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Jingle Bell Rock

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. . . Let's rock it out, y'all!

1

Christmas Eve Hustler

I strode inside, the last of the partiers' IDs checked and the club at full capacity. Steam rose off my leather jacket and I stomped my feet, heavy as glaciers with wet snow the icing on top. It'd been a rare cold snap in Charleston, sleet slaking off me like a second skin. I slid out of the jacket and handed it off to Jane so she could stow it behind the bar.

Jane was the owner of Mosh, one of the most popular live music rock clubs in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. It went with her downhome, family style eatery next door: Nosh. An odd combo for the stunning late thirties-something entrepreneur but it worked.

As usual, Mosh had brought in a big Christmas Eve crowd even though it was a weekday night. The vaulted room of the refurbished cathedral busted at the seams like a pair of leather-laced pants too tight for their owner. The usual mix 'n'

match hoard of customers drank, danced, and did a lot of groping in dark corners that weren't nearly dark enough. Black, deep blood red, and almost violent purple completed the color scheme. The bar was a glossy midnight color, the lights--dimmed to pinpoints set into the ceiling--looked like stars. The massive stage took up half the place and it was swarmed by a neverending wave of writhing dancers.

Jane said hi, which consisted of her bobbing the bright blond spikes of her short hair in my direction and giving a meaning-filled glance at the singer headlining the band. She kept it silent because I wouldn't have heard her over the reverberating noise of the southern rockers lighting up the stage or the roar of the fist-pumping, hip-grinding groupies on the floor.

I rolled my eyes and ignored my boss. The one who had almost the same haircut as mine, although my crew cut was more about easy maintenance and hers was about badass-bitch style. In fact, Jane and I were often mistaken for brother and sister. Same golden complexion, same brown eyes remarked upon as unusual in fair-haired folks. Of course whereas she was slender, I was a bulky mass of muscle topping out at six-foot-three, which made me an excellent resource as Mosh's one and only bouncer.

The fact I scowled more often than smiled was a bonus for the job too.

Yeah, she was totally feminine, I was completely masculine. One hundred percent man. Macho through and through. And finding out I was increasingly attracted to other men. Or man. Specifically, the one up on stage Jane had so unsubtly pointed out to me. The gruff scowl-frown expression I usually worked

slid away in favor of a rare smile as I settled an elbow on the bar and enjoyed a little session of listening and staring.

In shirtsleeves and leathers, I should've still been shivering with cold. The thing that warmed me to the bone was Jack Cotille. He jammed with Cotille and the Crazy Boys, sweat slicking his shirt to his skin. Skin flushed with heat, strained by muscle as he stroked his guitar. Belting out dirty rock lyrics, Jack stoked a raging blaze in my groin.

I pounded the one beer due to me during my shift and sat my ass on a stool.

I stared at Jack as I had all month and the one before too. A moth to flame and wings incinerated by fire.

At one a.m. their session ended, the club closed an hour later, and I was free to go home. Except I kept seeing visions of Jack strumming his guitar—strong forearms clenching and relaxing, wide wrists turning and tensing. Jack, pulling up his T-shirt to wipe the sweat from his face, revealing a sectioned abdomen and a trail of dark hair from his belly button to the top of his faded, holey jeans. And sweet Christ, his bragging-rights biceps, twin tantalizing mounds of muscle I wanted to sink my teeth into. The way he'd always blow a kiss out to the crowd at the end of a set. His red mouth plump. I thought about those pursed pouty lips wrapped around the head of my cock.

It was the tail end of Christmas Eve. Maybe he could be my Christmas Steve.

When I laughed at myself, it was so cold at stupid o'clock on the morning of the twenty-fifth of December, the air froze in front of me in 'ha ha' puffs of breath. This time I wasn't gonna walk by Jack as I ambled along Market Street. I wasn't gonna watch him from across the road as he stood beneath the wreath-wrapped lamppost, plucking his acoustic, busking for spare change from the last of the holiday revelers winding their way home. All around, the marketplace was festively decorated, bright with colored lights, done up like a high-classed whore putting on her best finery.

But Jack's black hair and his deep blue eyes shined brighter than any Christmas decoration ever could. I wanted him off the streets and in my bed. In my arms.

Every night I'd followed him, pretending I wasn't stalking him but rather investing a healthy interest in his welfare, I'd never seen him leave in the same direction twice and I drew the line at following him home. Mainly because I didn't think he had a home and that would just break my fucking heart.

And it was Christmas.

Okay, not that the holiday had anything to do with it. I wanted Jack period, any way I could get him, and had done so since the second I'd seen him on stage at Mosh last month. He made my cock ache. He made my fists clench because I wanted to touch him so much. Goddamn, he made my guts twist with need.

Flatpicking the strings of his Hagstrom Siljan guitar with one of the picks he stowed in his back pocket or flipped between his fingers like lucky poker chips, he looked up when I approached him.

The undeviating eye contact shivered up the base of my spine.

His fingers stilled on the guitar and his voice—low and rich—melted into the air mid-riff. If he pawned that damn guitar he'd probably make enough money to quit with the busking for extra cash. Another case of beauty over brains. And had I just called the man beautiful? Yeah . . . yeah I had.

Little strummer boy.

A dash of black hair met the high slope of his cheeks, pink from the cold. The unearthly blue eyes, which always twinkled or teased, got straight inside my gonads. Innocence and sin combined in one talented package destined for fame or self-destruction. Goddamn Jack Cotille had interrupted my regimented black and white and boring life in a major way.

Every night he worked at Mosh I watched him barge out the alley door. Two guitar cases slung over his shoulders, picks in his loose back pocket, his lips tilted in an easy grin even when he huddled inside his beaten-to-hell-and-back leather jacket.

"Need a lift home?" I'd call out to him. Those four words formed the sum total of my stellar conversational skills when it came to him. What I always intended to say was: *Come back to my place so I can find out how warm and delicious your mouth is, so I can find out what it feels like to touch and suck and fuck another guy's cock.*

His reply was always the same too. Devil-angel-temptation. “Not unless you’re ready to hit this.”

And I’d stare at his ass-on-offer, the perfect curve of it cupped inside his worn jeans, so ready *hit that* my mind raced with the image of fucking him against a brick wall. But I never answered, my brain having decided fun fantasies were all the action I was gonna get. He’d chuckle then start to sing as he strolled off into the dark beyond the streetlights. I’d cling to the last notes of his voice. Jack’s guttural Cajun accent dissolved into sexual grittiness when he sang, making every single song sound like a hot, rough, sweaty ride between the sheets. Or raw fucking in a dark alley with jeans shoved down to our thighs.

I glanced into the alley behind Jack, breaking contact with his seductive eyes before mine gave away my raunchy thoughts . . . although I supposed the substantial bulge in my pants was doing that for me. That and the rough swallow I forced down my throat.

Everything about him was beautiful. Sexual. Exotic and erotic. I couldn’t tell if he was bi-straight-gay. ’Course not. I was just figuring out I was gay. If it took me twenty-six years to come head-to-head with my own sexuality, it was gonna take more than a couple months to interpret someone else’s. That or a flashing fluorescent sign.

They called me Beef, my few friends, my coworkers, my boss. Huge muscles, tall body, and sides of beef for shoulders. Bouncer I could do. Boy magnet not so much. And as for the babes . . . The last chick broke up with me because I limp-dicked it with her. Eight inches of heavy cock going completely

flaccid every time she took her clothes off, or kissed me, or made a suggestive remark to me. Dead weight hanging between my thighs. But say *his* name, play *his* song, let me get a whiff of his sweat . . . and I was rock hard and throbbing. Motherfucking inconvenient when I was standing out here in the freezing cold trying to figure out how to pick the man up when I hadn't even managed to say hello yet.

My guitar player watched me. He teased me with every rub up the neck of his instrument, every slow slide of his fingers down the strings. And when he flattened his palm for reverb, my cock rippled inside my leathers, prodding against the seams. Leaning over, he pocketed the loose change and few dollar bills that had been dropped into the open guitar case.

I still hadn't managed to unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth when he came back up.

Jack peered at me, puffs of frosty air smoking between us. "Can I buy ya a cup of coffee, Beef?"

His lips were cherry red and plump-pursed. His cheeks were rosy from the cold and he clapped his hands together in front of him.

I frowned, fighting against the twin lusts to take him home and feed him, take him home and screw him. "Name's Brian."

"I thought they were just talkin' about that big piece of meat you got there between your legs." He winked, and even his wink was delicious. "You follow men around often at night?"

I chewed my lip, the usual scowl burrowing into my forehead. “Just you. I’m sorry. You just . . .” I looked up to catch his gaze, his eyes glittering with amusement. “You do something crazy to me.”

“That’d be about right, seein’ as I’m one of the Crazy Boys.” His hand drifted up between us, tugging on the collar of my jacket before coasting across the light stubble on my jaw. “What about that cup of coffee? I sure could use a warm up.”

Again I stood still, staring. I didn’t want him to spend what meager offerings he had on me. When the pad of his thumb brushed my bottom lip, air whooshed from me. “I’d rather take you home with me.”

Wide eyes then a slow blink before he licked the thumb that had been on my lips. *Horny, horny, horny.* “Should I be scared of you?”

I snorted a laugh and shook my head. The man was no frail pussy. He might not quite be able to kick my ass, but I bet he could handle himself if he decided I was taking advantage of him.

“Nah. I just . . . I can give you something hotter than coffee.” Flustered again, I felt a new blush crawl over my cheeks. “Something more filling.” *Shit, that sounds even worse.* “I meant a hot meal.” *Sort of. At first, at least.* “And I can give you some money.”

Christ. Did that make it sound like I thought he was a whore? *Did* I think he was a whore? All I knew about him I’d gleaned from trailing him around at night: he seemed to be a rootless wanderer. I’d never seen him with another man or a woman for that matter, only his bandmates. The way he swaggered off solo

after a show, his open invitations to have at his ass . . . maybe I wondered if he traded his body for cash the same way he gave his voice in song.

“Okay.” Jack hit me with a shy grin.

Okay to the money? Okay to coming home with me? Fuck it, I’d take him either way. Before he got a chance to backtrack or disappear or change his mind, I shouldered his ever-present backpack and the electric guitar case.

Tapping a black pick against his widened grin, he asked, “Eager?”

Yes. And cold. And hornier than I could ever remember. So that was just a rhetorical question I wasn’t gonna answer. After he took my silence for the agreement it was, he bent over to pack away his second guitar, the Hagstrom. I really wanted to shove my hands down the back of his pants and grab hold of his ass.

My face flamed some more when he caught me ogling. There was no way to explain my shameless staring—*drooling*—so I simply shrugged and set off in the direction of my truck.

During the short ride to my apartment, he alternated between playing with my radio and cupping his hands over the hot-blowing air vent. I curled my fingers tighter and tighter around the steering wheel, my knuckles turning white. When I parked in front of the Charleston Single House in one of the ‘bad parts’ of downtown that was undergoing a rebirth—or so the real estate developers hoped—Jack swiveled in his seat.

“C’mere.”

I dragged in a shaky breath. Inclining toward him, I shut my eyes at the first feel of his lips brushing the crest of my cheek, sliding toward my ear. “Don’ be nervous, Beef.” One hand skimmed up my thigh to squeeze the aching ridge of flesh in my leathers. “I ain’t g’on eat ya. Less you wan’ me too.”

Oh God. The Cajun accent came out heavy when he was turned on apparently. Or maybe he used it to arouse me more. That and his hand lying atop my cock worked. Worked real well.

Pulling back with a groan, I climbed out of the truck. I grabbed all his shit—I’d keep his guitars hostage if I had to—and led him up the walkway, up the stairs, and into my apartment.

It was nothing fancy inside. None of the seasonal shit the lowcountry was festooned with from street-to-street heralding the happy holidays. On the scarred kitchen table, one fat red candle sat in a circle of holly. Merry Christmas.

Jack strolled around the three-room-plus-bath affair, his scuffed cowboy boots ringing loudly on the aged oak floors. Opening the door to the third floor balcony, he quickly closed it up tight when an icy draft swept in.

“Nice digs.”

“Keeps me warm.” I came from a hardcore working-class Midwestern Lutheran family—one of four kids—where we learned early hubris was an even bigger sin than in the Greek tragedies. “I took it for the kitchen mostly.”

In spite of my shabby, bach-pad furniture, the kitchen was always well stocked. That room was the largest and I’d given it the DIY treatment when I moved in with a fresh coat of paint, new cupboards, the works.

Maybe that shoulda been an indicator I was gay.

Wet from the snow, his shaggy damp hair falling across his brow, Jack standing in my living room hypnotized me. He also made my brain short-out again because I asked, “You want payment up front?”

His low dirty chuckle shot straight to my straining hard-on, which hadn’t gone half-mast the entire time I’d been with him. “I don’t want your money, *cher*. And I might even suck your cock for free. If you ask nicely enough.”

Holy fuck. I mumbled something and beelined for the bathroom because Jack unbuttoning his jeans while licking his lips was a combo made-to-order for my dick to blast off. Not that I was running scared from him. No way, not at all. Hitting the shower was part of my ritual when I got home from the club. Reeking of stale smoke and spilled beer, I always scrub-a-dub-dubbed. Not freaking out at all that Jack was in my apartment. *Riiiiight.* I thrust the shower on hot, peeled off my clothes and almost beat my head—the one on top of my shoulders because I was saving the other one for Jack to beat off—against the slippery tiled wall.

A minute later, the shower door slid open and a naked beautiful man stepped in beside me. Water immediately pearled on his flesh and pooled in all the places I wanted to suck. I turned my back to the shower’s spray and tried to breathe with all that expansive, exquisite nudity before me. He was leaner than me, but all defined muscles. Corded shoulders, nice pecs, strong arms. The dark stubble on his jaw was like the black line from his hard stomach down until the hair curled around the base of a long, dark pink dick that stretched upward. Despite his muscled build, there was a thinness to his hip bones and around his

ribs that didn't belong. I wanted to see those sinews fill out with meal after meal of decent food and full nights of rest.

Jesus. If I wasn't gay then I was turning into a woman, a mother hen at that.

I didn't approach the subject of his possible homelessness. Instead I kept with my shit-for-brains theme for the night. "Are you even gay? Or just gay for cash?"

Flipping wet hair from his eyes, he soaped up his hands and placed them on my chest. When he stepped forward, our rigid cocks touched and that time I did beat the back of my head against the wall.

"Already told you I don't want your money. And maybe I just want you. Go with it, Brian." His hands—sudsy and hot and calloused—roamed in opposite directions. One behind my neck to pull me down for a kiss that made me see double even before his tongue took a long deep trip inside my mouth. The other skirted all around my groin, avoiding my shaft until my hips moved in a pleading motion for any kind of contact I could get.

Fuuuck.

Bewildered. Wanting. Hard.

Releasing my lips with loud porn-star-style suction, Jack lathered my cock in two tight fists. I went up on the balls of my feet and held onto the top of the shower almost ready to lose it all over his teasing hands. He'd tighten his grip and I'd grunt, he'd loosen his fists and I'd curse. He took my balls in one hand, teasing my taint with a crooked finger until I panted and shuddered.

Maneuvering me so I faced away from him, he kissed along my shoulders and down the center of my back. Jack's fingers trailed wet, sudsy fire to the fanned muscles flexing there.

"Feels good, *beb*?"

I grunted and croaked and nodded.

"Been with a man before?" A lone finger worked its way between my tight ass cheeks, circling my entrance.

"No," I choked out. Instead of clenching and closing Jack out, I opened my stance, gasping when he grasped both halves of my ass to spread me.

His teeth bit one side then the other and his tongue dangled at the top of my cleft, fingertip circling, tapping, teasing, relaxing. "Lucky me. Sexy ass, Beef. Nice tight virgin hole."

My dick was leaking like a fucking faucet when he pulled away from my backside with a wet slap of open palm to ass. I was about to go out of my damn mind.

I turned in time to see him working up more foam between his hands before setting about cleaning himself. I wasn't about to pass up the chance to help. Hands soapy, I cleaned and caressed his pecs, his abs. I kneeled in front of him and did his feet and calves, his thighs. The inner pockets where his legs met his groin and the V of muscle slicing to his ripe, red, and heavily veined cock. I rubbed the hair on his legs and lathered his pubes and gave a short laugh when his dick bounced into my hand. He was thick, straight, uncut. The uncircumcised skin slid inside my palm, revealing a fat flushed crown, turgid and richly colored.

His voice throbbed above the pounding of water, the pounding of my pulse. "Let's get outta here."

Toweling off beside him, I asked, "You hungry?" It wasn't meant to be a come on, but it sure sounded like one. And it was pretty hard to avoid that when we both stood basically bare ass with cocks bobbing.

"I could eat."

Fuck. Me too.

I tossed him a pair of sweats and hauled some on myself, pulling him to the kitchen. I gave him a beer and nursed my own. Because our nights were all fucked up on account of working club hours, it was closer to morning than midnight so I made breakfast. With beer. Maybe I wasn't queer after all.

One look at Jack watching me with a smile on his cherry red lips and my heart jackrabbited around my chest.

I am queer.

Just like my apartment, breakfast wasn't fancy, but it was filling. Eggs, toast, bacon. No coffee if we planned on catching some shuteye. Or perhaps I should start plying Jack with the caffeine, make sure he stayed good and awake until I had my way with him.

He smacked his lips after he cleared his plate, slinging one arm around the back of his chair. His hooded gaze settled on my bare chest and slid up to my mouth. I licked my lips, setting my fork down.

"You're really just a gentle giant, aren't ya?"

Yeah, a gentle giant who wants to fuck the living daylights out of you.

“I assume you’ve seen me restraining drunken fuckwits at the club.” I raised an eyebrow.

“Sure, but is that you, or is this?” He gestured to the kitchen and our plates then the pathetic excuse for a Christmas tree tucked into one corner of my living room. Its spindly lopsided limbs were not to be outdone by the tacky twinkling lights.

“Hey, I’m trying to be full of the Christmas spirit here.” I laughed.

“Is that why you brought me home?”

I shook my head.

“You bring guys home a lot?”

Another head shake, a whispered, “Never.”

“I like that answer.” His chair scraped back then his hand was held out to me as he stood before me. “C’mere.”

I eased into his arms, which folded me against him. Leaning toward his face, I licked and sucked those ripe lips before delving inside to discover a world of warmth and wetness. “Just you,” I murmured as Jack dragged his mouth down my throat.

We ended up in my bed, sweats long gone, my legs trapped by his. Cuddling and kissing. Every time my cock nudged his, I thought my entire body would explode from that point outward.

When breathing became difficult and thinking impossible, he leaned over me and clicked off the light. He snuggled in close, ignoring my throbbing fucking hard-on.

“G’night, Brian.” His nose nuzzled into the nape of my neck.

His body heat raged behind me, making sleep impossible. Shit, him—naked in my bed? Smelling of soap and feeling of everything manly from the shadow of hair on his chin to the strong lean muscles against my back, and the hot brand of his dick searing my ass—made sleeping, breathing, and anything but sporting a big fat boner impossible.

When he twisted further against me, I inhaled loudly.

His hand slid over my hip, onto my belly and down, down, down. Underneath my surefire so-hard cock, he grasped my balls, both lucky nuggets in his rough palm. Precome leaked from the head of my shaft, rolling down, coursing through his handhold on my nutsack. Jack kissed my neck and mouthed my earlobe. He nudged my shoulder.

I rolled onto my back, riding the loose, teasing grip of his hand up and over and off the head of my cock. My hips punched up and my breath came out in pants. “Fuck, baby.”

Baby.

His blue glazed stare widened then shuttered closed. “Say that again.”

Raising my head, I licked my lips then his, taunting him closer. “Suck my cock, *baby.*”

I watched his abs strike up in sharp relief when he groaned. He squeezed the fat column of flesh in his hand. His face disappeared down my chest, kissing the slim line of blond hair until it nested around the base of my cock. Jack sucked me into his mouth. He didn’t tease or taste or test the waters. He took my entire

shaft down in one large gulp so I felt his throat muscles moving in a velvet vise constricting over my length.

I shouted and he laughed. That laughter spilled chills down my spine and spun lust through my brain. Sleek back, bent head, hot breaths made me jerk. I wanted cock in my mouth too. I wanted his between my lips.

Hands on his inner thighs, I felt every muscle shifting as I kissed along the swarthy hairline that thickened the closer I got to his beautiful pink low-hangers. I moved him up and over my face until he straddled me with his mouth buried in my groin doing such debauched things I had a hard time focusing.

His thick, rich-colored cock hovered above my tongue. I pushed him further forward until his plump testes saddled my chin, his rigid cock slapping my chest. I kissed all across his taut ass cheeks. His glutes were tight crescents I peeled apart for my first view of his pink star of flesh. He wiggled in front of my face.

Jesus Christ.

I lipped around the edges of his smooth pink hole until it opened like a goddamn flower bloom. Inside, Jack looked wet and rosy. I bit my lip when he dug his fingers into my thighs, taking my cock deeper. And he shoved his perfect ass back.

I lapped up and down and around, holding him open. "So sweet, dude."

His muffled reply was a deep groan sent against my groin, incredible suction interspersed with insane-making wet circuits around and around my engorged tip.

“Never done this before.” I nipped and sucked and used one thumb to open him wider for my tongue.

Jack pumped my slickened cock in his hand. “*Uhhh*. Fuck, Bri. You kiddin’ me?” His soft black hair and raspy dark stubble scraped up and down my dick. “So good. Jesus. Yeah. Eat my ass.”

I attacked his ass like a man faced with his favorite last meal. I’d just never realized it. He tasted hot and musky and so fucking sinful, I strained to get my tongue deeper just for another ass-wiggle from him, another shout when he came off my cock to yell about how goddamn good I made him feel.

Pushing his gleaming ass up, I craned my neck to make long lollipop licks up and down the hottest hardest cock. I had to pull it down from where it stretched against his stomach and aim the thick swollen head between my lips. I moaned when he slid inside. All that heavy male flesh against my tongue, the taste sharper at the tip that oozed wetness. It felt so right to suck him, blow on him, tease him by rubbing that gorgeous knob against my whiskered cheek. So right to be with him. Unfettered, unworried, unrushed. I had no fear about losing my wood this time. Not with Jack practically screwing my brains out with the deep appreciative groans and all over bites and licks wetting every inch of my shaft.

Damn.

Too close, too far gone, I pulled Jack up and pinned him to the bed. My arms were steel bands around him and his hands were hot pistons between us. We rutted together, me gasping, Jack talking, filthy words spilling out in his Cajun accent.

“*Mm*. Fuck, *beb*, so goddamn hot like that. Got muscles like a mountain lion, all golden.” He reached up to suck on my tongue. “Asshole’s all golden too, *mm hmm, cher*. Hot virgin boy ass.”

My breath exploded like bullets from my chest, so fast, rapid-fire. He kept jerking our cocks together. I moaned when his back raised and his eyes blinked. His mouth ovaled and he came. His cock expanded and fired off against mine with hot spurts of come, thick and milky.

I curled over him and all but bleated when my dick jumped and pumped. The massive orgasm took my breath away. It stole across every muscle in my body, blitzing out my brain.

I came to awareness with his index finger sliding over my lips and into my mouth. Jack pushed come—his and mine—inside, following with his lips and tongue in the most erotic kisses I’d ever had. We traded more come-laden kisses, cleaning the stickiness from our hands and stomachs and chests, moaning and writhing together like a muscled humping beast.

I got hot Jack jizz for Christmas. *Joy to the World*, indeed.

“Yeah. I think I’m definitely gay.” Long muscular legs tangled between mine, crisp dark hair scratching against my lighter ones. Wet groins pushed together with my cock growing between us.

Jack jerked me slowly and breathed against my ear with a throaty chuckle. “Go to sleep, my big gay Beef.”

When I closed my eyes, Jack in my arms, the sun was just beginning to rise.

2

Belated Jingle Bell Cock

I woke up at midday with morning wood and an unshakeable feeling of loss. My late night lover was gone. All that lingered of Jack was the scent of combined spunk that shouldn't have been sexy and the dent from his head in the pillow beside me.

I sat down with a cup of coffee I cuddled between my hands. His disappearance got under my skin in a way I didn't want to inspect. It was pretty damn clear he didn't have any place to go. Had I sucked at sucking cock? He sure hadn't acted like it. But then he was one motherfucking talented showman.

I groaned and bunched my forearms on the table. It didn't matter why. The fact was the rejection stung. And when the hell had I gone and grown a pair of tits and a matched set of ovaries to go with?

Getting up, I rinsed out my mug. I leaned back against the sink and stared at the table where we'd sat eating breakfast together just a few short hours ago. I remembered the soft feel of his hair in my hands, the stunning blue color of his

eyes, the intense hungry kisses that were never enough and just the beginning of more.

I was a stalker. He was a one-night-stander. Maybe that made us even.

In lieu of hunting Jack down and dragging him back, I spent another fan-fuckin'-tastic Christmas Day thinking about the night before and what had almost been and what wouldn't be. Fucking sad case. Then I watched ESPN while baking, tackling two stereotypes at once. Big butch dude and sports. Possibly gay guy and baking. Muffins and stud muffins.

Who are you kidding? There is no 'possibly' about it. You spent a couple hours rolling around naked, giving and receiving head with the most gorgeous man you've ever met. Thinking about him makes you spring a boner and you had an out-of-body orgasm . . . with a man.

After that complete wake-up call, I turned off the internal commentator as well as the loudmouthed one on TV. I also shut down the *I'm-a-homo-at-last* hallelujahs because I had to call my family. I spoke to Ma, Pa, my two brothers and one sister all settled within four miles of each other back in the small Iowa town where I'd grown up. They yammered on about birthdays and college sports and new babies and when was I coming back to meet a nice girl, get hitched, start a family?

After that I escaped into a six-pack of beers.

My guitar hero, porno fantasy didn't have a set the next night. That didn't stop me from looking for a shock of black hair and a blaze of true blue eyes inside Mosh. No dice though.

I handed a Tupperware container of muffins to Jane, figuring she could put them in baskets for breakfast the next morning at Nosh if they were up to snuff. She peered at the contents. She watched me scanning the crowd like my eyes were laser beams that could latch onto Jack and pull him in.

“Ooh, Beef, you are hankerin’.” Shrewd Jane leaned over the bar.

“Huh?”

“C’mon, come to my office. You can tell me all about it.”

I met her at the swinging doors to the admin hall and backstage area of the club. She hustled me into her office and shut the door. Pouring a couple drinks from her personal stash, she sat behind the desk and propped her feet up.

“Listen, Beef, from the dyke to the not-so-straight-stud, your secret’s out.”

And apparently the floor had just dropped out from under my feet too because I had a bad case of the head spins. “Wait. You’re a—”

“Lady lover, vagina miner, a chick licker.” Her grin grew impossibly huge the more my mouth gaped open.

I snapped it shut. I rubbed my forehead and tried to think of something useful to say. *Are congrats in order?* “Oookay. But I’m not—”

“Get over yourself already. And if you wanna keep your big secret, you probably oughtta stop eye-fucking our favorite Cajun *chanteur*.”

My cheeks felt like they burst into flames. “I don’t—”

“Lust after Jack? Yeah, you do. Why do you think I keep tryin’ to throw you at him? You’re desperate for some nasty dick action.” She snorted and knocked back her liquor. “Listen, babe, I’m all about the rainbow of love so any hang-ups

you have about your homosexy-ness, get over it right now.” She ran a hand through her spiky hair. “Took you long enough to figure it out though.”

My jaw dropped to the floor as I dropped my ass to a chair and downed the whiskey neat.

“Look, if things don’t work out with you and Jack Frost pretty boy, I don’t imagine you’ll have a hard time pickin’ up another hot piece of ass.”

Could not believe I was having this convo with my boss. “I’m not gay.”
Deny, deny, deny.

“Yes, you are.”

My brow scrunched. “Maybe just for him?”

“How many damn times have I caught you with pussy dripping off you like gold chains from a rap singer? And you always look like a lamb bein’ lead to the slaughter. One look at Jack and no one can get your attention. No one. I don’t care if you think you’re a hitchhiker on the gay highway, but at least admit you have the hots for the man.”

“I took him home last night.”

She poured more whiskey. “Cheers!”

“He got me off then took off while I was sleeping.”

“Oh, hell.”

“Any more words of wisdom? Maybe another street boy you wanna set me up with?” Stomping to my feet, I had my eyes on the door.

“Sit your ass down.” A command from Jane was not to be messed with even if I could take down the five-foot-four hard-ass woman.

I plunked into my seat.

“Why do you think we call you Beef?”

“Because I’m big and dumb as a side of?”

“Jesus cunt. Do you even own a mirror? You’re gorgeous, buff, sexy as hell.”

I sent my eyes skyward. As far as I knew, Jesus didn’t have a cunt and the rest of the shit she spewed was bogus too.

“And I’m willing to bet *M’sieur* Cotille thinks so too.”

“Bullshit.” I sat back, folding my arms over my chest.

“So I guess the way his eyes are glued to you all night long is because he thinks you’re disgusting. Not because he wants to jump your bones.”

“Uh huh. And after he popped my gay cherry by giving me my first bj from a guy, he did a runner. Total romance there.” Talk about a shock to my self-confidence.

Jane wasn’t digging my pity party. “I bet he gets hard for you all night long. He’ll be back, tomorrow night in fact.” She crossed in front of the desk when I rose from the chair. She sent me off with a swat to my ass. “Now get back to work and stop being such a moody prick.”

“I thought moody and prickly were part of my job description.” I ducked out the door before she could throw something at my head.

The night that never ended finally finished with a knock at a godawful hour of the morning. Cracking the door, it turned out I didn’t have to wait until the next

night to see Jack. Since I had a Jack Cotille blind spot to go with the soft spot I couldn't hide around him—not to mention an unrelenting hard-on for the man—I let him inside.

He had a plastic bag in his hand . . . guitars crisscrossed over his shoulders. A cleft in his chin and twin goddamn deep dimples on his cheeks just like the ones I'd felt above his ass the other night. "So, I wanted to say sorry."

"Are you just looking for a place to flop?"

"I dunno, *cher*." The deep voice and sexy accent were pitch perfect to make my prick hard. "You don' make me do things for money. You're big and warm and fun to kiss. I like sleepin' with you, *mais* if you don' like it, I can go."

Fuck that. The man looked up at me with his eyes a killer combination of sinful innocence. I skimmed my thumb across his cheek beneath the dark fan of his eyelashes, sweeping the cold off his flesh and warming him with mine.

Dark day-old stubble was soft beneath my palm when I cupped his jaw. His eyes slid closed and if I hadn't been focused on every nuance of this man-boy, I would've missed his slight parting of lips and the quiver in his neck.

Pulling my hand away, I asked, "You gonna run away again?" I scratched my belly and his gaze glommed onto the blond pelt beneath my fingers.

His breath hitched as his eyes lifted to my face. He shook a CVS bag at me. "I brought presents."

"You didn't have to do that."

Jack stood uncertainly in the doorway. "Just thought I owed you somethin'."

“How old are you, Jack?” Because he seemed wise and knowing, and totally fucking guileless at the same time.

“Twenty-four if I’m a day. You?”

“Twenty-six.”

“*Bien*. I like big blond bears.”

I barked a laugh and backed up. Jack gathered his backpack from the landing.

Closing the door behind him, I pushed him onto the couch. “Are you a prostitute?” The question popped from the top of my mind and out of my mouth before I could reel it back in. This was not the way to entice him into staying, but I needed one thing from him, one truth. He gave himself while holding back everything. Transparent but with layers I’d never discover.

He merely shrugged his shoulders. That soft flop of black hair fell into his eyes. “I’m a survivor. Do what I gotta do.”

I did *not* like the idea of him out alone all night long. Or picking up whatever cheap fucking thrill he could to trick his way into a bed for the night. My heart played air hockey in my chest. “What does that mean?”

“Means you gotta lighten up. You need to take a load off.” He reached for my jeans. “I can help with that.”

Oh God, I wanted to say yes, I wanted to shout it out loud before he disappeared again. But more importantly I didn’t want to wake up in the morning with him missing from my bed.

I stilled his fingers that fiddled with the button fly of my jeans. “Are you really gay?”

“Oh yeah. Definitely homo . . . and very seriously gay for you. All the time. You’re so fuckin’ sexy. Since when did you decide dick does it for you?”

“Since you.”

“That should work in my favor then.” Everything worked in his favor, especially when he stood up and stripped off in the middle of my living room. He dived into the bag of goodies and pulled out half-price boxes of tree ornaments.

I took his seat and squirmed on the couch. “Christmas is over.”

“Not for me it isn’t. Get that hard meat out for me, *Beef*.”

Working out of my jeans was a feat of gymnastics because my cock tangled in the waistband. Freed from clothes, I crossed my arms behind my head to enjoy the show. He tinsel the tree and hung ornaments on it—Jack, my very own naughty angel who decorated while naked, his cock stretched straight up, rigid and ready.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“You don’ like it? Most guys want more from me.” Again with the whore attitude.

“I’m not most guys, I just want you.”

He dangled a piece of mistletoe from his fingertips as he swaggered to me. Bare skin, rampant cock, unbelievably erotic.

“You cheesy son of a bitch.” I dove for his lips, kissing them hard. Guiding his hips down to me until he lay in the lee of my thighs, I growled and gasped against his mouth. His hot body on top of mine, I clutched his smooth ass.

Slithering down my torso, he nibbled up and down my shaft. “You like the mistletoe now?” His parted lips sucked hard on the side of my cock.

I nodded mutely, eyes wide and unblinking. He made me hold the sprig of mistletoe above my cock as he gave slick Christmas kisses all over it.

Before I could come, he slid me to the floor. He turned off the lights, leaving us bathed in the multicolor glow from the Christmas tree. “That’s better,” he murmured against my ear, turning me over to my front.

He hauled me up, close enough to know I was gonna get fucked . . . hard. His knuckles and fingers dug deep into my glutes. His naked sweaty skin covering my back, Jack lifted me until I was in a hands and knees position.

Then he pulled off of me, palming my ass cheeks open. “Jesus. You’re a fuckin’ brute.” Rough hands kneaded me. “Your ass, they oughtta name a mountain range after it.” One finger perched at the rim. “Gonna be so fuckin’ tight, *cher*.”

Oh my fucking FUCK.

That was when his tongue then his fingers and possibly his tonsils too spread me, tasted me. Tunneling and twisting and turning with lube and spit and . . . *goddamn*. I shivered from my hips all the way up my body when he rolled on a condom. The lube went on next. He used loud, wet audible strokes, massaging the slick length between his hand and my cleft, breathing as hard and fast as me.

His cockhead knocked against my hole. He groaned loud with his dick in hand. Working me open again, he pushed more lube into my chute with three fingers.

“*Fuuuck*,” I grunted.

“You sure you want me in there?”

I reached back to grab his neck and pull him to me. My kiss was a deep plunge of tongue into his mouth, showing him exactly what I wanted him to do to me.

When he dragged the full, moist head of his cock against me, I rasped, “Do it, fuck me.”

My shoulders shook, my biceps bunched hard, bracing me up off the floor. Jack tunneled in, one slow inch at a time. The burn of it stung my eyes and pinched my ass. The foreign feeling of something—Jack—inside of me made me cry out. When the fiery pain eased, he was only half inside my trench and I was ready for all of him.

He held my hips in two firm hands when I tried to rock back. “Slow, *cher*, slow. Take my cock like this.”

The heat, the wet, the brand of being fucked as Jack soldered into me made me widen my thighs to accept every long inch of him.

He let loose the second I groaned. Hips thrusting, he yanked my short hair and breathed into my ear . . . that harsh dirty voice making me lose it. His low growls and long licks as he filled my ass had me slamming back against him as fast as I could.

Jack shouted and pulled out. I looked back over my shoulder. He poured more lube into his hand and slid wet fingers inside me. Another trail of slick went up his sheathed cock.

The grin he sent me was pure wicked intentions. Then he thrust inside of me in one straight shot. That time I yelled a hoarse cry that bounced off the walls and back at us. Pleasure pounded through me. His cock squelched. Our loud wet ass-fuck made me see stars behind my eyelids. They united in a supernova of fireworks as I shouted and shook and came so terrifyingly, so fucking awesomely hard, jism sprayed all over the floor and my chest and my neck in a scorching fountain.

Jack railed into me a few more times. Harsher and harsher breaths while I clenched around him, riding the wild thrusts. Then his hips snapped so hard he forced me to the floor. His breath stopped. His body bowed over mine. I felt the throbbing pump of his come filling the condom inside me and finally, finally his long loud roar.

Minutes later, maybe hours—who knew?—I heard the rubber snap off and his feet padding to the bathroom. A light came on somewhere in the distance, but fuck me, my vision was still blurred from the fuck of the century. A warm washcloth swabbed between my legs and his lips played gently with my mouth. The washcloth was tossed somewhere across the room. A pillow was shoved under my head and then blankets and Jack's bare skin snuggled over and against me.

Fucking perfect.

“Not a virgin anymore, *beb*.”

“Ungh,” was all I could manage.

“I hurt you?”

“Nuh uh,” I slurred.

He caressed my ass and back and shoulders in soothing motions, and I felt his smile against my neck, the tiny kisses and soft murmurs.

I fell asleep, so satisfied.

I woke to the low strains of Jack singing by the light of my one red candle. His back to the couch beside me, deep blue gaze locked on me. Voice sultry and deep, he hummed the refrain of a song I’d never heard. I reached for him, sitting up, kissing the words from his lips. And I took him inside me again.

3

A Side of Beef

Jack's vanishing act the next day wasn't unexpected, just hated. Once again, I roamed my apartment, coming up empty-handed. The fifty I'd tucked beneath the melted red candle on the kitchen table was untouched. I didn't want to buy Jack but I didn't want him cold or hungry or roaming around homeless. I'd fallen hard for the man in the space of three days, much harder than I'd suspected I would when I was watching him from afar.

I had his last name, but I didn't have a phone number. Definitely no address, as had basically been established. He'd taken his backpack and guitars with him so I didn't have anything to blackmail him with. The last thing I remembered from the night before were his desperate husky cries as he came inside me a third time after we finally made it to the bed. I'd passed out, probably with a 'lucky bastard' grin on my lips and I never heard him leave.

The one saving grace was I knew Jack Cotille and the Crazy Boys had a gig at Mosh that night. I took special care with my appearance before heading into work. I took a long shower, had a hot shave with lots of lather. My ass was a little sore; twinging when I sat down, but it was an ache I wore like a frigging badge of honor. I liked knowing Jack's cock had been inside me. A grin on my face, I put on a new pair of leathers, one of my black T-shirts, and big shitkicker boots. I considered making Jack a to-go box of food he could snack on but how ridiculous would that be? *Hey baby, here's a doggie bag . . . and thanks for the doggie style fucking last night. Think we can try it again later?*

At Mosh I had to wait until all the music lovers and rowdy partiers in line made it through the doors before I could follow them in. Jane winked at me from her station behind the bar. She shouted above the din, "You boy's here. Rockin' set tonight!"

Nice. Very smooth. Thanks, Jane. Bob the part-time bartender smirked in my direction. *Yup, secret's out.*

I found a nice place to park my ass on the sidelines where I could keep an eye on any dickheads with attitudes. I also made sure I had a giant stretch of uninterrupted view of Jack. As the night wore on I had to bounce several douchebags who'd had too much to drink. And the ones who thought getting punchy with their girlfriends was a smooth move. As well as the idiots who were too high to see straight but just plucky enough to start a fight over nothing.

All the while, Jack's gritty voice washed over me like a promise to fuck. The way he held the guitar over his crotch, pulling it and pushing it, invited a host

of sexual fantasies I wanted to enact. His hips moving in circles reminded me of the way he'd grinded into me last night, rotating his pelvis and pushing deep.

Testing Jane's theory, I stopped pretending I wasn't paying *aaaany* attention whatsoever to Jack and blatantly stared at him. And whaddya know? His gaze penetrated me the second I made eye contact, never straying. Singing to me. Licking his gorgeous cocksucking lips. *Christ*. He made me so horny.

By the time the final set ended I was worried about busting through the seams of my leathers. Thankfully I got to cool off as I escorted the final clubbers from Mosh when the house lights came on. But back inside, bathed once more in Jack's unmuted gaze, I was helpless to stop what I'd always been too scared to do before.

I marched up to the stage.

He peered up from packing his guitar and wiped a lick of sweat from his temple with the collar of his shirt. "*Cher*."

God. He killed me when he called me that. Add the drawl and the slow smile, the damp shaggy black hair . . . I jumped onto the stage. Excitement flashed across his eyes when I walked over to him. Running both hands up his arms, I cupped his neck. I leaned in to lick the juicy curve of his so-red lips, grinning when he hissed between his teeth. Then I kissed him, drawing his tongue into my mouth, moaning with how sweet he tasted.

I kissed Jack—a man—right there in the middle of Mosh in front of Jane, his bandmates, God and everyone.

And holy *hell*, did he ever kiss me back. One long wet, plundering loud kiss punctuated by his growling whimper.

“You’re coming home with me, baby.” I pulled back.

His face was flushed, his grin full of delight. “Okay.”

“Get your shit. Let’s go.” I was too impatient to wait for the rest of them to pack up.

“Okay.”

We exited to the sound of whistles and claps and catcalls.

I barely restrained myself from attacking him outside, or against my truck, or inside it. I wanted Jack so much, but I wanted to take it slow—and goddammit—I wanted to know where he would be and how I could reach him.

Hustling him into my apartment, I watched him drop the guitar cases and stow his backpack. I thrust my phone at him. “Add your number.”

His teeth bit into his lip, a lip that smiled as he tapped at the screen.

“Now I’m giving you mine.”

He dutifully plugged my number into his phone and I made him show it to me. The entry didn’t have my name, just *Cher*.

Fuck, my heart did a backflip in my chest.

Tonight there were worrying dark circles under his eyes. I stroked my thumb softly over the discolored skin, closing in to kiss him chastely. “Now we’re gonna eat.”

“Yessir.”

“Then you’re gonna sleep the rest of the night *and* morning in my bed and you ain’t running off while I’m passed out because you fucked every single bone in my body loose.”

“*Mais*, I can do the fucking part, right?”

My eyes flipped wide. My fists clenched on my hips. “Yeah.” My voice lowered to a hoarse note. “Yeah, you can do the fucking part.”

After he was well fed and fresh from the shower, he crawled up the bed toward me. The towel barely held its knot low on his lean hips. His hand cruised along the inside of my thigh, heat seeping in beneath the black leathers.

“You always wear leathers to Mosh . . .”

“Yeah. They make me look mean.”

He started laughing like that was the funniest fucking thing he’d ever heard.

Rolling him over, I tore the towel away. “You think that’s funny? I’m the big bad bouncer, remember?”

He linked his hands behind my neck, kissing a path to my ear. “You’re the least mean person I’ve ever met. My gentle giant.”

We stayed awake far longer than was smart, shooting the shit about our upbringings. My strict Midwestern rearing that might’ve had something to do with me cowering out about coming out about my gayness. His easy come easy go bayou childhood that had come to a crashing end when his folks died in a house fire, leaving him—sixteen years old and not at all legal—to look after his younger brother.

Everything about Jack was so temporary, so fleeting; it was painful to see him sitting across from me on the bed, in my bedroom. I wanted to tie him up and make him stay with his untarnished soul and his beautiful heart, his rough voice and his wild-at-heart songs.

He'd replaced the towel with a pair of my sweats he seemed to have adopted, and I did the same at some point during the night. And now we sat, my eyes growing heavy while he scribbled in one the many notebooks spilling from his open backpack. He drummed his fingers against his thigh and chewed the end of a sharp pencil that had some flashy cartoon design on it. Maybe it was another of his bargain bin post-Christmas finds. A smile flitted across his face when he sent a sidelong glance at me. Then he shook his head and bent back over the rapidly filling page.

I yawned and stretched, patting the bed beside me to see if he'd crawl up and inside. And be next to me. "What's that?"

"Oh. I just write my lyrics in here." He glanced at me again, coy instead of direct for a change.

"Are you blushing?"

He smirked, looking down at the pad. "I'm writin' you a song."

What is he doing to me? I had to admit to myself . . . I was falling in love. What a stupid thing to do with a man like him, who couldn't be nailed down and most assuredly was gonna walk right out of my life.

But the way my heart filled at his shy admittance, I just couldn't seem to give a shit. "Can you fuck me without a condom tonight?"

His eyes blinked up and the wide blue shock was swiftly taken over by pupil-blown arousal. Rougher than ever, his voice sent shockwaves of desire directly to my cock. “I can do that. I’m clean. I spend a lot of time at hospitals, I get tested regularly.”

Another worrying fact to stow away and mull over during the hours he went missing from my life.

He’d moved his redone Christmas tree into my bedroom because he liked the lights and the fact it was ours. With just those twinklers to light the way, Jack made out with me and sucked me until everything—the lights, his dancing eyes, his rakish grin—was a blur.

When he entered me, it was face to face for the first time. That first long thrust made me cry out and stretch for more. For him. Forever. I hoped I never stopped falling for him.

Curling over me with my thighs pushed up and out, he murmured sweet sexy nothings between a million wet hot kisses. *Beb*, and *cher*, and *wanna get closer, crawl inside you, never leave you*.

He kissed all over my throat and his breath gusted against my ear. His eyes blazed, the pulse in his throat jumping. “This isn’t fucking.”

I sucked in a breath, keeping my eyes open and on his as long as I could. “I know, baby.”

He slid deeper. His voice registered like a hypnotic drug to my soul, “I’m makin’ love to you, *cher*.”

It was intense and emotional and so completely right to be made love to by Jack, I had no choice but to groan and gasp and come just after those words. He held me up to him, getting as close as he could without inhabiting my skin like he did my heart. A heart that thundered with every thick hot pulse of his uncaptured seed inside of me.

Marking me.

Branding me.

Owning me to my very soul.

4

The Famous Jack Houdini Act

In the morning, it was heaven waking up with Jack still in my arms. Black hair hid his face while I watched—*no*—while I stared at him. It was closer to lunchtime, really. Birds chirping, the sun cascaded in creating humid warmth under the covers where our bare skin touched. The hardness of his male body draped over mine did a number on my morning wood.

He scrunched his nose and slipped off me to cuddle his pillow to his face. A smattering of wrinkles from the bed covers lined his cheek. I kissed his neck up to his mouth, lingering until he smiled. Under the shock of his jet-colored hair, hazy blue eyes winked out.

My hand drifted down his back—up and down—taking the sheet and blankets with me until they pooled beneath the amazing sleek crescents of his ass and the perfect rounds of his balls.

“Wan’ me to fuck you again?” His voice was lazy, sleepy.

My finger slid slowly into the crease between those tight muscular cheeks and Jack's eyes widened then narrowed. "Oh, you wanna fuck my ass, Brian?"

Just him saying it was enough to make my cock drip a drop of pre-ejaculate from the tip. I didn't need to answer. I pushed a little harder on the ring of muscle instead.

Getting into place above him, I homed in on his back. Kissing and nipping the tight sinews, I murmured, "I swear I could write a song about you."

"Yeah?"

"How soft your skin is, but how hard your muscles are underneath." I kissed my way down his back. Watching Jack's fingers clutch the blankets, I listened to his breathless moan that dipped and licked and curled around my cock like his tongue had.

"Your voice. When you sing and it gets so low it's almost a growl. That's what you sound like when you come."

I clasped his cheeks and pulled them open, my gaze pinpointed on his pucker. His hips thrust up when I tickled him with my breath. I set about suckling his beautiful balls first.

Jack's forehead thumped against the pillow.

I eased up with my tongue, drizzling saliva along his hot, sexy crack at the same time I pulled his cock back toward his feet. Grasping, stroking, handling the heft of him, I felt him get harder.

"Your hair that hides your bright blue eyes, and the way you smile at me . . ." I bit and licked his ass. "Your dirty little grin. Your arms, your wrists, your

fingers. Your face. Your fucking beautiful ass.” Reaching underneath, I raised him up. “This amazing cock. Especially when it’s throbbing in my hand or in my hole or coming in my mouth.”

“Ooh yeah. Bri, Jesus.”

I grabbed the lube, popped the cap. Spreading it over and around and into him, I almost chewed my lip clean through with the need to be inside him. I did every move he did to me and managed to bump his prostate over and over until he whimpered.

Cock lathered in a coat of lubricant, I teased him by tapping his entrance with the head of it.

“C’mon, man . . .” He begged.

“Maybe I’ll just eat you some more.”

“Brian, *cher*.” I loved how his voice got even deeper and shaky.

Watching his hot little hole bloom open in invitation, I slid inside—the tip popping through his ring of tissue first. “Not your first time.”

“*Unhh*. No.” Jack’s hips twisted for more cock. “Been a while since I had anything in there though.”

I stopped because my nads clenched so fast I almost came at the idea of . . . “Anything?”

“Dildo, butt plug, sometimes beads . . .”

Straining above him, sweating . . . I talked through rigid lips. “Beads? Jesus Christ, Jack, don’t say shit like that. You’re gonna make me blow.”

“Oh no you don’t. Not until you get that fucking big cock all the way in me and pound me into the mattress.”

I took it slow because goddamn right I was gonna enjoy every second of being inside him, every sound that expelled from him, and every inch of velvet suction convulsing around my fully shafted dick. He writhed and begged and whined. Nothing had ever felt so good, looked so fucking mind-blowingly hot, or sounded so erotic as his noises and the slap of my cock filling him up.

I kept a slow pace of deep forceful thrusts. When I was sure he was out of his head with arousal, I reached around to take his throbbing cock in hand. One pump, two, he came with a shattering yell.

Pulling him back onto my lap, I held him against my chest while he shuddered against me. Deep inside, he clenched all around me. Jack whimpered and groaned, coming more and longer than ever before until it was everywhere. The tang of it filled my nose. The silky feel of it filled my palm. I smeared it up his chest and hung onto him.

“Merde, beb. Such a romantic.”

Not at that point. I pushed him forward and withdrew. Scooping up his come, I slathered my cock with it. I slammed back into Jack. Ferocious, unrestrained, out of control, I fucked his own come into his ass until I blasted off inside. Our comingled release ran out of him and down his thighs, onto my shivering balls.

I slumped over him, catching my breath.

Jack's wicked grin in side view was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes.

"Did I say romantic? Bri, you are one hot dirty fuck."

At that point my brain said *Whoa* before blinking out of existence.

We worked out a routine of sorts. Jack came home with me the next night he had a gig at Mosh. He showed up on my doorstep in the wee hours of the morning the night in between. His backpack and freakin' guitars still traveled with him, but he didn't skip out without breakfast in his belly, a kiss on my lips—usually a grope and a blowjob too for good measure—and a promise to come back.

That was all I was gonna get. I'd take it.

And I had his phone number. I tried not to text the shit out of him but his constant one-word raunchy slingers made it worth losing some of my well-armed, 'don't need anybody' attitude.

Alarm bells went off for me when he skipped his gig on the twenty-ninth of December. The man never missed a spot, and his band showed up. He was the only one MIA.

Jane cornered me in the corridor between the club and her office—chunky blond hair in hand-raised disarray like mine. "You heard from your toyboy tonight?"

"No."

"Last night?"

“Yeah.”

“This ain’t like him.” Her brows skewered together. “Have you thought about checkin’ the hospitals?”

He spends a lot of time at hospitals. Why is he always at hospitals, and homeless, and fucking sleep deprived?

“I gotta go.” I was already halfway out the door when I looked back at Jane. She nodded me away, a hand raised to her mouth.

I didn’t call Roper or MUSC. That would waste too much time. I jumped in my truck and peeled out, speeding to the cluster of downtown hospitals. My hands shook on the steering wheel.

I hit one then the other and the next, getting no answers from the emergency room or reception staff. At MUSC, I double-parked. I ran across the street, almost colliding face first with an ambulance, and careened inside.

“Someone called Cotille here?” I tried to be polite instead of pounding my fist on the desk that sectioned me off from a bank of computers that held all the info I needed.

“Are you family?”

Close enough it felt like it. My nerves crawled across my skin. “A brother.”
Lover. Boyfriend. Whatever.

Leaning across the desk, I shoved an ID under the receptionist’s nose and stared at the screen of her computer. Seventh floor. Room 756. *Cotille, J.*

Jesus Christ!

I raced to the elevators, ignoring her shouts. “Visiting hours are over!”

Push-push-pushing the button as if my finger was a trigger, I almost fell inside when the elevator arrived. Going up too slowly for my liking, I paced the square space until the doors open and I rushed out. The hospital was a maze, one hall splitting into another that got me no closer to Jack.

My heart pounded. It could've been as loud as my heavy boots on the waxed floors.

Finally. Room 756.

Oh God, oh fuck. Something that sounded like a bilge pump did the work of breathing for the patient inside. Too pussy to go in head on, I peeked inside. And my heart climbed up to my throat. Jack was there all right. But he wasn't the patient.

My momentary relief was crushed by dread.

He held the hand of an equally stunning young man in the bed, no less gorgeous in spite of his emaciated form. His was a more haunting beauty than Jack's lively features. Jack tenderly stroked his cheek. He kissed the sleeping prince on his forehead as tears leaked from the corners of his eyes. The hushed whispers he murmured dissolved into sobs when he cried in a sudden heap over the man.

"You can pull through this. Don't die on me, *beb*."

Beb, the same endearment he called me when he made love to me.

I bent over from the waist, unseen from inside the room. Arms crossing my stomach, I held the screaming agony at bay, the wracking pain of betrayal deep inside my body. I stumbled away, half blind. The wall beneath my hand was the

only solid thing holding me up. Close to losing my lunch in the middle of the antiseptic-smelling hallway, I lurched for the elevator. Just before the doors closed me in, I saw the plaque on the wall opposite me. *7th Floor: Adult Oncology*

Knowing Jack's lover—*his partner*—had cancer almost made it impossible to hate him.

Almost.

5

Knock-Kock. Fuck Off.

Jane called and left messages. She wanted to know if I'd located Jack, if he was okay. My reply text was a terse explanation of the situation, and I only sent it because I didn't want her to worry about him.

I holed up in my apartment. I blinked back stupid tears and stared at the bare bulb above the kitchen table until the white recessed light blurred red and burned into my retinas, drying the surface of my eyes.

Jack had texted me, too. He must've found time to leave his lover's bedside. He probably wanted to make sure he had a place to bunk down later. I did not reply to him. He cottoned on quick that something was wrong because the upbeat tone of his texts quickly turned anxious . . . then pleading. *What's wrong, cher? Are you okay? I'll be there soon.*

Good. Let him be the one worrying for a change.

I should've texted back that he wasn't welcome, no need to turn up for his nightly fuckfest with Beef. I didn't. Part of me—childish, selfish, and spiteful—wanted to see his face when I told him I was onto his game and I wasn't gonna be his sucker anymore. I wanted to see if the end of our short affair tortured him as much as it did me. I wanted to hurt him.

I eventually turned off my cell after calling in sick to work—a first. I went on a bender, drinking beers and baking goddamn muffins. Slamming sticky bowls into the sink, because I knew I wouldn't lay my fists on Jack, I filled crackling muffin papers and tin upon tin of gooey blueberry batter. When the kitchen got overheated, I jerked up a window and hung my head outside in the crisp air. I gulped in icy breaths that froze in my lungs and made my heart run sluggish.

Jack showed up on my doorstep, way earlier than usual that night. He knocked and waited. Pounded and waited. I peered out the peephole just to see his distraught features, the handsome angles twisted in anguish. My fists curled into big slabs that could pummel and bruise but had always cherished and caressed him, even when the fucking got exquisitely rough.

He could stay out there all night for all I cared. There was nothing I could give him he didn't already have, including my heart. Tears leaked down my face. I wiped my nose.

The rap at my door didn't let up and then he really got pissed, shouting, "Brian goddamn Carroway, open this motherfuckin' door right now!"

I swung the door open so hard it bounced back and almost smacked Jack in the face.

Good.

Up close he looked even worse. Sunken eyes, sallow skin, he looked like shit.

Even better.

I didn't move out of the way or invite him inside. "No, no, no. You are *not* coming in."

He skimmed his hair back. I bit my tongue, opening and balling my fists again. The ever-present ache for him eviscerated me.

"Jane said you went to the hospital lookin' for me. Then you didn't turn up at work."

I slammed my hands against doorframe. "Do you have any fucking idea how scared I was about you?"

"What did you see, Brian?"

I gritted my teeth. I looked away from his enchanting lying eyes. "I'm sorry your *other* boyfriend's sick, but—"

"Brian."

"I can't do this!" I grabbed his collar and pulled him close. "Don't you get it? You made me fall in love with you!"

I shoved him away, ignoring his choked gasp.

"You need money for *his* hospital bills . . ." I watched a sole tear slide down his cheek. "Get in touch with me through Jane. But don't contact me again."

I slammed the door in his face.

I cut out my heart. I closed my eyes. I cried.

He railed on my door, thundering against it. “You don’t know what you’re talkin’ about! You think I go home with guys every night, Brian? You think I give it up for just anyone?”

No, I think you have someone you love already, and I’ll never be that person for you.

I heard him slide down the door and hit the floor. I imagined him sitting the same as me—head down, knees up, eyes clamped shut. Parted by only my thin door, the distance between us was wider than any gulf.

I heard his whisper: *“You made me feel like I was worth somethin’.”*

I listened to him falling apart on the other side.

I got wasted.

6

My Little Strummer Boy

Jack made me stupid. He made me crazy. He made me fall in love.

And drinking beer and getting tanked was not a smart way to deal with my heartbreak. He eventually left my landing. He left the building. I watched from my window as he walked down the road, the streetlamp's glow a halo over his downcast head.

He left my life.

Jane—on the other motherfucking hand—wouldn't get the hell out of it. Phone calls, texts, voice mails. Ignore, ignore, ignore. No matter how much I turned a blind eye to her incoming messages, I couldn't get out of working the biggest night of the year—New Year's Eve.

I certainly didn't make a big fuss out of getting ready for work that night. I barely stood under the shower long enough to soap up and run a toothbrush

across my teeth. The leathers and T-shirt I pulled on before I was completely dry, and a hand-rake made do for a brush through my hair.

It didn't matter how much I wanted to hate Jack, I searched him out the second I took the ticket and checked the ID of the last person in line and headed inside Mosh. Up on stage, Jack was beautiful as ever, and so goddamn untouchable no matter the number of times I'd kissed him or held him. Just a wanderer, who already had the love of his life and maybe used me for a little bit of solace because I would've given anything to him.

Pain washed over me in a choking tide of sadness.

Maybe I should write some fucking song lyrics too.

As I cruised through the crowd in the overheated, overflowing room, the lights dimmed further. A spot hit Jack, and he sat alone in the middle of the stage on a stool. He focused on his hands working the acoustic he almost never played in here, strumming out a few haunting notes.

When he began to sing, his voice—passionate, guttural, all the things I loved about it—cut through the roaring club noise and arrowed right inside of my chest. I stood stock-still as he lifted his face, peering through raven black hair straight at me.

I fell back onto a barstool when the force of his searing song swirled inside my ears. He got to his feet, on the edge of the stage, his fans going insane below him. He didn't look anywhere but at me.

The lyrics made my heart slip and slide inside my chest. Made my teeth ache, my eyes well. It wasn't a rock anthem but a love song. A ballad, to me. He

sang so surely, voice hungry and deep. How the sun climbed through my window while we lay in bed and he watched me sleep. How he wanted to be the sunlight on my skin and in my heart. The light on my face, like the light I poured into his soul.

I rubbed a hand over my mouth and tried to swallow. I couldn't tear my eyes away, not when he sang of the way I kissed him—full of every longing he'd ever felt. Every longing only I eased. My fingertips pushed into my thighs and I wet my lips when he jumped off the stage. The crowd screamed like ear-bashing banshees, slowly parting in a sea of black leather and denim as he swaggered through them.

With the final notes from his Hagstrom, his warm lips brushed my ear. The last line wasn't sung, it was whispered for me alone. "This is how I tell you I love you, Brian Beef Carroway."

Aside from his soft panting breaths, I couldn't hear a damn thing through the rush of blood pounding through me. He ignored the fans bringing down the house on all sides of us and pulled me out of the seat. Ushering me through the club, he yanked me into the hallway and through the doors to Jane's empty office.

I wanted to touch him so badly I had to ball my hands into fists to stay away from him.

"Whose name did you ask for at the hospital, *cher*?"

His endearment made me lose focus. "Huh?"

"Whose name, goddammit?"

“Cotille.” *Fuck.*

“You were lookin’ for me.” He ranged closer, his breath sliding across my throat.

I couldn’t let him touch me. I’d crumble to pieces.

“But I wasn’t the patient.” His lips parted so close to my mouth.

“No shit. I got that from the way you climbed on top of the man in the bed.”

Asshole, asshole, *asshole.*

“His name’s Cotille.”

“Congrats, bastard. So glad you have a loving partner. Can I go now before I have a moment?” I shoved my palms against his shoulders, pushing him away. I made for the door.

“He’s my brother!” Jack shouted. “Jesus, you *are* thick.”

Stopping halfway to the door, I turned to look at him. “What?”

“My brother, Brian.”

“What?”

“Justin . . .” Jack framed my face in his hands. “My little brother, the one I told you about. He’s got leukemia. I brought him here for the best hospitals. Been bunkin’ in his room except when you took me in.”

Instant shock rattled through me. My head reeled back, out of his grasp. “Your . . . Justin? Jesus Christ! Why didn’t you say something? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was barely holdin’ it together before you came along. You were the only thing that made me stop thinking about him dying.” He hit me with a shy smile

growing broader. “The bone marrow transplant happened last week—that’s where I was. Not fuckin’ around or bein’ a player. I think he’s gonna be okay.”

Grasping Jack’s arms, I hauled him against me. I snatched his lips between mine. His gasps and hungry growls I swallowed.

I curled my arms around him and held on. “You best tell me everything from now on. Or else I’m liable to lose my mind.”

“Can do.” Lifting his head, he teased me into another kiss.

“You’re coming home with me, by the way.”

He grinned at my total body-lock on him. “I gathered.”

“And you’re done for the night.”

“Thought so, *beb*.”

If he called me *beb* one more time, Jane’s desk was not gonna be off-limits. I was tempted to lift him up so he could wind his legs around my waist and I could carry him out of the club in full view of everyone.

I managed to make do with lacing my fingers through his. Finding Jane, I said, “We gotta go.”

“Course. Your first night back since you ducked outta here, but that’s fine. Go on. Go make up with your Cajun thrill, I s’pose the place’ll still be standin’ tomorrow.” She winked and waved us off. “Least someone likes dick around here.” I heard her grumble.

“I gotta get my stuff.” Jack tried twisting his hand from mine.

Not happening. Yeah, we’d get his stuff all right, and then it was staying at my place.

In the truck, I clenched his hand tight enough to break bones, but I couldn't let go. Once I stopped outside my apartment, my head fell forward. My shoulders hunched. I shuddered with the sort of full-body silent sobs no one ever wanted a witness to.

"I really messed you up, didn't I?" He reached for the seat lever then slid into the tight space he created, straddling my lap and holding me until I calmed down.

"I love you, *cher*. You're so gorgeous and generous, and . . . *goddamn* but you are filthy sexy hot in bed and I'm glad no other man knows it but me." His kiss was a tender flutter against my lips. "Might even get me to church on Sunday to give thanks for that."

The kisses became less tender, more hot. More about the need to touch, skin-on-skin. His hand between us opened my pants.

"What are you doing?"

"Reaffirmin' my feelings for you."

"Something's firm—" I broke off with a moan when Jack took us both out. I inhaled and shut my eyes.

The feel of hard flesh under silky skin and the rough material of jeans framing our erections was sinful. In my truck on the side of the road made it even more wicked, and so much better. He attacked my neck with teeth and tongue, driving me into a crazed, shivering mess.

The instant he lifted out my balls and rapped his cock against them, I came. He bowed over me, sending milky ropes over my pubes and dick, laughing with the last half-breath he had left.

I laughed with him. “New Year’s Eve spunk.”

“That’s good?” He swiped some into his mouth and made a sloppy kiss of me.

“Better than Jack jizz for Christmas,” I murmured.

“*Bien*. It *is* good. What do I get to do for your birthday? Which is when, by the by?”

“February fourteenth. And you get to come in my ass.”

“St. Valentine’s *bébé*. Shoulda known.” His sexy grin flashed at me in the dark.

Inside the apartment, I was done with the pleasantries, like coming all over his hand and stomach. “Do you have keys?”

He dug a plastic key ring from his backpack. “These are for the unit back in N’awlins where my stuff is stored.”

Temporary, always temporary. “I can’t keep doing this easy come easy go shit, you know.”

“I know.”

“So what happens when Justin gets the all clear?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I’m not leavin’ again, okay?”

I pulled a spare set of keys out of the kitchen drawer.

“What’s that?”

“The truck and the apartment.” I added the storage unit stuff to the bunch and handed them back. “You stay here. You use my ride if you need to. No more sleeping in a frickin’ chair in a hospital room and no more secrets.”

“You’re bossy.”

“I’m about to get a whole lot worse.”

“I think you just want me for your sex slave.”

“It’s not just about the sex.” Head hanging, I placed my hands on my hips.

“I know.” The way his indigo eyes shined said maybe he was in it for the long haul.

“Good.”

The guitars could stay in the living room. That was fine, Jack needed easy access. And I hoped he’d sing to me after he fucked me, like he usually did. But the backpack was getting emptied out.

I took it into my bedroom and tossed it onto the bed. Pointing at it I said to an amused Jack. “Unpack.”

“Where?”

I hastily emptied two drawers and shoved hangers aside in my closet. “Here.”

He ambled to his backpack and started pulling out stacks of clothes. Notebooks. Pencils he fiddled with . . .

I tackled him against the dresser, tugging his shirt up and off. On my knees, I licked the strong ridges of his abdomen, laving the twin muscled dents that led under his jeans to his cock.

“I thought you said unpack?” He went that breathy route, the one that made incredibly hard.

“I am unpacking.” I slipped the button fly open, hot male meaty erection slapping into my hand.

“My cock.” He chuckled then gasped. “I’m movin’ in.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you gonna tell your folks?”

“*Mm hmm.*” I slid my lips up and over his cock, filling my mouth.

He tugged my hair. “Your brothers and sister?”

Skimming up his body, I pressed him to the dresser. “Yes.”

“What if they can’t handle it?”

“Don’t care.” I nuzzled his neck. “Either they’ll accept me or they won’t, and I’ll deal with it when the time comes.”

“*We’ll* deal with it.”

I couldn’t control my smile because that hit me just right. “Baby.”

“You got any idea what it does to me when you say that?”

I shook my head before going for his neck and chest and shoulders with my teeth. I groaned, “Please, baby.”

There was barely any time for prep let alone poems or love songs before Jack had me undressed and folded almost in half on top of my dresser. It was just the right height. Amen to that. His cock burrowed in. The thick head, red and swelling, popping in, popping out. His tongue popped out in concentration too

and I tucked it into my mouth the same moment he pulled my ass open and plunged deep inside.

Then it was fucking. The dresser banged into the wall. My balls drew tight. His hands held me wide open and his eyes never left mine. The feel of his cock inside me—bare, hard, huge—made me claw at his hips. Slower, hotter. A roll, a grind. A chuckle when he pulled all the way out and pushed all the way in three times in a row. Jack's sinewy back flexed beneath my palms. I took his butt in both hands, making him increase the speed of his thrusts.

He held off, forearms carved in muscle straining beside my head. "Not yet. It's like my first time with you. Don' wanna come yet."

One huge rolling wave of intense pleasure surged through my body. I came the next time he entered me.

"Yeah, *cher*, yeah . . ." Hot jets punctuated the stutter of his hips. He shredded my lips between his teeth before he shouted the house down.

Jack filled me. So tight, so hard, so . . . *complete*.

Taking a deep ragged breath, he slid out of me and we fumbled together for the bed.

His lips got even softer after he orgasmed. A bonus for me as I licked him and snacked on him. "You're moving in."

"I'm movin' in."

"You'll still sing to me?"

"Long as you cook for me."

Goddamn.

The New Year's Eve countdown began. 10-9-8. Another year over. 7-6-5. The most amazing year ever starting with a Christmas Eve kiss and ending with Jack Cotille as the best gift of my life.

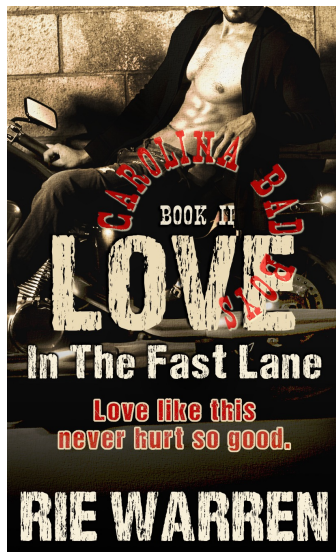
"Four-three-two-one," he rushed. Then he was on top of me, tackling me with the ferocity I loved.

I nipped the salty-sweet skin of his neck. "Still got that mistletoe?"

The End

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Chapter One

Potluck, Rotten Luck

I ARRIVED AT GIGI'S house on the last Sunday in August carting along my mimi, my Rottie, and a piping hot casserole dish of homemade mac 'n' cheese. Mimi had made it. Top Chef I was not. Neither was I Queer Eye/Straight Guy material after the failure of my fake relationship with Josh at the LitLuv convention in May. I blamed our bust-up on Josh's inability to keep his cock in his pants. He'd defected after no more than three days, switching to the other team to be with a woman he just couldn't get out of his system—Leelee Childes, known to the reading and writing masses as Leelee Songchild.

Shee-it. I hadn't been any better, bedding the first piece of fluff I could find right after him. Pandora had been no more than a receptacle for my erection that night in Atlanta, but she was one seriously determined, slightly freakish stalker. Even being half a country away didn't keep her from sending me all sorts of pictures of her . . . well . . . *Pandora's box*.

At least she hadn't begged me to reenact one of the squirm-in-your-seats sex scenes from my books. That was bonus material right there.

Cut loose from my *boyfriend*, I was back in the game, no gay cover story to keep the chick-fans at bay. Not that it mattered. They weren't catching me. I was about as far from relationship material as any man could get. Top romance writer I could do, but I had no frigging clue how to woo a woman anymore. Case in point, Cat Steele's open palm to the side of my face a month ago. Now that woman, she had some spark.

My cheek still burned. She sure packed power behind her punch, I'd give her that. And screw my cheek, every time I thought about Wildcat and how she'd gone off on me at Stone's garage, my cock fired to life. She was nothing like the revolving bed of babes I used to partake of whenever the mood hit me. That was a bad habit I'd outgrown in my late twenties.

These past few years, my octogenarian grandmother had been all the woman I could handle. Not that she needed handling, she'd have you know. With her health on the decline and me the only relation nearby to look after her, I did my best to provide for her. She'd done the same for me when no one else had cared enough, not even my parents. I kept her comfortable without letting her think she was incapable of doing for herself. One thing my mimi still had was an impish grin to go with her mean ear-pinching move if I stepped out of line or made her feel like a doddering old lady.

Gripping Mimi's elbow, I guided her over to Gigi Stone, who was holding court just like she used to at Stone's Auto Service back when her husband—Josh's dad—was still around. Gigi used to call James her silver fox, but she was still the foxy one. She and Mimi hugged, Mimi's long braid streaked with white and Gigi's cutting edge bob pure silver. They'd both weathered age and the losses of life well, even if it showed sometimes in the sadness of their eyes. It did in all of us who'd lost someone near to our hearts.

Gigi wheeled around to me after I set the casserole on the long table overflowing with potluck fare. She took my cheeks in her hands and pulled me down for a kiss on my forehead, the same way she had since Josh brought me home with him during my first days as the new kid at Wando High. I'd been abandoned by my folks and left to be raised by my mimi. Gigi's welcoming kiss that day had caused a thick lump in my throat. It still did, every damn time, but fourteen years later, I was better at covering up the emotions tugging at me.

Draping my arm around her shoulders, I planted a kiss on top of her head. "Hey, Gigi. Have the bozos eaten you out of house and home yet?"

I scanned the crowd of folks consisting mainly of Stone's garage crew—old and new—and their wives, partners, and kids.

She wrangled from beneath my arm and patted her hair where I'd mussed it up. "I figured you and Joshy would take care of that. You been keepin' each other out of trouble, now? 'Cause you know I don't like to hear about my boys behaving badly, 'specially not when it comes secondhand from my church ladies."

She accused me before the fact of any wrongdoing with a withering glare. She'd done the same when Josh and I had made devious, detention-bound plans during high school.

"Ain't up to nothing, ma'am. Just writing and riding, enjoying this fine southern weather, and your fine southern charm."

"Oh, you always were the sweet talker. Don't know how Joshy managed to hook that Leelee. If she ain't a prize, I don't know who is."

I glanced around until I saw the pair . . . Gigi's son and his lady love.

"Reckon I don't wanna know what you're ridin', either." She sniped with a hint of a smile.

I barked a laugh so loud, it startled a tiny baby in the arms of a woman across the table. Ray's wife hushed and rocked the little pink infant before popping a bottle between her lips.

"And I reckon Josh won't be getting into any more messes now Leelee's here to stay. Besides, I was talking about riding my Jeep. The bog's been good this summer—"

"*Sssht*. You can just save that mud-runnin' nonsense for the boys. Tell me about your writing instead." Gigi's eyes gleamed, her cheeks tinged pink. She was hankering after a new release date.

I slipped the leather tie from my ponytail and ran my fingers through my hair. "I signed that three-book contract in June for the witches series. Beating my head over a title for it, but I'm just finishing the first edits—"

"That's enough now, Nicky. Leave me and Miss Myra to it. We gotta catch up, and you don't need to listen to no more woman's stuff, you get enough of that in your books." Gigi nudged my mimi like they were schoolgirls about to steal kisses with the boys behind the bleachers.

"But you just told me to—"

"Sonny, don't tell me what I just told you to do. Haven't you learned anything yet? No wonder you haven't managed to snag the right woman." Gigi's impatience was evident in the cutting way she called me sonny.

"You know you're the only woman for me, Gigi."

“Oh, hush that now. I’m likely to get the heart palpitations. Anyway, I still remember that time you and Josh decided your first box of rubbers would be better put to use as water balloons so don’t you even try to flash that lady-killer grin at me.”

I was sent packing with a final sparkly laugh from Gigi and an in-cahoots grin from my mimi, Miss Myra. The pair of them were thicker than thieves when I sauntered away, whistling for Viper to keep up at my heels.

“They’re probably comparing notes on sex scenes from the latest New Adult releases,” I muttered as I ambled off.

They were part of the same old-dames book club that met once a week to read and discuss every single sex-riddled book under the sun, including mine. Gigi and Mimi had once convinced me to “give a talk” to the group. It was a frighteningly funny affair during which I felt like a retailer for Pure Romance. Except I wasn’t selling sex, I was selling romance . . . with a side of smut.

Far enough away from the food to give Viper free run, I let her loose and sent her in the direction of little dude-man, JJ, the kid. Might as well give Josh a few gray hairs while I was at it. He was living large with the love of his life and too smug for his own fucking good. A little scare wouldn’t hurt him none, and my dog would never hurt the kid. They’d practically grown up together, sharing dog beds, baby beds, and chewtoys during the teething stage.

That hadn’t gone down well with Josh.

Ray, Javier, Gerald, Mick, and all the other guys were in attendance, as were the old coots who shored up the checkerboards and headed up the town crier gossip outside of the garage on 17 North. Their kids, grandkids, and all the hangers-on always showed at the Stone homestead for potluck every last Sunday of the month. Directly after one’s church of choice.

I listened to the laughter, the murmurs and chatter. The sun beat down, spreading the smell of the giant white magnolia blooms with their lemony scent. Inhaling the heady fragrance, I started toward Josh who was half laughing, half telling JJ off about sharing Popsicles with Viper. Again. Ever the shit-stirrer,

Gerald held out an unwrapped orange icy treat to JJ, replacing the one Viper had licked down to the wooden stick, flipping Josh off behind his back.

Yay me. I'd get to clean up bright orange dog puke tonight. No matter. The kid would have a tummy ache, Viper would have a tummy ache. Josh and I would commiserate by phone in the morning.

I watched Leelee nuzzle Josh's neck and him smile down at her. I smiled myself when he leaned over to kiss her.

Man, he finally got it all.

I couldn't have been happier if he truly was my brother.

I shifted my aviators with one finger to brush beneath them, ducking my head while I swallowed the emotion filling my eyes out of nowhere.

Pressing through the beer-drinking, loud-talking crowd, I drew up short when I saw the sexy, black-haired vision of my dreams. Wildcat aka Catarina goddamn Steele. She got the steel part down, all right. She'd gone off like a powder keg at me, but she was back to her cool, untouchable self today. I could see that from several yards away.

She wore a dress as befitted a lady who had recently sung her Sunday psalms. But everything about Cat screamed hellfire more than O Heavenly Father to me. The white sheath stopped above her knees, snug on her willowy frame. The lightweight cardigan hid her arms to the wrists, but neither the dress nor the sweater could cover up the goddess body beneath. Ripe curves, long legs. Fiery as fuck, cold as ice, and just waiting to be melted by passion.

The sight of her rippled an arrow-shot of heat to my groin. My jeans became snug at the crotch as I took in her slanting cheekbones and the haughty tilt of her chin, her eyes hidden once more behind mirrored shades. She was exotic, erotic, and aloof. With jet black hair pulled straight back in a neat knot, Cat sent out a siren song that sizzled all the way up my cock.

I wanted to see her hair down. I wanted to tear off her sunglasses. Goddammit, I wanted to know what color her eyes were.

Her fingers flirted into JJ's hair when he dashed passed, her low laughter following the boy who had a whole gang of kids gunning at his heels for a game of tag.

When Cat looked up, her gaze swung to me. I didn't shift, breath, swallow. I didn't move. Neither did she. *Take the shades off, darlin'.* Mick from the garage careened past her, chasing after the kids, and our look was broken.

I was free to move on. But did I? Hell no. I stood stock still, taking in my fill of her. Cat didn't have a problem ignoring me though, turning to crouch down and scratch Viper's ears when my dog nuzzled against her legs.

"Got it bad, huh?" Ray asked, handing me a beer.

I snorted. "Not."

The burly blond guy took several long gulps of his beer then swiped a hand across his moustache and mouth. "Yeah right. Listen, Nicky, you don't wanna tangle with *that*." He pointed the beer bottle at Cat, who I'd already been staring at for far too long.

"She's pleasant enough with you."

"Cause I ain't tryin' to get into her pants."

Unfortunately the grease monkeys—or assholes as Josh affectionately called them—were more perceptive than a room full of shrinks, and I'd had my fair share of those, too.

"Hey, I was being friendly to her that day." I avoided his shrewd look by inspecting the label on my microbrew.

"Yeah, I don't think the woman does the friends thing. I heard she had some trouble in her past, so you're best leavin' her alone. Also, if you fuck up Josh's new partnership with Chrome and Steele, he's gonna get all pissy again like he was after the Leelee/Atlanta fiasco."

He had a point. Josh did excel at being a first rate dickhead when he was down in the dumps. And a woman with a troubled past was a headache I didn't need. I had too many skeletons in my own closet. I didn't have any room for anybody else's.

Ray cocked his head to the side when he heard his name called. “Aw hell, the old lady’s hollerin’ for me. Probably wants me to change another one of Emma Jane’s diapers. The girl’s so goddamn tiny, man, how can she dump such a huge load? And the smell? I’d rather put up with Gerald’s BO.” He complained like any new father would, but the twinkle in his eyes and the way he stepped-to on command gave him away as a proud papa.

I strolled around, drank more beer, and shot the breeze, maintaining a safe distance from Wildcat. My fingers started getting itchy when I hadn’t checked my phone for texts or emails or Facebook updates after the first hour. I didn’t always like the fact I had to run around like Viper chasing her tail on the social media loop to keep my author presence alive, but I still suffered from withdrawals from the Internet, the one addiction I allowed myself. Stone Sunday was a wifi-free zone, as anyone running the risk of Gigi’s formidable wrath found out. One good thing: it meant my con stalker-chicky couldn’t reach me via any outlet from Twitter to Facebook to G+ for at least one day.

Josh found me drumming my fingers on a table, watching Javier court danger as he hunkered over his phone, tapping away with speed.

“Watcha doin’?” Josh asked as he slung a hefty arm around my neck.

“Waiting for Javier’s imminent execution by your mom.” I peered at the black-eyed, black-haired boy. Then I knocked Josh’s arm off my shoulder, standing up straighter as Javier furiously typed on the screen of his iPhone, giggling quietly to himself. “Holy shit, he’s like—”

“Janice.”

“Yeah, man, if she was a Hispanic homosexual.”

Beer spewed out of Josh’s mouth, landing on me. Oh well, no worse than Viper’s slobber. We continued to laugh our asses off while Javier imparted two regal middle fingers in our direction without looking up. He better be careful, Gigi was liable to snap them off. A young dude with surfer blond hair approached Javier, leaning in to kiss his neck.

“So that’s his guy?” I took an appreciative look.

“Yeah, Tate.”

“How come we didn’t know about this?”

Josh shrugged. “‘Cause we’re dumbasses?”

He was probably right about that.

“They make a cute couple.” I nodded over to Javier and his All American jock.

“They make a better couple than you and I did anyway.”

“We sucked at that, huh? And not in the way we were supposed to.” Winking at me, Josh asked, “Which one do you think is the bottom?”

I squinted at the pair. It was hard to tell. Tate had some muscle on Javier, but maybe that just meant he was the tight-end receiver. Javier was the youngest of the garage crew at twenty-three and his boyfriend couldn’t be much older. “Maybe they’re switches?”

“The only switches I know are the ones Ma used to brand our behinds with when we misbehaved. Missy Peachtree would know all about that.” There was a fond smile on his face when he mentioned the Domme/grand dame from my writing group, the women we referred to as the Hens.

“Hey, Stone!” Javier was no longer giggling, he was outright guffawing.

“What up, ace?”

Just then, the rest of the Stone’s crew surrounded us, each brandishing his cell phone to show us . . . *Oh, fuckin’ hell.* Lookee there, a do-over of the infamous “Stone’s Roses” photo the guys had cobbled together while Josh and I were away in Atlanta last May. This time it was tiled and titled “Ring Around the Rosy”, their hairy assholes and all in close-up. Now I knew what Javier had been working away on; he’d emailed it to all the gathered gang.

And that shit was funny.

“Y’all, it’s gonna be your puckers full of posies if that bullshit ends up anywhere near Twitter,” Josh boomed.

We all laughed at his expense until Gigi yelled, “Chow’s on! Now put them damn gadgets away and get your grub on.”

One large table crowded onto, Gigi held everyone at bay with a nod to Josh. “Say grace, son.”

His deep voice began to rumble, and I held his hand on one side of me and Mimi's on the other. Holding them both tight. "We thank the Lord for the bounty he provided, for the family and friends we're given, for the life and love granted us. For those missing, and those we will always miss, we take this time to remember."

"Oh, Josh," Leelee sighed from the other side of him, knowing as I did he was thinking about his dad.

I squeezed his hand and released it so he could embrace his woman, pretending I wasn't blinking too fast when I kissed Mimi's wrinkly cheek.

Stuffing her hankie away, Gigi started sending platters around. "Eat up, y'all."

There was a saying from Gigi, from way back. *The Stone family is everyone's family*. I looked around the table bursting with people. She had that right.

Everyone tucked in and talk turned to Leelee's book *Ride*. Copies of it were everywhere in the lowcountry. The whole town of Mt. Pleasant was enamored with her. All the boys had read it, their wives, girlfriends, lovers, too. I could just imagine all the jealous broads who had bought that book simply for a hint about how Leelee had snagged the long-elusive Josh Stone.

"How do you feel about sharin' the limelight, Nicky?" One of the jackasses asked.

"Yeah, you ain't the only romance writer in town now." Someone else chimed in.

I chewed a mouthful of slaw. Slowly. My writing and Leelee's were about as far apart as you could get, apart from the gasping-for-breath sex. She was New Adult, I was Paranormal. Never the twain did meet.

Giving a smug grin to the group, I tipped my head toward Leelee. "Y'all can ask me that question when Miss Songchild has another five years under her belt."

"Booyah!"

"Snap."

"Oh, it's on," Leelee said as she reached for me while Josh leaned out of the way. Grabbing the collar of my shirt, she growled, "Romance wars."

"You got it, L." I spat in my palm. She did likewise and we shook on it.

"Y'all about done hauling out your dicks yet? 'Cause I've got something else to say," Josh grumbled.

Leelee slid her hand across his chest. "First of all, I don't have a dick, sug, which you well know by now. I have brass balls. And second," she whispered something in his ear and his hand around a bottle of beer tightened until white knuckles appeared.

His voice came out low and gruff to her, "Yeah. I want that later, babe."

Leelee's laughter tinkling, she sat back, a pleased smile on her face. Her haze of pale red hair brushed Josh's shoulder as he stood up.

With his hands on the table, he looked over all of his, shaking his head and smiling. "I asked Leelee to marry me, and she said yes. Would you believe it?"

The table erupted with victory shouts. I kept my eyes on Josh and Leelee, capturing the way she curled her fingers around his, silently mouthing, "I love you so much."

Tears shined in her eyes, in his—*fuck*—in mine too. I couldn't even bear to look at Gigi, but I knew she'd hauled out the hankie again.

Lifting Leelee's fingers to his mouth, Josh stared at his fiancée. "She's wearing my ring and that makes me the proudest damn man in the whole world. I don't deserve a woman like her, but I'm gonna do my best to make her happy. And I'll kick any motherfucker's ass who hurts her again."

Leave it to him to go barbarian/romantic. The table shook when everyone rapped on it.

"Date, date, date," we chanted.

He brought Leelee to her feet and into his arms, to a kiss that would've simmered off the pages. Breaking away, he was choked up. "We decided to get married on Thanksgiving. It seemed—shit." He backhanded his eyes. "It seemed a good time to get hitched 'cause I'm so fucking thankful for her."

I stood up and clasped his shoulder. "Cheers, man."

"With beer!" Some wiseass cracked.

But those bastards couldn't fool me. Their wide grins and claps and shouts showed how awesome they thought this was. The boss finding his woman, falling in love, making her his wife.

JJ piped up, "Weewee's gonna be a pwincess!"

He was passed down the table for squeals and hugs and gentler than usual high-fives.

We raised our bottles and everyone shouted, "To love!"

I gave Josh a hug, and one to Leelee after. "Tamed by love."

"I wouldn't say tamed," Josh grouched. "Watch it, bro, you're next."

Later in the afternoon, Gigi cornered me. "Now we've got Joshy settled down, what're you waitin' for, son?"

My gaze skidded to Wildcat. *Hell no to that*. Put a stop to that impulse right there. Fuck, my cheek still stung from her smack last month. I did not need a ballbuster for my woman.

JJ interrupted the ill-fated love match, breathless and doped up on sugar. "Uncle Wicky! Uncle Wicky!"

He grabbed me by both grubby hands until I hunched down. His sweet breath spilled across my face, and he grinned at me. "Wuv you, Uncle Wicky. And Weewee's gonna be my momma!"

Jesus. I knew what JJ did to Josh's heart . . . he just about flipped mine upside-down too. I'd been part of his life from newborn to now, helping my buddy out when Claire, his ex, left them high and dry.

These people were my family. The only family I needed.

"Come see, we built us a fort!" he shrieked in my ear.

Tugged along after him, I flagged down Leelee. "Just how much sugar has the kid had, L?"

"Ice pops on tap, Coke on repeat." She tallied off his cocktail of high octane sweets while the dude-man vibrated beside me, hopped up on his sugar rush.

"Josh is gonna have a field day with that."

"You know as well as I do all it takes is a Disney song and a reminder we aren't leavin' him to settle him down, Nicky." She smoothed JJ's rumpled hair.

“Weewee sings the bestest!”

His fingers slipping from mine, I turned to Leelee. “Nights in the rocking chair?”

She watched Josh’s son, soon to be hers, as he joined the ragtag bunch headed into the forest. “A few, but he’s getting better. I’m never gonna be Claire to him even if he barely remembers her, I don’t want to be. I just want him to know I love him, and I’ll never let him go like she did.”

“I’m really happy for you and Josh, you know that, right?”

“It shows, Nicky.” She reached up to pat my face.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and looked at the ground. “Does it?”

“You are Josh’s brother in every way but blood.” She squeezed me close for a hug before letting me go.

Josh had got it right with her. He was one lucky sumbitch.

It sounded like the kids were playing a cross between Marco Polo and Zombie Attack in the surrounding woods, but I couldn’t find JJ. Confident the older kids would keep their eyes out for the youngsters, warning them away from the creek and the pluff mud, I ended up at the plankboard bar where the cooler of beer, water, and juice boxes were stored along with an arrangement booze. Making myself useful beneath the flowering canopy of crepe myrtle, I played bartender to all and sundry.

I stood up from restocking the beer cooler, coming face-to-face with Cat. I slotted my aviators into the neck of my shirt and wiped my hands down the front of my faded-to-fuck jeans. I’d shaved in the morning but the evening stubble tickled beneath my fingertips when I scratched lightly on my jaw, never taking my eyes off Cat’s face. Her mouth parted, her tongue wetting the pouty bottom lip. I could take care of that for her.

Bracing my palms on the rough wooden bar top, my biceps bulged and my forearms flexed with muscles. “Pick your poison, Wildcat.” *Hell, pick me, darlin’.*

Suddenly, I didn’t give a shit about Ray’s warnings or her hot temper . . . in fact I was more intrigued than ever.

Especially when her voice rolled over me like raw silk, delivering another stinging barb. “If I had any poison, I’d have slipped it into your drink already.”

Yeah, that definitely got a rise out of me. My cock took the wake-up challenge and thumped against my jeans. Hot damn, I was gonna have this woman sweet-talking in my ear and eating out of my lap by the time I was through with her. If she was determined, I was goddamn stubborn.

“Hey, you don’t need to prove to me you’re tough as nails, I got it.”

Moving around the bar between us, I slid in front of Cat. Close enough to feel the heat of her body, not near enough to touch although at this point I wouldn’t say no to another slap across the face. Wildcat riled me up and made me feel alive like no other woman had.

She pursed her lips and the only hint I affected her at all was the fluttering pulse in the dip of her collarbone.

“So, what’ll it be, Cat?” My voice a low, rough rumble, I made sure she knew I was offering more than a refreshment.

“Sweet tea with lemon please.” Then her smile opened up, planting a perfect dimple beneath the apple of her right cheek. “Guess I could do with something to sweeten me up.”

I laughed, strolling back to get her a cup of sweet tea from the large silver tank of sun-sweetened brew. Serving her a red Solo cup filled with ice, lemon wedges and Gigi’s own recipe, I crossed my arms over my chest. “So, are you telling me your bark is worse than your bite?”

She took a sip, swallowed, and slowly grinned. “Oh, hon, my bite is so much worse than my bark. You don’t even want to know.”

Cat strolled off on long legs in a white dress, leaving me desperate to know, needing to know. I wanted to feel her bite, all over my body. Her words shook me, sent me straight into fuck fantasies I needed to expel onto paper, into my story, if I wasn’t going to get my hands on her.

The getting-my-hands-on her possibility looked even less likely when I saw Cat later. She was speaking heatedly to a new dude. Her hands waved around, her black hair came loose, and hot color painted her cheeks. The guy talked over

her, getting down in her face. *The guy* had wavy blond hair to his shoulders, golden scruff on his face, and full tattooed sleeves down his arms and onto the backs of his hands where several heavy silver rings weighed on his fingers.

It looked like Wildcat had her very own wildman with an MC crew.

A bolt of jealousy jolted right through me.

Oh no, I am not goin' there either.

Not with her, not just because she was a challenge. A very sexy, tight-lipped, straitlaced challenge who made my bygone days of bedding broads look like a walk in the park.

I knocked back the last warm dregs of my final beer of the day, prodding Josh with my elbow. "Think that fucker has enough tats? Wonder what he's trying to prove."

"Who? That guy with Cat?"

"Yeah. *That guy* with Wildcat." I gritted the words through clenched teeth.

Josh took both our empties and sailed them into the recycling bin. "Yo, that's one of her brothers, Brodie."

My pissed off mood immediately lightened. Which was stupid as hell. "Well, they don't look like they're related."

She was dark and gorgeous, he was light and . . . whatever. I was not paying attention to the relief spinning inside of me. Not.

"Word is Catarina has full sleeves on her arms, too. Must be a family thing," Josh added.

I hardly heard what he said. I was too busy picturing tats, all up and down Cat's arms, colorful sleeves over soft skin. Was it an intricate masterpiece or unconnected designs? I was turned right the hell on, wondering what story her ink would tell. Dammit.

After rubbernecking Cat and her brother's showdown, I hunted down Viper—who I hoped hadn't been made into mincemeat by Josh yet—and Mimi, who was probably up in the house trading her latest ebooks with Gigi, splashed out on bourbon.

I didn't get far before the blond biker stood directly in my path.

And here we go.

"I saw you staring at my kid sister."

Who the fuck was this dude kidding? There was no way Wildcat was a kid what-so-fucking-ever. "One might even say I was ogling her," I smart-assed.

This Brodie Steele was as ripped as me. And maybe he had an extra couple inches over me, but that just meant I could move faster. Josh didn't call me scrappy for nothing.

"She ain't interested," he growled, popping his knuckles where three fat silver rings sat for extra menacing measure.

"Huh. You see, that's funny." I scratched the side of my jaw and then loosened my neck. "I got the feelin' Cat was capable of taking care of herself when she slapped me across the face."

His fists uncurled and he smirked. "She did that?"

"Yeah, the first time I dared to say hello." A mistake I was willing to make again, but big brother didn't need to know that. Her smart slap awoke so many impulses inside of me, I'd let her beat the crap out of me just to see the passionate fire win out over the cold ice queen bondage.

"Sounds like her."

No shit.

"Hey, you're Nicky Love, right?" Brodie extended his hand, pumping mine.

"Nick Loveland, yeah."

"I probably shouldn't tell you this—Cat would kick my ass to Timbuktu and back—but she's got all your books." He chuckled.

Storing that little secret away for future flirtation.

"Lay off, Brodie."

That throaty voice, the one right there, made the hair on the back of my neck stand up and electricity course to my cock.

Brodie put both hands up in front of him to ward off Cat. "Just exchanging pleasantries, sis."

She came up beside me, her hands on her hips, long sleeves covering her arms and possible tattoos I wanted to see. "I know all about you and your pleasantries and you can fuck off, *brother*."

Backing away, Brodie grinned between us. That grin made him look like a devilish little boy, except for the fact he'd been ready to pummel my face in a few minutes ago.

"Walk me to my car?" Cat asked.

Invitation, question, command . . . I didn't care. I took Cat's hand in mine, lacing my fingers through hers, smiling when she audibly breathed in at the touch of skin against skin.

Yeah, spark.

And Christ, as if I needed another reason to ignite that spark. Cat's car? It was nothing but a top of the line, special edition, drag-racing demon with a thick black widow blood red stripe down the center . . . A Dodge Challenger Rallye Redline. The kind of road-beast women took their panties off for. Or, in my case, the kind of muscle car I tried not to drool over as I held her door open.

Waiting until she was seated, her long legs pulled inside, I lingered.

"That's far enough. You've done your job." Wildcat closed the door.

Most chicks invited me inside so they could take a ride on my cock. Forget about eight pistons pumping under that badass hood, I had one piston in mind for her.

I caressed the roof as if I was caressing Cat's body. The half-shaded, black-tinted window rolled partway down.

"My job?" I was not used to getting the brush-off.

Cat gripped the steering wheel with both hands, her eyes aimed out the windshield. "Proving a point to Brodie." Her mirrored shades reflected up at me. "And now we're done."

We weren't done, not by a longshot. But I let her roll up the window. I watched her peel out in a cloud of dust and gravel, mashing the pedal to the floor to fishtail it away from me.

For whatever reason, I got under cool Cat's skin.

I was so very fucking far from done with her.

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About Rie

Rie is the badass, sassafras author of *Sugar Daddy* and the *Don't Tell* series—a breakthrough trilogy that crosses traditional publishing boundaries beginning with *In His Command*. Her latest endeavor, the *Carolina Bad Boys* series, is fun, hot, and southern-sexy.

A Yankee transplant who has traveled the world, Rie started out a writer—causing her college professor to blush over her erotic poetry without one ounce of shame. Not much has changed. She swapped pen for paintbrushes and followed her other love during her twenties. From art school to marriage to children and many a wild and wonderful journey in between, Rie has come home to her calling. Her work has been called *edgy*, *daring*, and *some of the sexiest smut around*.

You can connect with Rie via the social media hangouts listed on her website <https://www.riewarren.com>. She is represented by Saritza Hernandez, Corvisiero Literary Agency http://www.corvisieroagency.com/Saritza_Hernandez.html.