

CHAPTER ONE

“We admitted that we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable.”

No fucking shit.

Ethan Kelly read the rest of the *Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous* and folded the single sheet of paper in half as the meeting was called to order. The two weeks' worth of stubble on his head felt foreign under his hand as he rubbed at it and glanced around the room. He'd shaved off his long black hair when he'd entered detox, a symbolic gesture of cutting off ties with his old life, but he still worried someone would recognize him and call him out. He wasn't there to put on a show for the media. He was there because he needed to stay clean, and this was one of the tools that had been recommended to him.

The inside of his left arm burned under his sleeve, and he rubbed the spot of his latest tattoo. Even though the flesh had healed, the pain behind it was still as raw as the day he'd gotten it.

The day he'd lost his best friend to heroin.

It was the wake-up call he'd both needed and been dreading. He'd watched Tyler slip deeper and deeper into his addiction, but he'd been too scared to say something. Then it was too late to say anything. Two days after getting the tattoo, he checked himself into detox. He only wished he'd been able to do it with Ty. Instead, his best friend was now ashes in an urn, and Ethan was left trying to pick up the pieces of his shattered life alone.

The craving to say “fuck it all” and shoot up ambushed him. It would be so easy to get high and forget about the pain, to go back to the euphoric place where his muse reigned supreme and he didn't give a damn about anyone but himself and his music. He balled his hands into fists and squeezed his eyes shut. *I can do this. I have to do this. No more escaping reality.*

He drew in several deep cleansing breaths like they'd taught him to do during detox, and the craving subsided.

For now.

He opened his eyes just as a woman was sneaking into the chair across from him. She shrugged off her knee-length leather coat, giving him an ample view of the bare bit of her thigh between her cream-colored boots and mint green sixties-style mini-dress as she crossed her legs. A different craving rose within him, one that shot straight to his crotch. Thank god for the six feet of aisle space between them, or he'd be tempted to find out for himself if her skin was as silky and supple as it looked.

From the corner of her eye, she caught him staring. A flush rose up her neck and into her cheeks

as she tugged on the hem of her skirt, but he couldn't turn away. Everything about her screamed Park Avenue, from her designer handbag to her flawless manicured nails. She looked like she should have been shopping at Neiman Marcus or Bergdorf Goodman, not sitting in a moldy church basement full of recovering addicts.

His attention wandered up from her legs to her face. He couldn't tell if her eyes were blue or green, but the arched brow above the left eye wordlessly asked him if he was done gawking.

And for the first time in two weeks, his lips rose into a grin. No, he wasn't done at all. Not as long as she had those legs on display.

She rolled her eyes and draped her coat over her lap, hiding those luscious thighs from his view just as the meeting leader, Gary, asked the new members to introduce themselves to the group.

Shit. This was the part he'd been dreading. Thankfully, he didn't have to give his last name, and he'd already been warned by Gary that he'd be hugged if he didn't make it clear from the beginning that he wasn't up for that. He cleared the lump forming in his throat and stood.

"Hi, I'm Ethan, and I'm not a hugger."

There. That was all they needed to know. The rest of his inner demons were his own to battle. He slumped back into his chair and crossed his arms, daring any of them to try and touch him.

"Hi, Ethan," the room replied in unison.

Then Gary opened the meeting up for the members to share.

Ethan stretched out his legs and closed his eyes, only halfway listening to their stories. He was here in this church basement only because his mother and the counselor at detox suggested he try it out. He didn't need any hand-holding or "Kumbaya" singing to help him avoid using again. He'd already gone through the flu-on-steroids hell of detox. And he had the most powerful deterrent to using again tattooed over his favorite vein.

Tyler Bransford, 1987–2014.

Every time he'd be tempted to shoot up, he'd see the name of his best friend and be reminded of the life and talent that were destroyed by heroin. To him, that was far more effective than a weekly meeting listening to people drone on and on about how hard it was to stay clean.

He had no idea how much time had passed, but when he cracked an eye open, he found the woman across the aisle studying him with a line furrowed above her too-perfect nose. Her lips were pursed as though he was some sort of riddle she was trying to decipher, yet despite the intense focus on her features, she twirled a lock of her dark brown hair around her fingers in a casual manner.

He mimicked the same questioning arched brow she'd given him.

Her lips parted in a silent gasp. She turned away and sat up straighter, her hands falling to her lap and her attention fixed on Gary instead of him.

Some part of him felt a little rush, knowing she'd been checking him out. The other part of him cautioned him to stay far away from Ms. Park Avenue. He already had enough drama going on in his life. He didn't need to involve what appeared to be a very high-maintenance woman. Not his style, anyway. He doubted she'd ever agree to hop on the back of his bike and zoom through the streets of Manhattan. He liked his women wild and fearless, not uptight and prissy.

Gary then announced it was time to adjourn and asked everyone to gather around in a circle for a quick prayer. Ethan's stomach recoiled at the idea. He didn't want any damned prayers or religion to

be stuffed down his throat. And yet, he found himself joining the others and standing next to Ms. Park Avenue. She smelled of amber and sandalwood mingled with something soft and floral. Exotic, yet distinctly feminine. The intoxicating scent distracted him long enough to let his anger fizzle out, and by the time the prayer was finished, his gut was no longer in knots.

The circle disbanded, and Gary made his way to him. "I'll be with you in a minute, Ethan," he said before pulling Ms. Park Avenue aside. Their hushed conversation made Ethan wonder if he was reprimanding her for showing up late. A couple of minutes later, she nodded, and they both approached him.

"Ethan, I'd like you to meet Rebecca. Usually, we let our newcomers choose a sponsor after spending a few weeks getting to know the group, but I would like to personally recommend her as someone who can help you get settled into the program."

Why? Because I was checking her out?

"She has graciously agreed to help you until you choose a sponsor, if you're interested, and probably would understand your situation far better than most of us."

Ethan's mouth went dry. He'd already done so much to go underground while dealing with his addiction. Changed his appearance. Moved across the country from LA to New York. Avoided the media at all costs after dealing with the circus that had dogged him until he checked into detox. But he'd made the mistake of confiding his need for confidentiality to Gary, and now, the meeting leader had shared who he was with someone else. He ground his teeth and flexed his fingers. Maybe this had been a mistake after all.

Gary gave Rebecca a genuine smile and a nod, which she returned. "I'll let you two get better acquainted."

Ethan didn't dare move a muscle as the group leader left to talk to someone else, leaving him alone with her. Every nerve in his body stood on edge. If he wanted to keep his privacy, he couldn't reveal anything personal.

Her smile faltered into a nervous twitch of her lips. "Listen, Ethan, I know you may think this isn't for you, but please, give it another week or two. The first week is always the hardest. If you give it a chance—"

"What exactly did he say to you about me?"

"Well, he wasn't praising your sunny personality, that's for sure."

Her sarcasm caught him off guard, and despite his better judgment, he took a step toward her. "Then what did he say?"

"He said I of all people would know what you were going through, and he trusted that I would handle you with care until you feel ready to choose a sponsor."

His insides bristled at the thought of being handled with care. It was bad enough his mother was calling him every night to check on him like a child. "Did he say why?"

She shook her head, her dangling earrings rattling against her jaw. "Nope."

The whole situation perplexed him, and he took another step toward her, encroaching on her personal space just to see how she'd react. "And who exactly are you?"

She looked up at him, and he finally could see the color of her eyes. Blue on the outside, green toward the center. Striking and clear and unwavering as she held his gaze. "A recovering addict, just

like you.”

His chest tightened, trapping the air in his lungs, but he refused to back down.

“In case you missed the memo,” she continued, “the ‘A’ stands for ‘anonymous.’ It’s something we take very seriously here. If you’re still wondering why Gary thinks I’ll be able to help you, I’d be willing to share a bit more about myself over coffee. But you’ll have to wait until next week.”

“Always a catch,” he muttered before turning. But she intrigued him enough that he might come back just to find out who she was and what she was doing here.

“Think of it more as an enticement.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a notepad and pen. “Here’s my number. If you feel the need to shoot up, give me a call first, and I’ll try to talk you down.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” But he took the piece of paper with her number on it anyway. In any other situation, getting a sexy woman’s digits meant he was doing something right. But right now, the fact she was giving him her number was a sign that she was just waiting for him to slip back into his old habits.

“Hey, I’ve been there, remember? I know what it’s like to be new to this and how hard it is to say ‘No’ to the cravings. We all stumble. We all make mistakes. But we’re not in this alone.” She slipped her coat back on, her gaze raking him over from head to toe and back again. “And maybe next week, you’ll have a better idea how I can help you out.”

He could think of a dozen ways she could help him out, but none of them involved this support group. But he stepped aside to let her leave, watching the way her hips swayed as she walked. Yes, he definitely wanted to know Ms. Park Avenue’s story.

He gathered up the booklets and pamphlets Gary had given him before the meeting and shoved them into his backpack. Rebecca’s number, however, was carefully folded and slipped into the inner pocket of his wallet. He doubted he’d ever need it, but just in case...

His Ducati Streetfighter was parked half a block away. He strapped on his helmet and hopped on the bike, revving it up until the vibrating purr of the engine massaged away the tension in his muscles. He’d come back next week, if only to learn more about her. Then he kicked off and sped down the street before his doubts could catch up to him.

“Ari, I’m home,” Rebecca called as she kicked the door closed behind her.

Her roommate, Ariela Horowitz, appeared from her bedroom dressed in yoga pants and a cami and took the pizza box from her. “Perfect timing. I’m starving.”

“They charged me four dollars extra for the gluten-free crust.”

“I’ll pay you back.” Ari lifted a slice of warm, gooey, veggie-topped pizza and folded it in half before taking a bite. “This is heaven.”

Rebecca grabbed a plate from the kitchen and handed it to Ari. “Please, use this. I don’t want a huge mess to clean up afterward.”

“Fine.” She took the plate with a huff and plopped down on the sofa. Both of them had grown up in wealthy families that employed several maids, but Ari still acted like they had one to pick up after them in the apartment they shared.

Instead, that job fell to Becca in exchange for living there rent-free.

She placed a slice on a plate for herself and joined her best friend on the sofa. “Why do you always insist on getting everything gluten-free? You’re not allergic to it.”

“I know, but it makes me bloat.” Ari patted a perfectly flat stomach that would make a Victoria’s Secret model envious. Petite, blond, and practically flawless, Ari was the embodiment of what an Upper East Side twenty-something should be.

“Whatever.” Becca bit into the pizza, methodically chewing through the rubbery crust and wishing it was real bread. But since Ari had launched the “gluten is evil” campaign in their apartment, she had noticed her clothes were fitting a bit looser.

After a few minutes, Ari went back into the kitchen for another slice. “You’re awfully quiet tonight.”

“My mind is elsewhere.” *Mainly on that moody, sullen, sexier-than-sin guy I gave my number to and wishing that he would call for non-NA things.*

“Work?”

That drew a derisive snort from her. Becca was an editorial assistant at *Moderne* magazine, a periodical totally devoted to the selfie generation. “Hardly. Instead of giving me the go-ahead for my human trafficking article, they asked me to research the best places to have sex in public.”

“Dressing rooms, first thing in the morning,” Ari replied with a wink. “Then what is it? Something happen at your meeting?”

“You can say that.” She forced herself to swallow the last bite and set her plate on the ottoman. “I got asked to help out this new guy until he can choose a sponsor.”

Ari wrinkled her nose. “Does that mean you’ll have to spend time with some strung-out user?”

Becca drew a sharp breath in through her nostrils and stiffened her spine. “Hello? That was me a few years ago.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what *do* you mean?”

Ari had the decency to squirm on her side of the sofa and hugged one of the throw pillows. “It’s just that, even when you were bad, you still functioned. Well, until the night of the Tribeca Ball. But, you know, you still looked normal.”

“And you think I’m an exception to what a ‘normal’ addict should look like?”

“Well, you see all those people on the street begging for money so they can go out and get high...”

Becca got up and took her plate to the kitchen. After giving it a quick rinse in the sink and placing it in the dishwasher, she turned around to find Ari leaning against the wall with her lower lip jutted out in an apologetic pout.

“Sorry, Becca. It’s just that I wish there was some support group you could go to that was filled with people more like us. I’d worry less.”

“I’m not going to get mugged or stabbed or whatever you’re worried about there.” She took Ari’s plate and added it to the dishwasher. “Besides, Gary personally asked me help this guy because he thought I would know best where he was coming from.”

Ari pushed off the wall, her worry changing into curiosity. “What is he? Some kind of Wall Street broker?”

“Not even close.” Everything about Ethan screamed bad boy, from the tattoos peeking out from under his shirtsleeves to the way he tore down the street on his bike. “But I have to trust Gary’s judgment and see where it goes.”

“I saw that look.” Ari flipped the dishwasher closed and moved to within a few inches of her, bumping hips with her. “You think he’s hot.”

Becca’s cheeks heated as she wrapped up the leftover pizza. She remembered all the little details about him with heart-jolting clarity. The heat from his body. The scent that rose from his skin. The air of pure masculinity that surrounded him. “He’s not bad looking.”

“Uh-huh,” Ari drawled, following close behind her. Ari wasn’t going to leave her alone until she’d reported everything she could about Ethan.

Time to call uncle or I’ll never hear the end of it. “What do you want to know?”

“What was he wearing?”

“Worn jeans that clung in all the right places, white T-shirt with an open red button-down shirt over it, black leather boots.”

“Ass?”

The heat from her cheeks flowed lower to the pit of her stomach. “Nice and tight.”

“Eyes?”

“Gray.” And angry, like thunderclouds.

“Hair?”

“It looked black.”

“What do you mean, it *looked* black? Was he wearing a hat or something?”

Becca shook her head. “It was really short, like he’d just shaved it all off recently.”

“Ew!” Ari wrinkled her nose and backed away. “Is he going bald or something?”

“Not that I could tell.” In fact, she’d wanted to run her hands over the thick, dark stubble.

“Then is he like some G.I. Joe wanna-be?”

“Nope.” She put the pizza in the fridge and walked out of the kitchen, leaving her friend behind.

But Ari wouldn’t let up that easily. “Oh, I see it now. Let me guess. Tattoos?”

“Yep.”

“Piercings?”

“Nope.”

“Motorcycle?”

“Ducati Streetfighter 848.”

Ari’s pale blond ponytail whipped her in the face as she shook her head. “No way, Becca. He’s got ‘stay away’ written all over him.”

“I know, but that’s what makes him so fascinating.” But it was more than the “angry at the world to cover up the pain” vibe she’d seen in his eyes. She couldn’t shake the feeling that she knew him from somewhere.

“Your dad would have a stroke if you brought him home for dinner.”

“Precisely, which is why he’ll remain forbidden fruit as far as the romance department goes. Besides, I’m just going to help initiate him into the program until he has his own sponsor—someone he can call when he’s in a crisis.”

“And what if that crisis is a desperate need for a hookup?”

“Please, I do have some integrity. The guy looks like he’s trying hard just to stay clean, and there’s a reason why relationships are a no-no this early in the recovery process.” But if she’d met him at a club, she’d have no problem hooking up with him. Ethan got her pulse racing in all the right ways. Dark, dangerous, and mysterious. She couldn’t wait to unravel his story.

That is, if he ever trusted her enough to share it.

“Fine, but if he calls, make sure you check in with me so I know where you are.” Ari stretched. “I’d better give Gabe a call before turning in. And speaking of brothers, Jacob called to find out if you were going to celebrate Rosh Hashanah with your parents. He’d come in from New Haven if you were.”

“You both know I’m not.” Part of staying clean involved avoiding situations where she’d be tempted to use again, and dealing with her father always triggered the desire to find the nearest dime bag.

“It’s your life.” Ari gave an indifferent shrug, but the look on her face said she’d be bringing it up again. “You still up for a little jog in the morning?”

Becca fought back a groan. A little jog with Ari equated to three miles of sprinting through Central Park. “Can I take a pass?”

“Sure, and your thighs can get flabbier for it.”

This time, Becca didn’t hold back. A full-blown groan of pain was followed by a whimper when she imagined how her thighs would burn afterward. “Fine, I’ll come.”

“Good choice. We’ll be leaving at five sharp.”

Talk about torture. “Where do you get your energy, and can I borrow some of it?”

“Spend energy to make energy. See you in the morning.” Ari pulled out her phone and was dialing her brother’s number as she disappeared into her bedroom.

Becca plumped the pillows on the sofa before retreating to her own bedroom. Even though she’d severed ties with her family, she still managed to live a very comfortable life. The newly renovated two-bedroom apartment had sleek, modern lines that made them the envy of their peers. The view was spectacular, the security exceptional, and the rent was to die for. The Upper East Side apartment building belonged to Ari’s grandmother, which meant they both got to live there rent-free. Becca’s room was the smaller of the two, but even it had a walk-in closet and an attached bathroom.

She shed the dress she’d gotten at H&M and tossed it in the hamper before slipping into a pair of comfortable boxers and a cami. As she sat in bed with her notebook and pen, trying to come up with some places for the article, her mind kept drifting back to Ethan. Once again, the sense that she knew him hit her, but she had no idea why. He definitely didn’t look like anyone who would’ve run in her circles growing up. But still, there was something about him...

She chucked her notebook across the room and fell back on her pillows. If she wanted to get anything done this next week, she needed to stop obsessing over a guy she just met.

A guy who was trying to stay clean.

A guy who acted like he wanted nothing to do with her.

Time for some mind-cleansing music. She scrolled through the music on her iPod Shuffle until she came to one of her favorite Ravinia’s Rejects songs. Unlike the driving rock beats of their other

songs, this one was slow and quiet, the acoustic guitars melding with the perfect harmonies of the two lead singers. During her first days of sobriety, she'd listened to the song over and over until it haunted her dreams. She closed her eyes and let the music wash over her. The chorus came on, and she sang along with it, letting each word soothe her soul.