Chapter One

Evie

"I'm hurrying," I grumble to my ringing cell phone as I dash into my townhouse, kicking the door shut behind me. Turning around, I flip the locks and reach into my purse, searching for my cell. Of course, my fingers connect with the phone just as the ringing ceases.

"Shit." I already know I'm going to be late. I should probably cancel. I don't even feel like going out tonight.

The shrill ringing cuts the air again and I sigh. Dropping my purse on the console in the hallway, I head into my living room, collapsing onto the couch.

"Jenny," I answer, curling my feet up below me and resting my head back on the cushions. My eyes shut. "I'm not sure about tonight. I'm really not up for it and I've—"

"Save it. I don't care. You're coming. Miranda and I haven't seen you in forever, and I really need a night out. You owe me."

I smile in response to her tenacity, but refuse to give in that easily. "I don't know. It's been a really long—"

"Day, week, month for all of us, which is why we need to grab a drink. I know you're probably pouting on your couch at the moment, trying to think of an excuse to ditch us again, but I'm not having it. Get your butt up, hop in the shower, pull on a pair of jeans and a sexy halter, and maybe, just maybe, if you cut the resting bitch face and smile a little, you'll even get laid tonight."

I manage to choke out a chuckle while a shudder runs down my spine, my eyes snapping open. "With a guy I meet at Raf's? Come on. We're lucky we don't contract STDs just from entering the place."

Jenny laughs, a girlish giggle she's had since high school. "Or needing a Tetanus shot from the hazardous bar."

I join in her laughter now, forcing myself to stand up. "Fine. I'll meet you girls there in an hour."

"We'll be sitting at the bar."

"Duh."

“There will be a Cosmo with your name on it so don’t be late.”

“No. Lenny makes the worst Cosmos ever. Just order a whisky sour or a gin and tonic, or something he can’t mess up.”

“A shot then. He should be able to handle that.”

“See you there.” Ending the call, I walk into my bathroom and toss my cell on the vanity.

Pinning up my hair since I know I won’t have enough time to dry it, I take a quick shower and towel off in front of the mirror. Taking a moment to study myself, I note how my shoulders curve inward, as if they’re trying to kiss. I can count my ribs, my boobs are nonexistent, and my arms hang awkwardly at my sides. Dark smudges from too many sleepless nights glare from underneath my eyes, exaggerated by the paleness of my skin. I look sallow, dejected, and exhausted.

I look like me.

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Fifty-four minutes after confirming I am, in fact, the most undesirable human on the planet, I slide onto a bar stool at Raf’s Bar and Grill and hesitantly accept the shot of tequila and lime chaser Miranda pushes in front of me.

“You look like shit,” she greets me matter-of-factly as Jenny comes up to stand beside me, throwing an arm around my shoulders in a half-hug.

“Bad day?” Jenny asks gently.

I wave to a girl I used to work with who is sitting across the bar at a high-top table. She left Morris last year to go to graduate school and do something with her life.

Turning toward my friends, I smile it off. “Nah, just the usual run-in with a couple of tough guys at work. Nothing I can’t handle.”

“The same guys that have been giving you trouble?” A frown twists Jenny’s lips as she peers down at me.

I shrug.

“That’s bullshit.” Miranda shakes her head. “You work at a physical therapy center for the goddamn military. You think they’d be able to control their own with all their talk of discipline and service and blah, blah, blah.”

“It’s not that simple,” I say, my voice quiet. I focus on my hands.

“It is,” Miranda counters, nodding as if to agree with herself. “You need to tell someone, Evie. Tell your boss or superior or commanding lieutenant or whatever the guy is called. Tell him you’re being harassed. We saw it that day in the parking lot. They were awful!”

“Miranda’s right.” Jenny squeezes my shoulder. “We’re just worried about you. You’ve been avoiding us.”

“I’ve been busy.”

Miranda’s eyes widen.

“I have been.” I sit straighter on the bar stool, defensive to the core. I wish they never saw what happened in the parking lot two weeks ago.

“I know,” Jenny soothes. “We just miss you and want you to be happy, Evie. That’s all. You need to tell someone about what’s been going on. It isn’t right.”

“I know. Thank you, guys. Look, I just, tonight, I just want to catch up with my best girlfriends and relax and have a good time, okay?” I gesture toward Lenny, who is walking toward us, a tray of shot glasses and mixed drinks balanced on his open palm. “Look, Lenny’s bringing more shots.”

Miranda’s eyes brighten as Jenny nods. “Absolutely. We can definitely do that.”

“Thank God.” I smile at Lenny, accepting the gin and tonic he hands me and passing my shot glass off to Miranda.

“You’re not going to have this?”

“It’s all you, girl.” I raise my gin and tonic in her direction. “Cheers, ladies!”

“To forgetting all the stupid things I do tonight.” Jenny raises her shot.

“And forgetting whoever I do stupid things with,” Miranda adds, a snort of laughter erupting from her nose as she clinks her shot against Jenny’s.

I laugh along with them, taking a small sip of my G and T.

I wish it were that easy to forget.

I wish I could throw back a shot, dance in a crowd, and give myself just one moment to turn off my mind. Enjoy a night out with my girlfriends.

I wish a lot of things.

“I love this song,” Jenny squeals, pulling Miranda off her barstool and swaying with her just to the left of where I sit.

“Dance with us.” Miranda tries to pull my hand, but I shake my head, taking another tentative sip of my drink.

“I’m good. You girls are crazy.” I sing along with the lyrics, trying to get into the good time mood. Trying.

“How’ve you been, Evie?” Lenny asks from across the bar, a welcome distraction from trying to fake having a good time with my friends.

“Same old, Lenny. What’s going on by you?”

“Not too much. Kep’s giving me more hours here, which is really helping. I’m hoping in another month or two, I’ll be able to quit my job at the mini-mart and bartend here full time.”

“No kidding? That’s great, Len.”

“I know. Then I can enroll back in school. I’ve only got one semester left ’til my BA, you know?”

I nod. I do know. I know because Lenny has always been focused on the future, even in high school. Even when things didn’t work out the way he planned after graduation, he remained determined to get his college degree, to do more with his life than anyone else in his family.

I offer a smile because I’m proud of him, even as the reminder that I’ve yet to finish my own degree flashes through my mind. Taking courses on and off, in-person and online, has stretched my typical four-year degree into nearly eight years. If I take summer courses, I can complete my B.A. by July but then what? I’m studying Psychology. Who the hell would want me rooting around in their head?

Coming from a long line of accomplished, successful, determined soldiers, my family is all military. And I’m all sorts of disappointment.

“I hope it works out, Len.”

“Thanks, Evie. You need anything?”

“Just water when you get a chance.”

“You got it.” He pulls a glass out from underneath the bar and fills it with water, setting it in front of me.

Once he’s called away from the opposite side of the bar, I shift my focus back to my friends. Grinding against each other, giggling, throwing back their heads, they attract the attention of nearly every guy in Raf’s.

I nurse my water and check my watch.

How long do I have to stay until it's acceptable to slip away? Closing my eyes, I think of my comfortable couch, the soft sleep pants I wear at night, and the oversized mug I like to drink my tea from.

Gah!

One night out won't kill me.

Plastering a bright smile on my face, I bop my head in beat with the music. I can do this. I'll be fine.