

# Prologue

*Then*

The steps were easy, performed so many times that they'd become automatic: (1) flip the raft, (2) get everyone back on board, (3) assess possible damage, then (4) high-five because they'd survived the unbridled power of Mother Nature.

They shouldn't have gotten stuck on number two.

When he finally saw her, the absence of her helmet struck him first. It must have come loose when they capsized and everyone flew into the drink.

"There!"

The team paddled furiously, digging in with the well-trained synchronicity only years of experience could afford. Adrenaline and sweeping panic hummed collectively between them. Voices quiet, heaving breaths deafening. The urethane bottom of the boat scraped up on shore, and he leaped from the side back into the churning drift.

She was face down. Caught in a strainer of fallen trees and branches. Unmoving except for a crown of muted gold. The river's greedy fingers combed through her hair, swirling and snarling the strands into a mat of dirty tangles.

His heart thundered in his head, a frenzied tempo by which he followed as he scrambled to her side. He grabbed her vest. Waterlogged clothes and the pull of surrounding rapids made her weight unreal, and he struggled with his remaining strength to free her from the petulant river. Her body broke loose from the

current, and he managed to drag her to the bank with the help of two others.

How had it all gone so wrong?

But there was no place for delusion there on the sandy edge. The hard, wet rocks dug into his knees as he gave her his breath. He knew who was to blame.

*It's my fault. It's all my fault.*

# Chapter One

## *Four years later, A Thursday night in May: Lucy*

When she'd agreed to let him plan her dirty thirty birthday, she had assumed he'd be there to help her celebrate the milestone. Yet, there Lucy sat, perched awkwardly on one of four wobbly barstools around a bistro table that likely hadn't been wiped down all night. Alone.

Practically.

"When's he going to get here?" Victor shouted over the thump of chest-rattling base, courtesy of the speakers strapped just above their heads. Lucy hadn't complained about snagging a table in the back—though the others had, vehemently—because they were lucky enough to get any seats this late in the evening without a reservation.

She glanced at her phone for the hundredth time that night and reread the last few texts they'd exchanged.

Lucy:

Where are you?

Brodan:

Almost done, babe. Still finishing the prep for my pitch on Monday.

Lucy:

Cool. We'll stay here a little longer.

Moving on to The Tackle Boxx. Meet us there?

Got a table in the back! Woo! ETA?

Lucy's reassuring grin slipped slightly before she flexed it back in place. There were enough scowls at this table that she didn't need to add another one to the mix. Her fingers scuttled across the screen as she pinged her tardy boyfriend again.

Lucy:

Hello?

Brodan:

Be there in 20. Next round's on me.

She sent him a thumbs-up emoji, too relieved to be snarky.

"Well?" Tasha sneered, having zero reservations about lacing her words with snark. The willowy woman draped herself against Victor, the usual bored expression frozen across her beautiful yet severe features. If Victor's girlfriend was capable of smiling, Lucy had never witnessed it, and a cheery expression would no doubt be a startling contrast to her typical pinched irritation.

"He'll be here in twenty minutes," she called back over the pulse, flashing her phone screen in their direction as further assurance that Brodan's friends hadn't wasted an evening attending Lucy's celebration only to be stood up by the person they *actually* wanted to see.

Tasha whispered something into Victor's ear. He nodded and stood. "We're going to grab the next round."

"Thanks, guys," Lucy shouted, lifting the half-full drink

she'd been nursing since arriving at the crowded drag venue. She cringed as the caustic tang of vodka and energy drink coated her mouth and rushed to add, "Can you make mine a beer, IPA, please?"

The couple, dressed so fashionably that they put Lucy's basic black tank top and snug jeans to shame, turned dismissively and strolled toward the bar.

*They can stay there for all I care.*

She banged her glass onto the table, inadvertently splashing a little of the high-octane gasoline over the rim and onto her fingers. "Shit," she mumbled, accepting a small stack of napkins from a passing cocktail server. She smiled bleakly. "Thanks."

Lucy pointlessly dabbed at her hands and then the table, the flimsy napkins all but disintegrating from the gluey combination of glitter and cheap cocktail mixer. She abandoned her efforts and accepted the sticky fate of her glass, just as the final peppy bars of "Call Me Maybe" by Carly Rae Jepsen thundered to a close. Confetti and applause coated the large room in equal measure. A statuesque drag queen—whom Lucy had the fortune of calling her best friend for the past decade—flapped her hands, smiling and cooing her thanks into the crowd.

"You're too kind. Please stop. Just kidding, MORE applause! Thank you, thank you!" Wrapped in a neon pink latex gown, Dirty O'Feelya wore a chocolate brown wig that added close to ten inches to the queen's already staggering height. She blew kisses and gestured to the backup dancers to share in the applause. "Thanks, boys! All right children, Mama needs to take a little break and wet her whistle. I'm leaving you in the ever-capable hands of DJ Yum. And *boy, is he ever*. Let's give it up and shower him with love!"

The spotlight faded as Dirty O'Feelya descended the stage into the crowd, periodically stopping to accept compliments

and pose for selfies with her adoring fans. Upbeat music piped through the speakers but at a blessedly more subdued volume.

“La La Lucy!” the drag queen sang as she approached. “Happy birthday, girl! I am so glad you made it.” Then, after glancing around the little bistro table and grinning wickedly, added, “And about 175 pounds of deadweight lighter, it appears. Does this mean—”

“Don’t go getting your hopes up,” Lucy interrupted, rolling her eyes. “Brodan *is* coming. He just had to finish some work stuff. He says hello and that he hopes you break a leg.”

“Oh, the little peach, I am *sure* he does.”

Lucy was under no delusion that her best friend and her boyfriend liked each other. At best, they pretended to tolerate the other’s presence for her sake. But the time spent with both of them at once had become so rare that neither had to put on much of a show.

Dirty O’Feelya plucked Lucy’s glass off the table with two careful fingers and sniffed. “What in the ever-loving hell are you drinking? It’s your birthday; you should be drinking expensive bourbon.” Placing the offending beverage back on the table, she snatched a stray napkin and dramatically wiped the gooey remnants from her skin, paying extra attention to her precariously long press-on nails.

“It’s a vodka and some kind of energy drink.” Lucy leaned in, continuing quietly. “I didn’t pick the last round.” She gestured to the stylish couple standing at the bar.

Her friend leaned in conspiratorially and with a teasing voice said, “Clearly.” She reached out and gently squeezed Lucy’s shoulder. “Where is everyone? I thought the girls were coming.”

“They canceled this afternoon,” Lucy explained. “Lydia had food poisoning and Kylie couldn’t get anyone to cover her shift; her boss needed her to serve at a last-minute banquet or

something.”

Dirty O’Feelya tsked. “Sounds like they blew you off, Luce.”

“What? No.” Her friends would have made it if they’d been able; Lucy was sure of that. She could admit that she hadn’t made much effort to hang out with only the girls in quite a while. Typically, she’d just invite them out when she spent time with Brodan and his crew—to which they’d been politely declining more and more frequently. But birthdays? They were sacred in her tight-knit little group. And this was her thirtieth! They wouldn’t have missed it on purpose. “Both of their reasons seemed genuine.”

“An easy feat over a text message.” Her glossy, pity-filled pout and shoulder squeeze made Lucy’s stomach sink.

*Are they avoiding me?*

“You know I would have joined you if I weren’t already filling in for one of my sisters tonight, but I have bills to pay. Dirty O’ is a picky bitch, and ostrich feathers aren’t cheap.”

“You look gorgeous. Did I forget to mention?”

“You did, but I’ll let it slide. What else is new?”

Lucy’s smile returned. She’d been dying to tell her friend about the upcoming trip she’d scheduled for June but hadn’t had the opportunity.

“Brodan and I have a romantic getaway planned next month. We’re renting a room in Leavenworth. It’s this cute little Bavarian town—pretzels, beer, bratwurst.”

“You had me at bratwurst!” The queen threw back her head and barked out a laugh.

“The most exciting thing is that we booked a two-night backpacking excursion with a guiding company out there.”

“Wait . . . Brodan agreed to this?” Dirty O’Feelya shot her friend a skeptical look, tapping a long, banana-yellow talon on the bistro table.

“He sure did.”

“Brodan?”

“Yes.”

“Not happily, though, right?”

Lucy’s smile dimmed slightly. “I mean, he wasn’t overly enthusiastic about it at first, but I convinced him. We bought all the gear last week, and he’s been a real trouper about it. Plus, we’ll only be roughing it two nights; the rest of the week, we’ll be in town at an inn.”

A strong side-eye told Lucy her friend wasn’t convinced. “So let me get this straight. Mr. Doesn’t-Know-How-To-Compromise is willing to go on a vacation to a place where there probably won’t be any cell reception, and there are more trees than buildings, and a bug might land on him?”

“Yep,” Lucy said, beaming smugly.

“I’m gagged.” The wig barely shifted as she shook her head. “How did you manage this amazing yet highly improbable feat? Bribes? Sexual favors?”

“I reasoned with him.”

“Well, what a prince. Maybe there’s hope for him yet.”

Lucy’s phone buzzed and she snatched it up with lightning speed.

Brodan:

Just finished, I’m completely wiped and gonna just go home and sleep. Sorry, babe. You understand how it is. I’ll make it up to you.

*Seriously?*

Lucy wished she’d been surprised, but the truth was, from the moment Brodan said he had to work late that night, she’d never really expected him to show. Still, she’d held out hope,



however misguided it turned out to be.

“Brodan’s not going to make it,” she struggled to confess. “He’s exhausted from work.”

“Shame.” The sentiment lacked all genuineness, but her friend’s pinched brows and head tilt screamed pity. She laid a feather-light kiss on Lucy’s temple. “I’d better go powder my nose before my next set. Love you, sweet pea.”

“Love you too. Brunch soon?”

“Count on it.”

Lucy watched Dirty O’Feelya saunter back toward the stage, simultaneously feeling grateful for her friend’s unyielding loyalty but uneasy that her criticisms of Brodan were a little too spot on. She jabbed a response into her phone, careful not to let her irritation show in the message. The last thing she wanted was a fight on her birthday.

Lucy:

Ok, I understand. See you in a bit. Love ya.

The sickly scent of cinnamon whiskey invaded her nostrils, reaching the table before the returning couple did.

“All outta beer?” Lucy joked to hide her trepidation.

“Nah, didn’t ask.” Victor passed around the shots and said, “Birthdays require Fireball, not beer. This will fuck you up properly.”

*Because who doesn’t want to get “fucked up” on their thirtieth birthday, right?*

Lucy instantly scolded herself for her snide view. The offer of a celebratory shot was a thoughtful gesture and she needed to be appreciative, even if that particular libation wasn’t what she would have chosen for herself. With a surrendering sigh, she accepted the drink, her hopes of a beer dashed along with the hope that Brodan would have made it out to celebrate her big day.

# Chapter Two

## *Lucy*

Around one thirty a.m., Lucy secured the deadbolt on the front door of the swanky one-bedroom apartment she and Brodan shared in Belltown. She placed her pumps in the entryway shoe rack, grateful for the usual chill of the hardwood floors beneath her aching feet, and beelined to the kitchen for a glass of water. The wash of cool liquid soothed the burn and aftertaste of alcohol that lingered in her ravaged throat. She'd lost count of the random shots and drinks she'd accepted at The Tackle Boxx and every other club leading up to it. With her next swig, she swallowed an ibuprofen to stave off the inevitable hangover she would undoubtedly suffer in the morning.

Lucy padded across the living room, pausing at the large, curtainless window opposite the kitchen and took in the partial view of the brightly lit Seattle skyline. The concrete jungle ahead of her was impressive but didn't speak to her heart the way being surrounded by trees and mountains did. The city was too loud, too bright, too crowded. Having lived there for more than a decade, she'd become accustomed to metropolitan life while never managing to feel at home.

Leavenworth would be a nice reprieve from the hustle and bustle.

She'd been buzzing with anticipation since Brodan *begrudgingly* agreed to the getaway. Maybe if she could get him outside, into the woods, somewhere beautiful and awe-inspiring,

her city boy would turn into an outdoorsy mountain man. Snorting into her glass, she wiped away the dribble of water that ran down her chin. Maybe “mountain man” was a bit far-fetched. But it didn’t seem out of the question that he might learn to tolerate a hike from time to time.

And that would be enough.

Lucy made her way to the bedroom. She dressed in the new pajamas she’d purchased for her birthday and snuggled under the fluffy comforter beside her boyfriend.

Brodan rolled over and yawned. “How was tonight?” he asked lazily, wrapping an arm around her waist.

“It was . . . fun. But I wish you could have been there.”

“I know. I needed to get some sleep. My brain’s fried after putting together the Tech City proposal. Plus, I’ve got an early start tomorrow.”

“I get it. Just would have been nice.”

“How’s Todd?”

“Great. He says hi. His transformation into Dirty O’Feelya is amazing. We should go support him again soon.”

“Sure.” Brodan nuzzled his face into her hair and kissed the back of her neck. “Mmm. You smell good,” he groaned, his hand shifting to her hip then roaming up beneath her silky camisole.

“Hey, babe?” Lucy murmured.

“Mmm?” His hand firmly cupped her breast, playing with her sensitive skin.

“Thanks again for being such a good sport about our trip. I know you don’t exactly worship on the altar of nature like I do, but it really means a lot to me that you’re willing to give it a try.”

Brodan’s body tensed and his hand stilled. “Uh, about that.”

A weighty disappointment sank through Lucy’s gut, heavy like a jagged rock heaved into a river. “What about *that*?” she demanded, words coming out sharper than intended, and flipped

on the side table lamp.

He squinted at the warm splash of light, adjusting to it as it filled the room. "This is a really bad time. I think we should postpone it for a while."

"What?" Lucy's voice came out in a low rumble. Frustration warmed her cheeks, but she wasn't exactly surprised by his words. She threw back the blankets and flopped her legs over the edge of the bed.

"It's just that Roberta wants me to join her at the yearly convention in Atlanta, and it overlaps some of our trip."

"You've got to be kidding me." She glared over her shoulder. He lounged back against the pillows, hands behind his head, elbows splayed . . . Completely unbothered. "We made these plans months ago, and now that it's less than a month away, we won't be able to get a refund." She lifted her fingers and massaged her temples. *Perfect. A tension headache.*

"Roberta wants to promote me to regional sales manager. And that would come with a dope raise, babe." He finally shifted, kneeling just behind her. Teasing his lips along her neck, he hooked a finger under her camisole strap and slid it down slowly. The attempt at seduction did nothing but stoke her anger.

"Pretty sure your boss wants to give you *more* than a promotion," Lucy mumbled as she snatched the thin strip of fabric back in place.

Brodan pulled back, contempt overtaking his expression. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You *know* Roberta's been lusting after you since you started there. And she hasn't exactly been subtle about it either."

Brodan had worked for Seattle's largest security system company, Locked Down, for the past eighteen months, and his boss, Roberta, had made her intentions crystal clear. With flaming red hair and nails to match, wearing nothing but tight, low-cut

sweaters, breasts lifted high enough to choke herself, Roberta was the definition of a cougar. Honestly, Lucy wouldn't give a rat's ass how the woman dressed—flaunt it if you've got it—except that Roberta had had her sights set on Brodan from the get-go. The couple attended a work dinner last Christmas, and Roberta's hands didn't know how to keep to themselves. They lingered on his shoulder and grazed over his chest. One even landed on his leg and stayed there through the majority of dessert.

Not one to make a scene, Lucy brought it up with Brodan later that night. He'd explained it away, saying that his boss was a flirty person and treated her entire team that way, but what Lucy witnessed that evening hardly supported his claim. Neither did the following social gatherings that played out the same way.

"It's about you not respecting me enough to tell your leopard-clad boss that you aren't interested."

"You realize I'd be kissing my promotion goodbye if I did that, right?"

Lucy's jaw dropped. "Let's see if I have this right. You'd be fine with getting a promotion all because Roberta thinks you'll sleep with her?"

Brodan shrugged. "It'd be, like, a twenty-five percent raise."

"You're unbelievable." Lucy shook her head as the dull ache tightened her scalp and radiated down her neck. *I need another ibuprofen.*

"I never said I'd actually fuck her." He flung back the covers with a groan and popped to his feet. Marching around the bed, he stood over Lucy, arms crossed.

"But you didn't tell her to back off either."

"You're acting real insecure, Luce. This isn't the first time that you've accused me of cheating and, frankly, I find it insulting."

She refused to look up at him. Instead, she stared straight

ahead, boring her sights into the wall beside the bed. They'd had this fight before, though typically, Lucy would back off the second Brodan started calling into question her trust in his fidelity. *He's right*, she'd tell herself. *I should be able to trust him. Otherwise, why stick around?* She'd talk herself out of her anger, even turn around and apologize for her accusations. They'd make up, have sex, and everything would return to normal.

Maybe it was the shot of Fireball at The Tackle Boxx or the two sake bombs she'd choked down at dinner, but she had zero intention of dropping it this time.

"I'm not letting you turn this around on me. I've seen firsthand how she is with you. And that's *in front of your girlfriend*."

Brodan huffed, "Fine. I don't care if you don't trust her. But I've never once cheated on you. Even though I've been tempted many times over the last four years, I've been completely faithful to you." When Lucy didn't look at him or respond, he sat down next to her on the bed. He ran a hand up her arm and softened his voice. "Babe, I have to go. Roberta said it's non-negotiable."

"Did you remind her that you already have this trip planned?" Lucy congratulated herself on her level, placid tone.

"I didn't tell her," he cooed, laying a gentle kiss on her shoulder.

"Why not?" She shrugged off his touch, her harrowing effort at remaining calm slipping away.

He sighed but said nothing.

"Why didn't you tell her you couldn't go, Brodan?" Lucy rose to her feet, hands balled into fist.

"Because this work trip is important to me!" he snarled as he stood and faced her. Brodan towered over her by nearly a foot, but she remained toe-to-toe, unwilling to withdraw from the confrontation. Prepared to have it out. Because she was thirty

years old, *dammit*, and it was about time she stood up for herself.

“And our trip isn’t important to you?” she ground out, craning her neck to look up at him. “Us getting to spend time together isn’t important to you?”

The fire in his eyes died away, and he took a step back. “I don’t think it is.”

“The trip or spending time together?” She popped her jaw, refusing to wince despite already knowing the answer.

“All of it.” Brodan scrubbed a hand down his face and let out a ragged grunt. “Look, Luce, this isn’t working.” He walked to the other side of the bed.

“You’re breaking up with me.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah, I think so.” He sighed and pulled a shirt over his head. “I’ve been thinking about this for a while now, and . . . we’re too different. Maybe it’s best if we cut our losses and call it quits.”

Lucy was speechless. *What the actual fuck?* This had been her life for almost four years, and he wanted them to “cut their losses?” They’d been great together. All right, maybe they were good together. Lord knows she made a lot of sacrifices for him, but that’s what you do! Isn’t it? You do what’s best for your partner; in return, they do the same.

“I am going to head to Steve’s and crash for the night,” he said, stuffing a few things into a duffel bag. “I’ll give you some time to get your stuff together. I won’t be back until tonight after work. That should be long enough.”

“Wait, you want me to move out? In less than twenty-four hours?”

“Well, yeah. This was my apartment to begin with, and you moved in. It just makes sense. Plus, your name isn’t even on the lease.”

He tugged on a pair of black jeans and his Vince Sonoma loafers. Running a hand through his somehow still perfectly

coiffed hair, his bicep flexed, straining against his fitted white V-neck T-shirt. He shrugged and threw his bag across his shoulder.

“I am sorry to do this on your birthday.”

Lucy watched Brodan stalk from the room. The jangle of keys followed him out the front door as it shut behind him, emphasizing the silence with a quiet *snick*.

In their bedroom—correction: what was their bedroom until just a minute ago—Lucy stood dumbfounded. *What just happened?* They’d spent four years together, and though she never could picture herself marrying Brodan, she hadn’t been ready for it to end quite yet.

The notion of going after him flitted through her mind but didn’t linger. Lowering slowly, she sat on the edge of the bed and dropped her head into her hands. She attempted a sob, squeezing her eyes shut, trying to wring water out of a dry washcloth. She had every intention of crying, but couldn’t seem to make the tears fall.



# Chapter Three

## *Later that morning: Lucy*

Lucy had been unable to sleep since Brodan left. She stayed in bed for a while, staring at the side table clock, watching the minutes flip by along with a montage of her life over the past four years. *What a waste.* After the passing of another hour, she said, “Fuck it,” and abandoned the futile pursuit in favor of packing while the rest of the city lay quiet. She showered and started collecting her things in a pile on the bed to take stock of how many boxes she would need. Two short hours later, everything Lucy owned sat atop the duvet, folded and organized into a few neat stacks.

“Huh.” Lucy puffed out a breath and glanced around the room, mumbling to herself, “That can’t be all of it.” She looked up where to find the nearest twenty-four-hour grocery store. Maybe a clerk or stocker would take pity on her so she could weasel a few boxes before they broke them down for recycling.

By six a.m., with a cup of coffee perched haphazardly on top of the large stack of boxes, Lucy lumbered back to the apartment. She set the wobbling game of cardboard Jenga next to the entryway and fished her keys from her purse. As the tower toppled, she snatched the twenty-ounce red eye from the top, saving the blessed caffeine from splattering across the recently recarpeted hallway. With a sigh of relief, she tested a sip. *Ouch. Still too hot.*

She propped open the door with one of Brodan’s large

boots and unceremoniously heaved and kicked the boxes through the threshold. The corner of one clipped a picture frame sitting on the entryway table, knocking it to the floor. She knelt to pick up the photo. It was a panned-out shot of her and Brodan's first date. Above their heads, the iconic Pike Place Market sign glowed a jarring shade of red against the darkening sky. Four-years-ago-Lucy stood on tip-toes, planting a kiss on a grinning Brodan's cheek while he wrapped an arm around her waist. She traced the cracked glass with her finger, wincing when a sharp edge drew blood. A burst of anger filled her chest and she flung the frame across the room. It shattered against the brick accent wall, shards flying in all directions.

"Shit." Despite being dumped on her birthday and told to move out immediately, Lucy wasn't keen on trashing the place. As she swept up the mess, her mother's voice played in her head like a recording: *Look on the bright side, peanut.*

*And what would that be, Mom?*

No response.

*That's what I thought.*

Grabbing a box and her finally-cool-enough-to-drink coffee, Lucy went back into the bedroom to resume packing. When she eyed the stacks again, they seemed even smaller than before. Lucy turned to do another lap through the cabinets and drawers, but paused when her phone buzzed on the side table.

*Brodan?*

Her heart fluttered. With hope? No, it felt more like acid reflux.

Lucy hesitated a moment, considered leaving the phone right where it was, but changed her mind and picked it up. She let out a relieved sigh and smiled weakly.

Todd:

Thinking of you, beautiful! Thank you so much for coming out and supporting this broke queen! Love, love, love you!

Lucy:

You were fabulous as usual!

I can't believe you're up already, though! I'm impressed...

Todd:

Oh, honey! I haven't even MADE it to bed yet! LOL. Just headed home in the cab now.

Why are you up at this ungodly hour?

Lucy:

Couldn't sleep. Brodan and I broke up.

Three dots popped up on her screen then disappeared. Lucy waited for a minute, chewing on her bottom lip, then put her phone down to get back to work.

Thirty minutes and two more sweeps later, the only things Lucy found to add to her pile were an old quilt in the back of the linen closet and a shoebox full of novelty magnets from every national park she had ever visited. The realization that all her belongings boiled down to a few measly boxes was jarring. She hadn't expected to make such a small footprint in her own apartment. *His apartment*. Had she really never demanded more than this?

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. Lucy hurried

over to the entryway, peeked through the peephole and threw open the door. “Do my eyes deceive me, or has the infamous Dirty O’Feelya shown up on my doorstep?”

Todd stood on the welcome mat, eight-inch heels and duffel bag in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other. “Dirty O’Feelya called it a night the second she got your text.” He sauntered by, planting a light kiss on his friend’s forehead. “How are you doin’, sweet pea?” he asked, barely able to contain his grin.

Lucy shrugged. “I’m fine. I’m surprised you’re here.”

Todd tossed his heels aside and sauntered into the kitchen. “I couldn’t very well go home when there’s something so big worth celebrating.”

“Celebrating, huh? I happen to be packing. Are you here to help?” Lucy followed him into the kitchen.

*Pop.*

The bursting sound echoed in the modernly sparse apartment.

“Where are your glasses? Never mind.” He held out the bottle to Lucy, who eyed it with hesitation.

“Isn’t it a little too early to start drinking?”

“First of all, I haven’t stopped, so I’m not technically *starting* anything. But if it eases your mind, it’s half of a mimosa, which is a breakfast drink.” Todd said as he wiggled the open bottle in Lucy’s direction.

“Fine, fine.” Accepting it, she took a long gulp. Hopefully, the alcohol would take some of the edge off her crummy mood.

“That’s my girl.”

“You really didn’t have to come.” Lucy walked into the living room, bottle still in hand.

Todd followed, making his way to the couch. “Yes, I did, sweetie. While I’m clearly doing a stellar job containing my joy right now, I know you’re probably hurting.”

“Yeah, stellar job . . .” Lucy rolled her eyes, taking another gulp.

“So, I came over to give moral support and to help you see the bright side of a shitty situation.” Todd reached out for the bottle of bubbly then plopped down on the black leather couch, duffel at his side. Displeasure contorted his painted face as he attempted to settle into the stiff, uncomfortable couch. After considerable effort, he gave up. “Look. Breakups are never easy, but this relationship ran its course. For far too long, if you ask me. You’ll see once you get a little distance.”

“You’re probably right—”

“Girl, I am always right,” Todd stated, removing the semi-collapsed wig from his head. With the reverence given to a loved (and probably expensive) possession, he carefully laid the wig out on the coffee table. He pinched the corner of the tape banded around his wig cap and peeled the covering off in one continuous strip then sighed with relief as he scratched his scalp with the nine remaining press-on nails. He settled back against the couch clutching the bottle of bubbly. Even in partial drag, Todd was quite the opposition to the gray-on-gray tones of the apartment. His neon colors screamed joy and life, reminding Lucy that outside of the bleak situation awaited a vibrant world of possibilities. The realization should have given her hope. Unfortunately, along with the effervescence of the champagne, it just added to her agitation. The double shots of espresso in her black coffee probably hadn’t helped either. Instead of reassurance, she felt resentment. She’d wasted years of her life with no one to blame but herself.

“But right now, I’m just pissed.” Lucy snatched the champagne, ignoring her friend’s small grunt of protest. She wiped a drop from her lips with the back of her hand and continued, “I couldn’t sleep, so I started packing. No sense

putting it off since Brodan gave me until the evening to be out of here.”

“That yuppie bastard—”

“But that’s not the worst part. I won’t even need that much time. I’ve barely taken up any space in this Patrick Bateman wet dream of an apartment. Everything here that’s mine fits in four boxes.” Anger rose and laced her words. “Will I need to rent a moving truck? *No!* Know why not?”

“I hardly think anyone *wants* to rent a moving truck—”

“Because I haven’t even amassed enough shit in four years to fill *half* of my fucking Kia!” Lucy paced across the living room. “How pathetic is that? Four years, four *years*, and my belongings have been reduced to a few measly boxes.” She took a pull off the bottle she held then another. “—And, AND! Look around. Do you think any of this artwork is mine?”

Glancing around, Todd winced. “Dear god, I hope not—”

“Not a damn piece. I don’t even have a tiny fucking succulent sitting on the windowsill because it wouldn’t *‘go with the aesthetic.’*”

“Well,” Todd said as he took a hesitant breath and retrieved a packet of face wipes from his bag. He pulled a few out and began wiping his glossy lips. “You morphed to fit into Brodan’s life and didn’t expect him to adapt to yours. You edited your world, and he swallowed you up.”

“So, I let this happen. Is that what you’re saying? It’s my fault?”

“There’s no fault, Luce. Take it from someone who spent the better part of twenty years trying to fit into a mold of someone else’s expectations. It’s an easy rut to fall into and extremely hard to break out of. But now you have the opportunity to reinvent yourself.”

Lucy didn’t know if it was Todd’s wisdom or

the twelve-dollar “champagne,” but everything became earth-shatteringly clear. She *had* lost herself. Not all at once. An immediate shift like that would have been easy to detect. No, this had happened over the course of years. How many times had she taken trips to the thrift store to donate a box of plates, picture frames, or clothes all because Brodan hadn’t been willing to make space? How many times did they go out to the types of clubs or restaurants that she hated just because he wanted to? Or blown off her friends to spend time with him and his circle? She always went along with what Brodan wanted, never speaking up to say what *she* wanted. She rarely, if ever, told him no.

“You know what?” Vitriol boiled to the surface and for once in her life she was unwilling to swallow it back down. “I am done being a doormat. From here on out, I’m going to be more selfish. No one is going to walk all over me, and I’m going to be my own boss. Make my own decisions! I’m going to start telling people ‘No.’”

“That’s right, girl.” Todd beamed, carefully peeling the plump set of lashes from his eyelids. “Now, only one question remains. What are you going to do about your trip?”

*The trip.*

*The romantic couple’s nature retreat.*

Lucy’s chest deflated and she stopped pacing for a moment as her shoulders slumped forward. “Maybe I should try to cancel. I doubt I’d get a refund, but it’s no big deal eating the cost, considering.”

Todd thought for a moment then shook his head. “Vetoed. I think you should still go.”

“Really? Why?”

“Get back to what you love and treat it like therapy. It’s already bought and paid for. And, you said so yourself, you probably can’t get your money back.”

“Maybe I could find a friend to come with me . . .” Lucy slowly grinned at Todd, who vigorously shook his head.

“Nice try, sweetie, but I can’t say this emphatically enough. *Hell no.*”

She eyed her friend, who wiggled an outstretched hand, requesting another drink from the champagne bottle. Finding it drained, Todd carelessly tossed the empty onto the couch. Lucy resumed marching back and forth in the living room, wringing her hands together. “So, I should go alone?”

“Yes! It would be very *Eat, Pray, Love* of you.” His mischievous grin made Lucy wary. “Live your Julia Roberts fantasy and do a little soul searching.”

“Hmm. A trip alone. It feels a little sad. Don’t you think it would be sad?”

“No, I think it’s empowering.” Todd stood and adjusted the hem of his dress then walked to his pacing friend. He laid a hand on each of her shoulders. “This. Is. A. Good. Thing. Trust me. You can move in with me until you find a place of your own. Go on your trip, and once you get some distance, you’ll see that you’re better off.” He pulled her in for a strong hug. “I promise.”

Lucy relaxed into her friend’s embrace, inhaling the scent of roses, tequila, and a faint whisp of cigarette smoke. “You’re probably right.”

“Like I said—”

“I know, I know,” Lucy interrupted. “You’re always right.”

“That’s my girl. Now, finish packing your shit while I get changed, then let’s go get some breakfast. Mama’s hungry!”



## Chapter Four

*One month later, on a Friday evening:  
Jonathan*

Jonathan Miller finished a final lap around the supply room. Life vests, paddles, ropes, trekking poles—everything was accounted for on the inventory list. He signed the bottom of the page, removed it from the clipboard, and strode into the back office to file it with the rest of the end-of-day paperwork. Off the Beaten Adventures had already seen an unprecedented surge of business this year, and summer hadn't even kicked off yet.

Warmer-than-usual temperatures accompanied record-breaking rainfall. The snow had long since melted, even atop the jagged peaks that surrounded the Bavarian-themed town. With the unseasonable warmth came an early influx of out-of-towners—mostly city dwellers—seeking adventures in the wilderness. Leavenworth was close enough to Seattle, Olympia, and Spokane for a quick getaway but also far enough to make travelers feel as though they had escaped to unknown lands.

The region was home to Jonathan. His parents were die-hard nature-loving adventurers and ensured he and his sister, Frankie, found a lifelong appreciation for the great outdoors. They'd spent the bulk of their childhood either gallivanting through the woods or doing homework in the guiding company's back office.

At the ripe old age of twelve, Jonathan started accompanying his father on excursions as an assistant guide. He idolized his dad, loving every second of their time spent exploring. Jonathan always

knew he would take over the Miller family business one day; he just hadn't expected it to be so soon.

"We're fully booked for the next three months. Can you believe it?" Janet's sharp hazel eyes peered above the rim of her reading glasses as her boss entered the administrative office. "Business is good, Johnny, business is *really* good."

"I thought we had a lull in the middle of July?"

"We did, but I just got off the phone with some folks out of Tacoma. A large youth group reserved that entire week. About thirty teens and six chaperones will be coming out to backpack, climb, and white water. Booked up the rest of our guides."

Jonathan's eyes widened as he nodded in acknowledgment and walked to stand beside Janet. The calendar filled the computer screen, emblazoned with various bright colors attached to each type of activity. "Ok, well, schedule me where you want me. Our guides will need the support."

"Since you mention it. I do have one excursion next week without a guide attached."

He shrugged. "Now you don't. Put my name down."

"It's a rafting trip." Her words were drawn out as she peered at the monitor, unwilling to meet his eyes.

Jonathan's stomach bottomed out. Throat completely dry, palms damp. Beads of sweat formed along his forehead. Flashes of churning, white water accosted his senses; he could see the swells, feel the mist and splashes on his skin, smell the silt. His once steady heartbeat accelerated, thundering so aggressively in his ears that he could barely hear Janet's worried voice.

"Johnny." He jerked as she laid a cool hand on his forearm and gently squeezed. "You all right?"

"Yeah," he managed to croak out. "Yes."

"Tsk, ts. Forget I said anything." The older woman gently patted his shoulder. "I'll switch things around."

*No need. I've got this, Janet. It's just a little rafting trip. I am an experienced guide, after all.*

Jonathan cleared his throat, wishing he could utter the words. Desperate to mean them. "Thank you," he murmured instead. He'd been stuck in limbo for far too long, balking at the prospect of getting into another raft after . . .

"Here we are," Janet chirped, forcing a cheery tone. "I can swap you and Francesca. She's scheduled for the Beckey Route, and you know how she hates the drive out to Liberty Bell. I don't blame the girl. That five a.m. start is rough."

Jonathan silently let out a cleansing breath. He could lead that multi-pitch in his sleep. And while he was typically up at dawn, his little sister needed to hit the snooze button four or five times before she convinced herself to roll out of bed each morning.

*This will work out better for everyone.*

Despite his relief, a niggling sense of dread lingered. How much longer could he go before his aversion became a real problem?

"Almost done, boss?" a deep, raspy voice called from the back door.

"It's still weird when you call me that," Jonathan hollered back through the office.

Zac sauntered into the office with his usual unwavering air of confidence despite the angry vermilion wash over his complexion. "Evening, Janet. You're looking lovely today."

"And you're looking positively crispy," the usually jovial woman retorted, barely glancing up from her work. "Forget the sunscreen again?"

"Bah. Sunscreen's for the weak." Zac raked his hands through wavy, chin length hair and winced a little. "I'm working on my base tan."

Jonathan cackled, grateful for the distraction from his earlier moment of panic. "I assume you climbed shirtless today too."

"Naturally. Gotta give the people what they want." He propped a hip on the office manager's desk, to which Janet gave him a shove.

"You're on my stack of invoices," she chastised, unmoved by his charm as usual. Jonathan cringed while the sunburned interloper chuckled, utterly unaware that he was pushing Janet's buttons just by being in the room.

Zac's attempts at charisma were met with two distinct responses: delight or ire. The void between the two reactions became wider and wider with each passing year. Jonathan loved his friend like a brother, but while he'd matured and found his way in the world, Zac remained a stagnant playboy who rarely took anything seriously. Jonathan assumed Zac's mischievous behavior and school yard antics were a rebellious attempt to get attention. Zac's folks were always off and away on some business trip or vacation, leaving Zac behind for the Miller's to look after. Jonathan's parents welcomed him with open arms, providing him with a loving environment and a bit of much-needed discipline.

"Er, Zac? Why don't you head to The Rooftop? I'm going to help Janet finish up here then I'll meet you guys."

"You got it, boss," Zac said, standing at attention and giving a lazy salute. He turned and strode out the way he came.

"That boy drives me nuts."

"I know he does," Jonathan empathized, walking over to take the file folder from Janet's outstretched hand. "Despite his cockiness, he's a great guide. But I'll talk to him about giving you some space. Deal?"

"Sounds good." She shut down the computer and stood slowly, various joints popping as she rose. With a final stretch, the older woman collected the stack of invoices and shuffled over to

the filing cabinet. She eyed Jonathan as she pulled a pen from the salt and pepper hair twisted into a bun at her nape. “The Rooftop again?” she queried.

“Yep, with the usual suspects.”

“Hmm.” The noise was followed by a pause stuffed full of opinions yet to be said—yet to be said *today*.

Jonathan waited a beat before he took the bait, knowing that his office manager would eventually blurt out what she had to say anyway. “Yes, Janet?”

“Not that you asked my opinion, and I’m sure you already know what I am going to say—”

He did.

“—I think you need to broaden your interests.”

“Broaden my interests? What is that supposed to mean?” The side of his mouth quirked upward as he tried to hold back a smile and feign seriousness. She pestered him relentlessly about his dating life. Or lack of a dating life, to be specific. She regularly told him what a waste it was for a man like him (tall, handsome, kind, successful) not to date. She liked to say that he was depriving the women in town of “high-quality stock.” Her words, though well-meaning, always seemed to make him feel more like a farm animal than an eligible bachelor.

“Dating, Mr. Miller! Falling in love with a special someone. I didn’t find my Jerry until I was fifty years old, and from that day, I cursed myself for not trying to find him sooner after my first husband passed. We’re social creatures, young man.” She peered over the top of her glasses again and waggled her pen at him before tucking it back into her hair. “We are not put on this earth to trudge around as solitary beings. It’s been four years since Cynthia’s passing; may she rest in peace. It’s time you start living your life again.” She closed and locked the filing cabinet with a metallic clunk. “You deserve happiness, dear. You’re too good of

a man not to.”

Jonathan crossed his arms and shrugged. “I *am* happy. I’m doing what I love and honoring my dad’s legacy by keeping this place going. I get to be outside every day. I live close to my family and see them all the time. I have a tight-knit group of friends I can rely on. I have *you* looking out for me. What more could I possibly need?”

“A pretty girl to warm your heart,” she stated then turned, mumbling just loud enough for him to hear, “and your bed . . .”

“And with that, I am calling it a night.” Jonathan scrubbed a hand down his face. “Are you about ready?”

“Oh, you go on.” Janet waved her hands dismissively in his direction. “I can lock up. Just have to gather my things, then I’ll be right behind you. See you tomorrow, dear.”

“You too, Janet.”