

## 6. *A Girl Is Here for the Introspection*

JAMIE

August 28, Friday Evening

Colorado

This just in: I love Terry, the early-thirty-something-year-old white lady with a New York accent and wild dark curls who owns this retreat. She picked me up from the Denver airport and we chatted the whole way here. She runs this Colorado retreat during the summer, and the rest of the year she's an elementary school art teacher, which is fabulously weird. She's engaged to a dude back in New York, and she laughed me off when I told her long distance was a death sentence. We're gonna be friends.

I follow her through the grass to a registration table set up in front of the cabin she parked us next to. The little square house is built up on six-foot risers with a set of steps leading to a front door.

Terry settles herself in the registration table chair and offers me a friendly smile. "Jamie, I really love your hair."

I snort and ruffle my permed, grown-out, neon orange frizz ball. "Wow, unpopular opinion, thanks, Terr! The fam hates it."

My roots are dark brown now and the orange starts around my ears. It's a look. It clashes with the red overalls I'm wearing today. I love a good color clash.

Terry laughs. "I'm sure they don't hate it."

They do.

I take stock of the area as Terry organizes some papers. The registration cabin is at the edge of a valley surrounded by towering trees. Across the way, the land swells upward into a hill, and atop that hill snakes a line of small, boxy cabins.

Alas, my new home.

“You have your cell?” Terry asks. She pulls out a lockbox and yanks a key necklace over her head while I fish my phone from my pocket. I offer it to her as she unlocks the box.

Terry dubiously eyes my old-fashioned, non-smart, baby blue slide-up phone with an iPodesque click wheel like it’s a stick of dynamite.

I raise my eyebrows. “What?”

“What is that?”

“It’s my phone.”

Her warm demeanor dims. “We have a strict no-phone policy here, James. Is this really your phone?”

“Terry, go ahead and make a call. It’s my phone.”

She plucks it from my palm and screws around, sliding the buttons open and closed. Her face contorts. “What is this, like the Chocolate?”

I clap my hands. “Good eye! I like to stay behind on the latest tech.”

“Okay . . .” She drops my phone into the lockbox and replaces the lid before handing me a clipboard with a pen dangling from a balled metal string. “Sign up for five activities and one group chat. During your open time, you’re free to wander, hike, stargaze, visit the cafeteria, journal, come talk to me, whatever soothes your mind. Down by the cafeteria there are six different trails, all with different mantras and philosophical ideas to ponder during your hikes.”

I bob my head in approval. “Do you have a favorite?”

“I love peace, but luck is probably my favorite. It’s happy haunted.”

A smile jumps up my cheeks. *Fabulously weird.* “What the fuck is happy haunted?”

Terry shrugs. “It’s haunting in a happy way.”

I head bob a couple more times, holding her eyes as I snatch the pen dangling from the clipboard. “I love it.”

## ACTIVITIES

- 1) Meditation by the Lake
- 2) Yoga
- 3) Rock climbing—FULL
- 4) Group Chat A
- 5) Slacklining
- 6) Group Chat B
- 7) Fishing
- 8) Cooking
- 9) Fire Choir

I scribble down fishing and slacklining. “So all the other retreaters are here?”

“We prefer to refer to our fellows as students.”

“Students of what?”

“Life,” she says simply.

I frown. “Okay, I dig it.” I pick three more activities and hand her back the clipboard. “So, we have the rest of our time . . . to fill ourselves, out here in the nothing?”

“Yep, there’s no shortage of ways to occupy your time and find introspection.” She hands me a plain brown journal from a pile on the table. “Here’s a new slate for your thoughts. You should put in a new entry every day.

“Activities are over for today, the sun will be setting in the next hour. You’ll receive a schedule later under your door.” She smiles. “For now, go get settled in cabin ten.” She holds out an old brass key that I pluck from her palm.

“Grand.” I spin to face the fifteen or so tiny cabins looming up on the hill. They’re across the grass clearing, about two hundred yards away, tucked under a swath of trees.

There’s a lake down a little trail that starts a few feet behind Terry and her registration table. She grins and points to her left. “Feel free to follow this trail, it leads down to the lake and back up to the student cabins.”

“Aces.”

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The world is so much greener outside of Los Angeles and New York. I've gotten used to being the blip of color within a constant gray palette. The dirt path I'm on is lined with bright, saturated green wilderness. Up ahead a lake shimmers golden with the dying light of our beloved ball of fire. A small cabin with canoes propped up against it sits a little ways from the waterline. I've never been in a canoe.

I skip my way down to the long wooden boats, toss my bag on a patch of grass, and glance around before tugging at the boat farthest from the water. It's heavy, but I heave until the thing groans and slides sideways off the side of the tiny house. I leap out of the way, leaving it free to slam bottom-first into the soft dirt. A small boom echoes as it clashes against the ground.

"Look at you." I grin at it, snatch up my pack, and take a seat on the bench inside, looking out at the water. *Let the introspection begin.* "Really, why canoe on the water when you can have the same experience from the safety of land?"

"Excuse me?"

"Gah!" I whip around.

An early-twenties, tall, brown-skinned dude with dark hair wearing a green rediscover yourself retreat T-shirt is standing behind my boat, holding a giant stack of lime green papers under his arm.

The guy's hot. Killer jawline. Big brown eyes. Great hair.

I turn back toward the water. "You're not excused. How dare you sneak up on a lady. I'm canoeing over here."

A moment passes before he adds, "You're not supposed to touch the canoes."

"I'll return it."

He ventures closer till he's standing slightly in front of me, beside the boat with his stack of papers.

I squint up at him. "What are you, the canoe police?"

"I teach the fishing class." I drop my gaze as he lifts a foot to step into the boat.

Instead of landing in the canoe, his sole gets caught on the rim. The guy fumbles and his whole collection of papers goes flying. They flutter around me and the surrounding area like oversized lime-green confetti as he drops

horizontally across the boat. He catches himself in a push-up position, his muscly arms bracing against the dirt outside the opposite rim of the canoe.

After a moment, I slow clap from my front row seat. “Wow. You okay?”

“Crap.” He rights himself and skitters around picking up the papers.

“Crap, crap, crap.”

I lean down and pick one up myself. *A Guide to Canoe Safety.*

- 1) Always wear a lifejacket
- 2) Never stand in a canoe away from shore
- 3) Carry a canoe whistle
- 4) Bring a rope to pull a swimmer to safety

I stop reading as the dude settles onto the boat bench across from me, re-sorting the pamphlets into a neat pile.

I raise a brow. “Is that how all the pros mount a canoe?”

He stares at me for a second. “Well, these aren’t actually classic canoes. They’re a weird canoe–row boat hybrid . . . technically. But they do the job. We call them canoes because they all say canoe along the side.” He points to my left.

I nod. “Okay, I see. So what you’re saying is you’re used to the classic canoe mount technique and these slightly different canoe-boat hybrids are throwing you off your usual step-into-a-canoe flow. And thus, that fall was completely warranted.”

The guy stares for another moment before bobbing his head in agreement.

I bend over the left edge of the boat. A snort blows out of me as I spot the word *canoe* printed in large, faded, old-fashioned yellow bubble letters. I swing back upright, cackling at the joke potential.

Hot guy tilts his chin down, really hitting me hard with the full force of his fantastic bone structure. “I’m Zarar, Zarar Jafri. Did you just arrive?”

“Wow, full-naming it. I’m Jamie. James George Federov for long, apparently the last student of life to arrive this session.”

He studies me. “Your eyes are . . . captivating.”

I waggle my brows. “I see you’re single.” I shoot him a smile before standing up. “I’m not here for that, but it was great meeting ya, I’ll see

you in class.” I step out of the boat and shove my bag over my shoulder.

“Peace.”

“Wait—”

I start toward the cabins. “Don’t worry. I’ll face this way so you don’t trip over my eyes on the way out.”