

Reilly's Wildcard

Chapter One

Two months earlier

Lucy's hands trembled with nerves. She took a deep breath and tugged at the hem of her dress. She'd come to the Blackwater Bar and Grill for two reasons. First and foremost, to help Sarah. Her coworker and friend had fallen flat-on-her-face in love with one of the restaurant's co-owners, Brodix Jennings. Unfortunately, Sarah had written a revealing article about Brodix, one that had appeared in the local newspaper for which Lucy and Sarah both worked. Brodix hadn't spoken to Sarah since.

Of course, her friend had known that putting Brodix's painful memories of his time in foster care in the article was going to cause problems. After all, he'd shared them with Sarah in private. To get the article on the front page, however, Sarah had been forced to use at least some of Brodix's life with her readers. Fortunately, it seemed Sarah's strategy had worked. Lucy looked around at the crowded room and knew that Sarah's article had made the reopening of the Blackwater Bar and Grill a huge hit. Whether the horde of new customers was enough to get Brodix to forgive Sarah still remained to be seen.

The other reason she'd decided to come to the restaurant was a little more personal and a whole lot scarier. She'd heard the Jenningses were looking to hire live music for the Blackwater, and Lucy had gotten it into her head to audition. She'd never actually sung for a crowd before. No doubt she'd freeze up the instant she opened her mouth. What had she been thinking? Then again, her dream of singing for an audience might never happen if she didn't take a chance, right?

To add to her nervousness, Brodix's brother Reilly Jennings, also a part owner, kept sending heated glances her way. Lucy hadn't expected Reilly to pay her any notice. When Reilly had approached her and Sarah earlier, he'd offered to seat them at his table. Of course, after Sarah had introduced them, Lucy had gotten a bit tongue-tied. Oh, she knew exactly who Reilly was. The same Reilly Jennings she'd had a crush on in high school. Back then, Reilly had never noticed her. She'd been way too shy and awkward.

Damn if he hadn't aged well. A white T-shirt conformed to the shape of Reilly's upper body, the short sleeves stretched over his muscular biceps. A pair of old jeans molded to his thighs and ass, and his ruffled dark brown hair and piercing green eyes gave him a devilish air. He towered over most of the other men in the restaurant and put every single one of them to shame with his fierce masculinity.

To her surprise, in the time Lucy had been sitting with Reilly, she'd noticed him glancing at her whenever she turned her head. It made her hyperaware of her skimpy outfit. The dress was a freaking work of art, but there wasn't a lot to it. She'd gotten lucky the day she'd found it at the consignment shop. It was a black strapless number put together in the most erotic way, with little cutouts down the front, stopping just below her navel. It was wild and uninhibited, which was

fitting, since that was the way she felt tonight. And maybe it was working—Reilly couldn't seem to keep his gaze off her.

“So, where's your brother Brodix?” she asked. “I'm surprised he isn't here.”

“He'll be here.” He looked down at his watch, then said, “Not sure what's keeping him, but he wouldn't miss the reopening for the world.”

As Lucy stared at the tall, dark-haired cutie next to her, something inside her body stirred to life. Lucy recognized the feeling as desire, but she'd thought herself incapable. Surely it'd been snuffed out long ago.

She took another sip of her cosmopolitan and said, “So, are you pleased with the turnout?”

The Jennings bunch was the talk of the town, thanks to Sarah's write-up. Heck, Sarah had made the five brothers sound like hometown heroes and their adoptive parents like saints.

“Well, I'm not real crazy with the way Sarah used Brodix's past in the story. Our days in foster care are not for public consumption.” A muscle in his jaw twitched, letting Lucy know just how distastefully he viewed the whole thing. “But she made the bar and grill sound like a friggin' local landmark. We've never had this many customers before. Not even when Dad ran the place. In the end, I'd say it all worked out.”

She smiled. “Yeah, well, the story did hit the front page, and it coincided nicely with the grand reopening of the restaurant.”

He nodded. “It does my heart good to know there's a line of customers waiting to get in.” He glanced around the room. “I'd say the family business is safely out of the red.”

The deep timbre of his voice turned Lucy's insides to molten lava. Earlier, as he'd approached her and Sarah at the bar, he'd taken her breath away. Just as the thought flitted through her mind, his brow arched up in inquiry, as if he could read her so easily. As if he knew what she was thinking. Heat crept into her face.

She sat up a little straighter and stared at her friend out on the dance floor. Since Brodix had yet to show up, Sarah had accepted an invitation to dance from another man. Lucy shook her head. Sarah always appeared so self-assured, independent and ready to take life by the horns. If only a little of that would rub off on her, Lucy would be a happy camper.

Needing a moment to regroup and catch her breath, Lucy stood and asked, “You wouldn't happen to know where the ladies' room is, would you?” He smiled and pointed to the far right of the room. Lucy thanked him and headed off.

She'd made it only about halfway when a big, burly man came up to her and grabbed her arm. Lucy stiffened. “Excuse me?”

“You’re a hot little number, aren’t you?”

Ew, as if the nasty attitude wasn’t bad enough, the amount of alcohol on his breath would kill her. She tried to yank her arm back, but his fingers tightened. “I’m not interested, pal.”

“That’s not what that dress is saying, little girl.” He stepped closer. “I watched you shake your ass when you walked in. Don’t act like you don’t want it.”

Uh-oh, things just went from nuisance factor to full-on scary. Fear skated down her spine as she tried to put some space between them. “Let me go,” she ground out as she brought her knee up. Damn, she missed his crotch by mere inches.

“Bitch,” he spewed out as his other hand whipped up as if to smack her across the face.

Lucy braced herself for the blow, but it never came. Without warning, he released her, and Reilly stood next to her, his eyes blazing with fury.

“Apologize to the lady.”

Mr. Stinky had the bad judgment to laugh and spit on the floor in front of Reilly. Sure, the guy was twice his size, and that wasn’t easy considering Reilly wasn’t a small man.

“Not the best choice you could have made,” Reilly bit out. Then he grabbed the man by his shirt and started dragging him toward the door. When he began to struggle, two other guys appeared at Reilly’s side. Together they all but dragged the drunken idiot out the door.

Lucy smoothed a hand over her arm. She looked down and frowned. “Great, that’s going to leave a bruise. What a jerk.”

A blonde waitress moved up next to her, a look of concern on her face. “I saw Reilly hauling some guy out by his shirt collar. Are you okay?”

Lucy waved away her concern. “Just some drunk idiot who wouldn’t take no for an answer and thought he could help himself.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not surprised. That guy has been getting progressively more annoying with each drink. I was about to notify one of the guys when I noticed Reilly already had the situation under control.”

Lucy could still feel the man’s touch on her skin. She tried to suppress a shudder. “I don’t think he’s going to feel too good when he sobers up tomorrow morning.”

“Serves him right, you ask me.”

Lucy nodded and started for the restroom again when Reilly reappeared. His brows scrunched together as he looked at her arm. “Did he hurt you?”

“Not really.”

His gaze swept over her, and Lucy warmed instantly. The soft concern in his gaze caused her heart to do a cartwheel. “Come on, you look like you could use a few minutes of peace and quiet.”

Lucy hesitated a moment, unsure if she should go off with him. But she trusted Reilly. She’d seen him around town, remembered him from high school and had tried to get up the nerve to approach him, but she’d always been too shy. This was her chance to get to know the gorgeous man a little. Dare she?

She took his hand and let him link her fingers with his. Without another word, he led her to the back of the restaurant. Once they were alone in a back corner of the kitchen, Reilly stopped and turned toward her. “Still need to use the restroom?”

She bit her lip and looked down at the floor, suddenly finding the white linoleum fascinating. “I’m fine, thanks.”

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In the brighter light of the back room, Reilly could see Lucy’s features better. Ah hell, she was even prettier than he’d first thought. She stood shorter than him by a few inches, with straight, dark hair that hung well past her shoulders. The purple streak going down one side stirred something in him.

“I like the purple,” he murmured, touching the shiny strands with his index finger.

“Thanks.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “It’s temporary. Just for fun.”

The perfection of her oval-shaped face appeared free of makeup, or else she wore very little. Just a touch of gloss to her full pink lips that was practically begging to be licked away, and maybe a little mascara, giving her eyes more of an exotic appearance. Her sexy siren’s dress covered a body made for sin. Lucy possessed a youthful glow that had tugged at every molecule in his being the instant he’d seen her walk into the restaurant.

She stared at him as if she wasn’t sure what to make of him, though. Not good. When his gaze caught on the reddened blotch on her arm, he frowned. “Damn it, I should’ve hit the ass.” Reilly really wanted to punch the bastard even now, but the jerk was already in the cop’s capable hands. He’d gotten lucky in finding Brian Delany, an old high school buddy turned police officer, having dinner at the restaurant. Brian had gladly escorted the drunk to his cruiser.

Reilly touched the mark on her forearm and rubbed back and forth, hoping to ease the pain. When their gazes connected, he leaned in closer until he could smell her pretty, feminine scent. Without thinking, he said, “You handled yourself pretty well back there.”

She blushed at his praise, and for a moment, Reilly didn’t think she was going to say anything. “Not as well as I should’ve,” she complained. “If you hadn’t come along, I’m not sure what I’d have done.”

He cocked his head. "What did he say to you, anyway?"

She smoothed a hand down her dress. "It doesn't matter."

She bit her lower lip, and Reilly decided he'd let the jerk off way too easy. "I have a feeling he wanted more than a dance from you." She turned her head away, avoiding his gaze. Reilly cupped her chin and gently forced her to look at him. "Lucy?"

Lucy squeezed her eyes shut and nodded.

"Well, he's gone now," he told her, hoping to reassure her. "And he won't be back."

"I'm glad." She looked around nervously. "Is it okay for us to be back here? Will we be in anyone's way?"

He chuckled. "Hey, I'm part owner of this joint, remember?"

She slapped her forehead. "Duh, of course. I guess I'm a little rattled."

"You have a right to be."

"What did you do with him anyway?"

"Let the police take care of it." He shoved a hand through his hair. "I have a feeling it's not that guy's first brush with the law."

Reilly moved a step nearer and grasped her by the waist. "You have something on your cheek." God, it was agony being so close to her and unable to do more than touch.

"I do?"

"Yep." He leaned slowly down, giving her ample time to pull away and call a halt. When she didn't, Reilly touched a stray eyelash on her cheek and lifted it to his mouth. "Make a wish," he softly ordered.

A secret little smile curved her lips upward an instant before she closed her eyes and blew. Reilly lifted back up, his gaze riveted to her. Her lips were parted, unconsciously inviting him to taste her. Christ, he wanted to. More than he'd wanted anything in his life. Too fast. Dude, let the woman breathe.

"What'd you wish for?" he asked in an effort to cool his raging hormones.

She blinked and stared up at him. "Huh?"

"Your wish," he reminded her.

She touched a finger to her lips. "Oh. I-I can't tell, or it won't come true."

“Of course,” he replied, charmed by her. “I forgot that part.” He stepped back and shook his head. What was he doing? Reilly felt like an idiot. A young, infatuated teenager, when in fact he was twenty-five years old. He’d dated plenty of beautiful women, and he’d never once been so completely fixated. He reached out and took her hand in his, teasing her knuckles with his thumb. “Ready to face the crowd?”

She nodded and moved away from the wall. “Thanks for being my white knight.”

“My pleasure,” he said, aching to keep her all to himself for another few minutes. There was more to Lucy than met the eye, and he desperately wanted to know everything about her. If there was a God, he’d get his wish too.

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Lucy let Reilly seat her at the table they’d vacated earlier. He waved a waitress over and ordered another drink for them, then leaned a little closer to be heard over the noise and said, “So, tell me more about yourself, Lucy.”

“I’m not that exciting,” she said in an attempt to bring the temperature in the room down a few degrees.

“I have a feeling you’re being modest.” Reilly smiled slightly, then gestured toward Sarah, who was currently dancing with a yummy blond. “So, are you here for moral support for Sarah, or is there another reason you came here tonight?”

Lucy’s heart fluttered at the sensual tone in his voice; then the first half of his statement sank in. It was the perfect opening to mention the singing gig, but Lucy chickened out. What else was new? “Everyone is talking about the restaurant and the five mysterious brothers who own it. I was curious, what can I say?”

He chuckled. “You make us sound like celebrities or something.”

Lucy looked over at the bar and spotted a man who bore a striking resemblance to Reilly. He appeared older, and his hair was shorter. There was something rougher about him too. “Is that one of your brothers?” she asked, pointing to the man who was currently cuddled up next to a laughing brunette.

Reilly smiled. “That’s Sam. He’s the oldest. The woman he’s holding is Julie, his better half.”

“They look happy together.” She wondered what that would be like. Her ex had turned out to be a total mooching loser. Lucy knew very little about happily-ever-after relationships.

“I figure he’ll propose before long.” Reilly looked back over to where Sarah was dancing and frowned. “Your friend is tempting the beast. You can bet Brodix isn’t going to like seeing her dancing with blondie there.”

Lucy frowned. To get Brodix's attention tonight, Lucy had talked Sarah into coming to the Blackwater Bar and Grill dressed to seduce. The plan was for Brodix to walk in, see Sarah looking sexy and hot, and go all caveman. So far, Brodix was a no-show, and the plan was quickly going to pot. "Well, Sarah is a big girl, you know? She hardly needs to ask permission if she wants to dance with a cute guy."

Reilly's gaze landed on her, his brows scrunched in anger. "Cute?"

Judging by the sneer in his tone, Lucy assumed he didn't find that notion pleasant. She didn't have the nerve to tell Reilly that the blond couldn't hold a candle to him. Ever since high school, she'd been hyperaware of him. When she'd seen Reilly outside the restaurant working on the sign one day a few months back, Lucy realized the feeling hadn't gone away with the years. And as pathetic as it sounded, she kept finding one reason or another to drive by the Blackwater just to get another peek at him.

"Sure," she answered, unable to resist the urge to tease him a little. "He's tall, blond and has a sexy Southern accent. A woman would have to be blind and deaf not to appreciate all that."

Reilly leaned toward her, and she forced herself to stay still, although her heartbeat was at full gallop. "I take it you aren't seeing anyone?"

"No." She swallowed back the lump forming in her throat. "You?"

"Nope."

She relaxed a little at the knowledge that no other woman had a claim on him. "Oh, that's good." Lucy took a sip of her drink. Liquid courage wasn't her usual MO. Then again, most men didn't send butterflies to flight inside her with a mere glance the way Reilly did. She'd already drained the first cosmopolitan she'd ordered earlier and was halfway into a second.

"We work together," Lucy said, thinking of his earlier question. "Sarah and I work at the newspaper together."

Reilly's gaze widened. "You're a reporter?"

"No, a copy editor. It's a busy, often stressful job that puts food on the table and keeps a roof over my head."

"Ah, I see. Not exactly your passion, huh?"

"No, but it's not the worst job in the world either. I can't complain."

When she lifted her glass to her lips, Reilly stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Easy, there."

Her face heated. "I'm a little nervous."

“Why?”

Did she dare tell him that she was interested in him? That she'd been interested in him for months? “I'm...attracted to you.” She decided to keep the fact that the attraction hadn't started up tonight, but years ago.

His grin was just this side of sinful when he said, “Ditto.”

An electric jolt zipped along her spine. He was so close, it rattled her. God, he was intoxicating. “Ditto?”

“Yep. In fact, it's all I can do to be good right now.”

“What would you do if you had permission to be bad?”

“This,” he groaned. He dipped his head forward and fastened his mouth to hers, angling his head as if for a deeper taste. He opened his mouth and stroked his tongue against her bottom lip. Lucy trembled as if he were the only man who had ever kissed her.

He lifted up and stared down at her. Her lips still tingled from his touch. “Cherries.”

She blinked, unsure what he'd said. “Huh?”

“Your lip gloss,” he explained. “It's cherry flavored.” His voice sounded rough and uneven. “I wondered.”

She touched a finger to her lips. “Oh.”

Lucy forgot all about a singing job at the bar and grill. Sarah's dilemma got pushed to the side too. Even the drunken idiot took a backseat. Everything had vanished the moment Reilly's lips met hers.

“I want to be alone with you. To get to know you better. Come home with me, Lucy.”

Oh boy. She so didn't trust men. Her ex-husband David and his cheating, user ways had ensured that. But as Reilly smoothed a palm over her back, her defenses began to crumble. She'd gone too long; that was the problem. There'd been no one since David. The divorce had been final a year ago last month. Lucy had tried to act as if it hadn't affected her when the end had come, but it had. She'd been left with plenty of emotional scars thanks to the whole debacle. Wasn't she due for a little excitement? A little fun? To be treated to a night of decadence at the hands of a man who knew how to treat a woman?

On the other hand, even though she'd admired him from afar and he'd come to her rescue tonight, Reilly may as well be a stranger. Did she dare?

“I don’t know,” she said, afraid to take a chance. Lucy looked out at the dance floor and saw her friend engaged in a conversation with a well-dressed, dark-haired man. Reilly had a wilder edge about him, with his shaggy, dark brown hair and the dare in his gaze. The man holding Sarah’s attention had neat, close-cropped, midnight-black hair, a crisp white dress shirt and black slacks. Had Brodix finally shown up?

“He came in a few moments ago,” Reilly said, answering her unspoken question. “For a second, I thought there was going to be bloodshed.”

As Lucy watched, the man Sarah had been dancing with stepped back, allowing Brodix to take over. For a few minutes, Lucy couldn’t take her gaze off the pair of lovers. The way Brodix looked at Sarah turned Lucy’s heart to mush. When had a man ever looked at her with so much love and devotion? Easy—never. When Sarah turned and gave her the nod, indicating she’d be leaving with Brodix, Lucy turned her attention back to Reilly. “Should I worry about Sarah?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know Sarah well, but from what I’ve gathered, your friend is pretty strong-minded. She can hold her own with my brother, believe me.”

“Fine,” she said, knowing it was the truth. “But he better not hurt her.”

“Nah, Brodix cares about Sarah. He might not be happy about the article, but he’s fallen damn hard for her.” Before Lucy could reply, Reilly took her chin in his palm and murmured, “Why the indecision about coming home with me? I don’t have any expectations. There isn’t a more sinister plan, I promise. Just you and me alone with a glass of wine and each other’s company.”

Lucy’s mouth went dry at the intensity in Reilly’s eyes. He had the look of a tiger about to pounce. “I don’t even know you,” she explained. “We only just met.”

“I know, and it’s crazy,” he bit out. “This will sound like a line, but I want to get to know you.”

As his touch drifted over her cheek and the heat from his gaze burned her up, a crack formed in the wall around Lucy’s heart. “I don’t believe in things like instant attraction,” she blurted out, frustrated that she couldn’t make sense out of what was happening between them. “Two strangers meeting and falling for each other in a crowded room. That sort of thing is for romantic comedies and fairy tales.” Another thought struck her. “Besides, don’t you need to be here for the grand reopening?”

“It’s only a few hours until closing, and there are five of us, not including the staff. They can manage without me.”

“But—”

“Maybe another one of these will change your mind,” Reilly said, interrupting her protest with the brush of his lips to hers. Lucy sank against him, accepting the kiss. Hell, surrendering to it. She tasted the warm, heady flavor of the man, laced with just a touch of alcohol. She should end the kiss. Go home and get in her pajamas and enjoy the last half of the romantic suspense book she’d been reading lately. Yep, she should definitely end this.

Reilly's lips were soft as they coasted back and forth, barely touching hers. As his tongue darted out, a shiver of excitement raced the length of her body. When he pulled back and stared down at her, Lucy could see the raw hunger in his pale green eyes. She well understood how he felt. Her entire body was screaming for more of his flavor.

She was done denying herself. Lucy pushed Sarah and Brodix out of her mind and turned all her attention on Reilly. That quickly, a blazing heat in Reilly's eyes matched her own rising temperature. They would both experience something exciting tonight; she knew it in her bones. Honesty forced her to admit that Reilly scared her a little. No, that wasn't right. It was the way he affected her. He so easily turned her body to fire, and all he had to do was smile. That kind of power was frightening to a woman who had already been burned by love.

Still, she wasn't the backward wallflower she had been in high school. And she wasn't the starry-eyed girl she'd been when she'd fallen for David. She was a confident woman now. She, and no one else, was in control of her own emotions.

Lucy took her cell phone out of her purse and tapped out a message to Sarah, then stood and looked down at Reilly. "I'm ready if you are."

His grin destroyed the last vestiges of her resistance. The juncture between Lucy's thighs dampened as his gaze went on a heated journey over her body.

"Give me a sec," he said, then strode across the room and whispered something to his brother Sam. When both men turned and looked at her, Lucy's face flamed. What had Reilly told him?

When he came back to her and took her by the hand, he said, "I let Sam know I was taking you home so Sarah and Brodix could have time to talk." He winked. "What'd you think I told him?"

She slumped in relief. "Suffice it to say I feel sort of stupid now."

He squeezed her hand in reassurance. "We're just going to have a drink and get to know each other, Lucy," he said. "No pressure, okay?"

She nodded and let him lead the way out of the restaurant. Once they were in the dark, close confines of his car, Lucy swore a feral smile skated over his face. Her stomach went all jumpy. Please don't let me live to regret this.

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