

# GUARDIAN LOVER



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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## CHAPTER 1



*K*atie was exhausted. It was just shy of two a.m., and the bar was almost empty. She looked back over her shoulder, reaching across the table she was currently clearing. Squinting in the dim light of the bar, she read the numbers on the clock that hung beside the saloon style doors swinging open and closed as her friend Brit rushed into the kitchen and back out to the bar, hauling bar glasses back to Manny, the dishwasher.

It had been another long day, and although she had grown accustomed to being on her feet for twelve hours straight, five or six days a week, tonight, Katie was especially worn out. She couldn't explain it, exactly. An hour later, when Jimmy D's was finally closed for the night, she sat leaning back in a booth at the diner across the street —the one with the flashing sign that promised 'we never close'. The bright, fluorescent lights of the diner were making it necessary for Katie to tiredly rub at her eyes —lights so bright that, from the dark street, the diner had the appearance of a giant fishbowl filled with sluggish diners barely moving through the still air of the hot August night. Well, it was either the sharp contrast of moving from the dim light of the bar to the bright light of the diner or the smoke from the cigarette Britt

left burning in the ashtray as she divided the night's tips into two neat piles on the chipped table top. Katie closed her eyes and tilted her head back to rest against the back of the booth as she stretched out her legs to rest on the seat next to her friend.

The two girls were sharing fries. Katie absently reached out to dip her fry into the pile of ketchup Britt had squirted onto a napkin when it became clear that the waitress—in her early forties and more than twice Katie's age—was equally worn out and not bringing the extra side plate they had requested. Katie glanced at her across the diner. She was wiping down the counter with the same weary expression that Katie herself had worn, not long ago, when she was cleaning up after the crowd of rowdy bikers and factory workers that had made Jimmy D's their own. Katie thought of her own mother, also a waitress, and her tired eyes started to involuntarily water.

Katie forced herself to look away. For just a second, she made eye contact with an older man sitting alone at the counter. He looked familiar and, after a minute, Katie realized that she had seen him earlier at the bar. When she caught his eye, he smiled gently and, for some inexplicable reason, she was reminded of one of those forty something, slightly graying fathers who hand out hugs and good advice on weekly sitcoms. Now that she thought about it, he didn't fit in at all with the regular crowd at Jimmy D's. He was handsome, for sure, with dark green eyes, but he looked like an educated management type who would be more at home on the golf course or at the bar of some fancy steakhouse. He did not belong at the end of Jimmy D's time worn bar, sitting next to old drunk Benny or Dave, the pervert who tried to grab at Katie and Britt whenever they passed by him sitting in his regular booth against the wall next to the jukebox.

Katie realized Britt was rambling on again about her boyfriend, Joey, who was easy on the eyes and not a bad guy, but also not the brightest bulb. Britt was saying something about a hockey game and how Joey got tickets from some other guy. Katie couldn't

follow what her friend was saying. After a grueling shift like tonight had been, Katie always felt dazed, like she was moving through a fog. Britt, on the other hand, was like a third grader who had run out of his Ritalin. She was tapping her foot and smoking one cigarette after another while she talked incessantly about nothing. Trying to follow her train of thought was draining Katie of what little energy she had left. She wondered dully if Britt had taken uppers to help get her through the long shift. Katie quickly pushed the thought out of her mind. She knew Britt was a wild child, to say the least, and Joey was no stranger to trouble of all kinds, but they were her only friends in the city and she needed them. Katie was currently sleeping on the couch at Britt's apartment. She had nowhere else to go since her mother had taken off to Florida with a new boyfriend and left Katie behind. Thinking about the trouble that followed Britt and Joey made her stomach twist and Katie tried to push those thoughts to the back of her mind.

Nodding absentmindedly at Britt's monologue, Katie's eyes darted over to the counter where the man from the bar was sitting. He was putting money down for the waitress, and when he stood up to leave, he nodded at Katie and offered another kind smile before he walked out the door.

Later, as Katie tried to find a comfortable position on the scratchy old couch she called home, she thought about that gentle smile and the man who seemed so out of place at the bar. It had been another crazy night. When they arrived back at the apartment, Joey and a bunch of his friends were partying in the living room. When they walked through the door and she saw three tattoo covered guys sitting on her couch/bed passing a bottle of God knows what, Katie wanted to cry. She was so tired and it was clear they weren't moving for a while. She could smell the pot and her stomach clenched again, thinking about what might happen if they got too rowdy and one of the neighbors called the cops.

Once they were finally gone and Britt was passed out with her boyfriend in the bedroom, Katie had time to think. This wasn't

necessarily a good thing for her, because time alone with her thoughts usually made Katie sad and often led to tears. That night, Katie lay on the couch holding Luna, her old black cat. As she stroked the smooth, silky fur, hot tears ran down Katie's face. She brushed them away impatiently, telling herself that she was being ridiculous. She wasn't a little girl anymore. Her mother had said as much when she packed up the contents of their tiny apartment and announced she was moving with her new boyfriend to Florida. Initially, Katie assumed she would be going along, but then her mother gave her the 'you are not a child anymore' speech, and Katie was broadsided with the knowledge that the man of the hour was not interested in supporting the eighteen-year-old daughter of his current girlfriend. She was out of school now, he reasoned. It was time for Katie to grow up and start taking responsibility for herself.

Thinking back, it made Katie laugh bitterly. Time to grow up and take care of herself. The reality was that Katie had been taking care of herself and her mother for most of her life. She hadn't graduated at eighteen, like a normal person. Katie had just stopped going to school at sixteen and her mother never tried to make her go back. Why would she? It was just the two of them and they needed the money Katie brought in waiting tables at the diner where her mother also worked. Of course, her mother never encouraged Katie to finish school; she never finished herself, and she was the one who asked the owner to hire Katie in the first place.

Katie was lonely, and although she was angry at her mother for ditching her, she wondered about her new life in Florida. Deep down, she loved her mother, flawed as she was, and Katie hoped she was happy. Thinking about her father was sure to make her cry again, so instead, Katie tried to picture the man sitting at the end of the counter back at the diner. Remembering the sparkling green eyes and gentle smile, she finally closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

The next day, Katie slept in until almost noon. When she finally

woke up, she took a shower, fed Luna and returned to her home on the couch, where she feasted on Lucky Charms and watched reruns on TV until two o'clock, when it was time for her to head out to work. She needed to be there early to help the bartender set up for the night. Britt didn't come in until four-thirty, when the bar got busy as the first shift workers from the factory down the street started to arrive. After Katie slipped into her faded jeans and the tight, low-cut Jimmy D's t-shirt that helped bring in the tips, she went in to wake Britt. She and Joey were still passed out from the night before, and Katie had to shake her awake and check that she was sitting up to be sure she wouldn't go back to sleep and miss her shift. Britt ditching work would be a disaster, in more ways than one, for Katie. Without her friend, she would be left to handle all the tables at Jimmy D's on her own, which was reason enough for her to make sure Britt was mobile before she left the apartment. Even more concerning, if Britt missed another night of work, Jimmy was threatening to fire her. Without a job, Britt would be unable to pay her rent, which would put them both out on the street. Britt could always stay with Joey or one of his friends if she was desperate, but, if they lost the apartment, Katie would be truly on her own. She tried to put those thoughts out of her head as she walked the five blocks down to Jimmy D's bar on the corner.

An hour later, she was absentmindedly refilling ketchup bottles and making small talk with Dale, the bartender, and some scary looking middle-aged biker guys who were much less threatening than they looked. Katie turned around and found herself face to face with the man from the counter of the diner. She was surprised enough to take a step back, and for some inexplicable reason, Katie could feel her cheeks getting hot.

Thankfully, no one seemed to notice her sudden embarrassment. The man looked Katie right in the eye, which, for some reason, made her squirm as if she had been caught doing something forbidden. That made absolutely no sense at all, being that Katie did not even know this man. "Is the kitchen open, sweetheart?" the

man questioned. Katie felt a flutter in her stomach. The men at Jimmy D's were, for the most part, many years older than Katie, and she had been called the typical endearments—honey, dear, baby. This wasn't the first time someone had called her 'sweetheart', either, but, for some reason, coming from this man, it left her feeling like a little girl staring up at an authority figure. When Katie realized that she was staring at his bright green eyes, she managed to sputter, "Um, yeah, yes, it's open—the kitchen." The man gave her the gentle smile, which brought back the flutter in her tummy but, somehow, still made her feel like everything was okay. He nodded and walked past her toward an open table, slightly brushing against her shoulder as he passed.

A few minutes later, Katie pulled herself together and went over to take his order. By then, she had convinced herself that she was being ridiculous. The cool, detached persona she had perfected was firmly in place as she walked towards his table. He was looking down at the menu as she approached, but just as she arrived at the table ready to ask if he would like a drink, the man looked up and she was staring back at the green eyes. Less confident and sure of herself than she had been a few seconds earlier, Katie once again blushed like a silly little girl when she met his stare. He seemed to recognize her sudden discomfort, and his whole demeanor shifted. He talked to Katie as if she was a shy child or a skittish animal. Instead of her starting the conversation as she would with any other customer, by asking if he would like a drink and if he was ready to order, the man spoke first.

"How are you doing, sweetheart?" he questioned.

"Um, fine, thanks. Can I get you something to drink?"

He ordered a beer, and when Katie returned to his table with the drink, he had decided on a burger and fries. There was something about this man that made Katie want to sit down and spend the rest of the night talking to him. He was handsome, but it was more than that. Katie had just turned twenty that summer and this guy had to be at least forty, maybe older. He had dark brown hair



that was starting to show just a little gray and, of course, the bright green eyes. He was maybe six-feet-tall with a nice build, not overly muscular like someone who spent all his free time at the gym, but fit like a guy who might have played sports when he was younger and probably either worked doing physical labor or kept in shape running or biking or maybe golfing. He did not look especially gentle, but for some inexplicable reason that is the feeling Katie got from this man. A few minutes later, when she delivered the food to his table, Katie quickly discovered that the gentleness the man demonstrated when he talked to her was not something he extended to just anyone.

Katie was putting the plate on his table and she reached across to grab the bottle of ketchup that was sitting on the other side. Out of nowhere, she felt a hand squeeze her butt and she jumped back, startled. Her immediate reaction was to turn and give the grabber a dirty look and then laugh it off. That kind of thing happened often, and the bar was starting to fill up with regulars, which meant it was crowded and getting tight.

Katie was shocked when the man at the table stood and put himself between her and the grabber. He then proceeded to growl at the guy to 'back off'. The bar was noisy by that time and no one else seemed to notice the stand-off going on between Mr. Grabby Hands and Katie's knight in shining armor. The drama was short lived. After a minute of staring each down, the grabber mumbled something under his breath and turned to walk toward the bar.

Katie's self-appointed protector put his hand on her arm and looked down at her with concern written all over his face. "Are you sure you're okay? He didn't hurt you, did he?"

Katie stepped back and laughed nervously, trying to make light of the whole situation. "I'm fine—really. It's no big deal. Guys here do that all the time," she answered.

Green Eyes was not impressed. "It definitely is a big deal," he said. "You need to be careful around men like that." He sat back

down at his table, shaking his head as if he could not believe Katie was not at all disturbed by what had just happened.

Katie felt uncomfortable. She was a pleaser by nature, and she sensed that she had done something to upset this man. She quickly hurried off to take care of her other tables. She brought the man's check and smiled when she set it on his table, but she didn't stick around to make small talk. By that time, the bar was packed and both she and Britt were running from tables to the bar and kitchen with no time to stand around chatting up the drinkers. As the night wore on, Katie felt exhausted but relieved at the same time. She was hard up for money and it had been a good night for tips. Even Grabby Hands had been generous. When Katie bought him a drink to smooth over the earlier scene, it was obvious to both that they were being watched. The guy who was sitting with a skinny friend in a Yankees cap glanced nervously across the room as he handed Katie a ten-dollar bill and said, "I didn't mean no harm before. I didn't know you were with someone."

Katie was surprised by the comment, and she was going to laugh and respond that she and the older man were not together. But then, she did not answer. She just smiled and thanked him for the tip. Katie walked away, letting the man and his friend believe that she belonged to the man with the green eyes who stared back at her from across the crowded bar.