

Name: Katerina Sutton

Work title: Position Filled

Category: Novel Writing

Award: Gold Key

---

Claire sat on the carpet floor, typing a paper for history class, when she heard keys jangle, a key turning in a lock, the doorknob slowly opening. Claire knew what to do when this happened: don't be heard, nor seen.

Each night at around six o'clock, she scurried from where she was sitting into her room, where she would work on something silently, usually homework. Each night, she hoped that he wouldn't come in to cause trouble, that he didn't have too many drinks that night.

Each night, her hopes were completely worthless.

Her heart pounded in her chest, trying to look unbothered as he opened the door. She always knew when he had been out. The putrid stench of beer, cigarettes, and staunch leather spread through the house like a poison; after months, Claire had almost gotten used to it.

He was only twenty years of age, and alcohol and cigarettes should have been unobtainable for him, yet he never got carded. He'd been doing this long enough to pull off acting older. He'd lived in his own house since he was sixteen, drank alcohol like water, and interacted with middle-aged men like he was one of them.

He looked down at her, through his glassy, bloodshot eyes. She knew to stay away from him when he was like this, but it was hard not to when he engaged.

"Claire," he said all too softly, "Would you come take a look at something in the kitchen?"

Eyes wide, she hopped off her bed and followed him into the kitchen. This was the unsettling calm before a storm, and she could do nothing more than brace herself for the inevitable.

"What's wrong, Everett?" she asked.

He grabbed a bowl in the kitchen sink, then slammed it back down with such force that Claire flinched, fearing that it would break.

"Do you see this?" he muttered angrily. "Self-entitled bitch who thinks she doesn't have to take any responsibility around here."

Claire felt her cheeks heat up as she lowered her head. Furious responses swarmed around her head, but she stayed quiet. She knew he was just angry because he got fired from his job, because his parents refused to loan him any more money, because everyone else had left since his life started going downhill. He hadn't always been like this.

"Well, guess what?" Everett shouted. "I'm not your goddamn servant! I'm not going to do things for you just because you may not *want* to!"

"I'm sorry," she said, staring down at the floor. Her heartbeat thumped rapidly in her ears, and she stayed frozen.

"You're not sorry at all. You think you can continue to get away with this, right? You're my girlfriend, but you're reliant on *me*. You're my charity case!" he yelled. "Who else would take in a worthless little girl who doesn't even clean the dishes?"

Claire wanted badly to make the point that she wasn't *little*, she was nineteen years old - an adult by society's standards.

"Go to bed," she said quietly. "You're drunk."

"You pity me. Do not pity me," he said darkly, grabbing the bowl from the sink and slamming it down again, cracking it this time from the pressure. "Can't you see what's happened to me?"

*If it gets any worse, I'll leave*, was what Claire told herself every day, yet she never found the courage to do it.

At around one in the morning, Claire went into the kitchen to make herself a mug of tea. The house was dark with the exception of a small lamp she'd turned on, and she didn't realize that she wasn't alone until she heard a voice in her ear.

"Claire," Everett said sadly, "can I talk to you?"

She took a mug out of a cabinet and set it down, trying to act like he hadn't spooked her.

"Okay."

"I'm sorry about what I said," he said. "You know I don't really think those things about you."

"Well, you say them a lot," Claire said, looking down at her feet.

"I know, but I never mean them. Please, just don't listen to me."

Claire scoffed.

"How could I not listen?"

I know, Claire, I know," he said. "I promise...I'll stop drinking for you. Believe me, I'll turn things around."

She looked at the floor.

"You always say that," she said quietly.

"You'll see. Starting today, I'm going to do better."

She met his gaze, desperately wanting to believe that his words were genuine. He looked down at her with innocent, apologetic eyes, and she almost couldn't believe he was the same man that seemed so vicious only hours before.

"Okay. I believe you," Claire said at last, letting herself trust that these were the vestiges of the sensible man she had once known. She had admired Everett so much when they first met, her knight in shining armor. He made a promise to keep her safe from the outside world when he took her in at sixteen, and he kept that with everything he had. She could trust that when he made a promise, he would do everything he could to keep it.

"I love you," he said, bending down and planting a soft kiss on her lips. His sinister breath still reeked of whiskey, and she flinched out of the contact. "You're the only one I have. The only person who hasn't left me."

"I know," she said softly.

"Please, Claire, you can't abandon me. I wouldn't survive it," Everett said, his eyes wide with panic. "I'll get better."

"I'm... going to go to bed," she said cautiously, leaving the tea as she turned around and briskly walked back to her room. She could feel his eyes following her until she shut the door.

A few nights later rain pattered against the windows, darkness sending a somber grey across the sky. Claire sat by a window, gazing at raindrops streaming down the windowsill.

The front door suddenly shot open, banging against the wall and swiveling back around. Claire quickly ran to her room, peeking from the corner as Everett trudged into the house, his face red. She shut the door quietly and sat on her bed.

The last few days, Everett had stopped scolding her unnecessarily, stopped leaving liquor bottles strewn all over tables, and even came home sober in the evenings. She was very proud of him for his progress, and hoped that day would be another day of improvement. He had told

her he was going to change his ways many times before, but he never made visible progress. Claire began to have hope in him again. After all, he promised, and she had confidence that he wouldn't break a promise.

She was almost done rewriting his essay about commercialization when she heard a voice shout, "Claire, goddammit, come here!"

Slowly setting her computer down, she took a deep breath and mentally prepared herself for her next steps: to open the door and walk over to him.

"You're a pig," he spat when she opened her door, looking at Claire with pure disgust.

"I did the chores that you told me to do," she told him, keeping her distance but moving closer.

"Pathetic."

He slammed the cabinet next to her shut, and she flinched at the harsh sound. "I don't know why the hell you expect me to change, if you're not willing to do anything, either."

"What are you talking about?" Claire said in a small voice. "I did everything you told me to." *He doesn't mean it*, she told herself. *He told me, he doesn't mean it*. She repeated this to herself, over and over, and didn't believe it for a moment.

"Again, with the goddamn backtalk!" he said angrily. "I'll tell you what you did."

He reached into the sink and picked up the only object left in it, a kitchen knife. He held it up and waved it around, frenzied. His eyes were hardened, cold, and his anger was impenetrable.

"You think that *I* did this?" Claire realized. "You came home, said you wanted pizza, and cut a slice from our leftovers."

"I would remember that," he spat back. "Don't mock me."

"You brought it to the couch, passed out, and left it there. I picked it up and cleaned the dish, because it was getting on your shirt."

He opened his mouth to retort, then hesitated for a moment, turning to gaze down at his white button-up shirt. There was a visible sauce stain near the collar.

The man snapped his gaze to Claire with renewed vengeance.

"You are lying to me, Claire," he spat, fury in his voice. He slammed his fist down on the counter, and her breathing became ragged.

"I'm not," she mumbled. He grasped the knife in his hand, clenching it so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

"You're a liar!" he cried out, his voice raw, pained. "Worthless, lying, selfish. I cannot," he yelled, clutching the knife in his hand, "stand you!"

It happened in a split second. In one instant the knife was in Everett's hand, and the next it clattered against the cabinet across the room. Claire breathed haggardly, tears rolling down her face.

"You promised," she whispered, meeting his angry, reddened eyes.

His pupils were dilated and his breath shaky as he answered, "I don't know why I promised you anything."

Claire finally looked up at him. There was no need to be disappointed: he never changed. He wasn't going to, no matter how long she stayed with him, no matter how long she endured his drunken rage. She needed to get out.

In that moment, Claire felt something shift. She started making a plan right when she got back to her room. She was going to leave home, to finally become independent. She was going to get away from Everett.

She didn't know where exactly she wanted to go, or even how she would get there. She only had a fantasy in her mind, of one day having a home she could call her own and the freedom to govern her life as she pleased. It gestated in her mind from ever since she was a young child, but grew in size in the past few months with Everett, when leaving began to float in her mind. To have these things which may have seemed simple but were all she'd ever wanted, she'd accept all challenges that lay ahead.

Claire had been without the means to leave Everett for years, and he knew this. Before anything else, she would need to find a job. In the following days, she spent hours searching aimlessly on different websites for somewhere where she was qualified to work. She came home, ate, and searched.

The only job that was in her area and accepted young adults was a marketing job that barely paid minimum wage. Still, she filled out the application and updated her resume when she noticed, in fine print at the bottom, a final requirement: proficiency in two languages.

She slumped down on her bed, on the verge of quitting, when she thought of Everett's drunken rage, of the smell he brought home every night, of the addiction he couldn't break. She would do anything to leave.

Upon further research, she saw that the job only required a certain level of proficiency, one that shouldn't be impossible to achieve. With rigorous instruction, she thought, it might only take a few months.

She spent every moment of free time researching language learning classes near her. She didn't care about the language, as long as it got her away from Everett and somewhere where she could create a new life for herself. The resentment she felt for him was overwhelming every time he entered the house, coupled with fear for his erratic personality, and she knew that she could not help him with his alcoholism; he had spiraled too far. Until that day when he threw the knife he had never been physically violent toward her, no matter the threats he made and things he said, and she was terrified that it might happen again.

She understood that no one else was going to advocate for her, that she was all on her own. She would do everything that she could for a chance at this job.

Claire's resolve led her to a small brick building. She reached a hand out to the doorknob tentatively, unsure whether she should knock first or just walk in. Part of her wanted to turn around and pace away as if she'd never intended to go there to begin with; no one had ever told her that the undertaking of courage felt more like fear. She had to remind herself that she controlled her own fate, and that this step was necessary.

She opened the door and walked inside.