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1

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# DAY ONE

# *Zeke*

I wake up on the houseboat wearing a trilby.

. . . huh.

I look around, moving gingerly. You've got to approach a hangover like this carefully in case it's a feral one. The boat's not changed much in the last five years: same wonky rectangular skylight, same wooden cupboards built into the sloping walls. One thing should be different, though – there should be a Lexi in this bed with me. A gorgeous, surprising, complicated Lexi.

I frown up at the skylight, pushing the hat back off my forehead. Has she . . . already left? I thought we'd have coffee first, at least, but I guess this is karma doing her thing. You can change your ways, but the past'll always catch up to you, and I've snuck out of enough morning-afters to earn a stint as the one left behind.

The houseboat sways beneath me. I grip the side table. Must be one of the larger boats from the marina passing too quickly. There was a surprising amount of that last night, and some

drunk idiot threw something at the hull, too. The sound had been loud enough to make Lexi pause beneath me for a few gasping breaths before she said, *Do we need to go check that out?* We'd started to get up, then kissed again, then forgotten all about it. It was an amazing night – worth breaking all my rules for. The sort of sex that makes you wonder why you ever do anything but that.

I close my eyes again. God, she was beautiful. Is beautiful. I guess she's still beautiful, she's just doing it somewhere else.

There's a new cold twinge in my stomach, a kind of wistful sad feeling, and I stay still for another moment to figure it out. I think I'm almost . . . missing her. Which is ridiculous. We met *yesterday*. Maybe this is the thing everyone says happens once you 'open yourself up to finding something meaningful' – the bit where suddenly everything seems to hurt. Not sure how I feel about it, so far.

I slide out from under the duvet, shedding my trilby and reaching for my boxers. When I open the bedroom door, I find Lexi standing at the sink in the tiny galley kitchen, wearing the same massive bun and irritated scowl she had when we first met. I smile when I see her, and it feels sort of like a reflex, like jumping at a loud noise. I'm glad she's still here. She doesn't smile back.

'Oh,' she says. 'You're up. I'm just figuring out coffee.'

'Hey. Yeah, sorry, I should be doing that,' I say, immediately getting distracted by the sight of myself in the bathroom mirror.

The door to the bathroom is just behind Lexi, a concertina one that my dad made himself. It's folded back into the frame right now, giving me a full view of my embarrassing bed hair.

I pat sleepily at my head, despite having been cursed with this hair for twenty-three years and knowing full well that without mousse there's absolutely no way to sort out the situation. One curl's sticking up at the front, like a question mark hovering above my forehead. Should've kept the trilby on.

'There's no kettle,' Lexi mumbles, pulling open all the cupboard doors in turn. This shouldn't take long – there're only four – but she does each of them twice, in a different order, as if she's not sure which one she looked in last.

Guessing Lexi's not a morning person either.

'Yeah, no,' I say, having another go at my hair. 'I don't think the boat's hooked up to shore power anyway right now, and . . .' I lean to open the fridge beneath the countertop, then wince. It smells of gone-off cheese. 'Yeah – the battery's flat.'

I pause midway through closing the fridge. That's weird. It's fully stocked with food. I asked to buy all fixtures, fittings and furnishings, and the seller agreed to leave basic bedding and kitchen essentials, since it was a rental and she wasn't attached to any of that stuff anyway. But do fixtures and fittings include, like, groceries?

'The fridge isn't working?' Lexi says, ducking down to stick her hand inside. 'Shit. I didn't notice.'

She rubs her forehead. She's got a thin gold ring on her pinkie finger and it catches in a sunbeam edging through the kitchen window's curtains. The kitchen on this boat leads straight into a living space that's maybe three metres by two: it's got a wood burner, two fixed chairs and a corner sofa. The fixed chairs are new. I don't love them – there's not really room. I frown, noticing that the cushions from the sofa seem to have ended

up on the opposite side of the boat some time during the night. Which is . . . also weird. Was that us, last night?

'I'm not totally on top of everything right now,' Lexi says, testing how cold the milk is with the back of her hand. 'Seems I can't offer you a coffee.'

'You don't need to make me a coffee. Why don't I go out for them? Bring us back some pastries and flat whites.'

She looks up at me, suddenly focused. I wonder if it was the word *pastries* or *flat whites* that got through to her.

She takes me in. Her eyes scan across my bare chest and flick up to my bad hair. Lexi's eyes are round and icy blue. Sharkish, in a gorgeous kind of way. They're what snagged me at the bar – well, not first, first was her line about how *suffragettes died for this shit*, then second was the curves, *then* it was the eyes. They're what made me break my rules.

'I've actually got quite a bit to do today, so . . .' She looks away.

No coffee, then. All right. That's fine. Better, probably.

'Can I walk you to your boat?'

Her eyes snap back to mine. 'What?'

'Uh . . . I just . . . was thinking I could walk you back . . . ? Or not?'

She's looking at me as though maybe I'm really stupid, even though last night she'd said, *You're smart, aren't you? Not school-smart, but actually clever.* It'd made me embarrassingly happy – I've never been called clever before, except in a sentence like, *You think you're so clever, don't you, Ezekiel?*

'You don't need to walk me anywhere,' she says. 'This is where I'm staying. I'm staying on this boat.'

'Umm . . . hey? What do you mean?'

'I'm staying on this boat,' she repeats slowly. 'As in, this is my friend Penny's houseboat. And I'm staying here for a bit.'

'Uh? No? This is my houseboat,' I say, leaning a hand on the counter as the floor shifts beneath me. 'I bought it on Wednesday.'

Lexi's eyes grow even wider. 'Are you fucking with me or something?' she asks, straightening up to her full five foot one – five foot three if you count the bun, she'd said at the pub.

'No,' I say, trying to focus. I need water, fried food, and one of those coffees that's so strong it erodes the roof of your mouth as you drink. 'It used to be my dad's. He lived here when I was a kid. When he passed away a few years ago, I sold it, but then I decided . . . Yeah. You know. I came up here to buy it back. Didn't we talk about this last night?'

More deadpan staring.

'We talked about you buying a houseboat last night, yes,' she says. 'But it wasn't this houseboat. Because this is Penny's houseboat.'

I guess I'm . . . missing something here?

'Is this a joke?' I ask.

Lexi reaches into the back pocket of her jeans and tugs out her mobile phone, frowning for a moment before shoving it back in again. 'OK, I have no signal, but if I did, I'd show you – it's on Houseboat Getaway Rentals.'

'It was on Houseboat Getaway Rentals,' I acknowledge. 'Before I bought it. Is your Penny called Penelope Manley?'

Lexi freezes. 'Yes,' she says, voice low with suspicion.

'Right,' I say, relieved. 'Then she just sold me this boat.'

'No, she didn't,' Lexi says, after a moment's pause. 'No, she

didn't. She would have told me if she was selling this boat. It wouldn't be online any more, either – it wouldn't be showing up on Houseboat Getaway whatever-it-is, would it? That's . . . No.' She scowls, shoulders tense now. She's getting upset. 'Is that why you came home with me from the pub? So you could get on this boat and claim squatters' rights, or something?'

'No! What? I didn't even . . .' I rub my eyes hard. 'Last night . . .' I try to piece it back together. 'I fobbed us into the marina. We chatted to Paige, you helped her sort the rope, then . . . we headed in. How did you not realise this was my houseboat?'

'*You* helped her sort the rope. And *I* fobbed us into the marina.'

This kind of feels like pointless semantics, as my sister Lyra would say.

'Didn't it seem weird to you that Paige said it was my boat?'

'She didn't,' Lexi says, staring at me. 'She said . . .' She presses her hand to her forehead. 'I can't remember exactly, but I'd remember if she'd said that. This is ridiculous. Penny wouldn't sell the houseboat without telling me. The key was still in the key safe, everything is the same as always . . .'

'I picked up the keys from the company that manages the boat rental yesterday,' I say. Though I haven't actually checked there aren't extras in the key safe, so I guess she could be telling the truth.

'This doesn't make any sense.'

Lexi looks around, staring at the mustard-coloured curtains pulled across the windows, the bland seaside paintings, the kitschy corgi-themed clock screwed to the wall in the narrow sliver of space between the bedroom doorframe and the kitchen cabinets. I follow her gaze and notice the time. Half twelve. I'm

always a fan of a long lie-in, but that's late even for me. When I turn back to Lexi, she looks kind of crumpled, as if someone's just given her some really bad news, and I feel shitty all of a sudden, because I think that someone might be me.

'Shall we go out for coffee?' I say. 'Talk this over properly?'

She's frowning down at her phone again.

'Lexi?'

'No,' she says, looking up at last. 'I'm not going to leave the houseboat. It doesn't seem sensible. In the circumstances.' She gives me a rare smile. It looks totally insincere. 'You are welcome to leave the boat, though.'

. . . hmm.

'Shall we at least sit down?'

'Maybe you could put some trousers on,' she says, 'if you're going to sit on Penny's sofa.'

'It's not . . .'

I deliberate. Best not. Caffeine first.

'I'll get dressed,' I say, turning on my heels and stepping back into the bedroom.

My bag is jammed by the bed, sitting in a pool of sunlight. It looks like a perfect July day outside – the skylight shows a rectangle of rich blue sky.

As I yank on last night's trousers and the one clean T-shirt I packed, I try to sort my head out. Being back on Dad's old houseboat is weird enough without adding in a beautiful woman who won't let me sit on the sofa.

I emerge from the bedroom to find Lexi staring at the little wood burner as if she's lost in thought. She looks a bit intimidating: the leather jacket, the frown, the way she plants her

feet like she's waiting for you to try to throw her off balance. She makes me want to figure her out, which I have no right to do. This was a one-night thing, even if it's dragged on a bit. She was very clear about that, and . . .

'I'd like you to go,' she says.

. . . she's definitely not changed her mind.

'Last night was . . . Well. You know, you were there,' she says. 'But we had an agreement, so yeah. Thanks. Goodbye.'

I'm the one who's staring now. She might play tough, but she's not meeting my eyes. I'm hit with a memory of the two of us kissing against the marina fence last night. *What the fuck are you doing to me, Zeke?* she'd said. *I'm literally shaking.*

'I'm not leaving. This is my boat.'

I pull out my phone. I've not got any signal. I know Gilmouth's not exactly the metropolis of Northumberland, but how have they not sorted out their rubbish phone coverage yet?

'I'm sure I can find something in my emails that proves I bought it.'

I scroll through the downloaded messages, trying not to get pissed off. People often take me for a pushover – it's the clothes, maybe, or the 'propensity to daydream', as my mum always puts it. But I'll stand up for myself when I have to.

'Let's just go somewhere where we've got some signal,' I say, giving up on my email. All my downloaded ones seem to be newsletters from brands telling me how eco they are.

'OK. You first,' she says, tipping her head towards the door.

'Seriously?'

She just blinks at me.

'You want me to walk out first? What, so you can . . . shut me out? Of my own boat?'

'I have no reason to think you own this boat.'

'What about my *key*?' I say, but I'm already patting my pockets and realising I don't know where it is. Bedside table? In my bag? 'Look,' I say, 'if you want, we can walk through the door together.'

We both turn to look at the short, narrow door to the deck.

'This is ridiculous,' Lexi says.

'No, yeah, I'm with you on that.'

We wait in silence, contemplating the door. She glances at me. Checking to see if I'm budging. I look back at her, perfectly polite, not going anywhere.

'Oh, fine,' Lexi snaps. 'I'll go first.'

She wrenches the door open, and then pauses there, framed against the sky.

I let myself look at her. Hourglass figure, bun shifting on the top of her head as the water tips us back and forth, her big black boots braced on the bottom step. I've never met anyone like Lexi before. Suddenly that new cold twinge starts up in my stomach again and I don't want her to walk out of that door.

'Wait,' I say, just as she turns to look at me.

I inhale. Her expression's completely changed. She looks . . . horrified.

'Zeke,' she says, staggering up the steps onto the tiny deck.

I'm right behind her. I duck through the door. The first thing that gets through to me is the smell, not what I'm looking at – it smells fresh, like sun and salt.

I straighten up and stare out at the water.

Water. Just water. Sea and sky and sea and sky and sea and sky. No boats. No marina.

No *land*.

'Fuck,' Lexi says, clinging to the railing. 'Zeke – are we out at sea?'