

# CHAPTER 11

## The Therapists Weight In

**Ben**

“So what’s going on, Ben?” Tom Brooks’ long rectangular face and short silvery hair looked comforting and familiar on the laptop screen.

“I’m glad you had time to squeeze me in today. Thank God for Zoom!” Ben replied with a laugh, taking a sip of coffee from a large blue mug, then setting it back down on his desk. “Since you insist on living in New York even when I’m out here.”

“Very funny. You know this is where my daughter is. And my granddaughter. Not to mention my practice. But I’ll always make time for you, my boy.” Tom smiled and Ben felt his warmth even though it was a virtual meeting and they were thousands of miles apart. “Now tell me what’s up.”

“Well, I’ve met someone.” Ben paused, waiting for a comment. When he saw that Tom was expectantly watching him through the screen, he continued. “Her name is Savannah. Last week when I did Tanglewood, I stayed at that yoga retreat center everyone’s always talking about. Kripalu. Brando went with me and anyway she was in a yoga class and then we sat together at dinner and started talking after that. We... we really clicked. I can’t believe how much we really clicked. I mean... I haven’t felt this attracted to a woman since Avery and ....” His voice trailed off as he rubbed his temples.

“Ben, I must say you sound happy but I sense you’re also conflicted. What’s causing the conflict?” Tom leaned forward, genuinely interested in Ben’s response.

“She lives in Massachusetts. She has a thriving business there, good friends. That’s pretty much it. Her life is there and mine is here.” He fiddled with the handle of the mug.

“Have you made plans to get together again?”

Ben smiled eagerly. “She’s flying out here next weekend.”

Tom’s eyebrows lifted. “Wow, that’s fast. But then... you probably didn’t have much time at the retreat center, right?”

“Right. We... spent a day in Lenox, touring around and...”

“By yourselves?” Tom interrupted.

“Yes, well... she tucked my hair into a Red Sox cap and we both wore sunglasses. It was fun. No one recognized me. We had a picnic that night and then ... yeah, that’s about it. We didn’t have a lot of time, a few walks and talking at meals and stuff. I really *really* like her.”

“That’s good, Ben, really good. It sounds like she really *really* likes you too.” He smiled and made a tent of his fingers, carefully contemplating his next words. “What about the Nondisclosure Agreement? Did your lawyers get to her yet?”

“Yeah. They got to me first, of course, especially after some reporters tracked us down at Kripalu. But I asked her about it and she was fine with it. Didn’t run away screaming. They faxed it to her and she signed it right away.”

Tom raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Seems like a good sign, Ben, eh?”

“I know, I know. It’s not always easy to get people to sign those things. Shoot, I hated having to ask her to sign it.”

“Well, ‘those things’ are there to protect you and you know it.”

Ben sighed. “I know, I know. It was such a relief when she just agreed to it. She’s pretty amazing.” He glanced at his watch, wondering if he had time to call her when he was through with Tom.

“You sound happy....” Tom squinted into his computer screen, trying to ascertain Ben’s expression. “You sound happy but not entirely content. What’s up with that?”

“Well I guess... All right, I’m not being totally honest with you. It’s more than me just clicking with a woman. I feel like I’m actually... falling in love with her. I don’t know how to explain it.” He took another gulp of coffee, felt the soothing dark warmth slide down his throat. “It was different with Avery. We were friends first and then came the physical connection and the deeper stuff came later. Savannah is... I don’t know... it was like we instantly recognized each other-”

“Ben, you’re a celebrity. Lots of people think they know you from media exposure but they really don’t. We’ve talked about this.”

“Yeah, Tom, I know, I know. But this...with Savannah... it’s different. She recognized me of course, she saw who I was, but she wasn’t .... I don’t know... overpowered by it or anything. She didn’t just assume she knew me because she’s been listening to my music for the past eight

years. And it goes the other way too. I feel like *I've* known *her* all my life. I mean, is that even possible? To meet someone and just *know*... immediately? My parents didn't fall in love that way."

Tom stroked his chin thoughtfully, then smiled. "Yes, it's possible, Ben. It's not always the way that people fall in love but it's definitely possible."

"What about you and Marjorie?" Ben asked, referring to Tom's wife who had died three years ago after a long struggle with Multiple Sclerosis.

"Ah yes, Marjorie." Tom looked out the window of his Manhattan high rise office and Ben could see the city skyline in the distance. "It was love at first sight for Marjorie and I... Yes." He looked back at the computer. "I'll tell you that story another time. Right now, I want to focus on you. I understand your confusion about how fast your feelings for her are growing. Is that it? Or is something else going on?"

Ben stood and began pacing back and forth in front of his cluttered desk, still in view of the laptop screen. He scratched the back of his head. "I'm just afraid we may be moving too fast." He paused, as if listening to what he'd just said. "Yes, that's it. I'm afraid it's going to be ruined because we're going too fast."

"What do you mean by too fast? Have you already made love?"

Ben frowned and stopped in front of the computer. "No. *No!* I mean we just met a few days ago and now she's flying out here to spend a long weekend with me."

"But if she lived in L.A., you'd be seeing each other sooner than next weekend, wouldn't you?"

"Of course." Ben dropped back down in the black leather swivel chair in front of the laptop.

"Then I don't see this as taking it too fast. You obviously have a connection. Why not take some time to explore it?"

"Oh my God. I'm so freakin' glad to hear you say that, Tom. I feel better already." He took a deep breath in and let it out. "Thank you."

"You are most welcome, Ben. Now... how's your music going?"

"Well, I'm working on a new album. You knew that, right?"

"Yes," Tom replied patiently. "But I'm wondering if this Savannah is distracting you so much that you're not able to focus on your music."

Ben chuckled. "Distracting in a very good way. I've actually written a couple of new songs since I met her... about her... about how I feel when I'm with her."

"I'm glad to hear it. The worse thing for you is a woman who takes you away from your music. Remember... what was her name? Cassandra?"

"Cassidy."

"Right. Remember Cassidy? You lost your focus when you were around her. She looked on your music like a jealous lover."

"I remember." Ben sighed and stretched his neck from one side to the other. "Savannah is like from a whole other universe, believe me."

"Good. Now...anything else my boy?" Tom smiled and pointed a finger at Ben.

Ben paused, drumming his fingers on the desk. "Okay. Now that you mention it, yes. What about sex?"

Tom leaned in to get a better look at Ben. "What about it?"

"I mean, should we make love? Should this visit be about that? I know we have sexual chemistry. But I was thinking that maybe we should just hang out and talk and watch TV and go for walks. I just... I don't know what we should be *doing* on this visit. It'll be the first time we've really been alone for longer than a few hours, and we'll actually have complete privacy and I don't know if we should spend that time making love or.... or what." He swiveled the chair from side to side, frowning.

"Ben, look. I can't answer that for you. I can only say that you and Savannah need to talk about this when she gets there. You have to start this relationship with open communication and by being totally honest with each other. This is how you and Avery got into trouble, remember? You wanted kids and she did not. You were willing to make some sacrifices and put the relationship first but she wasn't willing to do that, and neither of you talked about any of it until it was too late. Am I coming through?"

Ben nodded solemnly. "Loud and clear. You're right. Of course." He grinned and smacked himself on the side of his head. "We'll talk as soon as she gets here and I'll see what she's thinking and what she wants and needs. Why didn't I think of that?"

"That's why you pay me the big bucks, kiddo!" said Tom, breaking into a full-blown laugh. Ben joined in. "Now, I want you to remember something else. It's been five years since the

former love of your life walked out on you. You've come a long way. Do you remember what you were like back then?"

"I was a complete and total mess and you helped me through it."

"Right. You were a mess. But you're not a mess now. This is not the same scenario. This is something else altogether. I don't want you to start projecting all that "Avery stuff" onto this new relationship. Let this be something different. Let it be whatever it is. Don't assume anything. You're a great guy with a lot to offer the right woman. Just be yourself. Are you listening to me?"

Ben cleared his throat to loosen the sudden emotion that was gathering there. What would he do without Tom Brooks? "Yes, O Great Therapist in the Computer, I do hear you. I am listening. I bow to you." He grinned and made a mock bow towards the screen. "Thank you, Tom. I might be calling you next weekend." He paused and smiled. "But then again, maybe not."

"Either way, I'm here for you, son. Now remember this... I'm speaking words of wisdom now, so pay attention: *have fun!* You deserve to *have some fun.*" He smiled and said, "I'm signing off now. Let me know how it goes. You can text or email anytime."

Ben stood and stretched. "Thanks, Tom. I'll remember what you said. Have a fun weekend yourself."

"Ha! Fat chance of that. Gwen is dragging me along with her and Chloe to get things for the dorm room. Shopping." He shuddered dramatically. "Did I tell you Chloe got into Duke?"

"Only about a thousand times since May! It's a great school. Classes start soon?"

"She leaves the last week in August. I can't believe she's 18 already." He shook his head. "Don't know how much help I'm going to be picking out comforters and desk accessories and God knows what else."

"Oh, give it a rest. You know you love hanging out with them."

Tom made a short, disgruntled sound while winking, and they both waved, then snapped their laptops shut.

## Savannah

“Keely, I’m so glad you had time for me today,” Savannah said, hugging the petite older woman fiercely, then settling herself into the oak rocking chair by the window which looked out on a nearby beach.

Keely’s office had a warm and welcoming feel to it, with a large wooden desk, comfortable chairs and pillows in shades of sea foam, coral and ivory, lamps with seashells carved into them, and tribal African art on the walls. Savannah had always felt safe here; she’d been visiting this office since 2009 when she’d moved back to Salem to take care of Aunt Suzanna after her first stroke. But more than this, she felt safe with Keely. There was an earthy groundedness about her that reminded Savannah of a large oak tree spreading shade and comfort with its branches, yet standing strong and rooted in the earth. Not that Keely King was tall like a tree. She was built like a small wiry terrier, with skin the color of warm chestnuts. She was in her early 60’s and kept her tightly curled salt-and-pepper hair very short. Today she was wearing a pretty cotton batik dress in shades of rust, gold and olive green, with matching beaded earrings.

Keely sat down in the easy chair across from Savannah and folded her hands in her lap. “I will always make time for you, dear,” she replied, smiling kindly. “Now, tell me this big news you mentioned on the phone.”

Savannah took a deep breath, “I’m falling in love.”

Keely raised her eyebrows.

“No, really. I’m serious. I met him at Kripalu last weekend. And Keely... he’s someone famous. I mean, *really* famous. He lives in L.A. and I’m flying out there next Friday to spend five days with him. Oh my God, I’m so excited.” She moved to the edge of the rocking chair, leaning forward.

“Savannah, that’s wonderful!” exclaimed Keely, putting one hand over her heart. “Can you tell me more? Like for instance, oh, I don’t know... his name?”

“No, no, I can’t do that.” Savannah frowned, rubbing her hands together. I mean, he’s so famous that he has agents and managers and lawyers. And I had to sign something, a legally binding contract, a Nondisclosure Agreement. I promised that I won’t tell anyone about this until the two of us decide to make it public.”

“What on earth? I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

Savannah grinned. "Yeah, well, you've never dated a celebrity, I guess." She leaned back in the chair and began to slowly rock.

"But why...?"

"Here's the thing. If I start telling people that I'm seeing... him, then the risk of being exposed to the media is higher. And they don't want .... *we* don't want the press knowing about this before we know for sure that we want to make it public, and this way we'll have control over *how* it's made public. We just want some more time together, just the two of us, before that happens. Well, there were some reporters who descended on us at Kripalu, but his team has already dealt with that. It's not that I don't trust you.... I really do. You're one of the very best parts of my life, Keely, and-

Keely waved her hand in an effort to dismiss Savannah's worries. "I know that, of course I know that. Listening to you now, it does make sense." She paused, looked down at her notes, then back up at Savannah, a mischievous smile playing on her lips. "Would it be in violation of your contract if I *guessed* who this man is?"

Savannah abruptly stopped rocking and burst out laughing. "What? You're too funny!" Then she saw the expression on her therapist's face. "You're serious? You want to *guess* who I met at Kripalu?"

"Yes indeed, I do." Keely grinned from ear to ear, the lines around her large brown eyes crinkling with pleasure.

"Well I guess...." Savannah thought for a moment, totally still. "Oh, what the heck, sure, go ahead... twenty questions, right? And all I have to do is say yes or no? So I'm not actually *telling* you?"

"Absolutely." Keely shifted to the edge of her seat, crossed her ankles and her arms. "Ok, I mean business here, young lady! First question- Is he a politician?"

Savannah laughed out loud. "Definitely not."

"Okay then, is he an actor?"

"No. I mean, not now anyway. But he started on Broadway."

"Hmmm...is he a musician?"

"Yes."

"Does he sing country music?"

"Nope."

"How about pop?"

"Yes but... not entirely. He doesn't define himself by any one genre."

"Ah. I see." Keely's eyes lit up. "Does he have brown hair?"

"Sort of."

"Does he write most of his own music?"

"Yes ma'am!"

"And this Broadway thing.... was he the one in *Ten Thousand Hearts*?"

"Mmmm... hmmm."

"And one of his best songs is *Coming Home to Me*?"

Savannah grinned. "Oh yes."

Keely sank back in her chair and crossed her hands over her chest. "Savannah Rose Adams, you are dating *Ben Shepherd*?"

Savannah nodded and her smile lit up the room.

"This isn't some kind of joke or something, is it? I'm not on *Candid Camera*, am I?" She looked around the room warily.

"Oh it's true, all right!" exclaimed Savannah. "Although I wouldn't call it dating exactly. I mean, we took some walks together at the retreat center, and we explored Lenox together and had a picnic. Oh, and I went to his concert at Tanglewood with his friend Brando. We spent some time together after that too. We just really hit it off, you know? It's all kind of unreal..." She rubbed her forehead fiercely as if trying to keep the memories in her head.

"Well, my goodness." Keely smiled fondly at Savannah and leaned back in her chair. "That's an awful lot to have happen in such a short time. Did you say you're flying out to L.A. next Friday to see him again?"

Savannah nodded. "Yes. I just..." She looked out the window for a minute, hardly seeing the perfect blue summer sky, the sparkling ocean, the sunbathers crowding the beach. Turning back to Keely, she continued. "I've just never felt this way with anyone before. And it's not that he's 'Ben Shepherd' or anything like that. We just really clicked. How I felt when I was



with him reminded me of my parents somehow. I don't know how to explain it. It's like... they had such a special connection between them and I always took it for granted, and now to feel that for myself... with Ben... it was amazing. And we actually do have a lot in common except..."

"Except?"

"Well, except that he lives in L.A. and I live... here."

"But that's just logistics, right?"

"I guess so," Savannah said with a sigh, shrugging. "I just don't see how it's possible to make a relationship with him work. Not because he's famous or anything like that, but because we live so far apart. Granted, he has an apartment in New York City and he's there once a month, sometimes more depending on what he's got going on. But still... how can....?" She paused, frowning. "I don't see how we can make it work. But Keely..." her voice dropped to a whisper. "I *want* it to work so badly."

"Well, that's why you're going out there next weekend, right? To see if what you have with him is going to work."

"Yes, that. And to make sure I didn't make the whole thing up with my overactive imagination!"

"Listen, I'm glad you're taking another break from the business. I know that you go to Kripalu a few times a year but going out to L.A. to be with Ben sounds like it will be a fun break, and you know I've been encouraging you to bring more *fun* in your life."

"Yes, I know, I know!"

"So... the time you spent with Ben, was it fun?"

"Oh yes," she replied emphatically. "So much fun. He's playful and silly at times, yet also very intense, especially when he's talking about his music or his career."

"And what about your career?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you and Andi have built *Life Celebrations* from the ground up and it's doing very well. Are you comfortable stepping away from it for five days so soon after taking time off for your Kripalu retreat? Are you feeling conflicted about that at all?"

“Keely, you know me so well.” Savannah picked up a deep blue heart-shaped stone on the table beside her chair and turned it over in her hands, enjoying its cool solid weight. “I’m a little conflicted, of course. But yes, I’m comfortable leaving again. Andi and Jeremy will be fine. Of course. I’ll be checking in with them every day, more than once, I’m sure. And Jeremy’s been taking on more and more responsibility in the last year, so it’s all good. I only have two Celebrations planned for that weekend. One is a Bas Mitzvah and Jeremy is really good at those, and most everything’s done anyway so he’s good to go with it. The other is a baby shower and the girls can handle that together. Andi and Jeremy have events on Friday and Sunday and they’ll spot each other on those along with Summer and Winter. I’m not really needed until the following Thursday at the big retirement dinner in Gloucester.” She took a breath and set down the stone heart with a little thud. “But listen, I’ve been working hard practically my whole life, and you’re right, I have not had a ‘fun’ vacation in a really long time, maybe since Martin and I took that cruise right after we got married. I feel like I have to do this... I just have to take a chance on this relationship, and on Ben. I would never put my business in jeopardy, although I will admit that I’m a little nervous about being so far away from Aunt Suzanna for that long, but...” her voice dropped to a whisper again. “I find that I just can’t *not* do it.”

“I understand, dear. It sounds to me like you are doing the absolute right thing.”

“Really? Do you really and truly mean that?”

Keely nodded and leaned forward. “I really do. Your whole body and energy changes when you talk about Ben.” She smiled and shook her head. “You’re dating *Ben Shepherd!* That’s amazing, do you know how amazing that is?”

“Yes, I think I really do know... except it’s not so much about the fact that he’s Ben Shepherd, the celebrity. I can somehow see the real him underneath all of that folderol. And really, he’s not that different from the rest of us when you get right down to it.” She smiled again, remembering: *just a boy, just a girl.*

Keely nodded, and continued to sit still, waiting patiently to see if her client had anything else to say. Savannah rested in the silence. She always felt seen and heard by Keely, and she treasured these moments when neither one of them felt the need to speak. She was better able to hear what was going on inside her own mind during the quiet. Finally, she spoke. “I just... I’m not sure what we’ll be doing this weekend. You know, if we’re going to make love or just hang out or... or what.”

“Do you want to make love with him?”

Savannah smiled and glanced out at the ocean, savoring the thrill that ran through her body at the thought of being that close with Ben. "Absolutely."

"But you're not sure if he wants that too?"

She looked at Keely and leaned forward. "I think he really does want it. I mean... there's definitely a mutual attraction. But... what I mean is... I don't know if we *should* be spending our time on love making or if we'd be better off taking it slower and just... you know... spending what they call 'quality time' getting to know each other."

"I see." Keely smiled slightly and rubbed her neck thoughtfully with her left hand. "Making love is a very good way to get to know someone, I'd say. Especially if there's already an emotional connection, and you seem to have that with Ben."

Savannah nodded emphatically. "But I'm so afraid of going too fast, of ruining it because we didn't take time at the beginning to really get to know each other outside of the physical attraction."

"That makes sense. Now here's what I think. I think you should talk about it with Ben when you first get there."

"Talk about it?" Savannah tipped her head back and laughed joyously. "That's your sage advice, O Great Therapist? I probably could have figured that one out by myself."

"But you didn't, did you?" Keely teased, shaking her forefinger gently in Savannah's direction.

"Touché. Okay, I know you're right and that would be the smart thing to do. Open and honest communication, like you always say."

"Sounds trite but it's a powerful tool. You've learned that from experience, haven't you? Remember Martin?"

Savannah sighed. "Yes, I remember. Thank you. You're absolutely right on this and I will talk with Ben before we... do anything." She paused. "I... um... probably shouldn't talk too much more about him. Don't take notes on this, okay?"

Keely held up her hands. "No notes! I promise." She made a zipping motion across her mouth. "My lips are sealed."