



Creole Fires

By Kat Martin

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The Louisiana sun beat mercilessly on Nicole St. Claire just as fate, too, had been merciless. The once wealthy, flirtatious belle stood on the auction block to be sold as a servant. Her sensual figure disguised, her glorious titian hair disheveled, she looked like a waif, but she was all woman, trembling when she recognized the highest bidder--idol of her childhood dreams, the owner of plantation Belle Chene.

A man of blazing passion, Alex du Villier bought the girl out of pity, but her aqua eyes stirred his soul and her body ignited his blood. She would be the perfect mistress to make him forget his coming marriage to a cold, haughty heiress. Now he intended to teach this innocent beauty that although he had purchased her freedom, he could steal her heart.

An affair of burning desires. . . . Under a Creole moon their passion became a wildfire neither could control, driving them to heart-wrenching choices of silken sin...or freedom and love.

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

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About the Author

Kat is the bestselling author of thirty Historical and Contemporary Romance novels. Before she started writing in 1985, Kat was a real estate broker. During that time, she met her husband, Larry Jay Martin, also an author. Kat is a graduate of the University of California at Santa Barbara, where she majored in Anthropology and History.

To date, Kat has nine million copies of her books in print. She has been published in seventeen foreign countries, including Germany, Norway, Sweden, China, Korea, Bulgaria, Russia, England, South Africa, Italy, Spain, Argentina, and Greece.

From the Paperback edition.

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Creole Fires

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Louisiana, 1837

"Allons! Nicki, let's go! We should not have come so far into the swamp."

Michele was right, of course, and Nicole St. Claire didn't miss the uncertainty in her friend's softly spoken French words.

Still, it was a lovely day and the first chance she'd had to get away from the endless procession of friends who had heard of the St. Claires' visit and come to the Christophe plantation to pay their respects.

"You worry too much," Nicki chided. "It isn't good for you." Stretching a bit, she worked the kinks from her back, and filled her lungs with the still-cool Louisiana air.

"Mon Dieu, but you are stubborn." Michele glanced over her shoulder. Though she craned her neck and stood on her toes, she couldn't spot the big white plantation house they'd left behind. "I do not like this. There are snakes out here. Besides, I want to get out of these old clothes."

Across the thicket, Nicki just smiled, brightening her pretty oval face and tilting a pair of vivid aqua eyes.

"Cook says we need two buckets of berries if we want pies for supper," Nicki reminded her. Several inches shorter than Michele, Nicole was petite but not frail, her bosom full and high, her hips shapely, and her waist narrow. "You go ahead. I won't be far behind."

"Your maman's not going to like it." Michele looked again at their surroundings: the meandering inlet that drained the Mississippi River not far away, the heavy carpet of grass at their feet, the towering cypress that seemed to guard this small stretch of uncultivated swampland. She swiped at a gnat that buzzed beside her ear, then jumped as a vine snagged her skirt. "I don't think I should leave you out here alone."

Nicki's copper-haired head popped up from the thicket. "Who would dare to bother us" Who indeed? Nicki thought. The Christopes were one of the wealthiest families in these parts, even if times had gotten tougher. And the St. Claires were widely respected.

Michele still seemed uncertain. "Papa says Alain Lefevre is coming to supper."

If an image of the handsome French boy was meant to lure Nicole away, it failed miserably. "You can have him. I'm not interested."

"Why not?"

"He's far too . . . proper . . . for my tastes, always fawning about and spouting his meaningless poetry. I want someone reckless and dashing. A man who will sweep me off my feet."

"Mon Dieu, you are crazy." But Michele knew better than to argue. Nicole St. Claire was as stubborn a young woman as Michele had ever met. Far different from her own quiet nature, Nicki was determined and bold and fearless. It was amazing they could be such good friends.

"You are sure you will be all right?" Michele asked.

"I'll be fine."

Rolling her eyes in vexation, Michele took a last glance in Nicki's direction, but saw only the wriggle of her bottom in the faded blue gingham dress she had borrowed so her own fine yellow muslin would not get soiled.

Michele frowned, wondering again if she should wait, then decided against it. Nicki wouldn't leave until she was well and ready to go, and the lure of a bath and an afternoon nap were far too strong.

Lifting her worn brown slightly too-short skirts up out of the way, Michele headed back toward home, eager to be rid of her dowdy clothing and once again dressed in expensive silks and satins.

Nicki watched her friend cross the rise and disappear out of sight. She wished she could see Michele more often, but with Cote Verde, the Christophe plantation, here in La Ronde on the Mississippi, and Meadowood, the St. Claire plantation, near Napoleonville on Bayou Lafourche, they visited just a few times a year.

Michele Christophe was a good and loyal friend. Still, as Nicki bent to her task, filling the wooden bucket to overflowing with the plump and juicy blackberries, she was glad for these few minutes alone in the warm

spring sunshine.

With a contented sigh, she lifted her tattered, borrowed skirts up out of the way and started a little farther into the thicket. She hadn't gone more than several paces when she heard a twig snap in the underbrush, then the sound of men's laughter, harsh and grating, echoed somewhere behind her.

Nicki froze. In a spot behind some bushes just a few feet away, two men in shabby clothing stood grinning at her clumsy movements in the too-large dress, their eyes fastened on the portion of calf she exposed above the top of her sturdy brown shoe.

Letting the dress fall back into place, Nicki fixed them with one of her usually disconcerting aqua-eyed stares. "What is it you men want?" She asked them in French. When they answered with only a scowl, she repeated the question in English.

The taller man arched a bushy brow, apparently surprised she spoke his language without an accent. "We's just bein' neighborly."

When he stepped closer, Nicki caught the odor of whiskey and stale tobacco. His shirt and trousers, shabby and unwashed, hung on his too-thin frame. Running a rough hand along her cheek, he smiled, exposing crooked yellow teeth, and Nicki felt the first faint tremors of alarm.

"You're not from around here," she said, backing away from him.

The shorter man, a stocky fellow with graying hair, canvas breeches, and a red-checked shirt moved closer. "Saw you and yer Frenchy friend pickin' berries. Thought we oughta stop by and say hello."

"This land belongs to the Christophe family. You men are trespassing.

"The tall man chuckled softly. "What business is that of yers? You ain't no Christophe, that's fer damn sure." His eyes moved over her tattered blue gingham dress, which hung on her like a well-used potato sack.

"She's sure a perty 'un, Chester.

"Don't go off half-cocked, she told herself, beginning to think in English, the language she usually spoke. It was one of her mother's favorite expressions. "If you gentlemen will excuse me, I've got to be getting back." She tried to brush past, but the man named Chester caught her arm.

"You ain't going no place--leastwise, not yet." In a single, quick motion, he grabbed the ruffled neckline of her dress, twisted his fingers in the frayed blue fabric, and ripped the material away.

"Damn you!" Slamming her foot into the man's bony shin, Nicki tried to jerk free, but Chester only tightened his hold. With a muttered oath and a grin of anticipation, he forced her up against his chest while his hard arm wrapped around her waist.

"You got spirit, that's fer sure. I like a little spirit in a woman."

She shuddered as the cool air touched her bare skin and the man's clammy hand slid up her arm. "Let me go!" Nicki struggled harder, but the tall man just laughed. Tightening his hold on her waist, he dragged her toward a grassy depression protected by a growth of vines and weeds.

"You can squirm all ya like," he said, shoving her down on the ground. "Ain't gonna make a fiddler's damn. Me and Billy gonna take ya just the same. You can make it easy on yourself or hard. Either way, we're bound to take our pleasure."

When she tried to scream again, he clamped a hand over her mouth, ripped away the balance of her faded blue dress, and dispensed with her single drooping petticoat.

This can't be happening! But it was. Fear clutched at her insides, a feeling she had rarely known. With a long, thin leg, Chester pinned her thighs while Billy stretched her arms above her head. They were watching her breasts now, the rise and fall of the soft white flesh above the line of her corset.

Nicki's heart thundered in a cadence of panic and despair. Why hadn't she listened to Michele? What in God's name was she going to do?

It took her a moment to realize the men were looking at her oddly, their eyes carefully assessing her lacy pantalets, snowy white corset, and expensive embroidered chemise--quite a contrast to her ragged borrowed clothing.

"Ain't no sharecropper's daughter wearin' dainties the likes of these," Billy said.

Chester swore beneath his breath. For a moment he seemed uncertain, and Nicki's hopes soared. She tried to threaten him with her father's wealth and power, but her words were muffled behind his hand.

"Don't make a damn now," he finally decided. "We've gone too far to stop. 'Sides,"--he grinned, flashing his yellow teeth--"my privates is hurtin' so bad I gotta do somethin' to relieve 'em."

With that they jerked her to her feet and began to tug at the laces at the back of her corset. "Gimme your pigsticker, Billy."

The stocky man chuckled and pulled his big Arkansas toothpick from the leather sheath he wore at his side. Nicki had seen men at the docks in New Orleans carrying knives like that. A glint of sunlight on the heavy silver blade brought a moment of panic, a second shot of fear, then the courage to act.

Catching them off guard, she jerked free, twisted, and slammed her knee into the tall man's groin. A loud oof! and moan as he doubled over and slumped to the ground was her reward. Nicki didn't wait for the stocky man's reaction. She bolted, racing toward the men's horses she'd spotted tied in a clearing not far away.

Please, God, she prayed, knowing it would take a miracle for her to reach the animals, untie one, and climb into the saddle before the stocky man caught up with her.

In the Louisiana swamplands, her miracle appeared in the form of a hidden vine. She heard her pursuer's heavy footsteps, heard his uneven breathing, then a string of oaths as he stumbled and crashed to the ground. She'd say a dozen Hail Marys later, she vowed, and kept on running.

She was shaking by the time she reached the horses. If only she could u...

Users Review

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