

Chapter One



Don't Try to Define Love Unless You Need a Lesson in Futility

*C*areening past airline counters toward the security check-in, I'm explaining love and its various forms of failure to Lindsay, my assistant. Amid the hive of travelers—retirees in Bermuda shorts, cats in carry-on boxes perforated with air holes, hassled corporate stiffs—I find myself in the middle of a grand oration on love with a liberal dose of rationalizations. I've fallen in love with lovable cheats. I've adored the wrong men for the wrong reasons. I'm culpable. I've suffered an unruly heart and more than my share of prolonged bouts of poor judgment. I have lacked some basics in the area of control. For example: I had no control over the fact that I fell in love with Artie Shoreman—a man eighteen years my senior. I had no control over the fact that I am still in love with him even after I found out, in one fell swoop, that he had three affairs during our four-year marriage. Two were lovers he'd had before we got married, but had kept in touch with—held on to, really, like parting gifts from his bachelorhood, living

2 BRIDGET ASHER

memorabilia. Artie didn't want to call these *affairs* because they were spur-of-the-moment. They weren't *premeditated*. He trotted out terminology like *fling* and *dalliance*. The third affair he called *accidental*.

And I have no control over the fact that I am angry that Artie's gotten so sick—so deathbedish—in the midst of this and that I blame him for his dramatic flair. I have no control over the compulsion I feel to go back home to him right now, bailing out of a speech on convoluted SEC regulations—because my mother has told me in a middle-of-the-night, bad-news phone call that his health is grave. I have no control over the fact that I'm still furious at Artie for being a cheat just when one might, possibly, expect me to soften, at least a little.

I'm telling Lindsay how I left Artie shortly after I found out about the affairs and how that was the right thing to do six months ago. I tell her how all three affairs were revealed at once—like some awful game show.

Lindsay is petite. Her jacket sleeves are always a bit too long for her, as if she's wearing an older sister's hand-me-downs that she hasn't quite grown into. She has silky blond hair that swings around like she's trapped in a shampoo commercial, and she wears small glasses that slip down the bridge of a nose so perfect and narrow I'm not sure how she breathes through it. It's as if her nose were designed as an accent piece without regard to function. She knows this whole story, of course. She's nodding along in full agreement. I forge on.

I tell her that this hasn't been so bad, opting for business trip after business trip, a few months hunkered down with one client and then another, every convention opportunity—a life of short-term corporate rentals and hotel rooms. It was supposed to allow me some time and space

to get my heart together. The plan was that when I saw Artie again, I'd be ready, but I'm not.

"Love can't be ordered around or even run by a nice-enough democracy," I tell Lindsay. My definition of a democracy consists of polling the only two people I've chosen to confide in—my anxiety-prone office assistant, Lindsay, who at this very moment is clipping along next to me through JFK airport's terminal, and my overwrought mother, who's got me on speed dial.

"Love refuses to barter," I say. "It won't haggle with you like that Turkish man with the fake Gucci bags." My mother insists I get her a fake Gucci bag each time I'm in New York on business; my carry-on is bulging with fake Gucci at this very moment.

"Love isn't logical," I insist. "It's immune to logic." In my case: my husband is a cheater and a liar, therefore I should move on or decide to forgive him, which is an option that I've heard some women actually choose in situations like this.

Lindsay says, "Of course, Lucy. No doubt about it!"

There's something about Lindsay's confident tone that rattles me. She's often overly positive, and sometimes her high-salaried agreement makes me double-think. I try to carry on with the speech. I say, "I have to stick by my mistakes, though, including the ones that I came by naturally through my mother." My mother—the Queen of Poor Judgment in Men. I flash on an image of her in a velour sweat suit, smiling at me with a mix of hopeful pride and pity. "I have to stick by my mistakes because they've made me who I am. And I'm someone that I've come to like—except when I get flustered ordering elaborate side dishes in sushi restaurants, in which case I'm completely overbearing, I know."

“No kidding,” Lindsay agrees, a little too quickly.

And now I stop in the middle of the airport—my laptop swinging forward, my little carry-on suitcase wheels coming to a quick halt (I’ve only packed necessities—Lindsay will ship the rest of my things later). “I’m not ready to see him,” I say.

“Artie needs you,” my mother had told me during last night’s phone call. “He is your husband still, after all. And it’s very bad form to leave a dying husband, Lucy.”

This was the first time that anyone had said that Artie was going to die—aloud, matter-of-factly. Until that moment it had been serious, surely, but he’s still young—only fifty. He comes from a long line of men who died young, but that shouldn’t mean anything—not with today’s advances in medicine. “He’s just being dramatic,” I told my mother, trying to return to the old script, the one where we joke about Artie’s dire attempts to get me back.

“But what if he isn’t just being dramatic?” she said. “You need to be here. Your being away now, well, it’s bad karma. You’ll come back in your next life as a beetle.”

“Since when do you talk about karma?” I asked.

“I’m dating a Buddhist now,” my mother said. “Didn’t I tell you that?”

Lindsay has grabbed my elbow. “Are you okay?”

“My mother is dating a Buddhist,” I tell her, as if explaining how terribly wrong everything is. My eyes have filled with tears. The airport signs overhead go blurry. “Here.” I hand her my pocketbook. “I won’t be able to find my ID.”

She leads me to a set of phones near an elevator and starts digging through my purse. I can’t root through it right now. I can’t because I know what’s stuffed inside—all the little cards that I’ve pulled from little envelopes

stuck in small plastic green forks accompanying the daily deliveries of flowers that Artie's ordered long distance. He's found me no matter what hotel room I'm in or apartment I'm put up in anywhere I happen to be in the continental U.S. (How does he know where I am? Who gives him my itinerary—my mother? I've always suspected her, but have never told her to stop. Secretly, I like Artie to know where I am. Secretly, I need the flowers, even though part of me hates them—and him.)

"I'm glad you kept all of these," Lindsay says. She's been in my hotel rooms. She's seen the flowers that collect until they're all in various stages of wilt. She hands me my license.

"I wish I hadn't kept them. I'm pretty sure it's a sign of weakness," I tell her.

She pulls one out. "I've always wondered," she says, "you know, what he has to say in all of those cards."

Suddenly I don't want to find my way into the line at security with a herd of strangers. The line is long, but still I have plenty of time—too much. In fact, I know I'll be restless on the other side, feel a little caged myself—like one of those cats in the carry-ons. I don't want to be alone. "Go ahead."

"Are you sure?" She raises her thin eyebrows.

I think about it a moment longer. I don't really want to hear Artie's love notes. Part of me is desperate to grab the pocketbook out of her hands, tell her *sorry, changed my mind*, and get in line with everyone else. But another part of me wants her to read these cards, to see if they are as manipulative as I think they are. In fact, I think I need that right now. A little sisterly validation. "Yes," I tell her.

She plucks the note and reads aloud, "Number forty-seven: the way you think every dining room should have a

sofa in it for people who want to lie down to digest, but still be part of the witty conversation.” She glances at me.

“I like to lie down after I eat—like the Egyptians or something. The dining room sofa just makes good sense.”

“Do you have one?”

“Artie bought me one for our first anniversary.” I don’t want to think of it now, but it’s there in my mind—a long antique sofa reupholstered with a fabric of red poppies on a white background and dark wood trim that matches the dining room furniture. We made love on it that first night in the house, the boxy pillows sliding out from under us onto the floor, the aged springs creaking.

She pulls out another one and reads, “Number fifty-two: how the freckles on your chest can be connected to make an approximate constellation of Elvis.”

A crew of flight attendants glides by in what seems to be the V formation of migrating geese. A few of Artie’s old girlfriends were flight attendants. He made his money opening an Italian restaurant during his late twenties (despite a lack of any real Italian blood in him) and then launching a national chain. He traveled a lot. Flight attendants were plentiful. I watch them swish by in their nylons, the wheels on their suitcases rumbling. My stomach cinches up for a moment. “He actually did that once, connected the freckles, and documented it. We have the photos.” I’m waiting for Lindsay’s righteous anger to become apparent, but this doesn’t seem to be the case. In fact, I notice that she’s smiling a little.

She pulls out a third. “Number fifty-five: the way you’re afraid that if you forgive your father—once and for all—he might really disappear in some way, even though he’s been dead for years.”

Lindsay raises her eyebrows at me again.

“Artie’s a great listener. He remembers everything. What can I say? It doesn’t mean that I should forgive his betrayal and go home to him.” Here’s one of the reasons I hate Artie. He is so fully and completely himself, his own person, but when I asked him why he cheated on me, he came up with a tired, worn-out response. He constantly falls in love. He thought he could stop when we got married, but he couldn’t. He confessed that he fell in love with women all the time, all day, every day, that he adores everything about women—the way they sway when they walk, their fine necks—he even loves their imperfections. And he would get caught up. They confided in him, women did. Suddenly it seemed that a woman was telling him everything and then the next minute she was unbuttoning her blouse. He told me that he hated himself—of course—and that he didn’t want to hurt me. At the same time, he loved the women he’d had affairs with—all in different ways for different reasons. But he didn’t want to spend his life with them. He wanted to spend his life with me. I hate Artie for betraying me, yes, but I might hate him more for getting me caught up in such an embarrassing cliché.

I was too heartbroken to respond, too angry to do anything but leave.

“Do you think he’ll be okay?” Lindsay asks, meaning his health.

“I know,” I tell her. “I know. A good person would go home and forgive him because he’s so sick. A good person probably would have stayed put and tried to sort it all out, in person, one way or the other and not just run around the country like I did. I know.” I’m getting emotional. I take a moment to press the tears from my eyes. I wipe away some mascara. Why did I put on makeup at all? I

realize that I'm dressed all wrong. I'm wearing a professional outfit—tan slacks, expensive shoes, a blazer. What was I thinking? I remember getting dressed while packing quickly. I was on autopilot—bumping around my hotel room amid the dying flowers. I'm an auditor—a partner in a firm, in fact—and I look like one—even now when I shouldn't. Trust me, I'm aware of the irony that it's my job to know when someone is cheating and that I was blind to Artie's infidelity for so long. "I'm supposed to know fraud, intimately. It's what I do for a living, Lindsay. How could I have not seen it?"

"Well, he wasn't really handling his risk of detection very well." Lindsay smiles, trying to cheer me. She's recently gone to a lecture on the risk of detection and is proud of herself in this moment. "You'll sort it out, Lucy. You sort everything out. It's what you do best!"

"At work," I tell her. "But my personal history doesn't bear that out exactly. Two different worlds."

Lindsay looks around the airport like she's a little confused—she's wearing her confusion on her face, *advertising* her confusion, as if she's just for the first time heard that there are actually two different worlds—a twilight zone moment. I've been grooming her for upward mobility. She's going to be taking over while I'm on leave and she'll have to work on her toughness if she's going to make it through. I've talked to her about trying not to display her emotions so readily. I'd give her a little lecture on that right now—but I'm no model of emotional discipline at present.

"You think I should forgive him, don't you? You think I should go home and that we should try to figure it out, don't you?"

She's not sure what to say. She looks side to side and then she gives in and nods.

"Because he deserves it or because he's sick?"

She shifts. "I'm not sure that this is the right reason or not, but, well, because I've never had a boyfriend who could get past three or, maybe, four reasons why he loved me. Not that I've asked for a list or anything, but, you know what I mean. Because Artie loves you like that."

Artie loves me like that—it seems true in this instant, as if she's stripped away all of the gestures that I've taken as manipulation and just seen them purely, as a manifestation of his love—for me. I'm shocked by this way of seeing it—the bareness of it all. I'm not certain how to reply. "I'm sure you'll do fine while I'm gone," I tell her. "I know you can do it."

She's a little caught off guard. She blushes—again, something she shouldn't do, but, in this case, I'm glad to see it. She gives a little bow. "Thanks for the vote of confidence." She hands me my pocketbook and looks at my bags. "Do you have everything?"

"I'll be fine."

"Okay then." She turns and walks into the crowd. She's all business now, her chin up, her arms swinging strongly. I'm proud of her.

And just then the elevator lets out a loud *ding!* and I think of Artie's #57—the one that arrived this morning and that has been eating at me ever since: *The way you love the sound of an elevator bell, and once said it was like a little note of hope, the idea that things are bound to change, that you are finally going to get to go somewhere and start over.*

The only problem is that I don't like elevators. I've

always felt they were little movable death boxes—if anything, the ding seems to me like an awfully chipper death knell. They've always made me feel claustrophobic, and, another thing, I don't particularly care for change—like, say, finding out your husband is cheating on you—and, despite all the recent travel, I've never really had the feeling that I was finally getting to go somewhere else and start anew. *A little note of hope?* I never said any of these things. Number 57 isn't mine. It belongs to some other woman. Number 57 belongs to some other woman the way my own life right now—my work life, my personal life—seems to belong to some other woman.

An elderly woman in a wheelchair is pushed out of the elevator by a young man—maybe her son? They move on by, and the stainless steel doors close. I see a dim fuzzy reflection of myself, and I feel like I am that other woman. As misappropriated as it seems, this life is mine.