

Playing Her Secret Crush by Casey Griffin

CHAPTER ONE

Fairy_gurl hovered before the enemy, her iridescent wings beating in a blur. She nocked another arrow and murmured the words to a spell that would ensure it hit its mark: the fierce red dragon the size of a Wal-Mart. The tip began glowing with her power. She held her breath and let it fly. It hit, all right, but it ricocheted off the beast's scales, clanging with failure. This baddie was going to be as tough as calculus.

In response to her pathetic attack, the dragon snorted, almost laughing at her like she was a mere orchard gnome. A cloud of smoke puffed out its nostrils, sending heat waves shifting in the air between them. Its maw spread wide, giving a clear look at the fire glowing deep inside the creature.

Katie gritted her teeth and tapped the keyboard buttons so hard her fingers hurt. "Come on, Fairy_gurl. Go, go, go!"

Wide eyes fixed on the computer screen, she urged her avatar to fly away, wings kicking into overdrive. And *whoosh*, the fairy was engulfed in flames.

Delicate wings sizzled. An orange glow tinted the screen. The health meter in the corner drained of color, causing Katie's heart to skip a beat.

"Fairy_gurl!" an anxious voice rang through her headphones. It was Dark_Prince, a.k.a. her best friend, Alex.

Katie's fingers moved in a blur over the keyboard, and her avatar dove through the smoke. When the screen cleared, she spotted Dark_Prince below with his tall, lean body and handsome elven face. But not nearly as handsome as Alex was in real life.

Her fairy must have appeared on his screen, because he let out a slow breath. "Oh, there you are. Are you all right?"

The relief in his voice made her heart skip for a whole new reason, but she tried to keep her voice cool when she spoke into the mic on her headset.

"Nothing a little healing spell won't cure." She dropped her avatar lightly to the ground next to his. With a click of her mouse, the fairy on screen waggled her fingers. A burst of glitter fell over her head, landing on her smoldering wings and healing them

instantly. “There. Good as new.”

“Perfect as always,” he said.

She snorted but said nothing. Two years ago, that kind of comment would have made her blush, but he said that kind of stuff all the time. He didn’t mean it *that* way. At least, that’s what she had to tell herself. If he really meant it, they’d be together, right?

That was just part of the Alex Masse charm, something every girl got a piece of. Besides, if she were really perfect, she’d have had a boyfriend by now—and Kyle Jacobs in ninth grade didn’t count. But that was why she had *The Plan*.

Senior year was about to begin. It meant a fresh start, a chance to really come out of her shell. This year, Katie would be confident, sexier, funnier. She’d be a better version of herself, someone who things happened for. She’d come first in life and not dead last like she was used to. Last picked out of line for Red Rover in elementary school, last when it came to her father splitting without fighting for custody, and definitely last picked by boys.

It was time Katie came first.

On the screen, the dark sorceress of their group glided into view—the mysterious Pizzalover. As she joined Katie and Alex’s avatars, an invisible wind blew her cloak open. The voluptuous, scantily clad female figure hidden beneath always made Katie question the game’s T rating for teens.

Pizzalover slid her hood back and slipped the tiara of dead souls over her sleek, black locks, arming herself for the battle. Her eyes flashed red as the accessory powered her up. She was beautiful and feminine, but the voice that came through Katie’s headphones was anything but that of a seductive sorceress.

“Less talky talky. More stabby stabby,” said a deep voice belonging to twenty-five-year-old Trevor. On screen, his sorceress jabbed her staff at the empty air in demonstration. “We need to get past this overgrown lizard if we’re going to enter the Dwarf Mountains and search for the God Sword.”

At that moment, the dragon spun, whipping its tail. It swept over the ground in a deadly circle toward them, rustling the tall grass like a whispered promise: *you’re dead*.

“Look out!” Katie hit the button for her leaf shield and braced for the skull-crushing force, but it never came. When she changed the camera angle, she saw a pair of

thick arms wrapped around the tail, holding it back to protect them.

Those arms belonged to the fourth member of their group. A great, purple ogre from the Porcupine Hills, one with a strength Katie had never seen the likes of before in a level forty-six. He was known throughout the lands as the mighty, the terrible...Sugarplum.

Dark_Prince *whoo-hooed*. “Nice work, Sugarplum!”

The giggle of a ten-year-old girl bubbled through Katie’s headphones. “Thanks,” Penny said.

The dragon released an ear-piercing screech as it tried to flick its tail out of Sugarplum’s tight grasp. The ogre ground his brick-like teeth and held tight, muscles twitching, bare heels digging into the ground. “I can’t hold on for much...longer...”

With a violent twist, the scaled beast finally won the tug of war, flinging Sugarplum aside. The ogre soared through the air and landed in front of Katie’s avatar. After she doused him with a small healing spell, he got up and dusted himself off.

Alex groaned. “This is so frustrating. How are we... Oh...hold on a second, guys. My mom needs me to take out the trash. I’m pausing the game.”

A second later, the action froze and the Conquerors of Caroon logo popped up on the screen. Pulled from the game, Katie suddenly shook her head, blinking at her surroundings. As the grassy Eternal Plains gave way to her small bedroom wallpapered with anime posters, the world of Caroon shrunk until it was just an image on the computer screen in front of her.

It always amazed her how the game sucked her in. How real it felt. Not like she was seeing it play out online, but like she was actually there, living it, breathing it, experiencing it. Like she became Fairy_gurl.

As she slipped her headphones off her ears and relaxed in her desk chair, Katie caught sight of herself in the dresser mirror. Turning her head this way and that, she checked her freshly applied eye shadow.

She didn’t know much about makeup, but it seemed like her practice was paying off. At least she didn’t look like a clown school dropout anymore, which was good, since there were only two days left to prepare, two days until the start of senior year and the launch of *The Plan*.

But something was still missing... *Lipstick*, she realized.

Keeping her cordless headphones around her neck so she'd know when Alex returned to the game, she rushed to the mirror. She grabbed a ruby-red lip liner and consulted the magazine on her dresser already opened to "How to get Kissable Lips."

Although she wasn't used to wearing so much makeup, she'd read that giving yourself a makeover gave you a boost of confidence. When she walked through the doors into Porterville High, she wanted heads to turn.

"Is that Katie Warner?" the other students would ask in shock. It would be just like that Katy Perry song, "One of the Boys." Over the summer, something had definitely changed for Katie.

Once her lips were lined, to finish off the look, she smeared on Bodaciously Bold lipstick. She puckered up in the mirror. Yup, she was ready. Totally kissable. Or at least, *she* thought so. However, there was only one way to really know. Only one person experienced enough with girls and dating who could tell her for sure: Alex. After all, who else would know what a "kissable" girl looked like other than the guy who'd kissed them all?

He'd been away for the last week visiting family in San Jose with his parents. Since they'd met during the summer after freshman year, this was the longest they'd gone without seeing each other. And she'd been practicing her *New Look* the whole time. No one had seen it. She wanted Alex to be the first, so she could get a true reaction from him: the expert.

Before she could chicken out, she typed Alex a direct message in the game so the others couldn't see it.

Hey, can you come over? There's something I want to ask you.

With a shaking finger, she clicked on send.

She wasn't sure why his opinion meant so much to her. Sure, he was her best friend, but if she were honest with herself, she supposed a little piece of her hoped Alex would see her the way he saw other girls. The way she'd wanted him to see her when they'd first met. She wanted to show him what he'd be missing out on.

When they'd first become friends, they'd grown close quickly. Being with him had felt so natural. She'd assumed it was only a matter of time before things heated up. But

everything changed when his brother, Jason, died of cancer.

With so many things happening in Alex's life, what he'd needed was a friend, so that's exactly what Katie had been. And that's what she remained, because Alex's feelings for her seemed to shift—to the cheerleading squad, and the girl's swim team, and the gymnastics club...

But she was over the disappointment now. Totally over it. Ready to move on. It was all part of *The Plan*.

A trumpet blast in her headphones announced a response from Alex. Lunging for the mouse again, she clicked on the message to open it.

Sure, I'll head over once we finish playing. There's actually something I want to talk to you about, too.

What could that be about? They talked at least once a day. Sometimes it felt like she already knew everything about him.

While she waited for Alex to resume the game, she grabbed a magazine from her dresser. She flipped to the dog-eared page in the middle and scanned it like she was cramming for a test. But this was way more important than a test.

How to Hook Your Guy:

1. *Look your best*
2. *Act confident*
3. *Be flirty*
4. *Stand out*
5. *Show your sexy side*
6. *Try new things*

A car door slammed outside, startling Katie. She peered between her curtains and down to the driveway. It was a moving van next door. The house had been up for sale since spring. A SOLD sign appeared only a few weeks before.

Katie spied for a while, watching a couple around her parents' age begin unloading the van. She was about to turn away when a thunderous roar erupted outside.

She squished her face against the windowpane to get a better look. After a moment,

the noise transitioned into an aggressive rumble and a motorcycle appeared. It rolled down the neighbors' driveway, the identity of its mysterious leather-clad rider hidden beneath a full helmet.

The tires chirped as the bike cut onto the road. Another growl and it sped off, leaving the couple shaking their heads. Katie, too. She scowled, pushing away from the window. *Idiot.*

Sure, she felt like she defied death on a regular basis by joining Alex on his adrenaline junkie adventures—part of his new lease on life—but they were always in a controlled environment. Totally safe. Messing around on motorcycles? The guy must have a death wish.

The deep purr of the engine faded into the distance just as a chime rang through Katie's headset, indicating Alex's return to the game. She plopped into her desk chair and slipped her headphones on.

"Okay, guys," Alex began. "We need to get into those mountains. Anyone happen to know how to kill a dragon?"

Katie blew out a breath. "The only way we're going to beat it is if we focus our efforts. Trevor, do you think you can paralyze this guy before he takes flight again?"

"I can hold him down," he said, "but for something his size, that's about all I can handle."

"Good enough."

Pizzalover's aura began buzzing with energy. Her eyes turned inky black. As she laid her hands on the earth, a pulse shook the ground beneath Fairy_gurl's feet.

Dark walls rose up around them, shifting and swirling like oil on water. When they joined at the top, it formed an orb, trapping them inside with the dragon. Their fates were entwined.

With a few taps on her keyboard, Katie's fairy took to the air. "I'll draw the dragon's firepower. Penny, get ready for a game of piñata!"

"Already playing!" she said as the ogre charged the dragon and gave it a couple of shots to the belly with his mace. "Gimme some candy!"

"Alex, can you help her?" Katie asked. "We need to find its weakness by trial and error."

“That’s why you’re the idea girl.” The dark elf drew his curved dual blades before racing toward the creature.

While the others searched for a weakness, Katie flew Fairy_gurl around the dragon’s head. She zapped the beast with a barrage of spells, keeping the enemy’s focus—and occasional blast of flames—on her.

As she raced around the dragon, it stretched its swan-like neck to snap at her. That’s when Katie saw it. The light flicker beneath its jaw, quivering down the length of the neck, pulsating: a heartbeat.

Opening her weapon inventory, Katie equipped a bow. Steadily, she nocked an arrow, held her breath, and hit the enter button to fire. It struck the center of the beating pulse and sank into the scaly flesh.

The dragon choked. The constant glow of fire sputtered and died in its throat.

“There!” Katie cried out, pointing for the others to see. Then she realized they couldn’t see her pointing at the computer screen. “The scales are thinner on the neck, just below its jaw.”

Katie gave a little *whoop* of success, but it was cut short when the dragon darted forward, razor teeth chomping down on the fairy’s wings. Her avatar cried out. The beast whipped its head back and forth, shaking her like a ragdoll. The Eternal Plains spun on the computer screen, making Katie dizzy.

Alex gasped. “Fairy_gurl!”

She tried everything, *space bar*, *enter*, *shift-s*, but her avatar didn’t budge. “I can’t get free.”

“Sugarplum, time for a Combo Attack.” Dark_Prince sprinted across the screen. “Slingshot me up there.”

Katie saw Sugarplum grab Dark_Prince in a meaty hand and throw him like a javelin straight at the dragon. Alex’s grunt came through her headphones like it was really him sailing through the air.

It sent shivers down Katie’s spine. He was coming to save her. Or, if he didn’t make it in time, at least he’d avenge her.

The dragon responded with a snort that said *bring it on*. Smoke obscured Katie’s screen, threatening the hellfire to come. Hanging before the entrance to the inferno, she

feared that wasn't something she'd bounce back from.

She was going to die. Everything she'd worked so hard for would be lost. Over two years of gameplay, of painstakingly leveling up, of honing her skills, all gone. She'd have to start over again from level one!

A second later, Dark_Prince appeared, leaping toward her through the smoggy air. As he fell, he twisted and slashed his sword downward, stabbing it through the dragon's neck. It sank into the soft flesh over its throbbing heartbeat.

Black blood sprayed out in a gross sloshing sound. As the elf dropped to the ground, he dragged the blade down the length of the dragon's neck, filleting its throat.

The beast coughed, like her uncle Doug choking on his own cigarette. It convulsed and shook as smoke puffed out in dark, billowing clouds. The violent shudders shook Katie's fairy free, and she flew to safety.

Their target now obvious, together they made quick work of the dragon. When it finally fell, it cleared the way to a cave that led deep inside of the Dwarf Mountains. They'd done it!

Sugarplum did a happy dance, shaking his pelt-covered booty. Pizzalover downed her mana potion like a celebratory drink to recover her powers, and Dark_Prince wasted no time picking through the loot dropped by the dragon: priceless scales, rusty armor from fallen knights, rubies, and gold.

With a few clicks of her mouse, Katie cast a healing spell. It fell over her and the team in a sparkle of pink.

"Do you guys want to keep going?" Trevor asked. "I don't want to stop now that we've opened up the new area. The God Sword is somewhere in these mountains. I just know it."

"Aww," Penny whined. "I've got chores to do. But Mom says if I get them done really quick, I can play more later."

"Great," Alex said. "Let's all meet in a couple of hours."

"I've just saved our progress," Trevor said. "See you guys later."

"Toodles," Penny said.

The others signed out of the game and disappeared in little puffs of smoke, leaving Katie and Alex alone.

“So, are you coming over now?” Katie asked. She hoped he didn’t hear the nervous hitch in her voice.

“Just can’t get enough of me hanging around this summer?” he teased.

She snorted. “What do you mean? You’ve hardly been around. You know, between Gillian and Lucy and Mia and that other one.” She counted them off on her fingers, trying to work from the top of the cheerleader pyramid down. “Oh, and don’t forget that date with Audrey. She’s still messaging me, by the way, asking why you haven’t returned any of her calls.”

He groaned. “What did you tell her?”

“That you’ve been in Spain running with the bulls.”

He laughed. “Thanks. I can always count on you.”

“Well, I had to make it sound plausible,” she joked—sort of. Thanks to his *carpe diem* attitude, he was always trying to find new ways to get a rush.

“I’ll see you soon,” he said.

“Sure thing.”

Katie began gnawing on her lip before she remembered her lipstick. She took a calming breath. *Don’t be stupid*. It was only Alex. He was just her friend, and she needed his opinion on her *New Look*. No big deal.

Signing out of the game, she stripped out of her faded jeans and Marvel T-shirt and whipped open her closet. From its depths, she pulled out the little bag she’d been stashing all summer. Her secret weapon for *The Plan* to get noticed: a new, lacy red pushup bra.

Not that anyone would see it was lacy, or red, for that matter. Or would they? Eventually, maybe...but she was getting way ahead of herself.

The point was *she* was going to know she was wearing it. It would make her feel confident, like all those Victoria’s Secret models. And magazines always said the sexiest feature on a woman was confidence. If only that had come in a bottle at the cosmetics counter, too.

Katie riffled through her closet until she found her new red dress. She cut off the price tags and slipped it on over her new bra. Stepping in front of the mirror, she scrutinized how it hung.

“Looking good,” she told her reflection, because she was trying *Step two: Act*

confident. If she repeated her positive affirmations enough, she'd hopefully start to believe them, and others would see it, too—specifically the guys at school.

It wasn't like Katie had never had a boyfriend. She'd totally had one...sort of. But she didn't like to count him, even if he had been her first kiss.

Back in ninth grade, Kyle Jacobs, the swoonworthiest guy in their grade, had asked her out. But it turned out he was only dating Katie to make her friend Annabelle jealous. And it worked, because after they'd been going out for a couple of weeks, Katie walked in on Kyle making out with Annabelle at a house party.

After Katie ran out, Annabelle—drunk on two wine coolers and showing off her hickey like it was a medal of honor—confided in pretty much everyone at the party that the only reason Kyle had dated Katie was because she was the “warm-up” for the main attraction: Annabelle. By Monday morning, Katie's new name was Warm-up Warner. The next year, she switched schools.

But she wasn't a freshman anymore. She was a senior now, and this was going to be the year to put all *that* behind her. She wouldn't blend into the pages of the yearbook, forgotten. She'd attract friends like Alex attracted girls, and ten years from now, when her classmates were reminiscing, they'd say “Remember Katie Warner?” And not in a “God, she was so weird” kind of way or a “Remember that time she farted in Biology?” way.

While she waited for Alex to arrive, Katie grabbed another magazine. Just as she flipped to a new article, she heard the familiar chugging of an old Ford truck engine.

Katie jumped up so fast the magazine fell to the floor. Heart leaping, she rushed to the window and spotted Alex's truck pulling up across the street.

As his tall, muscular frame slid out of the cab, her stomach did a little jig. She knew it wasn't just because she hadn't seen him in a while. That reaction to him had never gone away even after two years, despite being “just friends.”

Giving herself one last look, she applied another coat of Bodaciously Bold lipstick. Then she puckered up in the mirror and blew herself a kiss before rushing to the door to meet Alex.

She couldn't wait to see his face when he got a load of the *New Katie*. He was going to love it for sure—at least, that was the positive affirmation she was supposed to tell herself.