman that loved bright colors and her puffed lips were as red as freshly oxidized blood.

Armand and Madam Laverne knew more about the Quarter, and old New Orleans, than any one else that I knew. Madam Laverne worked in the Notarial Archives in the basement of the District Court. The Archives provided her access to the detailed history

of the City from its beginning and she had expanded on this knowledge through the years. Now, she could quote the membership roles of the exclusive Boston Club and tell you who was in line to serve as next King of Comus.

Armand, a gifted collector and seller of New Orleans art and antiques, complemented Madam Laverne's knowledge. He knew the moneyed and powerful in the Big Easy on a first name basis - all of them. Armand and Laverne were a formidable pair. I ordered them fresh drinks and quickly explained my situation. When I finished my story, Armand shook his head in sympathy and killed his shot of Cuervo.

"You should have called me earlier, Cowboy. I could have saved you some embarrassment. Everyone knows the volume of the *Faun* you kiped belongs to Lillie Hebert."

Madam Laverne's wrapped her big hands around her Hurricane glass and sipped the icy pink concoction through a bright red straw. After licking her lips, she said, "If you had just read the inscription inside the front cover, you wouldn't have had to ask."

Armand's dark mustache twitched with his crooked grin. "It says to Lillie Hebert, my sweet benefactor -- William Faulkner"

"Don't rub it in," I said. "I feel bad enough already. Any idea who Sally may have sold it to?"

Again, Armand's mustache twitched and he exchanged a knowing glance with Madam Laverne. Madam Laverne winked and said, "Wyatt, you have a particular talent for seeking out the right person to question."

"Then you know the answer?"

Armand and Madam Laverne nodded in unison and Madam Laverne leaned against the padded booth, crossing her long legs. "Sally's assistant, James, has been busy all week. First he visited the rare book room at the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library at Tulane and then the Notarial Archives."

"Doing what?"

"Authenticating Lillie Hebert's copy of *The Marble Faun*."

"Why bother? She knows where I got it."

"Because the person that's going to receive the volume is just about the richest and most powerful man in Nawlins'," Armand said, answering for Madam Laverne. "Judge Henri Montegut."

"Montegut? How do you know that?"

"The person buying the *Faun* from Sally Barthelemy didn't trust James' authentication of the volume. She brought it by earlier this evening for my opinion."

"She?"

"Electra Montegut, the Judge's wife. Electra's giving the book to the Judge tonight during the Rex Ball. Case you didn't know, the Judge is King of Rex this year."

King of Rex, the most coveted crown in the Mardi Gras hierarchy. The Krewe considers only the richest and most influential men and then chosen only after a donation to the Krewe of Rex of at least a million dollars.

"The Rex Crown is one of two things Judge Henri Montegut covets most in the world," Armand said. "The other is Lillie Hebert's copy of *The Marble Faun*. He is an avid collector of rare books with a New Orleans connection and has lusted after Lillie's

edition for years. Of course, she would never sell it to him."

"But Electra is a devoted wife," Madam Laverne added. "She plans to fulfill Montegut's second greatest desire by presenting him with the *Faun* tonight at the Rex Ball."

"Then I'm shafted," I said.

"Why hell no," Armand said. "I got a copy of the *Faun* upstairs and I do a pretty good Faulkner forgery. I can let you have the book for five hundred dollars and that's cheap at twice the price."

Madame Laverne gave Armand a high five and me the power sign. "Just sneak it in the Ball and exchange it for Lillie's copy. You're good at that."

After devising a slight variation on the note Faulkner had inscribed in Lillie Hebert's book, I agreed to Armand's plan. We retrieved Armand's copy of *The Marble Faun* from their upstairs apartment and Madame Joubert found me an old devil's costume to wear to the ball. Armand administered the altered inscription to the book's cover as Madam Laverne watched me adjust the flashy red garb in front of her full-length wall mirror.

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Bertram Picou's nephew was security guard at the Municipal Auditorium and Bertram arranged entrance to the Rex Ball through a door in back. Once I made it inside, no one would know that I had crashed the party. It would be easy to switch the two books and get the hell out of Dodge before anyone discovered my ruse. Leaving Bertram's bar, I hurried toward the party.

Already well after dark, the town was really rocking. French Quarter revelers had pumped themselves into a drunken frenzy and were bumping and grinding along the entire length of Rue Bourbon. Ignoring the masses of drunk masqueraders, I pushed through the crowd.

Several simultaneous parties were ongoing in various ballrooms of the Municipal Auditorium, but the Rex Ball was by far the largest. After thanking Tommy for spiriting me through the back door, I stared in awe at the crowded ballroom. It was like something out of the Arabian Nights and an orchestra that included a full string section was barely succeeding in overcoming the dissonance of a thousand masked celebrants.

Strobes and rotating balls lighted the otherwise dim room with dancing light and I spotted the King and Queen through the shadows. They sat in regal splendor, viewing their subjects, high above the masses on a raised dais. Between their thrones, piles of gifts lay scattered.

Gold and ermine bedecked Henri and Electra - regal costumes that must have set them back a cool quarter-million. Both were soused, Electra and Judge Henri tipling straight from a Wild Turkey bottle. It made my job easier and neither of them paid any attention to the smiling devil pawing through their gifts.

I found Lillie Hebert's copy of ***The Marble Faun*** in a cheap gift bag tied with a red bow. No one noticed when I exchanged it for Armand's copy. I was halfway out the door when I decided to present the book to Judge Henri Montegut myself. Be there when he read my special inscription. Climbing back on the dais, I fumbled through the presents, found the book and handed it to Judge Henri.

"King Rex, look what the queen got for you."

Judge Montegut removed the book from the bag, fingering it covetously when he saw what it was. As he read the inscription, I felt his agitation and resultant ire, even though I could not see his face behind the mask. When he glanced up at me and tore the book in half, I knew for sure I had ruined his party. I did not wait around for him to thank me.

It was nearly midnight when I reached my flat just north of Esplanade. Mounted New Orleans policemen were already dispersing the crowds. I had followed a group of real Wild Magnolias through the Quarter. Their elaborate feathered costumes cost less than Henri and Electra's, but still added up to a large portion of their yearly income. Maybe they represented the true spirit of Mardi Gras. I wondered as much as I buzzed into the enclosed courtyard and climbed the steps to my apartment.

As I unlocked the heavy door and went inside, the hastily conceived inscription in Armand's *Marble Faun* crossed my mind. I wondered what Judge Henri Montegut must have thought when he read it and what price Sally Barthelemy would eventually have to pay to regain her spot in polite New Orleans society.

The inscription read *To Judge Henri, my sweet benefactor - Sally Barthelemy.*

END