



In Her Defense by Julianna Keyes

In Her Defense

by Julianna Keyes

Caitlin Dufresne has never loved anyone as much as she loves winning. A ruthless fifth-year associate at an elite Chicago law firm, she's on the fast track to partner...until a stupid, serious error enrages her bosses. Caitlin's continued refusal to share work—or credit—lands her a forced two-week vacation. She needs to regroup and learn to be part of a team, not just the star.

When she meets Eli Grant, head of the firm's IT department, Caitlin knows the overgrown frat boy isn't her type. But too much alcohol and a very public game of Truth or Dare turn into a dirty, breathless one-night stand. Which turns into a (mostly naked) two-week fling. Which turns into something that makes Caitlin incredibly nervous, despite the great sex.

Eli shows her the *many* upsides to sleeping in, and for the first time ever, Caitlin has more than the law waiting for her at home. But when she returns to the office and the relentless demands of a high-profile case, Caitlin must decide if winning this one is worth losing Eli forever.

Book two of Time Served

90,000 words

September 7, 2015

In Her Defense by Julianna Keyes

I don't know what to do. It's mid-July, bright and sunny, and I have nowhere to go and no one to call. My sister's working and Dorrie's at a sleepover, and they're really the only two people I know outside of work. I take a few steps in the direction of Zadie's, a local bistro that's popular with people from the firm, but then I stop. What am I going to do? Sit by myself while they all stare at me, whispering to each other that Caitlin Dufresne has no friends? Fuckers.

A drink sounds good, though. I'll need all the fortification I can get to get through this week. Hell, this whole month. Anyway. I'm not one to curl up and die. I'll just go somewhere different, off the beaten path. Some dark, little hole-in-the-wall where nobody knows my name. I shrug out of my jacket and stuff it in my oversized purse, leaving me in the red pencil skirt and a black silk shell. It's ridiculously hot out here, and I miss the air conditioning already.

Seven blocks later my feet are killing me. I normally walk from my apartment to the cab and the cab to the office, that's it. But this is what's required to get away from the swarm of white collars and onto a quiet side street with brick storefronts, neon signs and people wearing flip-flops. The Lonely Goat is a dank-looking pub with a grimy front window, ivy growing around the wooden door and a dozen aging patrons too tired to spare a glance when I enter. Perfect.

I ask for two shots of vodka with lime, then find a corner booth, cracked green vinyl pricking the back of my legs as I slide in. The seats around me are empty, the antique lamp hanging overhead offers little to no light and I feel blessedly anonymous as I toast summer hours and down the first shot. I sigh and close my eyes, slouching against the cushion as I feel the vodka burn.

I hate everybody right now. I hate the partners for this ridiculously unfair treatment. I hate Louis for going to Brazil. I hate Susan for working a double when I need company, and though it's petty, I hate Dorrie a little too, for going to a sleepover. I really hate Todd Varner for telling on me, and I really, *really* hate Eli Grant for—

“Fancy seeing you here.”

My eyes fly open, and there he is. Eli Grant, towering over the booth in his dreadful blue, plaid button-up and khakis, beer in hand. “What are you doing here?” I demand, not bothering to sit up.

“Same as you, I imagine.” He nods toward the remaining vodka shot. “Rough day?”

“Go away.”

He ignores me and slides into the booth.

“What are you doing?” I feel his feet bump mine as he slides them under the table. “Please leave.”

He copies my slouched position and sips his beer. “Why?”

“Because I don’t know you and I don’t want to.”

“Isn’t that why you came to this place? To avoid people you know?”

“And people I might see again.”

He laughs and looks around. “I don’t imagine you’ll bump into any of these folks outside this bar. Or me. Not unless you deign to visit us lowly ‘support staff’ on seventeen again.”

“I won’t. Don’t worry.” I haven’t planned how I’ll exact my revenge on him just yet, but it won’t involve a second trip to the freezer, that’s for sure.

“Too bad.”

“Shut up.”

“No, really. I mean, you’re rude as hell, but things can get pretty dull over in accounting. You gave them something to talk about for the rest of the summer.”

“Happy to help.” I swallow the second shot and bite the lime.

“Is it really that bad?” Eli asks, eyeing the shot glasses. “Leaving at seven?”

“Look at me,” I reply. “This is what I’m doing.” If it was just one night, I’m sure I could cope. It’s been so long since I’ve actually done something other than work that I can’t imagine what I might do, exactly, but I’m sure I could find something. But thirty nights? Four weekends? Two years ago we’d had a problem with the elevators, and one evening I’d almost stepped into an empty shaft when the doors opened before the car had arrived. I don’t want to admit it to anyone—Eli, in particular—but these summer hours feel like that: a yawning black hole with nothing to fill it. Terrifying. Endless.

An aging server appears to clear the glasses and empty bottle. She asks if we want anything else and Eli requests four of whatever I had.

“Are you saying you have a drinking problem?” he inquires. “And if you leave work at seven you’ll go to a bar?”

“No,” I return slowly. “I’m saying I don’t have anything to do after seven. Or rather, I have work to do, and being prevented from doing it really pisses me off.”

“That much I gathered.”

I scowl and pick up a shot when the server reappears with four brimming glasses. “Cheers,” I say.

Eli clinks my glass and we watch each other as we drink. “Do you have any friends?”

I narrow my eyes. “Yes.” Well, I have a sister. And a niece. “Do you?”

“Yep.”

“Then why are you here, drinking alone?”

“Not alone,” he corrects. “I have company.”

“Not for long.” I drink my fourth shot, feeling woozy. I don’t drink often, and I’m not sure I had lunch. Unfortunately Eli notices and gets the waitress’s attention, ordering two burger platters and a side of onion rings.

“I hope you’re planning to eat that by yourself,” I say coldly. “I’m not having dinner with you.”

He props his foot on the seat beside me, blocking me in. “Simmer down. If you have a drinking problem, it’s that you can’t handle your liquor.”

“I beg your pardon? I can *handle* anything.”

He laughs. “Prove it.”

“No. No, no, no, no, no. Absolutely not. You’re trying to trick me into staying with you while you drown your sorrows, and I’m not falling for it. Now, if you’d like to go to the lake and actually drown, you could probably convince me to come along and watch that.”

More laughter. “I guess your reputation isn’t an exaggeration, is it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The ‘coldhearted bitch’ thing. She-devil. Hell on heels. You know.”

“I’m good at my job.”

“I know you are. But when you’re not working...” He gazes around the dim room, and I feel a split-second pang of self-pity at what that ellipses implies.

“Fine,” I say eventually. “I don’t have *many* friends. And I don’t know what to do with free time. But don’t for one second think I forgot you didn’t answer my question. Why are you drinking alone?”

At the reminder, Eli picks up the final shot and tosses it back. “I,” he says, biting into the lime and licking the lingering drops off his lower lip, “*was* drinking alone because my best friend got engaged today.”

“Is your best friend a man or a woman?”

“A guy. His name’s Kent.”

“Are you in love with Kent?”

“What? No.”

“Is his fiancée a witch?”

“Nope.”

“Then I give up. Why is this cause for doing shots at The Lonely Goat?”

Eli pushes the empty glasses aside as the food arrives. Two steaming, massive burgers with all the fixings, each with a side of fries, and a bonus plate of onion rings. In spite of myself, my mouth waters. I definitely didn’t eat lunch. Did I eat breakfast?

“Go for it,” Eli urges, dipping a fry in ketchup and popping it in his mouth. “My treat.”

“I don’t need your treat.”

“I know.” A smile. His eyes crinkle at the corners, making him look kind. If he hadn’t taken away my network and elevator privileges, I might have believed it.

I bite the dill pickle garnish in half. “Answer.”

“I was halfway in love with her when they hooked up.”

I freeze midbite. “Come again?”

“You heard me.”

“Were you together, or was this a love from afar thing?”

“Together.”

“She cheated on you?”

“Yeah.”

“With your best friend?”

A nod.

“And you still call him your best friend?”

He takes a deep breath. “Yeah.”

“Tell me you hit him.”

A faint smile and shake of the head. “Nope.” The waitress wanders by and he orders two glasses of water and four shots of Captain Morgan, giving me an evil wink. I scowl and he chuckles. He has a nice laugh. Deep and rolling, like he’s actually amused, not the phony or frightened laughs of my coworkers.

“Why not?”

He swallows a mouthful of food and I bite into my burger, hot, juicy goodness exploding on my tongue. I close my eyes and stifle a moan. I don’t know the last time I had a burger, and it is divine.

“I don’t know,” Eli replies. “I guess I thought maybe they were better together. I’m okay with it now.”

“How long had you been dating? What’s her name?”

“Stella. And a few months.”

“How long have you known Kent?”

“Twenty years or so.”

“That’s messed up.”

The new drinks arrive and we each take one. My fingers leave greasy prints on the glass, and I grip it tightly so it doesn’t spill. “What are we toasting?” Eli asks.

“The people we hate,” I say. “May they burn in hell.”

“Burn in hell,” he echoes seriously. We drink. We eat. “How many flights of stairs did you have to walk down?” he asks after a while.

“Not telling.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to get my accomplice in trouble.”

“What’d you promise him?”

I don’t bother correcting his assumption that my helper was male. “What makes you think I promised anything?”

He raises a brow.

“Bulls tickets.”

“Seriously?”

I shrug. “Whatever. Better than hiking thirty-two floors.”

“Lucky guy.”

“No more questions. I won’t give up my source.”

He smiles and licks mustard off his thumb. I can’t remember my last real date, but it definitely didn’t involve boatloads of grease, unwanted company and this many shots.

“Did you really have an affair with Lee Haines?” he asks.

“He was separated from his wife at the time. Are you really okay with Kent and Stella getting engaged?”

“No. What were you planning to say to me earlier? When you came downstairs?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know what you looked like.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

I swallow a fry. “It’s easy to read people, usually. When I saw Varner’s picture, I knew how to handle him.” I dip an onion ring in ranch dressing and bite it in half. “He looked...nice. Like the kind of person who gets mugged and discovers the world is a terrible place.”

“As opposed to?”

“As opposed to the kind of person who gets mugged and isn’t surprised.”

“You’re the mugger in this situation?”

“So to speak.”

“Why didn’t you ‘mug’ me?”

“Well.” I polish off the onion ring. “For starters, you heard my first speech.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And second, I thought you were going to be some pale, scrawny kid with pierced eyebrows and an anarchy T-shirt.”

He laughs, long and loud. “*What?*”

“I didn’t realize you were going to be so...you know. Tall.”

“Tall.”

“Yes.”

“What else?”

“Forget it. That’s it.”

“Want to know what I thought about you?”

“You told me already, remember? Coldhearted bitch? She-devil? And I’m sure you saw my picture on the website.”

A smirk. “I saw your picture on the cover of *Chicago’s Finest*.”

I seldom blush, but I do now. I’d had copies delivered to everyone on staff.

“Whatever.”

“And when I saw you ripping into Todd I thought, *Holy shit. She’s the hottest, meanest woman I’ve ever seen.*”

I snicker, torn between feeling chastised and flattered. “Well,” I offer, “at least I didn’t fuck your friend.”

He tosses his head back and laughs, sounding pained. “Jesus Christ. I guess there’s that.” Eli picks up one of the remaining shots and gestures for me to do the same. “To being brutally honest,” he says, touching his glass to mine, holding my gaze as he does.

“Brutal honesty,” I echo, downing the shot.

He leans out of the booth and waves down the waitress, ordering six shots of tequila. “When was the last time you did anything fun?” he asks, resting back against the seat.

“Work is fun.”

“Something that wasn’t work.”

“I don’t know. I work a lot. What do you do that’s fun?”

“Lots of things. I like to keep busy.”

The tequila arrives, and Eli licks his wrist, sprinkles it with salt and holds the lemon wedge in his other hand. Then he extends both arms toward me, like I’m supposed to do something.

“No way.”

“Why not?”

I hesitate.

“Have fun, Caitlin.”

I take a breath, then shift out of my seat so I can lean over the table to reach him. I'm fully aware he's looking down my shirt as I grip his big hand and lick his wrist, hearing the soft catch of his breath as my tongue touches his skin. It's been a while since I've been this close to somebody, and while Eli is nothing like the men I usually go for, it's kind of...nice. His skin is warm and he smells like soap and French fries.

I down the shot and bite the lemon as he holds it, his gaze on my tongue when it flicks out to catch the juice at the corner of my mouth. Then I drop back into my seat as though I'm not a little turned on by the interaction.

"Tell me how they told you they were screwing," I say calmly. "Give me details. Don't be ashamed to tell me if you cried."

He does his own shot. "We're going to need more tequila."

"Do your worst."

"What's the deal here?"

"What do you mean?"

"If I admit I cried myself to sleep every night for a month, are you going to tell everyone in the building?"

"You might've cried for a week," I say, "but not a month. And no, I'm not going to tell anyone. Who would care?"

He shakes his head. "Heaven help me."

"No one would believe me, anyway," I add. "Just like they wouldn't believe you. Who could picture this?"

"I guess that's true." He picks up the saltshaker and we both dampen our wrists. "To tonight," he says, when we clink glasses. "What happens in The Lonely Goat stays in The Lonely Goat."

"Deal," I agree. And for the next several hours, it appears that what happens in The Lonely Goat will indeed stay there. Then Eli orders a banana split.