

## Water Woes

The glossy brochure juttred out from under the stack of my grad school texts on the dining room table corner. “What is *this*, Rick?”

“I signed us up for a two-day white-water rafting trip. Our whole department goes every year.”

“I’ve told you. The only water I’m good with is the water in the bathtub. Were you listening? What were you thinking? I can’t get over my fear of water. Something goes wrong *every* single time—always. Remember when I was stuck in a rip current and couldn’t get back to the dive boat?”

“Yeah, but rafting is safe, and it’s fun. Please? I’d love for you to meet my work buddies.”

“How about I meet them some other way? Like your company picnic?”

“Nothing will happen to you. Please?” I didn’t want to disappoint him. *How bad could it be anyway?*

It was a four-hour drive to the Merced River—in between catching up with weeks away from each other, there was plenty of time for my mind to run wild and conjure all kinds of watery nightmares. Narrow and winding mountain roads led us to the departure point. When we parked, Rick reached around the back of his seat to pull out a folder and take two sheets of paper—one for himself and the other he handed to me. “You need to read and sign it.”

## Mountain Bliss Rafting Company

*Joy in the journey ... Learn how to paddle together as a team, form new bonds with family and friends ... relax to the soft sounds of the soothing water ...*

This is a class IV river ...

“There are classes of rivers? It’s four out of ten, right Rick?”

“Nope, it’s four out of five.”

“Four out of five? Are you crazy? I’ve told you and told you—I’m afraid.”

“Just sign it. It’s paid for. We’re going. My work friends are expecting us.”

“I don’t care about your friends. It says I won’t hold the rafting company liable if I drown. I’m signing my life away.”

“Yeah, I know. I sign it every year. That’s just legalese to protect their butts. You’ll be fine. Stop worrying. It’ll be fun.”

I handed the release to the front office staff and ambled behind Rick toward the waiting raft.

“Come on. We’re gonna be late. If we’re not there for instructions, we don’t get in the raft.”

“Now there’s a great idea,” I muttered.

Thirty people from Metro Transit gathered in groups of six on the shores of the Merced waiting for their river guides. A smiling, tanned, five-foot-six sinewy man with a thick black braid of hair moved towards our group.

“Hi everybody. My name is Marco. I’ve been on the river so many years, my buddies think I’m water. They all call me Hydro. Your safety is *always* first, and when everyone follows directions, everyone’s safe. You’re in good hands.”

I flashed a withering look at Rick, but all I saw was his smiling face and happy agreement while my stomach twisted in knots.

While the raft slapped against the water, Hydro handed each of us a helmet, a life vest, and a paddle, and then he began the litany of warnings.

“The river is the highest it’s been in ten years. We’ve had extraordinary snow runoff, and the water is the coldest it’s been for a long time. Some things to know for your safety. If the raft flips over or you fall out, do *not* swim to shore. Tree branches and boulders can do you a lot of harm. Float in the center of the river feet first and breathe between waves. We’ll come and get you.”

*Oh my God - - float feet first and breathe between waves? I’ll be lucky enough just to remember to breathe.* I shot another glaring look at Rick, but my icy stare was lost behind my sunglasses.

“It’s important for all of you to follow my directions when I give them exactly as I give them. I’ll call the name for that part of the river — the command will follow. We have to be in unison to maneuver — otherwise, this doesn’t work. We’re going to practice before we go.”

“There are three on each side of the raft. I need three of you to stand here, and three of you to stand there. I’ll be in the back, but for practice, I need to see you do the commands as a team. Paddle left—rafters on the left side paddle together. Rafters on the right, paddle is out of

the water. Paddle right—rafters on the right paddle together. Rafters on the left, paddle is out of the water. All paddle— that’s everyone. Paddles up— that’s everyone.”

“Everyone double-check your life vests and helmets to be sure they’re secure.”

Hydro stepped toward me to tighten my chin strap. “Now you’re good,” he said.

“Paddles up to let me know you’re ready, and then we’ll go.”

Before I held my paddle up, I dipped my hand in the icy water and quickly withdrew it. The difference between the ninety-eight-degree heat and the water temperature was startling and made the knots in my stomach even tighter.

We floated by layers of sedimentary rock, reflecting and rippling in the soothing watery sounds of the sunlit Merced. Sparkles of pink and white granite flickered tiny prisms. Boulders the size of Volkswagens lined the shore. Each of their rocky crevices sported an upright hold of misplaced and misshapen tree branches that suffered their fate in the Sierra storms and the powerful river. Shades of light and dark water reflected outreached limbs as if to ignore Hydro’s warnings and beckon the rafters to safety. I heard a formidable and ear-crushing sound around the bend—a sound that beckoned images of Niagara Falls and the brave woman who survived her ride in a barrel.

“Here comes the Freight Train. All paddle,” Hydro yelled.

There was no time to know what was happening. “All paddle, all paddle,” he yelled again. The frothy white water whirled, circled, and spun, forming an eight-foot void that sucked the raft toward its middle as if it were plunging head-first down a drain. A one-hundred-and-eighty-degree translucent shocking arc of the arctic, teal, and baby blue water rose like the gaping

maw of a carnivorous animal. A bubbling white edge curled twice the width of the raft over our heads and began its upward ascent while the nose of the raft plummeted in a fraction of a second. The back of the raft glided through the air, slapped down on the water, and slipped through the hole.

Deborah was the first work buddy to flip in head over heels. Andy somersaulted across the side before Isabelle's agile form spun through the air. Rick's athletic physique reacted like a spring; he was swimming alongside the raft before anyone knew he was there. Luanne's thin and petite body drifted back and forth like a floating leaf before she splashed down.

I stopped breathing when the wall of water was halfway up the canyon. Realizing I was paddling nothing but air, I stuck the paddle between both of my knees, wrapped both of my hands around the raft's perimeter line rope, and wedged my feet under the thwart for lateral support.

"We've got four in the water—four in the water," Hydro signaled to the raft behind us. Deborah, Andy, and Rick hoisted themselves back on the raft. Hydro maneuvered over to pick up Luanne.

"What a ride. Isn't this great?" Andy asked me.

Water and sweat poured down my face. My eyes stung. My arms ached and felt like noodles. The tightness in my chest got worse.

"Isn't this the most fun you've ever had?" Rick asked. I shot him another icy and withering look, but he just smiled.

“We’re stopping at Shadow Run for lunch,” Hydro said. “Cheerio is the best river cook ever. He’s the king of river cuisine.”

We watched him take the pork loin from the roaster, pull it apart, and place it on an enormous platter in the middle of the picnic table. I had to admit the pulled pork sandwiches, baked beans, potato salad, and ice-cold beer tasted better than any I’d ever had. I sat down beside Deborah while Rick chatted with Andy.

“What do you think of the trip so far?” Deborah asked.

“I’m scared to death,” I admitted.

“You’d think you’re a pro. You and Hydro were the only ones who stayed in the raft on that first hole. Everyone else was tossed.”

“I’m no pro. This is my first time. If I’d known what questions to ask, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Well, we only have the second half to go, and then we’re done for the day. Then there’s tomorrow.”

“I’m telling you—there won’t be a tomorrow for me.”

“Rick will be disappointed,” Deborah said.

“I’m already disappointed,” I said, walking away.

“All aboard,” Hydro called. “See you later Cheerio. Lunch was great.”

The cragged gray canyon walls projected upward and inward. The raft floated serenely down the narrow river, but the sound around the bend was deafening. Beads of sweat pearly on my face and arms.

“Bull Run, all paddle. All paddle.”

The raft spun backward in a circle, and I felt like a professional bull riding competitor. I didn't see much difference between that and white-water rafting; get trampled to death or drown. One was not worse than the other.

“Great run,” Hydro called. “We made it. This is the last of the rough water for today.”

My arms fell to my side. It was everything I could do to paddle the slow and lazy water for the rest of the trip. All I wanted was a hot shower, a good meal, and to relax for the rest of the evening.

We sat around the campfire that blotted out the darkness, but it didn't erase the continuous roaring river sounds across the road.

“That was so much fun,” Luanne said. “Did you see those colors? I don't remember the water being that color last year.”

“You've might've had too much beer at lunch,” Andy kidded her.

“No more than anyone else.”

“What about you?” Andy asked me. “Deborah said this is your first rafting trip. What do you think?”

“I'm not going tomorrow.”

“Why not? You’ll be fine. You and Hydro were the only ones that didn’t get flipped out.”

“Yup. I won’t be flipped out tomorrow either—I’m not going.”

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” Rick asked me. We stepped away from the campfire and prying ears.

“What’s the matter with you?” he asked.

“What’s the matter with *you*? I told you I’m afraid of water. You didn’t bother to tell me this was some rip-roaring life-threatening trip. What were you thinking?”

“I didn’t know the water was so high.”

“Did you even think about checking the conditions before you signed up?”

“We go every year. It’s *never* been like this.”

"Enjoy yourself tomorrow because I'm getting in my car, taking myself out for breakfast, driving around Yosemite, and shooting some pictures instead of rapids.

“Vicki ....” I walked away to join the others around the fire.

## **Day Two**

“You by yourself?” the waitress asked when she came to take my order.

“Yeah, sort of. Everyone else is rafting today. I decided not to go.”

“Probably a good thing. They’ve had six fatalities since the season started last month. Hasn’t been that bad in a long time.”

I sipped my coffee, and I watched the water cascade and froth over a large boulder in the middle of the river. I wouldn't be eating Cheerio's tasty cuisine, but since I wasn't gyrating like a Whirling Dervish and my feet were on solid ground, I gave thanks to the powers above—for the first time, I made it through my watery nemesis with no mishaps. I said a silent prayer for everyone's safety, paid my bill, and spent the rest of the day driving around Yosemite.

I parked the car at the Frothy Hollow arrival point in time to see my group clambering out of their raft, thanking Hydro and shaking his hand.

I approached them, but I didn't get a word out before Deborah said, "It was a good thing that you *didn't* go. It was way rougher today than yesterday. All of the rafts flipped—no one stayed in. Everyone's okay, but Rick got the worst of it. He got trapped under the raft and went down river a while before he finally swam out. Then he was too close to the rocks, and he got banged up pretty bad. It took Hydro and Andy to haul him back in the raft."

Rick's head hung in dejection while he heard Deborah's explanation, but he managed to tell me I was right not to go. The water was too rough, and too many people were hurt.

"So, you going to plan this for next year too? Maybe we could just hang out with your work buddies at the company picnic instead ." It was a long and silent drive back to Oakland.

I wouldn't have water woes if I learned how to swim, but my water experiences were foretold at the age of four. When the swimming teacher fished me from the bottom of the pool during my first lesson, I refused to go back. If I had, I wouldn't have suffered my teenage "friends" throwing me into the ocean with uproarious laughter and teasing, drifted in a raging storm after a catamaran flipped in the Grand Caymans, or panicked in a riptide. H2o is still an

adversary, but not like it was. Other than being afraid and sore, Rick was right—nothing went wrong, and I *was* fine. Is it too late for swimming lessons?