

I'LL BE THERE

I remember the day I wanted Aunt DeeDee dead.

Of course, I felt rotten right away. I mean, I thought I'd forgiven her long ago for outgrowing me, and I'd begun admiring her again, even if we weren't the great buds we once were. But there was still a little resentment left over, and it came out, God help me.

DeeDee was my favorite babysitter when I was little. Her name was really Deirdre, but what little kid can say *that*? I loved DeeDee. She never treated me like I was almost ten years younger. My Barbie dolls were just as real to her as they were to me, her interest in Mariah Carey and Boyz II Men seemed just as sincere as mine, and she even let me help her take care of her horse for the 4-H county fair. When I was eight and my mom – her oldest sister – died, DeeDee crawled into the little closet under the stairwell with me and we cried together until we couldn't cry any more. My mom used to sing the chorus to Mariah's "I'll Be There" to me the last thing at night before I went to sleep; she must've told DeeDee about that, because I remember falling asleep under the stairwell in DeeDee's arms while she sang, over and over, "I'll be there, I'll be there, just call my name, and I'll be there...."

I thought DeeDee would be with me forever. Then I turned nine, and she abandoned me to go to college. I hid my resentment from her pretty well, but I think it was the first time I ever really lied to her. And she did try to keep things the same between us. She spent as much time with me as she could when she came home, and I spent at least two or three weekends each year visiting her.

I remember one visit, not too long after DeeDee had gotten her own apartment off campus. We were dressing up so she could take me out to dinner, and she told me to look through her jewelry box for a necklace. She came into the room to find me staring at a delicate gold chain bearing a dove carved from moonstone. I was crying. I told her that it was my mom's favorite necklace, but I didn't tell her that it had been my favorite, too, and that I had often wondered what had happened to it after she'd died. DeeDee told me that it had originally belonged to their grandmother, and that their own mother had passed it to them. I nodded as if I understood, but somehow I felt that DeeDee had stolen the necklace from my mom and me. I never mentioned it again, and she never wore it when I was around. I think she could sense how much it hurt me. After a while, the hurt almost vanished, but I don't think I ever truly forgave her.

About the time she graduated, I started noticing boys. I was in junior high, and was starting to think more about myself – how I looked, what my talents were, that sort of thing – so whenever DeeDee came home to visit, I couldn't help comparing myself to her. Guess who came up lacking. She was everything I wanted to be and wasn't – brilliant, beautiful, athletic, artistic. It wasn't so bad most of the time. She would swirl into town for a holiday or a summer, and I could have fun with her, knowing that she would be gone again in a few hours or days or weeks.

Then I started high school, and she came back to town as Miss Dee Hamilton, teacher, and I had to look forward to being compared to her all week. Every week.

I was surprised when it wasn't as bad as I expected. I didn't really see her all that often, and when I did run into her in the hall, she was always nice to me, even if I didn't always act like I was glad to see her. I figured that by the time I got to my senior year, they'd hire another senior English Composition teacher, but Red Creek High School wasn't that big. Dee Hamilton was the only one they needed, which meant that unless I wanted to give up my dream of being a writer, I would have to see her every day. It also meant that every day would present a fresh opportunity for everyone to compare us.

Red Creek is a small town. Everyone knew we were related, but you wouldn't know it by looking at us. And the boys looked – often. At least, they looked at *her*. I really couldn't blame them. The women on my mom's side of the family are all model-pretty and model-busty. I take after my dad's side. Their women are all "petite" and "wholesome", as they like to put it. Okay, so I'm not ugly, but I don't have DeeDee's high cheekbones, pouty mouth and startled doe eyes, and my hair won't commit to either blonde or brown and can't even have a curl forced into it, while DeeDee's long, thick, naturally curling hair has the color and shine of her favorite chestnut stallion. And her body? Even if she'd worn over-sized, shapeless sweatshirts – which she never did – the boys probably still couldn't tell you what color her eyes were. My best friend, Teri, kept telling me I was just a "late bloomer", but compared to Aunt DeeDee – or even to Teri – I sometimes felt that, at seventeen, I wasn't even budding yet.

So when I suddenly found myself with a boyfriend just a month into summer vacation after my junior year, I was ready to hire a brass band, send up fireworks, and hold a press conference. Bryce and I had grown up together in the same small church, and he was always teasing me, so when he asked me out one night after our youth group meeting, I thought he was joking. He'd grown into one of the hottest guys in town, a terrific athlete, and all the most popular girls always wanted to go out with him. He seemed to have a new girlfriend every week, so I ragged him about finally getting around to me. Then I looked into his eyes, and realized he was serious. I swallowed, hard, and said, "Yes".

I think I touched heaven that summer. Everything was so right. Bryce was every bit as sweet as he was handsome. He spent at least four nights of the week at our house, and we spent almost every minute together when he wasn't working on his parents' farm. It took a lot of conversations down by the creek, but he finally convinced me that he really did want to be with me, and that I was worth loving. Yes, he said loving! I lived for three days on that one word alone. It also scared me, at least a little, because as soon as he said it, I began to be afraid of what he might expect of me. But by the end of summer, the only thing he'd asked was if he could kiss me.

I went into my final year of high school with more confidence than I'd ever had. I was even able to walk into Dee Hamilton's senior English Comp class with my head high. I set my books on a desk in the back half of the room and was about to sit down when a pair of strong hands grabbed my waist from behind.

"Hi, babe!"

I turned my head, startled, and Bryce kissed me on the cheek.

"What -?" I blinked up at him. "What are you doing here?"

"I decided to take English Comp."

"Why? You told me English gave you hives!"

"I know," he grinned, "but I wanted to be with you, and this is the only class that fit into my schedule."

Now I was totally confused. "But you had to sign up last year!"

"I know." He took the desk next to mine. We sat down, and he leaned toward me so he could talk quietly. "I got a confession. I wanted to ask you out all last year, but I could never get you alone. So I decided I'd take a class with you. Then this summer happened, so"

I shook my head, and smiled. "Well, you can drop it now, if you want, since you've already got me."

"Nope," he replied firmly. "This is my only chance to have a class with you. I'm not going to lose it!"

The bell rang, so I just reached over and squeezed his hand. Then I turned my attention to the front of the room, where Aunt DeeDee was smiling, and my heart skipped a beat. For a moment, I wondered if Bryce had really signed up for English Comp so he could take a class with Miss Dee Hamilton. He wouldn't have been the first. Everyone had noticed a slight but significant increase in the male population of the class since she'd taken it over. But then she winked at me, as if to say she approved of my choice, and I relaxed. Maybe things were going to turn out all right after all!