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Huntersville, North Carolina

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Thank you for your interest in our debut publication, "True Nature".

The following is a direct excerpt of the first two chapters of the full length novel. We hope that you enjoy reading it enough to want to come back and purchase a copy for your own use or even as a gift.

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Again, we sincerely value your interest and hope you return to our website again,

The Staff at Blue Leaf Publications

<http://www.BlueLeafPub.com>
staff@blueleafpub.com

To sign up for our mailing list, email: review@blueleafpub.com

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TRUE NATURE
By Dehanna Bailee
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❧ CHAPTER ONE ❧

Kailen James woke with a start. The damp sheets clung like a second skin. Staring at the water-stained ceiling, she tried to remember her dream, but the chaotic images only faded. Sighing, she rose, grabbed her robe, and walked out onto a wrought iron balcony. Pigeons, startled by her sudden appearance, took flight and circled above in the pastel blue sky before they disappeared over the rooftops. She closed her eyes.

While leaning against the cold metal rail, she took a deep breath and tried to enjoy the solace of the dawn. A small rural village located high in the Appalachia flashed in her mind. There she'd been happy. At least until the headaches and pain came. Crippling her. Torturing her. Until after years of misery, the doctors at the hospital gave up and admitted her to the psychiatric ward – believing the ailment to be imagined.

It wasn't in my mind! She slammed her hand against the iron rail.

A horn broke her train of thought. She pulled her robe tighter and returned to her apartment. It would do no good to fight her anger.

Kailen left the doors open and walked to the kitchen for breakfast. Clicking on the radio, she listened to the local weather. Hot, muggy, with a chance of afternoon showers, just as every day since she got here a few weeks ago. She loved the music, the people, and the history of the ancient city of New Orleans.

After settling in, she'd found a waitress job and now worked at a restaurant off the main strip. The food tasted great and employees openly accepted her as one of their own, easing the loneliness from leaving the life she'd always known. Big Mama, the proprietor of the restaurant even helped her find a small apartment right above a nightclub. It wasn't the cleanest of places, mostly due to the age of the building, but it was dry and quiet during the hours the club wasn't open. Yet even with the obvious drawbacks, the apartment had one saving grace for if she stood at the right place on the ornate wrought iron balcony, she could catch a view of the river. There she would find herself standing for long periods, mesmerized by the swirling brown currents as she watched the river in its constant motion to the sea.

She shook her head to refocus and filled the coffeepot with water. Picking up a box of cereal, she poured out a bowl and sat down at the table she'd found in a trash pile a couple days back. It wobbled and had only one chair, but it was hers. Sipping coffee while perusing the articles in a day-old newspaper, Kailen found it amusing it made no difference if she read today's or last week's. It was always the same. Not troubling to the lives of most locals who lived the days here one at a time without much concern for what they couldn't change. She liked the logic and tried to apply it to her own life when she could.

After finishing breakfast, she set the dishes in the sink and walked to the bedroom to straighten the tangled covers. Once she made some order, she placed a small box upon the bed,

opened it, and removed several faded gray newspaper clippings and old books describing the illustrious history and mythology of the city. She pulled out a map and glanced at her notes, mentally double-checking her facts. Then using both hands, she lifted a large scrapbook from the bottom of the box, picked up her cup of coffee, and walked back out onto the balcony.

Seating herself in a lone chair, she knew it wasn't necessary to read the contents. The words could be recited from memory. She spread her hands across the worn leather cover, closed her eyes, and laid her head back. Silently, she waited for an answer.

"This has got to be the stupidest thing I've ever done," she spoke aloud. The anxiety in her body dissipated as she laughed at her foolish behavior. She grabbed her belongings, walked inside, placed them on the counter by the sink, then passed through the kitchen. Continuing on to the bathroom, she turned on the water to take a shower. When it warmed, she stepped inside, letting the water cascade over her body and humming along to the music as it blended with the sounds from the street.

She froze.

"Oh, God. Not now."

A soft, gray mist rose around her. Whirling points of light appeared in the corners of her eyes and flew wildly across her field of vision. Gaspings for air, she fell onto her hands and knees. Hundreds of hands were ripping and tearing the very flesh from her bones. Sparks from the static glistened off her body, even as the steaming water poured steadily from the showerhead.

Stop! Stop! Leave me alone, please!

It did no good. Her pleas were suppressed. Her cries of agony nothing but mere whispers, drowned out by the ceaseless noise of the radio. Again, her body bucked, slamming her against the hard tile, holding her hostage to her own affliction.

Lying on the bottom of the tub, she shivered. The cold porcelain only intensified the seizure

She felt the darkness.

Please help me! Someone... help!

Silence.

From the faint recesses of her mind came the vague aromatic scents of honeysuckle and magnolia. Her imagination bloomed. She heard the soft rumble of a woman's voice. A strange comforting sensation of warmth. The pain faded.

Leaving a slippery trail of water behind her, Kailen crawled from the bath and staggered across the room. She fell against the doorframe of her bedroom. With one last valiant effort, she made her way to the bed and collapsed.

Bands of sunlight streamed in through the open door, blinding her. Making her head ache. Weakly, she threw an arm across her face to block the intruding rays. Roaring diesel engines and raucous conversations from below blended into a cacophony of noise. She could smell the distinct odors of people and animals in the breeze coming in through the open doors. Her heart pounded. She fought to stay conscious. To imprint in her memory the chaotic events of her attack before they were again lost. However, fatigue overtook her distressed body. She fell asleep.



Kailen awoke some time later – the terrifying events of the morning almost all but forgotten. She could never clearly remember much of what happened, or exactly how the injuries and bruises appeared, but she knew the seizures were not a figment of her imagination for they'd videotaped her fits during her stay at the clinic. Yet even with the documented proof, they still diagnosed her as just having psychological problems and to further their faux treatment set a



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course of prescribing anti-psychotics. The sedatives and antidepressants helped for a while. At least until her body became resistant. It seemed no matter what, the seizures always returned.

Kailen tried doing research by digging into medical records accessed on her computer, but she didn't find anything of much help except for the occasional vague reference. Later, she searched through chat rooms and websites praying she'd find an answer until out of desperation she posted her symptoms anywhere she could, hoping someone out there had either suffered from or had heard about her ailment.

She received many replies. Some from true weirdoes and freaks – talking about special herbal concoctions and how for “just nineteen ninety-five” they could cure her ailment. But after enough false hope she almost gave up – until the day she found the message that made her choose the road she followed. The post mentioned a woman outside mainstream medicine who treated ailments for which regular medical science couldn't find any answers.

It was the only sane suggestion in her desperate mind. And it was the two words typed at the bottom of that final message that had led her here.

Find Mona.

Kailen had never believed pipe dreams and fantasies, always grounded reality, yet to her, that person somehow really seemed to know what she was going through. And in her heart, she knew she needed to do something. Anything. She had no intention of going to the new doctor her parents had found.

She sighed as she glanced at her clock. She had to be at work in almost two hours. There wasn't any way to begin until tomorrow.

∞ CHAPTER TWO ∞

Tips were great on a Saturday night. The crowd rolled in steadily as they enjoyed the cool evening. The band had just finished their third set. Big Mama was yelling at everyone from the bartender to the cook about one thing or another. A party of young men celebrating their companion's wedding had been the best table - ordering constant rounds of drinks and plenty of food - and Kailen relaxed in the active environment, letting the flow of sensations carry her through the long evening. It wasn't work to her, this constant social experience of sounds and smells, movement and color. Here she danced to the rhythm of the night and never before had she felt as she did now in this place with these people.

The empty beer bottles on her tray rattled as Kailen bumped into a customer. Turning to apologize, she froze as she met an ice blue gaze from a façade of rich ebony flesh. Time stopped. No longer could she hear the conversations and music. The vivid colors faded. She felt paralyzed. Floating. Bewitched before him.

The spell broke as his deep rich voice sent waves of sensations through her chest.

"You no lookin' where you need." He paused. "She'll send him...you jus' wait."

The dark man turned and faded silently into the crowd, leaving her with tingling fingers and the faint odor of honeysuckle and magnolia in the air.

"Hey, honey," Big Mama called as she wove her way through the crowd over to Kailen. "You look like you've seen a ghost." She moved closer and put her arm around her shoulders. "Do you need a break? Why don't you go? Ricky can cover." She gave her a gentle push towards the kitchen while at the same time deftly removing the tray from her hands. "Go on, honey. We'll be jus' fine."

Kailen stumbled through the room until she found the rear exit. Stepping out the back door into the cool night air, she entered the quiet sanctuary of the courtyard behind the club. A breeze drifted from the river. Clean, even over the pungent smell of trash. Closing her eyes, she wrapped her arms around her chest and tried to find peace. She shivered. Afraid. Not only of the dark but of the man who had approached her. She began to question her sanity, wondering if he had actually been there before her or merely another delusion. No one else seemed to have noticed his presence.

I'm sure if anyone else saw him there would have been some reaction, she thought, remembering his eyes. Tired and worried this was another side effect; she continued. It would figure. I was finally feeling happy for once in my life and now I have another symptom. What did my birth

parents ever do to have me punished with such tragedy? How will I ever have a real life if this stuff keeps getting worse?

Kailen sat down hard on one of the worn chairs left in the courtyard for the employees' use and laid her head on her forearms. There was no fight left in her. Maybe the whole trip had only been a cruel fantasy. A search for a Holy Grail that didn't exist.

She looked up as she heard someone.

"Sugar," Mama spoke, quietly coming through the back door to check on her. The woman paused. "I think you need to go on home an' get some rest. Don't worry, we can finish up. Night's about done anyhow. What you think?"

"Thank you," Kailen replied, touched by the woman's compassion. She attempted a smile. "I'll make it up. I promise. Please don't think I'm not able to do my job. I..."

"No dear. I know how 'tis. Don't fret yourself none about it." The woman helped her up and put her arm around Kailen. Smiling, she winked. "You just be ready for this week coming, okay darlin'?"

"Thanks, Mama. I will be."

Kailen picked up her few things from behind the bar and headed out the door; almost reluctant to go but relieved she'd have some time to herself. On the walk home, she decided to grab a cup of coffee and walk along the riverfront to watch the ships. With everything that had happened, she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep. No matter how tired.



Kailen held the steaming cup of coffee as she sat on one of the many benches on the side of the river, one by one licking the fingers of her free hand and trying to remove the last delicious trace of the sticky sugar left from the pastry she'd bought.

Out on the river, a small tugboat struggled against the current with a heavily loaded barge. There was a brief sounding of a horn as it signaled its change in course.

She leaned forward and set her coffee beside her feet. With the napkin crushed in between her palms, she laid back her head and breathed deeply, deciphering the scents in the air. The dirt of the river. The diesel fuel. The odors of wet moss and coffee. And the faint perfume of the women who strolled by holding their beaus close. She kept her eyes closed as they passed. Tried to ignore the soft conversations and laughter from the couples so to protect her heart from the fact it remained alone and vacant – waiting for the one man who would accept her. Even with her affliction.

"Nice evening."

Kailen dropped her napkin. The breeze claimed it.

She turned and met the inquisitive gaze of a man with an average build, light brown eyes, and cropped blond hair.

"I guess," she replied hesitantly. She started gathering her things and added, "I was just leaving."

"No, no...of course not." He came around the bench and sat next to her. Sliding his hand along the top rail, he crossed his legs and regarded her. "I'd never ask such a lovely lady to leave for my benefit. Please stay." He added a mock bow for emphasis.

Kailen heard a faint buzzing and waved her hand thinking it may be a mosquito.

"I really must get going. I appreciate the complement, but..." Her voice faded as she looked around, distracted. No matter what she did, the sound only grew. She stood. "I have to go."

The world spun violently. Her hair fell from its bindings and whipped in the breeze like snakes around her face, blocking her vision. Panicked, she worried about having another seizure.

Even more so her being out in public and with a total stranger. She turned.

He jumped up and laid a hand on her arm.

“No, wait! Please stay,” he spoke. “I’d like to talk with you more.”

The buzzing reverberated within her skull. Her vision clouded. His hand felt like a vise.

Run! Her inner voice screamed. *Go! Go now!*

Kailen stumbled back away from the bench, holding her hand in front of her to push the man back – her eyes clenched shut from the torment of the buzzing as she fought the urge to vomit.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Kailen shook her head again, steadily retreating until her back hit the rail. She opened her eyes to get her bearings. A shadow moved from around her. The man suddenly dropped his hold, whirled, and stalked off, his head hung down and shoulders hunched.

The buzzing eased.

She held onto the solid rail for support and leaned over as her hair fell around her, swaying with each breath as she tried to sort out her clouded mind. The pain faded, but her arm still tingled where the man had only barely made contact. As her vision cleared, she remembered what made him leave. She glanced towards the bench. Without moving her head, she could just see a pair of large black boots with much worn soles sticking out from the bottom of faded jeans. She rolled her eyes.

Great what now?

Standing up, she ran her hands through her hair to get the long tresses under some sort of control then turned to face the man. Keeping one hand on top of her head to stop her hair from falling back in her face, she searched around with her eyes on the ground for her tie.

“Well?” she inquired to the silent form seated on the bench as she picked up the ribbon and tied her hair up.

He looked out from under his hat, his face unreadable in the shadow it provided.

“No thanks?”

With her vision finally clear, she studied him closer. It was hard to gauge his height with his reclined seating, but she definitely noticed his broad shoulders, slight waist, and the physique suggested strength under a tight rein. He looked like he should be out on the range – not hanging out in the city. His smooth voice drew the image of whiskey to her. He smelled like clean country air and rain. She instantly wondered if he always smelled that good, but pushed the question from her mind.

“What do you expect, mister?” she replied sarcastically. “I came here to sit by myself and relax, hopefully get a moment’s peace, and some weirdo comes along and scares the crap out of me.” She began to open the distance between them as she continued, “What the hell do you expect?”

Nervous as she waited for him to say something, she watched the corner of his mouth turn up as if he were amused. Several moments passed before she broke the tense silence.

“Was this some joke,” she asked. “For a reward or something? Are you two working together?” She stared and hoped he would leave so she could go home. Irritated with his lack of response, she continued. “Well, fine. Whatever.”

Kailen turned sharply and began to head back to her apartment, hoping he would not follow and praying if he did she could find someone who would help her.

“I know why you’re here.”

Barely a whisper.

She froze and slowly faced him, feeling her eyes tighten with suspicion. She could read nothing in his posture to give her any clues about his true intentions.

“What?” She crossed her arms over her chest.



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"I said," he replied. "I know why you came here."

Kailen's mind raced, trying to find a logical solution to his statement. *Who did this guy think he was? This has to be a con artist trying to sucker me. Next, he'll tell me he knows where I got my shoes.*

"Well...okay, Mister," she countered. "Play psychic. Tell me my thoughts."

He sat quietly; drawing out the moment before he slowly leaned forward and placed his elbow on his knee. He tilted his hat back with his thumb.

His eyes were deep blue, like the night sky during the full moon, framed by thick black lashes, and set in a face tanned by the warm rays of the sun. As she met his gaze, it seemed that heavenly orb shone on her that exact moment. The heat in her body rose.

"You believe you're here to find an answer."

The words caressed her ears, sending a tingling sensation through her body again. Shocked and nervous, she struggled not to appear to be. *This is a joke, she thought. It's only a cruel guess. He's just trying to bait me. He doesn't know anything. How could he know?*

"Oh, really. So what else do you know?" she replied, trying to sound tough.

He settled back in the bench and stretched his legs out before him.

Noticing the movement of his lean body beneath the close fitting clothes, she turned away and looked across the river – trying to ignore the way his white cotton shirt clung to his hard body and hinted at the wide expanse of muscle beneath. The bees returned, but this time, softer, and deeper in her belly. She shifted her weight to one side, leaning against the rail while attempting to relax enough to draw an answer that made some sense.

He followed her gaze across the water and watched another oil tanker pass before answering.

"Well, I know you aren't from around here."

No duh, anyone could know that, she thought. Just as I thought...a local trying to scam me.

"Oh, that was *hard*," she rudely replied, suddenly feeling vindicated for she believed she knew his game.

Blue eyes pivoted towards her.

She began to question the intelligence of making him mad.

He looked back out across the river.

"Look lady," he started. "Whether you want to use the information I have or not is your choice, but I don't have the time or the patience to spar with you."

He leaned forward again.

She watched his gaze soften, deepening his blue eyes.

"But don't get me wrong," he continued. "I can understand if you don't want to talk about it. Hell, from what I've seen you've had a pretty hard night of it already." He stood up and pulled a card out of his back pocket.

She couldn't help but notice his height, his long legs, well defined by the tight denim jeans. He glanced at the card and flipped it over read the front before he looked back.

"Here." He studied her as he held the card out. "Take this. It has a number on the front where you can leave a message to get a hold of me. When you feel like you are ready, call me. I'll meet with you...on your terms."

He stepped forward, but didn't come too close, making her move in order to take it from his hand. His gaze traveled down her body.

Thousands of butterflies fluttered within. No matter how she tried, she couldn't ignore the sensation. Hesitantly, she took the card from his hand and read the front. It had the name of a local bar imprinted on it. As she looked up, he had already started walking away.

"Wait," she called, resisting the urge to chase after him.



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He paused, turning to face her.

“W-who do I ask for?” Kailen felt stupid for even asking.

He spoke softly as the corner of his mouth curled.

“Marc Foteneau. Just ask for Marc.”

Again, he began walking away, leaving her alone with the morning mist rising off the river and the first stray bands of sunlight painting the sky in pale blues and pinks. The steady sound of ships churned in the mighty river and the birds of the dawn sang brightly as they awakened. Surrounded by the faint scent of honeysuckle in the wind.

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Thanks you for your interest!!