

Evie

There's no way in hell I'm going in this.

"You look hot."

"I look... ridiculous," I tell her emphasizing ridiculous with a dramatic pause as I stare back at myself in my best friend Jill's too-small dorm room mirror. Wide shoulders, freckles down my arms, ears that are just a little too big, and if they keep growing the way my grandmother's do...

Ugh, get that image out of my head.

I control my thoughts, I remind myself, a sorta mantra I repeat in my mind on a daily...

No, hourly basis as my right-hand lands on that familiar spot on my right cheek. The back of three fingers touching my face in a relaxed fist as I continue shutting down my mind.

"Your ass looks way better than mine does in that dress," she says, handing me whatever the hell concoction she threw together tonight to "get our pre funk on" as *she* would say.

She was right about that; my ass does look good.

My ass always looks good.

This girl got back not ten minutes ago from the three-floor trek to the designated smoking area on campus, and now here she goes again. Always leaving me alone to go smoke at parties, the bars, and now even here in this tiny room filled with boxes and about two dozen outfits we ripped out, tried on, and threw in all directions. She does just fine on her own, thrives even, so she doesn't understand the sick feeling I get standing there by myself.

Beer helps.

“Keep it,” she says, slapping my backside as she walks by to grab her lighter off an ugly pine dresser that was here when we showed up, four long hours ago. I don't support her nasty habit so I refuse to go with her, but sometimes I wish I did because the anxiety of being alone might kill me faster than the cigarettes will kill her.

I stare in the mirror and try to convince myself to see what she sees—focus on the things I do like about myself. My butt looks phenomenal, of course, my legs are strong and toned, my light brown hair is curling just right—but I know that won't last long.

Dammit.

Positivity.

I control my thoughts.

The back of my fingers come up to my cheek, and for a moment...

I get lost in my eyes.

My father's eyes.

Dark and mysterious for the most part but turn an emerald green when he's happy. It's not just the color, but the shape too. "*You stole my heart day one, as well as my perfect almond shaped eyes,*" he'd say to me. Always emphasizing how much he loved me from that very first day. The rest of me is all Mom, or so they tell me. Never met the lady. I have a very small collection of photos of her, but Dad would always tell me she didn't like being in front of the camera, just behind it.

How cliché.

I get it, though. I hate pictures of myself. Mom would have appreciated filters, but then again, I wouldn't really know her real face then anyway. I'll stick to my tiny binder of memories over an Instagram pic any day. I don't really see the similarities in us, but everyone else does and they love to tell me how much I look like her. Maybe that's why I'm so insecure—growing up the only time someone commented on my appearance was to tell me how much I look like someone I'll never get the chance to meet.

Someone who isn't here because of me...

Or could be the whole raised by a man thing. Albeit a very loving man that tried to get in touch with his feminine side for me...

Tried.

As I stare, I see the reflection of the thirteen or so dresses Jill tried on, hated, and scattered behind me. If Jill doesn't like what she sees when she looks in this tiny mirror, bordered with our pictures and old concert tickets, then me?

Liking myself?

That ain't gonna happen.

Jill is the kind of girl you can't help but hate, then instantly love. Gorgeous in every aspect of the word. Dimples, thick dark hair, long legs, soft tanned skin, vibrant blue eyes, and a smile every guy we've ever met gets lost in.

Ok, who am I kidding? They get lost in her boobs. The most perfect pair of boobs you'll ever see. Plastic surgeons should have pictures of these boobs on their walls. Goal boobs, if you will. But for me, it's her smile that I love. Never been that into boobs, or girls for that matter, despite what Kelly Johansson told all the boys in seventh grade, but I appreciate a nice smile on anyone.

I, of course, hated her the minute I met her. What girl wouldn't? She's every guy's wet dream. But that second minute, I was hooked. This girl was my instant best friend and has been for the last eight, wild years.

I down my drink, take one last look at myself in Jill's tight black dress, and call it good. By the time she gets

back I actually am starting to feel a little sexy—thank you alcohol—and ready to get the hell out of this room.

If you can call this broom closet a room.

Because of the late transfer, Jill got stuck in the corner by herself, next to the bathroom. Which means constant flushing and girl gossip. You can hear everything too, and I mean...

Every.

Single.

Word.

...And turd drop.

So far today we've learned about a professor with insanely long ear hair, a girl named Jenny is a skank and is sleeping with someone named Bennett, and we unintentionally listened in on two girls who were way too into what they had eaten the previous day, in my opinion.

I'm curious how this room was utilized before because it clearly isn't intended to be a bedroom.

Yep, broom closet.

Convinced it was a broom closet.

Tonight's random adventure will start with crashing a frat party we heard about, while carrying Jill's thirty-boxes of clothes up six flights of stairs. Then who knows where the night will take us. We don't know anyone here, it's over an hour drive home, and none of our other friends are the college type. Jill is just starting this semester after

taking three and a half years' worth of classes online and spending the last seven months in Greece. She jokes she came back home for me, but I've seen her with her mom and know I'm just a bonus. Sometimes I envy their relationship, but I think about how close I am with Dad and shut those thoughts out.

I control my thoughts.

I notice my hand found its way to my cheek, my comfort. I don't realize I'm doing it half the time so Jill loves to point it out and bring me back to the now. She squeezes her way past a couch, we decided cannot stay, stinking like an ash tray.

"Get out of your head. One more shot before we head out?"

This girl's gonna kill me.



The snow has long melted but it is still way too cold to be wearing this dress, and despite the warm feeling in my stomach, my nipples would have to agree. Hard nipples and all I'm feeling pretty damn good as we make our way through a pedestrian neighborhood lined with leafless maple trees and beer pong tables. Red cups litter the street—I'm half tempted to clean them up and have this urge in my gut to scold someone. There are kids

everywhere—some too drunk to function, some just getting their night started. And I say kids because it's clear I have five years on them, at least.

Maybe a college party wasn't a good idea after all...

Someone does not agree.

"See? Aren't you so glad I decided to go here? We are going to have the best year of our lives." Jill gleams.

"Half a year," I remind her. "You were too busy exploring Greece for the first half."

"Exploring the men in Greece, Evie. The men."

I roll my eyes and we both smile as something hard hits me in the back.

Really hard.

And now I'm on the ground.

I stand, silently praying that I did not just flash my vagina to the group of eighteen-year old's playing flip cup, as someone grabs my arm and pulls me up about as fast as I went down.

"Sorry about that, uhhhhh...?" he trails off in question.

"Evie," I say as I wipe the dirt off my knees and notice the person I'm talking to. Tall, built, dark hair, and covered in tattoos. Ok smile. Half standing, half leaning on a damn electric scooter that I now feel indented into my

back. My focus makes its way to his sharp jaw and narrow eyes that are now locked in with Jill's.

“Sorry about that, Evie. I was, uh, distracted.” His eyes don't leave Jill as he puts his hand out to shake mine—now scanning my best friend up and down in an intentionally, obnoxious fashion. I ignore his outstretched arm as three more guys that, I kid you not, look exactly like him scooter up next to us.

I hate those damn things and I am making no effort to hide the annoyance that must be all over my face. Jill, however, is in heaven. She loves all men, but if she had a type... it was this guy.

And there were now four of them.

“What the hell are you doing, man?” one of the guys laughingly blurts out.

“Like I said. I was distracted,” he says kissing Jill's right hand.

Oh brother.



Twenty minutes, and several eye rolls on my end later, and we are walking into a party behind these tall, tattooed men. It took all of ten seconds for these guys—still haven't heard a name—to convince Jill that the frat party we were going to would *be a bust*, and we'd end up

wasting our night trying to find them again anyway. So now here we are, miles away from the college scene, ready to spend our night at this random party with these random men.

Which isn't out of the ordinary for us.

And yes, we scooted here.

The moment we walk in, Jill starts toward the back of the house. "I'm gonna go smoke!" she yells over her shoulder.

"We were just outsi-" I call out, but trail off because she is *gone*. "Ok," I tell myself. "Find the keg."

Hand on cheek, I make my way into this old Victorian style house. It's the perfect party house. Right when you walk in you are in this huge living room with a vaulted ceiling and after a quick scan...

I can see it's the usual eleven p.m. party scene.

A brunette is straddling some scrawny guy in the corner, aggressively kissing his neck. Four guys sit on a black, leather couch—one of them is rolling a blunt. A group of girls are taking their tops off, volunteering themselves for body shots. And yep...

There it is.

Through a rectangle cutout in the wall I see a—more than likely—underage girl doing a keg stand, while two of the guys we came with hold her and cheer her on.

Dang, they move fast.

When I do finally manage to make my way into the sticky-floored kitchen, there is a long line of girls waiting to be thrown head over heels, and no way I'm getting a beer from this keg any time soon.

Despite my valiant efforts pre-funking, I realize I'm way too sober for this crowd.

Anxiety stricken, sick feeling in my gut, and with no sign of Jill, I decide to venture off to find the bathroom, surprisingly not having to pee, but it sounds like a safe space where I can check my wind-thrown hair.

Knew those curls wouldn't last.

Same story, different area of the house...

The line is too long for my liking.

A glow shines through a cracked door down the hall, so I excuse my way past the pairs of waiting girls—who hopefully smell much more intoxicated than I do—and head toward that inviting light.

Under the muffled voices, I can hear the sharp snapping of shuffling cards.

Ahh... I love that sound.

The sick feeling in my gut starts to fade.

Growing up with Dad meant a lot of adventures—camping, days spent on the fishing boat, several trips out of the country.

It also meant cards.

Rummy, Crazy Eights, Speed. The occasional Solitaire.

The list goes on and on.

Howdy, Stranger was our family game motto, and competition is in my blood.

I guess I have Gram to thank for that—Mom’s grandma that passed before I was born. There were no “kid” rules or gimmes with her. It was every man for himself, and Dad loved it.

So it will live on in our bloodline forever.

I feel a renewed sense of confidence as I finger comb my collar bone length hair, and head in through that cracked door—voices now loud and laughing.

The person shuffling at the far end of the dark table looks up, sees me, then looks back to the cards before saying, “*Bathroom’s down the hall.*”

“Oh, I know, I’m here to play,” I reply instantly with a head nod toward the table.

That stopped his shuffling.

I’m getting the excited *bring it on* feeling that I get while doing anything competitive.

They are all looking up at me now; three of them grinning with curiosity in their eyes.

Loving this.

I can't make out the fourth guy's face—the one in the back corner that originally excused me to the drunk-girl filled bathroom, but he is looking too.

“Hell yeah you are!” the person on my left yells, simultaneously scooting a chair down; now seated by the man in the shadows. He is tall, blonde, and skinny. A toned skinny that really works for him—he clearly cares about his appearance. He smiles at me again, and motions to the empty seat.

What a great smile he has, I like this guy already.

I attempt to pull my dress further down my thighs before I sit, now feeling slutty rather than sexy in this new environment.

Oh well, I'm still giddy and ready to win whatever game we are playing.

I give the room a once over.

There are three additional chairs at the orange felted card table the five of us are sitting at, but no sign of anyone looking to join. Poker chips are stored beneath it, visible through a glass case. A cool breeze sends shivers down my arm as I spot the crank handle on the large window that is slightly ajar. In the corner, next to the window, there are five healthy looking plants. I don't know what they're called, but one looks tropical, and I have one similar to that leafy one there.

Except mine is more brown than green these days.

The tall blonde is again the one to speak. “We’re playing Seven Card Stud—no bets or folds. Best hand wins. Know how to play?” he asks, while the other two start fiddling in their pockets. One pulls out a joint container, the other a blue Bic.

The guy on right is average height, a little on the heavy side but not in an unhealthy way. He has kind eyes, thin lips, and black hair.

Looks like someone you’d want to have the munchies and play video games with.

“I do,” I say, as the guy with the lighter hands it off to his buddy and grabs the pile of cards.

“I’m Max,” he says. “That’s Andre, Pete, and Chase over there.” He nods counterclockwise around the room ending with the still smiling blonde.

“Hope you don’t mind their smoking. So rude of them not to ask,” the blonde, I now know as Chase, says with a theatrical huff. “I’ll try to teach these boys some manners.”

Knew I liked him.

“Don’t mind a bit actually, but appreciate you asking,” I say as I raise my eyebrows in question toward the joint Max is now holding.

I figure one hit will be enough to bring my buzz back.

“I’m Evie,” I say with a slight cough after passing the joint clockwise. “Thanks for letting me join.” I aim those last words to my left.

Pete, the guy in the dark corner is sitting casually back in his chair.

I can still feel his eyes on me.

In my side-eye glance, I can see he’s wearing dark-washed jeans and a tight gray, almost black, T-shirt that hugs his toned, tanned biceps, and damn, does that shirt fit nicely because I swear...

I can see an ab.

Or four.

It makes my face go warm.

“Whose deal?” I ask nobody in particular.

“Yours,” Andre says while taking a puff of the traveling joint. He has dark skin, great teeth, and is built like a distance runner or rock climber.

I gladly take the cards and begin shuffling like a pro, complete with bridge finish.

“Uh oh, boys,” Chase says, throwing his hands up in a fake surrender.

I smile and shake my head while burning the top card before starting to deal. I move my focus to the dark mysterious figure, and that’s when he finally sits up and comes into the light.

We lock eyes and my heart stops.

Or starts.

I'm not sure what that was, all I know is I cannot breathe.

Or move.

Or think.

I'm not sure how much time passes while I am completely frozen—my hand midair, holding the card meant for the gorgeous man diagonal from me.

Think.

I control my thoughts.

Deal.

You are dealing.

I continue passing cards around the table, looking down as I lay each card flat.

My heart is pounding...

Pounding hard.

I make my way around the table.

My card.

His.

What's his name again? The tall blonde? Chase. Oh, yes. Chase.

And then Pete.

I look up and we lock eyes again.

Now my heart isn't the only thing that's pounding—blood is pumping between my legs. He smiles, a cool half

smile that makes my stomach twist, and the throbbing through my body goes even faster.

So many sensations hitting me like I've never experienced...

It is now hotter than hell in this stuffy ass room. I look up at that tiny crack in the window and wish someone would crank the damn thing open so I could breathe.

What the hell is happening?

Breathe.

Deal.

I control my thoughts.

I have an urge to bring my hand to my face, but it's occupied sliding a red Bicycle card toward Max, who is busy in his phone with Andre.

Ok, I went around twice.

Here we go. Focus.

I'm really feeling that joint now.

I deal Chase his fourth card—he has his pointer finger on his chin inquisitively looking down in front of him.

My heart knows what's coming next and, again, betrays me.

I look up. Pete is full on smiling at me now—the most amazing smile I have ever seen.

Wow. Those lips...

He is.

Fucking.

Sexy.

Holy shit.

And he's still smiling at me.

So hot in here.

Am I sweating?

How could I be sweating in this skimpy ass dress?

I feel so naked all of a sudden.

I knew I should have worn leggings.

I'm going to murder Jill.

Jill...

Forgot about Jill.

Wonder where she is... having a good time, I'm

sure.

Focus.

I control my thoughts.

...Ok.

Five cards.

How many do we need?

What are we playing?

Oh yes, Seven Card Stud.

Seven.

Stud.

Hot damn, what a stud. And yes, he's still smiling at me.

I don't know why I'm getting flustered—I talk to good looking guys on a regular basis.

I know how to land them too.

Insecurities and all.

This feels different though, like something chemical is happening inside of me.

Making me come to life.

A pulse ripples through my entire body.

I finish dealing, place the remainder of the deck in front of me, and grab my cards.

I only have six cards...

Fuck.

The feeling inside shifts as I look up and notice the confusion on Max and Andre's faces.

"I have five cards," Max says quietly.

Andre doesn't look from the lacking hand he was dealt. "Four here," he says, while moving his cards around.

"Sweetie, I have Six," Chase adds, with an *I feel sorry for you* kind of look.

Now my heart is in my ass; still rapidly beating. I take in a deep breath as I look over to Pete...

He's still smiling at me with those full lips, perfect teeth—so white, contrasted against his tanned face. A strong jawline and sculpted chin that I can just barely see under a thin layer of scruff. More than a five o'clock shadow, but not a full-on beard either. Still smiling and

looking into my eyes as he holds up the cards, fanned out in his hand.

“I have eleven.”

Brooke

I could slow down—crash into that streetlight over there. Perhaps not the best idea because... electricity.

Hmm. A tree maybe?

I could just graze it a bit, ding the front passenger side. Insurance would cover it.

The deductible?

Not sure what that is, probably five hundred. It would have to go to the shop, I wouldn't have my car for weeks...

What a sick thought.

I shrug it off.

It's not like I'm contemplating suicide, I'm just not in the mood today, and I don't think I have the energy to fake it.

What if I drive into that ditch?

I could manage to get stuck—they'd have to bring someone else in before morning rush.

"Heh, like anyone else would pick up a last-minute shift," I chuckle that last thought aloud to myself as I lean the seat in my red Honda back a little further, while letting my eyelids close, just a little. Cruise control set at my usual

sixty-five miles per hour—ten over for this early morning trek with the roads to myself.

I could just call and *say* I'm stuck in the ditch. Fell asleep at the wheel. It is four AM, and I am exhausted.

It's a very believable story.

But Moe might send Jason to help me get "unstuck." That sounds like something Moe would do. Then he'd be worked up and worried about me all day. I'd feel guilty leaving him high and dry.

It's not worth the trouble.

It is only a five-hour shift, I will be heading home as most people are rushing out their doors to go to work.

I pull into my usual parking spot at the diner as I forfeit my daily driving game of *how can I get out of work today*. It's not a reserved spot or anything, but being the first person here every morning—there's not a lot of competition.

I don't hate my job...

I actually enjoy it the majority of the day.

It's just that I really, really am exhausted. I am exhausted when I wake up. I am exhausted when I get home and fall asleep on the couch. I'm exhausted when I wake up again to make Jeff, the love of my life, dinner. Then I am exhausted when I make my way upstairs to dive into my goose feather down comforter.

I am just...

Exhausted.

I look it too.

I avoid the mirror and wash my hands in the designated employee break room, which is made up of a small round table with one uncomfortable metal chair, a mini fridge filled with moldy food containers left by current and former employees, and shelves packed to the ceiling with dry goods. I vaguely remember the walk from my car to get here—unlocking the door, turning off the alarm. I must have put my mini-skirt-black-apron on over my fading waist high jeans at some point. I stick a ChapStick, four pens, and my notepad in the pocket of my apron embroidered with: “*Moe’s Family Diner.*”

My wheat-brown hair is in a messy bun, no makeup as usual. Nobody notices when I wear it, so... why bother? The bags under my eyes won’t fade for a couple of hours anyway. Years ago, I would take the time to get ready, figuring the tips would be better, but customers still treated me like shit, and I made the same on days I didn’t try—so I gave up altogether. I move on from the sink to start my morning routine.

The coffee pot gets woken up first.

I grab that quarter-full, rolled-up silver bag of Verona—my favorite coffee I bring from home and share with employees only. Next, I make my way to the radio. I put on some soft rock that’s loud enough to hear in every

area of the restaurant I'll need to tend to before we open. After that, I make my way to the kitchen to start up the fryer, which technically isn't my job, but Jason loves to roll in late and I have his back. I actually love mornings I open with Jason. I can bust out my to-do list in under ten minutes, then have a good half hour or more to drink my coffee and get in the right headspace before having to make conversation with anyone.

The quickest way to the kitchen is through Moe's office, so I squeeze my way past the metro holding sugar packets, and cases of little cream containers.

Suddenly, my heart stops.

The door hits something with *thud* as I swing it open. The thud is followed by a loud moan and a yelled, but muffled, "Do you mind?!"

I am now the most awake I have been in weeks.

A gasp escapes me as I plan to make my way to the front door—my closest unblocked exit. I have no intention to stay and find out what kind of person breaks into a diner in the middle of the night. My keys are on the table—I will have to grab them as I run out. I'm fast but I haven't run in years so, chances are, I'll get winded.

I knew I should have rammed my car into that tree this morning.

As I turn, ready to make my escape, I grab the metro with my left hand in the hopes of knocking it in front of the intruder's path.

Working by myself at four AM in a college town, six plus days a week, I tend to run scenarios such as this through my mind. I have always planned to utilize the shelves to my advantage, hoping I'd never have to actually use them but, also curious to see how it would play out.

Things did not go as I had planned...

As I lie here on my back—pinned under this metal shelf—the first words I heard this morning ring back in my ears.

Do you mind.

A flickering light catches my eye. Several coffee creamers have busted open and splattered across my face and chest.

Do you mind...

I have been alone in this diner from the hours of four to five AM—give or take twenty minutes if Jason is my opening cook—six days a week for the last three years, and this guy has the nerve to act like I am the one invading *his* privacy?!

He'd better be long gone by the time I get out of this Splenda trap.

I am no longer afraid. I am enraged...

...Do you mind.

Do you mind...

“Do I MIND?!” I am now saying out loud.

Suddenly, a lightning bolt of energy rushes through me. I lift the shelf straight up and throw it onto its two back feet. It wobbles back, then forward in my direction, before landing solid—now blocking the doorway as I had originally intended. Somehow, a case of raw sugar remains on the bottom shelf.

Now, I have a choice to make...

Continue my original plan: *run*. Grab the keys, book it to my Honda, rush to the gas station two blocks down, and call 911. Or, I can confront this dark figure that’s slowly rising, barely visible behind the wood door. I’m still contemplating my next move when it swings open and I get a clearer view of the trespasser.

The first thing I notice is that he is not wearing a shirt. I try to resist as my eyes immediately go down toward that distinguished “V” cut off from view by his smoke-grey, low hanging sweats.

My anger simmers down a little.

He must have noticed my glance, he laughs shyly as he runs his fingers through his dark honey-colored hair, that has a little mess, and a little curl to it. I see a large navy backpack, the kind you’d take on a long hiking trip. It’s packed full and bulging at the seams, resting at the foot of a tussled-up green sleeping bag.

I guess I've made my decision, as I'm still standing here.

He grabs a shirt off the floor and pulls it over his head—Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you," he says, sticking his hand between two shelves of the rack still standing between us. "My name is Theo, I'm a friend of Moe's."

Theo.

That is a great name. You can tell a lot about a person from their name. I would know, I hear a lot of them. Yes, there are certainly exceptions like the name Scott, which belongs to my favorite and my least favorite customer, but for the most part, I can hear a name and tell you whether it's going to be a good table or a DTB table.

Decaf the Bitch.

I would never, but I'm only here fifty hours a week, and my coworkers know I will pretend not to notice with a hint of a smile.

A friend of Moe's...

He did get in here somehow, there was no sign of break in that I recall.

My walk in was so hazy...

Now that I am thinking about it, I do remember turning off the alarm, so he must have the code to turn it back on...

My heart starts to slow back to a normal rate as I hesitantly reach my hand through to meet his. They are soft, but callused, I realize how clammy mine are as we gently shake twice.

“He told me I could crash here, said nobody would be in his office till he got in around seven,” he continues as he starts rolling up the sleeping bag off the, what had to have been a super uncomfortable, floor.

All feelings of terror and rage are suddenly replaced with a turn in my stomach—like I was doing something wrong.

He must have read that on my face.

“No biggie,” he shrugs. “Now I’m up to watch the sunrise. Is that coffee I smell?”

Without getting my permission, he picks the rack off the floor and slides it back to its home against the wall. He moves past me and starts scooping creamers that survived the crash into their box, pocketing two. That reminds me that I’m still covered in French Vanilla. The sink is to my left, and I silently excuse myself to clean up. He finishes picking up the scattered sugar packets when I finally speak.

“I’ll get the coffee.”

Evie

The room is spinning.

I got my buzz back like I wanted, that's for sure.
I'm reminded of the girls I overheard in the dorm earlier
and remember everything I've eaten today.

And everything I've had to drink.

I am so embarrassed and honestly a bit in shock of
myself.

We are playing cards.

This is where I thrive—where I am my favorite
version of myself.

Even if other people may not agree...

An image of the neighbor kid, angrily flipping over
a chessboard, flashes in my mind.

Get out of your head.

I control my thoughts.

Be slow.

The room stops spinning as I take a deep breath in
through my nose. As I breathe out the door rapidly swings
open...

Jill is standing in the wood frame with that look on
her face, that *time to bounce the hell out of here* look.

My best.

Fucking.

Friend.

“*Evie*” is all she says before going back down the hall, knowing I’ll take as much time as needed to follow.

How much time that is has yet to be determined.

I could laugh this off, pretend I was joking. Go with the ever-famous ditzzy girl response: “I guess I actually *don’t* know how to play this game.” That I would accompany with a “hehe” and a sly shrug. I could easily blame the weed—it was a major contributing factor after all.

What the hell was in that stuff anyway?

I do want to find out more about Pete.

Is he single?

No ring on those strong hands.

As annoyed as Jill seemed, she wouldn’t care if I took my time to land a guy’s phone number. Although, in this moment... I’m not sure I know how to do that anymore.

Maybe it wasn’t as bad as I am making it out to be...

Like Rafiki, Dad’s favorite cartoon character, would say: “*It doesn’t matter, it’s in the past.*”

Wise Monkey.

His quote continues in my head, "*The past can hurt. But the way I see it, you can either run from it or learn from it.*"

I'm gonna fucking run from it.

It's a straight shot to the door. With eight eyes glued in on me, I stand, pull my drifting skirt back down, then toss my cards on the table. Face up.

Even with one absent, I know it was going to be a great hand.

I dare one last look at Pete, who then coolly says to me, "Nice to meet you, Evie."

My heart hits me with one dramatic *thud*, then I look to my left to see my hand is parallel my eyes.

Am I fucking waving right now?

My arm dashes down and a few seconds later...

I am out the door.

I turn the corner, thankful for my white tennies, and hurriedly walk down the now-empty hall which seems to have gotten longer, with my destination moving further and further away.

I am now seeing way too many similarities to a different hall...

The Shining—awful movie.

The horror film that ruined me of scary movies for life. I think Dad's slightly bummed I won't rewatch with him, being one of his favorites. He thought it was funny—

how scared I got—until I was climbing in bed with him for the next two months straight, and sporadically after that.

I usually do appreciate it, those memories...

Not right now.

Still alone in the hall, I get that creepy *someone's following me* feeling.

I pick up my pace.

I will not be showing my kids that movie until they are much, much older.

I can promise you that.

Where is everyone?

When did it get so quiet in here?

I start replaying what happened only seconds ago in my head...

Ok, it might not have been as terrible as I'm making it out to be. The wave was bad, no denying that, but at least my hand was motionless.

My face?

What was I doing with my face?

As I walk down the never-ending hall, I pray to whoever will listen that one: the door I just exited doesn't open behind me, and two: that there are absolutely no twin girls in this house younger than the group I saw doing keg stands earlier.

I attempt to reenact the interaction...

My face goes blush as I exchange my left mimicking hand for my comforting right hand, relaxed in that familiar way on my cheek.

Oh my lanta...

I looked like the teeth man emoji.

Did I make a noise?

A nervous, grunting, “ehhh” sound comes out as I experiment what someone making that face might sound like.

Oh no, I really hope I didn’t make a noise...

I control my thoughts.

When I finally exit the haunted hall, I erase the interaction from my brain, and see that most of the party has moved to the backyard for a ladder ball tournament.

Looks fun, but we are without-a-doubt leaving.

My shoulders cringe as I accidentally kick a pile of empty cans, hopeful I didn’t disturb the girl passed out on the couch, or the couple arguing in the corner. *Great*, I think, now I’m making the same idiot face I made at Pete. Glad he has that image cemented in his mind, along with that wonderful story to go with it. I am again reminded of *The Shining* and Jack Nicholson’s famous “Here’s Johnny” face.

Yep, that’s exactly what I looked like.

Great. Just, great.

“I hope I never see him again,” I say aloud, but know I’m lying to myself.

The cold air hits me and levels me out when I find Jill sitting on the stone steps underneath the large covered porch. “We are never coming back here,” she says, putting her cigarette out on a landscape boulder.

“You are absolutely right about that.”

Brooke

About halfway toward the now-finished pot of coffee, I spot the empty sanitizer bucket and get my wits about me. “On second thought, the coffee should be ready. I’ll meet you in there,” I tell him.

He stays silent as he reaches into the pocket of those grey sweats—I know for a fact he has no underwear on underneath—and pulls the two creamers he pocketed from my earlier disaster. He tosses them in the air before I head back in the direction we came. I give that stupid shelf an evil look, while stepping into Moe’s office. The green sleeping bag is now rolled up on the hard floor—I kind of feel bad for the guy.

How can he get any sleep like that?

Why is he here and not at home?

Does he even have a home?

A car?

If he does, it’s absolutely not here—I would never walk into the diner alone if there was a strange car in the parking lot.

Are all his worldly possessions stuffed away in this backpack?

As I get closer, I notice it doesn't have a *bad* smell to it. In fact, it actually smells pretty good. I find myself veering out of my straight path to the kitchen to see if I can get more of that smell...

That masculine smell.

I wish Jeff smelt like that.

Wait.

What am I thinking???

Jeff.

My amazing husband—my soulmate—the last man I will ever kiss. When you know, you know and from that first up-close moment, I knew this man had to be mine forever. It wasn't a magical kiss—I mean what first kiss truly is? I had no idea what I was doing. It was much different from the way the web between my thumb and pointer finger felt. Jeff was a grade older than me; a junior at the time he had kissed two girls prior, so he took the lead. We had been nervously locking eyes with each other around school for weeks. That day when he finally got the courage after Mrs. Anderson's science class, he didn't say a word to me. He just walked up and laid one on me. I thought it was kind of odd at first—kissing a boy whose voice I had only heard in group discussions and occasionally when he was called on—but we had good chemistry from across the room, so I didn't mind.

It was a quick kiss.

Passionate.

A lot of tongue right out of the gate. It was a fast-learning experience, that's for sure. Like throwing a child into the deep end of the pool with no life jacket on, probably just as wet too. He is a much better kisser now.

When he is in the making out mood.

I am zoning out watching the fryer's pilot light flame flicker, imagining all the ways this person could have come to be here. I'm not sure what Moe has planned for Theo, but if he's still here when I clock out, I can give him a ride somewhere.

...As long as it's not too far out of the way.

Jeff gets home at five and I still have to go to the store and come up with a plan for dinner.

I get back in my groove and start hustling to get everything done in record time, while secretly hoping that Jason is just now rolling out of bed.

A safe bet.

Coffee again takes priority—I pour the customer's first, both regular and decaf, into the brew basket. I do not like that smell, I'm not sure if I'm more turned off from the fishy-ness or the darkness of it.

Coffee should not smell like that.

As I am counting the cash register to verify Heidi's closing entry I must make a mistake, because it doesn't

align. I need to remind myself to recount before ringing out Paul's order this morning.

How that man drinks this venomous stuff on a daily basis and still has the strength to run six miles with his wife after, I'm not sure. I should recount immediately, but I'm being pulled toward that break room, and for once it isn't the thought of sitting with my eyes closed for twenty minutes that's driving me.

I do my usual walk-through in the lobby—there are crumbs under approximately half the tables.

Who else worked last night?

The closers know I will pick up their slack, so they like to take advantage of my niceness.

I notice a carafe sitting on the table of the family booth in the corner, and a panic suddenly twists in my stomach at the thought of our latest health inspection.

Please do not let them come back for their reassessment today. I am not in the right mindset to woo Larry with sports talk at the end of the counter while my team quickly changes the sanitizer water and wipes the crusty, spilt milk out of the two-door fridge.

I carry the spoiled cream back to the crowded break room, with that one lonely chair, to throw it in the three-compartment sink and to fill up the sani bucket.

And then what's my plan?

Stare awkwardly down at him while I sip my coffee and small talk...?

It's not like I don't know how to spark up a conversation. I could walk up to a random man on the street, ask some questions with sprinkled in compliments, and he'd be inviting me to his nephew's graduation within ten minutes.

I still need to introduce myself...

I'll just start with my name, no big deal.

Then why am I so nervous?

I don't think I'm nervous because I thought he was here to hold me for ransom approximately seven minutes ago.

He makes me nervous in a different way...

Poor Jeff.

If he knew I was getting this flustered over another man...

I could really use some wine right about now.

A sick feeling washes over me, knowing how good I have it with Jeff. If Theo *had* been here to kidnap me, I know Jeff would pay any ransom. He would give everything we had—he would be sure to loop the cops in first, but... he would pay.

He isn't obsessed with money; it's just a big part of his life as an accountant. Boring, I know, but I really do appreciate my husband's saving habits—I know he is just

looking out for our future. Unfortunately, that means even when he is home, his mind and computer are occupied.

Poor guy.

So I make sure he comes home to a clean house and home cooked meal every night.

I am not as good with money—I love clothes. It's not an addiction or anything, but I like to dress nice. It makes up for my lack of makeup and thrown up hair. Jeff likes to look nice when we go out, but doesn't often deviate from his button-up work attire or black sweats and old T-shirt at home.

When we first got married and moved an hour out of our high school town, we shared his income. It led to a few fights so we decided it would be best for me to open a separate checking account, and that's when I found my job with Moe.

Which I am *so* grateful for.

I love the responsibility of making my own money; having this job is much more fulfilling than lying around the house watching TV all day. Now when I lounge, I can do it knowing I at least got some steps in at work.

When I arrive in the break room to find it empty, a sadness replaces the nervousness.

I may never get to learn about this stranger...

But then my heart lightens when I spot his backpack and rolled up sleeping bag still sitting in Moe's office.

I look at my watch—I have fifteen minutes, at least, to go track Theo down.

After pouring a cup of coffee—black—into a stained, white mug, I go back through the door to the lobby. I spot him through the window, sitting on the brick wall of an empty flower bed with an identical mug to mine beside him. His elbows are on his thighs, fingers interlocked as he looks up toward the sunrise. Unfortunately, the burger joint across the street blocks much of the view, and my eyes are too distracted by the black marquee letters that read:

“*Closed on Sunday*” to be able to enjoy it.

He seems to be though... enjoying it.

I wonder what a day in Maui might be like for him. Not like I would know—I will have to look at the picture my mom and grandma sent from their trip last spring.

The nervousness comes back...

Maybe I shouldn't approach him.

Just as I consider turning around, he looks over his shoulder and smiles. It's the kind of smile that makes your entire face light up—your entire being light up. My nerves turn to excitement as I make my way to join him.

“Beautiful morning,” he says, picking up the mug to make room for me.

I am no longer afraid, and I can't be *sad* for him anymore, not after the way he smiled at me. So I smile too and take my seat beside him.

“Beautiful was not the word I had in mind,” I tell him. “My morning started off a little *different*.”

Theo nods as he sets his mug on the ground, and I get the feeling he knows what I’m about to say when I say it. “I don’t think I got your name.” He sits up and offers me a sideways shake—no rack between us this time... hardly any space between us at all.

“I’m Brooke.”

“It’s very nice to meet you. I apologize you saw the cranky version of me earlier.”

“*That* was you cranky?”

An image of Jeff storming out after an old friend called flashes through my mind.

“Yeah, you caught me off guard. I was sleeping really well,” he says as he nudges his solid shoulder into my body.

It gives me goosebumps.

“How?” I reply, sounding way too surprised.

“I’ve slept in worse. I was actually having a really good dream,” he finishes.

“I’ve heard about that—good sleep, good dreams,” I say the last two words like it’s an alien concept.

Which it kind of is.

My nights consist of tossing and turning while Jeff sleeps soundly next to me.

Red wine helps.

I suddenly feel the weight of my wedding ring, which makes my stomach turn in a different way—in a guilty way. I start fidgeting with it, but Theo’s eyes don’t leave the sky that is now a shade of orange, as he tells me some of his story.

Theo was a foster kid. His mom passed at a young age, and he never knew his father. When he noticed my reaction, he gave me that relaxed smile and told me not to worry, his story wasn’t all that tragic. The foster families were all nice enough, but he was ignored and placed in a room with cartoons too often. In the last house the front yard adjoined a busy street, and was off limits, while the backyard was a glass-filled alleyway.

He craved the outdoors.

So he got a job at Moe’s the day he turned sixteen, needing any reason to get out of the house. He saved every penny he could for two years, and the day after graduation he bought that navy backpack and has been traveling the world since.

“What do you do for money now?” I blurt out my first thought.

“I write,” Theo says.

“Like a journalist?”

He shrugs with a slight tilt of his head. “You could say that—more along the lines of a freelance journalist. I write... stories. Memories. You’d be surprised how many

people are just looking for someone to share their story with and are willing to pay someone to write it down. Sometimes it's just with a home-cooked meal, or even a place to stay for the night." He looks over at me. "And if that doesn't work, I can caulk a sink or change a light bulb. I'm pretty good with my hands." He smiles again at that last bit, which sends a shiver between my legs.

I should not be having these feelings...

"I've worked for Moe for three years and I have never seen you in here before—I'm sure I'd remember you."

That came out different that I meant for it too...

It makes me blush.

I look down. "I just mean, I'm good with names, and I am even better with faces."

I absolutely would remember that body. And that smell, now so much stronger than the whiff I got in the office earlier.

He laughs shyly. "I'd remember you too, Brooke."

I want more of this conversation.

I *need* more...

But just as I look up, I see Jason rolling into the parking lot.

Right on damn time.

I knew Jimmy was my favorite cook.