

## THE ONLY BITCH YOU CAN TRUST

The night my brother Jeremy died, I went out looking for a distraction. Maybe that makes me callous, but Lord, I could not just sit in my dorm waiting till daylight to catch a Greyhound back home. My room had taken on a horror film quality after Mama called to tell me about Jeremy so I slipped on jeans and took off on foot into the warm night. After a couple of miles, I hit a dirt road that led to a house in the woods where I'd been to a party once. Not a college party, not a sorority mixer or football kegger. Instead, it'd been locals, people who'd live and die in this small college town without ever stepping foot on campus. Mechanics, cashiers, landscapers. The kind of friends I'd had at home before I got the scholarship.

I walked towards the sound of music until I saw yellow lights blasting from the windows of a one-story shack. It was the kind of house where there was always a party going on so long as you were loose in your definition of the word party. The Salvation Army couches were constantly full of random townies blasting Lynyrd Skynyrd and drinking cheap beer. I'd heard all about it from a girl in my biology group. She had a crush on one of the guys who lived there -a short scrubby guy named Keith - and dragged me with her one night to meet him. He'd had no interest in my friend but at the end of the night, he told me I could come back anytime because I "wasn't like the rest of those stuck up bitches at the University."

And there was Keith now, sitting on the front step drinking a can of Miller Genuine Draft. He noticed me coming down the road and his expression darkened to something ugly under the porch light. I waved and called out "Hey Keith" to let him know I was a friend and he waived back dumbly, still not sure who I was but wanting to

look like he did. As I drew closer, his scowl broke into a relieved smile.

“Hey there, girl,” he said and I knew he recognized me but didn’t remember my name. “What are you doing out here?”

How to tell him I was there to do whatever I could to keep my mind off Jeremy lying ice cold in the Wakulla county morgue? I brushed my limp hair out of my eyes and said, “Nothing. Looking to see what you all were doing.”

He shook his head heavily. “It’s a bad night, girl. Bad things happening. It’s gonna be a sad party this evening.”

“Don’t listen to him,” said a tall guy coming from the house onto the porch. “He just got dumped and it’s ruining his perspective.” He stopped behind Keith’s crumpled body and nudged Keith with his knee. “Snap out of it, man.”

“I’m Jenny,” I said to the newcomer, more for Keith’s benefit than anything else.

“Jenny,” Keith exclaimed, snapping his fingers as if he’d remembered my name all on his own. “That’s right. This is Troy.” Keith waived in the tall guy’s direction.

“Looks like you could use a beer,” Troy said, as if he knew the reason I was there was to drink myself sick so I could be miserable about something other than my brother. I said some version of yes and the three of us went inside. Keith installed himself on a couch and spent the next several hours ranting about his ex girlfriend to anyone who made the mistake of sitting next to him. His dog, a German shepherd mix, stayed at his feet, picking up its head only when Keith got up to get another beer.

I submerged myself in the strangers and the loud music and the beer. For a while, I lost the mental image of Jeremy’s broken body on a cold stainless table. But too soon I crossed over from friendly buzz into dreaded melancholy and I found my mind

wandering back to my mother's voice on the phone. Those particular words she used. *We've had a tragedy.* I stumbled over to Keith and landed on the sofa.

He looked at me and squinted one eye like he was deep in thought. Then he broke out into a smile. "Jenny!" he said, pointing at me.

"I like your dog," I said lamely.

"Yeah," he agreed. "She's a good girl. My K.D."

"Come here, Katie," I said.

"No, no, no," Keith said struggling to sit up. "Not Katie. K. D."

"Oh sorry. What does K.D. stand for?"

"Keith's Dog. And believe me, she is. That dog is my only friend. And the only bitch in the world I can trust."

"You have a lot of friends," I said gesturing around the room. "Everyone here loves you." I slurred on the L in love.

Keith waived dismissively at the room.

"They do," I insisted.

"Did they tell you that? Listen. Never believe anyone when they say they love you. Especially a bitch. When a bitch says I love you, what she's really saying is give me some money." He considered me. "You be careful Jenny. When a guy tells you he loves you, what he's really saying is I want to fuck you. I don't want to see you get fucked. You are a good girl."

I couldn't deny it. I'd been good a good girl my whole life, spending my days and nights studying, reading everything I could get my hands on in our tired local library, skipping grades, all the while taking care of Momma, making dinner and doing laundry

for her and Jeremy. I'd been such a good girl that I'd graduated high school early and was now in my last semester of college on my way to med school in the fall. None of it made me happy.

Meanwhile, my brother Jeremy was (had been) inexplicably happy. Up until this afternoon, he'd made his living by racing cars he fixed up himself and breeding teacup pigs in the backyard of our childhood home where he still stayed with Momma when he wasn't living with whatever girl he was seeing. He sold the pigs to rich ladies for more than what he paid for his cars. His car-

"Poor Keith," interrupted Troy, joining us by sitting on the coffee table in front of the couch. "He had a bad day."

"I did, man. I did."

"What happened?" I asked both of them.

"Claire dumped him." Troy said. As if I knew who Claire was.

"She didn't either. I left that bitch."

Troy laughed. "But only cause you found out she'd moved in with a chick."

Keith checked to see if anyone had overheard. "Keep that shit down, man."

"Don't worry. Nobody knows she went all lesbo on you," Troy said.

"She did not. Shut up. Just shut up. She moved in with that bitch for the money. She's no god damn dyke." He said this last part to me. "She's not," he said again.

"Of course she isn't," I said, having no idea what I was talking about.

"You need another beer," Troy told Keith. "You too," he said gesturing to me.

"Come on." He pulled me to my feet and told Keith we'd be right back.

"Man," Troy said once we'd reached the safety of the fake wood paneled kitchen

walls. “That boy is cra-zy.”

“He’s just upset,” I said. Keith suddenly seemed very dear to me - my host who offered me a haven from the world flipped upside down in the course of a five-minute phone call with my mother. “Haven’t you ever been dumped?”

“Do I look like I’ve ever been dumped?” asked Troy. I took a good look at him and felt my cheeks go hot. Laughing at my sudden speechlessness, Troy led me down the hall to an empty bedroom and closed the door behind us. I suddenly became uncomfortably aware of my own smallness, my skim milk skin stretched across my ironing board frame body.

“I’m not sure,” I said.

He barely nodded his head before pulling the string on the swinging ceiling fan to turn off the overhead light. I felt his hands on my face and his teeth as they sunk into my neck. I stayed underneath him the entire time we had sex, hoping the weight of him would keep me tethered to the spinning ground.

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There were only about five stragglers left. Keith and I sat on the couch talking about cartoons we’d liked as kids. Troy was nowhere in sight.

“Hong Kong Phooey kicked ass,” Keith said. “Made Buggs look like a retard.”

“No,” I said. “Huckleberry Hound. No wait. Captain Caveman.”

On Saturday mornings, Jeremy and I used to sit right in front of the television eating Count Chocula right from the box, raking our grubby hands through the brown pebbles, getting as many on the carpet as we got in our mouths. Mama slept in and there was no one to make us change out of our pajamas or bathe or eat with a spoon.

While Keith pontificated over the wisdom of Woody Woodpecker, the last guests disappeared into cars. Keith didn't seem concerned that it was four in the morning and I was still there. I figured eventually I'd be left to fall asleep on the couch. And that might have happened if in that moment a shirtless Troy hadn't stumbled out of the bedroom half asleep but ready to move onto the next thing.

"I'm hungry," he said scratching his chest. "Who wants Jack in the Box?"

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I sat in the middle of the pickup's bench seat between Troy and Keith. K.D. had wanted to come but there was no room in the cab and the bed of the truck was filled with old tires and two by fours so she stayed behind on the porch like a good dog. Troy and Keith were arguing over the NCAA polls, which put Oklahoma ahead of Florida that year. I had no idea what they were talking about but no one appeared to expect me to, so I just sat there dumb. Keith took a pull from a fifth of Johnny Walker and handed it to me. My head pounded but I doubted a little more could hurt so I took the bottle and thanked him. When we got through the drive-up window, Troy parked the car in the empty lot and handed out the burgers. Without my realizing it, he'd gotten one for me along with a Coke.

"I don't have any money," I told him awkwardly.

"Hey, I'm a gentleman. You think I want your three bucks?"

"Remember," Keith said, "if he says he loves you, he just wants to fuck you."

"For your information," Troy said, leaning around me, "I already fucked her."

I looked down at my hamburger bloody with ketchup.

"Well in that case," Keith said, "I love you too Jenny." He put his hand on my

leg and squeezed my knee.

“Hands off,” said Troy putting his arm around me protectively. “You’re giving up bitches, remember?”

For a second I thought I’d be split in two between them.

“Oh yeah,” said Keith retrieving his hand.

I took a deep breath. Everything went back to normal. Sort of.

“Seriously man. What happened with Claire? I mean she’s been around forever. And now she’s just like gone.”

“It was that job doing hair for dogs,” Keith said over my head to Troy. “Grooming or whatever. She got that job at... what’s the stupid friggin name? Groomingdales. Can you believe that? Groomingdales? I should have known that the owner was going to be some rich bitch.” Keith took another drink of whiskey. “Claire’s been acting different ever since she started working there. Suddenly, she can’t stop talking about her boss. Brenda.” He raised the pitch of his voice. “Brenda is so nice. Brenda is so smart. Brenda says I am the best groomer she has at any of her stores. Brenda has six pure white Maltese puppies.’ Oh my God. She was like a broken record about Brenda. The shit I had to listen to.”

Troy offered me one of his fries, which I took quietly. I was tiny but I could eat as much as any guy.

“So then I’m like, I want to meet this Brenda, and Claire’s all backtracking like well, she’s really busy, she’s not always at the store, always some bullshit story. But one day I go to pick her up and there’s Brenda with her perfect hair and her Chrysler Town Car with the backseat filled with thousand dollar dogs, and I get it. Claire’s embarrassed

for Brenda to meet *me*. Well, all right, fine. I don't give a fuck."

Something in Keith's voice reminded me of the last time I'd seen Jeremy - two months earlier. He'd driven over unexpectedly from our tiny town and shown up at my dorm, his hands stained with motor oil, his torn denim jacket with a painting of the Dark Side of the Moon album cover on the back. Unshaven, chewing tobacco, talking too damn loud. I stammered an excuse about having to run to class, being busy with a project, anything to get him out of the line of sight of my new friends. I didn't fool him; he knew exactly what I was thinking, how embarrassed I was. I saw it in the way he raised his chin.

I should have been happy to see him. I should have been thrilled that he smelled like diesel and not vodka, that he'd been sober enough to want to surprise me in the middle of a Tuesday. I wanted to tear my own hair out remembering it. Instead, I sat on my hands between the two boys and continued to listen to Keith's story.

"Then a month ago, Claire's all excited because Brenda's going to Atlanta for a week and wants Claire to housesit and take care of her six perfect dogs while she's gone. Says she'll pay Claire three hundred bucks so long as Claire promises to stay there every night and not have any visitors. So the first night I drive all the way out there to the house with its locked metal gate and fake marble columns and I hit the radio and say, Claire, it's me. Let me in. And she's all 'I can't let you in. Brenda said no visitors.' And I think she's kidding but then she hangs up and some jerkoff on a golf cart - a friggin golf cart, man - drives by and he's all 'Are you supposed to be here, sir?' Can you believe that? The guy in the golf cart called me *sir*."

"Then a couple of days later I feel bad so I drive out there and I'm about to ring



the radio buzzer at the gate when I see them. Right there in the front window, making their own private porno. That dyke was all over her. And Claire was just taking it. So I called Claire yesterday and say, ‘this ain’t right.’ And it ain’t right either. I says, ‘you come live with me if you need a place to live, not that lezzie.’ And then she says, ‘I can live where I want.’ And I say, ‘if you stay there, it’s over.’ And she’s still up there so I guess it’s over.”

I waited to see what Troy would say so I would know what I was supposed to do. But he just sat there, silent, looking straight ahead. I put my hand on Keith’s shoulder and said, “I’m sorry, Keith.” He just shrugged off my hand and said fuck it. Troy threw the truck in reverse, grinding the gears in the process and peeled out into the mist.

We ended up in front of a tacky house that probably advertised itself as Tuscan. Although newer, the house wasn’t large or impressive and the gate seemed like overkill, a manifestation of Brenda’s illusions of grandeur over her successful dog grooming chain.

“We should break in, man,” Keith said. “I should go in there right now and teach both of them a lesson.” He opened the glove box and rummaged through it. Not finding anything useful, he slammed it shut. “I could talk to her.” He said this softly. “I could remind her. Three years is a long time.”

I had visions of the police arriving, of having to call my mother and tell her I wasn’t going to make it to Jeremy’s funeral because I was in jail.

“Hey, cool down,” said Troy. Then he said, “I got an idea” and he got out of the cab of the truck and reached into the bed, pulling out a neon green plastic bottle. He walked around to the passenger window and rapped on it, all the while wearing a lopsided grin. “Come on,” he said to Keith.

I stayed in the car and watched them walk up to the gate and test it. It was locked. They conferred and then Troy walked back to the truck and opened the door.

“Need your help, darlin,” he said taking my hand.

“I’d rather not,” I said.

“I’m not looking for your permission. Get out of the truck.”

I followed him to the gate.

“We’re gonna hoist you over. There’s a keypad over there. It should have a button you can press that will open the gate from the inside.”

“I can’t,” I said.

“You can. And you will,” said Troy.

“What about the guy on the golf cart?” I said, stalling.

“It’s five in the morning. Ain’t no guy coming on a golf cart.” Keith put his hands together like a stirrup and Troy grabbed my waist and pushed me up and over.

“Good girl,” said Troy. “Now go open the gate.”

It seemed a long second that I stood there with that iron gate between us. As they came closer, I saw that the green container was a bottle of antifreeze. Ethylene glycol. But for whom?

“Jenny, you open that gate,” said Troy. “This will just take a minute. We’re not going into the house. Just open the gate and then I’ll take you home.”

Home. Where was that without Jeremy? My brave crazy brother.

“For god’s sake, girl, opening the fucking gate before I climb over and poor this shit down your throat.”

My mind shut down and I walked towards the keypad, hoping that it would

require a code, which would thwart the whole plan. But no. It was a cheap system. A single red button controlled the whole operation. I pushed the knob.

The opening of the gate had woken the dogs and they came bounding out of their dog door like four yapping clouds of fur. Troy dropped on the grass and started playing with them, quieting their yaps with soft slaps and laughing growls. He opened up the bottle and let the snowy bichons smell it. It must have smelled good because they knocked over each other to get to it.

“Jenny, Keith, come here,” said Troy, not taking his eyes or hands off the dogs and using the same playful tone he had to calm them down.

I stood rooted to my spot until Keith came up and grabbed me by my elbow. “Come on,” he said.

“Kneel down. Nice and slow. Good. Now cup your hands together.”

Keith, who knew the plan, put his hands together immediately like he was about to receive a sacrament. I watched stone still as Troy poured the antifreeze into Keith’s makeshift human hand bowl and the dogs lapping it up.

“Come on, Jenny,” said Keith.

I watched as those pitiful dogs lapped up the syrupy liquid gratefully. When there was none left in Keith’s hands, they licked his fingers and palms until more magically appeared. It took a few minutes to make sure each had gotten enough. By the time it was done, Keith was crying, cradling the dogs one by one, calling them stupid little bitches.

Troy and I helped him back to the car. We left the gate open and I suppose the dogs could have walked out right after us. Either way, it didn’t matter. They were already dead and just didn’t know it yet.