

CHAPTER I

From Arnaudville to New Orleans

by Lisanne Gamelin

“Look at the view. Look, look, look,” James said to Isabelle, pointing to the right side of the car, leaning forward on his wheel to have a glimpse too.

The window on her side was rolled all the way down, so Isabelle looked out, holding on to her beige fedora as she took in the spectacle of the Atchafalaya basin. They had gotten on Interstate 10—I-10—a little while back, past Cecilia. For a few miles, it had reminded her of Quebec’s highways with two lanes on each side and a wide median with freshly cut grass, bearing no trees.

Gradually a dense forest formed in the middle, eventually turning into waterways as they came up on a high-rise bridge reminding her of Prince Edward Island’s Confederation Bridge. But instead of the Canadian Gulf, this sight turned into an immense swamp, visible for miles, with tall sparse skinny cypress trees creating the misconception of small makeshift islands with their roots rising above the water. Several fishing boats were swiftly moving about the large wetland, as flocks of birds, mostly egrets, flew by on the horizon.

It was both impressive, and even a bit frightening, to look out from the Louisiana bridge, as it was one of the largest inland open water bodies Isabelle had ever come across.

Nature still owned what this man-made structure was timidly borrowing. Isabelle’s side of the highway faced south and offered the most beautiful scene according to James. It was indeed majestic, Isabelle agreed, but also a bit unnerving to cross such a

long bridge, especially when knowing that, if there were an accident, the next exit was miles away.

She understood why James, her internship supervisor, never grew tired of it, even if he was in his late forties and had driven this part of the highway all his life.

James Comeaux was a brilliant painter who had opened shop in Arnaudville, his hometown. It was a small rural municipality of 1,800 inhabitants in the heart of Acadiana, a Cajun stronghold of rural Louisiana located between Lafayette and Baton Rouge. Not only a visual artist, he was a natural-born storyteller, but it seemed to be a common character trait to most Louisianans. Isabelle had found out the first time he asked her to tag along for a day-trip to New Orleans, several weeks back. He had pointed out the view enthusiastically then too, visibly very proud of it.

They had gone to New Orleans several times in the last six weeks since her arrival from Montreal. The first time James had suggested she tag along, to drop off paintings at a client's home, Isabelle had automatically agreed, naturally curious to see the notorious city. When she had come down from Canada, her flight had landed in Lafayette, so she hadn't had the chance to visit the Big Easy yet.

"I warn you, it's almost a three-hour drive to New Orleans, if we hit a little bit of traffic, which we will."

"That's all right." Isabelle had said.

"Six hours total."

"Ok."

"It'll be a long day. And I don't wanna hear you bitchin'."

"Why would I be bitchin'?"

“Mm...’cause my AC’s busted.”

Isabelle hesitated, before adding. “Still fine.”

Louisiana, in late May, was like walking into a sauna where someone threw water on the rocks every five minutes. It felt sticky, like one of those aunty kisses during the Holiday season. However, after spending months freezing her ass off in Montreal, where it had just barely gotten above zero when she’d left in April, Isabelle wasn’t about to complain about the heat. She had also lived in Texas, spending a school year in the public system there to improve her English. The weather had also been terribly hot especially by her Canadian standards, but it had been a drier heat, much like opening an oven and standing in front of it for hours on end. Regardless, she wasn’t about to pass on the opportunity to see New Orleans for the first time, just because James’s AC was broken, even if it meant enduring a stifling ride of six hours. But it wasn’t just the faulty air-conditioner that would make this trip a challenge, she had come to realize on that first ride to New Orleans.

James’s car, a dark green Mazda Tribute, a 2008 model, was starting to break down and could only be described, loosely, as a moving trash can. The back window on the right side could no longer be rolled up fully—and it had been half-way down for God knows how long—plus, there was this pungent foul smell inside the car.

Two months prior, back in March, before Isabelle had arrived from Montreal, James had forgotten a milk carton in the car after getting groceries for the art collective volunteers. When his mama, Ms. Jo, had cleaned the car a little, she had found the inflated carton, picked it up just to have it burst into her hands, spraying curdled milk all

over the trunk. And since the compact SUV had only a thin flap covering the trunk area, the smell hadn't been restricted there.

Therefore, it helped a little that one of the windows was permanently rolled down, even if it rained inside a couple of times, which James seemed not to mind. Maybe, that was why he didn't get it fixed, Isabelle thought, so the smell could slowly get washed away through natural means.

From the beginning, Isabelle had appreciated James for his carefree attitude. She wished she could let go in the same way.

Right away, he had treated her as an equal. "Well, I knew I wasn't getting a dimwit when I saw your résumé. You have enough experience to run events on your own."

She'd been surprised by his brotherly attitude towards her. Maybe, it was sad that she was used to being belittled by superiors. Someone like James was rare, a person who didn't need to put you down to make themselves feel important.

The first time they had driven down to New Orleans to drop off paintings, James had parked on one of the streets adjacent to Magazine Street in Uptown to get lunch at a Vietnamese restaurant. He insisted they eat before they made the drop. Isabelle had looked back at the car, slightly concerned they were walking away with that window rolled down.

"Aren't you afraid someone's going to steal your car? With that window opened?"

James had covered the paintings with a large blue tarp, so you couldn't see them from outside.

"Nah," James had said, taking a quick backwards glance.

“Tell me something. Are the paintings inside worth more than the car itself?” Isabelle had asked, slightly frowning, as they carried on walking.

“Way more. Maybe four times the worth of the car. Each.” James had added in a hushed voice as to not draw attention to the car they were leaving. “But I’ve covered them, so it’s fine. No one’s going to know they’re there.”

When they’d gotten back from that first trip, Isabelle had bought a dozen car fresheners and strategically placed them all over the vehicle’s interior. She hadn’t been able to stop herself, thinking it might’ve been slightly neurotic of her to take such liberty, but she needed to do something about that car if she was to ride in it again. The air fresheners helped a little with the smell, but only partially, since it seemed James was never going to properly clean it.

Earlier that morning as they were heading back to New Orleans to drop her off there for a couple of weeks, Isabelle had found a banana peel by the gearshift.

“What the fuck?” Isabelle had asked, having decided a few weeks back that there was no need for coddling anymore, now openly showing how annoyed she was by his sloppiness. “How long has this been here?” She had carried on with an accusatory tone, picking up the rotten fruit peel with the tip of her two fingers, pinching her nose.

“Mm,” James had said quizzically, frowning a little, though unmoved by her use of profanity. For weeks now, Isabelle had been showing him her true colours as an incorrigible foul mouth, so he was used to it.

He had seemed to have genuinely forgotten. Exasperated, she had thrown it away. After giving a quick glance at the backseat area, she’d found more empty fast-food

wrappers. Cursing under her breath, she threw them away too. Then she'd swung her heavy luggage out back, and they had hit the road for New Orleans.

As James drove onto I-10, the view of the Atchafalaya was eventually blocked by cypress trees covered in Spanish moss. The plants looked like old men's beards, which apparently had been where their name had come from. It seemed conquistadors had left shaving blades at home when they had disembarked in Louisiana.

As they were getting closer to Baton Rouge, James began on how he had opened his art collective, NUNU, in Arnaudville almost ten years ago. His father, James Sr., had fallen ill so James had moved back from Baton Rouge where he had been a well-established artist. Not long after the move, his father passed away at St. Luc's, the local hospital. His mother—who all the volunteers affectionately called Ms. Jo—had started to show signs of depression by the loss of her husband, so James had decided to stay longer. He ended up never leaving again.

Being openly gay in a small town in rural Louisiana already took guts, but opening an art collective and making waves in the local political scene was on a different level.

"I had help, no questions asked. It's a collective, after all. Volunteer-based involvement only."

Local politicians had been out to undermine him at every turn, but James had chosen to join the fold instead of trying to fight it, signing up for the Chamber of Commerce, attending municipal meetings. He had taken Isabelle to a few of them since her arrival several weeks before. She had been curious to see how melodramatic it could get in Louisianan town halls. The times she had been present, even what appeared as

insignificant turf wars had gotten quickly out of hand. Maybe the crushing heat didn't help with everyone's mood.

James was telling her about the perks of having his collective in a rural area, but she wasn't convinced. Originally from a small village back in Quebec, Isabelle would never move back, especially not to open an art collective. She'd left that life behind without regrets. She told him so as the wind blew her bob haircut around, held in place only by her fedora.

Montreal was her home now.

The car rolled onto the large cantilevered Horace Wilkinson Bridge, which crossed over the Mississippi River into Baton Rouge. The city was covered in dark greenery, maybe compensating for being home to one of the largest oil refineries in the country. On the near horizon, to their left, the beige State Capitol rose, its austere main tower with black-tarnished window frames a little over twenty floors tall. Very Soviet Union for such a conservative stronghold, she pointed out to James, who burst out laughing.

"Only a Canadian could think that this place's anywhere near being a communist nest," James said.

"Well, don't you agree?" she asked.

"It was built in the 30s, so it sorta makes sense. In terms of architecture, it was pretty common."

While he continued heading south on I-10 through Baton Rouge, James further shared his vision for NUNU. Discussions about funding the arts in Louisiana always involved politics to some degree, and James had become quite a skilled fundraiser for his

collective. However, he hammered it down on everyone that there would be no gossiping or political debates within the walls of NUNU, especially since the election of Trump.

Truth be told, James was the biggest gossip of them all, Isabelle had noticed only after a few days. He would wait to be outside the place to have a go at it. Isabelle loved small town gossip, especially in America. Disagreements always seemed worse than they actually were. But James genuinely saw the best in people and was quite inclusive. Although a Democrat, he welcomed even conservatives. His rules regarding gossiping and politics were just to prevent people from fighting within the walls of NUNU. It was a sacred place for him, a second home.

When she arrived at NUNU in April, James entrusted her with only one mission:

“Talk to people. In French, as much as possible.”

“I can do that in my sleep,” she said, making him smile on that first day.

However, she would soon come to realize it wouldn’t be as easy as she had thought.

First of all, the French was not at all the same. She’d heard about Cajun French and had expected it to resemble what she’d been used to back home in Quebec. But then, some volunteers told her that some of them spoke Creole, and others, Cajun French, making it a chaotic environment for her to navigate. In Isabelle’s mind—and maybe to a lot of other Quebecers as well—Creole was a language mainly used by Haitians, including the large diaspora living in Montreal. It would never occur to her that both white and black Louisianans would speak a form of it. She had assumed, maybe naively, that everyone in Acadiana spoke like the folk singer Zachary Richard.

“*Ki ça t'ap   di?*” Ms. Jo had asked, confused, when Isabelle pronounced Richard’s name the first time.

Although the famous French-speaking Louisianan singer was a local celebrity, if Isabelle said his name with rough guttural ‘r’, no one at the collective knew who she was referring to. For them, he was just good old chummy Zachary; whereas to Isabelle, and most French-Canadians, Richard was a musical legend, filling the largest stadiums when he, a living symbol of French resistance, visited Quebec. All that was missing for Richard to be worshipped even more by Quebecers was an exposed breast and a blue and white fleur-de-lis flag.

After a few weeks, she’d come to hear similarities between Louisiana versions of French and her former rural French-Canadian lingo. Throughout the decade she’d lived in Montreal and worked in the literary field, Isabelle had felt pressured to speak in a more refined way, polishing her Quebecer accent, giving it a slight European lilt noticeable at times to keen ears. But, that ‘international French’ was no way near what Louisianans were used to, forcing her to adjust not only her pace, but also her choice of words.

She had always been aggravated when European French-speakers ridiculed French-Canadians for their accent, saying they didn’t speak ‘real’ French—Parisians even liked to pretend they didn’t understand Quebecers—but now, Isabelle was facing a similar linguistic barrier with Louisianans. Even if she didn’t want to, she ended up switching to English with most of them.

Ironically for such a proud defender of the French language, Isabelle had made significant effort to improve her English throughout the years. Her accent even resembled that of Acadiana. She’d spent a school year in Texas, almost fifteen years prior now, and

this experience had left traces of a twang, which she had also tried to suppress once back in Quebec. But now, the accent was resurfacing in a hybrid form, as Isabelle had a tendency to pick up and imitate people's accents pretty quickly.

But that wasn't what James wanted from her. He needed a mouthpiece, someone to advocate for French revival in Acadiana and the importance of French-English bilingualism in local youth. And as a bilingual French-Canadian thirty-one-year-old woman, Isabelle was a perfect poster child.

Quebec had struggled to keep its language alive, but this had been a battle of the past, now mostly won. Some hardcore French-language activists might disagree, preferring to shame bilingual Quebec youth by calling them *assimilés* if they didn't flip tables for being addressed in the 'oppressor's tongue' even in the few predominantly English-speaking neighbourhoods of Montreal.

Compared to French in Quebec though, the language in Louisiana was more timidly celebrated, and according to James, needed strong advocates.

"Like yourself," James had been telling Isabelle for the past six weeks, and repeated as they drove out of Baton Rouge city limits.

"I'll do my best."

"Oh, by the way, did you get a chance to see Michelle before we left? She was looking for you," James said.

"Yeah, she wanted to hug me goodbye."

Michelle, a volunteer at NUNU, had picked her up at the Lafayette Regional Airport back in April. She was a tall slender African-American woman, and had stood

straight in the middle of the baggage claim area, looking up at the escalators when Isabelle spotted her.

The woman, mid-sixties, had not needed to hold up a sign; Isabelle had known right away she was her ride. The woman had been wearing ample floaty clothing in earth tones, much like a bohemian. She had long, refined dreadlocks past her shoulders, with almost two inches shaved above her right ear. When Isabelle had gotten closer, she had noticed a little bright yellow paint in her hair, making it almost unnecessary to ask if she was with the art collective.

The woman had tilted her head in a silent yes, then had asked Isabelle if she'd had a good trip down from Montreal. Her voice was the low-key kind, harsh, almost masculine—a bit like Nina Simone's—but she spoke with warmth while they walked to the carousel for Isabelle to recover her luggage.

They had walked back to Michelle's 1993 Ford Flareside pickup truck. It was in pristine condition, inside out, with white paint and thin blue stripes on the side. A dark red leather bench was the seating arrangement inside. They had gone around the truck for Isabelle to swing her heavy luggage onto the open cargo area.

On the way back, they had talked a bit, but it was only a few weeks later that Isabelle had truly fell in love with the woman. That day, the woman had barged into NUNU, clearly pissed about something. Isabelle had timidly asked her what the matter was, and Michelle had told her about her very painful physiotherapy session at the local health center.

"Is that the one with those three *fucking* large crosses on the front yard? What's up with that?" Isabelle had asked.

Michelle had stopped mid-motion, and looked at her intently. There was an awkward pause. At first, Isabelle had tried to subdue her cursing in public, but the more she had tried, the less natural she had felt. She wasn't sure if she had insulted Michelle by cursing openly, and if she needed to apologize or something.

"Yeah...they want you to suck it up. Look at what Jesus had to go through. Well, I ain't going back. *Fuck* that," Michelle had said before making her way to her framing shop area at the back of NUNU.

From then on, Michelle had seemed to adopt her as her swear buddy. But Michelle was much more than just a foul mouth, she was also extremely caring, and treated Isabelle almost like a little sister. The woman was loyal to her adopted community, having recently moved to Arnaudville after years of involvement with NUNU from a distance, finally deciding it was time to get closer and invest more of her time for the collective to flourish.

It had been a relief to Isabelle to finally find someone like Michelle in the small rural town who appreciated not only her dark humour, but who wasn't offended at hearing crude words coming out in such a well-imitated Louisiana-Texan accent.

But winning over James had taken more work. The day following her arrival, Isabelle had shown up at the collective in a dark blue polka dot dress with a large red leather belt, while wearing her signature beige fedora with its bright orange ribbon. Upon seeing her, James had simply stared, not hiding his surprise at such attire for rural Louisiana. He had sworn throughout the following weeks that he hadn't been thrown off by her appearance that day. He had only been unsure if the volunteers would react well to her style, a bit fancy in his opinion.

“I was afraid you’d be snooty,” James said as he drove on I-10.

“Thanks! I hope I didn’t disappoint!” Isabelle said, making him laugh.

For Montrealers, it was an occupational hazard to come off as snobbish; they did have a reputation, especially in the rest of their own province, for being condescending. Isabelle might’ve come off that way, but she chose to ignore the comment, because it wasn’t true. Besides, in Arnaudville, she had known right away who she needed in her corner to fit in the volunteers’ group: Ms. Jo, James’ mother, a feisty petite eighty-year-old Creole-speaker. She was the key to NUNU, the heart of the collective. During Isabelle’s first week, James had often caught them speaking English with one another, and playfully ordered her to switch to French with his mama.

“It’s not even the same language. But we’ll try, promise,” Isabelle had said.

Finally, after miles of forests surrounding both sides, I-10 suddenly opened to another large water body on their left, Lake Pontchartrain. A row of tall electric poles was situated a little off the coast, ruining the view a bit. The right side of the bridge was surrounded by sparse trees that looked dead, but that weren’t dying, James insisted, when she made the observation. Isabelle looked out as New Orleans finally came on the horizon. She held on to her fedora as a burst of wind came rushing into the car. The city was still very small in the distance, but they were getting closer.

“By the way, what am I to do in New Orleans for the next two weeks or so?”

“Whatever Scott needs you to do.”

Scott was the jazz museum director in New Orleans, and he was a disorganized guy too, James mentioned. Things in his office were run pretty much like they were at the

collective in Arnaudville, which meant Isabelle would need to be extremely flexible and understanding if things changed sporadically throughout the day.

When she first heard Scott's name, Isabelle had a knee-jerk reaction. She had known another Scott back home. A previous boss. Who had betrayed her on his way out of town.

"But he fell *in love* with you when we drove down the first time, and now he can't shut up about having you over," James said.

"Hey! It's not impossible to love me, ok?"

James hadn't been able to push back her stay in New Orleans, nor her work alongside Scott at the museum. Isabelle was halfway through the internship and James was going away on a business trip to Georgia to deliver several paintings. It was actually perfect timing for James to drive her down there on that day, even if housing hadn't been figured out yet. Scott had agreed to find a more permanent solution for her soon enough.

So far, only Dana Saulnier, a friend of the collective in Arnaudville, had agreed to take her for the first couple of nights. After that, it hadn't been decided where Isabelle would go. Maybe another artists' collective, Scott had suggested via email the week before. Isabelle had been concerned about this evasive response, wanting to plan ahead more.

As James drove on, he asked, "Have you thought about what I asked you?"

"Yeah and no."

During their first meeting together when she'd arrived from Montreal, he had asked what she was looking for in this internship. She had too much experience to be seeking new professional knowledge. But she had applied nonetheless, having found

nothing better to do back home after her contract wasn't renewed. On that first day, she had given him a smirk before answering, "I'm not even sure what I'm doing here." He had grinned back, satisfied by her honesty.

She had spent weeks trying to figure out an answer, just to give up on that too.

He didn't pressure her further on the subject, "You gotta start trusting the process," James said. "This is Louisiana. You can't plan too much ahead of time. It just can't be done. You just gotta wing it most of the time."

"That's pretty ironic for an event-planning internship."

"Oh well," James said, looking out the window. He seemed to want to change the subject.

Although Isabelle might've been right about the paradox, she knew nothing would change. She'd discovered pretty quickly after her arrival that it was pointless to try to make her own notion of time fit to that of the South. Time might have been money up North, but it was leisure down South, and she better get used to it.

Yes, indeed, *laissez les bons temps rouler*. Let the good times roll.

Even that expression wouldn't be considered 'proper French' by 'international French' standards, but Isabelle had not dared say anything about it, because *that* would've truly been patronising. Besides, she knew better than to barge in and just criticize how locals spoke; she'd been on the receiving end of that for years back home with the flock of Parisians who'd invaded Montreal's now overrated Plateau neighbourhood.

Dana Saulnier and Isabelle had not officially met, but James was sure they would get along right away. Saulnier's parents lived in Sunset, a fifteen-minute drive from

Arnaudville, and they were often at the collective. Their youngest daughter, Dana, had been living in New Orleans for a couple of years now. She was very interested in the French revival, being of Cajun descent herself, but like James, she struggled to speak the language with her elders.

Isabelle was nervous to finally meet Dana Saulnier. She'd seen her at the collective during *Semaine de la Francophonie*—French Week—but it had been Isabelle's first week at NUNU. She hadn't dared go up to the other girl after hearing her speak so eloquently during a panel discussion on strategies for French revival in Louisiana. Saulnier had been impressive not only in wits, but also in height, as she had towered over everyone at 6'4".

James talked as they entered New Orleans, taking an overpass next to the Superdome. Large screens along the highway on the way to town announced upcoming shows at the stadium. The large facility seemed untarnished, as if unweathered, almost polished. Isabelle stared at the building, nodding absentmindedly as James told her that Scott would make her feel welcome in New Orleans.

Tomorrow was going to be June 1st, and hurricane season would officially start. Isabelle mentioned this to James, out of the blue, sounding more worried than she'd intended.

"Well, that should be the least of your worries in New Orleans," James said laughing, though Isabelle wasn't sure if he had been kidding or not.