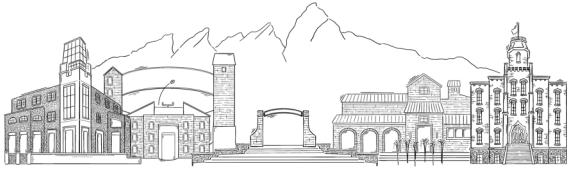


3



From the red brick walkway to the trees sending their dappled shadows over the benches underneath, to the colorful storefronts and awnings over tons of shiny windows, Pearl Street surpassed Skye's expectations. People milled around, filling tables outside restaurants, strolling past shops, and sitting anywhere they could find a spot. And on every block, the aroma of something yummy, be it coffee or bread or real food, had Skye's stomach protesting that they hadn't stopped yet.

"What kind of food are you in the mood for?" Benjamin's hand rested on her lower back as he steered them around a couple of women who were window shopping.

"I honestly don't care." She stepped a bit farther from him so he had to remove his hand. "What's good?"

"Everything." He chuckled. "A lot of the places down here are local, and most of them use fresh, in-season ingredients. It's hard to go wrong."

"You don't have a favorite, then?"

“I have several favorites, but I don’t mind trying something new.”

Was he admitting to being adventurous? Just when she’d thought she had him completely pegged, he threw another stone into her picture, sending ripples through the image until it blurred again. Time to shake him up, then. See if he really was as adventurous as he thought he was.

“Okay. I have an idea.”

“Okay.” No hint of doubt or uncertainty tinged his voice.

“Next person we see carrying a takeout box—whatever restaurant it’s from is where we’ll eat.” She watched for his reaction.

He rubbed his hands together and scanned the crowd. “Let’s do this.”

Really?

Of course, now that she’d suggested it, no one carried anything by but shopping bags. She tilted her head to read the words on one dangling from a stroller, but it looked like a coffee shop. Had she come up with a plan that wouldn’t work?

“There!” Benjamin tugged her arm and headed toward a couple walking the other way.

No logo showed on the bag, but the contents were obviously take-home containers. Okay. She followed his lead.

“Excuse me.” Benjamin waved them down and gave a friendly smile when they turned, looking confused. “Sorry, but we were wondering where you ate dinner tonight.”

The woman glanced at the man and gave a shrug.

“Just over there.” He pointed back a ways and said a name Skye couldn’t understand.

“Thanks so much. It smelled so good, we thought we’d try it.” Benjamin turned a cheeky grin to Skye and motioned her back toward the restaurant. “Right this way.”

“You know this place?”

“I’ve heard of it. Some of my coworkers gush about it all the time, but I’ve never checked it out.” He stopped in front of an orange door. “Hope you’re in the mood for curry.”

Inside, middle-Eastern music mingled with spicy scents and happy chatter. Skye breathed deeply, appreciating the mirrors on the walls that enhanced the candlelit tables and booths. When the hostess asked if they had a preference for seating, Benjamin requested a patio table, though.

Exactly what she’d have chosen if he’d asked.

“Two mango lassi, please.” His reply was quick when the server asked what they’d like to drink.

“Did you just order for me?” Skye frowned at him over her menu.

“Sorry. It’s my favorite drink when I eat Indian food, so I didn’t even think about the fact that you might want something different.”

“What is it, exactly?”

“It’s this mango yogurt drink they have. Super creamy and nice. Especially nice when the heat of the curry hits.”

“I would never have picked you for a guy who liked Indian food.”

“Or someone who drives a fifty-seven Chevy. Or someone who would run up to a stranger just to ask what they’d eaten for dinner.” He didn’t even look up from his menu as he stated all her shattered preconceived notions from this evening.

Rather than give him the satisfaction of answering, she studied the menu, reading the descriptions of each dish. “I have no idea what some of these things are.”

“I haven’t eaten here before, but at the other places I’ve eaten, I’ve figured out a few things I like. I would offer to order for you, but you didn’t seem to appreciate it the last time.” He winked.

She couldn't keep the small laugh from escaping. "I just wasn't expecting it."

"Here's a sampler platter. And it's probably enough food to share, if you want. Then, if we have room, we can grab some ice cream before heading back to Rain's house."

"I always have room for ice cream." Her finger traced the different dishes in the sampler and then found the longer descriptions to figure out what they were. "Okay. Let's do that."

"Here's your mango lassi. Are you ready to order?" The waitress set two cups of bright orange liquid in front of them.

Benjamin glanced at her with a grin before telling the waitress what they'd decided. "And can we get a basket of naan?"

"Of course."

He handed her their menus and settled back to sip his drink. "Perfect."

Skye wasn't about to let him know this unexpected side of him daunted her. Normally when she dated, she was the one suggesting new things or putting the other person in unusual circumstances. Today he'd turned the tables.

"What made you decide to come work with Rain? You didn't sound enthused about the job."

She scowled for a moment. "It's sort of a compromise for now."

"How's that?"

"My father said I need a job. I didn't have one lined up. He threatened to take my car. Rain offered a position for the summer until I can figure out what I want to do." She traced the curves in the patterned tile on their tabletop. "I hadn't seen Colorado yet, except during a quick family Christmas right after Rain got married, so I decided it would work as well as anything."

"But you don't really like wedding planning."

“Don’t get me wrong. I can see where there’s a market for it. But I don’t understand why. Why focus so much on one day?” She took a drink of her mango thing and enjoyed the tangy creaminess. If he was right about the rest of their dinner, too, she might have to come back here again before she left at summer’s end.

“What are you hoping for when looking for a job?”

A sigh escaped, and she leaned back in her wrought-iron chair. “I don’t know. Nothing sounds fun to me.”

“Fun again, huh?”

“Yes. Fun.” She rolled her eyes. “Is there something so bad about wanting to enjoy the job you’re stuck in for the rest of your life?”

“Not at all.” He took another drink. “That’s why I chose law. I love to prove my point, and my mom always told me I should put my argumentativeness to good use. So I took her advice. Now I get paid to argue.”

Another giggle escaped. What was wrong with her? Was she really enjoying hanging out with an attorney? Obviously, the thinner air here in Colorado was messing with her head.

“But don’t you find the long hours behind a desk tedious? How can you stand to be inside all day long when you’re surrounded by all this?” She motioned to the mountains hovering over them. “I’m not sure I could handle it.”

The waitress set several dishes in front of them, along with extra plates. “Enjoy.”

“Thank you.” Benjamin waited until she left again and then offered his hand. “Pray with me?”

She hesitated for a moment before slipping her fingers over his and bowing her head.

One more hurdle overcome. Benjamin hadn't been sure she'd agree to hold hands during the prayer, but her dainty fingers rested on his while he offered a short blessing. He squeezed her hand as he raised his head.

"Let's dig in." He picked up her plate and scooped out a bit of everything.

"What is all this?" She used her fork to poke at the lamb.

"That one is lamb, I think. It's a curry, so it's got a little spice. Same for the chicken. That one is the mango chutney. This is a vegetable samosa. And that is naan, which is a flatbread."

"Okay."

He held his breath while she chewed her first bite. Her lips turned up into a smile more genuine than he'd seen yet, and all the tension he hadn't realized he'd been holding slipped away. Simply finding a meal she enjoyed felt like a huge accomplishment.

Something about this whirlwind of a girl who couldn't seem to find anything to land on made him want to convince her to stay right here. As if he could offer her enough adventure and excitement to overcome whatever else might pull her away. Not if he couldn't find a job she considered 'fun.' To say nothing of her adamant opposition to being in a serious relationship—ever.

The cards were definitely stacked against him. But she was the first girl he'd desired to impress since ninth grade. And that had to mean something.

"So, you like arguing and old trucks and aren't afraid to try new foods." Skye pointed at him with her fork.

"Does all that fit with my 'old-man name'?" He smirked as he took a big bite out of his samosa.

"Make fun all you want, but you know I'm right." She tore off a piece of naan and used it to sop up some of the chutney.

“And the thing about it is, I can’t even shorten it. Because Ben sounds more like an old man than Benjamin. And Benji just sounds like a dog or something.”

He choked on his drink, the cool liquid burning the inside of his nose.

“Sorry!” She passed him an extra napkin.

“Just wasn’t expecting to go from a geezer to a dog like that.” He swiped at the tears in his eyes. “I’ll be sure to let my mom know how much you appreciate her passing the family name on to me.”

“You won’t really!” Her head jerked up.

“Of course not.” He set the napkin aside and took another drink. “But you have to admit, you’re being a bit ridiculous about this. I mean, Benjamin was the youngest of Jacob’s sons in the Bible.”

“But in the Bible, they had all sorts of names we wouldn’t give our kids today.” She shook her head. “That doesn’t count at all.”

Had she said ‘our kids’ meaning his and hers together or just in general? He wasn’t about to ask. Not when her armor was finally slipping a bit.

“I guess I’ll get used to it eventually, but you don’t hear many *young* guys with that name anymore.” She scooped up the last bite of her meal and then sat back with her last chunk of bread.

“You’d have to be around it pretty regularly to get used to it.” He raised an eyebrow as he polished off the rest of his own plate.

“You know what I meant.” She tossed her bread at him.

“I don’t know. I mean, we’ve only known each other a few days. I probably can’t pick up on all the nuances of how you talk.” He smirked.

She opened her mouth with a protest he was sure would be a

zinger, but the waitress chose that moment to bring their check. He took care of it, noticing Skye never offered to help pay even if he'd been willing to let her. Did she consider this a date or simply her right as someone who'd admitted to being unemployed?

They stood and made their way back through the restaurant and out into the evening. He wasn't quite ready to take her back to Rain's house yet. Not when they'd made such headway in her letting the real Skye show. Hopefully she wouldn't notice he kept their pace closer to a stroll than a walk.

"So ... ice cream?" She shot him a half-grin.

"You really have room for ice cream after that dinner we just ate?" He patted his own stomach, still full of naan.

"I told you. I always have room for ice cream." She paused outside a boutique with windows full of boho-style clothes.

"You want to go look?"

"I probably shouldn't. But that top is really cute." She pointed to a blouse with flowers all over the upper half.

"I could see something like that on you."

"Honestly, I probably have one similar in my wardrobe back home. But I only brought part of it for now. Crammed in Rain's guest bedroom, I don't have quite as much space as in my father's house."

The way she referred to her dad sounded so formal. He almost asked her about it but held off. Something told him she wasn't ready yet.

"If you'd rather, we could get coffee." He pointed to one of his favorite spots.

"Caffeine and me this late in the day is not a good combination."

"I would've figured you wouldn't care about that. Just give you more time to have fun."

"Here's a little secret about me." She leaned closer, and he

held his breath, waiting to see what was about to come out. “I like sleep too much to make that risk worth it.”

He exhaled with a laugh. “Got it. How about tea? There’s a nice tea place just up ahead.”

“Not really a tea girl, either. Never have acquired a taste for it. It’s like drinking dirty water.” She wrinkled her pert little nose.

“Maybe you just haven’t had a good cup yet.”

She shook her head. “I think we should just stick to ice cream.”

“Right this way.” He motioned toward the other side of the road. “There’s a place over here that was featured on one of those TV shows about amazing food all over the country.”

“Must be good.” She followed him through the glass door and took a deep breath.

“Their waffle cones are the best.”

“They smell amazing. Got a favorite flavor?” Her eyes scanned the menu board.

“Let’s see what’s available today. They only do so many flavors each day, so you never know what you’ll get to choose from.”

“Mm. Blueberry white chocolate chip sounds good.”

“Agreed.” He pointed to the Daily Specials board. “And we’re in luck. It’s on the list.”

“Okay.” She gave a quick nod. “That’s what I want. In a waffle cone.”

“No crazy way of picking a flavor or asking a person what they just chose or anything else?” He stared at her, waiting to see if she would change her mind.

“Nope. I’m good.”

“Okay, then.”

They moved forward in the line and placed their orders.

She didn't even glance in the case to see if another flavor caught her eye. Yet another side of Skye he hadn't expected.

At her first big bite, she actually sighed. He couldn't help but grin and watch her enjoying her treat. Her eyes widened when she noticed him.

"You're about to drip."

"What?" He glanced at his cone. "Oh. Thanks."

"Should we eat while we walk? Surely Rain will be home by now."

"All right. But since we're down here anyway, we should walk by the *Mork and Mindy* house on the way."

"The what house?" Her head jerked in his direction.

"The house where they filmed *Mork and Mindy*. You know? The old TV show?"

"Never heard of it." She nibbled the edge of her cone.

"It was this sitcom about an alien who came to earth and ended up living with Mindy, who sort of took care of him and showed him the ropes about living on earth. Had, um, oh, what's his name?" He pounded his palm against his head for a moment. "Robin Williams."

She shrugged. "I guess we can go by there, if it's that important to you."

He chuckled but led the way. Several blocks later, they stood in front of the old Victorian house. Skye tilted her head as she studied it.

"It's pretty."

"I've always thought so."

"Still doesn't trigger any memories of this strange show, though."

"I guess my parents liked to watch reruns more than yours." He finished off his cone and licked his fingers.

"Probably. Nothing but the latest and greatest for my

father.” She whipped out her phone and swiped across the screen. “Let’s take a selfie since we’re here.”

“What?”

“Don’t you take selfies? You said this was a famous place. Let’s document it.” She turned to where her back was to the house and held the phone out before glancing over where he remained facing the other way. “Come on.”

He turned around and leaned in close.

“Say, ‘Random old sitcom house!’” She pushed the sing-songy words through her smile.

“Nanu-Nanu.” Benjamin held his hands up like Mork used to as she snapped the picture.

“What was that?”

“It’s what Mork used to say.”

“If you’re the alien, I guess that means I’m the human who has to take care of you?” She glanced both ways down the sidewalk.

“Something like that.”

“Um. Which way to Rain’s house? I’m a bit turned around.”

He chuckled before turning her to their right. “Here we go. Maybe this alien has a better sense of direction.”

“Or something.” They were fairly quiet on the way back.

Every now and then, she exclaimed over a flower she wasn’t familiar with—especially the tall pink ones that looked like giant puff-balls. Toward the end of the walk, she paused a few times to adjust her sandals and rub her heels. He hadn’t considered how unused to walking she might be.

“Here we are.”

She glanced up the steep driveway and sighed. “Only a giant mountain left to climb before I can get rid of these shoes.”

“You’ve got this.” He wove her arm through his. “Come on.”

“Thanks for this evening. It was surprisingly fun.”

“Glad I could brighten your humdrum life.” He tugged her as she slowed near the top. “Almost there.”

“You must think I’m some spoiled little rich girl.”

“Nah.” He let go as she touched the handle of the back door. “Just someone I find fascinating.”

After he climbed in his truck, he glanced over his shoulder and discovered her still watching him. He shot a wink her way before backing up and easing down the driveway. And wondered what other excuses he could find to go to Happily Ever After over the next few weeks. Being in two weddings next month, surely someone needed him to do something there.