



## Waiting On You (Hqn)

By Kristan Higgins



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Is your first love worth a second chance...?



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But a family emergency has brought Lucas back to town, handsome as ever and still the only man who's ever been able to crack her defenses. Seems like maybe they've got some unfinished business waiting for them—but to find out, Colleen has to let her guard down, or risk losing a second chance with the only man she's ever loved.



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## **Waiting On You (Hqn) By Kristan Higgins Bibliography**

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

"Higgins [offers] strong storytelling and a refreshing, sarcastic wit...thoroughly entertaining."-People Magazine

"Well-placed flashbacks; snarky, snappy dialogue; and conflict both tender and traumatic will shove you into love with a perfectly irresistible array of imperfect characters. You'll adore every bit of this story...Higgins' latest is sexy, screwy, funny and fulfilling - a simply radiant read."-USA TODAY on The Best Man

"The result is a deliriously funny story...The Best Man is Kristan Higgin's best book -- and that's saying a lot."-Eloisa James

"A funny, poignant romance."

-Publishers Weekly starred review, on My One and Only

"Romance fans and lovers of women's fiction will devour this witty and tender novel. Highly recommended."

-Library Journal starred review on Somebody to Love

"Both gut-wrenchingly emotional and hysterically funny at the same time...Kristan Higgins writes the books you don't want to end."-#1 New York Times bestselling author Robyn Carr

"Higgins specializes in the kind of prose that makes you laugh out loud...hilarious on the surface, but with a bittersweet subtext."-National Public Radio

"Higgins has a special talent for creating characters readers love."-Romantic Times, 4½ stars on All I Ever Wanted

"A heartwarming, multi-generational tale of lost love, broken hearts and second chances."

-BookPage on The Next Best Thing

### About the Author

Kristan Higgins is a New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling author and two-time winner of the Romance Writers of America RITA Award. Her books have been praised for their "genius level EQ, whippet-fast, funny dialogue and sweet plots with a deliciously tart edge" (USA TODAY). She lives in Connecticut with her heroic firefighter husband and two extremely advanced children, one shy little mutt and an occasionally affectionate cat.

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"Drinks are on the house!"

A cheer went up from the gang, not just because Colleen O'Rourke-the bartender and half owner of the best (and only) bar in town-had just offered free booze, but because Brandy Morrison and Ted Standish had just gotten engaged.

Colleen hugged the happy couple once more, then went behind the bar and accepted high fives from her regulars as she pulled beers and mixed martinis, poured wine and slid glasses down the bar. After all, Brandy and Ted were her doing. That made...hmm.. fourteen couples she'd set on the road to matrimony? No, fifteen!

Not bad. Not bad at all.

"Good job, Coll," said Gerard Chartier, accepting his free Cooper's Cave IPA. He sat at the end of the bar, where the fire department was having a "meeting," the agenda of which seemed to be O'Rourke's list of microbrews. She wasn't complaining. They were good for business.

"Your sorry single state hasn't gone unnoticed," she said, rubbing his bald head. "Not to worry. You're next."

"I'd rather stay single."

"No, you wouldn't. Trust Auntie Colleen, ever wise and all-knowing."

"Colleen!" her brother, Connor, yelled from the kitchen. "Stop harassing the customers!"

"I'm part of our charm!" she yelled back. "Gang, are you feeling harassed?"

A satisfying chorus of *no* answered her. She breezed into the kitchen. "Hi, Rafe," she greeted the backup chef, who was making one of his famous cheesecakes. "Save some of that for me, okay?"

"Of course, my truest love," he said, not looking at her. He was gay. All the good ones were.

"Brother mine," Colleen said to her twin, "what bug is up your ass?"

"You just gave away three hundred dollars' worth of booze, that's what," he said.

"Brandy and Ted got engaged. Beautiful ring, too."

"Your work, Collie?" Rafe asked.

"As a matter of fact, yes. They'd been eyeing each other for weeks. I gave a gentle shove, and voilà. I expect I'll be a bridesmaid. Again."

Rafe smiled. "And when will you work your superpowers on your own self, lovey?"

"Oh, never. I'm too smart for all that. I like to use men for purely physical-"

"Stop! No one wants to hear about your sex life," Connor said.

"I do," said Rafe.

She grinned. Tormenting her brother, though they were both thirty-one, was still one of the great joys in life.

"It seems like such a waste. All that, unclaimed." Rafe gestured to her torso and face.

"She got burned when she was young," Connor told Rafe.

"Oh, please. That's *not* why I'm single. Besides, you're single, too. It's all part of our dysfunctional childhood, Rafe."

"Don't even try," he said, adding the sour cream layer to the cake. "I was a gay boy born to Jehovah's Witnesses and grew up in East Texas with five older brothers who all played football. It was *Friday Night Lights* meets *The Birdcage* meets *Swamp People*. No one can compete with me in the land of dysfunctional families."

"You totally win," Colleen said. "Con and I only had a cheating father and-

"Isn't tonight your night off?" Connor interrupted.

"Yep. But I came in because I sensed, using our magical twinsy bond, that you missed me."

"You sensed wrong," he muttered. "Get out of my kitchen. Your posse just came through the door."

"He has batlike hearing," Rafe said.

"I know. It's creepy. Bye, boys! Don't forget my piece of heaven, Rafe. Connor, come say hi. Everyone loves you, for some reason."

She went back out into the bar and sure enough, there were the girls: Faith Holland, her oldest pal in the world (and a newlywed, and while Colleen couldn't claim that one as her idea, she'd nonetheless helped keep them together); Honor, Faith's older sister (bone-dry martini, three olives), someone Colleen had *definitely* helped with sweet Tom Barlow-their wedding would be in early July; and Prudence, the oldest Holland sister (gin and tonic, now that it was spring), married for decades.

"How's tricks, Holland girls? Honor, you want your usual? Pru, a G&T? And what about you, Faithie? I have some strawberries I've been saving for you...a little vodka, a little mint, splash of lemon...want to try one?"

"Just water for me," Faith said.

"Oh, lordy, are you pregnant?" Colleen blurted. Faith and Levi had gotten married in January, and from the way he looked at her, those two got it on like weasels. And you know what they say about weasels.

"I didn't say that." But she blushed, and Honor smiled.

"Well, I hope you are," said Pru. "Nothing like the blessing of kids, even though I thought I would kill Abby the other day. She asked if she could get her tongue pierced. I said sure, I'd get a hammer and a nail and we could do it right now if she was that dumb, and the conversation devolved from there."

"Hi, girls," Connor said dutifully, having emerged from the kitchen.

"Con, bring Pru and Honor their regulars, and a big glass of ice water for Faith here."

"I thought you wanted me to say hi, not to wait on you," he said. "Faith, are you pregnant?"

"No! Maybe. Just shush," Faith said. "I'm thirsty, that's all."

"Connor Cooper would be a great name," he suggested.

"I think it sounds pretentious," Colleen said. "Colleen Cooper, or Colin for a boy...now we're talking. Con, how about those drinks? And some nachos?"

Her brother gave her a dark look but left obediently, and Colleen settled back in her seat. "Guess what you missed? Brandy Morrison and Ted Standish just got engaged! He got down on one knee and everything, and she was crying, and it was beautiful, ladies! Beautiful!"

Hannah, Colleen's cousin, brought over their food and drinks, and Prudence launched into a story of her latest adventure in keeping things fresh in the old conjugal bed. Very entertaining. Coll scanned the bar as Pru talked, making sure all was running smoothly.

It occurred to her that spending her night off at work was maybe not 100 percent healthy. Granted, options were limited in Manningsport, New York, a town of just over seven hundred. She could be home, reading and cuddling with Rufus, her enormous Irish wolfhound mutt, who would love nothing more than to stare into her eyes in adoration for several hours. One couldn't rule out the ego boost that provided.

Or, Colleen thought, she could be out on a date. Rafe had a point.

It's just that every guy she met seemed to be lacking something. She hadn't felt the tingle in a long, long time.

As the proprietor of the only year-round alcohol-serving establishment in town, Colleen saw a lot of relationships blossom or end in a fiery crash. When things went right, it was generally because the woman had cleverly manipulated the guy into good dating behavior. He'd call when he said he would. Put some thought into dates. He'd ask questions about her life because she didn't vomit up all her personal history in the first ten minutes.

Far more common, however, was the fiery crash model, when Colleen mixed a sympathy cosmo or poured an extra ounce of Pinot Grigio into a glass for a woman who had no idea what went wrong. Colleen could tell her, of course, and sometimes did... *Maybe you shouldn't have talked about your ex for two hours, or Is telling him you were just cleared for fertility treatments a good idea on the first date?*

Happily, the now-engaged Brandy had asked Colleen for advice from the start. *Should I go out with him again tomorrow? Is it okay to sleep with him yet? How about if I text him right now?*

The answers: *No, no and no.*

"Colleen," said the bride-to-be now, "I just wanted to thank you again for everything." She bent down and gave Coll a hug. "Bridesmaid?"

"Of course!" Colleen said. "You two...mazel tov! I'm so happy for you!"

"Thanks, Coll," Ted said. "You're the best."

"My fifteenth couple," she said to the Holland sisters as the happy couple left for some monkey sex, one presumed.

"You have a gift," Faith said, taking a slab of nachos onto her plate.

"And yet just last night, there was some poor woman in here, begging the guy she was with not to dump her, and I took her aside and said, 'Honey, if you have to beg, do you really want this loser?' But of course, she kept crying and begging, and it was agony, I tell you." She finished her drink, one of the strawberry thingies Faith had passed on. "Maybe I should teach a class. Pru, when Abby starts dating, you send her to me."

"Will do. And thanks, because God knows, she's not listening to me these days."

"Excuse me," came a voice, and all three of them looked up.

"Hey, Paulie," Colleen said. "How are you? Have a seat!"

Paulina "Paulie" Petrosinsky pulled up a chair, swung it backward and straddled it. She'd been Faith and Colleen's classmate-not quite a friend back in the day, but really nice. She came into O'Rourke's once in a while, usually after a workout at the gym, where her weight lifting skills were the stuff of legend.

"Um...I overheard you say something about, uh, teaching people? Women?" she asked.

"Slut University," Pru said, and Faith and Honor snorted.

"Very funny," Colleen said. "My reputation is greatly exaggerated."

"And whose fault is that?" Faith asked. "You should stop spreading rumors about yourself."

Colleen smiled. Had she in fact written something flattering about herself on the men's room wall just last week? She had. "Ignore my so-called friends," she said. "What's up?"

"Um...can you really help a, um, a person? With, uh...you know. Love and men and stuff?" Paulie's face turned deep red, then purple.

"Are you all right?" Honor asked, frowning a little.

"Oh, that. My face. It's called idiopathic craniofacial erythema. I.I blush. A lot."

"Wish I could hang around," Prudence said. "We farm people have to get up early. Good luck with your man, Paulie! See you, girls!"

"So are you interested in someone in particular?" Colleen asked, scootching over into Pru's vacated chair to make more room at the table.

Paulie swallowed. "Yeah," she whispered, glancing around.

"Who?" Faith asked.

"Um.I'd rather not say."

Colleen nodded. "What do you like about him?"

"He's...he's just so nice. I mean, really kind, right?"

And he's cheerful and good and smart, I think, too. I mean, he...well. He's great."

Colleen smiled. "And do you feel sick when you see him, and then hot, and then nauseous?"

"Exactly," Paulie said, her face purpling again.

"Do you imagine conversations with him, holding hands and moonlit walks and all that other mushy stuff?"

"I-yes. I do." Paulie took a shaky breath.

"Does he make your danger zone tingly? Does your skin get hot, do your knees wobble, does your tongue feel swollen-"

Faith stood up. "I miss Levi," she announced. She gave Colleen a kiss on the cheek and squeezed her sister's shoulder. "Good luck, Paulie! Take Colleen with a grain of salt."

"I'm going, too," Honor said. "Bye, matchmaker. Do no harm, mind you. See you, Paulina."

"So who is this guy?" Colleen asked when they were gone.

Paulie shot a nervous glance back to the bar. Aha! A hint. "You know what?" Paulie said. "Never mind. He's...he's out of my league."

"No, he's not!" Colleen cried. "Paulie, you're so nice! You are! Anyone would be lucky to have you." Besides, Colleen always felt a little guilty where Paulie was concerned.

"Thanks," she muttered.

"It's true," Colleen said firmly. Granted, Paulie hadn't been blessed with great beauty. And her dad was a little odd-Ronnie Petrosinsky, owner of four small restaurants called Chicken King that served fried chicken thirty-eight different ways, all of them very, very bad for you. He was locally famous for his commercials, where he pranced around dressed as a rooster wearing a crown. Poor Paulie was also featured in a fluffy yellow chick suit, wearing a crown-the Chicken Princess. Try getting out from under that title, especially in high school.

"Listen, Paulie. No one is out of your league. Go ahead, tell me."

Paulina sighed gustily and drained her Genesee (first order of business: get her to drink something more feminine). "It's Bryce Campbell."

Oh. Okay, so that might be tough.

Bryce was gorgeous. Jake Gyllenhaal DEFCON 4-gorgeous. He got his share of tail, as Colleen knew all too well. Bryce was a regular. Not the sharpest tool in the shed, but sweet. He had a certain charm, and women threw themselves at him all the time.

*Lots of women.*



"That's fine," Colleen said, realizing she hadn't spoken for a moment. "Not a problem."

Paulie gave her a despairing look.

"I'm serious. We can work with this. So, tell me more about you and Bryce."

Paulie's expression grew dreamy, the severe blush fading. "He volunteers at the animal shelter, you know?" Colleen nodded; Bryce had in fact helped her choose Rufus the Doofus. "And the animals, they all love him. I go in a lot. I, um...I've adopted two dogs and four cats in the past year."

Colleen smiled. "That's a lot. But go on."

"And the other day, I was getting gas, and so was he, and I didn't even plan that! He just smiled at me and said, 'Hey, Paulie, how's it going?'" She sighed at the memory of the magical words. "It was amazing. I mean, that smile, right?"

Yes. Bryce had a beautiful smile. That was true.

"He's never in a bad mood," Paulie went on. "Never has a bad thing to say about anyone. Not that I talk to him. Not much, anyway. But sometimes we lift weights at the same time, and...well, I try to talk to him. But my mind goes blank, and I never think of anything good to say. But last week? I had to walk past him, and I said 'Excuse me,' and he said, and I quote, 'No problem.' Colleen, he smelled *so* good."

The woman had it bad.

"And when we were in high school, he never made fun of me."

Colleen's heart gave a squeeze. Paulie had a solid, athletic build and held the school record for the number of push-ups, beating even Jeremy Lyon, football god, a record that stood to this day. Her father's business didn't help her social status; he'd started out as a chicken farmer, and Paulie hadn't grown up as comfortably as most of the kids in town, though not as poor as others. And then, when the Chicken King became so successful, well, that was different, too, and it was hard to be different at that age.

Though she was now the chief operating officer for the Chicken King franchises, Colleen had never seen Paulie out of gym clothes, and she always seemed on the fringe of things, as nice and smart as she was.

With a pang, Colleen realized Paulie reminded her of Savannah, her nine-year-old half sister.

"You know what? Let's forget about it, okay? I'm sorry," Paulie said now.

"Absolutely not," Colleen said. "He'd be lucky to have you. I'm serious. You're great, you have so many nice qualities...it's not gonna be that hard, Paulie. What have your other relationships been like?"

"Um...I...I've never had another relationship."

"That's fine. So, no experience with men?"

"I'm a virgin," she said.

"No worries. Nothing wrong with saving yourself for true love." Colleen herself had, after all. Not that hers was an exemplary story.

"It's more like no one's ever asked me."

Oh! Poor lamb! "Not a problem."

"He'd probably rather go out with you," Paulie said.

"Oh, please," Colleen said with a flinch. "Bryce? No. We're not... He's a sweetheart, but not my type. But you guys...you'd be great together."

Paulie's face lit up. "Really? You think so? Honest? I'll do whatever you say. You think I have a shot?"

"Absolutely."

Connor was back. "Dad called. Wants you to babysit. Apparently, Gail needs a break."

Ah. Gail Chianese O'Rourke, their stepmother, four years their senior, not so lovingly known as Gail-the-Tail-Chianese-Rhymes-with-Easy-Hyphen-O'Rourke.

## **Users Review**

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#### **Judy Young:**

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