

Rescued by a Kiss

First in the Series

The New Orleans Go Cup Chronicles

Colleen Mooney

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Print Edition

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Chapter One

THE NIGHT OF the shooting was a good one to catch pneumonia, but instead of staying home, I was at a Mardi Gras parade trying to catch beads. Julia took out a bottle of wine and two plastic wine glasses from her enormous leather shoulder bag and poured a drink for each of us. Suzanne, my childhood friend, held out a plastic go cup she just caught off a float for Julia to pour some wine into.

I was in my four-inch heels, and was still about six inches shorter than Julia. She had Dallas hair and wore big flashy gold and diamond jewelry, all of which were real. She took an inordinate amount of time to make sure her outfit was 100 percent coordinated, accessorized, pressed, or steamed. She spent forever getting dressed. It took her an hour to put on her makeup, and another hour to make sure her hair was just the right height. A wedding took less preparation than it took Julia getting ready to go, well . . . anywhere.

Julia purchased what nature failed to deliver. Those guys up on the floats looking down Julia's blouse were in for a treat. She was a stunner before her recent boob job, or, as Julia referred to it, augmentation. Now, all heads were turned toward her, all except my mother's. "Suzanne, you wanna drink outta something that has been rolling around on the ground before you wash it?" Julia hesitated for about a blink before pouring. Julia's Baton Rouge accent added an "r" to wash making it sound like 'warsh'.

"The booze will kill any germs," Suzanne answered, seemingly unfazed.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," I toasted, and we bumped glasses.

My name is Brandy Alexander, and I am twenty-six years old still living at home with my parents. I'm tall, thin, and God gave me the girly attributes Julia had to pay for. My hair is shoulder length, straight, and blonde. I wear it down or pulled into a ponytail on top of my head. I love King Cakes, and I'm a sucker for an abandoned dog, especially if it's a Schnauzer. Dad says these dogs find me; it's in my aura. And, just ask my Mother; I'm personally responsible for everything that goes wrong in the world and at home. She's Catholic, southern, and responsible for my biggest phobia, the cockroach.

And, here in New Orleans, they fly at you.

I live in a New Orleans neighborhood known as the Irish Channel, and a relative or lifelong friend lives in every home on our block. I have known the family of five boys who live next door to us since I was born. Dante is a year older than me, and we have been childhood friends and pseudo-sweethearts since we could crawl. Both our families expect us to set a date for the wedding any day.

It was the first parade of the Mardi Gras season, and I stood with family and friends in the same spot where we had watched parades for the last twenty-six years. My boyfriend, Dante, is a New Orleans cop. He and his partner always arranged to get their police parade assignments at either end of the block closest to this spot. Everyone came out and stood near them for protection. The only protection all of us needed was from each other.

Between the floats and bands, the members of the gentlemen walking clubs, often inebriated, marched along. Their objective, fueled with liquid courage, was to coerce a girl for a kiss in exchange for a flower they carried with them on a walking cane. It was lighthearted foolishness. The gentleman got a kiss, sometimes a peck on the cheek, or the fella kissed a girl's hand presented in exchange for a homemade paper carnation. These kiss-flower

negotiations were nothing serious—except with the man I kissed. New Orleans parades provide a decadent experience for every one of the senses. Bands passed, and their bass drums pounded in my chest. Vendors pushed carts of candied apples, cotton candy, peanuts, corn dogs, and popcorn. Smells of swirled cotton candy and peanuts mingled with whiffs of whiskey and marijuana from the crowd as they played, bumped, and pushed into each other and me. The yelling, laughing, and screaming died down after each float passed. When I looked back to the parade, my eyes locked onto those of a man with black, piercing eyes, a swimmer's body, and James Bond good looks. He was standing still and staring at me. I have a weakness for the tall, athletic type with a great tan. The formal wear was a bonus.

He wore a tuxedo like all the club members and he stood in the middle of the street, not at the curb working the women for kisses. He didn't have a drink or carry a cane of flowers. He held a few paper carnations in one hand. His confident demeanor and blatant attention caused me to catch my breath.

We stood there looking at each other for what felt like an eternity. I have no idea how much time passed from this moment on.

I knew I was going to kiss him. He never waved or gestured for me to come over. He just stood there, staring. He never took his eyes off me. No one had ever looked at me with such intensity. I didn't remember handing my glass to Julia. I didn't remember my feet moving. I glided in a trance. Some invisible force locked onto me and transported me to him, into the street, the noise, the music, and yelling—away from my parents, friends, boyfriend's parents, and Dante. I moved along a straight line in the direction of his face. People moved out of my way without bumping or touching me.

Everything around me—people, noise, music—faded away. I felt alone with him in the middle of St. Charles Avenue. Everything went silent as I glided up and stopped toe-to-toe, face-to-face with him, in the middle of a parade with people teeming all around us. In our quiet space, I could hear him breathing. I could smell him, not his cologne . . . him. The way he smelled made my skin tingle. He never unlocked his eyes from mine as he put his right hand around my waist and pulled me into him. I ran my hands up his arms and rested them on his shoulders. He moved his face to me and put his mouth on mine. Our bodies melted into each other, a perfect, comfortable fit. I don't know how

long it lasted. It was long, slow, hot—unlike any kiss I have ever had in my life.

My right leg bent up at the knee all by itself. I don't know how long I stood there in the street, in a bubble, in the kiss, on one foot. It could have been a minute or an hour. Everything stopped. We were alone in a world that belonged only to us. The rest of the parade—bands, floats, revelers, everything—just disappeared.

Then, I felt his face moving away from mine. He placed his warm giant hand behind my neck to turn my head. His lips brushed my ear and he whispered, "Meet me at the end of the parade."

His warm breath in my ear sent a heat wave down to my toes. As our faces moved apart, he pressed all the flowers he held into my hand with the intensity of his look. The kiss ended and the parade, with the thousands of people and noise, began to fade back into my awareness. The sounds and movement crescendoed until it resumed its original pitch. I could hear a policeman saying to him, "OK, lover boy, let's keep it moving, before I have to call a fire truck." The same policeman said to me, "You have to get behind the curb, Miss." He moved The Kisser along, grabbed my elbow and guided me to the curb. I knew the cop's voice and he knew my name. Why was he calling me "Miss?"

I looked around as I left the bubble. The voice belonged to Dante's partner, Joe.

When I got back to my spot standing next to Julia, my mother leaned over and said to me, "Brandy, you made a spectacle of yourself." What an accomplishment—since my competition was a Mardi Gras parade. Then she turned and walked back to stand with my dad. Dad was smiling at me until my mother gave him the look.

"Brandy, are you OK?" Suzanne asked. "You look like Dante popped you with his stun gun."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine."

Julia started prying to find out what he said in my ear. I told her. Ignoring the disapproving looks from my mother, Dante's parents, and all the neighbors who came to the parade, I decided to meet him. Normally, I don't believe in a kiss at first sight. But, as I was drawn into the street for the kiss, I felt similarly drawn to go to the Municipal Auditorium where the parade would end to find him. Dante didn't look at me. I had already forgotten his instructions from earlier in the evening to go straight home after the parade. He told me the police had it on good authority that there may be problems tonight with the crowd.

I had to find out why I had connected so intimately and without hesitation with the man I had

kissed—in front of a thousand people, no less. I couldn't blame my actions on drinking. I didn't taste liquor in his kiss and Julia took my untouched plastic flute from me when I started moving to the street. What are friends for, if not to hold your drink while you make a spectacle of yourself?

Before the last float approached, Julia and I left so we could make it to the Municipal Auditorium, where the parade would disband. Where the parade ends always looks like a scene right out of a Godzilla movie, with the Japanese fleeing the monster in mass hysteria. The traffic, people, animals, police cars, floats, bands, equipment and riders all scrambled. Everyone was pushing, shoving, and cursing to get to the next party, a carnival ball, or home. A free-for-all didn't begin to describe it.

I found him. I found him right away. The necktie he wore with the tuxedo hung untied around his neck. He looked at me at the same time I spotted him and he broke into a heart-melting smile. He was even better looking when he smiled. I couldn't stop the heat rising up my body to my face or the smile I felt spreading from ear to ear. He was walking away from me at a 45-degree angle, and without losing a beat to change direction his next step moved in the direction of my face. This

was easier than I thought. It felt as if the cone of silence that enveloped us while kissing was going to work again.

Julia stood right next to me and pointed over my shoulder saying, "There he is!" She sounded as if she were off in the distance.

Our eyes remained glued on each other as he continued making his way toward me. Again, I didn't need to push and shove. People just moved out of the path we made to each other. As we came face-to-face, we both reached out our hands to take the others. Just as we touched hands, and before I could even ask his name, or tell him mine, a shot was fired. The sound of the gun exploded next to my head.

Everyone went berserk, running into us from every direction. We never lost eye contact as he went down to the ground. When he pulled me to my knees along with him, I saw the blood all over his shirt. He pulled me in close to his face, squeezed my hands and gasped, "Please, help me. Please save Isabella." Then he passed out.

The police were everywhere.

Chapter Two

I HADN'T EXPECTED that night to spin out of control the way it did. It had started out like any other Friday after work. I planned a quick stop by the animal shelter to drop off some newspapers on my way home. Besides dropping off the papers, I made a pickup, which wasn't uncommon for me. I couldn't look the other way, especially for a sad dog no one wanted. Dealing with another dog was going to make me late to meet my friends for the parade and I had to sneak it past my mother.

"Shhhh. Stay quiet now," I whispered to the little dog inside the pet carrier. The car door seemed a lot bigger when I put the dog crate in here at the shelter.

I was leaning into the car, struggling with the crate, when a man leaned over me and I felt his breath on my neck. "You should try to be more stealthy if you don't want to get caught," he said as he grabbed me around the waist.

I spun around ready to start punching when I

realized who the voice belonged to. “Dante, you scared me, I almost screamed.” I never noticed his squad car parked there when I had pulled into our driveway. Dante’s stealthiness and equanimity came courtesy of U.S. Military training. If you asked him exactly what he did on his tour, he changed the subject or flat out ignored the question and then walked off.

“Do you want my mother to see me with another dog?” I started struggling with the dog crate again.

“Really, Brandy? She is going to see it and hear it,” he said. “You live in the same house.”

“Why are you home anyway? Did you lose your parade?” I asked, annoyed that he didn’t try to help me with the crate. He stood there and watched me wrestle it out of the car.

He waited until I gave him my undivided attention as we stood face to face with the dog crate between us. “We got a lunch break after ten hours of work and I’ll probably work another ten hours, so I came home to change into a clean uniform. I’ll see you at the parade in the usual spot, but come straight home after. I can’t meet you tonight. At roll call we were briefed to stay on another two hours after the parade. At roll call, the Lieutenant said they are expecting trouble and they want us on

duty in case it goes down.”

His tired face leaned into mine and kissed me on the cheek. “You smell like King Cake,” he said. “Randazzo’s?”

“Yes, I passed it on the way home and have two in the front seat. Want some?”

“It only looks like one and a half King Cakes. You’ve been sampling?”

“Just doing a quality control check to make sure it meets my King Cake standards, and I gave some to Fido here to make friends. He was hungry.” I leaned in and broke off a chunk for him to take with him. When I came out of the car he was holding the crate, so I stuck the King Cake in his mouth and he transferred the carrier to me.

“I gotta run,” he said, chewing. “I’ll see you at the parade. Maybe tomorrow night we can grab a bite.” He walked off and got in his squad car. As he drove away, he leaned out the window, turned the police search light on me and announced over the loudspeaker, “Brandy Alexander go straight home. Remember what I told you.”

The entire neighborhood heard what my marching orders were. The back door to the house creaked and I couldn’t hold it open and get the crate in at the same time. I was struggling again when it flew open and there stood our housekeeper

of the last umpteen years.

Woozie held the door with one hand, the other on her hip, pressing her back to the frame to allow me to squeeze past. “Oh Sweet Jesus, you done brought home another stinky dog. Your mama gonna pitch a conniption fit.”

“Shhh,” I was trying to keep Woozie quiet. “I’m trying to get this guy in and cleaned up before she sees it.”

“Brandy, your mama got eyes in the ceiling, and these walls are paper thin. Everybody hears everything about everybody else in this house. She already knows you got that dog. Thank Gawd I’m finished for today and needs to catch me the Magazine bus before all you crazy people going to the parade get streets shut down.” Woozie was a true ‘Yat’ and pronounced most words starting with ‘th’ with a ‘d’. This, that, these and those sounded like dis, dat, dese and dose.

“I’m supposed to go to the parade too, with Julia. I’m late ’cuz I had to go get this little guy.”

“Cuz you had to get another dog?” Woozie tipped her head side-to-side with every word mimicing me.

“He was left tied to the fence outside the shelter. I couldn’t leave him there or I’d have nightmares.”

“You gonna be living with the nightmare once your mama sees him.” She stood at the bottom step and nodded toward the living room where my mother was. Woozie blew me a kiss. “I read the cards for your mama and in there was one with your name on it. The Tarot said, ‘Brandy, stay home.’ You should stay home tonight or you might catch your death of cold. Good luck with that mutt.” She left with the big shopping bag she carried around with her like a purse. Woozie lugged it around with her everywhere she went. The only thing I ever saw her take in or out of the shopping bag was a deck of Tarot cards.

Woozie read the Tarot every time she came to clean. It seemed she made up the predictions depending on what was happening that day. If we doubted something in the cards, she pulled out a crystal on a silk cord and let it circle around a few times by way of confirming her reading. While none of us put any stock in Woozie’s superstitions, we minded not to tell her as much.

I hoped her comments about the dog were being drowned out by the ruckus at the front of the house. Someone was hammering away on the front door and it set the dogs off barking while I tried to sneak in the back. Maybe my mother hadn’t heard us. From the hall I could see the drama unfolding

in the living room.

“Come in, it’s open,” Dad bellowed from his Lazy Boy command center over the yapping dogs.

Julia entered in broadcast mode and could be heard throughout our house. I stood in the hallway and tried to get Julia’s attention without alerting my mother. Julia fired off questions, asking how they were, were they going to the parade, was I home yet and was this all the dogs I had rescued? Her questions ran together like they were all somehow related. She asked the dogs questions, too, and didn’t wait for anyone to answer her. “Get back, you little wild Nicki Hokies. I’m not chasing you up the street in these four-inch heels. Gawd, it is cold tonight.” She stood five foot eleven inches before you added the four-inch heels and big hair.

Julia and I had worked together in sales at the phone company until a month ago when she was laid off. When I asked her what was a Nicki Hokie she responded it had to do with her Indian heritage and that was her tribe. Her outfits, too tight, too low cut, and too short for my mother’s approval, always met my dad’s. Tonight’s ensemble was a combination of animal prints. She looked like Peg Bundy slammed into Chris Owens on Bourbon Street. I tried to get Julia’s attention.

“If you covered your chest in clothes made for

this weather you might not be so cold,” my mother admonished Julia. My mother expressed her dissatisfaction with a look that could cut through cinder block. Julia ignored her. Seeing them spar reminded me of lady wrestlers circling each other vying for the best position to strike.

“If I covered my assets, I wouldn’t catch any beads. Y’all going to the parade with us?” Julia asked my dad, as she glared at me standing in the hall holding the crate.

“Brandy parked in the back. I heard her sneaking in the back door with another dog when Woozie left,” my mother told her. Except for vital exchanges of information or a chance at a back-handed insult, my mother and Julia ignored each other.

Great, she knew. So much for the element of surprise, I thought.

“C’mon, I need to change before we leave,” I said to Julia. Dad got up and followed saying, “You two better step on it. I just saw the trouble truck through the front window go by right before you knocked.” Dad took his self-appointed job as parade monitor seriously. From his Lazy Boy Operations Post in front of the Camp Street window, he could see when the parade’s trouble truck passed. Spotting this truck allowed him to

announce the parade's estimated time of arrival. The trouble truck, outfitted with a pole indicating the tallest point of the parade, assessed overhead clearance for the floats to pass safely along under a tree, power line, or bridge. Once the truck passed, the parade was just minutes away. At any moment we would hear motorcycle sirens blasting, clearing people out of the street to make way for the beginning of the parade. We would have to hurry to get there for the start of it.

My apartment sat in back of the main house down the hall from the living room, and shared the side entrance. Julia said it was within "snooping distance" of my mother so she could hear me change my mind. Dad and Julia checked out the dog.

Julia gushed over the furry black ball while the dog wiggled in her arms. Then she held him out at arm's length. "He kinda stinks," she put the dog down and looked for somewhere to wash her hands. "His hair looks like dreadlocks. Why don't you name him Bob Marley? Are you sure he is a Schnauzer?"

"Yes, he's a Schnauzer and his name is . . .," I said trying to think of one.

"Go Cup," my dad finished for me. "With a name like Go Cup your mother will think he won't

be here long. You girls get going to the parade. I'll take care of this little guy." He continued to give the dog a vigorous head petting. "Boy, you do stink but you can't help it, can you? I'll get you cleaned up."

"Go Cup is all right, I guess, but spell it G-e-a-u-x instead of Go," I said. "I'd planned to bathe him, but the parade traffic was awful. I found him tied to the fence outside the shelter."

My calling to do animal rescue came from Dad. He was always bringing home strays. When I was in sixth grade, Dad brought home a little black Schnauzer mix I named Cricket Ann. She lived with me for fifteen years. When she went to the Big Milk Bone in heaven, I decided I wanted a dog as close to her size and personality as possible. At the shelter, there was a full-bred black Schnauzer that looked just like her. I named him Meaux Jeux and he put paw prints on my heart the second I saw him. Meaux ruled over everyone in our house, even my mother who made overtures of disapproval when it came to the dogs. But I would see her sneak scraps to Meaux under the table during dinner.

"What are you wearing?" Julia asked, not waiting for me to answer my dad.

"I'll groom him when I get home if you'll bathe him," I said to Dad. "I'm wearing this," I said to

Julia, stepping out the bathroom in a turtleneck and jeans.

“No, wear that scoop-neck sweater that shows some cleavage,” Julia said.

“You know we can’t keep another dog. Your mother . . .” Dad was trying to change the conversation back to the dog.

“I know. Four dogs are three over the limit.” Raising my right hand up and placing my left hand over my heart, I made the pledge. “I will go on record and say I plan to find this one a home.” To Julia I added, “I’m wearing parade colors,” as I pulled out a purple sweater and stepped back into my bathroom to change into it along with the matching lace bra and thong underwear as well. If someone was going to look down my sweater, I wanted them to know I had fashion sense. I put on a jacket and zipped it up to avoid my mother’s disapproving look on my way out the door.

“After you move into your own place you can rescue all the dogs you want,” Julia said.

“Are you moving out?” Dad’s head snapped up as he blurted out the question aimed at my bathroom door.

“Baby birds are supposed to leave the nest, right?” I said stepping back into my room making flapping movements with my arms in an attempt to

amuse him.

“Well, I just thought you’d move out after you and Dante got married,” he said looking back at the dog and not making eye contact with me. Julia gave me an eye roll and head nod toward the door.

“Well, I’d like to know I could make it on my own first. I’ve been thinking of getting an apartment, one that’s dog friendly.” I couldn’t look at Dad. I didn’t want to see the sad look in his eyes that matched the sound in his voice. We both knew it was high time for me to be making a life on my own. I needed to get out of my parents’ home, but according to my mother, nice girls didn’t move out until they were married. I hurried and said, “OK, Julia, let’s go. Danielle and Suzanne are meeting us there, and they’re saving us a good spot on Lee Circle.” I didn’t want Dad asking any more marriage questions.

“Try not to get into trouble or bring home any more dogs,” my mother said as I kissed her goodbye.

Nodding his head toward my rear apartment, Dad said, “Your Mother and I will meet you in our usual spot. You girls go on now and don’t worry about . . .”

“The stinky dog,” my mother said finishing his sentence. “I guess you better feed it along with the

other three after you bathe it. What did you name it?”

Outside, I picked up our pace to adjust to the chill in the damp night air. Woozie was right. It was a good night to catch a cold and to stay home. My parents’ house was one block off St. Charles Avenue, the major Mardi Gras parade route. We crossed the street and walked past St. Teresa’s Church. All of us, my sister, Dante, all Dante’s brothers, all the families on the block, had made our First Communion, Confirmation, and saw each other there every Sunday at Mass.

I heard the thunderous approach of the motorcycle escorts. They revved their engines and it sounded like they were only a couple of blocks away.

“You know Dante will be there on St. Charles Avenue at Lee Circle. He arranges his parade assignment so we can watch the parade together,” I said.

Julia did an eye roll that made her look like she was going into a coma. “He gets himself assigned where you tell him you’re going to meet your friends so he can keep an eye on you. He’s on duty, so he’s watching for criminals or listening to that chatter from the radio in his ear. You’re in the same place at the same time. Big difference. You get to

“speak to him in between radio talk? Sounds like fun. Between him, your dad, and your mother, you are never going to get laid.”

“Dante is just right for me.”

“Don’t you mean just right next door? Didn’t look too far for Mr. Right, did you? You should be looking for Mr. Show Me The World not settling for Mr. Right Next Door.”

Ouch. Just for that I will wait until the end of the night to tell her she missed a loop with her belt at the back of her pants. In retrospect she will think her night was ruined.

She looked around the crowd and added, “I don’t see my friends from work.”

“Work? Which work?” I asked. After Julia had been laid off from the phone company she found work at The Club Bare Minimum in the French Quarter as an exotic dancer. This was information my mother never needed to know.

“I have other friends, you know, not just dancers from my current occupation. You should try the night club dancing scene. You might like it. We make great money in tips. Ask Suzanne.”

“I should take my clothes off and dance naked in front of men for money?” I asked, with as much seriousness as I could muster.

“It’s sounds bad when you say it like that. It’s a

better workout than going to the gym, and I make a few hundred a night. Besides, it would be fun to see your mother go over the edge.”

We pushed through the crowd that swelled in the street, overflowed onto the sidewalks and up the steps of Lee Circle. We found Suzanne holding a place for us.

“I’m glad you made it” Suzanne said, smiling. “I was worried you were gonna miss the parade. It’s a big crowd tonight. Everybody and his dog is here. Dante told us you brought home another one.”

The busybody hotline was working overtime. My business was on the street before me. Julia was right. I needed to get my own place.

The Flambeaux carriers danced up the street while they twirled poles of fire. The tradition started when floats were drawn by mules or horses instead of trucks with generators. The carriers wrapped their heads and hands in rags to protect themselves from spewing kerosene as they danced and spun the poles. The crowd tossed them money for the entertainment. The real skill required the carrier to bend over in the street, pick up the quarters and not drop or spill kerosene into the crowd or onto the carrier in front of them. Even with all its possibility for calamity, I hoped this was a tradition that would never disappear or be

replaced.

Julia said, "Their dancing, if you can call it dancing, is obscene."

This from a pole dancer? I spotted Dante and waved to get his attention. We made eye contact and I blew him a kiss. He smiled a weary smile until he noticed Julia and the smile faded into his work face. The police worked sixteen-hour days for two to three weeks until Carnival Season ended.

Police vehicles blasted sirens urging people to get behind the curb. Immediately after they passed, like water seeking its own level, the crowd flowed back into the street. Revelers danced, drank, and boys carried girls on their shoulders to get a better view of the parade. Next came the mounted patrol. They rode shoulder to shoulder and spread across the street curb to curb. They followed the squad cars and blew whistles at the same people who just moved out of the cars' path and right into theirs. The horses pushed the same people behind the curb, again.

The Shriners' motorcycle escort thundered by next. Engines roared and revved, lunging forward to keep the open spaces in the parade short. On the sidewalks, vendors pushed along carts of roasted peanuts and cotton candy behind the crowd. The food smells intertwined and wafted in the air. Even

with the combined smell of horses, motorcycles, and exhaust, the cotton candy and peanut aromas made sales over the noise of the sirens and whistles. I heard the St. Augustine Marching One Hundred High School Band before I saw them. The horn section wailed out their fight song to the crowd who cheered them on.

Julia's favorite part of the parade approached—the gentlemen's walking clubs. These organizations consisted of men—young men, old men, and all ages in between. Even though the parade rolled at 6:30 P.M., all the Mardi Gras Krewes or clubs started their day at 8 A.M. with a breakfast of Bloody Marys or champagne cocktails. The official start of the parade kicked off the real drinking.

That was when I saw him, when I kissed a man I didn't know as if he were leaving to fight a war.