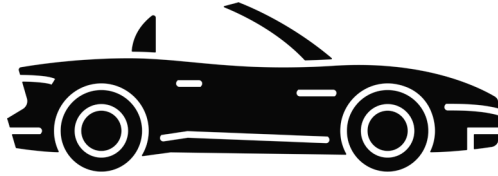


3



“This is a bad idea.” Camden ran a hand through his short hair and studied the crowds milling around the famous green awning the next morning.

“It’s not.” Ryan bounced on his toes as they waited for the light to change. “Why would Skye have told me where they were going if she didn’t intend for us to join them?”

“And how do you plan to find them in this crowd?” Camden reluctantly followed Ryan across the street, the smell of coffee and sugar drawing him more than his resolve to watch over his cousin.

“There.” Ryan pointed to three now-familiar heads around a table on the patio. He held up his phone. “Skye texted me.”

Evidently, Skye really had meant for them to join the girls this morning. Camden still had his doubts. Skipping the line and main entrance, Ryan dashed up to the metal railing instead and leaned over.

“Hey, gorgeous girls.”

Skye squealed with laughter, her coffee sloshing dangerously as she rocked back in her chair. Katie, on the other hand,

choked on her beignet. She pressed a napkin to her lips and fanned her face as the coughs continued despite several hard pats on the back from Bree.

“Fancy seeing you here, guys.” Bree shot a look at Skye and then at Ryan. “Are you coming around to join us?”

The look Katie shot him before he turned was somewhere between mortification and murder. Why hadn’t he tried to talk Ryan into something else? Even one of those stupid vampire tours would be better than the deadly looks sure to come his way all through breakfast. Although by the smells radiating throughout the place, those glares wouldn’t hamper his appetite.

“I don’t see any extra chairs around.” Skye half stood and then sat again as he and Ryan approached the girls’ table. “Do you think we could steal one from inside?”

“I’m sure they need those chairs in there, Skye.” Katie’s voice was icy.

“Well, maybe you can just share with me, then, Ryan.” Skye shot a saucy grin at Camden’s cousin and patted the edge of her seat.

“I’ll just lean against the rail.” Camden surveyed Skye’s side of the table, but the way the chair had to be positioned to hold both her and Ryan, there was no way he could squeeze by without climbing over someone’s lap. He spun and avoided Katie’s eyes as he slid past her and sat behind Bree.

“What can I get you boys?” A waitress with a black bowtie and white paper hat stood at their table, one eyebrow raised slightly higher than the other, as if to reprimand them for trying to fit too many people in such a small space.

“An order of beignets and a café au lait, please.” Camden gave her a grin he hoped included some apology too.

“Same for me. Anyone else need anything?” Ryan acted as if

intruding on someone else's breakfast were the most natural thing in the world.

"It's a small world, huh?" Bree took a sip from her mug.

"Come on. This is New Orleans! We had to come here at least once." Ryan snickered with Skye.

"And it just happened to be the same morning we're here?" Katie pursed her lips. How did she get them to look that small when they were so plump and inviting when she relaxed?

"Oh, come off it, Katie." Skye picked up the powdered sugar shaker and gave her beignets another coating. "Won't it be fun to hang out together today? After all, we're leaving tomorrow."

"Where are you going next?" Camden gratefully accepted a mug of chicory-laced coffee from the waitress.

"The beach." Katie's words cut off Skye's potential response, and the blonde didn't look too happy about it. "We're spending a night on the Gulf Coast. Skye thinks she needs to work on her tan."

"How else am I going to look good in my bridesmaid dress in a month?" Skye held out an arm that already had a healthy glow.

"You're not supposed to be the focus. Everyone's going to admire Bree because it's her wedding." Katie leaned back in her seat and crossed her legs.

"Well, since I'm the one who will be in white, I could definitely use some work on my tan. Those last few weeks of school didn't give me much time out of class or the library." Bree finished off the last bite of her beignets and licked her fingertips. "Although I probably don't need to eat many more of these either, or I'll need another fitting."

"Please." Katie playfully bumped her friend's shoulder. "As skinny as you are?"

"The beach will be relaxing anyway. Nice to have a few

days to just soak up the salt water and sun.” Bree cradled her mug in her hands. “I wish Nathan could have come, though.”

“That would sort of defeat the purpose of a girls’ trip, wouldn’t it?” Katie shot a look at Skye but was completely ignored.

“You girls playing the tourist today?” Camden hoped a change of subject might ease the discord.

“Why? You guys planning to follow us all day?”

Instead, his question just earned him the position of being on Katie’s bad side.

“We don’t have any plans. When I suggested we come down here, we sort of figured we’d play it by ear.” Ryan dusted sugar off his fingers. “I bet you scoped out all the tourist websites and made a list, ranked by which building you wanted to visit most.”

“I didn’t.” Skye laughed and flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I suggested the city, but Bree and Katie are the planners. I said we should just wing it like you, and you should have seen their faces.”

“We’ll be wandering around the French Quarter and Jackson Square this morning.” Bree placed her empty cup on the table. “Y’all are more than welcome to join us.”

Katie’s look said otherwise.

“Sounds great.” Ryan seemed intent on ignoring anything but what he wanted to see and hear. “Are we ready?”

Bills paid, Camden followed the rest of the group out of the busy café and onto the street already teeming with tourists. Bree and Katie led the way past stores opening for the day, restaurants with chalkboards declaring various specials, and vendors arranging their wares along the roads and alleys. The Cathedral’s spires filled the sky on one side of the famous square, and the girls in front paused to stare for a few seconds.

He couldn’t blame them. The architecture and history of

this city begged to be admired and appreciated. Ryan bumped into him from behind.

“Sorry, Cam. Didn’t realize we had stopped.” Ryan leaned around Camden’s shoulders and glanced at their surroundings. “What gives? There’s no streetlight holding us up.”

“I think the girls are deciding what to do first.”

“Who’s the dude on the horse?” Ryan pointed to the center of the square.

“Andrew Jackson.” Katie rolled her eyes. “You know ... the guy the square is named after?”

“Huh.”

As they made their way around, Skye and Bree showed more interest in shopping while Katie kept getting distracted by the plaques about history. She wandered into the doorway of a museum, but Skye refused to go, so Katie stepped back out, shoulders bowed. Street artists lined the sidewalks, showing off their work. A caricature vendor caught Skye’s eye.

“Oh, let’s have him do ours.” She bounced on her toes. “Wouldn’t it be fun to have this memory in ink?”

“He uses chalk.” Katie pointed out. “And who would keep the drawing? It’s not like we can have him do five so we can all have one.”

“Skye’s right.” Bree tugged Katie’s arm. “Let’s do this. Maybe just the girls, though. To commemorate our last trip together.”

“I’m doing this for you, Bree.” Katie perched on the stool.

Camden smiled as Bree said something to Katie that made her grin. Had he seen a real smile on her face before? He’d caught expressions of anger, frustration, fear, and pain, but a smile practically made her glow. What would it be like if she ever shot a look like that his way?

“Now let’s do one with the boys too.” Skye scooted over and waved at Camden and Ryan to join them.

Camden knew Ryan would want the spot by Skye, so he took the other spot, behind and between Katie and Bree. Katie's back was stiff and straight, as if afraid she might touch him if she relaxed. Ryan paused to talk about something with the artist before he meandered over to their group.

"Ready?" The artist called, winking at them.

Ryan snickered while the rest of their party nodded agreements. Having someone draw him gave Camden a strange sensation. Even as a comic-style character, to know a person was studying him intently enough to capture his various traits and maybe even some personality on paper seemed intimate. In less time than Camden expected, the artist nodded that he was finished.

When Skye saw the finished product, she roared with laughter. "Oh, perfect!"

Katie and Bree gasped about the same time. Camden braced himself and looked. The paper showed only Katie and him, pink hearts fluttering around them as they smiled at each other in chalk.

Before he could react, Katie stormed away from their group. This had to be Ryan's idea. No one else would have suggested it. Bree chased after her friend while Skye and Ryan settled the bill and gathered their rolled-up artwork.

Although Camden didn't mind the idea behind the drawing, he couldn't understand why Ryan would do such a thing. It's not like he and Katie would have time to get to know each other and actually form a relationship. The girls left tomorrow, and there was no way Katie would give him her cell number to try and do anything long distance. He followed the rest of the group to where Katie studied another plaque.

"The Louisiana Purchase was made just over there." Katie pointed. "Can you feel the history surrounding us right now? So much has happened in this area."

Evidently, she was going to pretend the drawing had never happened.

“Ugh. If I wanted a history lesson, I’d have taken more classes.” Skye turned on her heel. “See the statues in each corner? They’re the four seasons. Let’s do fun selfies with them.”

“What’s the point of coming to places like this if you never soak up the history of it?” Katie shrugged. “Life can’t be all about shopping and having fun.”

“What do you do again?” Camden couldn’t fight the intrigue anymore.

“She’s a librarian.” Bree squeezed her friend’s arm.

“For a school?”

“No. For a public library.” Katie folded her arms across her chest as if to challenge him should he think the job was dorky. He didn’t.

“I bet that’s really interesting.” He stuck his hands in his pockets. “I always stop right inside the doors of the one back home and just breathe for a moment. Nothing like the smell of books.”

Who was this guy? They’d definitely gotten off to a rocky start, and Katie had planned to keep it that way, but then he went and said things like that, setting her heart reaching toward his. Ridiculous. After today she’d never see him again. She wasn’t the kind of girl who went for vacation flings. Steadiness and permanence were all she wanted.

“Isn’t the river just over there?” Ryan pointed toward the levee on the other side of the square. “What if we grab some sandwiches and go picnic on the riverside?”

“I love that idea.” Skye flashed him a beaming smile.

Of course, she did. Skye seemed to like all of Ryan's suggestions. Otherwise, he wouldn't even be here right now. Still ... a sandwich and a view of the water did sound nice.

"If I remember correctly, there's a restaurant just over that way. They're supposed to have amazing po' boys." Bree pointed south. "It's even on the way to the park."

"Sounds good." Camden patted his flat stomach. "I could definitely go for some shrimp."

How did he stay so fit? She'd seen his toned arms and chest yesterday at the pool. Was he still lifeguarding somewhere? Surely a physical therapist didn't get that much of a workout in his day-to-day routine. She refused to ask, though. For one thing, she didn't want to let on that she'd noticed something so personal. And for another, she didn't want to encourage anyone to continue pushing them together into a relationship that would never have a chance.

The line was out the door of the restaurant Bree wanted to try, but since they weren't in a hurry, everyone agreed to wait. The smells coming from inside advertised it would be worth it. Katie fixed her attention on the small paper menu that Bree had plucked from a holder near the door. Everything sounded amazing.

"Brave enough to try crawfish?" Camden's voice pulled her from her decision making.

She wrinkled her nose. "No. I've heard it's good, but I can't even stand the thought of eating a lobster. They're just so ugly. And I especially can't get past the thought of what they eat before we eat them."

"So, no desire to go up to the northeast and indulge in lobster brought in fresh that day?" He leaned against the door-jamb. "I've always thought it would be fun to explore Maine and do something like that."

"I've always wanted to see Maine too." She twisted the

paper in her hands. “I don’t know. It’d have to be something special for me to try it even then though. But lobsters do sound more appetizing than crawfish.”

“So, you’re not from Maine, then.”

Oops. That eliminated at least one state in the list of possible places she lived. “No. Not from Maine.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“What? Why?”

“Your accent.” Camden winked. “It pretty much assures me you’re from the South. I just haven’t quite figured out which part yet.” The end of his statement was almost a question, but she wasn’t about to answer.

They moved forward with the crowd, and Katie closed her eyes to enjoy the air conditioning blowing directly on her from the vent by the door. A body pressed against hers and her eyes flew open. Camden took a step back again.

“Sorry.” He pointed at some people leaving. “They were rather aggressive as they pushed by.”

But his face didn’t look completely sorry despite his apology. Instead, he appeared to have enjoyed it as much as she had. Another thing never to admit.

Sandwiches procured, their group strolled down the Moonwalk, surveying the park for a good place to eat. They settled on a spot near a shade tree. Steamers rolled up and down the river below them, occasionally sounding their horns. Katie took a bite of her lunch and let her imagination follow the current on down toward the Gulf. She was surrounded by history, but none of her group seemed to care.

When she agreed to come on this trip, she knew it was going to be more about the fun than anything else, but she’d hoped to set foot inside at least one museum. With the inclusion of the boys, there was even less of a chance. At least

tomorrow they'd leave the guys behind, and she could relax a bit more.

A sharp pinch to her toe brought her out of her reverie. "Ouch!"

She brushed against her foot, knocking off several bugs.

"Fire ants." Camden's hand grabbed her lower leg and moved her away from the dirt mound she hadn't noticed. A thrill shot up her body, despite the lack of romance in the touch.

Where had that come from? She hadn't felt anything like that when he held her in the pool yesterday—not beyond humiliation and pain. Or last night in the carriage. Maybe it was triggered by the ant bites.

"I think we got them all." Camden's fingers trailed her shins, turning her ankles over to check underneath.

She jerked her legs away and tucked them close to her body. "Thanks. I didn't even notice them when we first sat down."

"The food probably attracted them." Camden gathered his trash and stood, not fazed at all by what had just happened.

Was she so repulsive? She crumbled the rest of her chips and added them to her Styrofoam container. Could she seem any more incompetent? First, she got knocked into the pool by a stupid volleyball, then passed out because of her ridiculous ghosts, and now she couldn't even watch out for ants before taking a seat. Even if they had a chance to see each other beyond today, he probably wouldn't want to take it.

"Let's go shopping." Skye jumped up and threw her garbage away. "There's a mall over there. All air conditioned. My father wanted me to bring him back some hot sauce."

"I thought we'd talked about going to see a plantation nearby." Katie brushed her capris off.

“Oh, Katie. That’s so depressing.” Skye pouted. “All that talk of slave labor, no air conditioning, and women forced to wear corsets and hoop skirts. Bleh. I might as well go take a nap.”

Skye might think a plantation was boring, but Katie considered shopping just as dull. What had happened to all the plans she and Bree had made for this road trip? Wasn’t Bree the one to decide? She was the bride, after all. Both girls looked to their friend, who appeared torn and distressed.

Katie sighed. There would be no history for her on this trip. She’d have to come back another time by herself. Skye was too influential to overcome.

“Come on. You said something about wanting to buy bridesmaids’ gifts along the way.” Katie looped her arm through Bree’s. “Onward to the mall.”

Would the guys abandon them for such a girly activity? But they followed along, flanking Skye. She giggled and pointed as they meandered farther south down the Moonwalk and past the casino and aquarium. The river held most of Katie’s attention, though.

“Look. There’s a ferry that takes you across the water.” Katie pointed.

“It would be more fun to ride on one of those big paddle-boats.” Skye giggled.

“True. But until I start getting paid, I’m trying to conserve as much money as possible, and a ride on one of those is not in my budget this trip.” Katie raised an eyebrow at her friend. “A free ferry ride on the other hand ...”

“Maybe we can catch one on the way back up. We’re parked up closer to Jackson Square, so we’ll have to come back this way anyway.” Bree tugged on Katie’s arm.

“Sounds good to me.” Camden’s voice carried from behind her.

“It’s only a five-minute ride across. It’s not like it’s going to be that thrilling.” Skye’s tone held a touch of disbelief.

“But for five minutes, we can pretend we’re Tom Sawyer.” Camden came up even with Katie and Bree and shot them a wink.

How had he known that was exactly what she’d been thinking? To live out a few moments of Mark Twain’s imagination would be a dream come true. Was this guy for real? Had she finally found someone she could be interested in, only to have to leave him tomorrow?