



# Drunk Dialing My Enemy

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance

**Description:** An accidental confession. A protective jock. One unforgettable night.

Katie

Darren Baker is several things. My best friend's older brother. My landlord. My enemy. And worst of all, my former first love.

I never meant to drunk dial him. But one too many cocktails and suddenly I find myself spilling everything. That I used to be in love with him...and sometimes think maybe I still am. That I want to settle down and have a family. And worst of all, that I'm the only twenty-four year old virgin in Wild Bronco.

I expected Darren to make a cruel joke, maybe hang up the phone and laugh about me later. Instead, he showed up at the bar with a stormy look in those blue-green eyes and a growl in his voice, demanding that I go home with him.

Darren

Katie was always off-limits. Cute, funny, curvy...and of course, my little sister's best friend. But when I heard her sweet voice on the phone, something in me snapped.

No way was I going to leave her at that bar in that kind of state.

Her drunk confession changes everything, though. She doesn't know that I've loved her for longer than I want to admit. Starting tonight, I'm done hiding my true feelings.

The real challenge? Showing Katie that she's everything I've ever wanted, and that I want forever. I'm not going anywhere, and she needs to get used to that.

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# Page 1

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## CHAPTER 1

KATIE

“Hello?”

Against my better judgement, I’ve somehow found myself on the phone with Darren. As in my ex-crush, Darren. My first love, Darren.

A man that I now hate.

His deep voice sounds thick with sleep. Despite the inconvenient hour, he doesn’t sound annoyed to be speaking with me.

Which is weird. Normally, he’s always annoyed to be speaking with me.

See, as much as I hate Darren, he hates me right back. Why we ever kissed, I will never know.

Sometimes I wonder if the kiss was a dare. You know, dare ya to kiss the fat girl and make her think you like her. Ha ha!

It’s the kind of thing that high school jocks would do. But not something I ever thought Darren would do.

I used to think he was different.

The single tequila shot that I had hours ago seems to be working overtime tonight. That's how I found myself on the phone with Darren at all. That, and Heather's taunting.

"When are you going to have a bachelorette party of your own? You're always the bridesmaid at these things. Pretty sure you'll be the last single girl left!"

After she said this, I had to get up and hide in the bathroom.

Her comment only hurt me so bad because it felt true. Not only am I one of the only singles left in our group of friends — though, I'm not so sure that Heather is a true friend — I haven't even had sex yet.

Yeah. That's right. I'm a twenty-four year old virgin. Between this and the fact that I'm plus sized, not a conventionally thin hourglass shape, sometimes I feel a pariah in the dating scene.

And the only man I've ever loved, acts like I don't exist. And when he's not acting like I don't exist, he's being an asshole to me.

"Katie? Are you still there?"

My name sounds weird on his lips. I stare at the stall door. The bathrooms in this bar are wallpapered with old country music posters. A young Reba McEntire is currently grinning at me, oblivious to my situation. I stare at her poofy hair. It's absolutely gigantic, teased and permed to be nearly double the size of her head.

Once upon a time, that was the standard of beauty. Just like centuries ago, my rolls and cellulite would have been depicted in oil paintings, an homage to the ideal feminine form.

Shit just isn't fair.

"Katie?"

"Why are you not growling at me?" I ask him. My tongue feels buzzy in my mouth.

"Growling?"

"Yeah. Normally when we talk, you're all like -" I lower my voice, doing my best impression of Darren's grumpy growl. "-Hey Katie. You've had a stack of packages on the porch for over three hours. That's unacceptable. And tell your customers to stop parking in the grass. They're ruining the sod."

"That supposed to be me?"

"You couldn't tell?"

"Sounds more like a constipated Oscar the Grouch."

My worst enemy just made a joke. A funny one. The laugh escapes my lips before I can stop it.

Damn. This isn't how this call was supposed to go. Darren was supposed to pick up the phone and be mad at me for waking him up at this hour. After he got all mad about that, I was going to tell him to go to hell.

## Page 2

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But he's ruining it by being all...nice.

"Just so you know, that leaking pipe you fixed was leaking again this morning," I say. "So I fixed it myself this time and guess what? No more leak. I fixed it and you didn't. Girl power! Ha!"

For some reason, this sounded a lot cooler in my head than it did aloud. I cringe.

"Katie, are you drunk?"

"Duct tape," I continue.

"What?"

"I fixed it with duct tape," I clarify. "Bet you've never even thought of that. Well, I did. Now you can't raise my rent."

"Katie, I won't raise your rent for calling me when you need a repair done," Darren says. "It's the landlord's job to maintain the property. You can call me whenever you need. Also, do not fix a pipe with duct tape. Or anything else for that matter."

I roll my eyes.

Darren was never meant to be my landlord. When I set up my plus-sized clothing boutique, an old woman named Mrs. Hayes owned the building. But then she passed away, the building went up for auction, and before I could secure the financing to buy it myself, Darren freaking Baker swept in and bought it with a pile of cash.

Now he owns the building and I make my rent checks out to him. And every time I need something to do with the building, I have to pick up the phone and call a man who once crushed my heart beneath his boot like it meant nothing.

“I only taped it until I can get a repairman to come out,” I say defensively.

“I am the repairman!”

“There it is!” I exclaim, bouncing up and down a little. “The growl! The Darren growl!”

“I do not growl.”

“You did it again.”

“Katie, are you drunk? Where are you?”

There he goes again, sounding all concerned about me.

Well, I’m not drunk. At least, I don’t think so. I had one shot of tequila at the start of tonight, which was hours ago. Since then, I’ve just been drinking strawberry lemonade while the rest of the girls drink alcohol.

I don’t mind being the sober friend – it’s good to have one among every group of girls, just to look out.

Except I don’t feel sober. Actually, I feel like I’m getting drunker by the minute.

“By the way,” I continue. “Just so you know? That kiss was super dumb. I don’t even think about it anymore.”

I cringe again at my own words. Why did I think that would sound cool?

Darren pauses before he answers. When he finally speaks, his voice is low and deep. It sends chills up my spine.

“If you don’t think about it anymore, why are you bringing it up?” he asks. “That was almost eight years ago.”

Was it really? Eight years?

I do the math, counting back to my sixteenth birthday. The day that Darren kissed me under the stars and my whole damn world turned upside down.

“Because I know you still think about it,” I tell him.

“You do?”

His voice is hardly a whisper, and I have to strain to hear him over the loud music playing over the speakers.

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“You think about how funny it was, playing that prank on me,” I say. “You knew that I was in love with you. You thought it was funny, right? Just like you think it’s funny to buy my building out from under me.”

“I didn’t think it was funny, I just -”

“But the joke is on you,” I continue, emboldened by Reba’s scarlet, sassy smile. “Because one day I’m going to live happily ever after. And I’m going to buy a different building. A better one with a better bridge. And then I’m going to find my husband and lose my virginity and have a million babies and probably some cats and dogs, too.”

“Katie, you’re slurring your words,” Darren says sternly. “Where are you?”

Click.

## CHAPTER 2

### DARREN

It takes no time at all to find out where Katie is. She and my little sister, Dot, have been best friends since they were in kindergarten. All I had to do was call Dot and learn that they’re both at some dive bar in Southeast Austin, a little over an hour away.

Dot assured me that all was fine, and that Katie had a bit too much to drink. Their hotel is nearby and they’ll call an Uber when they’re ready to go home.



This information should have placated me.

I should have been able to go back to bed, falling asleep quickly after a long day of exhausting physical labor.

But no. Unable to distract myself from the thought of Katie and now my little sister getting drunk in an unfamiliar place so late at night, I had to get out of bed.

Then I got dressed, grabbed the keys to my truck, and headed out the door.

On the drive over there, I replayed my conversation with Katie again and again. I can't stop thinking about it. Since I kissed her all those years ago, nothing has ever compared. I've tried to get her out of my head but there's no use. She's always been everything to me, and any connection I've tried to make with another woman — the few women I've been with since the night we kissed — has felt empty and dull.

No kiss ever measured up to the one we shared. I remember it vividly. The taste of birthday cake icing on her lips, the way her long eyelashes fluttered against my cheek. The involuntary sigh of pleasure that escaped her mouth as mine met hers.

It was her first.

And I selfishly claimed it, knowing I couldn't give her everything she wanted.

Tonight, I think she just told me that she still has another first waiting to be claimed. How the hell is it possible that she's still a virgin? She went away to college and then came back, she's had years to meet someone or even multiple someones. And don't tell me there wouldn't be a line of suitors willing to rid her of her virginity. I don't understand how a woman who looks like sin on two legs, curves as far as the eye can see, makes it to her current age without having sex.

But I know that the thought of it is driving me insane with need. Just like any thought of Katie being with other men has always driven me insane with jealousy.

Before she hung up, Katie also told me another thing. Something I hope is true and not just a drunken fabrication.

She told me that she used to be in love with me.

And if that's the truth, then it means she's capable of loving me. She used to love me. Which means that maybe she could love me again.

That gives me hope. Crazy, foolish hope.

I wasn't ready for the things Katie made me feel back then. I was a scared kid.

But I'm ready now.

When I get to the bar, at first I'm worried that they've already left. Then I see Dot, who is currently dancing on the table with a beer in one hand while men whoop and cheer.

Only the fact that I'm still looking for Katie could prevent me from going into big brother mode and yanking Dot down from the table. I feel a jolt of brotherly protectiveness for a moment but then my eyes go back to scanning the nearby people, looking for Katie's signature red hair.

I find it next to the jukebox. The beautiful girl that haunts my dreams is currently leaning against the wall, her eyes closed as though she's in pain.

"Katie!"

I rush forward, reaching for her. Her eyes open and she frowns at me.

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“I already paid rent this month,” she says, her words running together but still intelligible. “So you can get your dumb gorgeous face out of mine.”

“You think I’m gorgeous?” I grin.

“Shut up.”

“Can you stand up?”

“What kind of question is that?” Katie snaps, pushing off of the wall. She teeters dangerously in her cowboy boots, then falls forward into me. Her curves press against my body and I hold her up, looking around the crowd. Dot is chatting with friends now.

“Come on,” I tell Katie. “Let’s tell your friends you’re leaving for the night.”

“What? No.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Am not. I haven’t drankened anything in hours.”

“You’re aware you just said drankened, right?”

She frowns and I sigh, guiding her through the crowd, careful to let her lean on my arms for support so she doesn’t fall down.

“I’ll never allow you to get this drunk again,” I tell her in a low voice.

“Allow me? You might own the roof over my head but that doesn’t mean you’re in charge of everything I do.”

“Well maybe I should be. You sound like you’ve had a whole bottle of liquor.”

“Look at us. Squabbling like an old married couple. We should just tie the knot and make it official, don’t you think?”

Oh, I think so.

The idea of putting a ring on Katie’s finger and planting my seed in her belly has never been more appealing than right now, knowing the new information that she confessed over the phone.

She was in love with me. She’s a virgin. I could be her first and only. She could bear my children and my last name, too.

We make it to Dot and her friends. She looks at me in confusion, then to Katie.

“Katie! What happened?”

“Darren’s theory is that I’m drunk.”

“As much as it pains me to say this, I agree with my brother.”

Dot looks at me with a puzzled expression.

“Why are you here? I told you we’ve got it covered.”

“She’s even drunker than when she called me,” I reply accusingly.

Dot looks at Katie.

“Katie, what the hell? Have you been sneaking drinks?”

“Of course not,” Katie says, her voice nearly as wobbly as her legs. “Just the strawberry lemonade.”

Beside Dot, a woman that I can only describe as pointysmirks at Katie.

“Non-alcoholic strawberry lemonade?” I ask, looking between Dot and Katie.

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“I...uh...” Dot glances at Pointy Woman. “You’ve been getting the rounds. It’s non-alcoholic, right?”

Pointy Woman shrugs, still smirking. I think she knows exactly what she did tonight – got Katie drunk on purpose for some damn reason. Probably jealousy.

“We’re leaving,” I tell Katie.

“I want to stay!” Katie argues.

Dot shakes her head.

“Go on,” Dot says to Katie. “Darren will make sure you get home safe. You have to work tomorrow anyway, right? It’s probably better if you drive home tonight instead of heading back to the hotel with us.”

I agree.

Vehemently.

And notjustbecause this curvy goddess is currently pressed against me, provoking a hard-on in my jeans that threatens to become obvious very soon if I don’t get it under control.

Dot looks at me.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “Don’t blame Katie. She doesn’t even drink normally. I think

this whole thing was a misunderstanding.”

I look at Pointy Woman. I doubt it was a misunderstanding at all, more like a cruel trick. If a man did this to Katie, I’d probably have him laid out on the sidewalk outside by now with a bloody nose. But I don’t believe in hitting women, so I just give her the nastiest look I can muster. Her eyes widen, and she backs away.

“Let’s go,” I mutter to Katie.

She tries to take a step, and if I weren’t already holding onto her, she’d hit the floor right now. Instead, I pick her up and cradle her in my arms before carrying her out of the bar, to the safety of my warm truck.

## CHAPTER 3

### KATIE

“Where are we going?” I demand.

“I already told you. Back to my place,” Darren grunts.

Now that he knows I’m safe and sound, he’s back to his usual growly, grumpy self. I consider asking Darren why he hates me so much – after all, what did I ever do to him?

“Why your place?” I ask. “Are we going to have sex?”

This question causes a strange, strangled noise to escape from Darren's throat. I grin, pleased to disarm him.

“Hell no,” he sputters. “We are definitely not going to have sex.”



“Oh. Ouch.”

“Because you're drunk,” Darren continues quickly. “Not because I don't want to. But that doesn't mean I'm saying I do want to, either.”

“Got it. You're neutral on sex.”

“Yes. Completely neutral.”

Darren's Adam's apple bobs in his throat as he swallows. I am mesmerized by the movement. As I've always been when it comes to any of Darren's body parts.

“Neutral,” I continue. “You're like...like the Switzerland of sex.”

He shakes his head, the corner of his mouth lifting in a reluctant half-smile.

“You are so fucking drunk.”

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“Am not.”

“Are too.”

He’s right, of course. I must have had four of those strawberry lemonades, which apparently contained vodka and rum.

In the light of the upcoming cars on the highway, I study Darren’s profile. He's got one thick, muscular arm on the steering wheel. The other one is resting on the windowsill.

The cracked window lets in enough air to ruffle his sandy brown hair. His blue-green eyes are on the road, but the muscle in the corner of his jaw is clenched tight, letting me know that this conversation is affecting him as much as it's affecting me.

God. I haven’t let myself stare at him like this in so long. In high school, I used to sneak looks at him constantly. Any time Dot and I were hanging out, which was practically every day, I’d find some excuse to say hi to him.

Back then, he could usually be found in the Bakers’ massive kitchen, standing at the sink devouring last night’s leftovers and anything else he could get his hands on. Between puberty hitting him like a semi truck and his constant football practice, it seemed like Darren was always inhaling calories like there was no tomorrow.

I smile at the memory of finding him in the kitchen late one night when I slept over with Dot. I’d gotten up to get a drink, and there he was in his pajamas. Eating a bowl of Lucky Charms. Only, it wasn’t a normal cereal bowl. It was the giant red bowl that

the Bakers used for popcorn.

When he saw me, we didn't exchange a single word. He just opened up a drawer, grabbed another spoon, and handed it to me.

It was one of those moments where I felt like we were actually friends. Like I wasn't just his little sister's annoying friend.

"So...we're not having sex," I say slowly. "But you're taking me back to your house because...?"

"Like I said, you're drunk. Probably drunker than you even realize. Some real friends you have back there. They just abandoned you by the jukebox like that?"

"I only went by the jukebox so I could check my phone," I say defensively.

To check my phone and to get a break from all of the people. I hate things like bachelorette parties. I always say yes to them, because if my friend is getting married, I'm going to show up for her. But truthfully, I'd rather just stay home. I don't drink much, and bar hopping isn't my idea of a fun time.

To make matters worse, tonight I didn't even know many of these women very well. They were friends of the bride, but not people I'd hang out with normally. One of those women is Heather, a girl I've known since high school who always seems to have something rude to say.

"Regardless of what happened, you're here now. I'm going to take you to my place and help you sober up. You can stay the night. I'll sleep on the couch."

I'm disappointed. I always imagined that if I ever stayed the night with Darren, it would be because we were hooking up. Not because he's taking pity on me, or feels

like I'm too stupid to be left alone.

I glance down at my little skirt and black tank top, the one that says BRIDESMAID in pink sequined letters. I'm definitely showing a lot of skin tonight. If Darren was tempted at all, it seems like he's made up his mind.

Neutral on sex is just another way of saying no, isn't it? I mean, are men ever really neutral about sex? I thought it was either a hell yes or a no thank you. Then again, I've never actually done the deed, so what do I know?

I've come pretty close to doing it. Could have done it if I wanted to. But it never felt like the right man, or the right time. Or I'd have some other reason for backing off.

Truthfully? It's because none of the possible candidates ever made me feel the way Darren made me feel.

I lean my head against the cracked window on my side of the truck, inhaling the fresh breeze that mixes with Darren's scent, which seems to be soaked into the upholstery. I close my eyes and curl up into my seat, imagining he's still holding me the way he had when he carried me out of that bar.

"Is it true that you used to love me?"

I open my eyes at the sound of his voice, soft and slow with a slight scratch in his throat like he's been holding onto that question for a while.

"Of course," I whisper. "Why do you think I wanted to kiss you?"

He shrugs a shoulder.

"I knew you liked the way that I looked. I was used to that kind of attention from

girls.”

I huff. Yes, I’m aware of the way the girls in our town would obsess over Darren Baker. To say that they were obsessed would be an understatement. Then again, I was right there alongside them. Hopelessly infatuated.

“They liked me because I was on the football team,” he says. “That’s all.”

“No. They liked you because you’re you,” I correct him. “You’re sexy and funny and kind and...”

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I shut my mouth before I embarrass myself.

I could list all of the things I like about Darren for days but what would be the point? Why am I handing ammunition over to my enemy? Admitting I still feel anything for him is like handing him my heart. Here you go, Darren. Break it again.

“So you thought I just wanted to kiss you because you were a hot football player?” I ask him.

“Maybe.”

“Like I was objectifying you?”

He grins.

“Probably. I don’t know. You were sixteen and full of hormones.”

“And you were seventeen.”

“No, I was eighteen.”

“Barely. Our birthdays are only a few days apart, remember? You act like the gap in our age was so significant but it wasn’t.”

“It wasn’t about the number of years between us,” he replies. “It was about the fact that you were Dot’s best friend. That’s an automatic barrier. If you hadn’t been her friend already, if I’d just met you in the cafeteria at school...”

He drifts off and it's maddening. I desperately want to hear the end of this sentence, so much that I'm literally holding my breath.

"Let's just say that when we kissed, it was the beginning of losing all control."

## CHAPTER 4

### DARREN

I won't touch Katie until she's sober. I let her go once because of foolishness; I won't lose her again because of impatience.

I can wait for her. For as long as she needs. But I know now that I have to have her. Eventually, whether it's tomorrow or next year or ten years from now, Katie will be mine.

When we get to my place, Katie is fading fast. She's reached peak drunkenness — at least, hopefully it's the peak — and is also sleepy.

This combination creates a very affectionate, very clumsy version of the woman I've known for two decades.

"Ouch! Why is your sidewalk so hard?"

I rush around my truck to help her.

"I told you to let me help you get out," I scold, pulling her off the sidewalk and back into my arms. I can't ignore the way my cock is brought to life every time we touch. It's instant and urgent, and I know once we're settled in for the night, I'm going to need a long, hot shower to take care of this erection.

“Oooh, are we growling again? Fun!” Katie says happily, her hair tickling my chin. “My turn –My name is Darren. Grrr. Ilike to make out with girls and then pretend they’re invisible the next day.”

I ignore her, too focused on getting her into my house without falling down. But she continues.

“I hate Katie so much, I bought a whole damn building out of spite!”

“I didn’t buy it to spite you.”

“Coulda fooled me. It’s not enough that you had to buy it – you had to tear down my princess bridge too.”

“That thing was a goddamn hazard.”

“You’re just saying that because you hit your head on it! For those of us below six feet tall, it was fine.”

“It wasn’t just that,” I reply. “There were rusted nails sticking out all over. And the wood was rotted. I had nightmares thinking about you walking on that thing every day. It was a matter of time before you or one of the other women got hurt on it.”



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Miraculously, we've reached my front porch. I search my pocket for my keys with one hand. Katie leans on the door for support, looking up at me with those chocolate brown eyes.

"You were worried I'd get hurt?" she asks me.

"Of course I was," I tell her. "Why else would I demolish the bridge?"

"Because you knew I loved it," she says woundedly. "And you hate me."

It hurts me to hear her say this. She looks like she really means it. Every word. It's taking all of my restraint not to touch her right now. I want to pull her into an embrace and kiss her, show her just how much I don't hate her. But she's drunk. She doesn't know how to say yes right now. And I don't want her to wake up tomorrow and regret yet another kiss with me.

"I don't hate you, firecracker," I say.

She smiles weakly.

"You haven't called me 'firecracker' in so long. I thought you'd forgotten the nickname."

"Honey, I could never forget anything about you. That's the whole problem."

## CHAPTER 5

## KATIE

I wake up in a man's bedroom. At least, I suspect it's a man's bedroom because the interior decor is minimal and utilitarian. The bedsheets are plaid flannel and match the curtains on the wall. There's a nightstand and matching dresser that appear to be handmade. On top of the nightstand there's a glass of ice water and two ibuprofen beside it. When I sit up, I realize why. I'm hungover.

A first for me, because I've never had more than one or two drinks at a time. Bits and pieces of last night come into focus. I remember Heather being a jerk. Dot's concerned face. The music, the neon lights...

There are pieces of last night that aren't making sense, though. For instance, for some reason, my brain seems to think that I met Reba McEntire last night. And...Darren was there, too? Why would Darren be at a bachelorette party?

And then the rest of the night begins to come back to me. And I realize that not only am I waking up in a man's bed – the man is Darren Baker himself.

I gasp, looking around the room once again. I recognize the jacket slung over the back of a chair, the wristwatch that's sitting on top of the dresser. And now I know why the smell of the sheets is so familiar. It's the smell of him.

What the hell happened last night? I swear, if I lost my virginity to Darren Baker and I was too drunk to preserve that memory, I might cry.

Darren opens the door, bringing in a paper bag from Dolly's Diner. I sit up.

“Did we have sex?”

He looks at me like I've grown a second head.

“Absolutely not. Why do you keep asking me about sex? You must have asked me ten times last night alone.”

“Oh no. I was begging you for sex?”

“Not begging, exactly,” he says, putting the food bag on the nightstand and rubbing his chin. “More like you kept forgetting what was going on, and were curious if we had some sort of plan to sleep together. You were very drunk last night.”

“I can tell. My head is killing me.”

“Take that medicine,” he instructs me, opening the food bag. “And eat. Eating always helps.”

“It does?”

“You’ve never had a hangover before?”

I start to shake my head but the movement makes my head pound harder.

“I don’t drink much,” I say. “A few drinks a year, just at social events. Heather knew that. Do you think she knew she was overserving me?”

“If Heather is that pointy chick from the bar, yeah,” he replies flatly, handing me a breakfast burrito wrapped in foil. “I think you need to stay away from Heather. She’s not a real friend.”

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I open the burrito and take a bite. Wow. The cheesy, salty, crunchy mix of scrambled egg and bacon hit my tongue and my headache seems to disappear.

After a few more bites, I look at Darren. He seems content just to watch me eat, having nothing of his own.

“How long have you been awake?” I ask him.

“Since five.”

“God, why?”

He shrugs a broad shoulder.

“Couldn’t sleep last night. I was thinking about all the things you said.”

I bite my lip, wondering what kind of humiliating things I probably said last night when I wasn’t in my right mind.

“You said you used to be in love with me. And that you’re a virgin and you’re going to meet your husband someday and have a million babies.”

I groan.

“Is that true?” he asks.

“Darren, I don’t think it’s physically possible for a woman to give birth to a million

babies. Maybe a dozen or so, but not a million.”

“I meant about how you used to be in love with me. Was that the truth?”

I don’t know how to tell the man that not only did I used to be in love with him, but sometimes I think I still am. I don’t know if I can identify the moment where I stopped loving him, if there ever was any stopping point. I loved him, we kissed, and then he ignored my existence until he went to college.

I never stopped thinking about him. But with him out of town and out of sight, it was easier to ignore that old ache in my chest that I’d come to associate with my best friend’s older brother.

And then he came back and ruined everything by taking over my building, forcing me to acknowledge his existence once again.

Darren walks to the bed, sitting on it and leaning over me. I nibble on my burrito, wide eyes on him as he tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“Firecracker, I need to know. I need to know if what you said last night is the truth. Because if it is, it changes everything.”

“Like what?”

“Like the fact that we have unfinished business,” he says.

“You hate me.”

“I’ve never hated you.”

I lift my chin.

“We kissed on my birthday. Afterwards, we made plans to go on a date the next day. You said you’d pick me up at six. But you never showed. So I went to your house and Dot wanted to know why I was there, and told me you went out of town with some friends for the weekend. You were never going to take me out on that date, were you? You just said you would, just to mess with my head. Just like you pranked me with that kiss.”

“It wasn’t a prank,” he growls. “I would never do that to you, Katie. I was just scared, okay? I kissed you and then the weight of that choice hit me after the fact.”

“The weight of that choice?” I ask him. “What weight? I’m your sister’s friend, but -”

“It’s not just about Dot,” he replies. “It’s the fact that it was your first kiss. It was your first, but it wasn’t mine.”

“I know. I heard that you were popular with the girls in high school.”

“That was just gossip. I had a couple of girlfriends. Some casual dates.”

“And lots of kissing.”

“Sure.”

“So the fact that I was inexperienced was a problem? I wasn’t any good?”

“No!”

“Then what?” I ask him in exasperation.

I can’t figure out what the hell Darren means. Or what he wants. Which is fitting, because it’s always been this way. I’ve never quite understood what we were. Were we even friends? Did he like that kiss, or hate it? If he hated it, why did he even do it? Why was it such a long, breath-stealing, spine-tingling kiss?

“You were so innocent, Katie. So sweet. And I didn’t want to ruin you with my shit.”

“What do you mean?”

“My damage or whatever.”

“Darren, I don’t know what you mean. What damage?”

He gives me an odd look and I wonder if I’m missing something obvious. Maybe hangovers are kind of like being drunk, making you misunderstand what’s going on.

“Has Dot never told you about our parents?”

“I...no?” I have no idea what Darren could be talking about. I think of Mr. and Mrs.

Baker. I knew Mrs. Baker more than Mr. Baker, since she was a stay at home mom for most of Dot's childhood.

She was the one to give us a ride to the mall or help us paint our fingernails. She made the best chocolate chip cookies I've ever had and now Dot does too, something I'm incredibly jealous of.

Even though Dot shared the secret family recipe with me – saying I'm as good as family to her, so I deserve to have the recipe, too – I've tried to recreate the delicious cookies so many times to no success.

Mr. Baker was always busy. Sometimes he seemed stressed out and withdrawn, but I assumed it was because of his job as a cardiovascular surgeon, which always seemed to have him working long, unpredictable hours at the hospital.

"If Dot hasn't told you about this, I don't know if I should," Darren says slowly. "But...fuck it. I want you to know. Because I want you, Katie. So I need to tell you the truth. My dad is a piece of shit. Okay? He sucks."

"What?"

I'm shocked by the bitterness and anger in Darren's voice. Even in the worst of our exchanges since he bought my business's building, when I was sure he hated my guts, he's never spoken like this before.

"He would put on the act of the hard-working father and husband," Darren continues. "But he was cheating on our mom the whole time. And those times he said he was at medical conferences or doing emergency surgery? He was meeting one of his mistresses."

"You're not like him, Darren," I tell him.



He looks at me.

“I know that now,” he says quietly. “But when it all came to light, it was hard. It wasn’t just that he betrayed my mom. He betrayed all of us. All of those lies. This guy he pretended to be, but wasn’t. I was seventeen when I found out and I told them to keep it from Dot until she was older. She was already struggling enough in school with her ADHD and stuff. This would have derailed everything.”

I nod. I remember my good friend’s challenges in school very well.

“I was still processing it all when we kissed on your birthday,” Darren continues. “And when we did that, I felt so fucking free. While it was happening. Then it was over, and I went home that night and listened to my parents fighting upstairs. They were in marriage counseling. Trying to get past the infidelity. I listened from the stairs and thought about how these people were once my picture of an ideal life. How my father, just months ago, was my model of what a man should be. How could I have been so wrong? And what else could I be wrong about, if I was wrong about him?”

“You weren’t wrong. He was your dad. You had no reason to distrust him. And even with all of that, I think you became a good man. You didn’t become like him.”

He looks at me, a tortured expression in his eyes.

“I’d never do that to you,” he says. As though he’s trying to convince me.

Convince me that he’d never cheat on me. We’re not even together – are we? – but here he is, vowing to be loyal to me.

“I know,” I say. “Of course I know that.”

CHAPTER 6

DARREN

I step over the rubble of the former princess bridge in front of Katie's fashion boutique.

Long ago, this building was an event space for children's birthday parties. I can still remember it decades ago, in its former glory. It had a zipline, a paintball field, and a castle with a working moat that doubled as a lazy river in the summer.

Then the owner closed it down. Over the years, the property was sold and renovated several times. The moat was drained and filled. The castle was torn down. But the princess bridge stayed, the wooden planks sun-bleached and warped, a vacant dirt patch beneath it.

Until I bought the place, saw what a liability the bridge was, and tore it down.

I didn't think it would upset Katie, so I didn't warn her. But oh, I was wrong. She was upset. And she believed I must have done it on purpose, just to hurt her.

I would never do something like that. I don't hate Katie, I've just never known how to be around her without going crazy. Not since that kiss eight years ago.

I look upwards at the large sign, a mix of rustic elements and bright pink. The words FAT CHICK CHIC are large and proud on the front of the building that I, as of a couple of months ago, am the owner of.

Katie opens the front door, a hand over her brow to shield her eyes from the

afternoon sun.

“Would you please stop giving my sign a dirty look?” Katie says as I come inside. “I can name my business whatever I want. You’re my landlord, not my co-owner.”

“I know that.”

“So why do you always look at my sign like it’s got dirty words all over it?”

“I’m just trying to figure it out.”

“Figure what out?” she asks.

“All my life I was raised to be a gentleman,” I continue. “I was told to never talk about a woman’s age or her weight or anything like that. And if I ever called a woman ‘fat’ or even ‘chick’, for that matter, my mama would have lost her mind. But now the words are in bright huge letters on the front of a store all the women in this town are obsessed with.”

I watch as Katie goes around the counter at the front, where another similar sign is posted on the front of the counter above a display of lingerie. I clear my throat uncomfortably, looking away from the lace and straps and bows. I’ve only been inside of this place a couple of times. Once when the realtor gave me a walk through before I purchased it, and again when Katie called me about a leaking pipe.

I’ve never really looked around in here. Why would I? It’s Katie’s place, and it’s women’s clothing. Some of it modest, some of it sexy and revealing. Problem is, I can’t look at any of it without imagining Katie wearing it. And when I imagine that, I imagine myself ripping it off of her.

To my chagrin, Katie reaches into the display and pulls out a black lace teddy.

“Fat isn’t a bad word anymore,” she says, holding it up proudly. “At least, not in this context. I got tired of all the euphemisms that the fashion industry uses to describe my body. It’s like they invented a hundred different terms just to avoid saying the F-bomb. So I decided to reclaim it and strip it of its negative hold over me and women everywhere.”

“The F-bomb?”

“Fat,” she explains, as though it’s obvious.

“Oh, of course. The F-bomb.”

Katie grins as she holds the black teddy against her body.

“What do you think? Could I pull this off?”

“Hell yes. But I’d rather pull it off for you,” I blurt out.

Her eyes widen but I don’t regret a thing.

I’ve officially lost all control and now that I have, I’m not going back to the way things were before Katie called me last night.

She loved me. And I’m not going to stop until she loves me again. Katie will be mine. And I’m ready to be the kind of man she needs.

“So,” she says. “You’re here to fix the pipe, I assume?”

“And just look around,” I nod.

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“You’re shopping?” she raises a brow.

“No,” I say, eyeing the black teddy that Katie is still holding against her curves. “But I wanted to look around and see if there’s anything I can fix.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because for once, you’re going to allow me to,” I say. “You’ve wanted me to stay away from here since I bought the place. Not anymore. This old building needs a lot of work.”

And I’m not letting my woman work in some rundown old shack.

“Are you going to rebuild my bridge?” she jokes.

“Yes.”

This takes her by surprise.

“Darren, I was kidding. What do I need a bridge for?”

“Clearly it meant something to you. You’d walk across it all the time. Even ate your lunch on it a few times when the weather was nice.”

“You’ve been stalking me.”

She doesn’t sound displeased about this. And I don’t attempt to deny it.

“It was sentimental,” Katie says, gazing out of the storefront windows at the pile of old wood. “I had a couple of birthday parties here when I was a kid. And then in high school, me and my friends would sneak out in the middle of the night and meet on it.”

“That was a hangout spot?” I ask. “I had no idea.”

“No boys allowed,” she explains. “Even cute ones.”

“So you thought I was cute.”

“Everyone thought you were cute,” she rolls her eyes. “And they were constantly asking Dot and me about you. What does he do at his house? Do you ever see him shirtless? What kind of shampoo does he use? Does he talk to any girls on the phone?”

“So you were spilling my secrets.”

“I didn't tell them a damn thing,” Katie says proudly. “I respected your privacy. Also, as far as I was concerned, you were mine. I wasn't about to help them charm you by giving them inside information. In fact, sometimes I intentionally misled them.”

“What do you mean?”

“You remember going on some dates with Summer Settler?”

“I think so.”

“I told her that you absolutely loved show tunes. That's why she bought you the Annie soundtrack for your birthday.”

“You put her up to that? I always wondered what that was about. That was

so...weird.”

Katie smiles sheepishly as I shake my head, bewildered to absorb this information. Not only was Katie in love with me, she was so possessive over me that she intentionally sabotaged my dates.

Should that be a turn on?

Because it kind of is.

“Sorry,” Katie says. “I would never do something like that now. I was a teenager in love and all of these popular mean girls who would normally never be caught dead hanging out with me were suddenly trying to be my best friend. I realized it was just so they could get close to you.”

“That sucks.”

“It wasn’t just me. Dot, too. Oh, Dot loved to mess with them so much. You don’t even want to know the kinds of rumors your sister would start about you.”



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“You’re right. I don’t think I want to know.”

“So...you’re really going to rebuild my princess bridge?”

“If that’s what you want. Yes. However you want it.”

“Can we paint it, too?”

“I assumed painting was implied,” I reply. “But I don’t even remember what the original paint looked like, do you?”

“It was pink,” she says confidently. “It’s a princess bridge, after all. Oh – this time, we could match the shade to the sign on my store!”

“Whatever you want, firecracker.”

She blushes.

“I missed your nicknames.”

I walk around the counter, taking the teddy from Katie’s hands and pulling her close to me. Her breasts push against my chest and I know she can feel how hard I am right now, my cock pushing into her soft belly.

“I missed you, firecracker,” I whisper. “And now that I know I have a chance with you, I’m not going to leave you alone. I hope you know that.”

“I don’t know.”

I nod. I want her to know that I’m not going anywhere. But she doesn’t trust me. The last time I kissed her and made her a promise, I broke it. This time, it’ll be different.

My lips crash into hers. My tongue parts her lips as I pull her tight into my body, kissing her in the way I wish I’d had the guts to kiss her years ago. Not just a kiss but a claim to this woman.

I’ll be the only man to kiss her this way. The only one to be inside of her body. To plant my seed inside of her and watch her belly swell with my child. I’ll protect her from harm, provide for her, make sure the rest of her days are the best days.

She’s mine.

## CHAPTER 7

### KATIE

Darren gets to work right away, which I wasn’t expecting. I mean, he owns several buildings around here, not just mine. Plus his carpentry business keeps him pretty busy all year.

But it seems like as soon as he confirms the specifications of the bridge that I want, he gets to work. First he makes a trip to the lumber yard. When he returns with his truck loaded down with tools and wood, he also has a paper cup of coffee for me.

“You still like white chocolate mocha?” he asks me, handing me the warm cup.

As crazy as it is, I almost burst into tears over the kind gesture.

“Yes,” I manage out. “It’s still my favorite. Thank you.”

He nods, turning around and walking out the door to return to his truck. I look at the cup in my hands, a coffee brought to me by the man who, until yesterday, I thought couldn’t stand me.

Now it’s like everything has flipped around. Could it be that we’ve been misunderstanding each other this whole time?

I’m aware that I’m in serious danger of falling in love with Darren all over again. And that means I’m in danger of being heartbroken again. I’m not sure I can go through all of that again, but I don’t think I have a choice. If Darren wants to bewitch me, I’m going to say yes. I’m going to give this a try, because Darren is the only man I’ve ever loved.

The store isn’t too busy today, but that’s no surprise. Sundays tend to be pretty slow, and that’s good because my hangover is still faintly pounding between my ears. I’m unpacking new inventory in the backroom when the chime of the front door alerts me to someone entering. I walk out, expecting – or maybe hoping – that it’s Darren. Instead I see Dot.

“Hey!” I say brightly. The pitch of my voice is a bit too high. I don’t know why; it’s not like Dot knows anything is going on between Darren and me. Not yet, anyways.

Dot narrows her eyes. They’re blue-green, like Darren’s. But hers are brighter, lacking the ring of navy blue around the irises that gives Darren all of his smoky intensity.

“Hey?” she repeats, putting a hand on her hip. “What the hell, girl? You haven’t texted me back all day!”

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I pull my phone out of my back pocket and sure enough, I've got a handful of notifications from my best friend.

"Shoot, I'm sorry Dot," I groan. "I've been busy."

She looks me up and down.

"Well, you don't appear to be on death's door. I guess you're recovering from last night okay?"

"Yeah," I say. "Darren made sure I got home safe, and brought me breakfast and medicine this morning."

I look at Dot, searching for a sign that she suspects that there's more going on with her brother and her best friend, but she doesn't seem to think anything is unusual. Why would she? Darren was always looking out for us when we were growing up. She's never suspected anything ever happened between us, assuming the distance between Darren and I was because of him going off to college and us drifting apart.

"Are you here to shop?" I ask Dot.

"Mostly just to check on you," she says. "And I was going to ask if you needed me to grab you a coffee, but you've already got one."

I glance at the cup in my hand guiltily.

"But," she continues, walking down one of the aisles of my store. "I've got a new

client coming in for a photoshoot tomorrow, so I was thinking maybe I could grab a few things. She's size eighteen and she hasn't bought herself anything nice in a long time."

"Thought she would deserve nice clothes once she lost some weight?" I guess.

"Same story, different girl," Dot sighs, shaking her head as she flips through a rack of flowy gowns. "As though squeezing yourself into jeans that cut off your circulation is any way to live."

"What's the vibe of the photoshoot?" I ask, relieved that the conversation is moving far away from anything related to Darren.

"Boudoir. Not fully nude, but suggestive."

"Wow."

"She thinks it'll shake her out of the funk she's in," Dot explains.

I nod. I understand this very well. Most of Dot's clients are plus sized and it's funny how often they come in with the same needs.

I've always been in awe of Dot's ability to bring out the confidence in people. She's done it for me, and now for her clients. They come into her studio reluctant to even smile or be photographed at an angle they consider unflattering. By the end of it, sometimes they're stripping down for something to surprise their husband with.

"Perfect," Dot says, landing on a lacy full length robe. "I've got a minidress that would look so good with this."

"So after the photoshoot, what are you up to today?"

She sighs.

“My boss is being an unreasonable douche-face again. So probably doing some work for him.”

“On the weekend?” I ask. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Heis ridiculous,” she says. “I hate that I have to work there. But it’s only until my photography business picks up a little more...oooh, I can’t wait to see his face when I finally quit. I hope it wipes that stupid smirk right off his ugly face.”

“Your boss is a lot of things, but ugly is not one of them,” I say, thinking of William Lewis’s annoyingly handsome face. He might bealmostas good looking as Darren...but I’ve never been into the polished, professional types. Whereas Darren is always wearing jeans and cowboy boots, some kind of dirt or oil staining his palms, his hair and his beard always a little bit wild and in need of a trim.

“You okay?”

“What?” I ask. “What do you mean?”

Dot eyes me suspiciously.

“You just looked like you were zoning out there, for a moment.”

She glances out the window as I ring up her purchase.

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“What exactly is my brother doing out there?”

“Rebuilding the princess bridge.”

“Woah! How did you convince him to do that?”

She doesn’t want to know the truth.

“He just...offered. I guess he felt bad.”

“He should. That thing was a historical monument to our childhoods. I told him off when I found out.”

“You and me both.”

I hand Dot the bag. She continues to contemplate her brother through the windows.

“Do you know, when I was younger I always thought the two of you would end up together?” she says lightly.

“What?!”

She shrugs.

“I guess it was a selfish fantasy. I wanted you to be my sister for real, and if you married Darren, it would be like you were officially family.”

I can't believe what I'm hearing.

"But either way, you're my sister. Now and forever. I don't need it to be official," Dot continues. "You've got me forever, whether you like it or not. And Darren, too."

I like the idea of having Darren forever a little too much.

## CHAPTER 8

### DARREN

I don't quit until the sun goes down. It's only then that I realize my stomach is growling. How the hell didn't I notice?

I'm not the kind of person who misses meals. Actually, I eat twice as much as the average person. I always have. I don't know why, all I know is that I'm usually hungry a couple of hours after a meal. I work hard, and I assume the reason I never seem to gain any weight is because of that.

Or maybe it's just genetics. Dot always complains that I got all of the "skinny" genes.

The door to the shop opens up and Katie walks out to meet me with a bottle of ice-cold water. Is she trying to sway those hips like that? Or is this just the way she moves? Whatever it is, it's driving me wild. Enough to distract me from my hunger and make me focus on another primal need that is screaming for attention in my jeans.

"Wow," Katie surveys the work site. "You've accomplished so much."

I look dubiously at the underwhelming scene in front of us. Today was about clearing the area of the old debris, digging holes, and pouring concrete for the posts that will



eventually become the legs of the bridge.

Certainly it was a lot of hard work. But it doesn't actually look like much. Not yet.

"It'll be more like an actual bridge by the end of the week," I say.

She puts a hand on my shoulder and my cock stirs even more. Any physical contact from Katie has always done this to me. Always.

"You don't have to explain it to me," Katie says. "I know you do amazing work. It's like you've got all of the drawings in your head. It all comes together at the end, and it always looks perfect."

"I didn't know you looked at my work very much."

"The gazebo at the dog park," she says. "Dot and I always go there after grabbing coffee."

"Y'all don't own dogs."

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*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:39 am*

“That’s why we go! To dog-watch.”

I shake my head. This woman.

“One day I’ll have a dog of my own. When I own my own place.”

I glance at the apartment above the shop where Katie is living. The previous owner of the building had a strict no-pets policy. I never thought of changing the policy when I bought the place...but for Katie, I’d change everything. I’d burn the old building to the ground and build a new one if that’s what she said she needed from me.

“You should get a dog,” I tell her. “I know you won’t let it ruin the apartment. And I could put a little fence in the back so it would have room to run around.”

The look she gives me makes me feel about ten feet tall. Damn. It feels good to be Katie’s hero. I could get addicted to this.

“Are you hungry?” Katie asks me.

More than you know.

“Starving,” I say, wiping the sweat from my brow with the front of my shirt. Katie’s eyes drop to the strip of skin above my waistband that is exposed when my shirt rides up. I don’t miss this, nor do I miss the way those brown eyes turn molten with desire.

So it’s not just me who feels this way.

“Why don’t you go home and wash up and change?” Katie suggests. “Then come back here and I’ll fix you something to eat.”

I smile.

“What?” she asks.

“You said ‘fix’ something to eat,” I explain. “Those Texas sayings don’t die easily, do they? And sometimes you still have that twang in your voice. The way you did when we were kids.”

“What, you think I lost my accent?” she grins. “Just because I went to fashion school for a while in New York?”

“I haven’t heard it come out in a while.”

“Well it’s still here,” she says. “Gets a little stronger the longer I live in Wild Bronco.”

“I like it.”

I want to pull her into another steamy kiss, but I’m quite literally drenched in sweat. She looks pretty and clean in a white tank top and a hip-hugging pink skirt that I’m dying to look under. I don’t want to mess that outfit up – not yet, anyway – so I lean in for a gentle, soft kiss. No other touching, just our lips.

When I pull away, she looks dazed.

“I’ll be back,” I promise her, loading my tools back into their box and throwing it in the bed of my truck.

“See you soon.”

Very soon. I speed home and take a thorough but fast shower. I clean my beard up a little and put on some more deodorant and a fresh set of clothes.

I’ve never worried much about how I look. Still don’t. But Katie matters more to me than anything ever has, and I’ve had exactly twenty-four hours to absorb the things she told me last night when she drunk dialed me. I’m still reeling from the information she gave me. Knowing she’s never had sex, and knowing that I could be –willbe – her first, is causing the pressure to mount.

I was her first kiss and I fucked that up. So if we’re going to have sex tonight, I’m going to make sure it’s a first that she enjoys. That she can never possibly regret.

“That was quick!” Katie exclaims.

I’m standing on the porch of her apartment. The door faces the back of the building and is up a narrow flight of steps. The tiny little porch is lined with potted plants, and fairylights wrap around the rail from the bottom of the steps to the top.

It’s a tiny, cramped little space but Katie’s still found a way to make it homey. I look at the little curtains in the window. They’re faded and patterned with horses. Knowing her, the material came from some old shirt at the thrift store.

“Did you sew those yourself?” I ask her as she lets me inside.

“Of course,” she says proudly.

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“You’ve always been so good with things like this,” I say. “I should have known you’d make a career of it.”

“When you grow up shopping second hand, you learn how to make old things new,” she explains.

“I still have the shirt you made me.”

Her warm brown eyes widen.

“No you don’t!”

“Of course. I could never get rid of it.”

“There’s no way that it fits you anymore. I made that when you were like, twelve.”

“It definitely does not fit anymore,” I confirm. “But it’s sentimental. I could never get rid of anything from you, firecracker.”

“It was so bad!” she says. “I had just gotten my sewing machine and had no idea what I was doing. I didn’t even hem it.”

“It’s a style,” I reply with a grin. “Like...cutoff. Grunge.”

Katie is smiling at me in that “you’re my hero” way again and I lose all train of thought. That crooked little t-shirt that Katie made me still hangs in my closet, brought from place to place as I’ve moved through stages in my life, a little piece of

my firecracker with me everywhere I am.

I follow Katie into the little apartment. I know that she rented this place from Mrs. Hayes along with the store's space beneath it. Unlike the store, I didn't insist on touring the apartment before I bought the building. Although I would have had a right to do so, she was already angry enough that I was buying the building before she could.

She doesn't understand that if I didn't buy it when I did, another investor would have. And they would have raised the rent, kicked her out, and torn the whole damn building down only to rebuild a shopping strip in its place.

I know because I was there. The negotiations were cut throat. I got this place by the skin of my teeth and with the rent I charge, I'm not making a profit. Hell, I'm barely breaking even.

But I'd do anything to keep my firecracker happy. Seeing that smile on her lips is the fuel that keeps me going, my motivation to push through.

"I've made dinner," Katie states the obvious, as if the delicious smells filling the little space wouldn't tip me off. She glances nervously over her shoulder. "Fried chicken and potato wedges. Hope you're hungry."

"Starved."

I follow her into the kitchen like a hunter stalking prey. I really am starved but one look at Katie's ass and my mind is filled with thoughts of a different physical need.

I'm going to make this woman my wife.

She's going to be Mrs. Baker and I'm going to knock her up as many times as I

fucking can, as many as she'll let me. She wants a husband and a house full of kids? I'll make it happen.

Whatever she wants as long as I get a lifetime of worshipping her and her beautiful body in exchange.

"Sit down," she says, putting a hand on my shoulder and guiding me to a tiny table by the window.

Once again she's made a rundown little space feel cozy. The kitchen linoleum is peeling and yellowed, a relic from the 1980s if not older. The ceiling is sagging in the corner, and after just a few seconds of sitting beside the window I can tell that it has a leak, letting in the drafty evening air.

"Darlin, I can't have you living here."

I blurt it out when she sits down, unable to stop myself.

She raises a brow and I know exactly what she didn't like about what I just said. So before she can argue, I continue.

"Not like this," I say, gesturing to the state of disrepair. "It's not safe."

"Like my bridge wasn't safe," she murmurs. She takes a bite of chicken, closing her eyes. "Let's not talk anymore about the property tonight, okay? Dig in before it gets cold."

I watch her eat another bite, mesmerized by it all, before taking a bite of my own.

"Damn, Katie," I say. "This is the best fried chicken I've ever had."

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*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am*

She smiles sheepishly.

“Now I know that can’t be true. Dolly’s Diner makes the best fried chicken.”

“This puts Dolly’s to shame,” I say, shaking my head. I clear my plate in about two seconds.

“There’s more on the counter,” Katie says, gesturing to the little counter not far from our tiny table. I don’t even have to stand up to get the rest, placing it on the table between us.

“You’re the full package,” I declare. “All of this and you can cook, too.”

She shakes her head.

“You’ve always eaten your food like there’s not going to be more tomorrow,” she says with a smile.

“Does it bother you?” I ask her with a frown.

“No. Definitely not. Actually I kind of like it.”

“Why?”

“Because,” she looks down, her cheeks going pink. “I never have to worry about eating more than you.”



“Why would that matter?”

“Oh, Darren,” she shakes her head. “It doesn’t. It shouldn’t. But when you’re the big girl all your life, it feels like everyone’s watching your habits.”

“I don’t give a shit how much you eat, Katie. I’ve never watched you eat.”

Except to get turned on.

“I know,” she smiles. “I think that’s why it’s so comfortable to be with you. It’s always been that way. I can eat until I’m full and not wonder if it’s too much. You’re always eating three times as much as I am. And you’re bigger than me, too. I like that.”

“I like that, too.”

I finish my food, filled to contentment. Katie’s eating considerably slower than me, which means I’ve got nothing to do but watch.

And I do watch.

She smiles at me.

“You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?”

“What?” I ask innocently.

“Watching me eat,” she says. “And giving me that look.”

“What look?”

But I know exactly what the fuck she's talking about.

“That fuck me look.”

I grin.

“You recognize that look, do you?”

“On you, I think I'm starting to,” she says. Then she puts down her fork, looking at me boldly. “And I'm ready, Darren.”

## CHAPTER 9

KATIE

“I’m ready, Darren.”

Well shit. I wasn’t expecting to be so bold. The words tumble from my lips like a spilled drink, and his reaction is instant. He’s up from the table, walking around to close the distance between us. Eyes on me. Hands on me. He guides me up to him and then lifts me into his arms like I’m weightless.

“Ready for what, firecracker?” he asks, voice barely a rasp.

“I think that you know.”

“I need to hear you say it.”

He looks tormented, a man about to come undone. I love having the ability to turn him into this. From stiff and gruff and uptight to...falling apart at my hands. Mine, all mine.

“I’m ready for you to fuck me, Darren.”

I say filthy words in a tone I can hardly recognize. I’m already soaking with need, turned on by his scent, the bulk of his muscles, the way he can pick me up and toss me around like it’s no big deal.

He carries me to my bedroom, tossing me down on the mattress. His hands get to work on his shirt. With every button he undoes, I see more beautifully tanned skin,

peppered with dark hair across his chest and pecs, a happy trail leading beneath the waist of his jeans.

“More,” I beg.

I kneel on the bed, coming forward and grabbing his belt, yanking it open. I can’t wait any longer. It feels like I’ve been waiting for this moment since that first kiss we shared. We left something unfinished, and I’ve been holding my breath ever since.

I strip him from the waist down, hurriedly, desperately. When his cock springs free, I stop abruptly. It’s enormous.

“Oh my god.”

“We can stop whenever you want, honey.”

“No fucking way,” I shake my head. “This is happening. It’s happening. Tonight.”

Who am I trying to convince? Him, or me?

I want this. I’m just not sure how this is going to work. Looking at his girth, his length, I have no idea how I’m going to fit that thing into my body.

Darren seems to understand what I’m worried about.

“We’ll go slow, firecracker,” he vows. “You’re in control.”

“I’m not sure it’s going to fit,” I murmur.

I reach for it, gazing in wonder at the way my fingers hardly wrap around the thickness. Darren inhales sharply, his entire body going as stiff as his cock in my

hand.

“It’ll fit,” he says roughly. “You’ll take all of it, and you’ll fucking love it. But first, I’m going to warm you up.”

“What do you mean?”

Darren grabs my ankles and pulls them towards him, opening my legs. I slide down on the bed, back flat against the sheets. This enormous, muscular man climbs over me and I cannot take my eyes off the way his arms flex above me, around me, enclosing me beneath him. Everything else disappears and all that I see and feel is him.

“Your turn,” he says, eyes glittering in the light. He reaches for my shirt and I hesitate.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Let’s turn that off,” I say, looking at the bedside lamp.

“Why?”

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“You know why.”

“I’m afraid I don’t,” he says firmly. “Why the hell would I want to turn the light out? I want to see you, Katie. You don’t know how long I’ve been waiting to see you like this. All of you.”

“I’m worried you won’t like what you see.”

Darren shakes his head in amazement.

“Darlin there is no way I won’t like what I see. You’re my dream woman and you’re taking your clothes off and letting me touch your body. I am on cloud fucking nine right now and the only thing in the way of you and me are these clothes.”

He takes my hand and guides it to his cock again.

“Feel this?” he says.

“Yes,” I barely choke out, reminded once again of how absolutely huge he is. I can barely hold him in my hand. How is he going to be inside of me?

Now he backs up on the bed, taking his cock in his own fist between my open legs. He squeezes, gliding his hand up the shaft of his cock at the same time. I watch as clear liquid leaks from the tip of his member.

“You see this?” he demands. There it is. The growl that I’ve come to associate with this man. But this time the admonishing tone is fucking hot.

“Yes.” I hardly recognize the raw need in my voice. Who is this woman?

“This is what you do to me,” he says darkly. “It’s what you’ve always done to me. Do you know what I think about when I’m jacking off? Do you know?”

“What?”

“You. Your body. Your tits. Your thighs. I think of you. Every. Time.”

He strokes his cock as he speaks.

“You’re always forgetting how fucking beautiful you are. Tonight I’m going to remind you. Again and again.”

He strips my skirt off, pulling it down my legs and tossing it to the side. Then my underwear, too. He pulls my tank top and bra up and my breasts spill out beneath.

“Fuck,” he hisses before taking a nipple in his mouth.

I cry out, back arching as I writhe beneath his solid, heavy body. His cock is pressed against my naked pussy, teasing, needy, thick and smearing my arousal all over my clit. I grind against him. I need more. So much more.

He switches to my other nipple while his hand roams down my body, diving between my thighs and sliding through my wetness. He circles my clit before pushing a finger inside of me. Then, slowly, another finger.

“You’re tight,” he pants, looking down. “I’m going to need to stretch you first, baby.”

“Whatever you’re doing, just don’t stop.”

Somehow, his fingers have found the exact spot that sets my body on fire. My mind is blissfully blank, every worry forgotten as I'm filled with electric sensation. I never want it to end and at the same time I feel like I can hardly keep going. I feel so full, so good.

His fingers push against my walls, stretching me, while his thumb finds my sensitive clit and circles it faster and faster.

I reach my peak in seconds, my walls clenching around his hand, thighs pressing together and trapping him in place. His mouth finds mine and muffles my moans, like he's trying to steal this pleasure, consuming me, taking it all for himself. It's the longest, hardest orgasm I've ever had.

When it's over, I feel spent. I collapse on the bed, catching my breath. Darren doesn't even seem winded, not tired even after all of that work he's done today – on the bridge and on my body.

I close my eyes. When I feel his head brush against my inner thighs, I open them and sit upright.

“Darren, what are you doing?” I gasp.

I think I know exactly what he's doing, though. He was about to put his mouth right there, on my pussy. Another thing I've never done with a man before but have always wondered about – specifically wondering how it would feel to have Darren's strong hands gripping my thick thighs while his bearded mouth devoured me.

“Round two,” he says, his wicked eyes on me. “I have to make sure you're ready before I enter you, firecracker. Lay back and let me handle this.”



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His mouth is on me, this man I used to obsess over and daydream about the way some girls would daydream about Ryan Gosling or something. But he's real, really here in my bedroom and he's licking me right there.

Even with all my familiarity with my own body, my books and my toys, I've never been able to give myself two orgasms in a row. So I doubt Darren will be able to.

"Darren," I gasp as his tongue laps at me. "I don't think this is going to do anything."

He ignores me, sucking me more deeply now, his tongue entering my wet pussy. I now understand why the phrase is eating you out. Because he's absolutely devouring me, making a meal of me with his hands cupping my ass and pulling me closer to him. Like a man on his knees eating his first meal in days, exactly where he wants to be.

"Darren," I gasp again, raking my fingers through his hair and pulling. "Wait."

He looks up. As soon as his tongue stops, the overwhelming pleasure ceases too, and I find that I desperately want him to keep going.

"Turn off your brain," he orders me.

"Excuse me?" I arch a brow.

He grins between my thighs.

"Turn off that beautiful brain of yours for the rest of the night and just trust me," he

says. "You analyze everything, Katie. You analyze your whole damn life. Do me a favor and turn all of it off for one night with me. Shut your brain off. Listen to your body. What's it saying?"

It's screaming for more.

I push his face into my pussy and he grips my ass even harder now, as though afraid I'll fly away. I try to do what Darren says. Turn off the brain. Stop analyzing. Feel the way his breath is hot on my skin, the movements of his tongue rough and soft all at the same time.

The buzzing in my body is slowly increasing in frequency. His tongue circles my clit one more time and I'm screaming his name at the ceiling as I quake around him.

Two orgasms. Two in a row.

And by the look in those eyes, he's not done with me yet.

"Condom," I gasp.

It's miraculous that I manage to get the word out at all. Not only am I delirious with pos orgasmic bliss, but I also don't want the condom at all. I know it's the responsible thing to do, though. Which is why I've had a box of them in my bedside table for a couple of years now. Waiting, waiting, for a dick that I might deem worthy.

I didn't expect it would be Darren's.

"Here," I say, grabbing one from my nightstand drawer. Darren raises a brow but says nothing. I wonder what he's thinking. Probably that it's weird that I keep condoms if I don't have sex. He opens the little foil packet and rolls the latex over his shaft. Shockingly, it fits.

He fists the base of his cock and taps the head on my sensitive clit before sliding it up and down between my wet folds. Teasing my entrance but not going in.

"Stop analyzing," he says.

"I wasn't," I say.

A lie. I definitely was.

How can I not analyze when that giant cock is pressed against me, so thick and long? I've never had anything larger inside of me than his fingers so far, and before that just tampons and the occasional slender toy designed to reach my G-spot without stretching me.

"I don't think I can do it," I whimper as he rubs against me.

Impossible as it may seem, he's very close to giving me a third orgasm just by sliding against me like this. Are my orgasms getting closer together? How does this work? Is there a maximum number of orgasms a woman can have in a day, and if there is, what is that number? Because Darren is breaking all of the long-held beliefs that I had about my body tonight.

And he's about to break one more, it seems. Because I don't think it's possible for that massive thing to be inside of me, but somehow, I know it will be. Because I'm ready for this. I'm ready to lose my V-card. I hoped and dreamed it could be Darren, but never thought it would be. Now he's here, and I'm not about to stop now.

Maybe this goes nowhere. Maybe after tonight, Darren breaks my heart all over again. But I'm turning this damn brain off. My body is needy, hungry for him.

"You can do it," Darren says. "You'll stretch to fit me. You were made to take my

cock, Katie. Your body was made to fit me."

Looking at his thick member, I really don't see how this is possible.

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Darren pushes the head of his cock against my hole while he leans down, giving me a tender kiss before bowing lower to take my nipple into his mouth again. While he does, his hips press into me harder. There it is. The pain that I was promised. The pain that every woman I've ever talked to describes when they talk about their first time. It's not bad, just a pinch. And the pleasure that accompanies it, is enough to overcome the pain. It's enough to make me want more. I push up against his cock and he growls against my tits in approval, giving me more. Another half inch. Another inch. Every bit of length comes with a pinch of pain as he stretches my walls, but it also comes with unbelievable pleasure. I feel so full.

"Oh god, Darren. This feels amazing."

"You're only taking half of me right now, darlin. There's more."

"What?" my eyes snap open and I look between my thighs in alarm.

"Told you," he says in a tight voice. "I'm going slow. I don't want to break you, baby."

"You won't."

Am I sure about that?

I'm not sure of anything.

I just know this is the best feeling. My pussy still throbs from the two orgasms I've already had and I'm preparing for a third. My body is stretched tight around Darren's

most intimate part and he's about to give me more.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

He slides further inside of me until he's filling me all the way, his hips pressed against my ass and thighs, the weight of his body keeping me anchored the mattress.

"You're so tight," he grunts.

"Too much?"

"Nothing about you will ever be too much for me," he vows seriously. He takes my wrists, pulling my arms over my head. Then he dips his face to my chest, licking and sucking every inch of my breasts until he finds my nipples again, sucking softly and then harder, with need, as his hips begin to carefully pump.

"Fuck," he groans. "I want to knock you up."

"What?" I ask.

"Not tonight," he says. "But I'm going to. One day I'm going to be inside of you with nothing between us and I'm going to fill you up with my seed. Every fucking night. Until you're swollen with my baby."

He thrusts his cock into me with every sentence, increasing the pace and angle until he's at a steady, quick rhythm. One of his hands finds my clit and he smears my arousal all around it, stroking it until I'm quivering beneath him. I reach my third orgasm easily. It comes over me before I'm even aware of it, melting every muscle in my body until there's nothing left. No tension, no apprehension.

I forgot the pinching pain between my legs a long time ago and now I meet him thrust for thrust, pushing my hips against him, demanding more. The room fills with the sounds of our bodies slapping together, his cock coated in evidence of every explosive orgasm he's given me tonight.

"Fuck. Katie."

He explodes as he pounds forcefully against me, his orgasm quickly following mine.

After a few minutes of laying in the bed, he carefully slides out of me, running to the bathroom to throw away the condom. When he returns, his face is soft and concerned. He climbs into the bed, stroking my thigh comfortingly.

"Are you okay?" he asks. "Did I hurt you?"

"I'm not hurt," I say. "And I'm more than okay. That felt amazing. Thank you."

"Don't say thank you," he shakes his head. "Not when I should be thanking you for the privilege of getting to see and touch and taste your sexy body. This was better than anything I could have imagined in my wildest fantasies."

I still can't believe I've been something he's fantasized about. I'm afraid to believe it, because if I believe it, I might start to think I'm special to Darren. And believing that is a one-way ticket to getting hurt.

It seems like my brain is awake again, and it's analyzing the hell out of this entire situation.

## CHAPTER 10

### DARREN

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am*

First I'll fix the kitchen sink.

Then I'll pick out a ring.

Not because my priorities are out of order, but because the jewelry store doesn't open until ten.

Katie's sleeping in the bedroom, passed out after a night of passionate fucking.

Actually, the word fucking doesn't do it justice. What we did was more than sex. We bonded. We shared. I broke all her walls down and she demolished mine, too. And she shared another first with me, something I thought I'd never get another chance to do after I screwed everything up in high school.

The years without Katie have been lonely. Lonelier than I even realized. I didn't know how cold I was until I felt her warmth again and was reminded of how she brings me back to life.

She makes me want to take risks. And love is always a risk. I know this better than most because of the things I saw my parents go through. Two people who probably should have gotten a divorce a long time ago but won't, because of their "values."

Right. Values. Those same values that cause my father to cheat on my mother, and for my mother to look the other way as long as he continues to deposit his considerable paycheck in their shared checking account?

My mother claims they've figured out something that works for them. But when I



look at them, all I see is everything that I never want for myself. I don't want a fake arrangement. I don't want to leave my house in the morning knowing I'm about to betray the one woman I vowed to be loyal to.

As a man, my word is my bond. And from now on, my heart belongs to Katie. It always has. And we're going to make it official, just as soon as she'll let me.

I've never been so determined in my life.

"I didn't even tell you that it was broken."

Her soft voice is behind me. I quickly climb to my feet, dropping my tools on the ground.

"I was going to make coffee," I explain. "Then I noticed this and got distracted."

"You don't have to fix things while you're here as my guest, you know," she smiles.

Her red hair is messy in the back and her face is clean and free of any makeup, making her look a bit younger, a bit more innocent. Even though after last night, Katie is less "innocent." At least, if you're going by a traditional sort of definition. In my mind, Katie's still innocent. Just as sweet and pure in her heart as she's always been.

And me? I can only hope to deserve her. The difference between now and high school, is that now I know I'm not like my father. That I don't have to be him. I can be the kind of man Katie needs.

"Are you okay?" I ask her, my brow furrowing as I think about last night. Sure, I enjoyed myself. Of course I fucking did. Getting to make love to Katie is all I've ever wanted. Now I can be a happy man, knowing I've felt those soft curves yielding

beneath my palms.

But did she enjoy it, too? Was I too rough? Did I go too hard?

“I’m fine,” she says. “You don’t have to be so worried. I would have told you if something was wrong. And I’m not that fragile, you know!”

To me, you are. The most fragile, most important thing in my life.

Katie can’t understand that. She’s always wanted to be strong. Always insisting on standing on her own two feet and going her own way. She went to fashion school even though just about everyone in her life told her it was the wrong path. No job security. No money.

But she did it anyway. And then she came here and opened her own business. At her age, being a successful owner of a small business is unheard of. But she did it.

So I get it. I understand how Katie could feel like I don’t have to be worried about her. But I do. Because she’s important. Because she matters to me more than anything else.

I gesture to the sink, which is still half taken apart behind me.

“I’ll have to get a part from the store to fix it,” I tell her. “I’m going to do that now. I’ll be right back, so hands off the duct tape.”

Katie holds her hands up, palms out, with a grin.

“No duct tape. I promise.”

I nod. And then because I can’t help myself, I grab her by the hips and whirl her

around, pressing her against the edge of the counter and kissing her roughly. She tastes like peppermint toothpaste and sex.

“Coffee,” she gasps when I’m through claiming her mouth. “I need coffee before I can do anything else. Eventhat.”

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I kiss her again.

“Have your coffee,” I tell her. “I’m going to the hardware store. I’ll be back.”

Okay. Technically this is a lie. But I can’t exactly tell her that I want to pick out a ring this morning, can I?

I’ll get her a better one later. Bigger diamond, better band, whatever. She can design it herself, customize everything. For now, though, I’m getting her something quick. Something to put on her pretty little finger so that every man who looks her way will understand that she belongs to me.

The sooner I get her down the aisle, the sooner we can move onto my other plans for us. Plans that include knocking her up as many times as she’ll let me.

I feel like I’ve waited all my life for her. And now that I’ve finally got her, I’m going to make the most of every fucking day. I don’t care if it’s fast, I don’t care what anyone else might say on the matter.

Least of all my father.

That’s why I’m so annoyed to see him at the hardware store. Yes, I really did need something from the hardware store. I just neglected to tell Katie I’ve got another stop before I come back to her place.

Dad’s right at the exit, about to go inside. once he finishes his cigarette of course.

Yes, he's a cardiovascular surgeon who smokes cigarettes. It's stupid and makes no fucking sense. Then again, neither does cheating on the woman who gave him children and made his house a home.

I'm on speaking terms with Dad right now, but that hasn't always been the case. Really, it's only because of Mom and Dot that I reunited with him a few Thanksgivings ago. I hate to see a woman cry, and because of my feud with my father, I was making two of the most important women in my life cry. I felt like I was ruining the holidays. So I shook his hand and told him it's water under the bridge.

It's not true, of course.

But I'm trying. Maybe one day, I'll get there. Maybe if I keep moving, one day I'll finally arrive at that magical place my therapist calls forgiveness.

Until then, the unexpected sight of him is threatening to ruin my morning. Which is saying something, because up until now, this was the best damn morning of my life.

"Darren, what are you doing here?" Dad tries to discreetly put out the cigarette beneath his shoe, which is stupid. We all know he never quit. And the smoke that lingers in the air between us is a dead giveaway.

"PVC joiner," I explain curtly. "One of my properties has a leak."

He nods, a shadow crossing his face. I know that my chosen path in life isn't what he wanted for me. He dreamed of one of us going into medicine, preferably me as his eldest and the son. Some kind of macho idea that his pride and joy, the son who is the spitting image of him, should follow in his footsteps.

To Dad, I was only ever an extension of him. It shocked him when I was angry at him for cheating on our mom. Shocked him again when I said no to school halfway

through my sophomore year. I dropped out and became an apprentice for a local master carpenter, then moved to Wild Bronco and got to work.

Since then, I've done well for myself. Well enough to buy multiple commercial properties. I buy them, fix them up, and lease them out to local Wild Bronco businesses. Everyone wins.

Now I'm actually doing pretty well for myself and am on track to one day earn just as much as some early career surgeons do. But that's not enough for good old Dad.

It'll never be enough.

You're not him. That's what my firecracker said. And she's right.

"I'll see you around, Dad," I say.

Though true, I'm not sure when I plan to see him. Whenever Dot calls me and chews me out for avoiding family functions, I suppose.

Maybe family functions will be a little easier with Katie by my side. We'll have our own little family within my larger one, creating our own happiness.

Dad looks like he'd like to say more, but I just keep walking to my truck. I've got one more stop to go, and I'd like to get back to my girl as soon as possible.

## CHAPTER 11

### KATIE

"Anyways, now my boss is insisting that I work late into the evenings with him until the case is concluded."

“Can you work remotely?” I ask hopefully.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am*

Poor Dot is venting to me over the phone about her job and her boss, the ever-infuriating William Lewis.

Truth be told, sometimes I think there's a little more going on with her and William. Yes, he's an uptight boss. Heavens knows I couldn't handle working for a man like him, especially as his assistant.

"It's like he expects me to drop everything and do whatever he needs me to do. Never mind that I have a social life. And my photography business. And asleepschedule! I told him the other day, just because he only needs two hours of sleep like one of those Twilight vampires, that doesn't mean the rest of us don't need eight."

"Actually, the Twilight vampires never slept at all," I say. "Edward didn't even own a bed."

"Oh, that's right," Dot replies distractedly. "William is Edward. Except he never moved past the jerk stage from the first movie. He's just a...a perma-jerk!"

I hear her get into her car, the keys turning the ignition. If I know my best friend, she's probably going to stop to get a caramel macchiato, then head into the office that William's practice has in downtown Wild Bronco.

"Could you...quit? Find a new job?" I ask tentatively.

It's an unspoken rule in our friendship that when one of us calls and says she needs to vent, you let her vent. You don't suggest solutions, you just let her get it all off her chest. Solutions are stifling. We have to let the problem breathe first.



But this problem has breathed enough, hasn't it? Dot is venting to me about her job nearly every time I see her at this point. I hate seeing my friend so unhappy.

Something has to give.

"As soon as my photography business makes enough to pay my monthly bills, I'm out of there," she says firmly. "Problem is, William's erratic schedule has started to impact my photography business. I had to reschedule my boudoir client that was supposed to come in today. It's so frustrating."

I frown.

"That's so unfair. What did William say when you told him you'd have to reschedule your plans?"

"Oh, I didn't tell him," she says dismissively. "I don't talk to him about the photography business. He'd probably think it was stupid. You know, chubby chick taking photographs of other chubby chicks in their underwear. Guys like William love to make fun of things like that. He wouldn't get it at all."

I bite my lip. I'm not sure I agree with Dot's assessment of William. I don't know him well, and I understand that he's a big old grouch. But he's never been a bully.

"Anyway," Dot sighs. "I'm sorry. I'm taking up all the space in this conversation. We haven't even talked about you. How are you? What are you up to today?"

Feeling guilty as hell for not telling you about me and your brother, that's what.

"Just cleaning up around the house," I say. "You know, Sunday reset."

The door of my apartment opens. Darren enters, a couple of bags in his hands.

“Hey, I’m back,” he calls loudly before he notices me in the kitchen on the phone.

“Who’s that?” Dot asks. “Sounds like my brother.”

“It is,” I say quickly. “He came by to work on the building.”

“Well, give him my hello,” she says. “Tell him he better be a nice landlord to you or his sister will kick his butt.”

I hear her car slow down and then the sound of a drive through speaker. “Welcome to Fiction and Foam. Can I take your order?”

“I’ll talk to you later,” I say in a rush.

“See ya.”

Darren enters the kitchen. I wait by the counter with a smile, expecting him to come grab me the way he had before he left. Instead he goes to the sink, unpacking the stuff he got from the hardware store and laying it on the floor beside his toolbox.

Okay. That’s fine. He’s focused on fixing the sink.

No need to get insecure and weird about it, Katie.

Except I am. Damn.

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“So how was the store?” I ask him lamely.

“Fine.”

He doesn't look at me, laying down on the floor and looking beneath the sink. I can't even see his face now, just his torso and lower body. His muscular arms flex as he turns a screwdriver.

Even while anxious, I think I could watch him fix things all day. Something about this man when he's holding tools just does things to me.

“Did you go anywhere else while you were out?” It's the next question I can think of that isn't “Are we okay? Why does it feel like the entire vibe has shifted? What's going on?”

I know I shouldn't freak out but then again this is the same guy who kissed me and then stood me up the next day without any explanation.

He was my first kiss.

Now he's my first everything.

“Are you hungry?” I ask him. “I could make us some toast.”

“I'm okay for now.”

Okay, what the hell?

It's like all connection has died since he returned from the store and I don't know why. I stiffen, then blurt out the first thing that comes to mind.

“Darren Daniel Baker, if you do not get out from beneath that sink right now and look me in the eye while you speak to me, I'm going to kick you out of your own building.”

The hand holding the screwdriver freezes, then slowly puts it down in the toolbox. I watch Darren's large body slide out from beneath the sink and slowly stand upright.

My arms are crossed over my chest, giving myself a hug. I have to hold myself together, because I've already fallen apart over Darren once.

If I do it again, there will be no recovery. No third chance. Just a lot of rocky road ice cream and Gilmore Girls rewatching marathons as I try to stitch my heart back together and look for a new place to live at the same time.

“What's going on, firecracker?”

His voice is etched with equal parts concern and bewilderment. The use of my nickname softens me. You're an insecure nut, Katie. And he's realizing it.

“Last night you had your tongue inside of me, and today you came back from the store and will hardly look at me,” I say, looking down. “So you tell me what's going on.”

“Nothing is going on,” he says.

“Are you lying?” I ask him.

“No!”

He looks genuinely insulted by the accusation.

“Okay, so you’re not lying,” I say. “But...what’s going on? It’s like your energy totally changed since you returned from the store. Did something happen? Are you having second thoughts about us?”

“Hell no! Are you crazy?”

“If I am, it’s because you make me that way. You’re the one who left first, remember? You kissed me and promised you’d be there and you weren’t.”

He shakes his head.

“I know, baby. I know I fucked up. I’m not that guy anymore, and I’ve meant every damn word I’ve said to you. I love you, Katie. I don’t want to lose you. Tell me what’s wrong. What do I need to do to fix this? Tell me and I’ll do it.”

He reaches for me, grabbing me by the belt loops of my jeans and pulling me to him.

The tension in my shoulders melts. Just a little.

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“You can’t switch up your energy like this,” I tell him. “You can’t be hot and cold. Or even hot and lukewarm. Not for a long time. Because I’m still scared this is all a dream. Any second now I’m going to wake up alone in my bed and you’ll be the same old grouchy landlord who tore down my bridge.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he vows. “And I’m going to rebuild that bridge. Just like I’m going to rebuild what I broke between us. I know I’ve acted weird since I got back from the store...I’m not good at keeping secrets, okay?”

“Why would you be keeping a secret?” The tension in my body returns.

“It’s a good secret,” he says. “I’m still not good at keeping things from people, though.”

“This is killing me, Darren.”

“You know I love you?” he continues. “I’ve loved you since the day I saw you, before I even understood how I felt. I was just a boy then and you were my kid sister’s funny little friend always staying over at our house.”

“I know.”

“But I loved you, Katie. I didn’t get it back then. Then we grew up together and I kissed you on your birthday. When my lips touched yours, I had a vision of all that we could be. And it scared the shit out of me because I’d seen my own family fracture at the hands of my father’s mistakes. And I thought, if that’s the best my father can do, how am I supposed to believe I can do better? Maybe I’ll ruin your

life.”

“You wouldn’t do that, Darren.”

“You’re right,” he growls. “I wouldn’t. I know better. I’m the man you need. I’ll protect you and cherish you for the rest of my life if you let me. And that’s why I can hardly look at you, Katie. Because I’ve made up my mind and once I make up my mind about something, I want to take action.”

“By avoiding talking to me?” I ask humorously.

“By doing this.”

He pulls a small box from his pocket and immediately I know what it is. Funnily enough, I’ve never actually seen a ring box in real life. But I’ve watched enough rom coms and Christmas jewelry commercials to recognize it when I see it. It looks comically small in Darren’s oversized hand.

Darren kneels before me.

If this is a dream, it’s the cruelest dream my brain has ever conjured.

“Katie, darlin, firecracker,” he says. “You’ve been my lifelong obsession. My muse in all that I do. My inspiration, the thing that keeps me going. You make me want to be a better man. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to make your life easier. I want to dry your tears and be the reason you smile. I want to have a family with you, grow old with you, everything. From the bottom of my heart, you would make me the luckiest man alive if you said yes.”

“YES!”

If the store were open today then all of my customers would've just heard the loudest, most joyful scream ever.

## EPILOGUE

KATIE

“Ouch.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I assure the seamstress, whose nervous hands seem to be slipping often. I’ve been poked several times with pins. But it doesn’t bother me. I was once a beginner, too.

This dress store is nearly two hours north of Wild Bronco, but it’s the best plus-size wedding dress maker in the country as far as I’m concerned. They’ve got every style, every color, everything you might imagine.

“Why didn’t you ever carry wedding dresses in your store?” Dot asks me curiously.

“Wedding dresses are their whole specialty,” I shake my head. “I like to look at them, but making them? Nah. I’ll stick with the everyday wear and the lingerie.”

“I do like the lingerie,” Dot murmurs.

I nod. Just yesterday, Dot came into my store and practically bought out my entire inventory. Most things for her studio, which is now a boudoir studio exclusively. But I know that several items that she picked out were just for her.

You see, she’s doing her own solo shoot. Self portraits, just for her eyes. It’s such a



good idea, I don't know how it's taken her this long to do it.

"You know," I say. "If you ever do get married, you could give your husband an album full of your sexy pictures."

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She sighs.

“At this rate I’m never getting married. All of the good men in Wild Bronco have been snatched up.”

“Now, that’s not true. William Lewis is still single,” I tease her, referring to her much hated boss.

“Single for a reason! He’s a menace.”

“Maybe if you give him one of your pictures, he’ll go easier on you at work.”

Dot’s eyes widen and I hold back my laughter, carefully avoiding any movement that might cause a pin to stick me again.

Her phone buzzes in her pocket and she glances at the screen.

“Speak of the devil,” she mutters.

She glances at me guiltily.

“Go ahead,” I tell her. “It’s just another fitting. You’re not missing anything important.”

She nods and exits out the door, the phone already held to her ear as she says in a grandiose tone, “Good morrow, Sir William! How may I be of service, Your Grace?”

I shake my head. I know my best friend complains about William being the issue, but sometimes I think it's a mutually hostile relationship, with Dot instigating things just as often as her boss.

The seamstress adds a couple more pins, then steps back.

"Okay," she says. "Look."

I turn to the three way mirror in the corner.

"It's perfect," I declare.

It's not the first time I've seen my dress. This is my final fitting, and after this, the next time I put on this white dress will be on my wedding day. Which is only four days away from now.

It's hard to believe that soon I'll be Katie Baker, wife of Darren Baker. I want to pinch myself, because the last few months have been one long, amazing dream.

In so many ways, nothing has changed. I still live in the apartment above the store. I still work most days a week. Only now, Darren comes by for lunch most days. And then after work on Fridays, he picks me up in his truck and takes me out to dinner.

Sundays are for family dinner with the Bakers. I have a feeling that Darren and Dot are both glad I'm there for support. Things between Mrs. and Mr. Baker are always tense, the result of a divorce that is long overdue but will probably never come. Darren always holds my hand beneath the table, squeezing at several points throughout the night when he especially needs me.

Dot has told me I might be the one thing keeping Darren from getting into a fight with their dad.

I think she was serious.

“Wow. Is there a tablecloth convention I wasn’t aware of?”

I turn and see...Heather.

Of course it’s her. After the bachelorette party, I attended our friend’s wedding with Darren as my plus one. She was nice in front of the bride and others, but when we were alone together for a moment in the bridal suite, she laughed at the way I was doing my hair.

Always something negative to say. And then she saw Darren at the reception and realized we were together. She put on the sweet girl act in front of him, touching his arm and laughing at everything he said as though it was the funniest thing she ever heard.

I know flirting when I see it.

I don’t know why she ever started to hate me. But I know that now? Now she has multiple reasons to hate me. The fact that I’m with Darren and she’s not, must drive her crazy.

“Look at me,” I smile, gesturing down to my dress. “It’s a very pretty tablecloth, don’t you think? And it seems like I won’t be the last in our friend group to get married. That honor is yours.”

Her eyes widen for a moment, then narrow. Meanwhile, I’m congratulating myself for thinking on my feet and coming up with that comeback so easily.

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If only I was this smooth in high school. Would have been able to put a lot of bullies in their place. Luckily, Dot was always close by to help me out back then.

Speaking of Dot, she's walking back in the door now.

"William Lewis is a douchebag!" she groans. "Decaf coffee, though? Why would the intern buy decaf? Does he have a death wish?"

She looks at my face, then spots Heather hovering nearby.

"Oh no," she says. "What the hell do you want?"

"I was walking by and noticed Katie and -"

"And thought you'd take the opportunity to humiliate her on a special day?" Dot snaps, hands on her hips. "Seriously? Don't you have anything better to do with your free time?"

"I just -"

"I don't know why you insist on torturing my friend, here," Dot continues. "I know my brother better than anyone. He was never interested in you. Not even for a moment. No matter how many times you called our house or brought him water during football practice."

I laugh aloud and Heather looks from Dot to me, mouth squinched up like she's just sucked on a lemon.

“Clearly he’s into Katie,” Dot continues. “Who is nothing like you. Thank god. So you never had a chance and you never will. No amount of being mean to Katie is going to do anything about it. Except maybe piss my brother off, because anyone who has a problem with Katie has a problem with Darren, too.”

After Heather is gone, Dot gives me a hug.

“She’s a jealous bitch.”

“I know.”

“You really don’t,” Dot shakes her head. “I always wondered why she hated you so much. Now I realize. It’s because she knew what you meant to my brother. How did she know he was in love with you, but I had no idea?”

“She was attuned to him,” I shrug. “You weren’t. He’s just your big dorky brother, to you. To her, he was everything.”

I know how it feels, because Darren was everything to me in high school, too. My crush on him consumed me. And now as a grown woman, I am still crazy about him.

Even though Heather has always been mean to me, I still find a way to feel some empathy for her.

“She’s horrible,” Dot glares at the door Heather exited through.

“Nobody who is truly happy with themselves would treat another person the way she’s treated me,” I say with a shrug. “Whatever it is that’s causing her to lash out at people like this, I hope she heals from it.”

Dot shakes her head.

“You’re a bigger person than me.”

“What can I say? Being happily settled with my fiancé has changed me.”

“You just wanted an excuse to say ‘my fiancé’, didn’t you?”

“Of course. I only get to say it for four more days!”

I gasp for air, fisting the sheets in my hands. I’m on all fours, staring at Darren’s headboard as an earth-shattering orgasm ripples through my entire body. My second orgasm since I came home from the dress fitting.

His strong hands grip my hips and pull my ass back against him as he slams into me.

This? This is my favorite position. It’s the perfect angle, allowing me to take all of him without it being uncomfortable at all. At just the right angle, the sensations it causes basically melt my brain.

In a good way, obviously.

And ever since Darren learned that this position is my favorite, it’s all that he wants to do. He likes to please me in every way in life, and the bedroom is no different.

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I know what his favorite position is. He likes me on top. The first time we did it in that position, I tried to cover my torso in a blanket. He ripped the blanket off. Said he liked me on top precisely because he could see everything. It took me a while to really believe this, to strip off my clothes without even a hint of insecurity. But I'm here now. Being naked in front of Darren is easy now.

He finishes at nearly the same time as me. We fall into bed together, tired and sated.

"Katie."

"Yeah?"

Darren's hand strokes my lower stomach. I look at him and he's staring thoughtfully at the softness beneath his fingers.

"I want you to have my babies."

I smile.

"I know."

"Soon, though."

"How soon?"

His eyes roam my face.



“How about, starting on our wedding night?”

I raise a brow.

“You want to start trying for a baby in four days?” I ask him, wondering if he didn’t realize how quickly our wedding is coming up.

“I’d start now if you wanted to,” he offers. “But I know you want us to be husband and wife first and I respect it. But yeah. As soon as you say those vows, I want to march you out of the wedding venue and take you on the nearest surface we can find. Unprotected.”

I stare down at his hand on my stomach and imagine it resting on a baby bump instead. Are we ready for that?

Crazy as it seems, I think we are. As ready as anyone ever is for kids, anyway.

“Okay,” I smile. “Let’s start on our wedding night.”

He exhales and I realize Darren was actually nervous to bring this up to me. Nervous, worried I’d say no. This must mean a lot to him. I knew he wanted a family. I wanted one too. Having one this soon isn’t something we’d seriously discussed, but Darren makes me feel safe enough to jump into things without too much overthinking.

What’s that he told me on our first night together? To turn off my brain?

He makes it easier for me to turn off my brain. Or at least, turn it down.

I climb on top of him, straddling his hips as his cock hardens beneath me. His kiss is deep and slow.

I’m exactly where I want to be.