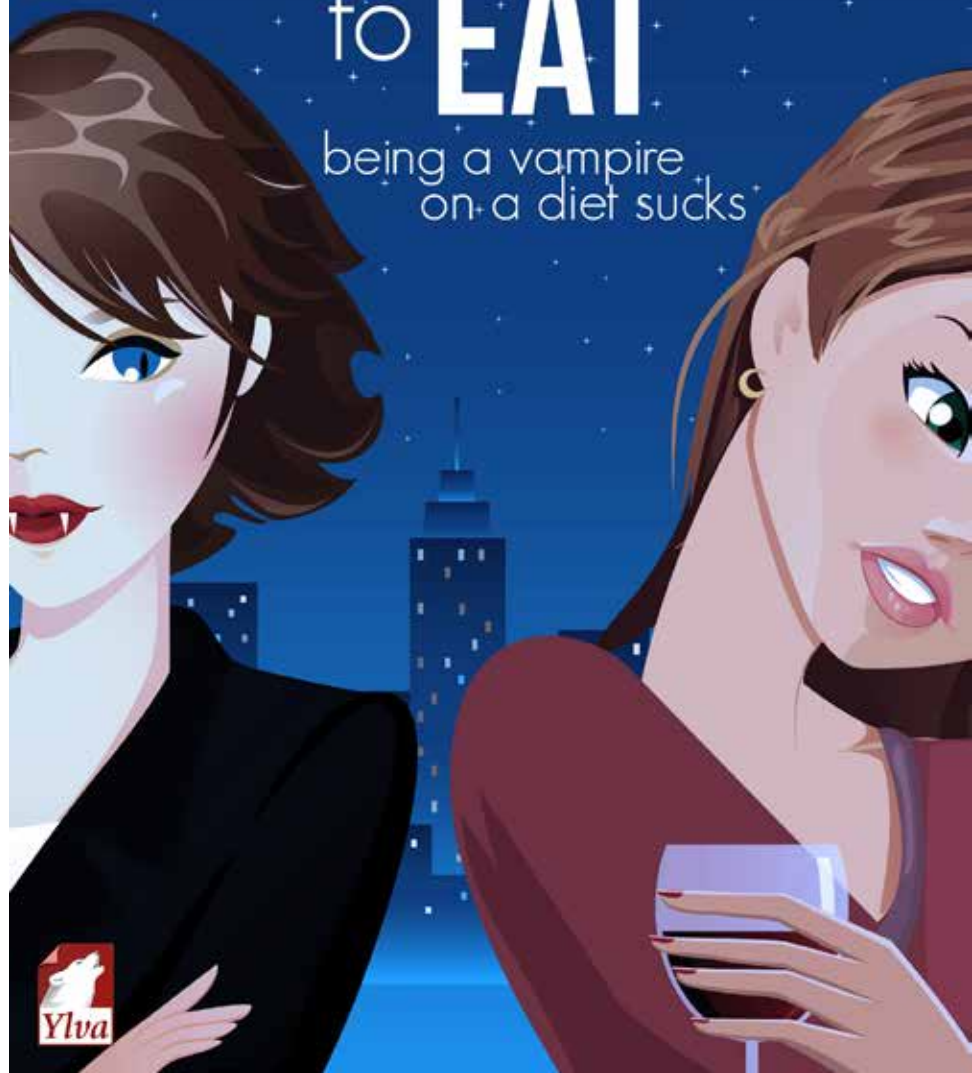


Alison Grey & Jae

good enough to **EAT**

being a vampire
on a diet sucks



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Alison Grey & Jae

good
enough
to **EAT**



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CHAPTER 1

A VAMPIRE WALKED INTO AN AA meeting. It sounded like the beginning of a bad joke, and maybe it was. Other Girah would certainly think so if they knew where she was.

Yeah, but you're not exactly walking into an AA meeting, are you? Coward! Robin sat in her car in the church parking lot. She had driven all the way to Brooklyn from her Central Park condo to avoid running into anyone she knew. Her fellow Girah wouldn't be amused if they saw her hanging out with a bunch of human alcoholics. For at least half an hour, she had been staring across the street at the Romanesque building with the tall spire but couldn't make herself go in. It wasn't the crucifix above the main portal that stopped her from entering. Her kind had been around much longer than Christianity, so, despite what humans might think, crosses didn't harm or repel her. The color of the side door seemed to mock her, though: a rich, bright crimson exactly the color of fresh blood.

Three humans stood outside the door, smoking and joking around with each other. She doubted they were there for the AA meeting. They looked too healthy. Too happy. Too normal.

Robin was neither happy nor normal, and after not drinking blood for four days, she didn't feel very healthy either.

This isn't right. She didn't belong here, to this group of humans. But where else was she supposed to go? She grinned wryly. It wasn't as if she could walk into a Bloodsuckers Anonymous meeting. She had tried Overeaters Anonymous, but

the sight of all those well-nourished humans made her feel as if she'd walked into a restaurant with an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Just thinking about it made her gums ache, and she started to sweat. She pulled down the visor to check if she could still pass as human. That was another myth about her kind that humans seemed to believe in. The vampires that Robin's fellow authors of paranormal fiction portrayed in their novels didn't have reflections, but she did. Her reflection looked flushed and shaky, but the people in the AA meeting would probably attribute it to alcohol withdrawal. Thankfully, her fangs hadn't protruded, so her teeth looked entirely human.

One of the men smoking in front of the church looked over.

Quickly, Robin pretended to check her teeth for any leftovers from dinner. When he directed his gaze elsewhere, she snapped back the visor and went back to staring at the church. Her legs were shaking, but she couldn't tell whether it was nerves or withdrawal. If she didn't get some blood soon, at least the synthetic type, she would become dizzy and pass out, possibly even die. Synth-O was expensive, though, so she usually waited until later in the evening to drink a bottle of the stuff. But before she could drive home and guzzle a bottle of Synth-O, she had to get through this AA meeting first.

The number eighty-two popped into her mind, and she realized she had been counting the bricks in the church's pale façade. She thought she'd shaken that old habit, but apparently, it was back.

Growling, she opened the car door and got out.

Her breath condensed in the cold January air. The smell of laundry detergent, oil, and chili powder assaulted her nose, making her realize for the first time that Saint Mary's was located between a Laundromat and a fast-food restaurant that served fried chicken and waffles. She wrinkled her nose at the weird combination of dishes. But then again, human eating habits were weird. She had eaten human food on occasion, trying

to fit in, but it didn't have the nutrients she needed or the taste she preferred.

On legs that still felt slightly shaky, she walked across the parking lot and past the three smoking men, ignoring their curious gazes. No lightning struck her as she entered the church. *No spontaneous combustion either.* She grinned and shrugged. *Guess I'll take it as a good sign.*

The website listing AA meetings had said that the self-help group gathered in the basement, so she made her way down the spiral stone staircase.

Laughter trickled up the stairs.

For Robin, her addiction wasn't a laughing matter. It was a matter of life or death—hers or that of a human. She didn't want a repeat of New Year's Eve. One human hanging lifeless in her grasp had been enough.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and proceeded down a hallway.

More laughter came from behind a door.

Was she really in the right place? Well, only one way to find out. She opened the door at the end of the hall.

Twenty-one people sat on folding chairs, some chatting, some staring off into space, all of them drinking coffee from paper cups. A glance and a quick sniff showed Robin that they were from all walks of life—ranging from a man in a suit who smelled as if he'd been counting money all day to a guy in paint-spattered work pants. Unlike the people in Overeaters Anonymous, most of them were men.

One more reason to switch to AA. Robin had a taste for the fairer sex and not just in the bedroom. She would be less tempted to bite one of the men.

She let her gaze trail through the rest of the room, which looked as if it doubled as a daycare center. Children's drawings hung next to posters with AA's twelve steps. A giant coffee pot, a pile of stale donuts, and a stack of paper cups sat on a table in the corner.

The door opened, and the smell of smoke preceded the three men she had seen outside into the room. The seats were filling up quickly, so Robin rushed toward the only unoccupied chair along the back wall. A thick, blue book lay on it. "Excuse me." Her throat was dry and burned with thirst, so she had to pause and clear it. "Is this seat taken?"

The gray-haired man to the left of the chair with the book shook his head and gave her a friendly smile. "No. Please, sit." He took the book off the chair, put it on his lap, and trailed his fingers over the letters carved into the hardback cover. "You're new, aren't you?"

Robin nodded and hunched down in her folding chair.

"Feel free to get yourself a cup of coffee," the man said, pointing at the snack table.

Robin shook her head. She had never understood why humans were so obsessed with that bitter brew.

"Then how about a donut?"

Again, she shook her head, wishing he would just shut up.

Of course, he didn't. "Have you been to a m—?"

She jerked around and looked into his eyes. *Shut up!* She used just enough thrall to make it an order he couldn't help following.

His eyes glazed over, and he closed his mouth so quickly that his teeth clacked together.

Finally, some peace and quiet. As much as being a blood-drinking Girah could be a pain in the ass, at times like this, she really appreciated the mind control her kind could exert over humans. She blew out a breath and looked away from Mr. Blabbermouth, releasing him from her hypnotic thrall. She hoped his survival instincts would kick in now and stop him from trying to have a chat with her again.

The teenager on her other side was chewing a hangnail. He was dressed in black, his baggy pants hanging loose on his scrawny frame. The smell of something worse than alcohol clung to him. Heroin? Amphetamines? Robin wasn't sure, but whatever

it was made him pretty sick. His skin was so pale that he looked much more like a vampire than she did—or at least more like the image humans had of vampires. His knee bounced up and down, and Robin caught herself counting the bounces.

She jerked her gaze away. The whole situation was surreal.
What am I doing here?

Just when she was about to bolt, a bearded man stood. “For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Brian, and I’m an alcoholic. Welcome to our AA meeting.”

The others murmured greetings, but Robin remained silent. “Okay,” Brian said. “Now please all join me in the Serenity Prayer.”

Oh, great. More prayer. The Overeaters Anonymous meeting had been the same. It had left Robin staring at the wall, not knowing how to pray to the human God.

All around her, people started to mumble the words with Brian. “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Robin shuddered as she flashed back to New Year’s Eve, to Meghan turning toward her, blood dripping from her fangs as she said, “Why are you fighting it? You can’t change who you are.”

Instead of discouraging her, the memory of that night made Robin determined to try even harder. She gripped the edges of her folding chair. *Maybe I can’t change who I am, but I can change what I do.*

That thought made her stay where she was, despite the urge to flee while Brian read the AA preamble and other members took turns reading from the blue book.

Most of what they read seemed more spiritual than practical. How were those corny mantras, the psychobabble, and the spiritual hooey supposed to help her?

Robin counted the number of times they mentioned God or a higher power, just to keep herself entertained.

Right when she started to consider putting them all in thrall and making a quick escape, the man who had been reading closed the book and Brian asked, “Are there any newcomers tonight?”

The teenager next to Robin stopped chewing his hangnail and looked up from where he slumped in his chair. He stopped bouncing his knee and lifted his hand. “Hi, I’m Kevin, and I...I guess I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Kevin,” the group said in unison. Their greetings echoed off the walls of the basement.

How amusing. Here she was, a paranormal creature, yet Robin felt as if she was the only normal one trapped in this weird cult.

“Anyone else here for the first time?” Brian asked and looked directly at her.

Reluctantly, Robin raised her hand too. She didn’t want to give her name or lie, so she said, “I’m just here to listen.”

“That’s fine. Everything in this meeting is confidential, including whether you want to introduce yourself or not.” Brian smiled, half hidden by his beard. “Tonight’s speaker will share her story now. Everyone, please welcome Alana.”

Beautiful name. Robin itched to pull out her ever-present notebook from her back pocket to write down the name so she could use it for one of her characters. But when she caught sight of the woman now striding toward the small podium at the front of the room, she forgot about the notebook.

Alana was as beautiful as her name. With her trim body, pretty face, and hair that shone with a copper glow, she didn’t look like an alcoholic at all. Then again, Robin knew only too well that looks could be deceiving. No one at the meeting would think she looked like someone who longed to sink her teeth into Alana’s carotid.

Alana’s steps were steady and her gaze never wavered as she took her position behind the lectern, but Robin could smell her nervous sweat and hear the blood rushing through her arteries

and veins, calling to her. The pulse thudding in Alana's neck taunted her. *Bite me! Bite me*, it seemed to shout.

As if that weren't bad enough, Alana's smell revealed that she was O negative. That blood type was Robin's comfort food—like a pint of Haagen-Dazs, a large pizza with double cheese, and a piece of chocolate cake all rolled into one.

Yum. Dessert has just been delivered, a voice in Robin's head said, sounding strangely like Meghan.

Thirst flared. She could almost taste that smooth, salty tang on her tongue. *Stop it!* She was here to fight that urge, not to indulge in it. Wrenching her gaze away from Alana, she started counting—the number of chairs in the room, the leftover donuts on the table, the syllables in the twelve traditions displayed on a wall poster, the buttons on Alana's blouse.

Like a human under thrall, her gaze kept wandering back to Alana. Finally, she gave up trying to ignore her and listened to what the woman had to say.

* * *

Alana held on to the lectern with both hands. Feeling something solid beneath her fingers usually had a soothing effect on her, but today it wasn't working. Her gaze darted over her audience and lingered on the group's two newbies. While the fidgeting teenager stared down at his bouncing knees, the new woman's gaze was so intense it made Alana want to squirm. Her shortish, dark brown hair and fair skin weren't really unusual. Quite the opposite. Except for her deep blue eyes, she didn't look remarkable at all, but even at a distance, Alana sensed that there was something off about the newcomer. *How would you know? It's not like you still have any powers left.*

Someone cleared his throat.

Get a grip! She's just someone looking for help. Like you. Alana took a deep breath. "Hi. My name is Alana, and I'm an alcoholic."

Brian, Pete, and the others gave her encouraging smiles. “Hi, Alana.”

The new woman still stared at her. Her face showed a strange mix of emotions, some unreadable. But Alana could have sworn she saw surprise and something like lust.

Shaking her head at herself, Alana focused on Brian. Even though he already knew her story, it helped to imagine she would speak just to him. “My beverage of choice was gin.” She chuckled. No one but her could recognize the irony in that. “Gin Fizz, Fallen Angel, gin straight out of the bottle, whatever I could get my hands on.”

Someone coughed, and Alana waited until the room quietened again.

“I started drinking after I found my girlfriend in bed with her catcher.” When the new boy frowned, Alana said, “She was into softball. When she told me she needed to bond with her teammates, I had no idea she meant that kind of bonding.” Alana shrugged, hoping to appear indifferent, but she doubted that anybody fell for it. No matter how many times she told this story, it still hurt. “Call me stupid, but I really thought she loved me and softball—in that order. Turns out she played softball just to hit on women and never loved me at all.” She clasped the sides of the lectern until her knuckles turned white.

“On that evening, I drank alcohol for the first time in my life. I went to a bar and told the bartender to give me a drink—any drink. He suggested a Suffering Bastard, and I accepted. It sounded fitting.” For a moment, she closed her eyes, remembering the fresh, slightly bitter taste and the numbness that soon followed. When she opened her eyes, she met the gaze of the female newbie.

But the stranger broke eye contact and looked down as if in shame.

I guess she has a similar story. Alana focused on Brian again. He winked.

“For those of you who don’t know this cocktail, it’s a mix of brandy, ginger ale, lime juice, a dash of bitters, and—you might have guessed it...” Alana smiled when everybody spoke together with her, “Gin.” She sobered. “I drained the glass in seconds and ordered a second one. My whole body started to tingle, and the more I drank, the better I felt. When I woke up the next morning, I was back in our apartment, lying in the bed I shared with my girlfriend. Well, ex-girlfriend, I guess. Somehow I had not just made it home but also managed to make a complete fool out of myself, begging my ex to take me back, as if I was the one who had messed up.”

Several group members shook their heads in sympathy.

“Looking back, I’m not sure what was more humiliating. Finding out my girlfriend was cheating on me or waking up naked beside her while she sported a grin as big as the cat that ate the canary.”

Alana rubbed the wood under her sweaty fingers. “I moved out the same day. First into a hotel, then into an apartment of my own. I was alone. And by alone I mean I had nobody. A suitcase with some clothes was all I had.” She closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the hopelessness she had felt. “I had given up everything for her. My life, my family, my friends. And there was no going back. My old existence had been lost forever, and the person I had sacrificed everything for was a fraud. I was such a fool. How could I ever think that it would be a good idea to go against everything I was?” Her words were more whispered than spoken. “Anyway, I couldn’t get back to being the person I was before, but I had no idea who I was now, without her. So for more than two years, not a single day went by without gin. Alcohol made me lose my self-control. The more I drank, the more I wanted.”

When Alana looked up, she met the penetrating gaze of the female newbie. A profound understanding shone in those blue eyes, as if this woman knew exactly what she was talking about.

Mentally shaking her head, she continued. “Without gin, I had no energy. I couldn’t function. I drank to feel normal.”

This was the part of her speech she hated the most. Bile rose in her throat, and it was as if no time at all had passed. She was behind the wheel again. Lights of oncoming cars blinded her, and the screams rang in her ears. “I had lost a case that day, so I went out and drank even more than I usually did. Not that I needed any excuse to drink by that point.” Staring down at the lectern so she wouldn’t have to meet anyone’s eyes, she hesitated and then said, “On my way home from the bar, I lost control of my car. I swerved onto the sidewalk, barely missing a woman with her little baby boy.” She swallowed and forced herself to look up and face her friends.

The faces of some people in the audience reflected relief. Most could probably empathize with the experience of driving drunk and narrowly avoiding disaster.

She cleared her throat and forced herself to continue. “I plowed into their dog—a yellow Labrador. He was instantly dead.” She wiped away her tears when she felt them trickling down her cheeks. “When I saw what I had done, I was horrified and threw up in my car. I love all creatures in this world. The guilt I feel over killing an innocent animal, all because I couldn’t face my life sober, will follow me to my grave.” Her voice was shaking when she added, “Just a few inches to the side and I would have killed the mother and her baby. They could have been dead too.” The last words were barely more than a whisper, and she had to swallow against the lump in her throat. “The judge sentenced me to attend AA and community service.” She looked down at her friends. “When I came here, everybody was a stranger. I felt lost, like I didn’t belong here. I couldn’t imagine even one day without gin. How could I do my job or go to sleep without it?” She exhaled. “It wasn’t easy, and AA sure wasn’t the instant cure I was hoping for. I still wake up every morning wanting a drink, but these wonderful people here took me under their wings and taught me that it’s not about not craving

anymore; it's about being strong enough to fight it." New tears came when Alana remembered what a special day it was. "Today I'm eighteen months sober."

The group applauded.

Alana wiped away her tears and stepped back from the lectern, smiling. Whatever happened, no one could take this accomplishment from her.

Still clapping his hands, Brian stood and stepped onto the podium. He gave her one of his famous bear hugs before pulling a key from his pocket and opening the case at the bottom of the lectern. He smiled as he took out a gleaming sobriety chip with the number eighteen on it and handed it over.

The chip felt good in her palm. She had earned it, and she was proud of it, especially since, other than becoming a lawyer, it was the first thing of importance she had accomplished without the skills she'd once possessed. Grinning like an idiot, she held up the chip for everybody to see.

The group cheered.

* * *

Robin stared in envy at the bronze chip arcing through the air as Alana flicked it up and then caught it smoothly on her way down from the podium. The sobriety chip had the number eighteen on it.

Eighteen months of sobriety.

Robin's respect for the woman grew. She knew she wouldn't even make it to eighteen days without drinking blood. She would die if she tried. But maybe what Alana had said was true. The words still rang in her ears: *It's not about not craving anymore; it's about being strong enough to fight it.* She would fight the urge to get blood fresh from its preferably human source and make do with synthetic blood, even though it was expensive and tasted like licking a dirty nickel. If she had to write a few extra short stories so she could afford a few pints of the brew, then so be it.

Maybe being here, among these humans who couldn't understand the nature of her problem, wasn't so useless after all. She had wanted to tune out Alana's story but couldn't help listening. As different from hers as the story was, it still struck a chord. The stories were different, but the emotions behind them were the same.

The more I drank, the more I wanted.

Those could be her own words, even though Alana had said them.

She started, wrenched from her thoughts, when the humans stood and formed a circle.

"Let's finish up with a prayer," Brian said.

Robin mentally rolled her eyes. *Great. Another prayer.*

Everyone joined hands.

When Robin hesitated, Brian waved her into the circle, directing her to take a place between him and Alana.

Bloody hell, no! She didn't want to hold hands with any human, least of all the alluring Alana. Just the thought of feeling the blood rushing through her arteries made her dizzy.

But Brian grinned at her. "Don't worry; we don't bite."

Yeah, but I might. Her stomach churned as she took a step forward, then another. Before she could change her mind, Brian grabbed her hand. His palm was rough, full of calluses, but then another hand, warm and soft, slid into hers on the other side.

Energy tingled up Robin's arm and ran through the rest of her body like a current. She wanted to wrench her hand away but knew she would only call attention to herself. Startled, Robin turned her head.

Alana looked up from where her gaze rested on their joined hands and smiled at Robin. Her green eyes were as deep and mysterious as a hidden lake in the forest. As if sensing Robin's urge to flee, Alana squeezed her hand.

Not knowing what else to do, Robin stood still like a statue as the group recited the Lord's Prayer. She didn't know the words, but she moved her lips, faking it.

Alana stood silent too.

Through their linked hands, Robin felt the pulse of her blood with every heartbeat, drowning out the words of the prayer.

Her teeth started to ache, and she forced herself to stare straight ahead instead of turning her head and ogling the smooth skin of Alana's neck.

When Brian finally said, "Amen," she pulled both of her hands back and stuffed them into her pants pockets.

Instead of dispersing, most group members hung around, drinking more coffee and talking to each other.

Robin eyed the door, but before she could make her escape, Brian cleared his throat to get her attention.

Alana still stood next to him, and Robin was only too aware of her presence.

"Let me welcome you in person," he said. "I'm Brian, and this is Alana."

Robin thought about giving a fake name, but with one glance at Alana, the truth rolled out of her mouth. "Robin Cald—"

Brian held up one hand. "Just first names in here."

Dub. Robin smirked at herself. *Did you think they're called Alcoholics Anonymous for nothing?*

"So, what did you think of your first AA meeting?" Brian asked.

Robin shrugged. "It was okay, I guess." She risked a quick glance at Alana. "I liked your speech."

A bright smile seemed to light Alana's face from within, transforming her features from pretty to breathtaking. "Thank you."

"So you'll come back next week?" Brian asked.

Everything in Robin screamed *yes*, but she wasn't sure if it was her bloodlust talking or the part of her that was looking for help. "I don't know yet."

"We always advise newcomers to go to ninety meetings in their first ninety days of sobriety," Brian said.

That might work for humans. At least at the meetings, there was no alcohol around. But for her, attending an AA meeting meant facing a room full of temptations. If she got hungry enough, even the men would start to look like tasty morsels. “I don’t know,” she said again. “I’m not sure this is the right place for me.”

Brian reached out as if to pat her arm, but then his brow furrowed and he pulled back before he could touch her.

Seems alcohol hasn't completely killed his survival instincts.
Robin suppressed a smirk.

“Well,” Brian said, “you’ve got time to figure it out. Maybe having someone to talk to one-on-one would help. You’ll need to find yourself a sponsor. Someone you can call for support. Normally, we prefer a same-sex sponsor.” He glanced to his left. “I’m sure Alana would be glad to take you on.”

Robin wasn’t sure who looked more shocked—Alana or she. They stared at Brian and then at each other.

There was no way to politely refuse the offer, but she couldn’t accept. Not when the blood running through Alana’s arteries and veins was her version of gin. *Shit. What do I do now?*

* * *

Alana stared at Brian in disbelief. He had a wicked sense of humor, but this went too far. She was in no condition to be a sponsor to anyone, let alone such an attractive woman. Where had this thought come from? Sure, Robin was a good-looking woman, but Alana hadn’t been attracted to anyone since Kelly. She cleared her throat. “Brian, I don’t think—”

“I don’t need a sponsor,” Robin said.

Brian frowned. “But it’s one of the things that make AA such a success. Having a sponsor can be a great thing whenever the craving for alcohol becomes—”

“I don’t have an alcohol problem,” Robin said, her face a stony mask.

Yeah, sure. It was always the same. When people came to a meeting for the first time, they all thought they didn't belong. Not that Alana had been any different. She had been just as deeply in denial as most others, maybe even more. She had told herself that there was nothing this bunch of humans could offer her. How were they supposed to help her when they didn't even understand who she was—or rather who she had been? But time had proven her wrong, and it would probably be the same for this newbie. She couldn't be the one to help her, though. She wasn't in the position to be a sponsor and a shining example for anyone, least of all for a woman she found herself strangely attracted to. Every instinct screamed at her to stay away and not risk her sobriety. "Brian, maybe you should ask Pete or Caren to take her on."

"That won't be necessary." Robin glanced at the exit. "If you would excuse me. I need to go."

Alana watched her leave.

"What was that?" Brian asked.

"Huh?" Alana snatched her gaze away from Robin's retreating form and looked at Brian.

He gestured to Robin's back. "Don't you think she could use some help?"

"Of course she could. She's a typical case." But at the same time, Alana felt there was more to this woman than met the eye. Something about Robin was different, but for the life of her, Alana couldn't put a finger on it.

"Then why don't you want to be her sponsor? I didn't hesitate to take you on when you first came here. Don't you think it's time to pay it forward?"

Alana lowered her gaze. Her shoulders drooped, and she nodded. Brian was right. Robin probably felt just as lost as she had during her first meeting. Maybe she had no one to support her. Without further hesitation, she grabbed her jacket and purse and hurried after her.

When Alana left the church, Robin was already halfway across the parking lot.

“Robin!”

The woman stopped and turned around as if in slow motion. “Yeah?”

Alana came to a halt in front of her. “I always denied it too.”

For a second, Robin seemed to look at a point below Alana’s face, but then she lowered her gaze and stared at the ground. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you can’t help me.” She turned away from Alana and strode toward a light aqua Toyota Prius. “But thank you anyway,” she said over her shoulder without looking at Alana again.

Alana nibbled on her bottom lip. She couldn’t force Robin. Getting sober had to be her choice. All Alana could do was to offer her help. Right? Right. But a nagging feeling told her to try one last time. “Wait.” She ran after her.

Robin opened the driver’s side door but still didn’t look at her. “What is it?” Her voice sounded strained.

Alana foraged through her purse, but instead of a piece of paper to write on, she found only one of her business cards. She hesitated. One of AA’s basic principles was anonymity. Should she really...? *Just do it!* She grabbed a pen as well and wrote her private numbers on the back of the card before holding it out to Robin. “If you need anything, call me.”

Long moments ticked by as Robin stared at the offered card but made no move to take it. Finally, she gingerly tugged the card from Alana’s fingers and put it into her pants pocket. “Thanks.” She climbed behind the wheel, closed the door, and drove off without looking back.

“That went well,” Alana mumbled and strolled to her own car. She wasn’t in the mood to go back inside and tell Brian she had probably scared off the newbie for good. It was time to drive home and face her empty apartment. A lot of work was waiting for her anyway.

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