

Just Best Friends

A
FRANKLIN NOTCH
NOVEL



SARAH EVERLY

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For everyone who took this journey through Franklin Notch with me - my author friends, my ARC readers, my reviewers, and everyone reading this dedication. Thank you so much!

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CHAPTER 1

Ben

I PULLED MY JACKET TIGHT AROUND MY CHEST. FROM THE driveway, Delbert Jenkins waved, shifting the giant behemoth of a car into drive and easing his way down the oak-lined street into the darkness. The car lights grew smeared and bleary as it traveled away. I rubbed my eyes, unsure if the effect was because of exhaustion or drinking.

“Damn it,” Thea swore under her breath, voice slurring.

We stood in front of her door. She’d forgotten to turn the porch light on and a distant street lamp kept us from being enveloped in complete darkness. Her body swayed as she fumbled with her keys.

“You want me to get that?” I asked, craning around her fur-lined jacket to check her progress.

“No.” She swatted me impatiently, the keys falling out of her hand. They jangled as they bounced off the porch and into the bushes below. “Damn it.”

She dove after them, and nearly toppled off the porch, her too-high heels and celebratory drinks throwing her off balance. I wound an arm around her waist, preventing her from falling headfirst into the bushes below.

“Put me down, Benny. I wasn’t going to fall.” She punched my calf before I pulled her up to standing.

“You were,” I countered. “At least let me get my phone out so you have some light while you launch off the porch.”

“I had no intention of launching off the porch.” She sighed dramatically, running her fingers over the pleats of the sapphire blue dress she’d worn for our early birthday celebration. “And, as I recall, you’ve had a couple of drinks yourself, so I’d prefer it if you didn’t manhandle me.”

I rolled my eyes and pulled my keys out of my pocket, slotting the familiar worn brass key into the lock and twisting it open. “Manhandle you? Fine, next time I’ll let you fall into the bushes. And leave you there.”

Thea pushed open the door, pulling my key out of the lock and handing it back as she flipped on the lights. I pulled the door shut behind us, too tipsy to care about her keys in the bushes. I’d grab them tomorrow.

Thea perched on the edge of a bench by the door, taking off each shoe and placing them lovingly in the rack I built for her years earlier. She unfurled the shawl covering her dark chocolate brown hair, which fell into perfectly placed ringlets. The hair style made us nearly an hour late to our own party. Then she removed her coat, still glaring at me.

“What?” I asked, taking off my jacket.

She wrinkled her nose. “I think we drank too much.”

“We?” I hung my jacket on the coat rack, shaking my head. “I could have driven us.”

“I saw you doing shots with Cal. Don’t give me that ‘I’m totally sober’ routine.”

“Fine, not totally sober, but I didn’t go nearly as hard as you. We should drink some water before bed.”

“Water,” she echoed, pursing her lips together. “Before another drink or after?”

I groaned, not sure either of us was fit for another drink.

“We have to, Benny. It’s tradition,” she said, heading down the wallpapered hallway and gliding into the kitchen.

“I don’t think our dads bought us that wine to get hammered every birthday!” I called after her.

She didn't reply. The hollow thump of a door in the back of the house signaled her descent into the basement to dig out a bottle from the two crates purchased shortly after we were born. I followed her path into the kitchen, keeping my ears perked in case she fell down the stairs.

Nothing except the sound of clinking bottles.

I turned on the kitchen lights and pulled open the cabinet over the microwave, the one where she kept the nice glassware for special occasions. I set two glasses on the granite countertop and rifled through the drawers until I found a wine opener.

"Well, bad news!" Thea said, emerging from the tiny door leading down to the basement. "We're officially halfway through the first crate. How much do you think a crate of twenty-seven-year-old wine goes for these days?"

"I think it depends on the wine."

"I'm going to look it up."

I winced as she smacked the bottle onto the counter in front of me, surprised when the bottle didn't crack.

"Where's my phone?" She patted the pockets in her dress and then surveyed the kitchen with a frown.

I grabbed the bottle, cutting the wax seal and prying open the cork. "Probably in your purse."

She stared longingly down the hallway. "I'll remember to check in the morning."

"You won't," I laughed, pouring the wine.

"I will," she said, picking up a glass. "I have a very good memory."

"When you're sober."

She took a sip before pursing her lips. "Good point. Do you think we should buy more wine now? Or wait until we're not broke? Will wine be more expensive then?"

I shrugged. "Well, I'm always going to be broke, so no sense waiting on me. And you could afford a crate of twenty-

seven-year-old wine now. Or we could just switch to hard liquor. Ride into the retirement home on a crate of tequila?”

“Tempting.” She rolled her eyes. “We should probably save a couple of bottles of wine, though. Your dad thinks we’re waiting to pop them open when one of us has a kid, or gets married.”

“In that order?” I laughed.

“I don’t think either of your parents cares much about the order. They’re just desperate for it to happen.”

I took a sip as Thea drained her glass, pouring herself another full serving and topping mine off.

“One A.M.” she said, voice bright and bubbly. “Happy 27th Birthday to you.”

“Happy 27th birthday to you, too.” I said.

We held up our glasses, toasting each other with a sip and beginning a tradition that neither of us could pin to a specific year. Instead, our joint birthday had evolved over a lifetime. Year one, a cake we’d share at my house one year and Thea’s the next. Until Thea’s mom died and then the cake was always at my house.

The birthday wish was one of my oldest memories. Thea and I burrowed under a mountain of blankets, holding hands, closing our eyes, and wishing for...well, the wish changed. Barbies and Legos. Four more inches to better fit sample sizes and a C in calculus. Admittance into the Fashion Institute and not to bankrupt my grandparent’s business.

The annual wine had only become a tradition when we turned twenty-one. My father presented us with the crates, bought while our moms were pregnant and hidden in my dad’s office until we were old enough to drink the stuff.

Finally, sometime tomorrow early in the morning came a gift. Just one and always homemade. For Thea, that meant brilliantly stitched outfits. For me, shoddily constructed shoe racks and poems.

“What’s your wish this year?” I asked, reclining back against the cool countertops, a wave of contentment washing over me and leaving me relaxed. Although, that also might have been the alcohol.

“You first.” She copied my stance, arm brushing against mine, her fingers playing on the top of the wineglass.

Unlike previous years, I hadn’t given the wish much thought. None at all, actually. In my teens, I’d wanted to leave Franklin Notch to hike the Appalachian trail. I’d wanted to become a park ranger and disappear into the woods.

Then, in my early twenties, I inherited the roadside stop from my grandparents and I wished to turn it into something new. So, I gutted the tourist trap with its cavalcade of old, neglected animals. Cage by cage, with the help of federal funding, independent donations, and specialty grants, I turned the roadside attraction into an animal sanctuary. One that provided injured animals a place to recover before returning to the wild and a home for animals that could never go back.

And now, in the backend of my twenties, I had run out of wants. And needs, for that matter.

“I don’t know, Thea,” I said with a shrug, the silence dragging on too long to not answer. “Maybe I don’t need to wish for anything this year.”

She scoffed loudly, spitting wine back into her glass. She set it down on the counter, hitting the countertop a little too enthusiastically. “You don’t want to wish for anything? Seriously?”

“My job is going great. I finished remodeling the kitchen so I’m happy with my house. Everyone’s healthy. I don’t know. I feel pretty good about my life at present.”

She narrowed her gray eyes at me, searching my face for something to betray my indifference.

“You’re ruining this,” she decided, picking the glass back up and draining the contents. “You can’t be happy.”

“But I am happy. Aren’t you?”

She corkscrewed her lips, eyes on the glass and her voice slurring. "I'm not unhappy."

But she wasn't happy either.

I'd seen that coming over the last year, the tiny, barely perceptible signs of her growing restlessness: the hand stitched bone-laced corset, the brochures for gardening classes and guitar lessons littering her hallway, the self-improvement books on her workbench.

I hadn't mentioned the signs. Part of me wondered if I just ignored them long enough, would they go away? But they hadn't. And more and more I worried she had finally worked up the nerve to move on, away from Franklin Notch. Away from me.

"What's your wish? Maybe that'll inspire me to come up with one of my own."

She swayed on her feet, the corners of her eyes crinkling as she thought. I waited patiently, emptying the rest of the wine bottle into my glass, intent on dumping it down the sink as soon as she turned away. She had already drunk enough to regret all her life decisions in the morning, and I hoped to mitigate at least a little of that hangover.

"I have three."

I let out a soft whistle. "Three? Big year, huh?"

She pushed off the counter and turned to face me, a tinge of sadness clouding her eyes that made all the pieces slip into place. I worried something was coming because something was coming, and I should have known all along.

"Your mom," I grimaced, wanting to eat the words back down again.

"Mom," she agreed with a sigh.

Thea's mom had been twenty-seven when she died, both of us barely out of diapers. I remembered all the other important days: her mom's birthday, the day of her death, her parents' anniversary. How had I missed this one?

“I’m starting over this year,” she said, shifting the conversation so quickly that I blinked to make sense of her words.

“What does that mean?”

“I’m getting married and having a family.”

I choked on a sip of wine. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” she said defiantly.

“With Chase?” I asked.

I’d long ago trained my face not to react with anything besides a placid acceptance when it came to Thea’s long-time not-boyfriend.

Sure, I’d dated women that Thea didn’t love. Lauren was a prime example and Thea stayed pleasant with her regardless. I had a harder time with Chase. Maybe it was his salesman energy. He had an unnaturally white grin and a smile that never quite made it to his eyes.

Yet, he treated Thea well, and she seemed to enjoy his company. But after two years of... whatever arrangement they’d come to, I’d only been forced to interact with him a handful of times and he’d never spent longer than a night in Franklin Notch.

Hell, the guy hadn’t even come to our birthday party.

“I’m taking that under advisement,” she said, pursing her lips together smugly. The alcohol slurred the words together, and she sounded more like she said “advicemence” than “advisement,” undercutting the coy answer.

“Under advisement? What does that mean?”

“I’m going to forget this,” she mumbled, bumping me on the way to her junk drawer. She rifled through the pens and hair clips and batteries until she pulled out a pink notepad that read “Thea Dawson’s To Do List” at the top and a matching pink pen. She set the notepad on the counter and quickly scribbled out three barely legible words:

Marry

Chase?

Kids

She showed me the list triumphantly; her own little drunken manifesto.

“You gonna remember why you wrote that in the morning?” I asked, eyebrow raised.

“How could I forget something this important?” Except she slurred out the word “impotent,” giving the list a whole new meaning.

I bit back a laugh. “Sure. So impotent.”

Her eyes narrowed before she returned to her work. She ripped off the piece of paper and slapped it onto the fridge under the impression the notepad was actually a sticky pad. The paper fluttered to the floor.

“Hm,” she said, sinking down with a wobble to scoop it back up. She found a magnet and affixed the paper to the front of the fridge with a nod. “There.”

“You’re doing quality work tonight,” I assured her, holding back a smile.

“At least I had a wish,” she said before throwing back the wine and setting the empty glass in her sink. “Bed?”

“Bed.”

CHAPTER 2

Thea

I DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TO OPEN MY EYES TO KNOW I SCREWED up. My stomach clenched and spasmed, and my brain throbbed against my skull. The moment I opened my eyes, the pressure would bloom into an epic hangover, and I'd be scrambling to hold down whatever I ate the night before.

Keeping my eyes firmly closed, I scrubbed my face with my hand. My skin felt clean, free from the cakey aftermath of a full face of makeup from the night before. With that revelation, I could only assume the man beside me was my best friend and not my errant boyfriend.

Of course, I'd know Ben's body anywhere, just like I knew the pattern of his breathing when he slept and his soft moan when he had a good dream. I snuggled into the crook of his neck, inhaling the scent of fresh air and pine. Not a cologne, although I'd kill to find that specific combination in a bottle.

No, Ben didn't bother with hair care or fragrance or even fashion. Most of his clothes came from L.L. Bean, Patagonia or Carhartt, secondhand when possible, but mainly Christmas and birthday gifts from his mom. Except for the clothes I sewed him, everything had dozens of holes and snags, the shoulders scratched by raptors and pant cuffs mauled by bears.

"Are you gonna throw up?" Ben asked, voice low and gravelly.

"Maybe," I admitted, peeling my eyes open and accepting the brief jolt of pain through my head with some grace. "How bad did we get last night?"

“Me? Not at all,” Ben said, a satisfied, smug look on his face I wanted to wipe back off. “You? Well, you were holding it together until the birthday wine.”

I groaned, running my tongue over my teeth, the acrid taste still in my mouth. “I opened it?”

“Yep. You insisted it was time.”

I pushed myself up, using Benny’s chest for leverage. He groaned underneath me, sitting up. “Breakfast?”

“Give me an hour,” I muttered, standing up and catching my reflection in the mirror. “Maybe two.”

“I’m starving and Cal sent a text saying he’s heading to the diner five minutes ago.”

“Cal can wait.” My stomach grumbled loudly, protesting the choice. “It’s my birthday.”

“Well, it’s my birthday too and I can’t wait,” he said with a grin. “Besides, you’ll feel better once you eat.”

Benny stood and crossed the room to my vanity, taking the neatly folded clothes off the tabletop and pulling on his shirt.

“Fine, forty-five minutes,” I conceded.

I stood up on my toes, peeking up over his shoulder to fluff my hair in the mirror. A little misshapen, but I could probably fix it without a shower.

“Twenty,” Ben countered, pulling on his pants.

I pouted, pushing out my lower lip. He didn’t blink. Benny was starving from a night of heavy drinking, one of the rare situations when I couldn’t coax him into waiting for me. “Twenty-five.”

I reached past him, rifling around in a drawer for a hair cap. He gave me a playful smack on the hip as I raced to the bathroom.

“If you want something to do, the kitchen tap has a leak.” I said. That should keep him busy for at least twenty-five minutes. By the time he realized I wouldn’t be down in the allotted time, I’d be close enough to dressed that he’d wait.

“On it. Better hurry though, Thea.”

I rinsed the liquor and sweat off my body. We began the night at Bob’s Cars, where we caught up with our parent friends who hired a babysitter for a few hours to celebrate our birthday before heading home at nine. Then, we’d made our way to the bar, a nondescript brownstone downtown that probably had a name, but everyone called the bar. Smokers packed the back porch, a cloud surrounded them. Inside, sticky counters and wobbly tables left me coated in booze and dirt.

I dried myself off and padded to the bedroom in a towel. Despite my raging hangover, I had no intention of turning up at the diner unwashed, but I also didn’t deserve to wear the birthday dress I’d sewed last month until I could put on a full face of makeup and accessorize, at least. I ran a hand over the pink tulle and lovingly hand-stitched pearl buttons before pulling away and selecting a simple blue A-line dress instead.

I swiped on a light layer of makeup and tied back my hair, covering the worst of my bed head with a scarf that matched my dress. I hurried downstairs without checking the time. Definitely longer than twenty minutes.

“Did you fix it?” I asked, noting the absence of any tools on the counter.

Benny stood in front of the coffee maker, a reusable cup in his hand and a second on the counter beside him. I grabbed the second coffee and took a sip as I turned to the sink.

“I said twenty minutes,” he sighed.

I turned the faucet on and off again, the steady drip gone. “You’re a wonder, Benny.”

“I’m a subpar handyman, but thanks. Now, please, breakfast.”

“Fine,” I said with a grin, pinching his cheek and brushing a kiss over his cheek on my way to the door. I stopped short, spotting a post-it note-sized splash of pink on the fridge. “What’s that?”

“You don’t remember?” Benny raked a hand through his black curly hair, his chin dimpling with a grin.

“You know I don’t,” I responded pertly, flouncing over to the fridge. “Marry Chase Kids?”

“That was your birthday wish.” Benny sidled up beside me, nudging my shoulder with his.

“If we’re talking about Chase Chase, I think I’m a little too old to marry his future kids. Or did I say I want to marry Chase and have his kids?”

“Ah.” He drawled out the sound, his faint mountain accent growing stronger as his long fingers curled into his hair. “Not sure. I think you wanted to marry and have kids, Chase being a possible candidate for their father.”

“All these big plans and he didn’t even show up to my birthday,” I joked, feigning levity that quickly crumbled. I frowned, running the pad of my thumb over the scratchings. “Do you think it’s a sign?”

“Maybe a sign that we should stop drinking so much.”

“I think it’s a sign,” I decided with a nod. The idea had been percolating at the back of my brain. Barely an idea, more of a feeling. Something was wrong. Something had to change. Time was running out.

“Eat breakfast and make life-changing decisions later, okay?” He pulled the note from my hand and set it back under the magnet.

I tilted my head, confused why a hastily scrawled note had put him out of sorts.

“Do you really hate Chase that much?”

He sighed. “I don’t hate Chase. I don’t even know him. It’s probably not a good idea to make drunken lifetime decisions about a guy who couldn’t even bother to show up for your birthday, though.”

“It’s just a birthday. Chase had something come up.”

Benny raised an eyebrow. “Seems to happen a lot.”

I’d been dating Chase for over a year. Although, dating was a bit too strong of a word for what we’d been doing.

Chase had wanted to date me in the beginning, but he traveled for work and I had a busy schedule. Over time, he'd stopped asking for more from me and I hadn't had to turn him down, both of us happier with that arrangement.

And now, not so much.

I read the subtext of his comment. Ben wouldn't talk shit about Chase, but didn't like him either. I blamed their careers, mostly. Ben spent more time with animals than with people. He had an effortless confidence built on long solo treks through the woods that rubbed guys like Chase the wrong way. Guys who relied on reading others to make a sale and advance their career.

Chase could never get a pulse on Ben. Ben thought Chase was an insincere jerk, more interested in appearing well-liked than being well-liked. And Ben had a point. But Chase was great in bed, happy with our arrangement, and looked good in a suit. We met up infrequently enough that the sex always felt fun and new.

But did I actually think a relationship with Chase would work? Only one way to find out.

"What was your wish?" I asked, breaking the awkward tension between us and ignoring Ben's comment altogether. "I don't see yours anywhere."

His cheeks turned red as he took a sip of coffee. "I actually didn't have one this year."

I clutched my chest. "What? No wish?"

"I don't need anything," he insisted.

No, lied. I narrowed my eyes. "Bull."

"I swear."

"I'm not accepting that."

"Don't." He shrugged. "Doesn't bother me."

It did. I could read it all over him.

"You need a revamp, too. Just as bad as me. Maybe worse."

The edge of his lip hitched up in a grin. “Is that a fact?”

“It is.”

“I’m not selling the rescue and moving to Paris or some shit, Thea.”

I laughed at the thought of Ben anywhere besides the middle of the woods. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’m the only sloppy one in this friendship.”

He shook his head, wrapping a hand around my waist. “You? Sloppy? Absolutely not.”

“It’s my birthday and I’m going to the diner looking like this.” I gestured down to my pitifully plain dress.

He laughed, pulling me closer against him. “You’re the least sloppy person in this town. If you’ve got your sights set on a husband and a family I’m behind you. If it’s Chase, I’ll deal with that too.”

I grinned up at Benny. My sweet Benny. My best friend. My other half. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Well, you’d have a birthday all to yourself to start.”

“Overrated.”

CHAPTER 3

Ben

“DON’T WORRY,” I ASSURED LEN AS HE HEFTED THE DOOR OF the metal cage up, knocking his visor down. “He doesn’t peck. Hard, anyway.”

Len turned to stare me down, the welding helmet shielding me from his withering glare. “I don’t want to be pecked at all.”

“Once the sparks are flying, he’ll back off.”

I flexed my fingers through the thick falconer gloves, ready to bat down the rough-legged hawk, if necessary. In the two months since a hunter had brought the hawk to me, he’d been a sweetheart, but if someone could aggravate an animal to attack, it’d be Len.

Len shot one last look at the perched hawk before turning his attention to the gate. The whirr of the welder scared the hawk off toward the opposite end of the cage.

Len finished the repair, tipping his visor back up. “That it?”

“For now. I have a grant to build a new enclosure that I should get funded in the next couple of months, but otherwise, everything is in decent shape.”

“Decent shape?” he asked with a frown.

“Nothing is falling off the hinges. Don’t worry.”

I helped Len gather his equipment, stopping to marvel at his handy work before leaving the enclosure. Not every animal rescue had a world-famous artist to fix their enclosures, but I’d

turned to Len early in both of our careers. Back before I had the rescue fully funded and before Len had sold his art across the globe.

We walked back to his truck, and I handed up the equipment which he slotted into the truck bed. He jumped off the tailgate and paused. “Fuck, I forgot.”

Hurrying around to the passenger seat, he grabbed a wrapped present off the seat. Based on the curled ribbons and the bright wrapping paper, his girlfriend helped him.

“Millie wrapped it,” he admitted. “Sorry I couldn’t make the birthday party...err, didn’t want to make the birthday party.”

“Not a big deal.” I said, taking the gift. “Millie said you weren’t feeling well.”

His lips lifted into as much of a smile as he could manage. “Liar. I love that woman.”

“Well, don’t worry about it,” I opened the gift. Inside, a tiny metal figurine glinted in the dying sun. I pulled it out. “Is this me?”

Len laughed. “Yeah. This campaign, anyway.”

The tiny miniature held a long broadsword. Under a metal helmet, the goateed ranger grinned.

“I can’t believe you built something so tiny.”

I’d only seen a couple of Len’s pieces. They were warehouse-sized, huge, sprawling sets, not thumb-sized casts.

“It was a huge pain in the ass and had I known it would take me a month to cast something so detailed, I wouldn’t have bothered,” he grumbled. “Besides, we’re going to finish Rangers of Shadow Deep soon and move onto something new.”

The admission was probably as close as I’d ever get to a “thanks for being my friend” from Len, but I appreciated it just as much. “This is amazing. Thanks.”

“Don’t get all gooey on me.” He smacked a palm over my shoulder. “Especially when we have a cyclops to deal with.”



The cyclops dispatched, Len and I lingered over the last of a six-pack.

In the early days of our friendship, we’d attempt awkward conversation. The board games helped. We played classics like Carcassonne and Settlers of Catan. Len grunted out single-word replies while I attempted to channel Thea and her natural chattiness. Neither of us had much experience making friends as an adult. I had Thea and Len never had any friends. We navigated our new and tenuous relationship by plunking a board game between us.

The weekly hangouts started with standalone games. As the months passed, we gravitated toward more complex games that stretched over months and years. Our current game delved as close to Dungeons and Dragons as we could get without bringing in a third player.

“So, how was your birthday?” Len asked. He settled back in the dining room chair, legs splayed out. In front of us sat the board we’d conquered, the cyclops dead on his back.

“Good. Thea and I drank a little too much and went to lunch at my parent’s too hungover to celebrate.” I shrugged. “Thea’s on a tear, though.”

Len lifted an eyebrow and nodded, a subtle encouragement to keep talking.

“She’s freaking out a little.”

“About turning twenty-seven?” he asked with a laugh. “Try thirty-two.”

“No. It’s not an age thing. I’m pretty sure it has more to do with her mom.”

Len stared at me blankly.

“You knew her mom died, right? When we were young?” I asked.

“Of course, I knew that. Who doesn’t know that?” Len blustered.

“Just checking.”

Despite growing up in the same town, Len and I had two vastly different childhoods, separated by only a few years. More of a recluse and with a far less stable family situation in his youth, Len had turned inward. I didn’t blame him for not keeping up with the gossip, especially when so much of it revolved around him.

“But she died, what? Twenty years ago?”

“Nearly. Her mom was twenty-seven.”

A barely perceptible flinch assured me the words hit home.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, fuck. She hasn’t said it outright, but...”

I had a hard time explaining my relationship with Thea to Len.

To start, the two could barely stand each other. Thursday game night was the only secret I kept from Thea. But also, Len, for as loyal and giving as he could be, didn’t rely on anyone like Thea and I relied on each other. Sure, he had Millie, but they’d only been dating for a year. He didn’t have someone who had all of his secrets. Someone who knew everything about him.

“But she’s thinking about it?”

I nodded. “We do this birthday wish thing every year, and she said she wants to be married and have a kid.”

“With her side piece?” Len asked, raising an eyebrow.

I suppressed a laugh. Maybe Len listened to some of the local gossip. “I’m not sure Thea would call Chase a side piece. More like a not-quite-boyfriend she’d like to turn permanent.”

“Millie doesn’t care for him much.”

“Neither do I,” I admitted. “But I don’t think either of us knows him well. It’s not like he hangs around Franklin Notch. Maybe he’s one of those guys who just seems like a dick until you know him better.”

Personally, I didn’t think time or exposure would change my opinion of the man, but, for Thea, I would try.

“Well, Thea will do what she wants, regardless of what we think.” Len ended the conversation with a shrug and a pull from his beer.

He had a point. Telling Thea what to do inevitably resulted in the exact opposite happening. Besides, no matter who we dated, it never changed our relationship much. Marriage, though, that could be a different story.

“Millie said Whitney is leaving town,” Len said, eager to move away from the subject of Thea and marriage and kids, though I suspected for different reasons.

“Yeah. She’s engaged to a guy in the Army, stationed in Portsmouth. They’re getting married soon, and she’s moving down there to join him. Not exactly a great time to hire, but when is it?”

The rescue had originally been a one-man operation. I’d written grants, sourced meat, safely transported moose, and learned hundreds of other tasks. I could easily see to the needs of the three remaining bears. But as more injured animals and semi-domesticated ex-pets flooded the doors, I’d hired outside help, many with no experience, just an interest in learning.

Then there was Whitney.

She wasn’t necessarily unlike the rest. She’d graduated a few years before me, worked the rescue when it used to be a roadside attraction. But unlike everyone else, she’d come back home as a veterinarian.

While the rescue broke even, finding a vet with experience in wildlife rehabilitation was rare, and expensive. Whitney had none, but I cobbled together enough grants to put her through training. She’d paid me back by providing her services for a fraction of the price she deserved.

“I shouldn’t complain too much,” I conceded, finishing my beer and pushing my chair back. “She’s coming back once a month until I can find a replacement.”

“Shouldn’t that be enough?” Len asked.

I shook my head. “I wish it was. The problem with growing bigger is now everyone knows we’re here. We’re getting more and more calls about animals hit by cars and accidentally clipped by hunters. I need someone close by, but Dr. Roberts won’t work with anything bigger than a pig. I’m hoping the vet he hires to replace Whitney might be willing to help us out.”

“Coward,” he scoffed.

I had the same thought, but didn’t share it. “I’ve sent out emails to every other vet in the White Mountains. There’s one guy up near the border who’s game, but he charges \$400 an hour.”

He whistled. “Fuck. Maybe I should have been a vet.”

“And deal with pet owners? I don’t see that working.”

“Good point. So, what happens if you can’t find someone?”

I shrugged. I’d been unwilling to consider what happened then. Probably, a lot more animals would die. “I don’t exactly want to consider that yet. I’m hoping someone turns up. In the meantime, I’m applying for more grants and getting more donations to train this mystery vet.”

“Fucking Whitney.”

I laughed at his straightforward assessment. “She seems happy, but yeah, fucking Whitney.”

CHAPTER 4

Thea

I FLOATED DOWN MAIN STREET, A SMILE ON MY FACE AND wearing my favorite pair of pumps: bright pink with a darling white bow.

I normally would sock them away until spring, but I woke up in a great mood.

I'd paired the shoes with a peplum pink dress with a sweetheart neckline. One I'd sewed myself two years ago from a bolt of vintage fabric I'd found buried in the back of a closet at an estate sale. I'd immediately fallen in love with the fabric, determined to make something for myself. Something perfect that made me walk on air.

And this morning, I was walking on air.

I stopped at the coffee shop, grabbing a coffee for Mrs. Evans and a cappuccino for me, plus two donuts as a little treat.

Besides Benny and my birthday, there wasn't normally much to celebrate in mid-January. The holidays were over and the snow seemed more obnoxious than magical this time of the year. The older folks who could afford it had fled for the south and everyone left hunkered down, praying for spring.

But not me.

My birthday celebration had revitalized me. I had a mission. A purpose. For the first time since I'd launched my clothing line, I felt a spark of something special. Now, I just needed to convince Chase to feel the same.

I pushed open the door to my shop, the bell jingling above me. “Mrs. Evans! I brought breakfast!”

I didn’t find her perched on the cloth seat behind the counter. I scanned the overstuffed aisles and found her at the far end of the store, duster in hand. “It’s awful early for cleaning, don’t you think?”

Truth be told, I didn’t think I’d ever seen Mrs. Evans clean the store. My brow furrowed as I delved into my memory of her cleaning when my grandmother was alive. Nothing.

“Oh, Theodora! You surprised me!” Mrs. Evans jumped. She had her hair pulled back into a low bun, silver gray hair turning almost white with age, no hearing aid.

“Good morning, Mrs. Evans,” I said, raising my voice so she could hear me. “I brought some breakfast.”

I lifted the bag of donuts.

“Thank you, dear,” she said, placing the duster down on an oak buffet. “I woke up early and couldn’t settle back down, so I came to the shop to clean. When’s the last time we gave this place a top-to-bottom clean?”

She shuffled down the aisle, her eyes avoiding mine and her energy oddly nervous.

“Over Christmas. Remember? I hired a cleaning crew?”

Twice a year, I closed up shop for two weeks: once for Christmas and again in July. The time off gave me a chance to travel, Mrs. Evans a chance to visit her daughter in Ohio and the store a chance to get clean. While I felt confident Mrs. Evan’s original job responsibilities included cleaning the shop, at eighty years old, I wasn’t about to ask her to mop the floor.

“Right, Christmas...”

“But if it looks dirty to you, why don’t we eat breakfast and I’ll help you,” I offered with a smile, angling toward the break room in the back.

Mrs. Evans shuffled past me, and I shot her a worried look. She’d been slowing down over the last few years, a fact I’d shared with her daughter during our monthly phone call. Her

mind might have been intact, but her body had slowly been failing. She'd had a nasty spill last winter, fracturing her hip, and her eyesight was atrocious. She'd plowed into the side of the building that summer, mistaking her gas pedal for the brake.

Her hearing was harder to gauge, thanks to her inability to keep her hearing aid in for more than an hour or two. I felt a pang of sadness and wondered whether I shouldn't be doing more to help my grandmother's closest friend and a woman who'd always been a grandmother to me.

"I got blueberry donuts," I said, setting the box down and opening it up.

"My favorite." She groaned as she eased herself into a seat. "How do you always remember?"

Her wrinkled fingers gripped my cheek before I could duck away. I sat beside her, placing a donut on two paper plates.

She didn't reach for her drink. Or the donut. She frowned, chin shaking, tears threatening to spill from her eyes. Panic gripped me.

"Are you okay, Mrs. Evans?" I asked, setting down my drink and covering her hand.

I tamed my panic. I'd only seen her cry a handful of times. My grandmother's funeral, the birth of her first great-grandchild, when I graduated college, and today.

Tears spilled down her cheek. She fumbled through her pockets, pulling out an embroidered handkerchief and pressing it to her cheek.

"Silly goose," she scolded herself, head shaking. She pressed her lips together, coral pink lipstick staining just below her lip line. "I need to talk to you about something, Theodora. Something serious."

I paled, visions of my grandmother's cancer diagnosis flooding back. I reflexively sat back in my seat, body rigid, preparing for bad news.

“Oh, no,” Mrs. Evans quickly corrected course. “Nothing wrong, per se. Health-wise, I’m fine. I mean, for an octogenarian, I suppose. But, I am old.”

“You’re not that old.”

“I’m ancient, honey.” She coughed, masking her laugh. “And as much as I’ve adored my time in Franklin Notch, my joints aren’t what they used to be.”

I flinched, sensing the conclusion of this conversation and wishing I hadn’t. “You’re leaving me?”

The question came out reedy and strained. I bit my lower lip as she nodded.

“It’s time, Theodora. I promised your grandmother I’d see you grown up, which you are. A beautiful, vivacious woman who doesn’t need a doddering old woman following her around.”

“You’re not a doddering old woman,” I insisted, wiping a finger over my cheek as a tear spilled out.

“I am. And while I love you to pieces, I want to spend more time with my grandkids before my time is up.”

The reference to her death made my tears flow in earnest. Much like I couldn’t imagine my life without my grandmother, I couldn’t imagine my life without her best friend.

“Besides, maybe this’ll encourage you to close this place and spend your time doing something you love more.”

“But I do love this store,” I insisted.

She shook her head, picking up her coffee and taking a delicate sip. “No. You love your grandmother and you love me, so you kept this place limping by over the years. And I appreciate it. I do. I don’t know I could have stayed without something to pass the days, but your grandmother didn’t want this place to be an albatross, and I don’t either.”

I would never have called the thrift store an “albatross,” even if I’d never loved the place like my grandmother had. I loved spending my childhood digging through the trunks and exploring the backrooms of the old shop. I loved sitting at the

cash register and listening to my grandmother and Mrs. Evans gossip. I loved the surety of knowing that every Monday at ten, Mrs. Evans would sit in the break room with a cup of tea. I loved how the place made me feel. Cozy and warm.

But she had a point.

The store hadn't made money in years. It barely broke even. My clothing line supplemented her salary and kept the bills paid outside of the tourist season. Without manning the cash register for doctor's appointments, I would have more time for my business, my passion.

Still, I didn't want her to go.

"When are you leaving?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"End of the month. I decided over the holidays and planned to tell you as soon as I got back, but I didn't want to disappoint you."

"You're not disappointing me," I said, sucking back tears.

"And I'll be hurt if you don't come visit me. You're up that way sometimes, aren't you?"

I huffed out a laugh. "No, but I'll find a reason to come. I want to see that sweet baby."

"And maybe bring one of your own?" she asked, a touch of hope in her voice.

"One day," I said noncommittally, though I hoped sooner rather than later. "What am I supposed to do without you?"

"Not have to hire a cleaner twice a year, for one."

"Besides that."

"I imagine have more time for fun. Or to relax. Do you recall what relaxing is? I'm not sure I've ever seen you do it," she teased.

"What am I going to do about this place, then?" I stood up, losing all interest in the food and only taking my coffee on a walk around the small break room.

The antique shop had been my grandmother's dream. A place to sell all the treasures she found for someone else to enjoy. She enjoyed walking down a bustling downtown area. She liked being a part of the community.

I did, too, of course, though not in the same way as my grandmother. Or Mrs. Evans, for that matter.

I had a clothing line and I was happy enough sewing handmade garb for re-enactors and retro wear for people who wanted sustainable and trendy clothing.

I didn't need a storefront. Most of my business was online, anyway.

"You should sell it," Mrs. Evans said primly, popping a small bite of blueberry donut into her mouth.

Sell it? I had never considered selling the place. I kept the business as it was when my grandmother ran it, giving Mrs. Evans full rein to buy and sell as needed.

"Do you think grandma would have minded?" I asked.

She shook her hand at me. "Of course not. This place was her dream, not yours. You've kept her memory alive in other ways. Just try to do something fun after it's sold. You're so young. You could use more fun in your life."

"I have plenty of fun," I assured her.

And I did.

Didn't I?

Sure, I crammed it in between work, but I made more time for it than most people.

"Well, I appreciate the breakfast, even though I ruined it with my retirement." She folded up what remained of her donut into a tiny packet with her napkin, tucking it away for later.

"You didn't ruin it. I'm glad to hear that you're finally going to spend more time with your kids. I just wish you would have let me help you pack."

She moved out of a sprawling four-bedroom farmhouse years ago. Even after downsizing, she packed her current one-bedroom apartment with mementos.

She waved a hand. “Sheila insisted on hiring movers. Most of it’s going into storage, anyway. Or in the trash. She was pretty vague about the details. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s torching the apartment after I move.”

I smiled. “Probably. Anything you want me to store until you come back?”

Mrs. Evans patted me on the shoulder. “You’re a good girl, Theodora.” She shuffled back to her place behind the till.

I stood in the break room, holding back tears and wondering if I should sell the store. If I could.

But maybe this was just another piece of the puzzle slotting into place. The antique store had caused me more headaches than the clothing store, and I had been pouring money into the place for years.

Maybe Mrs. Evans leaving for Ohio would free my time up for something else.

Someone else.

Chase?

We’d planned to meet in Concord this weekend, and I wanted to make it special. The gloom over Mrs. Evan’s announcement looming over me, I pulled out my phone and tapped on the reservation for confirmation.

Mount Pierce Resort Valentine’s Day Weekend was a getaway as luxurious as it was expensive. I winced at the purchase price, punching in my credit card and quickly closing the computer before I regretted that decision.

Now, with the charge safely on my credit card balance where it wouldn’t hurt me for another month or two, I pulled up the itinerary. Candle lit dinners, fancy cocktails, tasting menus, and exclusive spa treatments. It’d be romantic and relaxing. The perfect place to solidify our relationship.

CHAPTER 5

Thea

I PUSHED MY WAY OUT OF MY ANTIQUE BUICK AND ADJUSTED my dress. A little red bodycon number that fit me like a glove and looked phenomenal, even if I could barely breathe.

I'd hiked it up around my upper thighs on the drive, glad my car's heat actually worked this winter. Last winter, she struggled, the interior compartment barely reaching forty degrees until the snow melted.

I checked the mirror, swiping on another layer of lipstick and blowing a kiss at my reflection before exiting the car. I shimmied into the brick building with the name "Bass" emblazoned in blue on the side. Bass like the instrument, not the fish, though the shade of blue made me pause.

I opened the door, the trill of a saxophone nearly toppling me over, flooding the empty street with music. Inside, candles dotted the cafe tables, the overhead lights barely illuminating the tops of the patrons' heads.

I stood in the entry, letting my eyes adjust before searching for Chase. He'd be there, probably staked up beside the bar, drink in hand and poised to buy another.

Only when they adjusted I didn't see him. I frowned, turning my attention to the tiny penlight over the host stand.

"Hi, I'm looking for Chase. Chase Baker."

The woman behind the podium smiled, dropping her eyes to search the list of names.

“Ah, Baker. Party of two. Let me show you to your table.” She gathered two menus, beckoning me to follow.

Strange. Chase hated being late, and I perpetually ran twenty minutes behind.

Tonight, I’d only been ten minutes late. I fought the urge to check my phone for a text, smiling politely at the hostess and sitting down as best I could manage in the dress.

“Can I get you a drink?” A server in a slinky black dress stopped at the table.

I picked up the drink menu. I could use something to calm the nerves roiling through me at the prospect of asking the guy I’d been dating for over a year to be my actual boyfriend.

“I’ll just take water for now.”

She sauntered away, and I took a deep breath, eyes darting for the door, my hand in my purse as I spotted him.

Chase was hard to miss. He might have only been 5’8”, an inch taller than me barefoot, and two inches shorter than me in heels, but he dressed stylishly to capture attention and possessed a natural charisma that kept that attention pinned on him.

Tonight, he wore a tan suit, bright red button-up shirt beneath the unbuttoned jacket. He slicked his blonde hair back and his blue eyes sparkled.

The man had gorgeous eyes. Piercing eyes. He’d first locked those ice-blue eyes on mine at a crowded nightclub a year and a half ago and I still got goosebumps when his eyes met mine. Sure, we had little in common besides fashion and business.

Different types of business, of course. I didn’t know anything about pharmaceuticals and Chase didn’t know anything about fashion design, but that had never come between us. Mostly because we didn’t spend that much time together. I frowned, shaking the thought away.

He waved, lips forming a pleased smile as his focus shifted to the hostess. She batted her eyes, taken with him. How could

she not be? She smiled, laughing in reply before she gestured for him to follow.

“Sorry,” he mouthed as he approached.

A good start.

He leaned down, kissing me in a way that didn’t leave me with nearly as many goosebumps as locking eyes had. Was that normal? Maybe. Could I remember sharing a truly great kiss with Chase? Our first had been oddly disappointing. He had smoked a cigar earlier in the evening, and I could only taste stale cloves and bitter tobacco. I’d even considered turning down a second date, only convincing myself later that night to give him a second chance.

Unable to conjure up a great kiss, I forced an exasperated pout. “I can’t believe you’re late when I showed up on time.”

“The hostess said she just sat you.” He slid into the seat beside me, body angled toward the stage.

“On time for me,” I corrected. “Only a few minutes late.”

He set his hand on my thigh. “Well, I’m truly sorry I missed watching you walk in. You look gorgeous.”

“With a compliment like that, I guess I have to forgive you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That easy? Aren’t you generous tonight? Why’s that?”

“I’ve got an announcement,” I said cryptically.

I had the setting, a speech, but the timing was wrong.

He held up a hand, flagging down a passing server. “Can we get a bottle of champagne? Two glasses. We’re celebrating.”

“I haven’t even told you what it is yet.” A bubbly laugh escaped my mouth.

“Well, I actually have an announcement too, and I want to celebrate with you.”

I wrinkled my forehead, surprised. “What is it?”

Chase grinned, clear blue eyes sparkling. “A promotion.”

“Congratulations.”

I didn't understand Chase's job. Not really, anyway. Sure, a pharmaceutical sales rep sounded straightforward, but I didn't understand his day-to-day. He talked a lot about stubborn doctors, lunch and learns, and invoicing, but the profession didn't make much sense. What happened if none of the doctor's patients needed his drug?

Still, I understood the basics: Chase liked his job and wanted to move up. He wanted to move into higher volume territories and eventually get a supervisor position.

“What does that mean? You're a supervisor or does your territory just get bigger? Do you get to go to all of New England now?”

He shook his head. “No. They don't divide up territories like that. Besides, Boston is a gigantic market. We've got two reps in that city alone.”

I furrowed my brow. “So you're...what?”

He smiled, white teeth gleaming in the dim light of the club while the smooth jazz played. “I'm moving to New Jersey. I'll be handling all the accounts there, and if I prove myself, I might get some accounts in New York, too.”

“So, you're moving?” I frowned. “What about us?”

The server chose that moment to return with the champagne. He uncorked the bottle with a celebratory pop I no longer felt and poured us each a glass.

Chase's brilliant blue eyes narrowed on mine. “Us?”

I shifted in my seat, a sudden heat wave rolling through my body, up my torso and settling on my face. “Yeah, us.”

Chase ran a finger along the base of the champagne flute before gripping it in his hands. “Sorry, Thea. I didn't think you were really an ‘us’ type of person.”

Not a girlfriend. A person.

“Why do you say that?” Any attempt at coolness melted as my cheeks burned.

The band on stage picked up, the thrumming of the bass turning my stomach, and I took a sip of water to calm myself.

Chase cast a furtive glance to either side before leaning forward. “I didn’t want to bring it up, but didn’t you specifically turn me down? Twice?”

“Turn you down?”

“Yeah.” He eased back into his seat. “When we first started dating, I asked you if you wanted to get serious.”

“Right.” I vaguely remembered the conversation.

“And you said you weren’t ready.”

“I wasn’t,” I agreed. “At the time.”

“Right,” he said slowly. “So I asked again, last Christmas.”

I vaguely remembered that one. We’d gone on an overnight trip to Boston, taking in a concert and the Christmas lights down Commonwealth Avenue.

“Right,” I drawled out the word, scrambling to reconfigure this conversation from the one in my head to the one that was actually happening. “But now, I’m ready.”

He frowned, marring his face in the process. “You’re ready now that I’m moving?”

“I guess so.”

He sighed, tilting his head back and taking in the ceiling to the sound of “Summertime” before the frown cleared from his eyes and he leveled his face back at me. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay, we can make this work.”

The grip on my chest loosened as his face broke into a smile.

“Really?” I asked.

“Really.” He covered my hand with his. “The company is putting me up in a condo for the first two months, but that should give us plenty of time to find a place. That way, if you don’t want to move down with me right away, we can ease into it.”

I pulled my hand away. “Wait, what?”

“Did you want to do a long-distance thing?” His face crumpled. “How does that change anything?”

“No.” The rhythmic bass set my teeth on edge and the low trill of the saxophone made it hard to hear. I leaned closer. “I thought you’d move to Franklin Notch. With me.”

He pulled back. “Franklin Notch? What am I supposed to do in Franklin Notch?”

He had a point. “Keep your old job? Commute?”

“Franklin Notch is literally the northernmost point of my *former* region.” He emphasized. “And you know I want to work my way up. What part of staying in New Hampshire helps my career?”

I winced.

He dropped his voice, leaning in. “I know it’s your hometown, but doesn’t it make more sense for you to move with me? You’d be just an hour from New York City, close to Boston. You’d have more opportunities, more networking, more resources. What do you have in Franklin Notch?”

My friends? My past? My entire life? I’d flirted with moving over the years, but never seriously. I couldn’t picture myself anywhere besides Franklin Notch. Not permanently, anyway.

“But what about the future?”

“What about it?” The band picked up, and Chase raised his voice with it. “Jesus, can we step outside? I can barely think.”

We abandoned the champagne for the silence of the street. The biting chill in the air barely affected me and I exhaled a cloud of frost.

Chase ran his fingers through his hair, mussing the gel, his blue eyes wild. “You want this to work? I do, too. But I can’t torpedo my career when it took you eighteen months to decide you even wanted to date me.”

He laid the truth out inelegantly. Harsh enough for me to flinch. He had a point.

“I’m not asking you to ‘torpedo’ your career. I’m asking for a little more time. Maybe consider moving to Franklin Notch for a bit before we pack up and move halfway down the coast.”

He pursed his lips together, forehead wrinkling. “Move to Franklin Notch? Or move in with you?”

“To Franklin Notch?”

The wrong answer. Chase wanted to hear that he’d move in with me. And I should have been able to say as much, standing in front of him, asking him to give up a promotion. But the words wouldn’t come out.

He nodded. “So, you’re not really offering a commitment, are you, Thea?”

“I want to spend more time with you and see where this goes.”

He sighed, exhaling cold air that hung in the light of a streetlamp. “This isn’t going to work.”

I shook my head. “We can make it work. I didn’t expect you to have to move. Just, let’s think about this.”

The edge of his lips jerked up, a wry smile. “I like you, Thea. Truly. In another place, this might have worked, but I don’t think you really want to be with me.”

I frowned. “I do. Just moving in together feels...”

“Like a commitment?” he finished the thought.

I grimaced.

He sighed. “I should have broken things off at Christmas. Hell, I should have the first time I asked and you turned me down. But, like I said, I really like you.”

“I like you, too.”

But not enough to move with him or move in with him or rearrange my life for him. That much was clear now, at least.

“This? Us? It’s not going to work.” He wrapped an arm around me, pulling me in for a hug. “I hate that.”

The disappointment in his voice tugged at my heart. He really wanted us to work out. And I...didn’t.

I wrapped my hands around his waist, burrowing my face into his chest. “I’m sorry.”

“Me, too,” he said, voice muffled by my hair. “I really am. Good luck out there.”

And then he let me go.

CHAPTER 6

Ben

I CUT INTO THE SHEET CAKE, HACKING THE WORD “Congratulations” apart and placing a chunk on my plate.

Most of the money brought into the rescue went toward animals and staff salaries which meant the office buildings were little more than cheap sheds, retrofitted with heat. On the rare occasions when the entire staff came together, we gathered at my house. Whitney’s going away party was no exception.

“You didn’t have to do all this,” Whitney said, sidling up beside me and carefully cutting her name out of the cake. “I hate that I’m leaving you in a lurch.”

I forced a smile. “It’s fine, I swear. Besides, it’s not like Doug can help where he’s stationed. I should be happy he’s only in Portsmouth. If he got shipped to somewhere like Alaska, we’d really be screwed.”

She ate a forkful of cake with a frown. “Any luck finding a new vet?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. I’ve put in some calls. There’s someone in Concord who used to do exotic animal work willing to come up for \$400 an hour, plus expenses.”

Whitney whistled under her breath. “Damn, I really undercharged you, didn’t I?”

“You’ve seen our finances. I can’t afford that.”

“Dr. Roberts?”

“Hard no.”

Whitney's boss had been the only veterinarian within twenty miles when I first started the rescue and I couldn't convince him to come on board. I certainly couldn't convince him five years later.

She laughed. "That sounds right. His hip has been acting up and he's afraid he's going to take a spill and break it. He stopped seeing anything big enough to knock him down. But don't worry. I've put out some feelers. I'll let you know if I find someone. Until then, Lexi offered me a room at her place, so I'll come up every other week for the next two months until the wedding."

"And then I have you for a full week, minus the ceremony, of course."

She hit me with her shoulder, smiling. "You wish. I kept a couple of hours free, though, to help you out. That is, of course, unless you've found my replacement by then."

"Replacement? For you? Doesn't exist," I said, nostalgia washing over me. "A shadow of a successor. Not the original at all."

"I'm really going to miss this," she said with a soft sigh. "I'm going to miss you all so much."

"We'll miss you, too."

The cake slowly disappeared as everyone said their goodbyes. By five, the party wrapped up, and I stood in an empty house, cleaning up the remnants of the party.

I stacked dishes in the sink, working my way through the pile before wiping off the counters and putting away the leftover food, mulling over how I'd replace Whitney.

Not just as a vet. Impossible on its own. But Whitney had been a part of my team since the day the rescue opened its doors. We were a small team, but a close one, and one by one, I'd watched them all date, get married, have kids, and, in Whitney's case, move away.

But not me.

I picked up a broom but set it back down again. I'd sweep in the morning. For now, I wanted to lie down and forget about the rescue and Whitney and the pile of work slowly growing larger the longer her position stayed open.

I checked my phone, surprised to find I didn't have any text messages. I opened the text thread with Thea's name at the top.

Everything good? How'd it go with lover boy?

She'd left for Concord the night before on her date with Chase. I hadn't expected to hear from her until this morning, but the day had flown by without so much as a word.

Three dots appeared under my text.

Horrible. Drove back home last night. Lying on the couch and watching home improvement shows.

That didn't bode well for the date or her romantic gesture.

He broke up with me. Or we broke up, rather. He's moving to New Jersey.

Well, obviously. Who in their right mind wants to move to New Jersey? Want me to come over?

The dots appeared and disappeared.

I have cake.

Throw in a pizza and please.



I showed up at Thea's house an hour later with a giant piece of sheet cake, a supreme pizza, and a bottle of wine tucked into my backpack.

I gave a quick knock before opening up the front door with my key.

“I’m here!” I called, kicking off my shoes and walking toward the living room.

Thea lay on the couch in sweatpants and a t-shirt, hair in a messy bun.

“You’re taking this hard, aren’t you? Pulled out the sweatpants and everything.” I set the pizza on the coffee table and brushed a kiss over Thea’s forehead.

“He said I didn’t really want to date him,” she moaned, pulling an afghan blanket her grandma had crocheted her up over the shoulders.

“Didn’t you specifically ask him to date you?” I pulled the bottle of wine out of my backpack and set it beside the pizza.

“I was going to, and then he told me he was moving to New Jersey.”

“Not New Jersey.”

“He thought I was asking him to move in with me.”

“That would have made him stay?” I asked, my attempt at keeping the surprise from my voice failing.

I couldn’t think of any scenario where Chase and Thea lived in Franklin Notch. Despite dating for over a year, I’d only seen him in town once. The handful of other times we’d hung out, it’d been in Boston or Concord or Montreal. Hell, he hadn’t even come to town for her birthday.

She shrugged. “Maybe, but I didn’t ask him to move in with me. I asked him to move to Franklin Notch.”

That, I definitely couldn’t imagine. Chase at the local coffee shop. Chase getting groceries at Bob’s. Chase in the diner. The guy wore three-piece suits and used hair products. He would stick out like a sore thumb.

“Like, rent an apartment?” I suppressed a laugh.

“Don’t do that!” Her eyes widened and she covered her face. “Do you have any idea how embarrassing it was? To

realize in the restaurant that I didn't want to live with him?"

"Really puts a damper on the whole 'settle down with him' plan."

Thea squirmed on the couch, pulling the blanket over her head.

I softened. "So, he's not the one?"

Thea groaned, shaking her head. "You know the worst part?" She pulled the blanket off her face and I nodded encouragingly. "I was relieved when he told me he was moving. That's screwed up, isn't it? To go from thinking maybe we should get serious to breaking up in the span of an hour?"

"I don't think that's a great sign," I admitted.

"Did you feel that way about Emily?"

I held back a knee-jerk "no."

I didn't break up with Emily. The decision had been hers and, in hindsight, she had been the only one of us brave enough to make it.

"Actually, I was relieved."

Thea smiled slightly. "So, I'm not crazy?"

I shook my head. "You? Crazy? Absolutely not. He's not it."

"He's not it," she repeated, settling back into the couch, her shoulders collapsing under the heavy quilt.

I went into the kitchen, opening the cabinet by the fridge for wine glasses and plates and grabbing the corkscrew off the side of the fridge.

Thea eyed me as I muscled open the cheap bottle of wine, the cork crumbling into pieces that I dug from the neck of the bottle. I poured an overly full glass and handed it to her, urging her to sit up.

"So, did breaking up with Chase ruin all your plans?" I asked.

Thea moved her legs off the couch. “Sort of.”

I sat down beside her. “Just sort of? It really wasn’t love, was it?”

“What is love?” she groaned, holding out her hand for a piece of pizza.

I pulled out a cheesy slice and handed it to her with a napkin. “Baby, don’t hurt me?”

She rolled her eyes as she took the plate before her face crumpled. “Oh, fudge.”

I grabbed myself a slice. “Fudge?”

She set the plate in her lap and pressed her hand against her forehead. “I forgot about Mount Pierce.”

“Mount Pierce?” I echoed.

Her plate clattered on the coffee table as she struggled to get up from under the heavy blanket. She threw it on me as she scrambled for her laptop on the far side of the room. She returned to the couch with it, folding her legs up beside me as she opened it up.

“Ugh,” she groaned, throwing her head back. “Non-refundable.”

“What’s non-refundable?”

She squeezed her eyes shut, ignoring my question. “You know what? That’s fine. Come with me.”

“Come with you where? Mount Pierce? I can’t afford that place.”

The mountaintop resort wasn’t exactly a local hotspot. Most of the residents of the Notch could barely afford the fancy train that pulled tourists up the mountain, let alone a stay at the resort, with its Michelin-starred chef and fancy spa.

“My treat. Late birthday gift. Don’t make me go on a romantic weekend retreat alone. I need you.”

“A romantic weekend retreat?”

“Sort of an early Valentine’s Day weekend thing...” Thea squeaked out, a wary grin on her face.

“You planned to bring Chase to Mount Pierce for a romantic weekend?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time!” She dropped her head back against the couch. “And yeah, I spent way too much on it, but I thought...I don’t know. That this was a step on the way to getting married? Having a kid?”

“You couldn’t even commit to moving in with the guy.”

“I was panicking! You can’t hold this against me!” She smacked the laptop shut, placing it on the coffee table and scooping up her pizza. She shifted in her seat, turning away from the home renovation show droning on in the background. She set her legs on my lap and shot me a puppy dog frown. “I got bad news. I was distressed.”

The edge of actual distress filtered into her voice, and I stiffened. “What kind of bad news?”

Nothing earth-shattering, but certainly something that didn’t involve Chase.

“Mrs. Evans—” My breath caught in my throat before she pushed the rest out. “is moving to Ohio. She wants to spend more time with her grandkids.”

The relief washed away again as Thea’s eyes clouded. I balanced the plate of pizza on her legs and wrapped an arm around her. “Sorry, Thea.”

“It’s fine. She should have gone years ago.” A tear rolled down her cheek. She wiped it off with a laugh. “I’m fine. This is better, right?”

I nodded, holding back questions about what Thea planned to do with the shop or hiring. She’d figure that out once she stopped being sad about Mrs. Evans leaving.

She rested her head against my arm, exhaling loudly before picking her dinner back up. “You need to come with me.”

“Come with you?”

“To Mount Pierce,” she said, taking a bite.

“You just dropped that news to coerce me into coming?”

She nodded. “But don’t act like you were going to turn me down. It’ll be fun. There’s even a couple’s massage.”

Of course there was a couple’s massage. And crystal flutes. And live bands. And rich couples with business cards. And tuxedos.

A romantic weekend where I’d feel out of place, wearing suits that strangled my neck and talking to people who wouldn’t have any interest in me after finding out what I did. But Thea wanted me to go, so I’d go.

CHAPTER 7

Thea

TWO WEEKS LATER AND I SAT AT THE COUNTER OF THE THRIFT store, bag packed, waiting to close the shop and spend a romantic weekend in Mount Pierce.

Well, maybe not romantic.

The rest of the couples attending Mount Pierce's annual Valentine's Day getaway would have a romantic time. Ben and I would have fun.

The sting of breaking up with Chase had quickly faded, leaving me wondering how I'd convinced myself we had a future together. Sure, we had fun. Lots of fun, but we had nothing in common.

He hated Franklin Notch and I couldn't see myself ever leaving. We were both ambitious, we both loved dancing and jazz, and we looked nice together, but a future? No. Absolutely not.

And I should have seen that, but with the focus of a marriage and a family on the horizon, I'd tried to skip the step of meeting someone new and force Chase into that space.

So, great. Chase wasn't the one. I could deal with that. I could meet someone new. Where? I didn't have the foggiest idea. The dating pool in Franklin Notch was shallow, and I'd over fished it years ago. Now with a clear vision of my future, I would find someone on the same path.

Not immediately, of course. With Mrs. Evans safely on her way to Ohio, I had the thrift store to look after. The very empty, quiet thrift store. The one that might actually stay in the

black this year since I didn't have a full-time employee, other than myself of course.

I'd need to do something with the shop: hire an employee or sell it or close up the storefront and use the space for sewing. I hadn't decided. But, I had to decide because before long, the snow would melt and the tourists would descend on the mountains for the Highland Games. Fall foliage and the Highland Games were one of the few times of year that the shop actually made money.

For now, I only had myself to pay but rather than working on clothing, something that would actually pay the rent, I sat in the quiet shop, waiting to close up for the night.

I sighed, tapping my phone to life. Four thirty-five. Nearly time to close. Not close enough.

The bell on the front door jingled, and I straightened until I caught sight of Ben's curly hair over an antique wardrobe.

"You're early," I said, excited for the distraction regardless. I stood up, rounding the cash register to meet him.

He hefted a duffel bag over his shoulder, hair wet from a shower. He'd even dressed up. Or at least dressed up as much as he ever did: intact jeans and a nice plaid shirt.

I reached out, wrapping a curl around my index finger. "Did you shower for me?"

"Well, a muskrat peed on me. So I showered for both of us, really." He shot me a lopsided grin.

"I appreciate it. I don't know if the fine staff at Mount Pierce would let someone in if they smelled like muskrat pee."

"I'm sure you're paying them enough to ignore the smell," Benny teased as I grabbed my keys from the counter and made my way toward the front door. "Hey, you've got another thirty minutes according to that sign on your door."

I waved my hand. "Screw that. I'm the owner and I'm closing this place down for the weekend. Besides, it's not like

it's crawling with customers. Other than Jacob stopping by with the mail, it's been quiet all day."

I locked the door and gestured for him to follow me into the back.

"What's the plan, anyway?" he asked. "Are you hiring someone new?"

I shook my head. "I'm not sure yet. The building is paid off so I could keep it and make the whole place my studio."

"How?" Ben asked skeptically.

He had a point. The two-century old building had a strange floor plan consisting of tiny rooms and narrow hallways. I'd taken down one wall to build my studio in the back of the building even though the structural engineer had been hesitant to approve that much. I could clear out the storefront for some extra space, but the tiny interior rooms weren't good for much besides storage.

"Do you think I should sell?" I asked, flicking the lock on the back door closed and glancing back at him.

Ben's brow furrowed and he pursed his lips, considering the question. "Do you want to sell it?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know. I can't keep sitting here, bored out of my mind. And I can't hire someone just to close the place down in a month."

I sighed, overwhelmed. I shook it off. "That's a next week problem. For now, let's just think about the relaxing weekend we're about to have: spas, good food, booze."

The edge of his lips hitched up. "So romantic. Except for me being there."

I rubbed his arm. "Don't sell yourself short. Sure, I could have been having crazy sex with Chase, but what would we talk about when that's over?"

"I don't know," He shrugged. "What did you two normally talk about?"

"See, that was the entire problem. Nothing."

Despite his distaste for Chase, Ben was too good of a friend to rub the breakup in my face. Had Chase and I had even a tenth of the connection as Benny and I, I wouldn't have hesitated to have him move into my house.

I made quick work of cleaning the break room before grabbing my suitcase from the corner. "Alright, let's go have a romantic getaway!"



We elected to take Benny's truck. While the weather hadn't called for snow, in mid-February, snow was never too far away. Besides, my driving was only slightly better than Mrs. Evans' and I didn't want to risk us ending up in a ditch.

We drove on empty roads. I fiddled with the radio, turning through static until I settled on our local AM station. The bare trees gave the weak signal just enough oomph to reach outside the confines of Franklin Notch.

The station had been a constant source of entertainment for Benny and I growing up. Nearly everyone in town had a show on the frequency at some point, whether for fun or to provide information. Benny and I had even taken the midnight to 3 A.M. slot for a couple of years, whenever school was out of session.

"It's a little early for him to be on, isn't it?" Benny asked, eyes narrowing as a familiar tinny voice creaked over the static.

Delbert Jenkins: Franklin Notch's only Uber driver and resident alien conspiracy theorist. He'd held the Friday through Sunday evening slot for decades.

"Yep. The Sanitation guys have been getting drinks after work on Friday. They drop their cars off and have Delbert shuttle them, so he moved his show to earlier in the day."

Ben shook his head. "You could just hire him to drive you around and get the same information, you know?"

While I didn't believe Delbert's insistence that not only were aliens among us, but they were living in Franklin Notch, I did like hearing him unfold his grand conspiracy over the local AM station.

I shook my head at his suggestion. "Nope. Too close. Besides, he said he doesn't like to mix business with pleasure."

"He thinks alien sightings are pleasure?" Benny lifted an eyebrow.

"Or he thinks they're business and driving drunk locals around is pleasure. Neither option sounds particularly sane to me."

"I don't think you're allowed to comment on other people's sanity when you're encouraging his call-in alien sighting show."

On the radio, Delbert answered a call. I pinged the voice immediately: Jess Hopkins' kid, a willowy senior high school student with a wicked sense of humor.

"Where exactly should you wear the tinfoil?" he asked, his voice dropping laughably low in a bad attempt to conceal his identity.

"Well, personally, I keep a square under my baseball cap all the time, but you really only need it if you go to a big box store: Walmart, Lowes, hell, even Market Basket. And by the cell phone towers, of course."

"What about the local businesses?"

I could make out a muffled laugh on that other end of the line, but couldn't place whose.

"Well," Delbert paused before lowering his voice. "I don't want to start rumors, but I'd keep it on in the antique store."

My eyes widened and Benny spluttered out a laugh as Delbert continued over the radio. "Mind you, this is just one man's opinion, but last time I was in there, I doffed my cap, being respectful of course, and left with a headache."

“Do you think there are EMF waves in the antique store?” The boy prodded, the deep tenor falling away in excitement.

Ben leaned across the seat, brushing my arm. “Is Thea an alien?”

“I can’t believe he’s talking shit about me,” I said.

“Well, I can’t comment on the source of the disturbance, of course. Whether the shop owner is aware of the extraterrestrial interference, but...” Delbert’s voice trailed off and I leaned closer to the radio.

“He’s about to say you’re in cahoots with the aliens.” A grin enveloped Ben’s face as I glared at him.

“I find it interesting that it’s only since the owner took over the front desk duties that I’ve noticed this effect in her shop.”

My jaw dropped as Jess’s son thanked Delbert for his time.

“Did he just call me an alien?”

“No, that’s ridiculous,” Ben said, barely holding back laughter. “He implied that you’re an alien apologist. Possibly running some alien way station in your shop. And that Mrs. Evans was the only person stopping our alien overlords.”

I shook my head. “I can’t believe he called me out.”

“Should we tank his Uber ratings?”

“That’s the least of what I’m going to do to him. He came by this week. I was nice to him! Real nice! I even gave him a discount on a book. And that’s the thanks I get?”

“He’s got to tell the truth, Thea,” Ben said. “There are aliens among us and Delbert Jenkins is the only Uber driver willing to stand up for the truth.”

I pulled out my phone. “That’s it. I’m joining Uber just so he isn’t the only driver in the Notch, and then I’m going to mess up his ratings. He can’t just name names like that.”

“He does that all the time and you know it.” Ben had a point. Except, usually, it wasn’t my name. “Besides, I bet you and Jess’s kid are the only ones listening to him.”

“And you.”

“Well, good news. I know you’re not an alien.”

I huffed.

“Now, alien apologist? I don’t actually know your stance on that. Maybe you should clear that up before we spend the weekend together.”

Somehow, Delbert had uncovered perhaps the only thing Ben didn’t know about me.

“I’m not housing aliens, or letting them use EMF whatever’s in my business.”

“And why should I believe you?” He lifted an eyebrow, his expression neutral.

“You’re clearly feeling cute this weekend. Is this what I have to look forward to?”

“Maybe. Guess there’s only one way to find out.”

CHAPTER 8

Ben

“WANT TO TAKE THE TRAIN UP THE MOUNTAIN?” THEA ASKED, eyeing the crowded train station platform.

I tilted my head up the switchback road climbing the mountain and shook my head. “Nah. Unless you want to.”

The train made up the closest excuse for a field trip within two hours of Franklin Notch. Some intrepid entrepreneur with more gilded age money than sense erected the sprawling hotel on one of the highest mountain tops east of the Mississippi. And while the construction crew could muscle supplies up to the top during the summer months, in the winter, making the journey up to the top became impossible. So, the man built a train to climb the face.

The coal guzzling engine had been replaced some years back, but the trip up still attracted tourists, even those who couldn't afford to stay at the luxury resort on top of the mountain.

Those tourists came for overpriced souvenirs and a chance to experience sixty-mile per hour winds outside of a hurricane. All the local school children dutifully made the journey once a year after the rest of the field trip funds were spent on long trips to the closest planetarium or children's museum.

The tourists would come for Polar Express tours in the winter and with visiting relatives and friends in the summer.

“I sometimes have nightmares where the train conductor falls over and I have to finish the tour,” she murmured, face scrunching into a frown.

I laughed. “Do you think you could do it?”

She nodded. “Absolutely. Welcome to the Mount Pierce Express, the quickest way to the summit before cars were invented. Now, everything on this mountain was bought and paid for by a single family. Can you believe that?”

She mimicked the familiar pattern of about a dozen train conductors, all of them reciting the same lines. Nostalgia mixed with dread washed over me.

“Okay, fair enough. The road is empty. We can drive to the top. We’ll miss out on the drink caboose, though.”

“I’m pretty sure there’s a bar at the resort, and according to the tour guide on the train, we can easily beat them to the summit.”

Challenge accepted. I passed the parking lot and drove up the narrow paved road.

As the truck drifted back and forth up the mountain, the resort came into view little by little. First the wrought iron weathervane, swaying with the wind, then the gabled roof, recently painted green rather than an ostentatious red, better blending in with the trees. Next came the bright brick exterior, a semi-circle perched at the edge of the summit, overlooking the valleys below. The paved road ended as we reached the driveway and the original granite blocks lined the road. The truck lurched uncomfortably as we approached the main entrance.

I drove around the disused water fountain, another original design of the resort, now empty. Mostly because keeping a water feature in a place that stayed below freezing three-quarters of the year and with gale-force winds hadn’t panned out as intended.

I pulled the truck in front of a young man dressed in a thick black jacket, hunched over the valet stand. He didn’t immediately look up. I slipped out of the truck, slamming the door behind me. He startled, his eyes searching for who else witnessed his distraction.

“I’m so sorry.” He rushed around the podium, pocketing the phone. “Welcome to Mount Pierce. Can I get your bags?”

I would have carried them myself, except Thea had packed as if we were fleeing Franklin Notch for good. “Sure. You’ll need a cart, though.”

The attendant seemed nonplussed by the sheer amount of baggage for two days in the trunk. “I’ll take your keys and make sure your bags go to your room. Please head inside and warm up.”

I raised an eyebrow in Thea’s direction. After weeks in the single digits, the balmy twenty degree day felt warm, even with the whipping wind. Clearly, the target audience of this employee’s banter wasn’t locals.

“This is going to be a bunch of out-of-towners, isn’t it?” I murmured.

She rolled her eyes. “What do you think?”

I thought most of our friends and family couldn’t afford a single night at the resort, let alone a full weekend. Thea handed the guy a folded bill and took my elbow, pulling me into the lobby.

While the awe had worn off by the time I took my last trip to the summit back in high school, visiting for the first time in years, some of the grandeur had snuck back in. I craned my neck up to the high ceilings with exposed beams of wood crisscrossing above us and the massive chandelier of deer antlers.

Thea sailed by it all, greeting the front desk clerk with a smile. “Theodora Dawson.”

“Welcome to Mount Pierce, Ms. Dawson. And this must be Mr. Baker.”

I pulled my eyes away from the ceiling in time to watch as Thea’s cheeks bloomed red. So, she hadn’t changed the reservation.

“Yep, that’s me, Chase Baker. Nice to meet you.” I barely missed Thea’s elbow driving toward my ribs as I held out my

hand to the front desk staff. He gave me a confused smile before shaking my hand.

“Do you have many locals up this weekend?” I asked, wrapping an arm around Thea’s waist and pulling her close enough to prevent her from elbowing me again. She pinched my waist instead.

“I believe you two are it. We have several couples from the coast and Canada. But we’re obviously glad you decided to spend your Valentine’s Day with us.”

He tapped into the computer before handing us two keycards and a map of the resort.

“Your bags will be brought up to your room and you’re welcome to take a walk around. The festivities don’t begin until early this evening. There’s an open bar mixer starting at four. Dinner is served at seven and this evening’s entertainment starts at nine. There’s an itinerary in your room, as well as a complimentary bottle of wine and snack basket, to hold you over until dinner.”

I swiped the map, stomach rumbling at the mention of snacks.

“Great. Shall we?” I held out my arm.

She rolled her eyes but took it, anyway. I escorted her into the elevator and pushed the button for the fourth floor.

“Forget to change the reservations?” I asked, voice teasing.

She pursed her lips together. “I didn’t forget. I just didn’t do it. Besides, what would I say? I broke up with my boyfriend and am bringing a different man.”

“It’s fine. Maybe pretending to be Chase will make me more sociable.”

“You’re really going to pretend to be Chase?”

“He said there wasn’t anyone else local. I can be a pharma bro for the weekend.”

She huffed. “He’s not a ‘pharma bro.’ He’s a pharmaceutical sales rep.”

“Okay, pharmaceutical sales rep,” I parroted. “It’ll be fun. Besides, doesn’t it seem lame? Going on a romantic weekend with your best friend?”

“Lame? I never feel lame,” she said haughtily, sweeping her hair back with a pleased smile on her lips. Of course she didn’t.

“Besides, I don’t want to talk about the sanctuary this weekend,” I said, ignoring her vanity. “This is better. I bet no one asks follow-up questions about being a pharma bro.”

“Still haven’t found a replacement for Whitney?”

I shook my head as the doors slid open. “Nope, and I don’t really expect to. But, let’s not talk about that. This weekend only, I don’t run an animal rescue. I sell drugs.”

She stifled a laugh, swiping the card across the lock to our room. “He never said he ‘sold drugs.’”

“Why not? That’s the coolest way of explaining the job.”

“You know what? Fine. Be Chase. I’m really interested to see how you pull this off.” She smiled, reason enough to continue the charade. At least she wasn’t bummed about the breakup.

Thea pushed open the door, revealing a sea of red. A bouquet of red roses sat on the coffee table, red drapes hung over the canopy bed, tiny hearts littered every flat expanse of furniture.

“Wow.” My eyes widened at the intensity of the room. “They really went all out, didn’t they?” I ran a hand over the king size bed, rose petals splayed over the white covers. “Or is this their normal decor?”

She rolled her eyes, pushing open the red curtains to check the view. “Oh! Come look at this.”

She pushed open a sliding glass door, and I followed her onto the balcony. A thick cloud of fog obscured the view, but

Thea had her attention fixed firmly on the hot tub on the far end of the porch.

She unlatched the top, throwing open the cover and releasing a cloud of steam, exposing the clear, warm water. “We’re going to get drunk and hang out in a hot tub.”

“Isn’t it a little cold to hang out outside?”

“Don’t be lame, Benny. Besides, according to that itinerary, the bar closes at ten. We’ll have nothing else to do.”

“Other than hanging out in the hot tub?”

“Other than getting drunk in the hot tub,” she said enthusiastically. “Honestly, if I wasn’t starving, I’d say screw dinner and let’s get in, but I paid a lot for this fancy meal so we’re eating it. If you’re hungry, crack open that snack basket while I take a shower and get ready for dinner.”

“You’re not ready for dinner?” I asked with a frown.

She looked ready for dinner. Even coming straight from the thrift shop, she had a full face of makeup, hair curled, and wore a pale rose-colored dress with little heart-shaped buttons. One of my favorites, not the least because she made it.

She shook her head. “Not even a little. This place is Michelin-star fancy.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means it’s special, so I need to look special for it.” She gave me a pleased smile. “We both do.”

I groaned. “I’m guessing that means you packed for me.”

Thea loved nothing more than to dress me up like a doll. I’d been her first mannequin. Her first model. Her first guinea pig for French seams, arm scythes, and darts. She knew my proportions better than she knew her own, and she had lovingly stitched every single suit I ever owned. Hell, most of them lived in her closet.

“I might have grabbed a couple of things. Something other than plaid.”

“Hey,” I said. “I didn’t just pack plaid.”

I'd shoved a pair of cargo pants into my backpack along with a plain white polo, fancier than I normally dressed, but clearly not up to the hotel's high standards.

"I didn't go overboard. No suits, though trust me, I considered it. I packed that button-down shirt from Nora's wedding and I sewed another pair of those brown pants you liked."

I immediately knew the pair. I liked them so much, I turned them into work pants and last time Thea caught me in them, she'd taken them away to repair the worn pockets and frayed edges. At least I would get a second pair out of this weekend.

"What did you think would require flannel around here, anyway?" she asked, leading me back into the room to unpack our bags.

I glanced back at the mountains.

Thea followed my gaze and groaned. "Did you think we're going on a hike?"

"I just thought maybe, if the weather held out, we'd have time for a quick walk. We don't get up to the summit often and there are a few interesting trails."

Her bottom lip puffed out and she sighed. "Maybe. Or maybe there'll be a snowstorm and a hike would be too dangerous."

"The weather looked good," I said with a grin.

"Lucky us."

I ignored her fake enthusiasm. "Alright, put out what I should wear. I'll devour this gift basket while you're showering."

"Don't drink all the wine, please." She shot me a pleading look as she set out my outfit.

"I'll bring a glass into the bathroom for you," I said, tearing open the cellophane on the gift basket and picking through the contents.

Thea would murder me if I spilled wine on my new pants and she'd take at least an hour to dress. I could wait to get changed.

Once I wrestled the cork out of the wine, I opened the bathroom door a sliver and quickly placed it on the counter, keeping my eyes averted from the foggy shower.

“Good news, it's a white!” I called before retreating into the bedroom.

I grabbed a packet of nuts and the bottle of wine and moved onto the porch. Outside was frigid, but nowhere near the biting cold of the last few weeks. The wind whipped my hair and the bright sun held no warmth. I sat in a wooden rocking chair, enjoying room temperature wine and overly seasoned nuts until Thea turned off the shower and emerged from the bathroom and out onto the balcony “You're not dressed yet?” she asked as she fastened a diamond earring.

“It'll take two minutes.” I smiled, my eyes gliding up her body.

Thea always looked nice, even in her depression sweatpants, but sometimes I had a hard time recognizing her immediately. For a moment, she wasn't Thea, my best friend, my playmate, my sister in every way but blood, but as a beautiful woman. Someone I might lock eyes with while grocery shopping or dropping off the mail. Someone I would want to get to know better. Someone to ask out.

It didn't happen often and tonight, I blamed the red roses, the wine, the romantic room. I blamed the sapphire blue dress that hugged her body, the view from the rocking chair of her long legs. I shook off that thought fast, because it was Thea. My Thea.

CHAPTER 9

Thea

“I’M NOT WEARING A TIE, THEA.” BEN BRUSHED MY HANDS off his shirt with an exasperated groan.

“You’d look so good with the tie. It brings this outfit together.” I waved a hand in front of the suit. While I’d styled his clothes without a tie in mind, I’d slipped out of the room and scoped out the lobby, finding over half the men in full suits. I should have packed him a jacket.

“No. If this food is half as good as you claim, I plan on gorging myself and I don’t want a dumb tie choking me all night.” He ran a hand through his hair, mussing the small amount of hair gel I’d manage to apply before he chased me away.

I frowned, brushing his fingers away so I could smooth his hair back. “I’ll tie it loosely.”

“Hard no,” Ben said, closing the argument.

“Well, you still look really nice,” I said, smoothing the lapel of his jacket with a grin.

“I have a great stylist.” He covered my hand with his, stopping me from fussing with his suit. “Now, come on, let’s go mingle.”

Clearly I’d strained his patience, otherwise he never would have suggested we go talk to the other couples. After Emily broke up with him, he dragged me to every donor dinner and fundraising event, letting me play social butterfly while he faded into the background. Not that Benny wasn’t good at mingling. He had an understated charm and a low-key

charisma that allowed him to say shockingly little and still have people walk away thinking, “That Ben, he’s a great guy!” But even then, he never enjoyed being forced to mingle.

Chase did, though.

“You’re really channeling this Chase thing, aren’t you?”

“It’s the only way I’m going to get through the weekend. Unless, of course, you let me ditch drinks and dinner and we climb into that hot tub instead.”

I folded my arms, eyes outside. The sun set over the mountains and a gentle breeze moved the potted plants on the porch. The hot tub was definitely tempting until my stomach rumbled.

“No chance, Chase,” I said, hooking his arm with mine. “Let’s mingle.”

We took the elevator back to the main lobby, navigating to the bar by following the gentle hum of conversation. Soft music filtered through the building, growing louder with each step until we found a sign pointing us to the basement bar.

We took a few steps down a stone lined stairwell, emerging in what looked like a medieval pub. Casks lined one side of the room. A dark wood bar stood at the far end. A bartender in a white shirt and a handlebar mustache took orders while two dozen people or so milled about.

“Drink first?” Ben asked, his breath tickling my ear.

I nodded. He took my arm and led me to the bar. Not finding an empty seat, Ben muscled us into an empty spot at the far end.

“A sidecar, or do you want to browse the drink menu?” he asked, picking up a pink-tinted table tent. He held it between us and I read the list of Valentine’s Day themed drinks.

“There’s a love potion,” Ben dropped his voice low, his tone mischievous. “Maybe we can break one of these couples up.”

I poked his side. “Careful there, Chase. I think we’re more likely to run into a pair of rich swingers.”

He laughed. “Would that be an improvement in our current situation?”

I smacked his chest with the drink menu. “Absolutely not. I’m not swinging with you. I’ll take the besamé.”

“And I’m going to roll the dice on Cupid’s Arrow, which I’m pretty sure is just a pink gin and tonic,” he said with a grin.

I set a hand on his arm before he turned to the bar. “It’s working.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “What’s working?”

“Cheering me up.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he leaned close, forehead brushing mine. “I’m just enjoying being someone else this weekend. Not everything revolves around you, Thea.”

“Doesn’t it, though?”

He brushed a kiss over my forehead before flagging down the bartender and ordering our drinks. Brandishing a pink gin and tonic for himself and a fruity drink with enough tequila to make me open to kiss just about anybody, he gestured to me to follow him as we went in search of an empty table. “Oh, which drink is that?” A woman around our age caught my attention, hanging over a man in a black suit and tie to catch my attention. “It looks delish.”

“The besamé,” I answered with a smile, holding up the drink, tiny bits of raspberry swirling in the glass.

“Oh, the one with tequila? I can’t do tequila, isn’t that right?” She smacked the man next to her, arching an eyebrow.

“That’s right, and we have an entire album of drunk honeymoon pictures to prove it,” he agreed. “She got so drunk we missed the dolphin encounter tour.”

“I hate dolphins anyway,” she said with a flick of her wrist. “Would you like to join us? We don’t have seats, but we have space.”

She gestured to the cocktail table they stood at.

“That’d be great,” I said, setting my drink on the tabletop.

“I’m Robin, and this is my husband, Jared.” She held out a manicured hand. “We drove up here from Boston. I said I wanted to go somewhere romantic and secluded for the weekend, and wouldn’t you know? He found a place.”

“Thea,” I said, taking her hand. “And this is—”

“Chase. Chase Baker,” Ben interjected, a winning smile bordering on smarmy. “Pharma bro—pharmaceutical sales rep.”

“Really? I’m actually an oncology doctor,” Jared said. “Which outfit do you work for?”

I snorted into my drink, catching the wave of panic on Benny’s face before he rallied. “Tylenol.”

Jared raised an eyebrow, face crumpling. “I didn’t know Tylenol had sales reps. I just assumed everyone already knew about them.”

“Yeah,” Benny shrugged. “That’s what everyone thinks, but we exist. It’s a seriously easy job. The stuff sells itself.”

“It’s a dream job. He slung Viadox before,” I said with a mischievous smile. Ben’s eyes widened.

“Viadox?” Jared asked with a frown. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“Right,” Ben drawled, wrapping an arm around my waist and giving me a nervous squeeze. “Horrible job. Absolute worst. It was anti-inflammatory for domesticated pigs. Do you know how many pet pigs there are in New Hampshire?”

Robin and Jared shared a look and frowned.

“Two dozen. It was a tough sell,” Ben continued.

Jared’s forehead scrunched. “So, you worked in veterinary sales before? Huh.”

“Not much of a difference, really,” Ben shrugged, growing more confident in his fake persona. “But I made a big sale at a

Boston clinic and the Tylenol job opened up. I was a shoo-in. Easiest job I've ever had."

"I bet." Jared drained the last of his drink and eyed Ben's now empty glass. "Ready for a second round?"

"Sure thing."

The men walked back to the bar while Robin turned her attention on me.

"So, how long have you and Chase been together?"

I suppressed a grimace at Chase's name, bracing myself to double down on Ben's lies. "Feels like forever."

"Same, girl. Jared and I have only been married for three years now, but some days I can't even remember my life before him. So, is Chase your boyfriend or your—?"

"Fiancé," Ben interjected, slipping the empty glass out of my hand and replacing it with something noticeably less pink. I twisted my head, glaring at him, but he pressed on, undeterred. "Aren't I just the luckiest?"

"Oh, fiancé! Congratulations!" Her eyes lit up. "Let me see the ring!"

Reflexively, I balled my hand into a fist. Other than a ring on my right hand, my fingers were bare. Ben scooped up my hand with a frown.

"Did you forget to put it on again?" he sighed, shaking his head good-naturedly. "I told her to leave the ring on when she's getting ready, but she keeps forgetting it by the sink."

He dipped his head, burying his nose in my hair and kissing my forehead. His free hand returned to my waist.

"Oh, honey," Robin said. "That's how I lost my first engagement ring. Right down the garbage disposal."

"I nearly called off the wedding," Jared added with a grin.

A momentary pang of guilt over lying to the couple flooded over me. They seemed nice. Friendly and open, with an energy that matched Ben and I. Or Chase, rather

“But then you would have had to find some other woman and buy her a new ring.. Easier just to keep me.” She brushed a kiss over his cheek. “ How long have you two been engaged?”

“Christmas,” Ben answered coolly. His lie might have even fooled me.

“Aw, a Christmas engagement. That’s so cute!” Robin’s eyes went wide as she tugged at her husband’s lapel. “I wanted a Christmas engagement, but Jared claimed he couldn’t wait.”

“She never told me she wanted a Christmas proposal,” he said, dropping his voice conspiratorially.

Robin rolled her eyes.“I said it dozens of times. Hundreds.” She turned to Ben. “How did you two meet?”

Ben’s grip on my waist tightened. I bounced my hip into his side playfully, pursing my lips and making it perfectly clear I wouldn’t be bailing him out. He wanted to play Chase. He had to make up the story.

“We’ve actually known each other since birth. Thea was born twelve hours before me. Our moms were best friends.”

The truth. I tipped my head up, watching his face soften.

Robin tightened her grip on her husband’s lapel, threatening to choke him. “That’s so cute! Twelve hours!”

“He wasn’t due for another three weeks,” I said, unable to resist adding my favorite part of the story. “His mom claimed he couldn’t live without me.”

“More likely I realized from an early age that Thea shouldn’t be left unsupervised,” he joked. An old joke, a familiar one that I loved just as much as the story.

“And he’s been looking out for me ever since,” I said, a warmth blooming through my chest as I smiled up at him.

He had been watching out for me for years now. He’d been my cheerleader when I started my fashion line, stood by me when my dad left. Hell, he’d been the only person after my mom died to treat me the same. Not tiptoeing around me, afraid to talk, afraid to listen.

A familiar feeling of belonging hit me hard. I didn't even care about Ben lying to our new friends at that instant. I looked up at him, tilting my lips up to kiss his cheek. At the last second, Ben looked down and our lips crashed against each other.

I held back a grin at the unexpected kiss. I could sell this. I ran my hand up his chest and wove my fingers into his hair, pulling him in closer. His tongue swiped over my lips, teasing them open. Before he could, I dipped my tongue into his mouth, expecting a muffled laugh or a surprised gasp. Instead, he moaned, a light, barely audible groan that shot a bolt of lust through me and made me realize this wasn't a kiss for show.

His hand rubbed the small of my back, easing me closer. My eyes fluttered closed, body relaxing, melting into his as the kiss deepened into something new, something unexpected, something way too close to actual lust.

I pulled away, exhaling quick gasps, my face burning.

"Isn't that just the sweetest?" Robin looked at risk of melting into the floor herself. "Childhood sweethearts!"

I kept my eyes off Ben, unsure what had just happened.

It wasn't like we'd never kissed. We shared our first kiss in his parent's basement when we were in middle school. A drunken kiss at a high school party. Even an exploratory kiss five years ago when we were both single that had resulted in us collapsing in a laughing fit on the floor.

This didn't feel weird. Well, not that type of weird, anyway. The kiss felt charged, electric, and entirely repeatable.

I kept my focus on Jared and Robin, though I wanted to drag Ben off to ask what the hell that was. I couldn't do that. Not now.

I took a deep breath, plastering a smile on my face. "So, how did you two meet?"

"Friends," Robin said, just as Jared said, "Tinder."

"You're not supposed to tell people that!" Her eyes widened.

“I thought I could say Tinder, I just couldn’t tell them you said you just wanted a one-night stand.”

They began a friendly squabble, but all I could feel was my heart pounding in my chest and the pressure of Ben’s hand on the small of my back.

CHAPTER 10

Ben

AFTER THREE DRINKS, THE DINING ROOM DOORS OPENED FOR dinner. Thea had a death grip on her drink, her shoulders tense and her eyes anywhere but on me.

The kiss surprised her, too.

Fair.

We parted with Jared and Robin on the way to our table, a cozy booth overlooking the mountain. We sat far enough away from the other couples not to have our conversation interrupted by anyone besides the server who explained the menu and left us with our drinks.

“You good?” I asked, eyeing Thea warily. “Are we good?”

“Yeah.” She shook her head and smiled at me, meeting my eyes for the first time since the kiss. “That was weird, right? The kiss?”

I laughed. “Um, not weird...”

“Hot?”

My body relaxed at her confession. “Yeah, sort of hot.”

At least we felt the same way about the kiss. The unexpectedly passionate kiss that had left me completely off balance.

“Probably a one off, right?” Her eyebrows furrowed as she tore her gaze away. She unfurled the folded white napkin on the dinner plate and set it on her lap, spending way too much time flattening it out.

“Sure, probably,” I lied. The kiss certainly hadn’t felt like a once off. The kiss had felt shockingly right. Perfect. “I guess I channeled Chase a little too hard.”

“Chase never kissed me like that,” Thea said, her voice so low I strained to hear her.

“He didn’t?”

“Did Emily kiss you...?”

“Like that?” I frowned, mind replaying over a decade worth of kisses. “I don’t think so.”

No. My first kiss with Emily had been a disaster, her braces smashing my teeth and leaving us both in tears.

We lapsed into silence. Thea felt as familiar to me as my reflection, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like we were in uncharted territory.

“Should we test it?” Thea finally said, drawing out the words as she straightened the already straight silverware.

“Test it?”

“Yeah.” She glanced up, cheeks pink. “To make sure it was a one off. An experiment.”

“For science?” I asked, breaking some of the tension between us.

She grinned. “Something like that. It’ll probably be terrible, with just the two of us here. I think having an audience changed it.”

“That’s your hypothesis?” I raised an eyebrow, unconvinced by both her hypothesis and the prudence of her plan.

“It’s a working hypothesis, but yeah. I think we both got a little overwhelmed by our surroundings and then by pretending we were engaged.” She sharpened the last word. “You couldn’t help yourself, could you, Mr. Tylenol?”

“Maybe I went a little overboard,” I admitted. “Just a little.”

She stood up, sliding into the booth beside me. “A lot overboard.”

“You think this will fix it?” I asked, all the normal comfort and innocuousness of Thea nearby me gone. My body felt hyper aware of her: the pressure of her knee against my thigh, the gentle curve of her breasts on my arm, the warmth of her ass against my hand.

She trailed a hand down my jacket, tugging the soft wool before slipping her hand inside, running her fingers along my stomach and back up my chest.

My breath caught in my throat as she shifted closer, lifting her leg over my knee, her body angled toward mine.

I traced a finger down her arm. “Just a test, right?”

She nodded, honey brown eyes locked onto my face, exhaling softly before I dipped my head and our lips met.

Unlike the unexpected kiss in the bar, this kiss felt more exploratory and tentative. Thea stilled in my arms, her hand light on my chest, barely touching the fabric. Her body tensed.

I tightened my grip on her waist, pulling her closer. I set my other hand on her shoulder, my fingers slowly working their way up over her jaw. With one hand, I cradled the back of her head and wound my fingers through her hair.

She relaxed, kiss by kiss. Her fingers clutched the fabric of my shirt as she opened her lips, a soft moan at the back of her throat beckoning me to keep kissing her.

Not that I could have stopped. Whatever attraction that had been there before had only increased without a crowd. I slipped my tongue into her mouth and she let out a shuddered breath.

The clatter of plates hitting the table jolted us apart. Our server, red faced and eyes on the table, murmured out a brief description of each dish before slinking away. An older woman took the servers’ place.

“Um, sorry about the interruption,” the woman said. “Keith, at the front desk, said you drove up, so I missed you at

the train station, but I'm Barb Lewis, the events coordinator at Mount Pierce."

Thea pulled herself off my lap, running her hand through the back of her hair where my fingers had been. "Yeah, um, we're having a really great time. The resort is gorgeous."

"I can see that," Barb said with a raised eyebrow. Thea's cheeks flamed in response. "Well, we've organized a few events for this weekend, outside of the mixers. Just some light entertainment in the early evening. Tonight, we're doing a newlywed-style game show. I met Robin and Jared and they suggested you both take the stage. What do you say?"

I shrugged at Thea's questioning look.

"What's the prize?" she asked, shaking off any residual embarrassment in the name of competition.

Barb's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh! You're interested. I thought we'd have to pretend two of the servers are dating to make this work." She rustled through her clipboard. "The prize tonight is, oh, it's a good one, two bottles of wine delivered to your room, one a night, and tomorrow, a special dessert sent to your room after dinner."

"Chocolate?" I asked, warming up to the proposal.

"Chocolate dipped strawberries."

"We're in," we both answered.

Barb slipped away, leaving us alone again, a steaming appetizer between us.

"I should..." Thea glanced at the other side of the table but didn't move.

I rubbed my thumb over her arm. "So, how'd the experiment go?"

"Inconclusive." Her cheeks flared as she turned her attention to the appetizer.



“Now, for a score recap before the final round. Alexis and Matt are in third with five points. Jared and Robin in second with seven points. And in first, our newly engaged couple, Chase and Thea, with twenty points.”

“Not fair,” Robin grinned over at us. “They’ve known each other since they were babies.”

If booze and chocolate hadn’t been on the line, I might have felt bad about dominating the game so thoroughly. We’d only missed one question: What is your partner’s pet name for you?

I went with “honey.” And to the confusion of the crowd, Thea had written “Benny.” We stumbled through an awkward explanation, but it didn’t matter. After successfully answering what thing of mine she’d want to get rid of (my Carhartt jacket that had arguably seen better days), who is the better catch (Thea), and our favorite place to “make whoopie,” (unknown, but we both put “bed”) only the most catastrophic question would prevent us from winning. And even then, I don’t think anyone could have caught up with us.

“Last question for Chase, Jared, and Matt: What is your partner’s worst trait?”

Jared leaned close to me. “This is a trap, right?”

“Absolutely.” I nodded.

Across the stage, Thea locked eyes with me, mouthing, “Don’t blow this,” before hunching over her paper to write the answer.

Habitually late.

I scratched out my answer, giving her an exaggerated wink.

After thirty seconds, Barb called time and announced that the last question was worth ten points. Not enough points make us lose, but enough that I’d annoy Thea if I botched it.

“Starting with third, Alexis, what does Matt think is your most annoying habit?”

A middle-aged woman with a kind smile revealed her card. The word “Indecisive” jotted at the bottom after above half a dozen other guesses made and crossed out again.

“Matt, do you agree?”

Her partner showed the crowd his matching answer to applause. Fifteen points. Still nowhere close to beating Thea and I.

Robin and Jared went next, mismatching by Robin stating her worst trait was credit card debt and Jared opting for her caring too much. A weak answer, but not so innocuous that Robin didn’t get annoyed with them placing third overall.

“Well, we all know who the winners are, but just for fun, let’s look at your answer. Thea, what’s your worst trait?”

“According to Chase?” She asked, raising an eyebrow and turning over a card that read, “Always late.”

“And Chase, do you match?”

I turned over my blank card. “Nothing. Thea’s perfect.”

“Damn it,” Jared swore under his breath. “That’s good.”

Thea bit her bottom lip and rolled her eyes as a chorus of soft sighs rose from the crowd and Robin squeezed her arm.

“How about we have a round of applause for our winners?”

We stood up and accepted the win. Thea gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek. Considering I had no intention of making out with her in front of any more people at this resort, I was grateful she didn’t chance another kiss on the lips.

Jared and Robin invited us for another drink before the bar closed. I accepted, hoping that I might appease Thea’s annoyance with one last drink and the promise of more wine in our room.

Although, on second thought, more booze didn’t seem like the right answer to all the questions our kiss had dredged up.

I needed clarity and nothing felt clear, even after passing up another drink at dinner. I sipped the drink in my hand,

leaving it half full on the bar when the bartender announced he was closing up shop.

Jared and Robin bid us goodnight, tipsy and flirty on their way out of the elevator on the third floor.

Thea and I rode to the fourth in silence. I followed her down the quiet hallway, all the other resort guests already tucked in bed.

She pushed open the door to our room, passing by the bottle of wine on the coffee table and sitting down at the vanity to take off her jewelry and makeup.

“Want to watch a movie?” I asked, picking up the remote without turning on the bedroom television, just wanting to break the silence.

She shook her head. “No. I’m pretty tired.”

“Me, too,” I admitted. I pawed around my bag, pulling out a shirt and sweatpants.

“You know you’re my best friend, right?” Thea asked, staring at me through the mirror. She had removed what was left of her red lipstick, looking more like herself with every pass of the makeup remover.

“Of course I know that.” I grinned.

“I love you, Benny.”

“I love you too, Thea.”

I retreated into the bathroom, the smile slipping off my face. She wasn’t ready to talk about dinner, or the kiss before. She’d come around in her own time and I had my own thoughts to decipher.

CHAPTER 11

Thea

I WOKE UP IN BEN'S ARMS.

Not exactly newsworthy. We'd been having sleepovers at each other's houses since we were babies and never broke the habit. Sometime in high school, Ben's mom softly probed whether having the two of us in a room was a good idea, but Pete, Ben's dad, talked her down with a sigh and a laugh.

They're just best friends.

And we were. Other than a drunken kiss, we'd never tested the bounds of the friendship. Even in high school, when we had more hormones than sense, Ben always seemed vaguely off-limits, like I had too much to lose if I crossed that line with him. Last night, though, my sleep had been overwhelmed with dreams of making out with Ben in the restaurant, taking him up to our room, and doing things that would have made his mother wish she'd been a little firmer about boundaries in high school.

I'd opened my eyes, hoping those dreams that had been so spicy the night before would feel awkward and strange. But, if anything, my attraction to Ben had grown overnight and waking up with his arms around me and the faint imprint of morning wood on my thigh didn't make me scoff and smack him on the shoulder. I didn't even consider shaking him and telling him he needed to calm down.

No, instead, I turned slowly to face him, taking care not to wake him up.

He didn't look different. Not really, anyway. His brown hair was mussed from sleep. His eyes were closed, long lashes I was endlessly jealous of fluttering softly as he dreamed. His face, as familiar as my own, looked the same.

Only this morning, my eyes lingered on his Cupid's bow, the square cut of his jaw, and the firm muscles underneath my fingers. My pulse quickened at the memory of his lips on mine. I sucked in a breath, my knee brushing over the side of his leg, lean, hard muscle.

No, my thoughts had wandered past the realm of PG and strictly into R-rated. Sure, I'd never slept with Ben, but we talked about everything. I knew that the first time he had sex; he kept his shirt on because he was self-conscious about being skinny. That was back before he'd taken over the rescue and filled out. I knew that his last girlfriend hated him going down on her. I knew he loved camping sex.

All details of our lives shared over years, told more as general information than anything notable. I hadn't been turned on when he told me those things. Only interested in Ben.

But now, I couldn't help turning over those details and subtly moving myself closer beside him. A warm trail of heat traveled down my body as I let my sleep-addled mind wander. I imagined Ben's lips on my inner thigh, his calloused fingers digging into the flesh of my knee, his eyelashes brushing bare skin.

I closed my eyes, squeezing my thighs together to relieve some of the heat, frustrated and entirely aware that frustration was my own doing.

He moaned softly, tilting his head so he buried his nose in my hair, his arms pulling me closer, his boner now pressed into my hip.

Distantly, I reminded myself this wasn't okay. That Ben was my friend and I should pull away. I should wake him up, teasing him before taking a cold shower.

"Morning," Ben murmured into my hair.

“Hey,” I said, lying stock still, rationing my breath.

“How long have you been awake?”

“Just a minute,” I lied.

“Mmm.” His voice was deep and sleepy. “What are we doing today?”

He tensed, his hips drawing away from me. I tilted my head up in time to watch his cheeks turn pink, relaxing some of the pent up sexual frustration and making me laugh.

“We have a spa appointment this afternoon and breakfast is served until ten. Otherwise, not a single thing.”

“So, you’re saying we have enough time to take a hike?”

I groaned, sprawling onto the empty half of the bed and throwing my arm over my face. “Or enough time to lounge in the hot tub with the wine we didn’t drink last night.”

He laughed, pushing himself up. “Or we could go for a hike and have two bottles of wine to drink in the hot tub tonight.”

Normally, I’d be in enthusiastic agreement with that type of problem-solving, but after last night, I didn’t trust either of us to drink an entire bottle of wine. Still, he’d been a good sport so far this weekend. I owed him at least a hike.

“Fine, a short hike. Real short. I didn’t bring much besides cocktail attire.”

“Well,” he grinned, rearranging the sheet draped over his lap as he leaned over the bed, grabbing his duffel bag from the floor. “Good news. You weren’t the only person to pack for two. I grabbed your boots and a change of clothes from my house.”

He pulled out a pair of fleece-lined leggings and a sweater I forgot I owned.

On reflection, a hike might be exactly what we both needed: fresh air and plenty of space.

“Fine,” I sighed. “But first, breakfast.”

“Sure thing,” he pushed himself up, angling toward the bathroom. “Just give me ten minutes to get dressed and the bathroom is yours.”

I frowned, exhaling loudly in the now-empty room. I could white knuckle through breakfast and clear my head on the hike.

Temporarily clear my head, anyway. By the afternoon, we’d be barely clothed and pressed together on a massage table.

I shook that thought right out of my head and kept my eyes off the bathroom door. Half under the covers, I shimmied into the hiking outfit and hurriedly applied a layer of makeup that hugged the line of looking natural.

“Are you ready?” Ben asked, surprised when he emerged from the bathroom to find me dressed.

“Yep!” I answered, a little too excitedly.

He grabbed a map and his backpack, holding the door open. We took the elevator to the lobby, and the receptionist directed us to a conference room for a buffet breakfast.

“Thea! Chase!” Robin waved from a table by the window. “Come join us!”

I made up a plate of eggs and bacon, my stomach too queasy for carbs. Ben’s stomach must have been fine since he piled food onto his plate with gusto.

“Good morning!” Robin greeted us, green eyes gleaming. “What are you two up to today?”

She eyed my outfit as I sat down opposite her.

“We’re going on a hike,” Ben said, sliding into the seat next to mine.

“Oh!” Robin tilted her head. “Isn’t this weekend supposed to be about relaxing?”

“B—” I stopped myself short. “Chase thinks hikes are relaxing. And he’s promised me this one will only be an hour or two.”

“I’ll try to keep it under five miles,” Ben said with a grin.

“Five miles total,” I said firmly. “None of this ‘as the crow flies’ bull.” I shifted my focus back to Robin. “He’s burned me before.”

“Burned you? You always have fun on the trail,” Ben said, sliding his arm over my shoulders.

His hand kneaded my shoulder and the tug to lean into him overtook me. I shrugged his hand off my shoulder. “I always have fun, but we’ve got spa reservations at two.”

“I’ve heard such good things about the spa here,” Robin tittered, pushing her eggs around the plate with her fork. “The couples’ massage is supposed to be really relaxing,”

I dug into my bagel. “It sounds great. What time is your appointment?”

“Eleven. Jared and I were going to explore the resort before our appointment. Let us know how the hike is. Maybe we could check out a trail before we leave.”

The look on Jared’s face made it clear he had no intention of hiking and I didn’t blame him. I’d much rather go back to the room and crawl back into bed. Or play on my phone in the hot tub. But more clothes and activity were probably a better choice, all things considered.

“Have a pleasant morning. Want to catch up in the bar before dinner? Say five?”

We nodded as Robin and Jared stood to leave. I wolfed down the eggs before pouring myself a cup of coffee while Ben pushed around the food on his plate.

“Not hungry?” I asked.

He pushed the plate away. “Not really. I don’t want to get too full before we go out. I should have just stuck to a bowl of granola, but it all looked so good. Do you think you can steal some pieces of fruit to take with us?”

I smiled. “Yeah. I think I can handle that.” I swiped two bananas and two blueberry muffins on our way out the door, tucking them into my backpack.

Ben let the front desk know we'd be taking a hike and giving them the trail information. I had no cell phone service and Ben only had SOS mode on his screen. While the weather report looked fine, the last thing we needed was to get stranded on the side of the mountain with no phone and no one the wiser.

"So, how much pain are you putting me through today?" I asked, tucking my hands into my sweater as we emerged from the hotel.

"Hardly any. It's an out-and-back, just over three miles, with a lookout point."

I squinted up at the overcast sky with a shrug. "I'm not sure we'll see much."

"It's about the trip, not the destination," Ben chided me gently, taking my hand and pulling me toward the tree line.

I followed him through the parking lot and to the trailhead, nicely marked with a sign explaining the trail markers.

"Wow," I whistled under my breath. "Even the hikes are fancy up here, huh?"

"Only the fanciest hikes for the fine visitors to Mount Pierce." He squeezed my hand, letting it go while he traced his finger over a path.

I pulled my hat over my ears, glad Ben thought to pack mittens. "Three miles one-way or round trip?"

"Round trip. You're welcome." His eyes gleamed mischievously. "You're lucky we have that appointment at the spa. There's a really fun ten-miler I was tempted to drag you on."

I kicked a pine cone littering the path, watching it bounce down the path, but not arguing. He had a point. He could have made this a lot more unpleasant. Besides, the cool air and space had eased some of the tension in my chest leftover from the make-out session the night before.

As we wound around the mountain, my body warmed up and I pulled off my jacket, tying the arms around my waist.

The hat and mittens quickly followed.

Ben stripped down to a tight black t-shirt and, rather than watching the trail, I had my eyes glued to him and the shirt sculpted to his back. How had I not noticed his broad shoulders before?

“And look at that view!”

I pulled my eyes away from his muscles and saw a wooden observation deck overlooking a valley wrapped in clouds. Ben bounded onto the deck while I took a moment more to admire the view of his back.

I joined him on the deck. “Gorgeous,” I laughed. “Worth the trip.”

Through the fog, I could barely make out the shore of the lake below, only catching sight of a smattering of trees and some green.

I walked to the edge of the platform, standing beside Ben at the banister, staring down at the hazy view.

“We should come back in the spring, when the weather’s a little better.”

“Just for the hike, right? Because I don’t know if I can afford another weekend,” I joked.

His hand slid over my shoulder and down my waist, pulling me closer. “We could take the train.”

“Don’t threaten me with the train,” I groaned.

He dipped his head, lips at my ear. “Hike this path first and then the ten-miler.”

His breath was hot and inviting. Almost inviting enough to make me agree to a fourteen mile hike.

“Maybe I could spring for a night,” I relented.

“Next time will be my treat.”

I collapsed my head onto his shoulder. “That sounds nice, actually. Well, except the sweaty hike part.”

“It’ll be fun and something to look forward to.”

I pursed my lips, longing and lust mingling in my body for a person who shouldn't feel either emotion. Burrowing my face into the crook of his neck, I inhaled the scent of pine and lemon, the earthy smell that clung to him.

When I picked my head up, he stared down at me, his brown eyes piercing mine. The same intensity he looked at me in front of the couple from last night. A predatory, hungry gaze that made my heart patter and my pulse quicken.

I tried to laugh it off. "We're all on our own. There's no one here to convince."

He ducked his head, lips perilously close to mine. "Just you."

CHAPTER 12

Ben

OTHER THAN WHEN I WAS THIRTEEN, RAVAGED BY HORMONES, I'd gone twenty-seven years without thinking about kissing Thea. And now, in the span of the weekend, I'd somehow opened the floodgates. Previously innocent activities like hiking and sleeping were now steeped in a cloud of lust and desire. And worst of all, I couldn't act on it. I couldn't even acknowledge it.

The look of betrayal on Thea's face when I pulled away during our near-kiss on the mountain had nearly done me in. My heart beat so hard I couldn't barely hear myself say, "We should probably head back down." But as sure as I knew Thea had wanted me to kiss her, I also knew she needed to come to the same conclusion that I had: we belonged together and not just as friends.

We'd hiked back down the mountain and made our way to the spa, which turned out to be another hurdle. I'd gone to the beach with Thea dozens of times, seen her in a bathing suit hundreds more, and other than the year in middle school when she suddenly grew breasts, leaving us both fascinated, I couldn't remember ever being so distracted by her.

The pink bikini left little to the imagination. Thea tailored all of her clothes to accentuate every curve on her body. Currently, my focus caught on the scalloped edge of lace fitted to her ass.

"You'll start with a contrast bath hydrotherapy session," a man in a white polo and white pants said. The mish-mash of words dragged my attention away from Thea.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

Thea grinned. “Excuse him, he doesn’t spend much time in spas.”

The man shook his head. “I get that question a lot. For the next hour, you’ll be alternating between cold treatments and hot treatments.”

Cold. Cold was good.

Or was, until after a leisurely five-minutes in a hot sauna that reeked of menthol, I jumped into an ice bath.

“I thought we were just getting a massage,” I muttered, teeth chattering.

“It’s a spa experience,” Thea drawled, her face impassive to the ice-cold bath. Goosebumps sprouted over her arms, though, and the flimsy pink bikini top did nothing to cover her hard nipples.

Don’t look at her nipples, Ben I repeatedly told myself.

“Times up,” she said, standing up, altering my view from her breasts to her ass. “Back to the sauna.”

“How many more times are we doing this?” I groaned. Despite the discomfort of the cold, the cold bath at least kept my body in check.

Watching Thea sprawl out on the aspen bench, head tilted back onto a towel and her arms spread wide had me itching for the cold bath again.

“If you’d both like to cut the hydrotherapy short, your room is ready.” The employee from earlier materialized with a pair of towels for us to exit the bath.

“Yes, please,” I said, pushing myself out of the pool.

“You’re no fun,” Thea chided, languidly pushing herself up from the pool, as if she wasn’t freezing.

The man led us down a hallway into a sparse white room with two massage tables nestled nearly touching one another.

“So, we’re sharing a room?” I said, knocking my shoulder into Thea’s.

“Well, it is a couple’s massage,” she whispered back.

The woman gave us directions to undress and lie on the table, pulling the sheet over us. I awkwardly worked my way out of my wet bottoms, changing into a pair of boxers before getting under the sheets.

Thea didn’t even try at modesty. Her bikini was off in an instant and her naked body slipped under the sheet on her table..

“This is cozy,” she said, shifting on the table.

Cozy wasn’t the word I would use. Unbearable? Frustrating?

A knock at the door and the two massage therapists filed into the room.



“You don’t want to stay? Dominate another game?” I asked, attention still on the bar as Thea pulled me away.

“The winner gets a free round of contrast hydrotherapy,” she said, killing any interest I had in playing another couple’s game. “Besides, we already won the best prize. Barb told me the chocolate strawberries were upstairs, and the chef included a special treat for us.”

“More wine?”

“Champagne. We haven’t gone in the hot tub yet and there’s plenty of booze in the room now. Let’s go hang out on the deck.”

I had to admit, the idea of lounging in a hot tub in the depths of winter sounded appealing. And with chocolate strawberries? Absolutely decadent. I relented without much of a fight. Throwing on my half-dried swim trunks, I walked onto the deck to take off the top of the hot tub while Thea gathered all the remaining food and booze in the room.

It took her two trips, long enough for me to figure out the controls on the hot tub. I set the lights to rainbow and basked in the glow of red, purple, yellow, blue, and green.

“Fancy. I love it,” Thea said, teeth chattering.

I manhandled the heavy metal cafe table flush with the hot tub. She set the now open bottle of wine and the tray of strawberries on the table while I grabbed the champagne holder from the room. “Do you think it’s a good idea to have glass in the hot tub?”

“Absolutely not,” I said, picking up a flute and pouring Thea a glass. “But this place doesn’t have any plastic, so it’s that or a coffee mug. I promise to be careful if you promise to be careful.”

“I promise to be careful right now,” she answered, cheeks blushing. “But I don’t know if I can promise that once the Champagne is gone.”

I took the flute back, my fingers brushing hers. “I’m putting this in a coffee mug.”

Her face crumpled. “Fine. I guess that’s safer.”

I left for the mugs as she climbed into the hot tub and returned to find the jets on high and Thea’s head back on the lip of the tub, her body floating underneath the water.

“Why didn’t we do this last night?” she moaned.

Her moan hit me straight in the groin and I climbed in before that became clear.

“Here’s your champagne,” I said, handing Thea a dangerously full mug. I hadn’t quite emptied the bottle into the mugs, but I’d come close. Setting my mug on the café table, I carefully climbed into the hot tub, settling into a seat on the opposite side.

“Come closer,” she said, holding up her hand as if I was a mile away and not an arm’s length.

I picked my mug off the table and floated my way to her, settling onto the bench, hot jets massaging my back. Groaning, I flopped my head back.

“We should have done this last night,” she sighed.

“We should have blown off the massage. Why did that leave me so sore?” I shifted lower in the tub, letting the jets soothe the ache in my lower back.

“Well, I didn’t want to call you out during the massage, but you were tense the entire time. You could have told them to back off.”

I picked my head up. “And admit I couldn’t take it? Not a chance. Especially when you kept telling your masseuse to go harder.”

“You were getting competitive with me?”

“Maybe a little,” I admitted.

She tilted her head back against the headrest. “You’re awful.”

“And yet you took me on this really nice vacation. I can’t be all bad.”

She rolled onto her side, facing me. Steam billowed around her as her lips pursed, taking me in. “You’re not even a little bad, if I’m honest.”

I sank down in the tub, turning my head so I was only inches from her lips. “I like when you’re honest.”

Her bottom lip slipped into her mouth and she took a deep inhale.

“Do you want to talk about the kiss yesterday?”

She shook her head, lips pulling up into a smile.

“Want to check if we’re still into it today?”

The mischievous glint in her eyes told me the answer before she nodded. She leaned forward, lips brushing mine with a soft sigh that made me instantly hard. She pressed a hand on my bare chest, pushing me onto my back. Before I caught my breath, she straddled my hips, her lips fused to mine.

“Thea,” I groaned, pushing my hips back into the plastic molded seat in a hopeless attempt to not jam my hard dick into her thighs.

“What?” she asked, feigning innocence even as she relaxed into my lap, my tented dick pressed to her bikini bottoms. “We’re just kissing.”

She brushed her thumb over my ear before running her fingers through my hair, fingertips massaging my scalp until I relaxed my head back. Her lips nipped at my jawline, drawing closer to my lips without ever seeming to land on them. Not that I contributed much. My body froze as my mind fixated on every inch of contact between us: her lips on my chin, her hand pressed to my torso, her puckered nipples pressing my chest through the fabric of her bikini. I could barely breathe.

“Relax, Benny,” Thea purred into my ear before nipping my ear lobe.

The quick bite of pain returned at least a limited function of my body. I wrapped an arm around her waist, capturing her lips and sliding my tongue into her mouth. She tasted like honey and cream, bubbles and roses. An unexpected combination that made me want to taste her again and again. My grip around her waist tightened, drawing her closer.

Her hard nipples rubbed against my chest as she rolled her hips. The combination of the hot tub and the friction between our bodies left me light-headed. “Thea, what are you—”

She cut me off with a kiss, her hand squeezing my cheek before dipping down into the water and covering mine. She guided it up, past her exposed torso until I cupped her breast in my hand. “Let’s not overthink this now.”

I didn’t want to overthink it. Hell, I could barely think at all. Everything felt muddy, like I was shoulder-deep in quicksand and about to sink. I ran my thumb over her nipple, burrowing my face into her and pressed teasing kisses up her neck. She tilted her head back, releasing breathy gasps as I eased the fabric down, exposing her breasts to the chilly night air. My lips made their way back down, pausing to take her in: skin tinged pink from the heat of the tub, cheeks red, black

hair askew in her messy bun, and gray eyes wide and glassy with want.

I pulled her breast into my mouth, fingers kneading the other breast as she whimpered. She curled into me, her cheek brushing the top of my head and her arms wrapping around me. My hand at her back sank lower, cupping her ass and pulling her closer until everything was Thea: the taste on my lips, the sound of her voice, the feel of her skin.

Perfection.

Her hips rocked against me. “I need you to fuck me, Benny.”

The pleading in her voice sent a rush of heat to my dick and, for the first time since high school, I considered the very real possibility that I’d come in my pants. I rounded her ass, taking my time down her inner thigh before pressing my palm against her mound. She arched her back, head dropping back as she sucked in a breath. I pushed away the fabric, running a finger down her smooth slit before pressing my thumb against her clit.

“Benny,” she sighed, wrapping an arm around my neck.

“Should we go inside?” I asked, flicking my thumb and getting a soft moan in response.

“I don’t think we’re the first people who’ve fooled around in this hot tub,” she said, pressing her hips into my palm.

I ran my tongue up the underside of her breast, pulling her nipple into my mouth before letting go. “Your call. I just know how much you hate getting pruny.”

“Literally the last thing on my mind right now.”

“And I was also thinking how badly I wanted to taste you.”

CHAPTER 13

Thea

MY EYES SHOT OPEN AND I PULLED MY TIT OUT OF BEN'S mouth. "On second thought, I really hate getting pruny."

He grinned, brown eyes sparkling against the constantly changing light of the hot tub. As the evening got more heated, I'd kept my eyes off Ben's face, as if meeting his eye would remind me this wasn't some guy I picked up in a bar. This was Ben. My Ben. But the magic hadn't faded. Not even a little. I wavered between glad and worried until he latched his arms underneath me and stood up, holding me.

"You're going to drop us."

"Probably, but I need you out of this hot tub and out of that bathing suit immediately." His voice came out low and gruff, sending a slow trail of warmth through me, even as the evening air cooled my skin. He set me beside the hot tub and climbed out, surveying the mess of mugs and food we'd left strewn around. "Animals can't get up here, right? I should put this stuff away."

I laughed, picking up the plate of chocolate-covered strawberries. "I think the bears will leave the champagne alone. Inside, now."

Swatting his ass as he passed, I followed him inside. I set the strawberries on the nightstand and pulled off my already misplaced bikini top on my way to the shower. Shucking off my bottoms, I didn't turn around to check for Ben. I could feel the heat of his gaze as I turned on the shower, pulling my hair

down before stepping in and letting the hot water slough away all the hot tub water, waiting for him to slide in behind me.

As water warmed my back, I waited for regret to sink in. Instead, anticipation thrummed through my veins. Ben pulled off his shorts and slid into the shower behind me. His hand wrapped around my waist and his lips found my neck. I leaned back into him as his hand made its way up, cupping my breast, while the other traveled down past my stomach and cupped my sex, hard dick grinding into my ass.

His finger, slick with water, slipped inside me as his lips kissed down my shoulder. "I need you to turn around, Thea."

I didn't need him to tell me twice. I turned and leaned back against the cool tile as he sank in front of me. He ran his hands down my sides, his lips stopping at my stomach and then my inner thighs, pushing my legs apart. I wrapped my leg over his shoulders as his tongue slid over my clit, nearly toppling me onto the ground. I caught my breath and balance, placing a hand on his head as he gripped my inner thigh, opening up to him completely. His tongue swirled and lapped at a dizzying pace.

I tipped my head back, the shower spray hitting my pebbled nipples and my mind fuzzy and far away. I distantly registered the soft moans escaping from my mouth, unable to stop them as my body hurdled closer to orgasm. Oh God, Ben was about to make me orgasm. My grip tightened in his hair as I sucked in a breath, my body tensing before relaxing completely.

Fire burned through my veins and I seemingly lost all control of myself as the orgasm ripped through me. I closed my eyes, feeling everything and nothing all at once. I slid down the tiled wall, collapsing in a heap on the ground, Ben guiding me the entire way.

"Fuck," I swore under my breath.

"You okay?"

I opened my eyes to find myself in Ben's lap, legs straddled on either side of him. "I'm amazing. You're

amazing.”

His lips hitched up in a smirk. A pleased look that under any other circumstance I would have been thrilled to wipe off his face. But hell, the man had a right to be pleased with himself right now. I leaned forward, setting my forehead on his chest. “You didn’t warn me. You’re really good at that.”

“Sorry it didn’t come up before.”

His dick stood at attention between us and despite the recent orgasm, a lust stirred in my stomach.

“Now, I should probably show you something I’m really good at,” I said, pushing him back onto the shower floor. I traced my fingertips down his chest, gripping his hard dick in my hand and stroking it once, twice, before sinking onto him.

He groaned, eyes fluttering closed, as he gripped my thighs. I tilted my head back as I rocked my hips. The stirring of lust had turned into a full on tidal wave that took me by surprise. Rather than a perfunctory exchange of orgasms, I considered I might actually come again. Was that possible outside of porn and dirty novels? It certainly had never been before.

As if sensing my question, Ben’s fingers crawled around my thigh and his thumb pressed firm against my clit and gave me my answer. I leaned forward, one hand on his chest and the other on his side, using his body for support as I rode him. He rose, catching my nipple in his mouth as he continued stroking me. God, the man was talented.

His breath hot against my breast, his body turned to stone underneath me, he released my breast from his mouth and the most glorious groan erupted from him: low and rumbly and hot. I came with him: not exactly the same earth-shattering orgasm as before, but a pleasant surprise considering I didn’t think I was a “two orgasm” type of girl.

I pitched forward, lying on his chest as increasingly tepid water pelted my back. Ben massaged my back, his fingertips tracing tiny circles down my spine. “That was,” I sighed, body limp and everything perfect.

“Amazing?”

“Phenomenal.”

He rested his palm on my lower back with a sigh. “Um, not to ruin the mood, but protection. We didn’t...”

I winced. “Yeah, that got a little out of hand. Well, good news, I’m on the pill. And I’m nearly positive you don’t have the clap. You don’t have the clap, right, Benny?”

He kissed the top of my head before wrapping his arms around me. “Nope. Clean bill of health here. Now, not to destroy this calm, but we should probably get out of the shower.”

“Mm,” I nodded absently. “I’m tired.”



I reluctantly opened my eyes and found myself cocooned in Ben’s arms. That wasn’t necessarily out of the ordinary, but the fact that we were both naked definitely was.

A faint tug of regret pulled at my chest, coupled with a wistfulness I couldn’t place. I couldn’t pretend sleeping with Ben was a mistake. While we’d been drinking, both of us were stone cold sober and the sexual attraction between us had been growing all day.

No, sleeping with Ben had crossed a line, but wasn’t a mistake.

Or at least not the type of mistake where we hadn’t meant to sleep together.

We’d unequivocally meant to sleep together.

But this morning, we had to deal with the fallout of that decision. Because we certainly couldn’t keep sleeping together. Right?

No, definitely not.

Probably not.

Maybe.

I groaned against Ben's chest. Why did he have to be so good?

With Chase, we'd stumble home after a night of drinks and have quick, though mutually satisfying sex within the hour. No second round. No midnight wake ups. No collapsing in a naked pile with the promise of more.

With Ben there had been more. Lots more. And then, when I thought there couldn't possibly be more and my body felt like jello, there had been more.

Honestly, Ben should come with a warning label. He'd only ever dated one woman in Franklin Notch and I suspected that had the rest of them known his bedroom skills, he wouldn't have been single for the past three years.

Not that I wanted him in a relationship.

No. I shook that thought off. Of course I wanted Ben in a relationship. I wanted him coupled and endlessly happy. I wanted him to have cute little babies so I could be their cool aunt.

But after last night, maybe I wanted to be their mom, too?

No. No, no, no. This was Benny. My Benny. We had over twenty years of friendship. We'd weathered break ups and puberty and fights, but mind-blowing sex?

For the first time, I wished the sex had sucked. It would have been easier to get out of the mess I'd made had it been a train wreck of odd groping and unsatisfying screwing. Instead, in the future I'd have to comfort myself with memories of mind-blowing sex. The type of sex that would probably ruin any chance I had of finding someone new. Someone besides Ben.

I traced a finger down his chest, my eyes following the thin patch of hair until my finger hit the bottom of his ribs where he was ticklish and he jolted awake.

"Why would you wake me up like that?" He turned away from me and then back again, his arms pulling me tight against

him so I couldn't tickle him.

I wriggled far enough away to reach his face, brushing a kiss over his cheek. "Because I can? And we're about to get kicked out. I'm pretty sure check out is in an hour."

He groaned. "Next time, let's do a three-day weekend. Two wasn't long enough."

Three nights. Thank god I had to open the shop tomorrow, because the temptation to call the front desk and extend this sexual fever dream for a little while longer nearly overwhelmed me.

"You okay, Thea?" Ben's eyebrows knitted together, and I brushed the concern off my face, plastering on a smile instead.

"I'm fine. Totally fine."

"Don't lie." He loosened his grip on me, pushing himself up on his elbow. "Should we talk about last night?"

"Naked?"

"I can put on some pants if it helps."

Since I'd officially demolished any hope of a quick round before checking out, I nodded.

Ben stood up and grabbed his boxers off the ground, pulling them on with a cheeky look back at me. "And what about you?"

"I'm quite comfortable, thank you," I teased, gripping the sheet over my body.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. "I've got to be honest, Thea. I don't think I can focus on a conversation about us sleeping together if you're still naked. I'm easily distracted."

He tugged on the corner of the sheet.

"Fine." I reached past him, grabbing his shirt off the side table and pulling it over my head.

"Yeah, I'm not sure that'll help," Ben said, his voice low and his eyes raking over me.

I smacked his arm. "Hey, eyes up here, buddy. Focus."

“I’m not sure what I’m focusing on,” he admitted, eyes lazily making their way back to mine.

“You’re focusing on what happens when we walk out of here. We have dinner with your parents tomorrow.”

He grimaced.

“Seriously? You forgot?”

“I’ve been distracted.” He pushed aside the sheet and rubbed his palm over my knee, sending a shiver down my spine.

I batted his hand away. “You’re trying to distract me again. And your mom is going to sniff out that something happened if we don’t get our story straight.”

“Our story straight?” That seemed to get his attention. “What do we need to get our story straight for?”

“Seriously, Ben?”

“Seriously, Thea.”

My jaw dropped and I crossed my arms. “Fine, when your parents ask us how the resort was this weekend, let’s just tell them we slept together.”

He laughed. “Is that a dessert conversation or entrée?”

“It’s a not happening conversation,” I said. “Be serious, Benny.”

He sat on the side of the bed, leaning forward to kiss me. I sighed, melting into him before he pulled away. “Okay, I’ll stop joking around. We’ll tell them we had a nice time. That we enjoyed the food and the hot tub and the hikes.”

“I didn’t enjoy the hike,” I said, dropping my head onto his chest.

Ben wrapped a protective arm over me, his fingers raking through my hair. “Well, we’re already lying. Just consider that a natural extension of the lies. Besides, you’re supposed to bring a side dish. You can distract her with your amazing cooking.”

I groaned. “Do you think I can pay Gloria to open the diner just to make me a side dish?”

“No,” Ben said, kissing the top of my head. “I don’t know why you’re so worried.”

“Your mom will know,” I hissed.

Worse, she’d be thrilled. Beyond thrilled, elated. Ecstatic. Euphoric. She’d never say the words aloud, but her desperation for her son and her best friend’s daughter to get together was palpable.

“Well, I can’t control my mom, but that’s a good point,” Ben conceded. “We’ll just be normal. Totally normal.”

Laying in bed with Ben after a night of orgasms didn’t exactly meet the criteria of “normal,” but we couldn’t exactly change the night before now. Maybe we could pretend.

“And after dinner?” Ben asked, his finger tracing a path along my inner knee.

“Do you want to watch a movie or something?” I asked, keeping my voice level while I pushed back goosebumps.

He frowned. “No. I mean, sure, but that wasn’t what I was talking about. I meant this, us sleeping together.”

“Oh,” I stuttered, suddenly feeling out of my depth and wishing I’d at least put on a pair of pants. “Well, I don’t know. Wasn’t this just, like, a fluke?”

Ben’s mouth twitched before his jaw clenched. Not the answer he wanted. “Sex in the hot tub could be considered a fluke, Thea, but the bed? And then again at three? I think you only get to call one orgasm a fluke.”

“We’d been drinking.”

“We didn’t even open the wine.”

“It’s been a weird weekend.”

“Whose fault is that?” he snorted.

“I don’t know. Maybe the guy who pretended he was my ex?”

“You’re blaming this on me?”

I shook my head, sensing a fight I didn’t want to have on the horizon. “No, I just think maybe we got a little swept up in the glamour of it all.”

“Too many rose petals to resist?” Ben asked, nodding down at the floor.

“Something like that,” I conceded. “I think things will look a lot different once we’re back home, in our normal life.”

“And if it’s not?” His brown eyes bored into mine with an intensity that took me off guard.

I shrugged. “I guess we’ll deal with that then.”

“So, pretend this weekend didn’t happen?”

“Not the sex parts, anyway.”

“The kissing?”

“Maybe that part too.”

Ben frowned. “That’s asking a lot. I’m not sure I can forget.”

“Me neither, but it’d be better if we did. We got swept away a little. It happens.” I shrugged as if making out and then sleeping with your friend just happened sometimes even though it certainly hadn’t happened before.

He nodded. “Okay. That’s how we’ll play it for now then. If that’s what you want.”

What I wanted was to climb back under the covers and forget Franklin Notch, dinner with his parents and our entire history together. I wanted to call down to the front desk, extend our stay another day, and crawl back under the covers.

“Let’s get dressed and grab breakfast before we go.”

He pushed himself off the bed, rustling through his open backpack for a change of clothes. I grabbed my phone from the bedside table, hoping to distract myself with celebrity gossip or a new clothing collection.

“Hey.” Ben paused at the door to the bathroom. “You know that no matter what, nothing will change between us, right?”

I bit my bottom lip. “Is that a fact?”

He nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Not even last night?”

“Nothing. Ever.” His confidence almost convinced me he was telling the truth. He shot me a grin before closing the door behind him and I hoped that was true.

CHAPTER 14

Ben

I KNOCKED ON THEA'S FRONT DOOR AS I FIT IN THE KEY AND pushed open the door.

"Hey," I called upstairs. "Thea, it's me!"

"I'm running late!" she called back, her voice muffled from upstairs.

I set down the warm casserole I brought with me before bounding up to find her. The door to her childhood bedroom stood open and I paused in front, looking around inside.

She'd changed the room into a closet sometime last winter, well after her clothes had overwhelmed the tiny walk-in closet in the room, and I convinced her she should finally move into the primary bedroom. Still, she'd left remnants of her childhood bedroom intact: a gymnastics trophy on the dresser, a photo mural on the wall, a framed photo of her mom rocking punk clothes in the middle of a mosh pit blown above the bed.

"There you are," Thea said, padding into the room. Her hair was still in curlers, but her makeup was done. She wore a bright pink shirtdress with white lapels and a matching white belt. She'd undone the top two buttons, a deep v sending my eyes directly to her chest.

"Sorry, I got a little distracted." My cheeks burned as I pulled my eyes away.

"Did you?" She pursed her lips, hiding a smirk. "Well, no matter. I'm running a little late, anyway."

A little bit late was Thea code for at least fifteen minutes but no more than thirty. Mom had long ago grown accustomed to Thea's tardiness and wouldn't have dinner on the table for another half hour at least.

"So..." She dragged out the word. "Did you want to head over to your parents or wait for me?"

My ears perked at the phrasing and I shook my head. "I'll wait. What did you break?"

She grinned. "I pulled the paper towel holder out of the wall last week. Do you mind putting it back up?"

I sighed. "Alright, She-hulk. I'm going to anchor it this time, but if it happens again, I'm getting you a paper towel stand instead."

She smiled, setting her hand on my shoulder and rising on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. She pulled back without giving me the opportunity to wrap an arm around her waist.

"Um, yeah. Thanks."

She wouldn't have thought twice about kissing me like that last week. Or during our weekend at the resort. But now, back in our hometown, in a house we both grew up in, nothing seemed quite so clear cut. Well, to Thea anyway.

Any hesitations on my end had fallen away the morning we woke up together. Having her in my arms, her soft body pressed against mine, felt impossibly right. Unmistakably right. And now, I just needed Thea to come to that same conclusion. We'd been friends for twenty-seven years. What was a little more time?

Retracing my steps back downstairs, I shoved the casserole in the microwave and examined the paper towel holder with a sigh. She'd yanked the drywall screws straight out of the wall, so I'd need some spackle and a small jar of kitchen paint to patch the holes as well. I pulled my toolbox out of the hall closet and collected supplies in the garage.

By the time I applied the spackle and screwed the paper towel holder into the cabinets, she emerged from upstairs, hair done and shoes on.

“I don’t know if I like it there,” she said, narrowing her eyes as she examined the new home for the holder.

“Well, you’ve pulled it out of the wall three times now.” I pointed out the now-filled holes. “You just can’t tell because I do such quality work.”

She grinned. “You really do. What would I do without you?”

“You’d need to hire a handyman, that’s for sure.”

“And I don’t think anyone else would work in exchange for clothing and movie nights.”

“Probably not.” I cleaned up the countertop, stacking my tools to return to the garage. “Ready to go?”

She nodded and then pressed the heel of her palm to her forehead. “Crap. I forgot to bake a side dish. I said I’d do that, didn’t I?”

I laughed. “I knew you forgot.”

“You were supposed to remind me!”

“I did. Yesterday.”

“You know I can’t keep anything in my head that long. I needed a reminder today.”

“I cooked a side dish, just in case,” I said. I pressed my hand to the small of her back, stopping to grab the casserole out of the microwave before moving her to the front door.

“But your mom will know!”

“You left a dish at my house,” I admitted. “I used that.”

She gaped at me. “So smart! How did you get so smart? What did I bake?”

“Potatoes Au gratin.”

“That even sounds like something I’d cook,” she said, her smile contagious.

We walked across the street to my parents’ house. I didn’t bother knocking, opening up the side door into the kitchen.

“Hey, Mom,” I greeted her backside as she pulled a ham out of the oven. She set the dish on the oven and shucked off her oven mitts.

“My babies!” She pulled us into a messy embrace, tears smudging her makeup and probably ruining Thea’s dress. “I can’t believe I had to miss your birthday! I missed you both so much!”

She didn’t “have to” miss our birthday, but the cross-country road trip had been years in the making. They’d planned the trip for after the holidays and to escape New England for at least a month during the depths of winter. Hard to blame them after a lifetime of snowstorms.

“We missed you and bought so many presents. Your father finally told me to cut it out, but then I found a fabric store and, well, I might have gone a little overboard.”

I craned my neck over her into the dining room, spotting the mound of presents taking over the corner of the room. Dad claimed she’d always showered everyone with gifts, even before Thea’s mom died. Afterward, though, the gifts and trips and attention doubled, tripled even.

“We don’t need anything. We’re just so happy to have you back,” Thea gushed. “And I want to see more pictures.”

I suppressed a groan. “Or you could just tell us a couple of stories over dinner?”

“Thea showed me how to hook up my phone right to the TV,” my dad said, joining us in the kitchen. He gave Thea a giant hug before patting my back. “Good to see you, kiddo.”

I smiled at my father, more than ever tracking the similarities between us: dark brown eyes, tall, lanky build, faint hint of a mountain accent that made our R’s disappear. I’d never really considered our similarities growing up, but as I careened through my twenties, I gauged my progress based on him more and more. And rapidly falling behind.

Like Thea, this latest birthday just highlighted how far I’d drifted. Sure, my dad had never touched the trading post back when it belonged to my grandparents. He’d gone to a coastal

school for his teaching degree, returning to Franklin Notch to marry my mother and start a family. A smaller family than they imagined, but a happy one, nonetheless.

“How’d the RV hold up?” I asked.

Thea had fielded most of the phone calls from my parents while they traveled. My father and I weren’t really talkers, so my mom called Thea when they were away. Thea, in turn, told me all the pertinent information: when they’d be home, whether they were having fun, and how bad my dad hated traveling.

“Good. Finally figured out how to turn the damn thing around. Your mother was about to kick me out and find a new co-driver.”

“I only threatened you a few times. And I only meant it in Colorado.” Mom shook her head. “Those mountains are no joke. I told your father he had to get over his fear of driving the thing so I could get a nap or we weren’t going past the Rockies.”

“So, did you kick him out?” Thea poured us both a glass of wine, handing me mine and sitting at the breakfast bar while my parents finished cooking.

“I met a nice trucker at a diner we stopped for dinner at who was looking for a co-pilot and suddenly Tim was super interested in driving the RV. I didn’t want your birthday surprise to be finding out that I’d left your dad for a man with a tattoo that said ‘Easy Rider’ on his knuckles.”

Thea laughed, and I slid into the chair beside her. “Well, I’m glad your marriage survived the trip.”

“What did you two get up to while we were gone?” Mom asked.

Thea’s cheeks turned pink. “Nothing in particular.”

“Ben said you were going up to Mount Pierce for the weekend,” Mom said, donning her oven mitts to move the ham onto the dining room table. “That’s awful fancy for a weekend away.”

“Yeah, Chase was supposed to come with me but...” Thea said as we trailed her into the dining room.

Mom set the pan on a trivet in the center of the table and lifted an eyebrow. “But?”

“He got a big promotion and is moving to New Jersey. So, we broke up.” Any residual sadness seemed to have died away. She shrugged. “We weren’t really compatible, anyway.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that,” Mom frowned. “At least you salvaged the weekend. How was Mount Pierce?”

“Real fancy,” Thea answered with a shrug. “With lots of hikes.”

“Isn’t that some romantic getaway?” Dad’s brow furrowed in thought. “Steph down at Bob’s Cars mentioned some Valentine’s Day thing at the resort.”

Thea grimaced, and I swept in. “Yeah. Thea and I won the newlywed game. Two bottles of wine and some chocolate-covered strawberries.”

“Romantic weekend?” Mom raised an eyebrow, her gaze flicking from Thea to me.

“Romantic for everyone else, anyway.” I shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “Thea didn’t even try to woo me.”

“Woo you?” Thea laughed. “Not after you dragged me on a three-mile hike to look at fog.”

“How was I supposed to know we wouldn’t be able to see anything? Besides, it was nice to get out of the resort for a bit.”

“Maybe for you.” Thea punched my shoulder.

Mom sighed dramatically, crossing her arms. “Is it too much to ask for one of you to give us some grandbabies?”

“Yeah, Thea, get on that.” I nudged her with my shoulder.

Her mouth dropped. “Rude. They’re your parents.”

“They count you as one of their own.”

“Guess you gave up on them ever getting together?” Dad grinned at Mom.

“If a romantic weekend at a luxury resort didn’t do it, I don’t know what will,” Mom sighed.

Thea gulped and turned pale.

“You okay, Thea?” I asked under my breath.

“Yeah, fine.” She shook her head, plastering a smile on her face. “Now, what did you say about presents?”



After dinner, Mom showered us with way too many gifts. Well, mostly Thea. I’d kindly asked my mom to stop buying me random souvenirs years ago and she’d shifted those purchases to Thea. In addition to yards of fabric, apparently.

“Do you think I could hire your mom to buy fabric for me?” Thea asked, her heels clicking on the pavement while we crossed the street back to her house.

I hefted the sack of fabric onto my other shoulder. “If I have to haul it around? Absolutely not.”

“She’s got a good eye.” Thea touched the fabric sack holding pounds of cloth.

“I’m putting this in my truck and taking it to your shop in the morning. I’m not hauling this into your house so you can look at everything again.”

“No, please bring them inside,” Thea whined. “I just want to look at them one more time. I promise I’ll pack them back up and put them in the truck for you.”

A lie.

“Fine,” I sighed, bracing my back to carry the bag up the stairs. “Does that mean we’re not watching a movie?”

Thea shook her head. “Probably not. Are you going to kill me if I ask you to carry this up to the second floor, into my craft room? It’s got better lighting.”

I groaned.

“I can carry it for a bit,” she offered.

I shook my head, pointedly glaring at her heels. “Really?”

She followed my gaze and shrugged. “Okay, maybe not. How about if I just offer moral support?”

I lifted an eyebrow.

“You’re doing great! You’re so strong! Is that helping?”

“Not particularly.”

“You’re so manly!”

I laughed. “Okay, it’s not hurting.”

A sheen of sweat covered my brow by the time I dragged the bag into her craft room. The blinding lights burned away any residual chill in the room and I gratefully plopped the bag beside her worktable.

“Alright, all yours. Lovingly pet this fabric all night.”

“You’re the best.” Thea ran a hand over my arm and tilted her head up to kiss my cheek. Her lips felt warm, the lipstick adhering to my skin.

I slipped an arm around her waist as she curled her fingers against my chest. She pulled away a fraction of an inch, her breath still hot on my cheek. “Are we really doing this again?”

Brushing my lips over hers, I asked, “Why not?”

“That’s a really good question.”

CHAPTER 15

Thea

I WANDERED THE AISLE OF THE THRIFT STORE, STOPPING TO thumb through a box of books.

Mrs. Evans had left the shop impressively clean. Considering she hadn't so much as held a duster in the last decade, I guessed she was happier about fleeing Franklin Notch than she'd admitted. Unfortunately, her farewell burst of cleaning left me with nothing to occupy my time while I decided what to do with the shop.

Not just the shop. My life.

The "one time only" night with Benny had become two nights and then three. I kept waiting for the thrill of being with him to temper, but after the third night, I insisted we needed space. He didn't need space, of course, and I didn't really want space. For the first time I could remember, Benny's presence wasn't clarifying my mixed up emotions, just stoking them.

Because huddled up in my house or his, away from the rest of the world, I could so easily see myself with Benny. But as soon as his mom called or we ran into friends, I knew how much I could lose if we didn't work out.

No, the mess I had made of my life was too big of a question for a weekday. I had to focus on the shop, the failing shop that I should sell immediately before I fell anymore behind on my actual business. I scooped up a pulpy suspense novel with a rose drenched in blood on the cover and returned to the chair in front of the register.

Halfway into the book, the bell over the door rang.

“Hello,” I called, standing up and stretching my hands over my head, my body achy from not having moved.

“Thea?” Warren Kang greeted me with a warm smile.

“Hey, Warren! What are you doing on this side of the notch?” I asked, rounding the counter to hug him.

When had I seen Warren last? It’d be a few months, though with the holidays, that wasn’t a surprise. I’d known him since he’d moved to New Hampshire in high school. In a place where anyone who couldn’t trace their heritage back at least two generations was called an out-of-towner, Warren had charmed his way into the cloistered community. He stuck around after graduation, becoming the most successful real estate agent in the area. With his extroverted personality and good looks, the job had been a natural fit.

“I’m in town on business and wanted to stop by and say hi,” he said, enveloping me in a cloud of sandalwood and lemon before letting go. “I heard Mrs. Evans moved away.”

“Yep, went down to Ohio to be with her grandkids. Abandoned me.” I shook my head, stepping out of his arms and leaning on the countertop.

“I’m sorry to hear she left, but I’m glad she’s spending more time with her family.”

“Me, too,” I admitted. “So, what business are you up to?”

Warren was easy on the eyes. Tall, bright brown eyes, and a mischievous grin. He also had the best gossip. Even better, he loved spreading that gossip around.

“I’ve got a buyer interested in mixed use space.”

“Mixed use space?”

“Yeah, the woman is a candy maker. She does most of her business online, but wants a storefront. Apparently, the husband works online, so they’re moving to the mountains.”

“And she doesn’t want a shop in Pierce?”

While the city council had been desperate to make Franklin Notch half as attractive as Pierce, the quaint little

tourist village on the other side of the mountain, I didn't have any illusions about Franklin Notch's appeal to tourists: none. We were out of the way and run down compared to our richer neighbor.

"No, building prices have skyrocketed since Pierce won the contract to film that Christmas movie. Her husband has money and they can afford a house in Pierce or a storefront in Pierce. Not both."

"So, Franklin Notch is the consolation prize for Willa Wonka?"

Warren laughed. "If I can find a storefront and an apartment in their budget. When did downtown get so packed?"

Packed? The observation took me off guard. The empty storefronts and boarded-up shops from my childhood had one by one opened up as coffee shops and dry goods stores. A mental inventory of downtown revealed that, sure enough, none of them were currently empty. "Huh. Isn't that strange? I hadn't even noticed."

"I stopped by to check out that shop next to the tattoo parlor? The one in the back. It's the only thing close to what she's looking for in town."

The tiny row of shotgun houses behind Main Street had originally been built for low-income housing, but an apartment complex just outside of town with four times the capacity filled that need. After sitting empty for years, the city council bought the block and turned them into incubators: little shops for burgeoning businesses.

"I love those shops," I sighed. "But I don't know if you could fit a commercial kitchen in there."

Warren shook his head. "You definitely can't. And there's no foot traffic. So, that spot is out. I'm honestly starting to think I'm asking for the impossible."

"Hey, Warren," I asked tentatively, a poorly formed plan coming together in my brain. "What's your buyer's budget?"

"Why?" He raised an eyebrow.

“Did you know that this shop used to be a restaurant? Decades ago, before my grandma bought it. Obviously, all the equipment is gone, but the hookups are still there. I’m not positive, but I think this property is still zoned for mixed-use. The upstairs used to be an apartment. It’s just storage now.”

He cocked his head, eyes wide. “Really? Are you thinking of getting out of town?”

“No,” I shook my head. “But now that Mrs. Evans is gone, I don’t really have a reason to keep the shop open. I’d rather just put my effort into clothing and I don’t need all this space for clothes.”

Technically, I could fill the space. I just didn’t need to.

“I don’t want to close up a storefront on Main Street, but if I sold this place, I could move into the incubators in the back.”

Warren straightened, a smile forming on his lips. “So, you want me to sell this place and get you into the other shop?”

I nodded. “I don’t want to move unless this place sells. God knows I don’t need more payments. But yeah, if you can get a fair price, I want to move.”

Warren’s smile lit up the room. “Alright. Well, let me take some pictures, check if my client is interested, and I’ll get you some comps. I should be able to figure out a fair price for the building by Friday, at the latest.”

I showed Warren around and left him to take pictures while I resumed my post at the front door. Despite still being in the planning stage, the deal had fell into place with such ease that I couldn’t help feeling like fate had brought it about.

Maybe this was meant to happen.

“I think I have everything I need. I’ll call you later this week after I talk to my client and I have some suitable comps for you,” Warren said as he breezed back through the shop. “Hey, are you still doing that Singles Social Club at Bob’s?”

I nodded. “Yep. Every Wednesday.”

Originally a get together for the single members of the greater Franklin Notch community, the rapid coupling of

seemingly everyone had turned the weekly gathering into strictly a social club. I didn't mention that part, though.

He pulled out his phone. "Can you share this with the group? The Chamber of Commerce is putting on a speed dating event. I know you're seeing someone but—"

"Oh, actually, we just broke up." The admission slipped out of my mouth, like I would somehow betray Ben if I said Chase and I were still dating.

"Oh," Warren looked up from his phone, studying my face for my reaction. "Well, sorry about that."

"It's not a big deal."

"So, I'll see you there, then? It's Saturday at the Hops and Barrel."

"Um..." I hesitated, not really sure what to say. I hadn't talked to Ben about what was going on between us. I certainly wasn't about to tell Warren.

"You have to come, as a local business owner and all."

"Are you going?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I planned it."

Sighing heavily, I pulled my phone from my pocket, opening up the invitation. The pink hearts littered the background of the flier and a list of sponsors covered the bottom half.

"I could really use some more participants. I want this to be big. Huge."

I swayed on my feet, eyes moving between the flier and Warren's expectant smile. "How can I say no to that?"



The lunch crowd at the diner had reached fever pitch, but Ben and I somehow snagged a booth in the back. The clatter of silverware and loud conversations made me lean across the booth to be heard.

“Fate, Benny.”

He snorted, placing his arm over the back of the booth.
“Fate?”

“Fate. I was sitting in the shop, bored out of my mind—”

“And Warren stopped in to say hi? That’s fate?”

“No,” I groaned, trying to collect my thoughts into a coherent narrative. “But he was looking for a shop with kitchen hookups and the thrift store has them.”

“Any chance he had that information and was just subtly probing whether you wanted to sell?”

On reflection, that actually sounded plausible. I shook my head. “Okay, fine. Maybe not fate, but a sign?”

Ben took a sip of his coffee. “A sign of what?”

“A sign of what I should be doing. Where I’m going.”

“And that’s speed dating?”

Okay, he wasn’t impressed. Maybe even a little put out. Ben had wandered into the shop just as Warren said goodbye and had misinterpreted the speed dating as Warren’s idea and not mine.

Ben sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “So, what happened over the weekend? And Sunday? And Monday? We’re calling that, what? A fluke?”

My cheeks burned. I preoccupied myself with straightening the utensils on the table. “Not a fluke.”

I could have written off sleeping together as a one night mistake, but doing it again hadn’t helped anything.

“But we’re going speed dating?” He pitched forward, lowering his head and catching my eyes.

“Maybe we’re both lonely.”

“You just broke up with Chase,” he countered.

“Right, but Chase and I barely spent any time together. And when’s the last time you’ve been on a date? A year? Two?”

“I don’t know, Thea,” he sighed, leaning back. “It’s not like I’m keeping track.”

“Right, but long enough that you can’t even remember.” He grumbled under his breath but didn’t argue, so I pushed on. “My point is that what happened this weekend, it could have been anyone.”

He flinched, sending a wave of guilt coursing through me.

“Alright, not anyone, but not necessarily us. Together.” I whispered the last word, casting a furtive glance around the crowded diner.

“So, you want to find someone else?”

“I want us to find someone else. Both of us.”

He eyed me warily while Gloria returned to our table with our food.

“What’s the alternative, Benny?” I asked.

I knew the alternative, of course, and I didn’t know whether I just wanted to hear it from his mouth or expected him to deny it.

“We see where this goes. Between us.”

My turn to flinch. “And what if it goes sideways?” I asked quietly. “What if we can’t be friends anymore? What if we tell everyone and you decide you don’t actually want to date me?”

“Woah, Thea.” He dropped his fork and held up his hands. “I decide? What if you decide to break up with me?”

“Well, I’ve proven I can keep a good relationship with my exes.” The words slipped out and I immediately regretted them. “Low blow. Sorry.”

“Point taken, but Emily was the one to sever that relationship, not me. And as I recall, you were the reason she didn’t want to hang around me anymore.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, pushing away my plate. “See, this is exactly the problem. We’re already arguing.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call this an argument, Thea.” Ben grabbed a fry from my plate, pointing it at me. “But if you don’t want to date me, you don’t want to date me. I can’t change your mind.”

“I thought you’d at least fight me a little,” I admitted.

He shrugged. “I know you well enough to know when you’ve made up your mind. And if speed dating is going to make you feel better, then we’ll speed date.”

“And we can’t sleep together anymore,” I added, taking my plate back and shoving the sandwich into my mouth before I could make more of a mess of this conversation.

“Really?” Ben asked, brow furrowed. “Not even occasionally? Like for birthdays or holidays?”

I shook my head. “No. That’s done. I can’t think straight when we’re sleeping together.”

“Fine,” Ben conceded. “Just let me know if you change your mind.”

I didn’t expect the conversation with Ben to be easy, but he offered all the pushback of a gentle wind. Hell, he almost seemed relieved.

Why wasn’t I relieved?

CHAPTER 16

Ben

THE RODENTS SPILLED OUT OF THE FIREPLACE AND INTO THE tavern we'd found abandoned.

"Fuck," Len swore. "Are we trapped in here?"

"I told you to leave the door open," I shrugged as I placed another rat into the room.

"How many are there?"

"Eight." I consulted the game guide. "Nope. Scratch that. Ten."

"I was just checking behind the door." Len raked his hands through his hair. "How the hell was I supposed to know we'd get overrun?"

"You suck at meta gaming." I picked up my beer and took a pull, my eyes flitting to the actual fireplace, which roared in the living room. "It's fine. We probably won't die."

Setting down the beer, I scanned ahead in the scenario and spotted the words "Rat King," deciding to keep that bit of information to myself.

"Alright, I can't right now. Let's warm up that dip Millie made and deal with these things later." Len pushed himself away from the table and crossed into the kitchen. He pre-heated the oven and set the casserole dish inside, opening a bag of chips and eating one. "Are we going to have time for a second mission?"

I shook my head. "I'd love to but I can't. There's a vet coming out in the morning to look around. Seven A.M."

“Why so early?”

“She’s interviewing for Whitney’s old job with Dr. Roberts. If I had to guess, he doesn’t want her to interview here, too.”

Dr. Roberts had been inching toward retirement for decades now. Even if he wouldn’t say it aloud, he resented Whitney splitting her time between his practice and the rescue. He probably wasn’t happy that Whitney had set up a meeting between me and this new vet and I could only hope she’d be interested in the rescue.

“I can’t say I’m surprised. Who the hell would be dumb enough to get that close to wild animals?” Len smirked.

“I’m half-considering going to vet school myself. It’d probably speed up the process of finding a replacement. I don’t know what I’m going to do if Doug gets shipped out somewhere after the wedding. There’s one guy in Bangor willing to come out, but he charges nearly a thousand bucks just to get here. And my funding is going to get all messed up if I don’t have a vet. It’s just a nightmare.”

“That sounds really stressful.” Len shifted uncomfortably behind the kitchen island, eyes dipping to the oven and to the fireplace. “Do you...um...want to talk about it?”

I cocked my head, eyes narrowing in confusion. “Are you asking about what’s going on? With me?”

Len and I had formed a friendship over a natural reticence, though Len’s was borne out of a lifetime of shit luck and mine was just a personality trait. We could sit quietly for hours, splitting a six-pack and staring into the distance. We bonded over board games and beers, not feelings and check ins.

I had Thea for that.

Or rather, normally I had Thea for that.

His expression clouded. “Millie has been hounding me to be more ‘engaged’ so, fuck, I’m trying it. You can answer or not. I don’t give a shit.”

He pushed himself off the counter and opened the oven to check the still ice-cold dip.

“Sorry, I just didn’t expect that response.”

He slammed the oven closed. “Well, don’t say shit then.”

I chuckled, holding up my hands. “Okay. Relax.” I took a deep breath. Len’s face contorted into an annoyed pout. But the guy was trying, and I actually wanted to talk to someone. Someone other than Thea. “Last weekend, Thea and I slept together.”

“Okay, and...?”

I bristled at his nonchalance at my confession. “And what? We slept together. I slept with my best friend.”

“You guys don’t do that already? Is this news?” Len blinked, expression slack.

“No. We’ve never slept together.”

“But don’t you both have sleepovers? Like, all the time?”

“We’ve had sleepovers since we were kids. Did you really think we were sleeping together?”

He shrugged. “I don’t pretend to get your relationship. I just assumed.”

“Well, let me assure you, other than some kisses, we’ve never done anything physical before.”

“Huh.” Len pursed his lips and nodded his head.

“Don’t ‘huh’ that. I can’t believe you thought we slept together.” My hackles up now, I couldn’t help but be a little offended. “Well, before last weekend, anyway.”

“Interesting. You know, even Millie thought you two were quietly shacking up.”

“Millie said that? Seriously?” Now I was also offended for Thea, who considered Millie one of her best friends.

“So, what’s the problem?”

My annoyance rolled off Len’s back with a shrug. “You’re terrible at this, you know that, right?” I asked, swiping my

now-empty bottle of beer and standing up to get another.

“Yeah, Millie’s been pretty clear about how bad I am. Bunny says I’m doing a killer job. I even stopped by her house yesterday just to say ‘hey,’” He smiled at the confession. Bunny, his mom in every way but blood, probably thought she was having a stroke. Len wouldn’t let a minor inconvenience like living right next door to someone stop him from avoiding conversation. “Of course, I ran into Allen. Fucking Allen.”

Bunny’s bridge partner and potential boyfriend. Though the woman had been married seven times, that hadn’t deterred her from love.

“The problem is that I thought things were going in a... relationship direction.”

“They aren’t?”

I sighed. “She signed us up for speed dating.”

Len grimaced. “Shit.”

“Exactly my reaction.”

“She didn’t sign you up before you slept together, then?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. She decided that the entire reason we slept together was a lack of other options.”

Len bit back a snort and opened the oven to check the dip. “So she’s finding more options?”

I sighed. “I don’t really want to go.”

The oven door slammed closed and Len fixed his eyes on me. “You have to go.”

“I have to go?” I’d agreed to the invitation more out of resignation than actual interest, but Len’s sudden insistence caught my attention.

“Absolutely. You think it’s a good idea to send her to a singles event? Alone?”

“It’s probably a bunch of guys she already knows. What does it matter?”

Len rolled his eyes. “What if it’s not? What if she meets someone? I mean, clearly she’s trying to meet someone else and you’re going to stand aside and let her do it?”

“You’ve got a point.”

Len searched the kitchen, pulling out a set of oven mitts and setting the dip on the counter. “Sure as hell I do. And better yet, you should go and meet someone.”

I laughed. “What?”

“You heard me,” he grumbled, rounding the room back to the table. I pulled a trivet free from under the game board and Len set the dip down.

“Are you offering me advice on how to win over Thea?”

“Millie has me watching a bunch of romance shit, and yes, I’m giving you advice. Don’t fuck this up. Or rather, let her fuck this up. Because she will.”

“Thea? No, she won’t.”

He laughed, throwing the oven mitts onto the counter, grabbing the chips and setting them on the table between us. “She absolutely will. What other reason is there for her to still be single?”

“She literally just broke up with her boyfriend.”

Len scoffed before shoveling dip onto a chip. “Boyfriend? That man wasn’t her boyfriend. He was her hook up buddy.”

“She called him her boyfriend.”

“Boyfriends meet your friends. They spend the weekend with you. They hang out at your house. Thea and that guy were convenience dating.”

“Convenience dating?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Fuck you,” Len jammed the chip into his mouth, chewing loudly. “Don’t give me that look. I’m trying to help.”

He was trying to help, in his aggressive Len way. I appreciated that, even though it’d been entirely unexpected.

“I’m just saying she doesn’t really want to be in a relationship. Or at least she hasn’t before.”

I winced, realization dawning on me. “And I’m freaking her out, because we can’t be casual.”

“Not ‘we.’” Len pointed a chip in my direction. “You.”

“Me?” I grabbed a chip out of the bag.

“Yeah,” Len said, his mouth full. “You can’t keep anything casual. You’re a serial monogamist.”

“A serial monogamist? First off, where did you even learn that term? Second, I haven’t been in a relationship since Emily.”

Len shrugged. “Millie listens to some sex advice podcast when she’s cooking. I picked up some things.”

I laughed. “You’re just full of surprises tonight. Then please explain how I can be a man with only one long-term relationship and a serial monogamist? Since you’re a sexpert now.”

He grimaced, pulling away from me. “Fuck, man. Don’t make it weird. You stayed with Emily for what? Seven years?”

“Eight.”

“At least five too many. You didn’t even want to marry her.”

Emily had been my high school sweetheart, one I didn’t exactly know how to break it off with. “Probably six years too many, to be honest.”

“And since then, how many dates have you been on?”

“I’m not exactly keeping track,” I winced. Eight. Eight dates.

“And all of them had second dates, right? And third?”

I nodded.

“And then around the fifth or sixth date, they ghost you? Why do you think that is?”

I should have guessed Len knew as much about my dating life as Millie did, which, through the filter of Thea, was a lot.

“Because I come on too strong.”

“Because you want to be three years into a relationship with them. You don’t want to fall in love, you want to be in love.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Honestly, man, it’s intense.”

“Is that what your podcast said?”

He grinned. “And maybe Millie mentioned it.”

“Millie thinks I’m intense?”

He shook his head. He didn’t need to say a name. I could fill that part in. Thea. She’d said as much to me before too, but she’d been kinder. Len wasn’t nearly as good at buffering the criticism.

He shrugged. “You do your thing, but Thea has a right to be wary.”

“I’m her best friend,” I argued.

“And you won’t stop yourself from turning her into your girlfriend of twenty-seven years if given the chance.”

I flinched at his brusque assessment.

“Sorry,” he said, raising a hand. “What I meant to say is, given the chance, I think Thea will hook up with someone new just to keep your relationship from changing. So you need to go on this speed dating thing, be super charming, and keep her away from anyone interesting.”

I sat back in my seat, appetite gone, though Len seemed to have no problem making a dent in the giant dish of dip. “I had no idea you were such a relationship expert. Although, I can’t really tell if you’re rooting for Thea and I or not.”

He shook his head. “I’m rooting for you, man. Thea, well, if that’s who you choose, I’m going to help. Although, if you

end up dating her, we probably need to tell her about our game nights.”

“You think Millie hasn’t told her?”

“I swore Millie to secrecy, and she’s learned a thing or two about staying quiet since we’ve been dating.” Len pushed aside the chips. “Okay, I’m done caring about your personal life. Let’s exterminate these rats so you can meet a vet in the morning.”

CHAPTER 17

Thea

I CHECKED MY WATCH AND SIGHED. FIVE P.M. AND, FOR possibly the first time in my life, I was ready early and Ben was nowhere to be found.

My phone buzzed in my purse. I pulled it out.

BEN

I'm running fifteen minutes late. Sorry. Be there ASAP.

Perfect. I kicked off my red heels and hung my coat on the hall tree. I reapplied my lipstick, cursing my very annoying habit of nervously biting my lips. And I was definitely nervous.

Not about speed dating. At least, I didn't think I was nervous about speed dating. Sure, I'd never done it before, but considering the event was in Pierce, I probably knew most of the attendees. The event would probably be a rehash of my failed dating history.

No, for the first time in forever, my nervousness was entirely because of Ben.

We hadn't seen each other since lunch earlier that week. A lifetime for us to go without seeing each other, but Ben had some super secret meeting every Thursday night and I'd been at a concert on Friday.

I'd floated the idea of him coming over earlier in the day, but he said he had plans. Any other time, I would have grilled

him about his plans, asked him every question under the sun. But despite his reassurances that nothing would change between us, I felt a rift I had never felt before.

No, not a rift. A chasm. A giant canyon between us. A strange disconnect that sort of felt like losing an arm.

If I regretted sleeping with Ben, I could have righted our relationship, set our friendship back in place like nothing had happened.

But I didn't. I fell asleep to memories of us in the hot tub, daydreamed at the shop about that first kiss, and had some not-so-friendly thoughts about having him in my bed. Then, I remembered the risk. Ben and his parents were the only semblance of a family I had left. Mrs. Evans was gone, my mom was long dead, and my dad hadn't called in years.

Sure, I had friendships. Lots of friendships. People who invited me to parties and events. People who opened their homes up to me during the holidays. People who loved me, in their own way.

But not family. Not like Ben.

"Hey, Thea," Ben opened the door with his key, shouting into the entryway.

"In the kitchen!" I called, putting a glass of water into the sink.

His heavy footsteps padded down the hall and I met him halfway, my breath catching in my throat when I finally saw him.

Ben wasn't an unattractive guy, but a layer of flannel and grime from working outside all day made him secretly hot. I'd even called him that. Secretly hot. Big, brown eyes, a square jaw, and high cheekbones that had caused some amount of jealousy over the years.

Tonight, he wasn't secretly hot. He was actually hot. Shockingly hot. The shower that had no doubt made him late left his hair damp, brown hair curling into soft ringlets. He wore a pair of dark wash jeans that accentuated the muscles he developed caring for animals all day, paired with a soft waffle

knit henley I made for him for Christmas. Had I known we'd sleep together before Valentine's Day, I would have sewn something way less attractive. Something that didn't hug his broad shoulders or pull tight across his chest. Maybe something puffy, with a more rectangular cut.

Too late for that.

"Hey, sorry I'm late." He stopped short, eyes dropping to my dress as his mouth went slack. He shook his head, eyes jolting back to my face. "It's been a weird day."

"Has it?" I asked, taking a deep breath. "Why's that?"

He smiled, hand settling behind his neck. "Normal stuff. Everything's falling apart."

"Yep, normal, world-ending stuff," I agreed. "What's going on?"

"Ah," he glanced back at the door. "Whitney set up a meeting with a new vet. She bailed on me Friday and then again today."

"Rude."

He shrugged. "It was a shot in the dark. Do we have time to grab a bite or do you want to swing through a drive-thru in Pierce?"

"We have plenty of time," I said, ushering him to the front door. I slid into my heels and pulled down a black fur-lined jacket I'd picked up at an estate sale that wouldn't clash with my red cocktail dress.

Sure, I was overdressed for speed dating, but I'd never let that stop me before.

Ben took the coat from my hands. "I like this dress. Is it new?"

I'd been interested in fashion since I was a child, and Ben had dutifully listened and learned everything I knew over the years. He also could identify every item of clothing in my closet, a feat considering the sheer volume.

“It’s new, for me anyway. Kate Spade.” I turned so he could look at the open back and the enormous bow just above my ass.

Body heat warmed me as he leaned forward, his breath hot on my cheek. “But does it have pockets?”

I laughed. “It does.”

His lips brushed my neck before pulling away and holding up my coat. “It’s perfect.”

I sucked in a breath and jammed my arm into the coat, missing completely. He guided my other arm in, smoothing the neckline and running a hand down my back.

“Glad you approve,” I said shakily, pressing my palm to my stomach in a vain attempt to dispel some of the butterflies. “You look pretty nice yourself.”

He shrugged, opening the door for me. “I showered, which is going to have to be good enough for the single ladies of the greater Franklin Notch area.”

“They’ll be all over you, I’m sure.” I forced levity into my voice. It came out brittle instead. “ Even if the speed dating thing sucks, Hops & Barrel has amazing tapas.”

“Tapas?” Ben opened the passenger seat of his truck, letting me slide in before softly closing the door behind me.

I waited for him to get into the driver’s side. “Tapas? It’s Spanish, I think. Like appetizers.”

“Well, I could eat a lot of little things or one big thing. I’m not picky. I shoved down a sandwich for lunch, but I had a trucker turn up at dawn who hit a moose on the road a mile back. Only broke its leg, which considering the damage to the truck is a miracle.”

“I thought you weren’t going to take any more moose,” I asked.

I didn’t love the more dangerous animals at the rescue. I’d made peace with the bears. They were his grandparents and as close to domesticated as an animal that size could get. I didn’t wander around the cages, of course, but I also didn’t get the

same thrum of panic that seized me when Ben took in a moose.

He shrugged, starting up the truck. “I couldn’t say no. Besides, based on the truck, I thought I’d just be putting the poor thing down. I didn’t realize I could rehab her.”

“Her?” I raised an eyebrow. “Does Franklin Notch have a new mayor?”

The last time Ben ran out of space at the rescue, he’d drummed up a deal with the town: Ben could house the moose in the pasture just behind town hall, and Larry Jenkins, the former mayor of Franklin Notch, would make the moose acting mayor.

The deal had upped the tourism in Franklin Notch, but the uproar when the moose finally healed enough to be released back into the wild had been a nightmare. No one wanted to give up the moose except for Ben.

He sighed heavily, pulling out of the neighborhood. “I didn’t have a choice. Dr. Collins made her a town council member. I don’t think he was so hot on giving up his mayoral title, and Lexi’s seat is still open.”

I hiked my knee onto the bench seat, turning to face him. “Seriously? You pushover! You swore you’d never do that again.”

“It’s a town council member. It’s different.”

“Is she at least friendly? You know town hall is going to advertise that moose everywhere.”

He sighed. “Well, thanks for your concern, but it’s fine. Whitney drove up to look at our newest resident and I put Mrs. Marple in the pen.”

I nodded. “Good choice, actually.”

Mrs. Marple had been at the rescue for nearly five years now and was as friendly as a moose got. Unlike the last mayor, she was full grown, though.

“Are you sure the pen at town hall can hold her?”

“She’s pretty docile, but I spent the rest of the afternoon reinforcing the fence, just in case.”

Well, that at least answered why he hadn’t texted me all day.

“You must be exhausted,” I said. Looking past his freshly cleaned exterior, he looked tired. His eyes drooped slightly and his shoulders rounded. “You could have called me to help.”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I was the one who took the moose in. It’s my responsibility to find room for it. I’m sure you had better things to do on a Saturday.”

I pursed my lips. The only thing I’d done all day was sleep in, eat a late brunch, and take a nap. I hadn’t saved one animal and launched the political career of another.

“I would have liked hanging out with you, anyway.”

He glanced over at me, eyes warm as he reached out a hand and squeezed my knee. “I would have liked to hang out with you, too.”

I let the sincerity of that comment settle my stomach through the drive to Pierce, even as I dreaded the destination. Of course, it had been my brilliant idea to sign us up for speed dating.

Ben pulled into a parking space across the street from Oak & Barrel. We piled out of the car, entering the Irish pub with a Spanish menu, searching for any sign of the event.

A small sign hung over a booth and a grizzled man with an Irish accent barked at us. “Ya’ here for a drink? Or for speed dating?”

“Both,” Ben answered, sidling up to the bar and sitting on an oak stool. “Do you have a menu? We thought we’d eat before the thing got started.”

The man shook his head, throwing two menus down the bar. “Speed dating. Whoever thought of such a thing? A drink?”

“A pint for me. You, Thea?” Ben asked.

“Whiskey and cranberry would be great.”

I normally didn't enjoy drinking on a first date, but circumstances were different tonight. My stomach perched on the edge of throwing up and my nerves were shot. Hard liquor would at least calm me down enough to hold a conversation. Ben frowned at the menu.

“Well, this one says potato,” he said, pointing out “Patatas Bravas” on the menu. I scanned through the rest, unsure of just about every other dish.

“Well, this one has ham, so that can't be bad. And I'm pretty sure Manchego is a cheese, so that one should be safe.”

Ben ordered the three plates, throwing in a fourth that neither of us could decipher the ingredients to for fun.

“So, who will we know at this thing?” Ben asked, moving his legs under the bar, knee resting against mine.

“Warren, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Ben repeated.

“Nolan is still single, right?”

Ben shrugged.

“Jenny?” Ben asked after the cute redhead who'd been two years after us in high school.

An unfamiliar sting of jealousy buzzed through my body before shaking my head. “She's dating Cornbread, strangely enough.”

Ben pursed his lips before nodding. “That makes sense. He's really smart and fun to talk to. I could see Jenny going for a guy like him.”

“Are we talking about the same Cornbread?”

“I don't know any other bartenders named Cornbread in Franklin Notch.”

“He talks to you? Like conversations?” I squinted, trying to decide if Ben was just messing with me. No. Definitely not.

“I stop by for a drink sometimes when I’m free. Usually late afternoon when it’s just the two of us.”

“Seriously?” I’d been going to the bar since I was twenty-one and the cranky bartender barely acknowledged me. “You’re having full conversations? He’s never forgiven me for asking him to make me a margarita!”

Ben shrugged, nonplussed. “Like I said, the bar is usually empty. We struck up a friendship.”

“Wait, you consider him a friend? Is he part of the Thursday night thing?”

Four years ago, Ben had blocked Thursday night off in our shared calendar and never explained why. If he hadn’t been dating Emily at the time, I would have guessed he found a second girlfriend. Instead, the eight-hour block of time just tormented me each week.

“No, but I should ask him.”

I spluttered into my drink, sloshing whiskey onto the table as I slammed it back down. “Cornbread gets an invitation? And I don’t?”

Ben laughed. “You wouldn’t like it. Besides, I’ve been sworn to secrecy.”

“It’s not Fight Club, Benny. Unless it is Fight Club.”

“Even if it was, we still couldn’t talk about it.”

“So, let me get this straight?” I pouted. “Cornbread is a brilliant conversationalist, has a girlfriend, and warrants an invitation to your Fight Club.”

He rolled his eyes as the first of our tapas arrived. “You can’t know everything, Thea.”

“But I can try.”

CHAPTER 18

Ben

THE BAR SLOWLY FILLED UP AS WE PICKED AT THE TAPAS. IT looked like a draw between the number of people here out for an after-work drink and the ones here for speed dating. I fixed my attention on Thea rather than my rising anxiety at having to watch Thea flirt with other guys for the rest of the night. After Len's pep talk, I understood what I had to do: be charming, be a good sport, and convince Thea there was no reason to go home with anyone but me. Easy enough.

By the time we finished our second drink, a young woman with chunky glasses and a pencil skirt scooted into the booth with the speed dating sign on the table, clipboard in hand.

"Looks like we can check in," I said.

"Should we order another drink before we go?"

She held up her empty glass, and I shook my head. "You go for it, but I've got to drive home and I'm pretty wiped from being outdoors all day. I shouldn't have anymore."

Thea frowned, pale skin marked by a thin line down the center of her forehead that hadn't been there ten years ago. Back when her hair was a natural shade of brown and not raven black. Back when she wore short skirts and black t-shirts with bands she'd never seen. Her punk phase had only lasted through high school, but she'd kept using style to set herself apart from the crowd. Tonight, she'd set herself apart by wearing a dress that looked perfectly modest from the front but nearly bare in the back, except for a bow that made me want to unwrap her like a gift.

I could only hope that she'd sit with her back against the wall because otherwise, I didn't stand a chance of taking her home at the end of the night.

She ordered a third whiskey and cranberry before we checked in. The frazzled looking woman handed us name tags and a list of "icebreakers" in case we couldn't come up with five minutes of conversation on our own.

Thea folded the sheet in half and tucked it into her purse. "If I can't talk to someone for five minutes, I'm not dating them."

A fair point, although I scanned the questions, anyway. While Thea could talk to a blank wall, I either made friends with extroverts who could talk over my silence, or introverts who didn't mind sitting quietly.

That is, until Emily broke up with me and I learned about a third category, one where you were expected to carry at least half of a conversation.

"Oh, there's Warren," Thea grabbed my arm and dragged me over to say hi.

"Ben, how's it going?" Warren greeted me just as effusively as Thea, patting my shoulder.

"Great. How have you been?" Warren fell into the first batch of people, the Thea people, people who could carry a conversation for hours if need be. Even if I hadn't seen him in years, which I hadn't, he treated me like a close friend.

"How's the rescue?" He asked.

"Good. Growing fast."

"Are you looking for more land?" He raised an eyebrow, always on the lookout for another client to buy and sell property for.

"Always, but Mr. Crossman doesn't seem keen on selling and—"

"And you're butted up against the park. That's a shame." Warren shook his head, sincerity coating his voice.

“And a blessing. At least I don’t need to worry about developers setting up shop next door.”

“Well, I’ll keep my eyes peeled anyway,” he said with a grin.

“Thanks for that. So, have you done this before?” I asked, nodding to the row of tables set up by the entrance.

He nodded. “Once in Concord and then again in Boston. Then I volunteered to host the event here.”

“You’re in charge of this?”

“The Chamber of Commerce is technically hosting, but I did most of the organizing.”

“Well, it looks great.”

“Best part, I don’t recognize half of these people, so hopefully we pulled some people in from the nearby towns.” He elbowed me with a charming smirk. Sure enough, most of the people lining up at check-in were complete strangers. “Maybe there’s a chance of meeting someone.”

“Or at least getting reacquainted with someone you already dated,” Thea joked.

Not really a joke, of course. I’d dated at least three women in the room, and I bet Warren had dated more than that. I didn’t dwell too long on how many dates Thea had been on with the guys in the room.

“It’s a good networking opportunity regardless,” Warren said.

I hadn’t really thought of the event that way. I certainly wasn’t here to meet anyone. I was only here to keep Thea from meeting someone.

A chime sounded from the bar, quieting the crowd of people. The woman who handed out the name tags stood up, clearing her throat as her cheeks turned red.

“Could all the ladies please take a seat at the table listed on their name tag? Take the seat closest to the windows.”

Thea wished Warren and I luck before finding her seat.

“Before the men join you, I’ll go over the rules. You’ll find a sheet of paper and a pen at your seat. Keep it with you. You can take notes about your date. Each date lasts five minutes. I’ll chime the bell and you’ll have thirty seconds to move to the next table. Men will move, ladies will stay where they are. Once you reach table twelve, go back to one. The dates will last just over an hour, at which point, you’re welcome to talk to whoever you want and also turn in the bottom half of your sheet. On the bottom half of your sheet, you’ll find all twelve tables and you’ll indicate which person you would like to date again. Tomorrow, you’ll receive an email with the name and phone number of anyone you matched with. Questions?”

A few hands raised. No, we wouldn’t get someone’s number if they didn’t circle our name too. Yes, we had to go through all the tables, even if we’d dated the person before. No, we weren’t obligated to stay at the bar after the speed dating was over.

I checked my name tag and sat across from a shy woman who looked fresh out of high school and vaguely familiar. A minute into the date, I realized she was my employee’s cousin, and in fact, just graduated from high school.

I successfully navigated three dates, leaning on the sheet of questions more than a little for two of them. At the sound of the bell, I said goodbye to Lindsey, a Franklin Notch resident who’d been three years my senior in high school. She talked about her ex for the entire five minutes, leaving me relieved when the bell rang. I scanned for Thea.

She stood up from the table, brushing a kiss over Warren’s cheek before sitting back down with a smile. An ugly rise of jealousy pitted at the bottom of my stomach and I tried to push it back unsuccessfully.

“Hi, Ben.” An actual stranger greeted me.

“Hi…” I squinted at her name tag. She smiled, leaning forward so I had a better view. “Dana. I don’t think we’ve met before.”

She shook her head. “Probably not. I’m new in town.”

The bell chimed and I relaxed into the seat. “Well, that’s not something you hear very often around here.”

“So I’ve found out.” She set her arms on the table, lowering her voice conspiratorially. “Apparently, out-of-towners are a hot commodity at events like this. Everyone seems to know each other.”

I laughed. “Yeah. You might actually be the first stranger I’ve met tonight.”

“So, you haven’t circled anyone’s name yet?” Dana asked with a grin, eyes glancing down at my sheet.

I shook my head. “Not yet. What brings you to the White Mountains?”

Dana raked a hand through her blonde hair. “A job, actually.”

“Wow.”

“Is that another thing you don’t hear often?”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there aren’t a lot of opportunities for work that aren’t scooped up by a local.”

“Well, I’m a vet, so there’s a high bar to entry.”

I tilted my head. “A veterinarian?”

“I mean, if you want to get fancy with the title, sure. It’s right here in downtown Pierce, actually.”

“Dr. Dan Roberts?” I asked incredulously.

“You know him?”

I nodded. “I do. I know you, too. We were supposed to meet yesterday, in fact.”

Her eyes got wide, darting to my name tag. She winced. “Ben Clark.”

“That’s me. Whitney said you would be at the rescue Friday at seven and you never showed.”

“My flight got delayed. Whitney didn’t call?”

I shook my head. “She called me at noon and rescheduled for this morning.”

She grimaced, sinking down in her seat. “Which I also didn’t make. In my defense, I tried to call. It went straight to voicemail. Dr. Roberts wanted to take me on some emergency calls. Honestly, it almost felt like he was trying to make me miss our meeting.”

“Yeah.” I scratched the back of my neck. “He probably was. He doesn’t really love the rescue.”

“I feel terrible.”

“Don’t,” I shrugged. “It’s fine. I’ve been turned down by every other vet in New Hampshire. You’re not the first, and you definitely won’t be the last.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, you think I’m turning you down? The wildlife rescue was the entire reason I even considered this job. It sounds like such a cool opportunity and I blew it.”

I studied her face, judging whether she was being polite or actually interested. “You don’t have to say that because you ran into me.”

“I’m not.” She shook her head. “Honestly. Can we try again? I’m in town until Wednesday, and I have Monday and Tuesday free.”

“Monday? Nine? I could probably get Whitney to come and give you a tour.”

“Perfect,” she said, smiling. She glanced around the room before leaning close. “Can I ask you a question, though? Why does Dr. Roberts not like the rescue?”

I pitched forward, lowering my voice. “Cuts into his time at the golf course. I can’t really blame him. He’s got a business to run, and he didn’t like Whitney running off to help me every time someone found a downed hawk. Besides, he’s not a huge fan of wildlife in general.”

“He told me he prefers farm calls, which is fine by me. I got run down by one bull and I’d rather not repeat that experience.”

“You’d rather be run down by a moose instead?”

“At least that’s a better story,” she said with a shrug.

I chuckled. “Absolutely.”

The chime rang and I frowned. That five minutes had flown by, even if all I got from it was a potential replacement for Whitney.

“I’m so glad we met each other, Ben.” Dana rounded the table and pulled me into a hug.

I let her go and breathed a sigh of relief. “Me too.”

Only a few dates later, and I was in front of Thea.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

The challenge of keeping my eyes off her as I neared her table had grown harder, not helped by the fact that her soft laughs and murmured replies distracted me from the women in front of me. Not fair to them, but Thea had dragged me to this event. She shrugged, folding her hands and leaning across the table. “It’s good, but...doesn’t it feel like we know all these people?”

Except for Dana, it did.

“Well, what did you expect?”

She sighed. “I don’t know. Do you think we need to look further?”

I didn’t want to look any further than the other end of the table, but she had to come to that conclusion on her own.

I shrugged noncommittally.

She frowned, sitting back in her seat, lips pursed and her eyes faraway.

I pulled her back. “But for now, how about you woo me?”

Lifting an eyebrow, she grinned. “Woo you?”

“I’m an eligible guy, ready to meet the future Mrs. Clark. Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“To be the future Mrs. Clark? You’re ridiculous,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “But shouldn’t this be the other way around? Shouldn’t you be wooing me?”

She unclasped her hands, grabbing the edge of my sheet of paper. “Doesn’t look like you’ve taken many notes. How many of these names are you going to circle?”

“So far, only one.”

A hint of a blush crossed her cheeks. “You haven’t even asked me anything about myself.”

“Alright,” I nodded. “Why did we come here, Thea?”

Her smile faltered and her voice dropped. “Because we’re both single. Because it seemed like something fun to do.”

“Are you?” I asked. “Having fun?”

She shrugged. “The tapas were pretty good.”

“I’ll bring you back here, then. Just the two of us.”

“A date?”

“Yeah. We can go to a movie, get dinner, and have drinks.” The teasing in my voice fell away as her blush grew, working its way down her cheeks and onto her chest. “Or just say you’ll come back to my place tonight and we’ll work out the details tomorrow.”

“That’s awfully presumptuous.”

“Well, just think it over,” I said, pulling a pen from my pocket and circling Thea’s name on my sheet.

CHAPTER 19

Thea

THE WOMAN OPPOSITE BEN SMILED. AGAIN. SHE LOOKED LIKE his type: blonde, tiny, bright blue eyes. I didn't recognize her, which rattled me. But what rattled me more was how comfortable her and Ben seemed together.

"Meet anyone nice?" Warren asked as he sat on the stool next to me holding a Manhattan.

I exhaled and turned away from Ben. "Not really. Sort of a bust, actually."

"Yeah, I hit it off with Dana, but it looks like Ben has her attention right now."

Dana. At least I had a name to go with the perky woman Ben was flirting with. So much for that date.

"I don't recognize her," I said, unabashedly delving for more information.

"You wouldn't. She's not from here. She's interviewing for Whitney's position at Dr. Robert's clinic. Or rather, she's interviewing him."

"Huh, a vet?"

"So she says."

"And she's already looking for a date?" I winced at the cattiness in my voice. Cattiness for someone who hadn't done anything except shown up at a speed dating event looking for a date. Wasn't that the exact reason I was here?

“It’s not like there are a ton of social events up here, especially in the winter. I think she mostly wanted to meet someone, or she’s decided she’s moving here. Not sure which, but once Ben is done talking to her, I’m sliding in there.”

“So you’ll just abandon me?”

Warren laughed. “I didn’t get the impression you wanted to give us a second try..”

Warren and I had gone on a single date that had ended in an awkward hug.

I shook my head with a laugh. “Afraid not.”

“No chemistry,” he shrugged, taking a sip. “I get it.”

“But I can be your wingman.”

He raised an eyebrow. “How’s that?”

I grabbed my drink and stood up, crossing the bar to Ben. “Hey, sorry to interrupt. I’m Thea.”

I held my hand out to Dana. She took it with a smile. “Nice to meet you. Dana.”

“Warren said you’re interviewing for Whitney’s position at the vet and I wanted to come over and say hello.”

She shook my hand, her palm warm and smooth. If I hadn’t been singularly focused on getting Ben away, I would have asked about her skin routine.

“Oh. Do you bring your pets there?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t own a pet. I travel a lot for work, but it’s a small community. I live in Franklin Notch, just the next town over. Whitney lived down the street from me, before she met Doug, of course. That’s her fiancé. He’s in the Army, stationed on the coast.”

“Dr. Roberts had mentioned that.”

“Are you taking the job?”

Dana smiled awkwardly, eyes skittering away.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to pry. Everyone’s in each other’s business around here. Do you know Warren?” I gestured for

him to join us. “Oh, of course you do, from speed dating.”

Warren joined us, shooting me a sly grin. “What can I do for you, Thea?”

“I was just talking to Dana about her job interview and I didn’t know whether you mentioned that you’re the best realtor in the White Mountains.” Ben raised an eyebrow, but I pressed on. “I’m not prying, but if you are interested in moving up here, you absolutely need to talk to Warren about housing. Pierce has gotten so expensive in the last few years between the tourism and the film crews. But there are some gorgeous apartments in Franklin Notch. Or if you want more space, Tipton has tons of farmland.”

“Warren, you didn’t mention you were a realtor,” Dana said, a sly grin on her face.

Warren beamed in response. “I know a couple of short-term leases coming up. How long are you staying in town? I’d be happy to give you a tour, talk about your options, no pressure.”

I tipped back the last of my sparkling water. Two drinks and my stomach had rebelled. I blamed that on the stress of speed dating. “I’m going to grab another drink,” I said, grabbing Ben’s arm. “Do either of you need another?”

Warren shook his head, continuing a conversation about housing as I dragged Ben to the bar.

“What was that?” he asked as I set my empty glass on the bar and asked for the check.

“Sorry, were you interested in her?” I feigned ignorance.

Ben stood behind me, leaning close to my ear. “I’m interested in her taking Whitney’s position at the rescue.”

“But romantically?” I kept my eyes glued to the bar, all too aware that my heart threatened to hammer out of my chest.

“She seems nice enough, but romantically? No.”

I took a breath as the bartender slid the bill across the bar. I scribbled out my signature and turned to face Ben with a

smile. “Well, Warren was very interested in her. I was just giving him an opening.”

“What a nice wing woman you are,” he said sardonically.

“Besides, I should get to know her if she’s moving here.”

“Why? Are you planning on getting a pet?” Ben asked with a laugh.

“No.” I batted his chest. He shuffled closer as the crowd behind him swelled, his hand brushing mine. “I think you keep enough animals for both of us. But if she takes the job at the rescue, I’ll see her often enough.”

I frowned, wishing I’d ordered another drink. But I had made enough bad decisions for one night, coming to this event being the first one. I’d hoped one of us would meet someone new. Instead, I’d spent the entire night comparing every single guy in the White Mountains to Benny and wishing I were sitting across from him instead. But I couldn’t sleep with Ben again. Not if I wanted to maintain the facade that we should go back to being best friends.

“Hm.” He pursed his lips, eyes narrowing. “You just wanted to crowbar Warren into that conversation?”

I snorted. “Yeah.”

“You weren’t jealous?”

“Jealous? Why would I be jealous?” I shifted on the stool. “Besides, you know I don’t get jealous.”

He nodded, unconvinced. “You seemed a little jealous.”

I sighed. “Not jealous. Bored. Are you ready to head out?”

He shrugged. “Sure. Where am I bringing you?”



Under the incredibly weak excuse of desperately wanting to see a moose with a broken leg, Ben drove back to his place.

It was far too late to even see the animal, and over the course of my friendship with Ben, I'd seen more moose than most New Englanders. But he dutifully set his car toward the rescue, just the same.

We passed under the ancient sign proclaiming, "Welcome to Clarks! Bears, Beers, Bathrooms!" The paint had peeled with age, the grizzly bears etched into the wood barely visible, even with the floodlights on the entrance.

I sighed, a wave of nostalgia washing over. I'd spent entire summers working the cash register at his grandparent's roadside stop while Ben helped train the bears. The roadside attraction had felt as much as home to me as my own house. Or, actually, Ben's parent's house.

"Do you think we could pay someone to fix up the sign? It's practically falling apart."

Ben laughed. "Really, Thea?"

I'd always thought of the roadside attraction as a fun and kitschy oddity. Ben hadn't fully agreed. He worried that his grandparent's store capitalized on animal exploitation and as soon as they retired, he'd dismantled the place and turned it into a wildlife rescue. During the renovations, he bought up some good points. Sure, his grandparents had rescued the animals and true, most of the rescued animals couldn't go back in the wild, but Benny hated watching them perform. Hated making them perform even more. I supported him, until he wanted to take down the sign.

"Really, Benny. I love that sign."

Or rather, I loved the memories that I associated with the sign. The lazy summer days after my mom died, when I could dance to old music with Ben's grandmother and help his grandfather fix up the rapidly decaying building without being reminded of what was missing back home. I liked the way I felt there: protected and loved.

He sighed, a grin tugging at his lips. "I'll look into it."

Comforted, I settled into the seat as Ben navigated the truck through the long, dark dirt road to his house, past the

animal enclosures and administration buildings until we turned down his driveway, a narrow road with a string of lights running down each side. Ben had lived in his grandparent's store for years while he found funding for the rescue. He drew a meager salary, nowhere enough for the endless hours he spent building the place up from three aging brown bears to a staff of five and over fifty animals at any given time.

He'd only built a house of his own in the last year. I'd talked him out of a tiny house. Well, me along with Emily. She had been living with him and hoped they'd start a family. My intention had been less selfish. Ben deserved more.

After Emily broke up with him, he let me design the place instead, his only caveat being that I had to keep the project on budget. And I had. Mostly.

The wooden cabin blended in with the surrounding woods, a cozy fireplace in the living room with an insert that could heat the entire house, and a large kitchen, since Ben loved to cook. I selfishly added two extra bedrooms to the floor plan, leaving my things in one and the other for company, though Ben rarely had company.

We walked into the house and I pulled off my heels, hanging up my coat and padding my way into the kitchen. I pulled open the fridge. "What do you have that's snacky?"

"Still hungry?" he laughed, searching from over my shoulder. He reached over me and pulled a beer out of the top shelf. "Do you want one?"

I shook my head. "Nope, just something to eat. And maybe some water."

"I can get that."

He poured me a glass of water from the tap while I scoured his kitchen, spotting a casserole dish in the back of the fridge. I pulled it out, opening the top.

"It's a buffalo chicken dip. I can heat some up," Ben offered.

"Where did you get this?" I asked, rubbing the cloth casserole holder with my thumb.

“Um.” He bit his bottom lip. “Do I have to tell you?”

“Why don’t you want to tell me?” I placed the dip on the counter and fished a bowl out of its drawer. “Does it have something to do with Thursday nights?”

The edge of his lips twitched, but he stayed silent.

“What does Millie have to do with Thursday nights, then?” I asked. “Because this is her casserole dish and her weird little casserole clothing.”

Ben averted his eyes as I dug a scoopful of the dip out of the dish and into my bowl. I picked up the bowl, pausing mid-air. “Wait, not Millie. Len. Did Len bring this to your house?”

“Who I have over Thursday nights has nothing to do with you,” Ben answered quickly, cheeks blooming red.

“Holy hell, you hang out with Len, don’t you? Is that what’s happening on Thursdays?”

I’d formed a million theories in my head over the years: playing pool in Pierce, a secret girlfriend, music lessons, choir practice, cooking class. It’d been the only secret between us and while I’d been desperate to solve it, I’d stopped short of barging into Benny’s house on Thursday.

“Len.” I wrinkled my nose. “You hang out with Len on Thursday. What exactly do you do? Other than eat dip?”

Ben’s gaze flitted to the oak buffet on the opposite wall and away again. “Nothing.”

“Nothing, huh?” While the dip warmed up, I walked across the room, watching the panic rise in Ben’s eyes.

I opened the right door and found his grandparent’s china dinnerware inside. I opened the left, which should have had twelve crystal goblets, but instead, I found a giant box.

“Adventure Quest? What the hell is Adventure Quest?”

I pulled the box out, surprised by the weight of it. I set it on the dining room table and pulled off the top, a collection of figurines greeting me. “Oh god, is this some Dungeons and Dragons thing?”

“It’s not Dungeons and Dragons,” Ben corrected me, taking the box top out of my hands. “It’s really hard to get all the pieces back in there. Don’t mess around with it. And, honestly, I’m a little relieved you found out my secret.”

I shook my head. “I wish that had stayed a secret. You’ve been blowing me off for years. Years! And for what? To hang out with Len eating dip and playing dorky games about bones?”

“The Bone Warrior actually controls skeletons so they can fight against—” Ben stopped himself short. “Never mind. You don’t want to know.”

“I don’t,” I laughed. “I wish I didn’t know. This is a very deep, very dark secret, Ben. You should have guarded this with your life. And where are the champagne glasses?”

“I put them in the attic. It’s not like we were using them, anyway.”

I sighed heavily. “I should have dragged them out for the New Year’s party.”

“Next year.”

“Well,” I sighed heavily, feigning exhaustion. “Another mystery solved. How disappointing.”

He grinned, leaning into my shoulder. “Well, at least you got some dip out of it.”

CHAPTER 20

Thea

SOMEWHERE IN THE BACK OF MY MIND I THEORIZED THAT IF I got full enough, sex would be off the table and Ben and I could have a normal, platonic sleepover like every other weekend.

Sadly, there wasn't enough dip to get full and the fluttering in my stomach killed my appetite.

Instead, we sat in silence finishing the food and then, after a few mumbled words, retreated into our respective bedrooms to get changed.

I opened the closet in the spare room, aware that even if I shouldn't have sex with Ben, I wanted to. Maybe as much as he wanted to have sex with me. The look in his eyes when he said he only wanted one name on his list, his calloused hands gripping the pen to circle my name, the surge of jealousy as he talked to Dana.

I could at least admit to myself that I wanted Ben, and I didn't want him with anyone else. A selfish thought, because I couldn't admit that to Ben.

He'd be thrilled and he'd immediately tell everyone, which would be great. Until it wasn't. And what happened then?

No. I pushed those thoughts out of my head as I picked through drawers to find something to wear. Despite his clear desire to be with me, Benny had given me time and I had every intention of taking it.

I didn't exactly stock Ben's house with sexy, "come fuck me" clothing. He was the only person I could hang out with in

sweatpants and ratty t-shirts. Half the shirts in the chest of drawers were his, in fact.

I slipped off the red party dress, hanging it in the closet with a sigh. At least I'd worn some decent undergarments. The strapless bra would have to go, but the matching red lace panties were head and shoulders better than the plain white cotton briefs I had stashed at Ben's.

I wriggled into one of his t-shirts, one I'd cut the neck out of, stitching it up so it draped over one-shoulder. I'd altered the t-shirt to wear with a pair of leggings or jeans, not to bed, but staring at my reflection in the mirror, I felt confident Ben wouldn't mind.

I padded down the hallway, slipping through the open door to his room. He stood in the bathroom, door flung open, toothbrush in hand. His eyes slid toward me when I entered, the corner of his lips tipping up as he moved the toothbrush to the other side of his mouth.

I only caught a split second of his reaction, my eyes drifting down from his face to his exposed chest and low-slung shorts. How many times had I seen Ben in this state of undress? Hundreds. Thousands. Tens of thousands of times. But the sight of his body had never hit me quite like this.

I appreciated Ben was an attractive guy. He had a lean, rugged quality that had never been my type. When a friend or acquaintance would gush about his soulful dark eyes, his scruff of a beard, his muscled chest, I'd nod and mildly agree. Like, sure, Monet was a genius painter, but it just looks like smudges to me.

Tonight, though, those smudges clicked into place and I understood. My heart pounded at the thought of those rough hands on my skin. My stomach flipped as I imagined running my fingers down the thin line of hair to his waistband. I wanted nothing more than to cross the room and kiss his lips until he dragged me to bed.

Instead, I took a deep breath and walked into the bathroom, pulling my toothbrush from its holder. I kept my cool as best as I could, eyes glued on my reflection, mind

focused on the act of brushing my teeth. Ben spit out the mouthwash and wandered into the bedroom, his hand brushed my lower back as he passed me, lingering a second longer than necessary.

Reluctantly, I washed off my makeup. At least with a layer of lipstick and eyeshadow, I had something to mask me from the dawning realization that I had completely fallen for my best friend. I closed the bathroom door and drenched a washcloth with cold water, patting the back of my neck.

I didn't have to do this. I could slide into bed with Ben, stay on my side, and put any thought of sleeping with him out of my mind. He wouldn't fight it. He would be disappointed, sure, but he would accept it. Hell, he'd even let me burrow into his arms and fall asleep there if I wanted. He was that kind of guy. That kind of friend.

I groaned, throwing the washcloth into the laundry bin and working up my courage to open the door.

Ben lay in bed, covers up over his waist, one hand slung over his head, the other holding his phone above his face. A familiar sight that suddenly felt very new and foreign.

I pulled my charger out from behind the bedside table and plugged my phone in. Ben rustled on the other side of the bed as I pulled back the covers and slipped in.

I froze for a moment, my back toward Ben and my heartbeat fluttering like the hummingbird, before turning to face him. He had shifted onto his side, one arm cupping his head, the other draped across his torso.

“What are you thinking, Thea?” he asked, his voice low and rumbly.

A better question would have been, what am I feeling? Lust shot through me, some combination of his voice and body that affected me like never before.

I bit my bottom lip to stop myself from licking my lips like some cartoon horn dog. “I think you looked very handsome tonight.”

“You looked pretty nice yourself,” he grinned.

“And I don’t think speed dating was a good idea.”

“Why’s that?”

I had always told Ben everything: bad relationships, difficult friendships, family problems. The filter between us was non-existent, but still I couldn’t make myself say the words. Because I love you. Because I want to be with you.

“Well, for one, because we knew all those people.”

Disappointment crossed his face, followed by amusement. He chuckled. “Most of them. Any other reasons?”

“Honestly?” I answered, completely dishonestly. “I’m a little too distracted right now to think of more reasons.”

He leaned closer, his nose touching mine. “Well, think it over, but I don’t think speed dating is for us.”

I shook my head, my nose rubbing his before he tilted his head, his lips brushing mine. The soft impression of a kiss turned more pressing as his hand drifted down my arm, grasping my waist and pulling me against him.

I wound my fingers through his hair, twisting the soft curls and pulling his lips closer to mine. The brutal kiss bruised my lips and left me breathless. He pulled up the hem of the shirt, fabric sliding over my thighs and ass and waist until his fingers touched bare skin and I sucked in a breath, breaking the kiss.

Undeterred, Ben’s lips trailed down my neck. I turned onto my back as his knee pressed against the bed between my legs, pushing them open, his lips on my chest and his fingers brushing my breasts.

I arched my back, the shirt pooling uselessly around my neck as his other hand cupped my ass, pulling me firmly against his hard dick.

He straightened, staring down at me with an intensity that sent a rush of adrenaline through my veins. Why hadn’t I wanted to sleep with him again? Stupidity, clearly. There wasn’t a single other good reason.

I slid my hand down his chest, running my fingertips through the faint smattering of hair that led down his stomach. I brushed his skin just above his waistband before running my fingers over the tented fabric.

“Please don’t tease me, Thea,” he whispered into my ear before he nibbled on my ear, pulling a moan from my throat.

I didn’t have a smart reply for that. Instead, I nodded, pushing down his waistband over his ass and down his thighs. I gripped his dick in my hand, stroking him gently. He reached across me, pulling open the drawer of his bedside table and pulling a condom from inside.

“I’ve got that,” I said, plucking the foil from his fingers.

He pushed upright, sweatpants around his knees and a grin on his face as I shimmied out of my underwear and ripped open the package with my teeth.

“So ladylike,” he teased. His palm rested on my inner thigh, thumb distractingly circling closer and closer to me.

“I can be ladylike or we can bang, Benny,” I muttered, poorly attempting to roll the condom onto him. “Which one would you prefer?”

He bent down, pushing my hands off him and kissing me instead. “I think you know my answer.”



“Wait!” Millie’s exclamation rose above the grinder, music, and general conversation in the coffee shop. Her honey brown eyes widened and an infectious, mildly psychotic smile spread across her face. She dropped her voice when I glanced around the tiny coffeeshop, checking if anyone had overheard our conversation. “You slept with Ben?”

“A couple times, actually,” I admitted, cheeks burning with the recollection of our last night together.

Millie and Nora shared a look that read somewhere between shock and awe, though I suspected Millie wasn’t

nearly as shocked as Nora. When I'd insisted on having coffee with my two best friends to tell them something important, though, I don't think they expected my announcement.

I hadn't been entirely sure about telling them either.

Benny was my go-to person when I needed to mull. He helped me through a million other decisions and he had this amazing way of guiding me to the answer with more questions. But he couldn't solve this dilemma.

I was certain of one thing: Ben wanted us to be together. I caught the way his expression faltered when I laughed at speed dating. The way he tensed when I talked about chatting with Warren. I could feel it in the brief pause after we were sweaty and spent, laying together on his bed.

And I felt how much I wanted it too. So, I dipped my toe into the next pool. What if our friends knew?

"How did it happen?" Nora leaned forward on the leather seat, shoes off, feet curled under her and her coffee perched on the armrest. She cupped the coffee in two hands and took a sip.

"That weekend at Mount Pierce. He pretended to be Chase and..." I smiled at the thought of the shared kiss in the bar. "It just felt right."

"So, you're dating?" Millie tilted her head.

"No. Not dating, just not not dating." I pursed my lips, trying to find a word for what we were doing. "Friends with benefits?"

"Best friends with benefits, more like," Nora laughed.

Millie frowned. "Is that okay, though? Friends with benefits?"

That dampened my mood. Not that my mood had been great in general. With Warren selling my shop and Benny completely agreeable to the snail's pace I wanted to take our relationship, I should have been euphoric. Instead, I woke up every morning feeling nauseous and on edge. Like the other shoe would drop at any second.

“It’s fine.”

I didn’t actually know. I certainly knew I wanted to sleep with Ben more, but anytime talk turned to a relationship, I clammed up.

I had too much to lose.

“Is it weird that I never saw that coming?” Nora asked Millie.

Millie scoffed. “I don’t think you have a leg to stand on there.”

Nora held up a hand, her giant emerald engagement ring sparkling in the early morning sun. “Fair enough. Glass houses. I get it.”

“Speaking of not having a leg to stand on, Millie,” I turned my attention and the conversation. “What the hell is this about Len and Benny playing board games every Thursday?”

A blotch of red bloomed on her chest as Millie pressed her cup to her lips.

“Wait, what?” Nora asked.

“Tell her, Mil. Tell her the secret that’s been driving me nuts for years.”

Millie set down her cup. “One, Len only told me because I threatened to move in with Bunny if he didn’t tell me where he went. Two, he swore me to silence. And let’s be honest, Len doesn’t have a lot of secrets and he asks very little of me. I had to say yes.”

“Emotional blackmail.” I shook my head.

“So, what do my brother and Ben do on Thursdays?” Nora asked.

I raised an eyebrow at Millie.

Millie spluttered into her cup. “Honestly, you both need to chill. They play dorky board games and eat snacks. It’s not like they’re planning coups and assassinations. It’s just normal friendship stuff.”

Nora's nose scrunched. "Len has a friend? Why is that more shocking than him disappearing every Thursday?"

"Well, good news. He's not disappearing. He's just at Ben's," I said. "And Millie is plying them with dip."

She laughed. "Is that how you found out?"

"There's only one person in Franklin Notch under the age of eighty who puts their casseroles in a cozy."

She shrugged. "Just as well. Now you all know, Len has a friend and they like playing board games together."

"Not exactly on my bingo card for this year." I shook my head.

"Yeah, well, neither was you sleeping with Ben," Millie retorted. "So, is this you making it official?"

"No," I spluttered. "I just...I don't know, wanted to talk it out with my friends?"

"I don't know what there is to talk about," Nora smiled. "I think it's wonderful and romantic."

"Not romantic. There's nothing romantic about friends with benefits," I corrected her, even as my stomach fluttered.

"Well, make it official. I'd love to throw a dinner party," Millie said.

Nora rolled her eyes. "You can have a dinner party anytime. Ben and Thea don't have to be dating."

"But it would be more fun as a couple's dinner party," she mused. "I'm thinking Beef Wellington, Hasselback potatoes, and maybe clafoutis."

"Clafoutis?" Nora wrinkled her nose.

"It's a Dutch baby, Nor," I said. "And we're not planning couples' dinner parties because Ben and I are not a couple. We're the same as always except our sleepovers are a little less G-rated now."

"I've seen you two share a sleeping bag. There was never anything G-rated about your sleepovers." Nora finished her

coffee, leaning over the chair to set her empty cup on the coffee table between us.

Millie raised an eyebrow. “Oh? This wasn’t all innocent before?”

“We’re both cuddlers. There’s nothing indecent about cuddling with a friend. I’ll even cuddle with you, Nora, while Andy’s out of town.”

“I might take you up on that,” she said with a laugh before slipping into her shoes. “Alright, I’ve got to get back to my house and study.”

“How’s school going?” Millie asked.

Nora groaned. “Difficult. No one ever warned me nursing school would be hard.”

I laughed. “I guess we thought you would remember from the first time.”

Nora poked her tongue out of her mouth. “Well, thanks for the words of encouragement and good luck with the friends with benefits thing.”

She raised her voice as she walked away, drawing the attention of Tammy behind the register and the handful of other patrons in the store.

CHAPTER 21

Ben

I STOOD IN FRONT OF MY HOUSE AND CHECKED MY WATCH.

8:45.

Fifteen minutes before my interview with Dana. Hopefully, she'd show up this time.

Thea was right. I should repaint the sign by the road. She'd successfully convinced me to keep the giant billboard declaring "Welcome to Clarks! Bears, Beers, Bathrooms" which was as recognizable as the Old Man in the Mountain, and now seemed to be headed in the same direction: complete destruction. For a newcomer like Dana, who needed an actual address to find her way around, a sign that advertised the correct business might be helpful.

A gray sedan slowly picked its way over the pitted dirt and pulled up next to me. Dana emerged from the driver's seat, shielding her eyes against the bright winter day sun. "Wow, this place is really out there."

"Glad you found it," I replied. "You can leave your purse in there. Not many people are up this way and you don't want to bring anything in the enclosures you aren't prepared to lose."

She set her purse back in the car.

"Did you find the place, okay?"

"The sign was a little confusing. Do you also offer bathrooms and beers?"

"I have a six-pack in the fridge, but no, not to the public anyway. This place has been in my family for generations. It

used to be a roadside attraction. The sign is the closest thing to a billboard the state will allow and there was a bit of a dustup when we wanted to take it down.” I gestured for her to follow me down the road, toward the administration building.

“Interesting. What kind of roadside attraction?”

“The normal: convenience store and gas. Only, my grandpa took in injured bears, too. He trained them to do tricks to pull in more tourists. It worked, too. During its heyday, people came from all over the country.”

Dana blanched. “Do you still have bears?”

“Just one left but he’s pretty old. We don’t have the resources to take in anymore.”

“Did your family history inspire you to start the rescue?” she asked, following me as I led her to the administrative building.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “My grandparents are good people, but domesticating bears never sat right with me. My parents weren’t interested in taking the place over, and I’d been working here since I was old enough to sit behind the register. So, I inherited it.”

“What did they think about the change in direction?”

“Baffled, mostly,” I said with a shrug. “They were happy I planned to retire the bears, give them a place to live out their days. They didn’t understand why I wanted to take in more animals.”

“And how many animals are there?”

“Right now?” I pursed my lips. “Twenty-eight. Twenty-seven on site.”

“Where’s the twenty-eighth?” she asked with a laugh as we stopped on the porch.

“Franklin Notch Town Hall. They have a pen right out back that mostly stays empty. A couple of years ago, they took in a moose I didn’t have room for and made her mayor. This one is just a council member.”

“No leadership ability?”

“Not this one,” I laughed. “Although, I bet if she’s still in that pen come tourist season, she’ll get a promotion.”

“Oh, clever.”

“Not that clever. The mayor at the time had just visited a town in Alaska who elected a cat as the mayor and he was gearing up to retire, anyway.”

“Some of that New England ingenuity I keep hearing about?”

“More of a bald-face rip off, really, but it seemed to work. We had an influx of tourists bypassing Pierce for Franklin Notch. Now that Pierce snagged a contract for a made-for-TV Christmas movie, I’m sure the leadership in Franklin Notch will start mining for some more examples of ‘New England ingenuity.’”

“You know, when I accepted this interview, all my classmates warned me how unfriendly the locals are. But I’ve found the place to be pretty warm, considering the weather.”

“It’s a tiny community,” I said, stopping at the entrance to the building. “And you’re filling a much needed role. They’ll welcome you with open arms. Especially here. We’re in a bit of a bind with Whitney moving away.”

“I’ll be honest, Dr. Roberts has made it very clear he doesn’t want me taking this job.”

She had a straightforwardness that made me think she’d fit into the White Mountains just fine.

I dropped my hand from the door and turned to face her. “I don’t entirely blame him. This job takes time away from his practice. And it’s a lot of risk with little reward. We operate on grants and donations and we’ve been lucky to get more funding year after year, but that could go away. When Whitney joined, we didn’t even have a budget for a vet. It’s an underpaid position until we can work up to a full-time salary. But we can provide education and continuing education credits, in addition to a stipend.”

She smiled, undeterred by the lack of money, or at least good at masking her disappointment. I pushed open the door, a wave of warm air hitting me in the face. “Let me introduce you to a few people.”



Dana would fit in just fine. She leapt in front of me, introducing herself to Addison, our grant writer, and launching into a dozen questions about her job. I didn't need to say a word before Addison offered to give Dana a tour of the building.

As soon as they walked back to the break room, chatting like old friends, Jim had ambled in. Dana greeted him and talked him into taking her along while he fed the animals and checked the enclosures. With nothing better to do, I finished some paperwork before taking a cup of coffee outside for a break.

“Hey, stranger,” Whitney called as I emerged from the building.

Bundled up in a puffy black jacket, she shuffled over to me, cheeks brilliant red and eyes watery from the cold.

“Hey, I was wondering whether I'd ever see you again.”

She laughed. “I heard you might have found my replacement.”

“We're trying to trick her into taking the job as we speak. How's Doug?”

She smiled. “Regretting that he ever proposed to me in the first place. I've made him take over most of the wedding planning since I've been so busy.”

“And the new job?”

“Boring. The most exciting animal I saw this week was a chameleon. My training is wasted on the coast.”

“What do you think of Dana?” She asked as she climbed up the stairs, lowering her voice.

“I like her. She’s young, fresh out of school, but eager. She wants something more exciting than dogs and cats.”

“And you’ve explained the money?”

“Or the lack thereof? Not in solid numbers, but I warned her.”

Whitney shrugged. “I’ll play up the benefits: flexible schedule, free continuing education, speaking engagements. I’m going to miss those speaking engagements...”

The rescue had paid for Whitney’s training, and soon, she’d earned a reputation for her work. Invitations to speak at conferences had poured in from around the world, and with those speaking engagements had come more donations.

“Me, too. I’m really glad you could come by to talk to her,” I said, patting her shoulder. “We really miss you.”

“I miss you all, too.”

Jim and Dana emerged from the tree line. Dana held a bucket in one hand while Jim carried a pair of fence cutters over his shoulder. They had their heads bowed in conversation until they reached the bottom of the stairs.

“She’s a natural!” Jim said excitedly. “Walked into the bear lair with zero fear.”

“No, trust me,” Dana laughed. “There was a lot of fear. Tons. The only other time I’ve been that close to a bear was at the zoo and there was a glass partition between us.”

“Hi, Dana, nice to finally meet you in person,” Whitney extended a gloved hand with a smile. “I’m Whitney, the vet they ran off.”

I rolled my eyes. “Only took us half a decade.”

“I’m a little slow, but I came to my senses.” Whitney shook Dana’s hand. “Maybe I shouldn’t have asked you to come tell Dana about the job.”

“Nah, we’ll get along just fine. Let me take you back to your future office,” Whitney said, jerking her head toward the building.

I waited until they had closed the door behind them. “What do you think, Jim?”

His fingers gripped the tuft of hair on his chin, eyes narrowing in concentration. “I think she’d fit in just fine.”

“Good, because she might be our only option.”

“She has a good sense of humor, at least. Whitney won’t scare her off.”

Jim picked up his pail to finish his rounds, leaving me alone on the porch.

My first bit of silence so far that day.

I dug in my jeans for my phone, scrolling through until I found Thea’s text on the screen.

THEA

How’s the interview going?

I pressed the call button.

“Thank god you called,” Thea answered enthusiastically. “I’m bored out of my mind.”

“Want to come work at the rescue?”

She laughed, a low sparkling laugh that made me smile. “Not a chance. Did Dana show up?”

“Yep.”

“Did you give her the tour yet? How’d she do?”

“I didn’t, actually. Jim gave her the tour.”

“What did he say? Was she scared out of her mind?”

“Not according to Jim. He said she was a natural.”

She scoffed. “He says that about everyone. I nearly climbed on top of him to get away from that barn owl and he still claimed I was a natural.”

She had a point, but my desperation to make this work temporarily overrode any interest in asking more questions.

Besides, I didn't exactly call Thea to talk about Dana.

"How's the shop?" I asked as Thea asked, "What are you doing tonight?"

I paused, deciphering the overlapping words. "I don't have any plans. What about you?"

"The shop's dead and boring," she sighed. "What do you think about dinner and a movie?"

I had decided to tread carefully with Thea. The speed dating had been a disaster, but the night after had been a step in the right direction. But as well as I knew Thea, I also knew she'd back off completely if I pushed too hard. Still, I couldn't ignore the chance to tease her a little.

"Are you asking me out, Thea?"

"I'm discussing options," she countered.

"Well, now that you mention it, a burger sounds pretty good."

"So, you might be at the diner tonight? Say around six?"

"I'll be there."

"And where are you sleeping?"

Wherever Thea was sleeping, but I didn't lead with that. "It's a long drive back to my place."

"Yeah, and the roads are pretty treacherous this time of year, what with the black ice."

I bit back a laugh. It hadn't snowed in two weeks and the ground was well below freezing. "Yeah, I certainly don't want to risk it on the back roads."

"You could just stay with me tonight."

"That's awful magnanimous of you," I laughed.

She sighed exasperatedly. "I have a spare room."

"Didn't I turn that room into a closet recently?" I asked.

The "one day" paint job turned into a weekend-long project. Instead of just painting the room like we planned,

Thea decided to gut the closet instead.

“Right. I forgot about that. Well, the couch then.”

I stayed silent.

“Or I’ll make some space for you.”

“I’ll see you at six, Thea.”

“See you soon.”

CHAPTER 22

Thea

I EXHALED A PUFF OF AIR, TEMPORARILY MOVING AN ERRANT strand of hair out of my face. There was nothing to do with it. A thrift store would never look “showroom ready” no matter how much I mopped, swept, and dusted. Other than straightening the shelves and tidying the back rooms to look as presentable as possible, I could only cross my fingers and hope the buyers could see the potential.

The bell rang over the door and I picked my way out of the crowded aisles to the front of the store. Warren entered with a couple I guessed to be around my age, the woman wearing a red linen dress and a designer jacket and the man in a tailored suit. Not at all who I expected.

Not that I thought Willy Wonka would come through the door, but I expected someone whimsical and maybe a little older. Instead, the couple who walked through the door could have walked out of a J. Crew catalog. Hard to believe they had graduated college, let alone had a few hundred thousand lying around to start a small business.

“Thea.” Warren pressed his palm to his tie and wrapped me in a hug with his other hand. “Thanks for letting us look at your place. This is Mr. and Mrs. Carter.”

“Addison and David,” Addison corrected, stepping forward to shake my hand. “This is a beautiful spot you have here.”

“Thanks,” I smiled, biting my lip and looking around the place. “The space has a lot of potential.”

“Warren said you weren’t really looking to sell,” David said brusquely, his eyes inventorying every square inch of the space and barely setting on me.

“I inherited the antique store from my grandmother when she passed.”

“I’m so sorry,” Addison said as David asked, “How long ago was that?”

I pursed my lips, counting backward. “Seven years now. Her best friend mostly ran it, but she retired earlier this year. She left to spend more time with her kids.”

“And you don’t want the aggravation?” The offhand comment earned David a backhanded slap on the arm by his wife.

“My passion is in design,” I answered evenly. “I have a clothing line. You’ll see my workshop in the back.”

“Not enough money coming in from that to afford this place?” David wandered behind the counter, looking into the back room.

“Sorry, he’s in back-end design and doesn’t know how to politely ask questions,” Addison called after him as he disappeared through the door.

“Well, I honestly had no interest in selling until Warren mentioned someone was looking to buy.” I smiled weakly. “When I was a kid, most of these storefronts were boarded up. My grandma hated seeing downtown abandoned, and she bought this place to help revitalize downtown after the mills left. I don’t want to own an empty storefront.”

“You don’t want to sell your clothes?”

I shook my head. “I make a lot of historically accurate reproductions. There’s not really a market for that around here. And my fashion line is a little eclectic for the locals.”

I gestured down to the polka dot poodle dress I’d chosen today with a contrasting scarf around my neck that matched my belt.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“Thank you. Besides, this is too much space. There are some smaller workspaces behind Main Street that would better meet my needs.”

While David stalked the building, asking Warren about building codes and local legislation, I gave Addison a tour. She walked me through her vision for the candy shop and I liked what I heard.

A storefront candy shop might not be sustainable on its own, but Addison had a thriving e-commerce business and a vision for her future.

“Do you mind if I take some pictures?” she asked as we picked our way through the storeroom.

“No. Not at all. I’ll go close up and let you all explore on your own. If you have questions, I’ll be right next door in the coffee shop.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not at all. Take your time. Talk it over with your husband.”

Addison grimaced. “Yeah, he’s sort of a jerk when it comes to business stuff, but he’s a sweetheart. He just wants to make sure I’m successful.”

“Sounds like a good man. Well, I hope I’ll see you around town.”

I found Warren and said goodbye before locking up and walking down the street to the coffee shop.

A cloud of sadness followed me on the short walk. How many more times would I close up the antique shop? Even if the couple didn’t buy, I had made my decision. The shop had to go. I could afford an employee when my clothing line made money, but between my days in the antique shop and my nights with Benny, my production had been abysmal.

I ordered a lavender latte and settled into a chair in the corner, pulling out my phone to check over my emails.

I shot off a few replies before settling back and enjoying my drink, my phone on the table, waiting for Warren’s text.

The door to the shop opened and I turned, hoping to find Warren, only to find Emily.

Ben's ex.

I jolted, surprised and a little horrified. I turned to face the wall, hoping she hadn't seen me, but I felt her gaze burned into the back of my head.

I repressed a wince, lowering my shoulders and taking a deep breath as her footsteps headed in my direction.

Emily and I had never gotten along. Where I was loud and flirty, Emily was quiet and reserved. She played field hockey, and I was a theater kid. We couldn't get our opposite personalities to mesh, even with Ben as our connection.

Her bony fingertips tapped my shoulder. "Thea! I thought that was you!"

I pasted a smile on my face and looked up. "Oh, Emily. How are you?"

Last I'd heard, she broke Ben's heart and moved to Tipton, of all places. The rural farming community made Franklin Notch look metropolitan in comparison. Without a passion for farming, it wasn't exactly the type of spot you ended up on purpose.

"Great. Never better. Engaged!" She raised her hand, the diamond glinting. A half-carat princess cut. Cute, even though I hated admitting that.

"Congratulations! I had no idea. Who's the lucky man?"

"His name is Mike. I don't think you'd know him. He lives in Tipton. I'm just up visiting friends."

"Well, he's a lucky man. I'm happy for you." More happy that she wasn't still pining after Ben.

"How about you?" She dropped her hand and took a sip of her coffee.

"Not engaged."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Still dating that guy... What was his name?"

“Chase.”

“Right, Chase. The sales rep, right?”

I raised an eyebrow, surprised she remembered. She’d never taken much interest in my personal life. “That’s him. He got a promotion and moved to New Jersey.”

“Huh,” she frowned. “I don’t know why I thought that one would last.”

I grimaced, regretting that I’d complimented her recent engagement.

“Just as well.” She shrugged, the frown smoothing off her face. “I don’t think you and Ben are really cut out for mature relationships.”

My eyes widened as she dropped Ben’s name. “Excuse me?”

She smiled smugly. “Obviously, you have a codependent relationship. No need to be ashamed. I mean, I said as much to Ben when we broke up.”

“Codependent?” I repeated. “Wait, you told Ben that?”

Her eyes widened in feigned innocence. “He didn’t tell you? I thought you two shared everything.”

“Clearly not,” I said, gripping my coffee enough to pop the lid.

Emily smirked. “Well, it’s not his fault. Or yours, really. I mean, it must have been hard to lose your own family, but at some point, you need to let Ben live his own life.”

“He has his own life, Emily.”

“Does he?” Her face scrunched up, ski slope nose tilting toward the ceiling. “Do you? I mean, you’re almost thirty and neither of you can stay in a relationship with anyone else. I’m just worried about him, that’s all. And you.”

“Worried?” I had always worried that she would lead him straight into a marriage and family that wasn’t right for either of them, because he didn’t want to hurt her. I stopped worrying about Ben the minute she broke up with him.

She slid into the seat opposite me, pitching forward with a weak smile, like she was really trying to help me and not just getting in one last jab before she took off. “He’s clearly hung up on you, and you keep stringing him along. It’s sad, and I was done being the second woman in Ben’s life. But, you know what? That was for the best. Now, I’m engaged to a guy who actually loves me, and you two are still exactly where you were when I left you. Best of luck, Thea.”

She fluttered out of the coffee shop with nothing but a pleased smile. I picked up the now cold latte and took a sip, forcing it down and focused on what Emily had said.

I hadn’t asked Ben about the specifics of their breakup. He made an offhand comment about Emily feeling neglected and left it at that. I didn’t press. And now I wished I had. Maybe then I’d be in the right headspace to listen to her saying I was the problem with Ben.

Instead, I had a friends with benefits situation with Ben; him asking for more and me not ready to move our relationship firmly out of friendship and into dating.

And maybe she had a point. Maybe I was Ben’s problem.

My phone buzzed on the table. I picked it up.

BEN

How’d the showing go? Want to come over and tell me about it?

I sighed, biting my bottom lip and already regretting my response.

Still waiting on the buyers to finish and then grabbing dinner with Warren to discuss the listing.

I could come over for a drink once you’re done.

I’m a little tired.

Okay. I've got my Thursday night thing tomorrow, so I'll just catch you Friday?

I smiled at him still referring to his dorky game night with Len as his “Thursday night thing” but could still read the disappointment in the text.

Dinner at the parents. I'll even remember to make a side dish.

I set down the phone with a frown.

“Good news.” Warren startled me when he slid into the seat across from me. I thought Emily had returned to rub my face in my failures a little more. “They loved it.”

“She loved it, you mean.”

He shrugged. “He likes it. Certainly likes it better than a smaller footprint at twice the cost in Pierce. And he thinks this town has potential.”

He spread his hands out in front of him, making me laugh. “I expect you'll have an offer in two to four days.”

“They love it so much, they're going to wait a couple of days?”

“He knows they're the only ones who've looked at the property. He doesn't want to come across as too desperate, so he'll make her wait.”

“Is that your professional opinion?”

He nodded. “I've seen his type before. On the plus side, it'll probably be a cash offer.”

“I'm looking forward to all those hookers and blow.”

“Just set aside enough to pay the rent. You're still interested in moving behind Main Street, right?”

I nodded. “I'll sign that lease the day I get an offer and start moving my stuff.”

“It's a lot of stuff. I had no idea how much fabric you had in the back.”

My dirty little secret. Warren had modeled some clothes for me a few years prior, so he'd seen the outward facing component of my business. The Jacobean desk and the curtained walls. The fitting mirrors and the small hexagonal stage. What he hadn't seen were the piles of fabric and supplies I stashed in the back.

“Yeah. I'm guessing you know some movers?”

CHAPTER 23

Ben

I JOGGED UP THE STEPS TO THEA'S FRONT DOOR. TWO DAYS since I'd seen her and while we'd been in nearly constant contact, as always, I couldn't help worrying that the progress I'd made with her somehow had been washed away.

The feeling was both uncomfortable and unfamiliar. One I resigned myself to living with until Thea decided whether to give us a shot.

I knocked on the door, readying my key at the lock. She opened it with a smile on her face before I had a chance to turn the key. I stepped forward, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her into me for a kiss. She ducked out of my way at the last second.

"Benny, your parents!" she hissed in my ear. Her cheeks burned against my chest and she struggled to take a step back.

I tightened my grip. "They'll be thrilled."

She glared up at me and I pulled her into the house, kicking the door closed behind me. Once the door latched, she practically leapt into my arms and all my worry washed away.

"Better?" I asked.

She nodded, burrowing her face into my neck. Her grip tightened as her lips brushed against my neck, working their way down my jawline and finally on my lips. She tasted like honey, her plush lips leaving a tacky trace of lipstick with each kiss. I groaned, bracing her against the wall with one arm under her ass and the other pressed to her hip.

“If we keep going like this, we’ll definitely be late for dinner,” I murmured, not exactly hating the idea.

Thea pulled away, tilting her head back against the wall with a sigh. “They’d probably come over to figure out what’s going on, too.”

Probably. And they both had a key to Thea’s house.

“So, you still don’t want my parents to know?” I asked playfully.

She winced, answering the question without words. I exhaled, pushing back disappointment.

“Don’t worry about it. Mom would lose her mind and start talking about grandkids. It’d be a whole thing. Better to keep this between us for the time being.”

She dropped her legs from my waist and I set her down, taking a step backward to give her some space.

“Actually, I signed us up for something.” She straightened her skirt and smoothed out her hair.

I cupped her cheek with my palm and rubbed the smudged lipstick off the side of her mouth. “What’s that?”

She smiled tersely, turning toward the kitchen. “Just a singles’ ball. Sort of a late Valentine’s day thing. It’s in Concord so far enough out that we might not know everyone.”

My jaw dropped, eyes narrowing as she flitted into the kitchen. “Um...why?”

“We just really didn’t give it a shot last time.” She raised her voice an octave, blowing the words out in a single breath. Nervous. “And I stumbled across the ad and you know I love a ball. I have this really cute dress I’d love to wear out.”

“To a Singles Ball? To meet single men, presumably?” I asked, searching for clarification.

Thea opened the fridge, pulling out a covered bowl, her eyes glued to the contents. “They’re holding it at the Opera House. Have you ever been to the Opera House in Concord? It was built in the 1800s and has some really interesting

architectural details. I went to a show there once, but didn't have time to explore."

I rubbed my forehead. "Are we going to check out the architecture or meet other people?"

She tilted her head, now captivated by the condiment shelves. "There's even a live band. I haven't heard of them, but I checked out their music and it's not half bad. We'd at least get to dance."

"Together? Or with other people?"

She grabbed two bottles of salad dressing, balancing them on the lid of the bowl, before turning to me with a sigh. "I don't know. Just...what if I'm messing up your life?"

"Excuse me?"

Her lips twisted as she sat the salad down, the counter between us. "Did you ever wonder what would happen if I wasn't around all the time? What if you had more space?"

"More space?" I shook my head. Where had that come from?

"If we weren't so codependent?"

I winced. "I'm guessing you saw Emily the other day?"

"You knew she was in town?"

"She might have stopped by my parent's house, just to say hi," I admitted. "And maybe she called me to see if I was around."

"Were you?" Thea set a fist on her hip.

"Nope. Busy."

"She's engaged, you know?" Thea said, searching my face for my reaction.

I shrugged, not admitting that my mom had shared that exact piece of news last night. "Good for her." Even though she'd broken up with me, I didn't want Emily to be unhappy. Since our relationship hadn't made her happy, I was glad to

hear this one did. I didn't appreciate her riling up Thea, though. "You're not codependent, Thea."

"We," she stressed, crossing her arms. "We're codependent and that's why you'll never find happiness."

I chuckled, rolling my eyes.

"I'm serious, Benny."

"I'm serious, Thea." I rounded the counter, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her flush against me. "You make me happy. And don't let my ex, of all people, tell you otherwise." The edge of her lips worked their way up as her shoulders loosened. I rubbed my thumb over her forearm. "Now, I will go to this Singles Ball so you can enjoy a band you've never heard of and study the architecture, but I'm only doing it for you. No one else."

She dropped her head onto my shoulder, melting into me. I closed my eyes. Thea would come around. She'd realized we should be together. Just not today.

"Come on." I squeezed her shoulder and let her go. "Before Mom and Dad get worried we're blowing them off."



We entered my parent's house to the smell of lasagna and an undercurrent of jazz. Mom's off-key warbling echoed through the house.

"On time?" Mom's eyes widened. "And with food, too?"

"Just a salad," Thea said with a grin, setting the bowl on the countertop and taking off her coat.

"Well, isn't that a welcome surprise? Your father's going to be disappointed he doesn't have time for a quick nap, though."

"A nap?" I laughed.

"I'm not joking," Mom said, rolling her eyes as she stirred the cast iron pan on the oven. "Your dad has taken to a ten-

minute nap for lunch and a twenty-minute nap after work. He swears he feels more rested and sleeps less at night. But he's just getting old."

"Well, by the looks of that timer," Thea said, nodding toward the microwave timer with nearly thirty minutes left on it. "He'll have plenty of time."

"You should have warned me you'd be on time. I'm not equipped for it." Mom turned on the oven light, peering in to check on the tray of rolls. "Ben, pour us a glass of wine." She waved toward the wine rack.

I rotated the half-dozen bottles until I spotted a merlot, Thea and Mom's favorite.

"So, Thea, I heard from Tammy that you had a couple at the store yesterday looking to buy."

Thea rolled her eyes. "Tammy eavesdropped on a private conversation between Warren and I. But, yeah, I'm entertaining offers on the store."

"That's a shame." Mom frowned and took a sip of her wine.

Thea shook her head. "It's for the best. I kept it open for Mrs. Evans mostly, but now that she's gone, I'd just as soon sell the building. Owning a thrift store wasn't exactly my passion."

"What about your clothing?" Mom asked, stirring a fragrant pan full of sizzling veggies.

Thea slid into a seat at the table, angled toward Mom. "Nothing is happening to my clothing line. I don't really need all the space, and Main Street doesn't need another empty storefront."

"That's a good point." Mom exhaled, fingers wrapped around the wineglass stem. "You're not moving, right?"

Thea chuckled. "Is that the rumor Tammy is spreading around town?"

"She seems to think you're liquidating," Mom admitted sheepishly.

I shot Thea a sideways glance. She shrugged in response.

“Absolutely not. I’m planning to rent at a spot by the tattoo parlor. Todd Grant moved his office into his house to save on overhead. I’d fit in better there, anyway.”

“With the artists?” Mom teased.

“Exactly. Besides, the couple who toured the building seemed nice. Well, the wife did anyway. She’s a candy maker.”

“What is this about candy? And what the hell are you two doing here?” Dad ambled into the kitchen, eyeing us suspiciously as he pulled the lid off of Thea’s salad bowl. He grabbed a black olive from the top.

“I added extra just for you,” Thea said, sipping her wine. “Help yourself.”

“Does that mean we’re having dinner on time?” he asked between olives.

Mom shook her head. “Go get a nap in, you old coot. Lasagna won’t be ready for a while yet and I plan to open a second bottle of wine.”

Without waiting for another invitation, Dad hurried upstairs.

“When did he get so ancient?” Mom sighed, shaking her head. “Well, Thea, that’s one piece of gossip cleared up. Now it’s Ben’s turn.”

I blanched. “Me too?”

“I ran into Whitney at the diner the other night. Apparently, she came back to town to interview her replacement?”

Well, in the giant pot of Franklin Notch rumors that might have been swirling around about me, that was the easiest to address.

“Is that what Whitney said? Interviewing?”

“She said that this new vet, Dana, was a cutie.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t think Whitney ever said the words ‘cutie.’”

“It was implied. And she said this new vet met you at speed dating.” Mom lifted an eyebrow, her lips pursing as her gaze slid over to Thea conspiratorially.

“And you know who dragged me to speed dating, right?” I asked, bumping Thea’s shoulder with my arm.

“So, how did it go?” Mom prodded.

“The interview or the dating?”

She pulled the pan off the stovetop, setting it off to the side. “Both.”

“The interview went very well, which means the speed dating was a bust.”

Mom’s face fell. “Really? But it’s not like there’s a rule? Whitney wasn’t really your employee. More like a contractor.”

I gave my mom a hard look and shook my head.

She sat back in her chair with a pout. “What about a wedding? I’d settle for that.”

“Better talk to Thea about that.”

Thea’s eyes nearly came out of her head, her jaw dropping. Her heel connected with the back of my leg, and I held back a yelp as a smile came back to Mom’s face.

“Oh! You’re looking for someone, Thea? Someone serious? Is that what the speed dating was about?”

“I was just with someone seriously,” she murmured.

“Well, not exactly serious,” I said with a lopsided grin. “All things considered.”

“I attempted to make it serious. I can’t help that he moved to New Jersey,” she argued. “And yes, maybe I’m looking for something serious. I’m not getting any younger.”

Mom waved her hand. “You’re a baby. In fact, when I was your age...”

Her voice faltered as her eyes dropped to the now-empty glass of wine.

An awkward silence enveloped the room. When Mom was Thea's age, she was taking care of two kids in diapers while her best friend fought cancer.

"Exactly," Thea said with a sad smile, standing up to hug my mom and top off her glass.

"She would have been so proud of you," Mom sighed. "So fascinated. She was like that, always interested. Always asking questions."

Thea and I had talked about her mom hundreds of times, both of us mining our memories for something untouched by the stories my parents and her grandmother told us: a scent, an item, a time.

"What if we hated each other?" Thea asked with a mischievous grin.

Mom rolled her eyes. "Her hate you? Never. She loved everything about you. Even loved waking up all night with you. Both of you," Mom winked at me. "In the early days, we'd split shifts. I'd take you both during the day and she'd stay up all night. At one point, we even kicked your fathers into one house and had our own little momma compound, just us two and your grandmother, Thea."

We'd heard the story before. Nearly every year, always on our birthday, sometimes on the anniversary of her death, sometimes on nights like tonight, when we had a few minutes, just the three of us. Dad didn't enjoy talking about Thea's mom, or more specifically, how the man he'd considered his friend for decades disappeared, leaving behind his young daughter.

"He carries a bit of guilt about that," Mom would say with a sigh anytime the topic of Thea's dad came up and he'd walk away. As if the very proximity to Thea's father made him culpable.

"Old times," Mom said, clearing a tear with the back of her hand. "But you both are still young. Still plenty of future left

for you both.”

CHAPTER 24

Thea

“YOUR PHONE’S RINGING,” BEN GROANED, RUBBING MY shoulder.

“It’s not important,” I murmured, burrowing my face into the crook of his arm.

“How do you know that?” he asked, his voice alert.

Ugh. His awake voice. The jerk.

“Because no one important ever calls me,” I groaned.

“What if it’s about work?”

I stifled a giggle and pulled my head off his chest. “An emergency clothing situation? You think people are calling me about split pants and long hems on the weekend? It’s not even wedding season.”

The phone stopped buzzing on the side table.

“See,” I shrugged, kissing his neck. “No emergency. They hung up.”

“Must have found their number for an emergency tailor.”

The phone buzzed again. I sighed, leaning over him to pick it up.

“Yeah?” I grumbled into the receiver.

“Thea!” Warren’s voice pinged in my ear, so cheery that I pulled the phone away from my ear to check the time.

Eight A.M. Why was he so chipper?

“What’s up, Warren?”

“I have fantastic news. I was wrong.”

I sat up, brow furrowed. “Wrong?”

“About the Carters. They sent me a written contract this morning.”

“They put in an offer?”

Ben sat up beside me, tilting his head and mouthing, “What?”

I covered the speaker. “Warren has an offer on the shop.”

“Sorry, am I interrupting something?” Warren asked, voice tinged with interest.

“No. It’s just Ben.”

Ben pressed his head to the other side of the phone, listening in on the conversation.

“Oh,” Warren exhaled, his disappointment palpable. “Anyway, it’s a full offer, all cash, closing in two weeks.”

“Two weeks?”

“I know. It’s tight, but I already called the landlord on the back of Main. The last tenant is already out and he’ll give you the rest of this month and next free if you move in now.”

“You saw all the stuff in the thrift store, Warren. I need at least a month.”

Even a month seemed like too little time. I hadn’t touched the back storeroom since I inherited the place from my grandmother. It’d take weeks to go through it all. Maybe months.

“I know a couple of liquidators, if you’re interested. You could auction off the contents.”

I looked at Ben for guidance. He shrugged.

“Helpful,” I mouthed before making the split-second decision. “That might be best. When could you have someone come by and look at it all?”

“Monday?” Warren guessed. “I’ll make some calls and get back to you. Does that mean we’re accepting the contract?”

I took a deep breath, my stomach tumbling. “Yes!”

“Fantastic!” Warren enthused. “I’ll need you to come in and sign Monday but I’ll let them know you plan to accept. Congratulations!”

I hung up, not sharing Warren’s celebratory mood.

“You okay?” Ben asked, wrapping an arm around me and pulling me close.

“Yeah,” I said as a sense of disquiet washed over me. “It just feels weird.”

He nodded, dropping his head against mine. “Of course it does. It’s a huge change.”

“In a year already full of change,” I groaned, flopping back onto the bed. “There’s just so much stuff.”

“There’s not that much,” he argued.

“You haven’t seen the backroom. Or that weird storage room that used to be a bathroom. Or the crawl space.”

“Wait.” He laid down next to me, running his palm over my waist. “There’s a crawl space?”

“It used to be the central fireplace. Grandma walled it off and shoved a bunch of boxes in there. I barely remembered the room either, and then I sold a case of old vinyl records and uncovered the door. Honestly, I was afraid there might be a colony of bats hiding in there. I didn’t want to poke around too much so I blocked the entrance with a dresser and pretended I hadn’t seen it.”

“Well, a secret hidden room, potentially filled with bats? I’m in.”

I sighed. “You don’t mean that.”

He tightened his grip on my waist, rubbing his nose over my cheek. “I do. Let’s get dressed and head over there now.”

“I need a truck.”

“Great news,” he chuckled. “I happen to have a truck in your driveway.”

“Ugh, why are you always so helpful? Don’t you want to stay in bed for the rest of the day?”

“I do, but you’ll just be thinking about how much work you have. And I can’t exactly take a week off to help, so you have me and my truck for today only.” Ben kissed my cheek and stood up.

I lay there for a second longer, sad that practical matters like selling the store had interrupted a lazy morning in bed with Ben.

“Alright, fine.” I wrapped the sheet around my torso and stood, surveying the floor for my clothes. I grabbed a t-shirt and pulled it on. “Can we at least get breakfast first?”



I stacked the box Ben had pushed out of the secret room onto the growing pile.

“How many more?” I asked, crouching down to look into the small alcove. Ben had set a floodlight in the corner to check for bats and after extracting over a dozen boxes from the space, it was fully illuminated.

“This is the last one and it’s heavy as hell.” Ben grunted, hunched down, his back to me.

The box scraped across the floor and he muscled it toward the door. I stood out of the way as he pulled it into the shop.

“How did your grandma get those in there?” He ran a hand through his hair, eyebrows furrowed.

“No clue. Maybe she hired someone to do it.”

“Have you opened any of these yet?” Ben asked, stretching his back.

I moved around him, kneading his shoulders. “Not all of them yet, but so far nothing exciting has turned up.”

“Really?” He leaned into my touch, tilting his head back. “No gold bars or piles of cash?”

“Not yet, anyway.”

“That’s a real shame. There’s still a chance, though.”

“There’s a better chance this will all be up for auction in a couple of weeks.” I frowned. “And we haven’t even touched the back room.”

“More time to find our fortune.”

I suppressed a groan. Ben turned, slipping an arm around my shoulder and pulling me in close. He kissed my forehead. “It’s not that bad. It’s just a lot.”

“I don’t even remember half of this stuff.”

“I think your grandma was hiding it from you,” Ben said, my hair muffling his voice.

I relaxed against him, pressing my palm to his chest, feeling for the beat of his heart.

Slower than mine. Almost imperceptible under the thick flannel of his shirt. Not violently fast like the night before, after we’d tumbled into bed, clothes peeled off on the trip upstairs, his mouth tasting of me and his body slick with sweat.

Comfortingly slow, though. My stress ebbed away just being next to him.

“So, are we still searching for gold or what?” Ben murmured.

“Let’s keep going,” I sighed, pulling away.

After a quick search of the store for box cutters, we set to work opening up the boxes. Most were filled with junk, various items from estate sales that she realized had no business in the shop once she dragged it in. I set aside a few pieces in the keep pile. Ben took pictures of the stuff not good enough for auction but too good for the trash, posting the pictures to a local group for free items. Hopefully, someone would find a use for them.

We worked for hours, developing a system that whittled down the massive pile of boxes into smaller, more manageable

stacks. Mid-day, Ben set up some tables to put out the free stuff on Main Street in a way that looked professional enough not to draw the ire of the town busybodies, who wouldn't appreciate what amounted to a giveaway on the street.

"It's getting dark," Ben said as he returned to the back room. A faint sheen of sweat coated his forehead. "You want to call it a night?"

I looked at our progress and nodded. "Yep. I have the rest of the week to clear out anything that's not going up for auction. Do you think anyone would mind if I closed up shop now?"

He shook his head. "I think they'd understand. Besides, it's not exactly tourist season around here. Who's coming in?"

He had a good point. I'd gone entire days without a single customer. If someone desperately needed an old book or antique, they could knock.

"Close it down. Let's grab dinner," Ben said authoritatively.

My stomach growled. "Good idea."

I locked the doors while Ben warmed up the truck. The diner was just on the other side of Main Street, but the bone-chilling wind made his truck a better way to get there.

"Quiet night," Ben said as we waited for Gloria to seat us.

"They're calling for a foot of snow in the morning." Ben groaned. "Guess I need to head back to my place tonight, then."

He tilted his head, eyes searching mine, asking me to come with him without asking. And I had no reason not to go. If the weather got bad enough, I'd cancel my plans, anyway. Other than a houseplant, I didn't really have a reason to go home.

Ben, on the other hand, had a full zoo at his place. Even if the city cleared the main roads, he'd have to plow the road to let one of the keepers in. If the city didn't clear the roads, he'd be feeding the animals.

“Come on, you two,” Gloria growled, grabbing two menus and stomping towards an empty table without looking back.

“Bad night, Glor?” Ben asked, his voice light and cheery.

“The Jenkins girl called in. Says she’s got the flu, but Buddy said she was out late with his boy last night, so I’m running this place solo.”

A scan of the empty restaurant showed two other employees, but I knew better than to argue with Gloria.

“Sorry to hear that,” Ben said sympathetically.

“And besides that, I had to hear from Warren Kang that Thea is closing up Mildred’s shop.” Gloria glowered in my direction.

“I’m sorry about that, Gloria,” I said placatingly. “With Mrs. Evans leaving, I thought it’d be best to open up the space for something else. The buyer is opening a candy store, if that helps.”

Judging by the disappointed glare on her face, it did not. I would be in the doghouse with Gloria for a while. No more special lunch salads for me anymore.

“I just think when a person decides to dismantle an institution in this town, they should have the decency to announce it properly. Not let busybody realtors gossip about it while the owner boxes the place up in the night.”

Ben gave me a pained smile, one that assured me I’d screwed up and screwed up badly. Gloria huffed, setting down our menus and not even bothering to take our drink order.

“Oh, you’re in trouble,” Ben said, his voice teasing.

I smacked his arm with my menu.

“I didn’t know I had to go on an apology tour before I sold the shop,” I hissed.

“Maybe if you offer to let Gloria stop by the shop and pick out something she likes, she’ll forgive you.”

Not his worst plan. “Do you think that would work?”

Gloria tromped back with sparkling water for Ben. She plunked a water in front of me. “Out of iced tea,” she said as she turned back toward the kitchen without giving me a chance to make amends.

“She’s not out of iced tea, is she?” I asked with a frown.

“Debra’s pouring a glass right now,” Ben said, his eyes on the drink stand behind us.

I tipped my head back, closing my eyes with a groan. “I’ll be right back.”

CHAPTER 25

Ben

I CONVINCED THEA TO STAY THE NIGHT, THEN ANOTHER, AND another. On Thursday she left, claiming Len would never forgive her if she saw him playing dorky games.

And she had a point.

Len and Thea's relationship had never been what would be called friendly. Sharing Millie had been tough enough, and now Thea found out about my friendship with Len. Sharing irked them both.

The night with Len cleared my head a little, but by Saturday morning, I was back to where I started: my brain wracked with ways to convince Thea to drop the pretense that we weren't together. That we shouldn't date. Because I had made up my mind to marry her when we shared that first kiss.

And even as she tried to distract me from my goal by going out of town for a singles' event I was glad to have more time to convince her as much.

I sipped a cup of coffee, expecting Thea but instead spotting a gray sedan carefully picking its way down the pitted road. I pushed myself off the rocking chair on my porch to stand.

Dana.

She'd just moved to New Hampshire on Wednesday and I hadn't expected to see her until sometime next week.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, gripping my coffee mug in one hand and hanging over the railing.

“Whitney said she’d be in town and wanted to check up on a bull moose and I wanted to tag along.”

I frowned at that. “You’re not going into the cage, right?”

She shrugged.

“Well, if you are, give me a heads up and I’ll tag along.”

We had a strict policy of not going into cages alone at the rescue. While most of the animals were standoffish or, with the bear, downright docile, years ago an otherwise sweet animal had mauled my grandfather’s arm.

So far I’d run the place without any medical incidents more serious than some scrapes and falls. Whitney, while competent, tended to be too brave for her own good and I didn’t want Dana to get the idea that she’d be working close up with the animals by herself.

On top of that, something about the new bull moose put me on edge. When he first came in, hot off being bounced off a truck, he’d been docile but once he got better, he’d charged Jim one day. The incident rattled Jim and that was hard to do. I’d breathe a sigh of relief when we could release the moose back into the wild.

“Will do,” Dana said with a smile.

“You want a cup of coffee while you wait?” I asked, holding up my empty mug.

Dana looked toward the road. “Sure. That’d be nice. I went out this morning to run some errands, but the coffee shop wasn’t open yet.”

I gestured for Dana to follow me into my house. The tiny cabin didn’t look like much on the outside, but the interior was cozy. More than enough room for me, anyway. The front door opened up into a postage stamp sized living room and I rounded the small breakfast bar to the coffeemaker.

“Yeah, that’s Tammy’s fault. She used to open the place at six so the workers at the cabinetry shop could get a bite to eat before their shift, but she broke her hip last winter and can’t be

bothered anymore. Sometimes she doesn't open the place until nine."

"Couldn't they just hire someone else?" Dana followed me inside, her face wrinkling in confusion.

I laughed. "Not around here. Tammy only keeps the job because she enjoys being the town gossip and the owner lets her bring her dog into work. I don't think that meets the health code, but who's complaining?"

"No one who wants coffee."

I opened a cabinet and pulled out another mug. "Exactly. Now, how do you take your coffee?"

"Black would be great." I poured a cup, handing it to her and gesturing for her to take a seat.

She settled onto a stool. "What are you up to this weekend?"

"Going out of town actually," I said, nodding toward the overnight bag placed by the door.

"Doing anything fun?" She took a sip of coffee and shot me a smile.

"Yeah, actually." I ran a hand through my hair, unsure of exactly how much to spill. "Thea and I have tickets to a thing."

She raised an eyebrow. "So, are you two..."

I shrugged my shoulders. "We're best friends."

"And?" she probed.

"And exploring our relationship."

She nodded and took another sip of coffee.

"What about you? Meet anyone interesting at speed dating?"

She blushed slightly. "Maybe. Definitely in the exploration phase, too."

"It's going around," I said with a laugh. We chatted about her move to New Hampshire, the friends she left behind, and

the hiccups she'd encountered moving from a mid-sized city to the remote mountain town. Before long, I'd lost track of time and stopped listening for another car coming down the road.

Only when the door opened and Thea barged into the cabin did I remember we were both expecting company.

"Oh," Thea said, eyes wide, sliding from Dana to me. "Hey. Are you ready to go?"

I nodded, setting my empty mug in the sink. "Thea, do you remember—"

"Dana," she finished, setting her bag down by the door and crossing into the kitchen with her hand extended. "Nice to see you again. Benny mentioned that you'd be taking over for Whitney."

"Whitney's supposed to meet me here, but I guess she got caught up in traffic. I'm just going to go outside and call her quickly." Dana took her mug and slipped out the door.

Thea leaned over the counter while I washed my mug. "What was going on here?"

I shrugged. "What do you think was happening? You and Whitney are running late and the people on time had to fend for themselves."

Thea sighed, her brow furrowing slightly. "I'm just a little surprised, is all. She's cute. Dana."

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you jealous, Thea?"

"Of course not. But if you were interested, you would have said so at speed dating, right?"

I set the clean mugs on the drying rack, and grabbed a dish towel to dry my hands. I leaned forward and invaded her space. "I thought I made myself clear. I'm only interested in one person: you."

She rolled her eyes.. I brushed my lips over her cheek and she closed her eyes, her body leaning toward mine.

I pulled away. "But, right now, we've got to get on the road since you're dragging me to another singles event."

She tilted her head back with a groan.

“I hope that means you want to cancel.”

She shook her head, opening her eyes with a smile. “It’ll be fun.”

I didn’t believe her. I’d much rather keep Thea in the hotel room we’d booked for the night and spend the entire overnight trip there. Or hell, even take her bar hopping through downtown until the early hours of the morning. But I’d resigned myself to seeing this through. Thea would come around to the idea of dating me in time and we had all the time in the world.



I sighed, sloshing the glass of gin and tonic in my hand. I pulled my gaze from the dance floor, where Thea and a guy ten years her senior, but with the dance moves of a professional, gathered a crowd, and back to the man across from me.

Mark, fifty-two and recently divorced.

While Thea had attracted a swarm of men interested in her, I’d found the one other person at this event not remotely interested in meeting someone new.

“Then she said it was over. Thirty years down the drain.”

“Except for the kids,” I offered helpfully.

Judging by his expression, I hadn’t been helpful at all.

“Right, the kids. They have families of their own now, though. Our youngest only cared about whether we were keeping the house. She’s my ‘failure to launch’ child,” Mark lowered his voice as if she might show up at the party. “Anyway, I tried online dating, but half of those profiles don’t even look human. My buddy dragged me here.”

I followed Mark’s gaze to the other end of the room, past Thea and her partner, to a table of gray-haired singles

congregating around a man with suspiciously dark hair for his age.

“He’s a bit of a wild card. I told him I wasn’t ready, but what are you going to do?”

“Friends, right?” I laughed. “My buddy dragged me here, too.”

Mark nodded, following my pointed finger to Thea as the song wrapped up. She smiled at her partner, cheeks pink and skin glowing, effortlessly turning down a second dance before searching for me. Her sparkling gray eyes found mine and she shot me a wink before making her way towards us.

“Buddy?” Mark snorted. “If I had a buddy like that, I wouldn’t be bringing her to singles events.”

“Trust me, I didn’t want to bring her here.”

Mark clapped my back and bid me good luck as he crossed the dance floor.

“Make a new friend?” Thea teased, slipping the gin and tonic out of my hand and taking a sip. She wore a flapper inspired dress and sparkling black beads brushed against me every time she moved.

“I was trying. I think you scared him off.”

Thea wrapped her arm through mine and pulled me toward the bar. “Well, I just met the most fascinating man. He works on an oil rig.”

I raised an eyebrow and glanced back at her dance partner. He had a slim build and big hair. Not exactly a guy who screamed “oil rig worker,” but what did I know? Most people didn’t take me for a wild animal wrangler either. “Interesting. Did you get his number?”

She smacked my chest and pulled me into an unoccupied seat at the bar. “He only spends one week a month in New England. The rest of the time, he’s on a rig.”

“You don’t think that’s ideal?” I joked. “Following some guy who works on a rig?”

She shook her head. “And leave you behind? After you refused to move away after graduation, I made peace with the fact you’d never leave.”

I loved where I grew up and couldn’t imagine living anywhere else. But I’d been surprised that Thea had never left. Besides a summer in New York shortly after graduation, she’d flit in and out of town for her clothing business, but she never talked about selling her house. And she rarely went more than a couple of weeks without coming back home.

“Is that why you never moved away?” I asked, frowning.

Thea pursed her lips, taking two drinks from the bartender with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. She handed me an ice cold glass and took a sip of her own with a shrug. “I tried. A couple of times. I interviewed for a job in Boston, and I got an offer from some studio in L.A., but when it came time to tell you, I couldn’t do it.”

“I always wanted you to be happy, Thea. You never had to stay in Franklin Notch just because of me.”

The DJ transitioned from an upbeat dance beat to a slower song and Thea swayed on her feet, brushing her shoulder against my chest. “I couldn’t stand the thought of not being near you.”

My fingers gripped the chilled drink as she stilled, her body pressed against mine, and her lips turned up. I wrapped my free hand around her waist, pulling her close, and she sucked in a breath when I dipped my head, lips just inches from hers.

“Admit it, Thea. You’re in love with me.”

She sighed, her eyes on my lips and her body soft in my hands. Raising up on her heels, she kissed me.

CHAPTER 26

Thea

THE WORDS BURNED ON MY LIPS.

I'd told Ben I loved him a million times before. But three words that were once a nearly nightly refrain suddenly seemed scary and uncertain. They'd morphed into three loaded words that would change a relationship that had been comfortingly reliable for decades. A relationship that had withstood death and distance and hormones.

But with Emily's words still banging around my head and the exhaustion of near-constant change, I pushed them back.

"Are you ready for bed? I'm tired," I whispered into his ear.

He nodded, finishing the last gulp of his gin and tonic and setting the glass on the bar. I placed my still-full glass beside his, taking his hand and pulling him through the crowd.

We rode the elevator quietly to our hotel room.. His thumb drew circles on mine, giving my hand a squeeze as the doors opened and we walked down the hallway.

I rifled through my pockets, searching for the room key as we stopped at the door. Ben's hand wrapped around my waist. His suit jacket brushed my back. I closed my eyes as my fingers wrapped around the key, inhaling the smell of fresh air and pine before opening the door.

"That was a bust," Ben said with a grin, pulling off his jacket, folding it in half and setting it on top of his duffel bag.

“At least you made a new friend.” I unloaded the contents of my pockets onto the nightstand and took off my earrings, placing them beside my wallet.

“I found the only other person in that place not interested in hooking up.”

I frowned, turning to face him just in time to watch him pull his shirt off. “So, you’re not interested in hooking up? That’s a real shame.” I turned my back to him, brushing my hand over my neck to pull away the loose hair that fell out of my updo. “Do you mind unzipping me?”

His calloused fingertips brushed down my shoulders, fingers resting just above the zipper. His breath blew hot on my neck. I closed my eyes as his lips brushed over the back of my neck. “I’m not interested in hooking up with some stranger, Thea.”

“You just want to hook up with me?” I teased as he pulled down the zipper.

“If we’re just hooking up for now, then I can live with that,” he murmured, nipping at my ear. “Or, you could make this easy on both of us and admit to what’s really going on.”

“And what’s really going on, Benny?”

“We’re meant for each other.”

I closed my eyes, letting the perfection of that sentence warm my body like a roaring fire on a snowy day. I could feel myself sinking into the feeling. Burrowing into that feeling. For a moment, anyway, before the excuses and the fears cropped back up. Fainter now, though. Just a nagging at the back of my mind, reminding me of everything I had to lose if we tried dating and broke up: a family, the only place that felt like home, a best friend.

“But you don’t need to say it,” he whispered. “You don’t need to admit it. I can wait. We have plenty of time.”

I sighed as he kissed my shoulder before padding into the bathroom. I slipped off the dress, wondering how one of my favorite things about Ben, his endless patience, could be so frustrating sometimes.

If he would just get mad or give up, I wouldn't have to decide. I wouldn't have to be the reason our relationship changed or imploded or grew. But then again, he had given me exactly what I needed: time. Time to ease my way of thinking about Ben as only a friend and into more. If he thought it'd be a year and a half like Chase, he didn't mind. Or at least, outwardly didn't mind.

So I ignored the anxiety in my chest, calmer now that Ben had given me permission to wait. Permission to take my time. Which, considering my entire birthday wish had been to find a husband and kids, shouldn't have been a relief. But a mystery husband, someone I loved but who I conjured from thin air, didn't have the same weight as Ben.

I could give my heart to a mystery guy because what was the worst that could happen? The marriage didn't work out. We'd break up. We'd divorce. I couldn't remove Ben from my life nearly as easily. In a lot of ways, he was my life. An extension of it, anyway.

But he'd given me time, in his perfectly Ben-like way, depositing it into my lap with an offhand way that didn't make me feel dismissed or put upon. I didn't have to do anything with the information. I didn't even need to acknowledge it. He would wait.

I slipped into bed naked, feeling all at once closer to Ben than I'd ever felt and more exposed than ever before. He walked out of the bathroom, a pair of gym shorts slung low on his hips, and crawled into bed beside me.

"Thea, are you naked?" He lifted an eyebrow, snaking an arm around my shoulders as I nuzzled closer.

"Tell me again that you'll wait for me." I slung a leg over his hips, shifting my weight to his chest.

He grinned, grabbing my hips as I pushed up to straddle him. He ran his thumb over my thigh.

"That's really what you want to hear right now?"

I leaned forward, brushing my lips over his. He tasted like mint and I temporarily forgot the question when he palmed the

back of my head and pulled me closer, deepening the kiss.

“You don’t mind?” I asked breathlessly when he let me go.

He ran the pad of his thumb down my cheek. “If you agree to stop it with the singles events, I’ll be patient.”

“But can we keep doing this?”

He laughed. “Yeah. I’d be upset if you didn’t want to. I do need some commitment from you, though.”

I faked a pout. “Didn’t I just agree to stop with the singles’ events?”

His eyes softened. “I’m serious, Thea.”

“I’m a little offended you’re able to be serious while I’m naked,” I teased.

“Just us. You and me. No one else while you’re deciding whether we should be together.”

“You think I’d sleep with someone else?” I asked, more than a little hurt and not sure I had any right to be. I’d as much as told him I wasn’t ready to date him. What else could it mean than I wanted to keep my options open? “You, Benny, only you.”

The tension in his shoulders ebbed and his face relaxed. “Good.”

His hands snaked up my hips, over my waist. He cupped my breasts, sitting up to kiss my throat. I tilted my head back, closing my eyes as his fingers grazed over my nipples, his palms cupping my breasts as his lips caressed my neck. I reached down, slipping my hand past the waistband of his shorts and gripping his dick in my hand.

“You think I’d share you with anyone else?” I whispered in his ear.

Leaning over toward the side table, I fished out a condom, rolling it onto him and discarding the wrapper on the floor.

I wanted to give him everything he wanted. I wanted to say that we could be together. I wanted to say that he was my

birthday wish. But even as the words bounced around my head, I couldn't make them come out.

With Chase, I'd had nothing to lose. He could have just as easily been any other guy. A guy I got along well enough with. A guy I shared interests with. A guy who might be a father and a husband. Nothing concrete. Nothing permanent. An idea.

Benny wasn't an idea. He wasn't anyone. I couldn't imagine life without him. That made saying yes to being with him too scary to say aloud. What if we broke up? What would his parents say? What would our friends do? All of my relationships had been at an arm's length. We kept our own friends, our own homes, our separate lives, we were entwined.

And he would wait.

Or at least, wait for me to say the words. In an instant, his patience grown thin by my glacial pace, he gripped my waist, rolling me onto the bed. With one knee, he nudged my legs apart, sinking into me. I groaned, hips lifting to meet his. How did he make it feel this good?

I gripped the back of his neck, capturing his lips in a searing kiss that I hoped dispelled his anxiety. He thrust into me, stars forming behind my eyes and body pulsating with need. Need to be near him. Need to be with him.



“I’m really going to need you to back up, Thea.” Millie’s forehead creased as she craned forward in her seat at the noisy coffeeshop. “You took him to a singles event? Why?”

I shrugged, waiting for the coffee grinder to finish running. “Because I’m a moron? I’m scared? I’m in over my head?”

She laughed. “Over your head? Please. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in over your head.”

I pitched forward. “He said we’re meant for each other.”

“Aw.” Her mouth dropped and her brown eyes turned soft. “That’s so sweet.”

“It’s not sweet, it’s terrifying. Especially since everything feels like it’s completely off the rails: I sold the shop, Ben and I are...doing whatever we’re doing, and I haven’t felt good in forever.”

Millie’s eyes narrowed. “Haven’t felt good? How so?”

“I don’t know. Nauseous and tired. I thought I was getting the flu, but it never got worse. I should probably go to a doctor, but I keep thinking once the shop is sold, I’ll get better.”

Her eyes darted down, concern etched on her face. “Do you think maybe you might be—”

I held up a hand, cutting off the last word. “No. That’s insane.”

I pressed my palm to my stomach. “I’m on birth control and we always use a...”

No, we didn’t always use a condom. We hadn’t, once.

Millie shrugged. “I don’t want to speculate, but you’re looking a little breast-y lately.”

I brushed the underside of my chest, wincing slightly at a dull ache in response to the pressure. I had noticed that, of course, but I’d also been eating out a ton and doing next to nothing outside of having sex.

“No.” I shook my head. “That’s winter weight gain. I’m just hibernating.”

Millie looked about as convinced as I felt. I picked up my coffee and set it back down again. If I was pregnant, was I supposed to have caffeine? Or alcohol? Not that I’d been drinking much. I’d nearly thrown up after drinking a sip of bourbon at the Singles Ball.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, it’s fine.” I gathered up my plate and cup from the table. “This was fun, but I should go. I’ve got to finish sorting through the shop. We’ve got the auction at the end of the week and I need to have all my sewing supplies into the new building by tomorrow.”

“Do you want me to come by and help you out?”

I shook my head. “No need. I hired someone. They’re coming by tomorrow. I’m sorting a few odd boxes and wrapping up for the day. Thanks for offering!”

I made a hasty goodbye, my brain swirling as I stepped out onto the street, nearly knocking into Tammy as she returned to the coffee shop after a smoke. Murmuring an apology, I walked toward the thrift store and paused at the entrance, eyes sweeping over the now-empty tables out front. Cold metal stung my skin as I gripped the handle of the front door. I let it go again.

Backing away from the door, I rounded the building to the back parking lot, pulling out my keys and climbing into my car. I started the engine, hands on the steering wheel and breath coming out in short bursts. I fumbled for my phone in my pocket, counting back the weeks.

Six.

Not that I had the most predictable cycle, but six weeks seemed late. I scanned back over the last year. Way too late.

With a sigh, I pocketed the phone, gripping the wheel and pushing the car into reverse. I headed for the grocery store, changing my direction halfway because I couldn’t exactly buy a pregnancy test in town. The word would spread around town like wildfire.

Instead, I made a twenty-minute crawl through the winding roads to Pierce and the closest pharmacy. I ducked my head as I entered the shop, scanning the aisles out of an abundance of caution. No one, or at least no one I knew. I circled the aisles, grabbing a bag of chips and two bottles of nail polish before working my nerve up to enter the family planning aisle.

Family planning. Not exactly what I’d call it. I grabbed a test, shoving it under the other items. The pharmacy didn’t have a self checkout but the high schooler running the register absently scanned the test without a second look. I clutched the bag to my chest and hustled out of the store.

CHAPTER 27

Ben

I SAT IN THE OFFICE, A PILE OF PAPERWORK ON THE DESK IN front of me. Paperwork I should be completing or signing or reading. Instead, I fixed my attention on my phone, I tapped it to life on the corner of the desk and pulled up the last string of messages between Thea and I.

THEA

Moving day!

Need help?

I've got Pete's kids coming over to help. They're hauling all the fabric into the new shop.

So you don't need me? Ouch.

The response hadn't come right away. Instead, three bouncing dots appeared and disappeared over the span of minutes.

I definitely need you Benny. Can you come by later? I have something we need to talk about.

I frowned at the message, my initial excitement waning. She wanted to tell me she loved me, right? What else could it be? Only as the hours passed, more options came to mind, none of them positive. I pocketed the phone and stood, stretching my legs and looking for something to occupy my mind so I didn't race into town to find out what exactly we needed to talk about..

I threw on a jacket, intending to take a long walk, only to find Dana's car in the driveway.

I thumped on the hood. "What are you doing here? I thought you weren't on the schedule until Wednesday."

She hastily pulled her head out of the trunk of her car and barely avoided smacking her head as she pulled a bag out. "Dr. Roberts' secretary got her weeks mixed up. She thought I wasn't moving until next week. I got sick of unpacking and thought I should check in on the moose and the Northern Harrier."

I glanced at my watch. Ten A.M. Jim wouldn't be in until noon. "I'll tag along."

"I don't mind going alone," she waved me off.

"I could use the walk," I said with a shrug, "and if you have to go into a pen you need the company."

Dana shrugged and slammed the trunk shut. "That's right. Rule number one: Don't go into the moose enclosure alone."

"Bear, too. Although, I'd trust them more than I did a wild moose." I followed her down the packed path to the aviary. "How are you settling in?"

"Good," she glanced back with a smile. "Great, actually. I got this gorgeous apartment overlooking the river for a fraction of what I'd pay in the city and everyone's been surprisingly friendly."

I raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Surprisingly?"

"I was warned by more than one person that New Englanders were very cloistered and unfriendly. I mean, don't get me wrong, there have been a couple of unfriendly people, but they're at least helpful. Better than a bunch of smiling idiots. My only real complaint is that the bartender downtown can't mix a drink to save his life."

"Cornbread," I said knowingly. "You should know he does that on purpose. He'd rather you just order a beer."

"I switched to straight whiskey instead."

“He can’t mess that up, at least.”

“He can’t, but that also means I can only have a few drinks. Last night, I stood up to use the bathroom and nearly hit the floor.”

“You don’t want to do that either. The floor in that place hasn’t been replaced since the disco era.”

“At least that explains the ball over the ‘dance floor. It’s a weird little town, isn’t it?”

I shrugged. “I’ve never lived anywhere else so it’s hard for me to say.”

Dana smiled. “Let me tell you, there is nothing normal about this place. Other than my classmates, the only person I met while I was at vet school was the lady at the Laundromat who only knew me because I complained about the dryers. I’ve been in Franklin Notch for less than a week and I’ve had people stopping me in the street to introduce themselves.”

“I assume you know about the Singles Social Club, then?”

“Yeah, Thea made sure I knew about that the day I moved in.” Her cheeks, already burned red by the wind, flushed a deeper shade. “Is that invitation still open if you aren’t single?”

“It is,” I drawled, cocking my head.

“I’m just...seeing someone, actually.”

I resisted the urge to prod for more information. Not for me, but Thea would be furious that I hadn’t asked. But Dana’s dating life was none of my business.

“Warren.”

I nodded. “He’s a great guy.”

She exhaled, shoulders relaxing. “You think so? It’s so hard to tell when you meet someone new.”

“You have nothing to worry about with Warren.”

The edge of her lip lifted. “Why is he single then?”

I shrugged. “I can’t say for certain. It’s a small dating pool, and he’s lived here most of his life. Probably, like everyone else who’s still single, he made the rounds and didn’t find anyone.”

“You included?” she asked, pausing at the entrance to the Northern Harrier’s cage.

“Not really. I had a long-term girlfriend for the better part of a decade. We broke up and I haven’t gotten back out there again.”

“Hence the speed dating?”

“Nah, that was Thea’s idea. She broke up with her boyfriend and wanted to jump back into the dating pool.”

Dana nodded. “She’s gorgeous. I’m sure she won’t have any problem finding someone new.”

Her eyes studied me with each word, probing for information I had no intention of giving up.

I shrugged noncommittally.

She opened the cage and I followed her in. The raptor had posted himself into the corner of the enclosure two days ago and according to Jim, hadn’t moved since. Dana cautiously stepped closer. “Do you have any treats?”

I nodded, pulling a small tin of fish out of my pocket and popping the top. The Harrier perked up, eyes focusing on me rather than fixed on the forest behind us.

Dana reached over my shoulder, taking out a piece of fish and throwing it out in front of us. Before the fish hit the ground, the bird launched itself off its perch, swooping low to scoop up the treat and launching up into a tree behind us.

I guess he’s fine,” Dana said with a laugh. “I’ll diagnose him with boredom.”

I nodded, tossing another fish in his direction. “I’ll have Jim change up his food. He won’t be with us for much longer, anyway.”

“Well, let’s hope our next patient is also a quick study so we can get inside.” Dana rubbed her gloved hands together. “It’s freezing.”

I followed her out of the enclosure, keeping one eye on the bird as he clawed the ground to pick up any bits of fish he missed.

“Does that happen often? Animals getting bored?” Dana asked.

“Occasionally. Especially the ones who get stuck here over the winter. Thankfully, most only need a few weeks to recuperate and they’re back in the wild,” I said. “The lifers, well, we find other ways of keeping them occupied.”

The raptor had taken an errant shot from a hunter in the middle of grouse hunting season. I suspected it had been a case of mistaken identity, but I didn’t push the man too hard about the specifics of the injury. With their protected status, most people would have left the poor thing to die. But I’d worked hard to establish a no-questions-asked approach to taking in injured animals.

Unfortunately, he’d taken the shot mid-migration, forcing me to keep him through the worst of the winter.

We stopped in front of the moose enclosure. Unlike the pasture behind City Hall, the moose enclosure at the rescue had a tall metal fence and sturdy locked gate. I didn’t trust an animal that could grow to six feet tall and over one-thousand pounds being held back by something as flimsy as an electric fence or barbed wire.

“How many are in there now?” Dana asked, a worried look on her face as she scanned the enclosure.

“Just the one. I moved Mrs. Marple into the pen behind City Hall.”

“Behind City Hall? I assumed that pen was for horses or goats or something. They let you stash wild animals in there?”

“It’s a long story. And I only put the docile ones. Since Mrs. Marple is a lifer, she gets the prime digs when I need the space.”

I spotted the bull moose on the opposite side of the field. “Did you want to go in or round the fence?”

She shifted on her feet before nodding. “Go in. It’ll be easier.”

She kept close to the fence as I let us in. I latched the gate behind me, taking the lead toward the animal.

“Have you examined him before?” I asked, keeping my voice low, but loud enough to alert him to our presence.

The moose stopped chewing, turning to face us.

“No. Not him. The other moose, Mrs. Marple. Jim wanted to make sure I knew how to approach them.”

Rather than walking straight toward him, I walked toward a grove of trees to the left of the entrance. While the moose didn’t appear aggressive, I wanted something to hide behind in case he charged.

“He’s enormous,” Dana said, her voice nearly at my arm and high-pitched.

“He’s a baby. A big baby, but still a kid. Other than Mrs. Marple, we don’t take adults. Just calves.”

“Why not adults?” Her voice shook, and I glanced back at her.

“Too dangerous,” I answered calmly. “Now, according to Jim, this guy doesn’t seem to have broken anything. Good thing as I don’t know how we’d get a brace on him but he has a nasty gash on his front right leg. Jim is worried it’s going to get infected.”

I glanced back at Dana. Her hands shook and her eyes were wide.

“Are you sure you want to approach him? We could try to get on the other side of the fence and check him from there. If you still think we need to go in, we could sedate him first.”

Whitney had no fear when it came to the animals, for better or worse. I’d gotten used to how she operated, fast and

confidently. I shouldn't have assumed Dana would work in the same way. Certainly not in her first week.

"Can we do that?" Her voice wavered. She bit her bottom lip, finally pulling her gaze off the moose and onto me.

"Absolutely," I said, turning to face her. "Sorry. I should have offered that first. It'll take an hour or so—"

"But Whitney never did that?"

"You're not Whitney, and that's fine. Listen, let's get out of here. We can try to get a good look at him from outside the fence, and if we can't, I'll sedate him. We can come back when he's taking a nap."

"I don't want to keep you up."

"I'm here all day. It's not a problem at all." I shot her a comforting smile only for fear to flair in her eyes.

Not at me. Behind me.

I turned my head in time to catch a blur of brown, five hundred pounds of moose beelining straight for us. I shoved Dana out of the way, slamming her onto the ground behind a pine tree. A blinding sear of pain radiated down my lower back before my world went black.

CHAPTER 28

Thea

I PULLED AT THE LEGGINGS CURRENTLY MAKING THEIR WAY UP my ass, glad I opted to dress for optimal range of motion even if I hated the synthetic, skin tight fabric. A feeling I should probably get used to, but I suspected I'd sew a whole new wardrobe rather than let myself feel this uncomfortable for the next nine months.

I'd abandoned any pretense of clearing out the store the day before. With the pregnancy test in my car, I had headed straight for home to spend the rest of the day having an existential crisis, peeing on no less than three sticks before admitting I was pregnant.

I followed that shock with an awkward phone call to my doctor's office where the nurse, the mother of a high school friend, scheduled a ten-week ultrasound appointment and assured me that Ben was the father. Well, not by name, but it'd been over two months since I'd slept with Chase, so that ruled him out. At least I didn't have to call my ex.

But I did have to tell Ben. After picking up the phone a hundred times and setting it back down again, I'd decided a phone call wouldn't suffice. No, the "I'm pregnant with your baby and it has solidified my belief we should give this relationship a shot" conversation was a face-to-face conversation if there ever was one.

"Wow, you've really cleared this place out!" Pete's voice called out from the front of my shop. Former shop.

I pushed a lock of hair out of my face with the back of my dusty hand before lifting a packed box off the counter. “I’ve barely even scratched the surface.”

Adam stood at the entrance and behind him stood my movers. The two lanky young men eyed each other. Adam’s son and a friend looking to make some money during the winter when work was hard to find.

“Thea, this is my son, Jake, and his buddy Eric.”

The young men nodded politely, murmuring a greeting.

“Nice to meet you both. Let me show you what we’re doing today.”

I walked the two through the maze of rooms, pointing out which held fabric that would need to be lugged to my new shop, which pile was headed for the auction block, and what needed to go on Main Street. Once I oriented them, I took a seat, sipping my now-cold tea as a wave of exhaustion tore through me. I’d woken up at three A.M., anxiety gripping my chest and my stomach churning. Stress, baby or both, it had been a miserable night. Today I’d only taken a quick break to grab a muffin after I’d gotten woozy sifting through the mountain of fabric crowding the back room.

I’d known the shop had too much stuff, but until I started cataloging it all, I hadn’t realized how much. Mountains. Piles and piles. Almost too much to clear out before closing.

Almost.

With the help of the two boys in the next room and Ben, I could get it done.

Ben.

I patted the sheer pockets on the sides of my leggings, searching for my phone. I retraced my steps, checking every exposed countertop and sifting through my purse. No, not there. Beside the speaker.

I’d purchased the speaker years ago and perched it on the windowsill of my sewing room. Over the years, the sound range had dwindled to the point where you couldn’t hear it if

you were a foot away. When I walked in that morning, I'd thrown my phone on the windowsill while I'd repositioned the speaker so I could listen to music while I packed fabric.

A huge pile of fabric stood between me and the phone but I leaned in and groped around the dusty shelf until I brushed my fingers against the corner of my phone. Inching it closer with the tips of my fingers, I was almost able to wrap my hand around it.

"Thea?" Jake, or maybe Eric, called.

"Yeah?" I tightened my grip on the phone, pulling it close. My fingers brushed the screen, bringing the phone to life. The screen was covered by texts and missed phone calls. Great. What website had I given my number too so they could spam me.

"There's some guy pounding on the front door."

"Just a minute."

I was in no rush to explain to yet another antique flipper or garage sale scrounger that items would hit the curb when I was good and ready. I unlocked my phone.

I sucked in a breath as ice raced down my back.

Seventeen missed calls.

My fingers shook, hovering over the notification, unable to make myself open my call log. My body froze and memories of death washed over me. Seventeen calls weren't good. Seventeen calls weren't normal and the second I opened the call log, something would change, even if I couldn't say what.

A commotion in the front of the store ripped my attention away from the phone. My body, frozen in place, faintly registered one man yelling, "Hey, dude? Are you even listening? We aren't open."

A second later, Ben's dad Pete rushed into the room, face pale, normally neatly combed hair scrubbed and flying everywhere.

"Thea, thank God. We need to go."

His words sounded muffled, as if I'd crammed cotton into my ears.

"I..." I held up the phone in explanation. "Wh—"

I couldn't form a coherent sentence, couldn't think straight. I churned through the reasons I'd have seventeen missed calls on my phone and Ben's father would be standing in front of me, only coming to a single conclusion.

"Martha got into the helicopter with Ben. The sheriff is driving us to Concord, but we need to go." He stepped forward, taking my elbow.

I resisted. "But why?"

I pulled out my phone, hands trembling and it dropped from my grasp. The phone bounced off the carpet and under my desk. "Damn it," I swore, ducking out of Pete's grip and crawling on the ground until it was back in my hands. I stood up on shaky legs.

Pete frowned, his eyes sliding to the door at the two baffled young men. He softened his voice. "Ben was hurt at work. We need to go, Thea. Right now."

He wrapped an arm around me, guiding me to the entrance, past the piles of boxes and unsorted items.

"I need to close up. The keys." A well of tears formed behind my eyes, panic setting in.

"We can do that," Jake said, swooping in beside me.

I fumbled with my purse, not even able to remember when I picked it up. When Ben's dad walked in? Before? When I was looking for my phone? My fingers brushed against the tiny butterfly charm, one Ben got me on a trip to the coast. He'd knelt on the boardwalk, wiggling free a quarter that had become lodged between the planks.

"Fate," he'd said as he stood up, directly facing a small vending machine with a giant "25 cents!" sticker on the front.

"Sorry. I meant to get rid of some of these," I said, sorting through the dozens of keys on the ring.

I hadn't thrown away a key in years. I flipped through one for my grandmother's house, long since sold, and Ben's old apartment, before he built the cabin at the rescue.

"We'll figure it out," Jake said softly, his fingers covering mine as he slipped the keys out of my fingers. "Don't worry. We'll make sure we lock the place up."

Pete pulled me gently toward the door, but I stopped him. "There's a back door."

"We've got it. I'll call my dad if we need help," Jake reassured me.

Panic welled in my chest. The second I stepped outside, everything would change. Everything would be different. I wasn't ready.

"We need to go, Thea," Pete said calmly. "For Ben."

I nodded. For Ben. Of course.

I let Pete pull me outside. The sheriff's cruiser sat in front of the store. A few worried onlookers crowded the streets. Had they driven up with the lights on? The sirens?

Sheriff Clemmons wore glasses and I couldn't read his expression as he opened the back door.

"Theodora," he said with a curt nod.

He said my name with an inflection that reminded me of how he'd said it in high school, when he picked up Ben and I, stoned in the park after dark. One minute, we'd been watching the stars. The next, Sheriff Clemmons obstructed our view of the night sky, lips in a thin line. Theodora.

I slipped into the back of the squad car. He softly closed the door behind me.

"Sorry about the accommodations. This being short-notice, I didn't want to waste time picking up the SUV," he said, taking off his sunglasses and catching my gaze through the rearview mirror. His eyebrows knitted together in a worried frown.

“It’s fine. Thanks for taking us,” Pete said, voice tight. He shifted to face me through the cage separating the front seat from the back. “Are you okay?”

No. That wasn’t my most pressing question though. “Is he going to be alright?”

I pressed my palm against my stomach. I should have just told him. I should have dropped everything to be with him. Maybe, if I had...

I shook my head. No. That line of thinking would drive me crazy. I’d done it before: after my dad left, after my grandmother died, adding up the minor changes that could have prevented tragedy. I closed my eyes, forcing back tears.

“I...I’m not sure. Martha will call just as soon as she knows anything.”



The sheriff turned on the blue lights and raced us to Concord. I set my forehead on the window, desperately trying to keep my focus anywhere but on our destination. About what I hadn’t told him.

I tried to occupy my mind with other things. My outfit. Black leggings with a red shirt that slipped off my shoulder, a bright yellow bra underneath, a pair of sneakers. What would Benny say about that? He loved teasing me about my clothes, about my secret trove of leisure wear that I only wore at my house. Or his. Now, I sped down the highway in an outfit I wouldn’t let most people catch me dead wearing.

We pulled up to the entrance of the hospital before my mind wandered much further. Ben’s dad opened the door, letting me out, and I wavered by the car, unsure where to go.

“We’ll head to the operating room waiting room.”

“Do you want me to go in with you?” The sheriff asked.

Ben’s dad shook his head. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Just call if you need anything. And tell Martha we’re all praying for you.”

“Thanks.” Pete pressed his palm to my back, ushering me into the building.

“What happened?” I asked, distracting myself as we walked into the entrance. I kept my eyes away from the tiny gift shop where my dad bought me a teddy bear after my mom died of cancer and the cafeteria where I’d been eating when my grandmother passed away.

“He was in an enclosure with the moose and the new vet. They were about to leave and it charged them.”

“Dana?” I croaked out the name.

“She’s fine. Ben pushed her out of the way. He took the brunt of the damage. They brought her to the local hospital for cuts and bruises. Nothing serious.”

The brunt of the damage. I flinched.

“The vet — Dana — got him out of there. Pulled him out before he got trampled to death. Best they could tell while they stabilized him on the ground was he got knocked out and had a lot of swelling, maybe some back damage.”

I closed my eyes, inhaling sharply. Ben’s dad rubbed my back. “But I don’t know what’s happened since. We need to go find out.”

I nodded, not sure I wanted to find out at all.

CHAPTER 29

Thea

I WOKE UP WITH A BLINDING HEADACHE AND A CRICK IN MY neck that made it hard to pull myself upright.

The day before hadn't been a nightmare. I'd fallen asleep with my head on the bed, body in an uncomfortable rocking chair, bent over to be closer to Ben. The scent of pine and woods had been stripped off him in the operating room. He didn't smell like Ben. He smelled like Betadine and alcohol, nitrile gloves and plastic. His hand was clammy and limp. I gave it a squeeze, a wave of tears threatening to overtake me when he didn't respond.

"Benny," I whispered, standing up from the chair and sitting beside him. I pushed a lock of hair out of his face. Tubes criss crossed his arms and face. All at once, he looked pale and bloated, his skin yellow and his eyes closed. I exhaled a haggard breath, my eyes darting to the other side of the room where his parents lay in each other's arms. The bench beside the window had been turned into a bed for the night, though I doubt any of us got more than an hour of uninterrupted sleep. Still, seeing them there, tranquil for even a moment, I didn't want to wake them.

I picked up Benny's hand and set it in my lap, scooting closer to him.

"Hey." I squeezed his hand. "You're supposed to be better today."

I followed the trail of cords to the monitor behind him, charting the steady rhythm of his heart and the oxygen in his

body. The high-pitched beeps had subsided in the hours after the surgery to stop the internal bleeding and this morning, all appeared to be well.

Except he hadn't woken up.

"I have a secret, Benny." Tears sprung in my eyes and I lowered my voice. "And I need you to be the first one to know. So it's going to be very inconvenient if you don't get up soon."

I brushed my fingers over his forehead, letting my palm rest on his cheek, avoiding the side with the tubing. I rubbed my stomach, wishing I had told him that morning. Why had it been so important to tell him in person?

Because we had all the time in the world.

"Thea," Martha rubbed my back, her voice low and placating. "You need some sleep."

Sleep wouldn't help. I needed a bottle of tequila and a time machine, but both were an impossibility. Instead I did the next best thing. I distracted myself. I ran my thumb over Benny's cheek one more time before pulling away.

"I think we all could use something to eat. And a change of clothes," I said, forcing a smile onto my face. I ran my palm over his torso and stood. "I'll grab some breakfast from the cafeteria."

The nurses the night before had tried to talk us into a hotel, but we hadn't budged, hoping Benny would wake up in the night. With that hope squashed, I wanted to plan for the long-term, and while I'd be fine sleeping on a chair for the next week, Martha and Pete might not fare as well. Besides, even after one day, we could all use some time outside.

I left the room, mind just a little clearer, even as my body ached. I pulled out my phone, flicking past the increasingly frantic texts sent from Benny's parents the day before.

MILLIE

We just heard. What can we do?

I smiled sadly and pressed the call button.

“Thea,” Millie answered, breath panting and voice frantic. “How are you? How’s Ben?”

“Still unconscious. I’m not sure if we should be thankful for that or not.” I kept my voice level and my eyes on the walls for signs to the cafeteria. “We’re waiting to see the doctor today, but they took him in for emergency surgery last night for internal bleeding. When they wheeled him back, they were optimistic.”

“And how are you holding up?”

“Not well,” I admitted, taking a dogleg left into the lobby. “I’m just trying to get everyone fed this morning and then maybe find a hotel. Can you do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“We need clothes and a car. Could you and Len pick up my car and drop it off down here?”

“Absolutely. Len’s in the workshop now, but I’m sure he’ll take any excuse to come see how Ben’s doing.”

I frowned, pausing at the entrance to the cafeteria. Doctors and nurses crowded the omelet station and my stomach churned just smelling the eggs and bacon. “Hopefully, we have something positive to tell you. I’ll text you a list of what we need. Thanks, Mil.”

“Love you.”

“Love you, too.” I hung up, on the verge of tears, but thankfully not tipping over into full-blown sobbing. Yet.

Gathering myself, I picked through the breakfast offerings, opting for convenience rather than nutrition. I certainly didn’t want a big breakfast and I doubted Ben’s parents did, either. Anxious snacking sounded more appealing.

I loaded up on Pop Tarts, cereal bars, and fruit, grabbing two yogurts for good measure. While sorting through the fruit for a green apple, Martha’s favorite, I resolved to book a hotel as well. Ben’s parents would argue, but we all needed a shower and some uninterrupted sleep. I paid for breakfast and set the food on a table to search for a hotel nearby. A nice-

looking hotel across the street popped up immediately and I made a quick phone call, securing an early check in.

I retraced my steps back to the room, pausing by the barred doors to the ICU. A huddled figure curled up across two chairs, sweatshirt hood over her face. Beside her, Warren Kang sat, fast asleep, head back against the wall and one hand on the person in the next seat. I walked over, nudging the woman awake.

“Dana?”

She jolted up, pushing back the hood to reveal a nasty black eye. “Oh, Thea!”

She wrapped me in a hug.

“What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be home?”

Warren stirred from his seat, standing up. “Morning.”

“Good morning. What are you both doing here?”

Dana pulled away, tears streaming down her face. “How is he?”

“Still out,” I said. “We should know more later this morning. You need to get home though. Get some rest.”

“I feel awful. It was my fault we were in there. He shoved me out of the way.”

“Well, had he been thinking, he should have pulled you both out of the way, but Benny is a little stubborn,” I said with a terse smile. “He’ll be fine. He got run over by a 4-wheeler in high school and lived to tell the tale. This isn’t much different.”

Only the four-wheeler hadn’t knocked him unconscious and he’d been out of the emergency room in less than a day.

“Let me get your number and I’ll let you know when we get an update. I’m sure Benny wouldn’t want you recovering in the waiting room. And that black eye looks nasty. You should get some ice on it.”

We exchanged numbers with a promise that I’d text when I had news. Good news, I hoped, though with each passing hour,

the chances of Benny emerging unscathed decreased. By the time I made my way back into Ben's room, Martha and Pete had woken up.

“Any updates?” I asked, setting food onto a bedside cart, my eyes glued on Ben.

“A nurse stopped in while you were gone. She said the medical team should be in around ten,” Martha sighed. She raked a hand over her face and back through her peppered hair. Heavy bags hung under her eyes, and I winced at how the last day had aged her.

I opened a yogurt, sticking a spoon into it and handing it off to her. Reflexively, she took a bite.

“I booked two hotel rooms across the street and Millie and Len are coming down with a car and some clothes. Just tell me what you want them to pick up.” I said with a smile.

“Thanks, sweetie,” Martha smiled up at me, exhaustion on her face. “Pete and I want to talk to the doctor this morning, but why don't you get us checked in and take the afternoon shift with Ben?”

I opened my mouth to protest, but stopped myself. “Will you text me as soon as the doctor comes by? Tell me what's going on?”

“Of course. Go get some sleep.”



I didn't sleep. Not immediately, anyway. I took a long shower and sent instructions to Millie. Pete called to let me know the doctor had come by. The doctor said all his labs and X-rays looked good. No more bleeding. No more surgeries. No sign of permanent damage.

I breathed a sigh of relief and promised I'd come back to the hospital soon to let them sleep. With some reassurance that Ben would be okay, I fell into a deep sleep. When the alarm went off, I bumped around in the dark hotel room, disoriented

and foggy. I called down to the front desk and found that Millie and Len had dropped off the bags an hour ago.

I retrieved my clothes, taking a shower and dressed up as much as I could manage without my makeup bag or any hair tools besides a cheap dryer provided by the hotel. Feeling at least somewhat like myself, I left the hotel and made the short trek back to the hospital.

Millie sat on the couch, talking to Pete and Martha, while Len kept vigil beside Ben's bed, worry lining his face.

"You okay?" I asked.

He nodded, not pulling his eyes off of Ben. "Fine."

"You don't look fine."

Len sighed, wiping a hand over his face. "I'll be better once he wakes the fuck up, obviously. Don't make this about me."

"I'm not making it about you," I sighed, suppressing the very real urge to roll my eyes. Len's orneriness annoyed me in the best of situations, and we weren't in the best of situations. "I just...I know about Thursdays."

He tore his attention away from Ben, his lip curling up. "Ben told you?"

"Millie's casserole cozy." He lifted an eyebrow. "The fabric thing on the dish."

"Oh, I hate those things," he responded, eyes back on Ben.

"I don't even really know what they're for, but, yeah, that sort of gave it away."

"You think he's going to be alright?"

"He's a fighter. He'll pull through this," I said.

"Good. I don't want to lose my only friend."

"That's fair. It took you thirty years to make the one. I'm not sure you've got another friendship in you," I teased.

He nodded. "Let me know, or Millie, when he wakes up."

"I will."

CHAPTER 30

Thea

I FINALLY CONVINCED MARTHA TO LEAVE JUST BEFORE LUNCH. The promise of a warm shower and a soft bed provided enough temptation to get Martha and Pete to leave for a few hours at least. After eating a lukewarm dinner brought by a nurse, I pulled the recliner up against Ben's bed.

I'd turned on the TV, but the gratingly loud food competition had drowned out the steady tones and beeps from the medical equipment, assuring me Benny was fine. Instead, I curled up beside him, stroking his hand with mine as I absently flipped through a magazine Martha grabbed from the gift shop.

"Thea?" Ben's damp grip tightened.

I knocked the magazine to the ground, pitching forward. "Hey, I'm here."

His eyes fluttered open, eyes on the ceiling, far away. "What happened?"

"A moose charged you," I said, deliberately leaving out the internal bleeding and surgery part. For now, anyway. I had no interest in overwhelming him and wasn't sure I could explain without bursting into tears, anyway.

"Is Dana okay?" He pushed against the bed, a vain attempt to sit up. His eyes widened as they took in the tubes and wires covering his arms.

"She's fine," I said, gripping his forearm and easing him back down. I grabbed a cup of water off the table for him to drink. "A black eye and some bruises, but you saved her. You

pushed her out of the way. She got behind the tree before he could trample her, too. She called for help and pulled you to safety.”

He exhaled before taking a sip of water.

I squeezed his hand, forcing levity to push away the panic. “You were supposed to save yourself, too, Benny. Not let that thing run you over.”

The edge of his lip worked up into a grin before fading into a grimace. “It was my first time getting charged by a moose. Next time, I’ll know better.”

I hiccuped a sob, the crushing anxiety of the last twenty-four hours hitting me like a bombshell. I brushed my cheek with my hand, hot tears covered my cheeks. “No. No next time, Benny. You scared the living hell out of me. I can’t — I can’t be okay without you. I can’t grow old without you. I can’t raise this baby without you.”

I dropped my head on his arm, too worried that I’d pull out a wire if I allowed myself any more contact. Heavy sobs wracked my body as any reserve I’d built up came apart.

Ben’s hand brushed the back of my head. “Did I miss something while I was out?” he whispered. “What baby?”

“I planned to tell you last night,” I sobbed into his arm, my voice muffled by the itchy cotton blanket covering him. “But you went and got mauled by a moose, so really, you’re the one who ruined my big announcement.

“We need to talk?” He echoed the words I’d texted him the day before.

I kept my head down, not ready to read his reaction.

“I thought you wanted to call it off. I figured you wanted to back out,” he muttered, confusion clouding his voice.

I lifted my head. “Really? No. Not even a little. I wanted to tell you at the Singles’ Ball, but...you said we had all the time in the world.” My voice caught as more tears poured down my face. “You lied about that.”

“I didn’t lie, Thea,” he chuckled. “I’m fine. A little banged up, but fine.”

“I’m not sure you’re a qualified judge of your health right now,” I said, suddenly aware that I should have called someone. I groped around on the bed for the remote with the nurse call button before Ben’s hand covered mine.

“Back up for a minute, because I think maybe I hit my head. We’re having a baby?” he asked, his lips quirking into a smile. “You and me?”

“I mean, I’ll be doing most of the work for the first nine months, but if you wanted to tag in after that, I’d appreciate the help.” I smiled, the tears clearing as Ben’s grip tightened on my hand.

Despite the wires and the monitors and the dingy blue bedding, Ben sat up a little straighter. His sickly greige pallor cleared as his eyes sparkled. His grip on my hand tightened. “I love everything about that plan. How long have you known?”

“Yesterday. Well, the night before. I would have called but...”

But yesterday, we had all the time in the world. Plenty of time to tell him face-to-face. Time to work up the nerve to admit I loved him, too.

“I didn’t know you’d get yourself worked over by a moose. Now, we should probably call the nurse. Or the doctor? Definitely your parents,” I stammered.

He let my hand go long enough to shove the call button behind him and held his arms open. “Not yet. Come here.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I said, casting a worried glance at the door.

“Impossible.”

I carefully sat beside him on the bed, wrapping my arms around him and burrowing my face into the crook of his neck. The scent of Betadine and plastic gave way to pine trees and open air. “I love you, Benny. And you’re the only person I want to be with. I shouldn’t have waited to tell you that.”

He exhaled, firm muscles relaxing underneath me. “No more dating events?”

“Never again.”

“And we’re telling everyone? Mom, Dad, our friends?”

“We can shout it from the rooftops. Although, you’re probably in no state to go on rooftops right now.”

“So you’ll take care of that for me?”

“I’m not sure pregnant women should clamber up roofs, either, but if that makes you happy, I’ll ask Jim about a ladder.”

“Well, I already told Len, and that leaves Mom and Dad. I think we can break the news without resorting to heights.”

I jerked my head up. “Wait, you told Len?”

“I love you, too, Thea.” He kissed me, stale breath and chapped lips and absolutely perfect. When he pulled away, he cupped my cheek, thumb brushing my cheek.

“Excuse me?” I pulled away from Ben, eyes on the door to the room and a very annoyed nurse, hands on her hips. “Were you going to mention he woke up or just make out for the rest of the evening?”

I called Benny’s parents while the nurse contacted the doctor.

“We’re going to tell them, right?” Benny asked. He had a goofy smile plastered on his face, his eyes sliding from me to my stomach. The nurse had called the neurologist, worried his sudden giddiness might be a sign of a brain injury.

“I think everyone’s focus will be on you right now, so why don’t we wait?”

“But shouldn’t we have you checked too? Stress isn’t good for expectant mothers, right?”

“I think we both know the same amount of expectant mothers and that’s zero. I’m fine. In fact, I’ve been too worried about you to pay attention to my morning sickness. It’s been nice.”

“You’ve had morning sickness? Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrugged. “I thought it was allergies or food poisoning or something. How was I supposed to know you knocked me up the first time we had sex?”

“Fate,” he grinned.

I rolled my eyes, tamping back my amusement. “I suck at taking birth control consistently and we didn’t bring a condom.”

“Fate,” he insisted.

I leaned down, kissing him gently. “Maybe a little.”

“Ben!” Martha swept into the room, not nearly as careful with her son as I had been. “Thank god. I was so worried. We only left for a moment. I needed a shower, and we didn’t sleep well—”

“It’s fine, mom,” Ben said, goofy grin intact. “I have great news!”

The nurse at the foot of the bed raised an eyebrow.

“Seriously?” I asked.

“Thea’s pregnant.”

Martha blinked. Pete raised an eyebrow. I died a little inside.

“Or rather, we’re pregnant. Thea and I.”

More silence. I ducked my head.

“Um, is he okay?” Pete’s eyes widened, skating to the nurse.

She shrugged. “I called in the neurologist.”

“He’s fine,” I said, cheeks blazing. “And despite his shitty timing, he’s also right. We’re having a baby?”

Martha shrieked. “You and Ben? You and Thea? I’m having a grand baby? Pete! We’re having a grand baby!”

“You couldn’t have waited until you were at least discharged, Ben?” I muttered as Martha pulled me into her in a

bear hug.

He grinned. “You dropped the news on me. I’m only returning the favor. Besides, look how happy you made Mom. Now she’s not even worried about what the doctor might say.”

She released her death grip on me just slightly. “I’m still worried about you. Only now I need to worry whether you’re going to be healthy enough to take care of our Thea and a baby.”

“I’ll be up and moving before you know it,” Ben said cheerfully.

“We’ll see about that,” the nurse drawled, loping her stethoscope over her shoulders. “But for now, everything looks fine. I’ll come back when the doctor gets in.”

“This is the best day ever,” Martha said with a contented sigh. “My two favorite people having a baby.” Pete cleared his throat. “Two of my three favorite people,” she amended.

Pete squeezed Ben’s shoulder. “I’m glad you’re up, son. And congratulations.”

The doctor swept in just as Martha had begun to compile a list of baby names. He told us Ben could move out of the ICU in the morning so long as he did well overnight and assured Ben that the stress of his injuries wouldn’t harm me or the baby. The excitement wore Ben out quickly though and, at his insistence, Ben’s parents and I returned to the hotel for a full night’s sleep.



“You need to sit in the wheelchair,” the orderly said, a frown on his face and his arms crossed.

“I just walked up and down these halls. I can make it to the car,” Ben said, waving the cane a nurse had given him for balance.

“Hospital policy.”

“But I can stand up just as soon as I get to the car?” Ben questioned.

“You won’t be the hospital’s problem once you’re in the car. Just get in the wheelchair, Ben,” I said, my stomach suddenly queasy from the omelet that tasted so delicious an hour ago. I pressed a hand to my chest, hoping some pressure would work away the nausea.

“Are you okay? Do you want one of those ginger candies?” Ben stood up from the recliner and rustled through my purse, pulling out the candies that Martha had stashed there.

I took one, popping it in my mouth. “Just sit in the wheelchair.”

His lips twitched, but he sat down. “Put the bag in my lap. Don’t carry it. She’s pregnant, you know,” he said to the unamused orderly. “It’s our first.”

“And probably only if this is what it’s like,” I moaned.

“She’s just saying that. First so far.”

The orderly nodded, taking the bag from my hands and setting it gently onto Ben’s lap. “Congratulations. I’m sure you’re relieved to be getting out of here.”

“I am,” Ben said happily. “We got to hear the heartbeat a couple of days ago and in three weeks, we’ll get an ultrasound and we’ll see her.”

“Or him,” I corrected him.

Something about my pregnancy had switched our personalities. While the baby had morphed me into a hermit, Ben thrived, charming all the nurses and doctors as he prattled on about our baby. He even got a nurse from maternity to come down and let him listen to the heartbeat under the pretense of “missing out” on the experience. All he had missed out on so far was me losing my breakfast every morning.

“Or him. But I think it’s a girl. Can you imagine? A little Thea? I wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Ben stopped the orderly at the nurse's station to say goodbye before being wheeled out to the entrance. Martha and Pete waited for us out front, Martha hurrying out of the passenger seat to help Benny into the backseat. I slid into the middle, resting my head on his shoulder.

“Ready to go home?” he asked, his hand on my knee working small circles on my inner thigh.

“More than ever.”

CHAPTER 31

Ben

“PLEASE SLOW DOWN.” THEA PULLED ON MY ARM, SLOWING me. “You’re supposed to be taking it easy.”

“We’re going to be late,” I said.

I’d come home from the hospital as weak as a newborn kitten. But I had work to do at the rescue, and after Mom’s attempts to lure me back to my childhood home failed, Thea moved in. We hadn’t talked about specifics, but she also hadn’t moved out when I’d recovered enough to rattle around the house.

Still, the excitement of the doctor’s appointment and the ability to walk somewhere besides around the house had me excited. My legs ached to stretch, go on a hike, go anywhere.

Thea, on the other hand, had a rapidly growing midsection and the absolute certainty that our baby hated her lungs. She stopped walking with a sigh, dramatically checking her watch. “We have thirty minutes.”

“But there’s all that paperwork to fill out,” I protested, slowing down my gait. Holding out a hand, I reached for her, but she glared at my outstretched hand. “I’m so weak, Thea. I need you to hold my hand.”

She rolled her eyes, taking my hand and rubbing her other palm up my forearm. “You’re a mess.”

I pulled her close, nuzzling the top of her hair so I didn’t mess up her carefully curled hair. Despite the nausea, she hadn’t slowed down in the intervening weeks. As much as I

tried, I couldn't make her. She had the auction, the new shop to move into, and me.

She claimed selling the thrift store had made her responsibilities dissolve, so anything else seemed like a vacation. But once I had the rescue under control, I planned to spend all my extra energy helping her set up shop. She needed the rest.

"I'm excited," I said, inhaling lavender and spice. "We get to see our baby girl."

"Our baby. We still don't know if we're having a girl."

We stopped in front of the entrance to the medical office. I pressed a hand onto her stomach, closing my eyes. "Definitely a girl. She told me. She also told me she likes the name Esmerelda."

Thea dropped my arm and took a step back. "Is your doctor sure you don't have some residual brain fog? Because I can't think of another reason that you'd wish that upon our child."

"Okay. Esmerelda is a no. How about Janice?"

She laughed, ducking away from me. "Did I say this was your baby? I must have been mistaken. You remember that very nice older man I met at the Singles' Ball? I'm pretty sure it's his."

"I'm still recovering, Thea. You can't stress me like that. It's not good for my heart."

"I don't think that moose did anything to your heart."

"I think the doctor said something about inflammation."

A twinge of sadness passed over her face, and I regretted teasing her. Despite her outward toughness, the last few weeks had been rough. She'd cheerfully emerged from the bathroom every morning with a smile on her face and a seemingly endless supply of energy. For weeks, though, she'd slept fitfully, waking up with nightmares about her mom. And about me.

I wrapped my other arm around her, pulling her to face me. “You’re going to be a great mom. And I’m sure that guy had plenty of grandkids, so I bet he’ll make a second-time great dad.”

She smacked my shoulder. “Am I allowed to admit that I’m a little scared, Benny?”

“Absolutely.” I kissed her forehead, pulling her close.

“I’ve never sewn a maternity wardrobe before,” she sighed, voice faraway.

“You’ll figure it out. You’re an excellent seamstress.”

“I don’t like all my clothes being tight.” She pulled at her pink dress. The circle skirt obscured her rapidly growing stomach, but the seams below her bust strained.

“They’re just snug. Besides, you’re gorgeous. Absolutely glowing.”

“I’m bloated.”

“You’re having a baby. Our baby. And we get to see her today.”

She looked up, tears rimming her eyes. “Alright, let’s go see her.”



Pink and blue balloons bounced around the front door to my parent’s house. Cars filled the driveway and spilled out onto the street. Thea gripped the white envelope with our baby’s picture in her hand, the corner frayed and damp.

“Gender reveals are weird,” she groaned, scanning the street.

“Are you planning on telling my mom you’ve changed your mind about this party? Because I can’t do that to her.”

After watching an episode of some reality show about rich housewives, my mom had become fixated on the idea of having a gender reveal. She’d insisted on having a celebration

after the twenty-week scan and, judging by the glut of cars, she'd also invited most of the notch to the festivities.

“Of course not. She’s bought enough furniture for a dozen nurseries. I don’t have a leg to stand on,” Thea laughed. “Besides, this will be our first real party as a couple. Maybe once everyone sees us together, I’ll stop feeling like such a sideshow around downtown.”

Between recuperating and catching up with work at the rescue, I had had little time to hang around downtown. Unlike Thea.

She had a new business, and rumors of our relationship and her growing belly had resulted in the same conversations every day: Yes, she’s pregnant. Yes, I’m the father. Yes, we’re together.

Gloria found out from Tammy at the coffee shop and nearly banned Thea from the diner. Thea circumvented a lifetime ban with a shirt that stressed her bump and a few tears. A party would cement the rumors into fact and give Thea a reprieve from the constant questions.

“You want to stop at your house first?” I asked, pulling into her driveway just across the street. “You can take a minute to catch your breath?”

She shook her head. “It’s not really my house anymore, is it?”

“Of course it’s yours. You’re paying the taxes, right? Because even if your grandma paid off the house, you still owe those every year,” I teased.

She shifted in her seat, struggling to turn to face me. “But we can’t live here. You and me.”

“My mom would be thrilled. Grandparents right next door? Some people would kill for that.” I shrugged.

“But you couldn’t live here. Not all the time, anyway.”

Moving into town would make my life harder.

Despite what had happened, my injury hadn’t shaken my commitment to the rescue. If anything, the accident

strengthened my commitment. Sure, I'd changed some policies. I'd limited access to the enclosures and put better procedures in place for emergency response. The accident had uncovered massive gaps in our training and preparedness. After Dana and I pulled through unscathed, I could only look back on the attack with gratitude.

Still, I wouldn't leave Thea. I didn't want to live anywhere but where she lived. And our baby.

"I hate to say it, but I think we should sell it." Thea's bottom lip slipped into her mouth.

"You don't need to do that. We could hold on to it—"

Thea shook her head, covering my hand with hers. "My future isn't in there, Benny. It's with you."

I paused, letting the words sink in. "So, you'll move to the rescue?"

She nodded. "I'm not raising this baby alone."

"I wouldn't let you."

I leaned forward, brushing her cheek with my fingers and closing the distance between us. I slanted my lips to hers, closing my eyes and inhaling flowers and makeup and everything wonderful about Thea. My best friend. My girlfriend. My baby's mother. My wife, one day.

Despite my parent's disappointment, Thea insisted she wouldn't get married until she could sew her dream wedding gown. And we didn't have time for that. Some day.

I pulled away, half afraid if I kissed her for any longer, I'd lose any interest in the gender reveal party and drive straight home to pull her upstairs to the bedroom.

We exited the car, and I grabbed her hand, navigating the way to my parents' packed house. Congratulations rained down on us as we made our way toward the kitchen. Millie stood at the kitchen table, piles of cupcakes covering the counters. Thea handed over the now-tattered envelope.

She turned it over in her hand, a bright smile on her face. "What does it say?"

“Open it and find out,” Thea teased.

Millie held up a finger, setting down the envelope next to a bowl of frosting and opening up the fridge. “Have you had lunch? I made you a plate. Take this, socialize, and I’ll have these cupcakes filled in thirty.”

“Better make it forty-five,” Len growled from behind a tray of cupcakes at the kitchen table.

“Are you helping?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Hiding out while still being present.” Len said, swiping a cupcake and taking a bite.

“You’re supposed to wait until they’re frosted!” Millie said as she picked up the bowl of frosting, tutting him. “Now, help me out or go socialize. No freeloaders in the kitchen.”

Len reluctantly grabbed an icing spatula as I ushered Thea into the living room.

“Did you tell your mom we found out at the doctor’s appointment?” Thea whispered.

“I told her this gender reveal party was mostly for her benefit, but no, I didn’t say those exact words.” More like I implied them.

“Should we tell her?”

I shook my head. “If it doesn’t bother you, I say we go with it.”

Thea nodded before throwing herself into the center of the guests, eager to chat. I posted up against the wall to the kitchen, watching Gloria grab Thea by the arm and pull her in for what looked like a serious conversation.

“Beer?” Len pressed a cold bottle to my forearm, and I took it gratefully.

“Thanks. Did Millie kick you out?”

“Apparently I wasn’t helping. Besides, I figured you could use the company.”

I popped open the top and took a long pull. “Did you see the frosting?”

“Yep. Congrats.”

“Thanks. I’m terrified.”

“You’ll be a good dad. And Thea’s going to be a good mom. The kid’s going to be alright, no matter what.” He smacked me on the back, keeping his hand there a second longer than he needed. In a comforting way. Clearly, Millie’s influence had more than a passing effect on Len.

“Ready!” Millie cried from the kitchen, emerging with a tray full of cupcakes. Pink and blue frosting dotted the tops. I picked through the crowd to find Thea. I slid in beside Thea as she talked to my mom.

“My first grandkid,” Mom sighed, wrapping an arm around Thea and dropping her head onto her shoulder. “I can’t believe it.”

“Well, it’s about to get a lot more real,” Thea laughed, taking a cupcake off the tray. “Mom, will you do the honors?”

Mom’s head popped off Thea’s shoulder, tears in her eyes and her mouth in a surprised O. “Really?”

Thea nodded. I shrugged. Mom gave Thea a tight squeeze before holding up her hand. “Everyone, thank you so much for coming. We have so much to celebrate: Ben’s health, Thea and Ben’s relationship, and a new baby on the way.” Her eyes teared up as they flitted to Thea. “When these kids were babies, Thea’s mom, Elizabeth, and I would imagine who they’d grow into. We wanted them to be healthy and safe and have every opportunity in the world. We also wanted them to have each other.”

I grabbed Thea’s hand, squeezing it tight.

Mom wiped a tear from her eye. “And they did. They grew up inseparable. They cared for each other and they looked after one another. I...no, we couldn’t have asked for more. But we got so much more.”

Thea leaned her head against my shoulder, staring up at me with smokey gray eyes and a smile meant only for me.

“I love you,” I mouthed.

“I love you more,” she whispered.

“Impossible.”

“Anyway,” Mom continued. “I’m so very blessed to get a day like today. So, on the count of three, we’ll take a bite and find out whether I’m having a grandson or a granddaughter. One, two, three.”

Martha took a big bite of cupcake, revealing pink icing in the middle and immediately bursting out in tears. Pink icing smeared across my cheek as she pulled us into a bear hug.

Epilogue

BEN

SIX MONTHS LATER...

“And here is a rough-legged hawk. He’s sitting right now, so you can see the small feet and beak. When he’s flying, you can tell it’s him because of the dark markings under his wings.”

I stopped in front of the enclosure, tilting my body to the side so Betty could see the hawk from the carrier I’d strapped to my chest. Her tiny head brushed my chest as she reached for the hawk. Or something in the hawk’s direction. A chilly breeze rolled through the forest, whipping dead leaves off the trees and through the air. An orange maple leaf drifted in front of Betty, snagging her attention.

“You can’t play with them. Not yet, anyway. You need better hand-eye coordination first,” I said, pulling the leaf away.

She gurgled agreement, and I set off toward the next enclosure.

“This is a moose. Can you say moose?” I placed my finger into her outstretched hand and her pudgy fingers grasped mine. “They’re really dangerous, so if you see one in the wild, you talk loudly and slowly back away. If they charge you, you need to get into a ball, protect your head, and wait.”

“Definitely don’t have someone flail around trying to make the moose run away,” Thea said, sliding up behind me. She kissed my cheek before running her palm over Betty’s covered head. “I wondered where you two got off to.”

“I thought we could use some fresh air. And maybe you could use a nap. Besides, she might run this rescue one day. She’s got to know what I do around here.”

Thea smiled, brushing a kiss over my cheek. “Next time, leave a note. I would have loved a nap.”

“It’s not too late.”

She shrugged, rubbing the bags under her eyes. “I’m dressed. Besides, I’d rather hang out with my two favorite people. Especially since you haven’t given me a personalized tour of the property since I moved in.”

“I offered you plenty of tours,” I joked. “And you said you were, quote ‘too big to walk.’”

“I was too big to walk. I was carrying this eight-pound chonker. She didn’t leave much space for breathing.” She smiled, her eyes still on Betty. “But, I’m here now. It’s a group tour. Take us through the rescue.”

“You’ve seen this place a million times before.”

“I think I can add some necessary context, for Betty’s sake,” she said with a grin.

“Then, by all means,” I said, sweeping my hand to let her take the lead.

“Over here, Betty, is where your father turned down my proposal.” Thea gestured to a clearing between two pens.

“Don’t listen to her, Bet,” I said, pretending to cover her ears. “I didn’t ‘turn down’ your mother’s proposal. I just delayed it.”

Thea laughed, “You said absolutely not!”

“I said we’d wait for your dream wedding: Grace Kelly inspired wedding dress, lilies in the bouquets, full formal reception.”

“Maybe Mommy was a little over ambitious before you came along. I would have been fine with a simple courthouse ceremony.”

I shrugged, unsure if she was lying to me or herself. “We can sign the marriage certificate, if you want, but I think we should just wait until next summer and have a big wedding.”

She frowned, worrying her bottom lip. I wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She pressed her hand to Betty’s back, dropping her head onto my shoulder with a sigh. “You say that, but I almost lost you once by waiting.”

I shook my head. “Nope. Not even a little. Besides, you left out the most important part about that proposal.”

Thea’s head bolted up. “Excuse me?”

“You’re leaving off part of the story.” I moved my gaze to Betty, moving her hat back onto her head and off of her eyes. “I hate to say this about your mom, but that proposal? Not great.”

“Not great?” Thea bristled.

I shook my head. “Nope. Sort of awful, actually. Your mom is great at a lot of things, but proposals aren’t one of them. We were walking past this enclosure.”

“Shuffling. You could barely walk.”

“Shuffling past this enclosure, talking about what would happen once you were born. Your mom was scared that something might happen to her, and we were discussing drawing up some paperwork for both of us.” I chucked Betty’s pudgy chin, lifting her baby blue eyes to meet mine. “And your mom said, ‘wouldn’t it just be easier to get married? We can go into town tomorrow for that license.’”

“Right, and then I wouldn’t have had to draw up a living will and a power of attorney.” Thea rolled her eyes.

Betty whined, a high-pitched screech that grabbed Thea’s attention.

“See, even she thinks that’s a terrible way to propose.” I said. “And I didn’t even mention the lack of a ring.”

“You don’t wear jewelry,” she argued.

“But that’s just how it’s done. No decent proposal happens without a ring.”

“Oh, please, tell me exactly what you know about decent proposals,” Thea said, the edge of her lips tipped up in a smile.

I cupped Betty’s head and swooped down onto one knee. Thea’s eyes widened, reaching out to stop me as if I were still a fall risk.

“Theodora Charlotte Dawson, I loved you from the moment I saw you.”

Her cheeks burned red, eyes fluttering away. “We met in the hospital. I don’t even think we had depth perception then.”

“And it only took me another twenty-seven years to realize you are the only person I want to spend my life with. You held my hand on our first day in school, helped me through my first broken heart, and stood by me when a moose mauled me. You sewed half my wardrobe and had my baby. You’re the kindest, most generous, most wonderful person I know and I can only hope that I make you half as happy as you make me. Thea, will you marry me?” Tears misted her eyes as I reached for my pocket. “Wait. I almost forgot the most important part.”

I moved the carrier to the right, shifting Betty until I had room to pull the ring out of my pocket. Thea’s mom’s ring didn’t have a fancy box. Before her dad left town, he’d gifted my mom a small box of mementos, things to give Thea as she got older. The square-cut diamond ring had a gold band and a single garnet stone on the opposite side, placed after Thea’s birth. I added a topaz stone for our little Elizabeth Martha Clark.

“See, Betty, this is what makes a good proposal great. An actual ring.” I slipped the ring onto Thea’s finger. Her other hand covered her mouth as she looked down at us in shock.

“What would have happened if I had just taken a nap?” she finally managed.

I laughed. “I don’t know. Maybe I would have proposed without Betty strapped to my stomach?”

“I don’t think a proposal like that would have been nearly as good,” she whispered, dropping her hand to touch the ring. She drew her fingertips over the two stones embedded in the band.

“So...is that a yes?”

She nodded, sinking down next to me. Her warm palm snaked around my neck, pressing her forehead to mine. “Yes. Absolutely yes.”

A Note From Sarah Everly

Thanks for reading *Just Best Friends!* I hope you enjoyed Thea and Ben's story. If you did, consider leaving a review on [Amazon](#), [BookBub](#), [GoodReads](#), or any other review site. It would mean the world to me!

Interested in reading a second epilogue with all your favorite Franklin Notch couples? Join my [newsletter!](#)

As a thank you for joining, I'll send you the link for a free novella, also set in Franklin Notch, *Barely Civil*.

Talk to you soon!

Sarah

