

CHAPTER 1: ROCK BOTTOM BLUES



ROCK bottom looks different for everybody, and so does redemption. Though I didn't know it at the time, for me, rock bottom and redemption both looked like a sparse room with splintery plywood walls. This room contained nothing but a battered twin bed with a stained, thin mattress. It had only one window, and even that had a black sheet stapled over it to block out any light.

The mattress was gross, the room was dark and dusty, and I was in the depths of despair. Because I had been unprepared for this journey in nearly every way possible, I had neglected to pack a pillowcase or sheets. So, I was sitting on my sleeping bag, propped up against my pillow, which was covered with a garish tie-dye t-shirt in lieu of a case. I was Lamentations-style ugly crying, complete with wailing and gnashing of teeth, because I was reading a Bible devotional.

I'm sure the passage was supposed to be uplifting but, if so, it was lost on me. The topic was about how the ancient Hebrews used to heap all of their proverbial sins on a sacrificial goat during Yom Kippur. After the sin heaping, they sent the poor goat out into the wilderness to die, taking their burdens with it. Hence, the term: "scapegoat."

I'm staunchly against animal cruelty, but damn, I could've used a goat right about then. I'd have ridden it the hell out of there. Ol' Billy would've had an easier time carrying me than he would have had staggering under the weight of my problems.

To say I was in a dark place at that point in my life would be an understatement. On the other hand, it would also be technically untrue because I had just been dropped off at Boy Scout camp in Middle of Nowhere, Alaska, two weeks before summer solstice, in the land of the midnight sun.



I have found that women who were not born in Alaska tend to end up there for three main reasons: they are either super-adventurous thrill seekers, they come for a job, or they move for a guy. My journey to camp in Alaska started with me hyperventilating at my best friend Emily's kitchen table in Milford, Ohio, sobbing over the mess I had made of my life.

I was in the middle of a massive quarter-life crisis. I had made some bad choices, to say the least, and paying the piper was making me absolutely miserable. Most of my bad choices had revolved around a man I had loved, and when that relationship ended, it shattered me. I'd clung to him so hard that I'd been totally blinded to the fact that the relationship had chipped away all of the good things that make me who I am, like self-respect. My downward spiral had been so subtle that I hadn't

noticed that it was happening until I was just a husk of myself with a broken heart.

Additionally, my job was horrible and going nowhere. Nothing had worked out as I had planned. Worst of all, I had not given myself any kind of safety net. I felt like my heart had been kicked through a cheese grater, leaving me feeling broken, irrational, and lost. Was I overdramatic? Maybe. But, I was twenty-six years old and felt like I would never be able to crawl out of the hellhole booby-trap I had dug, and then set, for myself.

So, as I sat at Emily's table, wailing things like, "I want to jump off a cliff," my sweet friend humored me and consoled me, like girlfriends are supposed to. However, her pragmatic husband, Joe, wasn't having it. Emily comforts with unconditional love and support, but Joe comforts with his steadfastness. Joe just looked knowingly across the table to Emily and authoritatively declared, "You are going to be ok. I know it and you know it." I felt as if I would never be ok again but I have learned that Joe knows what he is talking about.



A few days after the kitchen table caterwauling, I was driving home from my horrible job, thinking about how nice it would be if an anvil fell on me. My phone started ringing, pulling me out of my morbid reverie. It was Joe. In our entire friendship, I had never received a phone call from him, so I assumed Emily was calling me from his phone. I answered, expecting to hear Emily's voice, but instead, without even really receiving a greeting, I heard Joe rush out with, "Hi. So...before you say anything, hear me out. You're going to quit your job and go work at Boy Scout camp in Alaska this summer. You don't have any good reasons not to."

“Um...I’m going to do WHAT?” I spluttered, shocked, as I tried to process what he had just said. (Joe is a gloriously bearded Eagle Scout manly man who worked six summers as a High Adventure Guide at the previously mentioned camp. He spent his summers guiding groups of Scouts on river trips and schlepping them on road trips all over the North Star State. Emily also worked as the aquatics director at the same camp for a few summers, after she and Joe started dating.)

“Listen,” he said gently, “Emily and I have been really worried about you. You know how Emily likes to say a prayer every night?”

“Yeah,” I said hesitantly.

“Well, last night she talked me into praying for you, for a way that we could help you. It’s not really my thing, but I did it anyway.”

I listened intently as I felt tears forming. It meant a lot that Joe prayed for me. Emily is basically a guru, but Joe handles his spirituality very privately.

“Well,” he continued, “I didn’t think much of it, but this morning my boss from camp called completely out of the blue. The person they had planned to have as a ropes course director fell through and she asked if I knew anyone who would be good for the job.” He paused. “I told her about you. They’ll pay for your flight and training and you’ll need to be there by June 12th.”

“Uh...” I started to say, but he interrupted me.

“Emily and I already talked about it and we’ll fly up with you. We’ll make a road trip of it and show you around Alaska before we drop you off at camp.”

My head whirled with this information. My initial reaction was to balk. *This was too good to be true. People didn’t just suddenly get a free plane*

ticket to a job that was 3,500 miles from all of their problems. What would I do when camp was over? What was I going to do with a bunch of Boy Scouts? I didn't know anything about Scouting. I didn't even have a sleeping bag. My mom was going to kill me. I couldn't just up and leave my life in Ohio. Or could I?

Joe then gave his closing argument by saying softly, "I normally wouldn't say this, but I think it's a God thing and I think you should do it. You know you don't have any good reasons not to and this is what you need. Alaska is amazing and you will love it." Joe's invocation of divine intervention was the nudge I needed. I remember feeling a wave of hope rush over me, thinking, *Maybe he's right. What do I have to lose anyway?*

At that point in my life, I really just needed someone to hold my hand and tell me what to do, and there was Joe, offering the opportunity of a lifetime. By the end of the conversation, I had agreed to go and teach high and low ropes courses and rock climbing in Alaska. I put in my two weeks notice at work the next day.



Maybe you can blame my grandparents for why I ended up in Alaska. When I was a kid, my Grandma Judy and Grandpa Stan always sang Johnny Horton's "The Battle of New Orleans" and I loved it. It was pretty much my favorite song. I requested to hear it so much that they finally got me a cassette tape of "*Johnny Horton's Greatest Hits*," which I then listened to on a little white tape player every single night of second and third grade. I fell asleep listening to Johnny croon about whispering pines, love, and adventure.

My two other favorite songs were "North to Alaska" and "When It's Springtime in Alaska." The songs gave me images of mountains and adventure,

and also of saloon girls, which I thought might be a fun job to have. I liked their ruffled skirts and how they always got to sing and dance on top of pianos.

Maybe listening to these songs every night during the formative years of my childhood somehow sealed my fate. Maybe I accidentally brainwashed myself with some time-released “you will go to Alaska” message, even though it was never really on my conscious radar.

Anyway, as I set about preparing to go live at a Boy Scout camp in Alaska, I found a “*Johnny Horton’s Greatest Hits*” CD at a dollar store. Listening to those old songs buoyed my spirit as I drove around the gear stores of Cincinnati, collecting sporks, wool socks, and the other camping accoutrements that I would need for my Alaskan adventure.



In addition to being my best friend, Emily and I sang together in a rock cover band. The night before we were to leave for Alaska, Emily arranged for our band to play at a local bar. She wanted the gig to double as a going away party for me.

Unfortunately, that morning, Emily and I both woke up with head colds. When we got to the bar that evening, one of us, probably me, got the hare-brained idea to treat our colds by taking (many) shots of Jack Daniels. With help from the whiskey, my throat felt better and I also became THE BEST DANCER EVER! I was braver than I’d ever been at a show and I danced and played to the audience like a wild woman. Emily and I were basically rock stars...until our third set. I am not proud to say that I do not remember our third set.

Apparently, I wouldn’t stop dancing to come back on stage to sing. Then, I ended the night screaming to our keyboard player, “PETE! PETE!

PLAY PIANO MAN!” over and over until he acquiesced just to shut me up. After that little spectacle, Joe drove me back to their house where I then had an hour long “I love you, guys” sobbing fit.

“What a classy lady,” said nobody about me that night. Seriously, how Emily and Joe managed to remain my friends through this time in my life is a testament to their sainthood.

Let’s just say the next morning was rough. You know it is going to be a bad day when you have a hangover before you even open your eyes. I dragged myself out of bed to assess the damage in the bathroom mirror and discovered that I looked like an extra for the brothel scene in *Les Miserables*. I dreamed a dream of days gone by, when hope was high and...I wasn’t a dumbass. I staggered to the kitchen where Emily and Joe just regarded me with pity.

“How ya doing?” asked Emily with a wry smile.

“Just Old Yeller me,” I moaned in my gravelly voice. “Take me out back and end this.”

Instead of mercy killing me, she just forced me to eat some watermelon. Emily was in much better condition than I was, somehow. Maybe because she had a husband who forced her to drink water and she is not as stupid as I am, or at least was.

Because I hadn’t packed the day before, like I was supposed to, I had to make the forty-five minute drive back to my dad’s house to get all of my stuff. Though I was in the process of moving back home from my apartment in Cincinnati, my room at my dad’s house was empty except for my giant frame backpack, my camping gear, and a big pile of clothes. I looked forlornly at the pile and started trying to organize things in my hung-over fog.

I ended up just lying on the floor and staring at my stuff, willing it to pack itself. As I lay there, I thought about how my present situation was the perfect metaphor for my very existence. I had incapacitated myself by my bad decision making, and everything in my life was piles of chaos.

However, in my previous months of misery, one thing I had learned was that even though you might want to lay down and die, you're eventually going to have to pee or something and you're going to get up, like it or not. So, I got up and crammed my stuff into every available crevice in my pack. Then, after picking up Emily and Joe, my dad drove me to the airport.

Haggard and hung-over, I staggered through the airport with my forty-pound backpack, my purse, and my guitar. As we waited for our plane to arrive, Emily and I drank Bloody Marys at the airport bar and I started to feel like a human again. We boarded the plane and my life changed forever.