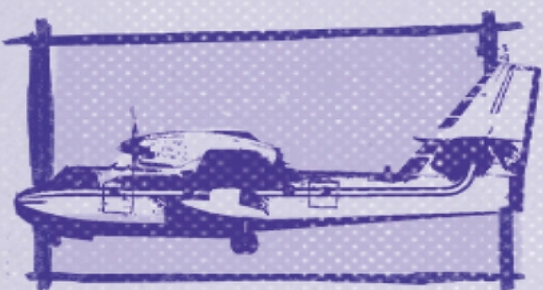


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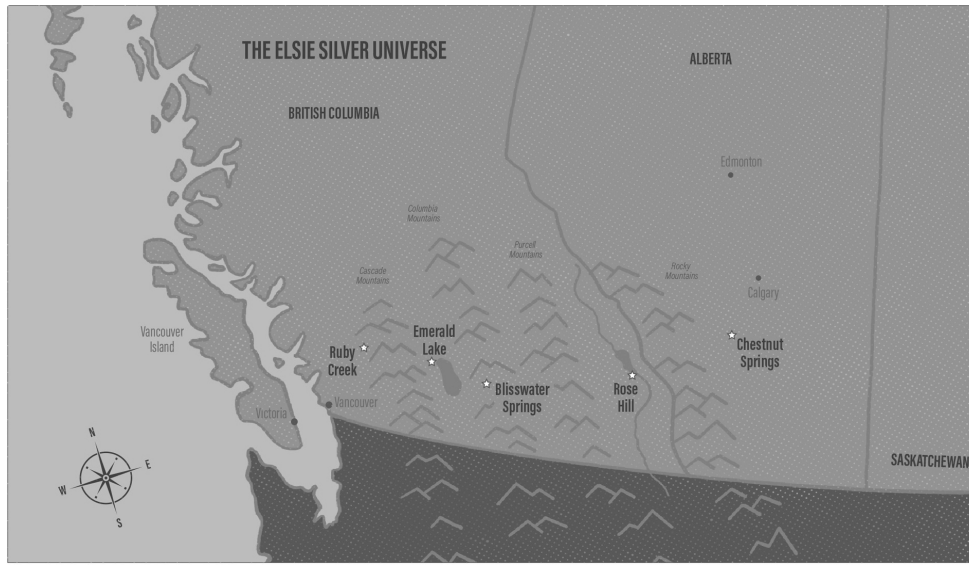
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*For the ones who were told their dreams were too dreamy but who went on
to make them come true anyway.*

*And for my awful high school English teacher, Mr. C, who looked me in the
eye at sixteen years old and told me I'd never be a good writer. Thanks for
the motivation.*



Description

A map showing Ruby Creek, Emerald Lake, Blisswater Springs, Rosehill and Chestnut Springs. British Columbia and Alberta are to the north and Vancouver Island is to the west.

READER NOTE

This book contains mentions of weight stigma and reflections on fatphobia. It incorporates brief discussions related to body shaming. I would like to thank the early sensitivity readers and clinical therapist I employed throughout the writing and editing process for helping me ensure that these topics were handled with the care and attention they deserve.

Please be advised that one main character is a firefighting pilot and as such there are detailed scenes that explore natural disasters and related subject matter.

CHAPTER 1

Bash

ONE YEAR AGO...

I'M STUCK IN AN AIRPORT, AND EVERYONE IS ANNOYING ME.

"We're delayed again, but it's so beautiful outside that I don't even mind," a voice singsongs from the row of blue pleather chairs behind me. It's a nice voice. Rich and calm and, based on the way she's chatting away on the phone, not at all frustrated by being stranded in a snowstorm. "I feel like I'm living in a snow globe or something."

I scoff, flexing my fists beneath my crossed arms. We've been waiting to board for three hours, and this woman doesn't even mind.

And I believe her. I don't bother looking in her direction, but I can tell by her tone, the awe seeping into every word, that she's never seen snow and would describe this nightmare as "cozy."

"Yeah, honestly... it's cozy."

Yep. There it is. Whoever she is, she's enjoying this.

Must be fucking nice because I'm ready to crawl right out of my skin. People sneezing without covering their faces, babies crying, the smell of stale bagels. I've walked laps like a tiger pacing his cage, and even that isn't taking the edge off anymore.

Leave it to Vancouver to be the only place in Canada that doesn't know how to handle a snowstorm. And it's not even *that* bad.

The crackle of the speakers filters through the low hum of Gate 82's waiting area. "Attention all passengers awaiting boarding for Air Acadia flight 2375 with service to Calgary. We regret to inform you that your flight has been canceled and rescheduled for tomorrow morning. You should

receive an email shortly with updated flight information. Please see a booking agent if you require further assistance. We appreciate your patience and understanding and look forward to serving you tomorrow.”

A communal groan rolls through the space. What follows is a string of announcements delivering the same message to neighboring gates: no one is getting out of here tonight.

My head drops back against the chair’s metal top and I let out an exhausted sigh. It’s been a crappy week, and this is just the bread that makes the whole thing a shit sandwich.

I’d empty my entire bank account just to sleep in my own bed tonight. To be alone with some fucking peace and quiet. To decompress.

Instead, I am fully compressed. Every muscle feels tight, and my jaw hurts from clenching it. Even my lungs feel constricted.

This was the last thing I needed after having my entire world turned upside down.

“Yeah, canceled.” That too-happy voice floats through the air toward me. “It’s okay. It is what it is. I’m going to make the most of it! When life gives you lemons...”

It squeezes the acid right in your fucking eyes.

I push to my feet.

A peek over my shoulder reveals a shock of wavy, platinum hair draped over the woman’s face as she rifles through an oversize bag, her phone pressed to her ear.

My brows scrunch low as she laughs at whatever the person on the other end of the line has said. I shake my head as I turn away and heave my bag onto my shoulder, deciding she’s altogether too happy. It’s not normal.

For some reason, her cheerfulness sours my mood even further. So with my heavy footfalls echoing on the polished concrete floors, I head toward the booking agent’s desk to see if there’s a way I can get the hell out of here.

Waiting in line doesn’t ease my annoyance. As it turns out, I’m not the only one in a foul mood. An angry middle-aged man ahead of me has gone from agitated to a full-blown meltdown. He points his index finger at the frazzled customer service representative, demanding she fix this—as if she personally created the snowstorm.

He’s mad about his bags. He’s mad about the lack of available accommodations. He’s mad about the new early flight time.

I'm mad too, but I'm not punching down over it. And the longer I watch, the more I'm just mad about what a royal asshole this guy is.

The girl's cheeks darken, and her bottom lip wobbles. When her eyes fill as she shrinks back from his tirade, I've had it.

"My man." I project my deep voice toward the desk. "Shit happens. No need to speak to her that way."

Heads swivel in my direction, including the one belonging to the red-faced man. "Excuse me?" His jowls vibrate with fury, his lip beneath his thick mustache curling as his eyes home in on me. I get the sense that he's not accustomed to people telling him off.

I shrug. Looking nonchalant is the ultimate affront to someone who wields their power in such a belittling way. "Take a walk," I say in a low rumble. "It is what it is."

"It is what it is?" His eyes bug out, his pie face turning an even deeper shade of red.

I can't believe I just used that woman's line on this guy, but I'm getting a kick out of confronting him, so I borrow another sentiment from Miss Happy.

"Yeah, it's like when life gives you lemons, don't be an asshole to the service staff. Or something like that."

The man stares at me, and I stare back. His gaze sweeps over my favorite plaid flannel shirt, then down my black jeans and leather boots. I'm bigger than him, and while it's been a few years since I threw a punch, I'm not above it. I may be pushing forty, but I'm in great shape, and it might feel good to release this tension.

His beady eyes skitter across the hushed crowd, as though assessing how embarrassed he should be (the answer is very embarrassed). He must realize I'm not an easy target because he turns back to the woman behind the desk—who looks suitably shocked—and swipes his paper ticket off the counter before storming away as fast as his furious little legs will carry him.

Watching him waddle away in a huff makes my lips twitch.

And here I thought nothing could make me smile tonight.

Though her shy *thank you* pulls on my heartstrings a bit, my polite exchange with the agent behind the desk doesn't make anything any better—the closest hotels have no availability because of other cancellations and our flight has been rescheduled for a 6 a.m. departure.

It's currently 11:08, which means by the time I get through the hellish

traffic in and around the city to a place with a vacancy, I might as well turn right back around since I'll need to clear security all over again. The only reasonable solution is to sleep on a bench in the terminal.

Everything about tonight sucks, but I swallow my frustration like a real man and thank her for her help before leaving to find a place to hunker down for the night.

Tired legs carry me through the airport as I scan for a spot where I can go horizontal for a few hours. Years of battling active forest fires have left me with the uncanny ability to doze off almost anywhere and function with little sleep. Wildfires don't care about your bedtime and often like to do their worst after dark, so I'm no stranger to catching some shut-eye in uncomfortable places.

Except, I'm not the only person who seems to have resigned themselves to sleeping at the airport tonight.

I stand in place, hands on my hips, searching for even a free corner, but the place is like a fucking hostel, people and bags splayed all over the place.

The only place my eyes land on that has a free spot is the bar. One lone table for two at the edge of the seating area, tucked right next to the walkway that leads to the bathroom. It's not glamorous, but it's something. And a drink sounds pretty damn good right now.

I don't bother asking if it's available. I just march past the deserted hostess stand and stake my claim. And just in the nick of time, based on the stream of people who walk up and peer around the restaurant like they can will an open spot into existence. But their wishful thinking is futile. The bar top is packed, shoulder to shoulder, with a mess of bags cluttering the floor. Frantic waitstaff hustle between the tables, struggling to keep up with the unexpected Monday night rush.

I feel bad for them too, so I pull my phone out and scroll as I wait—it's not like I have anywhere to be. The news about the snowstorm and all the chaos it's causing across the Pacific Northwest makes me shake my head. In almost any other Canadian city, this wouldn't be an issue. But here? Not enough plows. Not enough deicing machines.

As I internally scold a major airport, a voice catches my attention.

The sound of it pulls me right out of my downward spiral.

I glance up, and there she is. The lemonade girl.

Woman.

Because there is nothing girlish about her. She carries herself with a

confident ease, wearing soft, feminine curves like she invented them. And that voice? It's the furthest thing from girlish. That voice is all grown-up. It's not giddy or overly bright. It's all honey and spice, smooth with a hint of heat—borderline sensual without even trying.

“Not a single spot in the entire place?”

There's a kid at the front now who looks barely old enough to be working here. He stares back at her, and I can tell he's not immune to the heart-shaped face with matching heart-shaped lips. He looks ready to build her a chair himself, just to give her somewhere to sit.

As her gaze searches the restaurant, he watches her raptly. And I follow suit.

No wonder he's practically panting. He's just encountered a modern-day Marilyn Monroe—but she's even more buxom. Loose, platinum waves fall next to full cheeks and a button nose. But it's her big blue doe eyes that are a fucking kick to the gut. They're so vibrant, I swear they trend toward a lavender tone.

I shift in my seat and focus back on my phone. I'm too damn old to be gawking at a pretty girl in the airport. Scrolling the news is far more appropriate.

“S-sorry. I wish I could—”

I hear him trip over his words and chuckle.

Poor fucking kid.

“Oh, don't be sorry. I see a spot over there, actually. I appreciate your help.”

I scoff under my breath. Help. That's generous of her.

“Something funny?”

I hear that voice again, closer this time. And when I look up, she's standing right in front of me.

And fuck me if for a moment I don't feel as tongue-tied as the kid I was just laughing at. I stare back at her, feeling like I could squirm under the weight of her soulful gaze.

I grumble out an irritated-sounding no to cover for my otherwise-stunned reaction.

I deemed her pretty before, but I was wrong—she's fucking gorgeous.

Her lips tug up in an almost-knowing smile. “Good. I'd hate to sit with a stranger who's laughing to himself over nothing.”

“Sorry?” I ask, confused.

But any confusion vanishes when the woman slides the chair opposite me back from the table and takes a seat.

Uninvited.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

I straighten, a little put off by her... familiarity? Friendliness? I don’t know how to define it, but it throws me off. I’m not the guy who strikes up conversations with strangers. Hell, I barely like striking up conversations with the few people in my life that I consider friends.

“What if someone else is sitting there?” I grumble, not particularly comfortable with the unexpected nature of this run-in—or how attractive I find her.

She sets her bag on the floor with a husky, amused laugh. When she straightens, she doesn’t look remotely uncomfortable, resting her elbow on the table and propping her chin against her palm. “No one else is sitting here.”

I cross my arms and lean back, creating some space between us. “How do you know?”

Her head tilts, the overhead lights highlighting the apples of her cheeks. “No bag. No phone. And you are giving off some serious stay-the-fuck-away energy.”

I quirk a disbelieving brow at the woman. “Stay-the-fuck-away energy?”

She hits me with a conspiratorial smile. “Yes. If you were a house, I would sage you.”

Ah, more granola, woo-woo, make-lemonade, salt-of-the-earth shit. Exactly what I’m in the mood for.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing, and I suspect she picks up on my cynicism, but she just reaches across the table. That same tattoo I saw earlier catches my eye as dainty vines and leaves unfurl in my direction.

I frown at her hand, which gets me a throaty laugh followed by “Hi. Thanks for inviting me to join you. My name is Gwen, and you are?”

I glance back up, and her sparkling eyes flit between mine, a dimple deepening on her right cheek the longer I glare back. I swear to god, she’s getting a kick out of irritating me.

So, to ruin her fun, I reach for her hand with a brusque “Hi. I’m Bash. And I think our definitions of *invite* might be wildly different.”

Gwen lifts one shoulder in a gentle shrug. “Maybe this seat was meant

to be empty.”

My lips flatten. “Yes, exactly. It was.”

She laughs softly, head shaking as though I fascinate her. “Yet here I am. And you know what they say... When life gives you lemons...” She winks at me, and my jeans feel the slightest bit tighter across the front.

My jaw flexes but I give the woman seated across from me my best bored look in a pathetic attempt to cover for my downright boyish reaction to her.

“What if I wanted limes?” I ask, right as a flustered server pops up at our table with a breathless, “What can I get you?”

With her eyes fixed on mine and that pretty mouth curved into a knowing smile, Gwen—the interloper—doesn’t miss a beat. “Oh, thank goodness you’re here. This man desperately needs a lime margarita. Extra sour.”