

Chapter One

Glittering overhead lights melded with golden pools of candlelight around the sanctuary. Amber Dawson's breath hitched from where she sat in the second row. Her eyes stung as Pastor Frank pronounced the words *man and wife*.

Around the cavernous room, silence hung in breathless suspense as the groom kissed the bride. They drew apart, and applause broke out across the sanctuary. The guests stood. The newly married couple—Nathan and Leah—beamed at the crowd, but couldn't stop gazing at each other. Thankfully, they remembered their duty to get down the aisle, followed by bridesmaids and groomsmen.

Some in the bridal party looked familiar to her. Abbie O'Reilly, the maid of honor and Leah's best friend, Leah's brother, Garrett, and Ben something. Amber hadn't met the handsome, dark-haired best man, though they'd attended church together for the last few years. Ben, Abbie, and the rest of the bridal party nodded and grinned happily toward the rows of guests as they accompanied the newlyweds out of the sanctuary where the photographer awaited.

"That was so beautiful." Amber sighed and turned to her friend Kelsey, seated beside her. "I'm all choked up."

"Me too." Kelsey let out a bashful chuckle and swiped one eye. "I always get this way, whether or not I'm close to the couple." She fished a tissue from her purse and handed it to Amber before taking one for herself. "Nathan and Leah deserve such happiness."

Ushers in crisp dark suits released one row at a time to avoid a clog in the aisles. Finally, it was Kelsey and Amber's turn to file into the aisle and head to the reception. There had been no question in anyone's mind where the reception would occur. Not in the church gym, but at Seasons Dinner Theater and Restaurant. The historic mansion was a white elephant Nathan had inherited two years earlier. But he'd transformed it into a successful Brenner Falls landmark.

Several years earlier the Brenner Falls Community Church had started a daughter church, where Leah and Nathan attended. The small but growing storefront church, Real Life Chapel, wasn't nearly large enough for the crowd that came to celebrate the couple's vows.

"I bet it'll be your turn next, Amber." The statement came from just behind her. Mrs. Wilson, an older woman Amber had known during the last four years they'd attended the same church.

Though the woman's expression and tone were gentle, her words struck Amber like a hammer. Yeah, right. *That* wouldn't happen any day soon, though three years earlier, it had seemed likely.

Amber offered a bland smile that camouflaged the sudden tightness inside. "That would be a surprise, Mrs. Wilson."

The woman smiled and continued her halting progress down the aisle. "You just never know." Amber and Kelsey exchanged glances. "You never do," Kelsey murmured.

That ship had sailed. And it hadn't been a touching send-off, either. Rather, a shipwreck, leaving rage, confusion, and hurt in its wake. Amber had mostly recovered in the three years since. Unless she heard statements like that. Reminders that she was still poised for a happy ending, searching the horizon ... but saw nothing.

“Are you thinking about Kurt?” Kelsey’s voice was gentle.

“No, not a bit.” Amber winced at the hard edge in her response.

“Liar.”

They emerged into the sunlit mid-May afternoon and headed for Kelsey’s car. She slipped one arm through Amber’s. “C’mon, let’s go eat good food, see friends, and dance the night away.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Amber wouldn’t let a well-meaning but lethal comment dredge up all the toxic memories she’d worked so hard to release. No, as Kelsey had suggested, a few friends, a great meal, and lots of dancing would push those thoughts back over the cliff where they belonged.

Kelsey and Amber arrived at Seasons in a matter of minutes. The town of Brenner Falls, Pennsylvania, wasn’t that big, after all, even though it was growing. Seasons Dinner Theater and Restaurant, established in a stately Victorian house, had graced the corner of Market Street for nearly eighty years. Its recent face-lift made it elegant and upscale, a popular place for good food and a regular schedule of quality drama, comedy, or music.

The women entered the building along with a surge of other guests. Amber scanned the room, which sparkled even more than the church sanctuary had. Tiny lights glowed on clusters of potted trees in each corner, competing with candles shining from wall sconces and tabletops. Round cloth-covered tables dotted the room and surrounded a wooden dance floor, a hub in the center. A five-person orchestra played modern classics from the stage as guests found their seats according to name cards at each place setting.

Amber greeted two couples already seated at their table. Everyone had dressed in celebratory styles and colors. Amber wore her favorite color, cobalt blue that highlighted her blue eyes, in a scoop-neck dress she’d found on sale the week before. The full skirt swirled around her hips and descended to her knees. Looked and felt prettier and more feminine than the blue scrubs she wore to work every day.

Her older brother, Cooper, stood at a nearby table with his girlfriend, Blair, and her son, Jake. She sent them a smile and a wave before sitting next to Kelsey at their own table of six place settings. A uniformed server unloaded trays of hors d’oeuvres onto a table in the center of the room. Kelsey hitched her head in that direction. “That’ll keep us from starving while we wait for the photographer to finish. Want to go investigate?” She rose and waited for Amber to do the same.

“Sure, I’ll go with you.” At any rate, she didn’t want to sit alone perched on the edge of a half-empty table.

As they made their way toward the attractive table adorned with flowers, a punchbowl, and hors d’oeuvres, they stopped several times to greet and hug various friends they encountered. Almost nine years in Brenner Falls and Amber, gratefully, felt like a local. She loved her adopted small town. When Cooper moved there the previous year, it was even better since part of her family now lived nearby.

Soon, the bridal couple arrived with their entourage and noisy fanfare. The reception began in earnest. The wedding party’s table sat close to the stage. Nathan and Leah held court from the center seats. Before the meal arrived, Ben, the best man, stood and clinked his glass with a spoon. The room hushed.

“Welcome, everyone, to this celebration of love, as we all rejoice with our friends, Nathan and Leah. Nathan’s been my best friend since junior high, and I can tell you he deserves all the joy we see today. I’ve known Leah for a shorter time, but I can confidently say the same thing about her.” He turned to the couple and raised his glass. “To a solid, godly couple I’m proud to call my friends. May God bless you with joy, understanding, continued growth in your love for each other and in your own hearts, and may he direct every step in your new, wonderful future together. To Nathan and Leah.” He lifted his wineglass higher and those in the room followed. He remained standing, and after a moment, again rapped his spoon on the glass. The sound of glass ringing echoed around the room as guests followed his example. Nathan and Leah laughed, then Nathan pulled her in for a kiss. Everyone applauded.

“That’s the first one. We’ll have many more, is my guess.” Kelsey returned her attention to her table.

Amber laughed. “I’m sure you’re right. My hunch is Nathan and Leah won’t mind too much.”

“Since I’m new to the church, I don’t know the best man, the guy who did the toast,” Kelsey said. “Do you know him?”

“I haven’t met him personally, but I know who he is.” Amber sipped her wine. “He attends our church, so I’ve seen him around there. And he used to date my friend Colleen.”

Kelsey nodded. “He’s cute. I could see you with him.”

Amber frowned. “According to Colleen, he’s commitment phobic. They dated for over a year, and she got tired of waiting.”

“Maybe he realized she wasn’t the one. Think he’s dating anyone now?”

Amber shrugged. “I don’t really keep up with him since we haven’t met.” She smirked at Kelsey. “Though it seems he might be a serial dater.” Her gaze remained on Ben for a moment as he took his seat. He leaned forward and said something to those near him and laughter erupted. Handsome, confident. Yeah, she knew the type, and she didn’t want any part of it. Been there, done that.

Wait staff arrived like a small army, carrying aromatic plates to the tables. Any previous discouragement from past hurts disappeared amidst delicious food and pleasant conversation around the table.

Nearly two hours later, the servers cleared the tables, and the lights dimmed. Following the bridal dance, the orchestra took their leave, replaced by a DJ. The tone of the evening shifted as guests ambled onto the dance floor.

After several dances, Amber’s thirst raged. She’d sit the next few dances out and head to the punch table. Ben, the object of Kelsey’s matchmaking, was gulping down a glassful of punch. The flush from dancing—he hadn’t stopped all evening—tinted his olive complexion. Before Amber could reach for a glass, Ben offered one to her.

“Thanks.” She sipped the fruity beverage and closed her eyes for a moment as the sweet coolness slid down her throat. “That was a nice toast you made.”

He smiled and a soft expression came into his eyes. “It was a huge understatement. Nathan’s a great guy. The best.”

Maybe she was wrong about Ben. Clearly, he loved his best friend. His eyes became almost dewy with his statement. Amber returned his smile. “Close friends are the greatest. It’s cool that you’ve been friends for such a long time.”

He finished his glass. "I don't think we've met. I'm Ben Russo."

"Amber Dawson. I've seen you around at church. I think." Didn't want him to think she'd visually stalked him.

"Yeah, I think I've seen you too. Our paths didn't cross until now."

"I...I knew who you were because I was friends with Colleen. Before she moved away."

A cool curtain shuttered his expression. Not a pleasant subject for him, apparently. Why did she bring *that* up?

"Yeah, Colleen's a great girl. Didn't work out with us." He shrugged, but a cool film had replaced the previous warmth in his eyes.

"She seems happy in her new job in DC."

"Yeah, I hope she's happy." He paused. "Well, nice to meet you, Amber Dawson."

She sent him a muted smile. "Likewise. Enjoy your evening."

Little chance he wouldn't. Unless she'd thrown cold water on him by mentioning his ex. Which she sincerely regretted doing.

Seemed he'd danced with every female under the age of fifty.

But yeah, she knew the type.



Ben mopped the perspiration from his forehead with a cloth handkerchief, then stuffed it back into his pocket. He wove among tables to reclaim his seat at the mostly empty head table. Empty because its occupants were busy tearing up the dance floor. Time for a rest. His eyes followed Amber Dawson as she returned to her table, punch glass in hand.

He'd been curious about the identity of the willowy beauty, but he was no more. Now he knew, and that was plenty. Sure enough, Colleen had made sure he'd have no neutral ground if he wanted to know Amber better. And he wasn't sure he did.

Warm and sincere one moment, cool and judgmental the next. It fit with what he'd observed over the last couple of years he'd glimpsed her across the church during a Sunday service. She'd struck him as all together, armor in place, and completely self-sufficient. A cool customer, as they said. He could be wrong. Otherwise, he'd be judging her in the same way she likely judged him.

"That's quite a frown you've got there, Ben," Jason, a groomsman, said. A white-tooth grin beamed through the man's red bushy beard.

Ben chuckled. "Just thinking. I guess that gave me a headache."

Jason grinned. "No thinking tonight. Maybe dancing with everyone in the room gave you the headache."

"Could be." He had to admit, once he stopped to rest, the chair felt pretty good.

Jason glanced at his phone, then set it down on the table. "How did you and Nathan meet?" he asked.

"We met in ninth grade. I think it was some kind of math class. I was a troubled kid back then." Ben laughed and held up a hand. "I know, hard to believe. So, we started hanging out. He invited me to church, and we got involved in the youth group. Changed my life."

"That's awesome," murmured Jason.

Awesome didn't begin to describe Ben's journey. The mess that had been his life flipped upside down. "Yeah, it was. So, Nathan's been like a brother ever since. He was out of the area during college and a few years after. I was so glad he moved back here a couple years ago when he inherited this place." He inclined his head toward the room.

"And from what I hear, that move changed *his* life."

"That, it did, in several ways. And we're looking at one of them."

"So, when's it your time to get married? Are you seeing anyone?"

"Not now. I'm taking a break from dating." Ben grinned, then pulled out his phone, in hopes of silently closing the conversation. The one negative thing about weddings. It was suddenly everyone's goal to get singles settled into marital bliss.

His thoughts returned to Colleen. She'd been frustrated toward the end, so she took off. Literally. Took a job in DC. It was for the best. After a year of dating, he should have known it wouldn't click for them. He should have let it go much earlier, but there were many positive aspects to their relationship. He kept telling himself it would deepen, develop. They had fun. She was gorgeous. But something had been missing. And that mysterious something was missing with every woman he'd dated over the last few years.

He let out a long sigh. Maybe the thing he sought didn't exist. Maybe something *inside* him was broken, because of his broken past. Or maybe he was meant to be alone.

That was unlikely. He liked women. A lot. But at thirty years old, he was ready for permanence. The real thing. The real thing that maybe he was unable to recognize.

His gaze wandered back to Amber. Layers of wavy dark hair tumbled over bare shoulders. She laughed with the others around her table. Laughter had transformed her face. It was stunning and authentic. Not like the pinched, polite control he'd witnessed earlier. Had he lost any chance of her laughing like that with him, all because of Colleen?

What was wrong with him? Weddings weren't supposed to make one introspective and maudlin. That wasn't really his style, anyway. Time to dance with someone.

"Done resting." Ben pulled himself out of his chair and opened another button on his shirt. "Got my second wind."