

EASTER'S
LILLY

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Praise for Judy Serrano and the *Easter's Lilly Series*

“...One of those books that you just cannot put down.”

—Melissa Vera, *Adventures of Frugal Mom*

“Judy Serrano is a great author never leaving
a dull moment in the book.”

—Rachel Simons, blogger *Stressed Rach*

“Judy has masterfully written a love story full of so much passion,
courage, strength, and oh, the excitement! *Easter's Lilly* is stuffed
full of non-stop action and will leave you falling in love,
yearning for more.”

—Jodi Baker, *Uniquely Moi Books*

“I tried to sleep but I found myself thinking of the story too much.”

—Gina Butler, www.ginaslibrary.info

“I read this in two nights... It's a love story with a mobster family
twist and it moves fast enough to keep you glued to the pages.

I enjoy the way Judy Serrano tells a story.”

—Lisa E. Taylor, “*Lisa @ kssnikkel*”

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Chapter 1

The Discovery

I opened my eyes to unfamiliar surroundings. The air had a stench of old cigarettes and stale beer. My eyes caught notice of my skirt draped over my purse on a chair, by the door. This startled me as I reached down to feel what I was wearing. I had on a pair of sweatpants, which fit me rather well and I was grateful I was still wearing the same shirt from last night. I pulled myself up a bit; just to notice the three half smoked cigarettes in the ashtray beside me on the nightstand and a bong in desperate need of cleaning next to it. There were four beer cans by the ashtray, empty and crushed in the middle. I had discovered the source of the smell. Just then I heard the door crack open and a head popped into the doorway. I was startled and jumped a little as he said, "Good, you're awake." He had long stringy brown hair and some facial hair on his chin that I was sure he thought was a goatee. His mustache was pencil thin and looked as though it had been painted on his face. He was wearing a hat that was worn back in the old days in gangster movies. He looked about my age, twenty-something, and was very thin. I guessed that it was *his* sweatpants I was wearing after I got a good look at him. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine," I said. "I have a bit of a headache, though. Who are you?"

He approached me at that point and I jerked back. He had on red sneakers and clothing that matched only to the blind. I assumed Good Will was his department store of choice. "I'm Johnny Malone," he answered. "I already know you're Lilly O'Hara. We met at the party last night."

My heart leapt into my mouth, which I was sure was filled with cotton. I was shocked and speechless. Finally after an awkward pause I managed to squeak out, "Did we...?"

“No, no...” he answered quickly. “I’m nothing if not a gentleman.” I breathed out a sigh of relief.

“Darla, my roommate Patrick’s girlfriend, helped you change your clothes last night.”

“But I’m in *your* bed, aren’t I?” I asked.

“I slept on the couch.” He gave me a crooked smile when I said that. It was kind of charming.

“Thank you for that.” I was so embarrassed. “Was I drugged? What am I doing here?”

“I got a tip last night that the cops were on their way to the party. I ran out there to tell Rudy so he could flush the drugs and get everyone out of the house.” He paused. “Rudy, being Rudy, refused and is now spending a little time jail.”

I had to think for a minute. I remembered meeting Rudy last night at the club down the hill from my house. He invited me to a party at *his* house. Then I remembered him inviting me into a back room. I could feel my face flush. It felt like rushing hot water. There was a mountain of white powder on the mirror in the back room. I looked at Johnny and said, “Oh my gosh, I do remember.”

“You were the only person at the party I didn’t know, so I tried to get you out of there. You came home with me pretty easily. You were very friendly.” He smiled. “I drove your car here and you passed out in the front seat. Pat and Darla drove the other car home.” I was stunned. This was very out of character for me. I don’t do drugs, get drunk or go home with unidentified men. “We poured you into bed and let you sleep it off. You’re Mick’s daughter, right?”

“How do you know my dad?”

“Chief of police, right?”

“Don’t tell me how you know. I don’t think I want to know.” I laid my head back down on the pillow.

“It’s not like that,” he snickered. “Trust me, Mick would have been furious if he found you there.”

“I guess I owe you an apology and a thank you,” I answered. “You’re right, my dad would’ve freaked.”

“How about some breakfast,” he offered. “I work at the Grey Willow here in town. I’m an excellent cook.”

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"If you don't say so yourself," I answered. I began to find his eccentricities a little alluring.

"Really," he said. "I'm the assistant chef at the restaurant."

"Breakfast sounds great," I answered. "I'm sold."

I stumbled out of bed as he left me to go cook breakfast. I found his presence oddly comforting. I made the bed, opened the door to the bedroom and looked around for the kitchen. I could smell the garlic and onions mixed with the aroma of the coffee. It drew me like a child to danger. He presented me with a cheese omelet with potatoes incomparable to anything I had ever tasted before. When it was time to go, I carried my heels and skirt and walked barefooted on his pebbled driveway to my car. All I could think about was how I was going to sneak into the house unnoticed. Fortunately my room had a back entrance and when I got home, I slipped into bed and closed my eyes. I noticed my mother's red head look in and out of the door. I glance at the clock and it was already nine thirty in the morning.

"I told you she was here," I heard my mother whisper to my dad. "She must have gotten home late."

"She wasn't here," he answered.

"How would you know?" she asked in an agitated voice. "You worked all night."

"That's how I know." I didn't hear any more words after that.

I was never more grateful to a stranger. I slept for another hour or so and took a shower. I couldn't stop thinking about Johnny. From where did he get a *tip* about the police going to the party? Is there a leak in the police department that I needed to tell my dad about? If I did tell him, he would know where I was last night and that couldn't happen.

I tossed Johnny's sweatpants in the washing machine with some of my other clothes, looking for a reason to see him again. I finished with the laundry and headed into the living room where my father was sitting. "Lilly?" he asked.

"Yes, dad, it's me," I answered in dismay. I poured myself a cup of my father's coffee and headed into the living room.

"Let's go outside onto the patio and enjoy the view." I followed him outside and we sat on the very uncomfortable wicker

furniture admiring the mountains. "Lilly, I worry about you."

"Dad, I'm fine. What are you worried about?" I answered, knowing that somehow he knew that I had spent the night at Johnny's.

"I heard you were at the club last night. Meet anyone?"

I paused and wondered what would be an acceptable answer. "I don't know; a few people."

"Lilly, stay away from there," he answered.

"Why?" I asked. His face was beginning to acquire worry lines as we talked.

"I already know you spent the night out there with Rudy and Johnny." He got up and started to walk around the patio.

"I'm not sure what the problem is," I answered. I knew what the problem was but wasn't sure what to say.

"Did you sleep with him, Lilly?"

"Who?" I answered back. I was having trouble swallowing at this point, terrified of being discovered.

"Okay, let's stop playing games." He continued to walk around nervously. "John... did you sleep with John?"

"No dad, I just met him."

"You spent the whole damn night at his house. How can you explain that?"

"Dad, I don't need to." I stood up and became very defensive. "What's wrong with you? I'm 23 years old and he's just a guy."

"That's just it, Lilly, he's not *just* a guy."

"What are you talking about? He's a cook at the Grey Willow."

"Just stay away, Lilly. Promise me..."

"Fine. I'll stay away." I said it but had no intention of standing behind my words.

"Good." He smiled. "Have you given any thought to getting a job?" That came out of left field but I shouldn't have been surprised. I quit college and was drifting along senselessly for quite a while. "Maybe you could try to find a new place to sing." I spent a lot of time singing locally before we moved to Sedona, Arizona. "How about finding a job?"

"Fine, I'll find a job somewhere." I got up and went back into the kitchen. I was desperate to see Johnny again and threw the

sweatpants into the dryer. It was about a half-hour before they were done and I folded them up and drove as fast as I could to Johnny's house.

When I pulled into the driveway, my heart was racing. I could feel my knees weakening, as I got closer to the door. I rang the doorbell in unexplainable anticipation. A woman with frizzy blond hair answered the door. She was wearing a bathrobe that obviously did not belong to her and she had a cigarette hanging out of her mouth. She had that "just woke up" look about her. "Yeah?" she asked. It took me a few minutes to remember how to speak. I could see Darla on the couch, so I knew this woman was not there with Pat.

"Is Johnny home?" I asked. I was so hoping for a, "Nope, not here," answer.

"John!" she screamed. I began to feel like I was in the middle of a bad movie. He came to the door with a towel wrapped around his waist. I was breathless and afraid that my look of shock was not disguised very well. "Here," I said, pushing the sweats into his stomach as I tried to make a quick, discreet getaway.

"Wait!" he yelled to me.

I turned and looked at him. "Thanks for your help the other night. I'm so sorry I interrupted." I could barely feel my legs anymore as I briskly walked to my car. I could hear his low voice calling my name as I stumbled into the car and flew out of the driveway. It took me a few minutes to maintain a steady heartbeat after I got a safe distance from the house. It was at this defining moment that I realized I would have to find a life for myself that was independent of any man, and that included Johnny *and* my father.

Since finding a job singing was unlikely in this tiny town, I decided to go back to my old stand by: Waitressing. I drove down to the main highway and noticed a French bistro off the beaten path cradled in the red rocks. I drove down the small windy road and parked in the strangely inconvenient parking lot. As I approached the restaurant, I noticed a tall, well-built man in a tuxedo at the front door. "One for lunch?" he asked.

“No sir,” I answered. “I was wondering if you were looking to hire a waitress.”

He looked at me curiously. “Go ahead and ask the bartender for an application.” He was still sizing me up a bit. He was flamboyantly homosexual. “I don’t like to hire girls. Men are more professional.” He said it with a hint of superiority. I tried not to comment and headed towards the bartender. I knew at this point that my good looks were not going to get me this job. The bartender looked at me very much the same way the guy at the door did.

“What do you want?” He had a thick French accent.

“An application please,” I answered.

“Any experience waiting tables?” I looked behind me only to find a man in a chef’s uniform standing there. He was a very handsome man with an enticing French accent. “I *said*, any experience, beautiful lady?”

“Yes,” I answered. I looked at him trying to figure out if he too, was more interested in men than women.

He took my hand and kissed it. “Pierre.” He smiled, thinking himself to be very seductive.

“Lilly,” I responded. “About five years.”

“I would have guessed Marilyn.” He looked up at my face and I could see his brown eyes well with delight.

“Marilyn?” I asked curiously. “Who’s she?”

“You look just like Marilyn Monroe,” he answered, rather pleased with himself.

“Sure I do.” I started to think that maybe my good looks *would* land me this job.

“It appears that I have embarrassed you,” he replied. “You’re hired.” He laughed a bit. “I’m sorry, but I have to have a woman in here somewhere before I go crazy.”

“No girls?” I looked around suspiciously.

“No girls,” he answered with disappointment in his tone. “I have a breakfast and lunch shift open. Be here at 5:30 in the morning.”

“Seriously?” I asked.

“Is this going to be a problem?” He smiled a serious smile at

me that was almost irresistible.

“No, no problem.” I was very unhappy with the hours but knew at this point that I had no choice. It was important for me to establish an independent life and this was going to be the beginning.

“5:30 then, Marilyn. Don’t be late.”

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When 5:30 arrived, it was not a happy moment for me. I had to wake up at 4:30 just to arrive on time. I had never thought of myself as a morning person. As a matter of fact, when I was younger, my dad used to tease me about being a vampire. He said I never opened my eyes until it was almost dark. When I got to the restaurant, Pierre was singing and very energetically preparing the food for the breakfast rush. His handsome body was distracting. I must admit that the accent was ridiculously sexy. He continuously referred to me as *Marilyn*, which I found annoying. But as time went on, I got used to it.

When 6:00 came around they opened the doors and the very first customers were Johnny and Rudy. I was shocked that he had found me when I never told him about my new job. Before I even had a moment to meet his eyes; the owner, Jim, confronted him aggressively. Jim put his hand on Johnny’s chest and pushed him outside. “Do not show up here.” Jim put out as masculine a voice as he could muster.

“I’m not leaving until I see her,” Johnny said, intentionally antagonizing him. I peeked around the doorway and saw Johnny’s face right up against Jim’s.

“I’ll call Mick and have you arrested. I have a restraining order and you know that.”

“I won’t cause trouble, Jim. Just let me see her.”

“This is why I don’t hire women. They’re always trouble. Besides she and Pierre have a thing. Get lost!”

Johnny and Rudy hesitated before they walked away. Rudy put his hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “Look man, a relationship is out of the question anyway. Let it go.”

“Pierre and Lilly? I won’t have it,” Johnny sputtered as they disappeared from view out the door.

Jim walked up to me and grabbed my arm. “Since you were eavesdropping, I won’t mince words.” His grip began to sting. “I suppose I have you to thank for this.”

“I didn’t ask him to come.”

“I have spent years keeping him away. Don’t invite him here.” He walked away angrily.

I ran after him. “Wait Jim!” I finally caught up with him in the kitchen. Pierre and the other cooks had their eyes on both of us. “What is it about Johnny that everyone is telling me to keep away from?”

The room got very quiet. Jim grabbed me again by the arms and shook me. “He’s a drug addict and a dealer. He’s dangerous. He buys his supplies from some crazy guy in Mexico. They call this guy Satan or the beast! People around him die.” He walked off leaving me standing there with red marks on my forearms. I could barely catch my breath. This “drug addict” saved me from a possible arrest. He was a perfect gentleman. How could he be so bad?

I ran after him again and cried out, “Jim, I don’t know how he found me. I promise, I didn’t invite him.”

Jim laughed almost uncontrollably when I said that. “He has eyes and ears everywhere. I hope for your sake, you’re not involved with him. He’s like a disease, you know. An incurable one.” He left me there, speechless wondering what had just happened. I couldn’t move or breathe. Pierre came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. “Marilyn, get back to work.” And I did just that.

I hung up my apron and left the building. As I approached my car I saw a tall, lanky figure with a hat by my car. As I got closer I thought to myself, “Oh my gosh... it’s Johnny.” My heart was filled with panic and I wasn’t sure how to react. I looked back to see if anyone in the restaurant was looking. Pierre was on the front porch, smoking a cigarette, watching us. “What are you doing here?” I asked in a horrified whisper.

“Just open the door and let me in,” he said. “You don’t want

good ol' Pierre reporting you to Jim, do you?"

I quickly opened the door and shoved him inside the car. "Doesn't your girlfriend mind your hanging around me?" I asked.

"I don't do the *girlfriend thing*," he answered. "I don't commit and safe is no fun."

"Fine," I answered. "What do you want?"

"I have a special place I'd like to take you." I smiled and all the anxiety I was feeling seemed to wash away like unnecessary tears. We headed out to the Red Rock Crossing. He led me down a long windy road and took me through the mountains and by a creek. We pulled off the road into the parking lot. "This is where I go when I want to be alone." He pointed to the water. "I bring my guitar here and soak up the beauty." I was mystified. We walked around the rocks and laughed together. The sunlight danced along the rocks and the water sang sweetly as the waves crashed against the cliffs. We traveled quite a ways through the clearing. I was in heaven looking around to see how far we had gone from the road. As I looked from side to side, I noticed three figures following behind us. One of these figures was Rudy. The other two were Hispanic men, not much older than Johnny. I had never seen them before. He noticed my distraction and looked over his shoulder to see the men approaching. "Lilly," he said impatiently, "you need to get out of sight. Go over to the clearing and do not come out." He pointed to a wooded area and I complied without a word. I had recognized that what everyone had said was probably true. With panic flowing through veins like ice water, I sat in the woods in hiding. They all saw me and I saw one of the men point to me. I could hear them talk in Spanish and this concerned me. I was thinking about how Jim mentioned something about Johnny buying drugs from a man in Mexico. I heard my father's name mentioned a few times.

"What are you doing with her?" Rudy asked.

"I tell you what to do!" Johnny answered. "Don't make another mistake like that."

"Seriously..." Rudy looked back over at me. "Stop seeing her. You're just asking for trouble."

"Business, boys," one of the men reminded them.

“Get rid of her,” Rudy said, one last time. They walked off and I was too frightened to move. Johnny went to where I was sitting and sat beside me.

“Are you okay?” I couldn’t speak. I looked at him with fear in my eyes. He put his hands on both sides of my face and kissed me. I felt a warm tingling spread through my body. I responded to him, much to my surprise. He began to lose control and I stood up suddenly. “What’s happening, John?”

“Okay, you’re right, we have to leave. Let’s go.” We walked in silence back to the car. When we got back to Johnny’s house he grabbed my hand and kissed it. “I have about an hour. Come inside?”

I was so taken with him that I agreed. He moved towards me and kissed my lips. There was something about him that reached a part of me that had never been reached before. I was helpless in his arms. We got out of the car and he opened his front door. A woman with long brown hair in trashy, revealing clothes ran to him and hugged him. She reached for his face and kissed him passionately while I watched. “Who’s the kid?” the woman asked.

“I do *not* believe this!” I yelled at him. “Do you have some kind of illness?”

“I told you,” he answered. “I don’t do commitments.”

I turned and walked out, heading for my car. I could hear him behind me as I struggled with my keys. He grabbed me, turned me around and kissed me but I pushed him backwards. I could hear the woman in the background screaming, “Come on, John. Forget her!”

“I’m not going to share you with all these women.” I couldn’t believe that I had to explain that.

“We’re not in a committed relationship,” he answered. “We’re not sleeping together yet.” I almost threw up.

“I’ll never have sex with a man who has so many partners. So, if you want me, you had better make a decision.” I pushed him away again. He backed up lifting both his hands in the air as if to indicate that he was not going to stop me. I unlocked the car and got inside. He backed up farther away and then went back to the girl who was eagerly waiting for him.

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I couldn't help but wonder why he came for me in the first place when he had all those women. Was he selling them drugs? Does he have some kind of self-esteem issue? I had to fight the tears that were forming in my eyes. I felt so foolish. This would not happen again.

I drove home and my father was waiting for me in the driveway. I knew he had someone watching me. It was pretty obvious at this point. I got out of the car and my father grabbed me and hugged me. "What is it, dad?" I asked.

"Why, Lilly? Why can't you stay away from him?"

"I won't be seeing him anymore, dad. I'm done with that egomaniac."

"Lilly, he's clever. Keep your guard up at all times."

"He has some kind of problem. I'm done." My father seemed satisfied with that answer and we went inside the house together. As I shut the front door, I noticed that there was a black sedan parked outside of the house.