

Chapter 1

I was on the verge of a panic attack and my guided relaxation app was failing. I ripped off my headphones and clung tight to my Linus, though he was doing nothing to calm my nerves. It wasn't the flight that was causing me duress, it was my recent life choices. When the fasten seat belt sign lit up somewhere over the Great Lakes, the hipster couple seated beside me started breathing heavily. I didn't know why they were stressing and I hadn't yet spoken a word to them, but maybe we could find comfort in our shared anxiety? I jerked my head to the right. "I'm totally freaking out."

They stared wide-eyed and smiling at the blank screens on the seat backs in front of them. I tried to look away as Air Canada's assigned piece of fluff fluttered on, but I had to sneak a peek. No lie, she was giving him a tug. When he finally leaned his head back and sighed, I turned to him and asked, "Well, how was it?"

"Yeah, all right, thanks."

That was it?

He smiled, balled up the blanket, and threw it on the floor. I wondered how many happy endings my blanket had seen, and discarded it immediately.

The tugger stared transfixed at my lap. "May I ask you a question?" she muttered.

I felt like I was the one who should be asking questions, but I opened my hands wide and said, "Ask away."

"Why do you keep caressing that little blue towel?"

"It's my Linus. I've had him all my life and he goes wherever I go." I ran my fingertips over his soft prickles. "He helps me relax. I guess we all have our methods of relaxation."

"Oh . . . uh-huh . . . okay." She tugged at her boyfriend's sleeve and they shifted their bodies away from me, nodding like I was insane.

Are you kidding me?

You just jerked off your boyfriend while I sat here and watched. I buried my face in my Linus. Maybe I am insane.

Two months ago, I was finishing up my second year at university and working in a high-paying union job at a Safeway supermarket. My shift started at 7:30 a.m., the day after my sociology final. My essay about Durkheim and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* was, I thought, spot on. Panem had devolved into a state of anomie. My argument was sound but my professor was emphatically erudite and downright moody. Perhaps he would hate the pop culture reference. My GPA had never dipped below 3.9. Would this be its undoing?

I was fileting a halibut when this woman stepped up to the seafood counter, though it was beyond me how she could step anywhere in her thigh-high boots with six-inch spike heels. Designer clothes

hugged tight to her taut body; she looked like she had just walked off the set of *Gossip Girl*. She flicked her waist-length auburn hair off her shoulders and played with the zippers on her leather jacket. I smoothed my blue and white polyester uniform, straightened my “Alex at your service” name tag, and asked, “May I help you with something?”

“How old are you?” she asked.

“I’m twenty.” After fifteen seconds of wordless scrutiny, my nervous chatter kicked in. “Actually, I’m turning twenty-one in September, on the twenty-first. I’m a Virgo.”

“Okay, here’s the sitch.” Her voice was throaty and dangerous. “My name’s Robin. I’m a scout for a modeling agency in New York. You’ve got the right look for us. Maybe even something special.”

Special, me?

“I’m guessing 5’9 ¾, and you’re about 145 pounds. It’s not like you’re fat.”

Fat?

“You’ll definitely need to put down the fork and run up and down the stairs a few times. Having said that, you have a lot of potential.”

“Potential for what?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“You’re peddling fish, right? The modeling industry is peddling flesh. You’ll be the commodity. We’ll sell your image to photographers, fashion labels, and beauty products. The payout can be huge.” She paused for dramatic effect. “You will be scrutinized, adored, valued, and devalued. You will be rejected. It’s a runway to hell, kid, but perdition does have its perks.” She threw her card on the counter. “Call me.”

My best friend, Mike, gaped from the end of aisle twelve, where he was stocking shelves. He abandoned his case of salad dressing and ambled over as Robin breezed out the door. “What the fuck was that all about?”

“She works for a modeling agency in New York.”

“And she spends her afternoons hanging out in the suburbs of Canada dressed like a dominatrix?” Mike asked. “What’s with the boots?”

“I think she looks cool.”

“She’s got something,” he conceded. “She’s definitely worth a look.”

“For your information, she thinks *I’m* worth a look. She thinks I could be a model.”

Mike leaned in tight, squinting his eyes like he’d never seen me before. Finally he took a step back and said with the utmost sincerity, “I don’t get it.”

I didn’t get it either but my hands moved to my hips and I snapped, “She happens to be an expert, and she thinks I have something special.”

“Hey Al,” he smirked. “You have fish guts in your hair.”

I called Robin the next day and we arranged to meet at her hotel in Vancouver. I finished my shift at 4:00 p.m. and shot downtown. When faced with the prospect of being late or arriving in my Safeway uniform, I had opted for the uniform. Tardiness is not part of my vocabulary. Mercifully, there was a T-shirt in the backseat of my car, but I was stuck with the blue polyester pants. I swept my hair in a bun and charged into the hotel, arriving at Robin’s suite somewhat disheveled but with minutes to spare.

She was clad in the same all-black, skintight clothes, but barefoot this time. “What’s with the pants?”

“They’re part of my uniform.”

“Is this uniform a staple in your wardrobe for interactions outside of Safeway?”

It occurred to me that in this instance, tardiness might have been the better choice.

“It’s not my first choice, but it has been known to happen when I’m rushed.”

“It takes a certain sense of confidence to walk around in those things,” she remarked admiringly. “But please, don’t bring them to New York.”

She was far less intimidating in this setting, without onlookers, and without the boots.

“Do you really think I could be a model?” I asked.

“Absolutely! You’re a diamond in the rough. Really rough.” Her eyes were fixed on my pants. “But we can buff out the edges.”

I always wanted to be talented. I’d dreamed of being on Broadway. I’d love to be special, but I’d resigned myself to reality. If you’re 5’2”, you’re not going to play in the NBA, and if you’re Alex Emmerson, you’re not going to sing or dance for a living. Maybe not even in public. Studying was something I excelled at, so I was striving for success in at least one area. That’s why my GPA was so freaking important. But maybe this was *my* chance to be in the spotlight. If only my high-school frenemy, Lydia Baker, could see me now. Not just her. Her whole posse of mean girls. It’s pathetic how much I still care about what they think, but I do.

She grabbed a proper camera, not an iPhone, opened the curtains wide, and maneuvered me up against a wall.

“Take your hair down and let me take some pictures of you and a quick video to send to Metropolis.”

“Metropolis?” It sounded like a city in a superhero movie.

“It’s the agency I work with.” She started snapping pictures.

“Here’s the thing, doll: 20 pounds seems like a lot to lose, but it’s not.”

I beg to differ.

“Once you develop some healthy eating patterns, you’ll discover a whole new you.”

A whole new me might take more than dropping 20 pounds.

“You’re going to love New York.”

You know who would love New York? Lydia effing Baker. But me? Alone in New York? This is crazy.

Sweat was forming at the nape of my neck. “Yeah, but the people who go to New York are like you, or artists, or like the kids from *Fame*, or rich private school kids like the girls from *The Facts of Life*.”

I love eighties sitcoms. There’s always a teachable moment and once the thirty minutes are up, everyone, for the most part, is healed and happy.

“The suburbs, and the life you’re living now, will always be here waiting for you. No city is more alive than New York. It’s where art happens, where music happens, where cultures collide. The sense that anything can happen, at any moment, is a wild ride.”

I wanted to be bold and brazen and jump at the chance, but flying off to New York to take a stab at a modeling career sounded terrifying. Robin made it sound like *a wild ride* was the greatest experience of one’s life. Every aspect of *my* life was controlled and part of a delicate ecosystem to keep my neuroses in check. Riddled with anxiety was not the vibe I wanted to convey. What would Robin think if she knew the truth?

“I’m not sure a girl from the suburbs like me will fit in.” I shrugged, hoping to come off as nonchalant.

“There’s a place for everyone in New York,” she said, eyeing me thoughtfully.

Could she sense my fear?

I wanted to claw my way out of my own skin, but smiled as though this were the happiest moment of my life.

“This”—Robin’s voice dropped two octaves—“is the opportunity of a lifetime.”

I gazed out the window past Robin, past the city, past the Rocky Mountains. I didn't want my life to be filled with regret at the tender age of twenty. This may be my only chance to do something special. It wouldn't hurt if people thought I was cool.

"You only live once," I said with quivering vocal chords.

She motioned to me with a sweet smile. "Come and look at these pictures."

Scrutinizing my appearance was a nasty habit I developed in high school, and blissfully walked away from upon graduation. I was willing to revisit it in this moment for the sake of a potential modeling career.

Top-to-bottom scan: unkempt, and undeniably full-figured. Full facial inspection: enormous eyebrows match my unruly mass of brown, fuzzy curls. Depending on the camera angle, my nose is a little crooked. An ex-boyfriend once told me he would ski it to the left. My eyes are wide and deep blue. Sometimes they look gray-green depending on the light or mood. Deep blue could mean excited, nervous, or terrified. My expressions captured all three.

"She doesn't look like a model," I said.

"Not yet, doll." Robin leaned in close to the camera display. "But this girl's inner monologue is tantalizing."

If only Robin's compliments were my constant inner monologue.

"Her eyes are alive with a sense that anything could happen at any moment. You want to know her."

When I shared the news with Mike, we were hanging in his perfectly manicured backyard. I was laying in the hammock while he planted some shrubs. We started working at Safeway on the same day, when I was sixteen and he was twenty-one. He took me under his wing, and we became fast friends. Mike didn't talk about it much, but he was bullied in high school, which is why, I think, he has a soft spot for "awkward" people like me, and rescue dogs. He brought Ben, a black Lab mix, home two years ago and they've been inseparable ever since.

Mike's edges needed buffing out, but he was a softie underneath his gruff exterior. In the past four years, we had never missed our weekly Scrabble and spliff sessions.

"I went to see that model scout. She took a video and a bunch of pictures of me and sent them to an agency in New York."

"Al, I'm not sure this is the right fucking thing for you." Mike didn't curse for effect. It was just part of his vernacular. "You love fucking Safeway."

That was true. The money was great and it was paying for my degree. The customers liked me, the staff liked me. I felt happy and comfortable at work. Mike, not so much, even though he had been promoted to assistant store manager and Safeway was paying for his new house. He had gutted and completely remodeled the two-bedroom rancher. He wanted to flip houses full-time one day.

"And you're halfway through school," he said.

That was also true, but I didn't feel happy or comfortable at university. I felt perpetually in the way of other students who were busy "finding their way."

"I can finish my degree later." I didn't have a clue what I wanted to do when I finished school. The goal was to blossom into some formidable woman, a sociologist, a professor, a writer with a brilliant career, but it might take more than a BA in sociology. My dad's an engineer, and he never loved the idea of me majoring in something "impractical," but he was relieved I'd given up my childhood dreams of Broadway. "Besides, it's not like an undergraduate degree is the key to a thriving future."

"Modeling is the fucking key?" The muscles in his neck were strained like his words.

I thought about it for a second. Although there isn't an *exact* key, clearly STEM, law, medicine, or learning a viable trade such as plumbing might open more doors, but I wasn't interested in any of those.

"Modeling could pay for grad school." My face brightened. "Robin did say the payout could be huge."

I hadn't even considered grad school, but it was a compelling argument.

Mike just rolled his eyes. For him, the whole concept of modeling was connected to the high school hierarchy. He was too jaded to see the financial upside involved.

"And you have your weird fucking plumbing thing."

Mike was the only other person on the planet, besides my parents, who knew about my plumbaphobia. It started when I was ten. I just couldn't use a bathroom except in my own house. Public restrooms and pools had become sources of torture. It has gotten progressively worse through the years. Avoidance is key, which is why:

(a) I didn't attend a single pool party in my youth.

(b) I couldn't live in a dormitory.

(c) I have acquired the skill of never needing to relieve my bladder for ten-hour periods at a time.

In my four years at Safeway, I had never once used the facilities. In the event of an emergency, I carry rubber gloves with me at all times.

"I get what you're saying." I'd spent days obsessing over the exact points he was making. The logical voice in my head screamed *Don't go!* but there was a whisper from my gut murmuring *Go . . . Go . . . Go*. When I woke up this morning, the depths of my gut howled *Go!* I knew if I didn't try, I would regret it.

"Al, don't take this the wrong way, but you're not very fucking modelly."

"Robin said I'm a work in progress. She said Jennifer Lopez wasn't always JLo. She transformed herself."

"Who's transforming you?" Mike asked.

Robin had assured me the agency would take charge of my image, but they wouldn't take me on unless I lost the weight.

"Starting tomorrow, I'm implementing a daily routine of running up and down the stairs," I said with a mouthful of Oreos.

Mike just shook his head.

"This is my chance to do something special."

"Fucking 'modeling'?" He used air quotes. He knew how much that annoyed me. "That's what you think is special?"

"I would say that a lot of people think it's special, and I want to give it a shot."

I was done trying to convince him. And why not modeling?