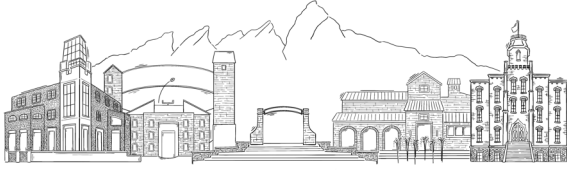


2



All things considered, Benjamin probably could've handled this errand with a phone call. That being said, he found himself standing in front of Happily Ever After on Friday afternoon anyway. Might as well go on in.

As soon as he stepped in the door, the woman who hadn't been far from his mind the last four days looked up from her perch behind the counter. If she held any ill will from their last interaction, she gave no indication. Instead, she straightened and flashed him a smile.

"How can I help you today?"

"My sister asked me to touch base with Rain about something for her wedding next month."

"Rain is meeting with a bride right now, but she'll be down soon. Or I can give her a message."

He leaned against his side of the counter. "I can wait."

"Suit yourself." Skye returned her attention to the magazine she'd been flipping through, some bridal periodical, full of fluffy dresses and overdone flowers.

“Planning something for your future?” He pointed to the page that held her attention.

“Doing homework.” Skye turned to the next gown.

“I had no idea bridal magazines counted as homework. Will there be a test?” He kept his voice light, hoping to draw back out her feisty side he’d seen on Monday.

“Knowing my sister, probably. Though I can’t figure out why anyone would want to go through all of this. Even if I had an inkling of desire to get married someday—which I don’t—I wouldn’t want such a production. Eloping sounds more my style.”

Who was this girl? Had he ever met one who willingly suggested elopement instead of a regular wedding? Or who had no dreams of finding a forever relationship?

“You don’t want to get married someday?” He tried to come across as nonchalant, but curiosity urged him to ask more questions. “No boy back home keeping the telephone wires hopping with his nightly calls and words of missing you?”

“Oh, no. I don’t have relationships. I only have *flirts*.”

“Wait. Did you just call yourself a flirt?”

“No, silly. I said I only had FLIRTS.” She held a finger up for each letter. “Fun Living in Right This Second.”

He mouthed the words as he made sure they really did correspond with each letter.

“No plans for the future? No dreams of settling down?”

“Nah. I’m more of a live-in-the-moment kind of girl. Having plans takes the spontaneity out of life—makes it dull.” She turned another page as if everything on it were the dullest thing imaginable.

“That can’t be true.” The attorney in him was coming out, wanting to plead his case.

“Can’t it?” She flipped a strand of the longest, blondest hair

over her shoulder and raised a thin eyebrow. “Do you have fun doing whatever it is you do for a living in a suit like that?”

“A suit like this?” He plucked at his lapel. “What’s wrong with wearing a suit?”

“It usually comes with a stuffy job to match.” She motioned up and down the length of him with a perfectly manicured nail.

“I’m not sure I’d call being an attorney stuffy.” He straightened.

Had there ever been such a perplexing and vexing girl in the world? The more she spoke, the more he wanted to dig deeper and find out all the whys of what she said. But her burst of laughter kept him from traveling down the road of investigation.

“Oh, that’s rich.” She slapped the counter. “A lawyer. Just perfect.”

“I consider law my perfect occupation. I mean, I worked hard enough to get where I am today.”

“And you’ll be working just as hard for the rest of your life.” Skye shook her head. “If that doesn’t scream *humdrum* and *dull*, I don’t know what does.”

He probably should have been offended, but he simply found her ‘curiouser and curiouser,’ as Alice said in Wonderland. How had someone grown up in the same house as Rain Wilkes and turned out so completely different? Rain was fun-loving, too, for sure. But she also found pleasure in accomplishments and hard work.

“Your name is Skye, right?” He buried both hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels.

“Yes.”

“I guess your parents liked the weather, huh?”

That earned him a moment of attention. “Why do you say that?”

“Rain and Skye?” He tilted his head. “Both seem rather weather-y to me.”

“Mm. Or simply unique.” She blinked. “Forgive me, but I’ve forgotten your name. Only that it was some old-man one.”

He sputtered. “Old man?”

“Dennis or Dwayne or Bob or something that sounds like it should belong to one of those guys who go sit in the fast-food place and drink coffee all morning.” Her lips twitched as if she were testing him.

He unclenched his teeth. “It’s Benjamin.”

“Right. Like I said, an old-man name.” And, as if to show how unconcerned she was about it, she picked up another magazine from behind her and opened it.

“If you must know, it was my uncle’s name. And my grandfather’s.”

“So, you’re like, the third or something?”

Surely, she wasn’t really this dense? It had to be an act, right? Before he could figure it out, Rain walked down the stairs chatting with another lady.

The other customer laughed and shook Rain’s hand before heading out the door. Rain turned and beamed a smile at Benjamin.

“I hope I didn’t keep you long.”

“Just getting to know your sister a bit.” He’d let her take that any way she wished. Though he still wasn’t sure he’d actually gotten to know the real Skye. Simply the shallow shell she wore as her armor.

Rain glanced Skye’s way, lips pursed, before returning her attention to him. “Did we forget something the other day when you were here?”

“No. Actually, Amelia needed me to run by and pick up whatever it is you wanted her to see. She’s gone to visit Clark’s

family for the weekend and wanted to have it Sunday night when they get back.”

“Right. Let me go grab it really fast, and I’ll be right back.”

“Thanks.”

And back to the other conversation.

“If I’m going to be working so hard for the rest of my life, how will I ever find time to drink coffee with all the other boring old men?” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“Should’ve thought of that before you agreed to take the job.” Skye smirked.

“What does a girl with a ... unique name like Skye plan for her occupation? You said working for your sister was only temporary, right?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” She leaned back on the stool until her shoulders rested against the wall behind her. “But it’ll have to be something that isn’t the same every day. I need adventure and excitement and fun.”

“And what kind of job would bring all of that?”

“That’s the problem.” She shrugged. “I can’t figure out a job that would.”

“Here we go.” Rain came out from behind the curtain and handed him a large portfolio of some sort.

“Oof!” He bent his knees as the weight of the thing landed in his arms. “What on earth is this?”

“Everything I’ve pulled together on flowers, their meanings, and what goes well together. I also have notes about which smell the strongest versus hardly any scent at all. And which more people are allergic to.” Rain ticked the items off on her fingers as she listed them.

“Wow.” He repositioned it to a better angle. “That’s comprehensive.”

“I try to think of anything and everything I might be asked. Saves time in the long run. Just let her know I’ll need that back

later next week.” Rain glanced at her phone. “I have another bride who’ll need to make the same decisions then.”

“I’ll put a sticky note on it before I drop it at Mom’s.”

“Perfect.” She glanced over her shoulder at Skye, who continued to ignore—or at least pretend to ignore—what happened right in front of her. “Skye, can you mark that off my to-do list, please?”

Skye raised her eyes, studied her sister a moment, and then lazily picked up a pencil and drew a line through one of the lower items on the piece of paper to her left. “Is that it for today, Rain?”

“Sorry. I just got a message from a groom that he could rearrange his schedule and come in this evening. Looks like you’re on your own for dinner tonight.”

Skye huffed. “I realize it’s an hour earlier here than back home, but you keep really late dinner hours, Rain.”

“My business takes a lot of time. And with Jeremiah traveling with the baseball team more this summer, it works out for us. I don’t have to worry about getting home to feed him. And he understands it’s my busy season.” Rain had either forgotten Benjamin still stood there or simply trusted him to not care that this discussion was happening where he could hear it.

“Who knew a job you described as fun would actually just be a lot of work?” Skye propped her chin on her fist.

“It is fun.”

“Uh-huh. And so is Boulder, or so you said. But so far, all I’ve seen is the inside of this office and your house.”

Rain cut a glance his way, and suddenly he knew she’d remembered his presence the whole time. “I have an idea.”

Benjamin opened his mouth to object, but couldn’t actually form the words fast enough.

“Benjamin is a Boulder native. I bet he could show you

around.” Rain flashed him a smile. “Unless you had other plans.”

He swallowed an argument, and it settled like a lump of gruel in his gut. “No plans. I was actually about to go grab a bite to eat.”

If nothing else, this would allow him more time to ask some of the questions that arose from their earlier conversation.

Skye shook her head. “You’re kidding, right? You don’t just send your sister off with some guy who happens to be in two different weddings you’re planning.”

“He’s not just some guy. I’ve known Benjamin the whole time I’ve lived here.” Rain waved her hand through the air. “If I didn’t trust him, I wouldn’t have suggested it.”

“It’s still not right. I mean, he’s obviously only agreeing because you put him on the spot. He has no desire to spend more time with me than necessary.”

Benjamin stepped forward. “Actually—”

But Rain answered Skye before he could finish that statement. “Weren’t you the one who coerced two guys into joining your girls’ trip earlier this summer? Wasn’t that the story I heard?”

Of course, that would come back to bite her. Why had she boasted about including Camden and Ryan on that stupid road trip? Especially considering how that had ruined things for Bree and Nathan.

“What does that have to do with this?” She motioned between herself and Benjamin.

“I’m just saying that if you’re willing to go run around with strangers on a road trip a month ago, you should be more than

comfortable going to dinner with someone I've known for several years."

Skye opened her mouth, though unsure what other protest to make, but Rain cut her off anyway.

"Besides, if you don't go to dinner with him, you're stuck here until after I'm done with the groom who's coming in about fifteen minutes. Because you rode with me this morning."

And there went the nail into her coffin.

"It's settled, then." Benjamin straightened. "Did you need to do anything else, or are you ready to go?"

As much as she'd love to say she had other tasks to do, there was nothing but looking through more bridal magazines to familiarize herself with the trends. And her eyes had glazed over enough doing that the last half hour, so she couldn't remember half of what she'd seen. Might as well get this over with.

"Let's go." She hopped down and grabbed her purse before turning to her sister. "And I guess if anything happens to me, you can live with the guilt for the rest of your life."

"I'm willing to take my chances." Rain shook her head before shooing them out the door.

There were only a few vehicles in the parking lot as they headed out into the warm evening. Skye took in each make and model before heading toward a sporty black sedan. Benjamin cleared his throat.

She stopped and looked his way. He head-motoned in the opposite direction of where she'd been walking. But all that was on that side of the lot was an antique orange Chevy pickup truck. No. Surely not.

That didn't mesh with a single bit of the mental image she'd settled on since meeting him.

But Benjamin opened the passenger door for her and

waited until she walked over and climbed in. Though it was obviously ancient, it was well cared for. The leather on the bench seat had no tears or stains—had maybe even been refurbished. The dashboard was shiny as if cleaned on a regular basis. She ran her fingers over the material before she could help herself.

“Admiring my ride?”

“This is what you get around in?” She couldn’t keep the incredulity out of her voice.

“A bit sturdier than that little red roller skate you drive, isn’t she?” He patted the steering wheel and then cranked the engine.

“Roller skate?” Skye huffed. “Rosie is not a roller skate.”

“Mm-hmm.” He glanced over his shoulder and backed out.

“She’s not.” The leather she’d admired moments before didn’t give much when she slapped her hands on it.

“Agree to disagree.” He wove through traffic easily.

“I guess I should just be grateful you weren’t on your bike today.”

He snorted. “Not after almost getting hit the other day.”

She glanced out her window instead of facing him. “I really am sorry about that.”

“I shouldn’t have brought it up again. If you had to learn that lesson the hard way, at least it was me you learned it on—not some hothead.”

“You didn’t look very cool-headed when you shook your fist in my rear-view mirror Monday afternoon.” Her lips twitched.

“We’ll see how cool you stay if you almost get hit by a car someday.” One of his perfectly shaped brows rose as he glanced her way.

“Fair enough.” She settled back in the seat. “Where are we going?”

“I thought you might enjoy Pearl Street. It’s one of the areas Boulder is best known for. Lots of shopping and eateries.”

“That sounds fun.” The agreeable words escaped before she could stop them. Now she’d done it.

“Speaking of keeping your cool ...” He tossed her a look that had her squirming. “How about you drop the attitude now that no one else is around to impress?”

“The attitude?” Her spine straightened. “I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The act you put on back at Rain’s shop. All that malarkey about never wanting to get married or only wanting to have fun.” He circled his hand in the air. “You don’t have to show off anymore. I’d much rather get to know the real you.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but that is the real me.” She crossed her arms over her chest. The neighborhood around them looked familiar, but she couldn’t tell if it was because all the residential streets in this town looked similar or if she’d been down this road before.

“I’m not so sure.” Benjamin turned again, and this time Skye was sure she’d gone this way during the last few days.

“Are you sure you know where you’re going?” She spotted a few garden gnomes she’d seen that morning. “I thought you said we were headed to a place with shops and restaurants.”

“We are. But Pearl Street is pedestrian only. So, I thought we’d park up here and walk the few blocks down to it instead of trying to find one of the few parking spots available.” He pulled into her sister’s driveway.

“This is Rain’s house.”

“Yes, it is.” He drove up the hill and parked behind Skye’s car. “She told you we knew each other.”

“And just how do you know my sister?”

“We go to church together.” He hopped out and headed around the front of the truck.

She wiggled the door handle, but nothing budged. A good yank from him and the door opened, Skye almost tumbling out from the momentum. Benjamin caught her, one arm around her back and a hand at her waist.

“You okay?”

“Your door is tricky, huh?” She willed her heartbeat to slow down. It was just the craziness of almost falling several feet down to the driveway that had her pulse so erratic. Nothing to do with his muscled shoulders under her fingers.

“A truck that’s been around sixty-five years will do that.”

“I guess so.” She planted her feet and straightened.

After she stood on her own again, he slipped his suit coat off and tossed it in the seat before slamming the door.

“Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”