

# Last of the Southern Romantics

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We're the last of the unreconstructed, unrepentant southern romantics.

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We both want, an old-fashioned, wide-screen, Technicolor epic romance, a real Bogie and Bacall number. Instead, what we got that night was two old friends so smashed they started making out at a levee party. "What in the world were you dreaming about, lady?" Amy Marshall opened her green eyes, pushed back her floppy straw hat, and looked up at Mark Cahill, her life-long friend, the man she'd just been dreaming about. "None of your business, mister. Why do you think I was dreaming anyway? Maybe I was just deep in thought." "Doubt it. The thing is, when I left to help our happy, hippie wedding party make their get-away, you looked awake. You also looked like you did the day old Jeff, your natural born tomcat, went one-on-one with that log truck and lost. "Thanks for all the sympathy." Mark nodded. Both knew he'd been just as upset as Amy over the old cat's death. "The thing is, my labors took a tad longer than expected. Seems the Chief Boo-Hoo, not content with just marrying our lovebirds, was filled with the spirit of the occasion, among other things, and wanted to baptize everyone. Anyway, when I made it back, your mouth was wide open, a sure sign you were asleep, and your face had this big, dumb, happy expression. So what were you dreaming about?" Amy gave him a sleepy, contented smile. No way could she tell him the truth, that she'd been dreaming about the night last spring when, at a party near this same spot beside the Mississippi River, they kissed, really kissed, for the first and, so far, only time. "You're right, I was feeling rotten. But I had this great dream that was all romantic and mushy with lots of heavy breathing. Now I feel a lot better." Mark reached out a big hand and helped her up while begging for details. She just grinned and mussed his dark, wavy hair. The familiar gesture felt more intimate, more personal than ever before. It confirmed what the dream had told her; beyond any doubt she'd fallen in love with Mark Cahill. Sure that night had been a one-time thing and they hadn't gone all the way. Maybe that said something. After all, he was the one who stopped, not her. And he'd been dating that trashy Bebe Boudreaux all summer. That little tramp would be so bad for Mark. But he liked short cute brunettes, like Bebe, not tall skinny redheads. It was obvious to Amy that he still thought of her as just a friend. Even "accidentally" brushing against him while they were skinny-dipping with some friends, hadn't fazed him. But back then she just wanted to distract him from Bebe. Now she wanted Mark for herself. And she had no idea what to do. To hide her feelings, Amy made a show of looking up and down the shoreline. Their friends, Libby and Bob, had slipped off during the wedding. It had long

since ended and everyone else departed for the post-ceremony beer bust, but the AWOL lovers hadn't returned. "Where are they?" Mark stated the obvious. "Out of sight." Amy tried not to smile, but failed. They headed over to the sun bleached driftwood log where Mark had left their stuff. "Thanks for the help, Joe Friday," she said, sitting on the smooth, warm wood. Mark grinned and sat beside her. "I think of myself more as the suave, sophisticated Peter Gunn, private-eye type." "Well, I think of yourself as nuts. And before you say it, I know, birds of a feather flock together. But seriously, do you think they're all right?" Mark nodded, lit a cigarette, and handed it over. "They're in love, remember? If one of 'em had fallen in, the other would be raising all kinds of hell." "Oh, that's a real comfort." Amy looked at the cigarette Mark had given her. "Weren't we going to quit these things?" "We did. It was our end-of-semester resolution. But it just applies when we're back home." He pointed to a spot near the shore downstream from where they sat. "Now, as for our non-smoking lovebirds, I figure they're hiding in that tangle of logs and doing God knows what sort of disgusting things. You wanna sneak over and take a peek?" "Of course not." "Spoil sport." Amy hesitated, then gestured in the same direction. "Is that the place where, you know, where we--, I mean, is that the place?" At first, Mark just looked at her. Amy could feel herself blushing. After what seemed like an eternity, he pointed towards the logs. "You're asking if that's the place where we made out like two wild weasels?" "Well, yes." "Well, no. That happened back in the spring. The water was a lot higher then. We'd have needed scuba gear to do anything over where those two are, no doubt, now carrying on." He twisted around and pointed north. "The hallowed ground in question, a sacred place forever etched in my memory, is upstream from here. Look back from where dat old man river is now rolling along. See that big pile of brush and logs at the foot of those two little willows? It was near the shore back then and made a perfect nighttime hideout." Amy turned and studied the location. When she spoke, it was in a low, hesitant voice. "Mark, this is a little embarrassing, but why didn't you, well, why did you stop?" Without getting up, Mark swung his legs over the log and faced upriver. After glancing at Amy, he gazed at the spot. "Something just told me it wasn't the right time, or place, or thing to do. God knows I didn't want to stop. I mean, it damn near gave me the bends." His grin was part teasing, part rueful. "The thing is, you mean a lot to me lady, a whole lot. But we both know we're not in love, at least not romantically. So I was afraid if we, you know, made love, we might not be able to keep on being friends. And while it was damn tempting, I didn't want to risk losing my best friend." "I knew that's what you'd say. And you're right, I suppose. But I still feel guilty. After all, I started it. So it's kind of my fault you got the bends." "No complaints. You were ripped, bummed out, and very vulnerable. And don't forget, the party was my dumb idea. I'm just glad I noticed you wandering away. Besides, if it hadn't happened, I might never have known my best friend is such a great kisser." "You're saying that, it's unreal. Because, you see, while we were kissing, I was thinking the same thing about you." Before he could reply, Amy continued. "Damn, but life would be simpler if we weren't such good friends. I mean, it has us so screwed up we can't, well, we can't even screw. And it seems like everybody's doing that these days." Mark nodded and flipped away his cigarette. "Right as usual, superstar Amy. The way I figure it, we belong in 1868, not 1968. We're the last of the unreconstructed, unrepentant southern romantics. Someone should have kept us from reading,

"Ivanhoe," when we were kids. And I know we've read and seen, "Gone With the Wind," way too many times." "What's wrong with that?" "Nothing, except that's what we both want, an old-fashioned, wide-screen, Technicolor epic romance, a real Bogie and Bacall number. Instead, what we got that night was two old friends so smashed they started making out at a levee party. And while it was a helluva lot of fun, at least for me, I don't think that qualifies as a great romance." "So what do we have?" "We like each other. That's what we have. At least, it's what I have. Because I like you, Amanda Nicole Marshall. I like you a whole lot. You're very special to me. So special, I wouldn't risk losing you even for sex." Mark looked at her and smiled. "And for a horny college guy, that just about says it all." They gazed at one another until Amy noticed she was biting her lower lip. Surprised, she looked out at the river and tried to think. Mark loved her. She was sure of it. She could hear it in his voice and see it when he looked at her. But he'd never make the first move. They were too close and he was too damn nice. So if she ever wanted him as more than just her best friend she'd have to make the first move and pray it worked. Amy took a deep breath, stood, and moved in between Mark's outstretched legs. Their eyes locked as she wrapped her arms around his neck, leaned her face close to his, and whispered, "You're right, Mark Henry Cahill, we do like each other—a lot. But something changed that night we kissed. You've become a whole lot more than just my best friend. So what I want to know, what I need you to tell me, is whether I've become more to you than just your best friend." A startled look flashed across Mark's features. He slipped his hands around her slender waist and pulled her close. "You always did have more guts than me. I've fought falling in love with you all summer. And believe me, when we went skinny-dipping I damn near gave up the fight. But now I surrender, unconditionally. Amy, I love you beyond passion and logic and the hope of ever being happier than I am right now." There were tears in Mark's eyes. Amy knew she was crying. "Oh God, but I love you, too." They held each other close, their lips sealing forever the changed nature of their love. When the kiss ended, it seemed by mutual consent. Amy stared into Mark's damp eyes and, to her own surprise, began unbuttoning her blouse. When it fell open, she took his hands in hers and pressed them over her breasts. "You know me, I never do anything half-way. If you want me, I'm yours, now and forever. But I'm greedy, Mark. I want all of you, all the time." Mark nodded. The deal had been struck. He was hers, she was his, and Bebe was history. Amy nodded toward the spot where they first kissed. "Let's go over there and pick-up where we left off. But this time, if you do love me, if you want me, don't you dare stop." "Best idea I've heard in this lifetime." His fingers rolled her hard nipples and for a moment Amy forgot how to breathe. Mark released her breasts and slid his hands around her back. When he spoke, his voice seemed to come from a fog. "Just one thing. I do want you, lady. But I want you forever, not just now. "So Amy, will you marry me?" "Oh God, yes," she cried, throwing herself back into his arms. Then she leaned back and laughed. "Where's that stupid preacher, the Boo-Hoo? Where'd he go?" Mark stood. "We don't need him or anyone else. In every way that counts, we're married. Now please hush so I can kiss my bride." Cradling her head in his hands, he sealed their union with a long kiss. When their lips parted, he looked into her eyes and smiled. "Now let's go find that spot."