

## Fair Deal

“Mom, look!” Avery Bullard’s excited voice rang out from the back seat as they crested the hill near Moreland Avenue. “Rides.” She pressed her face to the window, eyes aglow. “Can we go?”

Kendra smiled at the wonder in her seven year old daughter’s voice. The fair, billed as City Escape, did look impressive, spread over the parking lot that used to serve a large strip mall. “You have to make a choice, sweetie. The fair, or dinner and a movie?” She stopped at the light and turned for a quick glance at Avery.

“The rides,” Avery replied without hesitation. “I wanna go on that big wheel thingy.”

“That’s a double Ferris wheel. If you’re lucky, they stop it when you’re at the very top to let other riders get on and you can see for miles.”

“Cool. Do you think they have those cars that bump into each other?”

“I’m sure they do. It looks big enough to have almost everything.”

“Is it as big as Disney World? I wanna go there one day.” Avery’s voice was full of longing. “They have a castle and a mountain. I’m gonna be a princess when I grow up.”

Kendra didn’t voice her surprise. This was a radical shift for her cowboy-astronaut-stunt woman daughter. “What does a princess do?” she asked, making a left onto Moreland Avenue. As a reward for getting a good progress report, Kendra was treating Avery with a favorite treat, dinner-time breakfast at Huddle House.

“She plays with frogs, lives in a castle, and sometimes she gets to be king. Being king is kind of good ‘cause you get to tell everybody what to do. And I wouldn’t have to make my bed anymore, or do any chores.”

“I’m sure you’d like that,” Kendra said dryly. Getting Avery to do anything remotely connected with housework was a constant battle in their household. “But I don’t understand why you don’t just want to grow up to be a king?”

“Because they don’t play with frogs.” Her tone strongly suggested that her mother should have known the answer. “So is it as big as Disney World?”

It took Kendra a moment to figure out what Avery was talking about. She’d been busy wondering about her daughter’s new obsession with frogs, and where it might lead. “No, Disney World is like a small city.”

“Oh. When can we go?”

“To Disney World?”

“No! The fair.”

Kendra couldn't stop the sigh of relief. On her salary, a trip to Disney World was a few years away. “We can go Saturday afternoon, but *only* if you do your chores without complaining.”

Avery gave a long suffering sigh. “Okay. And can we stay until it's dark?”

“We'll see.”

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“We'll see means yes, right?” Tina Fraley asked. She'd already spent twenty minutes trying to persuade her best friend, Meghan, to agree to a blind date.

“We'll see means we'll see.” Meghan Graybar straightened, wiped her hands on an already greasy towel, and shut the hood to Tina's red convertible Mustang. “Seems fine to me,” she said, eyeing Tina with suspicion. She wouldn't put it past her friend to use phony car trouble as an excuse to stop by and hassle her into going on a blind date.

Tina met her gaze without flinching. Having known Meghan a long time, she was used to her friend's grumpy outer shell that hid a heart of gold. “So, about the date thingy. Was that a yes? Because when my mother says we'll see, it means yes.”

Meghan stopped wiping her hands and fixed Tina with a glare. “I'm not your mother, Fraley.”

“Like, when did you know?” Tina mocked. “Did it have anything to do with me being chocolate delight and you being a vanilla blonde-haired freak?” She quickly put up her hands to ward off the towel heading toward her. “Hey, watch the face!”

“Nobody else will, Smartass,” Meghan said, knowing it wasn't true. Tina with her almost boyish, clean cut looks never lacked female companionship. And over the years, to Meghan's dismay, Tina had gladly steered a few overages in Meghan's direction. It wasn't that Meghan couldn't find her own dates if she wanted, it was just Tina's way of trying to run, to her mind, Meghan's boring love life. “If I say yes, do you promise not to try and set me up for six months?”

“Six? Come on, if you're going to spend your night at home, you should have a lovely to keep you company.” Tina wiggled her eyebrows.

“I'm perfectly happy with the way I am. There's more to life than getting women, T.”

“Exactly! You don't need women; you need that one special woman. And you're not going to find her sitting at home on your ass.”

Meghan rubbed her chin, leaving behind a streak of dirt. She was almost scared. For once, Tina was actually making sense. “Okay, I’ll go, but you can’t set me up for three months.”

“Deal. I’ll come pick you up Saturday around seven.”

“Seven? I gotta work ‘til five. I need more time than that to unwind.”

Tina waved her hand dismissively and opened the car door. “Nah, you’ll be fine. Early is good. Then if things don’t work out, we’ll have plenty of time to scope out some new ladies.”

Meghan wished she had another dirty towel handy. “You’re a dog, T. Maybe I should drive myself. I’m not going to be stuck clubbing all night.”

“*We’ll see*. I’ll call you before then.” She climbed into the Mustang and started the engine. “I don’t know what you did, but it sounds better,” she said with a cheeky grin.

“You’re full of shit.” Try as she might, Meghan couldn’t keep an answering grin off her face. Tina was Tina, and she’d been that way since they met in kindergarten, twenty-seven years ago. “Later.” She watched Tina back out of the driveway before she lowered the garage door and entered the house she shared with her Grandmother.

“What did that rascal want now?” Anna Pelosi asked when Meghan entered the kitchen. She was standing at the counter seasoning the chicken for their dinner. At seventy-five, she was getting around slower, but she still made some of the best fried chicken in the City of Atlanta.

“She wants me to get together with some of her *friends* Saturday night.” Meghan crossed to the sink and scrubbed her hands. “There’s this big fair on the Southside that everyone’s been talking about.” She shrugged. “It could be fun.”

“Could be?” Anna snorted. “You need a new mind set, child. An attractive woman like you should go out more.”

Meghan rolled her eyes. She’d heard that line about a thousand times since she’d moved in a year ago to keep an eye on her grandmother. “Is this the part where you tell me I need to give you great grandchildren?”

“It would be nice to have some young ones to fetch things for me. And that’s certainly *not* going to happen if you spend your weekends with this old woman.”

Meghan flicked her wet fingers at her grandmother. “Old? I’m old, you’re ancient, Gran.” She ran from the room laughing as Anna’s choice words followed her. “That’s your daughter you’re talking about.”

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“Come on, Mom, let’s hurry!” Avery tugged on her mother’s hand, trying to speed her up. “I can’t believe we’re finally here. It’s been like forever since Wednesday. Everything looks so cool. I don’t know what I want to ride first.”

“Looks like you’ll have plenty of time to decide,” Kendra said as they joined the long line at the ticket booth. She should have known the fair would be packed when her daughter brought home the discount coupon from school. Looking around, it looked like every child in the Atlanta school system had gotten the same coupon and decided to use it. “Maybe we should have come earlier in the day, honey.”

“No, this is okay, Mom. I wanna see the lights from the big...” She scrunched up her face as she looked at her mother. “What’s it called again?”

“Double Ferris wheel.” Kendra smiled down at the round, brown face that was so like her own and nothing like the guy she’d thought she loved a long time ago.

“Yeah, the Ferris wheel. I want to ride that last, okay?”

Kendra nodded. “You get to be in charge today. I’m just along for the rides.” As she expected, the play on words was wasted on Avery, who jumped up and down in delight. Sooner than she would have thought possible, they were at the front of the line. Avery’s wide-eyed excitement encouraged Kendra to buy more tickets than she’d originally planned. Another couple of weeks of doing without new shoes was a small price to pay. She pocketed the tickets and handed Avery the map of the fair grounds. “You’re the guide.”

“Cool! Thanks, Mom.” Avery’s grin showed almost every tooth as she unfolded the map. “I know, we’ll do your favorite ride first. What’s your favorite ride?”

“I’m not sure what it’s called, sweetie. It’s the one where you go around in a circle real fast, and then they take you backwards.”

“Oh.” She studied the map carefully before giving up the search. “I don’t think I see it, Mom. “What if we go on the first ride we get to?”

“Sounds like a plan, Stan. Let’s go.” Kendra held out her hand.

“Mom!” Avery pulled a face and grabbed her mother’s hand. “Stan is a boy’s name. I don’t like boys, remember?”

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Before Meaghan could back her Toyota Frontrunner out of the driveway, her cell phone rang. She flipped it open, already knowing who the caller was. “I remember, okay?”

Tina laughed. “Just checking. See you by the ticket booth in twenty.”

“Gotcha.” Meghan dropped the phone onto the passenger seat. Although she would never admit it to Tina or her grandmother, she was looking forward to getting out. What she wasn’t looking forward to was trying to make nice with her “date”. The type of women Tina attracted usually left her lukewarm, and she didn’t think today would be an exception. Still, it would be nice to let loose, ride some rides, and eat too much junk food. She could almost taste a corndog slathered with mustard and some greasy fries.

Almost an hour and a half later, Meaghan was almost regretting leaving her house. The traffic had been backed up onto Moreland a couple of miles, turning a twenty minute trip into close to an hour. And once she’d gotten closer to the fair grounds, she discovered that parking was at a premium, forcing her to drive around for another fifteen minutes to find a space. As she made the long trek from her car to the ticket booth, her cell phone rang. “I know you’re not calling to ask why I’m late.”

“Hell no, I just got here myself. Have you made it off of Moreland yet?” Tina asked.

“Yeah. I’m on my way to the ticket booth as we speak.” Meghan dodged out of the way of a kid on roller shoes. “Is everybody in Atlanta here?”

“Everybody except our dates. We got stood up.”

Meghan laughed at the disbelief in Tina’s voice. “For the record, *you* got stood up, not me.”

“Damn, Graybar, that’s down right chilly. So what you wanna do?”

“You have to ask?”

“I’ll buy us some tickets.”

“Good answer.” Meghan slipped her phone into a front pocket of her cargo shorts and wound her way through the crowd.

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“Mom, why was that a good answer?” Avery asked as they walked away from the long row of games.

“Because rides are more fun than trying to hit a moving duck. And I don’t think your bed needs anymore stuffed animals.” Kendra dug in her pocket for tickets. When she saw how few they had left, she almost sighed in relief. The day had been fun, but after four hours she was ready to go home and put her feet up. “It looks like we can go on three more rides, so pick them carefully.”

“Can I see the map again?” Avery stopped and reached out with her arm, accidentally whacking a passer by in the crotch. Her brown eyes grew wide when the tall person bent over. “I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry, sir.”

“Are you okay?” Kendra unconsciously put a hand on the injured person’s back as she bent over to look into their face. Her breath caught in her throat when she looked into pale blue eyes. For what appeared to be an eternity, she felt like she couldn’t speak, she couldn’t think, she couldn’t move.

“Of course she’s okay,” an amused voice said. “She doesn’t use those parts anyway.”

The sound of a familiar voice brought Kendra out of the trance. To her embarrassment, she discovered she’d been stroking blue-eyes’ back. She quickly removed her hand and straightened up. “Tina?”

“Kendra. Long time no see.” Tina flashed the dimpled smile that usually got the girl. “I’ve been waiting for your call.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve been busy.” She placed a hand on Avery’s head. “This is my daughter, Avery. She keeps me pretty occupied.” *And out of predators’ hands.* “Avery, this is Ms. Tina and her injured friend.”

Meghan straightened slowly, still dazed, not from pain but from the warm gaze of Kendra’s big brown eyes. “You know each other, I take it.”

When Kendra turned to look at Meghan, her smile was noticeably warmer. “That depends on if you’ll hold it against me. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Megan nodded slowly, trying her best to appear the tragic figure. “I’m okay, it’s just...” She sighed. “I’m not sure if I can ever have kids now.”

“Oh God, I’d have a baby for you in a heartbeat.” The words shot out of Kendra’s mouth without her permission. “Please tell me I did not say that out loud?” She covered her heated cheeks in the face of Meghan’s wide grin. “Shoot me now.”

“A baby!” Avery’s eyes grew wide. She pulled on the bottom of Meghan’s shorts. “Do you want a boy baby or a girl baby? I want a girl ‘cause I don’t like boys. Will the baby stay at our house, or do we have to come to your house to visit? We *can* come visit, right...uh, what’s your name?”

Meghan almost reared back under the onslaught of rapidly fired questions. “Meghan,” she finally managed to say, making it sound more like a question than a statement.

Avery tilted her head and scrunched up her nose. “Are you sure?”

“Avery, that’s not polite,” Kendra said, managing to keep a straight face. She wanted to laugh at the adorable shell-shocked expression on Meghan’s face. “I was just joking about the baby, honey. There’s no need for anyone to panic.” She directed the last sentence at Meghan, and although she tried, Kendra couldn’t keep a smile from tugging at her lips.

“Oh.” Avery let loose a long, loud sigh. “Then I guess I should check the map.” This time she looked around before she held out her hand and accepted the map from her mother.

“You want my help with that?” Tina asked, happy to help her friend out by keeping the little girl occupied. She would have to be dumb not to see, and applaud, the chemistry shimmering in the air between Meghan and Kendra.

“Sure, but we’re saving the ferry wheel thingy for last. And my mom says we only have tickets for three more rides. So that only leaves two to pick.” She held the map so that Tina could study it with her.

“Pity about the baby,” Meghan said softly once Avery’s attention was averted. “I already know you do beautiful work. Maybe you should reconsider. I’m a whiz at diapers.”

“Oh, really?” Kendra took a step closer making no attempt to hide the fact that she was checking Meghan out, and that she liked what she saw. Meghan didn’t have Tina’s striking good looks, but the genuine kindness and warmth in her eyes easily made up for that. Not to mention the fit body that hinted of strength. “And what else are you a whiz at?”

Meghan’s brain swelled under Kendra’s heated gaze. She wasn’t used to this kind of attention when Tina was around and available. “Cars,” she finally said as her brain shifted back into gear. “I’m good with cars.” She pushed her hands into the front pockets of her shorts and rocked back on her heels. “But what I’m not so good at, is figuring out why a beautiful woman seems to find me more attractive than Tina. That doesn’t happen so much.”

“Then you definitely have *not* been meeting the right women.” Kendra smiled as she gently squeezed Meghan’s arm. “But that’s okay. I don’t mind being the first to put the situation right. If that’s okay with you, that is?”

Meghan’s smile lit up her face. “That’s very okay with me. You know another thing I’m pretty good at is first dates. Maybe I could convince you to go out on one of those.”

Kendra pretended to give the matter some thought. “I don’t know. If Tina’s your only reference, I’ll have to do some checking first,” she said playfully.

“I could give you my grandmother’s number, but I’m not so sure the old woman would give me a good reference. And I know she would bore you with made up stories about my childhood.”

Kendra gave a throaty laugh, her earlier tiredness forgotten. “The horror. Okay, how ‘bout I just quiz you while we walk around the fair, and then consider that as a reference? Deal?” When she held out her hand, it was quickly engulfed in Meghan’s larger one.

“That sounds fair. You’ve got yourself a deal.” Meghan didn’t let go of Kendra’s hand, liking the way it felt in hers. She motioned her head in the direction of Tina and Avery. “Do you think they’ll ever figure out where we’re going?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Kendra said, shaking her head. “I think I have a pretty good idea of where we’re going. Don’t you?” she asked with an arched eyebrow.

“Yeah.” Meghan squeezed her hand. “I do.”

“Mom! Tina says she can give us extra tickets. We can take them can’t we? ‘Cause I’m not ready to go home yet. This is too fun.”

“Yes, it is,” Kendra replied, looking at Meghan.