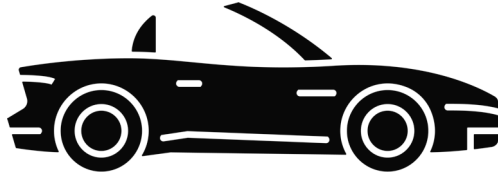


2



A couple of random men jostled Katie’s arm as they made their way past her group and on up Bourbon Street. The night was young, the sun barely set, but it was easy to see—and smell—that some people had already been here for hours. Katie attempted to swallow a lump lodged in her throat. Jazz music floated out of almost every building on the road, but it all mixed together in a jumbled cacophony of disjointed sounds, adding to her headache.

“Isn’t this amazing?” Skye motioned around them. Her sundress floated against her knees as she swayed to the rhythm of a song.

“Nothing better than this area for some soul pleasing.” Ryan linked arms with Skye, and they walked ahead.

“You okay?” Bree wove her arm through Katie’s and leaned close. “Is it your head?”

Her head? Yes. But not the way Bree was thinking. The pounding from her bruise was nothing compared to the panic and discomfort building inside her. She squeezed her eyes

closed and took a deep breath, hoping to calm her erratic pulse.

“Katie?” Bree pulled her to a stop in the middle of the sidewalk.

Katie forced her eyelids open and focused on her friend’s concerned frown. She managed a smile but could tell Bree wasn’t buying it. It was the best she could do though.

Why? Why did her body always betray her at times like this?

“You’re blocking the path, dummies.” A guy in a purple fedora pushed Katie against Bree so he could stomp his way past. The smell of whatever he’d been drinking lingered in the air.

Katie pressed a hand to her mouth, gagging.

“Watch it!” Camden hollered at the man’s back. “You girls okay?”

“I’m fine.” Bree cut a glance at him and then back at Katie. “Katie’s not looking so hot.”

“Bree—”

“No, she’s right.” Camden leaned down and lifted a curl off her forehead to study her bruise. “Are you feeling worse?”

Katie ducked her head. “It’s not from earlier.” Not earlier today, anyway.

Bree leaned close to catch Katie’s words over the noise around them. “Is it ... is it from ...?”

After glancing at Camden, Katie nodded to her friend.

“Katie, I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize this would bring up those memories.” Bree squeezed Katie’s hands. “Do you need to go? We can find Skye. We might even be able to catch one of those ghost tours she’d mentioned.”

“Maybe I should just go back to the hotel. I don’t want to ruin your night. No point in all of us suffering just because I can’t move on.” Katie pulled her hands from Bree’s and rubbed

her upper arms, despite the heat that lingered in the air. "I'll just call a rideshare or something."

"I don't like the idea of you riding back alone. We said we were going to stick together when we first planned this trip." Bree crossed her arms.

"Skye would hate it if she had to leave now. This is the kind of thing she lives for." Katie motioned the direction Skye had gone. "You stay with her. I'll be fine."

"Do you know where they went?" Camden raised himself on his toes. "I can't even see them anymore."

"I'll call her and ask her to come back so we can come up with a plan." Bree pulled out her phone and quickly dialed their missing friend.

"So, it's not your head?" Camden gave her his full attention the moment Bree turned her back.

"My head is fine. Just a slight headache." She subconsciously rubbed the spot where the ball had hit her.

"Are you sick from something else then?" The frown drew his eyebrows down, leaving a furrow between his eyes that her fingers itched to smooth out.

"It's just ... just something I thought I could handle, but I'm evidently not ready yet." Talk about beating around the bush. But there was no way she was going to pour out her history to someone she'd known only a few hours. Especially after they had such a rocky start.

"She's not answering." Bree held up her phone. "I wonder if it's too loud out here for her to hear it ring."

"Let me try Ryan." Camden grabbed his cell and pressed it to his ear.

Raucous laughter poured from the building nearest them. The neon lights lent an unearthly glow to their surroundings. Katie's heart couldn't decide if it wanted to keep pace with the jazz from this building or the song two doors down. It skittered

and spurted until she was sure her toes couldn't possibly be getting enough blood flow. Maybe that was why she suddenly felt wobbly.

"He's going to head them back. Said they're about five pubs ahead of us." Camden turned. "Katie?"

She blinked, and then blinked again, but the earth whirled around her, fuzzing the edges of her vision.

"Katie?" Camden's voice sounded far away. Had he gone to meet Ryan and Skye? But if that were the case, why was he calling her name? Was she supposed to follow him?

Strong arms encircled her as her knees turned to jelly.

"Hang in there, Katie." Camden supported the petite brunette for the second time that day, but this time there was no fight in her limp frame.

"Here, Mister. You can use my seat." Behind them, a man pointed to an iron chair on the bar's patio. "Looks like she needs it more than I do."

"Thanks." He easily lifted Katie and moved her out of the crowded path and into the less-crowded pub courtyard. Her head moved as he gently lowered her to the seat.

"Katie." He kept his arms on either side of her until he was sure she wouldn't topple off. "Katie, can you hear me?"

Her hazel eyes blinked once, twice, then stayed open, focusing on him. "What happened?"

"You passed out for a minute."

A look that could only be described as horror crossed her face. "I did?"

"You did," Bree's voice carried over her shoulder. "You're going back to the hotel, whether Skye likes it or not."

“No, Bree. Don’t ruin Skye’s night over this.” Katie buried her face in her hands.

“We’ll work something out.” Camden gave her upper arm a squeeze, wishing he could do more. This woman, so full of fire and ice earlier in the day, was obviously fighting demons no one else could see. And even though this was the town of witch doctors and voodoo artists, he didn’t believe in any of that. Something else haunted her, holding her in a grip too tight to escape. At least without help.

And he wanted more than anything to help. When her hazel eyes had focused on him a moment ago, they changed from terror to trust in an instant. Was there a way to keep that look there, or had he somehow ruined it earlier in the day when she’d declared him a party boy she’d never date?

“What’s up with Katie Belle?” Skye’s voice broke through his musings.

“She’s not feeling well.” Bree tugged on Camden’s sleeve and pulled him up. “We’ve got to get her away from this atmosphere.”

“Atmosphere?” He glanced around. “You mean the crowds?”

“More like the type of people making up the crowds.” Bree’s mouth pinched closed as if she were forcibly keeping the rest of the story from slipping out.

Camden shook his head in confusion.

“Look.” Bree glanced over her shoulder at Katie to make sure their conversation wasn’t overheard before turning her attention back to him. “It’s not my story to tell, okay? But let’s just suffice it to say that Katie has had some really bad history with alcoholics.”

A dim light went on in Camden’s head. Not enough to show him the full picture but enough to explain at least partly

why Katie had panicked earlier. The whicker of a horse drew his attention to the road.

“I have an idea.”

Bree looked over at the carriage and then back at him, a smile crossing her face. “Perfect. Now, we just have to convince her.”

“This isn’t going to be easy, is it?” Camden studied the fascinating woman sitting nearby, looking worse by the minute as Skye hovered at her side.

“You got that right, buster.” Bree thumbed over her shoulder. “You go see if you can catch one of those, and I’ll try and convince her this is a great plan.”

Several carriages passed before Camden found an empty one. From the looks of things behind him, though, that was probably just as well. Katie looked like she was adamantly refusing.

“I don’t even know this guy, and you’re suggesting I go off on a carriage ride with him in a strange city.” Nervous energy laced Katie’s voice.

“I have that app on my phone that lets me see where you are, remember?” Bree waved her cell. “I’ll check it every few minutes to make sure you’re still riding up and down the area at the speed of a carriage, and we’ll meet you guys back at the car in an hour. This way, none of us has to give up having fun this evening.”

Katie’s eyes were wide as Bree pushed her toward Camden. He raised an eyebrow and held out his hand, willing her to accept and come with him. Not only because he wanted to get her out of this toxic environment but also because he was looking forward to hopefully breaking through that shell she’d built around herself. Maybe even convince her he wasn’t as bad as she thought.

“You coming, lady?” The carriage driver gave her a dirty

look. “I don’t plan to sit here all night. And if you’ve been drinking too much and are needing a ride, I’d rather you call someone else. I don’t want sick in the back of my carriage.”

Katie’s face paled in the neon lights.

Camden quickly reached out and grabbed her hand, giving a little tug. “She hasn’t had a thing to drink tonight except water and coffee. We’re getting in.”

“Relax, Katie. You’re going to have so much fun.” Bree waved at them from the curb as the carriage pulled out into the foot traffic, meandering slowly up the street amid the pedestrians.

“Where all does this ride take us?” Katie studied her hands instead of their surroundings.

“I talked him into doing his usual route through the French Quarter and then a little side trip to go straight to our parking lot, so we won’t have to walk through any of that again.” Camden pointed his thumb in the direction of the Bourbon Street noise. “I’ve heard the French Quarter is beautiful in the moonlight.”

“With all that amazing architecture, it’s beautiful no matter when.” Her back straightened a bit. “But the colors obviously stand out more in the daytime.”

A tour group on Segways passed them on the sidewalk, the guide spewing some story about ghosts of former people who had occupied the buildings they drove past. Soft, mellow blues music wafted from a restaurant and wrapped its fingers around them. People strolled the streets. Lit balconies full of people and plants decorated the sides of many buildings.

“I’m sorry you had to leave. I really would’ve been fine just taking a taxi or something.” Katie picked at an invisible spot on her capris.

He covered her hand with his and gave a squeeze. “I wasn’t

really interested in Bourbon Street either. I'm just hanging out with Ryan this week."

Slipping her fingers back out of his, she tucked them under her thighs. "Still. It's not fun to end up being the babysitter."

He leaned as close as he dared. "You're definitely not a baby. You're a beautiful woman. And I don't feel like I'm forced to watch you."

She swallowed so hard he could see the muscles of her throat work.

"Is this your first time in New Orleans?" Maybe a change of subject would lighten the mood.

"Second." She stared in the direction of her side of the carriage. "My family visited here when I was a teenager. My uncle took us out to several plantations, but I don't think I'll be able to talk the girls into doing something like that tomorrow. Too much history and not enough fun."

"Maybe later this week." He leaned back in the seat, draping his arm across the back as casually as possible.

"We leave Wednesday morning." She glanced back at him.

"Too bad. We're supposed to be here until Saturday. At least that's what Ryan told Uncle John. And since Uncle John is footing the bill, I'm figuring we'll stick fairly close to that plan so we don't get cut off."

"Must be nice to have someone foot the bill for you to have fun." She leaned back and closed her eyes, not seeming to notice that her hair rested on his forearm.

"In some ways. In other ways, I think Uncle John was hoping I'd be a good influence on Ryan and keep him out of trouble."

One of Katie's eyes opened again and studied him. "He's the troublemaker? I thought that was you."

Camden chuckled. "He's the one who doesn't take things as seriously. Let's just leave it at that."

“Sounds like Skye.” Katie shook her head, her curls tickling his skin. “No wonder those two hit it off. Maybe it’s a good thing we’ll only be here one more day. Who knows what kind of trouble they might’ve gotten into?”

The horse clip-clopped on, but they settled into a comfortable silence. He inched just slightly closer, and her eyes popped open once more. Time stood still for several seconds as their gazes remained locked. Was her heart beating as hard as his right now?

The carriage hit a bump and jostled them. She landed pressed to his side. His arm slid down off the back of the bench and held her there for a split second before letting go. What was he doing? She’d just admitted they’d be here only one more day. What was the point of pursuing anything with this girl who did crazy things to his heart?

She straightened again. “I think I recognize some of these buildings. We must be getting close to the parking lot.”

He nodded.

“I know I haven’t shown much appreciation today, but I wanted to say thanks for finding a way to get me off of that street.” Katie studied her hands again.

“My pleasure.”

The carriage halted, and Camden paid the man before helping Katie down. The streetlights illuminated the rows of cars still filling the lot. As they neared Skye’s convertible, Bree waved.

“Well, hey, lovebirds!” Ryan laughed as if he’d told the funniest joke ever.

Katie stepped a bit farther away from Camden, and he missed her nearness immediately.

“Was it so much fun?” Bree climbed in the backseat and pulled Katie in beside her. “I’ve always wanted to go on one of those rides.”

“You could’ve come with us.” Katie scooted closer to Bree as Camden climbed in beside her, although their knees still pressed against each other. There wasn’t quite enough room for three people their size in the backseat of a car designed more for looks than anything.

“That bench didn’t look big enough. Maybe I can talk Nathan into taking me on one on our honeymoon. I know for a fact they have them in New York City too.”

“So, you’re for sure going to the Big Apple for your honeymoon?” Skye turned with interest while stopped at a red light.

“Nathan won’t answer me outright, but he hasn’t denied it. And that’s the location I gave the most hints about.” Bree shook her head. “He keeps saying he wants to surprise me.”

“I’d hate that. No idea what to pack if you don’t know where you’re going.” Skye flipped a strand of hair over her shoulder.

“I don’t really care where we go as long as Nathan’s there.”

“I want a guy like that one day. One who makes any location better by simply being there.” Had Katie just cut her eyes his way?

They’d only just met and would probably never see each other again after tonight. Besides, lifelong romances didn’t start with a volleyball to the head.

Back at the hotel, Camden helped the girls out of the backseat. “It was great hanging out with you this evening.”

“Thanks again for the carriage ride.” Katie’s reply came out almost a whisper. “And everything.”

“You’re welcome.” He caught the tips of her fingers as she passed and gave them a small tug.

Would he get to spend any more time with her before they left? He should’ve gotten her number or something. She intrigued him more than anyone he’d ever met.

“Coming, Cam?” Ryan waved the door key.

“Yeah.” Camden followed his cousin down the hallway in the opposite direction the girls had gone. “I’m beat.”

“Well, you better rest up tonight, then, because I have a great plan. You’re going to love it.”

Why did those words leave dread sifting through Camden’s heart instead of excitement? Ryan’s plans almost never ended well. What on earth had he come up with now?