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99 PERCENT MINE

A Novel 

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*USA Today Bestselling
Author of
THE HATING GAME*

P.S.
INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

Chapter 1

Nobody taught me this when I first started as a bartender, but luckily, I was a quick learner: When a group of men are walking in, you should work out which one is the alpha.

If you can handle him, you might get a bit of respect from the rest. Tonight, I can pick him straightaway. He's the tallest and best looking, with a *you're welcome* gleam in his eye. How predictable.

He and his friends have spilled out of a local frat party, bored and wanting adventure. They're all wearing pastel polo shirts. Well, buckle up, buttercups. If you play your cards right, things could get downright exhilarating. Devil's End Bar is not for the faint of heart. I see some of the bikers exchange amused looks over the pool tables. By the door, our security guy is sitting up straighter. Weird how we have the most trouble when this type of boy walks in.

I don't smile at the alpha. "Are you lost, kids?"

“Hey there, mister,” he responds—a jab at my short haircut—and his friends laugh and intone, “*Ohhhh shit.*”

My name is Darcy and he’s unknowingly made a Jane Austen joke. I doubt he’d get it. The laugh fades out of him a little as I narrow my eyes and stare harder. Alpha Boy remembers I have full control of the alcohol. “But seriously, it looks hot on you.”

My colleague Holly is backing away. She’s too new at this, and she’s feeling their eyes. “I’m just going to get more . . . register rolls.” She vanishes out back in a puff of gardenia body spray.

I’m still holding my hard stare with the alpha and I get a ping of triumph in my gut when he looks away first. I’m the alpha now. “We must go to the same barber, because you’re looking real pretty too. Now, order something or get out.”

The boss boy is not used to this from a woman and to his surprise he likes it. He chews gum in an openmouthed way, his avid eyes on my face. “What time do you get off work?”

I imagine a Ken doll left out in the sun too long, and I step on that soft tan head like it’s a cigarette. “Not for a million years.”

He’s visibly miffed. After all, being good-looking is his life’s backstage pass. Shouldn’t it work on me? Am I broken? The light hits his face in a shadowless beige pan of color, and he’s nothing that could interest me. I’m a face snob. It’s all about the shadows.

“What do you want?” I’m already gathering shot glasses.

“Sambuca shots,” one guy shouts. Naturally. The elixir of

morons.

I pour a row and take payments, and the tip jar gets fuller. They love being treated like dirt. These boys want the full biker-bar safari experience, and I am their tour guide. Their leader continues to flirt with me, determined to wear me down, but I walk away midsentence.

It's Sunday night, but the people in here aren't worried about being rested for work tomorrow.

My grandmother Loretta said once that if you know how to pour a drink into a glass, you can get a job anywhere. She was a bartender in her twenties, too. It was good advice; I've poured drinks into glasses all over the world, and I've dealt with every possible variant of alpha male.

I wonder what Loretta would say if she could see me now, pouring this beer with an insult preloaded on my tongue. She'd laugh and clap and say, *We could have been twins, Darcy Barrett*, because she was always saying that. There was a slideshow of photographs at her funeral, and I could feel the sideways glances at me.

Twins. No kidding. Now I'm sleeping in her bedroom and finishing off her canned goods. If I start carrying crystals in my purse and reading tarot cards, I will officially be her reincarnation.

Holly must be picking up those register rolls from the factory. One of the leather-jacket bikers has been waiting too long, and he's looking sideways at the Pastels. I nod to him and hold up my finger—*One minute*. He grizzles and huffs but decides against causing grievous bodily harm.

“Are those leather pants?” A Pastel boy leans over the bar, looking at my lower half. “You’re like Bad Sandy from *Grease*.” His eyes focus on the fake name tag I’ve pinned above my boob. “Joan.” His skeptical eyes slide lower. I guess I don’t look like a Joan.

“I’m obviously Rizzo, you idiot. And if you don’t quit leaning over like that looking at my tits, Keith is gonna come over. That’s him, by the door. He’s six foot ten and he’s bored.”

I twinkle my fingers in a wave to Keith and he copies the wave back from his stool.

“He’s bored, I’m bored, and the Leather Jackets are very, very bored.” I move along the bar, handing out glasses, taking payment, bumping the till drawer closed with my hip over and over.

“Joan’s right. We’re very bored,” one of the younger bikers says in a droll tone. He’s been leaning against the bar, watching the exchange with interest. The Pastels all flinch and stare at their phones. The biker and I grin at each other and I slide over a beer on the house.

I’m sick of their huddling. “Sambuca will shrink your nuts. Oh wait, too late. Now, go fuck off.” They do.

Holly’s big eyes peep around the door when the dust has settled. There is nothing in her hands. She’s all legs and elbows, and she was hired by our boss, Anthony, without being asked a single interview question. Faces like hers are very hireable. She can’t count change, pour drinks, or deal with men.

"I'm always so relieved when I see we're rostered on together." Holly sits on the bench and exhales long and loud, like she's been working hard. Her name tag says "HOLLY" and she added a pink glitter heart sticker. "I feel safer whenever I'm with you. I bet you're even looking out for Keith."

"That's true, I am." I catch Keith's eye and he tips his chin up in acknowledgment, leaning back against the wall on his stool. Another bartender tip? Make friends with security. I get these guys drunk, and Keith keeps the lid on this place. It occurs to me that I should be giving Holly these pearls of wisdom. But I don't want her sticking with this job longer than necessary. "When I quit, you're going to have to get tougher."

Holly purses her lips. "How much longer are you here?"

"The renovation on my grandma's place starts in two months, unless it gets pushed back again. And then I am outta here." Holly's glitter sticker stresses me out. "I'd never put my real name on my chest in this place."

She tips her head to the side. She'd be a great bridal model, in a full white cupcake gown and tiara. "I never thought of making a fake one. Who could I be?"

If my old pal the label maker has any clear sticky roll left inside it, it'll be a stone-cold miracle. Anthony's care factor about employee turnover is summed up by this bulk pack of name tags. There are about a hundred more to go before he needs to give it any thought.

"You'd be a great Doris."

Holly's nose wrinkles. "That's so old-lady."

“You want a sexy fake name? Come on, Hol.” I crank out a label and assemble the tag. When I give it to her, she’s silent for a while.

“You think I’m a Bertha?”

“Definitely.” I serve a few more customers.

“I’m more of a Gwendolyn. Or a Violet?” Dutifully, she pins it on anyway.

I make her hand over her old tag and I throw it in the trash. Maybe I can relax a fraction on my shifts if she continues this trajectory.

“One day you’ll be Dr. Bertha Sinclair, counseling depressed parrots, and tucked up in bed every single night at nine p.m.” I sound like an overprotective sister so I tack on, “Or you might be a vet in the South American jungle, helping the macaws learn to love again.”

She tucks her hands in her tight pockets and grins. “We honestly do more than parrots at vet school. I keep telling you.”

“Hey, babe,” a guy says to Holly. Bad boys love good girls.

“If you say so,” I say to her. To him, I say, “Fuck off.”

She keeps playing our game. “I bet that when I’m performing a diagnostic laparoscopy on an old tabby, you’ll be in the South American jungle, with your big backpack on, hacking through the vines.” She makes a chopping motion.

“I’ve actually done that in the Andes,” I admit, trying to not sound like I’m boasting. Nothing worse than a smug world traveler. “Boy, I could use a bush machete right about now.” I look across the room at our clientele.

“I looked through your Instagram a bit. I lost count of how many countries you’ve been to.”

“I misplaced my passport, otherwise I could count the stamps for you.” I begin gathering up dirty glasses. I mentally scan the floor plan of the cottage again. Loretta’s ghost is possibly messing with me. Either that, or my brother, Jamie, hid it.

Just the thought of Holly’s pretty eyes looking at my old life is giving me the privacy prickles. Imagine my exes scrolling through it. Curious one-night stands. Old photography clients. Or worse, Jamie. I need to make that account private. Or delete it.

“And there were photos of you and your brother. I can’t believe how much you guys look alike. He’s so good-looking. He could be a model.” Those last bits were said in an involuntary blurt. I’ve heard it many times before.

“He tried it once. He didn’t like being told what to do. Anyway, thanks. That’s a compliment for me, too,” I say, but she doesn’t get it.

Jamie and I look alike because we’re twins. There’s a twin ranking, and we’re at the bottom. A boy and a girl. We can’t even dress the same and swap places. Fraternal, what a yawn.

But if we reveal our twin status, we are fascinating to some people. They always ask, who was born first? Can we hear each other’s thoughts? Feel each other’s pain? I pinch myself hard on the leg. I hope he’s yelping in a fancy downtown bar, spilling his drink.

If he’s handsome, I should be good-looking in theory too,

but I've been called *Jamie in a wig* in school too many times to believe it. If you lined us up side by side, with my face washed clean, I'd be mistaken for his little brother. I know this because it's happened.

"Where will you go to first?" Holly is definitely the kind of girl who would wear a beret on a cobblestone street. A baguette in her bicycle's basket.

"I'm going to bury all of my name tags in a Japanese death forest called Aokigahara. Only then will my soul be free of Devil's End Bar."

"So, not Paris," she says, toeing a mark on the floor with her white sneaker, and I nearly laugh at how right I was. I lean a mop against her leg but she just holds it in both hands, resting the pole against her cheek, like someone in a musical about to break into song. "Why do you travel so much?"

"I've been told I have impulse control problems." I pull a face.

She's still thinking about what she's snooped. "You were a wedding photographer. How?" She looks me up and down.

"It's pretty easy. You find the lady wearing a white dress and go like this." I hold up an invisible camera and press my finger down.

"No, I mean, weren't you always traveling?"

"I worked the wedding season and lived here with my grandma. I traveled the rest of the year." *Shoestring budget* would be an understatement, but I maintained this arrangement for six years. "I work in bars when I need cash. I do some travel photography, but it doesn't sell too well."

“Well, no offense—”

“This is usually the part where someone says something offensive,” I cut in, and am saved by one of the old biker guys, blue tattoos bruising his forearms and a brown stain in his beard. He’s the physical embodiment of repugnant, but he says nothing as I pour his drink, so I smile at him as a reward. He looks disturbed.

When he’s gone I go to the bathroom and politely smile at myself in the mirror. I look like I haven’t tried that in a while. My reflection looks like Shark Week.

Holly is good at pressing pause on her thoughts. I mess around with my hair, put on more eyeliner, wash my hands for ages, and still when I return she continues seamlessly, “But you don’t seem to fit into the wedding scene.”

“Why ever not, Bertha?” I’ve gotten this comment from countless drunk dudes at wedding receptions, jostling around by my elbow while I’m trying to get the first-dance shots.

Holly says, “Weddings are romantic. And you aren’t romantic.”

“I don’t have to be romantic, I just have to know what the client thinks is romantic.” I shouldn’t be offended, but I kick a cardboard box straight under the counter and glare out at the unwashed masses.

There’s a couple making out right now on the back wall by the bathrooms. The humping swivel of his hips makes me want to barf. But every now and then, when they come up for air and their lips break apart? His hand is in her hair and

they look at each other. That's when I'd click. I could make even those assholes look beautiful.

Then I'd turn on the fire hose and spray them out of here.

"So, no romance with that guy Vince?" Holly asks like she already knows the answer. When she first saw him slinking in here, she said, *He's not a nice boy, Darcy*. I replied, *He has a tongue stud, so part of him is pretty nice*. She was open-mouth speechless.

I review the stock levels in the fridge closest to me. "I've got a sonnet in my back pocket. When I see him next, I'll read it to him."

"But you're not in love."

I laugh in response to that. I've given up on feeling anything with a man.

"He's a way to kill time. I've been here a lot longer than I was planning to." Please don't ask the follow-up question, *Have you ever been in love?* "Hmm, okay, I guess I'm unromantic."

"Why'd you quit weddings?"

That word *quit* is a sore point, and Holly sees it in my eyes. She looks down and fiddles with her Bertha tag. "Sorry. Your website said you're closed for bookings indefinitely. And you do product photography now. What's that?"

"Why don't you Google it, Bertha?" I try to make it a joke but I'm angry. Why does she constantly try to be friends like this? Doesn't she get I'm leaving?

I am deleting that entire website.

"You never tell me anything properly," she protests in a

weak voice. “You’re never serious.” Her beautiful face is all pink and smushed up with concern. I go to the far end of the bar and turn my back on her. I take down the beer glass containing my name tags. I’m sick of being Joan. I decide to be Lorraine for the rest of the shift.

I’m sick of being Darcy.

“I’m sorry,” Holly says again in a small voice.

I shrug and drag around bottles of vodka in the end fridge. “It’s okay. I’m just . . .” *Trapped, without a passport or a booked plane ticket. Living my nightmare.* “A bitch. Don’t mind me.”

Out the corner of my eye, the light catches in a bottle of whiskey, giving it a gold glint. I feel a twinge low down in my stomach and I exhale until I have nothing left inside. I’ve had a chronic case of the heavy sad sighs lately, especially when I think about weddings. Which I refuse to do.

I ran my own business for years, and I feel like I have X-ray vision for things that are going to become a major problem. Holly still hasn’t been given any payroll forms. Stock levels are alarmingly low. Maybe alcohol is not Anthony’s main source of income. I go to the back office and write on a Post-it: *Anthony—do you want me to do a stock order? —D*

For a tough bitch, I’ve got embarrassingly girly handwriting. I sure don’t see the guys on the daytime shift writing conscientious notes for the boss. I scrunch it up.

When I come back out and begin to count cash in the till, Holly tries again, rewinding to the part before she blew it. “I don’t think Vince is the guy for you, anyway. I think you

need one of them.” She means the Leather Jackets.

I keep counting cash. Five hundred, five fifty. That’s interesting, coming from her. She’s petrified of them. If a glass breaks, it’s me trudging out with a dustpan and broom. “Why do you think that?”

Holly shrugs. “You need someone even tougher than you. What about him? He looks at you all the time, and he always makes sure you serve him.”

I can’t be bothered even looking up from the register to see which one she means. Six hundred, six fifty. “I’d rather die alone than end up with one of these assholes.”

The same young Leather Jacket who helped me scare the college boys is weaving back to us. Free beer obviously goes down easy.

“Thirsty boy tonight,” I say, and pour his usual whiskey this time.

“Very,” he says in a way that sounds sexual, but when I look at his face, he’s serene. “Bored and thirsty, that is.”

“Well, that’s why you’re here. Now, if you’re gonna beat up those kids later, do it in the parking lot, please.”

His crystal-blue eyes flick to my name tag. “No problem. See you around, Lorraine.” He pays, tips me, and walks away.

“That’s the one that loves you,” Holly says, far too loud.