
ONE

EMILY

Jason dumps me while I'm wearing a bucket hat.

When I look back on this someday, I think that's the detail that will haunt me the most. Not that he broke up with me halfway through our weekly out-and-back hike, meaning we had to spend three very awkward miles together on the way back to the trailhead. And not that he dumped me for a professional dog walker named Piper who somehow wears overalls and a fanny pack without looking like a harried mom at Disney World. I won't even be most disturbed by the fact that he broke up with me three weeks before we were scheduled to take a very important, very nonrefundable trip to the most remote national park in the lower forty-eight.

It'll always be the bucket hat.

It should be one of the basic rules of being a decent person. Like *don't wear white to someone else's wedding* and *don't date somebody who's rude to the waiter, don't dump your girlfriend*



while she's wearing a hat with an adjustable chin cord seems like basic manners.

I knew the hat was a bad idea. When I studied my reflection in the REI changing room, it practically sparkled under the harsh fluorescent lighting. It had a sun-protective neck nape and a reinforced brim that could best be described as nauseating, with tiny blue fish stitched onto the yellow canvas. It was horrifying, and I looked horrifying in it.

"I can't tell if I look more like a large toddler or a grandma on vacation," I told my sister Brooke, who squinted at me as she, too, tried to figure it out.

"Both, I think," she said finally. "I can't decide. But buy it anyway. You don't want skin cancer."

So I bought it. But now, as I'm sweating my butt off in the ninety-degree heat and listening to Jason explain that it's him, not me, but it's also kind of me, I regret my choice. It's like the time I went on a midnight ice-cream run wearing a tunic and sweatpants tucked into snow boots only to run into my hand-some ex and his new girlfriend. They spotted me carrying four cartons of cookies 'n cream to the checkout, two tucked under each arm, and today is still worse. Because at least then I had dessert.

Today started out like every other Saturday for the past six weeks: I woke up, second-guessed my life choices while I hastily ate a protein bar, and drove with Jason to Hocking Hills State Park, where we strapped on our backpacking gear and hit the trail. By *hit the trail* I mean that he pranced over tree roots and muddy puddles with the grace of a nimble deer, and I tried my best not to slip on a wet leaf and break my leg.

Before we reached the first mile marker, however, I knew something was up. Jason, who rowed crew in college and gives off Tony Perkis from *Heavyweights* vibes when engaging in athletic endeavors, usually doesn't mind that I hike at the pace of a decrepit turtle. It's not that I'm lazy—my sixth-grade PE teacher wrote, *Emily tries hard, so that's something!* in the comments section of my report card—so much as wildly unathletic, and Jason usually peppers me with encouragement that borders on grating. But today, he didn't remind me that *The longest journey begins with a single step!* when I tripped on a rock and landed on my ass. Nor did he cheerfully inform me that *Nothing is impossible; the word itself says I'm possible!* when I mistook an Eastern milk snake for a rattlesnake and watched my life flash before my eyes. He just hiked silently, not even whistling as we started the steep ascent toward the turnaround point.

If I had oxygen to spare, I would have asked him what was up. But because cardiovascular exercise robs me of my breath and my general will to live, I focused on pushing through the burning ache in my muscles. Turns out I didn't have to ask anyway.

"Emily," Jason says once we reach the trickling waterfall that marks the turnaround point. "I need to tell you something."

I freeze. Hardly anyone calls me Emily; it's always Em or Emmy or Dr. Edwards. Even Jason's mother, who once snidely described my taste in living room decor as *Cracker Barrel gift shop, minus the subtlety* doesn't call me Emily. That's because she calls me Emma, but still.



“Um, okay,” I say, wondering if he’s about to announce that Taylor Swift died or something. The last time he went this many hours into the day without humming “Eye of the Tiger,” he was about to tell me that Bed Bath & Beyond was closing forever. And Bed Bath & Beyond was my happy place. “Shoot.”

He takes a deep breath, as if steeling himself to drop a bomb. “I can’t go to Isle Royale with you. Because, well, because I want to break up.”

I would have been less surprised if he told me he drank deer blood and sparkled in the sunlight. “Huh?”

“I know how important the Isle Royale trip is to you, and I can’t go,” he says, nudging a rock with the toe of his hiking boot. “It wouldn’t be right.”

I blink at him as my brain tries to assemble the sounds coming out of his mouth into something that makes sense. Isle Royale National Park, a jagged stretch of island in Lake Superior so remote that it can only be reached by ferry or seaplane, is my emotional and physical Everest. It’s also the site of the super important backpacking trip Jason and I are scheduled to take in T minus twenty days and counting. The super important trip that he’s bailing on, apparently.

“Em?” he asks, waving a hand in front of my face. “Are you okay? Can you hear me?”

His voice sounds muffled and tinny, and I wonder if the suffocating early September humidity is making me hallucinate. Surely my boyfriend of two years isn’t dumping me right before the one week I’ll desperately need his love, support, and ability to carry a shit ton of camping gear on his back.

“Water, please,” I croak, rubbing my throat and pointing to the canteen fastened to Jason’s day pack.

He passes it to me hurriedly, watching with wide eyes as I lift the canteen to my lips and gulp like my life depends on it.

“I, um, I know this is probably difficult for you to hear,” he says, his eyes going even wider as some of the water goes down the wrong pipe and I break into a coughing fit. “But I think it’s best for everyone.”

I sputter again, so loudly that I startle a family of robins from a nearby oak tree. It’s definitely not best for everyone for me to attempt a solo backpacking expedition in a national park that lacks potable water and cell service but has plenty of wolves and moose. It’s certainly not the best thing for *me*. The closest I’ve ever come to camping is watching *Troop Beverly Hills* on repeat as a kid, and I single-handedly ruined Wilderness Day for my entire fourth grade Girl Scout troop in a hapless attempt to make daisy chain necklaces. (Note to self: if you can’t find any daisies in the forest and substitute in a leafy green plant instead, make sure that plant isn’t poison ivy.) Unlike Jason, I am not built for surviving a week in the great outdoors. I’m built for appreciating a good pair of cashmere socks and reading Nora Roberts books by the fireplace.

“The thing is, you haven’t been yourself this last year,” Jason continues, studying me with mild alarm as I frantically dig through my day pack for a granola bar. “You’ve been really distracted, which is understandable. Considering, you know, what happened.”

My fingers locate the bag of peanut M&M’s that are supposed to be my post-hike treat, and I tear it open so roughly



that half the candies fly out. *What happened* is that on a chilly October afternoon eleven months ago, my dad died. One second Jason and I were eating Chinese takeout on the couch, and the next I was answering a frantic call from the tearful bookstore owner who watched Dad collapse in the checkout line. Roger Edwards Jr., a bearded, bear-hugging guy who still listened to baseball on the radio and never watched a World War II movie that didn't make him misty-eyed, had suffered a sudden massive heart attack. He died next to a cardboard cut-out of Clifford the Big Red Dog, the Jesse Owens biography he wanted to buy on the ground beside him.

Of course I haven't been myself since; losing your best friend will do that to you.

"Is this because I left your mom's party early?" I ask, crinkling the candy bag with my fingers. "Because I stayed as long as I could."

Last week, I'd left Judith's sixtieth birthday brunch long before she even opened my present, a rose gold pendant necklace with her and Jason's initials that took me three painstaking attempts to wrap. But after she gave me a pointed eyebrow raise for ordering a second mimosa and sharply corrected me for using the fancy forks out of order, I cried in the bathroom and peaced out. It wasn't her criticism that reduced me to tears, even though it hurt. I cried because of how hard it was to watch Judith, who called Jason's assistant *the help* and tried to sit me at the kids' table at Thanksgiving, ring in another year of berating waitstaff and terrorizing managers while my dad was gone.

It's not that I wanted anything bad to happen to Judith,

even if I had spent two years trying to (not literally) kill her with kindness. I just missed Dad so much that it ached, and running off to the bathroom to listen to one of the *Hey Emmy, just your old dad here* voicemails saved on my phone hadn't helped the situation. So I left before I could ruin the fancy vibes of Judith's party with my fun little mental breakdown.

"Not at all," Jason says. "I know how hard you've tried with my mom. It's just . . . we barely connect anymore. You're always at work or on your phone. And when you do get a day off, you seem way more interested in going to HomeGoods than spending time together."

I take another sip of water, mostly to ward off the tears swelling in the corners of my eyes. As much as I want to protest, he isn't wrong. After Dad's funeral, in addition to the grief, I felt a restlessness that made it impossible to relax. Working double shifts in the ER kept my mind and hands busy, and with every chest compression I performed or chest tube I placed, I felt like I was helping some other family avoid the fate that befell mine. And in an attempt to make my inner world cozy and soft when the outside world was anything but, I spent entirely too much money on handwoven accent rugs and cute ceramic planters shaped like pineapples. When Brooke came over for dinner last week, she took one look around my apartment and warned me that if I hung one more piece of wall art with a cutesy phrase like *moody for foody* or *more espresso, less depresso* in my alcove kitchen, she'd stage an intervention.

"HomeGoods had a lot of steep markdowns last month," I tell Jason quietly. "I got those watermelon hand towels half off."



He lets out a long exhale. “I know this year has been rough on you, so I’ve tried to be patient. But at some point, you have to start moving on, you know? You can’t keep living in the past.”

I chew my bottom lip, letting his words sink in. I don’t think Jason, a thirty-eight-year-old man who screamed at the ref when his adult kickball team lost the league championship, has any right to accuse me of living in the past.

“I am moving on,” I insist. “That’s what the Isle Royale trip is all about. I’m going on my dad’s behalf so that I can say goodbye properly. The way he would have wanted.”

I pause and shove a handful of M&M’s into my mouth, hoping a blood sugar boost will get rid of the woozy, light-headed feeling that just washed over me. “Besides, we’ll be in the literal woods for six days with no work or phones to distract us. That’s basically a couples retreat!”

He blinks. “With all due respect, I don’t think spreading ashes is part of your standard couples retreat.”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm the pounding in my chest. If Jason backs out of the trip, I’ll be forced to go into the wilderness alone. And considering that I don’t know the first thing about filtering drinking water or starting a campfire, my chances of being mauled by a wolf or accidentally swallowing a brain-eating amoeba are greater than zero.

“I can’t go alone,” I say, practically shouting to hear myself over the hum of buzzing cicadas. “We’ve been together for two years. Shouldn’t that count for something?”

He sighs and passes me a second canteen from his hydration belt. “There isn’t a linear relationship between time and

love, Em. I think you and I both know that. Besides, do you hear yourself? You said you can't go alone, not that you can't go *without me*. There's a big difference, and it's time we stop pretending otherwise."

I press the canteen to my forehead to cool my burning skin. Jason's words are harsh, but maybe he's not saying anything I don't already know deep down. Since we met at the complimentary breakfast our hospital hosted for National Doctors' Day, our fingertips brushing as we reached for the same basket of stale blueberry muffins, our relationship was driven more by convenience than chemistry. By the time I realized it, though, I was planning Dad's funeral, and it was easier to keep laughing at Jason's mediocre jokes and dragging myself to monthly dinners with his family than create another disruption in my already blown-up life.

So I nod, even though I wish I could argue. "Maybe you're right."

He wipes sweat off his brow and breathes a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad you agree. And look, I know my timing sucks, but you can just push your trip back until spring, right? So Brooke can go with you."

I pull the canteen away from my forehead. He might as well have said, *You can dye your hair green and become an Oompa Loompa, right?*

"No," I say. "No, absolutely not."

Dad, who died exactly one month before he was set to retire from his career as the editor of a small-town newspaper, had a mile-long bucket list of things he planned to do with his newfound free time. Some of his dreams were goofy—sample



every fried delicacy sold at the state fair, convince Brooke and me that *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* was a cinematic masterpiece—while others, like solve an Amber Alert and fish with Jeff Goldblum, were patently ridiculous. But the goal he was most excited about was visiting the national parks. After raising two stubbornly indoorsy daughters who made him attend countless teddy bear tea parties and suffer through every Mary-Kate and Ashley movie in existence, he was ready for fresh mountain air and crackling campfires. Don't get me wrong, he loved being a girl dad and could paint nails and French braid with the best of them, but he'd earned the chance to follow his own passions.

The national park Dad was most excited about was Isle Royale, and he asked Brooke and me to join him on a hiking trip in celebration of his retirement. We couldn't say no to the man who taught us to tie our shoes and do long division and love beyond measure, and so he'd booked our ferry tickets and planned our backpacking route months in advance. It was going to be the official kickoff of his national park adventures, and Brooke and I promised to be good sports and not complain about being briefly separated from air conditioning and our ten-step skincare routines. But then Dad died, leaving us heartbroken and haunted by what-ifs, and my sister and I vowed to go on the trip anyway. We'd stick to his planned itinerary and spread his ashes and pay tribute to the dude who loved donuts, *Indiana Jones*, and us. And when Brooke got pregnant and understandably backed out, we agreed that I would still go on our behalf. We'd made a promise to Dad, and I intended to keep it.

I still do.

“I’m not postponing,” I say firmly, both for Jason’s benefit and to quiet the nagging voice in my head warning me that this is a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad idea.

“Well, what about asking a friend to go?” he suggests, as if any of my friends would sacrifice a week of PTO to sleep on the ground and possibly contract Lyme disease. “I mean, you run to your car every morning because you’re scared of your neighbor’s Pomeranian. I’m not sure you should be going into wolf country on your own.”

I stare at him, wondering if he’s suffered one too many kickballs to the head. “Of course I shouldn’t go on my own. That’s why I invited you! And everyone’s afraid of Tipper. He’s unhinged! Besides, I don’t run to my car. I walk briskly.”

My boyfriend—no, ex—shakes his head and reaches into his pocket, pulling out a folded piece of paper. “I really am sorry for leaving you in the lurch. But I made you a list of reputable tour guides that work in the national parks. Promise me you’ll look into them?”

I consider tearing the paper into bits and sprinkling them over his head like confetti, but I’m more mature than that. Besides, it’s very wrong to litter.

“I promise nothing,” I say dramatically, but I take the list from his outstretched hand. He is a meticulous researcher, even if he mostly uses his skill for looking up *Zelda* cheats.

“I’d go with you as a friend, if I could,” he tells me, which is the exact same thing my high school lab partner said when he politely rejected my invitation to the Sadie Hawkins dance. “But I have, well . . .” Jason trails off and points at something



on the ground, clearly trying to distract me. “Hey, look at that ant!”

“You have what?” I ask, wondering what’s so important that it’s worth leaving me to my own devices in the untamed wilderness.

“Well. I made, um, plans. Other plans.”

“Other plans?” I repeat, watching a profusely sweating Jason fan himself with a trail map.

“I . . . well, I’m going to an EDM festival,” he admits, his words barely a croak. “With Piper.”

I don’t know which bit of information baffles me more: the idea of Jason, who’s terrified of porta potties and stans hard for Michael Bublé, willingly going to an electronic dance music festival, or who he’s going with.

“Piper?” I ask, perplexed. “Isn’t that your neighbor’s corgi?” His cheeks burn scarlet. “*Posey* is my neighbor’s corgi.

Piper is the dog walker.”

When I look at him in bewilderment, the flush spreads down to his neck. “*Posey* escaped her leash while I was getting the mail last week. I helped Piper catch her before she peed on the Wilsons’ hydrangeas, and we started talking. Turns out we have a lot in common.”

“Oh,” I say softly, dropping an M&M.

“Oh.” “I really am sorry.”

I nod and massage the hard ball that’s formed in my throat. It’s not the breakup that’s making my teeth clench, or even the revelation that he’s dumping me for an early-twentysomething whose complete lack of a capsule wardrobe will give Judith an aneurysm.

It's that I now have to say goodbye to my dad alone.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry for having this conversation in the middle of a hike," Jason adds, slipping on his polarized sunglasses. "I've been meaning to talk to you for a few days now, but I hoped sunshine and endorphins would make the news go down easier."

I don't bother explaining that I get endorphins from bubble baths and color coding my bookshelf, not from hiking. Instead, I catch a glimpse of my bucket-hat-wearing reflection in his sunglasses, and just like that, I have the answer to the question I asked Brooke in the REI changing room.

"Grandma on vacation," I whisper. Jason stares at me.

"Huh?"

"Never mind." I tear my hat off with a grumble, cursing my sister for letting me buy it.

"Are you okay?" He raises his sunglasses to get a good look at me. "I really do want you to be okay."

It's an odd statement coming from someone who just said some very not okay things to me, and I don't know what to tell him. I don't know if I'm okay, or if I will be, and I really don't know how I'm going to manage hiking fifty miles across a remote island when just this morning I was outpaced by a group of sprightly senior citizens. Wiping my palms on my shorts, I try to imagine what Dad would say if he were here right now. *You're acting like a fool, son*, he'd tell Jason, his voice booming but without malice. *Don't act like you've never seen a damn ant before.*

The thought eases a fraction of the heaviness in my heart, but it's not quite right. Because if Dad were here, he wouldn't



worry about Jason. He'd pass me my water bottle and encourage me to take another drink, then tell me the same thing he did when I was a gap-toothed kindergartener nervous for the first day of school or an over-caffeinated twenty-year-old panicking about the MCAT.

You got this, Emmy, he'd say, showing me how to place my hand on my heart and focus on steadying the beat. *Just breathe. I'm here. You're okay. I'm here.*

Once I calmed down and wasn't teetering on the edge of a panic attack, he'd nod and give me his signature toothy grin. *See? You got this. Adventure awaits.*

I'm here. You're okay. I'm here. I breathe in and out, closing my eyes until the pounding in my ears subsides.

"Good luck, Jason," I say, not bothering to respond to his question as I slip my pack onto my shoulders. "And a word of advice, if I may? Never make Piper move to the back seat so Judith can sit shotgun."

He opens his mouth to say something, but I don't wait for his reply. I just start hiking back the way we came, reminding myself that I might be the furthest thing from a wilderness girl, but I can do this. And if not, I have to at least try.

"Hey, Em?" Jason calls, jogging to catch up. "Don't forget, we drove here together. Can I still catch a ride back with you?" I'd like to tell him where to shove his polarized sunglasses.

"Seriously?"

He shrugs and holds up the bucket hat. "You forgot this."

I glance from him to the hat and back to him before sighing and taking it from his hand.

“Come on,” I mutter, gesturing in the direction of the trailhead.

Then I pull the hat down over my hair and quicken my pace.

Because whether I look like a large toddler or a grandma on vacation or just a sweaty thirty-three-year-old trying to piece the jagged edges of her broken heart back together, I have nothing left to lose.

Adventure freaking awaits.